

Taylor, Nikki M.

**DRIVEN TOWARD MADNESS: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner
and Tragedy on the Ohio**

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Best known as the basis for Toni Morrison's award-winning novel *Beloved* (1987), Margaret Garner's 1856 decision to kill her two-year-old daughter rather than see her returned to slavery has sparked anger, controversy, empathy, and even celebration. Nikki M. Taylor, in *Driven toward Madness*, uses exhaustive research to provide a nuanced view not only of Garner and her fateful act but also of the broader psychosis and trauma that slavery unleashed upon women.

Garner, a twenty-two-year-old pregnant slave from northern Kentucky, joined her husband, in-laws, and four young children in an escape attempt in early 1856. Aided by a dark night, a stolen sleigh, and a frozen Ohio River, they arrived in Cincinnati the following morning. Their freedom was short-lived, however, as slave catchers surrounded them just a few hours later. During a skirmish with deputized authorities, Garner slit the throat of her two-year-old daughter Mary, and attacked her other children, moments before deputies recaptured Garner and her family.

Taylor uses newspaper accounts, the manuscripts of Garner's owner, and eyewitness accounts of those who heard her testify in court or spoke to her while in jail not only to create a deeper understanding of Garner but also to understand more fully the conditions and abuse she faced as a slave of John Pollard Gaines. Taylor makes use of other disciplines, including trauma studies and black feminist theory, to reveal the horrific physical, mental, and sexual abuse Garner endured. She also makes a strong case that Mary and Garner's youngest daughter were fathered not by her husband but were the result of rape by Gaines.

Careful not to excuse, glorify, or celebrate Garner's decision to kill her own child, Taylor does offer a holistic picture of her possible motivations, suggesting frames of mental illness and depression as possibilities. Garner may also have been focused on saving her lighter-skinned daughters from facing a similar life of physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Taylor paints a picture of what life was like for slaves, slaveholders, and abolitionists in a community defined by the Ohio River. In places such as Cincinnati, people contested and sought to defy the implications of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave slave owners the right to recapture slaves who fled to free states. The book reminds readers that simply arriving in a free state did not guarantee freedom, with tragic implications for Garner and her family.

Driven toward Madness offers a compelling and heart-wrenching window onto the horrors faced by enslaved women in the United States. Taylor succeeds in her desire to model how historians can "reclaim black women's voices and agency in history when traditional historical sources are scarce, nonexistent, vague, coded, or erased" (p. 5).