Delia Cruz Kelly

Humanities Core 1CS

Dr. Sharareh Frouzesh

15 June 2018

The Disavowal of Black Motherhood and Its Complexes:

Thomas Satterwhite Noble's "Margaret Garner"

Noble, Thomas Satterwhite. *Margaret Garner.* (1867)

In late January of 1856, a band of fugitive slaves fled Boone County, Kentucky, seeking freedom across the frozen Ohio River in Cincinnati. Twenty-two year old Margaret Garner, her husband, her parents-in-law, and her four kids were all among this escape group (Furth, 38). Shortly after reaching Cincinnati, the Garner family was found by their slave owners and U.S. Marshals at the home of Margaret's uncle, freedman Joe Kite. The seizure of the Garner family

was warranted by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.[1] "In the house were found four adults…and four children…the oldest near six years and the youngest a babe of about nine months," the *Cincinnati Gazette* reported. "One of these, however, was lying on the floor dying, its head cut almost entirely off. There was also a gash about four inches long in the throat of the eldest, and a wound on the head of the other boy." The youngest child's head was bruised as well (Salamon). News of the slave mother's graphic infanticide was published locally and nationally, becoming a sort of cause célèbre, inspiring mixed reactions from complete horror to suffered sympathy (Kodat, 160). These oppositional receptions of Margaret Garner came to define the climate of political discourse in the pivotal civil war era. The debate was reignited over a decade later in Thomas Satterwhite Noble's "Margaret Garner" (1867). Noble's painting engages with conflicting representations of black mothers (and freed blacks) like Margaret Garner, that on the one hand reflect the attempt in the period of post-Civil War America to delegitimize the capabilities of former slaves as fully recognized persons and mothers so as to exclude their dangerous bodies from white society, and on the other hand seek to place the blame for violence and danger on the effects of the institution of slavery itself and interpret the desperate actions of slaves as redemptive and heroic. Among those representations, the figure of Margaret Garner stands as a symbol with confusing duality. Particularly, Noble's depiction allows for an oscillation between the two discourses creating a gray area that has been studied by art historians, literary critics, and race and culture experts; most of whom attempt to make their

1 The Fugitive Slave act of 1850 says that "No person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such service or Labour may be due." (Rodriguez, 234)

interpretation the truth and unveil any ambiguity. I propose that there is functionality to the uncertainty of how we are meant to understand Margaret Garner.

Uncertainty immediately comes into play in Noble's painting as it seems to reiterate negative stereotypes surrounding African Americans while simultaneously making artistic choices that ostensibly generate sympathy for Margaret Garner. Created just two years after the end of the Civil War, this piece was being circulated at a time when the prospect of freedom and power for African Americans fostered white anxiety (Brown). As Leslie Furth writes in "'The Modern Medea' and Race Matters," "Noble's audience may thus have been predisposed and even conditioned to view his representation of Garner within existing conventions of black deviance" (43). The commonplace attribution of a violent and destructive nature to a slave was emblematic of a larger machine at work. This kind of representation was a way to disenfranchise newly freed blacks from having a role in post-civil war society; Margaret Garner's case became the clear example employed by pro-slavery groups to show that blacks were not suitable for society, and especially not capable of motherhood. In one reading offered by Rachel Jolivette Brown, graduate of Tulane University, the painting "underscores perceptions of African American women as innately incapable of being maternal and highlights the notion that, without the authority of white men, they are dangerous and subversive." Brown's claim is founded in certain aspects of the painting like Garner's facial expression that denotes fury and rage as markers of a violently unhinged character as well as the powerless, and fearful positions of the white, male slave owners that were atypical of art from this period.

The painting is meant to be provocative, and while it seems to be at its full capacity for drama with a lifeless body at Garner's and the mens' feet, there are in fact some graphic features

that Noble decided to leave out, hinting towards a sympathetic goal. Most contrary to historical fact, the slain child appears to be an older boy when, in actuality, the murder was committed on Garner's two year old daughter, Mary. Replacing Garner's infant daughter with two fictitious sons serves a dual purpose: the death of two young male slaves would have had a greater financial impact, worsening Garner's act in the eyes of the slave owners, but then the absence of the image of a murdered infant allots a good deal more sympathy towards Garner (Brown). The timing of the scene is another factor contributing to mounting sympathy for Garner as the painting is a still taken not from mid-act but in the regrettable aftermath of the murder. We are not witnesses to the murder, but only viewing the suspended consequence of the act, putting the question of who is to blame upon our shoulders. Margaret stands with her arms outstretched as if to say "Look what you've made me do," "Look what slavery has made me do." The ambiguity of responsibility is added to by Noble's omission of the butcher knife that Garner used to kill her daughter. Although the weapon was included in initial drawings, it was left out of the final painting. The removal of the knife complicates the "distinction between who was really responsible for the murder of the little girl: Margaret or the men trying to retrieve their slaves under the Fugitive Slave Law" (Fleming, 105). The fact that it was once an element of the painting and was only discarded in the final draft suggests Noble's own vacillating interpretation of the event and how he wanted to depict Garner. Noble manages to convey "the perceived savage nature of African Americans, which without the institution of slavery to keep it in check, threatened both natural and social order" while simultaneously expressing Garner's own individual suffering and plight as an enslaved woman backed into a corner and forced to act against natural law and morality (Brown).

The case of Margaret Garner was exploited by the pro-slavery public to generalize and disavow all black mothers' capability in fulfilling the passive or acquiescent role that was the acceptable norm for motherhood. Leslie Furth's writing on Noble's painting is ubiquitously used in academic discussion of this piece of art as it thoroughly explores its every significant detail and provides apt analysis about the permissibility of black motherhood and the constraints its representations set upon it. One of Furth's main suggestions is that "Garner's violation foregrounds and upends one of the nineteenth century's most mythologized and symbolically charged relationships - the mother-child bond" (49). All the ideals of motherhood seem to be abandoned in Garner's most unfathomable act, how could any mother kill her own child? In reports of that fateful day, Garner's own mother-in-law is said to have been screaming in refusal to Margaret's request for help in killing her other children. Garner's apparent aggression and villainy is coming from a place of inconceivable desperation forced upon her by the impending return to a life of slavery, but still its representation in Noble's painting places her well beyond the norm of acceptable formulas. Furth suggests her depiction "directly flout[s] the most popular pictorial conventions at the time, in which men were the focus and women played a passive or aquiescent role" (49-50). Her image, as constructed by Noble, portrays no signs of passivity. Instead of standing abjectly, ready to accept her capture, Garner is imagined as powerfully holding her ground, and even as mildly accusatory, trying to turn the script and deflect the blame from herself. Noble had taken the typically powerless black woman and rendered her dangerous and dominant. Furth goes on to speculate:

> This reversal reflected profound social changes that were then rocking the country. Though most periods of intense national uncertainty and social upheaval have prompted a tightening of racial, class, and gender boundaries, in Post-Civil War America, it was precisely these social stratifications that were being overturned. The demise of the "subjugated African" also undermined the stereotype of the nurturing black woman

> leaving in its place a horrific nightmare of black female power out of control. Garner's capacity to destroy that which was her sole and sacred function to foster and sustain not only evidenced just such a breakdown, but also raised doubts about the suitability of blacks for citizenship (52).

This quote evidences the broader meaning that Garner's story had for all enslaved and freed black women, it was used as a tool to delegitimize their claims to motherhood and even womanhood. Noble's painting works within this social context of shifting stratifications and adds to the uncertainty of where freed blacks would figure in society. The exploitation of Garner's story is guised by sympathetic alterations in the facts of the incident that Noble makes.

Noble's painting takes great control of the human form, employing revealing body language and emotive facial expressions that imagine the scene at hand within a framework that gives no definitive answer to the question of who deserves to bear the responsibility of this violence. The diametric figures of the men on one side and Garner on the other create a kind of crisis to be deciphered by their stances. In her dissertation *Thomas Satterwhite Noble (1835–1907):"Reconstructed Rebel,"* Tuliza Fleming decodes the situation, saying, "Both the men and Garner gesture toward these two children - the men in a state of shock and Garner as if she is offering the children as the inevitable result of her desperate attempt to avert the Fugitive Slave Law" (103). Noble's positioning of the characters, especially the unexpectedly challenging form of Garner's stance, as Fleming suggests, points to his possible aim to critique the Fugitive Slave Law thus attributing the blame moreso to the institution of slavery than to this slave mother. Fleming goes on to analyze the significance of Noble's detailed rendering of Margaret's facial expression, commenting, "Margaret Garner's gaze directly confronts her pursuers and her countenance bespeaks unheard accusations" (104). This painting, through its dramatics, is an

almost audible argument between Garner and her captors for it seems loud and aggressive. Ultimately though, the message it's conveying is still more noise than actual content, meaning these depictions serve mainly to build up an unfinished discourse, not provide a completed appeal for a singular interpretation.

The questioning of Margaret Garner's agency as a mother reflects the wider scope of black mothers' disavowal; there was a common sense that their motherhood was only tolerated when validated by white authority. Noble's painting functions as a symbol of perceived ramifications of black motherhood liberated from white authority. The harrowing image of a lifeless body with blood on the floor works "as a warning of the dangers associated with empowering black mothers, suggesting the necessity of white supervision to prevent upheaval of both nature and society" (Brown). Themes of "black deviance" were conventional of art in post-civil war periods and were used to dehumanize freed blacks; Noble's painting of Margaret Garner engages with a similar rhetoric used to disavow the capabilities of black motherhood by demonizing the singular case and allows for a generalization and a mapping of her character onto all black mothers. These ideas and mechanisms of control are part of a larger conversation about the ways in which the institution of slavery stripped black mothers of their maternal identity (Brown). In this approach, the notion of white authority becomes entangled with the idea that the violent consequences - as Margaret Garner's case exemplify - due to the removal of white authority are in fact sourced from the effects of the original, oppressive white authority of slavery.

Thomas Satterwhite Noble's "Margaret Garner" painting creates a chasm of uncertainty about the nature of black motherhood and the effects of slavery using the case of Margaret

Garner's infanticide as an opportunity for ambiguity. We are left to determine whether her acts were a last resort heroic choice or an atrocious antithesis of natural order. In "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence and the Politics of Ventriloquism," author Mike Reinhardt observes:

> In a culture preoccupied with redemption, political discourse, especially that of sentimentalism, presented mothers and children as singularly capable of redeeming others. Deliverance through a child's death and "salvation through motherly love" were as Jane Tompkins observed, among the nation's favorite [stories] about itself … The Garner story gained some of its symbolic power by bridging these two plots together, offering anti-slavery commentators two potentially transformative narrative moments: a child's death and a mother's love saving that child from slavery. Yet of course the mother's love was not supposed to bring about the child's death; this was hardly the version of the salvation story that the culture already loved to tell. What did it mean to bend the story to include the likes of Margaret Garner?

Thomas Satterwhite Noble's work operates on that very bend; his art may not fully answer the question of what the encompassment of Garner's story into the canon of political discourse surrounding the radically transforming civil war period means, but his uncertainty does offer multi-faceted readings that echo the complexities of forming black, maternal identity.

Works Cited

Brown, Rachel Jolivette. “Mediated Motherhood: White Authority and the Representation of Enslaved Mothers in Antebellum Visual Culture.” *From Slave Mothers & Southern Belles to Radical Reformers & Lost Cause Ladies*, 2015, http://civilwarwomen.wp.tulane.edu/essays-4/mediated-motherhood-white-authority-and-the-representation-of-enslaved-mothers-in-antebellum-visual-culture/

Fleming, Tuliza. *Thomas Satterwhite Noble (1835–1907):“Reconstructed Rebel”*. University of Maryland, College Park, 2007.

Furth, Leslie.""The Modern Medea" and Race Matters: Thomas Satterwhite Noble's "Margaret Garner"," American Art 12, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 36-57.https://doi.org/10.1086/424319

Kodat, Catherine Gunther. “‘Margaret Garner’ and the Second Tear.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2008, pp. 159–171. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40068503.

Reinhardt, Mark. "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism," Critical Inquiry 29, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 81-119.https://doi.org/10.1086/367999

Rodriguez, Junius P. *Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World*. P. 234-240 Sharpe Reference, 2007.

Salamon, Jenni. "Who Is Margaret Garner?" *Uncle Tom's Cabin: The Excitement and the Influence*, 2 Nov. 2012, www.ohiohistoryhost.org/ohiomemory/archives/876.