

Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner

Ashley Baggett

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Review

Baggett, Ashley

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Frederickson, Mary E. and Walters, Delores M. *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*. University of Illinois Press, \$28.00 ISBN 978-0-252-07942-9

A Far Reaching Look at Slavery Through the Eyes of One Who Lived It

In 1856, an enslaved woman named Margaret Garner attempted to obtain freedom by running away with her family. Their quest quickly ended after being discovered by slave catchers. In a last ditch effort to resist her master and arguably protect her loved ones from the abuses of slavery, Garner slit the throat of her two-year-old daughter and stabbed her other three children. The incident drew national attention from pro-slavery and anti-slavery supporters as both sides used Garner's actions either to portray the supposed barbaric nature of slaves or show the desperation of a mother to escape the oppressive institution of slavery. The debate over interpretations of Margaret Garner's life, however, did not remain in the past. Most recently, Garner inspired a collection of essays in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*. Originating from a 2005 symposium, *Gendered Resistance* focuses on Garner's controversial act, and through an interdisciplinary approach, the contributors of the volume analyze acts of gendered resistance by women of color from the antebellum period to the present.

In the first section of *Gendered Resistance*, the authors reclaim Garner's story as a conscious act of resistance and challenge scholarship that defines slave resistance and heroism in masculine terms. Historians since the 1980s have examined agency in minority groups, including enslaved Africans and African Americans. Recent scholarship focuses on techniques, such as working slowly, stealing, breaking tools, or feigning illness, in order to demonstrate slave resistance; but, as Cheryl Janifer LaRoche argues, the most easily identifiable form of slave resistance is the act of running away. LaRoche cites historian Joseph C. Miller as an example of scholars who use running away as an example

of resistance, an action in which Miller claims men were more likely to choose. LaRoche counters this by asserting that upwards of thirty percent of runaways were in fact women—far from an insignificant number (62). She then, like the other contributors of *Gendered Resistance*, draws attention away from fugitive slaves to the specific methods of resistance by women of color. Facing chronic physical and sexual assault, female slaves manipulated a space for themselves through complex and varied means. As Kristin Yohe demonstrates, some, such as Garner, protected her daughter from a life of abuse and deprived her master of another slave through infanticide. Mary E. Frederickson shows how others, such as Elizabeth Clark Gaines, utilized the legal system to obtain her freedom and the freedom of her children. Veta Smith Tucker points out how forms of gendered resistance include the actions of Harriet Tubman and Mary Elizabeth Bowser. Tubman and Bowser exploited stereotypes of black women to fight against slavery (in the case of the former) and the Confederacy (in the case of the latter). Even free women of color faced a life circumscribed by a slave society. Diana Williams complicates the narrative of quadroon balls and plaçage as both a means of resistance and exploitation. Women of color in antebellum America existed in a society that enabled various types of violence, and in the face of such a reality, these women asserted their identities as women and resisted.

In the second part of *Gendered Resistance*, the contributors examine slavery in the current day global community. Jolene Smith compares Garner's experience to the life of Suraj Kali, who was enslaved illegally on a rock quarry in India and successfully demanded her town's freedom. Huda Seif shows gendered acts of resistance in current-day Yemen, where women utilize beliefs of demonic possession to create "spaces for voicing grievances" (163). While supposedly possessed, marginalized women break gender and socioeconomic class expectations to speak openly about sexual assaults and act assertively. Raquel L. de Souza analyzes slavery in Brazil by examining the life of Chica da Silva, an Afro-Brazilian woman who was the concubine of a Portuguese diamond-mine owner. De Souza dispels myths of women of color as mindless Jezebels and argues Chica da Silva consciously resisted by embracing her sexuality and reclaiming her identity through "refusing the role of sexual victim" (186). Cathy McDaniels-Wilson moves from resistance to exploring the psychological trauma from sexual abuse in women of color, the resilience of abused victims, and the process of healing that can occur. The second part ends with a reflection on the use of art to depict slavery and oppression and the capacity for art to be a vehicle for hope and healing.

Overall, *Gendered Resistance* seeks to draw attention to the lived experiences of women of color, illuminate continuities across time and geographic locations, and spark discussions among scholars and activists on the issue of gender based violence. To achieve this, the anthology applies an interdisciplinary approach, which successfully allows for an understanding of the multiple aspects of gender based violence. The contributors, for instance, deftly analyze power dynamics and build on formative works in black women's history by scholars, such as Deborah Gray White and Darlene Clark Hine. Arguably, the most important aspect of the work actually is the connection of the past to the present. The continuities offer meaning for reclaiming past women's lives and acts of resistance, and the similarities of the gender based violence in the past and the present provide the context of successful approaches, which equips activists in their fight to end human trafficking, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. In doing so, *Gendered Resistance* will appeal to a large base of readers from scholars in various disciplines to the general public.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Gendered Resistance* also creates the largest difficulty. Connecting the past to the present is a challenging but worthy goal. Discussion of the dynamics of gender based violence, however, is complex enough let alone a study of the problem across time and place. As a collection of essays, globalizing the discussion comes at the expense of some depth and partially leads to oversimplification of the institution of slavery. While the historical aspects of slavery in Margaret Garner's life are given a fair amount of attention, the context of slavery in Brazil, Yemen, and India is not. Slavery in present-day India, for instance, does have marked differences (as well as the noticed similarities) to slavery in the United States prior to 1865. How did the issue of race differ from country and century? Here a more detailed context would help to understanding possible solutions. Also, what about different types of slavery presently in the United States? As in other parts of the world, the U.S. is not free of human trafficking. How exactly do current forms of American slavery compare to the race based, government sanctioned form of slavery in the United States prior to the Civil War? The choice to extend the work beyond the United States, however, has its merits, particularly showing the extent of slavery in the present, and given the goal of provoking debates on the problem, the anthology does not necessarily have to provide an exhaustive analysis of slavery in Brazil, Yemen, and India to accomplish its objective.

Gendered Resistance offers valuable insight to the intersectionality of race, gender, and socioeconomic class by challenging cultural and historical

interpretations of enslaved women's resistance. Moreover, it traces important continuities in gender based violence and race from the past to the present. If nothing else, readers will walk away from this piece talking about these important social issues, and that alone is reason enough for *Gendered Resistance* to be a worthwhile read.

Ashley Baggett is a Ph.D. candidate in history with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies at Louisiana State University. She is graduating in May of 2014 and will be an assistant professor in history and education at North Dakota State University as of this fall.