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Henry Bibb's (Dis)claiming Family: Malinda as a Case Study of Black Women's Symbolic Annihilation in Antebellum Literature

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Abstract
Existing scholarship on the autobiography Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb *prioritizes Bibb's masculinity and the impact of slavery on Black families, often overlooking the complex experiences of enslaved Black women such as Bibb's first wife Malinda within such a narrative. Amy Lewis's article* "Who'll Speak for Malinda?" *distinguishes itself by offering an alternative narrative focusing on Malinda's experience. My paper builds on Lewis's work by arguing that despite condemning slavery, Bibb's narrative inadvertently perpetuates Malinda's symbolic annihilation. Through a close reading of Bibb, my study attempts to reveal how enslaved women's experiences are often omitted, trivialized, and condemned in American antebellum literature. By devoting particular attention to the "symbolic annihilation" of enslaved women, this paper responds to Amy Lewis's call for alternate narratives and offers a critical shift in reading and interpreting depiction and omission of Black women in ex-enslaved narratives throughout nineteenth-century antebellum America. This approach has the potential to uncover the complex realities of Black women to offer valuable insights into their lives and experiences, thus challenging dominant interpretations of slave narratives.*

Keywords
enslaved Black women, symbolic annihilation, slave narratives, gender and slavery

The Untold Stories of Black Women's Struggles and Resilience

Kimberly Juanita Brown highlights the need to tell the stories of and by Black women, past and present, who "linger and loiter, waiting to have their stories told."[1] Revisiting and retelling these stories as a form of intervention is crucial for focusing on the unique experiences of Black women and understanding their ongoing struggle for justice. Zelma Weston Henriques emphasizes that "[a]ny attempt to understand the African-American female must begin with slavery because her existence in the United States was conceived and defined in that context."[2] By choosing the term "slave narrative" instead of "freedom narrative," this analysis highlights Malinda's lived experience within a system of oppression, even within narratives often framed as struggles for freedom. This choice emphasizes the idea that as long as Black women continued to be oppressed and enslaved, freedom was unattainable for anyone. This sentiment is further echoed in an article by Caroline M. Bailey which underscores the lasting impact of slavery on the sexual victimization of Black women, an impact which is seen by some to continue even in contemporary times.[3]

1 Kimberly Juanita Brown, *Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.

2 Zelma W. Henriques, "African-American Women: The Oppressive Intersection of Gender, Race and Class," *Women & Criminal Justice* 7, no. 1 (1995): 67–80.

3 Caroline M. Bailey, "(Un)Safe Spaces: The Relationship Between Slavery and Sexual Victimization of Black Women," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 39, no. 7–8 (2023): 1543–1570.

Thus, by acknowledging the historical roots of Black women's experiences, we can better comprehend the complexities of their ongoing challenges and advocate for the empowerment and liberation of all. Slave narratives may serve as invaluable primary sources for tracing and revealing the complex realities that Black women faced, both while this brutal institution existed and after slavery was abolished. Enslaved Black women's narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)[4] and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831),[5] offer powerful firsthand accounts that represent the stories of enslaved Black women who emerged from the turmoil.

Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of enslaved Black women also requires an examination of how they are perceived and depicted in narratives by enslaved Black men. Unlike enslaved Black men, whose oppression was primarily based on race, Black women faced interlocking forces of racial and gender oppression. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, Black women "encounter a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions."[6] This intersectional approach sheds light on the complexities of Black women's experiences within systems of oppression.

As documented since the late 20th century, Black men sometimes still contribute to Black women's oppression. As Gerda Lerner writes, "On the one hand, we are assailed by white men, and on the other hand, we are assailed by Black men, who should be our natural protectors."[7] bell hooks further complicates this dynamic by suggesting that Black individuals have at times "[acted] in complicity with the [white] status quo," resulting in "contemporary Black men" being "shaped by these representations."[8] Recognizing these complexities is crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression in Black communities.

Similarly, David Stefan Doddington has cautioned against limiting discussions of enslaved Black communities solely to racial victimization. The historian argues that doing so could unintentionally obscure the specific challenges faced by Black women due to the intersectional nature of racial and gender power dynamics. Such limitations may also lead to downplaying the role that Black men have played in perpetuating the oppression of Black women.[9] Thus, a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of Black women requires an examination of the intertwined dynamics of race and gender in the context of oppression.

The role of enslaved Black men in shaping enslaved Black women's experiences "[has] at times been subsumed within a broader discourse stressing racial oppression"[10] for "[n]ot just White men, but Black men have been involved in finding ways to profit from Black women's bodies."[11] The

4 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston, MA: Published for the Author, 1861).

5 Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. To Which Is Added, The Narrative of Asa-Asa, A Captured African* (Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1831).

6 Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000), 23.

7 Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 157.

8 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992), 89.

9 David S. Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 130.

10 Doddington, *Contesting Slave* ,130.

11 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 143.

oppression of Black women took many forms and was manifested in various media, including the narratives of enslaved Black men themselves. Examining these complex and often uncomfortable truths is essential for a more complete understanding of Black history and the ongoing fight for racial and gender justice.

Published in 1849, Henry Bibb's autobiographical slave narrative places his quest for freedom at the center of the story. More importantly for this article, Bibb's slave narrative serves as a crucial text for a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of enslaved Black women in antebellum America in terms of interlocking systems of oppression. Throughout the narrative, Bibb frames his experience around what Ronda C. Henry Anthony terms "ideal masculinity."[12] According to Anthony, "the bodies of his wife and child [...] become the public grounds through which he can demonstrate familial responsibility, bravery, courage, and heroism—all qualities that prove Black masculine strength, honor, and humanity."[13] Along the same lines, Bibb's wife, Malinda, as well as his daughter Mary Frances, "become the means through which he can sever ties with slavery and the South to justify his new life in the North."[14] In fact, acknowledging the historical context within which Bibb is writing his narrative is crucial, as the writer faced immense pressure to appeal to his "white audience,"[15] for example to elicit support for the abolitionist cause. In an attempt to accomplish this goal, "Bibb engaged in the 19th-century praxis of sympathy/empathy."[16] His portrayal of Malinda and Mary Frances may be seen as a strategic choice aimed at evoking the sympathy and empathy of a white patriarchal community through "constructions of African American masculine ideality [...] by drawing on the dominant definitions and discourses of manhood to refute pervasive stereotypes of African Americans."[17] As depicted in Bibb's narrative, one of the most important motivations for escaping slavery is associated with the slavers' physical abuse of his first wife and daughter, which is strongly linked to the male slave's inability to protect them as a threat to his masculinity.

Depiction of Black Women in Slave Narratives

While both early and contemporary studies acknowledge the roles of Black women and the impact of familial relationships on Henry Bibb's slavery narrative, only a limited number of studies touch on the specific dynamics and impacts of these constructions on Black women, such as Ronda C. Henry Anthony's *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies* (see note 12); Corey D. Greathouse's "Conjuring Traditions of Resistance in Nineteenth Century Narratives

12 Ronda C. Henry Anthony, *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 18.

13 Anthony, *Searching for the New,* 18.

14 Anthony, *Searching for the New,* 18.

15 Anthony, *Searching for the New,* 27.

16 Johnnie Romon Blunt, *Literacy and Liberation: A Content Analysis of Four Antebellum Slave Narratives as Sites of Critical Literacy* (PhD diss., Oakland University, 2023), 87.

17 Anthony, *Searching for the New*, 28.

of Slavery;"[18] Keith Michael Green's "Am I Not a Husband and a Father? Re-membering Black Masculinity, Slave Incarceration, and Cherokee Slavery in *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*;"[19] and Christopher S. Lewis's "Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Narratives."[20] Yet, with the exception of Amy Lewis's article "*Who'll Speak for Malinda?*,"[21] there are few (if any) other studies focusing on Malinda's experience. Instead, Malinda has been utilized by past scholars merely to comprehend Bibb's triumphs and struggles within the context of slavery. Such a research gap clearly underscores the need to focus on Black women's experiences and stories to achieve a richer understanding.

In *Searching for the New Black Man: Black Masculinity and Women's Bodies,* Anthony thoroughly explores the way Black male authors have themselves "used and misused" Black "women's bodies" in African American literature.[22] Examining "representations of ideal Black masculinities and femininities," Anthony's book emphasizes the intertwined struggles of Black men for gendered agency along with their complex relationship with "(white) normative masculinity" as grounded in the context of evolving "socioeconomic circumstances."[23] Although Anthony critiques ideal Black masculinity and highlights its impact on both Black men and women, she mostly focuses on masculinity.

Exploring antebellum slave narratives, Christopher Lewis has claimed that both Henry Bibb's and Frederick Douglass's narratives of escape highlight the limitations of traditional slavery narratives, which focus on the freedom of Black men while leaving enslaved women's experiences and diverse forms of resistance largely unexplored. This view glosses over the complexities of slavery, for example the agency of enslaved women, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes and neglecting alternative paths to freedom. Moreover, both Bibb and Douglass depict their escapes as partially driven by the plight of the enslaved women left behind. This focus on escape as the only way out of slavery may not take into account the diverse experiences and resistance strategies of enslaved women, particularly those whose unique circumstances prevented them from escaping to the North like their male counterparts.[24]

Unlike Christopher S. Lewis, Keith Michael Green argues for the complexity of Bibb's narrative. Green claims that the narrative's engagement with captivity extends beyond slavery, urging "a multi-generic approach" to understanding the complexity of the antebellum slave narrative and its lasting impact.[25] Green argues that Bibb's narrative unveils the complex dynamics of captivity, masculinity, and the African-American slave narrative. In this interpretation, Bibb

18 Corey D. Greathouse, *Conjuring Traditions of Resistance in Nineteenth Century Narratives of Slavery* (PhD diss., The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2023).

19 Keith Michael Green, "Am I Not a Husband and a Father? Re-Membering Black Masculinity, Slave Incarceration, and Cherokee Slavery in *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*," *MELUS* 39, no. 4 (2014): 23–49.

20 Christopher S. Lewis, "Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Narratives," *The Arizona Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2018): 113–141.

21 Amy Lewis, "Who'll Speak for Malinda?: Alternate Narratives of Freedom in *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*," *African American Review* 52, no. 3 (2019): 255–276.

22 Anthony, *Searching for the New*, 4.

23 Anthony, *Searching for the New,* 4.

24 Lewis, "Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom," 118-119.

25 Green, "Am I Not a Husband," 41.

appears to be dedicated to showcasing models of antebellum manhood tied to devotion as husband and father. Nevertheless, as Green posits, Bibb's focus on his masculinity comes at the expense of other marginalized groups, such as enslaved women. Bibb's first wife and daughter, crucial to his narrative, are portrayed in roles that support his manhood, yet are denied full entry into the structure they help create, revealing the limits of the identities envisioned under oppressive norms.

Like Anthony, Lewis and Green, in his recent study of Henry Bibb's autobiography Greathouse concentrates on Bibb's experiences and his use of conjuring acts which not only served as survival strategies but also preserved African cultural traditions. However, within the context of his examination, Greathouse briefly highlights a critical perspective on the portrayal of enslaved Black women in the narratives of ex-enslaved Black men, namely that representations in slave narratives written by men may themselves contribute to a narrow and potentially distorted understanding of the experiences of enslaved Black women:

> While Douglass, Brown, and Bibb each make similar efforts to detail the violence enslaved Black women had to endure, their narratives limit enslaved Black women as inactive victims of white violence whose only means of protection was from their Black male counterparts. Given the (mis) representations of enslaved Black women in slave narratives written by men, the exigency for Black women to detail their own experiences was paramount.[26]

Although Greathouse underscores the vital significance of stories of enslaved Black women, the narratives of formerly enslaved Black men also remain crucial in illuminating the dual oppression faced by these women.

In her article "*Who'll Speak for Malinda?*," Lewis seeks to offer an alternative narrative through Malinda's voice. Lewis argues that Henry Bibb, shown to be aware of his audience in his abolitionist speeches, tailored his portrayal of Malinda to resonate with those who were fighting to end slavery. Lewis delves into Bibb's portrayal of Malinda in his autobiography, revealing the possibility that Malinda might not have shared Bibb's views on several issues, including regarding freedom and escape. Despite the lack of written records from Malinda, Bibb's narrative, although focused on his own perspective, offers glimpses into the complex realities of enslaved African American women in the antebellum South. Notably, Lewis seems to stand alone in her scholarly focus on Malinda's story, attempting to give this enslaved woman a voice by navigating gaps in Bibb's account.

Examining the narrative of Henry Bibb can not only help us comprehend the atrocities endured by Black women in slavery, but may also reveal how Black men's stories expose their involvement in the oppression of Black women. Bibb's narrative stands out as an important account through which the double oppression of enslaved Black women can be revealed and examined. As mentioned above, centering on Black women's experiences and stories is essential not only to scrutinize the role of Black women in shaping Black men's narratives, but also to investigate the feminine "symbolic annihilation" practiced against Black women. My paper employs a close-reading methodology focusing on this annihilation experienced by enslaved women like Malinda. Building on Amy Lewis's call for alternate narratives, this article offers a critical perspective on Black women's depiction and omission in slave narratives in antebellum America. By revealing the

26 Greathouse, *Conjuring Traditions of Resistance*, 94.

often-overlooked complexities of enslaved Black women's lives, this approach seeks to challenge conventional interpretations of slave narratives in an attempt to offer insights into both depicted and omitted experiences.

Theoretical Perspectives on Representation in Slave Narratives

In his book, *Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions*, George Gerbner describes how groups are marginalized through their underrepresentation or misrepresentation in the media. He argues that the absence or stereotypical portrayal of certain groups in television dramas contributes to their perceived insignificance and erases their experiences from public consciousness. Moreover, he claims that this process of symbolic annihilation can reinforce existing social inequalities and make it easier to justify discrimination and violence against marginalized groups. Thus, he defines symbolic annihilation as stemming from the insight that as "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."[27] Gaye Tuchman expands Gerbner's symbolic annihilation to include "condemnation" and "trivialization," in addition to omission. [28] Tuchman highlights that women, whether omitted, "condemned" or "trivialized," are "symbolized as child-like adornments, who need to be protected."[29] Expanding the reach of symbolic annihilation beyond media analysis, my article applies the concept to delve deeper into Malinda's portrayal in Bibb's slave narrative to foster a deeper understanding of Malinda's representation.

My article seeks to take a decisive step towards countering the symbolic annihilation of Malinda by critically examining her portrayal in Bibb's narrative. By meticulously uncovering the omission, trivialization, and condemnation of Malinda, my analysis empowers readers to critically assess Black men's slave narratives and challenge the inherent limitations. Ultimately, my work should serve as a powerful call to expose and dismantle the systematic annihilation of enslaved Black women within slave narratives authored by Black men. It encourages a deeper dive into slave narratives, urging consideration of the untold perspectives and misrepresented experiences of those whose voices have been trivialized, condemned, or even omitted altogether. Additionally, my study seeks to contribute to ongoing discourses regarding the portrayal of Black women in these narratives, with the ultimate goal of inspiring further bold examinations of how enslaved Black men perceived, depicted, and sometimes utilized enslaved women for their own social survival. Motivating this honest exploration is the profound understanding of the devastating impact slavery had on the entire Black community while stressing the double bondage of enslaved Black women. The act of reclaiming Malinda's presence serves as a powerful counternarrative that challenges the hegemonic masculine discourse adopted by ex-slaves.

27 George Gerbner, *Violence in Television Drama: A Study of Trends and Symbolic Functions* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1970), 44.

28 Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, eds. L. Crothers and C. Lockhart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 43.

29 Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation," 44.

Double Bondage: Malinda's Symbolic Annihilation Within Slavery and Beyond

Throughout his narrative, Bibb systematically distances Malinda from his envisioned freedom, consistently and persistently linking her to the shackles of slavery. This symbolic annihilation manifests in Bibb's implicit and explicit omission, trivialization, and condemnation of Malinda while antithetically accusing her of omission, trivialization, and condemnation on several occasions. He reflects on his decision to pursue marriage early in their relationship:

> After I had determined to carry out the great idea which is so universally and practically acknowledged among all the civilized nations of the earth, that I would be free or die, I suffered myself to be turned aside by the fascinating charms of a female, who gradually won my attention from an object so high as that of liberty.[30]

Malinda is made to bear the blame for Bibb's temporary prioritization of their relationship over his higher goal of freedom which, in turn, leads to the trivialization of his pursuit of liberty as he "suffered" and was "turned aside" by Malinda.[31] Moreover, this indicates Malinda's initial omission from the narrative's focus on freedom, since she is presented in contrast to the idea of liberty that Bibb embraces.

Henry Bibb makes the decisive choice to escape slavery before convincing Malinda's master, citing his master's cruelty as a compelling reason. Bibb asserts, "I soon found that I should have to run away in self-defense."[32] When Bibb's master doubted his intentions, he was sold to Malinda's master, William Gatewood. Despite being physically close to Malinda and their newborn daughter, this proximity does not discourage Bibb from escaping, nor does it encourage him to take Malinda and their infant daughter with him, even though he vividly recalls the mistreatment and abuse that both of them have endured in the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Gatewood. He describes a situation in which he has witnessed his daughter's abuse:

> Who can imagine what could be the feelings of a father and mother when looking upon their infant child whipped and tortured with impunity, and they placed in a situation where they could afford it no protection.[33]

Despite acknowledging Malinda's indescribable pain in witnessing their daughter's abuse, Bibb fails to actively support her or to contemplate taking both of them with him in his escape. Instead, he omits and trivializes Malinda's experience as an enslaved mother by centering on his own emotions and feelings as a husband and father. Bibb employs the "insults, scourgings and abuses"[34] suffered by Malinda and their daughter as a justification for his escape rather than their protection. Expressing reluctance to witness such horrors, he states:

30 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 33.

31 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 33.

32 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 42.

33 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 43.

34 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 42.

> If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave drivers and overseers, if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, Heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight.[35]

Bibb's self-centered framing minimizes Malinda's and his daughter's suffering and shifts focus to his own travails. This causes the reader to perceive Bibb's escape as an egocentric act that symbolically annihilates the suffering of his wife and of his daughter Mary Frances.

Bibb's centrism is further evidenced in his description of escaping and leaving Malinda and Mary Frances behind, which he labels as "one of the most self-denying acts."[36] This self-perception starkly contrasts with his portrayal of Malinda, who is not only symbolically marginalized, but is also depicted as a formidable barrier to his pursuit and is condemned for being so. An illustrative example may be found in Bibb's initial attempt to escape after marriage: "[h]ad Malinda known my intention at that time, it would not have been possible for me to have got away, and I might have this day been a slave."[37] This contradiction in Bibb's portrayal of Malinda is significant, especially considering his stance at the beginning of their relationship, prior to marriage: "[a]fter I found that Malinda was right upon these all-important questions [regarding freedom and religion], [...] I made proposals for marriage."[38] Bibb's subsequently shifting portrayal of Malinda from a partner who shares his aspirations, to a perceived obstacle to freedom underscores the complexity of his centrism. His prioritization of personal liberty over his commitment to his wife and child therefore reflects the moral dilemmas Bibb faces as he navigates his way out of the oppressive institution of slavery.

Indeed, Bibb reveals that when he shares his dream of freedom with Malinda, she expresses that she too had harbored this dream even before meeting him: "I have always felt a desire to be free; I have long cherished a hope that I should yet be free, either by purchase or running away."[39] As noted by Amy Lewis, Malinda shares "an alternate route to freedom,"[40] indicating that she desired and hoped for freedom long before meeting Bibb. Therefore, Bibb's implicit condemnation of Malinda by associating her with slavery, as mentioned earlier, implies her symbolic annihilation, as she is situated by Bibb in slavery and conceivably might keep Bibb with her. Furthermore, Malinda's existence and significance are trivialized as Bibb "forsake[s] friends and neighbors, wife and child" solely for the sake of his liberty.[41] Bibb's prioritization of his freedom over his commitment to his wife and child reveals the symbolic annihilation of Malinda, as she is cast aside in favor of Bibb's individual liberty.

In a pivotal scene that underscores Bibb's self-centeredness and the symbolic annihilation of Malinda, he recounts seeking permission from her enslaved owner, Gatewood, to marry her. Bibb details the exchange: "When I went to ask his permission to marry Malinda, his answer was in the affirmative with but one condition, which I consider to be too vulgar to be written in this

35 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 42.

36 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 46.

37 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 47.

38 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 37.

39 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 37.

40 Lewis, "Who'll Speak for Malinda?", 261.

41 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 47.

book."[42] This deliberate omission shrouds Gatewood's condition, compounding the ambiguity. In analyzing this scene, Afua Ava Cooper offers a possible explanation: "What did Gatewood say that was 'too vulgar' for Bibb to write down? Almost undoubtedly, I believe it had to do with sex, or the master's imposition of his sexual desires in the marriage bed of the slaves."[43] While speculative, Cooper's interpretation highlights the potential exploitation and Bibb's refusal to disclose Gatewood's stipulation raises troubling questions about Bibb's role in Malinda's oppression. Claiming the condition as "too vulgar"[44] to share suggests a desire to maintain a narrative built on sincerity and selflessness, yet it implies an uncomfortable truth Bibb cannot admit. This omission, coupled with his later condemnation of Malinda for her supposed closeness to her owner, paints a complex picture of Bibb's potential complicity. Wilma King highlights the vulnerability of enslaved women to sexual abuse by both white and Black men,[45] suggesting enslaved women's double bonds, even within supposedly safe spaces and intimate relationships. By downplaying the significance of Gatewood's prerequisite for consenting to the marriage as well as erasing any discussion with Malinda, Bibb effectively omits her experience and perpetuates her marginalization within the oppressive system. This information, vital for understanding the true extent of exploitation faced by enslaved Black women, is deliberately excluded from his narrative, leaving a troubling gap in Bibb's portrayal of their shared journeys. The deliberate exclusion leaves a gaping hole in Bibb's narrative, one that not only prevents a full understanding of their shared journey but also exemplifies the need for a critical examination of historical and other non-fictional accounts to ensure silenced voices like Malinda's are not lost amidst the struggles for liberty.

While alternative interpretations of Gatewood's condition are possible, Henry Bibb's narrative paints a disturbing picture of sexual exploitation in the South: he has recounted the tragic case of his mother, forced to bear seven children, including himself. He has provided statements regarding the difficulty of unequivocally determining the identities of the fathers of slave children: "It is almost impossible for slaves to give a correct account of their male parentage."[46] This further underscores the power imbalances and violations faced by enslaved women and helps explain Charles J. Heglar's argument that Bibb, anticipating the eventual dissolution of his marriage to Malinda, constructs his narrative to justify his actions and reinforce a specific theme.[47] The construction of this narrative involves withholding certain information which could potentially cast Bibb in an unfavorable light, for example the exact nature of Gatewood's stipulation to permit the marriage of his slaves. Further, Bibb's decision to declare his marital separation from Malinda, in her absence and without including her in the decision, aligns with Heglar's interpretation.

Bibb's narrative exposes a disturbing contradiction between his self-preservation and the precarious situation in which he leaves his family after his escape. Bibb narrates that he succeeds

42 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 40.

43 Afua Ava Pamela Cooper, *Doing Battle in Freedom's Cause: Henry Bibb, Abolitionism, Race Uplift, and Black Manhood, 1842–1854* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2000), 415–416.

44 Cooper, *Doing Battle in Freedom's,* 40.

45 Wilma King, "Suffer with them till death," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 158.

46 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 15.

47 Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), 35.

in his first escape from slavery after his marriage, and decides to return only to save his family. Nevertheless, he prioritizes his own safety when he returns to Malinda and gives her some money for her passage on a steamboat. He asks her to meet him in Cincinnati and sneaks away, since "it was not safe for [him] to wait for her until Saturday night."[48] Bibb downplays the increased risks faced by Malinda and their daughter despite their limited mobility and vulnerability as enslaved women. Bibb's awareness of Malinda's heightened scrutiny owing to his escape underscores the additional burdens women faced in navigating the perilous path to freedom as he knows that because of his escape "the owners of [Malinda] were more watchful over her than they had ever been before" and "[they] were very much afraid that she would follow [him]."[49] Hilde's observation that enslaved women were granted passes for movement far less frequently than men,[50] coupled with Lussana's assertion of restricted mobility,[51] highlights the systemic obstacles enslaved women faced. Furthermore, as Hilde notes, the responsibility of motherhood further limited enslaved women's abilities to become fugitives.[52] Bibb's actions, therefore, not only fail to acknowledge these inherent challenges, but also potentially exacerbate them, leaving Malinda and their daughter to navigate an even more treacherous path towards freedom.

Harriet Jacobs's poignant words, "it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery,"[53] resonate deeply with the plight of enslaved Black women like Malinda. Enslaved Black women such as Ann Moody, June Jordan, Harriet Jacobs, and Sara Brooks, just to name a few, sacrificed their own freedom, prioritizing their children.[54] Unlike men who could potentially escape alone, women like Jacobs, and arguably Malinda herself, faced an agonizing choice between securing their own freedom and leaving their children behind. This dilemma, compounded by other inherent restrictions placed on enslaved women's mobility and agency, significantly reduced the chances of these mothers of escaping successfully. Bibb's narrative, with its convenient omission of Malinda's struggle, not only perpetuates a romanticized view of escaping slavery, but also silences the voices of countless Black women who bore the additional burden of motherhood within an already brutal system. The result is a drastic simplification of the complex experiences of these women as well as their children.

Bibb's narrative acknowledges the pervasive threat of sexual violence enslaved women faced, as exemplified by Malinda's experiences. The "insults, scourging, and abuses" Malinda suffered at the hands of Gatewood and other figures of authority are recounted by Bibb with a degree of removed sympathy.[55] He highlights her exposure "to the insults and licentious passions," not just

48 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 59.

49 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 59.

50 Libra Rose Hilde, *Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal Duty in African American Communities over the Long Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 138.

51 Sergio A. Lussana, *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 148.

52 Hilde, *Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal*, 138.

53 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 76.

54 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 198.

55 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 42.

from her owner's desires, but also from the exploitative nature of the entire system.[56] Following their unsuccessful attempts to escape, Bibb and his family are imprisoned by Garrison, who intends to sell them in the New Orleans slave market. Within days, Garrison takes Malinda to a "private house where he kept female slaves for the basest purposes."[57] After painting a disturbing picture of the constant threats enslaved women face, Garrison threatens to sell off Malinda's child unless she complies with his wicked desires. Bibb notes that "[t]wo days later, [Garrison] came again and took Malinda out of the prison. It was several weeks before I saw her again, and learned that he had not sold her or the child."[58] While Bibb never explicitly states that Malinda submits to Garrison to protect their daughter, this possibility raises questions about the appalling choices that women like Malinda were forced to make within a system designed to strip them of agency and dignity.

Angela Davis underscores the harrowing reality of enslaved women's exploitation and double oppression, noting that "the punishment inflicted on women exceeded in intensity the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also raped."[59] Davis's observations emphasize the multifaceted and disproportionate suffering endured by enslaved women. Furthermore, Collins affirms the systemic nature of their exploitation, describing how "[u]nder slavery, U.S. Black women worked without pay in the allegedly public sphere of Southern agriculture and had their family privacy routinely violated."[60] In addition to their relentless labor, these women were subjected to constant surveillance and interference in their relationships and family lives, stripping them of any semblance of personal autonomy. Observations such as those by Davis and Collins paint the devastating picture of the brutal realities faced by enslaved Black women. Descriptions of the experiences of these women went through serve to expose the physical and psychological abuse they endured as well as the systematic dehumanization embedded within the very institution of slavery and all of the systems that supported it.

Further, Bibb confirms that enslaved women were sometimes forced into prostitution, describing these slaveholders as keepers of "houses of ill-fame" where Black women were trapped in "adultery" with no legal protection.[61] Grim realities such as these exemplify the utter helplessness that Black women faced against the pervasive sexual exploitation practiced in the South. As Davis points out, Malinda's ordeal of being sexually exploited and tortured underscores how "rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men."[62] The systematic use of sexual violence aimed to enforce the total capitulation of enslaved women as well as to demoralize enslaved men, creating a climate of fear and submission.

Bibb's assertion of his goal of seeking liberty before even meeting Malinda contrasts starkly with his letter to Gatewood in which he cites family abuse as a motivator for escape in order "to seek a better home for them."[63] While Bibb does express his longing for his former days with

56 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 42.

57 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 98.

58 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 98.

59 Angela Yvonne Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 19.

60 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 47.

61 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 38.

62 Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 19–20.

63 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 177–178.

Malinda, stating, "I often look back to that period even now as one of the most happy seasons of my life,"[64] on the other hand, a few pages later he confirms his regrets regarding his marriage to Malinda: "If ever there was one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over it is that of being a father and husband of slaves."[65] This potential discrepancy and even cognitive dissonance can be seen to raise questions regarding Bibb's evolving motivations as well as the influence of the writer's audience awareness. His regret at being the father and husband of slaves shows Bibb's condemnation of his relationship with Malinda and Mary Frances, a condemnation that further reinforces the symbolic annihilation of the mother and daughter within the narrative. Whereas emphasizing that family values might have resonated with white readers and projected a sense of masculinity, such a subject position also highlights the limitations of individual agency within a system of oppression.

Moreover, Bibb's later portrayal of Malinda presents a complex and potentially troubling aspect of the dynamics of his family. Having achieving freedom for several years, Bibb recounts his return to his former with the intention of saving his wife and children. However, upon hearing rumors of Malinda's relationship with a white man, he reacts swiftly without seeking clarification or attempting to verify the information directly.

While readers may find this reaction surprising, Bibb's subsequent expression of regret further intensifies the complexity. "After all the sacrifices, sufferings, and risks [...] every prospect and hope was cut off," he declares, suggesting a deep sense of personal investment and disappointment.[66] This regret culminates in his definitive statement of abandoning Malinda, declaring her "theoretically and practically dead" as a wife because of this purported disloyalty.[67] Bibb's condemnation of Malinda for living in putative adultery with her master negates his previous acknowledgement and narration of enslaved women's limited agency within slavery. Bibb has seemingly set aside his earlier understanding that "[enslaved] Black women who resisted sexual exploitation [...] were brutally punished."[68] Surprisingly, he justifies his judgment of Malinda by referring to what is right and wrong according to social and religious norms: "according to the laws of God and man,"[69] the same laws that kept him in slavery for half of his life. Throughout the narrative, Malinda is gradually trivialized, eventually condemned, and, finally, omitted altogether.

Conclusion

The legacy of slavery, along with its impact on gender dynamics, continues to contribute to the perpetuation of structures that disadvantage Black women. Comprehending the participation of Black men in these dynamics through the exploration of historical narratives such as Bibb's is crucial for navigating the contemporary challenges faced by both Black men and women as they grapple with historical legacies and strive for equality and empowerment.

64 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 41.

65 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 44.

66 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 189.

67 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 189.

68 Hooks, *Black Looks*, 27.

69 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 189.

Examining Henry Bibb's narrative can not only provide insights into the harrowing experiences endured by Black women in slavery, but also exposes the complicity of Black men in the oppression of Black women. Bibb's account serves as a vital lens through which the double bondage faced by enslaved Black women can be brought to light and analyzed. As highlighted earlier, centering on the experiences and stories of Black women is crucial not only for understanding their role in shaping the narratives of Black men but also for investigating the pervasive symbolic annihilation practiced against Black women. By investigating the experiences of enslaved women, we not only prioritize them, but also gain a deeper apprehension of the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and power within the context of slavery and beyond.

This study seeks to shed light on a number of complexities embedded within Henry Bibb's narrative of Malinda to reveal significant contradictions and implications for understanding the experiences of enslaved Black women. My analysis attempts to demonstrate how Bibb's narrative symbolically annihilates Malinda, trivializes her voice, condemns her experience, and ultimately omits her from the narrative. The goal of this investigation is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersecting oppression and double bondage faced by enslaved Black women along with the ways in which their voices and experiences have been marginalized within men's historical narratives.

Studies like these underscore the importance of critically examining historical narratives to uncover the voices and experiences of marginalized people. By examining the portrayal of individuals like Malinda in slave narratives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of slavery and its lasting impact on marginalized communities.

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