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### Who'll Speak for Malinda?: Alternate Narratives of Freedom in The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb

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Who'll Speak for Malinda?: Alternate Narratives of Freedom in  
*The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*

Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

In the winter of 1845, the fugitive slave Henry Bibb faced a terrible decision. He had spent the previous year speaking for the abolitionist cause, traveling through Michigan and Ohio as a paid agent of the Liberty Party of Michigan.<sup>1</sup> At these abolitionist events, Bibb was actively raising money to rescue his wife Malinda and their young daughter Mary Frances from enslavement. The enslavement of his family was often the focus of his speeches, and his audiences were deeply moved by their plight. An article in the *Palladium of Liberty* claimed that Bibb gave an account of the "separation of him from his wife," after which "the coldest hearts were warm, and every eye gave a tear" (Henry Bibb 1844). A writer for the *Ohio American* described how audiences would "melt in tears" when they heard "his appeals in behalf of a beloved wife and children yet in captivity in Louisiana" (Mr. Bibb 1845).<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), Bibb himself describes one of his first abolitionist talks, which drew "about one thousand persons," many of whom were "shedding tears while I related the sad story of my wrongs" (180).<sup>3</sup>

In order to buy Malinda and Mary Frances, Bibb needed not only the sympathy of his listeners, but also their financial support. In his narrative, he describes being hired by the Liberty Party of Michigan whose members were "pledging themselves to restore to me my wife and child" (185). He includes a circular originally distributed with the party's newspaper, *The Signal of Liberty*, in which the terms of his employment are described.<sup>4</sup> The circular states:

a strong obligation rests on the friends of this State to sustain Mr. Bibb, and restore to him his wife and child. Under the expectation that Michigan will yield to these claims: will support their laborer, and reunite the long severed ties of husband and wife, parent and child, Mr. Bibb will lecture through the whole state. (185)

At the beginning of his employment as an abolitionist speaker, it is clear that Bibb's goal, and that of his supporters, was to raise money to buy his family.

In the winter of 1845, as the emotional and financial support for his family continued to grow, Bibb traveled to Madison, Indiana, a town just across the Ohio River from Bedford, Kentucky where his family and Malinda's had originally been enslaved. Bibb's plan was to gather news about Malinda and Mary Frances from family and friends. As he describes in his narrative, Bibb learns that they had been sold from the Louisiana cotton plantation where the family had last been enslaved together and that Malinda was "living in a state of adultery" (188) with the man who purchased her. Bibb then states that "according to the law of God and man" Malinda's decision to "give him up" and her subsequent adulterous relationship, taken together, mean that their marriage could no longer exist (188-9). In one short chapter of his slave narrative, Bibb outlines his decision to stop trying to rescue Malinda and Mary Frances. Although members of the Liberty Party had pledged to restore his family "if it be within our means" and "the objects are living" (186), Bibb himself declares Malinda to be "theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife" (189), and he takes no further measures to rescue his family.

The title of this article asks the question: "Who'll speak for Malinda?". If Henry Bibb speaks for Malinda, then the story he tells is obviously incomplete. He declares her dead while she was still alive and living, with their daughter, in slavery. Even prior to his premature declaration of her death, when Bibb, in his narrative, describes their courtship and marriage, the birth of their daughter, their mutual hopes for freedom, and his own escape attempts, does he speak for Malinda as well as himself? Or, after years of positioning himself as the bereaved

husband at abolitionist meetings and after his ultimate decision to end their marriage, did Bibb write a narrative that obscures as much as it reveals? And, if Henry Bibb doesn't speak for Malinda, can contemporary scholars speak for her? Can we speak for one "specific enslaved woman" to whom Ta-Nehisi Coates refers in the epigraph above? Especially now, as more and more materials are being scanned into digital archives, is there reason to hope that we might find materials to clarify what Bibb's narrative obscures? Such questions are at the heart of research being done by scholars across disciplines in the humanities, the recovery work that seeks to find and add the voices of enslaved African Americans to our cultural history and the literary canon.

Much of the recovery work done by both historians and literary scholars in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century looked to slave narratives, like Henry Bibb's, as credible primary source materials and foundational writings in early African-American literature respectively.<sup>5</sup> Historians used slave narratives to construct revisionist histories of slavery that foregrounded the first-person accounts of enslaved African Americans in books such as John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the American South* (1972), Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (1976).<sup>6</sup> Recovery work done by literary scholars also focused on the collection and analysis of slave narratives. Frances Smith Foster's *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (1979), Marion Wilson Starling's *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (1981),<sup>7</sup> and William Andrews' *To Tell a True Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (1986) all argued for the importance of slave narratives in the study of early American literature. Perhaps the apex of such recovery work was the creation of the *North American Slave Narratives Collection*, the open-access digital repository that includes all known slave narratives written in English, that is part of the larger

and still-growing *Documenting the American South* project at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill.<sup>8</sup>

The recovery of slave narratives, the thoughtful analysis of the production and reception of these texts, and the synthesis of the content of key narratives into histories of slavery in the United States all represent important, foundational scholarly work. However, the emphasis on slave narratives in recovery work has also been described as problematic. For example, questions about the production of slave narratives have focused on the difficulty in establishing what impact white abolitionists had on the testimony of formerly enslaved African Americans. As John Ernest points out in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of The African American Slave Narrative* (2014), “Since all of white culture so frequently seemed devoted to creating fictions about what it means to be black, the interest of even the most trusted white Americans in the life stories of black Americans was almost always a mixed blessing” (7).<sup>9</sup> Another problem is the exceptionalism implicit in writings that could only be produced by those who escaped to the nominal freedom of the North.<sup>10</sup> Using slave narratives, for example, to represent enslaved African Americans in the antebellum United States, marginalizes women’s experiences, because the majority of those who escaped and then wrote slave narratives were men. An integral part of early recovery work was the description of such marginalization and an answering emphasis on women’s perspectives in books such as Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (1988) and Jean Fagin Yellin’s edition of Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1987).<sup>11</sup>

More recent scholarship on recovery work has focused on both the impact of expanding digital archives and the need to temper what some characterize as an overly optimistic approach

to recovery. In an article entitled “New World: The Impact of Digitization on the Study of Slavery,” (2017) Brit Rusert points out that texts newly available in digital archives have caused a shift in methodology for literary scholars. She writes: “while literary studies has historically stuck close to the slave narrative tradition, scholars are finding themselves inundated with new records and documentation that are changing the disciplinary boundaries between literary and historical approaches” (267). A search for Malinda’s story embraces that disciplinary shift. Newspaper articles that refer to Malinda, especially in descriptions of the abolitionist speeches delivered by Henry Bibb, as well as an “open letter” that Bibb wrote describing how his mother, Milldred Jackson, obtained her freedom, all match Rusert’s description of the “new records” that can now be accessed in digital archives, and they do foreground the opportunity to look past a single slave narrative to the primary-source materials that were produced by and about the narrative’s author. While parts of Malinda’s story might be found in Bibb’s narrative,<sup>12</sup> these additional documents add to and complicate the story Bibb presents. The two newspaper articles quoted in the paragraphs that begin this article, for example, were written before Bibb’s narrative, and they record Bibb’s emphasis on the loss of his family in his abolitionist speeches. But in the narrative itself, written after Bibb has stopped all rescue efforts and remarried, his own description of the talk he gave at an abolitionist meeting uses a more vague phrase, “the sad story of my wrongs,” to characterize the topic of his speech.

The optimism of current recovery work is tempered by an emphasis on the limitations of archives, both print and digital. One clear limitation is the organization of print archives that preserved some documents and not others. Only materials that were initially preserved can now be scanned into digital archives. In her article on black print cultures, Frances Smith Foster points out, “With African-American texts, as with other cultural materials produced by and for

other devalued groups, so much has been lost, gone astray, or been stolen that complete restoration is impossible” (714).<sup>13</sup> The goal to recover African-American stories is thus limited by archives that reproduce the prejudices of their time, and scholars who do recovery work sometimes outline the impossibility of telling the stories of those erased from history. These archival silences are especially marked in the study of Atlantic slavery, when the sole trace of one person’s life might be a mark on a ship’s manifest, but it can also apply to the study of antebellum slavery. In advertisements for runaway slaves, for example, when the slaveholder’s description of a fugitive slave is the only written record that marks that person’s existence, recovery work faces the challenging task of fighting erasure while recording the often racist and demeaning descriptions written by slaveholders.<sup>14</sup>

Saidiya Hartman argues for the importance of transparency in the process of writing the stories of women like Malinda, who have scant presence in archival sources.<sup>15</sup> In her article “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman reflects on one seven-year-old girl who was murdered on a slave ship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, outlining the impossibility and the necessity of telling her story. She warns against the temptation “to fill in the gaps and provide closure where there is none” (8) and states that her own intentions are “to imagine what cannot be verified” to create “a history of an unrecoverable past . . . a narrative of what might have been or what could have been” (12). Recent scholarship on recovery is at a paradoxical place - the silences of the archive may be unassailable, but still that silence cannot be where scholarship ends. This paradox is articulated by Laura Helton and others, who write, “we cannot resolve the tension between recovering archival traces of black life as a means of contesting legacies of racism and exclusion, on one hand, and reading the archive as a site of irrevocable silence that reproduces the racial hierarchies intrinsic to its construction, on the other” (Helton et al. 2).<sup>16</sup> In the search for

Malinda's story, the limitations of recovery work are clear. Malinda never escaped from slavery. Her story is not present in the archive as a slave narrative, a letter, or a transcript of her abolitionist speech. It is almost entirely contained within Henry Bibb's narrative. The narrative and the newspaper articles that describe Henry Bibb and his abolitionist work, almost without exception, were published by white abolitionists. Still, I believe a shadow narrative that tells part of Malinda's story can be read in these primary sources. In an interview about her archival work, Hartman says: "I observe that narrative may be the only available form of redress for the monumental crime that was the transatlantic slave trade and the terror of enslavement and racism" (On Working). Answering the question "Who'll speak for Malinda," is an attempt to create such a narrative, one that might serve as a partial and limited form of redress.

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When Bibb self-published his narrative in 1849, he must have been aware that he was presenting this story of abandonment to the same audiences who wept at his earlier abolitionist speeches.<sup>17</sup> When he writes about Malinda, the language he chooses and the explanations he provides reflect this awareness. Looking for a shadow narrative of Malinda's story within Bibb's autobiographical work, reveals some assumptions Bibb made about agency, freedom, and escape -- assumptions with which Malinda might not have agreed. While Malinda herself left no written record, Bibb's narrative provides much of the information needed to situate her in the complex circumstances surrounding African-American women enslaved in the antebellum United States. While Bibb primarily focuses on Malinda's plight to position himself as the "bereaved husband," both what he writes about Malinda and the strategic silences in his narrative allow us to read an alternate narrative about Malinda's enslavement and her own hopes for freedom.



One place where Bibb's and Malinda's narratives diverge might be in Bibb's description of their agreement to marry.<sup>18</sup> When Bibb describes his courtship of and marriage to Malinda, he emphasizes his desire to escape, even as he enters into a relationship that would potentially tie him to slavery.<sup>19</sup> Here we see both Bibb's language of militant abolition and Malinda's alternate narrative of emancipation.<sup>20</sup> When he broaches the subject of marriage, Bibb frames his declaration by presenting conditions that Malinda must agree to if they are to marry. Here is his proposal as Bibb describes it in his narrative:

I never will give my heart nor hand to any girl in marriage, until I first know her sentiments upon the all-important subjects of Religion and Liberty. No matter how well I might love her, nor how great the sacrifice in carrying out these God-given principles. And I here pledge myself from this course never to be shaken while a single pulsation of my heart shall continue to throb for Liberty. (36)

In Bibb's speech, his heart throbs not for Malinda, but for Liberty. God has sanctioned not their marriage, but his plans for escape. The narrative continues with their agreement to marry and their pledge to lead godly lives together, but Bibb has foregrounded his commitment to escape as the equivalent to his duty to God in this marriage proposal, rather than emphasizing his commitment to Malinda.

Language describing the Judeo-Christian God as sanctioning and aiding escape can be found throughout Bibb's narrative.<sup>21</sup> When he describes his first escape, Bibb asks for help via prayer: "I kneeled down before the Great I Am, and prayed for his aid and protection, which He bountifully bestowed" (48). The use of the phrase "Great I Am" as the name of God is a direct reference to the story of Moses leading the Israelites from enslavement. In Exodus, God tells Moses to say to the Israelites "I AM hath sent me unto you," and Bibb's use of "I AM" aligns chattel slavery in the United States with the enslavement of God's chosen people.<sup>22</sup> Bibb reinforces this connection between himself and the Israelites when he characterizes his early

determination to escape as having "the voice , of liberty . . . thundering in my very soul" (47).<sup>23</sup> In Exodus, the presence of God on Mount Sinai is marked by thunder and lightning, and the voice of God is described as thunder throughout the bible.<sup>24</sup> Thus Bibb implies that God's voice calls for his liberty and that his escapes are sanctioned by God.

While a comprehensive analysis of all the biblical allusions in Bibb's narrative is beyond the scope of this article, Bibb's repeated references to Exodus indicate his commitment to the biblical interpretations developed by African Americans, both enslaved and free.<sup>25</sup> Albert J. Raboteau describes the centrality of the Exodus story and the immediacy of this story of deliverance in black religious practices. He writes:

In the ecstasy of worship, time and distance collapsed, and the slaves became the children of Israel. With the Hebrews, they traveled dry-shod through the Red Sea; they, too, saw Pharaoh's army "get drowned"; they stood beside Moses on Mount Pisgah and gazed out over the Promised Land. (*A Fire in the Bones* 33-34)

In Bibb's narrative, the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt not only occurred in the past, but in his present. For Bibb, Exodus is a prophecy partially fulfilled by his own deliverance from enslavement.<sup>26</sup> When he describes his early longing to escape, initially thwarted by his inability to cross the Ohio River, Bibb refers to the parting of the Red Sea when he claims that he had "no rod wherewith to smite the stream" and "no Moses to go before me" (29). Later, describing his failed attempt to escape with Malinda and Mary Frances by running through the swamps of Louisiana, he alludes to the Israelites wandering in the desert when he writes: "We wandered about in the wilderness for eight or ten days" (123). Bibb, like many enslaved African Americans, uses Exodus as a key to his escape stories. Both when he succeeds and when he fails, he is living the experiences of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and repeating their search for freedom in the Promised Land.

Exodus is not the only part of the bible that Bibb uses to provide context for his escapes. He also refers to Paul's letter to the Galatians, using it to justify the measures he takes to achieve his final escape from the Indian territories outside of Arkansas. Bibb refers to Paul's letter when he steals a horse to cover more ground and then rides the horse through the night without stopping to rest.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting on the horse's suffering and his own, he writes "I could indeed afford to crucify my own flesh for the sake of redeeming myself from perpetual slavery" (163).<sup>28</sup> Bibb alludes to a passage in Galatians where Paul writes: "I am crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). In Galatians, Paul uses this language to emphasize the unity of all humankind and the redemption of humanity through Grace, created through Jesus's crucifixion and his resurrection to eternal life. Paul, originally writing to Jews who had accepted Jesus as the son of God, is arguing that following dietary law and being circumcised, for example, are less important than belief in Jesus as the Christ. For Bibb, just as Exodus unfolds in "real time," so does Paul's emphasis on faith over law. Fulfilling God's call to escape is more important than obeying human law. There's a trajectory in Bibb's narrative, as he first seeks God-given liberty but finds that he has "no Moses," then survives the "fiery ordeal" of slavery,<sup>29</sup> and finally is crucified to find his way to redemption in the North.

Bibb's use of religious language when describing escape is similar to the language of militant abolitionists, who believed freedom was God's gift to all humanity. This tradition of militant religious language is clear in the nineteenth-century debate surrounding self-purchase. Many abolitionists argued that because God made every human being free, no enslaved person should pay for his or her own freedom. Likewise, no abolitionist should purchase a slave, even with the intent to emancipate that person. Marion Wilson Starling describes the outcry among abolitionists in the United States when Frederick Douglass, having fled to England to avoid

capture, allowed British supporters to buy his freedom. She quotes letters of protest published in abolitionist newspapers that urged Douglass to refuse his sale and manumission. One representative letter, published in *The Liberator* in January 1847, warns Douglass that he "will lose the advantages of this truly manly, and . . . sublime position . . . if you accept that detestable certificate of your freedom, that blasphemous forgery, that accursed Bill of Sale of your body and soul" arguing that he should instead wait until he has "a penitent nation, prostrate at your feet, in tears, suing to you and God for forgiveness, for the outrages committed against God and man, in your person" (45). Another letter, also in the *Liberator*, insists that Douglass refuse his free papers and then dictates what Douglass should say to those who offer them: "The only free papers I possess, or will ever accept, is the impress that God has stamped upon me, in creating me a man like yourselves" (43). The letters of protest encompass many objections to Douglass' purchase and manumission, but a unifying theme among them is that Douglass must serve God by refusing to be bought and manumitted and not betray his faith by participating in the slave trade, even to free himself.<sup>30</sup>

While also a fugitive, Harriet Jacobs found herself in a situation very similar to Douglass', in that she fled New York after her whereabouts became known to the family that claimed to own her. When Jacobs' pursuers arrived in New York, her friend and employer, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, purchased Jacobs and secured her freedom. In her narrative, Jacobs describes her bitterness at being sold. She writes: "The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion" (257). Jacobs clearly sees her purchase, despite the good intentions of Willis, as contradictory to the fundamental doctrines of "the Christian religion." To be sure, at the end of her book, Jacobs tempers her bitterness by expressing

gratitude. She recalls that her father and her grandmother both tried to buy her freedom, and she describes Willis as "a friend among strangers" sent by God, adding "when I speak of Mrs. Bruce [Willis] as my friend, the word is sacred" (258). Reading Jacobs' narrative, one is struck by her mingling of militant abolitionist ideas -- no human being should ever be bought or sold -- with traditional "angel of the house" models for nineteenth-century women.<sup>31</sup> In her narrative, Jacobs softened her initial disapproval in alignment with this angelic model, but the militancy of her beliefs is clearer in her letters. According to Jean Fagan Yellin, when Willis wrote to Jacobs and declared her intention to purchase her, Jacobs declined her offer and announced her decision to move to Australia, where her brother and son were living. Jacobs chose to flee the country, rather than consent to be sold (114-116). Although Jacobs' determination to flee didn't prevent Willis from buying her, the letter is evidence that she never consented to be purchased.

Although Bibb may have come to embrace this militant opposition to self-purchase, Malinda's ideas about self-purchase seem to be more in line with the women in his narrative. Bibb's mother, Malinda's mother, and Malinda herself -- do not share the abolitionist disdain for freedom acquired by self-purchase.<sup>32</sup> Malinda certainly never expresses any conviction that God ordained escape as the path to freedom. When Bibb lays out his two conditions for marriage -- a willingness to live a Christian life and a desire for freedom -- Malinda's response is recorded as follows: "In regard to the subject of Religion, I have always felt that it was a good thing, and something I would seek for at some future period" (37). This tepid response, casting religion as "a good thing" that she might eventually embrace, suggests that Malinda had little religious conviction.<sup>33</sup> Although her acceptance of the plan to live a godly life is perfunctory, Malinda gives a more extensive and enthusiastic reply to Bibb's determination to be free. In Bibb's narrative, Malinda's reply continues as follows:

I have long entertained the same views [on the importance of freedom], and this has been one of the greatest reasons why I have not felt inclined to enter the married state while a slave; 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 by running away. (37)

Malinda's response, while an agreement to marry Bibb on his terms, also demonstrates a keen awareness that marriage itself is an impediment to escape.<sup>34</sup> Bibb's certainty that their marriage can take place as long as they agree on key principles is tempered by Malinda's more practical acknowledgment that marriage itself may block their path to freedom.

Malinda also presents an alternate route to freedom when she says that her freedom might be attained "*either by purchase or by running away*" (emphasis added 37). She agrees with Bibb's desire for freedom, but pairing the two phrases suggests that self-purchase is as viable a route to freedom as escape. Certainly, both Bibb and Malinda would have been aware of self-purchase as one route to freedom. While enslaved, neither Bibb nor Malinda could have read slave narratives such as those written by Venture Smith (1798) and Lunsford Lane (1843), both of which outline the struggles of each man to purchase himself and then his family. But the ubiquity of self-purchase in slave narratives suggests that it was an option frequently pursued by those enslaved.<sup>35</sup>

A careful reading of Bibb's narrative also shows that Malinda's mother and Henry's attained their freedom from enslavement without running to the North. During their courtship, Bibb often visited Malinda at her mother's house. He informs his readers that: "Malinda's mother was free, and lived in Bedford, about a quarter of a mile from her daughter" (35-6). Malinda's mother, whose name is never given, must have been a slave when Malinda was born, as children born to an enslaved mother "followed the condition" of the mother. Yet if she was a fugitive, if she had escaped from enslavement, she could not have lived in Kentucky.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps her experiences in slavery and the alternate route she took to freedom, whether manumission or

self-purchase, explain why she objects to Malinda plan to marry. According to Bibb, she wants Malinda to marry another man who, although enslaved, is also the biological son of his slaveholder. Bibb describes her motivation as such: "She thought no doubt that his master or father might chance to set him free . . . which would enable him to do a better part by her daughter than I could" (39). It is difficult to say whether "a better part" refers to general protection from harm or purchase and emancipation, but given the emphasis on freedom in this section of Bibb's narrative, her desire for Malinda to be free is implied. Malinda's mother is clearly concerned about the impact that marrying Bibb will have on her daughter's ability to obtain her freedom, and she doesn't see escape as the only route to freedom.

Bibb's mother, Mildred Jackson, also found an alternate route to freedom. She is identified as the slave mother of seven sons in the first pages of Bibb's narrative, and she is still enslaved and working as a cook in a tavern when he returns from his first escape.<sup>37</sup> Although Bibb never mentions her subsequent freedom in the body of his narrative, a letter that identifies her as free is included in the introductory materials of his narrative.<sup>38</sup> This letter, dated March 1845 and written by Silas Gatewood, claims that Bibb's mother "[who] belonged to [Judge David] White . . . is now here, free" still living in Bedford, Kentucky (5). A year later, while Bibb was writing his narrative and living in Detroit,<sup>39</sup> the *Signal of Liberty* published the following brief note:

Some of the many thousands who have heard Mr. Bibb's narrative, will be interested in learning that his mother, whom he left in slavery, has obtained her freedom and has come to Detroit. The particulars of her liberation from bondage we have not learned. (Mr. Bibb Sept. 1846)

The use of the cryptic word "obtained" and the lack of specifics both suggest that the editors know she did not escape from enslavement. In "A Letter to My Old Master," published after he moved to Canada,<sup>40</sup> Bibb celebrates the partial reunion of his family. He writes that three of his

brothers "whose legs brought them from your plantation, are now all at my house in Canada, with our dear mother" (236). Bibb explicitly states that his brothers escaped from their enslavement, but only says that his mother is also in Canada. The careful wording in *The Signal of Liberty* and Bibb's equally vague language both indicate that Milldred Jackson found an alternate route to freedom. The fact that the abolitionists writing about her freedom are reluctant to volunteer this information suggests that the only route to freedom they wish to celebrate is escape.

After the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, Henry Bibb moved to Canada and established a newspaper called *The Voice of the Fugitive*. In 1852, he published an open letter to his former owner, Albert Sibley, that is much more explicit about how his mother obtained her freedom. Bibb writes that Milldred's husband "was freeborn, and had labored for several years previous to his death, to ransom my mother," and had paid one-hundred and sixty-five dollars of the three-hundred dollar price, before he was killed in a steamboat explosion. According to Bibb, Sibley then refused to accept the remaining amount, instead promising to free Milldred after two more years of labor. Three years later, Sibley then sold Milldred and her youngest son to another man in Bedford, Kentucky, who sold Milldred's son to a slave trader and only manumitted Milldred six years later "when her constitution was completely broken, so that it was a gain to emancipate her and not a loss to the owner" (Bibb "Letter ... No. 3"). The purpose of the open letter was to shame Sibley, not to advocate for self-purchase. Bibb uses biblical language to again emphasize that enslaved African Americans share the persecution of the Israelites and are enslaved against the laws of God. But whether it is inadvertent or not, Bibb's letter adds more evidence that self-purchase was a common route to freedom, especially for women.



Given his awareness of self-purchase and the specific experiences of his mother and Malinda's, Bibb clearly knew that alternate paths to freedom were commonly used. This knowledge, his memory of Malinda's suggestion that she might attain her freedom "by purchase," and Malinda's own actions strongly suggest that Bibb and Malinda had conflicting ideas about the route they would take to freedom. Twice Bibb returns to Bedford and arranges for Malinda and Mary Frances to follow him to the North. The first time, in June 1838, he leaves money for Malinda to buy passage on a steamboat, telling her to meet him in Cincinnati within the next two weeks. He is recaptured while waiting for his family to arrive, but there is no suggestion that Malinda ever followed his instructions. The second time he returns, in July 1839, Bibb lays out the following plan: "We separated with the understanding that she was to wait until the excitement [of his return and second escape from capture] was all over; after which she was to meet me at a certain place in the State of Ohio; which would not be longer than two months from that time" (80). Again, Malinda and Mary Frances never make the trip.

The only time Malinda does try to escape from slavery is after the family has been sold to Francis Whitfield, while they are living under extremely cruel conditions on his cotton plantation in the Red River Valley region of Louisiana.<sup>41</sup> After Bibb attends a prayer meeting without permission, Whitfield instructs his overseer to wait for his return, stake him to the ground, and administer five-hundred lashes. Whitfield intends this torture to be only the first part of Bibb's punishment. He declares his intentions to then sell Bibb, thus separating the family. Only when faced with such a final separation from her husband, does Malinda, with Mary Frances, attempt an escape into the surrounding swamps.

In his narrative, Bibb offers no explanation for Malinda's apparent reluctance to escape from her early enslavement in Kentucky or for her later decision to run from Whitfield's

plantation, but careful consideration of their gendered positions in slavery offers some insight into Malinda's approach to freedom and escape. Perhaps Malinda was committed to what Stephanie Li calls "a freedom that merges independence with commitments to others" (18). Li argues that narratives such as Frederick Douglass' foreground a definition of freedom that narrowly focuses on an individual's run to the North, but that women often privileged staying with family over escape.<sup>42</sup> Certainly Malinda seems to choose family over the freedom that might be gained by escape to the North. In Kentucky, Malinda's mother, father, and mother-in-law live nearby.<sup>43</sup> In fact, when Bibb returns from his first escape, he finds Malinda and Mary Frances staying with his mother. If, for Malinda, "liberty has no meaning without a network of personal support and attachments" (Li 24), then her decision not to run was a decision to remain with family.

When Malinda does run from Whitfield's plantation in Louisiana, her decision again seems guided by the central importance of family.<sup>44</sup> In his narrative, Bibb describes the horrific conditions on Whitfield's plantation. He outlines the cruelty of overwork, starvation, the absence of health care, and the harsh daily punishments, pointing out that Deacon Whitfield "was far more like what the people call the devil, than he was like a deacon" (112).<sup>45</sup> Alongside his descriptions of such terrible material conditions, Bibb underscores his commitment to religion when he gives equal weight to the pain he feels over the lack of religious instruction. He writes:

After having enjoyed the blessings of civil and religious liberty . . . to linger out my existence without the aid of religious societies, or the light of revelation, was more than I could endure . . . I thought I was almost out of humanity's reach, and should never again have the pleasure of hearing the gospel sound. (114)

When Bibb tries to resist this dearth of religious instruction by attending a local prayer meeting and then runs into the swamps to escape the threatened punishment, Malinda joins him. Rather than accept the separation of her family, Malinda attempts to escape.

Malinda and Mary Frances join Bibb in a futile attempt to escape through the swamps, because it is their only chance to stay together. Obviously, if they escaped, they fled as a family. But given that a successful escape was nearly impossible, they hoped to be sold together because, according to Bibb, "they would be guilty of the same crime . . . so far as running away was concerned" (122). Malinda came to Whitfield's plantation pregnant with their second child, who died at birth. The harsh conditions on Whitfield's plantation most likely caused, and at least contributed to, the death of this child. She is also enslaved for the first time in a place where she has no family other than Henry and Mary Frances. As Bibb writes: "the thought of being torn apart in a strange land after having been sold away from all her friends and relations, was more than she could bear" (122). Malinda's only escape attempt is undertaken not with any real hope of reaching the North, but only with the desperate knowledge that running offers the only chance to keep her remaining family intact.

To be sure, any discussion of what Malinda did or did not "decide" must be put in the context of the totalitarian system of chattel slavery as it was constructed in the United States.<sup>46</sup> Malinda's decision to escape or to offer any form of overt resistance rested less on her own choices and more on the strict limitations inherent in chattel slavery. What was possible often had greater impact on the actions of enslaved African Americans than their own thoughts and desires. It was possible for Bibb to escape multiple times, in part because he was first enslaved in Kentucky, a border state, and also because he was a man traveling alone. In his final escape, Bibb also describes his mixed-race ancestry as allowing him to pass for white, when he travels on a steamboat. Malinda, when she was enslaved in Kentucky, shared the advantage of living next to a free state, but still would have had to travel as a woman with a child.<sup>47</sup> In her discussion of the limited agency available to enslaved African-Americans, Saidiya Hartman points to the

"direct and simple forms of domination, the brutal asymmetry of power, the regular exercise of violence, and the denial of liberty that make it difficult, if not impossible, to direct one's conduct, let alone the conduct of others" (55). African-American women enslaved in antebellum America could resist the conditions of their enslavement, but only in extremely limited ways.

Harriet Jacobs' narrative offers some insight into what types of resistance were and were not possible within such a draconian system. Faced with overwhelming pressure to have sex with her owner, whom she found repulsive, Jacobs chose to have a sexual relationship with another white man of considerable wealth and social standing. She was correct in thinking that this decision will, to some extent, protect her from her owner's sexual coercion.<sup>48</sup> However, before she made this decision, Jacobs wished to marry a free carpenter working in town. In a chapter titled "The Lover," which begins with the now famous question "Why does the slave ever love?" (46), Jacobs falls in love with a free black carpenter, who offers to buy and then marry her and thus offers both freedom and a marriage based on love. When her slaveholder refused to allow the sale and forbid her to see this young man, both Jacobs' ability to marry for love and her choice to remain chaste until marriage were taken from her.

Malinda had similarly limited choices. She could choose to marry, but she could not enter a marriage with legal protections.<sup>49</sup> When Bibb first meets Malinda, he describes her as a beautiful and accomplished young woman "graceful in her walk, of an extraordinary make, and active in business" who was well regarded for her "benevolence, talent and industry" (33-4). Bibb placed Malinda "in the highest circle of slaves," emphasizing her social standing by stating: "The distinction among slaves is as marked as the classes of society are in any aristocratic community" (32). Malinda's beauty, good character, and social position may have given her more choice regarding whom she marries, but after her marriage, she could not control whether

she remained with her family. When Bibb first escaped to the North, he did so without consulting Malinda. After he twice returned and attempted to rescue his family from enslavement, Malinda's owner decided to sell the entire family to the slave trader Madison Garrison. Thus, Bibb's actions and those of William Gatewood severely limited Malinda's ability to choose. First in Kentucky and then in Louisiana, she was separated from family through sale.

While Garrison held the family in a Louisville workhouse, Malinda faced the clearest and most brutal limitations of her ability to choose, when she was forced to "chose" between sex with Garrison and losing Mary Frances. After they first arrive, Malinda and Mary Frances were taken from the workhouse, and Bibb assumed they have been sold. Days later, Malinda was returned without Mary Frances, crying "Oh! My dear little child is gone? What shall I do? My child is gone" (97). Malinda told Bibb that Garrison had taken her "to a private house where he kept female slaves for the base[s]t purposes," but she had fought off his advances, even though each time she refused him, she was whipped "until her garments were stained with blood" (98). After the second whipping, Garrison took Mary Frances, told Malinda that she would never see her daughter again, and returned her to the workhouse. Two days later, Garrison took Malinda away again, and Bibb writes: "It was several weeks before I saw her again, and learned that he had not sold her or the child" (98). With this short sentence, Bibb acknowledges that Malinda has had to choose between sex with Garrison and the loss of their child. His readers, and certainly Bibb himself, know what choice she made.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout his narrative, Bibb demonstrates a keen awareness of the sexual abuse surrounding women in enslavement. Early in his narrative, while describing slavery in Kentucky, he emphasizes the fragility of slave marriages when he writes: "Licentious white men, can and do, enter at night or day the lodging places of slaves [and] break the bonds of affection in

families" (38). After being sold to Whitfield in Louisiana, Bibb describes a young girl who had been purchased to be "a wife" to Whitfield's son and who was "finally forced to it by an application of the driver's lash" (112).<sup>51</sup> When Bibb learns that Malinda has been forced to have sex with Garrison, he never suggests that she could have avoided this abuse, nor does he argue that their marriage had been compromised. In Bibb's narrative, there is an odd schism between the earlier sexual abuse, which is implicitly attributed to the brutality of slavery, and the later sexual relationship with her owner, which is labeled adultery and given as the reason that he can "no longer regard her as my wife" (189). How do readers of Bibb's narrative understand these contradictory assumptions about Malinda and her ability to act when faced with sexual abuse?

Frances Smith Foster offers one possible explanation for the different meanings assigned to each instance of sexual abuse, when she suggests that it is Malinda's implied consent to her new living arrangement that leads Bibb to dismiss the validity of their marriage. Foster argues that in a system where marriages began and ended outside of any legal contract, each partner's intentions are the foundation of their union. According to Foster, Bibb's decision "makes more sense if we think of marriage as an emotional commitment and fidelity as something made manifest by intentions and motivation as much – maybe more so – as through action" (18). In other words, if a slave marriage was founded on what each partner felt towards the other and what each intended to do, then "sexual exclusivity is not intrinsic to the sacredness of marital vows" (Foster 18). If Malinda loved Bibb and intended to be faithful, but was forced into a sexual relationship, then she was judged on her feelings and intentions but not on circumstances beyond her control. If, however, Malinda chose to end their marriage and if she felt affection for her new owner, then her marriage to Bibb would no longer exist.

When Bibb describes his last attempt to gather information on Malinda and Mary Frances, he begins and ends the chapter by emphasizing that it was Malinda who decided to end their marriage, well before he learned of her sale. While he doesn't name the "good authority" who first tells him that Malinda had "given him up," he does ask his mother to confirm what he's learned. Bibb's response to his mother's confirmation is as follows: "After all the sacrifices, sufferings, and risks which I had run, striving to rescue her from the grasp of slavery; every prospect and hope was cut off" (189). His use of the word "rescue" neatly sidesteps the question of whether he intended to travel south and lead his family in their escape or use an agent to purchase them. Based on these two sources, Bibb concludes that Malinda's message, sent "back to Kentucky, to her family and friends . . . that she had finally given me up" and that she "was better used than ordinary slaves" (189) means she has ended their marriage. For a scant three pages, Bibb alternates between assigning agency to Malinda, when labeling her actions as "adultery" and indicating that she chose to end their marriage, and acknowledging the limits of her agency, when he writes "I know not all the circumstances connected with the case" (189). While conflicting ideas of agency are present in the chapter, Bibb ends with a definitive description of the arc of their marriage: "Voluntarily assumed without law mutually, it was by her relinquished years ago, without my knowledge . . . during which time I was making every effort to secure her restoration" (192). Thus, according to Bibb, Malinda decided to end their marriage and communicated this decision to her friends and family. Bibb presents himself as simply accepting Malinda's decision.

A careful reading of Bibb's narrative sheds light on the complicated realities of agency and consent in a marriage between enslaved African-Americans.<sup>52</sup> As he works to explain the end of his marriage, Bibb does not settle on one consistent depiction of Malinda's actions.

Certainly, when he labels Malinda's sexual relationship with her owner as "adultery," Bibb uses language that assumes an agency that Malinda did not have. As William Andrews points out, Bibb is describing Malinda's situation "without considering the special 'wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications' that Harriet Jacobs' autobiography pleads on behalf of the sexually tyrannized slave woman" (159). Malinda could not have refused to be sold, and she could not have refused to have sex with her owner. There is nothing in the descriptions of Whitfield and the conditions of enslavement in the Red River Valley to suggest that Malinda had any option to avoid or even influence her sale.

Alongside his insistence that his marriage has ended, and that it has ended primarily as a result of Malinda's decision, Bibb does acknowledge that Malinda may not have been able to avoid being sold. He writes: "Poor unfortunate woman, I bring no charge of guilt against her, for I know not all the circumstances connected with the case" (189). This sentence both highlights Malinda's limited agency and softens any assignment of guilt that is attached to such a moralistic term as "adultery." By calling her "unfortunate," Bibb presents the very real possibility that Malinda would have, if given any choice, objected to her sale. Given the vulnerability of slave marriages created by the cultural norms of sexually abusive slaveholders and by a legal system that denied the legitimacy of slave marriage, it is hardly surprising that conflicting representations of agency emerge in Bibb's description of the end of his marriage.

From a practical viewpoint, Bibb had to justify his second marriage to Mary E. Miles, whom he had married while writing his narrative in 1848.<sup>53</sup> Andrews underscores this pragmatic goal when he analyzes the language Bibb used to explain his decision. Andrews writes: "By claiming that Malinda 'had finally given me up' in becoming a slave concubine, Bibb shifts moral responsibility for the maintenance of their marriage onto her . . . which opens the way for



him to declare her 'dead to [him] as a wife'" (159). Bibb repeatedly situates their separation as defacto death and describes Malinda as figuratively dead in his narrative. Bibb begins the story of his final journey South by stating that he undertakes the journey against the advice of friends. These friends have been urging him to marry again, because "they regarded my former wife as dead to me" (188). When he reaches the border of Kentucky and meets with his mother, she suggests he should no longer "grieve myself" over Malinda. Bibb himself describes the news of Malinda's sale and subsequent sexual relationship as a "death blow" (189). Even more explicitly, Bibb states that Malinda is "theoretically and practically dead to me as a wife . . . according to the law of God and man" (189). Thus, Bibb writes his narrative as if Malinda's sexual relationship with her owner constitutes adultery, which is forbidden in the Bible and is grounds for divorce in Civil law, and ends their marriage in the same way that it would have been ended by death.

Language that positions separation as a form of death appears even earlier in the narrative, when Bibb describes the last time he saw Malinda on Whitfield's plantation. Whitfield sold Bibb to a group of itinerant gamblers, who hope to turn a profit by offering him for sale at the horse races they attend.<sup>54</sup> These horse races take them to the Cherokee territory outside of Arkansas and back again to Louisiana, where Bibb persuades them to return to Whitfield's plantation and purchase his family by arguing that the family together can be sold for a higher price. But, when the gamblers offer to buy Malinda and Mary Frances, Whitfield refuses to reunite the family, despite the high price the gamblers offer to pay and despite Malinda's tearful pleading. Within her pleas, Bibb puts an awareness of the finality of their separation, having Malinda liken it to death. Bibb describes Malinda as "bathed with tears of sorrow and grief" saying, through her tears, that "to take away her husband, her last and only true friend, would be

like taking her life" (146). Bibb reinforces this equation of separation and death, describing her tears as recognition that "the loss of her departed husband, who was then, by the hellish laws of slavery, to her, theoretically and practically dead" (148-9). The use of the word "departed," which was commonly used to describe those who had died, underscores the finality of their separation. In this passage, both Malinda and Bibb are "theoretically dead." Malinda dies when her "only true friend" is taken from her. Bibb dies when he is separated from her. Bibb's word choice emphasizes that in the context of chattel slavery, as it was practiced in the antebellum United States, separation is death.<sup>55</sup>

In Chapter Eighteen, where Bibb justifies his decision to end his marriage to Malinda, he does use language that suggests Malinda had the agency to resist the conditions of her enslavement. However, in the rest of the book, especially in the scene of their final parting, Bibb clearly situates both himself and Malinda as essentially helpless in the perverse system of chattel slavery. It is slavery itself that is "killing" their marriage. Therefore, regarding questions of agency, neither Bibb nor Malinda could be held responsible for the destruction of their marriage.

The melodramatic scene of their final parting emphasizes the perversity of chattel slavery wherein a person is dead before s/he has died and a marriage is "torn asunder" by this defacto death. Faced with Whitfield's refusal to reunite the family, Bibb and Malinda wrap their arms around each other and sink to their knees, praying aloud "to the God of justice and to the sacred ties of humanity" while Whitfield uses "the gory lash with hellish vengeance to separate husband and wife" (146-7). The immediate audience for this violent parting is the gamblers. Although the gamblers had been described as professional confidence men, hardened to bad behavior, even they weep "the sympathetic tear drop" (146) at the cruelty of Whitfield and condemn his actions, stating that "hell was full of just such Deacon's [sic] as Whitfield" (149).<sup>56</sup> In her discussion of

the complicated nature of empathy in the abolitionist movement, Hartman posits that melodramatic antislavery plays were the one venue in which black characters took on heroic roles and points out that the "offense against virtue perpetuated in the sundering of families offended sentiment and easily transformed slavery's crimes into the stuff of melodrama" (27). In this scene, it is easy to read Bibb as the hero struggling in vain to stop his family from being torn apart by the cruelty of slavery made manifest in the form of the Deacon. In the illustration that accompanies this scene, Bibb holds up one hand to ward off the whip, with Malinda and Mary Frances partially sheltered by his body.<sup>57</sup> In the written description of the same scene, Malinda is equally heroic. She is the one who runs to Bibb, ignoring Whitfield's order to continue working. She is the one being whipped. When Bibb describes the scene, he points out that "even the gory lash had yet failed to break the grasp of poor Malinda" (147). In this moment, the gamblers bear witness to both the cruel perversity of slavery and to Bibb and Malinda's heroic efforts to preserve their union.

Bibb and Malinda also behave with equal heroism in one of the most dramatic scenes of the narrative. When the family tried to escape together and became lost in the swamps of the Red River valley, they woke to find themselves surrounded by wolves. Bibb writes that "bloodthirsty" wolves had "found us out and surrounded us as their prey, there in the dark wilderness many miles from any house or settlement," and he describes that moment as one in which he believed "the hour of death for us was at hand" (124). In this dangerous moment, Malinda and Bibb stood side by side. Bibb drew a knife and Malinda took "a club in one hand, and her child in the other," and they faced the wolves together (126-7).<sup>58</sup> Regarding discussions of Malinda's agency, it is important to note that this time in the swamps is the only part of the narrative when Malinda was outside of an environment controlled by a slaveholder. Thus, it is

the moment when her ability to act was the least encumbered, and Bibb clearly states that in this unencumbered moment, Malinda stood next to her husband ready to fight.

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[INSERT IMAGE HERE.] [Caption: The image that accompanies the wolf attack in Bibb's narrative shows a woman and child hiding behind a man, who stands ready to fight the wolves. According to Marcus Wood, this image was borrowed from an earlier abolitionist text and does not represent the actual event Bibb's narrative.]

Henry Bibb's narrative, taken as a whole, tells a story about Malinda's commitment to family, of the sacrifices she made to protect her family, and of her bravery, both when she could and when she could not effectively fight against the conditions of her enslavement. There is a practical explanation for the one place in the narrative, as mentioned above, where Bibb appears to blame Malinda, in that he plans to remarry and thus needs to establish that his previous marriage has ended. In civil and religious law, adultery was an incontestable reason to end a marriage. Twenty-first-century readers must also consider the impact that his nineteenth-century audience had on Bibb's explanation. His intended audience, most likely white abolitionists, might not have understood or even been willing to consider the realities of sexual abuse surrounding enslaved women.

An article published in the *Signal of Liberty* that describes the sale of Malinda and Mary Frances, illustrates this lack of understanding.<sup>59</sup> Read side-by-side with Bibb's chapter, this article both provides more specific detail regarding their sale and less consideration of Malinda's limited agency in slavery. It refers to Bibb's audience, "[t]he many thousands . . . who have listened to the story of this man's wrongs" and informs them that Bibb went to Madison, Indiana and "learned to his unspeakable misery that his wife and child had been bought two years ago, by a Frenchman, somewhere in Mississippi." (Mr. Bibb Feb. 1846).<sup>60</sup> The article circumspectly

acknowledges the sexual exploitation Malinda faces, when it says she "had been forced down to the extremest [sic] point of degradation to which woman can be reduced." It also outlines a sequence of events similar to those in Bibb's chapter, wherein he goes to Indiana with high hopes, is told that Malinda is in a sexual relationship with her current owner, and leaves broken hearted. Both texts focus on Bibb as the injured party and essentially resolve to leave Malinda in slavery, suggesting that God will care for her. The article says that Bibb "gave his cause into the hands of the Judge of all the earth," whereas Bibb's chapter states: "I gave her up into the hands of an all-wise Providence" (189). These parallel phrases strongly suggest that Bibb is reframing parts of this article in his narrative, reinforcing the assumptions of white abolitionists who equate infidelity with choice.

The article, which lists no author, rests on the assumption that Bibb's decision to leave Malinda and Mary Frances in slavery is a reasonable response to the information he gathers.<sup>61</sup> It begins by saying that Bibb's "attempts to recover his family have been entirely frustrated" and follows its description of Malinda's current enslavement with this simple statement: "Hope fled forever." They refer to Bibb's hope to restore his family, not Malinda's hope to attain her freedom. In this abolitionist newspaper, Malinda's plight is used to position Bibb in "unspeakable misery" as "a heart broken man," but it implies that her situation is one from which she cannot be saved. In his narrative, Bibb repeatedly uses the word "rescue" to describe his reason for returning to the South. He is "seeking to rescue [them] from perpetual slavery" (58) and "struggling to rescue my family from the hands of the oppressor" (62). Rescuing Malinda and Mary Frances is the act that will "restore" his family.<sup>62</sup> Yet he presents Malinda's sexual enslavement as a situation that precludes the restoration of his family. He assumes that she cannot be brought back from what Bibb calls "adultery" and the article calls "degradation." Both

words suggest that his family cannot be repaired. Bibb's point is perhaps most clearly made when, in the same chapter where he explains his abandonment of Malinda, he compares Malinda and his second wife Mary Miles. Bibb argues that no enslaved woman "can be true to her husband contrary to the will of her master" (191) and thus he, for the first time, has found a "loving companion in all the social, moral, and religious relations of life" (191).

This article starts with the question: Who speaks for Malinda? Henry Bibb's narrative is the only historical record that describes parts of her life: her decision to marry and the unrelentingly negative impact that Bibb's repeated escape attempts had on their family. In his book, *Malinda* looks for an alternate route to freedom, one that she ultimately does not find. While never explicitly stating Malinda's plan for self-purchase, Bibb describes how she works to preserve first her extended and then her immediate family, as well as the horrible circumstances she faces when she is ultimately separated from them both by sale. When Bibb was writing the narrative and describing their life together, he had already decided to leave his wife and child in slavery, and thus he constructed a narrative that works, in part, to explain and justify his decision. Although his reasons for leaving Malinda are foregrounded in his narrative, Bibb also acknowledges the increasingly cruel restrictions placed on Malinda as a wife and a mother in chattel slavery in the antebellum United States.

Scholars who do recovery work can use Bibb's narrative, the newspaper articles from the white abolitionist press and Bibb's open letter to Albert Sibley to perform what Toni Morrison calls "a kind of literary archeology" (92). Morrison's term suggests a careful analysis of these primary source materials to outline an alternate narrative that focuses on Malinda's life. Where Bibb presents his readers with a clear binary choice, "to bolt for Liberty or consent to die a Slave" (47) and exhorts all those enslaved to "break your chains and fly for freedom" (11),

Malinda's narrative speaks to a more complicated situation where the demands of family require a more gradual path to emancipation and commitment to family might entirely block all routes to freedom. Morrison claims that the authors of slave narratives wanted to say two things: "This is my historical life – my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race" (86) and "I write this text to persuade other people – you, the reader, who is probably not black – that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery" (86). I believe the slave narratives, especially when combined with other primary source materials, say one more thing, and that is: "Here are the stories of those who did not escape. Here are the stories of those who longed for freedom, but never lived outside the cruelties of chattel slavery." Malinda did not escape to write her own narrative, but if we read carefully, the story of Malinda's hopes for freedom and of the sacrifices she made to preserve her family can be found in newspaper articles written by and about Henry Bibb and in the pages of his narrative: *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberty Party formed in the early 1840s and had largely merged with the Free Soil Party by 1850. The Liberty Party strongly supported the abolition of slavery and believed that abolition could best be achieved through political activism, not through the "moral suasion" espoused by Garrisonian abolitionists. For a discussion of the impact which Free Soil rhetoric had on Henry Bibb, see J. Finley, "'The Land of Liberty': Henry Bibb's Free Soil Geographies."

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<sup>2</sup> While enslaved on the Deacon Francis Whitfield's plantation in the Red River Valley of Louisiana, Henry and Malinda had a second child, who died at birth. The newspaper account mistakenly uses the plural "children," but Mary Frances was their only living child. See "Mr. Bibb" in the *Signal of Liberty*, June 16, 1845, where the original article from the *Ohio American* is reprinted.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from Henry Bibb's narrative are drawn from a 2001 edition issued by the University of Wisconsin Press. This edition has an introduction by Charles Heglar, who states that "the complete text" of Bibb's narrative is included. The original title page reproduced in this volume has "1850" printed on the bottom of the page and "1849" printed in the copyright information on the back. Because the body of Bibb's narrative is followed by a sampling of nineteenth-century book reviews, I believe this must be a second or third printing of the text.

<sup>4</sup> *The Signal of Liberty* was an abolitionist newspaper published in Ann Arbor, Michigan from 1841 to 1848. From 1844 to 1847, numerous announcements of Bibb's speaking engagements are listed, as are descriptions of his speeches written by others and articles written by Bibb.

<sup>5</sup> It may seem reductive to limit this literature review to these two disciplines, given that scholars in African-American Studies, American Studies, and Cultural Studies all engage in recovery work. I choose these two disciplines simply because they represent my own training and research.

<sup>6</sup> See also George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972), John Blassingame *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (1977), and Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977).

<sup>7</sup> Starling's work illustrates the difficulty early scholars faced when arguing for the legitimacy of slave narratives. Although her book was published in 1981, Starling originally found and analyzed the narratives for her 1946 dissertation. In the author's prologue, Starling describes how her analysis of the narratives led to her determination that "[t]hrough me, the narratives would be reborn" (xxiv). And yet, because her family objected to her work, she only published her dissertation findings after Henry Louis Gates encouraged her to do so, more than 30 years later.

<sup>8</sup> William Andrews was instrumental in the development of this collection. See his brief introduction to the collection at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/biblintro.html>.

<sup>9</sup> For more detailed discussions of the influence white abolitionists had on the production of specific slave narratives, see William Andrew on Frederick Douglass' narratives in *To Tell a Free Story*, John Ernest's introduction to *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* and Caleb Smith's article on the lost last chapter of Harriet Jacobs' narrative in "Life among the Militants." For a discussion of the problematic nature of "sentimental abolitionism" as it impacted Henry Box Brown and the testimony of formerly enslaved African-Americans, see Ernest, "Outside the Box."

<sup>10</sup> For discussions of how WPA interviews might represent those who remained enslaved until after the Civil War, see Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Race and the Federal Writers' Ex-Slave Project During the New Deal*. See also Marie Jenkins Schwartz "The WPA Narrative as Historical Sources" and Sharon Ann Musher "The Other Slave Narratives: The Works Progress Administration" in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*.

<sup>11</sup> See Jean Fagin Yellin's edition of Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1987), her biography of Jacobs, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (2004), and *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers, Vol. 1 and 2* (2008). For other works that foreground the experiences of women

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in slavery, see Jacqueline Jones *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985) and Stephanie Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004).

<sup>12</sup> For insight into the continuing role of close reading in digitization projects, see Amanda Gailey "A Case for Heavy Editing: The Example of Race and Children's Literature in the Gilded Age" in *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age* (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Brit Rusert directly applies this lack to the optimistic embrace of digital archives, when she writes "digitization does not necessarily enable more access to the perspectives and stories of the enslaved" (271). Several journals across disciplines have recently published special editions devoted to recovery work. See *MELUS* (Fall 2015), *Social Text* 125 (December 2015), and *History of the Present* (Fall 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements Project at <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu> and a collaborative database being developed by Cornell University, University of Alabama, University of New Orleans, and University of Kentucky at [freedomonthemove.org](http://freedomonthemove.org).

<sup>15</sup> Hartman has written on the complicated realities of agency in enslavement as well as the violence inherent in the silences of the archive. See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007).

<sup>16</sup> For descriptions of methodologies that move beyond recovery, see Garcia and Faherty's article "Critical Keywords in Early American Studies," especially pages 626-627, and McCaskill's "Beyond Recovery: A Process Approach to Research on Women in Early African American Print Cultures."

<sup>17</sup> Henry Bibb self-published his narrative in 1849, and it was reprinted, with no significant changes to the body of the text, at least twice in 1850. Lucius C. Matlack, a staunch abolitionist and Methodist Episcopal minister, wrote an introduction to the narrative. In the introduction, Matlack describes his editorial work as "orthography and punctuation merely, an arrangement of the chapters, and table of contents – little more than falls to the lot of publishers generally" (2). Matlack was clearly anticipating the standard accusation of ghost writing that slavery advocates leveled against the more fluent and well-reasoned slave narratives. Given Bibb's extensive speaking and writing career prior to the publication of his narrative, Matlack's assurances were and remain persuasive.

<sup>18</sup> I refer to Henry Bibb as "Bibb" and "Henry" throughout this paper, because these are the names he chose after he escaped from enslavement. His first name, while enslaved, was "Walton." Malinda's full name is not given in Bibb's narrative. He does not indicate whether her last name changed dependent on who claimed to own her or if she shared the last name of either of her parents. Bibb also does not give the names of Malinda's parents in his narrative, although he does mention both of them living in Bedford, Kentucky.

<sup>19</sup> Both William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass refused to marry while enslaved. Although Douglass, in his first narrative, makes no mention of the woman he marries within days of his escape, Brown describes his complicated relationship with Eliza, a fellow slave, and his adamant refusal to be trapped by a wife and children. Bibb situates his own courtship stories within a state of passionate naïveté that precluded any knowledge of the unprotected nature of slave unions. Writing his narrative and looking back at these events, he stresses his newly acquired knowledge of and disgust with the laws that deny the legitimacy of marriages between those enslaved.

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<sup>20</sup> I am using the terms "abolition" and "emancipation" to differentiate between the Garrisonian call for the immediate end to slavery and the more moderate views of those who argued for working within federal and state governments to ameliorate the harsh conditions of enslavement and gradually end chattel slavery. I realize that the term "militant" most often refers to those who believed the immediate end to slavery might be pursued through violent means, but I am using the term to refer to the uncompromising equation of God's will with the abolitionist cause, which was used to argue for escape as a literal enactment of God's will and against the purchase and manumission of slaves. For a discussion of the more traditional concept of militance and the abolitionist movement as well as an analysis of the rhetoric of black abolitionists, see Howard H. Bell. For a discussion of Harriet Jacobs' implied support for violence see Caleb Smith.

<sup>21</sup> The biblical language of Bibb's narrative aligns most closely with the King James Bible. In "Letter from Henry Bibb to his Ex-Master," published in an 1850 pamphlet on the slave insurrections led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, Bibb directly quotes the King James version of 2 Corinthians 10:4 "But the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God." All biblical quotes in this essay are taken from the authorized King James Version of the Bible.

<sup>22</sup> Exodus 3:14 "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."

<sup>23</sup> Bibb's language often conflates political and religious goals. As a representative of the Liberty Party, it's not surprising that Bibb repeatedly uses the word "liberty" in his narrative. A word search reveals that "liberty" appears 43 times in Bibb's narrative, although some of these are in correspondence written by others. Liberty and God are most clearly combined when Bibb refers to "the God of Liberty" as one who would decide the success or failure of his final attempt to rescue his family.

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 19:16 "And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was [sic] in the camp trembled."

<sup>25</sup> Bibb mentions attending a Sabbath school while enslaved in Kentucky, which marks his earliest attempt to read the bible. After his first escape and the winter he spent in Perrysburgh, Ohio, he returns to Kentucky with both a certificate indicating his membership in the "Methodist E. Church" and a bible, both of which are stolen from him when he's attacked and re-enslaved. William L. Andrews delineates the impact white editors had on many slave narratives, especially their insertion of religion in ways that reflected their own convictions and not necessarily those of the narrative's subject. In this case, I believe the religious content in Bibb's narrative reflects his own beliefs. Bibb uses the bible throughout his narrative in ways specifically ascribed to African-American theologians, and he continued to reference the bible in his letters, even after he left the United States to settle in Canada in 1850. For further discussion of black theology, see Hopkins and Cummings. For further evidence of Bibb's emphasis on and use of the bible in his letters, see "A Letter to My Old Master," originally published in Bibb's Canadian newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, in 1852.

<sup>26</sup> In *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Raboteau emphasizes the importance of the Exodus story. He writes: "It would be hard to exaggerate the intensity of their [enslaved African-Americans] identification with the children of Israel" (33). For further discussion of the importance of Exodus in black theology, see Theophus Smith, Felder, and Kirk-Duggan. For a critical analysis of the Exodus story as central to secular black national identity, see Glaude.

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<sup>27</sup> Heglar has described the "recursive narrative structure" of Henry Bibb's story, noting that Bibb repeatedly escaped from slavery and returned to his family, hoping to bring them to the free states. While originally enslaved in Kentucky, Bibb first escapes to Ohio (1837), then returns to Kentucky, and while waiting for Malinda to join him in Cincinnati, is recaptured and escapes from his captors (1838). Bibb again returns to Kentucky, is recaptured and eventually sold, with Malinda and Mary Frances, to Francis Whitfield in Louisiana (1839). Bibb twice tries and fails to escape from Whitfield's plantation, first without and then with his family (1839-40), after which he is sold apart from Malinda and Mary Frances to itinerant gamblers, who sell him to a Cherokee living outside of Arkansas. His final escape comes after this last owner dies, when he travels from the Cherokee territory back to Ohio (1841).

<sup>28</sup> Galatians 2:20 "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

<sup>29</sup> As Bibb embarks on his final escape attempt, he describes his history of enslavement as a "fiery ordeal" (157) which may be a comparison of his own sufferings to Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego. Thrown into a fiery furnace when they refused to worship the golden idol put up by King Nebuchadnezzar, they were ultimately protected by God from the flames (Daniel 3:1-30). It may also be a reference to Peter 4:12 "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you."

<sup>30</sup> This abolitionist refusal of self-purchase is also mentioned in Lunsford Lane's 1842 slave narrative. Lane faces down a lynch mob by denying his own ties to abolition and offering as proof his intent to buy his wife and children. He writes: "I had been laboring to buy my family; and how then could they suppose me to be in league with the abolitionists?" (45).

<sup>31</sup> The Angel of the House was a Victorian ideal that relegated women to the domestic sphere and created a model of gendered behavior that foregrounded the gentle caretaker of a family as women's proper role in society. Literary critics used this concept to analyze cultural gender norms in nineteenth-century literature and to suggest ways in which the "Angel" ideal carried over into the twentieth century. The usefulness of this type of criticism was then challenged in *No More Separate Spheres*, a special edition of the journal *American Literature* (1998).

<sup>32</sup> It is clear in Bibb's narrative that he is writing after years of living as a nominally free man among abolitionists. Thus, Bibb represents himself as a significantly changed man looking back, whereas Malinda is represented as she was, having never had the opportunity to live as a free woman, get an education, study scripture, etc.

<sup>33</sup> An early chapter in Bibb's narrative focuses on the ways in which access to religion was blocked for those enslaved around Bedford, Kentucky. He describes the violent disruption of a Sabbath school he attended and the slaveholders' general encouragement of debauchery on the Sabbath (22-32).

<sup>34</sup> Many scholars argue that marriage, and the children such unions produced, were the central reason why many enslaved women could not run for the North. For an extensive discussion of marriage, family, and their impact on the lives of enslaved women, see White, Jones, and Camp.

<sup>35</sup> Starling states that "thousands of slaves hired themselves out nights or engaged in incredibly ingenious projects for earning money, and bought their freedom" while she also acknowledges that there were "thousands who thought the dogged labor . . . to earn money to pay the master for themselves, was idiotic" (7). In Bibb's narrative, the slave hunters who find him in Cincinnati offer to pay for information about the location of other fugitive slaves, so that he "would soon make enough money to buy my wife and child out of slavery" (67). Bibb doesn't condemn self-

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purchase in this section of his narrative, but he also refuses to provide information that would return others to slavery.

<sup>36</sup> State slave codes served to reinforce the nearly absolute power of slave owners and made the lives of all black residents, enslaved or free, extremely difficult. Most states had laws in place to limit manumission and self-purchase, and no slave state allowed fugitives to live openly in that state. For a nineteenth-century consideration of these state laws, see Goodell.

<sup>37</sup> The fact that Milldred works as a cook is significant, because this type of employment may have provided her with the opportunity to make enough "Sunday money" for self-purchase.

<sup>38</sup> The Liberty Party in Detroit formed a committee to verify the information presented in Bibb's narrative. Members of this committee wrote letters to Bibb's former owners and others named by Bibb, and some of the answers they received are printed in the introduction to the narrative. Silas Gatewood was the son of William Gatewood, who owned Henry, Malinda, and Mary Frances in Kentucky during the 1830s.

<sup>39</sup> The Seventh Census of the United States, published in 1850, lists Henry Bibb and his second wife Mary as living in Detroit. Bibb is listed as a "laborer," originally from Kentucky.

<sup>40</sup> Henry and Mary Bibb moved to Canada in 1850 after the passage of the Second Fugitive Slave Law. From 1851-1852, they published an abolitionist newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, which supported the fight for abolition in the United States and addressed the refugee crisis in Canada.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed analysis of the violently abusive practices designed to facilitate maximum cotton production in the Southern states, see Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014).

<sup>42</sup> Li is careful to avoid strict gender binaries when discussing family and escape. She points to Uncle Phillip, in Harriet Jacobs' narrative, who travels to New York with his owner's permission, meets his fugitive brother there, but refuses to remain with him. Phillip refuses to stay in the North because of the pain it would bring to their mother.

<sup>43</sup> Malinda's father is mentioned only once, when Bibb writes about an escape plan that requires Malinda and Mary Frances to board a steamboat for Ohio. Bibb writes: "Her father was to go with her to the Ohio River on Saturday night, and if a boat passed up during the night she was to get on board at Madison" (59).

<sup>44</sup> For analysis of the ways in which free African Americans were often forced to choose between staying with family and remaining free, see Emily West's *Family or Freedom: People of Color in the Antebellum South* (2012) and Ted Maris-Wolf's *Family Bonds: Free Blacks and Re-Enslavement Law in Antebellum Virginia* (2015). For insight into African-American marriages before and after the Civil War, see Tera W. Hunter's *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>45</sup> While being held in Louisville, Bibb is tasked with finding a buyer for his family. Ironically, Bibb chose Francis Whitfield because he was a deacon in the Baptist church. Bibb "thought it would give me a better opportunity to attend to my religious duties should I fall into the hands of this deacon" (108). In his narrative, Bibb struggles to align the subsequent horrors he finds on Whitfield's plantation with the deacon's stated religious beliefs.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Johnson's article "On Agency" is a thoughtful analysis of the challenges involved in writing about "self-directed action" of enslaved African Americans within the institution of antebellum slavery in the United States, an institution that was designed to destroy any such independence. Johnson urges scholars to focus on the historical and cultural context of slavery in



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order to recognize more nuanced acts of resistance situated amidst what each person could or could not do.

<sup>47</sup> In the 1860 slave narrative, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William & Ellen Craft from Slavery*, William Craft describes how he and his wife escaped together. Ellen, who could pass as white, cross-dressed and traveled as a man, while William traveled as her servant. In his narrative, Bibb never suggests that he and Malinda try to escape Kentucky together.

<sup>48</sup> Li borrows the phrase "something akin to freedom" from Harriet Jacobs, who explains her decision to enter into a sexual relationship as follows: "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (70). Jacobs is determined to avoid being forced into sex with her owner, and chooses to have sex with another white man, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, who was a lawyer and a member of a prominent local family. Sawyer eventually purchases their two children, and while he never legally manumits them, his ownership does allow them to live nominally free lives in the North.

<sup>49</sup> Bibb writes that "One or two other young men were paying attention to Malinda" (34), which suggests she could have chosen to marry someone other than Bibb.

<sup>50</sup> Regarding this strategic silence, Francis Smith Foster writes: "Bibb does not describe how Malinda appeared when she returned or what had happened in those several weeks. He simply resumes the narrative by describing the slave coffle's journey to Louisiana. His silence invites the idea that this time, Malinda had not been able to resist. She had been raped or, to save her child, she had submitted" (17).

<sup>51</sup> Bibb would also have been familiar with the narrative of William Wells Brown, originally published in 1847. Brown, who worked for a slave trader in Missouri, tells the story of Cynthia, sold to this trader, who had "an irreproachable character for virtue and propriety of conduct" (45) but was coerced into accepting the position of "housekeeper" when threatened with sale to a cotton plantation. Cynthia had to "choose" between an unwanted sexual relationship or work as a field slave "on the worst plantation on the river"(45). According to Brown, when the trader later decides to marry, he sells Cynthia and their four children into "hopeless bondage"(45).

<sup>52</sup> Foster and Andrews both thoughtfully parse this complex chapter in Bibb's narrative, each acknowledging the complexity of Bibb's contradictory explanations and arriving at subtly different interpretations. Foster focuses more on the reasons that Bibb may have believed justified severing his ties to Malinda, while Andrews suggests Bibb's explanations shade toward the hypocritical. The two readings together illustrate the inescapable fact that Bibb contradicts himself throughout this brief chapter. See Foster, 16-21 and Andrews, 150-160.

<sup>53</sup> Bibb states that his second marriage is legitimate "in accordance with the laws of God and our country" (191), but Foster points out that given his fugitive status, he is still legally a slave, and thus not legally married to Mary E. Miles.

<sup>54</sup> Bibb refers to these men as "blacklegs," a term used to describe those who make their living by swindling others and professional gambling.

<sup>55</sup> According to Blassingame, deciding whether separation could literally be interpreted as death, and thus whether those separated can remarry, was a difficult and divisive issue in Southern protestant churches. He writes: "One of the first great issues confronting Southern churches with black members was the impact of the forcible separation of mates upon a slave union" (170).

<sup>56</sup> Bibb's description of the gamblers reveals his awareness of their complex nature. They are fundamentally dishonest men, but they are also kind to Bibb. He credits them with good

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treatment, and yet he understands that this treatment is intended to make him appear more valuable to buyers. They promise to sell Bibb to someone from whom he can escape, but they also risk his safety when they include him in a wager and then, according to Bibb, "almost lost me, betting on a horse race" (149). They finally sell Bibb to a Cherokee, coaching him to act stupid as a way to facilitate the sale, and then giving him some of the sale money, along with advice on how best to escape.

<sup>57</sup> Heglar credits "Patrick Reason, a Haitian artist who had emigrated to the New York area" (xxxiii) with the engraving of Bibb that appears on the narrative's opening page. According to Marcus Wood, all the other images in the book were taken from a stock of abolitionist images that "have personal histories which stretch out backwards and forwards . . . through mainstream abolition periodicals and through sensational anecdotal accounts of plantation atrocity" (120). Wood points out that none of the images in the body of Bibb's text literally depict Henry and/or Malinda.

<sup>58</sup> The image that accompanies this scene in Bibb's narrative shows a woman and child cowering in the background while one man fights off the wolves. As noted above, this image was not originally created for the book.

<sup>59</sup> In a discussion of the impact that digitized newspaper databases have on contemporary scholarship, Ryan Cordell describes the "scissors editing" that was a common practice in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper trade. Editors often "cut" articles from other publications and reprinted them. The newspaper article describing Malinda's sale, which I cite here, has no listed author. It is reprinted in the *Signal of Liberty* and credited to the *Cincinnati Herald*. The article begins: "The Cincinnati Herald says."

<sup>60</sup> The specifics regarding when and to whom Malinda was sold suggest that an agent acting for the Liberty Party still might have been able to purchase and manumit Malinda and Mary Frances. It is possible that their current location and owner's name could have been discovered. In his narrative, Bibb does not include the information that identifies the location and the nationality of the man who purchased his wife and child.

<sup>61</sup> Some critics suggest that Bibb's entire narrative is structured around this decision. Andrews focuses on the "psychological dynamics of the making of a freeman" when he argues that Bibb's "freedom had always been compromised by the slavery of his bond to Malinda" (158). Heglar describes the structure of Bibb's narrative as initially setting up "the tension between slavery, marriage, and freedom" with "Malinda as an obstacle to his escape" (Narrative xx-xxi). Li writes: "For Bibb, his wife, Malinda, and family are 'obstacles' to achieving his greater goal of freedom" (22). Andrews and Heglar agree that Bibb's narrative essentially ends with the "divorce" from Malinda that breaks his last tie to slavery.

<sup>62</sup> Neither the newspaper article nor Bibb's narrative places much emphasis on Mary Frances. The article simply says she was sold with her mother. In his chapter, Bibb writes one sentence: "The child she said was still with her" (189). Andrews suggests that Bibb conflates mother and child. He writes: "The only way that Bibb could approach the future unencumbered by moral responsibility to and for her [Mary Frances] was to let her die an undeclared death in his narrative" (160).