

Motherhood as a “Hidden Transcript”: The Agency of Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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Abstract

One of the earliest slave narratives written by a female author, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) unfolds the tragic account of Linda Brent, who eventually uses her motherhood as a form of resistance and gains freedom. Adopting the fictional name Linda, the author Harriet Jacobs escapes from the sentimental trope of slave narratives in her display of the agency of the protagonist that is primarily manifested through Linda’s chosen, not forced, motherhood. Drawing on James C. Scott’s idea of “hidden transcripts” which stands for the subtle, masked nature of resistance used by the oppressed, this paper argues that motherhood can be read as a “hidden transcript” that Linda uses exhaustively not only to defeat her master but also to keep her dream alive. Gendering the concept of “hidden transcripts,” this paper, thus, explores the “infrapolitics” of Linda’s strategic motherhood in its power to undermine a patriarchal and racist society.

Keywords: Motherhood, agency, hidden transcript, infrapolitics, slave narrative

One of the earliest slave narratives written by a female author, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) unfolds the tragic chronicle of Linda Brent, who eventually gains freedom in the course of the narrative. The author Harriet Jacobs, adopting the fictional name Linda, presents her life story in a manner that evokes strong empathy for enslaved women, thereby drawing attention to the anti-slavery movement of America. However, her narrative turns out to be more than a sentimental account of a slave woman in its display of the agency of the protagonist, Linda. One of the crucial tools in her act of achieving agency is motherhood which, instead of making her domestic and weak, empowers her in her fight for freedom. This paper, thus, is an attempt to study Linda’s motherhood as a form of resistance against her master, Dr. Flint, who continuously attempts to absolutely subjugate and possess her. In doing so, the paper draws on James C. Scott’s idea of “hidden transcripts” which denotes the subtle, masked nature of resistance used by the oppressed. It argues that motherhood can be read as a “hidden transcript” that Linda uses exhaustively not only to defeat her master but also to keep her dream alive. As a weapon of the weak, motherhood allows her to practice the kind of agency that eventually makes her question orthodox gender and religious codes. By closely reading her motherhood, seven years of self-confinement, her escape, efforts of freeing her two children, and the dream of giving her children a home as a mother, this paper explores the “infrapolitics” of Linda’s strategic motherhood in its power to subvert a patriarchal and racist society.

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Arguably, since the 1960s, motherhood studies have become a discipline in their own right, and since then there has been an ongoing interest towards this broad area of study. Scholars often consider Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) as one of the pioneering books in shaping the interdisciplinary field of motherhood studies. The institution of motherhood, Rich argues, has "a history, it has an ideology" (33). Building upon Rich's theoretical design, over the last forty years feminist scholars have examined the various ways that motherhood operates both as a patriarchal institution to constrain and regulate women and as a form of resistance against patriarchal power dynamics. Since then, scholars such as Andrea O'Reilly, Marianne Hirsch, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and Ann Oakley have contributed substantially to this particular field. The Introduction to the thought-provoking book titled *Motherhood in Literature and Culture* (2018) begins sensibly, saying "Motherhood remains a complex and contested issue in feminist research as well as public discussion" (Rye et al. 1). This complex and contested concept of motherhood remains a central issue in Jacobs's *Incidents* as well as in the feminist scholarship that analysed the narrative.

What can be more fascinating than the study of motherhood in a slave narrative published in the nineteenth century when society witnessed the emergence of the concept of true motherhood, along with the cult of domesticity, and the peak of the abolitionist movement? Scholars such as Andrea O'Reilly, Mary McCartin Wearn, Grace McEntee, and John Ernest have already foregrounded the institution of motherhood and the experience of motherhood in their critical discussions of *Incidents*. O'Reilly does not see Linda's portrayal only as a maternal icon, or as a heroic, outraged slave mother; rather, she thinks that the single slave mother "functions as a critique against the ideals of womanhood and domesticity that white patriarchal society institutionalized during the period" ("Herself" 66). Wearn studies the narrative "as a maternal narrative with a clear political agenda" ("Links" 79). McEntee goes one step further, arguing that Jacobs's use of motherhood is not only a woman's issue; rather, it illustrates "a vision of racial equality" which has received little notice (201). Hence, it is not difficult to deduce from established feminist criticism that Linda's motherhood is a form of resistance where the personal becomes the political. In the same spirit, this paper considers Jacobs's portrayal of motherhood as one of the earliest depictions of women's agency in one of the earliest literary texts of African-American literature. However, what this paper mostly attempts to achieve is to find a nexus between motherhood as a form of resistance and motherhood as a "hidden transcript". In doing so, Linda's agency will be investigated in her act of planned motherhood through which we can witness Scott's concept of the "infrapolitics" of the oppressed.

Though Scott's discourse of resistance is broad, this paper mainly focuses on his discussion of "hidden transcripts," expanding his concept by adding one more apparatus to it, that is, motherhood. In his argument of the ideological resistance of oppressed groups, Scott primarily discusses their folktales, songs, jokes, gossip, and theatre, and even their use of anonymity and ambiguity. However, gendering the concept of "hidden transcripts" will allow us to accept Linda's chosen, not forced, motherhood as one of the guises of the powerless women as a form of resistance. In her seminal work, *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), a treatise on black women and feminism, bell hooks reminds us that

nineteenth century black women were more exposed to sexist oppression than any other female group in American history at any given time. She argues, “Not only were they the female group most victimized by sexist discrimination and sexist oppression, their powerlessness was such that resistance on their part could rarely take the form of organized collective action” (161). In the absence of an organized, collective movement, women’s resistance must have been personal, strategic, and deceptive. Prominent black feminist Patricia H. Collins sensibly adds, “Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed” (106). She categorically reveals how U.S. black women intellectuals have long explored the private, hidden space of black women’s consciousness, and the “inside” ideas that black women made use of to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of interconnected oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Linda’s motherhood should be read in that tradition of consciousness and resistance that was mostly private, hidden, and strategic. In its attempt to decode the “hidden transcript” of motherhood as portrayed in *Incidents*, the paper aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of motherhood studies in connection to African-American literature.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl chronicles Linda’s plight as a young slave girl who subsequently learns the arts of resistance in her unique way. Critics have long noted that motherhood is the primary lens through which Jacobs investigates the evils of institutionalized slavery. Writing specifically on behalf of “the thousands—of Slave Mothers that are still in bondage,” Jacobs thematically and rhetorically structured *Incidents* upon her maternal will power and upon her relationship to the maternal figures in her life (qtd. in Yellin xix). Linda is not portrayed simply as a black subject who is victimized and exploited by her white master, Dr. Flint. Rather, she is presented as a strong, determined, and strategic individual who is ready to fight the battle of life on her own terms. Frances S. Foster rightly argues that Jacobs’s text appears to be unprecedented in its use of sexual liaisons and misadventures as a prime example of the perils of slave womanhood. “But hers,” she continues, “was a story of a slave woman who refused to be victimized” (62). One of the earliest signs of her resistance is manifested in her courage to talk back. She understands that being silent will only result in presenting herself as vulnerable and accessible. Even if she is scared to face Dr. Flint initially, she eventually adopts “a buoyant disposition” that makes her white master uncomfortable (440). At times she openly expresses her contempt for him in a way that enrages him. Though he threatens her with death, or something worse than death, she does not despair. She always believes in finding “some threads of joy” that would overpower her “dark destiny” (440).

Linda’s agency can also be traced in her choosing a lover despite Dr. Flint’s constant warning against indulging in an affair. However, she falls in love with a free born, young colored carpenter with “all the ardor of a young girl’s first love” (446). Though she has to sacrifice her first love for the oppressive system of slavery, she retorts with dignity when interrogated by Dr. Flint: “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?” (448). Realizing the fact that her master would never sell her, and if she had children, they would “follow the

condition of the mother,” she lets her love go to Savannah for the sake of his better future (451). When Dr. Flint starts whispering more foul words in her ear, enticing her to become his mistress, Linda, then fifteen—the sad epoch of a poor slave girl, becomes desperate to save her dignity. Even at this point, she does not give up on her freedom, vowing to “do anything, everything, for the sake of defeating him” (463). As soon as she is informed that her master had finished making a hut for her in the woods, Linda feels more determined to resist him.

As a poor slave girl of merely fifteen, Linda protests as much as she is able to, sometimes verbally, at other times strategically. But Dr. Flint becomes so resolute to make Linda his mistress that she decides to shield herself from further abuse and possible rape. She is determined that she would not let her master succeed “in trampling his victim under his feet” (464). Therefore, she decides to commit something “offstage” in the absence of power that would defy the public act of deference of the powerless. She figures out that she could use her reproductive system against his will and could own her womb. She chooses an educated white gentleman as her partner who is “agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave” (465). By choosing a lover and a father for her child, she exercises her free will, given the system of slavery that oppressed women like her. She realizes: “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” (465). Her pregnancy is an act that she sends to her master as a message of defiance which is explicit, and at the same time, concealed. She has “a feeling of satisfaction and triumph” in the thought of telling him her news of pregnancy (466). Her personal choice is translated into an act of resistance with her declaration of motherhood:

From time to time he told me of his intended arrangements, and I was silent. At last, he came and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. I told him I would never enter it. He said, “I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there.” I replied, “I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a mother.” (466)

Linda’s defiance is achieved through her motherhood which gives her new hope for freedom. Her action can be understood as a new way of understanding resistance to domination. Linda’s act of claiming her body and womb as her own also signals Dr. Flint’s failure to own them. While motherhood empowers her, it makes her master helpless.

In her discussion of *Incidents*, Mary McCartin Wearn argues that Jacobs strategically refused to play the stereotypical role of feminine victim, fusing the spirit of male slave narrative with the structure of a domestic novel. Considering it a maternal narrative, she maintains that Linda rejects Aunt Martha’s Victorian maternal values and, instead, supports her uncle Benjamin’s individual quest for freedom. Refusing the sentimental role of passive, feminine victimhood, she chooses more masculine forms of resistance. Though Linda’s defensive choices are restricted by her sex, Jacobs refuses to be confined to a feminine, melodramatic plot development. Wearn argues, “Linda employs her sexuality to thwart her adversary... Jacobs thus imagines a new dynamic in which the slave woman’s sexual nature can be employed for her own ends rather than in service of the slave state” (“Links” 87). She decides to use her sexuality as a weapon that her master

is obsessed with. Her choice of practicing motherhood has been a calculative move and one that she knew would enrage Dr. Flint so much that it would be a “triumph over [her] tyrant” (465). Her choice of motherhood was primarily a device that she used not only to buy freedom from her master but also to defy him. Scott rightly argues that every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents “a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (xii). The powerless Linda is obliged “to adopt a strategic pose” in the presence of the powerful in the form of motherhood (xii). Linda’s insubordination might be read as “the infrapolitics of the powerless” that helps us understand those “rare moments of political electricity” when the “hidden transcript” is acted out directly and publicly in the teeth of power (Scott xiii).

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), Scott examines the conflicts between the powerless and powerful which are loaded with deception, role play, and feigned performance. He is a political scientist whose insightful anthropological field studies have earned him a crucial place in the discussion of political economy and in the theories of hegemony and resistance. He intends to construct a generic model of “the arts of resistance” of subordinate groups, drawing on the works of sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, literary critics, and novelists. Advocating a new way of understanding resistance to domination, what he suggests is to successfully read, interpret, and understand “the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups” (xii). In the process, Scott’s central contribution is his distinction between “public transcripts” and “hidden transcripts,” and he proposes a discourse of the powerless which he calls “infrapolitics”. The centerpiece of the book is its discussion of the “hidden transcripts” in an attempt to divulge a much more subversive and defiant culture among the oppressed beyond what is obvious. Scott uses the term “public transcript” as a shorthand way of denoting the open interaction between subordinates and those who subjugate. He convincingly elaborates that both subordinates and the powerful make use of “public transcripts”. While subordinates offer “a performance of deference and consent,” those who dominate, in turn, produce “a performance of mastery and command” (3). Though the dialectic of disguise and surveillance in “public transcripts” helps us understand “the cultural patterns of domination and subordination,” they are unlikely to tell the whole story of power relations (4). Therefore, Scott brings in the idea of a “hidden transcript” that “takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (4). The rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the powerless are considered as “hidden transcripts” which have the capability of insinuating a critique of power. These forms of insubordination, that Scott defines as the “infrapolitics” of the powerless, display a politics of disguise and anonymity that happens as a public spectacle but are intended to have a double meaning.

It is true that Scott informs the reader in the preface of the book that in delineating “broad patterns,” he deliberately overlooks “the great particularity of each and every form of subordination” (xi). Neglect of the particular, however, makes it difficult for readers to relate to the resistance of the women who are double victims of a racist and sexist society. The omission of gender-sensitive “hidden transcripts” makes Scott’s argument somewhat partial. In *Freedom Dreams* (2002), Robin Kelley identifies the crux of the problem of race studies when it comes to the question of black women’s freedom dreams.

He argues, “The black community is too often conceived as an undifferentiated group with common interests” (136-137). What he discovers is “a matter of deliberate exclusion than conception” that explains the relative invisibility of black women in the critical discussion of black studies (136). In the same spirit, hooks opines that scholars have privileged the impact of slavery on black men and even argues that men, more than black women, were the true casualties of the peculiar institution. She states:

Traditionally, scholars have emphasized the impact of slavery on the black male consciousness, arguing that black men, more so than black women, were the ‘real’ victims of slavery. Sexist historians and sociologists have provided the American public with a perspective on slavery in which the most cruel and de-humanizing impact of slavery on the lives of black people was that black men were stripped of their masculinity. (20)

This view not only ignores the fact that enslaved women toiled alongside men, even through pregnancy, but also disregards the routine sexual abuse of black women by their white masters—a fact that makes women’s experience of slavery more complex. The scholar Deborah White also testifies to the fact that the images of African-American women that grew out of the slavery era reveal that “black males and females did not experience slavery the same way” (62). As Scott assumes that gender-based domination and working-class culture and ideology share enough similarities regarding subjugation, he decides to be heavily “suggestive” in this regard (22). Therefore, though he admits that in the case of women, “relations of subordination have typically been both more personal and intimate,” he overlooks the unique gender experience in his discussion of the resistance of the powerless (22).

As women must go through a different form of subordination in a patriarchal society, their hidden transcripts tend to be substantially different from their male counterparts, even if they share some common transcripts with men. Jacobs’s narrator herself recognizes: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (488). If we turn to the history of slavery in the American South, it is evident that African-American female slaves had to disguise their fear, anger, and hatred not only from their white masters but also from their black superiors. hooks argues that the female slave lived in “constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear” that any male, white or black, might single her out for assault and abuse (24). In the process, they can exercise doubly-hidden transcripts among themselves in the absence of male power—both white and black. Deborah White’s statement also corroborates this claim that female slaves were “adept in inventing schemes and excuses to get their own way” (77). Thus, women’s unique resistance must be studied in essentialist terms. Linda’s choice of motherhood at a time when female slaves’ bodies were considered disposable demands to be recognized as an evasive transcript that upsets the system of slavery.

A close reading of Scott’s idea of resistance enables us to recognize the language-based approach he adopts in developing his idea of “hidden transcripts”. Linguistic practices have been made central in understanding resistance to cultural hegemony. Though he considers nonspeech acts such as gestures and expressions as “hidden transcripts,” he primarily focuses on either a verbal or a non-verbal form of language communication as a

signifier. I believe his concept of “infrapolitics” could have been more inclusive of other forms of resistance if he had elaborated his definition of transcripts. Under conditions of tyranny and persecution, any charismatic acts of a subjugated subject, he declares, can be a political statement. Referring to certain literary characters such as Mrs. Poyser from *Adam Bede* (1859), Scott, in his book, categorically argues how charismatic acts can possess qualities of “hidden transcripts”. It is worth mentioning that he does not use the word “charismatic” in the colloquial sense of the term. Understanding a charismatic act, he suggests, “depends upon appreciating how her gesture represented a shared hidden transcript that no one had yet had the courage to declare in the teeth of power” (20). However, as he limits his discussion of “hidden transcripts” to a language-based approach, he overlooks the non-lingual forms of messages of resistance. Otherwise, an African-American female slave’s decision of owning her womb by being pregnant by her chosen man could have been read as a charismatic act, as is defined by Scott, which, in the process, can categorize motherhood, in this specific context, as a “hidden transcript” ready to be decoded in the teeth of power.

This paper maintains that Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts” has a generic value that can offer a broad understanding of the term, providing a new paradigm of resistance. Thus, the paper finds an immense scope in appropriating and expanding Scott’s idea of “hidden transcripts” and “infrapolitics,” bringing in an obvious gender-sensitive perspective. What Scott provides us is a generic model of the discourse of the resistance, wrapped in a compelling and richly textured argument. It is undeniable that Scott’s poetics of resistance, in its breadth of vision and in its range of references, can only add agency to the ongoing, potential movements of the powerless. If Linda’s strategic motherhood is perceived as cunning and deception that defies the concept of true (black) womanhood constructed by a racist, patriarchal society, this is surely because her “vulnerability has rarely permitted [her] the luxury of direct confrontation” (Scott 136). As Eva Cherniavsky has argued in her discussion of the discourse of motherhood in 19th-century America, Jacobs’s planned motherhood is “an act of subaltern insurgency” meant to foil her white master’s plans in order to defeat him (102). Reading her planned pregnancy as a “hidden transcript,” thus, not only confirms the empowering experience of motherhood but also makes the concept of “hidden transcript” more gender inclusive. Referring to day-to-day strategies of the black working-class resistance, in his book *Race Rebels* (1994), Kelley, like Scott, discusses how black resistance has always remained “unorganized, clandestine, and evasive” (7-8). Using the concept of Scott’s “infrapolitics,” he suggests that the political history of exploited people cannot be understood without reference to “infrapolitics”. Linda’s strategic motherhood, thus, fits into the resistance model that both Scott and Kelley discuss. Linda’s engagement in the politics of everyday which is evasive, concealed, and yet, part of a bigger tradition of resistance is her brand of infrapolitics.

However, if a slave transgresses her boundary seeking refuge behind a mask, the master also finds more scope in controlling his subjects. Scott argues that the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is never a solid wall; rather, it is an area of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate. He continues: “The unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday

forms of class struggle” (14). Linda’s decision of being a mother does not empower her immediately; rather, it paves the way for new forms of struggles. She thought that Dr. Flint would sell her because of her voluntary act of giving in to another man. But what he loved more than money is power over her. He refuses all the offers of selling her, stating that Linda is his daughter’s property. Instead, he devises new plans to subjugate her:

Linda, you desire freedom for yourself and your children, and you can obtain it only through me. If you agree to what I am about to propose, you and they shall be free. There must be no communication of any kind between you and their father. I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom! (494)

Linda, however, refuses to be his mistress and, instead, decides to work on the plantation. Her pride as a woman and her love for her children are so powerful that she resolves that a brighter dawn would emerge soon out of the darkness. Her sense of responsibility for her children makes her more determined to fight for freedom. Collins rightly argues, “Viewing motherhood as a symbol of power can catalyze black women to take actions that they otherwise might not have considered” (210). She maintains that motherhood can serve as a site where black women can express and learn the power of self-definition, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and acquire a belief in black women’s empowerment in the form of resistance. Linda might have lost her motivation at some low points if she had not also felt responsible for her children’s freedom. Therefore, rather than being a confining experience, motherhood turns out to be an empowering one that provides her the strength to pursue her dream of freedom.

Linda does not play the traditional role of a mother like her grandmother, Martha. When she realizes that leaving her home and children behind would be good both for her and her children, she decides to run away. She stands in contrast to the ideals of motherly self-sacrifice of her grandmother who believes that a true mother must “stand by [her] children, and suffer with them till death” (502). She eventually succeeds in her attempt to run away from her master, and takes refuge in a secret abode. Her act of defying patriarchal power dynamics by refusing to give in to her master or any other man not of her choice had given her a sense of confidence. Her escape, her lies, her motherhood are all part of a strategy that she directs towards her freedom. Her “infrapolitics” has outwitted her white master so far. She defends her actions, saying, “Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants” (512). Her “infrapolitics” seem to be effective as Dr. Flint finally sells her children, who are secretly bought by their biological father. It has certainly been a victory, even if in a limited sense, to be able to free her children from a cruel and vindictive master, and secure for them a temporary, yet free home at her grandmother’s house.

However, Linda knows that her children would not be completely out of danger until she could buy her freedom and theirs as well. Though she is not sure when that day will come, she never gives up on her dream of freedom. Wearn rightly argues in her discussion of Linda’s motherhood that Jacobs’s narrative paradoxically reveals that, in order to claim her motherhood, “the slave woman had to be an agent of her own liberty by freeing herself from slavery—and from the ties that bound her to her children” (152).

Hence, to achieve her desired dream of freedom, Linda, ironically, accepts seven years of confinement at her grandmother's place. The garret she stayed in long seven years "was only nine feet long, and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air" (525). She is able to endure such an inhuman condition only because of her hatred of slavery and love for her children. However, her confinement is not "comfortless" as she is able to hear and see her children (525). Her desire for freedom has become trifold because of her bond towards her son and daughter. Her body undoubtedly suffers from long years of imprisonment, but not her soul. She finally manages to escape to become a free woman with the hope of making a free home for her children. Motherhood and Linda's sense freedom are so intricately linked in her imagination that they feed off each other in the narrative in such a manner that their existence in isolation seems impossible.

As a weapon of the weak, motherhood allows Linda to practice an agency that eventually makes her question orthodox gender and religious codes. Motherhood gives her such power that she accepts seven years of self-confinement and even separation from her own children. Her efforts of freeing her two children and the dream of giving them a home as a mother persuade her to subvert the patriarchal and racist society in which she lives. Narrating her own act of disobedience, in which Jacobs conceived out of wedlock, escaped from her master, and hid in her grandmother's garret for seven years, she thus "designs a model of disobedience that expresses her dual and contradictory commitment both to the claims of sentimentality and to liberal ideas forming the conceptual basis of law in the United States" (Goldman 237). Anita Goldman finds a pattern of civil disobedience in Jacobs's resistance who, like Thoreau, imagined "a political community or 'nation' of disobedients" (246). Linda's mysterious pregnancy can be humiliating for her initially, yet she chooses it over sexual exploitation by her white master. This is how she takes control over her body and sexuality, and eventually her life. Rejecting the role of submissive female sexuality, she decides which male partner she would consummate with. As Jean Fagan Yellin puts it, Jacobs's book embodies "a dual critique" of nineteenth-century America—it challenged the institution of chattel slavery with its dominant ideology of white racism, as well as orthodox patriarchal institutions and ideologies (xx). Deciding to lose virginity out of wedlock and being a single slave mother, she, thus, breaks a social and sexual taboo, which challenges not only slavery but also patriarchy.

In this regard, we can turn towards O'Reilly who does not see Linda's portrayal only as that of a maternal icon, or as a heroic, outraged slave mother. Referring to the middle-class ideals of domesticity and womanhood during the nineteenth-century, often referred to as "home idealism" and the "cult of the true womanhood," she discusses how females were "to be sexually and socially passive, modest, self-effacing, self-sacrificing, pious, and pure in body and mind" (56). On the contrary, the journey of the single slave mother, Linda, functions more as a critique against the ideals of womanhood and domesticity that white patriarchal society imposed on them. Martha Vicinus sums up middle-class women's positions during the period sensibly when she points out, "In her most perfect form," the ideal woman was expected to "[combine] total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth" (xi). Linda's sexual union and

pregnancy out of wedlock and her escape leaving her children behind contradict the then-prevalent idea of true womanhood. As Beth Maclay Doriani suggests in “Black Womanhood in Nineteenth Century America,” being a black female slave, Linda is faced with “a more complex standard of morality” than a white woman (210). For her, the ideals of chastity, domestic submissiveness, and sexual passivity—all of which her free grandmother embodies—are equivalent to complying with sexual exploitation and rape. Linda, following the mores of male resistance of her free-spirited uncle, Benjamin, and rebel brother, William, certainly breaks away from the sentimental trope of a female victim and sacrificing mother.

Just by deciding to own her reproductive system according to her choice, Linda defies the patriarchal design of controlling woman’s will and manipulating woman’s body—a situation which is intensified when women are chained in slavery. hooks reminds us that apart from rape and flogging a naked woman’s body, “breeding was another socially legitimized method of sexually exploiting black women” (39). By the middle of the eighteenth century, most slave owners came to realize the potential benefits of having female slaves. Referring to Thomas Nairne, an eighteenth-century South Carolina planter, the critic Deborah White discusses how, besides doing field work, female slaves were expected to have children so that it would increase the slave population. She argues, “Once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves” (68). Hence, Linda refuses to be manipulated as the kind of a sex object and a child breeder desired by a patriarchal system of slavery. By owning her womb, she refuses to become simply a breeder of more slaves as premeditated by white, male slaveowners. In this sense, Linda’s motherhood is not only a “hidden transcript” directed towards her white, racist master but also towards the dominant patriarchy. Thus, *Incidents* paves the way for future generations of black female writers to protest against the customary enslavement of women by patriarchy.

Linda may have confined herself for long years, sacrificed valuable years from life, and so on, yet she never compromised on her self-respect. What makes her a woman of agency is her triumph in not giving in to pressure and fear, especially in a system of slavery where female slaves are marginalized due to their race, gender, and class. Her personal choice of being a single mother and pursuing her dream of freedom must be read in political terms. Upholding the feminist slogan that the “personal is political,” Andrea O’Reilly and Silvia C. Bizzini attempt to understand “mothering to be an intellectual, philosophical, or self-reflexive activity, and motherhood to be a cultural-political institution” (12). They consider motherhood theory and autobiography as representatives of a negotiation within the patriarchal power structure. Wearn also argues in the same vein, discussing Jacobs’s covert articulation of a subversive, more politically dangerous, maternal subjectivity. She explains, “The narrative of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* hinges on the act of reproductive rebellion that made a mother of Harriet Jacobs.... Having yearned for escape from an early age, Jacobs imagined her impending maternity as a source of power and, possibly, freedom” (147). Just as Jacobs hides her true identity behind the fictional name of Linda Brent, she also hides a more radical maternal subjectivity under the unthreatening coating of sentimental motherhood. Thus, she seems to redefine not only true womanhood but the concept of motherhood in general.

O'Reilly and Wearn's concept of using motherhood as an act of political resistance can be compared to Scott's idea of "infrapolitics" since both consider it as an elementary form of politics without which an elaborate institutionalized political action cannot exist. Scott argues, "Under the conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live, it is political life. And when the rare civilities of open political life are curtailed or destroyed, as they so often are, the elementary forms of "infrapolitics" remain as a defense in depth of the powerless" (201). Refuting the fact that "infrapolitics" is empty posturing or a substitute for real resistance, he argues that it is essentially "the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril" (199). From her unorthodox planned pregnancy, to the tactical desertion of her children, through her triumphant escape to freedom, Linda proves to be a successful agent of "infrapolitics". Linda's resistance against Dr. Flint is just not about the defense of her chastity but also a conflict of two wills determined by their respective sex, race, and class. Her defiance can be compared to Frederick Douglass's exemplary physical fight with his master as narrated in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). His intense battle with his master, Mr. Covey, was not only the "turning-point" in his career as a slave but also a glorifying moment in the history of black literature (366). His courage to fight back against his master is not a display of his physical strength; rather, it demonstrates his will power, sense of identity, and love for freedom. Linda's unwavering spirit is equally obvious in her utterance: "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (496). Both Linda and Douglass, running the risk of life, answer back to their tyrannical masters but will not allow themselves to be subjugated. Though Linda's resistance is limited by her sex, her fight against her master is no less glorious, potent, and political.

Maria W. Stewart, one of the first African-American feminists, urged black women to forge self-definitions of self-reliance and independence in the troubled times of the 1830s. To Stewart, the power of self-definition was essential at a time when black women's survival was at stake. Following that radical line of thought, Linda's motherhood seems to act as a gateway to her self-reliance and independence. Stewart urged black women to use their special roles as mothers by forging powerful methods of political action. Emphasizing black women's crucial role as mothers in an enslaved society, she appeals to black mothers: "O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge.... It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, ... and the cultivation of a pure heart" (35). Linda evidently plays this special role, politically educating her two children through steadfast determination, unwavering resistance, and intense struggle. However, she seems to achieve more than what Stewart expected from black women during that era. Apart from passing down the dream of freedom to her freed children, Linda ensured creating her own identity. Thus, Jacobs's attitude towards motherhood proves to be anti-patriarchal, and was much ahead of its time. Instead of letting patriarchy to confine her through the institution of motherhood, she successfully uses motherhood as a tool to fight against a racist, patriarchal system.

Thus, Linda's "hidden transcript" of motherhood is a form of political resistance that she practices in the teeth of power. Her control of the black slave body, especially her womb,

itself is a manifestation of her secret message of resistance to a powerful white male chauvinist society. Linda proves her agency by transforming a confining experience of motherhood to an empowering one. Her arts of resistance against the white male supremacy is unique in the sense that she uses the same body and womb that the white slave owners desire to control. Dr. Flint's helplessness and rage at Linda's practicing motherhood are symptomatic of, in Scott's words, "rare moments of political electricity" that the powerless can create through practicing "infrapolitics" (xiii). Linda's chosen motherhood, therefore, should not be read only as a political act but also as a "hidden transcript" that women can strategically use to resist subjugation. Studying motherhood as "infrapolitics" in the form of a "hidden transcript" can, thus, open up new avenues in exploring the portrayal of motherhood in literature, investigating women's unique experience of mothering as an art of resistance against the dominant ethos of society.

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