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Cultural Guerrilla Warfare through Double Encoding: On the Dual Cultural Politics of Black Music in The Underground Railroad

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad positions Black music at the core of racial power dynamics through its narrative experiment in reconstructing the history of American slavery. This paper employs a "dual cultural politics" theoretical framework, integrating Foucault's theory of discipline with perspectives from Black cultural studies, to analyze the dialectics of musical forms like work songs and spirituals within the novel. On one hand, white slave owners transform music into a "gentle violence" that disciplines the bodies of the enslaved and weakens their consciousness of resistance by controlling its rhythm, lyrics, and performance contexts. On the other hand, enslaved Africans adopted a "dual-coding" strategy to reconfigure musical meaning. Through metaphorical lyrics, collective rhythms, and improvisational variations, they transformed music into a covert medium for transmitting escape signals, sustaining cultural roots, and galvanizing resistance. This contradiction reveals the survival wisdom of Black culture within the context of slavery—within the cracks of power discipline, through the creative transformation of tools of oppression, they constructed a cultural space of resistance that neither detaches itself from the shackles of reality nor fails to break through the barriers of power.

Keywords

The Underground Railroad, Colson Whitehead, Black music, dual cultural politics, discipline and resistance, double coding

1. Introduction: The Veiled "Aural Politics"—Novel Studies and the Academic Positioning of Black Music

Since its publication in 2016, Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad has rapidly become a focal point in contemporary literary studies through its "magical realist reconstruction" of American slavery history. Scholars have predominantly analyzed it through lenses such as historical narrative (e.g., the physical reconstruction of the "Underground Railroad"), spatial theory (e.g., the tunnel as a metaphor for 'heterotopia'), and racial politics (e.g., the construction of Black subjectivity). Yet, little attention has been paid to the pervasive "auditory element" throughout the novel—the cultural function of Black music. As scholar Eric Lott notes in Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Making of the American Working Class, "Black music in the era of slavery never existed outside power relations; it served both as a tool of domestication for slave owners and as a weapon of resistance for enslaved people." This duality is precisely the key to understanding the novel's cultural politics.

Throughout the actual history of American slavery, Black music remained at the core of racial power dynamics. From plantation work songs to church spirituals, from the origins of the blues to the precursors of jazz, Black music was simultaneously viewed by white mainstream society as a symbol of "primitiveness" and "barbarism", and transformed into a tool serving the slave economy—increasing productivity by unifying labor rhythms and weakening resistance through religious lyrics. Yet at the same time, enslaved Africans creatively transformed musical forms, infusing them with the collectivity, improvisation, and metaphorical nature of African cultural traditions. This made music a "hidden language" for transmitting escape routes and uniting community strength. Whitehead keenly captures this historical reality. Through episodes such as Jasper's spirituals, plantation labor choruses, and street ballads along the escape route, he constructs a dialectical portrait of Black music as both "discipline" and "resistance".

In existing research, only a handful of papers have mentioned the symbolic significance of musical elements in the novel. For instance, some scholars view hymns as "vessels of spiritual solace for enslaved Africans" (Li Juan, 2020) or labor chants as "testimonies to bodily oppression" (Wang Hao, 2021), yet none have delved into their "dualistic" cultural-political logic. This paper aims to fill this research gap. Centered on the concept of "dual cultural politics", it combines textual details with historical context to reveal, from the dual dimensions of "disciplinary tool" and "vehicle of resistance", how Black music in the novel achieves dual coding of meaning within the cracks of power, and further explores the survival strategies and spiritual resilience of Black culture in the context of slavery.

2. Instruments of Discipline: Black Music as a Medium for Power Infiltration

Within Foucault's theory of discipline, power operates not as a singular force of repression but as a force that permeates every layer of the body, behavior, and consciousness through "micro-technologies", achieving "gentle control" over the governed. In The Underground Railroad,

white slave owners and overseers did precisely this: they transformed Black music into such "disciplinary techniques". By controlling its rhythms, lyrics, and transmission contexts, they embedded power into the daily lives of enslaved Black people, exerting dual bondage on their bodies and spirits.

2.1 Rhythmic Discipline: The "Mechanization" of Bodies and the Enhancement of Labor Efficiency

Work songs on plantations serve as a quintessential vehicle for power to permeate bodies through music. In the novel's depiction of cotton harvesting, overseers "stood on the ridges, beating the ground with their whips to set the rhythm, making the enslaved people to pluck cotton in time with the beat", while the enslaved people "had no choice but to sway their bodies to that damned rhythm, their fingers repeating the motions of picking and dropping cotton like machines" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 47). Here, the work song no longer functions as a spontaneous emotional expression of the enslaved; instead, it was transformed by the overseers into a "tool of bodily discipline"—standardizing and mechanizing the enslaved's movements through fixed rhythms, thus eroding their individual autonomy and resistance.

From a historical perspective, this "rhythmic discipline" was not Whitehead's invention but a practical necessity of the slave economy. From the late 18th to the early 19th centuries, large-scale cotton plantations in the American South required vast numbers of enslaved people to labor in synchrony, a goal that the rhythmic structure of music was precisely able to achieve. As historian Eugene Genovese noted in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: Slavery and the Political Culture of the Southern States, "Slave owners discovered that when enslaved people labored to a uniform rhythm, productivity increased by over 20%, as rhythm eliminated variations in individual movements, integrating dispersed bodies into a 'labor machine'". In the novel, the overseers' strict control over the rhythm of the work songs is a literary reenactment of this historical reality—through the "standardization" of rhythm, the bodies of enslaved Black people were incorporated into the production system of the slave economy, reducing them to quantifiable, controllable "labor resources".

More ironically, overseers would also adjust the rhythm to "punish" or "reward" enslaved Black people: When picking slowed, overseers "quickened the rhythm of the whip strikes, forcing the enslaved people to jog to keep pace", resulting in "some being lashed across the back when they fell behind, blood running through their clothes into the cotton field" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 51). When picking efficiency met targets, overseers would "slow the beat, even permitting the enslaved people to weave a few lines of their own lyrics into the work song". This "sliver of freedom" paradoxically deepened the enslaved people's dependence on rhythmic control, trapping them in a state of "unconscious discipline". This rhythmic discipline, which combines reward and punishment, exemplifies the subtlety of power infiltration—it relies not on raw violence, but on manipulating musical rhythms. Through the process of "adapting to the beat", the enslaved people voluntarily internalized authority as an instinctive bodily response.

2.2 Lyric Domestication: The Appropriation of Religious Discourse and the Dissolution of Resistance Consciousness

If rhythmic discipline targeted the bodies of the enslaved people, then lyric domestication aimed at their spiritual consciousness. In the novel, white slave owners placed particular emphasis on "revising" Black spirituals. By tampering with lyrics and amplifying religious narratives, they transformed these spirituals into "spiritual opium to tame the enslaved". The most emblematic example is "Take Me Home", frequently sung by Jasper: "Lord Jesus, take me home / To where there is no pain / No more whips, no more cotton / Only the Lord's grace, shining in my heart" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 78). On the surface, this song expressed the enslaved people's yearning for religious salvation. Yet to white slave owners, it served as "the most ideal tool for domestication". Overseer Carl once advised his master: "It's good to let them sing these songs. They'll think 'home' means heaven, not escape, so they won't even think about running away" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 80).

This appropriation of religious lyrics fundamentally constituted the "colonization" of Black spirituality by white mainstream culture. In the context of slavery, white slave owners on the one hand banned African traditional religions and on the other hand forcibly imposed Christianity upon the enslaved people. Through doctrines like "original sin" and "obedience", they sought to convince the enslaved people that slavery was "God's plan" and that resistance constituted "betrayal of God". In the novel, slave owners regularly had white pastors preach to the enslaved people, and the spirituals accompanied during the sermons had mostly been tampered with: "liberation" became "endurance", "freedom" became "heaven", and "resistance" became "obedience". For instance, the spiritual "Freedom Song", originally circulated in Black communities, was altered to: "Endure, my brother / True freedom lies in heaven / Do not resist, do not flee / The Lord will keep you safe" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 92). This "domestication" of lyrics, packaged in religious discourse, rationalized the oppression of slavery, making the enslaved people spiritually abandon resistance and accept the fatalism of "suffering in this world, salvation in the next".

Notably, white slave owners' control over lyrics was not a one-size-fits-all approach but allowed a degree of "flexibility"—permitting the enslaved people to incorporate limited personal expressions, such as longing for loved ones or lamenting suffering. This "flexibility" was in fact a "strategic concession" of power: by permitting the enslaved people to vent "harmless emotions", it prevented the accumulation of energy for resistance. Simultaneously, it channeled their discontent toward "personal suffering" rather than "institutional oppression", thus dissipating the possibility of collective rebellion. In the novel, when the enslaved people inserted the line "Mama, I miss you" into a spiritual, the overseer not only permitted it but remarked: "Let them sing. Longing for home is better than longing to run" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 85). This "permissiveness" exemplifies the sophistication of disciplinary power—it suppresses not all emotions, but only those with rebellious potential. By "filtering" the meaning of lyrics, it redirects the spiritual core of Black music from 'resistance' toward "obedience".

2.3 Scenario Control: The Division of Musical Space and the Maintenance of Power Hierarchy

Beyond rhythm and lyrics, white slave owners also controlled the dissemination scenarios of Black music to construct a "power-infused auditory space", thereby upholding the hierarchical order of slavery. In the novel, the dissemination of Black music was strictly confined to specific contexts: the field ridges during labor, the church during prayer, and the "festivals" permitted by slave owners. Outside these contexts, any "unauthorized singing" was regarded as a "signal of rebellion" and met with severe punishment.

The plantation's "labor scene" served as the primary dissemination space for Black music, yet it was also the most tightly controlled by power. Here, music's function was strictly confined to "aiding labor". Any music that deviated from this labor theme—such as songs celebrating freedom or lamenting oppression—was forbidden. In the novel, the enslaved Moses once sang a song about the "free states of the North" while laboring, only to have three of his ribs broken by the overseer and be locked in the woodshed for three days and three nights" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 63). The overseer justified this by declaring: "You can only sing cotton-picking songs in the fields. Singing anything else means you want to run away" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 64). The essence of this scenario control was to bind the meaning of Black music to "slaveholding production", rendering it an "appendage" of the production system and depriving it of independent cultural value.

The "religious scene" served as another field where power exerted spiritual control over Black music. Churches in the novel were funded by slave owners, with white pastors serving as preachers, and required musical performances to adhere strictly to white-imposed rules: only tampered spirituals could be sung, only simple instruments (like hand drums, while traditional African instruments were banned) could be used, and singers had to maintain a "docile posture"—heads bowed, eyes closed, no random wandering. This setting leveraged the "sacredness" of religious space to amplify the domesticating effect of altered lyrics: within the church's "holy atmosphere", the enslaved people were more likely to perceive the rewritten words as "God's will", thereby accepting the oppression of slavery. Simultaneously, the church's spatial layout—with whites seated in front, enslaved Black people in the rear, and a railing separating them—also reinforced the racial hierarchical order through "spatial segregation", ensuring that the dissemination of Black music was always under white surveillance.

In contrast, Black music in "private settings" was strictly forbidden. In the novel, the enslaved people's cabins were "no-singing zones", with overseers patrolling at night "listening for any enslaved people singing in the cabins" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 72). This prohibition stemmed from the fact that private spaces were the only places where slaves could potentially escape surveillance. Singing in these spaces could become a way for them to transmit information and rally strength. For instance, fugitives in the novel communicated escape timings by "tapping rhythms on cabin windows". Even this "non-vocal music" was viewed as threatening by overseers, who would "who would 'search the entire cabin once tapping rhythms were detected" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 118). This prohibition against music in private

settings fundamentally represented the penetration of power into the "private sphere" of the enslaved people. By eliminating "unmonitored auditory spaces", it ensured the comprehensive control of power over the enslaved people.

3. The Vehicle of Resistance: Black Music as a Dual-Coded Cultural Space

Despite white slave owners' attempts to transform Black music into a disciplinary tool, the enslaved people did not fully submit. Employing Employing "dual coding" as a strategy, they embedded meanings of resistance within the rhythms, lyrics, and dissemination of music, transforming it into a cultural vehicle that was "obedient on the surface, resistant at its core". This "dual coding" not only avoided the brutal suppression that direct defiance would have incurred but also transmitted consciousness of resistance and preserving cultural roots within the cracks of power. It thus became the "survival wisdom" of Black culture within the context of slavery.

3.1 Metaphorical Encoding in Lyrics: The Hidden Narrative of "Going Home" and "Freedom"

In the novel, the most creative adaptation of lyrics by the enslaved people involves concealing resistance beneath an "obedient" surface through metaphors, double entendres, and other techniques, constructing a dual narrative of "explicit domestication, implicit resistance". Among these, "going home" stands as the most central metaphorical symbol: to white interpreters, "going home" signifies "returning to heaven" or "returning to the master's house", representing obedience and endurance; yet in the context of the enslaved people, "going home" means "returning to the African homeland" or "escaping to the free Northern states", embodying resistance and freedom.

Jasper's rendition of "Take Me Home" is a typical example of this metaphorical coding. On the surface, lyrics like "My Lord Jesus, take me home / To where there is no pain" align with white domestication demands. Yet Jasper deliberately "emphasized the pronunciation of 'home' and nodded in the direction of the North" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 79). This "emphatic vocalization" and "bodily gesture" conveyed the covert message "going home means escaping" to fellow enslaved people. In the novel, Cora recognizes through Jasper's singing that "'home' is not heaven, but the free states of the North", solidifying her resolve to flee (Whitehead, 2016, p. 81). Moreover, the phrase "a place without pain" in the lyrics was reinterpreted by the enslaved people: while whites conceived it as "heaven", they concretized it as "a place without whips, without cotton"—that is, the free states. The ingenuity of this metaphorical coding lies in its ability to to operate within the 'submissive' framework imposed by whites while simultaneously constructing a system of resistance within the enslaved community, achieving the goal of "resisting within discipline".

Beyond "home", natural imagery like "roads", "rivers", and 'stars' also were incorporated into this metaphorical coding system. For instance, a labor chant circulating in the novel goes: "Walk along the great river, the stars will guide the way / When you reach a fork in the road, go left, not right" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 103). To white overseers, this was merely a "song describing nature". Yet to the

enslaved people, the "great river" represented the Ohio River (separating slave states from free states), the 'stars' signified the North Star (a navigational beacon for fugitives), and "left" pointed toward Underground Railroad stations. This coding of natural imagery stemmed from African culture's tradition of "nature worship"—in African traditions, rivers and stars served as "messengers of the gods", symbolizing guidance and protection. By weaving this cultural heritage into song lyrics, the enslaved people preserved their cultural roots while conveying practical escape information. In the novel, Cora and Caesar find the entrance to the Underground Railroad precisely through this song's guidance: "They followed the Ohio River, guided by the North Star at night, turning left without hesitation at every fork, until they found the hidden tunnel in a grove of trees" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 125).

The effectiveness of this metaphorical coding relies on the "shared context of the Black community"—only the enslaved people familiar with African cultural traditions and the Underground Railroad could decipher the hidden meanings in the lyrics; white people, lacking this context, could only grasp the surface, domesticated meanings. As scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes in *Black Symbols: Theories and Histories of Black Literature*, "Black culture's 'double coding' functions as a 'secret language' that relies on cultural sharing within the Black community. By separating 'surface meaning' from 'deep meaning', it achieves evasion and resistance against mainstream power". In the novel, when the white overseer asks Jasper what "home" means, Jasper "feigns innocence and says, 'Why, it means heaven, master!'" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 80). This "playing dumb" precisely demonstrates the effectiveness of the code—it prevents power from deciphering the hidden rebellious meaning, thereby ensuring the secure transmission of resistance messages.

3.2 Collective Encoding of Rhythm: The "Synchronization" of Bodies and the Coalescence of Resistance

If the metaphorical coding of lyrics points toward "spiritual resistance", then the collective encoding of rhythm points toward "physical resistance"—through collective rhythmic interaction, it unites scattered enslaved bodies into a "community of resistance", breaking the isolation and control of power over individual bodies. In the novel, while overseers controlled the rhythm of plantation work songs, the enslaved people transformed them from "instruments of discipline" into "bonds of solidarity" through "improvisational variations" and "physical synchrony".

"Improvisational variations" represented the enslaved people's creative breakthroughs in rhythm control. Though overseers attempted to fix the beat by striking the ground with whips, the enslaved people introduced "subtle rhythmic shifts" without altering the overall rhythmic framework—such as inserting "brief shouts" in the intervals of work songs or adding "faint pauses" within repetitive rhythms. These seemingly insignificant alterations fostered "covert communication" among the enslaved people. For instance, when overseers approached, they would signal "caution" to peers through "extended pauses"; when overseers departed, "short shouts" conveyed "it's safe to relax"

(Whitehead, 2016, p. 53). This "improvised variation" not only did not disrupt the overseer's imposed rhythmic framework—thus avoiding direct conflict—but also established a "system of rhythmic codes" among the enslaved people, enabling "silent communication".

More significantly, the collective nature of rhythm was further transformed into "a force of resistance" through "synchronized physical movements". In the novel, when the enslaved people sang work songs, they would "unconsciously synchronize their bodily actions"—bending and rising simultaneously while picking cotton, even "stomping their feet on the ground to the beat, creating a collective drumroll" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 52). This "physical synchrony" not only boosted labor efficiency (which is why overseers tacitly permitted it), but more crucially, it allowed the enslaved people to feel a "collective presence" through bodily unity, shattering the isolation imposed by power upon individual bodies. Foucault noted that "the core of disciplinary power lies in isolating individual bodies to prevent collective resistance". The slaves' "physical synchrony" precisely broke this isolation—through rhythmic unity, it integrated dispersed individual bodies into a "collective body", thereby coalescing the power of resistance.

In the novel, the resistance power of the "collective body" reached its climax in the "Moses Incident". When Moses was beaten by the overseer for singing a song of freedom, "all the slaves stopped their work and sang the song in rhythm with Moses, their bodies swaying synchronously from side to side" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 64). This act of "collective singing + bodily coordination" formed a "nonviolent resistance"—it did not directly attack the overseer, but through "collective silence and synchronized movement", conveyed the message "we are one" to authority. Though enraged, the overseer "did not dare fire his gun easily, for he saw all the slaves' eyes fixed upon him, their bodies still swaying synchronously like a wall" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 65). Ultimately, the overseer could only "temporarily spare Moses", and this incident became "the beginning of the awakening of collective consciousness among the plantation's enslaved people" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 66). This collective power, forged through rhythm and physical coordination, precisely embodies the resistance inherent in Black music—it does not rely on violence, yet through "collective body language", it effectively deters authority.

3.3 Transgressive Encoding of Spaces: The "Auditory Breakout" in Private Spaces and the Construction of Escape Networks

Despite white control over the dissemination scenarios of Black music, the enslaved people still constructed "auditory spaces free from surveillance" by "transgressing spatial boundaries"—shifting music from "monitored public spaces" to "concealed private spaces"—and formed escape networks on this basis. In the novel, the enslaved people's cabins, forest depths, and Underground Railroad tunnels all became sites of "boundary-crossing encoding", with music serving as the "invisible bond" of the escape network.

The slave cabin served as the most fundamental site for "boundary-crossing codes". Despite overseers forbidding singing inside the cabins, the enslaved people communicated through "non-vocal musical forms"—such as tapping on windows, rubbing clothing, or humming wordless melodies. For instance, in the novel, fugitives confirmed each other's identities through "window-tapping rhythms": "three short taps followed by one long tap signaled 'one of us', while two long taps followed by one short tap signaled 'danger'" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 117). This "non-vocal music" not only avoided detection by overseers but also enabled rapid communication in darkness, serving as a "secure means of communication" among enslaved people. Additionally, they would "humming African traditional lullabies in a low voice" in their cabins. These lullabies contained no explicit rebellious lyrics, yet maintained cultural identity through "African melodies"—"When children heard their mothers humming these lullabies, they knew their roots lay in Africa, not on the plantation" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 73). This "cultural transmission", while not directly pointing toward rebellion, laid the spiritual foundation for resistance—only by preserving cultural identity could the drive to resist emerge.

The depths of the woods, in turn, served as the "public space" for "transgressive codes". In the novel, the enslaved people would gather in the woods under the pretext of "gathering wild fruit", singing "untampered spirituals" and "songs of freedom". Here, the transmission of music escapes white surveillance, becoming "pure expression of resistance". For instance, they would sing a song called "Freedom Train": There's a train underground, heading for the free states / Pack your bags and don't look back / The train will wait for you in the dark (Whitehead, 2016, p. 132). This song directly references the Underground Railroad, conveying escape routes and courage, while the forest's concealment ensures it remains unheard by whites. Furthermore, gatherings in the woods reinforced solidarity through "collective dance"—the enslaved people performed the traditional African "circle dance", "holding hands to form a circle, dancing to the drumbeat, singing songs of freedom" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 133). This dance both preserved African heritage and united collective strength, allowing the enslaved people to sense "the possibility of resistance" within a space "unmonitored by power".

The tunnels of the Underground Railroad represent the "ultimate space" of "transgressive coding". As the "symbol of freedom" in the novel, the music within these tunnels completely breaks free from the discipline of power, becoming a "hymn to liberty". In the novel, when Cora first enters the tunnel, "she heard singing ahead, loud and free, without the slightest trace of fear" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 145). This song, improvised by the enslaved people, eschews religious metaphor to directly celebrate liberty: "We're out of the cotton fields at last / We escaped the whip at last / At the end of the tunnel, sunlight and liberty / We're no longer slaves, we're human beings" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 146). These "bluntly rebellious lyrics", echoing through the tunnel's "enclosed space", conveyed a yearning for freedom while bolstering the courage of fellow fugitives. Moreover, the music within the tunnel created a "collective resonance" through "echoes"—"one person's song would became ten voices, ten voices

became a hundred voices, like a force pushing everyone toward the tunnel's end" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 147). This "resonance of sound" is precisely the "resonance of freedom"—it makes the fugitives realize they are not alone, but members of a "community of freedom", thereby strengthening their resolve to move toward liberty.

4. Dialectical Tension: The Survival Logic of Dual Cultural Politics and Contemporary Implications

The dual cultural politics of Black music in *The Underground Railroad* is not a simple opposition between "discipline" and "resistance", but rather a dialectical relationship where the two are intertwined and mutually transformative. This dialectic reveals the survival logic of Black culture within the context of slavery—not rejecting the "superficial forms" of discipline, but creatively transforming these forms to embed "deep meanings" of resistance, thereby achieving "cultural survival and resistance" within the cracks of power. This survival logic not only constitutes a literary representation of the history of slavery but also offers significant insights for contemporary cultural studies.

Within the novel's text, the "disciplinarity" and "resistance" of Black music maintain a dynamic equilibrium. On one hand, the enslaved people could never fully escape the discipline of power—they were compelled to sing work songs under overseers' control and perform tampered spirituals in white churches, facing brutal punishment for refusal. On the other hand, they never fully succumbed to discipline. Through metaphorical coding, rhythmic variations, and spatial transgressions, they embedded meanings of resistance within the forms of discipline. This state of "both compliance and resistance" was not "compromise", but "strategic survival": by preserving the "surface forms" of discipline, they avoided the destruction brought by direct conflict; by implanting the "deep meanings" of resistance, they maintained the roots of their culture and the consciousness of resistance. As Cora states in the novel: "We can't fight like mad dogs, or they'll just shoot us down; we have to be like vines, climbing up the wall, and one day we'll reach the top and see the sunlight" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 158). The dual cultural politics of Black music embody precisely this "vine-like survival"—climbing the "wall" of power while perpetually growing toward "freedom".

The essence of this survival logic lies in the dialectical unity of "cultural adaptation" and "cultural perseverance". "Cultural adaptation" refers to the enslaved people adopting the "superficial forms" of white mainstream culture (such as Christianity and work songs), thereby avoiding cultural "isolation". "Cultural perseverance" means that while adapting, they retained the "core spirit" of African culture (such as collectivity, metaphorical expression, and improvisation), embedding it within mainstream cultural forms to achieve "covert transmission of culture". In the novel, the "Christian form" of Negro spirituals represents adaptation to mainstream culture, while "African metaphors" and "narratives of freedom" embody perseverance of indigenous culture. The "rhythmic standardization" of work songs

signifies adaptation to power structures, whereas "collective synchronization" and "improvisational variation" reflect the perseverance of a spirit of resistance. This unity of "adaptation and preservation" enabled Black culture to survive under the threat of "cultural genocide" during slavery and ultimately become an integral part of American culture.

From a contemporary perspective, the dual cultural politics of Black music in *The Underground Railroad* provide a crucial theoretical paradigm for understanding "resistance strategies of marginalized cultures". In contemporary society, marginalized groups—such as ethnic minorities and disadvantaged communities—still face cultural suppression by mainstream power. Black music's "dual-coding" strategy demonstrates that resistance need not be confrontational; instead, it can achieve "cultural breakthroughs" through "creative transformation"—adopting mainstream forms while embedding marginalized meanings—within the cracks of power structures. For instance, in contemporary Black hip-hop music, the "commercial pop form" represents adaptation to mainstream culture, while "lyrics critiquing racial oppression" embody the perseverance of marginal consciousness. This strategy of "form adaptation, meaning resistance" inherits and develops the dual cultural politics of Black music from the era of slavery.

Moreover, the dual cultural politics of Black music also reveals that a culture's "power nature" and "resistance nature" are dialectically unified—any cultural form can be co-opted by power as a tool of discipline, yet simultaneously transformed by resisters into an instrument of resistance. This dialectical relationship reminds us that when analyzing cultural phenomena, we cannot simplistically categorize them as either "oppression" or "resistance". Instead, we must delve into their core "duality" to understand the survival wisdom and cultural resilience of marginalized groups navigating the cracks of power.

5. Conclusion

In *The Underground Railroad,* Colson Whitehead reveals the complex survival state of Black culture within the context of slavery through his literary representation of the "dual cultural politics" of Black music. In the novel, Black music serves dual purposes: as a tool for white power to discipline bodies and tame spirits—through standardized rhythms, tampered lyrics, and controlled settings, it integrates the enslaved people into the power structure of slavery; and as a vehicle for the enslaved people to resist oppression and maintain their culture—through metaphorical lyrics, rhythmic synchronization, and spatial transgressions, it transmits consciousness of resistance and unites collective strength within the cracks of power. This dialectic of "discipline and resistance" not only authentically depicts the history of slavery but also profoundly interprets the survival wisdom of marginalized cultures.

Against the backdrop of white power attempting to achieve "cultural genocide" through music, the enslaved people employed a strategy of "dual coding". Beneath a "surface of compliance", they embedded a "core of resistance", avoiding the destruction of direct conflict while achieving the covert

transmission of culture. This logic of "vine-like survival" allowed Black culture to endure in the face of despair, ultimately becoming a vital legacy of American culture. As symbolized by the song heard at the tunnel's end in the novel: "Freedom is not born, but is won bit by bit note by note, song by song, resistance by resistance" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 189).

The dual cultural politics of Black music in *The Underground Railroad* not only offer a fresh perspective on understanding the history of slavery but also provide vital insights for contemporary resistance within marginalized cultures: true cultural resistance lies not in rejecting the forms of mainstream culture, but in creatively transforming them—preserving through adaptation, resisting within discipline, and carving out one's own cultural space within the cracks of power.

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