Brand new translation, same old story? The perpetuation of female and racial stereotypes in (re)translation

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CHAPTER 4

It's not all black and white: Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time*

This chapter posits that some of the decisions made by the Dutch translators of *The Fire Next Time* negatively impact the way Black people are portrayed, while some of their translation choices mitigate or erase the accountability of white people for what has been and is being done to Black communities. It seeks to uncover this potential impact by conducting a case study of the two Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time*. The chapter discusses the relative lack of self-awareness regarding racism in Dutch society up until fairly recently and the debate triggered by the 2018 translation, which highlights the issue of white innocence, before presenting a number of examples from the 1963 and 2018 translations, comparing them to Baldwin's original.

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4.1 Introduction

In 2018, a literary translation was awarded the dubious honor of being the cause of a small media storm in the Netherlands. The apple of discord – originally between the publisher and the translator – was the initial use, in Harm Damsma's new Dutch translation of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, of what has been dubbed "*het n-woord*" (EN "the N-word") in the Netherlands. Admittedly, the ensuing debate was limited to literary and translation circles, but at least, and at long last, the issue of racism was given attention in the Dutch national press, leading current affairs magazines and translation circles (Gasthuis, 2018; Beks, 2019; Bootsma, 2019; Naaijkens, 2018). This fact alone might be seen as a step forward from a case of racial insensitivity that had happened only three years previously and had initially been completely ignored by the Dutch media. Here, too, the bone of contention had been the use of the N-word. But while the contested publication – a review of three American books, published in the respectable Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* – eventually caused a veritable Twitter hurricane on both sides of the Atlantic, the issue would likely not have been discussed in the Dutch press at all if a *Washington Post* columnist (Karen Attiah) had not voiced her dismay about the headline of the book review, one of the pictures accompanying it, and the newspaper editor's response to her criticism. The headline – a quote from Paul

Beatty's novel *The Sellout*, one of the books in the review – ran "*Nigger are you crazy?*," while the piece was illustrated by a blackface cartoon.[15] Attiah suggested that while the newspaper editors may have felt they were doing the right thing by devoting a review of three books about race relations in the United States "using the English n-word and blackface in a major newspaper is beyond comprehension at the least, and rage-inducing at worst." (Attiah, 2015). She argued that "by using the fully violent n-word in English, instead of Dutch, the editors felt they were escaping sanction, protecting Dutch readers from the realities of racism and discrimination in their own country while shaking their heads at the plight of blacks in the United States." (Attiah, 2015)

It was telling that the coverage in the Dutch mainstream media primarily commented on the fact that "*Americans* had taken offense" to the use of the N-word in the book review, echoing the reply sent to Attiah by the editor of the book supplement, which contains the remark that "[c]onsidering the fuss in your country it would have been better if we had put the headline between quotation marks." (Schut, 2015; Attiah 2015). Both the coverage in the Dutch media and the reply of the editor only further confirmed one of the points made by the *Washington Post* columnist in the first place, namely that – even though the racial history of the United States and the Netherlands are completely different – the latter has its fair share of racism and yet is largely oblivious to it. As a correspondent for *Vox* succinctly put it: "while *NRC Handelsblad*'s review may have been designed to discuss racism in America, it really ended up highlighting the same in the Netherlands." (Beauchamps, 2015)

Indeed, white-on-black racism was – and sometimes still is – thought of as an American phenomenon by white people in the Netherlands, a sentiment illustrated by Dutch reactions in both national and international media to observations made by those broaching the subject in the Netherlands. For instance, when asked about the racist aspects of the Dutch holiday "*Sinterklaas*" – which features people in blackface – a Dutch national defending the tradition answered a journalist from *USA Today*: "It's not blackface like you used to see in America, which is indeed

[15] Valk, G. (2015, July 31). Hoe vernietig je de zwarte identiteit? *NRC Handelsblad*. https://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2015/07/31/#302; The headline has since been removed from the article and has been replaced by "Nee, het wordt niet beter voor zwarte Amerikanen" ("No, things aren't getting better for African Americans" in the English translation) https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/08/03/nee-het-wordt-niet-beter-voor-zwarte-amerikanen-1520363-a185716 Both the original and the revised article are available in the newspaper's online archive.

racist" (Darroch, 2014). That such a conviction is by no means considered an extremist view may be evidenced by the fact that up until fairly recently, the Netherlands' former centre-right prime minister saw nothing wrong with using blackface as part of the Dutch holiday until he changed his view in 2020.

One of the contributing factors to this lack of self-awareness may be the fact that whereas the direct Dutch translation of the "fully violent n-word" referred to by Attiah ("*nikker*") is considered to be blatantly racist by the majority of the Dutch population, many white people in the Netherlands still use the direct translation of "Negro" ("*neger*") without realizing or acknowledging that it is offensive to Black fellow speakers of Dutch. Having said that, the latter term is gradually being replaced by the term "*het n-woord*" by an increasing number of people. The lack of sensitivity regarding the use of offensive terms is one of the many aspects related to the denial or disavowal of racism and white-on-black prejudice in the Netherlands observed by Dutch researchers such as Dienke Hondius (2009), Gloria Wekker (2016), and Teun van Dijk (1987). Whereas English terms used to refer to Black Americans had evolved from "colored people" in the 1920s and "Negroes" in the 1950s, to "blacks" or "Blacks" from the 1960s onwards, a term subsequently replaced by "African Americans" – with the two latter terms both used nowadays – the Dutch N-word was widely used in the Netherlands well into the twenty-first century. Up to then it was the only available word considered socially acceptable – despite its etymology and the negative meanings attached to the roots and forms of the word.[16] Only recently has it come to be regarded as "problematic" in broader circles, even if there is, as Dienke Hondius notes, still no real alternative for it in popular use.

The fact that, as the 2015 non-debate revealed, racial inequality and stereotyping were considered non-issues by the majority of white Dutch citizens perfectly illustrates the actual blind spot addressed by the very author whose work triggered the 2018 debate about the translation of words that may be offensive and hurtful: James Baldwin. In "My Dungeon Shook," the first essay in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin confronts his white readers with their ignorance. The racial

[16] The term "*kleurling*" ("coloured person") was used primarily in the context of South Africa under Apartheid for persons of mixed race. As a more general reference for persons of dual heritage (in the Netherlands mainly people from Indonesia) it was already considered as offensive (or old-fashioned at best) in the twentieth century: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_taa006190501_01/_taa006190501_01_0084.php (Prick van Wely, 1905); Dutch historian and journalist Ewoud Sanders discusses the history of the Dutch N-word in *Het N-woord: De geschiedenis van een beladen begrip*. (Sanders, 2023)

nightmare, in which both Black and white people are imprisoned, can only be ended if white people let go of their innocence. As Baldwin explains to his nephew James, the addressee of the essay: "if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it." (Baldwin, 1963). These lines, which contain *The Fire Next Time*'s central message, are quoted verbatim – in Dutch – by Gloria Wekker in the foreword to the 2018 retranslation by Harm Damsma.

Wekker, a Surinamese-Dutch anthropologist and prominent public intellectual, wrote her foreword to Damsma's translation – which pointedly does *not* discuss the translator's initial use of the Dutch "*n-woord*" – in the form of a letter to her niece Carmen. It mirrors the earnest counsel Baldwin gave his nephew James in "My Dungeon Shook," explaining that it is *white* people who should be changing, *not* Black people. With this foreword, things come round full circle: Wekker sees a young Black generation that is much more self-confident than hers and expresses hope that young Black people in the Netherlands, and especially young Black women, will be able to steer clear of bitterness in a society that is sometimes hostile to them, and may instead flourish. She expresses her hope that her niece will choose to read *The Fire Next Time* for her high school finals, and emphasizes the importance of not internalizing the idea that she would be worth less than others: "Don't believe everything white people say or think about you, that is Baldwin's main message to his nephew, and that message goes for you as well" (Wekker, 2018, p. 25).

In *The Fire This Time*, a collection of texts by contemporary Black writers inspired by Baldwin, Jesmyn Ward shares her feeling that Baldwin is speaking to her and other Black people: "It was as if I sat on my porch steps with a wise father, a kind, present uncle who said this to me. Told me I was worthy of love. Told me I was worth something in the world. Told me I was a human being." (Ward, 2017). At the same time, there is Baldwin's message to white people to take off the blinkers and acknowledge their responsibility. That white Americans, too, were the intended readers of *The Fire Next Time* has been contended by Ben Fried and, furthermore, may be illustrated by the following quotes – the first from James Silberman, Baldwin's publisher at Dial Press, the second from an article in *Time Magazine*, both mentioned by William Weatherby, a British-American author and journalist and Civil Rights activist, in his Baldwin biography: "It was a very sophisticated black man's warning to the white world" and "*Time* reported that

the essay showed Baldwin to be 'the most bitterly eloquent voice of the American Negro,' adding, 'yet it also shows him as one who speaks less for the Negro than to the white.'" (Fried, 2022; Weatherby, 1989, p. 236 and p. 233)

That *The Fire Next Time* was also aimed at white readers is not surprising. After all, it was them, not Black Americans, who needed to be told about what it means to be the victim of social inequality, police brutality, being treated as inferior, or about whites' obliviousness and willful ignorance to the injustices being done to their fellow human beings. Baldwin's goal was to expose the ostrich mentality of whites when it came to racial inequality and injustice. The concept of "innocence," so fundamental to the message of *The Fire Next Time*, is one that Wekker had previously examined with regard to the denial of racism in contemporary Dutch society. In her own words, she was "both shocked and pleased at the similarities between Baldwin's work and my book *White Innocence*" (Wekker, 2018, p. 26). This chapter will explore whether the Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time* show signs of "white innocence" – beyond Damsma's initial insistence on using of the Dutch "*n-woord*" in his 2018 translation, which has been so heatedly debated. However, even though the main focus of this chapter will be on translation choices other than racial labels, it is nevertheless important to first examine the disagreement between the publisher and translator of the retranslation in order to be able to better place the translation choices of both the first translation and the retranslation into their historical and social context.

4.2 Baldwin's Dutch readers and translators and the issue of 'white innocence'

While James Baldwin had already sky-rocketed into fame as a novelist in 1953 after the publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, it took more than a decade for him to become a renowned writer in the Netherlands. Up until the 1960s, it was not uncommon for American writers to gain popularity in the Netherlands considerably later than in their home country, and Baldwin was no exception. This decade saw a huge increase in the number of translations and a catch-up effort to translate the works of writers who had not yet been published in Dutch (Naaijkens, 2021). When Baldwin was finally hailed as a brilliant novelist, essayist, social critic and playwright in the Netherlands, the Dutch literary scene scrambled to make up on lost ground: no fewer than four of Baldwin's works were translated into

Dutch in 1963 and 1964 alone, and subsequently most of his novels, plays, and essay collections were published in translation in the 1960s and 1970s. It is not surprising that 1963 is the year that Baldwin became famous in the Netherlands almost overnight, after having been relatively unknown to the Dutch public before. It is not often that a political essay gets labelled "a classic" immediately after its publication, but Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* was an instant hit, sealing his reputation as one of America's foremost writers and gaining him international recognition (Weatherby, 2015). While Baldwin had already published three novels and numerous essays, *The Fire Next Time* established him as what one of his biographers called "literary royalty" (Campbell, 2021). Although *The Fire Next Time* and *Another Country* cemented Baldwin's place in the canon in the sixties, his fame in the US had waned considerably by the 1980s and 90s. The same was true for the Netherlands. To quote Campbell in his foreword to the 2021 edition of *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*:

> When I arrived in New York on my first field trip in the early part of 1988, a writer friend who lived in the city looked down on the Greenwich Village street from the window of the apartment where I was staying and indicated some young black people passing by. "Martin Luther King they might have heard of," he said. "But James Baldwin?" (p. xviii)

In the twenty-first century, especially in the second decade, however, Baldwin was back in spotlight once more – both in the US and in Europe (Verdickt, 2022). Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro* and the Black Lives Matter movement contributed to a renewed interest in his writing.[17] Over the past few years, as a Dutch novelist and journalist noted, there has been somewhat of a "Baldwin revival" in the Netherlands (Heerma van Voss, 2018, p. 131). Within just two years' time, three of Baldwin's works were retranslated, including *The Fire Next Time*, which had been published in Dutch in the same year it had come out in the United States. This first translation of *The Fire Next Time* was made by Oscar Timmers, a Dutch writer, translator, and editor for a literary publishing company in 1963. One year later, Timmers also translated Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*.

[17] Without a doubt, Peck's use of "Negro" constitutes an adjustment to contemporary cultural norms. The decision of the Dutch publishing company to use 'black' instead of 'Negro' in the 2018 translation of *The Fire Next Time* can be seen in a similar light.

Timmers was a professional editor and an acclaimed writer, under the pseudonym J. Ritzerfeld, and although he is mentioned as one of the driving forces behind the publication of many literary translations at the prominent publishing house *De Bezige Bij*, very little information can be found about his actual translation work, largely owing to the fact that until the nineteen fifties translation had not been regarded as a professional métier in the Netherlands (Naaijkens, 2017; Verrijt, 2017).

The 2018 retranslation was made by Harm Damsma, who translated two works by Baldwin in a single year; in addition to the retranslation of *The Fire Next Time*, a retranslation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* was published. While Damsma is a respected literary translator with a solid track record – including well-received translations of novels by other African American authors, such as Colson Whitehead and Jesmyn Ward – his Baldwin translations became a source of discord between himself and the Dutch publisher, *Uitgeverij De Geus*, and the Black editor employed by the publishing company.[18] Whereas neither the translation of the N-word in Whitehead's novels, nor the use of the Dutch "*n-woord*" in the retranslation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* made waves in the media, Damsma's retranslation of *The Fire Next Time* caused a great deal of controversy. He had translated the word "Negro" in the original with the Dutch N-word in both Baldwin translations, a decision that was overruled by the publisher.

The disagreement between the publisher and the translator was discussed at great length in Dutch broadsheets, blogs, and essays (e.g. de Rek, 2018, Bakker, 2019; Beks, 2019). Critics and readers were either outraged by the translator's initial use of the Dutch N-word or, alternatively, by the publisher's decision to replace it with a non-offensive alternative (van der Werf, 2018). A complicating factor in the debate is that the Dutch "*n-woord*," a direct translation of "Negro," denotes a different offensive term than its English counterpart, the "N-word," which would be "*nikker*" in Dutch. While the latter is, in fact, the "fully violent n-word," the direct translation of "Negro" has become regarded by a younger generation as almost equally objectionable. The publishing company, which evidently had a new generation of readers in mind – a generation which, as translation scholars point out (Berk Albachten & Tahir Gürçağlar, 2019), may have new "translational

[18] As Verdickt observes: "On the imprint page of the new Dutch translation of *The Fire Next Time*, De Geus mentions that it has used inclusivity as a point of departure for its translation strategies" (Verdickt 2022, p. 212).

needs" – added a statement to the credits page explaining their choice to use "*zwart(e mensen)*" (EN "Black (person/people)") instead of the Dutch N-word for the translation of "Negro" in the original, and to adopt "*wit*" (EN "white") instead of "*blank*" ("fair" or "Caucasian") for the translation of "white.". The rationale given was that they wished "to do justice to the author in the language used in contemporary Dutch society, taking the principle of inclusiveness as a point of departure" (Baldwin, 2018, credits page, my translation).[19] In an afterword to the translation, the translator states that he does understand the reasons why the publisher wished to replace a word that a new generation of readers will most likely take exception to. He acknowledges that soon after the publication of *The Fire Next Time* the English word itself came to be seen as offensive and therefore unacceptable – and, as he puts it "perhaps even vexing, given the extent to which the use of this word is now considered to be taboo." (Damsma in Baldwin, 2018). Nevertheless, in his afterword Damsma is adamant that the direct Dutch translation he had opted for would have been the better choice. He argues that at the time when Baldwin wrote *The Fire Next Time* the word "Negro" was still widely regarded as politically correct, and that, moreover, Black Americans themselves – not just Baldwin – used the same word. He adds that the Dutch N-word, likewise, was commonly used and accepted speech, and seen as neutral and inoffensive at the time. He claims that its frequent occurrence in *The Fire Next Time* means that Baldwin's use of the word is "stylistically marked," and that it is historically relevant "because it heralds the change in language that was about to take place" (Damsma in Baldwin, 2018, p. 163).

The argument of wishing to preserve a term used by the author himself can be considered a valid one. However, the grounds set forth by Damsma in his rebuttal, namely the fact that Black Americans used it in 1963, and that its use in *The Fire Next Time* is historically relevant *for that reason*, especially given its frequent occurrence, do not hold water. It is important to note that Baldwin does not use the terms "black" and "Negro" randomly or interchangeably: he uses the latter expressly to describe Black Americans, a conscious choice that is most clearly illustrated by the following line from 'Down at the Cross': "The American Negro is a unique creation; he has no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 73). In other words, Baldwin's use of the word "Negro" may

[19] The word "*blank*" does not reflect the fact that race is a social construct.

indeed be seen as a rhetorical device, but not for the reasons that Damsma puts forward to justify his translation choice, that is, the frequency with which the word occurs. Baldwin reserves the use of the word for those instances – admittedly many – in which he is referring to Black Americans, in particular when describing them and the situations they are required to navigate in US society – in other words, when addressing what was known as "the Negro problem."

This distinction between "black" and "Negro" is one of the many subtle ways in which Baldwin conveys his central message: the race problem is not about what Black Americans are or what they want, it is about white Americans not wishing to acknowledge what is wrong with society and their role in it. As Baldwin puts it an interview recorded in the documentary *Take this Hammer*: "You're the nigger baby, it isn't me." (Baldwin in Moore, 1963) One of his recent biographers, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (2020), explains: "The problem was white people. For Baldwin, there was no such thing as 'the Negro problem.'" (p. 105). Glaude echoes Baldwin's legendary assertion that white people have invented "the n*****", meaning that white people, in order not to have to face their fears and be held accountable for their country's brutal history, feel the need to perpetuate the lie of Black inferiority. It is a mechanism that Baldwin explains over and again, not just in *Take this Hammer*, but also in *The Price of the Ticket*, and, most importantly for the purpose of this study, in *The Fire Next Time*: "For Baldwin, the problem rested at the feet of white America. All they had to do was look down." (Glaude, 2020, p, 106)

So how to do justice to Baldwin's message in another language? How to convey the essence of *The Fire Next Time* to Dutch readers – readers who may not necessarily be familiar with American history and racial issues in the United States then and now? In her foreword to the Dutch 2018 translation, Wekker (2018, p. 16) asserts that the vastly different social circumstances and historical context have meant that the Netherlands had never been forced to truly give any thought to issues of slavery, allowing for a myth of racial equality to persist. While the Dutch were involved in the slave trade, the brutal reality of Dutch plantations in the Caribbean was thousands of miles away, and it was not until the 1970s that Black Dutch citizens from the former colonies moved to the Netherlands. It is only recently that the Dutch are slowly starting to acknowledge the past and its negative impact on Black people in their own country. This is a conclusion drawn by other scholars comparing the different historical contexts in Europe, too (Ball, Steffens & Niedlich, 2022; Essed & Hoving, 2014).

Given the fact that a translator, like anyone else, does not live in a vacuum, it is not inconceivable that both Dutch translators may have been influenced by prevailing ideas regarding racial inequality in the Netherlands, in 1963 and 2018, respectively. As Esther Allen (2013), an American writer, translator, and academic observes:

> Translators, like authors, are the product of social structures and circumstances; translators, like authors, play a role in bolstering or challenging those structures and continually altering the linguistic and narrative tools brought to bear on them, as well as the attitudes and norms that produce them. (p. 101)

This will undoubtedly go for Damsma's conviction that he was "doing the right thing" by translating "Negro" with "*neger*," and may well apply to other translation choices made by him, too. The same will be true for Timmers' translation, made over half a century ago, when there was little to no public debate on racial inequality in the Netherlands. The rest of this chapter will take a close look at the linguistic choices in the two Dutch translations that might attest to the "innocence" displayed by those taken to task by Baldwin: the majority of white people. There might be much more to "white innocence" in translation than the entire debate in the Netherlands about racial labels. At the same time, avoiding making translation mistakes – despite one's best intentions – may be harder than might appear at first sight. It's not all black and white.

The phenomenon of "innocence" described by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* and branded "the lie" by Glaude would today be labelled as a form of "implicit racial bias," referring to prejudiced perceptions and behavior that may not be outright racist in the conventional sense of the word, but which nevertheless involve racial prejudice – with individuals likely not aware of their bias (Maryfield, 2018). Trepagnier (2016), who refers to such a lack of awareness as "silent racism," contends that "there are two primary manifestations" of this form of racism: "*stereotypical images*" and "*paternalistic assumptions*" (p. 24). There is a great deal of research on language issues related to racial bias, both conscious and implicit, and both in terms of its causes and effects, such as covert racism, linguistic othering, and racial stereotyping (Alim, 2016; Pandey, 2004). When it

comes to research into linguistic choices and racial stereotyping in *translated* texts, however, studies are few and far between. Those that do highlight racial prejudice in translations tend to focus on translating as a political act, translating racially prejudiced texts from the past, the translation of racial slurs and racial epithets, approaches regarding the translation of the N-word used by Black writers, translation strategies used to convey AAVE, or racial stereotyping as a result of translation strategies used to translate AAVE (e.g. Fleck, 2016; Opperman, 2017; Hanes, 2018; Kujawska-Lis, 2008; Schyns, 2019; Berthele, 2000; Wu & Chang, 2008; Wekker & Wekker 1991). Little to no research, however, has been conducted into the potential effects of translation choices regarding more general lexical items and grammatical structures on racial stereotyping and implicit racial bias, certainly not where Dutch literary translations are concerned.[20] The chapter aims to fill this gap by comparing the linguistic differences between Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and its two Dutch translations in order to look into the ways translation decisions may unconsciously contribute to racial stereotypes and to a perpetuation of "white innocence."

For the purposes of this chapter, "innocence" will be taken to mean white people's belief that they are non-racist, to the extent that they may well be complicit in social injustice. It comprises a collective denial by white people of racism combined with a disavowal of their own accountability, often labelled "white ignorance" by US and Dutch academics.[21] The phrase "that they… do not know it and do not *want* to know it" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 14, italics mine) suggests that the "innocence" that Baldwin accuses white Americans of encompasses both their lack of awareness and the denial of their own racism. Barbara Applebaum (2015), whose research focuses on ethics and education and who aims to contribute to combatting "color-blindness" and social injustice in the classroom, outlines the twofold meaning of the concept of "white innocence" in an illuminating manner:

> White moral innocence depends on a need not to know about one's complicity so that one's perception of oneself as an upstanding moral

[20] Corine Tachtiris' *Translation and Race* addresses many valuable issues (Tachritis, 2024). It does, however, not include an in-depth study of the effect of translation choices regarding general lexical and grammatical features on racial stereotyping and perpetuation of white innocence.

[21] The active denial is sometimes also referred to as "white ignorance." See e.g. Mills, 2017 and Essed & Hoving, 2014, p. 10.

> agent is not disturbed. The double meaning of the term innocence is instructive. The term is often employed to describe one as naïve, unaware, or uninitiated, but it is also used to define someone as not guilty of a crime or offense, not responsible or morally blameworthy. (p. 451)

Applebaum's explanation, with its reference to righteousness, virtuousness, and blamelessness, echoes Baldwin's contention that "[i]t is the innocence which constitutes the crime," (Baldwin, p. 14) encompassing both meanings of the word as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary: "freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with, evil; moral purity" and "freedom from specific guilt; the fact of not being guilty of that with which one is charged; guiltlessness". The first OED definition comprises notions that conjure up the world of the pulpit (sin, untainted, evil), whereas the second meaning belongs to the courtroom (guilty, charged). In what follows, I will in particular examine the latter side of that same coin, because while Baldwin's language may be reminiscent of the black church tradition he grew up in, it is the indictment he presents that is most prominent in *The Fire Next Time*.

4.3 Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time*

The analysis will compare a selection of lines from the original (hereafter "TFNT") and the 1963 and 2018 Dutch translations, hereafter "TT1" and "TT2" for "target text 1" and "target text 2" respectively. Gloss translations will be provided for all Dutch words and phrases. In order to uncover how Baldwin's account of racial inequality and his call for white accountability are conveyed in the respective translations, the following two criteria for selection have been applied: first of all, the analysis includes references made by Baldwin to the lives and social circumstances of Black Americans in general and his own person and family in particular, and the conduct, views, and interactions of white and Black Americans. Secondly, the analysis includes explicit and implicit mentions of "innocence." The examples discussed cover a number of decisions made by the translators that may either negatively impact the way Black people are portrayed or that may mitigate or erase the accountability of white people for what has been and is being done to Black communities, thus sustaining racial stereotypes and allowing white innocence in the Netherlands to continue.

Both Timmers' 1963 translation and Damsma's 2018 retranslation of *The Fire Next Time* are entitled *Niet door water maar door vuur* (EN: "Not through water but through fire"), retaining the reference to the biblical metaphor of fire as apocalyptic judgement. But what about the accusation brought by Baldwin? Levelling an allegation against white Americans, while alluding to the Christian concept of mercy, Baldwin states:

> And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 14)

The 1963 translation is more "literal" than the 2018 translation in many respects. First of all, it retains the rhetorical device of repetition (in particular the anaphoric use of "and") that Baldwin employs to really drive home his message to a greater degree than the second translation. In other respects, too, TT1 also makes more use of "direct" translation than TT2, which is most evident in the different translations used for "crime" and "accuse."[22] In Dutch, there are two ways to translate the word "crime," one of which is the general, lay word "*misdaad*" (TT1, p. 10) (EN "crime"), the other being a proper legal term: "*misdrijf*" (TT2, p. 39) (EN "misdemeanor" or "serious offence").[23] The 1963 translator chooses the first option, the 2018 translator the second one. In addition, TT2 translates "accuse" as "*verantwoordelijk hou*" (TT2, p. 39) (EN "hold responsible"), as opposed to the direct translation "*beschuldig*" (TT1, p. 10) (EN "accuse") in TT1. In "My Dungeon Shook" Baldwin never once minces his words; he unambiguously blames white Americans for not wanting to acknowledge that they have destroyed so many Black lives. Softening of Baldwin's words in any way means doing a disservice to the reader. However eloquent Baldwin expresses his anger, he is outraged, and he does not pussyfoot around; understating his unreserved accusation diminishes

[22] The term "direct translation" is used in Translation Studies as a translation strategy that covers literal translation and words and phrases borrowed from other languages.

[23] Please note that this is only the case for Dutch as used in The Netherlands (as used by both translators); in Belgium, both "*misdrijf*" and "*misdaad*" are legal terms, the former being the blanket term for criminal offences, while the latter denotes a serious criminal offence (cf. AE "felony"): https://www.vlaanderen.be/team-taaladvies/taaladviezen/misdaad-misdrijf (accessed March 27, 2024).

the impact of his fury. And while Baldwin may be an accomplished human rights advocate, the language he uses is straightforward and intentionally does not contain legal jargon. The legal language in TT2 creates a distance, sanitizing the crime as it were, making it sound less ugly.

All aspects of Baldwin's language – lexis, syntax, schemes – are simple, direct and forceful, so that there can be no mistake about what he means. Baldwin's position that "[i]t is the innocence which constitutes the crime" (TFNT, p. 14) is abundantly clear, given that the word "constitutes" means "to comprise," "to be (equivalent to)": white innocence *is* the crime. TT1, which reads "*Het is de onschuld die de misdaad bepaalt*" (TT1, p. 11) (EN "It is the innocence that defines/determines the crime"), appears to miss this point completely, even if the difference between the translation and the original seems just a minor one. TT2, diverting from the original a great deal more with a structural change to "*Het is de onwetendheid die het zo misdadig maakt*" (TT2, p. 40) (EN "It is the ignorance that makes it so criminal"), actually comes closer to Baldwin's message, despite the loss of rhetorical force. Baldwin impresses on his nephew the importance of not believing what white people say about Black people, since "[y]ou can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*." (ibid., p. 13). The difference in the way the N-word and the label "white" have been translated should not come as a surprise. TT1 uses the "fully violent" N-word (TT1, p. 9) (EN N-word) and "*blanke*" (EN "fair-skinned person," "Caucasian"), TT2 copies the English N-word presumably to avoid what has long been the most extreme Dutch racial slur.[24] For "white," TT2 uses the contemporary Dutch reference "*witten*" ("whites"). The more salient difference concerns the complete phrase beginning "what the white world" TT1, again, adopts the approach of a direct translation (TT1, p. 9), but TT2 makes a structural change to "*wat men in de wereld van de witten een 'nigger' noemt*" (TT2, p. 38) (EN "what people in the world of the whites call a 'nigger'"). Using the impersonal pronoun "*men*" (EN "one") disguises the agent, thus creating distance and, as a result, a lack of responsibility, rather than unambiguously acknowledging that "the white world" in its entirety is to be held accountable for the destruction of Black people.

There are instances, on the other hand, where Baldwin's choice of words is more open to interpretation. When he first addresses his nephew, Baldwin describes

[24] It is worth noting that Baldwin only uses "nigger" once in 'My Dungeon Shook', and merely twice in 'Down at the Cross'.

how he is reminded of his father and brother: "Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody – with a very definite tendency to sound truculent because you want no one to think you are soft." (TFNT, p. 13). Of his nephew's characteristics, the following differences between the two translations in comparison with the original stand out: TT1 uses "*taai*" (TT, p. 9) (EN "tough," "tenacious") for "tough," making for a fairly positive description, TT2 uses "*onverzettelijk*" (TT2, p. 38) (EN either "firm," "steadfast" or "unbending," "indomitable"), which may thus be read as either more positive, or, alternatively – given the latter interpretation's connotations of stubbornness and uncompromising attitude – more negative. The phrase "with a tendency to sound truculent" remarkably enough loses the verb "sound" in both translations. The difficulty with the word "truculent" is that has multiple meanings, which inevitably results in room for individual interpretation by a translator. TT1's "*met een heel duidelijke neiging tot agressiviteit*" (TT1, p. 9) (EN "with a very clear tendency towards aggression") paints a very negative picture that is by no means present in the original. The translation might be a reflection of a common prejudice towards Black males, presenting the pejorative stereotype of "the threatening black male". TT2's "*sterk geneigd je strijdvaardig op te stellen*" (TT2, p. 38) (EN "strongly inclined to stand up for yourself") includes slight connotations of belligerence, whereas "truculent" in this context, given the combination with "moody," suggests that Baldwin describes his nephew as sounding surly and fiercely self-assertive rather than belligerent.

Having said that, being pugnacious does not necessarily imply aggression or threat. It is here that the consequences of not including the verb become evident: young James only *sounds* truculent. In fact, given the rhetorical device of antithesis employed by Baldwin by contrasting "truculent" and "soft," his nephew is most likely quite gentle and sensitive, and it is exactly because he is vulnerable, he does not want to show this to the outside world. The misinterpretations in both translations, which translate "soft" with "*week*" (TT1, p. 9) (EN "weak") and "*een slapjanus*" (TT2, p. 38) (EN "a wimp"), underline the reverse of the impression of an aggressive young man in the first translation, and of a stubborn, somewhat belligerent one in the second rather than a teenager who is soft-hearted but nevertheless wants to come across as someone who can stand up for himself. While neither translation seems a just portrayal of Baldwin's nephew, the first one may well – however unconsciously – sustain the prejudice that "young and black" equals "dangerous."

The following example appears to be diametrically opposed to the image of an aggressive and dangerous black man. In the scene where his younger self is lying on the church floor, Baldwin explains that Black people in America are forced to fend for themselves. Wedged in between this explanation and his despair that God must surely be white, he states that "Black people, mainly, look down or look up but do not look at each other, not at you, and white people, mainly, look away." (TFNT, pp. 33-34). Given the context and the many religious allusions (for example, the threshing floor as a symbol of judgement and the separation of good and evil), these movements in all directions – down, up, at each other, away – are at the same time allusions to heaven and hell. They suggest the stark choice between wretched circumstances, destruction, and despondency on the one hand and seeking refuge in religion on the other, as well as the road to hell (that is, crime) versus the aspiration to better oneself (that is, going to church and climbing the social ladder). Nowhere is there a reference to the deference suggested in the 2018 translation by adding the word "*nederig*" (TT2, p. 68) (EN "humbly," "submissively"). It is difficult to decide whether this translation choice contributes to the stereotype of a docile and meek Black person whose conduct is self-abasing, or whether it mainly reflects badly on white people's sense of superiority causing such behavior.[25]

Another stereotype perpetuated in the 2018 translation is that of the strong black woman, in particular the hard-working black domestic. In "My Dungeon Shook," Baldwin tells young James about his own mother, who embodies Black women of her generation who worked in white households yet were invisible to their white employers: "Your countrymen don't know that she exists, either, though she has been working for them all their lives." (TFNT, p. 15). TT2 adds a word that is not present in the original ("*krom*" [EN " bent," "stooped"]) turns "has been working for them" into "*heeft zich… voor hen krom gewerkt*" (TT2, p. 41) (EN "has worked her fingers to the bone for them"). It adds unsolicited pity, reminiscent of "white savior" behavior.[26] As a result, the translation comes across as patronizing rather than compassionate, however well-intentioned. Baldwin introduces us to a quintessential example of what is actually being done to strong black women: "an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow,

[25] David Olusoga (2016) comments on this picture of meekness and passivity.

[26] This phenomenon is discussed in academia and other publications, such as Steele (2006) and Nzume (2017).

agonizing death in a terrible small room" (TFNT, p. 26). Having both translated "hard labor" as "*noeste arbeid*" (TT1, p. 24, TT2, p. 57) (EN "unremitting labor," "industry"), it is obvious that neither translator has picked up on the forced nature of the work, which to more observant readers brings to mind slavery times. And there are other references to slavery that both translators have overlooked, such as "standing on the auction block" (TFNT, p. 32), which TT1 translates as "*op de hoek van een straat*" (EN "at the corner of a street") and TT2 as "*in de aanbieding*" (EN "on special offer"). Although the Dutch reader will get the gist of what Baldwin is saying, with the unpleasant idea of being treated like a commodity, the edge has been taken off the brutal reality of slavery.

There seems to be a pattern to this "softening" of the picture that Baldwin paints to his readers when it comes to both translations, in particular the retranslation. A few of the many examples of this mechanism include the way in which the translators have dealt with Baldwin's references to the constant violence, humiliation, and dehumanization Black people constantly have had to endure. The 1963 and 2018 translation of "they, the blacks, simply don't wish to be beaten over the head by the whites" (TFNT, p. 27) both lack the direct reference to violence (a realistic notion, considering, for instance, police brutality against Black people). The respective translations read as follows: "*zij, de negers, wensen alleen maar niet de grond ingekeken te worden door de blanken*" (TT1, p. 27) (EN "they, the negroes, simply don't wish to be looked into the ground by looks of the whites") and "*zij, die zwarte mensen, willen alleen maar dat ze… niet voortdurend de kop van Jut hoeven te zijn*" (TT2, p. 58) (EN "They, those black people, simply don't wish to permanently be a fairground try-your-strength-machine"). First of all, TT2's change of "the" into "*die*" (EN "those") seems to imply that the statement concerns a limited number of Black people only. More importantly, however, is the way in which both translations have translated the phrase "being beaten over the head." While the first translation lacks an allusion to violence altogether, the retranslation replaces the violent image of being "beaten" with the figure of speech "*kop van Jut*." This idiomatic expression carries the metaphorical sense of "forever getting the blame," but does not convey the image of brutality against Black people. TT2 also leaves out the agents, those responsible for the violence committed: "the whites."

As for euphemizing, the translation decisions regarding the two phrases with which Baldwin underlines his determination never to be dehumanized may serve

as another example. TT1's literal rendering of "before I would let any white man spit on me, before I would accept my 'place' in this republic" retains the picture of being spat at – an image so intensely degrading that Baldwin later, in *No Name in the Street*, describes Dorothy Counts being spat at as the a decisive moment in his life (Scott, 2009, p. 143). TT2 makes the image much less powerful by a gross generalization, opting for the translation "*vernederen*" (TT2, p. 60) (EN: "humiliate") instead of "spit on." Being spat on is so dehumanizing that translating it as "humiliate" is a type of sanitizing. Having said that, the retranslation does retain the sense of being treated as less than human at other places in the text, for example by opting for "*beest*" (TT2, p. 133) (EN animal," "beast," "creature") instead of simply "*dier*" (TT1, p. 89) (EN "animal") and even repeating the word instead of replacing it by "one," in order to underscore the heinous way in which whites treat Black people in the phrase "sold like an animal and treated like one" (TFNT, p. 74). The second translator's good intentions are also evident in what seems to be an eagerness to portray Black Americans in a favorable light multiple times. When Baldwin makes a mock-harsh comment about "the benighted black" (TFNT, p. 41), for instance, Damsma, unlike Timmers, who translates "benighted" as "*achterlijk*" (TT1, p. 44) (EN "backward"), opts for "*achtergesteld*" (TT2, p. 80) (EN "discriminated against," "slighted"). Although this translation does not convey Baldwin's biting tone, this translation choice at least achieves the desired result the translator seems to have had in mind, unlike the example discussed above regarding the "invisible" domestic, which could be regarded as a botched attempt to show one's good intentions, or, alternatively, an example of negative stereotyping.

4.4 Conclusion

The aim of scrutinizing the Dutch translations in this chapter was to address the potential impact of translation choices on the perpetuation of Black racial stereotypes, whether intentional or not, and to highlight white innocence on the part of the translators. The preceding examples serve as illustrations that it is imperative that white people cast off their innocence and acquire a real understanding of what systemic racism means in practice. Baldwin tells the white reader how differently they would think about racism if they were to put themselves not merely in a Black person's shoes, but to imagine what it must be like to *be*

Black, which means that no matter what you do, you are still seen as inferior. It is a missed opportunity, therefore, that the 2018 translation "normalizes" Baldwin's appeal to "put yourself in the skin of a man" (TFNT, p. 51) by skipping the word "skin," thus failing to truly imagine what it is like to be Black. It seems to be the case for both translations that, despite their many merits, they still betray the innocence that Baldwin refers to, and that they contain a number of cases in which Black stereotypes are perpetuated. Given that empathy alone might not be enough to gain a true understanding of what another person experiences, the translations underscore the importance of a communal effort to end racism.

A year after the publication of his translation of *The Fire Next Time*, Damsma appears to have taken this message on board: in a panel discussion at the translation event *Vertaalslag 2019* on changing norms in language use, Damsma said that, in hindsight, he probably would not have accepted the commission of translating *The Fire Next Time* and that he would certainly take up the offer of having the support of a Black reader if he was asked to translate the work of a Black author in the future.[27] This exchange, however, throws up the thorny questions of "who translates what" and "who translates how": skin color alone does not – or at least ought not to – determine one's ability to get Baldwin's message across in translation.[28] More importantly though, countering racism ought not to be the responsibility of Black people alone. As a matter of fact, it is time that white people, very much including myself, step up to the plate. White people should not feel exonerated from engaging in the task to end racism. It is time to "cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (TFNT, p. 17), to challenge one's own unconscious biases and become an active anti-racist. In other words, it is time to shed our innocence. In the final lines of "Down at the Cross," Baldwin appeals to "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" urging them to "insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others… to end the racial nightmare."[29] It is an appeal that everyone, including translators, should take to heart.

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[27] During a panel discussion at "Vertaalslag 2019: Vertalen anno nu," Sayonara Stutgard (writer, editor, translator, and founder of publishing house *Chaos*) addressed the issue of sensitivity / Black readers.

[28] Bringing up the issue of "the role of whiteness in a variety of translation norms in the West," Tachtiris asks the question: "Who is most 'qualified' to translate a particular text?." Introduction to Corine Tachtiris, *Translation and Race* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2024), p. 7.

[29] Ibid., p. 89.