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

Zeven, K.L.

CHAPTER 5

The devil is in the detail: doing justice to James Baldwin's message

There will never be justice in the world unless white people fully acknowledge their racism and shed their white innocence. James Baldwin's message in *The Fire Next Time* is abundantly clear, but whether this message is equally clear in the 2018 Dutch retranslation is not self-evident. The strategy of 'risk management' adopted by the translator to make the text accessible and understandable to contemporary Dutch readers may actually have an adverse effect on the readers' understanding of Baldwin's essay, to the extent that it goes against its key message. The present chapter aims to illustrate this by conducting a close-reading of the pivotal part of *The Fire Next Time* and its 2018 Dutch retranslation, showing that when translating Baldwin's rhetorical masterpiece tiny – and seemingly insignificant – differences between the source text and a translation critically affect the fundamental message of systemic racism conveyed in the original. The aim of this chapter is thus to highlight the insidious nature of implicit bias and to demonstrate that a risk-avoiding translation strategy sometimes has an undesirable effect – one that is at odds with the translator's intentions, and one that actually displays the white innocence for which Baldwin takes his readers to task.

This chapter is based on: Zeven, K., & Dorst, A. G. (2025). The devil is in the detail: doing justice to James Baldwin's message. *Perspectives*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2025.2550333

5.1 *The Fire Next Time* – Baldwin's rhetorical devices and discursive tools

'The white man sure is a devil. He proves that by his own actions.' In what is possibly the most famous twentieth century essay on racism – James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* – the word 'devil' is repeated no fewer than 15 times. But while the reader might expect Baldwin to turn to the image of the devil when speaking about 'the evil within' (TFNT, p. 23), that is, his *own* sins – after all, he was steeped in the "fire and brimstone" tradition of his father's Baptist church and the essay starts with his church experiences – all allusions to the devil are made *about others*, *by others*. The frequent use of the word 'devil' (without exception a reference to white people) occurs in what is the central part of his 1963 autobiographical essay 'Down at the Cross' ('Letter from a Region in my Mind'), which forms the second half of The Fire Next Time: an account of his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam at the time.[30]

[30] Baldwin's second personal essay included in *The Fire Next Time* (hereafter 'TFNT') will be referred to as 'Down at the Cross'.

The essay was originally intended for *Commentary*, a Jewish opinion magazine on religion, politics, and social and cultural issues, and one of the first to publish Baldwin's writings.[31] The editor, Norman Podhoretz, had commissioned him to write an article about Black Muslims. Baldwin's sentiments regarding The Nation of Islam and its members' views form the fulcrum on which the convictions expressed in 'Down at the Cross' pivots, both in the literal and figurative sense of the word.[32] His encounter with Elijah Muhammad, which took place in 1961, proved to be a significant one for Baldwin. It caused him to further reflect on the issues of redemption and salvation, prompting the question of where he stood – not necessarily on religion (after all, he had already turned his back on the church) or his own personal flaws, but also (and even more so) on the potential consequences of believing that white people are quite literally inhuman and therefore cannot be saved (McLarney, 2019, pp. 55-56). Whereas Elijah Muhammad's unambiguous message is that whites are devils, that they are beyond redemption and that the destruction of white Americans is near, Baldwin is unable to dismiss whites as purely evil.[33] Neither does he want to give in to hate (McLarney, 2019, pp. 61-62). At the end of his audience with Elijah Muhammad, after quipping 'I was, in fact, going to have a drink with several white devils on the other side of town' (TFNT, p. 69), he explains why he does not agree with the doctrine of the Nation of Islam regarding the manner in which true freedom, justice and empowerment for Black Americans might be attained. Although Baldwin is all too familiar with the crimes of whites against Blacks, and although he does not 'turn the other cheek', he nevertheless feels that there is a possibility – no matter how slight – to 'end the racial nightmare' (TFNT, p. 89). The only chance to do so is when 'the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks… insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others' (TFNT p. 89).

This study, of course, is not the first one to make the observation that the need to do exactly that is just as urgent today – if not more so – than in 1963, in Europe as much as in the US. The contribution the present study aspires to make is to show that when translating *The Fire Next Time* even minute and seemingly

---

[31] It was only because he had spent an advance given to him by *The New Yorker* that he submitted the essay to the latter (Weatherby 1989, pp. 233-234).

[32] This chapter, like Baldwin, will use the name 'Black Muslim movement' and 'Nation of Islam' to refer to the African American nationalist religious organization led by Elijah Muhammad at the time.

[33] McLarney (2019) comments extensively on Baldwin's "extensive engagement with Black Muslim thought" and his rejection of it because of its "racial essentialism, racial segregation, and racial supremacy" (McLarney, 2019, pp. 61).

insignificant differences between the source text and a translation may critically affect the fundamental message conveyed in the original.

The trope of the 'white devil', employed not by Baldwin (at least not in a direct manner), but by the members of the Nation of Islam, combined with the fact that it is reiterated so many times by Baldwin as the author of 'Down at the Cross', is one of the many rhetorical devices that Baldwin uses to encourage his white readers to take off their blinkers, and cease to be 'ignorant': 'This mirror held up to white racism was one of the Black Muslims' most powerful discursive tools, a tool Baldwin bends toward his own purposes' (McLarney, p. 62). The strength of Baldwin's message thus lies not just in the denunciation of racism itself (in all its guises), but also in the persuasive techniques he draws on in his appeal to 'the relatively conscious', as Baldwin outs it at the end of his essay (TFNT, p. 89). In his reception study of 'Down at the Cross', Fried (2022) argues how 'Baldwin builds in prose a structure of mutual reflection that challenges his white readers to surmount their innocence' and that 'the process of reading… becomes its own political effect, explicitly named by the author as the *effort* of the "relatively conscious" to "insist on, or create, the consciousness of others".' (p. 70, italics mine). In other words, reading 'Down at the Cross' is – or at least should be – making a real endeavour to understand systemic racism and the insidious nature of covert racism, and to become aware of one's own implicit bias.

Whereas Fried focuses on white readers, Houck (2017) points out how Baldwin encourages Black readers to become aware of the construct of race, and how it prevents them from breaking free of the erroneous assumption that they are inferior:

> In asking his readers to see precisely the constructed-ness of blackness, and therefore whiteness, Baldwin's rhetorical strategy comes into better focus: a meta-rhetoric that seeks to persuade blacks, and whites, that they can choose to see differently, that in fact blackness and whiteness are rhetorical creations, not biological facts. (p. 114)

It is therefore all the more important that translators of his work – who are both readers and mediators for others – are aware that Baldwin's use of rhetorical skills[34] in *The Fire Next Time* is not a mere display of eloquence or lyricism. And it is vital

[34] Although primarily concerned with Baldwin's oratorical skills, the importance of studying Baldwin's rhetorical agility in *The Fire Next Time* has been stressed by Houck (2017) in 'Who's the nigger now?'.

that they are conscious of the fact that even the tiniest difference between the source text and the translation may determine whether or not Baldwin's message is truly conveyed: when it comes to the voice of the translator, the devil is in the detail.

The importance of making a genuine effort to become fully aware of our own preconceptions and blind spots (not just implicit biases, but also the fact that race is a construct) applies to all readers addressed by Baldwin in his 'Letter' – both white and black, and both actual readers and translators, including contemporary ones (such as myself). It is the reason why this paper will present a close-reading of a number of instances in which *The Fire Next Time* raises such preconceptions, comparing the source text examples to the Dutch 2018 translation, occasionally (where relevant) contrasting this text with the first Dutch translation, which was published in 1963.

The main focus of this study is the central part of 'Down at the Cross', in which Baldwin describes how Elijah Muhammad and his followers refer to white people as 'devils', and in which he compares his own views with those of the Black Muslim movement. The aim of the analysis is to show the impact of translation choices on the extent to which Baldwin's message has been successfully conveyed – or not, as the case may be – given the fact that this paper's main finding is that white innocence may be perpetuated as a result of a (mis)reading of the original, combined with a translation strategy that has the exact opposite effect of the one intended by the translator.

5.2 Trying to convey Baldwin's message – then and now

The Fire Next Time has been translated into Dutch twice. The first Dutch translation, made by Oscar Timmers in 1963, had been a so-called 'hot' translation, i.e. the translation had come out in the Netherlands almost immediately after the original had been published in the US. The retranslation by Harm Damsma appeared in 2018, a little more than half a century after the US publication, in addition to two other Baldwin retranslations: *If Beale Street Could Talk* (also by Damsma) and *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (by Ghoos and van der Sterre), which came out in 2018 and 2019 respectively.[35] Bearing in mind that the Dutch publishing industry caters to a small market, the commissioning of these retranslations can be seen as attesting the canonical status of Baldwin's work in The Netherlands.[36]

[35] All three retranslations were commissioned by publishing house *De Geus* in the Netherlands.

[36] In July 2024, two more Dutch retranslations (of *Giovanni's Room* and *Notes of a Native Son*, respectively) were published by *De Geus*, both translated by Eefje Bosch and Manik Sarkar.

It goes without saying that the time interval between the publication of the two Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time* is relevant, irrespective of the extent to which one believes that translations are subject to 'ageing'. Many scholars have argued that target culture changes – whether linguistic, idiomatic, translational or cultural – have an impact on retranslations (Desmidt, 2009; Alvstad and Rosa, 2015; Van Poucke, 2017; Haug, 2019). According to Desmidt (2009)

> retranslations result from the wish to meet the requirements of the receiving culture, requirements that are obviously not (no longer or not entirely) met by the existing translation(s). As cultures continuously change, every generation may take a different view on what is a good, i.e., functional, translation and may ask for the creation of a new translation.' (Desmidt, 2009, p. 670)

Even when one takes the view that the phenomenon of 'changing cultural and linguistic norms of the source and target societies [is] inaccurately dubbed as aging' and that '… the passage of time may not necessarily "age" translations' (Berk Albachten & Tahir Gürçağlar 2019, p. 2), the fact remains that the societal norms of the target culture inevitably change over time, bringing about a change in readers, translators and publishers, a transformation of audiences and producers 'creating new segments of readers and new translational needs' (Berk Albachten & Tahir Gürçağlar, 2019, p. 2). Chances are, therefore, that when a retranslation is published, both the publisher and the translator will have a new generation of readers in mind. This was certainly the case for the Dutch retranslation of *The Fire Next Time*, as may be illustrated by the mission statement of the Dutch publisher and their message on the imprint page of *Niet Door Water Maar Door Vuur* as quoted by Verdickt: 'Dutch publisher *De Geus*… prides itself on… representing literature that "is characterized by depth and social engagement"' and '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' (Verdickt, 2022, p. 210 and p. 212, respectively).[37] Wekker's foreword to the retranslation also attests to this idea of a new generation of readers.[38]

---

[37] The statement on the imprint page also includes a reference to the dispute between the publisher and the translator regarding the translation of the word 'white' and the word 'Negro' respectively, which Zeven discussed alongside the broader question of 'white innocence' in the Netherlands (Zeven 2025, forthcoming).

[38] Wekker, a Surinamese-Dutch scholar and public intellectual, writes her foreword to her niece, mirroring 'My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation', Baldwin's first essay in *The Fire Next Time*, which is presented as a letter to his young nephew.

Despite the fact that cultural and temporal factors undoubtedly influence the translators' choices and publishers' objectives, the present paper will be concerned not so much with possible motives for retranslation or ideological considerations of the publishing company, nor does it aim to hypothesize on the potential influence of the translators' sociocultural backgrounds or the personal views that may have played a part in their opting for particular translation strategies. The focus of this chapter will instead be on the potential *effect* of these translation choices. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of the person of the translators that may well play a role in the translation choices made and which needs to be mentioned in the case of *The Fire Next Time*: the colour of their skin. Both Dutch translations were made by a white translator, both display instances of 'white innocence'[39] (also known as 'implicit racial bias'), as this paper posits – despite the fact that in his afterword, Damsma (the 2018 translator) explicitly underlines the importance of doing justice to Baldwin's message (TT2, p. 165).

The fact that both Dutch translators failed to step up to Baldwin's challenge to shed their own 'innocence' is a suggestion that has already been put forward in 'It's not all black and white: Dutch translations of *The Fire Next Time*' (Zeven, forthcoming), which included a close reading of 'My Dungeon Shook'. In order to provide additional proof for this claim, the following section will seek to lay bare the instances in the translations of 'Down at the Cross' that may actually result in microaggressions, the 'subtle linguistic cues' that 'may have several serious effects on targets' (Beukeboom and Burgers, 2019, p. 27). The definition of microaggressions as 'the everyday racism expressed by well-intentioned, dominant-group members who experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, who would never consciously discriminate against people of color' (Sue and Spanierman, 2020, p. 4) corresponds with Baldwin's description of his white fellow Americans: 'innocent and well-meaning' (TFNT, p. 14).

[39] The notion of white innocence has been discussed by a great many scholars from different fields on implicit racial bias, e.g. Applebaum (2015) and Wekker (2016), to name but two of the many articles and books on the subject. Wekker (2016, p. 18) quotes Essed & Hoving (2014), who describe 'the anxious Dutch claim of innocence' as the 'disavowal and denial of racism' and 'rejecting the possibility to know' (p. 24). Essed, a Dutch sociologist, coined the term 'everyday racism' (Essed, 1990).

5.3 Risk management in translation

In addition to further highlighting the effects of implicit racial bias on the part of the Dutch translator, this study intends to explore to what extent underlying translation approaches and strategies may have played a role in producing a translation that contains the type of microaggressions (or 'everyday racism') referred to above. To this purpose, the analysis will zoom in on the translation choices that may be seen as an attempt on the part of the translator to minimize "communicative risk", a tendency discussed by numerous translation scholars (Pym, 2015; De Metsenaere & Vandepitte, 2017; Matsushita, 2020, Gile 2021) and defined by Anthony Pym as 'the risk of the translation's not fulfilling the desired communicative function, no matter how that specific aim might be established' (Pym 2020, p. 448). The notion of "communicative risk" is only one of the three types of risk involved in translation as introduced by Pym. The present case study will solely focus on the type of risk defined as "communicative risk". The reason for this is the fact that the Dutch retranslation of *The Fire Next Time* has a clear communicative aim and function, which is (as argued above) to produce a translation for contemporary readers that does justice to Baldwin's message.

The topic of "risk" has received considerable attention in translation studies over the last few decades. Annjo Greenall and Inger Hesjevoll Schmidt-Melbye point out that 'The literature on risk is divided between a translator-oriented perspective, and work that looks at risk from a business/industry and/or multi-agent perspective.' (Greenall & Hesjevoll Schmidt-Melbye 2025). Recent research into "risk" in translation has explored the behaviour and attitudes of various translatorial agents (not just those of the translator) from different angles, and regarding different text types and genres, including studies into risk probability, risk impact, a possible correlation between risk and effort invested by the translator, investigations into decision-making processes, to name but a few. The present paper expressly focuses on the perspective of the translator.

Daniel Gile discusses the relation between translators' decision-making strategies and their expectations of "gain" and "loss" both in terms of the translation itself and of the receivers of the translation:

> Gain can take the form of increased clarity, more readable and convincing texts, a lower probability of misrepresenting the author's ideas etc. Loss may

> involve loss of information, lessened credibility because of inappropriate terminology, lower cultural acceptability because the target text says something or says it in a way which is not acceptable to target-text readers, etc. (Gile, 1995/2009)

While risk may have positive and negative consequences[40], for the purposes of this case study the term "risk" will follow Gile in that risk will be 'taken to refer to potential adverse outcomes only' and "risk management" as 'part of the decision making that addresses them' (Giles, 2021). According to Kayo Matsushita the idea that risk in translation is mostly negative is a view largely shared by Pym (Matsushita 2020, p. 66), who defines "risk" as 'the possibility of not fulfilling the translation's purpose' (Pym 2005). Opinions differ on the manner in which risk-management strategies are best categorized. While Akbari distinguishes between risk avoidance (avoiding or eliminating the risk) risk reduction/mitigation (reducing or mitigating the risk) risk transfer (outsourcing or transferring the risk) risk retention (accepting the risk and budgeting for it) (Akbari, 2009, as quoted in Matsushita, 2020), Pym 'adopted (a) and (c) above, and added risk-taking' (Matsushita, 2020). Pym and Matsushita (2018) also 'defined risk mitigation differently from Akbari', namely as 'a disposition in which the translator incurs one kind of risk in order to reduce another (Matsushita 2020, p. 129).

The complexity of labelling risk management strategies is commented on by Pym. As an example he poses the question whether lexical explicitation can truly be seen as "risk avoidance". Given the aspect of risk-taking involved, he suggests it should be 'analyzed in terms of trade-offs' (Pym, 2025, p. 21). The present case study will not attempt to categorize different translation solutions, nor will it attempt to consistently distinguish between different types of risk management strategies. It merely wishes to establish a correlation between the risk management strategies employed in the 2018 retranslation of 'Down at the Cross' and the adverse effects that these strategies ironically turn out to have.

Pym defines "risk" as 'the possibility of not fulfilling the translation's purpose' (Pym 2005). One of the famous examples he gives is the scenario of a

[40] Maggie Hui, for instance, defines risk in translation as 'the probability of a desired or an undesired outcome as a consequence of a (translational) action' (Hui 2012)

translator who writes the wrong name on a birth certificate – a mistake Pym calls no less than 'disastrous' (Pym 2005). Such a translation mistake qualifies as "high-stake", meaning that the consequences of the translation choice may be damaging. Although it might be stating the obvious that translators aspire to reduce risks that would 'stop the text from working as a successful translation' (Pym, 2015, p. 71), it may perhaps come as a surprise that this strategy might actually have the *opposite* effect. This paper argues that the translation choices made by the 2018 translator of *The Fire Next Time*, often aimed at increasing clarity (which would be a 'gain' in Gile's definition) and making things easier for the receiver (Pym 2025, p. 19), may well have an adverse effect on readers' understanding the notions of race as a construct, structural racism and white innocence.

As translators aim for "optimal relevance" (meeting the assumed needs of the target text readers) and attempt to avoid or reduce communicative risks, they employ explicitation, implicitation, addition, omission and substitution as 'applications'[41] of their general translation strategy (De Metsenaere & Vandepitte, 2017). Based on the premise that 'if knowledge crosses borders – of culture, language, and, *significantly, time* – and is thus being transferred into new contexts, parameters change and mediation becomes necessary' (Haug, 2019, italics mine) the 2018 translator may have felt that the temporal distance between the publication of the original and that of the retranslation warranted a greater degree of "risk avoidance".

Damsma's attempt to make *The Fire Next Time* accessible and relevant to contemporary Dutch-language readers, while doing justice to Baldwin's original in some places, backfired in others, as the following close reading aims to illustrate. Since this study aims to address the role of translation in potentially contributing to the perpetuation of white innocence, covert racism and structural racism[42], the following criterion for the selection of words, phrases and sentences was applied: the analysis includes explicit and implicit references made by Baldwin to structural racism (including implicit bias) that have been translated into Dutch in a manner

[41] While De Metsenaere and Vandepitte (2017) use the term "applications" as different ways to pursue the 'general translation strategy involving minimizing risk and maximizing relevance for the target audience, they prefer to use the term 'solution' to refer to the 'observable outcome of the decision-making processes, visible in the target text'.

[42] This study will use the term "structural racism" interchangeably with the more commonly used terms "systemic racism" and "institutional racism". Eddo-Lodge (2017) prefers this term because the racism referred to 'is much broader than our traditional institutions' (p. 64).

that – at least partly – underlines the importance of Baldwin's message of the need for white people to shed their white innocence. Since paper hypothesizes that the 2018 translation will make more use of risk avoidance solutions than the 1963 translation, the main focus of the analysis will be on this retranslation (TT2) by Harm Damsma. Where relevant, comparisons[43] will be made to the first translation (TT1) by Oscar Timmers.

5.4 Risk management strategies in the Dutch retranslation of *The Fire Next Time*

The first difference between Damsma's 2018 retranslation and Timmers' 1963 translation that stands out is Timmers' frequent retention of Baldwin's lexical choices through more direct translation, where Damsma's translation choices may be labelled as "risk management". The risk avoidance pursued by Damsma sometimes involves perceived lexical 'ageing', while other instances in which this strategy may have played a role involve an assumed cultural or temporal gap (or both), as the following comparisons may illustrate.

Take, for instance, the translation of 'servile' in the sentence 'Even the most doltish and servile Negro could scarcely fail to be impressed by the disparity between his situation and that of the people for whom he worked' (TFNT, p. 28): the 1963 translators uses '*serviel*' (TT1, p. 26) (EN 'servile'), the 2018 translator uses '*slaafs*' (TT2, 59) (EN: 'slavish / servile'). The latter clearly caters to contemporary readers, many of whom would have to look up '*serviel*', a word that is much less frequently used nowadays. On the one hand, choosing a word that will be known to all readers will indeed reduce the risk of readers not being able to understand the sentence. On the other hand, although both 'servile' and 'slavish' are depreciative terms, the latter sharing an etymology with the Latin word for 'slave', '*slaafs*' is the more negative of the two: while '*serviel*' denotes an attitude that is abjectly polite, with someone being too eager to obey, '*slaafs*' is even more derogatory, as it suggests conducting oneself 'like a slave', a difference commented on by Tachtiris (2024).[44] While this

[43] On two occasions a comparison is made to the 2019 German translation by Miriam Mandelkow (published two years after the Dutch retranslation), with respect to which Verdickt (2022) notes that: 'Dtv Verlag and Miriam Mandelkow lead the vanguard of new European translations that aim to correct the linguistic and cultural errors of the past. (p. 213).

[44] This translation choice could be labelled 'risk-mitigation' rather than 'risk avoidance', where the translator 'incurs one kind of risk in order to reduce another' (Pym and Matsushita, 2018).

may be a conscious decision on Damsma's part, used to underline the degrading attitude towards African Americans, the translation does not capture the caricature of the meekly obedient and simple-minded Black person. Baldwin uses 'servile' instead of 'slavish' on purpose, and exchanging the one word for the other results in a translation that may be easier to understand for a contemporary reader, but does not convey the precise meaning of the original.

There are instances, too, where Damsma's risk management strategy pays off: Dutch readers, while probably familiar with the notion of 'segregation', may not necessarily be familiar with the word '*segregatie*' (EN: 'segregation'). This would argue in favour of Damsma's choice to translate 'segregated buses' (TFNT, p. 52) with '*bus met de gescheiden zitplaatsen voor wit en zwart*' (TT2, p. 98) (EN: 'bus with separate places for white and black') instead of using a direct translation '*gesegregeerde bussen*' (TT1, p 58), despite the fact that the explanatory translation loses the connotations of systemic racism implicit in 'segregated'. Likewise, Damsma's explicitation '*de strijd tegen de blanken*' (TT2, p. 55)[45] (EN 'the fight against the whites') as a translation of 'fighting the man' (TFNT, p. 25) will likely make more sense to a Dutch reader than the literal translation '*bevechten van de man*' (TT1, p. 22) that Timmers opted for. After all, Dutch readers were – and are – probably not familiar with this American idiomatic expression that refers to opposing those in authority (obviously whites, in this context). The same is no doubt true for Damsma's addition of '*gingen vechten*' (TT2, 76) (EN: 'went to fight') to the sentence 'I remembered the Italian priests and bishops blessing Italian boys who were on their way to Ethiopia.' (TFNT, 38), in which Baldwin hints at the fact that church leaders blessed those who would soon be killing Black people. Even though contemporary readers may not necessarily know that these Italian-American boys were sent to fight for the fascist cause, the additional words do clarify to them that they are sent off to war, something that readers in 1963 were probably still more keenly aware of. In these examples, the risk avoiding translation solutions used by Damsma can be regarded as successful, in that they achieve the goal of helping the reader to understand the original.

Nevertheless, risk avoidance carries its own risks. The effort to meet target

[45] This is the only instance in which the 2018 translation uses 'blank' ('fair' or 'Caucasian') rather than 'wit' ('white') for the translation of 'white'. The term 'blank' is regarded as outdated and carrying colonialist overtones; the reason for not adopting the more neutral word 'white' in this context might be that it concerns the translation of an idiomatic expression primarily used during the Civil Rights era.

text readers' needs may actually have adverse effect when a translator might misread the original, possibly as a result of their own blind spots. The potentially negative impact of translation choices made in the 2018 Dutch translation will be illustrated below, with most examples selected from the pivotal scene in 'Down at the Cross', in which Baldwin meets Elijah Muhammad, the then leader of the Nation of Islam.

5.5 White innocence and Black stereotypes in translation

Baldwin's description of his meeting with Elijah Muhammad and his views regarding the Nation of Islam forms the hinge between the first part of 'Down at the Cross', which is devoted to his criticism of American society and the Christian church, and the third part, the culmination of the essay, which contains Baldwin asking for 'the impossible' (TFNT, p. 88). This pivotal scene contains another crux itself: Baldwin's revelation (as much to himself as to his readers) that, despite his own dire experiences, he does not share all of the Black Muslim's views regarding whites, even if he does not outright reject them either: 'In the eeriest way possible, I suddenly had a glimpse of what white people must go through at a dinner table when they are trying to prove that Negroes are not *subhuman*' (TFNT, p. 65 – italics mine). This sentence does more than communicating that Baldwin might not share the Nation of Islam's sense of Black superiority, however. It gives white readers food for thought in a clever turning of tables: 'Baldwin makes use of a "funhouse mirror" that reflects back to the viewer his own prejudice' (McLarney, 2019, p. 53). The image of Baldwin feeling the urge to defend his white friends (availing himself of a vocabulary and sentiment previously associated with white 'liberals' standing up for their Black friends) foregrounds the word 'subhuman' – a word that already demonstrates the immensity of white Americans' fear and hatred towards their Black fellow citizens. It is another example of Baldwin 'bending' the device of holding up a mirror to whites 'toward his own purposes' (McLarney, 2019) and of 'reframing of the traditional formulation of "the Negro problem"' (Glaude, 2020).

Another of the many aspects of Baldwin's rhetorical brilliance that comes to the fore here is his careful restraint when it comes to using overtly racist references. The word 'subhuman' occurs only twice in 'Down at the Cross'. The scene above, where Baldwin describes sitting at the table with Elijah Muhammad at the

headquarters of the Nation of Islam movement, is the second instance. Timmers translates the phrase 'that Negroes are not subhuman' with a transposition '*dat negers geen minderwaardige wezens zijn*' (TT1, 77) (EN: 'that Negroes are not inferior creatures'), while Damsma uses a modulation '*dat zwarten ook mensen zijn*' (TT, 120) (EN: 'that blacks are humans, too'). The first time Baldwin uses the word 'subhuman' in 'Down at the Cross' is when he asks the white reader to imagine – *really* imagine – what it is like to be Black. In this instance, where 'subhuman'[46] is the description of Black GIs fighting alongside their white fellow soldiers in World War II by these same men (TFNT, p. 51), the 1963 translation again opts for a transposition, albeit a different one: '*minder dan een mens*' (TT1, p. 58) (EN: 'less than a man / human'), while the 2018 translation once more employs a modulation, although a different one as well: '*niet meer… dan een dier*' (TT2, p. 97) (EN: 'not more… than an animal'). Both translations echo the two suggestions presented in the authoritative *Van Dale* English to Dutch dictionary for the entry 'subhuman' (when used as an *adjective*): '*minder dan menselijk*' (EN: 'less than human') and '*dierlijk*' ('animal-like'). Neither translation, however, does full justice to Baldwin's dissection of the blatant racism displayed by his fellow countrymen and women. Both translations miss out on the connotations of 'subhuman' of '*untermensch*' (mentioned as the translation of the *noun* 'subhuman' in the same dictionary), a term used by the Nazis as part of their racial policies – connotations undoubtedly intended by Baldwin to reverberate in his readers' minds. After all, it is precisely when describing how Black Americans fight alongside their white fellow soldiers to defeat the Nazis that the author alludes to Black Americans being degraded by these same "comrades-in-arms": 'a man… who knows that the white G.I. has informed the Europeans that he is subhuman' (TFNT, p. 51). Additionally, Baldwin will likely have specifically used a reference to Black Americans by white people as "subhuman" given that – contrary to popular belief – the term "*Untermensch*" was not originally coined by the Nazis, but by the American historian and white supremacist Stoddard, who first used the word 'under-man' for non-whites in 1922 in a book that was translated into German and that inspired the Nazis.[47] If the

[46] Apart from the obvious difference in terms of context, there is a difference in that one of the sentences includes a negative marker ('not'), whereas the other does not.

[47] A famous debate on racial equality had taken place in 1929 between Black historian and co-founder of the NAACP W.E.B. Du Bois and Stoddard, who believed that interracial relationships would lead to the destruction of Western civilization.

characterization in the Dutch translations seems to convey a negative attitude of whites toward Black Americans, the notion inferred by Baldwin's sentence is even more heinous and shocking. It alludes to the kind of dehumanization reminiscent of that of the Jewish population during the Nazi regime, which triggered great fear in Baldwin 'the fate of the Jews, and the world's indifference to it, frightened me very much… I was, of course, authoritatively assured that what had happened to the Jews in Germany could not happen to the Negroes in America, but I thought, bleakly, that the German Jews had probably believed similar counsellors' (TFNT, pp. 50-51). The retranslation's attempt at making the description sound more dramatic and attaining "optimal relevance" by substituting a reference to human with a reference to an animal results in a translation that is actually less effective and therefore does the exact opposite of meeting the needs of the target text reader. In order to meet those needs the translation ought to help the reader understand just how appalling the attitude of whites actually is through the use of the reference to *untermenschen*.[48]

It will surely be no coincidence that the word 'subhuman' is used in the very same sentence that contains one of the merely two instances that Baldwin uses the word 'nigger'.[49] The fact that Baldwin uses these words so sparingly underlines that there is more to racism than using racial slurs (or violence, for that matter). The message he wishes to get across is to white liberals – the 'relatively conscious', in whom he tries to instill that covert racism and their own ignorance also contributes to systemic racism – the message that African Americans are being treated by white American in the same way that Jewish people were treated by the Nazis, effectively destroying them without them having done anything to deserve this: 'And when he realizes that the treatment accorded him has nothing to do with anything he has done, that the attempt of white people to destroy him – for that is what it is – is utterly gratuitous, it is not hard for him to think of white people as devils.' (TFNT, p. 62)

The reference to being treated as '*untermenschen*' is not the only comparison Baldwin makes between African Americans and Jewish people. When he addresses the moral bankruptcy of the Christian faith by referring to the millions murdered, not because of anything they have done, but simply because of who they are:

[48] The German translation (Baldwin, 2020) uses the word '*Untermensch*' in both instances (p. 69 and p. 85, respectively).

[49] The only other time this slur is used in 'Down at the Cross' is when a police officer mutters it when Baldwin, thirteen years old crosses the street to go to the library (TFNT, p. 26).

'For the crime of their ancestry, millions of people in the middle of the twentieth century, and in the heart of Europe – God's citadel – were sent to a death so calculated, so hideous,… (TFNT, p. 50). Baldwin begins the sentence by hinting at the fact that the only 'crime'[50] that Jewish people have 'committed' is that they are Jewish, and it is not hard to draw the parallel with white-on-black racism. Whereas Timmers uses a direct translation '*Voor de misdaad van hun afstamming*' (TT1, p. 56), Damsma attempts to explain the reference to 'ancestry' by replacing it with 'ancestors' and modulating the phrase into '*Vanwege datgene wat hun voorvaderen ooit hadden misdaan*' (TT2, p. 94) (EN: 'On account of what their ancestors had once done wrong'). While Damsma probably sought to reduce the risk of Dutch readers failing to understand the more condensed and indirect allusion to anti-Semitism in the source text, the result of this strategy is that the original message is completely lost. For rather than pointing out systemic racism, this translation suggests that the ancestors of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany were somehow to blame for what happened.

There are several other instances in which the 2018 translation does not – or at least not entirely – succeed in relaying Baldwin's references to systemic racism. Before the account of his audience with Elijah Muhammad, for example, Baldwin already hints at the fact that Black people do not have the option to escape from the reality of the world they live in. He also speaks of the bleak fate they will face if they attempt to do so, or even if they simply give white people the impression that they think they are not inferior: 'a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction' (TFNT, p. 30). The translation '*een angst dat het kind zijn eigen graf zou graven door de klakkeloze aannames van de wereld van de witten aan te vechten*' (TT2, p. 64) (EN: 'a fear that the child would be digging its own grave by challenging the unquestioning / groundless assumptions of the world of the whites') fails to render Baldwin's point that there is no such thing as "a world of white people" (which would suggest that there is another world, one in which Black people have a say as well). Presumably, by not adopting a direct translation ('white world'), the translator aimed to avoid the risk of employing a combination that is also used as a turn of phrase for

[50] The 'crime' of being Black is echoed nowadays in the phrase 'Driving While Black', which refers to the completely unwarranted criminalization of African Americans. Obviously, this example by no means equates 'Driving While Black' or other examples of white-on-black racism with the horrors of the Holocaust. It is merely used to illustrate the use of 'the crime' of a person's origin or skin colour to justify or excuse racism.

'snowy landscape'. By doing so, however, the translation misses the point that Black people live in 'the white world', that is, a world dominated by white people. Baldwin expressly mentions the inequality of society as well: 'This world is white and they are black' (TFNT, p. 29). Another example of risk management concerns the substitution of 'putting himself in the path of destruction' with the expression 'digging one's own grave'. Whereas the original infers that the mere fact of not conforming to the image that white people have of a Black person already presents a danger, the agency expressed in 'digging one's own grave' implies that a Black child who "has the audacity" to defy white supremacy is partly responsible for its own fate. The original, instead, draws attention to the notion of destruction, in this case the fact that white people, when their white superiority is challenged (in whatever manner), will destroy Black people – a notion that is a leitmotif in *The Fire Next Time*. Both translation choices in this sentence are instances of missing the point of systemic racism and the power structures underlying it.

As Baldwin is slowly building up to his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, he explains how he observes the beginnings of a shift in power on the streets of Harlem (where members of the Nation of Islam frequently speak to the neighbourhood's Black citizens) and why he has come to view these Black Muslims in a different light. One of the contributing factors to him being 'forced… to reassess the speakers and their message' is 'the behaviour of the police' (TFNT, p. 47). It is not police brutality that he refers to; it is the fear that he notices in the policemen who seem to realize that they are no longer in control. The other factor is directly related to this, namely 'the behaviour of the crowd'. It begins to dawn on him that while white people still do not regard Black people as human beings, there may well come a time when the roles will be reversed, not merely in terms of the way in which a Black person might regard a white person (as outlined above), but in an actual overturning of power. Observing the powerless policemen watching the crowds in Harlem listening to the Black Muslim speakers on their soapboxes, Baldwin contemplates 'I might have pitied them if I had not found myself in their hands so often and discovered, through ugly experience, what they were like when they held the power and what they were like when you held the power.' (TFNT, p. 47). The translation of 'ugly experience' with '*een paar gruwelijke ervaringen*' (TT2, p. 90) (EN: 'a few gruesome experiences'), by using addition and substitution, emphasizes the horrific treatment of African Americans by the police. This is quite probably another genuine attempt by the

translator to emphasize the cruelty of racism (like the example of the translation of 'subhuman' discussed earlier)[51], but the translation once more misses the mark. For one thing, there is the possibility of white readers remaining stuck in the 'but I am not a racist' groove, believing that only outright racist language and the kind of violence experienced by Black Americans in Baldwin's time are instances of 'real racism' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, Sims, 2024). Apart from lulling the reader into a false consciousness of thinking that 'real' racism is something that 'used to happen in the United States', the addition of '*een paar*' (EN: 'a few, a couple'), moreover, fails to show the systematic nature of racism. The good intentions of the translator employing a risk management strategy, therefore, actually result in a downplaying of structural racism.

Acknowledging the pervasiveness of racism is all the more important because structural racism and the myth of meritocracy go hand in hand.[52] This fallacy is one of the largest obstacles in the way of equality today (Sandel, 2020). The 2018 translation glosses over this fallacy, too. Baldwin addresses white progressives in describing how (following a TV interview) he tries to explain that comparing the successful social climbing of the Irish with the lack thereof by Black Americans does not hold water. He points out that their respective circumstances are vastly different: 'Negroes were brought here in chains long before the Irish ever thought of leaving Ireland. He then adds 'what manner of consolation is it to be told that emigrants arriving here – voluntarily – long after you did have risen far above you?' (TFNT, pp. 55-56). The translation turns his rhetorical question into a statement '*en het biedt weinig troost*' (TT2, p. 104) (EN: 'and it offers little consolation'), making it less powerful. But what is much more harmful (and probably a mistranslation rather than a risk management strategy) is that the second part of the sentence has been translated with '*als je bedenkt dat de emigranten die hier lang na jou – en geheel uit vrije wil! – naartoe zijn gekomen het inmiddels veel beter hebben dan jij*' (TT2, p. 104) (EN: 'when you think about the fact the emigrants who came here long after you – and completely of their own volition – by now are much better off than you'). The complete lack of empathy from whites (daring to even compare the Irish poor to formerly enslaved Black Americans) stays more or less intact, but by changing 'to be told' into 'when you think about'

[51] The translator's counterproductive tendency to stress the cruelty of racism is also discussed in *It's not all black and white: Dutch translations of The Fire Next Time*' (Zeven, forthcoming).

[52] See, e.g. Crenshaw et al (1996), Delgado (2017), Eddo-Lodge (2017) – to name but a few.

the blatantly unfair allegation that "surely their present condition must be their own fault for not being industrious enough" that is implied is eliminated entirely. As such, the white privilege enjoyed by even those that are financially and socially disadvantaged historically is being ignored, as is the fact that the starting position between Irish and Black Americans is completely different. That Baldwin comments on the absence of a level playing field is an understatement to say the least, but his observation is not reflected in the translation.

5.6 Conclusion

The above analysis presents a small sample of all the instances in which the risk management strategies adopted in the 2018 translation have had a detrimental effect. A single example of a translation falling short of doing justice to the author's message might seem trivial. A series of similar examples, however, illustrates a lack of awareness of the ubiquitous and structural nature of racism. Many of the mistranslations in the 2018 Dutch retranslation seem to be the result of risk management strategies. Rather than helping the contemporary Dutch reader to access the true meaning of what Baldwin tells his English-speaking readers about white innocence, implicit racial bias, the fallacy of meritocracy and systemic racism, these strategies actually obscure Baldwin's message for his Dutch readers. The afterword by the translator and the publisher's note testify to the fact that such a result is completely at odds with both the translator's intention and with the aim the Dutch publishing company had in mind. It is clear that the translation of seminal and socially relevant texts like *The Fire Next Time*, whose power lies in the intricacy of their rhetoric, warrant a publishing process that allows more time for a translator to make all their decisions based on careful consideration. After all, the devil is in the detail.