

TRANSLATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES: BLACK ENGLISH IN *THE GOOD LORD BIRD* AND *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper studies how two recent neo-slave narratives have been translated into Spanish: *The Good Lord Bird*, by James McBride, and *The Underground Railroad*, by Colson Whitehead. Since they were both published simultaneously in Spain in September 2017, special attention is paid to the strategies used to render Black English, which marks slaves' otherness, in the target polysystem. An overview of the origin, rise, and evolution of neo-slave narratives precedes the features of African-American Vernacular English portrayed in the novels that belong to this sub-genre. After some insights into the issue of translating literary dialect, the risks it entails, and the different strategies that can be used, the Spanish versions of McBride's and Whitehead's works are analyzed accordingly and contrasted.

RESUMEN: Este artículo estudia cómo se han traducido al castellano dos novelas recientes que pertenecen al subgénero de las novelas de esclavitud: *El pájaro carpintero*, de James McBride, y *El ferrocarril subterráneo*, de Colson Whitehead. Dado que ambas se publicaron a la vez en España en septiembre de 2017, se presta especial atención a las estrategias empleadas para verter el inglés afroamericano, que subraya la otredad de los esclavos, al polisistema

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meta. Tras una aproximación al origen y evolución de las novelas de esclavitud, se describen los rasgos del inglés afroamericano que reflejan las novelas de este subgénero. A continuación, se consideran las reflexiones en torno a la casuística de la traducción del dialecto literario, los riesgos que conlleva y las distintas estrategias a disposición de los traductores, para después analizar las versiones en castellano de las novelas de McBride y Whitehead y contrastarlas según estas consideraciones.

1. INTRODUCTION

James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* are two critically acclaimed novels that play with language, ideas of race, and history to take slave narratives to new places (Dreisinger n.p.; Vásquez n.p.). These books have won major awards in recent years, namely the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. They belong to the subgenre known as neo-slave narratives and, given their success in the American context, they were simultaneously published in Spain in September 2017.

Following Gideon Toury's assertion that "a translation will be taken to be any target-language utterance which is presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on whatever grounds" (20), and the tenets of Descriptive Translation Studies, this paper looks at how Black English is depicted in McBride's and Whitehead's novels, where it is presented as part of the slaves' identities, seen as the dispossessed Other by their white oppressors. The Spanish translations of these two novels, Sanz Jiménez's *El pájaro carpintero* and Rodríguez Juiz's *El ferrocarril subterráneo*, follow different strategies for rendering or even neutralizing Black English. This implies that the otherness introduced by the source novels is refracted and even suppressed in the target versions. Interestingly, the preference for different translation strategies may shed some light on the underlying publishing policies that play a key part in the reception of African-American slave narratives by Spanish readers.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVES

The first account of African slavery in the early United States narrated by a slave was published in 1760 by Britton Hammon, a

castaway who lived a series of adventures, such as being kidnapped by Native Americans, taken to jail in Cuba, and enrolling the British Navy (Misrahi-Barak 11-18). By the end of the 18th century, the first African-American slave narratives were published as a mixture of different genres from which they inherited certain narrative techniques, such as spiritual autobiographies, conversion narratives, sea adventure stories, and picaresque novels (Gould 12). In the 1770s and 1780s, slave narratives were read as a religious genre since the Bible was their main source for linguistic inspiration, the protagonist's physical freedom was seen as spiritual liberation, enslaved black people were seen as an analogy of Israel in Egyptian times, and the use of biblical allusions managed to appeal to a white readership (Connor 36-37; Gould 14). A key example is *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, first published in 1789 in London.

In the early 19th century, with the rise of abolitionism in the 1830s and 1840s, the features of this genre changed (Gould 18-19). Thanks to the autobiographies written by renowned authors, who had also been slaves and were now active in the abolitionist press, such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, slave narratives revealed what was actually happening in Southern plantations. This autobiographical genre detailed the slaves' daily routines together with the many horrors and abuses that took place on plantations, as narratives written by ex-slaves were a firm testimony against the virtues of the so-called peculiar institution and they also responded to the stereotypical depiction of happy and submissive slaves in fiction, popularly known, later on, as Uncle Toms (Benito and Manzanás 27). As Gould explains, "many of the narrative and thematic conventions which were apparent yet not fully developed in eighteenth-century works take shape in this period" (19), for instance, the portrayal of depraved Southern masters, the hypocrisy of Southern Christians who see slaves as simple chattel, brutal scenes of whipping and torture described in great detail, and tales of slaves who rebel and end up running away to the North—as the example of Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey and his escape beyond the Mason-Dixon line. All these features are shared by the two novels studied in this paper, since, as stated by Benito and Manzanás (18) and by Martín Gutiérrez (68), slave narratives can be regarded as the original source for a vast majority of African-American literature, in whose development autobiographies have played a key role.

Taking these early autobiographies as their basis, slave narratives evolved and became a subgenre that is characterized by detailed descriptions—especially when it comes to scenes of whippings and punishments—, by the slaves’ search for identity, and by using opposing pairs to build a representation of reality, as in the cases of masters vs. slaves, North vs. South, and being considered chattel vs. being seen as humans (Butterfield 74). Narrators focus on the acts of resistance, too, such as learning to read and write in secrecy and the attempts to escape from the South. As Cindy Weinstein points out, “slave narratives appropriated certain conventions of sentimental novels” (119), as can be appreciated in the episodes of rape, of children being sold or kidnapped and separated from their parents, the trauma of not knowing who one’s true father is, and shifting back and forth between past and present time frames; yet “white sentimental heroines need not actively pursue freedom. They are always rescued. For the slave, however, freedom must be pursued” (131). Besides, whereas the endings of sentimental novels show that the protagonists will not be threatened by past menaces again, “fugitive slaves are in a perpetual state of fear” (Weinstein 129). In addition, it is worth noticing how slave narratives opt for not recreating Black English on the written page, a strategy aimed at showing that blacks could also speak Standard American English and write according to its norms (Depardieu 123-124). On the contrary, they resort to biblical language to engage a white readership, as mentioned above, and they are usually preceded by prologues written by white men ensuring readers that the following story is true (Ring 118). Although publishing slave narratives was a key tool for abolitionism before the Civil War, Morrison (88) explains their authors had to omit some details, usually the most gruesome, when describing the horrors of slavery because they feared their readers’ response and critical hostility. Despite writers’ attempts to tell a personal story that represents their racial experience, “American slaves’ autobiographical narratives were frequently scorned as ‘biased,’ ‘inflammatory’ and ‘improbable’” (Morrison 87).

African-American slave narratives were reworked in the second half of the 20th century and they evolved into a literary subgenre that explores the peculiar institution, partly as a consequence of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements’ influence on the representation of slavery in fiction. These novels, published from the late 1960s onwards, are known as neo-slave

narratives, a term coined by Bernard W. Bell, who defines them as “modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). Rushdy elaborates on this and defines this kind of fiction as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3). This scholar goes on to explain how the intellectual changes in the sixties triggered the emergence of neo-slave narratives in the coming decades, especially due to the fact that certain connections could be established between the antebellum United States and the 1960s, because in this decade “race occupied the center stage of American politics in a manner unprecedented since the Civil War” (7). Dubey agrees and explains how “slavery erupted onto the national scene as a matter of intense public interest and debate” (333) in the aftermath of Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement, when African-American writers argued that the issues concerning contemporary racial identities could be discussed by adopting the voice of a fugitive slave and reconstructing the first texts that articulated black subjectivity, i.e., slave narratives.

These works of fiction deal with African-American slavery from different perspectives; for instance, they use humor, hyperbole, and anachronism to underline the absurdity of the peculiar institution, as in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976). Neo-slave narratives can also introduce certain elements from science-fiction stories, such as time-travel in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), or be based on actual research to present a historical novel, as in the well-known case of *Roots* (1976), in which Alex Haley traces his family’s history back to his ancestor Kunta Kinte, who was kidnapped from Africa and taken to America through the Middle Passage.² On top of that, neo-slave narratives can even comprise ghost stories about motherhood and memory in the times of the Reconstruction, like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and sea adventures featuring slave traders, as in Charles Jonson’s *Middle Passage* (1991). By playing with different genres and introducing formal innovations, neo-slave narratives manage to retell key

² *Roots* has been questioned by historians who point out several inaccurate events depicted in the novel, for example having white men leading the ambush that ends up with Kunta being kidnapped and taken away in bondage. In 1977, not long after the book came out, an investigative reporter from England named Mark Ottaway argued that the village of Juffure, where according to the novel no white man had ventured before Kunta was kidnapped, “was actually an important slave-trading village along the Gambia River” (Lambert 103).

historical events from the slaves' point of view. Earlier, black protagonists had been regarded as the dispossessed Other in canonical texts—e.g., Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*—, so neo-slave narratives manage to disclose a hidden version of the history of the United States and its traumatic past.

Since the late 1960s, neo-slave narratives have evolved into “an extraordinary genre of retrospective literature about slavery that exploded in the last decades of the twentieth century and shows no signs of abating” (Smith 168). The two novels under study in this paper belong to this particular sub-genre. They resort to stories of life in bondage to explore contemporary issues of racial and gender identities. This type of African-American works of fiction has not received much attention when it comes to literary texts translated into Spanish. Nevertheless, both *The Underground Railroad* and *The Good Lord Bird* were translated and published in Spain in September 2017, and a few months later, in April 2018, *Flight to Canada* and *Kindred* were also rendered into Spanish for the first time.

3. BLACK ENGLISH IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

This section points out some of the key features of the literary dialect portrayed in the neo-slave narratives published from the 1960s onwards: Black English, a linguistic variety that has also been termed as black dialect, Ebonics, and African-American Vernacular English,³ which is “the whole range of language varieties used by black people in the United States [...] both in cities and in rural areas, and by all age groups of both sexes” (Mufwene 291-292). In contrast with 19th-century autobiographies, neo-slave narratives tend to portray Black English on the printed page and let the protagonists speak their own variety, so the features of Black English in McBride's and Whitehead's novels pose an extra difficulty for translators.

To begin with, it needs to be stressed that Black English is not a series of random deviations from standard English, but rather a rule-governed vernacular (Green x-xi), i.e., this variety is not simply “bad English” or slang. When it comes to works of fiction, as Naranjo Sánchez explains (418), “Black English constitutes the ideal linguistic resource to create a distinctive marked discourse

³ Alternatively, this paper will refer to this linguistic variety as Black English and African-American Vernacular English.

commonly associated with the black race identity” by the readership. This resource is often portrayed through the technique known as eye-dialect, which may be defined as “the attempt to indicate on the printed page, through spellings and misspellings, elisions, apostrophes, syntactical shifts, signals, etc. the speech of an ethnic, regional or racial group” (Zanger 40).

The features of African-American Vernacular English in relation to neo-slave narratives may be divided into two main categories: morpho-syntactic traits and phonological features. A total of ten features will be described below—seven of them belong to the morpho-syntactic category and the remaining three fall under the phonological classification. Still, it is relevant to observe that these features are not all of the traits that characterize Black English as a dialect, since there are also sub-varieties and many variables to take into account, such as speakers’ place, time setting, and sex. Black English even shares some features with certain rural varieties spoken by Southern white people, probably as a consequence of “the history of social relations in the South which allowed whites to assimilate features of black speech” (Wolfram 523).

Concerning the representation of Black English in neo-slave narratives, its phonological features are recreated on the printed page through the eye-dialect technique mentioned above, which Rodríguez Herrera describes as “the practice of spelling words almost exactly as they are pronounced” (292) to imply speakers’ illiteracy, so that it marks the speech of certain characters as non-standard and contrasts it with the pronunciation of Standard English. In the case of Black English, the three phonological features that are most often portrayed thanks to this recreation of literary dialect are the omission of the final consonant at the end of a consonant cluster (Rickford and Rickford 104; Lappin-Fortin 461), the pronunciation of the ending /ŋ/ in verb gerunds as /n/ (Green 121; Naranjo Sánchez 423), and the deletion of unstressed vowels in initial syllables (Minnick 66). The following example, taken from *The Good Lord Bird*, illustrates how some of these features⁴ are portrayed in McBride’s novel by introducing misspellings that reflect Bob’s marked pronunciation:

⁴ The author of this paper has highlighted in bold the specific Black English features being discussed. This is the case of the words in bold in the following examples, unless otherwise stated.

“I don’t think it’s proper that you unstring that dress from **’round** yourself in front of **ol’** Nigger Bob—a married man.” He paused a minute, glanced around, then added, “Less’n you want to, of course.” (McBride 61)

This example of eye-dialect in the novel accounts for some of the phonological markers of Black English, such as consonant cluster simplification (*ol’* for *old*), and the deletion of unstressed vowels in initial syllables (*’round* for *around*). When it comes to the replacement of /ŋ/ by /n/ in *-ing* endings, the next excerpt shows it when Henry, the protagonist, tries to convince Bob and says that he is telling the truth about the abolitionist John Brown:

“If I’m **tellin’** a lie I hope I drop down dead after I tell it. I ain’t a girl! I managed to pull the bonnet back off my head. (McBride 67)

Regarding morpho-syntactic features, the first one that needs to be taken into account is the use of the verbal marker *be* as an auxiliary to make predictions about the immediate future, similarly to the modal *will* in Standard English. This is known as “invariant *be*” (Rickford and Rickford 113) and is often displayed in *The Good Lord Bird*, for example when Sibonia, a rebellious slave, threatens the protagonist with a marked possessive followed by invariant *be*: “I’ll know about it, and you’ll wake up with a heap of knives poking out that pretty neck of yours. Mine’s **be the first**.” (McBride 166). Another morpho-syntactic feature of African-American Vernacular English often found in neo-slave narratives involves negation, specifically double negation and the use of the contraction *ain’t* as the predominant negative particle (Green 76; Lappin-Fortin 461). Marked negation can be observed in Bob’s refusal to take white slavers in his wagon, when the black driver says “**I ain’t riding you no place**” (McBride 64). With reference to question formation, Black English shows a syntactic feature that falls under the category of morpho-syntactic traits: there are no auxiliary verbs in the initial position and there is no inversion of subject and verb (Green 84; Rickford and Rickford 124), as can be appreciated in this example from *The Underground Railroad*, when the protagonist, Cora, argues with another black slave at the plantation, omits the auxiliary *is* and asks “**What your mother** gonna do?” (Whitehead 57-58).

Rickford and Rickford (110-114) give some more morpho-syntactic features of African-American Vernacular English, for

instance, using the demonstrative *them* as a substitute of *those*, like in “Old John Brown riding here, screwing things up and whipping **them pen niggers** into a frenzy” (McBride 155); and the tendency to omit the third-person singular –s in the present tense, as in the following line uttered by Cora when she complains about her master in *The Underground Railroad*: “**He work** us hard” (Whitehead 244). Furthermore, Mufwene (299) and Rickford and Rickford (114) examine another morpho-syntactic characteristic known as the zero copula, i.e., the absence of the verb to be between a subject and its corresponding attribute, as when Henry says “**The best part of me nearly as white** as you, sir” (McBride 132). Green studies, additionally, the omission of auxiliary verbs in compound forms such as present perfect and continuous (166-190) —“**I seen you** from the window” (McBride 308)—, with *been* and *done* working as aspectual markers in Black English to refer, respectively, to a habit that started a long time ago or to an already finished action. For example, Cora confronts a white slave catcher, threatens him and says: “He’s going to look in your soul and see **what you done**” (212).

The following fragment, taken from *The Underground Railroad*, may serve to illustrate a few of the morpho-syntactic markers of Black English discussed above. In it, Cora and Caesar are about to escape from the plantation at night, yet they are unexpectedly joined by Lovey, a naïve slave:

“I knew you were up to something,” she whispered when she caught up. “Sneaking around with him but not talking about it. And then you dig up **them yams** not even ripe yet!” She had cinched some old fabric to make a bag that she slung over her shoulder.

“You get on back before you ruin us,” Caesar said.

“I’m going **where you going**,” Lovey said.

“He’s not going to take three of us,” Caesar said.

“**He know I’m coming?**” Cora asked.

He shook his head.

“Then **two surprises as good as one**,” she said. She lifted her sack.

“We got enough food, anyway.” (Whitehead 56)

As can be appreciated from the excerpts in bold, some of the morpho-syntactic traits of African-American Vernacular English that should be taken into account by translators of neo-slave narratives are the absence of verb copula (*two surprises [are] as good as one*), the omission of the final –s in the third person singular (*He know[s]*),

questions that follow a declarative syntactic order with no auxiliary verbs (*[Does] He know I'm coming?*), the suppression of auxiliary verbs in compound forms (*I'm going where you [are] going*), and the use of the personal pronoun *them* as a demonstrative replacing *those* (*them yams*). To these features, two more should be added, as explained above: double negation and invariant be constructions.

4. STRATEGIES FOR TRANSLATING BLACK ENGLISH IN LITERARY TEXTS

Given the use of Black English to characterize slaves in the two novels under study, it is pertinent to consider several strategies for dealing with the translation of African-American Vernacular English. When it comes to linguistic variation, Hatim and Mason state that it is part of the translators' task to study its function in the source text and, accordingly, they need to search for a strategy and be aware of the implications this may have in the target polysystem (40). These two scholars distinguish between two broad strategies, which are translating dialect in the source text (ST) into standard target language (TL), and using a target dialect, yet they warn that "rendering ST dialect by TL standard has the disadvantage of losing the special effect intended in the ST, while rendering dialect by dialect runs the risk of creating unintended effects" (41). An illustrative example of the former option, standardization, is the Spanish translation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* by Ana María de la Fuente. This epistolary novel consists of the letters Celie, the protagonist, writes to God and it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. Comparing the opening letter to the Spanish version shows that the features that deviate from Standard English—double negation, the zero copula, invariant be, and the lack of the third-person singular -s in the present tense—have been rendered into an unmarked, standard Spanish text, as Table 1 shows:

Walker 1	Fuente 9
When that hurt , I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy ,	Cuando yo grité, él me apretó el cuello y me dijo: Calla y empieza a acostumbrarte. Pero no me he acostumbrado. Y ahora me pongo mala cada vez que tengo que guisar. Mi mamá anda preocupada, y no hace más que

cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long.	mirarme, pero ya está más contenta porque él la deja tranquila. Pero está demasiado enferma y me parece que no durará mucho.
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Table 1. Translating Black English in *The Color Purple*

There is the problem of into which target dialect Black English could be translated, since there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the source and target polysystems, given the fact that “the social, ethnic, and geographical stratification of each language is different and language communities have different levels of tolerance towards written dialect” (Määttä 321). Regarding this issue, there should not be a need to choose a specific regional variety from the target language. There is the option of modifying the standard target language, playing with spelling and lexis to lower the register in the translated text. The latter is the strategy found in another book from the 1980s, Álvarez Flórez and Pérez’s Spanish version of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. John Kennedy Toole’s novel depicts the literary dialects spoken by its characters, who are from New Orleans. One of them is Jones, an uneducated black janitor who works cleaning a bar and whose interventions portray some traits of African-American Vernacular English through the eye-dialect technique, like consonant cluster simplification (*han* for *hand*, *star* for *start*), and the replacement of /ŋ/ by /n/ in *-ing* endings, together with morpho-syntactic features such as the zero copula (*it sorta like eatin*) and the suppressions of the third-person singular *-s* in the present tense (*it come*, *he star*). In their rendering, Álvarez Flórez and Pérez keep the names and cultural references to New Orleans from the source text, yet they play with spelling and features from colloquial Spanish to recreate a fictional dialect that may be accessible for readers, compensating Jones’s marked speech with the deletion of intervocalic *d* in past participles (*acabao*) and with the omission of the final *r* in verb infinitives and other words, as Table 2 illustrates:

Toole 92	Álvarez Flórez and Pérez 163
“I already finish on your flo. I turnin into a expert on flos. I think color cats got sweepin and moppin in they blood, it come natural. It sorta like eatin and breathin now to color peoples. I bet you give some	—Ya he acabao con su suelo. Estoy convirtiéndome en especialista en suelos. Creo que la gente de coló lleva en la sangre lo de barré y limpiá el polvo. Para la gente de coló es ya como comé y respirá . Estoy seguro

little color baby one-year-old a broom in the han, he star sweepin his ass off. Whoa!”	de que si le das a un niño de coló de un año una escoba empezará a barré hasta romperse el culo. ¡Sí, señó , seguro!
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Table 2. Translating Black English in *A Confederacy of Dunces*

Following Hatim and Mason, Tello Fons states that translators should consider rendering linguistic variety and choosing from a series of strategies depending on the role literary dialect plays in the source text (143-144). She differentiates between two functions that literary dialect can have, which are the mimetic function —portraying how a specific linguistic community actually speaks—, and the symbolic function —concerning the ideology behind a certain dialect and opposing characters who speak differently. Rosa supports Tello Fons and emphasizes that “besides contributing to verisimilitude, characterizing discourse indirectly presents characters and their profiles, which are suggested by their speech and are consequently constructed by reader interpretation” (83).

Given these observations on translating literary dialect, Rica Peromingo and Braga Riera put forward the following six strategies for dealing with this issue (134-143): dialect compilation, consisting of mixing several idioms and colloquial expressions from the target language while maintaining the source setting; pseudodialectal translation, using sub-standard target language and low registers to recreate a fictional non-geographical variety; parallel dialect translation, choosing a specific dialect from the target language with similar connotations to the one in the source text; dialect localization, which is a case of domestication since dialect, cultural references and even the setting are moved to the target culture; standardization, translating into the normative target language and erasing any trace of linguistic variation in favor of readers’ understanding of the text; and, lastly, compensation, rendering some instances of linguistic variety into standard target language but marking other passages in the target text which have no traits of dialect to compensate for this loss. In the case of translating Black English into Spanish, the most widely used strategy is probably standardization, since this particular dialect is often rendered as standard Spanish mostly due to lack of time and low pay in the publishing business, as Calvo comments (129). There is also the stylistic difference between translating Black English in a dramatic

novel like *The Color Purple* and rendering it in a comical book like *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which allows more room for playing with spelling and introducing substandard varieties. However, Rosa warns that the “predominant decision not to transfer source text literary varieties into the target text is not devoid of consequence, either” (93).

5. THE GOOD LORD BIRD

The Good Lord Bird is a neo-slave narrative by James McBride that was translated into Spanish by Miguel Sanz Jiménez, titled *El pájaro carpintero*. This novel uses the technique known as “found manuscript” to show readers the autobiography of Henry Shackleford, who talks about his childhood in the late 1850s, when he is a slave in Kansas territory during the Bleeding Kansas period. He works at a small tavern when John Brown frees him and invites him to join an abolitionist crusade that will take them both all over North America. Henry, nick-named Little Onion, goes with Brown to the East Coast and Canada, seeking help and meeting key abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. Their crusade takes them to Harpers Ferry, where they try to take over the federal armory and free the local black population.

For its search for identity and survival in antebellum America, McBride’s novel has been hailed as a new take on Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Dreisinger n.p.), given the historical setting and the two main characters who, in *The Good Lord Bird*, switch their roles with Huck and Jim—there is an adult white man and a black child who becomes the narrator. In its rich portrayal of rural America in the mid-19th century, McBride’s novel features black slaves, gunslingers, outlaws, prostitutes, and abolitionist leaders, among many other characters. Since its publication, it has been positively reviewed for its skill in blending history and fiction while critically playing with ideas of race and gender (Dreisinger n.p.). Henry uses African-American Vernacular English in his storytelling, together with everyday expressions related to rural English, which was one of the achievements highlighted by the jury of the National Book Award when McBride won this literary prize in 2013. Precisely on the narrator’s use of Black English, the author has commented in an interview (Simon n.p.):

I love the language of, you know, the old, black, country man with a blues guitar and... boots and the quick banter... I just love that voice and I wanted this character to be an old man looking back on his life and then telling a, just a grand whopper.

The novel came out in Spain in September 2017 thanks to Hoja de Lata, a small and independently-run publishing house. This edition includes a “Note on the Translation” as a preface, in which Sanz Jiménez explains he took into account McBride’s remarks and, accordingly, he decided to resort to dialect compilation and pseudo-dialect translation in his version (11). By resorting to these two strategies, he recreated Black English in the target text and played with idioms and widespread features of colloquial Spanish that do not pertain to a given regional variety, but to a non-standard register. Additionally, Henry’s first-person narration includes plenty of popular expressions and even vulgar idioms that have been compensated with other Spanish set phrases. The excerpt below illustrates the use of the strategies just discussed. It is taken from the protagonist’s description of his father, who worked at the Kansas tavern, too:

McBride 8-9	Sanz Jiménez 24-25
<p>But white folks liked him fine. Many a night I seen my Pa fill up on joy juice and leap atop the bar at Dutch Henry’s, snipping his scissors and hollering through the smoke and gin, “The Lord’s coming! He’s a comin’ to gnash out your teeth and tear out your hair!” then fling hissself into a crowd of the meanest, low-down, piss-drunk Missouri rebels you ever saw.</p>	<p>Pero a los blancos sí les gustaba bastante. Muchas noches, vi cómo mi papa s’hinchaba a beber zumo de l’alegría y luego saltaba encima de la barra de la taberna de Henry el Holandés, pegaba tijeretazos y gritaba entre’l humo y la ginebra: —¡Que viene’l Señor! ¡Ya viene a sacaros los dientes y a arrancaros el pelo! Luego se tiraba encima d’una multitud de la peor escoria, la de los rebeldes de Misuri más borrachuzos que jamás hayáis visto.</p>

Table 3. Translating Black English in Henry’s Voice

These strategies are applied not only to the protagonist’s narration; they are also used to mark the speech of other black slaves, such as Bob. The next fragment takes place in the fifth

chapter, when Henry dresses up as a girl, tries to run away from Brown, and meets Bob driving a wagon:

McBride 61	Sanz Jiménez 78
<p>“I got business, child,” he said, chinking away at the wheel. He wouldn’t look up at me. “I ain’t a girl.” “Whatever you think you is, honey, I don’t think it’s proper that you unstring that dress from ’round yourself in front of ol’ Nigger Bob—a married man.” He paused a minute, glanced around, then added, “Less’n you want to, of course.” “You got a lot of salt talking that way,” I said. “You the one asking for favors.” (61)</p>	<p>—Tengo cosas qu’hacer, niña —dijo, golpeando la rueda. Ni se volvió a mirarme. —No soy una niña. —Seas lo que seas, cariño, no creo que sea apropiao que te desates el vestío y te lo quites delante del viejo Bob el Negro. Estoy casao. —Se detuvo un instante, echó un vistazo alrededor y añadió—: A menos que tú quieras, claro. —Hay que tener cara p’hablar así —dije. —Tú eres la que va por ahí pidiendo favores. (78)</p>

Table 4. Translating Black English in *The Good Lord Bird*

As can be appreciated by comparing source and target fragments, the strategy followed by Sanz Jiménez to translate Black English into Spanish has been pseudodialectal translation, since he does not render African-American Vernacular English into a specific regional dialect, but rather resorts to colloquial Spanish and non-standard language. This strategy has been combined with compensation, since some passages showing no traits of dialect have been marked in the target text, as in the case of Henry’s final intervention in the above fragment (*Hay que tener cara p’hablar así*). Trying to keep the original atmosphere in *El pájaro carpintero*, Sanz Jiménez tries to compensate Black English with features of colloquial Spanish, such as shortenings (*pa* for *para*), omitting final *d* (*multitú*) and intervocalic *d* in past participles (*apropiao*, *vestío*, *casao*), and contractions when two vowels meet at the ending and the beginning of different words (*l’alegría*, *p’hablar*). With a consistent use of these strategies, African-American characters are identified as members of a particular community, seen as the Other, who speak a given linguistic variety that differs from the standard norm.

However, *The Good Lord Bird* is a polydialectal text, since it also depicts the Southern rural dialect spoken by white characters, such as the Missouri rebels and Henry’s master. Sanz Jiménez (11)

explains his choice to standardize this linguistic variety, so that the difference between rebels' position of power and their dispossessed black slaves could still be present in the target novel, as white characters speak the standard variety and black slaves speak marked Spanish. This may be observed in Table 5, which corresponds to the conversation John Brown and Dutch Henry have when the latter is trying to figure out if the Old Man is the famous abolitionist:

McBride 14	Sanz Jiménez 29-30
"You look familiar," he said. "What's your name?" "Shubel Morgan," the Old man said. "What you doing 'round these parts?" "Looking for work."	—Tiene un aspecto familiar —dijo—. ¿Cómo se llama? —Shubel Morgan —respondió el Viejo. —¿Y qué hace por aquí? —Busco trabajo.

Table 5. Translating Southern Rural English in *The Good Lord Bird*

6. THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The second neo-slave narrative under study, *The Underground Railroad*, is Colson Whitehead's sixth novel. It won the National Book Award in 2016 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017. It tells the story of Cora, a young slave working in a Georgia plantation who, after a series of episodes of abuse on the part of her peers, decides to run away and heads North searching for her mother, Mabel. In her journey, she is joined by other escapees, such as Caesar, and chased by a dreadful and relentless slave-catcher named Ridgeway. The novel's title alludes to the secret network of ex-slaves and abolitionists that helped fugitives reach Northern states, as well as to the hidden routes and coded messages they used to communicate and guide slaves to freedom. In Whitehead's novel there is an actual underground railroad, an early subway built by runaway slaves to move between states and help others escape from their masters.

Apart from the prestigious awards it earned, the novel has been hailed for its episodic structure that takes readers across antebellum America and to "new places in the narrative of slavery, or rather to places where it actually has something new to say" (Vásquez n.p.). When writing the novel, Whitehead researched oral history archives and read slave narratives from the 19th century,

namely those “first-person accounts of slavery collected by the Federal Writers’ Project” (Brookes n.p.), because he wanted to offer a realistic story that depicted the horror, violence, and brutality of the peculiar institution. Furthermore, Feith analyzes how *The Underground Railroad* takes elements from both 19th-century autobiographies and 20th-century neo-slave narratives and finds “its place in such a movement, as it prolongs, through imagination and satire, the work of symbolic resilience and political involvement of the 19th-century originals” (246).

Whitehead’s novel was translated into Spanish by Cruz Rodríguez Juiz and titled *El ferrocarril subterráneo*. It was published by Penguin Random House in September 2017. The following excerpt, shown previously in the third section, takes place early in the novel, when Cora and Caesar are about to escape from the Georgia plantation and are unexpectedly joined by Lovey. Table 6 below contrasts Whitehead’s text with Rodríguez Juiz’s rendering:

Whitehead 56	Rodríguez Juiz 66
<p>“I knew you were up to something,” she whispered when she caught up. “Sneaking around with him but not talking about it. And then you dig up them yams not even ripe yet!” She had cinched some old fabric to make a bag that she slung over her shoulder.</p> <p>“You get on back before you ruin us,” Caesar said.</p> <p>“I’m going where you going,” Lovey said.</p> <p>“He’s not going to take three of us,” Caesar said.</p> <p>“He know I’m coming?” Cora asked.</p> <p>He shook his head.</p> <p>“Then two surprises as good as one,” she said. She lifted her sack.</p> <p>“We got enough food, anyway.”</p>	<p>—Sabía que andabais tramando algo —susurró cuando los alcanzó—. No parabas de escabullirte con él, pero no contabas nada. ¡Y luego vas y arrancas hasta los boniatos verdes! Cargaba al hombro una bolsa que había confeccionado atando una tela vieja.</p> <p>—Vuelve antes de que lo estropees —dijo Caesar.</p> <p>—Yo voy a donde vayáis —dijo Lovey.</p> <p>—No nos aceptará a los tres —dijo Caesar.</p> <p>—¿Sabe que yo también voy? —preguntó Cora.</p> <p>Caesar negó con la cabeza.</p> <p>—Entonces tanto dan dos sorpresas como una —repuso ella. Levantó el saco—. De todos modos tenemos suficiente comida.</p>

Table 6. Translating Black English in *The Underground Railroad*

As can be seen by comparing source and target texts, the strategy chosen by Rodríguez Juiz for rendering African-American

Vernacular English has been standardized, i.e., the traits of Black English have been erased and the slaves speak standard, normative Spanish. On the one hand, this strategy ensures that all readers will be able to understand the target text and will not be taken aback by non-normative spelling, unlike the case of *El pájaro carpintero*. On the other hand, black slaves' otherness is not conveyed in the Spanish version, since they speak the same language as the white masters and patrollers. However, Rodríguez Juiz's version holds one exception to standardization. After escaping from Georgia, Cora is living in South Carolina under the name Bessie so that no one knows she is a runaway. The next fragment is part of her conversation with Miss Lucy, the white woman with whom she lives:

Whitehead 89	Rodríguez Juiz 99
<p>"How are things?" Miss Lucy asked. "Think I'm gonna spend a quiet night in the quarter, Miss Lucy," Bessie said. <i>"Dormitory, Bessie. Not quarter."</i> "Yes, Miss Lucy." <i>"Going to, not gonna."</i> "I am working on it." "And making splendid progress!" Miss Lucy patted Bessie's arm.</p>	<p>—¿Qué tal todo? —preguntó la señorita Lucy. —Creo qu'esta noche me quedo en el barracón a descansar, señorita Lucy —dijo Bessie. —El dormitorio, Bessie. No es un barracón. —Sí, señorita Lucy. —«Que esta», no «qu'esta». —Me esfuerzo. —¡Y progresas! —La señorita Lucy le dio unas palmaditas en el brazo.</p>

Table 7. Metalinguistic Comments in *The Underground Railroad*

Table 7 illustrates how Miss Lucy corrects Cora's use of *gonna* —the informal pronunciation of *going to*— and of the word *quarter* referring to the slave cabins in which the protagonist used to live back at the plantation. To compensate this metalinguistic comment in the target text, Rodríguez Juiz marks Cora's lines as she refers to her room as *barracón* instead of *dormitorio*, and she even contracts the conjunction *que* and the demonstrative *esta* as *qu'esta*, since they end and begin with a vowel, respectively. This italicized contraction may be identified as a mark of colloquial Spanish, because it does not ascribe to a specific regional dialect in the target culture. Therefore, Rodríguez Juiz resorts to pseudo-dialect translation to compensate Miss Lucy's metalinguistic remark. On top

of that, the term *barracón* has certain connotations that may suggest to Spanish readers some small and crammed military housing.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In *El pájaro carpintero*, standardization is not the main strategy used to render literary dialect and to offer Spanish readers a uniform and normative Spanish text. As Sanz Jiménez advances in his “Note on the Translation,” he chooses to rely on strategies such as compensation, pseudo-dialect translation, and dialect compilation to produce a marked target text that evokes Black English not as a specific regional variety from the recipient culture, but as a non-standard variety that contains certain features of colloquial spoken Spanish, namely short forms, contractions, and the omission of final *d* and of intervocalic *d* in past participles.

By playing with these three strategies, Sanz Jiménez manages to reflect the otherness introduced by the depiction of Black English in the source text: Black slaves speak non-normative Spanish in *El pájaro carpintero*, a literary dialect that tells them apart from white oppressors and the standard variety they speak. Still, it needs to be underlined that these strategies may work because McBride’s novel is a humoristic text that mocks the whole institution of slavery and even parodies key historical figures such as John Brown and Frederick Douglass. Marking the speech of black slaves and having them speak non-standard language might be offensive for target readers in a historical novel that is not humoristic at all, for instance *Roots*. Besides, it is worth pointing out that Sanz Jiménez’s version was published by Hoja de Lata, an independently-run company that specializes in subversive texts and allows for such literary games, given their small readership in comparison with that of multinational groups like Penguin Random House.

Since big publishers try to reach a broader readership and have the need to make profits, they relegate the translation of literary dialect to a second place (Calvo 121-122), which may account for the predominance of standardization in *El ferrocarril subterráneo*, published in Spain by Penguin Random House just a few months after Whitehead’s novel had won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The wide scope of this company may try to reach as many target readers as possible, who could be drawn to the book because of the prestigious awards endorsing it. This reason can

account for the publishers' preference of an unmarked standard text that may be accessible for such a massive potential readership.

Standardization is the main strategy that Rodríguez Juiz has chosen to neutralize linguistic varieties and, consequently, Cora and all the black slaves speak in perfectly unmarked standard Spanish. This implies that the otherness introduced in Whitehead's novel when black slaves speak their own literary dialect and confront their white oppressors is refracted and even suppressed from Rodríguez Juiz's version. As a result, readers get the impression that uneducated black slaves like Cora speak the same normative language as white masters, slave-catchers, and patrollers. Nevertheless, there is one exception, since the translator deviates from standardization and resorts to pseudo-dialectal translation to mark Cora's lines in a short episode when her use of non-normative English is pointed out by Miss Lucy. Still, the adoption of these different strategies in the neo-slave narratives under study may be related to the humorous tone in *The Good Lord Bird*, which gives Sanz Jiménez more room to play with spelling and to introduce substandard varieties in the target version; whereas the dramatic nature of *The Underground Railroad* limits the use of dialect compilation and pseudodialect translation to avoid unwanted comical effects in the Spanish text.

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