

## **Bible adaptation as linguistic, cultural, and socio-political appropriation: the case of the *Black Bible Chronicles* series**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines the rewording by African American author P. K. McCary of part of the 1611 King James Bible. A great publishing success that has attracted considerable media attention, McCary's 1993-1994 *Black Bible* in African American Vernacular English and urban street slang is a paradigmatic illustration of the culturally and ideologically marked character of Bible retranslation and adaptation to suit the cultural, cognitive, and sociolinguistic needs of specific communities of readers. Through her use of the sociolect of her target readers, and her updating of the linguistic and conceptual elements of her source text, McCary builds a mediating, transdialectal and transcultural bridge between the Bible and African American urban street youth. As my analysis of paratextual elements shows, the full linguistic and cultural intelligibility of McCary's adaptation is designed to empower a community of readers situated in a cultural and socio-political periphery and, more broadly, to contribute to the process of demarginalization of African American identity.

**Key Words** – *Black Bible Chronicles*; *Rappin' with Jesus*; Intralingual translation; Bible adaptation; African American identity

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## 1. Introduction

Given its canonical status, its wide circulation, the theologically, politically, and ideologically sensitive character of the varied hermeneutic and translative initiatives linked to it across an extensive timeframe and a vast geographical area, the Bible is without doubt one of the most interesting and fecund subjects of studies of translation and retranslation<sup>1</sup>. It has been convincingly shown (Steiner 1975) that translation is always interpretation, and this is even more so in the case of Bible translations and retranslations, and especially intralingual ones. If the Bible, as Norton noticed, has frequently been «a major religious battlefield» with translators «in the front line» (2000: 3), its retranslations and adaptations are often even more ideologically and culturally marked. The biblical version I examine, P. K. McCary's 1993-1994 *Black Bible Chronicles* series, is a paradigmatic example of this markedness. This widely circulated work is a linguistic, cultural and ideological adaptation by an African American of a text that has unique political significance in the history of African Americans, as the text used first to justify and promote white hegemony and African slavery, and then to propel antislavery and civil rights movements<sup>2</sup>.

Dusi aptly reminds us that «many approaches to translation concur on the need to take account of the cultural and contextual constraints and specificities that underlie the act of translation, defining equivalence in its “broad” sense as something necessarily *relative* in many ways» (2015: 189). The productive character of this methodological approach appears very clearly in relation to studies of new inter- and intra-linguistic versions of the Bible, as translators operate on a very sensitive text with multiple social, confessional, cultural, political, and ideological implications and reverberations and do so with specific target audiences and text uses in mind. Their own contexts, those of their target readers, and the intended skopos<sup>3</sup> of their translative act determine strategies and the distinctive character of their translations. Bible translation issues, therefore, «go beyond the “what” and “how” of translation theories and methodologies» (Punt 2002: 96). Indeed, when analyzing texts such as the ones I discuss in the present study, more fruitful questions concern who translates, for whom, when, and why and reflections are best funnelled towards what Pym describes as issues related to «social causation» of translations and the «intercultures», i.e., «the social contexts where translators live and work» (1998: ix-x). These are the questions that my study attempts to answer in relation to a rewording of the Bible designed as an adaptation to the specific socio-cultural frames of a precisely identified community of readers, young urban African Americans, as well as a response to their cognitive, linguistic, and knowledge needs, and aiming at their empowerment and socio-political demarginalization. I argue that interesting answers to these questions are found in elements of the paratext of McCary's work and hence paratextual analysis is the main focus of my contribution. Given McCary's extensive omission of portions of the source text, the 1611 King James Bible, and her paraphrasing and summarizing of other passages, a comparative analysis of source text and target text seems far less potentially profitable, besides appearing scarcely relevant in light of the marked character of her

<sup>1</sup> In her important 2009 article which compares five Danish versions of a section of the Bible, Zethsen points out that, after considering various types of texts for her study of intralingual translation, she selected the Bible because of the very large corpus of its intralingual versions designed to cater for a variety of target readers.

<sup>2</sup> See Callahan (2006) and Wimbush (2000).

<sup>3</sup> My reference is clearly to the skopos theory (Reiss and Vermeer 2013) which «focuses above all on the purpose of the translation, which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce a functionally adequate result» (Munday 2016: 79).

work as an act of socio-cultural mediation and a paradigmatic example of the extreme adaptability of intralingual translation to changed contexts, of its dual nature as a product and a response to these contexts.

Genette (1997) has conclusively demonstrated the very important function of paratextual elements – «these peripheries which are so often central to the translated text» (Gil-Bardají et al. 2012: 10) – as presentation, explanation, and justification of translative acts, as well as orientation of their reception. Recent research (Berk Albachten and Tahir Gürçağlar 2019) has clearly shown that the role of the paratext in the case of retranslation is of particular relevance, making paratextual analyses crucial for the identification of «the multitude of factors which shape» it (Deane-Cox 2014: 11). The identification of these factors is essential in the case of the diachronic, diaphasic, intergeneric, intercultural, and interdialectal biblical revisitation I examine.

## 2. McCary's acquisition of symbolic capital

The two books of the *Black Bible Chronicles* series (hereafter abbreviated as *BBC* series) were published in the United States in 1993 and 1994 by African American Family Press, a minor publishing house no longer in business today. The first volume, *The Black Bible Chronicles: From Genesis to the Promised Land* (hereafter abbreviated as *BBC*), is a version of the first five books of the Old Testament, the so-called Pentateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the second, titled *Rappin' with Jesus: The Good News According to the Four Brothers*, is a retelling of the four Gospels. Whereas in both books the text and footnotes make McCary's presence visible and her aims and strategies manifest, in the first book her name is conspicuously absent.

Even a quick web search yields abundant first- and third-person information regarding Perri Kathryn (P. K. is the author's own preference) McCary and her work in the shape of interviews, articles, and reviews from 1993, the year of the publication of the first book in the *BBC* series, to the present day. Blogs, YouTube videos (including a «spiritual autobiography»), and biographical sketches on various business and charity websites document her multiple activities as a journalist, writer, specialist of communication, and activist against racial and social discrimination, for peace and interconfessional dialogue. This material points to her literary and communicative talents and to the socio-culturally and ideologically situated nature of her engagement with the Bible. Over time McCary has become a very visible person with an assertive and influential voice; it is interesting to trace the progressive increase of her visibility and acquisition of a public voice as the author of a biblical retelling – in Bourdieu's terms (1977), her progressive gaining of a symbolic capital –, through an analysis of relevant paratextual elements.

McCary's name is nowhere to be found throughout the first volume; yet, a year later, she became extremely visible: the name P. K. McCary and the indication «Interpreter» feature prominently on the title page, after the title. Another indication of her presence, complete with a reference to personal circumstances, is her dedication to her three children (with mention of their names); even more notably, her photograph and a twelve-line biographical sketch takes up the book's last page. Biographical notes first describe her as an author and journalist for «major newspapers and television stations» nationwide, and a «lecturer and stage artist», thus establishing her expertise and experience with regard to the world of letters and communication, then cast her as a spiritual person by mentioning how her grandfather, a Baptist minister, influenced her. A direct quotation

from her about how he instilled in her «an abiding faith that “life is a spiritual connection with God”», introduces her very voice in the book. The last lines offer personal details, indicating that she lives in Houston, Texas, and is the mother of three children. Her name is also mentioned in the central pre-review or blurb on the back cover: a journalist of the *Chicago Defender*, who describes her style as «throbbing like a heartbeat», observes that «McCary’s words jump across each page at the lost and the proud».

### 3. The important function of forewords and blurbs in the *Black Bible Chronicles* series

When the first book in the series of the *BBC* was published, the publisher must have deemed McCary’s symbolic capital insufficient and unhelpful in launching the book which, however, was deemed potentially appealing enough to justify a first print run of 40,000<sup>4</sup>. The symbolic capital of authoritative and influential personalities was used instead in two prominent areas of the paratext, the foreword and the back cover, to promote the book, define its target readership, and illustrate its aim<sup>5</sup>.

The foreword is signed by «The Honorable Andrew Young, Former Ambassador to the United Nations, Former Congressman and Mayor of Atlanta», who also authored the foreword to McCary’s version of the Gospels. As a former pastor, an important politician, a leader of the African American civil rights movement, and a friend of Martin Luther King, he possessed remarkable symbolic (cultural, moral, political) capital. His forewords, excerpts of which also appear with his name on the back covers of both volumes function as very clear frames which suggest the markedly situated ideological and political character of this translative and editorial enterprise. Further capital is added and the moral, political, and militant frames confirmed, through three other blurbs (besides that by Young) by a US Congress chairman, the Chaplain to the Senate, and the former executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus, all emphasizing that the *BBC* «makes the timeless truths of Scriptures understandable and relevant to young people groping for meaning» (fourth blurb). The first blurb on the back cover is by a 1991 Super Bowl hero, Brad Edwards, a person young readers were likely to admire and relate to, who confirms that the *BBC* is «hip and holy». It is interesting to note how a large statement on top of the cover, «The streets are singing the praises of the *Black Bible Chronicles*. All of America is talking about it», anticipates the desired response from the intended audience, street youth, and the book’s commercial success.

### 4. McCary’s various peripheral stances

As a matter of fact, we know from articles and reviews that the *BBC* was an immediate success, selling an impressive 100,000 copies in the first three months (Smith 1993) and becoming the object of remarkable media attention, while its author engaged in book tours throughout the country<sup>6</sup>. The changed policy of the publishing house, which obliterated

<sup>4</sup> This information is from a 1993 article of the biweekly newspaper *National Catholic Reporter*, ‘The Black Bible Chronicles: A Survival Manual for the Streets’ (Holmes-White 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Ziemann shows very well the orientative function of these elements of the paratext and proposes a subcategory within the general notion of translation reception which would include «preconceptions developed about a given translated text based on extratextual factors» such as blurbs (Ziemann 2019: 100).

<sup>6</sup> Numerous articles and reviews describe the *BBC* as a best seller and a journalist of the *Tampa Bay Times* defines McCary as a «top-selling black author[s]» (Smith 1993).

McCary's name in the first volume and then gave her name and personality great prominence in the paratext of the second volume, is clearly related to McCary's acquisition of capital following her first book's excellent reception. Nationwide book presentations, extensive media coverage, including many television interviews, had made her name and face familiar: she had acquired a cultural capital as a biblical interpreter and that capital was used to market the second book in the series. Indication of her role as «interpreter», not translator, on the title page of *Rappin' with Jesus*, in all likelihood articulated her own and her publisher's preoccupations for her lack of scholarly and professional qualification with regard to Bible translation and the paraphrastic nature of her renderings of selected scriptural narratives<sup>7</sup>. Her own description of the genesis and development of the *BBC* project, in fact, suggests her want of specific experience as a translator and the occasional nature of her translative enterprise. In an interview in *The Chicago Tribune* (Galloway 1993) she explains how as a Sunday School teacher she had noticed that her pupils had great difficulties in understanding – and showed very modest interest in – stories from the King James version of the Bible she was teaching from and how their attention was captured instead by her retelling of them. While working as a journalist, she reworded Genesis and asked a colleague to read her version; he liked it and showed it to the African American Family Press which test-marketed it with leaders of church communities and general readers: on the basis of the balance between negative and positive feedbacks, McCary was invited to translate the other four books of the Pentateuch and publish the book.

Besides lacking specific professional and scholarly qualifications as a Bible translator, as well as institutional authorization and affiliation, McCary, as a woman, approached the rewriting of the Bible from another disadvantaged position. The first complete translation of the Bible in English by a woman is that by American Julia Evelina Smith in 1876 and is one of the very few examples in this respect to this day<sup>8</sup>. While we have plenty of writings on the Bible and quotations from it in poems, meditations, prayers, and diaries by women, they were (and still are to a large extent) notably absent from or present in very modest numbers in Bible translation teams and projects, and in the institutional and academic field of Bible hermeneutics. The position of black women in this respect was (and still is) even more marginal than that of white women (Raboteau 1999: chapt. 7).

## 5. The socio-cultural frames of McCary's target readers

Because of her gender, ethnic background, and distance from the field of Bible translation and hermeneutics, McCary wrote her version from the stance of periphery and marginality. As the paratext clearly indicates, she addressed a peripheral and marginal audience, an ethnic, cultural, generational, socio-economic minority group – black urban street youth – within a larger minority group, African Americans. The author and addressees shared specific frames: they belonged to the same ethnic community, stood in the same politically disempowered position, faced the same social and racial discrimination, and had first-hand experience of the extreme marginality of life on the street: in interviews and blogs McCary often recalls her experience of the hardships of street life when she spent five months as a

<sup>7</sup> The term *interpreter* in its various meanings has been at the core of reflections on translation from antiquity (cf. Cicero's *interpres/orator* dualism in Cicero, ed. Giomini 1995, for example) to Steiner (1975) and beyond.

<sup>8</sup> See Taylor (2012).

homeless unemployed single mother. The linguistic, cultural, editorial choices of the *BBC* enterprise derive directly from its socio-cultural context and its author's various circumstances and are accurately adapted to the sociocultural frames of the target audience, functioning as a very practical response to its needs: as its telling subtitle indicates, the *BBC* is «A Survival Manual for the Streets»: far from being presented simply as informative and enjoyable reading, it is proposed as a useful handbook for its addressees' hard life: unsurprisingly, the majority of the scriptural episodes selected by McCary for her retelling deal with violence, sex, and God's laws and advice to his people.

The *BBC*'s imagined readers were black urban street youth in 1990s America when the situation of black people in general was difficult because of racial discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage, and that of black urban communities was harder still, characterized as it was by socio-political marginalization and particularly high rates of unemployment and poverty which caused a very tense situation and affected intergenerational relations. The *BBC* was published in the aftermath of the deadly and destructive 1992 Los Angeles riots following the acquittal of four white policemen who had savagely beaten an unarmed black motorist, and at the time of multiple rebellious responses to police violence and systematic injustices, and within the framework of the great gang war of the 1990s<sup>9</sup>. Zanfagna notices how the tough anti-gang campaign carried out by special police squads enforcing very strict targeted state laws resulted in mass incarceration and general prejudice against urban black youth (2017: 2-3). Reflecting on how young African-Americans were subject to «repressive harassment and violent police action», Callahan evokes two different and very powerful expressions of current identifications of their sufferings with those of Jesus: voicing the desperation of «young people born guilty of blackness», hip hop rap artist Public Enemy denounced that «Crucifixion ain't no fiction» and poet Frank Smith Home invited black boys to look «on yonder crucifix / Where He hangs nailed and pierced / [...] Look you well, / You shall know this thing» (Callahan 2006: 227). McCary writes for these black youth in a difficult situation.

Perceptions of the critical nature of the historical context in the United States, as well as of the difficult socio-political position of young urban blacks, leading many to fall prey to disorientation and despair, are very prominent in the forewords to the *BBC* and *Rappin' with Jesus* by Andrew Young (indicated here as foreword 1 and foreword 2). Regarding the exceptional difficulty of his day, in foreword 1 Young mentions specific events and says that the *BBC* «comes at a time when significant and varied tensions are pulling at the very fabric of our society. From the Los Angeles riots to the economic distress plaguing our country, America is at an important crossroads». «America's youth at risk» because of «drugs, crime, and the raging open warfare on the streets» are clearly in his mind and in the mind of the author and publisher of the book. In foreword 2 Young further reflects that «the challenges of the 90s are of staggering proportions. In addition to a prolonged economic slowdown, our cities continue to cry out for attention. [...] Violence is commonplace, and on and on».

## 6. McCary's cultural and linguistic adaptation of the Scriptures

McCary's translative gesture thus appears as a product of its historic context and is cast as a specific response to the situation and needs of the intended readers who are offered

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<sup>9</sup> On police violence and the situation of black people in America from the 1960s onwards, see Hinton (2021). A contemporary analysis of the specific situation of black youth in the 1990s is Taylor (1995).

their own Bible in a linguistic and cultural code they understand and find engaging. McCary was writing during the full flourish of hip hop culture and the development of holy hip hop and gospel rap which originated in 1986 Los Angeles<sup>10</sup>. The full meaning, function, and customized character of various crucial choices regarding both text and paratext (the language used by McCary, a mix of African American Vernacular English and urban street slang, and the title of her version of the Gospel, *Rappin' with Jesus*, are obvious examples) are best assessed when they are considered against the backdrop of the contemporaneous popularity of cultural products – the spiritual versions of hip hop and rap – that, besides voicing social and political protest, also put black youth in conversation with the Bible; this is what Negro spirituals had done for the ancestors of McCarey's readers, and this is what McCary herself was doing with her «hip» Bible retelling. It is notable that the incorporation of biblical narratives and references in songs – an expressive mode deriving from the intersection of storytelling and music typical of traditional African cultures – which articulates both socio-political distress and spiritual longings is a mark of African struggles for resistance in colonial and post-colonial situations<sup>11</sup>.

The *BBC* series echoes this discourse not just in the linguistic and cultural frames of the text, but quite openly through an element of the paratext, epigraphs. As Genette has shown, epigraphs function as comments to a text and integrate it into a cultural tradition (1997: 157 and 160): the epigraph following the title page and McCary's dedication in *Rappin' with Jesus* is from a Negro spiritual, and of the four epigraphs in blank pages at the head of four of the five books of the Old Testament in *BBC* (Deuteronomy has a four-line summary describing the arrival of the Israelites in the Promised Land after forty years of captivity, a pervasive theme in songs, sermons, and speeches by African American activists of the civil rights movement), two are from Negro spirituals, the first from the vastly popular «When the Saints Go Marching In», the other from an untitled «Old Negro Spiritual» about the Israelites' longing for liberation from captivity. The other two epigraphs are from poems by African American civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson, another significant choice in the perspective of the ideological framework of the *BBC* series. Intra-paratextual recurrence of the cultural and political frame evoked by quotes from Negro spirituals are also found in some of the titles which introduce narratives from the Gospels in *Rappin' with Jesus*. An example is «This little light of mine» – a popular gospel song for children which became an anthem of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The expression of personal and collective distress, of longings for conversion and spiritual healing, is the aim of cultural initiatives aimed at the same target community by the likes, among others, of gospel rappers and McCarey, and spiritual healing in their contexts and in the framework of the significance of the Bible in African-American history is indivisible from socio-cultural and political healing. As holy hip hoppers and gospel rappers who sang their evangelising songs in the street in groups by evocative names like Hood Ministries or Gospel Gangstaz transferred and transformed, i.e., translated, Scriptures into hip hop rhymes, McCarey as a self-made biblical interpreter translated Scriptures into a compact African-American street Bible functioning as a «survival manual». McCary and the «street disciples» (Zanfagna 2017: 106) used the same language, a mix of AAVE and urban street slang, and shared purpose and target

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<sup>10</sup> Zanfagna (2017) is a thorough and informative study of the socio-cultural, political, and commercial characters of the hip hop phenomenon, with special emphasis on the intersection of music and religion.

<sup>11</sup> An interesting example is the use of Psalms as expressions of socio-political difficulties and longings for change in Rastafari reggae music, see Thompson (2012).

audience: both aimed to take the Bible to the streets to reach «“unchurched” and marginalized populations in ways that traditional churches and gospel music artists have failed to do» (Zanfagna 2017: 8).

In consideration of the cultural, social, and knowledge frames of her target readers, McCary devised what, according to relevance theory and Gutt’s cognitive approach (1991)<sup>12</sup>, could be described as communicative strategies requiring the least possible processing efforts on the part of her readers, while at the same time conveying the scriptural message in an effective way<sup>13</sup>. Totally devoting her loyalty to her target readers, she opted for a reader-oriented rendering<sup>14</sup>. She therefore decided that a foreignizing translation (a translation that preserves the historic remoteness of the Bible and its sociocultural otherness) was unsuitable for her audience because of the important readerly processing efforts it requires and that the informative rather than the expressive function of the source text was what mattered for her purpose: hence her adoption of domestication that informs textual choices such as language and cultural frame. Paratextual elements like illustrations on the covers of both volumes, titles, and subtitles are also essential domesticating tools.

With the needs of her target readers in view, McCary opted for the translation strategy defined by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) as adaptation, the recreation of the content of the source text to suit the cultural, cognitive, and sociolinguistic needs of a specific community of readers<sup>15</sup>. Her aim was simplification which she achieved through her use of the sociolect of her target readers, the updating of linguistic and conceptual elements (with some anachronisms like the use of «coma» for Adam’s deep sleep during Eve’s creation or «H2O» for water, *BBC*, pp. 5, 4), and explicitation of information through the insertion of footnotes. Omission of part of the source text and paraphrasing are also crucial choices in the *BBC* series: presenting the whole Bible to street youth and expecting them to read through its hundreds and hundreds of pages (783,137 words in the King James version) was clearly deemed unrealistic by McCary. Therefore, she selected episodes from the first five books of the Bible (Genesis is very extensively covered and takes up half of the whole volume), and the main episodes from the four Gospels. McCary’s version of the Old Testament is thus a manageable book of 190 pages, sized 15,24 x 2,54 x 22,86 centimetres, priced at just 14,95 dollars<sup>16</sup>, her New Testament is the same size and has 168 pages<sup>17</sup>. Biblical narratives are arranged in short thematic sections (mainly of one and a half page) introduced by titles which summarize the content and domesticate it by variously calling to mind familiar experiences and common knowledge. Interesting examples are titles of popular songs like «Hold on, I’m coming» and

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<sup>12</sup> The founding text of relevance theory is Sperber and Wilson’s *Relevance: communication and cognition*.

<sup>13</sup> She engages in what Newmark’s model classifies as communicative translation oriented towards the language and culture of the target audience (1981: 39). See Nord’s use of the concept of «translation brief» referring to the definition of the intended purpose of the translation process (2008: 47).

<sup>14</sup> As Whyatt (2017: 189) suggests, «both intralingual translation and interlingual translation rely on the same faculty of the human mind: its ability to interpret meaning from linguistic expressions and reformulate it depending on the cognitive profile of the assumed reader».

<sup>15</sup> Bastin’s discussion of adaptation in *The Routledge encyclopedia of translation* is very useful. In relation to Bible translation, the most influential endorsement of linguistic and cultural customized versions is in Nida and Taber (1964) and Nida and Taber (1969).

<sup>16</sup> A calculation on [dollartimes.com](https://dollartimes.com) shows that 14,95 dollars of 1993 equal 31,27 dollars in 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Pillière (2021) illustrates very well how the material presentation of a text (which includes covers, illustrations, book price, and page format) influences reading experiences and interpretation, besides impacting on the book’s commercial appeal.



«Working hard for the money», idioms like «Sink or swim», and even an adaptation from the Uncle-Sam-wants-you war poster, «The Almighty wants you!»<sup>18</sup>.

The otherness and complexity of biblical narratives are further domesticated and simplified by means of a generous corpus of footnotes, 89 in *BBC* and 109 in *Rappin' with Jesus*. «Footnotes, like footprints, are marks left behind by people who have gone their way, and they let us follow and discover the paths they have taken» (Paloposki 2010: 87 in Toledano Buendia 2013: 150)<sup>19</sup>. McCary has left very clear footprints, indeed, voiceprints, in her biblical rewritings: her notes function as direct addresses to her readers and critics, and as very concise, but no less clear statements of her aims and strategies.

Notes in *BBC* and *Rappin' with Jesus* «mediate the book[s] to the reader» (Genette 1997: xviii), map their position in the biblical translation field, and indicate their intended reception. Placed at the bottom of the page, written in the same mix of AAVE and street slang as the text, notes in McCary's work are short and fulfil various pragmatic functions; some of them are informative and didactic, clearly functioning as reading instruction for the intended audience of youth not too familiar with the Bible and its remote cultural context; other notes are implicitly yet clearly addressed to potential critics within the varied community of general Bible readers, exegetes, and translation practitioners; yet others which include cross references to passages from both Old and New Testament serve to suggest McCary's solid knowledge of the Scriptures. Regarding notes intended to address the needs of the specific target readers, many perform the informative and explicative function required when it is necessary to «help the audience bridge the gap between their frames of reference and those of the biblical writers» (Wilt 2014: 45). Some offer information on culture-bound terms like the Passover (*Rappin'*, n. 28, p. 66) or «shekels», 'the currency used at the time' (*BBC*, n. 14, p. 38). Many explicative notes tend to clarify the meaning of current standard English terms likely to be unfamiliar to McCary's readers: one example is «blasphemy» which «means to diss the Almighty» (*Rappin'*, n. 14, p. 22), others describe uncommon items like «myrrh», «type of fragrances that make really cool incense» (*Rappin'*, n. 2, p. 4). Other notes for the intended readers are markedly didactic and hence point to the educational aim (besides its evangelising one) of McCary's retelling; they offer practical advice for her readers' life, in line with the announced function of the retranslation as a «survival manual for the street». Here is an example: «Also read about dealing with a brother who disses you in Matthew, Chapter 18, verses 15 through 17» (*Rappin'*, note 22, p. 47). At times notes take the form of assignments: «Read and study the Beatitudes in Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 3 through 12» (*Rappin'*, n. 11, p. 11). Some notes include references to various treatments of the same topic in the Old and New Testament. Notes of this kind are more likely to be found in study Bibles than in simplified versions: their presence in the *BBC* series suggests McCary's wide knowledge of the Scriptures, thus functioning as a sort of authorization of her engagement with the Bible, and at the same time points to her wish to elevate her readers' knowledge of biblical texts above the very basic. In relation to Mark's account of how Jesus expelled the merchants from the Temple, for example, cross-references are given in Matthew, Mark, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (*Rappin'*, note 44, p. 98). Few notes function as commentary or include some form of judgement: describing how the Pharisees

<sup>18</sup> The important role played by titles in the reception of texts, in their «framing» and interpretation is stressed by Wilt (2014: 237) who recalls the experiment performed by Brown and Yule who asked two groups of people to read the same text framed by two different titles: the totally different interpretation of the same text by the groups pointed clearly to the orientative function of the framing of texts through titles.

<sup>19</sup> Toledano Buendia's discussion of translators' notes includes useful bibliographical references.

blamed Jesus for mass baptisms, McCary remarks that in reality, it was his disciples who performed them: «But of course that didn't matter to the Pharisees. They continued and blamed Jesus for everything» (*Rappin'*, n. 93, p. 153). Notes which clearly indicate omissions are addressed at once to McCary's specific readers and to all those involved in the process of critical evaluation and circulation of her work. These notes are used as implied disclaimers, thus performing the same function as notices on the cover or in the preface: they aim to prevent criticism within the wide area of common Bible users, professionals of Bible translation and hermeneutics, and other persons such as reviewers who «favour or hinder the circulation of the text» and also «filter and determine the specific way the work is received in the target culture» (Toledano Buendia 2013: 154)<sup>20</sup>. Notes such as: «See Exodus, Chapter 32 and 33, for the complete story» (*BBC*, n. 23, p. 121) or «See Genesis, Chapter 1 for more information on the Almighty's program» (*BBC*, n. 1, p. 2) make clear that one is reading a rewording of part of the biblical text. Some notes specify precisely what McCary's narrative is summarizing, hence indicating the extent of omissions: «Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 20 through 26» (*BBC*, n. 2, p. 3). These notes locate McCary's work outside the field of formal, literal, or even dynamic equivalent translations and function as disclaimers of any ambition on the part of McCary's biblical retelling to the status of an authoritative Bible for study or general church use.

The language of the *BBC* series, a mix of African American Vernacular English and *street slang* (hip hop and rap slang), is another very important element of McCary's domesticating strategies. It is also one of the mainstays of her peculiar cultural and political initiative, of her contribution to the long process of African American reappropriation of the Bible. It is one of her ways of inserting an African American voice in the hegemonic discourse of Euro-American biblical hermeneutics, of «put[ting] Africa and blacks back in the Bible» (Yorke 1995: 8). Besides requiring specific expertise in the various diachronical phases and local varieties of AAVE and American slang, a detailed analysis of McCary's text from a linguistic point of view would only very partially reveal the distinctive aspects of this biblical revisitation that make it so interesting to students of translation studies and cultural history<sup>21</sup>. In line with the focus and methodological approach of my study, I shall therefore consider instead the function of McCary's choice of language within the *skopos* of her work and show how this function is prominently stressed in the peritext as part of the orientative editorial strategies.

Modernization and simplification of the Bible's language in order to address the specific needs of various audiences and attract young readers were current practices in McCary's day. In her own account of the genesis of her project, as we have seen, she referred to the difficulties of her Sunday School pupils with the text of the King James Bible she was reading from and she presented her retelling as an answer to that problem. However, she could have used one of the many existing simplified and modernized versions of the Bible like the 1987 New Century Version written in third grade level English and aimed at people with basic proficiency in English or the very popular (still largely used today) version of the New Testament (1958) and part of the Old Testament (1963) by J. B. Philips in markedly colloquial English designed to remedy young people's lack of understanding of «Bible English» (Scorgie et al. 2003: 189) and scarce interest in

<sup>20</sup> Toledano Buendia (2013: 154) aptly mentions Lefevre's concept of patronage (1992).

<sup>21</sup> The author of an article in a student journal used examples from the *BBC* series for his analysis of the lexicon of AAVE (unfortunately, references to quoted passages from the *BBC* volumes are missing) (Dudziński 2013). An excellent study of AAVE is Green (2002). A very useful guide to the American street slang of McCary's time is Smitherman (2000).

the biblical narratives. The socio-cultural situatedness of McCary's enterprise, therefore, is shown by the fact that her choice to recreate the biblical message in a mix of AAVE and street slang was not simply and not even predominantly motivated by the necessity to present her target readers with a modernized and simplified Bible in colloquial English. Far from restricting herself to simplifying the text, she made it linguistically and culturally distinctive: in this light, hers is one of those retranslations «designed deliberately to form particular identities» (Venuti 2013: 97). By using the language of her target readers with its inherent cultural frame, she made them feel that they were in the text and owned it. Viewed in the perspective of post-colonial theories of translation<sup>22</sup>, McCary's is an act of reparation and serves to empower a community of readers situated in a cultural and socio-political periphery with respect to the hegemonic discourse. By rendering part of the Bible, such canonical, authoritative text, the most crucial text for those like McCary who put Christianity at the core of their life in the dialect of disenfranchisement, subordination, and marginality, she transferred this dialect and its users from the periphery to the core of Western and especially American life and culture<sup>23</sup>. By enabling her readers to gain access to the Bible, she enabled their participation in its culture, while at the same time preserving their distinctiveness through the adoption and hence validation of their linguistic and cultural codes.

Two elements of the peritext (the two forewords and the blurbs on the back covers) endorse McCary's choice of linguistic and cultural frames with the full weight of their authors' symbolic capital. The subtitle of Young's foreword to the *BBC* which stands out in large letters, «The Language of the Streets», confirms the distinctive character of the rewording. A justification and a validation of McCary's linguistic choices and translation strategy follow: «while the message must remain the same, the language must be responsive to the times». Young argues that the intended readers whom in paragraph two he had defined as «America's youth at risk» in the grips of gang wars, drugs, and crime, need a Bible version to suit their distinctive «experience» and «culture»: «Important to our young people's understanding of the Word is the manner in which the Bible is communicated. To be truly [sic] relevant to their experience, it must be in a language familiar to their culture». Given the specificity and singularity of the linguistic and cultural codes of this community, a mediating, transdialectal and transcultural bridge is clearly needed, and he casts the *BBC* as just that bridge. While «the traditional language of faith has lost the power to bring them in touch with their God», the *BBC* which attempts «to put the most important message of life into the language of the streets», «brings the Word» to them and addresses «their deepest longings». It is interesting to notice how Young's foreword, besides presenting the *BBC* as a necessary and effective response to the needs of urban black youth, attempts also to answer what must have appeared to him as likely criticism of McCary's use of the «language of the streets» by stating that her choice «is in keeping with the very origins of the Bible», given that «the New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek, the street language of the people» and that Luther and others translated the Bible into «the language of the people of their day». Because of its use of «contemporary language», Young maintains that the *BBC* «stands in this tradition».

<sup>22</sup> Important studies of postcolonial theories of translation are Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) and Bandia (2008). With specific reference to the Bible, see Sugirtharajah (2002).

<sup>23</sup> Deane-Cox (2014: 25) notes that «for dominant languages, translation serves as a means of appropriating symbolic capital, and for the dominated, translation offers a path towards recognition».

In the foreword to *Rappin' with Jesus*, Young first confirms his earlier support for McCary's «project which brings the Word of God to our younger generation in contemporary language», then relates McCary's version of the Gospels to her previous rendering of the first five books of the Old Testament and praises both at once – McCary «offers us yet another powerful interpretation of the Scriptures» – thus encouraging readers of the second book of the series to buy the first too. In his second foreword Young reiterates in other words the same view he had expressed in the first regarding the uniqueness of the linguistic and cultural frames of the intended readers needing a suitable translative response: «*Rappin' with Jesus* is stunning and relevant particularly to our young people who are hungry for spiritual food, yet need to understand it in terms meaningful to them in their unique culture and language». He anticipates that some people of his generation will deem *Rappin' with Jesus* «off-putting and at times perplexing», but declares that by virtue of its effectiveness in opening «a doorway to understanding the significance of life in relationship with a personal God» he «applaud[s]» it and expresses the wish that «every young person will have the opportunity to glean from its riches».

My survey of epitextual material shows that not all reviewers and readers concurred with the view of the acceptability and effectiveness of the linguistic frame of the *BBC* series furthered in the forewords<sup>24</sup>. It is unsurprising that God's addresses in a mix of AAVE and street slang sounded «perplexing», to use Young's terms, to some ears accustomed to the majestic language of the 1611 King James Bible or the more modern but still very dignified English of the New King James Version of 1982, or even the colloquial American of the 1976 Good News Translation. Here is God's markedly different voice in the three versions just mentioned and in the *BBC*:

#### Genesis 3: 14

KJB 1611	NKJV 1982	GNT 1976	<i>BBC</i> 1993
Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle.	Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle.	You will be punished for this; you alone of all the animals must bear this curse.	Boy, you messed up! I'm gonna curse you worse than all the cattle.

And here is Jesus' voice:

#### Matthew 5:10

KJB 1611	NKJV 1982	GNT 1976	<i>RAPPIN'</i> 1994
Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!	But those who are dissed and stepped on 'cuz they are trying to do the right thing, the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

<sup>24</sup> A discussion of my analysis of responses to the *BBC* series in articles, reviews, readers' blogs, etc. is beyond the scope of this study.

Prospective buyers and readers of the two volumes of the *BBC* series, however, could stand in no doubt as to what to expect: a quick glance at the front covers would have offered clear indications as to the specificity of this version of Scriptures, of its African frame and its customized «hip» and «rap» character for black street youth.

As Genette has shown, covers are important elements of the peritext (1997: 16). The *BBC*'s cover features a cloth belt whose shape and serpentine movement bring to mind the serpent in Genesis. The fabric of the belt shows typical African colours and patterns. The background is black, almost certainly not a casual or merely aesthetic choice designed to bring out the belt's colours; total black on the covers of both books in the *BBC* series seems rather a visual and immediate announcement of the *cultural blackness* of both works, of their *black* frames. The title, *Black Bible Chronicles*, is in large letters and is followed by the subtitle in smaller letters. The subtitle, «From *Genesis* to the Promised Land», has the important function to indicate clearly that the book only includes some stories (chronicles), not all, from those books of the Old Testament that describe the creation of the world and the hardships of God's chosen people from slavery in Egypt to their liberation, a narrative that black political discourses and biblical hermeneutics often appropriated, casting African Americans as God's new chosen people. The second subtitle at the bottom of the cover is the manifesto of the series: «A Survival Manual for the Streets», a declaration of its intended readership and function. The front cover of *Rappin' with Jesus* is also very interesting: the four Evangelists on the black cover are characterized as African men both physically and through the style and traditional patterns of their clothes. The title, *Rappin' with Jesus*, is preceded by the indication that this volume is part of *The Black Bible Chronicles* series, a mention which serves to cast this work as part of a sustained project and is also undoubtedly meant to promote the previous volume. The subtitle, «The Good News According to the Four Brothers», appears at the bottom of this cover. The terms «Rappin'» and «Brothers» are clear indicators of the linguistic and cultural framework of McCary's retelling of the Gospels.

## 7. Conclusion

Pym argues that translation history «should explain why translations were produced in a particular social time and place» (1998: ix) and with reference to Bible translations and retranslations, Wimbush (2000: 9) rightly suggests that meaningful research questions are «what is done with the Bible, for whom and why, and to what end»: my article has attempted to answer those questions in relation to a widely circulated 1990s rewording of part of the Bible in African American Vernacular English and street slang for African American urban street youth. My analysis of the socio-cultural contexts of its production, of paratextual elements, and translative choices has shown the marked social and political situatedness of this rewriting which is an eloquent illustration of the view that «the act of translation involves more than language» and that «translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history» (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999: 6): indeed, McCary's peculiar reception and propagation of the biblical text confirms Gadamer's view of the «situated nature of *all* interpretative acts» (Lieb et al. 2011: 1)<sup>25</sup>.

My study has also described the construction of the *Black Bible Chronicles* series as a didactic, evangelising, and empowering tool, as well as a contribution to the process of

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<sup>25</sup> On the history of responses to the Bible (reception history), see *The Oxford handbook of the reception history of the Bible*. Reception history is based on the hermeneutical reflection of Gadamer (1975).

demarginalization of African American identity. In the very Protestant perspective of the centrality of the Word and unmediated universal access to it, McCary aims at full linguistic and cultural intelligibility of the Scriptures, as well as their relevance, for her target readers in consideration of their cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and knowledge frames and the conditions of their life. Possessing none of the philological and theological tools of great individual translators such as Tyndale, Coverdale, or Luther, she nonetheless passionately shared their aims of taking the Bible to the people, all of them, including her marginalized target readers.

Bible translation throughout history has often been an ideological and political battlefield and those who enter it must be aware of the risks and challenges. With reference to Bourdieu's concepts of *illusio* and literary field<sup>26</sup>, the stakes and aims that motivated McCary led her to enter the field of biblical translation despite her lack of scholarly stature to enable the descendants of those African American slaves deprived for a very long time of freedom, including the freedom to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, to fully possess a biblical text that validates their linguistic and cultural codes. In light of the African Americans' struggle to gain access to the Bible through literacy and the development of their own hermeneutics – which intersected with their struggle for civil rights – by encouraging and enabling black youth to own and read the Bible, McCary continued down the path of her ancestors as she herself very significantly observed in one of her blogs titled «I am the hope of slaves made tangible»<sup>27</sup>. Describing herself as «a child of the Diaspora», she reflects that she cannot tell

where my ancestors hailed from. I'm a Texan and two of my children are as well. [...] We are Americans whose roots were cut away because of the enslavement of some of my ancestors. [...] I was taught that I am the hope of my ancestors, a hope that belies the struggle of those enslaved.

McCary is a biblical interpreter with an assertive voice used to inscribe her social, political, and evangelical agendas into her rewriting. She is aware of the potentially disturbing character of God's African American voice, but at the same time she is deeply convinced of the usefulness of her biblical «survival manual for the streets» and of the legitimacy and efficacy of her mediating role: this is her reply to her critics: «Anyone who feels that they have a problem with the book should talk to God about it» (Smith: 1993).

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<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu observes that the literary field as he views it is «a force-field acting on all those who enter it, and acting in a differential manner according to the position they occupy there» (1996, p. 232). For an authoritative analysis of the American field of bible translation, see Gutjhar (2017).

<sup>27</sup> McCary's reflection was published on 2 November 2016 in the now closed HuffPost Contributor Platform.

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