**Kristina Kočan Šalamon**
Slovenia

2015, Vol. 12 (2), 211-224(244)
revije.ff.uni-lj.si/elope
doi: 10.4312/elope.12.2.211-224
UDC: 81'255.4:821.111(73=013)-1=163.6"1950/…

# Translating Culture: Contemporary African American Poetry

ABSTRACT

The paper interrogates cultural specifics of contemporary African American poetry and exhibits translation problems when translating this poetic work. African American writers have always included much of their cultural heritage in their writing and this is immediately noticed by a translator. The cultural elements, such as African American cuisine, attire and style in general, as well as spiritual and religious practices, often play a significant role for African American poets who are proclaiming their identity. Moreover, the paper presents the translation problems that emerge when attempting to transfer such a specific, even exotic, source culture into a target culture, like Slovene. The goal is to show to what extent contemporary African American poetry can successfully be translated into the Slovene language and to highlight the parts that inevitably remain lost in the translation process.

**Keywords:** African American poetry; African American culture; translation; source culture; target culture

# Prevajanje kulture: sodobna afriško ameriška poezija

POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje kulturno-specifične prvine znotraj sodobne afriško ameriške poezije ter predstavlja probleme pri prevajanju takšne poezije. Afriško ameriški pesniki in pisatelji so že od nekdaj vključevali elemente lastne kulturne dediščine in to je prav tista lastnost, ki jo prevajalec nemudoma opazi. Kulturno-specifični elementi, kot so afriško ameriška prehrana, oblačila in stil nasploh ter duhovno in versko prepričanje, igrajo pogosto pomembno vlogo za afriško ameriške pesnike, tudi pri potrjevanju lastne identitete. Članek tako oriše prevajalske probleme med procesom prenosa te specifične, celo eksotične izvirne kulture v ciljno kulturo, kot je slovenska. Namen članka je prikazati, do kakšne mere lahko to specifično poezijo uspešno prevedemo v slovenski jezik, ter elemente, ki neizbežno ostanejo izgubljeni med procesom prevajanja.

**Ključne besede:** afriško ameriška poezija; afriško ameriška kultura; prevajanje; izvirna kultura; ciljna kultura

# Translating Culture: Contemporary African American Poetry

## 1 Introduction

African American poetry often differs from traditional literary norms, and this is what a translator notices first. Many contemporary African American poets do not use Standard English and resort to unusual typography as well as their cultural heritage. This paper examines the cultural elements of African American poetry after 1950. African American food items, apparel, and spiritual beliefs are all part of African American culture. Poets tend to include these as well as various cultural references in their writing, and it is difficult to translate a source culture of such cultural specifics for a target culture and language so widely removed without making serious errors, or at least slightly changing meanings. The attempt is to present the translator's encounter with such poetry, including its dilemmas, and also to present potential translation solutions. Each cultural compound and related translation problem is supported by examples, analysis, and discussion. The goal is to show to what extent African American poetry and culture can be transferred into the Slovene language and its culture. Inevitably, it will identify a share of elements that are lost in translation.

The root problem of translating African American poetry also hinges on the fact that not much African American poetry has been translated into Slovene so far. Therefore the present generation of translators are almost pioneers in this field. There was an anthology of African poetry in 1976 entitled *Afrika, mati moja*[1] (*Africa, Mother of Mine*), which included eight African American poets.[2] In 1986 an anthology of American poetry, *Antologija ameriške poezije 20. Stoletja*[3] (Anthology of American 20th-century poetry), was published, which included only two African American poets.[4] In 2006 the author of this study and Samo Šalamon translated twenty-one contemporary African American poets, and these were published in the anthology *Govoreči boben* (*The Talking Drum*; see Kočan and Šalamon 2006). This anthology served to some extent as the basis for the present study.[5]

---

1 Translated by Veno Taufer and Aleš Berger.

2 Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Dudley Randal, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lance Jeffers, Naomi Long Madgett, and Amiri Baraka under his original name LeRoi Jones, a name that he never used after 1968. The anthology includes two other poets as African American, i.e. Claude McKay and Keorapetse Kgositsile; however, this classification is incorrect: McKay is a Jamaican American poet and Kgositsile is a South African poet.

3 Translated by Miha Avanzo, Andrej Arko, Bogdan Gradišnik, Boris A. Novak, Mart Ogen, Denis Poniž, Jure Potokar, Marjan Strojan, Veno Taufer, Dane Zajc, Irena Zorko Novak.

4 Bogdan Gradišnik translated two poems by Gwendolyn Brooks and Jure Potokar translated four poems by Amiri Baraka.

5 Due to the fact that the existing translations by other translators of African American poetry into Slovene published in the above mentioned anthologies are scarce, the present author chose not to add those translations in the paper. The main reason why the paper does not employ a comparative approach is that the somewhat limited selection of previously translated African American poems by Veno Taufer in *Afrika, mati moja*, and Bogdan Gradišnik and Jure Potokar in *Antologija ameriške poezije 20. Stoletja*, does not include poems that involve culture-specific elements/items, which this paper examines. In the informative afterword to the anthology *Afrika, mati moja*, Veno Taufer and Aleš Berger mention the "exotic aspect of African American culture"; however, none of the translated poems includes the typical (exotic) culture-based features. If the paper was to discuss the general characteristics of contemporary African American poetry, the present author would consider and observe also translations by other translators. Nevertheless, the paper focuses exclusively on culture-specific elements in African American poetry after 1950.

## 2 Translating African American Culture in Poetry

African American culture, which is partly based on an African heritage, plays a major part in the life of African American people. This is apparent in the literature of many African American writers.[6] Ever since the 1960s, when the motto "Black is beautiful" became important for members of African American society, many ordinary African Americans – not just intellectuals – actually began to live this idea:

> For the first time in the nation's history, black was considered beautiful, and black power and black pride were images and attitudes to be celebrated and revered, not hidden or feared. Wearing big natural Afros, dashikis, and African beads, blacks, young and old, raised their fists to salute Black Power… (Liggins Hill 1998, 1355)

African American writers attempted to interweave elements of their culture into their writing; some mention their typical diet, some their apparel, while others write under the influence of black music or gospel. Still others write about older African systems of belief. Another important cultural aspect of the literature of African American writers involves allusions to important historical events, people or places, such as New Orleans or Mississippi. Many writers use the Black Vernacular.

When translating African American poetry, it is vital that the translator be aware of translation's function as intercultural communication. Grosman (1997, 11), for instance, claims that literary translation is the most important form of intercultural mediation of fiction and that it has been ever since the term literature has existed in the present meaning of the word. Since African American poetry is full of cultural allusions, the translator must learn about African American heritage and culture. Grosman also mentions the theorist Christina Schaffner, who points out the importance of the translator's knowledge and understanding of the culture where the text originates.

A further step in the process of translation is the translator's decision whether a culture-based word, which in some cases may even sound exotic, should be translated or adapted. In this case, André Lefevere (1992, 125) claims: "Translations not only project an image of the work that is translated and, through it, of the world that work belongs to; they also protect their own world against images that are too radically different, either by adapting them or by screening them out." It is difficult to present a foreign culture through literature to a target culture, since the translator must be able to adapt foreign words or on many occasions add footnotes to explain what an exotic word actually means. Lefevere (1992, 127) also reminds us that "On the level of universe of discourse the clash between two cultures can result in various forms of misunderstanding, of acculturation, and all kinds of mixtures in between."

## 3 Style and Fashion

Many African American poets find African American apparel, together with different hair styles to be important parts of African American culture and heritage. They refer instinctively to what is a natural part of their surroundings. Nikki Giovanni often uses different types of apparel in her

[6] I refer to African American poets after 1950, such as Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, Michael S.Harper, Quincy Troupe, Al Young, Ishmael Reed, and others.

poetry. In the poem "Beautiful Black Men,"[7] she uses terms such as *dashiki* and *afro*. A dashiki is a loose fitting garment made from brightly colored, patterned fabric. The patterns had their origin in the Kente cloth of West Africa. Wearing bright colors is a cultural expression through which Africans communicate their desire to bring vitality to everyday life. Dashikis were popular in the sixties and worn mostly by men. An "Afro," on the other hand, is a hairstyle.

Lefevere (1992, 127) claims that it is the translator's decision whether to leave the foreign words as in the original, based on "the extent to which the foreign culture is seen as central to the development of the target culture." Since theorists agree on the importance of the translator's knowledge, the current translator decided to leave words like *dashiki* in the original, because of the importance of the item within African American culture (one would, for instance, do the same with "jazz"). Lefevere (1992, 127) explains: "Some may decide to retain the exotic flavor at all costs if the exotic has a special flavor in their own universe of discourse." This is exactly what happens in the case of Nikki Giovanni's poem with its exotic words, adding a special flavor to the Slovene translation, and the reader can better grasp the notion of African American culture. A footnote would be recommended for the term *dashiki*. For the term a*fro*, the translator added the Slovene word 'haircut' after the word for clarity and because the Slovene language demands declension, and it would sound unnatural for the translator to decline *afro* (with their afros → z njihovimi afro frizurami):

| **Beautiful Black Men** | **Čudoviti črni moški** |
|---|---|
| i wanta say just gotta say something | želela sem reči samo nekaj moram reči |
| bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful | o tistih čudovitih čudovitih čudovitih |
| outasight | črnih moških |
| black men | z njihovimi afro frizurami |
| with they afros | ... |
| ... | dashiki oblekah s srajcami ki se ujemajo |
| dashiki suits with shirts that match | |

Similar examples occur in Al Young's poem "A Dance for Militant Dilettantes" and Quincy Troupe's poem "Reflections on Growing Older" (see the translations in Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 126 and 140). The translators' decision here is not as difficult, since these poets put words like *hair* or *haircut* next to the word *afro*. Young writes: "you need ... / nappy snaggly afro hair," which the translator simply translated "potrebuješ... / kodrasto štrleče afro lase"; "in a fiji haircut" → "s fiji frizuro." A similar occurrence appears in Troupe's poem: "... my roped, rasta hair snaking down in twisted salt & pepper..." → "moji zvezani rasta lasje se vijejo navzdol v mešanici soli & popra." With the latter, a Slovene reader would experience fewer problems in general, because reggae culture also emerged in Slovenia a few years ago and spread, mostly among young people. It would not, however, be amiss to put a footnote for both terms, *afro* and *rasta*.

A further example involves the poem "extended family," where the poet Janice Lowe presents another term, completely unknown to a Slovene reader: *kufi*. A *kufi* is a round skullcap, worn by Muslims as a symbol for the Islamic religion. Since many African Americans converted to Islam

[7] Translations by the current author, except if noted otherwise. Several poems have been translated exclusively for the purpose of this study.

in the 1960s, *kufis* and other Islamic attire also became part of African American culture. The current translator leaves intact both terms, *kufi* and *dashiki*, as in the case of Giovanni's poem; however, the translator adds a footnote explaining the term *kufi*:

| **extended family** | **razširjena družina** |
|---|---|
| ...<br>a guy in a kufi and dashiki once threw a<br>giant trash bag full of glass<br>at the back of my head after i refused to let<br>him sit down with me at<br>an outdoor cafe<br>… | ...<br>tip s kufijem in dashikijem je enkrat vrgel<br>velikansko vrečko polno stekla<br>za mojo glavo po tem ko nisem dovolila da<br>sedi poleg mene v<br>neki kavarni na prostem<br>... |

The poem "Me, in Kulu Se & Karma" by Carolyn Rodgers, on the other hand, offers almost the same item but designated by another word. Instead of the term *kufi*, the poet uses the term *skullcap*. This represents a different decision for the translator. Because the poet uses the term *skullcaps*, it becomes impossible to leave it in the original; it is not an exotic word but an ordinary English one, and the translator is obliged to translate it. Slovene culture does not have a word that refers exactly to a *kufi* or, therefore, a *skullcap*. The Slovene language has only the word cap or round cap. The meaning is partly lost, since the translation does not carry the reference to the Islamic cap:

| **Me, in Kulu Se & Karma** | **Jaz, v Kulu Se & Karma** |
|---|---|
| ...<br>found skullcaps lining up the both sides<br>of the street ... | ...<br>našla sem čepice razvrščene na obeh straneh<br>ulice ... |

# 4 African American Cuisine

Special food items are part of African American culture, as well. In their poetry, African American poets generally use food items that are closely connected to their culture. This cuisine has its origin in the southern part of the United States, and it was influenced by the historical reality of slavery. In the following poem "Knoxville, Tennessee," Nikki Giovanni mentions a few food items in connection with African American cuisine: *okra* and *greens* in particular, even *barbeque*. The term g*reens* refers to various kinds of spinach grown in the southern slave states. For a translator, these food items can be problematic. *Okra* or even the English word *greens* are both rather new to Slovene readers. Because of globalization, one can occasionally find imported okra in Slovenia, but it is not common. The word okra has, however, been commercially adopted in Slovenia. *Greens*, on the other hand, is unknown; a Slovene reader who understands English would, when reading the word *greens*, immediately think it refers to green vegetables in general. Therefore, there is the possibility of translating the word by describing it, to translate it as spinach leaves (listje špinače). Clifford E. Landers (2001, 80) warns the translator, though: "…provide only as much information as can be conveyed without resort to artificiality." On such occasions, explanation is the only possible way to achieve at least a similar meaning, if the exact one is impossible to maintain: "Most translators compensate in one way or another: they add features

that do not match features in the original on a one-to-one basis but that can be said to be in the spirit of the original" (Lefevere 1992, 105).

Even the word *barbeque* needs the translator's attention. In Standard English the word *barbecue* refers either to the grill itself, or is an adjective describing the meat prepared on the grill (e.g. barbecued chicken). If people refer to barbeque, as "going for barbeque" (as is the case in the poem), they are African Americans using Black English. The translator cannot present this difference in translation, since there is only one Slovene word for barbeque: 'žar'. Slovenes use 'meso z žara', which literally refers to 'barbeque meat' and stands for 'barbeque':

| **Knoxville, Tennessee** | **Knoxville, Tennessee** |
|---|---|
| I always like summer | Vedno imam poletja |
| best | najraje |
| you can eat fresh corn | lahko ješ svežo koruzo |
| from daddy's garden | z očkovega vrta |
| and okra | in okro |
| and greens | in listje špinače |
| and cabbage | in zelje |
| and lots of | in ogromno mesa z |
| barbeque | žara |
| and buttermilk | in pinjenec |
| and homemade ice-cream | in domači sladoled |
| at the church picnic | na cerkvenem pikniku |
| ... | ... |

In the poem "Roast Possum" by Rita Dove, the poet mentions eating an opossum. There are no opossums in Slovenia, but if there were, Slovene people most probably would include them in their diet as a specialty. Slovene people occasionally eat game, including deer, wild rabbits, etc. Some people even eat dormice, but those are a specialty and are rarely eaten nowadays. It is definitely not part of an everyday diet. Opossums, squirrels, and rabbits, however, were a part of the African American diet during the time of slavery, or even later in more rural areas. There are no actual dilemmas for the translator, although some readers might well be puzzled by why someone is eating opossum. To translate *sweet potatoes* is also not a translation dilemma, since the translator simply literally translates the expression. Even if the poet were referring to yams (sweet potatoes with orange flesh), the translator would translate it as *sweet potatoes* (*sladki krompir*):

| **Roast Possum** | **Pečeni oposum** |
|---|---|
| Yessir, | Ja gospod, |
| We enjoyed that possum. We ate him | uživali smo v tistem oposumu. Pojedli smo ga |
| Real slow, with sweet potatoes. | zares počasi, s sladkim krompirjem. |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 160) |

An interesting term to describe a food item occurs in Tom Dent's poem "Magnolia Street": *gumbo*. Gumbo is a spicy stew that originates in New Orleans, Louisiana, but the word comes from the African word 'ngombo', which means okra, and okra is the main ingredient of this dish. It is a fairly new word for a Slovene reader, and the translator has the possibility to translate the word either by explaining it or by just leaving it in the original. Lefevere draws a parallel example in the case of *borscht*, saying that the first Russian translations needed a footnote explaining the term; nowadays it is common to all of Western Europe and even the United States. In the case of gumbo, the translator must decide to add a footnote. Otherwise it is impossible for a reader to grasp the meaning of the term *gumbo*, since Dent places the term in a context that does not even imply a food topic. Landers (2001, 79), however, claims, "Surprisingly, there are times when the best way of dealing with seemingly opaque items in the source culture is not to translate them at all." The translators leave the word in the original, preferably adding a footnote.

| **Magnolia Street** | **Magnolijina ulica** |
|---|---|
| … | … |
| music for siesta and dreaming | glasba za siesto in sanjarjenje |
| and funerals | in pogrebe |
| & sun-happiness Saturday nights | & sončno-srečne sobotne noči |
| & your clumsy heavy winding | & vaše nerodne naporne vijugaste |
| stairsteps | stopnice |
| & the circular room that looked | & okrogla soba ki je izgledala |
| like a lighthouse | kakor svetilnik |
| & gumbo | & gumbo |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 46) |

# 5 Belief Systems

Belief systems, such as voodoo, stand in close relation to African American culture. Many proverbs and tales originate in Africa. Patricia Liggins Hill explains voodoo thus:

> A system of belief in Dahomey and Haiti, but reduced to a system of magic when it entered the United States through New Orleans in 1809, hoodoo (changed to voodoo outside the United States) became a way for African Americans to try to equalize the imbalance of power in their world. The system depended on belief … and it contained elaborate processes by which one could be conjured, the ways in which such conjurings could be divined, and the means by which the conjured person could be cured. (Liggins Hill 1998, 59)

African American poets have always included African and African American spiritual beliefs in their poetry, either in connection to voodoo and other beliefs, or, since the sixties, in connection to Islam. For the translator, it is difficult to transfer the cultural aspect, since, "[c]ulture is often mindlessly accepted within the SL and may cause cultural shock in the TL readership through a stroke of devastating literal translation, since culture is expressed in 'universal' as well as in 'local' words" (Newmark 1991, 75). The actual difficulty is to what extent the translator should explain the cultural expression. Peter Newmark expresses the issue thus:

> …the only problem is the degree to which the cultural expression is to be explained in the translation, which may range from not at all (leaving the readers to calculate the meaning from a combination of the linguistic context and from their own reading in the SL culture), through a few hints to a full explanation in terms of functional (neutral) or even TL cultural equivalents. (Newmark 1991, 74)

The following examples from the poetry examined here show several cultural expressions that are connected to African American beliefs and completely unfamiliar to Slovene readers. In his poem "I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra," Ishmael Reed uses a number of allusions to Egyptian mythology (Nefertiti), jazz musicians (Sonny Rollins),[8] and astrological signs (Pisces, Aquarius). None of this is problematic for the translator, since Egyptian mythology and other allusions are generally known among Slovene readers or are at least recognizable. The dilemma occurs in the second half of the poem, as the poet presents us with the line: "bring me my bones of Ju-Ju snake." The translator must again play the role of researcher to be able to translate the expression *Ju-Ju snake*. In this case it is impossible to assume that the reader can or will decode the meaning of the linguistic context, unless the reader is familiar with the expression. The majority of Slovene readers will incorrectly understand that the *Ju-Ju snake* is a kind of a snake, as if it were, for example, a rattlesnake. But for the sake of preserving the features of the source culture, and according to Lefevere (1992, 127), "to retain the exotic flavor," the translator must leave the term *Ju-Ju* as in the original, but must also include a footnote in order to explain the meaning. *Ju-Ju* or just *juju* is a West African word for magic, and it usually refers to good luck. It should not be associated with voodoo. The translation reads: "prinesi mi moje kosti Ju-Ju kače" (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 121–22).

Another such example occurs in Jayne Cortez's poem "Orisha."[9] The translator should, as in the previous example, add a footnote explaining the term *Orisha*. *Orisha* is another term that is unknown to Slovene readers. *Orisha* (also *Orisa* or *Orixa*) refers to a spirit in the Yoruba religion; it represents the forces of nature. The translator preserved the exotic by leaving the term *Orisha* as in the original. *Satchmo* is not that problematic, as most readers of poetry know that Satchmo refers to Louis Armstrong.

| **Orisha** | **Orisha** |
|---|---|
| … | … |
| burning veins of respect forward into blues | zažigajo žile spoštovanja naprej v blues |
| into pulsating ear of my cobra skin heart | v utripajoče uho mojega kobrsko kožnega srca |
| immense in its infancy of these few words | ogromnega v svoji otroškosti teh nekaj besed |
| Orisha Orisha Satchmo Orisha | Orisha Orisha Satchmo Orisha |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 83) |

A slightly different example can be found in Quincy Troupe's poem "Snake-Back Solo." In the third, fifty-ninth and eighty-third line, Troupe uses the term *mojo*; he actually derives a participle out of it, *mojoin*. The term *mojo* meant originally a magic charm or a spell, even luck (good or

[8] Sonny Rollins (1930–), a jazz tenor saxophonist and a composer.

[9] There are several such examples in African American poetry: Amiri Baraka's poem Ka' Ba, where Ka' Ba refers to Islam, and the translator leaves the term as in the original but adds a footnote.

bad mojo), all in connection to voodoo. *Mojo* was a term also often found in blues lyrics, as blues lyrics were full of superstitious elements. We can see this in the famous song "Hoochie Coochie Man" (I got a black cat bone / I got a mojo too ...), or in "Got My Mojo Working" (I'm going down to Louisiana to get me a mojo hand / I'm going down to Louisiana to get me a mojo hand / I'm gonna have all you women right here at my command / Got my mojo working ...) by Muddy Waters.[10]

Nowadays, it often refers to sex appeal or personal charm. This is one of the cases where, as Newmark (1991, 74) explains, the translator must find a TL equivalent for the cultural term, since it seems impossible to translate the word *mojo* as in the previous example *Orisha*. Even the pronunciation in English and Slovene differs, since the spelling <j> in Slovene is similar to <y> in English and is thus pronounced as /j/. That does not represent a major dilemma in the case of *juju*, but in the case of *mojo* it could sound awkward since *moj* in Slovene means *my*. The translator decided on a TL equivalent, the Slovene word *čar*, which stands for *charm*. The originality is therefore partly lost, but at least the reader is given an understandable term. Newmark expands on this argument:

> If the translator's first task is to contribute to understanding (and peace) between individual groups and nations, and the second is to transmit knowledge (technology transfer), then the third is to mediate cultural features not so much in terms of target language cultural features ('cultural equivalents) which are pragmatically vivid but usually inaccurate … but in terms of universal experience and ultimately common humanity. (Newmark 1991, 74)

| **Snake-Back Solo** | **Kačji solo** |
|---|---|
| … | … |
| up & under eye come slidin on in mojoin | zgoraj & spodaj pridrsim s svojim čarom |
| … | … |
| as blues solo of the matrix mojoin new blues solo | kakor blues solo matrice ki čara novi blues solo |
| … | … |
| up & under eye come slidin on in mojoin on in | zgoraj & spodaj jaz pridrsim s svojim čarom |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 141) |

# 6 Cultural Allusions

African American poetry after 1950 is also full of allusions. According to Lefevere, there are four types of allusions: biblical, classical, cultural, and literary. The translator's main issue when translating African American poetry involves cultural allusions that allude to either personal names or geographical names. Some allusions are references to a particular historical era or event. Dilemmas emerge even when translating personal or geographical names. In his article, Uroš Mozetič quotes Newmark as he explains that in most cases there is a rule that personal names in texts are not translated in order to maintain their national status (Mozetič 1997, 61). Therefore it is best to leave the names as in the original.

[10] Both songs from the CD *Muddy Waters at Newport, Muddy Waters Live*, BGO Records (1996).

When poets use a personal name in their poems, that is usually an allusion to an important historical figure,[11] but it can occasionally be an allusion to a person with whom the poet stands in a relation of some kind (e.g. Al Young: "For Arl in Her Sixth Month"). Quincy Troupe was one of many poets who often used the name Malcolm X in his poems. In the poem "For Malcolm Who Walks in the Eyes of Our Children" the poet not only mentions Malcolm X but almost deifies him as Jesus, presents him as a savior. Troupe includes another name in the poem, Coltrane. In that line the poet compares Malcolm X to the jazz musician John Coltrane. On such occasions, the translator leaves the names in the original to show their nationality and because these names usually represent important figures. A footnote containing brief information about the person is recommended.

| **For Malcolm Who Walks in the Eyes of Our Children** | **Za Malcolma, ki hodi v očeh naših otrok** |
|---|---|
| … | … |
| came singing like Coltrane breathing life | prišel je pojoč kot Coltrane vdihnil življenje |
| into stone statues formed from lies | kamnitim kipom izklesanim iz laži |
| | |
| Malcolm, flaming cosmic spirit who walks | Malcolm, ognjeviti kozmični duh ki hodi |
| amongst us, we hear your voice | med nami, slišimo tvoj glas |
| speaking wisdom in the wind, | ki govori modrost v veter, |
| we see your vision in the life / fires of men, | vidimo tvojo vizijo v življenju / ognju mož, |
| in our incredible young children | v naših neverjetno mladih otrocih |
| who watch your image | ki gledajo tvojo podobo |
| flaming in the sun | ko žari na soncu |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 139) |

The same occurs when poets include geographical names in their poems. An interesting phenomenon occurs in Tom Dent's poem "Magnolia Street." New Orleans is the place mentioned in the poem, and Dent is describing the pulse of this town. The dilemma about translating names does not occur, since names usually remain as in the original. We would translate America into the Slovene term 'Amerika', though. The poet also adds to the flavor of the town by writing the name New Orleans in the way the people in the south would pronounce it, *nawlins* → /ˈnɔ:lɪns/ – and here a certain lexical problem emerges. If the translator used the same form of the lexeme, then the meaning would most probably be lost, since a Slovene reader would never read or pronounce the word New Orleans as it occurs in the south of the United States. Therefore the translator had to adapt Dent's written form into a possible Slovene pronunciation: *nuulins* → /nu:lɪns/.

[11] Other poets used historical persons such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and a number of jazz musicians or poets.

| **Magnolia Street** | **Magnolijina ulica** |
|---|---|
| dear Miss Lucas | draga gospa Lucas |
| i remember you | spomnim se vas |
| when i pass Felicity & | ko grem mimo Felicity & |
| Magnolia | Magnolia |
| yes old Magnolia | da stare Magnolijine |
| | |
| that rickety winding street | tiste razmajane vijugaste ulice |
| that smells New Orleans | ki diši po New Orleansu |
| | |
| that is open fish-markets | to so ribje tržnice na odprtem |
| people lounging | ljudje ki postopajo |
| memories of numbers tickets strewn | spomini na loterijske srečke nastlani |
| like confetti over the sidewalks | kot konfeti na pločnikih |
| | |
| that rickety winding street | tista razmajana vijugasta ulica |
| that sounds New Orleans | ki diši po New Orleansu |
| | |
| which is music | ki je glasba |
| loud | glasna |
| music for siesta and dreaming | glasba za siesto in sanjarjenje |
| and funerals | in pogrebe |
| & sun-happiness Saturday nights | & sončno-srečne sobotne noči |
| & your clumsy heavy winding | & vaše nerodne naporne vijugaste |
| stairsteps | stopnice |
| & the circular room that looked | & okrogla soba ki je izgledala |
| like a lighthouse | kakor svetilnik |
| & gumbo | & gumbo |
| | |
| that broken winding street | tista polomljena vijugasta ulica |
| that breathes naw/lins | ki diha nuu/lins |
| | |
| which is everybody knowing your bizness | kar je da vsi vedo vse o vas |
| Miss Lucas | Gospa Lucas |
| is it not? | ali pač? |
| … | ... |
| | (Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 46) |

A different translation dilemma occurs when poets allude to a certain historical event. In the poem "Alabama Centennial," Naomi Long Madgett writes about several events in Alabama since the end of slavery. She briefly surveys the history of the African American people, describing

the hideous circumstances of slavery; she subtly tells about the Montgomery bus boycott, the Greensboro events, using the famous chant from the Civil Rights Movement ("We shall overcome"); she mentions Birmingham, where four black girls were killed, and even Selma. In the end she tells the reader that now is the time to act and that it is time for some changes. If the reader is not familiar with the events in Alabama, where segregation was almost the strongest, it is the translator's obligation to add a footnote with brief references to all the places of events. The names of the places stay, as in previous examples, in the original.

| **Alabama Centennial** | **Stoletnica Alabame** |
|---|---|
| They said, "Wait." Well, I waited.<br>For a hundred years I waited<br>In cotton fields, kitchens, balconies,<br>In bread lines, at back doors, on chain gangs,<br>In stinking "colored" toilets<br>And crowded ghettos,<br>Outside of schools and voting booths.<br>And some said, "Later."<br>And some said, "Never!" | Rekli so: »Počakaj.« Torej, sem počakala.<br>Sto let sem čakala<br>na poljih bombaža, v kuhinjah, na balkonih,<br>v vrstah za kruh, pri zadnjih vratih, v ujetništvu,<br>v smrdljivih »barvnih« straniščih<br>in prenatrpanih getih<br>zunaj šol in volišč.<br>In nekateri so rekli: »Kasneje.«<br>In drugi spet: »Nikoli!« |
| Then a new wind blew, and a new voice<br>Rode its wings with quiet urgency,<br>Strong, determined, sure. | Nato je zapihal nov veter in novi glas<br>je zamahnil s krili s tiho nujnostjo,<br>močno, odločno, gotovo. |
| "No," it said. "Not 'never,' not 'later."<br>Not even 'soon.'<br>Now.<br>Walk!" | »Ne,« je rekel. »Ne 'nikoli', ne 'kasneje'.<br>Niti ne 'kmalu'.<br>Zdaj.<br>Hodite!« |
| And other voices echoed the freedom words,<br>"Walk together, children, don't get weary,"<br>Whispered them, sang them, prayed them,<br>shouted them.<br>"Walk!"<br>And I walked the streets of Montgomery<br>Until a link in the chain of patient acquiescence<br>broke. | In ostali glasovi so odzvanjali besede svobode,<br>»Hodite skupaj, otroci, ne utrudite se,«<br>so jih šepetali, prepevali, molili, kričali.<br>»Hodite!«<br>In hodila sem po ulicah Montgomeryja,<br>dokler se ni člen verige potrpežljive privolitve<br>odtrgal. |
| Then again: Sit down!<br>And I sat down at the counters of Greensboro.<br>Ride! And I rode the bus for freedom.<br>Kneel! And I went down on my knees in prayer<br>and faith.<br>March! And I'll march until the last chain falls<br>Singing, "We shall overcome." | Nato spet: Sedite!<br>In sem sedla poleg blagajne v Greensboru.<br>Peljite se! In sem se odpeljala z avtobusom za<br>svobodo.<br>Pokleknite! In sem pokleknila v molitvi in veri.<br>Korakajte! In korakala bom, dokler se zadnja<br>veriga ne pretrga<br>pojoč: »Premagali bomo.« |

| | |
|---|---|
| Not all the dogs and hoses in Birmingham<br>Nor all the clubs and guns in Selma<br>Can turn this tide.<br>Not all the jails can hold these young black faces<br>From their destiny of manhood,<br>Of equality, of dignity,<br>Of the American Dream<br>A hundred years past due.<br>Now! | Niti vsi psi in cevi Birminghama<br>niti vsi kiji in pištole Selme<br>ne morejo preprečiti tega vala.<br>Niti vsi zapori ne morejo zadržati vseh teh<br>mladih črnih<br>obrazov<br>pred njihovo usodo moškosti,<br>enakosti, dostojanstva,<br>ameriških sanj,<br>zapadlih pred stotimi leti.<br>Zdaj!<br><br>(Kočan and Šalamon 2006, 25) |

Since cultural aspects are strongly represented in African American poetry, it is the translator's obligation to maintain these as much as possible, in order to successfully transfer the source culture for the target culture. The translator must be aware of cultural aspects, since they contribute a great deal to this poetry and to poetry in general. Lefevere expresses this notion:

> On the micro level translators can use all the linguistic and hermeneutic techniques they have learned, but the finality of their endeavor is the text as part of the culture, not the much vaunted struggle with the word the sentence, the line. For this reason potential translators need to learn about the conditions or constraints – ideological, poetological, sociocultural, linguistic – under which texts come into being... (Lefevere 1992, 13)

# 7 Conclusion

This paper has presented various cultural characteristics of African American poetry after 1950. Moreover, the attempt was to focus on the most obvious dilemmas and problems the translator might encounter when translating such poetry. The findings show that the occurrence of cultural allusions as well as the inclusion of items closely connected to the African American cultural background in the poetry of African American poets tend to present certain difficulties and limitations for a translator of such specific writing. First, the translator has to be a skilled researcher to become familiar with the specifics of the African American culture and then he/she can begin translating. African American food, pieces of clothing and their fashion style in general, cultural allusions to historic figures and events crucial for the rights of African Americans as well as the spiritual beliefs – all these features are vital for the identity of the African American poet and have to play an important role also in the course of translating.

For the translator, the cultural aspect is always the most difficult, especially when the source culture seems exotic to the target culture. African American culture can be considered exotic to a Slovene reader of poetry in terms of its interweaving the typical features of African American culture in the literature discussed in the paper. It is the translator's obligation to transfer the cultural expressions in a manner understandable and acceptable to Slovene readers. S/he must choose what is or is not translatable. As has been shown in this paper, part of the originality of African American language and culture is certainly lost through the process of translation. Of course, the paper cannot include all dilemmas and a number of questions remain unanswered.

# References


Baraka, Amiri. 1995. *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka*. New York: Marsilio Publishers.

Feinstein, Sascha, and Yusef Komunyakaa. 1991. *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Giovanni, Nikki. 1996. *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Grosman, Meta. 1997. "Književni prevod kot oblika medkulturnega posredovanja leposlovja." In *Književni prevod*, edited by Meta Grosman and Uroš Mozetič, 11–56. Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete.

Kočan, Kristina, and Samo Šalamon, trans. 2006. *Govoreči boben: Antologija afriško ameriške poezije po letu 1950*. Murska Sobota: Zveza kulturnih društev, Edicije revije Separatio.

Landers, Clifford E. 2001. *Literary Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Lefevere, André. 1992. *Translating Literature. Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Liggins Hill, Patricia, ed. 1998. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Mozetič, Uroš. 1997. "Splošni in posebni problemi prevajanja angleških in ameriških leposlovnih besedil v slovenščino." In *Književni prevod*, edited by Meta Grosman and Uroš Mozetič, 57–73. Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete.

Newmark, Peter. 1991. *About Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.