

## Revisiting *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: Censorship in its Spanish Translation

## Revisitar *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: La Censura en la Traducción Española

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the Spanish translation of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. It observes the effects that institutional and self-censorship have had in Andrés Bosch's version, first published in 1968 by Lumen as *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*.

Presented as the fictional autobiography of a historical figure, the novel is based on a failed revolt that took place in a Virginia plantation in 1831. The source context is described and contrasted with the target one, paying attention to the paratexts that have conditioned the novel's reception in Spain. Accessing the General Archive of the Administration shows that Bosch's translation was self-censored in a possible attempt to avoid the institutional intervention that would have delayed the book's publication. Research also shows that this same version is the one being republished in the early twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Censorship; literary translation; neo-slave Narratives; paratexts; publishing history; William Styron.

**Summary:** Introduction. The controversy surrounding *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the 1960s. Censoring *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*. Republishing a censored translation. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** Este artículo estudia la traducción española de *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, de William Styron. Se observa cómo la censura institucional y la autocensura han influido en la versión de Andrés Bosch, que Lumen publicó por primera vez en 1968 con el título *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*.

Esta novela se presenta en calidad de autobiografía ficticia de una figura histórica, pues se basa en una revuelta fallida que sucedió en una plantación de Virginia en 1831. Se describe el contexto fuente y se contrasta con el meta para prestar atención a los paratextos que han condicionado la

recepción de la novela en España. Al acceder al Archivo General de la Administración, se han descubierto indicios de autocensura en la traducción de Bosch, en un posible intento de evitar la intervención de las instituciones, la cual habría retrasado la publicación del libro. La investigación también muestra que esta misma versión se ha vuelto a publicar a principios del siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** Censura; traducción literaria; novelas de esclavitud; paratextos; historia editorial; William Styron.

**Sumario:** Introducción. La polémica alrededor de *The Confessions of Nat Turner* en los años sesenta. La censura de *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*. Republicar una traducción censurada. Conclusiones.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to study the Spanish publication history of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Originally written by William Styron, a white Southerner, this novel came out in October 1967. It was translated into Spanish by Andrés Bosch and it was first published by Lumen in 1968. Later, this translation was republished in 1980 and in 2000, the latest being an edition commemorating Lumen's fortieth anniversary. In 2016, Bosch's rendering of Styron's text was reprinted once again, this time by Capitán Swing.

The novel is presented as Styron's fictional autobiography of Nat Turner, the enslaved African American preacher who led a failed revolt against white masters in Virginia in 1831. It is the protagonist himself who delves into his personal motivations as the book begins in the rebellion's aftermath, when Turner is held in a prison cell and awaits his execution. Thomas Gray, a white attorney, interrogates Turner, who, in a long flashback, comments on his childhood and describes his experiences as an enslaved boy at Samuel Turner's plantation, where he is taught how to read and write. The narrator describes the physical abuses he endures and how he is eventually bought by Travis, the farmer who lets him become a preacher for his fellow enslaved Black people. As a preacher, Turner experiences several religious visions, meets Margaret Whitehead—a wealthy white lady whom he sexually desires—and starts to plot a rebellion against the white slaveholders. After persuading most Black people in his religious congregation, Turner's revolt begins on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1831, but it does not turn out as he expected. The rebels get drunk, Turner hesitates in the ensuing turmoil, and the sadistic Will ends up leading the revolt. He deems the protagonist a coward and forces him to murder Margaret. The white authorities stop the mutiny violently and slaughter all

the rebellious Black people, except for Nat, who is imprisoned and is sentenced to death by hanging.

When this book came out in the United States in 1967, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* became one of the most polemical American novels in the second half of the twentieth century (Manuel 79), due to the fact a white writer appropriated the true story of a nineteenth-century Black man who rebelled against the institution of slavery. Despite the controversy it spurred, it was also a best-selling book and it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year. Hence, in Section 1, the first step is to observe the context in which Styron's source text was published, namely, the emergence of African American neo-slave Narratives and the responses it got in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, edited by John Hendrik Clarke in 1968.

Following the tenets of Descriptive Translation Studies (Toury xi–xiii), this paper does not aim to prescribe how Bosch should have translated Styron's novel into Spanish, underlining the fragments in which some translation errors may be found. On the contrary, Section 2 examines the political and cultural context in which the target text was produced. In order to do so, the paratexts that frame Bosch's *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* will be observed, as they have the "capacity to explain, contextualize, and justify a product" (Braga Riera 254). Paratexts may be defined broadly as the "elements in a published work that accompany the text" (Braga Riera 249), providing readers with "the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" and discarding a given text (Genette 2). Specifically, paratexts resort to both linguistic and visual elements to get readers' attention, to explain the text's content, and to guide the reading. They may be divided into two subcategories, peritexts and epitexts. Peritexts are those paratexts which are physically joined to the text, such as "footnotes and endnotes, prefaces and forewords, introductions, epilogues or afterwords, postscript, dedications, acknowledgements, indexes, titles, and subtitles, chapter synopsis and headings" (Braga Riera 249), together with visual elements, such as illustrations, covers, and dust jackets. An epitext can be "any paratext not materially appended to the text" (Genette 344) that somehow conditions the text's reception, for instance, reviews, interviews with the author, book signings, tours, book fairs, and censorship reports. For example, peritexts like covers can emphasize certain elements that will draw readers to the book, whereas epitexts such as press reviews may boost the book's sales.

The paratexts accompanying the Spanish translation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* will be studied in Sections 2 and 3 to try to understand how they have influenced the reception of this novel in Spain. The main reason for this textual analysis is that Styron's novel was first rendered into Spanish during the Francoist dictatorship, so Section 2 delves into the impact both institutional and self-censorship had on this translation. Section 3 observes how the same censored translation was republished decades later, after the Spanish Transition to democracy, with changing peritexts. Particularly, it is interesting to ponder how this kind of paratexts have conditioned the portrayal of Blackness in the target culture,<sup>1</sup> as it had already happened in the case of Margaret Walker's *Jubileo*, the first neo-slave narrative to be translated into Spanish in 1968 (Sanz Jiménez).

### 1. THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING *THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER* IN THE 1960S

Similarly to *Jubileo*, by Margaret Walker, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* depicts the traumatic experiences that the protagonist endures under the institution of slavery in the antebellum South, so Styron's novel could be labeled as neo-slave narrative. This subgenre of historical fiction may be defined as the “modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (Bell 289) that American writers began to publish in the 1960s. Amidst the social changes demanded by the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, Black writers and activists suggested that revisiting, from a contemporary perspective, the texts that articulated African American subjectivity for the first time—autobiographies by former slaves like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown—could help “discuss the issues concerning contemporary racial identities” (Dubey 333).

Nevertheless, considering *The Confessions of Nat Turner* a neo-slave narrative may be troublesome. Indeed, the novel fits into Bell's definition

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the concept of Blackness is understood as the cultural expression of the Black experience in the United States, in contrast to the white cultural impositions, in line with Landry's remarks on how “African Americans are bound together by not only the presence of outward physical similarities but also a collective history of American slavery and racial subjecthood, convergent life chances, and shared placement in the US racial structure” (127). For another philosophical approach to the notion of Blackness, refer to Fanon, Frantz. “The Fact of Blackness.” *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 2008, pp. 82–108.

described above, since it reimagines Turner's attempt at escaping from his enslavers, though he does not end up free in the North, but captured and executed for his transgression. It even matches Rushdy's description of African American neo-slave narratives (375–76), given that the novel chronicles an enslaved person's life in the South before the Civil War and the hardships that Nat Turner survives, similarly to what can be appreciated in some other books belonging to this subgenre, for example, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2004), James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* (2008), or Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016).

Being published in 1967, a time of social unrest in the United States,<sup>2</sup> *The Confessions of Nat Turner* “proved highly offensive to [B]lack scholars” (Inscoc 419), because they were concerned about how a white novelist—particularly a Southerner from Virginia—could have appropriated an enslaved man's voice. As Dubey explains, “the publication of a fictionalized slave narrative by a white writer, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), provoked the most acrimonious debates about authentic representation of slavery” (334). On the one hand, Styron himself claimed that it had been his friend, Black intellectual James Baldwin, who had encouraged him to “overcome his hesitancy to cross the forbidden zone and write from the point of view of someone with a different skin color” (Inscoc 431). The novel became a best-selling title, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1968, the year when it was translated into Spanish.

On the other hand, some early reviews claimed that “the entire story illustrates that learning destroyed Nat Turner” (Turner 184), because the protagonist was taught how to read and write while in bondage and this led to him becoming a preacher, being obsessed with raping a white woman, and eventually turning other enslaved people against the white Southerners with whom they were in close contact at the plantation (Turner 183). Apart from highlighting the risks of letting the enslaved get some basic education, Styron's book also contributed to perpetuate negative stereotypes. For instance, it features promiscuous Black women—such as Nat's mother—as well as disobedient Black men who venture beyond the plantation's limits and try to rape defenseless white maidens. These men's

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, 1967 is the year when the Detroit Riots took place. The growing racial tensions leading to these events were recently fictionalized in the movie *Detroit*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Annapurna Pictures, 2017.

behavior seems close to Jim Crow's, who was, as Stordeur Pryor explains (31), the stock character from blackface minstrel shows after whom the segregation policies were named in the Reconstruction era. The way in which Styron introduced such racist stereotypes in a historical novel that reimagines an actual revolt from the 1830s led some reviewers to deem the book "Styron's caricature, drawn from his own and bigoted fancies" (Turner 185). Another critical voice was June Jordan, a Black activist and poet who denounced *The Confessions of Nat Turner* for denying African Americans the opportunity to tell their own account of the Black experience in the United States in a time as crucial for the Civil Rights movement as the 1960s (Manuel 91). When it comes to literary criticism, Rushdy, in his seminal volume on neo-slave narrative, argues that "Styron's decision to cast his novel as a first-person narration, using the conventions and forms of the antebellum slave narrative and in fact basing the book on a piece of slave testimony, raised deeply divisive issues of cultural expertise and appropriation" (54).

Indeed, this instance of cultural appropriation, particularly of taking an actual subversive Black rebel who died in the 1830s, led to the publication, in 1968, of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Edited by John Henrik Clarke, it was a book of literary criticism that attempted to deal with the issues of historical, cultural, and racial representation in the Civil Rights era that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had raised. As Rushdy explains when chronicling the controversy and the reasons for publishing this critical volume, some white intellectuals were in favor of Styron's artistic integrity and maintained that "the only person who could write from a slave's point of view in 1967 was a white southerner" (56). On the contrary, Clarke's book purported that Styron's novel, being written from an enslaved Black man's point of view—Nat Turner's—wrongfully appropriated Blackness and African American culture. The way in which the protagonist is portrayed as a religious zealot who lusts for Margaret Whitehead, and how his sexual desire motivates him to ignite a revolt, supports "the circulation of [existing] racist stereotypes" (Rushdy 63) and does not question them, as explained above in the case of Jim Crow.

Reading *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, it seems that, in the antebellum South, Black men may only fit into two simplistic categories: they may be docile and obediently serve the white slaveholders, like Turner does when he is a child; or they can turn into violent wild men who want to sexually assault the Southern belles, as in Will's case, who ends

up overthrowing the protagonist and becoming the rebellion's leader. Additionally, critics have seen this rewriting of a historical figure—at this point in the novel, Nat Turner is portrayed as a hesitant coward—as Styron's attempt to “deny [B]lacks the one militant hero and role model in their American past” (Inscoc 429).

Despite reimagining Black historical events and figures, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* also manages to provide a detailed portrayal of daily life in early nineteenth-century rural Virginia and even tries to recreate, through eye-dialect, regional dialects like Southern American English and social varieties, such as the Black English spoken by the enslaved people. Manuel (82) also censures the book's use of eye-dialect, particularly the first-person narrator's use of language, because Nat Turner's voice seems literary and educated during most of his confessions, yet there are some issues about which he chooses not to talk articulately, for example, his relationship with his wife and children is mostly absent from Styron's work.

This novel may be read as well as the attempt made by a Southerner to come to terms with the South's history of oppressing and abusing its Black population, since, as Manuel argues (80), it revisits a historical event and ponders the impact that one Black leader, Nat Turner, had on Virginia's white society. Over the years, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has been reassessed as a book that reflects on how American fiction can mirror the social, cultural, and racial crisis that it is undergoing at a certain point in time—as in the 1960s and during the Civil Rights movement—showing readers how racist Southern stereotypes still survive in contemporary literature (Manuel 94). Furthermore, one positive consequence of the controversy surrounding Styron's novel was that it triggered the evolution of African American neo-slave narratives, as some Black writers looked back at folklore and the oral tradition to revisit the complex topic of slavery in literature. Historical novels like those by McBride and Whitehead, which were mentioned above, have asked questions about the links between Southern slavery and the postmodern Black identities, reimagining the so-called peculiar institution from the point of view of the enslaved protagonists, and trying to “establish a dialectic between slave-masters' oppressive literary representations and the slaves' own liberating oral witnessing of slavery” (Rushdy 91). Such a phenomenon of reimagination and memory is still active in the early twenty-first century, thanks to the publication of critically acclaimed neo-

slave narratives, such as Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019).

## 2. CENSORING *LAS CONFESIONES DE NAT TURNER*

The economic success of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the American context, in addition to the fact that the book was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, led to its quick publication in the Spanish target context in 1968. The company that was responsible for the Spanish version was Lumen, a publishing house from Barcelona that would be absorbed by the multinational group Penguin Random House in the late 1990s. The translator was Andrés Bosch, a renowned writer from Mallorca who had won the Planeta Award in 1959 for his first novel, *La Noche*. Interestingly, by 1968 Bosch had already translated a key African American novel for Lumen—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1966.

When analyzing a 1968 Spanish translation, careful attention should be paid to the ideological context in which it was produced, since, as Lefevere contends, translators “adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time” (8). The specific dominant ideology dominating the translation process was the dogmas of the Francoist dictatorship, so the impact that state censorship had on translated books should be considered. Allan and Burridge define censorship as “the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good” (13), a tool that controls the circulation of those texts which are regarded as not acceptable thanks to the “institutional suppressions of language by powerful governing classes, supposedly acting for the common good by preserving stability and/or moral fiber in the nation” (Allan and Burridge 24). Since literary translation can be a “key vehicle for disseminating, sifting and understanding cultural and social phenomena that come to us from foreign countries and languages” (McLaughlin and Muñoz-Basols 2), translated books were perceived as a menace to the dictatorship in this period.

Nevertheless, scholars like McLaughlin and Muñoz-Basols have pointed out that the 1960s was a “period which, interestingly enough, was characterized by political openness within the Ministry” in charge of censorship (3), especially if it is contrasted with the system of extremely rigid censorship that the 1938 Press Law had established during the Spanish Civil War (*Boletín Oficial del Estado* 23 April 1938). At that time,



censorship was a means to control the flow of information and disseminate propaganda, preventing subversive ideas from reaching a broad audience. The censorship report on *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*, number 894–69 (Departamento de Información Nacional), shows on the top of its page that subversive ideas were identified by asking a series of six questions about the book under examination:

- Does the book attack the Dogma?
- Does it attack morality?
- Does it attack the [Catholic] Church or its Ministers?
- Does it attack the Regime or its institutions?
- Does it attack the people who collaborate or have collaborated with the Regime?
- Do the passages to be censored mark the whole book?<sup>3</sup>

These ideas may be broadly divided into four categories, as Lobejón et al. explain: “sexual references, use of vulgar language, as well as attacks against the Catholic Church and against the regime, including their representatives” (95). In the 1960s, the Press Law was replaced when Fraga Iribarne’s Ministry of Information and Tourism issued a new one regulating state censorship, the “Ley 14/1966 de Prensa e Imprenta, de 18 de marzo” (Gutiérrez Lanza et al. 97; *Boletín Oficial del Estado* 19 March 1966). The 1966 law meant that the previous system of compulsory review was over and that publishers were given the chance of submitting their book for voluntary consultation. In a recent research paper, Lobejón et al. ponder carefully what this new form of censorship meant (95):

This meant, in principle, that publishers could release new titles without prior administrative approval. Although this period was characterized by a slightly more open cultural climate, in reality, the new law substituted the former preventive system with a repressive one, making government intervention in these matters more visible to society. . . . This halfhearted attempt at liberalization was ultimately, and by design, meant to give the illusion that the regime’s cultural policy had changed course for the better. The 1966 law, in fact, outlined a new set of restrictions. Prior censorship was eliminated, but books were still liable to be sequestered based on their contents.

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<sup>3</sup> This translation into English has been carried out by the writer of this paper.

Therefore, if Spanish publishers wanted to avoid the economic losses that having a book seized by the Ministry meant, they would better be willing to submit a copy of their books for voluntary consultation. The state censors would review the book, produce a censorship report—an epitext—and decide whether the book was ready for publication or some changes needed to be made in order not to violate the dictatorship's dogmas. Thus, Francoist censorship worked as a key element in patronage, selecting which texts were imported, translated, and published in Spain. Additionally, it is interesting to reflect on how, in the 1960s, American best-selling titles like Styron's started to storm the Spanish publishing industry (Gómez Castro 40–41). As Lobejón et al. explain, it was “during the aforementioned period of relative *apertura* (1962–1969) when the regime felt compelled to authorize problematic foreign films [and books] for both economic and political reasons” (98). Consequently, literary translation acted as an innovative tool, allowing Spanish culture to glimpse beyond its rigid borders and to import some literary models that the target writers would, in turn, imitate.

Since Styron's novel was translated in the late sixties, two years after the new censorship law had been passed. A visit to the General Archive of the Administration—or AGA, for its Spanish initials, as in Archivo General de la Administración—in Alcalá de Henares allowed access to the censorship reports of books published in Spain during the Francoist dictatorship. Created in 1969, the AGA houses different types of records that catalogue the censorship procedures from 1938 up to the Spanish Transition to democracy, specifically, to 1985, when the censorship apparatus was finally dismantled (Lobejón et al. 94). This collection of censorship files has been preserved and is available for researchers to be consulted on site, as it remains to be digitalized and remote access is, therefore, not possible. As Lobejón et al. accurately describe (103), “book censorship files contain two main sets of information: the internal documentation produced by the censors, that is, their reports, as well as that generated through interaction with the publishers (e.g., correspondence, drafts, galley proofs, etc.)”

The censorship report on *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* has proven to be a valuable epitext for this research paper, because it sheds some light on the predominance of certain translation techniques, namely the omission of three passages that were seen as obscene and menacing for the dictatorship's dogmas. The elements included in these three passages match the first category that was prone to institutional censorship—

explicit sexual references, as explained above. The censorship report 894–69 issued on February 1969 by the Ministry of Information and Tourism (Departamento de Información Nacional) regards Styron’s book as a historical novel, goes on to praise the realistic dialogues and the depiction of slavery in the rural South, but it makes the following remarks regarding a few sexual allusions:

The novel has plenty of erotic descriptions, far from pornographic, though it sometimes includes a few obscene details and swearing. If it had not been presented already printed, it would have been convenient to suppress the underlined passages on pages 33, 42, 92, 101, 137, 139, 147, 152, 153, 192–94, 202, 222–23, 231–32, 232–33, 234–35, 254–55, 260–61, 299, 300, 302, 323–24, 329–30, 377–78, 387, 425–26, 439, 450, 461, 482. It is a pity to be unable to do so, at least partially. Authorized.<sup>4</sup>

As can be seen above, the censor alludes to a series of underlined fragments that contain Spanish swear words that he would like to omit, such as *cabrón*, *negro hijo-puta*, and *mierda*. These would match the second category of elements that were liable to be censored—the use of vulgar language. Apart from them, those excerpts underlined in red in the manuscript that is annexed to the report feature scenes of Black people being violently punished, descriptions of how enslaved women were raped by the overseers, and Nat Turner’s sexual fantasies and visions regarding women. Interestingly, the censorship report includes an unexpected epitext: a letter written by Esther Tusquets, who worked as Lumen’s publisher at the time. In this letter, Tusquets addresses the censors respectfully and tells them that *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* is a much-anticipated book—since it has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize—the Spanish edition is ready and soon to be delivered to bookstores, so she urges the censors to be quick when writing the report in order not to delay the publication date and lose her investment in this promising new novel. This could be the reason why the censor lamented, in the report, that he wished he could have suppressed the underlined passages if the book had not been submitted in a hurry, already printed, and ready to be distributed.

Although it may seem that *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* escaped Francoist censorship, a careful contrast of coupled pairs of fragments from the source and target texts reveals that the Spanish translation was indeed

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<sup>4</sup> This translation into English has been carried out by the writer of this paper.

censored. If, as the report states, the censor did not change anything in the translation, then who was responsible for omitting a series of taboo fragments that included explicit sexual allusions? The answer to this question may be found in the concept of self-censorship, which Santaemilia defines as “an individual ethical struggle between self and context . . . translators tend to censor themselves—either voluntarily or involuntarily—in order to produce rewritings which are ‘acceptable’ from both social and personal perspectives” (221–22). In 1968, when a book could be sequestered and a publishing house could lose its investment in it simply for reproducing sexual references that were excluded from the dictatorship’s dominant discourse, it may have been likely that the Bosch, Tusquets, or even both of them agreed to suppress these fragments. That way, the translator and the publisher managed to elude institutional intervention and distributed the novel as soon as possible.

Table 1. Censoring sexual references

Styron 62	Bosch 79
<p>I should add that Putnam had more or less had it in for Hark ever since the preceding year when, out hunting hickory nuts on a balmy afternoon. Hark had innocently but clumsily ambushed Putnam and Joel Westbrook in some tangled carnal union by the swimming pond, both of the boys naked as catfish on the muddy bank, writhing. ‘Never seed such foolishness,’ Hark had said to me, ‘But ’twarn’t like I was gwine pay it no never mind. Nigger don’ care ’bout no white boys’ foolishness. Now dat daggone Putnam he so mad, you’d think it was me <b>dat dey caught jackin’ off de ole bird.</b>’</p>	<p>Debo añadir que Putnam la había tomado con Hark desde una cálida tarde del año anterior, en la que Hark se dedicaba a buscar nueces y, sin querer, pero también sin saber disimular, sorprendió a Putnam y a Joel Westbrook dedicados a consumir una complicada unión carnal, junto a la balsa en que solíamos nadar, estando los dos muchachos desnudos como lagartos, tumbados en la embarrada orilla, retorciéndose y revolcándose con el mayor abandono. Luego Hark me dijo: ‘Nunca había visto cosa más absurda. Pero, bueno, de todos modos, a mí no me importan esas cosas. No, al negro no le importan las insensateces de los muchachos blancos. Pero ahora ese desgraciado de Putnam está tan furioso conmigo que cualquiera diría que ellos fueron los que me descubrieron a mí’.</p>

Table 1 above shows the first self-censored fragment out of the three that have been found in a contrastive analysis of the source and target texts. In it, Hark—Nat Turner’s friend at the plantation—mentions he has spotted the young slaveholder, Putnam, engaging in sexual intercourse with Joel, the Black boy in charge of fixing wheels and wagons. The description of what Hark saw the boys doing—masturbating each other—has been completely omitted in Bosch’s translation. It makes sense that either the translator or Tusquets decided to erase this, as homosexuality was a taboo concept that violated the Francoist dogmas. The same strategy can be found in the second excerpt that was self-censored. As shown in Table 2 below, Nat Turner ventures into the woods and has sex with Willis, another enslaved Black man at the plantation. The first part of this intimate encounter is reproduced in the Spanish translation, how Turner touches Willis’s skin, feels him sigh and murmur. However, Willis’s explicit comment about semen resembling butter at the end of the passage is omitted in Bosch’s translation, since it was seen as taboo.

Table 2. Censoring homosexual references

Styron 199–201	Bosch 221–22
I reached up to wipe away the blood from his lips, pulling him near with the feel of his shoulders slippery beneath my hand, and then we somehow fell on each other, very close, soft and comfortable in a sprawl like babies; beneath my exploring fingers his hot skin throbbed and pulsed like the throat of a pigeon, and I heard him sigh in a faraway voice, and then for a long moment as if set free into another land we did with our hands together what, before, I had done alone. Never had I known that human flesh could be so sweet. Minutes afterward I heard Willis murmur: ‘Man, I sho liked dat. Want to do it again?’	Alargué la mano para limpiarle la sangre de los labios y lo acerqué a mí, sintiendo en la palma la resbaladiza piel de sus hombros, y entonces, sin que sepa cómo, caímos el uno en brazos del otro y quedamos muy juntos, abrazados como niños, suave y dulcemente. Bajo la piel de mis dedos inquietos la cálida piel de Willis latía como la garganta de una paloma, y le oí lanzar un desolado suspiro, y entonces, durante un largo, largo, instante, como si nos hubieran libertado en otro mundo, hicimos juntos, con las manos, aquello que yo antes hacía solo. Jamás hubiera sospechado que la carne humana pudiera ser tan dulce.
. . . Time passed <b>and Willis said nothing, then I heard him fidget on the</b>	Minutos después, oí que Willis murmuraba:

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<b>ground next to me, and he said, chuckling: ‘You know what jizzom puts me in mind of, Nat? Hit look jes’ lak buttermilk. Look dere.’</b>	—Chico, me ha gustado, me ha gustado mucho. ¿Quieres que volvamos a hacerlo? ... Pasó el tiempo, y <b>Willis nada dijo.</b>
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Lastly, the translation technique used to self-censor the third sexual allusion may not be considered a straightforward omission as those shown in Tables 1 and 2, but it may be better labeled as a mitigation. Table 3 below shows an event that takes place in the days leading to the slave revolt, when Turner is becoming mentally deranged and planning his mutiny. He cannot find solace in his Bible any longer and a series of visions cloud his judgment. One of them consists of a Black woman that sexually tempts him. She explicitly touches her vagina in front of the protagonist, inviting him to have sex and getting him sexually aroused. This episode—Nat getting an erection due to this vision—may be read as a distraction from his rebellious mission. In the target text, Spanish readers find a ghostly woman who dances in front of the narrator and simply caresses her thighs. Any mention to the characters’ genitals has been carefully omitted and the temptation scene has been mitigated, reducing its sexual tones and making it more likely to avoid institutional censorship and be published.

Table 3. Mitigating Nat Turner’s sexual fantasies

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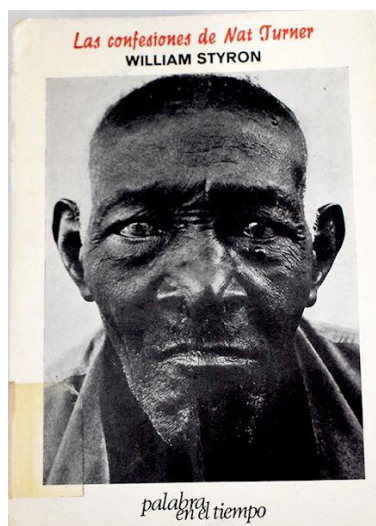
Styron 337	Bosch 362
Try as I might I could not banish her, keep her away; my Bible availed me nothing. Does you want a l’il bit ob honeycomb, sweet pussy bee? she crooned to me with those words she had wheedled others, and <b>as she ground her hips in my face, with delicate brown fingers stroking the pink lips of her sex, my own stiffened.</b>	Por mucho que lo intentara, yo no podía apartarla de mi mente y mantenerla lejos. De nada me servía la Biblia, a este fin. ¿Vamos a pasarlo bien tú y yo, monada?, susurraba dulcemente, empleando las mismas palabras de que se servía para atraer a otros, <b>mientras imprimía un movimiento rotatorio a sus caderas, ante mi rostro, y con delicados dedos color chocolate se acariciaba los muslos.</b>

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Lastly, when analyzing the 1968 Spanish translation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, there is a peritext worth observing: its cover.

The cover of Lumen's first edition features an old Black man staring at readers. Who is this person? If readers base their judgment on the novel's title, they may assume he is the protagonist. He could be about to confess what he has done, as the title suggests. This explanation may be a possibility, except for the fact that Nat Turner was hanged when he was thirty-one, shortly after his failed revolt had ended. The cover manages to somehow hint at Blackness and, therefore, initially conditions the target readers' response to Bosch's rendering. For instance, before reading the text, Spanish readers can have a look at the cover, see the old Black man on it, and guess the book is about some kind of Uncle Tom—an obedient and enslaved African American who is nice and subservient to his white masters. It is also interesting to observe that the cover does not include any blurb emphasizing that the novel had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction that same year. It is likely that, given Francoist cultural isolation—the *apertura* period had begun only six years before, in 1962, as stated above—, potential readers were not acquainted with that award and its significance in American Humanities. Despite the self-censored sexual allusions, Lumen printed three thousand copies of the first edition of *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*. Three years later, in 1971, it was a third party, Círculo de Lectores, the one that printed another eight thousand copies for its subscribers.

Fig. 1. Front cover. Bosch, Andrés, translator. *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* By William Styron, Lumen, 1968.



### 3. REPUBLISHING A CENSORED TRANSLATION

The story of Bosch's self-censored translation does not end in 1968. In fact, as this section will show, that version is the only one that has been published in Spanish, conditioning the novel's reception in the target culture.

Lumen reprinted that same edition in 1980, during Spain's Transition to democracy. Given that institutional censorship remained active until 1985, it may be understandable why the translation was not reviewed, and the self-censored passages were not rewritten. It was twenty years later, in 2000, when the publishing company celebrated its fortieth anniversary and Esther Tusquets retired, and they decided to publish a special collection of hardcover books to commemorate the occasion. One of the titles chosen to be included in this collection was *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*. The translation was exactly the same one as that published in 1968, republishing Bosch's text with no further additions or amendments. The only change made was a new peritext—the book's cover. As part of the collection "40 Lumen," the Black man's face was replaced by a picture of William Styron on a pink background.

The story of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in Spain has one final chapter. In late 2016, it was the independent and Madrid-based publishing house Capitán Swing the one who was responsible for the latest Spanish edition of Styron's book. They tried to match the publication of the novel with the theatrical release of Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation*, a retelling of Turner's revolt that was a forerunner for the Academy Awards before the actor and filmmaker was accused of rape by a former college acquaintance.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to the book itself, Capitán Swing did not commission a new translation. Instead, the company decided to reprint Andrés Bosch's text once again, including the self-censored passages that were described in Tables 1–3. This researcher has tried to ask the publishers about this decision and has emailed them, obtaining no answer at all.<sup>6</sup> The only text that Capitán Swing added to its edition is not the

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<sup>5</sup> Since it falls beyond the scope of this research paper, the following article may be checked for more details on the effects these charges have had on the movie itself and on Nate Parker's career: Hornaday, Ann. "What Happened after Nate Parker's Film Career Imploded." *Washington Post*, 9 Nov. 2022, [www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/11/11/nate-parker-film-career-david-oyelowo/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/11/11/nate-parker-film-career-david-oyelowo/).

<sup>6</sup> Working as a literary translator, this researcher is aware of how hard it is to contact Spanish publishers and to have them answer your emails.



previously self-censored fragments, but another peritext—the epilogue that Styron wrote in 1992 to commemorate *The Confessions of Nat Turner*'s twenty-fifth anniversary. In it, the novelist talks about the controversy described in Section 1, assuring the readers that he never thought his book was going to be condemned by Black scholars and deemed racist, since he just wanted to rewrite a historical episode that had taken place in the Virginia county where he had grown up (Bosch, *Capitán Swing* 449–70). Interestingly, the name of the person who translated this epitext is nowhere to be found in the epilogue itself and in the credits page.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that the products of self-censorship are present in the 2016 edition was not pointed out in the reviews that were written in early 2017, when *The Birth of a Nation* was about to be released. Instead, reviewers like Benítez praised *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* for portraying the “Black Spartacus,” a complex hero who was featured in a true story, and for being a retelling that deviated from the simplistic view of enslaved people that can be found in other popular best-selling titles, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, the translator's name was not even mentioned in this newspaper review.

In contrast to Lumen's 2000 cover, *Capitán Swing*'s hinted at certain elements of Blackness that may draw readers' attention to the novel. This peritext does highlight Blackness, as it displays the looming silhouette of a Black man, presumably Nat Turner himself. Within this silhouette, there are a few Black men running across a field and, behind them, a huge American flag is burning. These people may be the rebels who join Turner's revolt against the slaveholders. The burning flag is a powerful image that could represent the collapse of the institution of Southern plantations, an oppressive system that would be regarded as one of the main causes for the American Civil War. The imagery in *Capitán Swing*'s cover mirrors the one used in the poster for Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, in which the mutinous Black people make up the red stripes in the American flag and follow their rebellious leader, Nat Turner—see Fig. 2 below. This cover strongly contrasts with the peaceful Black man featured in Lumen's. Perhaps that one was more suitable for the censorship of the sixties, whereas *Capitán Swing*'s peritext and its use of revolutionary

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<sup>7</sup> Andrés Bosch died in 1983, so it remains a mystery who translated this epilogue for *Capitán Swing*. My hypothesis is that it was the publishers themselves.

images could appeal to readers who are looking for a historical novel that criticizes institutional power.

Fig. 2. Front cover. Bosch, Andrés, translator. *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* By William Styron, Capitán Swing, 2016.



## CONCLUSIONS

The publication history of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has been marked by several hurdles. Although it was awarded the meritorious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1968, the novel was heavily criticized by African American scholars for perpetuating simplistic and racist stereotypes, applying them to a historical figure who rebelled against the institution of Southern slavery in 1831.

As the novel was translated into Spanish in 1968, during the Francoist dictatorship, the context of “censorship measures, such as pre-publication or editorial censorship” (Santaemilia 222) needed to be studied carefully, particularly after the 1966 Press Law had been passed. Visiting the AGA has allowed this researcher to access rather revealing epitexts concerning the publication of *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner*. The first one was the censorship report, which lamented that some passages containing swearing and violent scenes could not be redacted because the book was about to be distributed, as Tusquets's letter assured. The contrastive analysis of

Bosch's translation and the source text has shown that there are three fragments in which sexual allusions—two of them to homosexuality—were self-censored. The discovery of the translator's self-censorship, together with the publisher's letter to the censors, are revealing evidence of "the negotiation processes" (Lobejón et al. 106) that were used in the 1960s as a way of avoiding institutional censorship and the economic losses that having a book sequestered would entail. Finding self-censorship in Bosch's translation contrasts with a previous study on *Jubileo*, another neo-slave narrative translated in Spain in the 1960s (Sanz Jiménez). In that case, the censorship report compared the novel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*, claiming there was nothing to change in a work that was "not very evocative and many details are predictable in comparison with the two novels just mentioned" (Sanz Jiménez). After *Las Confesiones de Nat Turner* and *Jubileo* were published, there was another neo-slave narrative that came out ten years later, during Spain's Transition to democracy—Alex Haley's *Raíces*. Nevertheless, the censorship report 9660–78 issued on September 16, 1978, by the Ministry of Information and Tourism (Departamento de Información Nacional) simply states that the novel is "very interesting and well written. It has all the American vicissitudes, such as slave auctions, harvests, the Civil War, etc."<sup>8</sup>

It has been intriguing to find out that Bosch's self-censored translation was not reviewed or fixed once Francoist censorship was officially over. This mutilated version continued to be reprinted well into the twenty-first century, as the study of *Capitán Swing*'s 2016 edition has proven. The book contains no editors' preface or footnotes stating why the publishers decided to reprint an existing and self-censored translation instead of having a new one. Given the silence this researcher had found when trying to contact the publishers on this issue, the hypothesis formulated by Rodríguez Espinosa (235) and Calvo (162) seems likely: Sometimes, the Spanish publishing industry can find it more profitable to reprint a previously published translation than to hire a new translator. Instances of this phenomenon may be found in the catalogs of both independent companies, like *Capitán Swing*, and big ones that belong to multinational groups, such as Lumen. In a market that is saturated with new titles coming out every week, releasing a book as soon as possible may reduce

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<sup>8</sup> This translation into English has been carried out by the writer of this paper.

production costs, even if that means reusing a formerly censored translation.

This practice might be more common than the average readers may think and, even in the early twenty-first century, there are quite a few censored books that may be sold in Spanish bookstores. For example, a recent master's dissertation proved that a popular book, the paperback edition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, features a censored translation that first came out in the 1960s (Sánchez Padilla 69–71). Hopefully, future studies could follow this research line, use the AGA's resources, and expose how many censored books are sold as unabridged versions today, arguing the need for new translations into Spanish.

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