**Sturm, Drang and Slang:**

**Writing Translations of Teenage Fiction**

**Clémentine Beauvais**

*Sometimes, when I speak,*

*And think I’ve said something,*

*Mama hears something else*

*Completely.*

—Sarah Crossan, *The Weight of Water*

*Nobody in the world understands me!* whines the Stereotypical Teenager (when not asleep, drunk, or masturbating). Whether or not that cliché is correct, teenage literature does often take as a major narrative drive the idea that adolescence is characterised by a fundamental breakdown in communication. Where meaning used to circulate, it no longer does: the teenager’s slang, picked up among peers and sharpened on the street, is impenetrable to parents; adult speech, filtered by teenage ears, suddenly sounds full of authoritarian demands; as voices change – boys’ darkening, girls’ speeding up – so does body language as limbs grow, chests swell and faces turn unreadable. The teenage character of adolescent literature, emerging from the blissful trust of childhood, becomes a master of suspicion, Foucault-shrewd in seeing through institutional lingo:

They have come up with a

Civil way for saying we are slow,

But it all means the same thing:

I get extra time because

I have *special needs*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Meanwhile, best-friends-forever are no longer forever, or only intermittently forever. New friendships are born – though the signs, again, are difficult to interpret:

‘Hi, Cassie!’ she says,

Blinking.

That’s all.

And I wonder if

This means

We’re friends.[[2]](#endnote-2)

*When did the world become so desperately undecipherable?* asks the teenager of adolescent literature. Still, friends are not as complicated as potential romantic partners; there is no glossary for love, the most crucial signals of which slip into silences, sighs, the interstices of casual conversations – or, as in Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018), notes in a biology lab book:

A: You ever messed with anyone in school?

X: Nah, never really be into anyone.

A: We not cute enough for you?

X: Nope. Ya ain’t.

A: Damn. Shit on my whole life!

X: You just want me to say you cute.

A: Do you think I am?

X: I’m still deciding :)[[3]](#endnote-3)

In short, adolescence – or so teenage literature tells us – is about being perpetually lost in translation. Or, more optimistically, perhaps it’s about becoming an obsessive translator of everyday life. Everyone and everything is suddenly a potential object of interpretation. Each adult utterance is subjected to ruthless deconstruction. Friends’ words are decrypted, reused, misused, defined and redefined; with them, language begins to be perceived as context-dependent (the trope of a teenager going to a new school gives ample opportunity for linguistic exploration) and linked to socioeconomic class. Fragments of a lover’s discourse are zealously dissected, and the lovesick teenager struggles to package into words all their feelings. Here they bump against the outer frontiers of language.

No wonder Xiomara, Acevedo’s rebellious protagonist, philosophically concludes:

The world is almost peaceful

when you stop trying

to understand it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

How can a literary translator of teenage literature[[5]](#endnote-5) – examples above are taken from books I have myself translated into French – render a type of text so focused on the (mis)understandings, (mis)translation, (mis)interpretation of others’ discourses, and the early formulation of one’s own? In this chapter, I talk about the translation of contemporary teenage literature through its focus on language as a *problem*. That literature’s polyphonic, often multimodal characteristics are in permanent tension with the fact that it is also highly commercial, with the kinds of editorial demands that inhabit children’s literature more generally.[[6]](#endnote-6) Translating teenage literature implies navigating spaces between languages as a place of both acculturation and experimentation.

In the first part, I look at elements within teenage fiction that invite the translator to treat language as resistant, alien, difficult. I next show that those literary nudges are counterbalanced by editorial drives towards naturalness and domestication. This leads to the necessity for the translator to commit not just politically, but also *didactically*, to the text. In the last part, I look at what creative translation workshops with teenagers themselves might bring the translator in this endeavour, offering a meeting-point for aesthetic and didactic considerations in the translation of adolescent fiction.

# An Aesthetics of Linguistic Resistance …

Most teenage fiction is fundamentally about finding a place in the world; it stages young characters negotiating their roles in the social and political spheres and getting to grips with the riddles of interpersonal relationships and institutions.[[7]](#endnote-7) Many of those problems are discursively inscribed, dependent as they are on the world’s many tongues (in the figurative sense of *tongue*, though the teenagers of adolescent literature are quite curious of the literal too). The teenage character writes, speaks, stays silent in many ways and across a wide range of platforms, registers and voices. Teenage literature today joyfully jumps from messaging to secret diary, letter to internal monologue, lyrical poetry to cartoons, lists to maps. Generic hybridity is common, with novels in verse, novels in comics and other hybrids gaining commercial traction, while authors experiment with language in sometimes postmodern ways.[[8]](#endnote-8) This polyphony (after Bakhtin), arguably, both shapes and responds to real reading experiences of multiliterate contemporary teenagers, who are quite receptive to rapid switches of register, perspective or mode (e.g., through images, maps, layout, etc.). Thus, the (interlinguistic) translation of adolescent fiction today is bound up with questions of intralinguistic and, often, intersemiotic translation too (to take Jakobson’s terms).

An example is Acevedo’s National Book Award winner, *The Poet X*. The novel, composed of chapters in verse from a first-person perspective, also contains ‘schoolwork’ in prose, such as text messages, notes passed in class, prayers, lists; poems, including an entire poem in Spanish and its English translation; visual poetry; haikus; a ‘song’. Much of the novel, across those different types of writing, is in American English with occurrences of Dominican Spanish, sometimes explained, sometimes translated, sometimes neither, mirroring the translinguistic fluency of bilinguals. In the story, Xiomara Batista, a Harlem teen of Dominican heritage, develops a passion for slam poetry and begins to write and speak her own texts. Because her mother does not speak English, Xiomara’s life also involves simultaneous translation, transmitting – or refusing to transmit – or only partially transmitting – important messages:

‘No es nada. It’s nothing.

It was just a misunderstanding.’[[9]](#endnote-9)

Xiomara also engages in translating her own feelings – love for the handsome Aman, frustration towards her mother, fear for her brother, tenderness towards her friend Caridad – into poetry. And that poetry does not remain on paper; she ‘translates’ it back into her body by performing it. Academically, too, Xiomara learns to switch registers; the novel provides readers with two versions of schoolwork, the ‘draft’ – highly poetic, idiosyncratic and intense – and the school-polished version, in prose, the character’s fiery temperament gleaming under a slightly stolid patina. Xiomara thus constantly goes from body to words and back, from family to social life, from school language to private language and across various types of text.

This boundary-bending approach to language is quite typical of contemporary adolescent literature.[[10]](#endnote-10) Adolescent fiction is intensely concerned with learning about boundaries, and how to bend or break them. As Lydia Kokkola analyses, adolescence symbolises a kind of ‘buffer zone’ between childhood and adulthood.[[11]](#endnote-11) During that time, the body opens up – for carnal reasons, among others – and closes down; frontiers between the self and the world become more sharply defined and problematized. So, too, on a linguistic level. Many adolescent novels play with frontiers between registers, languages and voices; controlling those frontiers – choosing when and how to release words – often means exerting power.[[12]](#endnote-12) The teenage novel is thus not just often polyphonic but also presents characters at an age where the polyphonic aspects of existence emerge as an ardent problem.

For the translator, this emphasis on the gradual acquisition and mastery of multiple voices encourages an approach that stresses the tension between self and words – the reluctance of language to signify straightforwardly. If the teenage character is, metaphorically speaking, experiencing the resistance of language, then the work of the translator can, indeed should, render that sense. In terms more familiar to translation theory, we could talk here of a nudge, present in that category of text within its characterisation, structures, narration, style, genres, etc., towards an ‘ethics of difference’, a foreignization.[[13]](#endnote-13) Here the *foreign* is both inter- and intralinguistic; *foreign* of another country, but also the foreign within the self, the person inside who struggles to speak.

In the following extract from Sarah Crossan’s *The Weight of Water* (2012), Kasienka, a Polish teenager living in Coventry, overhears two Polish classmates:

They laugh, loudly, because the teacher

Is right there listening,

Not understanding,

Thinking they are being

Good

When really they are being

Horrible,

When really they are talking about

Her chest.[[14]](#endnote-14)

This passage piles up unwieldly gerunds and repetitive adverbs; Kasienka’s efforts to find the right words for the boys’ attitude – landing on simple, strong adjectives – reveal not just that her English is imperfect but that she is struggling to find the right words for the situation. Her plain, but powerful, choppy English is difficult to render in French, a language that requires more grammatical machinery.

Elle les écoute *She listens to them*

Sans les comprendre ; *Without understanding;*

Elle croit qu’ils sont *She thinks they’re being / they are*

Sages, *Nice (/well-behaved)*

Alors qu’ils sont *Whereas they’re being*

Sales, *Dirty,*

Alors qu’ils parlent *Whereas they’re talking / they talk*

De sa poitrine.[[15]](#endnote-15) *About her chest.*

(‘Literal’ back-translation)

My translation choice was to preserve the straightforwardness, roughness and slight clunkiness through the clumsily vague present construction ‘ils sont / sages / ils sont/ sales’, and to weave alliterations of harsh [k] and soft [s] sounds, expressing the coexistence, in Kasienka’s speech, of resistance and fluency. I opted to render the awkward internal gerundive rhyme through a system of quasi rhymes (sages / sales / parlent), which does not provide perfectly satisfying closure, and where the poetic stumbles, frustratingly.

Even as the syntax is simple and the vocabulary basic, the text – as in many instances of adolescent literature – calls for an aesthetics of resistance, an experience of the teenager’s frustration that language does not quite exactly cover reality.

# … but a Didactics of Domestication

Yet, of course, while there are *literary* reasons to consider teenage fiction a good candidate for an aesthetics of linguistic resistance, there are also pressing *editorial and didactic* reasons to privilege naturalness and domestication. Teenage fiction is a closely controlled, reviewed, surveyed strand of publishing. At least on the Anglophone market, a domesticating tendency dominates,[[16]](#endnote-16) due in part to the highly commercial nature of teenage literature and to the fact that translated works in Anglophone countries are an exception; numbers of translated texts are still very low, and publishers aim at an aesthetic of naturalness and transparency.

Alongside those commercial aspects, the domesticating tendencies are also a question of ideological (and, as I argue, didactic) stakes. Teenage literature is read by many adults, but it is put under much stronger ideological scrutiny than adult fiction. In recent years, notably under the impulse of movements seeking to widen representation and diversity within children’s and adolescent fiction, an influential para-academic discourse on teenage literature has emerged, through blogs, social media, etc.[[17]](#endnote-17) Correspondingly, politically committed academic work on the matter has noticeably increased, including scholarly analysis of controversies,[[18]](#endnote-18) or interventions with a view to changing the current publishing status quo,[[19]](#endnote-19) or pedagogical practices around the mediation of such texts.[[20]](#endnote-20) This discourse on teenage literature has enabled an emerging strand of teenage fiction representing the previously ignored experiences of characters from minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds, people of colour, women, LGBTQ+ people and people with disabilities. This cultural diversification of teenage literature has led to discursive diversification, with political as well as literary ramifications – *The Poet X*, for instance, is, arguably, ideologically and aesthetically inscribed within this movement.

In this context, the translator cannot just engage with the ‘usual’ challenges of translating speech (challenges well described by van Coillie). They must also be receptive to the quickly evolving, culturally variable discourses of youth culture, youth activism and identity politics, which are constantly developing their own vocabulary, narratives, characters (both real and fictional) and multimodal forms of communication. Much contemporary teenage literature follows closely the development of discourses emerging online and in activist circles, and novels are a strong channel by which those politics become normalised, aestheticized and integrated within dominant youth culture. A worldwide bestselling teenage book such as Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (2017), for instance, cannot be read – or translated – without close familiarity with the development, discourses and stakes of the #BlackLivesMatter movement[[21]](#endnote-21) as well as fluency with a longer history of African American writing. The kind of discursive agility required of translators – reaching into the far past and the immediate present, into youth and internet cultures – makes teenage literature probably one of the most demanding kinds of literary translation today from the point of view of intralinguistic and metalinguistic skill.

But there exist significant discrepancies in the degree of penetration of such discourses in different cultures, leading to tensions, in translatorial decisions, between aesthetic and political choices. For instance, Tillie Walden, the author of comics for young people, in her recent graphic novel *On a Sunbeam* (2018), has a nonbinary character, Elliot, who goes by the pronoun ‘they’. In the French version, issued by the prestigious publisher Gallimard and translated by Alice Marchand, Elliot is referred to, throughout, as ‘iel’, which is one of the French equivalent pronouns of the singular ‘they’. Yet the French translation introduces, and maintains throughout the book, inverted commas around ‘iel’. This decision has the effect of making the pronoun conspicuous, giving, within the speech bubbles, an impression of air quotes.

This editorial-translatorial decision says a lot about the difficulty, for the textual aspects of teenage literature that are closely linked to emerging political discourses, to translate happily to other cultural contexts where they are barely known. Evidently, in 2018, the use of the term ‘iel’ was far less familiar to a French audience than the singular ‘they’ for an Anglo-American one, and the scare quotes arguably highlight it as an abnormal pronoun. Where including a gender-neutral character was a passively political act in the American version (one tending towards normalisation), it becomes, in the French version, depending on one’s interpretation, either militantly political or permanently othering. Reactions from bloggers to this one aspect of the text have been mixed, with the book being praised for its representation of queer identities, but the scare quotes attracting some negative comments.[[22]](#endnote-22) The translator of teenage literature today must show not just familiarity but also critical engagement with the many discourses involved; this requires adopting at all points an ethical/political position.

Because that political commitment is directed towards a young audience, it belongs to a wider sphere of discourse infused with age-related power imbalances. As childhood scholar D. T. Cook argues,

Tensions of voice, of persona, and of the locus of decision-making are present in every personal interaction with a child, in every depiction of a child, in every iteration of childhood, and in every gesture made by, toward, and about children. Each word to a child … each decision made on its behalf … favors some aspects of the world over others; every lifestyle choice is potentially didactic.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Any translatorial decision in children’s and teenage fiction is by necessity didactic – a term that should not be taken, however, in its pejorative sense. Scholars of children’s and teenage literature have long discussed what is known as the literary/didactic split in texts for the young,[[24]](#endnote-24) namely, the fact that this kind of literature is characterised by a double drive towards pleasuring and teaching. In the driving seat is the adult, a composite entity that has been defined as ‘hidden’[[25]](#endnote-25) and sometimes perceived as perverse and domineering (since Rose in 1984), or more neutrally as a normative authority.[[26]](#endnote-26) Discussions of tensions between adult authority and child potential have constituted the core of children’s literature theory since its inception. The didacticism of literature for the young is less a fault to be bemoaned, however, than an aspect of that literature’s aesthetics – and can, in fact, be celebrated. Literature targeted at young people, namely, at people (in theory) equipped with a longer future than the creators of that literature, cannot sever itself from its engagement with futurity, as I discuss elsewhere.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is didactic insofar as its utterances attempt to reach out, through the younger readership, into a future inaccessible to the older authorship. Thus the term ‘didactic’, in the theoretical framework of youth literature, emerges not as a defect but rather as a characteristic of children’s fiction, which signals it as a category of text engaged in the cultivation of its primary readership’s future actions.

From this theoretical perspective, the translator of adolescent fiction, like the writer of such fiction, is thus not just politically but *didactically* committed by the text they are translating: they may opt to endorse or eschew that commitment, but in either case, they will have made a choice of a didactic nature. And those choices are, of course, strongly connected to editorial and other material configurations. In the current international market of children’s publishing, the United States, it is fair to say, controls the ideological and, therefore, didactic agenda of teenage fiction, including its translated imports into English. I will take here the example of a didactic translatorial choice with one of my own teenage novels in verse, *Songe à la douceur* (2017), whose translation into English (as *In Paris with You* [2018]) I followed closely: Sam Taylor, the translator, and I corresponded much about it while it was being edited, simultaneously, by a UK editor and a US editor. The translation required some rewriting, especially of moments considered ideologically problematic in the Anglophone world.

One clear example was a passage where young Tatiana, aged fourteen, among other night-time reveries, imagines herself as the victim of attempted rape, from which a fantasy husband-to-be saves her heroically. The passage is told by the (female) narrator:

Tatiana est une jeune fille très à l’ancienne.

Je l’imagine s’imaginant un homme peu amène,

voire sombre et même cruel au début,

le genre d’homme qui a vécu

des choses qu’on ne sait pas,

mais cet homme-là, rencontrant Tatiana,

sous l’effet de sa beauté et de sa vertu

se verrait infusé d’un perplexe et vibrant amour,

auquel feraient obstacle bien des aventures

et des péripéties,

y compris la plupart du temps une sorte de tentative de viol par un autre homme qu’au départ elle aurait trouvé assez charmant ; tentative de laquelle elle serait sauvée, in extremis, hymen toujours en condition optimale, vêtements un peu déchirés mais cachant adroitement ses tétons,

par l’homme qui l’aime,

et ils partiraient main dans la main pour être mariés …[[28]](#endnote-28)

(Beauvais, 2017 : 32)

Taylor’s first translation was as follows:

Tatiana is a very old-fashioned young girl.

I imagine her imagining a rather surly heartthrob,

dark-eyed, rough, even cruel to start with;

the kind of man who’s been through things

that no young girl can even imagine,

Encountering Tatiana, however,

this noble savage,

transfixed by her beauty and her virtue,

falls prey to a pulsating, life-changing love

which will of course be thwarted by various incidents

and events,

generally including a sort of attempted rape by another man whom she did at first find rather charming; an attack from which she will be saved at the last second, her hymen still in top condition, her clothes a little torn but draped in such a way as to hide her nipples,

by the man who loves her

and they will walk off hand in hand into the sunset to be wed …[[29]](#endnote-29)

From editorial feedback, it was clear that the attempted rape (and, arguably, the very word ‘rape’) was impossible to keep in the English version. The passage, it was assumed, might be (mis)interpreted as advocating rape; the very acknowledgement that teenage girls might have rape-attempt fantasies was problematic. The mention of the word rape was also considered unnecessarily triggering. I rewrote the passage in French, and Taylor provided another translation, to make it clear that Tatiana was in fact having *torture*-attempt fantasies, which are quite acceptable:

For example:

One time, she might be kidnapped by the mafia (or some sort of hoodlums anyway) – in the shape of three very bad (but not bad-looking) men,

who want to dig up dirt

on her mystery man,

because he’s working as a spy for their enemy

(or something);

so they threaten to hurt

Tatiana,

to torture her, even,

unless

she confesses

everything she knows about him!

(Though in fact it’s not the kind of torture

that would actually hurt her:

electrical wires that aren’t plugged in;

ropes not tied so tightly that they burn her skin;

her torturer too susceptible to her beauty

to really do his duty.)

And suddenly one of the gangsters will stop

and stare

and shout in a panicked voice:

*Who’s there?*

And she will be saved in the nick of time

by the man who loves her,

and they will walk off hand in hand into the sunset

to be wed (etc.)[[30]](#endnote-30)

The rewriting is not, in literary terms, inferior to the first version (in fact, it is arguably funnier). The modification here does not have literary, but didactic, implications. By replacing a fourteen-year-old character’s cartoonish rape fantasy by a cartoonish torture fantasy, the English version is making a different didactic utterance – speaking into existence a quite different world of adolescent reverie. To stress the point, I do *not* consider this rewriting an artistic concession: it is a decision driven by a specific didactic commitment to an audience who indeed would not have received the ‘original’ version as the French audience did. That fantasy would have stood out, unsettled, caught the attention of the young Anglophone readership in a way that it did not for a French one. Such translatorial decisions, of course, also commit not just the translator and editor but also the author. Reactions of shock or outrage from young readers in the United States would reflect badly on the original author; thus the translator cannot eschew thinking about such didactic choices in translating a text with no adjustment. There is no default solution that would be ideologically – and thus didactically – neutral.

However, this translatorial decision is by nature didactic (and not ‘just’ political or ideological) because it most certainly would *not* have been made had the book been intended for adults. As such, it is a didactic utterance: it states, ‘I do not want *young people* to be reading about a fourteen-year-old’s rape fantasies’. It implies, too, that the book’s readers will be literarily immature – incapable, here, of operations of reading such as sensitivity to unreliable narration and to humour. Those decisions, by reflecting back on the work, and forward onto the audience, make statements about teenage literature and its readers, which may be to a degree performative. We can bemoan this fact, but we can also rejoice in the fact that it makes ethical demands on the translators, encouraging self-reflectiveness and a dynamism in their practice. Still, it is extremely difficult, always, as a translator of teenage fiction, to gauge the line between didactic domestication for the purpose of ideological conservatism and for aesthetic-didactic purposes – here, preservation of effect linked to consideration of audience.

# Translating Teenage Novels with Teenagers

Between the aesthetic and the didactic, there is, in the reflective work of a translator in teenage fiction, an empirical possibility of working out some of those questions. In this last part, I turn to the translator’s contact with their target audience. That contact is very much a privilege of children’s and adolescent literature. Adult readers live their lives scattered around the world, and only a self-selecting group come to literary events; teenagers, however, are conveniently locked up and packed into schools every day. This allows authors and, sometimes, translators direct access to roomfuls of their (in-theory) target audience, captive, to test things on them and work with them – namely, to do writing workshops. Since the 2000s, the practice of literary translation workshops has risen in Anglophone countries and is budding in others, with translators visiting schools and book fairs and getting children and teenagers (either monolingual or bilingual) to translate literary texts. I will not talk here about the potential benefits of that practice for young people but about what it might bring the translator, and translation, of adolescent fiction.

Let me describe briefly the kind of translation workshop I do with teenagers. I first talk to the teenagers about translation before showing them a video of Acevedo doing a slam poetry performance. I then give out a poem by her, from *The Poet X*, and read it out loud. This is the stanza we translate:

It happens when I’m at bodegas.

It happens when I’m at school.

It happens when I’m on the train.

It happens when I’m standing on the platform.

It happens when I’m sitting on the stoop.

It happens when I’m turning the corner.

It happens when I forget to be on guard.

It happens all the time.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The ‘it’ that happens is explained later: various instances of sexual harassment or catcalling. We talk about what they hear and, perhaps, already begin to understand in the poem: sounds, beat, rhythm. We then seek to intuit some of the meaning. After this semantic stage, teenagers work in groups to propose literary translations (into French) of the poem, which they then perform and discuss in class.

Just because teenagers are translating does not mean, obviously, that their words are more valid than the adult translator’s. Teenagers often say ‘we would/wouldn’t say that’, but they are of course talking from within their own contexts, and they are not representative of their whole age group. Writing teenage literature, even highly realistic, is a literary move, not a journalistic one: a literary dialogue is not a transcript of a ‘real’ dialogue, and the teenage character is not a direct reflection of a ‘real’ teenager. Yet much of teenage literature does seek to achieve a ‘pseudo-orality’, a literary rendering of oral language[[32]](#endnote-32) with a concern for real-life plausibility. Teenage literature, with ancestors such as J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), sought from its early years to blur the boundaries between ethnographic and sociological observation of teenagers and their literary rendering. Thus, it is evidently enriching for the translator to come into contact with contemporary teenage speech.[[33]](#endnote-33) Furthermore, the co-constructed nature of the exercise – they have to work together and negotiate one solution – means that it invites them to the kind of polyphonic thinking, and dialogic work, that adolescent fiction itself is so concerned about. Writing the translation is a way of, so to speak, activating and adopting the polyphonic potential of the source text.

As such, the teenage translator is mirroring what the teenage narrator is doing: finding the best words in the best order for the cacophony of feelings, meanings and gestures in their heads. Some words are clear, some less so; some feelings are straightforward, others do not appear to exist in ‘our’ native language – do they even exist in *any* language? Rendering all this in a literary way recapitulates the protagonist’s experiences. Working this out with actual teenagers helps the translator gauge how stretchable the target audience’s tolerance of linguistic estrangement can be, when subjected to the pull of literary artifice, and what kinds of didactic utterances emerge in that encounter. The answer is, often, very stretchable and also, paradoxically, quite didactic indeed. The target audience, in short, is often quite satisfied with high linguistic experimentation *and* explicitly didactic content.

In the case of the Acevedo poem, French teenagers routinely propose translations for ‘It happens’ ranging from the immediate ‘Ca arrive’ and ‘Ca se passe’ to much freer and/or more politically loaded interpretations – interpretations, that is, that put a more didactic stamp on the text. Those who treat sexual harassment with the kind of matter-of-fact resignation one would have about the weather might suggest ‘C’est là’ (it is there); those who want to lay the emphasis on the victim will reach for ‘Ca m’arrive’ (it happens to me); those who focus on the perpetrators offer ‘Ils le font’ (they do it). Teenagers not only come up with such suggestions but also explain their choices well and are fully aware of the political connotations. Simply, they often do not seem to feel that the spelt-out, actively political commitment restricts their freedom of thought. Translatorial choices emerge that are both aesthetically complex *and* didactically explicit.

Teenagers of all backgrounds generally intuit very well the central questions of translation theory from the practice of translation. They launch into discussions about, for instance, the transformation of ‘bodega’ into ‘café’, ‘bar’, etc.; the mysterious ‘sitting on the stoop’ (a practice unknown, and architecturally impossible, in France); and so on. I have observed that teenage translators often proceed from domestication to foreignization in their strategies. They might first, for instance, translate ‘train’ as ‘RER’, not just a very French but a very Parisian denomination for suburban trains; they then modify their approach, opining that we cannot Parisianize this very New York story. They move from a literal translation of each verse to a more poetic one by stretching the field of lexical possibilities, deciding that rhyme and rhythm may trump semantics. I would argue, though more extensive research is currently being done, that teenagers put in a situation of literary translation will often move outwards, so to speak, from an aesthetics of naturalness to an aesthetics of linguistic resistance and experimentation, with a stronger and stronger focus on the literary. But, importantly, they do *not* shirk away from political, and therefore didactic, decisions. In the process, they can come up with texts arguably more actively committed than the source text.

For the translator of adolescent fiction, these encounters are precious not only because they provide very many fresh pairs of eyes on a text but because they are a window onto the linguistic, metalinguistic and literary ability, as well as the political sagacity, of that target audience. They show that teenagers are not just passive consumers of text but fluent users of language, and social and political thinkers. Often, such workshops reflect, in short, exactly what teenage fiction is about: that linguistic resistance, wordplay and awareness of the political nature of language are facts of everyday life for teenagers, and ones they are quite equipped to deal with.

# Conclusion: Beyond the Aesthetic and the Didactic

Christiane Nord’s insistence on ‘loyalty’, as opposed to fidelity, in the task of the translator[[34]](#endnote-34) is applicable, too, to teenage literature today, which is seeking to be *loyal* to the teenage experience, though not claiming to be a faithful reflection of it. Like translation, it is less a question of direct equivalence than of alternating strategies; sometimes contemporary teenage jargon will be used to activate identification (what Rudine Sims Bishop might term the ‘mirroring’ mission of youth literature[[35]](#endnote-35)), and sometimes the characters will speak in ways that are primarily aspirational or foreign (the ‘window’ mission, in Bishop’s view[[36]](#endnote-36)).

Similarly, the translator of teenage fiction must determine, often on a case-by-case basis, whether the ‘pseudo-orality’ of the text, or its occasionally meteoric switches to another register or the use of textspeak, etc., should be made natural – to spur on the plot – or left discursively disturbing, slowing down the pace of reading. Teenage literature remains, arguably, a primarily target-oriented market, a didactically committed and a didactically committing kind of literature, and so, therefore, its translation. Its postmodern polyphony, a joy and a challenge to tackle as a translator, is counterbalanced by tight control – authorial, editorial and translatorial – over its ideological agenda.

But even in that control we can find creative pleasure and an opportunity for inventiveness, as working with teenagers themselves reveals. A precious practice for translators (as well as for teenagers), it reconnects one to a live (and lively) target audience. With them, we witness directly the linguistic and literary agility of that audience, their readerly maturity, their literary sense and their expertise in register- and code-switching. While questions of an aesthetic and didactic order precede and supersede those encounters, they find in them a place to meet, less conflictually than constructively. Because that audience, in fact, is not against being taught while it is being entertained – and not against committing to a vision of the world and to the words that express it.

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1. Crossan, *Weight of Water*, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Crossan, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Acevedo, *Poet X*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Acevedo, 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout this article I refer to teenage or adolescent fiction to mean works whose target audience is roughly in the thirteen to eighteen age bracket. This literature is also known as ‘young adult’ and ‘new adult’ in its higher age ranges. Distinctions between the three labels are of little relevance to this article (for a discussion, see Pattee, ‘Between Youth and Adulthood’). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Oittinen, *Translating for Children*; Lathey, *Translating Children’s Literature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Tandoi, ‘Hybrid Novels’; Cadden, ‘Verse Novel’; Daley-Carey, ‘Testing the Limits’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Acevedo, *Poet X*, 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Cadden, ‘Rhetorical Technique’, and Flynn, ‘Why Genre Matters’, for the verse novel in particular; see also Day, ‘Power and Polyphony’. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kokkola, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Venuti, *Scandals of Translation*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Crossan, *Weight of Water*, 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Crossan, *Swimming Pool*, trans. Beauvais, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Lathey, *Translating Children’s Literature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Coats, ‘Teaching the Conflicts’. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, Thomas, Reese and Horning, ‘Much Ado’. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See, for example, Nel, *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See, for example, Connors and Rish, ‘Troubling Ideologies’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Haddad, ‘Nobody’s Protest Novel’. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See, for example, ‘Dans un rayon de soleil’. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Cook, ‘Interrogating Symbolic Childhood’, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Nodelman, *Hidden Adult*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Beauvais, *Mighty Child*; Beauvais, ‘Didacticism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Beauvais, *Mighty Child*, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Clémentine Beauvais, *In Paris with You*, trans. Sam Taylor, unpublished version. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Beauvais, *In Paris with You*, trans. Taylor, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Acevedo, *Poet X*, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Fludernik, ‘Conversational Narration – Oral Narration’. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Lathey, *Translating Children’s Literature*, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Nord, ‘Scopos, Loyalty, and Translational Conventions’. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Bishop, ‘Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors’. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Bishop, ‘Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors’. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)