

LINES OF FORCE:

A conversation with Arnold Adoff (b. 1935)

Interview by Steven Withrow, December 2011/January 2012

It is a great honor to share with you a wide-ranging new interview with Arnold Adoff—a renowned poet, and an anthologist of African American literature who has published more than forty books for young people, including the seminal *Black Is Brown Is Tan*, which was the first children's book to portray an interracial family. He is the recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children in 1988 for the body of his work, and he lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio. He was married to the late Virginia Hamilton, the celebrated American novelist. They have two grown children: Leigh Hamilton (Adoff), an operatic soprano, and Jaime Adoff, a poet and novelist. His latest publication is *Roots and Blues: A Celebration* (Clarion/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). To learn more, please visit www.arnoldadoff.com.

Is your poetry, at root, a performance art? Do you write for the individual voice speaking aloud—for the breath, for the body?

my influences have been as varied as rilke and rexroth...cummings and sweet langston hughes....

a major teacher of mine...in the 60's was jose garcia villa...who was against any reading aloud/performing of any poetry...

(and i still believe that the reading aloud of poems meant to live on the page is "performance" and so different from the reader encountering the work on paper...or now on a screen...)

but i did love seeing ee perform several times a year...

and large parts of my soul and intellect have...since early adolescence...inhabited the worlds of blues and jazz...

(i was a groupie before that word was created...and did some "managing" of that extraordinary composer and (bassist/ performer: charles mingus...)

(i do count mingus and jose as my additional fathers after aaron jacob adoff....)

when you add the elements of social and political concern(s) to much of my work...

(racial and cultural aspects of my anthologies...many of my own works are written from

a female point of view....)

in the end: my best work is a synthesis of these aspects of governing importance(s)

i write for the printed book...the poem "living" on the page encountered by young readers and their older allies....

simply:

my poems should be read three times....first: for the "information..."

as with any piece of p r o s e....

second: for the rhythmic and semantic lines of force...their balance(s) or imbalance(s)

and third: to try and see... just how i have "directed" the reader to enjoy the poem with simultaneous "musics" and "meanings"

then:

if the poet or reader does perform the piece out loud...

that is in another realm of voice and ear and the additional "'outside" influences

of each individual....

i want to add:

the tag line at the end of my emails is:

the struggle continues...

this

is far more than the continuing struggle(s) for political and economic...

gender and racial... equalities and opportunities....

i always struggle with the "making" of each piece...

the use of my various techniques to create that balanced synthesis of music and meaning

and some kind of societal w o r t h...

which also pleases me as poet....

i believe in

vision and g r e a t revision...

and employ the process of selectivity...at the end of literally dozens of versions of a single piece...

to choose the most successful and fully realized draft to be part of the final manuscript....

(as much as i have been able to influence and direct my various selves and priorities...

i do not create post-wwII confessional free verse....)

I've long been intrigued by your use of space to control pacing

and time. How might you describe your approach to space and time? Do you have a general "theory of spacing," or is it a more organic process unique to each poem?

so: my work is structured and extremely deliberate...
shaping and crafting colloquial speech....
after i stopped doing anthologies...because of the strong conviction that
african americans
should control and continue to create their own collections of their poetry
and prose...
reenergizing and reentering the long line going back to countee cullen and
claud mckay and william stanley braithwaite
and of course: langston hughes and arna bontemps...
i began to publish my own work...with an exclusive emphasis on writing
for young readers...(the only readership
which gave me any hope for the future....)
my books either are thematic collections...or are groups of poems(and
sometimes i write what i have called:
"poet's prose pieces...") which do prose work...an approach which has
allowed me to
soften some of the attitudes of editorial gate-keepers....
each book is approached individually...in all aspects:
which combinations of upper or lower case usage...will dominate the style
and structure...
whether the first lines are the titles as well....and so on....
(i always quote the dylan thomas designation: "craft and sullen art....")
when i can make a collection e x a c t l y as i choose:
all the lines will flush right...
and within that kind of frame...i do my "direction..."
i believe we read in a series of millisecond movements of eyes...and the
synapses of nerve endings
moving to appropriate places in the brain....
simply: i use flushings of groups of words within a piece...various spacings
and additional horizontal and vertical spaces...
to create the melodic and rhythmic lines or force...
a kind of j u g g l e happening along with the narrative flow/meaning(s) of
words...
my work needs to "say" stuff...while i s i n g s...
thus the great number of revisions...
the trial(s) and error(s) which finally succeed and make me personally/
aesthetically very happy....

(if i have finally chosen the "just right/perfect draft of the poem...)

if you take a look at:

Roots and Blues, for example...

you will see a unity of all of these style and structure elements...

i am telling a centuries long story with these pieces

in this celebration...

and that narrative flow and impetus

co-exists and is enhanced

by the "look" and purpose of each piece...

and the flow of style...

(to be grandiose: i could say it is like a musical composition

and novel... both evolving...spinning out... for the length (and time) of the book...

simultaneously capturing the reader...)

(once, at nyc's museum of modern art:

i saw all of the original paintings for jacob lawrence's "great migration" picture book...

hung at eye level...side by side...wall after wall..."directing" my eyes and brain...

the flow of palette and subject matter...

brush elements...etc. into a unified experience in its totality...

greater, of course...than merely the pages of its parts....

i have developed over these past decades...

an idiosyncratic style/voice/visual presentation

which has "internalized" the technical elements we use into a poetry

which is

far "beyond", and, i believe... far more exciting and challenging

than "mere" free verse...

(and it has always thrilled me that all of this innovation

and complexity...is aimed...sometimes...at the youngest audiences....)

You've talked elsewhere about being "fueled by the dual energies of love and anger." What about a poem makes it an ideal "transformer" for these energies?

this quote is rather recent...and mostly refers to the difficulty of continuing to create poems and books for young people in this time of callous disregard...

this is a time of death and destruction
indifference and greed... wherever we look...
the understanding that this country
has been practicing genocide against large segments of its population
(and not only kids of color) for much of my life...
has only been deepened since the disastrous effects
of this continuing second great depression...
so how does an (aging gracelessly) old poet
overcome the (almost automatic) effects of depression and inertia....
of course
i go back to the reasons i have always "given" myself
in spending more than 40 years
writing for young readers...being a poet in a prosaic land...
(catch the "stranger in a strange land" resonance....)
i have always been "fueled" in any hopes for a future
of equal opportunity...by the duality of anger and love...
love and rage...and love again...
(it's a variation on the poetic standby of "truth and beauty..."
where beauty is the open mind of the kid...and anger is the only
true way to view colonialism and capitalism
and the malthusian effects of our wars both at home and abroad....)

these energies (along with others of course)
are inherent in the impetus of this short form....
thought and the excitement of a fresh vision
are some results...the poem adds to the mix
as does the song and the sculpture and so on...
but a full belly true transforms and a decent place to live...
and all and any art falls far too short
in influence and affect....

Even the youngest children can express love and anger in countless ways. They know how beautiful and how insane the world can be. When you travel to schools, do you encourage children to make known their anger—to shout, to scream even—when their feelings demand it? Is a poem a container or an amplifier for these strong emotions?

when i did travel to so many schools around the country...one of

my "exercises"

was to focus on s i m p l y the speaking out and the shouting out of the n
a m e ..by each kid...

my efforts to get young girls to be as "loud" (and assertive) as the boys in
their classes....

we see at these early years...the cultural tamping down...repression
sometimes...

the use of the archaic term "lady and ladylike..." rather than w o m a n...
(as in burgeoning and rehearsing to become that strong and equal and
powerful young woman....)

from intellectual insight to the creation of a deep sense of entitlement...

is a process as socio-economic and beyond-race...as instilling that
sense of self-worth...and understanding that there are choices...

the poem contains... and the poem amplifies...

just because it is a poem...always beyond its

"subject matter..."

the power(s) of language:

words arranged sequentially to e l i c i t...

and sometimes even the sappy repetition

and predictable end-line rhyme...

does create a kind of assurance which can foster exploration

and curiosity...

i want to add

that most of my work

looks so different and has elements which require thought

and some study sometimes...rereading...

the work requires the participation of the reader...

(i true don't know what "interactive" really means...in any context....)

but i try to elicit joy and satisfactions and thought...

frustrations and empathies beyond experiential levels of the readers....

(boredom and indifference are the enemies of course...)

and so much poetry is merely

reassurance

and

the sweet affirmations of old visions and cultural places....

and

the easy (re)statements of the obvious....

we always need to t r y to move the reader
from point a to point b...(from b e i n g to b e coming...)

The education of a young musician and composer -- particularly in classical and jazz -- is often quite rigorous and begins at a very young age. Music students often seek out individual teachers outside formal education. Might such a structured and mentored approach be warranted for young poets?

two things:

because the materials of the poet are
words and language we humans (also) use to order large fries
or denounce economic systems...
the word "rigorous" may not be part of the equation...

even the most serious of young writers often balk
at learning the scales and tonal modalities of the stuff they are using
to make their work...

there are countless scales to p r a c t i c e...countless times....
and the reading and rereading
through generations and centuries...and cultural imperatives....
and then there are the (re)conditioning(s)
to go beyond artistic and cultural comforts...

a fine teacher can help you, perhaps, to color outside the lines...
but what outside forces get you to actually
go beyond the edge of the paper and the table
and off your chair and on your knees and onto the floor
and, perhaps, out the door to some things rare attempted....

and this to young poets and their older allies:

structured or unstructured situations: try and reach out to those who
create the work you admire...

(if they are still "alive" and will respond...even make some kind(s) of
sense...)

as you are choosing a college...

as you are looking at any individual course in your local institution
or "adult education"

facility....(just the "learning" to meet deadlines with your work and its
developing stages

is most important...)
write to poets c/o their publishers....
approach them at signings and at schools and libraries and at
conferences...
email of course...
but never phone or stalk...
(always be respectful of person and work...there are obligations on both
sides....)

What were some of the ways you and Virginia Hamilton introduced your children to poetry, story, and music?

we are a biracial family: multicultural and international...and, above all:
inclusive

in the diverse cultural components of our family lives....
we always had a house full of books for young readers...by authors of all
races
and geographies...and generations...
music was as varied as bob dylan and the commodores...
aretha franklin and the ohio players....tom waites and bruce, of course....
even the most well-intentioned programming for young viewers:
at that time...the captain and electric company, for example...always
require a household
which inhabits and presents as far beyond tokenism as possible....
parents must be deliberate in their augmenting of pop culture...media....
our kids are biracial and "of color..." celebrating the world
majority to which they belong....(minority is a "dirty word" around
here....)
for example: the antiphonal "call and response" at the ame church...
and similar "call and response" at the synagogue services...
are part of the same "human universal..."

two more items of note from our own family times when the kids were
young:

i built and filled wall to ceiling bookcases in my upstairs office...
and in those days i was dealing with the many revisions of my poetry
collections
pieces...by taping them to the fronts of each bookcase...
walking around for hours reading them aloud....
of course we also always read aloud books to/with the kids....

and they had the great luxury of a granny close by who loved to tell stories...of extended families and histories....

Do you believe that "children's poetry" and "young adult poetry" are useful categories? Are they fundamentally different from one another and from poetry for adults?

experiential levels of the intended readers always dictate to me

how the poem is made...how it "means" and says....
uppermost in my intentions is making sure that there
is poetic excellence and freshness in
whatever i do and intend...regardless of audience...age level....
my work is "shaped speech" regardless of the age intended...
most labels come from publishers and even marketing people
at the houses....and the professionals who categorize....
i always say i am writing for young readers and their older allies....

By extension, is a poem composed by a child fundamentally different from a poem composed by an adult? If a poem moves a listener or reader, should it matter the age of the author?

my single criteria is always
excellence...
even though the fine piece of work
done by a kid poet may contain
fewer elements which make that
excellence...
compared to a fine piece
done by an adult...
whatever the age of the poet...
i apply the same test:
read and reread:
take a deep breath
with its accompanying sound of "wonder"
at some fresh vision of an everyday moment...
presented by the poet....
some vision...some thought....
i am saying that the power of a piece written by an adult or written by a

kid...

though of different wattage...still turns the gears of this motor....

myra cohn livingston published a book called the child as poet: myth or reality? with an opposing point of view...

Many in the publishing industry believe that poetry collections and anthologies (with a few exceptions) do not sell. And talented poets are finding it more difficult than ever to find a publisher for their books. Have poets and poetry always struggled in this way, and if so, why do you think this might be the case?

when i end each email of mine: "the struggle continues"

i am referencing many aspects of my life....

after more than 40 years of publishing my work...i am still struggling to get new work out there....i rail against the evils of capitalism...

but i have plugged into the same profit-making corporations (some with international ownership) who are in the midst of actually creating the mass culture...still tokenistic in hiring a diverse editorial component... and publishing beyond that token approach...

this was our choice back in the mid-sixties....

although i like to think i can still make noise from the outside...

while establishing relationships with those who are the gatekeepers of the culture....

i am struggling against my usual cynical and depressing rant....

please read and reread...please write and rewrite...

work at keeping the inside of your heads open...

and the outside of your skulls impervious to the lumps....

if it gets too easy...question the value of your work.....

i encourage anyone to get in touch...especially young poets and their teachers and librarians..even parents....

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the struggle continues

n o justice n o p e a c e

o f course:

t r u e change is always too slow

and o u r b e s t hopes rest with

s t e a d y

o n

beyond our own times

the t r u e revolutions h a p p e n

within the covers of our best books

inside the noises of words with words

inside the movements of reading eyes

so:

the writers are the engines

the artists are the engines

and the women and men

and the girls and the boys

reading those noisy books

all are engines of true change

the words contain the power

and the books must have that

power and the noise of that

story and the shout of that song

**must always be louder than the
silence of the bullets and the
silent deaths of grim despair**

we move forward with love

the struggle continues

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orien berg strasse

saturday night in berlincentrale /berlincenter the mitte section of thecity the middle
the street: like tourist streets every big city boasts and on the old side walks the
crowds of p e o p l e people people come and go s p e a k i n g s p e a k i n g

speak ing: of david and lorelei walk ing handinhand in to that th ai restaurant:

what a beautiful couple and give them room to pass so they still are able to hold
hands a n d what a beautiful couple and who is more beautiful: the tallthin boy
with the backpack and the long black curls sticking out of the sides of his newyork
y a n k e e s cap ororororor ohohohohoh that fine tan teengirlwoman in
quilted long coat andandand the shortestanddarkest b r o w n crown of c u r l s

and the sky opens and the s m i l i n g face of the g o d d e s s shines down on us

and the sea of people parts in front of the truthful beauty of this new world couple

and the brightrounddome of the old orienberg synagogue opens into the night sky

in an explosion of light and warmth and the many colors of jacob's ancient coat

and a chorus of ten b l a c k b e a r d e d a n g e l s sings them into their d i n n e r

and loveoh loveahlove: and menandwomen weep and wipe wet eyes on cold winter

sleeves and fall to the ground in praise of the wonder and triumph of some single kiss

and beat their chests and beg forgiveness on the selfsame stones worn smooth with

march and shuffle and shuffle and march and march and march and march and march

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