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Mel Glenn and Arnold Adoff:
The Poetics of Power in the Adolescent Voice-lyric

In *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, Charles Altieri labels the most prevalent mode of adult poetry written today “the scenic style” (11). Altieri characterizes this mode, also called the poetics of “voice” or the “voice-lyric” by Hank Lazer in *Opposing Poetries* (52), as one that, using “elaborate vowel and consonantal music” and “unobtrusive” craft,

places a reticent, plain-speaking, and self-reflective speaker within a narratively presented scene evoking a sense of loss. Then the poet tries to resolve the loss in a moment of emotional poignance or wry acceptance that renders the entire lyric event an evocative metaphor for some general sense of mystery about the human condition. (10-11)

We’re all familiar with this poem, whatever its theme or subject may be, for this type of poem predominates in all poetry, be it targeted for adults, children, or adolescents. It is my aim to examine the voice-lyric and how it operates within the genre of adolescent poetry, how it can subvert or perpetuate the power structures adolescents grapple with daily.

Mel Glenn stands out as one of the most popular of the few poets writing for adolescents, and one of the most prolific. He is perhaps the only poet who has made his name exclusively by writing for an adolescent audience, having authored some ten collections of poetry since his 1982 debut *Class Dismissed!*. Most other writers of adolescent poetry compose principally for other audiences, and largely other genres. For example, Karen Hesse’s Newbery award-winning free-verse novel *Out of the Dust* (1997), though an exceptional example of the scenic-mode and certainly appropriate for adolescent readers, is often categorized by teachers, booksellers, and librarians as children’s, rather than adolescent, poetry—or even children’s fiction—as is Hesse’s other work. And while Betsy Gould Hearne’s *Love Lines: Poetry in Person* (1987) and *Polaroid and other Poems of View* (1991) were marketed, when in print, for both young adult readers and adults, Hearne has made her name as a writer of prose and poetry for younger children. Even Liz Rosenberg, author of the young adult poetry collection *Heart & Soul* (1996) and a dedicated champion of poetry for adolescents, is known largely as an editor and anthologist, responsible for such projects as *Light-Gathering Poems* (2000), *Earth-Shattering Poems* (1998), and *The Invisible Ladder: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poems for Young Readers* (1996), among others.
All of these collections feature verse written in the scenic-mode, to greater and lesser degrees of success. But one collection of adolescent verse stands radically apart from these: Arnold Adoff's *Slow Dance Heart Break Blues* (1995), whose contents exemplify the possibilities of an empowering poetic for adolescents, while still participating in the voice-lyric paradigm. Adoff, like Hesse, Hearne, and Rosenberg, is not well known in adult circles for his adolescent poetry. Rather, he is more critically acclaimed for his work as an anthologist. Nevertheless, unlike Glenn and other poets writing for adolescents, Adoff pushes the boundaries of the voice-lyric, developing the usually short, meditative, and confessional poem into highly complex explorations. Refusing to condescend to them, Adoff’s work empowers adolescents by exemplifying a level of complexity and nuance traditionally reserved for adult poetry. I position Adoff’s *Slow Dance Heart Break Blues* on the progressive end of the spectrum of adolescent poetry, with Glenn’s work resting on the other pole, embodying adolescent poetry’s conservative tendencies toward condescension and stereotyping.

In style and intention, Glenn represents the majority of North American poets writing specifically for adolescents. Rarely complicating our conception of adolescence, he treats the traditional subjects in young adult literature in quite traditional ways. In fact, his subjects and characters are traditional to the point of being clichés, a problem compounded by the fact that Glenn remains so widely read by teens and so consistently lauded by critics. The American Library Association awarded *Class Dismissed!* the 1970-1982 Best of the Best Books Award and the 1982 Best Book Award. Further, shortly after its release, *Class Dismissed!* was acclaimed as a Golden Kite Honor Book by the Society of Children’s Book Writers. Though no doubt Glenn is well intentioned in his construction of his characters, his clichéd representations of uncomplicated and predictable adolescents ultimately disempower his adolescent readers. In fact, his implied audience often seems to be adults with rather reductive ideas of adolescence. Take, for example, “Grace DeLorenzo,” a poem from *Class Dismissed!:

I can't tell my father;
He would shoot me.
I can't tell my mother;
She would throw me out of the house.
I can't tell my sister;
She would rat on me.
I can't tell Chris;
He would offer to marry me.
For all the wrong reasons.
I'm so afraid and scared.
There's no one left to turn to.

This lyric speaker typifies the melodrama often found in North American adolescent poetry. The poem limns an overly familiar image of teen-pregnancy
bolstered by clichéd, hackneyed language: "all the wrong reasons," "I'm so afraid and scared"; "There's no one left to turn to." The emotional impact of the poem depends upon sentimentalism and empathy: we're confronted with a confused teen in a life-changing circumstance. Beyond our first, empathetic reaction, there's nothing substantial to hold on to. Glenn leaves Grace to wallow in her uncertainty and never returns to her. There is in this snap-shot approach to depicting adolescence a voyeuristic quality, for he presents these prefabricated images of adolescents in brief, quasi-poetic vignettes, and makes no attempt to linger, to round them, to provide depth either by way of conventional narrative character development or poetic density of language. These poems are merely two-dimensional snap-shots, a fact emphasized by Michael J. Bernstein's obviously posed, year-book style black-and-white photos that intermittently accompany them.

Glenn consistently uses the voice-lyric to construct flat characters who, in his words, a "kid can look at [...] and say [...] 'Hey, that poem is me, I'm not so bad'" (Copeland 24). On the surface this goal seems laudable, but by simplifying the complicated relationships adolescents have with power into short, fifteen to twenty line clichés, it colonizes adolescence. Of course, as Glenn knows, poets often represent quite complicated subjectivities in as few as fourteen lines, but Glenn's poems, steering clear of the tools often employed by writers of voice lyrics: ambiguity, irony, paradox, demonstrate no elaborate semantic and metaphoric interrelationships necessary for such representations. Instead, Glenn strives to incorporate a "kicker" into his poems. In an interview with Jeffrey S. Copeland, Glenn states,

In a Shakespearean sonnet there is a two line couplet at the end that is the zinger, that summarizes it. I call it a "kicker," something that will make the reader go, "Oh!" [In my poems] that is very conscious. It may be a reversal back to the first sentence. It may be something the reader won't expect. (21)

In the English sonnet, however, the final couplet, the "zinger," doesn't so much "summarize" a poem as turn it by allowing the reader to reexamine the poem, by complicating and often subverting the reader's expectations and assumptions concerning the poem. Glenn finishes most of his poems with these "kickers," but they are startling only insofar as they are so routinely clichés. Take for example another of his poems, "Franz Domíquez," a 13-line piece depicting an angry, illiterate student who—predictably—could overcome his illiteracy if only someone would give him a chance:

I don't know whose fault it is.  
There's enough blame to go around.  
I always order a hamburger in a restaurant.  
I can't read the menu.  
I memorize the number of stops on the train.  
I can't read the signs.  
I know TV cartoons by heart.  
TV Guide is much too hard for me.
I think I could learn to read if someone sat with me.  
But teachers don’t seem to have the time.  
Words fly right by me.  
Sometimes, when no one’s around, I punch the wall.  
I’m frightened by my own anger.

The “zinger” at the end is, again, a rather tired expression, as is the message behind the pedantic piece. It’s not necessary to catalogue the clichés in Franz’s monologue, yet it might be useful to note the indistinct diction. Franz Domínguez’s name would suggest a non-Caucasian speaker, and his testimony suggests that he is from a non-literate background. Yet his voice is almost indistinguishable from other characters in the book. He says, “I’m frightened by my own anger.” He laments, “teachers don’t seem to have the time.” I find myself unconvincing that the speaker is Franz and not a proselytizing Glenn. Most of the characters in Class Dismissed! find their “voice” by way of mans and ain’ts and nothin’s, not by characteristic sentence structure or diction. One reason the voices achieve such an ironically distinctive sameness—even considering male and female narrators—may be that all the narrators, to borrow from Gérard Genette, are extradiegetic, narrators who address listeners outside the immediate narrative (229). Since there is no dramatic occasion for these confessional pieces, no interplay between characters to occasion difference, there is little opportunity to highlight linguistic or cultural diversity.

This is a problem Glenn himself seems to notice, for in his 1991 work My Friend’s got this Problem, Mr. Candler, Glenn adds a bit of narrative cohesiveness to his vignettes, creating Mr. Candler, a kind, dedicated counselor, to act as the intra-narrative audience for the students’ dramatic monologues. This structure creates interesting interplay between the student-subjects, each now an extradiegetic narrator, and institutional power. Following Peter Hollindale’s delineation of ideologies, we can divine two strata of ideology in My Friend’s got this Problem, Mr. Candler. The first, “the explicit social, political or moral beliefs of the individual writer” (10) is, as in Class Dismissed!, quite clear: adolescents are beleaguered by social and economic difficulties that must be attended to in order for them to become properly integrated citizens. The second stratum is more problematic, however. As we see by the last poem, “Mr. Mark Candler,” the hero of the book is not the group of students, but rather is Mr. Candler himself, a faultless, self-sacrificing counselor who stands in for institutional power. The students come by his office to “confess” their innermost fears and desires. The text’s implicit ideology, Glenn’s “unexamined assumptions” (Hollindale 12), is that students, and, indeed, parents, should trust institutional power structures and the individuals who operate within those power structures.

Terry Eagleton defines ideology as “those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (15). Using this definition, we can see how the
book's ideology participates in the paradox Roberta Trites articulates in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000). Though supposedly representing the interests of adolescents, *My Friend's got this Problem, Mr. Candler* in fact reproduces traditional power relationships between adolescents and school authority. In young adult fiction, Trites writes, "‘adolescentness,’ especially immaturity, is unacceptable, even though the surface intention of most YA novels is ostensibly to legitimize adolescence" (83). The same holds true of Glenn's adolescent poetry. In the words of Michel Foucault, Mr. Candler and the institutional power he represents are "producing] domains of objects and rituals of truth." He is not repressive, and, as such, the effects of his power should not be defined "in negative terms" (194). Rather, the power of the counselor's position is a "productive" one, but one that is nonetheless disempowering. It elicits action, but this action, as Foucault points out, is nothing but self-regulation and, again, confession.

Writing of the panopticon, Foucault asserts, "the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (173). But as Althusser argues in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," power would rather have its subjects willingly submit to its control by inculcating them with the ideological obviousnesses that maintain the conditions of the dominant class's power. In other words, power prefers to allow ideological state apparatuses to interpellate its subjects, deferring regulatory duties to the citizens themselves as opposed to the more overt power of the repressive state apparatus, the police, or, in terms of secondary education, perhaps the vice-principal. *My Friend's got this Problem, Mr. Candler* illustrates the result of such interpellation, and, I argue, reinforces it by depicting students eagerly placing themselves within the panoptic gaze of Mr. Candler while simultaneously depicting Mr. Candler sympathetically.

The final poem, "Mr. Mark Candler: Counselor," demonstrates this wonderfully:

I'm beat, can't even move.
Got to get home,
Maybe catch a few winks
Before I have to
    take the car in for a muffler,
    go to the dentist at five,
    pick [sic] up supper, Chinese maybe,
    pick up Jamie from Mrs. Brenner.

My desk?
The mess can keep till Monday.
Where'd I put my keys?
They were here a second ago.

It's OK, Randy, you can come in.
You look upset.
That bad?
You better sit down.
No, I wasn’t leaving.
Not just yet, that is.
So what’s up?
Just tell me about it—slowly.
I’m here,
Like always.

I would like to suggest that this poem ultimately mixes aesthetics and ideology. Aesthetically, Glenn’s poetry. “Mr. Mark Candler” in particular, lacks both phonological cohesion, one of the hallmarks of the voice-lyric, and original, surprising phrasing, a lack that might say less about Glenn’s ability as a poet than it says about his condescension to his implied adolescent audience. His aesthetic choices are tightly lashed to a disempowering ideology. Rather than provoking us to reconsider the narrative and musical possibilities of language—again, one of the merits of voice-lyrics—Glenn’s verse reinforces power via clichéd, conventional modes of thought and expression. It reproduces knowledges that implicitly support the status quo by representing culturally sanctioned images of “problem teens” and putting them in the charge of a benevolent caretaker who, like some sort of panopticonic deity, is “always” there. The language of Glenn’s poem fails to exemplify what Situationist theorist Guy Debord calls in his essay “All the King’s Men”, the revolutionary moment of language,” for Glenn’s verse is not oppositional. As Debord writes, poetry

is nothing other than liberated language, language recovering its richness, language which breaks its rigid significations and simultaneously embraces words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, facts, acts. Poetry thus depends on the greatest wealth of possibilities in living and changing life at a given stage of socioeconomic power.

(115)

“Mr. Mark Candler” uses everyday language in everyday ways to fortify power and, perhaps more invidiously, to summon in its adolescent readers sympathy for those in authority.

Let me further demonstrate this by examining the remainder of the poem. Unlike any of the other poems in the collection, Mr. Candler’s piece uses typography for emphasis, setting Candler apart from the students just as it sets the many personal, familial duties he must perform apart from the rest of the poem. This list suggests that Candler has a daughter (or a ward of some kind); that he is so busy he cannot prepare food, but has to pick up “Chinese”; that his car is in disrepair; and, perhaps, that he is single or has a companion who is equally busy—why can’t his partner pick up Jamie, or supper, or take the car in? Regardless of how we read this verse paragraph, it certainly implies that Candler is sacrificing his personal life for his job—an inclination admired in late-capitalistic America. The poem is clumsy—even if we ignore the irregular capitalization in line 7 and the overused language—as it shows little concern for the narrative consistency of the book, lack of concern which shows little respect for his adolescent audience. For example, to whom is Candler speaking in line 9? Himself? Has he become an
extradiegetic narrator—speaking directly to the teens reading—unlike the other narrators in the book? It seems more probable that the third verse paragraph is merely an awkward strategy for Glenn to elicit sympathy for Candler by way of the vague image of a messy desk that Candler, because of his harried days, has no time to organize. Urging students to “tell me about it—slowly,” remaining ubiquitous, “always” there—like all power—Mr. Candler, as the title suggests, is the true focus of My Friend’s got this Problem, Mr. Candler. As a result, the students’ voices are robbed of any power, for they are systematically subordinated to him.

Arnold Adoff’s poetry exists in stark contrast to Glenn’s, for, avoiding the stylistic and ideological pitfalls of Glenn’s work, it implicitly empowers its young readers. Slow Dance Heart Break Blues is one of the most exciting single author collections of poetry for adolescents in the 1990s. Though still participating in the voice-lyric paradigm, Slow Dance Heart Break Blues consistently surprises the reader. Operating as a producer of knowledge, it is a book that empowers by assuming empowered, capable readers. Debord writes.

Power lives off stolen goods. It creates nothing, it recuperates. If it created the meaning of words, there would be no poetry but only useful “information.” Opposition would not be able to express itself in language; any refusal would be outside it, would be purely lettriste. What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from the history of personal life? (115)

Adoff’s poetry creates by constructing Debord’s “history of personal life,” as well as overtly creating language-sites where readers can glean multiple meanings. It is polyphonic and polyvalent, in that most of the poems cannot be pinned down, for they unite, react, and interact with one another to create complex webs of possibility. Often, we cannot be sure who the lyric speaker is, whether s/he is a male character or a female character, whether s/he is white or black or some of other ethnicity. Adoff’s poems imply what Roland Barthes calls in S/Z a “writerly” reader, a reader who is “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). Barthes’s notion of the “writerly” text has been used for nearly three decades by the group of poets called the LANGUAGE school, and it is to LANGUAGE poet-critic Lyn Hejinian that I now turn to help illuminate Adoff’s book. Hejinian’s essay “The Rejection of Closure” is especially relevant, for it offers a distinction between open and closed texts that can be applied to Adoff. Unlike the “closed” poems found in the work of Glenn and many other North American adolescent poets, Adoff’s book seems “open.”

In “The Rejection of Closure,” a talk transcribed in Writing/Talks (1985), Hejinian characterizes the closed text as “one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of the work. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity” (270). She continues, noting that newspaper articles, Dickens’ novels, and detective stories are all closed texts—even though we can deconstruct any “single reading.” Glenn’s poems are closed as they generally work toward a single reading, try to avoid “lurking ambiguity,” and, using flat, mass-produced, and easily consumable characters,
attempt to tell a story with a very obvious didactic slant, a story that means something very particular. Indeed, two of Glenn’s most popular works are, curiously enough, detective stories, his recently reprinted *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?* (1996) and *Foreign Exchange* (1999), both subtitled *A Mystery in Poems*. Of course, Adoff’s *Slow Dance Heart Break Blues* also tells a story, or, perhaps better, stories, for it interweaves micro-narratives grouped together in sections imagistically “titled” by William Cotton’s interesting collage pieces. By this move, Adoff calls attention to the signifying nature of image, and, as a corollary, the signifying nature of words and systems of words as image. As we shall see, Adoff makes the visual aspect of line, word, and even letter crucial to his poetic.

Hejinian discusses several formal devices useful in creating open texts. She stresses that these devices only “serve to open” (emphasis mine) texts because the degree of openness “depends on other elements in the work and by all means on the intention of the writer” (272). Adoff’s poems aren’t as open as Hejinian’s own poetry, but they do demonstrate a degree of openness uncommon in voice-lyrics, and, indeed, most poetic texts aimed at adolescents. Hejinian argues that an open text is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. (272)

As open texts, Adoff’s poems are implicitly revolutionary, arguing against textual and cultural hierarchies. Unlike Glenn, who tacitly endorses institutional, hierarchical power structures, Adoff’s verse works against authority, even the authority of the writer and the authority of poetic convention. His poem “This Hug, / This Kiss, / This Hand:” dismantles many preconceptions adult and adolescent readers may have about poetry. Beginning with the line breaks in the title, the poem plays with conventions of reading, creating through typography the occasion for horizontal *and* vertical reading:

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This
Life Of
Love
Of Five
Fingers
In Five
Fingers
In

This
Life Of
Love.
This Hand.
This Hand.
This Hand.
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His poems often consist of single-word lines that descend in narrow columns, but he also uses poems with the more conventional longer line, and even uses prose poems—which he calls “poet’s prose”—with no line-breaks at all. Thus, when we encounter a poem like “This Hug, / This Kiss, / This Hand;,” we are unsure which reading strategy we should employ. Therefore, it “invites participation,” as Hejinian says, and we can find multiple reading axes, creating the phrases “This Life Of Love” and “This Life Love” simultaneously. The speaker, perhaps, wonders if the person s/he is holding hands with is her or his “Life Love,” even as the exciting situation colors the speaker’s world-view, and positions her or him within a “Life of Love.” In this respect, the poem is “generative rather than directive” (Hejinian 272).

Hejinian also notes that the physical layout of a document can encourage openness. Any document, she argues, “in which the order of the reading is not imposed in advance” has open tendencies (273). Adoff doesn’t tell us how to read his poems, but, instead, provides poems that encourage a variety of reading approaches. Hejinian writes,

Any reading of [open texts] is an improvisation. One progresses through the work not on straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections. (273)

Adoff’s four “Skin Games” poems use typography to construct potentially “improvisational” reading acts. In “Skin Games #3,” for example, the layout enables readers to experience language in quite unusual ways, ways that foreground the referentiality of language: “They rub our produced; / raise charcoal legacy floats” (1.2). In “Skin Games #4” we find wrenching rhythms and lyric cohesiveness, even when conventional syntax is ostensibly absent: “father mother should / still be / hustles holds brothers. / to her We make job” (2-5). Of course, some might say that my presentation of these lines misrepresents Adoff’s intention—and they’d be right—for we can make a more easily digestible “sense” of the “Skin Games” poems by reading them top down, vertically:

Skin Games #1
My cheeks are covered with a fine red rash that lights up bright as always red my arms are red and arms. But tree branch thin; and legs: for your fine as fine brown face, and you always smile.
Nevertheless, the poem encourages multiple reading strategies, for reading horizontally provides the humorous opening phrase, “My Christmas tree But / cheeks” and other interesting semantic units: “my / are you thin,” and “with me my mirrors” (1.2.3,5). The speaker of the poem is obviously self-conscious, worried about his “tree/branch/thin” limbs, and this insecurity is apparent in the horizontal text: “my / are you thin.” Moreover, even as his eyes mirror “your / fine / brown / face,” the speaker is assaulted by anxiety caused by his own negative self-image: “with me my mirrors” he says—mirrors reflecting only flaws. Formally, Adoff’s “Skin” poems resonate with the subject matter, for the poems suggest, though subtly, a budding love affair between two teenagers of different ethnic origin. The poems complicate or transgress normal reading strategies just as the burgeoning couple is attempting to transgress their culturally regulated boundaries.

Similarly, we have this poem, perhaps one we could call “He/She.” a poem that also asks for imaginative reading strategies:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He:} & \quad :ehS \\
\text{There} & \quad erehT \\
\text{is} & \quad si \\
\text{hair} & \quad riah \\
\text{on} & \quad no \\
\text{my} & \quad ym \\
\text{upper} & \quad reppu \\
\text{lip.} & \quad :pil
\end{align*}
\]

As you can see, fixing this poem with a title is difficult, because it consists of two poems united visually on the page, “He” and its near-mirror image “ehS.” Here Adoff explores the typographic semantics pioneered by the Concrete poets. Rather than constructing a scene with the semantic meaning of the words themselves, the piece evokes the two-fold scene typographically. The mirrored reflection of the words suggests both a boy and a girl examining their faces in mirrors, perhaps a bathroom mirror similar to Cotton’s collage on the front cover. The poem points to how the same utterance can have diametrically opposite meanings when spoken by different people. The boy’s observation in the mirror may be a point of pride—and his text is formatted conventionally—while the girl’s observation may be cause for dread, even as her text is backwards. The situation recalls the line “with me my mirrors” found in the first “Skin Games” poem. Foregrounding the insecurity and self-consciousness of two adolescents in a form that resists the structural prescriptions of mainstream verse, perhaps it encourages teens to resist the cultural prescriptions at the root of their insecurities. Indeed, in the central line of the “ehS” poem is “no,” positioned directly above “ym,” the abbreviated title of the popular teen fashion and beauty magazine Young and Modern.

The theme of insecurity found in these last two poems echoes nicely with Adoff’s “Listen To The Voice In Your Head.” It also highlights teenage anxiety, a circus mirror that reflects only our defects. Again, the poem’s formal features make it exceptional, for it breaks away from the traditional voice-lyric paradigm used by
Glenn and other poets, a paradigm that creates a unified self musing on some topic of usually metaphoric significance. “Listen To The Voice In Your Head” consists of a numbered list, a form that resists the lyric voice, just as the items in the list explicitly complicate our understanding of the implied audience: “3. You will never have a chest (male or female variety) / that will cause excitement” (3,4). These lines suggest simultaneously a male and female implied audience, but one might argue that the typographical extension of “excitement” implies decidedly masculine symptoms of arousal. Furthermore, the poem makes effective use of line-breaks. It is organized around the repeated phrase “You will,” the “Voice In Your Head” ordaining a miserable future for the reader, the second person “you” of the poem. The voice predicts, “You will break out / with a huge / pimple on your nose,” the phrase “you will break out” taking added significance, as it is repeated five times in various contexts, the poem ending:

13. You will break out forever.
14. You will always forever.
13. You will.
14. You will.
15. You.

(20-27)

A rather uncheerful finish, the end suggests adolescent solipsism, but the line-breaks emphasize “break out,” an ambiguous phrase that may refer to either the pimples in line 8 or to breaking out of the depression depicted in the poem or even to breaking out of socially defined norms. The phrase “break out” is isolated in line 23, and can be read as either the enjambed continuation of line 22 or, taken separately, as an imperative statement: “break out.” This may be a stretch, but Adoff’s poems abet such stretching. One of the tensions throughout the book is that Adoff blurs the line between socially constructed “normalcy” and the abnormal, the marginalized, the spaces created when adolescents “break out” of their prescribed roles. Moreover, the very poems themselves question the nature of poetic form, breaking away from predefined notions of poetry by creating open texts that “One progresses through […] not on straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections” (Hejinian 273).

Adoff’s poems exemplify progressive poetry for adolescents. Although all adolescent poetry shouldn’t imitate Adoff’s poetic style, it is unfortunate for adolescents that there isn’t more poetry informed by the same empowering ideology that permeates Adoff’s Slow Dance Heart Break Blues. Adoff’s poems are surprising, refuse cliché, and play with language, revitalizing it, empowering phrases even as they empower their readers. And they are empowering, for, unlike most poetry written expressly for adolescents, they assume a reader who is willing to work, an intelligent, complex reader who demands intelligent, complex verse. As Adoff says, “I don’t write for adults or young people who are not willing to
commit the effort. [...] I deal with flesh and blood. I try to create real kids and say real things for real readers” (Copeland 4.6). And he succeeds. Unlike Glenn’s verse, which unselfconsciously participates in the paradox Trites describes in Disturbing the Universe, Adoff’s poetry champions “adolescentness,” and “legitimize[s] adolescence” (83). It refuses to urge its readers into conformity and maturation, and instead lingers on the issues and problems that confront their lives without simplifying them or reducing them to clichés. Where Glenn uses the voice-lyric both to circumscribe the voice of adolescents through prefabricated representations and to subjugate them to adult, institutional power, Adoff manages to craft a place where adolescents may experience Debord’s “revolutionary moment of language,” a place that serves the interests of adolescents with great complexity and without condescension.

Works Cited


