

do not hold doors:

The Underground Poetics of Jeffrey Dessources

Review by Lee Ann Brown

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One of the prime responsibilities of poets is to voice dissent with the present culture, usually in hopes of making it better. In *do not hold doors*, Jeffrey Dessources actualizes this dissent into a literal descent by getting down into a newly imagined “underground.” The layered worlds articulated here revolve around the intricate alphabetic systems of a real and imagined metropolitan subway. The extended metaphor of “underground poetics” structures a “Post Soul” (train) underground railroad that deftly plays with the NYC subway system’s alphabetical systems and to create a rich nexus of complex poetic texts dealing with formative historical moments and pop cultural mixes. It’s a call to power for the reader to “Stand Clear” of the underground cultural forces at work and is a provocative invocation to get on board or be left behind.

In an interview with Brian Kim Stephans, published in *Jacket Magazine*, poet, Alice Notley, who also uses the subway as a vast metaphor for a modern Dante’s *Inferno* in her long poem *The Descent of Alette*, expresses a corresponding take on the poets’ duty to oppose oppressive, authoritarian systems: “One is told constantly by anyone and everyone what is true and how to behave. Every transaction you have is founded on assumptions: what to say, how to dress, what a city is, a sex is, a human, the superiority of the

human world over the animal and vegetal world, the rightness of whatever religion or atheism or philosophy or psychology is handy, the existence and superiority of American democracy etc — you know. One gets up and goes to work etc etc. Also, one rebels etc etc, in ways approved of by the university, or as my sons call it, the Crackademy.” (<http://jacketmagazine.com/15/stef-iv-not.html>)

Likewise, albeit in a very different mode, Dessources’ subway networks serve as sources of found and collaged observation in newly imagined planes that transport readers to new realms of thinking and reference. The opening section of the book is entitled “the platform” and begins by instructing the reader to “Please stand close to the edge,” doubling “platform” as departure pad and as political sounding board. The introduction lays out goals of speaking to “the younger Post Soul generation and all the youth that follow.” Dessources writes, “Through media, government, pop culture, our elders and other mediums, members of this generation have been fed information about life and African American culture on the surface. Half-truths, lies and omissions are keeping many individuals in the dark.” He ambitiously sets out to right these omissions with a personal riff on literary ancestors and histories that are not acknowledged and represented. After the prose intro of “platform,” the author then proceeds to the “U Train *express*” of cultural reference directly urging the “You” of the reader to “DO NOT HOLD DOORS,” nothing less than a call to not impede the progress of necessary revolution, concluding the poem with “Next stop... *Ayiti*.” This provides a neat segue into the next section that centers on themes from the Haitian revolution. He’s included a glossary of Haitian Creole that is riffed on through the book.

His conceptual structure proceeds in “nine critical stops” following the nine sections of the book. “The R Stop” engages with the “concept of revolution,” “Take the A Train” with “American lifestyle,” “Does the H Stop Here” addresses “definitions of place and homeland,” “Have You Seen the C Train?” takes issue with “the impact of black churches,” “issues pertaining to black youth” are found throughout “Where Can I Take The Y?,” “depictions of black women” in “Transfer to the S,” (I read as transfer power to the Sistah), “elements of hip hop music” is “The Number 5 Stop,” “growth of pop culture,” in “Where can I catch the P Train?” and finally “funk” in the final section “The Funk Vehicle.” He concludes this conceptual sketch with “these destinations are all part of daily life for members young and old of the Post Soul generation.”

Throughout there are claims for poetic power and lineage, such as “Cross Chocolate Reference (first verse).” “I’m like Miles with a mic/ Richard when I write/ Malcolm in da night/ fightin for all our rights/ lyrical like Langston Hughes...” This is a kind of intellectual autobiography of an individual and of his generation, in poems like “16 and up but not quite 19”: “Resistance to the existence of a PS2 cord lynching keeps me young in the face.” In another poem, “Blinded by a Sacrilegious State,” he makes the case that “It’s not safe to leave P.S. 1776 / I attend P.S. 1776 and so do you.”

In “Mind Rape Case #5,” the violence and violation of rape is employed as another metaphor to show the extremity of how a young mind perceives the killing off of imagination, intellectual freedom, limited perspective and silencing of having to say “I exist unseen.” Like *Invisible Man*, recurring tropes of invisibility permeate the work. In the poem, “Academic Committee”, “When Tymel’s talkative behavior spiraled him into Special Education (1st grade) / or / Mr. Ritz baited Bo to pick up a ball instead of Baldwin (7th grade)”. The poem’s end line “Now class let’s move on” offers a chilling instance of the kinds of omission this book is made to ward off.

I am far from being fluent in hip hop lineage and parlance, which is one of the several cultural pools of which *do not hold doors* partakes, so I enjoyed being launched into those waters. From researching some references, I did learn that LL Cool J’s real name is Todd Smith, and that Big L is a rapper whose *Lifestylez Ov Da Poor and Dangerous* was a cult classic and whose posthumous work recorded before he was gunned down at 24 years old will be released soon. A weblog I encountered when searching for some of the references in this book include “blogsoup.” The multiple posts in linebreak reminded me of post by poets on contemporary poetry and poetics lists such as the Buffalo Poetics list and the growing universe of online poetry blogs, where entries are often written in poetic line. In “blogsoup”, “nastack” posts, “Big L is the nigga you’d expect / To Catch wreck / On any cassette deck / I’m so ahead of my time my parents haven’t met yet.” There existed a strong awareness that some of the truly great poets or artists don’t get the recognition they deserve. On the same blog, “eskay” comments on Big L, “cuz he didn’t pop like that, alot of the best artists don’t.” That reminded me of Maggie Zurawski adopting the title “minor American poet” in solidarity with Frank O’Hara after coming across a reference listing him as a “minor American poet.” (She now runs a grat poetry blog by that same name with

her partner kathryn l. pringle). Dessources' sense of flowing through NYC mental-cultural landscapes has many O'Haraesque moments for me as well, and is an active culture worker in the recovery and defense of important works and voices.

The above 4-line verse from "blogsoup" led me to search for a good definition of "doing the dozens" which led me to a blog titled that of a very articulate American mother in Amsterdam raising multiple children and blogging their daily activities for friends and family. Randomhouse.com's Maven "Word of the Day" yielded: "The dozens is a game, especially common among urban blacks, of exchanging insults usually about the mother of the opponent. Skilled playing of the dozens displays verbal improvisation of great originality and wittiness. It also requires a thick skin: you lose the contest if you get upset. The game is often in a stylized, rhythmic form, and the dozens are considered one of the precursors of rap music. Some excellent examples of the dozens can be seen in the movie *White Men Can't Jump*. The term dozens is usually used in such phrases as "to play the dozens" or "to do the dozens"; the form dirty dozens is also common. The word dates at least to the 1910s, but the game was probably played considerably earlier. There are examples of this type of game in several other cultures; in sixteenth-century Scotland, a **flyting** was a battle between poets who exchanged abusive poems; and in the late nineteenth century, American cowboys engaged in "cussing contests," where a saddle would be awarded to the most abusive participant. The origin of the term is unknown" but goes onto speculate on various origins. Here, Jeff Dess is a master at that skill. And at the risk of belaboring the point, Jeffrey Dessources' book code-switches much as a good multi-world roving session on the internet does: free associating across the curves of the earth. He readily acknowledges and credits sources and forms but it is interesting to me what other references and influences active readers will bring to his work.

"In hip hop, where an artist comes from means everything" Mickey Hess states in his current call for contributors for *Represent Where I'm From*: *The Greenwood Guide to American Regional Hip Hop*. He goes onto say, "In hip hop, where an artist comes from means everything. From Brooklyn to Memphis, hip hop artists devote song lyrics to their cities, neighborhoods, area codes, and street corners. Musically, regions often carry distinctive styles of production that become known as Houston's Screwed and Chopped sound or the Miami Bass Sound. Hip hop artists represent where they're from in the way they talk in regional accents and dialects, the way they dress, and the setting of the stories they tell in their lyrics." *do not hold doors* embodies

these principles as well and firmly emanates from in roots grounded in place, race and neighborhood (see poems such as “Twende chimbo! (Lets go home!)” while extending out to other realms.

This work puts Dessources into dialogue with poets such as Vejea Jennings, and Doug Kearney whose work splices multiple registers of hip hop, musical and cultural reference into new poems. Also in the conversation are Thomas Sayers Ellis’ evocations of Parliament Funkadelic, Sun Ra and others, and the poetry of Paul Beatty, Major Jackson and Kevin Young. Cultural mash-ups of multidisciplinary artists who remix and reclaim language like DJ Spooky and Carl Hancock Rux can be productively rubbed up against these poems productively as well.

One of the pleasures of this text is the vast cast of reference that speed by, some much more “googleable” than others and a plethora that are altogether ungoogleable. For example, there is the name of the press Dessources has created to publish his work: “Grew Bap.” I believe the riff contains a reference to “Jes Grew” Ishmael Reed’s coinage from *Mumbo Jumbo* which is referenced here as well in the final poem of the collection as an incantatory invocation, a refrain of how African American Culture “jes grew” organically from so many sources and manifests in these poems, a conjuration of literary ancestors going on. And “Bap” I thought could be a bop or hit, or baptist but probably not “black american princess.” So a “Bap” or “punch” that’s grown large, evanescent greatness. Then I read “Letter #3” which seemed to provide more clues as to the nature of “grew bap:”

DEAR HIP HOP

Recently I let Rap have it. We’re no longer contacting each other. I am asking you to reunite all the elements and bring it back. Rap has gotten out of hand and only your cultural presence as a whole will be able to bring back the voice of the voiceless. WE need your help finding the philosophers, teachers, revolutionaries and cultural critics. Is that too much of a task? Have I asked for too much? Rap doesn’t speak for everyone but everyone believes this to be true. The spirit of Boum Bap will bring the essence of boom bap. We need you HIP HOP.

Peace
EL PREZ

In this epistolary poem to Hip Hop, Dessources calls for new genres and forms to emerge to do the cultural works he proposes. He spells out his purpose with youthful exuberance and calls on the forms and genres of hip hop, funk and poetry to unite in the cause. Dessources engages primarily written and traditional poetic forms, he “uses diverse poetic techniques as a form of literary expansion to reach multiple audiences. As the textual subway traverse this underground world, readers encounter traditional sonnets, haiku, acrostics, and pantoums” (and I would add list poem: one of my favorites of which is “DARK PEARLS the compilation vol. 1” which extends the list poem to playlist) “joined by spoken word pieces and hip hop rap verses” and I would add experimental forms. ‘Lost Sonnet,’ introduces new (hip hop) idioms to the sonnet form, and points to the self reflexivity of both poetry and the the oral poetic song forms: “Within my rhymes one can taste the essence./ I spit with a reason and rock with a cause. / A new breed has arrived can you sense my presence.” This sonnet also includes one of the multiple takes on the orality of Poetic performance, “I’m so sick on the mic you thought I was a patient” And “I am six, and/ Married to the Mic. / I have no kids, but can make you my son in sixteen bars.”

“Boum Bap” also recurs in the pivotal poem “Spirit Known As Boum Bap” which functions as a kind of “grew bap” word score for performance using typography and shaped text for a multileveled readings, the baps and booms sounding percussive, human voice drums. The texts are graphically sophisticated and work on the page as well as being scores for spoken performance.

I finally thought to search out “boum bap” and came up with multiple definitions, including the most popular of many submitted to the website urbandictionary.com:

1. **boom bap** : A style of hip hop signified by a hard bass drum and snapping snare that is often EQed to the forefront of the beat. Some examples include the album "Return of the

Boom-bap" by KRS-One, the Duck Down record label. "With a kick, snare, kicks and high hat / Skilled in the trade of that old boom bap" is originally from A Tribe Called Quest song "We Can Get Down."

And then I came across multiple references to French Afro-Caribbean music described as Boum Bap, including a recent compilation album, *Bele Boum Bap*, a brief sample of which can be heard at:

http://www.kalibanjo.com/album_beleboubap.php

Dessources freely integrates language from multiple registers from slang to theory to Haitian and hip hop modes of speech to create a multilayered, satisfyingly difficult and intertextual work of poetic achievement. The book freshly engages politics on multiple levels from the personal, to the urban, to the global and shows an impressive awareness of 20th and 21st Century concerns vital to all. I am reminded of Oppen's turn of Byrons's "Poets are the Unacknowledged legislators of the world" into "Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world." There are words within worlds here. Again and again we encounter resourceful discourses of "civil dess-obedience." The articulated goal of "the unfamiliar becomes familiar and vice-versa" holds true as parallel flips like "Notorious like Big, Special like Ed" in "Lost Sonnet" abound throughout the text.

Here's to Jeffrey Dessources, a prodigious poet, on and off the page. As the last page of do not hold doors proclaims:

grew bap has arrived