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I have recently been asked the seemingly simple but quite compelling question *what is poetry to you?* Upon days of reflection, I came to an answer that I will probably never fully construct in my lifetime, which begins with an understanding (a personal and possibly a spiritual one), that poetry is a *quality* connected to the unknown realm of existence; it is about connecting people to other potential – and potent – dimensions of being. As a poet, I'm constantly moved by the mysteries fluttering about in the realm of the unknown: things I don't know, questions I ask myself and the world. My willingness to write comes from constantly going back to these *I don't knows*, which Wislawa Szymborska, in her Nobel Prize speech of 1996 alludes to as the core of so-called poetic "inspiration". In the process of translating my queries to poetic language and form, and attempting to access these subjective spaces where these questions flourish and become discourse, my personal and political layers of self intersect.

That could be a way to start to express how the exercise of reading Du Bois's thoughts and writing arises philosophical and existential questions in me which inform my poetic writing, and in coming from the multiracial country of Brazil, with a young and somewhat frail democracy, such interrogations certainly involve race.

One of the things that fascinates me about Du Bois's approach to the problem of race in the United States is his understanding that in order to be full citizens, black people need not simply formal education, but also deep and meaningful knowledge of culture. They need to develop ways in which to interpret the world that are sensible, humane, out of the ordinary; all intellectual and self-reflective practices which are poetic in nature.

In a number of his writings, Du Bois explicitly makes the point that **poetry** is an element – and might I add, a *quality* – which ought to be part of the experience of existing in the world while black. In his commencement address delivered at Howard University in 1930¹, for instance, he stresses that one of the ideals that must guide Negro education is the ideal of knowledge, which involves "feeding rather than choking the glorious world of fancy imagination, of poetry and art and beauty and deep culture". Moreover, Du Bois understands that besides working as a tool to educate people, poetry is a means

¹ "Education and work, June 6, 1930". In: W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

through which an entire culture can be transformed. In a letter to Dorothy Eller from 1938², he writes: “The future of Negro literature and especially of Negro poetry depends on the development of a public that wants to read the sincere and thoughtful expression of the Negro mind no matter how bitter or radical or unpleasant it might be”. It can be argued then, that in Du Bois’s understanding, poetry has connections to the unknown which are related to the history of black people in the diaspora, to a past which is painful and bitter. This historical aspect of poetry can contribute, he adds, to “a development of Negro literature for such literature is of significance not merely to Negroes, not even mainly to Negroes; it is of significance to America”. Du Bois reminds me, then, that the mysterious quality of poetry has deep ancestral roots. Writing about the questions of this time can be combined with writing about the questions surrounding what was, and a knowledge of these two spheres can advance the soul and experience of black people existing in the world today. Reading Du Bois’s poetry and fiction, I am reminded to tap into the memories of my body which are ancestral and old. Not only does this challenge raise my spirit to a hope in the souls of humans, it also reminds me that articulating our ancestral experiences and bringing voice to the voices that were once erased from the historical narratives and the literature of the Europeanized cannon is a way to transform nations, one poem at a time.

In this same spirit, Audre Lorde expresses in her celebrated essay “Poetry is not a luxury” the belief that poetry is language created to implement freedom; and sees in its ancestral dimension a potential to promote liberation: “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde, 2007). Lorde adds to Du Bois’s assertion about revisiting the pain and hardships of the past through poetry, by defending that it is legitimate and powerful to do that through the language of feeling. I then conclude that poetry is not simply about the unknown, but about the known from the past, and about the ancestral, spiritual and subjective knowledge of feeling. In exercising my writing and claiming my right to poetry, I hold onto the writings of thinkers and academics such as Du Bois and Lorde, who also saw in the poetic word the potential of transformation and dared to use it as makers of the change they so desired to see and be.

² “The future of Negro poetry, June 2, 1938”. In: W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.