

Phillip Luke Sinitiere – W. E. B. Du Bois Center Scholar in Residence

In her 2015 memoir *Ordinary Light*, U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith summarizes her intellectual and experiential relationship to poetry as her own “[dialect of the soul](#).” For Smith, poetry’s language, in its visceral presence and its profound immediacy, speaks to something beyond words. When I first read Smith’s description, its Du Boisian sensibility captured my imagination. It got me to think in new ways about W. E. B. Du Bois’s poetry. It prompted me to notice how its existential register—in other words the ways his verse imaginatively addresses the full materiality of human existence—revealed where poetry served as one dialect of Du Bois’s soul as well.

Beyond Du Bois’s poems themselves, I’ve also been fascinated with how his larger philosophy of aesthetics inspired creative writers to pen poetry about him. Perhaps the most famous in this regard is Dudley Randall’s well-known 1952 poem “[Booker T. and W. E. B.](#)” More recently, literary scholar Sandra Staton-Taiwo’s book [Broad Sympathies in a Narrow World](#) offers a creative reimagining of Du Bois’s life in verse while rapper Timothy Welbeck’s record [No City for Young Men](#) and artist Sho Baraka’s album [Talented Xth](#) translate Du Bois’s ideas into hip hop culture.

Above all, centering Du Bois’s poetry as a site of analysis reminds us of the breath of his intellectual labor as an artist, and compels us to consider imagination’s role in movements for social change. Art’s capacity to stir the imagination, what scholar Robin D. G. Kelly calls “[freedom dreams](#),” emphasizes the mental and social transformation that makes possible an alteration of material and social realities. Put in the form of a question, How might Du Bois’s art help to propel our collective efforts to destroy white supremacy? Or inspire new lines of thinking that reallocate, or redistribute resources in efforts to dignify human existence beyond merely surviving another day? Or foster freedom dreams that provide spaces to think, reflect, write, imagine, and create meaningful cultural products?

Read more from Phillip Luke Sinitiere on Du Bois’s relationship with poetry here:

["Hold Sacred Strong and Purposeful Art" W. E. B. Du Bois & Poetry](#)