

Simply to Be Americans?

Literary Radicals Confront Monopoly Capitalism,
1885-1938

Joel Wendland-Liu

Grand Valley State University

Series in Literary Studies



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Introduction: A 100-Year-Old Question

What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?¹

Posed nearly 100 years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois's questions imply a rejection of white supremacy as the measure of cultural values. In these questions, Du Bois invited his audience at an NAACP awards dinner to consider Black nationalist, Pan-African, and other internationalist frames of reference for thought, identity, and action. Do we want simply to be Americans? Du Bois gave this speech just a few weeks before boarding an ocean liner bound for Europe, which delivered him onto a continental train ride through Europe into the heart of revolutionary Russia. Once there, he declared deep sympathy with the Soviet experiment in building socialism. This book explores how Du Bois's difficult questions about "what America really is" and whether "we" should (or could) be a part of it add new dimensions to his much more famous assertion that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."²

Simply to Be Americans? examines through a historical lens and Marxist literary criticism the radical literature that creatively responded to the early epoch of U.S. monopoly capitalism, between 1885 and 1938.³ Du Bois's question "Do we want simply to be Americans?" was loaded with complex and radical meanings. It was not exclusively an appeal to "New Negro" cultural sensibilities that sought innovative ways for Black cultural self-expression or an angst of identity formation in a racist society. His questions reject anti-Black racism and other exclusionary models of social organization. They also implicitly critique cultural pluralism or the related "new America" concept posed by Du Bois's contemporaries as possible cultural solutions for social conflict. Further, one of Du Bois's intended targets lay more precisely near what Charisse Burden-Stelly calls "racial liberalism's" complicity with the offending,

violent status quo via the “self-regulation” of critical postures toward the fundamental root causes of social conflict.⁴

Most profoundly, Du Bois challenged his audience to resist ideological consent for mythological concepts like “100% Americanism.” Fermented in the conflict-ridden closing decades of the nineteenth century, that slogan had become a popular means in the early twentieth century to call for white racial purity and dominance, the criminalization and expulsion of perceived radicals, unswerving support for U.S. imperialism, and suppression of criticism or dissent. It referenced the pugnacious desire to exclude all but the purest European-descended people and sojourners least likely to be ideologically polluted, those who could accept the main pillars of U.S. society.⁵ For predominantly Euro-American social forces and civic organizations who adopted the term “100% Americanism,” America was an ideological and racial project demonstrably articulated with monopoly capitalism, world imperialism, white supremacy, heteronormative patriarchy, and settler colonialism. In *Menace to Empire*, Moon-Ho Jung, for example, shows how Euro-American sugar planters in Hawai‘i, fearful of an industry-wide strike, deployed the term as part of a call for eliminating non-white peoples from the islands as a resolution of class conflict. Through it, Hawai‘i’s capitalists sought complete submission to the economic relations they ruled, the goals of imperialism, and collaboration with or submission to white supremacy.⁶

One hundred percent Americanism had been the basis of the popularization of the KKK, the primary message of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and its literary predecessor, Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansmen, A Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1907). The components of this ideological formation had been at the root of racial-imperial projects at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and the 1902 parades celebrating the mass atrocities in the Philippines ordered by General Jacob H. Smith, to name but a few of the cultural landmarks that defined the dominant ethos and pathos of the era.⁷ The ideas, rhetorics, and practices that comprised these landmarks were interwoven with a variety of forms of cultural expression such as literature, movies, and music.⁸ With this seething, violent context in mind, Du Bois’s questions are posed most fundamentally toward challenging his audience to consider whether they can or should identify with those racial, political, and economic goals that dominant social forces celebrated and clustered under the rubric of “American.” *Simply to Be Americans?* explores how radical writers, through imaginative and communicative architectures, grappled with the complexity of the varied meanings of such a slogan.

This book studies novelists, short story writers, dramatists, poets, and essayists, spanning roughly one-half of a century, who we might imagine as having explored some version of Du Bois's questions.⁹ It is not my contention that literary radicals universally refused American identity *in toto*. The writers studied here expressed the limits of the goodness of being American or the limits of what "America" as an undertaking is, especially within the frame of monopoly capitalism. Accordingly, Du Bois's questions demanded scrutiny of the ethics of being American, registering a desire to abandon the role of collaborator with such a deadly and violent scheme. Literary radicals sometimes suggested that U.S. geopolitical borders and the sought-after restrictive cultural boundaries defining "America" could not contain the imagination, desires, or hopes of those who struggle for liberation. Those constructs could not suppress radical forms of social power and reorganization, a meaningful existence rooted in collaboration, community, and collectivity of "freedom dreams," to borrow respectfully from historian Robin D. G. Kelley.¹⁰

The 1880s through the 1930s saw relentless cultural wars closely connected to the emergence of monopoly capitalism, U.S. imperialism, and the re-entrenchment of white supremacy after Reconstruction. As in any era, literary production was an ideological project, in a sense theorized by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. "The ideas of the ruling class," they famously pronounced, "are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force."¹¹ Marx and Engels ascertained how capitalism's ideological circuits, processes, and content obscure the process of class power through cultural (and legal, political, and institutional) work. They observed the tenacity and capacity of ruling class ideology to protect the intellectual sources, justifications, and sustenance of the continued existence of that power.

Accordingly, publishing media and education institutions—the network of material apparatuses (both state-based and privately controlled) that condition the scaffolding of acceptable or legitimate ideas combined with the coercive institutions to enforce those limits—operate to construct, in their everyday work, an "illusory consciousness" and "socially necessary misunderstanding" of capitalism, habits of thought about the practices of "everyday life," a "common sense," that prioritizes "immediacy" or the acceptance of reality purely on the surface of things, "the level of appearance."¹² Both at a public, institutional level where people encounter the state and capitalism and at a personal, private level, ideology functions to elicit

consent or suppress opposition for ruling class power. It rewards “willing subjects;” and disciplines “willful,” “wayward,” “fugitive,” or “turbulent” subjects.¹³ Perry Anderson defines ideology as “a prevailing set of ideas, but also the conditions and events that generated them, and which they both reflect and distort.” He adds that competing ideologies can combine or intersect to constitute a broader “mental framework,” which may seem to reduce ideology to a thought process.¹⁴ However, ideology, as E. San Juan Jr. contends, operates as “a social practice, not a transcribed ‘false consciousness.’”¹⁵

Ideology within a concrete historical period is simultaneously a set of ideas, their determinate relationship with social institutions and practices, and their work to mystify, legitimate, or celebrate the totality of social relations of a mode of production. Because a class-based sociality always operates via the struggle for hegemony between and among capitalists and subordinate classes, ideology functions as an unclosed project in which counter-hegemonic meanings, criticisms, and utterances are present. In this vein, institutions, actions, ideas (ideologemes, discourses, and rhetorics), and their basic unit—the word—carry and alter ideology.¹⁶ It is never uniformly or thoroughly the product of a single class, class fraction, or power source, even when produced by the revolutionary critic of capitalism. For example, consider the questions Du Bois posed in 1926. They imply a criticism of the ideological essence at the heart of the demand some Black people made to be included in the cultural and political definitions of being American. They attempted to uncover the ideological effect of mixing “American ideology” with genuinely democratic and egalitarian ideology. Thus, they function as ideology critique, a necessary starting point for counter-hegemonic sets of ideas, ideologemes, and practices.

Thus, ideology critique references exposure, uncovering, illuminating, and revealing.¹⁷ It indexes the creation of cultural artifacts, the adjustment of everyday habits, the organization of collectivities, and the crafting of group identities defined as emergent alternatives to the dominant system via the sustained practices, work, and activism that produces connection. It is the creation and fabrication of counter-ideology.¹⁸ Radical ideology critique envisages and announces not only the evils, corruptions, and distortion of the present world but also imagines and pronounces the “horizon of communism.”¹⁹ Literary radicals, thus, presented counter-hegemonic ideas that contended for dominance as part of class struggle. This book explores and documents how radical writer-activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries deployed this aspect of ideology critique and worked toward creating new grammars and rhetorics of liberation.

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