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Joel Wendland-Liu

Simply to Be Americans?

Literary Radicals Confront Monopoly Capitalism, 1885-1938

SERIES IN LITERARY STUDIES

Wendland-Liu deftly navigates decades of radical literary figures who struggled with the question of “what is an American?” during a defining era of American monopoly capitalism, imperialism, and racial and class subjugation. A work of theory, literary analysis, history, and social commentary, “Simply to Be Americans?” re-imagines American literary icons while introducing audiences to lesser-known authors and thinkers who, undaunted, forged a revolutionary social tradition that continues to demand more of our shared cultural identity of “American.” “Simply to Be Americans?” is an important addition to revolutionary’s library.

Prof. Dr. Melissa Ford
Slippery Rock University

About the author

Dr. Joel Wendland-Liu is the author of ‘Mythologies: A Political Economy of U.S. Literature in the Long Nineteenth-Century’ and ‘The Collectivity of Life: Spaces of Social Mobility and the Individualism Myth.’ He is an associate professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. His teaching and research lie at the intersection of Marxist studies, literary criticism, and histories of racial capitalism.

Summary

‘Simply to Be Americans?’ delves into the transformative power of radical U.S. literature from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, uncovering how writers boldly confronted the intertwined forces of Americanism, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Through the works of visionaries like Lucy Parsons, Albert Parsons, and Sutton Griggs, this book reveals how early literary radicals challenged the foundations of monopoly capitalism and white supremacy, planting the seeds for a culture of resistance that would flourish in the decades to come.

Exploring the speculative genius of Mark Twain, Jack London, Gertrude Nafe, and W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘Simply to Be Americans?’ showcases how allegory and satire became powerful tools to dismantle nationalism, imperialism, and racial hierarchies. While these pioneers often grappled with the complexity of these systems, a study of their work illuminated both the possibilities and limitations of early radical thought. As the twentieth century unfolded, U.S. writers embraced revolutionary internationalism, forging connections between domestic struggles and global anti-imperialist movements. Figures like John Reed and Hubert Harrison championed solidarity across borders, while the Russian Revolution and worldwide labor uprisings inspired a new wave of politically charged art. Writers like Genevieve Taggard and W.E.B. Du Bois called for literature that expresses urgent struggles against systemic oppression.

In the 1920s and 1930s, luminaries like Mary Burrill, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, H.T. Tsiang, Josefina Niggli, Lola Ridge, and Dorothy West rejected assimilation, exposing American society’s capitalist and imperialist core. Their works vividly exposed the intersections of race, class, and gender, advocating for unity among the oppressed. ‘Simply to Be Americans?’ redefines the legacy of U.S. radical literature, tracing its evolution and celebrating its enduring impact. This groundbreaking study reveals how these writers critiqued their world and laid the foundation for future movements against exploitation and injustice, offering timeless insights into today’s struggles.

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