

Two accounts of what it means to be an American

By [John D. Wilsey](#)

May 12, 2015

One of the characteristic idiosyncrasies of Americans is that they are always fretting about their identity. They are a people constantly asking themselves, what does it mean to be a “real American”?

There are certain literary figures we can instantly associate with the issue of American identity—for example, Thomas Paine, who claimed that Americans were about to begin the world anew. Alexis de Tocqueville famously asserted that Americans were an exceptional people. And we remember Theodore Roosevelt, who often spoke and wrote about what he called “true Americanism.” And in our own times, we may think of politicians like Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and even Barack Obama, all of whom have made American identity a trademark of their rhetoric.

Let us consider and compare two figures in particular who addressed the question of American identity: J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735–1813) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). Both Crevecoeur and Du Bois were prolific writers, but the works we will take up are Crevecoeur’s [Letters from an American Farmer](#) and Du Bois’s [Souls of Black Folk](#).

Crevecoeur’s *Letters* are a compilation of manuscripts that he published after fleeing America during the Revolution in 1781. The narratives contained in the *Letters* are given to us through a narrator by the name of James. Twelve letters were published in the first edition—the first eight letters are optimistic portrayals of an idyllic pastoral life on the American frontier. The last four are more pessimistic, as James is forced to flee the tempest of war and seek refuge among the Native Americans.

Du Bois wrote *Souls* in 1903 to chronicle the world and experience of African Americans living in an America that had recently emerged from the Civil War and Reconstruction. Du Bois underscores the profound and unique African American struggle of “two-ness,” that is, being “an American, a Negro; . . . two warring ideals in one dark body.”

Though Crèvecoeur and Du Bois were writing in two different historical and cultural contexts, and thus cannot be compared on a one-to-one basis, there are some critical similarities and differences between the two as they are situated in the historical tradition of the idea of American identity.

First, some similarities: both recognized the promise of America. Crèvecoeur saw the freedom of living on the frontier, the freedom from constraints, and the vast potential of the land, and exulted. Du Bois saw the hope in freedom from slavery after the war, which was a dream of centuries that was finally realized. He also saw hope in that new political rights, particularly the ballot, could be claimed by African Americans for the first time. And he also saw that African Americans had new access to the land, like the land in south Georgia, the “Egypt of the Confederacy,” as well as its potential.

For both authors, the American promise was unfulfilled. Crèvecoeur’s James—reflecting Crèvecoeur’s own experience—is harried out of the land by war, thus losing his farm and his freedom. Du Bois writes about poor black farmers in Dougherty County, Georgia, languishing under crushing debt, exhausted soil, and the legacy of the degradations of racism and slavery.

Both Crèvecoeur and Du Bois understood that the idea of being an American was not neat and tidy. America offered freedom, hope, and opportunity in theory. But Crèvecoeur could certainly affirm Du Bois’ statement in *Souls*, that “America is not another word for Opportunity to *all* her sons.”

Still, there are critical differences between these two American thinkers, aside from the obvious gulf between their cultural and historical circumstances. The most important difference is anthropological. Crèvecoeur’s placid and optimistic perspective as a gentleman farmer on the American frontier, free from traditional constraints, is vexed and disrupted by the coming of war. American promise is denied him by external circumstances. Absent those unfortunate circumstances however, Crèvecoeur may well have secured that promise of fruitful labor and a fulfilled life.

But Du Bois is concerned with something deeper than these abstractions. He is concerned with what it means to be human. He is concerned with how African Americans were compelled to view themselves through the eyes of others, namely, white Americans. Whereas Crèvecoeur posed his famous question, “What, then, is

the American, this new man?" Du Bois asked, in the context of Jim Crow's degradation and dehumanization of black people, "Is this the life," that is, a life marked by the dignity of the human mind, body, and spirit, "Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America?"

What does it mean to be truly American? Crèvecoeur thought he found the answer in freedom from external constraints. But Crèvecoeur discovered that freedom is fleeting. Du Bois teaches us that being an American entails generously granting the humanity in every precious person.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [John D. Wilsey](#).*