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978-0-521-12091-3 - Literature, Amusement and Technology in the Great Depression

William Solomon

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LITERATURE, AMUSEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Literature, Amusement and Technology examines the exchange between literature and recreational practices in 1930s America. William Solomon argues that autobiographical writers like Edward Dahlberg and Henry Miller took aesthetic inspiration from urban manifestations of the carnival spirit: Coney Island amusement parks, burlesque, vaudeville, and the dime museum display of human oddities. More broadly, he demonstrates that the literary projects of the period pivoted around images of grotesquely disfigured bodies which appeared as part of this recreational culture. Figures of corporeal fragmentation also proved important to novelists such as Nathanael West and John Dos Passos who were concerned to resist the ideological force of spectacular forms of mass entertainment like the World's Fairs, Hollywood film and military ceremonies. Psychic, social, aesthetic, and political tensions were thus managed in Depression-era American literature in relation to communal modes of play. This study will appeal to scholars of twentieth-century American literature and culture.

WILLIAM SOLOMON is Assistant Professor in the Departments of English and American Studies at Stanford University. He has published essays in *American Literature*, *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, and *Style*. This is his first book.

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For Michael Sprinker

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A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing.

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

One must learn *how to read* books, not *how to fear* them.

Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*

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Acknowledgments

My mother's uncle was a pilot, a reporter, and probably a member of the Communist Party. He was also the first American killed in the Spanish Civil War. While on a mission, his plane was disabled by ground fire. Struggling to return home, he died in the crash.

To honor his memory, my maternal grandparents helped organize the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee League, the purpose of which was to collect funds to aid those fleeing Franco's forces in Spain. Many years later, my grandmother and step-grandfather were brought before the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities and told by the court that if they refused to reveal the names of those who gave contributions to the League, they would be imprisoned. When my mother graduated from high school, her parents were in jail.

My grandmother had it tough; she went in alone. My grandfather was more fortunate; he soon had the Hollywood Ten for company. Upon his release, my grandfather, who at the time of the trial was chair of the German Department at New York University, was promptly fired. He never worked in academia again. Blacklists can be tough too.

I began this project with the hope of re-establishing contact with a radical heritage from which I felt quite distanced. I set out to research and write about work and social protest in the 1930s – serious business by all previous accounts. Yet I became distracted by the proliferation of grotesque bodies in Depression-era prose. Attending to these figures of physical disfiguration drew my attention to the interaction throughout the decade between American literature and assorted recreational practices. Depictions of torn bodies and mutilated faces turned out to be a means of gaining interpretive access to the radical artist's intense involvement with urban manifestations of the carnival spirit, with the dime museum freak show, Coney Island amusement parks, American burlesque and vaudeville, and slapstick cinema. It then became evident to me that images of corporeal fragmentation had proved indispensable

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to dissident writers concerned to contest the ideological effects of the period's mass spectacles: its World's Fairs, Hollywood films, national holidays, and military ceremonies. Left-wing politics turned out to be a laughing matter.

To the degree that these forms of popular entertainment were mechanized, artistic interest in them led writers into an ambivalent engagement with modern technology. To manage the excitements and anxieties these public attractions produced, as did domestic devices like the phonograph, the predominantly male authorial subjects on whom I concentrate consistently turned to gender. Mass amusements were eroticized and made to embody the thrills and terrors conventionally associated with the feminine. In sum, my scholarly labors gave way to a fascination with the ways in which psychosexual, aesthetic, social, and political tensions were negotiated in the Depression era in relation to collective modes of play.

I take no responsibility for my deviation from orthodox literary history. I blame the following individuals: Renée Fox, Michael Pinkus, David Riggs, Bryan Wolf, Al Gelpi, Eric and Irene Solomon, and Molly Hutton. Unlike my grandparents, I am willing to name names.

Sections of the "Intermission" and Chapter 4 appeared in a different form in *American Literature* (68:4) and a portion of Chapter 1 appeared in *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* (43:4). I appreciate the permission of these journals to reprint these materials.