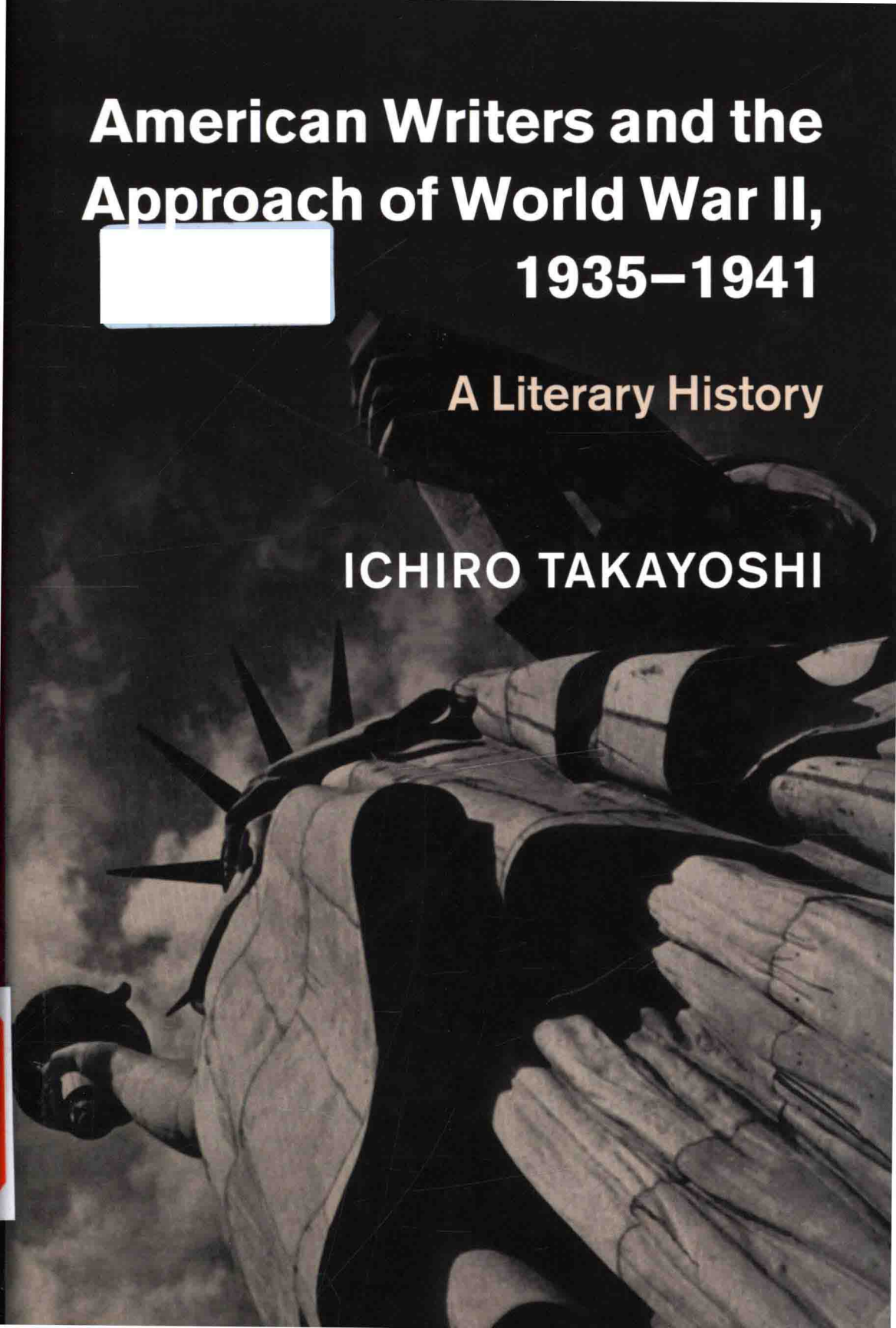
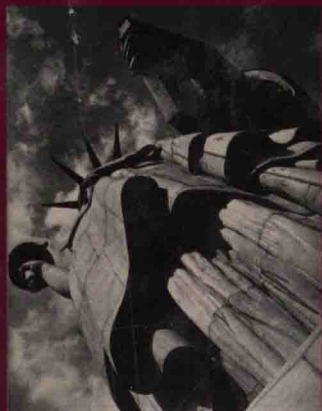


American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935–1941

A Literary History

ICHIRO TAKAYOSHI





Ichiro Takayoshi's *American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935–1941: A Literary History* argues that World War II transformed American literary culture. From the mid-1930s to America's entry into World War II in 1941, preeminent writers and intellectuals from Ernest Hemingway to Reinhold Neibuhr responded to the turn of the public's interest from the economic depression at home to the menace of totalitarian systems abroad by producing novels, short stories, plays, poems, and cultural criticism in which they prophesied the coming of a second world war and explored how America could prepare for it. The variety of competing answers offered a rich legacy of idioms, symbols, and standard arguments that were destined to license America's promotion of its values and interests around the world for the rest of the twentieth century. Ambitious in scope and addressing an enormous range of writers, thinkers, and artists, this book is the first to establish the outlines of American culture during this pivotal period.

Ichiro Takayoshi is Assistant Professor of English at Tufts University. His articles on modern U.S. literature have appeared in academic journals such as *Post45* and *Representations*. Takayoshi has also translated into Japanese the works of Don DeLillo, David Mitchell, and Richard Powers.

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Tufts University



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AMERICAN WRITERS AND THE APPROACH OF WORLD WAR II, 1935-1941

Ichiro Takayoshi's *American Writers and the Approach of World War II, 1935-1941: A Literary History* argues that the approach of World War II transformed American literary culture. From the mid-1930s to America's entry into World War II in 1941, preeminent writers and intellectuals responded to the turn of the public's attention from the economic depression at home to the menace of dictatorships abroad by producing novels, short stories, plays, poems, and cultural criticism in which they prophesied the coming of a second world war and explored how America could prepare for it. Their competing answers left a rich legacy of idioms, symbols, and standard arguments that were destined to license America's promotion of its values and interests around the world for the rest of the twentieth century. Ambitious in scope and addressing an enormous range of writers, thinkers, and artists, this book is the first to establish the outlines of American letters during this pivotal period.

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Only the prophecies are true. The present is an opportunity to repent.

Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941)

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PROLOGUE

Fun to Be Free

It was October 5, 1941. Madison Square Garden in New York City. The Fight for Freedom Committee staged a patriotic extravaganza, "Fun To Be Free." An intense publicity blitz preceded the event. The show would feature an all-star \$150,000-a-week cast, ballyhooed the Committee's Stage, Screen, Radio and Arts Division, headed by Helen Hayes and Burgess Meredith. The tickets had been selling briskly. On the first night of the show, a capacity crowd of 17,000 packed the arena.

The action opened with a concert, with several soloists taking turns singing Irving Berlin's new song "Arms for the Love of America":

On land and on the sea and in the air
We've gotta be there, we've gotta be there
America is sounding her alarm
We've gotta have arms, we've gotta have arms

The main event of the "Fun To Be Free" night followed – a pageant written by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur with Kurt Veill's music. The narrator, played in turn by Tallulah Bankhead, Burgess Meredith, and Claude Rains, challenged the audience with a question: "What is America? What is the USA?" To answer these queries, a phalanx of American patriots, from Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Andrew Jackson to Abraham Lincoln, was summoned from the nation's hallowed past onto the stage. Reflecting their historical circumstances, their definitions of the national genius differed. Yet the libretto also made it crystal-clear that all these heroes spoke directly to the latest emergency confronting the country: the approach of World War II. After Lincoln denounced Vandalism and Copperheads, a thinly veiled stand-in for the latter-day isolationists, the narrator announced to the audience that Lincoln had been recently reincarnated – in the person of Franklin D. Roosevelt. On cue, the speech

that Roosevelt delivered a few weeks prior blared from the loudspeakers. What the audience heard was a stark reminder of the impending crisis.

Dubbed the “shoot-on-sight” speech by the press, this radio address called for an undeclared war on Germany in the Atlantic. Roosevelt’s call was supported by four arguments that must have been familiar to most of the audience in Madison Square Garden. First was the charge of conspiratorial designs for world domination. A series of recent attacks on U.S. vessels by German submarines, Roosevelt’s sonorous voice explained, formed “part of a general plan.” Those attacks constituted “one determined step toward creating a permanent world system based on force, on terror, and on murder.” Second was the military vulnerability of the Western Hemisphere. The Germans had recently attempted to subvert the governments of Uruguay and Bolivia. Secret landing fields had just been discovered in Colombia, “within easy range of the Panama Canal.” Third, the United States was taking a defensive, not offensive, action against aggressor nations. The Navy would not hesitate to shoot on sight to control “any waters which America deems vital to its defense.” “The aggression is not ours,” Roosevelt reassured the audience, “Ours is solely defense.” And finally, Roosevelt criminalized war. The torpedo attacks on U.S. convoys were acts of “piracy” and “international lawlessness.” The Germans were “international outlaws,” an “enemy of all law, all liberty, all morality, all religion.”¹ Someone – presumably the United States – must enforce the law of civilization globally.

Agitated voices reading a news flash then interrupted Roosevelt. The audience must have instantly recognized these urgent voices belonging to Raymond Gram Swing, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Elmer Davis, all famous anti-Nazi radio commentators. Reports were coming from south, east, and west, they told the audience. Enemy planes were sighted over Laredo, Texas, bomber formations from Dakar were flying over the Atlantic toward New England, the sky over the Pacific darkened with Japanese bombers heading for San Francisco and Los Angeles, and finally, just outside Madison Square Garden, an armada of German planes was swarming the sky over Manhattan and dropping paratroopers. All the lights went out thereupon. From the loudspeakers blasted sirens, the roar of diving bombers, and explosions. Myriad white crisscrossing shafts of searchlight began sweeping the balconies and the ceiling. And the audience gawked at thousands of Aryan and Asiatic paratroopers descending from the sky – until they discovered that the parachutes were made of cardboard, only five-inch tall.

The finale was a variety show featuring Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Ella Logan, Ethel Merman, Bill Robinson, and the Lindy Hoppers. It opened

with a column of Nazi soldiers, clad in brown shirts and sporting steel helmets, meandering through the audience, with Hitler's coffin on their shoulders. When the funeral procession reached the stage, Robinson, aged sixty-three and in his usual regalia of an ermine coat and gold pants, leaped on the coffin, shuffled a few gingerly steps, and then really went to town. To a jolly rhythm that Bonjangle's split cog shoes tapped out on the lid of Hitler's casket, a chorus of sixteen black voices boomed Berlin's song, "When That Man Is Dead and Gone:"

When that man is dead and gone
When that man is dead and gone
We'll go dancing down the street
Kissing everyone we meet
When that man is dead and gone

As the song neared its close, Whitey's Lindy Hoppers rushed the stage. A bedlam of hilarious acrobatics ensued. To the quick rhythm of swing jazz, the jitterbugs celebrated the end of war.²

The show was a roaring success. It would tour major cities across the country.

A small but luminous detail in this episode shines a bright light on the main premise of this book. The first stanza of "When That Man Is Dead and Gone" depicted the day when, following Hitler's death, ordinary citizens would go dancing down the street kissing everyone they meet. Berlin was recalling that all-too-familiar iconic scene of spontaneous street celebrations at the end of World War II, captured in the black-and-white pictures showing the jubilant crowds on V-E Day and V-J Day – only that he wasn't. For on that night America was not yet even at war with the Axis powers. Berlin was prophesying the coming, and even the ending, of a new world war before it started.

Berlin's premonitions were also evident in the forgotten opening verse of another song, "God Bless America." Usually omitted in later performances, the original lyric, as it received its radio premier by Kate Smith on Armistice Day in 1938 (its first official observance), explained why Americans were in dire need of God's blessing:

While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
Let us all be grateful that we're far from there,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.

Berlin originally composed this song during the Great War. At Camp Upton in Yaphank, New York, Sergeant Berlin was asked to produce a

revue to raise funds for a communal building in the army base. *Yip Yip Yaphank* (1918), performed by an all-soldier cast, was the result. But for some reason Berlin dropped “God Bless America,” one of the many songs he wrote for the show. Now, precisely two decades since the original Armistice and a mere month after the Munich Crisis portended another great war in Europe, he updated it with this new introductory verse. With the sighting of a dark storm far across the sea that originally motivated the entire song forgotten today, it is worth remembering that what compelled Berlin to dust off this anthem was the rumors of war, the danger from without. What is today universally considered America’s unofficial anthem was originally intended by Berlin as a “great peace song.” It prayed for guidance from the Almighty for the “land that’s free.” Berlin saw the ship of state navigating the stormy waters toward the war clouds, still “far away” but ominous and threatening. Berlin, the first-generation immigrant from a war-torn Europe, wished that his adopted country would avert this storm, “grateful” as he was, along with countless pacifists and isolationists of his day, “that we’re far from there.” In three years, however, it struck America head-on. And, by that time, Berlin had altered this fainthearted line to “grateful for a land so fair.” As this minor but revealing change and a number of martial songs he composed for “Fun to Be Free” attested, Berlin’s transformation from a nervous pacifist to the minstrel of righteous war had been completed.³

Berlin’s was not a rare and isolated case of artistic clairvoyance or political conversion. On the contrary, his was part of an epidemic of sorts. Roughly from 1935 to 1941, during the prolonged run-up to America’s direct participation in the global conflict, countless artists, writers, critics, thinkers, and journalists were exercised by the war they saw coming in slow motion. These prewar Americans thought they saw a world war coming because starting in the mid-1930s, omens proliferated far across the sea (China, Ethiopia, Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Finland, France, England). By the late 1930s, all these geopolitical bush fires spotted in distant lands had come together to threaten a global holocaust, which seemed increasingly likely to reach American shores. The alarm over this slow advent of war pervaded all departments of American letters, including song writing, fiction, theater, poetry, and criticism. These writers all nervously “look[ed] from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future,” Wallace Stevens remarked in 1936. The mirage of the coming world war on the horizon transfixed writers, artists, critics, and intellectuals. They brooded, puzzled, and quarreled over what the next war would mean to their country. And from their worries and perplexities resulted a