



Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression

Jani Scandura

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Mucking around in the messy terrain of American trash, Jani Scandura tells the story of the United States during the Great Depression through evocative and photo-rich portraits of four locales: Reno, Key West, Harlem, and Hollywood. In investigating these Depression-era “dumps,” places that she claims contained and reclaimed the cultural, ideological, and material refuse of modern America, Scandura introduces the concept of “depressive modernity,” an enduring affective component of American culture that exposes itself at those moments when the foundational myths of America and progressive modernity—capitalism, democracy, individualism, secularism, utopian aspiration—are thrown into question. Depressive modernity is modernity at a *standstill*. Such a modernity is not stagnant or fixed, nor immobile, but is constituted by an instantaneous unstaging of desire, territory, language, and memory that reveals itself in the shimmering of place.

An interpretive bricolage that draws on an unlikely archive of 1930s detritus—office memos, scribbled manuscripts, scrapbooks, ruined photographs, newspaper clippings, glass eyes, incinerated stage sets, pulp novels, and junk washed ashore—*Down in the Dumps* escorts its readers through Reno’s divorce factory of the 1930s, where couples from across the United States came to quickly dissolve matrimonial bonds; Key West’s multilingual salvage economy and its status as the island that became the center of an ideological tug-of-war between the American New Deal government and a politically fraught Caribbean; post-Renaissance Harlem, in the process of memorializing, remembering, grieving, and rewriting a modernity that had already passed; and Studio-era Hollywood, Nathanael West’s “dump of dreams,” in which the introduction of sound in film and shifts in art direction began to transform how Americans understood place-making and even being itself. A coda on Alcatraz and the Pentagon brings the book into the present, exploring how American Depression comes to bear on post-9/11 America.

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