
Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place Modernity, American Depression.*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9154>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9154

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Greg Zacharias, "Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place Modernity, American Depression.*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 3, Online since 30 May 2011, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9154> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9154>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



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REFERENCES

Durham: Duke UP, 2008). Pp. xix, 322. ISBN: 978-0-8223-3666-2.

- 1 Too infrequently in a reader's life one encounters books of such surprise, such difference and such mental and expository agility that one cannot release oneself from the memory of that text. In fact, one becomes haunted by them. Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* was like that for me. So was Hans Gabler's synoptic text version of Joyce's *Ulysses*. I add to the list the opening essay especially, but others as well, in Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*. One common element in all of these books was the notion of recovery and revaluing. Beginning with his employment of Pound's strategy for the luminous moment—Henry James and Ezra Pound shaking hands and then parting ways in a figuration of London, Kenner found a way to recover and revalue the entire story of Pound's literary world, which, of course, itself turned on the famous phrase "Make It New." Gabler, in an effort that could not for a range of reasons ever be duplicated, recovered and reassembled the range of variants from the editions of *Ulysses*. In so doing, he offered on the recto and just opposite a reading text and not at the back of a book or as "footnotes" a nearly unreadable synoptic texts of variants placed side by side so a reader could trace a history of compositional decision making. He built that astounding text, now valued equally with an "edited" version right across the page from editions that had more or less been thrown away. Greenblatt, of course, opens *Shakespearean Negotiations* with a meditation of his (our?) desire to "speak with the dead." That is, to recover what has died and been buried.
- 2 But recovery, reclaiming, redefining in American Studies and elsewhere is something we are now comfortable with—even reliant upon (Jonathan Culler wrote recently that "the motif of return" dominated the essay he included in the October 2010 special issue

of PMLA on “Literary Criticism for the Twenty-first Century” [908]), whether or not the product of that discovery is worth speaking to or being haunted by. Literary, historical and cultural studies, at least, frequently depend upon “looks back,” “revaluations,” and “recoveries.” But nobody to my knowledge has taken on both what has been done and will be done like Jani Scandura in *Down in the Dumps*.

- 3 *Down in the Dumps* is both frustrating and highly rewarding. Those rewards come partly as a function of the frustration that results from Scandura’s commitment to enacting her subject in her writing textually, typographically, compositionally (Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book* offers a rough comparison of the method). Where the nominal approach of *Down in the Dumps* is cultural archaeology of refuse—the refused, the discarded, the marginalized, Scandura also conducts her autobiographical and political narrative through unwavering attention to and consideration of what she recovered from the dump sites she surveys. The (re)enactment or at least its representation, then, of the power of such recovery also marks a commitment to reexamination, reconsideration, recycling in the broadest sense.
- 4 Scandura’s dumps include those refuse sites one might imagine would be the work territory for cultural archaeology: decrepit parts of once-famous and glittering towns and cities and the waste areas for once important institutions, for example. They also include sites where the dumping is covert, secret, or simply overlooked such as Hollywood and the Pentagon.
- 5 Part One of *Down in the Dumps* takes up “Reno, the Divorce Factory.” In the examination of Reno, Nevada and the divorce industry, Scandura reexamines American modernity, notions of gender-value, and twentieth-century commerce. These are points of analysis throughout. “So, finally, to be Reno-vated means not just to remarry, but to be restored or cured by becoming [. . .] a 1930’s ‘revised New Woman,’ a woman who shops” (66). “Part Two: Key West, the Nation and the Corpse,” looks to Key West, Florida as a site once thrown away and now recovered here for its “mythology of piracy [which] embodies an alternative myth of the building of America, a narrative that embraces revolt and revolution, that reveals the violence buried in all narratives of nation building, a narrative of dismemberment, disinterment, and mixture (*mestizaje*) rather than coherence, cleanliness, and Manifest Destiny” (79). She asserts that a “Key West aesthetic is an aesthetic of salvaging” (96). Part Three, “Harlem: Blue-Penciled Place,” among other investigations/revivals, explores the significance of Harlem Hospital and disease, especially tuberculosis, both as a trope and as something recovered from Harlem history. Part Four, “Hollywood(land): Wax, Fire, Insomnia,” considers Hollywood in terms of its dumped artifacts and the dumping even of its own history. For example, at the UCLA film archives off Hollywood Boulevard, “you sit mostly alone in a hot, darkened closet of a room, winding short reels of crackling films around the spools of ancient projectors. Unlike the wood-paneled rooms of the overly air-conditioned Charles E. Young Research Library on the UCLA campus in Westwood, these archives are a tomb of sorts—and a death trap. Curators regularly throw out reels of disintegrating films to keep them from liquefying and incinerating the rest” (189). Thus film, like the sets used to create the images on it, which itself, always, eventually, must be thrown out, becomes a trope for the book, for Hollywood, and for this portion, at least, of American commerce and culture. Finally, “Afterword: the Prison and the Pentagon” considers Alcatraz Prison, a dumping ground for prisoners and later redeemed as a tourist site, next to the Pentagon. This comparison is

legitimated through a comparison made in a lost-now-found 1943 *Saturday Evening Post* article (241). Both are places of secrets.

- 6 The analysis of those sites then functions as a metonymic analysis of the towns and institutions and finally the national culture with which the sites are affiliated. And these sections alone are worth the reading. For in addition to “stag[ing] an encounter with the past through its dumps,” the book “also looks at the mechanisms through which refuse is managed, manipulated, and defined” (21). But *Down in the Dumps* carries even greater rewards. These are in sections that discuss thrown-away buildings, such as the Mapes Hotel in Reno, the Key West Aquarium, and the Atlanta set for *Gone with the Wind*, classes of workers, such as women following the return of WWII soldiers, and even considerations of the meaning of the most mundane trash, such as a corporate ID card recovered from the Fresh Kills Land Fill, or a common memo picked from an archive, or an email, so usually read and then deleted. All that is thrown away is valuable for Scandura because it marks what we keep and in refuse is marked a sign of what we keep. To understand what we throw away, then, is to understand the other side of the coin of what we keep. Such an intensity of revaluation of values, then, accounts for the book’s autobiographical element. Following Scandura, the narrative logic of *Down in the Dumps* seems to suggest, the reexamination of one (wo)man’s trash as one (wo)man’s treasure also calls out that (wo)man’s ways of understanding trash and treasure.
- 7 *Down in the Dumps*, finally, is a book one is not likely to have seen often before—or at least remember easily that one has seen it: a book *about* seeing, reseeing and reunderstanding what has been hidden from sight through forgetting, hiding, discarding. After reading *Down in the Dumps*, one is not likely to take the phrase, “out of sight, out of mind” in quite the same way ever again.

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