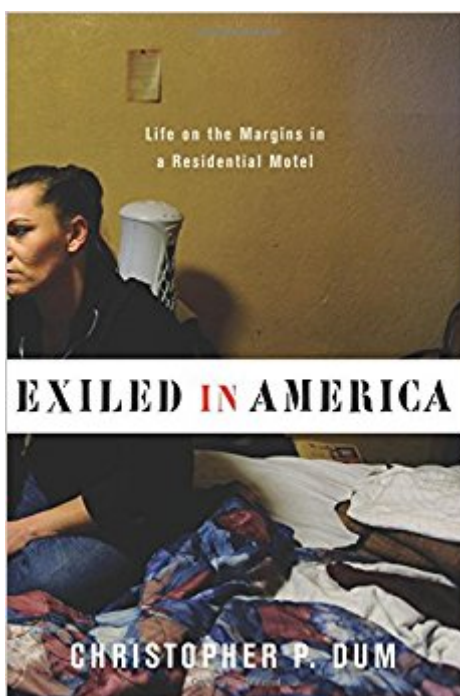


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Exiled In America: Life On The Margins In A Residential Motel (Studies In Transgression)



Synopsis

Residential motels have long been places of last resort for many vulnerable Americans—released prisoners, people with disabilities or mental illness, struggling addicts, the recently homeless, and the working poor. Cast aside by their families and mainstream society, they survive in squalid, unsafe, and demeaning circumstances that few of us can imagine. For a year, the sociologist Christopher P. Dum lived in the Boardwalk Motel to better understand its residents and the varied paths that brought them there. He witnessed moments of violence and conflict, as well as those of care and compassion. As told through the voices and experiences of motel residents, *Exiled in America* paints a portrait of a vibrant community whose members forged identities in response to overwhelming stigma and created meaningful lives despite crushing economic instability. In addition to chronicling daily life at the Boardwalk, Dum follows local neighborhood efforts to shut the establishment down, leading to a wider analysis of legislative attempts to sanitize shared social space. He also suggests meaningful policy changes to address the societal failures that lead to the need for motels such as the Boardwalk. The story of the Boardwalk, and the many motels like it, will concern anyone who cares about the lives of America's most vulnerable citizens.

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Customer Reviews

Exiled in America is a keen, well-written study of the powerful social forces of inequality as they are

shaped by cultural issues and social institutions. Christopher P. Dum provides an unusual glimpse of a unique population living in a difficult and hazardous place— a nuanced and important work. (Terry Williams, author of *The Con Men: Hustling in New York City*) Living in a poverty motel that houses the most marginalized and scrutinized populations in the United States, Dum documents the lived drama of managed stigma, the eruptive proclivities of a caring fragile community of 'social refugees,' the tragedy of public indifference, and the humanity of capitalism's newly rendered 'huddled masses.' It is a story that can only be told through immersive ethnography. (Timothy Black, author of *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid: The Lives of Three Puerto Rican Brothers On and Off the Streets*) It is not often, after forty years in the field, that I actually get excited by a new scholar's tone— that I find it so fascinating, so rich, so theoretically and analytically thick, that I go agog over it. Such is the case with Dum's work. (Peter Adler, University of Denver) Dum digs down deep inside the darkness of marginality and exclusion to find the lives that others willfully ignore. Amidst that darkness he discovers hard living and plenty of hurt but something else as well: little flowerings of courage and community. An exemplar of engaging ethnography, *Exiled in America* is a book that I've now read twice and will no doubt read again— it's that good. (Jeff Ferrell, author of *Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging*) *Exiled in America* is a compelling and compassionate look at people living at society's margins. Dum details the evolution of the 'no tell' Boardwalk Motel, the people who live there, and the social dynamics among themselves and the surrounding community, illustrating our 'dystopian cultural response to inequality.' Ethnography at its best! (Andrea Leverentz, author of *The Ex-Prisoner's Dilemma: How Women Negotiate Competing Narratives of Reentry and Desistance*) [A] revealing, rigorously academic work.... [Dum] places the painful experiences of these residents in the larger societal context: rising rates of incarceration, foreclosures, evictions, and homelessness have in recent years turned many nonchain motels into shelters for the marginalized. (Kirkus Reviews (starred review)) [A] fine, vivid and disturbing ethnography. (Times Higher Education) This book, Dum's debut, is a lively evocation of a precarious, misunderstood community's rhythms, textures, and tools for living together. It also contains a nicely potted history of American motels, once symbols of freedom for car-owning travelers, now disreputable, last-ditch options for the transient and marginalized— living monuments to what happens when massive social problems run up against a national desire for Band-Aid solutions. (Peter C. Baker Pacific Standard) Eye-opening, necessary work (Lit Rant) *Exiled in America* is on the whole an exemplary piece of social reportage and analysis. (Inside Higher Ed) Recommended. (Choice)

Christopher P. Dum is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Kent State University. He is a contributor to *Justice Quarterly* and *Children and Youth Services Review*.

Only a few months before reading *Exiled in America*, I read Matthew Desmond's *Evicted*. Both authors took the same ethnographic approach. One lived among low-income people in a mobile home park, the other in a motel that housed other low-income people, including sex offenders and others with arrest records. Since I thought *Evicted* was a landmark study masterfully done, Dum's was bound to suffer by comparison. What made the difference? Both authors sought to humanize their subjects, breaking the stereotypes many hold about the poor. But where Desmond succeeded over Dum was that Desmond concentrated on unbroken day-to-day narratives of his folks, many of which stirred the heart. Dum, on the other hand, seems intent on certifying his legitimacy as a sociologist, breaking his narrative into little illustrative vignettes to show how elements such as community and conflict were characteristic of the people among whom he lived. Well, yes: I would expect bits of community and conflict would manifest themselves wherever a group shares common space over a period of time. In my own profession I work with homeless folks and I see the same qualities among them—these things rise as part of natural human interaction—so I found not much insight among Dum's writing here. Furthermore, in using vignettes simply to illustrate principles or to make points, interrupted any narrative, challenging me to keep the stories of all the individuals straight (chronology of events could be especially hard to follow). Then we come to the conclusion. My greatest criticism of *Evicted* was that while Desmond did a terrific job reporting on the plight of his subjects, the immensity of the things they had to overcome subdued the suggestions he had for fixing them. In contrast, Dum is at no loss of suggestions in his conclusions—from the relatively small-scale (e.g., making a distinctive between the different types of sex offenders when it comes time for agencies to house them), to the grandiose (e.g. overcoming the consumer mentality and overthrowing capitalism). Indeed, the last paragraphs of Dum's book turn into passionate polemic. In my gut I agree with 100% of what Dum says. I just wish that Dum himself relied less on his gut in drawing his conclusions. For whereas he so diligently strives to be purely scientific sociologist in reporting on his experiences with his subjects, his conclusions abandon that approach to make a moral argument instead. They are based less on any data he has presented than on his sense of principle. He wants us to care about his subjects because he cares. And while that may be admirable, moral argument abandons objectivity. And unfortunately, if social

policy is to be changed to improve the lives of those Dum cares about, it will have to be done by policymakers who won't be swayed by moral argument alone.

"Exiled in America" is a stunning work of ethnography by Christopher P Dum. For one year the author lived part-time in a motel which was a dumping ground for sex offenders, the mentally ill, people on parole, drug addicts, the homeless and other vulnerable poor people. In what seems to have been the author's PhD dissertation, the book tells of the individuals who either lived there because they could not afford to live somewhere else, or who were placed there by DSS. As the author tells us: Ethnography captures the lived experience of people and preserves their memories as a historical record of their universal right to exist. He further states: By observing people and behavior over time, I was able to examine the Motel not at a cross-sectional moment in time but instead what turned out to be the tail end of its lifespan. Therefore, this book chronicled not only the lives of motel residents but the culmination of social forces that had affected them over time and which eventually led to their displacement. In "Exiled in America" the reader gets to know a number of the residents quite well, and to sympathize with them. But Dum treats neither his subjects nor his readers with condescension or contempt. He describes the residents as real people, with all of the complications of being human, and without disguising weaknesses or illegal behavior. It is very much a "walk one mile in my shoes" situation. He is forthright in describing the physical deficiencies of the motel, and clear in his description of how the middle-class town in which the motel was situated felt about and treated the residents. This book is well worth reading, and extremely thought provoking. Dum ends his book with some serious ideas and policies to improve the lives of vulnerable populations and after having read what he has reported they make a lot of sense. You won't look at people in quite the same way after reading "Exiled in America" and that is a good thing. Five enthusiastic stars. I was given an ARC from the publisher and NetGalley for my honest opinion.

I learned some things from reading this book which makes me glad that I checked it out at our local library. I hope to read similar works. Dum's writing is of good quality and the book is interesting and engaging. My 3 star rating is due to his "social refugee" characterizations and his almost non-existent reference to personal responsibility for actions. I get that sucky and bad things happen to people but we all make choices in life. If one chooses the path of a criminal which then leads to jail time-- to me (and the dictionary) that does not constitute a refugee (since it was his choice to

resort to a criminal lifestyle). The author alludes to the frequent purchase of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes by residents of the motel--but seems to assert that these purchases are out of the individual's control due to temptation by proximity and common usage. I could give many other examples of Dum's ignoring any sort of personal responsibility for choices made by residents. Again, I'm not trying to say that bad things didn't happen to the people whose stories were recounted here but there were also a lot of choices that were made that exacerbated these problems. Again, I'm glad that I read the book--I thought Dum did a good job and put the spotlight on a demographic of people that are largely ignored and given band aid fixes that hurt more than help. There's no way I'd pay \$35 for it though, look for it in your local library.

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