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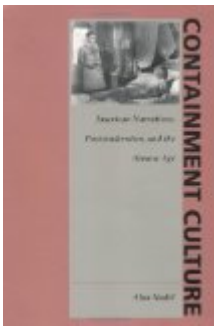

Alan Nadel. *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age (New Americanists).* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. xii + 332 pp. $23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-1699-2.

Reviewed by Steve Schroeder

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This book is demands a special reviewing style. If I wrote a review that made it "same," I would simultaneously undermine and confirm it. So I won't.

Titles signify, as do books. This book's title implies that it is "about" containment culture, American narratives, postmodernism, and the atomic age. But the book signifies nothing, which is what "American" narratives have been ***about*** in the atomic age. "From the first atomic bomb tests to Vietnam," Nadel writes, "`democracy' has named stories produced under the rubric of containment" (7-8). Stories produced under the rubric of containment have meticulously signified "nothing" as a ***strategy*** of containment, an epistemology of the closet that, by "repetition of tropes," struggles endlessly to keep the narrative straight. "History is a cipher for omission" (8); reading, writing, and living it (not three activities, but one) involves seeing (as Wallace Stevens eloquently put it) nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Nadel evokes Salman Rushdie in his preface, referring to ***Midnight's Children*** in the course of recounting a personal anecdote that frames this book as an act of remembering. For Nadel, as for Rushdie, "the question of how national trauma effects personal narratives" [not affects, but effects] is both "beyond the scope of this book" and "informs virtually every page" (xi). Nadel, like Rushdie, is concerned with absences that are uncannily present. That Saleem, the main character of ***Midnight's Children***, is "handcuffed to history" is signified by the coincidence of his birth with the birth of India: both occurred on August 15, 1947--as did Nadel's. This is an important indicator of how Nadel will occupy (if not colonize) a past that occupies his present and ours.

Nadel's style is anecdotal. He calls a series of witnesses--some persons, some films, some news accounts, some novels, all fictions: George Kennan, John Hersey, Holden Caulfield, ***The Ten Commandments***, ***Lady and the Tramp***, ***Pillow Talk***, ***Playboy***, James Bond, Woody Allen, ***Catch-22***, the Bay of Pigs, ***The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance***, John Searle, the Free Speech Movement, John A. Williams, ***Meridian***, ***Democracy***... Each functions as "witness" in that they testify (in a sense more

"religious" than "judicial," though the postmodern experience of the atomic age renders that distinction notably indistinct). It goes without saying that this is a dizzying array of witnesses, marked by considerable diversity. To imply that they are the same would be an unconscionable act of colonialism. Nadel doesn't.

On the other hand, by putting them together between the covers of a book, he creates and occupies (and invites us to occupy) an "impossible" space of the kind he attributes to Woody Allen's early films (149). For Nadel, as for the postmodern writers he calls to mind, history is an accomplice: "Postmodern writers...realize that they have complete control over history and no control whatsoever over events" (39). To write that writing is simultaneously "a source of truth" and "a process of distortion" (66), is to place oneself in a position like the one Nadel attributes to "the Western man": "The success of the Western man is measured by his ability to create a place in which there is no longer any place for him" (193).

In the end, Nadel tells us that this book "has been about narratives that effected strategies of containment in America during the decades immediately following World War II." Had those strategies "worked effectively," he goes on, "this book would be illegible" (297). That is a challenge worthy of a book on the containment strategy of the atomic age! If the book is illegible, then the strategies "worked." If it is legible (or, as Nadel more confidently suggests, because it *is* legible), the strategies did not work.

But if the "effectiveness" of the strategies is to be measured by their creation of places in which there is no longer any place, they have succeeded spectacularly: their end is the end of the world as we know it, "not a renunciation of cold war thematics" but "a shift from the dominance of thematic narratives to the dominance of formal ones. The cold war will not have been put behind us by postmodern discourse, but it may be always and readily available as an in-the-wings or on-line performance whose cogency, like that of all other cultural narratives, will depend on its ability to conform to the codes of representation rather than to some historical referent. In such circumstances, nostalgia is passe (82), because the past is now" (299-300)--and the "end" is still the end of the world as we know it.

Nadel's readings of works from many genres in diverse media will be instructive for students of popular culture, as will his development and application of theory associated with Baudrillard, de Certeau, Foucault, and Jameson.

The light that this book sheds on American narratives, postmodernism, and the atomic age is something to see. I highly recommend it.

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