Just 2 weeks after the events of September 11, 2001, *Time* magazine ran a story entitled “Irony Comes to an End.” Discourses about the death of irony circulated widely in the weeks immediately following 9/11, as the United States had embraced a newfound patriotism based in sincerity, reverence, and consensus. In *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, a collection of essays interrogating the complicated relationship between humor and politics in the aftermath of 9/11, Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene take the proclamation of irony’s death as their starting point. However, by the second paragraph of the introduction they are actively working to displace this common understanding of the post-9/11 cultural climate. Writing 10 years after the attacks, they propose a “counternarrative to 9/11 discourse, in which the past decade can be characterized as much by dissent—often in the form of ironic or humorous expression—as by acceptance of simplified notions of good and evil and of amplified state power” (p. xi). This counternarrative is the point of departure for Gournelos and Greene’s collection, and the various authors in the collection grapple with the complicated relationship between comedy and politics as it manifests in the complex landscape of post-9/11 popular culture.

Gournelos and Greene’s theoretical framework relies upon a notion of a dedifferentiated terrain in which politics, entertainment, humor, and reverence all circulate within the same cultural *milieu*. Evoking many of the tenets of media convergence theories, they contend that “humor, satire, interpretation, bias, entertainment, journalism, and activism blend together in increasingly active media practices” (p. xv). In this media environment, irony evokes a great deal of cultural anxiety because it is an inherently unstable category. It thrives by refusing to adopt any fixed point of stability from which to analyze culture and mount a critique. Irony is neither inherently progressive nor reactionary; it offers the possibility of expanding cultural discourse, but also the possibility of foreclosing discursive potentialities. As the editors suggest, “Irony is therefore a potentially useful tool by which one can open up new ways of speaking about an issue, even though the possibility of it being offensive and foreclosing discourse is always present” (p. xxiv). If discourses about the death of irony produced a chilling effect that limited potentially subversive speech, the mobilization of irony worked to counter that effect. Further, the move to marginalize irony in favor of sincerity and earnestness provides fodder for ironic discourses; the alleged death...
of irony and the proliferation of ironic discourses in the post-9/11 cultural landscape are obverse phenomena that are mutually constitutive.

In Gournelos and Greene’s schema, irony overflows with political possibility. Gournelos (2009) lays out a more detailed theoretical framework in his previous monograph, *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics*. In that book, Gournelos maintains that “the political involves reforming and displacing contemporary common sense and acceptable discourse, challenging and transgressing boundaries in order to expand and alter the frameworks of conversation” (p. 18). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, consensus became commonsensical, and any discourses that might challenge commonsense discourse were potentially subversive. Crucially, irony is not inherently subversive, nor is it inherently reactionary. Precisely because of its ambiguous nature and the possibility that this ambiguity might produce multiple or even incompatible discourses, the politics that relies upon irony as its condition of possibility is necessarily multivalent. Gournelos (2009) explains that “political discourse, particularly when parodic/humorous/satirical, is ambiguous. It both reifies and destabilizes existing power structures and social norms” (p. 45). Because it holds the potential to both reify and destabilize, irony produces a cultural anxiety—a fear that it will be used against itself or its own political leanings.

All of the authors in *A Decade of Dark Humor* speak in one way or another to the political possibilities and concomitant anxieties that characterize humor and irony in general, but especially the ways in which those discourses manifested in the post-9/11 cultural landscape. In the first section, “First Responders,” the authors analyze the period immediately following the 9/11 attacks. In “Everything Changes Forever (Temporarily),” David Gurney examines the awkward position of late-night comics as they tried to negotiate the irreverence of their usual schtick with a saddened and sincere national mood. The most remarkable event involved ABC firing Bill Maher for comments that he made suggesting that the acts of 9/11 were anything but acts of cowardice. Maher’s firing had a chilling effect, and Gurney notes that “the boundaries of acceptable discourse were tightened and vehemently policed post-9/11 and even the intimation of transgression became unacceptable” (pp. 13–14). The firing of a comic was especially worrisome because comics have tended to rely on humor for immunity from potentially offensive language because they are “just kidding.” However, as Gurney notes, “at times traumatic events and the public response to them can be used to shut the window on the play space comedians seek to create” (p. 16). Thus, for Gurney, comedy provides a potential space to offer critiques of institutions of power, but hegemonic forces work to close that space during times of crisis. All of the authors in the collection work from a critical position dedicated to effecting political and cultural change; all recognize the stifling tendencies of nationalist discourses after times of crisis and all believe that humor plays some role in bringing about this change. Their differences are tactical and theoretical as the authors approach the issue from various vantage points.

One such approach involves viewing humor in the post-9/11 U.S. through...
a racial lens, as issues of race became especially salient as the ethnicity of the perpetrators brought the issue of racial profiling to the fore of public discourse. In “The Arab is the New Nigger,” Lanita Jacobs highlights an ambivalence among members of the African American community regarding the attacks. The title of Jacobs’ chapter stems from a set of discourses circulating in the African American community that expressed an only half-joking sentiment: in the wake of the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment that characterized the era, African Americans were no longer the most feared or hated people in the U.S. Jacobs uses the comic Ray Chatman to highlight this ambivalence. She argues that “the post-9/11 framing of the Arab as ‘new nigger’ was a bittersweet outcome at best, since it only afforded […] temporary reprieve from indiscriminate racial profiling and police brutality” (55). For Jacobs, the discursive reconfiguration that moved African Americans above Arabs and other Muslims in the racial hierarchy was tenuous at best, and the advancement relied upon a displacement of racial hierarchies onto another marginalized population. Some members of the African American community were reluctant to embrace the consensus vision of the United States after centuries of racism and exclusion. Jacobs argues that predominantly African American comedy clubs were places in which dissent and skepticism could circulate in a relatively safe space. Later in the book, authors will look further outward and examine the relationship between extremely contained spaces such as the comedy club and the vast expanses of the global village—a relationship facilitated by media technologies.

In terms of chronology, the editors of the book distinguish between the eventual qualities of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, and the enduring discourses of the “War on Terror,” the lingering legacy of the event. In the second section of the book, “Enter the ‘War on Terror,’” the authors wrestle with this era, characterized by lengthy wars and unprecedented presumption and deployment of executive power. Gournelos pens the first chapter of the section, “Trauma, Post-9/11 Politics,” and suggests that the political goal of much of the 2000s was to project the individual trauma of 9/11 onto the trauma of the nation. He holds that “moving from personal to national trauma disconnects social and political responses from the events themselves, and instead relies only on the mythic construction of the events as traumatic” (p. 85). Because the notion of national trauma functions anthropomorphically, such trauma is always constituted retroactively. Gournelos laments that discourses of national trauma often accompany fiercely nationalist discourses and points to “the appropriation of the event by the interests of capital, the state, the military, or the culture industry” (p. 85). He ultimately sees the notion of national trauma as a means of foreclosing the possibility of multiple discourses and posits irony and its polysemic characteristics as the antidote to trauma’s limiting tendencies.

Gournelos goes a step further and suggests that irony is more than simply politically ambivalent; it is “an essential tool for progressive change in moments of extreme repression or nationalism like the immediate aftermath of 9/11” (p. 96). Positioning irony as particularly useful or
perhaps uniquely qualified to combat the reactionary tendencies of national trauma is the critical move that Gournelos makes and is the central claim around which the editors organize the book. For this move, he borrows Linda Hutchenson’s term “irony’s edge” and quotes her assertions that irony “foregrounds human agency” and that it works to “relate and relativize,” whereas discourses of national trauma work to “exclude and finalize” (p. 96). Thus, irony is not ambivalent; or perhaps more cynically, hegemonic discourses work so powerfully and effectively to disavow ambivalence, discursive gestures such as irony that foreground their ambivalence are potentially subversive in such a stifling environment.

In a curious and bold editorial move, immediately following Gournelos’ very cogent endorsement of irony as a critical tool for progressive politics is “Republican Decline and Culture Wars in 9/11 Humor,” a piece by David Holloway in which he is extremely skeptical of irony’s role in republican democracy. Holloway is especially concerned with what he sees as a decline in civic responsibility and a collective sense of duty towards the state, both of which are traditional (small r) republican values. He offers Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s *Team America: World Police* as competing visions of American identity in the decade following 9/11. He describes *Fahrenheit 9/11* as “a populist republican fable about the need for watchfulness when dealing with governments, and the dangers posed to the republic by corporate capitalism” (p. 105). He lauds Moore’s attempt to reinvigorate civic engagement through his use of humor in his film because for Halloway, the message of the film is extraordinarily clear, and consequently leaves little or no room for “misreadings.” However, he despairs of a far greater number of texts in the era that feature what he defines as “postrepublican humor,” exemplified by *Team America: World Police*.

Halloway attacks the ambivalent nature of irony that Gournelos sees as its biggest asset; for Halloway, *Team America* presents a textbook case of ironic duplicity—it says one thing, while it means something else. He argues that this technique proliferates “the responses that are possible from different audiences, while transferring responsibility for what the film means from its producers to its consumers” (p. 112). Precisely because the film’s irony opens up spaces for multiple meanings, its most important quality in Gournelos’ schema, Halloway contends that its filmmakers are acting irresponsibly. Rather than locating irony’s potential for subversion in its ability to produce equivocal meanings, irony only offers the potential for subversion when it succeeds. In this framework, *Team America* becomes a problematic text because “the irony consistently fails at key moments, leaving the film looking parochial, xenophobic, and aggressively heterosexual—positions the film still indulges and displays, albeit on the pretext of not really meaning them” (p. 114). Read together, the contributions of Gournelos and Halloway offer cogent explanations of contemporary debates about irony and its political efficacy. Further, the two articles work to highlight irony’s duality—the gesture includes the possibility for both progressive and reactionary readings.
In the book’s final section, “Rethinking Post-9/11 Politics,” the authors move from analyzing particular cases from the decade of dark humor to reconfiguring the terrain of politics going forward. In “Laughing Doves,” Aaron Winter warns against conflating political humor with politics as such. He eloquently suggests that “we must not confuse our appreciation of today’s laughing doves with a committed political act per se. It’s good venom indeed, but it’s not quite magical” (p. 179). Winter foregrounds another underlying theme of the book—the question of whether political humor, no matter how subversive, is an authentic political act or merely a representation thereof. One of the strengths of the collection is that by including multiple voices, the editors move past this binary understanding of humor in which some discourses are political or subversive and some are inherently apolitical or reactionary. As a collection, the authors demonstrate that the interplay between humor, irony, and politics is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory.

Because of the multiple ways in which humor and irony can be deployed or understood, issues of political efficacy exist alongside issues of ethics. In the volume’s final chapter (What’s so Funny About a Dead Terrorist?), Paul Lewis addresses the issue of ethics and takes as his object of study one of the defining characteristics of the decade—humor that many people would find to be patently offensive, crude, or even hateful. He explains that “unlike most professional comedy and canned joke, these stories feature mockery and ridicule used not only (or even primarily) to amuse but also to shock, persuade, relax, insult, impress, soothe, taunt, and/or denigrate” (p. 215). Further, the political and ethical ramifications of jokes resonate further in the digital media age. The audience no longer observes the limits of a comedy club, a region, an ethnic group, or even a nation. The controversy in which a Danish newspaper posted an image of the Prophet Mohammed as a cartoon, sparking violence in the Muslim world, exemplifies the new global environment in which humor circulates as well as the elevated ethical and political stakes in this new environment. Lewis describes a world in which “every wag with a cell phone can film and upload comic material and gaffes, satire produced in one country is rebroadcast or otherwise distributed around the planet” (p. 220). He concludes the chapter, as well as the body of the book, by issuing a plea for comics to consider the larger political and ethical implications of their material. He contends that “public humorists need to find ways not to incite outrage that can harm both themselves and others” (p. 229). Thus, a book that addresses the myriad implications of humor on the level of the community, the nation, and the globe, ultimately ends with a call to individual ethics. The final argument is that the individual needs to understand his or her relationship to an increasingly complex political world and take responsibility for his or her contributions to an increasingly turbulent global landscape.

While ethical perspectives provide a useful framework for navigating this complex set of issues, Lewis’ individualist ethics resonates with a neoliberal understanding of a self in need of discipline and personal responsibility that pervades in contemporary discourses. Taken
alone, Lewis’ conception of ethics could be problematic; however, the ideas are contextualized within a volume that includes a multiplicity of voices. In the coda, Arthur Asa Berger suggests that the characteristic way that communication scholars deal with humor is to view the subject as “a form of communication that forces us to confront paradoxical aspects of reality” (p. 236). Berger is correct that humor does address culture’s contradiction; however, a communication approach to comedy should not only identify the contradictions, but should also provide a framework for understanding and assessing those contradictions, identifying the possibility for agency, and effecting cultural change. Further, a communication approach is able to dislodge ethics as the sole responsibility of the individual, but to situate both the individual and the ethics within sets of relations that address shared interests on interpersonal, communal, and global levels. In their collection, Gournelos and Greene are able to negotiate successfully the landscape of post-9/11 humor and are able to address issues of political and cultural import on all of these levels.

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