Willett’s final chapter is a careful analysis of different accounts of freedom. She argues that not only can comedy limit the power of oppression, but that it can also provide insight into the nature of freedom. Her task here is to overcome the dualism of positive and negative freedom, both of which overemphasize the status of the individual. Instead, she argues for a third conception of freedom that involves not just a struggle for recognition, which is overmasculine, but rather a struggle for cultural rituals of affiliation. Camp, carnival and farce can liberate us from a false impression of free choice, pointing out the “comic irregularity at our libidinal core” (135). Comedies of manners can help us to develop a degree of self irony in response to an overly rationalist conception of positive freedom. And intercultural comedies can help us overcome inauthentic responses to racial identity and solidarity.

Willett’s arguments are sustained and wide ranging. A brief review cannot do justice to her synthetic vision. I would offer two minor criticisms of _Irony_. First, I would like to see more clarity in her analysis of the distinctions between irony, satire, comedy and the ridiculous. At times, it seems Willett uses these terms almost interchangeably. Nevertheless, Richard Rorty’s conception of the ironist, for example, is relatively humorless. Willett must be using the term somewhat differently from Rorty. Her argument could benefit from some careful analytical distinctions among these terms.

A more important criticism, however, is that she fails to adequately address the concern that humor is often an extremely conservative element in social life. She acknowledges that humor is resistant to moralizing and as such it can rely on prejudices and assumptions that it easily reinforces. Willett is attentive to these dangers of comedy, arguing that certain types of prophetic and equality promoting humor is appropriate, whereas racist and sexist humor is not. But just as often, she is unwilling to limit humor by moral judgment that would undermine the spontaneity and community that humor engenders. While dictators and tyrants are notoriously humorless, oligarchs and aristocrats often engage in humor that has the effect of ridiculing novel approaches to social organization that are necessary to achieve more social equality and solidarity. A more robust discussion of the double-edged sword of humor would be helpful lest we become infatuated with humor that subtly reinforces coercive and offensive social structures. Despite these reservations, this book is a novel and fascinating examination of how certain forms of comedy model democratic social life.

Gregory M. Fahy


This book is important for graduate classes, undergraduate classes, scholars and students of philosophy, race, intellectual history, anthropology, American philosophical trends, and a host of other fields.

The essays are well integrated, they cross reference one another, and all support profound and provocative insights about our nation, the contributions of American pragmatic philosophy to race and the nation, and most importantly, they define the national and international social problems on race, nation, and community to be addressed in the next decade. The book is fairly
tight, from a scholarly perspective, well written and edited, and overall fairly accurate in its analysis of pragmatism.

The thesis of the book is that pragmatism provides the optimal approach for analysis, discussion, and resolution of social issues. The authors view the major problematic social issues of today as how we (the U.S. citizenry) view people who are different. That difference is a difference of race, ethnicity, and nationality. How that difference affects our actions ranges from imperial hubris, suppression and racism, war, and economic exploitation. Further, the contributors are clear that the founding pragmatists, while developing a philosophical system to resolve community conflict, failed to use the process themselves, to right the various racist inequities, or to even discuss them cogently and comprehensively.

Perhaps the questions that a professor who uses this text would ask are: How true to the pragmatists’ individual philosophies are the representations presented in this text? How has the book painted the group of founding pragmatists in terms of its contribution to American philosophy? How can race and nationalism be addressed in context of equity? Is war or suppression ever warranted? And, given the various conclusions of the contributors, what future discussions and actions do we need to have as a community and a nation, or as an international collection of scholars or government agents?

The value of the book is found in the provocation of such questions and others, and in the possible answers that the authors provide. There are single essays herein that are worth the price of the book, alone. And there are parts of every essay that are worthy of the price of the book. There are also some weaknesses, holes, misrepresentations, and some near misses, all of which are worthy of discussion.

First, for the weaknesses: Robert Brandom’s essay, for example is one of the best short introductions on pragmatism that I have read, as he summarizes Menand’s Metaphysical Club. Then, he seeks to show the fallibilities of pragmatic thought in four brief critiques. Among other things, he misconstrues Peirce’s “beliefs’ as philosophical beliefs instead of the physiological habits, which Peirce intended. He pushes pragmatism toward behaviorism by missing that the pragmatists were interested in the depth of what happened between the environment and the response taken by the organism within the environment. Perhaps the errors are because he seeks to make pragmatism a “linguistic” pragmatism, made over to include logical positivism or logical empiricism (pp. 41, & 39 respectively).

Some contributors err in lumping numerous people into the folds of pragmatism and “neo-pragmatism” who are far less pragmatists than realists, positivists, or idealists. Perhaps the most glaring mistake is Mendeta’s inclusion of Josiah Royce as a pragmatist (see page 223). From the reading of Royce’s The Spirit of Modern Philosophy to the reading of Royce’s biography by John Clendenning, Royce was an idealist, far removed from pragmatic thought. Further, Rorty is less pragmatic than an Aristotelian realist, particularly in this volume. Robert Westbrook, who is typically a thorough scholar, could have tightened his conclusions by reading Michael Sullivan’s critique of the “unpragmatic” pragmatists when he discusses Richard Posner and Richard Rorty in Legal Pragmatism: Community, Rights, and Democracy. Westbrook’s conclusion is spot on, though, when he says “Like it or not . . . , pragmatism is a public philosophy well-suited to a fractious, quarrelsome people who would nonetheless hope to remain politically one. Such a people may or may not go to war, but whether they do or not, they will act
under the banner of pragmatist arguments.” (p. 251) His argument would have been more cogent if he had begun with Sullivan, however.

Even these mistakes provide discussion points for truly understanding the essence of pragmatism from Dewey, Mead, Peirce and James. Turning from the weaknesses, the strengths of the book are phenomenal.

Cynthia Willet’s essay is impeccable, as she addresses the hubris, the arrogance of power, and racism. The interview with Cornel West interview builds to a crescendo as he describes society in ways that centrist whites miss—in fact most of American philosophy has no notion of the substantive issues he presents. He warns of the dichotomy of democracy within empire and the failure of America to enter into discussions about race before or after 9/11.

Aboulafia’s essay on Mead’s cosmopolitanism and war is superb. Rorty’s analysis of America’s schizophrenic empire and democracy is the mature and cogent essay reflective of this gifted philosophy elder. And David Kim’s poignant and provocative essay argues precisely that we have failed as a democracy in our promotion of justice and equity for all, just as Dewey failed in his understanding of the contribution of frontier to democracy, which resulted in his missed opportunity to address race. The quality of the others not mentioned is worthy of your time, but space is limiting herein to do them justice.

The book is divided into three parts, and the following essays:

Part One: Transformative Communities and Enlarge Loyalties

1. When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment, by Robert Brandom;
2. The Unexamined Frontier: Dewey, Pragmatism, and America Enlarged, by David H. Kim;
3. Pragmatism and Solidarity with the Past, by Max Pensky;
4. Mead on Cosmopolitanism, Sympathy, and War, by Mitchell Aboulafia;
5. Deliberating about the Past: Decentering Deliberative Democracy, by James Bohman;

Part Two: The Racial Nation

7. William James on Nation and Race, by Harvey Cormier
8. Race, Culture, and Black Self-Determination, by Tommie Shelby;

Part Three: The Tragedy and Comedy of Empire

10. The Unpredictable American Empire, by Richard Rorty;
11. Transcending the “Gory Cradle of Humanity”: War, Loyalty, and Civic Action in Royce and James, by Eduardo Mendieta;
12. Pragmatism and War by Robert Westbrook;
13. Laughter against Hubris: A Preemptive Strike by Cynthia Willett;
14. Interview with Cornel West, conducted by Eduardo Mendieta.
It is difficult to overstate the importance of this book and its collective effort to invigorate the questions of race, ethnicity and citizenship in philosophers and pragmatists.

George W. Stickel
Cobb County Public Schools, Georgia


This book is an excellent exploration of the concept of reference. Boersema compares and contrasts recent analytical accounts of reference with various pragmatist views, both classical and recent. Boersema's arguments are of course not recounted here, but some key claims and conclusions are summarized as an indication of the book's main themes.

The book is in three parts, each part consisting of three chapters. (1) In the first set of three chapters, Boersema critiques three standard accounts of reference. These include, first, a descriptivist cluster theory of names, associated with Russell and Searle, and second, a causal account of direct reference associated with Kripke, Donnellan, Devitt, and others. Despite their obvious differences, these two accounts of reference have much in common, including realist commitments to conceptions of individuation and similarity (pp.41-46,191-192). In contrast, third, a Wittgensteinian theory of meaning as use yields a fundamentally different option, recognizing "the open texture of names" (p.53) and otherwise rejecting fundamental features of the other two accounts (such as the notion that at least some referring terms are so-called rigid designators). Boersema argues that the first two views fall short for multiple reasons and that the third by itself does not quite save the day, leaving room then for the consideration of alternatives such as one finds in the writings of classical as well as more recent pragmatists.

(2) In the second group of three chapters, Boersema recounts views of reference of three different sets of pragmatists. The first of these chapters looks at "the big three" classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey); the second chapter looks at three contemporary Americans (Putnam, Elgin, Rorty); and the third examines three recent Europeans (Eco, Apel, Habermas). This is of course a motley group whose collective work harbors a variety of views on names and reference. Yet they provide Boersema with the basic ingredients for a coherent pragmatist alternative to the cluster and causal accounts of reference.

One would like to see more details concerning what Peirce, James, and Dewey thought about names and reference, especially given that classical pragmatism provides the basis for Boersema's response to the descriptivist-cluster and direct-causal accounts of reference. Prior familiarity with the big three pragmatists is required here (e.g., Peirce's notion of an "interpretant"); but the focus and the strength of this chapter is Boersema's discussion of how the views of none of the big three fall under either of the two received accounts of reference. Assuming the reader already knows what these three have said about names and reference, it is a useful exercise at this historical juncture to articulate what those views are not. Boersema shows in detail why none of them can be properly understood in terms of a descriptivist cluster account or a causal direct-reference account.

The discussion of Putnam, Elgin, and Rorty is also focused on establishing that their respective views on reference fall neatly under neither of the two received views. We also begin