Should one be allowed to review a book whose author clearly expresses that it has been written for others? Jeffrey Israel declares early on that his words are mainly intended “for people who live in the United States of America at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (9). This reader, a Swiss living in Switzerland, hopefully glanced at the corresponding footnote, only to discover that the actual scope is even narrower: “Well, [the book is] written for those scholars, intellectuals, and other people who live in the United States of America at the beginning of the twenty-first century who are willing to read an academic book of this sort” (287n22). Alas, Israel focuses his work on the potential of play to foster (self-)understanding and empathy. This reader takes it as an invitation to play along and assume the role of the target group—but, as it may happen in the realm of play, she may slip up at times and lose her mask.

In Israel’s domain of play, people do not bear masks, though, but rather take off those required by the mandates of civilization and civility to expose their true grudges, urges, and yearnings. The German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller observed that “[man] only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (Friedrich Schiller, Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man [1795], translation at http://public-library.uk/ebooks/55/76.pdf, letter XV). In a sense, Israel builds on this idea as he envisions a nation able to cultivate “political love,” “an emotion . . . that all of us who live in America today can share, even as we remain divided by our in-terminable grudges, chauvinism, and aversions” (60). Instead of suggesting that the injustices in America’s history can be, let alone should be, forgiven or forgotten, Israel believes it necessary to give people space to express their anger, rancor, and other feelings we may normally want to see repressed. In a fraught society, even under the best of circumstances, these feelings would persist, as “any effort to eradicate or police these elements of culture threatens to extend the power of the liberal state too far and infringe upon the entitlement to expressive capabilities of some citizens” (75). This “problem of remainders,” as Israel terms it, is exacerbated by “the problem of reproduction,” that is, the fact that collective identities may build on these remainders. Or, as Israel puts it, superbly: “The problem of reproduction is that to be a certain kind of Jewish American male is to find Roth utterly hilarious and moving” (102).

The space within which people may hold on to these emotions, legacies, memories, and so on, remains in the domain of play that turns the carnivalesque normal but also forces players and audiences to reflect on the joy they take in their
revolts against so-called decency: “It is still worth trying to cultivate widely shared political love in America. This is because perverse remainders, reproduced grudges, longings for the End, and propulsion toward transgressive bodily outbursts can be redirected into the domain of play. This is my central claim. If we can imagine a nation where these elements of the fact of fraught societies are redirected into the domain of play, we can imagine a nation worth striving to become” (161). Building on Rawls, Israel sets the domain of play within the background culture, which is distinct from the public political culture. The latter requires us as citizens to accept each other as equals, committed to public reason. Once we start playing, though, we may move beyond these constraints and indulge in our fantasies, may they be of pain or retribution. So while the Confederate flag, as Israel explains, may not be displayed in public institutions, it may—in spite of the pain it symbolizes for many—be proudly waved in Civil War reenactments.

Israel develops his thesis of play as a way to foster political love over the span of five chapters, building on Rawls and Martha Nussbaum, interweaving political theory and philosophy, as well as psychology, with enviable ease, before he watches, reads, and laughs at/with three different examples of Jewish-American humor, all classics in their own right: pioneering stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce (1925–66), Philip Roth’s novel Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), and Norman Lear’s sitcom “All in the Family” (1971–79). In each case, Israel offers compelling insights into the way audiences and readers develop a “feeling of closeness that comes from sharing a contrived, detached viewpoint in relation to the same object” (201), termed “metaperspectival intimacy.” Thereby, they also gain a distanced glance at themselves, seeing their prejudices, shortcomings, human failings, and more mirrored, distorted, ridiculed, and exposed. Even those unfamiliar with some of the examples (the Swiss reviewer spent fruitful time on YouTube and was relieved to be in Nussbaum’s prominent company) will get a sense of why Israel focused on the comedies, broadly understood, in question. Yet one wonders, particularly as a reader-impostor who is not part of Israel’s target group, what happens in those instances where the play remains contained in particular spheres of the background culture and does not attempt to gap the distance between these different spheres (or at least expose and criticize these differences). How long can you contain anger in the domain of play?

To explore this question, it would be interesting to leave the realm of Jewish-American humor and its dance along the hyphen, to go beyond the US context and explore other examples. It might be particularly instructive to study those cases in which the joke backfires and the intended metaperspectival intimacy leads to hostility rather than understanding, not least when humor has to cross cultural boundaries. In Switzerland, German-Turkish comedian Serdar Somuncu made headlines in 2016 when footage of his routine at a well-known festival was not aired by Swiss public television. He claimed that his appearance had been censored
as a result of the negative reactions by some members of the live audience who left
the show when Somuncu joked that “the Germans have become too soft for my
taste. Nowadays, they are even friendly to refugees. I applaud the Swiss. At least
they are sincere Nazis.”1 Yes, audience members probably understood the criti-
cism of Swiss asylum procedures and the reputation the country had gained owing
to popular initiatives such as a ban against minarets. Yet the scathing tone of
Somuncu, as well as the lack of distance between performance and his stance on
a political podium, violated the terms of play between him and many an audience
member. Maybe the self-recognition was too painful to shrug it off and laugh
along? Philip Roth declared “Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness” to be
his “closest friends” (Joyce Carol Oates, “A Conversation with Philip Roth,” in
Conversations with Philip Roth, ed. George J. Searles [Jackson: University Press
of Mississippi, 1992], 98)—yet the vitriol he had to endure in the wake of Port-
noy’s Complaint taught him, too, that when some readers place your joke out-
side the realm of play, any conciliatory tone gets drowned by the shrillness of in-
dignation and worse.

Israel models his book on the idea of a “good, long conversation that you have
with a friend that you hope and expect is only one of many more to come” (9)—
this reader would be all ears.

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mittlerweile sogar freundlich zu Flüchtlingen. Da lobe ich mir die Schweizer. Sie sind wenigstens
aufrichtige Nazis” (Bruno Tuchschmid, “Schweizer sind wenigstens aufrichtige Nazis’: SRF kippt
.ch/kultur/buch-buehne-kunst/schweizer-sind-wenigstens-aufrichtige-nazis-srf-kippt-satiriker-aus-
programm-129959993).

Wendy Brown. In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic
$75.00 (cloth).

In this work, Wendy Brown exposes neoliberalism’s antidemocratic aspira-
tions and effects, and fans of Sheldon Wolin’s radical democratic theory will
greet it with much interest and enthusiasm. Elaborating neo-Marxist and
Foucauldian analyses of neoliberalism, Brown adds her own provocative the-
thesis that neoliberalism, especially in its influential Hayekian version, constitutes
a marriage between two institutions often thought to be in tension: free markets
and traditional morality. She thereby confirms for the Left that two primary