

**Jean Wyatt: *Risking Difference: Identification, Race, and Community*.**

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1        Reading academic texts in order to review them is a task I often find both rewarding and stressful. Obviously one typically chooses to review books that relate to one's own areas of research, and thus one in many ways seeks to learn whilst reviewing. Yet, on the other hand, reviewing often feels like an adversarial task - one must, in order to review a book, simultaneously critique it. There will of course be books one reviews that one loves, and others that one reacts aversively to. And then there will be books that produce both emotions (amongst others) - ones that thoroughly excite the reader, and yet also elicit concern over particular theoretical formulations or knowledge claims. This is perhaps as it should be - a good book should challenge, educate and stimulate the reader, and certainly few books are likely to achieve consensus amongst readers. Where this is problematic, however, is in the writing of the review itself - how does one balance critique with praise, and importantly, how does one not undermine the importance of a book when critiquing it?

2        I raise these points as they are precisely the issues presented to me in reading and reviewing this book. As I will elaborate within this review, I began reading the book, and became quickly enamored of Wyatt's eloquent writing style, her accessible reading of psychoanalytic concepts, and her thoughtful elaborations of issues of envy, identification and ethical engagement. I was somewhat troubled, however, by later portions of the text, which seem in part to perpetuate the very problems the author seeks to challenge. Whilst, as I will reiterate later, I thoroughly enjoyed the text overall, and would recommend it to academics working in a wide range of fields, I feel it is nonetheless important to raise the points of contention I have with the text, and to connect these to the productive and exciting aspects of the text.

3        From the beginning of the text, Wyatt introduces the reader to an exciting journey through her early chapters on envy and identification. Her explication of a psychoanalytic understanding of envy is exciting not only for its applicability to a wide range of areas, but also for the neatness and clarity of the argument. Wyatt's choice of Atwood's *The Robber Bride* as a site for examining envy within feminist communities highlights her skill in bringing together literary analysis, social commentary and politically engaged theorizing. Similarly, Wyatt's work on identification across a number of novels, and in particular her analysis of Morrison's *Beloved*, demonstrates the central importance of psychoanalytic

accounts for understanding the complexities of subjectivity, and the ways in which legacies of violence continue to function across generations. Read together, her analysis of envy and her explication of the operations of identification provide much-needed tools for exploring the role that the psyche plays in managing our negotiations with the world around us.

4 Wyatt then moves in later chapters to an exploration of the complexities of racial identification, and the problems that exist within feminism for white women attempting to engage with the voices of non-white women. Where this line of thinking falls short, appears to be when Wyatt does not make adequate use of the growing body of literature on race and whiteness studies. Whilst Wyatt references Seshadri-Crooks' excellent text on whiteness and psychoanalysis, she does not appear to draw substantially upon other work that has engaged not only with race and psychoanalysis, but more importantly with work that examines the privileges held by white people and the implications of these for challenging white feminisms. As a result, whilst Wyatt provides important insights into the ways in which white women talk about their location within the academy, she largely fails to locate herself as a white woman who benefits from privilege. Thus in places she talks about white women as 'they', neglecting to include herself in the category 'white'. In places she does mark herself as 'Anglo', but the use of this descriptor has significantly different rhetorical effects to the marking of other women as 'white'. Wyatt's failure to adequately locate her own racial identity, particularly in chapter four, results in her reading of Morrison's *Tar Baby* coming across not only as highly defensive in places, but also as potentially perpetuating the negative representations of African American women that she attempts to challenge.

5 Wyatt does however provide an excellent bookend to the early, highly original, chapters, in her final chapter, where she begins the task of outlining what a cross-cultural ethical engagement could look like. Whilst here again she does not draw upon literature from within race and whiteness studies, she nonetheless deftly employs psychoanalysis once again to explore the relationships between self and other, and in particular how the location of those positioned as racialized others reminds dominant members of our fundamental lack, and the failure of white systems of knowledge to adequately encompass or incorporate non-white knowledges. Wyatt's focus on cross-cultural interactions recognises that the needs of differing groups may at times produce conflict, and that rather than trying to sidestep this with claims to 'respecting difference' or 'creating space', it may be more important to acknowledge incommensurabilities and to recognise the legitimacy of the voicing of dissent.

6 On the whole, Wyatt's text represents an exciting intervention into how we 'do' community, both within the academy and beyond. Wyatt skillfully utilizes psychoanalytic

theory in order to develop an understanding of racial identifications, and in so doing she highlights the shortfalls of existing accounts of collaboration and solidarity within feminist communities. Whilst, as I have elaborated, this is in places problematic in regards to the lack of engagement with her own race privilege, Wyatt has nonetheless produced a text that is both theoretically engaged and politically motivated. In this sense, the text stands out as an important contribution to understandings of difference and community, not despite its shortfalls, but because of them. That Wyatt willingly lays herself open to critique for her own investments in whiteness and feminism displays a commitment to a politics of engagement that is less about managing difference or legitimating privilege, and far more about working through the everyday struggles faced in the building of coalitions across racialized divides.