

Sarah Whatmore (2002). "Hybrid Geographies. Natures, Cultures and Spaces". Sage, London. Pp. 225.

This work has been described by others as, "*wildly fascinating and unique*" (John Urry), and, "*one of the most original and important contributions . . . immensely provocative and productive . . . and promises to breathe new life not only into geographical inquiry but into critical practice across the spectrum of humanities . . . social sciences – and beyond . . . extraordinary*" (Derek Gregory). I could not agree more.

Hybrid Geographies is at once broad and deep, critical and insightful, alternative and informative. At each stage of the text's thesis development I found myself reflecting on the matter in hand, keenly anticipating the theoretical revelations at the next stage, and considering the application of these approaches to my own field of specific research interest.

The argument that runs throughout the entire book is: ". . . *it is both more interesting and more pressing to engage in a politics of hybridity that is not defined as / by academic disputes like the so-called 'science wars', important though these are, but in which the stakes are thoroughly and promiscuously distributed through the messy attachments, skills and intensities of differently embodied lives whose everyday conduct exceeds and perverts the designs of parliament, corporations and labour*" (p.162). To explore this, the book comprises a number of case study chapters divided into 3 discrete yet interrelated sections that describe and analyse the relations between culture and nature, the human and the non-human, the social and material and examines their configuration in space. The 3 sections respectively debate the macro concepts of 'bewildering spaces'; 'governing spaces'; and, 'living spaces', capturing and defining their truly hybrid yet related geographies in a subtle, yet sharp, manner.

In Section 1 the issues of displacing and embodying 'The Wild' are explored. Chapter 2 questions what can be counted as opposed to what counts as an impetus behind the creation of so-called human networks around wild beings. Its core message is that, "*(t)he designation 'wild' seems not to have served its animal inhabitants well, figuring them as the currency of various human desires whose value rises with distance. Even as they are caught up in the assemblage of global regulatory networks designed to 'protect' them, they find themselves objectified again in the urgent business of 'wildlife management' . . .*" (p.33). In addition, Chapter 3 comprises an eclectic mix of socio-natural phenomena and issues and ideas that Whatmore asserts focuses on the distribution of the effects of shifting positionalities of animals in and through particular spatial formations of wildlife exchange. In this way, I would suggest that she introduces and develops the notion of individuals in networks in relation to network creation and functioning in a more vivid and tangible way than other ANT accounts have to date.

Moving on, Section 2 focuses on territorial governance and the governance of the use of plant genetic resources. It explores the relationship between law and geography and how law maps the flesh as well as the earth and suggests that actions in relation to the use of genetic resources are relatively fixed as a result of the articulations of property law. Specifically, in Chapter 4, it is suggested that while law attempts to normalise activity, it is actually the outcome of the (rather subjective and specific temporally and spatially defined) political environment to which it relates. Furthermore, to highlight how virtually impossible it would be to normalise activity by developing a national law which relates to each and every space and place in a territory, it is argued (after Ingold 1986) "*. . . land is a much more energetic configuration of earth, air, water, minerals, animals and plants as well as people than a surface area contained by lines on a map*". Chapter 5 explores this by looking into the de- / re-territorialisation of the association between plants and people. Relative to that, Whatmore argues that nature is made up of elements identified and defined by those presenting it and that it is therefore subjectively defined and used according to those with the ability to define it and govern its use. On that basis, she then suggests that, "*the politics of 'global ecology' . . . or 'earth politics' . . . are necessarily more plural and partial than a global vision that maps a universal subject, the 'we' of humanity, on to a powerful image of a finite terrain*" (p.116).

Finally, Section 3 theorises GM foods and food scares and the notion of relational ethics with regard to food consumption. The objective of the Section is to re-situate consumption in a more intuitive way by examining the contemporary agri-food system and a core concern of the section is that, "[food scares] *are endemic to the relentless industrialisation of food over the last half century and are emblematic of*

the threadbare fabric of trust (dis)connecting industrial food production and consumption as we enter the twenty first Century” (p.121, after Griffiths and Wallace 1998). Furthermore, Whatmore critically evaluates the complex and multifarious, capitalist contemporary agri-food system in more depth, defining it as ‘the turbid interval between field and plate which is occupied by corporate and state agencies that ask people to ‘trust’ them’. In the UK agri-food system she suggests that this has created a hotbed of civil and consumer defiance of scientific and political authorities that ‘look after’ public health. To close the analysis, Whatmore calls for more holistic consideration of the complex governance and activity networks that comprise the UK agri-food system through more joined up working between those who consider agri-food production, consumption and biological make up. In justification of this call she reasons, “(i)t is [the] . . . *matrix of knowledge practices that must be realigned if the over-stretched fabric of trust transacting the distant intimacies of growing and eating is to be rewoven*” (p.144).

In summary, the book takes the reader through a subtle, well constructed text that uses a thought provoking, incisive and inspiring theoretical approach that re-presents previously under-questioned understandings and concepts, encouraging the reader to reassess the ‘known’, or at theorise its spatial and temporal existence in an alternative way. I would suggest that anyone wishing to develop, explore and / or inform their awareness of the existence, composition and governance of social, natural, human and material relations in time and space would be well advised to read this book.

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