

Introduction

From there to here
From here to there
Funny things are everywhere.
(Dr Seuss, *Red Fish, Blue Fish*)

Simply put, this book is about how nature is 'done', how it is practised, how it materializes as an active partner in and through those practices. Perhaps, unlike many other volumes, I am not especially concerned here with how nature is imagined, represented, thought or conceived. Rather, imagining, representing and thinking are treated as activities which take their place alongside many other practices (like growing, infecting, digging, counting), some of which do not have people at their centre. This last point is crucial. For there are many other accounts of nature as produced and practised, within landscape studies, sociology, psychology, political economy and human geography, for example, which tend to reduce nature to not much more than a malleable mass to be shaped at will or at the behest of cultural, economic or political forces and contestations. *Geographies of Nature* is more even-handed, arguing that non-humans are lively and dynamic colleagues in the making of worlds. Yet in being even-handed I do not mean to suggest that the book is politically neutral. Indeed, the politics of nature become more pressing once the contributions to those politics become 'more than human' (the phrase comes from Whatmore, 2004).

So why 'geographies' of nature? People have long been used to the idea of natural history. Landscapes and species are often given a history, although usually one that emphasizes their interrelations with cultures and peoples. What, then, about a natural geography? One way to do this would be to rehearse a rather tired geography which talks about nature's gradual or sudden retreat to the peripheries of modern societies. Another approach would be to develop geographies where natures and societies are interwoven in a variety of different ways with a variety of different effects. This would be to note how natures vary from place to place, that there are cultures of nature (for exemplars, see Jardine et al., 1996; Livingstone, 2003; Matless, 1998; Wilson, 1992). But even here, nature can remain rather passive and ironically a-spatial. Indeed, it usually turns out that it is culture that varies through history and from place to place, while nature stays much the same. So another possibility would

be to develop geographies of natures wherein natures are made up of many different practices, all of which are implicated in the continual shaping of those natures. A woodland, for example, will be practised by and with many different species, people, habits, artefacts, in many different places (from soil horizons to government offices, from prevailing winds to balance sheets). So a natural history of the woodland could be written, but so too could a natural geography. In place of a contested history of nature, we can, to put the point too baldly, give nature a complex present (Mol, 2002: 43), or better, start to map together or diagram the histories and geographies (the space-times, Massey, 2005) of natures. The result is, I hope, a sensitivity to the multiplicity that is the very stuff of the world. It's an ethos, or mode of attention (as Donna Haraway (2003) puts it), which allows for more of the world to colour and affect the way that world is made and remade.

So this is a positive, affirmative account of nature, of spaces for nature. And yet, rumours of the death of nature have been around for a long time. According to some, such as the critical feminist historian Caroline Merchant (1990), the death knell was sounded some time ago, at the birth of the modern world and in particular with the advent of 'Western' seventeenth-century science and technology. More famously, in terms of popular literature, the end of nature has been reported by Bill McKibben (2003). For him the expansion of human influence to every corner of the globe, and in particular the changes wrought on such mammoth systems as climate and oceans, has meant that if we went looking for nature, we would be hard pressed to find anything that was untouched by human hands. More recently, the sociologist Bruno Latour (2004b) has attempted to nail the coffin firmly shut by suggesting, even insisting, that we abolish Nature. For Latour, Nature does no more and no less than act as a convenient foil. It allows so-called modern societies to act as if the nonhuman world were mute and malleable material. This has two silencing effects:

- 1 Animals, plants, human bodies, tectonic plates, stem cells, proteins – all, according to this modern version of the world (Latour, 1993), do what they are told. They behave. They perform to pre-written scripts, and obey the rules and laws of the game. The only thing left in this rather disenchanting world (Bennett, 2001) that is remarkable, that is worthy of remark or literally is able to re-mark or re-script itself, is human ingenuity. And this ingenuity allows people to read all the scripts that these poor others are forced to simply act out. Once read, humans can tell you what is going to happen next (for everything performs to (the) type), or even get in there and change bits of the script (think of genetic modification), so that changes can occur in determinable and predictable ways.
- 2 As we have already heard, natural objects are reliable followers of scripts and thereby their limited behaviour forms the basis for determinate laws of nature. Such laws are generally non-negotiable, they just are. Which

means that human beings can do one of two things. Either they can say, 'All this stuff that just is, that simply behaves, is not important to the world of politics, to the world of making complex decisions about how to live together. We can therefore leave all these embryos, rivers, machines, molecules of carbon dioxide out of politics (and out of human geography).' Or they can say, 'If we leave things to people they will argue incessantly about how to go on, so let us look for natural laws, non-negotiable truths, that can shape our actions. Let us bring the bickering to a halt by saying this is the way things are, this is natural, and then find ways of living accordingly.'

None of this is satisfactory. As I argue throughout the book, performing to a script happens, but not as often as this version of mute nature suggests. And politics, people, animals, rivers, tectonic plates – none of them are well served by imagining that all power to decide and judge resides on one side of a human–nonhuman divide (or even that a politics is best implemented by skillfully moving from one side to another in the heat of action, hoping that nobody will notice).

Geographies of Nature is written out of a great deal of sympathy for Latour's work. And yet, unlike this work, there is less of a compulsion to finish nature off in these pages. As I have already indicated this is a book arguing *for* nature. In other words, there's a belief that the word can still do some work. (In the text I sometimes use 'Nature' with a capital N when reference is made to the idea of a fixed and single world, totally outside systems of understanding and acting. I prefer to use 'nature', small n, to denote that natures are made but not in ways that are reducible to human meaning systems.) In the following pages, nature (certainly demoted from the capital Nature) is alive and well and living in inner-city Birmingham, in subtropical Africa, in laboratories, on farms, in the offices of European governments, on allotments, and so on. In this I echo and expand on Thrift's (2000) sense of nature as biopolitical domain – to wit, that far from being dead and buried, nature is currently being practised anew (see also Franklin, 2002). But, given that nature is not what we have imagined it to be, fixed in its identity and unrelated to societies, a crucial question remains as to what kinds of spaces there are for nature. What sorts of spaces can overcome the tendency to either assume nature is dead, or assume that it exists, neatly bounded, incarcerated in a self-sealed cell? How can we productively find proximities and distances from, in, for, to nature, in order to avoid swamping all and every nonhuman and human being with cultural artifice, prevent over-sentimentalizing others and/or reduce everyone and everything to a relational force field wherein most of them matter little? The following chapters will explore various natural relations, topologies of nature, nature and 'difference' in order to tease out a multiplicity of spaces for nature.

So the book aims to re-figure what nature is and can be and at the same time experiment with the sorts of spaces that we can generate *for* those natures (human and nonhuman). Throughout it will be argued that this experiment matters. For without this unsettling and re-settling of nature's spaces we will continue to produce unjust politics. A politics that consigns people, animals, plants, and the various assemblies that are made up of more or less of these, to unsatisfactory ends.

The book starts with only the assumption that readers are somewhat aware of the notion that understandings of nature are coloured by and have incredible effects on the ways in which the world gets to be made (the background to this argument is spelled out clearly in Castree, 2005). The argument then builds, progressively. Readers may want to start at the beginning, get a flavour of the argument and then move at a speed that suits them through the book. The book is divided into two main sections, moving from a description of geographies of nature (or an argument on what they are and what they are not), to a discussion of how and why they matter. The two sections overlap. There are discussions in Part I that make strong cases for why it is that geographies of nature matter, just as there are discussions in Part II that elaborate upon the spatial possibilities introduced in Part I.

The chapters are of varying lengths, and are sometimes written with slightly different styles, all of which is partly dictated by the subject matter and by the degree of introductory material that I have included. There are boxes or intermissions. Sometimes these are meant to stand alone and offer easily locatable places to gain a quick idea of a key point or style of thinking. At other times they can be used as side shoots from the main argument of the chapter, marking a change of pace and key, an example or case study. Their aim is to assist in the understanding of imaginative resources that a reader can bring to the main argument. Finally, each chapter contains a short list for background and for further reading. If you find a chapter particularly perplexing it may be worth looking at some of the background readings before carrying on. If you find the chapter is insufficient, or you would like more depth or empirical detail, then the further readings would be the place to start.