

# 24 HYBRID GEOGRAPHIES (2002): SARAH WHATMORE

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... the hybrid invites new ways of travelling.  
(Whatmore, 2002: 6)

## Introduction

*Hybrid Geographies* is a challenging book. Its theoretical and empirical scope is wide ranging and impressive. It draws on and develops a number of different areas of literature to locate them firmly within the discipline of geography. In this book, Whatmore challenges us to fundamentally rethink the ways in which we understand nature and the natural world. In exploring our conceptualizations of nature we are required to think through the politics of nature, to traverse history and the globe, and to question our assumptions about the relationship between humans and the natural world. This is also a book that challenges many other assumptions. It occupies many contradictory, or seemingly contradictory, positions at once. It is poetic and yet factual, imaginative but not imaginary. The book takes as its subject the 'fleshiness' of the material world and yet it is an intricately theoretical text. It is, as Whatmore (2002: 6) herself says, philosophical but not philosophy. Moreover, it is neither a conventional monograph with a beginning, middle and end, nor a book of essays. It is, again in her own words, 'an effort to germinate connections and openings that complicate' (Whatmore, 2002: 6). A book which has the express aim

of complication can seem a little unnerving – especially for the undergraduate reader. Consequently, it is a book that can be as confounding as it is pleasurable.

In this chapter I aim to provide readers an entry into the text and an understanding of why this text has become a key text in human geography. I begin by giving an overview of the book, describing the contemporary relevance of the topics addressed in *Hybrid Geographies* and geographers' interest in these. I then turn to the main arguments Whatmore makes and the evidence she draws on to make them. I highlight concerns raised by some about the truth status of the claims made in the book. In the next section I describe the acclaim with which the book was received at the time of publishing. I summarize three key questions discussed in the book raised in conference session about *Hybrid Geographies*. These provide a thought-provoking platform from which readers can perform their own critical reading. I then end with a short consideration of the place *Hybrid Geographies* has within a more unified human-and-physical geography.

## Overview

The book begins by invoking a set of debates we are used to seeing on the front pages of our newspapers and on the evening news. In any given week, the media covers many

stories which concern our changing relationship with the natural world. These stories include concerns over farming and the food we eat, such as the 'crisis' in the UK in 2001 over the spread of foot and mouth disease or the ongoing debates about genetically modified crops (GMOs). Watching the evening news we are confronted with stories about the risks wild animals pose to humans. The spread of bird flu from 2003 onwards, the contraction of the disease by people, and the subsequent debate about the likelihood of human-to-human infection, is typical. We also see the converse concerns, about the threats humans pose to the natural world, be they marked by extinction rates of endangered animals or rising sea levels. Similarly, stories abound of the new and challenging ways in which science and technology are enabling us to alter our own (human) nature, from extending fertility to enhancing of our capabilities through drugs. As the popular press recognize, these stories and the issues raised are of great concern to people. We are challenged to think about what we can and can't control, how we should behave, and whose responsibility it all is.

Whatmore's premise is that geography brings important tools to the understanding of these issues. In order to introduce her readers to hybrid geographies, Whatmore (2002: 4–6) describes four main bodies of work with which she engages. These are variously labelled ones of 'life politics' or 'bio-sociality' as they involve a reconfiguring of socio-political life, the material world, and the relationships between the two. Geographers have been interested in these issues and these literatures long before *Hybrid Geographies*. However, Whatmore's project is a creative synthesis of existing literatures and to locate them firmly within geography. Elsewhere, Whatmore has argued that social science often ends up following the agendas and lead of the life sciences:

... not enough energy is being invested in the much harder and less eye-catching work of contextualising the biotechnologies that are making the headlines in the variegated histories and geographies through which life and knowledge has been co-fabricated. (Whatmore, 2004: 1362)

Geography has the ability to transcend the 'science wars' that pit social against natural sciences, she argues, and to enable social scientists to contribute fully to debates about 'life politics'.

In order to demonstrate the value of geography, Whatmore works through a number of examples in *Hybrid Geographies*. The book is divided into three sections: bewildering spaces; governing spaces; and living spaces. Each section has its own short introduction and a couple of chapters giving what can be thought of as case studies. Each case can be read as self-contained, as illustrating the theme of the section it is in, or as furthering the arguments of the book as a whole. She sets out her agenda and theoretical underpinning in the first and last chapter of the book. I will not summarize the case studies here, as I could not do Whatmore's rich and thorough descriptions justice. I will turn instead to a wider consideration of the argument the book makes.

### Arguments and evidence

*Hybrid Geographies* is, at its core, a book about relations; it is about the relationship between the social and the natural; it is about the relationships of long-dead leopards that fought in the Roman amphitheatres and of elephants in British zoos; it is about the relationships that construct each of these creatures and, through juxtaposing the stories of these animals in this book, Whatmore poses questions about the relationships between these creatures. It may seem odd to talk about animals having relationships, but that is

Whatmore's starting point. She sets out in this book to challenge conventional ways of thinking about nature and to challenge us to think about the relationships between society and nature. It is only by challenging such conventional dualist thinking we have the chance of honestly representing and acting in the world.

The nature-society dichotomy is a long-standing and powerful one. For a long time (in the Western world) these two realms have been thought to be ontologically separate, mutually exclusive. It is associated with other dichotomies under the labels Modernity or the Enlightenment. Something is social or natural, active or passive, agent or acted upon. In this schema nature is separate from humanity and humans have the monopoly on knowledge, agency and morality. Humans are subjects in the world. They are able to know and to manipulate nature, which is passive and object. Being separate does not mean located in different places, although that too is seen to be true (rural versus urban), but separate ontologically, in the most fundamental way. Whatmore is by no means alone in her attempt to describe an alternative mode of thought. However, the fundamental premise of *Hybrid Geographies* is that seeing the world as being divided up into either the natural or the social (and all the other associated dichotomies) is neither useful nor honest. The fundamental aim of the book is to enlarge the notion of social and to de-couple the subject-object dichotomy (Whatmore, 2002: 4): to write of what Whatmore has called elsewhere, a 'more-than-human geography' (Whatmore, 2003: 139).

It is important to understand that this is not just a book about the relations of nature and society but a book that asks us to understand the world as constituted by relations. Rather than being 'pure' or 'discrete' and belonging to the natural rather than the social entities, things such as elephants or soy beans are constituted through relations. They

are hybrids. Our world is a world constituted through hybridity. And the same is true for people. Although we might assume humans obviously belonging to the realm of the social, as Whatmore shows when she discusses the colonization of Australia, people have always managed to construct a division between social and natural, which excludes some people. Having posited the world as relational, the author provides a tool for making sense of it: hybrid geographies.

In order to understand the relationships that constitutes things, the author insists, we must follow the journeys these things take. These might be literal journeys, such as the transportation of leopards to Roman amphitheatres, or the movement of captive-bred crocodiles into the wild. They might also involve translation into information, such as the drawing up of a statute or the monitoring of captive animals' breeding stock, and the movement of this data. Consequently, in this book we travel back and forward in history and traverse the globe. Whatmore conjures up 'wormholes', holes between the past and the present, the distant and the local, the strange and the familiar. These are not imaginary journeys (although they do seek to be imaginative ones), neither is this book simply a report of empirical work. The author seeks to present us with 'closely textured journeys' (Whatmore, 2002: 4). They encompass both the very personal (for example, invoking the moment she became a member of staff at UCL or getting lost on a car journey in Australia) and the more common academic representations of the world. The journeys the people and animals in the book take (literally and figuratively) constitute them.

Whatmore is magpie-like in her collecting of evidence, which she deploys to construct these geographies using both words and images. Using plans of the journeys these animals take (for example, Figure 2.4 on page 25), description of the bureaucratic

discourses, and 'thick' descriptions of the spaces these animals inhabit, she paint compelling pictures of their geographies of hybridity. She illustrates how what we think of as 'nature' does not pre-exist the spaces and relationships which it occupies.

Whatmore's use of evidence in her argument has attracted some attention. As Duncan (2004: 161) has noted, the empirical material in the book is 'marshalled as illustrations' in a methodological, theoretical, and ethical project. While this is not in itself necessarily problematic, there is no conventional methods section which lays out the methods of selecting, collecting, and analysing empirical data. This makes it hard for the more conventionally minded social science reader to judge the merits of evidence and arguments with which they are presented. Braun (2005: 835) sees *Hybrid Geographies* as 'insistently empirical ... (that it) seeks to explain nothing more than what is immediately at hand'. While he is sympathetic with Whatmore's approach, he suggests her own knowledge claims, which are presented as detached and objective, do not reflect her professed claim that knowledge is relational and precarious. Demeritt (2005: 821) agrees: 'The epistemic modesty about partial and situated knowledge is somewhat belied by some quite strong claims about how that world actually is.' Conventionally, a methodology offers readers an account and defence of the mechanics of the research project(s). Such an account recognizes the precarious and inter-subjective nature of social science truth claims.

The methodological commitments demonstrated in *Hybrid Geographies* are fundamental to many geographers' vision of the ways in which the discipline ought to develop. Whatmore has since argued that we need to be risky and imaginative in the methods we use:

(O)ne of the greatest challenges of 'more-than-human' styles of working as I see it is the onus they place on experimentation ... (There) is the urgent need to supplement

the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject. (Whatmore, 2004: 1362)

Certainly, *Hybrid Geographies* meets this challenge although, as noted above, it may be in a way that some geographers find a little opaque. In a paper on Australia, Instone (2004) considers the book, methodological lessons. She argues (Instone, 2004: 134) that Whatmore has challenged geographers to focus 'on the practices through which nature is manifested in social action'. Such a relational analysis requires, she argues, a 'multilayered, multivalent, embodied and situated approach' (Instone, 2004: 131), with 'connectivity at its heart' (Instone, 2004: 136). Such an approach will include textual, visual, oral and/or material evidence. These methods force geographers into 'a process of figuring what matters' (Instone, 2004: 138).

The multilayering and 'risky-ness' of the methods espoused in *Hybrid Geographies* are mirrored by the prose. In the preface to *Hybrid Geographies* Whatmore (2002: x) says she has tried to 'hold onto some sense of this energetic fabrication in the writing'. This emphasis, on opening up arguments and connections rather than closing them down or settling them, can lead to rather dense text. However, it is an important strand in her argument. Whatmore (2005: 844) says she sets out to perform her philosophical commitments rather than merely state them. She wants to open up new ways of thinking about nature and to make these imaginatively as well as rationally plausible.

This leads to a style that some find delightful but others find frustrating. It allows the reader, sometimes requires her/him, to be playful. For example, there is no exclusively linear argument in the book. This book presents the reader with a robust structure, albeit a malleable one. The three sections structure

although there is not necessarily a lateral progression of the arguments through the book. At its core, though, as Demeritt (2005: 882) notes, this is still at its heart an academic text which follows the appropriate scholarly conventions such as citation. For, in a sense, the beginning chapters counter conventional views of nature as apart from the social while the later chapters provide an alternative construction. Although the final chapter is not a conclusion to the book (it does not rehearse the arguments or sum up the findings), it returns to the aim set out at the beginning of the book to enlarge our notion of the social.

### Impacts and significance

*Hybrid Geographies* received much interest and acclaim at the time of publishing. It was described variously as 'splendid book, brimming over with interesting ideas' and with 'compelling' arguments (Duncan, 2004: 162) and marking 'an important and impressive milestone' (O'Brien and Wilkes, 2004: 149). It was welcomed as '(r)einvigorating geography and making it relevant to interdisciplinary work (O'Brien and Wilkes, 2004). Geographers of a certain bent had been working on the questions and literatures of science and technology studies for a while. They embraced *Hybrid Geographies* as a book that works through the implications of geographic thought for these concerns and promises the contribution geography can make to this academic area. In the years since its publication the book has been much cited. Becoming what can be termed, in ANT parlance, an obligatory passage point. It is a necessary point of reference for many geographers of nature and informs their thinking on the relational co-constitution of nature and society.

In 2003, Noel Castree organized an author-meets-critic discussion at the annual conference of the UK's Royal Geographic Society (RGS). Those involved in this exchange published their thoughts in *Antipode* (Demeritt,

2005; Philo, 2005; Braun, 2005; Whatmore, 2005). These papers provide thoughtful and sympathetic critique of the book. Braun (2005: 835) describes it as a book that 'believes in the world'. Demeritt (2005: 818) calls it fascinating. Philo (2005: 824) characterizes it as an 'excellent book, which seriously moves on debates'. All of the contributions recognize that the book is challenging and provide entries into, and questions to enrich, our reading of the *Hybrid Geographies*. Having already described the concerns expressed in part in this exchange about the status of the truth claims Whatmore makes, I am going to concentrate here on three further questions. The first is Demeritt's concern about how far we ought to extend Whatmore's analysis of hybridity. The second concerns Braun's calls for a clarification of the relationship between knowledge and ethics/politics. Finally, I describe Philo's anxiety about the place of animals in the text.

The first question posed in the *Antipode* exchange concerns the scope of Whatmore's analysis. I have said that at its core, *Hybrid Geographies* is a book about relations. One turn of phrase Whatmore (2002) uses in this book is that of 'becoming...'. For example, she talks of becoming a leopard and becoming a soybean. In doing so, Whatmore seeks to highlight the networks and journeys that co-construct leopards and soybeans. While we might be convinced that this is a useful way of thinking about the capacities of animals, we ought to ask is it a useful way of thinking about their fleshiness. Demeritt (2005: 829) asks whether we want to accept an elephant's skin and trunk are partial and provisional achievements. He accepts such a critical realist challenge makes assumption about what partial and provisional mean. However, this is an important question to ask in our reading of *Hybrid Geographies*. While Whatmore makes a compelling case for the socio-natural hybridity of some aspects of nature, how far does the scope of her argument extend?

The second of the *Antipode* questions concerns the place of animals in this text. Although this is a book about animals, there is a sense in which they are absent, or at least veiled, in the text. As Philo puts it:

... might it not be that the animals – in detail, up close, face to face, as it were – still remain somewhat shadowy presences? They are animating the stories being told, but ... they stay in the margins. (Philo, 2005: 829)

Although she discusses corporeal ‘fleshiness’, her examples are drawn from bureaucratic and all too human discourses. As another commentator has said:

Although at times ... we may occasionally be tempted to ask where the elephants are, in some ways this is the point here – that there are many aspects that define an animal, what it can do, or will be made to do, which are constituted in wide circulations of materials moving in and beyond its fleshy body, though admittedly these can be somewhat abstracted forms here. (Wilbert, 2004: 91)

Duncan too notes how the examples Whatmore works through effectively illustrate how social networks interpenetrate the natural (Duncan, 2004: 162). He wonders what hybrid geographies of animals that are less enrolled in human projects would look like and posit that they would be less human-centred granting greater agency to animals.

The final consideration raised by the *Antipode* exchange that I will mention here is the construction of ethics. The project of ethics is central to *Hybrid Geographies*. In an earlier paper, Whatmore lays out the basis of the relational ethics which makes up the ‘conclusion’ of *Hybrid Geographies* (Whatmore, 1997). Despite the centrality of ethics to the *Hybrid Geographies* project, there is a sense in which it remains difficult to get a handle on the resultant ethics. Braun (2005: 838) has

argued that ‘the question of knowledge and its relation to politics is not always clear in *Hybrid Geographies*’, noting in particular the absence of a mention of capitalism in her analysis. Wilbert (2004: 92) has described relational ethics as rather vague. There is a sense in which it is unclear what difference hybrid geographies make ethically. What can we now understand, now do, that we couldn’t before? For example, conventional humanist ethical theories take human agency and subjecthood to denote a capacity for responsibility. Whether newly enlarged hybrid geographies of agency and subjectivity bring with them such moral responsibility is something on which Whatmore remains silent.

The exchange in *Antipode* raises these questions as part of a thorough engagement with Whatmore’s book and against a background of praise for its ambitions and execution. They provide useful questions to enrich our own readings of *Hybrid Geographies*. The extent to which these concerns are judged important or worked through rests not with Whatmore herself but with the extent to which the text proves useful to geographers, other academics, activists and beyond. As Whatmore (2005: 842) herself notes, ‘books have lives of their own – proliferating connections as they travel that exceed any authorial intentions’.

## Conclusion

*Hybrid Geographies* has been received as an important and challenging book. It has already become a classic among a community of geographers dealing with the relationship between nature and society, already widely cited. To some working in this area, though, its analysis is too apolitical to be adopted. For others, its dense prose and flouting of important social science convention (such as an account of methods) make it inaccessible.

However, despite such reservations *Hybrid Geographies* has become known as an important and agenda-setting book.

This is a book that firmly positions geography as relevant to important issues facing the world and the academic treatment of these issues. In a sense, this will be its acid test. The challenge is twofold. There is the need for geographers to communicate with those beyond geography. There is also the challenge of creating methods and language for geographers to communicate with those in the discipline working in areas other than their own. Elsewhere, Whatmore (2003) has discussed the ability geography ought to have to make sense of biological processes, such as diseases and micro-organisms, as much as political ones, such as international trade agreements. She gives the case of banana

production and its threat by a virulent leaf disease called Black Sigatoka:

This obscure airborne fungus put the banana in the headlines in European news papers, heralding generic engineering as the banana's only salvation. Geography should be a discipline that fosters skills to deal as effectively with this pathological process as with the organisational relations of banana production, but seems less inclined to do so. (Whatmore, 2003: 139)

If Whatmore's book *Hybrid Geographies* can prompt such research agendas, and if it plays a role in the conversation between human and physical geography, it will be a real success. The book will be creating its own hybrid networks. It is certainly up to the challenge.

### Secondary sources and further reading

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