Everywhen-to-Nature

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Abstract

Truth-to-nature, the eighteenth-century forerunner to scientific objectivity, employed nonlinear approaches to time and place to visualise an observed 'truth.' From flora and fauna to the depictions of landscape, truth-to-nature combined science, art, technology, and colonisation to visualise not what is seen but what is seen to be true. While nonlinear chronologies, such as the Everywhen, are deeply connected with Indigeneity, this paper explores the less common instances of the Everywhen in Western image-making practices, particularly the spatiotemporal strategies deployed in truth-to-nature representations. This paper will introduce examples of the Everywhen co-opted in colonial representations of Aotearoa New Zealand. By way of creative practice, I propose a provisional methodology that re-enacts the spatiotemporal tactics operating within truth-to-nature representations. This pictorial paper will critique the exploitation of settler-colonial practices through co-opting the Everywhen worlding potential within truth-to-nature images to explore more just and ethical ways of seeing and relating to land.

Keywords

Spatiotemporal relations, truth-to-nature, settler-colonial representations, co-chronologies, co-locations, landscape, worlding

Introduction

Truth-to-nature is a form of colonial image-making that employs Everywhen-like relations between space and time. This paper aims to co-opt the settler-colonial worlding imaginaries of such representations as an attempt to see and make landscapes differently.

Being pākehā (European New Zealander), I will approach Indigenous notions of time and place by engaging with Western representations of landscape and nature. Foregrounding my pākehā positionality does not automatically align oneself with colonial practices. Indeed, it is an attempt to move past them. I connect my approach with Donna Haraway's notion of 'staying with the trouble.' [1] Haraway's ethos is used here to disclose the troubling aspect of truth-to-nature representations and to work through them literally and figuratively. Through re-reading and re-enacting Western image-making practices, I aim to intersect their spatiotemporal worlding possibilities with conceptions of the Everywhen.

Truth-to-nature is a term I am familiar with from Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's book *Objectivity*, where they examine the history of objectivity in the sciences. [2] Daston and Galison reveal that prior to objectivity, scientists working closely with artists had a very different approach to constructing scientific knowledge. While truth-to-nature touched the sciences broadly, it mainly aided the taxonomic classification of flora and fauna. Truth-to-nature classification of newly discovered species was entangled with their visual representation. Scientists at this time had a deep knowledge of flora and fauna, but in this pre-photographic era, they rarely had the artistic skills required for their depiction. Artists were employed to work with scientists to illustrate the 'truth' the scientist saw in the natural world. Daston and Galison call truth-to-nature's collective (scientist and artist) way of seeing 'four-eyed sight.' [3] By comparison, objectivity attempts to see without a cultural lens, which Daston and Galison call 'blind sight.' [4]

Various approaches exist for accessing the 'truth' within a truth-to-nature epistemology. Some scientist-artist collaborations focused on the typical when representing a species, while others aimed to capture the ideal traits of a specimen, which is the focus of this paper. In both cases, the 'monstrous' and the irregular were omitted. One tactic found across the various truth-to-nature practices is a layering of time and place, which I refer to as co-chronologies and co-locations. Co-chronologies is a practice that shows events from the past, present and future as happening at one time. Co-locations take the same approach to place. In this paper, the time periods may not be as expansive as the Everywhen. However, it will be argued that the chronopolitics of flattening time and place is a worlding operation that can be co-opted to align more ethically with the Everywhen. This pictorial paper will introduce co-chronologies and co-locations through examples of truth-to-nature colonial images of Aotearoa New Zealand, along with my own creative re-enactments of these spatiotemporal strategies.
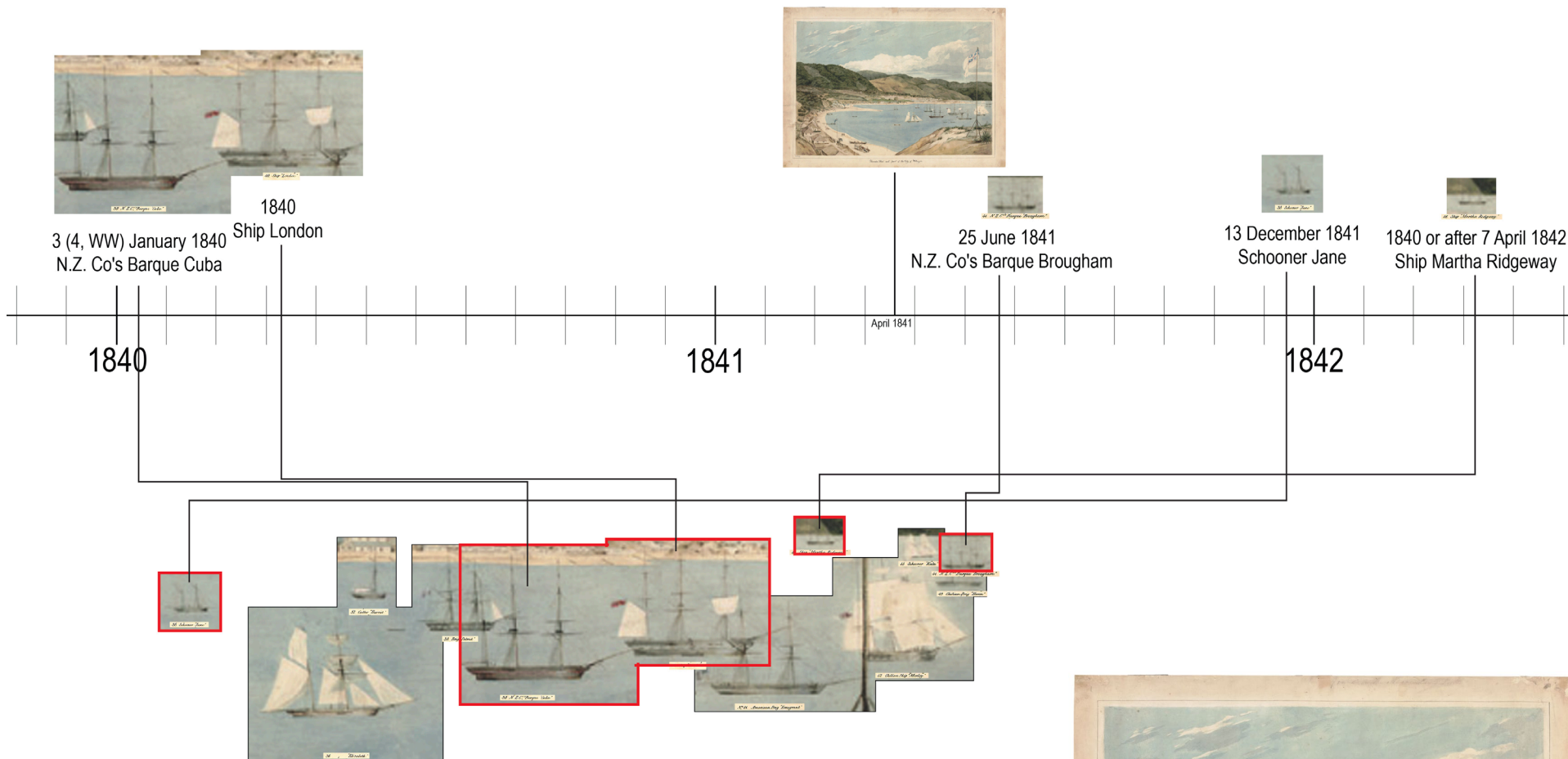
1840
Ship London

3 (4, WW) January 1840
N.Z. Co's Barque Cuba

25 June 1841
N.Z. Co's Barque Brougham

13 December 1841
Schooner Jane

1840 or after 7 April 1842
Ship Martha Ridgeway

April 1841

1840

1841

1842

Figure 2. Daniel Coombes, *Diagramming Heaphy's Co-chronologies*. 2023.

Figure 1. Charles Heaphy. T*horndon Flat and Part of the City of Wellington*, 1841, from Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Co-chronologies

In April 1841, Charles Heaphy, artist and surveyor for the New Zealand Company (a British settler-colonial organisation with ties to the British Government), painted *Thorndon Flat and part of the city of Wellington* (hereafter referred to as '*Thorndon Flat*') (Figure 1). The watercolour is dated to April, which is a significant timestamp when investigating the temporality within this image. Looking at the right-hand side of *Thorndon Flat*, we can see a collection of ships anchored in the Wellington harbour. Art historian Patricia Thomas says of *Thorndon Flat*, "At some stage or another, all the ships shown…did arrive in Wellington Harbour. However, they happen not to have done so at the same time." [5] Significantly, *Thorndon Flat* and similar works were produced for a British audience and presented as 'on the spot' recordings, that is, as first-person, authentic accounts of the New Zealand landscape. [6] *Diagramming Heaphy's Co-chronologies* (Figure 2) shows a timeline plotting the known arrival times of five of the twelve ships in Heaphy's painting. [7] The timeline diagram shows that two of the five ships arrived in the harbour in early 1840 and are thought to have left by the time *Thorndon Flat* was produced in April of 1841, while three ships arrived after Heaphy's painting of this landscape.

In Heaphy's *Thorndon Flat* (Figure 1), he engages with nonlinear constructions of time by presenting past and future events alongside what he was seeing in the present moment in April 1841. Representations of Wellington, such as *Thorndon Flat*, were made for an

Figure 3. Daniel Coombes, *Enacting Co-chronologies*. 2023.

audience of potential British immigrants, both prospective land owners and labourers. Distorting the truth, as we see here with the number of British immigration ships, would help the potential settlers be more assured in moving to the new colony. *Thorndon Flat* co-opts Everywhen-like conceptions of time, in this case, the specific chronology of colonial sailings to Wellington. Such an image would no doubt lead potential settlers to equate the number of ships with the number of people, like them, already in New Zealand.

Enacting Co-chronologies (Figure 3) shows a visual experiment by the author that co-opts the temporal shifts observed in Heaphy's *Thorndon Flat*. Figure 3 was made by photographing a flock of pigeons within a single location over five minutes. Following the nonlinear temporality observed in Heaphy's view of Wellington, this work similarly presents multiple moments as a single snapshot. A key difference between Heaphy's image and this pigeon-based exploration is that it does so with a degree of 'objectivity.' The pigeons are not re-positioned to construct a believable composition, as the ship was in *Thorndon Flat*.

The truth-to-nature practice of presenting more than one temporality simultaneously, which I call co-chronologies, is most well known in connection with Western botanical illustrations from the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. At this time, truth-to-nature was the dominant approach to making scientific images. [8] Daston and Galison tell us that "it was standard practice for botanical drawings to represent the fruit and flower of a plant in the same drawings, as never occurred at the same time in nature." [9] While there are rare examples of plants that have both simultaneously, most plants flower and then produce fruit and seeds. We can see this core characteristic of truth-to-nature of showing flora with flowers and fruit in the illustration of plants indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand in Figures 4 and 5.

We can draw intriguing parallels between the depiction of ships in Heaphy's landscape view (Figure 1) and these botanical illustrations (Figures 4 and 5). Where Heaphy showed past, present, and future ships as if anchored in one moment, botanists and their artists simultaneously depicted the plant's seasonal changes. Heaphy's watercolour and these plant illustrations demonstrate a shared ambition for curating time and mastery over the natural world. However, the explicit motives behind the images are different. Heaphy's image is implicitly a marketing device, while the plant images tend to be perceived as a scientific endeavour. The nonlinear chronologies in the flora images take on a political

Figure 4. Sydney Parkinson. *Corynocarpus laevigatus Forster & G. Forster; Plate 427*, in Joseph Banks' Florilegium: Botanical Treasures from Cook's First Voyage. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2017.

dimension when we consider their deployment to counter the perception that Aotearoa New Zealand's indigenous plants appeared not to be particularly floral. In *The Native Flowers of New Zealand*, Georgina Hetley says she wanted "to debunk the widely held belief that 'there are no flowers in New Zealand'" [10]. June Starke explains that "Hetley had aimed to produce 'a good popular' work rather than exact botanical drawings. Her success can be measured by a reviewer's comment that the plates brought 'home to us, as never before, the gorgeousness of the New Zealand flora.'" [11] The perceived lack of flowers in New Zealand was not just a botanical issue, but a problem for the country's image to potential Western immigrants. The mention of 'home' in the above quote is a common motif built into many colonial image-making practices. Taken from the publication *English Reaction to the New Zealand Landscape Before 1850*, the phrase, adding "a dash from Home to the picture", describes the strategy of picturing New Zealand for the landscape preferences of future settlers. [12] Even "the luxuriant growth of well-known English weeds" was said to serve this purpose. [13] Adding British familiarity to representations of Aotearoa New Zealand was achieved through situating exotic flags, animals, architecture, street names, or, in the case of the images discussed here, ships and indigenous flowers in the landscape.

Figure 5. Emily Cumming Harris. *Rubus parvus - Mountain bramble*, in New Zealand Mountain Flora. 1890-1896.

Co-locations

Co-chronologies are a technique that shows different temporalities as if they were a single moment, while co-locations present two or more distant locations in the same place. Heaphy's *Kakariki, from Ship Cove and Teawaiti August, 1839* (hereafter referred to as '*Kakariki*') (Figure 6) and Peter Brown's *The New Zealand Creeper* (Figure 7) are examples of the co-locations tactic at play in truth-to-nature images. The co-locations technique is more about location than time. However, the Everywhen is clearly situated both spatially and temporally. *Kakariki* (Figure 6) is said to be the first watercolour Heaphy made in New Zealand. The National Library of New Zealand's description of the image says it "Shows two green parrots on tree foliage, with flowers and berries. The tree may be imaginary, but may be an approximation of puriri." [14] This description aligns with the co-chronologies tactic. Pertinent to the context of spatiality, Figure 6 combines multiple locations into one scene. Looking at the full title of the work *Kakariki, from Ship Cove and Teawaiti August, 1839*, "Kakariki" is the Māori name of the birds depicted, and "Ship Cove" and "Teawaiti" are the names of places that Heaphy visited in August of 1839 in which the birds were documented. Ship Cove is at the top of New Zealand's South Island, and Teawaiti is at the bottom of the North Island. Iain Sharp says, "Heaphy wanted viewers to know his kakariki were generalised from multiple observations rather than reliant on a single sighting." [15] A difference between Heaphy's *Kakariki* and his *Thorndon Flat* is that in *Kakariki*, the artist discloses the conceit that the image draws from two locations.

Figure 6. Charles Heaphy. *Kakariki, from Ship Cove and Teawaiti August, 1839*, 1839, from Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

The New Zealand Creeper (Figure 7) is the first published illustration of a New Zeeland bird and appeared in the publication *New Illustrations of Zoology* in 1776. The plate was labelled *The New Zealand Creeper* and was modelled after a persevered specimen collected on James Cook's first voyage, 1768-71. The bird is well known in Aotearoa, New Zealand, by its Māori name tūī. Most relevant to the practice of co-locations is that the butterfly in this image is not a New Zealand species. [16] The butterfly, a known Western species, could have been included for scale purposes. However, looking through the lens of imbuing the 'new world' the colonists encountered with British familiarity, the image offers more violent interpretations. For example, we could interpret this image as two distant geographies, one Indigenous and one exotic, coming together. Unlike *Kakariki*, where the two locations are within New Zealand, in *The New Zealand Creeper* (Figure 7), we have species representing different countries, the tūī from New Zealand and the butterfly most likely from England. More speculatively, we could see this image as a future prediction, a colonial dream. In 1776, when this image was made, it did not represent reality (the butterfly was not in New Zealand); however, thinking of this image through the idealisation of truth-to-nature, the image

Figure 7. Peter Brown. *The New Zealand Creeper*, in New illustrations of Zoology. London: Fleet Street Publisher, 1776.
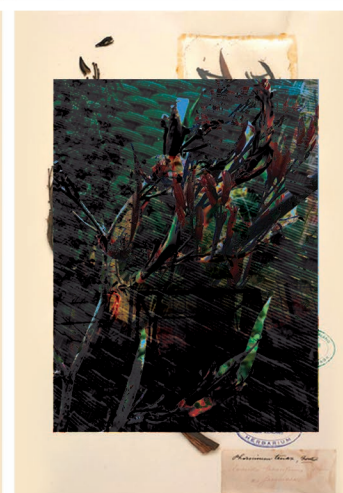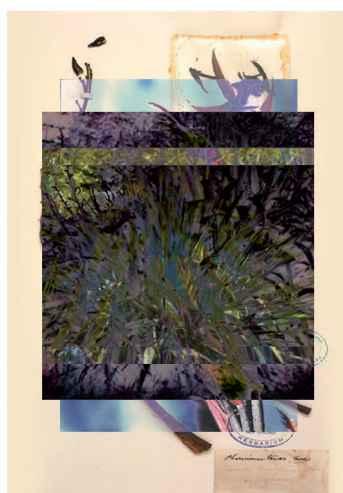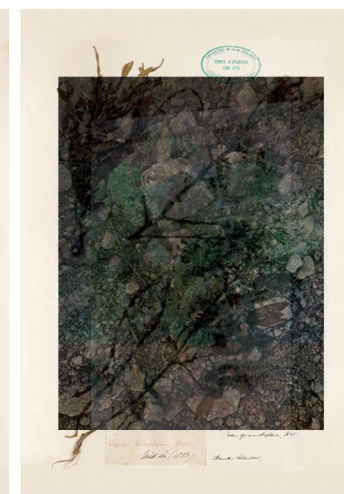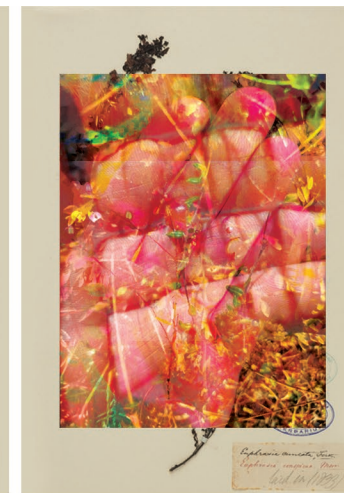
As a descendant of British settlers, my presence in Aotearoa New Zealand, was granted by the Māori through the signing of the Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) in 1840. This positionality is woven into the *Kinship-to-Nature* series (Figure 8-11), which delves into a settler positionality where my relations are entangled with the colonisers. The specific practice of colonisation I explore in this project is classifying species through botanical illustrations within a truth-to-nature epistemology. *Kinship-to-Nature* explores how the colonial drive for classification is a drive that severs and erases existing spatiotemporal relations. On colonial voyages, flora specimens were collected, preserved and taken away to be classified through imaging practices that capture the plant's perceived essence. *Kinship-to-Nature* is a series made for the journal *You Are Here: The Journal of Creative Geography* for their themed issue, *Mapping All My Relations*. The title *Kinship-to-Nature* is a play on truth-to-nature in which 'truth' is substituted for 'kinship,' meaning here relationality, which strongly intersects with the Everywhen. This project relates to the previous visual analysis of temporal and spatial relations in colonial images. This work has concrete connections to *The New Zealand Creeper* (Figure 7) in that the plants in *Kinship-to-Nature* were also collected on Cook's first voyage.

Kinship-to-Nature is based on three plants indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand: Tutumako (Euphrasia cuneata), Kōwhai (Sophora tetraptera), and Harakeke (Phormium tenax). Along with others, these plants were collected by the botanists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, who were on Cook's voyage. When reading Figure 8 from left to right, the three rows begin with photographs of the three plants collected by Banks and Solander. This forms the starting point for a classification process that is co-created with a community of online plant enthusiasts. I uploaded Banks' and Solander's plant samples to a

Figure 9. Daniel Coombes, *Kinship-to-Nature Map 1*. 2024.

digital platform (plantnet.org) that identifies plant images by comparing them to a community-curated image archive. The search results on plantnet.org suggest five possible plant identifications, along with numerous plant images related to each potential classification. Situating myself as the classifier and illustrator, I superimposed the search results, illustrating the plant's multiple modes of existence. [17] Rather than following truth-to-nature conventions of visually extracting an idealised or typical instance of each plant, my approach counters the

Figure 10. Daniel Coombes, *Kinship-to-Nature Map 2*. 2024.

Figure 11. Daniel Coombes, *Kinship-to-Nature Map 3*. 2024.

taxonomic goal of species singularity and forms of individuation more generally.

Unlike the truth-to-nature approach, which edits out irregularities to present an imagined essence, the *Kinship-to-Nature* series subverts this method to provoke and unsettle colonial and white ways of seeing the world, or what the visual culture scholar Nick Mirzoeff refers to as 'white sight.' [18] This work re-enacts the colonial botanist practice of taking specimens home for taxonomic classification. However, the geographical connections in this series are not based on colonial expansion but on the potential for alternative perspectives. Rather than erasing space-time relations through classification practices, this work explores the critical and creative potential of re-reading and re-enacting colonial conventions.

Conclusion

The above analysis explores spatiotemporal strategies that intersect with Everywhen-like concepts operating in truth-to-nature images depicting flora, fauna, and landscapes indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. The re-enactments of co-chronologies and co-locations through the creative practice experiments, *Enacting Co-chronologies* (Figure 3) and *Kinship-to-Nature* (Figures 8-11) start to show possibilities for linking the colonial co-option of the Everywhen back its creative and critical source. Where truth-to-nature visual practices were used violently to re-imagine existing worlds, this paper shows how those re-imaginings may be modestly recovered to explore more just and ethical ways of seeing and relating to land.

Acknowledgements

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[3] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 98-9.

[4] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 98-9.

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