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Disrupting the Cartographic View from Nowhere: “Hating Empire Properly” in Layla Curtis’s Cartographic Collage *The Thames*

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This article gives a close reading of a contemporary artwork, *The Thames* by Layla Curtis (2013), as an opportunity to think through how it disrupts the “cartographic view from nowhere.” This characteristic viewpoint of cartography is understood as a form of cartographic abstraction, the material mode of thought and experience that can be produced through cartographic ways of depicting the world. *The Thames* uses collage to bring together disparate cartographic images and place names, creating an altered and disrupted image of the River Thames at London, UK. In reading the artwork, I aim to acknowledge authorial positionality (within the “imperial centre,” in this case London) in order to show that *The Thames* both uses and disrupts the cartographic view from nowhere, showing it to be conceptually “collaged.” This disruption can usefully be read in a postcolonial context as a “productive fiction,” showing the co-constitution and “mutual imbrication” of “centre” and “periphery.” **Key Words:** cartography, cartographic viewing, collage, Layla Curtis, view from nowhere.

In this article, I offer a close reading of a contemporary artwork, *The Thames* by Layla Curtis (2013), as an opportunity to think through how it disrupts the “cartographic view from nowhere.” I argue that in the process of interpretation, we can uncover the functioning of cartographic abstraction, and its ability to constitute viewpoints which powerfully position us as viewers of cartographic imagery—therefore also providing some of the parameters for our interpretations of that imagery. I suggest that the cartographic view from nowhere is an example of cartographic abstraction—the material mode of thought and experience that can be produced through cartographic ways of depicting the world. Within this broader framework, this article reads the series of ten collaged images that make up *The Thames*, and attempts to acknowledge authorial positionality (within the “imperial centre,” in this case London) in order to show that *The Thames* both uses and disrupts the cartographic view from nowhere, showing it to be conceptually “collaged.” Drawing from the academic tradition of critical cartography as well as an interpretation of artistic collage as a critical method, I interpret the disruption staged in *The Thames* in a postcolonial context as a useful, rupturous counter to the authoritative images that the cartographic view from nowhere is usually used to produce. This disruption produces instead a new, ambivalent and multiple cartographic vision that shows the co-constitution and “mutual imbrication” of “imperial centre” and “periphery.”

READING THE ARTWORK

On viewing *The Thames* (Section 1: *From London Bridge, Arizona to Salt Island, British Virgin Islands*) by Layla Curtis (2013) (Figure 1) the first words I notice each time are “DOG ISLANDS.” Right of centre, they are not the largest words to be found in the image—I also read “GREENWICH,” “WEST GREENWICH,” “East Greenwich” and “BEEF I.” This is the signature image of the series of ten collages, the one that is most iconic of London, UK, as it features the loop of the River Thames in the east of the city (Figure 2). It is also the image I am drawn to most strongly as a viewer of Layla Curtis’s artworks, as my eye has become accustomed to identifying this loop of the river and tracing up from it to locate my home on the map of London. More so than Curtis’s collaged interventions in places with which I do not feel a personal connection—such as Gateshead—the immediate details of the changed names, colours, lines and symbols have multiple significances as soon as I start to read.¹ “DOG ISLANDS” has taken over the usual location of the Isle of Dogs, and while the river retains the shape of the Thames, its place names have altered so that I might now call it the “Northwest Passage,” the “STRAIT OF MALACCA,” “Sir Francis Drake Channel” or “ORCA BAY.”²

This imagined “Northwest Passage-Strait-Channel-Bay” flows through a relatively rural landscape, at least in contrast to the densely-built urban landscape usually depicted as existing in the area surrounding this loop of river. An area of city, perhaps interconnecting suburbs,



FIGURE 1 *The Thames* (Section 1: *From London Bridge, Arizona to Salt Island, British Virgin Islands*) by Layla Curtis (2013). Reproduced with permission of Layla Curtis.



FIGURE 2 Detail of *The Thames* (Section 1: From London Bridge, Arizona to Salt Island, British Virgin Islands). Reproduced with permission of Layla Curtis.

appears in the top left corner of the rectangular image, on the north side of the “Northwest Passage-Thames”; “New London” or “LONDON” is the name of this settlement, which apparently extends to the north and the west, off the edge of this map sheet. It is arranged around the “MOHAVE MOUNTAINS,” or perhaps these mountains act as a dividing landmark for the undepicted local population, with those to the south-west, between mountain and river, considering themselves as residents of a separate town, “Lake Havasu City.”³

The series of ten collaged images⁴ was originally commissioned as part of the Thames Festival in 2013, and “exhibited on riverside walkways in front of Tate Modern and by Tower Bridge.”⁵ Considered as a sequence, one way to explore and read the altered geography evoked in this work is to follow the course of the Northwest Passage-Thames sequentially through the numbered images, ending with sheet ten, “From Cape Verde Islands to Thames, New Zealand,” at the mouth of the estuary in the indeterminate zone where the demarcation “river” comes to

an end and gives way to the saltwater zone demarcated as “sea.” The sequence may be followed unproblematically until “reaching” the final four collaged sheets, at which point the conjoined images open out the scope of the area depicted to accommodate the widening (or narrowing) estuary.

This mode of “reading” the series of collages is not the only approach that could be taken to their interpretation, and indeed no reading of cartographic imagery is so linear as the mode of reading called for in interpreting prose. I explore this sequential approach as a way of structuring my reading in a way that is in sympathy with the order of imagery proposed by the artist, reflecting, as it does, the progressive enlarging and widening of the river channel itself as it flows into and becomes the sea. Such an appeal to “naturalness,” of the mode of interpretation reflecting the form of the object of interpretation, is itself open to critical deconstruction; reversal of direction would be one alternate approach that would continue in an accord with the form of the river, reflecting the flow of the rising tide from east to west, as well as the direction of travel of vessels, cargoes, and knowledges upriver into the centre of the city⁶ and of the colonial political formation in the abstract. Other worthwhile approaches to interpretation may be non-sequential, may focus on textual reading and etymological interpretation, or comparative readings of the topography of the cartographically-imported areas. Acknowledging the potential for diverse interpretative approaches, then, positions a sequential west-to-east reading as non-definitive, subjective and provisional, inflected by this article’s theoretical concern with cartographic capacities for formulating abstract viewpoints.

In section 2, “From Sugar Island, Maine to Cut n Shoot, Texas” (Figure 3), the river passes south of “Prince Albert Sound” in place of the former Royal Albert Dock, while sheet 3, “From Convict’s Bay, Bermuda to Tilbury, Canada,” follows the river south-east, beneath the absent M25 motorway, to the imported islands of Indonesia. Here “Wallace’s Line” replaces the M25’s Dartford Crossing; this feature refers to the faunal boundary named in 1859 by Alfred Russel Wallace, marking a transitional zone in species distribution between the ecozones of Asia and Wallacea, itself a transitional zone between Asia and Australia.⁷ This area of London’s “transition” into Kent on the Thames’ southern banks, and Essex on its northern side, takes on a division whose significance is ecological and historical in place of a marker, in the form of the M25, whose significance is socio-economic as well as cultural. As London spreads, particularly into Kent and Medway, its boundaries become increasingly indistinct, and the M25 frequently provides a tacit reference point for Londoners needing to demarcate what is and is not “London.”

The Northwest Passage-Thames continues eastward as the river widens into sheet 6, where its route splits to accommodate imported islands located in the “real” of the Northwest Passage in the Nunavut territory of northern Canada. At the end of the estuary, the dotted line of the “Northwest Passage” stops at the town of “Thames,” rather than continuing into the sea, which has itself been re-named as “PACIFIC OCEAN” (see Figure 4).

En route to “Thames,” the Northwest Passage’s bifurcation and interruption suggests the inconsistency of interest in the Northwest Passage in the European imagination through the sixteenth century to the present (Williams 2002). As attempts are made in the twenty-first century to understand the effects of climate change in the Canadian Arctic, the question of a reliable sea route between the Atlantic and the Pacific via the north of North America remains a real one, as patterns of thawing and freezing are in flux. The presence of an altered Northwest Passage in the cartographic image of the River Thames, then, is not simply an appearance of a specific historical



FIGURE 3 *The Thames* (Section 2: From Sugar Island, Maine to Cut n Shoot, Texas). Reproduced with permission of Layla Curtis.

and cultural phenomenon; rather, the geographical referent of the name “Northwest Passage” is something that is changing in the present as climate change impacts the Canadian High Arctic and opens up the Passage as a seasonally navigable route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This complex temporality and history (Eades 2016, 67) must not be elided in asking what it is that we may understand the cartographic “view from nowhere” to be visualising.

It is not a straightforward matter to determine what the phrase Northwest Passage names; its most familiar referent must be the European idea that a navigable ocean passage could be found and exploited in the North American Arctic, that would “open” the Far East and the South Pacific to easy and profitable European trade.⁸ The Northwest Passage has had an extensive existence on European maps beginning in the sixteenth century, when, as Glyn Williams notes, “the successors of Columbus slowly realized the massive, continental dimensions of the new lands across the Atlantic” (2002, xv) and sought routes beyond it to the Pacific. The possibility for discovering a feasible passage for shipping continued to be a productive cartographic and geographic fantasy well into the nineteenth century. For Williams, the name

in time would carry emotive implications, of men and ships battling against hopeless odds in a frozen wilderness [...] The main features of this vast region were named after these explorers: Davis Strait, Baffin Island and Baffin Bay, Frobisher Bay, Hudson Strait and Hudson Bay, Foxe Basin, James Bay.



FIGURE 4 *The Thames (Section 10: From Cape Verde Islands to Thames, New Zealand)*. Reproduced with permission of Layla Curtis.

Once those names stood like hopeful signposts on the maps, pointing the way to the Pacific; but for all the endurance and bravery of the navigators there was no way through. (ibid. xvi)

One thing that is named by the label Northwest Passage is European “exploration” itself, despite frequently proving to be of secondary or tertiary importance in the orders given to expeditions (Vaughan 1994, 65, 67; Williams 2002). Exploration and discovery were not pursued as ends in themselves. Rather, the desire for opportunities to generate profits led interest in the Northwest Passage: “The desire for discovery for its own sake played no part in their thinking [...] the Northwest Passage promised an almost magical enlargement of British trade” (Williams 2002, 151). To assert, then, that the “names stood like hopeful signposts on the maps” is to occlude the larger question of what end this de-personalized notion of hopefulness may be directed to, and for *which* readers of maps these place names may be received as a sign of hopefulness. For the reader of the contemporary “map” presented in *The Thames*, the phrase “Northwest Passage” no longer indicates solely a historic concern of geographers, but appears as a contemporary reality through online search results such as: “Icebound no more: Is Northwest Passage a game-changer?” and “Even small boats are tackling the fabled Northwest Passage. The ice doesn’t always cooperate.”⁹ Climate change is altering the behaviour of Arctic sea ice, such that the navigability of the Northwest Passage is now no longer (only) a generative myth but a practical reality.

At the level of signification, then, the status of what we may take to be the signified remains subject to change. The appearance of this place name also offers a disruption to the aesthetic and representational coherence of the cartographic image of the Thames, asserting its dialectical relationship to other places it has had a role in constituting, and their role in constituting the Thames.

The form of viewing from above that we see in *The Thames* is the cartographic view from nowhere—this is the distinctively cartographic way of constructing the image of the viewed area as though it is seen from directly (not obliquely) above each part of the viewed place simultaneously. The “view from above” is by no means exclusive to cartography,¹⁰ but views constructed to appear as though the viewer is either directly or obliquely above the viewed area are characteristic of maps in general.

This viewpoint effectively functions by “compiling” a view from above every point of the viewed area, and bringing these viewed points together into a visually coherent whole. What is important about the view from nowhere is its resolute departure from the conceptual possibility of inhabitation, or embodiment. In designating the view from nowhere, I aim to scrutinize what we may understand this viewpoint to compile, and I argue that approaching this question by way of a close engagement with cartographic art shows that cartographic “viewing from nowhere” comes to compile¹¹—or to *collage*—time as well as space.

CONTRAPUNTAL CARTOGRAPHIES: COUNTER-MAPPING, RADICAL CARTOGRAPHY AND MAP ART

Before considering collage in more depth, it is important to bring this discussion into the context of existing critiques of artworks that engage with maps or cartographic processes, as well as the cartographic movements that have sought to challenge and remake hegemonic conceptions of cartography—counter-mapping and radical cartography.

Counter-mapping emerges in part out of the recognition that maps must be selective, and that particular interests are necessarily forwarded through this process while others are suppressed, and it draws much of its political and imaginative force from the seemingly simple gesture of mapping subject matter not traditionally appearing in maps. Such mappings are usually associated with motivations of social justice, and have become particularly associated with assertions of land rights in postcolonial contexts (see in particular Sparke 1998; Eades 2016). As Alexis Bhagat and Lize Mogel describe their 2008 work, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, published with ten fold-out maps, “[t]he object of critique in *An Atlas* [...] is not cartography per se (as is generally meant by the overlapping term *critical cartography*), but rather social relations. Our criteria for selecting these ten maps emphasized radical inquiry and activist engagement” (2008, 6–7, emphasis in original).

Connecting the themes of power or power-knowledge, postcolonial theory, and the formation of the nation-state in the Canadian context, Matthew Sparke identifies Benedict Anderson (1991) as having contributed a critique of the hegemonic capacities of national mapping, and argues for the need to also take account of “the *counterhegemonic* effect of cartographic negotiations” (Sparke 1998, 464, emphasis in original). In one of the signal essays on counter-mapping and its role in indigenous and postcolonial land rights struggles, Sparke also identifies “the recursive proleptic effects of mapping—the way maps contribute to the construction of spaces that later they seem only to represent” (ibid., 466). He introduces the idea, drawn from Edward Said, of “contrapuntal reading” and “contrapuntal voicing,” forming what he calls the “concept-metaphor” (ibid., 467) of “contrapuntal cartographies.” The emphasis is on countering dominant discourses of power, particularly in the context of the nation-state, and particularly through the medium of cartography, turning its capacities against the hegemonic effects of nation-formation and unfolding “contrapuntal cartographies” as a liberatory political practice. The discourse of counter-mapping has drawn from critiques of cartography’s practical role in furthering hegemonic interests, as succinctly articulated by Denis Wood: “[c]artographers played a significant role in making the world safe for colonizers, mining conglomerates, and the military” (2010, 7).

Postcolonial—and contrapuntal—contemporary approaches in visual culture are also concerned with the production and dissemination of images and the understandings they authorize.¹² In the specific context of cartographic production of the god’s eye view, “[a]s historians of cartography who write under the influence of J. B. Harley’s pioneering scholarship have documented, this god-trick frequently preceded the messy fact of empire, as maps were first used to claim lands and resources on parchment and paper for European powers well before they were effectively occupied by colonizing bodies and presences” (Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 33). As Sparke asserts of colonial mapping in Newfoundland, “the abstracting and disembodied effect of the Cartesian cartography simultaneously presented the interior as known as empty as uninhabited. Less than a century later, the anticipatory aspect of this colonial enframing effect became disembodied reality. By 1830 there were no living native bodies left.” (1998, 308) Cartographic visualization is identified as anticipatory, and active in the production of a “disembodied reality”; “the gridded colony” (Rajaram 2006, 476) is anticipated and produced, in part, cartographically. Further, as Martin Jay argues, “[f]rom mapping new territories and representing sovereign power to the photographic and cinematic presentation of imperial relations, from the most popular mass culture to the most esoteric

avant-garde art, the role of visibility in creating, sustaining, justifying, and undermining imperial power is impossible to deny” (Jay in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 613).

Denis Wood offered one of the earliest accounts of “map art” in his chapter “Map Art: Stripping the Mask from the Map,” in *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (2010). Wood offers a broad definition of this growing body of artworks, including works of Dada, Surrealism, Letterism and Situationism, Conceptual and Earth Art, and gives a detailed survey of exhibitions and contemporary artists using mapping. Creative and artistic approaches to map-making have also been influentially anthologized in Katharine Harmon’s 2004 work, *You are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*.

The emerging interdisciplinary area of the geohumanities also takes a critical interest in creative methodologies in relation to space and spatial understandings. In a dedicated volume on this issue, “geohumanities” is defined as referring to “the rapidly growing zone of creative interaction between geography and the humanities” (Dear et al. 2011, 3). In a similar vein, Hawkins’s (2014) theoretical approach to “geography-art relations” investigates “questions of creative geographies, and specifically [...] points of over-lap and spaces of co-operation between geography and art” (2014, 1).

Hawkins argues that artistic work gathered under the rubric of “critical cartographies” addresses “traditional practices of cartography” (ibid., 40) through a critique of positivism in cartography’s scientifically-oriented disciplinary self-understanding, and through the ongoing development of new practices of mapping, by artists, and put in context by theorists and critics. I take up and build on some of these developing interdisciplinary approaches to interpretation of artworks in what follows, exploring a single cartographic artwork as a methodological approach to elaborating the functioning of the view from nowhere as a cartographic abstraction.

COLLAGE AS ARTISTIC AND CRITICAL METHOD

The artist Martha Rosler has characterized collage, as an artistic method, as “a productive fiction” (Rosler in Flood, Gioni, and Hoptman 2007, 96). Contemporary artists offer a range of understandings of collage, as an artistic product and as a process of making. I aim to take seriously the senses of violence and aggression that some artists find in collage-making, without uncritically valorizing these intentions. I see collage less in relation to notions of artistic self-expression and overt political critique,¹³ and more in relation to the naturalized epistemic violence that much visual discourse, notably cartography, is able to enact and support, particularly in the context of colonialism-imperialism as is prominent in Curtis’s series *The Thames*. In this light, a “productive fiction” would also be a useful description of “the map” itself.¹⁴

The artist Thomas Hirschorn has emphasized the sense of subjective interpretation that artists find in collage:

A collage is an interpretation. It’s a true, real, entire interpretation, an interpretation that wants to create something new. Doing collages means creating a new world with elements of this existing world. [...] I want to break the scale and I want to break the angles and the perspective. I want to put *the whole world* into my collages. [...] I want to express the world that I am living in, not the

whole world as the entire world but as a *fragmented world*. (Hirschorn in Flood, Gioni, and Hoptman 2007, 44, emphasis in original)

The desire Hirschorn articulates to both “put the whole world” into his collages and also to express this world as “fragmented” resonates with my reading of *The Thames*, as fragments of the geographical and cartographic “world” are collaged into a “new world”—a phrase that becomes more significant in the context of Curtis’s incorporation of place names relating to European ocean voyages of exploration and colonial incursion in the Americas, given the epithet “new world” by a European culture that arrogated to itself the entitlement to bestow such labels (Eades 2016). Hirschorn also uses “world” here to signify both the fullness and extent of the geographical world, and the personal sense of all that is experienced, known and thought by an individual; both of these worlds are characterized as fragmentary, complex and difficult to apprehend. He continues:

It’s about the entire History and not just a single fact. With my work, I want to reach, to touch History beyond the historical fact. The question is always: What is my position? The question is about myself, today. I want to confront the chaos, the incomprehensibility, and the unclarity of the world [...] The images that I use in a collage are an attempt to confront the violence of the world and *my own violence*. I am part of the world and all the violence of the world is my own violence, all the wounds of the world are my own wounds. All the hate is my own hate. (ibid., emphasis in original)

Although Hirschorn is not commenting on cartography here, he articulates an interest in both acknowledging and claiming a stake in a generalized notion of violence as a condition of being, making imagery, using language, and explicitly appropriating and altering images that are the product of the labour (both manual and intellectual) of others. In the context of cartography, the process of appropriation and reconfiguring through paper collage necessarily involves cutting, dismantling and effectively destroying the physical object; the non-appearance of these processes in the resulting collage provides an analogue of the epistemic violences that are productive of the original cartographic image.

Rosler emphasises the quality of “unlikely” juxtapositions leading to a sense of contradictoriness in the resulting evocation of space:

Collage, for me, suspends the perceiver between the possible and the impossible or the unlikely. I am interested in all kinds of collages, but the kinds that interest me most draw attention to spatiality, to the spatial dimension. That can mean an improbable relation of the fragments not only to each other but possibly also to the space within the frame, creating a “no space” or a contradictory one. (Rosler in Flood, Gioni, and Hoptman 2007, 96)

While I have interpreted *The Thames* as producing something like Rosler’s “improbable relation of fragments” on an initial encounter, the relation of cartographic fragments gives on to a different sense of coherence than that proposed by the “non-artistic” cartographic image. Its coherence arises from an explicit acknowledgement and claiming of relations of mutual imbrication between and among places, histories and knowledges; a claiming that the protocols of non-artistic cartographic description foreclose. Rosler further asserts that in collage in general we find “a simple shock of collision to begin with” (ibid.). This shock is reversed in *The Thames*, as the collages retain an initial appearance of a familiar cartographic aesthetic recognizable from topographic maps, and it is only on closer scrutiny that the images give way

to intruding elements, “rupturing the surface with the previously hidden, ripping a seam into a seamless tale” (ibid.).

John Stezaker, who works with found photographs and postcard images in his numerous collage series, suggests a more nuanced approach to the vantage point that may be constructed, and critiqued, through collage as a mode of critical image production:

The challenge was to represent the vantage point of the consumer rather than that of the producer of images, and to evolve a practice that never departed from the position of the consumer whilst somehow betraying something of the strangeness of that vantage point. (Stezaker in Flood, Gioni, and Hoptman 2007, 116)

This position is also in question in *The Thames*, as the mode of collaging and thereby appropriating existing imagery is not at once assimilable to a straightforward binary of consumption as against production. An ambivalent position is performed in relation to the appropriated material, as the artist both consumes—indeed, destroys—while at once seeking to produce and reproduce altered meanings and effects.

CARTOGRAPHIC “VIEWING FROM NOWHERE” AS COLLAGE

Having considered collage as an artistic mode of production, I suggest that cartographic “viewing from nowhere” may be understood as a form of collage. The view from nowhere combines data, depictions and knowledge that often find their genesis elsewhere—not just outside the given image as a unified entity, but arising from processes carried out at a wide range of times and by a wide variety of agents. These processes include gathering survey data, selecting data ranges and types, and choosing appropriate modes of symbolization and generalization; the processes of production of all cartographic imagery.

In the cartographic view from nowhere, compilation is directed not at simulating perspective, but rather at removing it altogether. The visual production of any apparent point of view is eschewed in the cartographic view from nowhere, in favour of simulating viewing from directly overhead all parts of the viewed area simultaneously. This mode is already thoroughly abstracted from any embodied mode of viewing from above, which necessarily involves perspective. In the view from nowhere, perspective is precluded, such that a thoroughly abstract viewpoint becomes the most naturalized and characteristic mode of viewing associated with cartography in general.

Although artistic collage and the cartographic view from nowhere both operate by way of combining information from different sources, it is important to mark out a distinction between their modes of image production. Collage tends to denote images made up of other images that continue to retain some distinctiveness or identifiability of the original images (see Spies 1991, 11). By contrast, cartographic production renders the combined imagery, data and symbols into a newly coherent image, and does not overtly retain the traces of its sources. While collage and cartographic production are not the same thing, then, looking at an artistic work that uses collage to create a particular case of the cartographic view from nowhere enables us to encounter its compilatory character as well as the productive role of epistemic violence in constituting cartographic imagery using this viewpoint.

Cartographic imagery tends to occlude depiction of the process of its own production in its final form. This is not a surprising observation in itself, but is worth noting as it can lead to

a consideration of how time is depicted in terms of the view from nowhere. This is a viewpoint that appears not only to view all spaces of the physical area simultaneously, but also—potentially—all times. It can also claim to view a much more delimited timeframe. For example, if we specify that the world map projection as a generic image visualizes the world’s landmasses and oceans in configurations that are themselves historical, then instead of interpreting the view from nowhere (that is at work in the world map projection) as viewing all times simultaneously, we can interpret it as depicting a delimited span of some millions of years. While each individual cartographic image that uses the view from nowhere does, then, delimit the timeframe that is being visualized, the view from nowhere as an abstraction performs the capacity to blend, and to de-particularise, time in the cartographic image. Another way in which time is occluded is the conventional non-selection of variation in natural light for cartographic depiction, and the time involved in generating survey data for inclusion in a single cartographic image does not appear in the cartographic image. Thus, the interpretation of the view from nowhere as giving visual access to a unified present of the depicted place is misleading. The unified appearance is necessarily, and complexly, composite.

Rosenberg and Grafton’s history of the timeline, *Cartographies of Time*, addresses graphic and cartographic approaches to the depiction of time, including events. Where the timeline “appears as a graphic instantiation of history itself” (2010, 244) I argue that the view from nowhere demotes and often even disavows the role of time, and the “instantiation of history,” in the cartographic images it makes possible. Describing a twelfth century diagram depicting three eras in time (ibid., 58), including the future, Rosenberg and Grafton note “the synoptic power of [these] maps of time” (ibid.); in this case, “synoptic power” is used to denote a certain “melding” of “the uniform, year-by-year time of the world chronicles with the more irregular genealogical version of time” (ibid.). In this case, then, “synoptic power” is the capacity to “meld” two incommensurate ways of depicting and conceiving of time.

My formulation of the term “cartographic view from nowhere” in terms of cartographic viewing is compatible with this use but not the same; rather than “melding” two incommensurate modes of visualization, the view from nowhere carries out a more thoroughgoing and versatile compilation and commensuration of conceptual viewing positions, data, and forms of graphic depiction. The non-appearance of crucial aspects of the process of production in the resulting image has relevance for a much wider range of visual production than cartography in particular. In terms of the view from nowhere and its relationship to collage in *The Thames*, what is distinctive about collage’s capacity to explicitly draw attention to its own process of production is the attention it is able to focus on cartography’s own complex processes of production. In this light, I turn to discussion of ways in which we may interpret, or de-code, not only the abstract space of *The Thames*, but also, vitally, its time.

METROPOLE AND COLONY: IMPLICATION, CO-CONSTITUTION AND CONTAMINATION

Colonial identities (beyond the binary formation of colonized and colonizer) have been seen as mutually constructed (Bhabha 1994), as have colonial geographies. As Julie Codell

describes, “metropole and colony, however convenient an abstract dichotomy, were never fixed or discrete but always overlapping and intersecting” (2003, 16). Visuality is also deeply involved in the relationships between Europe and its colonies, as Sumathi Ramaswamy argues in terms of “the mutual implication of the global overseas empires of Europe and modern regimes of visibility and their reciprocal constitution” (Ramaswamy in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 1). Without wishing to follow the potential down-playing of the physical and epistemic violence in colonial and imperial domination to be read in these uses of “mutual” and “reciprocal,” I do wish to take up the emphasis on implication and construction. A deep sense of connection and embeddedness between artworks, as active representations, and the world in which they operate emerges from contemporary post-colonial discourses (see for example Best, 2010). Once we loosen our notions of representations as mimetic and move to a more dynamic, creative and constitutive understanding, identities, and, further, places, may now be considered beyond the rigid terms of binary formations, to be recognized as complex, shifting, and open to re-constitution and renegotiation. Codell notes the profound influence on Britain of “the influx of ideas, fashions, culture, and food from the colonies” (2003, 16), and further that, “[a]s Raymond Williams has shown in *The Country and the City*, relations between perceived ‘centers’ [sic] and their peripheries generate constant conflict, appropriation, and re-modelling, to produce what Simon Gikandi calls ‘a culture of mutual imbrication and contamination’” (ibid.).

The term “contamination” is arresting in the context of cartography’s epistemic violence, and “radical” cartography’s affirmative stance toward the “recovery” of peripheral and marginalised perspectives, geographies and knowledges. The idea of “contamination” can act as a marker of opposition to the affirmative thrust of some critical cartography towards “recovery” and counter-mapping, pointing up the discomfort that often attends the confrontation with discourses, and artworks, that manage to unsettle the interpreter rather than simply to affirm and illustrate ideas that are already held.

In the particular case of *The Thames*, we see the erstwhile “colonial centre,” London, and more particularly its river, visually re-constructed by the geographies and spatial practices of colonialism-imperialism. This notion is perhaps least problematic in relation to identities and cultural practices that may appear to be straightforwardly immaterial, but more complex when applied more “literally”—that is, materially—regarding place. On one reading, *The Thames* series is a picture of precisely the colonial centre, the river flowing out from the heartland of England via the waterways of the world to the locations—becoming visually present as their place names—that came to constitute the geographical empire itself. British history and geography therefore undergo a “continuing renegotiation in the erstwhile imperial heartland” (Proudfoot and Roche 2005, 5).

The image of the river and the city that emerges from *The Thames* may be interpreted as quaint, harmless, decorative or didactic, but I argue for an interpretation that emphasises the material constitution of the colonial centre dialectically—materially—through its imperial-colonial geography. Roche and Proudfoot characterize this co-constitution in terms of “material flows”:

as sites of identity and interaction, these colonial places were also partly constituted by their relationship with other places, and were connected to them by discursive flows of information, knowledge and belief, as well as by more material flows of capital, commodities and labour. (2005, 3)

When viewers of *The Thames* attempt to engage with the altered place names to be found in it, we are presented with a range of interpretative directions that we could pursue to inform ourselves about the geographies and histories at stake in this artwork. Wanting to take seriously the variety of circumstances in which a contemporary work of this kind may be viewed, I want to attend to the positioned character of my own viewing and interpretation, as a viewing subject who lives and thinks in the depicted “erstwhile imperial heartland.”

“HATING EMPIRE PROPERLY”

Said has observed the tension between the tendency of empire to combine and draw together, while the individual remains in their position from which they cannot view or encounter the whole:

[T]he British empire integrated and fused things within it, and taken together it and other empires made the world one. Yet no individual, and certainly not I, can see or fully grasp this whole imperial world. (Said 1994, 4)

The river, the city and cartographic image of “empire” are all synopsized into a new image, opening out a new opportunity for re-considering and nuancing the mutual imbrication, the complex and dynamic concatenation and reinscription, of periphery and centre, colonized and colonizing, and mapped and mapping subjects. Homi Bhabha has emphasized the importance of thinking and engaging “beyond” binary formations, and poses the notion of “beyond” in the context of his reconsideration of multiculturalism:

Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction—that takes you “beyond” yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present. (1994, 4, emphasis in original)

While I do not claim that *The Thames* illustrates this framing of the multiculturalist project, it is the importance of the notion of a conceptual movement “beyond” oneself, and one’s present conditions of visual interpretation, that I apply to the cartographic reconfiguring undertaken in this artwork. Bhabha uses the notion of “beyond,” in the context of multiculturalism and cultural hybridity, to describe a process of “revealing” the constitutive discontinuities in our collective self-understanding:

“Beyond” signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; [...] The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, *our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.* (ibid., 5–6, emphasis added)

A state of “rupturedness” designates the status of the present; Bhabha’s remarks return me to Rosler’s characterization of the potential of collage, quoted above: “rupturing the surface with the previously hidden, ripping a seam into a seamless tale.” Ramaswamy also argues that “the image interrupts and intervenes, disturbing the discursive field of colonial and postcolonial studies” (Ramaswamy in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 5). The descriptive terms are resonant: “blasting,” “rupturing” and “ripping,” “interrupting” and “disturbing.” When brought into the

context of cartographic collage, they speak to the counter-violence enacted on the level of the physical deconstruction of the original paper maps that the artist has cut, and the re-ordering of places and their names that is at once “revealing” and aggressive. In considering my position as a viewer in the metropole, who looks for the location of “home” in the image called *The Thames* (*Section 1: From London Bridge, Arizona to Salt Island, British Virgin Islands*), I draw on Ramaswamy’s characterization of Sunil Agnani’s idea of hating empire properly, adapted from Adorno’s notion of hating tradition properly:

hating empire properly is a peculiar combination of an antagonistic relationship to empire, alongside a (tragic?) immersion in it, “a subtle form of inhabitation.” This form of subtle inhabitation of antagonism and immersion, of hating and (tragic) loving at the same time, is especially true for our postcolonial encounter with empire’s images, many of which remain objects of great beauty and value. (Ramaswamy in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 13)

This formulation provides a useful way to understand the position of the viewer who inhabits but wishes to be antagonistic towards the role of their home city or nation in the postcolonial world. Rather than straightforwardly revealing or indicating, the cartographic image *The Thames* takes up this more “antagonistic” role in performing its own “postcolonial encounter with empire’s images,” rupturing, disturbing and interrupting. This disturbing does not only operate at the level of the work’s cacophony of place names, but also at the level of the view from nowhere deployed in the image. Multiple cartographic grids underlie the multiple cartographic fragments that disturb the picture of London, such that the exclusivity and stability of the singular cartographic grid is “ruptured.” Multiple, overlapping grids now constitute the image. The cartographic view from nowhere, then, collages this overlapping, multiple surface, and presents rupture and multiplicity without disrupting the aesthetic unity of the “original” map image.

I cite Bhabha, Rosler and Ramaswamy in the spirit of disruption and often discordant renewal that is customarily identified with collage as an artistic practice, per se, and similarly ascribed to practices of counter-mapping in general. As a sub-disciplinary area of the sub-discipline of critical cartography, cartographic art is often called upon to straightforwardly illustrate or support critical positions that are primarily enacted in the form of written discourse. In this register, artworks are instrumentalized for what they can be claimed to show, say, and reveal about cartography itself. While I am also doing this to some extent, I think it is also important to take seriously the commitment argued by Ramaswamy, that

images are not mere illustrations or passive reflections of something already established elsewhere through the vast verbal archives of these modern industrial empires [...] [T]he image is a site where new accounts of empire, the (post)colony, and Europe itself emerge that depart from—even challenge—the more familiar narrative line(s) of nonvisual histories. (Ramaswamy in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 3)

The image is distinct yet deeply involved in nonvisual discourse, then, but not a substitute or a shorthand for the nonvisual. In his discussion of the “cartographic uncanny” in Curtis’s work, Matthew Hart proposes that a collage by Curtis may “replace much wordy theorising about the interpenetration of nations, histories and markets” (Curtis 2017, 45), as though the key function of the artwork is to abridge this “theorising.” This notion of the artwork as shorthand is misguided. The presence of the words “Lake,” “Havasu” and “City,” for example, in *The Thames* (*Section 1*) does not in itself convey to the viewer the relationship that exists between

London and Lake Havasu City, so if it is not already known about by the viewer, the artwork does not reveal it. It does not substitute for a gazetteer, encyclopedia, textbook or Wikipedia.

Rather than misinterpreting the artwork as a source of information, what may be of more critical value in thinking with this work and others is their productive engagement with the broadly abstract modality of cartography, which I refer to as cartographic abstraction.¹⁵ This is the way in which cartographic techniques of depiction—such as projection, symbolization, and scale—are able to give rise to a mode of thought and experience that is somewhere between the concrete and the ideal. Through its images of the world, which are formed using these abstracting techniques, cartography both posits and produces a “geo-coded world” (Pickles 2004)—one which we are able to understand and engage with as though it is a homogeneous space that is regular and objective. Cartographic abstraction, then, is a way of describing these abstracting techniques’ functioning, as well as the outcome of that functioning. Abstraction in this sense takes place outside thought, in the shared practices of depicting and viewing in which we take part as fluent users of maps.

In closing, then, I suggest that the cartographic mode of production of abstractions, specifically of the cartographic view from nowhere, itself undergoes a productive de-structuring in *The Thames*. As Ramaswamy argues, “the image interrupts and intervenes, disturbing the discursive field of colonial and postcolonial studies” (Ramaswamy in Jay and Ramaswamy 2014, 5). In this way, *The Thames* interrupts and intervenes in the discursive field called up by this set of cartographic images. The claim of the view from nowhere to offer a unifying, organising image is disrupted here by the inclusion and appropriation of multiple “views from nowhere” into one newly cacophonous image.

The view from nowhere as a signature form of cartographic visualization may be newly understood, particularly through considering collage, as open to interruptions, new layerings of images and their geographies. Rather than “replacing wordy theorising” and being regarded as existing in order to make specific knowledge claims *about* imperialism-colonialism or *about* history, the cartographic images of *The Thames* perform a visual de-stabilizing of the authoritative claims of the view from nowhere. This de-stabilizing neither rejects nor endorses the terms of viewing from nowhere, but rather seeks to enlarge and disrupt its possibilities.

What is at stake, and what is critically worthwhile, in approaching this particular artwork as well as cartographic art as a growing genre, is not quite what they or it may *reveal* about the functioning of cartographic abstraction. Rather, the cartographic mode of production of abstractions itself undergoes a productive de-structuring and a de-stabilizing in *The Thames*. The cartographic mode of forming the view from nowhere is re-enacted here with a critical orientation towards disruption, defamiliarising, and violence, as against the conventional orientation of non-art cartography towards producing coherence, legibility and interpretative stability. The multiple histories and geographies that are themselves dialectically produced by, and productive of, imperialism-colonialism are here rupturously assimilated into a renewed cartographic formation, the viewpoint of which—from “nowhere”—no longer produces a monolithic coherence, objective knowledge, or an authoritative vision. The altered view from nowhere performed in *The Thames* produces instead a multiple coherence, ambivalent knowledges, and a cartographic vision that shows the “imperial heartland” to be thoroughly co-constituted by its geographical others.

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NOTES

1. In taking this approach to interpreting the artwork, I attempt to acknowledge my own position in the “imperial centre” and understand “positionality” as the idea that “personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world” (Sánchez 2010, 2257).
2. As well as the ocean route, “Northwest Passage” names a small inlet to be found on maps of Lord Howe Island in the south-west Pacific, an unincorporated area of New South Wales, Australia. The “STRAIT OF MALACCA” is a heavily used shipping route lying between the Malay archipelago, Malaysia, and the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. The “Sir Francis Drake Channel” is in the British Virgin Islands, a British overseas territory in the Caribbean, named for the sixteenth-century British navigator, privateer and slave trader Sir Francis Drake. “ORCA BAY” is in southern Alaska, USA.
3. Lake Havasu City is in Arizona, USA, and is symbolically and materially associated with London because it bought and reconstructed London Bridge, designed by John Rennie in the 1830s, when it was replaced with the present bridge in the late 1960s.
4. The full series of ten map sheets can be viewed in sequence at <http://www.laylacurtis.com/work/display/2-collage>, accessed 21 December 2018, and as a combined whole at <https://www.interaliomag.org/audiovisual/layla-curtis>, accessed 21 December 2018. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for bringing this source to my attention.
5. The description given on the artist’s website explains: “This ten-part collage examines place names along the shores of the River Thames, tracing their global namesakes and namegivers and revealing in the process many of the river’s industrial and colonial histories. Initially commissioned for the Thames Festival in 2013, it was exhibited on riverside walkways in front of Tate Modern and by Tower Bridge. The first section of the ten-part collage is reproduced as a limited edition print to coincide with the Bridge exhibition at Museum of London Docklands (commissioned by The Cultureship for Thames Festival, available at <http://www.laylacurtis.com/work/project/42>, accessed 21 December 2018). The exhibition of the work has continued online, and it is largely as an online viewer that I have experienced the work. The collage exists digitally as single images as well as a series, and has been exhibited physically as a series as well as a single, privileged print, and is also on sale in the form of a signed, numbered edition of *Section 1*. I reject the art historical impulse to regard the moment of physical exhibition as definitive or privileged, and attend to the digital exhibition of the work as equally significant and worthy of detailed consideration. The series has been brought together as a “whole” image available to be viewed at <https://www.interaliomag.org/audiovisual/layla-curtis/> when I first began writing about this work, this rendering was not yet available and I printed out the ten collages and glued them together as part of the interpretive process.
6. On the importance of the Port of London as “a nexus of empire,” see Schneer (1999).
7. For an account of the Wallace Line, see Whitmore (1981).
8. The two key accounts I draw on in this section are by Glyn Williams (2002) and Richard Vaughan (1994).

9. Articles available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/americas/2018/02/icebound-northwest-passage-game-changer-180202072318578.html> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/08/09/we-wanted-to-be-early-northwest-passage-adventurers-held-back-by-lingering-ice/?utm_term=.543c57965b7f, both accessed 14 April 2018.
10. For a detailed discussion of the development of aerial photography and its relationships with cartographic modes of depiction from above, see Jeanne Haffner (2013).
11. “Compilation” is a term that already has a particular role in cartographic history, designating a process for creating maps from non-professional and unreliable sources, that was in use particularly during the period of British imperial domination of large parts of Africa from the end of the nineteenth century into the 1940s. For a detailed account see Stone (1984). I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for drawing this important issue to my attention. A full consideration of the wider relationships between this method of compilation, other methods of cartographic production based on survey data, and artistic methods of collage production is beyond the scope of this article and must be reserved for future work. In the present context, I intend the term “compiling” here in the less specific senses of gathering together, blending and merging.
12. As J.B. Harley argues, “[c]olonialism is first signposted in the map margins. Titles make increasing reference to empire and to the possession and bounding of territory; dedications define the social rank of colonial governors; and cartouches, with a parade of national flags, coats of arms, or crowns set above subservient Indians, define the power relations in colonial life. But *the contours of colonial society can also be read between the lines of the maps*. Cartography has become preeminently a record of colonial self-interest. It is an unconscious portrait of how successfully a European colonial society had reproduced itself in the New World, and the maps grant reassurance to settlers by reproducing the symbolic authority and place-names of the Old World” (Harley and Laxton 2001, 46, emphasis added).
13. For an account of collage as a critical practice as well as a response to the domination of twentieth (and twenty-first) century life by the commodity form, see Banash (2013).
14. Thomas Richards has also elaborated the idea of empire itself as “partly a fiction” (1993, 1) whose imagined unity relies more on fantasy than realism.
15. I have discussed cartographic abstraction at length in Reddeman (2018).

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