

Treaty Canoe Welcome October 2013)
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I would like to welcome Alex McKay to these shores, and to say how very pleased I am that he is recreating his important work *Treaty Canoe* here at the University of Kent in Canterbury. This work has had one incarnation in Canada, and its re-making here—very much a project involving public participation—will be a stimulating and fascinating process here.

Alex's formal training includes both an MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1992, and an earlier stint training as a cabinetmaker in NY: his work brings together the visual arts with material practices of making.

He has held Fellowships from the Yale Center for British Art and the Canadian Society for 18th Century Studies, and his works have been installed in some very interesting places internationally, including the Canadian Canoe Museum, the Curve Lake Indian reserve in central Ontario; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, and Tintern Abbey, in Wales.

Alex's work explores the intersections of landscape, place, empire and identity, and especially, as his website states, “the often fraught relationship between the Dominant Euro Settler Culture and First Nations” in Canada. *Treaty Canoe* is a brilliant example of this.

First produced in 1999, *Treaty Canoe* is constructed of texts of actual Canadian treaties with First Nations peoples, transcribed onto linen paper using dip pen and ink as they would have originally been written. The texts form the outer hull of a cedar canoe frame, and together with copper wire, red ribbon recalling bound legal documents and red tape, and birch bark—the actual material from which northeastern canoes were made—forms an astonishing work which is both substantial, weighted by all that history, all the politics implied in its texts, and light enough that when the finished canoe hangs in its display space, it will ride air currents and dance in the breeze.

Treaty Canoe's power lies in its fusion of materiality and sociality. Its materials remind us of the historic processes of colonialism, the problematic meetings of Crown and Aboriginal peoples and the long-term implications of these symbolized by the treaty texts. Its processes of making involve the participation of many people transcribing those texts. Few of us have actually read the treaty texts before. The physical, embodied process of laborious transcription with a dip pen lends itself to reflection about the words used, about the promises made, and about the difference between what was said at the negotiations—in what languages, and how well were they translated?—and what was recorded in legal jargon. As former AFN Grand Chief Ovide Mercredi recently reminded an audience in Oxford, 'there is no word in my language for cede. There is no word in Cree for surrender of land.' Indeed, if you do a basic word cloud for the text of say, treaty 4, it starts with 'aforesaid,' moves along to 'hereinafter,' and ends with 'whereas': a sobering and graphic reminder of how little the parties must have truly understood each other, and how stacked the deck already was against the Aboriginal leaders trying to negotiate.

For those of you with less familiarity with the Canadian treaties, they were instruments by which Aboriginal people were settled on a tiny fraction of their territories in order to make the rest of those territories and the resources included in them available for settlement. Treaties began with formal expressions of alliances with Europeans in the early 18thC and then proceeded more or less westward across what is now Ontario and Manitoba, and then across the western prairies and parkland. During treaty negotiations, Aboriginal leaders attempted to provide for their peoples' future by having the commissioners include in the treaty guarantees to provide food, medicine, education, housing and other basic needs. The treaties are still operational legal documents. They are now administered by the Canadian federal government. Aboriginal people feel that the government has consistently failed to honour aspects of the treaties. Very few non-Aboriginal Canadians have ever read the treaties—they are not well taught in Canadian history lessons at school—and many people assume the treaties are no longer valid. Aboriginal peoples' lives, of course, are affected by the treaties every single day.

There is a powerful force to the physical, embodied processes of making *Treaty Canoe* which lends itself to such reflections. I encourage you to take part in this process, to help create *Treaty Canoe*. There is something about physically shaping the words of the treaty that asks: are you complicit in this? Did you even know this, about the wording of the treaties, what they say? These treaties marginalized First Peoples from their lands and resources; are you content with this? You have seen the effects of that marginalization: what are you going to do about that? Are you going to keep writing these words, or are you going to say something else? This very physical, but also very emotional and social element of the making of *Treaty Canoe* reminds me of Eelco Runia's idea of presence, the process "of being in touch—either literally or figuratively—with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are."

And yet, *Treaty Canoe* does not sink under this weight. Like all well-crafted canoes, it dances. In this case, it will dance in the air, riding the air currents and responding to the movements of visitors. Aboriginal people have not sunk under the weight of history either, at least not in the way that the Treaty commissioners expected they would. *Treaty Canoe* also says: we are still with you. We have not become extinct, as you thought we would. We have not become assimilated, as you thought would be best for us. We remember your words, even if you do not, because we live with them, every single day.

Like all well-crafted canoes, it will hold more people and more baggage than you would think possible. *Treaty Canoe* reminds us that Aboriginal people carry with them their heritage and culture, their difficult histories, and also their incredible joy: this canoe dances, too, just as Aboriginal people have danced through the hard times, into the present, to be themselves, despite everything.

I work with historic objects at the Pitt Rivers Museum that are often thought of by their communities of origin not as simply physical objects, but as animate beings, as having with them the spirits of those who made and used them. I think of *Treaty Canoe* in a similar way. In the world view of Algonquian speakers of NE North America, where birchbark canoes come from, it

is assumed that there are spiritual relationships between living things. We are all related. We are all in this canoe, together, whether we have wanted to be or not. It's up to us to work on those relationships. It's up to us to think about the past, how we have come to where we are now, about the words of the treaties, and about their effects. Aboriginal and settler are bound up in the making of this canoe, in its form and its words and its meanings. There are a lot of spirits in this canoe.

And now, *Treaty Canoe* comes to Britain. Comes home, in a sense. Brings with it the very words and thoughts and intentions of British people, and allows people here to reflect on those—and to reflect on their relationships with Aboriginal people now. England is a symbolic place for Aboriginal people, the locus of the powers they have had to contend with for so many centuries. We have just had the anniversary events in London for the 250th anniversary of the Proclamation of 1763, the document which both acknowledged Aboriginal sovereignty and began to impose British colonial control over North America. This is a very interesting space in which to install *Treaty Canoe*, and to ask people to think about these historic relationships and about the relationships we want to have in the future with Aboriginal people. I hope there might be a comment book near the installation; it would be really interesting to see comments as well from the other installations of *Treaty Canoe*, which included the Canadian Canoe Museum and the Curve Lake Indian Reserve: we might get other kinds of dialogues emerging in these parallel texts. *Treaty Canoe* is a wonderful project, and I congratulate Alex McKay and the University for bringing it here.

I also want to welcome and to introduce tonight's speaker, Coll Thrush, from the Department of History at UBC. There are strong connections between *Treaty Canoe* and Coll's current research project, connections that have to do with embodiment and presence, and what we can learn from these.

Coll's work has focused on the productive tensions between long-held concepts of the civilized

and the savage, and the way these have mapped onto the idea of the city and the idea of “the Native,” who is of course expected to be located in the wilderness rather than in the city. What Coll did, quite brilliantly in his first book, was to challenge not only those dichotomies but the idea of the city as a settler-created space in which Indigenous people were somehow simply tolerated or taboo. *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (2007), linked urban and Indigenous histories through the experiences of the local Duwamish people. It argued that instead of being mutually exclusive, urban and Indigenous histories are in fact mutually constitutive.

That set of ideas has particular resonance in a city within a settler nation. It has even stronger power when considering the city at the heart of the British empire: London. Coll’s current research project involves exploring historic London as a centre for Indigenous people: as an Indigenous city and as a city formed, in part, through the visitations and experiences of Indigenous people who travelled there from what became the settler countries of the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, beginning in 1502. As Kathleen Wilson has said, Britain—but especially England—created a distinct national identity for itself, essentially imagined itself into being, through comparison with the many Others it encountered during the early modern period.¹ We usually think of those encounters as occurring in what became the furthest reaches of Empire. What Coll is doing is examining the encounters that occurred ‘at home,’ at the heart of it all, and what they might mean for our understanding of empire as well as of London.

We are very lucky to have persuaded Coll to come away from his research to talk about this project; he is very much *in medias res*, and has been finding material tokens of the historic presence of Indigenous people all around him in London. Statues, weather vanes, documents,

¹ Wilson, *The Island Race*.

Bille, Mikkel, et al. 2010. *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*. New York: Springer.

Runia, Eelco. 2006. “Presence.” *History and Theory* 45 (1): 1–29.

visual representations, invoices, and maps are the stuff of his exploration, the materials with which he is re-presenting many peoples and their histories—and challenging long-established expectations and assumptions in the process.

Coll's talk is entitled **London Entangled: Indigenous Histories at/of the Heart of Empire**.

Thank you for coming to speak, Coll.

