This paper continues Darnell’s discussion (2004) of a project based at the University of Western Ontario to track the movements of Algonquian (mostly Potawatomi, Ojibwe and Delaware of the historic Three Fires Confederacy) and Iroquoian peoples back and forth between the city of London, Ontario and local reserves. The study deconstructs the rigid image of the “the urban Indian” which is too often taken for granted in the social science literature. There is considerable need to document, particularly for demographers, the flexibility with which actual people move around a territory that encompasses both urban and rural segments, not randomly but in search of exploitable resources. The model postulates that people who move in search of education, employment or social services retain the right to return to their home place, usually keeping in touch while they are away from home through visits and kinship networks. Moreover, we argue that the decision-making strategies of these Algonquian peoples are adapted from traditional subsistence patterns, despite dramatic changes in the kind and location of contemporary resources. Although our preliminary data indicate both complexity and contention in the decisions made, the stories we hear make sense in terms of this theoretical model.

First, some caveats about methodology. We have made no attempt to sample systematically the up to 10,000 Native people living in London at any given moment. Potential research subjects have been identified by personal contacts made through events and service organizations in London and surrounding area. An open-ended life history methodology facilitates narrative linkages by interviewing relatives and friends of subjects and following informal social networks that, for many, substitute for the extended family that used to be present on the reserve. Because many individuals living in the city are interconnected, this interactionally based methodology potentially represents the community as a whole. But it is not a sample in the sociological sense.
The individuals involved in our study cannot be understood independently of their interconnections. Members of families and communities make their residential decisions in a kind of balance or symbiosis. The chain of reasoning across interrelated individuals provides a much more complex and realistic picture of migration and return than the limited story of any given person. Narratives need to be juxtaposed in order to reveal underlying process. People come to the city of London for diverse reasons and remain for variable time spans.

There is no simple way of defining an Aboriginal community in London that isolates it from the rest of the urban population. Intermarriage with non-Native persons or persons of different Native backgrounds is one reason for people to live in the city and raise their children there. We suggest that a community of persons known to each other through face-to-face relationships is defined by patterns of regular social contact accessible through sustained participant-observation fieldwork. The stories of these individuals overlap and intersect. Each narrative fills out the genealogy, locates multiple individuals in terms of present, past and envisioned future residence, and frames residence in terms of biographically unique experiences and decisions.

London contains a number of such local interactional communities whose membership occasionally overlaps but whose members do not necessarily know one another. The imagined community (Anderson 1983), therefore, is considerably larger than the community of known persons (which includes persons known about and therefore tied into the flexible and open-ended social order of kinship, (First) Nation, and home community).

The urban context is not unique in this sense. Reserve communities also include intersecting networks that are at least partially autonomous. To come from the same reserve does not necessarily entail kinship relation or commonality of experience. Different families and factions have differential access to both traditional culture and contemporary opportunities.

Although we aspire to a model that can be generalized to other formerly nomadic peoples who retain traditional values across Canada (and perhaps beyond), there are particularities of our case study – as of any case study based on limited ethnographic investigation – that encourage caution in extending our results. Preliminary interviews suggest, however, that much experience is shared across generations, families and home
places. We listen to stories and realize that we have heard many of their themes before, regardless of surface differences.

There is an absence of opportunities on the reserve, especially for employment. Dan Smoke expresses both the widespread need to choose urban opportunities away from home and the wish to return home:

... the mobility patterns and the alliances that First Nations people build in the modern society [mean that they] have to leave the reserve due to there not being an economy on the reserve. In the same way, in the old days, the people would travel and mobilize where the hunting and gathering and the agriculture were resourceful. This would determine the resources of a location and would determine lengths of stays in territories. So the ... claim that First Nations people are leaving the reserve to find a better life, is untrue. They go in search of a better economy until one is created in their own home, where they can work and develop their own economy. So, this pattern of leaving the reserve is not holding true, when you see so many people returning home to help develop an economy, which can only happen by attracting resources ... The old patterns of our ancestors are very similar to the resource tracing patterns of our present day populations. And ... people are returning home to help develop businesses and resources in their own communities.

People who grow up away from home are separated from much of their own history and identity. At some time during their lives, many will return to their home communities to rediscover what they have missed. Many communities still have elders who have not been sought out by their own children and grandchildren but who can sometimes be persuaded to teach when they are asked. Individuals of mixed Native and non-Native descent, or of mixed Native descent, perhaps more often move through a phase of denying their Aboriginal heritage, only later returning to seek out their roots through relatives and other community members. Although Native identity is certainly constructed and maintained in cities, we argue that access to tradition outweighs residence at a given moment. A life cycle framework is needed to see how Native residential mobility differs from that of other Canadians who relocate from one place to another.

First Nations people living in the city, especially if they lack immediate and ongoing ties to their home place, are largely alone in seeking resolutions of individual and community identity. Native identity in London is not institutionalized, although there are many public spaces in which some groups and individuals habitually meet. The communities
created by these meetings are often temporary, but they stand in for the kinds of relations that were, or should have been, available back home.

The First Nations segment of London's overall population of 330,000 is virtually invisible in a city with a British Empire Loyalist history and diverse immigrant populations. There is no single residential core for Native people, although individuals may gravitate to streets or buildings where they have relatives or other known persons. The institutions that support Native identity remain relatively diffuse. For some, the N’Amerind Friendship Centre provides a place to meet, share resources, and reconstitute community in the urban setting.

Another focal point is Nokee Kwe, a non-governmental organization funded by Human Resources Development Canada. Their services are based on Aboriginal principles and they serve as a catalyst of community and government sponsored events for the First Nations community in London. Although their main focus is on employment and literacy programs for both Natives and non-Natives, Nokee Kwe is widely acknowledged as a sponsor and support agency for “Indian” issues in the city.

At Lohsa is a women’s shelter servicing the community of London and surrounding area (including many of the home places of interest to this project). Their services range from family counselling to workshops on abusive domestic relations and traditional ways of healing. They also offer support programs for residential school survivors. Despite the “services” that these agencies provide, however, the workers (regardless of their actual cultural identity) are perceived as part of the formal “government” regulations. Some programs are directed by non-Native people, despite the foundational emphasis on domestic abuse as it manifests itself in Native communities.

Information about events and people's activities is provided by the Smoke Signals program run through the University of Western Ontario radio station for the last 15 years by Dan Smoke (Seneca) and his wife Mary Lou Smoke (Ojibwe). The Smokes recapitulate the contrast between the Anishinaabe and Hodenosaunee traditions of southwestern Ontario. Both are active in Native-oriented organizations and institutions in the area. Their program also attempts to provide accurate and inclusive information for non-Native as well as Native residents of London.

There seems to be some at least passive resistance to formalizing institutional frameworks for the maintenance of Native identity in the
city. Traditional Algonquian cultures, of course, maintained social cohesion through less formal mechanisms than did European settler descendants. There is also a widespread disinclination to develop programs and institutions exclusive to Native members or clients. Jackie, for example, insists that as long as anyone has a problem like alcoholism or domestic abuse, she/he should be eligible for whatever resources are available in the city or region. She wants to avoid discrimination based on the public perception that only Native people have such problems. Her sense of community in the city is based on a shifting personal network of family ties. This is no one else’s business, certainly not an institution’s that might pass judgment on her decisions or the circumstances of her life.

The urgency of constituting an urban community may be mitigated, for many individuals, by the proximity of a number of reserves to the city. Oneida, Chippewas-of-the-Thames, and Muncey (Delaware) are virtually at the city limits. Sarnia, Kettle and Stony Point, Stoney Point, and Walpole Island are among the nearby Algonquian reserves from which commuting is possible despite the vagaries of weather and competing family responsibilities. Although this means that many people choose to live at home and come into the city on a non-resident basis, it also entails a resident reserve population much of which is absent part of the time. Regardless of the choice, it is on the one hand possible to function in both places simultaneously, but on the other hand the stress of doing so is considerable for many individuals. First Nations university students, for example, often have family and community responsibilities at home and are constantly torn between conflicting commitments.

Further tensions arise from scarcity of resources on local reserves, especially housing, and especially for people whose Aboriginal status has been reclaimed since the C-31 revision of the Indian Act in 1985. If everyone who had the right to come home were to do so, difficulties of resource availability would be compounded. Yet those who live nearby but not at home remain in an ambivalent position to exercise their rights of citizenship, e.g., voting in band council elections (a right affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in Corbiere vs. Canada, 1999).

Despite these complexities that must be factored into individual and family decisions about where to live at a given moment, life history interviews rapidly produce what Darnell (1994) has called “generic narratives.” That is, individuals do not stress what is unique in their stories.
Rather, they see themselves as functioning within a network of kin and community in which whole generations have shared similar though of course not identical experiences. This sense of experiential solidarity is most evident in the memory and sharing of residential school traumas. Residential school narratives resonate across generation, home community, and particular school. Loss of language has resulted in failure to pass on traditional knowledge. Parenting and life skills have not been learned, in a legacy that persists across new generations. For many, the primary goal is to stop the cycle of abuse in their own families.

Insofar as narratives are generic, we expected to hear a limited number of stories reflecting the decisions that must be made by everyone who moves between city and reserve. Our study population works for Aboriginal agencies and/or belongs to the London Native community. Manzano Munguia contacts them on recommendation of consultants already known within the community and its constituent social networks. Interviews are being conducted quite informally in accordance with participants’ comfort level and openness about their experience. For instance, in the participant’s home, volunteer centre, at Aboriginal feasts and/or community gatherings and in public spaces (e.g., cafes, restaurants, or parks). Questions about genealogy and life history are open-ended, with an emphasis on agency and decision-making intended to operationalize the “accordion” model of Algonquian social organization (Darnell 1998).

Already we have begun to hear such a resonance across stories, not based on statistics but on experience. Although the majority of our initial informants were women, many of them young, an equal proportion of female and male informants were interviewed (n=7). They were between the ages of 45 and 60 years, single or living in common law, mostly with one child, renting the unit where they live. Most of these individuals have lived in an urban area for 10-15 years. Only one male respondent has returned to live on his home reserve since the start of the project. All of the interviewees are the first generation of their families to leave the reserve and start a new life in London. However, they return and visit their extended family or friends on their respective reserve, often for powwows, feasts, birthdays, funerals, or other formally marked occasions.

Ultimately, we hope to interview multiple members of the same extended families, in an effort to clarify the standpoints that arise from age, gender, occupation, education, etc. We emphasize, however, that any
speaker talking about her/his own residential decisions over time will clarify simultaneously the location and choices of her/his relatives and other known community members.

Richie’s life story illustrates the inter-generational parameters of decision-making:

I grew up in Upper New York State on Onondaga Reservation ... My father was a niagara pit [worker], my mother was a nurse, and we moved wherever my father was employed. So we moved around a lot ... certainly in New York State. And then ... my father was an alcoholic so my mother you know had a hard time with that ... I grew up with that ... I was the eldest of four children and ahh ... I spent the first six years of my life moving from place to place as my father [tried to] find work and was trying to deal with his drinking problem. Well, he promised my mother that he was going to quit drinking if we went back home, if he was able to bring his family back home. Originally they both came from the Six Nations reserve in Brantford, Ontario. And he said that if we all went back to Six Nations he will quit drinking. Ah ... through the first six years of my life the most happiest times of my life was when my grandmother and grandfather from my mother[’s] side, my maternal grandfather and grandmother will come and visit us†... And really fond times with them, they will always come, they will always be very, so happy, and fond loving. And my grandmother loved ice cream, we called her Big Grandma because she was big and it was fun being with her and I loved sitting over her lap and talking to her and listening to her. So that was the ... I had, you know, that was like the kind of dark side of my father’s drinking†... the violence and the good side of my grandmother[’s] visits ... Some of the places we lived at I can’t imagine the name now but they were so short and then leave, because [of] my father[’s] jobs we had to leave fast and we had to move into another house. So that was kind of hard for me, because I did not make a lot of friends. I did have a good set of friends in Eastern New York who we are friends till this day. Both my mother and father were good friends of their mother and father and then they had children our age and they made us children four kids and we had a good time, we played with each other. So, we did all what I call ‘the geographical cure’ for my father[’s] alcoholism and we move back to Canada. We move back up ... We moved to Canada. My grandmother at that time lived in ah ... for the first six years of my life ... I have memory of going to see her in Buffalo, New York ... and then she moved from Buffalo back to Six Nations. So by the time we move back to Six Nations when I was six years old in 1950, my grandma was living back on Six Nations reserve. We moved back to Six Nations reserve.

Now my father was out of work. He work for maybe 8 months at a place, and then he will not [be] working again, because now he was in
a company of his brothers. He was one of twelve brothers, and their mother, and they were all rough and hard drinking men. My mother was a single child, only child, and so, her parents really heaped a lot of love on us their grandchildren. And that’s why till this day those are the best memories I have of growing up here. I stayed at this homestead from 1960 to 1970. For ten years ... we did not have running water or hydro, because my mother insisted and appealed to the council that we needed to have hydro, we need to have a plumbing system, we need to have a washroom. But we never did. We had to leave the reserve. We saw the hydro installed but we did not have plumbing. I did not care cutting the wood, carrying the wood, the wood was cleaned up. But we left the reserve.

Richie is explicit about the consequences for his learning about his Native identity as a result of these residential moves:

I remember I had fun because I will go and visit my relatives and my cousins who were my age and played with them ... I learned about the culture through my grandmother from my mother’s side, my grandmother was the only child and her mother was a hereditary clan mother of the Seneca Nation Deer Clan ... So I remember going to the Long House and I enjoyed going but I did not understand what was happening and they will explain it to me, because I did not understand the language.

My mother was traditional but she thought that assimilation was the way to go. So that was kind of what she instill in us children to go and get an education, get a good paying job, we need to have a big and nice good house but the only way to get that is by getting a good education. So that was instilled on me, I really internalized that. But at the same time, living with my grandmother, I learned about the land, and living so happy and profoundly ... to love the land that living the life that she was living: planting, tanning, harvesting, picking cucumbers, tomatoes, and I lived the benefits.

So there are multiple answers to our inquiry about why people leave the reserve and how we identify the moments of decision-making within the life histories. As a child, Richie lived in multiple settings closely intertwined with his father’s job and drinking problems. Moreover, his grandparents played an important role in his father’s decision to move back to his “home” in an effort to cure his alcoholism. Home was a different sort of place for his father, and by extension for Richie, a safe place where problems of the outside world could be addressed with the support of family and community. The support system gave him access to his grandparents and thus to traditional knowledge (although his grandmother also
moved away from the reserve for some time). The recurrent pattern within such moments of decision resides precisely in this context of "looking for work," "better opportunities," "escaping from the alcohol or a drinking problem," "escaping from abusive situations" or "getting education."

In the following interview excerpts, we expand this idea of the persistence of nomadic patterns among contemporary First Nations populations. A common element in our life histories begins with the "personal decision" of "leaving the reserve" and "moving to London." Anecdote becomes generalization with repetition across individuals and the details of their personal experience. As Joe told us:

My dad had to work in the city and while I was a child we moved back and forth from the city to the rez ... We lived a few minutes from home ... It was almost every weekend going back to see my family. So I grew up pretty much in both places. Now I am living in London until I finish my education but I used to live on reserve for two years before I came here and I go back there almost every weekend.

For others, the reserve is the place to escape from. Sandy explained:

I had to "smarten up" ... to leave and stay away from the alcohol and drugs ... Coming to London was my only way to start a new life ... When I was a child, my parents moved from one place to another ... You see, my father was a preacher and we had to move where he had a job ... But we lived on reserve while I was a teenager. Then I had to move with my child for a better life.

Whether it is due to a lack of opportunities or to improve their sense of well-being, many First Nations people leave the reserve. We can think of these moments of decision-making as multiple, complex and related to crises through which individuals contest their future. People describe their decisions as things they "had to do." Our informants frequently mentioned moments of crisis involving but not limited to: lack of jobs, lack of training or post-secondary education, lack of housing, stopping abusive relationships, ending alcohol or drug abuse, avoiding poverty, and providing a better future for their children.

For some, the feelings are more ambivalent. Stephanie emphasizes that the city is not always as positive as it seems from the reserve:

Everybody wants to get out of the reserve. Everybody wants to leave ... like to the bigger cities ... because they don't know what it is like to live in the city ... They just want to know what it is like to meet
new people after living in a community where you know everybody but then eventually after you’ve done that you back to the reserve.

Stephanie misses the reserve when she is away from home:

I missed how quiet it was [the reserve] because it was louder in the city, and ... it took a while to get used to that. And ah ... because back home ... when you mm are like in my reserve ... there’s trains, like that’s the only noise you hear but it’s like no fire trucks and police cars or stuff like that. So there are just different noises that you have to get used to. And I noticed that whenever I will hear that I’ll get really very noisy and I’ll go right outside to see “what’s going on,” you know ... cause whenever something happens on reserve everyone’s like “what’s going on?”, you know, ‘cause that’s just rare. So I’m all used to that now ... or like the fires ... We used to have a fire like every night on the weekends ... and in the city you have to have a grill, you can’t have open pits.

Education is one of the most significant reasons that people leave home. Yet this too is ambivalent. Stephanie clarifies her experience of moving back and forth:

Well, everybody on my reserve went to school in the city [Sarnia]. The only time that we went to school on the reserve was for daycare and pre-school, but that’s it. Once you get into the grade school you are in the city ... going to school in the city was OK ... It was hard to get used to it because there were so many other kids ... But all the Indians hang out together in the public school and high school, like we had our city bands, and then we had our bands on the reserve, but it was always ... always Indians hanging out together ... ’specially in high school.

For Brenda, the school experiences away from home were coloured by racism. When she first moved to London, to live with an older sister after the death of her mother:

For the first months my sister taught me what to do, but after that I was very rebellious. I did not want to go to school and I did not want to be told what to do ... I did not know what it was to be different ... I did not experience racism before until I went to school in London. I was 15 [when] I left the reserve and I saw and felt the difference between my world and the other world. It was tough but I got used to it.

One never really goes away from home. Brenda explains that she left her reserve when she was 15 and has not lived there since. She visits often but does not intend to move back there to live. Yet her statement of where she belongs is clear:
Walpole Island is and will always be my home ... That's the place I come from ... When Native people talk about home, we know that they are talking about their reserve. We know that is the place where home is ... where they come and we will always ask [people we meet] where is home?

Family is the core of this identity. When families are large, as most are, there is always experience of death, illness, loss, and "sometimes happiness." But family members remain connected even when their relationships are not activated often. It depends on the circumstances. Brenda continues:

I have 400 and some relatives ... and people don't understand the connections that we have ... I don't know everyone but I know they are out there. We know where we come from and that we are a big family. We get together when we have weddings, birthdays or when someone dies. We know that.

After her mother died when she was 12, Brenda was raised by her older sisters. They kept the family together so she could grow up with her siblings. "I am very grateful to my sister because I don't know how we survived without a mother and father." Her sisters did not have adult parenting skills, but they did their best, and she appreciates that now. But she still does not understand why more distant relatives did not intervene. Despite the centring of her identity on the reserve, she does not want to go home permanently:

I am not going back home, it's not easy to go back. I just see it when I go and visit my relatives down there. They are always mad or complaining about something, someone did or said something ... They are not happy with their life. I don't want to live in a place like that. There is a lot of sickness over there [people angry and hurt]. I am like the mediator among my family members, they call me if they need to know about someone they don't talk to any more. I am like the point of reference, and I think it is because of my position of living outside the reserve and at the same time so close to home.

Many feel that they cannot improve their personal life and remain at home. Lisa left her husband's reserve in Alberta in order to seek a better life for her children and herself and to escape an abusive relationship with her husband. A decisive factor in Lisa's decision to reside in London was that one of her relatives lived in this city and she had (re-)established communication with her. Within the nuclear or extended family there is always "knowledge of the whereabouts" of relatives who might provide
resources in moving around to better one’s circumstances. For these people, this may be a nomadic strategy designed to cope with variable resource availability (even though kin networks obviously affect migration and relocation decisions during moments of crisis in other communities as well).

The residence of any given Aboriginal person at a particular moment is contingent on specific circumstances and may change quite rapidly as circumstances change. But the ties that may again expand the accordion remain even at the point of maximum dispersal (Darnell 1998). John explains how this worked in his life experience:

I was always on the move ... My dad used to be a carpenter ... Sure he did [a] good fine job ... [We] were constantly moving because my dad had to look for a good income eh ... Most of the time I lived in cities, not only in London, but also in the surrounding cities where jobs were available. But it was like not being away from home [the reserve], because my parents always brought us [4 brothers] back to our home ... Yeah ... in the rez, we went many times to the old Long House and we learned who we were, the traditional ways that our forefathers told our ancestors to pass it on to us and therefore, we always felt like not far but closer to our family in community.

Leaving the reserve [home] does not mean that people cease to be Indians or that they stop learning traditional ways. Because many people move back and forth regularly, children who live in the city often retain access to family and community socialization processes. Maintaining such contact is itself one of the reasons people choose to live where they do and try to maximize the resources of both city and reserve.

In our generic narratives experiential solidarity does not involve a sense of permanency or “belonging” while living in urban centres. Rather, there is a “sense” that the urban residence is temporary, just as it was for parents or grandparents who “moved” from the rez. There is substantial continuity to the experience of mobility. Closeness to the reserve is not an objective distance but a perceived ease of access to “home.” Death of immediate relatives, circumstances in which the individual leaves, and the intensity of ongoing ties to the reserve all influence how close people feel to “home.”

Kinship ties and ownership of a vehicle for transportation influence the frequency with which it is possible to move back and forth between city and reserve, whether for long-term residence or visiting. Stephanie, for example, could not imagine how someone from a distant reserve “sur-
vived” in the city: “I had my own car and I was only like a ten minute drive away from the reserve so it wasn’t that bad. But I can’t imagine how someone can survive if they live far away from home.” For her, urban residence is only sustainable because it does not cut her off entirely from her nearby home.

These narratives problematize the appropriateness of permanence of residence as an index of the strategies people actually use to decide where they will live at a given moment (Darnell 2004). We have identified a recurrent discourse of how Algonquians define “home” or position themselves in relation to home every time they go to their reserve, “visit” their relatives and significant others, participate in community activities and/or traditional teachings. Hence, neither the reserve nor the city represents a permanent residence for Native people who struggle to subsist in both worlds.

Lisa, from Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, explains the repetitive nature of her experience:

I’ve been moving from one place to another ... My husband was from another reserve in Alberta and I moved there, then we split and I decided to move back [to her home reserve] with my children and again I moved to London to find a job ... always moving in and moving out.

We suggest that contemporary Aboriginal people are not bounded by the spatial constraints dictated by the legal and governmental regulations of mainstream Canada. Instead, the nomadic pattern developed over millennia has persisted and been adapted to new circumstances even in the face of intensive externally imposed pressures toward assimilation. Hence, it is only recently that the government of Canada has recognized the particular needs of Aboriginal people who live in cities and do not cease to be Aboriginal. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples cites “the high level of mobility that the Aboriginal population practices [which] represents a challenge to Native and non-Native organizations that plan and implement programs in education, social services, housing and health care in urban areas” (Canada 1996). Our data suggest that geographic contiguity and in situ residence are not necessary correlates of Aboriginal citizenship.

Indeed, the categories of urban and rural/reserve Indian may be highly misleading in reflecting the experience and decision-making of our
consultants as expressed in their life history narratives. These categories have been imposed arbitrarily on Aboriginal people and fail to characterize their nomadic experience and livelihood. John expresses a widespread strategy:

I have the best of both worlds of people who have their community [reserve] ... and in the city ... I know how to move around and I like it. But first you need to know your people (traditional teachings) and then go out.

John’s comment illustrates the rationality of the nomadic strategy for maintaining Indian identity despite frequent movement and urban residence. The advice to “know your people and then go out” captures the need to retain a place in the home community as part of the transitional position of moving from the home on the reserve to the city. Those who leave without such certainty of where they belong often report protracted struggles to find their way home; many are embarrassed to return until they have achieved their goals. Others find that they have built a new life in the city and will return only temporarily. In all cases, however, nomadic patterns are embedded in community identity and enhance the survival of kinship groups through the active decision-making of their members.

REFERENCES


