For several years now, I have been attempting to think ethnographically about Canadian national identity. The first stage of the argument defined Canada, or at least Anglophone Canada, as an intersection of standpoints that together constituted something larger than the sum of their parts (Darnell 2000). From my location in the heart of British Empire Loyalist country, the Anglo-Saxon values placed on moderation and reasonable compromise were captured effectively by the image of the Canadian chicken crossing the road to get to the middle. This model of what John Ralston Saul has called "civic" nationalism (Saul et al. 2002) easily incorporates Canadian multiculturalism policies of immigrants maintaining their heterogeneous cultural mosaics within a benign albeit somewhat paternalistic governmental umbrella of Canadian Confederation. This perspective also fits well with the experience of my twenty-one years on the Prairies, where the official bilingualism of French and English founding nations was met with distinct skepticism.

In this initial phase of theorizing, however, I was actually more interested in the how the First Nations might be understood as a third founding nation with considerable influence in mediating the uneasy confluence of the English and French settler nations. Following a train of thought suggested by John Ralston Saul (1997), I mused that the First Nations, whether accurately characterized in public discourse or not, had come to occupy a substantial position in the balance of forces that maintained Confederation. British North America, then, differs from Europe in great part because of the Aboriginal presence (cf. Philip Deloria’s 1998 discussion of “playing Indian” as the core of American New World identity). Saul goes on to discuss distinctive features (or “mythological propositions”) of Canadian identity that he believes come from, or at least are consistent with, Aboriginal traditions: for example, animism, balance, oral tradition, nomadism.

That these distinctive features are mythological is crucially important. Any national identity is based necessarily on what Benedict Ander-
son (1983) has called "imagined community," the ability of people to envision themselves as part of an entity alongside others who are not and will never be known persons. The question then becomes: how many standpoints toward being Canadian, or not, must we include in order to have some confidence in having defined the entity calling itself Canada? It's rather like the old ditty about the six blind men of Hindustan examining various parts of the anatomy of an elephant, each insisting that his [sic] version was the only "true" one. If the public discourse surrounding Canadian national identity is not to bog down in cross-cultural mis-communication, then the standpoints of each of the blind men must enter into some sort of dialogue; more simply, they must talk to each other. This is where the academic models meet the public discourse. We, anthropologists and linguists, but also the social sciences more generally, have the tools to recognize when parties to a discourse are not speaking about the same things and thus mishear one another's arguments. Perhaps we can redirect the debate.

The first need, at least given the focus of my own scholarship and fieldwork, has been to define that discourse so as to include the First Nations. This view of three founding nations, each needing to remain in balance with the others, is, I believe, becoming more common -- although its implications, both conceptual and pragmatic, remain to be explored. For example, the first three LaFontaine-Baldwin Lectures, recently published with the subtitle "A dialogue on democracy in Canada" (Saul et al. 2002), present Saul speaking from the standpoint of Anglophone Canada, Alain Dubuc speaking for Quebec in its relationship to Canada, and Georges Erasmus, former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, co-chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and currently president of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, representing the all-too-frequently muffled voices of the First Nations. The "democracy" of the title is envisioned by all three as a multiplex tolerance for diversity rather than as a narrowly defined equality of the three historically prior contributors to Canadian national identity.

Erasmus is perhaps the most pessimistic of the three, emphasizing cross-cultural mis-communication (although he does not use the term) and highlighting the need for effective translation in the "discourse" among cultures within Canada (Saul et al. 2002:101). The most urgent need is to search out "language that expresses Aboriginal perspectives
and *also* [emphasis mine] connects with the aspirations of a wide spectrum of Canadians” (Saul et al. 2002:102). That is, Erasmus, like Dubuc and Saul, is interested in the often turbulent relationship of Canada’s constituent communities rather than in their artificially isolated separateness. But herein lies the rub. What is the nature of the gulf between the First Nations and the rest of Canada? Is it unitary? How might we surmount it?

In the second stage of my argument (Darnell 2002), based on fieldwork and language study in rural Quebec, I suggested that the First Nations share with the Province of Quebec a notion of a “nation” understood as “a people” rather than as a bureaucratic organization. While Anglophone Canada superciliously envisions Canada as encompassing the diversity of Quebec and the First Nations alike, with equality of provinces, regions and cultural traditions as its primary desideratum, the recipients of this unwanted largesse are left in seething frustration engendered by the unintelligibility of their aspirations to hold, and govern, a territory coterminous with their sense of nation-ness. For Anglophone Canada, according to Saul, responsible government does not require the sharing of values; it merely provides and defends a civic framework within which other senses of personal and communal identity may persist parallel to, but not encompassed structurally by, the nation-state. The result of these incommensurable assumptions is more mis-communication, usually operating below the level of political consciousness.

Nonetheless, I assume that the common features of the Amerindian and Quebecois positions do not necessarily draw the two groups into solidarity based on their grounds of argument. Because of the asymmetrical relations of power and the enormous differences of scale between them, they are subject to quite different consequences of their similar senses of “nation.” They are more often threatened than united in their opposition to the dominant Anglophone national imaginary.

In this context, I want to explore the redefinitions necessary to define the First Nations differently, to redirect the public discourse in a more inclusive fashion. Erasmus has suggested three areas: first, he wants to talk less about Aboriginal rights and more about reconfiguring the relationships among “peoples” constituting the Canadian nation-state; secondly, he wants to move from a discourse about “the Indian problem” to one of “vigorous capacity” (Saul et al. 2002:103); thirdly, he envisions
the reframing of individual citizenship in terms of nations (in the sense discussed above) within the nation-state.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, reporting in 1996 and itself an exercise in First Nations-oriented reflexivity about Canadian national identity (Darnell 2002), emphasizes that mutual trust has to be reestablished between Canada and its First Nations. For Erasmus, such a commitment involves historic restitution (e.g., for residential school abuses), ceremonial respect for the relationship (e.g., through the Aboriginal treaty-making forms adopted by European newcomers) and the establishment of legal and political institutions to support the contemporary and future development of the First Nations within Canada (Saul et al. 2002:106-107).

The emphasis on trust and relationship rests on Aboriginal values intended to establish and sustain the ongoing interactions of cultures. This is one of the places where the treaty logic breaks down into miscommunication. European signatories to treaties wanted to extinguish Aboriginal rights in land and to settle the matter for all time. Aboriginal peoples, in contrast, assumed that both parties to the treaties would continue to hold rights in the land and its resources, indefinitely. That is, no closure was intended. Contemporary policies of resource co-management, most common in British Columbia and the Maritimes, are much more easily reconciled with traditional forms of Aboriginal governance. Despite broad public support for such issues across the country (evidenced, for example, in the Meech Lake Dis-Accord), the public discourse, particularly in the media, remains contentious at best. One cannot easily envision fishery co-management at Burnt Church. Relationship, whatever the ideal, is not in the forefront of such confrontations. The likelihood of social cohesion displacing conflict is slight, at least in the short term.

Let us now turn to Erasmus's third requirement, for First Nations institutional infrastructure. I can do little more here than suggest some of the parameters:

The RCAP model for self-government implicitly imagined a parallel to municipal government, a local form dependent on the contiguous boundaries of First Nations territories. According to this logic, some First Nations would be able to move quite rapidly toward self-government, whereas others would be excluded by their small numbers or contemporary dispersion. Nunavut is easy, as is the fairly continuous distribution of
Cree, Ojibwe and Dene peoples across Canada. It seems to me, however, that the inequities of equating geographical continuity with Aboriginal citizenship are substantial. The exclusion of the more than half of Canada's Aboriginal people who live off-Reserve is too high a cost. The concern is not exclusively theoretical. The Nisga'a Agreement provides a useful precedent for greater inclusiveness because its definitions of citizenship attempt to incorporate Aboriginal citizens living in southern urban areas.

I believe that Aboriginal cultures, particularly those with formerly hunting and gathering traditions, are pre-adapted to what we might call a nomadic cultural politics. In order to see how these traditions of nomadism persist into the present, however, we need to look more carefully at what it means to be nomadic. If access to and rapid change in information is indeed the defining characteristic of the so-called "postmodern condition" (recalling that Lyotard's book of that title was written at the behest of the Quebec government), then the concrete practices of obtaining and sharing "information" that recur in First Nations organizations may serve as its index. The flow of information makes it clear that Reserves are not bounded or isolated. Having spent some time tracing the use of the word "information" in meetings with First Nations colleagues over the last couple of years, I am convinced it functions as a key technical term. People have access to "information" or situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) because of their unique standpoints. These are, by definition, local. Only by combining what is known to each individual can an overview be attained. Then and only then is any given individual in an informed position to pick and choose a position – and attempt to negotiate consensus with others who have shared information in the expectation that consensus is desirable.

Both in its localism and in its continuous movement, this is a nomadic strategy. Those theorists who consider globalization inevitable and resistance to it futile have misconstrued the nature of nomad relationships to land. Far from being "backward, outmoded and essentialist" (Turgeon 2002), the fierce determination of First Nations people to remain localized on what remains of their ancestral homelands is the very groundwork from which they can participate in larger networks of interaction.
Hugh Brody’s recent book *The other side of Eden* (2000) reverses the usual assumption that farmers are settled, whereas hunters are not tied to particular lands. The tragedies of forced relocation in the Canadian north remind us that all chunks of ice are not the same. Inuit starved after forced relocation because they did not know how to live off the land in their new homes. Hunters, Brody argues, are utterly dependent on the their knowledge of the land. Because they move around on that known land, moreover, their technology must be one of knowledge (or localized information) rather than of artifacts (Ridington 1988). Extended kinship networks provide an effective mechanism for learning about new lands under emergency or stress conditions. Without such sharing of information, the localizing strategies of hunting economies would not be viable.

Farmers, in contrast, are dependent on tools and fences. They shape the land rather than adapting to its local characteristics. And when the land is farmed out, they move on, imposing their structures on other lands. Their localisms are, at least relatively, interchangeable. There has to be land, but it does not matter so much *which* land.

I find useful here the “nomadology” of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). Because their prototypical nomads are Asian hordes, they focus on a nomadic (and often mercenary) “war machine” in relation to settled states. But the distinction they make between “arborescent” and “rhizomatic” structures of organization seems to me to capture the tensile strength of the recently nomadic as opposed to the brittle rigidity of the settled mainstream. A healthy society requires a rhizomatic underbelly, Deleuze and Guattari argue, although that streak of anti-structure must always remain at the margins. To become majority is to buy into linear (bureaucratic) order. It is the going back and forth that maintains the vitality of a rhizomatic nomadism, rather than the usually unsuccessful effort to create a rigidly arborescent Aboriginal tradition parallel to that of the mainstream.

Deleuze and Guattari have drawn their distinction far beyond subsistence strategies. Former hunters continue to think in terms of moving among available resources to maximize food and sociality. “Hanging out at the lake,” as Michael Asch (personal communication) describes the sociability of Dene summers in the Mackenzie Delta, is part of a nomadic alternation that structures all of everyday life, not just or perhaps even primarily subsistence.
When people stop hunting, as most of the Ojibwe, Potawatomi and Delaware of southwestern Ontario have done, they do not cease to be Native people and they do not cease to think nomadically. Given that half of Canada’s Native people now live off-Reserve, it is crucial that our public discourse move beyond implicit assumptions of assimilation. Aboriginality is a way of thinking and acting as well as a claim to special status under Canadian Confederation.

Movement back and forth between Reserve and city is a persistent nomadic strategy, familiar to anyone who has followed individual Algonquian lives over a period of time. People in active middle life move to the city, sometimes leaving their children in the home place with grandparents. These ostensibly urban people often move back home when they retire. Children who have never lived on the Reserve are said to “belong” there. The population of a Reserve community quadruples when there is a wedding or a funeral; almost everybody who comes is thought to be of that place. A conventional census, because it deals with populations as aggregates rather than individuals, cannot possibly capture these nomadic identities. Focus on the strategic agency of individuals and the interconnected decisions of families over time rapidly demonstrates that the urban population of a given area may remain stable in numbers but that they are not always the same individuals. Extended families share the responsibilities of children and subsistence in ways that our methods of describing aggregates populations cannot capture. The need, therefore, is for qualitative research that records the details on which decisions are made, from the points of view of all those whose decisions are interconnected.

What we need, therefore, is systematic documentation in life histories and genealogies. London, Ontario, provides an ideal test site for such a mapping project. Its 10,000 Native residents mostly come from southwestern Ontario Algonquian and Iroquoian communities, each with about 10,000 people. This project is still in the preliminary planning stages, in conjunction with a nascent First Nations Studies program at the University of Western Ontario and depending heavily on collaboration with the University’s Aboriginal Education and Employment Council. But I believe it will clarify many of the theoretical issues that bedevil our current political impasse between Canada and the First Nations, as well as provide a strategic standpoint from which it makes sense that First Nations persons move comfortably in international fora, especially with
respect to human rights, and see no contradiction between indigeneity and full participation in a global society. One returns to grounded rhizomatic land-based roots – and then one goes out again. (Iroquoians in southwestern Ontario, who lack a nomadic tradition in the past, are more likely to settle permanently in small towns not far from their home Reserve. They are less likely to move directly from Reserve to a large urban setting, a contrast in essential cultural values and practices which has not emerged from the few available demographic studies of so-called urban Indians.)

Although Aboriginality is a claim to special status based on descent, membership in the category “Native person” has been and remains contentious. RCAP has insisted on the right of Aboriginal communities to decide who is a member and who is not. Blood quantum, so important in the United States, is rejected as relevant to citizenship. Such matters as community approval, custom adoption, in-marriage, language and culture should be taken as the key variables. This means, of course, that local decisions cannot be “the same” in all jurisdictions. The First Nations are already a plurality among themselves. RCAP privileges Charter rights to equal/equitable treatment of women and of non-Aboriginal citizens within a jurisdiction. Beyond this, decisions are supposed to be a local matter. We might contrast the often locally disruptive consequences of the uniform and externally imposed C-31 revision to the Indian Act in 1985. No account was taken of the difference between people who have always gone back and forth, and thus are already understood to belong to the community, and those who return as strangers to reclaim a newly valued identity. The consequences and the stresses play out distinctly.

One could, of course, talk about the consequences of nomadic self-governance in any number of semantic and pragmatic domains. Let me flag health and wellness as one of the most critical ones. Because underlying premises conflict, we must untangle the persistent miscommunication between bio-medicine and “healing” as the term is used by First Nations peoples today. Premises unfamiliar to the mainstream include:

Balance is at the heart of health and well-being. Well-being is much more than the absence of illness. It is a spiritual and moral state as well as a physical one.

Mind and body are indivisible. The whole human person is involved in well-being or in illness.
Healing is individual and not necessarily explicable in bio-medical terms. One need not stuff a particular illness into a generic diagnostic box.

Family and community are intimately entailed in healing. Balance and well-being cannot be attained without the support of others.

The patient is an active participant in the healing. Balance cannot be restored from outside the individual.

Those who are healed are thereby credentialed to heal (usually with a further discipline which must be acquired through apprenticeship). The illness has given them closeness to the future illnesses of others. Powerful spirits are thought to choose as well as to sustain a healer.

Death is part of the life cycle and is neither avoided nor denied. It is understood that everyone dies and that this is part of the cycle of a well-lived life.

The impact of recognition of such Aboriginal premises on mainstream bio-medicine might very positively redirect our present health care policies, as well as enhance culturally appropriate health care delivery in Aboriginal communities. Some of these premises are counter-intuitive, but others reflect forward-thinking bio-medical research and practice.

Similar policy implications would arise from taking seriously Aboriginal premises about the nature of the individual and her/his relationship to the human community and to the natural world in domains such as education, the legal and justice system, workforce participation, civic political engagement with the mainstream, etc.

Even should internal matters of Aboriginal self-governance and autonomy be resolved, however, we would still have to confront the pejorative entailments of Aboriginality as local groundedness, i.e., the denial of coevalness (Fabian 1983) and the consequent denial of full participation in modernization or globalization. If local boundaries are taken to be fluid, but internal control of the affairs of citizens is firmly entrenched, then full participation in national and transnational affairs becomes unproblematic (regardless of the geographical location of given individuals at a given moment).

I am, however, less than optimistic about the emergence of “the Aboriginal cosmopolitan” – whatever the realities of everyday exemplars, the public discourse has yet to acknowledge the escape of the formerly “savage” from the boundaries of Reserve, museum or history textbook.
Whether based on race/racism, ethnicity or culture, exclusionary assumptions re-surface.

Back in the days when I taught Plains Cree language and culture with various native speakers from northern Alberta, from 1970 to 1985, one of my anthropology colleagues blew a gasket when I reported casually over coffee that my co-teacher and our family’s (adopted) grandmother was in Hawaii. “What’s she doing there?” Disbelief. “People take vacations,” I muttered; “Why not Hawaii?” I implied. He mumbled something quite defensive about how he had never been to Hawaii. I guess he thought that bush Indians like Grandma and Bert did not go to far-away tourist locations, or could not afford the ticket, or something.

At the time, I was simultaneously irritated and amused. In retrospect, this brief incident encapsulates the contemporary Native person in a sticky web of stereotyped meanings having little in common with Clifford Geertz’s holistic and self-fulfilling concept of culture. Our anthropology comes with a lot of baggage. It is much more convenient if our research subjects are static. How can we keep track of them if they insist on running off to Hawaii? Perhaps we still subconsciously and secretly cherish the image of the noble savage whose traditional way of life is no longer viable. We can poke and prod at the remnants and smugly congratulate ourselves that we have contributed to preserving the best that has been thought and said in the world, extending Matthew Arnold’s humanist ideal to encompass all human cultures. I share this aspiration. But I also worry about its implications, both theoretical and humane. Nostalgia may be a safe emotion for the outsider, but it is a stifling prison for the object of encapsulation. Moreover, the stereotype is not accurate.

Contemporary Native people in Canada are performing a variety of identities that are both cosmopolitan and “traditional.” The way many of the people I know use the term “traditional” to describe their values and actions is, I believe, much more sophisticated than the culture theory we have inherited from E.B. Tylor and his successors. Indeed, there are always two sources of our theory, one internal and the other arising from what we learn from or with those we study.

“Tradition” provides a benchmark for evaluating contemporary circumstances and making decisions about how to proceed. It is a moving, evolving process rather than a thing. It keeps changing as the past is constantly reassessed in contemporary terms. It is understood, for example,
that the teachings of an elder are to be mulled over repeatedly during a lifetime and finally integrated with life experience. (Parenthetically, “history” as well as “culture” has this same emergent, interpretive quality.)

There is a school of thought within anthropology that devalues this elusive essence of “tradition,” with its slippery but inherent variability across individuals and communities. The sometimes popular concept of “invented tradition” is self-consciously dismissive of (the validity of) what people say about themselves. To change one’s tradition becomes an act of wilful disregard for a static “Truth” thought to exist in the distant past, thus closed off from contemporary experience. Disrespect aside, though it is reason enough to reject such a stance, “invention” is better considered as a vital and creative process. If we are not prepared to acknowledge that, then we have little chance of understanding the contemporary roles of Aboriginal peoples, in Canada or elsewhere. A public discourse taking tradition as invented cannot break through the impasses of communication that we face.

Algonquianists have an obligation, I believe, to contribute to a more tolerant, inclusive, and effectively communicating public discourse between First Nations and Canada in its various manifestations. For me, the key feature in how we might do that lies in the adaptation of “traditional” forms, particularly those associated with oral tradition, to new technologies which have the potential to produce social cohesion rather than conflict. Most of us have been involved, in one context or another, in innovative projects of collaboration that break down local boundaries, entextualize oral performance for future use and use in other communities, and model interpretive uses of media productions for local agendas. This is Erasmus’s second modest proposal: that we begin with an expectation of “vigorous capacity.”

The exemplars are legion: Aboriginal filmmakers are working with the National Film Board of Canada. The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network builds on the communicative experience facilitated by satellite communications in the North, particularly the Inuit Broadcasting Company. Native-run newspapers directed to a Native audience provide genuinely alternative definitions of “news” (what is reportable) and sociality; readers range from the immediate local area of publications to national and international indigenous persons as well as to those from the mainstream who choose to listen. The Aboriginal value placed on local and
particular social relations produces a curiosity about the local elsewhere that dissolves distance in commonality. Native writers, artists and musicians are reaching both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal publics. Drew Hayden Taylor’s recent film on Native humour across the country and the immense popularity of Tom King’s radio version of Dead Dog Cafe serve to illustrate this richness.

The linguistic text collections (e.g., Ahenakew & Wolfart 1998, Wolfart & Ahenakew 2000) arising from the long-term collaboration between a linguist and an expert speaker of an Algonquian language embody the ability to embrace new technologies within traditional worldviews. The story-tellers chosen are usually monolingual elders deeply embedded in oral traditions. But these elders also value tape recorders, video cameras, and written texts as long as the uses of the resulting materials are clear, and control of the words and images remains in community hands. The audience for these innovations is Native. The mutual trust necessary to place it in a more public discourse is often absent. Intellectual property law does not cover oral tradition. Whoever writes it down can copyright the result. Because of such suspicions of motive and profit, it is increasingly difficult to justify our research, even if it is collaborative. Those of us who are privileged to eavesdrop on communications within a community and its transmission of traditional knowledge have an obligation to share what we have learned with great care to the proper uses of information once it has gone beyond our personal control.

If I have a conclusion, it is perhaps that we live in interesting times. These matters are evolving rapidly. Neither social science theory nor public policy has kept pace. This is the challenge we face, whether in policy or application.

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