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Hamilton's Racalmuto: Immigration, Cultural Identity, and the *Festa del Monte*¹

Sam Migliore

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Introduction

Maria SS del Monte is the patron saint of Racalmuto, Sicily. Each year, the people of Racalmuto celebrate a *festa* in honor of the Madonna del Monte. According to local tradition, this *festa* has a long history—a history that spans over 500 years. This history, however, is not limited to a particular time and place. *La Festa del Monte* is something both historical and current, something of great importance to the Racalmutesi in Sicily, in other parts of Italy, and to the Racalmutesi emigrants around the world. It is also something forward looking. It not only tells us something about the past and people's current feelings and attachments, but also their desires for the future.

For many of the Racalmutesi of Hamilton, Ontario, Maria SS del Monte (and the *festa* celebrated in her honor) has become an important symbol of both their religious faith and their cultural identity. The celebration of the *Festa del Monte* has become a significant means of expressing and maintaining a sense of attachment to one's native or ancestral place of origin. It is one of the means by which the immigrant generation has mapped out a terrain of "belongingness" within their new sociocultural environment, and created a way to celebrate their cultural identity with their children (see Fortier; Orsi; Sturino, "Italians"; Varacalli *et al*). From this point of view, to truly understand oneself and to maintain a sense of dignity and liberty as a Canadian of Racalmutese heritage, it is important to retain the memory of a collective past. As

¹ The research for this paper is based on periodic fieldwork I have conducted in Hamilton (and Racalmuto) over the course of more than 20 years. During this time, I have been fortunate to receive the assistance and support of various individuals and organizations. I wish to sincerely thank all those who have participated in my work, and ask to be excused for any errors or omissions that may be found in the paper. I have tried my best to make this a community-oriented paper. I also wish to acknowledge the support of Kwantlen University College and the SSHRC for research funding.

Leonardo Sciascia, the famous Racalmutese writer, stated in Racalmuto for the inauguration of a painting exhibit titled "Ritratti racalmutesi 800" (on June 27, 1981):

Quando un popolo, un paese, una collettività grande o piccola che sia, non è disposta a perdere la memoria, vuol dire che non è disposta nemmeno a perdere la libertà.²

As a phenomenon that has this type of *meaning* and *significance* for the Racalmutesi, the *Festa del Monte* is a topic worthy of further discussion (see Varacalli). This article is my attempt to unravel some of the details associated with the historical process of creating a new place for oneself and one's children, without losing sight, and memory, of the past.

Historical and Ethnographic Context

Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, has had a history characterized by foreign influence, invasion and domination. When the Greeks arrived in Sicily at approximately 750 B.C., they identified three distinct peoples as occupying the island: the Sikels in the northeast (from the mainland of Italy); the Elymians in the west (from what is today Turkey or the Middle East); and, the Sicans in central Sicily (see Brea; Finley; Correnti, *A Short History*). The Greeks referred to the Sicans as the original peoples of Sicily. Within a relatively short period of time, however, the initial Greek colonies expanded to the point where much of the island became Hellenized (Leighton; Smith & Serrati; De Angelis). Since the 3rd Century B.C., Sicily has come under the control or influence of various peoples—Carthaginians; Romans; Vandals; Byzantines; Arabs; Normans; Swabians; Angevins; the Aragonese; Spaniards; Austrians; and, more recently, mainland Italians (see Ahmad; Correnti, *A Short History*; Finley; both entries for Mack Smith; Norwich; Quatriglio; Runciman). Sicily officially became part of the newly united Italian state under King Vittorio Emanuele II in 1861 (Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily: Modern Sicily, After 1713*; Correnti, *A Short History*).

This extended period of foreign domination, and often exploitation, created severe social and economic problems for the region. Italian unification did not improve conditions in the south, including Sicily. As a result, many southern Italians chose out-migration, and later emigration. Some of the more popular emigration destinations included

² This statement now appears on a plaque in front of the doors to the Racalmuto Town Hall.

Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, and the United States. "Between 1876 and 1915 more than seven million Italians immigrated to the Americas" (Harney 16).

Racalmuto and *La Festa della Madonna del Monte*

Racalmuto is located in a predominantly agricultural area of south-central Sicily.³ It has a population of about 10,000 inhabitants. Today, the town often is referred to as *il paese di Leonardo Sciascia*. Sciascia (1921-1989), through his extraordinary works of literature and political essays, has helped raise Racalmuto's profile on both the Sicilian and the International scene.⁴ The history of the town, however, mirrors the history of Sicily in general.

Although the municipality of Racalmuto officially came into existence around 1232, by order of Emperor Frederick II of Swabia (see Martorana 85; Regione Siciliana 30), the community's roots reach much deeper into the area's historic and prehistoric past. The origins of the community, for example, can be traced to a 9th Century village constructed by the Arabs. The name Racalmuto comes from the Arabic *Rahal Maut*, meaning "dead" or "abandoned" village. The Arabs named the village *Rahal Maut* to signify that it was built on or near the ruins of an archaeological site (Martorana; Messina; Parisi; Regione Siciliana). Within the general vicinity of Racalmuto, a number of archaeological sites or materials have been found dating back to the Sican and Greco-Roman periods. With the Norman conquest of the second half of the 11th Century, various customs and practices were introduced, or re-introduced, to the area—including Christianity as the official religion.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is an important religious figure in Mediterranean countries such as Spain and Italy (see Carroll; Primeggia "La Via Vecchia"; Wolf 294-296). In Sicily, Mary, the *Madonna*, is recognized officially as the patron saint of the island (see Correnti, *Leggende di Sicilia* 71-75).⁵ At a more local level, the people of Racalmuto recognize *Maria SS. del Monte* as their patron saint. According to Racalmutese

³ The area, however, is also known for its salt and, in the past, sulphur mines. The town also serves as a centre of commerce for a number of smaller communities in the vicinity.

⁴ Some of Leonardo Sciascia's writings actually focus, directly or indirectly, on Racalmuto itself – for example, *Le parrocchie di Regalpetra* and *Morte dell'inquisitore*. These two works are published together, in English translation, as *Salt in the Wounds* (1969).

⁵ According to Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum (7-9), this special devotion to Mary may be linked, indirectly, to a much older Earth Mother tradition dating back to the prehistoric period in Sicily. For a discussion of the myth and cult of Mary in the Christian tradition see Warner.

legend, the origins of this devotion to Mary dates back to a set of miracles that took place in the early part of the 16th Century (Martorana; Messina; Migliore, "Religious Symbols"). While on a hunting expedition in North Africa in 1503, Prince Eugenio Gioeni and his companions took refuge from a storm in a nearby cave. In the cave, the first miracle occurred; a mysterious female voice led the party to the discovery of a beautiful statue of the Madonna with child. Prince Gioeni quickly moved to take the statue back to his home in Castronovo, Sicily. To reach Castronovo, however, he and his companions had to travel through Racalmuto. The citizens of Racalmuto were deeply moved by the beauty of the statue, and the holy figure it represented. Count Ercole del Carretto of Racalmuto made every effort to convince Prince Gioeni to allow the statue to remain in Racalmuto. From friendly discussion, the two sides quickly moved to armed conflict over possession of the statue. At that moment, however, the oxen transporting the cart carrying the statue of the Madonna went down on bended knee, while the wheels of the cart sank into the ground. Both sides recognized that a second miracle had just taken place. It was the Madonna herself that made the decision for the statue to remain in Racalmuto. To commemorate the event, the people of Racalmuto built a church on the hill overlooking the town (on the spot where the miracle had taken place), and promised to celebrate a *fiesta* in Mary's honour every year.⁶

Traditionally, the *fiesta* of the *Madonna del Monte* was celebrated in May. Today, the festivities take place on the second weekend of July. This change occurred to provide the Racalmutesi working in other parts of Italy and Europe, as well as other parts of the world, with the opportunity to return to Racalmuto for the *fiesta*. Although the specific activities may vary from year to year, the *fiesta* involves three primary events. On the Friday evening, a statue of the Madonna is transported, as part of a procession, through some of the main streets of the town on a cart drawn by oxen. When the statue arrives at the *piazza*, a group of young people perform a play written by Padre Bonaventura Caruselli (see Caruselli), with some modification by Piero Carbone and others (Carbone, "La Madonna del Monte"). This play re-enacts the arrival of the statue of the Madonna to Racalmuto, and the miracle that allowed the statue to remain in the town. On the Saturday, attention shifts to

⁶ Similar legends can be found in other communities in Sicily (Correnti, "Leggende di Sicilia"), and in other Mediterranean areas of Western Europe (Christian 107). The historical record, however, suggests that the statue was commissioned by the people of Racalmuto from the Gagini family of sculptors in Palermo (Morreale 37-40; Salvo 62-64). The statue was transported by ship from Palermo to Punta Bianca, and then taken overland to Racalmuto. For a history of the *Madonna del Monte* in Racalmuto, see Morreale and Salvo.



Fig. 1. The Arrival, 1503 (Painting, Chiesa della Madonna del Monte, Racalmuto)

three highly decorated floats, in the shape of large candles dedicated to the Madonna. Each of these floats is associated with a particular agricultural society—the *Cicirara* (chick pea producers), the *Ugliulara* (olive oil producers), and the *Burgisi* (independent landowners). In the evening, all three floats are paraded through the main streets of the town. The *ciliu* or candle of the *Burgisi* is decorated with a number of banners or flags depicting the Madonna del Monte. When the float arrives at a particular location near the town *piazza*, unmarried, male members of the agricultural society may attempt to capture the main banner.

The person who captures the banner receives a great deal of attention and prestige. In many respects, he becomes the most eligible bachelor in the town. It becomes the responsibility of this individual (and his family), however, to prepare the new banner for the following year. The *ciliu* is brought to the family home on the appropriate day of the next *fiesta*. A group of drummers announces the beginnings of the festivities, while the local marching band performs as the new banner is officially mounted on the *ciliu*. The mounting of the new banner, the one to be captured in the new competition, tends to draw a large crowd. It is customary for the family to make available drinks, sweets, and snacks for all the visitors who attend to witness the event. It is a costly venture for the individual and his family; a decision to attempt to capture the banner is not made lightly. From year to year, the number of people participating in the struggle to capture the banner can involve as many as 20

individuals, or more. The number of *Burgisi* actually competing for the banner, however, is often no more than two or three individuals – each individual supported by a group of male friends and family members for the struggle.



Fig. 2. Lillo Giangreco
Captures the *Ciliu*
(Racalmuto, 1994)



Fig. 3. *Li Prumisioni* (Racalmuto, 1988)

The Sunday begins with a series of Masses at the *Chiesa de Maria SS. del Monte*. Throughout the course of the year, members of the community may make special requests for favours from, along with specific promises to, the Madonna. These promises (or *prumisioni*) are delivered in spectacular form during the Sunday services of the *festa*. In many cases, the individual (or a family representative) will race a brightly decorated horse up the steep steps leading to the church, and enter the church on horseback to deliver the *prumisioni*. In other cases, an individual (often accompanied or represented by family members) will walk up the steps carrying a large candle or a *prumisioni* as a symbol of their devotion to the Madonna. Later in the evening, a statue of the Madonna is placed on a large float decorated as a ship, and transported as part of a procession through some of the main streets of the town. At the end of the procession, the community celebrates an outdoor Mass, witnessed by thousands of people. The weekend celebrations are also marked by several firework displays.



Fig. 4.
A Celebration
of Faith
(Racalmuto,
1983)

Although the *Festa del Monte* is a religious celebration, it also provides an opportunity for people to engage in various secular activities, entertainment, and family gatherings (see also both entries by Primeggia). The festivities, in fact, are so lively that they attract not only Racalmutesi living in other regions or countries, but also people from neighbouring villages and towns such as Grotte and Milena. In 2003, for the 500th anniversary of the *Festa del Monte*, for example, a small group of young men from Milena walked approximately 10 km to reach Racalmuto as a pilgrimage to the Madonna and to take part in the Sunday festivities.⁷ That same year several hundred Racalmutesi from

⁷ Although many people from Milena may travel to Racalmuto to take part in the festivities (see also Chapman 172), the inhabitants of Robba Bonfigliu (a

Hamilton, Ontario travelled to Racalmuto to show their devotion to Mary, visit with family and friends, and reconnect with the land of their ancestors.

From Racalmuto to Hamilton

Although some individuals travelled to Canada prior to 1900, the first major wave of Italian emigration to the country occurred in the early part of the 20th century. In 1901 there were roughly 11,000 individuals of Italian ethnic origin in all of Canada (Statistics Canada, *Census of Canada, 1901*). This number jumped to over 45,000 by 1911 (Statistics Canada, *Census of Canada, 1911*). The Italian community in Hamilton numbered about 1,500 in 1910 (Weaver 11). This population grew slowly during the period between the two great Wars.

The second major wave of Italian immigration to Canada occurred after the Second World War, as people attempted to escape the social problems and economic hardships of post-war Italy. By 1961, the number of Italians residing in Canada increased to 450,351 (Statistics Canada, *Census of Canada, 1961*). Hamilton, with its wealth of industries, attracted many of these post-war immigrants. By 1961 there were roughly 23,000 Italians in Hamilton. These people came to Canada as part of a process of chain-migration⁸—as emigrants established themselves in particular cities and neighbourhoods, they sponsored and assisted other family members in their efforts to immigrate to and settle in Canada. As a result, Hamilton, and other Canadian (as well as American and Australian) cities, witnessed the rise of transplanted communities from particular towns and regions of Italy (see Bianco; Boissevain; Cronin; Migliore, "Religious Symbols"; Sturino, "Italian Emigration"). In addition to Hamilton, for example, Racalmutese colonies were established in both Buffalo and New York City (Carbone, *Gli amori*).

The 2001 census indicates that there are 67,685 individuals of Italian ethnic origin in metropolitan Hamilton (Statistics Canada, 2001 *Census*). Based on community estimates approximately 25,000 of these individuals are Sicilian Canadian—with at least 95% either born in, or able to trace their ancestry to, Racalmuto.

small hamlet in the Villaggio Garibaldi district of Milena) have a special attachment to the *Madonna del Monte*. At Bonfigliu, in fact, there is a shrine devoted to Maria SS. del Monte, along with a small replica of the statue located in Racalmuto. Recently, Rosalba Pellegrino, Ornella Arnone, and Anna Cassenti put together a CD titled *I canti delle donne di Milena*. The CD includes Paola Tona's performance of "*Maria di Racarmutu*," a song describing the 1503 arrival of the statue of the Madonna in Racalmuto.

⁸ For an early discussion of the concept of chain-migration, see MacDonald and MacDonald.

The Racalmutesi in Hamilton: The Early Years

In the early years of the immigration process, two distinct Italian communities began to develop in Hamilton—one located in the north-central area, by Sherman and Barton Sts., and the other in the vicinity of James and Barton Sts. (see Foster). The community that established itself in the northwest section of the city consisted largely of Racalmutesi. The focal point for this Racalmutese community was a small chapel attached to St. Mary's Cathedral. The community, however, lacked the services of an Italian-speaking priest. To correct the problem, Bishop Dowling invited Rev. Giovanni F. Bonomi to take up residence in Hamilton. Giovanni Bonomi (1882-1958) was born in Italy, and ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1905. He spent two years in Boston with the St. Charles Borromeo Society (Scalabrini) before accepting his new position in Hamilton.⁹ Rev. Bonomi arrived in March of 1908, and immediately began to provide Italian-language services at the St. Mary's chapel (Anonymus; Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton"; *Hamilton Herald*, May 23, 1931).¹⁰ He remained in the city to administer to the needs of the community for the next forty-five years (*The Canadian Register* 21).¹¹

By 1922, the Italian population of the northwest section of the city had increased to such an extent that a separate Roman Catholic Church was established for the community—a community consisting largely of Racalmutesi. A ceremony celebrating the laying of the corner stone for the new structure took place on Sunday, December 17 (*Hamilton Herald*, December 18, 1922). Some of the older Racalmutesi have reported that each Italian family contributed one dollar per month over a period of several years, when the average wage rate was 8-10 cents per hour, to

⁹ Rev. Bonomi was a member of the Missionary Fathers of St. Charles (the Scalabrinians). Bishop J. B. Scalabrini, with the blessing of Pope Leo XIII, established the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles in 1887 to provide religious services to Italian migrants leaving for North America (see Scalabrinians; see also Our Lady of All Souls Church).

¹⁰ Two years later, on August 14, 1910, Rev. Bonomi opened a chapel at St. Ann's School for the Italian community in the north-central area of the city. This small chapel gradually developed into the St. Anthony of Padua Parish (*The Canadian Register* 21, see also Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton" 31). For a general discussion of the development of Italian Canadian parishes in Canada, and their role in community life, see Angelo Principe and Franc Sturino, "Italians".

¹¹ Rev. Bonomi's many contributions to the City of Hamilton were acknowledged formally in 1996, when he was inducted into the Hamilton Gallery of Distinction. His portrait now appears on the wall of distinction at the Hamilton Convention Centre (see Phillips)



Fig. 5
St. Mary's
Cathedral &
Chapel

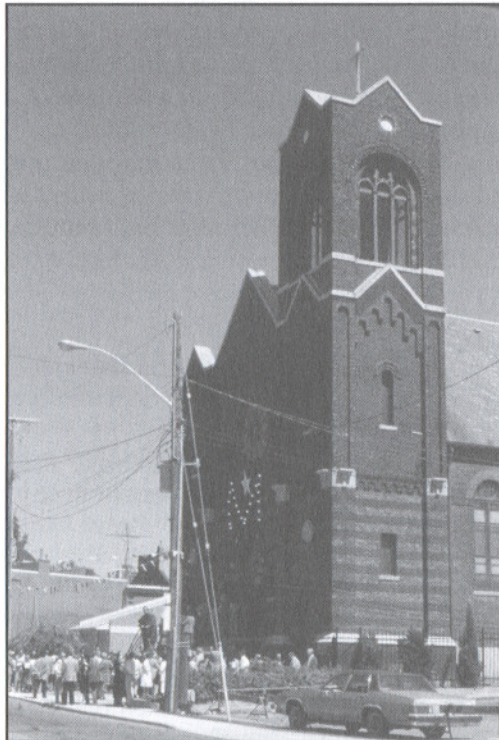


Fig. 6. Our Lady of All Souls' Church]

help finance the construction of the church. The Racalmu-tesi, who also contributed a statue of the Madonna to the church, wanted the structure to be named the *Chiesa di Maria SS. del Monte*. To avoid conflict with the other Italian groups in the area, however, Rev. Bonomi named it the *Church of Our Lady of All Souls*. The church doors officially opened on October 21, 1923 (see Anonymous). Giuseppe Agro, the Racalmutese artist who immigrated to Hamilton in the late 1940s, created the beautiful paintings now found in the church.

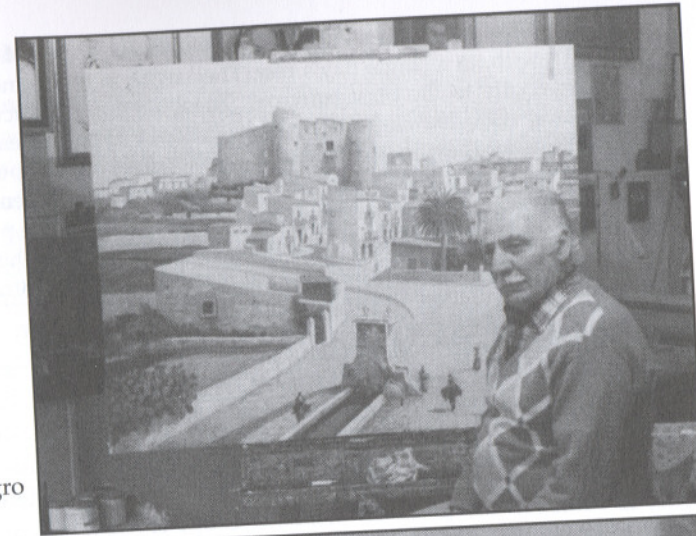


Fig. 7.
Giuseppe Agro



Fig. 8. Interior of Our Lady of All Souls' Church (by Giuseppe Agro)

Today, the Racalmutesi are well established in Hamilton, and some hold very prominent positions in the structure of Canadian society. This, of course, was not always the case. The early emigrants experienced many problems and hardships in their efforts to establish themselves in Canada, and to provide a better future for their children. They faced language difficulties, hard physical labour constructing roads and railways, dangers at their work sites, and various forms of racism and discrimination. In a letter written in June of 1910, for example, Rev. Bonomi states:

[The Italians in the steel mills] labour from January 1st to December 31st without a single day's rest. They work in the foundries, assigned especially to the blast furnaces. These men are particularly bitter at being regarded as [undesirables], inferior even to beasts of burden. The work they do is dangerous and horrible, but the poor 'dagos' can do little but quietly endure their hardships. Since December last, three workers have lost their lives tragically and [others are presently in the hospital] on account of accidents at work. These are the conditions in which our poor immigrants find themselves in this strange land. (as cited in Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton" 28)

Those that emigrated to Canada after the Second World War also faced various problems, including negative treatment. A number of Racalmutesi men, for example, recall being told to disperse if they walked together on James Street North in groups of three or more. A typical testimony to this type of treatment was provided by Angelo Cino to Raffaele Leone for an article that appeared in *La Sicilia*:

Io partii nel 1958 con tre figli e mia moglie.... Un paio di anni prima c'era stato un fortunale che aveva distrutto tutti i raccolti facendo precipitare il paese in un periodo di crisi, così mi decisi ad andare.... Non era tutto rose e fiori quello che trovammo lì [....] "Move," toglietevi, ci dicevano per le strade quando ci incontravano. Dovemmo fare capire quanto siamo laboriosi per farci rispettare. (see Leone 5).

The Racalmutesi adapted to these situations by residing in the same district of the city, establishing their own shops, and forming their own mutual aid and recreational societies – all within a short distance from the *Church of Our Lady of All Souls* (see Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton"; Migliore 1980, 1988). The *Società di Mutuo Soccorso Racalmutese* was founded in 1918 (Cumbo, "Italians in Hamilton" 30), the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* in 1933, the *Hamilton Italian Recreation Club* in 1939, and the *Trinacria Soccer Club* in 1957.¹²

¹² The 1984 pamphlet of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* constitution indicates that the society was founded on October 2, 1932, and incorporated on February 4, 1933 (see *Fratellanza Racalmutese*). The *Hamilton Italian Recreation Club* was founded on June 3, 1939 (see *Hamilton Italian Recreation Club*). The 1984 pamphlet of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* constitution, however, lists both the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* and the *Hamilton Italian Recreation Club* on the cover. Some association members suggest that we are dealing with name changes that have taken place over the years, rather than two associations. The official union of the *Società di Mutuo Soccorso Racalmutese* and the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* took place in 1965 (see *Società di Mutuo Soccorso Racalmutese ed Il Circolo Recreative Fratellanza Racalmutese*). The *Trinacria Soccer Club* became the *Trinacria Sports Club* in 1962, and the *Hamilton Trinacria Association* in 1989 (see *Hamilton Trinacria Association*).

La Festa del Monte in Hamilton: The Early Years

As the Racalmutese community became entrenched in the city, people began to organize various community events, including the celebration of the *Festa del Monte*. By 1924, the three Racalmutese communities of Hamilton, Buffalo (New York), and New York City were in direct communication with one another, and with Padre Giuseppe Cipolla in Racalmuto. Ferdinando Ippolito of New York City, on September 15, 1924, for example, wrote to Padre Cipolla seeking assistance in obtaining a copy of the play re-enacting the arrival of the Madonna to Racalmuto.

Padre Reverendissimo [...] ci facciamo sapere che abbiamo scritto alle colonie Racalmutese di Buffalo e di Hamilton Canada e ci hanno risposto che anche loro lavorano per ricavare qualche sommetta di denaro ed aiutare la nobile iniziativa da lei sviluppata intanto abbiamo deciso di rappresentare La venuta della Madonna [...] Dunque Padre Giuseppe Cipolla, alcuni nostri paesani uomini vecchi ci hanno informato che esiste un libro di Padre Bonaventura Caruselli di Lucca, il quale in detto libro si trova scritto il Dramma della Venuta della Madonna completo uso per il teatro [...] Lei Padre resta pregato di fare il mezzo possibile di procurarci questo libro con questo termine chiedendo la sua S. B. da parte da tutta la società. Devotissimo Ferdinando Ippolito. (as quoted in Carbone *Gli amori*).

Through Padre Cipolla, the three Racalmutese communities were able to obtain a copy of Padre Caruselli's text, and to make use of the text to re-enact the arrival of the Madonna to Racalmuto in their new sociocultural environments.¹³

A number of *feste* were celebrated in the 1920s and 30s in Hamilton (see *Hamilton Spectator* June 29, 1925 and July 24, 1931). These *feste* were organized under the direction of a special committee of the *Società di Mutuo Soccorso Racalmutese* (Cumbo, "The Feast of Madonna del Monte"). Dr. Vincenzo Agro, among others, organized an elaborate version of this *festa* for the 1931 celebration. On the evening of Friday, July 24, 1931, a procession travelled through parts of the north-end of the city, and made its way to *Our Lady of All Souls' Church*. Rev. Bonomi officially opened the festivities with a religious service attended by Racalmutesi (and others) from Hamilton, Welland, Port Colborne, and Niagara Falls, Ontario, as well as Buffalo, New York (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 24, 1931 and July 25, 1931).

¹³ In the mid-1930s members of the Racalmutese community of Hamilton also organized a series of performances of the Passion Play—a play focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The play was performed in both Hamilton and Buffalo, New York.

Following the service the congregation assembled in front of the church and were entertained by the Italian Marine band [of Hamilton], under the direction of Prof. Gaspare Mandarino. The front of the church and the streets in the district were illuminated with colored lights and marked the fete as one to be long remembered by the Italians of Hamilton (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 25, 1931, 4).

The festivities continued the next evening with "solemn vespers [...] sung in All Souls' church" (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 27, 1931, 3). After more entertainment by the Italian Marine band, "a spectacular display of fireworks" took place at Eastwood Park (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 27, 1931).



Fig. 9. Festa del Monte (Hamilton, 1931)



Fig. 10. Festa del Monte (Hamilton, 1931)

On the Sunday, a section of the Racalmutese district was closed to traffic. In the morning the community celebrated a high Mass. Later in the day, a major procession travelled through the north-end of the city. The procession included the Italian Marine band, a colourful float carrying the statue of the Madonna, and a large number of people from the congregation. "Several thousand people lined the streets...seeking to get a glimpse" of the procession (*Hamilton Spectator*, July 27, 1931). As part of the celebration, a group of community members—dressed as Count Ercole del Carretto, Prince Gioene, and their followers—re-enacted the arrival of the statue of the Madonna, and the miracle that allowed the statue to remain in Racalmuto. The *festa* ended with another exciting fireworks display.



Fig. 11. Festa del Monte (Hamilton, mid-1930s)

By the 1930s, then, the *Festa del Monte* was well established in Hamilton. The *festa* served not only as a vehicle through which the Racalmutesi could celebrate their faith and cultural identity, but also as a public statement of their attachment to Racalmuto and their land of origin.

Although community members faced various forms of discrimination in the early years of the immigration process, Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in the mid-1930s generated a more intense anti-Italian sentiment throughout Canada. Due in part to the Depression and, in part, to avoid drawing negative attention to itself, the Racalmutese community stopped the public display and celebration of the *Festa del Monte*.

In 1940, the Canadian government labelled Italians in Canada as *enemy aliens*. All Italian Canadians had to report to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on a regular basis, and some 700 to 800 individuals across Canada were arrested and interned in prison camps. These peo-

ple were arrested even though they had not committed a crime, and many remained in the prison camps throughout the war years (Migliore, "From Internment to Military Service").¹⁴ It was difficult to be Italian in Canada during this time period. In 1990, former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney publicly apologized to the Italian community for this wartime treatment. At a meeting of the National Congress of Italian Canadians and the Canadian Italian Business Professional Association, Mulroney stated:

What happened to many Italian Canadians is deeply offensive to the simple notion of respect for human dignity and the presumption of innocence. The brutal injustice was inflicted arbitrarily, not only on individuals whose only crime was to being of Italian origin [...] None of the 700 internees was ever charged with an offence and no judicial proceedings were launched. It was often, in the simplest terms, an act of prejudice—organized and carried out under law, but prejudice nevertheless [...] Forty-five years of silence about these wrongs is a shameful part of our history [...] On behalf of the government and people of Canada, I offer a full and unqualified apology for the wrongs done to our fellow Canadians of Italian origin during World War II. (Office of the Prime Minister 4).

Prime Minister Mulroney, however, did not make the apology at the national Parliament. The same can be said for the successive Liberal Governments under Jean Chretien and Paul Martin. As a result, those imprisoned (and their families) have not been compensated for the treatment they received (Iacovetta and Ventresca; Migliore, "From Internment to Military Service"). Approximately 70 Italian Canadians from the Hamilton area, including prominent Racalmutesi, were sent to the internment camp near Petawawa, Ontario.

A Miracle of Faith

As the Racalmutese population increased dramatically in Hamilton after the Second World War, and anti-Italian sentiments subsided, people began to think about re-establishing the *Festa del Monte* in Hamilton. During the 1970s, several versions of the *festa* were held in Milton, Ontario. These celebrations were organized by Alfonso Crisci and a small committee of Hamilton Racalmutesi. Crisci commissioned a statue of the Madonna in white marble for a designated property in Milton.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the Italian Canadian experience during the Second World War see Iacovetta, Perin, and Principe (see also Cumbo, "Uneasy Neighbours"; Duliani; Migliore and DiPierro, Nicaso). Several works of fiction also touch on these issues in terms of both the Canadian (Currie; Palermo) and the American (Scottoline) context.

The property included a small restaurant and sufficient land to host a large crowd for the festivities. The *festa* in Milton involved a procession, an outdoor Mass, and a communal picnic. A Sicilian cart was also available for rides for the children. These festivities were attended by the several hundred Hamilton-Racalmutesi.



Fig. 12. Angelo Cino, 1912-2003 (Hamilton, 1996)



Fig. 13. Salvatore Restivo & Sam Migliore (Racalmuto, 2003)

Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, something significant happened. Angelo Cino, Nicolo Rizzo, Giovanni Macaluso, and others in Hamilton began a dialogue with Professor Salvatore Restivo and the *Pro Loco* of Racalmuto concerning the possibilities of establishing a more formal connection between Hamilton and Racalmuto. September 24, 1983 marked the 50th anniversary of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* of Hamilton. During the festivities celebrating this historic moment, members of the association unveiled a beautiful commemorative plaque, and read notes of congratulations, from the *Pro Loco* of Racalmuto. Several prominent local politicians attended this celebration; among them was Alderman Vince Agro, a Hamilton-Racalmutese. At the request of the *Fratellanza Racalmutese*, and the Racalmutese community in general, Alderman Agro began official work towards the twinning of the two cities. Soon Mayor Robert Morrow of Hamilton became involved in the process, and negotiations began with Salvatore Marchese and Calogero Sardo of Racalmuto.

The town of Racalmuto passed a motion in favour of twinning with Hamilton on October 12, 1985. A copy of the *Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale* for that date was forwarded to the Hamilton City Council. As part of the rationale for twinning, the document states:

Fa presente che il gemellaggio rappresenterebbe per i Racalmutesi di Hamilton la prova della ferma volontà dei Racalmutesi di Racalmuto di mantenere con loro un costante rapporto di affetto, riconoscendo il loro diritto di sentirsi ancora parte integrante della nostra Comunità....

The official twinning was scheduled to take place in the summer of 1986 in Racalmuto, followed by an official visit to Hamilton in 1987 to complete the proceedings.

July 11th 1986 marked an historic moment for Racalmuto. Young actors from Castronovo, Sicily took part, for the first time, in the annual performance of the play re-enacting the struggle between Prince Gioeni of Castronovo and Count Ercole del Carretto of Racalmuto for possession of the statue of the Madonna. At the end of the play, the representatives of the two communities signed papers officially twinning Castronovo and Racalmuto (Carbone *La Madonna Del Monte*; Migliore "Religious Symbols"). During that same period, a mundialization agreement was completed between Racalmuto and Hamilton.¹⁵ Mayor Morrow, and members of the Hamilton-Racalmutese community, trav-

¹⁵ The City of Hamilton has established twin-city relations with a number of communities—such as Fukiyama, Japan; Mangalore, India; and, Shawinigan, Quebec. The Hamilton City Council refers to this phenomenon as a process of *mundialization*.

elled to Racalmuto to take part in the 1986 *Festa* of the Madonna del Monte, and to sign the official documents linking the two communities. At the festivities, Mayor Sardo is quoted as saying to Bob Morrow: "You also are the Mayor of Racalmuto because there are more Racalmutesi that voted for you in Hamilton than for me here in Racalmuto" (as quoted in correspondence from Vince Agro, August 8, 1986).

In my view, the timing of the Hamilton-Racalmuto twinning agree-



Fig. 14.
Mayors Robert Morrow &
Calogero Sardo (Racalmuto,
1986)



Fig. 15. Establishing Twin City Relations (Racalmuto, 1986)

ment was not a coincidence. The Madonna del Monte is both a figure of devotion, and a key symbol that serves to unite the two communities in a *spiritual* relationship that extends beyond political, economic, and cultural considerations. In a sense, the Madonna del Monte—the patron saint of all Racalmutesi—served as a witness to this historic event. Racalmuto and Hamilton now share a form of *ritual kinship* that involves the type of reciprocity that benefits both communities.



Fig. 16. Sam Agro & Ennio Corsini

10th and 11th of 1989. Giovanni Falletta and the Gruppo Folkloristico—a group formed specifically for the *Festa*—provided the entertainment for the festivities.¹⁶

The committee organizing the 1989 *festa* was lead by Salvatore Agro (Organizational Chairman), Santo Randazzo (President), and Jenny Frappa (President of the Women's Committee). On February 25, 1989, at a social event organized to raise funds for the *festa*, the committee handed out a leaflet that included the following statement:

¹⁶ Santo Randazzo, and later Maria and Joe Martorelli, have also led this folk group (*Gruppo Folkloristico Racalmutese di Hamilton*). The group, unfortunately, came to an end in the mid-1990s.

In the late 1980s, Salvatore (Sam) Agro took the initiative in re-establishing the *Festa* of the Madonna del Monte in Hamilton. While walking with friends one day, he encountered the Portuguese procession for the *Santo Rosario*. At that very moment, the thought occurred to him: "come mai noi Racalmutese... non siamo capaci di fare una Festa alla Madonna del Monte?" He consulted with Vince and John Agro for political and legal advice. They encouraged him to work towards fulfilling his dream. Sam Agro and others formed the *Comunità Racalmutese Maria SS Del Monte*, Ontario and, together with Rev. Francesco Geramia and Our Lady of All Souls Church, the *Fratellanza Racalmutese*, and many, many others, successfully organized and celebrated a new version of the *festa* on June



Fig. 17. Gruppo Folkloristico di Hamilton (1991)



Fig. 18.
Gruppo
Folkloristico
di Hamilton
(1991)]

I Siciliani e Racalmutesi in questo caso abbiamo assorbito tutti le dure vicissitudini delle occupazioni straniere. Quello che ci ha mantenuto durante i secoli è stata la famiglia e la fede. Il mistero della fede per la Madonna è un punto debole e forte per noi Racalmutesi. Attraverso i secoli, i nostri genitori prima, e ora noi, abbiamo fatto i lavori più duri e sostenuto le più grosse umiliazioni solo con l'aiuto della Madonna del Monte. Ora noi vogliamo integrare questo faldello di cultura, laica e religiosa per farne un obolo ai nostri figli e il Canada che ci ospita e ci fa progredire in dignità.... (Maria SS. del Monte Association of Hamilton)

The statement directly links the celebration of the *Festa* of the Madonna del Monte to Sicilian, and more specifically Racalmutese, history, and to the importance of the Madonna del Monte in Racalmutese religion and culture. It also indicates that the celebration of the *festa*, and everything it represents for the Racalmutesi, constitutes an offering, something of value, to both their children and Canadian society (their new homeland).



Fig. 19. The Preparations (Francesca & Antonino Migliore with Michele Agro, 1991)



Fig. 20. The Preparations (Nicolò Rizzo & Alfonso Castellino)

Since 1989, the *Festa del Monte* has been celebrated in Hamilton each year. The festivities are celebrated over a three-day period. The actual preparations, however, begin much earlier. The celebration committee organizes activities to generate funds, while various individuals carry out the duties necessary to ensure a successful *festa*. Each year, for example, Michele Agro prepares a float, donated by Croce Morreale, to transport the statue of the Madonna. A group of women then dress the float with a colourful, velvet material prepared by Francesca Migliore, while some of the men erect the metal stand and crown constructed by Nicolò Rizzo and Alfonso Castellino.

On the Friday evening a candlelight procession (*fioccolata*) travels from the *Fratellanza Racalmutese* to *Our Lady of All Souls Church* where a special Mass is celebrated. During one of these Masses, in the early 1990s, Calogero Mulè recited his epic poem about the arrival of the Madonna to Racalmuto. Saturday is devoted to music and celebration. Sunday, however, is the key to the celebrations. In the morning a series of *prumisioni* are accompanied to the church by a local band, and there is a celebration of a series of Masses. During the High Mass, at noon, the statue of the Madonna is crowned. I recall how some people at one of the celebrations in the early 1990s literally had tears in their eyes, as Vince Paparo sang the Ave Maria as his daughter walked down the aisle and crowned the Madonna in front of a large, appreciative congregation.



Fig. 21. The Crowning of the Madonna (early 1990s)

During the 1991 celebration of the *festa*, the Bozzo family took part in the *prumisioni* process to thank the Madonna for helping their son.

Last year, in May, I had a severe car accident...and cracked my skull.... Most doctors were not optimistic about my chances.... My family was having problems; they were shaking, and they couldn't handle the situation. My sister was marrying Jack. Jack's dad Sam ... took my father to the church.... [They] took a few articles of clothing and rubbed them against the [statue of the Madonna]— this festival was happening right about this time [last year]—and rubbed them against my head. They had a firm belief in religious saints helping out in situations such as that.... They believed that this helped the situation, and helped me through the situation. (Vince Bozzo, in Migliore *Feast of the Madonna Del Monte*)



Although not everyone makes the reasons behind their *prumisioni* public, the *prumisioni* are an important part of the celebration in both Racalmuto and Hamilton.

On the Sunday afternoon, a major procession transports the statue of the Madonna through the main streets of the city, and in the evening there is more music

Fig. 22.
Vince Bozzo's *Prumisioni* (1991)



Fig. 23.
Prumisioni of the
Fratellanza
Racalmutese
(mid-1990s)

and celebration. Finally, the festivities come to an end with a colourful display of fireworks. Later in the summer a picnic celebration has often been held at Christie Conservation Park to thank everyone for contributing to the *festa*, and to start the process of preparing for the *festa* in the following year.

Although the activities remain roughly the same from year to year, there have been significant activities added to the celebration at various



Fig. 24. The Procession (1991)



Fig. 25. The Procession—Count Ercole del Carretto & Prince Gioeni
(early 1990s)

points in time. In 1990, for example, the *Cilio dell' Emigrante Racalmutese*—a float in the shape of a large candle, similar in structure to those found in Racalmuto—was introduced as part of the festivities. The *Cilio* was constructed by Vincenzo Gagliardo, finely painted by Giuseppe Agro, and financed and promoted by Guido Ricca (and his family). The *Cilio*, along with the float transporting the statue of the Madonna, played a prominent role in the 1990 and 1991 *Festa* processions.¹⁷ Gagliardo, Agro and Ricca were honoured for their contributions to the *Festa* during the 1991 festivities.

Over the years, this *Cilio* has been at the centre of controversy in the community. As a result, it has not always been a part of the annual fes-



Fig. 26.
Cilio dell'Emigrante
Racalmutese
(Guido Ricca, Vincenzo
Gagliardo, Giuseppe Agro)

tivities. This controversy is due, in part, to misunderstandings and personality clashes. The situation, however, is much more complex. The problems surrounding the *Cilio* involve unfortunate statements made by certain individuals, factional conflicts and, more importantly, issues concerning ownership and control of the structure. All of this is further complicated by history. The history of the *Madonna del Monte* and the celebration of

the annual *feste* in Racalmuto have been marked by a series of controversies and conflicts. In the folk tradition, for example, the initial arrival of the statue of the Madonna to Racalmuto was marked by an armed struggle between Count Ercole del Carretto (of Racalmuto) and Prince Gioeni (of Castronovo). Historical conflicts between *Burgisi* families over power and prestige were institutionalised gradually into the com-

¹⁷ The *Cilio* was decorated with a number of banners painted by Francesca Migliore.

petition over the capture of the main banner of the *ciliu*. Given these scenarios, it is not surprising that the *Cilio dell'Emigrante Racalmutese* has become embroiled in controversy.

During the first six years of the *Festa*, the organizing committees put aside funds for the eventual sculpturing of a replica of the statue of the *Madonna del Monte* of Racalmuto. By 1995, a committee lead by Salvatore Agro (President), Jenny Frappa (President, Women's Committee), Carmelo Licata (Vice-President), and Baldo Giglia (Treasurer) – with the support of Rev. Francesco Geremia and *Our Lady of All Souls' Church*, and many community members – was able to secure sufficient funds to order construction of the statue. The new statue arrived on Wednesday, June 21 from Ortisei, Italy. Rev. Giampietro Lazzarato celebrated an evening Mass to commemorate the addition of the statue to *Our Lady of All Souls' Church*. The statue, completely covered in white sheets, was carried into the Church and unveiled formally for the congregation. The applause was so loud, the emotion so high, that the entire Church could be felt shaking. It was a major accomplishment for the community. Today, the small, original statue of the Madonna is used for the Friday night *fioccolata*, while the new statue is used for the main procession on the Sunday.

In the summer of 1996, Sam Agro and the *Comitato Festa* introduced a second *ciliu* for the *festa*. The structure is officially named *Lu Ciliu di la Comunità Racalmutisi* (and informally known as *Lu Ciliu di li Paisana*).

The *Comitato Festa* commissioned the construction of this *ciliu*, and entrusted the completion of the project to Calogero Scozzari and Giuseppe Mulè. Carmelo Gueli of Racalmuto supplied the necessary structural details, while Luigi Tonellotto of Hamilton carried out the actual construction of the *ciliu*. In the same year, Lillo Giangreco and the Racalmutese folk group *Biddizzi, Sali e Surfaru* (under the directorship of Luigi Matteliano and



Fig. 27. The Original Statue

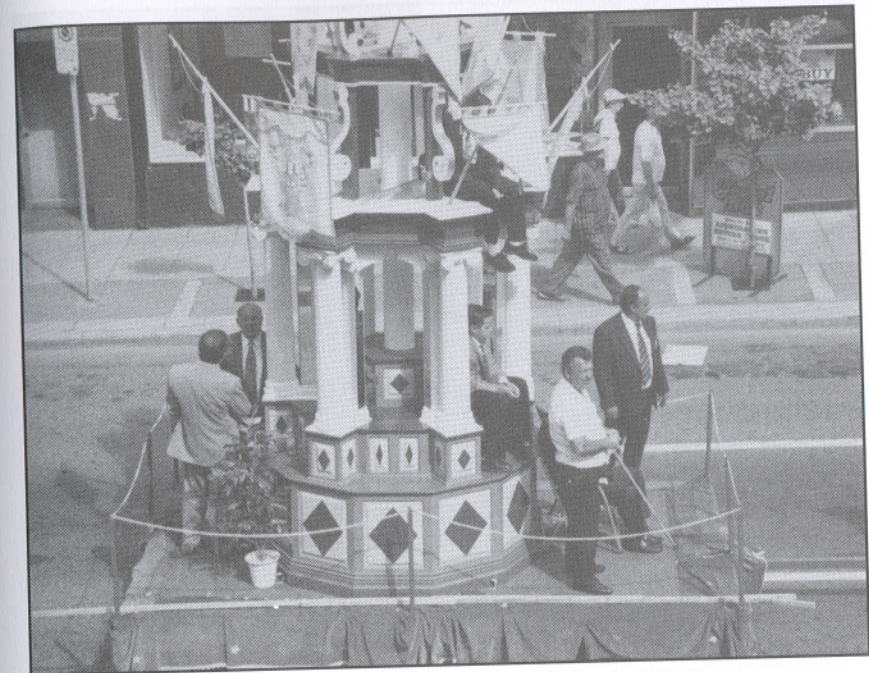


Fig. 28. The New Statue

Francesco Macaluso) travelled to Hamilton to take part in the festivities. During the Sunday procession, some of the male members of this folk group separated from the crowd, and scaled the new structure in a "spectacular climb" to capture the *ciliu* (Calogero Milazzo, personal communication).

On July 14, 1996, as part of Hamilton's Sesquicentennial celebrations and Racalmuto's celebration of the *Festa del Monte*, the two communities were linked together through a live satellite connection for roughly 55 minutes. The proceedings began in Racalmuto with a rendition of *La vinuta di la Madonna di lu Munti* by Domenico Mannella and the *Coro Polifonico Terzo Millennio*. The performance was followed by official greetings between Mayor Petrotto of Racalmuto and Mayor Morrow of Hamilton, as well as other representatives of the two communities including Arciprete Alfonso Puma of Racalmuto. Soon, however, a number of Hamilton Racalmutesi were able to communicate directly with family and friends in Racalmuto.

"Come stai Concettina?" "Bene, che si dice a Racalmuto dopo tutti questi anni?" "Niente di diverso!" "Tuo figlio Carmelo si è sposato?" "Sì, adesso tiene tre figli." "Perché non vieni qui a Racalmuto?" "No,

Fig. 29. *Lu Ciliu di la Comunità Racalmutisi* (1996)

cara sorella, ormai resterò qui per sempre, le mie figlie si sono sposate, e non vogliono venire in Sicilia." (Picone)

Calogero Milazzo, a member of the Racalmutese community of Hamilton, describes the significance of the event in this way:

Initially a sceptic who almost didn't attend the event, the historical significance of the whole event hit home just after the two cities established satellite contact (video and audio) at exactly 5:05 PM. For the next 55 minutes the citizens of Racalmuto and the citizens of Hamilton's Racalmuto ... chatted in a cybernetic piazza. What took two years of planning (with several trips to Roma) came to a conclusion at 6 PM. It was an experience I'll not soon forget. (personal communication)

As part of these festivities, the *Gruppo Popolare "Chiaromonte"* of Racalmuto performed live in Hamilton's Copps Coliseum.¹⁸

Between 1960 and the present, many changes have taken place in the northwest district of Hamilton. A relatively large percentage, as

¹⁸ Several people and organizations were responsible for making the satellite connection possible including, in Hamilton, Gab Macaluso (as Managing Director of the Hamilton Entertainment and Convention Facilities Inc.).



Fig. 30. Festa Committee Members (Hamilton, 2005)

much as 70% or more, of the Racalmutesi population has moved out of the district—primarily to the Hamilton “mountain.” *Our Lady of All Souls’ Church* continues to serve as a focal point of the community, although many people are now officially registered with other parishes in the city. The Racalmutesi associations and many businesses remained in the old neighbourhood. During this period, there has been a large influx of Portuguese immigrants into the area. The Portuguese population, in fact, increased to the point where St. Mary’s Church (the former Cathedral) was transformed into a Portuguese-speaking parish. Since 1990, the northwest district of Hamilton has also had an influx of immigrants from various parts of Latin America. *Our Lady of All Souls’ Church* now serves the needs of both an Italian- and a Spanish-speaking population and, although the organizing committee for the *festa* consists primarily of Racalmutesi, both groups participate actively in the celebration of the *Festa del Monte*. Members of the Portuguese community have also been instrumental in some of celebrations. On a number of occasions, for example, they have been hired to take part in the construction of the bandstand, to provide one, and sometimes two, marching bands for the processions, and other activities. The *festa*, although still a predominantly Racalmutesi celebration, in a sense, has become more of a multicultural event.

Today, the *Festa del Monte* appears to be firmly established in Hamilton. This does not mean that the celebrations are free of tensions and controversies. Recent tensions, for example, have surrounded the issue of where the celebrations should be held. Many people prefer to have the entire *festa* celebrated in the immediate area of *Our Lady of All Souls Church*, while others have worked towards holding part of the *festa* at the new Bay Front Park. Community members, however, are committed to ensuring the survival of the *festa*. To quote Sam Agro, “the hope is for the celebrations to always move forward, and to get better, and better.”

Conclusion

For the Racalmutesi of Hamilton, the *Madonna del Monte* is both a figure of devotion, and a key symbol of their ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage. A large number of individuals in the community have made it explicitly and emphatically clear to me that they would do anything for *Maria SS. del Monte*, and that they will always retain a strong attachment to Racalmuto. Michele Agro, for example, has stated: “I am involved in this *festa* because I believe in this Lady [pointing to a photo of the statue of the Madonna] very, very much. I am Racalmutese. I would do anything for her, for the rest of my life” (Migliore, *Feast of the Madonna Del Monte*). Similar sentiments were echoed recently by the hundreds of Racalmutesi from Hamilton that travelled to Racalmuto in 2003, for the three-week celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the arrival of the statue of the Madonna in Racalmuto. Their desire is to pass these sentiments on to their children.

One young, Canadian-born woman who attended the 2003 celebration in Racalmuto with her fiancée stated:

It was great seeing where my Grandfather and my Grandmother grew up.... [The *festa*] was wonderful; it was so exciting. [We] were so lucky to go for the 500th Anniversary. There were horses everywhere, fireworks...everyone was having a good time. I never experienced anything like that ... it was wonderful.... [The last day of the celebration] was a Holy experience [for us]. Doves were flying, and the whole town was singing. Water was running down the street. It was as if everyone’s feet were being washed. It was very, very moving for me to be there, and to see their love for the Madonna.

The celebration of the *Festa del Monte* in both Racalmuto and Hamilton gives people an opportunity to expose their children to an important aspect of their faith, a Racalmutese tradition, and to create a basis for feeling proud to be Sicilian Canadian with strong roots in Racalmuto. According to Peppi Pillitteri, for example, “Our peoples’

continuous interest in community affairs like *Festa Italia*, *Maria SS Del Monte* and other social and cultural activities between Hamilton and Sicily make our stay in Canada honourable, acceptable and noble." (42) By re-establishing the *festa* in Hamilton, the Racalmutesi are attempting to share their heritage with their children, and all the inhabitants of the area. Only time will tell if the younger generations will accept the gift their elders wish to pass on to them. There are signs of hope for success, however. A committee of young people has been established to take part in organizing the celebrations, and young people are taking part in a number of aspects of the festivities.

I would like to end the paper with a message, in both Italian and English, from the older generation of Racalmutesi to their children and grandchildren:

La Festa del Monte a Racalmuto è qualcosa di straordinario. In quanto tradizione, è molto importante per tutti i Racalmutesi. A Racalmuto non c'è pericolo che le generazioni future perdano questa festa. Ad Hamilton, però, la situazione è diversa ed i Racalmutesi di Hamilton si rendono conto dei pericoli che la perdita della madre lingua, della religione e della cultura siciliana può comportare. Ed per questo motivo che essi fanno tutto il possibile per far sì che questa festa sia parte integra del nuovo ambiente socioculturale in cui essi vivono.

The *Festa del Monte* of Racalmuto is something extraordinary. In terms of tradition, it is something of great importance to all Racalmutesi. For Racalmuto, there is less danger or fear that this *festa* might one day be lost to future generations. In Hamilton the situation is different. The Racalmutesi of Hamilton are well aware of the dangers of losing one's mother tongue, religion, and Sicilian culture. It is for these reasons that they are doing everything possible to ensure that this *festa* becomes entrenched in its new sociocultural environment.

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