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# Mobility, Nostalgia, and Ethnic Identity: The Racalmutesi Experience in Canada, and Beyond

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Résumé de l'article

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# Mobility, Nostalgia, and Ethnic Identity: The Racalmutesi Experience in Canada, and Beyond

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*Abstract:* We are currently in an era characterized by rapid movement; movement of people, products, resources, and information both within and beyond national boundaries. In this paper, I examine the movement not only of Italians (and more specifically Racalmutesi) to Canada, but also of Canadian Italians to Italy and other locations. As part of this discussion, my aim is to explore the role of nostalgia in people's conceptions of the interrelationships among movement, ethnic identity, and their sense of "home."

*Keywords:* Mobility, Identity, Religion, Nostalgia and Wellbeing

## Introduction

The world today can be characterized in terms of rapid movement. The movement of people, products, and resources both within and across national boundaries, and the instantaneous transmission of information over great distances (Sheller and Urry 2006). This mobility, in part, has been made possible by a combination of globalization forces and technological changes that, in many cases, allow for unprecedented movement over long distances in a matter of seconds, hours, or days. These developments, in fact, sometimes make it easier to move products and resources across international borders, than for ordinary people to make the same trek.

Mobility, however, is not something new. It is, and has been, an important part of who we are as human beings. Movement has played a major role in our very evolution as a species (Kuhn, Raichlen, and Clark 2016). According to evolutionary theory, it was our ability to develop upright posture and become bipedal that freed our hands for tool use, and led, in turn, to the development of hand/eye coordination and the co-evolution of our brain (Wilson 1998; Stanford 2003). We also know that early humans were involved in significant migrations. Evidence, for example, indicates that *Homo erectus* migrated out of Africa (Derricourt 2005), and that early *Homo sapiens* later moved to virtually all parts of the world (Bellwood 2013). As humans, then, we have a long history of mobility and migration—migration that in more recent

years has included forced diasporas, large scale emigration/immigration, and the movement of millions of refugees seeking asylum from desperate political, environmental, and economic situations. In addition, there has been a tremendous rise of industries that promote and/or facilitate travel for pleasure, religious reasons, educational purposes, and many other individual or group interests (Sheller and Urry 2006).

My aim for this paper is to address issues of mobility by focusing on: (1) Italian emigration/immigration to Canada; (2) how people have attempted to maintain a sense of Italian ethnic identity while, at the same time, developing a sense of *belonging* in their new sociocultural environment; and, (3) the role of *nostalgia* in this process of identity construction. More specifically, I focus on the community of Racalmuto in south central Sicily, and the immigration of Racalmutesi to southern Ontario (and Hamilton in particular). I argue that nostalgia—as expressed through a commitment to key religious and cultural symbols—has played a major role in people’s efforts to construct and manage an identity for themselves, and their children, that allows them to live happy lives in their new “home,” but retain a meaningful relationship with their past and their place of origins. In fact, I maintain that this nostalgia has become so entrenched in the immigrant generation, that it is expressed prominently in some people’s thoughts and actions not only as they return for visits to Racalmuto, but also travel to other locations.

### **Southern Italy and Out-migration**

Southern Italian history, due to political and socioeconomic conditions, was marked by high levels of out-migration for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People migrated to industrial centres in Northern Italy, urban and industrial areas of Western Europe, and overseas destinations in Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Canada, and the United States (Baldassar and Gabaccia 2011; Cronin 1970; N. Harney 1998). In their new places of residence, they often faced enormous pressures to adapt, or assimilate, into the new sociocultural environment. Although, for some immigrants, the process of chain migration helped to ease these pressures in the large urban centers of North America (Bianco 1974; MacDonald and MacDonald 1964; Sturino 1989). At any rate, people, in one way or another, often found ways to adjust to their new circumstances without abandoning certain social or cultural elements they held dear (Baldassar and Gabaccia 2011a; Migliore 2006).

### **From Racalmuto to Hamilton**

Racalmuto is located in a predominantly agricultural area in the province of Agrigento, Sicily, Italy. Hamilton Racalmutesi estimate that the population of the town was once as high as 16,000 (or more) inhabitants. Population numbers, however, have declined gradually over the

years due to out-migration and other factors. According to the *Comune di Racalmuto* website, there were 8,338 people in the community as of November 30, 2012. The Racalmutesi have emigrated to a variety of places in order to improve their socioeconomic situation, with communities of significant size developing in England, Belgium, the United States, and Canada.

Hamilton, with its wealth of industries, attracted a large influx of Racalmutesi immigrants. The first wave of these immigrants arrived in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their population grew slowly during the period between the two great Wars. The vast majority of Racalmutesi immigrants to the city, however, arrived between 1955 and 1969. Although people continued to arrive in the 1970s and early 1980s, their numbers were relatively small. The 2016 Canadian census indicates that people of Italian ethnic origin in the metropolitan Hamilton area numbered 79,725 (Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2016 Census*). Hamilton Racalmutesi estimate that they currently number approximately 25,000, including people who were either born in, or trace their ancestry to, Racalmuto.

### **Nostos, Epic Narratives and Identity Construction**

In 1503, according to local legend, Prince Eugenio Gioeni and a group of companions from Castronovo, Sicily, made their way to North Africa for a hunting expedition. While there, a storm compelled them to take refuge in a nearby cave. In the cave, the company began to hear a faint female voice. They explored the cave, and soon discovered a beautiful statue of the Madonna with child. It was a miracle. Prince Gioeni quickly set sail for Sicily to bring his beloved Castronovo the priceless "gift" of the statue. In order to reach Castronovo, however, he and his companions had to travel through Racalmuto. The people of Racalmuto were so taken by the beauty of the statue, and the holy figure it represented, that they were not willing to allow the statue to leave their community. Count Ercole del Carretto of Racalmuto first offered to purchase the statue and, when this failed, initiated an armed struggle to retain the holy image of Mary for the Racalmutesi people. This is when the second miracle occurred. The oxen transporting the statue fell on bended knee, and the wheels of the cart sank into the ground. Everyone recognized this as a clear message from the Madonna herself that the statue should remain in Racalmuto. The Racalmutesi built a church on the spot to thank Holy Mary, and to house her statue. Prince Gioeni also remained in Racalmuto to be near the Madonna through her statue.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which this legend represents what actually transpired in 1503. We know that there are similar legends in other communities in Sicily (Correnti 1975), and in other parts of the western Mediterranean region (Christian 1973, 107). In addition, certain scholars maintain that the statue was actually commissioned by the people of Racalmuto, sculpted by the Gagini family of Palermo, and then transported by sea and land to the community (Morreale 1986, 37-



40; Salvo 1994, 62-64). In Racalmuto, people seem to prefer discussing the arrival of the statue in terms of the legend. The popularity of the legend, in my view, is intimately linked to a play initially written by Padre Bonaventura Caruselli (1856), and more recently modified by Piero Carbone and others (Carbone 2003; Messina, Macaluso, and Carbone 1988). The play effectively reenacts the legend of the arrival of the statue to Racalmuto, and it is performed annually as part of the celebration of the *Festa di Maria SS. del Monte*. Whether the legend is or is not factual is beyond the scope of this paper. What is significant for this discussion is that the legend has become firmly entrenched in people's discourse surrounding the Madonna del Monte and her *festa*.

Also significant for this paper is the fact that the legend shares, albeit loosely, some of the elements found in the epic, *nostos* narratives of ancient Greece (including Homer's *Odyssey*). The precise meaning of the term *nostos* is difficult to determine because the concept is both complex and ambiguous (Alexopoulou 2009; Bonifazi 2009). Alexopoulou (2009, 1), however, points out that the term often is used to refer to narratives of the "the return"—sometimes "heroic return"—after a period of absence (Kratzer 2013). Unlike many of the Greek heroes, though, Prince Gioeni does not make a heroic return to Castronova bearing gifts. A logical reading of the legend, then, is that he has failed in his quest to return home with the beautiful statue of the Madonna. And, he is deeply wounded by this failure. Near the very end of Padre Caruselli's play (1856, 74), Prince Gioeni states to his faithful servant:

E tu Fernando la fatal novella,  
La dolorosa storia riporta  
Al patrio suolo, e di ch'io qui rimango...

Sì, nel mio dolore  
M'è sol conforto, che restar m'è possa  
In questa terra da Maria prescelta.

At the same time, we can interpret what transpired not as Prince Gioeni's personal failure, but rather divine intervention that transformed him into the vehicle through which the Madonna achieved her goal. He did not suffer defeat; the Madonna predetermined the outcome in favor of the Racalmutesi. Prince Gioeni, in addition, does not despair and passively accept his fate; he deliberately chooses to honor Holy Mary's wishes, and to remain in Racalmuto. He displays the classic Sicilian (and Italian) trait of being able to *arrangiarsi*, to adapt to his new circumstances and to make the best of what fate has handed him. Prince Gioeni succeeds in being able to spend the rest of his life happy in Racalmuto, enveloped by the Madonna's shining light.

### From *Nostos* to Nostalgia

As mentioned earlier, the term *nostos* can be used to generate different meanings. For Bonifazi (2009, 492, also 506-507), although mobility is

certainly an important element associated with the concept, “the core meaning of *nostos*” is not so much *the return after a period of absence*, but rather “surviving lethal danger” in one’s travels. Prince Gioeni may not have accomplished his personal goal, but he did survive the challenges he encountered on his quest. Metaphorically speaking, many of the Racalmutesi immigrants who traveled across the Atlantic experienced a similar *nostos*—a *nostos* characterized by movement, epic challenges, dire conditions, etc.—and they survived to successfully reach, and gradually adapt, to their new sociocultural environment in Hamilton, Ontario (for a more general discussion, Lima 2013).

Their success, as in the case of Prince Gioeni, came at a price. Some people, for example, have never returned to Racalmuto while, for others, the Racalmuto they visited after many years of absence was no longer the place (physically or culturally) they remembered. Members of the immigrant generation became Hamiltonians, grounded in the new sociocultural environment by family, friends, and their livelihood. Yet, at the same time, many of these individuals have experienced strong feelings of nostalgia—a combination of *nostos*, as a sense of identity linked to a particular place, and *algia* (or *algos*), the “longing [or suffering] for a home” that is distant, no longer exists, or possibly never existed (see Alexopoulou 2009, 3; Boym 2001, ix). In conversations with Racalmutesi immigrants, I often hear simple statements that seem to express feelings of *homesickness*—e.g., ‘the fruit just doesn’t taste the same here,’ or ‘the sun doesn’t warm you the way it did in Sicily.’ Giovanni Esposto (1993, 17), who emigrated to Canada from Racalmuto, captures these feelings of homesickness succinctly in his dialect poem “*Sicilia Bedda*”:

Doppu tant’anni nu taiu scurdatu  
Sicilia bedda, ti piensu ancora  
Cca’ nni sta terra sugnu emigratu  
Luntanu di tia e di la casuzza mia [...]

Sicilia bedda, Sicilia mia  
Ti piensu ancora cu nustalgia  
Tu si la vita, tu si la gioia  
Cu ti vidi di tia s’innammura.

In other cases, the statements are much more powerful, with people presenting illness narratives that deal with physical and mental suffering—either literally or metaphorically—in terms of *nierbi* (nerves) or *nirbusu* (a folk illness involving a disruption of one’s nerves). These illness narratives, at one level, hint at feelings of nostalgia, while at another level address issues associated with financial problems, work conditions, discrimination, etc. encountered in Canada (Migliore 1994; 2001; and Migliore and Dorazio-Migliore 2014). For example:

Well, what do you expect. We come here to a foreign land, face all kinds of pressures to find a job, save money, buy a house, pay the mortgage... Then the jobs run dry, people are laid off, the mortgages are too high,

the children are older and we need money for them. There is too much pressure in this lifestyle. No wonder we all end up at the doctor's office suffering from *nirbusu*. (Migliore 2001, 117)

Implicit in this and similar statements is a longing for a simpler and more manageable life in the Sicily they remember or imagine.

The Hamilton Racalmutesi immigrants did not forget or abandon their "homeland." Instead, over the years, they worked diligently not only to maintain strong links with Racalmuto, but also construct what some now call Hamilton's Racalmuto (Migliore 1988; 2006)—a physical and mental space intimately linked to key religious and cultural symbols that remind them of what they left behind, and that encapsulate their desires for the future. Although the notion of a return to one's ancestral "homeland," except for short visits, may be an impossibility for many in future generations (as Lima 2013, 229-230 points out), a figurative return is certainly possible. In my view, by establishing the *Festa di Maria SS. del Monte* in Hamilton, Racalmutesi immigrants are actively attempting to share their ethnic and cultural identity with their children, and their children's children. Consciously or unconsciously, it may be an attempt to instill a collective memory, a collective nostalgia, for their ancestral home.

### *La Festa del Monte of Racalmuto*

*Maria SS. del Monte* is the patron saint of Racalmuto. Each year, the Racalmutesi celebrate a major *festa* in her honor. The celebration may vary from year to year, but today it tends to occur over a three-day period in early July. Mobility is a key feature of various aspects of the celebration. Each day, drummers march through the streets announcing that the day's activities are about to begin. On the Friday evening, a procession transports a statue of the Madonna, on an ox drawn cart, through some of the main streets of the town. Once the procession arrives at the *piazza*, a troupe of young people dressed in 16<sup>th</sup> century apparel "re-enacts the arrival of the statue of the Madonna to Racalmuto, and the miracle that allowed the statue to remain in the town" (Migliore 2006, 70; also Messina, Macaluso, and Carbone 1988). The next evening, another procession occurs involving three *cilii*, floats decorated in the shape of large candles dedicated to Mary. The largest of these floats, the *ciliu* of the *Burgisi* agricultural society, transports a number of banners made from fine embroidered or painted material, all depicting the Madonna del Monte in unique and interesting ways. The most recent banner is displayed at the top of the *ciliu*. When the float arrives at the designated location, groups of unmarried males associated with the *Burgisi* society may rush the *ciliu*, and struggle with one another in an attempt to capture the new banner. Capturing the banner bestows a great deal of prestige on the successful individual (and his associates). He and his family, however, must take on major responsibilities for the next year's *festa*, including contributing the new banner for the *ciliu*.



Although Sunday is devoted primarily to a series of religious services or masses, these services themselves are inseparable from the celebratory mobility of the *fiesta*. Community members not only make their way to and from the church, but also engage in or observe the *prumissioni*—the delivery of people's promised offerings to the church. During the year, for example, someone may ask the Madonna to help him or her, or a family member, with a health problem. In return for this favor, the person promises to make an offering to the *Chiesa di Maria SS. del Monte*. These *prumissioni* (money, food products, grain, and a variety of other items) are delivered to the church throughout the day. Individuals either walk alone or with others, carrying large candles as symbols of their devotion to Mary, or race colorfully decorated horses up the steep steps and into the church to deliver their offerings. On the Sunday evening, another procession takes place. A truck decorated in the form of a ship transports the statue of the Madonna del Monte to the *piazza*, where an outdoor mass is then celebrated. At the end of the evening, the community enjoys itself with a wonderful fireworks display.

All three days of celebration for the *Festa del Monte* attract visitors from nearby towns. Each year, there are also a number of Racalmutesi residing in northern Italy, other parts of Europe, and communities in North America who travel to Racalmuto to take part in the festivities. Some of these individuals explicitly refer to their return to Racalmuto as a pilgrimage in honor of the Madonna del Monte. In 2003, for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Madonna's statue in Racalmuto, several hundred Hamilton Racalmutesi traveled to the town "to show their devotion to Mary, visit with family and friends, and reconnect with the land of their ancestors" (Migliore 2006, 74).

### The Moveable Feast

The Madonna del Monte and the celebration of her *fiesta* are important symbols of Racalmutesi identity, and key features of the discourse on what it means to be Racalmutesi. This is true in Racalmuto, and it is true for Racalmutesi now living in other areas. The Madonna del Monte features prominently in how people attempt to: (1) retain an attachment to their home community while moving, sometimes permanently, to locations near or far; and, (2) establish an identity for themselves in their new sociocultural environment.

### Racalmuto and Its Environs

The Madonna del Monte has had a significant influence on people in surrounding communities, and this is particularly true of Milena—a small town a short distance from Racalmuto. Individuals and families visit Racalmuto each year to take part in the celebration of the *Festa del Monte*. Milena's relationship to the Madonna del Monte, however, is much more complex. The town consists of several villages and hamlets. One of these hamlets, Robba Bonfigliu (in the Villaggio Garibaldi dis-



trict), has a special attachment to *Maria SS. del Monte*. Over the years, some Racalmutesi have married into the community, while others have moved to Bonfigliu to farm the land in the vicinity. The people of the hamlet, because of the relatively large Racalmutesi presence, have set up a shrine with a small replica of the statue of the Madonna del Monte to show their devotion to Mary.

On Sunday, July 13, 2003, three men from Milena walked the 15 kilometers to Racalmuto, across farmland and rough terrain, to attend the high mass in honor of the Madonna del Monte. As part of my interview with them, one stated: "On this occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Madonna del Monte [to Racalmuto], we have taken the opportunity to make this pilgrimage as a sign of our thanks to the Madonna." Beginning in July 2007, the people of Bonfigliu (and others from Milena) have celebrated their own simplified version of the *Festa del Monte*, including a short procession and a religious service. An outdoor mass is celebrated in front of the Madonna's shrine, with participants, both young and old, sitting or standing in an area surrounded by people's finest linens.

### Hamilton's Racalmuto

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a small group of Racalmutesi immigrants began to settle in the north end of Hamilton near James and Barton streets. The focal point of the community was St. Mary's Cathedral and, more specifically, the small chapel attached to the cathedral. It was here that the Missionary Fathers of St. Charles, the Scalabrini, provided Italian-language services for the various Italian groups in this part of the city (Cumbo 1985). By 1922, the Italian population had grown to sufficient numbers to construct a separate Roman Catholic Church, *Our Lady of All Souls*, in the same area. The Racalmutesi immigrants made significant contributions to finance and later construct the new church, as well as contribute a statue of the Madonna with child to the church (Cumbo 1985; Migliore 2006). They also established various shops, recreational clubs, and mutual aid societies for themselves in the vicinity of the church (Migliore 1988). A few years after the construction of *All Souls'* church, the Racalmutesi community celebrated several *Feste del Monte* in Hamilton (Cumbo 1985; Migliore 2006).

The first *Festa* took place in the mid-1920s, and it was followed by several other celebrations in the coming years (Cumbo 1983; Migliore 2006). These *feste* were not as elaborate as those celebrated in Racalmuto, but they did incorporate key aspects of the Sicilian feast. More specifically, they involved: (1) participating in a high mass in honor of the Madonna on the Sunday; (2) transporting her statue through the main streets near the church; and, (3) performing the play reenacting the legend of the arrival of the Madonna's statue to Racalmuto.

For these early immigrants, the *Festa del Monte* served as an impor-

tant means of easing their feelings of nostalgia, and of expressing publicly their ethnic and cultural identity as Racalmutesi (and more generally as Italians). By the mid-1930s, however, the situation changed drastically. Italy's invasion of Ethiopia sparked anti-Italian sentiments in Canada. The community determined that it was no longer wise to express these collective sentiments publicly, and they stopped their formal celebration of the *Festa del Monte* in Hamilton.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the second wave of Racalmutesi immigration brought a significant influx of people to the city. As their numbers increased, there was new talk of celebrating the *Festa del Monte*. This eventually led to several small *feste* on a private property in Milton, Ontario with mainly Hamilton Racalmutesi participation. The *Festa del Monte*, however, was not reestablished in the city until 1989, the year after Hamilton and Racalmuto formally signed a twin city agreement (Migliore 2006). In fact, the *Festa del Monte* figured prominently in the twinning process. Mayor Morrow (1946-2018) of Hamilton, and a delegation of Hamilton Racalmutesi, traveled to Racalmuto to participate in the 1986 *Festa*, and to sign the initial documents officially linking the two communities. The timing of the twinning process is significant, in my view, for three primary and interrelated reasons. First, Racalmuto completed twin city relations with Castronovo during the celebration of this same *Festa* (Carbone 1986; Troisi 1986). The Hamilton delegation was able to witness the historic event, as young people from Castronovo took part in the reenactment of the arrival of the Madonna del Monte to Racalmuto. Second, the Hamilton-Racalmuto agreement signaled not only a political and cultural link between the two communities, but also a type of *ritual kinship* established and celebrated in the presence of the Madonna del Monte. And, third, we can interpret the experience of the Hamilton Racalmutesi delegation as a collective, *nostos*-like return to Racalmuto after a long, difficult period of absence. The Hamilton Racalmutesi did not remain in Racalmuto, but they were able to successfully solidify their links with the community, and to share this link with their new "home." Racalmuto became part of Hamilton, just as Hamilton became part of Racalmuto.

In the mid-1980s, Salvatore Agro (1935-2017) initiated the process, and collaborated with many others, to establish the modern version of the *Festa del Monte* in Hamilton. The community's desires were fulfilled in 1989 with the first celebration of the *Festa* in the city since the 1930s. The *Festa* has now become an annual event. The main celebration typically involves the following key events: (1) a Friday evening *fioccolata* (candlelight procession), with a short service at *All Souls'* church; and, (2) a series of *prumisioni*, a high mass with the crowning of the Madonna's statue, a large procession, and fireworks (or a light show) on the Sunday.

Although certain elements have remained consistent, the modern version of the *Festa* has changed over time. The performance of the play reenacting the arrival of the Madonna del Monte to Racalmuto was very prominent in the early years (from 1989 to the mid-1990s), but it is not

performed today. Some of the young people, however, still dress in 16<sup>th</sup> century apparel, and take part in the procession. There also have been significant additions to the celebration. For example, the construction of two *cilii* (one in 1990, and the other in 1996) for the procession; and, the purchase of a large, sculpted replica of the statue of the Madonna del Monte of Racalmuto in 1995. The firework displays of the past have now been replaced by a laser light show. The number of people actively participating in the *Festa* has declined over the years, as some of the community elders have passed away or become infirm. The biggest disappointment for the community occurred in 2013, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the modern *Festa*, when efforts to form a new *fiesta*-organizing committee failed. The celebration did occur, but only as a less elaborate church sponsored event. Since 2013, however, the *Festa* has shown significant promise of returning slowly to its former level of achievement. There is a solid core of young people today who have joined the efforts to maintain and work towards ensuring successful *fieste* for the future.

In the fall of 2015, Mayor Messina of Racalmuto visited Hamilton to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the twinning of the two communities. Mayor Fred Eisenberger of Hamilton returned the visit in July of 2016 to take part in the *Festa del Monte*. In fact, Mayor Eisenberger took part in the *prumisioni*, riding one of the elaborately decorated horses up the steps and into the church of the Madonna del Monte (Dreschel 2017). The ritual kinship between the two communities remains strong in the eyes of the Hamilton Racalmutesi. The visit, however, also produced some material evidence of people's commitment to maintain a strong relationship between Hamilton and Racalmuto. As a result of the visit, for example, a group of Hamilton Racalmutesi commissioned a statue of Leonardo Sciascia—a replica of the one in Racalmuto. The statue can now be seen at Immigration Square on the grounds of the Liuna station in Hamilton (see *Sicilia Para* 2017, 5). A special committee also was formed to commission a highly decorated Sicilian Carretto. The carretto was constructed by Dino Agro of Racalmuto, and decorated/painted by the acclaimed artist Roberto Caputo of Barrafranca, Sicily (Picone 2019; also *Sicilia Canta Canada* 2019). The official unveiling of the carretto took place at the Art Gallery of Hamilton on June 21, 2019, at the time of the *Festa del Monte* in Hamilton.

### *Festa* in Mexico

Although the *Festa del Monte* has its origins in Racalmuto, the Racalmutesi have taken a version of this *fiesta* to their new places of residence—whether a short drive away to Milena, or across the Atlantic to Canada. The Racalmutesi of Hamilton have been particularly active in this process and, because of their numbers, have weathered various ups and downs over the years to maintain the *fiesta* in the city. The Madonna del Monte remains a significant religious and cultural symbol linking people to their ancestral home in Sicily. In fact, certain individuals have taken this sense of nostalgia or attachment to Racalmuto one step further.



Robert Harney (1989), in his article "The Palmetto and the Maple Leaf," addresses Canadian migrations to Florida for winter vacation. He found that people, including members of various ethnic groups, tended to travel to particular locations, and engage with one another in small enclaves at these holiday locations. During the last 25 years or so, a small group of Hamilton Racalmutesi, many retired, have traveled to the west coast of Mexico for winter vacations. Although some of these individuals may also visit Racalmuto on occasion, they enjoy their Mexican holidays for various reasons, ranging from relatively cheap flights to good winter conditions for retirement activities in a "Latin country." In Mexico, they tend to return to the same location (where some have even purchased a place to stay), often traveling together in small groups, and remain for anywhere from a week to two or more months. They visit one another, share meals, meet for entertainment, and relax together on the beach.

In 2003, Giuseppina and Calogero Graci (1921-2016) took the initiative to order a replica of the statue of the Madonna del Monte from a firm in Mexico City. They contributed their own funds, and collected funds from others, to finance the purchase of the statue. A year later, the Hamilton Racalmutesi vacation group organized a procession to deliver the statue to the local church. In the early afternoon they crowned the statue, dressed it with a ribbon displaying Canadian paper money to be donated to the church, and then placed the statue on a stand for transport. The priest and two attendants led the procession, while Giuseppina Graci walked behind sprinkling flower petals in the Madonna's path. The procession included Hamilton Racalmutesi vacationers, and a group of local people associated with the church. One individual carried a painted banner depicting the Madonna, similar to the ones made for the *cilii* of Hamilton. A second banner displayed the words: "*Comunità Italiana Canadese, Racalmuto, Maria SS. del Monte.*"

As the procession made its way to the church, the Hamilton Racalmutesi sang *Maria del Monte* in Italian, just as they would in Hamilton.

Maria del Monte, Vergine bella,  
di nostra vita tu sei la stella...

Siam peccatori, ma figli tuoi  
Maria del Monte prega per noi...

Su Racalmuto, Maria del Monte;  
Ti giunga, accetta, il pio saluto.  
Noi CANADESI con grande affetto  
VOGLIAMO DARTI IL GRAN RISPETTO.

The priest blessed the statue as the procession entered the church. A special mass was then celebrated for the Madonna, followed by additional singing lead by Charles Terrana. While the Hamilton Racalmutesi again sang *Maria del Monte*, individuals approached the statue for per-



sonal prayer, and to greet the Madonna.

In 2007, I asked Mrs. Graci why it was important to have a statue of the Madonna del Monte in Mexico. She replied in this way:

It's important because she is the patron saint of Racalmuto, and of all the Racalmutesi in Italy, in Canada, and among us now who are on holiday in Mexico. The Madonna is a saint; she helps us. We [...] have a great deal of faith in her, and we are happy to pray to her. We want to be close to her—close to her physically, and in our thoughts.

The Mexican version of the celebration has occurred on a number of occasions since 2004. The celebration of this *festa*, however, depends on how many people are present from year to year, and the participation of key individuals in organizing the activities. It has not always been celebrated in recent years, but people continue to visit the church to pay their respects to the Madonna del Monte.

### Mobility, the Internet, and Information Sharing

For the early Racalmutesi immigrants arriving in Hamilton, it was difficult to communicate regularly with family in Sicily. They relied primarily on the postal service, and the occasional telegram for important news. As the community grew in size, there was always someone either arriving from Racalmuto or returning to Sicily who could deliver mail, small gifts, and other items. The second wave of Racalmutesi immigrants to Hamilton continued this process, with the added advantage of being able to communicate by telephone as well. These various means of communication were used to address not only personal issues, but also to develop and expand links for both the *festa* in Racalmuto and, later, in Hamilton.

A significant development took place in 1996. As part of Hamilton's sesquicentennial festivities, the city set up a live, one-hour satellite connection with Racalmuto during the celebration of the town's annual *Festa del Monte*.

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. (Migliore 2006, 94)

The satellite connection was then made available for individuals to communicate directly with family members. Calogero Milazzo of Hamilton described the proceedings as a type of "cybernetic piazza" where people who had not seen each other in some time were able to greet and chat with one another face-to-face (Migliore 2006, 95).

Today, with the ease of access to the internet, the opportunities to transmit information from place to place have expanded tremendously. The Racalmutesi of both Racalmuto and Hamilton have taken advantage of this new form of mobility to establish an online presence, and to

share information in various ways. Although the two communities remain physically distant, the *virtual distance* between Racalmuto and Hamilton has declined drastically through Facebook, various community Blogs, as well as e-mail and text messaging.

The failure of the Hamilton Racalmutesi to establish a *festa* committee in 2013 served as a powerful reminder that a great deal of work had to be done to ensure the survival of the *festa*. There was a need to: (1) open more channels of communication to promote the celebration; (2) expand the list of *festa* events to draw both individuals and families for secular activities; and, (3) attract more young people to participate in the organizing committee itself. The active use of the internet to share information began under the leadership of Dr. Joseph Rizzo (2014-2016), and it has expanded under the leadership of Joe Curto (beginning in 2016). Today, for example, the *Comunità Racalmutese* of Hamilton posts its annual booklet or related information for the *festa* online, and they provide information on the various *festa* activities through e-mail, their website and other means.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the committee advertises the *festa* through both church and community bulletins, local newspapers, and radio spots. Of particular importance for the theme of this paper is the social media group, *Hamilton Racalmutese Community*, the *festa* committee established not only to make announcements and promote the *festa*, but also to allow members to post photos. During the 2019 *festa* celebrations in Hamilton, people also posted short video clips of the procession (and other activities), as they occurred, for immediate access in Hamilton, Racalmuto, and elsewhere. This process of photo and video sharing helps to promote a sense of pride in people's attachment to their cultural and religious identity. And, through the availability of the photos and videos for viewing in Racalmuto, it encourages a celebration of an on-going relationship between the two communities, and a recognition of their shared identity.

## Conclusion

In my view, mobility is intimately linked to all aspects of Racalmutesi identity, and it serves as the key for understanding aspects of *nostos* and nostalgia among the Hamilton Racalmutesi. Mobility plays a major role in the legend of the arrival of the Madonna to Racalmuto, it figures prominently in the *festa* celebrations and, through people's travels, contributes to the establishment of the *Festa del Monte* in other locations. The ability to transmit information quickly and easily also provides an important means of maintaining key virtual links between Racalmuto and Hamilton.

The Hamilton Racalmutesi immigrants traveled across the Atlantic to improve their socioeconomic standing, and to give their children an

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<sup>1</sup> Webpage ([www.racalmutesecomunityhamilton.com](http://www.racalmutesecomunityhamilton.com)); Facebook (@racalmutesecomunityhamilton); Twitter (@HamMariaDelMont), and Instagram(@racalmuteseHamilton2017).

opportunity for success in a new location. They experienced various hardships along the way, and in the early years of their stay in Canada. Some people have returned to Sicily for short visits, while others have never returned to their land of origins. The Hamilton Racalmutesi, as a group, have not experienced *nostos* in the classic sense of a triumphant return to Racalmuto. Their experience of *nostos* involves the creation of a version of Racalmuto in Hamilton—a physical and mental space that allows people to retain a sense of ethnic, cultural, and religious identity linked to Racalmuto, and Sicily, while adapting to and making a life for themselves in the new sociocultural environment.

The Madonna del Monte links Racalmutesi together wherever they may be, and people have established symbols of the Madonna wherever they have gone. Francesca Migliore (2011, 69) of Hamilton, my mother, states this clearly in this excerpt from her *Poesia alla Madonna SS. del Monte*:

Ti abbiamo lasciata nella nostra terra nativa  
 ma ora ti abbiamo trovata  
 nella nostra fede e nella nostra gioia  
 nella terra di tutti gli emigranti in Canada...

Many of the Hamilton Racalmutesi immigrants express their feelings of nostalgia through participation in the *fiesta*, and the celebration of key religious and cultural symbols linked to both the Madonna and Racalmuto. They also aim to share these feelings, symbols, and activities with their children in an attempt to ensure that Racalmuto continues to figure prominently in their collective memory. The *fiesta* brings people together as a community, and it helps them construct and maintain a particular sense of identity—an identity that shares certain key elements—whether they are in Racalmuto, Hamilton, or on vacation in Mexico.

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