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Article abstract

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THE PRECIOUS KNOWLEDGE OF ORAL CULTURES: CONVERGING ANALYSES OF ITALIAN PEASANTRY AND THE HAUDENOSAUNEE FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE. A CASE STUDY

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Summary: This case study documents the ancestral oral knowledge of Italian peasant culture and the Haudenosaunee people in informing an ecologically sustainable land ethic. In preserving the knowledge of their oral traditions and comparing the two oral cultures, humanity gains a deeper understanding into the insight and wisdom of oral stories. These two oral cultures point towards a sustainable and interdependent way of knowing and living on the land that will ensure a healthy and nurturing Earth for future generations.

Introduction

This work reflects on oral interviews conducted in the late 1990s. Although it represents attitudes at this time, this work is still relevant to the reader today. Conducted from an Environmental Studies perspective, this case study demonstrates the connection between two oral cultures and how they can inform a sustainable land ethic to walk this sacred earth more gently.

In today's society, we are faced with a diversity of destructive environmental issues resulting from the permeating economic ideologies that drive the attainment of wealth and power. The capitalistic economic paradigm continues to widen the gap in our physical, emotional, and spiritual connection to the land. What is needed is an environmental ethic which helps people ground their lives in learning from and respecting the land. Who walked the land before us? What are their beliefs and practices? Such questions imply the importance of adopting a historical perspective when trying to form a suitable land ethic. Prior to the European discovery of North America, Southern Ontario was inhabited by diverse groups of Indigenous people. For centuries,

and to this day, there has been an influx of people representative of many cultures from around the world within this region. It is impossible to generalize about the beliefs and practices of the numerous cultures in Southern Ontario. The two cultures of focus will be Italian peasant culture and the First Nations Haudenosaunee people. These cultures have survived primarily by the Elders telling their oral narratives to younger generations. These are two cultures that settled so far apart, yet they come together in this work to offer the reader a new appreciation for their mutual values.

Today, we face the constantly changing pace of the technological global world where oral cultures are being lost, particularly those of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures in Canada. The Ministry of Education has set in place the Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework, which has as its mandate to increase levels of public confidence. Two of its strategies include “building educational leadership capacity and coordination and building capacity to support identity building, including the appreciation of Aboriginal perspectives, values, and cultures by all students, school board staff, and elected trustees.”¹ As a performance measure, this work provides an increased opportunity for knowledge sharing and collaboration to support building capacity. Reflecting on these oral cultures together can help to reteach us how to live as a community in tune with, and respectful of, the patterns of the land. This work supports the mandates of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, specifically number 63, which calls upon Council of Ministers of Education in Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues by building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.² The goals of this work are three-fold: to document the rich oral narratives of Italian peasant ancestral roots for future generations; to develop a deeper understanding of Haudenosaunee culture through oral narratives; and to analyze the points of convergence and divergence between the two oral cultures. This is done in the hope of helping people realize the importance of preserving and learning from the knowledge and practices spoken about in the oral narratives of these two cultures, in our journey to develop a sustainable land ethic.

¹ Aboriginal Education Office, *Ontario First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework*, 22.

² *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 7.

Oral Culture

Bioregionalist Peter Berg says that “a region holds the power to sustain and join disparate people: old ground charged with a common wholeness and forces of long-growing life. All people are within regions as a condition of existence, and regions condition all people within them.”³

Today, primary oral culture in the strictest sense is hard to find, since most cultures have become knowledgeable of writing or have been affected by the technology of writing. Still, to varying degrees, many cultures, even within a pervasive technological world, preserve an oral state of mind through practising the storytelling traditions of orality.⁴ According to Ong, “spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation which engages the body in the process of learning and knowing.”⁵ A foundation based on the life world allows for the assimilation of the natural world as something subjective, close, familiar, and real.⁶ It is evident that this real emotional connection of body, mind, and spirit between humans and the natural world existed within many primary oral cultures.

The literature suggests that the greatest examples of primary oral cultures come from Indigenous people, who continue to maintain oral traditions rooted in the natural world. It is the Indigenous people who are studied to illustrate a way of life rooted in a balanced, harmonious, and closely connected relationship with the natural world. However, this emphasis has led to the oral traditions of other cultures being overlooked in the process of creating a more interdependent, reciprocal, and respectful relationship with the natural world. One culture of particular interest here is that of Italian peasants who have lived rurally throughout Italy. For generations, this culture has continued to maintain its own oral tradition. Thus, it is by analyzing the literature and conducting interviews with elderly Italian people that one can come to understand their relation to the environment as expressed in their oral traditions.

The literature on this oral Italian peasant culture demonstrates an implicit or underlying environmental ethic. An argument will be developed to make this ethic explicit and illustrate the need for this oral environmental

³ As quoted in Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 40.

⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 11.

⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.

⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.

ethic to be maintained and preserved. This will help to acknowledge the importance of cultural continuity in matters of sustainability for Italian peasantry, in both past and present tenses. This environmental ethic has been transformed in practice upon arrival into the New World and urban life in Canada. The ongoing relation to, and respect for, the natural world continues in the daily lives of many Italians living in Toronto. Yet to place the environmental attitudes and practices of Italian people in context, one needs to make a comparison with those of Indigenous people. If society is to consider the environmental ethic of the Italian peasantry, it must somehow reinforce or enhance the precious philosophy and behaviour of Indigenous people.

Indigenous cultures differ in their places of dwelling, relations to the land, and views of the natural world. This diversity is commonly reflected in the recognition of various Indigenous groups. The Indigenous people focused on in this work are the Haudenosaunee, comprising the Six Nations of the Iroquois. Their ancient place of dwelling was upper New York State. A comparison between the lifestyle and philosophy of the Haudenosaunee and Italian peasantry will outline the similarities and differences in relation to the land.

Indigenous people and Italian peasants have continued to maintain their way of life through their oral narratives and the practice of gardening. By gaining a greater understanding of these oral cultures, people within modern paradigms can remember, develop, learn, and practise a more sustainable relationship with the environment. This process begins by finding one's place within an extensive ancestral context of knowledge, as well as through cultural and agricultural practices. By examining the oral cultures of Italian peasants and the Haudenosaunee, it is evident that they will combine to form a more elaborate foundation for the creation of a way of acting, being, and believing connected to and rooted in the natural world.

Italian Oral Traditions

After a wide literature search on the topic of Italian peasantry, no source explicitly outlining the environmental ethic within Italian peasant culture was found. Within the literature, there were some examples that illustrate an underlying environmental ethic of sustainable living. However, to gain a greater understanding of the Italian peoples' relationship to the environment, one needs to examine other sources beyond the available literature. To this end, firsthand sources, namely, living elderly people, were consulted and

interviewed about the oral stories passed on by their ancestors. Discussing these in detail allows the reader to deduce an implicit environmental ethic. Evidently, in order to understand Italian peasants' relationship to the environment, one must begin to examine documented sources regarding agricultural practices, the centre of their way of life.

The literature describing Italian peasant agricultural practices exists for many different regions throughout the country. It is through describing the relevant literature that one can see the connection the Italian peasants had with the land. Although their thought processes are not described in detail, their connection to the land is seen through their actions, specifically their agricultural practices. Italian peasants' lives revolved around an agricultural cycle, ultimately rooted in the seasonal cycles of nature. It is by analyzing their practices with the land that the reader will come to infer an environmental ethic. Thus, it is important to gain a better understanding of the agricultural practices, existing since antiquity, of Italian peasants living in different regions.

Within a particular region in southern Italy called Lucania, simple sustainable agricultural practices have been documented. Since antiquity, farmers here have practiced a simple crop rotation plan. This entails dividing the land in half. On one half, wheat is planted each year during the winter. On the other half of the land, vegetables are planted during spring and harvested in the fall.⁷ Therefore, half of the land is always left unplanted to help restore and maintain the soil's fertility. The typical farm is made up of a variety of plants including figs, oak trees, and olive trees, if the land permits. Interestingly, the farmer cuts off the bottom branches of a variety of trees and feeds the leaves to the oxen or goats, while the women and children gather branches for fuel and collect acorns for the pigs.⁸ Within this region, a sustainable pattern of living is practised by these Italian peasants. This lifestyle helps to maintain the productivity and fertility of the land. This is not the only example of sustainable living documented in written text.

A region not too distant from Lucania, called Apulia, has been described in detail within the literature. The region of Apulia is located in the southeastern end of the Italian peninsula, forming the heel of the "boot." The area of focus is the southernmost quarter of this region, known as Il Salento. Today, it forms the province of Lecce. Since antiquity, the agricultural techniques practised here have been described as "primitive." Fundamentally,

⁷ Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, 50.

⁸ Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, 50.

there is no deep plowing and no rotation of crops. The most important tools are the hoe, known as *la zappa*, and the horse-drawn plow. There is a refusal to use artificial fertilizers; therefore, the peasants rely on the natural manure of horses and goats. The domestic livestock are characterized by the land in the area. Thus, no cattle are maintained, except for donkeys, because there is no land suitable for cattle pasture.⁹

Still today, there is evidence of rural Italian peasants using the agricultural techniques described above. Calimera, one of the more prosperous villages, is inhabited by villagers who have used the terrain to form the basis of their livelihood.¹⁰ Stones were removed from the soil and used to build up the village. It is evident that primitive agricultural techniques helped to make this area prosperous. The learned techniques have made it difficult to over-cultivate the land and inadequately till the land to produce more. In this agricultural area, it is no surprise that “wherein everything depends ultimately on the land, it is inevitable that the land alone should be invested with the values of society.”¹¹ Although the literature provides some insight into the practices of Italian peasantry, firsthand sources were consulted.

Discussions with an elderly Italian couple in Toronto provided a direct source of insight into their way of life in the early twentieth century. For several generations, their understanding of, and relation with, the natural environment has been formed by the oral stories told by their ancestors. To provide some detail about their relation to the land, dialogues with this Italian couple living in Toronto were conducted. The wife, Luisa, is a descendant of the Tomada family, and the husband, Giuseppe, is a descendant of the Fanutti family. The ancestral roots of both families originate from Friuli Venezia Giulia. Friuli is the most northeastern province in Italy. The northern part of the province is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain resulting from the immense and wondrous Alps. The southern part of the province is characterized mainly by lowlands and plains.

The Fanutti couple began their lives in a small rural town in the southern central part of the province, called Mereto di Tomba. The town has less than 1,000 inhabitants. Interestingly, their lives revolved around the seasonal agricultural cycle rooted in the land. It was a difficult, laborious life, from the preparation of the soil to the harvest of the crops. Describing this interview

⁹ Maraspini, *The Study of an Italian Village*, 215.

¹⁰ Maraspini, *The Study of an Italian Village*, 214.

¹¹ Maraspini, *The Study of an Italian Village*, 214.

in detail will allow the reader to gain insight into a historic environmental ethic not formally documented in any text. Thus, by documenting these oral stories, one will come to know the deep connection with and relation to the land of the Italian peasants.

The ancestral knowledge passed on talks about the central importance of the cycles of the moon in their understanding of the natural life cycle. The moon's phases are understood through the language used within the oral stories told by their ancestors. One saying states, "*Gobba a levante, luna calante [...] gobba a ponente, luna crescente.*"¹² This saying illustrates the four phases of the moon. From the full moon, which starts off in the west, the moon decreases in size as it prepares to form a new moon. When the new moon appears in the east, it is in the process of becoming a full moon once again. This cycle usually takes place once a month. Furthermore, in their Furlan dialect, this is referred to as the *lunario*. Translated, this refers to "the moon," a way of life dependent on the cycles of the moon. The cycles of the moon dictated the best time for seeding, harvesting the crops, raising the livestock, and many other daily activities. Seeding should always occur after the full moon during the waning stages when the moon is disappearing. Stories tell of seeds growing in quantity during the waxing stages and seeds growing taller and healthier in quality during the waning stages of the moon. Once early spring arrived, identified through the scent in the air and the clouds in the sky, it was time for the agricultural cycle to begin.

In early spring, the fields and family garden needed to be prepared. For the first few years, the flat land was difficult to work on as it was covered by a thin layer of gravel. Some soils were more fertile while others were very poor, but one did the best one could. Nonetheless, before the soil was turned, manure from farm animals, namely cows and oxen, was spread over the land. Mixing it into soil would increase the soil's fertility and productivity. However, the difficult part was yet to come. The manual plowing of the fields and garden by the oxen required many long hours and days. Oxen were used to carry the plow in the wagon and carry the manure of the farm animals to the fields. The plowing and the oxen were shared with two or three other close families. All of them worked together to support each other and help ease the burden. It was a community working together to survive. After the preparation of the land was complete, the planting began. A distinction of what was grown in the fields and the family garden will become evident to the reader.

¹² Luisa Fanutti (interview).

In the large fields called *campi*, each large tract of land, approximately two acres in size, was worked for agricultural purposes. The *campi* were located anywhere from a short walk away on the outskirts of the town to as far as a fifteen-minute ride by horse and buggy. Different soil conditions dictated what was grown by the land. The staple crops included wheat, corn, sunflowers, and potatoes, as well as tobacco. Each crop was planted at a specific time of the year as the couple maintained an intimate knowledge of the plants.

Wheat, the main crop, was planted in November and harvested in June. Wheat was the last crop to be planted because it was grown during the winter months. The wheat was grown and ground at the local mill into flour once a year. Luisa recalled being taught as a young child about the different grains of flour. The first quality was the white four used for fresh oven-baked bread and sweets. The second and third qualities were darker brown in colour, namely bran flour, which was used for livestock and poultry feed. These qualities contained high levels of proteins and vitamins, helping to fatten the livestock to produce milk, meat, and eggs.

Not only was wheat vital but so too was corn. In contrast to wheat, corn was planted in April. If the preserved seeds from the previous year were still viable, they would be used; otherwise, new seeds would be purchased at the food market. Corn seeds were planted individually in straight rows by hand. In September, the corn stocks were removed and de-cobbed by hand. The kernels were placed in the sun to dry before being brought to the mill. Corn served two purposes. First, corn was milled into corn flour, used to make *polenta*, a traditional and nutritious dish eaten daily at meals as a substitute for bread. Another by-product of corn was livestock feed called *semola*, formed by mixing corn with other natural ingredients in the mill. The livestock feed was consumed by chickens, pigs, and rabbits.

Along with corn, the growth of sunflowers was essential to their livelihood. Sunflower seeds were stored from the previous year and planted one by one in the spring. They were planted in places where there was ample sunlight to ensure proper growth. At harvest time in September, the sunflower was cut off from the plant, and the seeds were removed and sun-dried. They were crushed with a stick and the shells were separated. The seeds were then brought to the distillery for the extraction and production of oil used for cooking.

Another essential crop grown was potatoes, a main staple for their diet. Potatoes were suited to the climate and soil conditions of the region, allowing them to grow plentifully. The potatoes were planted individually in April and

cultivated in late September. The potatoes were washed and sun-dried for a short period of time. They were stored as a source of food for most of the winter. Potatoes were served in various ways, including baked, boiled, and fried.

Not only were the fields used for wheat, corn, sunflower, and potatoes but tobacco was also a very important crop for the couple. The tobacco grown was of first quality, called *Brenta*, a store-bought variety. The tobacco seeds were seeded one by one in March. In early May, the tobacco plants were transplanted about eighteen inches apart because of the expected large leaf growth. The plants needed to be tended once or twice by removing the outer dried, rotten leaves to allow for healthier growth. In August, the tobacco plants were ready for harvest. The good leaves were removed from the plant and left to dry in the sun for days. From these, the healthy golden yellow leaves, called *gialoro*, were chosen and packaged into bags. They were brought to the food market and traded for money. Thus, the fields were planted with wheat, corn, sunflowers, potatoes, and tobacco crops to help the family survive.

The family garden was also central to their lives. The family garden was located two houses away to the west of their home near a stream called *Il Corno*. This garden was plowed every spring and fertilized by cow manure. The vegetables planted included peas, cucumbers, winter radicchio, beans, lettuce, spinach, and onions. It was tended every day by Luisa with the help of their younger children. The children were responsible for carrying the water from the stream in buckets to water the vegetables. However, this stream was not their source of water for the larger crops; for these, they were dependent on God's providence for rain. Overall, the garden was a very important daily source of food for the family. These vegetables were not traded for money as they were a source of subsistence for the family.

Surrounding the garden were long rows of grape vines. Giuseppe remembers his hours spent in March pruning and caring for the vineyard to ensure a good yield of grapes used for making his own wine. Luisa recalled a saying that expresses these important practices: "*Se non vuoi la botte vuota – in marzo taglia e pota.*"¹³ At the end of September, wine was made with the cooperation of neighbouring families. Both the children and adults were involved in this process. The children tended to harvest the grapes, carefully hand-picking them by gently breaking the clusters from the vine. The adults completed the actual winemaking, a laborious week-long process. Wine was transferred twice into barrels, once in December and a second time in early

¹³ Luisa Fanutti (interview).

spring. Wine was transferred when the moon was waning on a warm, clear day or night to ensure that the residue or deposit from the wine remained on the bottom, keeping the wine clear.

Undoubtedly, it is clear that the agricultural practices described here indicate a way of life that is based on difficult physical labour and the gifts of nature. There were no artificial fertilizers or unnatural chemicals used in the agricultural process. The land was maintained in its natural form and fertilized in a natural way, using the waste of farm animals. It was a simple way of life rooted in the knowledge of the land, its fertility, its care, and its production. The knowledge of plants and their life cycles was not written in books but was rather told through the oral narratives of their ancestors and practised from a very young age. Most importantly, all the stories tell of praise and thanksgiving to the Good Lord for all of nature's gifts and His many blessings. The position of the Lord is present within all of creation as it is formed by the work of His hands. However, the stories do not only reveal a deep understanding of God's plants but also the animals placed on Earth.

By far, one of the most noteworthy understandings of animals is that of the life cycle of the silkworm. The ancestral knowledge passed on was still fresh in the minds of this couple. Luisa retold this in the form of a story:

The story of the silkworm begins in early summer. Every summer I went to the local market in the town and purchased an ounce of silkworms. They were carefully placed in a small tray and put on the third floor of our house, in a room called *il solar*, known as the solarium. For about four to five weeks, the work to care for these animals was exhausting and time consuming. The silkworms only ate dried leaves from the mulberry tree. In order to grow at a fast rate, the silkworms needed to be fed every two to three hours, day and night. They ate continuously. The silkworms had to go through four important life stages to grow healthy. Each of the four stages is characterized by careful changes in the food preparations. In the first stage, the silkworms were very small and they needed to be fed finely chopped mulberry leaves. After a week, the first skin was shed by the silkworms. This was followed by the second stage of their life, in which the leaves were cut into quarters. The third stage was marked by shedding of their skin a second time indicating that they were to be fed larger half-sizes of leaves. Finally, after the skin was shed for the last

time, the silkworms, three inches in size, were carefully placed on the floor. Then, they were fed smaller branches from the tree for about seven or eight days. When the silkworms turned yellow in colour, bundles of tied hay were placed in the solarium. In these hay bundles, the silkworms crawled in and spun a net where they attached themselves. The time had come for the silkworms to form a cocoon. After a few days, they had finished spinning the silk. To protect the cocoon from being broken by the silkworm, the bundles were baked in water to kill the silkworms. The silk was brought to the market to trade for other goods or money. However, not every year was successful because some summers were too hot or too dry. This did not provide adequate climatic conditions for the health and survival of the silkworms. This complex and profound knowledge of raising silkworms was passed on from my ancestors. They had learned and gained an understanding of the life cycle of these animals and passed it on to us. It was a vital piece of knowledge for our survival.¹⁴

The deep understanding of the life cycle of the silkworm illustrates the centrality these animals had in the lives of these Italian peasants. The life cycle of the silkworm had been passed on orally for generations. Consulting the encyclopedia, the story told corresponds to what has been documented in written texts. Italian peasants lacked written text and depended on oral language. As a people, they came to understand the life cycle of the animals, perhaps using observations for years. The extensive knowledge of silkworms documented is exemplary of their understanding of the natural life cycles of other animals. Other animals central to their survival were cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, and oxen. Each of the animals was raised with care and respect, relying on knowledge of the stages of their life cycles. Most of the animals were raised as a source of nourishment or, in the case of oxen, for plowing the fields. Thus, the lore of their ancestors emphasized an understanding of the animals' life cycles and limits of the land.

Italian peasants' understanding of the land is supported by their practice of trade within the region. The goods that could be grown for trade were determined by the conditions of the land within the inhabited region. In the southern lowland plains area of Friuli, where the Fanutti couple lived, the

¹⁴ Luisa Fanutti (interview).

soil conditions were best suited for wheat, corn, sunflowers, and potatoes. In the norther part of Friuli, the mountainous Alps region, different staple crops, including chestnuts, nuts, and apples, were grown because of the colder climate and diverse soil conditions. To trade such goods, women and children would travel for days down the steep mountain slopes to the small towns. They travelled by foot, carrying homemade woven baskets on their backs and pulled carts full of goods behind them. The Fanutti couple recalled that each year in late October or early November, towards the end of the big harvest, villagers from the mountains came to their town. Local townspeople exchanged their wheat and corn for a negotiated number of chestnuts, nuts, and apples. Trade allowed them to attain food products that could not be grown in the immediate local environment. The products were traded in large quantities and stored as food for the winter in the cold cellar. Chestnuts were a traditional delicacy, eaten between the months of November and January. They were roasted over the open fire for special family gatherings and social visits, including Christmas, the Epiphany, and Easter. Thus, it is evident that their practice of trade illustrates the peoples' understanding of the local environment and limitations and resources.

Sadly, these oral recounts brought the couple back to one of the most difficult life choices they had to make. Following the Second World War, the Italian couple recalls the economic hardships, high unemployment, and poverty within their homeland. Their future was bleak. Letters from friends persuaded the couple to immigrate to the West in search of a better life. In 1956, Giuseppe left his family behind and set out on a journey to Canada. The letters he sent home described the hardships and loneliness he felt living in the new place. Thankfully, through savings and hard work in the construction sector, he was able to have his family make the trip to join him. In December of 1958, his wife and five children were reunited with him. After this move, they could not help but remember the pain and suffering they felt leaving their family and homeland behind. Their first place of settlement was the Dufferin and St. Clair area in Toronto. The transition from a small town to a large, developing, urban city was difficult. Life was no longer focused on independent agriculture because they rented the top floor of a house, and they owned no land. Moreover, there was no room for domesticated animals. In Toronto, one could not help but become dependent on the marketplace for food. Meat and other products were purchased at the local corner food markets. To survive in this new city, the family was forced to work difficult manual-labour jobs. Life no longer included the daily chores of tending the

large-scale agricultural fields and livestock. However, as time passed, they managed to have a communal garden plot, followed by a garden of their own. Indeed, the art of gardening remained so important in applying environmental knowledge.

Gardening continues to be a central part of life for three main reasons. First, gardening is a practice that is part of their culture and thus a part of who they are. They are immigrants from Northern Italy and they were brought up by their relatives who spent most of their days working in the large fields. As children, they learned to plow, plant, water, and harvest the crops. The garden seems to be a “landscape full of meaning, one that has answered their wishes.”¹⁵ Gardening allows them to use the skills and knowledge they have learned from their ancestors. Although they found the land and climate different in Canada, their past experiences gave them the knowledge to come to know the soil, how to care for different vegetables, and what the present soil conditions could grow. Second, the garden allows them to eat naturally grown products, which are healthier, fresher, and tastier than those purchased at a store. Luisa commented, “At least we know that our products are not grown with chemicals or pesticides.”¹⁶ They practice organic farming because they refuse to use unnatural fertilizers or chemicals. Lastly, gardening is important for economic reasons. Food grown in the backyard is less expensive. The garden usually produces vegetables throughout the summer, allowing one to preserve vegetables for winter.

The process of gardening begins in the spring and ends in the early winter months. This is the story of their garden, broken into the four seasons as observed within Toronto.

In the early spring, usually the first week of May, it is important to watch the earth’s patterns to determine when the conditions are right to start preparing the garden. Giuseppe is responsible for turning the soil in the garden by hand, without the use of machine-powered devices. The soil is raked until it becomes fine and smooth. After the plot has been prepared, it is time to take out the seeds collected from last year’s harvest. These are shared among relatives, which brings the family closer as another garden season arrives. Some of the vegetables that are planted are raised within the house and others are purchased from local greenhouses. The day of planting is usually around Victoria Day long weekend. The couple takes charge of planting, as

¹⁵ Pollan, *Second Nature*, 22.

¹⁶ Luisa Fanutti (interview).

they know how much space to leave and will seed the vegetables by spreading the seeds evenly. This is followed by carefully watering the seeds, often with cloth sacs on top to ensure warmth and soaking for growth. As the plants begin to grow, it is important to water the plants weekly, tie the tomatoes to sticks, and put in place tall, strong fallen branches to allow for the cucumbers and beans to grow upwards. By the end of spring, the garden is flourishing with “greenness.”

As the summer approaches, more time is spent in the garden as it is a very demanding task. Due to the hot and humid summers, the key to maintaining a healthy garden lies in watering it on a daily basis. Early in the morning or late in the evening, time is taken to water the garden. During the mid-afternoon, the sun evaporates the water too fast as the soil and plant temperature is very warm. Thus, there is a greater difference between the temperature of the cold water and the temperature of the plant. To avoid this problem, a bin is filled with water every morning so that the water will warm with the sun’s heat for the evening. To water, they use a fine spray or watering can with a fine nozzle so as not to flatten or uproot the plants. Moreover, there are the weeds in the summer. Every year there are more and more weeds in the garden, but one must be able to recognize what they look like. A lot of time is spent removing the weeds, but they have come to accept the fact that weeds are part of the garden. There are several vegetables, inclusive of cucumbers and spring lettuce, that are ready early. The tomatoes require tending, as the extra shoots from the main stem are broken off to ensure the plant grows well. One vegetable of note is the lettuce, called *insalata*, the leaves of which are cut with scissors or a knife from a section, rotating through the patch as each section regrows for harvesting again.

As fall approaches, great joy arises in harvesting the vegetables. There is a feeling of thanks that is felt as God has allowed a wonderful and plentiful bounty of food. The growth of a seed to a plant is a natural and spiritual process. Almost every weekend in the fall, fresh vegetables are preserved for the winter, with the leftover scraps being buried in the garden for renourishment. Moreover, one must know how to collect seeds from the vegetables for next year. First, the plants need to be allowed to produce flowers and bloom. Second, in each bloom, seeds are formed. Third, the flower dies, and the seeds have to ripen. Fourth, the seeds are collected and left to dry in the sun. Fifth, the seeds are stored in a dry place. There is one vegetable that is grown, winter radicchio, which must be exposed to the first few frosts and then protected from the cold with a thick layer of polyethylene plastic or canvas.

Interestingly, when the radicchio leaves are cut, the roots are left behind as they will resprout in the following spring, keeping its promise “that the return of every spring of the earth’s first freshness would never be kept if not for the frost and rot and ripe death of fall.”¹⁷

Winter is welcomed as this provides the couple with a period of relaxation. The garden lies dormant until spring arrives for the start of a new agricultural season.

The last question posed to the Fanutti couple was, “Does the garden help to foster a relationship between nature yourselves; if so, how?” Their response provides the reader with valuable insight into their relationship to the natural world. To summarize, the garden is a place where they can be in tune with and respect the cycle of nature taking place in the garden and more broadly in the natural world. It allows them the opportunity to take care of living things, the garden plants. The art of gardening allows them to continue practising the ways of their Italian ancestors. Nature and culture work together to allow them to feel a sense of wholeness. It is their wilderness. Michael Pollan sums this up best by saying, “it is the garden that gives most of us our direct and intimate experience of nature – its satisfactions, fragility and power.”¹⁸

Overall, it is important for the reader to understand the purpose of this interview. This elderly couple began their lives in a small rural town in the early 1900s and, in the mid-1950s, began their life in urban Toronto. Have their lives undergone changes with respect to their relationship to the natural world? Their lives continue to be centred around the agricultural seasonal cycle, year after year. Their agricultural practices changed from large-scale farming to small-scale personal gardening. Today, the foods grown no longer include wheat, sunflowers corn, and potatoes. The main reason for this is that they no longer raise livestock, and these foods are relatively inexpensive at local farms. What is grown in the garden? It is not very different from the family garden grown back in Italy. It is used primarily to grow a variety of green vegetables. They now grow eggplants, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, and onions. Luisa seemed disturbed because today’s society does not cultivate food in a natural way. She was disappointed by the fact that the products offered in the store are imported and are mixed with preservatives, artificial flavours, and growth hormones. These are the reasons why they held onto gardening. In conclusion, evidently, the reader can see that the

¹⁷ Pollan, *Second Nature*, 77.

¹⁸ Pollan, *Second Nature*, 4.

environmental relationships of this Italian couple have changed over eighty years. One can acknowledge that their lives in Italy and in Canada centred around the agricultural cycle. Although new technologies have been developed, their belief in and practice of natural farming methods has positive impacts on the environment. This precious ancestral knowledge has been passed on for generations and it is important they teach what they know to the family. A relationship founded on the principles of interdependence, bioregionalism, and spirituality with the natural world forms the basis of the Fanutti couples' relation to the natural world.

Having considered one's cultural ancestral roots allows one to begin to understand where one's attitudes and beliefs towards the environment originate from. Finding oneself living in a new land leaves a new spectrum of knowledge to be considered. Who inhabited the land on which the Fanutti couple now lives? How did they shape the land? How different are one's cultural practices to those of these other people? What beliefs and practices help to demonstrate their relationship with the land?

One cannot be overwhelmed by trying to come to a complete understanding of the land on which one resides. To narrow the focus, it would be valuable to gain insight into another culture that is also dependent on passing down precious knowledge through oral narratives. Several diverse Indigenous peoples have dwelled within the region of Southern Ontario. Are the beliefs and practices of these Indigenous people in some way connected to those of the Italian people already discussed? One needs to gain insight to unravel this question.

Orality in Haudenosaunee Culture

Long before the discovery of the Americas, Indigenous peoples moved and settled, leaving their footprints on much of the land. The Americas encompass such a large land mass that it would be ineffective to generalize about the experiences of the Indigenous people who have lived in the area. To ground oneself, to understand that place informs one's ethics, particular reference will be made to Southern Ontario. Reference to Indigenous peoples living in this area helps to provide a more solid understanding of the place where Italian people have located themselves. It is through the rich oral narratives of Indigenous people that one can begin to understand how they have shaped and interacted with the land prior to the settlement of these Italian immigrants. Without a doubt, one must not overlook the Indigenous, who

continue to dwell in the land several centuries after European settlement. One must recognize that there are many diverse Indigenous peoples that continue to flourish within the region in our present-day society.

Within Southern Ontario, there is a wide spectrum of Indigenous people who continue to live on reserves as well as in towns, cities, and metropolitan areas. One of the first names that comes to mind when one is asked to think of an Indigenous people of Southern Ontario is the Haudenosaunee. The Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, refers to a federation of six nations, including the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, and Seneca, that once occupied upper New York State.¹⁹ One can see how the word Haudenosaunee is a categorization of different nations of Indigenous people. This is disturbing because one cannot generalize about the experiences and beliefs of these six nations. The oral narratives of members from within one nation may be quite distinct from a member within another nation. To document the oral narratives of the Indigenous people, it would be important to focus on a particular nation. The nation selected is one of these six nations, the Mohawk.

Prior to my interviews with a member of the Mohawk people, little research on this culture was available. This allowed for true self-immersion into the powerful oral narratives of the Mohawk, which speak of the peoples' relationship to the land. To begin to understand the precious knowledge within oral narratives, it would only be sensible to have an open dialogue within a living member of the Mohawk people. One member willing to share her knowledge, Michelle Froman, attended the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her ancestry is rooted in the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve located near the city of Brantford, a thirty-minute drive west of Hamilton in the region of Southern Ontario. The Six Nations are reflective of the aforementioned Iroquois Confederacy, and the Grand River is the natural waterway signifying where the Mohawk land is located.

Her story begins with a historical perspective of how her people's reserve originated. In the past, between the 1770s and 1800s, a Mohawk by the name of Joseph Brant formed an allegiance with the English. There was a division amongst the nations to join forces with the English, the French, or to remain neutral. Some nations ended up supporting the English or the French and others did not participate in the raging battles at all. As a result of

¹⁹ Michelle Froman (interview).

the divisions amongst the Indigenous people, conflict arose in the longhouse. Nonetheless, countless battles were fought. As the battles came to an end, the English, known as the Americans, were victorious. As a repayment of the support of the Haudenosaunee, the English granted the people the reward of freely selecting a place for their service. The original treaty signed by both parties documented a reserve encompassing territorial boundaries extending the entire length of the Grand River, including six miles on either side of its banks, near the town of Brantford. Today, due to increased settlement and government policies, the reserve has been reduced to a smaller size.

The Mohawk people are known as the Haudenosaunee, people of the longhouse.²⁰ It is this type of dwelling which characterizes the Mohawk people. Settlement on the reserve was set up in a circular formation of longhouses with an open area in the middle. The longhouse was made from trees and bark with a shingle-look finish on the outside. In the central open area, the people gathered to share public news and to hold special ceremonies. It was known as the “common area.” In the area surrounding the longhouse settlement, called the *palisade*, there were large wooden tree trunks carved with sharp pointed edges. They were erected as a protective barrier from other invaders. Each *palisade* had a lookout post which would be guarded at all times to signal any impending danger. Several *palisades* were located within the region. Their community infrastructure is reflective of their societal organization.

The Mohawk people were grounded in a matrilineal societal structure. The Clan Mother was given the authority to make decisions regarding civil matters. She led both the males and females within these decisions. Evidently, the matrilineal structure was practised within the longhouse, where over fifty families would live together. When a woman married a man, he would come live in the house of his wife’s mother. When the couple gave birth to a son or daughter, the child was seen as belonging to the mother. For the male child, this resulted in the uncle, brother, or male cousins on the mother’s side taking on the role of his father. The father was granted greater responsibility for his child only when the child entered manhood. On the other hand, the females were nurtured and remained close to their mother throughout their lives.

Other members of the nation who symbolize power are the Chiefs. Within each settlement, there was a Chief who was a male. The decision making among the Mohawks involved the formation of a council of people. It was

²⁰ Michelle Froman (interview).

a true democracy. Decisions were not carried out unless everyone came to a consensus. At times, decisions could be reached within the span of a few days or after several years. The Mohawk people worked cooperatively as a society, yet it is their relation to the land that informs their beliefs and practices as a people.

The Mohawk are a people who follow the agricultural seasonal cycle. They see the year divided into four seasons and thirteen months. The thirteen-month calendar is rooted in the cycles of the moon. As a people, they have come to know that there is a full moon approximately every twenty-eight days. This knowledge allows them to let the cycles of the moon act as their source of time and helps them to better recognize the processes occurring within the natural life cycle. This seasonal cycle is verified by the link it shares with the turtle's back. On a turtle's back, the shell is divided into thirteen parts. The turtle is a physical manifestation of their connection with their spiritual beliefs. Within the oral narratives, the turtle is a symbolic animal representative of how the world was formed and its processes.

As a people, the Mohawk are highly dependent on agriculture for their survival. The Mohawk continue to pass on knowledge rooted in understanding and respecting the land in which they dwell. Pieces of land or crops are set aside for agricultural production. The tracts of land are not far from the settlements. Crops are planted in mounds, large or small hills of soil. The food staples of the Mohawk people reflect what they ate and the spiritual beliefs of the people. Traditionally, the Mohawks ate three main food staples: beans, squash, and corn. These three crops were planted together within a mound. These three crops are known as "The Three Sisters." Spiritually, these people believe that the spirits within these crops get along very well together. Through oral narratives one learns about the reciprocal, interdependent, spiritual, and biological relationship between the crops. What is significant is the nitrogen exchange process that takes place throughout the lives of the plants. Corn depletes certain nutrients in the soil and, in turn, beans and squash renourish the soil. It is a cyclical relationship that maintains the fertility of the soil over a longer period. After ten to twenty-five years, the Mohawk people would resettle to another fertile area.

To supplement these agricultural food staples, the people relied on hunting animals. The men were responsible for large game hunting, including deer and moose. Women also participated through the small game hunting of rabbits. The practice of hunting took place primarily in the fall. At this point, the reader may be wondering, what are the beliefs underlying these

practices? Through oral narratives, one comes to learn of the Mohawks' understanding of the natural cycle. Mating occurs in the spring, which may lead to conception and birth of new life. After birth, the young need the attention and support of the Elders to teach them how to survive within their environment. Having raised their young to be more independent by the fall season, a Mohawk is granted the right to hunt the animals. It is a protective measure which ensures that they do not interfere with the natural cycle.

As a people, they rely on agriculture and hunting as the two primary methods of ensuring an adequate supply of dietary sustenance. The Mohawks settled within an area characterized by the very cold, snowy, and fierce winters. On the other hand, they also experience very warm and humid summers. How did the Mohawk manage to maintain an adequate food supply? The Mohawk have an intricate methodology for food preservation passed on through generations. Before meat from the animals could be stored, it was dried out in the sun on wooden tracks. Another important food staple, corn, was prepared before it could be stored. One example involves drying out the corn in the open air by removing all the kernels from the cob. A tool used to grind corn is called a pestle. After the food was prepared for preservation, it was stored. Interestingly, the "refrigerator" for the Mohawk people was the ground. The Mohawk people dug small holes in the ground and stored food there. For example, in the winter, the temperature in the longhouse was too warm due to the fires. The colder ground and insulation of the snow from frost provided a better storage place for the foods. The storage, hunting, and agricultural practices of the Mohawk people provided the means for their trade.

Prior to colonization, the Mohawk people traded in large-scale amounts with European settlers, primarily the Dutch. Trade allowed for the Mohawks to extend their dietary food staples to include food and minerals not available within their place of dwelling. Mohawks offered the skins of animals, meats, and food staples in exchange for garments, beads, copper, and other foods. Much of the trade occurred to satisfy aesthetic and spiritual purposes for the people. The primary methods of transportation for trade were either by foot or by canoe. The primary destinations for trade were in Upper New York State. Trade occurred between other Indigenous Nations and European settlers.

To find one's way to the trading partners required an extensive understanding of the geographical land region. For example, there are river networks, including the St. Lawrence River and Mohawk River, to name a

few, which had to be travelled for successful trade. Trade involved an understanding of the markings on the land that signaled where one was located in relation to one's home and destination. This complex, detailed description and understanding of one's environment was passed on to the generations through oral narratives. By listening to the stories of the Elders, they were able to voyage out on the journey, confident in their rich understanding of the larger region within which they dwelled.

Within these oral narratives, the spiritual connection to the natural world is a very important driving force in the lives of the Mohawk people. Their spiritual foundation is very complex and intricate. To capture part of the spiritual dimension of the Mohawk people, it would be valuable to reflect on what they eat. In addition to the three main food staples already discussed, another important food they consumed is strawberries. The reader will become enlightened by this recount of the oral narrative about the sacredness of the strawberry by understanding its historical significance.

When the world was being created, sky woman was falling through the sky. She did not want to leave her celestial home so she tried with all her might not to fall through the hole. She tried to grab something to help her climb back up. What she grabbed onto were the roots and the branches of the strawberry plant. Despite her efforts she fell through the hole. She was alone in the world of water. Together with the help of diverse animals, she helped to create the world on the back of a turtle.²¹

According to the Victorian calendar, the Mohawk people celebrate the celestial gift of strawberries through the "Strawberry Festival" in June. Strawberries represent the link between the celestial world, from which sky woman fell, to the earth. Also, strawberries are closely linked to the spiritual dimension within females. As a result, at the festival, little girls are often given spiritual names. The names given to the girls are those of their deceased ancestors. If a family wishes to use a name existing within another family, a basket must be placed in front of the longhouse door of the family from which the name is being taken. However, the family whose name has been taken can reclaim it back by placing the basket in front of the longhouse. The Strawberry Festival is only one of the important ceremonies that take place on a yearly basis.

²¹ Michelle Froman (interview).

Changing seasons from late summer to fall to winter, the Mohawk people prepare for another important ceremony. For generations, it has become known as the Mid-Winter Ceremonies, which take place in January. This ceremony marks the time of renewal, requiring all people to settle outstanding matters or issues within the longhouse. To help understand the complexity of this ceremony, one needs to become knowledgeable of the different societies that have been formed amongst the Mohawk people. The most prominent societies that exist are known as the Eagle Feather, False Face, and Corn Huskers. Perhaps the following oral narrative will help the reader to understand the origins of these societies.

A long time ago, the Creator was going around the earth creating all living and non-living things. To his surprise, he bumps into someone else. Each being started to argue with the other one because they both introduced themselves as the Creator. To prove to each other who was better, they agreed to enter a dual. Each tried to beat the other by causing natural phenomena (i.e., volcanic eruption, earthquakes). During the argument, one of the men moved a mountain. It followed that when the other being turned around he smashed into the mountain with his face. His face was left badly injured and quite distorted. This became known as False Face. False Face begged the other to have mercy on him. The other would have mercy on False Face only if he agreed that the other man was the Creator. And that he would take upon the responsibility of caring for the Ongwanohsioni people when they are sick. False Face accepted this on the grounds that the people hold special ceremonies, which he laid out, in his honour. The ceremony was to celebrate and recognize the help offered by False Face to the Mohawk people. He wanted to be respected through the offering of tobacco and corn, so he could feed the spirit which would give him strength to continually help the Mohawk people.²²

False Face society was symbolized through the wooden masks people wore. The design of the masks would arise within the dreams of males. The masks were carved out of a living tree. Under these wooden masks, there

²² Michelle Froman (interview).

would be two types of masks: a red one to symbolize the day and a black one to symbolize night. They were decorated with black hair and over time copper was used for the eyes. The False Face embers would be requested by families to help heal people when they were sick. The men would wear these wooden masks to represent False Face. Moreover, the False Face society was aided by the Corn Huskers, a more feminine spiritual entity related to agriculture. They were more involved with the nurturing of people. Corn Huskers would also wear masks shaped with different facial expressions. For example, one mask was shaped with puffed cheeks with the mouth open, known as a Blower. The Blowers oversaw blowing the sickness away through the use of ashes. During the healing ceremonies, others would guard the doorways of the longhouse from any visitors.

The two ceremonial celebrations discussed above are only a few examples of the many that are practised by the Mohawk people. Other celebrations recognized the other events that take place within the four seasons, for example the bountiful harvest. Ceremonies were a time when the people gathered and participated in rituals passed on from many generations ago. Ceremonies reflected the spiritual belief that the natural world encompassed spirits and forces which they as a people honoured and respected. Ceremonies were a time to recognize and give thanks to the wonders of the earth, which ultimately sustain all life.

To document historical ceremonial practices, agreements, and other significant occurrences, the Mohawk relied on the creation of wampum belts. These sacred wampum belts were a record of their knowledge and history as a people. They were also utilized as a legal document because of the laws and beliefs that they detailed. Wampum belts involved the use of large, thick shells from which they would carve out individual beads. The diverse colours of white, pink, and dark purple beads carved from the shell were used to convey a message and contribute to the decorative value of the wampum belts. Wampum belts are carved by hand using stone chisels. They require a great deal of artistic talent and patience. However, one must recognize that the wampum belts are a permanent record to capture and present the precious knowledge of generations past.

Most of the precious knowledge is passed on through the oral narratives of the living Elders within the Mohawk people. The Elders are seen as the “beholders of knowledge.” They are the wise ones with whom many people consult in their time of indecision and imperil. One important source of knowledge they hold involves knowing full well the medical properties

of various plants. Some documented examples were available to be included within the interview, while other medicinal remedies had become lost over the generations for fear that they could be claimed by other individuals or companies. Nonetheless, the Elders are described as those who had “lived the most, seen the most, and who were wise.”²³ Yet to become an Elder, one had to pass through various life cycles. Ceremonies would take place to celebrate the passage of females and males to adulthood. The passing of knowledge was respective to the age of the individuals. As one grew older, one became more knowledgeable of one’s identity and place. One common saying among the people is “all my relations.” This short phrase is reflective of the belief that although one’s ancestors have passed on in their physical form, their spirit continues to be manifested and carried within their living family members. Their spiritual guidance and wisdom will continue to live through the generations through the recounting of their ancestral oral narratives.

Overall, this descriptive presentation of the oral recounts of a Mohawk woman is very insightful and enlightening. Its documentation does not provide a complete understanding of the environmental beliefs, attitudes, and practices of the Mohawk people. However, it does provide a very informative starting point to begin to understand the precious environmental knowledge captured within oral narratives.

The two preceding sections provide the reader with the documentation of oral narratives resulting from the culmination of lived experiences. Both peoples continue to live within the Southern Ontario region. Those interviewed are representatives of two cultures who have shaped, and continue to shape, the land on which many people now live. They are part of the story embedded within this land. However, one could assume that these cultures are distinct in their beliefs, attitudes, and relationships with the land. Through extensive research, it has become evident that the two cultures have seldom been considered within the same piece of literature. Yet to develop a way of living rooted in the land, it is vital to come to some understanding of these two cultures.

To gain insight into these two cultures, these firsthand recounts from the people provide a solid foundation to begin to understand their relationship with the environment. Evidently, one needs to develop some type of framework to compare environmental practices, attitudes, and beliefs. Through analysis, the points of convergence and divergence will become

²³ Michelle Froman (interview).

apparent. What is a useful framework for this analysis? After much thought, the framework chosen is that outlined within Kirkpatrick Sale's book entitled *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*. Although Sale's book focuses on a bioregional environmental ethic, the discussion to follow is not grounded in proving that the two cultures are or are not bioregional. Rather, it is a framework which will help one come to some understanding of how the two cultures shape the land that people now make their home.

Sale divides his approach into four main sub-categories, including knowing the land, learning the lore, developing the potential, and liberating the self. The descriptive oral narratives will be considered within these four broad categories.

Clearly, one must choose a starting point: knowing the land. Sale provides examples of knowing the land by simply stating, "Anyone of us can walk the territory and see what inhabits there become conscious of the bird songs, waterfalls and animal droppings, follow a brooklet to a stream and down to a river, and learn when to set out the tomatoes, what kind of soil is best for celery and where blueberries thrive."²⁴ Ultimately, one is able to understand the carrying capacity of the land. The oral recounts illustrate their knowledge of the land. Both cultures come to learn what agricultural crops are best suited for the soil conditions within their region. Similarly, their lives revolve around agricultural cycles, dictated by the phases of the moon. To ensure a healthy crop, the best time to plant is in the waning stages of the moon. Also, they share similar staple food crops, including corn, beans, and tobacco. The Italian couple's recounts illustrate the greater diversity of food crops grown within the family garden, including potatoes, lettuce, radicchio, and carrots. Both these people allowed the land to dictate what was grown. Moreover, they practised an agricultural method rooted in the maintenance of the fertility of the soil. One can infer that this practice is grounded in the belief that the land has a carrying capacity that one must respect. Natural fertilizers including food or fish scraps and animal manure were used to renourish the soil for the following season.

Their knowledge of the land is also evidenced by their practice of trade. The Italian couple illustrated this through their story of how the women from the mountains would travel by foot in October to trade apples and chestnuts for the food grown on the plains. The Indigenous narratives detail the practice of trading meats and corn for other foods not grown in their region. Not

²⁴ Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 44.

all land was suited for every purpose. They knew where their water came from and how to water the plants. Therefore, they were aware of the different soil conditions, for example, too wet or too dry. They understood what could be grown, where, and at what time of the year. Their lives were rooted and respectful of the regional soil and climate conditions of the land on which they made their home. It follows that this knowledge must have been passed on through the generations.

The second category involves learning the lore of the place. Sale states that “every place has a history [...] But every serious historical and anthropological exploration of their ways and wisdom shows that earlier cultures, particular those well-rooted in the earth, knew a number of important things.”²⁵ Within the Indigenous context, one sees the spiritual connection of the people to the land and their ancestors. There is a great reliance on learning from the wise Elders. The history of their place and people is passed on through the many oral narratives shared through their lives. For example, the creation of the world, the spiritual sisterhood between corn, squash, and beans, and the sacredness of strawberries. The knowledge of medicinal plants within the region is part of their history and wisdom as a people. Their existence is rooted in maintaining a respectful and mutual relationship with the land, based on the principles of cooperation, reciprocity, and interdependence.

Looking at the Italian recounts, we can see that their beliefs are grounded in cooperation, as well as understanding the limits of the land and its patterns. This analysis leads one to believe that their lore is grounded in their spiritual connection to the Creator of Heaven and Earth, God. The choice of crops is not so much grounded in an understanding of their connection but rather is a creation or gift from God. The phrases and sayings of the people capture the lore of the land passed on through generations. These sayings continue to be a mechanism for understanding time and weather patterns. Take, for example, this saying, not yet mentioned: “*Rosso di mattina, la pioggia si avvicina.*” In English, this is translated as, “When the sky has a reddish colour in the morning, rain is near.” One important observation is that the oral Italian recount provides great insight into the preservation of seeds for the following agricultural season as learned from past generations. The methods for collecting seeds are vital for the survival of many plant species which give rise to the food staples of the people year after year. In contrast, the Indigenous people provide the reader with some similar insights through their oral narratives,

²⁵ Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 44.

yet the stories documented do not provide much detail about their preservation methods. The important difference is that the Indigenous people appear to have a more extensive understanding of the medicinal properties of plants. In summary, both peoples understood the lore of the land, yet there exists a difference with regards to the content of the oral narratives. The Indigenous narratives focused on the spiritual connection to the natural world whereas the Italian narratives focused on the vital methods of agricultural practices from the time of planting to the preservation of food for the following agricultural cycles. They do share the overarching similarity of their dependence on understanding the moon to guide their lives. Also, their oral recounts are rich in describing the historical processes that have shaped the land under their feet. The lore of the land is passed on through stories told by the wise and respected Elders. Their lore embodies their ancestors' knowledge, beliefs, and practices with respect to the natural environment. By understanding the lore of the land, one becomes more informed of one's identity and one's place. In turn, this should allow people to come to understand the potential of the region.

Third, Sale describes the importance of developing the potential of a region. He states, "the potential can be realized within the boundaries of the region, using all the biotic and geological resources to their fullest, constrained only by the logic of necessity and the principles of ecology."²⁶ Both the Indigenous and Italian people lived within a region. However, the scales of their boundaries did differ. For the Indigenous, their region included Southern Ontario and upper New York State. For the Italian people, their region included the province of Friuli Venezia Giulia and the Mediterranean area. Although trade occurred, the people proved to be self-reliant within their region.

Self-reliance at the regional level was achieved through an understanding of the soil and the climatic conditions of the land. The environmental practices within the natural world involved using the land to grow food and other crops to ensure survival. They shared their extensive knowledge of what, when, and where crops would be most bountiful. For example, food staples included for the Indigenous people included wheat, corn, squash, beans, and tobacco within their region. For the Italian people, the land was suited to wheat, corn, potatoes, sunflower, and tobacco. Other foods were attained through regional trade. Food grown within other parts of the region was traded to expand the diet of the people. Limiting their diet to crops

²⁶ Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 44.

suitable for the land allowed the soil to remain fertile for many more years. Not only was their understanding of their agricultural cycles vital but so were their soil fertility practices.

Both recounts illustrate the environmental practices of maintaining soil fertility. Both peoples were committed to the growth of agricultural crops in natural ways. Specifically, the Italian people used the waste of their farm animals and food scraps. The Indigenous used scraps of fish, animals, and food scraps. This would not have been termed “composting” by these people, yet this is how we have come to define it today. The soil renourishment practices allowed the carrying capacity of the land to remain constant for many generations. Therefore, the potential of the region was respected by their practices but also by their beliefs in the logic of necessity.

There is a clear parallelism between the Indigenous and Italian people in their belief in necessities. Their agricultural practices involved using the land to its fullest, yet their way of life did not encompass the acquisition of vast amounts of material resources. Their agricultural practices rested on the belief that what and how much was grown would allow the people to survive. Little food was left over at the end of the day. They ate to renourish their bodies, and their diet did not exceed the simple diet available within their region. Growing what one needed to survive, be it for food or for trade, was associated with the belief in the importance of attaining necessities. The material wealth of the rich was out of their reach; thus, their necessities were attained through the land.

Through their rich understanding of the land, people worked together to survive. Land was not abused through chemical fertilizers and other chemical growth agents. What they ate was natural and representative of their hard, manual work. What they ate was part of their very being because food growth involved the tender care and concern of the people. At times, climatic conditions and soil conditions resulted in a poor agricultural season, leaving the people with very little nourishment for the cold winter. They understood that the natural world acted in ways that were beyond the control of humans. Prayers and rituals to the Creator helped the people to get through these tough times. Overall, perseverance and a sound environmental knowledge base allowed for the people to continually develop the potential of the region respective of its carrying capacity.

Lastly, Sale’s fourth category discusses the liberation of self. In developing the land in which one makes one’s home, it follows that the potential of the individual develops simultaneously. Sale states that “by living closer

to the land one necessarily lives closer to the community, able to enjoy the communitarian values of cooperation, participation, sodality and reciprocity that enhance individual development.²⁷ All these values are present in the Italian and Indigenous recounts in one form or another. What follows is a brief analysis of these values within the context of both recounts.

Within Italian peasant culture, cooperation is part of their way of life. To survive, families worked cooperatively. Land was plowed, planted, and harvested with communal effort and the participation of many families. Supplies and tools were shared. The women and children were primarily responsible for tending the fields. Success in agricultural crops involved the cooperation of all members of the household at one time or another. From a very young age, one was expected to help family and friends in the fields. The work was strenuous and back-breaking. Together, the people celebrated religious observances by giving thanks to God for the bounty and gifts from the earth. Parallel to this experience is that of the Indigenous.

For the Indigenous people, the recounts illustrate the notion of cooperation and participation through the decision-making processes as well as other aspects of their lives. Indigenous family structure and ceremonial traditions differ from those of the Italian people. As a people, each member lived communally with others in their longhouse. To get along, cooperation within the longhouse was necessary from all individuals. Together, they participated in ceremonial rituals and practices as a community. They also carved and stitched decorative attire for special festivals in celebration of their connection to, and gratitude for, the gifts of the natural world.

Ultimately, people are participants within the natural world. One can assume that the survival of the people involved the cooperation of the natural world. The natural world encompasses the creators of the natural world, spiritual beings. Together in a respective partnership, the people, the natural world, and spiritual beings worked together to bring the community closer together. What evolves is a reciprocal interdependent relationship. As a community, the people came to understand the cyclical nature of all life. Embodied in the land are the celestial spirits of the creators, their ancestors, and those who now maintain their human form. It is by living closer to the land as a people that they have come to understand the importance of community in their quest to self-actualize themselves as individuals.

²⁷ Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 47.

Knowing the land and being connected to it physically provides that sense of oneness and rootedness experienced by past generations.²⁸ Why must people feel rooted in a place? A philosopher named Simone Weil states that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need for the human soul.”²⁹ A sense of oneness involves a spiritual, emotional, and physical connection to the natural world. The lives of Italian peasants and Indigenous people revolved around their use of the natural world for food, energy, crafts, and shelter. The spiritual connection of the people to the land is evident through their prayers, worship, and ritual ceremonies. Emotionally, the land embodies the wisdom and practices of the ancestors who passed on from this life. The land is their means of survival and their partner for life. Therefore, their self-actualization process was influenced and grounded in their communal relationship with the land.

Conclusion

Sale’s bioregional framework proved to be a useful analytical tool. His framework, based on knowing, learning, developing, and liberating, allowed for the beginnings of a comparative analysis between two cultures who have shaped the land on which we now live. Similarly, the Italian and Indigenous cultures discussed have an intricate understanding of the land. The oral narratives focused on beliefs and practices, thus enlightening the reader with their spiritual connection to the natural world. The lore of the land was grounded in an understanding of the cycles of the moon. The moon is seen as a symbolic representation of the many processes taking place within the natural cycle. By understanding the lore, the people were able to develop the potential of the land, mindful of its limits. This is evidenced in the agricultural practices of the peoples. Without a doubt, Italian and Indigenous lives are rooted in the land. Understanding the relationship of these people within their oral cultures provides a solid foundation for developing an environmental land ethic rooted in sustainability. By developing a deeper understanding of these oral cultures, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s call to action for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect is furthered by enhancing learning and appreciation for Aboriginal cultures. The perspective and values brought forth through these oral cultures provide insightful

²⁸ Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 47.

²⁹ As quoted in Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, 47.

wisdom that is still relevant in serving all humanity to inform an ecological philosophy of sustainability and interdependence on Mother Earth.

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