

## Italian Canadiana

# A Didactic Shift: Indigenous Studies Teaches an Italian Canadian about Being Italian

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Volume 36, Number 2, Fall 2022

Italian Canadians and Indigenous Peoples in Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098678ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v36i2.40628>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (print)

2564-2340 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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Cite this article

Piazza, M. (2022). A Didactic Shift: Indigenous Studies Teaches an Italian Canadian about Being Italian. *Italian Canadiana*, 36(2), 61–85.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v36i2.40628>

### Article abstract

To Indigenous Nations, place is fundamental to one's identity, language, and worldview. More than a geographical location, place reflects a sacred relationship that grounds them in their worldview of inclusivity, equity, and gratitude, and acts as a central role in the formation of identity. Eurocentric ideology is diametrically opposite to Indigenous values and beliefs. This is clearly evident in the Indian Act, a law designed to annihilate Indigenous languages and identity/culture and one that reflects the colonizer's paternalistic and racist ideology. Both Italian Canadians and Indigenous Nations have experienced assimilation and acculturation. Both peoples have confronted the challenges of displacement. Yet, to fully live on this land and solidify our sense of belonging here, Italian Canadians have an obligation to be knowledgeable of Turtle Island's colonial past and in doing so support Indigenous efforts to decolonize.

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# A DIDACTIC SHIFT: INDIGENOUS STUDIES TEACHES AN ITALIAN CANADIAN ABOUT BEING ITALIAN

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MARGHERITA (RITA) PIAZZA

*Toronto, Ontario*

*Summary:* To Indigenous Nations, place is fundamental to one's identity, language, and worldview. More than a geographical location, place reflects a sacred relationship that grounds them in their worldview of inclusivity, equity, and gratitude, and acts as a central role in the formation of identity. Eurocentric ideology is diametrically opposite to Indigenous values and beliefs. This is clearly evident in the Indian Act, a law designed to annihilate Indigenous languages and identity/culture and one that reflects the colonizer's paternalistic and racist ideology. Both Italian Canadians and Indigenous Nations have experienced assimilation and acculturation. Both peoples have confronted the challenges of displacement. Yet, to fully live on this land and solidify our sense of belonging here, Italian Canadians have an obligation to be knowledgeable of Turtle Island's colonial past and in doing so support Indigenous efforts to decolonize.

In English, my name is Rita Piazza, and I am from the region of Molise. In Guardiaregiano dialect, "M chiam Rita Piazza e sing d ru Mulis." In Anishnaabe, "Rita Piazza nin ndizhinikaaz Molise ndoonjii." Molise, Italy, was formerly a part of Abruzzo, and in antiquity, was the land of the Sanniti People, also known by their Roman name, Samnites. I have introduced myself in this way to acknowledge and give respect to the place where I am from, the new culture that I have adopted, and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, on whose land I now live. One of my professors in the Indigenous Studies Department at the University of Toronto taught me to introduce myself in the Anishnaabe way. Indigenous Studies also introduced me to a new worldview, one different to what I had been taught by my family and community, and one that I resonated with and welcomed. This worldview expanded my understanding of not only Indigenous Nations but also my Italian culture and identity. What I learned was unexpected. A silent dialogue ensued, a dialogue that questioned and explored my sense of being Italian. Like many other

immigrants, struggling to live in two worlds was daunting. I straddled the Italian world and the Canadian/English world. Navigating these two worlds can be challenging and impactful; for me, it unsettled my sense of self. I felt split and weakened.<sup>1</sup> The English language was overpowering the Italian dialect spoken at home, and our family dynamics were being challenged. Chaos ruled my internal world until the Indigenous Studies courses elucidated the importance of one's heritage to their sense of belonging. Understanding the interplay between place, language, and identity grounded and solidified my understanding of belonging here, in this place, on this land.

In this article I will use the terms "Canada" and "Turtle Island" interchangeably. I define Indigenous Nations as those who have lived here (Canada and the United States) since time immemorial. A full discussion of residential schools and their intergenerational impact is beyond the scope of this article, but will be referred to when necessary, to clarify issues of assimilation. The word "we" refers either to the colonizers of this land, or specifically to Italian Canadians.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to a dialogue between Italian Canadians and Indigenous peoples. The intention, with respect to both, is to highlight the issues I learned while taking Indigenous Studies courses, which were pivotal to my journey of discovering the ancestral people of my region, and to address the colonization experienced by both peoples, albeit in different times. The resilience of both, in the past and today, to overcome policies of acculturation and assimilation is attributable to the intrinsic relationships between place, identity, and language.

### *Place*

this land is not  
just a platform for my dance  
- Marilyn Dumont, "Not Just a Platform  
for My Dance"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Comellini, "Italian-Canadian Female Voices."

<sup>2</sup> In her poem, "Not Just a Platform for My Dance," Marilyn Dumont (Métis) compares the settlers' view of the land as a resource to exploit to that of Indigenous peoples who understand that the land is alive, respected, and integral to their existence.

### *Where It All Begins*

Place is the origin of self. This is where humans initiate and establish their worldviews, languages, cultures, and identities. Our connection with place is intensified because our relationship with the land we are born on is embedded in our ancestral beginnings. Moreover, place, and the power that it contains, is where the composition of one's personality is formed.<sup>3</sup> This metaphysical understanding provides the conditions for the evolution of values and beliefs to take form in a place, thereby contributing to our humanity and creating culture, identity, and language in and of that place.

The Anishnaabe phrase *Pimachiowin Aki* means "the land that gives life."<sup>4</sup> Through this concept, Indigenous Nations understood the symbiotic relationship between humans and place; they also understood that both the land and everything on the land is alive. The Indigenous worldview identifies place as more than the environment; it is the kernel that gives birth to culture and identity for those who inhabit the place.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, according to Indigenous perspectives, there is no separation between the living and non-living elements of the earth. Life and creation in all their forms are constantly changing, so the relationship between person and land, and all that springs from the land is fundamental and dynamic. Moreover, the Indigenous concept of the "universe" as a living entity is in relation to everything within it, including humans. Hence, as the universe's inhabitants, we are obligated to acknowledge, respect, and participate in that relationship.<sup>6</sup> However, the European imperialistic ideology of place does not recognize this relationship, and so it was with contempt and cruelty that Europeans disrespected and displaced Indigenous Nations.<sup>7</sup>

### *Loss of Place*

Being forcibly uprooted from one's ancestral homeland is both metaphorical-ly and physically a violent act. Uprooting centuries of ancestral relationships

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<sup>3</sup> Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> See "Pimachiowin Aki."

<sup>5</sup> Moore, et al., *How It Is*, 197.

<sup>6</sup> Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> "Historical Background," on the Facing History & Ourselves website, looks at unsettled issues between Europeans and Indigenous Nations, and the stereotypes and definitions that have permeated into settler society.

to a new place requires enormous strength as one's entire history of self, family, and community is torn from its roots. As a diasporic people, Italians, many of whom came from agrarian and pastoral communities, found themselves having to adjust to living in urban centres with a lifestyle unfamiliar to them. Transitioning to an unfamiliar urban environment compelled them to learn new ways to reside in their new place. To assist Italian immigrants, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, established Italian Canadians began to organize themselves and create organizations to help acclimatize newcomers to the country.<sup>8</sup> For example, "in 1952, Italian-Canadians formed the Italian Immigrant Aid Society to assist new Italian immigrants in their transition to Canada, and in the 1960s, the pan-Canadian National Congress of Italian Canadians was established"<sup>9</sup> to unite the various Italian associations by representing their interests in the political arena and contributing to the preservation of Italian culture in Canada. By 1971, there were approximately sixty Italian clubs in Toronto.<sup>10</sup> Villa Colombo, an Italian seniors home built to service the aging Italian Canadian population, and the Columbus Centre Athletic Club, a sport, recreational, and cultural complex, were built in 1976.<sup>11</sup> Organizations such as these assisted in the negotiation of Italian Canadians' understanding of identity/culture in major urban centres, as well as to ease "the pain of displacement and reassert a belonging to a collectivity."<sup>12</sup> In Toronto (and in other urban centres like Montreal), Italian Canadians built cafes, grocery stores, bakeries, and restaurants.<sup>13</sup> The renovations of storefronts along main streets "brought people onto the sidewalk to eat and drink in the summer months, something not previously experienced [...] probably nowhere else in the city."<sup>14</sup> Streetscapes were now being redesigned to reflect and recreate their homeland culture. Italian Canadians wanted to keep their sense of the homeland in the new land, and therefore created communities to

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO), the number of Italians arriving during the period 1951–61 increased from 150,000 to 450,000. See "The Global Gathering Place."

<sup>9</sup> See "History," from the website of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21.

<sup>10</sup> Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 151.

<sup>11</sup> See "Historical Timeline" on the Villa Charities website.

<sup>12</sup> Harney, "Building Italian Regional Identity," 43. Harney argues that Italian Canadians re-created spaces similar to the ones in their hometowns to feel a connection to the new land. This enabled them to overcome the anguish of having to leave not only their familial land but also their families and communities.

<sup>13</sup> Buzzelli, "From Little Britain to Little Italy," 582.

<sup>14</sup> Buzzelli, "From Little Britain to Little Italy," 580.

experience the familiar and have a sense of belonging. In this way, Little Italies were formed across Canadian cities. By bridging their connection to what was familiar, Italian Canadians retained a connection with their homeland, but did not connect to this land, Turtle Island. As settlers, we proceeded to recreate the familiar without inquiring at whose expense these settlements were established.<sup>15</sup>

Indigenous writers like Jeanette Armstrong write to refute settler society's view of this land and to remind them of what has been lost. In her poem "History Lesson," she gives a brief history of Canada from an Indigenous perspective and offers insights into the emotional toll on Indigenous Nations and what our structures signify to them. She writes:

The colossi  
in which they trust  
while burying  
breathing forests and fields  
beneath concrete and steel  
stand shaking fists  
waiting to mutilate  
whole civilizations  
ten generations at a blow.  
[...]  
for the power  
glimpsed in a garden  
forever closed  
forever lost.<sup>16</sup>

Although asserting our sense of belonging here is psychologically important, it served to further divide Indigenous from non-Indigenous people.<sup>17</sup> By

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<sup>15</sup> Lowman and Barker, *Settler*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Armstrong, "History Lesson," (228–229). Armstrong expresses the destructive nature of the colonizers and, more poignantly, what everyone has lost because of that nature. The concrete and steel of the high-rise buildings were built at the expense not only of the forests but also of the garden, a metaphor of that first garden, Eden, that is now forever lost. What we have lost is our ability to perceive that by building our colossi, we reimagine this land according to us. Herein lies our problem: we have not embodied respect nor do we acknowledge or understand Indigenous Nations' sacred relationship with this land.

<sup>17</sup> Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, 5.

creating these communities, in the new land, we nullified as well as ignored an existing civilization – that of the Indigenous Nations.

Colonization forced Indigenous Nations to mediate with the loss of place as they were forcibly moved from their traditional territory or confined to reserves. They too suffered the pain of displacement. Their territorial boundaries were redefined; reserves were created to keep Indigenous peoples contained and separated from non-Aboriginal Peoples, and their land was forcibly taken without due respect to the signed treaties between the government and Indigenous Nations. A paternalistic attitude contributed to and dominated decisions made by past and present governments.<sup>18</sup> Forcibly cut from their ancestral lands, myths, and stories, Indigenous Nations today do not rely on the government or the Canadian people to rectify systemic racism. Indigenous activism is forcing the government to negotiate rather than dictate its agenda regarding unceded land and treaty rights. Organizations such as the Wet'suwet'en in northern BC, for example, has banned Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines from their territories.<sup>19</sup> The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), a national organization representing and supporting Indigenous communities and individuals, and Idle No More (INM), a group advocating for Indigenous sovereignty and the environmental protection of Turtle Island, continue to communicate and remind governments and Canadians of their neglected responsibilities and the existing inequities with other Canadians. The education of Indigenous youth, formerly the jurisdiction of the federal government, is now administered by a number of Indigenous Nations.<sup>20</sup> According to the AFN, there are 518 on-reserve schools throughout Canada. Many Indigenous elementary and high schools are located in urban centres – for instance, Dennis Franklin High School in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and First Nation Junior and Senior School in Toronto, Ontario. These educational institutions are teaching Indigenous Traditional Knowledge in addition to a Western curriculum to forge a strong future for their young people.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See page 413 of volume 1 of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, which was commissioned in 1991 after the stand-off known as the Oka Crisis. The purpose of the five-volume report was to find solutions to the complex issues between Indigenous Nations and settler society. Today, proposed recommendations have not been fully adopted nor implemented by the Canadian government.

<sup>19</sup> See Proctor, "Northern Gateway Pipelines Approval Overturned."

<sup>20</sup> Wallin et al., *Understanding Canadian Schools*, chapt. 2.11.

<sup>21</sup> See *First Nations Control of First Nations Education*.

Italian Canadians have assimilated and acculturated to the Canadian experience. As newcomers to this land they have created aspects of their homeland on Turtle Island, along with organizations to facilitate their sense of belonging. Indigenous Nations continue their commitment to regain their sovereignty and self-determination through organized action. Their symbiotic relationship with the land has not been broken. Rather, it is their pathway to decolonizing and thus healing and reclaiming their place in their homeland. Indigenous Nations will continue to resist the prevalent systemic discrimination and inequities towards their people and their land.

### *Identity*

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

- Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories*

The stories that we tell or those that are told to us, as Thomas King infers, are dangerous because once they are set loose in the world we cannot take them back (10). Stories of a people flow from a place and the power that dwells in that place.<sup>22</sup> It follows that the story that we, as settlers, know of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island is one that was propagated by the Canadian government, which wrote its own story about the Indigenous peoples through its colonizing strategies, settlement practices, and the proclamation of the Indian Act in 1876. Rome, too, wrote new stories of those whom it conquered and colonized. After conquering the Sanniti People, for instance, the Romans destroyed any remnants of their existence. Yet, some Sanniti stories have survived.

### *Ancestral Story*

The Sanniti People were predominantly a pastoral and agrarian society, famous for their gladiatorial skills. They were one of Rome's archenemies. My father, whom I now recognize as a keeper of stories, told me an ancient story of how "we were conquered" by the Romans.<sup>23</sup> According to him, the fatal blow happened in Saepinum, today near the town of Sepino. The queen of the faeries lived in Saepinum, a community whose walls and gates kept the

<sup>22</sup> Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> This story is recognized in Salmon, *History of the Samnium*, and Livy, *History of Rome*.



community safe. During that last war, the Romans, fighting fiercely to enter the town, were unable to tear down the gates at the doors of the town. Not wanting to lose this war, the Romans retreated but still remained close to the faeries' community. During the night, the Romans strategically rotated the horseshoes on their horses to make it seem to the queen and her subjects that they had left and were returning to Rome. The next day, the queen and the townspeople, seeing the reversed prints left by the horseshoes, believed that the Romans had departed. They opened the gates and, suddenly, the queen and her subjects were surrounded by Roman soldiers who killed the faery queen and many of the townspeople. This oral story gives us a glimpse into the characteristics of these two ancient peoples: the Sanniti, who chose myth to narrate an experience where a war was lost through trickery, and the Romans, the victors whose military strategies and ingenuity built their empire.

What is interesting about this oral history is its mythical quality and explanation of an historic event. The Apennine Mountains, with their lush forests and fauna, conjure the image of a magical place, which inspires such mythical creatures as the faeries of *Saepinum*. The Sanniti's belief in these magical beings arises from their close relationship with their land and its cyclical phases, attesting to their understanding that place underlies the formation of culture and identity.<sup>24</sup> Knowing "The things that make [...] places so important to ethnic and national groups are traditions, memories, myths, and history". Indigenous sagacity recognizes these elements that not only "connect past and future generations but also weave a rich tapestry where landscape and identity are often inseparable"<sup>25</sup> The Sanniti's stories arise from their relationship with the land. These stories are remembered, told, and, if forgotten, awakened to remind us of who we are, where we are from, and our ancestral beginnings.

Losing the war with the Romans, the Sanniti People and other ancient peoples of the Italic peninsula lost distinctive social, cultural, and political perspectives based on individual freedoms, where slavery was impermissible in its society.<sup>26</sup> As a democratic commonwealth, its officials were elected annually<sup>27</sup> and their governance was through the rule of an elected council. Their pastoral and agrarian lifestyle centred on their connection to and

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<sup>24</sup> See the section titled "Landscape and Identity" in "Words, Places, and Belonging" on the Facing History & Ourselves website.

<sup>25</sup> "Words, Places, and Belonging."

<sup>26</sup> Monaco, "Il Popolo."

<sup>27</sup> See the section titled "Il Governo' SANNITI (Nemici di Roma)."

traditional knowledge of the land, and this understanding contributed to their being a fiercely independent people. The loss of the Sanniti language, Oscan, further diminished the language diversity of the Italic peninsula. Rome's intention was to make Romans out of the Sanniti and extinguish Sanniti indigenusness. The genocide of the Sanniti people did not intimidate them into passively surrendering. They continued to be Rome's nemesis right up until the first century CE.<sup>28</sup>

Today, the word "Sanniti" has not been forgotten in Molise. *Il Sannio Quotidiano*, one of Molise's daily newspapers, includes a heading entitled "Dal Territorio Sannita," meaning "from the territory of the Sanniti,"<sup>29</sup> thereby reminding its readers of their ancestral heritage. Giovanni Affinita, a business executive in the region, also reminds his audience of their heritage. During a 2018 conference promoting industries in Southern Italy, he noted the following:

[...] there was only one group of people that managed to momentarily stop [the Romans] and defeat them in battle: a small but determined group known as "Sanniti." Sannio was a region in southern Italy. It covered all of Molise, a part of Abruzzo and the northern part of Campania. We are Sanniti. I would like to delve into details, but it's probably enough to just tell you how proud we are to be part of this territory. It is who we are and it's strongly rooted in our DNA.<sup>30</sup>

The Romans may have won a political war, but they did not win this cultural war.

Remembering my father's story and inspired by my Indigenous Studies courses, I began a personal research project to learn more about the history of the Sanniti. Upon knowing my ancestral history and heritage, it surprisingly and unexpectedly grounded me in an authentic understanding of my Italianness. Even though the demise and colonization of the Sanniti by the Romans extinguished the Oscan language – and even though later in the history of Italic peoples, we were invaded by various foreign nations, – I, as an

<sup>28</sup> Collins-Elliott, "Social Memory and Identity." Benedittis, "Il genocidio romano dei Sanniti."

<sup>29</sup> *Il Sannio Quotidiano* can be found online at <https://www.ilsannioquotidiano.it/>; see also <http://www.beneventogiornale.com/>.

<sup>30</sup> Affinita, "Promoting Excellence in Southern Italy."

Italian-Canadian, can accept this hyphenated label without it interfering with my identity as an Italian, because I know the place and I know the ancestral stories of my indigenusness.

### *The Indian Act – Defining Indigenous Identity*

When the Europeans arrived on Turtle Island, they viewed the land and its Peoples from their perspective; they saw uncivilized peoples and acres of unsettled and “empty land” – *terra nullius*.<sup>31</sup> Europeans considered the way of living of Indigenous Nations as inconsequential and a means of restraining their desire to increase their wealth and land acquisitions.<sup>32</sup> The colonizer’s scheme to eradicate the “Indian problem” was to create a Europe on Turtle Island by forcibly imposing Eurocentric ways onto the land and its peoples. Treaties established how the land was going to be shared and what annuities would be given to the Indigenous Nations for sharing their lands.<sup>33</sup> Although these treaties were meant to be legally binding when they were signed by both Nations, they were not honoured by the government or the new settlers. To further their dominion of land and people, the Canadian government’s solution to the “Indian Problem” was to proclaim the Indian Act (the Act) first legislated in 1876.

The Indian Act was legislated to define and control Indigenous self-identification and self-determination, thereby revealing the Act to be reflective of paternalistic, oppressive, and racist attitudes. The power over a people is demonstrated in the Act’s definition of “Indian” as “a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian” (sec. 2.1). It continues: “A Band list maintained in the Department shall indicate the date on which each name was added thereto or deleted therefrom” (sec. 8.4). “Indians,” once registered, had their names entered on the

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<sup>31</sup> Beginning in the 1400s, the papal “Doctrine of Discovery” edicts were used to claim and occupy lands not inhabited by Christians. This doctrine gave the Christian discoverers jurisdiction over Indigenous lands. *Terra nullius* refers to “empty” lands, thus nullifying the existence of those living on the land. The doctrine continues to impact Indigenous land issues in Canada. See “The Doctrine of Discovery.”

<sup>32</sup> “Manifest Destiny” was a belief that Europeans were entitled to disregard or remove Indigenous peoples from their lands and to appropriate and exploit Indigenous lands without due compensation and respect. See “Manifest Destiny and Indian Removal”

<sup>33</sup> See “Treaties and Agreements” on the Government of Canada’s website; for an Indigenous perspective, see MacLean, “6 Common Myths,” and the Indigenous Bar Association in Canada, “Strengthening Partnership.”

list therefore identifying them as having Indian Status, thus allowing only the “Indians” who had registered to receive government annuities and rights as declared in the treaties. In section 66.1, the Act gives the minister the authority, “with the bands consent [...] to direct the expenditure of revenue moneys for any purpose that, in the opinion of the minister, will promote the general progress and welfare of the band or any member of the band.” In other words, economic and financial concerns or developments were not administered by Indigenous Nations;<sup>34</sup> their needs were dependent upon the opinion and decision of the minister. In addition, the Act prohibits Indigenous communities from practising their traditional forms of governance and dictates that they conform to a Western style of governing. It states, “Unless otherwise ordered by the minister, the council of a band in respect of which an order has been made under subsection (1) shall consist of one chief, and one councillor for every one hundred members of the band, but the number of councillors shall not be less than two nor more than twelve and no band shall have more than one chief” (sec. 74.2).<sup>35</sup> Traditional forms of Indigenous governments varied – they included hereditary chiefs, elected councils, and the clan system; however the federal government refused to acknowledge Indigenous governance and imposed a uniform structure for all Indigenous Nations.<sup>36</sup> The Act simplified the process of acculturation and assimilation for the federal government, whose intention was to accelerate cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing.<sup>37</sup> Hence, many Indigenous people refused to be defined and identified by the government, thereby relinquishing their government-given rights. Furthermore, the Act refused to acknowledge, and therefore abolished, the traditional importance of Indigenous women’s matrilineal heritage and the role of women in Indigenous communities.<sup>38</sup> No other ethnic community in

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<sup>34</sup> See section 65 of the Act, “Expenditure of Capital.”

<sup>35</sup> The Indian Act can be found online at <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/I-5.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Ladner, “Indigenous Governance.”

<sup>37</sup> A dominant mechanism of cultural genocide was the establishment of residential schools that forced Indigenous children into institutions where they were subject to extensive abuse, from which many did not survive. Later, in the 1960s (referred as the “60s Scoop”), government policy continued to authorize the removal of children from their families to assimilate and acculturate them into the dominant culture.

<sup>38</sup> The Eurocentric view of women as powerless beings was reflected in the Act by denying Indigenous women Indian Status if they married a non-Indian person; however, men were not denied their “status” if they married a non-Indian person. The Act was not amended until 1985 after decades of protest from Indigenous women. The Act further demonstrates its “radicalized notions of what constitutes an Indigenous person as

Canada is bound to live or is defined according to such legislation designed by government legislators.

Notably, authorizing the Indigenous ethnocide enabled the government to have barrier-free access to all Indigenous lands. The Act is still in effect today, even though Indigenous Nations have protested its human rights violations. Some Indigenous Nations do not wish to abolish the Act. Their reasoning is legitimate, since it is the primary legal document that details the special relationship and responsibilities the federal government has towards Indigenous Nations.<sup>39</sup> Regrettably, this despotic legislation further subjugated Indigenous Nations' rights to the ownership of their own stories, their land, and their identity.

In the 1920s, the deputy superintendent of the department of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott,<sup>40</sup> acknowledged that Canada continued to have an "Indian Problem." He presented a government bill to deal with this issue, stating,

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. [...] Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.<sup>41</sup>

The extreme measures taken by the government to further "rid" them of the Indian problem was to build residential schools across Canada and begin the educational process of erasing a peoples' identity, culture, and language.

The story that we as settlers know of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island is one propagated by the Canadian government, which wrote its own story about the Indigenous Nations through its colonizing strategies, settlement practices, and the proclamation of the Indian Act. These oppressive policies solidified the story of Indigenous Peoples to the Canadian Government, to European settlers and to the Indigenous peoples themselves. The purpose of this Act, as mentioned, was to eradicate Indigenous Nations'

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determined by [the colonizer's] patrilineal heritage," according to Stote, "thus, nullifying the matrilineal custom as practiced by many Indigenous Nations." See Stote, "Indian-Race-based Definition."

<sup>39</sup> Canada, Privy Council, *Royal Commission*, 1:236.

<sup>40</sup> McDougall, "Duncan Campbell Scott."

<sup>41</sup> Rheault, "Solving the 'Indian Problem.'"

cultures and identity. Scott's inhumane attitude further demonstrates the colonizer's callous determination to proceed with the cultural genocide of Indigenous Nations and thus Indigenous personhood itself.

Today, Indigenous Nations are acting upon a resurgence of their traditional culture, governance, and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge<sup>42</sup> to protest against governmental control, thereby engaging in and furthering the decolonization process. In his book *Wasàse: An Indigenous Pathway of Action and Freedom*, Taiaiake Alfred argues that it is imperative that settler society "acknowledge our existence and the integrity of our connection to the land."<sup>43</sup> Alfred wants to negotiate a strategy that achieves "a respectful coexistence" with settler society.<sup>44</sup> Alfred is proposing to the settlers a distinct and different paradigm to that of the present imperialistic model we as settlers conform to, one that is centred on "settlers demonstrating respect for what we share – the land and its resources – and making things right by offering us the dignity and freedom we are due and returning our power and land enough for us to be self-sufficient."<sup>45</sup> The new paradigm would abolish the imperialistic model, and form in its place an equitable representation in the governance of this land, one where governments and settlers support Indigenous Nationhood and Indigeniety.

### *Defining Canadianness*

John Ralston Saul, in his book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, reflects on what it means to be Canadian. He recognizes that Canada's sense of nationhood is dependent upon Canadians' understanding that "we are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. We never have been."<sup>46</sup> Instead, he affirms that we are a Métis civilization that can embrace the togetherness of two peoples, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.<sup>47</sup> Our togetherness with Indigenous Nations has enabled us to incorporate into our social and political structures many of their principles, such as land stewardship, restorative justice, inclusivity of multi-gendered identities, the meaning

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<sup>42</sup> For an extensive explanation of this concept, see Asch et al., *Resurgence and Reconciliation*.

<sup>43</sup> Taiaiake, *Wasàse*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Taiaiake, *Wasàse*, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Taiaiake, *Wasàse*, 153.

<sup>46</sup> Saul, *A Fair Country*, xi.

<sup>47</sup> Saul, *A Fair Country*, 3.

of an egalitarian society, etc. We live with ease within Canadian diversity without realizing our socialization into Indigenous values. However, for us to admit this, we need to extract ourselves from our colonial mindset and understand as well as adopt Indigenous Nations as the “founding pillar of our civilization.”<sup>48</sup> To attain this understanding, Ward Churchill argues that it is imperative that we learn about our own indigenous past. That way, we will know the values of our indigenusness and gain an understanding of belonging in this world rather than destroying it.<sup>49</sup> To learn of our indigenusness, we need to decolonize our minds<sup>50</sup> by recognizing that imbedded in our psyche is the collective trauma of our own colonial past. Acknowledging our colonial past will then facilitate our support for the decolonization of Indigenous Nations, as well as our own. Facing our own experiences of colonization and what we have lost will allow us to recognize and be cognizant of the loss experienced by Indigenous Nations. Then, as we become familiar with the meaning of Indigenous places, we will understand and honour Indigenous connections to the land, thus deepening our sense of belonging here.

As Italian Canadians, we have an obligation to fully understand what it means to live here, on Indigenous land. As stated, we can begin by discovering our own indigenusness; otherwise, we contribute to the colonizing process and continued systemic racism. As settlers on Indigenous land, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves about whose land we live on so that we may establish a functional and respectful relationship with Indigenous peoples. Familiarizing ourselves with the occurring issues in Indigenous communities facilitates our understanding of the government’s role in provoking these issues. We need to work together with Indigenous Nations to confront and eradicate systemic racism and Canada’s colonial structures.<sup>51</sup> By remaining passive on this subject we perpetuate the status quo. Understandably, these actions will require much introspection, dialogue, negotiation, time, and political will from settlers and the Canadian government.

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<sup>48</sup> Saul, *A Fair Country*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Churchill, *Indians Are Us?*, 235.

<sup>50</sup> Churchill, *Indians Are Us?*, 236.

<sup>51</sup> See Lowman and Barker, *Settler*.

*Language*

I lost my talk  
 The talk you took away.  
 [...]  
 I speak like you  
 I think like you  
 I create like you  
 The scrambled ballad, about my world.  
 [...]  
 So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
 Let me find my talk  
 So I can teach you about me.  
 – Rita Joe, “I Lost My Talk”

During colonization, Indigenous Nations experienced not only an imposition of foreign languages in their respective territories but also a loss of their languages. Equally, for Italians/Italian Canadians standard Italian was promoted to take precedence over other Italian languages/dialects, thus contributing to the decline of many traditional languages in Italy

Rita Joe, in her poem “I Lost My Talk,” describes the impact of colonial domination and language erasure at residential schools. Despite the many atrocities at residential schools, she suggests we embrace our language diversity so that we learn about each other, thereby strengthening our inclusion as members of a multicultural society.<sup>52</sup>

*Indigenous Inclusive Language*

As noted earlier, an example of the Indigenous perspective of inclusivity is evident in many Indigenous languages. The Indigenous worldview of inclusivity stunned the Europeans upon first contact with Indigenous peoples. Irving Hallowell, a British anthropologist of the nineteenth century, clearly indicates the differences between the English language and the Ojibwa language

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<sup>52</sup> The tone at the beginning of the poem expresses the rage the persona felt as a student in a residential school. By the end of the poem, the tone is conciliatory. The persona lets the reader know that there is a way for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people to live together. Joe, “I Lost My Talk.”



by stating that “the inclusiveness of the animate category of beings sharply distinguishes the Ojibwa worldview from our own.”<sup>53</sup> For instance, when Indigenous peoples use the phrase “all my relations,” it refers to all creation, beyond one’s family – literally all that is human and non-human. This idea of inclusion of all creation in many Indigenous cultures and languages is evident in the “Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address” (the Address). The Address is recited before all ceremonies, community events, and government council meetings. It begins,

Today we have gathered and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as people. Now our minds are one.

We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of time. To our mother, we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one ...<sup>54</sup>

The Address continues on to express gratitude and remembrance, reminding the community of its relationship with all creation, as in the past, the present, and the future. Further, the Address explains the People’s responsibilities in the community, the environment, and all living things. It also reaffirms the community’s worldview of interconnection to all creation.<sup>55</sup> The Address is still recited today as in the past.

To Wade Davis, an internationally acclaimed anthropologist, language is,

not merely a set of grammatical rules or vocabulary. It is a flash of the human spirit, the vehicle by which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, and an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hallowell, *The Ojibwa of Berens River, Manitoba*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> The Address is quoted in full in Buchanan, “Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address.”

<sup>55</sup> Cornelius, “The Thanksgiving Address,” 14.

<sup>56</sup> Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 3.

If language is the manifestation of a culture's soul, then Indigenous languages, like Haudenosaunee, express their culture's entrenched egalitarianism. There was no hierarchy between men and women's roles but rather equitable roles, and "in many cases women were able to transcend gender roles."<sup>57</sup> Traditionally, Indigenous women "played a central role within the Aboriginal family, within Aboriginal government and in spiritual ceremonies."<sup>58</sup> In the Haudenosaunee Great Law, women's political roles were and still are legitimized as a check and balance in Haudenosaunee governance. This position gives them legal authority to oust representatives for not performing their duty to their community.<sup>59</sup> Regrettably, Eurocentric patriarchal ideology weakened Indigenous cultural practices, thus eroding the equitable roles between women and men in many Indigenous Nations.

Today, Indigenous languages are being revitalized by many Indigenous Nations mainly through Indigenous language courses in schools (both on and off reserves), universities, and colleges. Friendship centres also offer courses to Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The internet offers a number of Indigenous language courses as well.<sup>60</sup> It is feasible that with these initiatives Indigenous Nations will be able to reclaim their traditional languages and the values inherent in them.

### *Italian Canadians and Dialect Languages*

Many Italians in Canada and in Italy also have a history of language loss. First, during the time of Rome's colonization of the Italic peninsula, the Sanniti, as well as other Italic Peoples, lost their language. As a consequence of the genocide of the Sanniti by the Romans, the Oscan language became extinct. Further erosion of the dialect languages occurred in recent history with the rule of Mussolini. During his rule (1923–42), dialect languages were under

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<sup>57</sup> Tsosie, "Native Women and Leadership," 32.

<sup>58</sup> See the section titled "Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society" in the Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, "Aboriginal Women."

<sup>59</sup> The *Great Law*: over 1,000 years ago, Peacemaker and Hiawatha united the Five Nations (Haudenosaunee) and achieved a union of political and social harmony by designing a two-tiered democracy with equal representation and responsibility. Women were given the title of "Chieftanship" (those who select the chiefs), and it was declared that "the lineal descent of the Hotinonshonni shall run in the female line" (*Traditional Teachings*, 49). Later, the Tuscarora were "adopted" as the sixth nation in the 1700s.

<sup>60</sup> See Ojibwe.net and Candace Squire, "Kanienkeha'ka."

threat because of his language policies. Mussolini dictated that all Italians were to learn standard Italian in order to further unify Italy, at least linguistically. His aim was to transform the multilingual Italian society to a monolingual one, reasoning that “these local variations in language represented all that was wrong in the old Italy, including political regionalism, cultural disunity, and anti-modernism.”<sup>61</sup> Although the intention of the policy was to unite the country, ironically, it created a further divide. The social consequences of Mussolini’s language policy included the shaming of those who spoke a dialect and the esteeming of those who spoke standard Italian. As a result, Italians discriminated against other Italians simply because of the language they spoke.<sup>62</sup> One reason for this discriminatory behaviour towards these dialect speakers was that dialects were not regarded as full languages, in and of themselves.<sup>63</sup>

First generation Italian Canadians, now acclimatized to their new home in Canada, continued to speak their dialects as a means of maintaining their link to their ancestral roots.<sup>64</sup> Their mother tongue was still spoken in familial environments, but as the second and third generation of Italian Canadians assimilated and acculturated into Canadian society, the number of Italian Canadians speaking their mother tongue declined.<sup>65</sup> Although today’s dialect speakers are declining, the dialects are not dying.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, Italian dialect speakers do not disappear by the third generation, as Isajiw concludes in his study.<sup>67</sup> In fact, they want to maintain their Italian dialects because it is an opportunity to remain connected with their culture in Canada and in Italy.<sup>68</sup> When I speak my dialect, I can hear a melancholic resonance to the past, yet there is also a joy with its playful sounds and rhythms reminding me and connecting me to my ancestral people, my ancestral land and those living there today.

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<sup>61</sup> Cannistraro, “Mussolini’s Cultural Revolution,” 130.

<sup>62</sup> Dal Negro and Vietti, “Italian and Italo-Romance Dialects,” 73–74.

<sup>63</sup> Tortora, “Heritage Nation vs. Heritage Language,” 271.

<sup>64</sup> Danesi, “Canadian Italian: A Case in Point.”

<sup>65</sup> According to Statistics Canada, the traditional dialects declined almost 7% between 2011 and 2016. See Statistics Canada, “Linguistic Diversity.”

<sup>66</sup> Repetti, “Where Did All the Dialects Go?” 219. Paolo Coluzzi noted that teaching these languages may minimize their decline. Coluzzi, “Endangered Minority,” 48. Italian cultural groups/clubs could take the lead role in preventing the decline of Italian dialect languages in Canada by offering courses in their respective dialects.

<sup>67</sup> Isajiw, “The Assimilation-Retention Hypothesis,” 6.

<sup>68</sup> Sajoo, *Being Ethnic: 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Italian Identity in Vancouver*, 5–6.

The presumptive loss of Italian dialects in Italy and the Italian diaspora cannot be interpreted as the eventual death of the dialects. Italian dialect speakers, whether in Canada, Italy or elsewhere, have an obligation to reflect upon the implications of the loss of the dialect languages. We must consider the possibility that if we lose the Italian dialects, we lose the idea and the character of what is Italy.<sup>69</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The paths of Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island and Italian Canadians, because of their history, have met at an intersection where they can view a parallel and distinctive account of their respective stories. Because of government policies, Italians, first-generation Italian Canadians, and Canada's Indigenous populations share the experience of losing, or risk to losing, their languages and dialects. Canada's Eurocentric government decided to choose assimilation over diversity in order to gain power and control over land and peoples. The loss of Italian dialects and the loss of Indigenous languages through laws and policies deterred neither Italians/Italian Canadians nor Indigenous Nations from protecting their traditional languages, each in their own way. In this place, there lies an opportunity for Italian Canadians to maintain and strengthen their linguistic and cultural traditions, while continuing to live in a pluralistic Indigenous-Canadian society. Indigenous Nations also wish to maintain their linguistic and cultural traditions, on their land. Therefore, if we wish to maintain our own linguistic and cultural traditions on this land, we must partake in Indigenous Nations' efforts to erase the colonial constructs that control and deny Indigenous rights to their land, culture and traditions. Recognizing and acknowledging whose land we live on, the Métis heritage of this land, and our own ancestral heritage are central to our contributing to and taking action towards decolonizing Turtle Island. Moreover, the resurgence of Indigenous Nations' autonomy is essential for a nation-to-nation relationship with the government and settler society. Inclusivity inherent in many Indigenous languages shows us the way to reconcile matters between Indigenous and settler communities. *Minobimaadiziwin* is an Anishnaabe word meaning "the good life," a way to live a life that is

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<sup>69</sup> The interest Italian Canadians have in preserving their dialects may be the beginnings of where Italian dialects have found a place to flourish and be protected, in Canada.

balanced, and in connection with family, community, and the land.<sup>70</sup> I wish to invite readers to investigate and relate their own experiences to those of Indigenous peoples, the purpose of which is to understand, maintain, and respect our diversity, as well as to make this land a better place where we all can participate in *Minobimaadiziwin* – the good life.

*I wish to acknowledge, and am sincerely grateful to, the Indigenous professors who taught and shared their knowledge with me, and to the many other Indigenous people I have had the privilege to meet along the way. As well, I would like to thank Professor Konrad Eisenbichler for his encouragement and patience, and the anonymous readers for their constructive reviews. Chi Miigweetch! / Grazie! / Thank you!*

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<sup>70</sup> Haigh-Turner, "Minobimaadiziwin / The Good Life."

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