BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER
AN ANALYSIS OF FAMILY, FAMIGLIA AND ITALIAN IDENTITY IN THE SOPRANOS

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INTRODUCTION

On January 10th, 1999, American premium cable network HBO released the first episode of the series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), an American crime drama created by showrunner David Chase. As is often the case, the beginning was rocky. Jamie Lynn-Singer, the actress portraying Meadow, thought the show was about opera singers (Martin 92). Chase failed to attract the attention of traditional TV networks with his script, with all of the networks declining to finance a pilot episode (Martin 65). This rejection drove Chase into the arms of HBO, where president Chris Albrecht agreed to financing a pilot episode, and eventually a complete first season. By the time Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believing” abruptly ended the show in 2007, all doubts were long gone. As Murray writes, “By the time the writer and producer David Chase brought “The Sopranos” to a close on June 10, 2007, he had helped establish HBO as a cultural force and make literary symbolism, cinematic style, long-form storytelling and complicated antiheroes the norm for high-end TV dramas.” (Murray).

*The Sopranos* is often cited as one of the best TV shows ever made (Sheffield), with critics applauding the show for its unique exploration of crime and family life, often gushing over the late James Gandolfini’s portrayal of Tony Soprano. More relevant than critical and personal opinion, it is important to acknowledge the influence *The Sopranos* has had on TV. Sheffield describes it as “the crime saga that cut the history of TV in two, kicking off a golden age when suddenly anything seemed possible” (Sheffield).

The notion that *The Sopranos* marked the beginning of a golden age is also supported in Brett Martin’s “Difficult Men”, in which he explores the ins and outs of how the greatest TV shows of the new millennium came to be. Martin posits that the third golden age of television consists of a string of shows centered around male antiheroes who are “all trying to preserve a sense of masculine virtue in a declining America that values them less and less.” (Marche). Indeed, Tony Soprano is a deeply flawed character, opening up to Dr. Melfi in the pilot by saying that he’s “getting
the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.” (1:1)¹. For difficult men such as himself, though, it was only the beginning. Over the years after The Sopranos’ debut, other difficult men such as Don Draper (Mad Men, 2007 – 2015), Walter White (Breaking Bad, 2008 - 2013) and Nucky Thompson (Boardwalk Empire, 2010 - 2014) would walk down the path that Tony Soprano paved.

The Sopranos is not your everyday mobster drama. It is just as much a show about mobsters, prostitutes and car jackings as it is one about husbands, housewives and backyard barbecues. In his excellent web series “Sopranos Autopsy”, Ron Bernard argues that “The Sopranos must be characterized as an American story first and foremost, and only secondarily as a mob saga. (...) Over the course of six seasons, The Sopranos investigates the strange, hilarious and messy ways in which people of different cultures—different ethnicities, incomes, education levels, and regional histories—come together in the mosaic we call America. The Sopranos explores what it means to be American.” (Bernard).

In this dissertation, I will explore what the concept family means in The Sopranos. Tony has two families: his own family, and his famiglia. Being at the head of both for the vast majority of the series, Tony surely has his hands full. In part one, I will take a close look at Tony’s immediate family. Chapters 1 to 5 respectively examine Livia Soprano, Carmela Soprano, Meadow Soprano, A.J. Soprano and Janice Soprano. Who are these characters? What is their opinion on the Mafia? Where do their lives intersect with the Mafia? In part two, I will shift my focus towards the famiglia. Through an analysis of two characters, Christopher Moltisanti and Eugene Pontecorvo, I will look at the devastating consequences the famiglia can have on one’s other family. In the final part, I zoom in on Italian-American ethnicity which is so prominently present throughout the whole series, and its link to organized crime.

¹ Every Sopranos episode is indicated with the formula (x:y), in which x specifies the season and y the episode.
PART I: FAMILY

A tagline on some early promotional posters for the first season of *The Sopranos* reads “Meet Tony Soprano. If one family doesn’t kill him… the other family will.” Indeed, as Kocela writes, the show “has consistently foregrounded Tony’s divided loyalties to family and business” (6). Despite the fact that these two families are the most important driving factors of the series, the first family the viewer is introduced to is neither of those. Before we catch a glimpse of Carmela, Uncle Junior or Silvio, we see a family of ducks “from Canada or something” (1:1) spending mating season in the family pool. Despite the many difficulties and dangers both his family and *la famiglia* will bring him over the course of the series, the most immediate danger to his personal health for now is the family of ducks. When Tony sees them flying away, he suffers a panic attack and falls down on the floor unconsciously. Considering there is nothing wrong with him physically speaking, Tony visits a psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. It’s in her room that the viewer will get the most insight into our anti-hero’s mind and mindset.

Tony and Dr. Melfi make quick strides, in fact, Tony feels good after one session, and is inclined to thank her for the Prozac-prescription and move on with his life. However, Dr. Melfi points out that the medicine can’t have had any effects on such a short time span, instead crediting the talking session for Tony’s (perceived) progression. After all, “hope comes in many forms” (1:1). Tony seems to give in to the possibility that the talking might be worth another shot and tells about a dream he had the night before: he unscrewed his belly button, his penis falls off, and a seagull flies off with his manhood. Dr. Melfi is able to get Tony to connect the dots:

> Dr. Melfi: What else is a water bird?
> Tony: Pelican, flamingo…
> Dr. Melfi: What about ducks?
> Tony: Those goddamn ducks.
> Dr. Melfi: What is it about those ducks that meant so much to you?
> Tony: I don’t know, it was just a trip… having those wild creatures… come into my pool and have their little babies. … I was sad to see them go…
> (...)
Dr. Melfi: When the ducks gave birth to those babies, they became a family.
Tony: You’re right. It’s a link. A connection. I’m afraid I’m gonna lose my family, like I lost the ducks. That’s what I’m full of dread about. It’s always with me.
Dr. Melfi: What is it you’re so afraid of is going to happen?
T: I don’t know.

Family is what it is all about for Tony, but who exactly are the people he’s afraid of losing? In the following section of my dissertation, I will take a closer look at some of Tony’s close family members – those being Livia, Carmela, Meadow, AJ and Janice – individually. I will take a closer look at who they are, to which extent they are involved in la famiglia and how they stand in relation to Tony’s illegal activities.
CHAPTER 1: LIVIA SOPRANO

Brett Martin writes in “Difficult Men” that “Every great TV show tells its whole story in its pilot. Often in just one line.” (59). In applying this idea to The Sopranos, one could take it one step further. The whole story is told in one shot: the very first one.

The very first shot of the entire series is one of Tony Soprano – feared and fearless mobster – confusedly gazing at the statue of a naked woman in Dr. Melfi’s waiting room. The framing is interesting: Tony is trapped in between the thighs of a woman. As Nochimson puts it, “Tony Soprano is in dialogue with familial confusions, specifically the maternal influence: he is sitting in the office of a female psychiatrist, completely framed by the legs of a female nude sculpture (recalling his origins in the birth canal and the power of the mother)” (5). Especially in the first two seasons, The Sopranos investigates the relationship between Tony and his mother. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at who Livia Soprano is, how her relationship with her son develops, and how she is able to heavily influence both family and famiglia from her matriarchal position.

Tony Soprano will spend a lot of his time dealing with the various troubles caused by various female presences in his life. Tony himself comes to the same conclusion during a session with Dr. Melfi in Pax Soprana (1:6):
Dr. Melfi: What’s the one thing every woman… Your mother, your wife, your daughter have in common?
Tony: They all break my balls.

(1:6)

The biggest “ball-breaker” in the first two seasons is most definitely his mother Livia. No longer capable of taking care of her own, Tony has decided it is in his mother’s best interest if she moves into a luxurious retirement community, Green Grove. Livia doesn’t see it the same way, though. According to her, Green Grove is in fact a nursing home, a place where “people come to die.” (1:2). Livia fails to acknowledge that Green Grove seems to be an exceptionally luxurious facility, or as Dr. Melfi puts it: “It’s more like a hotel at Cap d’Antibes.” (1:2). The pressure Livia puts on Tony is too much for him to handle, and in the middle of Livia’s fit, he once again succumbs to the ground. The cause-effect between his mother’s behavior and his panic attacks is pretty straightforward to the viewer, yet Tony remains oblivious, firmly in denial about his mother’s negative influence on him. Dr. Melfi seems to have caught on already, and asks Tony to tell her more about his mother:

Tony: My dad was tough; he ran his own crew. Guy like that and my mother wore him down to a little nub. He was a squeaking little gerbil when he died.
Dr. Melfi: Quite a formidable maternal presence…
Tony: I gotta be honest with you. I’m not getting any satisfaction from my work, either.

(1:2)

It’s interesting that as soon as Dr. Melfi merely hints at Livia as a possible source of his agitation, Tony immediately steers the conversation towards his work. Dr. Melfi tries to guide him towards his mother as a source of his stress, but Tony doesn’t take the bait just yet. Dr. Melfi pushes the topic harder in a following session, Tony remains an unwavering defender of his mother:

Dr. Melfi: So, you’re carrying all this guilt when your mother is clearly someone who has great difficulty maintaining a relationship with anyone.
Tony: But she’s my mother. You’re supposed to take care of your mother. She’s a little old lady.
Dr. Melfi: Not to you. She’s very powerful!
Tony: Bullshit.
Dr. Melfi: You accord this “little old lady” an almost mystical ability to wreak havoc.
(…)
Dr. Melfi: There are some people who are not ideal candidates for parenthood.
Tony: Come on! She’s an old sweetie-pie!

In general, Tony is rather hesitant to talk about his mother to Dr. Melfi, especially after their relationship turns sour. It’s not impossible to think that precisely because Tony doesn’t like to talk about his mother, the whole therapy session becomes about his mother. It takes a very long time for Tony to realize that Livia is in fact at the center of his psychological troubles. However, Tony’s view of his mother gradually changes as she becomes more and more manipulative and negative in her attitude towards himself, Carmela and their children.

Initially however, Livia can’t immediately be characterized or identified as the main antagonist. Sure, she is a rather pessimistic and grumpy old lady, but she is far from the first elder to behave this way in the early stages of accepting their diminishing independence. And the move to a nursing home is dreaded by many, too – albeit the destination is often not as luxurious as Green Grove. However, as the season progresses, Livia starts to prove that “her position as an elderly, widowed grandmother carries far greater power than the archetype might suggest.” (Gething 213). As her resentment towards her son grows, she increases her interference in la famiglia. Livia has been preoccupied with the idea of infanticide seemingly her whole life. In a flashback sequence (1:7), we see a young Livia screaming at an 8-year old Tony how she “could stick this fork in your eye”. Later on, when arguing with Tony’s father about a possible move to Nevada, she screams that she’d “rather smother them with a pillow than take them to Nevada!”. Even in present day with her children all grown up with families of their own, she hasn’t let go of this idea. She refers to mothers throwing their babies out of skyscraper windows and a whole family dying of eating uncooked pork. When Livia takes notice of the power struggle between Tony and Uncle Junior, she starts to earn the denominations “Caligula-like despot” (Holden 38), “a demon-
possessed matriarch" (Simon 4-5) and “Machiavellian, malevolent matriarch” (Palmer-Mehta 57) assigned to her in other research. She finds an ally in Uncle Junior, who according to her is the only one who "listens to me and doesn’t treat me like an old shoe" (1:11). In their shared frustrations regarding her son, Livia sees an opportunity to act upon her fascination with infanticide. As De Stefanio aptly observes, “she is Medea in a housedress, ready to avenge the slights and humiliations of her life on her children.” (207). She chooses the perfect moment to do so. As Lippman writes, “feeling as if Tony’s need for counseling somehow calls into question her fitness as a mother, she at first limits herself to snide comments about Tony’s mental fitness. But in the end, she reveals her knowledge to Junior at a crucial moment, fueling his suspicions of her son.” (195):

Junior: Three of my capos have their mothers in this place?
Livia: Instead of living in normal homes with their sons, like human beings
Junior: this must be some kind of fucking end move. What do they think? I’m stupid? We’ll see!
Livia: Now wait a minute. I don’t like that kind of talk! Now just stop it, it upsets me! Or I won’t tell you anything anymore.
Junior: If this is true, Livia, you know what I… I mean… I’m the boss, for Christ’s sake! If I don’t act, blood or no… I have to
Livia: Oh, god, why… What did I say now…? I suppose I should’ve just kept my mouth shut, like a mute. And then everybody would’ve been happy.

(1:11)

Of course, as soon as she has carefully laid out – and exaggerated - all the necessary information for Uncle Junior to put the pieces together, she seemingly backs out. In a truly Machiavellian fashion, she plays Uncle Junior like a fiddle in order to push him towards her ultimate wish: the death of her son. In the first real therapy session after the failed attempt on his life, Tony talks again about his mother, how her Alzheimer’s seemingly has gotten worse. Considering the life of her patient is in danger, Dr. Melfi connects the dots for him:

Dr. Melfi: You think it was a carjacking?
Tony: Of course not. But I got an idea who was behind it, and... enough said. You don’t want to go there.
Dr. Melfi: Maybe you don’t want to go there?
Tony: What are you talking about?
Dr. Melfi: Well, let's track it. Right around the time of the shooting you were having hallucinations of that Isabella figure. The protective, loving mother. Your subconscious was shouting something at you. On the day before the shooting you said to me that she kept going on yet again about news stories of mothers throwing their babies out of windows.
Tony: Why don't we put our fucking cards on the table here! What do you think? My mother tried to have me whacked 'cause I put her in a nursing home?

(1:13)

Dr. Melfi links the Isabella figure to Tony’s idealized version of a mother and juxtaposes this imagery with that of his true mother, who never provided the nursing and love that baby Antonio receives from ‘Isabella’. Tony is, however, not yet ready to see the truth. In rage, he throws Dr. Melfi’s coffee table on the ground, screaming “You twisted fucking bitch, that’s my mother we’re talking about, not some fuck up in Attica, stab you in the shower. We’re through, you and I. We’re finished. And you’re lucky if I don’t break your fucking face in 50,000 pieces.”(1:13). However, FBI tapes force him to face the truth: Junior, endorsed by Livia, is in fact responsible for the attempt on his life. Livia and Junior escape Tony’s wrath each in their own way, though. Junior is arrested by law enforcement while Livia has a stroke just when Tony is on his way to suffocate her with a pillow. Despite not being able to perform the murder on a physical level, Tony seems to be able to “resign himself”, as Gething writes, “to the ideological death of the mother he never had: ‘she’s the devil… she’s dead to me’” (Gething 220). Tony is able to keep up this ideology for the majority of the second season, forbidding her name to be called in the house. By the end of the second season, Tony has started talking to her again very sporadically, and he has found the perfect solution to keep her out of his life for good: stolen airline tickets to Arizona for both Livia and Quintina. Unfortunately for Tony, his mother gets caught with the stolen airline tickets and the FBI is already knocking on the front door of the Soprano mansion. Tony is arrested but is able to make bail and be present for Meadow’s graduation. The shadow of the airline tickets keeps hanging over his head, though, as the FBI is building a RICO case against Tony. The key to the airline-fraud investigation is Livia: she can gain immunity for herself by testifying against Tony, but -luckily for Tony- the Feds
never give it much thought: “Come on, whose own mother is going to testify against him?” (3.2). Tony is understandably not so sure and is desperately trying to make Livia say the right things to cover for him. His doubts do not last long, though, as fate is on his side for now: Livia passes away from a heart attack.

The first therapy session after her death, Tony finally seems ready to open up about his mother: “All right, here’s the thing. I’m glad she’s dead. Not just glad. I wished she’d die. Wished. Had this court case coming up. She might’ve testified against me. So when I heard she was dead, relief flooded into my veins (...) You know, you’re right. Why the fuck should I be good to tha – that fucking demented old bat? That fucking selfish, miserable cunt? She ruined my father’s life!” (3:2).

 Particularly noteworthy is the evolution Tony has gone through regarding his perception of his mother. As Gething writes, “The dramatic transformation of Livia in Tony’s eyes from “little old lady” and “sweetie pie” to “demented old bat” – from revered matriarch to reviled monster – carries fairytale connotations: the wicked (step)mother exposed and revenged; the wolf in granny’s clothing. Livia, then, is the storybook villain.” (223). Tony’s concluding remarks for the session confirms the presumption presented here earlier: “So we’re probably done here, right? She’s dead.” (3:2). After all, at its core all the therapy has been about his troubled relationship with Livia, despite being unwilling to talk about her on many different occasions.

During the wake organized for her in Proshai, Livushka (3:2) nobody has anything nice to say, with the exception of Fanny, who claims that Livia was her best friend. Although that might have had more to do with Fanny being a lonely old woman, who “mistook Livia’s morbid conversations about death as an act of friendship.” (Bernard). Carmela finally breaks the silence, declaring that Livia was “a woman that we all know was terribly dysfunctional, who spread no cheer at all” (3:2). Livia’s legacy, “a grim philosophy of nothingness” (Bernard) will cast a shadow over the rest of the series, not in the least on Tony and A.J..
It can be concluded that Livia was quite clearly a terrible mother, who was very capable of manipulating other people into doing as she wished. She had a troubled relationship with Tony, who despite everything had great difficulty realizing just how terrible his mother treated him.
CHAPTER 2: CARMELA SOPRANO

Carmela Soprano, Tony’s elegant, bejeweled and caring wife is the second most complicated character on the show, trailing only her husband. She is “far removed from the Mafioso wife as a hapless casualty of male (generic) violence” and “possesses a tremendous sense of agency from within the multiple institutions that seek to disenfranchise and even oppress her.” (McCabe and Akass 40). In the following overview, I will delve deeper into Carmela’s failure to act upon her feelings, both in regard to love as well as in regard to her moral doubts regarding her husband’s line of work.

The marriage between Tony and Carmela is tumultuous, to say the least. Throughout the series, Tony has one goomar after the other: and if even the Irina’s, Valentina’s or Gloria’s of this world couldn’t satisfy Tony’s needs, there were always the girls at the Bing! It’s already clear from the pilot episode that Carmela is aware of her husband’s sexual escapades:

Carmela: You’re gonna be home tonight for Anthony Jr.’s birthday party, right? (...) Tony: Yeah, yeah. I’ll get home early from work.
Carmela: I’m not talking about work…

(1.1)

Carmela reluctantly accepts the adultery of her husband – it’s merely a price she has to pay to maintain her luxurious lifestyle. Carmela herself has some opportunities to cheat on Tony as well. Most notable is the crush she develops on Furio, her “romantic Dionysian fantasy lover” (Akass and McCabe 99). Furio, a henchman Tony flew over from Naples, is Tony’s driver. Him drinking coffee in the morning while waiting for Tony to get ready becomes the highlight of her day. In For All Debts Public and Private (4:1), when it’s Christopher picking up Tony instead of Furio, Chrissie’s “Hey, everybody” is met with a disappointed “Where’s Furio?” from Carmela. During Furio’s housewarming party in The Weight (4:2), the attraction between Furio and Carmela is obvious. As they dance together, the camera switches a few times to Tony talking business with Silvio, completely ignorant of what is happening in front of him. The women in the room, however, do
notice. This first form of true physical contact has certainly left an impression on Carmela: when Tony and Carmela are having sex that night, her mind is clearly somewhere else. Right before the credits begin to roll, the song to which she and Furio danced earlier, is playing in her head. In order to see Furio more, Carmela takes it as her personal mission to help him decorate his new house. It’s interesting that every time she visits his new home, she takes A.J. with her. She uses her son as a chaperone to keep her own feelings in check. A.J., oblivious to the whole situation, serves as a safety net for his mother’s sexual desires: she knows that as long as he’s present, nothing will happen. It’s a bit surprising that Carmela keeps restraining herself this way. When you look at Carmela and Tony’s marriage from an ‘eye for an eye’ perspective, she certainly has ‘the right’ to cheat on him. On top of this, as evidenced above by her thoughts, the desire is clearly there. Perhaps she’s been put off by Rosalie Aprile’s story of how she always regretted her one-time affair. As Palmer-Mehta notes, “The other Mafia women typically do not engage in affairs, and when they do, they speak of it in guilty terms.” (62). It’s simply put not expected of a house wife, a role Carmela has always fulfilled with much dedication. Furio is also struggling with the feelings he has developed for his boss’ wife. When he briefly returns to Italy for the funeral of his father, he receives some valuable advice from his uncle: “Stay away. (…) Are you fucking crazy? (…) The only way you could have her, is if you killed the man.” (4:8). Furio seems to truly consider this option after a night in a casino in Connecticut. Tony is clearly enjoying his night out, getting drunk and having a good time with some of the women, which visibly upsets Furio. Before the helicopter flight home, the two men urinate near the helicopter’s blades. Furio seriously thinks of pushing his drunk boss in the blades, and even grabs him to do so. At the last moment he seems to be able to restrain himself and regain his composure, warning him: “you’re standing too close” (4:12). Furio realizes that nothing good can come out of this situation and flees to Italy to escape his feelings. Carmela wants to visit Furio again, only to find his apartment to be empty. Bernard remarks that “The empty
rooms echo the emptiness of Carmela’s heart.” (Bernard). The visuals beautifully accompany Carmela’s feeling:

As the camera moves away from Carmela, the window she is looking through becomes smaller and smaller just like how her window of opportunity to get out of her unhappy marriage is shrinking.

The heaviest domestic crisis of the whole series takes place in the following episode, *Whitecaps* (4:13). Bernard writes that “Carmela has remained passive about her husband’s philandering for decades, because marriage to him is the path that she has chosen to reach success, comfort and assimilation.” (Bernard). But when Carmela finds out that Tony cheated on her with Svetlana, the one-legged cousin of Irina, she’s finally had enough. She confesses to Tony how “The last year I have been dreaming and fantasizing and in love with Furio. (…) He made me feel like I mattered.” (4:13). This is a confirmation Carmela’s sadness over Furio’s departure undoubtedly has finally made her reach her tipping point. Carmela has long been fine with Tony’s cheating, but now that he has unknowingly undermined her chances at romance by being Furio’s boss, she’s had enough. Furio was held back by *famiglia* values, effectively choosing *famiglia* over Carmela. Although purely speculation, it’s not unreasonable to think that if Furio had not been in the Mafia, they would have acted on their feelings. Carmela lets out all the frustrations that have been building up over the previous years, and the argument ends with Tony moving out of the Soprano mansion. Her longing for affection and romance becomes painstakingly clear when Meadow calls her mother to announce that Finn has proposed to her. Carmela congratulates her, saying “Oh my god, I’m gonna cry.” (5:9). Whether they are tears of happiness or tears of sadness, remains somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Carmela is obviously proud of her daughter, and
is joyed with the happiness she has found. On the other hand, she realizes, as she is looking down on her estranged husband floating around in the swimming pool, that Meadow and she are “at opposite ends of the romantic spectrum.” McCabe and Akass elaborate: “Whereas Meadow may be starting out on her fairy-tale romance complete with skiing trips, roaring fires, the promise of an engagement ring from Tiffany’s, Carmela abruptly finds herself forcibly at the end left with nothing but a broken heart and color swatches.” (53).

Eventually, Carmela and Tony grow closer to each other again, but Carmela has a price in mind for their reconciliation:

Carmela: It turns out there is a lot for sale over on Chrisfield, a little over an acre. I was thinking I could build a spec house and take my dad in as a partner. I mean, my allowance is what it is, but…
Tony: How much is the lot?
Carmela: 600.000. Anyway, he would oversee the construction
Tony: Well, I'll call Ginsberg and have him free up a down payment.
Carmela: And then?
Tony: I'll move back in.

(5:12)

What we see is not a couple talking trying to resolve their differences or talking about their feelings, this is a negotiation. Carmela has negotiated a position in which wife and husband are both on equal footing in their loveless marriage: Carmela gets her spec house, and Tony can continue “dealing with his midlife crisis problems” as long as he makes sure they don’t intrude on Carmela. If it weren’t for the fact that the deal is sealed by a kiss instead of a handshake, the viewer might have mistaken this scene for a business deal.

This eagerness to obtain wealth and live a luxurious lifestyle forms the basis of Carmela’s view on her husband’s line of work. Carmela herself once said “poverty is a great motivator” (5:13). If that statement is expanded that just a bit to “money is a great motivator”, we have landed at the very core of Carmela’s being. Although she knows her husband has done terrible things, she gladly ignores any doubts that pop up when she receives a fur coat, golden necklace or new Porsche.
The only time Carmela seems to seriously question the consequences of Tony’s work, is during her one time visit with therapist Krakower. When he points out to Carmela that “you will never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talk about, as long as your accomplice” (3:7), she rejects the term accomplice. Dr. Krakower is, however, of course right in his assessment: As Walker notes, “she is capable of asking him, with great excitement, if he made a score; she is capable of warning him to keep an eye on Vito and Paulie when they deliver short envelopes; she is capable of aiding in his schemes actively, as when she takes Livia away from the retirement home Green Grove so that Tony can hide money and guns there.” (Walker, 292). Dr. Krakower advises her to “take only the children, what’s left of them, and go.” (3:7). Carmela thinks it’s easy enough for Dr. Krakower to say this considering he’s Jewish, whereas “us Catholics, we place a great deal of stock in the sanctity of the family.” (3:7). It’s one of Carmela’s bad habits to turn to her ‘faith’ and hide behind it when all other avenues fail to provide a solution. Here, she uses it as an excuse for herself to not start a divorce procedure. In a final attempt to get Carmela to see the truth, Dr. Krakower tells her that “I’m not charging you because I won’t take blood money. And you can’t either. One thing you can never say: that you haven’t been told.” (3:7). Carmela nods in agreement, yet it’s exactly what she does upon returning home. By feigning depression – or at the very least laying it on thick – she manages to manipulate Tony into making the $50.000 donation to Columbia University she’s been looking after for a while. Surely enough, the prospect of seeing the Soprano name inscribed in the black marble “Donors Wall” at the upcoming Student Center at an Ivy League university soothes her conscience for a while.

To summarize, Carmela is depicted as a hypocritical, yet loyal house wife. She is shown as a loving mother throughout the whole series, who wants the best for her kids. Even though she has feelings for Furio, she does not act on them. While she seems to realize that her husband’s involvement in the Mafia is detrimental to the future of her children and herself, she consistently
fails to address these problems, instead opting to look the other way. Ultimately, she does not have the willpower to take the final hurdle on her road to freedom, namely leaving her husband.
CHAPTER 3: MEADOW SOPRANO

Out of all Tony’s family members, his daughter Meadow has always been the one most likely to leave la famiglia behind. As Carroll observes: “She certainly had the tools to escape her mob ties, or at least New Jersey: brains, the benefits of an upper-middle-class life, and an Ivy League diploma.” (81-82). From very early on in the series, she has in fact expressed her wish to do so. She muses to her friend Hunter: “I cannot wait until the whole North-American landmass is between me and Tony and Carmela” (1:3). After Jackie Jr.’s death – which will be discussed later on – she reiterates this desire by stating her plans to take a year off of school and travel to Europe instead. In the following overview, I will investigate how Meadow’s character arch is, perhaps more than any other character in the series, about finding a place for la famiglia in her life.

At the start of The Sopranos, Meadow is in her final year of high school, looking at different colleges to continue her education. She’s reached an age where she has very strong suspicions regarding the line of work her father is in. With the typical hypocrisy Carmela has a patent on, she tells her daughter that “you can’t just lie and cheat and break the rules you don’t like” (1:1) after Meadow snuck out of her room at night. Although Meadow resists the urge to call her mother out, her facial expression says it all. In College (1:05), one of the most critically heralded episodes of the whole series, Meadow and Tony are on a college tour in New England. On this father-daughter trip – Carmela is back home with A.J. – she confronts her father directly: “Are you in the Mafia?” (1:5). At first, Tony tries to deny it with pathetic arguments before sheepishly admitting that “some of my money comes from illegal gambling and whatnot.”(1:5). Meadow seems pleased with the honesty of her father, returning the favor by admitting to having done speed with friends. After going off to Columbia University, Meadow seems to have succeeded at least a little bit in distancing herself form her family and her heritage. She begins a relationship with fellow Columbia student Noah. Tony heavily dislikes Noah, due to him being African American, and Tony’s treatment of him certainly sours Tony’s relationship with Meadow for quite some time.
It is the relationship with her next boyfriend, Jackie Aprile Jr., which will prove to be a transformative and defining experience for Meadow. As the son of former acting boss Jackie Sr., Jackie Jr. was born in the life of crime. Despite this, Jackie Sr. had other wishes for his son: on his deathbed, he made Tony promise that he would “try to keep him out of this shit”. (3:3). It’s interesting that both Jackie Sr. and Tony, two men who have garnered significant power and wealth thanks to their criminal careers, have other wishes for their kids. Perhaps the outer glitter and glamour of being a gangster is not all it is made out to be, after all. Jackie Jr., who is as reckless, bold and ambitious as they come, does not share the view of his old man. As his sister says: “My brother’s whole stupid, pathetic dream was to follow in our father’s footsteps.” (3:13). Jackie Jr. will soon learn what it means to be dating Tony Soprano’s daughter, though:

Tony: Listen, I think you’re a good kid. You show respect at my house and you come from a good family
Jackie Jr.: Thanks.
Tony: As far as my daughter goes… You know I only want the best for her. I’m gonna be very protective over her. You can understand that, right?
Jackie Jr.: Of course.
Tony: So if you wanna spend time with her, I want the best from you. If you’re in school, you gotta give it everything you got.
Jackie Jr.: Yeah, right. I know it…
Tony: Shut up. Listen to me. I know I’ve been saying this to you all along, but now it’s different. You understand what I’m saying to you?

(3:9)

Jackie Jr. is unable to keep his promises: He drops out of Rutgers, and when Tony notices him at an illegal casino, he throws him out. When Tony catches Jackie Jr. enjoying a lap dance from a stripper in a strip club, it is the last straw. Tony makes Jackie pay for disrespecting Meadow: he beats him up in the bathroom of the club, ending with a brutal knee to the groin, warning Jackie that he has “bottomed out” (3:9). The message of Tony hitting Jackie in his manhood is impossible to ignore: stay away from my daughter. In her essay on the father-daughter relationship of Tony and Meadow, Carroll argues that Tony is a seductive father who has “narcissistic and erotic feelings toward Meadow” (85). He “doesn’t approve of his daughter’s romantic choices and he interferes
with her relationships.” (86). His interference with Jackie has been quite brutal, but despite all this, Jackie does not seem to be able to take the hint: he shows up on Christmas morning at casa Soprano with presents from Rosalie for the family. He surprises Meadow with a necklace engraved with the message ‘I will always be true’. Daughter Soprano is enchanted, father Soprano not so much: he reacts with a dead stare and a wordless invitation to the kitchen. There, Tony doesn’t create any illusions for Jackie Jr.: “You bullshit me and you betray my daughter. (…) I’m gonna be frank on this. I haven’t decided what to do with you yet.” (3:10). Jackie Jr. makes the decision rather easy for Tony: Meadow catches him cheating on her, and Jackie Jr. bites off more than he can chew when shooting at made men – and killing a civilian – while robbing a card game. While in hiding, Jackie Jr. calls Tony to beg for forgiveness. Tony is having none of it though, and ultimately guides Ralphie towards ordering the hit on Jackie Jr.. When Carmela and Meadow talk soon after finding out the sad news of Jackie Jr.’s death, Meadow immediately hints at Jackie being a victim of his family and his surroundings – thus, by extension, of her family and her surroundings. Carmela quickly shuts those thoughts down: “You liked Jackie, so you don’t want to believe he did this to himself. So like a lot of other people, you go around looking for bogeymen to blame, bogeymen with Italian names. So whatever you’re thinking, you just stop thinking it right now because that is not what happened.” (3:13) Apparently, Carmela really got through to Meadow for a change, as is evidenced by a conversation with Kelli Aprile, Jackie Jr.’s sister:

Kelli: I gotta paint a picture? He was killed by some fat fuck in see-through socks. Take your pick, they all look alike
Meadow: Actually, Kelli, you really have no basis to say that.
Kelli: We used to joke around about our families. What happened to you?
(...) Meadow: Let’s just drop it, okay.
Kelli: Yeah right. I mean, if my dad still controlled all the crime in North Jersey like your dad does now I’d probably want to drop it too. But then… it might not have happened!
Meadow: Wait, this is way beyond. Our dads are in the garbage business. And it’s always good for a laugh and yeah they brush up against organized crime. But you think they control every slimeball and illegal gun in like a hundred communities? The fact that you would even say this in front of an outsider is amazing to me. Jesus Christ, some loyalty?
Along with Kelli, the viewer is left wondering: what happened to Meadow? Meadow doesn’t provide an answer, likely because she doesn’t have one either. She isn’t even sure of her own stance on how her family makes a living. Just hours after the conversation above has taken place, she storms out of the dinner following the funeral. She literally runs away from the mob community while screaming nothing more than “this is such bullshit!” (3:13).

In the aftermath of Jackie Jr.’s death, Meadow is clearly stuck in a downward spiral: she quit her summer job, lies around the pool all day and has decided to take a year off to travel to Europe. In the ensuing discussions and fights she has one argument all the others are based on: “I keep having images of Jackie Aprile lying in a pool of his own blood in some street somewhere.” (4:2). But as Ron Bernard notes, “her cries of ‘Jackie’ here function more as a euphemism for the confusion and unhappiness she feels as the daughter of a mob boss.” (Bernard). Evidence to support this claim can be found in one of the most intense scenes of the whole series. Strengthened by her therapist’s support for a trip to Europe, Meadow engages in a heated argument with Tony:

Tony: Your mother doesn’t want it.
Meadow: Wow, listen to mister mob boss!
Tony: What did you call me?
Meadow: All this fucking pussyfooting around, years now? Why don’t we just get it all out there?
Tony: You got something you wanna say to me?
Meadow: What do you mean?
Tony: What do I mean? What do you mean? All these innuendoes. You inferring to me that I didn’t do everything I could to keep that kid from fucking himself up? That, knowing him and his family, that I didn’t try to be a better dad to him than his own dad, God rest his soul? That I didn’t try to protect Jackie Jr? That I didn’t actually smack him around, ‘cause I was so frustrated? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?
Meadow: I’m through telling people you help with environmental cleanup!

(4:2)

Meadow’s last turn is extremely telling as to what really is bothering her. Of course, the death of her friend is a great source of pain and negativity, but after Tony ensures her that he did everything in his power to help Jackie Jr., the true reason comes to the surface: she is yet to find her place in
the world as a mob daughter. Jackie Jr.’s death is the first event in her life which has forced her to face both worlds of her life at once. This collision of worlds has forced her to face and evaluate her position as a mob daughter, which is a challenge she obviously has trouble dealing with.

As the saying as old as time goes: ‘Time heals all wounds’. Even for a mob daughter, this rings true. Meadow never takes a year off and instead signs up for a class on ‘morality, self and society’ in hopes of finding some peace, as well as her place in this world. She seems to succeed: her flat mates can’t stop gushing over her cooking skills, and she has a new boyfriend, Finn DeTrolio. Finn differs as much from Jackie Jr. as humanly possible. Jackie Jr. was a wannabe wise guy from New Jersey who was completely uninterested in his studies. Finn, on the other hand, is a well-traveled, diligent student aiming for dental school. Finn is introduced very suddenly, without any buildup. Bernard observes that “The fact that Meadow has got roommates and a boyfriend and a whole life that viewers no longer know very much about just underlines how independent she is becoming. Meadow is no longer trapped in that little corner of New Jersey where she grew up.” (Bernard). Interestingly, as her independence and mental distance from her little corner of New Jersey grows, so does her tolerance for the Mafia and her family’s involvement in it. After Finn witnesses a violent outburst by Eugene Pontecorvo on the construction site he also works at, he discusses the events with Meadow:

Finn: You should’ve seen these guys. They were laughing. It was fucking sick. I mean is this what you grew up with?
Meadow: What are you talking about?
Finn: These people, your dad’s friends.
Meadow: I never saw one bit of violence growing up.
Finn: What about your dad’s road rage? And didn’t you tell me you had a boyfriend who was killed? Shot to death or something?
Meadow: First of all, he was killed by drug dealers. African-Americans, if that makes you feel any better. You know you talk about these guys like it’s an anthropology class. But the truth is, they bring certain modes of conflict resolution from all the way back in the old country.

(5:9)
The turnaround Meadow has made regarding her opinions on la famiglia is astonishing. “Certain modes of conflict resolution” is a laughable euphemism for smashing someone’s skull upon slight disagreement, which could have been taken straight out of Tony’s book. She also confidently states that Jackie was killed by African-American drug dealers, which directly contradicts her original instinct, when she was quick to lay blame on la famiglia. It sounds like Meadow has made her decision: she has decided to embrace her position as daughter of a Mafia boss and is starting to act accordingly. When it comes to willfully ignoring injustice and extreme violence, she certainly has learnt from the best, being the daughter of Carmela Soprano. Finn and Meadow will get engaged, but eventually their relationship will fall apart. Their engagement is broken off off-screen, so it remains guessing to what exactly happened between the young lovers. However, Meadow insinuates that Finn was not “normal” (6:14). It’s justified to assume that Finn and Meadow grew apart because Meadow started to see her family more and more as ‘normal’, which automatically makes Finn ‘abnormal’ considering his views on the Mafia and its members.

Towards the end of the series, Meadow has a few mystery dates. In The Second Coming (6:19) it is revealed that her mystery man is Patrick Parisi, the son of DiMeo-family associate Patsy Parisi. In the final episode, Patrick and Meadow are getting engaged. Meadow has taken up law instead of medicine, and Patrick works at a prestigious law firm. Upon hearing that the firm has offered a position for Meadow as soon as she graduates, with a starting salary of $170,000, Tony and Carmela share a look of pride. However, Tony has always dreamt of Meadow becoming a doctor and she used to, too. He later asks her why she changed her mind: “You know what really turned me? Seeing the way Italian are treated (…) If I hadn’t seen you dragged away all those times by the FBI then I’d probably be a boring suburban doctor.” (6:21). The viewer might expect a look of fatherly pride upon hearing Meadow’s reason to choose law, but this isn’t the case:
It’s a look of defeat on Tony’s face. After all, Tony once mentioned to Dr. Melfi that “the important thing is she get far away from me.” (3.13). He has failed in his attempt to keep her out of the mob environment, and on top of this failure, it seems to be his own fault, too. Just like that, Meadow has come full circle. Judging from the case Patrick is working on now, Meadow will be spending her days defending white collar criminals such as her father. In the end, despite all her efforts to leave the Mafia world behind, she ends up where exactly where she began: firmly in the family business.

We can conclude that Meadow had great difficulty coming to terms with her identity as Mafia daughter. Swinging back and forth between rejecting and accepting *la famiglia*, she ultimately chooses the latter, to great disappointment of her father who has always wanted more for his children.
Chapter 4: A.J. Soprano

Out of all of Tony’s family members, A.J. is the least concerned with la famiglia and what it means to be a Soprano. Although he struggles immensely with himself, even to the point of suicide, his internal struggle isn’t really related to the occupation of his father and his many uncles. Unlike his sister Meadow, A.J. is not equipped with Ivy League smarts or the will to distance himself from his family. On the contrary, he is rather comfortable with enjoying a luxurious lifestyle depending on mom and dad. In the following overview, I will examine Tony’s mixed feelings towards his son, and demonstrate how Tony and Carmela have unknowingly set him up for failure.

Celebrating his 13th birthday in the pilot episode, A.J. is still a kid when the series starts. He’s shown as not the brightest of students and gets in trouble in Down Neck (1:7) for getting drunk on the sacramental wine; “an affront to our holy sacristy”. When the school psychologist mentions that “Anthony sometimes has trouble following the rules, weighing consequences… At times, doesn’t think before he acts” (1:7), Tony clearly recognizes himself in the description. When it turns out that A.J. also suffers from panic attacks, Tony is hard on himself: “He’s got that putrid rotten Soprano gene.” (3:13). Dr. Melfi points out that “when you blame your genes, you’re really blaming yourself.” (3:13). Indeed, Tony feeling guilty for the negative similarities between him and A.J. is a recurring sentiment throughout the series. A.J.’s involvement in la famiglia is extremely limited - in fact, it’s nonexistent - and for good reason. Tony says that “I don’t want him to be like me. He could be anything he wants to be.” (3.13). However, it is probably fair to say that A.J. was never fit to follow in his father’s footsteps in the first place, even if both A.J. and Tony had wanted to. Tony realizes perhaps more than anyone else that his son is unfit to lead a life of crime: “A.J., in my business? Forget it. He’d never make it.” (3:13). Tony clearly doesn’t mind that his son is unfit for his career path, but that doesn’t clear him of all disappointments. “There are many scenes that depict Tony’s disappointment with A.J., and in particular his frustration with what he perceives as A.J.’s weaknesses: lack of drive, ambition, sexual energy, and physical and emotional resilience –
in other words, the very properties that have allowed Tony to acquire power.” (Jacobs 69). In one brutal scene, Tony screams “You want me to get a vasectomy when this is my male heir? Look at him!” (2:9).

When Tony lies in a coma after being shot by Uncle Junior, A.J. has a lot of trouble dealing with the situation. As his mother says, “Tony has always loomed so large for A.J.”, and it is showing: as Janice noticed, “When A.J. talks about Tony's possibly not coming out of this, he can’t even use the word ‘dad’, he says “Anthony Soprano is not going to die.” (6:2). He can’t stand to be in the room with his father, instead ‘studying’, dealing with a ‘stomach flu’ or giving interviews on ‘growing up Soprano’ outside the hospital. This is in stark contrast to Meadow’s behavior, who is staying up all night next to Tony’s bedside and asking questions regarding the medication her father is receiving. Eventually, A.J. does muster the courage to face his ill father. He spends all night talking to him, vowing that “I’m gonna get Uncle Junior for this. Don’t worry. (…) I’m gonna put a bullet in his fucking mummy head.” (6:2) However, when he decides to act on his promise, he drops the knife before he’s even able to lay a hand on his uncle. In what is supposed to be the biggest moment of his life – avenging the attack on his father’s life - A.J. comes up short once again. Tony remarks this, too:

Tony: You stupid fucking moron. You realize what could have happened to you, if we didn’t have connections? Some cop goes by the book and they charge you attempted murder. You hear me? Attempted murder! Then what? Then what?
A.J.: He shot you! You were just gonna let him fucking get away with it?
Tony: I told you that’s my business, not yours! And what did you do? Nothing! Zero! A big fucking jerk-off!

(6:8)

Tony goes on saying that killing someone is “not in your nature”, saying “you’re a nice guy and that’s a good thing, for Christ’s sakes.” (6.8). Tony reiterates his wish for his son to be different than him, but A.J. is not having any of it. He calls Tony a hypocrite, because the Godfather scene in which Michael avenges his father’s murder is his favorite movie scene of all time. Just now, it becomes clear how shockingly simplistic and blind A.J.’s adoration for his father really is, how
desperate he is to prove his worth to his father.

A.J. being fired from Blockbuster is just the last failure in a long list of failures. This time, however, Tony takes it really hard – he might be unable to save his kid after all. He opens up to Dr. Melfi, literally saying that he hates his son, how he wants to “fucking smash his fucking face in”. Here, Tony mimics a sentiment normally associated with his mother: infanticide. Perhaps they should not be taken literally, as Tony himself admits that “I couldn’t even hit him if I wanted to, he’s so fucking little” (6:11). Instead of acting on these feelings, Tony takes it upon himself to finally provide A.J. with what he’s needed this whole time: discipline. “If you’re not at that site tomorrow morning, I’m gonna take away your car. And then, I’m gonna take away your clothes. And then I’m gonna take away your room and then I’m gonna take away your mother’s cooking. And pretty soon, you’re gonna be out in the fucking street.” (6.11). Tony seemingly has finally gotten through to A.J.

At the family’s Christmas party, he introduces his girlfriend Blanca and her son Hector to his family. A.J. has bought Blanca a nice necklace, which initiates an interesting conversation:

Christopher: Nice piece, that necklace. Where’d you get it?
Tony: Should’ve told me, I got a guy.
A.J.: And I got a job.

(6.12)

This response is unlike anything we’ve seen or heard from A.J. before. Despite the restraints his parents might have about Blanca, A.J. is blossoming in his role as a family man. The fact that he denies the (financial) help of Tony, which he has relied upon for his whole life up until now, is a sign of his growing independence. Claiming that A.J. is ready to step out of the mob way of life would be a bridge too far, though. After all, he is still living at home, and the construction job is provided by Tony as well. Unfortunately for A.J., things don’t work out with him and Blanca. After he proposes to her, she ends their relationship, sending A.J. in a very dark, downwards spiral. A.J. is severely depressed over losing Blanca and yet again, Tony blames himself:
Tony: It's like when they're little, and they get sick, you'd give anything in the world to trade places with them, so they don't have to suffer... And then to think you're the cause of it.

Dr. Melfi: How are you the cause of it?

Tony: It's in his blood, this miserable fucking existence. My rotten, fucking, putrid genes have infected my kid's soul. That's my gift to my son.

(6:17)

A.J. attempts to commit suicide by drowning himself in the swimming pool. The rope to which he had tied his, allowing Tony to find and save his son. When Dr. Melfi suggests that subconsciously A.J. may have known the rope was too long to keep him submerged, Tony recognizes the irony of yet another failure, responding that "or, he could just be a fucking idiot. Historically, that's been the case." (6.19). Tony later admits to being ashamed of his son for trying to take "the easy way out" (6.19).

Unknowingly, Tony and Carmela are part of the problem with A.J.. Golden observes that "Tony’s feelings of responsibility for his son’s misfortunes lead him into a vicious cycle of wanting to help his son, then interfering in A.J.’s life, and finally resenting him for his dependence on Tony.” (128). Tony and Carmela repeat this exact mistake at the very end of the series, when A.J. informs his parents of his plan to join the military. Tony has always found that A.J. needed to ‘toughen up’, and was even brought to tears after he couldn’t send him to military school because of his panic attacks, desperately wondering: “We can’t send him to that place... how we gonna save this kid?” (3:13). Yet now, when the ‘toughening up’ is finally bound to happen, Tony is anything but happy, declaring together with Carmela that “as your parents, we don’t feel joining the Army is in your best interest.” (6:21). They have an alternative ready: A.J. can begin in little Carmine’s film production company, where a cushy office and a new BMW are waiting for him. After hearing the title of the job, “development executive”, A.J. quickly forgets about his plans to be a liaison officer with the local population in Afghanistan.

We can conclude that throughout the series, Tony becomes increasingly infuriated with his son, and his lack of independence, power and sexual drive. Indirectly, Tony is the one setting up
his son for failure. To compensate for the guilt he feels for passing on his knack for negativity and depression, he continuously feels the urge to help his son. However, due to this constant interference, A.J. remains dependent on Tony, hereby completing the vicious cycle.
CHAPTER 5: JANICE SOPRANO

Janice Soprano, Tony’s older sister, is a highly interesting take on the traditional role of the Italian housewife. Janice is the opposite of the traditional, Italian, feminine housewife, embodied by Carmela. Instead, as I will demonstrate in this overview, she is a hypermasculine woman incapable of conforming to the expected traditional gender norms.

When she’s first introduced into the series she has taken on a new name, Parvati, and she comes across as “a seemingly harmless, overweight spaced-out hippie chick who doesn’t realize that she is far too old for her clothes and lifestyle.” (Donatelli and Alward 66). She is presented as a highly masculine woman who is independent and individualistic. She used to work as a furniture mover, traditionally speaking a very masculine profession. She gets into fights at soccer games and takes anger management classes as a result. She even takes on the male role during sex with, when she penetrates her boyfriend Ralphie with a dildo. Throughout the series, it becomes clear that she is not the ideal candidate to take on the role of caring and welcoming housewife. When Bobby Baccala’s wife Karen suddenly dies in a car crash, the mob wives take turns helping out Bobby by making dinner for him and his kids. When it’s Janice’s turn, she neglects to make him dinner. Instead, she opts for a night of fun with Ralphie. When she does show up to Bobby’s the next evening, she shows up with a bucket of KFC. When compared to the other women who bring lasagna, ziti or other traditional, homemade Italian dishes, Janice once again stands out. Her unwillingness – or perhaps inability – to bring a homemade dish once again underlines how different she is from the other women, how she does not fit into the traditional role of mob wife. Janice tells Bobby that she couldn’t make it the previous night because “her bible group had a potluck for the homeless and she was on cleanup crew.” (4:3). As Palmer-Mehta observes: “Janice has just told a lie about attending a church event in order to get out of missing her “womanly” duty of bringing food to Bobby. In contrast, Bobby’s deceased wife, Karen, who was characterized as a caring, selfless woman who took care of the extended family, was killed coming home from an actual
church event. Janice is juxtaposed with Karen, who is positioned as the (Italian-American) feminine archetype, highlighting her distance from the feminine norm." (64).

Janice’s unwillingness and inability to conform to this feminine norm is especially explored through her relationship with Richie. Even Tony – not necessarily an authority on marriage and relationships himself – acknowledges the absurdity of their relationship. When he first sees them together, he sneers: “Oh look at this, Ozzie and fucking Harriet over here” (2:4), in reference to the popular 50’s and 60’s family friendly American sitcom The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet. Indeed, their happiness is short-lived:

Janice: You know, you came home with a fucking attitude today. You know I’ve been in this house, cooking your fucking dinner and taking care of that fucking black hole upstairs all day.
Richie: Keep your voice down. She hears everything
Janice: Not tonight. I gave her two Nembutals. Because I thought maybe we’d want to have sex. But not likely!
Richie: Put my fucking dinner on the table, and keep your mouth shut.
Janice: No, you shut up. What, just because he’s a ballroom dancer, you think your son is gay. And what if he was gay? What difference does it make?

(2:12)

There are quite a few interesting things to note in this conversation. Janice proves her incompetence as a housewife by complaining to Richie how she has to cook “his fucking dinner”. As Grynbaum observes, “in these characters’ cultural norms, a wife would never whine about such a responsibility.” (187). Janice steps out of her expected role even further, when she is the one initiating sex, “a traditionally masculine role” (Grynbaum 187). Richie responds by trying to put his fiancé back in her traditional role, by ordering her to put his dinner on the table. Janice however, as independent and stubborn as always, doesn’t oblige. Instead, she goes one step further, pushing the issue of Richie’s son’s sexuality – a very sensitive topic for the hypermasculine Richie. Having heard enough, Richie resorts to his natural response to insults: physical violence. He punches Janice in the face. Janice won’t have anything of it, though, and she calmly shoots Richie twice, killing her “soulmate”. Ultimately, Janice’s incapability to fit into the expected gender norms brought
on extreme physical violence. Janice was created “in part to bridge the relationship between Tony and his mom”. (57). She takes over the role of disturbing factor in the Soprano family. As Palmer-Metha notes, “In many ways, Janice is clearly the spawn of Livia: calculating, unpredictable, and dangerous” (57). There are quite a few parallels between mother and daughter. Both were/are mother to a child who tried to put distance between themselves and their mother by abandoning their given names: Janice became Parvati, and Janice in turn has a son named Harpo, who changed his name to Hal (6:21). By the beginning of the final season, Janice has a daughter of her own with Bobby called Domenica. The parenting ‘skills’ Janice puts on display during a trip to Bobby’s lake house, are eerily similar to those of her mother. Domenica, around 5 years old, is playing in the lake with her aunt Carmela, when Janice wants her to come out of the water:

Janice: Come on, you’ve been in there long enough! … Domenica, did you hear me? I’m talking to you.
Domenica: No!
Janice: What did you say?
Domenica: *screeches*
Janice: Nica, come over here.
Domenica: No!
Janice: Don’t tell me no. Don’t you ever tell me no!
Domenica: Mad!
Janice: You’re not mad. You have no right to feel mad. I’ll give you something to be mad about.

6.13

The controlling tone she uses against her child is reminiscent Livia. Janice warning little Nica that she’ll “give you something to be mad about” is reminiscent of Livia threatening to stick this fork in Tony’s eye, albeit a bit less extreme.

Perhaps most importantly, Janice is just as savvy in manipulating the members of la famiglia as her mother was. Throughout the show, she has three different relationships – some more serious than others. The three men in question, Richie, Ralphie and Bobby, have one thing in common: they’re all part of her brother’s crew. In certain ways, the Janice-Richie dynamic from season two mirrors the dynamic between Livia and uncle Junior from the first season. Just like Junior felt
disrespected by Tony, so does Richie: He’s older than Tony, a capo just back from spending ten
years in prison and expecting a piece of the action. A lot has changed over the years, though, and
Richie has trouble accepting the new pecking order, one in which Tony outranks Richie. During
sex, while Richie is holding a gun to her head, Janice screams “Oh, you’re the boss”, followed by
“It should be you!” (2.12). While she is attending to Richie’s sexual desires here, she undoubtedly
is also pushing him towards making a move against her brother. Janice has recognized the building
tension between the two men from the beginning, and masterfully picks out her moment to escalate
the conflict. As Palmer-Mehta recognizes, “in a move reminiscent of Livia, Janice decides to reveal
the real reason Tony’s son did not attend the dirt bike championship with Richie is because Tony
does not want Richie around his kids” Janice recognizes this will push Richie over the edge since
“this shit with your brother’s been building since I been out.” (59). Just like Livia was able to push
Junior into making a move against Tony, Janice succeeds in pushing Richie over the edge.
However, after Richie fails to garner more support for the potential takeover, Junior weighs his
options. He decides it’s more beneficial to side with Tony, and warns him of Richie’s budding ploy.
Junior, having had quite some experience with the manipulative capabilities of the Soprano women
himself even sees the hand of Janice in Richie’s action: “You gotta wonder where she is in all this.
My little niece.” (2:12). Janice desires for material wealth and a position of power. Her motives for
trying to get rid of Tony are predominantly financial: “See, he just can’t handle that our house is
gonna be nicer than his fucking house!” (2:12). Ultimately, her ploy fails due to her own inability to
live up to her expected role in the household.

Always looking for ways to maintain her luxurious lifestyle, she grabs an opportunity when
she sees one. After Bobby’s wife Karen dies, she manipulates her way into the family by scaring
his kids to death and offering a listening ear to him. Her eventual marriage to Bobby Baccilieri, Jr.,
whom Janice dominates and manipulates, appears to be another avenue to power for Janice, as
she “guides” (perhaps “goads” is a better word) him to advance through the ranks of the Mafia.” (Palmer-Mehta 57). Janice plays a very significant role in carving out Bobby’s career path:

Janice: You know, marrying the boss’ sister... Usually it’s a step up. But you keep your goddamned foot on our necks. You punish Bobby because he’s my husband.
Tony: Will you stop, heh.
Janice: To be his age and not to be a captain.
Tony: Oh, now I see what this little visit’s all about.
Janice: He works so hard for you, and what does he get?

(6:10)

Bobby’s rise through the ranks after beginning a relationship with Janice is an interesting example of the interactions between family and la famiglia. Tony himself acknowledges the peculiarities of being a member of both families and warns Bobby: “‘You can’t hide behind this brother-in-law shit forever. You’re an okay guy, but each and every man is judged on his own merit.” (6:4). However, as time goes on, and Tony’s relationship with Christopher cools, Bobby becomes the clear-cut number two if anything would happen to Tony. He’s come a long way from being the walking calzone who’s delivering Junior’s messages.

Finally, the sensitivities of the power structure become truly clear on a family trip to Bobby’s lake house to celebrate Tony’s birthday. With little Nica in bed, Tony, Carmela, Bobby and Janice are enjoying a few drinks too many while singing karaoke and playing Monopoly. Tony can’t stop making allusions to Janice’s past as a promiscuous teenager, Tony gets what he had coming: a punch in the face from Bobby. What ensues is “the ugly, undignified, and rather pathetic sight of two fat, middle-aged men falling over and gasping for breath” (Creeber 144). Ultimately, Tony has to admit his defeat. Tony, who has always taken great pride in his physical strength, is upset: Bobby challenged Tony’s status as the alpha male, and frankly, he won the challenge. As a result, the power structure of la famiglia is now destabilized. The head of the family has lost a physical fight with one of his subordinates, which undeniably changes the dynamics of the hypermasculine mob hierarchy, which highly values physical strength. Bobby, realizing what he’s done and what Tony
might do in response, is immediately regretful of his actions. Janice, too, realizes the gravity of the situation:

Janice: What the fuck were you thinking?
Bobby: You’re my wife. He insulted you!
Janice: I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself. Oh god, he is head of the family. You think he’s just gonna wake up tomorrow and forget about this?

(6.13)

Neither the viewer nor Bobby seems sure what to expect when the men are on their way to a business meeting the next day. The silence is tangible, and Bobby is clearly uncomfortable, fruitlessly trying to blame it on not having taken a leak before departure. The imagery is reminiscent of Adriana’s final ride, especially when Tony takes a sudden turn into a smaller dirt road. However, Tony doesn’t have any plans of killing Bobby. For once, he has a more elegant solution: by forcing Bobby to commit his first murder in order to get a discount on a deal, Tony firmly reestablishes himself at the top of the food chain. After Bobby’s death, Tony visits Janice with some chocolates. Janice’s intentions are clear when she declines them, saying “I need to watch my weight. I need to snag another husband.” (6:21). Although she claims to be joking, one can never be sure with Janice Soprano.

In conclusion, Janice is a highly interesting character, which strongly differs from the traditional housewife. Being the daughter of her mother, she shows equal desire for power as well as skill in manipulating the made men, and is able to influence la famiglia accordingly.
PART II: FAMIGLIA

In *The Sopranos*, there is an extremely high emphasis on the value and importance of *famiglia*. The two men at the center of this second part, Christopher Moltisanti and Eugene Pontecorvo, will both experience the gravity of their commitment to *la famiglia* first hand. When you put all your effort in one *famiglia*, your other family is bound to suffer. In the following two chapters, I will take a look at how their commitment to their *famiglia* ultimately destroys their own families. Although Chris' road towards unhappiness is longer more stretched out than Eugene’s, the destination is the same for both men: a destroyed family.
CHAPTER 6: CHRISTOPHER MOLTISANTI

On Christopher’s web page on the official Sopranos website, Tony Soprano is described as “the closest thing he’s ever had to a paternal figure” (HBO). In this chapter, I will examine Christopher’s unique status as the surrogate son of Tony, and how their relationship slowly but surely deteriorates.

Before I dive deeper into Christopher’s relationship with Tony, it is important to explore the backstory of Christopher’s biological father, as it forms the backdrop to the whole Tony-Christopher relationship. Richard “Dickie” Moltisanti, Christopher’s biological father, was a soldier in the DiMeo family. Because Dickie died when Christopher was just a toddler, Christopher doesn’t have any recollections or memories of his real father. Christopher clearly has some underlying issues regarding this loss. These are explored for the first time in Big Girls Don’t Cry (2:5), when Christopher is enrolled in an acting class thanks to Adriana. Christopher is assigned a role in a scene from James Dean’s famous last movie, Rebel Without a Cause (1955). Christopher, just like Dean, plays the titular rebel Jim in the climactic scene in which Jim’s friend Plato is shot by the police. Christopher, crying and on his knees, pleads to his father: “Help me, daddy! Dad, help me. Daddy!” (2:5). The scene ends, and Christopher’s performance is met with enthusiastic applause by his teacher and fellow classmates. When one of the students asks how Christopher managed to convincingly fake those tears, Christopher storms out of the class, clearly confused with the feelings evoked by his own performance. When, in a later session, Christopher is again matched up with the same actor who played the father in the previous exercise, it only takes one letter from him to elicit a reaction out of Christopher, who punches the man in the face without a warning, ferociously beating him until he’s pulled away by his fellow students. Adriana later wonders if it’s possible that the scene brought up some bad feelings, suggesting that the other actor reminded him of his father, causing Christopher’s violent outburst. However, Chris dismisses Adriana’s theory with a characteristically snarky “oh, fuck that” (2:5). The issues with Chris’ father are again touched
upon in For All Debts Public and Private (4:1). Tony tells Christopher more about his father, describing how Tony saw him as a mentor, and how Dickie is considered a legend in New Jersey organized crime circles. Later in the hour, Tony leads Christopher to the murderer of Christopher’s father, a newly retired police officer. Tony fills his pupil in on the specific circumstances of his father’s death. A visibly upset Chris happily accepts the address of the police officer, where he kills his victim. The titular debt has been paid off, as Chris finally is able to avenge his father’s death. Clearly, the lack of a biological father has left a void in Christopher’s life. This void is largely filled up by Tony, who functions as a surrogate father for Chris throughout the series.

Chris is a young, impulsive and inexperienced man, with an unstoppable urge to make a name for himself and earn the respect of the other wise guys. He dreads “the fucking regularness of life” (1:8), and desperately tries to escape it through his life in organized crime. Unfortunately for him, he has a habit of losing himself in his excitement. Tony is there for Christopher to show him the ropes, temper his excitement and cure him from “cowboy-itis” – a diagnosis Tony himself makes after Christopher shoots a bakery employee in the foot for letting him wait in line. The special relationship between Tony and Christopher proves to be a significant advantage for Chris in his climb to the top of the Soprano crew. Chris starts out as Tony’s driver, but quickly moves up in the world. In the most desperate of times, Tony often relies on Christopher to help him out. When Janice kills Richie, she calls Tony to come get her out of this predicament. Tony in turn calls Christopher (and fellow henchman Furio) to help him dispose of the body. Tony repeats this move three seasons later, after Tony gruesomely murders Ralphie in blind rage. Again, Tony relies on Chris in order to help him fix this sensitive matter. The sequence in which Tony and Chris clean up Ralphie’s house is one of the more unique scenes in the whole series. When the two men are preparing Ralphie’s body for his unceremonious burial, their demeanor gives away an unsettling sense of familiarity. In this shocking display of excessive violence, both men are completely unfazed, steadily carrying on with their respective tasks. This scene is even more remarkable
because of its lack of background music. The silence is only interrupted by the pouring of Tony’s bleach, the slashing of Christopher’s cleaver and the occasional short conversation. As S. Peacock writes, “The Sopranos is cocooned in silence. (...) Like a glass cloak, silence envelops the series and its families, protecting Tony from the hand of the law, but not from pain: it invites reflection, yet also contains the inevitability of being broken.” (277-278). The silence in this scene, especially, seems to invite reflection. It transforms this gruesome task into a bonding session between the two men. Afterwards, Chris opens up to Tony about Adriana’s inability to have children and the doubts these problems cause for his possible future with Adriana. Tony’s fatherly advice is, in a somewhat rare moment of clarity, to “not overthink it, either jump in with both feet, or don’t.” (4:9). As Ralphie’s body is finally disappearing in the water, the viewer gets the feeling that the men have grown closer to each other. This feeling is reinforced visually: Christopher and Tony are both shown while showering, in the silence which characterizes the whole operation:

The advantages Chris enjoys because of his special relationship with Tony don’t go unnoticed by the other mobsters. When Chris is promoted to acting capo in order to temporarily replace the imprisoned Paulie in No Show (4:2), Patsy Parisi feels passed over because he has seniority over Chris. Silvio runs the issue past Tony, saying that Patsy feels marginalized. Tony doesn’t see it though, perhaps not aware of the nepotism he’s showing: “Marginalized? What the fuck does that even mean?” (4:2). Silvio seems to feel the same way as many of the other men
though and acts accordingly. Uncharacteristically, the consigliere goes behind Tony’s back to give Patsy the ok to steal expensive floor tiles from the construction site Christopher is responsible for. The fact that Silvio almost never goes behind Tony’s back speaks volumes to how sensitive the hierarchy structure within la famiglia is, and how important it is that this hierarchy is respected. Although the incident is resolved quietly – the dispute between Patsy and Chris eventually blows over, and Tony gets his share of the money made from the floor tiles – the whole situation does underline how delicate the balance between family and famiglia is.

As I have already discussed in Chapter 4, Tony doesn’t want his biological son, A.J., to be involved in organized crime. Instead, he has big plans for his surrogate son Christopher. As Golden points out, “A.J. and Christopher demonstrate a remarkable similitude throughout the series; both struggle with drugs, questionable associates, and the ability to cause problems for Tony. Both spend time institutionalized: Christopher for his drug addiction, which he blames on his father, Dickie Moltisanti, and A.J. for his depression, clearly inherited from his father.” (134). The overarching narrative between Tony and Christopher is one of succession. From the very start, Tony is grooming him to become his eventual successor as head of la famiglia. In a conversation with Chris, Tony elaborates on why he chose him as his successor: “Those other guys, Sil, Paulie… One thing they’re not. They’re not my blood. You hear what I’m saying to you? It’s a matter of trust.” (4:6). Tony makes it clear that Chrissy will always be one step above everybody else – regardless of age or income – simply because of the fact that he’s “his blood”. It’s interesting to hear Tony referring to Christopher as his blood. After all, that is a very generous and liberal description. Although Tony may always refer to Chris as his nephew, Christopher is in fact a cousin of his wife Carmela, as well as a very distant cousin to Tony himself. Therefore, it can be assumed that Tony is calling him “his blood” because he truly sees him as a son. Christopher clearly feels the same about Tony, saying that “I’d follow you into the gates of hell” (4:6).

The amount of influence Tony has on Christopher cannot be understated, and truly
resembles the authority a father has over his son. This is evidenced in The Strong Silent Type (4:10). While high on heroin, Christopher falls asleep on top of Cosette, Adriana's beloved dog, suffocating the animal in its sleep. For Adriana, this is the final straw. She breaks down in tears, screaming "you and your fucking smack!" (4:10). Adriana is desperate to do something about her fiancée’s problems. She urges him to go into rehab, but upon seeing that his fiancée has "put him on a mailing list for junkies" (4:10), Chris loses all self-control and brutally beats Adriana. After she goes to Tony and Carmela for help, an intervention is organized to show Christopher they’re worried, and to push him in the direction of rehabilitation. The mobsters aren’t used to this way of dealing with problems. It doesn’t come as a surprise that the “carefrontation”, as Dominic calls it, quickly turns into a shouting match. When Paulie grabs Christopher, ready to punch him, Chrissie’s mother screams “Good, maybe somebody will smack some god damn sense into him!” (4:10). Chris doesn’t take this well, answering “Great, my own mother. Fuck you, you fucking whore!” (4.10). In the hospital after the intervention, it’s Tony’s turn to persuade Chris in his own way: “You lied to me. I told you you were the future of this family. I gave you that responsibility and you looked me in the eye, and you accepted it and you were fucking high. (…) Tomorrow morning you’re gonna go with Patsy up to this rehab place in Pennsylvania. You’re going in, you’re staying in. You’re going to every fucking session and you’re going to keep your mouth shut.” (4.10). In response, Chris starts sobbing and apologizing to Tony. Sure enough, the next day Chris checks in to the rehabilitation facility. The difference in Chris’ response to Adriana, his mother and Tony is extremely telling. When Adriana, the woman he intends to marry, voices her concerns, he physically abuses her, dismissing her concerns without a second thought. When his mother does the same, he verbally abuses her. Yet when Tony speaks to him, Chris turns into a sobbing puppy begging for forgiveness. His snide remarks and insults have made way for sobbing apologies.

However, the excellent relationship between the two men doesn’t last. The first major breaking point in the relationship between Chris and Tony occurs in Irregular Around the Margins
Adriana has been reluctantly giving information to the FBI and her double life is starting to take a toll on her. Because of the stress, she has developed irritable bowel syndrome. Tony is on a break with Carmela and is no longer living in their house. Tony has medical problems of his own: He has a squamous-cell carcinoma removed at the beginning of the episode. The two bond over their medical issues: unlike Christopher, Tony positions himself as a sensitive listener, showing interest in her condition and offering uplifting words. The mutual attraction very nearly materializes during a game of darts in the back office of The Crazy Horse, Adriana's night club. If it weren't for an interruption by Phil Leotardo, it is highly likely that their relationship would not have remained platonic. When Christopher is in North Carolina for business, Adriana and Tony decide to drive out to a dealer to buy some coke. However, Tony crashes the car in an attempt to evade a raccoon on the road. Quickly, the rumor mill starts running, and upon Christopher's return everyone thinks that the car crashed because Adriana was performing oral sex on Tony while he was driving. Christopher picks up on the rumor, and he flies off the handle: he drags Adriana out of their apartment by her hair in one of the series' most brutal scenes of domestic violence. Seething with anger he goes looking for Tony, the man he's always idolized, the man he considers to be his father. Christopher is restrained before he can get to Tony and is taken to a desolate road by the crew. Tony is ready to execute the man he sees as a son, but Tony Blundetto steps in at the last moment to bring Tony to reason. They get ahold of the doctor who treated Adriana and Tony when they first got the hospital after the ER, and he confirms that both passengers were sitting upright at the moment of the crash. The situation is skillfully defused by Tony Blundetto, but as Christopher disgruntledly mentions after the doctor's explanation: “But at this point now, it don't make no difference. Even if it wasn't true, it's what people think…” (5:5). In order to set things right, Tony, Chris, Carmela and Adriana go on a dinner date. While the appearances might be restored, something has broken between the two men.
Christopher's frustration with Tony boils to an all-time high, in one of the most intense hours the series has to offer, *Long Term Parking* (5:12):

Christopher: Fuck this piece of shit, I’m done. You hear me? Put my life on the line, my fucking life.
Adriana: Baby I hate seeing you like this
Christopher: Fuck family, fuck loyalty. You cost him a dime, you’re a fucking pariah. I gave that fuck pieces of my soul, Adriana. You know what he said to me? He said I should have a fucking drink.
Adriana: When?
Christopher: Up there, when we were up there at Uncle Pat’s farm.
Adriana: Well you don’t need to listen to him, isn’t that why you have a sponsor?
Christopher: Him and Tony B, breaking my balls, teasing my like when I was little. I mean what kind of fucked up, undermining shit is that to tell someone who’s got the disease. You know I could take him out in a second, that fat fuck. Bang! His kids wouldn’t even give a shit.
Adriana: Don’t talk like that. You’re a better man than he is, a better person.
Christopher: Fuck all this shit with Paulie and all, you know what hurts me the worst? Right to my heart? Him and our ass-wipe cousin, that two-faced cocksucker. He could get us all killed with New York. And him, Tony has to think about what to do with him now after all this shit? Me he don’t need to fucking think. Well maybe I need to think! Ever thought of that, you fat fucking scumbag? That’s the guy Adriana, my uncle Tony. The guy I’m going to hell for.

(5:12)

The timing of his rant couldn’t have come worse. A murder took place in *The Crazy Horse*, and the FBI has been able to prove Adriana’s involvement in it. She faces up to 25 years in prison for obstruction of justice, which allows the FBI to pressure her into either wearing a wire, convincing Christopher to rat out his uncle or doing the 25 years in jail. Because of Christopher’s mounting frustration with Tony, she believes she can convince him to start over somewhere else, far away from *la famiglia*. When she explains to Chris that she has been giving information to the FBI for over a year now, he resorts to his natural reaction: physical violence. Out of pure anger and disappointment, he nearly chokes the woman he loves to death with his bare hands. However, he can’t bear to carry through with it, and he lets go of her at the last moment. The rage is replaced by desperation and disbelief, and Christopher seems to be seriously considering the betrayal of *la famiglia*, as he muses how he “could do his memoirs, finally” (5:12). By telling Christopher of her
double life, Adriana forces him into making a choice. Bernard formulates Chris’ dilemma as follows: “Is Chris willing to forfeit his girlfriend’s life in order to maintain the relatively exciting, expensive lifestyle that is such an integral part of how he defines himself?” (Bernard). He goes to the gas station to buy cigarettes in order to clear his head before making this life-defining decision. There, he sees a man coming out of the convenience store arguing with his wife, annoyed by his three kids, getting into an old, overloaded car. If Chris chooses to stay with Adriana, this is the future that awaits him: in the witness protection program, working a regular job, living a regular life. Indeed, this is everything in life what Chris is not looking for: after all, he once said that “It’s like the fucking regularness of everyday life is too hard for me.” (1:8). However, there is another layer to the dilemma, that being family versus *famiglia*, love versus loyalty. Chris doesn’t just choose for the ‘glamorous’ wise guy life, he also chooses for Tony over Adriana. Chris can try to convince himself that he hates Tony, that he “could take him out in a second.” (5.12), his decision says otherwise. Despite his harsh and strong words for Tony, he proves to be unable to pull the figurative trigger on him. Chris is just too dependent on Tony. No matter which choice Christopher would have made, it was sure to scar him for life. The loss of Adriana immediately impacts him in a negative way. To cope with the loss of his fiancée, he turns to heroin again, concluding, “I can't stand the pain. I loved her.” (5:12). When Tony and Christopher speak later, they both use remarkably strong language when talking about Adriana:

Christopher: She was willing to rat me out because she couldn't do five fucking years? I thought she loved me!
Tony: She’s a cunt. Does no good to think about that now.

(5:12)

However, it is painfully clear that both men are suffering from the consequences of their actions. In prioritizing *la famiglia*, they lost a person beloved by both of them. These complicated feelings are expressed in the intimate hug the men share after this conversation. It’s one of the most intimate hugs in the series, loaded with desperation as the two men struggle to fight back their tears:
Chris does eventually start a family with his new girlfriend Kelli – who he turns into his wife overnight in Atlantic City after finding out she’s pregnant. Chris is excited to start his family: “I tell ya, T, with the example you set, plus the wisdom I learned from AA. It’s an inspiration. Building blocks, home, family. (…) My son will be my strength.” (6:9). Despite his good intentions, this marks the definitive beginning of the end for Christopher. On their way back from a business trip to Pennsylvania, Christopher and Tony steal a stash of crates containing expensive wine. To celebrate their unexpected score, the men visit a restaurant. Christopher struggles to stay off the wine, and after some encouragement by Tony, “You should toast to your wedding at least. Your kid.” (6:9) – he gives in. Of course, one glass doesn’t stay one glass for long. The men end up on a porch, reminiscing on their long and storied relationship:

Christopher: When you think of the shit we’ve been through, huh? Shit we’ve done. Fucking Three Musketeers.
Tony: We got a bond. It’s very special.
Christopher: You saved my life in a lot of ways.
Tony: You’ve been there for me, too, you know? Don’t think I don’t know that.
Christopher: There were times it was hard with me and you. I didn’t understand.
Tony: You were young. Stubborn.
Christopher: You always had my back, though. Like that day when I came to the house.
(…)
Christopher: I love you, man.
Tony: I love you, too.
This scene is the final tender moment the men share in the whole series. However, the
sentimentality and comradery are induced by alcohol and very short-lived. When Christopher visits
Tony later in his cellar, stocking his share of the stolen wine, there is a remarkable awkwardness
between the two. Tony attempts to break the ice recollecting the night of their heist. However, the
jokes fall flat, and their laughs are sour.

The resentment Chris has felt towards Tony ever since the accident in *Irregular Around the
Margins* (5:5) really comes to the surface when Christopher is finally able to fulfill his dream of
becoming a Hollywood film producer. Christopher describes his film - which he produced together
with Little Carmine - as follows: "Young wise guy, assassin, gets betrayed by his people. They
whack him, leave his body parts in dumpsters all around the city. Long story short, he is put back
together, by science...or maybe it's supernatural. And he gets payback on everyone who fucked
him over, including the cunt he was engaged to. She was getting porked by his boss the night the
hero was killed." (6:14). On the official premiere of the movie, Christopher gives a very small
speech: “I know you're all psyched to see the movie, so I'm not gonna give a big speech here. I
just wanna give a shout-out to the man who, without him, this whole thing would be impossible.
Where is he? Anthony Soprano, everybody." (6:14). Of course, Tony is the main investor in the
movie, so it couldn't have been made without his financial support. But the movie couldn't have
been made without him on a subconscious level either. The mob boss Salvatore is based on Tony,
with some quite obvious references. Just like Tony, Salvatore walks around in his bathrobe often,
and holds confidential meetings in the basement of his home. Tony doesn’t mind though, saying
that “imitation is a form of flattery” (6:14). However, Carmela doesn’t exactly see it the same way
as her husband:

C: Sally Boy, the boss, he fucked the guy's fiancée.
T: The thing with Adriana? I told you it never fucking happened.
C: Well apparently, your nephew feels otherwise.
(...)
C: It's a revenge fantasy, Tony, which ends with the boss’s head split open by a meat cleaver.

(6.14)

It’s hard to argue with Carmela’s logic, as the similarities are obviously there. Terence Winter, credited as the writer of *Stage 5*, confirms her theory with a subtle, metafictonal nod: the main character in the movie is named Michael. This is a reference to Michael Imperioli, the actor portraying Christopher in *The Sopranos*. This would make Christopher the main character in the movie, meaning that Sally Boy is Tony, and Michael’s fiancée indeed Adriana. By the end of the hour, Tony, too is convinced of the malicious feelings Christopher is harboring towards him. In a session with Dr. Melfi, he lets some of the frustrations out:

T: And all I did for this fucking kid, and he fucking hates me so much.
M: I’m sure on some level he loves you too.
T: Yeah? Take that home. Judge for yourself. Last five minutes should answer that question.
C: I’m not going to do that.
T: Not a horror fan?
C: It’s what you think that matters.
T: I think he fucking despises me. It’s pretty obvious. Wants to see me dead.

(6:14)

Understandably, Tony is offended on a deeply personal level by the movie. He feels betrayed by the man he once considered to be his son. This is the definitive breaking point between the two men. Late in the hour, at the christening of Christopher’s daughter Caitlyn the men share a congratulatory hug. In their eyes, there is nothing left of the love, respect and loyalty they once shared for each other:
They no longer see themselves as father or son, their surrogate relationship has been completely hollowed out: “At the beginning, as noted, Christopher is Tony’s surrogate son; however, the long, wearing decay of their friendship — Tony’s growing dismay over Christopher’s incompetence, drug abuse, and failure to assume responsibility in the organization, and Christopher’s growing suspicion and resentment of his cousin — eats away at their initial connection, leaving only the habit of being together” (Pattie 176). Because Chris continuously disappoints Tony, he eventually loses his status as crown prince of the Soprano crew. This honor has now fallen upon Bobby Baccala — not in the least thanks to his marriage to Janice, as I have discussed in chapter 5. Unfortunately for Chris, this means that he has outlived his usefulness for Tony and *la famiglia*. Being a drug addict and making revenge fantasy slasher movies certainly doesn’t help his case. Before he realizes it, Chris has become a liability to Tony and the *famiglia*.

In *Kennedy and Heidi* (6:19), Chris is driving Tony back from a business meeting with Phil Leotardo. As Chris is fiddling with the car stereo, he is no longer paying attention to the curving road, which causes him to swerve into the opposite lane. He can narrowly avoid crashing into the car coming from the opposite direction but loses control of the steering wheel after the maneuver. The car tumbles off the road, leaving Chris severely injured, stuck in the driver’s seat. Tony on the contrary appears to have only minor injuries. He climbs out of the wreck to help his nephew. Christopher asks Tony to call a taxi instead of an ambulance, as he’ll never pass the drug test.
Tony contemplates calling 911 but changes his mind. This is the last straw for Tony, especially after he notices the tree branch sticking in the baby seat in the back of the car. Realizing that if baby Caitlyn had been in the car, she surely would have died, he chokes Christopher to death. Ultimately, Tony’s decision to kill Christopher is a combination from failure to live up to expectations in both families. Chris failed to become a trustworthy number two to Tony in *la famiglia*: for all his ambition and hunger for respect and recognition, Chris has very little to show for it. As Pattie points out, “the last time we see Chris alive, he is acting as Tony’s driver; exactly what he was doing the first time we saw him.” (176). He also failed his very own family. He declared that his son would be his strength yet fails his child – even though it’s a daughter – miserably. In a dream after the crash, Tony opens up to Dr. Melfi, how he is relieved by Christopher’s death, calling him a “tremendous drag on my emotions”. He goes on how “Every morning I wake up thinking: ‘Is today the day that one of my best friends is gonna dime me to the FBI?’ And a weak, fucking sniveling, lying drug addict? That’s the worst kind of bet. The biggest blunder of my career is now gone. And I don’t have to be confronted by that no more.” (6:18). Although this conversation is happening in his subconsciousness, it’s still worth discussing. The sentiments Tony expresses here are the exact opposite of how he used to feel about Christopher in the beginning of the series. It doesn’t matter what Chris once meant to him, or how close they used to be. All it did, was buy, Chris a little bit more time: “What allows Christopher to survive for so long as Tony’s trusted number two despite his many problems with drugs, his involvement with Adriana, who is forced into cooperating with the FBI, and his obsession with Hollywood filmmaking is Tony’s feeling that Christopher is more like a son to him than merely another member of the crew or his nephew or cousin.” (Golden 128). Yet, Tony has his limits too, even when it comes to Christopher.

It can be concluded that family love in the world of *The Sopranos* is highly conditional, and entirely dependent on your position in *la famiglia*. Even a bond which was once as strong as a surrogate father-son relationship can’t escape the smothering
Chapter 7: Eugene Pontecorvo

The family – *famiglia* dichotomy is not just a concern for Tony and Christopher. A very unique storyline in the series is the story of Eugene Pontecorvo, a relatively minor character who briefly comes to the forefront in *Members Only* (6.1). His story dramatically underlines how the values these two families can contradict each other. Eugene is first introduced in season 3 as an associate of the Soprano crime family. He becomes a made man together with Christopher in *Fortunate Son* (3.3). During the ceremony, led by Tony, Tony explicitly articulates what it means to be a part of the *famiglia*:

Tony: Once you enter this family, there’s no getting out. This family comes before everything else. Before your wife, and your children, and your mother and your father. It’s a thing of honor.
Paulie: This man right here, he’s like your father.

(3.3)

Tony clearly lays out the ground rules of being a made man: *famiglia* comes before family. Upon accepting this oath, Eugene and Chris agree to prioritize *Famiglia* over family. Chris does so, although with a heavy heart, when he gives up Adriana to Tony. Eugene also will experience the weight of his oath first hand.

After being a very minor, borderline irrelevant character during his first three seasons on the series, Eugene is suddenly put in the spotlight in *Members Only* (6:1). Eugene has inherited two million dollars from his deceased aunt, and he plans to put the money to good use. He wants to retire from organized crime and set up a new life in Florida with his family. Hoping to get permission from Tony, Eugene does everything in his power to convince him. When first bringing the issue up to Tony he brings expensive watches for him. Tony is not convinced, though, telling him: “You took an oath, Gene. There’s no retiring from this.” (6:1), although he does agree to think it over. Eugene takes his persuasion to the next level, giving Tony a little ‘taste’ of the inheritance. He even kills a man in Boston to please Christopher, hoping that he will put in a good word with
Tony for him. Unfortunately for Eugene, none of his efforts have made a difference. Tony can’t even tell Eugene directly; he lets Silvio announce the message that “the Florida thing is off” (6.1). When delivering the bad news to his wife Deanne, she is upset at the power structure of the *famiglia*:

Eugene: Look, for Tony to…
Deanne: Tony, Tony! Why don’t you kill him? Put a bullet in his fucking head
Eugene: I can’t do that.
Deanne: What, you think I don’t know that you’ve done it before?
Eugene: He’s the boss, Deanne.
Dianne: The boss of what? He’s a piece of shit!
Eugene: Is our life that bad?
Dianne: It’s your money. Your aunt’s money. It has nothing to do with him!
(6:1)

This whole situation truly underscores the absurdity of how much control Tony has over the life of Eugene, as well as the other made men. Deanne realizes this: When Gene’s cellphone rings, she gives the ok for Gene to answer the call: “Go ahead. His master’s voice.” (6.1). While Gene isn’t exactly Tony’s slave, it’s hard to blame Deanne for her comparison. In many ways Tony has as much control over Gene’s life as a master has over his slave, except for the fact that Gene can’t even buy himself a way to freedom. Eugene is torn between Tony’s stubbornness, his son’s drug problem and the FBI shattering his Florida dream forever, Eugene sees no other way out than to commit suicide. His suicide carries a lot of symbolic meaning: “Gene was caught in a metaphoric noose between the mob and the FBI, and both the mob and the FBI choked off the avenue of escape that his aunt’s will seemed to provide.” (Bernard). And just like that, Eugene disappeared from the forefront as quickly and as suddenly as he entered it.

Eugene’s tragic storyline underlines the ultimately hollow meaning of the family values of *la famiglia*. For all his talk about loyalty and standing up for each other, Tony is remarkably disloyal to Eugene. Even though Tony and Eugene “go way back”, Tony can’t even muster up the time to personally tell him that he will have to bury his plans for the future. On a personal level, one could
argue that Tony has betrayed Eugene, by denying his way out of the criminal life. Ultimately, their 
*famiglia* is built around one thing: money.
PART III: THE SOPRANOS AND ITALIAN IDENTITY

The overwhelming majority of the characters in *The Sopranos* are Italian Americans – in fact, Herman “Hesh” Rabkin, Tony’s longtime friend and trusted advisor, is the only recurring character in Tony’s environment who is not of Italian descent. As Tomasulo writes, “the casa Soprano and the Mafia *famiglia* are distinctly Italian, and are identified as such.” (197). It is therefore unsurprising that Italian culture, heritage and identity play a significant role in the series. In this final part of my thesis, I will take a closer look at how Italian-American identity is depicted in the series, and which purpose it serves. In chapter 8, I explore the link between the omnipresent Italian pride and the socio-historic circumstances of early Italian immigrants. Finally, in chapter 9, I discuss the connection between organized crime and Italian ethnic identification.
CHAPTER 8: ITALIAN PRIDE

*The Sopranos* is filled with characters who distinctly characterize themselves as Italian Americans, who take exceptional pride in their Italian heritage. The topic of Italian heritage has been addressed in numerous journalistic and academic works. Tabasinejad argues that “the main theme in the treatment of race in *The Sopranos* is one of trauma: specifically, the trauma of immigration, subjugation, exclusion, and, finally, (a highly selective and conditional) acceptance into Whiteness.” (5). This acceptance into Whiteness is a gradual process, often referred to as Whitening. Gans describes Whitening as “the social process by which the descendants of the European immigration were accepted by non-immigrant America.” (269). Tabasinejad refers to the marginalized position of Italian immigrants in the pre-World War II United States, citing their “inferior positions in various sectors, including the labour market, politics and unions.” Luconi describes their situation as follows: “Italians, though they themselves did not ascribe to the identity of ‘Italian’, were constructed as inferior to Northern Europeans, occupying a space in the racial hierarchy in between Whites and Blacks, and often called Dagoes, Guineas and Wops.” (295). This historically unjust treatment of, and underappreciation for, Italians is indeed mentioned numerous times throughout the series. In *The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti* (1:08), the FBI searches the Soprano estate in hopes of finding “any incriminating evidence” against Tony. During the search, FBI agent Grasso accidently breaks a glass bowl. The incident is revisited later that night over dinner:

Tony: Grasso. You think it’s a coincidence they sent him? If he wasn’t Italian, he’d be back at the office sweeping up, the stupid jerk. They probably frisk him every night before he goes home
A.J.: Why?
Tony: Why? Because he has a vowel at the end of his name, that’s why: Grasso! I mean what’s he thinking. He’s gonna make it to the top by arresting his own people?
A.J.: Pass the moo shu!
Tony: He’ll see. He’ll learn!
A.J.: We have a vowel.
Tony: Effin’ right and you be proud of it. Jesus Christ you’d think there never was no Michelangelo the way they treat people!
Christopher: Did you know that an Italian invented the telephone?
A.J.: Alexander Graham Bell was Italian?
Tony: You see? You see what I’m talking – Antonio Meucci invented the telephone and he got robbed! Everybody knows that!
(…)
Tony: Here’s something else I bet you didn’t know. More Italians fought for this country in World War 2 than any other ethnic group!

Carmela and Tony continue listing historical achievements of Italians, such as the discovery of Canada and the founding of Bank of America, before drifting over to Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italians who got sentenced to death despite overwhelming evidence of their innocence.

Phil Leotardo, Tony’s fiery rival in the final seasons, also holds his Italian ancestry in high regard. On his brother’s funeral, the whole family is present, and as head of the family Phil has a few words for his many grandchildren:

Phil: Who knows, who is Leonardo da Vinci?
Matty: Yeah, he wrote The Da Vinci Code!
Phil: No!
Woman: Another man wrote that, but it’s a hideous, sacrilegious book!
Phil: Annabella?
Annabella: He was a painter of the Mona Lisa
Phil: Very good. He was not only a painter; he did medical drawings and he designed a tank for the army. Leonardo was a great Italian, and that was our name originally, Leonardo. But many years ago, when my grandpa came over from Sicily, they changed it at Ellis Island to Leotardo.
Grandchild: What did they do that for?
Phil: Because they’re stupid, that’s why, and jealous. They disrespected a proud Italian heritage and named us after a ballet costume.

In both of these excerpts, the head of the family places great importance on Italian history and its historical figures. Clearly, the historical mistreatment by non-Italian Americans of these is a source of great anger for Tony as well as for Phil. Noteworthy is the ignorance by the younger generation to these Italian historical nuggets: A.J. (rightfully ) believes Graham Bell invented the telephone, and Phil’s grandson Matty thinks Leonardo da Vinci is the author of The Da Vinci Code. These comic differences are used to show the rift in knowledge on Italian culture, and the increasing
distance between Italian Americans and the mother country as the generations grow. Slowly but surely, the 'Italian' in front of 'Italian American' is fading away. Even Paulie “Walnuts” Gaultieri - not exactly the man we’d expect to be very much concerned with the socio-historic image of Italian immigrants – chips in. At a coffee shop in the second episode of the series, 46 long, he is annoyed by the Americanization and commercialization of Italian coffee: “It's not just money. It's a pride thing. All our food, pizza, calzone, buffalo mozzarella', olive oil. These fucks had nothing. They ate puzzi before we gave them our cuisine. But this, this is the worst. This espresso shit.” (1:2). In a comically inconsequential attempt at revenge, Paulie steals a coffee pot from the chain coffee store.

It can be concluded that many characters share a great pride and fondness regarding Italian culture and heritage, and this can at least partially be linked to the historically unjust treatment of early Italian immigrants in the United States.
CHAPTER 9: ITALIAN ETHNICITY AND ORGANIZED CRIME

While historical and communal trauma is certainly an aspect present in relation to Italian identity, as Tabasinejad suggests, this not the sole reason for the extreme identification with Italian culture – as well as the extreme differentiation from non-Italian Americans many characters show. In this final chapter I will argue that this extreme identification serves a purpose for the *famiglia*. During a therapy session in *From Where To Eternity*, Tony himself connects the criminal activities of the mafia to his Italian heritage:

Dr. Melfi: So does that justify everything that you do?
Tony: Excuse me. Let me tell you something. When America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? Because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways, and to make them richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers; they needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn’t want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us: Honor and family and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action! Now we weren’t educated like the Americans, but we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks, those other… euh the, the, the JP Morgans, they were crooks and killers too. But that was the business, right? The American Way.

(2:9)

The timing of Tony’s reference to Italian history is interesting. For the second time in the series, Italian heritage and history is brought up by Tony after his criminal activities have been questioned:

The dinner scene from *The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti* (1:8) I discussed earlier follows immediately after the FBI has searched the Soprano mansion for “incriminating evidence”. Here again, his involvement in illegal activities is questioned, this time by Dr. Melfi. Tony makes some interesting connections in this small monologue. The communal “we”, the “some of us”, are the Italian Americans who are involved in the mafia. They took “a piece of the action”, because they had to, because nobody was giving them a chance; all that was given to them were low-end jobs with low-end pay. According to Tony, they wanted to preserve three values that meant something to them: honor, family and loyalty. It is worth observing that these values, which Tony calls Italian,
sound eerily similar to the values of the Mafia: perhaps Tony is confusing the two? It shows just how closely Tony associates organized crime with being Italian-American. In this particular segment, “Tony’s reverence for an anti-assimilationist model of Italian-American history” (108), as Kocela calls it, very clearly shows through. For Tony, reverence for anti-assimilation comes together with disdain for assimilation. In A Hit Is A Hit (1:10), Tony tells Dr. Melfi that “Guys like me were brought up to think the medigons are fucking bores. The truth is the average white man is, is no more boring than the millionth conversation over, over who should have won; Marciano or Ali.” (1:10). When Dr. Melfi wonders if that means that he doesn’t consider himself white, Tony elaborates by saying “I don’t mean white like Caucasian. I mean a white man, like our friend Cusamano.” Tony draws a line here between “real” Italian-Americans such as himself, and medigons – defined by Longo as a “non-Italian American or an Italian who has lost his roots” - such as his neighbor Cusamano. The fact that Tony was brought up thinking medigons are bores is yet another clue to how ingrained Italian American identity is in the mob. Tony even goes as far as to say that, even if he wanted to, he couldn’t hang out with Cusamano and the other medigon because of what “the guys” (the other men in the DiMeo family) would think. This brings Kocela to an interesting observation, stating that Tony “begins to see whiteness (…) as detrimental to his long-term ability to maintain credibility as a Mafia boss.” (210). In summary, in order to be accepted and respected as a Mafia member, you have to remain distinctly Italian American, even to the point of not being around more assimilated Italian Americans. Even a man in as powerful a position as Tony will lose respect for doing so. In other words, “success as a postmodern mob boss demands proficiency in manipulating one’s racial and ethnic profile.” (Kocela 210). When Kocela describes “Tony’s self-serving ability to manipulate the terms Caucasian and white man as signifiers of racial and ethnic difference” (210), he refers to the housing development scam in Watching Too Much Television (4:7): “Tony is able to gain the trust of his African American compatriot, Maurice, by appealing to a shared history of ethnic persecution. At the same time, he is also able to exempt
himself and his crew from the dirty business of clearing out crack houses by invoking his visibility as a white man: “Oh nice! Bunch of white guys settin’ off caps in the ghetto. That won’t attract any attention at all!” (210). However, this manipulation of race and ethnicity isn’t just limited to conversation and interaction with outsiders and business partners as Kocela describes. This manipulation is constantly happening between the Mafia members themselves, perhaps on an unconscious level. In terms of language and apparel, the men constantly reinforce their shared ethnic background.

### 9.1 Language as a tool of ethnic manipulation

The language used by the vast majority of the characters is highly stylized mix of New Jersey slang and Italian expressions. However, as one looks closer at the exact language used; there are a few interesting observations to be made. As Grynbaum writes: “Names of Italian dishes fly as often as bullets: pasta “fazool”, veal parm’, tiramisu, clam *oregenato*.“ (184). Indeed, *prosciut’, monigott* and *antipasto* seem to make up about half of the Italian vocabulary of Tony and his colleagues. The other half is reserved for expressions and insults such as *Madonn’, Butann’* and *Ffangull*! More relevant than the meaning of these last two, is the lack of full Italian sentences throughout the series. Although, admittedly, I did not scan the whole series for Italian sentences, I can only find one in the entire series which was spoken by Tony Soprano or one of his crew. This is excluding Furio Giunta simply due to the fact that he is an Italian citizen, and Italian is in fact his mother tongue. The line in question is – unsurprisingly - an insult, directed at FBI agent Grasso during the search of the Soprano mansion: “Grasso, ti faccio un culo così” (1:8). In 46 *long* (1.2), Livia is moving into Green Grove, a retirement community where she will spend her golden years. However, Livia is anything but enthusiastic about spending her final years in a nursing home. Noticing this, Green Grove manager Bonnie DiCaprio attempts to cheer her up:

Bonnie: Livia, did you ever hear the old Italian saying? My aunt used to go: “Col tempo la foglia di gelso diventa seta.”

Carmela: What does that mean, Bonnie?
Bonnie: Time and patience change the mulberry leaf to silk.  

(1:2)

In this scene, it is confirmed that neither Tony, Carmela nor Livia have any proficiency in Italian beyond some very basic vocabulary. This realization is quite problematic, and automatically begs the following question: If Italian doesn’t come naturally for them (which it obviously doesn’t, it doesn’t for any other of the crew either), the code-switching automatically becomes unnatural and forced as well. If these men don’t have any proven proficiency in Italian, why do they switch to it so often? Sociolinguist Howard Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can help provide an answer to this question. Gallois, Ogay and Giles describe the three basic assumptions on which CAT is based (136-137):

1. “Communicative interactions are embedded in a sociohistorical context.”

2. “Communication is about both exchanges of referential meaning and negotiation of personal and social identities.”

3. “Interactants achieve the informational and relational functions of communications by accommodating their communicative behavior, through linguistic, paralinguistic, discursive and nonlinguistic moves, to their interlocutor’s perceived individual and group characteristics.”

Gallois et al. elaborate on assumption two, saying that “Personal and social identities are negotiated throughout the communication process, whereby interactants regulate the social distance between themselves”. (136). The key word in the CAT is of course ‘accommodation’. “Accommodation is the process through which interactants regulate their communication (…) in order to appear more like (accommodation) or distinct from each other (nonaccommodation).” (137). With this information in mind, it’s now clear that the regular code-switching is a subconscious form of accommodation in order to appear more like the others. By their regular usage of Italian despite their extremely limited knowledge of the language, they are constantly reconfirming their shared ethnicity and heritage. As Trotta writes in his paper on language in The Sopranos, “Identity (in this case ‘linguistic identity’) and in-group solidarity are important phenomena in understanding
the dynamics of sociolinguistic processes such as accommodation, dialect shifting/code switching, use of taboo face, etc." (19). It can be concluded that the code-switching of the mobsters serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it underlines the fact that they’re different than the rest of society – not in the least from the medigon - while at the same time also accommodating and enforcing the in-group solidarity of the crew. More specifically, by constantly code-switching to Italian, a language none of the men properly speak, they are artificially reconfirming their belonging to this specific Italian-American ethnic group.

9.2 Apparel as a tool of ethnic manipulation

To a lesser extent, clothing also plays a role in the gangsters’ identification as Italian-American. In his essay on how The Sopranos shows Italian ethnicity as "a fixed essence, an immutable national character pattern" (202), Tomasulo touches on the attire worn by the crew. Specifically, he focusses on “the so-called guinea T” (202). Tomasulo loathes “the fact that all male Italian American characters on the Sopranos wear sleeveless undershirts, and they are constantly shown in that attire.” (202). The sleeveless undershirt is part of the unofficial DiMeo family uniform. Just like their language usage, their preference for a “guinea T” has two functions. On the one hand, as a (stereo)typical symbol of Italians, it underlines their heritage and ethnicity. On the other hand, everyone in the DiMeo crew is wearing them. In this sense, wearing a ‘guinea T’ is just as much a signal that they belong with the crew. Not only does it underline their identity as Italian Americans, it also underlines their identity as members of the DiMeo crime family.

9.3 Ethnic manipulation?

Manipulation might come off as a rather strong word to describe the characters’ views on heritage and ethnicity. But it is undeniable that the mobsters wildly exaggerate their bond with Italian culture and heritage. David Chase leaves few chances on the table to point out the ironies and hypocrisy the characters display regarding their ethnicity.
For an early example of the irony, I turn back to the dinner scene from *The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti*, which I have already partially discussed above on page 57. The dinner of choice by the Sopranos is remarkable: no traditional Italian food on the menu. Instead, The Sopranos have opted for Chinese takeout food along with some cans of coke. While this may seem like an irrelevant detail, it shouldn’t be regarded as such. Chase explicitly guides the attention of the viewer towards the food: In the middle of Tony’s rant, he is interrupted by AJ when AJ asks to pass the moo shu. On top of this, food in general carries a lot of meaning and importance throughout the series. As Grynbaum writes, “every episode of the series is saturated in sumptuous Italian fare. (...) Names of Italian dishes fly as often as bullets: pasta ‘fazool’, veal parm’, tiramisu, clam oregano. The characters fetishize certain dishes and the camera follows suit. (...) Food and dining play an important role in underscoring the shows’ themes, fleshing out characters, foreshadowing events, and developing narrative. (...) For *The Sopranos*’ Italian Americans, food is identity, and it can represent norms of masculinity, memory, family, and cultural heritage.” (184).

It’s in this representation of cultural heritage that the paradox lies. Tony and Carmela are teaching their children about all the historical achievements of the Italian people, over their remarkably un-Italian dinner. Chase is nodding to the fact that the Sopranos perhaps aren’t as distinctly Italian-American as they’d like to believe so much. Perhaps Tony and his family, living their comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle in their safe, suburban mansion are more assimilated than he’d like to admit. Tony exaggerating his identity as an Italian American comes to the forefront once again in *Walk Like A Man* (6:17). A.J. is still hurting over his breakup with his ex-fiancé Blanca, when Tony tries to cheer him up:

Tony: And I know it feels like you’re never gonna love anybody again. But trust me, there’s millions of girls out there that are dying to meet a guy like you. I see them every day.
A.J.: Oh, right, I’m so special.
Tony: You’re damn right you are. You’re handsome and smart and a hard worker... and, let’s be honest, white. That’s a huge plus nowadays.

(6:17)
It’s interesting to hear Tony referring to A.J. as white instead of Italian-American, especially when taking into account his previous reliance upon the distinction between Caucasian and white. It’s not a coincidence that Tony uses these terms at home. When we take into account that Tony doesn’t want his son involved in the Mafia, this takes on an extra dimension. Once again, this shows the hypocrisy and flexibility on Tony’s part regarding ethnicity. For his crew, he is distinctly Italian American, yet at home with his son, he has no problem identifying as white.

In Commendatori (2:4), the disconnection between the Italian Americans and the old country is explored. Tony, Chris and Paulie make the trip overseas to sell stolen cars to the local Mafia. At the end of the hour, back in the United States, Tony tells Pussy that they “did real good business-wise”. However, when looking at the facial expressions of the men, there is clear disappointment to be found:

Each of the men has had some illusions shattered during this trip. Christopher is excited upon arrival: “Two definite agendas I got, hit the topless beaches and see that fucking crater. I don’t care what anybody says, I’m there.” (2:4). However, Chris doesn’t even come close to either. He spends the whole trip on a heroin high with his Italian colleague Tanno.

Tony, too, has some of his illusions shattered. He was longing to meet Don Vittorio, the longstanding boss of the Italian famiglia. But to Tony’s great disappointment, Don Vittorio isn’t a charismatic, stoic and respected pater familias. Instead he’s a senile old man, no longer capable of taking care of himself, let alone a crime family. Paulie puts two and two together: “Ton’, you give this guy a golf club, he’ll probably try to fuck it.” (2:4). After getting over the initial shock, Tony
manages to get a great price for the cars and gets Furio as an extra man on top in his negotiations with Don Vittorio’s daughter, Annalisa. However, Tony’s trip has been all about business. For all his talk about the old country, Italian heritage and the historical greatness of Italians, Tony is remarkably uninterested in all the history, culture and mythology surrounding him on the trip.

The gap between the Italian American gangsters and Italy, however, is explored mainly through Paulie’s experience. Out of the three men, Paulie seems to be the most interested in all Italy has to offer: upon arrival, he exclaims with an almost childlike excitement: "Look at this place! The mother country. T, here they make it real." (2:4). He feels respected when the hotel staff addresses them as commendatori, and marvels over the octopus served during a business dinner. When Tony notices his enthusiasm, Paulie admits that “this is a big thing to me, T. I was never here, okay?” (2:4). Unfortunately for Paulie, the excitement doesn’t last. Paulie has always held Italian cuisine in high regard, as seen in 46 Long (1:2), where he angrily states: “All our food, pizza, calzone, buffalo mozzarella, olive oil. These fucks had nothing. They ate puzzi before we gave them our cuisine.” (1:2). Ironically, the Italian cuisine so heralded by Paulie doesn’t seem to be much to his liking. He asks for more gravy on the pasta which is met with scorn by the Italian mobsters: “And you though the Germans were classless pieces of shit.” (2:4). Later on, Paulie sits by himself on a terrace enjoying a coffee. When he sees a group of older Italian men doing the same, he attempts to greet them with the same address he was so impressed by, commendatori. However, only one of the men – David Chase in a cameo - turns around, just to give him a disapproving glance. Affronted by this rejection, Paulie quickly changes his opinion on the men from commendatori into “cocksuckers”. (2:4). When Paulie learns that the prostitute he’s with is from Ariano Irpino, the same town his grandfather was from, he enthusiastically muses how “our families probably knew each other!”. (2:4). However, the woman is ostensibly more interested in the sole of her feet than their families' presumably shared history. After all, “Ariano Irpino is simply another town in Italy for her, not the seat of some mythologized history as it is for Paulie Walnuts.” (Bernard).
Upon his return to New Jersey, Paulie maintains the façade he’s been keeping up since the beginning of the trip:

Pussy: So how the fuck was it?
Paulie: Fabulous, I felt right at home.
Pussy: That’s great.
Tony: Real good business-wise.
Paulie: I feel sorry for anyone who hasn’t been. Especially any Italians.
Pussy: Someday.
Paulie: Don’t put it off another second, Pus.
Pussy: Alright, I fucking heard you.

(2:4)

At first sight, Paulie is convincing Pussy to plan a trip as soon as possible. But the viewer knows better. Italy wasn’t everything he thought it would be, and if anything, Paulie is trying to convince himself otherwise. This episode has exposed the discrepancies between Italian American culture and Italian culture. It is clear that the two aren’t nearly as connected to one another as the Italian American mobsters had previously believed.

Finally, an analysis of Italian identity and heritage in *The Sopranos* wouldn’t be complete without the inclusion of *Christopher* (4.3). Auster calls *Christopher* “most insightful of all the episodes that deal with the Italian American experience and their heritage.” (271). When the Soprano crew learns about a planned protest against the Columbus Day parade, the men get quite worked up about. Silvio, especially, takes offense: “You know what it is? I’ll tell you what it is. It’s anti-Italian discrimination. Columbus Day is a day of Italian pride. It’s our holiday, and they wanna take it away!” (4:3). When Sil and some of the crew – even model citizen Artie Bucco - try to break up an Indian American protest on the upcoming Columbus Day parade, it’s an embarrassment. A few guys are arrested for public disorder and Little Paulie is hospitalized after he catches a glass bottle to the head. Tony is furious and expects more from his usually level-headed consigliere.

When the men return from a trip to the casino, they hear about a scuffle during the Columbus Day parade on the car radio:
Silvio: I should’ve been there. I would’ve been fucking there. I forgot this was a Monday. Maybe we ought to just whack this prick.

Tony: Who the fuck are you kidding? All you thought about was blackjack!

(4:3)

It’s interesting that Tony calls Silvio out on his double standards, considering his own flexibility regarding his own ethnicity. But nonetheless, Tony is right. Silvio earlier said that “this is something that hits home. I can’t turn the other cheek on this.” (4.3) Yet when push comes to shove, Silvio is nowhere to be found because he was playing blackjack. As Bernard puts it aptly: “The various issues of the olive-skinned or red-skinned or black-skinned or white-skinned eventually fall away for these characters – ultimately, it’s all about the green, all about money.” (Bernard).

It can be concluded that even though the mobsters consider their Italian heritage to be an essential part of their identity, they really are less Italian than they let people believe. Despite this, they keep heavily relating to their heritage, as it builds and constantly reconfirms a common ground with the other mobsters.
CONCLUSION

In a total of 86 episodes spread over 8 years, *The Sopranos* has given us insight into the organized crime world of New Jersey. A study on turn of the century America, it tells the story of two families, how they intertwine and interact.

The first part of this thesis was dedicated to the members of the intimate Soprano household. Individually analyzing the roles of these characters allowed me to put nuance into each character’s views on organized crime, and the specific roles they fulfilled within that context. I discussed how Livia and Janice both manipulated their way to the top of the hierarchy, both not fit for the role of traditional housewife. I described Meadow’s back and forth stance on *la famiglia*, only for her to end up right where she started. I went into how Tony is torn between guilt and anger when it comes to A.J., and I discussed Carmela’s lack of willpower to truly pursue her dreams.

The second part dealt with the crushing role the *famiglia* can have on its members. I discussed how the close father-son relationship between Tony and Christopher ultimately crumbled under the crushing pressure of the *famiglia*. Chris was forced to make a choice no one can: his surrogate father, or the love of his life. Emotionally crushed after this decision, he was unable to crawl out of the emotional; instead he relapsed into drugs and made an unflattering movie about Tony. Eugene, too, faced insurmountable problems. When he was faced with the harsh truth that he was stuck between his two families, he saw no other option than to take his own life.

The final part zoomed in on Italian-American identity, and its relation to organized crime. After establishing that much of the Italian pride on display in the series could be traced back to the unjust treatment of early Italian immigrants, I argued that, in order to be accepted and respected as a Mafia member, you have to remain distinctly Italian American. I then connected this mentality to ethnic manipulation, which all the wiseguys are guilty of. By constantly underlining their heritage, they find. Most notably, they all regularly use Italian slang despite not speaking the tongue, in an
effort to constantly artificially reconfirm their belonging to this specific Italian-American ethnic group. With these three separate parts, I have aimed to discuss and touch upon the different aspects of family and community depicted in “The Sopranos.”
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