Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Borderlands Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjbs20

Mafia Borderland: Narratives, Traits, and Expectations of Italian-American Mafias in Ontario and the Niagara Region

Anna Sergi

To cite this article: Anna Sergi (2022): Mafia Borderland: Narratives, Traits, and Expectations of Italian-American Mafias in Ontario and the Niagara Region, Journal of Borderlands Studies, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2022.2151036

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2151036

Published online: 29 Nov 2022.

JOURNAL OF BORDERLANDS STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2151036

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Mafia Borderland: Narratives, Traits, and Expectations of Italian-American Mafias in Ontario and the Niagara Region*

Anna Sergi

Sociology, University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper will investigate narratives, traits, and expectations of Italian-American mafias in North America. The specific case study is the area of Niagara, at the border between New York State, USA and Ontario, Canada. In this context, the artricle will mainly explore narratives and traits of so-called "mafia" families in the city of Hamilton, and their apparent connections with other "mafia" groups on the other side of the borderland, in Buffalo and in Toronto.

Through qualitative design adapted from grounded theory methodology with mixed data, including news stories, investigative files and interviews, this article shows how mafias in the borderland of Niagara are conceptualised as hybrid groups, employing different identity "flags". Mafias appear isomorphic since they imitate each other's structures and (try to) obey traditional mafia rules, to adapt and survive. In line with GT methodology, this paper finally explores an emerging theoretical category, that of the mafia borderland. As a space and identity, mafia borderland helps to sketch traits and expectations of mafia groups in border areas.

KEYWORDS

Italian mafia; mafia borderland; Niagara region; cosa nostra; ndrangheta; borderlands

Introduction

North America has been for decades the location where Italian mafias have fascinated many and shaped policies and countering strategies. It has been argued that the concept of mafias has been shaped by Americans far more than Italians (Jacobs and Dondlinger Wyman 2014). The Americanization of the concept of mafias, in the English-speaking world, has profoundly affected the way organized crime is understood globally (Beare and Woodiwiss 2014).

Notwithstanding the enduring interests on mafia-related topics, research on Italian-American mafias in North America has progressively decreased. Research has focused on more "contemporary" forms of organized crime, perceived as less "traditional", by

CONTACT Anna Sergi asergi@essex.ac.uk

*This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professor Carlo Morselli, who passed away in 2020. His expertise, his guidance, his wit, and his good heart accompany the author always when approaching these research topics. More importantly, for the purposes of this paper, the author still hears the echo – and is still made to smile! – at the very first question he asked onfirst arrival in Montreal for a visiting fellowship in 2017: "*Tell me now, do you really believe in the Mafia, then*"?

investigating a variety of phenomena from biker gangs (Quinn 2017) to transnational organized crimes, including cyber and financial crimes (McCusker 2017) and social network analysis of co-offending patterns (Malm, Bichler, and Nash 2011; Bright, Brewer, and Morselli 2021). Arguably, following successful arrests, trials and convictions by federal and national authorities that decimated the "Mob" in major US centers (Jacobs, Panarella, and Worthington 1994), the attention to Italian mafias in the U.S.A. has steadily decreased, with some exception (e.g. New York City) (Sergi and Storti 2020). In Canada, research has been interested in investigating "traditional" forms of organized crime, including Italian mafias and their Canadian/North American manifestations (Schneider 2009). Recent research on Italian mafias has been also linked to the cities, in the Eastern Coast, in Toronto and Montreal (Sergi 2018). Notwithstanding the declined interest from academia, mafia-related activities in North America still interest law enforcement. Authorities in the U.S.A. and Canada, in fact, still have mafia-related units (for example, the Italian Organised Crime unit of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the mafia enterprise units of the Federal Bureau of Investigations) and their work remains interesting.

This article will investigate the current traits and expectations of Italian-American mafias in North America, starting from the narratives found in media and official documents, such as court files and investigations. In addition, interviews with police forces and journalists, next to self-narratives of alleged "mafiosi" as they appear in the investigative documents, constitute additional narratives. The methodology employed, qualitative and inspired to grounded theory, has allowed for self-correction and a creative research process. The term "mafia" is used critically in reference to families or other close-knit groups of Italians or people of Italian descent that have been at different stages connected to, or thought to be connected to, organized crime activities, aimed at both securing profits but also affirming power through governance of territories and trading activities in those territories (Varese 2020) One of the key characteristics of mafias is their resilience: in fact they are considered "permanent" organizations, due to their inter-generational organization and the exploitation of Italian culture (Sergi 2017).

The specific case study is the area of Niagara, which is at the border between New York State, U.S.A. and Ontario, Canada. The Niagara River serves as an international border between the two countries and the areas on both sides of the river are well known tourist spots and particularly lively places. By placing the compass on Niagara, this article will not seek to present the "truth" about criminal enterprises or mafia families in these contexts. The article will primarily look at narratives on Italian mafias in and around the city of Hamilton. The city of Hamilton lies almost at midpoint between Buffalo and Toronto, less than a one-hour drive from each, so the influence of each of these larger cities has direct impact on Hamilton. The analysis in this article depicts mafias in the Niagara as hybrids, in terms of their groups' identity and composition, as well as interconnected on many levels. Additionally, their organizations appear isomorphic – in as much as they imitate each other's structures and a traditional idea of "the mafia". As is expected in grounded theory research, this research did not start from a theoretical underpinning, but landed on a theoretical contribution. This article, therefore, will present the grounded theoretical category of "mafia borderland" which emerges through data collection. The category of mafia borderland helps the analysis of mafias' traits in Niagara: the groups' hybridity and isomorphism can be considered the main traits of a borderland identity.

This category can be helpful in understanding expectations for "mafias" at borders more generally. In essence this article argues that criminal groups in the Niagara borderland seem to erode and blur the border, when it comes to both crime and identity, and do appear to have developed their own bordering practices. Niagara is a mafia borderland, a place where mafia-type groups excel at survival -or rather their "narrative" does – and at negotiating identities. Mafia borderlands are characterized by specific and contextual cultural expectations, as the border creates opportunities for mafia-type groups to cooperate in business while accepting – and bolstering – each other's diversity. The data analysed for this paper will help us sketch the constitution of the mafia borderland, through the scrutiny of its opportunities, traits, and expectations as narrated by the actors, legal and illegal, at the border.

(Italian) mafia-type groups in North America

Italian mafias in North America, Italian-American mafias, have filled popular culture and ignited research interest as early as the 1950s. Following policy interest since the Kefauver Committee between 1949 and 1951, the national resonance of the "Mafia" – at times intended as a secret society at times as the result of entrepreneurial Italianness – has kept growing in the US (Albanese 1996; Woodiwiss 2015). Following the Committee, the testimony of Joe Valachi in 1963 proved essential to enriching knowledge on the structure of Sicilian/Italian groups in the US. The President's Crime Commission Task Force on Organised Crime in 1967 finally facilitated reconciliation of the terminology between "the Mafia", used since 1969 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and "La Cosa Nostra," the terminology of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Those were the years when Donald P. Cressey published *Theft of a Nation* (Cressey 1969), which has remained a very influential book. A book that has been criticized to nourish an "alien conspiracy theory" by linking Italian migration to mafia transplantation (Finckenauer 2012). The literature on the Italian-American mafia, after Cressey's publication, has been particularly active in refuting the alien conspiracy model, by focusing on the social behaviors of mafia families (Ianni and Reuss-Ianni 1972); on the patron-client relationships of syndicated crime (Albini 1971); questioning the "xenophobic legends" around Italians and Sicilians (Lupo 2009). The most important reaction to the alien conspiracy model was the paradigm of the illicit enterprise, in *The Mafia Mystique* by Dwight Smith (1975). In this paradigmatic shift that pushed aside the "Mafia" label, Smith proposed to focus not on the ethnicity character of the "Mafia", but on the entrepreneurial nature of the crimes committed, more like licit businesses than secret societies. While studies since the 1970s have looked at the markets, especially drugs, of mafia groups in the country (increasingly referred to as LCN, La Cosa Nostra) (Reuter 1983), and popular culture has continued to be interested in "the Mob", the interest on the actual structure of LCN has decreased. This of course was also the result of aggressive law enforcement action (Jacobs, Panarella, and Worthington 1994) and of the events of 9/11 that have effectively shifted the attention of law enforcement to other, networked, and transnational forms of organized criminality (White House 2011) . The decreased interest, however, has also to do with the difficulty of gathering reliable data on what are essentially still semi-clandestine organizations; that does not mean, however, that these organizations have stopped existing even though their activities have reduced (Sergi 2017).

The legacy of those years between 1960 and1980, in which "the Mafia" became America's number one crime problem, is in the enduring policing paradigms against traditional organized crime in North America (Woodiwiss 2015). In fact, policies and discourses from the U.S. have significantly shaped concepts and strategies in other countries of the West, including Canada (Beare 1996). In Canada, as in the U.S., the concept of "traditional" organized crime overlapped with the vague idea of "the Italian Mafia" (Sheptycki 2003) or the "mafia model" (Desroches 2005). A Canada/U.S. Threat assessment on organized crime of 2006 confirms (DEA et al, 2006, 9) that "Canadian law enforcement refers to all ethnic Italian criminal activity as either Traditional Organized Crime or Italian Organized Crime". Eventually, "traditional organized crime" still is the accepted term to refer to Italian-American mafia-type groups.

Academics have been for decades particularly weary of the "ethnicity trap" in understanding organized crime, and mafias in particular (Morselli, Turcotte, and Tenti 2011): attributing too much importance to the value of ethnicity risks to be deterministic: people of a certain ethnicity who commit crimes will be (treated as) part of that ethnic organized crime group (aka "the Mafia"). The ethnicity trap also does not allow to capture the reality of composite structures and opportunistic behaviors by organized crime groups that will necessarily mingle and cooperate if they have to. This notwithstanding, the U.S. and Canada as well have known their fair share of mafia stories, mafia murders and "Italian" "mobsters". In particular, in Canada, in the 1980s, the story of a Calabrian vs. Sicilian (to simplify) feud is well ingrained in popular knowledge as the reason why the Rizzuto clan/family has become a particularly important criminal syndicate in Montreal (Schneider 2013).

Recent research on mafia mobility in Canada has highlighted how the so-called mafia (traditional organized crime) groups are believed to be highly interconnected with one another and with other ethnic groups for business purposes, and with groups abroad for organizational structures (Sergi 2018). In particular, Sergi (2018:, 446) explored the current presence of the Calabrian mafia, the 'ndrangheta, in Eastern Canada to conclude how "in these networks, being Sicilian or Calabrian or Italian generally does not matter when it comes to criminal activities, but it becomes relevant when looking at the cultural aspects of mafia-type organizations". This confirms recent (Varese 2011; Sciarrone and Storti 2014) and less recent (Lupo 2002) studies that highlight how, even when mafia groups maintain relationships with their motherland, their arrival and settlement in different areas forces them to adapt to the local "underworld". This is particularly relevant when looking at countries where Italian migration has reached second, third or even fourth generation. It is important to critically consider the actual degree of Italianness of those mafia groups who had Italian origins generations ago (Sergi 2018; Sergi 2022). To do so, it is paramount to look at the evolution and the characteristics of these groups within the specificities of local context of what we might call "mafia".

Academic work (Block 1983; Sergi 2017) defines mafias as those groups that exercise both power-seeking structures (such as racketeering, extortion or political infiltration) and (criminal) profit enterprises in their areas of interest. Some of the groups that have historically been called mafias are probably not fitting this definition, which appears to be mostly linked to mafias in Italy. In North America, however, mafias are largely defined with a language that overlaps with fictional images of Hollywood

(Whithorn 2014): the use of the term mafia, in popular culture and in common understanding, still refers to organized crime groups of Italian descent, with or without their power-seeking dimension. This article will confirm that the ethnicity dimension still makes the world of mafia, at the border between the U.S. and Canada. The narratives on traditional organized crime, or Italian-American mafia families, analysed for this research, point to high levels of hybridization of these groups, having different identities within a self-perception of "Italian mafia", and well-developed survival skills in the "underworld". All these traits will help us sketch the mafia borderland, as theoretical category, that characterizes the space, identity and resilience of these groups. The existence of the border allows law enforcement, and – for what was seen in the data – also (alleged/convicted) members of mafia-type groups, to identify (and narrate) mafia identities as, on the one hand, hybrid and interconnected, and on the other hand, as still "traditional" and eventually still recognizable as "Italian-American". The border is offering opportunities to overcome divides and it also re-marks those divides when necessary. In fact, the existence of the border seems to make it possible to exploit legal and economic asymmetries, and this affects not only the business but also the identity of these actors and groups.

Methodology

This research focuses on mafia-type families, intended primarily as "traditional" Italian-American families engaged in organized crime in the border area of Niagara, between Canada and the U.S.A. The term "traditional" is used to refer to the established narrative among police forces in North America on mafia-type families, including an ethnicity connotation (Italian) (Von Lampe 2016; Sergi 2018; White House 2011), even though mafia groups elsewhere are also intended as organizations that both want to profit illegally, as well as govern their territory (Varese 2020; Sergi 2017). The border area of Niagara is a regional municipality comprising twelve municipalities of Southern Ontario, Canada, with a population just below half a million people. One of the most popular of U.S.–Canada crossings is indeed the Buffalo Niagara Falls area. Hamilton is on the western end of the Niagara Peninsula at the westernmost part of Lake Ontario. Hamilton, with a population of over a half million people, is also a border town as it is the biggest Canadian city right outside the immediate Niagara region border crossing. The distance between Hamilton and Buffalo is roughly 120 km.

The spark for this research project has been two-fold: first, the recent outburst of violent acts in the so-called underworld of Hamilton.[1] This outburst of violence has not only decimated a "mafia" family in the city (Musitano), but it also challenges previous/existing equilibria in the local world of organized crime. Second, recent investigations and arrest in Buffalo, NY, have rekindled interests in the so-called "Italian mafia" in upstate New York following years of perceived mob inactivity, specifically in connection with Hamilton.[2] The first question guiding the data collection for this research project was:

> 1. What are the current scenarios of so-called "traditional" organized crime, intended as mafia-type families, in Ontario and New York State with a specific focus on the border area of Niagara?

This research design has been inspired by a grounded theory methodology (GT) with mixed qualitative data: media and documents, including court and investigation files;

interviews. GT is a general inductive method, ending with a theory rather than beginning with a hypothesis, a theoretical framework of reference or a literature review (Glaser and Strauss 1967). From a GT perspective, a pre-research literature review is "inimical" to generating grounded theory (Glaser 1998, 67); this paper has opted for a short and generalist literature review of reference,that of mafia-type groups in North America, which includes recent literature on the mobility of Italian mafias in Canada and the U.S. Notwithstanding the knowledge of the main literature and theories in the field that the researcher had prior to starting this project, the initial research question has been kept explorative and no theoretical framework was selected to pre-conceptualise the data, in line with classic grounded theory (Glaser 1992).

The research started in January 2021 and ended in May 2021. The first phase of data collection was for context discovery. A media analysis was carried out, on two local newspapers, *The Hamilton Spectator* and *Buffalo News* with keywords "Italian"; "Mafia"; "organized crime", for an initial selection of stories (N = 12) relevant to the area of Niagara in the past few years. At the same time, court documents, such as indictments, arrest warrants with interceptions, and sentences, from U.S. (Pacer database), Canada (Canlii database), and Italy (DeJure database) were collected. Keywords were combinations of: "Italian"; "mafia"; "Hamilton"; "criminal family"; "ndrangheta" (the mafia groups from Calabria, Italy); "Buffalo"; "Toronto"; "Calabrian"; "Sicilian"; "Niagara"; "organized crime"; "drugs"; "corruption"; "extortion" to catch the traditional "organized crime" connotation. The timeframe for the context discovery was expanded to historical data when relevant (up to 30 years); a total of just over 30 documents were eventually selected for relevance – mostly indictments, arrest warrants and pre-trial prosecution documents, but also verdicts – some of which were very rich and long (the longest has over 1000 pages from Italy). The aim was not only to collect and analyze a varied amount of data, but also to identify relevant concepts and eventually theories emerging from inductive analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007).

During the first phase of data collection the researcher noted that the data was already built within two main narratives, judicial and media-based, both describing Italian-American mafias in their own ways. Another research question, this time with a theoretical standing, emerged:

> 2. Does the existence of the US–Canada border impact on the narratives on activities, the structure and eventually the identity, of these groups? If yes, how?

This question emerged because the borderland, Niagara, between Hamilton and Buffalo, was found to be conceptually and practically relevant to shape the stories and the judicial approaches, thus the narratives collected. The borderland emerged soon as a relevant theoretical and empirical category; in GT, "categories are the "cornerstones" of a developing theory. They provide the means by which a theory can be integrated" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 7). The second phase of data collection served a purpose of testing the concepts around the category of the borderland. The researcher carried out interviews (N = 13): informal conversations (N = 4) with Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the Greater Toronto Area and in Hamilton, as well as meetings with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Homeland Security in Buffalo. The researcher had already met intelligence analysts during previous research projects who had experience investigating "Italian Mafia" or "Traditional Italian Organized Crime" in these forces

in the past 5–10 years. Some interviews were not authorized centrally but carried out with these willing agents after they learned about the study: they agreed to participate if they could remain anonymous and not quoted. Second, interviews with specialist journalists, considered "underworld observers" (N = 3) in the Hamilton area have also been part of this phase. Third, collective interviews (N = 5) have been purposively carried out with authorities in the interested areas and in Italy: Organized Crime Units of Niagara Police, Hamilton Police, York Police in Ontario, and the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) in Reggio Calabria (as they hold information about Italian immigrants involved in criminal activities in North America), with a mix of 2–5 agents in each. Buffalo Policen Department in N.Y was contacted but never replied to the request for research engagement. The agents involved all had experience investigating "Italian Mafia" or "Traditional Italian Organized Crime" in their forces in the past 5–10 years. The sampling strategy was purposive, e.g. by identifying relevant detectives who followed certain cases mentioned by media and/or mentioned by case law.

Due to the confidential and informal nature of some of these conversations, recording was often not allowed. Even if quotes are not possible, attribution will be given when appropriate to the "general" police force or institution. Eventually the analysis of this paper is informed by four sets of narratives: media and judicial texts: narratives from interviews with police officers and journalists, and narratives from alleged mafia members themselves, as their words were intercepted or subjected to surveillance and included in investigation files. Even though the number of resources used in this article might seem limited, the data collected for this research represents the most truthful access to available resources of the topic. A better resource can only be ethnographic work within the groups themselves.

The findings of this research show that the narratives on Italian-American mafias in the region are congruent; across media, judicial files, police agents and analysts, and journalists, we find similar concepts and converging data. . For the reader's clarity some references to historical facts/events, beyond those directly linked to the data, will be provided when needed,

Findings

Mafia flags

When investigating the history and the status of mafia families on either side of the Niagara border, the data shows a narrative that is, on the one hand, increasingly complex to decipher and, on the other hand, very peculiar since the start. In the investigative files of Operation Siderno Group (DIA 1992:108–109), run in Calabria in the early 1990s, we read:

> At the beginning of the 1960s, in Niagara Falls, New York, a series of meetings were organized between Stefano Magaddino, resident in USA [abovementioned], from Canada, Vincenzo Luppino [son of Giacomo Luppino and brother-in-law of Paul Violi], Santo Scibetta [from Hamilton within the Magaddino family], John Papalia [abovementioned], Paolo Violi [abovementioned], Vincenzo Cotrone(i) [from Montreal], Vincenzo Zappavigna, Carmelo Antonio Cotroneo and Matteo Vizzari. The object of these meetings was the re-organisation of the "locali"[3] and the division of territories, but also the establishment of a "chamber of control" with an oversight role over the "locali" to handle any dispute.

Niagara Falls is often narrated as meeting point, and ideal "bordertown" where mafia associates from Buffalo and Hamilton, but also Toronto and Montreal, would meet for organizational and business purposes. The border at Niagara is said to facilitate a high level of hybridity of mafias. We can analyze this narrative of hybridity through at least two "mafia" lenses, the flag of La Cosa Nostra (Italian-American mafia, LCN) and that of the 'ndrangheta (the Calabrian "honored society"). The term flag was used by an agent in the RCMP to indicate everchanging mafia identities. From an organizational perspective, the 'ndrangheta lens overlaps almost completely with the Siderno group, active mainly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Also from an organizational perspective, the LCN flag would require us to look at the links between the Buffalo groups and the rest of LCN, especially in New York City, but also in Quebec/Montreal. Given that the historical data converge in detailing the links between LCN/Buffalo and Hamilton, here we focus more on the lens of the Siderno group, which is not the most common narrative of this context but nevertheless the most recent and the predominant one in the 'ndrangheta in Canada.

The interview with the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) in Reggio Calabria (as said, they hold investigations at times involving groups and individuals operating between Italy and Canada/North America) paints a picture of the Siderno group as a peculiar entity within the Calabrian mafia, the "ndrangheta, which settled in Ontario, but without ever receding the connections with Calabria. In the 1960s as much as today, the Siderno group appears rooted in GTA and revolving around a few "families", from towns around Siderno in Calabria (like Gioiosa Ionica and Marina di Gioiosa Ionica), engaged in drug trafficking and money laundering. Among these families (and it is not feasible to discuss them all), the Commisso clan (aka Quagghia – Quail) surely appears as the most resilient and the most internationalized. The role of this family in Ontario has been two-fold. First, they were among the first clans to operate in the drug trade between Canada and Italy, though historical alliances with other clans (Ursino, Aquino, Coluccio, Macrì, Stalteri, Agostino etc). Historical operations, like Project Outfox in Canada and mirror investigations in New York (e.g. Operation Isola Dora) and in Italy (Operation Siderno Group), in the late 1980s, confirm that these drug operations spanned from New York City to Toronto via Italy, first for heroin, then for cocaine. Those were intense years in Calabria for the Commissos too, between an ongoing feud with the local Costa family (also particularly active at that time in the drug trade in Canada) and the end of the period of the kidnappings (with proceeds reinvested in drugs) (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). The second role of the Commisso family in Ontario has been one of umbrella organization for the Calabrian clans of the area by working with others at the borders, as has been confirmed also by analysts in the RCMP in Toronto. Business-wise, there are documented links between individuals working for the Magaddino in Buffalo and for his successors who were selling drugs to the Commissos in the 1980s. In Operation Siderno group (DIA 1992, 119) we read about a piece of the puzzle in the famous Operation Pizza Connection on the drug trade between the U.S. and Sicily.

> In 1976, in Siderno, there was a reunion with also affiliates from Canada and the U.S.A. The trafficking of heroin was organized through the "Siderno Group" who will then contact a clan in Palermo, Sicily, who would handle the logistics in French port towns.

Organization-wise, their reputation in both North America and Calabria has always been linked to the fact that the organization existed in both countries, according to the DIA in Reggio Calabria. Drug trafficking in Canada made it possible for the Commissos in Siderno to launder money, access public works, access politics. The growing reputation of the Commissos in Calabria made it possible for the Canadian side of the family to prosper even beyond the drug trade and become the main 'ndrangheta group in Canada. Knowing how the 'ndrangheta works (Sergi 2022), it seems plausible that one of the Commissos held the role of "Capo-Crimine" or "Capo-Società"[4] for the other clans in the area and in Canada. This appears to be corroborated by a variety of elements. For example, Carmine Barillaro, right-hand man of John Papalia in Hamilton – famous "boss" of the mafia family carrying his name – was apparently frequently meeting with Remo Commisso in Toronto. It is well known that Papalia had a prominent role in the Pizza Connection venture. John Papalia apparently acted as mediator between Remo Commisso and others in the Siderno group in Toronto when an internal feud in 1971 risked altering equilibria (DIA 1992, 119). The same can be said of the Luppino group. In the early 1970s interceptions relating to an initiation ritual by the Commissos in GTA saw the presence of Giacomo Luppino. Luppino also acted as mediator between two members of the Commisso group following the attempted homicide of two adolescent boys by the sons of two prominent 'ndrangheta members in 1971. From a 'ndrangheta lens, this does not surprise as the Commissos and the Papalias not only would be at the same level in terms of mafia pedigree, but also would be recognizing each other by making concessions and supporting one another. Luppino had connections to both Montreal (through Violi) and Buffalo and family ties with the Commissos and others in the Siderno group, putting the family at a very high level of recognition.

The flag of LCN of course has always been respected, say RCMP analysts, even by the 'ndrangheta. Italian documents consider the area of Ontario and Niagara divided in three areas of influence: the Siderno Group, John Papalia's group and Stefano Magaddino's group, including his Hamilton outposts with Luppino and Scibetta. It seems, however, also clear that the Luppino-Violi family connections in the 'ndrangheta back in Calabria, granted the Luppinos in Hamilton also a seat at the 'ndrangheta table in the socalled "chamber of control" together with the Commissos, Racco, Volpe, and Zito. Indeed, according the DIA, Giacomo Luppino was considered the referee of the 'ndrangheta for Hamilton in the 1960s (especially when Papalia was in prison). Essentially, mafia families of Hamilton could use – and apparently did use – both flags, 'ndrangheta and LCN, depending on occasions, by engaging with 'ndrangheta members on the one hand – leveraging their 'ndrangheta roots –, but affiliating themselves, for business purposes, with LCN groups. This has apparently been the case also for the Musitanos – also Calabrian and with very vague connections with the 'ndrangheta historically – but with crucial differences: a weaker link with the Sidernesi (the Musitanos appear often in conflict with the Sidernesi) and weaker (but confirmed) ties with Buffalo, with whom they apparently had good relationships if not membership, nevertheless. This is the narrative of Hamilton authorities. The Musitanos apparently used the LCN flag of Montreal, through alliances with the Rizzutos and the Cuntrera Caruana family.

The more connections spread, to Montreal, Calabria, and New York City, the more the borderland increases in importance as the center of the analytical understanding of the narratives of the police authorities and the journalists between Hamilton,

Buffalo and Niagara Falls. On the one hand, the families who live and settled in Niagara, like branches of the Commisso clans, are described as historical and reputable families – those who set the "standards", even if at the border, the flags of mafia belonging are interchangeable. On the other hand, however, the border as a space that calls for alliances, remains autonomous from the various influences; mafia groups at the border are in fact hybrid and set their own standards. As recorded in the Agent Debrief Report in Project Otremens[5], when the Agent[6] was discussing the prospect for Joe Violi to join the Bonanno Family in New York City, Joe Violi apparently commented that he would rather stay put: "would only see them once every ten years … if you are never going to see these people what's the point of being with them?". Ontario and Niagara police force converge in noticing how alliances change, flags too, but what might endure is the name reputation, history, nostalgia, and of course the seeking of money and power.

For a clearer reading of the following sections and a summary of the previous one, Table 1 presents the main criminal groups that are today believed to operate across Eastern U.S.A., primarily New York State, and Canada, primarily Ontario but also Quebec. These mafia-type groups are intended as "traditional" groups of "Italian" origin or descent. The table also helps visualize how cross-border cooperation or conflicts across groups operate cross-border primarily in the border areas of Niagara. A warning for the reader: this list might not be complete and does not represent the "truth"; it is indeed representative of the main narratives about the presence of criminal organizations in the given territory as emerging from this research.

Mafias' "right ways"

We read in the pre-trial files for Operation Canadian Connection (2019) in Reggio Calabria, that two (alleged) 'ndrangheta affiliates from Siderno – connected to the Commisso clan – were intercepted commenting the murder of Cece Luppino just a few weeks after the event. Cece Luppino, son of Rocco Luppino – the head the Luppino-Violi family in Hamilton (with his brother Natale) – was murdered in January 2019. Cece's wife has family in Siderno, so the news travels fast. Thanks to current family links, individuals in Siderno keep up to date with what is happening in Canada, independently from the flag of mafia families there. After commenting on the murder, one of the affiliates announces that he is planning to go to Canada soon to meet his family but also meet with the Figliomeni clan (clan in the società of Siderno allied with the Commisso); he gets a warning that "there, it's worse than here, it's chaos … "; the affiliate says that he is going to try and figure out what are they doing, with "old quarrels", and that Natale Luppino, uncle of Cece, is the "compere" (witness of marriage) of his cousin Gimì, aka Jimmy De Maria, (alleged) member of the Siderno group in Toronto: he might go and see them too. "He [Natale Luppino] was going with the Sicilians, you know … the way I understand it, they hang around with the Sicilians"; he is then asked whether they (Luppino-Violi) were rivals with ours (Sidernesi in Canada), and he assures that they (Luppino-Violi) are not, but still, those Sicilians are the ones against "our" Sidernesi. The conversation touches upon a series of acts of violence and intimidation – bombing of a bar[7], arson of a bakery[8], and even murder[9] – which, according to the two men prove the rivalry between the "Sicilians" and the Sidernesi and the tensions across the clans in Ontario.

Table 1. (Italian) "Traditional" mafia-type groups in North-Eastern America, their "official" regional origin and some of their relationships.

CANADA			USA	
TORONTO & GTA	HAMILTON & NIAGARA	MONTREAL	NYC	BUFFALO
Siderno group – 'ndrangheta (Calabrian origin): Commisso, Figliomeni, Coluccio, De Maria, Bruzzese, Etc. In conflict with Magaddino and internally	Papalia (Calabrian origin) In partnership with Magaddino. In conflict with Musitano.	Rizzuto (Sicilian origin). In partnership with Bonanno, Musitano,	The 5 families: Gambino (in partnership with 'ndrangheta-Siderno group), Genovese, Bonanno (in partnership with Rizzuto, with Luppino-Violi) Lucchese Colombo	(Former/defunct) Magaddino. In partnership (various periods) with Luppino, Papalia, Musitano. In conflict with Rizzuto and 'ndrangheta-Siderno group
Caruana-Cuntrera. In partnership with Rizzuto and Musitano. In conflict with 'ndrangheta-Siderno group and (uncertain) Luppino-Violi	Musitano (Calabrian origin) – associated to Rizzuto	(Former/defunct) Cotroni-Violi (Calabrian origin). In conflict with Rizzuto.		Todaro. In partnership with Luppino-Violi
Others (e.g. 'ndrangheta clans from Italy with emissaries in GTA) or other groups loosely connected to Cosa Nostra or free of franchising (Cammalleri, Arcuri, Cardinale, Scarcella)	Luppino-Violi (Calabrian origin) – in conflict with Rizzuto and Cuntrera Caruana; in partnership with Magaddino/Todaro in Buffalo.	Others (e.g. Scoppa, Calabrian origin but no affiliation)		Others – Italian-descent without clear affiliation – connection with nearby Rochester
	Other groups (e.g. Iavarone, associated to Gambino in NYC)			

The interesting thing about this dialogue is not necessarily its content which of course is based to a certain extent on opinions and speculations – but rather the way it is interpreted by the Reggio Calabria prosecutors: the pair seems to operate a distinction between the Calabrians (including both the Siderno group and the Luppino-Violi) and the Sicilians (arguably including both the Buffalo family and the Montreal-based groups) notwithstanding the acknowledgement that the Luppino-Violi are "with the Sicilians". Their mafia flags here appear to be ethnic/regional (Sicilians/Calabrians) to Italian authorities, while for law enforcement in Canada – specifically York Police, who collaborated with the Italian authorities for this case – there is very little difference in the way these groups eventually act, obeying to logics of convenience rather than regional belonging: they are all "Italian mafia". This is recurrent in both Canada and the United States. For example, in the pre-trial motions against Joseph Bongiovanni[10], former DEA agent charged in Buffalo, we read how the defense teams challenge the "Italian mafia" idea, which brings back the ethnicity trap: "The government has noticed that all of the participants have Italian last names, and as such, has imagined the existence of an Italian-American organized crime syndicate".

A conversation between Dom Violi, man in charge of the clan in Hamilton and nephew of Rocco and Natale, and the Agent in project Otremens in 2017 also gives interesting narratives on this. Dom Violi claims he was "promoted" to Underboss of the Buffalo family (the "Sicilians") and now he has a few outstanding items to consider: first, the affiliation of his brother Joe, possibly to Buffalo but more likely to the Bonanno crew in New York City; second, the need to properly communicate the "new order" to everyone in the proper manner. In fact, the uncles (Rocco and Natale Luppino) need to be informed directly by Joe Todaro (alleged boss of the Buffalo family), he says, while talks with "the guys in Montreal … when they figure out their own mess over there"[11] also would be appropriate. The "big guys will sort this out", in New York and Buffalo, both Dom Violi and the Agent seem to settle. That conversation ends with Dom Violi agreeing that everyone wants to be friends, and that "everyone works together nowadays and that the old walls are gone".

In other conversations, various names of (alleged/known) mafia members come out, from New York, Buffalo, Montreal, and Toronto. Judgements are passed on people who claim to be "made members" but whose "affiliation" is not clear: "The Agent stated that Joe Todaro had told Natale Luppino that he did not recognize Joe and Paolo Cuntrera as made members of a crime family[12]" and that "Rocco Luppino agreed that they should not be recognized, who knew if they were even made in Italy".[13] However, a high-ranking member of the NYC Bonanno family had introduced them as "friends of ours".[14] This speaks to the necessity, often invoked, to do things in "the right way", which requires respecting tradition, hierarchy, and rules. This is supported also by the resilience of rituals of affiliation, as we see in Project Otremens for both the Bonanno and the Todaro crews and confirmed by the RCMP. Indeed, what most of the rules are and how hierarchy works in practice is not always clear and it often sounds like "hearsay".

> J Violi didn't know if it was the Cuntreras through the Musitanos looking to get rid of someone in Toronto; the Agent asked J Violi who gave the Musitanos the okay to do the hit – J Violi felt it may have been Joe Todaro. The Agent did not think J Todaro would kill individuals that were "made" without getting permission from New York.[15]

> D Violi said that he learned that New York has called Todaro to come and be a part of the commission.[16]

> D Violi repeated that "he" (Joe Todaro) told D Violi to let "him" (Joe Todaro) tell "them" (the Uncles, Rocco and Natale Luppino). The Agent agreed; that if they (Uncles) had heard it from D Violi it would be the wrong way. D Violi stated that he had actually told "him" (Joe Todaro) that D Violi would not tell them; that then "he" (Joe Todaro) said it.[17]

> D Violi stated that JoeTodaro was right; he should have been told that A Iavarone and A Caputo had been straightened out [allegedly in the Gambino family in California], because it was in Todaro's area.[18]

> The PA asked asked who D Violi met in Florida … the Colombo? The Gambino? … D Violi stated no; that they were there, but that D Violi had not met them the right way; that that was why "he" (J Todaro) wanted D Violi to go to New York, to meet them the right way.[19]

On the one hand, there seems to be a call to unity, to "all be friends" – mostly for business purposes as the next section will detail more. This call for unity is meant to

keep various actors together under the general umbrella of "Italian mafia", which has very loose rules based on the respect of traditions, hierarchy, and the occasional use of the Italian language. The various groups appear both isomorphic – they might imitate each other as much as an idea of "Italian mafia" from the past – and hybrid, in as much as they end up mixing with each other and merging into each other's structures and activities, across the border, for survival. The existence of a border between Ontario and the U.S. – although fundamental for law enforcement – does not mean that their "right ways" are supposed to change.

On the other hand, a quest to maintain specific identities within the same Italian mafia still manifests through the occasional invocation of "flags" – 'ndrangheta, Siderno group, LCN, Sicilians, Calabrians, as the authorities in Ontario (RCMP above all) commented. These specific, regional or group identities are brought also by long-running internal feuds among families (Violi vs. Rizzuto); by alliances that feel like betrayal to some (Musitanos, Calabrians, with Cuntreras and Rizzutos, Sicilians); by recognizing each other's historical and traditional power within different organization's (LCN in Buffalo or NYC or Commissos in Niagara and GTA). This also occasionally pushes groups to cement their independence, like in the case of Dom Violi (allegedly) becoming the first Canadian, and from an historical 'ndrangheta family, with an Underboss ranking in an American crime family, putting Hamilton at the center of a borderland criminal group, as the authorities in Niagara Falls and in Buffalo agreed.

Survival

A fundamental narrative on the underworld of Niagara, spanning from Buffalo to Toronto and with Hamilton in between, is certainly one of cross-border cooperation among actors. This has an impact also on their business. As affirmed by Niagara police, the selling of cannabis, still illegal in New York but legalized in Canada is a clear example of such criminogenic asymmetries in borderlands that generate cross-border cooperation across groups. In the investigative data one can see how various groups try not only to keep up with the "news" about others, but also attempt to clarify their belonging. It is of course a common feature in complex (and largely secret) organizations and networks for individuals not to know what is going on in the other crews, especially when they are in other cities. At the same time, it is also common for individuals to use traditional links (e.g. family ties) to maintain their own crew and arrange clusters. For example, in 2019 the Supreme Court of Ontario[20] pronounced an historical sentence recognizing 'ndrangheta operations in GTA, stemming from Project Ophenix, by the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit (CSFEU) in Toronto. In that operation, Cosimo Commisso in Ontario provided intelligence about the alliance between the "Sicilian" group of the Cuntrera-Caruana (in GTA and Montreal) and the Musitano family from Hamilton. This was a matter of public knowledge in the "underworld", confirmed by many. When Cosimo Commisso was arrested for fraud in November 2017 (and then the Crown dropped the charges), Dom Violi discussed the news trying to figure out what was happening with that and remembering the last time he saw Commisso.[21]

Another trend, which is typical of many "mafia" families in the area (and not only) is the diversification of networks and activities within the same group. For example, in the

records of intercepted materials in Operation Otremens we read not only about the possibility for Joe Violi to "be made" into the Bonanno family, but also how he, allegedly, was also forging links with the bikers, using his family's reputation[22]:

> J Violi stated that he did everything already; that he met the new president and that he liked him; that they could work together; J Violi stated that the president said to J Violi that he knows how "you guys" (J Violi's crew) work, that they make the bikers look like the bad guys and (J Violi's crew) the good guys.

This also highlights another constant element in these narratives: some mafia families tend to be more appreciated than others as they "behave" better, and do not cause any disorder. This is the case of the Commissos in the Niagara region, according to Niagara Falls police; "they are on the radar of the police, but they do not cause alarm", especially compared to others in the region responsible for violent acts. Also, some families, more than others in Niagara, can appreciate that other groups, like the bikers, are fundamental allies to keep the order cross-border. This is the case of the Figliomeni clan, based mostly in GTA, with family ties with the Commissos in Niagara and with a working partnership with the bikers in both GTA and Niagara.

When looking at the activities in which many of the actors gravitating around "mafia" families are caught into, these often are about the drug trade and the attachment to traditional "fields", mostly linked to "easier" cash flows. Ontario police forces have found both smaller and larger scale activities in the same families, and not all members have to "agree" with the main family strategy. For example, in the Siderno group, which – as a 'ndrangheta group – is characterized by the autonomy of clans and activities, we find international drug trafficking as much as local involvement in gambling. This is confirmed in Italian data too. Operation Canadian Connection, for example, builds from Operation Acero Connection[23] in 2015: in that operation, one of the core activities was cocaine trafficking by the Coluccio brothers. Trafficking was apparently made possible by important connections with other 'ndrangheta clans in Italy/Calabria, namely the Mancuso clan, active in cocaine trade from Brazil into Europe, but also Canada (through the port of Halifax) and Australia. The group of the Coluccio brothers, from around the area of Siderno, had some internal feuds with other Sidernesi (Figliomeni) in Canada, according to DIA, linked precisely to drugs and the Coluccio's alleged alliance with other groups ("Sicilians"). In the Italian verdict/sentence for Operation Bene Comune – Recupero[24], we read of the apical role of the Figliomeni clan, within the Commisso group in Siderno and in Canada. Members of the Figliomeni group try to explain how things are done, differently, in Canada. Italian operations paint the organization of the Siderno group in GTA, the dominance of the Commisso among the other clans (Bruzzese, Figliomeni, Coluccio) with the internal autonomy of the clans; there appears to be different activities from drug trafficking to extortion of the Italian community, from gambling to money laundering, all carried out independently from the rest of the group and with varying degrees of success. In Project Sindacato, York Police arrested members of the Figliomeni group for illegal gambling operations, fraud, drug trafficking and laundering money through casinos.

The case "collapsed" due to procedural issues in 2021 but it remains of interest in as much as it is connected to Italian Operation Canadian Connection. In that investigation, in fact, alleged "ndranghetisti from Siderno attribute to fights over control of gambling,

gaming and slot machines some of the violence in Ontario: "This all happened, why? Because of where they put up those gaming machines! Why don't you [external to the Siderno group] just go and ask, Cosimo [Figliomeni], I want to put in some machines, meet me halfway!".[25] This dynamism is not found in the Hamilton families, which instead are said to remain more locally bound.

In the mix between drug trade and local activities, not only is there still spurious violence, but also there seems to be not that much money as one might think. Overall, journalists' interviews converge in pointing out the struggles of these groups to keep the business (whichever) afloat and in not entering fights with one another; additionally, in the interviews of police forces investigating these groups, the "mafia" is not only not always engaging in serious and/or lucrative crime, but also their "survival" as groups with a specific identity seems to be constantly challenged, forcing them to reshape alliances and business. Indeed, alleged mafia members often have limited capacity to attempt corruption and are cautious about how they invest it:

> The Agent did not believe they would be able to make the case disappear (…) Violi stated that if the judge was going to ask too much money that Violi would not pay the judge $200,000 for Carfagna to get 3 years; that $200,000 should get Carfagna out sleeping at home tonight.[26]

While trafficking of Methamphetamine and MDMA can generate a profit in between 10,000 to over 200,000 CAD, other businesses, such as the selling of Unstamped Tobacco barely generates 13,000 CAD.[27] The narrative of survival seems to be shared by the alleged mafiosi too. In Project Otremens (2015) we read:

> J Violi stated that Cece Luppino was asked if he wanted to be involved (be made), Cece told his dad if he could make money then he would be involved, if no money than he doesn't want to be involved; that there are too many headaches. J Violi stated that Cece told his father he watched his father struggle for 30 years, and that Cece does not want to struggle for 30 years; and if he does have to then he doesn't want it.[28]

The "traditional" mafia allure is constantly challenged, by law enforcement, by intergenerational changes, by new people arriving in the territory, and by diverging strategies across groups. Some examples of this: "Joe Violi told the Agent that his uncle Nat (Luppino) gave him the speech, don't do that (drugs), do anything just not that and if you do don't come here".[29] Or: "They talked about the organization rules not to be involved in drugs but that everyone is doing it. Dom Violi said of course, that's the only place with any money in it".[30] The current situation in Hamilton, especially the violence of recent years, according to Hamilton and Niagara police forces and RCMP, seems therefore connected to altered equilibria that have to do with the behaviors of new generations (see the Luppino-Violi case); the entry of new groups (for example, the Iavarone's interests in Hamilton and their apparent "alliance" with New York, and not Buffalo); the action of law enforcement at the borders. Additionally, the journalists interviewed and law enforcement analysts observed how there are old "Italian" bars of Hamilton or GTA, where people speak about mafia rituals or things that "used to be" (in the mafia) without really referring to current criminal activities. A sort of mafia or 'ndrangheta social club, has been identified, for example, in a bar in Hamilton, which could be important in preserving mafia structures, but more importantly mafia allure and self-narratives, and therefore, survival.

Mafia borderland's space and identity: traits and expectations

We argue that studies on borderlands, applied at the Niagara borderland specifically and to its mafias, allow us to think about mafia identity as part of a broader border identity. For example, Eagles (2010) noticed how notwithstanding shared binational space at the Niagara Border, cross-border institutions are relatively few. Helleneir (2016, 10) notices how residents at the borderland combine everyday binationalism (e.g. crossings) with interesting forms of national belonging. Roberts (2019, 303) crucially reminds us that "taking into consideration how people feel about a border area (…) helps both theorists and border actors affect change in a given region". A theoretical category of "mafia borderland", built through the narratives in this paper, 'failss to critically read the actors in the Niagara borderland. We hereby sketch the traits and the expectations of a mafia borderland space and identity.

Through notions of "border effects" (Idler 2019), we can identify what the border means to mafias and how it affects them to create an identity of mafia borderland. The border seems to affect identity, including criminal identity, and its narrative; the border is always talked about when it comes to flags, right ways and survival, but also always taken for granted, in the background, because it is indeed normalised. As argued by Dürrschmidt (2002) there is a "symbolic upgrade" offered by living near a border, and our mafia groups survive because of that. Indeed, the first trait of mafia borderland is that it is a place where mafia-type groups excel at survival -or rather their "narrative" does – and at negotiating identities.

In the police narratives and in the narratives on traditional "mafia" groups given by investigations, we see mafia groups around Niagara, also around Buffalo city and towards GTA, attempting to seize opportunities that the border gives for trafficking and business, not only to empower their relationships, but also to accept each other's diversity; the border, which both divides and unites them is exactly what keeps them still operational, in the minds of many. Like the non-criminal borderland, also the mafia borderland is characterized by specific and contextual cultural expectations: the "affirmation of borderlands culture requires empowerment of border stakeholders, recognition that balanced approaches work best, effective scaling of the border relationship, humanized security and acknowledgement of diversity (Konrad 2012, 544)".

Notwithstanding the highly securitized border between the US and Canada, police agents in Niagara agree that the region remains a "workable border", a "portal", where security is managed daily, for example by checking who, in a criminal group, manages to cross the border undisturbed. There are no conflicts nor breakdowns of interactions, according to Niagara Police and FBI, when the groups are successful in what we can call their mafia borderland identity, as it happens for the non-criminal borderland too (Konrad and Nicol 2011). Border crossings for business and life events are indeed a daily task in mafia borderland (Helleiner 2016). Violence is a by-product of changing dynamics in organized crime and cannot last long, especially at the borders where governance is negotiated to give space to bordering practices (Garcia Pinzon and Mantilla 2021). Mafia borderlands therefore can be expected to reduce the violence to keep the borders workable.

Criminal groups in the Niagara borderland seem to erode and blur the border, when it comes to both crime and identity, and do appear to have developed their own bordering

practices. As said, the closer they are to the border the more they imitate one another; between Hamilton and Buffalo, at the border. Groups appear more similar and interconnected than those between Buffalo and GTA for example, more distant from the border. The closer groups are to the border the more they mirror in each other's choices and depend on each other's networks and strategy, as discussed with agents of the FBI in Buffalo. Mafia borderland is indeed characterized by isomorphic organisational structures (Glebovskiy 2019).

The mafia borderland identity is what explains how alleged mafia members use their different flags upon convenience. The interchangeable nature of the various mafia flags and identities paints a picture of hybrid mafia structures and integrated behaviors. Mafia borderlands spaces and identities are characterized by *hybridization* (like in a case when the Sidernesi do business with the Musitanos, originally allied to the Rizzuto clan in Montreal). In borderland studies, hybridisation is "contact that creates novel forms and practices that exist independently of antecedent forms and practices and requires that engaged agents be geographically adjacent for their production to occur" (Dear and Burridge 2005, 303). In the mafia narrative analysed, we still observe distinctive systems at play – 'ndrangheta through the Siderno group, or La Cosa Nostra in New York, Montreal or Buffalo – next to new organizational forms, like the Hamilton families, whose identity is the product of various stages of merging of the other ones. A characteristic of mafia borderlands is the existence of groups' hybrid identities, at times referred to, in borderland studies, as transcultural or cross-cultural (Walter 2005) – to highlight not just the mix of various cultural capitals but rather their accumulation in the same individual.

In this research, police authorities and journalists spoke of hybridization, but also a system of integration is visible in the data (like in the case of Violi, active between Hamilton and Buffalo). In integration processes studied at borderland "interdependencies develop while antecedents remain unaltered" (Ibid, 302). Therefore, mafia borderland identities can be expected to "integrate" when their original identities (as Calabrians, Sicilians mafiosi or similar) become interdependent with others in the same contexts.

Both hybridisation or integration of identities and practices appear to be necessary for survival of mafia borderland groups. In addition, nostalgia associated to mafia traditional practices and rules that were barely respected even back in the golden age of mafia power (in America) is also part of the survival skills that both police and alleged mafiosi seem to agree upon. Such nostalgia is also not new in the literature and is kept alive by the adherence to rituals and rules (Reuter 1995). In mafia borderland, nostalgia is part of the identity-keeping exercise as much as nationalism is part of the Niagara borderland experience (Helleiner 2016).

Rituals, rules, "proper/right ways", honor, hierarchy, and respect, are all concepts of a consolidated narrative on the mafia "social" identity, which the border might amplify. Mafia borderlands, like non-mafia ones (Roberts 1998), are in fact also places where rituals can be expected to revive. The liminality of the space facilitates the creation of rituals maintained not "as a function of ties and kinship, but according to ties of co-residence and cooperation" (Agier 2016:23), to keep, but also to share, distinctive identities. Indeed, criminal rituals provide both a sense of continuity and an illusion of certainty in a rather uncertain world (Gambetta 1993, 146), as much as playing an important organisational role (Catino 2019). The attachment to the "right way", the "honorable" way and to rules of respect that is

said to still exist (at least as narratives) in "mafia" families at the border might help building networks, create and preserve that common knowledge of the origins of the group to transmit to new generations, and that shapes members' self-identity within the groups (Skarbek and Wang 2015). Rituals and putative rules support internal governance, resilience and of course permanency and survival. As said, peculiar of the Niagara context is the perseverance of a narrative of "mafia" that is not only "traditional" but also barely "criminal" when not solely a "social" aggregation. The non-criminal or quasi-criminal identity of mafia groups should not sound like an oddity; it comes with the nature of mafias as permanent social phenomena (Sergi 2017; 2022). Rules and rituals – whether they are actually respected – make the continuity also of the social phenomena that "mafias" are. Continuity can determine survival and organizational settings, as it directly affects the reputation of these groups in the present and for the future too.

Lastly, we have seen that there still is of course a criminal component of mafia groups; the whole reason why they are still on police radar even though, as said, mafias might not engage in serious organized crime. Indeed, the seriousness that mafias have endured as a phenomenon in policing strategies, does not always match the seriousness of the crimes they are committing nowadays (Sergi 2017). Spikes of violence are considered a temporary status in mafia contexts; we know that mafias benefit from order and thrive when they are in "control", often following power struggles and power vacuums (Lupo 2009; Catino 2019). It is crucial therefore, for law enforcement's narratives on mafias in mafia borderlands, to not only identify criminal activities, but also to identify what activities committed on one side of the border might affect the other side too. Law enforcement is also influenced by the existence of mafia borderland spaces and identities. Different aggressiveness from law enforcement against "traditional" organized crime is emblematic of this: investigations and prosecutions (especially via RICO) in the US are more aggressive than in Canada, according to both RCMP and FBI, thus making borderland "mafiosi" more likely to invest/live/associate with others on the Canadian side.

One last example: in Buffalo, today, the historical LCN family does not seem to be active or even connected to the identified criminal activities of other "Italian offenders" in the city. It could be the case, discussed with the FBI in Buffalo that the borderland might explain the status of mafias in Buffalo; by including Hamilton in the intelligence picture and GTA at large, Buffalo police or the FBI can construct their narrative and their investigations. We can therefore conclude that the presence of the border and a theoretical framework that includes studies on border effects on identity and practices, could help us shed some light onto the enduring narratives of mafias in and around Niagara.

Conclusion

The narrative of mafias in Niagara is a narrative of an increasingly difficult and boundless (under)world. Mafia flags, "right ways", and survival are the recurrent concepts found in the narratives of Italian-American so-called mafia families in Ontario and on the Niagara border over Buffalo, NY. The use of different mafia flags leads to hybridization of the groups, according to authorities; the endurance of "right ways" of being "mafia", is the sign of profoundly different identities compared to those of origins. The survival of "mafia" families in the borderland appears linked to the decreased seriousness of their

criminal activities, as well as the existence of mechanisms of cooperation, hybridity, and resourcefulness.

Nothing of this is brand new in literature: research on collaboration in organized crime networks has confirmed how complexity and fluidity are the norms in these groups (Bouchard 2020); research on the survival of traditional organized crime groups has confirmed the interdependencies between global economic drives and criminal success (or failure) (Sergi and Storti 2020). However, this research has explored a new theoretical contribution – mafia borderland – as space and identity that characterizes criminal and mafia groups in Niagara, and possibly in other border areas, when contextualized\. Mafia borderland, as sketched in this paper, has certain traits which can become expectations, rooted in border studies as well as in mafia studies.

Further research should look for those bordering practices that we have briefly identified here, both on the side of law enforcement and on the side of mafia groups, by means of ethnographic research at the border. In particular, the notion of mafia borderland can help scholars of mafia mobility redefine the relations between the original territories (Italy in our case) and the territory of migration and settlement (Canada/U.S.). In fact, groups in the mafia borderland are bound to adapt their identity quickly and change their behaviors and businesses according to the borderland traits and opportunities: this, in turn, will affect their relationship with groups in the motherland.

The Niagara borderland, apart from being represented as a lucrative opportunity for both legal and illegal investments, proves to be an interesting space to research groups' identities, including those of groups involved in criminal offending. A mafia borderland theoretical category, however, can go beyond Niagara, to study criminal groups' spaces and identities in border areas.

Notes

1. See articles from 2017: https://www.thespec.com/news/hamilton-region/2017/05/03/a-short-history-of-mob-violence-in-hamilton.html; https://www.thespec.com/news/hamilton-region/2017/05/03/a-short-history-of-mob-violence-in-hamilton.html; https://www.thespec.com/news/crime/2020/07/10/shooting-in-burlington-neighbourhood-leaves-one-dead-and-one-injured.html; https://torontosun.com/news/provincial/mob-in-flux-since-hit-on-boss-pat-musitano-underworld-is-fluid
2. See articles https://buffalonews.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/is-the-mob-back-feds-probe-buffalo-mafia-after-calling-it-all-but-dead/article_0a77da5e-72db-11eb-bc36-e7e3b5ffe74b.html; https://torontosun.com/news/world/hunter-longtime-enigma-of-buffalo-mafia-dead-or-alive
3. A "Locale" – locali in the plural – is the territorial grouping of more 'ndrine (family clans) in the 'ndrangheta.
4. The Capo-Crimine and the Capo-Società are two apical functions within the 'ndrangheta. The Capo-Crimine is the apical member of whole the clans that recognise the 'ndrangheta, while the Capo-Società is the head of a territorial portion, a locale, in a specific area. The terms are often used with imprecision and interchangeably by affiliates. In Operation Crimine, Calabria (2008), Domenico Ruso, cousin of Antonio Commisso, was indicated as the Capo Crimine for Toronto, while in Operation Canadian Connection the Commissos are referred to as apical members of the Società of Siderno and the Crimine in Canada.
5. Project Otremens, 3, 5/6/2015
6. Project Otremens involved an undercover operation, with a police informant in contact with Joe and Dom Violi; as part of the investigation, law enforcement secretly video- and audio-

recorded an induction ceremony in which they all took part in Canada. This operation was covered in the news stories and the researcher discussed the details with relevant authorities during interviews.
7. 29 June 2017, at "Caffè Corretto" in Vaughan, owned by the Figliomeni brothers.
8. 29 September and 1 October 2017, at "Angel's Bakery" in Toronto, owned by the De Maria family.
9. 29 June 2018 Cosimo Ernesto Commisso (nephew of Remo Commisso) and his girlfriend Chantelle Almeida were killed in Woodbridge.
10. United States District Court - Western District of New York, USA v Joseph Bongiovanni, Amended Defendant Joseph Bongiovanni's Pretrial Motions, 19-cr-227, page 4
11. Project Otremens, 9, 9/7/2016
12. Ibid., 9, 11/23/2016
13. Ibid., 12, 12/7/2016
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 5, 1/6/16
16. Ibid., 12, 12/6/16
17. Ibid. 25, 11/1/17
18. Ibid., 15, 6/30/17
19. Ibid., 21, 11/1/17
20. R. v. Ursino and Dracea, 2019 ONSC 1171
21. Project Otremens, 18, 9/26/17
22. Project Otremens, 2, 3/18/15
23. Operation Acero Connection – Proc. Pen. N. 7498/2010 RGNRA DDA Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale Ordinario di Reggio Calabria Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia.
24. Operation Bene Comune – Recupero – Sent. nr.488/2014 – nr.1988/08 R.G.N.R. D.D.A. – nr. 37/12 Reg. Dib – Tribunale di Locri, 7 July 2014.
25. Operation Canadian Connection, 185
26. Project Otremens, 15, 6/8/17
27. Project Otremens.
28. Project Otremens, 1, 2/11/15
29. Ibid., 7, 5/13/16
30. Ibid., 4, 10/9/15

Acknowledgement

The author is thankful to Adrian Humphreys for the support in retrieving some of the data used in this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Anna Sergi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9995-117X

References

Agier, M. 2016. *Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
Albanese, J.S. 1996. *Organized Crime in America*. Cincinnati: Anderson.

Albini, J.L. 1971. *The American Mafia: Genesis of a Legend*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
Beare, M.E. 1996. *Criminal Conspiracies: Organized Crime in Canada*. Nelson: Scarborough.
Beare, M., and M. Woodiwiss. 2014. US Organized Crime Control Policies Exported Abroad. In *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, ed. L. Paoli, 545–571. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Block, A. 1983. East Side—West Side: Organizing Crime in New York (1930–1950). New Brunswick: Transaction.
Bouchard, M. 2020. Collaboration and Boundaries in Organized Crime: A Network Perspective. *Crime and Justice* 49, no. 1: 425–69.
Bright, D., R. Brewer, and C. Morselli. 2021. Using Social Network Analysis to Study Crime: Navigating the Challenges of Criminal Justice Records. *Social Networks* 66: 50–64.
Bryant, A., and K. Charmaz, eds. 2007. *Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.
Catino, M. 2019. *Mafia Organization. The Visible Hand of Criminal Enterprise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Corbin, J., and A.L. Strauss. 1990. Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria. *Qualitative Sociology* 13, no. 1: 3–21.
Cressey, D.R. 1969. *Theft of the Nation. The Structure and Operations of Organized Crime in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
Dear, M., and A. Burridge. 2005. Cultural Integration and Hybridization at the United States-Mexico Borderlands. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 49, no. 138: 301–318.
Desroches, F.J. 2005. *The Crime that Pays: Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA). 1992. Centro Operativo di Reggio Calabria - Informativa conclusiva relativa alle indagini svolte in direzione di un'associazione per delinquere di tipo mafioso finalizzata al controllo del territorio ed al traffico internazionale di sostanze stupefacenti, denominata "Siderno Group", Reggio Calabria, 20.10.1992
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). 2006. te Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) *Canada/US Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, Washington, DC.
Dürrschmidt, J. 2002. 'They're Worse off Than Us' – The Social Construction of European Space and Boundaries in the German/Polish Twin-City Guben-Gubin. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9: 123–50.
Eagles, M. 2010. Organizing Across the Canada-US Border: Binational Institutions in the Niagara Region. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 3: 379–94.
Finckenauer, J.O. 2012. *Mafia and Organized Crime: A Beginner's Guide*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Gambetta, D. 1993. *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
García Pinzón, V., and J. Mantilla. 2021. Contested Borders: Organized Crime, Governance, and Bordering Practices in Colombia-Venezuela Borderlands. *Trends in Organized Crime* 24: 265–81.
Glaser, B.G. 1992. *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis. Emergence vs Forcing*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press.
Glaser, B.G. 1998. *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley: Sociology Press.
Glaser, B.G., and A.L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
Glebovskiy, A. 2019. Criminogenic Isomorphism and Groupthink in the Business Context. *International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior* 22, no. 1: 22–42.
Helleiner, J. 2016. *Borderline Canadianness: Border Crossings and Everyday Nationalism in Niagara*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Ianni, F.A., and E. Reuss-Ianni. 1972. *A Family Business: Kinship and Social Control in Organized Crime*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
Idler, A. 2019. *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jacobs, J.B., and E. Dondlinger Wyman. 2014. Organized Crime Control in the United States of America. In *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, ed. L Paoli, 529–544. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jacobs, J.B., C. Panarella, and J. Worthington. 1994. *Busting the Mob: United States v. Cosa Nostra*. New York & London: New York University Press.
Konrad, V. 2012. Conflating Imagination, Identity, and Affinity in the Social Construction of Borderlands Culture Between Canada and the United States. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 42, no. 4: 530–48.
Konrad, V., and H.N. Nicol. 2011. Border Culture, the Boundary Between Canada and the United States of America, and the Advancement of Borderlands Theory. *Geopolitics* 16, no. 1: 70–90.
Lupo, S. 2002. Cose Nostre: Mafia siciliana e mafia americana. In *Storia di Emigrazione Italiana*, eds. P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, and E Franzina, 47–64. Milano: Donzelli Editore.
Lupo, S. 2009. *History of the Mafia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Malm, A., G. Bichler, and R. Nash. 2011. Co-offending Between Criminal Enterprise Groups. *Global Crime* 12, no. 2: 112–28.
McCusker, R. 2017. Transnational Organised Cybercrime: Distinguishing Threat from Reality. In *Transnational Financial Crime*, ed. N. Passas, 415–32. New York: Routledge.
Morselli, C., M. Turcotte, and V. Tenti. 2011. The Mobility of Criminal Groups. *Global Crime* 12, no. 3: 165–88.
Operation Canadian Connection. 2019. Procura della Repubblica, Presso il Tribunale di Reggio Calabria, Direzione Distrettuale Antimafia, Proc. Pen. 2960/2019 RGNR/DDA, 2019.
Project Otremens. 2015. Italian Mafia Criminal Organization, Agent Debrief Report Summary Excerpts and Project Otremens Substantive Event Summary - Domenic Violi, Kam-Tim Tong, Tran Giang Tang, Yin Yun Leong, Toronto, 2015-18.
Quinn, J.F. 2017. The Outlaw Extreme: Violence, Prosecution, and Evolution of the North American One Percent Motorcycle Club. In *Contemporary Organized Crime*, edited byD. Siegel and H. Nelen, 103–124. Sham: Springer.
Reuter, P. 1983. *Disorganized Crime: The Economics of the Visible Hand*. Boston: MIT Press.
Reuter, P. 1995. The Decline of the American Mafia. *The Public interest* 120: 89.
Roberts, S.R. 1998. Negotiating Locality, Islam, and National Culture in a Changing Borderlands: The Revival of the Mäshräp Ritual among Young Uighur men in the Ili Valley. *Central Asian Survey* 17, no. 4: 673–99.
Roberts, K.A. 2019. Borderland Identities in Niagara: Craig Davidson's Cataract City (2013). *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 34, no. 2: 299–315.
Schneider, S. 2009. *Iced: The Story of Organized Crime in Canada*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
Schneider, S. 2013. Violence, Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Markets: A Canadian Case Study. *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas* 71: 125–43.
Sciarrone, R., and L. Storti. 2014. The Territorial Expansion of Mafia-Type Organized Crime. The Case of the Italian Mafia in Germany. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 61, no. 1: 37–60.
Sergi, A. 2017. *From Mafia to Organised Crime: A Comparative Analysis of Policing Models*. London: Palgrave.
Sergi, A. 2018. What's in a Name? Shifting Identities of Traditional Organized Crime in Canada in the Transnational Fight Against the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 60, no. 4: 427–54.
Sergi, A. 2022. *Chasing the Mafia. 'Ndrangheta, Memories and Journeys*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
Sergi, A., and A. Lavorgna. 2016. *'Ndrangheta: The Glocal Dimensions of the Most Powerful Italian Mafia*. London: Palgrave.
Sergi, Anna, and Luca Storti. 2020. Survive or Perish: Organised Crime in the Port of Montreal and the Port of New York/New Jersey. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 63: 100424.
Sheptycki, J. 2003. The Governance of Organised Crime in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 4: 489–516.
Skarbek, D., and P. Wang. 2015. Criminal Rituals. *Global Crime* 16, no. 4: 288–305.
Smith, D.C. 1975. *The Mafia Mystique*. London: Hutchinson.

Varese, F. 2011. *Mafias on the Move: How Organized Crime Conquers New Territories*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Varese, F. 2020. How Mafias Migrate: Transplantation, Functional Diversification, and Separation. *Crime and Justice* 49, no. 1: 289–337.

Von Lampe, K. 2016. *Organised Crime. Analyzing Illegal Activities, Criminal Structures, and Extra-Legal Governance*. New York: SAGE.

Walter, R. 2005. Notes on Border (Land)s and Transculturation in the "Damp and Hungry Interstices" of the Americas. In *How Far is America from Here?*Selected Proceedings of the First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, 22-24 May 2003, edited by T. D'Haen, P. Giles, D. Nadir, and L. Parkison Zamora, 143–57. Amsterdam: Radopi.

White House. 2011. *Strategy to Combat Transnational Organised Crime: Addressing Converging Threats to National Security*. Washington, D.C: National Security Council.

Whithorn, N. 2014. Translating the Mafia: Legal Translation Issues and Strategies. *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 22: 157–73.

Woodiwiss, M. 2015. Combatting and Analysing Organized Crime: The View from Witnesses. *Trends in Organized Crime* 18: 1–11.