

A “Finook” in the Crew:
Vito Spatafore, “The Sopranos,” and the Queering of the Mafia Genre

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The Sopranos: A Wake
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Whatever else can be said about “The Sopranos” – and this conference¹ proves there’s quite a lot to be said -- the show was a deconstructionist’s delight.

Throughout its eight-year run, the HBO series scrutinized categories such as “The Mafia,” “the gangster,” “Italian American,” and “American” and reconceived them, demythicizing conventional wisdom and forcing us to look at them anew.

“The Sopranos” also critically probed the details and nuances of gender and sexuality. More specifically, it interrogated the meanings of masculinity and femininity as lived within the culture of Italian American organized crime, relocated from urban Little Italies to the affluent suburbs of New Jersey.

The show situated that inquiry within the larger context of post-industrial America, a new world shaped by developments negative and unsettling – rampant economic insecurity, widening income disparities, the resurgence of such atavisms as fundamentalist religion and Social Darwinism – and also positive and liberatory, such as diminished overt racism and greater cultural diversity, increasing gender equality and acceptance of stigmatized social minorities such as gays and lesbians.

This is Tony Soprano’s world, but he doesn’t feel at home in it. The suburban capo is tormented by a sense of purposelessness and confusion over his place in an America that has radically changed since the days of his gangster father, Johnny Soprano.

“Things are trending downward,” he complains during his first psychotherapy session with Dr. Jennifer Melfi. He is particularly troubled by the phenomenon that Italian journalist Vittorio Zucconi has called “*il declino del padrino*”²— literally, the

decline of the godfather. Organized crime just isn't what it used to be, its practitioners having forsaken the discipline and values that permitted the mafia to flourish.

For Tony the decadence of today's mafia is emblematic of a larger decline, that of America itself, and he articulates his sense of loss in distinctly gendered terms.

"Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong silent type?" he fumes. "That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. See, what they didn't know is that once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings they couldn't get him to shut up. It's dysfunction this, dysfunction that, dysfunction *vaffancul*."

Tony's masculine identity in fact is under siege, notwithstanding his testosterone swagger and energetic sexual promiscuity. In one episode, he dreams that a bird flies away with his penis. The roots of his castration anxiety lie in his tortured relationship with his mother Livia, who during his childhood withheld love and threatened violence. Now, in middle age, Tony remains locked in an oedipal *lucha libre* with Livia, still fruitlessly trying to extract love from this bitter, self-pitying and unloving woman.

This mob boss is having problems with his conjugal family as well. In an episode from the series' first season, Tony chastises his daughter Meadow for speaking frankly about sex at the dinner table. When she protests that it's now the 21st century, he snaps: "In this house it's 1953."

Tony's expressed nostalgia for a supposed golden age of sexual reticence is, like most of his pronouncements, riddled with bad faith. With an independent and ambitious wife, a daughter who not only talks candidly about sex but also doesn't hide the fact that she sleeps with her boyfriends and a sullen, undisciplined son – Tony cannot plausibly

argue that changes in the larger society have not breached the barricades of his own world.

If his home life has become unruly, it's an oasis of calm and sanity compared to his criminal enterprise. At work he struggles to manage a crew of violent sociopaths and substance abusers, louche characters who are the antithesis of Don Vito Corleone's abstemious family men. The behavior of certain crew members proves so disruptive that it threatens the entire Soprano organization, as with Ralphie Cifaretto, a violent misogynist who must be eliminated to maintain Tony's authority and the crew's cohesion.

But the most subversive threat to the status quo appears in the corpulent form of Vito Spatafore, a mafia captain who, in the fifth season of "The Sopranos," was revealed to be a closeted homosexual. Vito's sexuality was disclosed in a scene that many found more shocking than any of the series' murders and other acts of ultra-violence. Finn De Trolio, the boyfriend of Meadow Soprano, arrives early one morning at his summer job with the Soprano-affiliated Spatafore Construction Company. He pulls up alongside a parked car that appears to have only one passenger, a uniformed security guard. Then Vito appears, and we, sharing Finn's perspective, immediately realize that the mobster was giving the guard a blow job.

When "The Sopranos" returned for its sixth season in March 2006, Vito's hidden homosexuality became public when two mafia bagmen encountered him in a gay bar, clad in black motorcycle cap, black leather vest worn over his bare chest, leather pants, and studded wristband. He tried to persuade the astonished and disgusted wiseguys that

they have not seen what they think they have seen. "It's a fuckin' joke," he cries. "C'mon guys, it's just a joke."

But when word of Vito's sighting begins to circulate among his fellow gangsters, no one is amused. The revelation that there is "a finook in the crew," as one mobster says, precipitates a crisis not only within the Sopranos criminal organization but also reverberates through its familial and social networks. Vito is a "made man" in the mafia, and, as a captain, a leader. But he also is a husband and father, and his "outing" has a disruptive impact on the intertwined realms of family and "family."

Letizia Paoli, in her study *Mafia Brotherhoods*, notes that "the woman is considered the repository of the family's honor because she is the most important element of the family patrimony... Her honor thus defines the honor of all the male family members and enhances the group's cohesion."³ Phil Leotardo, the hoodlum who calls Vito a "finook" (from *finocchio*, a derogatory Italian term for homosexual) demands his death because Vito not only has violated the mob's sex/gender protocols. Vito is married to Phil's cousin; therefore he has dishonored the entire Leotardo family.

"The Sopranos," pre-Vito Spatafore, made women the cynosure of its critical interrogation of gender and sexuality. David Chase reconfigured the familiar typology of women in gangster dramas – the long-suffering wife, the flashy mistress, and the unquestioningly devoted *mamma* – and in the process relocated these types from the periphery of an androcentric genre, giving them agency their forbears rarely exercised. The silently suffering mob wife becomes Carmela Soprano, a tough cookie who uses Tony's chronic infidelity as a bargaining chip to negotiate his backing for her real-estate business. The sexpot mistress becomes Gloria Trillo, a successful businesswoman with a

carnal appetite to match Tony's own. The fretting devoted *mamma* becomes the scheming emotional terrorist Livia Soprano.

But the Vito Spatafore narrative problematized gender and sexuality more radically than previously had been the case on the show.

In depicting a "finook in the crew" and the repercussions of such a transgression, "The Sopranos" "queered" the mafia genre, decentering its typical construction of masculinity as incontrovertibly heterosexual.

The Vito storyline made manifest the possibility of actual homosexuality within the homosocial milieu of organized crime groups. As Joseph Pistone, the FBI agent who, under the alias "Donnie Brasco" infiltrated the Bonnano crime family, has observed, gangsters much prefer each other's company to that of their wives or girlfriends.⁴ [slide, sopranos group]

Marriage and children, and the obligatory "gumads," or mistresses, confirm their heterosexual public image, but the absence of women from mob society inevitably raises questions about homoerotic desire.

This possibility, however, must not become actuality. The specter of queerness may haunt the all-male entity. But to admit it as an acceptable way of being would subvert the very ethos of the organized crime group. The culture of the mafia, patriarchal and authoritarian, strictly polices the unruly realms of gender and sexuality. Its protocols demand that men master, even repress their emotions. They must subordinate their own individual needs and desires to that of the collective, the mafia "family." They must not hesitate to inflict violence, including murder, if the boss deems it necessary. Establishing and supporting a family is another mandatory standard of mafia manhood; violating

another mafioso's honor through sexual relations with a female member of his family is one of the most egregious offenses a mobster can commit.

As noted previously, the values of the so-called mafia family are based in a code that stresses respect for women and the centrality of their status in defining and preserving a mafioso's honor. But at the same time, the denigration of femininity is central to mafia culture.

Misogyny is allied with homophobia, a conflation memorably established in a scene from "The Godfather." When the has-been pop singer Johnny Fontane weeps about the sorry state of his once-glorious career – "Oh Godfather, what can I do, what can I do?"-- Don Vito slaps him and bellows, "You can act like a man! Is this how you turned out, a Hollywood *finocchio* that cries like a woman?"

Jane C. Schneider and Peter T. Schneider, American social scientists who, over four decades, have produced an invaluable body of work on Sicily and the mafia, documented the centrality of misogyny and homophobia to Cosa Nosa culture in their 2003 book *Reversible Destiny*. They provide a vivid account of how Sicilian mafiosi symbolically and literally exclude women from their world. "Through rituals, feasts, and hunting trips, the members shore up and continuously reassert a form of masculine identity that repels affection and dependency as womanly signs of weakness."⁵

The Schneiders report how "food play" is a central to male bonding among Sicilian mafiosi. Huge feasts were major social occasions for Cosa Nostra members. At their men-only banquets, the gangsters "revealed a striking ability to carry on without women by preparing each of the lavish, multi-course feasts entirely on their own."⁶

And when they had finished eating, “the revelers settled into an hour or more of hilarious, carnivalesque entertainment that parodied the absent sex.”⁷ The Schneiders render an astonishing account of one such revel, where three mafiosi improvised priestly vestments out of tablecloths and conducted a profane mass, in which, at the end of each verse, instead of an “amen,” they would chant, “minchia!” (This slang term for “penis” also serves as an all-purpose expletive, like “Fuck!”)

These “masses” often were elaborate parodies in which “some of the bonvivants performed erotic imitations of women doing a strip tease.” One mafioso at such a bacchanal “dressed up in pink silk women’s underwear with lace trim, a pink satin nightgown and a hooded black satin cape. Plump oranges were used to give the illusion of breasts as he cavorted about.”⁸

Though these mafia rituals and traditions seem to employ a certain amount of homoerotic horseplay, such parodic behavior actually exorcises the specters of femininity and homosexuality, the latter seen as a feminine weakness or vice. It builds solidarity among mafiosi by defining them by what they are not: women or homosexuals.

The Schneiders cite the psychiatric transcript of an imprisoned mafioso who killed two other mobsters and attempted to kill a third. He claimed he committed the murders to “show himself and to others that he was the equal of the other men, ‘one of the boys,’ capable of manhood, and not one of ‘them’—the women. Indeed the killings had helped him deal with his growing concern that he might be inclined toward ‘pederasty,’ by which he meant being sexually attracted to young men.”⁹

“The Sopranos” captures with vivid accuracy the mafioso’s conflation of femininity and homosexuality and the fear and loathing of both. Furio Giunta, an enforcer

imported from Naples, mutters disgustedly that two young hoodlums must be performing oral sex on each other when he discovers them lounging in their underwear in their shared apartment. For Paulie Walnuts, a captain in Tony Soprano's crew, being called a "cocksucker" is enough to incite him to homicidal fury. Richie Aprile, a sullen brute who becomes the lover of Tony's sister, Janice, worries that his son might be gay because he takes part in dance contests. And when Janice Soprano asks what difference it would make if the boy were gay, Richie punches her in the face.

Both Tony and his son A.J. speculate that the high school counselor David Wegner must be a "fag." Carmela, who will have an affair with Wegner, snaps at her husband, "What's with you, you think everybody's gay. Maybe *you're* gay!"

There's genuine insight in Carmela's rebuke of Tony: those who object most vociferously to homosexuality often do so to assuage anxiety about their own unacceptable or unwanted desires. But organized crime groups rely upon mechanisms somewhat cruder than Dr. Freud's projection to deal with the threat of sexual unorthodoxy in their ranks. Joseph Pistone, discussing the infractions of mafia rules that may be punished by death, cites such offenses as not sharing proceeds from illegal activities, talking to police and testifying before grand juries, and concludes, "...being gay will get you killed, too."¹⁰

John D'Amato, the acting boss of the New Jersey-based De Cavalcante crime organization, was murdered when his confederates learned that he went to swingers' clubs, where he sometimes had sex with men. The mobster who shot D'Amato explained the hit when he became a government informer: "Nobody's going to respect us if we have a gay homosexual boss sitting down discussing business with other families."

Or a leather-clad captain who cavorts with other men in gay discos. Which returns us to Vito Spatafore, and the crisis that results from his violation of mafia norms.

Social theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is not a “natural” category but is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts. The repetition of these acts constitutes what Butler calls the “performativity” of gender, as well as of sexuality. In our everyday lives, in the ways that we live in the world, we repeat and perform our culture's gender norms.¹¹

But gender performativity isn't only a matter of social constraints. It also is a source of agency, and of power.

The constraints of gender performativity, that is, the standards of mafia manhood, have made Vito Spatafore the man he is: a successful, high-earning mobster, indisputably masculine, which is to say, heterosexual, as confirmed by wife, children, and mistress. Violence, including murder, also is the norm in Vito's world, and here again he conforms to normative expectations.

Acting like a man, in Don Vito Corleone's terms, has had its rewards for his fictive descendant Vito Spatafore. But Spatafore's growing sense of himself as homosexual is creating unbearable distress. In the mafia's theater of gender, Vito finds that he can no longer convincingly perform the self that heretofore has constituted his identity and established his place in the world. In a scene that precedes the public exposure of his sexuality, he nearly “drops his beads,” to borrow a phrase from the pre-liberation gay lexicon. When some mobsters discuss the inexplicably erratic behavior of a Sopranos crew member, Vito offers by way of explanation, “Maybe he's a secret homo who can't tell anyone about it.”

Once Vito's sexuality is inadvertently disclosed and it becomes evident that his life is in danger, he flees to New Hampshire. Ensnared in a picturesque bed-and-breakfast and posing as a sports writer working on a book, he tries to locate a relative who lives somewhere in the state. He fails to find his kin. But he instead discovers the possibility of a new life and a new identity.

Stopping in a diner one morning, Vito finds himself attracted to Jim, the handsome, virile short-order cook. Jim is whipping up an order of "johnnycakes," and the smitten Vito affectionately nicknames him after the breakfast item. Johnnycakes is both everything Vito is, and is not, which makes him irresistible to the fugitive mobster. Like Vito, Johnnycakes is conventionally masculine, but unlike him, he "performs" gender with unselfconscious ease. He is openly gay, and suffers no psychic discordance between his masculine gender presentation and his sexuality.

Like Vito, he also is a father, with a daughter whom he loves and who adores him. Unlike Vito, whose idea of work is to sit around construction sites kibitzing with other mobsters, Johnnycakes not only performs honest paid labor as a cook; he also is a volunteer fireman. In one episode, he rescues a small child from a burning building. Vito, witnessing this act of heroism, has an epiphany. His mob cronies back in New Jersey denigrate homosexuals as weak and unmanly, but here is a gay man who refutes that stereotype.

Johnnycakes, moreover, is integrated into a community of gay men, some of whom also are volunteer firemen. Johnnycakes' friends constitute an alternative community to the Sopranos mob crew, a counterculture premised on humanistic values. Whereas the interpersonal dynamics of the gangster fraternity are corrupted by avarice,

betrayal and the omnipresent threat of lethal violence, the gay crew is founded on friendship, mutual support and a frankly expressed eroticism.

Vito is stricken with cognitive dissonance, drawn to the appealing gay world of the New Hampshire hamlet but emotionally and materially tied to the criminal life that has provided not only his living but also his masculine identity. When Jim moves to kiss him for the first time, Vito balks -- "What are you, some kinda fag?" -- and punches the short-order cook. But Johnnycakes, stronger and in better physical condition, beats down the mobster and curses him for leading him on. Vito, bruised and chastened, later apologizes, saying, "Sometimes you tell a lie so long you don't know when to stop."

After their reconciliation, Johnnycakes and Vito enjoy a brief idyll as a couple, the mafioso maintaining their household while his lover works. The scenes of their domestic life are remarkable for their credible depiction of a gay male partnership and their sexual candor. In one scene Vito prepares a meal of what he calls "real peasant food" -- veal with vinegar peppers, *pasta patate* and *insalata* -- but Johnnycakes hungers for Vito. What follows is a moment entirely without precedent in the gangster genre: as Johnnycakes put the moves on Vito, the positioning of their bodies makes evident who is the top and who is the bottom. A fat gay mobster "bottoming" for a chubby-chasing, macho short-order cook: it's hard to imagine a more radical subversion of genre and genre expectations.

But this blissful interlude soon comes to its inevitable conclusion. Johnnycakes finds Vito a real construction job, but the gangster is incapable of honest labor. Vito longs for his life in New Jersey, missing the perquisites of being a mob captain, as well as his two children. He flees New Hampshire, leaving behind one irate lover and a dead

innocent bystander who had gotten in his way. Once back home Vito attempts to win Tony Soprano's favor and protection with the offer of a lucrative business deal. Tony says he will consider the offer. But in the meantime, Phil Leotardo intervenes. He and his thugs track Vito down to a seedy motel room, where they bind and gag him, beat him to death, and for good measure, force a pool cue into his rectum.

Two startling bits of visual business imply the contradictory and combustible mix of fear, loathing, and unacknowledged desire that often underlies violent homophobia. Phil's presence in the motel room is revealed as he literally comes out of the closet in which he has been hiding, and as his thugs murder Vito, an expression suggesting sexual arousal flickers in his cold eyes.

Judith Butler's performativity theory allows for the possibility of resistance to and the overthrowing of oppressive gender norms. The weakness of norms lies in the very fact that they must be constantly reiterated: no matter how "natural" they may seem, they are culturally conditioned and therefore can be changed. But Vito doesn't want to revolt; he wants back in. In his meeting with Tony he denies that he is gay. Blood pressure medication made him do it, he tells the obviously unconvinced boss.

Tony actually considers re-integrating the gay gangster. "It's 2006 – there's pillow-biters in the Special Forces," he remarks, even reminding his crew, "we all know Vito isn't the first."

Here "The Sopranos" slyly alludes not only to John D'Amato but to the notorious Vito Arena, the "gay hit man," as the Gambino crime family member came to be known in the media. Although the Gambinos knew that Arena was gay, apparently he was such an accomplished assassin that they were willing to overlook his sexuality.

But this "thing of ours" is bigger than any individual, and it demands Vito's elimination, to preserve the cohesion of the Sopranos organization and its members' sense of themselves. Tony Soprano's authority also is on the line, as his men have declared that they will not work for "that fuckin' finook." Though Tony is angry that Phil has defied him by killing Vito without his permission, he is nonetheless relieved that the Vito problem has been "taken care of."

There are a few messy loose ends, however. When a rival mobster jokes one time too many that other Sopranos crew members also must be gay, Tony's unamused underlings stab him to death, an act both impulsive and inconvenient, as the killing occurs in Tony's redoubt, the Bada Bing strip club. Innocents suffer as well: Vito's two young children find out about their death of their father, including the pool cue penetration, in a newspaper article that identifies him as a gangster.

Whatever the wreckage left in its wake, the killing of Vito has resolved the crisis posed by the "finook in the crew." It also was the only dramatically credible resolution, as any Butlerian revolt against the mafia's sex/gender norms was doomed to failure. Some institutions are intransigent in their resistance to change, and will employ a range of strategies – cooptation, ostracism, repression, violence – to deflect any challenge to hegemonic beliefs and values. The paramilitary, male supremacist mafia crew is such an entity. But it is hardly the only one, as David Chase and his writers took pains to establish.

From its first episode, "The Sopranos" presented mafia life as a microcosm of contemporary American society. This enabled the series to comment on such phenomena as class mobility, ethnicity, racism, political and corporate corruption, sex and gender,

and mafia narrative itself. With the Vito Spatafore storyline, "The Sopranos" once again made the organized crime genre perform metaphoric heavy lifting, in service of a larger critique.

Religion, and in particular the significance of Catholicism in Italian American life, has not escaped the scrutiny of Chase and company. "The Sopranos" zeroed in on the historically ambiguous relationship between the Church and the Mafia through the character "Father Phil," an Italian American priest who seemed to spend more time in the Sopranos McMansion, enjoying Tony's home entertainment center and Carmela's baked ziti, than attending to his parishioners.

With the Vito Spatafore storyline, the series broadened the focus to take in a new and disconcerting development in American life: the convergence between the moral agendas of right-wing, evangelical Protestants and conservative Roman Catholics.

As everyone wonders what to do about Vito, Phil Leotardo's wife Patty, a self-righteous harridan who considers herself a devout Catholic, reports that her church group has sought the assistance of a Protestant evangelical whom she claims is an expert in "curing" homosexuality.

"The Sopranos" gleefully satirized the moral outrage of the gangsters who were so outraged over Vito dishonoring them and their upstanding family values. But with Patty Leotardo's anti-gay ecumenism, the show targeted more than the hypocrisy of the mafia value system. A militant Catholic like Patty making common cause with a right-wing evangelical is a familiar scenario nowadays.

Abortion, reproductive technologies, the Terry Schiavo controversy, and George Bush's Supreme Court appointment of Italian American jurist Samuel Alito: these issues

have made ideological bedfellows of Christian Rightists and conservative Roman Catholics, an alliance that has been institutionalized in the Republican Party.

But as the furor over same-sex marriage has demonstrated, few issues unite conservative Catholics and the Christian Right as effectively as homosexuality.

Given the Catholic Church's anti-gay anathemas and the Republican Party's cynical exploitation of bigotry as an electoral strategy, the New Jersey mafia is hardly the only male-dominated institution unwilling to tolerate "a finook in the crew." There also is the U.S. military, with its institutionalized hypocrisy of "don't ask/don't tell." And yet, just as Vito Spatafore wasn't "the first" in his milieu, gay men serve in all of these organizations: generally closeted, and often self-hating and self-abasing in their subservience to power.

In late 2006, Ted Haggard, a prominent Christian Right minister from Colorado, was exposed as a crystal methamphetamine user who patronized male prostitutes. It was an angry hustler who "outed" Haggard, when he discovered that the client he knew as "Art" was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals and an outspoken opponent of gay rights and same-sex marriage. The scandal not only rocked the Christian Right; coming right before the 2006 midterm elections, the Haggard affair contributed to the Republican losses at the polls, which gave control of Congress to the Democrats for the first time since 1994.¹²

Then, in 2007, Larry Craig, a conservative anti-gay Republican senator from Idaho, became the butt of countless jokes when he was arrested for "lewd conduct" in an airport men's room.

The lives of evangelical Ted Haggard, Senator Larry Craig, and fictional gangster Vito Spatafore attest to a sad but apparently universal truth: the need to belong to a structure that provides meaning and purpose and even identity, as well as power and money, can be more powerful than the urge to live authentically. And yet, there always is a cost for making such an accommodation, whether it is a furtive life of private anguish and public hypocrisy, or a sordid brutal death in a motel room.

With the story of Vito Spatafore, the made man destroyed by the organization that made him a certain type of man, "The Sopranos" delivered an incisive and iconoclastic critique of gender, sex, and sexual politics, and one that resonates far beyond the parochial world of the New Jersey mafia in the age of *il declino del padrino*.

¹ "The Sopranos: A Wake," held May 22-24 in New York City, featured more than 60 academics, critics, and journalists, as well as attorneys, law enforcement professionals and the former head of the FBI anti-organized crime squad.

² George De Stefano. "UnGoodfellas." *The Nation*. February 7, 2000

³ Paoli, Letizia, *Mafia Brotherhoods*, 2003, pp. 88-89

⁴ Pistone, Joseph D. *The Way of the Wiseguy*, 2004, pp. 52-53

⁵ Schneider, Jane C and Peter T, *Reversible Destiny*, 2003, p. 94

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 96

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 92

¹⁰ Pistone, p. 29

¹¹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, p. 140

¹² In February 2007, however, one of four ministers who oversaw what the Associated Press described as "intensive counseling" of Haggard declared the disgraced preacher "completely heterosexual." The ministers did not, however, welcome Haggard back to the National Association of Evangelicals and instead "strongly urged" him to "go into secular work." "Haggard Pronounced 'Completely Heterosexual,'" Associated Press, February 6, 2007