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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Calabrian self-perception and the struggle for recognition in the context of ’ndrangheta stereotypes: oral sources

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Abstract

Calabrian ‘illegitimacy’ in the (inter)national imaginary today is largely the result of the region’s association with the ’ndrangheta. Using analysis of oral history interviews, this research examines how this ‘illegitimacy’ influences the self-perception of Calabrians. It argues that a spectrum of prejudice and its effects can be mapped out both metaphorically and geographically. This spectrum incorporates Italy’s position in relation to northern Europe, the South’s position within Italy, Calabria’s position within the South and the position within Calabria of certain communities. A number of towns in the Locride are at the extreme end of this spectrum: Locri, San Luca, Africo and Platì. Analysis of the (mis)recognition of inhabitants of these communities, including by other Calabrians, demonstrates how the experience of shame may be layered. This paper also considers how interviewees appear to deny their social and cultural proximity with the ’ndrangheta and the role this plays in a self-perpetuating cycle involving stereotypes, ’ndrangheta growth and extreme socioeconomic conditions.

Keywords: Calabria; ’ndrangheta; oral history; prejudice; shame; mafia

Introduction

Calabria’s reputation in the national and international collective imaginary is overwhelmingly negative. Several Calabrians interviewed for this research believed that the region occupies the most extreme ‘illegitimate’ position in the (inter)national collective imaginary, but also that the ‘illegitimacy’ of certain Calabrian communities is greater than others. I examine the ways in which Calabrians perceive and represent their identity in light of stereotypes that mark all Calabrians as proximate to criminality and argue that anti-Calabrian prejudice can be mapped out in a series of concentric layers within the region. Denials and victimhood on the part of interviewees contribute to this ‘illegitimacy’ and therefore require careful examination. By contrast with the ‘legitimate’, which connotes the ‘reasonable and acceptable’ (Cambridge Dictionary Online), I use the term ‘illegitimate’ to reflect how Calabria is commonly perceived as ‘unacceptable’ because of its association with criminality. This use of ‘illegitimacy’ also alludes to Calabria’s identity as an Italian region and thus its relationship to Italy. It is part of the nation and yet on

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the receiving end of prejudice at a national level. There is nothing inherently 'illegitimate' about Calabria outside of this discourse. Instead, the term 'illegitimacy' encapsulates the way Calabria and the wider South have existed historically as a source of preoccupation, if not shame, within official Italian discourse (Moxon 2022).[1] Calabria has largely been overlooked in Italian Studies to date, indicating the region's continued marginality in discussions of Italian identity. I seek to address the dearth of material on the Calabrian experience in this research. This is an adapted version of a chapter section from my PhD dissertation, which explored multiple forms of Calabrian 'illegitimacy' in its transnational context.[2]

Central to this research is the idea of a spectrum of 'illegitimacy' that starts with Italy's historic othering in the context of northern Europe, the South's position within Italy, Calabria's position within the South, and ultimately, the position of certain communities within Calabria. As scholars looking at Italy's Southern Question have argued, from a northern European standpoint, the Italian peninsula has long been recognised as a 'backward' 'other' (Cassano 2012). Italy's South has been framed as the extreme manifestation of this othering. In Italian national discourse, the South has, since Unification, been conceptualised as a land of 'backwardness', of archaic traditions that exist in contradistinction to northern Italian and wider northern European ideals of 'modernity': a land of violence and organised crime, inhabited by a population that is inherently 'backward' and 'criminal' (Dickie 1999). This southern 'illegitimacy' was central to the hugely influential work of the nineteenth-century criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, who paid particular attention to Calabrians. Lombroso explained the prevalence of 'atavistic', violent crime in the South through the racialised notion of the biological inferiority of Southerners, who he considered further down the evolutionary scale as a result of their north African and Arab patrimonies (1897, 30). Tropes of southern 'backwardness' were subsequently cemented in the work of more recent intellectuals. Edward Banfield's concept of 'amoral familism' and Robert Putnam's contention that Southerners lacked 'civic sense' have also played a central role in the conceptualisation of the South (Banfield and Banfield 1958; Putnam 1994). These tropes have been used to frame organised crime and socioeconomic conditions in the South as distinctly southern problems, caused by the character of Southerners (Di Ronco and Lavorgna 2018). Counteracting such tropes, in 1967 Alessandro Pizzorno argued that the South's marginality, rather than being the result of Southerners' 'amoral familism', arose from its position on the fringes of the national identity and in the absence of socioeconomic interventions that would have allowed the South to generate progress for itself (2001, no pages). I thus take into consideration the role of the Italian state when looking at possible victimhood in interviews.

With close references to oral sources, I examine responses by Calabrian interviewees to the region's alignment with crime, reflecting the contention common across interviews that Calabria is synonymous with crime in the wider contemporary collective imaginary. I demonstrate how the application of the crime marker shifts between implicating the whole region, the province of Reggio Calabria and especially an area called the Locride, and, in turn, a cluster of towns in the Locride. The Locride's coastal capital, Locri, is strongly associated with the 'ndrangheta by other Calabrians and in the wider collective imaginary. However, it is a nexus of nearby towns that occupies an extreme 'illegitimate' position. I analyse how inhabitants of these towns, which I term the 'hinterland nexus', position their communities in relation to this spectrum.[3] Employing the term 'hinterland nexus' reflects the automatic association of San Luca, Africo, Platì (and to a lesser extent, Natile) with the 'ndrangheta, as well as the inland position of these towns and their geographic proximity to each other (see Figure 1). The idea of a 'hinterland nexus' is confirmed by interviewees living both in and outside of these communities.

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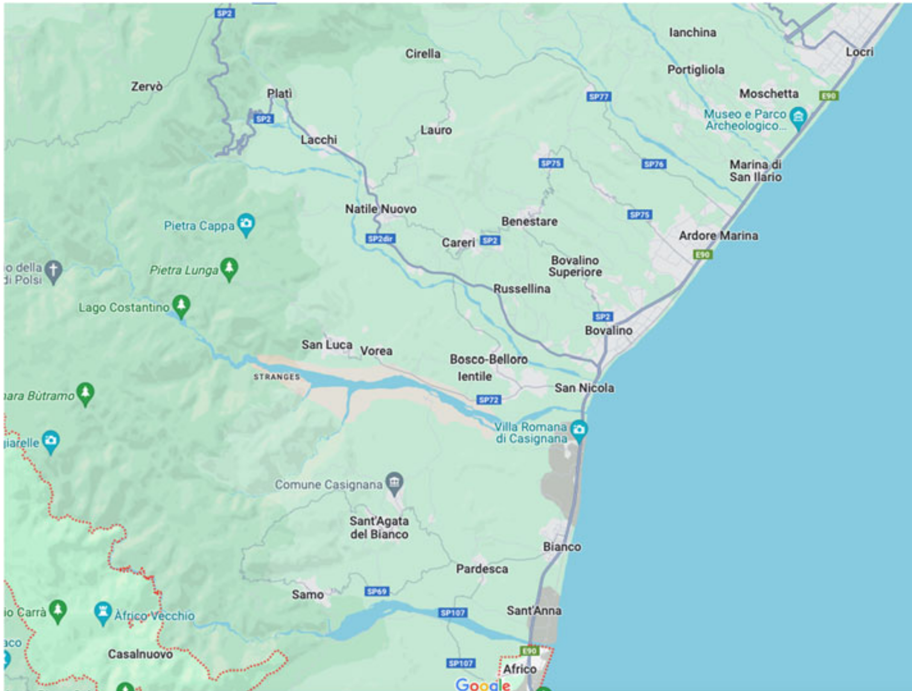

Figure 1. Map including Locri and the towns of the 'hinterland nexus': Africo Vecchio and Nuovo, San Luca, Natile Nuovo, and Platì. Scale 1:5000. Google Maps 2021 (online), accessed 30 August 2022. https://goo.gl/maps/UjWV1Q33Bzqc8Wwf8

It is undeniable that the 'ndrangheta is the most powerful Italian mafia today and that the 'hinterland nexus' is home to some of the most influential *'ndrine*.[4] San Luca is considered the symbolic heart of the organisation, with 'Ndranghetisti from San Luca known for being 'among the most respected and powerful' (Sergi 2022, 9; Varese 2011, 32). San Luca is arguably the most notorious of these towns. Sanluchesi (inhabitants of San Luca) were on the receiving end of what journalist and author Corrado Stajano terms 'letters full of hate' and 'regurgitated racism' sent to the town hall in San Luca by northern Italians as a result of the kidnappings undertaken by the 'ndrangheta in the 1970s–1990s (2015, no pages). During this period wealthy victims and their children were kept hostage in the Aspromonte. San Luca's *'ndrine* were not the only ones to undertake these kidnappings, nor was the 'ndrangheta the only organisation involved in the kidnapping era. However, one letter deemed Calabria the 'shame of Italy' (Teti 2011, 12). Others targeted inhabitants of San Luca specifically: 'to the sub-human degenerate inhabitants of San Luca, symbol of barbarism and shame' (Teti 2011, 12). At times San Luca became a specific symbol of depravity, at other times it was conflated with Calabria, the effects of which become clear in further letters penned by Calabrians residing in the North: 'but how shameful, *we are all Calabrian* and we are infamous, wherever we go they call us *maledetti* ['cursed' or 'intolerable']' (Teti 2011, 13). The assimilation of San Luca with organised crime and extreme violence was consolidated by the Duisburg Feud in 2007, in which affiliates from one of San Luca's *'ndrina* shot dead six affiliates of another in a street in Duisburg, Germany, sparking international media attention (Sergi 2022, 11).

Both Platì and Africo are also 'ndrangheta strongholds and the *'ndrine* from San Luca, Platì and Africo have close links with each other (Sergi 2019; Teti 2014, 244; Ciconte 2012,

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53–54). Natile exists within this nexus geographically and also because of its association with prolific kidnappings (Paoli 2003, 145).[5] This very real 'ndrangheta presence influences the way these towns are seen by others and reinforces the idea that Calabrian 'illegitimacy' today is extreme in the context of the South. The immediate association of these towns with the 'ndrangheta denies these communities the possibility of identifying with any other narrative. It takes away from the fact that the 'ndrangheta is strong throughout Reggio Calabria province and has also asserted itself across Calabria, Italy's North, and overseas (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016).[6] However, given the cultural and social proximity of the 'ndrangheta with inhabitants of these communities, the outright rejection by interviewees of their association with organised crime requires careful consideration. This research engages with recounted experiences of prejudice that mark out this spectrum of 'illegitimacy' before offering a nuanced analysis of a pattern of silence and denial by a number of interviewees over their cultural and social proximity to local *'ndrine*.

Methodology

Subjectivity and the notion that identity is formed in dialogue with others is at the core of this research. In order to critically examine the ways in which the dominant discourse and its framing of Calabrian identity affects Calabrians, this research employs a theoretical framework grounded in Charles Taylor's theory of recognition. Taylor argues that self-realisation is formed 'in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us' (1994, 33). Central to Taylor's theory is the idea that dominant groups misrecognise marginal groups. The idea of a power imbalance is crucial here. One group does not simply misrecognise another; the recogniser is in a position to determine the treatment and self-identification of the (mis)recognised.[7] Analysis includes the affective responses of Calabrians to their 'illegitimacy' in the eyes of others with reference to scholarship on shame. Drawing on affect, gender and race theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Sally Munt and Judith Butler, I explore how shame plays a crucial role in constituting subjectivity in the Calabrian context. Reflecting Munt's contention that the study of shame requires an interdisciplinary approach (2008, 2), this article is in dialogue with scholarship on shame and denial in mafia contexts from anthropology, psychology, criminology and wider sociology in order to better understand the complex and far-reaching effects of anti-Calabrian prejudice.

Oral history interviews provide a unique lens through which to study responses to prejudice on a personal as well as a collective level. Alessandro Portelli argues that oral history lends itself to revealing otherwise obscured emotions and also that oral histories must be judged differently from conventional sources since '"wrong" statements are still psychologically "true" and … this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts' (2018; 2016, 53). As analysis of Calabrian oral sources makes clear, this does not negate the value of these testimonies as anticipated or assumed prejudice tells us much about the Calabrian experience. This research analyses anecdotes that recount prejudice across a number of interviews in order to present experiences and feelings that appear to be common to Calabrians. It also employs what Paul Thompson calls 'narrative analysis', focusing on individual interviews as 'oral text[s]' in which much can be learnt from the use of language, themes, repetitions and silences (2000, 270). It concludes with a reflection on how experiences of prejudice form a collective Calabrian memory that appears to influence the way individual Calabrians perceive prejudice, resonating with Thompson's view that individual memory and collective memory are inextricably linked (2000, 133).

Lynn Abrams contends that 'a respondent may be more willing to explain and to describe in detail to a stranger than to a peer' (2016, 63). Given the examination of the

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ways in which different groups of Calabrians position themselves against each other, being an outsider allowed for a certain degree of objectivity. As a northern European, I do effectively belong to the dominant group in terms of the spectrum of 'illegitimacy'. However, as this research demonstrates, the 'dominant group' is not a fixed concept. Referring back to Taylor's work on recognition, different Calabrian communities find themselves in the position of the dominant group based on their ability to recognise other groups towards the more extreme end of this spectrum. Interviewees reassured me that my own position in relation to Calabrian identity was not a problem, perhaps because, as two of them explained, they did not feel judged as they would were an 'Italian' researcher to interview them.

In order to mitigate potential risks surrounding talking about the 'ndrangheta, interviewees were informed that they would remain anonymous in order to encourage greater openness about experiences relating to organised crime. Interviewees knew they could terminate their interview at any point and that they did not have to answer any of my questions.[8] It is possible that interviewees did not trust me enough to discuss the 'ndrangheta in their towns more openly for fear of my preconceptions and what I might go on to write. Elisa Costanzo, a journalist from San Luca, explains that locals do not want to discuss the 'ndrangheta with outsiders because they are concerned they will be framed as complicit or as members (Scandaliato 2017, 5:07-5:33). For this reason, I approach the subject of 'ndrangheta denials with caution and push for a more nuanced understanding of defensive behaviours. Questions like 'what are the main problems your community faces?' were asked in order to give interviewees the opportunity to discuss the 'ndrangheta. However, I did not directly bring up the 'ndrangheta until it was referred to by interviewees in order to build trust and to reassure them that I was researching the wider Calabrian experience, not just organised crime.

Of the 28 Calabrians interviewed in 2019 (16 men and 12 women), two were from Catanzaro province and 26 were from towns in Reggio Calabria province.[9] Although this is a relatively small sample, especially with regards to Catanzaro province, the in-depth interviews recorded with interviewees open up a new line of inquiry. This exploratory research is backed up through analysis of interviews amongst the Calabrian diaspora as well as through analysis of literary material in the wider study from which this research is taken (Moxon 2022). In Calabria I interviewed six interviewees in their 70s, five between the ages of 50 and 70, 15 between the ages of 30 and 50, and two aged between 18 and 30. While this latter category is small, it does reflect the overwhelming tendency of this age group to emigrate from the region. Interviewees were from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds: one was illiterate and others had only completed elementary school. The majority of interviewees aged 50 and below had university degrees and one was the mayor of a small town.[10] A number worked or had worked as nurses, teachers, restaurateurs, call-centre workers, factory workers and farmers.

From the Locride

The layered experience of prejudice in the region is presented in this paper through analysis of interviews with Locresi (inhabitants of Locri) followed by analysis of interviews with inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus'. I proceed to examine patterns of denial and self-deception across interviews. Locresi explained that their town is synonymous with the 'ndrangheta in the wider Calabrian and Italian imaginaries. They recounted many memories of prejudice within Calabria (outside of Reggio Calabria province), Italy and abroad. The following is one of the most salient examples of (mis)recognition recounted by a Locrese. When I asked Giuseppa about the perception of Locri held by other Calabrians she described a school trip to Cosenza during her childhood:

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> The children in Cosenza … called us *terroni*, but *terroni* from where? As in, we're still in Calabria. But this is because the province of Reggio Calabria, especially the Locride, is always seen … very negatively. Twenty years ago, there was a mafia war … so the image others had of us in Locri [was] if you go outside they'll shoot you.[11]

This episode narrates the lived experience of the kinds of (mis)recognition by other Calabrians of inhabitants of Reggio Calabria province, and in particular the Locride, that I have witnessed during multiple research and non-research trips to the wider region. While the two inhabitants of Catanzaro province interviewed for this research did not use slurs like *terroni*, they clearly placed distance between their communities and Reggio Calabria province, in particular the Locride and especially the 'hinterland nexus'. I read Giuseppa's vexation over the use of the marker *terroni* (which she indicates in this instance was related to stereotypes of criminality) by one community of Calabrians to describe another as a rejection of the validity of this (mis)recognition. In this instance, the act of (mis)recognition by members of the dominant group or, to use Taylor's term, by a 'significant other' (in this context, inhabitants of Cosenza province), does not inculcate a sense of inferiority in a member of the minority group (1994, 33). Sergi states that 'Ndranghetisti represent 'a qualified minority of the Calabrian community, the community as a whole shall not be misjudged or discriminated against for this' (2019, 4). Despite her experience of being judged precisely because of her Locrese identity and the association of this identity with criminality, Giuseppa said: 'I have never been ashamed because I am proud of where I'm from. Obviously, I'm ashamed of some people who live here.' She thus simultaneously rejected and manifested shame. Rather than deny the 'ndrangheta's presence outright, which would imply an inculcated sense of 'illegitimacy' through attempted erasure, Giuseppa acknowledged the shameful behaviour of a minority and placed an 'ontological' distance between them and herself: their presence was shameful – she was ashamed of them – but she conceived of herself as distinguishable from them (Butler 2001, 30).

In what was described as 'inverted discrimination', Sebastiano recounted how he had boarded a bus in Cosenza before realising he had left his tickets and wallet behind.[12] The ticket collector instructed him to get off and return to the bus station with his documents, but when they started conversing and Sebastiano said he was from Locri, the collector 'completely changed his behaviour towards me.' Sebastiano explained: 'the day before there had been a murder in Locri but not a mafia murder … and they discussed it on the news.' The inspector told him to wait until the other passengers had left, then he was free to go: 'I felt bad because I didn't feel discriminated against, I felt advantaged because someone was scared … of a person that lived in a [certain] context, and according to his logic, was the same as everyone else there.' Because of the perceived absence of discrimination, this is an antithetical form of prejudice compared with examples where interviewees felt discriminated against for being Locrese. Yet, his claim that 'I felt bad' is still the consequence of his association with Locri and therefore with organised crime. Prejudice, then, is experienced in contradictory ways; Sebastiano found associations of Locri with criminality painful even when they advantaged him. When I asked Sebastiano to explain how others see Locri, this memory of prejudice, like Giuseppa's, surfaced without hesitation many years after taking place (both interviewees were in their 30s), indicating that the salience of these memories continues in the present. Giuseppa's engagement in the present tense with the shameful behaviour of 'Ndranghetisti in her community suggests that similar prejudice caused by the association of Locri with the 'ndrangheta is prevalent today.

The way in which interviewees from Locri position the 'hinterland nexus' further reveals the spectrum of prejudice. Locresi typically explained this distinction through a

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Figure 2. Provinces of Calabria n.d. (online), accessed 29 August 2022. https://www.italyheritage.com/visit-italy/ita/regioni/calabria/

coastal-hinterland paradigm which depicted coastal Locri (the administrative centre for the region, home to the local courthouse, hospital and secondary schools) as distinct from the more 'backward' 'hinterland nexus' (towns in the Aspromonte with few services that remained inaccessible by road until the second half of the twentieth century). Describing San Luca, Giovanni said: 'San Luca is one of those towns that in some way is the symbol of the stereotype because it's a town in the hinterland, it's a town where the 'ndrangheta exists … in a big way.'[13] Elsewhere Giovanni spoke candidly of the 'ndrangheta's presence in Locri; he did not shift the 'ndrangheta marker exclusively onto San Luca or similar inland towns. However, he did imply that the simple fact of San Luca's position 'in the hinterland' equates to its greater contiguity with the 'ndrangheta and consequently its distinction from coastal Locri. A number of Locresi reinforced this divide by claiming that certain behaviours which they associate with criminality like 'bullismo' ('bullying') and 'arroganza' ('arrogance') are common amongst inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus'. Such framing is arguably comparable with the notion of a criminal mentality associated with all Calabrians in the dominant discourse. While mafia scholars do associate 'cocky' behaviour and 'bullying' with mafia affiliates, this idea of a behavioural divide between the wider communities of nearby towns has not been recognised (Sergi 2018, 151; Dickie 2011, 180). In framing the divide, Locresi reinforced notions of 'us' and 'them' in relation to the 'ndrangheta that do not account for the influential *'ndrine* active in Locri. Drawing on Munt (2008, 114), who argues that those who feel shame might attempt to 'relocat[e] it in another', Locresi appeared to frame inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus' through the kind of reductionist lens that other Calabrians use to distance themselves from Reggio Calabria and especially the Locride. This desire to relocate a marker

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that is so shameful in the context of the Italian national imaginary indicates an anxiety on the part of Locresi over their own shameful association with the 'ndrangheta.

Conversely, Saverio made clear his awareness that Locresi stereotype inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus': 'those who are a bit worse off than us – Africo … San Luca, Platì – *we too* look at them from here, 15 kilometres away, with a bit of suspicion.'[14] The words '*we too*' challenge such attempts to create distance. Saverio's willingness to bridge the metaphorical divide between Locri and the 'hinterland nexus' resists a dominant discourse that, I argue, encourages attempts to create distance from communities further along the spectrum of 'illegitimacy' through their (mis)recognition. On the other hand, other Locresi explained that their suspicion of the 'hinterland nexus' is the result of hostility they have felt towards themselves. Vincenzo said:

> [I'm] afraid of visiting … San Luca [and] Africo … Maybe I avoid these [towns] because I'm scared that someone will ask me 'what are you doing here?' … [I]f you go, they give you bad looks … they follow you.[15]

A lack of contact between nearby communities becomes apparent. Vincenzo's use of the present tense here suggests that hostility and suspicion may not be based on their experience of visiting these towns but on preconceived ideas. Indeed, very few Locresi recounted visits to the 'hinterland nexus'.

Two instances in which Locresi did describe visiting San Luca problematise these preconceptions. Raffaella had performed in San Luca with an amateur dramatics group and recounted how locals brought them refreshments once they 'realised that *we* had gone there to do something for *them*'.[16] The initial hostility on the part of Sanluchesi disappeared once they understood the visiting group's intentions. She also believed this unexpected welcome demonstrated the visiting group's own preconceptions. The idea that Sanluchesi assume the prejudice of others and pre-empt this with hostility is further backed up by Giovanni who explained that his Milanese brother-in-law asked to visit San Luca (a clear indication of San Luca's reputation outside the region) and Giovanni took him there, 'on the condition that he understood we were going to a normal town, not … a zoo'. In San Luca they went to the bar but were not served until Giovanni repeated their order in the local dialect so that the barista knew, in Giovanni's words, that he 'was playing on home turf.' Giovanni empathised with the Sanluchesi: 'Sanluchesi … see those who come from outside [as people who] try to teach them something,' consequently 'the outsider is considered with diffidence'. In this situation Giovanni acted as a mediator between his Milanese relation and an inhabitant of San Luca who, according to Giovanni, immediately felt prejudice as a result of the presence of outsiders. Giovanni's ability to mediate implies that in certain instances a Locrese might be considered less of an outsider than those from further afield, which speaks again to the existence of a spectrum of prejudice. His narration of this episode without hesitations or obvious contradictions indicates that he had reflected on this interaction, as well as on the way inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus' are (mis)recognised, prior to this interview. Giovanni therefore also indicated his willingness to understand inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus' in relation to the prejudice he knows they experience.

It is clear from this episode that some Locresi understand that the apparent refusal of Sanluchesi to engage with outsiders is the result of pre-empted prejudice. This dynamic tallies with Ahmed's delineation of the desire of the shamed 'to turn away from the other's gaze': 'shame feels like an exposure … but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject turn away from the other and towards itself' (2014, 103). The apparent response by Sanluchesi to outsiders illustrates the dialogic nature of (mis)recognition, and in turn manifests interiorised shame. The perceived or assumed prejudiced gaze of the other determines a turning away from outsiders. For Sanluchesi, shame is generated

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by the 'knowledge' of their 'illegitimacy' in the eyes of outsiders who, within this hierarchy of marginality, belong to the dominant group. Acknowledgement of this dynamic signals that Locresi feel they are themselves preconceived within a 'them' and 'us' binary maintained by inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus'. Assumed prejudice on both sides therefore perpetuates a literal and metaphorical divide between these communities.

From the 'hinterland nexus'

Of the towns in the 'hinterland nexus', it is Africo that has historically been emblematic of perceived southern 'backwardness' within the national narrative. Teti describes Africo as 'the place forgotten by God', while Dickie explains that Africesi (inhabitants of Africo) were considered 'innately wicked' as early as the nineteenth century (2014, 247; 2011, 194). Activists who campaigned to improve the town's desperate living conditions brought national attention to Africo from the early twentieth century (Teti 2011, 222). After a devastating landslide in 1951 the town was relocated from the Aspromonte to the coast, a traumatic upheaval for an inland, pastoral community and one that local criminal families exploited (Pipyrou 2015, 62). Africo is still infamous today, only now it has become synonymous with organised crime in the Calabrian and wider Italian collective imaginary (Teti 2014, 248). Africesi were unanimous about the role mediated images play in their alignment with criminality. Bearing in mind Ciconte's argument that the many Calabrians who live honestly go unrecognised, Rocco believed that the media was only interested in the 'ndrangheta: 'when something negative happens in Africo the papers talk about it for six months. They won't even talk for ten minutes about something positive' (Ciconte 2012, 217).[17] This criticism also corresponds with Louis Althusser's theory that the dominant group broadcasts information, or 'knowledge' in Foucauldian terms, in line with their ideology through 'state apparatuses' such as the mainstream media (Althusser 2001, 96; Foucault 1980, 81). Africo has become a metonym for the 'ndrangheta as a result of stereotypical media representations, the effects of which Teti outlines clearly: 'Africesi feel hounded and criminalised also by many denunciatory [news] articles' (2014, 248). Teti states that 'criminal' images of Africesi generate 'feelings of closedness', corroborating the notion that shame leads Africesi to turn away from those who (mis)recognise them (2014, 248).

Teresa discussed the ways in which Africesi come up against these stereotypes both in the wider South and the Locride. As a student in Messina, she felt prejudice 'not so much for being Calabrian but for being Africese', indicating that the Africo marker is experienced separately from her Calabrian identity even outside of Calabria, though this may be explained in part by the high numbers of Calabrian students at the University of Messina.[18] When she started working in Locri she says her colleagues 'looked at me a bit ... suspiciously'. Teresa's testimony therefore bears witness to Saverio's admission that Locresi are suspicious of the inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus'. She believed this suspicion resulted from Africo's association with 'backwardness' and the 'ndrangheta. Francesco similarly perceived this disparity between his Sanluchese identity and his wider Calabrian identity when it comes to his (mis)recognition by others:

> In San Luca we now live with the stereotype which pervades ... the collective imaginary of the rest of Italy, of the world. ... [A]lready you're looked at differently because you're Calabrian. ... You have a double marking. The mark of being Calabrian and the mark of being Sanluchesi.[19]

Francesco was evidently conscious of San Luca's extreme marginality, the result of the town's reputation for being, as Dickie labels it, 'the 'Bethlehem' of organised crime (2011, 190). San Luca has become an international metonym for the 'ndrangheta

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(Ahmed 214, 76). The town's heightened 'illegitimacy' in the international, national and regional collective imaginaries has fed into the local imaginary and is 'known' and felt by Sanluchesi (Foucault 1980). Francesco's description of a '*doppio marchio*' ('double marking') suggests he feels visibly branded, which correlates with Ahmed's notion of 'the physicality of shame' generated by the gaze of a dominant other (2014, 103). As a Sanluchese, Francesco's (mis)recognition feels layered or doubled. He explained that he does not immediately name his hometown when he meets new people, which indicates how this 'double branding' affects his behaviour. When he does name his hometown, he says people respond with: 'you don't seem like you're from San Luca', to which he replies 'so what are people from San Luca like? People from San Luca are like me.' Francesco's use of the present tense reveals something about the experience of prejudice. He did not narrate a specific memory but an ongoing situation that he is prepared to respond to. Although the initial concealment of his identity is arguably a demonstration of shame, his rejection of the cogency of this prejudice indicates that shame, again, does not stem from being Sanluchese per se, but is generated by his expectation of others' prejudice. However, by calling out instances of (mis)recognition as well as recounting these moments to me, Francesco, like Teresa, exhibited his refusal to submit to the 'known' 'illegitimacy' of San Luca. Shame was again simultaneously felt and resisted by the same person.

When I asked Gerardo if other Calabrians held an extreme image of Africo he interrupted, having misinterpreted my question as a comment instead on the particular prevalence of crime in Africo: '[n]o-no-no, I think – no look, no, I think that all towns are – they are all heading in the same direction. You'll find criminals in Africo, in Sant'Agata di Militello, in Messina.' In one of his best-known analyses of an oral history interview, Portelli interprets his interviewee's stammering as crucial information that indicates shame. Portelli affirms that the information his interviewee gives regarding her family's history of slavery, 'is less about her ancestry than about her relationship to this ancestry' (2018, 245–246). I understand Gerardo's misinterpretation of my question – his assumption that I was aligning Africo with crime, and his consequent distress – as evidence of his belief that others see Africo in terms of extreme 'illegitimacy', as well as the pain and shame this prejudice triggers. Although Gerardo manifested distress as opposed to hostility, he (mistakenly) pre-empted prejudice on my part, once more reinforcing the idea that interviewees from these towns assume others will immediately associate them with the 'ndrangheta. This resonates with Di Blasi et al., who have found that pain arises amongst inhabitants of mafia-dense communities as a result of feeling 'stuck in a dimension of humiliating existential and cultural unchangeability' (2015, 182). However, Gerardo effectively shifted the crime marker back along the paradigm of marginality, attempting to realise its redistribution from a narrower to a wider southern application.

Interestingly, inhabitants of Africo, Natile and Platì did not scapegoat Sanluchesi, or vice versa. Unlike attempts by Locresi to 'relocate' shameful markers onto the 'hinterland nexus', no inhabitants of Africo, San Luca, Platì or Natile attempted to deflect perceived extreme 'illegitimacy' by attaching this marker onto each other (Munt 2008, 114). This finding is consolidated by a comment Teresa made: '[people] think that in Africo there are only bad people. … Probably [this is] not just the case for Africo, also for San Luca, also for Platì.' She implied that extreme 'illegitimacy' is experienced across towns of the 'hinterland nexus', reinforcing the need to consider these towns together. Shame is increasingly concentrated towards this end of the spectrum of 'illegitimacy' within Calabria, 'intensify[ing] as it travels' (Morrison 1989, cited in Munt 2008, 114). As we reach this end of the spectrum, shame manifests more intensely, perhaps in part because there is no further, specific point onto which it can be projected. The acuteness of this 'illegitimacy' may be lessened through this idea of shared shame. Alternatively, the

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assimilation of these 'illegitimate' towns with each other, and the way the 'hinterland nexus' as a whole is a metonym for organised crime, may heighten feelings of 'illegitimacy'.

Denial and victimhood

The desire to speak back to the extreme and layered prejudice delineated in these interviews at times risks obscuring the reality of the 'ndrangheta in the Locride, and especially its presence in the 'hinterland nexus'. Maria Di Blasi et al. explain how inhabitants of 'mafia-dense' towns often feel 'an overwhelming shame' as a result of 'sharing their social space with the Mafia' (2015, 181). The focus of this section is on how interviewees, generally speaking, failed to acknowledge their social and cultural proximity to the 'ndrangheta in any meaningful way, thereby reinforcing tropes of passive victimhood and even consensus.

Sergi clarifies the cultural proximity between the 'ndrangheta and Calabrian society: *'ndrine* 'are organic to their communities. Some cultural elements of Calabrian society can, and have been, absorbed into the mafia culture and vice versa' (2018, 153). Furthermore, the outright rejection of associations with criminality in a number of these interviews, or at least the failure to acknowledge this proximity, does not reflect the lived reality of the 'ndrangheta and the multiple ways it asserts its control over others in these communities. For example, local *'ndrine* prevent fair competition in the commercial arena. They have siphoned off state and EU funds intended to improve regional infrastructure and have repeatedly undermined the physical health of their wider communities and local environments (Sergi and South 2016). However, consensus and family ties, especially in the small communities of the 'hinterland nexus', mean that distinguishing between those who participate in or facilitate the activities of local *'ndrine*, those who have benefitted from these activities and those who have fallen victim is problematic (Ciconte 2015, 7–8). For example, while the kidnapping era resulted in the extreme 'illegitimacy' of the 'hinterland nexus' and San Luca in particular, 'the trickle-down profits of kidnapping' benefitted a number of these communities (Dickie 2014, 174). Also, 'ndrangheta affiliation is often considered the only option for young men in communities where there are high levels of unemployment (Ciconte 2015, 31). A number of interviewees did discuss the strength of local *'ndrine* and some were active both in antimafia activities and other local organisations set up to tackle social issues in their communities, thereby challenging tropes of passivity and the absence of 'civic sense' amongst Southerners (Putnam 1994). However, the majority of interviewees discussed the pain of perceived prejudice without acknowledging this complex web of relations with local *'ndrine*.

Recalling both Portelli's contention that '"wrong" statements are still psychologically "true"' and Thompson's belief that much can be learned from silences in oral histories, the omission of this proximity reveals a self-perpetuating pattern of victimhood behaviours and (mis)recognition (Portelli 2016, 53; Thompson 2000, 270). The repeated silence regarding this proximity can be considered a form of defensive denial that corresponds with Ciconte's delineation of the reaction of Calabrian journalists and politicians to media representations of Calabria in the 1950s: he argues that they demonstrated 'behaviours of victimhood [which] ended by obscuring … the 'ndrangheta phenomenon' (1992, 299). Amber Phillips has coined the term *calabresismo* with reference to such 'defensiveness' (2017, 132).[20] While both Ciconte and Phillips refer to a defensiveness on the part of the Calabrian political and cultural elite, I argue that the outright rejection by interviewees of their association with the 'ndrangheta, read alongside the omission of the

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lived reality of the ’ndrangheta in their communities, coincides with the kinds of defensiveness inherent to *calabresismo*, constituting a form of ’ndrangheta denial.

Omertà may also play a role in these denials. This law of silence around the presence and activities of organised criminality is maintained for fear of speaking out and the associated ‘dishonour’ this would bring (Dickie 2014, 316–317). However, *omertà* is arguably comparable with *calabresismo* when it refers to a refusal amongst inhabitants of areas with high rates of mafia activity to discuss organised crime as a means of defending their identity (Giordano et al. 2017, 3).[21] With reference to Giordano et al.’s psychological study of inhabitants of Corleone, we can read this kind of defensive denial without falling into tropes of collective passivity and victimhood: ‘powerful defences [such] as denial, projection, and the repression of memory are activated at a social unconscious level’ in contexts where mafias are present ‘in the vital fabric’ of the community (2017, 3). This idea of denial as a defence mechanism that may be unconsciously employed speaks to Stanley Cohen’s work on self-deception: ‘[s]elf-deception is a way to keep secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face (2001, 39)’. Drawing on Freud to argue that it is both possible to consciously ‘hide’ a known truth from oneself and unconsciously deny this same truth, Cohen argues that denial and self-deception work to protect people from ‘threatening and unwelcome knowledge’ about themselves (2001, 39; 41). It is therefore possible that interviewees obscure the truth of this proximity both to outsiders and to themselves. The ‘illegitimacy’ brought about by the recognition of these communities only ever in the context of the ’ndrangheta is damaging and unjustified. However, their recognition by others as culturally and socially proximate to the ’ndrangheta arguably reflects a more accurate recognition than the kinds of (mis)recognition being claimed. Read this way, silence over this proximity may be a defence mechanism rather than evidence of widespread consensus. Teti and Ciconte highlight the fact that Southerners, from politicians to ’Ndranghetisti, have utilised victimhood narratives (Teti 2011, 8; Ciconte 2012, 18). The notion, at times implicit and at other times explicit, put forward by interviewees that they are simply victims of unfounded prejudice is a form of self-deception that protects them from the potentially shameful truth of their cultural and social proximity to the ’ndrangheta.

The ’ndrangheta is, of course, made up of Calabrians and its growth has long been facilitated and exploited by the Calabrian ruling classes (Ciconte 2012, 18). At the same time, criticism of the unjust nature of the assimilation of these communities with criminality cannot simply be understood as the collective, defensive denial of the proximity and the complicity of Calabrians with the ’ndrangheta. Maria Ridda (2020) explores how the rise of organised crime in Italy is inextricably tied up with the state. She has argued that this is an inconvenient truth conveniently ignored in official narratives which reinforce the idea that organised crime can be understood with reference only to Southerners. Likewise, Ciconte contends that the Italian state has been complicit in the ’ndrangheta’s growth and that representations of Calabrian ‘backwardness’ and hostility to the state constitute an ‘ideological cover-up’ (2012, 40). Tropes of widespread Calabrian consensus allow for the same kind of convenient denial on the part of the state as that outlined above in relation to interviewees: publicly recognising the truth behind the ’ndrangheta’s power would mean having to take greater responsibility for the (inter)national problems posed by the ’ndrangheta.

Ridda describes the state’s employment of this ‘criminal narrative’ as a ‘tool of oppression’ that has generated ‘conditions of subalternity’ (2020, 210). A moment in Teresa’s interview brings into focus the links between state (in)action, socioeconomic conditions, the ’ndrangheta, prejudice and feelings of extreme ‘illegitimacy’ and resignation. Teresa believed that Africesi were not offered a future because Africo’s town council is continually dissolved as a result of mafia infiltration. Long-term projects to improve

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socioeconomic conditions are suspended: 'this means the young leave because here there are no prospects … [and Africo] inevitably becomes more depressed.'[22] Blaming the state, in this case antimafia legislation and authorities, for Africo's socioeconomic conditions might easily be categorised as an example of *calabresismo*. It arguably confirms a tendency to employ victimhood narratives that 'silence' the proximity of these communities to the 'ndrangheta (Thompson 2000, 270). However, criticisms of the state's absence and ineffectiveness (or, indeed, its complicity), must be considered alongside similar arguments made by mafia scholars. Dickie, for example, highlights how the Emergency Commissioners employed to take over the running of dissolved local councils 'generally lack the experience necessary to run local government departments. As a result, the administration often grinds to a halt and with it a large section of the local economy' (2010, 331).

High tumour rates in Africo are attributed by the local media to the disposal of toxic or industrial waste in the vicinity by local *'ndrine*.[23] Although it is highly probable that members of Africo's wider population could shed further light on this phenomenon, the need for state intervention is undeniable. After explaining that the state has not provided adequate help in order to investigate the cause of these tumours, a sense of resignation pervaded Teresa's speech: '[Africo] is a bit of an unfortunate population, it continues to pay the price for so many prejudices.'[24] Reflecting both Teresa's words and the way she spoke them, Teti argues that being 'criminalised' by outsiders, including by other Calabrians, has left Africesi feeling 'even more alone and even more unhappy' (2014, 248). In his theory of recognition, Taylor contends that self-realisation is formed 'sometimes in struggle against the things our significant others want to see in us' (1992, 33). The word 'want' is crucial here; it fits with Teresa's belief and that of Ridda and Ciconte that mafia tropes are convenient for state authorities, providing them with an excuse not to intervene, especially in the more 'illegitimate' towns of the 'hinterland nexus' where this greater proximity between *'ndrine* and the wider community can be utilised. Teti explains that Calabrians have reached a state of paralysis through their subjugation to external images of themselves, the effects of which 'end up confirming the stereotypes that they want to deny. They end up making Calabrians genuinely pathologically melancholy … distrusting, [and] dependent on the positive or negative images and decisions of others' (2011, 26–27). As both Giordano et al. and Teresa indicate, such resignation, or paralysis, serves to maintain the status quo which plays straight into the hands of local *'ndrine* (who themselves exploit victimhood narratives in order to fuel hostility towards the state) (Giordano et al. 2017, 2; Ciconte 2012, 44). This inevitably feeds stereotypes of consensus and passivity and, in turn, prejudice against these communities which contribute to collective feelings of extreme 'illegitimacy', especially in the towns of the 'hinterland nexus'. A self-perpetuating cycle emerges. Through the lens of recognition theory, these communities are trapped in negative, constructed images that are prescriptive.

Conclusion

Analysis of oral sources allows for a greater understanding of the lived experience of Calabrians – an area that has been chronically under-researched, especially in Italian Studies – in light of their 'struggle' for recognition against the prevailing 'ndrangheta stereotypes repeated across the (inter)national collective imaginary, the Italian state and the international media (Taylor 1994, 33). However, such study reveals that prejudice is perpetuated and layered within the region amongst Calabrians themselves in what can best be understood as a spectrum of 'illegitimacy'. Certain Calabrian communities are able to recognise others as more 'illegitimate' in the context of organised crime. Through distancing themselves from this 'illegitimacy' they simultaneously indicate the shame that

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their own association with criminality triggers. A clear spectrum of prejudice emerges within the region, reaching its extreme manifestation in the 'hinterland nexus'. Experiences of prejudice (perceived or real) therefore form part of the Calabrian experience, and thus the collective memory of Calabrians. Drawing on Thompson, this collective memory may shape the individual Calabrian experience so that Calabrians anticipate being seen a certain way by others and may then behave in a certain way towards these others (2000, 133). Communities situated at different points on the spectrum of 'illegitimacy' likewise form collective memories that inform their experiences of prejudice and their own self-perception.

In order to examine Calabrian responses to their association with the 'ndrangheta further, this research moves away from recounted experiences of prejudice to offer a nuanced analysis of silences and denials that emerge across interviews in relation to the reality of the 'ndrangheta's presence in these communities. These denials must be considered alongside the fact that a number of interviewees did engage openly with the extent of the 'ndrangheta in their towns and also that others were active in local organisations which worked to improve social problems. However, reiterating work by Portelli and Thompson on reliability and silence in oral testimonies, a pattern emerges in which the rejection of 'ndrangheta stereotypes coincides with the denial of the cultural and social proximity of these communities with local *'ndrine*: a proximity which, arguably, is more extreme in the smaller towns of the 'hinterland nexus'. This proximity calls into question the insistence by interviewees that their association with the 'ndrangheta by others is indeed a form of (mis)recognition. However, careful analysis of this denial in the context of state (in)action, socioeconomic conditions and felt prejudice contradicts tropes of passivity and insists on a more incisive critique of patterns of victimhood. Such research aims to address the *why* behind behaviours that may be framed as examples of *calabresismo* and even certain forms of *omertà*.

Crucially, through analysis of real-life testimonies this research reveals an awareness on the part of inhabitants of the 'hinterland nexus' that they are caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of prejudice. This confirms that subjectivity is formed in a 'struggle' against what the dominant group 'wants' to see, or what is convenient for them to see, in marginal groups (Taylor 1994, 33). The need for a more accurate recognition of the reasons behind the 'ndrangheta's power and, in turn, the trigger for victimhood narratives, resignation and feelings of 'illegitimacy' becomes clear, reflecting Teti's insistence that in towns like Africo '[t]he truth is made up of many truths' (2014, 249). Given the relatively small number of Calabrians interviewed for this research, further study involving a larger body of interviewees would consolidate the notion that anti-Calabrian prejudice is experienced differently across the region's provinces. Additionally, more in-depth study of the lure of the 'ndrangheta for young men in these towns would shed further light on contemporary attitudes towards the state, allowing for a more profound critique of the self-perpetuating cycle of prejudice delineated in this research. Expanding such study to incorporate the attitudes of locals towards the destruction of their surroundings through activities related to ecomafia would provide a lens through which to examine local perceptions of criminality in the context of pressing environmental debates. By contrast, another area ripe for study is the growing number of antimafia activities at grassroots level in Calabria that suggest Calabrians are trying to break this cycle of prejudice themselves. Ciconte has noted a generational shift in favour of ousting the 'ndrangheta from Calabria, with younger Calabrians increasingly taking to their streets in protest (2012, 218). Study of the way in which Calabrians conceive of antimafia legislation, such as the redistribution of confiscated assets back to local communities, and their attitudes towards grassroots antimafia organisations, would shed further light on feelings of 'illegitimacy', and whether such phenomena may be dissipating amongst younger Calabrians.

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Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. My use of inverted commas highlights that this 'illegitimacy' exists in the dominant discourse but remains a construct.
2. My PhD thesis explored how awareness of Calabrian 'illegitimacy' in national, international, and transnational contexts affects the self-perception of Calabrians.
3. I chose the term 'hinterland nexus' because a number of interviewees referred to these towns as being situated in the 'hinterland' ('*entroterra*'). 'Nexus' reflects the web of 'ndrangheta power that connects these communities and the way they are considered by others as a nexus of 'illegitimacy'.
4. The term *'ndrine* refers to local 'ndrangheta cells made up of one or more families who control specific geographic areas.
5. Natile refers to Natile Vecchio and Natile (Nuovo).
6. Reggio Calabria province is divided into three *mandamenti* (principal branches of the 'ndrangheta), all of which are located in Reggio Calabria province (Dickie 2014).
7. The term '(mis)recognition' indicates that the way Calabrians are recognised is open to interpretation; the accuracy of the way in which they are recognised is always subjective.
8. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bristol.
9. I also interviewed 28 Calabrian-Australian interviewees for my PhD.
10. I have translated interview material from Italian into English.
11. Giuseppa, interview by Aurora Moxon, 08/05/2019.
12. Sebastiano, interview by Aurora Moxon, 08/05/2019.
13. Giovanni, interview by Aurora Moxon, 09/05/2019.
14. Saverio, interview by Aurora Moxon, 21/05/2019.
15. Vincenzo, interview by Aurora Moxon, 21/05/2019.
16. Raffaella, interview by Aurora Moxon, 21/05/2019.
17. Rocco, interview by Aurora Moxon, 09/05/2019.
18. Teresa, interview by Aurora Moxon, 21/05/2019.
19. Francesco, interview by Aurora Moxon, 07/05/2019.
20. Phillips draws on Joseph Farrell's definition of *sicilianismo*: 'a hysterical rejection of all criticisms of Sicily, whether well founded and however motivated' (1995, 32).
21. Only one interviewee denied the 'ndrangheta outright.
22. Under Italian law 164/1991, town councils can be dissolved for infiltration or proximity to criminal organisations. Emergency Commissioners take over the disbanded municipal government (Dickie 2010, 331).
23. The national media has not addressed this phenomenon, nor has it been recognised in scholarship on the 'ndrangheta.
24. Africesi have attempted to investigate and bring attention to the problem.

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Italian summary

L'idea della Calabria come luogo dell'"illegittimità" dipende in gran parte, in Italia come altrove, dall'associazione tra la regione e la 'ndrangheta. Utilizzando interviste originali e metodologie proprie della storia orale, l'articolo esplora il modo in cui l'idea di illegittimità influenza l'autopercezione dei calabresi stessi. Ne emerge una gamma di pregiudizi la cui natura ed i cui effetti corrispondono a una mappa tanto geografica quanto metaforica. Tale mappa posiziona l'Italia rispetto all'Europa, il Sud all'interno dell'Italia, e la Calabria all'interno del Sud, ma anche specifiche comunità all'interno della Calabria. All'estremo di tale spettro troviamo comunità situate nella Locride (nella provincia di Reggio Calabria), quali Locri, San Luca, Africo e Platì. L'articolo attinge alla teoria del riconoscimento di Charles Taylor per analizzare come il riconoscimento, o 'misconoscimento', degli abitanti di queste comunità, anche da parte di altri calabresi, provochi diversi gradi e forme di vergogna. Prende inoltre in considerazione come gli intervistati sembrino negare la loro prossimità sociale e culturale alla 'ndrangheta ed il ruolo che questa negazione svolge in un ciclo che alimenta l'autoriproduzione degli stereotipi, la crescita della 'ndrangheta, ed il perpetuarsi di condizioni socioeconomiche estreme.

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