Giuseppina Terranova and Other Gruesome Stories: Cases of Female Italian-American murderers in the press from the 1890s to the 1910s

by Marina Cacioppo*

On June 28 1906, a hot summer day in New York City, at the Villa Pensa *caffe concerto* on Grand Street, the usual Italian melodrama is being performed[1]. At the climactic moment, the protagonist, a 16-year-old Italian girl, draws a revolver and shoots her uncle and abuser and his wife, accomplice of his crime. When the pistol does not kill them, she finishes them with a knife. Except this time the story is real. The girl's name is Giuseppina Terranova, originally from Sicily, and her trial has just ended on June 2 with an acquittal on the grounds of temporary insanity. Her story filled the pages of both mainstream newspapers, such as the «New York Times», and the so-called yellow press as well as Italian-American dailies, such as «Il Telegrafo» and «L'Araldo Italiano», bringing the life of an obscure Italian woman to the attention of the wider public.

As I have noted elsewhere[2], the early years of Italian immigration to the United States, women were almost invisible. Emigration was a predominantly male experience; women had a subordinate and ancillary position, typically following their families later to fulfil domestic roles. It was taken for granted that they were silent and passive, moving in the background, confined as they were to the private sphere and constrained by Old World codes of behavior and often victims of abuse.

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[1] *Echi della cronaca. Giuseppina Terranova a villa Pensa*, in "Il Telegrafo", 29 June 1906, p. 5.

[2] Marina Cacioppo, *"Curious victories": the famous murder case of Maria Barbella and Italian-American women in the press between the 1890s and 1919s*, in "Italian Americana", XVIII (2019), 2, forthcoming.

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In contrast, American women – the "New Woman", "Gibson girls", reform movement women, suffragists, reporters, cycling women – were often the focus of the growing popular press, or yellow press, which was interested in their ideas about politics and alcohol consumption, what they wore, which sport they should practice, what they should wear while cycling, what they liked to read, and it catered to their needs when choosing the stories to publish. In short, women were a new audience for the new press.

Around the turn of the century, the lives and stories of some Italian immigrant women came to the public's attention when they became protagonists in sensational murder cases splashed across the pages of both Italian and mainstream papers (which otherwise virtually ignored them). The stories of these abused women, who rebelled and killed their abusers and oppressors and were subsequently acquitted or pardoned (or had their sentences commuted), show a fascinating picture of these women who begin to emerge as individuals with a certain degree of agency and, in a curious way, change the course of their lives.

In my research on the Italian-American press, I was surprised to find seven cases similar to Terranova's[3] between 1887 and 1911:

[3] Josephine Terranova, from Santo Stefano di Quisquina, Sicily, was 16 when, on 22 February 1906, she killed her aunt and uncle with whom she lived. She had been sexually abused by her uncle from the age of 12 with the complicity of her aunt, who limited her contact with the external world and made her work long hours in her boarding house. When she was 16 a Brooklyn contractor, Joseph Terranova, who had noticed her at the Riggio's house, asked to marry her. The couple married on 28 January 1906. Two weeks after their marriage, the couple paid a visit to the Riggio's house and her uncle alluded to his relations with his niece. When they got home to Brooklyn, the girl, questioned by her husband, told him her story of abuse, only in that moment fully realizing how badly she had been wronged by her aunt and uncle. Cast off and deserted by her husband, alone for ten days, she barely ate or slept and later reported to that she was hearing a voice, which she believed to be the voice of God, which commanded her to kill her uncle. On 22 February she purchased a revolver and a potato knife and went to Riggio's Williamsbridge bakery with the intention of killing him. When she arrived, she confronted her uncle, calling him a traitor, and stabbed him three times. When her aunt tried to stop her, she stabbed her twice. One of Riggio's drivers, who was alerted by the voices, intervened and stopped her before she could use the revolver. The girl dropped her weapons and left. She wandered for 36 hours until she was arrested without resisting when she reached her mother's house. Her trial started on 15 May 1906, and her lawyer pursued a defense of temporary insanity caused by the extreme brutality, abuse and isolation she had suffered. The trial ended on 2 June with her acquittal for the murder of her aunt and the dismissal of the charges for her uncle's killing. For a detailed account of the trial and its importance for debates on the role of psychiatric expertise in judicial proceedings, see Jacob M.

Chiara Cignarale[4] (1886-88), Pasqualina Robertiello[5] (1891), Maria Barbella[6] (1895-96), Anna Valentini[7] (1904-06), Antonietta Tolla[8]

Appel, *The girl wife and the alienists: the forgotten murder trial of Josephine Terranova*, in "Western New England Law Review", XXVI (2004), 2, pp. 203-232 (http://digitalcommons.law.wne.edu/lawreview/vol26/iss2/1; consulted on 12 September 2019).

[4] Cignarale, accused of killing her abusive husband with the help of her lover, was arrested on 20 October 1886 and later sentenced to death. Many petitions were signed in the Italian community, prominent people (including the actress Pearl Eytinge) advocated on her behalf, and ultimately the Governor commuted her sentence to life in prison. In 1900, she was pardoned by Governor Roosevelt.

[5] On 2 March 1891, Robertiello shot Nicolò Pierro, who "had ruined her under promise of marriage" (*Her life at stake*, in "New York Herald", 19 May 1891, p. 3) and was about to to go back to Italy leaving her alone and pregnant. The case was characterized by massive popular sympathy and, in the end, she was acquitted on the legal ground of temporary insanity, but "the real ground was sympathy" (*Acquittal of the Italian girl*, in "New York Herald", 28 May 1891, p. 6).

[6] In New York City on 26 April 1895, Barbella, also known as Maria Barberi in the press, slit her boyfriend's throat in public after he had dated her, raped her, promised to marry her and then strung her along, ultimately refusing to marry her and saying he was returning to Italy. She was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. Her trial was filled with injustices, and her case had been taken up from the start by the Italian-American press, but after her conviction, other groups, including suffragists, philanthropists, social reformers and death penalty opponents, joined the campaign. The verdict was overturned and a new trial granted where she was acquitted on the grounds of having acted during an epileptic episode after her lawyers, rather ironically, employed a strategy based on hereditary degeneracy – similar to the Lombrosian arguments used by the prosecution to convict her at her first trial. Barbella's is the most famous of these cases and has been discussed in various contexts: see, for example, Cacioppo, *"Curious victories"*, cit.; Thomas J. Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: the art of ethnicity in America*, New York, New York University Press, 2005; Idanna Pucci, *The trials of Maria Barbella: the true story of a 19th century crime of passion*, New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1996.

[7] In March 1904, Anna Valentina killed Rosa Salza, who had taunted her about having been cast off by Michael Carlucci with whom she had lived as her common law husband for 15 years. Allegedly, Mrs Salza had replaced Anna in the affections of Carlucci. Valentina was sentenced to death twice, and then her sentence was commuted to life in prison on 17 May 1906. Her case is different from that of the other women since she killed a woman out of jealousy, but it is mentioned here since she is often mentioned in articles together with Antoinette Tolla and Josephine Terranova.

[8] Tolla, from Hackensack, NJ, was sentenced to death on 27 April 1905 for the murder of her husband's *padrone* who had made aggressive sexual advances and threatened to rape her at gunpoint. Her first trial was marred by incompetent translation and inadequate representation, and Governor Stokes received a petition with 230,000 signatures (*Mrs. Tolla reprieved: petitioners by the thousand plead for her*,

(1905-06), Augusta Crisanti[9] (1911) and Angelina Napolitano[10] (1911). These cases, which I first located in Italian-American newspapers such as «L'Eco d'Italia», «Cristoforo Colombo», «Il Progresso Italo-Americano», «L'Araldo Italiano» and «Il Telegrafo» were also given space in the mainstream press. Their emergence coincided with the rise of yellow journalism, with Hearst and Pulitzer competing for bigger audiences by producing more and more sensational news and cultivating a new female audience, even hiring women to write pieces that would specifically appeal to it[11]. These stories captured the public's attention because they epitomized the clash of immigrant and mainstream cultures, but they also interested feminists who saw in these desperate, ignorant women the embodiment of social oppression, as well as racists and nativists who saw in them the incarnation of a menacing genetic degeneracy. These cases created a battleground in which ideas, beliefs, and stereotypes of the time came together, generating new alliances as well as discursive formations.

in "New York Times", 10 January 1906, p. 4) organized by the Susan B. Anthony Club of Cincinnati. Her case was then taken up by a female lawyer, Mary Grace Quackenbos, who found new evidence in her favor, including the victim's gun that had not been produced at trial. Tolla's sentence was commuted to seven-and-a-half years, of which she had already served more than two (*Mrs Tolla escapes hanging*, in "New York Times", 10 March 1906, p. 6).

[9] On 18 August 1909, Crisanti killed her abusive, jealous husband by thrusting a large shoemaker's knife into his heart when he threatened to kill her. The famous lawyer Samuel Untermeyer was appointed by the Court to defend her and she was acquitted for self-defense on 2 December 1909.

[10] Napolitano, an immigrant to Canada, was sentenced to death in 1911 for killing her abusive husband, Pietro, in his sleep after he had repeatedly tried to force her into prostitution. Six months earlier, he had attacked her with a knife in the face, neck, shoulder, chest and arms (*Sentence commuted*, in "Boston Globe", 15 July 1911, p. 1). The trial lasted only three hours with a public defender appointed only a day before and who presented no witnesses. Her defense that the abuse had forced the desperate, pregnant Angelina to kill him was ruled inadmissible and she was sentenced to death. The case ignited a public debate about domestic violence and the death penalty, and a campaign was launched to have her sentence commuted. A deluge of letters and petitions arrived in the office of the Federal Minister of Justice, organized by individuals and groups from Canada, the US, and even Europe (*The case of Angelina Napolitano*, in "The Globe", 19 May 1911, p. 5). Her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and she was paroled in 1922.

[11] Paulette D. Kilmer, *Why women dared to make journalism their calling*, in D. B. Sachsman (ed.), *After the war: the press in a changing America, 1865-1900*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp 313-328.

The 1870s had seen big changes in journalism as newspapers became more independent from political funding and started to rely more on advertising revenue, making capturing larger audiences central to their survival and success. With the help of technological improvements that made printing faster and cheaper, the circulation of American newspapers increased by over 500% between 1870 and 1900, going from 7 to 39 million. By the end of the 1890s, with the rise of yellow journalism, sensational stories were increasingly prevalent, especially in big cities like New York. The need to increase circulation led newspapers such as the «New York World» and «New York Journal» to engage in an intense competition over sensational stories like the ones of these Italian women, featuring new immigration, sickness from abroad, violent crime, sexual abuse, lurid domestic situations, corrupt politicians, labor exploitation and even ghost stories.

This new style of journalism was characterized by an emphasis on narrative over facts, moving away from short "episodic coverage» to more "thematic extended and interpretive stories»[12]. The more complex human interest story, with second and third day continuing coverage and new techniques such as interview stories, was better suited to capturing and holding the attention of a wider popular audience. At the same time, this increase in the complexity of coverage and more interpretive stance allowed journalists and editors to become "interpreters" of major issues relating to social changes for its ever-growing public. For example, according to Timothy L. Moran «newspapers appointed themselves to explain what immigration meant and how its effects should be interpreted»[13]. Moreover, these stories also provided extended entertainment – presented in installments, they effectively competed with *feuilletons*.

Stories featuring new immigrants were frequent features in the mainstream American press in the period under consideration, conveying a representation of the phenomenon of immigration as a threatening force that needed to be controlled and of America as a «dumping ground» for the criminals and paupers of Europe[14]. In particular, Italians were often

[12] Timothy L. Moran, *Changes in the news: characterizing immigration 1850-1890*, in Sachsman (ed.), *After the war*, cit., p. 215.

[13] Ivi, p. 216.

[14] See, for example, *Woes of the immigrants*, in "New York World", 25 July 1888, p. 3.

represented in the context of crime, characterized as dangerous and hot-blooded, often brandishing knives or «razors» against one another, with these depictions creating a sort of narrative formula, or «journalistic shorthand», in which readers were supposed to fill in the expected details[15].

To counter these negative stereotypes, Italian-language newspapers, which also relied on the same sensational stories to expand their readership, put forward counternarratives and performed a relentless work of self-representation, providing the same stories from a point of view from inside the Italian community, an internal cultural perspective, thus playing a vital role as a site of dialogue with mainstream representations as they sought to construct counter-discourses of identity to combat the sinister racialized representations of the mainstream press. The press thus functioned «as a crucial point of intersection between discourses of racialization and identity construction»[16].

An example of this dialectic between American and Italian papers around the issue of immigration and crime can be found in two somewhat peripheral articles, published in 1906 around the time of the Tolla, Valentini and Terranova trials, which allude to these cases but do not directly refer to them, and in which they define and characterize the context of these cases from vastly different perspectives. The first one, from the «Brooklyn Daily Eagle», decries the rise of the insanity rate by more than 25% since 1892, with its high social cost, and attributes it to the rise of immigration: «The great volume of our alien immigration coming as much of it does, from European and Asiatic centers where social demoralization is prevalent and where physical and mental types fall below average, is responsible for a large proportion of the indigent insane»[17]. The article relies on and upholds a widespread turn-of-the-century belief that immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia were inferior «mental types», genetically prone to crime and insanity, which referred to the Lombroso school's theories of positivist criminology, contending that «race served as an essential element to the etiology of deviancy» and that «the dangerousness of an individual was evaluated through his/her evolutionary development»[18].

[15] Moran, *Changes in the news*, cit., p. 214.

[16] Marina Cacioppo, *Early representations of organized crime and issues of identity in the Italian American press (1890-1910)*, in "Italian American Review", VI (2016), 1, pp. 55-56.

[17] *Increase of insanity*, in "Brooklyn Daily Eagle", 26, February 1906, p. 4.

[18] Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the nation in liberal Italy, 1861-1911: meridionalism, empire, and diaspora*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 48.

The second article, an editorial published in the «Araldo Italiano» immediately after the end of the Tolla trial, puts forward an entirely different narrative in which Italians are victims of prejudice in the American criminal justice system, often without the linguistic and economic resources to ensure a proper defense, and too often at risk of receiving the death penalty, which had just been abolished in Italy[19]. In the case of Antonietta Tolla, the article continues, if it had not been for the legal assistance kindly provided pro bono by Grace Quackenbos, the fact that the victim had a loaded gun in his pocket at the time of the murder would not have been brought to the attention of the judge and jurors, and Antonietta would likely have been unjustly sentenced to death. In other words, the first article presents the problem in terms of the "nature" of these new immigrants, who are portrayed as being too different genetically and culturally and who become a burden and a danger for society, whereas the second argues that the problem is rooted in inequality and prejudice against Italians, together with a primitive justice system that still permits the barbarism of the death penalty.

From house-hold drudge to the most sought-after celebrity in New York City

In this panorama, in which the newly-born yellow press was always hungry for sensational news and women were emerging as both consumers and producers of news, the stories of these Italian "women who kill" had all the ingredients for success and were therefore deliberately constructed as extended narratives, in part to appeal to a female readership which would invest in the development of a story over time, and given a prominent position in the papers, bringing the stories of these obscure women – and, indeed, the women themselves – to a sudden enormous popularity.

These stories of helpless victims-turned-avengers certainly spurred the interest and support of thousands of female followers as they presented "honor killings" in which the traditional (Victorian) power dynamics between genders were overturned. Normally, the "honor defense" was aimed at empowering men at the expense of women, but in these trials, the ones to be empowered were the women who, through murder, had set themselves free from their oppressors – faithless

[19] *Valentini, Tolla e Marmo un terribile problema*, in "Araldo Italiano", 1 April 1906, p. 2.

boyfriends, harassing *padrones*, abusive husbands and incestuous uncles – and got away with it[20]. A clear sign that these newspapers were trying to gratify female readers is that all of them gave space to descriptions of the women in the audience, how many there were, how they looked, what they wore, what emotions they expressed[21], thus giving the female readership characters to identify with (FIG. 1).

FIGURE 1
"New York World", 22 May 1906, p. 20

Moreover, these articles were crafted to fit perfectly into the style of the trial report, which was a regular feature in the popular press and had become a genre in its own right, with its own specific conventions[22]. They had an episodic structure in which the trial played out as a serial drama, focusing on the defendant from the crime to the verdict and beyond, in an extended narrative; they covered pre-

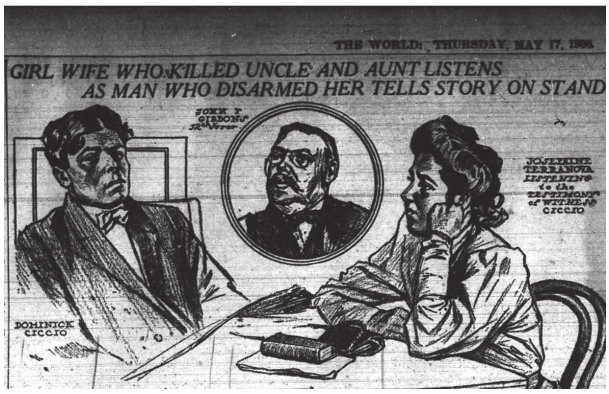
[20] Appel, *The girl wife and the alienists*, cit., p. 227.

[21] For example, a woman, probably the journalist Margaret Hubbard Ayer, was widely reported to have fainted, falling off her chair during Josephine Terranova's testimony on 22 May, by the "New York World" (23 May), the "New York Sun" (22 May) and the "Evening World" (22 May).

[22] See Daniel M. Vyleta, *Crime, Jews and news*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2012.

trial events, such as experiences during pre-trial detention, Grand Jury proceedings, the Coroner's Court, the trial itself, and then the aftermath of the trial. The articles include a fixed set of characters, including the judge, the jurors, the witnesses (FIG. 2), the experts, the interpreter and the audience. In addition, this reporting was often complemented by more extended pieces and editorials, both at the beginning and end of the trial, in-depth coverage in the Sunday magazine sections – and all of this reporting was accompanied by drawings that often took up half a page. But perhaps the most interesting aspect was the detailed and evolving characterization of these immigrant women that occupied center stage in the media spectacles that were their trials.

FIGURE 2
"New York World", 17 May 1906, p. 18



The coverage of the trial of Josephine Terranova, as she was known in the media, is an example which shows how prevailing ideologies on immigrants, women and crime were made explicit in these characterizations. In an article in the «New York World»[23] reporting on the first day of her trial, Terranova is described down to the most minute detail. «At first she appeared pretty and pathetic», «she has a luxuriant mass of wavy dark brown hair»,

[23] *Trial for life a dull drama to girl slayer*, in "New York World", 15 May 1906, p. 18.

«great clear hazel eyes» and, when she is addressed, «color mantles her cheeks of vivid pink», the article notes; but, soon, details that are not quite right start to emerge, making it increasingly clear that there is something not quite right about the genetic make-up hidden beneath her pretty overall appearance. Her figure is «graceful», but «a trifle too heavy to be beautiful»; her nose is straight, but «a trifle long»; «her forehead is broad but not high» (which would be a sign of intelligence); «her chin is small but outjutting» and «her pale, dark skin is exquisitely clear». This final oxymoron represents the point at which elements signifying degeneracy start emerging and a racialized representation is superimposed onto the description of this «very pretty» girl. After all, she is not just a regular pretty girl, she is one who kills.

As the article goes on, the underlying ideology reveals itself fully as it begins to offer an interpretation of her features as signs of criminality and degeneracy, directly invoking Lombroso:

> The strong element in the girl's face is the prominence of the cheek bones. These stand up and jut outward in a marked degree. Lombroso and his school of criminologists associate this appearance with the ability to do acts of great violence. Indians have such cheek bones. If Lombroso's theory is correct, it is easy to see how this apathetic and gentle girl, fired by new gained knowledge of her wrongs, needed no help, but went out alone upon her errand of vengeance. The strength of the jaw and prominence of the cheek bones throw a strong light on the words the girl has so often uttered: «My aunt rushed between us. I killed her. I would have killed anyone who came between us»[24].

Her features had to be matched to the images of "La Donna Delinquente"[25], and they are the proof of her insanity and degeneracy[26]. By comparing Terranova to an Indian woman (invoking the idea of an uncivilized "savage"), her cheekbones mark her *racial* difference and, at the same time, the *biological* difference that made her a criminal, effectively summing the othering effect of these two discourses[27]. The evening edition of the «New York World» of the previous day offers a complementary concept rooted in eugenics, that of hereditary

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Turin, Roux, 1893.

[26] See Margaret Hubbard Ayer, *Josephine Terranova is mere child in character*, in "New York Evening World", 22 May 1906, p. 3.

[27] See Vyleta, *Crime, Jews and news*, cit., pp. 1-13.

degeneracy, while outlining her lawyer, ex-judge Palmeri's line of defense: temporary insanity[28].

Other articles and editorials pointed out and underlined cultural differences, though it was clearly more from a perspective of cultural inferiority than simple difference. Through Terranova's story, the audience was able to catch a glimpse of the miserable, «pitiful little»[29] lives of these foreign immigrants up close and in detail, with live testimony to give it a voice and a persona. The public's interest in the lives of "The Other Half," the poor and wretched of the inner city, had been piqued by the work of Jacob Riis and others, and these papers catered to this morbid curiosity about people assumed to be so different from themselves.

The distance between Terranova and mainstream American culture and values is clearly signaled when her crime is characterized as «a tale of a Sicilian code of honor applied in New York on Washington's Birthday by this ignorant impulsive young woman»[30]. Here, the direct opposition between Sicily and New York is emphasized even further by alluding to the nation's first President, as if she has besmirched the honor of America itself through her uncivilized behavior. Another important detail that is highlighted is the fact that Terranova felt no remorse for her actions because, in her mind, «She cleared her name by the code of Sicily», and not only in her mind but also in the opinion of her fellow Italians, as it is noted that «On the stairway a curious crowd of Italians were gathered. They saw what she had done and knew that a Sicilian had taken what was hers and not a hand was raised to stay her flight»[31]. This is summed up as a cultural generalization: «By that unwritten law of her people she had purged herself of sin. The blood of her betrayers had washed her soul white. She thinks, her mother thinks so, her husband thinks so. Perhaps that was why she smiled so placidly as a bailiff led her to the chair»[32].

Furthermore, this following of the «unwritten law» of her culture is presented as an absolute incapacity to comprehend American law

[28] *Alienists study Terranova girl in court room*, in "New York Evening World", 14 May 1906, p. 1.

[29] *Should the death penalty be given this girl?*, in "The Washington Times Magazine", 27 May 1906, p. 7.

[30] *Terranova girl smiles when held by Coroner*, in "New York World", 7 March 1906, p. 1.

[31] Ivi, p. 2.

[32] *Ibidem*.

and thus, by implication, an indication that she, and Italian immigrants more generally, were incapable of ever assimilating: «That anyone could fail to see that she was justified to do what she did she cannot realize. She does not now and probably never will attain any comprehension of our criminal code. Her mother and her husband forgave her not for the murder, for that they counted to her for virtue, but for the injury done her by those whom she had slain»[33].

These sensational representations epitomized the clash between immigrant culture and mainstream culture and widely circulated racialized representations of Italian immigrants, thus gratifying the nativists and confirming all the expectations, prejudices and anxieties of the wider audience regarding immigration and its effects on American values and society. By contrast, the Italian newspapers had a more factual and educational approach to reporting Terranova's trial and these cases in general. The various phases of the trial were clearly identified and illustrated for the Italian audience who might not be familiar with American legal procedures and, more than on the defendant, the focus was on the testimony and debate which unfolded in court; the direct examinations and cross examinations of the witnesses are reported in the form of a dialogue, in a way that was similar to a play, with the occasional stage direction which quickly described the defendant's attitude and emotions[34]. The more melodramatic aspects, instead, were relegated to actual plays which were based on these cases and whose performances were used as fundraisers to support the defendants. Of these cases, at least four inspired plays: *Maria Barberi* by Eduardo Pecoraro (n.d.)[35], *Marie Barberi, a Soul on Fire* by Moses Horowitz (1896), in Yiddish, *Chiara, La Condannata* by Rocco Metelli (1887), and *Giuseppina Terranova, ovvero l'Onore Vendicato* (1906) by Riccardo Cordiferro. The «Eco d'Italia»[36] mentions a play inspired by Pasqualina Robertiello's story but does not mention the title or author.

[33] *Should the death penalty*, cit., p. 7.

[34] For Terranova's case, see, for example, *Processo Terranova*, in "Il Telegrafo", 16-17 May 1906, p. 1, and *Processo Terranova*, in "Il Telegrafo", 17-18 May 1906, p. 1. The former article explains: «L'udienza d'oggi: dopo la scelta del 12° giurato, la giuria presterà il rituale giuramento e il sostituto procuratore Ely leggerà l'accusa. Terminata questa si passerà all'esame testimoniale» [Today's hearing: after the 12th juror is selected, the jury will perform the ritual oath and Deputy Public Prosecutor Ely will read the accusation. Once this is over, we will move on to witness testimony].

[35] See Hutchins Hapgood, *The foreign stage in New York: III the Italian theatre*, in "The Bookman; a Review of Books and Life", XI (August 1900), 6, pp. 545-553.

[36] *Nuovo Circolo filodrammatico d'Aiuto*, in "Eco d'Italia", 10 March 1891, p. 2.

All in all, Italian-language newspapers were critical of the sensationalization of these cases and at times sought to expose the underlying assumption of the superiority of American culture and civilization present in this coverage, pointing out exaggerated descriptions or outright fabrications and accusing the yellow press of exploiting and inflating these stories, for example, when the «New York Herald» falsely announced Robertiello's marriage[37] the day after the end of the trial, obviously trying to milk it as much as possible.

At first, press accounts of these women were strictly negative, characterizing them as abnormal and unbalanced in their affect. They were represented as being at one of two emotional extremes: either hysterical, unable to contain their emotions – playing on the stereotype of Italian fieriness (e.g., Cignarale and Robertiello) – or completely emotionless, which manifested as their being either unconcerned, stupid and «not understanding what was going on» or as cold and contented (e.g., Barbella, Tolla and Terranova). For example, Robertiello is infantilized, often referred to as a «girl», «poor child», «childish», even though she was in her mid-twenties, and she is described as crying inconsolably, disturbing the proceedings and incapable of following the procedures both because she was hysterical and due to her lack of understanding of English[38]. On the other side of the spectrum, Barbella was characterized according to another Italian stereotype as «dull and apathetic»[39]. According to the «New York Times», «in her demeanor, she is the personification of vengeance satisfied»[40], and to a reporter from the «New York World» she looks «satisfied with her work" and does not understand what the fuss is about[41]. Tolla appeared «unconcerned […] throughout the trial»[42], and Terranova is defined as «composed» as she «listened intently […] politely» and «altogether unmoved» by «the description of her bloody deeds», «frigid as she gazed steadily at her deadly weapon»[43]; she is even happy to hear of the death of her aunt, to the dismay of the mission workers who were there to support her during the trial: «As

[37] *Pasqualina Robertiello*, in "Cristoforo Colombo", 30 May 1891, p. 2.

[38] *Sometimes she cried*, in "New York World", 21 May 1891, p. 1 and *Pasqualina in tears*, in "New York World", 22 May 1891, p. 6.

[39] *Barberi trial begins*, in "New York World", 17 November 1896, p. 14.

[40] *Maudlin sentiment in parallel*, in "New York Times", 28 April 1895, p. 16.

[41] *He invited his death*, in "New York World", 27 April 1895, p. 11.

[42] *Woman is found guilty of murder*, in "New York World", 27 April 1905, p. 2.

[43] *Yawns as story of her murders is told in court*, in "New York World", 17 May 1906, p. 18.

Dr. Dolan of Fordham Hospital where the couple died told of Mrs. Riggio's wound the girl smiled showing her white teeth. One of the mission workers was shocked and whispered to her. "What do I care", muttered the girl, "I'm glad she's dead". The mission worker gave her a little tract which she glanced over and threw upon the lawyers table»[44].

As the accounts of the trial progressed and the cases gained increasing popular sympathy and support from the general public, including donations in support of the women's legal defense, as well as from reform movements, representations which sought to prove the otherness of these foreign, criminal women started to fade, and more human portraits emerged. For Terranova, this turning point came when she testified about her suffering at the hands of her uncle. The coverage highlighted her sense of embarrassment and shame, noting how her «cheeks tinged with flush»[45], which lent her a sense of innocence and, according to one account, created «something very human and intensely appealing about her»[46].

Moreover, following such important moments during their trails, and in the wake of the massive public support that these cases had received from the more progressive parts of society[47], including well-known feminists[48], the press narratives opportunistically shifted from constructing these women in terms of innate primitivism, the signs of which were inscribed on their bodies (FIG. 3) as innate and immutable characteristics, to emphasizing transformation, improvement, change. Barbella, for example, after more than a year of incarceration while awaiting her second trail, appears to be a person entirely different «from the dull trembling peasant girl» of the first trial[49]. According to the «New York World» reporter Dorothy Dare, Maria «has developed into an intelligent young woman. She speaks, reads and writes English»[50]. In a sort of before and after comparison that even includes visual depictions of her transformation, Maria is represented as having been

[44] *Terranova girl smiles*, cit., p. 2.

[45] *Voice said "kill him"*, in "Washington Post", 23 May 1906, p. 3.

[46] *Josephine Terranova tells her life story*, in "Brooklyn Daily Eagle", 22 May 1906, p. 1.

[47] All the cases gained the support of various feminists and philanthropic groups, as it emerges from the newspapers accounts, but Barbella's case in particular was picked up by the feminist philanthropist Countess Cora Slocomb di Brazzà, who secured first-rate legal representation.

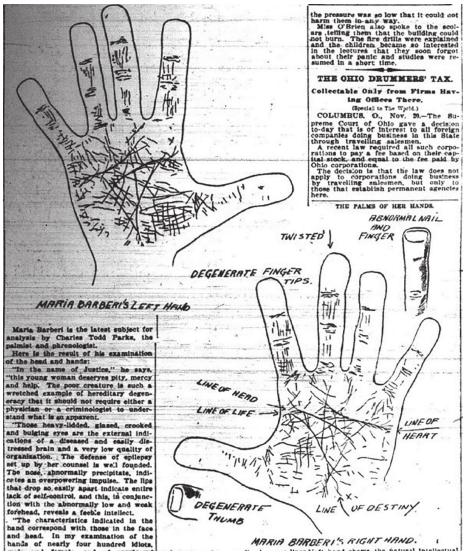
[48] *It would be murder*, in "The Recorder", 19 July 1895, p. 6.

[49] *Barberi trial begins*, cit., p. 14.

[50] *Ibidem*.

completely made over, both physically and intellectually. Her initial «barbarism» has given way to a civilized attitude, and the end result of «higher mental development» is described as being a product of her contact with «kindly influences» and education «by gentle women»[51]. Tapping into the American ethic of self-transformation, these stories crafted a more reassuring story of immigration in which even the most alien, pathological, and deviant immigrant can be changed, educated, and assimilated if they are exposed to American institutions of reform and education.

FIGURE 3
"New York World", 21 November 1896



After Terranova's acquittal, her future as a free person became a subject of interest for the public. Rumors spread that she would get back together with her husband with the blessing of a priest, or that, as her lawyer had reportedly declared, she would retire to a convent or go live with the Sisters of Charity (short of becoming a nun, which she could not for obvious reasons) where she would «lead a new

[51] *Ibidem*. See Cacioppo, *"Curious Victories"*, cit.

life» of «seclusion and chastity» and receive a religious education[52]. Other rumors had it that a «mysterious good angel» would provide temporary shelter for her where she would «be taught sewing and dress-making» so that she could «become self-supporting»[53]. On the day of her release, she was «almost mobbed in the corridor», and she was whisked away through the back elevator, eluding the crowd that was waiting for her in the street like they would a real star. She had certainly gone a long way from «house-hold drudge»[54] to «New York's most sought after celebrity»[55].

FIGURE 4
"New York World", 10 June, 1906
Josephine examined by the lunacy commission

In effect, by the end of their trials, many of these women had become full-blown celebrities. And along the way, they had learned a lot about how to use the public's fascination and support to further their own interests in a sort of symbiotic relationship with the press. They must

[52] *Josephine Terranova free*, in "New York Sun", 13 June 1906, p. 14.
[53] *New life for Terranova girl*, in "New York Tribune", 12 June 1906, p. 10.
[54] *Terranova girl, facing her accusers, shows no fear*, in "New York Evening World", 16 May 1906, p. 2.
[55] Appel, *The girl wife and the alienists*, cit., p. 230.

have understood the power of the media to stir public opinion and, in the same way that the press exploited their sensational cases to increase earnings and influence, they too may very well have consciously used the press to cultivate a sympathetic relationship with the public. Thrown into the public sphere by forces beyond their control, they embraced their status as celebrities, not doing too bad a job of carefully styling every gesture and deliberately choosing each word, both during the trial and when they gave interviews or posed for photographs. For example, Terranova, while being examined by a group of experts appointed by the prosecution to decide if she was sane enough to stand trial, was photographed by a newspaper, and while from her testimony it is clear that she did not want to be examined, in the photographs she is smiling and composed despite the indignity she is experiencing (FIG. 4).

A fortuitous convergence of different cultural forces, effectively, got them out of their predicaments. The appeal to the code of honor, the Victorian «unwritten law» which also corresponded to the Sicilian code and which provided a justification for their crime, progressive notions of scientific expertise in criminology which were the basis for their temporary insanity defense, and the emergence of social reform and feminism provided material help and highlighted their victimhood, emphasizing their capacity for transformation and reform, thereby helping them gain public sympathy and support. But the question at this point is whether they were only passive subjects being moved by these forces or whether they somehow took advantage of the lucky cultural and judicial circumstances that they encountered to emerge as individuals who were able to make choices. Of course, we can only speculate. Certainly, as we can see in the Barbella and Terranova cases, the experience of the trial was an empowering one. By the end of their trials, they had acquired familiarity with court procedures and were actively participating in their own defense. In spite of her young age, as the trial progressed Terranova became «more animated»[56]. She is consulted by her lawyer when defining the criteria to choose the jurors – they had to be fathers with daughters – and is assertive, vocally expressing her disagreement with being re-examined by a lunacy commission: «I will not submit to any more of this. For seventeen years my life has been a hell on earth. Now that you find that you cannot put me in prison – oh you know the jury will set me free! – you want to

[56] *Girl aids in defense*, in "Washington Post", 18 May 1906, p. 3.

put me in a lunatic asylum. I tell you [...] I am not insane». Her lawyer tells her to hush, but she responds: «No, I will not hush. I have a right to speak and I will speak [...] Mr. Ely I am more sane than you. They ought to have a commission to examine you»[57].

When put on the witness stand, both women were ready; they knew exactly what they had to say to back up the expert alienists' diagnosis of temporary insanity as well as how they needed to say it to present themselves as appealing to the public and to convince the jurors. For Terranova, according to the «New York World», «there could be no doubt that she was elated to have the opportunity to make her own defense» and responded perfectly to the cues of her lawyer in «calmly» presenting a faithful, detailed account of the abuse she had suffered, blushing at the right moment, and especially sticking to the story of having heard the voice of God telling her to do it[58]. Barbella withstood a five-hour cross examination without contradicting herself and managed to convince the jurors that she really had been unconscious when she killed her boyfriend, and even the very skeptical journalist Julian Hawthorne, in the end, came to believe her since it seemed to him that she was an «agent» acting in her own interest and not under the direction of others[59].

Though such stories are extreme, they let us catch glimpses of the reality of the conditions of Italian immigrant women and their encounter with America, its institutions, its values, its ideologies. In effect, their stories are presented as a dramatization of a nascent individuality. Although the legal defenses employed, including hereditary insanity, portrayed these women as inert, passive victims of their backward culture and defective genes, the stories they told – and the performances they gave – suggest that they were able to exercise a certain amount of agency and demonstrate their capacity to negotiate between the southern Italian culture of honor and their emergence as individuals who could make choices and change the course of their lives.

As I have argued elsewhere,

[57] *Jerome stops girl's trial for dual murder*, in "New York World", 26 May 1906, p. 1.

[58] *Degraded and an outcast: the voice said kill*, in "New York World", 23 May 1906, p. 1.

[59] Julian Hawthorne, *Maria Barberi to her twelve judges*, in "New York Journal", 26 November 1896, p. 8.

These women, as transnational subjects, were caught in the interplay of three major cultural forces: the transatlantic relocation of the residual southern Italian culture of honor (which pushed them to enact a vendetta), the dominant American democratic ethos of justice (which characterized the trial), and the emergent feminist and reform movements (which provided the opportunity for transformation). These women were somehow able to negotiate these forces and find a space for individual affirmation, using these tragic circumstances to their advantage[60].

Had their stories remained within the closed cultural space of the Italian community, they likely would have simply become outcasts; but by going through the American justice system which validated them as not being guilty, they managed to emancipate themselves from the patriarchal Old World code and become individuals able to make choices. In the end, Barbella was accepted back by her community, got married and advocated against the death penalty before eventually disappearing from the public record; Terranova managed to have a fresh start, deliberately disappearing from the public eye and reuniting with her husband who took her to San Francisco where she died in 1981 at 91. Not even her children knew anything of her trial.

[60] Cacioppo, *"Curious victories"*, cit.