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# Giunta, Edvige, and Mary Anne Trasciatti, eds. Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Marcella Bencivenni

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Giunta, Edvige, and Mary Anne Trasciatti, eds. *Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*. New York: New Village Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-61332-150-8 (print). \$26.95.

*Talking to the Girls* is not just another book about the infamous Triangle fire of 1911, of which a vast body of literature exists today. It does not recount the events that led to the tragic death of 146 workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women, at a garment factory in New York City – the worst workplace disaster in the history of American industrial capitalism. Nor is the book specifically about “the girls.” Instead, as editors Edvige Giunta and Mary Anne Trasciatti explain in their introduction, this collection is “about the ways Triangle continues to call to us” (1).

Conceiving their project as a conversation “that transcends temporal, national, geographic, ethnic/racial, gender, and class boundaries” (2), Giunta and Trasciatti asked their contributors to write a personal essay about “their own visceral relationship to Triangle,” exploring “the combination of intimate and political that permeates Triangle activism” (17). The authors, several of them academics, were also told to put aside scholarly conventions, including endnotes and bibliography, and “write from the heart,” putting their personal experiences at the very centre of the writing process. The end result is a rich and powerful tribute to the many ways the history of the fire has captured, and continues to capture, the public’s heart and imagination – how Triangle “workers are remembered today, and how their stories have inspired people, and even changed lives” (1).

Organized in five overlapping thematic sections – Witnesses, Families, Teachers, Movements, and Memorials – the volume brings together nineteen contributors: writers, poets, artists, activists, scholars, and descendants of the Triangle workers; each telling their own unique story about the Triangle fire, the reasons of their personal interest in the fire, and how the fire has informed their professional careers and lives. Although all essays tap into the huge literature that has been produced on the fire (discussed by the editors in an appendix), in writing their stories, authors have drawn primarily from family memories and special effects, such as photographs, and from personal experiences, conversations, and interviews with relatives, activists, and friends.

The first two parts include intimate recollections by authors whose family members were directly impacted by the Triangle fire. Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall fondly remembers his grandmother Frances Perkins, the well-known social rights advocate who became Secretary of Labor under Franklin

Delano Roosevelt and whom many credit with being the true force behind the New Deal. His story starts with a memory from his childhood when he discovered in his grandmother's bedroom a cardboard box containing a rope ladder that could have been used in case of a fire emergency. As it often happens within family history, only much later he discovered that Perkins was so cautious about fires because she had been an eyewitness of the Triangle tragedy and had been deeply shaken by it – so much so that the event became the real catalyst for her fight for workers' rights and social change.

In another moving family memoir, Martin Abramowitz courageously seeks to uncover the truth about his father Isodore, a cutter who survived the fire and, according to some sources, might have inadvertently started it. As difficult and uncomfortable as his search must have been, and despite family attempts to suppress the story to protect their good name, Abramowitz candidly shares with the reader his shocking findings, conflicting emotions, and potential conjectures, because as he puts it: "We owe it to the girls and the seventeen men who perished with them" (109).

Other rescued Triangle stories include literary critic Ellen Gruber Garvey's contrasting accounts of her great uncle's father, Abraham Bernstein, who testified on behalf of the Triangle owners, and Sophie Sasslovsky, a forelady at Triangle who was fired after she was spotted talking to union organizers before the fire. A powerful example of cross-generational activism, Sasslovsky's daughter, Frances Goldin, would go on to become a driving force against gentrification in the Lower East Side where Garvey, her family, and so many of the Triangle workers once lived. In "In a Legacy of Grief," psychologist Susanne Pred Bass talks about her two maternal great-aunts, Rosie Weiner who died in the fire, and Katie Wiener, who survived, and how that dramatic loss "forever marked" her family – "a legacy of loss and grief. But knowledge, too" (107). Finally, social worker Annie Schneiderman Valliere remembers her great-aunt Rose Schneiderman, the heroine of the early labour movement, who would be the inspiration of her own activism; while historian Anne Orleck pays a tribute to her grandmother Lena, who worked at Triangle as a girl, and who similarly helped shape her initial understanding of the Triangle fire and her research on the women workers' movements.

While there are no stories by Italian-American descendants of the Triangle workers, performer/writer Annie Lanzilotto and poet Paola Corso contribute two compelling essays drawing connections between their Italian immigrant working-class family experiences and Triangle. Recalling growing up in her native Pittsburgh, Corso writes: "Like the Triangle workers, my father

was an immigrant. He crossed the ocean in steerage and passed through Ellis Island, a guinea pig who flunked his first grade of school because he couldn't speak English, then managed to graduate from high-school and get a job in a steel mill, where he operated a crane, like his father" (83). Both died at a young age of leukemia, the type of cancer that crane operators working above coal-fired furnaces were prone to get. The steel industry, Corso sadly notes, was her family's equivalent of New York City's Triangle.

Lanzillotto similarly explains that she began to "chalk" the names of the Triangle victims after she was evicted from her family's apartment in Brooklyn under a wave of rampant gentrification in 2007. "I am not a factory worker, nor am I an immigrant," she writes. "But I relate to these girls [...]. My life and the life of my family were vulnerable to the landlord class, which I saw as part of the same money-lusting fabric as the Triangle bosses who had locked the workers in the factory" (32). Lanzillotto and Corso are part of an inspiring generation of artists who have devoted a large part of their lives and work memorializing working-class lives and remembering forgotten people's heroes – like Giuseppe Zito, the "Elevator Man" immortalized in Lanzillotto's signature Triangle ballad. He and another Italian, Gaspare Mortillaro, reportedly saved as many as one hundred lives by making dangerous trips back and forth from the top floors of the Triangle building, until the flames burned the cables of the 6-by-9-foot elevator they operated. Even though their heroism made front-page news at the time, they are rarely mentioned in history books.

This sense of suppressed Italian American working-class history also pervades the essay by literary scholar Michele Fazio. Drawing on her family archives, she talks about her efforts to reconstruct her family's labour and radical history, even though excavating the past can be "an emotionally painful process" (217). Her grandmother, Angelina Scelfo, worked as a dress-maker in New York from 1903 to the late 1950s and was active in the garment unions, participating in strikes and union events, as shown in a beautiful photo included in the essay picturing her and her many children at a May Day celebration in 1920. Like other women activists, she met her husband, Vincenzo Fazio, in the union. They married in 1914 and raised five children on factory wages while fighting side-by-side to promote workers' rights. It was from her grandmother at the dinner table that Fazio learned for the first time the story of the Triangle fire; a story that eventually propelled her to uncover and recover her family's radical past – a legacy that, as Fazio notes, should be upheld, not disavowed.

Historian Janette Gayle brings up another glaring omission: the nearly absolute lack of historical records on Black garment workers in the early twentieth century. Unlike the case of Italian Americans, however, she came to the realization that this dearth was due not to invisibility but exclusion. Indeed, in 1910, “a mere 188 Black women worked in the industry” (224). Understanding why they “were not there” sadly means to reckon with slavery’s terrible legacy of racism and the divisive role that race has played in American history.

The remaining essays address more specifically the pedagogical value and inspirational nature of the Triangle story, connecting the fire “that changed America” to other tragedies all over the world that continue to resonate with people. Kimberly Schiller, Laura Ruberto, and Jacqueline Ellis show how they teach Triangle not only to discuss gender, migration, and labour but also to cultivate a sense of community, to foster empathy, and to inspire students to build “a bolder, more generous future” (178). Significantly, the book’s cover image shows eighth-grade students from Schiller’s Middle School in Huntington, Long Island, at the 2019 annual Triangle fire commemoration, proudly holding aloft shirtwaists pinned on wood poles, each bearing the name of a victim.

In the last two sections, May Chen, Janette Gayle, Ellen Wiley Todd, Ester Rizzo Licata, Richard Joon Yoo, and Kalpona Akter move the conversation toward larger political questions of social justice, corporate greed, and global capitalism, reflecting on the power and importance of coming together, of building solidarity, and of remembering. Thanks to their activism, there are now well-established rituals, practices, and official ceremonies to commemorate Triangle. Plaques honouring the Italian victims have appeared in public sites of their native towns in Sicily, Apulia, Campania, and Basilicata, and a permanent memorial will be erected at the Brown Building, the site of the fire, featuring a textured stainless steel ribbon, designed by Uri Wegman and Richard Joon Yoo.

The volume ends with a powerful epilogue, featuring the story of activist Kalpona Akter, a Bangladeshi garment worker and the founder of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, who has become a vocal defender of garment workers and women’s rights. Based on an interview that Giunta and Trasciatti conducted with her in 2019, this oral narrative is a perfect finale to an anthology that seeks above all to underline links among vulnerable workers, then and now, and to nourish change, for, as Akter succinctly puts it:

“In 120 years of this [the garment] industry, only one thing has changed – the place” (285).

Indeed, the Triangle fire remains emblematic of an economic system that continues to put a relentless drive for profit above everything else. But, as the reforms and commemorative efforts that have followed the fire show, Triangle’s enduring power rests also on its reminding us that change against apparently insurmountable odds can, and does, happen. From the initial introduction to the concluding epilogue, *Talking to the Girls* effectively invites readers to listen to the trauma, pain, and loss that permeates the Triangle fire, while calling on our ethical responsibility to keep its legacy alive and to take action.

Highly interdisciplinary and didactic, the book is perfect for both undergraduate and graduate students taking classes in labour, immigration, or gender studies. The emphasis on memoiristic stories makes it also a great read for scholars interested in exploring the power of writing to generate “not just new perspectives but new feelings” (27). And, with so many intriguing stories, provocative thoughts, and inspirational calls to action, general readers and activists too will be deeply moved by Giunta and Trasciatti’s efforts to bring together the interconnections between history, memory, and political activism. Just like the history of Triangle, this moving collection “is the history of people coming together to mourn and fight for social justice” (9).

MARCELLA BENCIVENNI

*Hostos Community College of The City University of New York*