

**Giunta, E. and Trasciatti, M., eds. (2022)**  
***Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political***  
***Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory***  
***Fire*. New Village Press.**

**Review by Janet Zandy**



On the evening of March 3, 1991 freezing rain fell on the city of Rochester, New York. The storm lasted about 17 hours and destroyed more than 10,000 trees. Trees crackled and broke in the night. It was beautiful and horrifying. I escaped the cold and ice and eleven-day power loss by flying to New York City so I could immerse myself in stories of fire—newspaper articles, labor journals, poetry then and now, any writing I could find—about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911. I had a small grant to support my scheduled research at the Tamiment Library, located inside NYU library, on Washington Square, near the current Brown Building and the site of the Triangle fire. As all accounts attest, the building survived, but the fire took the lives of 146 workers, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant girls. I realized then and can confirm even better now—because of the publication of this important collection—that I am not alone in being drawn to this fire and its cultural and political implications. It is braided personal and public history.

*Talking to the Girls* is an insightfully constructed anthology of threaded history, scholarship, memory, family lore, teaching practices, and labor activism. In their Introduction, the editors Edvige Giunta and Mary Anne Trasciatti state their intent: ‘to show how these [Triangle] workers are remembered today, and how their stories have inspired people, and even changed lives.’ The Triangle Fire is a usable past and a record of ‘what if’s.’ What if the Triangle workers had won their strike during the clothing workers Uprising of the 20,000 and gotten the safety conditions they demanded instead of a meager raise in pay? What if the switchboard operator on the eighth floor warned the workers on the ninth floor, and not just the bosses on the tenth floor? What if the fire hoses could reach to the upper floors and not just stop at the sixth floor? What if a door had not been locked? What if the fire escape had not collapsed? What if the bosses had not been acquitted by a jury of their clothing producing business peers? What if, in Rose Schneiderman’s language, ‘the good people of the public’ cared as much for the sewers of their clothing as for the latest style in shirtwaists? These questions and many more have no end point. They are retold in contemporary commemorations, some poignantly ephemeral like chalking the names of dead

workers in front of buildings where they lived in Lower Manhattan and one soon-to-be permanent marker, the Triangle Fire Memorial, stainless steel panels affixed to the corner of the Triangle building with etchings from a collectively stitched ribbon.

This international anthology embraces answerability, call and response, through multiple individual voices orchestrated as a collective chorus. It is organized around key words: Witnesses, Families, Teachers, Movements, and Memorials, including an essay in translation from the Italian and an interview with Bangladeshi labor organizer, Kalpona Akter. Before highlighting a few selections, I want to call particular attention to the smart organizational decisions the editors made. They solved the problem of balancing private voices with scholarly research by eliminating foot and end notes, including instead summary sections where contributors comment on their sources as well as offer brief biographies, more personal than academic, and then from the editors, an excellent survey of the literature of the Triangle Fire and a sturdy bibliography. It works as a useful model for building anthologies appropriate for classrooms and personal reading.

This is a book of wishful rescue and determined remembrance. The selections range in tone and voice—shouts and laments, roars and whispers, reports and elegies. Like an epic prose poem, they carry a refrain: ‘those poor girls, those poor girls.’ Annie Rachele Lanzillotta draws a ‘topography of loss’ linking the twenty-four girls who left their no-future Sicilian towns only to perish in a New York fire to the loss of affordable housing in that gentrified city. In ‘Girl Talk’ Paola Corso movingly evokes triangles—the confluence of three rivers in her native Pittsburgh, the triangle of class, gender and ethnicity of her father’s fellow Calabrian-American steelworkers, to the triangle she sews onto a segment of the 320-foot Collective Ribbon as she poetically links the lives of girls sewing in China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mexico, Bangladesh, sewing to live. A few contributors speak of family relations: the grandson of Frances Perkins, first female labor secretary and member of the Factory Investigating Commission; Ellen Gruber Garvey’s recollection of distant relative Abraham Bernstein, who escaped the fire and testified in Yiddish on behalf of the owners at their trial and ‘made himself unknowing’; Suzanne Pred Bass’s account of her great aunt Rosie who died in the fire, but whose sister Katie survived; Martin Abramowitz’s story of his father Abraham who may or may not have started the fire. Historian Annelise Orleck sees the Triangle as a foundation story linked to global garment workers today as she tells the story of her grandmother Lena who was a child worker at Triangle. Teaching about the fire is personal, too, for Laura Ruberto in California and Kimberly Schiller on Long Island, Jacqueline Ellis in New Jersey, and Michele Fazio in a rural Southern university. Fazio recalls her grandmother’s suppressed memory of witnessing the fire, ‘the fire was bad, very bad,’ and then through interviews and historical records recovers her family’s involvement in the Italian American labor movement. So many stories linked to the fire.

If English is not your first language, then images matter even more. Imagine the families seeing the oval portraits of their children in the newspapers following the event. Illustrations as well as photos told the Triangle story. On March 28, 1911 the *New York Call* published on its front page an illustration of a triangle pyramid of bones and skulls. The triangle became a symbol of greed. In this collective iteration of the Triangle story, the editors and writers include family photos, snapshots of chalked sidewalks and of sewers adding to the ribbon or making kite shirtwaists.

Reminiscent of the competition for the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. won by then Yale architecture student Maya Lin, there was an international competition for a Triangle Fire Memorial in 2013. Uri Wegman and Richard Joon Yoo won the competition for their design: a stainless-steel ribbon attached to the corner of the Triangle Building etched with marks from collaged materials sewed onto the fabric ribbon. The ribbon descends from the 9<sup>th</sup> floor then splits 12 feet above the sidewalk revealing the names and ages of the lost workers as well as quotes from witnesses (see [www.trianglefirememorial.com](http://www.trianglefirememorial.com)). My rough description of the soon-to-be constructed monument is clarified in Richard Joon Yoo's contribution, 'The Fabric of Memory.' His essay is compelling reading because of the intersections he elucidates and also because it opens a larger conversation about the agency of monuments and memorials. 'We were guided by a desire to maximize the emotional experience of remembering the fire by utilizing a minimum of material,' he writes. He and Wegman wanted 'a memorial *for* the public *from* the public.' On March 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, volunteers associated with the Triangle Fire Coalition gathered in the great hall of NYC's Fashion Institute of Technology and, seated around four long tables (like a sweatshop floor?) sewed bits of fabric, personal cloth memories, onto the long canvas that would be cast as a steel ribbon affixed to the corner of the Triangle Building where it intersects Greene Street and Washington Place. When I study the agency of art, I think of hinges opening and closing. Richard Joon Yoo envisions a fulcrum, tilting us to look up and look down, see what's there and what's gone, and inspiring us to 'reframe ourselves.' He sums up the monumental work of the memorial: 'This memorial does not remember people who died going to war; it remembers people who died going to work. It pays respect to immigrants looking to make a better life—the simple American promise that was betrayed.'

I will try to be there on March 25, 2023 for its unveiling.

Out of an ancestry of German/Russian Jews and Southern Italian Catholics, I evoke both strains in remembering Vincenza:

### **Missing Minyan for Vincenza**

Working-class daughter  
sister, friend

I want to know you.

Your name was Vincenza Billota  
you were 16 years  
you worked at Triangle  
Handed your parents your pay  
Needed. Momma gave you a bit for yourself.

I imagine your hair  
thick brown with hints of red  
and waved from braiding and unbraiding.

I imagine your full body

your bosom and skin  
neck and throat

Not falling.

Your *famiglia*, loving but strict  
Your father knowing, yes, this is your body  
because the *calzolaio*, the shoe repairer, left a mark  
on your boot

You lived in Hoboken.

I was born there  
As a Ballotta

### Reviewer Bio

**Janet Zandy** is emerita professor of English and American Studies at Rochester Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, *Unfinished Stories: The Narrative Photography of Hansel Mieth and Marion Palfi*, and other books on working-class culture. Her current work is on artmaking, class, and democracy.