

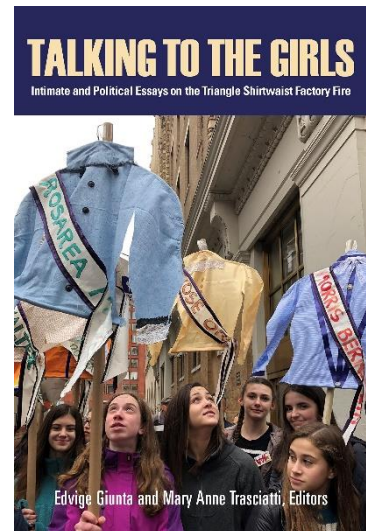
Edvige Giunta and Mary Ann Trasciatti, eds.

# Talking to the Girls

Intimate and Political Essays on the  
Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

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Review by Maddalena Marinari



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**E**dvige Giunta and Mary Ann Trasciatti's *Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* brings together an impressive and wide-ranging group of writers, artists, activists, scholars, and teachers to explore the legacy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The book captures how vividly this episode -- the largest workplace disaster in the history of New York City prior to 9/11 -- is seared in the memory of many of the authors. In 15 minutes, on March 25, 1911, the fire killed 146 people working for the Triangle Waist Company. Most of these workers were immigrant women from Eastern Europe and Italy, some as young as fourteen. Many of them had not been in the United States for very long. All of them experienced "firsthand the failure of an economic system focused on profit at the expense of human life" (4). Rather than exploring the history of the fire per se, the essays in this book "show how these workers are remembered today, and how their stories have inspired people, and even changed lives" (1). In doing so, the volume powerfully demonstrates how singular historical events can influence and affect people for generations to come.

Capturing the legacy of this tragic event across generational, geographic, racial, gender, and class boundaries is at the heart of *Talking to the Girls*. The book builds on recent efforts to recover the memory of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and raise awareness of its continued importance today. Since 2001, activists have mobilized to keep the memory of the fire alive but also to highlight the legal reforms it propelled and the social movements it inspired. In chronicling these efforts to recover and memorialize the Triangle fire, the book also explores the different answers that the tragedy received from the Jewish and Italian communities. While the

former immediately recognized the fire as an integral part of its history (and continues to do so to this day), the latter acknowledged its importance only belatedly (and somewhat reluctantly). At a time of passionate debates about immigration and American identity, these different trajectories provide important lessons into how challenging it is to belong in times of rabid anti-immigrant hysteria.

*Talking to the Girls* is divided into five sections, each exploring a different perspective through which to consider the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: witnesses, families, teachers, movements, and memorials. Cross-generational trauma, activism, cross-cultural alliances, and memorialization are some of the main themes that characterize most of the essays. A spirit of collaboration and shared commitment to grappling with the Triangle fire animates the entire anthology. Many of the authors first met at an annual commemoration of the tragedy, a panel discussion, a performance, a march, a community meeting, or a cultural event. These personal connections make it clear why the book reads like a conversation centered around a shared understanding of the importance of the Triangle fire. *Talking to the Girls* excels in picking common threads, creating shared themes, and bringing together disparate voices. It is a great model for how to work collaboratively.

What makes this book particularly compelling is its commitment to showing how to use historical events to fight for change in the present, understand the connections between the past and the present, and grapple with the implications of global phenomena like migration, capitalism, and identity in multicultural societies. In fact, had some of these connections between then and now been made more explicit, the volume would have been even more powerful because the Triangle fire echoes many of the tragedies that immigrants and immigrant communities have experienced in recent years, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the resurgence of anti-Semitism and anti-Asian xenophobia in the United States, and the denial of basic rights to refugees and asylum seekers along the southern border.

As a historian of migration, I really appreciate the book's ability to show how important it is to keep history alive, to think seriously about how scholars can bring their expertise to bear beyond academia, and to collaborate with a broad range of actors to enact change. As a teacher, I look forward to assigning this book to my students. I find the significant number of photographs sprinkled throughout the essays another great benefit of this book. Along with its structure, these visuals make the anthology eminently teachable, particularly in undergraduate courses focusing on history, memory, memorialization, personal narratives, literature, as well as cultural and American studies, not to mention Italian/Italian American and Jewish studies courses.

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