Salutations and frames
They defy easy categorization. Flamboyant of speech, demur of dress, they emerged as public performers, testifying with their words and bodies to America’s economic class war. For some, they were heroic leaders; for others, dangerous women. Frequently harassed, arrested, and jailed, Mother Jones, Lucy Parsons, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn challenged the hypocrisy and class determinism of female gentility. Within the labor movement they were privately imperfect public saints who never relinquished their commitment to class struggle and liberation. From a historical distance, their lives enable us to see the myriad, often hidden ways by which class is framed.

To situate their lives within a context of class struggle, consider the difference between these two salutations: “Dear Reader”, and “Fellow Workers and Friends”. Each greeting raises salient questions about the position, literally and figuratively, of the author/speaker. Are we indoors or outdoors? Inside, reading a text or stood in a crowd hearing a speech? Are we sympathetic outsiders or comrades in the heat of a struggle? In the safety of our homes or on the street likely to be harassed or jailed? Fixed in one place or continually moving about? These questions stir us to imagine the physicality of performing and participating in labor activism, and also coax us to be self-conscious about how our own class positions frame our interpretive readings of the lives of working-class women organizers, agitators, and orators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

With the more familiar “Dear Reader”, we step back to 1861 and the publication of an extraordinary story, “Life in the Iron Mills”, in The Atlantic Monthly. The author, Rebecca Harding Davis, asks her readers to imagine a cloudy day in a iron-works town and to look through the frame of a window of a decaying cottage to observe,
through the industrial smoke and filthy rain, the pig iron mule trains and “the slow stream of human life creeping past.”¹ Rebecca Harding Davis claims her readers’ attention in a particular way:

Stop a moment …. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me, here, into the thickest of fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story.²

From the perspective of middle-class respectability, Harding Davis portrays the lives and language of individual laborers, and calls for sympathetic awareness.³

The dangerous women considered in this essay did not dismiss sympathetic awareness. But their interests did not lie with the tender feelings of the middle class, sympathetic or not. Rather, they saw their life’s work as developing the nascent and organic consciousness of workers (through newspapers, pamphlets, organizing, speeches, direct action and aid to the needy) as a way of achieving their larger goal – a radical change in the social order that exploits workers. Contemporary interpreters of their lives, turning from the familiar, text-based “Dear Reader” to the open, oratorical, “Fellow Workers and Friends”, were asked to alter their class perspective and adjust their subjectivity. We shift our angle of vision from the human object, imagined, observed, and presented from the outsider’s position (Davis’ perspective), to a view that approximates the perspective of the subject of the gaze. We move from object to subject. We leave behind Rebecca Harding Davis’ framed window, and, in some cases, domestic space entirely, and enter another world: the world of our second salutation and the focus of this essay.

Mother (Mary Harris) Jones, Lucy Parsons, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn understood labor struggle as inseparable from domestic struggle – that is, securing a decent life for working-class women and their children. They themselves, however, rarely had secure domestic lives.

² Ibid., 13.