The clothing industry and its workers have been sites of conflict for historians and activists alike. Debate has flourished in print and visual media in both the Progressive years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in more recent times. Long hours, low wages, seasonal unemployment, child, female and immigrant labor, exploitative middlemen and employers, sexual harassment and lack of care for health and safety have been the main features of attention. Frequently these issues have been collapsed into discussions of the infamous site of the sweatshop, a site that has aroused outrage and moral repulsion despite recent efforts to suggest that sweating had positive attributes.¹ The recent sweatshop debate, like its predecessor in the early twentieth century, rendered visible what otherwise would have been invisible to the vast majority of the American population; so too did the great labor uprisings or the clothing strikes of the years 1910-1913.² But there is and was more to the ready-made clothing

industry than the sweatshop and industrial action. If the invisible women who sewed are to become visible alongside their activist sisters, a broader range of activities and socio-economic environments must be examined alongside the exposés and media coverage.

Indeed women’s presence in the clothing industry needs to be perceived as layered. At the top of any pyramid of visibility were the union leaders such as Pauline Newman, Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich or Teresa Malkiel, who strove to improve working conditions. These notable women left much evidence of their actions and their stories have been told, more recently by women’s and labor historians.\(^3\) Less well known individually, but heralded collectively for the wrong reasons, were the workers of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory who fell to their deaths in the disastrous fire of 1911.\(^4\) Their counterparts laboring in other garment factories and clothing shops of the large cities were discussed both sympathetically and pejoratively by contemporary government inspectors, Progressive reformers, and newspaper reporters, and their images were at times recorded for posterity by documentary photographers whose work continues to be analyzed in academia. Such photographers as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis also portrayed the outworkers toiling in their tenement homes for a pittance. These outworkers’ lives were likewise documented in print through the distorted lenses of white middle-class reformers and commentators who reported their findings to governments and in the press. Certainly a variety of historians have refocused the lives of ordinary, frequently Jewish and Italian clothing workers more positively and have given them much more agency both within their communities and in their workplaces. Yet these anonymous lives need much more attention if their visibility is to be

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