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# We Have Found You Wanting”: The Limits of Coalition Among Women Writing Across Class and Ethnic Boundaries in Response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911

Brenda Glascott\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Portland State University – United States

## Abstract

The fire that consumed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory killed 146 people—mostly women, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants—on March 25, 1911 in New York City. This fire, which has been characterized as “the worst industrial factory fire in the history of American capitalism” (Greider xi), also heightened the impact of women labor advocates’ writing and rhetoric. Even as the fire lent urgency to women rhetoricians’ critique of labor conditions affecting women workers, the fire also revealed the limits of coalition between the middle class Anglo and the working class ethnically marked women activists. This paper investigates the ways this coalition, as represented by the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), was strained and sustained after the fire by analyzing the divergent rhetorical choices middle class and working class advocates made, particularly regarding genre and appeals to audience. This paper contrasts the combative post-fire response of working class, ethnically Othered rhetors such as Rose Schneiderman, who gave the speech entitled “We Have Found You Wanting” to the WTUL, and Clara Lemlich with the articles published about the fire in *Life and Labor*, WTUL’s magazine edited by Australian émigré and labor leader Alice Henry. The activist labor movement was polyphonous, with texts in multiple languages by working class immigrant laborers. In this way, women’s labor writing is often an example of the translingual, with texts in English borrowing from, for example, Yiddish rhetorical traditions. This paper’s comparative analysis demonstrates that intersectionality—although not called this or as fully theorized as today—was a significant factor in the limits of coalition in the first wave feminist movement.

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\*Speaker