

GENDERING THE MEMORY OF WORK:

WOMEN WORKERS' NARRATIVES

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Introduction

Paris and New York: geographies and histories in the garment industry

With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A Woman sat, in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread –
Stitch! stitch! stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the 'Song of the Shirt!'¹

The hardships and plight of garment workers and particularly women worldwide has increasingly become a daily piece of sad news. The April 2013 disaster of the Rana Plaza collapse in the Dhaka area, where 1,217 garment workers were buried under the ramble of an unsafe building, while 2,500 were seriously injured is the most tragic event in recent years in a series of fatal accidents that cause international protests, but they do not seem to stop.² It is as we have never stopped listening to Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' and reading Henry Mayhew's and Beatrice Webb's reports from the sweatshops of East London.³ These places and spaces of destitute have now been transferred to countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Mexico amongst others, where garment workers struggle to survive while doing their work, creating the apparels that we in the West buy and wear. But together with the indignation about the sometimes unbearable conditions of garment workers worldwide, the majority of whom are women, comes the news of their on-going struggles to resist exploitation and act together for better conditions of work and more widely for a better life. One might wonder how far indeed have we come after a century of women's struggles in the garment industry and more than 50 years of scholarship in women's labour history? How much have things changed and to what extent do they remain the same, or different but equally oppressive and unbearable for the seamstress?

There is indeed a significant body of literature and research in this critical area closely interconnected with women's work.⁴ Feminist Marxist studies have made a significant contribution in this field, particularly in debates around the class politics of the left, both in Europe and North America, as well as the dangerous liaisons between feminist politics and the trade union movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ What is strikingly missing however from this rich and multi-disciplinary body of scholarship is the seamstress' narrative, not as fragmented storylines illustrating the historian's, economist's, sociologist's or anthropologist's argument, but as an object of analysis in its own right, a rich source that could illuminate many

grey areas of the seamstress condition and her constitution as a subject in the social milieu of work, a significant part of what Hannah Arendt has theorised as 'the vita activa' (1998).

What has also remained under researched is the seamstress' agentic intervention in the histories of her times; she has been mostly depicted and discussed as a destitute figure worth of our sympathy and entangled in a web of philanthropic discourses – a suffering figure that has inspired literary texts, poetry and paintings.⁶ The seamstress has been talked about and written about but her own story has very rarely emerged and even when it has, in some biographical studies, it has been presented as evidentiary material of women's history, or has remained on the selves of university libraries and has not been analysed as a document of life in its own right.⁷ This is quite striking, given the rich history of what has been theorised as 'the great uprisings of the twentieth century' (Jensen and Davidson 1984) in the garment industry and beyond, mostly in the US and France. And yet it was these events that radically changed the conditions of work for thousands of women garment workers. Indeed, it seems that there is a backlash today in the seamstress condition, following a line of such discontinuities in the history of their trade. (See Green 1997)

What I argue in this book is that we urgently need to listen again to the seamstresses' agonistic stories as traces of their memories of work and struggle. Such an approach would enrich our appreciation of the role women's labour history in the wider realm of cultural memory, as well as in the politics of women's work. In this light the book addresses a significant gap in the literature: its particular focus on the memory of work from a gendered perspective is a cutting edge area in the humanities and the social sciences today. Indeed in recent years there has been a revitalisation and at some times creation of archives related to the world of work, while the study and consideration of the memory of work has emerged in a range of research projects and publications that are located in diverse fields and disciplines including industrial archaeology, museum studies, anthropology, history, sociology, geography and town planning (see Castillo 2008). As the relevant literature in this field indicates, it is the minutiae and forgotten details of the world of work that allow glimpses in its past; such 'moments of being' in the culture of work can be beautifully captured in the workers' oral and/or written narratives-although material objects and spaces clearly play a crucial role in the memory of work. The book and its underpinning research therefore contributes to this wider research field of considering and studying the memory of work.

What has also been identified in this literature is the need to theorise 'intra-actions' (Barad 2007) between workspaces and personal spaces, the intimate, intense and often invisible ways through which workers occupy workspaces and populate them with their ideas, emotions, beliefs, habits and everyday practices.⁸ What the book adds to this interesting area of research is a particular gendered perspective, which does not only focus on the importance of women's memory of work, but also looks into how the workspace/personal space connections become more complicated when the domestic space is also

included in their entanglement. This private/public complexity is particularly relevant to the study of seamstresses' work, where the boundaries between home and work have been blended and blurred from the very beginning in the histories and geographies of the garment industry that I now want to map.

Paris and New York are internationally recognised as the fashion capitals of the world but throughout the twentieth century they were also the centres of a vibrant urban manufacturing sector, the garment industry, which has now been moving along the global east and south. What were the conditions of possibility for this dual emergence? On the one hand it was the fact that both cities were powerful finance and commercial centres at the same time of being cultural metropolises, attracting art in all its manifestations, including fashion and design. As Nancy Green has argued fashion has always been 'torn between art and industry' (1997, 15) and in this light both Paris and New York were the urban centres par excellence for such contradictions to flourish. Their global and cosmopolitan character also meant that both cities became a magnet for a large numbers of immigrant workers, who went there for better life opportunities and ended up working in their urban industries, which urgently needed cheap, unprotected and seasonal labour. There were similarities, but also differences between these two fashion, manufacturing and commercial centres that I now want to chart in their interrelation.⁹ In doing this I have chosen to focus on the first forty years of the twentieth century, not only because they were formative in how the two modern urban industries developed, but also because it is the time framing the two case studies, Jeanne Bouvier and Rose Pesotta that I will examine in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Paris: a city of fashion and politics

'He who contemplates the depths of Paris is seized with vertigo. Nothing is more fantastic. Nothing is more tragic. Nothing is more sublime', Victor Hugot wrote in

in his introductory essay for the *Paris Guide*, a publication to accompany the Exposition Universelle of 1867 (1867, vii). It goes without saying that Paris emerged as the fashion capital of the world since the seventeenth century when in 1675 seamstresses established the first all female guild.¹⁰ Paris was indeed the city where fashion was born not just as an art and craft, but also as an urban manufacturing sector that followed its own peculiar trails in the industrial formations of modernity. As Green (1997, 74) has commented the Parisian garment history has been at the heart of French labour politics since the time of the French Revolution, while the first autonomous feminist movement in nineteenth century France erupted from the Parisian seamstresses' agonistic politics.¹¹

The Parisian garment industry was one of the largest in France in the second half of the twentieth century and certainly the largest one employing women workers. According to Madeleine Guilbert (1966, 13) there were 1,380,000 women workers in the garment industry in 1906, representing 89% of its total labour force. Their number had more than doubled in a span of fifty years, a

spectacular rise expressing not only the burgeoning of the garment industry, but also the radical structural changes in the overall organisation of women's work in modernity. Ready-made clothing and the advent of new technologies, particularly the sewing-machine, were motor forces in such changes, although the Parisian clothing industry moved much more slowly towards *confection*, that is ready-made production for women's wear than its counterpart in New York, as I will discuss later.

Green has further noted there were distinct divisions not only between *couture* and *confection*, but also between *Grande* or *Haute couture* and *Moyenne* and *Petite couture* (1977, 79). Such divisions and separations were simultaneously classed and gendered both on the side of the workers as well as on the side of the customers. We all know that *Haute couture* has been dominated by men designers even to our own days and is only affordable to the upper classes. Women dressmakers have mostly dominated the *Moyenne couture* area and their clients have been from the upper and middle classes; it was only the *petite couture* that petit bourgeois and women from the labour aristocracy could have access to, through their local *couturière*, a labour figure that persisted in France and other European cities throughout the twentieth century. As for working class women they simply made their and their families' clothes themselves in the long tradition of home sewing, either because they worked as seamstresses or because sewing was a component of their formal and informal education, an inherent part of their gender socialisation (See Burman 1999).

The first part of the twentieth century and particularly the post World-War I period was also a time of important changes in the organisation of work, both structural and legislative. According to the French labour inspector Gabrielle Lettelier, the war had made patrons and matrons in the garment industry to become more attentive to their workers' demands, since they had to meet increased wartime needs and orders. (Green 1997, 82) Important changes in the labour law, such as the 1915 minimum wage bill, as well as the 1917 introduction of the *semaine anglaise*, which freed Saturday afternoons, had a great impact on workers' lives in general and women garment workers in particular. The introduction of the eight-hour working day in 1919, further improved working conditions, although it was differently applied to the garment industry, given its specificities: the 48 hour week was broken down to 9 hours a day between Monday and Friday and 3 hours on Saturday morning, with provisions for exceptions during the high season (see Green 1997, 84). The *semaine anglaise* and the 48 hour working week regulations rectified the inefficiencies of the 1892 law, which had supposedly limited working hours for women and children, but had never been applied in practice. Moreover, family workshops had not been included in these labour time regulations on the grounds of not interference in the private sphere. It is not difficult to imagine what this meant, particularly for the garment industry, where *le travaille a domicile*, what Coffin (1897) has theorised as 'industrial homework', was one of its inherent components.

The Parisian garment industry suffered in the interwar period, when military workshops closed, but also because of the eventual dominance of the

confection, which meant simpler clothes for women and fewer accessories to the point of ‘some girls going out of the house bareheaded’ (Green 1997, 85). The previous tripartite division of the *haute-moyenne-petite couture*, was increasingly losing its middle part, as well as the trades, skilled workers and shops that were adjacent to it. Although the prêt-à-porter clothes had their own hierarchies: ‘*la très belle confection, articles moins soignés* and *la confection ordinaire*’ (ibid., 86) the prêt-à-porter industry was there to stay and was hardly affected by the 1932-1937 Depression, which the French economy took much longer to recover from.

The role of the trade unions was also a decisive factor in how working conditions changed during and after the Great war and strange as it seems there were many strikes in Paris during the war, which went on feisty in the interwar period. As I have written elsewhere, the Parisian garment workers were at the forefront of the workers’ uprisings in France in the nineteenth century (Tamboukou 2015) and this militant activity was transferred to the twentieth. Already in 1901 there was a general strike of Parisian tailors and seamstresses with central demand the regulation of standard wages and the abolition of piecework. Despite its mixed constitution, this strike was attributed to the women’s movement and gave them the opportunity to appear and speak publicly about their needs.¹² But it were the 1917 and 1919 strikes that had a long lasting effect on how working condition were ultimately reformed. The first one started in May 1917 from the *Maison Jenny*, and by June it had become a general strike of 42,000 workers from all sectors, where women were the majority. Among the 30,000 women strikers, who took to the streets, 25,000 of them were *midinettes*, that is garment workers from all clothing specialities demanding increased wages, decreased hours and an end to the war: ‘Our twenty sous! The English week! Give us back our boys’ (Green 1997, 87). The gendered discourses that the media deployed to represent the fighting *midinettes* notwithstanding, the strike was heralded as a big success, but the problems in the garment industry did not end with the strike.

The 1919 strike broke out in the end of April, shortly after the law on collective bargaining and the eight-hour workday were signed and by the beginning of May 55,000 garment workers had taken to the streets of Paris and had remembered their position in the nineteenth century barricades. There were riots and clashes, where 2 strikers died and 500 were wounded. The workers were fighting for collective agreements, increased wages and increased rates for overtime, which was a standard feature of the garment industry during the busy seasons. Apart from an increase in their salaries, they got a 44 hours week with a 48 hours’ pay. The final militant strike that was to remain in the memory of work was the 1923 walk out of the Parisian *midinettes*, also called *cousettes*, who were marching in shouts and loud laughter along the Parisian boulevards, creating the sensation and bewilderment of militant femininities: ‘Are the laughter and songs not part of the *cousettes*’ battle ammunition?’ an article published in *L’Humanité* asked on April 6, 1923. (cited in Green 1997, 87)

As Green has noted (1997, 88) the garment workers' strikes were part of the overall labour movement in France, but what made their demands distinctive was that apart from wages and working hours the problem of regulation of industrial homework was always the thorn of their demands, their successes and their failures. The seasonal character of the garment industry was also a specific aspect of the workers' militant actions and demands. One of the 1923 strike's claims was the regulation of seasonal unemployment and while the employers signed an agreement stipulating that the slack season would be reduced to 30 days per year the question of how they would actually do it was unavoidably raised (*ibid.*). Things and labour relations went quiet after the 1923 strike, although there was one more major strike at the heart of the Depression between 1934 and 1935, where garment workers once more succeeded in getting hourly wages, but victory was only temporary, since the piece-wage soon came back as a result of a series of recurrent crises in the industry.

The histories of the labour movement should be understood as entanglements of structural changes in the industry, strikes, regulating labour legislation and counter-attacks by the bosses and manufacturers – all underpinned by the invisible hand of the sweatshop conditions of the industrial homework – a problem that has never been really resolved, tucked as it has always been within the abode of the private sphere. Home industries were described as the 'nursery of strike breakers' (Coffin 1996, 175), and it was its many women workers, who were accused of stumbling and annihilating the work of the unions. But as we have seen above, the history of militant syndicalism tells a different story about women's involvement. Moreover, the problem of industrial homework was not just a gendered one, but as Coffin has pithily noted 'it was equally bound up with ethnic antagonisms and shifting hierarchies within the trade' (*ibid.*, 176).

It goes without saying that the role of the trade unions was catalytic in the workers' militant actions. The first national trade union of garment workers in France, the *Fédération nationale des travailleurs de l'habillement* was founded in Nîmes in 1893, but it moved its headquarters to Paris in 1910. Despite the fact that women were representing the 80% of the workforce in the garment industry, only 20% of the union members were women, a gendered pattern well recognised in the US trade unions, as I will discuss later in the chapter (Green 1997, 89). But as Green has noted, what is strikingly different from the US trade unions movement is that French workers took sides along wider ideological and political lines in comparison to the craft and industrial based divisions of the US labour movement (*ibid.*). In this light the garment workers' alignment with the reformists of the Confédération General du Travail (CGT) or the communists of the Confédération General du Travail Unitaire (CGTU) was the effect of wider divisions in the French political scene and quite different from the communist/socialists wars of the garment workers in the US, that I will further discuss in Chapter 4. In any case such divisions seemed to withdraw in France, particularly in their attempt to confront the attack on Labour Rights after the Depression. The two unions merged in December 1935 and their membership reached a historic height of 100,000 as compared to the 4,000 members of their 1893 foundation.

Garment workers' involvement in the trade unions fluctuated, following the successes or failures of strikes, financial booms or economic disasters such as the Great Depression. Here it is not only the politics of the trade unions in France that need to be considered, but also the strategies of the International Labour movement that had a catalytic effect upon workers' lives in general and women workers in particular. Organised labour in the garment industry was not only a decisive factor of change, but also a portal that opened up new possibilities in women workers' lives, as I will argue throughout the book, which draws on autobiographical, political and historical writings of women trade unionists, both in France and the US. But here the harsh gendered relations and the deep-rooted sexism of the trade unions also had a formative effect in how women's labour was conceived and debated and in how women workers negotiated the personal and the political in their lives and beyond.

Overall women's work opened up a complex field of antagonistic gender power relations, contradictory discourses and paradoxical positions and statements from all parts, women workers included. What is particularly important to note here is that French discourses, ideas, legal regulations and practices were notably different from other countries, both in Europe and America. The fact that women's work still remains a troubling area for labour history, economic and political theory as well as feminist analytics is not surprising. Such complexities however need to be addressed as both historically and geographically situated and in this light it is to the New York cartography of the garment industry that I will now turn.

New York: in the jungle of fashion

There is today a rich body of literature revolving around the New York garment industry, wherein its central location, the Seventh Avenue, has often been called 'a jungle', a metaphor that encapsulates the industry's complexities, contradictions and fierce antagonisms.¹³ What is particularly striking in this body of literature is that the history of the New York garment industry almost coincides with the history of one of its largest syndicate, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU). Gender and migration are central analytical categories in this labour history, whose protagonists were Jewish and Italian migrant women workers.

It was the civil war and the increased need for clothing that gave a boost to the ready-made industry in New York, with women's wear becoming part of it much earlier and faster than in Paris. New York was also the city, where an important shift in women's fashion first emerged: the dress, stimulating the growth of the ready-made market in the 1920s. Green has noted that there was a spectacular rise in the US garment industry at the turn of the nineteenth century and particularly between 1870 and 1900, which run synchronically and in parallel with the French upwards rise that we have seen in the previous section. New York's position was predominant in this industrial growth. As Green has shown in the beginning of the twentieth century the NY state employed 90,000 workers out of the overall 206,000 across the US (1997, 46).

The gender division of labour in the garment industry had significant geographical variations: women garment workers outnumbered men in NY, but represented only one third of all women garment workers in the US, while NY men constituted half the workforce of garment workers across the country. Local diversities notwithstanding, by 1913, 70% of all clothing workers were women (see Jensen 1984, 86). Women's supremacy in the industry however, was hardly represented in the ILGWU membership, where only one third of its 10,000 members in 1903 were women. Of course ILGWU numbers rose and fell, following the fluctuations of the industry, but in 1920 it was the sixth largest union in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) counting 100,000 members, women being half of it (ibid., 89).

Divisions also existed within the industry and its multiple local unions but they were different from the Parisian ones that we have seen above. The dress fashion created shifts in the labour force increasingly employing less-skilled workers such as the new immigrants who were flocking in New York in the beginning of the century escaping either the Russian pogroms or the Italian repressive campaign against all socialist and anarchist groups.¹⁴ By 1919 the Lady's Waist and Dress Makers' Union had 30,000 members: it was the largest local, constituting one quarter of the union's total membership. One year later dressmakers had formed their own separate union, local 22. Such divisions expressed the organizational nuances and problems that the different sectors in the industry were facing, but they sometimes led to coalition-building problems within the unions, where solidarity was crucial for the survival of the few women organizers.¹⁵

The New York garment industry also saw some influential legislative changes at the turn of the twentieth century, most notably the 1892 New York State tenement law that echoing the French, sought to regulate industrial homework and possibly eradicate sweatshop conditions. There was a three-sided struggle amongst progressive social reformers, workers' unions and stubborn manufacturers and the battlefield was fierce, particularly in the first three decades of the century. What is worth noting here is that the history of the US garment industry is a history of uprisings, struggles and strikes that have attracted an important body of literature.¹⁶ Green has usefully highlighted four major events in the memory of work of the garment industry in the period before the First War: 'two strikes, a collective agreement and a tragic fire' (1997, 53).

The first of the strike Green refers to above, was the November 1909 'Uprising of the 20,000', when 20,000 shirtwaist makers walked out of work and remained in the picket lines for eleven weeks, till February 1910, demanding amongst others a 52 hour workweek, equally distributed work seasons, paid holidays, a fair and consistent pay scale, recognition of their union rights and conversion of their factories to closed union shops.¹⁷ The girls' strike, as it is also known, was soon followed by 'the Great Revolt' in the summer of 1910. This time it was mostly men cloak makers who took to the streets: they were better prepared and supported and they also won. Their victory was followed by 'The Protocol of Peace' signed on September 2, 1910 between the ILGWU and the Cloak, Suit and Skirt Manufacturers' Protective Association'; it called

for a 50-hour week, the abolition of industrial homework, minimum wages, and a 'preferential' union shop rather than a closed one. Regulatory bodies were also established for sanitary control, grievances and arbitrations, while similar protocols with more manufacturers' associations soon followed. And yet only some months later, on March 25, 1911 the Triangle Fire broke out as one of the worst industrial accidents in the history of the New York garment industry sending 146 girls to their death,¹⁸ and a whole movement to disillusion and despair.

Women workers were central in all of these events, their intervention being encapsulated in Clara Lemlich's legendary speech at Cooper Union meeting on November 22, 1909, an event that set off the 'Uprising of the 20,000':

I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared—now. (Levine 1924, 154)

After the First World War the industry saw better days, which were reflected in the ILGOW membership, but things deteriorated again. In her unpublished history of the ILGWU¹⁹, Fannia Mary Cohn, ILGWU's educational officer for almost 50 years, as well as one of its few women's vice-presidents has written in detail about the union's troubling histories and its multi-leveled complexities. Consider for example the 1920-1922 period, 'when the post war business boom collapsed and a severe depression set in.'²⁰ Cohn has identified this period as 'The Employers' Offensive', discerning three waves in its deployment. During the first wave, which lasted between October 1920 and February 1921, various manufacturers' associations tried to cut wages and revise previous agreements, but in most cases such attempts were fought back by harsh negotiations and in some cases local strikes, as in Boston and New York.

The second wave was launched in April 1921 aiming to 'a reduction of wages, reestablishment of the piece-work plan and greater freedom to hire and fire.'²¹ This wave was met with 'defensive strikes', ending up in a compromise wherein ILGWU was bound to 'a promise of better work and high productivity' through a 'Supplementary Agreement', which did not go down well by the garment workers, although it was ultimately accepted as 'a necessary defensive measure.'²² The second wave escalated dramatically in August 1921 with the beginning of the Philadelphia strike, 'one of the bitterest struggles in the local history of the trade', which ended with a humiliated defeat after 26 weeks; this defeat however was overturned in March 1923, when after only a two weeks' strike, the Philadelphia dress and waistmakers won 'a substantial victory'.²³

The third wave started in October 1921 and was initiated by a conference of the New York Cloak and Suit Manufacturers' Protective Association in Atlantic City, where employers returned to the demands of the first wave, including wage-cuts and the re-introduction of piece-work amongst other reactionary

measures. The response was a massively voted general strike by the cloak makers in November 1921, when 55,000 workers left their shops in New York, while the strike movement spread across a number of US cities, reaching its peak in December 1921, with 75,000 women's garment workers on strike, defending previously won labour rights. This national upheaval ended triumphantly in January 1922 with the employers finally agreeing 'to reinstate the week-work system and the 41-hour week.'²⁴ The January agreement seemed to be a temporary victory however, as the spring and summer of 1922 were slack periods in the trade, unemployment rose and the economic conditions deteriorated, a decline that was reflected in the ILGWU's membership numbers (105,000 in 1920 to 93,000 in 1922). But by the fall of 1922, the depression in the garment trade had seen its worse days and signs of improvement started emerging.

What I wanted to show through a closer look into two years only in the long history of the US garment industry, written by one of its protagonists, is that despite its highs and lows, the problems, demands and claims were more or less recurrent: increased wages, decreased hours, regulation of the industrial homework, protection for the uneven seasons of the trade and last but not least, recognition of the syndicalism right. Seen in this light, the 1920s was a decade of an on-going whirl of employers' attacks and workers' resistance, retreat as well as accommodation strategies, but overall a period of 'fitful but cumulative progress' according to a report to the New York State Department of Labor (cited in Green 1997, 62). Working hours were finally brought down to 40 hours weekly by 1928, but the Depression of the early 1930s threw everything in the air yet once again. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933 introduced a series of laws that were beneficial for the garment industry but it did not last long and soon there were leaks in the garment industry towards industrial homework, sweatshop conditions, other states which were not union protected, as well as to Puerto Rico. The garment industry had started moving south and although the effects of this extended bench work were to be seen much later its radical transformation and translocation had already begun.

Adventures in micro-history

What I wanted to highlight by tracing some events in the troubling histories of the garment industry in both Paris and New York is that it is only through the lenses of micro-history that a situated understanding of its intricacies and complexities can be grasped. Moreover it is only through such forgotten and marginalized events in the memory of work that we can begin to unravel the riddle of women's work across geographies and histories. The book will contribute to such adventures in micro-history and it is with an outline of its chapters that I now want to conclude.

What is an archive and how many ways are there for doing archival research? In addressing this question in Chapter 1, I retrace paths of narrative sensibility within the archive, mostly drawing on my research experience of working in the *Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris* (BHVP) and the Manuscripts

and Archives Division of the *New York Public Library* (NYPL). In further mapping the researcher's 'meta-archive' (Moore at al., 2016) of documents and knowledges in the garment industry, I also make references to a number of other collections in France and the US including the *Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand* in Paris, the *Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives* in New York, the *Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library* in Boston and the *Sophia Smith Collection* in Northampton, Mass.

In Chapter 2, I look at gendered traces in the memory of work, a theme that has recently opened up interesting debates in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies. In doing so I map the memory of work in the wider field of cultural memory studies and identify key themes and debates. Here I focus on the material turn in the philosophical treatment of memory, particularly looking at the strands of embodied and emplaced memories. In following entanglements between memory, forgetting and imagination, I finally examine how gender inflects the field of memory studies in general and the memory of work in particular.

In Chapter 3 I read, analyse and discuss the memoirs, letters and papers of Jeanne Bouvier (1865-1964). Bouvier was born to a peasant family in eastern France, started working when she was eleven years old and by the age of 21 she had become a skilled dressmaker living and working in Paris. She also emerged as an ardent trade unionist in the French garment industry and in 1936 she published her memoirs recounting her industrial activities between 1876 and 1935. Her papers include 23 boxes of published and unpublished manuscripts, essays, personal writings and correspondence. Apart from her memoirs, she is the author of four books: *La lingerie et les lingères*, (1928), *Deux époques, deux hommes* (1927), *Histoire des dammes employées dans les postes, télégraphes et telephones, de 1714 a 1929* (1930); *Les femmes pendant la révolution* (1931).

In Chapter 4 I look at institutional histories, discourses and ideologies revolving around women workers' cultural lives and political activities in the first half of the twentieth century in the US. In doing this I sketch Rose Pesotta's pen-portrait, drawing on her papers at the New York Public Library. Pesotta (1896-1965) was born in Ukraine and migrated to the US in 1913. Like many of her contemporaries she was employed in the garment industry and got involved in the trade union movement as an anarchist labour organizer. She was one of the few women to become vice president of the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union (ILGWU) between 1933-1944, but she had to step down because of the sexist union politics. Her papers include 45 boxes of diaries, correspondence, essays, articles, personal writings and unpublished manuscripts. She has published two autobiographies, *Bread Upon the Water* (1944) and *Days of Our Lives* (1958).

Chapter 5 revolves around the aesthetics and politics of writing memory, particularly focusing on the seamstresses' literary work. It brings together insights and paradigms from both sides of the Atlantic and looks at processes of 'symbolic transformation' (Langer 1952). In mapping women workers' creative forces on an international plane, the chapter particularly considers

the role of fiction and its blurring boundaries with autobiography. It further charts the cultural and sexual politics of the seamstresses' intellectual lives and cultural production and traces intertextual connections between and amongst them. What is finally highlighted is the material nexus of memory in its interrelation with narrative.

In the Conclusion I return to the importance of excavating archives in the memory of work. What I suggest is that the archive as a laboratory of memory and imagination intensifies auto/biographical research and in doing so opens up new vistas in the analysis of women workers' documents of life and consequently to our understanding of workers' contribution to the cultural formations of the twentieth century.

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¹ ‘Song of the Shirt’, first verse by Thomas Hood, first published in *Punch* in 1843. See the British Library Archive for an illustration of its first publication: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/thomas-hoods-poem-about-working-conditions-the-song-of-the-shirt> [Accessed, 20-9-2014].

² See the Clean Clothes campaign for an update list of incidents and actions: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/> [Accessed, 20-9-2014].

³ See Mayhew 2010 [1851] and Webb, 1888, 1938.

⁴ This research mostly goes below the umbrella of disciplinary areas such as history (Green 1997, Crowston 2001, Kessler-Harris 2007), anthropology (Verdier 1979, Lynch 2007), economics and development (Kabeer 2002; Dedeoglu 2008), sociology (Phizacklea 1990), geography (Hale and Wills 2005), as well as the more interdisciplinary field of gender and/or women’s studies (Burman 1999, Guglielmo 2010).

⁵ See amongst others, Rowbotham, 1973; Dalla Costa, 1974; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Barrett. 1980; Walby 1990; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Todd 2008; Federici 2012; Newman 2012.

⁶ See Rogers 1997, Alexander 2003, Harris 2005 and Ross 2007 for a critique of this discourse, but also for an overview of the Victorian literature and visual culture on the plights of the seamstress. See also Amireh 2000, for representations of the factory girl in American popular history and culture.

⁷ See Leeder 1993 and Saporì 2010.

⁸ I will discuss Barad's (2007) notion of intra-actions in Chapter 1.

⁹ See Coffin 1994 for an excellent overview of the unconventional histories of the Parisian clothing industry.

¹⁰ See Crowston, 2001 for a rich historical account of seamstresses in pre-revolutionary France.

¹¹ See Tamboukou 2015 for a narrative and discourse analysis of the seamstresses' involvement in the romantic social movements of nineteenth century France.

¹² See Green 1986, 128-30 and Coffin 1996, 177-178 for more details about this strike.

¹³ See Green 1997, for a comprehensive overview of this literature.

¹⁴ In her study of Italian women's resistance in New York, Jennifer Guglielmo has pointed to the revolutionary struggle in Italy in the beginning of the twentieth century as the political context within mass emigration from Italy took place (2010, 11).

¹⁵ See Kessler-Harris (2007) for an excellent collection of essays on the gender labour politics in the garment industries.

¹⁶ Apart from Kessler-Harris important work as cited in n. 14, see also Jensen and Davidson 1984, Orleck 1995, Guglielmo 2010.

¹⁷ See amongst others, Levine 1924, Schofield 1997 and Malkiel 1910.

¹⁸ The history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire has amassed an important body of labour literature. See amongst others, Stein 1962.

¹⁹ 'History of ILGWU', unpublished essay, Chapter 11, pp.81-84, (FCP/NYPL/Writings)

²⁰ Ibid., 81.

²¹ Ibid., p. 81A

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p.83