

STACY D. FAHRENTHOLD, *Unmentionables: Textiles, Garment Work, and the Syrian American Working Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024). Pp. 306. \$120.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503638082.

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Stacy Fahrenthold's *Unmentionables: Textiles, Garment Work, and the Syrian American Working Class* provides an original and compelling labor history of the Syrian American diaspora in the early decades of the twentieth century. The book takes on dominant trends in scholarship on Syrian migrants of the era, arguing that it is important to look beyond the often-romanticized (and resolutely masculine) figure of the pack peddler to truly understand work, gender, race, and class formation among Syrian immigrant communities. Nothing was more central to class identity and consciousness among Syrian migrants, Fahrenthold explains, than the textile industry. But rather than examine the textile industry through any single segment, worksite, or laboring population, Fahrenthold weaves together the stories of workers along different parts of the industry's supply and trade chain, broadening our understanding of who labored, and how, to produce the Syrian American textile trade. As the book asserts early on: "Textile workers, merchant-manufacturers, and peddlers. These are the main characters in this book, and their labor histories can only be understood together" (18). The stories of this diverse cast of "characters" are told masterfully and fluidly throughout the book, which toggles easily back and forth between intimate life accounts and wide geopolitical developments.

Critical to Fahrenthold's reframing of this narrative is the fact that a substantial majority of Syrian migrant workers in this industry were women. While their mobilization might not have taken on precisely the contours of mainstream unionization and labor activism, she insists, they were still part of a vibrant communal world of organizing, protest, and class conflict (both within and beyond their own ethnic communities). And the factory floor, she reminds us, can

never be truly severed from the world of class relations which developed beyond it. To trace these interconnected labor histories, she relies on a broad source base, including traditional sources like union records, as well as employment files, business ledgers, consular correspondence, records of workers' societies, personal collections, and print culture. This dedication to not only uncovering "hidden histories" but also to interrogating the "class politics of hiding" certain narratives allows, in particular, a much deeper interrogation of the intersections of gender and work in the Syrian diaspora (197).

Fahrenthold does not merely urge the reader to suspend their preconceived notions about the figure of Syrian immigrant laborer, however. Instead, she adopts a capacious understanding of the geography of the Syrian textile industry across what she terms the interconnected routes of the "Arab Atlantic." The story of the industry that *Unmentionables* tells, therefore, is located both precisely where one might expect it—in the factories of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and the New York City garment district—and in sites as far away as northern Mexico or Madeira. By taking on a "global labor history approach," the book provides a dynamic, innovative view of the integrated networks of labor, capital, migration, and trade which comprised the Syrian American textile industry (12).

Syrian textile workers, Fahrenthold demonstrates in the early chapters of the book, occupied a complex space within the American textile industry during its peak in the first decades of the twentieth century. In textile cities like Lawrence, Massachusetts, where they worked for major American textile corporations, Syrian workers were sometimes on the outskirts of the labor movement in terms of union membership, even as they were at the heart of ongoing labor uprisings in the streets. Among more conservative unions, like the United Textile Workers, Syrian garment workers were often seen as a "racial threat to native labor" and as "irredeemable radicals" (4). The racial othering they experienced therefore led them into either the more radical wing of the labor movement (participating in interethnic activism with the Industrial Workers of the World or the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union) or into union-resistant Syrian shops. After two chapters devoted to labor mobilization, ethnic organizing, and struggle in Massachusetts, Fahrenthold shifts focus to the garment district of New York City, tracing the establishment and expansion of Syrian-owned garment manufacturing, particularly of "unmentionables" (or undergarments and "white goods"). In "Syrian shops," the third chapter argues, the conditions of women's labor and the horizons of their activism were shaped by notions of "ethnic obligation, patriotic

duty, and the prevailing gender norms" (89). In the final two chapters, Fahrenthold pivots to the role of Syrians as manufacturers and merchants beyond and across American borders. In chapter 4, she explores the meteoric but short-lived rise of the Syrian American domination of the embroidery industry in Madeira starting during World War I, which included both elements of mechanization and capitalized modernization, and older systems of women's home work. In the final chapter, the book follows Syrian peddlers in the US-Mexico borderlands. But despite returning to this common figure, Fahrenthold provides a fresh take, arguing that despite their depiction as "self-made men, unfettered by the drudgery of waged work," this mythology of independence "requires training one's eye away from the garments he sold as well as the hands that produced them" (157).

Unmentionables has a great deal to offer historians of the Syrian American diaspora, as well as scholars of labor history, capitalism, and migration more generally. Among its many insightful contributions are the productive reminder that unionization rates are not the only (nor even necessarily the appropriate way) to trace labor militance. Fahrenthold also offers a nuanced rethinking of mutual aid, arguing that in addition to *cultural* projects, as typically represented within the scholarship, mutual aid societies not only "alleviated poverty, but they also built Syrian understandings about the sources of poverty, mobilizing their members around ethnic solidarity and collective action" (65). And one of the most novel and intriguing revelations of the book is the way that Syrian American merchants "represented American capital" in Madeira, by taking advantage of trade and tariff developments, geopolitical currents including World War I, and access to both US citizenship through naturalization and a range of other nationality documents (126, 130). Beyond Madeira, Fahrenthold's attention to the rapidly evolving politics and practices of border control and documentation regimes (and the strategies Syrians used to navigate them), is detailed and productive.

At times, this expansive perspective on the Syrian American garment industry poses an organizational challenge. In particular, the book's fascinating conclusion highlights the difficulties of delivering on the promises of its transnational framing. In it, Fahrenthold shifts back to Syria, tracing how diasporic elites tried to encourage the use of capital and labor to benefit the homeland and build the textile industry in the region during mandate period. However, this intriguing examination is a bit jarring after a larger narrative which offers only glimpses of homeland connections or visions of return or circular migration. Furthermore, while the goal of integrating the Arab Atlantic

development of the Syrian garment industry is largely fulfilled, there is a bit of an imbalance and disconnect between the first three chapters, which focus on the northeastern US, and the last two chapters, which offer an exciting departure from this more conventional geography. Nevertheless, the book provides a brilliant, sweeping rethinking of Syrian American labor which should serve as a model for doing conscientious, deeply grounded global labor history.