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ARC Knickerbocker Award for Archival Research
Research Summary

My dissertation explores the role of travel and mobility in nineteenth-century theatre and therefore deliberately attends to the “margins” of early American performance culture. In contrast to the extensive existing scholarship on noteworthy performances in northeastern centers, I explore the exigencies of journeys made to and from theatrical events, and emerging circuits in the west and south. I examine how geographic movement, while central to the construction of celebrity, also operated as cultural capital for ordinary, understudied performers. Using the paradigm of mobility, I explore the significance of the structural changes that developed during the 1830s and 1840s under the emerging “star system” alongside the everyday lived experiences of actors, lecturers, and popular entertainers.

Due to the Knickerbocker Award, I was able to take two week long research trips this summer—to the Missouri History Museum and Library in St. Louis and to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. At the MoHS, I engaged two collections that have been indispensable to developing my project: the Solomon Smith Collection and the Ludlow-Field-Maury Family Papers. Sol Smith and Noah Ludlow established the first major western theatrical company and presented seasons in St. Louis, Mobile, and New Orleans 1835-1851. The hundreds of letters and dozens of diaries, account ledgers, and scrapbooks that I consulted illustrate the mechanics of travel within antebellum theatre culture. Correspondence between Ludlow, Smith, and the performers they engaged, vividly document the possibilities and challenges inherent in circulating performers and objects (plays, costumes, scenic props) between several cities, as well as in coordinating contracts and itineraries across distances. The managers’ negotiations with well-known “stars,” such as Edwin Forrest and Charlotte Cushman, as well as with lesser-known actors like Mary Ann Farren and Eliza Petrie, depict actors and managers confronting the demands of unreliable travel conditions and a haphazard postal service. I plan to use the materials from the MoHS as the core of my first chapter, where I examine the unsystematic operations of the “star system” (stars traveling to support resident

stock companies). Although stars were often able to convert their mobility, as well as their eastern or European personae, into cultural capital, at times they were dismissed as fleeting novelties, as “humbugs” in contrast to the reliable, longstanding local stock company. In addition, Smith’s diary of his travels on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers during the 1840s will inform my chapter on everyday life on the road (Ch. 2), while his correspondence during the Civil War with declining star Mary Ann Farren will help shape my chapter on traveling female performers (Ch. 3).

At the AAS, I consulted the papers of temperance lecturer John Gough, who kept meticulous accounts of his journeys around the country from the 1840s through the 1880s. As part of my chapter on the quotidian, subjective experiences of traveling performers (Ch. 2), I will argue that Gough’s diaries and appointment books, which tracked his locations, expenses, and other travel data, were central to his reform agenda as well as to his celebrity. The extensive collection of theatrical broadsides at the AAS also offered insight into how visiting performers were promoted in different cities, and how managers balanced appeals to local audiences with publicity for visiting stars.

In addition to the collections, in person meetings with the curators at the MoHS and the AAS were invaluable. I initiated conversations about my project that are now ongoing, and that have led me to essential other sources and secondary scholarship.