

Unit 7: Video 2 Transcript

Q7: Describe Canadian performers in a transnational context.

A: There are many reasons why I became interested in these Canadian performers and particularly these English-Canadian women who had careers in the United States, in Britain, across Canada, and in a few cases Australia as well from the 1860's to the 1940's. And partly this just came out of research that I was doing on Canadian tourists because I'd written about Canadian tourists going to Britain and to Europe. And as I was looking through a lot of the middleclass magazines in which these people wrote about their travels, I kept seeing articles about various actresses on, you know, United States stages and how wonderful this was. And so it was a somewhat different kind of narrative than I used to hear in the 1970's and the 1980's about what a travesty it was to see Canadian performers have to go elsewhere to create careers. It was, you know, that we didn't have a national stage and we're starting to in the eyes of some. But it was too bad, that we were losing people to Broadway or increasingly to Hollywood. And so what I was seeing was quite a celebration of these people. Wasn't it wonderful that they were able to go elsewhere. They would still come back to Canada and they would still perform in Montreal and Halifax and St. John and, of course, Toronto. And in some cases tour across the western provinces and go to Vancouver. So I started to think there's something rather interesting here. And actually on a very personal note, a friend of mine who was the daughter of a Canadian actress had a biography of a woman named Margaret Anglin and she was wondering whether or not she might be related to this person because her mother is Anne Anglin in Toronto. And I didn't know very much about these people, but as I started to dig into their lives I started finding more and more and more of them. And realized that they were part of an international circuit that took them as young women who might have been interested in theatre, involved in amateur or family theatricals in Hamilton or Toronto or they'd gone to convent schools in which they'd been exposed to lessons in elocution and drama. Or they might have played a boy's role in a production of something like, you know, Shakespeare. But increasingly I started seeing a larger pattern, that it wasn't a question of just one or two, you know, interesting individuals. That there were more and more of these people. I found out that theatre historians, people actually here at U of T, Paula Spidakis [?] had done some work on them and, again provided me with more and more names. And, again, with the sense that there was a larger circuit for

these people and that they certainly took advantage of that circuit. So one of the reasons why I started thinking this is interesting to me, and I hoped would be interesting to others, is the way in which these people seized these opportunities that came their way. To move out of Canada, but in many cases to maintain ties to Canada and to think of themselves, sometimes, not always, but sometimes as Canadians was-- sorry. Lost my train of thought there for a second. That they saw more opportunities for themselves by moving around the world. And that I also think, too, that their careers pose interesting questions about women's public mobility and visibility in this period. This is a moment in which women's fitness for higher education, for example, is being debated. It's a moment in which women's ability to travel around urban centres on their own is also being hotly contested. Some of these women were also involved in social reform and sometimes in women's suffrage organizations, although that wasn't my primary reason for looking at them, but I started to see that they connected to other kinds of movements that I think of as being bound up with the particular modernity of the late 19th and early 20th century. They were very highly visible and they were highly visible in the press. I've just completed a research to the Houghton Library at Harvard where I've been looking at the papers of Julia Arthur, a young woman from Hamilton who started her career at the age of 14, traveling across the United States with a theatre company. And she ended up marrying a Boston millionaire, retiring for a while, then going back. But her movements and her decisions and her career choices received tons of coverage from the American press, sometimes the British press as well, because she also went to London and worked with Henry Irving's company there for a bit. But the press was fascinated by these women. And one of the other things that has sort of surprised me in a way, you know, I fully anticipated that if they were well known that they'd be part of a wider culture of celebrity, the early 20th century. And that there would be a lot of coverage, for example, of their clothes or their hair or their marriages. And certainly I found that. But one of the things the press talked a lot about in a number of cases was the intelligence that these women displayed which I did not expect. I expected that they would be treated as somewhat flighty, you know, that they would be treated as not having anything interesting to say. And, in fact, the press would ask them about their theories about acting, for example, you know, what kinds of advice should they give young women. And I'm thinking, well, there's something interesting going on when these women are being asked about-- giving career advice. I can't really think of many other women whose opinions were being solicited at that particular moment. So I think there's, you know, there's questions around female

visibility, how gender relations made it-- or how particular understandings of gender relations made it possible for women to have these kinds of public careers at a time when that was very hotly debated in Canada and Britain and the United States. And the other thing that interests me too is the kind of technologies of the time, you know, how steamships, railroad, I mean, the expansion of the transcontinental railway, both, you know, throughout the United States and also in Canada facilitated their movement. And the other thing that has been intriguing me too, and it's something I'm just working on now, is their work for World War I. I'm seeing a number of these women involved in fundraising for the troops, performing in patriotic displays. Julia Arthur, the woman I mentioned earlier appeared in a pageant called Liberty Aflame that toured vaudeville houses all across the United States and then in Canada in 1917 in which she dressed up as the Statue of Liberty and recited patriotic poetry. Was accompanied by all kinds of singers, clips of Woodrow Wilson appearing in film. Fundraising for different kinds of causes. Another woman Lena Ashwell actually ran her own touring company throughout France during the war, bringing both singers and then later on theatre to troops in France. So I'm interested in their relationship to, not just culture, but also other forms of social and political movements during this period.