

Unit 1: Video 1 Transcript

Q4 Is there a connection between national, transnational, and hypernational historiographies of New France and early America?

A: For someone like me who's interested in the 17th, 18th, early 19th century—you sometimes feel a little bit lonely in gatherings of Canadian historians because everybody studies the 20th century. So some of us find ourselves going to conferences, for example, on early American history. Because the Americans tend to take the colonial period much more seriously. It's partly just there's a lot of them. And so inevitably I, and other people interested in early Canadian history, find themselves in close contact with our American colleagues. And increasingly finding them, not only do we start to get interested in early Virginia and Massachusetts and so on, they're getting interested in early Acadia, New France and so on and the western fur trade. Which was, you know, a welcome development.

But I began to realize they had their own special take on things. So, you know, naturally enough they view it from their angle and I decided to write an article about what I had perceived as the kind of particularly U.S. approach to early Canadian history. So on the one hand it's great that they're showing an interest in it. They're making wonderful contributions and no one wants to say to them, hey, you know, get off our lawn. That's not the point. But you begin to realize that, my goodness, they bring to it, of course, a U.S. historiographic sensibility. They come from a very entrenched, national historiographical tradition that asks particular questions of the past that makes meaning in particular ways. And I thought, you know, when I read a book about the deportation of the Acadians in the 1750's that says this was an important event in American history and, you know, the first ethnic cleansing in American history, I think, wait a minute. American, yes, in the sense that it happens in the North American continent but, you know, this is not really part of the U.S. national story, which is the way it's been treated.

So, you know, I hope in a good natured and tolerant way, I decided to just kind of look closely at the way these things worked and sort of the distortions that came in when people incorporated phenomena from New France, we'll say, from the, you know, fur trade of the Hudson's Bay Company, Acadia in the case of—great and noble dream, that I just mentioned. What happens when they incorporate that into a U.S. national perspective and what ends up being distorted and what ends up being missing. And sometimes it's a matter

of them kind of reinventing the wheel, like discovering things that I think Canadian historians knew 50 years ago. But sometimes it's just an odd way of putting it together. So I just wanted to take note of that and also to encourage what I would say is a truly non-national approach to colonial history. So I think it's great, Americans looking at New France. It would be great if Mexicans and Brazilians did the same and vice versa. And if we can try to overcome the limitations that are imposed by national historiography, this is the desirable end that I was trying to promote. And whether it will work, I don't know.