

Unit 4: Video 1 Transcript

Q1 You have written about colonial themes in general and the Mohawk Saint Kateri (Catherine) Tekakwitha in particular. What did you learn from this and what have you learned? What should students know about your research?

A: I got started looking at the life of, well, she's now known as Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, because I'd come across some of the writings about her and began to realize that a lot had been written at the time about this young woman who was Mohawk. And I began to realize that it was actually more—there was actually more biographical material about her than any other Indigenous person of the Americas at the time of contact. More than about Pocahontas. More than about Montezuma and, you know, from then on you get into almost nothing. So the attraction for me with this material, which is several hundred pages of details about her life, is here's an opportunity to personalize a story that had always been told in kind of general and impersonal terms. We know Europeans come to the New World. We know that Indigenous people's lives are phenomenally affected, that there's tremendous mortality, death, violence, displacement. We know that in general terms, but we never really had a handle on what, what does it mean to be an individual person undergoing these events?

So it looked to me like an opportunity to do that. The challenge was this was religious writing in the hagiographic mode meaning her life story was written by missionaries who were convinced she was a saint. So they had to write her life in the way that a saint's life is written. And so, you know, there's a lot of distortion that comes in when it's, really it's a story of virtues and symbols and emblematic anecdotes. So the trick was trying to extract from these materials written by Jesuits in the 17th century, some understanding of what the human life was that lay behind these documents. Because, you know, I say there was distortion. There are no historical sources that are transparent. And these ones, the sort of non-transparent aspects were a lot more obvious than maybe for some other people. So that's what drew

me to it, forced me to kind of come to terms with, for example, the literary genre of the saint's life and what its conventions are in order to kind of decode things. To get more acquainted with the historical ethnography on the Iroquoian peoples and so on and so forth. To learn about what a Jesuit was and what their motives might be, what their background would be, what they would mentally bring to this encounter.

So in the process I got to know as much about this young Jesuit, Claude Chauchetière, who wrote her life as I did about her. And it turned out they were, you know, inseparable parts of the story. So I ended up—I started out wanting to write a biography of an Indigenous woman. I ended up with a kind of—in a certain sense, dual biography of two people who personally knew one another and came from opposite sides of the world, in a sense. So it was a way of personalizing things in a, if you will, on both sides. So that's what originally attracted me to it and that was sort of the procedure.

I guess another part of your question, I also edited a book called *Colonial Saints* with Jodi Bilinkoff and that was—that came out of a conference that I organized in Toronto in 1999, I think it was, where in doing this research I realized this is not an exclusively Canadian story. Something like this is happening all over the place in Peru, in Mexico, and elsewhere. So I got together people from different parts of the world that had worked on life stories of Indigenous people told in this religious way. So we had art historians. We had literary specialists. We had a historian who studied the persecution of Quakers in 17th century Massachusetts and so on. And it was quite an interesting encounter of the scholars. We had different disciplines. We had people giving their papers in Portuguese, in Spanish, in French, in English. We had European people. And so we put it all—eventually put together most of the papers in a volume entitled *Colonial Saints*. So it was, you know, for me coming out of the Canadian history background, it was a nice occasion to internationalize the kind of research I was doing. And I think there's been a lot more of that on my part and on the part of other people of kind of breaking a little bit beyond the national boundaries of Canadian history and realizing that the phenomena we're looking at often are better understood if we open things up a little bit. And get in touch with similar phenomena and scholarship that's going on in other countries and in some

cases in other disciplines as well.