375s04 Reaction Paper Topics

Each student will write reaction papers on three of the four personal narratives we are reading this semester. These papers will serve as the starting point for our discussions of the nineteenth-century worlds of William Otter, Harriet Jacobs, Black Hawk, and Frances Trollope. While you may craft your paper around an issue or theme that you find interesting in these works (that's why they are called reaction papers), you may wish to focus on the following suggested topics:

1. What does Otter's narrative tell you about daily life in antebellum America? In particular, what can we learn about labor, masculinity, violence and racism from Otter's adventures? How would you relate Otter's "history" to that presented by the modern historians of northern capitalism that we have been reading in Major Problems? Due March 3rd.

2. How does Harriet Jacobs' autobiography reveal the intersections of racial and gender oppression under slavery? What can we learn about family life under both slavery and freedom from Jacobs' narrative? How would you relate Jacobs' experiences to the modern histories of the slave south that we have been reading in Major Problems? Due March 17th.

3. What does the Life of Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak tell us about the various strategies used by Native Americans to resist American expansion? How much control did Black Hawk have over his own story and how were his ideas contained during the process of composition and publication? How would you relate Black Hawk's ideas about land to those found in the modern histories of frontier expansion that we have been reading in Major Problems? Due April 14th.

4. What does Fanny Trollope's book tell us about life in antebellum America? In particular, how does she describe the place of women in American society? What were her hopes for her American "adventure" and how did her actual experiences differ from her expectations? How would you relate Trollope's story to the modern histories of antebellum America that we have been reading in Major Problems? Due May 5th.

These short essays (1000 words maximum) should, at a minimum, draw upon the relevant personal narrative. Superior essays will integrate primary and secondary sources from the autobiography and Major Problems into an original and persuasive analysis of the issues posed by the questions. While it is certainly acceptable to restate the questions above as you craft your thesis, better papers will center upon a well-defined argument rather than just summarizing the material. Please try to be as specific as possible in your papers, and illustrate your arguments with examples or quotations. When you use quotations, introduce them with proper transitions and analyze their meaning—do not regard quotations as self-explanatory. All quotations must be cited using parenthetical references, footnotes, or endnotes.

Before submitting your papers, please thoroughly PROOFREAD them. Rather than relying upon your word processor's spell check program, read your paper carefully, looking for misspellings (watch out for homonyms—words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings), missing or incorrect punctuation (possessives are a major pitfall for many students, as is the proper punctuation around quotations), typos, and layout issues. It may be helpful to read the paper aloud, or have a friend read the paper, to help you discover if something in your paper is confusing or not easily understood.

Depth and originality of analysis, organization, coherence, clarity, stylistic smoothness, and mechanics will all be factors in determining your grade. Papers must conform to the guidelines provided on the course syllabus and are due at the beginning of class on the dates assigned.