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Dr. Emin Lelić's Explanation of the Assignment and Its Value

I like to tell the students that this project, which is made up of several components and makes up a significant part of their final grade, is their way to go beyond being passive recipients of historical narratives and to become historians themselves.



The process begins with selecting a primary source from the rich Nabb Center collection. After analyzing the source, the students have to develop an understanding of its historical context before proceeding to craft a narrative about the past on the basis of their chosen historical primary source. This conditions them to develop a very keen understanding of the difference between primary and secondary sources. Even more importantly, it exposes them to the limitations of both primary and secondary sources.

Through this project, students begin to realize the amount of creative historical imagination that is necessary to transform primary historical sources into a secondary historical source – a book, article, video documentary, etc. In other words, when they first choose a primary source, Minstrel Booklets, to pick a random example, it becomes immediately evident that a primary source tells only a fragment of a larger story. In order to overcome that limitation, students must then do a lot of research about the historical context of that primary source: When were these minstrel booklets written? For whom? Who read them? How were they received? And, so on. As students research what others have written about minstrels of color and their historical ramifications, they inevitably become aware of the various historical narratives on the subject, which change significantly depending on the time period and political perspective. And here the limitations of secondary sources become apparent. No history book is omniscient; all historical narratives are conditioned by their time and perspective.

Finally, students must develop their own historical narrative, motivated by an original argument, for their video documentary. If they have done their research properly, this involves a lot of editing and cutting. Thus, they experience firsthand some of the limitations of secondary sources, as they are producing their own secondary source, the video documentary, by developing a historical argument and economizing information in order to fit the 10-minute time limit.

The greatest value in this long and demanding semester-long process in an introductory level history course is that students develop skills for assessing information in a critical manner. Learning and applying the historian's craft teaches students that historical

narratives are stories crafted by human beings to make sense of the past. This helps to demystify history and it imbues students with the confidence to critically examine historical narratives and to develop their own informed opinions.

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