To conduct research throughout my Spring semester, I was assigned to read various compilations of letters, notes, and other documentation concerning westward exploration by whites into Native American territory. Throughout this research opportunity I was charted with the task of specifically identifying how trade was conducted and how the written discourse conveyed the different manifestations of trade with Natives. Straying from my particular attention to trade, I also documented several other themes concerning the treatment of women in certain tribes as well as particular tribal hostility towards white explorers. My research took me from the likes the famed Lewis and Clark in *The Journals of the Expedition of Lewis and Clark*, to Edwin James’ *Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*, which detailed a fairly large exploratory force sent to establish further trade with the west, and ending with a more thematic book; *North American Indians*, which featured works of art and letters from George Catlin as he traveled among various Native American tribes.

From these texts, I drew several major themes that encompass a great deal of white and Native interactions. The first of these, one that was prominent in all three texts I read, was the destructive impact of tobacco and whisky trade with the Native Americans. The Natives, having little experience with either of the substances prior to introduction by the white man, soon became addicted to both. Nearly every tribe encountered by Edwin James’ exploratory force in *Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*, demands tobacco or whisky in some form upon being encountered. This is mirrored in Lewis and Clark’s journals, and is present in George Catlin’s letters. The Native Americans had little to no tolerance for alcohol and
would become belligerently drunk easily. When they were sober, they craved both the
tobacco and whisky, often stealing from the explorers or from neighboring tribes to obtain
the substances.

This unfortunate theme transitioned smoothly into a trade-related aspect of
white-Native interactions: item value systems. Often the Natives viewed possessions and
supplies much differently than the white man. This, more often than not, was slanted heavily
in the white mans’ favor. Typically described as “fickle” in James’ as well as Lewis and
Clarks’ works, the Natives may trade an ideal horse for a mere trinket the explorers brought
along to trade for food or other minor supplies. In addition, repeated offers of the same
bargain materials by a white man would many times convince Natives to barter away
something of much higher value than what they were receiving in exchange.

Viewing explorer-Native American relations in a positive light—the white explorers,
paired with their Native translators, would act as mediators for tribal conflicts, aiding in
peace agreements and reestablishment of trade relations. One particular case was among
more than a dozen different tribes, as detailed in James’ writing. Whites would often provide
tobacco for the peace-pipe ceremonies that would take place before debates and discourse
among the tribes. This promising relationship between whites and the Natives was soured,
however, upon the revelation in Lewis and Clark as well as George Catlin’s accounts that
white traders would often pit the Native peoples against each other to find and provide the
best resources for the best prices; this created violent conflict between tribes that had been
previously at peace and even set brother against brother.

Understandably, several Native American tribes had cold, hostile relationships with
the explorers throughout all three accounts. The Apache and Comanche were often stated as
the most violent and hostile in the texts, but other tribes were also considered dangerous
although, often never encountered by the explorers. This hostility was considered a bi-
product of the explorers’ encroachment on the Native way of life in the writing of George Catlin, who believed full-heartedly in the goodness and respectful nature of the Native American people. The Omahas were a shining example of this concept—a well-liked and communicable people in all three texts. This depiction of them may have had to do with their willingness to, for the most part, submit to the will of the white explorers and traders.

Finally, one of the most interesting thematic observations I made concerned Native American tribal treatment of women and how it related to the tribes’ civility by the writers of each of these three accounts. It was often concluded that tribes treating women respectfully and not as mere objects for trade were more civil and friendly than those who would use marriage as an economic bargaining piece—offering women to other tribal leaders and explorers for supplies, whisky and tobacco.

Overall, the relationship between white explorers and Native Americans had a few positive effects on tribes, but was primarily detrimental to their survival in America. In addition to being able to reach this conclusion from my research, I found the analysis of these texts taught me a great deal of skills for sorting significant and non-significant details in regard to a particular research goal as well as paying attention to themes that may tie into the primary goal of my research.