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Philanthropy and the Humanities
PHST P-211
Fall 2017

Reading Response #1

The traditional definition of philanthropy given by Payton is “voluntary action for public good.” The Underground Railroad, an informal and illegal pathway to emancipation for African slaves during the antebellum period embodied philanthropy as the reduction of human suffering, the promotion of equity and justice, and the providing of human fulfillment.

The reduction of human suffering was primarily achieved through addressing critical material needs of the fugitive slaves—such as food, shelter, and clothing. As argued by the Indiana Underground Railroad Coalition, several free black men like Gabriel Smith, chose to shelter and escort fugitive slaves throughout their lifetime, with no apparent benefit, and the risk of recapture by laws that simplified coercing even free blacks into captivity (p. 45). Moreover, the religiously inspired, like the Quaker merchant Levi Coffin, equipped their homes with supplies on a near daily basis, as fugitive slaves could be expected at any day, and at any hour.

At a more audacious level, philanthropic efforts of the Underground Railroad served as a direct affront to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and to the antebellum American legal climate—thereby promoting equity and justice. In one Ohio court case, aiding a fugitive slave was considered to be “excess philanthropy” and a manifestation of “aggression” (class discussion). More dangerously, enslaved men chose to defy the law by channeling any access to transportation as a means of bringing another to freedom. As a case in point, Freeman Anderson transported fugitive slaves to Indiana using the skiff he was provided to buy supplies; an action that underscores the conceptualization of philanthropy for a greater good rather than personal gain (p. 22).

In this era, the unique dichotomy of either being silent and law-abiding or vocal and delinquent posed a unique moral dilemma. On one hand, the criminality of breaking the law is often viewed as a moral failing of sorts, and indeed, the physical repercussions of breaking the law, as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, ranged from severe fines to subjecting fugitives to a brutal death (p.5). At the same time, a rigorous adherence to natural law could potentially absolve the sin of breaking the positive law—an imperfect reflection of society (Kahn, p.117-119). As a case in point, Levi Coffin and Reverend John Finley Crowe justified their act of defiance against the federal government, in hosting fugitive slaves, by the greater teachings of the Bible that espouse mercy, compassion, and human dignity (). Perhaps then, morality is in itself a subjective concept, based on an individual's perceptions and priorities of right and wrong.

And indeed, this shaping of moral understanding stems from self-actualization, the fruit of providing human fulfillment. Women like Sojourner Truth offered spiritual fulfillment to the oppressed black men and women of the Underground Railroad era, empowering shifts in the social order by quoting from the Bible. As a case in point, in the famous speech, "May I Say A Few Words," Sojourner espouses gender equality, stating that "women are coming up, blessed be God" (qtd. In , 57). Moreover, as slavery directly strips individuality and dignity, writers like Frances Harper and Harriet Beecher Stowe crafted works of poetry, essays, and literature, respectively, to promote black identity—even in the most troubled of states (class discussion).

Philanthropy in the context of the Underground Railroad presented itself traditionally, by providing the funds and material goods for direct alleviation of suffering. At the same time, however, philanthropy assumed broader contextual roles, paving the way for thought, both from legal and sociological standpoints.