

In Fall 2008, I taught a section of African American Literature: Beginnings to 1900. While there is virtually no text in the class which does not come under the scrutiny of ethics, I wanted to revise the course by focusing both on the ethics of obeying the law and on the ethics of breaking the law. The context for this discussion was our readings of slave narratives which feature enslaved persons who escaped slavery using the Underground Railroad (UGRR). Solomon Northup of Saratoga Springs, NY, was a free black man kidnapped and taken into slavery (his 1853 narrative: *Twelve Years a Slave*). Harriet Jacobs was born enslaved; in her 1861 text, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she details the specific problems faced by enslaved women. In addition, we read several speeches and letters by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free black woman who openly supported not only fugitive slaves but also John Brown and his followers.

The Rhetorical Use of the Truth: The purpose of this segment on slave narratives was not to debate the ethics of slavery; rather, it was to have the students consider the ethics of obeying — or of not obeying— the laws of a given land; and, to ask the students to focus on the sometimes necessary obfuscation of the truth in the narratives themselves (e.g.: Jacobs made up names to protect those who were breaking the law and to protect the integrity of the UGRR system; Northup lied about his true identity so as to protect his life; both Jacobs and Northup urged their readers to break the Fugitive Slave laws). Occasionally the narratives have such a strong literary quality that readers argue they are made up — not the “truth.” Slave narratives reprinted today now often come with several layers of authenticating materials, provided by historians. I wanted students to consider the ethical implications of using the truth to tell the “not-truth,” by embellishment. Again, the purpose was not to debate whether the texts are “true” or not; rather, the purpose was to have the students think about how literary and rhetorical devices serve ethical considerations. The class also read and debated points about David Walker’s *Appeal: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*, in which Walker argues that both the Christian God and the Constitution of the United States are on the side of those who would fight slavery in any way possible, including armed insurrection.

In order to help the students assess the ethical issues they have considered throughout the term, one paper for the course asked the students to write about the act of truth-telling in these nineteenth century texts. The paper question: “Consider the sometimes competing voices in the novel, the short stories, poems, or the essays you have read during the latter half of the term. To what extent is the act of truth-telling significant in the writing?” This assignment was one of the options for the final paper assignment for the course; about half of the students chose this assignment. The results were thought-provoking and often insightful.

History and real experiences: In addition to having students read texts that addressed the ethics of telling the truth, and of breaking the law, I wanted the students to see historical sites used by abolitionists. Using support from the EAC, the Africana Studies Program, and the History Department, I arranged a trip to the Harriet Tubman House and to the William H. Seward House in Auburn, NY. Seward graduated from Union College in 1820; Tubman is now an iconic figure of the UGRR. The trip brought history and its legacy together for the students as they toured the homes of two key figures of U.S. abolitionism who were friends and colleagues. The Swards provided a home for Tubman, which she later purchased, in 1857. This transaction was illegal at the time. Students were impressed by Tubman’s perseverance, both during her abolitionist activities during the antebellum period and her communally oriented activities in the postbellum

period. Being able to see the basement of the Seward home where fugitive slaves were housed gave the students a sense of the scale of the Abolitionist endeavors, as well as allowing them to see the social and economic differences between Seward and Tubman.

I also wanted students to be able to extrapolate the issues from their readings into their own lived experiences. One of my goals was to have students move beyond reading the texts as records of something that happened “back then,” and move toward thinking about the ways older texts can ask readers of the twenty-first century to consider our own ethical stances. Toward the end of the course, I asked students to take on the roles of nineteenth century people; half of them were assigned to be white, the other half were assigned to be African American. I let them decide all other demographic details: whether they were wealthy, poor, or in-between; male or female; free or enslaved; property owner or not. I then asked them a series of questions about whether they would help an enslaved person escape, altering the consequences as we went along. For example, in the first case, there were no negative consequences to helping an enslaved person escape. The negative consequences then shifted: first to a financial consequence (losing business, paying a fine) to a physical consequence (being beaten, enslaved, hung). When I asked about the consequences of obeying the Fugitive Slave Laws, some students opened up the question of, in their words, “what kind of law? Moral or legal?” It was clear that as the negative consequences became more severe, the fewer students would be willing (hypothetically) to put themselves or their loved ones at physical risk.

After this class meeting, I attended a meeting of the UCID (Union Coalition for Inclusiveness and Diversity) at which we learned about the clicker technology available to use through ITS. The clicker system allows us to take surveys and show the results immediately in class; the advantage is the votes are anonymous. I had not known of this technology before the class in which we did the “what would you do” exercise. Though I believe that it is vital that our students practice discussing difficult subjects with one another face to face, and I would not want to rely entirely on the clicker system, I do think that in future courses I would try out the clicker technology because as the class went on, students were clearly more uncomfortable about revealing what they might do in this hypothetical situation as the negative consequences became more severe.

In the future, I plan on adding some readings in ethics into the class that directly address the issues of truth-telling. I am especially interesting in adding essays published during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the writers of the slave narratives would possibly have known of them.