The Scholar as Human
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Published by Cornell University Press

Castillo, Debra A. and Anna Sims Bartel.
The Scholar as Human: Research and Teaching for Public Impact.

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When Ed Baptist, a historian who participated in our seminar, shared some of his work on runaway slave ads, he brought some images of such ads and focused our attention on the small black figure of a runner. This icon appears in every print ad seeking the return of “property”—a tiny, eloquent image of freedom that bespeaks its opposite. What Ed impressed upon us was the physicality of the icon. In every print shop around the country, there was iron type for every letter and punctuation mark as well as sorts—special characters—including the sort of a runaway. Boys, Ed told us, were often typesetting assistants, and so he painted for us a picture of a wood-floored printing office, where the news and advertisements were set and where a twelve-year-old assistant picked up this sort of a human being fleeing slavery and set it in a composing stick. What did such assistants feel as they handled the sort? Did they realize they were participating in ending someone’s hope for freedom? Encouraging violence? Advancing the dehumanization of an entire people?

Ed Baptist (a member of our seminar but not a contributor to this volume) is a key collaborator and founder of Freedom on the Move—an NEH-funded national archive of runaway slave ads. The fact of the archive itself emphasizes the importance of artifacts. The work of arts and humanities scholars is rooted in ideas, but it depends on artifacts—books, of course, and archives, but also textiles, ruins, signage, blueprints, exhibits, paintings,
videos, websites, and much more. Artifacts proclaim not only information but belonging and context. Their embeddedness in communities, organizations, landscapes, and homes make them extraordinary opportunities for place-based and creative connection to others. In short, all artifacts are already bridges with the potential to link communities and scholars. Ed and his colleagues in Freedom on the Move write, “[W]e use crowdsourcing to enable the general public to take part in creating the database. Though the data collected will be invaluable to academic researchers, we also see this as a collective public history project: the crowdsourcing platform will provide an opportunity for people in all areas of life to engage with the history of slavery in the US in a concrete and meaningful way, by excavating small details of enslaved peoples’ lives, bit by bit.”

Much of the work of humanizing scholarship seeks to demonstrate that kind of commitment to public benefit and participation, to treat artifacts and their home communities with the respect and collegiality that they deserve. To the surprise of many scholars, the hard work of demonstrating that respect is not a cost of doing business but an opening toward greater learning and deeper impact—again, this is a core lesson of community engagement, but it is shared here in the particular stories of individuals grappling with their own instinctual sense of right practice.