

Working Across Disciplines: Understanding Slave Life and Culture.

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Last week at this time, I was in Washington DC attending the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and Culture. In the afternoon, I made sure that I had a front row seat at a roundtable table discussion honoring the life and work of John Blassingame. John Blassingame, you remember, is best known for his 1972 book entitled *Slave Community*; he also authored a number of other works on slave testimony, African Americans who fought in the Civil War, and essays on Reconstruction. Blassingame passed away on February 13 of this year after fighting and losing a long battle with a nerve disease that immobilized his body the last years of his life. I thought about Blassingame and his *Slave Community* as I drew my thoughts together to share with you this morning. Blassingame's *Slave Community* did not enter the world quietly. There were people who praised his work and almost as many who found it deficient and lacking any real substance. Blassingame was criticized for leaving out slave testimony and for standing too close to Stanley Elkins and not talking enough about African influences in African-American life. Blassingame took the criticism and soothed its stings with the understanding that what was between the covers of the book was not all that he knew about black folks. He knew that he had a real understanding of black culture and the lives it created, it just was not between the covers of this first book. He went on to revise the book, issuing the new edition six years later. He also wrote a volume on slave testimony and published it too. But what he also did, and this is what drew my attention to him as I thought about what we are doing here today, is what he did at Yale University while he was completing the manuscript for *Slave Community*. He was setting up one of the first and one of the finest Afro-American Studies Department in the country and he was using an interdisciplinary approach. He brought together people from different disciplines that understood different aspects of a people--who could talk about multiple meanings and contexts and perspectives. He did what we are doing here. What studying the African-American community had taught John Blassingame was something that we now know and accept, partially as a result of the work that he did: It is not possible to understand a people or an event by only looking at them from one perspective. And so we are here today and I am talking to you about working across disciplines--understanding slave life and culture, about what Blassingame knew and what I have come to realize is that this is easier said than done. I think that it is easier said than done for three reasons:

1. There are problems of language
2. There are problems of access

3. There are problems of style

Language. Let me share with you what I mean about Language... The Fourth of July is a very busy day here at Monticello. It is also a vacation day for Monticello employees. But on July 4th of this year I left my home, drove through the heat and reached my office--not a destination that offered fun or excitement for the day. I set aside the day to do one thing and one thing only...to read and understand the materials Jillian Galle had sent me. As a member of this steering committee I, just like the rest of you, had received thick white envelopes of information. When I opened the first one, I sat back in my chair, adjusted my eyeglasses, and decided that I did not understand anything that the envelope contained--except her opening letter. I tried a number of strategies to decipher the authority tables that her mailing included...to no avail. After a hour or so, I picked up the telephone dialed her number, got her answering machine because, unlike me, she was having a holiday, and said one word--Help! I think that I told her that we needed to meet and talk about this project and what she wanted from me. We did meet and she did explain the information that had so puzzled me before. I came to realize that in working across disciplines, language can be a barrier that impedes exchange if not addressed.

Access. Many historians are becoming technology gurus. My graduate advisor, Ed Ayers, is considered by many to be blazing a trail in this area--showing others what can be done with computers and networks and data available to those both in and out of the academy. What I have come to realize through learning about this project however is that there are different types of technology access. If we are going to efficiently work across disciplinary boundaries we are going to have to be mindful of the limitations our own trainings provide. We must also be brave enough to learn yet another skill.

Style. A couple of summers ago I was in a seminar at the Carter G. Woodson Institute at the University of Virginia, and a bunch of scholars--all historians this time-- were talking about technology and new ways of getting the information that we need in order to research and write. I shared something that I had noted about historians who had been writing for a long time--something that I had also come to recognize in myself. We don't just get information--however we get information in archives, in libraries, on the web...and write about it. We sit with the information for a while--sometimes longer than others. We get to know it and allow it to get to know us as it enters our consciousness. If we are working across disciplines we have to be mindful that an archaeologist may not follow the same path as a historian, and that a historian may not have the same procedure as a biologist, and a botanist may have a different or a similar pattern than all of them--or one identical to one or more of them. It is not simple. Working across disciplines requires patience and tolerance. My father used to tell me that it is not how hard a person works but how smart. I think that as we gather together to understand the slave life and culture we need to remember this...we need to remember what John Blassingame knew...that the source of black life and culture is African-American people themselves. So, that when we bring together these objects, these beads, and bones, and bits of bowls, that we recognize that they all tell us something that when added to the words of and about the people who left them behind, we will come to understand the people we study

in the ways that they understood themselves. Which is really all that we are trying to do after all, isn't it?