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Section 3 Response

Radcliffe-Brown stated that myths and legends “serve to express certain ways of thinking and feeling about the society and its relation to the world of nature[[1]](#footnote-1).” Thus, a society’s preserved myths and legends are representative of the values and worldviews which they find worth upholding. According to Yentsch [[2]](#footnote-2), myths and legends surrounding houses are encoded with “ethnographic information on social values and folk ideas about kinship, community, identity, society, history, culture, and nature.” All of these areas of information mentioned by Yentsch are the ideas and factors that compose one’s worldview. The more we can work on constructing a complete picture of the John Brown House’s original layout, use, internal structure etc., the better we can understand the atmosphere that would have been produced and consequently, surrounded the landscape.

There are various ways that we can interpret the information and artifacts we find at the John Brown House. The structuralist approach would be to focus not on what the social groups did, but on what they thought[[3]](#footnote-3). Leone’s critical archaeology approach would involve “defining material culture as one form or symbol of social and political power[[4]](#footnote-4)” and paying attention to the cultural and larger societal ideologies represented in a house. Houses not only have the potential to reveal countless amounts of information about a set of individuals and a family, but also about a society as a whole.

Take a hand-painted ceramic plate shard as an example. If this artifact was found, dated, and decided to have been used by the original inhabitants, we could use it to tell us a variety of things. It would first indicate the personal aesthetic of the original owner. If, by using newspapers or some other reliable cultural informant contemporary to the era, we were able to find out information about the cost and “genre” (daily/holiday/outdoor etc. use) of the plate, we could find out more about the spending or eating habits of the owners.

On a larger scale, finding remains of entire structures or features can give us a glimpse of the bigger picture. Knowing the types of buildings located on a lot and where they were placed in relation to each other can give us a good idea of not only the types of activities that took place on the site, but what their order of importance was. Even the landscape of a site can reveal a wealth of information about the original inhabitants. Leone uses this great example of gardens in 18th century Annapolis. He found that the style of falling or descending gardens was an expression of control that mirrored the owner’s need for command over natural law and the changing political atmosphere. He further examines gardens to inform conclusions he draws about alignment of wealth, land as income, hierarchical structures, manners, and individual liberty[[5]](#footnote-5). Leone shows that landscapes and architectural structures were a means for their original owners to reflect their ideologies and establish their place in society. But beyond what it was able to do at its original creation, an architectural space can effectively serve to help an archaeologist recreate the “world in action” and gain a clearer understanding of the inhabitants mental thought process.

We should be able to use what remains of the John Brown House in a similar way. At our disposal, we not only have an intact structure to examine, but documents, whatever artifacts we find, geophysics surveys, and whatever remaining features we can unearth. Yentsch stated that houses hold a variety of ethnographic information. All these things that we have at our disposal should be great fodder for building that complete and fully understood picture that archaeologists are always seeking to create. If we know what was done on the site, we should be able to work on combining that information to create an idea of what the original inhabitants of the house thought like. And when doing this reconstruction, it will be important to take everybody’s ideas into account. Everybody brings their biases, preconceptions, and life experiences into their interpretations, and we should always remember to work to make our explanations as comprehensive as possible.

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1. Anne Yentsch, “Legends, Houses, Families, and Myths” (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yentsch 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Julia A. King, “Household Archaeology, Identities, and Biographies” (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. King 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark P. Leone, “The Georgian Order as the Order of Merchant Capitalism in Annapolis, Maryland” (Washington: Smithsonian, 1988) 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)