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ARCH 1900

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Critical Response Week 4

 Archaeology of College Hill has taught us patience, endurance, and fortitude. Our methods of excavation have proven themselves effective as we reach lower depths and continue to discover material culture. At the John Brown House, we are digging not only for our educational benefit but for the rest of the community. We hope to learn more about the occupants of the area from the items we recover and, hopefully, learn about the history that lays underneath our feet.

Lucas and Jones both agreed on the fact that archaeology is generally a linear process that moves in stages from excavation to post-excavation to publication, however, Lucas mentions that a more reflexive methodology encourages constant feedback (2001: 14). This, on the other hand, may not feasible in our own case. Because of the limited time we have out in the field, it is best, as we are doing, that we continue moving in a linear direction. If we were to go into lab every so often, we would lose precious time out in the field, and perhaps even lose the capacity to reach the earlier periods of occupation – our ultimate goal in excavating. I believe that our methods do not hinder us in the least bit. As beginners, we are learning how to properly do things by the book. What we are currently doing and learning is laying the foundation for what will hopefully be a successful semester.

Lucas wrote about the hierarchy that exists within an excavation site. The disparity of power found between the lowly diggers and the site director, as Lucas describes it, is not paralleled at our own site. As a member of Unit 11, I’m not able to watch the other units excavate; however, I am able to find out via their blogs what they managed to accomplish for the day. In addition, I can also read the excavation and unit summaries in order to find out what the other groups unearthed that day. I am pleased with the way information is freely disseminated in the class. Nothing is hidden from us; we have full access to each other’s site reports.

Lucas also states that the director “determines the interpretation of the site not only by being in possession of the ‘wider picture,’ but by selecting where and what the site assistant excavates” (2001: 9). This is certainly not true within our class. Though we have not reached the interpretation phase, we were able to select where to dig. Once we were oriented with the area and up to date with the findings of the previous classes we were able to make informed decisions about where to dig.

Jones describes the archaeological site as a holistic entity (2003: 40). Since excavation is a destructive and non-reproducible process, we cannot go back and redo any of our work. Through excavation the site has become fragmented. As we’ve been discovering material culture, we’ve been placing them in Ziploc bags completely devoid of all context. Jones uses a large-scale operation in Britain to make his point, which isn’t very comparable to our own situation, but as we bag our sherds we lose their spatial and temporal veracity. Jones also very briefly mentioned the destructiveness of archaeology. It wasn’t until last week’s class that I fully comprehend this fact. My unit ran into so many roots, and as we were clipping them, I couldn’t help but think, “What right do I have to harm this living tree?”

In conclusion, I have found the class to be not only educational and instructive but fulfilling and rewarding. Lucas described how gender affected the site dynamic during the 19th and even 20th century, stating how women hindered the excavation process. Fortunately, this is no longer believed to be true, but I can see how a woman’s small frame or “feminine weakness” may impede her ability to do heavy-lifting when necessary or perhaps her ability to shovel for extended periods of time. He also made a very interesting point at the end when he discussed privacy. I never thought to consider the issue of privacy associated with archaeology. At the John Brown House, actual families, with descendants still around, lived where we are currently digging. Though we have received permission to dig, we must tread carefully as we uncover objects and possessions that once belonged to living, breathing people.

Works Cited

Lucas, Gavin. 2001 Introduction, pgs. 1-17, In Critical Approaches to Fieldwork. Routledge: London.Roskams, Excavation. Chapter 13.

Jones, Andrew. 2002 Archaeology observed, pgs. 39-62, In Archaeological theory and scientific practice. CUP: Cambridge.