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Critical Response Three

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**Critical Response 3: Archaeological Questions and Interpretations**

Post-processualist theory in archaeology has led to the scholarly acceptance of applying flexible and nuanced methodologies oft borrowed from other disciplines to the study of material remains. This has led to an interest in ethnoarchaeology, or the reconstruction of past lived experiences. In terms of North American household archaeology, this type of anthropologically-tinged archaeology has taken the form of analysis of what James Deetz calls the “mental structure or worldview” of the inhabitants of historical houses. This structuralist approach is a distinct departure from the processualist school of archaeological thought prevalent in the 1960s through the 1980s that advocated for more scientific analysis of material remains, which translated to an emphasis on the interaction between the house structure and its natural environment in terms of North American household archaeology. In this school of thought, the house is thought of as an “adaptive mechanism” (King 2006: 301) and is therefore directly reflective of environmental and social conditions at the time of its inhabitance. This focus does not fully account for the day-to-day lived experiences of the members of a household and can do little to describe intra-household relations. Yet Deetz’s structuralism lacks a concretely defined methodology and succumbs to many of the analytical shortcomings of processualism. Household archaeologists, then, must be intellectually able to combine a wide variety of theoretical approaches to their analysis of the material and textual remains that they work with in order to best achieve an understanding of historical lived experiences.

By extension, this combined theoretical approach to household archaeology necessitates both aboveground and trench work. The value of modern ethnographic research focused on collecting the oral history of sites is illustrated in Anne Yentsch’s chapter on household mythologies in an edited volume on North American documentary archaeology. Opening the chapter with the assertion that landscape should be studied as though it was “a series of images in which history is held” (Peter Schmidt in Yentsch 1988: 5), she sets the stage for the argument that aboveground archaeology can make valuable contributions to the social stories told about historic structures. These oral histories can illuminate the social, political, and economic functions of houses, regardless of their accuracy. In terms of the John Brown House, legends surrounding the household’s relationship to George Washington are especially indicative of historical social structures, not in the least because subjective stories of Washington’s visits to the house are reflected in the prominence of George Washington-related decorations in the dining room of the house. In this case, it is obvious that John Brown contributed directly to the construction of mythologies relating to his relationship with George Washington, using Washington’s likeness to establish a physically visible connection between himself and the great, patriotic general. This illustrates the importance for the Brown household of being associated with politically powerful figures, specifically those related to the American Revolution. This association would have socially functioned to elevate John Brown’s political and patriotic clout, which, as evidenced by the prevalence of Washington-related objects, was extremely important in the tumultuous early years of American independence.

Another important cultural shift at this time, arguably also related to the political and social upheaval of the settlement of the New World and the subsequent American Revolution, was a new emphasis on intellect and order. Known as the “Georgian Order”, this cultural trend is reflected in both the architecture of North American houses themselves as well as the artifacts they contain. The John Brown House was the first house in Providence to be constructed in the Georgian style of architecture. Mark Leone believes that Georgian-style houses were “intended as witnesses to an ability to observe and copy nature accurately” (Leone 1988: 250), an admirable quality for a household to be associated with because it illustrated control over a previously wild environment. This control over the natural world served “to convince people that a rational social order based on nature was possible and that those with access to its laws were its natural leaders” (Leone 1988: 250). By choosing to construct his house using the Georgian style, John Brown was making a conscious argument about what his position in society should be. By representing himself as an ordered, organized, capable man through the architecture of his house, he was asserting his belief that he was well suited to prominence in society.

The Georgian Order as described by Mark Leone is further reflected in the John Brown House by artifacts. The Georgian Order is materially represented by objects that relate to historically novel technologies and scientific instruments. Leone posits that the desire to own and display objects such as clocks and musical instruments was an important symbol of wealth and intellectualism. The Brown household was in possession of beautiful upright clocks, indicating a concern with chronological order. They also had a machine that produced static electricity, an item that may have been used to impress and entertain guests at dinner parties. An object such as this had a variety of social functions, able to be used for “pleasure, amusement, instruction, as status symbols, as things of beauty…” (Porter in Leone 1988: 242) and certainly would have emphasized John Brown’s good taste, reaffirming his elite position in Providence society.

In utilizing such a wide variety of approaches to the study of household archaeology, the responsible scholar must be careful not to sacrifice methodological rigor in a desire to paint a holistic picture of a household’s socioeconomic functions. All of the authors reference the analytical difficulties that must be grappled with in household archaeology, the most challenging being “matching specific contexts to temporally circumscribed periods of occupation” (Mrozowski 2006: 37). This issue is complicated at sites of continuous occupation over a long period of time, such as the John Brown House. Subsequent owners have radically modified the house, most notably in decorative and technological modifications. Besides Marsden Perry, the early 20th century owner of the property who is often credited with the most extensive changes to the house, there has been another important period of ownership that greatly affects aboveground archaeological interpretations; the conversion of the property into a house museum by the Rhode Island Historical Society has imposed a perceived set of lived experiences onto the domestic space. This is not to say that the currently viewable presentation of the John Brown House is historically inaccurate. Rather, an archaeologist working at the site must be aware of how modern motivations and biases have shaped the modern state of the house so as not to conflate the objects displayed in the rooms with the period of original proprietorship. Context, then, truly is everything. Both the historical context of material remains and the analytical contexts in which different theoretical methodologies should be applied to the study of households are of paramount importance in the project of reconstructing past lives. Archaeologists must be critical and rigorous while remaining flexible and innovative, a fact well illustrated by the archaeological study of the John Brown House and other household sites.