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Section 5 Response

Defining “the past” and “heritage” as they apply to my own life is difficult. First, I have to try and establish some difference between the two. In the dictionary, heritage is defined as “something that comes or belongs to one by reason of birth[[1]](#footnote-1)” while past is defined as “what has existed or has happened at some earlier time[[2]](#footnote-2).” For me, “heritage” is a history personalized to each individual while “the past” refers to a broader type of history.

My heritage would be summed up of the experiences and accomplishments of my parents and the earliest known relations I can tie myself back to. To further define my heritage, I think of the struggles that my great-grandparents went through, and claim them as my own. I would say that heritage even goes so far as to feeling that I have the right to share in the shame or success of the countries that my parents came from. Heritage in terms of archaeology is a history that is relevant to the way that a person self-identifies.

Generally speaking, the phrase “the past” has broader, more general implications. The past doesn’t necessarily have to be something that I’m personally or linked to through familial ties. It’s more about having an awareness of events that have occurred or mindsets that have existed and understanding that they are part of a larger history. For instance, while I am in no way linked to Marston Perry or any of his descendants, I’m still extremely interested in finding the remains of his existence in the John Brown House yard. It’s hard to succinctly put into words, but “the past” connotes events and conditions that don’t necessarily belong to the person considering it.

When dealing with the past, it is important to keep in mind that it is difficult to say who the past belongs to and whether all parties involved in the history of a place are accurately and adequately represented. Shepherd warns that notions of ownership and agency often overlook stories of dispossession[[3]](#footnote-3). As Bankoff and Winter pointed out, although people often say that archaeology will always uncover the stories of the unheard peoples, the Van Cortlandt plantation proved that the very nature of archaeology can neglect a people group as easily as deliberate human intention,[[4]](#footnote-4) despite the best efforts of an archaeologist to avoid doing so.

The fact that notions of heritage and past are different for every individual is part of why publication needs to be as neutral, unbiased, and objective as possible. Again, even thinking of the John Brown House in terms of archaeological finds related to slavery, there are at least two completely different audiences that could be catered to—descendants of slaves and descendants of the freedmen in the greater New England area. Rhode Island was fairly dependent on slavery and as seen in the Slavery and Justice article, the Brown family was fairly involved in the slave trade[[5]](#footnote-5). So when presenting finds related to evidence of the slave trade, it would be important to humanize the memory of the slaves without detracting from the good that the Brown family accomplished outside of the slave trade.

People’s different ways of identifying with the past is another reason why an archaeologist needs to remain as objective as possible when presenting their information. While an archaeologist’s job is to reconstruct the clearest possible picture of the past, he or she must also leave room for people’s rights to claim and reclaim their heritage. It is not the archaeologist’s job to decide how today’s people should relate to the past, only to make informed interpretations and unearth the most complete history available.

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*“Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and  
 Justice*.” Brown University, 2007.

1. “Heritage” (Dictionary.com, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Past” (Dictionary.com, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nick Shepherd “Give the Past Back to the People”(Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007) 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Arthur H. Bankoff and F. Winter “The Archaeology of Slavery” (New York: International Journal of Historical Archaeology) 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Slavery and Justice” (Brown University, 2007) 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)