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Reconciling with Slavery in the United States: An Evolving Narrative

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A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents for supporting me in my education, and for encouraging me to pursue what I am passionate about.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the people who supported the completion of this thesis. First, thank you to Dr. Cathryn Molloy for serving as my chair. Your depth of expertise along with your passion for issues of injustice have kept me inspired and energized as I completed this project. Each conversation with you left me more excited to write than I was before, and your feedback was incredibly helpful as this thesis took shape. Thank you for your encouragement and patience from start to finish. I am so grateful to have had your guidance in this and I learned so much from you—not just in terms of content, but also in terms of being a responsible researcher and leader in academia.

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Introduction

The impetus for this thesis project comes from a desire to better understand ongoing racial inequity and tension in the United States. There has been progress toward racial equity since the abolition of slavery in 1865, but, as Ta-Nehisi Coates noted, “such progress rests on a shaky foundation, and fault lines are everywhere” (2014). There is still great discrepancy between the wealth and health of Black Americans versus white Americans, and there seems to be disagreement among some Americans about the cause of this inequality (and, about the solution to it).

I believe that the place to start when trying to understand this is history—starting with slavery—and perhaps just as importantly, the stories people tell about history. A coherent national discussion of slavery and its various legacies is a necessary part of addressing contemporary forms of racial inequalities in the U.S. For there to be progress, I argue, Americans must meaningfully contend with slavery’s influence and legacy; the realities of slavery and its repercussions must be integrated into the dominant narrative. Otherwise, people may continue to live in diametrically opposed realities: one in which slavery was but a minor blemish in an otherwise inspiring story of American freedom and success, and one in which slavery—and the racism that both fueled and was fueled by the institution—was and is an integral part of American life. This dissonance will continue to feed racial inequality and moral atrophy if efforts to interrogate the rhetorical construction of slavery aren’t made.

It is worth noting here that the notion of “progress” is nuanced. There are several elements of progress toward racial equity to consider: legal, health, economic, social and cultural, and educational. True reconciliation and healing from slavery—as much as is

possible—requires equity in all of these areas. When progress is made in one area, it can fool some white Americans into thinking that the work is done when it is not.

This project addresses two strands of inquiry that spring from this issue of evolving race relations in the U.S. First, I examine how Americans talk about the *history* of slavery in the U.S. What rhetorical strategies are employed when slavery is discussed and/or debated in public history contexts and beyond? Second, I examine talk about the *future* of race relations in the context of the legacy of slavery. Specifically, I am interested in exploring what rhetorical strategies are employed when discussing the potential for reparations in mainstream arenas.

These questions are essentially about the stories that are produced, reproduced, and circulated on the origins of the US and their impact. My thesis project ultimately asks: What are the prevailing national narratives about slavery and its impact? What role do discourses surrounding reparations in the form of historical realignments play in ongoing efforts to heal race relations in the US?

Readers will find two distinct submittable papers that make up this thesis: one an ethnographic project conducted at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation and one a critical discourse analysis of a corpus of texts from the past two years related to reparations.

Narratives of Slavery at Historic Sites: Slavery at Monticello

Abstract

This article seeks to identify the main narrative(s) about slavery that are shared at historic sites such as plantations. Specifically, I discuss findings from a micro-ethnographic inquiry at Monticello—Thomas Jefferson’s plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia where more than 600 people were enslaved over the course of Jefferson’s life. This field-based inquiry in rhetoric yielded several key themes, many of which demonstrate a concerted effort to challenge dominant, white-centric narratives and to provide proper recognition and acknowledgement of enslaved persons’ contributions and struggles at Monticello.

Introduction

In December of 2019, I attended four tours at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello estate in Charlottesville, Virginia. During these visits, I ventured to better understand how this historic site’s staff communicate about slavery. What narratives do tour guides share regarding slavery, Thomas Jefferson, and life at Monticello? Is slavery downplayed? Is it given proper recognition? How do guides navigate implications of slavery in terms of Jefferson and his legacy?

Historic sites where slavery played a significant role, such as plantations and estates like Monticello, are opportune spaces in which to examine how popular origin narratives in US public history are coming to terms with slavery. How is slavery addressed in the crafting of visitors’ experiences of such places? What impact does the rhetorical content of site tours and installations have on how visitors think about slavery?

What stories are told through these sites? How do these narratives challenge (or not) notions of “founding fathers” and their bold contributions to American progress?

Rhetoric, of course, is a fundamental aspect of how people understand history and connect the past to the present. Whether it is through an attempt to reconstruct the past for its own sake, or to evoke the past in service of a present need, the rhetoric used when discussing history acts as a link between past and present (Gronbeck, 1995). Examining the rhetoric used to discuss history at specific historic sites can help to contextualize and clarify the rhetoric used to discuss related contemporary issues.

In this essay, I look at the rhetoric used to discuss slavery so that I might theorize the impact of that rhetoric. While rhetoric about slavery can be found in several places—for example, in school curriculums, news articles, documentaries, or films—I have chosen to look at a public historic site. Specifically, I describe my experience acting as a participant-observer on tours—both official “house” tours and designated “slavery” tours—at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Literature Review

While interest in reparations are not new, there is a recent mounting push for reparations for slavery in the U.S. (Reiter, 2019; Obuah, 2016; Melish, 2006). Calls for reparations, “despite being long derided as an unrealistic plan” and despite being shot down repeatedly, have never been completely squelched and are now experiencing a resurgence due in part to increased political interest from the Democratic party (Reiter, 2019, p. 1).

By extension, there is mounting pressure on historic sites to communicate the history of slavery with reparations in mind. After all, arguably, simply acknowledging the

full, complex history of slavery is a form of reparations in and of itself. Melish (2006) put it well: “One of the most important aspects of the notion of reparations, then, is its promise of restoring completeness to everyone’s American history” (p. 133).

The related literature might be best illuminated via the themes: strategies for reparations; resistance from historic sites to presenting an integrated narrative; exceptions to resistance (i.e., sites that have explicitly strived to present an integrated narrative); resistance from visitors to hearing an integrated narrative at historic sites; and challenges to dominant (i.e., white-centered) narratives at historic sites.

Strategies

The extent to which historic sites are engaged in this reparations work varies. Historic sites have adopted various strategies for communicating about slavery, and while some lend themselves well to reparations work, others impede it.

In their analysis of hundreds of tours of plantation museums and houses, researchers Eichstedt and Small (2002) identified several common approaches used by sites to discuss slavery (p. 162). They include:

1. Symbolic annihilation and the erasure of slavery;
2. Trivialization and deflection of the experience of enslavement;
3. Segregated knowledge (i.e., providing a tour about slavery that is separate from the main tour); and
4. Relative incorporation . . . thoughtful and integrated presentation of historical information that includes discussion of the slave experience.

Resistance from Historic Sites

While many would likely agree that an integrated presentation of history is what all historic sites should aim for, many sites, instead, erase, trivialize, deflect, and segregate narratives of slavery from the overall narrative of U.S. history (Carter, Butler, & Alderman, 2014; Modlin, 2008).

These sites are likely unsure of how to handle the complexity of their rhetorical situation; they must work within a paradox: major U.S. historical figures are both revered and reviled. As Melish (2006) clarified, “restoring completeness to history” is often more complicated than simply adding in previously missing stories. It requires careful excavation, “uncovering ... successive layers of language and meaning, sometimes in bits and pieces over a long period of time” (p. 104). And even once stories are uncovered, there is the matter of integrating them with the current narrative, and possibly reinterpreting and recrafting the current narrative completely.

As Adamkiewicz explained (2016), it is not just important that historic sites talk about slavery; the *way* they talk about it is equally important. Simply acknowledging that slavery was a part of the historic site—for example, by stating the number of enslaved people who lived there—is not enough. Plantations must go beyond these “perfunctory” acknowledgements of slavery (p. 23). To truly reintegrate the history of slavery at these sites, plantations must dig deep and deal with not just the facts, but also with the emotional impact of those facts. As Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry (2011) pointed out, “tours through plantation house museums are more than mere factual adventures; these journeys are emotional, indeed, affective. The process of remembering means coming to terms with more than facts” (p. 15).

In addition to the complexity of the task, historic sites may also be fearful of negative reactions from donors, visitors, and other stakeholders (Melish, 2006). Historic sites often feel pressure to provide “edutainment” to audiences—education that is entertaining and enjoyable (Carter, Butler, & Alderman, 2014; Hannigan, 1998; van Aalst & Boogaarts, 2002). This pressure may lead to “sugar-coating” history so as not to upset visitors who are accustomed to narratives that minimize or ignore the reality of slavery.

Another reason that historic sites may feel the need to “edutain” their audiences is that they are, in a sense, “tourist destinations” (Alderman & Modlin, 2008, p. 266). Historic sites’ need to attract visitors (and thus, revenue) may impact how they communicate about slavery. For example, plantation owners and managers may take it upon themselves to minimize or erase the historical narratives of slavery in the plantation’s promotional materials in efforts to attract more visitors (Stone, Spangler, Griffin, & Hanna, 2016).

Relatedly, it is important to note here that tourist sites in general, including plantations and other historic sites, have traditionally catered to white audiences (Alderman, 2013), and white audiences tend to be less interested in slave narratives than Black audiences (Butler, Carter, & Dwyer, 2008). Even when plantations do discuss slavery, they do so in a way that preserves the “white nostalgia” they are ultimately selling (Adamkiewicz, 2016).

Exceptions

Despite all of these astute critiques, there are notable examples of sites that are employing powerful counter-narratives meant to challenge dominant, white-centric narratives that minimize the role of slavery (Cook, 2015). As they acknowledge the

realities of slavery and emphasize the contributions of enslaved persons at such sites, these efforts constitute important reparations work.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia—the research site I rely on for this project—has made a lot of progress in how the realities of slavery have been integrated into tours. Over the past 30 years, Monticello has made major changes to the way they present the topic of slavery. In the 1990s, Monticello gathered archival and archeological research that gave greater insight into Mulberry Row, the area where many enslaved African Americans lived and worked. During this time, the site also brought on an advisory committee to help Monticello accurately portray historical interpretations of race and slavery. Monticello, then, decided to begin giving tours of Mulberry Row, and tour guides were encouraged to speak openly about slavery. Overall, reactions to this new tour were reportedly very positive (Horton, 2006a).

Resistance from the Audience

However, although most visitors today expect the topic of slavery to be part of their plantation experience (Bright, Alderman & Butler, 2016)—especially African American visitors (Alderman & Modlin, 2008)—there are still those who expect to hear an unfettered celebration of American history (Horton, 2006b). As such, historic sites like Monticello that attempt to incorporate rather than trivialize or even erase the realities of slavery often suffer backlash. In a recent article in *The Washington Post*, for example, journalist Hannah Knowles (2019) described the negative feedback that Monticello and other sites are facing as they make an effort to communicate the history of slavery more accurately to visitors. Their efforts include changes such as using the term “enslaved people” rather than “servants,” and generally speaking more openly and honestly about

the realities of slavery. Unfortunately, there have been negative reactions to this effort from white visitors, who claim that this “politically correct” narrative is really just “bashing America” (Knowles, 2019).

Indeed, more inclusive content in historic site tours have a particularly burdensome rhetorical aim in attempting to alter the idea that early U.S. leaders used their own grit, determination, and brilliance to create a “great” country. As such, even if sites do meaningfully integrate slavery narratives into their historical accounts, audiences may push back.

Part of this pushback is illuminated via narrative theories. For example, Carter, Butler, and Alderman (2014) described how both sites and audiences bring with them socially and culturally constructed “narrativized worlds” (p. 549). The narrative exchanged between sites and audiences, then, is impacted by these larger narrativized worlds. In other words, both the way sites *convey* information and the way audiences *receive and interpret* it will be influenced by society and culture. The authors noted that “narratives work by enabling certain ways of thinking while disabling alternatives” (p. 549). If audiences already have a narrative of slavery in their heads—or a narrative of the site or its previous owner (e.g., Thomas Jefferson)—any new narratives (i.e., previously dismissed African American narratives) presented at the site will be in direct conflict with their previously-held narratives. People would have to “unlearn” what they know in order to make room for new narratives.

Referencing Brace (2004), Carter, Butler, and Alderman point out that plantations’ narratives tend to be ones that “minimize violence, highlight reason and order, and promote the merits of appropriation for both colonizer and subjugated other”

(p. 550). If audiences are accustomed to hearing these types of stories, historic sites that wish to challenge these narratives must determine how to help audiences become receptive to having their narratives altered.

Challenging Dominant Narratives

This leads to what is perhaps the crux of the issue. The realities of slavery run absolutely counter to the ideals that Americans pride themselves on: liberty, equality, and independence. Facing slavery, thus, results in a sort of cognitive dissonance—discomfort resulting from simultaneously-held conflicting beliefs or attitudes (McLeod, 2018)—for white Americans. Horton (2006) explained that acknowledging America’s racist past can even be “embarrassing” and “guilt-producing” for white Americans (p. 36).

This conflict was clearly seen in the seven-year-long battle over a monument to slavery at Independence Mall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. When the foundations of the “Robert Morris House”—a home that once belonged to George Washington and nine enslaved people—were discovered, people debated whether to use the site to memorialize the enslaved individuals who lived in the house. Park superintendent Martha Aikens argued that creating a memorial for the enslaved would create a “dissonance” with the park’s other features, “potentially causing confusion for visitors” (Wofford, 2015). Aikens’ comments make explicit what is implied when historic sites downplay or even ignore the realities of slavery: prioritizing the comfort of white visitors is more important than being honest about history.

Finally, advocates for the slavery exhibit earned a “partial victory”—the new site includes first-person narratives about enslaved individuals, but these share the space with stories and information about former presidents. Nonetheless, this example perhaps gives

hope that counter-narratives can successfully challenge and even depose dominant, white-centric narratives at historic sites (Wofford, 2015).

While sensitive, the topics of slavery and racism are integral parts of America's past, present, and future. Particularly at historic sites, as Horton (2006) pointed out, guides and audiences alike are called upon to reckon with narratives that may cause people to feel dissonance, hurt, or anger. Although discussing slavery is difficult in public settings such as plantations, narratives of slavery are inseparable from other aspects of history and therefore must be contended with at historic sites (Horton, 2006b). Horton, thus, articulated the stakes involved in efforts to more equitably represent U.S. history at significant historic sites.

Methods

To investigate the rhetoric employed when discussing slavery at historic sites, I conducted a micro-ethnographic inquiry at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia.¹ This is a field-based inquiry in rhetoric that aims to shed light on the ways that Monticello staff discuss slavery and attempt to do justice to the topic in presenting the history of Monticello.

It is worth noting here that while tour guides work under superiors at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc. (the nonprofit organization that has operated Monticello since 1923), they do have freedom in the way they deliver their tours. From speaking with one tour guide, I learned that guides are free to write their own scripts. Scripts are reviewed by other staff before being approved. From what I gather, guides are not directed to say (or not say) certain things. They are, however, encouraged to adhere to three general

¹ IRB Protocol 20-1290.

themes in their tours: *agency* [it was my impression that this theme largely referred to agency of enslaved persons], *paradox* [of Thomas Jefferson; the good and the bad], and *legacy*.

For this inquiry, I attended two tours at Monticello. Each tour lasted about one hour. I made observations during the tours, taking field notes about what I saw and heard, and then analyzed my findings in the larger context of Monticello as a historic site and alongside the existing research and literature about these sites. When possible, I also conducted short, semi-structured interviews with tour guides.²

Using grounded theory, I developed a coding system based on the themes that emerged in the field notes. After working with and refining codes using the constant comparative method, I coded the field notes using the Nvivo software. I describe my findings below.

Findings

Findings from my observations at Monticello reveal several different ways that tour guides discuss slavery with visitors. Parsing out these nuances in the way slavery is discussed, I identified nine main themes. I sorted these themes into three broad categories, which describe what I perceive to be the main function of the comments: *restoring* narratives, *integrating* narratives, or *linking* past narratives to present narratives.

² While a more robust ethnography would also include an analysis of written materials at Monticello (for example, exhibit captions, tour guide training materials, and website content), I chose to focus mainly on the spoken words of the tour guides. I will, however, briefly discuss some of the exhibit captions along with website content, but only as they relate to and enhance analysis of my field notes. A full ethnography that includes both spoken and written content at Monticello or other plantations would be an interesting and worthy inquiry for future research.

In total, I coded 123 items. I coded 57 items as “restoring narratives of slavery,” 47 items as “integrating slavery narratives with dominant narratives and complicating dominant narratives” and 19 items as “linking slavery to present and future issues.”

Category 1, “Restoring narratives of slavery,” includes four subcodes: “daily lives and culture of enslaved people,” “harshness of the institution of slavery at Monticello,” “personal agency and personal stories of enslaved people,” and “the life of Sally Hemings.” Category 2, “Integrating slavery narratives with dominant narratives and complicating dominant narratives,” includes three subcodes: “acknowledging the work carried out by enslaved people,” “complicating Jefferson’s legacy,” and “integrating slavery narratives with Jefferson’s narrative.” Category 3, “Linking slavery to present and future issues,” includes two subcodes: “lasting legacy and descendants of enslaved families” and “recovery and reparations.”

Graphic representations of the number of comments coded to each category and code are displayed below. In Figure 2, the shades of blue correspond to the overarching categories of codes shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Monticello Inquiry Findings – Major Themes

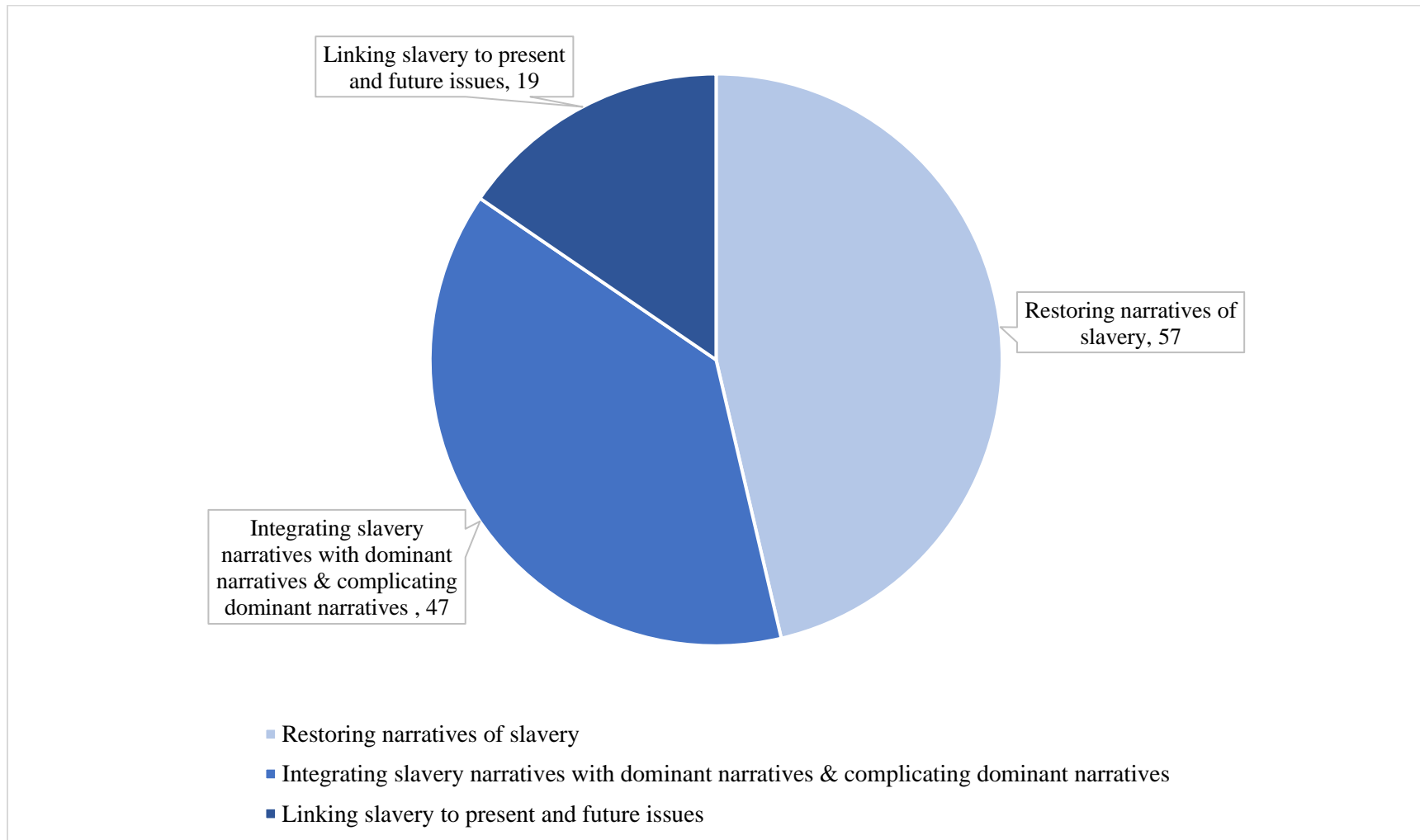
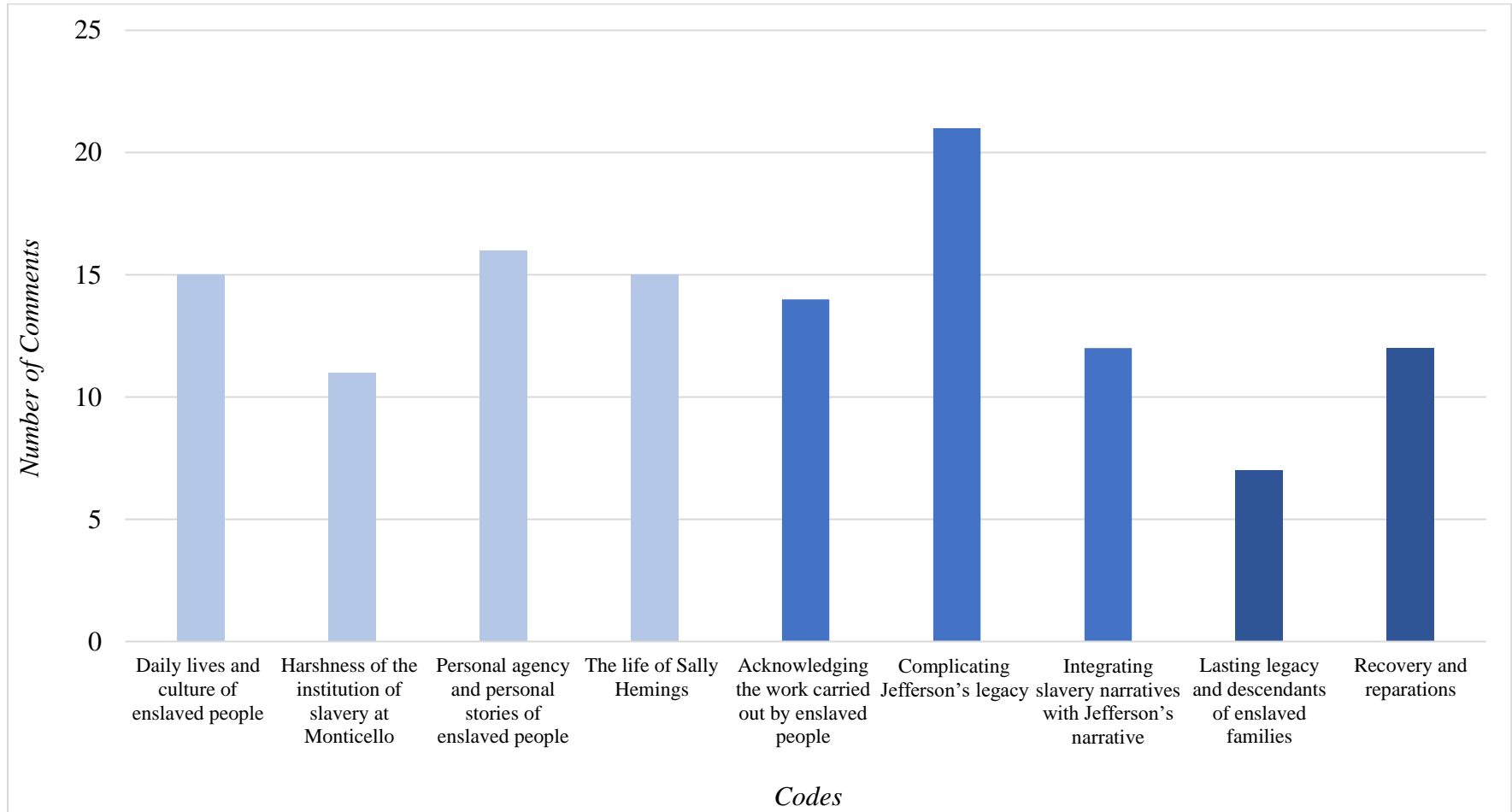


Figure 2. Monticello Inquiry Findings – Subcodes



Note that because field notes were taken by hand onsite, some notes are word-for-word transcriptions of what was said while others are shorter, paraphrased versions of what was said. As my methods section makes clear, no audio or video recordings were taken onsite. Still, many of the comments I share below were spoken verbatim by the tour guide; others are paraphrased from my notes with a good faith effort to maintain the substance of the original utterance.

The sections below go into more detail about each category and code, explain the meaning behind these labels, and provide examples of comments in each code.

Restoring Narratives of Slavery

Codes within this category pertain to text that describes the lives and experiences of enslaved people at Monticello. What differentiates these codes from those in the other two categories is that these mainly *describe* slavery rather than *integrate* the narratives of enslaved persons with dominant narratives, *challenge* dominant narratives, or *connect* slavery to contemporary race issues. While telling these stories is important, the comments in the other two categories are more active in confronting and transforming white-centered narratives.

I coded a total of 57 comments as “restoring narratives of slavery.” Within this category are four (4) subcodes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Daily lives and culture of enslaved people (15).
2. Harshness of the institution of slavery at Monticello (11).
3. Personal agency and personal stories of enslaved people (16).

4. The life of Sally Hemings (15).³

I explain each of these codes in more detail below.

Daily Lives and Culture of Enslaved People. Comments coded as “daily lives and culture of enslaved people” describe, of course, how enslaved people lived at Monticello. These comments recount, for example, what enslaved people ate, how their time was spent, and where they lived. For the most part, comments in this category were not emotionally charged in terms of delivery and content. They were fairly straightforward historical accounts.

One tour guide, for example, mentioned that “Enslaved people worked in these buildings,” also mentioned that “Slaves⁴ weren’t too concerned with the exact time of day. They were concerned with sun-up to sun-down [because that is when they worked].” Another guide noted that “Sunday was a day of rest. On Sundays, enslaved people could come up to the house and sell things to the Jefferson family.” The guide noted that although enslaved people were permitted to earn money this way, it would never be nearly enough to buy their own freedom.

As mentioned earlier, I interpreted most of the comments in this code to be straightforward statements of fact. However, there were also comments that conveyed information in a way that encouraged empathy from the audience and contained more of an emotional appeal. For example, one guide pointed out that “Slaves were just trying to find moments in their lives to rest and spend time with loved ones” and “Everything was

³ Sally Hemings was an enslaved woman at Monticello. Thomas Jefferson fathered her six children. (See <https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>.)

⁴ The terms “enslaved people” and “slaves” were used interchangeably in my experience at Monticello. “Enslaved people” was used more often than “slaves.” Scholars and historians often opt to use “enslaved” rather than “slave” to communicate that enslaved people were people, not property (Cumbo-Floyd, 2011).

connected by family; there were strong family bonds.” These comments, more so than comments like “Enslaved people worked in these buildings,” prompts visitors to imagine themselves in enslaved people’s shoes. *Of course* people were just trying to find moments in their lives to rest and spend time with loved ones—wouldn’t we all?

Harshness of The Institution of Slavery at Monticello. I coded tour guides’ comments “harshness of the institution of slavery at Monticello” when they delivered pointed statements on the severe realities of slavery at Monticello. What differentiates these comments from those described above is that these historical facts are presented in a way that clearly demonstrates the harshness of slavery.

One guide recounted to visitors how “130 slaves were put up for sale after Jefferson’s death. Their lives were turned upside down. Families were separated.” Another explained, “Children were the property of the enslaver. Jefferson didn’t have the money to buy all of those people.” Still another guide showed pictures of what enslaved families received as food, telling visitors that “Slaves had to grow their own vegetables in order to have a balanced diet. The rations were not enough.”

These comments go beyond presenting historical facts by making explicit the tragedy and suffering behind those facts. For example, in the first example above, instead of simply stating that “130 slaves were put up for sale,” the guide went on to make clear what the implications of this event were: “Their lives were turned upside down. Families were separated.” Comments like these do important work by restoring completeness and authenticity to history. They illuminate an entire people’s point of view—that of enslaved people—which has been largely ignored.

Personal Agency and Personal Stories of Enslaved People. I coded “personal agency and personal stories of enslaved people” when tour guides made attempts to illuminate the humanity behind the institution of slavery at Monticello, often by telling stories of individual enslaved people and demonstrating their agency as human beings. These comments combat the monolithic view of slavery as a nameless, faceless entity by sharing about the experiences, achievements, and personalities of individual enslaved people.

One guide informed visitors that “Jefferson paid for James Hemings to be trained in French cooking” and went on to assert that “James should get credit for being one of the pioneers of French cooking in America.” Another guide told the story of Joseph Fossett, an enslaved blacksmith who “walked all the way to the White House to see his wife, who worked as a cook there.” The guide explained that “Joseph Fossett was freed in Jefferson’s will, but his wife and kids were auctioned off. After 10 years of working, Fossett was able to buy back everyone except his son Peter. Peter, with the help of friends, finally escaped slavery. He founded a church which was part of the Underground Railroad.”

In addition to the comments made about specific enslaved individuals and their own agency and stories, one guide also showed photographs of the descendants of the individuals who were mentioned. All of this—the photographs, the names, the personal stories—promotes a deeper human connection with history. Personal stories, names, and photographs were previously reserved for Jefferson and his family, so by sharing these details of enslaved people, Monticello restores completeness to the site’s history and engages in an important aspect of reparations work.

The Life of Sally Hemings. I coded comments as “the life of Sally Hemings” when tour guides made explicit mention of Sally Hemings, the enslaved woman who had six children with Jefferson. The relationship began when Hemings was just a teenager and it lasted until Jefferson’s death in 1826, when Hemings was in her 50s. Two of the guides emphasized that researchers and historians have not been able to shed much light on the nature of the relationship. However, as one guide noted, and as the Monticello website states, as an enslaved woman Hemings would be legally unable to refuse advances from Jefferson (<https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>).

All four guides made clear that little is known about the true nature of Jefferson and Hemings’ relationship. For example, one guide pointed out that “We are unsure if she [Hemings] wanted to have Jefferson’s children.” This conveys to visitors that Hemings could not consent to her relationship with Jefferson. The website makes this explicit: “female slaves had no legal right to refuse unwanted sexual advances” (<https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>).

Another speculated, “It might not have been a romance, but more of a partnership.” This guide went on to describe the possible transactional nature of the relationship, saying “I think she learned something from him. You give something to me; I’ll give something to you.” The Monticello website echoes this transactional nature of the relationship, stating that Hemings “negotiated ‘extraordinary privileges’ for herself and freedom for her future children” (<https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>).

While it is true that Hemings negotiated with Jefferson before agreeing to leave France (where she was legally free) and return to Monticello with him according to their son Madison, emphasizing the transactional nature of their relationship could suggest to

some that Hemings had more say in the matter than she really did. After all, she was just a teenager at this time, in a foreign country with no friends and family. It may have felt like her only real choice may have been to stay with Jefferson, and once she returned to Monticello, she was once again considered his property. On the other hand, one could argue this emphasizes Hemings' agency and gives her credit for how she navigated her life despite the horrible circumstances.

It should be noted that Hemings and her children were mentioned in all four tours, including in the two house tours.

Integrating Slavery Narratives with Dominant Narratives and Complicating Dominant Narratives

Codes within this category pertain to text that not only describes slavery, but actively integrates narratives of slavery with dominant narratives. Dominant narratives would be those that focus primarily on the Jefferson family, the architecture at Monticello, and other aspects that center white experiences and marginalize experiences from people of color.

I coded a total of 47 comments in this category. Within this category are three (3) subcodes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Acknowledging the work carried out by enslaved people (14).
2. Complicating Jefferson's legacy (21).
3. Integrating slavery narratives with Jefferson's narrative (12).

I explain each of these codes in more detail below.

Acknowledging the Work Carried Out by Enslaved People. I coded comments as "acknowledging the work carried out by enslaved people" when tour guides gave

credit to enslaved people for the work they performed at Monticello. This work includes, for example, the buildings and furniture they built, the food they prepared, and the crops they maintained. While comments in this code are somewhat similar to comments in the “daily lives and culture of enslaved people” code described earlier, these comments were more active in fusing slavery narratives with dominant narratives.

As one tour guide noted, “There is no way Jefferson could’ve lived this lifestyle without slaves.” Another guide started off the house tour by stating, “Jefferson designed the house, but he didn’t lift a finger in building it. Slaves did all of it.” These comments not only give credit to enslaved people for their labor and craftsmanship, but also explicate the implications of this for the image of Jefferson. He relied heavily on enslaved labor, and the beauty visitors admire may have been designed by him, but it was not his hands that brought it to life.

Interestingly, all of the comments in this code were made during the house tours, not the slave tours. These comments were sprinkled throughout each house tour, consistently reminding visitors of whose work built and maintained the estate. Their placement, perhaps just as importantly as their content, challenged the dominant narrative which has traditionally kept the work and accomplishments of enslaved people hidden. These comments were shared consistently, dispersed between comments about Jefferson and other aspects of Monticello—they were not saved up until the end, or segregated in any way. This gives the impression the work of enslaved people is on equal standing with the work of Jefferson.

Complicating Jefferson’s Legacy. Out of all nine subcodes, “complicating Jefferson’s legacy” has the most items (21). This intentional muddling of his legacy by

guides—by sharing parts of Jefferson’s life that are not worthy of celebration and are not usually talked about in history books—was a strong theme in each of the four tours I attended.

Some comments in this code, although still complicating his legacy, were softer than others in their portrayal of Jefferson. For example, some comments emphasized that Jefferson was a “human being who made mistakes” and explained that although Jefferson said he hated the institution of slavery, he participated in it because he didn’t know how to end it. Comments like these prompt visitors to empathize with Jefferson despite his wrongdoings.

Others, however, were more explicit and less empathy-provoking. For example, one guide made explicit that “Jefferson believed that white males were superior.” This guide also told visitors, “He [Jefferson] kept his children with Sally Hemings as slaves. He gave them slightly better treatment, but they were still seen as property.” These facts may not come as a surprise to visitors, but by speaking them so plainly without any sort of masking or softening, guides come across as more forthright and honest in their portrayal of Jefferson.

Another guide talked about Jefferson’s writings, telling visitors, “One of the worst things he wrote about them [enslaved people] was, ‘their griefs are transient.’” In other words, the guide told us, Jefferson believed enslaved people did not grieve as strongly or as long as white people. Americans typically hear quite a bit about Jefferson’s most well-known and celebrated writings (e.g., the Declaration of Independence), so by calling attention to these unflattering (to say the least) writings, the guide directly challenges dominant narratives of Jefferson.

This same guide cut through any ambiguity about Jefferson's involvement with slavery, stating, "Jefferson was very connected to slavery. We know that he ordered children to be whipped, although he would not have done the whipping himself." Again, making these facts known and stating them unequivocally complicates the generally positive narrative of Jefferson that many Americans grew up with.

Comments in this code were distributed evenly throughout each tour, which helped in integrating this more critical and complicated view of Jefferson with what people typically are taught about him—that he was a visionary, one of the great founding fathers of the nation. If comments like these were reserved for say, the slavery tour, or for the very end of the house tour, they could come off as perfunctory rather than genuine. But because they were woven throughout all tours, they were quite impactful.

Integrating Slavery Narratives with Jefferson's Narrative. Comments coded as "integrating slavery narratives with Jefferson's narrative" conveyed to the audience that Jefferson's life was very much entwined with those of the people he enslaved. This may seem intuitive, but it could be forgotten if people hear "the Jefferson story" and "the slavery story" separately. These comments make explicit the fact that Jefferson lived with and had relationships with enslaved people that lived at Monticello.

As one guide stated, "Jefferson's life was completely intertwined with theirs [slaves'], not just Sally's." This reminds visitors that although Sally Hemings is perhaps the most talked about enslaved person at Monticello, there were many, many others who lived complex and rich lives and whom Jefferson had relationships with.

Another guide mused, "It is interesting that Jefferson's life was 'bookended' by people of color. Jefferson said his first memory was of seeing an African American

woman holding him as a baby, and his enslaved butler was likely the last person he saw before he died.” The guide did not elaborate on this thought, instead leaving it for visitors to ruminate on. For me, it gave the impression that Jefferson’s life, from infancy to old age, was dependent on enslaved people.

Again, these comments show that Jefferson and the people he enslaved did not live in separate realms—their lives were completely intertwined, and their stories are an indispensable part of the story of Monticello and the early years of the United States.

Linking Slavery to Present and Future Issues

Codes within this category pertain to text that goes beyond recounting historical information to address current and future issues pertaining to race and gender. While this category contains the fewest comments, I found them to be some of the most powerful. Notably, even though these comments were the fewest, each of the four tours had at least one comment coded in this category.

I coded a total of 19 comments in this category. Within this category are two (2) codes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Lasting legacy and descendants of enslaved families (7).
2. Recovery and reparations (12).

I explain each of these codes in more detail below.

Lasting Legacy and Descendants of Enslaved Families. I coded as “lasting legacy and descendants of enslaved families” when tour guides made comments about the lasting legacy of slavery and about the descendants of enslaved families at Monticello.

All seven of these comments were made during the two slavery tours, not the house tours.

Both tour guides on the slavery tours spoke of descendants with reverence. For example, one guide told visitors earnestly, “If you meet a descendant [of enslaved families at Monticello], it will change your life.” Another guide explained, “These are stories of trauma and fear, but also of hope and triumph. These are all American stories. We will be remembered for what we do.” These comments and others in “lasting legacy and descendants of enslaved families” prompt visitors to consider the stories that continued on after Jefferson died, and even after slavery was abolished. They also draw attention to the lasting impact of slavery on countless families. In other words, the story did not begin and end with Jefferson.

This is particularly evident with a comment about Peter Fossett, a formerly enslaved man at Monticello who went on to establish a church in Ohio. The guide explained, “Members of the church came to visit Monticello in honor of *their* founding father.” The guide’s use of the phrase, “*their* founding father” is, of course, in reference to Jefferson being known as one of America’s founding fathers. This powerful phrasing reminds visitors (who were mostly white during my visits) that Jefferson is not universally idolized as a founding father. People enslaved at Monticello, their descendants, and other Black communities like the members of Fossett’s church may not have seen Jefferson as *their* founding father. He and other “founding fathers,” after all, fought for the rights of white people (namely, men) in this country, not for the rights of Black Americans.

Recovery and Reparations. I coded as “recovery and reparations” when guides made comments that stood out as distinctly restorative and corrective in nature. These comments were aimed at *dismantling*—not just complicating, integrating with, or adding

to—dominant, white-centered narratives of slavery. These comments were about more than just Monticello. They pointed to broader implications and work that still needs to be done.

For example, one guide explained to visitors, “When asked whether Jefferson was a ‘kind slaveowner,’ I [the guide] say, ‘that is an oxymoron.’” Another guide echoed this sentiment, saying “There is no such thing as a good slave owner.” These comments point not just to Jefferson, but to other founding fathers and white families who participated in slavery. Statements like this cut through any ambiguity about slavery and slaveholders in the U.S.

These comments directly contradict what guides used to say about Jefferson 50 years ago. One guide told visitors that back the 1970s, visitors would hear about how Jefferson was a “good” and “kind” slave owner with “loyal servants.” The way the guide said this made clear that this is not where Monticello guides stand today. There is clearly an effort to be more explicit and honest about the story of slavery at Monticello—it’s not “good slaveowners” and “loyal servants”; it’s “no such thing as a good slaveowner” and “enslaved people.”

Another guide closed out the house tour by saying, “There are things still not yet realized. We still have work to do with the rights of women and people of color.” This expressed an awareness of the broader sociocultural context, implying a link between Monticello’s history and the larger American society. This situates Monticello’s work—telling stories about history and educating the public—in the greater efforts for racial and gender equality.

The fourth guide recounted an illustrative story, telling visitors, “Once, a young kid approached me [the tour guide] and asked, ‘what are you hiding?’ This is what we should be asking. What is being hidden in the stories we tell about history? Whenever you go to historical sites, ask yourself what is being hidden.” This encourages visitors to think critically and question preexisting beliefs about history and the founding fathers. The guide explicitly challenged visitors to ask themselves what stories are being hidden at historical sites. This direct engagement of the audience is an important call to action that helps visitors not only be receptive to new information that they may learn at Monticello, but also to question everything they have previously heard or will hear in the future regarding history and slavery.

Discussion

Returning to the three approaches identified by Eichstedt and Small (2002) discussed earlier—the erasure of slavery, trivialization of slavery, segregating knowledge of slavery, and thoughtful integration of slavery—it appears that Monticello has strove for (and in some ways, as I will discuss, surpassed) *thoughtful integration of slavery*. While integration of slavery narratives is preferable to the erasure, trivialization, or segregation of slavery narratives, it may be time to move further—especially because it has been nearly two decades since Eichstedt and Small first identified these strategies. And indeed, as I mention, Monticello has begun to venture beyond simple integration of slavery narratives. If other historic sites want to follow suit and endeavor to be true agents of change, integration of slavery narratives is not enough. cursory mentions of slavery are not sufficient to truly combat and transform dominant, white-centric narratives of early American life.

Of course, one may argue that it is not the role or responsibility of historic sites to be “agents of change,” engaging in restorative and reparative work through the narratives they share. But if not, what *is* their role or responsibility? Is it solely to entertain? I would venture to guess that many would argue that historic sites are also meant to educate audiences. For the sake of argument, I adopt this view: that historic sites are not just tourist destinations but also educational spaces. To accept this premise in the context of this discussion leads one to question, what kind of education are people receiving? What historic information and narratives are sanctioned in these spaces, and why? From whose perspective is the story told? Does it cater mainly to white audiences, selling a kind of “white nostalgia” (Adamkiewicz, 2016)? If sites are indeed educational spaces, and they do not want to participate in preserving “white nostalgia,” that necessitates that they participate as agents of change in restorative justice and reparations work.

While Monticello and other historic sites have catered to white audiences and “white nostalgia” in the past, the evidence set forth in this study suggests that Monticello has now ventured into reparative work with the narratives they present. They have done this by not only sharing information and stories about slavery at Monticello, but also explicating the *impact* of these narratives. Certain comments from guides show visitors that slavery is not just an addendum to Monticello’s history; instead, it is a long-ignored story that, when restored, demands that dominant historical narratives be rewritten. For example, by making explicit links to Jefferson and his involvement with slavery throughout discussions of slavery at Monticello, guides prompt visitors to think of Jefferson’s identity as slaveholder with just as much, if not more, weight and consideration as they give to his identity as an author, innovator, and “founding father.”

Guides certainly did not shy away from complicating Jefferson’s image—in fact, this code had the most comments out of all nine subcodes in the study.

However, the fact that Monticello is synonymous with Thomas Jefferson, and Jefferson is a famous figure in American history, gives guides a way to distill big questions down and focus them on a single person. It may be easier to do this narrative-rewriting with one person whose legacy is as big and lofty and (almost) untouchable as Jefferson’s. That begs the question, what do other, lesser-known historic sites do? Especially in cases where the property still belongs to the family that originally owned it. Future research could examine how sites of various fame and significance navigate evolving historical and cultural narratives and attempt to do justice to the topic of slavery. In the absence of a famous owner to focus on, sites may employ other tactics to thoughtfully integrate slavery narratives into history and reckon with the impact those narratives have.

All of this discussion along with the research I have laid out above seems to suggest that researchers, historians, and others are trying to make progress toward some end goal. Looking back, it becomes clear that progress has been made at Monticello. The site has gone from “Jefferson was a kind slaveowner” to “There is no such thing as a good slaveowner.” Most would likely recognize this as growth and improvement. But have these sites and their stakeholders considered where the progress is ultimately leading? What will it look like once they have “gotten there”?

This is also a question that many other sites and institutions must reckon with as well. From colleges and universities to cities and townships, there have been intense debates over what parts of history should be celebrated. For example, several U.S. towns

and cities have debated whether or not to remove confederate monuments (O’Connell, 2020), and universities have been forced to reconsider names of buildings (whose namesakes have been slaveholders) and deal with the history of their founding, which may have been funded by money that came from slave labor (Rothman, 2017; Brophy, 2018). In some of these cases, confederate monuments have been taken down, buildings have been renamed, and new plaques and monuments have been erected. This is surely progress, but again, how will these places know when they are “done”?

Ultimately, the question seems to be this: what do people consider “bad enough” to tip the scales and move a historic figure (or figures) from a generally positive and celebrated position to a generally negative and condemned one? Can a historic figure be squarely in the middle? And if so, what implications does that have for the way he or she continues to be commemorated and talked about?

Based on my findings, Monticello seems to be moving toward this middle ground of trying to simultaneously hold up Jefferson’s accomplishments while also holding up—with equal attention and effort—his transgressions. One guide posed this quandary to visitors, encouraging them to “decide for [them]selves” what they think about Jefferson. In this approach, the guide relieves himself of having to deem Jefferson as “good” or “bad.” Instead, he presents the information he has and lets visitors decide for themselves.

Perhaps this is a good start, letting visitors decide for themselves. However, as mentioned earlier, visitors are not entering these sites as blank slates. They bring with them pre-formed “narrativized words” (Carter, Butler, and Alderman, 2014, p. 549). Even if visitors have encountered more nuanced presentations of historic figures in popular media or at historic sites, these more progressive narratives have generally not

made their ways into school systems yet (Thomson, 2017). Therefore, historic sites that want to present more progressive and complete narratives could be in conflict with school systems. Narratives that present “founding fathers” and other historic figures as morally ambiguous or even morally corrupt may butt up against what people have already learned. Given this, it may be more likely that Americans will err on the side of leniency when judging Thomas Jefferson and other prominent figures.

Perhaps this means that historic sites like Monticello need to think of themselves as operating not in a vacuum, but rather in a large network of educational spaces. These include, for example: schools, colleges/universities, movies, television, social media, news, podcasts, political speeches, activist movements, and others. If historic sites are serious about making change and engaging in restorative justice work, they should think about how they fit into the bigger picture. What narratives do they want to *combat* that are still out there (for example, in K-12 schools)? What narratives do they want to *adopt* from scholarship and activism that is on the cutting-edge of racial justice?

When all is said and done, historic sites must contend with the question of whether they should continue to celebrate historic figures who participated in and/or fought for slavery. Should their time, energy, and funds go to preserving the image and legacy of the slaveholder, or those of the enslaved? And if historic sites want to try and do both, how will they navigate that? Is it possible to hold two seemingly contradictory and mutually exclusive views?

As plantations and historic sites grapple with these questions in the years to come, more examples of what to do will surely emerge. Historic sites can look to each other—and other educational spaces—for guidance on how to rectify problematic narratives that

center slaveholders and marginalize enslaved people. Monticello may serve as one such exemplar for other historic sites as they strive toward a more authentic and just portrayal of history. Furthermore, scholars, researchers, historians, activists, and others should pay attention to Monticello as the site inches closer and closer to what may be the culmination of all of this work and interrogation: the question of whether figures like Thomas Jefferson should continue to be celebrated at all, and if so, how to also hold equal space for the transgressions that hide beneath the public accomplishments.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates explained, “If Thomas Jefferson’s genius matters, then so does his taking of Sally Hemings’s body.” To take historical figures’ accomplishments and ignore their transgressions is “patriotism à la carte” (2014).

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Reparations Narratives in the United States

Abstract

This article explores the rhetoric employed in texts that discuss reparations for slavery in the United States. Specifically, I share the findings of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of recent news articles about reparations, which revealed many differing and sometimes contradictory narratives used by advocates and opponents of reparations. Results of the analysis indicate a lack of shared understanding among Americans about the impact of slavery and the need (or not) for specific atonement.

Introduction

The word “reparation” is defined by Oxford English Dictionary as “1: An act of replacing or fixing parts of an object or structure in order to keep it in repair, or of restoring an object or structure to good condition by making repairs,” “2: Restoration of something to good or proper condition, position, or level, compensating for deterioration or decline; an instance of this,” or “3: The action of making amends for a wrong or harm done by providing payment or other assistance to the wronged party; an instance of this. Also: payment or assistance given in compensation for such a wrong; an example of this.”

This word, innocuous in and of itself, becomes charged and contentious when discussing reparations for a nation’s crimes. This is the case when discussing reparations for slavery in the United States. Since the abolition of slavery in 1865, Americans have debated about the type and amount of compensation owed to Black Americans who have suffered under the legacy of slavery (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019).

While the belief that slavery caused deep and lasting harm to Black Americans is fairly uncontested and uncontroversial among Americans⁵, ideas about what to do about it are wide-ranging and are sometimes considered controversial or extreme. Here, I examine contemporary narratives surrounding the concept of reparations for slavery in the U.S. and ask: what are the main themes that emerge in contemporary texts pertaining to reparations? What rhetoric is used when discussing reparations, and what are the implications of that rhetoric for current and future race relations in the United States?

Literature Review

Once one acknowledges that severe damage was inflicted by the institution of slavery, the next natural and logical step is to ask, “what can and should be done about it?” The concept of reparations, thus, emerges as a potential solution to a problem—the complex and deeply-entrenched problem of racism and broken race relations in the United States. Those who discuss and debate the potential for reparations for slavery take on the daunting task of answering: How can we try to repair what has been broken for centuries, since the very start of our nation?

History

Calls for reparations began immediately after slavery was abolished in 1865. The first plan, proposed by General William Tecumseh Sherman and later supported by Republicans in Congress, was for each formerly enslaved family to receive 40 acres of land and a mule. However, this proposal was vetoed in 1866 by President Johnson (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019). In fact, there were several federal pushes for land to be allocated to formerly enslaved families during this time, but none came to

⁵ This is, unfortunately, not universally true as white supremacy still exists in the U.S. (Bery, 2014; Domby, 2020).

fruition. Tellingly, several former *slaveholders* were paid reparations for *their* loss of human “property” (Biondi, 2003).

Things remained relatively quiet on the reparations front until a few decades later, when several bills were proposed that would have provided pensions to formerly enslaved people and their children. None of these bills made it past Congress (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019). The failure of this second wave of calls for reparations is telling; it exposes the lack of progress made in the decades after the abolition of slavery. Studying this history, one can see a persistence in America’s refusal to accept responsibility for the atrocity of slavery—a persistence that, unfortunately, does not weaken in the decades to come.

The reparations movement quieted again—this time even longer—until the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement was at its peak and the Jim Crow era was being stamped out. During this time, Black activist groups began advocating for monetary reparations to be paid by institutions who helped support slavery. Again, no reparations actually came to pass (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019; Craemer, 2018b).

In the 1980s, the modern reparations for slavery movement was revived after two groups received reparations from the U.S. government: several Sioux tribes (to pay for the land that was stolen from them in the 1800s) and Japanese Americans (who were imprisoned in camps during World War II). While these successes may have been encouraging to those advocating for reparations for slavery, the various bills and plans that have been put forward since then have continued to be rejected (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019; Craemer, 2018b). Even though these conversations have been ongoing among countless groups and generations since 1865, not a single reparations

plan has been executed. Although U.S. officials and average Americans may say they feel badly for what Black Americans endured during slavery and in the years since, critics might say that the lack of federal action and lack of support for reparations among some Americans say otherwise. Simply put: how a country spends its resources reveals a lot about what it values, and the U.S. government has never spent any resources on reparations for slavery.

The Case for (and Against) Reparations

While some may think that race issues began to heal with the abolition of slavery in 1865, many scholars and activists view abolition instead as the birth of a “thousand-headed snake”—not the death of racism, but rather its evolution and manifestation in new ways (e.g., the Jim Crow era, lynching’s, segregation, police brutality, etc.) (Hunger, 2018, p. 420). Those advocating for reparations for slavery today are faced with the difficult task of convincing others that racism—this “thousand-headed snake”—still exists.

Some Americans may believe that the damage done by slavery has “worked itself out” over the past 150 years. Indeed, even elected officials often allude to this in their statements, downplaying the severity and impact of slavery and insinuating that it would be futile to try and make amends for slavery now. For example, recently Republican Congressman Mike Johnson spoke of slavery as “the sins of a small subset of Americans from many generations ago,” and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, “No one currently alive was responsible for that [slavery], and I don't think we should be trying to figure out how to compensate for it” (Shaw, 2019).⁶ Comments such as these

⁶ This text is part of the corpus for my analysis. It is further described in the “findings” section below.

fail to address the institutional aspect of slavery and racism. Slavery and the racism it spawned did not begin and end with the individuals who owned slaves. By speaking as though it did, people suggest that there is no need for reparations. As Coates (2014) explained: “The last slaveholder has been dead for a very long time” but “A nation outlives its generations.”

Even if Americans do concede that there are lasting effects from slavery today, they still may not believe that reparations are an appropriate avenue for remedying the issues we face today. Polling shows that even while 60% of Americans agreed that slavery continues to impact Black Americans today, only 29% believed that the government should pay reparations (Williams & Nasir, 2019). Other polls similarly show a lack of widespread support for reparations (Younis, 2019; Holland, 2016), suggesting that many Americans (mostly white, according to the data) do not believe that reparations would be feasible or beneficial. This lack of support (again, primarily among white Americans) may be caused by people’s inability to see connections between slavery and modern society (Craemer, 2015). Indeed, one of the most troublesome hurdles for reparations activists to overcome may be convincing people that reparations are still warranted despite all the years that have passed, especially when considering the repeated failure of the U.S. government to aggressively combat structural racism (Kaplan & Valls, 2007).

Arguments against Reparations. Arguments against reparations include logistical concerns as well as race-based concerns that emerge from people believing that racism is no longer an issue in the U.S. or that the country is too far removed from slavery and racial discrimination to do anything about it now.

Some logistical concerns are focused on the cost of reparations—that reparations themselves would be too expensive for the country to afford, or that the administrative costs of a reparations plan would be too expensive. Others are focused on the logistics of identifying reparations recipients. Because we are several generations removed from slavery, it is more difficult to identify the descendants of formerly enslaved people. There is also the question of whether reparations should be paid to descendants of slavery only or all Black Americans (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019). It is easy to see how this could get complicated when considering the complexity of family lineage and of mixed-race families; who is considered Black? How many of one’s ancestors would need to have been enslaved for an individual to be entitled to reparations? These kinds of logistical uncertainties are often held up by opponents as reason enough to dismiss the possibility of reparations (Prager, 2017).

Other arguments against reparations reveal a persistent belief among some Americans that race is no longer an issue in the U.S. These arguments typically sound something like this: the issues faced by Black Americans today are not caused by slavery; many Black Americans have been very successful, “proving” that reparations are not necessary; and/or Black Americans need to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and not depend on the government for assistance (Valls, 2019; Torpey & Burkett, 2010; Prager, 2017; Conklin, 2020; Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019).

Arguments for Reparations. Arguments for reparations, then, must contend with these concerns and take on the arduous challenge of convincing people that racial injustices still exist and are linked to slavery—and further, that the U.S. can and should make an effort to make amends for it. There will continue to be little consensus on the

issue of reparations if there is widespread disagreement about the extent of damage done. Reparations activists have to first convince others that the damage from slavery is serious, widespread, and ongoing in order to get to a place where people can discuss the logistics of reparations (Martin & Yaquinto, 2007; Allen & Chrisman, 2001; Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2019).

While this is a daunting task for pro-reparations activists, there is hope to be found in both well-established and emerging research. Not only is there already plenty of research confirming that racism and implicit racial bias are very real issues in the United States (Gabrielson, Grochowski Jones, & Sagara, 2014; Correll et al., 2002; Lawson, 2015), but other new research may help provide further “concrete proof” of physical and psychological trauma from slavery that continue to impact the health and wellbeing of Black Americans (Grossi, 2020, p. 95). For example, researcher Élodie Grossi (2020) detailed the various contemporary research suggesting that current health disparities between Black people and white people (for example, lower birth rates among Black infants) is due in part to generational trauma dating back to slavery. In other words, some researchers have suggested that the physical overexertion, nutritional deficiencies, and psychological trauma inherent to slavery are continuing to produce real physical effects in Black Americans today. Grossi cited Grazyna Jasienska (2009), who hypothesized that differences in infant birth weights among Black and white Americans is caused by changes in the epigenome (chemical compounds and proteins that impact how genes are expressed) throughout generations of Black Americans during and after slavery. These types of epigenetic theories have not gained widespread consensus and are still being debated among scientists, but Grossi notes that nevertheless, the theories can (and have)

been used by reparations activists to convince people that slavery does indeed continue to impact Black Americans.

Even if one dismisses the epigenetic theories pertaining to generational trauma, reparations activists may still point to health disparities between Black and white Americans as evidence of ongoing harm from slavery (and the racism it bred). These include, for example, significantly higher rates of maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates among Black Americans (Prather et al., 2018). The maternal mortality rate for Black women is three to four times higher than that of white women, and the infant mortality rate is two times higher (Novoa & Taylor, 2018).

While socioeconomic factors play a part in these health disparities (Prather et al., 2018; Novoa & Taylor, 2018), they do not fully explain them (Novoa & Taylor, 2018). Even when controlling for education level and socioeconomic status, Black women *still* experience higher rates of maternal and infant mortality (Novoa & Taylor, 2018). In other words, some of the discrepancies may instead be caused by racism and implicit racial bias, the effects of which “are difficult for African American women to avoid, because race and ultimately racism are based on physical characteristics (i.e., skin color)” (Prather et al., 2018, p. 253).

Everyday racial discrimination and even the anticipation of future racial discrimination has been shown to create chronic stress among Black Americans, leading to tangible health problems like hypertension and sleep disturbances (Mouzon et al., 2017).

This has also been shown to be true with regard to women’s reproductive health. Black American women tend to experience worse reproductive health outcomes than

Black women who have immigrated to the U.S. as adults. In addition, teenage Black women tend to have better health outcomes than Black women in their twenties. In other words, there is strong evidence that the longer Black women live in the U.S., the more likely they are to experience reproductive health problems. This is also referred to as “the weathering hypothesis”—this is the idea that “cumulative stress negatively affects African American women’s health” (Novoa & Taylor, 2018, p. 7).

If this type of research—research showing that slavery and racism continue to impact Black Americans in a real, physical sense—continues to mount, reparations activists may be able to use it to give teeth to claims about racism and the legacy of slavery that others have dismissed as far-fetched or too abstract.

That said, these arguments would need to be carefully woven into public-facing texts where those with erroneous beliefs about racism being “solved” and slavery and its effects being “long over” would consume them. In this study, I examined a sampling of public-facing texts to see whether this type of research has made its way into current debates about reparations.

Types of Reparations

While the first calls for reparations focused on providing property to formerly enslaved families, contemporary discussions of reparations look much different. The U.S. government had the chance to provide formerly enslaved families with assistance right after slavery was abolished in 1865, but that ship has sailed. Black families have worked on their own to acquire land and property and build generational wealth, all while battling against racist beliefs and practices that, of course, did not magically vanish when slavery was abolished. Thus, conversations about reparations today have to take into account not

just the stolen labor (and lives) of slavery, but also the racism and discrimination that has persisted since then and made it harder for Black Americans to work their way up in American society (Hunter, 2019).

Ideas about what reparations should look like today encompass both the concrete and the abstract. By this I mean that discussions about reparations include both financial restitution and symbolic restitution (measures taken in the name of justice, healing, and remembrance). These two sectors of reparations—which some assert are inseparable and equally necessary (Brooks, 2019)—are described in the table below.

Figure 3. Monetary and Symbolic Reparations

Monetary Reparations	Symbolic Reparations
Financial payments and likewise “material” reparations such as institutional programs and reforms meant to combat inequalities in education, employment, health care, and housing (McCarthy, 2004).	Non-monetary, “symbolic” reparations could include things such as public acknowledgements and apologies, museums and exhibits, curricular reforms to K-12 education, and tributes and commemorations (McCarthy, 2004).

Germany’s Reparations for the Holocaust

The U.S. has several examples to look to when considering how to go about providing reparations for slavery. Not only did the U.S. government provide reparations to Sioux tribes and to Japanese Americans, as discussed above, but other countries such as South Africa and Germany have paid reparations for their historical injustices as well.

Reiter (2019) asserts that the U.S. is capable of and obligated to pay reparations for slavery. He explains that the U.S. should look to Germany as an exemplar for this.

After World War II, Germany paid the modern-day equivalent of several billion dollars to Israel and to the World Jewish Congress. Furthermore, Germany outlawed “symbols that incite hatred against any segment of its population” and they officially apologized for crimes perpetrated by the Nazis (p. 3).

Reiter contrasts Germany’s response to the Holocaust with the United States’ response to slavery, noting that not only has the U.S. government has never paid any reparations to individuals suffering under the legacy of slavery, it also has not done anything to crack down on “symbols that incite hatred” as Germany did after the Holocaust (Confederate monuments and flags come to mind).

While there are differences between the two countries’ situations—for one, Germany was able to fairly easily identify victims of the Nazi regime, whereas the U.S. may struggle to clearly identify who should receive reparations 150 years after slavery was abolished—Reiter explains that nevertheless, the U.S. can and should look to Germany as an example for how to construct its own plan for reparations. Craemer (2018a) echoed this, explaining, “this similarity [between the two cases] supports the idea that German Holocaust reparations may serve as a blueprint for eventual Transatlantic Slave Trade reparations” (p. 319).

Methods

To investigate the rhetoric employed when discussing reparations, I performed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a variety of texts that pertain to reparations in any form—monetary and otherwise. I searched online using the terms “reparations” and “reparations for slavery” to see what texts appear in the first two pages of results. The rationale for this approach is that I wanted to find the most relevant, current, and most-

read texts pertaining to reparations at this point in time. All of these sources ended up being news articles. I selected six articles from six different news outlets, representing a range of political leanings, readerships, and styles. In an effort to gauge the most current conversations about reparations, I selected only articles from the past two years (2019 and 2020).

1. *Wall Street Journal*: “The Case For—and Against—Reparations.” Published March 26, 2019.
2. *New York Times*: “What Reparations for Slavery Might Look Like in 2019.” Published May 23, 2019.
3. *Fox*: “Heckling, drama mark House hearing on slavery reparations as top Dem asks, ‘Why not now?’” Published June 19, 2019.
4. *LA Times*: “Slavery’s descendants say a reparations check won’t make the pain go away.” Published August 18, 2019.
5. *CNN*: “Nearly 75% of African Americans support reparations for slavery. Only 15% of white Americans do, a poll says.” Published October 28, 2019.
6. *Washington Post*: “Slavery reparations seem impossible. In many places, they’re already happening.” Published January 31, 2020.

Although all of my sources ended up being news articles, my goal with this strand of inquiry was not to analyze a particular type of text but rather to gain a sense of the current national conversation about reparations, wherever it is happening. What rhetoric is being employed? What is the general level of understanding about the issue? How do people feel about it? Where do we seem to be going with it? Logistically, I stopped collecting new artifacts for my corpus when I reach data saturation. Data saturation

occurs at the point that a researcher who is conducting qualitative research stops identifying new themes (or “codes”) and instead is continuing to accumulate more and more samples that fit into existing themes/codes (Saunders et al., 2018). I used Nvivo, a qualitative analysis software, to organize my corpus and to perform the CDA.

Findings

Findings from my CDA of contemporary texts pertaining to reparations for slavery in the U.S., although covering a range of news outlets and perspectives, revealed several common themes. Analyzing these themes may provide insight into where the U.S. government and the American public stand on the issue of reparations. This analysis might even offer insight into where the conversations could go in the future and, more importantly, how rhetorical lenses may help to meaningfully shape future conversations.

Analyzing the six texts I describe above, I identified four categories. One category described comments that set the stage for reparations discussions by providing history and background information about slavery and the reparations movement. The other categories included text about contemporary issues and discussions: one included persuasive arguments on either side of the issue, another described the current hot-button issues and sticking points in discussions of reparations, and the final category described logistical conversations about how reparations would be implemented.

In total, I coded 177 items. I coded 19 items as “background and history of reparations,” 49 items as “arguments for and against reparations,” 68 items as “current issues and debates about reparations,” and 41 items as “types and logistics of reparations.”

Category 1, “Background and history of reparations,” does not include any subcodes. Category 2, “Arguments for and against reparations,” includes four subcodes: “current racial inequalities,” “harshness of slavery and ongoing racism,” “morality and ethics,” and “benefits of reparations.” Category 3, “Current issues and debates about reparations,” includes four subcodes: “controversy and divisiveness,” “current politics,” “racial differences in opinion,” and “renewed interest.” Category 4, “Types and logistics of reparations,” includes three subcodes: “logistics,” “money and financial amounts,” and “symbolic reparations.”

Graphic representations of the number of comments coded to each category and code are displayed below. In Figure 5, the shades of blue correspond to the overarching categories of codes shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Reparations Inquiry Findings – Major Themes

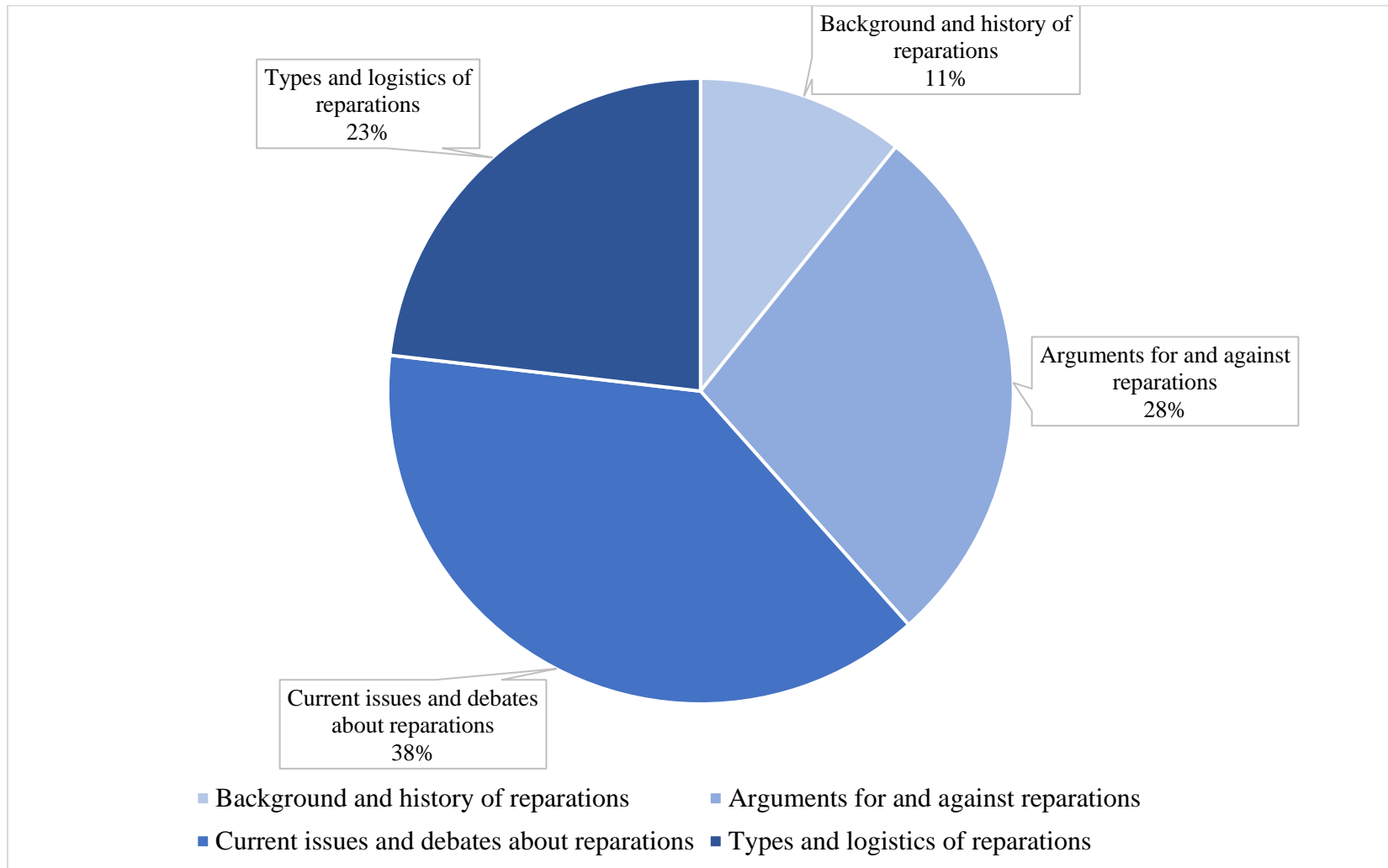
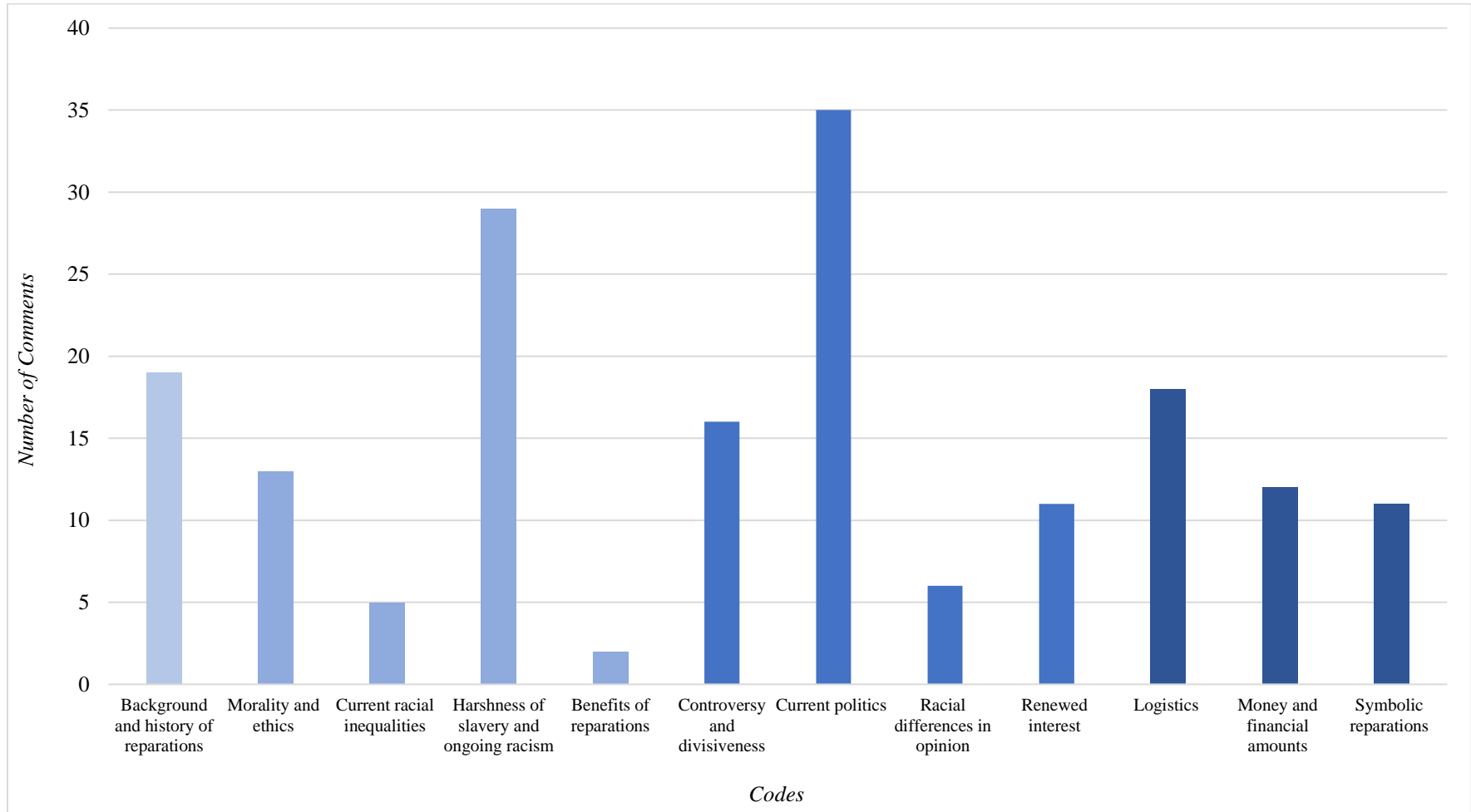


Figure 5. Reparations Inquiry Findings – Subcodes



Background and History of Reparations

Text coded as “background and history of reparations” describes historical events in U.S. history pertaining to reparations. These items give readers background information about how the conversation around reparations have evolved in the U.S. since the abolition of slavery in 1865.

I coded a total of 19 items as “background and history of reparations.” There are no subcodes within this category. Four out of the six texts included some sort of historical information about reparations.

These items were fairly straightforward and informational in tone. Nevertheless, their presence implies a rhetorical deliberateness and significance. The fact that some contemporary authors writing relatively short news articles on reparations feel it is necessary to include historical information about reparations *could* suggest that they believe Americans need further historical education in order to grasp the current debates on reparations. Pro-reparations authors who use their limited article space to share historical facts may be implicitly saying to readers, “if you learn more about the history, you may understand and even support reparations.” If the true and complete history of slavery was already widely acknowledged and understood, authors would not feel the need to include such information in their articles about reparations.

This was especially evident when authors shared lesser-known facts about slavery. For example, two authors explained that it was not just individuals but also entities, like companies and even churches, that enslaved people. As one author explained, “Insurance companies sold policies on the lives of enslaved people (for their owners’ profit, of course) or underwrote slaving voyages. Railroads used slave labor and

profited from transporting cotton or rice produced by enslaved plantation workers. Past efforts to bring private corporations to account have failed (some lawsuits remain unresolved).” Another author, explaining the different institutions who should explore reparations, noted that “Southern churches of nearly every denomination owned African Americans” and “cities and states often directly owned enslaved people.” By educating readers, the author builds a case for local institutions and organizations—not just the federal government—to explore reparations options.

For readers who oppose reparations, learning something new about slavery (if they were in fact unaware of these facts) could suggest to them that they have more to learn about the subject. This could be an advantage to pro-reparations authors, who, by showing there is more out there to learn, could lead readers to wonder whether learning more would influence their stance on reparations.

Arguments for and Against Reparations

The category “arguments for and against reparations” describes text that outlines the various reasons and rationales for reparations as well as those against reparations.

I coded a total of 49 comments as “arguments for and against reparations.” Within this category are four subcodes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Current racial inequalities (5).
2. Harshness of slavery and ongoing racism (29).
3. Morality and ethics (13).
4. Benefits of reparations (2).

Current Racial Inequalities. I coded as “current racial inequalities” when text described the racial inequalities that exist today, thereby building support for the case for reparations. All five items in this code discussed financial inequality—perhaps one of the easiest and most straightforward inequalities for people to understand. Four out of the five items included statistics in support of the claims.

One author shared, “Collins said he's found that the median wealth of a white household is 41 times greater than the median wealth of a black family -- \$147,000 versus \$3,600.” Another author shared a similar statistic: “According to the Federal Reserve’s Survey of Consumer Finances, the median wealth of black households is \$16,000, compared with \$163,000 for whites.” This same author explained that “For every dollar a typical white household holds, a black one has 10 cents. It is this cumulative effect that justifies the payment of reparations to descendants of slaves long dead, supporters say.” These statistics are difficult to argue with. People may debate the causes of the inequalities, but the numbers are so staggering that they are bound to provoke a response from readers and make them wonder how it is *this bad*. Thus, the authors’ inclusion of such statistics is an effective logical appeal.

Another author described the wealth gaps in Los Angeles and Charleston, and went on to describe a conversation with an agricultural historian Richard Porcher who explained that “Any frank discussion about the suppressed economic fortunes of African Americans will require white people to acknowledge the advantages that might have disproportionately expanded their own wealth.” This comment goes a step further than the statistics provided above in that it explicates the reverse side of disadvantaged Black Americans: unfairly advantaged white Americans. These types of comments may help

reparations activists show how white Americans, even if they or their ancestors didn't participate in slavery, still are attached to and benefit from the legacy of slavery in the U.S.

As mentioned above, part of the work of reparations activists is to convince people that reparations are needed. By pointing to statistics and explaining that Black Americans have never achieved economic parity with white Americans, activists can help build their case.

Harshness of Slavery and Ongoing Racism. Items coded as “harshness of slavery and ongoing racism” cover a somewhat broad range of sentiments; however, they are united in their function: to provide the backdrop and rationale for why the conversation about reparations is happening today. In other words, these comments recounted the racism and injustices that were inherent in slavery and clarified that the racism born out of slavery is still very much a part of America today.

As one author put it, “To supporters of reparations, the idea that slavery's impacts are not widely felt some 150 years after it was abolished is a pervasive myth.” Another author wrote, “The hardship and humiliation didn't end when the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865. Black Americans continue to endure racist violence, entrenched poverty and inequities in areas such as education, employment and the criminal justice system.” Comments such as these are clearly a response to a real or perceived lack of awareness among Americans that racism is still in fact an issue in the U.S. and its roots are in slavery.

One author shared the stories and sentiments of Black Americans who lived during the Jim Crow era, bringing an added level of personal connection and emotional

appeal to the article: ““We are damaged people,” [Fred] Lincoln said of the stress and anxiety that come with being black in America. He wants the government to help descendants of slaves heal emotionally from the scars left by generations of mistreatment.” The author also quotes a man named Edward Lee, who said, “You built a house with a thought of it being burned down [from Ku Klux Kan attacks].” These first-hand accounts create a compelling case for the need for reparations, perhaps more so than second-hand storytelling, by provoking empathy and allowing white readers to hear about the damage of slavery and racism “straight from the source” (i.e., from people who have lived it).

Still another author shared the views of a university student, who wrote, “Slavery did lasting damage to the image of blackness. Black people have been underestimated, objectified and discriminated against.” This comment presents another way of explaining the impact of slavery and racism—that it damaged the *image of blackness*. This encompasses much more than just financial inequality, which many other authors focused on. It encapsulates everything—the mental, the emotional, even the spiritual anguish felt by an entire people who were brought here against their will and treated as less than human. Another university student echoed and expounded upon this sentiment: “Since the first African slaves landed at Jamestown in 1619, African-Americans have been disparaged and treated as disposable by American society. Although the institution of slavery was abolished throughout the U.S. with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, its animus lingers in American culture and politics.” In these comments, this student made clear that it was not just a handful of individuals who treated Black

Americans this way even after slavery ended—it was, and continues to be, a larger force: society, culture, and politics.

The relatively large number of items coded as “harshness of slavery and ongoing racism” (29⁷) could suggest that advocates for reparations feel a need to share with people (and perhaps, convince people) how damaging slavery was and continues to be in order for people to understand why reparations are warranted. The presence of this theme throughout the texts implies that authors perceive this as an important aspect of the rhetorical situation surrounding reparations. Sharing these details must be considered important to the overall purpose of their argument. Perhaps this suggests that there is a real or perceived lack of awareness or understanding among Americans about the brutality of slavery. Otherwise, sharing this type of information in articles would be considered superfluous.

Morality and Ethics. I coded as “morality and ethics” when authors spoke about what is right and wrong; what is just and unjust. Much of these items talked about debt and punishment—the debt owed from slavery and perceived “punishment” of those who would pay for reparations. For example, one author quoted Republican Representative Louie Gohmert who said, “It is important that we know our history and we not punish people for the sins of their predecessors.” Another author asserted, “People should be punished and pay restitution for crimes they commit, but they are never responsible for the sins of their fathers [...] Reparations are unjust.” Interestingly, six of the 13 items coded as “morality and ethics” expressed this sentiment—that reparations would unjustly

⁷ Note: Some items are single or partial sentences, while others are entire paragraphs.

punish white Americans for “the sins of their fathers.” This could suggest that this narrative is a common one used by those who oppose reparations.

This same author goes on to quote activist and actor Danny Glover, who countered this point by saying, “Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are solely and individually responsible for, but we are American citizens and thus bound to a collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach.” Another author similarly evoked American citizenship and American identity, even taking it a step further by harkening back to American’s founding principles: “the U.S. not only owes financial reparations, but also a renewed and sincere commitment to extending a fair chance in life to all people. Restitution requires it and the validity of this nation’s founding principle, as defined in the Declaration of Independence, depends on it. Without this reckoning, the American covenant is a farce.” While assertions that white Americans should not be punished for “the sins of their fathers” draw on a sense of individualism and liberty, these comments draw on equally powerful American ideals—equal opportunity, justice, and a “collective enterprise.”

Americans’ sense of individualism could be a strong impediment to reparations efforts—after all, reparations represent a sort of “group effort” (Conklin, 2020). Therefore, it may be wise for pro-reparations authors to evoke other cherished American ideals in their counterarguments. By asserting that a failure to atone for slavery would actually undermine the entire premise that America was founded on, that the country would be a “farce,” reparations advocates meet opponents with equal force, using the same arsenal of rhetorical tactics (i.e., evoking American values).

Comments that drew on Americans' sense of morality and ethics, similar to those that detailed the harshness of slavery and of ongoing racism, served to evoke an emotional response. Unlike debates about logistics and monetary amounts, these comments appeal to people's sense of justice and their identity as American people.

Benefits of Reparations. I coded text as "benefits of reparations" when it mentioned the potential positive outcomes of reparations. While there were only two items coded in this category, they were distinct in that they were unambiguous and direct. While other text alludes to the need and rationale for reparations and (often very distantly) to the benefits, these items were explicit in discussing benefits. For this reason, I decided to create a separate code for these comments despite the fact that there was not a lot of data to support "benefits" as a real trend.

One author, acknowledging the limitations of reparations while still advocating for them, explained that "Reparations are not likely to eliminate the racial wealth gap, but could narrow it somewhat. Low-income families, with the fewest assets, would benefit the most." Another author pointed out, "Those less worried about a growing deficit could argue that reparations would be a boon over the long run — lifting people out of poverty, and improving their earning potential and buying power."

Again, it is interesting that across the six texts, only two texts mentioned the benefits reparations. While conversations about what reparations would look like logistically, who would receive them, and why the U.S. should (or should not) be considering reparations at all abound, comments about the hoped-for outcomes were scarce.

While my evidence is limited, if this is in fact a small indication of a larger trend, it suggests a prime rhetorical opportunity waiting to be seized. This is something that politicians and activists in favor of reparations could perhaps discuss more in national discussions—they could share not just the need for reparations and the potential avenues, but also what would hopefully come of them and how they would benefit future generations.

Current Issues and Debates About Reparations

Items coded as “current issues and debates about reparations” address the current beliefs, controversies, and debates happening among politicians, activists, and everyday Americans about reparations for slavery.

I coded a total of 68 comments as “current issues and debates about reparations.” Within this category are four subcodes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Controversy and divisiveness (16).
2. Current politics (35).
3. Racial differences in opinion (6).
4. Renewed interest (11).

Controversy and Divisiveness. More than half (four out of six) of the texts made some mention of the controversy surrounding reparations. Many of these comments spoke broadly about Americans in general. For example, one author wrote, “Slavery is a horrific, irremovable stain on U.S. history. But Americans disagree on how to handle its legacy.” The author reiterates this again, saying “there's little consensus among average Americans.” Another asserted that “Slavery reparations may be the single most divisive

idea in American politics,” and went on to state that although the topic has received increased attention from Democrats, “The public remains unmoved.”

These comments, in a way, state the obvious: if there have been calls for reparations since 1865 and yet none have come to fruition, there must be deep disagreement about the issue. Statement of this fact may seem innocuous and neutral on its face, but one has to wonder if people who oppose reparations could use this to their advantage. Their arguments could sound something like, “If it is so controversial, it must not be a good idea.”

For example, one author quoted writer Coleman Hughes, who argued that “If we were to pay reparations today, we would only divide the country further.” Another author quoted a university student who claimed that reparations would “rip America apart at the seams.” What these assertions really imply is this: reparations would upset white Americans who oppose reparations. America is already divided—would reparations really divide it further, or just agitate white Americans?

If this is indeed a common narrative pushed by opponents—that the reparations movement’s divisiveness outweighs its merits—then reparations activists will need to explain why reparations would help to unite and heal rather than divide. They may challenge people to think of other divisive issues in the country’s history—like the abolishment of slavery—and urge readers to look beyond the current public opinion to a more unified (and morally sound) future.

Current Politics. I coded as “current politics” when there was discussion of contemporary political debates and initiatives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as I intentionally

selected recent articles, this code contained the greatest number of items (35). All six articles contained text pertaining to current political conversations about reparations.

Most comments pertaining to current politics simply reported ongoing political happenings in a neutral tone. For example, one author explained, “The current effort focuses on a congressional bill that would commission a study on reparations, a version of legislation first introduced in 1989. Several Democratic presidential hopefuls have declared their support, including Senators Kamala Harris of California, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Cory Booker of New Jersey and former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro.”

Other comments, however, discuss current politics in a way that highlights different aspects of reparations and points to different ultimate goals. For example, one author, speaking about current local reparations initiatives, wrote, “None of these policies can replace national action. Even combining their efforts, local and corporate entities couldn’t afford the scale of repayment — often estimated in the billions of dollars — that a federal reparations law would probably entail.” The author goes on to note that “Local reparations could represent an incremental reckoning en route to ultimate reconciliation.” Writing about reparations initiatives in this way suggests that local initiatives are but a steppingstone to what is ultimately needed: federal reconciliation. In this article, the idea of reparations is presented not as a pipe dream but as a real future possibility.

Another author highlights the uncertainty and lack of planning by Democrats who advocate for reparations. The author writes, “But amid a steady shift in the [Democratic] party to the left, the issue has been given new life with endorsements from 2020 hopefuls and others -- though details remain vague as to what form such reparations should take,

with estimates for a controversial direct payment to slave descendants running into the trillions.” This is reiterated later in the article, when the author points out that “2020 Democrats . . . have been vague about the form reparations would take.” This perceived lack of attention to detail and concrete planning by some may be something that reparations activists need to combat if they hope to win over those who believe reparations are too far-fetched.

Racial Differences in Opinion. Four of the six texts contained some mention of the racial differences in opinion about reparations. These comments, unlike the comments made about divisiveness among the “general American public” described above, reveal which Americans generally support reparations and which Americans generally do not.

As one might guess, more Black Americans tend to support reparations than white Americans. Several authors pointed to statistics—from different polls that produced similar results—that reveal this racial divide. For example, one author explained, “While a majority of black Americans in a 2016 Marist poll supported reparations, whites rejected it by an overwhelming margin.” Another noted, “While nearly 75% of black respondents in an AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll said they believe the U.S. government should pay reparations to the descendants of enslaved black people, just 15% of white participants supported the idea.” Still another author explained, “Americans are split along racial lines on the question of whether to give direct payments to slave descendants, with just 16% of white people backing the idea in a Gallup poll taken in June and July and 73% of black respondents supporting it.”

One author, interestingly, asserted that “minds are made up — according to a recent Associated Press poll, 74 percent of African Americans now favor reparation

payments, while 85 percent of whites oppose them — and Congress seems unlikely to take up the matter.” To argue that Americans’ minds are made up and that Congress is “unlikely to take up the matter” reveals some resignation and skepticism about reparations. Do other Americans feel this way? That pushes for reparations are ultimately going nowhere? If so, reparations activists will have to fight this and make the case that change is possible.

Renewed Interest. I coded as “renewed interest” when authors made mention of a “new” or “reignited” interest in reparations. These comments create a sense of being at the beginning of something—a new movement, perhaps. They may create a sense of hope for those who support reparations. For example, an author writing about local reparations efforts explained that “for some African Americans, reparations are within reach” and “it could be just the beginning.”

Several comments coded as “renewed interest” spoke about politicians—specifically, Democratic presidential nominee hopefuls who took a stance on the issue as part of their campaign platform. For example, one author wrote, “Now, in the early phase of the 2020 presidential campaign, the question of compensating black Americans for suffering under slavery and other forms of racial injustice has resurfaced.”

Interestingly, some comments spoke about reparations as “far left” issue. One author painted it as a problem for “moderate” Democrats: “If this latest revival has excited supporters, it has worried some party moderates who fear that such an effort would alienate many voters.” Another characterized it as part of the party’s shift to the left: “But amid a steady shift in the party to the left, the issue has been given new life with endorsements from 2020 hopefuls and others.”

If the topic of reparations has a reputation for being a “far left” or “radical” issue, reparations activists may have to consider how to appeal to Americans who consider themselves to be moderate or right-leaning.

Types and Logistics of Reparations

The category “types and logistics of reparations” describes text pertaining to the different kinds of reparations (i.e., monetary, symbolic, or others, such as program initiatives) and/or to the logistics of reparations (e.g., who would receive reparations, how much money would be paid, in what form it would be paid, etc.).

I coded a total of 41 comments as “arguments for and against reparations.” Within this category are three (3) subcodes. They are listed below, along with the number of comments in each code.

1. Logistics (18).
2. Money and financial amounts (12).
3. Symbolic reparations (11).

Logistics. I coded as “logistics” when authors discussed the logistical details of potential reparations plans. Most comments about logistics expressed the difficulty of sorting them out, and the general uncertainty about how reparations would actually be made. One author summarized this, writing “Still, the economic nuts and bolts of such a program have gotten scant public attention: Who would be paid? How much? Where would the money come from?” Another authored share a quote from Congressman Mike Johnson, who argued that “the fair distribution of reparations would be nearly impossible when one considers the complexity of the American struggle to abolish slavery.”

Other authors explained that the logistics of reparations depends on what type of reparations are paid. As one author put it, “Reparations could take on different forms, too: They could be delivered as land or through special social programs instead of direct payment, and some politicians have discussed developing tax credits for low-income families and ‘baby bonds’ to pay for children's college tuition, but neither of those measures would be exclusive to black families.” Another author echoed this, writing, “Compensation programs can take many forms” and “A reparations program in the United States could likewise [speaking about Germany’s reparations] adopt a single method or several at once. Families could get a one-time check, receive vouchers for medical insurance or college, or have access to a trust fund to finance a business or a home.”

While people may disagree or be uncertain about the logistics of reparations, the fact that these conversations are happening is surely encouraging to reparations activists. It will likely be more difficult for opponents of reparations to shoot down the idea entirely when so many different possibilities are being proposed.

Money and Financial Amounts. Comments coded as “money and financial amounts” pertain to the potential cost of monetary reparations. The majority of these comments include cost estimates resulting from various calculations. For example, one author explained that economists have estimated a reparations cost using the racial income gap (one economist estimated that 40-60% of the gap is due to discrimination), while others have developed estimates using the wages that enslaved people would have been paid for their labor. This author explained that the basis for estimates can make a

huge difference: “Of course, varying any critical assumption can add or subtract billions or trillions of dollars.”

Other authors also discussed the multitude of possible formulas for calculating reparations, with one author writing, “Attaching a dollar figure to a program of reparations resembles a ‘Wheel of Fortune’ spin.” Another author noted that “There's no equation for reparations, but various academics, lawyers and activists have guessed -- based on formulations on the total value of slave labor to the U.S. economy over about 250 years -- that the payments would fall anywhere between \$17 billion and \$5 trillion.”

These comments frequently referenced estimates of billions to trillions of dollars—very large numbers that carry some shock value. Figures like this could be used as evidence by those against reparations to support their claims that reparations would be too expensive. In arguments in favor of reparations, then, advocates likely need to address these large figures and explain why the U.S. could afford to pay it (perhaps, for example, by contrasting a reparations plan with other spending from the U.S.).

Symbolic Reparations. I coded as “symbolic reparations” when authors talked about non-monetary reparations. Several of the comments contrasted the symbolic with the monetary to emphasize the importance of symbolic reparations (and, in some cases, argue that monetary reparations are not needed or would not be beneficial on their own). For example, one university student quoted in one of the articles asserted that “Black Americans do not need handouts or remuneration. For true reparations, they need America’s respect.” Another student took this a step further, arguing that monetary reparations without symbolic reparations would be somewhat of a failure: “To put it plainly, no financial reward is capable of sealing shut the wounds inflicted by America’s

‘peculiar institution.’ In fact, to assume money will suffice only indicates that we have fallen victim to our selfish tendencies once again. Money without justice and guidance is merely a flame without tinder.”

One author quoted economist and reparations scholar William A. Darity Jr., who shared an interesting insight: that monetary reparations are also symbolic. Darity asserts that “for both substantive and symbolic reasons, some important component must be direct payment to eligible recipients.” While one may think of monetary reparations as distinctly separate from symbolic reparations, this point from Darity illuminates the fact that monetary reparations, more than just sending money, would send a message: that America values Black Americans and is willing to invest in righting the country’s wrongs.

Throughout all items coded as “symbolic reparations” is a common thread: acknowledgement. More so than apology, these comments called for the U.S. to acknowledge and take responsibility for slavery. For example, one author, speaking of historical researcher Vennie Deas Moore, wrote: “She [Deas Moore] wants Americans to muster the courage to face the wrongs of slavery and inequality — and take responsibility.” This author also quotes historian Daniel Littlefield, who said, “What the reparations debate is about is not so much people wanting to get money. Black people feel they deserve some acknowledgment of ongoing wrong.”

All of these comments about symbolic reparations—particularly this last quote from Littlefield—shed light on a potential strategy for reparations activists: to push the “why” behind reparations and highlight the fact that it is not just about money. For those who oppose reparations, it could be more difficult to argue with people who are looking

for something so basic and fundamental as acknowledgement and respect. If reparations activists can get people to agree on that premise—that all Americans deserve to feel seen, heard, and respected—that is the first step in creating common ground from which people can begin to build more productive discussions about the logistics of how reparations would happen.

Discussion

When reading or listening to contemporary discussions about reparations for slavery in the U.S., it might not be immediately obvious to someone that these conversations have been ongoing for over 150 years. Despite decades and centuries of debate, the idea of reparations largely remains just that—an idea. Today, politicians, students, scholars, activists, and others are still, quite frankly, all over the board with regard to reparations. While some are convicted in their belief that reparations must be paid and are busy discussing details and logistics of potential plans, others are still unconvinced that slavery was even bad enough to warrant such attention today.

To truly meditate on how much time has passed without any resolution to this issue is to grow more and more curious as to why. How can so many calls for reparations go unanswered for so long without at least some sort of compromise or solution? As Coates (2014) pointed out, “if the practicalities, not the justice, of reparations are the true sticking point, there has for some time been the beginnings of a solution.” If all people really disagreed on were logistics and not whether or not reparations were warranted, the U.S. should have had time to work those out by now. So, there must be deeper social and psychological issues impeding reparations cases from moving forward.

This lack of movement toward reparations, perhaps, reveals a deep dissonance and maybe even delusion in America about slavery and its impact. As Scottie Andrew (2019), author of one of the texts used in this analysis, put it, “To supporters of reparations, the idea that slavery's impacts are not widely felt some 150 years after it was abolished is a pervasive myth.” If Andrew is correct—that reparations activists are battling a “pervasive myth”—that means that efforts may need to be directed to debunking that myth before substantive progress can be made in sorting out the logistical details of a reparations plan.

However, chalking up the disagreement over the ongoing impact of slavery to a “myth” neglects another important and insidious factor: racism. Prager (2017) asserts that the country’s failure to own up to slavery and make real efforts to help Black Americans rebuild their lives has created a “collective psychology frozen in time when domination by race was a formal feature of America” (p. 640). In other words, it may be more than a case of misinformation for some Americans. Consciously or not, they might be resistant to the idea of reparations because they hold racist beliefs about Black Americans, their history, and their ongoing struggles. Fighting a myth becomes much more difficult if people *want* to hang on to the myth despite evidence to the contrary.

So, it may be that unfortunately, much of the work of reparations advocates will continue to be to convince Americans that slavery continues to impact Black Americans today. This is not to say that conversations about logistics should not be happening simultaneously. Perhaps while some politicians, activists, and scholars are theorizing about the logistics of a reparations plan, others can focus on changing the hearts and minds of Americans who have yet to grasp the significance and legacy of slavery. This is

the “why.” Part of this, as evidenced in the texts analyzed here, is to convey the harshness of slavery and explain how the racism it fueled continues to survive and even thrive in the U.S.

But another part of this that did not receive much attention in the texts I analyzed is the hoped-for outcomes. Reparations activists may need to make sure they are discussing not just the impetus for reparations, but also what would be on the other side. As those who oppose reparations talk of reparations in terms of “punishment” and “division,” reparations activists can directly combat with narratives of healing, resolution, peace, and unity.

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Conclusion

At the outset of this project, I sought to better understand the rhetoric used when discussing slavery in the U.S. Specifically, I wanted to get a sense of the popular narratives surrounding the lasting legacy of slavery. How do Americans reconcile the country's history of slavery with their present-day experiences and understandings of American society and government? Do Americans share a common narrative when it comes to slavery and racism in the U.S.?

Reflecting on my findings from these two analyses, I think the answer is: no—Americans do not seem to share a common narrative about these issues. There are, instead, many different narratives that splinter off, often along racial and party lines, depending on what aspect of race/racism one is discussing.

Some Americans believe that slavery does not impact society today. Some believe it does. Some Americans believe that there is sufficient and proper acknowledgement of slavery in schools, historic sites, and other arenas. Some believe there is not. Some believe that certain historic figures should be celebrated as purely good and heroic. Some believe that they should not. Some believe that reparations for slavery are unnecessary and even unjust. Some believe that they are vital to America's healing and fulfillment of its founding principles.

Pondering this could conjure up a bleak image of America in some people's minds: an America hopelessly divided with no resolution in sight. On the other hand, one could imagine that this is due to positive shifts in narratives. The reason there are conflicting narratives is because new, more progressive ones are rising up to hopefully subvert the dominant ones.

This is evident, for example, in Monticello's work to recognize and remember the enslaved individuals and families who made Monticello what it was. Doing this work necessitates some complicating and muddying of Thomas Jefferson's legacy, but tour guides did not shy away from doing this. In their sphere, they are doing important reparations work by constructing and sharing powerful counter-narratives with the American public.

Positive change is also evident in the increased attention that the reparations movement is receiving. While reparations are still considered to be somewhat radical and are generally unpopular among the public, there is hope to be found in the fact that several Democratic politicians campaigning for the 2020 presidential nomination took up the issue and expressed at least some support. This could indicate that the idea of reparations—whether symbolic or monetary or both—is inching toward the mainstream. The more that serious discussions are pushed by politicians, authors, scholars, and others, the more it will influence the overarching narratives about slavery in the U.S. Although it is already far past overdue, it is not too late to reconstruct narratives around slavery and convince resistant Americans that there is potential restitution and healing to be found through reparations.

Rhetoric is powerful, as are the stories people tell themselves. Activists, scholars, and everyday citizens should recognize these powerful tools and use them to create the change they want to see in the world. I look forward to seeing further research into these areas develop, and I hope to continue contributing to the discussion.

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