

Using Twitter Spaces to Explore Reparations for Black American Descendants of U.S. Freedmen: Activism, Ethnicity, and Online Informal Adult Learning

Lisa R. Brown and Marissa Molina

University of the Incarnate Word

Abstract: The U.S. Supreme Court, on June 29, 2023, issued a ruling in the case of STUDENTS FOR FAIR ADMISSIONS, INC. v. PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD COLLEGE. The decision was anxiously interpreted as an end to race-based Affirmative Action. However, insufficient attention has been given to their discussions, holding that race was an *underinclusive* category for those Blacks who are the descendants of slaves and U.S. Freedmen. This secondary source research examined how social media led to informal adult education on reparations. It presents how online activism parleyed into hundreds of adults presenting before the Office of Management and Budget to consider the *Freedmen* term and a unique ethnic identity for descendants of slaves in America as it revises the Federal Statistical Policy Directive (SPD 15)¹.

Keywords: Black Americanism, generational wealth gap, reparations, slavery, U.S. Freedmen descendant

Lineage-based reparations for Black Americans who are the descendants of formerly enslaved people have been an emerging national social justice debate in the United States. In this research, secondary source data was collected and analyzed. Adults have been engaged in nonformal online learning using *Twitter [X] Spaces* to discuss the emotionally and politically charged topic of direct cash reparations. This ethnographic study emerged from a class assignment where graduate students used weekly discussion boards to grapple with contemporary social issues philosophically and theoretically. The national reparations movement was the topic selected for this article. The students in the course observed and documented discussions occurring in the *Twitter X Spaces* voice capture rooms and connected them to course content. The experiences resulted in transformational learning moments for the Black American and Latino graduate students relative to their views about the merits of reparations for the descendants of U.S. Freedmen.

On November 21, 2022, during an OMB listening session and presentation, scholars advanced a more in-depth proposal for categories of race and ethnicity concepts for the U.S. Freedmen descendant group (Brown, McDowell, Darity Jr., & Mullen, 2022). After further research and informal reflection with the affected group members concerned about the changes, the scholars restructured the terms and definitions presented at the initial listening session last Fall. The Federal Registry Note (FRN) Docket # OMB-2023-0001² was released on January 27, 2023. It included several of the Reparations Planning Committee's (RPC) recommendations offered at the initial OMB presentation over the proposed changes to the race and ethnicity terms being considered for Black Americans who were the descendants of emancipated slaves in the United States (i.e., Freedmen). The RPC subsequently submitted a full technical report requesting that definitions and terms be created to disaggregate—for purposes of empirical data collection and fair distribution of government resources—by race and ethnicity those Black Americans who descended from formerly enslaved people in the United States.

² [Initial Proposals For Updating OMB's Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards](#). A Notice by the [Management and Budget Office](#) on [01/27/2023](#)

Background

The purpose of this research was exploratory because the secondary source data was collected from a class project. Graduate students monitored and documented—using the course’s *Canvas Learning Management System (LMS)* discussion threads—their interpretations of the national Black American U.S. Freedmen descendants’ reparations movement, the debates occurring online, and how transformative the disorienting dilemma process was for them as observer-listeners (Seeley, 2023; Tisdell, 2003). Research question one (R1) was, *What is the current state of knowledge about lineage-based cash reparations payments and levels of support among graduate students and other adults within the informal learning context (e.g., Twitter)?* The second research question two (R2) was, *How were race and ethnicity concepts negotiated by discussion participants relative to who would be eligible for U.S. reparations?* This paper is organized with a literature review, a description of the methodology and research approach, the data analysis, and findings that produced major themes from the *in vivo* qualitative coding of the data and the synthesis of emerging concepts. The paper concludes by describing the worldviews (reality paradigms) associated with the adults participating in the online national Black American U.S. Freedmen descendant reparations movement. The research identifies typologies of social activism and describes informal adult learning within the context of *X Spaces*’ social media voice-capture discussion rooms.

Literature Review

Democracy and equality, as concepts of nation-building, present a contradiction for a country that codified slavery in its founding to advance its wealth (Darity & Mullen, 2020). The Continental Army engaged in a Revolutionary War against the British crown. It held that taxation without representation was an anathema (Bryant, 2015) to the vision of freedom and democracy forged by its colonial-settler class in the *new world* that would become the United States of America. Ironically, even enslaved in America, Blacks have arguably been the exemplars of freedom-fighting patriots, having served in every war conflict—including the Revolutionary War while enslaved—on behalf of what would subsequently become the sovereign nation of America (Hocker, 1990; Tillman II, 2021). Historically, Black Americans have constantly engaged in revolutionary praxis (Freire, 2000) and radical acts to pursue freedom and equal rights (Darity & Mullen, 2020; Johnson, 1997). Such actions included fighting for independence from slavery and the benefits of manumission reparations. As an example, in the 1834 case of *Fisher’s Negroes v. Dabbs*, in his will, Peter Fisher “(1) called for his slaves to be set free; (2) left them livestock, farming equipment, and a year’s worth of financial support; and (3) granted them the right to live on his plantation for 15 years following his death” (Bryant, 2015, p. 94). However, justice remained elusive for the Freedmen cited in the Dabbs case. In a scandalous maneuver by the nephew of Fisher (James Dabbs), who administered the estate, with the aid of a lower court ruling, the formerly enslaved people were threatened to relinquish the bequeathed benefits and into a bullied agreement to immigrate to Liberia in exchange for their freedom. Hence, they were denied the reparations owed to them per Fisher’s wishes. Moreover, the Supreme Court subsequently expanded upon the unfair ruling. It required that the terms of space occupancy for the formerly enslaved—who obtained manumission by Fisher—be that of removal from the state of Tennessee and beyond the limits of the United States of America (Bryant, 2015).

A lesser-known fact of history is that President Lincoln and many white abolitionists opposed Freedman Frederick Douglass. The former two advocated that the newly emancipated immigrate to Liberia, Africa (Tackach, 2021) versus obtaining their restorative justice owed via full citizenship and direct monetary compensation in America. Nevertheless, most Blacks who were granted freedom from slavery and living in the country rejected such attempts at deception, holding that America was the home they had built for themselves and their families. Therefore, the United States’ fortunes as an emerging sovereign also belonged to them, and their collective destiny was intertwined (Darity & Mullen, 2020) in what the authors of this article have termed *Black Americanism*. In the twentieth century, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—quoting Frederick Douglass—excoriated the injustices faced by descendants of the emancipated slaves (i.e., Negroes). He expounded upon how the Black American Freedmen had not received reparations in a speech, *The Other America*, delivered at Stanford University. The Martin Luther

King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (2015) offers video documentation where Dr King reiterated that the formerly enslaved were “released to freedom and famine” (20:15) while at the same time, the 1862 Homestead Act provided newly arrived Europeans with land and what Katznelson (2006) described as affirmative action for whites.

Methodology

In 2022, graduate students were required to create or resurrect a dormant Twitter account (now rebranded as X) to join and listen to the emerging voice-capture community engagement public discussions called *Twitter Spaces*. The benefits of *X Spaces* were that they created innovative nonformal and informal reflection-in-action adult learning moments for graduate students (Mintz, 2016; Schön, 1983). The adult learners needed to grapple with theoretical and experiential knowledge gained about the Week 4 discussion board topic of Reparations for Black Americans. The pedagogical approach to the course was to create a multiplier *affective*³ impact (Brown et al., 2023) for group and self-directed learning best practices, including experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) and transformational learning (Smith & Morris, 2023). The course connected the content literature to the students’ social action (Tisdell, 2003, as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 139) interpreted as *embodied knowing* experiences of identity in three dimensions (intellectual, emotional, and spatial audio) as graduate students processed the conversations within the online social media voice-capture discussion environment.

Social Media and Voice-Capture Technology

The listening sessions were assigned during week four of a five-week course. Before entering the Twitter voice-capture spaces, the instructor guided the graduate students so they could gain content mastery—as evidenced by submitted course papers, class discussions, and active learning activities. The graduate students understood more deeply the *liberal, progressive, behaviorist, humanistic, radical critical, analytic, and postmodernist* foundational adult education philosophies (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Social media has facilitated civic and community engagement, not confined to virtual online spaces—for the greater good or evil. Emerging and innovative forms of contemporary nonformal adult education (Yamashita et al., 2022) have served to revitalize Black grassroots activism, particularly about reparations in online adult learning spaces, leading to participants who identified as former education professionals, celebrities, working-class adults, political operatives, or academics.

However, informal online adult learning exposes participants to risks (e.g., doxxing) or the revealing of racist dark web activities where communities of practice meet to plan and execute nefarious acts. For example, the Buffalo, NY massacre gunman wrote on his firearm, “Here’s Your Reparations,” “Niggers”; and developed a horrid online Manifesto within an online community of practice (Saunders, 2022).

Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis

The secondary data source collected from the Canvas LMS discussion board posts included supplementary hyperlinks, written reflections, reading circle attachments, and video resources that some graduate students embedded into their LMS discussion board responses (Hahn, 2011). The use of secondary source qualitative data (SSQD) has grown in popularity, particularly in the social sciences and education fields (Sherif, 2018). The literature explains that the increase in use is partly due to the limitation of quantitative survey data for obtaining the rich and deep descriptive interpretation of complex human phenomena, particularly in ethnographic inquiry and offering counternarratives (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2023) that help to thwart ethnic erasure in higher education. SSQD has been a means for constructing new inquiry questions with existing data sets, strengthening the development of theories and strategies used by practitioners through generating data and analysis that examine social phenomena in new and different ways (Boeren, 2018). The SSQD allowed for the development of emergent questions

³ Affective learning involves moods, feelings, and attitudes that can emerge during team/group student work due to the diverse Spiral Dynamic Theory ontological worldview(s) of the adult learner(s) and the social context that locates the graduate-level education.

surrounding the use of social media and online informal adult learning. Graduate students made connections as to how topics would impact their philosophical perspectives and their experiential and transformational learning, in this case, about reparations for Black American descendants of U.S. Freedmen. Collected data was organized and analyzed for Level Two categorization after the Level One open coding of their comments entered on the discussion boards relative to their experiences in X Spaces—including their written paper reflections and field trip narratives (Kolb, 2014). The interpretations of the coded text and responses were reviewed and confirmed (via member-checking techniques), with each graduate student ensuring that the documentation of their responses appropriately matched the coded themes. In the Level Three analysis, six significant themes emerged from the data. Themes emerged following in vivo coding of direct quotes.

Major Themes

The graphic display below (Figure 1) captured the authentic voice of each submission, matching patterns identified for each graduate student via an interpretive-coded theme. Few data responses conformed to a single theme typology. Therefore, the participant quotes can have multiple letter code designations based upon the following conceptual meta-themes that emerged from discussants: (a) experiences of deep trauma and transformation, (b) identification of complex thinking and analysis, (c) discussion room management concerns, (d) identification of politics and praxis, (e) questioning information veracity, (f) a desire for coalition building. Researchers assert that people try as much as possible to avoid suffering and make adult life enjoyable (Toma & Berge, 2023). However, professed suffering and trauma in this project were a source of the adult participants’ transformation. Moments sharing seemed cathartic as people

Figure 1
Display Matrix of Select Major Data Coding Themes

Participants and Theme Codes	Graduate Student In Vivo Direct Quotes
Arturo E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I joined a Twitter space called 'Are "Black" immigrants too immature to discuss OUR issues?' #reparation. I have never used Twitter spaces before. However, after being in the space and listening to people speak, it was amazing how a platform like this allows people to get together and engage in educational conversations about how things are right now. The primary purpose of the space I was in was to educate us on the appropriate information to believe.”</i>
Ruben A, D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The Spaces allowed me to view reparations from a different lens and a diverse perspective. The Spaces allowed me to hear the passion of the advocates speaking that only want justice. I look forward to learning more about this topic and becoming well versed in reparations.”</i>
Luís A, F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Reparations is not a topic that I was very familiar with and really did not understand what exactly it entails. I believe that a lot of harm and trauma was created by the US government by allowing slavery to be legal. The good-o-boy-run government has always been oppressive to minority races. The level of white supremacy is penetrated and can be seen in all aspects of life in the U.S. There is a need for a systematic change so there is true equality.”</i>

Note. This figure represents the major themes after three levels of coding modeled after the grounded theory coding approach of Qureshi and Ünlü (2020). The letter code’s key theme interpretations were: A =Trauma and Transformation, B = Complex Thinking and Analysis, C = Room Dialogue Management, D = Reparations Politics and Praxis, E = Trustworthiness and Veracity, and F = Desires for Coalition Building.

described their traumas in safe, culturally supportive spaces. *X participants* shared profound personal experiences—which deeply impacted the graduate students—and would receive emotional validation within the online discussion community, leading to radical and meaningful change incidents. *R1* showed that the depth of knowledge among Twitter users was extensive and helped build the graduate student's knowledge capacity as they documented their transformative experiences in support of reparations. *R2* showed that racial identity was very personal, and Black Americans felt a need for a unique racial identity that did not *denationalize* or *misracialize* them as African, holding that it was important to respect their unique history as Blacks who descended from the formerly enslaved in America.

Discussion

One forward-thinking approach to social and generational repair for the descendants of slaves and U.S. Freedmen is to reinstitute the unfinished work of Reconstruction (Foner, 2012). Ideally, the authors of this work hold that it would be an appropriate compelling government interest that aligns with the recent SCOTUS ruling on Affirmative Actions (e.g., to correct the sanctioned harms caused by failed Federal government policies)—to establish a national *Office of Post-Reconstruction Remediation and Reparations Justice* for the descendants of U.S. Freedmen. Nevertheless, its establishment is not a precondition for direct cash payments due to the generational debt owed to eligible heirs. Those funds should go directly to the posterity of the formerly enslaved, the subsequent U.S. Freedmen descendants.

The Federal government established the Office of Indian Affairs on March 11, 1824, which it maintains until today. However, the Freedmen's Bureau (enacted by legislative acts in 1865 and 1866), intended to usher in the newly emancipated Black Americans into full citizenship, was limited to a mere seven-year administrative run. The thwarted efforts of Reconstruction were sealed in a series of failures, such as the Great Compromise⁴ of 1877, where President Rutherford B. Hayes agreed to end the Reconstruction Era and authorized the removal of federal troops charged with protecting the lives and property of the newly emancipated (DuBois, 1935). The latter decision led to the rise of a campaign of domestic terrorism (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan), which included the retrenchment of Black citizens' rights, the lynching of Freedmen family members, and the confiscation of their lands and properties (Woodward, 1991).

How the OMB codifies its revisions to SPD-15 is vital for a federal Black Reparations project (Brown et al., 2022; Darity, 2023). First, it will establish a distinct ethnic identification and thwart efforts to culturally ethnocide the descendants of slaves' contribution to American History through racial assimilation schemes. Delineation of Freedmen heirs will provide for the empirical variables to research, monitor, and gauge ongoing harms that contribute to the extreme generational wealth gaps and anti-Black Americanism being experienced by the descendants of U.S. Freedmen. Lastly, an ethnic identifier will guide the fair distribution of federal resources and actions of repair and justice toward the descendent community (Brown et al., 2023).

References

- Boeren, E. (2018). The Methodological Underdog: A Review of Quantitative Research in the Key Adult Education Journals. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 68(1), 63-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713617739347>
- Brown, L.R., McCray, P. & Neal, J. (2023). Creating affective collaborative adult teams and groups guided by Spiral Dynamic Theory. In D. Guralnick et al. (Eds.), *Innovative approaches to technology-enhanced learning for the workplace and higher education*, (pp. 81–96). Springer Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21569-8_8
- Brown, L. R., McDowell, E., Darity Jr., W. A., & Mullen, A. K. (2023). *Response to OMB FRN Docket #OMB-2023-0001: Initial Proposals For Updating OMB's Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards © Prepared by select subcommittee members of the Reparations Planning Committee (RPC)* [Technical Report].

⁴ The Compromise of 1877 was an informal, unwritten deal that settled the disputed 1876 U.S. Presidential election; through it, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was awarded the White House on the understanding that he would remove the federal troops from South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana (History.com editors, 2019).

- <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30024.90882>
- Brown, L. R., McDowell, E., Darity Jr., W. A., & Mullen, A. K. [Dr. Lisa R. Brown]. (2022, November 21). *Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Initial Proposals For Updating OMB's Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards: Directive 15 Research Presentation RPC Subcommittee* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/VQNSbV2RwpM>
- Bryant, C. J. (2015). Without representation, no taxation: Free Blacks, taxes, and tax exemptions between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, 21(1), 91-123. <https://uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/without-representation-no-taxation-free-blacks/docview/1778700499/se-2>
- Darity, W. (Ed.). (2023). *The Black Reparations Project: A Handbook for Racial Justice*. Univ of California Press.
- Darity Jr., W.A. & Mullen, A.K. (2020). *From here to equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the twenty-first century*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1935). *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*. The Free Press.
- Elias, J. L. & Merriam, S. B. (2005). *Philosophical foundations of adult education* (3rd ed.). Krieger Publishing Company.
- Foner, E. (2012). Panel II: Reconstruction Revisited. *Columbia Law Review*, 112(7), 1585–1606
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.
- Hahn, C. (2011). *Doing qualitative research using your computer*. Sage Publications.
- History.com Editors. (2019, November 27). *Compromise of 1877*. History.com. <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/compromise-of-1877>
- Hocker, W. C. (1990, June 20). D.C. to honor Black Revolutionary War soldiers. *Black Enterprise*, 20, 43. <https://uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/magazines/d-c-honor-black-revolutionary-war-soldiers/docview/217863257/se-2>
- Johnson, J. S. (1997). Johnson vs. Washington & Brown. *Adult Learning*, 8(3), 9. <https://doi-org.uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/104515959700800306>
- Katznelson, I. (2006). *When affirmative action was White: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT press.
- Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2014). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mintz, J. (2016). Bion and Schön: Psychoanalytic perspectives on reflection in action. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64(3), 277-293.
- Qureshi, H. A., & Ünlü, Z. (2020). Beyond the paradigm conflicts: A four-step coding instrument for grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920928188>
- Ramdeholl, D. & Jones, J. (2023). Counternarratives as truth-telling: Survival, community & racial justice in higher education. *Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal*, 8(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.55370/dsj.v8i1.1545>
- Saunders, A. (2022, May 17). *Buffalo shooter's gun allegedly had the N-word written on the barrel*. Revolt. <https://www.revolt.tv/article/2022-05-17/169430/buffalo-shooters-gun-allegedly-had-n-word-written/>
- Schön, D. A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Seeley, J. (2023). Ask me why I asked: Using concepts of collaborative communication to think together about teaching and learning. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 15(3), 139–151. <https://doi-org.uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/10.26209/td2023vol15iss31505>
- Sherif, V. (2018). Evaluating preexisting qualitative research data for secondary analysis. *Forum, Qualitative Social Research*, 19(2), 1-18. DOI:10.17169/fqs-19.2.2821
- Smith, R., & Morris, C. B. (2023). Reflecting back and looking forward: Critical reflective practice in an online master's in art education program. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 15(3), 65–81. <https://doi-org.uiwtx.idm.oclc.org/10.26209/td2023vol15iss31760>
- Supreme Court of the United States [SCOTUS]. (2023). *STUDENTS FOR FAIR ADMISSIONS, INC. v. PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD COLLEGE*. https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf
- Tackach, J. (2021). Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: A bond cut short. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, 101(2), 16–17.
- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. (2015, July 2). *MLK: The other America* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/dOWDtDUKz-U>
- Tillman II, JL (2021). *Tillman's handbook of great Black American Patriots & guide to the national parks, and landmarks, statues, museums, and historic places dedicated to Them*. Tillman Family Press.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*. Jossey-Bass.

- Toma, R., & Berge, M. (2023). Online teaching in a time of crisis: Social capital and community building tools. *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning*, 16(1), 65.
- Yamashita, T., Zhang, J., Sun, N., & Cummins, P. A. (2022). Sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and basic skills of the nonformal distance education participants among adults in the U.S. *Adult Education Quarterly* 72(2), 243–261.
- Woodward, C. (1991). *Reunion and reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the end of Reconstruction*. Oxford University Press.