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"Who Cancelled Lee Highway?": Expressions of White Racial Frames and Counterframes on Nextdoor

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Abstract: In July of 2021, the Arlington County Board, just outside of Washington, DC, voted to change a major thoroughfare – previously known as Lee Highway – to Langston Boulevard. Despite this well-publicized and openly debated name change, the sight of the new road caused an uproar on the neighborhood social media site, Nextdoor. While social media sites have been central to the mobilization efforts of racial justice activists, these same sites are also often fundamental to a growing and more visible community of white supremacists. This study focuses on the ways in which geographic proximity, through the social media site Nextdoor, constructs community-based expressions of racial justice and whiteness. Using the 151 posts and responses that were published on Nextdoor the day after the street name change in a neighborhood in Arlington, VA, this study analyses how a primarily white, upper-class neighborhood publicly communicates its understanding of race and racial justice. This study was grounded in Feagin's (2020) concept of the white racial frame, an overarching white worldview dominant in the Global North that embraces a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes and ideologies. Findings suggest community members engaged in equal numbers in white racial frames and counterframes. Within the white racial frames, community members used whiteness as virtuousness and non-whiteness as unvirtuous, while counter-frames primarily relied on unveiling the white racial frames used. These findings indicate the ways in which social media as a form of communication works to reinforce existing spatial hierarchies while also reimagining community participation.
Keywords: Neighborhood, social justice, social media, white racial frames

In July of 2021, the Arlington County Board, a governing body in Northern Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC, voted to change a major thoroughfare—previously known as Lee Highway—to Langston Boulevard. This vote only affected the stretch of road that runs through Arlington (5.2 miles from Rosslyn to East Falls Church), leaving the previous name to remain in adjoining Fairfax County, as well as other moniker iterations through its 248-mile route through Virginia to North Carolina (including Washington Boulevard, Route 29, and 29th Infantry Division Memorial Highway). Passed after the nationwide mini-racial reckoning that occurred in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent rise of Black Lives Matter, the Arlington County Board rejected the near-ubiquitous name of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in order to "create[…] a welcoming Main Street and also take[…] an important step in reconciling the history of racial discrimination and intimidation embodied by the 'Lee' name"

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(Arlington County Board, 2021, para. 1). Instead, the road was renamed for John Langston, the first dean of Howard University, the first black man elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Virginia in 1888, and only one of five Southern black men to be elected to Congress during Jim Crow.

Despite this well-publicized and openly debated street name change, the sight of the new road signs caused an uproar on the neighborhood social media site, Nextdoor. This, of course, is not unusual. Social media sites contain resources to allow individuals to air their grievances and, more significantly, for collective action, invest in protest acts.
Such sites have been central to the mobilization efforts of racial justice activists (Barnard, 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Martin, 2021). By allowing for connective action, whereby individuals virtually come together to engage in co-participation and co-production of knowledge for a certain cause, social media can act as a platform for knowledge production and mobilization (Vaast et al., 2017). At the same time, these same social media sites are often fundamental to a growing and more visible community of white supremacists, trolls, and, perhaps less noxiously, privileged NIMBYers[2] (Brooks, 2020; Freelon et al., 2022), as well as those white people who work towards allyship and equity (Clark, 2019; James; 2019; Wilkins et al., 2019).

Given the affordances of social media – persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (boyd, 2010) – much of the extant literature focuses on the ways in which digital media offers a boundless, geographically-untethered mechanism for connecting, communicating, interacting, and community building within a social justice arena (e.g., Cho, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2019). This study, then, attempts to fill that academic gap, focusing on how geographic proximity, through the social media site Nextdoor, constructs community-based expressions of racial justice and whiteness. Focused on a single thread of posts and replies the day after the street name change, this study utilizes the white racial frame (Feagin, 2020), along with its accompanying subframes, as well as the counter-frames from both white people and people of color, this study focuses on the following research question: how, if at all, are systemic racism and white privilege are performed – and responded to – at a neighborhood level and in a virtual space? Such research offers a lens into how individuals participate in social and political issues that affect their local community (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). It can help inform local leaders how and where to disseminate certain public messages (Yeung, 2018).

Community and Neighborhood

Community and the concomitant idea of the neighborhood act as both a spatial and conceptual construct. Both in the physical and virtual sense, community works as a site for living, working, socializing, and engaging every day, a way in which people understand themselves and how they relate to others (Gibbons, 2020). As this ever-changing social space, the community has often been understood as an ideal, a paradigm for "cooperation, equality, and communion," nearly ubiquitously discussed as "an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging" (Joseph, 2002, p. vii). Social ties linked to neighborhoods have frequently been cited as the foundation for both collective efficiency within communities and healthy social networks for the individuals within those communities (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). While the community is not limited to a geographic region in this age of technology and travel, the physical closeness of neighborhoods provides distinctive social interactions and chances for support.

Despite this primarily positive interpretation, the concept of community and neighborhood is, at its most basic definition, always already engaged in creating boundaries. Understood as an ideological construct, the community's work in creating not only identities

[2] NIMBY, or Not In My Backyard, refers to a group of individuals who oppose what they consider undesirable projects and development in their own neighborhood.

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but also parallel social hierarchies becomes clearer. Like many of the other social formations and institutions intersecting with it, the community is actively delineating us from *them*. As Staeheli (2003) argues, the community has become a site of struggle for membership and citizenship, where "moral geographies are imaged, upheld, and come to serve as a litmus test for who rightfully belongs and who should be legally excluded" (p. 5). These boundaries, the terms of and for membership in a specific community, are created by the community members themselves. These members consciously (or generously, unconsciously) create and patrol the terms of inclusion through norms and informal social control (Morley, 2021) and, simultaneously, exclusion. While these boundaries may be partially physical, they are also always class- and race-based, with geography acting as a sort of shield for racist and classist stereotypes and biases. As Massey (1994) argues, the urge to categorize social formations via geographical positioning has "been part of what has given rise to defensive and reactionary responses - certain forms of nationalism sentimentalized recovering of sanitized 'heritages,' and outright antagonism to newcomers and 'outsiders'" (p. 1).

Much recent scholarship has indeed focused on the community as a place-based materialization of race and class tension, often through criminalization and gentrification (Bloch, 2021), surveillance (Molla, 2019), and policy-based contexts such as restrictive covenants, gated communities, and tax and housing laws (Kurwa, 2019). Moreover, racial inequities in communities should be understood through the idea of white privilege, which reinforces both the assumption of and privilege to (predominantly) white spaces and has been found to shape residential preferences even more than social class, to the extent that the presences of blacks in a neighborhood have been found to degrade its desirability by white residents (Douds, 2021). Thus, the continuing racial segregation that plagues most American cities and towns can be attributed to both institutional failures and the individual choices that arise from those historical and contemporary systemic inequities.

Nextdoor

Founded in 2010, the stated mission of Nextdoor is "to provide a trusted platform where neighbors all over the world can work together to build stronger, safer, and happier communities" (Nextdoor, 2018, para. 2). And while the website and app started in the neighborhoods of San Francisco, it has expanded across the country, as well as globally, with over 25 million registered users and a company valuation of more than $2 billion. Given its geographically bound concept, Nextdoor requires members to create their account based on their physical address (the borders of which are defined by the app), which then must be "validated" by either a neighbor who uses Nextdoor or by submitting evidence of one's residency to the company. In addition, participants are required to use their own names, leading to a default publicness that requires physical and corporeal verifiability (Cho, 2018). This is part of a private social network of Nextdoor neighbors, a hyperlocal self-contained group focused solely on one specific place, with the ability to view posts and neighbors across adjoining neighborhoods.

The platform allows for myriad functions, including information on public events, asking questions and recommendations of fellow neighbors, announcements from local government agencies, selling and giving away items, and coordinating neighborhood activities. But Nextdoor is also frequently used as a virtual neighborhood watch or homeowner association, where neighbors share information about safety and crime issues, which frequently devolves into a "cesspool for racist gentrification" (Ahmad, 2018), where neighbors label "suspicious" individuals – nearly monolithically black and brown – reifying the spatial politics of exclusion via race. In contrast, Nextdoor has responded to the numerous charges of racial profiling by mandating at least two more identifiers than race (i.e., style of hair, approximate

age, or description of clothing). Such a redesign of the platform has not stopped the racialized perceptions of crime and the exclusionary imaginaries of neighborhoods in Nextdoor posts.

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in Joe Feagin's (2020) concept of the white racial frame, "an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (p. 11). Feagin (2020) argues that while ideas such as "prejudice," "bias," and "stereotyping" are important and useful, we must broaden the way we view racism in the US to include systemic racism and the white racial frame in order to better capture the entrenched structural racial oppression inherent in our country's institutions. This white racial frame consists of multiple elements, including words, visual images, emotions, and spoken language. It has been formed, solidified, and imposed on humans over centuries – making it the dominant frame, particularly in the Global North. Yet, variations and transmutations of the frame have evolved to keep up with the times and ever-changing racial landscape.

According to Feagin (2020), the contemporary white racial frame is a combination of racial metaphors and ideological concepts, racialized images and emotions, racial biases and stereotypes, subjectively constructed racial narratives, and generalized racist framing. This broadly includes white virtuousness (a sense of overwhelming white morality) and white unvirtuousness (a negative view of anyone, not white, racial "others"), which has become so entrenched in our culture and society that we are often unaware of this comprehensive racialized worldview. Despite the possible unconscious nature of the white racial frame, Feagin (2020) notes that the frame has progressed from an ideology – a way of seeing and understanding the world – to a central feature of a white person's understanding of themselves and their identity. Implicitly learned from peers, family, media, schools, etc., the white racial frame enables and encourages a sense of white privilege and power and entitlement to and naturalization of that power and privilege.

Counterframing, which Feagin (2010) attributes to communities of color but may also be employed by anti-racist whites, involves the "perspectives, ideologies, and epistemologies that challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy and its legitimating white racial frame" (p. 146). There are different elements to counter-framing. One major element of the counter-frame is the centering, acknowledgment, and unveiling of the white racial frame in a public setting. Drawing out these frames, typically kept between friends and family in private settings, allows the frame to be analyzed, discussed, and contended within a larger cultural setting. In addition, Feagin (2020) cites the white-crafted liberty-and-justice frame, the anti-oppression frame, and the home-culture frame primarily used by communities of color. Counterframes act as a form of resistance and are often situational; that is, marginalized groups (as well as anti-racist whites) will often change counterframes to align with the framing of the dominant racial group. Moreover, counter-frames are often in tension with internalized elements of the white racial frame; thus, like the white racial frame itself, counter-frames often incorporate elements of multiple forms of resistance-based narratives, sometimes alongside those dominant white racial frames themselves.

Context for Study: Arlington, Virginia

A 25.8-square-mile county directly across from the southwestern bank of the Potomac River and Washington, DC, Arlington, Virginia, is one of the smallest counties in the country. Taken by the federal government in 1780, it was originally part of the District of Columbia until the land was ceded back by the federal government to Virginia in 1847. Like so many

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southern cities, the history of Arlington is racially problematic but also nuanced and somewhat paradoxical. During the Civil War, county residents voted for secession 958-48, while the country residents surrounding the county remained a Union stronghold (Gernand, 2002). After the war, in 1870, Arlington was re-named (separating from adjoining Alexandria) after the former estate of the Custis-Lee families, and this homage to Confederate heroes remains not only in street names but also in hospitals and schools. At the same time, Arlington was the first county in Virginia to integrate the school system, a move approved by the Arlington County Board, which sparked resistance that went up to both the U.S. District Court and the Virginia Supreme Court, both of whom upheld the order to desegregate.

By 1977, the gentrification of Arlington had begun. Installing two Metro lines that year significantly increased property values for residential and commercial properties, and the former working- and lower-middle-class white Southerners were often priced out of their homes. Given its proximity to DC, Arlington became a beacon for white-collar government workers. Arlington has existed as a bastion of white, upper-class residents for the last twenty years. This reliably blue county has an all-Democrat County Board and all Democrat-Constitutional officers (a clerk of court, a commonwealth's attorney, a commissioner of revenue, a sheriff, and a treasurer). According to the U.S. Census (2021), Arlington has a population of 238,543, 75% white and only 9.7% black. The county is well-educated (75.8% have a Bachelor's degree or higher) and wealthy (with a median income of $122,604 and a per capita income of $73,078—nearly 1.5 times higher than the rest of Virginia, DC, Maryland, and West Virginia - and a 6% poverty rate). There are 108,504 households in the county (at a 93% occupancy rate), with the median value of an owner-occupied housing unit at $731,700 (with a median mortgage cost of $3,2013) and the median gross rent at $2,005. The population is also relatively young, with a median age of 34.8, and technologically equipped, as 96.1% of households have a computer and 92.4% subscribe to Internet broadband.

Author Positionality

The principal investigator lives within the Nextdoor geographically designated neighborhood in Arlington, VA, which gives me access to these posts. My positionality as a community member not only offered the ability to be a part of the forums and conversations but also to contextualize them within the specific neighborhood and demographics of that neighborhood. However, I had no personal association with any individuals who posted on the site, nor did I post. As a member of the community, I certainly have a vested interest in how constructions of race reflect in the streets and neighborhoods of which I am a part, and my privileged position as a white academic allowed me to understand better that through this community social media site. Thus, my current involvement in the neighborhood does constrain the notion of objectivity; however, it provides a more engaged and personal connection with this work, which is inherently sociopolitical.

Data Source and Methods

This study used the posts and responses that were published on Nextdoor on December 21, 2021, in the Lyon Park neighborhood in Arlington, VA, in reaction to an original post, which stated:

> Who canceled Lee Highway? I've lived in Arlington and Alexandria all my life; this morning, I woke up and found out that Lee Highway had been canceled. I have lived off of Lee Highway for the last 30 years; it'll always be Lee Highway, as far as I'm concerned. Go Redskins.

Given that Nextdoor has a history of deleting politically charged posts (the following day, the thread had been deleted completely), the principal investigator took screenshots of all the posts and responses to this thread throughout the day. While the Nextdoor users gave no explicit consent for this research, there is only a basic assumption of privacy on Nextdoor. The site's policy indicates that neighbors must (a) confirm their address in the neighborhood and (b) provide their real name (though they choose how that name appears to others on the site). Moreover, Nextdoor notes that data—including posts, addresses, demographic information, contact lists, etc.—are all gathered and used by the site and third-party users. Finally, all posts were anonymous, did not include any vulnerable populations, and did not divulge sensitive or identifiable information (Ess, 2020).

The posts and responses totaled 193. However, of those 193, only 151 were coded as either frames or counterframes. The remaining 42 were either asides (i.e., "meh" as a response), comments, or responses that did not express opinions related to racial justice (i.e., "it's been years since I've seen anyone mention bingo this much…") or partial responses that were not captured in total, and thus could not be coded (15 of the 42 non-coded posts/responses). These remaining 151 posts and responses comprised the data for this study.

Data analysis was guided by procedures described by Corbin and Strauss (1990). The principal investigator and a trained graduate student coded identifying how a post, or a response to a post within the overall thread, constructed the idea of race and racial justice through the topic of changing a major street thoroughfare name. This included open coding, as themes based on Feagin's (2020) theoretical concepts of white racial frames and counter-frames were used on the data set and then evaluated for similarities with the constant comparative method. Once the larger themes were established, using Feagin's (2020) conceptual categories (white virtuousness, white unvirtuousness), we created subthemes also linked to Feagin's (2020) white racial frames (shrouding, white innocence, big picture narrative) in order analyze and reconnect the data. Posts and responses could be coded with multiple subthemes; some entries evoked both a Big Picture Narrative *and* Collective Memory. Finally, redundant and overlapping themes were merged, reducing the number of codes to a more manageable number of categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). All names were given initials to protect the identity of the posters.

In order to create inter-coder reliability, the graduate student and principal investigator worked independently, coding a sample of the posts and responses and discussing our findings with each other. During this iterative process, the principal investigator resolved any coding discrepancies. Once we reached 90% simple agreement across 20% of the data set, the graduate student and principal investigator independently coded the remaining posts. The codes and definitions for these codes are shown in Table 1. Data was also coded for and by neighborhood and gender presentation, ascertained by name, picture, and/or self-identification.

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Table 1
Codes for Data Set Frames

Codes for Frames	Primary or Subtheme: Frame or Counter-frame	Definition
White Virtuousness	Primary Frame	Whiteness as positive. White virtue overrides any racist behavior.
White Unvirtuousness	Primary Frame	Non-whiteness as negative.
Big Picture Narrative	Frame Subtheme	The foundational myths most important to white Americans. (E.g.: colonization, hard work, achievement, superiority). They rely heavily on white-washed history that ignores the colonization of America and the oppression faced by non-white Americans.
Collective Forgetting	Frame Subtheme	Erasing the historical trauma and abuse suffered by non-whites.
Collective Remembering	Frame Subtheme	Glorification of the "big picture" narratives.
Shrouding	Frame Subtheme	Concealing the brutal, difficult realities of the lived experience of non-white groups for the benefit of future generations.
White Innocence	Frame Subtheme	Attempting to diffuse accusations of racist jokes and comments by deflecting accusations of racism, often by invoking humor.
Whiteness as Normative	Frame Subtheme	Race is only marked by "other" races, not whiteness. This includes a sense of who "belongs" and makes us feel "comfortable."
Unveiling White Racial Frame	Counter-frame subtheme	Critique of white social structures and conventions, of the claimed morality and wisdom of whites.
Liberty and Justice	Counter-frame subtheme	Evoking this American frame, but using it to critique its hypocrisy and moral contradictions.
Anti-Oppression	Counter-frame subtheme	Active protests against white oppression for all people of color.

Results

The results of this study indicated that the majority of users posted (and responded) using white racial frames, and nearly half engaged in counter-frames. Within white racial frames, most posts used a combination of white unvirtuousness and white virtuousness rather than those individual frames (i.e., white unvirtuousness, white virtuousness). The following sections describe the subthemes of white racial frames used by members of Nextdoor in this Arlington neighborhood.

White Racial Frame: Shrouding/Collective Forgetting

This merging of primary white racial frames most often took the form of shrouding, which denies or ignores (intentionally or not) the violent and cruel lived experiences of non-white individuals, often with collective forgetting, which works to erase the historical trauma and abuse suffered by non-whites. This sanitization of a systemically racist history and system that functions at the core of the US most often took the form of whataboutism[3] or an attempt to re-contextualize racism as a function of a (distant) time and place. J. P., for instance, casts Robert E. Lee in the role of the Virginia loyalist and simply a product of his time while simultaneously casting blame on the Union army:

> Robert E. Lee, the son of "Lighthorse" Harry Lee (hero of the American Revolution) and son-in-law of General George Washington, was a citizen of Virginia at a time when loyalty to the state took precedence over loyalty to the Nation. General Lee answered the call of his state, resigned his commission, and came to his state's aid…Ignorant attempts to vilify Lee by applying 21st-century standards of behavior to a 19th-century man are just silly and a sure sign of limited education in history and accomplish nothing.

The recasting of Lee, not as a racist and thus not as an object of ridicule, was echoed by many promulgating this particular white racial frame. As J. A. opines:

> The whole thing is horrible! Many comments are misguided and misleading. Need to keep it in context of the times. Lee is a top graduate of West Point, a son of Virginia, and an honorable man. He is [sic] misaligned and a scapegoat of our times regarding race.

Lee, as a (white) person—rather than his role as a general, fighting to perpetuate the exploitation and dehumanization of an entire race—is centered on erasing the vicious inhumanness of slavery experienced by black people.

The shrouding of the Civil War and the way in which Virginia was implicit in both slavery and the fight to keep it as a system is echoed in the post of A. L., who also promotes the whataboutism of slavery:

> Virginia was a southern state and fought for states' rights, slavery among those rights. Carrying your mindset on why not just erase Virginia, too, and change that name?... As unfortunate as slavery was, it was common in its day and throughout millennia. It was a different time in which standing with your state took precedence.

This frame was similarly used by K. M., who not only ignores the implications and contemporary sociopolitical and economic consequences of slavery in this country but also employs whataboutism regarding slavery as a system:

[3] Whataboutism is a logical fallacy that involves deflecting accusations by counter accusing (i.e. Well, what about…?)

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> And clearly, slavery is morally wrong on every level. The owning of another human being or the taking of a human life except in self-defense is morally wrong. Still, slavery (of all races) has been in existence for nearly as long as mankind has. It still exists throughout the world today. So instead of the woke act of changing street names with other people's money, if one truly cared about slavery, one would use one's OWN money to actually go to one of the many countries where it is still practiced today and actually works to eliminate it…But then again, the street name route is so much easier--AND--the piece de resistance allows for the delicious posturing on ND [Nextdoor]... :-)

In this way, not only does the poster sterilize the moral hands of the US, but it also works to shift the blame of slavery to the individual, arguing that the community of Nextdoor should be personally (and economically) responsible for eradicating global slavery.

The use of shrouding and collective forgetting as a frame also involves the argument that a long-ago history does not merit changes in our contemporary society—or, more specifically, our Arlington neighborhood. As L. M. says, "[A.P.], here's a fact: you can neither cancel or correct history. For better or worse, it exists forever, no matter what you try to do. Period." C. Y. echoes this sentiment: "All of the old racists who did all of this road naming are dead and buried at this point anyway. Why give them this attention? It just foments division. Scrubbing and sanitizing won't make this world clean." Such a construction of our relationship to the past does indeed work to scrub—but what it cleans is any understanding of the ways in which systemic racism and white supremacy still function and are normalized in our society (Reece, 2020). This, then, disregards both the traumas of history and of the present day for black people.

White Racial Frame: Big Picture Narrative/Collective Remembering

The big picture narrative, which uses frames critical to the foundational mythos of a white-centered America, was often applied in conjunction with collective remembering, a glorification of the "big picture" narratives. Relying on white-washed[4] histories, these frames ignore the ways in which American colonization and (white) American-created dogmas of hard work, achievement, and superiority have and continue to oppress non-white Americans. This frame was often used to excuse or ignore history and the concurrent responsibility of slavery in our country. As L. H. posted:

> All of our "founding fathers" owned people of color—what shall we do about all of them???? Change every building, college, and roadway town that is named after them. Maybe we should not teach all of real history—just the pieces the collective agrees with.?? Or maybe we should start with the original inhabitants of this country and what was done to them so that the invaders could take the land.

This framework upholds the authority and untouchability of the (white) Founding Fathers, implicitly arguing the importance of keeping those individuals as heroes of and to the United States.

The use of the big picture narrative also minimizes and delegitimizes the need for racial justice within the "big picture" of the contemporary world, arguing that there are more pressing social justice issues. As A. R. posts, "Is this really what we have devolved to as a society? We have obviously solved the minor issues of climate change, crime, and worldwide pandemics, and this is what we are worried about now." Likewise, A. B. writes, "Personally, we have bigger

[4] Whitewashing can be understood as covering up and/or ignoring of racialized history that negatively constructs whiteness, and/or misrepresenting the past via the centering of white narratives.

issues to worry about in this world like poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, etc. Ultimately, humans are fallible." A. L. also employs this tactic, arguing:

> We have more important threats out in the world. String up all this havoc over the last few years when the true threat is out there in the world. I worry where this country is heading. China is our biggest threat. Those that made the signs and the statues the bigger threat have greatly damaged this country in my opinion.

In this way, the bigger picture – of America as an ideological construct – is not only centered but also used as justification for the shrouding and erasure used in the previous white racial frames.

White Racial Frame: Whiteness as Normative/White Innocence

Whiteness as normative, which constructs race as "other" races (besides white) and makes whiteness the default, was frequently paired with the subframe of white innocence, which works to subvert claims of racism by deflecting, often with humor. For example, S. D. posts about the street name change: "People wake up bored and have to do something that makes themselves feel better by wasting money." This post assumes whiteness as a default with the implication that it is just "bored" (white) people who decided to change the name of Lee Highway rather than people (of any race) who sought to mitigate the systemic fetishization of Confederate heroes, and thus the perpetuation and legitimization of white supremacy (Simko et al., 2022). Such a declaration—of "bored" people just "wasting money"—also bears the claim of white innocence by implying the street name change was unnecessary. If the change to Langston Blvd. was simply an (ill-advised) choice, then white people have nothing to reckon with. This consolidation of white innocence and whiteness as normative is used again by G. M., who uses sarcasm as a mode of deflection: "…Can't you see how valuable it is to use taxpayer dollars AND impact businesses on Lee Highway just to make sure you can virtue signal how we're eradicating racism!!!" For S. E., who mocks, "And let's get rid of Christmas break and Easter while we are at it," whiteness is not only normative but also inherently tied to Christianity. The presumption of Christmas and Easter as natural – if not sacrosanct – speaks to the othering of anyone outside of a specific identity, using sarcasm as a form of deflection. By linking whiteness as normative with the "absurdity" of changing a road name, posters of Nextdoor bolster the immutable white supremacist ideology via the monument of a street name (Jackson, 2022).

Counter-frames: Unveiling the White Racial Frame

While the use of counter-frames was not quite as prevalent as the use of white racial frames, by far, the most utilized of these counter-frames was an attempt to combat the naturalization of the white racial frames the majority of Nextdoor posters deployed. These alternative frames worked to uncover the inherent white supremacy upholding the original posters' arguments and unmask the assumptions of neutrality embedded in the white racial frames used by neighbors. In part, this unveiling necessitated a calling out of the whitewashing of America and a refusal to glorify systemic racism through that whitewashing. As B. C. posts:

> Rethinking the legacy of a former "hero" and the impulses that resulted in naming a highway after him is not changing history. It's an honorific he does not deserve if he ever did. He's still in the history books. Keeping the honorific does serve the purpose of reminding us of these deep scars that he personally inflicted on the country and how so many honored him for exactly that, so there's that, I suppose. And the opposition to removing it shows us either who would not reminded of

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> actual history - kind of the opposite, no? - or who would name it again for a racist, traitorous slaver who was perhaps a good tactician but a lousy strategist and pretty much a butcher as a field commander. Not a good look either way.

The unveiling also took the form of a history lesson, undermining the often-over-simplistic construction of Robert E. Lee as simply a man of his own time. As L. R., addressing J. A., who used a white racial frame in their post, replies:

> J, your comment is the most "misguided and misleading" of all(!) 1. Lee turned down an offer from Lincoln to lead the federal army to stop the rebellion. 2. Over 40% of the contemporary Army officers FROM VIRGINIA opposed the confederacy... (you may even recall that this is why and when West Virginia originally seceded from VA itself to reaffirm its allegiance to the union.) 3. If you want to dispute Lee's motives for leading the insurrection, look no further than his personal effort to lead the crushing of John Browns' Raid on Harpers Ferry-YEARS BEFORE the Civil War began 4. Last but not least, LEE WAS NOT A "Son of Virginia" (!) He was born in Alexandria-when it was STILL PART of the original District of Columbia.

By delegitimizing the white-washed narrative of Lee, L. R. simultaneously delegitimizes the rationale for keeping the street named after him. What's more, this unveiling of the white racial frame speaks to the long history and explicit intentionality of racism (by Lee but also by America *writ large*).

Part of this re-orientation to factual history, and the concurrent way in which this denaturalizes white supremacy, is the signification of the concept of "cancel culture."[5] Indeed, the original post that began this thread ("Who canceled Lee Highway?") evokes – and subsequently appropriates – the language of cancel culture to imply censorship or an attack on what they saw as traditional American values. The counter-framers on Nextdoor, however, framed canceling as it was originally understood – as a form of accountability. As J. R.'s post indicates, this misguided discussion of cancel culture is just another form of whitewashing:

> What is now being labeled as "cancel culture" by the right happens in every country in the world all the time. They've just created the idiotic phrase to paint only the things that they like being changed or fought against as cancel culture. All as they seek to ban hundreds of books from school libraries, including the classics. The Right is also literally trying to "cancel" historical facts by white-washing history. So you do, you man, but leave history to the people who've actually studied it.

This concept is reiterated by A. P., who responds to a neighbor's use of a white racial frame in being concerned about "where we are heading" with cancel culture: "So you were definitely against the rewriting of history that led to all these statues and naming of those who had fought to retain slavery in the first place, right? This is correcting history, not canceling it, obviously." And as C. S. posts, Lee's place in history secured his own so-called cancellation: "Robert E Lee canceled it when violating his sacred oath of office in the US Army, he led a rebellion against the lawfully elected government of the US. It just took the county a bit to catch up." These counter-framing posts act as a way to challenge the dominant white racial frame and the privilege and white supremacy implicit in it and reframe not only history but also the street name change as an act of racial justice.

[5] As a product of Black Twitter in the 2010's, cancel culture refers to the divestment in a person, company, or object because it causes offense. By the 2020s, however, conservatives appropriate the term to refer to what they believed was the disproportionate response to merely politically incorrect (though, in their minds, truthful) statements.

Counter-frame: Anti-Oppression

Arlington Nextdoor posters' efforts to de-frame and reframe also incorporate a wider social justice lens of anti-oppression, linking the fight for racial justice to the other historical and contemporary movements for social change. These counter-frames connected racial justice to the US' history of colonialization and whitewashing of Indigenous peoples ("Please do away with the Christopher Columbus holiday and re-name it too!") as well as other oppressive and tyrannical regimes ("So should we have Hitler Highway and Pol Pot Parkway too, for educational reasons?"). This wider anti-oppression counter-frame is also tied to the larger movements for racial justice throughout history, unveiling the white racial frame and arguing for broader justice. As M. S. posts, "Veneration of the Lost Cause is a proxy for resistance to movements in favor of equality. Basically, part of the institutionalization of racism." D. G. widens the street name change to other problematic nomenclature, noting that Harry Byrd Highway should also be changed. Explaining the racist legacy of Byrd, the poster notes the politician was:

> Vehemently opposed the racial desegregation of the public schools and was the leader of "massive resistance," a campaign of opposition to the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in Brown v. Board of Education that led to the closure of some public schools in Virginia in the 1950s. Byrd was vehemently opposed to racial desegregation and later opposed Presidents Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy because they opposed racial discrimination within the federal workforce.

This racism is thus linked to Lee—placing Byrd as a more contemporary incarnation of Lee's Confederate values—as well as to the larger fight for racial justice.

Counter-frame: Liberty and Justice

The final counter-frame, used by a handful of Nextdoor posters, was liberty and justice. As an extension of the anti-oppression counter-frame, this counter-frame posits America within its founding ethos of "liberty and justice for all," recognizing the hypocrisy of such a sentiment with the ever-present racial inequality and violence embedded into the foundational institutions of this country. J. K. evokes this sentiment succinctly, posting, "I never liked enshrining persons who enslaved other humans. Bye-bye, Lee."

And B.C. connects this counter-frame specifically to systems of racism in the country:

> Renaming is an attempt to consider the sensibilities of the people who were deliberately denigrated by the original (re)naming. Legacy of slavery, existing racism…It should be accomplished in that vein – easily, relatively quietly, just a normal evolution of a society looking around it and recognizing exactly how pervasive racism and the institution of slavery was.

Commenters and posters also link the liberty and justice frame to the unveiling of white racial frames, exposing the whitewashed narrative of "states' rights" as a rationale for Lee's name renaming (and for the innocence of his fight for the Confederacy) for what it was—an aberration of liberty and justice in the name of slavery. J. R. exemplifies this when commenting on J. P.'s post, saying: "You skipped over the part where the catastrophe that you waxed poetic about was instigated by slave owners, for slave owners, in an attempt to protect and continue the institution of slavery…." Likewise commenting on J. P.'s white racial frame, M. S. argues, "[Lee] fought for Virginia to serve his own economic interest in slavery. Stop perpetuating the 'honorable Lee' Lost Cause BS." Indeed, this (factual) counternarrative is explicitly coupled with the concept of liberty and justice, as seen in the post from L. R., who quotes, "Freedom lies in educating people whereas the secret of tyranny is in keeping them ignorant."

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Discussion and Implications

The aim of this study was to see how systemic racism and white privilege are performed – and responded to – at a neighborhood level and in a virtual space. Given that the majority of the posts and comments employ a white racial frame, the Lyon Park neighbors posting in Nextdoor are (often explicitly) promulgating a racial narrative that not only continues the social, cultural, and institutional dominance of whiteness and white privilege and power but also (and necessarily) continues the oppression of black bodies (Brasher et al., 2020; Jackson, 2022). It does so in a multitude of ways. The use of Lee as a street name – and one naturalized and justified – is both a symbolic and material complicity in "reproducing…the legacies of violence," commemorating certain valorized racial histories while ignoring others (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018, p. 313). This marginalization of the physical violence enslaved individuals faced also creates spatial supremacy in the glorification of the Confederacy; in this way, street names are symbolic markers of and for racial terror (Nagel, 2023). These findings are in line with much of the extant literature on the fight to remove Confederate statues, wherein white members of the community reject a history of deeply rooted inequalities and the contemporary violence of those symbols (Jackson, 2022; Mitchell, 2020) while valorizing the white supremacy values of the Confederacy (Nagel, 2023; O'Connell, 2020).

The delimitations of this study - it is just one post for one day on a name change of one street through one stretch of Arlington County, Virginia—may seem to limit the implications of its findings. Yet, it is such a seemingly banal circumstance that is precisely *how* the white racial frame and its accompanying hegemony function. The name change of Lee to Langston and the accompanying vitriol speaks to how everyday acts and their concomitant narratives work to:

> Discount or distort the many societal contributions and profound acts of human agency exhibited by people of color in the face of everyday racial oppression, and it excuses or ignores recurring white mob and state violence and the exclusion or segregation of people of color from society's major societal institutions and opportunities. (Elias & Feagin, 2020, pp. 16–17)

It is the reiteration of a whitewashed history—that Lee was simply a product of his time, that he was fighting for states' rights—through the mundane and routine, that work to position whiteness as the authority and establish a white-centered worldview, actively and willfully remaining ignorant of racial oppression, history, and its implications on and for contemporary society (Nagel, 2023; Simko et al., 2022). Indeed, the abundance of these posts and comments on Nextdoor—for *just* a street change—speaks to the vast amount of time and energy expended to preserve institutional racism. Any ceding of white institutional power is perceived as a threat. The auspices of "history" and "tradition," in conjunction with the appropriation and subsequent denigration of "cancel culture," are conceived as a contemporary form of colorblindness, an adjustment to the white racial frame that works around the blatant and often unacceptable explicit racism of years past (Evans & Lees, 2021; Pierce & Powers, 2023). These frames, then, act as a dog whistle[6], indicating white supremacy without having to term it as such and reproducing racial inequality by centering (invisible) whiteness and the privileged entitlement to public space and a community sense of belonging (Bhat & Klein, 2020). This indicates that *how* systemic racism and white privilege are performed is just as crucial as the content itself. The use of the dog whistle in these posts, in conjunction with the gatekeeping of a narrative of white supremacy, is mirrored and amplified in American politics and policies (Bhat & Klein, 2020; Drakulich et al., 2020; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2024). Moreover, this covert racism and

[6] Dog whistle in American politics refers to suggestive or coded language to specific groups of constituents without causing explicit offense.

valorization of white supremacy (and its attending white privilege) offer a lens to understand the global history (and contemporary milieu) of colonialism, wherein "a global field of former empires, colonies, or dominant and subordinate state actors" continuously "reifies a discursive white global order" not through traditional racialized hierarchies but instead through furtive and normalized racism (Christian, 2019, p. 177–178). Most blatantly, these global sociopolitical lenses have reformulated through the rise of authoritarian right-wing governments and parties, from the National Front in France to Viktor Orban in Hungary to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, whose members, ideologies, and policies simultaneously venerate and deny the values of white supremacy (Mills, 2022).

Despite this deluge of white racial frames in local, national, and global politics, it is significant that nearly half of posts and comments in this study aggressively counteracted these white racial frames, working to uncover and make explicit the dominance of the white racial frame. By understanding the seemingly banal act of changing a street name *as* a form of racial justice, or at least as the bare minimum of racial reckoning, the counter-framers seek a cultural shift in understanding (Jethro, 2022). Implicit in this name change, and the counter-frames used to comment on this name change, is the reexamination of not only America's racist history and the institutionalization of that racism but also the de-glorification of that racist history. By eliminating the name of Lee on a major thoroughfare in Arlington, counterframers are denaturalizing the glorification of Confederate heroes (O'Connell, 2020). Such a change also begins to speak to the degradation and re-traumatization of black individuals, who have to see and travel that road, sometimes daily (Sweet & Harper-Anderson, 2023).

Such an unveiling, and ultimately reframing, of these narratives is itself a form of activism, constructing "a coherent frame that supports and sustains collective action" (Gamson, 1995, p. 85) that works to transform individual and collective beliefs, identities, and practices (Feagin, 2020). Rather than direct political changes, these counterframers respond to white supremacy by shaping community members' perceptions of the norm. Thus, counter-frames are used as a re-orientation to the everyday—how to see and uncover the white racial frame in street names as a first step to seeing and uncovering white racial frames in all social and political life. While this study is limited to a neighborhood in a suburb of Washington, D.C., the use of counterframes to re-construct racial narratives has global implications for networking, coalition building, and collective identity, reimagining transnational "visions of utopia through shared meaning-making" (Hall, 2021, p.2).

The reimagining of racialized history and its possible influence on cultural change can be, to some extent, attributed to their existence within the (quasi) public space of social media. While historically, public spaces have emphasized the value and durability of whiteness (Goetz et al., 2020), the structure of social media offers agency and power to those frequently marginalized by traditional institutions. In part, this can be understood as a form of context collapse, as private and public spheres become ever-more muddled, allowing for social interactions and intersections of groups of individuals who previously may have been isolated (Allen, 2023). These virtual interactions and the participation of the community through those online activities have been found to not only increase the diversity and amount of information and improve civic and political knowledge (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020) but also translate into changes in interactions in physical spaces (Gatti & Procentese, 2022). This power and agency is not limited to one small neighborhood in Arlington, Virginia, but is instead a tool for oppressed and marginalized individuals and communities around the world.

This is not to say that counter-frames on Nextdoor will create a seismic shift in racial justice reckoning in Arlington (or any other part of the world). In part, Nextdoor simply reproduces the geographic and political structures of the physical world. These white racial frames and counterframes, and any subsequent neighborhood interactions within the virtual and physical communities, (re)create what Henri Lefebvre (1991) calls perceived space (everyday spatial practices), conceived space (representations of space), and lived space (representation).

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Given the majority-white composition of Arlington County (the lived space), the frames and counter-frames on Nextdoor reinforce the social power of whiteness (perceived space). The racial separation of and in Arlington parallels and promulgates—if not preempts—how white people frame racial understandings and also works to create conceived space: that is, the perception of not only whiteness but also the truculence towards racial justice is a part of Arlington as a neighborhood. These (white) spaces are buttressed by the default publicness of Nextdoor. The app requires not only geographic validity – to prove that you live in these neighborhoods in Arlington – but also personal validity. One's government name (rather than a handle, abbreviation, or pseudonym) is how one posts and comments. Thus, it is not just a random Internet troll using white racial frames but one's neighbor down the street. This presumes a lack of risk in default publicness, one which centers white heterosexual masculinity at the expense of any other identities and works to naturalize and strengthen the whiteness of Arlington's perceived and conceived space (Cho, 2018).

Despite these limitations, the possibilities offered by social media are more expansive and more radical than those located solely in Arlington, Virginia. For communities around the globe, hyperlocal social media, and its innate interactive nature, offer the ability to challenge governmental and dominant narratives, to have community members act as knowledge producers, and to mobilize like-minded individuals (Kuruç & Opiyo, 2017; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

A Final Word

It may be easy to see Nextdoor as simply a consequence of ever-emerging digital technologies, a micro-public that exists within, or because of the virtual sphere. But clearly, it is not the digital platform responsible for the racial frames and attitudes towards racial justice; Nextdoor does not "dictate participants' behavior" (boyd, 2010, p. 47). Instead, the social media platform acts as a space between the private and the public, offering new ways to amplify, record, and spread already-existent ideas, frames, and social acts. Yet, Nextdoor is also not a neutral body in the construction, dissemination, or destruction of the form and content of these posts. They, as boyd (2010) notes in the second half of her aforementioned quote, "configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement" (p. 47). This is of particular note for two interrelated reasons. First, Nextdoor has an economic interest in the interactions that occur on their platform. As a corporate entity, Nextdoor profits from both the data and content produced by its users (Fuchs, 2014). At the same time, the primary (economic and user) driver of Nextdoor is the crime and safety section, where, as discussed in the literature review of this study, participants engage in racial profiling, racial community policing, and racial surveillance (Kurwa, 2019).

Thus, the economic value of Nextdoor is always intertwined with racial surveillance and policing. This affects not only what people post on the Nextdoor primary page but also the racial frames and contexts from which they post. This economic value also influences how and when posts are "moderated" or taken down, an anecdotally frequent experience that scrubs clean name-calling, racist hate, sexist drivel, or run-of-the-mill political radicalism. This ephemerality of posts and the uncertainty as to when and how it will happen could act as a damper to the default publicness of Next Door. As K. M. posted: "Fear not. It is only a matter of (likely short) time before our ND [Nextdoor] overlords take this post down... So, enjoy the banter while we can... [three sunglasses-wearing emojis].

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