

STREETSBLOG

Under the Banner of 'Urbanism': An Interview With Kristen Jeffers

'I don't begrudge anyone who doesn't relate to the word "urbanist," but I do hope we can examine what we're asked to do under the banner of that word.'


By Kea Wilson | Jun 3, 2020 |  7 COMMENTS





Image courtesy of The Black Urbanist

As founder, convener, and editor in chief at the [The Black Urbanist](#), Kristen Jeffers explores land use, planning and transportation systems while centering the black, queer, and feminist voices. A native of North Carolina, she is also an author, textile artist and designer, urban planner and activist. Streetsblog sat down with her to talk about how she



sees the conversation about street safety shifting in light of the most recent extrajudicial murders of PoC by police, the subsequent uprisings, and the COVID-19 pandemic.



This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



For many years, you and other people of color who work in transportation and the built environment have been challenging your white counterparts to confront street safety beyond car traffic, including police brutality against black, indigenous, and people of color and a wide range of other factors. Have you seen the conversation evolving in the wake of the last week's protests to center BIPOC voices?



Obviously, we've had escalations over the past week, but [the conversation about how to keep our streets safe] is rooted in centuries of oppression. ... It echoes back to the beginning of American slavery in 1619. It echoes back to the first colonization in the Americas. It echoes back to why police were created in many states in the first place: to protect landed interests like slaveowners.

Over time, cities began to adapt these police forces for other purposes, but it was still primarily about protecting and serving moneyed interests. Given that history, it shouldn't surprise us that there's a ton of documentation of police brutality towards black people today — and for every case that's documented, there are so many that *aren't* documented. Our streets have never really been safe for black people — and that's before we even talk about gendered violence, and violence towards queer and trans people, and violence to people on the basis of their size, or their gender expression.

So when we get into these Vision Zero plans, often we talk like we're doing people a favor; we're making streets safe! But then, in practice, we just use Vision Zero approaches to laser in on minor infractions in a way that hurts communities.

For instance, many cities have seen the advantages of installing speed cameras — but not to cut down on driver speeds. They configure them in such a way that they can automatically generate tickets just to create city revenues. And then you see tickets issued disproportionately in areas with disproportionately black people and poor residents, because that's where the cameras are installed. I live right on the Prince Georges County, Md. line, and [that's where you see the cameras](#). I don't see that many cameras in neighborhoods with larger white populations, including ones I've lived in myself in the past.



How has the COVID-19 pandemic deepened the conversation about race and equity in transportation?



Let's talk about opening up street plazas. Especially as we come out of peak of the COVID-19 curve, obviously people mean well, but so far, we're only really talking about opening *certain* outdoor spaces for certain reasons.



So we'll say, for instance, it's okay to have a restaurant plaza; we say it's okay for people who paid lots of money for a meal to use that public space to eat; it's okay for folks, who are predominantly white, to gather en masse for *that*. And we'll also say it's okay for restaurant workers, who are primarily black and brown people who don't have access to vacation days they can use to maintain their livelihood if they don't feel safe in their workplaces during a pandemic, to go to work in those spaces, to essentially be forced into front-line jobs. But when black people choose to gather to participate in political speech — even when people gather to participate in protests *in support* of black people — well, of course *that's* still an issue.



So it's like, how do we create a system where people can *choose* to be on the front lines? And then, how can we create a transportation system that supports those choices?



In the United States, it's being treated as a necessity for the poor, black and brown people who disproportionately make up the essential professions to go to the front lines. We're not giving them those choices. They *have* to get to work. But then we turn around and say, "Oh, well, *everyone's* working at home now; people aren't going to work like they used to, they aren't driving cars, so we can just open up the streets!" But a lot of these essential service industry jobs are located far away from where people live, [so walking and biking to work on an open street isn't an option]; some cities are ignoring the fact that these workers are usually taking the bus, or else they're driving.



So it's one thing to say we're going to drop a lane to do bus rapid transit to get those essential workers where they need to go safely and quickly; it's another thing to do a woonerf and ignore the essential workers that need to come and go in buses and, yes, in cars. *[Editor's note: Oakland's Slow Streets program is an example of a car-limiting project that faced pushback in communities of color. [Read Streetsblog's interview with Warren Logan](#), the city official who oversaw the project, to learn more about how the city altered the program based on feedback.]*

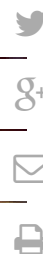




A thread I've noticed among women of color in my networks is a resistance to the word "urbanist." Has your relationship to that word changed since you adopted the Black Urbanist moniker a decade ago?

I do identify with the word "urbanism," and also with the term "friend of the city." For me, "friend of the city" means being someone who advocates for every citizen to live in a just environment. I've always been fascinated with maps; I've always been fascinated with how people come together in urban spaces.

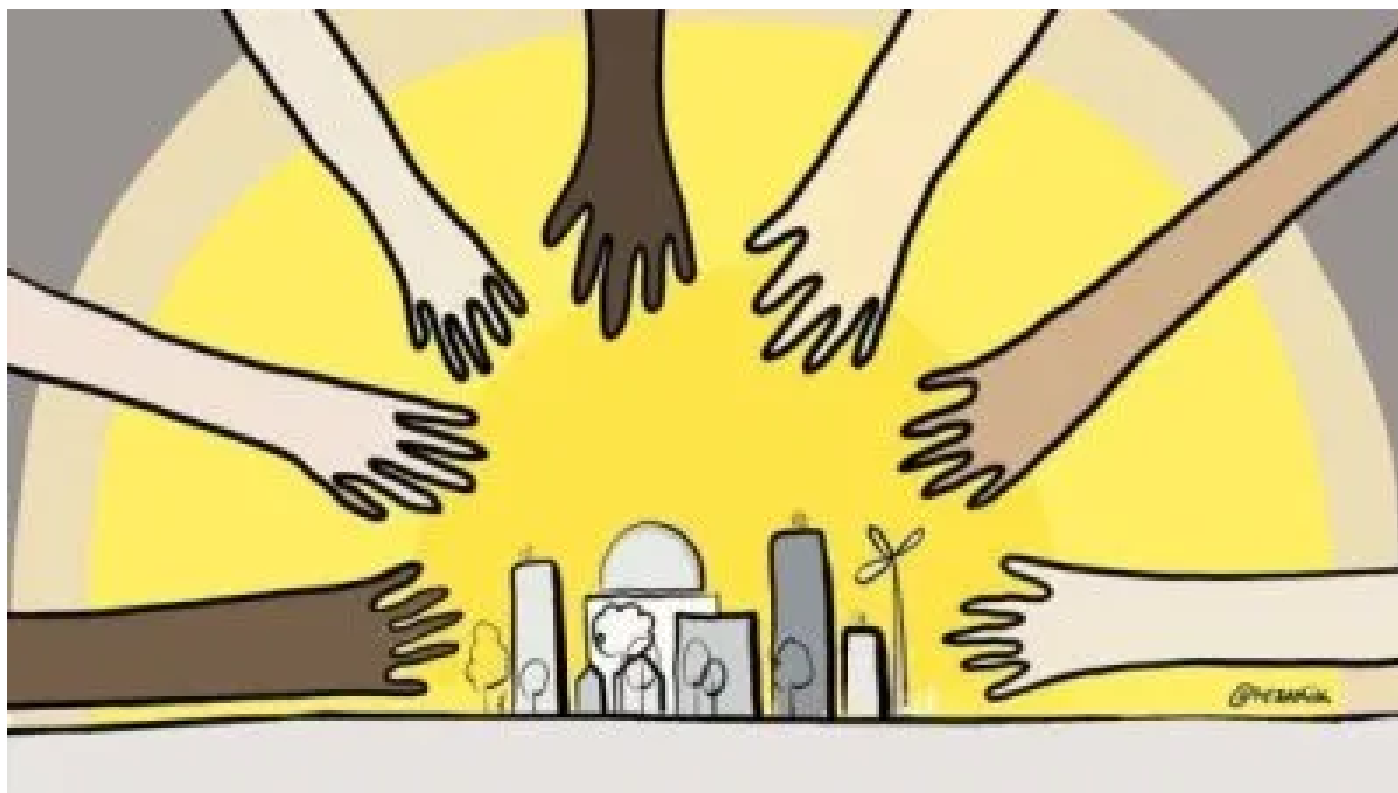
Now, that said, there is very much a classist undertone to the word "urbanist." It's also biased; if you hear the word "urbanism," you don't automatically think of that as [a term](#)



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By Kea Wilson | Jun 22, 2020

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By Courtney Cobbs | Jun 14, 2020

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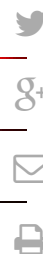
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By Angie Schmitt | Jan 24, 2018

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<https://usa.streetsblog.org/2020/06/03/under-the-banner-of-urbanism-an-interview-with-kristin-jeffers-of-the-black-urbanist/>



By Tracey Capers | Jul 1, 2020

Our racial-equity lens must foster real policies that can be regularly evaluated and measured.



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[that includes rural communities](#). I make that connection in my head, but I understand why people don't. There have been times when I've thought about saying I'm just a "place-ist," but then even that assumes a certain definition of place, as a literal, physical space that you put a stake in.



At this point, all I can say is that anything that I do is going to convene people and create conversations in a way that centers black, queer, feminist people — and that centers black trans people, and is mindful of the fact that we, as black people, were brought to lands that were already stolen from indigenous first nations folks. I don't begrudge anyone who doesn't relate to the word "urbanist," but I do hope we can help create a community that examines that word, that examines what we're asked to do under the banner of that word.

You can support Jeffers's work through [Patreon](#). Supporters at the \$40/month level will gain access to a weekly book club for White and Non-BIPOC allies, accomplices and abolitionists.

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**ceefer** • a month ago • edited

Her argument that DC speed cameras are discriminatory is accurate.


DC has deployed speed cameras (stationary and mobile) on EVERY major commuter route between DC and predominantly black Prince Georges County, Maryland. That is not the case with the commuter routes to/from majority white Montgomery County, MD.

DC has NO speed cameras, repeat NO speed cameras, on the bridges and roads between DC and Virginia.

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**Marcotico** → ceefer • a month ago

I always supported speed cameras in principle, but it seems that a) the corporate interests behind them corrupted their purpose (I saw an article about a speed camera company lobbying in Arizona, I think?, to shorten the yellow light phase to increase violations, and b) according to the studies I've seen haven't led to much of an increase in a safety outcomes.

I could be mistaken, sorry for the lack of links, and would be happy to be corrected.

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**American Dirt** → ceefer • a month ago

I have definitely noticed the abundance of cameras at I-295 approaching the National Harbor and Wilson Bridge--gotten snagged by them a few times. I came to the conclusion a while ago that they are first and foremost a revenue generating strategy, more than a tool for promoting safety. Though I wasn't aware that there are fewer concentrations of cameras in other parts of the city leading into MontCo or VA, it wouldn't surprise me if the strategy behind installation was to place them where there's the highest evidence of malfeasance, again in the interest of getting more money...though they'll never admit it. And they never have to; they can claim these are the "problematic" parts of town for speeding and kill two birds with one stone.

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**ceefer** → American Dirt • a month ago • edited

It wouldn't be so bad if DC spent a sizable portion of the traffic camera revenue (>\$150 million in 2018) on road maintenance (DCDOT's highway and street budget was ~\$24 million that same year). DC's roads re an embarrassment. I've



had out of town visitors express shock and dismay at the poor condition of DC's streets - as well as at the copious amount of litter, junk, overgrown weeds, and roadkill strewn long the highways (admittedly, Maryland is just as bad if not worse).



True story: In April of last year, I hit a pothole on the southbound side of 295 in DC that ruptured my right front tire and broke the rim. I'm familiar with the area and I know where the speed cameras are, so I wasn't speeding. While I was waiting for roadside assistance, the cameras on both sides of the road were lighting up night.

The speed camera situation in DC is frankly out of hand. It's past time for Congress to step in again, like it did in 2012 when members and staffers living in Virginia complained about the traps on 395 near the 14th Street Bridge.

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American Dirt → ceefer • a month ago

I'd agree that it's approaching the point of an exercise in police power where the intended goal of the law (to promote safe driving speeds) had been subsumed by another consequence that the executors of the law find more desirable (revenue generation). Apparently DC has about the same number of cameras as New York City--a city ten times its size. Nuts.

If you want the most extreme example of corrupt speed trap enforcement I've seen, take a look at this article I wrote on New Rome, OH. It got so bad that the Ohio Attorney General ultimately had to disincorporate the town. <http://dirtamericana.com/20...>

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paulrandall • a month ago • edited

The brunch v/s protest is a weak argument and a bad analogy. The black people have to get to work too is worse. Speed camera locations is a better argument.

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@movethecurb • a month ago

Streetsblog might want to follow up on the speed camera topic. The speed camera in the linked news clip is a mobile contraption driven around by police. This is just a fancier speed gun. It is NOT Vision Zero. VZ is about 24/7 automated enforcement at set locations. It is bias-free (except of course for scofflaws) with low recidivism. The point is not raise money but to reduce speeds.

I am of the opinion that VZ has been co-opted in the USA by nefarious forces, <https://www.trafficcalmer.c...>

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