

The Toxic Intersection of Racism and Public Space

For black men like Christian Cooper, the threat of a call to police casts a cloud of fear over parks and public spaces that others associate with safety.

By [Brentin Mock](#)

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If only black men had the same protection as birds in Central Park's Ramble. *Michael Gross/Bloomberg*

That Christian Cooper is still alive should not be taken for granted. His encounter with [Amy Cooper](#) in Central Park could have ended in any number of ways. Arrest. Injury. Gunfire. We don't know whether Amy Cooper, a white woman, considered any of those outcomes when she called the police on Christian after he admonished her for refusing to leash her dog in a bird garden, per park rules. But in [the viral video of the encounter](#), we can hear malice in her voice.

The way she says, "I'm going to tell them an African American man is threatening my life," – when Christian was armed with nothing but dog treats – gives a clear indication that at the very

least, she believed referencing his race would matter in the police response. By identifying Christian as an African American man when calling 911, she was dialing it up to mark her call urgent.

Fortunately, neither of the Coopers were still in the park when police arrived on the scene. Had they remained, the situation had high potential for escalation, especially given that Christian Cooper visits the Ramble bird garden frequently. He is a birdwatcher and invested in protecting the Ramble bird habitat from an influx of dog-walkers spurred by Covid-19 social distancing guidelines, even though the habitat is clearly marked as prohibiting unleashed dogs.

After a heavy dose of Twitter-shaming, Amy Cooper apologized for her actions. (She also gave up her dog and was fired from her finance job amid the backlash.) But the casual encounter between the white and black Coopers raises questions about who and what are considered to be deserving of protection when it comes to public spaces. Urbanists have been calling for more green spaces and open streets where cars are limited or prohibited, to encourage walking and biking. Many cities have answered this call at least temporarily during coronavirus lockdowns. Study after study shows that more parks and green spaces in cities can yield positive mental health benefits – something especially useful in the current pandemic.

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But policies intended to foster feelings of safety and liberation can also invite more anxiety for black people so long as they are viewed as threatening, or, at best, with suspicion in public spaces. This becomes more magnified under the mandate of wearing masks, which under any other circumstance would invite an even more prejudiced view of black people.

“Contact with nature reduces precursors to crime like stress and aggression, making people feel happier, and less inclined to engage in criminal acts,” wrote researchers Lincoln Larson and S. Scott Ogletree. “And when people gather in parks and other green spaces, it puts more ‘eyes on the streets,’ exposing criminals to constant community surveillance.”

Those kinds of observations must be tempered by the day-to-day realities of those who don't have the cheat codes of whiteness to help them avoid racial harassment, especially from police. The Jane Jacobian idea of “eyes on the street” very easily becomes “eyes on the black people” – which is why some African Americans disengage from public spaces like parks altogether. These peaceful green spaces just as easily induce anxiety and trauma for black and brown people, especially when they know the cops can be unleashed at any moment.

White people can weaponize the police against people who aren't white, and that power only flows in one direction. The way Amy Cooper reacted in the video shows that she was aware of that power dynamic. All it took was for a white person to send a bat signal – or in Amy Cooper's case, a racial dog whistle – to make a garden unsafe for a black person. So long as people of color, and black men in particular, are seen as a potential danger, the issue of racial equity in parks and other open and public spaces goes unresolved.

Acknowledging Christian Cooper's bird-watching mission in this, the National Audubon Society released a statement:

“Black Americans often face terrible daily dangers in outdoor spaces, where they are subjected to unwarranted suspicion, confrontation, and violence,” said Audubon SVP for State Programs Rebeccah Sanders. “The outdoors – and the joy of birds – should be safe and welcoming for all people.”

But it doesn't really matter that Christian Cooper is a card-carrying Audubon Society member, or that he is a Harvard grad. Here he is discussing birds:

These titles have no sentinel function for black people if they have no reasonable expectation of equal protection under the law. With just one sentence and a phone, Amy Cooper was able to unfurl a whole U.S. history of police – and police wannabes – apprehending, hunting, and killing

black people in open parks and streets to remind him that this was a space that he was not entitled to be in, unlike herself. The park rules? Those were for the birds.

Christian Cooper did not run when she unholstered this history; he stood his ground.

“I am not going to participate in my own dehumanization,” he told *The Washington Post*.

Had he run, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't have been chased down by anyone in the park who believed their whiteness deputizes them by birthright to police black people out of any public space. There was no guarantee that if police showed up that they wouldn't have acted just as they did with Eric Garner – or with George Floyd, the latest unarmed African American man to die while being restrained by police in Minneapolis on Memorial Day.

Just as with Garner, Floyd was killed by police on a public street with dozens of people watching – “eyes on the street” were of no help to them.



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