

SUNTA section column for Anthropology News  
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Submitted by Rudolf Gaudio, SUNTA Secretary

In the past year the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about the long-term sustainability of cities, while Black Lives Matter protests have called out the systematic injustices and violence endured by racialized urban residents. These challenges have hindered many SUNTA members' ability to do their work (and to find and keep jobs), while underscoring the need for more critical anthropological research and teaching on urban planning and policy and the ways the built environment and urban forms facilitate or foreclose possibilities for human and other lives. Thanks to the technologies accessible, albeit unevenly, to most of the people reading this column, much of that work continues to be done remotely by SUNTA members and associates in and outside the academy.

Inspiring examples of such research were spotlighted and celebrated at the SUNTA board and business meetings, which were held online in October and November 2020, just before and after the U.S. presidential election. Danny Hoffman presented the Anthony Leeds Book Prize to Rebecca Louise Carter for *Prayers for the People: Homicide and Humanity in the Crescent City* (University of Chicago Press, 2019). The book explores religious practices and kinship formations among African American women in New Orleans in the years following hurricane Katrina, when the city experienced repeated cycles of violent crime. Carter documents how, in the face of death and loss, the women strove to "grieve well" through participation in prayer groups, community organizing and activism, and "restorative kinship."

Prizes were also awarded for outstanding papers. Christina Schwenkel presented the Graduate Student Paper Prize to Stephanie Love, a Ph.D. candidate at City University of New York, Graduate Center, for her paper, "The Poetics of Grievance: Urban Taxi-Drivers, Vernacular Place-Names, and the Paradoxes of Post-Coloniality in Oran, Algeria." Exploring connections between linguistic forms and urban spaces, Love analyzes vernacular street-naming practices as ways to express dissatisfaction with an authoritarian state. The article will be published in an upcoming issue of *City & Society*. Acknowledging the work of outgoing C&S editors Derek Pardue and Sheri Gibbings, the journal's new editor, Julian Brash, and associate editor, Kristin Monroe, confirmed that its 2020 Best Paper Prize was awarded to Oskar Verkaaik for "[The Anticipated Mosque: The Political Affect of a Planned Building](#)" (C&S 32:1). Drawing on fieldwork in Almere, a post-World War II planned city in the Netherlands, Verkaaik analyzes impassioned debates over the construction of a new mosque as inextricably material and political.

At the business meeting outgoing president Jeff Maskovsky passed the virtual baton of leadership to new [section president Suzanne Scheld](#), who commended Jeff's energetic leadership and thanked the SUNTA board's outgoing officers for their service: Jayne Howell (past-president), Faedah Totah (secretary), Sylvia Nam (third-year councilor), as well as Danny Hoffman, Sheri Gibbings and Derek Pardue as noted above. Suzanne also introduced the board's new members: Susan Falls (president-elect), Rudolf Gaudio (secretary), Rashmi Sadana (first-year councilor), Yukiko Koga (chair of Anthony Leeds prize committee), as well as *City & Society* editors Julian Brash and Kristin Monroe.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, SUNTA's current and recent presidents are based in the USA's two largest metropolitan areas, which (if you'll forgive the geologically and epidemiologically fraught metaphor) are coastal epicenters of scholarship and activism about urban and public space. Since 1995, CUNY Grad Center has hosted the [Public Space Research Group](#). Founded and directed by former SUNTA and AAA president Setha Low, this group has collectively participated in hundreds of ethnographically grounded studies on the design and use of public space. The PSRG has also organized compelling lectures by scholars, planners, and activists working on public space issues. In September 2020 they joined forces with the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability to host Dr. Julian Agyeman, professor of urban and environmental policy and planning at Tufts University, whose online lecture discussed "Just Sustainabilities in Policy, Planning and Practice," drawing on research and theorizing that intentionally integrates social justice and environmental sustainability.

The [Public Space Research Group West](#) is an emerging group for researchers interested in public space issues in the "West," a broad signifier referring nonexclusively to the western regions of the USA or the North American continent. Organized by three Southern California-based anthropologists—Suzanne Scheld (CSU Northridge), Jayne Howell (CSU Long Beach), and Matilde Córdoba Azcárate (UC San Diego)—this group plans to host events that aim to engender conversations around a host of issues including the politics of repatriation, the rise of homelessness, surveillance, street vending, and public access to beaches.

Building on the experiences and energies of both Public Space Research Groups, and mindful of a growing awareness among social scientists, planners, architects, and community members of the need to attend to the issue of just public space, SUNTA organized a [Public Space Research Working Group](#) that met for the first time during the AAA's virtual conference, *Raising Our Voices*, in November 2020. Fifty people attended that meeting, many of them motivated by the realization that COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have had contrasting effects on public space: the coronavirus encourages avoidance of public space, while BLM activists are reclaiming and reconfiguring public space by staging protests, removing monuments, and other interventions. With Suzanne Scheld and B. Lynne Milgram coordinating its efforts, an ad hoc committee was formed that will chart practical steps to promote the Working Group's main goal of developing a platform for researchers, practitioners, and students associated with the AAA to discuss and investigate the politics of public space, and advocate for making, using, and preserving just public space. In addition, Working Group members will work to disseminate ethnographic research on public space to a broader public, including urban planners, policy-makers, and governmental authorities. Inquiries about the Working Group can be sent to [aaa.psrwg@gmail.com](mailto:aaa.psrwg@gmail.com). Anyone interested in joining SUNTA or who has questions or suggestions about the section is encouraged to contact Suzanne Scheld at [SUNTAPresident21@gmail.com](mailto:SUNTAPresident21@gmail.com).