

# Book Review

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**Carter, Rebecca Louise. *Prayers for the People: Homicide and Humanity in the Crescent City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019, 272 pages.**

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*Prayers for the People* is a powerful, moving ethnography of how African American churches, specifically African American church *women*, deal with gun violence in New Orleans, coming together to “grieve well,” find strength, and potentially transform their community. Carter undertook fieldwork from 2007 to 2009, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when homicide rates were especially high. One of the book’s strengths is its honesty about the challenges of conducting research amidst people’s struggles to rebuild their lives. Carter articulates the mode of uncertainty in which ethnographers work with more candour, care, and respect than many.

The book is divided into three parts, each two chapters in length. In the necessary first lay-of-the-land chapter, Carter develops the useful concept of the “Black urban delta.” She also meshes the history of Black New Orleans with her personal history with the city, from visiting her father as a child to meeting Danielle, who lost her firstborn son to gun violence and who would become a key participant in Carter’s research. In chapter 2, Carter explores diverse religious responses to the high homicide rate, visiting an uptown white Catholic group that prays for peace in a universalist manner, a mixed Episcopalian church in Treme that dignifies every single victim of gun violence by naming them, and a mainly white Vodou *sosyete* that invokes the spirits for healing and protection at “anti-crime ceremonies” performed at downtown intersections. Carter argues that these interventions, though worthy, are too far removed from the “structural and local formations” (87) of violence to be able to counteract the devaluing of Black life by asserting a “sacred Black humanity” (88). She thus settles for the rest of the book on Black Baptist traditions, specifically, Liberty Street Baptist Church in the Central City neighbourhood.

Part two sets the missions of Liberty Street in historical and geographical context. In chapter 3, Carter takes us to a “Yes We Care” rally held in early 2009, which she locates along the intertwined paths of the civil rights movement and Black social gospel. Akin to a Black Baptist revival, the rally called on participants to demonstrate care within the African American community, to spread God’s word in order to halt gun violence, and, ultimately, to realize and act on their “somebodiness,” an understanding of Black dignity, worth, and agency articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. Chapter 4 focuses on the work of Liberty Street’s Pastor Samuel, particularly the missions that he took onto the streets of New Orleans in the 1990s and 2000s: mounting campaigns of billboards and signs stating “THOU SHALT NOT KILL” and “ENOUGH,” staging weekly public demonstrations, building a cross-denominational Pastors’ Coalition against violence, and holding outdoor prayer vigils. Carter probes the significance of these missions for Pastor Samuel and other participants, explaining how they inscribe “powerful directives for nonviolence in New Orleans, etching moral belief and a relational framework for human being onto the social, spiritual, and physical grounds of the Crescent City” (131). Of note is that “crescent,” for Carter, does not refer only to the shape of New Orleans along the Mississippi, but to its character—emergent, “on the cusp of change” (12), about to wax or wane—an important insight into this mutable city.

Part three, which is the most affecting, centres on Liberty Street’s support group for mothers (and other kinswomen) of murder victims, founded by Danielle. It conveys how the women “raise their dead,” that is, keep and honour deep connections with them by celebrating their birthdays and death anniversaries and by testifying to the intrinsic worth of their lives. Carter theorizes these practices as “restorative kinship,” and shows how they extend out from close family toward the “beloved community” of New Orleans as a whole, by means of the connections the women forge with others impacted by violence, and the visions they communicate of a better, peaceful world in which all human life is valued.

Each part is preceded by an evocative photograph and a “‘message’ in the spirit of a pastoral or lay message one would receive in Baptist worship service” (24), lyrically written like an extended fieldwork vignette. All three messages centre the experiences of the Black women in the support group. Not only do they point to the sacred Black female personhood at the heart of the book, but they also demonstrate Carter’s ethnographic skill. The depiction in the last message of how a commemorative balloon release reflected the tension

between the needs of the living to connect with their dead and to let them go was both moving and illuminating.

This book accomplishes three important things. First, its explanations of faith-based anti-violence missions pushed me to think in a new way about the production (and possible resolution) of urban violence, a phenomenon often framed atheistically in terms of socioeconomic conditions and power relations. In this vein, the book helped me learn about a facet of New Orleans that my research there, on a completely different topic, has not touched on. Second, it contributes the concept of restorative kinship, showing how Black women's kinship practices, rooted in their religion, resist physical and social death, assuage the "kin pain" of losing loved ones to homicide, and unearth hope from despair. Third, it reiterates the centrality of religion in African American movements for social justice and transformation, connecting the love at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement with "divine love" (220) and the sense of dignity and value that people find in their churches and with God. *Prayers for the People*, which was awarded the 2020 Anthony Leeds prize by the Society for Urban, National, and Transnational Anthropology, makes an excellent text for teaching urban anthropology, kinship, anthropology of religion, social justice, critical race theory, and the art and methods of ethnography.