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Meridians 16:2

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Editor's Introduction

Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

—Alice Walker (2003, xii)

It is a bittersweet pleasure to publish this special issue on Black women's health, guest edited by Jameta Nicole Barlow and LeConté J. Dill. The serendipitous timing of a special issue focused on Black women's health is particularly significant at this historical moment when Black women have launched and are leading movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #MeToo because Black men, women, and children continue to be disproportionately subjected to life-threatening, state-based, structural and interpersonal violence in the United States. Whether killed by police officers in the course of daily life, from Staten Island to Cleveland to St. Louis and beyond; subjected to poisonous tap water in Flint for four years and counting; evicted, redlined, and gentrified into toxic and substandard housing; dying in childbirth at two to six times the rate of white women; routinely denied pain medication or adequate health care regardless of class; pushed out of schools into prisons and the military industrial complex; legally sanctioned for having natural hair styles; or subjected to sundry other egregious assaults on Black bodies and souls, Black life is under attack, now as ever. And as always, Black women organize and respond, providing direct care, nurturing bodies and spirits, demanding reform, and launching revolutions.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the womanist philosophy and politics articulated in the early 1980s by Alice Walker are woven through this collection of essays, reflections, culture works, and archives of Black women's pursuit of collective health and well-being. Womanism is a way of being, a way of knowing, and a practice of fostering and cultivating life-affirming spaces. A womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (Walker 2003, xi). And Black health, as Walker's definition (in part) of womanist in the epigraph above reminds us, is about living Black lives fully, sensuously, spiritedly, and politically. What's more, Black liberation movements have historically led to social change that improves everyone's quality of life.

For example, it was African American activist Tarana Burke who coined the powerful phrase "Me Too" when she launched a nonprofit to serve victims of sexual abuse in 2006. Burke was inspired to launch "Me Too" after a decade of reflecting on an encounter she had with a 13-year-old girl who shared her story of sexual abuse. Stunned into momentary silence, Burke later wished she had said, "me too," so that the child would have known that she wasn't alone—neither in the experience nor in the recovery from it—and that women like her were working to prevent sexual violence. Burke's Just Be Inc. had already spent a decade working to build a social movement against sexual violence and harassment by the time white actress Alyssa Milano tweeted out a "#MeToo" hashtag in response to allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017 (García 2017).

Likewise, the recent and dramatic success of the #NeverAgain movement for gun control led by Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School students who survived the Valentine's Day 2018 mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, did not simply spring up out of fallow ground. Rather, it was rooted in and nourished by the largely youth-led #HandsUpDontShoot and #SayHerName movements' intersectional understanding of the political economy of police brutality and impunity. That is, the #NeverAgain teenagers—"with every color represented"—have come of age both subject to the regular spectacle of hundreds of school-based shootings since the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre and witness to the massive

protests organized across the country in the aftermath of the extrajudicial killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, and dozens of others. We may never hear about the full extent of the role #BlackLivesMatter cofounders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, Tarana Burke, and other Black women’s health activists played in establishing the national groundwork that allowed the #MeToo and #NeverAgain movements to take off as they have, but we do know that they are part of a long history of Black women’s critical insights and public health activism that continues to sow new ground. As Alicia Garza (2016) put it, “When Black people get free, everybody gets free.”

Thus, in keeping with the spirit of resistance and remembrance that it celebrates, and as a powerful counterpoint to all of the times and ways Black folks have said #ICantBreathe to no avail, we dedicate this issue to Erica Garner (May 29, 1990—December 30, 2017). In the three years between when her father Eric Garner was choked to death by NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo in 2014 and her own untimely death at the age of twenty-nine, Ms. Garner transformed her personal outrage and grief into political activism against police brutality and for criminal justice reforms. Fittingly, the cover for this special issue on Black women’s health features Zahira Kelly-Cabrera’s powerful image *Breathe*. As Barlow and Dill remind us in their introduction, for all who have come before, and for all who will follow, breathe—for self-care “is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988).

Finally, in addition to being the last issue bridging Paula Giddings’s editorship and my own, this is also the last issue to be published by Indiana University Press. We are thankful to IUP—especially Sherondra Thedford, Journals Production Manager—for ensuring that *Meridians* has been produced as beautifully in form as it is serious in substance. We are particularly grateful that IUP’s understanding of *Meridians*’ mission and vision was evidenced in its sustained commitment to vividly reproducing art by and about women of color on all of our covers. We thank also our longtime cover compositor, Rebecca Neimark, who has repeatedly brought together a wide range of contributor’s art and *Meridians* design aesthetic with remarkable skill, and our brilliant copyeditor Alex Kapitan for often-unheralded, yet critical, production work. Thank you one and all.

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