



The Enduring Urgency of Black Breath

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Breath is a powerful material and spiritual force, a point not only of harm but also recovery. It can show us how Black people experience multiple convergences of racial violence, health and environmental hazards, socioeconomic precarity, and disaster through time and space.

“I Can’t Breathe.” The last words Eric Garner uttered on a New York City sidewalk in 2014 were also uttered by George Floyd in 2020. Through the years, these words link the deaths of far too many Black people in the United States and across the world due to violent encounters with state agents including the police. In the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, disproportionately borne by Black people, these three words have even deeper resonance: they provoke grief and mourning; they urge action; they invoke restorative practices among Black people to mediate repression; and they beseech us, as anthropologists, to investigate racial inequities in the access to breath, the essence of life itself.