



**ANTOINETTE COOPER | BLACK EXHALE  
LIVES IN THE BALANCE SUMMIT | JULY 2, 2020  
“AT THE INTERSECTION OF ILLNESS AND INEQUITY”**

We are here today because while there is a pandemic affecting the world, we are also committed to the communities most sensitive to crisis...women, children and adolescents. Our conversations and our work is about making sure that the future we are creating is shaped around, rather than at the expense of, vulnerable bodies.

And so if the theme of this summit is *Lives In The Balance*, then I would like for you to consider that there are lives that rarely have the privilege of experiencing balance. For example, the Centers for Disease Control documented that the pandemic has affected communities of color, and specifically the Black communities in America, at a rate of 5 times that of white communities. This is not because of natural consequence but because of inequities in various health and social systems.

So, what happens when there is an overlapping of illness and inequities? What happens when systems unprepared to meet basic needs are then charged with meeting critical needs?

In a health system where the Black maternal mortality rate is 2 ½ times greater than that of white women, alongside decreased access to quality prenatal care, racial pain bias that lead to disparities in treatment, and susceptibility to other health conditions like obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes, the pandemic has laid bare the impact of systems that do not consider intersectionality. Implicit biases are often unconscious, but the preservation of those biases is a choice. Knowing that, if you set the intention of unraveling the overlapping systems of disadvantage or the multiple sources of oppression...then what can further be uncovered?

Here's a few. There's the environmental inequality that had residents of Flint, Michigan drinking contaminated water for years, and now has a crisis of trust in government. There's urban food deserts



that disproportionately affect the Black community's access to affordable, nutritious food necessary for a healthy diet. Another is that Black Americans are exposed to over 50% more pollution leading to higher rates of asthma...especially detrimental in a pandemic that affects the lungs.

Black people in America are air hungry. Covid-19 affects the breath. And the current social justice movement in America was reignited with the plea, **"I can't breathe."** All of these comorbidities, or violence on Black bodies, have brought us to a tipping point.

Again, we are here because we are committed to communities most sensitive to crisis...so I would like you to go deeper into your commitment and to consider the fragility of Black women, Black children, and Black adolescents. In fact, go even deeper into your hearts and also consider Black transwomen who have even more barriers to health and social protections. Consider the Black essential workers that received no daily applause, had no access to the privilege of distancing and went to work to keep America working. Consider the disabled Black body, the Black family, the Black wealth gap, the school to prison pipeline, and the demonization of Black men. Consider under all of those pressures the damage to Black mental wellness, and a mental healthcare system that is also rampant with inequities and a lack of cultural competency.

Take it in.

And in this portion of the summit, while we're pulling back the veil to consider what's so, we're also interested in what's next.

We are at the precipice and all of these considerations can seem insurmountable when crafting actions to take. Yet, this is the work—dismantling inequities and systems of oppression in order to evolve as a collective.

So, where do we start? We start with inquiry.



Start to interrogate what operates in the shadows or blind spot for you as an individual. What's in the shadows of your family units, your social circles, your organizations? What's in the shadows of your ethnic group, your gender, your religion, your country?

Examine the lens through which you view the world. Do you impose **that** lens on others who have a different experience of the world? Do you not allow others to have their experience?

This work will be uncomfortable, breathe through it. And then bring these questions to the spaces you occupy. How willing are you to acknowledge and look at the gaps in your various systems? How willing are you to turn your attention to the margins and accept that there are people who have been relegated to the margins that have a place at the table? How willing are you to move over? How willing are you to create bridges and share access to power and resources and beingness? How willing are you to co-create a new paradigm where access begins at the level of planning and not just consuming?

And the final question...is this performance, or is it in the love language of the people who have been air hungry too long?

