

After the Gunshots, We Hear the Same, Deafening White Silence

 www.teenvogue.com/story/police-brutality-on-black-people-white-silence-affects

Kayla Monteiro

I am a black woman from a small town in Florida. The same Florida whose soil is now home to Trayvon Martin. The same Florida that forced me to drive past four confederate flags every day after school to get to my job. The same Florida that placed me in predominantly white spaces for the majority of my life.

In many ways, these spaces shaped my identity. I really hated being black. I was hyper aware of my pigment, and I constantly wished I could be lighter. I was the brown girl who'd let you use her foundation to dress up in blackface for a costume. I took pride in "talking white" and being "pretty for a black girl." When I was not ruining my curls by straightening my hair every day, I was doing everything in my power to ignore that I was black. I would fill out job applications and tests as Hispanic, because to me that was a much more dignified thing to be. I would avoid spending long amounts of time in the sun, because the last thing I wanted was to be darker. And in those rare moments when I was acknowledging my blackness, I would turn myself into a caricature of a black woman because I thought the white kids would like me better that way. It took a long time for me to feel secure and beautiful in being a black woman, but I am very grateful I made it to that point.

Michael Brown's death helped me learn to love myself.

I will never forget how I felt after I heard about his murder. It was a unique type of rage and hopelessness that I was not (yet) used to. But one of the most damaging parts of mourning him — and fearing for my life and the lives of the black people around me — was the deafening silence of my white friends. I didn't understand how something that shook me to my core was not a big deal to the white people surrounding me. When your white friends prioritize asking you what "on fleek" means, but don't bother to ask how you're feeling after your own reflection is gunned down, it feels personal. It is incredibly dehumanizing to watch your friends consume the parts of black culture that are convenient to them — the vernacular, the hairstyles, the music — all without giving the creators, the black bodies behind these things, legitimate access to humanity.

When you are already adorned in privilege and choose to sit on the sidelines, leaving a marginalized group of people to fight for themselves, you are contributing to the problem. In that moment, nothing is louder than your refusal to speak. As a white person, you have an opportunity to speak and move in spaces that my voice as a black woman won't reach. Use this power and fight for us. Shying away from conversations that make you uncomfortable is coming at the expense of our lives.

Alton Sterling was the 559th person to be shot and killed by a police officer this year, [according to The Guardian](#). But more than being another sobering statistic, Alton Sterling was the father of five children who are now navigating the world fatherless. Alton Sterling did not wake up on July 5th anticipating his death at the hands of those sworn to protect him. Alton Sterling in many facets is my father, my uncles, my cousins, my brothers, my friends. He deserves to be more than a momentarily trending hashtag resulting from police brutality.

Philando Castile was the 561st person to be shot and killed by a police officer this year, but he was also a 32-year-old kitchen supervisor at a Montessori school. He was in a car with his girlfriend and his girlfriend's 4-year-old daughter when he was shot and killed after being pulled over for a routine traffic stop. In the video of his execution, the child can be heard trying to comfort her mother after Philando is shot. She is repeatedly heard saying, "It's okay, Mommy. It's okay. I'm right here with you." Philando Castile in many facets is my father, my uncles, my cousins, my brothers, my friends. He deserves to be more than a momentarily trending hashtag resulting from police brutality.

To my white friends: This is not a time to be silent. Your actions, and specifically your voice, are critical. Your black friends need to know you hear them. Your black friends need to know you support them. Moments like these are when

your silence is deafening. If you love your black friends, stand with us in solidarity. Check in on us — send us a text, call us, hug us. Remind us that our lives have value extending beyond the people who look like us. Take that confederate flag off your profile. If we are being attacked on Facebook or Twitter, step in, carry some of that weight and defend us. It is heavy. Use your own platforms to elevate the importance of black lives. Educate yourselves. March with us. Stop muting my #BlackLivesMatter statements with “all lives matter.” Enjoy our culture — but advocate for our safety.