As an American living over here, *Grazia*'s *Kenya Hunt* is often told that Britain doesn't have the same race problem as the US. As Black History Month kicks off, she says it's time to wake up

PHOTOGRAPH SUKI DHANDA

Black History Month

'You've acknowledged your privilege – now change your behaviour'

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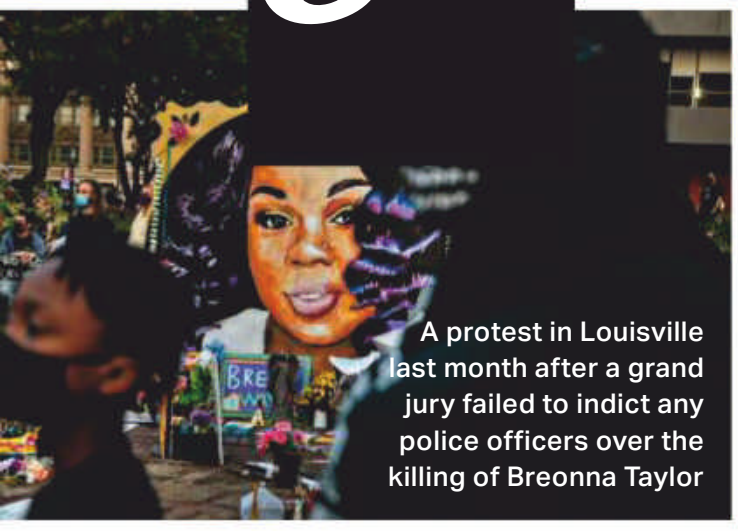


A protest in Louisville last month after a grand jury failed to indict any police officers over the killing of Breonna Taylor

GROWING UP IN women's magazine journalism, I was always told the secret to getting a reader to care about a story is to show why a topic is relevant to her. What it means to her life in the day-to-day. And during my years in the UK as an American expat, watching manifold debates around race rotate in and out of the news cycle, it has always struck me how many Brits view racism as 'that problem over there'. Trayvon Martin. Sandra Bland. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor. Elijah McClain. Tragic deaths that, in the minds of many, took place a world away from life here in the UK. Race is not just an American problem, and yet many here still fail to recognise that. And this failure leads to a lack of action that ultimately contributes to chronic inequality.

'America is a terrifying mess,' a British friend said to me as we discussed the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, an explosive night in which the US President was widely viewed to be dog-whistling white supremacy. 'It's so bad there,' she added. Her remarks echoed a conversation I had with a taxi driver a year back, while discussing some especially controversial comments Trump made about ▸

From far left: a rally in Boston (top) in response to the killing of George Floyd; the *Britain's Got Talent* BLM-inspired dance that drew 25,500 complaints; a Juneteenth celebration and protest in Brooklyn

lynching. The driver pointed out to me, quite proudly, that race isn't the issue in the UK that it is in the US: 'It's because of slavery. We didn't have it here the way America did.'

In fact, I countered, England did. Both England and America fuelled and were completely dependent on a slave-owning economy. But the legacy of transatlantic slavery isn't as visible a low-hanging cloud here as it is in America. That doesn't mean its legacy doesn't thread its way through the fabric of the day-to-day lives of most Black Brits the way it does most Black Americans. Empire, Jim Crow, whatever you want to call it, the root – racism – is the same.

Want evidence? How about 25,500 pieces of it. That's how many people complained to Ofcom that a *Britain's Got Talent* dance routine – decrying racism and in tribute to Black Lives Matter – was unsuitable for a family audience. Meanwhile, Black people are 9.7 times more likely than whites to be stopped and searched by the police. And since Covid-19 has hit, Black people have lost their jobs at a higher rate, widening existing inequalities. According to the Office for National Statistics, the average white British household has roughly £282,000 in wealth; the average Black African household has just roughly £23, 800.

'We don't see race the same way. Class is the issue here.' The British taxi driver echoed sentiments I'd heard in the office, at parties, at fashion shows and even in a doctor's surgery. 'It's not the same here, you'll see.'

In the four months since George Floyd's killing sparked global protests, monuments to slave owners have been toppled, diversity and inclusion coalitions assembled, corporate apologies and donations have been made and BLM murals painted. We've witnessed grand and small gestures. But it can be harder to see how the noise – the hashtags, social media campaigns – translate to those daily, unpublicised, banal moments that shape our reality and the norm.

What is the conversion rate of a black square? How many anti-racist IRL actions stem from a post? Any? The nuances of the race conversation differ as you cross the Atlantic. But when thinking about how to move the needle – what it will take for white people to do the work of regarding, treating, hiring and paying Black and brown people equally – the core issues seem the same. Put simply: it's hard to stop and question something when you benefit from it.

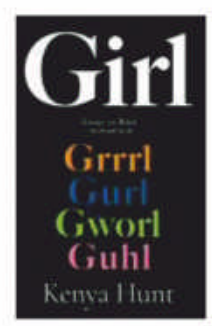
When I had my second son, I worried that all the baby stuff (disposable nappies, wipes, plastic toys) was bad for the environment. My intentions were good; I switched to biodegradable wipes, priced out cloth nappies and talked loudly about my desire to switch to a greener solution. But ultimately, the prospect of long-term environmental damage was no match for the convenience of being able to quickly change my baby's nappy, hassle-free. The benefit was too hard to pass up, even though I knew the cumulative damage would likely have a negative long-term impact on my life and that of my sons, even their kids. The thought of putting in the extra work (the laundry, the smell, the sight!) – I couldn't deal with it. So disposable nappies it was.

I've observed similar patterns when it comes to race. Intellectually, you know discrimination is wrong. But when it's time to actually do something about it – action that requires not just acknowledging privilege but changing one's behaviour – the internal blocks spring up. So it's easier to respond to the problem happening 'over there', to opine about it on social media, rather than commit to sustained, perpetual actions that could make a difference.

Recently, a white childhood friend confessed that she was afraid to challenge her grandmother's long-standing white supremacist views, because she didn't want to jeopardise her trust fund. Here in the UK, a white peer thought it easier to complain about her boss's acts of casual racism in the office behind his back, rather than address them with him or HR directly, out of fear for her own job security. Both are well-meaning liberals who have bought and read the books from the anti-racist reading lists and talked the talk.

Walking the walk is another matter. And so we have textbook examples of personal benefit rendering good intentions null and void. Over there and, yes, over here.

For more information on Black History Month visit blackhistorymonth.org.uk



'Girl: Essays On Black Womanhood' by Kenya Hunt is out 26 November (£16.99, HQ) and available for preorder now

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: HILA KARMAND AT ONE REPRESENTS, WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO MICHELE FAUSTINO AND KYRA TEIXEIRA FOR HAIR AND LOCATION. OTHER PHOTOS: EYEVINE, PA