

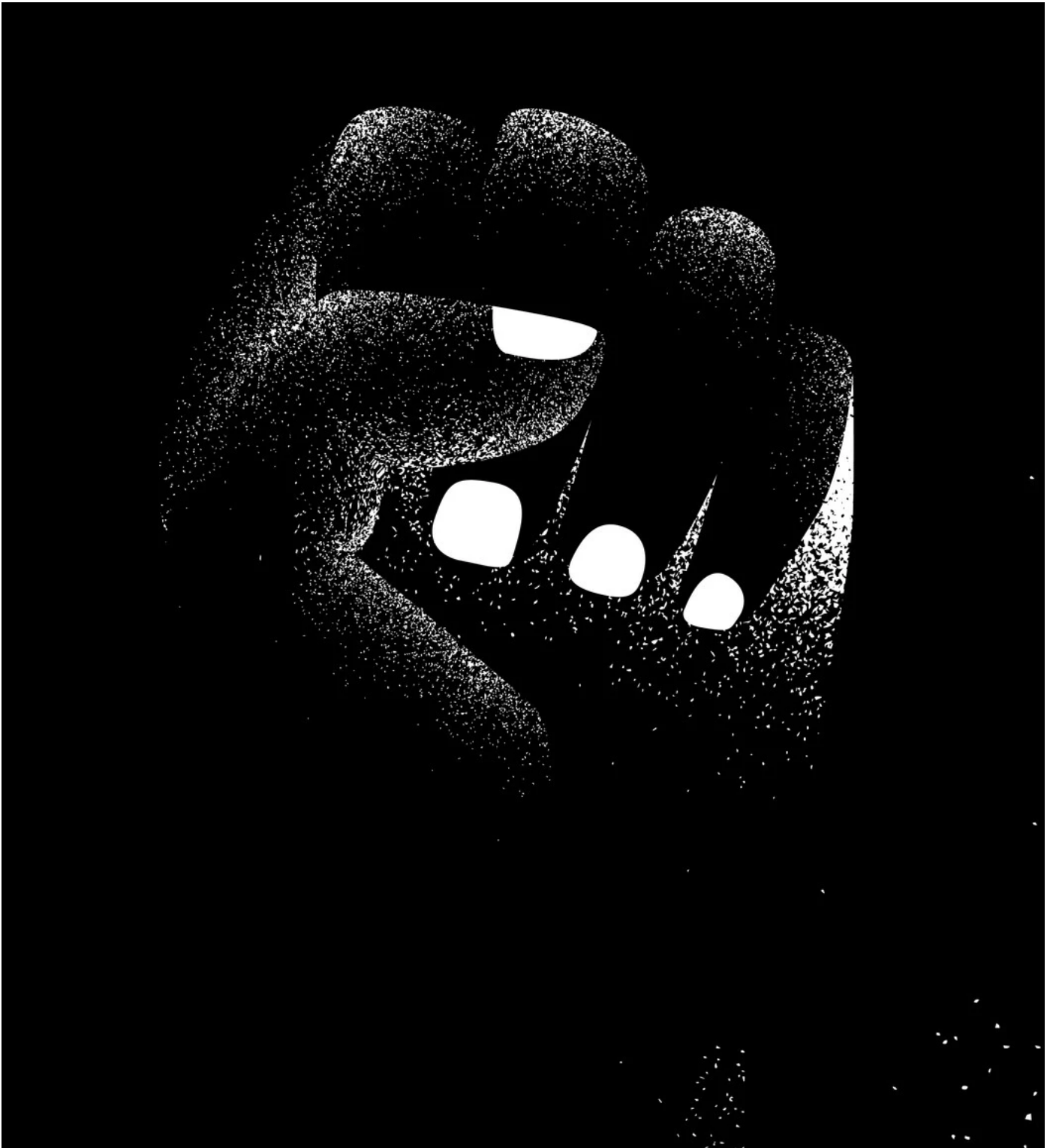


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Opinion

Why I can't raise my fist with Black Lives Matter, but I will fight for you

By Vanessa Garcia | Jun. 03, 2021



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Last year, as protesters marched for Black Lives Matter, I stood in solidarity with the Black community, and, like everyone I knew, I wanted justice not only for George Floyd but for the long line of Black lives who have suffered due to a racial inequity

in our country that haunts us not just as a nation but as a human race; a generational playing field made uneven by the echoes of ghosts we can still hear coming from the chained bowels of ships that reached our shores across the Middle Passage. We trafficked in human beings, we sold souls. Reparations should have come a long time ago.

I support Black lives. But I could not and still cannot raise my fist alongside BLM.

As most of us know by now, the logo for BLM is a clenched, raised fist. When the movement asked me to show my solidarity by posting this fist on Instagram and Facebook, I just couldn't do it, despite my very own family being mixed race. I maintained my support for Black lives, used my voice in the ways I could, but I refused the symbol because, for me as a Cuban American, the raised fist also symbolizes a haunting history that has reverberated for generations.

It represents the rise of a regime that tortured members of my family and has murdered so many of my people. I am not the only Cuban American for whom the raised fist was a highly problematic trigger of past trauma, given the symbol's roots in Communist movements across time and history. There were other groups who have been affected by Communism's repressive regimes that felt the same — some Venezuelan Americans, for instance.

The “fear of the fist” was the fear that BLM was saying: The way to equalize the playing field = Communism. For those of us who know better, who have been directly affected by the outcomes of Communism, who understand how Black lives fare under Communism (not well, to say the least), the fist jolted us. To add to the symbolism, the BLM organization wrote an elegy in Fidel Castro's defense on Medium after his death, which ended with the words: “Fidel Vive!” Back in 2015, two of BLM's co-founders even identified themselves as “trained Marxists.”

Despite the fact that the movement now includes people that would never call themselves “Marxists,” the word itself and what it stands for — alongside phrases like “Fidel Vive!” clenched inside a fist – is chilling for many Cuban Americans.

Last year, I wanted, more than anything, to explain where that chill came from, but I feared that saying anything at the time, could draw light from where it absolutely needed to collectively shine at that moment: on Black lives.

Now, however, I think it's important to share what I couldn't then if I am to be a true ally and, also, to ask for allyship in return. I believe true allyship must be founded in mutual understanding.

To fully understand my trigger, you would have to know that I am the daughter of Cuban refugees. That my grandfather spent 15 years as a political prisoner in Cuba. That my other grandfather's brother was also a political prisoner; given electroshocks as a form of torture in prison. To understand my trigger, you would have to know that many of my Cuban refugee friends are artists who cannot live or work freely in Cuba because the law is, literally, codified to instill the fear of imprisonment and death against those who speak out against the State. Cuba is, simply put, not free.

Beyond my own personal experience, Cuba is a country where unlawful and politically motivated torture and murder of its own people still exists. One has to simply read through the 2020 reports on Human Rights practices issued by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, to see what's happening in Cuba today: "Disappearance ... torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, or punishment ... arbitrary arrests or detention ... denial of free public trials ... unlawful interference with privacy, family, home, [and] correspondence..." The list goes on and on.

It was hard to grapple with BLM's fist as a signifier when the raised-fist symbol triggered everything that had tried to destroy members of my family and still enslaves my motherland. This conflict was made exponential because members of my family, both immediate and extended, are both Cuban and Black.

Last year, we felt racism and prejudice breathing down our necks, as we tried to catch our own breaths underneath our masks. At one point during the pandemic, my sister and her family — a family comprised of a Black man, a Hispanic woman, and mixed-race children — considered driving from California, where they live, to

Miami, where I live. It had been the longest time we'd ever gone without seeing each other, and we were getting desperate. But, we were also really scared they might be pulled over, or that there might be some violent action taken against them on the road, especially given the heightened racial tensions of the moment. We were, in other words, scared of what it could mean for a Black family to drive across the South at night. That we are still afraid of this is an American tragedy.

This fear is not unfounded. My sister and her family, just a few years ago, had rocks hurled at their home in Sherman Oaks, California. It was, as we understand it, a hate crime. One that pushed them from their house and neighborhood. My niece and goddaughter, who was close to 3 years old at the time, tried to grasp what was happening as one rock after another was thrown at her window. One day, she will piece what happened together, and what she will see breaks my heart in half. For now, she just refers to that house as “the broken house.”

The side of myself that wanted to make sure not a single stone was ever hurled in hate again prevented what my Cuban side felt from speaking fully at the time or making a big deal about the fist. BLM was and is, too, necessary. And more so, I was grateful to be able to do, in the United States, what is not allowed in Cuba: to protest freely.

Some Cuban Americans, Venezuelan Americans, and Nicaraguan Americans who brought up their feelings against BLM's symbol in everyday conversation were shunned as a result, called “crazy Trumppers,” even when they were not aligned with former President Trump — their own pain and marginalization belittled and ignored. Others were called “right-wing nutjobs” under the stereotype that “all Cuban Americans are hardline Republicans,” even though that is also untrue. For me, it was a constant battle between factions that shouldn't have been battling to begin with, as we were and are all seeking liberation.

I understand that there are moments when we all need to come together and bring the sun to shine on one particular issue, so that, finally, we can all see that issue. Sometimes it takes hundreds of years to drag the sun to a field that's lived in dark and dying shadow for all those centuries. I understand that this is why “All Lives Matter” was so enraging and painful a response to “Black Lives Matter.” Like having

those who have held the sun all the while, who have finally lent it out, ask for it back, relegating that dark corner to darkness once more. As someone whose own history still lives in veiled shadow, I understand that.

I also long for light.

If allyship is about bringing the periphery to the center, or marginalized and oppressed groups to the light, then what happens when marginalized groups are allies for each other? What if what we think we know about a group, isn't the reality because that group sits in darkness too? At some point, we do actually have to listen to each story, and our knee-jerk reaction cannot be to kick each other out of the light.

Most recently, I was invited to speak on a panel about the San Isidro Movement, an urgent movement of young Cubans inside Cuba who are fighting for the right to be free from tyranny. Currently, its members — who are bravely and outwardly calling the island “a grand center for torture” — are under threat of death by the regime. They disappear from one day to the next and are being held hostage by the government.

The poster for this event was a raised fist wrapped in the Cuban flag. Talk about a paradox. On one level, you could say that the event appropriated BLM's raised fist, which had, in turn, appropriated the Cuban Revolution's raised fist. But that complexity is way too simplistic. It's even more layered than that. There is context and history about what it means to take back imagery, particularly that of propaganda, and complicate it. Make it multiple, a multiplicity upon which our democracy and American future stands. A multiplicity upon which true allyship stands. A multiplicity which is, in fact, the meaning of allyship. And herein, is where the paradox comes full circle and I can almost begin to see a moment where the symbol of the fist can continue to evolve, and I can raise mine, alongside the Black community and my own Cuban people. Because in the places we share story, we can see and share light.

We're all fighting against injustice and inequity. For freedom and joy, and quality of life. For life itself. For breath. And no, this is not the same as saying “All Lives

Matter” because what I’m aiming for here is a conversation, not a slogan – a bridge not a dam. An understanding that you cannot assume there is not darkness where you cannot see – that’s the definition of darkness. The Cuban people, too, are begging to be released from their yoke, needing light. And not light which shines on the oppressor, like an elegy to Fidel does, but one that listens to activists like Luis Manuel Alcántara, an artist who was, until recently, held captive by the Cuban regime. He and others are risking their lives daily as we speak in order to fight for a better one.

I cannot yet raise my fist for BLM, but I can still be a strong and strident ally. And I can share this story, and, in sharing this story, I can be an even stronger one. This is the beauty of being American.

Vanessa Garcia is an award-winning novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and journalist. She has a PhD from the University of California Irvine in Creative Nonfiction. Her debut novel, “White Light,” was published in 2015, to critical acclaim. Named one of the Best Books of 2015 by NPR, Al Dia, Flavorwire, and numerous other publications and institutions, it also won an International Latino Book Award. Her plays have been produced in Edinburgh, Miami, Los Angeles, New York, and other cities around the world. Most recently, she produced Ich Bin Ein Berliner, a hybrid audio play about the fall of the Berlin Wall, its connection to Cuba, and why it all matters right here, right now. As a journalist, feature writer, and essayist, her pieces have appeared in The LA Times, The Miami Herald, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Narrative.ly, and American Theatre Magazine, among numerous other publications.



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