

NIGHTSTAND

Browning of America?

Emerging Racial Realities

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Census Bureau bean counters announced last summer that “Hispanics” had numerically surpassed African-Americans, thus becoming the largest minority group in the U.S. This demographic shift is backdrop to intense debates now raging over such issues as immigration and citizenship, national security, the road to the White House, and “American” identity.

**THE PRESUMED ALLIANCE:
The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks
and what it Means for America**
Nicolás C. Vaca

Nicolás C. Vaca’s much-discussed new book, **The Presumed Alliance**, aims to explore the prospects for *black-brown* political cooperation in light of Latin@s’ growing numbers and, presumably, political power. Those hoping for a rigorous and insightful examination of these issues will have to look elsewhere, but the book inadvertently raises critical questions for progressives.

In an opening confessional, Vaca tells us that daring to “ruffle feathers [and] destroy the illusion of unbroken unity between Blacks and Latinos,” has made him unpopular with former friends committed to the prevailing left-wing “gospel” of Third World solidarity. Vaca portrays himself as a courageous dissident who tells it like it is: blacks and Latin@s hold negative stereotypes about each other; fail to unite behind candidates (most notably Latino candidates in Los Angeles and New York City); are divided on public policy (such as extending Voting Rights Act protections to Latin@s); and sometimes use what political power they have built (e.g. Cuban-Americans in Miami and African-Americans in Compton, Cal.) to deny resources to the other group.

Vaca is not entirely wrong, nor is he the first to point out some of these problems. But he is mostly uninterested in explaining or overcoming the causes of these conflicts, beyond noting the obvious: communities often have different priorities. As for causes, Vaca is casually dismissive of his ex-friends’ view that conflict among communities of color is often encouraged by, and almost always benefits, white economic elites.

The most interesting passage in the book comes early on. Vaca cites Toni Morrison’s 1993 piece, “On the Backs of Blacks,” which points out how successive waves of immigrants to the U.S. have accepted — and participated in — the oppression

of African-Americans in order that their own communities might advance. (Readers interested in this should pick up Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*.) Vaca admits the possibility that Latin@s might be following this same pattern.

It’s an important and positive development that Latin@s are gaining new political leverage within the U.S. How and to what end that power is used are, of course, crucial questions. When Democratic strategists call for writing off the South in favor of a new path to the White House that runs through Latin@ Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona, it should not be surprising that some African-Americans will perceive that yet another group of immigrants is leap-frogging ahead at their expense, even though the substantial and growing Latin@ population of the South would also lose in this equation.

Complex colonial relationships distinguish most Latin@ immigration to the U.S. from earlier European immigration. (Are you an “immigrant” if the border crosses your people and not the other way around, or if the U.S. turns your homeland into one of its “territories” or military bases?) Still, the chance that at least some Latin@s might be absorbed into *whiteness* would seem to be a valid concern. But Vaca drops this line of inquiry, instead asserting that Latin@s bear no responsibility for the historical suffering of African-Americans and therefore are free to pursue their own interests “with a clear conscience.” (Importantly, Vaca does not consider light-skin privilege or the legacies of slavery and genocide within Latin America.) Competition for resources is inevitable, he says, and the irreversible numerical advantage that Latin@s now hold bodes well for their political prospects.

For anyone who believes that solidarity and cooperation among oppressed peoples is critical to advancing progressive social change, this makes for an irritating read. But something important is going on here. It’s telling that nowhere does Vaca address the situation of the 2–4 million blacks *from Latin America* — Afro-Latin@s — residing in the United

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States. Afro-Latinos occupy an important and complicated position in African-American/Latin@ relations. This deficiency may result in

part from a West Coast bias (Vaca resides in California, whereas the Afro-Latino population is concentrated on the East Coast). But neither does Vaca have much to say about Indígenas — the millions of indigenous people from Mexico, Central America and elsewhere classified as “Hispanics” but whose native tongues are not Spanish and whose cultures are not *mestizo*.

These omissions raise fundamental questions about who, in Vaca’s view, Latin@s are, and which Latin@s stand to gain advantage with changing demographic and political realities. His analysis reflects what some scholars call the “Latin Americanization” of racial categories and relations in the United States.

Unlike in the U.S., where debates over who is *really* an American have served to exclude oppressed racial groups, in Latin America common national identities are generally emphasized as a means of social control. Through much of Latin America, racial identification is suppressed by the myth of race mixing as an equalizing social force (*mestizaje*, “we’re all the same — mixed”). This, along with the denial of structural racism (as distinct from individual *prejudice*), provides ideological cover for the extreme concentration of power, wealth and status among white elites and some “browns” (*mestizos*). Despite the *mestizaje* myth, whitening (*blanqueamiento*) is often a national (and personal) goal, and class — and even status within families — is closely linked to color.

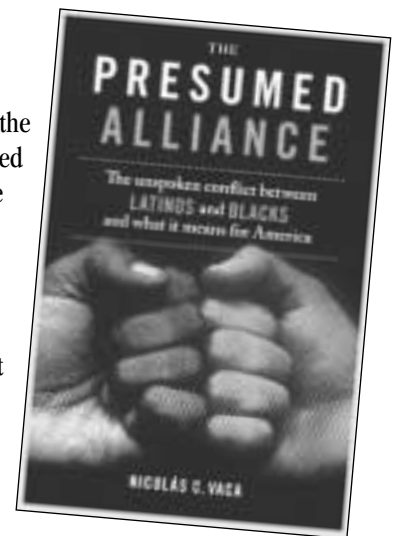
When Vaca subsumes Afro-Latinos and Indígenas under the image and, we must assume, leadership of the *mestizo*, he is carrying on a problematic Latin-American tradition with important implications for Latin@s in the U.S. In the emerging Latin-Americanized racial hierarchy, darker and poorer Latin@s stand to be excluded from the *Latin@ power* that Vaca anticipates. And it is precisely among poor and working class African-Americans and Latin@s that alliances are most desperately needed.

As people of color become a majority in the U.S., perhaps before 2050, it’s to be expected that a new racial order and ideology will be required to maintain the power of elites. In their forthcoming essay, “‘We Are All Americans’: The Latin Americanization of Race Relations in the U.S.,” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Karen S. Glover argue that the United States is developing a tri-racial system with whites at the top, a buffer group of “honorary whites” (similar to coloreds under apartheid South Africa), and the “collective black” at the bottom.

They predict that assimilated Latin@s, light-skinned “multiracials” and others will be absorbed as *white*; most light-skinned Latin@s, some Asians and most Middle-Eastern Americans will be in the *honorary white group*; and blacks, dark-skinned Latin@s, Vietnamese, Cambodians and others will make up the *collective black*. As in much of Latin America, individuals — based on their color — may move from one tier to another and groups, too, may be reclassified over time.

White supremacy in post-civil rights America has, write Bonilla-Silva and Glover, “an accompanying ideology that rings Latin America all over: the ideology of colorblind racism.” Colorblind racism, they explain, “denies the salience of race, scorns those who talk about race, and increasingly proclaims that ‘We are all Americans.’” One recalls the Ad Council’s “I’m an American” television spots that saturated airwaves following the 9/11 massacres.

On the other hand, the place of Latin@s in the “American” identity is under fierce attack by white nationalists, including academic heavy hitters like Samuel Huntington (whose “clash of civilizations” thesis about “the West” and “Islam” has become extremely influential since 9/11). In his forthcoming book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s Identity*, Huntington argues that Latin@ — and particularly Mexican-American — immigration is a perilous threat to “the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.” His detractors will undoubtedly include those who believe “We are all Americans” is a better strategy for preserving their privilege and economic power than “Defend the White Nation.” 🐘



As I finished The Presumed Alliance, I attended a large unity rally condemning the latest in a string of fatal shootings of poor people of color by white Portland police officers. Within 24 seconds of pulling an unarmed African-American man over for allegedly failing to use his turn signal, officers had shot him dead while still seat-belted inside his car. Speakers at the rally focused on three of these cases: José Santos Victor Mejía Poot, a Mayan “Hispanic” from Mexico; Kendra James, an African-American woman (also shot in her car); and the most recent, James Jahar Perez. The immediate need and possibility for cross-racial alliances to stop the violent oppression of poor people of color never seemed clearer.

— Tarso Luís Ramos