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Author calling for discourse on black-Latino conflicts

By Katherine Corcoran
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Call it the myth of a rainbow coalition, or the newest elephant in America's living room. Either way, Bay Area attorney Nicolas Vaca wants a frank discussion on the latest taboo subject in the race milieu -- the growing tension between Latinos and blacks.

Long presumed to be aligned on issues of civil rights and economic opportunity, Latinos and blacks in fact are locked in a ``zero-sum" struggle for jobs and educational resources, and they're more likely to form political coalitions with whites than with each other, Vaca contends in his new book, ``The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Blacks and Latinos and What It Means For America."

Members of both groups are loath to talk about it, believing they must provide a united front against a white majority, says Vaca, who notes that he has received the most criticism from Latinos for airing the issue in public.

One attorney, a longtime colleague whom Vaca describes as Chicano, stormed out of a bar when Vaca told him over drinks that he intended to lay out the conflict in a book, saying it will only foster more division.

``The white man will divide and conquer.' I've heard that argument. It's time to move beyond that," Vaca said in a recent interview in his Walnut Creek office. ``It's a way of not confronting the question."

Vaca, 60, a Harvard Law School graduate with a doctorate in sociology from the University of California-Berkeley, decided to write a book as he watched the nation's burgeoning Latino population and wondered why no one was discussing the effect of that growth on African-Americans, who have always led the nation's civil rights agenda.

The U.S. Census Bureau released numbers last year showing that Latinos have surpassed blacks as the nation's largest minority group, making up 13.4 percent of the population, slightly more than the 13.3 percent for blacks.

Whether it's the ouster of a black superintendent in predominantly Latino public schools in East Palo Alto, or renaming a San Jose street in a historically Latino neighborhood after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., differences between the two groups have surfaced in the Bay Area.

In his book, Vaca, son of a Mexican immigrant and the youngest of 16 children, focuses on other examples of what he calls two marginalized groups unwilling to share power: Miami, where he says the Latino power structure shows blatant disregard for black issues, and Compton, where, he says, blacks withhold political power and jobs from the Latino majority.

With the changing numbers, Vaca calls for a new relationship among African-Americans and Latinos, whose agenda has been overshadowed and in some cases opposed by blacks.

``It is now time to share center stage with another actor," he writes in the book. ``African-Americans cannot expect that Latinos will respond to their condition in the same way as whites, and because of this,

African-Americans must adjust their agenda accordingly."

The book has sold out of its first printing since making its debut a month ago, and Vaca has been on the talk-radio circuit, particularly on stations with African-American listeners. He said the response has been lively, and he's finding the discussion is truly welcomed, though many question his premises.

On a National Public Radio program, Ta-Nehisi Coates, a writer for the Village Voice, wondered why growth in numbers of Latinos is always cast as a problem for African-Americans.

"The real question I think that nobody is really dealing with is what does it mean for America at large," Coates said last month. "I'm not sure it's more of a problem for us than it is for anybody else in America."

Steven Millner, a professor of African-American studies at San Jose State University who was a fellow graduate student with Vaca, agrees that the dialogue is a good one, though he calls the split "hardly a secret."

"If the issues that sometimes feed into the disagreement between African-Americans and Mexican-Americans are frankly and openly discussed, then the possibility of a more healthy set of alliances when possible can emerge," Millner said. "In politics, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. And sophisticated members of both groups embrace that."

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