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Brown Like Me?

By Ed Morales

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The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means...
by Nicolás C. Vaca

The Iowa Brown and Black Forum. There it was, superimposed on the bottom corner of the screen going to co
break just after Al Sharpton tore into Howard Dean's affirmative-action hiring record. Hosted by MSNBC's Leste
African-American, and Maria Celeste Arrarás, a Puerto Rican-born anchor for Telemundo, this last debate befo
caucuses helped introduce a new phrase into the American political lexicon. Black and brown. "Do you have a
member of your cabinet that was black or brown?" Sharpton prodded, and Dean turned red (again).

Although Sharpton and the Iowa group use this phrase to promote black-Latino unity, the first time I remember
was when, on the occasion of the quincentennial of Columbus's journey to the Americas (and the aftermath of t
King riots), The Atlantic Monthly published "Blacks vs. Browns," by LA Times reporter Jack Miles. In a significan
to the binary view of American racial politics, Miles uncovered the hidden truth about the riots, that there was su
Latino involvement in what was widely portrayed as a black-and-white confrontation. Yet he did not regard this
of an alignment of black and Latino interests. On the contrary, he predicted that "America's older black poor an
brown poor are on a collision course."

According to Miles, the civil rights era coalition between blacks and Latinos was threatened by an emerging clas
Fearful of the "nihilistic" tendencies in black urban culture, he claimed, white and Asian employers were increas
over poor blacks in favor of Latino immigrants, who were willing to work for lower wages. "Blacks are the most
minority, but it matters enormously that whites are no longer a majority," wrote Miles. "And within the urban geo
Los Angeles, African-Americans seem to me to be competing more directly with Latin Americans than with any

A year earlier, Charles Kamasaki and Raul Yzaguirre of the National Council of La Raza had published a groun
paper that corroborated Miles's argument. Yzaguirre and Kamasaki recounted several instances when African-
leaders had failed to support Latino causes. The NAACP opposed an extension of the Voting Rights Act that be
Latinos in 1975, while the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights opposed a similar extension of the act in 1982
NAACP declined to oppose employer sanctions under the Immigration Reform and Control Act; throughout the
LCCR was indifferent to increasing protection for Latinos against employment discrimination, while only nomina
the English-only movement. The paper concluded that "growing tension between the two communities...threate
of blacks and Hispanics to develop strong, sustainable coalitions."

These ominous predictions are echoed in Nicolás C. Vaca's new book, The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken
Between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means for America. But unlike Miles and Kamasaki and Yzaguirre, wh
arguments he cites, Vaca, a lawyer and scholar based in the Bay Area, wants to posit the adversarial aspects o
relationship between blacks and Latinos as a fact of life. In making this argument, Vaca, who fancies himself a
claims he is simply facing up to realities that Latino intellectuals and activists have sidestepped because of "kne
"politically correct" assumptions about black-Latino solidarity. He is so convinced of this that he lost an old Latin

public argument over whether to write this book."Why dig up dirt," writes Vaca, "ruffle feathers, destroy the illusi
unbroken unity between Blacks and Latinos, bleeding the colors of the Rainbow Coalition by giving the dreaded
ammunition my former friend told me I was providing? The simple answer is that the ethnic landscape has chan

Vaca's argument hinges on demographics, laid out in the opening chapter, "The Latino Tsunami: The Browning
He cites statistics that forecast exponential population growth, which will cast California and the Southwest in ar
increasingly "brown" hue by mid-century, and the related "hypergrowth" of Latino communities in areas like Atla
Raleigh, Greensboro and Charlotte, North Carolina, with the influx of new, mostly Mexican, immigrants. This de
transformation will inexorably generate increasing conflict as Latinos--who have long been underrepresented in
office, in part because immigrants can't vote, and who have long felt their concerns are not taken seriously--see
representation equal to their numbers. In cities like Los Angeles, where African-Americans wield a measure of
power, blacks are increasingly digging in to resist a numerically superior brown rival.

In Chapter 3, "Who's the Leader of the Civil Rights Band?" Vaca analyzes the landmark case Mendez v. Westm
challenged the existence of separate schools for Mexican-Americans and "helped lay the groundwork for the rul
vs. Board of Education eight years later." By establishing a Latino claim to a history of oppression by white Ame
also trying to establish that African-Americans were not the only pioneers of civil rights struggle, and that Latino
share of the movement's benefits. Unfortunately, he uses these arguments to blame another victim: The villains
turn out to be African-Americans, who are threatened by demographic changes and shut Latinos out of political
refusing to acknowledge that anyone's suffering could ever be as great as theirs. In the chapter "Somewhere O
Rainbow Coalition," Vaca curiously draws from the Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton classic Black Pow
that "feel-good statements" and an idealistic "squinty-eyed view" held by out-of-touch activists "does not square
has happened in the real world." By invoking Carmichael and Hamilton's observation that different groups in a c
tend to act in their own interest, he is merely invoking a tautology that could be made about almost any political
Vaca goes on to cite several studies showing that in Los Angeles, blacks often block Latinos from obtaining mu
employment. This competition is "one of many examples of how zero-sum conflict trumps any idealized notion c
Black cooperation." But there is no discussion in this chapter of the private sector, either with respect to the hirir
of small businesses or with respect to falling wages, which Latino immigrants are more likely to accept than Afri
Americans.

All of which is not to say that Vaca is entirely wrong. Although he doesn't take into account that Mexican-Americ
are also displaced in the job market by immigrants (including fellow Latinos), and that some established Mexica
do not favor pro-immigration legislation, this conflict scenario accurately represents the Latino experience in the
Southwest. Los Angeles has seen black-Latino political conflict (and cooperation) since the early days of the civ
movement. Although the city's eighteenth-century founders were multiracial Mexicans of indigenous, African, C
Spanish blood, LA has not elected a Latino mayor in more than a century, and blacks and Latinos have often vc
different candidates. The 1965 Watts riots, a predominantly African-American uprising, focused attention on the
black Angelenos but not on the barrios, while the black-Jewish liberal coalition that swept Tom Bradley into pow
isolated Mexican-Americans from political power. An even greater rift developed when janitorial jobs, once the
African-American union members, were turned over to nonunionized Mexican immigrants by unionbusting janitc
Despite Antonio Villaraigosa's strong candidacy in the 2001 mayoral race, he was not able to draw enough blac
James Hahn, a white liberal whose father was a favorite of African-Americans.

Vaca shows that the conflict between blacks and Latinos in California is historically rooted in a dynamic that is
that part of the country. After it was absorbed by the United States following the Mexican-American War, the So
primary racial divide was between Anglos and Latinos (and to a lesser extent East Asians), with African-Americ
into the mix later on, beginning in the 1930s. In Vaca's account of phenomena like segregated Mexican-Americ
schools and the lynching of Mexican-Americans, African-Americans are portrayed as latecomers to the West's
battle for resources. That is to say, despite African-Americans' claim to primary "minority" status, "black sufferin
necessarily trump Latino suffering."

Vaca's argument is true as far as it goes--which isn't far at all. As he points out, Mexican-Americans make up a
percent of the total Latino population in the United States, and their experience in Los Angeles (particularly in th
neighborhood of Compton) has been marked, at times, by tensions with African-Americans. But the question of
relations is national in scope, and Vaca's analysis reflects a distinctly West Coast and ultimately parochial pers
Chapters on black-Latino political strife in Los Angeles and Houston focus almost entirely on the Mexican-Amer
of Latino interests. In an attempt to counterbalance this, Vaca offers an analysis of black-Latino relations in Mia

reverse-case scenario, where the white Cuban-American elite has historically refused to share public-sector po\ African-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans) and, in the book's least coherent chapter, of the 2001 mayoral race in Rican-dominated New York. Miami is clearly an aberrant case, because that city's Latino immigration was domi lighter-skinned members of Cuba's upper and middle classes fleeing Castro's revolution, and New York's compl politics, in which Latinos and blacks have entered into various coalitions with each other and with whites, is app beyond Vaca's expertise.

Although he rarely uses the word "brown" to describe Latinos, Vaca's assertion of a sharp separation between b Latino is consistent with the "brown perspective" associated with a group of influential West Coast Latino writers can serve as a useful color-coded signifier for being Latino, "brown" obscures the fact that Latinos come in the f of racial hues, very much including black. West Coast Brownologists like the essayist Richard Rodriguez and th commentator and New America Foundation fellow Gregory Rodriguez consistently categorize Latinos as distinc from African-Americans, a third, mestizo, wheel in the American race dialogue. Although the Rodriguezes (no re more diplomatic than Vaca in declaring that historic Latino suffering could never approach black suffering, the m important subtext in both writers' output is their effort to erect explicit barriers between blacks and Latinos.

Richard Rodriguez's concept of brown is, to be sure, semantically playful, invoking UPS's current ad campaign a in describing this "undermining brown motif, this erotic tunnel." Brown can be read here as the messy multiethni America is seemingly becoming through rising rates of Latino intermarriage, a utopian space from which, as the writer José Vasconcelos once suggested in his work La Raza Cósmica, humanity could launch its next great lea recent book of essays, Brown, Rodriguez describes how growing up as an "honorary white" allowed him to esca with the black culture of suffering. When a black professor at a public forum uses the phrase "blacks-and-Latino "synonym for the disadvantaged in America," Rodriguez recoils in discomfort. His most fervent desire for the Afr Americans he has so much compassion for is "white freedom. The same as I wanted for myself." By this he mea from "culture" or "race," a desire expressed in various ways by ideologues like Ward Connerly and writers like S Steele.

In his June 22, 2003, editorial in the LA Times Gregory Rodriguez went to great lengths to give African-America as the undisputed kings of suffering. "Even as Latinos exert growing influence on American politics and culture, continue to have a more powerful claim on America's moral imagination," he wrote. "Their history of slavery and ensures that African-Americans will not be displaced in their role as the preeminent 'other' in U.S. society." But a this moral authority is directly proportional to the ability to inspire the kind of fear Jack Miles's Atlantic Monthly a evoked. "Latino immigrants generally do not instill the same fear among whites that blacks can. The social dista brown and white has never been as great as that between black and white."

Well, that may be true, but what if you were one of the millions of Latinos who are not brown but actually black (condition given only passing reference by Brownologists), or even stranger, strongly identify with African culture of skin tone? One doesn't have to look too far in US Latino letters to find representatives of this point of view. W Sánchez-González's fascinating meditation, in Boricua Literature, in which she contrasts William Carlos William Schomburg (both of Puerto Rican heritage) and the roles they played defining how Latinos have manifested the just as brown but as "white" and "black" in America. Hip-hop, the most dynamic and commercially successful m the world today, emerged as a joint creative effort between blacks and Latinos, as both Juan Flores's From Bor hop and Raquel Rivera's New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone have recently demonstrated. These texts are evidence of "identification" with African-Americans but a reflection of a shared, lived experience engendered by of black and Latino neighborhoods in Northeastern cities and the Caribbean islands, as well as an acknowledgn shared African genetic heritage. Pace Vaca, this shared history, though no guarantee of black-Latino solidarity, translate into a set of overlapping political interests.

Call these writers the leading edge of the East Coast-based Caribbean alternative to the brown perspective on b relations, if you are daring enough or have the energy to accept even more categories in the increasingly compl debate over race in America. One might argue that these works are merely part of a "Puerto Rican exception," t phrase from the neoconservative Linda Chavez, who used it to describe intractable Puerto Rican poverty in her 1992 treatise Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation. But although Puerto Ricans mal than 10 percent of US Latinos (roughly 17 percent if you count island Puerto Ricans, all US citizens), and other American countries with Afro-Caribbean affinities (including the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia and add another 5-7 percent, this perspective has always been crucial when examining the relations between blacks in the United States. And the Puerto Rican experience formed a pattern that Dominicans are following, despite t they entered this country as immigrants. One of the major projects recently proposed by the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone is the creation of an Afro-Dominican cultural center in Washington Heights.

Vaca's take on New York's sometimes troubled black-Latino political coalitions in the chapter "The Big Manzana reveals the limitations of West Coast Brownology. Vaca concludes that mayoral candidate Freddy Ferrer foolish in the potential of a black-Latino coalition (which had elected David Dinkins in 1989), only to be betrayed by Al S who withheld his support until the last minute, denying Ferrer his best chance. What Vaca fails to understand is had a history of shying away from African-American issues, and in part for this reason was never wholeheartedl by the Puerto Rican community, a significant portion of which is black. Vaca recounts that Ferrer was strongly ir until (a) the 9/11 terror attacks, which occurred the day of the scheduled Democratic primary, drove the city into minority-unfriendly Rudolph Giuliani; and (b) stepped-up mailings of a New York Post cartoon depicting Ferrer a Sharpton puppet ruined him with white voters. While Vaca wrongly argues that Sharpton's refusal to help out a l evidence that Ferrer was sabotaged by black self-interest (Sharpton initially demanded Ferrer's support for a sla candidates in exchange for his endorsement), the implication is that Ferrer's mistake was his attempt to appeal voters. Freddy violated the Brownologists' rule of keeping your distance.

Vaca's underlying project, it seems, is to free Latinos from any guilt they might feel about pursuing their own inte Latinos, he argues in his conclusion, are not responsible for the plight of African-Americans. And, he adds, beca are not responsible, they come to the table with a clear conscience. Latinos come from "another land, living a lif the black-and-white vision of the world described by Black literature." As Vaca points out, the Latin American ide was always more supple and nuanced than that of the United States. In Latin America, large communities of es freed slaves were able to flourish, and with the abolition of slavery, Jim Crow laws were never adopted. While th grain of truth to the idea that Latin America's openness to racial mixing contrasts with the notorious "one-drop" r United States, that doesn't mean its conscience is clear. Latin America was a major player in the slave trade, ha legacy of antiblack attitudes, and Latinos often bring those attitudes with them when they come north. Slur word mayate that refer to people of African descent and qualifiers like pelo malo (bad hair) did not originate in the Uni In fact, Afro-Latinos are beginning to organize in countries like Brazil, Colombia and Honduras to address gover policies of benign neglect. Representatives Charles Rangel and John Conyers, with the support of both the Con Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, are pushing for an "Afro-Latino Resolution" asserting th funding to Latin American countries should come with a provision recognizing the difficult economic and social c the approximately 80-100 million Afro-Latinos.

In truth, the relations between blacks and Latinos have never been as plain as black and white, as Tatcho Mindi Flores Niemann and Nestor Rodriguez show in their valuable work of analytic sociology, Black-Brown Relations Stereotypes. The book's measured discussion of black-Latino relations in Houston, in which attitudes are reveal extensive questionnaires, contrasts markedly with Vaca's inflammatory selection of anecdotes from a single arti published in March 2001 in the Charlotte Post, in which blacks were quoted as saying things about Mexican imr "they're taking all of our jobs...they could be plotting to kill you and you would never know." But the two groups h successfully worked together on the West Coast, and black-Latino relations in New York are never completely s While researching a piece about Spanish Harlem last year, I encountered strains between African-American an politicians fighting over whether to call the region East Harlem or Spanish Harlem. The Harlem political machine propped up Dinkins has often outmaneuvered and sometimes sabotaged Latino pols. But whether or not you thi was posturing for influence, he did spend three months in jail over Vieques. And how do Vaca's theories hold up Freehold, New Jersey, where a black Baptist church is providing sanctuary for Mexican immigrant day laborers is being represented by the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund? In the end, Brownologists like Va the value of a brown-black alliance in the same way many mestizos in Latin America distinguish themselves fro

The Brownologists' excitement is fueled by an explosion of immigrants who are willing to work long, hard hours unlike US citizen Puerto Ricans, are not eligible for welfare. But as anyone who has studied inner-city youth or p copy of Urban Latino magazine knows, after a few generations many Latinos start to look more and more like A Americans. It's in places like Chicago, with its mix of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and blacks, and Spanish Harlem, demographics are beginning to resemble Chicago's, that much of the work of black-Latino relations will be done professor Arlene Dávila says in her forthcoming book, Barrio Dreams, "the relationship between Mexicans and P Ricans...echoes that of Blacks and Puerto Ricans, at least in regards to a history of cooperation and competitio always cooperating and competing with everyone we love?

Migration to the United States has allowed many darker-skinned or Afro-Latinos (primarily from the Caribbean, b

increasingly from South America) to embrace an African identity that was suppressed in their native countries. T
Dominican-Americans like Nelly Rosario and Junot Diaz, and of Puerto Ricans like Edgardo Vega Yunqué and I
is part of a new understanding of Latino identity that could not have formed in the postcolonial culture of Latin A
When Richard Rodriguez, referring to the probability that most African-Americans have white blood in their gen
declares that "the last white freedom in America will be the freedom of the African American to admit brown," I c
wonder, when will the Brownologists be free to admit black?

Of course, racial cross-identification is only a preliminary step in the difficult process of creating and maintaining
alliances between oppressed groups. Vaca's book might be helpful in clearing the ground for future cooperation
blacks and Latinos by acknowledging points of contention. But the book is more likely to have the effect of reinf
generations of immigrants have been taught: that estrangement from blackness is the key to success in Americ

http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20040308&s=morales

¿Que es un Virtual Boricua, anyway?

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