

BOOK REVIEW

THE PRESUMED ALLIANCE: THE UNSPOKEN CONFLICT BETWEEN LATINOS AND BLACKS AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR AMERICA

BY NICOLÁS VACA. RAYO (2004). ISBN 0060522054.

Reviewed By LeeAnn O'Neill*

Chicano Attorney Nicolás Vaca's fascination with the exponential growth of the Latino population in the United States compelled him to conduct a daring study of past tensions and future problems between the African American community and the Latino community in *The Presumed Alliance: The unspoken conflict between Latinos and blacks and what it means for America*. Vaca begins with the proposition that there is an idealized, assumed alliance between the African American and Latino communities, an assumption often made by Latinos and the liberal White community. Vaca deconstructs the myth of a "brown-black" coalition, identifying prejudice, zero-sum employment competition, and political competition as factors driving the two communities apart.

Vaca's identification and definition of each group is problematic. By favoring the terms Latinos and Blacks, "black" and "white" Latinos are lost within the scope of these terms. In a recent interview, Vaca acknowledged that African Americans are aware of the problem with the term Latino. Furthermore, he explained that African Americans often deconstruct the term Latino to show that if Latinos were identified by country, then African Americans would still be the largest minority despite the ambiguous nature of being "African" American.¹ Also particularly relevant, but conspicuously missing, is a discussion of the Latino construct and the assumption that all Latinos can be lumped together as a cultural and political group. A discussion of the tensions and divisions among Latino groups would add to Vaca's analysis. Further complicating the Latino construct, Vaca overwhelmingly focuses on Mexicans and their history. Although Mexicans do comprise about 58% of the total Latino population, he glosses over the other 32 countries and 11 dependent political units that comprise Latin America. Even though Vaca intends on representing all Latinos in his analysis, it often seems he uses the label Latino and the label Mexican interchangeably.

Vaca does an admirable job of attempting to balance his analysis of "brown-black" politics. He cites the failure of African Americans to vote for Cuban candidate Antonio Villaraigosa in Los Angeles to balance the Latinos' failure to vote for African American candidate Lee Brown in Houston. In addition,

he contrasts the African American community's control in Compton with the Cuban dominance in Miami. There are also examples of racial stereotyping and antipathy on both sides. Despite these seemingly objective examples, however, there is an underlying disapproving message to the African American community. In his interview, Vaca affirmed this message: "I have repeatedly stated that my book is far more significant for African Americans than it is for Latinos. The release of every new survey by the U.S. Census reveals a Latino growth trajectory that continues to exceed that of the African American population. The refusal of the African American notables to address the conflict between the two groups is done at their own peril and that of the larger African American community."² He supported this statement by revealing that none of the prominent African American scholars who received his manuscript responded or showed any interest in giving input.³

Yet while Vaca chastises the African American community for their lack of support, he glazes over several important problems. Vaca discusses briefly the comparative lack of civic participation by those in the Latino community who can vote. He does not discuss the impact of undocumented immigrants on the civic participation statistics, specifically that a great number of Latinos in the United States are unable to legally vote. Although the growth of the Latino community is noteworthy, the population statistics only become pivotal when they translate into votes. Notably, Vaca admits that when Latino candidates lost by a small margin, the loss was caused by a lack of Latino voter participation, not necessarily the lack of support from the African American community. Perhaps before focusing on Latino population growth patterns, there should be a discussion of the growth of political participation by Latinos.

The book's shortcomings do not erase the fact that the dynamics between African Americans and Latinos are a growing force that must be addressed. Vaca does not mince words and he states what many people are afraid to say in these days of political correctness. Readers will either immediately agree or immediately disagree with his conclusions, but either way, Vaca's book performs an important role as a catalyst for the discussion of the political reality of "brown" versus "black."

* LeeAnn O'Neill is a second-year law student at American University Washington College of Law and the co-editor-in-chief of *The Modern American*.

¹ Email interview between LeeAnn O'Neill and Nicolás Vaca on July 26, 2005.

² Id.

³ Id.