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*Introduction*

**The Future Is Mestizo:  
We Are the Shades**

*by David Carrasco*

We are entering the Brown Millennium. By Brown Millennium I mean the type of hopeful and complex change summoned by the poet Paul Celan when he wrote

Speak  
But keep yes and no unsplit  
And give your say this meaning  
Give it the shade

No more the color line as the only defining symbol of race and culture in this country. No more the border line as the primary defining political scar between Latin America and the United States. Latinos are speaking with voices and living lives that combine criticism and affirmation of the United States and ourselves. We say “no” to the debilitating provincialisms of the white/black discourse and “yes” to the potentials of the new *mestizaje* of democracy. Latinos are the “unsplit.” We are the shades! The

Brown Millennium that Latinos represent extends to include all people because with the influx, input and involvement of Asians, Africans, Europeans, and Latin Americans into the complex interactions of the global city and especially the United States, the overall hue and cry will be shades of brown, black, white, red, and yellow.

Or in the words of the prophet Virgilio Elizondo, the future is mestizo. In order for the future to favor a new knowledge of measured inclusions and not nullifying provincialisms, love and not hate, then a new order of meaning of what mestizaje is and is becoming must emerge in our minds and cultural practices. Elizondo is a prophet of mestizaje in the face of the troubling and horrible trends of ethnic cleansing and vicious narrow-mindedness. I am referring not only to the ethnic cleansings of the Balkans but the massacres of American Indians, the deportations of Mexican Americans, the enslavement of African peoples. Elizondo, the priest-theologian-activist from San Antonio, is not a “New Ager” but a “new thinker” and he focuses on the creative power of the new mestizaje, the Brown Millennium. While politicians, businesspeople, and the media freeze our sense of the future with hysteria about “Y2K,” Elizondo, speaking as a Chicano, says something like “*porqué y2k? y qué?*” The real challenges and opportunities of the future are not only in computer systems, but also in developing a real knowledge of ourselves, biologically and spiritually. This involves for Elizondo, first of all, acts of cultural and spiritual memory. Writing of the new model of human existence that emerges from the Mexican-American experience, he refers to a dialogue in which he has been involved during his pilgrimage through Mexico, Holland, France, Japan, and the United States:

The more we talked and explored the destructive status of our world, the more we became convinced that our USA-

Latino mestizaje was the greatest thing we had to offer the human family! Not the mestizaje of Latin America which had produced such a deep sense of shame in everything Indian and such an over exaggeration of everything European, but the new mestizaje which we Hispanics are discovering and elaborating here in the USA—one that joyfully reclaims the heritage of all our parents, grandparents, and ancestors. A denial or even worse a shame of one's heritage is a life of eternal self-torture and self-destruction. A reclaiming and restructuring is a life of freedom and creativity. This is the mestizaje we long to introduce to others and offer its fascinating benefits for humanity.

The second move in Elizondo's future beyond memory is critique—critique of Anglo supremacy and the stultifying white-black discourse that has dominated and obsessed cultural work in the United States for centuries. Latinos are the shades of culture, race, labor, and religion that set the stage for a new order of meaning about the power and nature of democracy in the twenty-first century. We know that Latinos will be the largest minority in the United States within two decades. This means that the new demography can be a creative resource for a new democracy. On the one hand, Elizondo and I are grateful and inspired by the lessons and gifts of the multiple ways that the black struggle for freedom has renewed our democracy. Latinos need to continually draw strategies and wisdom from the multiplicity of ways that African Americans have widened the doors of opportunity for peoples of color. But we are also impatient with the tenacity and provincialism of the reduction of race, culture, and humanity to white and black categories. I recently experienced this impatience when going by an "Amistad" window—one of those store windows promoting the movie *Amistad*, which depicts the story of the rebellion of African slaves on the high seas and their long struggle for freedom from slavery and human

degradation in this country. In this window there were books and a few articles about the film and the controversies and lawsuits associated with it. I noticed an unusual weariness and anger in my response—tired of something in yet another Hollywood depiction of the white/black world. I did not feel *amistad*/friendship toward the film version of this story, and this bothered me. I had to examine myself and this weary anger and I explored three possible causes. First, I asked myself if the relentless market forces pushing this story of white-on-black atrocities in my face caused my discomfort. These market forces are colossal, monumental, and some of my discomfort stemmed from the market as manipulator. But I knew the problem was deeper than that.

Second, I had to ask a harder question. Did I detect some latent racism in me? This is always a possibility in a society where children are saturated with racial nullifications—mostly against people of color but today against all people. I examined this possibility because I had grown up with a father who was the first Mexican American to be a head basketball coach at a major university in this country and who brought the first African American athletes into public view in college basketball in Washington, D.C. In those days, Georgetown University, the University of Maryland, George Washington University, and Catholic University only recruited and played white basketball players in their public games. As a young boy, I had been on the playgrounds at Spingarn, Dunbar, and Kelly Miller schools and knew firsthand what it was to combine educational justice with athletic competition. This was a rare story in which a Chicano was crossing the color line by enabling black athletes to do the same. Still, I had to monitor the possibility of negative racial feelings at the window. Latinos need to check themselves on this point because more often than not, Latin Americans who come to this country feel the pull of expressing or adopting superior racial feelings promoted by traditions of white superiority. In actual fact, Latinos

are multi-racial and many are black or have had decades-long positive interaction with African Americans and share soulfulness. It is crucial, as the Puerto Rican cultural critic Juan Flores argues, that in the Brown Millennium Latinos not embrace the media-hyped ascendancy of non-black elements of Latino society at the expense of us all. But this was not the problem I experience with *Amistad*.

No, what was wearing me out and causing some rising anger was the interpretive power of the Spielberg version of the black/white dichotomy—here symbolized in the Spanish word *amistad*, meaning “friendship.” As the white/black discourse has become multilayered and commercialized, it has also become an agent of exclusion of the many emerging narratives of race and class in the history to the United States, or the struggles, oppressions, cultural traditions, and creative engagements of Latino peoples. The social and racial complexity and dynamism of black-red-white-Latin American relationships, in the hands of the mainstream media, is becoming less visible, not more so. This growing exclusion was wearing me out and bringing some rumble to my humble. I was fed up with seeing films about color line relations that erased the past that was mestizo but also threatens to marginalize the future that is mestizo, even though Latinos have often been right in the middle, in the gravity of American stories.

This tenacious hold to the “color line” interpretation of history is being loosened by the expansion of mind represented in this book. Certainly the color line will continue to be one of the problems of the twenty-first century but, as Elizondo states, we are really facing a century of borderlands. We are moving beyond the color line and it is Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Guatemalans, and others who are the living beyond. The hybrid is crossing the color line, and bridges are being built that lead to a compelling question spoken by the Puerto Rican word artist Mária Fernández (*aka* Mariposa): “What does it mean to live in between?”

The third move in Elizondo's vision, after memory and critique, is a new vision of the borderlands that we all inhabit. The borderlands are moving in all directions from the south, and they bring democracy's fullest hope and deepest challenges because we are the shades. The borderlands have shades! They move from sharp, crooked lines into thick cities. We do not inhabit or cross only the borderlands of the Rio Grande or what Puerto Ricans call *el charco*, the Caribe. These borders have never been stable—they have always immigrated! Our relations with the United States teach us that it is not only Latin Americans who immigrate into the United States but also the U.S. borders that move and invade! The U.S. borderlands moved south in 1848 after the Mexican American War to include California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Colorado and Utah. The U.S. border moved again in 1898 to engulf Puerto Rico in an annexation that is still in hot dispute. As Father Elizondo says, "I'm not an immigrant. My family has lived in the San Antonio Valley before this country was country. So it is for many Latinos. We didn't come to you. You came to us."

Now the borderlands are moving again as Spanish, Portuguese, and Creole languages, food, literature, art, family patterns, religious faiths and imaginations, sexual fire, musical heat, myths, athletes, and ideas migrate north and spread out in all directions. One advertiser calls us "Mega Bueno." The real borderlands that I am speaking about are cities: Los Angeles, the great linguistic, social and racial borderlands that is the capital of the Third World; New York, about which someone said recently, "the good thing about New York City is that it is so close to the United States." In his new book *La Memoria Rota*, ("broken memory,") Puerto Rican cultural critic Arcadio Diaz Quinones shows us that New York has been, in part, a Caribbean city for over one hundred years. A city blessed with such Caribeños as José Martí, Celia Cruz, Eugenio María de Hostos, Machito, Tito

Rodriguez—and we now hear the bomba, plena, and salsa sounds in all Puerto Rican immigrant neighborhoods from Lorraine, Ohio, to Hartford, Connecticut, from Perty Amboy to Hawaii. Other cities of the Brown Millennium are Miami, the city on the edge; Denver, the city in the air; Boston, the city that is green once a year; San Juan, the city in the painful sea; San Francisco, the city of Barrio Mission and Dr. Loco and the Rockin' Jalapeño Band; El Paso, the city of the violated outrage where the old gringo of Carlos Fuentes made his fateful crossing and the farm workers make theirs. El Paso and the Mexican American border have moved up to Chicago. And so on and on.

When I speak of the Brown Millennium and Elizondo says the future is mestizo, we mean that the United States is entering the fuller recognition that it is a world of racial, cultural, and political shades. The many-hued, multicolored America—with Asian, Latin American, African peoples mixing, enriching and challenging our democracy—will be neither a black world nor a white world. What Elizondo and I are asking of our black brothers and sisters is how can we remake democracy together when the mestizo hybrid crosses the color line, which has been one of the great problems of the twentieth century? Juan Flores puts it well when he writes, “cultural expression in all areas—from language and music to literature and the visual arts—typically illustrates fusions and crossovers, mutual fascinations and emulations, that have resulted in much of what we identify, for example in the field of popular music, as jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop. . . . And this conjoined cultural history put the lie to any wedge driven between latin@ and black life and representation.” How can we work together for justice and equality when Latinos join African Americans as the most creative minority in the United States? What happens when the claim that *the* color line is the narrative space from which to remake democracy becomes a zigzag, a salsa step, a cumbia move?

Let me make it clear by the Brown Millennium I do not mean just the expanded Latino presence, but that the overall hue, shades and meanings will be mestizo. The Chicano artists called Culture Clash recite this perspective when they tell of someone killed in the Mission District in San Francisco the following. Speaking to us from heaven says

But Who was I while I was Alive  
 Was I a Man  
 A Woman  
 Was I Cop  
 I don't remember  
 I said to myself, I'm an American  
 And in that same precious instant I said  
 What is an American  
 I don't remember  
 The population of heaven is young and brown  
 Does not Speak English  
 I found very few Americans here  
 In fact everyone here seemed to be black, Latin or Chinese  
 So I guess heaven was like Earth  
 And the Mission district was becoming more like heaven every  
 day

We ask our white brothers and sisters, "What happens to your power and privilege when, in the lifetime of any twenty-year-old college student, you will live in a society where no one ethnic group, including whites of European descent, will comprise a majority of the national population. How will you respond when policies and attitudes of white supremacy undergo yet another sustained critique? Can you live with the shades?"

We are asking everyone in the new future that is mestizo to give us some shades in the new democracy.

give us some shades

I ask us all—can we turn the new demography into a new democracy? What does it mean for our future language of democracy when we discover that more African American peoples speak Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas than speak English? Do you realize that Spanish is also an American language—a language spoken in the America one hundred years before English was heard on these shores?

What do we say in the face of the recent conflict in an East Palo Alto school board meeting where a black parent yelled at Latino parents, “If you want to learn Spanish, why don’t you go back to Mexico?” Is that like me saying, “If you want to celebrate kwanzaa, go back to Africa”? Both positions are unacceptable in the Brown Millennium.

And why do some think that democracy can only be spoken in English? I agree with Doris Sommer, who “defends code-switching as one of democracy’s most effective speech-acts, along with translation and speaking English through heavy accents, because they all slow down communication and labor through the difficulties of understanding and reaching agreement.” Slow down in the Brown Millennium.

Can we forge a critical amistad? A critical friendship that will help Latinos go to school on the black struggle for freedom and help blacks and whites go to school on the more complex history of race, race discourse and mixture of Latin America. The new knowledge that Elizondo calls us to may allow African Americans to confront and find powerful new positive meanings in their mestizaje and enable whites to pull back the masks of purity that protect and inhibit their own fuller humanity. Some years ago, the great writer Ralph Ellison ended his novel *Invisible Man* with the critical question, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequency, I speak for you?” Well, it may be hard to take at first, but Elizondo is answering back, “In part, yes, and thank you brother, but in fact and in future, who knows but that on

all frequencies we speak for and with all of us.” The reader will have to decide how far Elizondo has gone in this book toward articulating a creative balance between diversities and inclusions while respecting differences and accentuating what we share. In the words of his new essay in this book, “I can become infinitely more creative for I have more cultural words within me than anyone who is a descendent of only one culture. I can even have more fun for I can party in many more ways than imagined by any one group alone.”

What I ask of all who read this and celebrate and learn from *The Future Is Mestizo*

is  
give us some shades  
for together  
we are the future and shades of democracy.

In the thought of Elizondo this means knowing the worst that we all have done and can still do but also seeking with all our hearts, minds, and bodies, the best of each and all of us. Give us some shades on the future that is mestizo.