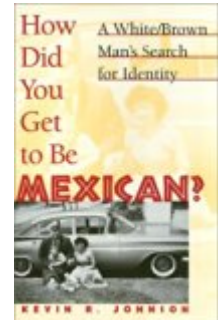


**Kevin R. Johnson.** *How Did You Get to Be Mexican? A White/Brown Man's Search for Identity.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. 256 pp. \$54.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56639-650-9.



**Reviewed by** Elaine C. Lacy

**Published on** H-LatAm (June, 2000)

Anyone interested in issues of ethnic identity and/or cultural politics in the United States should read *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?*, Kevin Johnson's sometimes painfully honest discourse on identity, assimilation, and discrimination in the late twentieth-century United States. In this volume, Johnson presents his own life story as a way to explore broader issues, including what he refers to as "race relations," focusing primarily on the problems Latinos encounter in this country. Johnson is of mixed Mexican-Anglo descent and self-identifies as Latino (preferring that term to "Hispanic"). He argues in this book that life as a Latino, especially as a Latino of mixed heritage, is especially difficult in the United States. His stated aim here is to shed light on the complexity of this country's Latino population, claiming that we must address this group's grievances in order to avoid "civil unrest and mass discontent" (p. 181). The book's general focus, however, is late twentieth-century U.S. cultural politics and Johnson's own tortured life as someone caught up in these politics.

The bulk of this work details Johnson's family life, education, and career, offering valuable insight into the dilemma faced by those of mixed ancestry in identity formation. Johnson was born in Los Angeles in 1958 to a first- or possible second-generation Mexican mother and an Anglo father. (He suspects that his maternal grandmother was born on the Mexican rather than the U.S. side of the border, as she claimed). His mother, who was born in California, met Johnson's Anglo father at Los Angeles City College. After about four years, their marriage ended in divorce and Johnson moved with his mother and brother to Los Angeles where they lived among working-class whites and Mexican Americans, at times on welfare. His mother eventually remarried another Anglo and had another son. Johnson's new stepfather, whom he classifies as racist, did not want to raise Kevin and his brother and he instigated a custody battle that his biological father won when Kevin was about twelve years of age. His mother's second marriage also ended in divorce, in part because she began to exhibit symptoms of mental

illness. (She was later diagnosed as schizophrenic).

From middle school until he left for college at UC Berkeley, Johnson lived with his father and stepmother in Long Beach and West Torrance, California. He often visited his mother, and the juxtaposition of his mother's working-class existence and his own middle-class life confused him "racially and economically" (p. 80). During those years, Johnson, "as the product of three divorces, a mixed background, and many different schools," struggled with issues of ethnic identity (p. 80).

Johnson's confusion regarding his identity actually began during those formative years in which he lived with his mother in Azusa, in part because he received mixed messages regarding his maternal family's ethnicity. His mother and grandmother tried desperately to assimilate into U.S. culture and society, and, denying their Mexican heritage, referred to themselves as "Spanish." Johnson learned no Spanish at home, heard anti-Mexican rhetoric from his mother's side of the family, and was told that he should "marry white." Still, he claims that as a child, he was heavily influenced by Mexican American culture, eating Mexican food, and playing with Mexican American children. Further, he was raised Catholic, and his family members crossed the border into Mexicali on a regular basis to visit his great grandmother.

Meanwhile, Johnson's Anglo father, whose family had moved to California from the Midwest, spoke positively about his mother's Mexican background and urged Kevin to be proud of his Mexican roots. Johnson credits his father's family for instilling in him a sensitivity to issues of race and class, and his father in particular for teaching him to fight racial injustice. During the ever-difficult teen years, Johnson's struggle over his ethnic identity intensified. He learned that with his white skin, Anglo surname, and somewhat Asian appearance (his characterization), he had relative freedom to choose how he wished to represent

himself. He could pass for white, which was the choice of his brother and stepbrother. Conscious of anti-Mexican biases among his peers, Johnson remained quiet about the Mexican side of his family, and he tried (relatively unsuccessfully, he claims) to become assimilated into white society. Typical of his candor in this book, Johnson admits to joining his friends in making derogatory remarks against Mexicans during those years. Still, he took four years of Spanish in high school and enjoyed practicing Spanish with his mother and grandmother. Regarding the struggles he faced during his high school years, Johnson concludes, "Whatever I wanted to be, I could not fully assimilate . . . if assimilation meant forgetting your family history, accepting racial hatred as a norm, and disregarding what you knew was right and true" (p. 88).

Johnson's father also instilled in him a determination to attend college. Because of Affirmative Action, Johnson was forced to make a decision regarding his identity when he began the college application process. He decided to identify as Mexican American, a choice he claims to have made without much thought. He speculates that factors involved in this decision include the alienation he felt in high school, the anti-Mexican feelings of his friends there, his negative feelings about his mother's and grandmother's denial of their Mexican roots, and encouragement from his father and a family friend to "check the box" in order to gain an advantage in admissions. Johnson was accepted at UC Berkeley, where he majored in Economics. He credits the great regard for racial and ethnic diversity at Berkeley with providing an environment that encouraged him to embrace his Latino identity, and worries that the end of Affirmative Action programs will do away with such diversity.

Johnson's discussion of his Berkeley years (1976-1980) offers the reader a glimpse of the politics of ethnicity. He says that while his coursework and other learning experiences at Berkeley

helped him develop a Mexican-American identity, he avoided Chicano student organizations and activists mainly because he feared they would reject him on the basis of his mixed heritage. He worried that these Latinos would consider him a "check the box Mexican," someone merely seeking the benefits of Affirmative Action. Johnson claims to have met many other Latinos of mixed heritage who did not associate with Chicanos for the same reasons. He admits lacking confidence in his racial identity at the time, but he also denounces identity politics among Chicanos, especially the practice of "attacking the ethnic credibility" of opponents in order to gain legitimacy themselves.

Based on his claim that Berkeley helped him to assert his Mexican American identity (although the only example he offers related to being Latino is that he had some Latino friends), one would think that Johnson would be more comfortable in "checking the box" when applying to Harvard Law School in 1980. He admits, however, that he had the same insecurities because of his mixed ancestry, and expresses a fear expressed by many recipients of Affirmative Action benefits: was his acceptance based only on his minority status? Johnson's years at Harvard Law were not happy ones; he complains of discrimination because of his ethnicity and his social class. He thoroughly disliked Boston, his professors, and most other students, and was filled with self-doubt and constant worry over the psychological and economic condition of his mother and stepbrother.

Even though he felt alienated at Harvard, Johnson still avoided the more "militant" Latinos and did not join their organizations. Once again he feared rejection, sure that other Latinos would consider him an opportunistic "box checker." Of other students of mixed Latino ancestry, Johnson says that most self-identified as minority because of Affirmative Action, but they tended to "pass as white." His most bitter memories of Harvard involve an incident when he was an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. In 1983, in the annual satir-

ical edition of the Review, Johnson was among the chief targets. He claims that he was depicted as a racist substance abuser. Still smarting from these wounds after fifteen years, Johnson argues that he was targeted because as a Latino of mixed heritage, he was a "quasi minority," an "invisible man." No one would consider saying such things about African Americans, but Latinos were fair game. This experience, Johnson asserts, "demonstrated . . . the limits to my ever being fully assimilated into the mainstream" (pp. 48-49). In the end, he has little good to say about Harvard or his years there other than to recognize that Harvard helped to transform his identity and developed his interest in social justice and civil rights.

In 1983, Johnson returned to California and clerked for a federal appeals judge, and in 1985, he began to practice law with a private firm in San Francisco, where he remained until joining the faculty at UC Davis in 1989. Interestingly, in spite of (or perhaps as a result of?) the suffering he endured at Harvard for having identified as Mexican American, Johnson did not announce his minority status while at the law firm, at one point even declining to be identified as a minority in order to help a colleague make the point that the firm did not hire enough minorities. When he began to apply for academic positions in 1988, however, he chose to "check the box," but claims to have done so out of ethnic pride. His decision to do so was prompted by his new Mexican-American wife, who asked if he was ashamed of his Latino heritage. Still, after completing the applications, Johnson admits concern that because of his name and appearance people would accuse him of trying "to reap the undeserved benefits of affirmative action" (p. 123).

The title of this memoir is taken from an experience during the interview process for an academic position. A senior professor asked Johnson how someone with white skin and an Anglo name could be a Mexican American (Johnson admits that this is how he translated the question). He

says that the episode alerted him to the "intensity of racial politics in academia, "which he labels as "treacherous" (pp. 122, 138). Johnson sought an academic position at a time when many law schools wished to hire minorities, and, while aware that making his status known gave him an advantage in that regard, he appears to have been offended when his status was mentioned during interviews. His feelings about such issues after taking the job at Davis seem mixed: when a local newspaper listed his name as one of the new "professors of color" hired by the institution, Johnson worried that because of his appearance and name he would be considered a fraud. Yet, when he later learned that students had indeed labeled him a professor of color, he was offended. He also recounts several incidents at Davis in which students behaved disrespectfully toward him and wonders if they would have treated him differently had he been older and "whiter." At the same time, Johnson considered taking his mother's maiden name after arriving at UC Davis, but decided against it so as not to appear "opportunistic."

Clearly, only those who have lived through experiences such as Johnson describes can understand the alienation and pain associated with confused identities and discrimination. However, some readers may wonder at Johnson's chameleon-like behavior and may be tempted to accuse him of identifying as Latino only when it served his interests. His clearly defensive posture in this book suggests that he feels vulnerable to such charges. His fear of rejection by other Latinos is rather understandable, especially given the intensive nature of identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s. What is less understandable to an outsider is Johnson's prickliness over seemingly innocent questions and comments regarding his national origin or his ethnicity in general, especially given confusion generated by his appearance and name.

Further, although Johnson mentions class as a factor in cases of discrimination, especially at Harvard, he apparently feels that his Mexican heritage was the major cause of his treatment. Another Latino who has expressed torment over issues of identity, Richard Rodriguez, argues that class is a greater source of discrimination in the United States than is ethnicity. How many of Johnson's problems were related to class differences rather than ethnicity? As Lani Guinier has argued, ethnicity acts as a marker in the U.S. because no one is comfortable discussing issues of class. Although Johnson mentions being sensitized to issues of class by his father's family, he does not elaborate on class differences and says only at the end of the book that further study is needed on the role of class in the subordination of minorities.

In the final chapters, "Lessons for Latino Assimilation" and "What Does It all Mean for Race Relations in the United States?" Johnson offers his perspective on the possibility of Latino assimilation and offers a diagnostic and prescriptive treatment of assimilation and racial politics in the U.S. His discussion of assimilation in these chapters is murky, however, in that he tends to use the term without always clarifying his meaning. The reader may, therefore, be perplexed by the apparent contradiction between Johnson's argument on the one hand that, despite what "assimilationists" Linda Chavez and Richard Rodriguez claim, Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. society and are not likely to do so and his statement on page 154 that Latin American immigrants have assimilated and adapted in varying degrees to life in the U.S. As evidence of the latter, he points to the fact that Latinos learn English; in California, they join the labor force in larger numbers than any other group of immigrants; and Latinos hold values and behaviors similar to middle class Anglos. A more careful distinction between "assimilation" and "acculturation" or even "economic integration" would perhaps have been useful here. Further, Johnson clearly has little understanding

(or does not agree with?) the literature in Latino Studies regarding assimilation. A major point of this literature is that Latinos are already an ethnic mix, so any discussion of "assimilation" must take this fact into consideration.

Despite his evidence of economic assimilation of some Latinos, Johnson maintains that Latinos' physical differences mean that they will always be considered "Other" by Anglos, who tend to lump all those with Latin American ancestry together regardless of country of origin, language, and citizenship. Physical differences act as a barrier to assimilation for many immigrant groups, he argues, but some, including the Germans and Irish, have experienced "relatively easy acceptance into the culture." Those familiar with the history of Irish immigration and the discrimination to which this group was subjected would likely disagree with Johnson here. He also maintains that physical differences within the Latino population shape patterns of assimilation: the whiter the skin, the greater the opportunity for acceptance by Anglos. Cubans, because of their fair skin, "have found it easier than other Latino national origin groups to assimilate economically, politically, and socially. Puerto Ricans, in contrast, some of whom are black, are the least likely Latino group to be assimilated in these ways" (p. 156). This assertion presents another problem with Johnson's analysis: Latinos' experiences in this country are often based on the regions in which they settle. For example, in the Southeastern United States, many Puerto Ricans are middle class, while most Mexican immigrants are working class, and the former group has assimilated (in the generally accepted meaning of the term) and faces much less discrimination than the latter. Once again, Johnson fails to take the importance of class into consideration.

Cultural differences act as a further barrier to Anglo acceptance of Latinos, according to Johnson. Anglos, he says, accuse Latinos of refusing to assimilate by maintaining their language and cul-

ture and by choosing to live in separate enclaves. Only by shedding their cultural practices can Latinos become acceptable, and even then, they continue to face discrimination, especially if they are not "white" enough. All this has led many Latinos, he argues, to push multiculturalism, to challenge the assimilationist ideal.

Johnson's discussion of the particular problems faced by people of mixed ancestry forms the core of this book. (Again, taking the point of view that Latinos already represent an ethnic mixture, this discussion is problematic). He argues that multi-racial persons face not only numerous forms of discrimination, but legal difficulties as well, since our legal system "lacks intermediate or 'mixed race' classifications." They do not fit comfortably among any groups and often struggle to find an identity. They may be white enough to "pass," but doing so bears psychological costs. Johnson admits his own ambivalence about those who make the effort to pass as white, adding that he vacillates between understanding their need to do so and resenting them for trying. He clearly would prefer that Latinos lay claim to their heritage, if for no other reason than to gain the psychological benefits of doing so. "Denial of one's background," he asserts, "exact[s] a psychological toll that may outweigh the benefits of the higher status and prestige accorded to whiteness" (p. 159).

In a discussion of the future of "race relations" in the United States, Johnson argues that even though the focus of civil rights issues is on Black-White relations, matters have become much more complex. The number of people of color is growing dramatically and most face discrimination. He alternates between optimism and pessimism regarding the future of race relations, contending that attitudes toward Latinos have improved, mainly as a result of "Chicano activism in the 1960s and multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s," and says that "Latinos today enjoy greater freedom than in the past to embrace their history

and take pride in their indigenous Latin American roots" (p. 178). Still, he remains pessimistic regarding Latino's full acceptance by white society. Even though Linda Chavez and others believe that we will move toward racial harmony in this century as intermarriage between Latinos and whites increases, Johnson argues that people of mixed heritage will continue to face racism and discrimination. He speculates that U.S. society will "construct new races, perhaps based on lightness or darkness of skin color, language, culture, or religion" (p. 179). He refers to the ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe as a "chilling possibility." What Johnson does not take into consideration here is the longstanding violent nature of Eastern European ethnic conflicts, the intensity of which goes far deeper than any sense of superiority Anglos have felt regarding their southern neighbors over time.

Johnson advocates Latino coalitions to help "move beyond racial divisiveness and work to change the racial status quo" (p. 177). Despite their diversity, Latino groups in the U.S. should rally around their cultural commonalties, such as family, ethnicity, religion, and Spanish language. These could form a core of "Latino identity," and around this core, Latinos could unite to work toward change in the political process. Interestingly, unity over these cultural "commonalties" could conceivably encourage the Anglo tendency to homogenize Latinos in this country, a practice to which most Latinos strongly object. In a related endnote, Johnson cites an argument by Kimberl Williams Crenshaw that Blacks' greatest political asset has been their ability "to assert a common identity."

The real value of this book is its intimate picture of the agony of the new "mestizo." Issues of identity for persons of mixed heritage are nothing new; Johnson's book may remind Latin Americanists of the writings of the 17th century mestizo Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. Peruvian Guaman Poma also struggled with issues of cultural alle-

giance: he adopted aspects of Spanish culture, including Catholicism; but he defended the Incas against the injustices of their Spanish rulers. Johnson's candor regarding his identity crisis adds to this book's readability: he describes his sensitivity to comments regarding his ethnicity, the ongoing questions over whether or not he should have "checked the box," and the guilt he feels over his mother's social, economic, and even emotional situation vis-a-vis his own offer a poignant glimpse into the complexity and pain suffered by persons of mixed economic and cultural background. The book also heightens sensitivity to the situation of and issues encountered by Latinos in the country today.

Johnson's bibliography on the Latino population in the U.S. is exhaustive, yet anyone who has read most of these works will surely question some of Johnson's larger arguments in the two diagnostic and prescriptive chapters. His numerous end notes are often distractions, and generally rely too heavily on articles in law journals.

This work could be useful in courses with themes related to ethnic identity, cultural politics, and/or the Latino presence in the United States, especially if accompanied by supplemental works on assimilation, acculturation, and, given that Johnson tends to fold "race" and "ethnicity" together, works on race and ethnicity as social constructs. This work contributes to the growing literature on persons of Latino ancestry in this country and provides another perspective on issues of identity formation.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Elaine C. Lacy. Review of Johnson, Kevin R. *How Did You Get to Be Mexican? A White/Brown Man's Search for Identity*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4216>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.