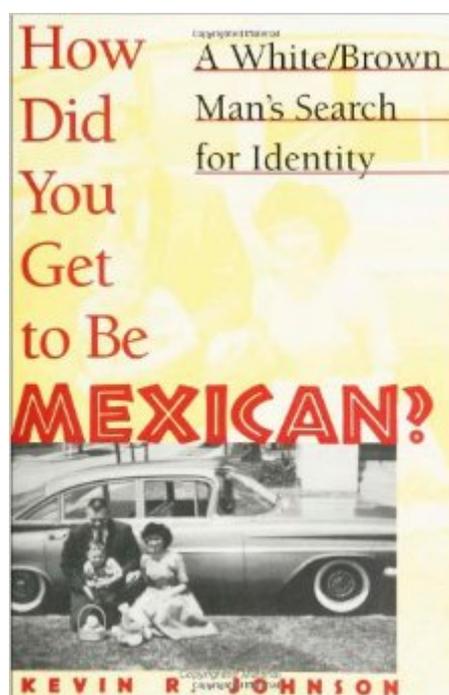


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# How Did You Get To Be Mexican



## Synopsis

Presents an account of racial identity that takes a close look at the question 'Who is a Latino?' and determines where persons of mixed Anglo-Latino heritage fit into the racial dynamics of the United States. This book examines issues of diversity, assimilation, race relations, and affirmative action in contemporary United States.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the story of a mother who dearly wanted to assimilate but couldn't - and her son, who could have but finally wouldn't. It is the story of a man of mixed White-Latino heritage engulfed in self-doubt about his place in a society obsessed with race. It is the story of a prominent young lawyer and college professor who can never fully enjoy his success because someone always pops up to accuse him of being a "box checker," a counterfeit Latino for affirmative action purposes. Contradictions run wild in Kevin Johnson's autobiographical account of growing up racially mixed and emotionally mixed up. On one page, he rightly laments racial pigeonholing. On the next, he paints a painfully detailed picture of someone's racial history and physical features. The book is replete with mixed heritage characters who "identify" publicly with the racial tradition of one parent over that of another. At first this approach left me frustrated (maybe I yearned for transcendence). But soon I realized that Johnson could hardly tell his story otherwise: the contradictions are not his but society's. Such is the sad - indeed the surreal - state of America's racial politics. However sad and surreal race relations indeed may be, books like Johnson's represent a breakthrough of sorts

for diversity and understanding. For most of our nation's history, dispossessed individuals were truly silenced - either by poverty or outright discrimination. As society began to allow different voices to emerge, pure outsiders got most of the attention. Now people like Johnson, who inhabits what the book jacket calls "the borderlands between racial identities," are receiving the call to tell their stories. Before I run on any longer, I should reveal some modest secrets of my own. Johnson and I attended the same high school in Southern California. In college, in the late 1970s, we shared two different apartments on Berkeley's Haste Street, a student ghetto just south of the University of California campus. We remained friends as he progressed through the legal profession to his current position as associate dean for academic affairs and professor of law at the University of California, Davis. Johnson was born in 1958, the first child of a White father and a Mexican American mother. His parents divorced when he was young, and he grew up hopscotching from the barrio's poverty to the relative affluence of the beach cities near Los Angeles. Johnson's mother, a staunch assimilationist, neither taught him Spanish nor encouraged pride in his Latin roots. When she remarried, she attached herself yet another Anglo. Following the advice of his politically savvy father, the adolescent Johnson began to ponder his Mexican American background. He began taking Spanish in high school. He continued in college. Meanwhile Berkeley introduced him - as it did us all - to heretofore unimagined diversity. Yet, to me, my roommate seemed most comfortable while slam dancing to the Dead Kennedys at the San Francisco punk club Mabuhay Gardens. White like me, I would have told anyone who bothered to ask about his racial identity (though I knew, of course, about his mother's background). Tellingly, no one raised the question. My analysis at the time partly reflected my own lack of maturity and perception, but there's little doubt that Harvard Law School forced my friend unequivocally out of his Latino closet. Like other Harvard law students from modest economic and social backgrounds, he wondered whether he really deserved his place in the elite institution. Had the admissions committee let him in just because he'd checked the Latino box on the application? Even after he made law review, he could never convince himself. During a tussle over affirmative action on the virtually all-white law review, Johnson took a firm pro-diversity stance. From that point on, he became increasingly outspoken about his Mexican American heritage - both personally and professionally. Though it might have been easier to blend in as white, he opted for a more rewarding, if rockier, bicultural path. His chapter about Harvard, which opens the book, should be required reading for any undergraduate contemplating the LSAT. This isn't the first time someone has slammed Harvard Law, and it won't be the last, but Johnson's account makes the experience seem outright hellish for anyone with the slightest non-conformist streak. Pranks (probably innocuous to your average Yale man) resound with new meaning when aimed at a

sensitive outsider. For his defense of affirmative action, Johnson earned a citation in a spoof yearbook as author of a volume entitled, "I Hate Whites." Nearly two decades later, the barb still stings. After law school, Johnson plunged into pro bono work on behalf of Latin American immigrants and married a woman of Mexican American descent. Virginia helped him grow more comfortable with his identity, and together they try to provide a foundation of Mexican culture for their three children. Policy discussions generally take a backseat in Johnson's autobiographical account. When they appear, they're grounded in personal experience - like his analysis of the "box checker" dilemma. The question is simple: what constitutes a member of an underprivileged group for the purposes of affirmative action? The answer is complex, if not insoluble. Under pressure to admit or hire individuals from certain groups, many institutions and businesses are keen to count anyone vaguely entitled to membership. Predictably, this has sparked a debate among civil rights activists over who qualifies to check the box. Individuals of mixed racial heritage, like Johnson, come under special scrutiny. The phenomenon is captured by the book's title, "How Did You Get to Be a Mexican?" A senior professor asked Johnson that very question during an interview for a position on a law faculty. Johnson's book offers a partial answer, but no response will prove satisfactory as long as our society remains obsessed with race. Indeed, we can only put racism behind us when we no longer care about the answer.\* Bill Hinchberger is the editor of the BrazilMax website.

As a person of Latino/Anglo heritage, I was quite excited when I saw this book at my favorite bookstore. We do not often hear about us when racially-mixed people are discussed. Johnson's experiences mirrored many of my own and I found myself verbally agreeing with him as I read the book! As a future scholar in the area of multiracial identity, I will certainly utilize this book in my classroom!

In my professional opinion, "How Did You Get to Be Mexican?" appeals not only to our simple love of a well-told tale, but also to our more complex need to understand how we will confront the most daunting task of the new century: getting along in our increasingly multicultural world. Part memoir, part legal memorandum, the book reminds us that a person's racial and ethnic identity is actually constructed in at least two ways: by how others see him, and by how he comes to see himself. Using his own life as the evidence, Dean Johnson makes the case that neither can be ignored. He convincingly illustrates the critical role that the law plays in shaping this process -- and vice versa. On a personal note, I share the author's Anglo-and-Mexican heritage, and hear the echoes my own life in his story.

Kevin Johnson's book "How Did you Get to be Mexican?" is an excellent book about being mixed race in America. Johnson considers life on the color line from the perspective of one who is half Latino and half Anglo. In so doing he considers many important topics including the limits on Latino assimilation and the construction of racial identity. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the topic of race.

As a mixed race Mexican/Anglo myself, I saw my own childhood as well as parts of my adult life in Dean Johnson's writing. While reading like an autobiography, this book is not lacking in scholarship. The numerous and current scholarly references for each chapter provide a wealth of resources for those who desire to learn more about the topics of which Dean Johnson speaks. I am enriched by having read this book.

The subject matter was of tremendous personal interest to me, because, like Johnson, I have an Anglo father and a Latina mother, and am, myself an academic. I often found myself identifying with his anecdotes and quite thoroughly enjoyed the combination of autobiography and academic tome. On the academic side, Johnson contributes a great deal (not to mention a new perspective) to the literature on racial construction. Too many academic works on Latino/a racial construction treat Latino/as as a monolithic body, suffering the same levels and types of discrimination, whether they are an immigrant or US born. Johnson recognized the great diversity amongst Latino populations. Some mixed race individuals, in fact, face more discrimination from Latinos than from whites. To be embarrassingly honest, I had never heard of Kevin Johnson until he reviewed my book for the Journal of American History. Wanting to know the scholars who reviewed me, I purchased and read this book. I whole heartedly recommend this work to any mixed race individual, as well as to any academic working in the fields of racial construction, Latino history, or even those studying recent US History in general.

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