

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**F**orty or so students looked up expectantly from their seats in a spartan classroom in Martin Luther King Hall. A hush came over the room as I entered and walked briskly to the lectern. It was my second year teaching at the U.C. Davis law school, but this was a new class and I was nervous. Five years in the litigation trenches had not fully prepared me for the butterflies that accompany looking out at all those young faces. “I am Kevin Johnson and this is Business Litigation,” I blurted. As I took the class step by step through the syllabus, I began to relax. This isn’t so bad, I thought. Now to wrap it all up. Thinking I had covered every conceivable issue, I asked if there were any questions. A hand appeared in the back row. “Have you ever tried a case?” a young woman asked skeptically. The class rustled, suspicion in the air. A challenge to my credentials before the course was even underway. Irritated, I reluctantly answered “yes” as my temperature rose and my brow dampened. Why had she asked? I wondered. Had she heard that I was a minority of some sort? Was it my youth?

This incident took place almost a decade ago. I am still a law professor and I still teach at the University of California at Davis School of Law, located in the Central Valley, an agricultural corridor that runs down the middle of the state. My work has been

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published in prestigious law journals and I have the security of tenure. My colleagues and students generally make me feel appreciated. Racial rumblings, however, regularly interrupt my peaceful life. I am still occasionally reminded that I might not have a job, or at least not such a good one, if I were not Mexican American.

My mother is Mexican American and my father is Anglo. They met and married young in Los Angeles, where I was born in 1958. Their story is unremarkable. Intermarriage between Anglos and Mexican Americans has occurred for centuries in the Southwest. For much of childhood and youth, I paid little attention to my mixed heritage.

Though I did not think much about it at the time, I have classified myself as Mexican American since adolescence. My eyes are brown and my hair dark brown, almost black. I am more comfortable in Mexican American than in Anglo culture. Over the years, the contrast between my name and self-identification has often been a source of curiosity to others and of occasional discomfort to me. The burning question always seems to be, “Am I a Latino?” This seemingly simple, straightforward question raises complex issues that go to the core of race relations in the modern United States. This book offers a glimpse into my life in the borderlands between the Anglo and Mexican worlds.



It is funny how a person’s entire identity can be thrown into doubt in the space of a moment. Sitting in my cluttered office one day, I got a call from an old high school friend I had not seen for years. We chatted for a bit about mutual friends and reminisced about our wild youth. Eventually my friend came to the point. “I need some legal advice,” he said. “I got a drunk driving arrest in Nevada. My attorney told me that it was a mandatory six months in jail, so I left the state.” I understood his reluctance; who wouldn’t try to avoid being locked up?

“I can’t go to jail,” he continued. “A white guy like me would get killed by the blacks and the Mexicans.” My stomach tightened. Perhaps he heard my silence. Remembering that he was talking to a man whose wife’s last name is Salazar, whose wedding featured mariachis, whose children are called Teresa, Tomás, and Elena, and whose mother was Mexican American, my friend quickly backpedaled. “No disrespect. I just meant Mexican gang members. That’s what I should have said.” Both angered and saddened, I gave him the legal advice he wanted. It would do no good to lecture.



I like to run. In December 1992, after months of training, I ran the California International Marathon with Steve Roscow, a college chum. The race started in the city of Folsom, a historic Gold Rush town located where the Sierra Nevada foothills begin their slow ascent. After a night of heavy rain, the skies had cleared and the sun was out. It was a magical moment when Bruce Springsteen’s inspiring tune “Leap of Faith” came over the loudspeakers. “This is my day,” I thought. About half an hour later, I was running through a downpour into a thirty-mile-per-hour headwind that dashed any hopes I had of qualifying for the Boston Marathon.

At the twenty-third mile, I was on J Street, approaching the State Capitol building in downtown Sacramento. Moving more and more slowly and caring less and less, I found myself on the wrong side of the red cones that marked the course as I approached a Safeway grocery store. A group of spectators braving the elements cheered for the back of the pack. A guy looked at me and yelled in a friendly tone, “Hey, Ese. Ese, there is a bus behind you. Watch out.” Without thinking, I looked back to see a bus lurching behind me. I looked back at the guy, who looked Mexican American. It then struck me that he had called me *ese*, Spanish slang for dude or man. Did he see me as a Mexican American? Why? How? Did I look so obviously Mexican American? Or had he called me *ese out*

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of habit? Perhaps it had nothing to do with me or how I looked or ran. I pondered the question for the last three dreadful miles of the race and for a long time thereafter.



My mother-in-law, Mary Helen Salazar, a Mexican American from Los Angeles, was visiting our new house in Davis. We were sitting in the family room watching the television news. The program cut to a story about racism in the South. Listening intently, Mary Helen observed, “I would never survive there.” I responded without thinking, “The real division there is between blacks and whites,” to which she quickly replied, “Well, you don’t have a Spanish surname.”



In the spring of 1996, I was sitting in a bar off Pacific Coast Highway in Manhattan Beach, California, a white, upper-middle-class suburb of Los Angeles. Funeral services for my father’s uncle, my great-uncle Kennard Johnson (known as “Brown-eyes” or “Brownie” to distinguish him from his blue-eyed twin), had just ended. I had time to kill with my father and step-brother while I waited for my return flight to Sacramento, and we were exchanging memories of Brown-eyes over a few beers. What a funny guy, I mused. “Remember on the way to Yosemite that year when he pulled up his car next to ours and, for a laugh, pulled out his false teeth?” But he sure was a worrier, which was no wonder given a lifetime of economic insecurity. He always worked hard at the bakery, where he was employed for as long as I can remember, but money must have been tight. I wondered what it had been like when he married Rosie and became one of the first in his family to marry a Mexican American woman. They had grown up together in a working-class neighborhood near downtown Los An-

geles where Mexican Americans and Anglos lived side by side, and had spent fifty years there before moving to the desert to retire.

While I sat there thinking about Brown-eyes, a tall fellow sitting on the barstool next to us was rambling on to anyone who would listen about a recent trip to Texas,<sup>1</sup> interspersing his banter with a series of bad jokes. In retrospect, what happened next seemed inevitable.<sup>2</sup> I tuned in just in time to hear him ask, “How do you make sure nobody steals the stereo speakers in your car? You put a sign on them saying ‘no *habla español*.’” Nobody laughed. I wondered why I had to listen to this crap. Why couldn’t I drink my beer and grieve without dealing with jokes that cut painfully to the core of my identity? Like a boxer in the late rounds of a fight or a weary runner near the end of a marathon, I was too tired from the travails of the long day—seeing mourning family, reliving the sad and happy memories, pondering my own mortality—to lash back at this insensitive Texan wannabe. “Please give me another,” I asked the barmaid and emptied my glass.<sup>3</sup>

The guy got me thinking. On the flight back to Sacramento, I thought of the Spanish speakers I knew and found that I could not think of one who might steal a car stereo. I wondered what it would be like for my identity to be “transparent,” a non-issue in my daily life, the way it is for many Anglos.<sup>4</sup>



These stories show how a few words may hurt and marginalize.<sup>5</sup> They also demonstrate the limits of assimilation for Latinos, even half-white ones like myself. Born in 1958 at the tail end of the so-called Baby Boom, I identify as a Latino,<sup>6</sup> specifically as a Mexican American or Chicano. My mother, whose maiden name was Angela (Angie) Gallardo, is a first- or second-generation Mexican American born a few miles north of the border in Brawley, California, a small farmtown in the Imperial Valley. My father, Kenneth

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Johnson, is an Anglo who grew up in what was then a mixed Mexican-Anglo working-class neighborhood near Chavez Ravine, where the Los Angeles Dodgers play baseball today.

Through the experiences recounted in this book, I analyze some difficult but crucially important issues for Latinos in the modern United States. Though well aware that the use of autobiography in scholarship is suspect,<sup>7</sup> I believe that it offers a unique opportunity for bringing to the fore the stories of groups of people who have been invisible or ignored, and for offering general insights based on individual experiences.\* “Mexican Americans need to tell their side of the story.”<sup>9</sup> I am part of that story.

I specifically want to explore the assimilation of Latinos into dominant society, with a focus on the experience of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. In recent years, Latino intellectuals like Linda Chavez and Richard Rodriguez<sup>10</sup> have embraced the goal of Latino assimilation into the mainstream of American life. Chavez, for example, proclaims a “new theory” of assimilation, which argues that Latinos, like previous waves of white “ethnic” immigrants, should assimilate into mainstream American culture and are in fact doing so. Separate and unequal Latino enclaves in many cities, however, demonstrate that assimilation is far from complete. Moreover, the economic disparities show no signs of narrowing.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the current anti-immigrant backlash represents in no small part an attack on all persons, citizens as well as immigrants, of Mexican ancestry in the United States, including persons who trace their ancestry in this country back for centuries.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years a growing number of academic studies have looked at how and why some people voluntarily adopt a particular racial identity.<sup>13</sup> Because race is a social construction, people—some people, at least—decide to be Latino. Although physical

features, surname, language, or accent make it difficult for some Latinos to pass as white, I could do so if I chose. For the most part, I was never forced to present myself as Mexican American. My brother, who as a youngster had sandy blond hair and blue eyes, never identified as Mexican American. Like him, I might have downplayed my background and hoped that nobody would remember, find out, or care. I could have shed my ethnicity and blended in, though I would have had to deny a family history that has grown increasingly central to my identity.

Because the Latino community is extremely diverse, the ability to choose an identity and assimilate varies widely. My own family history exemplifies Latino heterogeneity. I myself am multicultural.<sup>14</sup> I have my mother's dark brown hair and brown eyes, but I bear the last name Johnson and my height comes from my father's side of the family. My brother's blond hair and blue eyes come from my father's side of the family, though he is short in stature like my mother. My mother speaks Spanish, but she wanted her sons to assimilate and she never taught us the language.

My wife, Virginia Salazar, is from a tightly knit Mexican American family in La Puente, California, east of East Los Angeles. She has dark brown hair and brown eyes and a light complexion. Members of her mother's family generally have fair complexions and light brown hair; those in her father's family generally have dark skin and hair that is dark brown bordering on black. Although both her parents speak Spanish, she was not taught the language at home, either.

To our surprise, our first two children, Teresa and Tomás, have blond hair and blue eyes and fair complexions. By all appearances, they are "white." They are embraced by the family and occasionally have been referred to as *güeros*, Spanish slang for "white ones."<sup>15</sup> Such references hint at the value placed on whiteness in U.S. soci-

ety. Our third child, Elena, looks more like us, with olive-colored skin and dark hair and eyes. Some have referred to her as our “Mexican” baby or *la morena* (the dark one).<sup>16</sup>

This diversity in physical appearance among a family of five Mexican Americans should make it clear that the Mexican American community is far from homogenous. If Mexican Americans are a diverse group, Latinos are even more so. Mixtures of race, national origin, immigration status, class, culture, education, political outlook, and many other characteristics abound.

As my story illustrates, one aspect of Latino diversity is the prevalence of persons of mixed Latino/Anglo background.” Latinos and Anglos intermarry frequently, adding to the population of mixed Latino/Anglo people in the United States. As Latino members increase, one can expect the number of intermarriages and mixed-race children to increase as well. But while poignant books by James McBride, Judy Scales-Trent, Greg Williams, and others<sup>18</sup> have documented the experiences of persons with one black and one white parent, the discussion of mixed-race people has not focused on Latinos of mixed parentage.

Changing demographics make the circumstances of mixed-race Latinos all the more important to consider. According to U.S. Census projections, by 2005 Latinos will be the largest minority group in the United States.<sup>19</sup> If current demographic trends continue, persons of mixed-race backgrounds will increase greatly as a proportion of the U.S. population.<sup>20</sup> Race relations and individual experiences of race are sure to change as a result.

As my own experiences show, American social, political, economic, and legal institutions attempt to force people into hard-and-fast categories, which accounts for some of the difficulties faced by mixed-race persons.<sup>21</sup> To take one small but important example, what box should a person check on the U.S. Census form when that person does not fit neatly into any of the enumerated



racial or ethnic categories? What message does the absence of an appropriate box convey? The same questions apply to applications for admission to educational institutions and for employment. None of the recognized categories fully or accurately describes a mixed-race person. One hates to be in the position of denying one's background and appearing to be ashamed of one's heritage. At the same time, one fears being accused of claiming to be a minority — sometimes by members of the very minority group with which he or she has identified — simply to obtain a “special” preference in affirmative action programs.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the assimilation experiences of Latinos tell us a great deal about race relations in the United States. Both Mexican Americans in the Southwest and Latinos throughout the country have been defined as different from and inferior to whites. Because they are different from the Anglo-Saxon “core” of the United States, Latinos are often viewed as “foreigners” to the nation, even if their families have lived in this country for generations.<sup>23</sup>

The stories in this book illustrate some oft-ignored facets of the assimilation process. My grandmother and mother were two of the most ardent Mexican American assimilationists you would ever want to meet. They never succeeded, and they suffered immensely in the effort. Whatever the world may think, their son and grandson — for all his Harvard education and cushy university job — has never been fully assimilated into the mainstream either.<sup>24</sup> The stories of my mother and maternal grandmother reflect the difficulties of assimilation for Latinas and are a sad metaphor for the story of the assimilation of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. My own experiences reflect the amorphousness of the concept of race, the difficulties resulting from racial ambiguity, and the complexities of racial mixture in a time of identity politics.