

Preface

Originating in the mid-1800s, the term *greaser* first came to be used against those of Mexican appearance in California and the Southwest. Although some suggest the derogatory description came from the practice of Mexican laborers in the Southwest greasing their backs to facilitate the unloading of hides and cargo,¹ others suppose it stemmed from a similarity between Mexican skin color and grease.² Its origin may be more disparaging still—the “greasers” label may derive from long-standing conceptions of Mexicans as unkempt and unclean, with unwashed, greasy black hair. “Greasers” was a popular reference by U.S. troops in the U.S.-Mexico war of 1846–1848, as well as by settlers in gold rush California.³ Its original usage appears to have been sexualized, a way to describe a “treacherous Mexican male who was sexually threatening to and desirous of white women.”⁴ Although the term continued to be associated with Mexican men in its Hollywood usage, “greasers” came to refer to Mexicans generally, encompassing both sexes as well as both Mexicans and Mexican Americans.⁵ Further, the term originated as a derogatory reference toward those of Mexican origin, but its use expanded over time to encompass Peruvian and Chilean miners during the California gold rush and, more broadly, to describe anyone of Spanish origin.

The term *greasers* and the negative sentiments behind it had legal bite too. In 1855, California adopted the Vagrancy Act, known popularly as the Greaser Act, addressing “all persons who are commonly known as ‘Greasers’ or the issue of Spanish and Indian blood . . . and who go armed and are not peaceable and quiet persons.” Targeting the supposed “idle Mexican,” this antiloitering law was the precursor to modern laws directed at loitering, gang activity, and other apparently race-neutral offenses that in practice are often used to justify interrogatory stops of persons of color.⁶

Hollywood embraced the “greasers” label to describe its unflattering

creation of despicable Mexicans who robbed, raped, and murdered their way through the Southwest. Familiar enough to reach the marquee, the Hollywood greaser image of the 1900s was the villain of such films as *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), *Tony the Greaser* (1911), *The Girl and the Greaser* (1913), *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914), *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* (1914), and, simply, *The Greaser* (1915).⁷ Although almost uniformly villainous, the Hollywood greaser occasionally had a good heart, as reflected in the movie advertisement for the 1911 silent *Tony the Greaser*: “From force of habit, some might call him a ‘Greaser’; true, he is a Mexicano, but a man of noble instincts and chivalrous nature.”⁸

Prompted in the 1930s by the threat of losing distribution of Hollywood films to crucial Mexican and Latin American markets, Hollywood’s self-policing body at the time, the Production Code Administration, helped eliminate the most virulent anti-Latina/o references from Hollywood films, including references to greasers. By the time these economic pressures had relaxed in the 1950s and this self-censorship board’s influence had waned, the term *greaser* and its close cousin *greaseball* had gradually given way in Hollywood and American society to other derogatory references to Latinas/os—although Hollywood resurrected the greaser from time to time, beginning with the 1961 western *One Eyed Jacks*. Particularly in the 1940s, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, especially young boys, were labeled “pachucos” or “zoot suiters.” Later, Mexicans and Mexican Americans became “wetbacks,” “aliens,” and “illegals” as the U.S.-Mexico border was fortified against entry by undocumented Mexican immigrants. Border Patrol officials have referred to undocumented immigrants from Mexico as *pollos*. Mexicans in particular also came to be known disparagingly as “beaners,” presumably for their staple diet; the demeaning reference to Mexicans as “chilies” likely has similar origins. In the 1999 premiere episode of the popular sitcom *Will and Grace*, one of the regulars belittled her Salvadoran maid as a “tamale” [*sic*]. Even the term *Mexican* is used debasingly, especially when accompanied with expletives, as in late 2001 when then professional basketball coach Dan Issel yelled to a heckling fan, “Go drink another beer, you fucking Mexican piece of shit,” while captured on videotape.

Puerto Ricans, especially those living in New York City, garnered their own degrading moniker—*spic*, the term of choice in films such as *West Side Story* (1961) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). “Spic,” like “greaser,” has disputed origins. Some say it derives from the term *His-*

panic; others suggest it refers to the accent-thick response of those Latinas/os who “don’t speak English”; and still others claim the term is an acronym for those of Spanish, Indian, and colored origin. Regardless of its exact origin, this term, like “greasers,” eventually came to represent Latinas/os of all backgrounds.