

BOOK REVIEW

GREASERS AND GRINGOS: LATINOS, LAW, AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

By Steven W. Bender. New York University Press (2005). ISBN 0814798888.

Reviewed By Chelsy A. Castro*

Have you ever questioned the significance of *Frito Bandido*? Why does *Speedy Gonzalez* have a sluggish cousin named *Slowpoke Rodriguez*? What were the Cherrie Poppin' Daddies were singing about in their late 1990s hit song *Zoot Suit Riot*? Steven Bender's book, *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law, and the American Imagination*, inspires readers to examine Latino stereotypes and how those stereotypes have affected the Latino experience in the U.S.¹

Bender dissects the Latino² image in the U.S. by examining Anglo-American film, television, literature, song, political propaganda, jokes, government policy, and legal history to illustrate Latino stereotypes in Anglo-American culture. He then analyzes the effect of these stereotypes on the rights and legal status of Latinos in the U.S. Bender argues that "most of the long-standing demeaning social constructions of Latinos have helped ensure their legal detriment [and that]... the legal rules that disadvantage Latinos, as well as underlying images, often spur private citizens to enforce their dictates through injurious vigilantism."³ *Greasers and Gringos* explores how discrimination against Latinos in the legal system, such as Arista Lira Flores' life sentence for drunk driving; and how violence towards Latinos, such as the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, are at least partially, the fruits of hateful stereotypes.⁴

Bender presents various images of Latinos in ways that force the reader to look beyond the stereotypes and into the Latino human experience. He claims Anglo-American media portrays Latinos as greasy, lazy, lusty, dim-witted *bandidos*, *latin lovers* prone to criminal activity, and as subhuman in that Latinos are content to live in atrocious environmental conditions. Bender cites instances of police brutality inspired by fear of the stereotypical knife-carrying Latino and to numerous examples of migrant workers forced by employers to live in deplorable conditions. These examples contextualize the stereotypes that have condemned such unfortunate victims of social injustice.

Bender's illustrations of mistreatment and general derogatory depictions of Latinos in the media can be overwhelming for a reader not previously exposed to this negative aspect of the Latino experience in the U.S. Bender boldly points to racist perspectives in American television, literature, and cinema characterizing Latinos as filthy, lazy, subhuman dogs and Latinas as sexual fiends and prostitutes. The shock induced by Bender's

descriptions of Latino stereotyping serve as a grim reality check for the reader. The discrimination and violence endured by Latinos is as unfortunate and revolting as the stereotypes ascribed to them.

Given the "shock value" of Bender's distressing illustrations, he naturally runs the risk of losing reader sympathy or the ultimate message regarding the gravity of these circumstances. Moreover, Bender's strict scrutiny of some examples of Anglo-American media may draw the reader to the conclusion that his analysis is too critical and therefore, unreliable. Bender's use of movies such as *Fools Rush In* and *Crazy/Beautiful* in criticizing the extent to which American media presents Latinos as "foreign" to the typical Anglo-American culture opens him up to potential criticism for stretching his analysis to such glaring examples in order to serve his thesis and not as a genuine study.⁵

However, despite Bender's explicit use of examples that may distress some readers and lead others to question his credibility, overall, his organization and execution of the material is excellent. *Greasers and Gringos* is organized along clear and progressive subjects. Each chapter builds on the previous chapter in providing the reader with a continuously developing idea of the Latino experience in the U.S. in relation to Anglo-provided stereotypes. Bender's mastery of drawing from a diverse array of media to form an overall impression of the Latino experience through a stereotypical lens offers the reader a three-dimensional view of Latino stereotypes and their effect on the Latinos. Additionally, Bender offers his own anecdotes throughout the book and includes a chapter discussing his own family history and experience.

Lastly, one of the most impressive and redeeming aspects of Bender's approach is the inclusion of Latino stereotypes and discriminations within the Latino community in addition to those of Anglos. Similarly, Bender does not directly attack Anglo-American media. Instead, he presents the harmful effects suffered by the Latino community in the U.S. as a result of these stereotypes promoted by the Anglo-American media. Bender aptly demonstrates the damage caused by the promotion of negative stereotypes, regardless of the ethnic group or source. *Greasers and Gringos* will force readers to question media presentation of Latinos and any other ethnic or minority group in order to avoid these unnecessary harms.

* Chelsy A. Castro is a second-year law student at American University Washington College of Law. She is also pursuing a Masters in International Affairs from American University School of International Service.

¹ BENDER, STEVEN, GREASERS AND GRINGOS: LATINOS, LAW, AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION (2003).

² The masculine form of Latino is used consistently in this piece to refer to both Latinos (males) and Latinas (females).

³ BENDER, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁴ BENDER, *supra* note 1, at 32.

⁵ BENDER, *supra* note 1, at 83-84.