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In this paper, I will focus on 2 cult classics- *Friday* and *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle*. Both movies focus on two friends who smoke weed and find themselves in a multitude of humorous situations. Even though both movies have a lighthearted tone and encourage viewers to also partake in smoke marijuana, the films deal with some heavy topics. Both *Friday* and *Harold and Kumar* try to dismantle racist stereotypes about Black and Asian people. Furthermore, they question what it means to be a man of color in the United States. *Harold and Kumar* sees two young Asian-American men trying to navigate their Asian identities in a world that often (in a comedic way) others them and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about their race. *Friday* has less overtly racial tones, but because the main cast is Black and the movie takes place in a predominately Black and Brown neighborhood, important conversations surrounding race are in the subtext. Ultimately, both movies aim to break and challenge racial stereotypes, such as the model minority myth or how 'violent' life is in inner-city neighborhoods.

In order to challenge stereotypes, one has to challenge hegemonic ideals. Philosopher Antonio Gramsci describes hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (qtd. In Allen, 30). An example of hegemony in today's society is capitalism— we as a society have 'consented' to abide by the ideals of capitalism. A personal example of this is people choosing to attend a school like Northeastern because of its co-op programing being seen as an impressive resume builder. A more systemic example of this would be a pharmaceutical company raising the prices of their medicine because it is more in demand.

Not everyone will ascribe to these hegemonic ideals and will resist them, which is precisely what *Friday* and *Harold and Kumar* are trying to do, in terms of race. However, the

protagonists of both movies are young men, so we must discuss intersectionality and how it impacts the tone of the film.

Intersectionality considers that people have multiple identities that intersect and can influence how a person is treated and sees the world. White men, Black men, and Asian men all have different experiences in life. Yes, they are all men, so they may benefit from patriarchal structures, but the Black and Asian man are at a disadvantage because of their race and will have different experiences not only from White men, but from each other. Additionally, Black and Asian women will have different experiences than their male counterparts. This is where both films tend to fall short in resisting stereotypes. Women are subject to intense objectification and are mostly included only as objects of sexual desire or love interests. However, there are times when there are positive commentaries about gender, such as *Friday* having a throughline about toxic black masculinity and domestic abuse.

These films are important to discuss today because they popular in online internet culture; there are many memes and references to both movies online. These movies still hold up in popularity due to the (at the time) subversive commentaries on race, drug use, and gender, but there are still many shortcomings with how women are portrayed in these films. In fact, the portrayal of women exposes how men of color (particularly cisgendered, straight men) can seek to dismantle systems of power that disenfranchises them but still uphold other systems of power that benefit them. In *Harold and Kumar* and *Friday*, both films seek to dismantle racial stereotypes, but end up enforcing negative portrayals of women. Those negative portrayals of women can and do overshadow the positive portrayals of people of color. In this paper, I will do a textual analysis of both films and how they enforce or resist racial and gender stereotypes.

Literature Review

Comedy duo Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong, better known as Cheech and Chong, are credited with starting the stoner film subgenre, with their film *Up in Smoke* (Rhinestone; Sears & Johnston). Released in 1978, the movie established common tropes for the genre: two protagonists (usually male) are sent on a journey full of hijinks and misadventures in search of weed or typical objects associated with weed, such as junk food (Sears & Johnston). Although movies in this genre have a lighthearted tone, they usually include themes that are concerned with rebelling against patriarchal societal roles. Agatha Rhinestone argues that “the genre and its comedy are formed in reaction to rejection from the father: literally as well as the greater ‘father’ encompassed by institutions such as education, the government, and the nuclear family structure”.

To add to this, Cornelia Sears and Jessica Johnston believe ‘wastedness’ as a prominent element of the stoner genre. Movies such as *Up in Smoke*, *Dude Where’s My Car?*, and *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* focus on both protagonists not living up to the expectations of society and their family, namely their fathers (Rhinestone; Sears & Johnston). Not only are these protagonists not living up to expectations, but they are happy to be perceived as slackers and as ‘others’ (Sears & Johnston). This inherently adds a somewhat anti-capitalist tone to these movies, as these movies inadvertently makes viewers question what laziness is and who defines it (Rhinestone; Sears & Johnston). However, when we add the lens of race to the genre, there is an added level of protagonists not living up to stereotypes related to their race as well as protagonists trying to subvert stereotypes about their race.

In the 1960’s and 70’s there was a shift in how politicians talked about lower-income Americans. Before then, there was a more Christian-like, benevolent approach to people in poverty (Allen; Halper & Muzzio). After that, there became a distinction between ‘deserving’ poor people and ‘undeserving’ poor people (Allen; Halper & Muzzio). The deserving poor are

people who deserve our pity, such as an orphan or someone with a serious illness— they became poor due to chance. The undeserving poor, on the other hand, have distinct qualities that make them poor. They are lazy, unmotivated, and are at fault for their suffering (Halper & Muzzio). It was at that time that the terms ‘war on drugs’, ‘war on poverty’, and ‘culture of poverty’ started to become used more often and these terms had anti-Black connotations (Halper & Muzzio).

Blaxploitation films also popped up during this time, and themes of these films included inner-city life, poverty, and crime (Halper & Muzzio). These movies showed studios that Black audiences were willing to go to the movies and that movies with a majority Black cast can make revenue. By the 1980’s, though, ‘hood movies’, or films about life in the inner-city, became popular. Movies such as *Boyz n The Hood* and *Menace II Society* were applauded for trying to bring marginalized voices into the mainstream and for asking audiences to be understanding of the protagonists (Halper & Muzzio). However, criticized for glamorizing the hood (Halper & Muzzio) and for promoting violent images of Black men (Gray). They were also criticized for portraying housing projects and the ‘hood’ as bleak places with no hope or vibrant culture (Halper & Muzzio).

Gangsta rap was also popular at the time, reinforcing hypermasculine, criminalized images of Black men (Gray). There was a moral panic, and this helped fuel the fears of the wars on crime and poverty (Grey). Rap groups such as NWA were being heavily policed and monitored by police (Rose). Likewise, mainstream music media outlets like MTV were not too keen on playing gangsta rap, due to the perceived criminality of the genre (Rose). Add in the association of drugs such as weed and crack with the Black community, and there were multiple stereotypes about drugs, poverty, and crime that Black men and people had to fight.

Asian men, on the other hand, have had the opposite problem when it comes to representation. One major stereotype that was promoted in film was yellow peril through the

characters Fu-Manchu and Charlie Chan (Kawai; La Force) Yellow peril happened in the late 1800's and early-mid 1900's, with the rise of China and Japan's influence (Kawai). White Americans were nervous that Asian people would outnumber them and gain more influence. This fear also led to policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act being passed. Fu-Manchu was a popular character that promoted this image. His character tapped into the fear of Asian men being highly intelligent, calculating, and ruthless (Kawai). Charlie Chan was a more submissive character, but also played into stereotypes about strictness (La Force).

The model minority stereotype has a different message than yellow peril. Instead, Asian Americans are seen as people with good work ethic, family values, and are smart (Kawai). This stereotype worked to drive a wedge between Asians and other people of color, namely Blacks and Latinos. It blamed Black and Latino people for their problems; the United States cannot be racist if Asian people are able to succeed, so other races just need to work harder (La Force). Even though this may sound like a positive stereotype, it is not. Asian people are seen as less kind, courageous, and likeable (La Force). The model minority myth says that Asian people are intelligent, but that's about it— they are not creative, personable, or have sexual desires (La Force; Walzem).

Many portrayals of Asian men have emasculated them and made them devoid of any sex appeal or attractiveness. For example, in the movie *Romeo Must Die*, it is implied that Jet Li and Aaliyah's characters are supposed to be romantic interests. But there is barely any physical affection shown while on screen. At the end of the film, the two characters have a friendly hug, and not a kiss (Walzem). In the movie *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, the actor that is portraying Bruce Lee is likened to a prepubescent boy; the camera focuses on how he has little to no facial hair and his body is feminized (Walzem).

Another group of people that are portrayed in stoner films but are not represented properly are women. As stated earlier, most of the movies in the genre focus on male protagonists. Women barely are supporting characters and usually love interests, or, they are there for the sole purpose of looking at them (Sears & Johnston).

In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey discusses how films can encourage viewers to participate in scopophilia, or gaining pleasure from looking at an object or an item. She contrasts scopophilia from voyeurism, saying that “voyeurism has associations with sadism” (64). Scopophilia has no guilt or humiliation component to it, in fact, men are supposed to take pride in enjoying looking at women (Mulvey). She also mentions how the male gaze has a Freudian aspect to it as well. She says that men feel the need to constantly look at women because they do not have a penis (64). A lack of penis can cause castration anxiety, and therefore the object of desire (women) needs to constantly be under the gaze so that men can control their anxieties (Mulvey 64). Mulvey also argues that a woman’s lack of penis can be seen as the main defining feature that separates a man from a woman. Stoner films can also have this psychoanalytic lens to it. It can be argued that a joint, blunt, or any other smoking device is a phallic object, and that there are homoerotic subtexts in the genre (Rhinestone). The lack of women in stoner films (unless they are being objectified) is related to a fear of seeing women as actual people and not objects (Rhinestone). One of the main ways that these women are objectified is through the male gaze.

Gaze is a concept that is taken from the aforementioned essay written by Mulvey. It describes how films are filmed from a certain point of view– with the most prevailing gaze being the male gaze. In 2019, filmmaker Nina Menkes gave a talk discussing how certain shots in a film promote said gaze. Point-of-view, or POV shots are very common in films. However, we mostly see women from the POV of a male. Likewise, we see body framing, such as closeups on

a woman's behind, chest, or legs as being a common technique. There are a few subtle techniques such as lighting and camera position; filmmakers tend to film women from above and literally cast them in a light that male actors were not in (Armstrong).

In this paper, I hope to put racial stereotypes and male gaze in conversation with each other, as it would be beneficial to explore how marginalized people can still be complicit in marginalizing others. It is especially interesting to look at it through a niche genre such as stoner comedies because the genre itself deals with being on the margins of society; potheads are seen as lazy and unproductive members of society and at the release of these films, weed was not legalized in any state. Even though the genre is trying to challenge people's thinking in a comedic way, it still reinforces harmful depictions of women.

Analysis

Friday

Friday follows two friends, Craig and Smokey, for the duration of an entire Friday. Smokey, who is a pothead, received a lot of weed from the local drug dealer, Big Worm, on the premises that he would sell it. Instead, he ends up smoking it all and owes Big Worm \$200. Smokey then gets Craig involved after Big Worm came to his house to ask for the money. As they go about their day thinking of ways to get the money, multiple events happen, such as a neighborhood bully, Deebo, robbing a house with Smokey, and Craig's girlfriend breaking up with him. At the end of the film, Craig and Smokey end up getting the money, but Big Worm is upset that it took them too long to get the money. Smokey claims he will stop smoking weed because all it causes him is trouble, but he does not learn his lesson and the movie ends with him smoking a joint.

The film, overall, tries to portray a more positive view of the actual inner city. The beginning montage plays soul music and shows various residents of this mostly Black neighborhood going about their day. The movie itself is bright and colorful, it does not depict the neighborhood as drab, lifeless, and depressing. This goes against mainstream depictions and conversations about inner city life, which claims that inner city neighborhoods are rife with violence and have no culture.

Friday also shows inhabitants of inner-city neighborhoods in a positive light and seek to dismantle negative stereotypes. For example, Craig is depicted as being part of a traditional nuclear family. Both his mom and dad are married and present in his life, and he has a younger sister. Compare this to the stereotypes about single motherhood and absent fathers. Another example of breaking stereotypes in *Friday* is one of Craig and Smokey's neighbors, Stanley. Stanley is shown to be more 'uppity'— he gets the newspaper in a velvet robe and slippers, he does not speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and it is presumed that he has quite a bit of money. His character also shows that it is not one type of Black person that lives in the hood. By depicting a wide range of Black experiences, we can challenge the idea that all Black people have the same exact lived experiences.

Throughout the film, both men struggle with what it means to be a man. Craig's parents are annoyed with him because he does not have a job. Likewise, they find Smokey to be lazy and a bad influence. Smokey, on the other hand, has a mom that is not as involved as Craig's parents, but she too is annoyed that her son does not have his life together. So, from early on it is established that in order to be a man you must provide for the household, and if you don't, then you are not a real man. Craig especially seems to struggle with this, as he wants to be seen as manly. Smokey, on the other hand, is less concerned with that and is more in pursuit of getting

his next high. Craig seems to be annoyed that he cannot fit the ideal of what a man should be, but Smokey is upset that there is an ideal to begin with.

Another way they navigate manhood is through violence. There are depictions of violence in this movie, but they are not graphic or fatal when compared to other movies that take place in similar backgrounds, such as *Menace II Society*. Instead, there is an air of humor surrounding the violent incidences in this movie, and violence is treated as not just a way to prove you are a man, but as a fact of life.

Craig's father finds out that Craig has a gun, and he tells him that toting a gun is not what would make him a real man. He goes on to say that hand-to-hand combat is the real way to become a man, as it forces you to understand how to lose a fight. which I found to be interesting. First, it is ironic that Ice Cube would include this scene in the movie. As mentioned in the previous section, Ice Cube was a member of NWA, a rap group that was criticized for promoting violent images of Black men. This scene could be interpreted as Ice Cube talking to his past self. Guns can bring unnecessary fear and suffering onto a community. Likewise, this scene seems to be both bolstering and tearing down toxic masculinity. As someone who grew up in an inner-city neighborhood, one common criticism I have heard from older men is that younger men became 'soft' because of guns. Instead of facing a potential beatdown and accepting that fact that one may lose, younger men are trigger happy and would rather kill than physically fight. This perspective is understandable. Part of being a man is accepting your shortcomings and to be humble in the face of humility. However, the fact that violence is being seen as a way to be a man is problematic. The film does not question why we socialize boys to be violent, nor does it comment on why that socialization can be detrimental to young boys.

The film also shows that violence can be the answer to your problems. *Friday* ends with Craig beating up Deebo because he was abusing women. This is also a way that the movie tried

to combat stereotypes about Black men. Black men do have morals and will protect women in their community, not all Black men are senselessly violent. One thing that I appreciate about *Friday* is that it does acknowledge that there are some bad actors in the Black community, but obviously not every Black man is like that.

There is also a varied portrayal of Black women in the film as well. There are female characters that have more of a positive image, such as Craig's mom, sister, and crush. Craig's sister is shown to be more successful than Craig— she has a job, has good grades, and does not do drugs or party. Craig's mom is also shown to have a job and to be involved with her family. His crush, Debbie, is friends with his sister and she too is smart, articulate, and successful. They do not fit the stereotype of an angry Black woman.

However, these more positive portrayals are overshadowed by the characterization of other women in the film. One prominent example is how we are introduced to Debbie. when we are first introduced to her, we are seeing her from Smokey and Craig's point of view. She is out jogging, and the movie shows her jogging in slow motion to highlight her breasts bouncing. Even though the movie tried to develop her as a character, she was not immune to be sexualized. There is also the constant sexualization of Mrs. Parker. When her character was introduced, the camera situates us from Smokey and Craig's point of view. There are extended shots of her body, the camera pans up her legs and accentuates her chest and behind. Smokey also makes lewd comments about wanting to have sex with her, even though she is supposed to be married. Throughout the movie, she is only mentioned in connection with sex.

Lastly, there is the problematic treatment of women who are not deemed sexually desirable. They are treated as if they are subhuman. Debbie's sister, Felisha, is supposed to be a crackhead. She is presented as a fiend, she will do anything to get crack, including doing sexual acts. Craig and Smokey are very dismissive of her, even though they both are caught up in the

world of drugs as well. Felisha does not get the same point-of-view shots that Mrs. Parker or her sister did. There is also another character, Rita, who is also not considered desirable. Earlier in the film, Smokey talked to her over the phone. He was excited to meet her, as he did not really know what she looked like. However, when we see Rita, it's revealed that she is plus-sized and is bald. Smokey is unattracted to her and starts to insult her appearance. *Friday* seems to imply that unattractive women are not worthy of anything—love, friends, or attention.

All in all, *Friday* seeks to get rid of hegemonic ideals pertaining to Blackness. There is not one way to be Black, Black people are not inherently violent, and, there is beauty and culture in the hood. But, this is overshadowed by the objectification of women and the treatment of women who are considered to be unattractive.

Harold and Kumar go to White Castle

Harold and Kumar go to White Castle has a similar format to *Friday*. We follow the two protagonists, Harold, and Kumar, as they try to go to White Castle. The only problem is that the closest White Castle to them closed, so they have to go a further distance to get to the nearest restaurant. While on the way to White Castle, they also end up in multiple scenarios, such as performing a surgery, getting arrested, and they even befriend a cheetah that escaped from the local zoo. They also encounter outlandish and comedic racist abuse from co-workers, neighbors, and random people that they meet. At the end of the film, Harold and Kumar end up making it to White Castle, satisfying their cravings.

Towards the end of the movie, Kumar talks about how White Castle is a stand in for the American Dream; their trek to White Castle can be compared to the journey their immigrant parents took to the United States. Even though that scene was meant to be comedic, this film can

be interpreted as two young Asian American men trying to achieve their American Dream, which is smoking weed. Furthermore, their navigation of the American Dream also forces them to explore their Asian identities and what it means to be Asian.

First off, the fact that there are two Asian protagonist in a stoner film already calls the model minority stereotype into question and challenges our perception of Asian Americans. Asian Americans are not often portrayed as crude, pot smoking slackers. Additionally, the characters in the film are acutely aware of this. Weed is not only a drug that they use to relax, it is a way for them to rebel against societal standards. The model minority stereotype is constantly brought up either overtly or subtly, and most of the film focuses on how Harold and Kumar perceive themselves and their Asian heritage.

Being Asian is both a source of pride for Harold and Kumar and the reason for their suffering. They both struggle with trying not to fit the mold of a model minority. Harold works as an accountant in an office and his White co-workers continuously push their work off onto him because 'Asians like math'. They also assume he has no social life and that he is a nerd. It's clear that Harold is seen as a model minority by his co-workers. Because of this intense workplace bullying, Harold somewhat rejects his community. There is a woman who is a family friend of Harold's and goes to Princeton. She invites Harold to a Chinese student association party, but Harold is reluctant to go because he harbors internal racism. He assumes that everyone in the group are nerds, only talk about doing schoolwork, and don't know how to have fun—much like the stereotypes his co-workers have of him. However, he goes to the party and sees that the Chinese students know how to have fun! He's pleasantly surprised and after that scene, we see a clear change as to how Harold perceives himself. He eventually stands up to his racist co-workers and gains more pride in being Asian.

Kumar, on the other hand, does not outwardly struggle with being Asian like Harold does, but he also has the very real fear of conforming to stereotypes. His father and brother are surgeons, and there is pressure on him to attend medical school. At the beginning of the movie, Kumar purposefully bombs his medical school interview by being unprofessional because he thinks that becoming a doctor is uncool. But his father sees him as a slacker and gets upset that he ruined the interview. Kumar doesn't seem to be bothered by this; he was only agreeing to apply to medical schools so that his father would keep contributing for their rent. However, it is revealed that Kumar has an almost God-like gift for medicine. He successfully performs a surgery at the hospital his father and brother work at because one of the White staffers mistook him for his brother. After doing the surgery, Kumar realizes that it is not the end of the world if one conforms to some stereotypes.

However, one notable way that Kumar does not conform to stereotypes is his sexual prowess. He does not have trouble talking to or dating women. In fact, he seems to be a ladies' man— throughout the film he is flirting with various different women. He also talks about women in a derogatory way. He refers to them as 'sweet pussy' or he hyper fixates on certain parts of the body, such as a woman's breasts. This is where the conversation surrounding the objectification of women becomes tricky, especially in regards to this film. For years, Asian men have been depicted as sexless beings that are incapable of having any sort of sex appeal. Kumar goes against that, which is important. But his nonconformity is problematic because the way he refers to and talks about women is harmful. It's as if he does not see them as real people.

Harold, once again, differs from Kumar because he does have trouble talking to women. He is crushing on Maria, a woman who lives in his and Kumar's building. He always gets super nervous around her and always fumbles his words. By the end of the movie, though, he musters up the courage to ask her out, and they get married later on in the franchise. Now, Maria's

depiction was not 'problematic' per se, but when we look at how women as a whole are portrayed in the movie, there is a big problem.

In contrast to *Friday*, there are no women in the main cast and the only women with speaking roles are potential love interests. Also, these love interests are shown to be actual humans, with thoughts and feelings. For instance, Maria is not objectified heavily because she is supposed to be pure. But other women in the movie are heavily objectified. There is a notable scene where Neil Patrick Harris (also called Neil Patrick Harris in the *Harold and Kumar* universe) is snorting cocaine off of topless strippers. There is also another scene, where a tow truck driver's wife strips for Harold and Kumar. Both scenes include shots from a male's point of view. These women are not meant to be thought of as actual people. They are just meant to be seen as objects of desire.

As mentioned earlier, this idea of women being seen as sexually attractive by Asian men can be hard to navigate because of the model minority stereotype. Adding those scenes make Harold and Kumar personable because audiences who may have held prejudiced beliefs may relate to them, as they act like 'one of the boys'. But, this type of representation is harmful to women. Is it really that beneficial to have these scenes because it harms other groups? It is hypocritical for a film to criticize the plight of Asian men while upholding patriarchal ideals for women.

Harold and Kumar tries to shatter the model minority stereotype by having two Asian male leads be stoners who are crude, rude, and lewd. They struggle with accepting certain parts of their own identity in relation to being Asian, and show strong character development throughout. Unfortunately, the lack of positive female representation can be too big to ignore for female audiences.

Conclusion

Both *Harold and Kumar* and *Friday* seek to dismantle hegemonic stereotypes about Asian and Black people, respectively. They challenge what it means to be a Black or Asian man in America; they also question what it means. The films also question racial stereotypes in general. However, as both movies have male leads, there is a huge problem with intersectionality, as women are objectified and viewers are subject to looking at these women through the male gaze. The portrayal of women illustrates how men of color can criticize systems of power that disempower them but still uphold other systems of power that benefit them. In *Harold and Kumar* and *Friday*, both films seek to dismantle racial stereotypes, but end up enforcing negative portrayals of women. Those negative portrayals of women can and do overshadow the positive portrayals of people of color.

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