

Suburban Dystopia, Racial Stereotypes, and Drug Use in Showtime's *Weeds*

Douglas E. Forster

Introduction

Cable television network Showtime's *Weeds* (Kohan, 2005–2012) debuted on August 7, 2005 and became an instant hit, generating the network's highest ratings with the premier of the fourth season attracting 1.3 million viewers. The show is a dark American comedy that centers around Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker), a stay-at-home mother whose husband suddenly died of a heart attack, forcing her to find a way to support her family and maintain their middle-class lifestyle in the fictional suburban town of Agrestic, California, which was filmed in the Southern California suburban community of Stevenson Ranch. Rather than finding a "real" job with a paycheck, Nancy begins to sell marijuana to her neighbors whom seem desperate to escape the banality of their suburban lives.

The first three seasons of the show opened with Malvina Reynolds' 1962 song, "Little Boxes," a political satire of conformist, middle-class suburban life in seemingly identical houses ("little boxes") of different colors that are "all made of ticky-tacky" (which refers to the home's shoddy stucco construction), and "all look the same." While the show follows the conventions of a U.S. situation comedy, it is, according to Glaister (2005: Online), "far edgier than the complacent high-gloss universe of *Desperate Housewives*" (Cherry, 2004–2012). However, unlike *Housewives*, which "deals with the fantasy of life and death in a gated community, *Weeds* . . . sticks closer to the real world" (Glaister, 2005), and "is perhaps the most incisive at revealing what bubbles behind the closed doors of America's identical suburban homes" (Miranda, 2006: Online).

Indeed, the show is more than a satire on drug use in American suburbia because it begs the question: “*Why* are so many middle-class Americans so desperate to get stoned?” As Tonye Patano, who plays Heylia James, Nancy’s pot supplier, points out, marijuana is not the main theme of the show. “It’s much more than that . . . The big questions (the show) raises are so much more interesting: ‘Why do people do it?’ ‘What do people really need in their lives?’” (Associate Press, 2005: Online). These are the questions this paper will address.

Suburban Dystopia

Subverting the American suburbs is nothing new for Hollywood films and U.S. television shows. A good example is the film *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998), which presents a sharply contradictory vision of suburban life. While on the surface the film projects all that seems good about life in the American Eisenhower-era suburbs — the ideal nuclear family living the ideal life in the ideal house; the milkman making his neighborhood deliveries, etc. — the film also challenges and questions popularly conceived concepts of suburban bliss. Ulaby (2006: Online) rightly points out that in “American fiction, TV and film, suburbia has long stood as shorthand for repression. It’s a place of ‘wide lawns and narrow minds,’ as Earnest Hemingway put it” (Hemingway was referring to Chicago suburb of Oak Park, where he grew up). Still, suburban life has long been viewed as socially enviable in the United States, and it continues to be where many Americans choose to live in search of the “good life.”

As Dickinson (2006) puts it, the suburbs, “in all their shifting visual, cultural, political, and economic forms, are now central to everyday American life” (215). According to Hayden (2003), more Americans live in the suburbs today than in urbanized areas. In fact, they “are the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies,” serving as “a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and social uplift” (3). However, living in the suburbs presents a paradox: the “dilemma of how to protect ourselves and our children from danger, crime, and unknown others while still perpetuating open, friendly, neighborhoods and

comfortable, safe homes" (Low, 2003: 11). In other words, while suburbia may be seen as "bland" and "conformist," a place devoid of emotions and passion, it also offers a sense of security and acceptance, which makes the prominent presence of marijuana use in *Agrestic* all the more ironic.

Weeds attempts to subvert suburban modernity, inviting the audience "to situate their opinions about marijuana amid spheres of bourgeois soccer-moms, class politics, turf wars, raw economics, violent milieu, and multicultural heterogeneity" (Lavoie, 2011: Online). The show thus reflects how "the modern American suburb is constantly being reconstructed and reexamined" (Kirby, 2007: Online). Whereas the suburbs were once viewed as "the paradise of American life," they have "now become not-so-dissimilar to perceptions of urban dwelling, a place of death, disillusionment, and degradation, the site of Columbine and sprawl" (ibid.). While life does seem peaceful in *Agrestic*, morality is most certainly not absolute. For example, one of Nancy's regular customers, Doug Wilson (Kevin Nealon), is a pothead C.P.A. who is on the city council. Doug does whatever he wants whenever he wants, and most of the time he is stoned. Although he has a position of authority, he is willing to abuse it to benefit both himself and his pot-smoking friends. Clearly, *Weeds* is both questioning and parodying suburban morality.

Consider Willard (2007), who states that "not very long ago, people still generally assumed that traditional moral rules and order were a good thing," and people living in the suburbs "did not routinely do what they felt like doing but did what they were supposed to do" (152–153). Thus, *Weeds* reflects the fact that exposing "the presumably dirty underside of such an 'ideal' suburban existence as a major and constantly reiterated theme is only quite recent" (ibid.) in Hollywood films and television shows.

Subverting Race in Suburbia

American television shows have long used the suburbs as their setting, and particularly in the 1950s and 60s, the inhabitants of these fictional suburban towns have been predominately white. In fact, part of the perceived "safety" of the suburbs is that they are far removed from the racial tension and violence

that plague many American cities. Many Americans still wax nostalgic for the peace, stability, and wholesomeness found in popular sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* (Russell & Tewksbury, 1954–1960), *Leave it to Beaver* (Connelly, Conway & Mosher, 1957–1963), and *The Donna Reed Show* (Roberts, 1958–1966). Overtly absent in these shows, as well as in the real life suburban communities they depicted, were people of color. In fact, in these early shows there was no indication whatsoever “that people of color could be part of this utopian mode of living” (Smukler, 2008: Online).

The two exceptions were *Beulah* (Yarbrough, 1950–1953) and *The Amos 'n Andy Show* (Gosden & Correll, 1951–1953). *Beulah* was an American situation comedy noted for starring the first African American actress (Ethel Waters, 1950–1951 and Louise Beavers, 1952). The main character, Beulah, was known as “the queen of the kitchen,” and like many future “black angel / helper” characters on TV and in films, she was able to offer advice to or solve problems for her white employers. As Mukherjee (2006) states: “The positioning of black characters as ‘helpers’ serving to rehabilitate white protagonists . . . is a familiar trope” (95). And Gooding-Williams (1993) quotes Toni Morrison who “reads these black nurses and helpers as ‘a useful, convenient, and sometimes welcome means for propping up and stabilizing the patriarchal and capitalistic social order’” (162). Similarly, Levering-Lewis (2001: Online) notes that “‘the role of the African American as surrogate for the troubles and malefactions of white people is as old as the Republic, a part carefully scripted in the antebellum South and archetypically acted out in American literature from Harriet-Beecher Stowe to William Faulkner and beyond’” (Mukherjee, 2006: 95). *The Amos 'n Andy Show*, adapted from radio in which two white men provided the voices for the lead characters, centered on two African American friends, Andy (Spencer Williams) and Kingfish (Tim Moore), and drew much criticism, particularly from the NAACP, for portraying “caricatures of black men as lazy, dimwitted, clownish, and dishonest” (Smukler, 2008: Online). Under such strong criticism from the NAACP, CBS cancelled the show in 1953, and as a result, “[no] black families were depicted as television characters again until fifteen years later, in the 1968 show *Julia*” [Kanter, 1968–1971] (Douglas, 2003, 141). It wasn’t until the 1970s that black sit-

coms, such as *Good Times* (Monte & Evans, 1974–1979), *Sanford and Son* (Yorkin, 1972–1977), and *The Jeffersons* (Nicholl, Ross & West, 1975–1985) became mainstream. And it wasn't until *The Cosby Show* (Weinberger, Leeson & Cosby, 1984–1992) that a black sitcom became popular with white viewers. These were successful shows “comprised of all black casts” that “told the stories of multi-class, non-white families” (Smukler, 2008: Online).

Weeds, on the other hand, takes the familiar and traditional suburban themes of family, home and work and “twists the formula by introducing foreign factors such as race, urban settings, and illegal drug trade” (ibid.). And unlike television shows in the 1950s and 60s, where conflict always found a harmonious resolution, *Weeds* centers around domestic chaos rather than harmony. In fact, *Weeds* “concludes each episode with a problem so huge that any chance at resolution and reconciliation . . . seems utterly impossible” (ibid.). Indeed, the suburban home no longer offers nurture or safety. In the midst of this chaos, Nancy seems to find not only momentary solace, but truth and sincerity when she visits the home of Heylia James, her pot supplier. Nancy “becomes a different person as soon as she walks into Heylia’s overpopulated kitchen” where “she can be herself” (Wiegand, 2005: Online).

Weeds relies heavily on social and racial stereotypes for much of its comedic effect, and Heylia is no exception. The matriarchal figure Heylia “is portrayed every bit as stereotypically as the characters of suburbia . . . a large, angry black woman that’s good at cooking and a mother to an unwed daughter with a new-born” (Casnellie, 2009: Online). In addition, Love (2009: Online) points out that “Heylia’s unwed, pregnant daughter is not presented as some sort of conflict for any of the characters involved, but instead the audience is to understand her situation as one so obvious and typical of the black community that no mediation or intervention of any type need be mentioned.” At first, Heylia’s family seems “to embody the most egregious of African-American stereotypes (buying fancy tire rims for their broken-down hoopties, arguing over recipes for cornbread)” (Stevens, 2005: Online), but they also show more unity and strength than Nancy’s broken family. For Stevens, the “general message about racial relations . . . seems to be that this overprivileged and

still-grieving white woman needs the grounding and humor that her alternative black family provides.” And as Love (2009: Online) states: “The show communicates a reality that because Conrad [Romany Malco] and Heylia are black, they have some implicit knowledge about how to sell drugs. If Nancy is to succeed in her drug dealings, she is to do as Conrad and Heylia advise, for they are all knowing and potentially dangerous, while Nancy is to be understood as harmless and naïve.” In other words, if a suburban middle-class white woman wants to succeed as a criminal, she had better enlist the help of blacks who have the experience and knowhow.

Some of the stereotypes seem more serious, however. For example, in the fifth episode of season one, “Lude Awakening,” Heylia’s son Conrad, Nancy and Heylia are in the kitchen talking about Nancy’s recent success at drug dealing when suddenly the house gets shot at and everyone ducks for cover. Once the shooting stops, Nancy is clearly in shock while Heylia and Conrad seem unfazed by what has just happened. When Nancy asks if they should call the police, Heylia laughs, drawing the scorn of Conrad who tells her to back off because she (Nancy) just had her “shootin’ cherry broke.” The message here is clear: it is normal for black drug dealers to get shot at in their homes. This idea is summed up by Heylia who tells Nancy: “White folks get soda pop, niggas get bullets.” However, Patano points out that everyone in *Weeds* is stereotyped at first, but as you get to know the characters better, they become less stereotyped and more real as people. For Smukler (2008: Online), Heylia represents “an added show of distorted and reconfigured domesticity” because she “not only traffics marijuana, and extremely unladylike profession due to its illegality and potential danger, but business is always conducted in the midst of the most traditional female duties; while baking cookies, or making lunch, Heylia weighs bags of drugs on her kitchen counter, often times wearing an apron.” Clearly, she is no Donna Reed or June Cleaver, though she embodies their domesticity.

Racially, then, Nancy’s relationship with Heylia is quite significant because Nancy must leave the perceived safety of her white suburban home in search of economic stability through selling drugs, which represents “a shock to the

suburban system she comes from" (Smukler, 2008: Online). Furthermore, because Nancy "must learn how to maintain a home from exactly the image her community, historically, was made to reject — the inner city resident and their dwelling — is an added jab at tradition" (ibid.). Heylia, then, is very much unlike the character Beulah, "a stereotypical black female domestic worker," because "while she is still giving middle-class, suburbanite women advice from the kitchen . . . it is [now] from a place of true authority, her own kitchen where she runs a profitable, self-made business" (ibid.). However, any social "progress" that seems to have been made by American blacks is negated in *Weeds* by portraying them as criminals, albeit smart and savvy ones.

Rather than shying away from racial issues, Showtime's *Weeds* embraces them in what can be viewed in a "reflexive, postmodern way" (Trojan, 2012: Online). In other words, the producers are attempting to draw "attention to the elements of racism that exist in modern day society — both blatantly and beneath the surface" (ibid.). Within the first ten minutes of the pilot episode, for example, we find Heylia in the kitchen baking cornbread and the following exchange with Nancy takes place:

Heylia: You callin' black people stupid?
 Nancy: And lazy and they also steal.
 Heylia: Oh, but we sing and dance real good.

This very short exchange is steeped in racial stereotypes of black people: they are stupid and lazy, they steal, and they are good at singing and dancing. Given such blatant racist remarks in the dialog (and there are plenty more), one might wonder why black actors would agree to play such stereotypical roles. For Romany Malco (Conrad), "by adhering to certain stereotypes, the show dispels others. 'You got a black man selling drugs. But he's cerebral and subtle, not the reactionary guy you're accustomed to seeing [Strauss, 2007: Online]" (Trojan, 2012: Online).

Still, we must question if *Weeds* is truly being progressive about racism. While Heylia and Conrad are definitely not portrayed as being lazy or stupid — at least when it comes to surviving in the drug trade business — Nancy,

despite her immaturity, stupidity, and poor choices, “still comes out on top, while the black characters, however devoted to their craft they are, are still portrayed as drug dealers, unwed mothers, and sassy urban characters” (ibid.). There are other, more subtle examples that expose the racial inequality that still exists in America. For example, when Nancy opens a fake bakery as a front for selling pot, Conrad points out that “banks . . . will only give loans to white dealers.” As Long (2008) states: “the show’s black characters make frequent though fleeting references to the discrepancies that characterize their positions in contrast to Nancy’s” (107). And Baye (2005: Online) complains: “‘Weeds’ may provoke some African-Americans to sigh, ‘Here we go again.’ I mean, why else would a white widow who chooses to make money peddling marijuana to her white-bread neighbors . . . have to get her supply from black folks? . . . if it was crack, maybe, but weed? Please. Everybody knows that when you want marijuana direct from the source, you don’t go to the ghetto. You go to the white folks who grow the stuff.” Therefore, perhaps *Weeds*’ popularity is limited to an American white audience whose only “knowledge” about blacks is what they hear and see on television and in Hollywood movies.

But it is not only the black characters in the show that are racially stereotyped. Because of the criminal element in *Weeds*, racial differences are further reinforced. For example, Hispanics are portrayed in a particularly bad light, dealing not only marijuana but also heroin, smuggling weapons and prostitutes across the border, and killing anyone who gets in their way. Whites, on the other hand, are dealt with “in the realm of white collar crime. From bribery, to hiring illegal aliens, to corporate fraud, there exists a distinct difference between white crime and colored crime — a divide that Nancy Botwin manages to straddle and exploit” (Long, 2008, 107). For example, she agrees to smuggle drugs across the border for Guillermo (Guillermo Diaz) because “Mexican border customs doesn’t bat an eyelash at a touristy looking white woman the way they would with a black man” (ibid.).

Consider the character Sucio (Ramón Franco) from the fifth season, who “is explicitly characterized solely as a ‘dirty Mexican’ — his name literally means dirty” (DMJ, 2010: Online). As Trojan (2012: Online) rightly claims:

"While the writers certainly meant this as a commentary on the way white society views the Hispanic community, the reference falls short with a white audience that likely doesn't understand Spanish, making the statement less social commentary and closer to true racism." Guillermo, who is actually supposed to be Puerto Rican, plays a merciless drug dealer who traffics not only drugs, but also prostitutes, across the California / Mexican border. And Cesar (Enrique Castillo), while seeming level-headed and reasonable, turns out to be a cold-blooded killer when he orders Sucio to continue torturing DEA agent Phil Schlatter (Andrew Rothenberg) by grinding his skin off with an electric sander.

A milder, though still important example, is Nancy's Latino housekeeper, Lupita (Renee Victor). Even though the setting of *Weeds* is Southern California, where the Hispanic population now represents the largest ethnic group (over 40 percent), Lupita is the only Hispanic character who is not portrayed as a criminal. And "when Nancy gets upset that . . . Lupita won't clean the dishes, she threatens to find a new housekeeper, as if housekeepers are disposable utensils . . . like paper towels" (Love, 2009: Online). In short, the Hispanic characters in *Weeds* are portrayed as threatening and menacing, or at the very least, they cannot be trusted.

Perhaps the racial stereotypes in *Weeds* "balance out," so to speak, in the show's portrayal of suburban whites as well. Gonzalez (2005: Online) goes so far as to state: "Weeds isn't racist because the whites seem to be cut from the same stereotypical cardboard as the blacks." Take Celia (Elizabeth Perkins) who is portrayed as "a ruthless mother, tortured wife and alcoholic, pill-popping mess" (Associated Press, 2005: Online). She is a "calculating and manipulative" woman who "appears to get pleasure out of torturing her husband and daughter" (Goldstein, 2009: Online). As Nancy's neighbor, she "is the embodiment of the Agrestic community ideals of a perfect appearance. She is head of the PTA but her daughter, Isabelle [Allie Grant], in her opinion, does not fit within that desired ideal," referring to her as 'Isa-belly' . . . and frequently makes disparaging comments about her weight" (ibid.). In fact, Celia is obsessed with forcing Isabelle to lose weight, believing "that she is helping

her daughter because the world is so thin obsessed and she is trying to spare her pain later on" (ibid.). For example, in the August 22, 2005 episode, "Good Shit Lollipop," Celia states: "Excuse me for wanting my daughter to be thin and attractive so the world is her oyster . . . it's a cruel world out there for fat girls."

However, Celia's efforts are nothing less than cruel at times. For example, when Celia finds Isabel's secret stash of chocolate in her bedroom, she replaces it with chocolate laxatives, which causes Isabel to have an embarrassing accident at school. In a sense, Celia and Isabel's relationship reflects white suburban America, for it "is symbolic of the desire to have a 'cookie-cutter' lifestyle where everyone is the same" (Goldstein, 2009: Online). Indeed, Celia "seems to value conformity above everything else" (ibid.). This conformity is apparent in the very first episode of season one, when the PTA is debating whether or not to ban sugary soft drinks from the school's vending machines. "Celia argues that diet soda does not constitute a 'sugary' drink and that since many girls in the school are dieting, they should not be denied diet drinks" (ibid.). However, "Nancy argues that the oldest girls in the elementary school are 11 and should not be concerned with diet" (ibid.). Thus, "[f]rom the initial scene, it is made clear to the audience that within this community, appearance and conformity are of utmost importance" (ibid.).

In addition, Celia "voices externally, the racist / racial attitudes the show internalizes. She exemplifies your typical upper-class white bitch who thinks she's better than everyone by nature of wealth, class and race" (Trojan, 2012: Online). Furthermore, when "not marginalizing other races, she fetishizes them" (ibid.) by cheating on her husband with a black man and later boasting about it. In short, Celia "exemplifies white privilege and does so unapologetically. The words that come out of her mouth may seem overly racist and insensitive but she merely serves as a vocal reminder of the reality the show depicts" (ibid.). That may be true, but Celia's dialog in *Weeds* must surely offend many viewers, both white, black and Hispanic.

In the end, we must recognize who is the main audience for *Weeds*. Show-

time is a premium cable television network, which allows it to so freely manipulate racial stereotypes for humor. But as a “premium” (i.e. pay channel), “a luxury good in the truest sense of the word . . . its primary consumers tend to be White, middle to upper-class members of society” (Love, 2009: Online). This is problematic because “while *Weeds* attempts to create humor and entertainment through its employment of such run of the mill stereotypes, it fails to ask an audience that may not have regular interactions with minority communities to question, object, or even contemplate the damaging content that it imparts” (ibid.). Of course, the pat response from the media would certainly be: “It’s *just* a TV show.”

Drug Use in Suburbia

Many viewers might find it hard to accept that the main theme of *Weeds* is not marijuana use, given its seemingly widespread use by white, suburban Americans in the show. In reality, marijuana use *is* widespread in the United States. For example, Hickman (2011: Online) points out that “more than four out of ten Americans have smoked marijuana, as have more than five out of ten Americans in their twenties.” Even in the nation’s capital, Washington D.C., marijuana “plays a big role” and its use “cuts across racial and socioeconomic lines” (Robbins, 2012: Online). For example, Robbins cites a 2011 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report, which found “that about 14 percent of DC residents over age 12 and about 10 percent in Maryland and Virginia had used pot in the past year” (ibid.). Still, we have not answered the question posed in the introduction: *Why* are so many people in the show, and in real life America, smoking marijuana? Is Nancy’s brother-in-law, Andy (Justin Kirk), correct in his assertion that there is “not enough pot in the world to get these people stoned enough to forget where they live”?

According to Elizabeth Perkins, smoking marijuana is not suburbia’s “dirty little secret — it’s every other thing in the show” (Kiwi, 2006: Online). “There are fat camps all over America and every actress in Hollywood is anorexic,” says Perkins. “We’re fighting this dirty war overseas so housewives can drive their (Cadillac SUV) Escalades. And we’re putting out the largest emissions in

the world. Marijuana is innocuous — it's really here nor there. The problem is that we, as Americans, will not give up our lifestyles. Marijuana is just a metaphor for the dirty little secrets underneath this pristine American way of life" (ibid.). Of course, Perkins' comments are nothing new. Consider Grace Metalious's 1956 novel, *Peyton Place*, in which readers became acutely aware of the taboos, including sex, incest, rape, abortion, and class tensions, which always lurked uncomfortably close, just below the surface, but were not brought into clear focus. In contrast, *Weeds* focuses a spotlight on America's widespread use of illegal drugs.

Some claim that *Weeds* reflects how marijuana use in America is becoming more "mainstream." According to Tschorn (2009: Online): "After decades of bubbling up around the edges of so-called civilized society, marijuana seems to be marching mainstream at a fairly rapid pace. At least in urban areas such as Los Angeles, cannabis culture is coming out of the closet." In fact, a 2009 poll found that "56 percent of California voters supported legalizing and taxing marijuana" (ibid.), and references to marijuana are once again becoming prominent in popular music as well as on television and in movies. As Tschorn puts it: "Marijuana's presence on TV and in movies has moved from the harbinger of bad things including murderous rage (Reefer Madness in 1936) to full-scale hauntings (Poltergeist in 1982) and burger runs gone awry (Harold & Kumar go to White Castle in 2001) to being just another fixture in the pop-culture firmament. Cannabis crops up in shows such as *Entourage*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *True Blood*, and *Desperate Housewives*, and even on animated shows such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*" (ibid.).

Indeed, while marijuana remains essentially illegal in the U.S., "public perception (and opinion polls) have shifted plenty over the past two decades, to the point where Showtime's 'Weeds' can run for eight seasons, stoner comedy can become a mainstream movie subgenre, and politicians can feel emboldened to answer the question 'Have you ever smoked it?' with a simple 'yes' instead of 'I experimented with it'" (Seitz, 2011: Online). Case in point: in 2006, then Senator Barack Obama admitted, "When I was a kid, I inhaled." This was in stark contrast to President Clinton's "denial in his 1992 campaign

for president that he had smoked marijuana. 'I didn't inhale,' Clinton said, cementing the idea that he liked to have things both ways" (Seeyle, 2006: Online).

Still others see *Weeds* as glorifying marijuana use. As James Baker stated: "Marijuana use is essentially decriminalized here" (Glaister, 2005: Online). Some complained about the show's marketing campaign for the second season, in which a *Rolling Stone* magazine ad for *Weeds* contained a marijuana-scented strip and "Catch the buzz!" next to it (Figure 1).

This ad provoked a sharp response from Tom Riley, Director of Public Affairs for the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy: "In addition to reciting statistics about marijuana use ('There are more teens in treatment for marijuana than for alcohol dependence — is that funny?'), Riley chided the *Rolling Stone* promotion as all too retro. 'Unless they're going for the over-50



(Figure 1)

demographic, it sounds like their marketing department might be a little out of touch,' Riley said. 'Maybe some baby boomers still find this kind of thing edgy, but young people don't'" (Weinreich, 2006: Online). Weinreich questions why it is okay for Showtime to "make a show glamorizing pot smoking and drug dealing, when they would probably never portray smoking tobacco or the tobacco industry as a positive thing?" (ibid.). This is a problem, she claims, because "by creating sympathetic characters who are engaging in these unhealthy and illegal behaviors, they normalize the behaviors and make them seem like something everybody else is doing. Television plays a huge role in how people construct their perceptions of reality and appropriate behavior" (ibid.). Weinreich also complained: "They will also have ice cream trucks called 'Weeds Munchie Mobiles' (Figure 2) that will pass out Weeds merchandise and brownies at concerts and other events, and street vendors handing out coffee in Weeds cups" (ibid.).

Living in the suburbs have long been considered "safer" than living in urban areas, particularly inner-city areas that are predominately non-white. However, as Goldstein (2009) points out: "Weeds demonstrates that while gated communities are attempting to control external threats, there are often



(Figure 2)

bigger threats from within their own community. There are numerous examples throughout the first season, which illustrate how danger can exist right below the surface of the superficially created 'safe' community" (113). But this leads us to believe that marijuana use is dangerous no matter who is doing it: inner-city blacks or other ethnic groups, or middle-class suburban whites. And if it truly is so "dangerous," why do so many Americans continue to smoke pot?

For many Americans, particularly middle-class whites, living in the suburbs is the norm. And as Dickinson (2006) states, they are "the dwelling places of postmodernity, the loci of everyday lives and practices" (213). In fact, it "is within suburban landscapes that many US Americans stake their claim to the good life" (*ibid.*). But unlike Hollywood movies and television shows that offer a nostalgic, i.e. 1950s, view of the suburbs, *Weeds* offers a contemporary and more "realistic" version of the Southern California suburbs. And perhaps it is location that is key to understanding the pervasiveness of marijuana use both in the show and in real life. With its proximity to Hollywood and a perceived more "liberal" attitude towards drug use than "mainstream" America, marijuana use has been prevalent in California, and especially in the greater Los Angeles area, since the "hippie" 1960s.

Hollywood actors often become spokespersons for legalizing marijuana. Consider a *High Times* (Skye, 2012: Online) interview with Bryan Cranston, who plays Walter White on the cable television AMC Network's hit show *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008 – present). A native of Canoga Park, a suburban enclave in the San Fernando Valley, Cranston grew up during California's "pot ascendance," when marijuana use by teens reached a peak in the late 1970s. When asked for his stance on marijuana, he replied: "I went on Bill Maher's show and publicly said, 'Legalize marijuana.' Marijuana started out with a bad connotation, as you know — but to me, marijuana is no different than wine. It's a drug of choice. It's meant to alter your current state — and that's not a bad thing. It's ridiculous that marijuana is still illegal. We're still fighting for it." Cranston is not alone. Consider the March 6, 2002 ad in *The New York Times* that promoted legalizing medical marijuana, "and was endorsed

by . . . stacks of celebrities, including Bill Maher, Richard Pryor, Anjelica Huston, Hugh Downs, Walter Cronkite, Michelle Phillips, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, Sharon Stone, Lily Tomlin and many others” (Larson, 2003: Online).

In addition to television shows such as *Weeds*, recent Hollywood movies, such as *Pineapple Express* (Green 2008), reflect “the growing trend of movies produced at major studios that feature plots and characters that involve, or even revolve around, weed” (Stone, 2012: Online). But according to Ethan Nadelmann, Executive Director of the Drug Policy Alliance, “dramatic depictions of marijuana are increasingly incidental to the plot, not the thrust of it. ‘It’s normalization,’ he says. ‘It’s not Cheech & Chong, and it’s not “Reefer Madness.” It’s background”” (Lowry, 2011: Online). In the past, many movies and television shows depicted characters who used marijuana and made a joke out of it. For example, the comedy duo Cheech and Chong, “arguably the original ‘pot heads,’ found a wide audience in the 1970s and 1980s for their stand-up routines which were based on the era’s hippie, free love, and drug culture movements” (United Patient’s Group, 2012: Online). Most notable is their 1978 film *Up in Smoke* (Adler & Chong) in which “Cheech and Chong were hilariously stoned all the time and audiences found it entertaining” (ibid.). However, unlike these “stoner films,” *Weeds* makes smoking marijuana commonplace—it’s as if *everybody* in the suburbs is doing it, not just a couple of comedians in a movie.

Conclusion

Perhaps *Weeds* has opened the door for more “pro-pot” television shows, which, more than likely, will have to remain on pay cable television channels. *Weeds* has certainly played a big part in the “increasing normalized depiction of marijuana use on television” (Meslow, 2012: Online). But this does not mean that *all* Americans accept, use, or support the legalization of marijuana. In 2010, for example, Melissa Henson, Director of the Parents Television Council, had a debate on Fox News with Allen St. Pierre, an advocate for the legalization of marijuana. Henson argued that television shows that feature marijuana use, like *Weeds*, “communicate the idea that it’s not only acceptable

behavior, but normal behavior" (ibid.). In other words, if it's on TV in America, it can't be *that* bad . . . can it?

Weeds final episode aired on September 16, 2012, marking the end of its eight-year run on Showtime. According to Lionsgate TV Group President Kevin Biggs: "From a creative standpoint, the show broke a bunch of barriers . . . It became one of the most talked about cable comedies and ushered in a new era. Jenji's unique voice skewered hypocrisy; whether attitudes towards drug use, racism, sexism or suburbia" (Hibberd, 2012: Online). This may be true, but it does not necessarily mean that *Weeds*, or any other television show or movie, had contributed to an increased use of marijuana in America. In fact, while marijuana use increased dramatically in the 1990s — before *Weeds* — "the U.S. has seen a decline in marijuana use among youth over the last decade. By 2007, the percentage of 9th through 12th graders who had ever tried or used marijuana had dropped to 38%" (Zuckerman & Ravichandran, 2010: Online).

It remains to be seen whether or not cable television will create another series with a drug theme. It is interesting to note that the season finale of *Weeds* takes place ten years in the future and marijuana is now legal. In fact, Nancy Botwin and her son, Silas (Hunter Parish) now owns a successful chain of marijuana cafés called Good Seed, which sells marijuana cigarettes called "Puff Dragons," that none other than Starbucks wants to buy. And in the last scene, we find everyone sitting together on the porch sharing a joint, as if it is the most natural thing in the world — like drinking a glass of wine. Does this mean that *Weeds* was pro-legalization of marijuana? Or perhaps the writers just assumed that eventually marijuana would become legal in the U.S., particularly with more and more states tentatively legalizing marijuana for medical use. What is probably more certain is that both Hollywood films and certain television series will continue to examine, poke holes in, parody or critique the dystopia, racism, and — perhaps — drug use in America's suburbs.

Works Cited

- Adler, L. and Chong, T. (Directors). (1978). *Up in Smoke*. United States: Paramount Pictures.
- Associate Press. (July 27, 2005). "Suburbia Meets Pot on Showtime's 'Weeds.'" FoxNews.com. [Online] Available: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,163858,00.html>.
- Baye, B. (August 16, 2005). "'Weeds' Continues to Grow Negative Stereotypes." *National Public Radio*. [Online] Available: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4801619>.
- Casnellie, A. (December 22, 2009). "'Putting the Herb in Suburb': The Use of Stereotypes in the Comedy of Weeds." *The Poetics of Television*. [Online] Available: <http://thepoeticsoftelevision.wordpress.com/2009/12/22/putting-the-herb-in-suburb-the-use-of-stereotypes-in-the-comedy-of-weeds/>.
- Cherry, M. (Creator / Producer). (2004–2012). *Desperate Housewives* (TV series). New York: American Broadcasting Company.
- Connelly, J., Conway, D. & Mosher, B. (Creators). (1957–1963). *Leave it to Beaver* (TV series). New York: American Broadcasting Company.
- Dickinson, G. (July 2006). "The Pleasantville effect: nostalgia and the visual framing of (white) suburbia." *Western Journal of Communication*, Vol. 70, No. 3, 212–233.
- DMJ. (June 29, 2010). "Television: The Erasure of Heylia and Conrad on Weeds." *bitchmedia*. [Online] Available: <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/televism-the-erasure-of-haylia-and-conrad-on-weeds>.
- Douglas, W. (2003). *Television Families: Is Something Wrong in Suburbia?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Gilligan, V. (Creator). (2008 – present). *Breaking Bad* (TV series). New York: AMC Networks.
- Glaister, D. (August 9, 2005). "Conservative U.S. braced for drugs and the suburbs." *The Guardian*. [Online] Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/aug/09/usnews.broadcasting>.
- Goldstein, S. G. (2009). *Not Your Average Criminal: Dexter, Weeds and The Sopranos, Challenging Traditional Media Portrayals*. Master of Arts thesis. School of Criminology. Simon Fraser University. [Online] Available: <http://summit.sfu.ca/item/9414>.
- Gonzalez, E. (August 30, 2005). "Weeds: Season One." *Slant Magazine*. [Online] Available: <http://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/review/weeds-season-one/14>.
- Gooding-Williams, R. (1993). "Look, a negro!" *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*. London: Routledge, 157–177.
- Gosden, F. F. & Correll, C. J. (Creators). (1951–1953). *The Amos 'n Andy Show* (TV series). New York: CBS Television Network.
- Green, D. G. (Director). *Pineapple Express* (film). United States: Columbia Pictures.

- Hayden, D. (2003). *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hibberd, J. (June 13, 2012). "Showtime's 'Weeds' to end this year." *Entertainment Weekly*. [Online] Available: <http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/06/13/weeds-final-season/>.
- Hickman, J. (April 4, 2011). "The Limits of Subversion: Theorizing Weeds." *Like the Dew, A Journal of Southern Culture & Politics*. [Online] Available: <http://likethedew.com/2011/04/04/the-limits-of-subversion-theorizing-weeds/>.
- Kanter, H. (Creator). (1968–1971). *Julia* (TV series). United States: 20th Century Fox Television.
- Kirby, L. A. (Spring 2007). "Interrogating Suburbia in The Virgin Suicides." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Vol. 11, Issue 1. [Online] Available: <http://www.higher-ed.org/AEQ/cho3350w6.htm>.
- Kiwi, C. (August 13, 2006). "Weeds the latest twist on American suburbia . . . and you thought Desperate Housewives was shallow." *Beating*. [Online] Available: <http://www.beating.com/forums/topic/22890-weeds-the-latest-twist-on-american-suburbia/>.
- Kohan, J. (Creator / Producer). (2005–2012). *Weeds* (TV series). New York: Showtime Networks, Inc.
- Larson, D. (June 19, 2003). "Celebrity Stoners." *Cannabis Culture*. [Online] Available: <http://www.cannabisculture.com/articles/2404.html>.
- Lavoie, D. (2011). "Smoking the Other: Marijuana and Counterhegemony in *Weeds*." *Substance Use & Misuse*, Vol. 46, No. 7, 910–921. [Online] Available: <http://informahealthcare.com/doi/abs/10.3109/10826084.2011.570631>.
- Levering-Lewis, D. (August 2, 2001). "Harlem's Visible Man." *The New York Times*. [Online] Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/02/opinion/harlem-s-visible-man.html>.
- Long, A. (2008). *Dealing with Drugs: Gender, Genre, and Seriality in The Wire and Weeds*. Master of Arts thesis, University of Florida. [Online] Available: <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0022225/00001>.
- Love, J. (December 14, 2009). *Weeds: The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side*. [Online] Available: <http://weeds-thegrassisalwaysgreener.blogspot.jp>.
- Low, S. (2003). *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America*. New York: Routledge.
- Lowry, B. (November 19, 2011). "Marijuana on TV: A Budding Acceptance." *Variety*. [Online] Available: <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118046334>.
- Meslow, S. (April 20, 2012). "How TV Fell in Love With Marijuana." *The Atlantic*. [Online] Available: <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/how-tv-fell-in-love-with-marijuana/256169/>.
- Metalious, G. (1956). *Peyton Place*. London: Virago Press Modern Classics.
- Miranda, C. A. (December 20, 2006). "Weeds: Season 1." *Top 10 Everything*. [Online]

- Available: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2011254_2015252_2015246,00.html.
- Monte, E. & Evans, M. (Creators). (1974–1979). *Good Times* (TV series). New York: CBS Broadcasting, Inc.
- Mukherjee, R. (2006). *The Racial Order of Things, Cultural Imaginaries of the Post-Soul Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nicholl, D., Ross, M. & West, B. (Creators). (1975–1985). *The Jeffersons* (TV series). New York: CBS Broadcasting, Inc.
- Reynolds, M. (1962). *Little Boxes* (song). New York: RCA Victor.
- Robbins, A. (February 2012). "High Society: Washington's Love Affair With Marijuana." *Washingtonian*. [Online] Available: <http://www.washingtonian.com/articles/people/high-society-washingtons-love-affair-with-marijuana/>.
- Roberts, W. (Creator). (1958–1966). *The Donna Reed Show* (TV series). New York: American Broadcasting Company.
- Ross, G. (Director). (1998). *Pleasantville* (film). United States: New Line Cinema.
- Russell, W. D. & Tewksbury, P. (Directors). (1954–1960). *Father Knows Best* (TV series). New York: American Broadcasting Company.
- Seelye, K. Q. (October 24, 2006). "Barack Obama, asked about drug history, admits he inhaled — Americas — International Herald Tribune." *The New York Times*. [Online] Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/24/world/americas/24iht-dems.3272493.html?_r=0.
- Seitz, M. Z. (December 1, 2011). "On 'Weed Wars,' drug clichés go up in smoke." *Salon*. [Online] Available: http://www.salon.com/2011/12/01/on_weed_wars_drug_cliches_go_up_in_smoke/.
- Skye, D. (August 16, 2012). "The HIGH TIMES Interview: Bryan Cranston." *High Times*. [Online] Available: <http://hightimes.com/lounge/dskye/7853>.
- Smukler, M. M. (2008). "Race, Suburbia and the Televised American Dream." *UCLA Film & Television Archive*. [Online] Available: http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/Smukler08_ARSC_Award.pdf.
- Stevens, D. (August 5, 2005). "Chronic Condition: Showtime's Weeds offers a fresh token — I mean take — on suburban satire." *Slate*. [Online] Available: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/surfergirl/2005/08/chronic_condition.html.
- Stone, D. J. (2012). "Marijuana in the Movies." *1000 Watts*. [Online] Available: <http://1000watts.info/stories/MarijuanaInTheMovies.aspx>.
- Strauss, G. (August 9, 2007). "Comedy and cast light up 'Weeds.'" *USA Today*. [Online] Available: http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2007-08-08-weeds_N.htm.
- Trojan, G. (July 24, 2012). "Green with Envy: Showtime's Weeds & Racial Tokenism in Suburban Los Angeles." *cinammonandspice: Reflections on all things Obscure and*

- Ordinary*. [Online] Available: <http://cinammonandsilence.com/2012/07/24/green-with-envy-showtimes-weeds-racial-tokenism-in-suburban-los-angeles/>.
- Tschorn, A. (September 7, 2009). "Illegal Chic: Pot is Firing up Mainstream Pop Culture." *Los Angeles Times*. [Online] Available: <http://www.cannabisculture.com/content/illegal-chic-pot-firing-mainstream-pop-culture>.
- Ulaby, N. (October 7, 2006). "Popular Culture's Evolving View of the Suburbs." *National Public Radio*. [Online] Available: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6215779>.
- United Patient's Group. (June 1, 2012). "Medical Marijuana and How Hollywood Influences the Way We Think About It." *United Patient's Group*. [Online] Available: <http://www.unitedpatientsgroup.com/blog/2012/06/01/medical-marijuana-and-how-hollywood-influences-the-way-we-think-about-it/>.
- Weinberger, E., Leeson, M. & Cosby, W. (Creators). (1984–1992). *The Cosby Show* (TV series). New York: National Broadcasting Company.
- Weinreich, D. (August 5, 2005). "Smoldering frustrations in suburbia spark up in Showtime's superb 'Weeds.'" *SFGate*. [Online] Available: <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Smoldering-frustrations-in-suburbia-spark-up-in-2650324.php>.
- Wiegand, D. (August 5, 2005). "Smoldering frustrations in suburbia spark up in Showtime's superb 'Weeds.'" *SFGate*. [Online] Available: <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Smoldering-frustrations-in-suburbia-spark-up-in-2650324.php>.
- Willard, D. (2007). "Liberation Through Sensuality, Cinematic Moral Vision in an Age of Feeling." In R. Douglas Geivett and J.S. Spiegel, eds., *Faith, Film and Philosophy, Big Ideas on the Big Screen*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.
- Yarbrough, J. (Director). (1950–1953). *Beulah* (TV series). Culver City, CA: Hal Roach Studios.
- Yorkin, B. (Producer). (1972–1977). *Sanford and Son* (TV series). New York: National Broadcasting Company.
- Zuckerman, D. & Ravichandran, P. (June 2010). "Marijuana Use Among Youth." *National Research Center for Women & Families*. [Online] Available: <http://www.center4research.org/2010/05/marijuana-use-among-youth/>.