Marijuana, also known as cannabis, has had a long history in California. In the last thirty-five years, law enforcement has regarded possession of marijuana in multiple ways: as a felony punishable by imprisonment, as a misdemeanor, as a medical necessity. Although according to federal law marijuana is illegal under the federal Controlled Substance Act, states such as California have enacted their own statues concerning marijuana. Early in the twentieth century, since the 1907 Poison Act, a number of local and state legislative regulations have steadily increased the penalties for the possession of marijuana in California, treating possession as a felony. However, since the seventies, there has been a steady push in the state to decriminalize the possession of marijuana, and in 1975, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 95 making possession of small amounts of marijuana a civil misdemeanor, rather than a criminal offence. In 1996, California passed Proposition 215, also known as the Compassionate Use Act, legalizing marijuana for medical use. In 2010, California passed State Bill 1449, reducing the penalty for up to one ounce of marijuana possession from a misdemeanor to an infraction.

What has changed during this time? I argue that legislators and voters have been influenced by the changing depiction of marijuana from a dangerous drug to a restricted substance, such as tobacco. One of the ways, we have witnessed this shift is through popular culture, specifically in comical marijuana films. Films such as the 1978 *Up in Smoke*, the 1995 *Friday*, and the 2008 *Pineapple Express* all use a subversive form of humor to challenge the public perception of marijuana use. I argue that these parodic depictions not only influenced public perceptions of the drug, but also influenced the legal shift concerning marijuana use as well.
One of the earliest films of the 20th century addressing the subject of marijuana, *Reefer Madness* (1936) portrays marijuana in a negative light. Threatening dire consequences, *Reefer Madness* in its trailer states that marijuana is a “deadly menace,” “a burning weed with its roots in hell,” a “viscous plant,” and if one partakes in its pleasures it can lead to “violence,” “murder,” and “suicide” (*Reefer Madness*). *Reefer Madness*, with its many negative stereotypes, helped to shape public perception concerning the use of marijuana. Only a year after the film’s released, according to David F. Musto M.D., “the anti-marihuana law of 1937 was largely the federal government’s response to political pressure from enforcement agencies and other alarmed groups who feared the use and spread of marihuana by ‘Mexicans’” (par 1). *Reefer Madness* created a fear within Americans that marijuana is a dangerous narcotic that will destroy the next generation of Americans.

Rhetorically, the film’s message also tied marijuana and its use with security issues. After *Reefer Madness*’s debuted in 1936, people witnessed an increased level of security for the next two decades towards marijuana use: “Most contemporary accounts of marijuana policy argue that the ‘reefer madness’ period in the 1930s brought draconian laws that included the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 and a number of state laws” (Nicholas par 1). The *Reefer Madness* film helped to influence federal and state governments to take up laws opposing the legalization of marijuana. In the succeeding decades, federal and state laws became increasingly punitive, and in the 1950s offenders faced increased jail sentences. The 1960s—the Age of Woodstock—saw increased usage of marijuana as a countercultural sign of resistance, and in the 1970s, California witnessed increased legal actions taken to decriminalize marijuana.

The 1978 film *Up in Smoke*, featuring Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong, challenges existing marijuana stereotypes created from the film *Reefer Madness*. In the film *Reefer Madness*, a young adult after being handed a marijuana cigarette and after smoking the whole thing, drives fast and reckless, running a red light and in turn killing a pedestrian. Cannabis is portrayed in the film as a drug that makes one do irresponsible things such as speeding and running red lights, potentially hurting oneself or others. However in the film *Up in Smoke*, Cheech and Chong smoke a cartoonishly large
marijuana joint while driving. They end up driving slower than the posted speed limit to the point where they come to a complete stop. Cheech asks Tommy Chong, “Hey man, am I driving okay?” to which Tommy Chong replies, “I think we’re parked man” (Up in Smoke). Marijuana is not the performance enhancing drug portrayed in the film Reefer Madness. According to Melinda Ratini, a doctor of osteopathic medicine, one of the physical effects of marijuana is a “slowed reaction time” (par 8). Therefore, it is highly unlikely for the young adult in Reefer Madness to be speeding. Transforming this scene, Cheech and Chong enact this “slowed reaction time” with comic exaggeration, coming to a complete stop; in this comic moment, they appear to be innocent fools, not a threatening menace.

While Reefer Madness essentially tells a morality tale of a young generation destroying itself, Up in Smoke focuses upon two pot-smoking protagonists who miraculously escape prosecution and even death. In the beginning of the film, Chong is approached by his father urging Chong to “get a job” (Up in Smoke). His father gives him an ultimatum: unless his son becomes a mature and accountable adult, he will be sent to an authoritarian military school. Like the parents in Reefer Madness, Chong’s father fears that his child may never mature into a responsible young adult because of his ties to marijuana. Up in Smoke transforms Reefer Madness’ accounts of irresponsible young adults into farce by creating hyper-irresponsible characters such as Cheech and Chong. In the opening scene, Cheech urinates in the laundry basket because he has mistaken it for the toilette. Rather than obey his father, a symbol of authority, Chong goes in search of marijuana and meets his fellow pot smoker, Cheech. While in Reefer Madness, marijuana is regarded as an evil, Cheech and Chong regard it as their quest. In fact, by the end of the movie, these two farcical characters are rewarded with a music contract, rather than the death and destruction promised by Reefer Madness.

In a sly way, Up in Smoke also addresses the xenophobic fear embedded in the Anti-Marihuana law of 1937 (i.e. Americans “[fear] the use and spread of marihuana by ‘Mexicans’”). First of all, both the protagonists are people of color: Cheech is of Mexican descent and Chong is of Asian descent. Second, the two bumbling characters travel to
Mexico, and in their attempt to cross back in the United States, they unknowingly smuggle a large cargo van made entirely out of marijuana (Musto), comically acting out the American fear of the “spread of marijuana by Mexicans.” They are easily able to transport the shaggy green bus at the border, for the inept authorities believe that a group of nuns are the culprits to what should be a major marijuana bust. Cheech and Chong, unaware that they are essentially “felons” transporting drugs into the United States, parody the fear of drugs being transported by criminals south of the border. In truth, Cheech and Chong are both ethnic American characters, and while they transport a large amount of cannabis into the United States, they do so because of the authorities’ dysfunctional attitudes. And because two bumbling and fumbling users of marijuana, such as Cheech and Chong, are able to transport several tons of cannabis across the border, the film satirizes the legal forces, such as the police and the border patrol, as well as the effectiveness of earlier laws such as the 1937 Anti-Marijuana Law, as well as the marijuana laws of the 1970s.

In the 1970s, there were a number of debates concerning marijuana, some arguing that marijuana was a dangerous drug, while others argued that it should be decriminalized. In 1971 Richard Nixon enforced the War on Drugs. However what is interesting to note is that in 1972, “[t]he Shafer Commission recommends that cannabis should be decriminalized for personal use; and that personal cultivation be allowed along with small transfers for no profit” (“Marijuana Law Reform Timeline”). Unfortunately, Nixon and the US Congress rejected the recommendations of the Shafer Commission. In 1976, two years prior to the release of *Up in Smoke*, “Jimmy Carter endorsed the Shafer Commission’s findings and sent a statement to Congress on August 3 asking them to decriminalize cannabis possession in America for adults” (“Marijuana Law Reform Timeline”). Already America is starting to see a positive shift towards the negative widespread views of marijuana. I argue that this shift is in part reflected in films such as *Up in Smoke*.

In fact, *Up in Smoke* also displays the complicity of law enforcement. Instead of engaging in “a war of drugs,” law officers are ineptly attempting to enforce ant-marijuana laws, or passively participating in smoking marijuana, or actively complicit in the sale of
narcotics. In one scene, a pedestrian and a police officer, both of whom are non-smokers of marijuana, are found eating hot dogs after accidentally inhaling some cannabis smoke. Rather than acting violently, they simply voraciously eat hot dogs; *Up in Smoke* is showing its audience how non-violent and, even harmless, marijuana really is. When the inept border patrol completely miss the real smugglers and accuse the nuns of transporting marijuana, the filmmakers are parodying a “drug bust,” showing how innocent people can be in danger of being punished—not by the criminals, but by law enforcement. Finally, one of the police officers, Gloria, actually sells confiscated drugs. Again the film blurs the lines between what is legal or illegal. In turn, in the 1970s, citizens are witnessing this debate in the public arena.

The 1995 *Friday* film featuring Ice Cube, known in the film as Craig, portrays marijuana as a recreational substance. Smokey, Craig’s friend and a pothead in the film, addresses Craig and says, “I know that you don’t smoke weed. I know this. But I’m gonna get you high today, because it’s Friday. You ain’t got no job, and you ain’t got shit to do” (*Friday*). Smokey, a dealer of marijuana for the supplier Big Worm, actually smokes more of his consignment than he sells. For Smokey, marijuana is a substance to enjoy and smoke, especially, during a day when there is nothing to do. By 1995, viewers have a much different attitude concerning marijuana from earlier times. Even in the 1960s, the audience witnessed the early signs of a shift in public perception. In 1968 and 1969, “appellate courts’ challenges to the 1937 *Reefer Madness* anti-cannabis laws force the federal government to create a Controlled Substance Act and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1970” (“Marijuana Law Reform Timeline”). As we saw with the 1970s *Up in Smoke* decades, the public debates about marijuana were reflected in the legal debates and the changing laws. During the 1980s, the county of Los Angeles instituted Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs. Founded in 1983 “as part of a joint effort between the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to ‘break the generational cycle of drug abuse, related criminal activity, and arrest’” (“Is the D.A.R.E. Program good for America’s Kids (K-12)?”). Thus, this debate continued, as the public, as we saw in earlier decades, seemed to be especially concerned with how marijuana was affecting
young people. What is interesting to note is that the *Friday* film precedes in a year’s time the ground breaking legislation within the state of California allowing for the medicinal use of marijuana: Proposition 215, which passed in 1996. Such films as *Friday* reflect differing views of cannabis—for instance, as a recreational drug—but it also satirically points to the socio-political issues of race and class that are also part of the marijuana debate.

*Friday* begins with Craig’s father berating his son for not completing his chores, and then while his father is in the bathroom, he demands that his son comes in and bombards him, chastising him for losing his job and for not being a working responsible adult. Both *Up in Smoke* and *Friday* begin with fathers, as figures of authorities, complaining that their sons have not matured into adulthood because they cannot hold steady employment. In contrast to Chong, Craig is not a habitual marijuana user—in fact, he was just fired from his job, ironically, on his day off. The habitual user in the film is Smokey, who tells Craig that he needs to relax and recreationally enjoy his stash.

The question of marijuana used as a recreational drug has long been debated in California. In an interview with Barack Obama and Barbara Walters, Walters asks Obama the following question: “Do you think marijuana should be legalized?” (Kerlikowske) Obama in addressing the legalization of marijuana responds,

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. But what I think is that, at this point, Washington and Colorado, you’ve seen the voters speak on this issue. And as it is, the federal government has a lot to do when it comes to criminal prosecutions. It does not make sense from a prioritization point of view for us to focus on recreational drug users in a state that has already said that under state law that’s legal” (Kerlikowske)

In *Friday*, however, the idea of marijuana as a personal recreational drug is only one aspect of the film, for it also parodically deals with danger of drug dealers in the community. In the movie, the clear and present danger comes from the aggressive drug dealer known as Big Worm, to whom Smokey owes money. While *Reefer Madness* emphasizes the effects of the potent “dangerous menace” of marijuana on young people and their ability to judge, *Friday* focuses upon a contrasting danger: the threat in the
community surrounding the use of cannabis. In *Reefer Madness*, youths become violent after smoking marijuana even almost to the point of violent insanity. A young woman takes her life by jumping out a window, and a young adult male is framed with the shooting of his sister only within minutes of smoking marijuana. *Reefer Madness* highlights the individual and familial cost, while *Friday* focuses upon the neighborhood, emphasizing that the actions of one person may affect the entire community. In *Friday*, Smokey and Craig are shot at with machine guns from several people in a black van. The cause for the aggression is because they owe the drug dealer Big Worm two hundred dollars. *Friday* demonstrates the present danger two recreational cannabis smokers encounter—especially in terms of the violence generated around the illegal drug.

The film also emphasizes the socio-economic situation in which the two stoner buddies find themselves. Not only are Craig and Smokey unemployed, but the film’s director, F. Gary Gray, depicts the neighborhood struggling with urban issues. In *Friday*, there is never enough food or money to go around, reflecting the lower economic living conditions in this small African American Los Angeles-based suburb. In the morning, Craig is seen trying to fix himself up a bowl of cereal; however, there is no milk. Money seems to always be a problem within the film as well. Smokey’s mother asks him to get her cigarettes and she only gives him a dollar. Everything seems to be broken down and to not work to its full potential. For instance, Smokey’s automobile is always popping and hissing, and it can never come to a full complete stop. Perhaps Gray, though parody, is suggesting that the neighborhood is “broken down” through outside neglect, although certain members of the community are committed to work to their full potential—although not all of them have the right direction.

In his comedy, Gray highlights the interrelationship of the two friends with the life of the community, especially the criminal life. Within the span of 16 hours—less than a day—Craig and Smokey encounter Big Worm, who threatens to kill them both unless they pay him the $200 owed him; Smokey is forced by Deebo, the community bully, to break into a local home to steal some money and jewelry; and both Craig and Smokey are threatened with guns. In the end, Craig stands up to Deebo and knocks him out, and
Smokey then takes the stolen cash to pay back Big Worm. In a final scene, Smokey states that he plans to go into rehab, comically echoing the morality lessons of *Reefer Madness*; however, he then announces he was “bullshittin’” and lights up a joint, subverting the fundamental ideology of the 1936 film.

Through humor, Gray reminds us that drug use and crime may be intertwined in the complex debate concerning marijuana during this time. In addition, issues of race and class are also significant. Such groups as the Drug Policy Alliance have noted that while drug use is comparable across racial lines, people of color are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated. Although *Friday* desires to make its audience laugh, the film also portrays urban areas that suffer from diminished resources and inequitable laws and enforcement systems.

The 2008 film *Pineapple Express* directly deals with the issues concerning the legalization of marijuana. The film opens in 1937 in black and white a year after the release of *Reefer Madness*. The opening of *Pineapple Express* is subversively alluding to the 1936 film. Director David Gordon Green of *Pineapple Express* strategically places the time period of the film to contrast it with *Reefer Madness*. The film then pans to an underground top secret research bunker in the desert: Private Miller smokes cannabis, known as “item nine” in the film, in an airtight room. He is asked the question, “When you think of your superiors what emotions do you feel?” (*Pineapple Express*). Because Miller is unable to give an affirmative answer to the question and mocks his authorities by making drum and trumpet sounds as they are speaking, General Bratt reaches a final conclusion for item nine by shouting in the phone “illegal” (*Pineapple Express*). The black and white scene in the beginning of *Pineapple Express* subversively mimics the black and white film *Reefer Madness*. This first scene highlights the 1937 fear and cultural frustration concerning cannabis, especially as the authoritarian military fears that this “item nine” will lead to a break down in social order.

The black and white scene then switches to color with a shot of a pot smoking Dale Denton, the protagonist, driving in his car. Although Chong and Craig were both lectured by their fathers in the opening scenes, the authoritarian military takes the place of the father figure. All three protagonists use marijuana as a means to deal with social
authorities and social norms. In fact, Dale, the main character, and his drug dealer Saul are depicted as perpetual adolescents. Dale, played by Seth Rogen, is even dating a high school student. Early in the movie, Dale and Seth meet and discuss Saul’s grandmother and euthanasia, but Dale prefers not to talk about the serious topic of death. Before Dale leaves, Saul asks him if he would like to smoke a cross joint with him. The cross suggests a religious symbol, and for some marijuana smokers, smoking marijuana can be a religious experience. For Saul and Dale, that is exactly what they experience. Their spirits are lifted; they part; and, they continue throughout their day. Here, the director Green alludes to both death and life, associating marijuana as a secular means to an everyday religious paradise.

During the opening credits, the film depicts Dale conversing with a radio talk host, while driving and smoking cannabis. Speaking with great conviction, Dale argues that he will lose faith in humanity if marijuana is not legal in the next five years (Pineapple Express). He continues to argue the weakness of the current system of the buying and selling of cannabis by saying, “All this current system is doing is putting money in the hands of criminals and it’s making ordinary people like you and me deal with those criminals” (Pineapple Express). His statements ironically foreshadow, in fact, the violent events to come. What is interesting to note is that the film takes place in Los Angeles: a place where marijuana is legal for medicinal use, yet Dale purchases marijuana from a drug dealer. I argue that the reason he purchases marijuana from a drug dealer is because he is using it not for medicinal purpose, but for recreational purposes. However purchasing marijuana from a drug dealer also sheds light upon the many millions of Americans who have to do this if they want to smoke marijuana for recreational purposes.

Like Up in Smoke and Friday, Pineapple Express highlights the world of the marijuana user intersecting with the criminal world. Green especially depicts a number of scenes of disturbing physical violence. The first scene occurs when Dale, as process server, visits the drug lord Ted Jones, who with a corrupt police officer kills a member of a rival drug ring. Ironically, Dale’s job—as a process server of legal documents—gets him into a situation where he is witnessing a criminal act. Later, Dale and Saul visit Red
the drug dealer. Dale and Saul approach Red and ask him if anybody has been looking for Dale because Dale witnessed a murder. Red replies with, “uh-un” meaning no he has not been approached by anyone looking for Dale (*Pineapple Express*). However, Dale and Saul quickly realize that Red is lying and for about the next two and a half minutes a violent physical brawl occurs.

As we saw in *Up in Smoke* and *Friday*, the director and screenwriters have blurred the lines between what is legal and illegal. Although in 2008, medical marijuana had been legalized, recreational marijuana was still illegal. Steven M. Graves author of “Cannabis City: Medical Marijuana Landscapes in Los Angeles,” notes that this ambiguity between what is legal and illegal gets perpetuated in multiple ways. Analyzing a medical marijuana building in Venice, California, he states, “The open-air Victorian building and the purple sign emblazoned with the word ‘Kush,’ a slang term used by recreational users of marijuana, clearly contradict proclamations of the clinical administration of medical care” (5). Graves notices a shift that medical marijuana dispensaries are going through, catering to recreational users because of the language of the sign. The shift that Graves talks about has also been encouraged by safety issues. As we see in *Pineapple Express*’s violent scenes, danger is much more likely when dealing with drug dealers and criminalized marijuana, rather than clinics and legalized marijuana.

The blurring of the division between what is legal and illegal is especially highlighted in the final scenes. The corrupt police officer, played by Rosie Perez, joins forces with Ted, the drug lord, and his henchmen to track down Dale and Saul. The film, as we have seen earlier, depicts the “law” complicit with the criminal. The last scenes in *Pineapple Express* are very violent. Saul is captured and held hostage by Ted, while Dale enlists Red’s help to free his friend. The final shots of the movie include multiple factions descending on Ted’s barn, with gunfire and explosions galore. In the end, Dale, Saul, and Red survive, while both the drug lord and the corrupt police officer are killed. Although *Pineapple Express* is humorously depicting these characters’ adventures, they offer a message to the viewer—if one can’t distinguish between the law and the criminal, are current laws on legal and illegal marijuana so clearly distinguishable?
In *Pineapple Express*, the director and screenwriters use multiple stereotypes to communicate their amusing narrative, and, intriguingly, the three surviving characters—the drug dealers and users—end up being the heroes. How the filmmakers use stereotypes is especially interesting. Saul especially plays the comedic fool, perpetuating stereotypes of marijuana smokers. When Saul and Dale are stranded and need a ride, they attempt to hitchhike. Saul takes his thumb and sticks it out of the zipper pocket in his pants so that it looks like his penis is suspended outside of his pants. Clearly, Saul provides the comedic relief within the film. Later in the film, he is seen running down an alley and he jumps into a dumpster. He is hiding from some people that are chasing him and he does not want to get out. Dale tells him that the location of the dumpster is not a good place to hide, so they continue running from the people that are chasing them. In these scenes, Saul appears child-like and innocent. Rather than using the stereotype of a vicious drug dealer, the director deflates those threatening stereotypes, choosing the innocent stoner stereotype instead.

In all three of the films, the directors and screenwriters perpetuate the stoner character, and this vision of the marijuana user, although a stereotype, has become iconic. Ideologically, this type has actually combatted the stereotype of the crazed and dangerous marijuana user of *Reefer Madness*. By making the marijuana user appear adolescent and immature, the filmmakers have also created characters who appear simply dysfunctional and no longer a threat to the social order. In actuality, to try and define what a marijuana smoker would look like and how he would act is difficult because cannabis smokers come from all walks of life: grandmothers, fathers, sons, daughters, teachers, police officers, construction workers, and the list can be endless. But for the filmmakers, the stoner image is especially non-threatening to such figures as General Bratt, and, perhaps, to the world of lawmakers, as well.

Finally, *Pineapple Express* is a unique film in that it has two kinds of messages: one is the celebration and glorification of marijuana. The second questions the first message. Dale realizes that he gets into a lot of trouble during the course of a day because of his consumption of marijuana and his relationship to Saul his drug dealer. Dale says, “You are my drug dealer. There’s one reason we know each other. I like the
drugs you sell. That’s it. If you didn’t sell those drugs, I would have no idea who you were, and I would look fantastic right now” (*Pineapple Express*). Dale realizes that the drugs (cannabis) he likes are partly responsible for his problems. Thus, while the audience is sympathetic to the plight of the protagonist, the viewer also sees his limits.

In the end, despite the competing ideologies in the film, I argue that marijuana films such as *Pineapple Express* have helped to alter the perceptions of the American public--within the United States, the state of California, and Los Angeles County. Recently in December of 2014, Congress ended the federal government’s ban on medical marijuana. Republican Representative Dana Rohrabacher of Costa Mesa notes that the measure’s approval represents “the first time in decades that the federal government has curtailed its oppressive prohibition of marijuana” (Halper par 7). Films such as *Pineapple Express* may very well have helped to re-shape cultural attitudes of “the current system.”

*Up in Smoke, Friday, and Pineapple Express* all challenge the stereotypes of marijuana perpetuated by such movies as *Reefer Madness*. Each film subversively disputes the power of such punitive laws as the Anti-Marijuana law of 1937, by depicting marijuana protagonists who appear more innocent than threatening. All three films provide both subversive and subtle messages that deal with marijuana in Los Angeles. The films may have created a counter culture that is more accepting of marijuana as a legal substance within the county of Los Angeles. At times the message is implicit and at other times it is more explicit, but the film’s message is both subversive and clear: to legalize marijuana.
Works Cited


