

This essay about malleable identity was written in David Foley's "Writing Art in the World." It investigates into film history and film genre to explicate a single film, Dope. Denise Zhou's generous handling of journalism, academic scholarship, visual evidence and radio broadcasts helps to support his strong argument against social stereotyping.

COMING OF IDENTITIES

Denise Zhou

"How you living, large?
A broker charge, cards are mediocre
You flippin' coke or playin' spit, spades, and strip poker?"

—"The World is Yours," Nas

Panning down from a clear blue sky, interrupted only by a number of long, thin palm trees—an iconic, leafy symbol of Los Angeles—the camera brings us to our beloved trio riding BMX bikes down an endless, empty road. Nas's "The World is Yours" thumps smoothly in the background as we're introduced to a suburbia baked in the lazy summer feel of *Dope's* California sun. Every element of the scene—from Malcolm's orange bike, to Diggy's yellow crop top, to the virtually pastel blue sky—plays off a vibrant color palette reminiscent of the neon hues of decades past. The protagonists pedal effortlessly past nearly identical beige houses, curb-parked cars, and large green trash cans. They bike in snaking routes, weaving across the empty street. A simple interlude, a transition into the next scene: all at once this image captures the essence of these characters, their friendship, and the setting. For a moment, the complicated plot is forgotten, and we are simply left with these characters, existing solely as friends, as kids, as people.

Rick Famuyiwa's *Dope* follows straight-A student Malcolm and his best friends Jib and Diggy in their coming-of-age journey as seniors in 'The Bottoms' of Inglewood, a suburb infamous for gang violence and drug use, predominantly inhabited by working-class African-American and Latino populations. The film centers on Malcolm and his friends as they traverse outrageous situations; we watch the trio of friends get bullied, play in their punk band, go to a party, end up with a huge stash of MDMA, try to get rid of the huge stash of MDMA, and face the numerous consequences—consequences that become intertwined with who they thought they were, who others see them as, and who they want to be.

Introduced by off-screen narrator Forrest Whitaker as nineties-obsessed, band-loving nerds, the protagonists of *Dope* are rarely seen without each other. Their camaraderie is created in part by the similarities of their differences. Attending a high school with metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs, Malcolm's peers are not nearly as concerned about grades and college as he and his friends are. Many Inglewood residents—both within the school and outside—have already participated in the projected expectations of a crime and drug-filled neighborhood by being part of gangs, dealing drugs, or shooting up fast food restaurants. However, Malcolm, Jib, and Diggy have actively avoided all of the above, choosing instead to focus on their aspirations to leave Inglewood, go to college, get good jobs, and help their families. Their friendship represents a distinct acknowledgment of how they fit in (or, rather, don't fit in) with their community. They are, in a word, misfits.

The idea of the misfit has, over the last few decades, increasingly proliferated in film, particularly in the American teenage coming-of-age genre. As Timothy Shary discusses in his book *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*, while the earlier days of cinema did not target adolescents or market a youth genre, more recent films are deliberately "fixated on capturing certain youth styles and promoting certain perspectives on the celebration (or really, survival) of adolescence" (1). With changing economic, social, and cultural factors—namely a recovering economy post-World War II, a greater number of adolescents staying in school, and the rising popularity of rebellious rock-and-roll music—the film industry began

testing teen roles in theaters (Shary 6). With the success of *Rebel Without a Cause* in 1955, a gateway opened for using teen angst and delinquency as a platform for entertainment. In the eighties, “Hollywood revised its fifties formula by intensifying the narrative range of youth films through placing teenage characters in previously established genres with more dramatic impact” (Shary 6). This expansion gave way to the five subgenres we now have in the youth coming-of-age genre—horror, science, love/sex, delinquency, and the school film. Of course, these subgenres are not exclusive. *Dope* in particular demonstrates an incredible blending of genre: it is a comedy, a drama, a hood film, a coming-of-age story, a school film, and a teen delinquency/crime film all wrapped into an hour and fifty-five minutes.

In his book, Shary examines the elements of each subgenre. The school film, for example, uses its setting to establish social standings and relationships crucial to the characters’ identities and coming-of-age journeys. Acceptance, both of the self and by others, is a common theme in all youth films; the school film specifically uses the characters’ “physical placement in the school environment” to give “a visible reminder of their plight” through puberty, conformity, and rebellion (Shary 27). Hollywood’s view of high school teenagers has primarily existed through five main character types: the athletic jock, the popular beauty, the outcast rebel, the endearing delinquent, and the quiet nerd. As the youth genre developed, the characters did, too, becoming more multifaceted. They have transformed into an array of different kinds of misfits, ultimately defying their surface-level labels to show their complexities: the athletic jock is secretly emotional, the popular beauty is internally burdened by social expectation, the outcast rebel is “psychologically distraught,” the endearing delinquent has a heartbreaking backstory that explains his mischief, and the quiet nerd has an ambitious career goal “inspired by a desire to rise above [his] class conditions” (Shary 31). Films like Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and John Hughes’s *The Breakfast Club* enforce these character tropes, proving that we are, after all, products of our environments, and that how and where youths are raised greatly impact their desires and the situations they encounter.

Famuyiwa's *Dope* works off the theme of environmental influence: the characters are raised in a "bad" neighborhood and thus the plot points of the film occur accordingly, involving the characters in violence, crime, sex, and drugs. The film emulates a number of the patterns identified in the school film subgenre, including its ambitious nerd characters who are "seeking identity in relation to their peers" (Shary 47). While the school film focuses on the use of setting and character, the delinquent film is more primarily concerned with situations involving "class and race issues, family dynamics, genetics and psychology, and political conditions" (Shary 81). The rebellious acts portrayed in films have ranged from frolicking at the beach, dancing, interacting with animals and nature, mastering "hot wheels" of fast cars, bikes, and skateboards, and, most relevantly, committing crimes. As Clifford Terry reveals in his essay "Hollywood High," many popular coming-of-age films feature "upper-middle-class white suburbanites from two-parent, one-dog homes." And while such characters can be labeled as "misfits" within the contexts of their respective social worlds, their differences are typically just that: differences. The stakes that these characters face are rarely life-or-death; often, the consequences they encounter are more internal, less tangible.

The same cannot be said for *Dope*. Although it seems, at first, to be "a black *Breakfast Club*, where the geeks' geekdom mostly comes from their love of '90s hip hop and 'white shit,'" a sense of real danger looms over the film's comedic and playful aspects (Kornhaber). Most likely, under Shary's classifications, *Dope* would still be considered an "African American crime film," or a "hood film." This style of youth crime genre began to develop in the early nineties, in which African-American filmmakers addressed race issues through the experiences of Black male adolescent characters living in "violent urban conditions" (Shary 123). Famuyiwa makes it a point to address many racial issues in his film, pointing out many of the differences between the life of typical geeks and the life of *Dope*'s geeks. While a bad day for a regular geek might involve getting bullied by a jock, a bad day for a geek in *The Bottoms* might end with getting killed. As Whitaker tells us in his introductory narration, it's "a daily navigation between bad and worse choices" (*Dope*). In Spencer Kornhaber's review of the movie, "*Dope: When High-School Hijinks Are Life-or-Death*," he

claims that *Dope* is different from other coming-of-age films “less because of the color shift [and more] because of what this particular color shift means in the real world. Being a geek here isn’t just about being obsessed with unpopular stuff; it’s about opting out from cultural expectations as a way to try and survive.”

In the world of *Dope*, Malcolm, Jib, and Diggy are different from everyone else mostly because of their musical tastes, good grades, and Ivy League aspirations. As Terry Gross points out in her radio interview with director Famuyiwa, “part of what pop culture means when you’re a teenager, the music you love, the movies you love, is—it’s a way of defining who you are . . . pop culture has . . . two purposes in young people’s lives—just loving it but also saying ‘that’s who I am.’” Through their interests, the characters attempt to distance themselves from the image that others expect them to gravitate toward. This image is influenced in part by the neighborhood’s bad reputation and also in part by the characters’ racial identity.

As James Cox asserts in his article “Obama, Hip Hop And A New Black Masculinity,” the representation of Black males in media is often centered on either “the completely threatening and race affirming Bad Black Man or the completely comforting and assimilationist Good Black Man” (34). Of course, the concept of the Bad or Angry Black Man comes from a history of stereotyping and confining the identity of African-American individuals, often reinforced by media-formulated images of Black masculinity. These images have been heavily influenced by a “substyle” of mainstream hip hop music, wherein a lifestyle based on “hustling, crime, sexual domination, and drug dealing” is normalized and promoted (Rose 13). In Byron Hurt’s short film *Barack and Curtis: Manhood, Power and Respect*, radio host and playwright Esther Armah speaks to the differences in representation of masculinity between President Barack Obama and hip hop rapper 50 Cent, suggesting that, by the time of the former’s election in 2008, “Gangsta rap had begun to shape the definition of Black manhood to the degree that it made middle class men lose their place in manhood . . . in terms of a media image. Everywhere you went the image of manhood in every form of creative media came out of that 50 Cent mold; if it wasn’t thugged out it wasn’t manhood” (*Barack and Curtis*).

What's interesting about *Dope* is that it uses hip hop as an important character and plot aspect, while in no way promoting the "thugged out" image like many other films and music videos do. In fact, because Famuyiwa has placed a plethora of hip hop culture and music alongside these odd, geeky misfits, a new image of what hip hop can mean for Black male youth is carefully cultivated. This new outlook on the relationship between hip hop and Black masculinity is also seen in Barack Obama's relationship with hip hop. Obama has, since the beginning of his presidential career, voiced his love for hip hop music and culture, while simultaneously denouncing the more negative themes of misogyny, materialism, and bad language often found in hip hop lyrics (Cox 32). Obama's engagement with hip hop music and rap artists has showed his connection to the African-American community. His image as an educated, well-spoken Black man placed alongside a genre of music often negatively portrayed in mass media "[explodes] the very facile and simple notions we have of what it means to be a Black man in this society. Obama's intellect is one of the foremost things you will notice about him, [he] is the very antithesis of the angry, out of control Negro" (*Barack and Curtis*). Obama's "Good Black Man" image merges with hip hop, and, as the two find a way to exist in harmony, we start to move toward a more complex idea of who and what a Black man can be. We start to accept that the identity is not confined to the one stereotype perpetuated by the media and centuries of racism.

Dope presents this complex idea not only through hip hop, but also through the use of drugs, crime, and violence in its plot. Malcolm and his friends are remarkably smart, and make way for a rise of "Black nerds" in the coming-of-age genre. These characters are not angry or violent, and work incredibly hard to avoid participating in angry and violent activities. Despite their efforts, one decision to attend a party entangles them in a web of gangsters and drugs. This turn taken by the movie suggests how easily individuals in communities like Malcolm's can become trapped in that dangerous world, in which one decision can create a slippery slope and lead to unforeseen and unintended consequences. Black coming-of-age crime films often depict adolescents "fighting for their lives, under the hegemony of a racist legal and political system, under difficult family and class con-

ditions, and under the influence of the media that were rapidly codifying the image of young Black ‘gangstas’ through certain rap music acts” (Shary 123). Many films such as *Super Fly* and *Boyz N The Hood* use drugs in their narratives to reflect a reality in which young people must deal with drug or crime-related situations. Often the protagonist must make a choice between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in an effort to ‘get out of the hood.’ While *Dope* tiptoes around this same idea for a while, Famuyiwa ultimately decides to trade the expected in for something a little different. By factoring in the unfamiliarity the characters have with this new world they have fallen into, he shows the kids using their intelligence and geekiness to deal with the drugs in a very unconventional way, selling them on the Internet for profit. With this shift, Famuyiwa begins poking at something deeper than an affirmation of the good vs. bad cliché. In the context of identity, the boundaries of what *Dope* presents with its main characters begins to expand; the existence of the complex Black man (or woman) is exhibited in all of *Dope*’s characters.

At one point in the film, after encountering a couple of rich kids and their subtly menacing Harvard alum father, Malcolm gets on a bus, exhausted by the day’s events. As Malcolm makes his way to a seat to wait out the ride home, “Home is Where the Hatred Is” by Gil Scott-Heron begins to play. Malcolm sits dead center in the back; shots of the bus and its riders are intercut with the changing LA light that streams through the big bus windows. Malcolm begins to dream that each of the friends, acquaintances, bullies, gangsters, and everyone else he met that day all get on the bus. As the bus fills one by one, they all nod to the song and look back at him. The moment is one of peace, much like the opening bike scene, but instead of just the trio, we are encouraged to look at everyone. While much of the movie is focused on Malcolm and his struggle with identity, in this moment, it implies that he is not alone. *Dope*, although largely driven by comedy, makes a serious point to challenge the way people see all ‘kids from the hood.’ The straight-edge nerds could easily be dope-dealing gangsters and the dope-dealing gangsters are likely just as smart and nerdy as Malcolm. The societal expectations and dangers that shaped each different character in Inglewood—from drug dealers to violent gangsters to Malcolm’s own friends—prove to be much more threatening

‘villains’ than any of the gangsters or bullies that harass the protagonists. Every person is multi-dimensional, and, on the bus, the viewer faces the reality that these characters should not be blamed for their background and circumstance. There is no good vs. bad, there are only decisions that each individual makes; decisions that, as Whitaker says in the beginning, often straddle the line between bad and worse.

At its simplest identification, *Dope* is about misfits Malcolm, Jib, and Diggy. But through scenes like the one on the bus, where we gain a deeply empathetic perspective on what every single character is going through, we begin to see more than a city of gangsters and nerds. We see a community of misfits. Malcolm’s self-acceptance is a journey that comes hand in hand with his experiences in the film. What he chooses to do with the drugs is not so much a concern with what is morally right as it is a concern with what is going to best work to his advantage. Malcolm asserts his identity as both a straight-A, guitar-playing nerd and a (one-time) drug-dealing blackmailer, merging two unexpected identities. While the youth crime film typically “examine[s] the representation of teenagers’ senses of power . . . in relation to . . . ethnicity and class issues” through violence, *Dope* goes a step further and acknowledges the power Malcolm gains simply by accepting the two supposedly warring halves of his identity (Shary 51). If we can look at Malcolm in the movie and find complexity in his character, we can do the same in reality. *Dope* is set in a real city with real crime problems, and the reminder that Malcolm’s world runs parallel to ours—that he and the other characters could very well be real people—is vital in moving away from a limited conception of Black identity in our society.

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