

SUBTITLING RAP

Appropriating *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* for Youthful Identity Formation in Kuwait

Timothy Havens

Abstract / This article reports the findings of a pilot study of a single African-American situation comedy, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, among a small number of young viewers in the nation of Kuwait. It is intended as a first step toward investigating the popularity of black and African-American youth styles among young people from various parts of the globe, and the conclusions that the author reaches are intended to be suggestive rather than definitive. Throughout the article, the author focuses on questions that his research has raised about the pleasures and meanings that these young people derive from the series, and how the series might be implicated in the expression of distinct ethnic, generational and gender identities.

Keywords / African-American studies / global media / new ethnicities / television studies / youth studies

[B]lack street styles and black bodies have become the universal signifiers of modernity and 'difference'. (Stuart Hall, 'Black and White in Television', 1995)

The dynamism of cross-cultural interactions, cross-overs and borrowings among Southall youth is particularly apparent in the selective appropriation of black youth styles. Black American 'street culture' is a major force in popular youth cultures throughout Britain today. (Marie Gillespie, Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change, 1995)

Another case in point is rap music, highly popular in countries where there are virtually no traces of black culture. (Dafna Lemish, 'Global Culture in Practice', 1998)

As the epigraphs to this article attest, the recognition that black youth culture, particularly African-American youth culture, holds an esteemed position among teenagers around the globe has become commonplace. How have black youth cultures achieved such universal appeal? What are the politics of this inversion of the traditional 'scale of whiteness' (Hall, 1977) among the world's young people, who often seem to revere black culture and black people above all others? Does this trend forebode the crumbling of white supremacist thinking that has pervaded people from all nations for centuries? Or does it simply reflect the circulation, among a wider audience, of racist ideas about the violence and sexuality of black people and cultures that have intrigued young white people for more than a century (Lott, 1993)?

Given the surge of interest in race and ethnicity among international media

scholars in recent years, along with the visibility of internationally popular black youth cultures like hip-hop, the lack of attention to the role that black youth cultures play in articulating global youth cultures is surprising. A handful of popular music scholars have addressed the cross-cultural appeal of black popular music like rap (Bennett, 1999; Gilroy, 1993; Jones, 1988; Lipsitz, 1994), but the capacity for black television programming to draw worldwide youth audiences remains uninvestigated. In recent years, several African-American situation comedies have achieved noteworthy international sales records. Reception studies of how black television series are appropriated by teenaged viewers worldwide are crucial if we hope to understand the processes of ethnic and racial identity formation among today's youth as well as the racial politics at work in those processes, as television is one of the main vehicles for carrying black youth styles today.

This article provides a first step toward investigating the pleasures and the meanings that young people derive from imported African-American situation comedies, and how these imports are implicated in the expression of distinct ethnic, generational, class and gender identities. I report the findings of a pilot reception study of a single African-American situation comedy, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, among a small number of young viewers in the nation of Kuwait. Because of the number of participants and the short period of time I stayed in the country (three weeks), the conclusions that I reach in this article are meant to be speculative. What I hope to provide is a consideration of some of the ways that some Kuwaiti viewers appropriate representations of 'blackness' in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* as part of a process of negotiating their own identities in a global, mediated world.

The Global and Local Popularity of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

By 1997, *Fresh Prince* had become the second best-selling US sitcom on the international market (Curtis, 1997). American scholars of race and television have been divided over the racial politics of the series. In the introduction to Robin Coleman's (1998) *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, Alvin Pouissant, a psychologist and consultant for *The Cosby Show*, praises the series for its positive depiction of an African-American family and its strong male role model. Coleman (1998), meanwhile, sharply criticizes the show for its 'neo-minstrel' antics. Likewise, Herman Gray (1995) takes issue with the series' portrayals of monolithic black identities that differ only slightly from middle-class white identity, arguing that the series promotes a 'separate-but-equal' racial politics. Kristal Zook (1999), on the other hand, argues that *Fresh Prince* was a trailblazer for early 1990s African-American television programs that gave voice to in-group comedy and autobiographical narratives and explored differences such as class and gender among African-Americans.

Regardless of the series' racial politics, which for our purposes can be divined only through analyses of its reception in specific locales anyway, it is unquestionable that *Fresh Prince* was the first in a list of youth-oriented African-American situation comedies that appealed to American teenagers

across racial and ethnic lines. Many of these series, including *Fresh Prince*, *Family Matters* and *Moesha* also went on to enjoy noteworthy international success (Havens, forthcoming).

Fresh Prince was especially popular in Middle Eastern markets, which often have distinct preferences for television comedies that feature African-Americans,¹ and my decision to focus on the Middle East stemmed from this feature of the region. Additionally, because much of the literature on black youth culture addresses either white or black fans, I wanted to look at the meanings that these series carry for teenagers who are neither black nor white. Finally, I focused on *Fresh Prince* rather than a current African-American situation comedy in order to increase the likelihood that viewers had seen episodes of the series and would talk about their impressions of it beyond the somewhat artificial interviewing circumstances. Indeed, all but one of the young men I interviewed had watched the series, as had one of the young women in their early twenties. Later, I discuss some of the reasons why more young men than young women watched *Fresh Prince*.

Among the countries in the Middle East where *Fresh Prince* became popular is Kuwait. The series aired on both the Orbit satellite channel America Plus and Kuwait Television Channel 2 (KTV2), an English-language, government-owned terrestrial channel. While KTV2 relies on letters, faxes and phone calls rather than ratings data to gauge a show's popularity, two top executives confirmed the remarkable popularity of the series, particularly among teenage boys.² KTV2 aired three seasons of *Fresh Prince* between 1994 and 1996, but finally cancelled the series because the channel could not obtain rights to new seasons until several months after the full season had aired on satellite.³

Study Design and Participants

The reception study that I undertook involved 11 Kuwaiti viewers in four sessions (Table 1), including six teenage boys attending their junior years at a private American high school, and five young women in their early to late twenties. With the exception of the fourth session, where I employed the help of a translator, all interviews were conducted in English, in which participants had varying levels of ability.

In each session, we screened a single episode of *Fresh Prince* and discussed participants' impressions of the plot, characters and humor. Participants then selected a favorite scene, and we watched that scene a second time to explore more fully their specific pleasures and interpretations. Finally, we discussed general television viewing habits and attitudes toward black and white American cultures. I used an open, unstructured interview method in these sessions in order to cast the widest net possible for investigating the relationships between the series and viewers' lives. In addition to these interviews, I got some sense of the prevalent styles among a wider cross-section of Kuwaiti youth at the more elite Sharq mall, several smaller markets and the restaurants on the Arabian Gulf that have become regular weekend hangouts.

In this article, I focus on interviews with the teenage boys and the women in their early twenties, treating them as part of the same generation of Kuwaiti

TABLE 1**Interview Participants**

Session One	'Ali', 16-year-old male attending American high school 'Nino', 16-year-old male attending American high school 'Mohammed', 16-year-old male attending American high school 'Khalid', 16-year-old male attending American high school 'Joe', 16-year-old male attending American high school
Session Two	'Ahmed', 16-year-old male attending American high school 'Ali' (from Session One)
Session Three	'Amna', 21-year-old female medical student
Session Four	'Manal', 21-year-old philosophy and political science graduate 'Amal', 22-year-old recent graduate, looking for work 'Sheikha', late twenties, stay-at-home mother 'Malka', late twenties, computer engineer at the Ministry of Information

youth who share the formative childhood experience of the 1990 Iraqi invasion and subsequent liberation. As we see, the economic and social fallout from the invasion are central to understanding the meanings that these viewers attach to imported American television programming. Additionally, the recent explosion of satellite channels, the reopening of movie theaters, and the popularity of retail, pirated video cassettes have created an environment where imported media are significantly more plentiful than they were prior to the Iraqi invasion. Though adult Kuwaitis also have access to these media, Sonia Livingstone (1998: 442) has suggested that 'while the media often serve as the very currency through which [youthful] identities are constructed, social relations negotiated and peer culture generated, for adults this is more likely to be provided by work'. Both young men and young women mentioned the abundance of western media as a central feature of contemporary life for young Kuwaitis. As we discuss later, the selective adoption of white and black American styles, which are carried by visual media like film, television and magazines, form part of an internal dialog about what it means to be a young Kuwaiti person today.

This article is divided into two main sections. In the first, I address specific readings that participants made of *Fresh Prince's* representations of 'blackness'. In the second section, I explore the connotations that black and white American culture in general have for these participants, and how imported black and white styles are appropriated as part of a broader dialog about Kuwaiti youth identity. I conclude with a series of questions designed to guide future research into the global consumption of African-American youth television.

Youth Studies, New Ethnicities and Television

In order to analyze how participants use black and white American styles to understand and express their identities, I adopt the theoretical frameworks of youth studies and new ethnicities research. As noted earlier, youth studies posit that young people in media-saturated societies pick up on, rework and recirculate the cultural material available in mass-mediated texts to express individual and collective dreams, worries, experiences and identities. Roland Robertson (1994) has termed this process 'glocalization', whereby local audiences derive meaning and significance from global media texts that serve their own immediate social and cultural ends.

The syncretic cultural practices of young people worldwide have led to new processes of ethnic identity formation that Stuart Hall has dubbed 'new ethnicities' (Hall, 1988). Hall argues that attempts to provide coherence to youthful ethnic identities have been abandoned in favor of ethnic identities that are continually manipulated and transformed. This new pattern of identity formation involves a process of articulating and rearticulating one's ethnicity by consuming and appropriating global, regional and local media styles.

Work on new ethnicities has tended to focus on European ethnic and racial groups, while work in youth studies has traditionally concentrated on the high-profile youth cultures of Western Europe and the USA, especially those that derive from working-class boys (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). Studies of the cultures of elite youth such as the Kuwaitis I interviewed, who more or less conform to their parents' expectations and defer to authority, are uncommon. Nevertheless, though the cultural practices of elite youth may be subdued, they do face unique social and economic pressures which they negotiate through distinct cultural practices (Skelton et al., 1998). Youth studies have also tended to focus on youth in North America, Eastern and Western Europe and, more recently, Japan (see Kawasaki, 1994). Finally, research into youth television consumption, the relationship of television to other forms of youth culture and television's role in helping to articulate a distinct youthful identity is rare (Oswell, 1998).⁴

Despite these caveats, youth studies and new ethnicities research do provide useful frameworks for exploring the place of imported African-American television in the lives of Kuwaiti youth. In particular, youth studies can help us map the relationships between the social circumstances that young people face and the cultural worlds they inhabit. Meanwhile, new ethnicities research provides us a way to think about the processes of identity construction in a global media world, where ethnicity 'increasingly depends on the ability to deploy a large repertoire of heterogeneous linguistic, social and cultural signs' (Cohen, 1999: 2–3).

Phil Cohen (1999) argues that much new ethnicities work has tended to ignore Hall's (1988) original insight that new ethnicities have not replaced older, more exclusionary ethnic and racial identities, but coexist with them. In fact, my interviews suggest that both 'new ethnicities' and 'old racisms' may play a part in the pleasures associated with imported African-American television programming like *Fresh Prince* and in the formation of youthful, elite Kuwaiti identity.

Watching *Fresh Prince* and Reading Race in Kuwait

Before we address broader questions about the meanings and politics of imported American styles, let us concentrate on the television viewing process itself, particularly the ways in which a television series that is 'encoded' according to American semiotic codes is then 'decoded' or translated by Kuwaiti viewers (Hall, 1980). Specifically, I want to look at how 'blackness'⁵ is encoded into episodes of *Fresh Prince* and how participants interpreted those representations. I argue that a lack of familiarity with African-American counterdiscourses, combined with ambivalent attitudes toward blacks and African-Americans among the people I interviewed, block the successful translation of the series' more radical critiques of white western society. Instead, the widespread ideology among participants that dark-skinned people are inherently whimsical led them to read only these dimensions of Will Smith's character. On the other hand, a sense of shared histories of exploitation and similar experiences of negative stereotyping at the hands of the western media led many participants to claim affinities with blacks and African-Americans that also influence their interpretations.

Fresh Prince features international superstar Will Smith as a teenager from the inner city of Philadelphia who gets sent to live with his rich cousins in the Bel-Air area of Beverly Hills. The narrative tension that fuels each episode is the contradiction between Will's inner-city culture, lifestyle and values and the upper middle-class values of his relatives, particularly his cousins Carlton and Hilary. Because of my host's concerns about a specific scene in one episode, I screened different episodes for young women and young men. In both episodes, Will Smith overcomes adverse circumstances because of his expertise with youth culture, especially African-American youth culture.

The episode that I showed to the young men concerned Will and Carlton's attempts to get into Princeton University. Will, whose grades are poor, inadvertently charms the Princeton interviewer into admitting him. Initially put off by Will's cavalier attitude, the interviewer rather curtly dismisses him. Before he leaves, however, Will takes a moment to solve the Rubik's cube puzzle that the interviewer has been working throughout much of the interview. Astonished at this feat, he calls after Will to come back, and we witness a montage scene where Will teaches the interviewer how to make shadow puppets, how to execute an elaborate 'street' handshake, how to wear a baseball cap backwards and how to dance properly. Following this montage, Will is still reticent about attending Princeton, and the interviewer begs him to reconsider. Meanwhile, Carlton, whose grade and extracurricular activities are impeccable, destroys his chances of getting into Princeton by trying unsuccessfully to replicate Will's performance.

The episode I screened for the young women concerned the possibility that Will might not graduate from high school because of poor attendance in his music appreciation class. After some cajoling, Will's teacher agrees to let him make up the classes he has missed by attending an after-school class. To Will's surprise, the class is filled with second-graders, all of whom seem to know much more about music than he does. Adding insult to injury, Will discovers that he must perform in a 'recital' with his young classmates at the graduation ceremony. In spite of his refusal to 'make a fool' of himself, his uncle and his mother

force Will to comply, and he must dress as a large sunflower and perform the song 'You Are My Sunshine' in front of the graduation crowd. After this rather embarrassing performance, the lights dim and the troupe dons dark sunglasses and performs a rap version of the song, with Will at center stage barking out the lyrics in a strong, staccato voice, thereby rescuing his dignity and his cool.

In both of these episodes, Will's character is similar to the 'signifying monkey' in West African folklore, a trickster figure whose superior linguistic capacities allow it repeatedly to outwit a hungry and much stronger lion and save its own life (Gates, 1988). According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr (1988), this figure has maintained its currency and sense of defiance against dominant white culture throughout African-American history, when the ability to subtly ridicule whites was often the only form of resistance available (see also White and White, 1998). Through the trope of the signifying monkey, *Fresh Prince* imagines a world in which social and economic success derive from knowledge about African-American youth culture, simultaneously unmasking the need to know white American folkways in order to succeed in the US. That is, in the interview with Princeton, Will's knowledge of the Rubik's cube, shadow puppets, contemporary fashion and dance win over the interviewer; in his performance at graduation, his capacity to rap and perform save him from embarrassment. Part of the reason that viewers can decode this critique of dominant white society is because they are familiar with the 'other forms of life, other traditions of representation' that black popular culture often evokes (Hall, 1992: 27). Thus, for people who believe that white students have always got into ivy league universities because of who they are, not what they know, Will's acceptance is both understandable and humorous.

Will can only embody this different worldview, however, if viewers possess knowledge of these 'other forms of life' and 'other traditions of representation'. As Celeste Condit (1989) has argued, when decoding fictional television texts, viewers employ ideologies that they are already familiar with. The young men I interviewed seemed incapable of imagining a world where students can charm their way into universities, and therefore decoded the plot in a way that defused the critique of university entrance procedures. When I asked why Will was accepted to Princeton, both groups agreed that the interviewer realized Will's intelligence when he solved the Rubik's cube.

T.H.: Do you know why the guy decided to let Will in [to Princeton]? What changed his mind?

Khalid: Money.

Others: No.

Nino: I think that he knew he was intelligent when he solved the Rubik's cube.

Here, Khalid makes sense of the episode through reference to an ideology that he is already familiar with, namely that rich people can buy their way into Princeton, even though no textual evidence supports this interpretation. Nino, meanwhile, interprets Will's solving of the Rubik's cube as evidence of his intelligence, which explains Will's subsequent acceptance.

By contrast, I have shown this clip to two undergraduate media classes in the US, one with approximately 15 students and another with about 30, and both of these groups told me that Will got accepted because he charmed the interviewer. This may seem like a trifling distinction, particularly because Will's solving of the Rubik's cube is a narrative turning point that undoubtedly demonstrates his intelligence. But I suspect that something worthy of investigation may be going on here. It may be that the idea that one can get into Princeton sheerly on one's charm is such an outlandish proposition that these young men read Will's solving of the cube as the only motive for accepting him. On the other hand, American viewers read this moment as an expression of Will's mastery of youth culture, similar to dancing or shadow puppets. While it does demonstrate Will's intelligence, his abilities with youth culture clinch his acceptance, suggesting that the college admissions process is subjective, even corrupt.

This possibility has significance for how 'blackness' is decoded from this scene because, if viewers believe that the interviewer has already decided to admit Will, the ensuing montage sequence becomes no more than an example of Will's natural effervescence, which entertains the interviewer but does nothing to benefit Will. Certainly, this interpretation is speculative, but it does merit further ethnographic investigation into how international viewers read the various alternate worldviews that are represented in African-American sitcoms like *Fresh Prince*.

The people I interviewed did seem to read Will's acceptance to Princeton as a consequence of his intelligence, which undercuts some of the politically subversive dimensions of black male identity represented in the episode. Instead, 'blackness' becomes associated with a frivolous attitude toward life which easily degenerates into a kind of romantic racialism, where black social and cultural differences are ascribed to biology, even though those differences may then be evaluated positively (Fredrickson, 1971). Such an attitude toward blacks was widespread among participants. One young woman explained that people with darker skin are naturally funnier and have an inherent capacity for entertainment. The young men echoed these beliefs. When I asked if there were any aspects of African-American culture that they try to emulate, one young man explained, 'The simplicity. The simplicity in the way they act. They act naturally.'

In the text which follows, I explore the significance of such fixed ideas about racial identity in the construction of fluid Kuwaiti identities. At this point, I want to make only two observations: first, that some of the more radical dimensions of imported African-American sitcoms may disappear in their translation to Kuwait because of a lack of access among Kuwaitis to African-American counterdiscourses; second, that the series deployment of African-American youth culture as an explanation for Will's narrative triumphs and as a vehicle for mocking white societal norms also fits snugly with potentially racist attitudes among Kuwaitis about the natural effervescence of African-Americans.

It may be that imported African-American sitcoms like *Fresh Prince*, which highlight the performative dimensions of black culture and identity, subtly work to reinforce potentially racist attitudes among Kuwaitis. On the other hand, the cultural distance of imported programming and knowledge of the operations of

popular culture, at least among some of the young men I interviewed, seems to mitigate such attitudes. Ali and Joe spoke eloquently and at length about how popular culture stereotypes groups like African-Americans, and their understanding of this process caused them to suspect that the representations of African-Americans they receive are not representative of all African-Americans. Ali explained:

. . . in the US, some people have this stereotype of Arabs with all the swords and petrol, that they are barbarians, and some people have a stereotype of the Americans, like blacks' slang and their actions: that's our stereotype of Americans. . . . You know, black actions, the slang that they talk, that's how some Kuwaitis view America.

Joe offered a similar insight:

. . . what I'm saying is you can relate these Black shows and the black-white conflict to the Arab-western thing. Because you might view blacks as different with the way they live, lifestyles, the way they talk, and that's maybe how westerners view the Arabs.

These teens recognize that the view that most Americans receive of Arabs is limited, and this allows them to understand that their own views of African-Americans might be limited as well. In part, this owes to the fact that they are also aware that only a small number of mainstream American films and television shows are imported to Kuwait.

Also countering the negative connotations of 'blackness' was a tendency to draw parallels between the histories of African and Arab genocide. Joe explains:

. . . at the beginning of American history, blacks were slaves, they came as slaves, they were sold as merchandise. . . . So, basically, blacks didn't have any rights, basic rights of humans, and I associate that with the imperialist time in the Arab world. Arabs were enslaved, not directly, but by going by the imperial rule like the British. Mostly, that wasn't in the Gulf, but mostly in Egypt, Algeria, and all these parts, where Britain had a strong hand, and France. You had hundreds of thousands of people killed in digging up the Suez Canal. They weren't paid.

In spite of the historical connection that Joe draws between imperialism and slavery, he does not simply exploit the horrors of African slavery in order to emphasize the suffering of Arabs during imperialism, as we see in his careful clarification that Arabs were not 'directly' enslaved. Some of the young women I interviewed also drew similarities between African experiences of slavery and Arab experiences of imperialism.

Part of the way that these young people understand their identities as Arabs involves both biological distinctions between Arabness and Africanness based upon traditionally racist hierarchies of skin color, and historical and contemporary identifications with blacks and African-Americans. While the presence of biological racial ascriptions among young Kuwaitis may be disconcerting, it seems that Kuwaiti ideas about racial identity are more complex; they don't fit neatly into western dichotomies that stress either nature or nurture.

'Blackness,' 'Whiteness' and Youthful Kuwaiti Identities

The foregoing discussion of the reception of *Fresh Prince* attempts to isolate a single text from the broader cultural tapestry of imported and domestic media.

Such a method allows us to specify the interactions between texts and viewers, but ignores the intertextual connections that viewers make among media products, and which several authors have suggested are the most important frames of reference for understanding the meanings that audiences make of popular culture and the significance it plays in their everyday lives (see Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1992). The lack of connection between these levels of analysis is an inevitable outcome of the short period of time that I spent in Kuwait, the limited number of meetings I had with viewers and the artificiality of the viewing groups and viewing contexts.

Because of these shortcomings, I interviewed participants about their general experiences of white and black American popular culture in order to get some idea of how these forms fit into that broader cultural tapestry. While the responses I received are open to the kinds of concerns that hound all methods of viewer self-report, including intentional and unintentional inaccuracies, the distortions of social desirability and the tendency to manufacture responses to questions that otherwise would have never come up, they do provide a starting point from which to generate a series of questions that can guide future research into youthful appropriations of imported African-American television programming around the world.

The Contexts for Youthful Kuwaiti Identity Formation

Kuwait is one of the oil-rich nations of the Arabian Gulf. Due to strict naturalization laws, fewer than 40 percent of the permanent residents of Kuwait are Kuwaiti citizens, with foreign guestworkers comprising the rest of the population. Unlike the citizens of most Arab nations, many Kuwaitis consider themselves a single ethnic group, although significant cleavages do exist, most notably between the majority Sunnis and minority Shi'ites. Although Islam is the official religion of Kuwait, a long practice of separating the affairs of church and state exists. This practice, combined with the fact that oil revenues do not belong to the ruling family but to the state, has led to the rapid westernization of Kuwait, as many wealthy Kuwaitis heavily consume western goods, styles and media. It is generally thought that Kuwait is one of the most westernized Gulf Arab states.

For young men and women who were between the ages of six and 12 at the time, the Iraqi invasion and seven-month occupation of Kuwait in 1990 is a formative part of their identities. According to Jill Crystal (1992), Kuwaiti national identity has long been constituted through a fierce sense of independence and a recognition of Kuwait's dependence upon outsiders. The Gulf War helped solidify this sense of reliance upon outside help as well as the sense of a shared Kuwaiti identity, as Kuwaitis of various social classes, family backgrounds and religions banded together against a common foe.

Among the young men I interviewed, the desire to connect with the outside world while maintaining their independence surfaced through concerns about western cultural imperialism. No one I interviewed expressed the belief that American culture should be kept out of the country entirely. Instead, most of them wanted to adopt western culture and fashions selectively. This selective

adoption of American culture among Kuwaiti youth has become part of an internal dialog about Kuwaiti identity (Longva, 1993: 453). It is this internal dialog via the adoption of white and black American styles that I want to try to outline in this section.

If we look closely at the distinctions that participants drew between black and white American shows, we see that both 'whiteness' and 'blackness' carry particular connotations, and that these connotations frame the pleasures that young Kuwaiti men and women get from American television. In fact, a clear gender division in racialized television portrayals emerged from the interviews: young men seemed to prefer the individuality that they associate with black American masculinity, while young women responded to the sense of personal freedom that they associate with the ability to appropriate the fashion and beauty styles of white American femininity.

'Blackness' and Young Kuwaiti Men

The chief fears among the young men I interviewed involved anxieties about their future careers and social statuses. Since the discovery of oil, Kuwaitis have enjoyed one of the highest per capita income levels anywhere in the world. Not only does the government guarantee practically free housing for every family, but every Kuwaiti is also guaranteed a government position if he or she cannot find employment elsewhere (Khalaf, 1992: 62). However, the liberation proved extremely costly for the Kuwaiti government. According to a political scientist at Kuwait University, 'by the end of the 1990s unemployment will be a source of tension between the state and the educated youth' (Ghabra, 1997: 361).

While I was told that almost everyone is still guaranteed a government position, it was clear that most Kuwaiti men considered these positions to be less prestigious than others. The hierarchy of careers in Kuwait places business-people on top; engineers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals on the second rung; and government workers on the bottom. The young men I interviewed felt extreme pressure to ensure their future careers by studying hard, getting into prestigious American universities and majoring in engineering or business.

Such pressure on 16-year-old boys helps explain the preference that some of them have for African-American television programs and the fashions that they carry, which provide both a fantasy of a world that works differently and a means for expressing dissatisfaction. Given these pressures, the comment about the 'simplicity' of African-American culture noted earlier takes on new resonance. This attitude was common among the young men I talked to. Another young man, discussing Will's influence on other characters, explained:

Maybe people want to be more funny. Because I believe that people are just guided all the way [through their lives]: 'Do this, do this, do this.' People would get bored of doing this stuff and they would hate it.

Will displays a level of enjoyment in life that these boys emulate. He provides an image of a young man who maintains his sense of humor and fun, while his charisma keeps him out of serious trouble and even helps him succeed. For overworked Kuwaiti boys, his character might cast a powerful spell. Could a

white American sitcom provide such an image for these young men? Perhaps. But the ready association between frivolity and 'blackness' among these young men makes it more likely that African-American characters will fill this role.

In a patriarchal society such as Kuwait, where sons have long faced the challenge of living up to their fathers' legacies while distinguishing themselves from their fathers, African-American youth styles also offer a language with which they can express their difference and individuality. In reference to Carlton's character, who spends much of his time trying to appease authority figures, Khalid said, 'He just wants to be everything like his father. He doesn't have a strong personality that tells about what he really believes in.' In a separate session, when I asked Ahmed whether he considered Carlton a likeable character, he replied, 'No, he just plays the role I don't want to be. He, like, lives in the shadow of his father.' Obviously, living in the shadow of one's father is a negative thing for these two young men. However, Will, whom Ahmed described as 'an individual' and 'guided by himself', apparently struck a chord with Ahmed's and Khalid's aspirations to be independent of their fathers' reputations. In fact, African-American youth culture in general seems to provide a marker of independence for young Kuwaiti men:

T.H.: So American culture has this aura of being cool then?

Khalid: Yeah.

Ali: Some people view it that way, yeah.

T.H.: More so for black culture? It seems to me that black culture would be cooler than white culture.

Ali: Yeah, yeah it is.

Joe: White culture is more sophisticated, they go for the clothes, for the looks. Blacks also do that, but in a down-to-earth cool way.

In spite of my rather leading question, it is clear that these young men distinguish between white and black American styles in a way similar to Sheikha and Malka, who explained that black styles are 'more adventurous', 'more ostentatious' and 'not as proper', while white styles are 'more official', 'more classic' and 'more fashionable'.

Black styles, then, might better fit the needs of young Kuwaiti men who are reacting against traditional styles in an effort to mark their dissatisfaction with, and difference from, their fathers' lifestyles. While white western styles are certainly distinct from the *dishdashas* and *guras* worn by adult Kuwaiti men, black styles connote a defiance that white styles cannot because of associations between 'whiteness' and cultural refinement. Black youth styles may be part of an internal distinction among young Kuwaiti men who have varying levels of frustration with contemporary Kuwaiti society.

'Whiteness' and Young Kuwaiti Women

Young Kuwaiti women face a unique set of contemporary challenges which have also become more pronounced since the Gulf War. Although women in Kuwait

are not legally restricted from pursuing careers, many are effectively barred from work by their families, and their rate of participation in the workforce is low (Crystal, 1992: 169). Partly for this reason, and partly because Kuwaiti women are not measured by their careers as much as men are, the most important issue for many of these women seems to be protecting their civil liberties. Crystal (1992) suggests that the Iraqi invasion and subsequent liberation gave hope to aggrieved Kuwaitis that 'Free Kuwait' would become more inclusive of religious and ethnic minorities and women. While this has not happened, the dream of a more inclusive society remains, threatened today by certain factions of the Islamist movement that seek to restrict women's rights.

The issues faced by Kuwaiti women are similar to those faced by women throughout the Gulf and the Arab world today. They take on special resonance because Kuwaiti women are 'known throughout the Gulf for their active participation in social life compared to their Arab sisters' (Longva, 1993: 444). Prior to the Gulf War, Kuwaiti women typically wore the traditional *abaya*, a full-length, loose-fitting dress that marked their status and privilege as Kuwaitis in interactions with foreign guestworkers, in much the same way that men's *dishdashas* continue to mark them as Kuwaiti. Since the war, however, elite Kuwaiti women have taken to wearing more western styles in public, while women from Bedouin families have maintained Islamic fashion styles. Longva (1993) reads these contradictory trends as an internal dialog among Kuwaiti women about gender identity and urban-rural differences that is carried out through fashion (Longva, 1993: 453-4).

Regardless of the particular meanings that western styles carry for Kuwaiti women, the women I interviewed explained that they primarily associate these fashion and beauty styles with white western fashions. Visual media seem to be the principal avenues for staying on top of these fashions. Amna, for instance, explains why she and her friends watch *Friends*:

[The women] are in very good shape and, Jennifer Aniston, her hair is perfect. Also, some of the most things that attract us to the series is their clothes, their fashion – not only the clothes, their make-up. Sometimes we attract to such things more than the series.

The adoption of western styles may also reflect generational differences among Kuwaiti women. Certainly, the access that these young women have to American media and the constantly changing world of western fashion is something unique that they have grown up with.

While the adoption of these styles may look like a capitulation to white western standards of beauty, more complex politics may be at work here. Claire Dwyer (1998) has suggested that the combination of western and Islamic fashion styles among young British Muslim women challenges both British conceptions of Islam and Islamic conceptions of women. Similarly, Amna explained to me that many young Kuwaiti women combine western and Kuwaiti styles of dress. For Amna and her friends, western clothing may be a statement of their civil liberties as Kuwaiti women, who are free to dress as they wish in public. It may also reflect their class identities and serve to distinguish them from non-Kuwaiti women because of the considerable expense involved in both subscribing to the forms of media that carry these styles, and purchasing the designer labels from expensive stores.

Conclusion: New Ethnicities and Old Racisms

In his report on research conducted at the Center for New Ethnicities Research, Cohen (1999) claims that

. . . to hold on to binary oppositions between an 'old' biological and 'new' cultural racism, or between old organic and new hybridised ethnicity . . . is to reintroduce ideal typical distinctions that no longer (if they ever did) correspond to the complexity of what is happening on the ground. (Cohen, 1999: 9)

This article has been an initial attempt to explore how youthful Kuwaiti identities form through the consumption and selective appropriation of black and white American media. What seems to be happening 'on the ground' in Kuwait is that young people are constructing their ethnic and gender identities through fixed notions of race. Styles that connote conventional, biological associations of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' are appropriated from imported media and recirculated as part of a process of negotiating Kuwaiti identity in the contemporary world.

Representations of 'blackness' in *Fresh Prince* were central to participants' understandings and enjoyment of the episodes that they screened. However, they did not seem to comprehend the show's challenging of the universality of western society and white cultural norms. Instead, they picked up on conventional representations of African-American culture and characters as inherently carefree and performative, and uniformly attributed these differences to biology. Nevertheless, we also saw that several people expressed an identification with blacks and African-Americans via a shared history of racialized exploitation and contemporary processes of stereotyping in western media. This mixture of biological, historical and cultural racial attributes certainly adheres to Cohen's (1999) observation that we can no longer distinguish between 'good, new ethnicities' and 'bad, old racisms'. One question that remains is whether this situation is anything new, or whether Kuwaiti identity has for a long time been structured through rigid 'colonial discourses' (Bhabha, 1994) of 'whiteness' and 'blackness'.

Through interviews and personal observations, I have attempted to sketch the contours of the internal dialogs that young Kuwaitis carry out through their selective adoption of black and white American cultural styles. As the main vehicles for importing American culture, television and film hold privileged places in helping stage and popularize these dialogs. Though the numbers in this study were small, they have raised some important questions for future research into the significance of imported African-American television programming in Kuwait and elsewhere. How do African-American sitcoms construct distinct worldviews, and how important are these constructions for understanding and enjoying imported African-American comedies? Do all youthful viewers around the world link 'blackness' with masculinity and 'whiteness' with femininity, or do they also appropriate elements of white masculinity and black femininity from imported American programming? How do already existing notions of race influence international viewers' readings of specific texts, and how much can individual texts challenge those notions? How do local identities form through reference to fixed racial categories like 'blackness' and

'whiteness'? What other racial and ethnic distinctions might be significant in the formation of youthful identities, and what role might global media play in importing these other identities? Finally, how have global television and film flows altered or retrenched traditional processes of identity formation?

Notes

The author wishes to thank Khalid Bourisly, Nibal Bourisly, Maher Nasser Al-Hajji and Ali Bourisly for their invaluable assistance. The Indiana University Center for International Business Education and Research provided crucial funding for this project.

1. B. Hajjawi, president and CEO, International Distribution Agency (Amman, Jordan), telephone interview, 28 June 1999; K. Al-Mugaiseeb, director general, Kuwait Television Channel 2, personal interview, 13 October 1999.
2. F. Al-Hashash, programming supervisor and foreign programming controller, Kuwait Television Channel 2, personal interview, 13 October 1999; K. Al-Mugaiseeb, personal interview, 13 October 1999.
3. According to Al-Mugaiseeb, viewership for *Fresh Prince* was decreasing because most fans had already seen the entire season of episodes on American Plus before the season ever appeared on KTV2 (K. Al-Mugaiseeb, personal interview, 13 October 1999).
4. One notable exception is the December 1998 issue of the *European Journal of Communication*, which was devoted to presenting findings from an ongoing cross-cultural research project, 'Children, Young People, and the Changing Media Environment', that investigates both new and traditional media.
5. I use the term 'blackness' here in Herman Gray's (1995: 12) sense to refer to 'the constellation of productions, histories, images, representations, and meanings associated with black presence in the United States'. Hence, I treat 'blackness' as a rhetorical construct rather than a biological (or even cultural) essence, which nevertheless generates an important and unique dimension of individual and collective identity.

References

- Bennet, A. (1999) 'Hip Hop Am Main: The Localization of Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture', *Media, Culture and Society* 21: 77-92.
- Bhabha, H. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, P. (1999) 'Through a Glass Darkly: Intellectuals on Race', pp. 1-17 in P. Cohen (ed.) *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms?* London and New York: Zed Books.
- Coleman, R. (1998) *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Condit, C. (1989) 'The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6: 103-22.
- Crystal, J. (1992) *Kuwait: The Transformation of an Oil-State*. Boulder, CO and San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Curtis, H. (1997) 'Have Comedy, Will Travel?', *TV World* August/September: 31-6.
- Dwyer, C. (1998) 'Contested Identities: Challenging Dominant Representations of Young British Muslim Women', pp. 50-65 in T. Skelton and G. Valentine (eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fredrickson, G. (1971) *The Black Image in the White Mind: the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Gates, H. (1988) *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ghabra, S. (1997) 'Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change', *Middle East Journal* 51: 358-72.

- Gillespie, M. (1995) *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gray, H. (1995) *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hall, S. (1977) 'Pluralism, Race, and Class in Caribbean Society', pp. 150–82 in *Race and Class in Post-Colonial Society*. Paris and London: UNESCO.
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding', pp. 128–38 in S. Hall et al. (eds) *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1988) 'New Ethnicities', pp. 27–31 in K. Mercer (ed.) *Black Film, British Cinema*. London: Institute for Contemporary Arts.
- Hall, S. (1992) 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', pp. 21–37 in G. Dent (ed.) *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michelle Wallace*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Hall, S. (1995) 'Black and White in Television', pp. 13–28 in J. Givanni (ed.) *Remote Control: Dilemmas of Black Intervention in British Film and TV*. London: British Film Institute.
- Havens, T. (forthcoming) 'African American Media Activism in a Global World', in S. Kumar and L. Parks (eds) *Planet TV*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jones, S. (1988) *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK*. London: Macmillan.
- Kawasaki, K. (1994) 'Youth Culture in Japan', *Social Justice* 21: 185–203.
- Khalaf, S. (1992) 'Gulf Societies and the Image of Unlimited Good', *Dialectical Anthropology* 17: 53–84.
- Lemish, D. (1998) 'Global Culture in Practice', *European Journal of Communication* 13: 539–56.
- Lipsitz, G. (1994) *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London and New York: Verso.
- Livingstone, S. (1998) 'Mediated Childhoods: A Comparative Approach to Young People's Changing Media Environment in Europe', *European Journal of Communication* 13: 435–56.
- Longva, A. (1993) 'Kuwaiti Women at a Crossroads: Privileged Development and the Constraints of Ethnic Stratification', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25: 443–56.
- Lott, E. (1993) *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morley, D. (1992) *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Oswell, D. (1998) 'A Question of Belonging: Television, Youth and the Domestic', pp. 35–49 in T. Skelton and G. Valentine (eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Robertson, R. (1994) 'Globalization or Glocalization?', *Journal of International Communication* 1: 33–52.
- Skelton, T., G. Valentine and D. Chambers (1998) 'Cool Places: An Introduction to Youth and Youth Cultures', pp. 1–32 in T. Skelton and G. Valentine (eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- White, S. and G. White (1998) *Stylin: African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Widdicombe, S. and R. Wooffitt (1995) *The Language of Youth Subcultures: Social Identity in Action*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Zook, K. (1999) *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Timothy Havens is an assistant professor of communications and the humanities at Old Dominion University. His research interests include race and television, particularly the racial and ethnic dimension of global television culture.

Address Old Dominion University, 720 Redgate Avenue, No. 5, Norfolk, VA 23507, USA. [email: thavens@odu.edu]