

# Popular Culture and Public Space in Africa: The Possibilities of Cultural Citizenship

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**Abstract:** Popular culture in Africa is increasingly intertwined with the public space of nations. Drawing on contemporary scholarship on popular culture, citizenship, and identity in transnational and global contexts, this article analyzes the phenomenal success of the television show *Big Brother Africa* in 2003 and argues that people's everyday engagement with popular culture, including television, must be a central component of understanding emergent public spaces and citizenship practices in Africa's present and future.

**Résumé:** En Afrique, la culture populaire se fond de plus en plus avec l'espace public des états. S'appuyant sur des recherches récentes portant sur la culture populaire, la citoyenneté et l'identité dans un contexte transnational et mondial, cet article analyse le succès phénoménal que l'émission de télévision *Big Brother Africa* a rencontré en 2003 et démontre que la relation qu'entretiennent au quotidien les citoyens avec la culture populaire y compris la télévision est un élément essentiel pour comprendre les espaces publics et les pratiques citoyennes qui émergent dans l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui et de demain.

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## Introduction

While research on traditional forms of popular culture has an established history in the field of African studies, there is a growing interest in study-

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ing emergent cultural and media forms, such as contemporary music (Hofmeyr, Nyairo, & Ogude 2003; Larkin 2004), movies and films (Diawara 2003), popular magazines (Nuttall 2003), clothing and fashion (Dolby 2001; Hansen 2000; Scheld 2003; Nuttall 2004); television (Barnett 2004; Fair 2003), and urban and rural culture (Barber 1997; Zeleza & Veney 2003). Such intensified research and analysis are timely, as popular culture in Africa—as elsewhere in the world—is increasingly intertwined with the public spaces of nations. For example, in the Kenyan context, Isabel Hofmeyr, Joyce Nyairo, and James Ogude (2003) analyzed the interplay of popular music and politics in the 2002 elections. In Liberia, George Weah, a world renowned football (soccer) star, used his popular celebrity as the basis for his campaign for the presidency of the nation (Rice 2005). Popular culture is also a significant component of transnational imaginaries and spaces (Appadurai 1993, 1996), as demonstrated, for example, by Rob Nixon's (1994) scholarship on the relationship between mediascapes in South Africa and the United States.

In this article, I draw on contemporary scholarship on popular culture, citizenship, and identity in a transnational and global context to analyze the phenomenal success of the television show *Big Brother Africa* in 2003. I argue that people's everyday engagement with popular culture—including in this case, a television show—must be a central component in understanding emergent public spaces and citizenship practices in Africa's present and future.

## Popular Culture and Public Space

Popular culture is a critical component of people's lives and identities in societies throughout the world (Dolby 2003; Grossberg 1989; Hall 1981). Youth are particularly voracious consumers and producers of popular culture (Lipsitz, Maira, & Soep 2004; Willis 1990). Though youths' ability to consume popular culture is largely dictated by their economic means, and is in some cases constrained by religious or cultural norms, the products of a media-obsessed world shape the imaginative landscape of youth's lives.

As Larry Grossberg (1989) argues, popular culture is a central force of affective investment for people: it grips their hearts and minds and strongly influences the possibilities of their imagination. Regardless of their actual access to media, youth around the world are captivated by the images and sounds that flow from screens and boomboxes; being part of popular culture is a key component of modernity and feeling that one is somehow connected to the global flows described by Arjun Appadurai (1996). Mamadou Diouf (2003) notes that "the condition of young people in Africa, as well as their future, is heavily influenced by the interaction between local and global pressures: the fragmentation or dissolution of local culture and memory, on the one hand, and the influence of global culture, on the other" (2).

Popular culture has often been framed in a dichotomous manner: it is either good or bad; it evokes either anxiety or celebration (see McCarthy et al. 1999). We are all familiar with claims that popular culture is polluting and contaminating the young, or that it offers only escapism and has no relationship to the actual world. While such a perspective is increasingly criticized in academic scholarship, it persists in the popular imagination, particularly in media coverage of popular cultural practices. For example, the popularity of rap music instigated a moral panic in the United States in the 1990s, and the “invasion” of the computer and Internet into the home has sparked a similar panic in many nations more recently (Leland 1999; Sterne 1999; Halliday 2001). As I will discuss later, the moral panic perspective also frames much of the official (e.g., the state’s) response to *Big Brother Africa*.

Less familiar, but still relevant, are arguments on the other side of the divide that celebrate popular culture as the true spirit of the people, pitting it against mass-produced corporate culture and highlighting the ways in which people undermine and undercut the meanings of the popular that emanate from televisions, radios, and computers.<sup>1</sup> However, such analysis is waning in academic scholarship, as unified notions of the “people” based on nation, race, ethnicity, or culture have been criticized and largely abandoned within the past fifteen years (Appadurai 1993, 1996; Clifford 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1997).

More useful is a third position, which I draw on in this article. From this perspective, most commonly associated with the field of cultural studies, popular culture is understood as a site of struggle, a place for the negotiation of race, gender, nation, and other identities and for the play of power. Stuart Hall, for example, writes that “popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (1981:239). Thus popular culture is a site that is an important locus of public debate and of individual and community agency. As scholars such as Stuart Hall (1973), Paul Willis (1990), and Cameron McCarthy (1998) have argued, people do not consume popular culture mindlessly and passively. Instead, they use it in their lives in innovative ways—much as an artist uses paint or a musician uses notes and chords—to create and express identity. Identity, from this perspective, is not a settled, timeless, fixed entity, but is instead, as I have argued elsewhere, “a constant process of formation and change that occurs within a global/local matrix, and that is both formed by and expresses structures of power” (Dolby 2001:13). As a central part of the human experience in the modern world, popular culture is also a critical part of our public lives, our public experiences. For example, Clive Barnett (2004) examines how a popular South African soap opera, *Yizo Yizo*, is a forum for public discourse in a newly democratic nation, despite the controversial nature of some of its content. Jennifer

Nadeau (2001) and Suzanne Scheld (2003) explore related themes in their work on Ghana and Senegal, respectively.<sup>2</sup> In these critical ways, popular culture can be understood not solely as a private pleasure, or pastimes that one pursues with little consequence for public, societal relations. In contrast, I and other scholars have argued that popular culture has important implications for the public spaces and social fabric of a society, including the way that youth conceptualize and enact their roles as citizens (Dolby 2003).

### **Changing Citizenship: The Global Context**

Citizenship, as traditionally conceived, is marked by a relationship between a state, a “people,” and a particular territory. In multiple ways, states attempt to enforce that relationship: by establishing, maintaining, and policing borders; by attempting to ward off the influence of “outsiders,” however defined; and by means of appeals to economic, political, and cultural patriotism.<sup>3</sup> Of course, no nation-state exists outside global forces and interactions, though the exact nature of this interaction and the inherent challenges differ, depending on the geopolitical reality and wealth of the state.

For example, in the industrialized world there are forces that are increasingly beyond the control of states. As Saskia Sassen (2001) observes, the “global cities” of New York, London, and Tokyo are situated in, but are not of, their corresponding nation-states. Thus “New York” is not necessarily the quintessential “American” city but is instead a “global” city that belongs to the world. Less economically advantaged states are also forced to respond to global forces and rework their ideas of national identity. Aihwa Ong’s (1998) writing documents the way that Chinese nationals deploy “flexible citizenship” to develop new spaces of attachment that defy traditional national borders. Instead of rejecting their diasporic citizens, many states are embracing, and in some cases, even encouraging, the extension of the national imaginary beyond geographic and political lines.

In the poorer nations of the world the situation is similarly complex, though the dynamics are different. Less wealthy states often have fewer choices than more wealthy states, and they are more likely constrained by the economic dictates of supranational organizations such as the World Bank. Peggy Levitt’s (2001) research on the Dominican Republic exemplifies the way in which poorer states reshape their notions of citizenship to accommodate new global realities. Dominican communities are increasingly transnational and diasporic, and the economic health of the Dominican Republic depends on the movement of its citizens residing abroad. In response, the state is rethinking its idea of “citizenship” and parliamentary representation to ensure the continuation of close national ties among the state, the nation, and Dominican nationals living abroad. Many other

nation-states, including Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Portugal, and India, are also revamping and broadening the way the “nation” is imagined to embrace those beyond the physical borders of the nation (Appadurai 1993, 1996; Levitt 2001).

Related observations can be made about African diasporic citizenship, as the research of Paul Stoller (2002) and JoAnn D’Alisera (2004) among others, demonstrates. What this research suggests is that contemporary citizenship is not necessarily restricted to the relationship between a state, a people, and a particular piece of land. Citizenship can, and should, be conceived more broadly: individuals who may not have access to the traditional rights and responsibilities of citizenship are still very much part of the fabric of the modern nation-state. These contemporary patterns set up the conditions for what Toby Miller (1998) refers to as “cultural citizenship,” practices that configure and reconfigure the heart of citizenship and the public spaces of democracies. As I will discuss, television shows such as *Big Brother Africa* are not simply entertainment; they are forums through which ordinary people voice their opinions and participate in open, public discourse in ways that often are not possible through established (if often contested and fluctuating) political channels. Citizenship thus is an active process that involves the core of people’s daily existence, including the ways in which they interact with and use popular culture.

### ***Big Brother Africa: Television, Cultural Citizenship, and African Identity***

Not surprisingly, television ownership in African is still limited to the elite. According to U.N. statistics, in the mid 1990s, there were only 37 million television receivers in Africa out of 1.3 billion worldwide (Fair 2003). Keyan Tomaselli and William Heuva (2004) report that in 1996 only 3.5 percent of African households owned televisions. Despite the relative scarcity of television sets in Africa, there have been important shifts in the uses of television in the public sphere in recent decades. While originally broadcasting was a government initiative tied to the project of national development and identity, most African states have been unable to sustain that commitment, often due to World Bank requirements for curtailing public spending. Thus cheap, often imported entertainment programs began to flood African screens, and advertisements were sold to replace lost state funds (Bourgault 1995). Beginning in the 1990s, the availability of satellite and digital technologies once again transformed the parameters of television in Africa. Multichoice Africa, based in South Africa, offers fifty-five video and forty-eight audio channels to eight hundred and sixty thousand subscribers in fifty African countries and nearby islands (Tomaselli & Heuva 2004). As of 2000, M-Net, also a South African enterprise, is the first company in Africa to offer direct digital services to subscribers in thirty-six countries.<sup>4</sup> The technological advances of the 1990s, combined with the growing commercialization of African television, have created conditions, barely possi-

ble a decade ago, for the production and distribution of television programs like *Big Brother Africa*.

The *Big Brother* series, and the reality television genre more generally, are also new phenomena. As Annette Hill (2005) says, the rise of reality television in the American and British contexts is linked to multiple simultaneous forces: the growing demand for inexpensive programming, the waning interest in traditional documentaries, and particularly in the British context, the pressure on public television to increase ratings and become competitive with privately owned stations. *Big Brother* itself began in the Netherlands in 1999 and has since been franchised in more than thirty countries. As Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones (2004) observe, *Big Brother* is not a conventional television program, but rather a new format that combines multiple "platforms" and creates numerous sites and opportunities for audience involvement and participation. *Big Brother* typically includes a live Internet site, chat rooms for viewers, telephone voting, and appearances on television and radio talk shows for evicted housemates (who become celebrities). *Big Brother Africa* has also provided an opportunity for viewers to send SMS messages on their cell phones, which appear in a continuous scroll at the bottom of the viewing screen. The program's basic premise is the same as that of dozens of other *Big Brother* productions around the world: a group of young people is isolated in a large, suburban-type house with cameras that record the participants' actions twenty-four hours a day. As in the television show *Survivor*, contestants are evicted one by one over a period of several months on the basis of a popular call-in vote.<sup>5</sup> *Big Brother Africa*, which finished its run in early September 2003 after one hundred and six days, was not the first *Big Brother* on the African continent. M-Net, the producer of *Big Brother Africa*, had earlier produced two seasons of *Big Brother South Africa*, which was confined to South African participants.<sup>6</sup> *Big Brother Africa* (henceforth *BBA*), however, was a decidedly more ambitious project, pulling together young people from twelve African countries, confining them in a house in Randburg, South Africa (a suburb in the Johannesburg metro area), and broadcasting the unfolding soap opera throughout the continent. The countries represented by the original twelve housemates were Uganda, Angola, Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria.

At first, *BBA* was scheduled to be broadcast only on DSTV, the satellite television network that is available only to the relatively few Africans who both have a television and can afford the approximately sixty-dollar monthly fee. However, when M-Net allowed national networks to broadcast thirty-minute nightly segments at no charge, *BBA* quickly became the most watched television show on the African continent (Itano 2003; Wax 2003). According to some estimates, 30 million people in 46 countries watched at least part of *BBA*, and the program was offered on free-to-air channels in at least nine countries (Wax 2003). While certainly people of all ages watched

*BBA*, the show's contestants were all relatively youthful (in their twenties) single, English speakers, and professional. Considering these attributes, it is clear that the show's target demographic was youth, who are statistically the largest percentage of the African population, the primary consumers of media and specifically television, and those most likely to be interested in a television show whose content is dependent on the sexual tension and dynamics that inevitably develop among a group of single twenty-somethings.<sup>7</sup>

My analysis in this article draws on the relatively new field of anthropology of media, which, as Laura Hubbard and Kathryn Mathers (2004) argue, "is not simply the undertaking of ethnography but also the critical analysis and historicization of image, texts, and objects of media as sites of production of power" (444). Thus I am interested in analyzing the multiple texts that constitute the "site" of *BBA*. I first became interested in *BBA* during a research trip to South Africa in August 2003, and I watched and took notes on the show for the two weeks I was there. While I had never watched *Big Brother* in the United States (or anywhere else), I became intrigued by the continental scope of the program and fascinated by the SMS messages from all over Africa that flowed across my television screen in Pretoria—certainly a rare occurrence in South Africa. I was also captivated by the copious media coverage (which of course, in those two weeks, I viewed from South Africa), and how *BBA* was constructed as a public event in the way that is typically reserved for sports or politics. Once I returned to the United States, I monitored the *BBA* Web site and chat rooms and scoured English-language newspapers (predominantly from Africa, the United States, Britain, and Australia) on the Internet for coverage of *BBA*. While there certainly is a need for ethnographic and audience studies of the impact of *BBA* (and television in Africa more generally), this study draws on the available resources and texts of *BBA* to suggest ways in which we might begin to analyze this extremely new phenomenon on the African continent.

One of the most intense responses to *BBA* was grounded in the paradigm of "moral panic." Mamadou Diouf (2003) analyzes the historical and contemporary specificity of the panic surrounding youth in Africa, which he labels as both moral and civil. As he argues, "At issue are the bodies of young people and their behavior; their sexuality and their presence" (3). Diouf particularly highlights how the failures of African nationalist projects—economic, cultural, and political—have minimized the importance of the socialization of youth. He continues, "Not only are young people losing the prestigious status that nationalism gave them in its ascending phase, but they no longer represent the national priority.... Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that

escapes the limits of the national territory" (5).

Given this new reality, African youth are increasingly seen as a threat and beyond the control of the state. Thus predictably, much of the moral and civic outrage surrounding *BBA* focused on the visual display of the seminaked bodies of African youth on television screens. For example, the well-publicized *BBA* "shower hour" sparked indignation from a Ugandan pastor, who urged people to pray for the eviction of the Ugandan housemate so that Ugandans would no longer be interested in the show (Coppen 2003). Despite the objections of clergy, the show was so popular in Uganda that the television in the parliament's cafeteria was tuned to *BBA* instead of the state news (Wax 2003). Similarly, the Malawian parliament attempted to ban the show, though a high court later reversed the decision ("*Bigger Brother*" 2003). In Namibia, President Sam Nujoma was quoted as saying, "I would like to call on the Namibian Broadcasting Authority to stop showing this so-called *Big Brother* and to start showing the history of Namibia" ("*Cherise Is the Last to Walk*," 2003). Wole Soyinka also denounced the show, calling it "banal" and "lacking anything to offer to the continent" (Ukudolo 2003). While the attempted bans in Uganda and Malawi appear to have been based on moral grounds (thus reproducing the "moral panic" argument), Nujoma and Soyinka's critiques seemed to derive from a dismissal of popular culture as meaningless fluff that distracts people from the more pressing issues of the day.

Despite the protests of these well-known public and political figures, *BBA* continued to dominate headlines and command public attention and involvement. Enthusiasm was greatest in Zambia, the home of the winner of *BBA*, Cherise Makubale. Though *BBA* was denounced by Zambian church leaders when first broadcast, Cherise was officially congratulated by the Zambian government and granted a diplomatic passport so that she could, according to the Home Affairs Permanent Secretary Peter Mumba, "visit the countries where the 11 contestants come from with a message of love and unity" ("*Levy Congratulates Cherise*," September 10). Significantly, only one other ordinary (nondiplomatic) Zambian citizen has a diplomatic passport, the football star Kalusha Bwalya ("*African TV Winner Made 'Ambassador*,'" 2003). Cherise was also invited to be congratulated in person by former South African President Nelson Mandela, who praised her for making a contribution to Africa, commenting that he had invited her to meet with him because "it encourages young people to follow an example like this" ("*Levy Congratulates Cherise*," September 10). The symbolism of Mandela's praise is significant, as his popularity extends well past South Africa; in many ways, he currently serves as the elder statesman of the entire continent and is revered both for his sacrifice and his ability to bring together people of disparate backgrounds and beliefs. Three years after the end of *BBA*, Cherise remains a popular figure in Zambia and serves as a role model for young women. Her Cherise Kids Park provides education and recreational opportunities for children in Lusaka, and she



is raising funds to construct a basketball court, weight circuit, swimming pool, and educational resource center (see [www.cherishkidspark.co.zm](http://www.cherishkidspark.co.zm)).

For scholars of popular culture, *BBA* is an important event in the evolution and history of popular culture on the African continent. Despite the limitations of demographics and content, the televising of *BBA* was the first time that the entire African continent was linked. Though certainly most Africans did not have access to *BBA*, the television program stimulated cross-national dialogue among ordinary people in ways that were not possible before. Previously, African elites have had numerous opportunities for pan-African conversation: through the United Nations and other international and supranational organizations; in regional African organizations such as NEPAD and the OAU; in the former colonial metropolises of London and Paris; and in British, American, and Canadian universities. Yet with the limited exceptions of migrants and refugees, most ordinary Africans have little opportunity to hear the voices of others on their own continent: when they do, those voices are often filtered through Europe and the United States (through BBC and CNN, for example) and then dispatched back to them. Manthia Diawara makes a similar argument, writing, “Clearly, the media have sufficiently wired Africa to the West, from the public sphere to the bedroom, to the extent that Africans are isolated from nation to nation but united in looking toward Europe and the United States for the latest news, politics, and culture” (2003:64). The new linkages—while historically rooted—are of course made possible only through such relatively new technologies as satellite television, computers, and mobile phones, and only because of the ascendancy of private, for-profit television services such as M-Net.

At one level, it is fair to say that *BBA* represented only the tiny elite of a poor continent, a reality conceded by Kole Omotoso, the show’s cultural advisor (Dynes 2003). All contestants were English-speaking, educated, and middle class. Certainly the audience demographic, while perhaps slightly broader, hardly represented the wide swath of Africans. Yet the enthusiasm, public debate, and in the end, public (and in some cases, state) adoration heaped upon the final winner indicates that *BBA* tapped into the sensibility of people who would not easily be satisfied by, for example, a documentary on Namibian history. Thus it is important to analyze how we might understand *BBA* in the context of thinking about citizenship, youth, democracy, and the public sphere in Africa.

*BBA* presented an opportunity for Africa and Africans to be united in a conversation in a way that up to now has been largely impossible. While political movements for pan-Africanism and Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance idealize African unity, *BBA* provided a forum for its actual practice, however rocky, incomplete, and partial. Africans did participate—they watched, they voted, they called in SMS messages on their cell phones. As the Web site *Ghana web* ([www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com)) asserted, “Some viewers say it has done more to unite them than independence, the Cold War, or the

pan-African movement” (“Big Brother’ Housemates Here,” November 22, 2003). And one particularly enthusiastic viewer, quoted in the *Washington Post*, sent in this text message, which scrolled at the bottom of the screen: “Since BBA I see Africa in a whole new light. One Nation. One People. No Borders” (Wax 2003).

While certainly *BBA* did not unite Africans in an ideological sense under the rubric of a political party or project, *BBA* did unite Africans in a shared conversation that ranged from the trivialities of on-screen romances to discussions of premarital sex, AIDS, the role of women in African societies, racial, ethnic, and national stereotypes, and the immunerable common challenges of many African countries. While such discussions are hardly rare in Africa, *BBA* provided a forum that was unique in several ways: it was watched and engaged by youth; it extended beyond the borders of a particular nation; and it was largely beyond the control of the state. The housemates’ weekly activities—which ranged from silly (bodypainting) to more serious projects (proposing solutions to Africa’s economic, political, and social problems)—created opportunities for focused in-house discussions of important issues, which spilled onto the streets. *BBA* provided the ground for millions of ordinary Africans to voice and express their opinions about critical social issues in a forum that was accessible, engaging, and, if you were following the drama, entertaining. The personal interactions between the housemates and the ongoing soap opera created a personal, human environment for debate: people who may not usually think of themselves as “political” were nonetheless drawn into Africa’s largest, noisiest, and perhaps most entertaining political dialogue in history.

While some may think of the *Big Brother* series as a foreign import, it is clear that at least some Africans embraced it as an African television show—in fact, in some cases, as the *only* African television show. Images and ideas in *BBA* were not filtered through Paris, London, Frankfurt, or other post-colonial African diasporic capitals and then fed back to Africa. Instead, the images, the debates, and the issues were located squarely on the continent. A *BBA* viewer from Kampala was quoted by the *London Times* as saying, “We Africans don’t want to watch the imported shows anymore. It’s African comedy. There are jokes about extended families and men who marry too many wives. It’s all about us. That’s why we love it” (Dynes 2003). Tsanga (2003) echoed this outlook, writing, “*Big Brother Africa* was truly African not because of its rainbow outlook, but because it centered on the lives of Africans as we know them and whom viewers could relate to.” Thus *BBA*—despite its global roots—is positioned as a local, African television show that is far superior to the imported reruns from American and European television so common in Africa. Critically, the Africa that is pictured on *BBA* is a modern, secular Africa where disputes and differences are negotiated through dialogue—critical social practices for democracy. Its status as an African television show also allowed *BBA* to explore intellectual questions through a popular forum. For example, the presence of Stefan, the white housemate from Namibia,

generated controversy about who is (or is not) African in the context of the continent's colonial history (see Tsanga 2003). It is noteworthy that the "African" roots of the winner of *BBA*, the Zambian Cherise Makubale, were rarely (if ever) mentioned, though as the BBC News reported, she was "brought up by a foster father who is a white settler while her mother has been living in the United Kingdom for years" (Jere 2003). That her background generated little controversy either on the show or in Zambia (she also refused to discuss her upbringing publicly) indicates that the question of "who is African" is not simply about racial essences, or, in Cherise's case, the state citizenships of her parents, but about who is committed to the nurturing of Africa and to the common good.

This is not to suggest that all points of view regarding *BBA* reflected progressive ideas or similar visions of an African future. For example, Cherise's role in the *BBA* house was very domestic—she cooked, provided the housemates with fresh bread, cleaned, and nurtured. The president of Zambia, Levy Mwanawasa, celebrated Cherise's domesticity and overall behavior, commenting, "While other housemates were either having sex or drinking alcohol, Cherise preferred to clean and cook for them, depicting a more traditional African woman" (Jere 2003). Clearly, Mwanawasa thought that such exemplary behavior, in the face of temptation, reflected well on Zambia (and Zambian women) and was an element in his decision to award Cherise a diplomatic passport. A writer for the *Sunday Mirror* interpreted Cherise's victory from a slightly different perspective, commenting that "it is good that she will be rewarded [with \$100,000] for all that cooking and washing up. All too often, women's unpaid work is so undervalued and it is time people realised just how much this kind of work keeps life going" (Tsanga 2003). Finally, a viewer ("Orock") posted this comment to the *Big Brother Africa* "chat" site:

*BBA* has done a lot for Africa. Africans battered their wives and treated them as if they were second-class citizens. This could be disheartening to hear and see the torments women went through. God changed our minds and we came to realize that women must work hand in hand with men for Africa to forge ahead. That is why *BBA* decides to bring ladies and gents into this house to compete together. *BBA*—congratulations for the fight for gender equality. (August 21, 2003)<sup>8</sup>

While "Orock" may exaggerate the positive effects of *BBA*, it is obvious that *BBA* has promoted reflection and discussion across borders. One *BBA* viewer quoted in the *Washington Post* echoed Manthia Diawara's analysis of the relationship between Africa and Europe, concluding that "It's great for Africa. There is so much tribalism and stereotypes that we Africans have about each other. This show is changing all that. We have never had a chance to get to know each other, since most of us don't travel. And if we do, it's only to the West. It's so nice to have this" (Wax 2003). There are also

signs that at least some African governments and tourism ministries are using *BBA*'s success to promote tourism within Africa. For example, Cherise's diplomatic passport allows her to travel throughout Africa (and Europe) to promote Zambian tourism. And in December 2003 the Kenyan government, in cooperation with M-Net, sponsored a trip to Kenya for the twelve housemates to celebrate Kenya's fortieth anniversary of independence and to encourage Kenyan tourism ("Big Brother's Big Trip" 2003).

### Conclusion: Cultural Citizenship and African Futures

Cultural citizenship, as Toby Miller (1998) argues, pierces the zone "where the popular and the civic brush up against one another." As Miller suggests, popular culture is not a reactive space, but a formative one that has implications for other arenas of society and for the makings, and unmakings, of democracy. In the U.S. context, Benjamin Barber (2001) has made the observation that if citizens are literally and figuratively "at the mall" (e.g., self-defined by their consumption practices), then it is the job of those concerned with democracy and the solidity of the public sphere to go to the mall, recognize the significance of the identity work that is occurring there, and reorient those consumptive practices into democratic ones. Similarly, if *BBA* has invigorated public discourse and pan-African conversations in unprecedented ways, Soyinka and Nujoma's comments are ultimately destructive to the project of democracy. This is not to wholly reject their positions—like perhaps many scholars, I personally was not captivated by the antics of the housemates. But it is crucial to understand that there is a deep, affective human pleasure that can be found in multiple spaces, and popular culture clearly taps into that desire. Popular culture, in that sense, is deeply political. It mobilizes people to act, to care, and to discuss: in this case throughout a continent that rarely sees such conversation.

Nor, as I have demonstrated, can the popularity of *BBA* be easily dismissed as "Western" influence. As authors such as Nixon (1994) and David (2001) have shown, African identities have always been situated at the crossroads of multiple forces. The line between "the West" and "the rest" is inherently unstable, and much of what has been deemed "Western" is in fact a discursive construction (see Nederveen 1994). It is also clear from public reaction discussed in this essay that many Africans embraced *BBA* as "African." Thus the desire here, as David (2001) argues in the context of black South African identity in 1950s Johannesburg, is not to be part of the "West" (as elusive a concept as that is), but to be modern: to be part of the global flows that shape the contemporary world. Kwaku Korang (2003) makes a related argument in his discussion of Ghanaian intellectuals from preindependence Ghana, demonstrating that "modernity" is not to be equated with "Western" but is instead located in the relational, intercultural flows and patterns of human interaction.

Diouf writes that “in many ways, young Africans can be seen as searching for a narrative that provides a territory for the free play of their imagination” (2003:6). As David, Nixon, and I, among others, have asserted, the territory for this free play is the global stage. The narratives that African youth seek are representative of the longings that they feel from being positioned as consumers by the global marketplace, while simultaneously being largely unable to consume. *BBA* allowed them to participate, however briefly, in a global conversation that they are often simply forced to watch, with no outlet for involvement. As Diouf suggests, we must understand how African youth are “situated in a temporality both indigenous and global” (2003:10).

While the “indigenous” and the “national” have been paradigms often used to understand African youth’s self-imaginings, the curious combination of “global” and “African” ignited by *BBA* has been less well explored.<sup>9</sup> One of the shortcomings of globalization theorizing is its general ignorance of the conditions of Africa, and often its irrelevance for explaining its realities. All the talk about movement, shifting identities, the impact of new technologies, global nomads, and other buzzwords of globalization seem foreign to a continent still struggling to fulfill the most basic of human needs. However, as *BBA* and other examples illustrate, we cannot simply dismiss the importance of global flows *beyond* the economic for understanding contemporary Africa. As Leon Tikly comments in his discussion of South African President Thabo Mbeki’s “African Renaissance,” there is an intricate relationship between economics, politics, and culture; “political and cultural development relies on economic growth but conversely, economic success is contingent on cultural renewal and innovation and on the maintenance of political stability” (2001:169). In the example I have discussed in this article, a television show that is situated at the nexus of global flows of capital and culture, and that in some ways is foreign to Africa, is received and embraced as “African.” And perhaps, in some African countries, it was the only television program that rejected indigenous and/or national paradigms for portraying African lives. In that way, it tapped into African desires for modernity, and for seeing not only their current lives, but also their dreams, portrayed on the small screen. And as viewers pointed out, these were African lives—ones that were fully implicated in the cross-currents of modernity.

*Big Brother Africa* provides one example of a nascent cultural citizenship in Africa. Critically, it is a citizenship that exceeds the borders of a single nation-state without falling into an idealized and romanticized notion of a singular, unified African state. Instead, *Big Brother Africa* is one forum—and certainly a powerful one—for the difficult work of unifying Africa on its own terms and for contributing to the formation of a continentwide public sphere. Within Africa, as elsewhere, it is important to analyze the everyday practices of people—their cultural practices—within a framework that examines these very practices for what we can learn about the changing

patterns of citizenship and the public sphere. Certainly *Big Brother Africa* is a part of this global, public sphere.

As Diouf (2003) comments, African youth were central to the nationalist projects of emergent African states and the sweet dreams of a bright future. With the decline of this nationalist fervor, African youth have been repositioned—much like youth the world over—as violent menaces and threats to the social order. Certainly much has changed in the past forty years; yet to wholly condemn African youth is both an oversimplification and a rejection of Africa's future. Instead scholars need to look to cultural realities that go beyond the narrowly national, to those that are both African and global. One of the key elements of the African Renaissance, if there is to be one, is the development of a vibrant African public sphere—one that embraces the entire continent. Such a project cannot be solely imposed from above, but must seek to understand the popular forms that shape youth's imaginings, their practices of citizenship, and ultimately, Africa's future.

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## Notes

1. This perspective is well represented in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, published by the Center for Popular Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. See Henry Giroux (1992) and Dolby (2003) for discussion.
2. Research on youth, consumer culture, and modernity is also growing in other parts of the world. For example, see Mark Liechty (2003) on Nepal, and Ritty Lukose (2001) on India.
3. The scholarship on the idea of “nation” is certainly vast, and a complete review is beyond the scope of this article. Within primarily the European context, see for example, Benedict Anderson (1983) and Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991). For postcolonial perspectives, see Partha Chatterjee (1993). Within the specific African context, see Korang (2003).
4. The M-Net Web site in 2005 indicated that its service is available in at least forty-one African countries. The major exceptions to its continentwide coverage are in Northern Africa. See [www.mnet.co.za](http://www.mnet.co.za).
5. *Survivor*, of course, also differs from *Big Brother* in numerous ways, particularly the ways in which *Survivor* becomes a staging ground for negotiations of American identity.
6. See Laura Hubbard and Kathryn Mathers (2004) for a discussion of *Survivor Africa*. The success of *Big Brother Africa* has spawned more reality television on the African continent. *Big Brother Nigeria*—filmed on location in Nigeria with a Nigerian cast—was aired on M-Net in 2006. *Survivor South Africa* and *Survivor Africa* are both scheduled to be filmed in Panama later in 2006.
7. According to the United Nations Population Fund, 63 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa was under the age of 25 in 2002.
8. Orock’s posting contained numerous typographical errors. I have edited the statement for clarity.
9. Though there are indications that there is growing interest in this area. For example, in April 2003, the annual conference of the Stanford-Berkeley Joint Center for African Studies was entitled “Popular Culture in Africa.” “Footprints Across the Globe: Popular Culture and African/a Globalization” was the theme of the 2002 annual meeting of the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies.