

AFRICA NORTH, SOUTH, AND IN BETWEEN

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It is by now a well-known and remarked-upon fact that there exists a problematic divide between north and south in the scholarship on Africa, a divide that ignores centuries-long continental circulations of people, objects, images, and practices. Another scholarly divide, which is well known to Middle East scholars, but less so to Africanists, exists between the eastern and western parts of North Africa. This regional partitioning is reproduced in the structuring of academic departments/centers, professional associations, funding organizations, and publications, as well as in the often parallel structuring of visual culture venues, such as museums and their collections, exhibitions, and film series. Visual culture practitioners—artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians—also frequently experience and reproduce this divide.

The historical reasons for this compartmentalization of knowledge production are multiple: an environmental determinism that presumes a lack of activity in or movement across the Sahara; the association of North Africa with Islam (often accompanied by an assumption that Islam defines North African life and renders it distinct from the sub-continent); the association of North Africans with slave-traders (not as also enslaved); essentializing notions of racial and ethnic uniformity in the north, and difference from the south; and the association of the north with higher levels of modernization and modernity. Many of these constructions of difference are traceable to the colonial era, when territories were carved up into administrative units,

with little regard for existing human relations and movements, when the people living within these territories were divided and placed into colonial ideological hierarchies of value, and when their material and visual culture was collected and organized according to corresponding thematic distinctions. These colonial spatial and hierarchical divisions were also often reproduced within the anti-colonial nationalist discourse of North African elites. Their reinscription continued into the post-independence period of nation- and geopolitical-alliance-building, most notably within the pan-Arab movement. Yet there were important early attempts to think across these boundaries, and these deserve further attention.

AFRICANITY AND NORTH AFRICAN VISUAL CULTURE

In the Archives section of this issue of *Critical Interventions*, several central texts dating from the 1960s on the notion of Africity are reprinted. These manifestoes and essays address the term's relevance in relation to North Africa. During the early post-colonial period, the term "Africity" was coined by Africa's theorists as a way to talk about spatial and political affiliations on the continent. For instance, Jacques Maquet's work posited an African unity while stressing north-south difference and continental divisions; Léopold Sédar Senghor argued for common values and cultural exchange; and articles by the editors of the Moroccan cultural journal, *Souffles*, fundamentally questioned the terminologies of cross-continental engagement.

Jacques Maquet's well-known 1967 study, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (excerpted in this issue), examined how histories and shared cultural and social practices unite peoples from sub-Saharan Africa. However, when it came to relations with North Africa, he argued that, "It cannot be denied that the separation of these two worlds is definite and rests on well-established academic traditions."¹ For Maquet, the division between north and south of the Sahara is not due to racial difference, but rather to a lack of shared cultural ground and to minimal cultural exchange, concluding that, "of course, the Maghreb civilization belongs to the continent of Africa, but it does not seem to me to belong to Africanity."²

While Maquet used the term Africanity to exclude North Africa from the cultural unity of "black" Africa, the very same year, Léopold Sédar Senghor (first President of independent Senegal, and co-theorist of the concept of Négritude) spoke about the shared foundations and characteristics of *Africanité* and *Arabicité* in his 1967 speech at Cairo University (reproduced in the Archives section of this issue). Claiming that the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural values that these terms evoked were in fact shared and symbiotic, Senghor argued for a political continental unity supported by a similarly shared history of anti-colonial struggle and a humanist practice of cultural exchange. He argued that the time had come to deconstruct divisive colonial categories and constructions: "It is time for us, the ex-colonized, to rid ourselves of complexes inculcated by the former colonizers."³ In order to do so, Senghor posited that African unity must be founded on "points of cultural convergence" and he identified two obstacles to African unity: linguistic divisions between Francophone and Anglophone Africa, and the "gap between Arab-Berbers and Negro-Africans."⁴ Senghor did not believe that the

(conventionally assumed) gap between these two latter identity categories should be erased. Instead he urged "Arab-Berbers" and "Negro-Africans" to move closer together through a recognition of cultural specificities combined with symbiotic values, stating: "In order to give and receive, it is necessary that you remain *Arabs*. Otherwise you would have nothing to offer us. [...] But it is also necessary that we, sub-Saharanans, remain *Negroes*. To be specific, Negro-Africans."⁵ Senghor valorized cultural specificity while also working toward a goal of unity through practices of exchange that would lead to the realization of an African humanism.

The 1960s, the immediate post-independence era in Africa, also witnessed numerous artistic and cultural festivals on the continent. Many of these public platforms strove to highlight cultural exchange and convergence across the erstwhile Saharan divide. This issue of *Critical Interventions* includes reportage originally published in the Moroccan cultural journal *Souffles*, which not only documented these events, but also moved beyond Senghor's perspective. In *Souffles* the writers questioned the success of these pan-African festivals when it came to actually uniting artists or working across conventionally established cultural, ethnic, and political divides. For instance, included here is Abdellah Stouky's essay (published in *Souffles* in 1967) on the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar that was organized under the guidance of then-President Senghor. Stouky questioned the founding principles and terminology of the festival, particularly Senghor's overarching (and essentialist) concept of Négritude, going so far as to ask, "Does the Negro exist anymore? Are we still at the point where we must racialize thought?"⁶ In another essay, this time on the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers, the *Souffles* editorial board (founded and led by Abdellatif Laâbi) collectively addressed

the lack of substantive activity in the wake of the 1969 festival. They bemoaned how important resolutions articulated by artists and intellectuals remained purely discursive. For the *Souffles* group, Africanity would have to signify more than just a statement about shared values, cultures, and practices of exchange. For them, Africanity was a rallying call for concrete political action.

Today, scholars, artists, and other producers of visual culture continue to grapple with the partitioned discursive and institutional structures handed down in part from colonialism—divisions further exacerbated in recent contexts of local, national, and global conflict. At present, impatience with these partitions, combined with significant post-Cold War changes in the intensity of certain kinds of transnational circulations, have converged to make an unreflective stance towards north/south and east/west divisions untenable. Although the shortest route for an artist from Cairo to meet an artist from Abidjan is still through Paris, the current continental circulations of culture producers, art objects, and visual media are more numerous and more frequent than at any other point in the modern period. The essays in this special issue constitute a purposeful intervention at this critical moment in time, when we must not only actively seek to break down scholarly divisions based on false assumptions with suspect historical roots, but when we must also examine—in a more concerted way—how such divisions get reproduced in multiple contexts within a range of histories and contemporary contingencies.

The authors included in this issue do not take enduring divides for granted, but rather examine the multiple ways in which they have been both created and transgressed in visual culture and through its complex circulation. By taking how the notion of Africa has been constructed, circulated, and challenged as their starting point, they work against essentialist notions of the Maghreb in

the west or Mashreq in the east of North Africa. Presented together in this issue, their research, while diverse, uncovers several common themes that we believe constitute a productive basis for future research on how visual culture in and of North Africa is linked to the rest of the continent, and vice versa. These common themes are politics, circulation, and performance/commodity.

AFRICA AS POLITICS

During the immediate post-independence period, unified notions of pan-African and of pan-North African culture were created through the concepts of *Africanité* and *Arabicité*. The discourse of these terms may be understood as an attempt to reconcile a desire for modernization with a politics of cultural decolonization. Indeed, no full discussion of the contemporary visual culture of North Africa can ignore how Africa comes to be expressed as a representation, a category, and a practice in relationship to political histories, structures, and struggles that have either divided, or traversed divisions. Along these lines, the contributors to this issue show how cultural production may alternately create or disable the concept of Africa with regard to colonial histories, modern nation-states, political movements, and racial/ethnic hierarchies. Several of the contributions examine how Africa has been imagined as part of a political transnational visual practice, especially within configurations of ethnicity.

Cynthia Becker's essay analyzes how artists construct an image of an "authentic" Imazighen people—as a pre-Arab pre-Islamic pre-modern indigenous African/Mediterranean group—in part to build a transnational Amazigh political movement that seeks cultural autonomy from domination within Arab-Islamic nations. As Becker notes, these artists draw on gendered colonial-era stereotypes of Berber and Tuareg peoples in order

to challenge the very nation-state divisions within Africa that the colonizers promoted, as well as to challenge pro-Arab policies in post-colonial North African societies. Through their work, these artists create a political argument for the re-creation of a transnational culture that spans the Sahara as well as the Mediterranean. In this visual politics, artists and activists attempt to create an idea of Africa where autochthonous/indigenous Amazigh women are freed from patriarchy, from Islam, and from historical Arabism.

In her essay on Gnawa musicians in Morocco, Deborah Kapchan discusses how Africa is constructed as a political vision of transnational artistry. The Gnawa people originally came to Morocco from sub-Saharan Africa via the slave trade, and among other Moroccans (and for foreign tourists) they retain associations with "the south" and with "black" Africanness. Partly as a response to their own traumatic history of slavery, and through the self-conscious creation of their heritage, Gnawa artists and musicians establish strategic connections with sub-Saharan Africa and with the African diaspora in the Americas. As with the Amazigh artists studied by Becker, institutionalized representations and the nascent heritage industry that feeds them create an idealized view of a pre-colonial/pre-Islamic essence for Africa, in ways that expand beyond territorial boundaries.

In contrast to these strategically positive adoptions of the idea of Africa as part of a political-visual practice involving North Africa and North Africans, Eve Troutt Powell and Elizabeth Smith present comparative cases where the visual category/representation of Africa carries a significantly more negative component. Powell's essay on representations of the Darfur conflict in Sudan in Western video documentaries shows how Africa is visually constructed as a site of problematic Arab-Muslim politics and divides, in

a way that—like the Amazigh artists, but from a completely different political location—draws on and reproduces (neo)colonial notions, of Arab Muslims as invaders and aggressors and of other Africans as authentic Africans and victims. Yet, in this rendering, as in many other Western films and humanitarian enterprises "concerned with" Africa, Darfuris are presented as agency-deprived victims in need of Western salvation. Important differences within and between the groups in the Darfur conflict are often ignored, as are earlier histories and the role of Western powers in the region, in favor of a homogenizing narrative of religious-racial conflict that is refracted through the racial categories and assumptions about Islam held by the filmmakers and many of their audiences. In these representations, Africa becomes simultaneously an uncivilized space of genocidal conflict, as well as a site for north/south divides that too neatly coincides with the West's own racial and religious divides.

In Western films on the crisis in Darfur, northern Sudanese are portrayed as vicious barbarians—as African, but not—and southerners as innocent victims. In contrast, in the Egyptian media stereotypes described by Elizabeth Smith northern Egyptians take on the familiar role usually played by Westerners, that is, as Africa's civilizing saviors. Smith discusses the images of especially those darker-skinned southern Egyptians who are racially and culturally coded in that country as Nubian and African, in distinction from the rest of Egypt. In her analysis of the wildly popular Egyptian children's cartoon *Bakkar*, Smith shows how Egypt's history as a colonial power in the Sudan has shaped popular media representations of Nubians (and by extension other sub-Saharan Africans) as exotic others endangering the integrity of the nation and as uncivilized barbarians. Yet, Nubians are also represented and performed as stereotyped

folklore that is considered part of the nation's patrimony. All of these constructions of Africa, Smith suggests, must also be viewed in the context of the Egyptian government's decision after independence to build the Aswan Dam, and to flood ancestral Nubian lands. Nubian self-representations in an idealized historical register are a direct outcome of that history, and they mirror the self-representations of the Amazigh activists and Gnawa musicians discussed by Becker and Kapchan. But Nubians' own embrace of Bakkar, and their desire to be part of the Egyptian nation, suggests a different investment in ideas of continental African identity. At times they set aside an "African" identity in the interest of political enfranchisement within the Egyptian nation-state.

AFRICA AS CIRCULATION / AFRICA IN CIRCULATION

While Jacques Maquet claimed that "exchanges between the peoples living on the borders of the Sahara were not sufficiently intense or numerous to create cultural unity," many essays in this issue challenge this contention and identify the movement, displacement, circulation, and exchange of peoples, images, and ideas across the Sahara and across the continent as fundamental characteristics of Africanness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition to addressing the political nature of transnational movement, several essays highlight recent histories of cultural and visual exchange. The authors also focus on the manufactured borders and areas of arbitrary detention and criminalization that have accompanied the contemporary desires of indigenous communities for mobility—forms of policing that limit image circulation abroad and restrict the production of the visual within local national discourses.

The opening and closing of space and the circulation of people and images are central concerns in Felicia McCarren's essay. McCarren examines how people in the Moroccan south self-represent and how they perform identities when confronted by the more dominant visual culture of northern Morocco. She argues that articulations of a constructed African identity serve as forms of resistance to mainstream northern Moroccan urban imagery. She writes that, while the romanticizing of the Saharan Desert as a metaphorical space of freedom may seem outdated today, the dramatization in local folklore that "freedom does not lie to the north" still performs a powerful counter-narrative to ubiquitous migration stories that equate progress, wealth, and power with the north.

Intra-African identity and the continental circulation of people, images, and ideas are often positioned as responses to the political work of the individual nation-state and its dominant cultures. But, ironically, Africa is also often erased in the interest of a larger transcontinental politics. Katarzyna Pieprzak's interview with the curator Abdellah Karroum reveals how his transnational curatorial practice refuses holistic conceptions of Africa and North Africa while still facilitating connections and circulations within the continent. Karroum is reluctant to perform categories of identity, whether continental or national. However, he is committed to exposing the power relations inherent in such identities and positions, and to exploring how the conventional categories have historically shaped both curatorial practice and funding for the arts. In order to achieve this, his curatorial practice is itself envisioned as a nomadic and exploratory movement between differing spaces, ideologies, and practices.

Also included here is a text and stills from a video project by Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, titled *Sahara Chronicles*. Biemann's

project approaches questions similar to those in McCarren's case study, except from the outside rather than from within. Biemann explores how contemporary state borders within African and between Africa and Europe have become highly politicized and are being policed in ways that engender both an increased urgency for mobility and a heightening of containment. The effects of these contradictory forces cross-cut any easy racial or technological categorizations. Biemann describes how historic routes of travel across the Sahara have been translated and mobilized in the contemporary period into new migration networks. Her video footage combines interviews with clandestine migrants with police images taken by Moroccan surveillance drone planes. Seen together, these images deconstruct how space is simultaneously opened and closed, made visible and invisible, and how movement in the Sahara is constantly being monitored. Biemann pays close attention to the material and metaphorical landscapes that her work inhabits, but she is careful to keep the contemporary politics of migration in focus, and not to de-territorialize her subject into merely an abstract meditation on movement.

A note on the cover for this issue: *Or d'Afrique* (Gold from Africa) is a work by conceptual artist Hassan Darsi (b. 1961, Casablanca). Like Biemann, Darsi is concerned with movement in and out of the continent and the valorization of materials over human life. In this project, he applied golden adhesive to sections of the concrete cubes that make up a jetty in the pleasure port of Guia de Isora in Tenerife, Canary Islands. As Helen Adkins has written: "the bewitchingly beautiful and geometrically minimalist water-edge of the wealthy marina stands out in paradoxical contrast to the brutality of the concrete, with associations of coastline protection against warfare or illegal immigration."⁷

The title plays with the linguistic slippage (in French) between "*Or*" (gold) and "*hors*" (out of), in order to elicit reflection on what and who in Africa is valued by global and local markets, and how processes of global capitalism signify wealth. Where gold draws and attracts investment of multiple types (foreign investors as well as migrants seeking better economic conditions out of Africa), it also points to brutal barriers in circulation. Darsi explains: "In general, the re-occurrence of gold adhesive signals danger. The context is the Canary Islands, gateway to Europe, space of transit and also final resting place for the large majority of people who attempt the crossing [to Europe]."⁸ Migrants who seek to leave Africa, in search of work or safety, are consistently dehumanized by both local and international authorities.

AFRICA AS PERFORMANCE AND COMMODITY

As all the essays in this collection show, Africa is not only a visual construction, political category, or institutionalized identity, it is also a performance and a daily practice that can be, and increasingly is, commodified. Africa is performed by artists and communities as a means to seek recognition from various nation-states, NGOs, and businesses in order to move beyond post-colonial nationalism and to claim membership in a larger, more cosmopolitan and transnational marketplace of ideas. Africanness is an identity that, through performance, may be used to navigate daily life. In their essays, McCarren, Kapchan, and Becker reveal how people perform and enact discourses of African belonging as they seek agency in nation-states that simultaneously exclude and subsume minority cultures into dominant models. Kapchan shows us how a growing Gnawa heritage industry performs a "possession" of the very cultures that it discursively seeks to protect. Smith explores how the performance of Nubian types on television

has functioned as a representational carrier of Egyptian discourses on African otherness. And both Karroum and Kinsey Katchka discuss how contemporary artists have navigated identity politics in what Olu Oguibe has called the “culture game.”⁹ What they describe, as we see it, is how artists have used performances of Africanness as they have sought inclusion in the international art scene. Performance here becomes intimately tied to a process of commodification and commodity flows.

Abdellah Karroum makes the highly significant claim that Africanity is in fact Europeanity. He suggests that European desires for the exotic produce marketable classifications of certain artists and artwork as African. Cynthia Becker argues similarly that some Amazigh artists specifically construct their political visions of a transnational Africa for a tourist market. Indeed, a majority of the essays in this collection reveal that when notions of Africa are engaged in the visual culture of/in North Africa, these notions are frequently commodified ones. Moreover, many times such engagements with Africa are only made possible through the very process of commodification. Certainly, the new forms of categorizing and circulating ideas, objects, images, and bodies discussed earlier cannot be fully understood without examining the multiple ways that they attach to marketing agendas, consumer desires, and commodity circuits.

Karroum’s and Katchka’s provocations force us to consider the ways in which market desires for African art—whether on the continent, in Europe, or in North America—shape the very construction of that category and open spaces for its articulation, creating both limitations and opportunities. As Katchka suggests, growing Western interest in “contemporary African art” has converged with practitioner interest in bridging north/south divides, leading in part to the

development of new institutions and exhibitions that bring artists together from all over the continent. In our view, “contemporary African art” has become a highly marketable art/commodity status for new collections and funding initiatives. This has in turn compelled a number of North African artists to explore (and embrace) African identities and linkages. This plays out in terms of how they interpret or present their work, as well as through their relations with other artists.

While on the one hand this development has helped artists escape some of the boxes into which North African artists had been placed (e.g., Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern), it also expands another already existing category of “African” that persists as a box nonetheless. Furthermore, as both Karroum and Becker suggest, we need to pay attention to the ways in which art and artists become entangled in the process of commodification. This is not to say that North African artists merely make themselves out to be African to gain exposure, or that we should forget that sub-Saharan artists will have a significantly more difficult time dropping the Africa label when they want to. Rather, we feel it is critical to question the ways that certain artistic subjectivities and practices are enabled by and produced within markets, while not being completely determined by them.

It is also important to question the effects of new markets on older cultural forms. Deborah Kapchan’s essay reveals how the music, dance, and objects associated with the Gnawa in Morocco have become fetishized in tourist events and “heritage” spaces, and have gained currency alongside new Gnawa commodities such as tee-shirts and postcards. This fetishization of Gnawa-as-Africa, she argues, has a powerful visual component which is itself “possessing” the earlier cultural significance of Gnawa. Felicia McCarren’s essay also shows how Africanness is signified

through the consumption of commodities such as clothing and music—in this case by residents of Zagora who are marginalized both by processes of capitalism and by the Moroccan state. In Zagora, self-identification as African through commodities enables a political solidarity across ethnic divides.

Kapchan, Becker, and McCarren are each describing situations in which a politically empowered (but sometimes spiritually denuded) image of ideal Africa bridging north and south is enabled through commodity flows. Smith's discussion of the tensions in the images of Nubians in Egyptian visual culture, on the other hand, demonstrates how commodified images positively coded as African often carry with them a negative racialized shadow. The emphasis on positive aspects of Nubians in a kind of "brotherly love" discourse is ultimately built on fears of an internal less-civilized other. Such images enable the construction of a positive Nubian political/ethnic identity; they also enable Egyptian state interventions that more often than not have not benefited Nubians themselves. Likewise, Eve Powell's essay pulls apart this tension to show how commercial documentaries reproduce negative images of Africa, including age old stereotypes of north/south dichotomies. Western films representing the Darfur conflict are marketable precisely because of the pathetic images of black Africa (and the demonic images of Arab Africa) that they offer. Importantly, this construction of Africa in the marketplace of cinema plays a significant role in enabling political and military intervention.

FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

With the groundbreaking essays in this issue as a starting point, we call for moving beyond merely lamenting the myopic north/south and

east/west divides in scholarship into an era of continued and concerted research directly on this topic. We argue for proceeding in a way that does not simply look for and uncritically celebrate continental circulations, but rather investigates them in all of their differences, contingencies, and blockages. Such a project will necessarily involve some unpleasant moments, as the pernicious persistence of continental inequalities is recognized, utopian visions disintegrate, and as scholars and practitioners are forced to cede control over geographic regions and institutional territories. Fortunately, this project is already underway. In the summer of 2009, Cynthia Becker organized a joint conference in Tangier between scholars from the American Institute of Maghrebi Studies and the West African Research Association (based in Dakar) on the subject of "Saharan Crossroads: Views from the North," which will be followed by a conference in 2010 in West Africa on "Views from the South." It is precisely this type of cross-continental academic cooperation and exchange that is necessary in order to open the dialogues that will start breaking down persistent academic barriers.

We find it relevant and important that scholars and artists considering the question of Africa in relationship to North Africa have found it productive to focus on the Sahara as a territorial space of intra-continental human interaction and as a source of iconographic images of that interaction. We suggest that future research could more directly consider how the Sahara becomes central to different groups' imaginings of the continent as viewed from the north. A focus on the Sahara enables us to uncover historical and contemporary continental circulations of culture. We can also pay more attention to how these circulations are not always "free-flowing," but are instead continually structured by group divisions, nation-state boundaries, and political and economic inequalities.

We also suggest that it would be fruitful to think more about the ways in which attempts to break down north/south divides are still rooted in a potentially limiting territorial imaginary. While we believe the shift to Saharan studies is a valuable intervention, surely there are continental circulations of visual culture and ways of thinking about north/south connections that are not necessarily related to the desert's sands or its imagery.

The most important future intervention that we identify at this point in scholarship centers on race. In our view, future research needs to pay special attention to the thorny, but important, issues of racism and stereotyping in the construction of Africa in visual culture, especially that emerging from North Africa. As we have noted, several essays in this collection suggest that Africa is most frequently signified in various pejorative forms tied to problematic depictions of race and culture. Depictions of Africa as a remnant of a past from which the modern North African has emerged, or depictions of Africans as threatening internal others (the celebration of which constitutes a strategy of containment) need more critical dissection. Likewise, the construction of Africa as black and/or traditional for putatively positive ends, such as the construction of transnational and/or transcontinental artistic movements, needs more critical analysis in terms of race theory. Colonial era stereotyping of sub-Saharan Africa not only still adheres in both of these formulations, but it also continues to be enmeshed with new postcolonial and post-Cold War stereotypes of Africa and Africans. Rather than ignoring race, assigning problematic race constructions to the colonial period, or desiring that the era of racialized thought be over, scholars of North Africa should carefully and rigorously examine racial ideologies present in contemporary North African visual culture and substantively

engage with race theory emerging from the linked disciplines of Atlantic studies, Africana studies, and African-American studies. Our reading of the essays in this issue and the important paths upon which they have embarked suggests that it is crucial for future research to take seriously the continued, changing, and contingent ways in which racial ideologies continue to shape visual culture in and of North Africa.

NOTES

- ¹ Jacques Maquet, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, Joan Rayfield trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 15. See Archives, this issue.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Foundations of Africanité*, trans. Mercer Cook (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1971), 83. See Archives, this issue.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Abdellah Stouky, "Le festival mondial des arts nègres ou les nostalgiques de la négritude" *Souffles* 2 (1966), 45. See Archives, this issue.
- ⁷ See Helen Adkins, "Hassan Darsi's Golden Applications" *Universes in Universe / Nafas Art Magazine* online at [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2008/hassan_darsi/].
- ⁸ Hassan Darsi, email interview with K. Pieprzak, 11 July 2008.
- ⁹ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).