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QUEERING THE MIDDLE

Race, Region, and a Queer Midwest

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When imagined in relation to other regions in the United States, the Midwest is often positioned as the “norm,” the uncontested site of middle-class white American heteronormativity. This characterization of the Midwest has often prevailed in scholarship on sexual identity, practice, and culture, but a growing body of recent queer work on rural sexualities, transnational migration, regional identities, and working-class cultures suggests the need to understand the Midwest otherwise. This special issue offers an opportunity to think with, through, and against the idea of region. Rather than reinforce the idea of the Midwest as a core that essentializes and naturalizes American cultural and ideological formations, these essays instead open up possibilities for dispelling and unraveling the idea of the heartland.

This special issue represents an engagement with and a creative departure from the notion of the American Midwest both as a geographic entity and as a discursive formation. The middle creates less a magisterial panoramic perspective than a queer vantage—a troubled, unstable perch buttressed by the dominance of the coasts and the “South.” We believe that such instabilities are productive of alternative ways to approach space and time and to reimagine routes and paths, contours and shapes, directions and teloses of queer lives, practices, and institutions.

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Descaling the Region: Within and Beyond

As a collection about and against regional space, we need to start with the normative set of metrics that have been set up by geographers—scale. Scales such as the body, community, neighborhood, city, and nation have long been regarded as crucial to the understanding of social, political, and economic processes. Spatial scales such as the rural and the urban are both rhetorical and analytic frames to rein in necessary fictions and meanings. In other words, spatial scales such as neighborhood, town, region, urban, rural, nation, and global are not neutral terms. Instead, as Anna Tsing points out, scales are ideologically laden points of view, “ways of knowing,” and not mere taxonomic categories of physical space.¹

Scales are a culturally motivated set of metrics or measures that do not merely deal with inches, miles, and hectares but enable discernment of the limits and excessive potentialities of lives, communities, and bodies. Scales therefore are constitutive of flows, practices, and dimensions that both form and exceed their limits. Recognizing the limits and possibilities of scale, we are particularly interested in revisiting the idea of the region, a scale rife with potent and contentious political and cultural underpinnings. Indeed, region as a spatial scale has a long, fraught history with Cold War area studies and traditional geography. It has had a long-standing valence in academic and policy literature with the establishment of Title VI funding from the federal government and area studies centers and degree programs.

Discursively, region is a two-pronged concept; it is both subnational and supranational. It is perhaps this double-edged nature of region that lends itself to interesting alternative narratives, particularly in light of emergent approaches, even within traditional area studies, to unsettle and complicate this notion. Such moves involve the deployment of sexuality and gender as vantages to reformulate region and regionality. Asia, in particular, has been the focus of an emergent queer or LGBT critique of the idea of region. Social scientists such as Ara Wilson, Mark Johnson, Gilbert Herdt, and Peter Jackson have asserted the inadequacies of static or fixed formulations of region and instead put forward the idea of a critical regionalities that recognizes global flows and practices while emphasizing internal or intra-Asian dynamics as not merely local but in fact transnational.² For example, *tongzhi*, or comrade, as a political slogan and sex/gender identificatory category has emerged in and been appropriated by queer communities in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Singapore, and other Chinese-speaking groups within Asia. *Tongzhi*'s provenance comes from local and indigenous sex/gender categories that do not necessarily translate to homosexual, gay, or lesbian. While having some

discursive affinities with *gay* and *queer*, this category has provided a vibrant and dynamic semantic fulcrum for animating cultural productions, activist effort, and quotidian lives that are separate from yet in constant tension with gay globality and modernity. *Tongzhi* is a paradigmatic illustration of the various ways in which these kinds of discursive “frictions” are the grist for mobilizing new forms of transnationalisms and, consequently, alternative forms of region and regionalisms through sex/gender categories, issues, and practices. The move toward *tongzhi* is seen to destabilize the idea of West-East or North-South relations, particularly around emergent sexual/gender formations as reminiscent only of colonial/imperial and unilineal diffusion of ideas and practices.

Deploying a queer and feminist diasporic frame, Gayatri Gopinath admonishes us to understand the more intricate ways in which sexuality and gender can be understood beyond the circumscribed strictures of the nation and nationalist patriarchies or the abstracting and elitist universalizing allures of the global. Reading cultural texts as unruly cartographies, she points to the creative potentials of deploying a critical regionality that unravels and defuses the power of the national and the global, by showing how the narratives of the region “rub against” the triumphant teleologies of nation making and globalization in general, and the creation of sexual/gender subjects in particular. As Gopinath writes, a regional perspective “provides us with an alternative mapping of sexual geographies that link disparate transnational locations and that allow new models of sexual subjectivity to come into focus.”³ *Queering the Middle* continues these lines of inquiry that showcase the “frictive” dynamics of interscalar relationship through a vibrant, invigorated idea of a critical regionality.

From the purview of the subnational, the idea of region requires a more detailed and complex assessment that challenges commonsensical understandings of the categories rural and urban. In his important study *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape*, literary studies scholar Douglas Reichert Powell argues that “a region can, ultimately, never be an isolated space withdrawn from larger cultural forces and processes.”⁴ In national US imaginaries, the Midwest is often characterized as primarily rural, a framing that implicitly casts the East and West Coasts as urban. While its demarcation as rural may help ascertain defining elements of the Midwest’s cultural, economic, and political identity, such characterizations erase the significance of an urban Midwest. One need only consider the example of Chicago (unofficially identified by some as “the capital of the Midwest”), as do a number of contributors to this collection.⁵ While a clearly urban example helps complicate any blanket classification of the Midwest as rural, we must also keep in mind the constant inter-

play and overlap of urban and rural beyond the binary of the metropole and the hinterlands. Cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha famously insisted that we must call attention to the fact “that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice-versa.”⁶ *Queering the Middle* takes a cue from Trinh by insisting that any assessment of the Midwest region—given how it is hardly an isolated space but one saturated by larger cultural forces and processes—must call attention to the fact that the rural is always present in the urban, and vice versa. Or to put it differently: How do the mixed positionality and porous borders of the Midwest allow us to redefine and reimagine the traditional ways that national political and cultural imaginaries have been structured by geographic dualisms such as coast/heartland and north/south?

Recent queer critiques have attempted to reconceptualize the rural in ways that depart from its traditional characterization as the site of the tragic, the homophobic, the unmodern, and the dismal. These critiques nuance the idea of the rural as a space of racially charged and class-abjected violence. Judith Halberstam, Scott Herring, Mary Gray, E. Patrick Johnson, John Howard, and Colin Johnson, to name only a few scholars, have importantly argued for the decoupling of queer and urban by brilliantly elucidating how queer sexualities and subjectivities historically and contemporarily manifest in rural locations.⁷ At the same time, their critiques reimagine the urban less as a utopic end point of queer travel than as one of many problematic nodes in movement, settlement, and habitation. Metronormativity, a concept largely popularized by Halberstam, has been particularly useful in recent queer studies investigations of region and space. (One need only consider recent symposia on the topic at the University of Michigan, Indiana University, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where inspiration for this special issue originated.)⁸ We must also ask: What are the stakes of recent critiques of the telos of rural to urban migration? Is it possible to mount this critique without disparaging the intimate queer histories (many of which are gendered, classed, and racialized in discernible and not so evident ways) of the city? Can the urban be read without recourse to this telos?

Instead of merely questioning metronormativity, we need to ask who gets to inhabit what kind of urban space. Or, for that matter, rurality. The city is constituted by multiple landscapes that suggest divergent hierarchical grids of time and space—a multiplicity of temporalities and spatialities, both modern and “traditional.” These cartographies suggest different urban ways of living and being in the world. The urban, then, is less a stable site and scale and more a set of shifting landscapes, times, and ways of life. As such, we need to find better interventions

into queer modes of urban habitation—ones that do not depend on or pivot away from, or read against, the rural. The essays here illustrate the unruliness of racial, class, and gender dynamics that transgress easy rural or urban organization and signal what escapes both metronormative locales and their alternative spaces.

Who gets to be incarcerated, sequestered, and isolated within such spatial scales—of the rural and urban? Who gets to escape? This special issue grapples with these questions in its queer unmapping of the Midwest. Yet while the Midwest is indeed the setting in which various queer social, cultural, and political networks materialize in the following essays, the Midwest—and “the middle” more broadly—is a point of both return and departure, simultaneously a catalyst for movement and a marker of stasis.

Escape and incarceration mutually constitute each other. There is no one space and mode of escape or sequestration. To flee, to settle, and/or to be marooned in place and to take off on itinerant paths are part and parcel of the complexities of movement and nonmovement across space and time, across scales. In other words, utopia and dystopia are not mere physical spaces but fleeting moments—stopovers or way stations amid the seemingly contradictory ideas of movement and nonmovement. Flight and confinement are implicated in the ideas of traveling cultures. We suggest that “escape” need not be from one kind of region (the rural, for example) to another (the urban). But can escape be about the kinds of moments that are *not always* spatially bound but time sensitive, moments of habitation or dwelling despite physical mobility? In his commentary to James Clifford’s classic essay “Travelling Cultures” (1992), Homi Bhabha argues that staying in place is paradoxically exemplary of this globalized moment of border crossings and travel. That is, there is one persistent reality: that of the need to be settled—or forcibly settled—to be marooned and thus to stay put.⁹ In other words, we need to find a better lexicon and sharper set of semantics (or, more appropriately, new forms of “queer metrics”) to better understand the notions of spatiality and temporality that need not be anchored or tethered to notions such as metronormativity or queer rurality, to fixed and fixating notions of “middleness.”

The Middle of Somewhere

This collection of essays grew out of a yearlong reading group and graduate seminar, funded by a University of Illinois Graduate College Focal Point Grant, which involved several faculty members (including all four issue editors) and graduate students and culminated in two conferences: “Queering the Middle: Race, Sexual Diasporas, and a Queer Midwest,” October 7–8, 2010, where most of the essays

that appear in this volume were presented; and a graduate student conference, “(Dis)locating Queer: Race, Region, and Sexual Diasporas,” May 5–7, 2011.¹⁰ The entire process was based on a sustained dialogue about queer theory and studies in general, and the efficacy of queering the Midwest and the American heartland in particular. As such, the ideas that circulate and fuel the ethos of this special issue are the result of creative mentoring and collegial conversations about the exigencies and geographies of queer and queerness.

Our initial conversations began with two key questions about the Midwest, but quickly generated ideas about a more broadly conceived “middle” that was not necessarily geographically bound. How might the Midwest—or the middle more generally—be understood through the lenses of queer studies, and how might the perspective of the middle reorient our understanding of queer history, politics, and culture? We invited participants to address additional related questions, including: How might we account for the Midwest as a kind of “queer space” cut through with different population densities—urban (large and small), rural, suburban, and “in between”? How has migration to and from the Midwest, both within the United States and across national borders, been simultaneously sexualized and racialized? How might we understand queer migration to and from the Midwest in relation to related histories of migration, such as Mexican migration during the 1980s and 1990s, the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities in the 1910s, or the policy of Indian Removal in the nineteenth century? How have queer sexualities and practices been imagined within, against, or despite the cultures and geographies of the Midwest? What role have academic institutions—such as the Big Ten—played in producing, sustaining, or thwarting queer studies scholarship?¹¹ What role has region played in producing and sustaining particular scholarly formations such as black queer studies? We were committed to making race and region as central as sexuality in our conversations, a goal shared by the contributors to this volume. Important new work in black queer studies and queer indigenous studies was also spotlighted at the October conference on which this special issue is based, where Marlon Bailey, Bethany Schneider, and E. Patrick Johnson were critical interlocutors.¹² While their work is published elsewhere, this special issue continues to be in conversation with forthcoming work by these scholars and fields.¹³

Each essay explores queer approaches to the Midwest as both a material space and a discursive construct. In a critical reading of the recent film, *On the Downlow*, about the tragic love affair between two Latino male gang members and their failed dreams and desires, Bill Johnson González locates his analysis within the bitter neoliberal realities of the “Second City,” Chicago. The urban “heart” of

the heartland and the setting for the paradigmatic academic formation for the sociological study of urban life (the Chicago School), Chicago is also home to one of the largest Latino populations in the country. Johnson González unravels the tensions and contradictions within *On the Downlow*, a story of two men located outside the realms of the “corn-fed wholesome boys of the Midwest,” who occupy the peripheries of such idealized habitations of gayborhoods and middle-class suburbia. He argues that the two Latino men on the “downlow” embody the uneven and violent city terrain as they negotiate heteronormative expectations, class struggle, racialized criminalization, queer desires, and the ruthless displacements of urban gentrification.

Also focusing on Chicago, Lourdes Torres traces the history of Midwest Latina lesbian organizing by two Chicago-based groups, Amigas Latina, still in existence, and its (spiritual) predecessor LLENA. Intermingling oral histories and archival sources, Torres maps a complex and sometimes unsettling history of queer women of color activism in the context of mixed urban communities. Her approach not only documents and explores what are rightly seen as fundamental gaps in the historicization of multiracial political movements, but stands as a genuine proposal to imagine the potential for coalition building across sexual, gender, and racial identity practices. As she notes, the grassroots and outreach interventions of Amigas Latinas and LLENA “have made it impossible for mainstream LGBT organizations and Latino communities to ignore the presence, contributions, and concerns of Latina lesbians in the political landscape of Chicagoland.” Through her focus on Chicago, Torres makes visible a dynamic regional history of Latina lesbians in the Midwest, forged across longstanding Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities in the city, along with more recent transnational migrants from Central and South America to Chicago.

Nicholas L. Syrett’s essay reorients understandings of the history of sexuality by mapping queer epistolary relations among a dispersed group of middle-class white men in the mid-twentieth-century US Midwest. Carefully tracing the circulation of letters among these men, as well as their movement between major and minor cities, Syrett suggests that they forged “an alternative form of queer community” that cannot be accounted for through familiar models of linear migration from rural to urban locations. Thus, through this Midwest example, Syrett offers a model of queer community formation that has implications for rereading the history of sexuality in unexpected locations, one that does not depend on sustained physical proximity or rural-to-urban migration. His compelling analysis of these rich archival sources unsettles expectations about three kinds of “middles” simultaneously—the Midwest, the mid-twentieth century, and the middle

class—and demonstrates the queer practices that circulate within (and sometimes secure) apparently normative social worlds and values.

Reminding us of Gayle Rubin's early insight that the politics of sexuality became central to the Right and Left during the 1970s in the United States, Scott Herring explores the genre of low-budget "hixploitation" films from the 1970s to show how they produced a particular sexual imaginary, a kind of queer hyper-visibility, that became pivotal in building the momentum of a reactionary New Right, especially within the Midwest. Focusing on Roger Corman's drive-in movie hit *Bloody Mama* (1970), Herring argues that "some versions of nonnormative sexuality in the 1970s were not expelled from conservatism's imaginary but incorporated into it." Thus the sexually nonnormative, not-quite-white figure of the hill-billy can be read as a queer presence that circulated to the delight of some Midwestern audiences, even while the films sutured those same audiences to a project of New Right conservatism.

Through a transnational and translocal consideration of the Great Lakes region, Kale Bantigue Fajardo maps the seemingly intractable contours of Filipino/a queer and gender-nonconforming "tomboy" subjectivity. By reading *Throw It to the River*, a collection of short stories by the Filipino immigrant queer writer Nice Rodriguez, Fajardo unravels the crossings and disjunctions of immigration, gender insubordination, and sexual alterity in the midst of the US-sponsored Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s and Filipino global migration in the late twentieth century. By deploying the fluid and mobile media of riverine and lake-water formations not as spaces of containment but as sites of cultural and political reconfiguration and transgression, Fajardo opens up a space to unsettle the ideas of the "middle" or "Midwest" by demonstrating how tomboy alternative-manhood and masculinity resist and critique dominant North American notions of sexuality, gender, and citizenship.

As a way to understand the disjunctions between national and regional histories of gender and sexuality, Emily Skidmore offers an invaluable historical account of representations of the mixed-race Milwaukee resident Ralph Kerwineo (a man who was born a biological female named Cora Anderson) in early twentieth-century print culture. Parting ways with previous assessments of Kerwineo as a "passing woman" and refusing to find in his example early twentieth-century evidence of a protolesbian or trans subject, Skidmore critically foregrounds the importance of geographic scale to reflect on the marked differences between local and national perspectives on Kerwineo's story. In contrast to national media coverage that used medical and criminological discourses to cast Kerwineo as the classic sexual invert, Skidmore reveals the absence of such discourses in Mil-

waukee press accounts, suggesting that attention to local and regional scales offers new ways to understand the uneven histories of sexuality and gender in the United States.

One key point to emerge from these essays is the importance of understanding the Midwest as the site of specific modes of sexual circulation, whether by land (via cars, highways, and drive-ins) or by water (via rivers, boats, and lakes), rather than as a static backdrop or bounded space. Whether it is the transnational circulation of the Filipino “tomboy” (Fajardo), the surprising hypervisibility of queer sex on the screens of Midwestern drive-ins (Herring), or the intimate spaces of private correspondence (Syrett), these essays emphasize that the politics of sexuality in the Midwest do not cohere easily or predictably.

Several of the essays also demonstrate that metronormativity, while a useful concept for challenging the dominance of urban narratives in queer history, can also erase the complexities of gender and desire as lived by and represented by people of color in urban contexts, including Latina lesbians in Chicago (Torres), rival gang members in love and on the downlow (Johnson González), or figures like Ralph Kerwineo in smaller cities such as early twentieth-century Milwaukee (Skidmore). The essays by Johnson González and Torres focus on Chicago not merely as the urban core of the Midwest but as a setting for queer habitations or ways of lives that exceed and go beyond the typicality of everyday life in the heartland. Lesbian activists and men on the “downlow” reveal the exigencies of race, class, and desire in the Second City in ways that do not predetermine their trajectories or locatedness in the region.

As Powell writes:

No definition of region—whether it is offered by a scholar, a government commission, a novelist, a Hollywood film—exists in a vacuum. At any site on the landscape, multiple definitions of place are continually in play and at work, sometimes convivially and sometimes antagonistically. Ideas of property, of homeland, of natural resource, of infrastructure; of city, county, school district, economic development zone, environmental hazard; of shit-hole, unspoiled paradise, dullsville; of wildness and weirdness and domestication and discipline—all swirl and interconnect and contend and contest in any given space.¹⁴

Although they concern Appalachia, Powell’s reflections on region are an important guidepost for what we want this special issue on the queer middle to emphasize. Such a vertiginous perspective, we maintain, might be one way to char-

acterize the middle in general. While the essays here focus on the North American Midwest in particular, we believe that their insights extend and resonate with the middles of somewhere and elsewhere, potentially upsetting the assumed stability of key geopolitical referents such as “continent” or “diaspora.” To be clear, we are not calling for something like a critical regionalism “from below,” a model that may inadvertently reinforce a vertical or hierarchical way to think about space and scale. Rather, we hope that this special issue begins the harder task of reconceptualizing a queer critical regionalism from the middle. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remind us, “It’s not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you’ll see that everything changes.”¹⁵

Notes

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1. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
2. See Ara Wilson, “Queering Asia,” *Intersections: Gender, History, and Culture in the Asian Context* 14 (November 2006), available at intersections.anu.edu.au; and Mark Johnson, Peter Jackson, and Gilbert Herdt, “Critical Regionalities and the Study of Gender and Sexual Diversity,” *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 2, no. 4 (2000): 361–75.
3. Gayatri Gopinath, “Queer Regions: Locating Lesbians in *Sancharram*,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 343.
4. Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
5. See also Jill Austin and Jennifer Brier, eds., *Out in Chicago: LGBT History at the*

- Crossroads* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 2012); St. Sukie de la Croix, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); and Chad Heap, "The City as a Sexual Laboratory: The Queer Heritage of the Chicago School," *Qualitative Sociology* 26, no. 4 (2003): 457–87. On the specific black gay history of South Side Chicago, see the series of articles by Tristan Cabello: "Constructing Black Homosexuality on Chicago's South Side: The Black Press, Queer Identities, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1950–1965," *Windy City Times*, March 28, 2012, 43–45; "Being Black and Queer in 1940s Bronzeville: Race, Class, and Queer Identities in Black Chicago, 1940–1950," *Windy City Times*, March 14, 2012, 44–45; and "The Emergence of African-American Queer Cultures on Chicago's South Side, 1920–1940," *Windy City Times*, February 12, 2012, 42–45.
6. Trinh T. Minh-ha, introduction to *She, The Inappropriate/d Other*, special issue, *Discourse* 8 (1986–87): 3.
 7. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Colin Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).
 8. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 36–38.
 9. James Clifford, "Travelling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 114.
 10. Graduate student participants at the May symposium included Melinda Q. Brennan, Sarah Brookshier, Durell Callier, Peter O. Campbell, Sarah Moon Cassinelli, Nick Clarkson, Jess Deshayes, Ricky Gutierrez-Maldonado, Kwame Holmes, Marsha Horsley, Ryan Jones, Kareem Khubchandani, Scott B. Kissick, Jean Y. Lee, Susan Livingston, Luis Morales Villalba, James Mulder, Michelle Salerno, K. Schweighofer, Mel Stanfill, T. J. Tallie, Wat Chi Cheng, and Elizabeth Williams. The keynote speaker was Eithne Luibhéid.
 11. The "Big Ten," like the "Ivy League," originally referred to a group of universities organized into an intercollegiate athletic conference beginning in the late nineteenth century (and now includes more than ten universities, of course). While the Big Ten technically includes institutions in a number of regions, it still tends to be associated with the US Midwest in the popular imagination. In 1957, the Big Ten universities organized an academic counterpart, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium that has historically included the same major universities (both public and private) in the Midwest region and is often referred to as

the Big Ten also. A listing of CIC institutions is available at www.cic.net/about-cic/member-universities.

12. Marlon Bailey, "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and Black Queer Performance Geographies in Detroit"; Bethany Schneider, "'A Queer Kind of Tunnel in the Grass': Between Laura Ingalls Wilder and Zitkala-Sa"; and E. Patrick Johnson, "My Indifference: Transgressing Transgender Normativity" (papers presented at "Queering the Middle: Sexual Diasporas, Race, and a Queer Midwest," University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, October 7–8, 2010).
13. See Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
14. Powell, *Critical Regionalism*, 5.
15. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 23.