Martha Schoolman’s *Abolitionist Geographies* ends but does not conclude. I mean this quite literally. There is no subunit of the book bearing the title “Conclusion”, “Coda”, or anything of the sort. It’s all rather abrupt, the ending. The reader never has a moment to bid adieu to the book, to revisit the characters, concepts, and cartographies one has moved with and through over the course of Schoolman’s intellectual peregrinations. The abruptness of the book’s end is not just a formal fluke. Rather, it encodes the eruption of the historical event in whose horizon Schoolman and her subjects write—the U.S. Civil War. It is as if the event of war, even one perhaps already finished, dispossesses us, even today, of the reflexive time required to revisit what we had spent time doing. War takes time, it steals our time, its grim presence and unknowable future collude in refusing to let us look back. In stealing time, war steals space as well. The “strategic machinations of all-out-war” reset the geographic scales through which we think history (p.188). What some might call the War Between the States imposes the macrological optics of the state itself on our perspective of history’s spaces. It thus renders invisible the tracks and trails marked out as abolitionists felt out different articulations between space and freedom. If Schoolman’s book abruptly ends, then, it is because these other routes to freedom did not go really anywhere, because war forcibly halted the construction of alternative tracks and trails to abolitionist futures. As she shows, abolitionists wrote—and then fought—precisely because they did not want a war. We are engaging a history of failure, then. The book would be a grave of aborted potentials, with “political designs that never came to pass” etched on the headstone (p.8).
But potential does not get entombed so easily. Never having gotten going, never having exhausted itself in the concreteness of actuality, potential always survives its end. And so we might read *Abolitionist Geographies*’ lack of a conclusion as an insistence on the vibrant inconclusiveness of a history that has ended but is not yet finished. John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave, as the song goes, but his soul marches on. Sure, “John Brown’s Body” was a Union military song, sung with the hope that Brown’s soul marched in lockstep with the boys in blue. We can never be sure, though, that the spatial thinking of a state at war entirely subsumed–or subsumes–alternative spacings of freedom’s future, we can never be totally sure that the abolitionist impulse’s errant and erratic steps toward freedom aligned so neatly with the strategic pathways to union and emancipation set down by the state. Schoolman’s decision to end her book without closure might be less of a historicist decision to stop when her subjects finally “ceded” space to the war-making state and more an incitement to track the open-ended proliferation of spaces that remain unceded to, or that even seceded from, emergently hegemonic cartographies (p.188).

*Abolitionist Geographies* thus ends by opening space for a decision, one both interpretive and political. Two different paths out of the book. Be warned, though: the decision is not as simple as opting for the openness of an unexhausted potential over the historical specificity of a delimited practice. Schoolman’s unclosed book, I want to suggest, is a challenge to us to think the futurity of contingent contiguities, random propinquities, and ephemeral spacings—if these have any futurity at all.

Learning how to follow abolitionists in their space-making attempts to find space for freedom is hard work, as Schoolman shows. Literary critics and cultural historians tend to simplify the articulations between geography and politics by hastily equating a spatial scale with a politics. As Schoolman puts it, the scholarship on abolitionist geography “has been less
interested in discovering the clear possibility of tension between spatial coverage and political significance than in fixing the identity between space and meaning with the greatest possible consistency” (p.5). In the case of American studies, scholars tend to promote supranational scales of analysis as politically satisfactory means of getting away from the putatively conservative frame of the nation. We go big (and I mean this “we”; I’m guilty as charged): the hemisphere, the transnational, the postnational. Schoolman is not interested in simply dismissing these critical efforts at scalar “remapping”, but she is not interested in promoting a new, better scale either. For Schoolman, there is no one scale that could analytically contain abolitionist geography. This situation obtains because abolitionists themselves actively thought across, improvised, and reoriented space in pursuing their projects: “critical remapping [was] a nineteenth-century abolitionist project in itself” (p.6). Abolitionism was a spatial practice. It had to be: abolitionists’ distance from the scene of slavery necessitated a self-conscious clarification of their spatial relation to slavery itself. And as Schoolman shows, abolitionists did not identify any one spatial scale with a political value so much as they worked across complex scalar terrains that constantly shifted under the force of imperial expansion, global capitalism, (inter)national politics, and local circumstance.

The spatial practice of abolitionists was thus characterized by a “deep contingency” (p.5). Methodologically, Schoolman recovers this contingency by means of a hard-nosed, gritty micro-historicism, one that reads texts “in relation to contexts carefully delimited by time and place” (p.8). In practice, this works quite well. Her chapter on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) brings together material texts scholarship, local legal and political history, and careful, creative reading to argue for the primacy of Stowe’s political affiliation with abolitionist Ohio, troubling work that centers the nation in the novel’s imaginary as well as critical work that locates the novel in the field of empire. Schoolman floats the possibility that the character of
Senator Bird is not a U.S. but a state legislator, suggesting that the novel incorporates Ohio’s legislative resistance to the federal law on slavery as the basis for an “optimism” about the possibility of local, and perhaps even national, reform (p.143). It’s an important re-reading of the novel, and one that demonstrates the persistent value of methods that literary scholars are starting to shy away from—patient, careful archival analysis, historico-geographical contextualization, and close reading.

Other deep contingencies that Schoolman tracks are far stranger. In the first two chapters, “Emerson’s Hemisphere” and “August First and the Practice of Disunion”, Schoolman tracks how New England abolitionists took up the historical example of West Indian emancipation as a chance to determine the soundness of the Garrisonian policy of disunion—that is, that abolitionists should work for the dissolution of the political ties between non-slave and slave states. Her aim here is to move the field of American studies beyond celebratory narratives of a hemispheric or transnational Americas in order to see how U.S. abolitionists’ relations with the world outside the nation were quite frequently vexed. If, for some abolitionists, West Indian emancipation exemplified the merits of a state-led, “forced Emancipation” (in William Ellery Channing’s phrase), for others the reality of West Indian emancipation was all too continuous with that of slavery (p.65). As Schoolman shows, at stake in these debates over the exemplary status of West Indian emancipation was the very status of enslaved and black subjects as historical agents. Channing by and large approved of “forced Emancipation” because white subjects retained power in determining the process of emancipation. Emerson, meanwhile, “endeavor[ed] to develop an account of West Indian emancipation that posits the dialectical results of northern disunion as the emergence of an African American subject capable of functioning outside the master-slave relation” (p.96). As they scaled up to the hemispheric, abolitionists only encountered more problems, not simple solutions. Freedom, we might say, does not admit of
easy spatial fixes. And this indeed was the recognition that, for Schoolman, William Wells Brown had while sojourning in Britain. Having sighted the pleasures of a postracial, cosmopolitan freedom abroad, Schoolman argues that Brown comes to acknowledge a “possibly cyclical relationship between emancipation and oppression” (p.115).

If Schoolman’s careful, creative historicism allows her to make legible buried spatial connections—Brown’s writing on Tintern Abbey, for instance, is linked to the Haitian Revolution—this same methodological impulse risks attenuating the force of the connections made. Her commitment to empirics and her desire to follow texts as they engender their own spatial context can inspire feelings of claustrophobia, disorientation, or both; I had a hard time following the argument and understanding the stakes of her writing on health tourism in the West Indies, for instance. More importantly, Schoolman’s focus on the contingencies of abolitionist spatial practice registers as something like a refusal to take leave of the concrete. That is, of course, part of her point: the abstract, programmatic, or aprioristic ways in which literary scholars handle or use space ends up dissolving the real complexities of spatial practice. Schoolman doesn’t want to promote a new scale, or even a new concept; she wants rather to attune us to the complexity of empirical spatial practice. In the terms she draws from de Certeau, scholarly “strategies” of ordering the world absorb our texts’ spatial “tactics”, and top-down looking occludes on-the-ground action. We see Empire, and so forget Ohio; we see the West Indies, but ignore that abolitionists didn’t like what they saw. In order to make our spatial abstractions make sense, texts fall victim to “significant archival repressions and theoretical rationalizations” (p.15). Empirical concreteness becomes a prophylaxis against the possible violence that attends any act of abstraction. So then what? Do the contingent relations that both configure and emerge through improvisatory spatial practices have any life beyond the “carefully delimited…time and place” of their making? Does the life of a contingent spatial relation conclude in the exhaustion of its own
concrete materiality? The very method that recovers the potentials embedded in the contingencies of concrete spatial practice threatens to entomb them in and as the epoch of their elaboration. Other worlds, it would seem, were possible. But can epochs be so delimited and contingent contexts so securely drawn?

We have arrived, then, at the text’s point of decision, at the deliberative space where we cannot not ask: What do we do with this history? Allow me in closing to turn to a very brief moment in *Abolitionist Geographies*, a moment where Schoolman offers an analogy that, I think, is something more than just that. Before I do, allow me too to apologize for my focus on this snippet of text and, indeed, for the way in which I’ve approached this text in general. Blame it on contingencies of time and space: given the recent (but never novel) spate of police murders of black people in the U.S., and the vibrant social movements that have erupted in response, it is impossible to read this book without thinking through abolitionism’s unfinished, uncompleted business. My own relationship to these movements was spatially scrambled. Traveling for research, the first solidarity march I went to was in London, outside the U.S. Embassy, where black British activists were keen to link Michael Brown’s murder to that of Mark Duggan in London in 2011. I returned to Chicago in time to march against the non-indictments in the Brown and then Eric Garner cases. Along the way, in person and online, I encountered activists both attempting to improvise new spatial relations and to think critically and reflexively about this work of spatial improvisation. Where exactly is Ferguson? Is it a city, a town, a suburb of St. Louis? What are the stakes of saying one or the other? Is locality, however conceived, the proper scale at which to organize? If so, how might organizing in Ferguson scale up? Does it scale up just to the nation, or do transnational relations matter? How do we think the relationship between Palestine and Ferguson, say, insisted upon by persons from both? Who counts as an insider, spatially and existentially, to this locale? What constitutes the outsideness of the “outside
agitator”—a question that vexes all of the abolitionists Schoolman explores? Space, in short, had become a key idiom, problem, and medium for the ongoing project of abolishing the antiblack state. Reading *Abolitionist Geographies* in this delimited time and place, I felt like I was encountering in the text transcriptions of debates I had just witnessed or participated in on Twitter, in meetings, on the street. It seemed to me, in other words, that there is something that survives beyond the unabstractable concreteness of the contingent relations Schoolman recomposes—but what?

And so the quote, the analogy that is necessarily something more. Having described (with the aid of historian Edward Rugemer) New England celebrations of West Indian Emancipation Day, having attended to the way that these interracial abolitionists posed themselves as the true inheritors of U.S. democracy, Schoolman comments: “For Rugemer…the West Indian emancipation celebration represents a nineteenth-century version of the classic heterotopic claim of modern street activism: ‘this is what democracy looks like’” (p.79). It is one of the few moments of anachronism that Schoolman allows herself in this productively monochronic text. But the point, I think, is that this analogy is not anachronistic at all. Schoolman gestures to an impossible but utterly possible time-space that gathers together Emancipation Day celebrations, the Ferguson Rebellion, the Baltimore Uprising, the entire Black Lives Matter movement—in and through their dispersal, in and through their concrete particularity. What, after all, could be more concrete, contingent, and contextualized than the community formed and figured in the utterance of this “this”? But what word, precisely for its insistent concreteness, is more bound up in the historico-spatial drift of iteration and reiteration, as Hegel would suggest? *Abolitionist Geographies* encourages us to follow the drift of this “this” in and through an abolitionist undercommons, a singular plurality instantiated with each iteration of a democracy that always
indexes itself in the contingent, concrete scene of its enunciation; but one that, as a reiteration, always points us away to other scenes, scales, and times of abolishing what democracy isn’t.

Due to the violence of the state, and the counter-violence of those whom it would kill, the time of abolition has been reopened. It continues to reopen, as black life is disposed of: Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Rekia Boyd in Chicago, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Tony Robinson in Madison, and on, and on. (Problematically, it tends not to open around the murders of cis and trans women of color, even as women of color have been central to organizing Black Lives Matter.) Whatever else it does in relation to the historiography of antebellum abolition—and indeed it does much—Schoolman’s book teaches us to see this reopening of abolitionist time as an opening of abolitionist space as well.

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