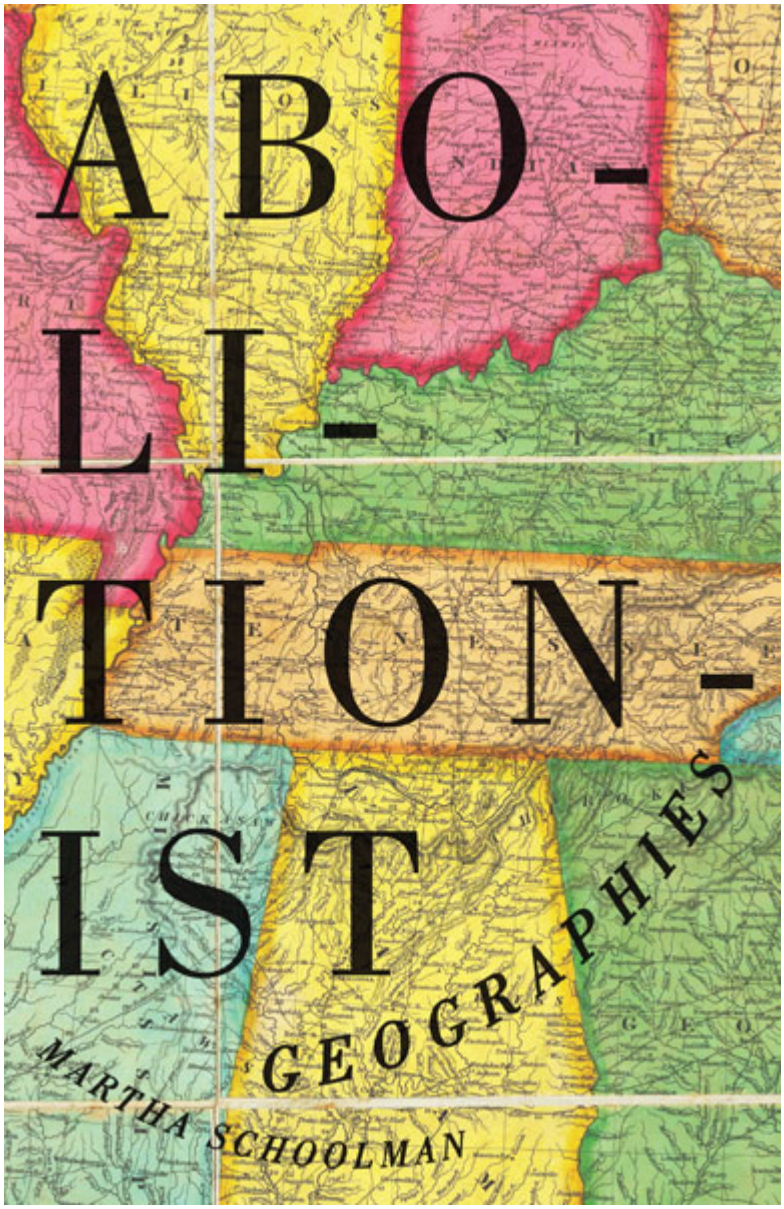
Antislavery's Contingent Cartographies



In *Abolitionist Geographies* Martha Schoolman challenges the dominant maps of nineteenth-century American literary studies. These maps often register along two axes—a North-South axis of slavery and an East-West axis of U.S. expansionism and manifest destiny—but Schoolman's book challenges the common landmarks and roadways that often characterize these two mappings, arguing that neither adequately depicts antebellum thinkers' understandings of abolitionism or the project of U.S. empire. Instead, she insists that writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Martin Delany, William Wells Brown, and Ralph Waldo Emerson imagined cartographies of power and resistance that registered "ground-level contingency" more often than they did hardened lines of sectional difference (15). Schoolman concentrates on abolitionist geographies'

simultaneous negotiation of the local, the national, and the transnational. To put it another way, the writers in her study imagined abolitionist projects that were locally specific and part of a broader hemispheric struggle, including the 1834 emancipation of the British West Indies, which provoked markedly different responses to its potential impact on antislavery tactics in the U.S. Of particular interest to her project is how antislavery writers acknowledged their own complicity with an economy of violence, even as they experienced differing proximities to the U.S. and hemispheric South. In making such an argument, Schoolman does not jettison previous scholarly mappings of antislavery and U.S. empire; rather, she invites a multiscalar reading that places ideology and embodied experience on an equal footing.

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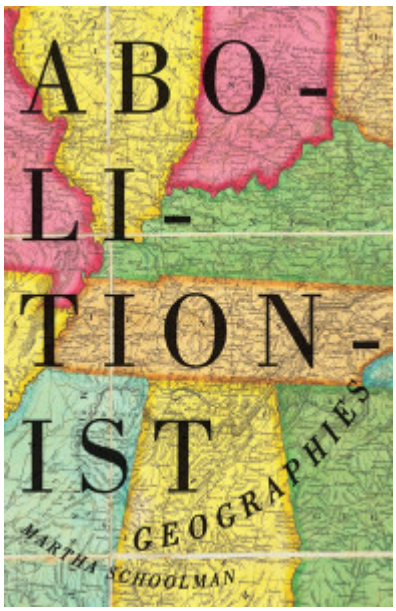
In her first chapter, Schoolman argues that nineteenth-century abolitionist projects throughout the hemisphere were in conversation with one another, but not always in tactical or theoretical agreement. She characterizes these hemispheric affinities as marked both by "temporal dislocations" and "spatial repetitions" in that they demonstrate consistency across various hemispheric antislavery efforts but also a localized unevenness in their struggles. Focusing on Ralph Waldo Emerson's embodied notion of illness as a way to understand the physical and psychic effects of slave economies, Schoolman unpacks New England responses to 1834 abolition in the British Caribbean and its effect on antislavery discussions in the U.S. (21). For Schoolman, Emerson's pathbreaking book *Nature* (1836) was, in many ways, an extended rumination on health and place. *Nature* was published shortly after both Emerson and his brother Edward embarked on rest cures—while Ralph Waldo visited England in 1833, Edward spent time in the British Caribbean. In their travels, the brothers physically circulated through key hubs of Britain's slave economy at precisely the moment Parliament debated abolition. Schoolman argues that for Emerson, "health was indeed a location as well as a status," informing both his philosophical ideals and antislavery politics (26). Paradoxically, while it was illness that pulled Emerson into hemispheric reform debates, he advocated most fervently for the act of staying put in *Nature*. In other words, Emerson grounded his theory on the benefits of stasis, a stasis Schoolman connects both to the body and to the nation in his writings. By physically distancing oneself from the practice of slavery through what Schoolman terms "spatial dissent," New Englanders such as Emerson, William Lloyd Garrison, and William Ellery Channing argued for a particular brand of reform that strategically deployed a sense of hemispheric alliance (25). She describes this reform as one of "disunion" by which the hemispheric is imagined as one tactic to weaken a U.S. North-South bond forged through federalism, replacing a sense of national unity with hemispheric affinity. Disunion functions as a politics of "refusal," to

use one of Schoolman's terms, attempting to free the individual from the transnational constellation of labor and commodity that tethered antislavery New Englanders to a slave economy via "luxury *consumption*" and "*consumptives* like the Emerson brothers" who sought health cures (25).



Martha Schoolman, *Abolitionist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 240 pp., $25.

In chapter 2 Schoolman turns to August First celebrations to map hemispheric responses to West Indian emancipation and its aftermath. August First celebrations commemorated the abolition of British slavery, but they were not uniform; rather, they manifested themselves in complex socio-spatial ways throughout the U.S. She argues that Northern abolitionists did not simply distance themselves from British emancipation or avoid engaging its impact on the hemisphere. To the contrary, the material events in the West Indies became reworked in conceptual terms. As such, the logistical details of emancipation became overshadowed by its symbolic import—that is, the actual quotidian details were superseded by a narrative of moral epiphany through which British subjects realized slavery was untenable and immoral. Schoolman turns again to the writings of William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson in this chapter to demonstrate the "symbolic performance of disunion," her term for Northern abolitionists' belief that political nonparticipation was, itself, a form of radical activism bettering the abolitionist cause. She then demonstrates how both men discursively endorsed a logic by which white New Englanders aligned themselves with British emancipation and slave resistance and productively distanced themselves from proslavery sympathizers as a form of political (in)action (79).

While Emerson argued for the necessity of the bodily and the local, according to *Abolitionist Geographies*, William Wells Brown embraced cosmopolitanism and the promise offered African Americans by traveling abroad, away from the

nation's racially rigid social structures. In her third chapter, Schoolman describes Brown's second autobiography, *Three Years in Europe: Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met* (1852), in which he recounts his travels across Europe. While Brown's text begins as a celebration of cosmopolitanism, it becomes ambivalent about the actual emancipatory power of mobility for global Black subjects. His travel, Schoolman explains, led him to a "critical cosmopolitanism." He was unwilling to give up on the radical potential of cosmopolitanism as a way to escape institutional and national forms of oppression, but he likewise realized that such possibility was not viable in the European present (102).

Schoolman frames the final two chapters of *Abolitionist Geographies* with a discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's two best-known novels, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Dred* (1856). In her fourth chapter, Schoolman overturns readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) that argue for the novel as a geographically expansive text pushing toward the edges of U.S. empire. Instead, she reads Stowe's novel as one of "spatial conservatism," very much situated in the local and regional of Cincinnati, Ohio (132). More importantly, it is a regionalism that challenges sectional divides, embracing Cincinnati's spatial position as a river town lipping the border between North and South, slave and free. Ohio becomes the microcosm that allows Stowe to stage broader national debates about colonization and emancipation, referencing the states' legal debates about emancipation and citizenship to reveal the relevance of regional discussion to federal policy. It is in her later novel *Dred* that Stowe turns to the national as a scale for imagined radical political transformation. Schoolman argues that the potential for intranational resistance is symbolically rendered by Stowe's Dred, a maroon who lives in the Great Dismal Swamp and therefore challenges Southern slavocracy from within. Stowe's novel embraces the swamp as a space for the active refusal of slavery and for interracial organizing, one where white abolitionist radicalism and marronage can discursively meet. Schoolman argues that this literary trope of swamp-as-spatial-resistance connects seemingly disparate strains of antislavery activism and imagines a geographic locale wherein white Northern abolitionists and African American Southern resistance can spatially convene. Using this logic, she traces the unlikely connections between Stowe's novel, James Redpath's travel writings, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson's memoir to explain how marronage became a way for white radicals to imagine more extreme antislavery tactics, ones that include greater advocacy of black violence.

Abolitionist Geographies journeys across many familiar landscapes of nineteenth-century intellectual thought, overturning prevailing analyses of antislavery movements in the Americas, but perhaps its most compelling contribution is its claims about temporality and abolitionist spatial thinking. Schoolman's abolitionist map argues for new abolitionist spatialities, but also highlights how various radical antislavery projects functioned out of sync temporally with one another, even when temporally contemporaneous or geographically contiguous. Schoolman's abolitionist geographies are not just about the maps people make, but about how maps and people move through time.

These maps both imagine radical futures and demonstrate strategically synchronic *and* diachronic understandings of social change. Thus, they demonstrate how both provincial time and ahistorical affinities between peoples, spaces, or sociocultural objectives influenced antislavery spatialities and disrupted teleologies of social progress. There is great generative potential in such a model, challenging other prominent assumptions about space and time in the field. For example, while the West, U.S. colonialism, and Indigenous Peoples are largely absent from Schoolman's project, one can imagine how this dialectic method of understanding both space and time might be further deployed to rework logics of U.S. imperial expansion and settler colonialism. What Schoolman's text does depict, however, is a nuanced topography that highlights the contradictory, the quotidian, and the contextual strategies ever present in nineteenth-century abolitionist geographies.

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