



Derrick R. Spires. *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 344 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5080-0.

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In the introduction to *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*, Derrick R. Spires poses two questions that delineate the stakes and the organizing logic of the book: “What happens to our thinking about citizenship if, instead of reading black writers as reacting to or a presence in a largely white-defined discourse, we base our working definitions of citizenship on black writers’ proactive attempts to describe their own political work? What happens when we base our working definition of citizenship on black writers’ texts written explicitly to and for black communities?” (p. 2). In addition to shifting the discourse on citizenship away from a white-centered juridical model, these questions enlarge the forms of writing and performance that, for Spires, constitute the creation and practice of black citizenship and belonging beyond the state. Spires reads these practices in materials from political conventions, newspaper and periodical culture, poetry, and fiction, offering an account of black citizenship that is as broad as it is deep. In his deft navigation of these wide-ranging archives, Spires offers a compelling account of black citizenship practices firmly based in his nimble reading and deep historical knowledge of literary and social worlds in the first half of the nineteenth century. Through a methodology he describes as “read-

ing citizenship reparatively,” Spires unsettles limited or white-centered notions of citizenship to open up expansive ways of studying black life (p. 12). This work likewise offers a capacious theory of the ways citizenship is not just regulated but also practiced.

The Practice of Citizenship enters ongoing conversations within black studies on forms of black culture that intersect with, but do not define themselves by, state structures, particularly in nineteenth-century studies. As Spires puts it, the goal here is to “uncouple citizenship from the state institutions that are the most recognized but not the only medium for organizing” citizenship acts (p. 17). In reading against state institutions but not through them, Spires brings a creative archival framework to this project, as well as a set of specific reading practices that locate black citizenship “as a field for creative play” and as a site of “neighborliness ... between individuals on terms of moral equality in a way that creates a collective” (pp. 131, 56). Here the project is in deep dialogue with Spires’s work on the Colored Conventions Project. [1] *The Practice of Citizenship* also participates in a recent trend of scholarship that theorizes citizenship, and particularly black citizenship, as a form of belonging that was continually being made and

reshaped by everyday people. In this respect, *The Practice of Citizenship* extends the scholarly conversations from recent work by Martha S. Jones (*Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* [2018]), Koritha Mitchell (*From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture* [2020]), and Carrie Hyde (*Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* [2018]).

The Practice of Citizenship examines several connected citizenship practices through texts and print culture that sometimes overlap across chapters. In chapter 1, Spires reads “neighborly” citizenship through accounts of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, offering a telling example of Spires’s creative theorization of citizenship practices. For Spires, this concept of neighborly citizenship entails “a potentially more democratic ethos of equality and inclusion, demanding that neighbor-citizens serve the common good by serving each other, by being neighborly toward the individuals encountered in everyday life” (p. 56). To explore this concept, he examines work by black writers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen whose joint account of the epidemic countered a white writer’s misrepresentation of black relief efforts as theft or unethical pricing practices. As Spires demonstrates, Jones and Allen reframe those efforts through recourse to the Good Samaritan parable. In their reframing of the epidemic’s economic conditions through ethics of care and community—in one example, they describe a black man unwilling to accept compensation for providing water to a dying man, after numerous white people have ignored his pleas for help—Spires argues that Jones and Allen offer a theory of citizenship as “a permeable civic space, resembling more a dynamic web of associations based in mutual aid than a single sphere, a neighborhood rather than a market” (p. 56). Spires reads neighborliness here as a logic of civic responsibility that does not depend on money or familial relation; rather it prioritizes “collective action against needs that threaten individual competence, in re-

cognition that a threat to the individual is, ultimately, a threat to all” (p. 63).

Chapter 2 shifts attention away from the more intimate spheres of everyday citizenship and toward the very public politics of black state conventions in the 1840s. This chapter theorizes “circulation as a heuristic for analyzing how the conventions functioned as an archive and repertoire of black citizenship—a constellation of texts and gatherings, beginning well in advance of the actual conventions and continuing well past delegates’ departure from the physical meeting space” (p. 81). This treatment of the conventions as having both antecedent and afterlife aligns with the ethics of the Colored Conventions Project, and Spires’s work in this chapter offers an extended example of how those events cannot be contained in the minutes of the proceedings alone. Spires marks his reading of the conventions not merely “for their documentary and evidentiary value” but also “as distinct and important political and cultural phenomena” (p. 80). The work in this chapter, which productively marshals the language of circulation to demonstrate both the intricacy and the extensive reach of the conventions, frames the conventions as catalyzing “political community [that] materializes not through the formal franchise but rather through audiences’ reading, consuming, and acting on these new civic texts” (p. 82). Here again, Spires adeptly navigates a challengingly diffuse archive across newspapers and convention minutes, demonstrating how convention participants themselves used the language of circulation to trace communal connections that underpin their calls for franchise rights.

This chapter also takes particular care to develop black women’s citizenship practices around the conventions, noting how convention materials themselves tend to erase or obscure women’s contributions. In addition to reading materials by women writers, Spires also urges reading practices that include, for instance, marking places where convention minutes record the erasure of remarks

by women. Spires thus indexes these gaps and fragments not merely as erasures but also as traces that ought to enlarge our sense of black women's logistical, intellectual, and material contributions to these events. Finally, this chapter uses the petition format of convention materials to theorize political organizing as "sublime appeal" (p. 110)—a manifesto-like call for redress in which black organizers exposed the moral and legal flaws in state structures and asserted their own authority as legal agents and advocates.

In chapter 3, *The Practice of Citizenship* turns to economic citizenship as read through the correspondences of "Ethiop" (William J. Wilson) and "Communi-paw" (James McCune Smith) in *Frederick Douglass's Paper* between 1851 and 1854. Here, Spires notes that these writers staged their "debates" in print as a way to navigate the increasingly modern urban setting of New York City. The debate itself coalesced around advocacy for, on the one hand, "black aristocracy" (Wilson), and on the other, a sort of new black republicanism that centers the average person (Smith). Spires's consideration of their debates foregrounds their treatment of New York as a sort of metonym for thinking about US economic citizenship more broadly. This is one of the places in *The Practice of Citizenship* where Spires productively mines the permeability of fiction and nonfiction, pressing on the creative dimensions of these personae's debates and noting at one point how the language of the "real" even inflects Ethiop's and Communi-paw's critiques of each other (p. 156). This reading of the debates reminds us again of Spires's practice of locating the elements of play, creation, and imagination in the intricate terrain of black citizenship practices. Recognizing the possible comparison to Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois as a relevant but insufficient rubric for reading their staged debates in *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, Spires focuses on Smith and Wilson as collaborators and co-creators of a deeply textured conversation around economic citizenship.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of critical citizenship, read primarily through the *Anglo-African Magazine*, where Wilson reprises his "Ethiop" persona in a series called "Afric-American Picture Gallery." In describing a set of imaginary visual art pieces, Ethiop offers "a challenge to modes of collective memory and institutional framing and a site for cultivating critical citizenship" (p. 164). Spires refers here to a citizenship practice characterized by its "intrusiveness," by how it troubles assumptions that tend to naturalize white supremacy. Critical citizenship deliberately breaks norms and boundaries by "insist[ing] on historical complexity and interpretation ... as a means for interrogating and revising the assumptions that make current social and political arrangements seem natural, timeless, and desirable" (p. 163). In this chapter, Spires first traces a national discourse on citizenship through Frederick Douglass and Anthony Burns. He then reads Wilson's contributions to the *Anglo-African Magazine* as an example of how his fictional art gallery cultivates critical citizenship "as a historical, a cultural, and an intellectual project" that recast Eurocentric narratives and histories as villains and slavery as the founding structure of US national history (p. 181). Here again, Spires underscores fiction as an engine of citizenship practice and as an example of black creative labor deeply invested in collaborative praxis.

The intricate close readings of critical citizenship in the *Anglo-African Magazine* serve as a hinge to chapter 5, where Spires reads practices of "revolutionary citizenship" primarily through Frances Harper's contributions to that same publication (p. 206). The choice to read revolutionary citizenship through a woman writer, and specifically some of Harper's lesser-known work, offers another example of Spires's innovative framings of categories like "citizen" and "revolution." Chapter 5 specifically returns to the sublime to examine the relationship among citizenship, literary representation, and revolutionary violence. Of these interrelated spheres, Spires asks us to ques-

tion, through Harper, “What happens after critique?” (p. 32). He traces the literary worlds that Harper builds within and across texts from “Fancy Sketches” to “The Triumph of Freedom—A Dream” (1859-60) and “The Two Offers” (1859) where women deconstruct the metaphors and mythologies that enable slavery and antislavery. Spires repeatedly brings Harper into conversation with his previous chapters, foregrounding how Harper centers “‘thinking’ black women ... and ostensibly genteel spaces like parlors as sites where revolutionary citizenship might be taught and (em)plotted” (p. 233). For Spires, Harper not only dismantles antiblack mythologies but also imagines her own mythologies of black survival and revolution in a network of global diasporic consciousness. It is significant that Spires dedicates this entire chapter to Harper, given a tendency among scholars to think revolution primarily through men. Spires’s reading of Harper indexes her contributions to black revolutionary thought while also providing a reparative reading of revolution, itself, reminding scholars that, beyond slave insurrection, “free black life was another front in the same war” (p. 244).

Finally, in a brief conclusion to *The Practice of Citizenship*, Spires offers a reflection on black theorizing and its relation to form as an evolving and entangled project, and he notes how contemporary black organizing practices—for example, Black Lives Matter—take up “the ongoing work of black citizenship practices” examined in this book (p. 249). He concludes the book by reflecting on a moment when Frances Smith Foster invited him to reframe an earlier iteration of his project. Noting how her critique challenged him to refine his own scholarly investments and priorities, Spires offers an example of how a willingness to listen and adapt is itself a scholarly methodology, and this reflection rehearses the collaborative and citational praxis that defines the very histories his book examines.

Having already won a number of prestigious awards, including the MLA Prize for a First Book,

The Practice of Citizenship will no doubt continue to be taken up by scholars in a range of disciplines and historical periods. As notable for its breadth of coverage as for its depth, it offers highly teachable scholarship for historians, archivists, literary critics, black studies scholars, and scholars of material culture. In addition to the contributions it makes to each of these separate fields, *The Practice of Citizenship* is equally noteworthy for the connections it establishes between and among these various scholarly spheres.

Note

[1]. Derrick R. Spires, “Performing Politics, Creating Community: Antebellum Black Conventions as Political Rituals,” in *The Colored Conventions Movement*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 154-66.

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