

DERRICK R. SPIRES, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 344. \$49.95.

In its original form, the U.S. Constitution had no fixed definition of citizenship. In absence of a clear legal standard, a de facto classification emerged. After the Naturalization Act of 1790 limited naturalized citizenship to “free white persons,” U.S. politics increasingly tightened citizenship’s boundaries. Subsequently, as political contention over slavery intensified in the antebellum decades, Black personhood was increasingly framed as the negative image of the civic values that white men imagined they alone possessed. This white supremacist logic reached its most infamous articulation in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), a Supreme Court case evaluating a Black man’s claim to freedom from his enslavers after being brought to a free state. In its decision, the Supreme Court determined that Black people had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” defining national citizenship as a white enterprise and making Black citizenship an impossibility. After the Civil War, the Republicans in congress drafted the Fourteenth Amendment with the intention of correcting this wrong; they aimed to repair the previous exclusion of Black people from civic life once and for all by expanding citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.” This arc tells a story in which white politicians realize the promise of a “more perfect union” by beginning to imagine Black people within a civic domain they previously reserved for themselves.

Derrick Spires’s *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* flips this account of antebellum citizenship on its head. Instead of focusing on the way the white majority described Black (non)belonging, Spires examines the way Black Americans theorized their own citizenship. As Spires shows, Black Americans discussed citizenship frequently in vibrant print and political ecosystems to which scholars of the antebellum period have devoted insufficient attention. The implications of this inversion are vast. Spires asks: what story of American belonging would we tell 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?” (p. 2). Through this question, Spires reclaims political agency for understudied communities of Black writers and politicians. But he also shows the more dynamic and adaptable vision

of citizenship they imagined. Defining citizenship not as “a thing determined by who one is but rather by what one does,” Spires writes that Black writers viewed citizenship “not as a destination, an enacted identity, or static relation to a state but rather as a self-reflexive, dialectical process of becoming” (p. 3). Put another way, Spires shows how Black thinkers articulated a vision of citizenship that would “enliven, not deaden” by becoming a practice in need of continual renewal that could also yield liberation from a white supremacist state (p. 16).

To show how Black Americans conceived of citizenship on their own terms, Spires excavates citizenship discourses in Black American print culture from the 1790s to the Civil War. Even as the United States developed regimes for circumscribing citizenship based on race, Black writers and political groups “claim[ed] their everyday activities as doing the work of citizenship” to model what citizenship might become (p. 13). Mutual aid societies, political conventions, magazine dialogues, and fiction offered ways of discussing how extant Black cultures already embodied the civic values of Republican government from which they were excluded. Instead of defaulting to white values, the communities documented and imagined in Black publications offer a rich tableau of citizenship practices that did not request authorization from the state or hegemonic society. More importantly, these practices embodied the communitarian sensibility that white models of citizenship failed to provide.

To trace these often-conflicting practices of citizenship, Spires chronicles a print public sphere where Black thinkers posited ideas and enacted practices of citizenship. His chapters outline five inter-related citizenship methods visible in print magazines and state conventions: neighborly contact, free circulation of civic participation in political gatherings, economic representation, critiques of citizenship, and literary imaginings of revolution (p. 26). In the first chapter, Spires explores the kind of neighborly citizenship that Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, founders of the Free African Society, circulated in their 1794 *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late and Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793*, after the Philadelphia 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Responding to an account of the epidemic that accused Black Philadelphians of civic unrest, Jones and Allen instead describe how Black communities crafted mutual aid societies that promoted community care during the crisis. Where white city institutions failed to address the yellow fever outbreak, Black communities worked collectively to provide for mutual safety. Chronicling the success of Black communities in their

*Narrative*, Jones and Allen “leverage[d] the moment to demand a wholesale rethinking of the relationship between citizenship and sensibility in the period” (p. 39). As Spires excavates, Jones and Allen advocated for neighborly care as a model for Black citizenship after emancipation.

Chapter 2 explores how the printed record of Black state conventions in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio between 1840 and 1851 provides insight into the way that Black political groups demonstrated a “faith and participation in a republican style of government” that was often unrecognized (p. 29). Where mainstream arguments suggested that Black Americans were unprepared for full political membership, these conventions illustrated democratic participation in practice. More importantly, the conventions “telegraph the terms under which that community was and desired itself to be a part of a larger U.S. national community” (p. 81). By printing transcripts of these conventions subsequently, Black political groups executed “the very citizenship practices from which the delegates had been excluded” by building and distributing a record of their democratic practice (p. 82). Though leaving women’s rights largely on the periphery, the printed circulation of conventions demonstrates both a practice and a theorization of Black citizenship that was unimaginable in white political circles.

Some forms theorized citizenship through disagreement. In chapter 3, Spires details the pseudonymous correspondence of two critics in the 1850s—James McCune Smith and William J. Wilson—to understand competing theories of Black economic potential during the mid-century market revolution. Under the moniker “Ethiop” and “Communipaw,” each narrator examines the implications of Black participation as the market eclipsed civil society as the primary locus for imagining citizenship. Where Wilson (Ethiop) argued for the creation of a Black aristocracy in a way that anticipated Booker T. Washington’s narratives of uplift, Smith (Communipaw) advocated for a democratic polity constituted through the interests of common laboring folk. Together, they advanced “a dialogic approach to representing black economic citizenship [that] offered a powerful complement to their activism: no single person *could* represent or re-present black labor” (p. 127). By emphasizing the importance of dialogue, Wilson and Smith created a rich civic discourse about Black economic membership—but they also offered a literary take on the political work of economic representation and citizenship.

The fourth chapter discusses the limitations of existing U.S. frameworks in what Spires terms critical citizenship. Here, Spires

shows how work in Thomas Hamilton's *Anglo-African Magazine* illustrated the structural limitations that the presumption of whiteness placed on narratives of inclusion within U.S. citizenship. Acknowledging the positive work of abolition activism by figures like Abraham Lincoln, they suggested that Black Americans would remain unequal to white citizens after emancipation because of white social tastes. Critiquing the implicit bias of the white majority, writers in the *Anglo-African Magazine* advocated for community dialogues and "critical practices that cultivated a 'taste' for participatory plurality" that American politicians seemed intent on neglecting (p. 175). As such, Black writers critiqued positions that imagined Black citizenship through conformity to white standards; instead, the magazine illustrated how Black communities represented the egalitarian ideals of citizenship that the United States failed to uphold.

Finally, Spires concludes by exploring how authors at the cusp of the Civil War envisioned emancipation as an enduring project. Authors interested in what he calls revolutionary citizenship "represent slave rebellion, Underground Railroad work, communal self-defense, and affirmations of black life more broadly as fundamentally political acts—as citizenship practices that speak new potentialities into existence" (p. 210). Focusing on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's antebellum career, Spires shows how Harper deployed fictionalized imaginings of past acts of resistance to emphasize the possibility of liberation even while U.S. politics seemed on the precipice of a wholesale abandonment of Black citizenship. Reflecting on previous decades of Black writing, Harper raises questions about the role that critique and revolutionary violence play in shattering the status quo and opening a reality of Black equality.

Ultimately, these modes of theorizing proved ephemeral. Interrupted by the Civil War, they were occluded by the Fourteenth Amendment's expansion of citizenship to any person born or naturalized within U.S. jurisdiction. Though obscured by Reconstruction, these practices of citizenship nonetheless offer an enduring critique of the legal theories that shape our ideas of citizenship now. Perhaps most importantly, Spires recovers an untold story of how Black Americans—in community action, print circulation, literature, and political conventions—conceived of what citizenship could be outside of the standards of white society. In this sense, Spires's work is a critical corrective to scholarship on nineteenth-century American political culture because it decenters white ideology and elevates Black political thought surrounding our most embattled political category: the citizen with rights.

What Spires also emphasizes is that this story of citizenship is not isolated to the past. As he writes, *The Practice of Citizenship* narrates a “creative struggle for a just society” through republican self-government that Black people theorized and rethought continually (p. 33). Alongside Carrie Hyde’s *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2018), *The Practice of Citizenship* shows the active way that the U.S. print sphere reconceived citizenship’s boundaries where the law failed. These imaginings—inconclusive as they were—illuminate the limitations of the static birthright citizenship model under which we currently operate. As Spires offers in conclusion, the inequalities that #blacklivesmatter has made hyper-visible echo this nineteenth-century genealogy, enacting egalitarian civic values in the face of state violence. Even now, practices like mutual aid societies are increasingly prevalent during the COVID-19 crisis and concurrent protests that erupted after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, protests that themselves circulate forms of civic critique reminiscent of those chronicled by Spires. In light of the manifold crises over citizenship rights in the present, these nineteenth-century experiments in imagining political membership are ever more relevant.

Since Spires’s book is dedicated to uncovering a past that has not been adequately explored, it does not express all these transhistorical connections. Nonetheless, any scholar of citizenship in the nineteenth century or of the racial politics of the present will find vital information about Black political thought that dislodges the persistent presumption that whiteness is the neutral standard of citizenship. Since the equal rights of citizens remain withheld in practice for Black people, these spaces for theorizing remain necessary for understanding the history and the present status of Black political inequality in the United States. As such, *The Practice of Citizenship* is both an important corrective and a reminder that our citizenship is not limited to how we are defined in law but is rather an ongoing negotiation that we practice every day. As Spires’s account shows, those are practices that Black Americans have been imagining since this imperfect union was constituted, especially where mainstream society neglected to look.

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