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Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 341 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and acknowledgments. \$49.95

As current debates over walls, census questions, and even the validity of the birthright clause of the Fourteenth Amendment make clear, the battle over who belongs within the boundaries of the United States, and more to the point who does not, has moved to the forefront of American politics. Implicitly and explicitly, such debates often revolve around questions of whom the government should recognize and protect as citizens. Such discussions generally, if silently, rest upon an idea of citizenship as a status conferred by the state. But as Derrick R. Spires shows in *The Practice of Citizenship*, this top-down understanding of citizenship is a relatively recent development in the United States. More specifically, his book pivots on the premise that such an understanding would have held little purchase for African American writers and activists before the Civil War. As the title of Spires's engaging, powerful, and absolutely necessary book indicates, the subjects he explores understood citizenship as a set of dynamic practices rather than a static condition, as a constellation of verbs to be enacted rather than as a singular noun to be endowed. As Spires declares in his introduction, "Practicing citizenship makes citizens" (p. 4). In a way, the rest of *The Practice of Citizenship* is an exploration into the ways in which black writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries helped Spires compose that sentence.

The Practice of Citizenship begins with an extended introduction where Spires lays out his main methodological intervention. Implicitly building upon the pathbreaking work of Black Feminist scholars such as Barbara Christian, Spires terms his primary method "Black Theorizing," an approach dedicated to recovering and interpreting the theories articulated and developed by eighteenth and nineteenth-century black writers. "What happens to our thinking about citizenship if," Spires asks, "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)? Spires focuses especially on the ways in which

such proactive attempts occurred in and through a distinctive black print culture. Looking closely at “the processes by which black citizens used print to articulate and enact the citizenship they theorized,” Spires delves into an archive that includes pamphlets, the minutes of Colored Conventions, letters written to black newspapers, and sketches published in black magazines (p. 3). By concentrating on these different mediums of black print, Spires reveals how in addition to the theories contained in their pages the forms, structures, and circulations of such productions model and perform particular practices of citizenship.

The book’s first chapter turns to the example of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s account of the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia. Their 1794 pamphlet, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the year 1793 and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications*, theorizes the practice of “neighborly citizenship” (p. 34). Spires first situates Jones and Allen’s model of the neighborly citizen within the idea of “citizenship as commerce” embraced by white writers like Matthew Carey. In his own account of the 1793 epidemic, which includes an attack on the city’s black residents, Carey offers a version of citizenship premised on the existence of a “managerial elite” who “ensure that citizens work toward their own general welfare or... simply protect citizens from each other” (p. 54). Unlike neighborly citizenship, this model “removes the need for citizens to be responsible to and concerned for each other, requiring only that they appear to be so” (p. 54). Framing citizenship as a practice of self-preservation centered on appearance, Carey’s notion is, as Allen and Jones realized, inadequate “to the task of addressing enslavement, let alone the white supremacy subtending it” (p. 55). By contrast, the “neighborly citizen,” Spires explains, “understands that benevolence means more than appearing virtuous; it means mutual aid: collective action against needs that threaten individual competence, in the recognition that a threat to the individual is, ultimately, a threat to all” (p. 63). Moreover, while neighborliness appears to be a practice for individuals, Jones and Allen expand the notion to include institutions. The “neighborly state” would take its cue from the practices of its neighborly citizens, and enact an emancipation built not on instances of “momentary benevolence” but instead “structural adjustments and long-term planning” (p. 74). In his reading of *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the year 1793*, Spires highlights in particular the moments when the work recasts Carey’s account of the epidemic “from the perspective of the citizens *on the ground*” (p. 36). In doing so, he underscores the ways in which “the form and point of view” of the pamphlet “model the kinds of bonds and citizenship practice Jones and Allen were theorizing” (p. 36).

In chapter two, Spires turns to how the members of state Colored Conventions theorized the practice of “circulating citizenship.” Scholars have long consulted the records of the Colored Conventions movement, mining the minutes of such meetings for various kinds of historical data. Spires, though, makes a key intervention by considering the ways in which the specific form of the convention—which he defines as “a combination of public gatherings and printed proceedings”—theorizes a particular practice of citizenship (p. 80). Concentrating on a handful of antebellum gatherings, Spires considers the conventions 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). He also reads against the grain of most work on the Colored Conventions by focusing his attention not on national gatherings but instead on state-level meetings. As the digital Colored Conventions Project has documented, black activists began meeting at the state level at least as early as 1837 in Ohio, and in the decades before the Civil War regularly convened in states across the northeast and Old Northwest. After the Civil War, the meetings spread across the entire nation. Spires argues for the crucial importance of state-level conventions that took up decidedly local concerns, explaining that “Local specificity was critical, because where the rhetoric of citizenship had nationalist tones, the instrumentalities of citizenship, the institutions that outlined the contours and limits of who could or could not be a citizen, were primarily under state control” (p. 85). Considering the form and content of these meetings, Spires shows how “the conventions figure political participation as a shared vital, moving substance and invoke tropes of circulation—blood, power, people, water, and texts—to theorize these practices” (81).

Having laid out the practices of neighborly and circulating citizenship, Spires turns in his third chapter to “economic citizenship.” Teasing out the contested nature of economic citizenship within and among black communities, Spires here focuses his attention on the 1850s newspaper correspondence of two leading black intellectuals: William J. Wilson and James McCune Smith. Writing into *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* as Ethiop and Communipaw, respectively, Wilson and Smith used their letters to debate the relationship between labor and citizenship. Discerning the political economy of the United States as an oligarchy, Wilson offered readers a vision of economic citizenship where a black elite would “advocate for its community economically and politically among the nation’s ‘monied class’” (p. 123). In a way, Wilson’s theory anticipates W.E.B. Du Bois’s early-twentieth-century notion of a “Talented Tenth” that could, as members of the nation’s upper classes, use their economic status to reach across the color line. In contrast to Wilson and later Du Bois, Smith grounded his preferred practice of economic citizenship in the belief that the United States was indeed a republic whose most representative and

influential members belonged to the middle classes rather than the aristocracy. Spires's attention to a debate that occurred in the pages of a black newspaper between two writers who have largely been ignored by scholars offers another example of his impressive ability to draw out powerful theories and practices from people and print sources that other scholars have overlooked or read as simple historical documents. Specialists in African American literary studies have begun to grapple with the complexities of the black press, and in doing so have rediscovered the voluminous writings of correspondents like Wilson and Smith, but as Spires quickly acknowledges, even his impressive readings are merely a beginning.

Chapter four stays with William J. Wilson and the black press, moving from his letters to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* to a series of sketches written for the *Anglo-African Magazine*. Training his attention especially on Wilson's "Afric-American Picture Gallery" series, published in installments in 1859, Spires explores "practices of critical citizenship: a process of disruption, meant to disquiet and discomfort, that draws on counterhistory to produce new visions of what citizenship might have been, could be in the present, and might become in the future" (p. 162). While the "Afric-American Picture Gallery" has been garnering increasing attention from scholar-teachers of African American literature—in part because of a 2015 digital edition co-edited by Leif Eckstrom and Britt Rusert and published by the *Just Teach One: Early African American Print* project—Spires's intricate readings provide a model for engaging with this wide-ranging and challenging work. Moreover, through his careful attention to other contributors to the *Anglo-African Magazine*, Spires reveals the sophisticated ways in which black writers understood the nation's practices of white citizenship. For example, Spires works through the writer S.S.N.'s framing of these dominant practices as "fugue citizenship." "The point of fugue citizenship," Spires writes, "is not to empower the citizenry but rather to manage it through a manufactured consensus tethered to white identity politics, policed speech, and fear" (p. 174). Pointing to the 1858 debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglass as a prime example, Spires underscores how this manufacturing folds in apparent dissent. And it is here that the "metaphor of the fugue" becomes so revealing. Following S.S.N., Spires explains that the "formal structure of the fugue—a contrapuntal repetition on a single theme—ensures that each voice, not matter how 'tonally' different, and each subject, no matter how ostensibly divisive, repeat the central dogma: the superiority and defense of 'Anglo-Saxon blood'" (p. 172). With an emphasis on intrusion, discomfort, and the creation of alternative narratives of national belonging, practices of critical citizenship disrupt this consensus.

In his fifth and final chapter, Spires largely stays with the *Anglo-African Magazine* but shifts from Wilson to the writings of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Beginning with Harper's antebellum poetry and moving through a

series of sketches she composed for the *Anglo-African*, Spires traces the contours of “revolutionary citizenship.” Unlike critical citizenship practices that looked backward to craft alternative histories, enacting revolutionary citizenship entails imagining radical futures. Harper accomplishes such work through her focus on slave rebellions within and beyond the boundaries of the United States, events that “created new worlds and, even in failure, reaffirmed a sense of potentiality” (p. 210). Moreover, Harper’s writings not only display the revolutionary potential of slave rebellions but also model the ways in which the stories of such uprisings can be spread in the hopes of sparking future uprisings. Her oeuvre thus exemplifies how a practice of revolutionary citizenship “entails disseminating and triggering these radical political moments of reordering—of breaking down in the name of making new” (p. 210). Spires spends much of this chapter with Harper’s “Fancy Sketches,” a series of short pieces published in the *Anglo-African* that stage scenes of narrator Jane Rustic relating tales of black freedom (including the story of a Brazilian Maroon community) to a younger generation of African Americans. Through this frame, Harper “models pedagogies of revolutionary citizenship as an everyday parlor and print practice,” especially when Jane implores her listeners (and the magazine’s readers) to support the *Anglo-African* (p. 241). Like Allen and Jones, the Colored Conventions, and Smith and Wilson, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is not unknown to specialists. But as with his earlier chapters, Spires’s centering of Harper as one of the nineteenth century’s most important writers and theorists places him once again on the leading edge of African American literary studies.

Spires concludes his book with a return to his opening discussion of “black theorizing.” Reframing the idea as a practice not only for nineteenth-century black writers but also for current scholars, Spires contends that a method grounded in black theorizing “requires reading black print as a site of theoretical production and our own roles as theorizing with and alongside it, rather than bringing ‘theory’ to black writing” (p. 248). And while acknowledging that “the convention of a conclusion is to end with an articulation of the book’s arguments in a way that foregrounds my own words,” Spires instead devotes his closing to a discussion of a well-established and growing group of scholars and activists whose work exemplifies such an approach. This closing move, he explains, brings to the present one of his book’s key interventions: “that there’s power in acknowledging these roots and networks of polyphonic, collective engagements” (p. 253).

I deeply admire Spires’s decision to end his book with a turn to the collective, but let me conclude this review with a celebration of his own singular achievements. In *The Practice of Citizenship*, Spires theorizes alongside some of the most brilliant and challenging writers of the nineteenth century, subjects who made and make incredible demands upon their readers. But with

an ease made all the more impressive because of its seeming effortlessness, Spires has written a detailed and elegant book that offers his readers a well-cleared pathway into the world of black theorizing in the nineteenth century, and thus provided us with an opportunity to learn from activist-writers who developed and enacted practices of citizenship that engaged with but refused to be bound by the rules and regulations of a white supremacist state. And as an interpreter of and guide through these practices, Spires models for us black theorizing in the twenty-first century, an approach that is at once scholarly method and ethical imperative. An inspired and inspiring work filled with theories and practices that are as necessary now as they were then, *The Practice of Citizenship* is, in short, essential reading.

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