

Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship

Johann N. Neem

Western Washington University, johann.neem@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Neem, Johann N. (2018) "Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 20 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.4.06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss4/6>

Review

Neem, Johann N.

Fall 2018

Hyde, Carrie. *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship.* Harvard University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9780674976153

In the midst of the transnational turn in American letters and historiography, Carrie Hyde explores the nature of “civic longing,” in which real and imagined outsiders cultivated a desire to be part of the American nation. A work of literary criticism, Hyde argues that, prior to the 14th amendment, citizenship in the U.S. was defined through “culture” rather than law. “In the absence of a centralized legal definition of citizenship,” Hyde writes, questions of citizenship were explored through “political philosophy, Christian theology, natural law, literature, and didactic writing” (8).

Hyde argues that American ideals of citizenship were not created from the center out. Instead of being defined primarily or solely by white Protestant men, “the individuals excluded from full political membership” articulated the benefits of belonging. Outsiders real and fictional helped Americans experience the costs of exclusion. The result was that through literature broadly defined, Americans felt a sense of “civic longing.”

Hyde argues that for this formative era in American history, scholars must put aside their bias for legal sources. Instead, fiction and other kinds of literature were vital to defining the contours, benefits, and meaning of citizenship. Where law might dictate, culture permitted the formation of the “political subjunctive,” an “aspirational mode of politicking” in which readers could imagine what political membership “*might or should be,*” rather than just what it was or must be (16). Through literature’s capacity to invoke the subjunctive, Americans struggled to determine what it meant to belong to the nation, and who belonged.

The first chapter provides an overview of the “definitional poverty of ‘citizenship’” in the early republic. Jurists complained that there was no clause or specific state or national set of laws that could determine who was or was not a citizen, and to what rights or privileges citizens were

entitled. U.S. Attorney General Edward Bates in 1862 noted the “fruitless search in our law books and the records of our courts, for a satisfactory definition of the phrase *citizen of the United States*” (19). This mattered because Bates and others were struggling over whether African Americans were to be considered American citizens. Chief Justice Roger Taney had recognized the need for clarity and, in *Dred Scott* (1857), offered a highly questionable historical account to prove that black Americans had never been U.S. citizens. As Bates suggested, the real story was much more complicated, and in the era before the law—in *Dred Scott* and then the 14th amendment—sought to impose certainty, Americans turned to other sources.

No source was invoked, Hyde argues in chapter two, more than the Bible. Americans embraced the notion of “citizenship in heaven” to offer analogies to citizenship in the here and now. Indeed, Hyde writes, the emergence of Christian nationalism cannot be dismissed as primarily reactionary or exclusionary. Instead, Christian nationalism enabled “claims to political membership” (47). Christian nationalism sought to resolve a fundamental and real problem for Americans: how to reconcile one’s loyalty to God and to the state. Hyde takes this question as a real issue for Americans seeking to build a new nation. Yet, Biblical tradition did not just reconcile Americans to the world; it also reinforced a sense of estrangement from it. The heavenly was in tension with the fallen world. For David Walker and for many abolitionists, the experience of estrangement cultivated a higher loyalty to a divine order that might be. It fostered the political subjunctive. And, in her novel *Dred*, Harriet Beecher Stowe relied on “an egalitarian image of heavenly citizenship as a counterfactual imperative for a racially inclusive model of political citizenship in the United States” (81).

The third chapter relies on the occasion of a successful slave revolt aboard the American vessel *Creole* to examine how Americans relied on the higher claims of nature and natural law to demand access to political membership. Abolitionists embraced the English idea that slavery is unnatural and can only be sustained by the artifice of local positive laws. Frederick Douglass argued that enslaved people are accountable to “natural law,” and not to unjust positive laws. Like the Bible, then, the natural law tradition offered a realm for the political subjunctive, for claims of what might or ought to be, or perhaps what is in a plane higher than the existing social order.

The fourth chapter looks specifically at the “civic importance of fiction as a differential mode of expression.” For many literary historians and critics, romanticism was an aesthetic, politically

agnostic movement. For Hyde, in contrast, the expansion for the realm of the imagination “facilitated the emergence of a secular form of political critique” (117-18). Rather than representative, fiction created other worlds that enabled readers to compare the fictional with the actual. Focusing particularly on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hyde argues that, to Hawthorne, the autonomy of literature from the world was precisely what enabled it to serve as a mode of civic imagination. Hawthorne proclaimed himself a citizen of the literary, not the local or national, but in doing so he created a space for thinking about the local or national. The gap between the fictional and actual served as “catalysts for civic longing” (150).

The final chapter explores how fiction can produce civic longing through a close reading of Edward Everett Hale’s widely-read and widely-reproduced essay, “The Man without a Country” (1863). An essay assigned in schools well into the twentieth century, Hale narrates the fictional tale of a naval officer named Philip Nolan who had been seduced by Aaron Burr’s conspiracy. Brought to trial, Nolan proclaims, “D—n the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!” (160) In response, the court determines that Nolan should get what he wished for. He is sentenced to never hear again any news about the U.S. and imprisoned on a ship. He is, in other words, sent into exile or made stateless.

For readers in the midst of the Civil War, dealing with secession and the unbelievable human costs of the war, Hale’s story allowed them to imagine the anguish of being without a nation. And Hale recognized that this anguish was analogous to the anguish of enslaved people brought to the U.S. never to hear from or see their homes again. Hale’s story “uses its protagonist’s punitive exile from the nation to reconceive of patriotism as a form of national longing” (167). For the story’s readers, to be denied membership in the nation was a horror that reinforced their desire to be part of the nation, and perhaps to expand access to membership to excluded minorities.

Hyde’s excellent book makes a strong case for the role of culture and literature in shaping American understandings of what it meant to be a member of the nation in the era before the 14th amendment asserted law’s authority. It emphasizes the notion of membership, challenging accounts that focus primarily on legal history, such as Rogers Smith’s *Civic Ideals* (1997) and James Kettner’s *The Development of American Citizenship 1608-1870* (1978). To Hyde, rediscovering the role of culture allows us to imagine a more flexible, more contingent, set of ideas about membership than the law. It allows for the subjunctive, not just the indicative.

Hyde's book will be fruitfully read alongside Martha S. Jones's new *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York, 2018). If Hyde focuses on culture, Jones turns her attention to law. Focusing on Baltimore, Jones explores the way African Americans and their abolitionist allies used the legal system to claim rights that belonged to citizens. At a time when, as Hyde too argues, the civic status of African Americans was far from stable, Jones shows how claims to rights before the law endowed free black Americans with civic standing. Black Baltimoreans thus used law as a wedge to challenge efforts to deny them civic standing. Like Hyde, Jones argues that central conceptions of American citizenship were forged by outsiders.

If, to Hyde, literature's capacity to speak in the subjunctive spurred imaginative expansions of citizenship beyond law's claims, to Jones, the purposeful actions of African Americans to claim membership in the nation through the legal system led to the 14th Amendment's determination that all people born in the U.S. are entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship. In both books, what Hyde calls the "definitional poverty of 'citizenship'" created opportunities for outsiders to make claims on the nation and, ultimately, to assert their membership in it.

Johann N. Neem is Professor of History at Western Washington University. He is author of Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America (2017) and Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts (2008).