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**MLA PRIZE FOR A FIRST BOOK AWARDED TO DERRICK R. SPIRES FOR *THE PRACTICE OF CITIZENSHIP***

New York, NY – 14 December 2020 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its twenty-seventh annual Modern Language Association Prize for a First Book to Derrick R. Spires, associate professor of English at Cornell University, for *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

The MLA Prize for a First Book was established in 1993. It is awarded annually for the first book-length publication of a member of the association that is a literary or linguistic study, a critical edition of an important work, or a critical biography.

The MLA Prize for a First Book is one of eighteen awards that will be presented on 9 January 2021, during the association's annual convention, to be held online. The members of the selection committee were Christopher Sheehan Braider (Univ. of Colorado, Boulder), chair; Priya Joshi (Temple Univ.); Yoon Sun Lee (Wellesley Coll.); Su Fang Ng (Virginia Polytechnic Inst. and State Univ.); Gayle Rogers (Univ. of Pittsburgh); Karl Steel (Brooklyn Coll. and Graduate Center, City Univ. of New York); and Priscilla B. Wald (Duke Univ.). The committee's citation for Spires's book reads:

Derrick R. Spires's *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* is a gorgeously written, powerfully argued, and extensively researched book that casts vivid new light on a timely and important topic. Going far beyond the traditional corpus of acknowledged Black American writers and thinkers, Spires pursues an impressively broad exploration of Black print culture of all kinds, including the surviving minutes of political meetings in which Black Americans sought not only to secure their full rights of citizenship but also to define citizenship itself in ways that resonate powerfully today in the Black Lives Matter movement. Analyzing the ways Black Americans challenged the institutions and structures that excluded them from full participation in civic life in the United States, Spires compellingly demonstrates how the active and participatory character of citizenship as Black Americans creatively defined it can—and should—serve as a model for all Americans.

The Modern Language Association of America and its over 24,000 members in 100 countries work to strengthen the study and teaching of languages and literature. Founded in 1883, the MLA provides opportunities for its members to share their scholarly findings and teaching experiences with colleagues and to discuss trends in the academy. The MLA sustains one of the finest publication programs in the humanities, producing a variety of publications for language and literature professionals and for the general public. The association publishes the *MLA International Bibliography*, the only comprehensive bibliography in language and literature,

available online. The MLA Annual Convention features meetings on a wide variety of subjects. More information on MLA programs is available at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

Before the establishment of the MLA Prize for a First Book in 1993, members who were authors of first books were eligible, along with other members, to compete for the association's James Russell Lowell Prize, established in 1969. Apart from its limitation to members' first books, the MLA Prize for a First Book follows the same criteria and definitions as the Lowell Prize

The MLA Prize for a First Book is awarded under the auspices of the association's Committee on Honors and Awards. Other awards sponsored by the committee are the William Riley Parker Prize; the James Russell Lowell Prize; the Howard R. Marraro Prize; the Kenneth W. Mildener Prize; the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize; the MLA Prize for Independent Scholars; the Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize; the Morton N. Cohen Award; the MLA Prizes for a Scholarly Edition and for Collaborative, Bibliographical, or Archival Scholarship; the Lois Roth Award; the William Sanders Scarborough Prize; the Fenia and Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies; the MLA Prize in United States Latina and Latino and Chicana and Chicano Literary and Cultural Studies; the MLA Prize for Studies in Native American Literatures, Cultures, and Languages; the Matei Calinescu Prize; the MLA Prize for an Edited Collection; the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prizes for Comparative Literary Studies, for French and Francophone Studies, for Italian Studies, for Studies in Germanic Languages and Literatures, for Studies in Slavic Languages and Literatures, for a Translation of a Literary Work, and for a Translation of a Scholarly Study of Literature; and the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies. A complete list of current and previous winners can be found on the [MLA website](#).