

2022

## Making Mary Ann Waters is a Free Black Woman: Critical Fabrication as Bibliographic Method

Kadin Henningsen  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, [kjh3@illinois.edu](mailto:kjh3@illinois.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Henningsen, Kadin (2022) "Making Mary Ann Waters is a Free Black Woman: Critical Fabrication as Bibliographic Method," *Criticism*: Vol. 64: Iss. 3, Article 22.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol64/iss3/22>

---

## **Making Mary Ann Waters is a Free Black Woman: Critical Fabrication as Bibliographic Method**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Thank you to Derrick Spires for providing space to bring my artistic practice into the classroom, and for his early encouragement and ongoing support of this project. Thank you also to Kate Ozment and Lisa Maruca for their editorial stewardship on this essay.

# MAKING MARY ANN WATERS IS A FREE BLACK WOMAN: CRITICAL FABRICATION AS BIBLIOGRAPHIC METHOD

Kadin Henningsen

*I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions  
of history*

—Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”<sup>1</sup>

On September 23, 1851, Mary Ann Waters was committed “as a runaway [slave]” to the city and county jail of Baltimore, Maryland. We know about Waters because of a “pickup notice”—a form of slaving literature—placed in the *Daily National Intelligencer* on September 29, 1851, by the warden of the jail.<sup>2</sup> In addition to inscribing Waters as a fugitive from enslavement, the warden goes on to describe what Waters was wearing, as well as record how Waters articulated herself to authorities—she says that she is free and that she has been “hiring out in the city of Baltimore as a woman for the last three years.”

I was drawn to this notice for two reasons. First, as a transgender man I was initially drawn to what I read as archival evidence of the lived experiences of other transgender people. For me, the contradiction between the warden’s articulation of Waters as a fugitive “Negro man” and the printed record of her own articulation of self is, in part, what makes her transness visible. At a time when rampant antitransgender legislation is sweeping across the United States, Mary Ann Waters’s presence in the archive is evidence that trans people have always existed even if we did not yet have the language of transness to articulate ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as a white trans man living in the twenty-first century, I also know that I am limited in my shared experience with Mary Ann Waters, who I read as a free Black trans woman and sex worker living and working in Antebellum Baltimore. The pickup notice also documents that trans people have also always resisted attempts by legal authorities to write us out of existence—for instance, the ad provides only one name, indicating that Waters refused to provide any name other than Mary Ann.<sup>4</sup> Waters,

therefore, offers trans people in the present strategies for resisting state and legal erasure.

Second, the notice raised questions for me about the proximity of sex/gender and race to print, and, more specifically, about the relationship between the (un)fixity of sex/gender and race and the perceived fixity of print in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> How are ideas about sex/gender, race, and print coconstitutive? I struggled to work through this question with writing alone, so I went to the printmaking studio (Noble Ink Lab) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to try to answer it through creative letterpress work. The result was my artist's book, *Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman*.<sup>6</sup> Making this flip-book helped me tease out potential answers to this question by mixing creativity, intellectual engagement, and the material practice of making in a process I have come to call "critical fabrication."<sup>7</sup> What follows is, first, a discussion of the artist's book's physical qualities and my process for printing the book using Christina Sharpe's theorization of Black redaction. I then discuss critical fabrication as a new method for critical bibliography. I close with a brief reflection on how the process helped me understand what was made possible for Mary Ann Waters as well as what was reinscribed in the process.

\*\*\*

*Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman* is a flip-book of forty pages bound together with a Japanese hemp-leaf stab binding and slip case with title on the front and colophon on the back. The book flips from back to front and starts with the full pickup notice about Mary Ann Waters. As the book is flipped, letters become unfixated, some moving around, most disappearing, ultimately leaving behind what I perceive to be Waters's own articulation of selfhood: Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman. The visual aesthetics of the empty space on the page, as letters are removed, have a wave-like effect that washes the text away as it moves across the page from right to left.

I wanted the book's overall aesthetics to subtly gesture toward the pickup notice's original location in a nineteenth-century newspaper. The notice was hand-typeset using 18-point Weiss metal type—a serif typeface similar to common newspaper typefaces—and was printed on French Paper Co.'s 80-pound cover weight "Newsprint White" card stock, with 140-pound cover weight "Kraft Cardstock" for the covers and slip case. I selected paper that would visually gesture to the off-white quality

of newsprint paper yet knew that actual newsprint paper was too thin and light for a flip-book, which requires a stiffer heavier paper to make the mechanics of flipping the pages easier. The 80-pound cover weight Dur-o-tone Newsprint provided enough weight and thickness to make flipping the pages easier yet was too light to hold when flipping from front to back as most flip-books are operated. I therefore had to collate the pages to fall as the book is flipped from back to front. I also used a much heavier/thicker cover weight paper (140 pounds) for the front and back cover to help provide additional support when flipping through the book.

There are two effects from these decisions. On the one hand, when approached as a standard Western codex moving from the first to the last page (from front to back), the notice is reconstructed providing a visual and linguistic entrapment of Waters. On the other hand, when operated as a flip book as intended, the text falls away as the pages are flipped from back to front, thus removing the notice's violent visual and linguistic apparatus that attempts to contain Waters. Furthermore, by flipping from back to front, the book resists a Western linear progression of the text. In so doing, the movement from back to front allows the reader to not only participate in the removal of the visual and linguistic container of the pickup notice but also participate in bringing Mary Ann Waters into the present (figs. 1 and 2).

In creating *Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman*, I employed a method informed by Christina Sharpe's theorization of Black redaction. While redaction is "the action of bringing or putting into a definite form" and/or the "action or process of revising or editing text," in its more obsolete usage, Sharpe points out, redaction is also the "action of driving back; resistance, reaction."<sup>8</sup> In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe theorizes Black redaction as a way "toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame."<sup>9</sup> Sharpe engages in Black redaction as a mode of resistance through a processes of revising or editing a text in order to "locate a counter to the force of the state."<sup>10</sup> In the making of *Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman*, I used Sharpe's theory of Black redaction to "counter the force of the state" by engaging directly with the pickup notice's visual and linguistic containment of Waters. My intention was to "drive back" the warden's words in order to bring Mary Ann Waters forward "into a definite form."

My engagement with Black redaction is also influenced by the visual aesthetics of poet M. NourbeSe Philip. In her collection of poems based on archival records regarding the slaving ship *Zong*, Philip engages in a mode of Black redaction in order to make visible a "story that cannot be told, yet must be told"—a story that is in excess of what is caught in the frame

WAS COMMITTED to the jail of Baltimore city and county, on the 23d day of September 1851, by D. C. H. Bordley, Esq, a justice of the peace of the State of Maryland, in and for the city of Baltimore, as a runaway, a Negro Man, who calls himself Mary Ann Waters, about twenty-eight years of age, 5 feet 2.5 inches high, stout built, very black complexion, and has a scar on his left ear. Said negro had on blue velvet mantilla, white satin bonnet, and figured scarf. Says he is free, was born in Elkridge, and has been hiring out in the city of Baltimore as a woman for the last three years.

The owner of the above described negro is requested to come forward, prove property, pay charges, and take said negro away; otherwise he will be discharged according to law.

W. M. H. COUNSELMAN,  
 Sep 29--31 Warden of Baltimore city and county jail.

A O M I to t e a i l of a l t i m o r e c i t  
 u n t y, o n t h e a e t e m e r 1 8 5 1, b  
 o r d l e y, E s q, a j u s t i c e o f t h e p e a c e o f M a  
 a n n, i n a n d f o r t h e c i t y o f B a l t i m o r e,  
 M n o c a l l h i m s e l f M a r y A n n W a t e r s, a b o u t  
 e a r t y e a r s o f a g e, 5 f e e t 2. 5 i n c h e s h i g h,  
 p l e x i o n, a n d h a s a s c a r o n h i s l e f t e a r. S a i d  
 l a n t i l l a, w h i t e s a t i n b o n n e t, a n d f i g u r e d  
 a y s h e i s f r e e. W a s b o r n i n E l k r i d g e, a n d h a s  
 i n t h e c i t y o f B a l t i m o r e a s a w o m a n f o r t h e  
 l a s t t h r e e y e a r s.

T h e o w n e r o f t h e a b o v e d e s c r i b e d n e g r o  
 i s r e q u e s t e d t o c o m e f o r w a r d, p r o v e p r o p e r t y,  
 p a y c h a r g e s, a n d t a k e s a i d n e g r o a w a y;  
 o t h e r w i s e h e w i l l b e d i s c h a r g e d a c c o r d i n g  
 t o l a w.

W. M. H. C O U N S E L M A N,  
 S e p 2 9 - 3 1 W a r d e n o f B a l t i m o r e c i t y a n d c o u n t y j a i l.

Figure 1. Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman, 1 (top) and 13 (bottom). *Kadin Henningsen, Meanwhile . . . Letterpress* © 2019.

of the archival documents about the murder of enslaved men, women, and children aboard *Zong*.<sup>11</sup> Describing her process of archival redaction using a variety of strategies, Philip writes:

- I white out and black out words (is there a difference?).
- I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated.
- I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, ordering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, songoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.<sup>12</sup>

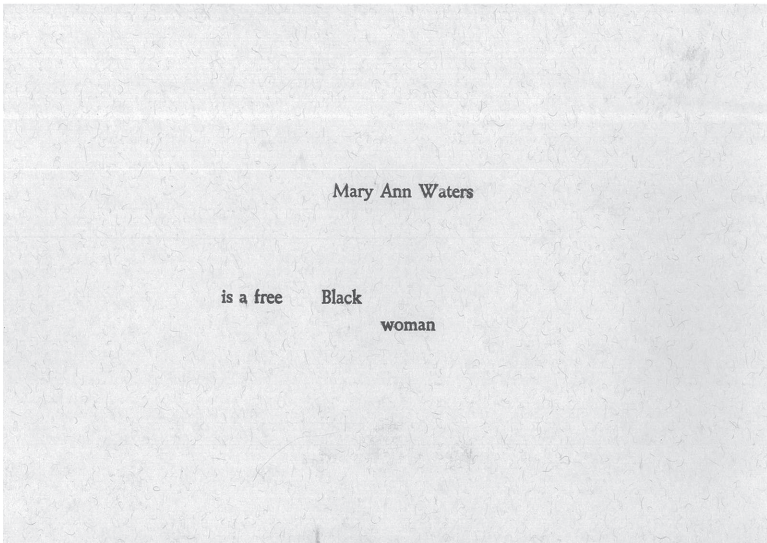
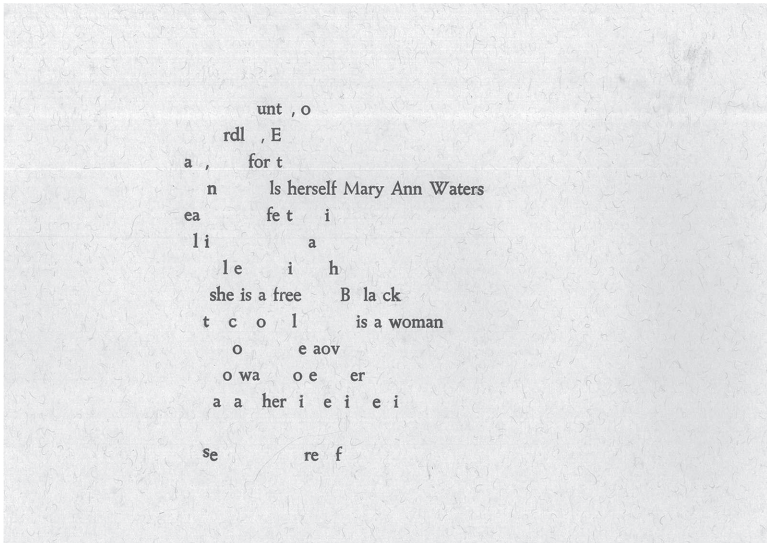


Figure 2. Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman, 33 (top) and 40 (bottom). *Kadin Henningsen, Meanwhile . . . Letterpress* © 2019.

For Philip, the poems emerge through a process of redaction “when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life.”<sup>13</sup>



On the page, many poems are visually fragmented as a result of Black redaction—with a water like quality the white spaces of the page disrupt the flow of the poems like the tumultuous choppy waves of the Middle Passage.

Sharpe, however, approaches Black redaction using a mode most associated with the redaction of state documents: blacking out text. In her example, Sharpe used this common mode of redaction on a *New York Times* article about a juvenile criminal case involving Makia Hutchings, a young Black girl who wrote “Hi” on her school’s wall. In her accounting of the case, Sharpe notes that the *New York Times* article “tries to bring [Makia] into focus, and yet she disappears in description.”<sup>14</sup> Through Black redaction—the blacking out of text that surrounds Makia’s testimony—Sharpe argues that “we might hear what [Makia] has to say in her own defense,” and thus Black redaction “locate[s] a counter to the force of the state.”<sup>15</sup>

Like Sharpe and Philip, I read an excess in the pickup notice about Mary Ann Waters, an excess that the notice attempts to contain—particularly her gender and freedom. Indeed, as Vanessa Holden has argued, for Mary Ann Waters gender and freedom defined each other and that, for her, “freedom was life as a free woman of color.”<sup>16</sup> The notice, however, attempts to “fix,” in both senses of the word—to correct *and* to make permanent or stabilize—a social position for Mary Ann Waters that runs counter to the way she understood herself as a free woman of color.<sup>17</sup> For instance, the warden attempts to “fix” her gender and freedom by describing Waters as a “runaway” and a “Negro man,” as well as using “he/him” pronouns throughout the notice.<sup>18</sup>

In the making of the artist’s book, I used Sharpe’s theory of Black redaction to remove the warden’s attempt to “fix” Waters’s social position. Whereas Sharpe makes use of redaction through using blacked-out lines most common in state documents, I redacted the text of the pickup notice through the removal of type after each page is printed. The use of blacked-out lines by Sharpe makes Makia’s voice more legible—a legibility made possible specifically by blackness. Yet I still read Makia’s voice as being somewhat “caught in the frame” of the article—the thick black lines make Makia more legible while simultaneously continuing to contain her. This containment is possible because this specific method of redaction merely *covers* the text leaving it obscured but intact.

My initial solution to this problem, as I saw it, was to engage in a mode of Black redaction that did not cover but removed the textual apparatus that attempts to contain and fix Waters. Therefore, I redacted the notice by removing type and replacing each letter with spacing after each page was printed. My method for selecting type was somewhat random while



also trying to visually build a wave like line that moved across the page from right to left, gesturing toward the oceanic visual aesthetics of many of the poems in Philip's *Zong!*. Because redaction can also be thought of as bringing a text into a "definite form," I shift some letters over the course of the printing, changing words entirely or moving words into a new sequence. For instance, the original text "calls himself Mary Ann Waters" is slowly morphed into "calls herself Mary Ann Waters," where "himself" is a gender-neutral pronoun, eventually becoming "calls herself Mary Ann Waters" before "calls herself" disappears altogether leaving just her name. In addition, the word "Black" is slowly composed before "woman" by moving individual letters into place over the duration of the book. By the end of the flip book, only the words "Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman" remain.

The making of *Mary Ann Waters is a free Black woman* has also allowed me to begin to theorize a practice of what I am calling "critical fabrication." Critical fabrication weaves together Saidiya Hartman's process of critical fabulation with the insights and methods of "research-creation." Based in deep research and the historical record, critical fabulation attempts to make visible the gaps, fissures, and erasures of the archive by bringing together theory and narrative form in a way that is "committed to a storied articulation of ideas."<sup>19</sup> As Hartman says,

The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather *laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible*. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.<sup>20</sup>

I add to Hartman's method a philosophy of research-creation which insists that "artistic practice is no longer solely an *object* of scholarly inquiry but is itself a legitimate *form of research and dissemination*."<sup>21</sup> That is, research-creation does not merely study artistic practices and objects but also seeks to legitimize artistic practice as itself a valuable method for deep research and theorization while also resisting traditional modes of academic discourse like the scholarly article or monograph. Research-creation understands and privileges the products of artistic practice, from the music album or painting to (in my case) the artist's book, as equally legitimate forms of scholarly research and modes of circulation.

By bringing together critical fabulation and research-creation, critical fabrication asks, To what end can the creation of, say, artists' books help us interrogate the very limits of the archive while also questioning our assumptions about the book and its related materialities? What might critical fabrication make possible for both the book and for those who encounter their own archival absences?

As a methodology, critical fabrication engages with the gaps, fissures, and erasures of the archive while also helping the creator better understand the materiality of such archives through a critical process of making—in my case, specifically the pickup notice and artist's book. While critical fabrication can make use of a range of methods, media, strategies, and techniques for research-creation, artists' books are a valuable site for interrogating the nature of the book because, as Amaranth Borsuk notes, they “highlight the ‘idea’ by paradoxically drawing attention to the ‘object’ we have come to take for granted.”<sup>22</sup> Put another way, artists' books require us to interrogate our own assumptions about what a book is or is not. Critical fabrication further requires us to move beyond considering artists' books as mere objects of study and asks us to interrogate the nature of the book through research-creation, which emphasizes critical “hands-on engagement with technologies and processes of textual production”—an approach valued by critical bibliography.<sup>23</sup> Critical bibliography also values the contributions of contemporary humanities scholarship to the study of books, including but not limited to critical race, feminist, and queer and transgender studies. As such, critical fabrication as a bibliographic methodology moves critical bibliography simultaneously beyond and alongside analysis to ask how *making* artists' books can “disrupt our treatment of the book as a transparent container for literary and aesthetic ‘content’” while also helping us understand how the very technologies and process that produce books might participate in the formation of, for instance, sex/gender and race.<sup>24</sup>

Critical fabrication as a bibliographic method, therefore, requires me to also reflect on the implications of my artist's book that are the result of its creation, as well as my engagement with Sharpe's theory of Black redaction. In my attempt to unfix the violence of the pickup notice, have I inflicted new violences? On the one hand, removing the text of the notice makes Mary Ann Waters's voice legible. On the other, that legibility, unlike Makia's, is made possible not by blackness but by whiteness—a whiteness that washes over the pages as text is removed.<sup>25</sup> The whiteness is then further fixed and bound within the format of the book because the “book as an object” is itself invested in antiblackness.<sup>26</sup> In addition, despite removing type, that type is replaced with physical material which

keeps Waters contained by keeping the type locked within the frame of the chase/form.<sup>27</sup> The spacing material that replaces the type is what creates the whiteness on the page. To fully enact Sharpe's theory of Black redaction I would need to make Mary Ann Waters legible though a proliferation of blackness without merely covering the text or simply removing it. One possible approach, based on my engagement with letterpress printing and critical fabrication, would be to not remove the individual pieces of type but to flip them over which would apply ink to the foot of the type, printing solid black and thus creating a wave of blackness that washes over the page as the book is flipped. This technique does not merely cover the text while leaving it in place but instead damages the face of the type preventing it from being used to print again. Audre Lorde argues that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps, then, at the very least I can damage the master's tools preventing their future use and in the process honor Mary Ann Waters, a free Black woman.

*Kadin Henningsen is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he works on nineteenth-century American literature, book history, and transgender studies. He is also an artist and printer.*

#### NOTES

Thank you to Derrick Spires for providing space to bring my artistic practice into the classroom and for his early encouragement and ongoing support of this project. Thank you also to Kate Ozment and Lisa Maruca for their editorial stewardship on this article.

1. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 26 (June 2008): 1–14, quotation on 9.
2. Pickup notice for Mary Ann Waters, *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), September 29, 1851. The pick-up notice is located on page 2, at the bottom of the sixth column on the right-hand side adjacent to the gutter. I first learned of Mary Ann Waters in C. Riley Snorton's discussion of her in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 64–65. See also Vanessa M. Holden, "Living Free: Self-emancipated Women and Queer Formations of Freedom," in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, ed. Janell Hobson (London: Routledge, 2021), 168–76.
3. At the time of this writing there are close to 150 antitrans bills across thirty-four US states targeting health care, restrooms, sports, school curriculum, and access to accurate identification. See "Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights across the Country," ACLU, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbtq-rights-across-country>.
4. Holden notes that this also suggests that people probably knew and accepted her as Mary Ann Waters; "Living Free," 171.

5. Harold Love notes that “the claim for the fixity of the printed text [is] a retro-projection of nineteenth-century attitudes.” “Fixity versus Flexibility in ‘A Song of Tom of Danby’ and Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel*,” in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 140–55, esp. 140.
6. *Mary Ann Waters a free Black woman* (2019) was printed in a limited edition of five copies plus an artist’s proof. Physical copies are available at Tulane University’s special collections, the Cynthia Sear’s Artists’ Book Collection at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, King Library at the University of Kentucky, and Houghton Library’s Printing and Graphic Arts Collection at Harvard University.
7. Thank you to Derrick Spires for suggesting this terminology.
8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, quoted in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 113.
9. Sharpe, 113.
10. Sharpe, 123.
11. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 198.
12. Philip, 193–94.
13. Philip, 195.
14. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 121.
15. Sharpe, 123.
16. Holden, “Living Free,” 171.
17. As a genre, “fugitive slave” ads and pickup notices helped establish assumptions of race and gender as stable, knowable, and recognizable. See Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).
18. It is possible that I am also “fixing” in print a specific reading of Mary Ann Waters as “a free Black trans woman and sex worker” at the start of this essay. While this reading isn’t entirely at odds with how Waters understood herself, it is remarkably different than what the artist’s book makes visible.
19. Thora Siemsen, “On Working with Archives: An Interview with writer Saidiya Hartman,” *Creative Independent*, last modified February 3, 2021, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives>.
20. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11; emphasis added.
21. Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 13; emphasis in original.
22. Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 112–13.
23. “The Andrew W. Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography,” Rare Book School, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://rarebookschool.org/sofcb/>.
24. Borsuk, *Book*, 113.
25. See Jonathan Senchyne, “The Whiteness of the Page: Racial Legibility and Authenticity,” in *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 125–56.

26. Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery, "Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the Antiblackness of the Book as an Object," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, ed. by Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019): 131–46.
27. Type is locked into a metal frame called a chase that allows the type to be moved to and from the printing press. The locked type and chase together is known as the form—a form can be made of several imposed pages.
28. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–14.

