

uses none of the innovative display features that are the sole focus of its content. The opening words of the story are “ELENA, 10 POINT,” followed by a description of a make-believe typeface by this name that sees frequently used words begin to fade and fall apart over time (*The Guardian*; Guardian News and Media, 6 Dec. 2002; Web; 22 Aug. 2013). The premise of “About the Typefaces” is that there is no edition, no original book. What readers get instead is the story of the fonts that were not used in the book that does not exist. There is, without a doubt, a clear appreciation of what the material text might do, but there is also the implicit acknowledgment of how much the material text cannot do. While a book may age and crumble, select printed words on the page cannot do so on cue. While a line of text might begin to contain its own alternate versions (as in Joyce’s layered *Finnegans Wake*, Nicholson Baker’s and David Foster Wallace’s elaborate footnoting, and the children’s-book series *Choose Your Own Adventure*), the material book could never replicate the work of Foer’s imagined “TRANS-1, 10 POINT” typeface, which sees words linger for a moment and then be replaced by synonyms, which recombine for new meaning. And what an aesthetic of bookishness can never give us, but “About the Typefaces” insists on imagining, is a typeface like the imaginary “REAL TIME, REAL WORLD, TO SCALE,” which, the speaker tells us, “began organically, with the popularization of e-mail” and its reshaping of language and punctuation into unpronounceable (but still somehow Saussure-defying) emoticons :)

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Black Print Culture before *Plessy*

TO THE EDITOR:

The recent cluster of responses to Kenneth W. Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (128.2 [2013]: 386–408) offered some useful reflection on the question, to use Rafia Zafar’s skillful reframing of the book’s title, “What purpose is served by proposing an end to African American literature?” (401).

I was thus stunned by the participants’ lack of attention to a key corollary question: what purpose is served by proposing a *beginning* to African American literature—especially a beginning as late as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)?

Relying on the ahistorical sense that pre-1896 black literature was more interested in reaching white readers, this start date ironically positions the literature of the Jim Crow era as similarly reactive. Several recent critics, especially those influenced by Frances Smith Foster’s work, have demonstrated the development of pockets of lively black print culture—by African Americans, largely for African Americans, and often centered on concerns of African Americans—decades before *Plessy*. That print culture defies many Americanists’ reductive tokenizing of Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs—part of the still common dismissal of much “pre-Harlem” black writing—and it demands that we rethink the aesthetic and political dimensions of periodization and canon formation. The nineteenth century (to say nothing of the eighteenth) was and is much richer and messier than its absence in Warren’s book and much of the *PMLA* response suggests.

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