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BOOKISHNESS:
The New Fate of Reading in the Digital Age

GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE

Shaman Drum
BOOKSHOP

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BOOKISHNESS: THE NEW FATE OF READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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THE AESTHETIC OF BOOKISHNESS IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERATURE

It has become fashionable, again, to talk about the death of the book. And thus it has also become fashionable, again, to defend against such prophecies by proclaiming the power of these bound bundles of print and paper. Consider a recent sampling of titles published in the last few years: the *New York Times* ran a series called "The Future of Reading," while the *Observer*, the *Financial Times*, and numerous websites (including *January Magazine*) presented articles titled "The Death of the Book Again." Last year Jeff Gomez cashed in on this rhetoric with a book titled *Print Is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age*; and you can bet that more commentaries are forthcoming—*in print*. This babel leads inevitably to a question: what effect does this preoccupation with the book's impending mortality have on literature? I'd like to briefly outline one response: the threat posed to books by digital technologies becomes a source of artistic inspiration and formal experimentation in the pages of twenty-first-century literature.

What I'm calling "the aesthetic of bookishness" is a trend in novels published since 2000. It is not limited to American or even Anglophone novels, and, I will argue, it is more than a just a coincidence: it is an emergent literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment. These novels exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies. They define the book as an aesthetic form whose power has been purposefully employed by literature for centuries and will continue to be far into the digital age. Now, fear of the death of books and the end of reading is not new; such rhetoric accompanied the introduction of new

reading and writing technologies well before the introduction of the book as we know it—think of Plato's fear that writing would produce orphaned language and destroy the cultural ability to remember. Nor is an aesthetic of bookishness—the fetishized focus on textuality and the book-bound reading object—a new thing: think of *Tristram Shandy*. Indeed, it could be argued that the aesthetic of bookishness is as old as the book form and as old as rhetoric about the death of the book. But there is something different about this aesthetic as it appears in works of twenty-first-century fiction. This focus on the book and the aesthetics it promotes is not merely another form of postmodern reflexivity in which the author toys with the reader in a layered process of simulacra. There is a decisively different tone and ambition at work in the novels of our moment. This is not an argument I can adequately develop in these pages; it is the basis of a larger critical project that I can only sketch out here. But the argument does depend upon a few key questions and answers: Why this literary response now? And why is the novel the location and genre to take up this fight?

As we will see in the text I have selected as my representative case study, contemporary works that employ an aesthetic of bookishness present a serious reflection on the book—and the literary book in particular—through experimentation with the media-specific properties of print illuminated by the light of the digital. The resulting experimentations expose the book to be not only capable of withstanding the cultural transformations wrought by digital technologies but also a medium in need of the threat posed by the information revolution in order to remain innovative. In other words, if, as theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin and critics like J. Paul Hunter have argued, the genre of the novel remains novel only by constantly innovating in relation to its contemporary environment of popular culture and media, so too do these novels expose how the literary book needs the threat of its demise as stimulus for its defense.

Although I will examine only one novel in this essay, the aesthetic of bookishness that I identify and trace unites novels that pursue a thematic interest in depicting books as characters and focal points of narrative action. Protagonists embark on quests to find a particular edition of a book (Stephane

Audeguy's *The Theory of Clouds* [2007]) and books or paper-filled spaces serve as physical places of refuge for traumatized characters (Carlos María Domínguez's *The House of Paper* [2005]). Formally, the pages containing these narratives make visually manifest the fact that the reader is interacting with a book that takes itself seriously as a material object and, moreover, as a reading machine. Books become aesthetic objects that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction by connecting their book-bound body to the virtual world of digital information (Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* [2000]). Contemporary digital literature also participates in this trend. These born-digital works exploit the aesthetic of bookishness by adapting the appearance of paper and translating the print-based reading practices onto the screen. For example, they employ handwritten drawings on notepaper as backdrops for Flash-animated narratives (J. R. Carpenter's "Entre Ville" [2006] and Jason Nelson's "Game, Game, Game, and Again Game") and, like the print novels mentioned above, they depict narratives that spiral around a specific print book (Mark C. Marino's "Marginalia in the Library of Babel" [2007]). The contemporary aesthetic of bookishness appropriates characteristics of digital technologies and Web 2.0 reading practices into the book-bound novel in order to enhance the book's status as an innovative medium.

The actual status of the book as a reading technology is not my focus here, but rather how the cultural and technological shift away from a book-centered society affects literature—and not necessarily the study or definition of literature (although these are certainly scholarly interests of mine)—that is, how the changing role of the book inspires a literary and, indeed, an aesthetic response. Reading literature through the paradigm I am constructing is based upon the understanding that the status of the book as a reading technology is shifting from being the central format for accessing knowledge to being one medium among many. The book will not become obsolete with new reading platforms, but rather, will change and develop new incarnations and readerships; it will continue to serve certain kinds of literacy needs and literary desires—specifically, those related to its book-bound physicality and potentiality. This focus on and fetishization of the book-bound nature of the codex as reading object has, in some re-

spects, always been the case for certain strains of literature, experimental writing in particular. Literature has never really been just about information delivery—about information in the form of experience and enlightenment perhaps, but content that is inseparable from its formal presentation. Thus, the general shift in the status of books toward a book-bound aesthetic or an aesthetic of bookishness actually reaffirms the preexisting status of literature. In other words, as the codex cedes its dominance as a form of information access to other media formats, book-bound content becomes more associated with the literary. Thus, the presumed and much-prognosticated death of the book just might prove beneficial to literature and, as I will show, to experimental literature in particular.

This situation is depicted thematically and formally in the pages of the novel that I read as my exemplary case, a work that encapsulates the fear that the print novel will vanish into the dark, fathomless depths of digital culture—and with it, literary culture and cultural literacy—in both entertaining (the novel has achieved popular success and is rumored to be in production to become a movie) and thoroughly experimental ways. Indeed, no contemporary novel has responded with such vigor to the fears of the dark, fathomless depths of digital culture by presenting the book as a defense against it than British author Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007). The novel begins with a first line that positions its story within the genres of horror and mystery: "I was unconscious. I'd stopped breathing." The suspense and fear continues as the protagonist realizes that he has no idea who he is. Eric Sanderson has lost his memory and, as his therapist, Dr. Randle, informs him, suffers from a kind of long-term, posttraumatic disorder called "disassociative condition." He opens an envelope and reads a typed letter from himself to himself that begins: "First things first, stay calm." It is signed, The First Eric Sanderson. The novel thus begins with a character reading and breathing himself back to life from near death, making synonymous and intertwined these two embodied actions. Reading from paper the material imprints of the typewriter that the first Eric Sanderson used to communicate with his amnesiac self is depicted as a life-affirming and embodied action.

The immediate focus on embodiment, and the parallel between human and textual bodies, situates the novel in the realm of recent discourse about the posthuman condition as a situation in which information loses its body. As Katherine Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman*, the posthuman paradigms of cybernetics and digital information espouse that a message can be divorced from its material instantiation for the purpose of transmission, and that doing so always involves an underlying belief about the value (or lack of value) of materiality and bodies. *The Raw Shark Texts* turns this situation into a narrative that takes as its founding principle the fact that we live in a world wherein text is no longer contained on the page and information lives invisibly and spreads virally. The novel explores the posthuman condition as a cultural situation and exploits it as a stimulus for literary production. It induces fear of a posthuman situation in which information loses its body to become virtual, invisible, and viral as a means of combating it in print-based and book-bound innovative narrative. I read *The Raw Shark Texts* as representative of a widespread response across contemporary literary genres: works that induce fear of the death of print in order to show that it is precisely the threat of the print body's demise that prompts book-bound literature to respond with the necessary vigor to fight for its life.

The Raw Shark Texts makes manifest the lurking fears and doubts about the future of literature and literacy in its two central villains, depicting these threats as effects of decisively digital technologies. In so doing, it exposes why the current manifestation of bookish aesthetics is happening now and how the genre responds to an anxiety that has become a full-blown fear. The horror is made manifest in one of its central villains: the Ludovician shark. This is the shark that had attacked Eric, rendering him unconscious at the novel's beginning. But this is not a normal, flesh-eating shark, the iconic kind that strikes horror in the hearts of generations raised watching *Jaws* (to which the novel presents an explicit intertextual homage near its end). The Ludovician is a conceptual shark. Like all textual and book-bound characters, it comprises ideas, signs, and signifiers. But this is not as benign as it sounds. The shark at the center of *The Raw Shark Texts* is made of text: both literally (on the page) and conceptually
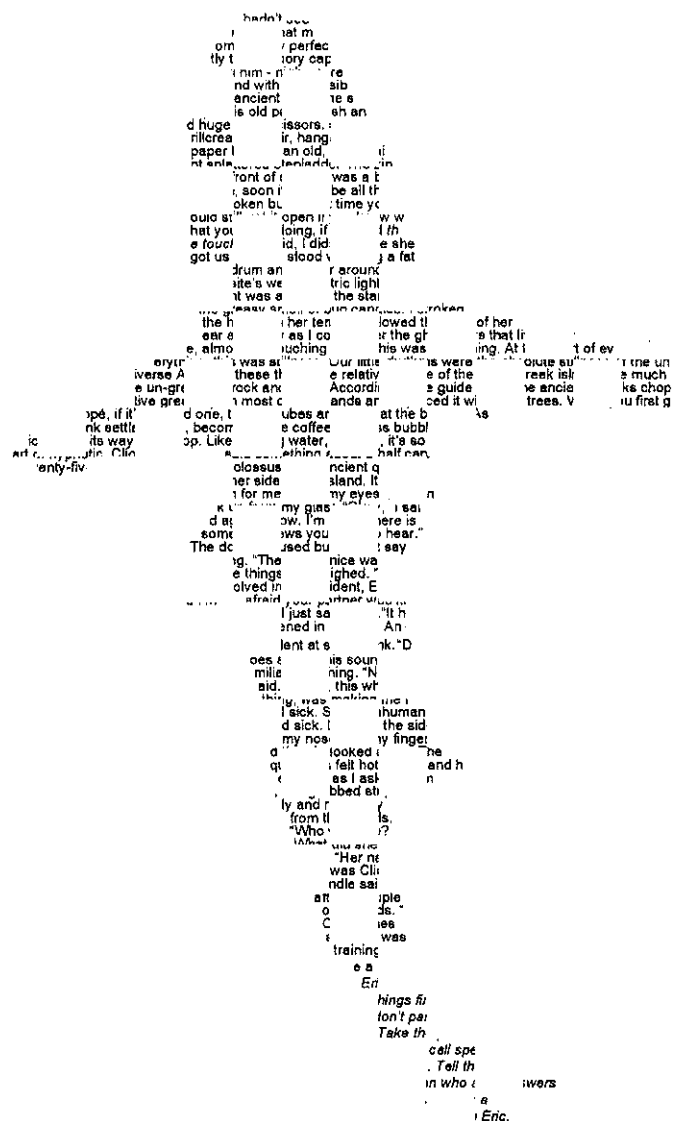
(within the narrative). When it appears, it is presented visually as an instance of concrete poetry. But it also serves to turn the flat page into an opaque reading surface that reflexively defines both the physical book and the novel as possessing depth. These depths are hidden reserves that shelter the shark and remind us that there remain as-yet-unexplored spaces in the book-bound, print novel and the aesthetic of bookishness. This is made particularly evident in pages 328 through 373, wherein the left page is left blank while the right page depicts the slow emergence of the shark from a tiny spot on the page (early in the pagination sequence) to a full-blown visualization of an open-mouthed predator on page 373.
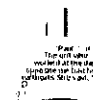
When flipped through, these pages display the novel as graphic and cinematic, visual and tangible. The book becomes a medium through which action happens, a place wherein things live, and a physical object which readers manipulate. The final page of the sequence depicts the shark leaping off the page to attack not Eric Sanderson but the reader. Here the information channels connecting protagonist and reader operate though the book as a mediating medium and present an example of the novel's employment of an aesthetic of bookishness.

The Ludovician shark is a perfect predator for the Information Age. It is a conceptual and literary manifestation of the ways in which data mutate across spaces, platforms, and interfaces. It is a representation of what Alan Liu identifies as the central construct of what he calls "discourse network 2000": transcendental data. Taking his terminology from Friedrich Kittler's concept of a discourse network as "the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and produce relevant data," Liu describes the current discourse network as being instantiated and exemplified by Web 2.0: "These cardinal needs of transformability, autonomous mobility, and automation resolve at a more general level into what may be identified as the governing ideology of discourse network 2000: *the separation of content from material instantiation or formal presentation.*" Liu's identification of the discourse network 2000 thus shares its beliefs and cultural history with Hayles's concept of the posthuman. He writes, "What is at stake is indeed what I called an ideology of strict division between content and pre-

sentation—the very religion, as it were, of text encoding and databases." The belief in disembodied information, the "religion" that fosters discourse network 2000, produces the following possibilities: (1) that information lives invisibly and spreads virally, and (2) that material bodies (of people, books, et cetera) will be emptied of content and thus of relevance. The Ludovician shark at the center of Hall's novel represents and preys upon both of these fears.

The shark feeds off characters' minds, devouring memories and information, leaving its victims mindless physical shells. It thus embodies an actual modern epidemic, Alzheimer's disease. But the fear of memory loss that the shark represents is also about the fear of data loss from informational storage machines; the byproduct of a culture of information overload is a fear of memory loss that conjoins human and machine. Thus, the first letter from the first Eric Sanderson laments, "I used to know so many things . . . all I have are splinters. Remains of things I was quick enough to write down and preserve." Paper is here shown to preserve and shelter, to stave off the shark's destruction and archive information in physical form against the threat of the disembodied discourse network. The paper that Eric reads saves the remaining knowledge of his former self and enables these shards to be shared with the reader, who follows along in her paperbound book.

Yet, the shark is not a creation of the digital age, an evolutionary mutation produced by discourse network 2000. It is, in fact, an ancient beast. Eric learns that the shark has a long and varied cultural history. From reading *An Encyclopedia of Unusual Fish*, he discovers that in Native American myth, for example, "each Ludovician shark came to be revered as a self-contained, living afterlife" because it contained the "memory-families" made from "generations of shared knowledge and experience." The shark was not viewed solely as devastating predator but also as valuable archive. But something has changed. The first Eric Sanderson explains, "The streams, currents and rivers of human knowledge, experience and communication which have grown throughout our short history are now a vast, rich and bountiful environment." In our contemporary technoculture more information is streaming faster and more fluidly across more communication networks than

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ever before, creating a fertile feeding ground for this ancient beast.

The shark is not the only predator in the novel, nor is it the only representation of digital systems and the threat they pose to human bodies and minds. The larger evil is the ying to the shark's yang: the completely disembodied entity named Mycroft Ward. Ward lived at the end of the nineteenth century, the beginning of discourse network 1900. His story is presented in one of the many stories-within-a-story segments; Eric's companion, Scout, tells the Ward story to Eric, but the text is represented in the form of a document rather than as speech. This formal detail focuses attention on the print record as archive and thus as defense against the kind of information loss made possible by the transcendental discourse network 2000 and its mind-eating villains. Mycroft Ward (hear, of course, "Microsoft Word"—but also Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock Holmes's older, smarter brother) serves as a critique of megacorporations that seek global imperialism through digital networks, and, more specifically with a word processing program that has achieved near ubiquity and, in so doing, has displaced the bookish form of writing in ink and on paper. Ward is a transcendental ego in an age of transcendental data. Unlike the Ludovician, he is not an ancient beast but a product of the shift between discourse networks 1800 and 1900 that Kittler traces and Liu builds upon. Ward was once a living person, a nineteenth-century gentleman scientist who, refusing to die, devised a plan to insert himself into the brains of other human beings as an information strand. He produces a kind of Turing test, a question and answer regime, that imitates his personality: "through the use of thousands of questions and tests, Ward succeeded in reproducing a very rough copy of his personality on paper." Ward then successfully standardizes this informational pattern into a program that can be endlessly replicated. The postindustrial logic and operating method succeeds, and following a posthuman paradigm, Ward extracts his identity from his material substrate—his body— and circulates as a form of disembodied data. With the outbreak of World War I and its industrialized warfare, Ward takes his program into a new discourse network. Ward witnesses the mechanization of warfare and the threat of destruction to his host body (again, it is the threat of death that
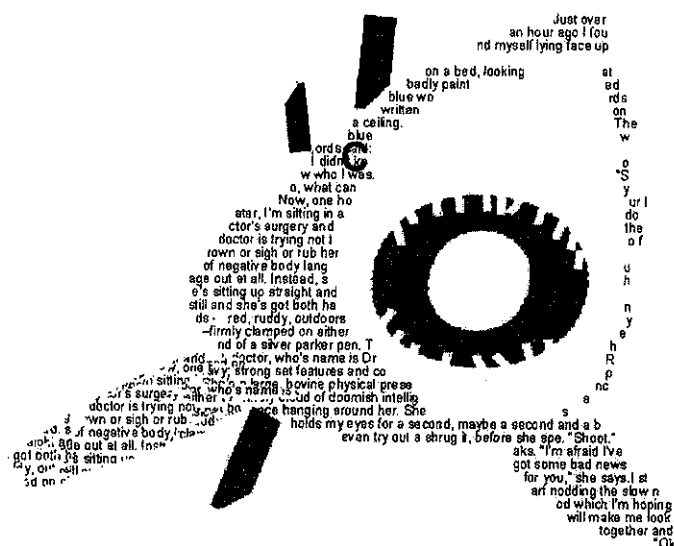
stimulates creative response and renewal), and he "decided one body was simply not enough to guarantee his survival" so he "modified the original personality recording template" to enable "one Mycroft Ward, a single *self* inhabiting two bodies" (italics in original). Ward adopts the ideology of discourse network 1900 to create "an all important procedure" that enables him to replicate himself and distribute his cognition across multiple bodies. Ward then spreads virally and globally, leaping across bodies and time. Hayles's designation of "distributed cognition" as a symptom of the posthuman condition is here imagined as a cultural characteristic of the modern age through a character that embodies (or disembodies) this concept.

Ward is the ultimate posthuman, cybernetic character. Yet, it is the cybernetic that brings about his downfall. The novel explains that as he increasingly became a self-organizing program solely focused in its own survival, "Ward became a slave to his own machine." Ward "amended his new personality record to instill an increased desire for self-preservation," and this resulted in turning "Ward's preservation command into a feedback loop" with the sole purpose of maintaining homeostasis as survival. The cybernetic impulse towards survival through feedback and homeostasis proves the undoing of the previously human endeavor, the "post" to Ward's humanism. For, "what had once been a single human personality became a vastly intelligent mind-machine focused only on survival, on growing bigger and bigger and bigger with no regard for anything else at all." And what had once been an effort to gain knowledge and defy mortality, ambitions associated with being human, evolved into a program whose efficiency at achieving a singular purpose—survival—eliminated the less efficient but more human aspects of cognition such as associative and creative thought. The Ward program thus evolves into a finely tuned code but loses the ability to think humanistically, leaving Ward vulnerable to creative plans by humans (led by Eric) to destroy him.

Herein lies the moral of the Ward tale pursued through the aesthetic of bookishness: the novel reminds us that the mechanistic pursuit of a single purpose can produce its opposite. Ward's desire for ubiquitous domination by way of a standard operating procedure necessitates that he maintain his system-

atic control through standardizing upgrades. But these acts of maintenance also produce opportunities for error and hacking. The process is described in biblical terms: "every Saturday, they [the bodies comprising Ward] underwent the standardising process; collating the week's information from each of them, making it uniform, and transferring the amalgamation back into both heads." Standardization is shown to be both a mode of domination and a moment of weakness. Eric seizes the opportunity provided by the standardizing process, wherein information is being updated and distributed, to combat Ward. Through the success of this effort, the novel makes a larger didactic claim about opportunities for subversion implicit in seemingly monolithic and monopolistic systems of digital control, whether these systems are actual technologies such as Microsoft Word or cultural belief systems such as the book's impending demise in the face of digital culture. Embracing technophobia by retreating into a defensive, binary view of books versus digital technologies is self-defeating. Rather, the lesson to be learned is that the best way to challenge the threat of the standardization is to explore and exploit the interstices between the digital and the bookish.

The Raw Shark Texts thus answers one of the questions I raised earlier: it shows why bookishness becomes a necessary aesthetic now and why this iteration of the aesthetic of bookishness differs from bookish aesthetics of the past. The novel projects digital technologies into the book format as a means of combating the simultaneous peril of information loss and the ideology of transcendental data that constitute discourse network 2000. But what about the form and location of this response: the aestheticization of bookishness within the book-bound novel? Why is the novel identified as the form for fighting the good fight against the threat of the death of all things bookish: books, reading, and literature? By definition, the novel is a genre that pursues newness by incorporating the popular and contemporary in new, novel ways; finding new ways to remain novel and relevant is what makes it what it is. *The Raw Shark Texts* exemplifies this definition of the novel, updating its book-bound aesthetic to the contemporary, digital moment and environment. Yet, despite the selected pieces of plot I have presented so far, this is not a novel fixated on digital technologies. Indeed, such media forms rarely even figure

into the narrative. Eric shuns the use of computers and the Internet, following a clue from his former self: "there is no safe procedure for electronic information. Avoid it at all costs." So, where does a protagonist turn for refuge from conceptual sharks and body-snatching information viruses? Where does one go to stage a battle against the transcendental data of discourse network 2000? To books, of course.

Following the advice of his former self—which is all presented in paper formats—Eric seeks the assistance of Dr. Trey Fidorus. His quest to find the good doctor leads Eric to a world called un-space, literally an underground labyrinth whose gateway is located, of all places, in a bookstore. This house of books, this portal into the safe space of un-space, is described as "sort of religious." Eric finds Dr. Fidorus in a hideout built completely from books. "The walls themselves had been built from more solid material than we'd seen previously—hardback books mainly, with the odd thick softback dictionaries, thesauruses, textbooks—and had been constructed with careful bricklaying techniques." This space too, like the bookstore, is described as a sanctuary: "It's like a church or something." The novel identifies this book-bound place as the sole refuge from the Ludovician and Mycroft Ward; it becomes the center of resistance and rebellion wherein Fidorus, Eric, and Scout, Eric's accomplice and romantic interest, stage their last stand against the evils of disembodied, digital information.

The Raw Shark Texts not only identifies the material format of books as a safe location but also a particular kind of content: text that demands interpretation and, specifically, literary texts and novels. Indeed, as the novel's title implies, this is a text about making meaning through print-based acts of narration and analysis. When said aloud, *The Raw Shark Texts* sounds like "Rorschach test," the psychological examination that asks an individual to interpret the appearance of an inkblot on paper and then prompts the test's administrator to interpret the given answers in ways that interpret the individual's psyche. The reference to the Rorschach test is a reflexive reminder that the reader makes meaning from inkblots presented in the pages of Hall's book. This focus on ink-based, textual interpretation is made explicit and literal when the shark appears as a few blots of ink on the page, as

in the beginning of the flipbook animation sequence discussed earlier. The novel's insistence on the importance of interpreting text is also illustrated by Eric's learning that complex and decisively literary texts are the most effective means of combating the Ludovician and Ward. In one of the many letters Eric Sanderson receives from his former self, he learns that books of fiction are the best type of shelter from the shark because they distort the information channel by building a figurative "labyrinth of glass and mirrors." Indeed, "some of the great and most complicated stories like the *Thousand and One Nights* are very old protection puzzles." The novel is defined as the privileged site for challenging the standardizing influence of digital culture.

Novels provide shelter that is reinforced by their physical frame and their method of circulation; it is not just the content of the books that matters but also the physical nature of book as shelter for the story. So, complex literary works may be the best shield against the shark, but it is even better if these literary works are library books. The first Eric Sanderson informs, "Library books are best because they also link the book to every previous reader and any applications of the text." Books are not discrete, isolated objects; rather, they are shown to circulate within a network of readers and readings, as part of a system of distribution that connects to the larger network culture of our digital age. *The Raw Shark Texts* makes this point formally and thematically through its overwhelming range of intertextual connections to all variations of narrative popular culture: literary works by the likes of Jorge Luis Borges, Paul Auster, Lewis Carroll, Italo Calvino and Mark Danielewski as well as films ranging across *The Wizard of Oz, The Matrix, Jaws,* and *Casablanca*. Like the Native American myth Eric reads in his encyclopedia of fish that depicts the Ludovician as an archive of cultural memory, Hall's book-bound and bookish novel serves a similar purpose: it devours and remixes the cultural network that sustains it. *The Raw Shark Texts* thus both depicts and demonstrates how books, and novels in particular, live within physical and conceptual spaces, thereby creating a parallel between the book as conceptual being and the conceptual shark in Hall's novel. Recognizing a correspondence between the book and the shark makes it hard to view the book as a passive victim bleeding

out into the waters of digital technoculture. Instead, as I am suggesting, the book *The Raw Shark Texts* uses bookishness as a strategic mode of combating not the digital world but the claims about the death of the book that circulate within it.

I want to reiterate that the aesthetic of bookishness is not merely nostalgia for print amid an era seemingly devoted to becoming paperless. This is not about retreating into book-bound structures as barriers from which to hide from the real world. Instead, the book-bound shelters (like Dr. Fidorus's paper house) depicted in *The Raw Shark Texts* and in other works that employ an aesthetic of bookishness provide temporary spaces in which to explore, critique, and challenge the changing world. Thus, when the first Eric Sanderson advises, "Build the books into a small wall around yourself. My notes say three to five books high is best," he provides this knowledge as part of an elaborate plan to educate the second Eric Sanderson in how best to encounter and interact with the shark and all that the shark represents. It is from these book-bound spaces that characters, and readers through them, learn to rethink the ways in which we relate to books as objects and media forms. Reading works of twenty-first-century literature through the paradigm I am constructing here prompts us to think beyond dichotomies when considering the relationship between print and digital media, particularly in relation to contemporary discourse about the death of the book. Works that adopt an aesthetic of bookishness respond to their contemporary, digital moment by showing how literature retains a central role in our emergent technoculture as a space for aesthetic expression and cultural critique. They harness the power and potential, as well as the fears and frustrations, of new media *into* print and *onto* paper. Examining the ways in which they do so promotes a crosscurrent of analysis that demands that we rethink the very terms and means through which we articulate our concerns about the future of reading, literacy, and certainly, of literature.

NOTES

[1]The presentation of the Ludovician as a variation of Alzheimer's continues in that passage: "A Ludovician might select an individual human being as its prey animal and pursue and feed on that individual over the course

of years, until that victim's memory and identity have been completely consumed." Later in the novel, the connection to Alzheimer's is even more explicit because age becomes an aspect of determining the shark's prey: "Any frail mind kicking and struggling in the world, if they're [the sharks] passing they'll take a chunk out of it. Especially out of old people."

[2]In *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, Kittler identifies an epistemic shift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries based on the way discourse is produced, fostered, and institutionalized. Namely, "The continuous connection of writing and/or the individual was of such importance in 1800" but gave way to a "discourse network of 1900 [that] was the first to establish a treasury of the signifier whose rules were entirely based on randomness and combinatorics."

[3]See "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" (1950), reprinted in *The New Media Reader*. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Monfort, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[4]See Liu wherein he follows Wendell Piez in identifying John Hall's interchangeable-part manufacturing process, introduced in the early nineteenth century, used at the US armory at Harper's Ferry to build guns as the predecessor to the logic of discourse network 2000.

[5]See Hunter.

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