

Domesticity Unveiled:
Unconventional Hauntings, and the Dismantling of the National Myths of
Exceptionalism and the American Dream
in
Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Mark Z. Danielewski's experimental novel *House of Leaves*, published in 2000, is a work unlike any other. At the heart of the novel is the basic story of the Navidsons, who move from New York city to a house in the idyllic Virginia countryside only to discover that their home is haunted. It is a tale as old as time, practically cliché, and the premise of every other horror movie that comes out. Yet, the particularities of the haunting, of the family's identity and dynamics, and of how the story of the haunting is brought to the reader, transform an otherwise straightforward account into a goliath of a story. The genre-bending narrative plays with academic-style prose and format, as well as with gothic conventions, resulting in a labyrinthian weave of stories and voices that stretch across layers of footnotes and that the reader must untangle. As if that were not enough, Danielewski breaks radically from the conventions of page layout and frequently forces the reader to turn the book sideways or upside down, skip ahead, or painstakingly backtrack in the dense text.

As the title of the novel indicates, the house that the Navidsons move into is central to the narrative. So, one discovers, is the subversion of expectations regarding the home, family, and domesticity as they are traditionally represented and valued in American culture. The novel taps into the very ways the house works as a symbol in the national mythos and its derivative American Dream, characterized by notions of exceptionalism and expansion. Throughout this paper, I will seek to show that Danielewski's treatment of the house does not merely put into question a singular aspect of contemporary American culture, but rather forges a critique of the very structure and basis of American national identity. I will dive into the depths of the Navidson home, and unveil family dysfunction across all levels of the narrative; I will show how the novel

muddles the line between the true and the false, and both narratively and physically breeches boundaries between the stories of each character, and between the world of the novel and the reality of the reader. In doing so, I hope to reveal how the novel asks us to fundamentally question what America is, what stories the nation tells itself about its history and identity, and how these continue to affect national policy today.

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*:

An Experimental Novel that *Requires* an Introduction

Because of the vastness and complexity of the book in question, it is worth lingering on its basic plot and structure before launching into any further attempts at analysis.

At the core of the novel is the story of the Navidsons and their harrowing experiences in their new home. Will Navidson, a Pulitzer prize-winning photographer, moves into a beautiful house with his family, made up of his partner Karen, his children Chad and Daisy, a cat, and a dog. The move is all part of a fellowship-sponsored project for Will, referred to as Navy throughout most of the novel, to film his and his family's experience of the quieter side of life—a departure from his past work as a war journalist. Upon arrival, however, they soon discover that something is wrong: impossible dark spaces and corridors begin appearing throughout the house. These implausible spaces are able to expand, shift, and shrink in the blink of an eye while the exterior of the house remains unaffected. Soon, with the aid of a team of explorers, his brother, and a longtime friend, Navy goes on a mission to investigate and document these dark depths. In doing so, he endangers all involved, and not everyone makes it out alive.

We learn of the elusive documentary that Navy produced from these tragic events, *The Navidson Record*, via the quasi-academic manuscript on the film put together by Zampanò, an old blind man. The oddity of the original haunting is reproduced in the text. It fundamentally breaches page layout conventions by intermingling fonts and featuring sporadic, column-based pages, intercut with graphic squares of vertical text mirrored on the other side of the page as if the latter was translucent. Some text, in fact, appears upside-down. Crucially, at the peak of the action, when the Navidsons and their friends confront the haunting manifested by the mysterious dark spaces, Zampanò's layout reproduces the movements of this space on the page. The book itself appears to be haunted by the very thing that haunts the house.

Zampanò's manuscript is brought to light through the efforts of Johnny Truant, a young Los Angeles tattoo-shop apprentice with a penchant for parties and drugs. He discovers the scattered parts of the manuscript in Zampanò's apartment after the latter's death, works to reassemble the fragments into a whole, and tries to unravel the mystery behind both the man's death and the contents of the manuscript. And there is much to unravel, for the manuscript cites a combination of real and invented sources, and centers on the Navidson documentary, which, we find out, may or may not exist in the first place. Johnny inserts his own narrative as additional footnotes to Zampanò's document, printed in a separate font. Through these footnotes, we witness the young man's gradual decline into madness, and his growing paranoia, fearing that he might be pursued by the very beast that is heard growling in the dark hallways of the Navidson house—the very beast that might have murdered Zampanò, leaving behind deep claw marks the floor of his apartment.

Eventually, in a third layer of footnotes inserted by the editors of the final book—the book that the reader holds in their hands—to correct or fill in gaps in Johnny’s research, we find out that Johnny has disappeared after delivering the manuscript to them.

Upon reflection, it is no surprise that this novel has gained its share of fame and garnered a cult following for its postmodern, metafictional experimentation. When first picking up the brick-like tome, one cannot help but be struck by the visual oddness of the work at hand, as well as by its narrative twists and turns. Consequently, it is the metanarration and postmodern experimentation of the novel that have gotten the most critical attention. According to Martin Brick, the book’s structure exposes the mechanics of literature and yet enables total reader immersion. Natalie Hamilton traces the novel’s experimental origins back to Jorge Luis Borges’ works. Several critics offer interventions into the practices of literary analysis through the lens of Danielewski’s innovative writing. Indeed, Conor Dawson folds his analysis of the book into a larger body of criticism, by arguing that the structure of the novel challenges the prevalent poststructuralist approach to trauma studies; Josh Toth reads *House of Leaves*’ take on postmodernism as undermining postmodernism’s usefulness, and then calls for new steps in literary interpretation. Nick Lord seems especially infatuated with Danielewski’s oeuvre and offers his take on *House of Leaves* in not one but two articles. In “The Labyrinth and the Lacuna: Metafiction, the Symbolic, and the Real in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*,” Lord posits that *House of Leaves*’ metafictionality problematizes signification itself. In his second article, published two years later, Lord

argues—in the vein of Dawson and Toth—that the novel’s textual, narrative, and physical design open up the possibility for new reading practices that emphasize books’ thingness.

In one of the few articles that does not give its full attention to the experimental nature of Danielewski’s writing, “*House of Leaves: A Postmodern Retelling of Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House*,” Lisa Kröger posits exactly what her title indicates: “If Jackson’s Hill House is the prime example of the modern haunted house,” she writes, “then I would suggest the house on Ash Tree Lane in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is the postmodern reinterpretation of Hill House” (Kröger 152). Postmodernism remains an important part of her analysis, but she shifts her gaze from the structure of the book alone to the house within the story. In my paper, I shall follow Kröger’s lead, and go one step further. Rather than writing about the novel in terms of its innovative form and metafictional properties, I will focus on how it centers on some classic American traditions and tropes: the gothic, haunted house mystery, and its subversive relationship to the central American myths of exceptionalism and the American Dream. Doing so, I will ultimately seek to show how the haunting qualities of the house, and by extension, the book, deconstruct those very myths.

***House of Leaves* and the Gothic Literary Tradition**

House of Leaves, though quintessentially experimental, might nevertheless be deemed a haunted house story at its core. Thus, to understand how Danielewski plays with American myth and tradition, we must understand the gothic literary tradition out of which the American haunted house arose.

In *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, Dale Bailey traces the conventions of horror fiction as we know them today back to 1764, with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (Bailey 3). Among a plethora of conventions, the gothic stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included over-the-top villains embracing in excess conventionally repressed appetites, such as sex or greed. Their hero counterparts, "languid white-bread sorts," were frequently imprisoned by the miscreant who raged against the rule of both human and universal law. Moreover, the "common gothic motifs [of] tangled genealogies, subterranean flights, incest, doubles, supernatural incursion, and of course, hauntings" fundamentally shaped these gothic narratives. Crucial to these stories was the "centrality of the setting," "that atmosphere of gloom and decay which adheres to the crumbling abbey and the ruined castle in the gothic novel" (Bailey 3-4).

Political subversion was equally central to the gothic, achieved through the genre's provocative themes of transgression already mentioned. Mark Edmundson, in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*, characterizes gothic literature as "the literature of Revolution" (Edmundson 17). Critics contemporary of the genre, including Edmund Burke and Karl Marx, took advantage of popular gothic rhetoric in their own social critiques (Bailey 5). Politics and setting merged as the gothic locales were transformed into spaces of social critique by the villains inhabiting them. Such villains included Montoni of Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), who masquerades as a count to take over the property of the young heroine and gain wealth and a title. This quintessential gothic villain was followed, in Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), by Ambrosio, a monk who

breaks his vows of chastity, becomes obsessed with the innocent Antonia, and decides she shall be his at all cost. “These figures of church and state,” Edmundson argues, reflected “the forces that weigh too hard upon society, that need renovation” (Edmundson 54). In turn, the quasi-hauntings of these spaces make “gloomy settings [into] a shorthand for the hierarchies of aristocracy and theocracy which [gothic novelists] detested and which their revolutionary age fatally undermined” (Bailey 5). The setting of the gothic novel became an inherent vehicle for social criticism.

American critic Leslie Fiedler recognized the revolutionary potential of early British gothic and connected it to the American revolutionary brand when he declared that this strand of fiction represented “the central American mode” (Fiedler 137). Unsurprisingly, the genre had no trouble finding a home in the young nation, but it was nevertheless altered in one crucial way by American writers, who moved the plot out of the typical “ruined abbey or decaying castle” (Bailey 4). Instead, writers of gothic fiction throughout the United States set their hauntings in more modest contemporary houses (Bailey 21-22). The text that originated the new gothic tradition of the American haunted house, as did Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* for gothic fiction at large, was Edgar Allan Poe’s 1839 story, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” After the latter’s publication, the haunted house “assumed an enduring role in the American tradition,” reappearing in works across centuries by authors ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Stephen King (Bailey 6).

The House and its Symbolism in the American Mythos

Why would American writers bother to reinvent the genre in this way, especially considering that it already suited the spirit of the nation so well? This move can in part be attributed to geography—specifically to the limitations imposed on American writers by a landscape devoid of the traditional gothic structures. If they wanted to set their story in the United States, they might need to change the location of the haunting. Nevertheless, they could have relied on their readers' suspension of disbelief, or located their narratives overseas, where castles were numerous and readily available for any writer to exploit.¹ After all, the precedent for gothic stories set abroad had been established in the European tradition, with English novels like Anne Radcliffe's above-mentioned *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, which take place in Italy and Belgium respectively.

However, the house as an object bears a lot of meaning in American history and culture. Lingering thereon provides further insight into why American writers would so happily convert the castle into a house. Bailey points out that houses and American notions of success are historically linked, and that houses remain a central component of the American Dream as it is conceived of today (Bailey 8). The house is “a potent symbol” in the United States, “perhaps more [so] than [in] any previous culture;” its significance can be located not just in literature, but also in “statistical descriptions of the American Dream (a house, a car, 2.4 kids),” where its acquisition signals both economic and personal success (Bailey 8).

¹ So readily available, in fact, that when I lived in Switzerland as a tween, I attended public school in the Château D'Aubonne, the largest building already-present in the area, and therefore the most convenient place to locate the middle-school serving children from surrounding villages.

It is consequently worth noting that the Navidson family at the heart of *House of Leaves* and *The Navidson Record* appear to be a perfect example of a family fitting the mold of the American Dream. Navy, Karen, and their two children, Daisy and Chad, fall short of that perfect family unit by only 0.4 kids. They make up for this shortcoming with the addition of both a cat and a dog to complete the family portrait. Moreover, the two parents are models of great American success, tying domestic happiness, yet again, to outwardly perceivable professional accomplishments.

Karen Green might aptly be described, though not married to Navy, as a trophy-wife extraordinaire, “[o]nce a model with the Ford agency in New York, [who] has since put behind her the life of Milan fashion shoots and Venetian Masques in order to raise her two children” (Danielewski 11). Her professional and personal success and continued happiness are embodied in her outstanding beauty; Zampanò remarks that “[c]onsidering how beautiful she appears on the dreadful Hi 8 tapes, it is hardly surprising editors frequently relied on slides of her pouty lips, high cheek bones, and hazel eyes to sell their magazines” (Danielewski 11). Even Zampanò, just as had the editors, seems to fall for her looks, his description lingering conspicuously on her features. Karen stands out as a real catch—another marker of Navy’s success not just professionally but also personally.

Navy himself is “*none other* than [the] prize-winning photojournalist who won the Pulitzer for his picture of a dying girl in Sudan” (Danielewski 6; emphasis added). It is his professional success that makes it possible for him to bring his family out to Virginia and take the last step toward fulfilling the domestic fantasy of the American Dream. The accomplishment of the latter is the explicit goal of the move, in fact, with the

added caveat that it is to be recorded—the myth in some way documented as real for posterity. Navy provides a sort of mission-statement for the project in an early segment of the film:

“It’s funny,” Navidson tells us at the outset. “I just want to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children. Sort of see how everything turns out. No gunfire, famine, or flies. Just lots of toothpaste, gardening and people stuff. Which is how I got the Guggenheim Fellowship and the NEA Media Arts Grant. Maybe because of my past they’re expecting something different, but I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it. Settle in, maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better. Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set.” (Danielewski 8-9)

The picture of well-being at home that he describes contrasts immensely with all he has seen as a photojournalist abroad. As a result, the domestic space, in both the familial and national sense, becomes a locus for a stability that pervades the home and nation, but cannot be found beyond the country’s boundaries. In the beginning of the film, certainly, it seems that Navy has been rewarded for his toil, as promised. Zampanò describes the opening shots of *The Navidson Record* thus: “Will Navidson relaxing on the porch of his small, old-style heritage house, enjoying a glass of lemonade, watching the sun turn the first few minutes of daytime gold” (Danielewski 9). Battle won, our hero does not ride into the sunset. There is nowhere else to go. He has already reached his final destination.

Tied to the Navidson house is a tale of success quintessentially American in flavor. The book that most thoroughly entrenched the house into the American mythos (or at least bore witness to the early importance of the house in the American imagination), interestingly, takes no part in the gothic. Nevertheless, it stands out as so iconic in a lineage of house-based literature that Bailey pauses his account of American haunted-house literature and film to discuss the importance of this seminal text: Henry David Thoreau's 1854 memoir *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*.

Bailey claims that in it Thoreau "launche[s] his famous assault on the American Dream," deeming the "ten feet wide by fifteen long" house a repudiation of materialism, and so of the capitalistic behaviors deemed the road to success and the American Dream (Thoreau 53; Bailey 8-9). In this instance, I beg to differ. Indeed, rather than a simple repudiation of the American Dream as a whole, I would argue that Thoreau's text underscores, emphatically, the place of the house in the American mythos of success, which became today's white picket fence fantasy; furthermore, I think his text points to the importance of dwelling and lifestyle in representing the kind of individual success prescribed by that national mythos. As a foundation for an alternative reading of Thoreau's Walden abode, I turn to the cultural historical investigation into the "shack" and its origins offered up by Lisa Goff in *Shantytown, USA*.

Goff, too, recognizes the iconicity of Walden as place and text. Unlike Bailey, she strengthens its ties to the American Dream, noting that "Thoreau's exertions have become [...] [the] blueprint for [an] American identity" founded in self-reliance (Goff 1). Essential to the iconic status of the cabin in the American collective imagination, she adds, is the purported fact that Thoreau built it with his own hands. It is then interesting

to consider that he did not build it from scratch—he purchased it from the Collinses, a family of Irish railroad workers, and reassembled it by Walden Pond (Goff 1). As Goff so eloquently puts it: “At Walden, Thoreau built a shanty. In *Walden*, he persuades readers that it was a house” (Goff 3). He glosses over the cabin’s origins to instead construct “an idealized version of America with himself in the role of ideal of American, a being with the power to make history through sheer force of will” (Goff 2). These conclusions she draws from Thoreau’s claims that “[w]herever [he] sat, there [he] might live, and the landscape radiated from [him] accordingly” (Thoreau 88). He had a mind to conquer the landscape and submits it to his will with ease.

Through his narrative zeal, “Thoreau put the idea and the act of building a home at the core of American identity, where it still resides 170 years later” (Goff 2). Indeed, *Walden* buys into and reinforces the notion of Americans as independent makers of their destiny, “the sole architects of their own success” (Goff 2). Thoreau’s powerful depiction of self-determination arises from the distance he creates between the house he assembles and the shanties of the poor and working-class. Calling it a cabin rather than a shanty, emphasizing the physical labor of construction, and describing the finished cabin in terms of neatness, he strongly contrasts it to the Collinses’ crude home (Goff 2-3). In doing so, he distances himself not from capitalism itself, but rather from the workers who were at the system’s mercy, unable to achieve rapid upward economic or social progress. Thus, “Thoreau exiled the shantytowns built by railroad workers like James Collins to the margins, where generations of readers, historians, annotators, and re-enactors have left them” (Goff 3). Those overpowered and unable to fit the standard mold of American

success were left out of its history by Thoreau and others, who instead promoted a national narrative centered on the middle-class.

This American narrative originates in part in the frontier imagination, which had as core values self-reliance and progress. Indeed, in the days of American continental expansion, Americans placed tenacious trust in the promise of the frontier: that it “would deliver outsized expectations.” They saw the “physical journey to an economic and geographic frontier [...] [as] a journey into the cultural geography of expectations of progress and development that came to define American identity” (Goff 26). These notions of progress were crucially tied to the appearance of homes. While shanties like the Collins’s might represent the first step toward an enterprising future, their continued presence in the landscape was frowned upon (Goff 29). Even before their departure to the colonies, colonists were pressured to rapidly improve their dwellings upon arrival, “taught to imagine a steady progression of housing types that would reflect a predictable rise in affluence” (Goff 31). A striking 1650 pamphlet described six different kinds of dwellings to be found in America, from the “newcomer’s wigwam” to the “brick house,” the only housing type considered “permanent,” and to which all colonists ought to eventually “graduate” (Carson 139-40; Goff 31). Swift progress was the name of the game, and those who did not fall in line with this narrative, like the Collinses, were to be forgotten.

It was moreover considered crucial to show concrete signs of progress and tangible improvement because it was thus that Puritan leaders could justify taking over the land from Native Americans, by force if necessary. Visible upgrades to their houses would showcase their gradual improvement of the land, and would in turn make them

entitled to it, they thought (Goff 31). Religious language, all in all, was from the beginning tightly tied not just to progress in general, but also to its manifestation in the colonists' dwellings. Edward Johnson was one of the first settlers in Massachusetts Bay and is referred to as "Old Johnson" in *Walden*. He declared in 1654 that "[t]he Lord hath been pleased to turn all the wigwams, huts, and hovels the English dwelt in at their first coming into orderly, fair, and welt-built houses" (Goff 30-31; Johnson 174). His words bear witness to the earliest iterations of American national rhetoric, which portrayed America as exceptional, both guided by and provided for by God himself.

American national identity has always been steeped in ideas of American exceptionalism. Defined in religious terms, the nation has been held up as a beacon of hope and progress for its citizens as well as for the world. M. Kathleen Kaveny outlines, in "The Remnants of Theocracy: The Puritans, the Jeremiad and the Contemporary Culture Wars," how the Puritans settlers of the Massachusetts Bay colony "saw themselves as having the opportunity [...] to create a society whose ecclesiastical polity and whose civic governance were in accordance with divine will." They were convinced that "their 'city on a hill' [had] captured the attention of God almighty himself" (Kaveny 63). Drawing on scripture, they thought of themselves "almost literally as the new chosen people, stepping in to the position of divine covenant partner once held by the Israelites" (Kaveny 63). They positioned themselves in a divine historiography and hoped to "capture the attention of Protestants striving to reform the relationship of church and society," destined to right the wrongs of the old world on a global scale (Kaveny 63). Thus, if their houses failed to improve, failed to attest to their chosen-ness, what might

that mean? Could they be deceived in their interpretation of a God-assured destiny? The thought was unacceptable.

The American Haunted House: Not Haunted by, but Haunting

Setting matters in gothic fiction, because, according to Bailey, “setting is destiny—and it’s been so from the first,” and the genre thus perfectly suits America’s particular rhetoric of religiously predestined greatness (Bailey 22). Consequently, in a loaded cultural context that attaches great importance to the house, the unusual haunting of the Navidsons begins to point precisely to what is being questioned by Danielewski’s novelistic exploration: the very basis of the mythos of American exceptionalism and destiny itself. It seems, additionally, that Danielewski’s alternative take on the haunting takes an existent tradition in American haunted house fiction to a new extreme.

Indeed, a major innovation in Poe and Hawthorne’s iteration of gothic fiction, which came to be adopted at large in American horror fiction and as a crucial part of the haunted house formula, was the displacement of the haunted focus of the narrative. Rather than require the surrogate presence of some ghost or human evil-doer, the house itself embodied the evil. “The house is alive,” writes Bailey. “It possesses its own malign will,” he adds (Bailey 22). Such evil traditionally manifests itself in the very appearance of the house at the center of the story. This is the case in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” where “[a]n obscure conjunction of architecture and geometry [which] has endowed the house with a malign will and intelligence utterly distinct from a merely human revenant” (Bailey 22). The haunting in turn seems to emanate from the structure, its ghosts inseparably tied to it.

Danielewski's house is, interestingly, not outwardly threatening. As the opening shots of *The Navidson Record* featuring Navy relaxing on the porch can attest, all seems well when the Navidsons first move in. It is nevertheless the house itself which comes to threaten its new inhabitants, rather than some presence contained within it. The haunting manifests itself as new, impossibly dark, and ever expanding or shrinking spaces within the home.

The change to the home is at first difficult to pin down, as the language of Zampanò's description attests. Indeed, it is after a brief absence from their new home, returning from a wedding in Seattle, that the family at first realizes something is wrong. "Though they had only been away for four days," Zampanò writes, "the change was enormous. It was not, however, obvious—like for instance a fire, a robbery, or an act of vandalism" (Danielewski 24). While, on the surface, the house presents the same image of promised blissful domesticity, what appears at first glance is not to be trusted. Zampanò goes on to describe "the horror [as] atypical," adding that "no one could deny there had been an intrusion" (Danielewski 24). Unsure of how to act in reaction to the change, Karen "draws both hands up to her face as if she were about to pray" (Danielewski 24). Her gesture echoes the religious language of American exceptionalism and its purported predestination for prosperity, though only as mimic. Alongside the outwardly imperceptible change to the home symbolic of the American Dream, this scene points to a darkness emerging from the very core of this American mythology. Though initially protected from view by that mythology, as if by the façade of a house, it seems it can no longer be contained.

It is when the family goes upstairs that they discover the first dark space that manifests itself in their house, located between the master bedroom and the children's room. The new space "lacks outlets, sockets, switches, shelves, a rod on which to hang things, or even some decorative moldings," characterized instead by "walls [that] are perfectly smooth and almost pure black—'almost' because there is a slightly grey quality to the surface" (Danielewski 28). Despite the "plain white door with a glass knob" that has appeared along with this strange new room, nothing about it fits the house's setting, or meets its expected parameters. Not even the blueprints of the house can account for it, nor new measurements taken by Navy on his own, or later with the help of his brother. They only confirm the official numbers (Danielewski 29). Thus, the dark space and those which appear later on are not part of the house's official history; they radically subvert it in ways that should be impossible.

Karen's attempts to mitigate this intrusive presence in what was supposed to be her family's perfect home is, tellingly, to largely ignore it, or at least to attempt to maintain a semblance of normalcy despite the circumstances. In the end, this proves futile. Zampanò characterizes Karen's efforts, which consist of building a bookshelf with a friend while chatting as if all was well, as those of "the quintessential gatherer [who] keeps close to the homestead" (Danielewski 37). The language of "homestead" hearkens back to the frontier imagination so crucial in the constitution of the American mythos of progress, linking it to Karen's attempt to maintain the appearance of home as it ought to be. In doing so, however, and in her failure to truly help the situation, she inadvertently calls attention to the fact that things have not been 'as they should be' for quite a while.

As the novel progresses, glimpses of *The Navidson Record* accumulate to reveal that the Navidson family was on the brink of dissolution before moving into the house on Ash Tree Lane. The move to Virginia, then, does not embody the last step in the predestined march toward progress and happiness of America and its citizens promised to them by the national myth. Rather, it is a last-ditch effort to prevent collapse.

Notably, Karen's image as the perfect woman, partner, and mother soon fades away to be replaced by the image of "a thirty-seven year old woman who worries about leaving the city, growing old, keeping trim, and staying happy" (Danielewski 11). Though these concerns might seem mundane enough, their urgency increases as an "unguarded moment captured on one of the house Hi 8s [...] demonstrates Karen's almost bewildering dependence on Navidson" and her simultaneous discontentedness with her domestic situation (Danielewski 11). She is overwhelmed at moments when she should be happy, undoing any hopes we might have had for her new, improved life. One such moment includes a candle making project captured on film, where Karen shows genuine care for her children, "[helping] brush the hair out of her daughter's eyes lest she try to go it herself and end up smearing plaster all over her face" (Danielewski 11). Despite this attentive and loving gesture, and "even though Karen keeps Chad from overfilling the molds or Daisy from hurting herself with the scissors, she still cannot resist looking out the window every couple of minutes," as she acutely feels "the weight of a hundred seconds" (Danielewski 11-12). She seems to long for the world outside the walls of the home, a profoundly unhappy stay-at-home mom despite everything.

Her smile, so alluring to the magazines, inadvertently drops in these unguarded moments, and speaks to her melancholy mood, to her anxiety, as well as to her

dependence on Navy. Indeed, when she hears him pulling into the driveway, *her* façade drops, and the resplendent smile reappears on her face as she “instantly leaps up” and “dashes from the room,” forced to return to instruct her children to stop, which she had forgotten in her initial eagerness (Danielewski 12). When she arrives in the foyer to meet Navy, strangely, she “has quite effectively masked all her eagerness to see him.”

Zampanò’s analysis follows: “In that peculiar contradiction that serves as connective tissue in so many relationships, it is possible to see that she loves Navidson almost as much as she has no room for him” (Danielewski 12). Their relationship is held back by this web of unresolved tension, and trouble had in fact long plagued the relationship. Feeling lonely and abandoned because of Navy’s frequent work abroad, Karen had an affair; “[a]fter a decade of distance, the house was supposed to be a new beginning” for Karen to focus on raising the children, thus properly embodying the caretaking stay-at-home mother she had failed to be back in New York. It was also meant to be an opportunity for Navy to step away from the work that had destabilized the family to begin with, which he clearly does not do (Danielewski 348).

Navy appears to be extremely affected by Karen’s infidelity. The corrupted structure of the house in turn becomes mirrored in its owner, the head of the household, patriarch, and famous American photojournalist. Indeed, a moment in the *Hi 8* film reveals him, before he ever enters the depths of the dark spaces within the house, treating his “rotten feet” (Danielewski 83). Zampanò describes Navy’s symptoms in graphic detail: “As we can clearly see, the tops are puffy and in some places as red as clay. Furthermore, all his toe nails are horribly cracked, disfigured, and yellow” (Danielewski 83). It is as if Navidson is himself rotting from the bottom-up, unsettling perceptions of

American accomplishment. Navy attributes his disorder, as have his physicians after two decades of attempted diagnoses, to a fungus caused by stress in general. Zampanò, on the other hand, specifically argues that the intertwining of this moment in the film with scenes of the flirtation between Karen and Holloway—an explorer heading the team assembled to explore the house, and with whom Navy instantly develops a rivalry—seems to suggest the latter as the direct cause for this flare-up (Danielewski 83). For Navy, Holloway embodies the threat of yet more domestic unrest to come.

As the Navidsons prepare to confront the darkness of the house, whatever it may hold, their familial situation increasingly degrades. In turn, it does not seem excessive to link Navidson's own disfigurement with the disfigurement of the house, and the larger, widespread, symbolic disfigurement of American foundations and the history of the nation. In the very next paragraph, Zampanò indeed refers back to the (fictional) critical discourse surrounding *The Navidson Record*, referencing a book about the national picture of the family. It investigates not only the documentary, but specifically the relationship between Holloway and Karen in terms of territory. "Frequently treatment of the first three exploration has concentrated on the physical aspects of the house," Zampanò writes. "Florencia Calzatti, however, has shown in her compelling book *The Fraying of the American Family* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995)—no longer in print—how these invasions begin to strip the Navidsons of any existing cohesion. It is an interesting examination of the complex variables implicit in any intrusion" (Danielewski 83). Karen and Holloway's interactions are cast in colonial and expansionist terms, in a way that echoes earlier descriptions of the hallways that appeared throughout the house.

This, in the context of Holloway's profession as an explorer, intimately connects the potential affair with national history.

Furthermore, featured throughout *The Navidson Record* and Zampanò's manuscript are a wide array of individuals who all seem to struggle; it is impossible, in fact, to find among them any examples of untainted American domestic success or stability. Fowler, the man with whom Karen has had an affair, is an "actor [...] [working] at a Fifth Avenue clothing store, specializing in Italian cuts for women." He is "considered consummately attractive and [spends] his evenings talking about acting down at the Bowery Bar, Naked Lunch, or Odelay-la" (Danielewski 348). The glossiness of handsome actors and Italian Fifth Avenue tailors, and the glamour of trendy restaurants strategically namedropped by Fowler during interviews when dishing about his affair with Karen, are but skin-deep. Not far beneath the surface lays the story of the failure of a man who, though a self-proclaimed actor, spends his evenings off from his retail job talking about acting much more than he actually acts.

Karen's relationship with the members of her extended family appears even worse than her strained relationship with Navy, whom she at least loves despite her ambivalent feelings toward her domestic situation. Linda, her sister, happily offers "a pornographic recounting" of Karen's affair to media sources, excited to bask in her five minutes of fame. She is believed at large until the discovery that she and Karen have not been in touch for three years, and that Karen therefore would have told her no such things (Danielewski 349). In another bout of sordid storytelling, despite the lack of evidence of abuse from the therapy sessions that Zampanò cites, Linda claims that their stepfather

sexually abused both girls. On a night their mother was gone, she says, he took them out to a farmhouse and forced each sister into a well before raping the other, one at a time (Danielewski 347). Though these allegations, due to the lack of documentation and the strained, if not non-existent relationship between the two sisters, appear false, they nevertheless bear witness to a broken sisterly bond.

Navy also comes from a broken family, and Zampanò attributes to this past the choices he makes when facing the house, and those that brought him there in the first place. His father was a working-class man, who moved his family across the Midwest for work; he unsettled the home both geographically, as well day-to-day, as an alcoholic “prone to violent outbursts” and to disappearing without notice for extended periods of time (Danielewski 22). Navy’s mother did not fare much better as a parent, leaving the family to pursue acting, failing at the latter, and, Zampanò quips, “[ending] up living with a string of not so productive producers” (Danielewski 22). His father eventually dies of heart disease, while his mother simply disappears. Navy and his twin brother, Tom, “learned to identify with absence,” and so to treat everything as temporary, which according to Zampanò, leads Navy to become “so enamored with photography [because of] the way it gave permanence to moments that were often so fleeting” (Danielewski 23). It is precisely this that ultimately brings his own family to the verge of falling apart, as he reproduces his parents’ disappearing acts in his own way, through his work, and eventually leads his family into the arms of the danger hiding within the house on Ash Tree Lane. One might also align the dark corridors, anti-spaces characterized by their emptiness, as absence embodied, and so as the representations of Navy’s dysfunctional family past, which he eagerly walks back into.

Through the multilayered structure of the narrative, specifically via Johnny's footnotes, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Navidsons are far from the only ones whose family life goes against the grain of the narrative of success embodied in the house as a symbolic locus. It seems, in fact, that no characters in the book reap the benefits of stable domesticity. Included in Johnny's footnotes is a list made by Lude, his close friend, of all of his conquests. Lude includes general information about the date, the women's names, ages and ethnicities, as well as lurid details about what they did together (Danielewski 262-63). Johnny, oddly enough, decides to take the time to trace down these women and check up on them after Lude's death. The results are not promising, as will be gleaned from the full account copied below:

LUDE'S LIST REVISITED

Monique	—	Husband recently left her.
Tonya	—	An ex- and a restraining order.
Nina	—	Silence.
Sparkle	—	Rage.
Kelly	—	When she was only eleven, her mother had forced her to perform oral sex on her.
Gina	—	Hiding from a stalker. Her fourth.
Caroline	—	Grew up in a commune. Had her first abortion when she was twelve.
Susan	—	Said "Who cares" two dozen telling times. Hole in the roof of her mouth from too much cocaine.
Brooke	—	Numb.
Marin	—	Uncle would come over and finger her.
Alison	—	Father killed when she was eighteen.
Leslie	—	Raped by gym coach when she was fourteen.

Dawn	—	Date raped last year.	
Melissa	—	Ex-boyfriend used to hit her. She finally had to get a nose job.	
Erin	—	Walked in on her mother screwing her boyfriend.	
Betsy	—	A reduction left jagged scars running around her nipples and through both breasts. Ashamed before. Ashamed now.	
Michelle	—	Engaged.	
Alicia	—	Lost her virginity to her father.	
Dana	—	Prostitute.	(Danielewski 265).

So much for the American Dream. On many levels, this list points to the complete failure of American domesticity: It is a list of Lude's previous conquests, of meaningless dalliances never intended to be more. Most of the women's trauma, moreover, took place in their childhood homes, and were frequently committed by parents or relatives, breaching the ultimate family taboos. Those not victimized as children are instead victimized by romantic partners, pointing to the impossibility of achieving stable domesticity regardless of one's past. Finally, several of the women on the list have been disfigured, as if the social and domestic dysfunction unveiled in this list was made manifest on their bodies. Despite the prevalence of trauma and dysfunction, its stories are an afterthought largely left at the margins, or, rather, in the footnotes of American history, just as they are relegated to the footnotes of Zampanò's manuscript. Here, nevertheless, they are momentarily brought to light, a crack in the façade of the great American mythos.

Even in the context of these egregious examples, Johnny's story stands out especially, because of his marginality as a drug user and the abuse he suffered in the foster system, as well as because of what got him there in the first place. His mother went

mad, culminating in an attempt to murder him as a child, and her subsequent institutionalization; his father's untimely death followed soon thereafter and left him without anyone. More disturbing still, we witness him gradually unravel throughout the novel, as he works to assemble the many pieces of Zampanò's manuscript. Eventually too unstable to keep his apartment, he begins to train-hop across the country in a desperate bid to find some answers regarding the mystery of *The Navidson Record* and Zampanò's account of it. This evokes the American tradition of freight- or train-hopping. Train hopping became a widespread practice during various American crises, financial and otherwise, which constitute yet another part of American history neglected by the mythos of progress, success, and prosperity. These include, perhaps most iconically, the migration of unemployed people who crossed vast distances in search of work during the Great Depression of the 1930s. There were also the voyages home of soldiers at the end of the Civil War, a war during which America's future as a nation was at its most precarious. Of course, train hopping also played a key role in the settlement of the West, when those with a spirit of adventure responded in their own way to the westward call issued by the government. Perhaps shockingly, train hopping continues to be practiced across the country, prompting an article on it by the BBC as recently as 2012 (Bowes).

While the focus of my paper is not the metanarrative properties of Danielewski's novel, it is worth lingering on one metanarrative instance that speaks to the notion of predestination key to American exceptionalism. In a startling passage, while on his travels, Johnny stops by a bar nearby the railroad tracks where he has just hopped off. He engages the band playing the venue in conversation after their performance, and eventually breeches the subject most dear to him: Zampanò's manuscript and the ever-

elusive *Navidson Record*, for the title of one of the band's songs, surprisingly, echoed the title of a segment from the film. Recognizing what he speaks of, they hand him a bundle of papers, with a title page inscribed thus:

House of Leaves
by Zampanò

with introduction and
notes by Johnny Truant

Circle Round A Stone Publication
First Edition

(Danielewski 513).

It is a near-identical copy of the title page of Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, with the exception that it purports to be the second edition, published by Pantheon Books. The book we read features itself, although, on this narrated journey, Johnny has presumably been writing it all along. Paradoxically, the book appears to have been finished before the fact. What then seems to be predestined for Johnny is not success, but rather his downward spiral into madness, to which his mother's madness already seemed to doom him. The reader is increasingly implicated in Johnny's fate, furthermore, as they too, in possession of the book in question, transform into characters in Johnny's world. Here, through its experimentation, the boundaries between the fictional world of the book and the real world of the reader dissolve.

The Dark Underbelly of the American Mythos, Radical Breaches of Time and Space, and the Implication of the American Reader

The big takeaway from Danielewski's novel seems to be that the mythology of an exceptional America, upon which the nation has built its official narrative, and from where individual ideas about what constitutes success derive, is in fact a lie—a mere façade. But a façade for what? And why, instead of peeling back this myth simply to reveal complexity and diversity, does *House of Leaves* portray it as a nightmare, in the gothic mode? One answer might be that what the novel reveals is the myth not simply as exaggeration or oversimplification, but rather as concealing a great history of suffering in the pursuit of this alleged American destiny.

In fact, the myth of an exceptional America not only concealed but was made possible by a centuries-long history of racism and violent expansion. Initially, the notion of predestination provided a rhetoric to promote the advancement of colonization. It is important to note how violently the colonizers of North America dealt with Native Americans, “[defining] America from the beginning as a settler society, and domestic, expanding, imperial power,” according to Michael Paul Rogin in *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* (Rogin 49). Expansion westward was further deemed necessary to “guarantee [...] American freedom” by offering protection against the over-crowding of Europe, and to prevent class divisions according to land-owning status (Rogin 49-50). What the settlers refused to see was that under the guise of “the myth of the self-made man,” “[the] Indian wars actually exemplified [the kind of] state violence” that the European settlers had initially fled and now condemned back in Europe (Rogin 49-50). Moreover, while violence allowed the colonizers of the so-called New World to conquer land and

construct a nation according to certain ideals and principles, they also found in the violent ‘othering’ of native inhabitants the most useful means of legitimizing their expansion:

By the Age of Jackson, Americans celebrated their own independence, which Indian tribalism threatened to confine. White Americans contrasted their own freedom, disciplined by self-restraint, with the subversive, idle, and violent freedom of the Indians. The self-reliant American gained his freedom, won his authority, and defined the American national identity in violent Indian combat in the West. (Rogin 49-50).

American identity forged in the principals of freedom, independence, and, eventually, authority and power, required a particular kind of violence. It was conceived by and remains interwoven with a history that culminated in the genocide of the continent’s indigenous peoples.

Expansion had to be achieved at any cost, an implicit founding principle of the nation, perpetuated as a result of the exceptionalist rhetoric of the earliest colonizers. After settlers conquered the far frontiers of America, reaching the end of the continent in the 1890s, America’s expansionist dreams turned eastward, as “the policy of Manifest Destiny was extended to Asia” (Rogin 49-50). American intervention in the Philippines suppressed the push for independence and was justified once more through claims of a civilizing mission, itself justified by the precedent set by the treatment of Native Americans. These patterns of expansion and intervention would go on to influence American foreign policy implemented in Latin America and in Vietnam (Rogin 49-50).

Jason Gilmore furthermore describes, in “American Exceptionalism in the American Mind: Presidential Discourse, National Identity, and U.S. Public Opinion,” a

“national exceptionalism bias.” Encouraged by the explicit mentions of American exceptionalism, this bias allowed people to find self-worth through their national belonging. This sense of belonging then caused them to engage in tactics to preserve their self-image by protecting the image or mythology of their national group. They are in turn required to “go out of their way to disregard or downplay negative characteristics associated with members of their respective country” while “[coupling] both a positive evaluation of [their] own national group with negative evaluations of other national groups” (Gilmore 305-06). To sustain the view of America as exceptional, America had to demonize an ‘other,’ often along the lines of race, while the citizens who couched their identity in the nation had to explicitly disregard the consequences of this rhetoric.

In *House of Leaves*, the warped house and its dark corridors, which eventually extend downward like roots gripping to a ground from which they might be torn, points to these concealed episodes of American history that allowed the nation to gain its hold on the continent. Indeed, the house on Ash Tree Lane symbolically points to the horror as being built into the very core of American identity and its myths, its history literally pointing to this murky past. When Karen goes to speak to their realtor, hoping to make some sense of what is happening to her family, the agent initially jokes about having investigated if the house might have been built on an Indian burial ground. This joke obviously evokes a popular American horror trope, made especially famous in the 1982 movie, *Poltergeist*. She quickly admits to have found no such thing to be true, and tells Karen that “[u]fortunately, the only thing distinguished about your home’s past, but I

guess it's part of everybody's past here, and it's no mystery either, would be the colony, the Jamestown Colony" (Danielewski 409).

This, evidently, bears more meaning than the real estate agent realizes, and Zampanò does not miss the chance to jump on her casual dismissal and enormous oversight, adding that "having some familiarity with the bloody and painful origins of that particular toe hold in the new world reveals just how old the roots of that house really are" (Danielewski 409). He elaborates, detailing how the initial colonists barely survived by the skin of their teeth, culminating, in the novel's reimagined history, in the discovery of stairs where the house on Ash Tree Lane now stands (Danielewski 409-14). This plot point makes meaning on three levels: first, there is the implicit reference to the eventual Native American genocide that would precede the solidification of the American colonies as a nation; second, the precariousness of the early colonizing endeavors points to the way the process of colonization has been glossed over or embellished to fit into a more desirable narrative; and, finally, by locating the stairs in the original pre-colonial American landscape, the novel's alternate history points to the origins or roots of the haunting of the house in this colonial past.

The novel, moreover, does not fail to expand its critique beyond early colonization, evoking contemporary instances of American meddling abroad in parallel to the domestic drama at hand. For example, the index at the back of the novel cites three instances of the word "affair," two of which refer to Karen's extra-marital dalliance. The third instead refers to a brief mention, on the news playing in the background, of the Iran-Contra Affair. The Iran-Contra affair was an American international policy crisis that

lasted from 1985 to 1987 and involved the sale of arms to Iran by the United States in spite of the weapons-embargo then in place (Danielewski 29).

The trauma experienced by the Navidson children manifests in disturbing drawings of their house. They feature wild and snarling wolves, tigers, and dragons that lope around the margins of the sheet of paper, with the house at their center made up of “several layers of black crayon and pencil [...] applied so that not even a speck of the paper beneath could have shown through” (Danielewski 313). The growls heard resonating throughout the morphing corridors of the house and the deep blackness of those corridors find their way into the children’s art, and implicitly evoke Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*. Therein, Bachelard discusses, briefly, the unusual drawings of houses made by Polish and Jewish children who suffered particularly throughout the Nazi occupation of Poland (Bachelard 92). Daisy and Chad’s drawings become, through this reference, not only signs of domestic, but indeed national, even international trauma. The domestic drama of the Navidson household and America at large are inextricable from a global, geopolitical context.

In retrospect, this seems evident, considering Navy’s thriving career as a war photographer following his brief stint as a soldier. He directly profits from the United States’ extensive history of military intervention abroad. It is in fact on one of his assignments, in Sudan during the 1993 famine, that he took the picture that won him the Pulitzer, and enabled him to purchase the house and pursue his domestic dream: the picture of a small Sudanese girl, whom Navy names Delial, skeletal and on the verge of death; in the image, a vulture crouches behind her, waiting for her to die and be its next meal (Danielewski 420). Shockingly, this picture really exists, taken by real war

photographer Kevin Carter during the Sudanese famine. It did in fact win Carter a Pulitzer in 1994, though he committed suicide that same year. The dubious ethics behind the pursuit of success are put on display, as are the ways modern media, specifically, photography and television, have been wielded in its service.

Navy was impotent to help Delial, and he is racked by guilt. This is the deciding factor that sends him into the dark hallways of the house when Holloway's team fails to return. He tells Karen, when she protests, "I waited too long with Delial. I'm not going to do it again" (Danielewski 102). His source of motivation underscores the failures of America abroad to live up to its own savior mythos, and moreover does so through the means by which the rhetoric has been increasingly perpetuated. Indeed, Gilmore notes that "U.S. presidents widely tapped into the power of American exceptionalism once they were able to communicate directly with the American people in the advent of new mass media technologies, as it was a way to rally the country" (Gilmore 304).

American exceptionalism became increasingly common in political discourse, specifically that of American presidents, from the 1930s onwards. After 1933, in fact, with the rise of new media technologies in the twentieth century, presidents have evoked American exceptionalism in 67% of all major speeches (Gilmore 304). Ronald Reagan especially capitalized on this rhetorical tool throughout his presidency. As John Roper outlines in *The Contours of American Politics*, the former actor frequently turned to the trope of the "shining city upon a hill" in his speeches (Roper 171). In his televised farewell address, Reagan attributed the phrase not to scripture but rather to John Winthrop, "an early freedom man," while emphasizing the United States' humble origins and vast historical progress. He described the nation as "a beacon, [...] a magnet for all

who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home” (Roper 171). Reagan’s conception of the nation echoed a “typical and classic [...] American patriotism” that hearkened back to the country’s colonial origins (Roper 172). Reagan both evoked and preserved America’s identity as that of a guiding light of hope amidst the darkness of the Cold War, ultimate champion of freedom and of righteous democratic values not just at home but throughout the world. And he did so through television.

Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* tears down the façade of American exceptionalism, unveiling in its stead story after story of domestic failure, dysfunction, and trauma. It buries the American Dream by distorting its most important symbol: the house. Moreover, by tying the Navidsons and their home to the colonial past, as well as to contemporary, global networks of trauma, Danielewski makes it clear that the great American myth was built on and continues to be propelled forward by bloody expansion.

To properly conclude a discussion of the novel at hand, I would be remiss in not returning at least briefly to its strange form; photography and television have played a great role in promoting the American national myth, and so do genre-bending, visual experimentation, and metanarrative in conveying the message at the heart of *House of Leaves*. Indeed, the playful blending of gothic and academic prose styles blurs the line between fiction and fact. Yet, I would argue that the novel stakes its claim to factuality with the inclusion of an academic “voice” unusual in fiction writing. The reader is furthermore forced into the role of fact-finder, as they must make heads and tails of lengthy footnotes and convoluted page layouts. The same can be said of the effect of the

book's appendices, which allegedly contain pictures of Johnny's scrawled notes, letters from his mother, and other artefacts that provide physical proof that what we have read is true. Finally, by reproducing on the page, via carefully laid-out text, the shifting corridors of the house on Ash Tree Lane, the novel seems to physically place us within the predatory American house, making its world into ours.

Danielewski's novel demands that we second-guess America's national mythology, while asking us to take seriously its own central claims. By simultaneously immersing us in its technically fictional world, *House of Leaves* raises the stakes by recasting us as characters. Refusing to remain simply revelatory, the book requires of us new, active practices of reading. Not content to simply unveil hidden ills, it calls for us to take action, lest we too fall victim to the threat it unmasks in the American home.

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