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**“The Omphalos of All We Are”:  
Re-imagining the Captivity Narrative  
in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves***

Mark Z. Danielewski includes an excerpt from a fictional early-seventeenth-century journal about two-thirds of the way through his 2000 novel *House of Leaves*. According to the narrator of this section of the novel, the journal had belonged to one of the original Jamestown colonists, a man who had left the settlement in January 1610, the colony’s “starving time,” with two companions to hunt for food. Apparently this quest did not end well; two of the men’s bodies were found in the spring, after the snow had thawed, and the third disappeared. Using the archaic spellings and typography characteristic of the period, the first journal entry notes that the men “fearch for deere or other Game and alwayes there is nothing. Tiggs believes our luck will change . . . . Likewife we muft also believe or elfe in the name of the Lorde take charge of the Knowledge that we are all dead men” (Danielewski 410, 413, original spelling). This dark presentiment establishes the tone that persists through the other four short entries, which center on the men’s growing fears of an unidentifiable supernatural force. The unnamed journal-writer calls the resting-spot they have chosen “a terrible Place” in which he and his friends are “plagued by many bad Dreames.” As the days pass from January 18<sup>th</sup> through the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the date of the journal’s final entry, the list of foreboding events mounts ever higher: one man, Verm, returns quickly and empty-handed from an attempt to hunt; the “Wind makes a wicked found in the Woods”; the men dream of “Bones,” “the Sunne,” and the “fnow about us turn[ed] Red with blood”; and the silence takes on ominous qualities (413, original spelling).

The journal’s last entry reads, simply, “Ftaires! We haue found ftaires!”(414, original spelling). Read in the context of the novel’s subject, a house that contains a hidden set of constantly expanding and unmappable rooms, this statement both confirms the men’s bad luck—they stumbled upon the “house of leaves” in an era far predating the novel’s twentieth-century events—and cuts off the possibility of discovering what happened to them. The one indisputable fact in this scenario is the men’s discovery of a manmade structure that did not, in the end, offer a

means by which to save their lives. Instead, they seem to have been absorbed into it, to be recovered only when it is already too late. The diarist observes stairs only, none of the other structures associated with a human dwelling. Yet this lone sign motivates these desperate souls to act, just as the house is able to motivate extraordinary levels of curiosity in present-day observers. Its uncanny qualities permeate multiple historical boundaries as well as spatial ones, suggesting that supernatural elements also contributed to the Jamestown difficulties. The men interpret the stairs as the signifier of a conventional manmade building, a structure that ought to manifest at least some homely traits; instead, they are trapped by an undetermined entity or force for whom such stairs serve a much more *unheimlich* function.

For scholars of early American literature, the men's fate inevitably recalls the many disappearances that occurred as a result of Native American captivity, through kidnapping or military conflict. As typical settlers in one of the early colonies, and thus members of the primary group targeted for capture, the journal-writer and his friends would likely have come from upper-class households in which such duties as plowing, planting, and building were virtually unknown, rendering their survival in the New World difficult at best. Climate and supplies had severely limited Jamestown's available food by the winter of 1610, and the primitive conditions under which its inhabitants were forced to live bred disease and starvation. These fictional representatives of the colony undergo a captivity that, unlike many others of the same period, occurs without cause, resolution, or explanatory narrative; the book's contextual focus on the mysterious properties of a house situated in the same area of Virginia provides the most concrete clue about who, or what, might be responsible. Danielewski's decision to position his fictional house near Jamestown signifies both that this period of American history informs his narrative ambiguities and that the unseen forces acting on his characters, who frequently disappear from and reappear in the story, produce effects similar to the American Indians' forcible removal of settlers who had trespassed the boundaries of comfort and civility. The house manifests traits that act on not only characters' day-to-day lives but also the very structure of Danielewski's narrative, distorting actions and the style of their narration in order to conform to an as yet unknowable agenda. By equating the house's uncanny or *unheimlich* qualities with the hostility that the white settlers perceived in local Native American populations, Danielewski suggests that one of his novel's many narrative motivations exists in key questions about the role that cross-cultural contact and negotiation play in the formation of national identities. The book implicitly criticizes the captivity narrative as a genre that confirms the importance of cultural insularity without measuring the degrees of difference and unknowability that

help to define both captors and captives. Danielewski's "house of leaves" grows out of an endemic ambiguity that originated in the founding of the country itself, responding to both its settlers' colonial status and the land's potential for physical exploitation.

The core narrative of *House of Leaves* is the story of a strange house in which photographer Will Navidson and his partner, former model Karen Green, live for a time with their two children. One door in the house opens onto a seemingly limitless labyrinth of rooms and corridors, imperceptible from the exterior, that change at random. Both Will and Karen make short films recording and commenting on their experiences in the house; Danielewski's readers access these documentaries secondhand, through the perspectives of the many cultural critics, both fictional and real, whom the narrative positions as viewers of the films. These perspectives are further annotated in a manuscript compiled by Zampanò, an elderly blind man living in a small apartment in southern California. Zampanò, whose manuscript provides the primary narrative about the Navidsons' house and the films they make about it, never appears in the present-time diegesis of Danielewski's novel; instead, his papers are discovered and appropriated, within a third frame, by a young man named Johnny Truant, who annotates them with extensive footnotes that depict a series of catastrophic events in his own life. Johnny Truant discovers Zampanò's work after the latter dies suddenly in an apartment whose floor is striated by claw marks; Truant also never appears in the novel's present-time framework. Instead, a group of unnamed editors offers his footnoted version of Zampanò's manuscript along with a series of additional footnotes and appendices.

Many structural, historical, and cultural contexts inform the narrative; however, Danielewski's attention to the specific geographies of the Navidson house, especially its links to the British colonization of Jamestown, situates his novel in close structural and thematic relation to colonial American captivity narratives. The critique that *House of Leaves* offers of captivity tropes and themes assumes that its readers possess knowledge of relevant colonial history. Danielewski may have chosen to set his story near Jamestown since the establishment of the Jamestown Settlement in the Virginia Colony in May 1607 represented a watershed in the histories of both American colonialism and Anglo-Native relations. Though the English colonists had failed several times to maintain a settlement in North America, this community signified the ongoing global dominance of British commerce as well as its inhabitants' commitment to Puritan religious separatism. The colonists' initial decision to settle on an island, isolated from not only the threat of Native American aggression but also the more fertile soil found on the mainland, and their relatively late arrival in the planting season resulted in the

deaths of ten percent of the party within the first few months alone and, during the exceptionally difficult winter of 1609–1610, the desertions of several others. In fact, more than 400 of the original 500 colonists had died by the summer of 1610. A number of factors contributed to these rocky beginnings, including the colonists' inexperience with manual labor. The nearby Algonquian chief, Powhatan, also sought an alliance with the settlers at first, but they responded with aggression, attempting to repatriate the colonists who had deserted to the Indians in the hopes of sharing their resources. These separatist gestures resulted in full-out war between the English and the Natives, a series of events featured in many later captivity narratives. Robert Hine and John Faragher have also observed that, unlike the Spanish and French colonists who sought to incorporate Natives into settlement life, the English settlers endeavored to exclude them by "pushing [them] to the periphery" of society (57). Such movements to enforce social rank only underlined the aggression that existed between the groups and reinforced the themes of antagonism and social balkanization that inform many captivity narratives.

In the end, Jamestown and other settlements helped to foster trade between England and the New World, yet the relationship between white and native inhabitants throughout the colonies often faltered in spite of the potential for sharing emerging technologies and resources. The repeated capture of whites by Natives during this period accomplished several goals: garnering bargaining-power in times of war, serving as revenge for lost allies and family members, replenishing numbers decimated by attack, and even setting an example of the advantages that existed in other cultures' standards of living. Such behavior always existed within a fraught social context, in which white settlers aggressively pursued colonialist goals with little regard for Native rights, liberty, and autonomy.

In a manner akin to several critics' conceptualizations of the captivity narrative as a constructed, collage-like, yet historically real story, Mark Danielewski frames the chronicle of the Navidson house as a chapter of American history that no single witness fully understands. Yet this account also points to the Jamestown chronicles as a key factor in establishing early America as a place of uncertainty, violence, and revelation, a complex history that represents one important dimension of Danielewski's convoluted story. *House of Leaves* consciously invokes tropes of the early American Indian captivity-narrative form through literal and metaphorical imprisonment within the titular house; characters' struggles to come to terms with a narrative whose resolution is repeatedly forestalled; their difficulties in consolidating a coherent identity; the trials inherent to encounters with a potentially hostile "other"; and an emotional catharsis that is tied to efforts to escape from captivity within the house or from its later psychological

hold. At the same time, the narrative ambiguities that define the Navidson house assemble a critique of the genre that challenges the veracity and goals of the colonialist project that underlies it. The novel's representations of the history of the Jamestown Settlement in particular, which serves as both a diegetic and a historical touchstone for captivity-narrative conventions, frame this type of human exploration as self-destructive and oblivious to the cultural worth of the unknown. Danielewski's observations about the persistence of such conventions into present-day narratives, even if fictional, suggest that such historical atrocities have not yet been adequately resolved or accommodated within the history of modern American literature.

In order to reproduce the experience of captivity within an environment that sometimes seems completely alien to colonialist landscapes, Danielewski cultivates the contradictory mixture of fascination and terror characteristic of American Indian captivity narratives in *House of Leaves*. He sustains this emotional intensity in his text through the interventions of myriad narrators and outside observers, each of whom claims a specific brand of expert knowledge while experiencing a common affect. These contributions accumulate in palimpsestic form, as a text written upon and through so many times that the original source of this sensation is impossible to discern; indeed, Danielewski implies through this cacophony of competing voices that there never has been an original. Gordon M. Sayre notes that the captivity-narrative form "has always been elastic and malleable," producing texts that are variously "revised, plagiarized, reprinted, and adapted" (17). Each facet of Danielewski's story is revealed by a different person; the novel's nested structure renders revision and adaptation key elements of its narrative style, suggesting that the most accurate account of events has already been sacrificed in favor of flexibility. He observes on the book's first page that "the house itself, like Melville's behemoth, remains resistant to summation" (3): it participates, as a self-contained entity, in the processes of history-making as much as do its narrators. These processes take place right before its inhabitants' eyes, fixing them in place as they try to understand the house and to escape from it. Like the earlier authors of captivity narratives, too, they begin to understand the difficulties inherent to such history-making when every representation of an event or person is both subjective and subject to others' rereading.

The problems begin for the Navidsons, the novel's most prominent captives, when they return from a trip out of town to find that a new door has appeared in their bedroom, opening onto a closet that did not exist before they left. When Will and his brother Tom perform a series of measurements, they find that the building's interior dimensions now exceed its exterior dimensions by  $5/16^{\text{th}}$  of an inch. From that point on, each time someone enters the new, alien space,

it grows larger, spinning off staircases and vast chambers and steep ramps into a labyrinth that seems to lead on forever. Travel through the labyrinth produces distant but menacing growls, as if some unseen predator is patrolling within the Navidson walls. Will and Karen come to feel as though control of their living space has been taken away from them; their physical surroundings directly generate their fear and anxiety. The house's physical properties do not conform to any known material laws, while its alien nature not only shapes the actions that Will, Karen, Tom, Will's friend Billy Reston, and a hired team of explorers take while penetrating the labyrinth but also determines the experiences of those analyzing the house through second-, third-, and fourth-hand accounts. The house's influence bleeds through multiple narrative layers, obscuring the causes of the many ill effects that later scholars of the house suffer. These symptoms of physical and mental distress—such as nausea, severe anxiety, and depression—diminish the store of knowledge and analysis that can be relied upon in their accounts, much as the emotional constraints and competing purposes behind the captivity narrative necessarily drained a certain measure of authentic meaning.

Several characters' experiences link the house to the colonial period of American history and indicate that its owners have always felt controlled by rather than in control of their home. The house's qualities, rooted in a basic ambiguity about who owns it, challenge the notion of private property that forms the basis of American capitalism, positioning it as though it still exists at a formative moment in the nation's history. The Navidsons' real estate agent claims the house was built in 1720 and has had "approximately .37 owners every year" (21); though the unfortunate Jamestown settlers' experiences contradict this date, its presence in local mythology reveals a vexing combination of permanence and transience. Since the house both precedes and exceeds the historical development of late-stage capitalism in its defiance of the concepts of origination and ownership, its presence suggests notions of belonging antithetical to accepted human commerce. Karen's experiences confirm this sense that the house exists outside the usual boundaries of space and time; a compass she purchases will not function within its walls, and, upon in-depth exploration, its labyrinth reveals only an "utter blankness found within. . . . not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish work has ever been discovered there" (Danielewski 119). Intensive elemental analysis suggests a far more troubling possibility: Mel O'Geery, a petrologist that Will Navidson hires to perform radiometric dating on some samples taken from the walls of the labyrinth, finds that "several of the . . . samples also appear to have ages predating the formation of the earth" (374). O'Geery's tests conclude that the materials range in age from a few thousand to 4.7 billion years; he labels

his findings only “a very nice little vein of history,” in spite of the fact that some of the samples may be interstellar (378).

Though this discovery seems to confirm pre-colonial origins, the house's chronological ambiguity points to the many ways in which its very unknowability captivates its audiences—a trait that characterized white-Native relations in the settlement period. The alien nature of its material components reinforces the sense of psychological alienation that its inhabitants experience; the Native dwelling-places in which many colonial captives found themselves produced similar sentiments. Danielewski includes an abbreviated history of the Jamestown area in chapter XVIII that underlines the narrative's attention to some less successful moments in the American past, particularly in the settlers' encounters with the unknown. This history also serves as an introduction to the journal entries with which this essay begins, described as “a strange set of pages currently held at the Lacuna Rare Books Library at Horenew College in South Carolina” (410). The journal is thus revealed as a microcosm of the entire novel, itself a “strange set of pages” that leads again and again into gaps, inconsistencies, and dead ends. Though it is held in a rare-books collection, its historical worth implicitly confirmed by scholarly attention, the journal embodies nothing so much as the lacunae of meaning that its writer and subsequent readers confront.

The house's external properties only help to maintain the illusion of everyday life, just as captivity narratives focus on the parallels between life in captivity and life at home. Danielewski's narrative re-creates the jarring experience of encountering an unfamiliar, potentially hostile force by focusing on the disruptions of everyday life that such an encounter produces. A realtor with whom Karen discusses selling the Navidson house points out that “the only thing distinguished about your home's past . . . would be the colony, the Jamestown Colony” (409). Though this comment provokes no desire in Karen to perform further research, it produces a visible effect in the commentators who observe her experiences from a distance. The long s's present in the journal entries soon begin to permeate Johnny Truant's associated footnotes, for instance, suggesting that the malevolent energy embodied in the house can infect a narrative removed nearly four hundred years in time and space.

The notion of the “remove,” a term that invokes both time and space, is a central convention of the American Indian captivity narrative that dates back at least to Mary Rowlandson's 1682 *True History of the Captivity and Restoration*; Rowlandson's text helped to delineate the genre through its accounts of twenty removes from colonial life into a distinctly unfamiliar wilderness that she was forced to traverse alone. So, too, Danielewski's nested narratives point the reader toward an always anticipated moment of resolution that continually recedes through

diegetic delay and deferral. The novel's structure extends its thematic focus on captivity and control, ideas that manifest in questions of communal and personal identity. Danielewski's characters repeatedly defer the possibility of establishing such identities in their ambivalence about the causes of the house's anomalies and their efforts to intervene on narrative levels chronologically or geographically removed from their own. Rather than undermining Danielewski's authorial control, these efforts eliminate the question of the author altogether, providing a neat solution to the difficulties inherent to ascertaining authorial ownership in the traditional captivity narrative. Danielewski represents authorship instead as a collective task in which anyone with access to the narrative can participate.

Both the characters' daily existence and the maintenance of the text itself are represented as vulnerable, subject to redirection without warning. The terrain of the Navidson house remains fundamentally unknowable; Danielewski presents this lack of knowledge as desirable, suggesting that captives' accounts of captors' civilizations benefit from the decision to accept the unknowable. In a discussion of early American fiction, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse argue that "the American novel . . . imagine[s] 'home' more as a crossroads and less as a beginning or endpoint in a vast network of utterly contingent connections" (681). Both *House of Leaves* and the "house of leaves" that is its subject exist at a crossroads of transient existence, floating signifiers, and palimpsestic identities. The novel's references to the structural, thematic, and rhetorical conventions of the American Indian captivity narrative can offer one way to cohere such narratively disjunctive moments of meaning by locating the substance of characters' experiences in the "removes" through which they travel. Rather than closing the circuit of meaning in his captivity narrative through a final promise of Christian redemption or providence, Danielewski places faith in the reader's ability to explore the text's potential for broader aesthetic and social resonance.

In keeping with the serial nature of the captivity narrative's removes, Danielewski represents his characters' search for personal identity at several different moments in the novel. Each of these instances manifests psychological effects unique to an individual, highlighting the persistence of captivity-based trauma beyond the period of physical imprisonment. One of the Navidson family's earliest discoveries about their house's unusual properties occurs, for example, when the children, Chad and Daisy, race into the labyrinth and vanish, their shouts echoing from what appears to be, impossibly, hundreds of feet away. When Will Navidson is finally able to retrieve them, they appear "still clutching a homemade candle, their faces lit like sprites on a winter's eve" (57). Armed for the descent into darkness with only their candles and the private game they are playing, the children remain unaware of the danger that has threatened them, yet these fa-

miliar features save them from the terror of the house that haunts their parents. Trying to make sense of events like this one, fictional parapsychologist Lucinda S. Hausmaninger describes the house as “the omphalos of all we are” (414): it contains all the meaning that the world can offer, a promise similar to that of many religions, yet this knowledge comes at the price of personal security. One must give oneself up to the risks of living with the unknown.

As did the authors of the early captivity narratives, who also struggled with the uncertain nature of their physical environment, the Navidsons understand themselves as both nationally located and unmoored from the state and the history that once sheltered them. Andrea Tinnemeyer points out that the three players always present in the drama of captivity—the captive, her captors, and the person or group who comes to her rescue—occupy positions that underline “the nation-building project at hand.” Because the captivity narrative itself is meant to illustrate the supposedly immoral nature of the Native population and to underline the Christian values that helped to sustain the captive, it must “serve as a dynamic register for national dissonance . . . and for cautionary tales of unchecked territorial expansion and genocide” (Tinnemeyer xii-xiii). Richard Slotkin notes that the anxiety implied by this ambivalent relationship to the nation resonated for Puritans in at least three ways: in their rejection of English national identity, in their resistance to Native practices and beliefs, and in their children’s creation of original American identities (98–99). Thus the captivity narrative manifests a complex set of sometimes contradictory notions about the allegiance owed to the native land. Danielewski’s characters repeatedly negotiate among the terms of this dialectic in their attempts to center themselves as individuals and as a family within the hostile space of the home; while Chad and Daisy are able to navigate the labyrinth without danger because they do not comprehend its nature, their parents find themselves caught between the identities they possessed before coming to Ash Tree Lane and their sense that no representational category can correctly articulate their experiences.

Danielewski acknowledges this complex relationship to national identity in his narrative’s chronology; key events often occur on national holidays, while references to national cultures and mythologies highlight the supposedly immanent nature of patriotic sentiment. Johnny Truant edits a large portion of the manuscript on July 4, a holiday that falls near his birthday (181), while the final events of the Navidsons’ story take place on Halloween, and Zampanò’s own edits conclude on Christmas Day (527–528). Danielewski’s reference to Halloween here serves as a rather tongue-in-cheek nod to conventions of the haunted-house tale, but he incorporates many mythologies with more complex cultural significance as well. The house is situated on Ash Tree Lane, an apparent reference to the

Norse mythology of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which is an ash tree. Numerous allusions to ash recur throughout the text, including a quote from *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* by Thomas Hariot, who worked for Sir Walter Raleigh: "Ashe, good for caske hoopes: and if neede require, plow worke, as alfo for many things els" (408). This quote appears as the epigraph to chapter XVIII, which includes the bulk of the Jamestown history and discussion in the text, suggesting that the Navidson house contains elements essential to the maintenance of the nation itself. In spite of its potentially prehistoric origins, the house's modern identity is tied to that of the colonies. Gordon Sayre has observed that "the [captivity narrative's] importance is unique to the English literature of America"; the genre is not central to the literature of any other colonial region (4). Danielewski highlights the importance of the captivity narrative within American literary traditions by linking key plot events to captivity conventions and by rendering national identity as fluid and mutable even as he offers alternate ways of imagining its epistemological functions.

As Wendy Martin has noted, "travel, whether voluntary or forced, presents a radical challenge to the notion of a fixed stable self" (viii). Danielewski's nested narrative structure incorporates several journeys in which characters either act to uncover the house's mysteries or are acted upon without their consent. Each of these incidents functions as a "remove" from the life with which characters are familiar, effectively reinscribing their identities as unknown and, as long as they are in contact with the house, unknowable. Unstable personal identity presents a steep challenge for characters and readers alike. When Will Navidson undertakes his solitary exploration of the house, after the professional explorers he hired have met a series of devastating outcomes, the text representing his journey dwindles little by little until only a few lines or words appear on each page. As he loses all sense of direction and purpose, a skewed perception reflected in the text's unconventional positioning sideways or upside-down on the page, his ability to narrate his experiences verbally also diminishes. One of his last utterances appears on three consecutive pages, underlining his need to hold onto a concrete sense of self: "'Don't be scared. Don't be. I am'" (480–482). While he is clearly trying to reassure himself in this passage, he also asserts his identity in the face of an exploration whose discoveries do not conform to any known precedents. He still possesses sufficient agency to declare himself, yet the nature of his vocal expression is constrained by the undefined forces operating around him. For the reader, the typographical sparseness of sections like this one re-creates a tangible sense of captivity that a more conventionally represented narrative cannot.

In the end, it is Will's partner, Karen Green, who conquers severe claustrophobia in order to enter the house's labyrinth and pull him to safety. Her

heroic, unselfish actions replenish the meaning drained from Navidson's sense of self by his fruitless quest to uncover the house's origins; she adds fallibility to the figure of the rescuer as well, demonstrating that every player in the captivity tale is subject to some kind of shortcoming. At the same time, she manifests physical markers that signal her participation in a narrative aware of its links to the defining literatures of early America. When she reappears outside the house, holding the recovered Navidson in her lap, Karen wears a pink ribbon in her hair (523)—a narrative device clearly meant to recall the character Faith from Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." In that story, an errant pink ribbon from Faith's cap signals to her husband that she is lost to the satanic temptations that have consumed the rest of his village; the ribbon suggests that his "Faith is gone" and no good can be reclaimed. Danielewski underlines this reference in the appendix containing letters from Pelafina Lièvre, Johnny Truant's mother, who is a permanent resident of the Three Attic Whalestoe Institute, a mental hospital: at one point, she describes herself as captivated like a "silly school girl" by her son's clever letters and, "[l]ike Hawthorne's Faith," wearing "pink ribbons in [her] hair" to demonstrate her devotion (599). If read in the context of Hawthorne's story, these ribbons communicate only the ambivalent nature of her emotions, yet, in a parallel level of the narrative, Karen fills in the gaps in Will's life that his explorations have produced. Rather than functioning as a badge of her uncertainty, her pink ribbon gestures toward the faith in individual and communal identities that has been sacrificed to curiosity about the unknown. Her grief at Will's absence and suffering in the labyrinth produces the shattered self characteristic of the captivity tale but also coheres their family's story. Danielewski represents this fragmentation in terms of the potential that the unknown possesses.

Danielewski establishes the fact that humans cannot sustain a day-to-day existence in or near the Navidson house; rather than cultivating an atmosphere of homeliness and welcome, it wears down inhabitants' fortitude by undermining the possibility of an ownership that would connect them to the broader social community. Several narrators raise the question of who in fact owns the house and, by extension, the narratives that house it. Zampanò speculates early in his discussion about "whether or not it is someone's house" since its history remains veiled: "Though if so whose? Whose was it or even whose *is* it? Thus giving voice to another suspicion: could the owner still be there?" (121). This sense of a life experienced through accident recurs throughout many early captivity narratives as well. Richard Slotkin points out that the captive, once returned to her original people, must live by lessons learned in captivity: she realizes that "life is lived on the brink of an abyss," and only continual vigilance can preserve her soul from

“the wrath of God’s judgment on sinful people” (111). Danielewski’s characters also struggle to forestall the threats posed by the house’s unpredictable nature.

Reflecting on the Navidson’s experiences, Johnny Truant observes that the most important moments of history tend to vanish unless their lessons contribute to a shared pool of communal knowledge:

Where is the starving time of 1610? The 1622 Powhatan Indian Insurrection which left almost 400 dead? Where are the dioramas of famine and disease? The black and broken toes? The gangrene? The night rending pain?

‘Why, it’s right here,’ says a docent.

But I can’t see what she’s talking about.

And besides, there is no docent. (500)

His failure to locate in the present day the history that serves as the context for the house signals the precarious nature of the existence that he and the other participants in the Navidson story now share. As a central narrator of the text, he is aware of the early American history that shaped the house’s bizarre evolution, yet the more unpleasant elements of that history have faded for those not directly involved, wiped clean by their willful ignorance. No person or group is willing to lay a claim to this history, so its long-term effects diminish just as the house’s origins remain unclear. Truant finds himself haunted by the need to remember the lessons he has learned: “Everywhere I’ve gone, there’ve been hints of Zampanò’s history, by which I mean Navidson’s, without any real evidence to confirm any of it” (501). Because he has been captivated by a narrative that tells the story of multiple captivities engineered by a single, unknowable house, Truant realizes that the material effects of history persist in spite of unreliable witnesses.

Captivity narratives are also defined as much by their authors’ ability—or, in some cases, unwillingness—to escape as they are by the original act of capture. Often the captive herself must initiate a successful flight, though in many cases interested friends will facilitate her efforts. Will Navidson, first alerted to his house’s imminent collapse by Karen’s scream, rushes into the disintegrating structure to pull his partner to safety before beginning to search for his children. Aware, perhaps, that “this is the first time the house has ‘physically acted’ upon inhabitants and objects” (341), he makes decisions without thinking through the consequences. Because he is too late to rescue Daisy, Tom snatches her up first and reaches Will just in time to hand his daughter to him. This moment of joyous reunion, followed immediately by absolute loss, forever reshapes the

Navidson's relationships to one another. Tom cannot extricate himself from the house; instead, the family hears confirmation of his fate "in the shape of an awful gasp" (346). Since two family members' escape from the house required the death of a third, Will Navidson realizes that his successful escape depended upon an unsought sacrifice.

Slotkin argues that this progression of events in the early American captivity narrative, from an entry into the new environment of America to captivity by an unknown Native "other," begins "in a happy condition of innocence or complacency." This attitude is shattered by unforeseen challenges but "results in a figurative rebirth" attesting to the trials the captive has successfully endured (101). Will undergoes a self-imposed ordeal after his family escapes from the house: he returns to make a solo exploration of the labyrinth, determined to identify at last the forces that took three men's lives and drove them from their home. The letter he writes to Karen in the course of this adventure articulates his belief that the house is an instrument for conversion from worldly egotism to selflessness: "God's a house. Which is not to say that our house is God's house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house is God" (390). This revelation reshapes Will's perspective on personal morality even as the letter's increasing grammatical and syntactical errors reflect a fragmenting state of mind. He concludes by mourning Delial, the dying Sudanese girl whose photograph earned him a Pulitzer, alongside his brother and his own sense of self: "i miss her i miss delial i miss the man i thought i was before i met her the man who would have saved her who would have done something who would have been tom maybe hes the one im looking for or maybe im looking for all of them" (393). The house strips away the pretenses that had concealed his true motivations; with the essential facts of his existence laid bare, he pins his hopes for escape this final time on the possibility of showing his family the humane qualities that he possesses. Yet he suffers physical disability in the course of this quest, loses his brother, and sees Karen succumb to a terminal illness after their reunion. The house denies him redemption in spite of his efforts.

In *House of Leaves*, as in other examples of the captivity form, successful escapes often incorporate strategies that captors cannot anticipate, even if these escapes also involve personal sacrifice. Janis P. Stout suggests that such planned escapes constitute "the most fully characteristic form adopted by the American imagination . . . a part of the mythology of the American experience from its origins" (31); a successful traveler or escapee is motivated by an essentially American frontier impulse to seek out the new. At the same time, some narratives of travel and captivity include a "counter move toward the East," which may be interpreted as "an ironic reversal of the original hopeful flight from Old World

decadence to the New Eden” (Stout 5)—or, as in the Navidsons’ experiences, one such strategy meant to circumvent the house’s hold on its inhabitants. After Karen successfully rescues Will from his failed attempt at solo exploration, she cannot explain exactly how she found him or how they were able to emerge. According to an interview that she gives afterward, she did not know where he was but simply thought about finding him until she saw him; when she wanted to get outside again, the house “just dissolved.” Though the interviewer remains skeptical of this insight—“How’s that possible? It’s still there, isn’t it?” (524–525)—the episode reveals that faith, the very property that Hawthorne’s Goodman Brown lost so irrevocably, enables the family’s survival in this moment. Karen may have imagined that flight from the house represented their most viable option, but, paradoxically, only her return to it can save her partner. Such flights are repeated in and echo through the novel’s other narrative levels as well. Pelefina Lièvre escapes from the Whalestoe Institute for a day, for instance, claiming that “[n]ot even lightning could out light my rage” (596). Her later comments on what she gained through this brief period of freedom can be read as an analysis of the purpose and function of the captivity narrative as well: her observation that “[t]hese pages are my only flight. At least they escape” (619) signifies that the captive ultimately achieves freedom in name only, remaining subject to the constraints of the unknown and the unknowable even after returning to her home. While the primary goal of a captive may be to effect a physical escape, the rhetorical goals of the captivity narrative center on communicating such experiences to the outside world—giving them a structure but allowing their consequences to permeate beyond the limits of the page.

The themes and gestures that Danielewski borrows from the captivity narrative contribute to the substance of this house of leaves. Its revisionist and visionary form is born from an American literary tradition of emigration, conflict, conversion, and rebirth. Even as it questions the social structures that form the basis of modern American culture, it places the burden of knowledge on the reader, who must accept the unknowable, ambiguous dimensions of history and come to understand that captivity is also a self-imposed phenomenon. To escape from the confines of the enigmatic other, to assert absolute mastery over the forms of knowledge and experience that have always fascinated us, is to give up the very fact of desire itself. Rather, Danielewski argues, the captivity narrative allows us the opportunity to put ourselves in the same dangerous position as the captor in order both to acknowledge the gaps in our knowledge that can never be filled and to find representations of human experience that exist outside of us.

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