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White Masculinity and the Performance of Authorial Failure in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

This essay examines the depiction, subversion, and reconfigurations of white masculinity in Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern horror novel *House of Leaves*, with a particular focus on varying thematizations, and performances, of failure. I venture that Will Navidson, photojournalist and protagonist of the novel's innermost narrative, is construed in reference to a conception of masculine art coded as heroism. In this conception, failure is something to be struggled against even at the peril of mental, physical, and communal wellbeing. However, by juxtaposing Navidson to the foil character Robert Holloway with a hyperbolic display of heroic, individualist masculinity, the novel emphasizes his gradual moving away from such a conception and towards a less masculinist, more comforting, and communal acceptance of failure. In a second step, however, I argue that *House of Leaves*, through its nested doll structure and repeated references to artistic dramatization, in fact replaces one notion of exploitative masculinity with another, staging the acceptance of failure as the greater heroic feat than the futile confrontation of it. Therefore, it re-models rather than disassembles a white masculinist notion of the creative process which is as contingent on failure to define itself *ex negativo* as the form it superficially writes against.

Keywords: Danielewski; masculinity; failure; performativity; postmodernism

*L'homme se croit un héros, toujours comme l'enfant.
L'homme aime la guerre, la chasse, la pêche [...]*
(Marguerite Duras, qtd. in Danielewski, *House* 652)¹

In 2022, the US-American author and 2006 National Book Award finalist Mark Z. Danielewski delivered a New Year's address via Instagram, in which he ventured:

There is a connection, especially among artists, with failure, and I think in many ways that the creative process is about a constant engagement with failure. [...] Pretty much every day when I'm working [...] there is a sense of incompleteness, a sense of not being able to reach what I'm reaching for, of not being able to continue, of not being able to assemble in a way that reflects accurately what that area beyond articulation seems to provoke in me. ("Engaging Failure" 06:43–11:46)

Two contradictory tenets underlie this speech: to a degree, it constitutes an admission of human and personal fallibility, a neo-Romantic resignation to impossible goals that is epitomized in the German poet Novalis's aphorism "we *seek* the absolute everywhere and only ever *find* things" (23, emphasis in original). Danielewski posits that failure in any artistic endeavor is inevitable, perpetual, and universal. It should best be embraced with humility, he continues, since the reason for its paralyzing effect is merely its being loaded with "ego or expectations, the highly erroneous notion that others are not experiencing that" ("Engaging Failure" 07:37–07:50). The failure of art must not be conflated with personal failure, but rather accepted as an essential and valuable part of the artistic self. In other words, its value is decoupled from traditionally masculinist "burdens" of invincibility (Cheung 284). At the same time, however, Danielewski does not argue for the acceptance of failure per se. Rather, he sees it as a precondition for heroic confrontation in which artistic subjectivity can be formed, tested, and ultimately validated on the basis of questionable, potentially harmful tenets:

What I would like to say is that if you're not failing, you're really not working hard enough, because failure is an everyday experience, an everyday part of the creative experience in very much the same way that athletes can work towards failure, where literally their muscles begin to exhaust themselves to the point where they can't continue. This is not something that you can do always, but it is part of pushing beyond that

¹ "Man believes himself a hero, always like the child. Man loves war, the hunt, fishing [...]" (my trans.).

pleasant plateau towards real gains. (Danielewski, “Engaging Failure” 07:53–08:39)

Inevitable failure, in this conception, is something to be struggled against; the individual’s worth as an artist is established not in his² coming to terms with his own inability to reach the absolute, but in his continuing to seek it despite frustration, depletion, and even—as the analogy to athletes implies—risk of harm. The artist’s quest, in this case, is but another guise for Romantic individualism, which, historically, has not only posited “the artist as hero, [but] as male hero” who refuses to show weakness in his “attempting to ‘present the unpresentable’” (Larrissy 5). This parallels hegemonic paradigms of manhood, a concept that has long been equated with willpower, “knowing how to face danger and pain” (Mosse 100). As Kaja Silverman writes, the male subject has historically been held to aspire “to mastery and sufficiency” (52). Hardship, in that conception, serves to demonstrate man’s perseverance; precarious endeavors prove his “hardness and potency” (Schwalbe 68). While one part of Danielewski’s statement and the metaphors he uses disavow such traditionally masculine qualities by openly admitting to ubiquitous failure, another evokes the very challenges posed by that failure as prerequisite for the validation of the artist. Subversion and perpetuation exist alongside each other in his speech without conclusive hierarchy or resolution, which results in the takeaway regarding masculinist conceptions of creativity ultimately lying in the eye—or self-conception—of the beholder.

As Christine Battersby, Darrin McMahon, Adrianna Paliyenko, and many others have demonstrated, there has been a strong association between masculinity and artistic genius throughout history, which persists well into the present day. This association also permeates Danielewski’s work, especially his first and still most famous novel *House of Leaves*, where all artistically inclined characters are male. Even though he never explicitly genders his conception of the creative process as perseverance in the face of unpleasantness in his New Year’s address, I propose that a gendered component is in fact implicit if one takes representations of masculinity, heroism, and creativity in his literary work into account, which the audience of his Instagram account is likely to know in detail. Therefore, I aim to take Danielewski’s simultaneous yet mutually contradictory conceptions of failure in the creative process as a lens through

² For reasons that will become apparent over the course of this essay, I keep with Gabrielle Dean: “I use and draw attention to masculine pronouns for authors, not to prefer them, but to show that they have been preferred” (251).

which to re-examine *House of Leaves*. I venture that the novel constitutes a multi-levelled performance not only of failure in general, but specifically of failure of heroic masculinity which is overwhelmingly embodied by white US-Americans. However, in the same breath, it re-forms a less perilous and thus ultimately more unsubvertible masculine artistic identity.³

In the following, I will therefore first present a reading of Will Navidson and Robert Holloway, two key characters in *House of Leaves*' main story, both of which are engaged in a quest for an unobtainable goal that is metonymical for the creative process as described in Danielewski's address. This reading will especially highlight how Holloway's exaggerated performance of masculinist individualism functions as a foil to Navidson's heroic acceptance of failure. In a second step, I will take the novel's unusual structure into account and discuss the role of authorship—both by characters within the text and by Danielewski himself—to outline how performative failure is in fact harnessed for the self-construction of the creative subject. In this, I use the term 'performance' not in a strictly Butlerian sense as constant repetition and reiteration, but rather as "a willed act by a subject" (Cabantous et al. 201), a constitutive self-presentation of a subject that is contingent on being perceived by others.⁴

House of Leaves—which a *New York Times* review described as an "adventure story" notwithstanding "all its modernist maneuvers, post-modernist airs and post-postmodernist critical parodies" (Kelly)—consists of at least three nested narratives: it starts as the report of Johnny Truant, a tattoo-artist in training adrift in Los Angeles. Johnny, by chance, comes into possession and begins sorting through a manuscript left by the blind recluse Zampanò, who was murdered in his home. The manuscript, in turn, is an exorbitant academic treatise on a—possibly fictitious—docu-

³ While it is not strictly speaking concerned with the literary movement of 'New Sincerity' and does not quote directly from his monograph, this essay is greatly indebted to Felix Haase's 2022 *Productive Failure: Sincerity and Irony in Contemporary North American Literature*, which offers an eye-opening study of authentication through performative failure in the works of Ben Lerner, Dave Eggers, and Sheila Heti.

⁴ I acknowledge that the difference, of course, is gradual. Judith Butler herself, while warning against a "reduction of performativity to performance" (*Bodies* 234), posits that "the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that he or she speaks" (*Excitable Speech* 28). If that language is directed at an audience—for example an author writing, or a filmmaker speaking into a camera, such as in *House of Leaves*—a performance in the literal sense falls under Butler's concept of performativity.

mentary film, *The Navidson Record*. It was created by the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Will Navidson and documents his moving with his wife and children into a house in suburban Virginia where, inexplicably, new rooms, hallways, and eventually a Lovecraftian labyrinth of impossible, ash-gray hallways appear. Each of these narrative layers contains its share of characters—frequently artists, exclusively white cis-male US-Americans—in pursuit of some “area beyond articulation” (Danielewski, “Engaging Failure” 11:45): Johnny Truant strives to discern the veracity of Zampanò’s manuscript, and Zampanò’s writing aims to provide a definitive scholarly explication of Navidson’s film. Foremost, Will Navidson—the *de facto* protagonist of *House of Leaves*—embarks on a quest to make sense of the categorically inarticulable labyrinth that has appeared in his home.⁵

Once a highly renowned photojournalist, Navidson has given up on assignments abroad, as they had “led to increased alienation and untold personal difficulties” with his partner Karen Green (Danielewski, *House* 10). Instead, he has settled down with his family to mend their frayed relationship. Having been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for a photograph of a starving girl in Sudan stalked by a vulture, Navidson is modeled after real-life photojournalist Kevin Carter, who received accolades and criticism alike for a 1993 photograph titled “The Vulture and the Little Girl.” Carter, however, died by suicide at the age of thirty-three. It has since become a commonplace that his depression and death were caused by grueling scenes like these with which his work regularly confronted him. As Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman write, Carter was stylized from “the name on the side of the photograph to a narrative, [...] a subject in the cultural story his photograph helped write by being transformed, infected more than affected, by what he had to bear” (6–7). He has become symbolic for the idea of an artist who not only suffered but was quite literally killed by his work.⁶ The fact that the character of Navidson is so explicitly modeled after Carter—even the fictitious editors of *House of Leaves* point out the similarity (Danielewski 368)—means that his actions

⁵ All of these are ultimately artistic endeavors: Navidson creates a feature-length film, Zampanò is not just a critic but has potentially invented the whole narrative he writes about, and Johnny tries to “create stories to protect [himself]” (Danielewski, *House* 20), his attempt at a conclusive story around Zampanò’s manuscript among them.

⁶ Upon Carter’s suicide, various obituaries explicitly claimed as much. *The Guardian*, for instance, wrote that he “always carried around the horror of the work he did. In the end it was too much” (McCabe).

and developments within the novel enter into dialogue with this cultural narrative of art as hardship, but also as gendered and imperialist exploitation: One remarkable footnote to Carter's story is that the "Little Girl" in his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph was revealed in 2011 to actually have been a boy (Rojas & Núñez). One can only speculate what exact role the feminine coding of the photograph's subject vis-à-vis a male photographer might have played in its cultural impact, but, as Elisabeth Bronfen writes, femininity and death have long been "enmeshed paradigms" in our culture (361), and the suffering woman's body has seen equally paradigmatic use "as cipher for the [male] artist-hero" (52). While Carter's photograph does not overtly sexualize the starving child, through its (faulty) gendering, it nonetheless leaves that interpretative option. *House of Leaves*, accidentally, seems to allow an opening for the same counterfactual gendering by calling the girl in the photograph "Delial," a singularly obscure name with no apparent male or female association.

Photojournalism, in this context, functions as a metonymy for art in general: Kevin Carter was awarded his Pulitzer Prize not for his reporting as such, but for "a distinguished example of feature photography" ("The 1994 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Feature Photography"). Moreover, *House of Leaves* itself goes to some lengths to question the distinction between the two. "Will Navidson is one of this century's finest photographers, but because his work defines him as a 'photojournalist' he suffers to this day that most lamentable of critical denunciations," one character comments, to which Zampanò adds, "A photojournalist is very much like an athlete. [...] great photographers must not only commit to reflex those physical demands crucial to handling a camera, they must also refine and internalize aesthetic sensibilities" (Danielewski, *House* 419). Zampanò thereby anticipates the athlete metaphor Danielewski uses in his New Year's address, which stresses the associative links between the two. Both photojournalist and athlete are distinguished by their physical prowess as well as aesthetic sensibilities. Consequently, Navidson in *House of Leaves* can be read as metonymical for precisely the form of persevering artist Danielewski describes.

The second reference point for Navidson is Herman Melville's Captain Ahab.⁷ Like Ahab, Navidson is the "captain" (Danielewski, *House* 95) of a fateful expedition, departing from dry US-American mainland into "walls black like black waters when they are heavy and seem to belong to other seas" (546). Michael S. Kimmel writes that "in Ahab, Melville provides a portrait of gendered madness, a blind rage fueled by sexual obsession, the self-destruction of the self-made Marketplace Man" (28), or, in the current context, of masculine identity dependent on hardship in order to legitimize masculine identity. Like Carter's, Ahab's endeavor is ultimately suicidal, and likewise, there is no overtly gendered or imperial motivation to his quest but an excess of it in its subtext.

From the moment the first impossible hallway appears in Navidson's house, he becomes obsessed with the arduous task of measuring, making sense of, and ultimately defeating that impossibility. While his motivation is never explicitly his own ego—thus keeping with Danielewski's own ostensible disavowal of this factor in his New Year's address—he does confront the labyrinth with the declared goal of "going down in history" (Danielewski, *House* 91). Crucially, however, the novel does not allow for Navidson to be reduced to a mere allegory for performative male heroism. Such an attempted reduction is complicated by the portrayal of the secondary characters—his 'crew'—with whom he confronts the labyrinth, first among them one Holloway Roberts from Menomonie,⁸ Wisconsin. In order to understand how Holloway contrasts Navidson's character, it is worth examining his first in-person appearance in the novel—i.e., in Navidson's documentary film—in full length:

Holloway Roberts arrives carrying a rifle. In fact in the very first shot we see of him, he emerges from a truck holding a Weatherby 300 magnum.

Even without weapons though, Holloway would still be an intimidating man. He is broad and powerful with a thick beard and deeply creased brow. Dissatisfaction motivates him, and at forty-eight, he still drives

⁷ While this analogy is something only a few critics have remarked on in passing (see Kelly; McCaffery and Gregory), it is heavily implied by the novel itself. Early on, *House of Leaves* likens the labyrinthine house Navidson is obsessed with exploring to "Melville's behemoth" (Danielewski, *House* 3), subsequently displays various structural parallels with *Moby Dick*, and features a fictional interview with Stephen King in which the author compares the symbolic oversaturation of Navidson's quest to that of "Ahab's whale" (361). I currently examine the parallels in detail in my PhD project at FSU Jena, expected to be published in 2025.

⁸ A near-anagram for "Monomanie," the German translation of "monomania," which already cues us to what sort of character we can expect Holloway to be.

himself harder than any man half his age. Consequently, when he steps onto Navidson's front lawn, arms folded, eyes scrutinizing the house, bees flying near his boots, he looks less like a guest and more like some conquistador landing on new shores, preparing for war. (Danielewski, *House* 80)

As this passage demonstrates, Holloway does not merely tap into masculine paradigms of the hunter and warrior, the tough-as-nails imperialist. Rather, he embodies them to the point of caricature: his paraphernalia, truck and rifle, are established before the reader receives any other information on him. The explicit mention of his age positions him at the brink of failure, that is, with little time left before his physical strength and thus ability to prove his worth will wane. At the same time, however, this very precarity is thereby tied to his legitimacy, emphasizing that it is precisely Holloway's exertion *in spite of* his age that proves what mettle he is made of, echoing Danielewski's athlete pushing past discomfort. Moreover, the imperialist connotations of such a concept of masculinity are underscored by the simile of the conquistador, the gendered ones by the remark that Holloway "places his hand on Karen's back and makes her laugh with a line the camera never hears" a few pages later (Danielewski, *House* 82). He is more self-destructively dedicated than Kevin Carter, a more uncompromising and violently individualistic leader than Ahab.⁹

Holloway's two associates, Wax and Jed, epitomize two variants of this same hegemonic masculinity. One of them is planning to get married and found a heteronormative family himself soon, the other "likes to drink, get laid, and most of all boast about how much he drank and how many times he got laid" (Danielewski, *House* 81). Both are exceptionally capable and resilient, and essentially serve but as secondary instances of Holloway's own narrative function, namely to draw our attention to the theme of excessive masculinity while also functioning as a foil to Navidson's divergence from it. *House of Leaves* invites us to read the two characters combinedly, as competing performances of masculinity with competing approaches to an identical quest: stepping into, struggling against, and photographically articulating the "area beyond articulation" of the

⁹ Another reference point laden with connotations of individualist masculinity is, of course, Ernest Hemingway, who is evoked not only through visual similarities and the characteristic rifle, but also in the almost perfect assonance of their last names. For an extensive discussion of Hemingway, violence, and masculinist performance, see Thomas F. Strychacz's *Hemingway's Theaters of Masculinity*, and Roger Horrock's *Masculinity in Crisis* (89–106).

labyrinth.¹⁰ Navidson may be an artist in the most literal sense—he wants to use the footage gathered in his explorations for raw material of a film—but the others are not only explorers too, but relentless athletes just like the one Danielewski employs as a metaphor for the creative process. Holloway’s character can therefore likewise be read as equally metonymical for the type of self-sufficient artist.

That being said, the spoils of that quest are widely different for the two protagonists. “Holloway Roberts’ tape is virtually unwatchable: tilted frames, out of focus, shakes, horrible lighting [whereas] only the images Navidson shoots capture the otherness inherent in that place” (Danielewski, *House* 64). Moreover, Navidson’s and Holloway’s approaches—and responses—to moments of failure diverge over the course of the story. While the former’s interest in the labyrinth remains academic and artistic—he wants to solve this impossibility of physics and finish the documentary film he started shooting when he and his family moved into the house—the latter’s becomes increasingly combative. Even though the endless hallways are all identically empty, window- and featureless, Holloway “keeps pushing forward, in what appears to be a determined effort to find something, something different, something defining, or at least some kind of indication of an outsideness to that place” (Danielewski, *House* 119). The parallels between this behavior and the strife for “what that area beyond articulation *seems* to provoke in [him]” that Danielewski attributes to the process of an artist (“Engaging Failure” 11:43–11:46, emphasis added) are obvious. Like an athlete ignoring his own exertion, Holloway pushes “beyond that pleasant plateau towards real gain” (“Engaging Failure” 8:36–8:39). *House of Leaves*, however, clearly does not endorse that behavior: Holloway becomes unhinged, insane even. He refuses to leave the dark hallways, splits from his associates, and, when they return for him on a rescue expedition, shoots both of them before committing suicide (Danielewski, *House* 318; 337). The reason for this behavior is explicitly stated by a fictitious critic in novel to be his inability to admit failure in the face of his overbearing “sense of inadequacy” (330).

Read against Holloway’s aggressive, excessive, and fundamentally destructive masculinity, Navidson’s alternative performance becomes remarkable. As with Holloway, there is a point when Navidson leaves

¹⁰ Of course, much could be made of the symbolism of the house and the significance of the domestic sphere especially in US-American culture. The copious footnotes in *House of Leaves* indeed already offer an inflationary amount of such interpretations themselves.

behind his expedition crew. He rides a mountain bike for thousands of miles through corridors that inexplicably lead downhill, prompting him to note “a definite decrease in resistance” (Danielewski, *House* 424). This detail is crucial, since it makes his expedition, unlike Holloway’s, not one defined by struggle but rather by natural, almost joyful progress. In moments of disorientation, the manuscript’s fictitious editors quote comforting poetry in their footnotes, thereby creating an ambience of tenderness and community rather than precarity. On multiple occasions, the text highlights moments of enjoyment (Danielewski, *House* 462) and lightheartedness (464; 476) on Navidson’s journey.

When he eventually runs out of supplies and can do nothing but record his own voice in impenetrable darkness, he “does not rave about angels in chariots [...] Nor does he offer [the viewer] his C.V. like Holloway. Instead [...] Navidson begins rambling on about people he has known and loved” and, ultimately, “lost” (Danielewski, *House* 474). This sentiment is underscored by a single line of unlabeled sheet music after his last words. Its melody could be either that of the popular Civil War song “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” or the near-identical anti-war song “Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye,” the former of which describes the glorious reunification of a soldier with his family after the war, the latter the irreversible damage done to him by war (“When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again”). There are three significant implications of this ambiguity: first, it evokes notions of heroism at the same time as it reminds us of their disastrous consequences. Second, both songs equally focus on notions of community rather than individualism. Third, and most crucially, since only a single line of sheet music is given, the notions of (harmful) heroism connoted by either song remain unfinished, abandoned, transcended even. Moreover, the fact that the song is presented as a melody without lyrics, which Navidson “can remember but cannot quite name” (Danielewski, *House* 476), situates its connotations exclusively in the past. We are reminded of the circumstances that got Navidson into this peril to begin with instead of the goals he hoped to achieve. The wordless tune signifies his coming to terms with the failure of his quest, with not “going down in history” (Danielewski, *House* 91), and thus his abandoning Romantic motivations: “He knows his voice will never heat this world. [...] Memories cease to surface. Sorrow threatens to no longer matter. [...] Very soon he will vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza” (Danielewski, *House* 483–484).

Thus, Navidson’s development moves from the male artistic heroism of Kevin Carter and Captain Ahab to an acceptance of failure, from strife

and individualism to joy and community. By contrast, Holloway's arc shows insistence on individual triumph ending in frustration, violence, and ultimate defeat. The fact that the latter's masculine traits are heightened to the point of caricature not only emphasizes their crucial role in that defeat but also tips our sympathies towards the former and invites us to read Navidson's recanting of those very traits as the more desirable option.

Up to this point, my analysis has focused primarily on text-immanent depictions of white male heroic behavior connotative of the creative process within the narrative of *House of Leaves*. However, all its findings are considerably complicated by a third dimension, that of *House of Leaves*' vertical structure. As I have mentioned, the novel consists of several embedded narratives. Some of them echo Navidson's story: Johnny Truant the apprentice tattoo artist, for example, displays many of the same characteristics of self-destructively artistic masculinity.¹¹ Each of them, however, is written, filmed, or edited by a character on a higher level. In other words, each diegetic level is presented to us not under the aegis of verisimilitude, but mediated by someone else's design.

While Navidson is one of the protagonists in the narrative centered on the exploration of the infinite labyrinth inside his house, he is also its author. He films, records, and edits the entire process, from his family's moving into the house to Holloway's arrival, their various expeditions, the conflicts and transformations that are spawned by them. At times, the text explicitly points out that Navidson cuts or re-arranges certain sequences, thus meddling with the original order of events or orchestrating the focus on certain aspects: "no documentary is ever entirely absolved from at least the suspicion that mise-en-scène may have been carefully designed, actions stage, or lines written and rehearsed," Zampanò concludes (Danielewski, *House* 140). Consequently, I maintain that the divergences between Navidson's and Holloway's arcs, their different engagements with failure and their vastly different outcomes are not so much inherent to their characters but rather the results of Navidson's dramatization of them. Yes, Holloway is set up to contrast his own traits and decisions as starkly as possible, but, at the same time, it is Navidson

¹¹ Among those characteristics are his gratuitous descriptions of (hetero)sexual exploits, his work as a tattoo artist—which places creativity at the core of Johnny's characterization—and increasing signs of distress, violence and insanity as he attempts to get to the truth behind Navidson's purported adventures. These only subside once Johnny decides to accept the impossibility of it and abandon this Ahab-like endeavor.

who *sets* him up, thus not representing but rather deliberately constructing himself within the narrative. By framing himself next to Holloway's extreme, Navidson highlights his own nuances, triumphs, complexities, and his starkly different capacity to accommodate frustration. Navidson's arc from obsessive and self-destructive artistic individualism to non-masculinist acceptance needs to be understood not as organic growth, but as deliberate performance. If the viewer/reader sees Navidson fail, it is because he has chosen to present himself failing.

Of course, it does not stop there. Navidson's documentary film is likewise presented at second hand, through Zampanò's descriptions in his scholarly analysis. Again, the constructedness of this mediation is repeatedly highlighted. As Johnny Truant already writes in the introduction: "Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theaters or video stores. [...] Add to this my own mistakes [...] and you'll see why there's suddenly a whole lot here not to take too seriously" (Danielewski, *House* xix–xx). What this leaves us with, inevitably, is not a semblance of accurate reporting, not even a postmodern epistemological challenge, but the unmistakable example of an artist creating a work—which purposefully includes various portraits of masculine heroism in the artistic process—with the goal of fashioning their own image not in spite of, but through the failures immanent in that work: "I ask only that my name take its rightful place," Zampanò writes in his will. "They say truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document *failed* such a test" (Danielewski, *House* xix, emphasis added). The achievement, in this statement like in Navidson's work, is located precisely in its flawedness, which, paradoxically, consolidates the subjectivity—in this quote, the "name"—of the artist behind it.

This structure not only destabilizes the ontology of each narrative layer by drawing attention to its being recounted, edited, framed, and fictionalized by authors who are themselves only figures in someone else's account, but it also makes it impossible for us to forget that it is always *someone's* ontology being destabilized, that each narrative layer is another (male) artist's project. Each character's experience of events is inevitably filtered through someone else; discourse in *House of Leaves* is without exception indirect, mediated through somebody else's discourse, which is mediated in turn. As the passage from Zampanò's will demonstrates, superimposed on each character struggling to assert their subjectivity against failure is a hyperdiegetic character defining their own subjectivity

through it. As Elaine Freedgood writes: “Free indirect discourse makes characters poor so that narrators can remain rich” (71), which, in this context, means that characters higher in the narrative hierarchy edit, erase, filter, or re-shape the subjective expression of characters on lower levels at will to ultimately create not with them or next to them, but *from* them.

Thus, the imperialist undertones of art that were already pervasive in the examples of Holloway and Navidson merely shift from horizontal to vertical. For instance, while Holloway’s unrelenting heroism is presented as misguided, even actively destructive, Navidson emerges from the documentary of his making no less of a hero precisely because he has failed without destroying himself in the process:

Navidson has never stopped wrestling with the meaning of his experience. And even though it has literally crippled him, he somehow manages to remain passionate about his work. [...] Passion has little to do with euphoria and everything to do with patience. It is not about feeling good. It is about endurance. [...] Navidson suffers the responsibilities of his art. (Danielewski, *House* 526–527)

In a manner parallel to Zampanò’s will, this passage does not explode but rather re-frames the novel’s ultimate concept of heroism. It is not Navidson’s triumph over the labyrinth—not Ahab’s killing of his metaphorical whale—which is his true heroic feat but his admitting defeat and making that very admission the subject of his art. Through the centering of his own failure, coincidentally, Navidson also shifts the focus back onto his own person and away from Holloway and the epistemological violence he committed on him by framing, dramatizing, and stylizing him as a foil in a narrative which, ultimately, served but his own self-construction.

Fritz Breithaupt writes that

trauma is invented where it is needed, where it holds a promise. This promise, as we will see, is the promise to turn weakness into strength, to turn the weakness of not having a self into the very self that is sought [...] The new man claimed that his weakness made him more human and more humane and thus better able to make intelligent choices, resist bad influences, be more responsible than others, and thus, ultimately, to be stronger. (78–81)

Judith Butler describes a very similar phenomenon in her interpolation of Lacanian repression theory and Nietzschean insights: “There does seem to be a romanticization or, indeed, a religious idealization of ‘failure,’ humility and limitation” which leads to an ongoing production of “sexed sub-

jects” before “a power (the will-to-power) that regularly institutes its own powerlessness” (*Gender Trouble* 76–77). Both, paradoxically, describe a process of subjectivity being formed precisely through a challenge to it. The subject that ostensibly fails in fact harnesses the spectacle of that failure for his own emancipation.

This formation of subjectivity through the performative incorporation of failure permeates all levels of *House of Leaves*. After all, each narrative level has its superimposed god-like author figure who highlights his own powerlessness to bring the narrative to its intended conclusion. Navidson frames his own weakness as strength through Holloway’s more radical failure, Zampanò sets his own fallibility as an academic against the fictitiousness of *The Navidson Record*, and Johnny Truant frames his own misery against Zampanò’s scholarly antics which he considers “pretentious as all fuck” (Danielewski, *House* 127). Finally, Mark Z. Danielewski¹² stages his own powerlessness as an author against the genuine suffering and insanity of his characters, most apparently in the climax of *House of Leaves*, when Navidson has ventured so far into the tunnels that he has run out of supplies, light, and any hope for a safe return. This section is at the same time one of the most typographically eclectic. On some pages, there is only a single sentence packed into a tiny square in the middle (see Danielewski, *House* 443–458), on others, sentences run diagonally across the page (464–655), form spirals (466) or are replaced by clusters of the letter X (461; 463). The effect of these is one of subtle metalepsis. While the author technically does not intrude into the diegesis himself, he is constantly visible, his handywork so clearly apparent on the page that it becomes impossible to follow Navidson’s exploration without at the same time seeing Danielewski leading him along, needing to resolve the narrative conflict he has built up over hundreds of pages. Ultimately, Navidson is thousands of miles from home and lost in utter darkness. However, instead of adhering to narrative convention and providing an explanation for his survival in a subsequent scene—or opting for postmodern indeterminacy and keeping the ending entirely beyond our grasp—Danielewski ends the scene with a page that contains nothing

¹² The novel itself abounds in ostensible author stand-ins. For instance, Zampanò—whose initial matches that of Danielewski’s never publicly specific middle name—has been described by him as “my youth” (qtd. in McCaffery and Gregory 113), and the book’s appendix includes a collection entitled “The Pelican Poems,” purportedly written by Johnny Truant, which are actually poems Danielewski wrote in his youth on a trip through Europe, years before he began working on *House of Leaves* (McCaffery and Gregory 123).

but empty brackets (*House of Leaves* 485), brackets that contain a single asterisk (487), two pages on which a handful of words describe Navidson seeing a light (488–489) and, finally, a page that is entirely empty except for the page number and the word “*Yale” in the bottom right corner (490). The asterisk here actually links to two elements simultaneously, with two widely different interpretative consequences: first, it merely specifies “the name of the processing lab” that appears when Navidson’s film runs out (Danielewski, *House of Leaves* 489). Second, however, another asterisk stands amidst the brackets two pages earlier, the typographical rendition of a white wall or empty page, which seems to link to the same footnote. This can be read as a highly personal detail pertaining to Danielewski’s own ambitions as an author: he was an undergraduate at Yale, where “[he] was rejected at every writing seminar [he] applied to” (Danielewski, qtd. in Sims). If we thus take “Yale” to footnote the meaning of the empty brackets, they come to directly represent rejection and Danielewski’s failure as a budding writer.

Through this climax, then, Danielewski brings himself and his role in manipulating the text into focus by manipulating the visuals of the text more conspicuously than anywhere else in the book. He brings the narrative to its apogee, but then seems to fall audibly silent. He does not skip to another part of the narration but gives visible space to the absence of a conclusion. The page numbers run on, the narrative still awaits resolution, but when the next chapter—unrelated to Navidson—finally begins, this can be interpreted less as one of withholding for dramatic reasons but rather of inability to conclude the story in an appropriate fashion. Danielewski himself, it is suggested, has been bested by his artistic project.

Of course, this is not to mean that Danielewski actually did not know how to finish the story and had to admit defeat, just as the reader is not actually expected to believe that there is no possibility for Navidson to escape from the labyrinth. Nevertheless, it constitutes a spectacular example of an author performing his own failure and not merely constructing, but explicitly marking his work as inconclusive. His identity as an author is not threatened by his fallibility. Rather, he wears it like a badge of honor, demands people to notice how he finished his narrative endeavor not without, not in spite of, but heroically accommodating failure. His performance of it, in other words, ends up first and foremost demonstrating his exceptional skill as a performer. He demonstrates the failure of his authorial project, but that demonstration is widely successful.

In conclusion, fittingly, the findings of this study remain inconclusive. *House of Leaves* is interested in similar paradigms of male heroic pursuit as Danielewski's New Year's address. However, it subverts them as often as it reaffirms them, and adds to them an unmistakably gendered component. In the pairing of Will Navidson and Robert Holloway, the novel puts masculinity and notions of potentially self-destructive heroism center stage. It explores how a refusal to accept failure, how a mustering of athletic onslaught against it, can result in mental distress, physical harm, and utter defeat, whereas an acceptance of failure, focus on community instead of individualism, and the recanting of such masculinist pursuits brings about stability, reconciliation and, paradoxically, artistic success. However, at the same time, it moves from this apparent subversion to the construction of a male artistic identity whose heroism is still negotiated, if not through the struggle against, now through the performance of failure—failure which, in consequence, must be suspected to be self-induced for that very purpose. It would in effect subvert the subversion, replacing one conception of masculinity as resilience with another, were it not for one quintessential detail: through its elaborate nested structure, *House of Leaves* draws attention to the very process in which it is complicit. While it embodies Danielewski's performance of authorial heroism, it gives the reader a chance to recognize the performative, minutely orchestrated nature of it, since they witness Navidson, Zampanò, and Johnny Truant all attempt the very same kind of performance. Unlike his New Year's address, which did not have the benefit of such structural complexity and therefore did not go beyond a set of contradictory metaphors, *House of Leaves* not only deconstructs the notion of relentlessly heroic individualism, but also offers the tools to deconstruct the alternative it puts in its place. Danielewski hands over evaluative authority to the reader and leaves it to them whether they view Navidson as a character and himself as an author as continuing Kevin Carter's and Captain Ahab's artistic heroism, or if they acknowledge enough instabilities to bring down the house.

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