In this article, I discuss the linguistic landscape of officially sanctioned street name signage on the Navajo Nation. Given the Navajo Nation’s Enhanced 9-1-1 and Rural Addressing Initiative, this is a moment of transition for such signage. First I describe, in broad strokes, the linguistic landscape of the Navajo Nation. I then look at street name signs that are ostensibly written in Navajo in Ft. Defiance, AZ. These signs show “spectacular typos” that suggest a lack of familiarity with written or spoken Navajo. In the conclusion, following work in linguistic landscaping, I take up the issues of what kinds of audience these signs select and what kinds of imagined community these signs create.

Signs in public space document complexity.
—Jan Blommaert

In this article, I discuss some examples of officially sanctioned signage on the Navajo Nation. I do this by looking primarily at street name signs. This is a moment of transition for such signage. In the mid-2000s, the Navajo Nation government began implementing a Rural Addressing Initiative to improve 9-1-1 emergency response times. As a brochure produced by the tribal government noted, because many roads did not have names or signage, it was both unsafe and difficult for emergency responders to find homes (or “addressable structures”). The brochure stated:

Navajo Nation will use postal valid road naming and addressing protocol in their GIS databases. All roads that serve four or more addressable structures will be named regardless of whether the ownership is public or private. Duplicate road names will be prohibited. There will be no road names using the Navajo Language due to Non-Navajos interpreting the language in emergency situations.¹

Yet, as we will see below, street signs with Navajo names are in use on the Navajo Nation. Note the assumption—based on a peculiar semantico-referentialist view—that having a sign in Navajo will increase the chances that non-Navajos
will get lost (cf. Jaffe and Oliva 2013:109). The above quote also seems to assume that Navajos would be able to understand Navajo language signs, downplaying the fact that many Navajos do not know the Navajo language and they too would need to interpret the language in emergency situations. As has been noted by a variety of scholars, a language shift from Navajo to English is occurring on the Navajo Nation (House 2002; Lee 2007; Spolsky 2002). And, literacy in Navajo is not widespread (Spolsky 2002; Webster 2012a). I will return to these themes in the next section.

Recent, ethnographically informed analyses of linguistic landscaping (Blommaert 2013; Coupland and Garrett 2010; Jaffe and Oliva 2013; Juffermans 2012; Shohamy and Gorter 2008; Stroud and Mpendukana 2009) have inspired me to turn to materials that I have been gathering over the past several years on the linguistic landscape of the Navajo Nation. In 2000–2001, while I was doing dissertation research on the emergence of Navajo written poetry, I began to take photos of signs on the Navajo Nation. I also began asking Navajo consultants about those signs. I did this because a concern with the emergence of written Navajo poetry bespeaks an interest in literacy practices more generally—the public signage was part of the larger question of public uses of written Navajo (Webster 2006, 2012a). Since then, as I have returned to the Navajo Nation for fieldwork in the summers of 2007–2012 and for other visits at different times of the year, I have continued to take pictures of those signs and ask questions about them. Part of this had to do with a realization that written Navajo public signage was becoming ever more common (Webster 2012a). I have spent most of my time on the Navajo Nation around the communities of Chinle and Lukachukai, Arizona; Shiprock, New Mexico; and Window Rock/Ft. Defiance, Arizona. As anyone who has worked on the Navajo Nation knows, much time is also spent driving, and on those drives I have been attentive to the signs around me. Navajos and fellow anthropologists, knowing of this research, have graciously over the years expanded my collection by sending me pictures they have taken. Indeed, some Navajos have told me where interesting signs were or have delighted in taking me to see various signs in Navajo and quizzing me to see if I could recognize the errors in the sign. From the beginning, I should add, I was taking pictures of signs in all the various languages spoken and written on the Navajo Nation. I now have an ever-growing corpus of pictures of signs on the Navajo Nation in the hundreds (for other such images see Webster 2008, 2010a, 2012a). All of the images included in this article were taken on the Navajo Nation. This, then, is my own modest contribution to what Pennycook, Morgan, and Kubota (2013:xi) call signography (the ethnography of signs).

In what follows, I first locate the relevant features of the Navajo Nation and Navajo literacy. I turn to a discussion of linguistic landscaping and linguistic superdiversity. I note the relative paucity of linguistic landscaping work concerning Native American communities and in rural areas. I also note my unease with the notion of superdiversity as it relates to the American Southwest. I then, in broad strokes, describe something of the linguistic landscape on the Navajo Nation. After that orientation, I look at street signs that are ostensibly written in Navajo in
NAVAJO LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPING

Ft. Defiance (e.g., Figure 1). These signs show “spectacular typos” (Blommaert 2010:30) that suggest a lack of familiarity with written or spoken Navajo. I also locate such signage as part of a broader attempt at semiotic calquing of the logic of suburban American neighborhoods. In the conclusion, following work in linguistic landscaping, I take up the issues of what kinds of audience do these signs select and what kinds of imagined community do these signs create.

NAVAJO AND NAVAJO LITERACY

The Navajo Nation, covering parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, is roughly the size of West Virginia (or, as another example, the Republic of Ireland). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are nearly 300,000 people who identify as Navajo (Diné). 178,014 people identified themselves as speakers of Navajo, with roughly 120,000 of those identifying themselves as speakers of Navajo and as residents of the Navajo Nation. Rough numbers, then, give an impression that the Navajo language is widely spoken (in fact, it is spoken in every state in the U.S.) by a significant number of speakers. However, as Navajo scholars such as Tiffany Lee (2007) and AnCita Benally (Benally and Viri 2005) point out, the Navajo language is a threatened language (see also Spolsky 2002) in the sense that young
Navajos are not learning the language at a rate that will ensure the continued use of the language (see also Peterson and Webster 2013). Heteroglossia continues to be the norm on the Reservation, including English, Navajo, Navajo English, and Navalish (Peterson and Webster 2013; Webster 2010b). The reservation is a rural area. Population centers include the communities of Window Rock (the capital of the Navajo Nation) and Chinle (near Canyon de Chelly National Monument), both in Arizona, and Shiprock, New Mexico (all places where I have spent considerable time). Tourists come to the Navajo Nation to visit such sites as Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. The Navajo Nation actively promotes itself as a tourist destination, though some Navajos I know complain that the Navajo Nation has become like a “zoo,” where tourists can gawk at Navajos (Webster 2012b). Tourists come not just from the United States but also from Europe and Asia.

I have elsewhere (Webster 2012a) discussed the emergence of Navajo literacy and so here I merely retrace and highlight some of the key features in that story. Robert Young (1993), an interested party to the development of the current Navajo orthography, has sketched out some of the important moments of writing Navajo by Western graphic means (i.e., the Latin alphabet). Young (1993) describes how first explorers and then the U.S. military wrote down various Navajo words, followed by the missionaries’ attempts to translate the Bible into Navajo. Finally, Young (1993) describes the work of anthropological linguists such as Edward Sapir’s and Harry Hoijer’s and his own involvement with the federal government in the creation of the current Navajo orthography. The “orthographic norm” for writing Navajo is the orthography found in Young and Morgan’s (1987) grammar and dictionary, The Navajo Language (see also Holm 1996; Dinwoodie 2003; Peery 2012). Morgan, as many Navajos were quick to mention to me, was Navajo. One Navajo educator with whom I spoke called the orthographic norm the “Morgan standard”—others call it the “YounganMorgan standard” (see Holm 1996). The orthography—which was developed in the 1940s—led to an initial burst of written Navajo materials produced by the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) and other governmental agencies. It did not, however, lead to widespread literacy in Navajo.

I think it clear that one impetus for promoting the orthographic norm was a kind of Andersonian writing=national identity calculus (Anderson 1991; see Dinwoodie 2003; Peery 2012). As Spolsky and Boomer (1983) note, the rise of an orthographic norm (“standardization” in their terms) was conjoined with the rise of the Navajo Nation and its political infrastructure and a sense of “modernizing.” Concerning a BIA photo of William Morgan, Dinwoodie (2003:431) notes that “judging from the situational portrait, Morgan by his typewriter and dictionary reviewing the headlines of the Navajo newspaper, Collier’s Bureau of Indian Affairs saw in him the possibility of a genuine Navajo public discourse grounded in a modern Navajo language” (see also Peery 2012). Indeed, many of the early bilingual publications in Navajo and English were produced by the U.S. government and often had overtly nationalistic and Protestant-work-ethic-inspired themes (see Lomawaima and McCarty 2006). As Young (1993:53)
notes, by 1956, after this initial burst of interest by the federal government in Navajo literacy and written materials, “literacy in Navajo ended, so far as Federal programs were concerned.” Indeed, federal policy toward the Navajo language, especially in boarding schools, became antagonistic (Young 1993). The focus shifted to the coercive teaching of standard English literacy at the expense of, or as a replacement for, Navajo language skills.

As anthropologist Gladys Reichard (1945:167) noted with regard to her 1934 “Hogan School” conducted on the Navajo Reservation, one of the purposes of which was to create a Navajo writing system (see also Young 1993:52; Lockard 1995:26), historically there was a good deal of linguistic diversity among Navajos. Rather than being considered “wrong,” this diversity was linked with a speaker’s clans and with a respect for individual autonomy and thus reflective of what Kroskrity (2009:193) has termed “a language ideology of variationism.” Reichard’s (1945) “Hogan School” was concluded largely before Navajos went to boarding schools in large numbers in the 1950s. In 2007, a Navajo writer and former boarding school student, commenting on the influence of the boarding school on Navajos, said to me that the worst thing—the most insidious thing—that the boarding school taught Navajos about language was that “You could tell someone they were wrong.” For this consultant it was not just that Navajos were beaten or punished for speaking Navajo, but that you could tell someone that their use of language was “wrong.” As Field (2009) has noted, Navajo language ideologies have been neither unitary nor static. What my consultant was hinting at was that some Navajos, through the influence of the boarding schools, had shifted from a variationist language ideology, one that respected individual and clan language difference, to an ideology focused on “linguistic nationalism” and a “standard” and “orthographic norm” (Anderson 1991; Blommaert 2008; Milroy 2001; Silverstein 2000). 2 Spolsky and Boomer (1983:247–50) make this point explicit when they discuss efforts in the “standardization” of Navajo writing in conjunction with the “modernization of Navajo.” Peery (2012:122) argues that Young was actively attempting to create a standard Navajo, and that this was linked to an ideal modern Navajo. Some Navajos I know still respect the view that speech diversity is tied to individual and clan differences, but those same Navajos are often critical of what they see as spelling errors in written Navajo. For them, speaking may be variable, but writing should be tied to a standard.

Today, Navajo literacy classes are taught at Diné College (the tribal college) and to varying degrees at schools on the Navajo Nation (Austin-Garrison et al. 1996; Holm 1996; McLaughlin 1992). In the past several years, as I describe elsewhere (Webster 2012a), there has been a substantial upsurge in the number of public signs in Navajo. Yet, for all that, Navajo literacy has not been widely embraced. Spolsky (2002:157) argues that “literacy functioned mainly in alien domains: church, school, and government. As a result, Navajo literacy never managed to challenge the usefulness and appropriateness of English language.” Some Navajos have explained to me that the orthographic norm, with its diacritics, is just too complicated to be used. On a basic level, some Navajos have
found Navajo fonts difficult to access or to use on computers. On the other hand, McLaughlin (1992:151) argues that in the community where he worked (which had a robust bilingual program), Navajo literacy had gone through a “process of indigenization” in which Navajos used Navajo literacy for personally satisfying and empowering reasons. Spolsky (2008) has also briefly discussed some of the issues concerning public signage in Navajo in the 1970s. Spolsky (2008:27) notes that at that time “the only public written use of the Navajo language seemed to be in signs put up by Anglo owners and managers of a supermarket.” As we will see below, since that time the use of Navajo on public signage has greatly increased.

Before that, the contact idelects of “trader Navajo” were in use in some—but not most—trading posts on the Navajo Reservation (Werner 1963). This contact variety was spoken and, it appears, written exclusively by non-Navajo traders (Werner 1963). The actual number of readers, and who exactly was reading such signage (Navajos or non-Navajos), remain unclear.

In previous works (Webster 2006, 2009, 2012a), I discuss some of the tensions between Navajo literacy practices and oral tradition (a complex set of praxes that include various inscriptive practices as well). Here I wish to acknowledge those complexities. As in many verbal artistic traditions around the world (see Bahr 1994; Sherzer 1982), Navajos have a cline of fixity from verbal artistic forms, such as chants (meant to be relatively fixed [Faris 1994]), to other forms of verbal art, such as Coyote narratives and personal narratives that have much more variability, to puns, which are often fleeting. The degree of *keptness*, to borrow Donald Bahr’s (1994) term, differs across various genres of Navajo verbal art. Note too that non-alphabetic Navajo inscriptive practices also run the gamut from relatively “permanent”—such as pictographs recounting the Long Walk (Webster 2009:155)—to sandpaintings in ritual contexts that were not meant to be preserved (Parezo 1991). I know some Navajo medicine men who keep notebooks concerning their curing ceremonies and the images and chants (written in Navajo) associated with the ceremonies. These are not widely shared. Certainly Navajo poets such as Rex Lee Jim, Blackhorse Mitchell, and Laura Tohe have combined literacy in Navajo with poetic devices from the oral tradition (Webster 2009). The value of place-names and clan names in Navajo has been explained to me by some Navajos as related to the fact that they are quotations of the ancestors (Webster 2009; relatedly, see Basso 1996). They had a fixed form in Navajo. On the other hand, as Toelken (1998) has noted, some Navajos (but certainly not all) believe that the voices of the dead on audio-recordings are dangerous to listeners and should be destroyed (though there is less concern with the written form here than with the sonic quality of the audio-recording; Toelken 1998:383). Keeping and hearing the voice can be dangerous, but writing the voice seems less dangerous because the physicality of the voice—its soundedness—is removed. So too, not everything that is written is meant to be kept or shared.
Landry and Bourhis (1997:23) define linguistic landscapes as “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region.” Though, as Daveluy and Ferguson (2009) note, such a perspective may be unnecessarily restrictive in that it assumes a territory or region and does not consider how such linguistic landscapes help constitute territories or regions. Further, as Blommaert (2013:14) argues concerning linguistic landscaping research, it “needs to become the detailed study of situated signs-in-public-space, aimed at identifying the fine fabric of their structure and function in constant interaction with several layers of context.” Crucial to this work, as Blommaert (2013) and others (see Stroud and Mpendukana 2009) have argued, is ethnography or signography (Pennycook et al. 2013). Still further, Blommaert (2013) convincingly argues that linguistic landscaping must be understood within on-going historical trajectories, not merely as a synchronic snapshot.

Informed by Blommaert’s (2013) ethnographically evocative work, I find the concern with linguistic landscaping to be a particularly useful heuristic for approaching public signage on the Navajo Nation and a place to expand such research as well. Unlike other linguistic landscaping work, which has tended to focus on urban areas, the location of my research is decidedly not urban and thus gives us a glimpse of the linguistic landscape of a rural indigenous community. Indeed, ethnographically informed studies of public signage among Native North Americans are still relatively uncommon (see Webster 2012a for a survey). While her research focus is not Native North America, Romaine (2002) has called attention to the importance of questions of orthography for Hawaiian language public signage and debates over Native-place-named-inspired street names. Dinwoodie (1998) details the conflicts over attempts to use the indigenous Tsilhqut’in language in the public sphere in Canada. These conflicts include questions over how to spell the name of a new provincial park on public signage. The issue hinged on how or whether to include the glottal stop in the name. Daveluy and Ferguson (2009) argue that the use of digraphic public signs (syllabic for Inuit and alphabetic for English and Inuit) among Inuit in Kuujjuag, Nunavik (Canada), reveal broader issues about the role of writing system standardization and modernizing languages among Inuit in Greenland and Canada. Bender (2008:97) argues that signage in the Cherokee syllabary among the Eastern Cherokee indexes “the community’s recent cultural revitalization and . . . the physical space of the reservation as authentically Indian spaces.” She also notes that the use of syllabary in the public sphere demarcates “Cherokee as a tourist destination for a largely non-Indian market” (Bender 2008:99). As we will see, these works resonate with what is encountered on the Navajo Nation.

Now my caveat: much of the literature on linguistic landscaping has also posited superdiversity and its newness. This is what Blommaert (2013:4) calls “diversity within diversity.” While I have heard languages such as English (of various varieties), German, French, Czech, Japanese, and Spanish spoken
on the reservation (especially when I lived in Chinle, near Canyon de Chelly National Monument [Webster 2009]), I have also heard Navajo English, Jicarilla Apache, and Hopi. Certainly, as it relates to literacy practices, more languages are being written on the Navajo Nation than ever before. But I would caution against a wholesale embrace of superdiversity for the Navajo Nation. I am hard-pressed to see such linguistic diversity as something new. It is true that Navajos returning from off-reservation schooling have brought with them both new ways of speaking and language ideologies inflected by dominant educational settings (see Field 2009; Harvey 1974; Lomawaima and McCarty 2006). Certainly too, the introduction of languages such as Japanese or German is relatively recent, but a variety of indigenous languages have been and continue to be spoken in the area. These include the various Apache languages, Hopi, Arizona Tewa, Paiute, Ute, the various Pueblo languages (from multiple language families), and Zuni. Navajos visited or interacted with most of these groups in one way or another historically. Although most of the indigenous languages are endangered to one degree or another, and a general shift from indigenous languages to English is occurring among Southwest Native populations, it is the textures and contours of linguistic diversity that are changing (see Kroskrity 2012; Kroskrity and Field 2009). Historically the American Southwest has had substantial linguistic diversity (a veritable diversity within diversity); what has changed, most recently, is the distribution of the languages and associated language ideologies about those languages (again, see Kroskrity 2012; Kroskrity and Field 2009).3

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPING ON THE NAVAJO NATION

Here I briefly outline the linguistic landscape on the Navajo Nation, which is dominated by English (of one variety or another). English is the most visible language on the Navajo Nation. Although public uses of written Navajo have steadily increased over the past decade (Webster 2012a), English remains the most visible language throughout the Navajo Nation. As Jaffe and Oliva (2013:101) note, “for minority languages, public signage is a site for the affirmation of language status and rights. . . . Signs can counteract the historical exclusion of minority languages from public space by making them visible” (see also Cenoz and Gorter 2006). This affirmation is, however, constrained by English (see Meek and Messing 2007). To see this, we can look at a few examples. My goal here is not to be exhaustive, but to exemplify certain types of signs and relevant features of those signs (for other signs, see Webster 2008, 2010a, 2012a).4 In Figure 2, taken in the Bashas’ Supermarket (not owned by Navajos) in Window Rock (the capital of the Navajo Nation), we see the Navajo form Ch’il Attaas’êí [ch’il ataas’êí], “various vegetables/plants,” written in large letters, and below it in English, also in large letters, “Fresh Fruits & Vegetables.” Clearly both signs are professionally done and are, to invoke Blommaert’s (2013:53) terminology, permanent signs. However, beyond that, as the picture reveals, English signage—of varying degrees of permanence—surround the Navajo form. Many of the signs in English are glossy and professionally made. Even words such as “potatoes,”
written above $2.57 in the foreground of the photo, reveal the overwhelming nature of English here. Navajo, to borrow from Meek and Messing (2007), is clearly secondary to the more dominant English. Although the Navajo is certainly meant to index a Navajo space and promote the Navajo language, the attentive Navajo language reader would notice that \textit{attaas'éí} (various) is normally written \textit{altaas'éí} and pronounced with a voiceless lateral \textit{l}. It seems that no one literate in the orthographic norm of Navajo proofed the production of the sign, or that representing the \textit{l} was too costly. Still, the Navajo writing stands out in a sea of English language writing. It also contrasts with other supermarkets on the reservation, which do not have Navajo language signage (e.g., the City Market in Shiprock—as of 2012—did not have such signage).

Let us consider another example. Figure 3 was taken at one of the main intersections in Shiprock. \textit{Tòbahí} is, following Jaffe and Oliva (2013:101), an emblematic use of Navajo, and it is certainly oriented to tourists who might use the RV park. The Navajo form is not meant to be read for semantic content; rather it indexes for tourists the Navajoness of the RV park. Again, while the name is in Navajo, it is surrounded by English. This includes a handwritten sign indicating the location of the community garden. The community garden sign is not—I might add—intended for tourists but rather provides information for local community members.
Although the signs in Figure 3 show their age, even in new spaces and buildings, such as casinos (built in the past few years), English predominates. In Figure 4, we see the sign at the Fire Rock Navajo Casino just off Interstate Highway 40 near Gallup, run by the Navajo Nation. This sign, unlike the sign in Figure 3, is bilingual with a translation pairing (that is, the Navajo form is translated into English on the same sign). The Navajo form *Ahéehe’Nihaahisookai* is translated underneath into English as “Thank You, Come Again.” This professionally produced sign is clearly meant for tourists visiting the casino. It indexes a Navajo space and, in so doing, it creates an “authentic” experience of difference, in essence suggesting that this isn’t just a casino, it’s a Navajo casino where they speak Navajo (laminating here the old modernist logic of one language, one people, and one land [see Bauman and Briggs 2003]). Note, however, that even here the Navajo language is surrounded by English-language signs. Another example (Figure 5), this time from the Northern Edge Navajo Casino (on the Navajo Indian Reservation) just outside Farmington, has the English phrase “Free Valet Parking” followed by a rough gloss into Navajo: *T’áá Jiik’eh Nidadiilbqs* (Free Parking [of a wheeled vehicle]). As with the previous example, this sign seems directed toward tourists (the English is both larger and above the Navajo form). They mark, following Bender (2008), portions of the reservation as tourist destinations. And, in both cases, these professionally made signs show alignment with the orthographic norm for Navajo. Again, as well, signs with Navajo are often either bilingual with English or surrounded by English-language signs.
Figure 4. Fire Rock Navajo Casino, near Gallup, New Mexico.

Figure 5. Northern Edge Navajo Casino, near Farmington, New Mexico.
Indeed, even signs that are meant to attract Navajo language users and to indicate that a local business conducts business in Navajo often do so in English. Figure 6 shows a sign at a garage in Tse Bonito, NM. The assumption behind this sign, and fully justified, is that Navajo speakers are more likely to be literate in English rather than in Navajo. Indeed, in my experience, Navajos who are literate in Navajo are always (and first) literate in English (Webster 2012a). This sign, while welcoming of Navajo speakers, acknowledges the dominance of English-language literacy on the Navajo Nation. The sign also acknowledges a sense among some Navajo that the Navajo language is under siege (see Webster 2010b, 2010c).

*DIF’G’ONE’*

In Ft. Defiance, near Window Rock High School, is a modern neighborhood addition set up in a grid and cul-de-sac pattern. With modest homes and paved streets, the neighborhood is reminiscent of housing complexes one can find in

![Image of a sign reading "NAVAJO spoken and allowed here"](photo by Leighton C. Peterson)

Figure 6. Navajo Spoken and Allowed Here, Tse Bonito, NM (photo by Leighton C. Peterson)
nearby Gallup or Farmington (Figure 7). Indeed, it is the kind of neighborhood that one finds in my hometown of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and where I now live in Austin, Texas. This design for a neighborhood is imminently portable. What strikes one familiar with the Navajo Nation are the street signs. Most of the housing complexes that I have lived in or visited did not have street signs. This, of course, is the situation that the Rural Addressing Initiative seeks to address. In the summer of 2000 when I lived in a government housing project in Chinle, ironically nicknamed “Beverly Hills” by local Navajos (Webster 2009), there were no street signs. At another place I have stayed while doing research, again there were no street signs. From the highway, the entrance can be found (during the day) by numbers on a post indicating the Navajo Nation road number, but the dirt road soon forks and then forks again, and no signs indicate road numbers or the like (Figure 8). One simply needs to know which fork to follow. Indeed, where I have stayed is a cluster of homes and a hooghan (glossed in English as “hogan”) for ceremonies along with a dirt road that circles around and weaves in and out between homes. During the rainy season, the dirt road is sometimes impassable. Most of the people living in the cluster of homes are related by matrilineal clan or have married in. Such housing arrangements, while perhaps not as common as before, harken back to more pervasive (but not immutable) matrilocal patterns as described in the ethnographic literature (see Aberle 1961; Lamphere 1977; Witherspoon 1970). The houses in the complex near Window Rock High School, on the other hand, are modeled on middle-class white neolocal residential patterns. There are no hogans, nor are there any sheep corrals. I do not think the proximity to the high school is an accident (both the signage and the high school work in the service of modeling a particular “modern American” subjectivity). Figures 7 and 8 highlight some of the differences.

Figure 7. Schematic map of a grid and cul-de-sac neighborhood with street signs, Ft. Defiance, Arizona. (Map by Samuel Wilson)
This is not to say that there are no street signs on the Navajo Nation. There are. Many are for the main thoroughfares. But street signs in neighborhoods are relatively uncommon. Navajos I have talked with have sometimes lamented this fact. Others have criticized the dominant society’s absolute reliance on these “bilagáana addresses” (bilagáana is a Navajo term for “white people”) and the way that logic is being imposed on Navajos (I call this transferring of logics semiotic calquing). It is, as they say, difficult—if not impossible—to get packages delivered directly to their homes or to set up certain financial transactions. Instead, most Navajos I know who live on the reservation have boxes at the nearest post office (sometimes several miles away). For example, when I lived outside Lukachukai in 2000–2001, I received my mail at the Totsoh Trading Post in Lukachukai. The post office was in the back of the trading post. My mail was sent General Delivery since there was a waiting list for boxes. Most Navajos that I know on the Navajo Nation do not have a street address.

Yet here, in Ft. Defiance, is a neighborhood clearly modeled after neighborhoods found off the reservation in suburbs around the country. To go with that grid-structured neighborhood are street signs (Figures 9–11). The signs are green with white lettering that reflects headlights at night. They look, in that

Figure 8. Map of a Navajo homestead where the author has worked, Navajo Nation.
(Map by Samuel Wilson).

To protect their privacy, this map has been slightly modified to obscure the location of the homestead. The general details of the roads and layout of the homestead are accurate.
respect, exactly like the street signs in my neighborhood in Austin. That is, given their form, they have the imprint of institutional legitimacy. They are recognizable as street signs (even if what is on the signs might not be in English). As we will see, not only is the logic of suburban grid and cul-de-sac housing complexes calqued onto the Navajo Nation, the logic of street signs and numbering is calqued from English into Navajo. In Figure 9 is the street name Laa’ii G’one’. Given the orthographic norm, this form might be written as łáá’íí góne’ and glossed into English as the ordinal number “first.” Based on the orthographic norm, the form on the sign does not indicate the voiceless lateral initial Ṽ, nor does it indicate high tone on vowels (indicated by an acute accent mark and phonemic in Navajo), though the insertion of the apostrophe after the G is likely an attempt to account for the high tone on the following vowel (see Webster 2012a). The final apostrophe, on the other hand, indicates the glottal stop (which is phonemic in Navajo). Notice again the way that English language signs utterly surround the Navajo language sign here. It need not be this way. Daveluy and Ferguson (2009) have noted the use of Inuit syllabics on stop signs in Canada. Given that stop signs are meant to be universal and iconic (octagon, red with white lettering) without concern for the actual language of the sign, stop signs are actually an ideal site for minority language signage. No matter the language on the sign, a stop sign looks like a stop sign (it is iconic of other stop signs).

In Figure 10, we find Ta’a G’one’. Again, based on the orthographic norm, this is likely the ordinal number táá’ góne’ (third). As before, high tone is not indicated by way of an acute accent over the vowel, but rather, at best, by an apostrophe after the first a and then, again, after the G. The apostrophe indicating a glottal stop at the end of táá’ is not indicated on the street sign.

Finally, in Figure 11, we have Dif’ G’one’. This is most likely díí’ góne’, “fourth” (the “hooks” under the vowels indicate nasality—again phonemic in Navajo). When I discussed this image with a Navajo friend, he stated baldly, “That’s

Figure 9. Laa’ii G’one’, Ft. Defiance.
Figure 10. Ta’a G’one’, Ft. Defiance.

Figure 11. Dif’ G’one’, Ft. Defiance.
an impossible word in Navajo.” What my friend was getting at is that there is no phonemic f in Navajo. There is no f in the Navajo orthography. One can imagine how it became Dif’G’one’. Whoever created the sign seems to have misread dįį’ as dif’ based on a vague similarity of form. This suggests that whoever created these signs was completely unfamiliar with the Navajo orthography. Nor, I might add, when read aloud, does it sound particularly Navajo. Indeed, the f seems to index a non-Navajoness or foreignness to this word. This sign is reminiscent of what Blommaert (2010:30) describes as the “spectacular typos” found in English signs in China, including, for example, Lced for “Iced.” He argues that such signs are “not language but a meaningless design” (Blommaert 2010:30). Is Dif’G’one’ a meaningless design? Note as well that “correcting” the sign to dįį’goне’ might actually run counter to the dictates of the Rural Addressing Initiative noted above. It would turn the sign into a Navajo language sign.

It also seems clear that this neighborhood—from its grid layout to its ordinal street names—is meant to reproduce the bilagáana lived environment of suburbia about which some Navajos are deeply suspicious. The things that make it Navajo are its location (on the Navajo Nation) and ostensibly the Navajo language street signs. This is what I mean by semiotic calquing: the logic is non-Navajo, but it has been transferred into a Navajo context (if not into Navajo as well). But note, as well, that there are traces of the incompleteness of that transfer. The neighborhood, as I think it should be obvious, is not a designated tourist attraction on the Navajo Nation. Rather, it is a place where Navajo families live.

A number of years ago Romaine (2002) noted the outrage regarding the use of an apostrophe instead of the ’okina (resembles a left [open] single quote) for the glottal stop in the Hawaiian language sign at the Hawai‘i Convention Center. Outraged letters to the editor were published in the Honolulu Star Bulletin concerning the error (Romaine 2002:202). As far as I know, no outraged letters to the editor have been published in the Navajo Times (the paper of record for most Navajos) about Dif’G’one’. As I have noted elsewhere (Webster 2013), some Navajos enjoy pointing out what they perceive to be “misspellings” on various Navajo-language public signs on and around the Navajo Nation. Sometimes the “misspellings” amount to writing hózhó instead of hózhō (beauty, harmony, order). Here the nasal hook has been left off the word. Other times, the “misspellings” are the lack of an acute accent indicating high tone or the absence of the apostrophe to indicate the glottal stop. Still other examples are the use of t for the voiceless lateral l, as seen in Figure 2. Other signage, especially the signage at Diné College in Tsaile (Figure 12), show a significant fidelity to the orthographic norm (a norm that is taught there as well) (Webster 2012a). It is not my goal here to promote the orthographic norm on the Navajo Nation; rather it is to point out that the street signs in Figures 9–11—which show the imprint of institutional support and would seem likely candidates to promote the norm—are at variance with that norm. Indeed, they are at such variance in the sign in Figure 11 that it was seen as an “impossible word in Navajo.” With the use of the f, according to some Navajos it does not even look like a Navajo word. Yet, Dif’G’one’ is the official name of the street on the U.S. Census Bureau grid of Ft. Defiance.8 Unlike the
variability in spelling in Inuit signs described by Daveluy and Ferguson (2009:89) as “creativity,” it is difficult to see Dif’G’one’ as linguistic creativity in Navajo. Some Navajos I know take pleasure in joking about such signs; they see them as examples of the imposition of the values of the dominant culture going awry and find such signs humorous parodies of those impositions.

This is not, however, to say that Navajo-language signs have not been the source of concern. As I describe elsewhere (Webster 2014), there was outrage over an attempt by the community of Ft. Defiance to change the name of a street named in honor of Kit Carson—a white man who was significantly involved in the forced relocation of many Navajo from their homeland to Fort Sumner, hundreds of miles away in eastern New Mexico, in the 1860s (see Denetdale 2007)—to Tséhootsooí (The Place Of The Rock Meadow). The issue arose when the Bureau of Indian Affairs—in accord with the Rural Addressing Initiative—posted signs with Kit Carson Dr. on them (Shebala 2006). Before then, there had been no street signs, and few knew that on the BIA’s records the street actually had a name. The move to change the name to Tséhootsooí came as a response. This traditional place-name is long recognized as being associated with the area near Ft. Defiance. The outrage, however, was not over the use of the Navajo place-name, but rather came from non-Navajos concerned that Navajos were not giving Kit Carson the respect he deserved and that Navajos did not know their own history (Cazedessus 2006).

The desire to use a Navajo place-name instead of an English-language place-name is part of a more general trend on the Navajo Nation to replace English-language place-names with Navajo language place-names (Webster 2009). Many chapters—regional political units—have replaced their English language names with Navajo language place-names that evoke more traditional place-naming
practices (Kelley and Harris 1994; Jett 2001; Webster 2009; see also Basso 1996). Consider, for example, the sign in Figure 13. The chapter has put the place-name Tiis Tsoh Sikaad (T’iistsoh Sikaad, Big Cottonwoods Stand Spread Out) over the previous name of the chapter (Burnham). The Navajo language portion is clearly newer than the rest of the sign, thus revealing the shift in naming practices. Yet, although the sign indexes traditional Navajo place-naming practices, the rest of the sign is in English (or acronyms predicated on English—NAPI is Navajo Agricultural Products Industry and BHP is BHP Billiton Energy Coal [a controversial mining operation on the Navajo Nation; see Powell and Long 2010]). Ironically, the historicity of the sign suggests that the Navajo place-name is actually a more recent addition than either NAPI or BHP. English again is the dominant language on signs. Certainly the Navajo form here challenges English monolingualism and reasserts Navajo prerogatives for naming. The Navajo place-name here is also not translated into English. This is very different than the signs at Diné College or the casinos. But the Navajo place-name—on this sign—stands alone in a world surrounded by English. As do, I might add, Laa’ii G’one’ and Dif’ G’one’, which are also surrounded by English signs. Though here the naming is based on Navajo place-naming practices, whereas Laa’ii G’one’, for example, is calqued from the logic of mainstream American street-naming practices.

CONCLUSIONS

In a fascinating paper on signage and tourists in Corsica, Jaffe and Oliva (2013:101) note that “a model of signage [is] a space of virtual or imagined interaction. In this framework, the choice of languages and their functions presupposes and/or stages imagined linguistic communities, audiences, and linguistic interactions.” Blommaert (2013:45) also discusses the ways that signs
in various languages “select” certain audiences. Emblematic signs in Navajo that are geared for tourists, such as the kinds Jaffe and Oliva (2013) and Bender (2008) discuss, are common on the Navajo Nation (see Figures 3 and 4). The audience for those signs is, indeed, often tourists. Other signs, such as the Navajo language signs in grocery stores (Figure 2) or the chapter signs (Figure 13), make Navajo a more publically visible language and can demarcate Navajo spaces. The chapter signs do this most compellingly, for they are regional political entities and are connected with political and institutional support (even when, as we see in Figure 13, they are not professionally made). Signs in Navajo may select Navajo readers (a small number), but they are often more emblematic than semantic. As I have argued elsewhere, they are not normally read for content (Webster 2012a). As one Navajo consultant noted when I asked about the increase in Navajo signage on the Navajo Nation, “Sure there are more signs in Navajo, but nobody reads them.” Of course that isn’t completely accurate. Some Navajos do read the signs written in Navajo and read them for content. Still other Navajos read the signs, not for content, but for “misspellings.” Some Navajos I have spoken with are proud of the signage in Navajo around the reservation, whether or not they can read the signage for content. English language signs, as I have noted throughout, still predominate—reflecting the predominance of literacy in English on the Navajo Nation. That vision is not, however, monolithic.

The linguistic landscape of the Navajo Nation is deeply complex, and Dif’ G’one’ can serve as an emblem of that complexity. Signs do, as Blommaert (2013:16) argues, “document complexity,” and it is a complexity that must be informed by ethnography. So what can we take away from Dif’ G’one’? First, as with most of the signs discussed in this article, the street signs are, in Blommaert’s (2013:53) terms, permanent signs—they are signs that are meant to last and that have, in some measure, the support of the structures of institutions such as the Navajo Nation government. Obviously, Dif’ G’one’ and Attaas’éí are not part of the standard language ideology (Milroy 2001). The signs do not promote the orthographic norm. Instead, although meant to promote the Navajo language, they also seem to work against the promotion of the orthographic norm. Here I am reminded of comments a Navajo educator made to me in 2001 about the short-lived Navajo Language Page published in the mid-1990s in the Navajo Times (see also Webster 2012a). The page was meant to promote the accomplishments of Navajo students writing in Navajo (the page published poetry and short stories written in Navajo—see Webster 2009). Ultimately, though, the educator told me that they stopped sending materials to the Navajo Times because the published forms were often full of “mistakes” and were at times unreadable. This, according to the educator, was due to the fact that the copy-editor at the Navajo Times did not know how to read and write Navajo. One thing Dif’ G’one’ suggests, then, is a desire to promote the Navajo language that outpaced a knowledge of the orthographic norm. And, as such, it yielded “spectacular typos” (Blommaert 2010:30) such as Dif’ G’one’.

A second thing to note is that the signs in the neighborhood in Ft. Defiance are also meant to replicate a modernist vision of a suburban American
neighborhood on the Navajo Nation with a tilt toward Navajo. But it was only a tilt, since only some street name signs were in Navajo, while others remained in English. Here we see the importance of recognizing the process of semiotic calquing and the limits of its portability. The street names, as well as the layout of the neighborhood, were calqued from the logic of American street names and not Navajo place-naming practices or spatial arrangements. In some ways, Dif’G’one’ calls into question the portability of the calque of American modernist visions for the layout of neighborhoods. Like Dif’G’one’, they make no sense in Navajo.

A third level of complexity, following Blommaert (2013), is the notion of historicity. From a synchronic perspective, the signs we have looked at here are incongruent—some aligning with the orthographic norm (at Diné College or at the casinos), others displaying “spectacular typos”—a veritable hodgepodge of signage. We should not be surprised to see that the signs at Diné College align with the orthographic norm the school is actively working to promote; it really is the center of the promotion of that norm. The farther you get from the center—including the tribal government and the Navajo Nation Division of Transportation, the less alignment one sees with the orthographic norm. Looked at as traces of complex history, then, some signs suggest, as with the Navajo Language Page, the Navajo Nation meant to promote written Navajo in public spaces prior to a concomitant level of knowledge of the orthographic norm. Other, more recent signs—at the casinos, for example—even while aimed at tourists, show that the orthographic norm is making inroads onto public space signage on the Navajo Nation. Standardization toward the orthographic norm on the Navajo Nation is happening, but visual traces point to the process of that standardization.

I return now to Jaffe and Oliva’s (2013:101) concern with imagined linguistic communities (see Anderson 1991; Silverstein 2000). One of the underlying assumptions behind Anderson’s (1991) concern with imagined communities is a naive view that a written language entails an audience literate in that language. A few years ago, as we were sitting in the Diné Restaurant in Window Rock, a non-Navajo acquaintance asked me why Navajos were so reluctant to explain basic things to non-Navajos. He described how he had asked several Navajos to tell him what various signs in Navajo said, and the response was either silence or “I don’t know.” These were Navajos, he assured me, who knew Navajo. Most Navajos that I know who speak Navajo do not also read and write Navajo. A few do, but then I work with an elite group of Navajos (college-educated). The assumption that “knowing Navajo” means also knowing how to read Navajo seems wholly unwarranted at this particular time on the Navajo Nation. A sign such as that seen in Figure 6 is far more useful to a Navajo-speaking clientele. The signs in Navajo are written for an audience—a legitimately imagined linguistic community—that does not yet exist. The signage does not so much presuppose an audience as suppose a future audience. The signs speak to a desire for a particular kind of future audience. At best, the signs point to an audience that will recognize, at some future time, Dif’G’one’ as “an impossible word in Navajo.”
I would like to thank the Navajos with whom I have spoken about signage on the Navajo Nation. I also would like to thank the various colleagues and friends who have supplied me with their own photos over the years. I appreciate encouragement from Jennifer Denetdale on this topic. I also thank Leighton C. Peterson, Janis Nuckolls, and Roberto Barrios for useful conversations on this topic. I thank Aimée Hosemann for comments on an earlier version of this paper. A special thank-you is due Sam Wilson for help with the maps. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Global Media Research Center, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, February 14, 2013. I thank those in attendance for comments and questions. I especially want to thank the three reviewers for JAR for providing such thoughtful and provocative commentary and suggestions. This article has benefited immensely from their suggestions.

2. This is not to say that literacy causes standardization, but rather to note that a particular brand of school literacy fosters an ideology of orthographic standardization. For an early discussion of this point see Bloomfield (1927). See Collins and Blot (2003) for a history of literacies and literacy (also Webster 2006).
3. Consider, for example, the relative time depth of such emergent heteroglossic ways of speaking as Navalish and interlingual punning. Both can be traced back, at least, to the early twentieth century (Webster 2010b). For professionally made signage that displays an example of Navalish, see Webster 2008. That sign has now been replaced. See, too, “trader Navajo” (Werner 1963).
4. Other signage—including examples of grassroots literacy (Blommaert 2008) signage—is discussed in Webster 2012a. For example, one of the more common forms of signage found in the summer on the Navajo Nation are those indicating Nidaa ceremonies; in the winter, numerous signs indicating Yé’ii Bicheii ceremonies can be found (Webster 2012a:384–85). These generally temporary, handwritten or hand-painted signs show various alignments with the orthographic norm. The signage in this article concerns more permanent and institutional examples.
5. Casinos on the Navajo Nation are not without controversy (see also Schwarz 2012). Some of the people I work with do not support the casino initiative by the Navajo Nation. They question its long-term viability and the compromises they feel the Tribe has made in establishing them. Some see the use of Navajo language signage as mere crass marketing for tourists. Given the controversial place of casinos, the need for signage to align with and promote the orthographic norm may be more pronounced. In this way, casino signage validates Diné College and other educational institutions orthographic norms.
6. This is a part of a larger trend of reimagining and restructuring the lived space (and time) of Native peoples. On this point, see Nevins (2008) and Anderson (2011).
7. One reviewer suggested that this might have been an intentional attempt to parody the logic of such neighborhoods. This is certainly a possibility. Although some Navajos were keen to parody this sign as an example of the incompetence of the Navajo tribal government, none suggested that it was done intentionally. All seemed to believe it was a mistake. In fact, one Navajo I showed this picture to was frankly embarrassed that the sign continued to be up and suggested that it highlighted the lack of seriousness that the Navajo Nation had concerning promoting the Navajo language (here understood as commensurate with the promotion of public signage). Another Navajo consultant told me that “How the language is used and spelled is very important.” To do otherwise, he went on, showed a lack of respect and control and was potentially “dangerous” because
you don’t know what will happen if you use the language carelessly (see Webster 2012b). Given too that the other signs in the neighborhood show similar orthographic issues as are found elsewhere in Navajo writing based on a lack of familiarity with Navajo orthography (see Webster 2012a), this sign appears to be an extreme example of a lack of familiarity with the orthographic norm.

8. See: http://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/dc10map/UAUC_RefMap/uc/uc30655_fort_defiance_az--nm/DC10UC30655.pdf

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