RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who reads Navajo poetry and what are they reading? Exploring the semiotic functions of contemporary written Navajo

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(Received 28 March 2011; final version received 25 July 2011)

This paper analyzes contemporary written Navajo in public signs, newspapers, and poetry. While the number of public space displays of written Navajo has increased in recent years, this has not met with an increase in either Navajo literacy or in the number of Navajo speakers. This paper argues that much written Navajo is not for semantic-referential content, but rather as icons and indexes of Navajo space and identity or as indexes of fidelity to an orthographic norm. Contemporary written Navajo poetry is not normally read as poetry but as a success or failure to align with the orthographic norm. This mirrors nothing so much as how many Navajos were taught English literacy in the boarding schools.

Keywords: Navajo; literacy; poetry; orthographic norms; iconicity

Introduction

It is December 2010 and I am stopping off at the Navajo Arts and Crafts Enterprise (NACE) in Shiprock, NM, on the Navajo Nation to look for gifts. As I pull into the parking lot, I pass the sign that reads “Tsé Bit’a’í Shopping Center” (Figure 1). On the front window of NACE, one side reads “Happy Holidays” and the other side reads “Yá’át’éegho Koshmish Ne’adooleel” (“Wishing you a merry Christmas”) (Figure 2). Inside the store are a number of professionally produced Navajo-language children’s books by Salina Bookshelf out of Flagstaff, AZ. Laura Tohe’s (2005) Tséyi’: Deep in the Rock is also for sale. A flyer on the bulletin board next to the City Market, in the same shopping center, has “tsin for sale” (tsin: “wood”). As these examples suggest, writing in Navajo is a visible part of the public semiotic world of the Navajo Nation (compare with McLaughlin 1992). Yet it is also noted in the scholarly literature that Navajo literacy has not caught on (Spolsky 2002).

In this article I explore something of the tensions and contradictions in writing and reading Navajo poetry in Navajo. Here I would like to rethink some previous work (Webster 2006a, 2006b) in light of more recent work on Native American literacy practices (to be discussed below) and in light of my continuing engagement on the Navajo Nation (in the American Southwest) with Navajo poets and poetry (fieldwork in the summers of 2007–2011). While I do not pretend to offer an explanation for the lack of literacy in Navajo taking hold, I do hope that in describing something of the ways that Navajo poets have to deal with the various

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ISSN 1035-0330 print/1470-1219 online
© 2012 Taylor & Francis
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.693298
http://www.tandfonline.com
social, linguistic, and ideological tensions they encounter in writing or not writing poetry in Navajo, I can at least point towards how one might approach this issue. To place writing poetry in Navajo in context, I begin with a discussion of written Navajo in selected public spaces on the Navajo Nation. But this relative lack of literacy in Navajo suggests an important question about poetry written in Navajo; namely, who reads Navajo poetry written in Navajo and what are they reading? My argument, simply stated, is that much Navajo poetry is read iconically. I work through two interrelated themes concerning why Navajo writing — first on signs and in the Navajo Times and then in poetry — is often read iconically and not for semantico-referential content. Let me preface those themes here.

First, Navajo verbal art has traditionally been oral, and while some Navajos do argue that Navajo visual arts such as sandpaintings, weaving, and petroglyphs are forms of writing, no poetry, for example, has (yet) been written based on these practices. A number of issues are connected with this first theme. Many Navajo poets explicitly link their poetry to the oral tradition (Webster 2009). The current alphabetic system is often associated by Navajos with outsiders and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), although Navajo linguist William Morgan’s role, to be discussed below, in the creation of the current orthography is often noted by Navajos. No written literary canon of Navajo literature currently exists, although some Navajo poets write in Navajo to create that canon. But the poetry written in Navajo is often seen as emblems of the canon and not read for content. Writing in Navajo has not been uniformly welcomed by all Navajos. Some Navajos have been
concerned that writing is a negative influence on not just the language but also on Navajo beliefs and values. However, due to the current public awareness and discourses that the Navajo language is a threatened language (see House 2002; Webster 2009), such reactions to written Navajo have been muted in certain public domains.
Second, and related to the previous point, the number of young Navajos learning to speak Navajo is on the decline (see Benally and Viri 2005). Again, a number of issues are connected with this theme and are interrelated to issues noted above. Some Navajos are concerned that "writing Navajo incorrectly" shows a lack of a proper attitude towards the language. Some Navajos suggest that some Navajos are not taking learning the Navajo language seriously because they try to speak or write the language before they are ready. They lack patience and self-control (two important Navajo values, see Mitchell and Webster 2011). On the other hand, some Navajos are desirous of making the Navajo language as visible as possible, irrespective of whether or not the writing aligns with the orthographic norm. Here is the paradox of a decline of Navajo speakers with the concomitant rise in public displays of written Navajo. Some Navajos argue that writing has, again, negative ramifications on the Navajo language; either because it neglects the importance of speaking Navajo or because it discourages Navajos because of an overwhelming focus on the violations of the orthographic norm. The decline in speakers is related to the boarding school experience that many older Navajos endured and in the restructuring of how one imagines languages (see Field 2009; Webster 2010a, and references therein). Teaching English literacy at boarding schools was often focused on whether or not a student aligned their writing with the orthographic norm and not on content of what they had written (see Webster 2011a). Yet Navajo poets are using written Navajo to valorize the Navajo language and to use literacy for Navajo goals. In the end, I want to suggest that the ways poetry written in Navajo is often approached by literate Navajos reflects the influence of a boarding school educational practice that often marked the English-language literacy production of Navajos as deficient because it violated orthographic norms.

Native American literacy practices

The study of Native American literacy practices has come a significant distance since Keith Basso and Ned Anderson's (1973) review of Garrick Mallery's work and the rather neglected topic of Native American writing (see also Walker 1969; Hymes 1996). Basso and Anderson (1973) were concerned with the indigenous writing system developed by Silas John (a Western Apache prophet) for his "Holy Ground" ceremony. The writing system, as Basso and Anderson (1973) note, was both a phonetic sign system and a kinetic sign system (it was both the words to the Holy Ground prayers but also the actions to be done during the prayer). Basso and Anderson (1973, 1021) critique "etic" perspectives on writing systems as ethnocentric because they do not account for the local meanings of inscriptive practices, noting that "it is we who use alphabets who most frequently associate writing with language." In this paper, taking inspiration from Basso and Anderson, I attend to local understandings of written Navajo.

Basso and Anderson provide a telling example of what Frank Salomon and Sabine Hyland (2010) term the "graphic pluralism" that has been a persistent feature of Native America. Today there has begun to be significant work into both the history of Native American literacy practices and writing systems (see Bender 2002; Morgan 2009; Bragdon 2010; Bohaker 2010; Salomon and Hyland 2010; Cushman 2011), but also of the use of writing systems in Native language educational settings (see Stebbins 2001; Bender 2002; Nevins 2004; Meek 2010; Meek and Messing 2007;
Morgan 2009; Neely and Palmer 2009). What this research suggests is that literacy practices among Native Americans are complicated social practices that are not outside various historical trajectories, but are fully enmeshed within them. Some Native groups had inscriptive practices prior to contact with Europeans (for the case of the Anishinaabe, see Bohaker 2010). Some Native American groups, like the Cochiti of New Mexico, have decided against literacy in the Native language (Benjamin, Pecos, and Romero 1999). The work of Margaret Bender (2002, 2008) and Mindy Morgan (2009) — who explore, respectively, the history and contemporary dynamics of Cherokee and Assiniboine engagements with literacies — show the ways that Native American literacy practices are intertwined with language ideologies and issues of identity. Morgan is especially insightful in her discussion of the ways that "oral culture" in Fort Belknap discourse becomes valorized as "indigenous," and "literacy" is then equated with a particular brand of "English" (standard bureaucratic English) (see also Anderson 1998). The long history of using English literacy to dominate and control Natives at Fort Belknap has aided in an ideological association of "literacy" with Anglo society and "orality" with, for example, Assiniboine society. Orality then becomes valorized as an important feature of Assiniboine culture. Even, as Morgan (2009) notes, various Assiniboine have attempted to use literacy in the indigenous language as a method of language maintenance. Resulting ideological clashes have made the promotion of literacy in Assiniboine problematic (for a similar example from Western Apache, see also Nevins 2004).

Barbra Meek and Jacqueline Messing (2007) provide a detailed account of how literacy products in indigenous languages can be seen as "secondary" to the dominant language and its writing system. Like the work of Morgan (2009), Meek and Messing (2007) show the ways that Native writing is understood in relationship to the dominant standard English literacy that surrounds them. Native written materials iconically display the lack of economic import — through, for example, written materials that highlight economic disparities in production quality between indigenous literacy materials and standard English literacy materials — of Native languages. Bender (2002, 2008) has explored the semiotic functions of the various Cherokee writing systems in use on the Boundary. Amber Neely and Gus Palmer (2009) develop a keen analysis of Kiowa "heterographia" that is, like the case of Cherokee as described by Bender (2002), where there are multiple writing systems in circulation for writing Kiowa. For the Kiowa, as described by Neely and Palmer (2009), questions of standardization loom large. For the Cherokee, as described by Bender (2002, 2008), various writing systems have filled particular ideological niches and become indexes of genres. The Cherokee example, like the Silas John example discussed above, is a form of "secondary graphogenesis" (i.e. the contact situation seems to have influenced the creation of a writing system) (Salomon and Hyland 2010, 5). Sequoyah's role in the creation of the Cherokee syllabic system is highly valorized in much public Cherokee discourse (see Bender 2002; Cushman 2011). Among the Kiowa, while indigenous writing systems are preferred, the role of the native Kiowa linguist Parker McKenzie in the creation of one of the Kiowa orthographies is often met with ambivalence (Neely and Palmer 2009, 289). There is a sense among some Kiowa that McKenzie's connection with the BIA compromised his orthography.

Finally, there has been some attention by linguists and linguistic anthropologists about Native American poetry written in traditionally understood indigenous
languages (on the distinction, see Webster 2011a). Literary scholars have largely attended to Native American literature written predominately in English (for a critique of this practice, see Webster 2011a; Mitchell and Webster 2011). Tohono O’odham linguist Ofelia Zepeda (1982) has discussed the role of O’odham poetry (thoughts) in literacy education and she (Zepeda 1997) has also written O’odham language poetry as well. Colleen Fitzgerald (2003) has discussed word order in O’odham poetry and how it connects to other genres of O’odham verbal art. Dakota poet John Peacock (2006, 59) has discussed the fact that while he “can hardly speak Dakota,” he has made a concerted effort to learn to read and write Dakota through writing poetry in Dakota. Marcia Haag (2011) has recently investigated the poetic features of Choctaw-language poetry. Little attention, however, has been given to the reception of Native-language poetry in those communities. More importantly, nothing has been said about how such poetry is “read” in those communities. This paper attempts to fill that gap.

On Navajo literacy: a brief history
For Navajo, Robert Young (1993), an interested party to the development of the current Navajo orthography, has sketched out some of the important contours of writing Navajo by western graphic means (i.e. the alphabet) (see also Spolsky and Boomer 1983; Shonaer 1990; Holm 1996; Webster 2010a). Young (1993) describes how first explorers and the military wrote down various Navajo words, and then the introduction of missionaries and attempts to translate the Bible into Navajo (see also Lockard 1995). Finally, Young (1993) describes the work of anthropological linguists such as Edward Sapir and Harry Hoijer and his own involvement with the Federal Government in the creation of the current Navajo orthography. The “orthographic norm” on the Navajo Nation for writing Navajo is the orthography found in Young and William Morgan’s (1987) grammar and dictionary, The Navajo Language (see also Holm 1996). Morgan, as many Navajos were quick to mention to me, was Navajo (on Morgan, see Dinwoodie 2003). One Navajo educator I spoke with called the orthographic norm the “Morgan standard.” However, while there is pride in Morgan’s role in creating the orthography, there is also recognition that the orthography was the product of the Federal Government. The orthography – which was developed in the 1940s – led to an initial burst of written Navajo materials produced by the BIA and other governmental agencies (see Young 1976; Spolsky and Boomer 1983). It did not, however, lead to widespread literacy in Navajo (Spolsky 2002). Although I think it clear that one impetus for promoting the orthographic norm was a kind of Andersonian writing = national identity calculus (Anderson 1991). As Bernard Spolsky and Lorraine 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” Navajo. K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa McCarty (2006) note that many of the early bilingual publications in Navajo and English were produced by the US Government and the BIA, and often had overtly nationalistic and Protestant work-ethic inspired themes. As Young (1993, 53) notes, after this initial burst of interest by the Federal Government in Navajo literacy and written materials in the 1940s, by 1956 “literacy in Navajo ended, so far as Federal programs were concerned.” Indeed, Federal policy toward the Navajo language, especially in boarding schools, became
agonistic (Young 1993; Webster 2010a). The focus shifted to the coercive teaching of standard English literacy at the expense of or as a replacement to Navajo language skills (Young 1993; Webster 2010a).

Historically, anthropologist Gladys Reichard (1945, 167) noted with regard to her 1934 “Hogan School” conducted on the Navajo Reservation, which meant to create a Navajo writing system (see also Young 1993, 52; Lockard 1995, 26), there was a good deal of linguistic diversity among Navajos and this diversity was not considered “wrong,” but linked with a speaker’s clans and with a respect for individual autonomy and thus reflective of what Paul Kroskrity (2009, 193) has termed “a language ideology of variationism.”5 Reichard’s (1945) “Hogan School” was done largely before Navajos went to boarding schools in large numbers in the 1950s (see Spolsky and Boomer 1983; Webster 2010a). 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 (see Tohe 1999; Webster 2010a), but that you could tell someone that their use of language was “wrong.” As Margaret Field (2009) has noted, Navajo language ideologies have been neither unitary nor have they been static over time. What my consultant was hinting at here 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 norms” (see Anderson 1991; Silverstein 2000; Blommaert 2008; Kroskrity 2009). Spolsky and Boomer (1983, 247–250) make this point explicit when they discuss efforts at the “standardization” of Navajo writing in conjunction with the “modernization of Navajo.” But note, however, that where Benedict Anderson (1991) assumed literacy in printed materials, written Navajo indexes and iconically asserts Navajo nationalism without any attendant widespread literacy.

Daniel McLaughlin (1992) has provided a “sociolinguistics of Navajo literacy.” McLaughlin (1992) suggests through ethnography of literacy practices in a Navajo community that literacy — both in English and in Navajo — can be “empowering” for local community members. 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” where Navajos used Navajo literacy for personally satisfying and empowering reasons. I make a similar argument for some of the Navajo poets he worked with (Webster 2009). One Navajo educator I spoke with wrote poetry in her journal in Navajo. This is the kind of empowering literacy practice that McLaughlin (1992) discusses. She wrote the poetry for her grandchildren. Some of her grandchildren were teenagers and when I asked her whether her grandchildren read Navajo, she replied that they did not (she also noted that they did not speak Navajo either). She hoped, she said, that the poetry written in Navajo would inspire her grandchildren to learn Navajo (both speaking and writing). Still, surrounded by English literacy as Navajos are, some Navajos have explained to me, using an economic calculus that does not account for the felt value of writing Navajo described by the Navajo educator, that there is little practical or economic value in learning to write Navajo.
A number of authors have investigated the role of Navajo and Navajo English literacy in educational settings (see Holm and Holm 1995; Austin-Garrison et al. 1996; Dick and McCarthy 1997; Dick 1998; Dyc 2002; Spolsky 2002; T. Lee 2007; Benally and Viri 2005; Webster 2011a). Navajo literacy education is largely localized in school settings and, at least with Navajos I have spoken with about this matter, Navajo literacy is often associated with school settings. Wayne Holm and Agnes Holm (1995) outline the diversity of teaching methods used on the Navajo Nation for Navajo language instruction. Bernice Casuas (1996) and Martha Austin-Garrison (1991) have written in Navajo on the use of poetry in teaching Navajo literacy. Both argue for the use of Navajo poetry to aid in the self-expression of and by Navajos. A number of Navajo-language poems have been written in these classes and some were collected in Begay (1998) (Webster 2009 discusses some of this work). Neither Casuas nor Austin-Garrison discusses who actually reads Navajo poetry written in Navajo.

In a number of works (Webster 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2011a), I have detailed the ways that Navajo poets write in English, Navajo English, Navlish (a code-mixed form of Navajo and English), and Navajo. I have described the use of Navajo by Navajo poets as a way to valorize the Navajo language and to index and iconically calibrate a Navajo identity. As I note, the very forms of Navajo used by the poets often obscure the sociolinguistic realities of the Navajo Nation (Webster 2009). For example, while Navlish is quite commonly used by Navajos of all ages on the Navajo Nation, it is not found in much contemporary Navajo poetry. Elsewhere (Webster 2006b, 305), I also note that there is a veritable "cottage industry" of bilingual children's books in Navajo and English. More recently, Leighton Peterson (2006) has discussed the use of Navajo literacy in various new technologies (cell phones and the Internet). Indeed, today many of the Navajo poets I have worked with post Navajo phrases and words (with varying alignment to the orthographic norm) on social media such as "Facebook." There is also a Navajo-language Wikipedia page as well.

Such displays of written Navajo on the Internet index and iconically highlight that written Navajo is a "modern" language (Navajo thus resembles other modern languages found on the Internet) (see also Peterson 2006). Asserting the modernity of Navajo is important for some Navajos because, as Henry Shonerad (1990) has shown, there has been a long history by outsiders of treating Navajo as a "primitive" and "barbarous" language (see also Webster 2011a). Having books written in Navajo, as more than one Navajo consultant explained to me, shows that Navajo is a "real language" and "equal" to the more ideologically and economically dominant English language. But note that the value of written Navajo is not in the content, but rather in the emblematic value of written Navajo. It is to that theme that I now turn in looking at the role of written Navajo in public spaces on the Navajo Nation.

Written Navajo on signs and newspapers

Here I will briefly discuss, following the work of Bender (2002, 2008) and Daveluy and Ferguson (2009), the role of written Navajo in public spaces on the Navajo Nation. I discuss the Navajo Times and billboards and signs because they are ubiquitous to the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Times, published on Thursdays, is widely read, and at some trading posts on the Reservation often sells out by mid-Thursday afternoon. Many signs often figure prominently in the semiotic landscape of Navajo communities. They are some of the most visible and public displays of
written Navajo — regardless of age or economic status. Navajos that do not have electricity or Internet access can still see written Navajo on signs when they drive across the Reservation or when they read the Navajo Times.

In 2001, literacy in Navajo was not as public as it has become. While a number of on-Reservation shopping centers had signs with the shopping center’s name in Navajo, not all did and, indeed, there are now new flea markets and shopping centers that have signs in Navajo (see Figures 1 and 3–7). The Indian Market in Figure 5 did not exist in 2001, nor did Gloria Emerson’s coffee shop in Figure 8. Likewise the signs for regional chapters in Figures 9 and 10 did not exist in 2001 and were part of an active practice of renaming Navajo chapters with Navajo names (see Whitehurst 2007; see also below). Billboards, both professionally made and homemade, more commonly had recognizable Navajo forms on them in 2007–2010 when I had done more recent research, than they did when I did research on the Navajo Nation from 2000 to 2001. A public safety billboard written in Navajo and Navlish that greeted motorists entering the Navajo Nation from Gallup, NM in 2007 through 2009 did not exist in 2001 either (for the image of this billboard, see Webster 2008, 532). Some Navajos have also commented to me that one sees more written Navajo on the Navajo Nation than in the past. Some of those same Navajos, although not all, have also suggested that the visibility of written Navajo on the Navajo Nation is an indicator of the continued vitality of the language. On the other hand, one Navajo consultant told me: “sure there are more signs in Navajo, but nobody pays attention to them.”

Figure 3. Sign at Tséyi’ Shopping Center, Chinle, AZ.
Note: Photograph by author, November 2007.
One ubiquitous kind of sign on the reservation — both then and now — during the winter months are signs that announce Yé’ii Bichéii ceremonies (in the summer they are signs for Nídaa ceremonies). These signs are often hand-made and write Yé’ii Bichéii (as it is written in Young and Morgan 1987, 756) in, following Bender (2002, 62), “easy phonetics” or, following Tonya Stebbins’s (2001, 163) discussion of Sm’algyax literacy, “emergent spelling” practices. So, for example, one can find the form written as a single word as Yébicháai or with hyphens such as Yéi-bi-cháai (among a variety of ways of spelling this). As Bender (2002, 62) notes, this “easy phonetics” presupposes an acquaintance with English spelling practices, here most notably with the final being changed from <ei> to <ai> (and sometimes also <ay>). Such emergent spelling practices reveal the underlying knowledge of Navajo writers about English literacy practices and apply that knowledge to writing the Navajo language. During the winter of 2000/01, I went to a number of Yé’ii Bichéii ceremonies with Navajos and not once did I hear a negative evaluation of the spelling of the sign (often indicating a turn-off onto a dirt road and up into the foothills of the mountains). These signs are not meant to be read for semantico-referential content; rather, they are largely indexical in that they point to the occurrence of the ceremony and often point to (sometimes with an accompanying arrow) the turn-off to get to the ceremony. These signs are, following Jan Blommaert (2008, 7), examples of “grassroots literacy” and “hetero-graphly.” According to Blommaert (2008, 7), grassroots literacy is “writing performed by people who are not fully inserted into elite economies of information, language and literacy.” One feature of grassroots
literacy is "hetero-graphy" or "the deployment of graphic symbols in ways that defy orthographic norms" (Blommaert 2008, 7). It should be clear that "easy phonetics" and emergent spelling practices are kinds of hetero-graphy (for other examples of Navajo grassroots literacy, see McLaughlin 1992).

As I noted, signs with Navajo on them for shopping centers, such as Tséyi’ Shopping Center and Tsé Bit’a’il Shopping Center, were becoming more common and, indeed, businesses like Emerson’s Àvëéí/Gohwëéí coffee shop in Shiprock, NM also had prominent signs with Navajo written on them (Figure 8). The shopping center names were linked with prominent places, often important for tourists, near the shopping center (Figures 1 and 3–7). They are not based on the names for the communities where the shopping centers are located. For example, Tséyi’ Shopping Center (Figure 3) is located in Chinle, AZ (Ch’nillį́: “it flows out”) but names Canyon de Chelly, known in Navajo as Tséyi’ ["within the rock"], which abuts Chinle, AZ. The shopping center sign lacks the acute accent indicating high tone that the Young and Morgan system uses. As Stebbins (2001, 171–172) notes for Sm’algyax emergent spelling practices, the use of diacritics (like the acute accent here for high tone) are often not used consistently, even by writers who are literate in the orthographic norm of Sm’algyax. This is an example of what Stebbins (2001, 172) calls a “reduced orthography.” Other signs on the Navajo Nation, however, show more fidelity to the orthographic norm or at least to indicating tone. Tsé Bit’a’il Shopping Center (Figure 4), with high tone indicated, is in Shiprock, NM, but the community of Shiprock is known in Navajo as either Naat’áą́ii Néez ["tall leader"]
or Toohdi ["at the water/river"] (see also Figure 6). Tsé Bit’al’i ["winged rock"] is a prominent rock formation several miles away from the community of Shiprock and called in English "Shiprock."

Within the various local grocery stores in the shopping centers, some had, by 2007, added Navajo to the English names of the sections of the store. So for example, one section had ‘atsi’ written next to "meat" above the counters.² Indeed, from 2001 to 2007 at Diné College in Tsaile, AZ, which originally opened in 1969, Navajo names for buildings were added to the English names (see Figures 11 and 12).¹⁰ And, in many cases, they were coupled with what could be taken to be an English equivalent. Note that the signs at Diné College use the acute accent to indicate tone, whereas the shopping center signs and, as we will see, the chapter signs use a tildé <～> to indicate high tone. There is alignment with the orthographic norm (indicating tone), but not fidelity to the orthographic norm (which grapheme to use to indicate tone). Various chapters (regional political units) on the Navajo Nation have changed their names from English-language names, to Navajo place-names that are used for local geographic features (Webster 2009). Often the Navajo names are then written on signs at the entrance to the Chapter House (the local meeting place for the chapter) (see Figures 9 and 10).

In all of the cases of the signs at Diné College, an attempt was made to match the Navajo writing to the orthographic norm of Navajo found in Young and Morgan (1987) and now taught at various schools (including Diné College) on the Navajo Nation. The other signs, for shopping centers and for chapters, indicated tone, but
did not match the orthographic norm. In each case, these signs served more as indexes than they did to provide semantico-referential content. The use of Navajo on signs was, however, iconic of Navajoness (see Webster 2009; Irvine and Gal 2000). That is, the signs established Navajo as a language of value for Navajo identity. On the Navajo Nation, the signs seemed to be arguing that both English and Navajo are important forms of symbolic capital. Tourists who drive onto the Navajo Nation are, then, confronted by signs in Navajo. As Bender (2002) notes about the role of signs in Cherokee syllabary, the use of Navajo signs creates a public space that is recognized as Navajo. They assert, that is, Navajo sovereignty through the display of written Navajo. Likewise, because signs at Diné College align with the Navajo orthographic norm, we can, following Blommaert (2008, 7), term these signs as examples of “writing right” or “ ortho-graphy.” They are, in essence, iconic displays of the orthographic norm.

During the mid-1990s, the Navajo Times, the paper of record for many Navajos, had a short-lived “Navajo Language Page.” In 2000–2001, no such language page accompanied the Navajo Times. In the last few years, starting in the late 2000s, the Navajo Times has again begun publishing a “Navajo Language Page.” The “Navajo Language Page” is usually one page of the Navajo Times in an otherwise completely English publication (occasionally letters to the editor will include Navajo and headlines will also use Navajo, especially for important cultural topics, like place-names) (Webster 2009). Here, following Meek and Messing (2007), Navajo clearly appears secondary or ideologically subordinate to the more dominant English.
During the 1940s, however, a Navajo language monthly newspaper entitled *Adahoomiilgil* was published (Young 1970, 226). But in conversation with an elder Navajo man about this newspaper in 2000, he noted that the paper, when it was read, was often read aloud to other Navajos. Thus, like contemporary poetry written in Navajo, it was accessed not so much as a written document, but as an oral performance (see Webster 2009).

The mid-1990s “Navajo Language Page” was not universally appreciated. Let me briefly quote from a letter by Eliza Johnson, from 29 February 1996. Ms Johnson identifies herself as Navajo, in her 20s, and having been in the US Navy:

*I disagree with the teaching of our Navajo language being printed in the Navajo Times and Navajos who are teaching other races to speak Navajo. Our language should not even be in the newspaper or taught to other races… The reason is the Navajo language is our language. It should not be put on display or taught to other races like it has no meaning to us. I know it was put out so the younger generation could learn and not forget their own language but it is Navajo parents responsibility to teach it in our own homes… Please teach your children and others the Navajo Ways and our language and keep it among ourselves. Let’s respect what we were blessed with.* (Johnson 1996, 4)

While there is much that could be said about this letter and other letters like it that were published in the *Navajo Times* critiquing the mid-90s “Navajo Language Page” (see Webster 2004, 186–190), I want to make only a few points here. First, Ms Johnson’s letter was not the only letter to critique the use of written Navajo in the
Navajo Times, a paper that circulates off the reservation (letters to the editor come from throughout the United States and internationally). Second, Ms Johnson explicitly states the iconic nature of speaking Navajo with being Navajo. The Navajo language is for Navajos only. Third, Ms Johnson connects the Navajo language with Navajo ceremonies or “ways” (as they are called). Indeed, some Christian Navajos have been reluctant to have Navajo taught in school (either written or spoken) because they see a direct connection between the Navajo language and Navajo ceremonialism (see Spolsky 2002, 148; Field 2009; Webster 2009). Fourth, such letters did not occur when the “Navajo Language Page” was reintroduced in the late 2000s. I cannot say whether this was because such letters were not written or because the editors of the Navajo Times did not publish them. In either case, an overt critique of the use of written Navajo in the Navajo Times did not accompany the reintroduction of the “Navajo Language Page.”

Let me add that creative writing like poetry was often featured in the “Navajo Language Page” in the mid-1990s (Webster 2004, 2009). It is far less common now in the current “Navajo Language Page.” The publishing of creative writing, I might add, presupposed knowledge of the Navajo language. Young people were learning to write Navajo in the 1990s. Today they are learning Navajo through writing. Now one finds various educational stories (some based on traditional narrative genres), a listing of the Navajo alphabet, and language exercises on the page. The printing of the Navajo alphabet is reminiscent of Adaahonilhigi, which ran the Navajo alphabet on the back page of each issue (Dinwoodie 2003, 446). The language page is now
Figure 10. New Chapter sign at Tse Dáá Káán Chapter House, Tse Dáá Káán, NM.
Note: Photograph by author, December 2010.

entitled *Tį' Diné Bizaad bee yádeelti' dookeell* and translated immediately below as "Let's go speak Navajo!". Each week the page runs the same explanation for the language page in English:

the Diné Bizaad page's purpose is to provide an introduction to our indigenous language. Our language has been spoken by our people throughout time to communicate with one another, to sing, to pray, to express thought, and to think, plan, live, and reflect on our lives. *(Navajo Times, 11 March 2011, C-11)*

This is followed by a quote in Navajo attributed to Chief Manuelito, an important historical figure for many Navajos (Denetdale 2007). The rationale for the language page then references the use of the Navajo language by the Code Talkers during World War II — noting that "our Diné language was used to win a war for this country." This is a familiar trope that is also found in Navajo poetry (Webster 2009). It then places that language within the context of Columbus and the decline of many indigenous languages, "Diné Bizaad is one of the few indigenous languages left. We have not lost it all yet. Out of hundreds of indigenous languages pre-Columbus, there are less than 100 languages left that are spoken today." The rationale concludes: "Language is essential to the survival of a culture. Language and culture is essential to one's self-identity, self-esteem, foundation, and success in life" *(Navajo Times, 11 March 2011, C-11)*. Many Navajos have expressed to me similar sentiments about the importance of Navajo for young people's self-identity and self-esteem. Part of the
reason that the current language page has not been critiqued the way the earlier language page was, may be due to the growing sense of awareness about the threatened nature of the Navajo language (see House 2002; T. Lee 2007; Webster 2009). The language page is, in fact, explicitly framed so as to link the page with the need to maintain the Navajo language.

That the Navajo Times provides its ideological justification for publishing the language page in English seems to have a dual audience, both Navajo readers and non-Naavo readers. It valorizes the language both for Navajos and for non-Naavoos, but at the same time acknowledges the superordinate position of the English-reading audience (Meek and Messing 2007). Valorizing the Navajo language in English is also something that contemporary Navajo poetry also does (Webster 2009). Note that in the rationale and justification for the language page, at no point does it discuss writing in Navajo. The justification and rationale is concerned with “spoken language.” Some Navajos that I know, however, criticize the language page, not for publishing written Navajo but for what they see as a series of “spelling errors.” That is, when the written Navajo is read for semantico-referential content, the form of the written Navajo is often critiqued. On the other hand, Navajos who are not literate in Navajo have sometimes praised the language page as evidence for the strength of the Navajo language and as validating the status of the Navajo language.

Given what I have said about the public nature of signs in Navajo, some conforming to the orthographic norms of Young and Morgan (1987), and the increased presence of written Navajo in the Navajo Times, it might be assumed that
literacy in Navajo is now much more common than it was in 2000–2001. In conversations with various Navajos and in reviewing the literature concerning Navajo literacy education, that seems to be largely not the case (Spolsky 2002; Dyc 2002; Benally and Viri 2005; T. Lee 2007, 2009). Indeed, a number of scholars have written about the language shift from Navajo to English that is occurring (Spolsky 2002; House 2002; Benally and Viri 2005; Field 2009; T. Lee 2007, 2009). In other words, as written Navajo has become more public, Navajo literacy has not become more common and speaking Navajo has actually decreased among Navajos. Clay Slate (2001, 409), in reviewing the work of the Navajo Language Program (which teaches Navajo literacy) and teaching Navajo at Diné College for 28 years, speaks of the “many dozens” of Navajos who have been trained there. Certainly the public displays of written Navajo have led to some Navajos being more aware of the orthographic conventions of written Navajo, but they are not necessarily fully literate in that orthographic norm. What these public displays of written Navajo suggest are that most Navajos do not read Navajo for semantico-referential content, they read them as indexes and icons of Navajoness, demarcating and creating Navajo spaces and valorizing the Navajo language as an object of value.

Written poetry in Navajo

More than one Navajo poet has told me that Navajo is an “oral culture.” Indeed, some Navajo poets I have worked with have suggested that their work ties in with
Navajo oral tradition. I have outlined a number of oral poetic devices in Navajo that have been transferred by some Navajo poets into contemporary written poetry (Webster 2009). Some Navajo poets describe Navajo poetry as a form of *hane* ["story, narrative"] (see Webster 2009). As Morgan (2009) amply demonstrates for Pt. Belknap, "oral cultures" are ideological achievements, they are not given. For many Navajos that I have spoken with, writing (alphabetic writing) has been ideologically associated with "writing in English" (compare with Nevins 2004). This writing in English is often associated with the English found in schools and governmental bureaucracies. Much of Navajo poet Esther Belin's recent unpublished poetry has been aimed at critiquing the bureaucratic literacy practices in English that Navajos often find themselves enmeshed in (see also Webster 2009).

There is another current here as well, then, that resists conflating writing with alphabetic writing and that orients to the "graphic pluralism" (Salomon and Hyland 2010) that has been a persistent feature of the semiotic social world of Navajos. "Oral cultures" are ideological constructs, often made so by erasing or misrecognizing the existence of "graphic pluralism." One Navajo poet was very clear that Navajo had a long history of writing; as that poet noted, Navajos had been writing through weaving, sandpaintings and petroglyphs long before the current Navajo writing system based on Robert Young and William Morgan (1987). In fact, some Navajo poets connect writing poetry with traditional weaving. Indeed, some Navajo poets sign their work as *ayilaa* ["to make"] (invariably written without the word initial glottal stop) and not as *yissoh* ["to write it"]; the former verb is also used with weaving (Webster 2004, 184). One Navajo I have worked with has long talked about creating a Navajo writing system based on sandpaintings. One Navajo consultant talked about the pictographs that practitioners would sometimes use in learning a new chantway (see note 2). That consultant described the use of such pictograms as akin to writing in shorthand. Another Navajo poet I know stated that they would write poetry in Navajo when the Navajo writing system looked less like English. Note also that contemporary Navajo poets are literate in English, sometimes literate also in Navajo English and Navajo, and often quite aware of western poetry conventions and styles (Belin and Webster 2012; Webster 2011a). Indeed, if a Navajo poet is literate in Navajo, they are also literate in English. I have never met a Navajo poet that was monoliterate in Navajo. In fact, it seems extremely unlikely that there are Navajos monoliterate in Navajo. In my experience, literacy in Navajo is always accompanied by (and after the fact of) literacy in English (mainstream English, Navajo English, or both).

The vast majority of contemporary written Navajo poetry is in something akin to mainstream English or Navajo English (a local way of speaking and writing, see Webster 2011a; Bartlett 2001). In that poetry, there are sometimes shifts to Navajo for a word, a phrase, or a few clauses (Webster 2006a, 2009). Poetry written entirely in Navajo is far less common than poetry written predominately in mainstream English or Navajo English. Over the years I have interviewed a number of poets about why they write or do not write in Navajo or English. When discussing why they write in English, Navajo poets often noted that writing in English meant that their work would be more accessible to both Navajos and non-Navajos (see Webster 2009). Rex Lee Jim, however, stated that he wrote in English or Navajo based on the aesthetics he was trying to express through his poem (see Webster 2009, 2–3 and 25–26). One Navajo poet, when I asked him why he wrote in English and not Navajo, replied that
he did not know how to write in Navajo. Indeed, some poets have simply noted that they do not write entire poems in Navajo because they do not know how to write the “official” or “correct” way in Navajo. Some Navajos are reluctant to use Navajo in their poetry because they are worried that they will be criticized for how they “spell” Navajo words. Of these poets who do not feel that they are literate in the orthographic norm found in Young and Morgan (1987) and other school-based materials, some write important Navajo terms and phrases in the hetero-graphy of emergent spelling practices or what Bender (2002) termed “easy phonetics.” “Easy phonetics,” as Bender (2002) notes, is a misleading term because this hetero-graphy is based on knowledge of English-language writing practices and is only “easy” if one presupposes literacy in English (see Bender 2002). Such emergent spelling practices are a form of hetero-graphy; that is, they often display a lack of awareness or an incomplete knowledge of Navajo orthographic norms. The “barred I” &gt;1 &lt; that indicates a voiceless alveolar lateral and the diacritics that mark high tone and nasality on the vowels are often not represented in these hetero-graphic ways of writing.

Let me present three examples from Rutherford Ashley’s (2001) Heart Vision 2000. Ashley’s book is written in a complex interplay of Navajo, Navajo English, English, and Navlish (a code-mixed form combing Navajo affixes with English lexical items; see Webster 2009) and suggests something of the heteroglottia that Navajos daily confront. Most of the poems are primarily in one variety of English or another. Ashley’s book is set up as if one is flipping through the channels on the television. The book was published while I was doing fieldwork in 2001 and I interviewed him shortly after the publication. In Window Rock, AZ in 2010 we again talked about his work and he interviewed me about my recent book. In a previous piece (Webster 2006a), I noted that Ashley was more concerned with using important Navajo words and phrases than he was in getting the linguistic (orthographic) details correct. Ashley, in my interview with him in 2001, was upfront about the fact that he had not taken classes in Navajo literacy and that he knew the ways that he wrote Navajo words were not “correct.” In 2010, he reiterated that openness about the lack of “correctness” in his writing of Navajo words. For Ashley, the use of Navajo to evoke Navajo sensibilities was too important to let spelling constrain him. Other Navajo poets have also stated that some emotions, kin terms, sacred places, and the like cannot be translated into English and must be written in Navajo regardless of whether or not the orthographic details are correct (see Webster 2006a, 2009). I have placed the orthographic norm below Ashley’s form. Note, I am not claiming that Ashley misspelled these words, only that the spelling does not align with the orthographic norm. It is, however, the case that some Navajos that I have talked with have stated, even as they praised Ashley’s book for its realism about Reservation life, that Ashley “spelled lots of words wrong.”

(1) Sa’aghagh bika’hozhogo (Ashley 2001, 291)
Saq’ah naaghá bik’eh hózhógo
[everlasting and beautiful living]13
(2) taidiin ʼatin (Ashley 2001, 291)
taidiin ʼattin
[pollen path/road]
In each of the above examples, Ashley does not indicate high tone (marked by an acute accent) or nasality (marked by a nasal "hook") on the vowel. He is inconsistent in indicating vowel length, marking it in *atiin* ["someone's road"] (["someone"] + *-tìin* ["road"]) for example, but not in *Hajinei* ["the place of emergence"]. He also does not indicate the word initial glottal stop in *atiin*. However, the glottal stop word initial before a vowel is both predictable by phonological rule and is often only realized in combination; that is, when a word takes a prefix, for example (*be'atiin* ["her road, path"]), so it is redundant and there is much variation on its use word initial. He treats *Sa'aghnaghai* be'ke'hozhgoho as two words instead of as four, but in spoken discourse they often do sound like two words. This is what Blommaert (2008, 130) calls "orthographic traces of vernacular pronunciations." In other words, while Ashley's writing does not completely align with the orthographic norm, the actual forms are still recognizable to Navajos. Note also, that Ashley's writing does show an influence from the Navajo orthographic norm. When Ashley doubles a vowel as in *atiin*, he is matching the Navajo orthographic convention. Likewise, when Ashley uses the apostrophe to indicate a glottal stop in *Sa'aghnaghai*, he is again linking with the orthographic norm. While Ashley has not taken classes in writing Navajo, he has seen written Navajo on and around the Navajo Nation. If the "Navajo Language Page" of the mid-1990s did anything, it familiarized Navajos with the look of the orthographic norm. The above examples also all link with important cultural beliefs among Navajos and they are all well-known words or formulaic phrases. That is, they are not novel expressions in Navajo, using the potentials of Navajo grammar for poetic purposes. They are, rather, culturally significant formulaic phrases and vocabulary items (Webster 2006a). Indeed, such formulaic phrases and forms of repetition are a valued aesthetic feature in Navajo verbal art (Webster 2005).

Some Navajo poets -- both Navajo speakers and non-Navajo-speaking Navajos -- will also go to Young and Morgan (1987) to find how a word is written so that they can use it in a poem, or they ask a relative who is literate in Navajo to check their spelling. Rather than spell the word via hetero-graphy, they seek out the orthographic norm and use that form. This is true both for Navajos that speak Navajo and Navajos that do not. And like the examples from Ashley above, they are often, but not always, looking for lexical items or formulaic phrases. Note that the orthographic norm largely erases certain dialect differences in Navajo (Reichard 1945; Saville-Troike 1974). Tohe was taking classes in the summers of 2000 and 2001 at Diné College, Tsaile, AZ to learn to write the orthographic norm. Tohe speaks Navajo, but did not read or write Navajo. This is, in fact, quite common. Most Navajos that I have met over the years that speak Navajo are not literate in Navajo.

If one compares Tohe's 1999 book with her 2005 book published after taking Navajo literacy classes, one sees that Tohe's more recent work aligns more closely with the orthographic norm than did her earlier work. In fact, in her most recent book of poetry, Tohe (2005, 26–27) has two poems that are written entirely in Navajo. These poems align more with the orthographic norm than did her use of Navajo in her 1999 book. For example, here are the first two lines of Tohe's poem
Niltsá Bi’áád ["Female Rain"]. Note her use of the “nasal hook” on nasal vowels, the “barred I” on the voiceless alveolar lateral, the indication of high tone with an acute accent, and the use of the glottal stop at the beginning of a word that begins with a vowel (the translation is by Tohe 2005, 26):

(4) Niltsá bi’áád
    Sha’dí’dáké’é go dah naaldogo ‘ažhish
    [Female Rain
    Dancing from the south].

But, like with Ashley, Tohe’s earlier work does show familiarity with various features of the orthographic norm (like the apostrophe for a glottal stop and vowel doubling for long vowels, but also the use of the acute accent marker for high tone), but also evidences what Stebbins (2001, 172) termed “reduced orthography.” The nasal hook is not used, for example, in hóló (Tohe 1999, 27) but in the orthographic norm we find hóló ["it exists"]. In Tohe’s (1999) work Navajo phrases are inserted into predominately English-language poetry, and sometimes English-language portions are to be understood as having been said in Navajo. For example, Tohe (1999, 16) begins a stretch of quoted speech between Navajos this way:

(5) when one of us said
    Eí hastín ayóó baa dzóñii [this man is very handsome]
    Eí laa’ [I agree]
    then we were making all kinds of comments about him in Diné.

The English that follows the Navajo forms are translations by Tohe of the Navajo forms. Later in the poem, however, Tohe (1999, 16) presents the English forms with the understanding that they were said in Navajo (see Webster 2010a). The use of English to stand in for Navajo presents both an image of Navajo as being secondary to the more dominant English (Meek and Messing 2007), but also that there is a “referential transparency” of semantic content between Navajo and English (Haviland 2003, 768). However, in poetry performances, which are again the most common way that many Navajos encounter contemporary Navajo poetry, Tohe does not subordinate the Navajo forms to the English forms. Instead, she performs the Navajo forms for both those that are written in Navajo in her book, but also for those that are written in English and are to be understood as being said in Navajo (Webster 2010a). We do not find the use of English to stand in for Navajo in Tohe’s (2005) later work. Second, unlike Ashley’s examples above, Tohe uses Navajo in a creative, poetic and semantically-referentially meaningful way here in her written poem. These are not culturally important formulaic phrases or words; they are instead the kinds of things said between young girls.

Navajos have often told me that the Navajo language is a dangerous language (Webster 2010a). One thing they mean by this is that, if you say something in Navajo slightly off your target, you can end up saying something you would wish you had not said. A number of stories circulate about these unintentional puns, where either an outsider (a missionary, Indian Health Service doctor, or linguistic anthropologist) or a Navajo says something that embarrasses them. Take this example from the 1960s, when ethnomusicologists Charlotte Frisbie and David McAllester recorded
the life-history of Blessingway singer Frank Mitchell. Mitchell, in discussing his time at school, could not help but recount the following story (edited by Frisbie and McAllester):

I remember a priest who used to come out to Fort Defiance, and every time he got there he always talked to the children. He would begin his talk by saying, "my dear children," (āchinnī) but instead of saying it that way, he used to say "a Głónih" (abalone shell).
(Frisbie and McAllester 1978, 66)

This story is a nice example of what some of my Navajo consultants have termed the one of the "dangers" of speaking Navajo. The priest is talking "carelessly" and is not showing proper restraint in his use of language. Speaking carelessly is, in Navajo philosophy, dangerous because it is connected with Navajo concerns about lack of control and order (see Rushforth and Chisholm 1991, 72–75; Mitchell and Webster 2011). Such stories abound on the Navajo Nation; stories of non-Navajos and sometimes Navajos, too eager to speak Navajo and not careful enough in their knowledge of Navajo. They act as cautionary tales: reminding non-Navajo speakers that speaking Navajo is difficult and takes patience.15

Such stories also now circulate about writing Navajo. I have been told about a young Navajo who did "sand art" and would sign his works (sold to tourists) with what he thought was his Navajo name. However, an elder literate Navajo then comes along and asks the Navajo artist what the written form is supposed to mean. The young man states that it is his "Navajo name." The elder Navajo then notes that the name is spelled "incorrectly" and rather than being a positive and flattering Navajo name it is rather a description of a sexual act. In the story, what the young Navajo has confused are vowel doubling for long vowels and the inclusion of the apostrophe for the glottal stop. The young man shows an incomplete grasp of the orthographic norm and because of that has spelled his name "incorrectly." Of course, it is unlikely that any tourists would actually be able to read the Navajo name in the first place. The signature on the work served an indexical and iconic function for the tourists and was not intended to be read for its semantico-referential meaning. Only when an elder literate Navajo comes along and reads the name for its semantico-referential content is the humor of the name made apparent. Unstated, but clearly implied in the story, is that there are numerous pieces of "sand art" that this young man signed with this sexually explicit statement that are now somewhere far from the Navajo Nation, perhaps prominently hanging in the houses of those tourists.16 Note that this form of hetero-graphy is "mobile" (Blommaert 2008, 23–24) as it travels with the tourists and it retains its indexical and iconic functions to some putative "authentic Navajo experience" (compare with Bender 2002, 138–139). Where this hetero-graphy is least mobile, "where it loses voice and creates ‘misunderstanding’" (Blommaert 2008, 24) is in the local context of literate Navajos reading for alignment with the orthographic norm and for semantico-referential content.

Today, when Navajo poets write in Navajo their poetry is often opened up to criticism for being "spelled incorrectly." One Navajo student I knew in 2000–2001 showed me a poem he had written in Navajo for a creative writing class that was replete with red marks indicating all his spelling errors. As he noted, nothing had been said about the content of the poem. It was my impression that that had discouraged him about writing in Navajo. In discussing a poem written in Navajo by
a Navajo poet with two Navajos literate in Navajo, one of the Navajo consultants (Consultant A) was highly critical of that poet's abilities to write Navajo (the poet was not present). The other Navajo (Consultant B) told Consultant A that he sounded like a teacher from the boarding school. Consultant A conceded that point and tried to couch his criticism of the writing in Navajo in a more positive frame. The chastisement by Consultant B that Consultant A sounded like a boarding school teacher seemed to clearly resonate with Consultant A. Where Consultant A had claimed that the poem was completely incomprehensible, Consultant B had said he could read the poem. Consultant A ultimately conceded that he too could read the poem, but that it was still "spelled incorrectly." However, Consultant A still had a hard time moving beyond treating the poem as a test of whether or not the poet could write the orthographic norm to discussing the poem as a poem.

In 2000–2001 Rex Lee Jim was teaching Navajo philosophy at Diné College, Tsaile, AZ. He had also published three books of poetry. Two of those books were written entirely in Navajo (Jim 1989, 1995) and a third book was a trilingual collection in Navajo, Gaelic, and English (Jim 1998). Many Navajos I spoke to during my fieldwork often commented on Jim's poetry, noting that, in fact, he wrote in Navajo. He was, as people would tell me, someone I should talk to. Most Navajos that I spoke with had not read Jim's poetry. However, they had either heard it at a poetry performance they attended or on the tribal radio station KTNN (where he had occasionally read his poetry). Some literate Navajos did praise his poetry. However, there were a number of Navajos who praised Jim for writing poetry in Navajo and then noted that he did not "spell correctly" (Webster 2006b). One Navajo educator I spoke with about Jim's poetry singled out Jim's use of -x- in a number of his poems. For example, in the following poem, the Navajo educator suggested that all of the words spelled with the -x- (indicating a velar fricative) were "misspelled." The poem has been translated into English in consultation with Blackhorse Mitchell (Mitchell and Webster 2011):

(6) na'aschehxidi
bichqį́ h
ni'deeschehexido
ni'tibchehxį́h
chxqq’ bee
náníichexdaad. (Jim 1995, 38)
[The badger's
nose
stretched round
shitting
with shit
is full]

In each of the lexical items that includes the -x- above, they violate the orthographic norm. For example, the orthographic norm for the second line is bichqį́ h ["its nose"] and for the sixth line náníichexda ["to become full, to swell back up"]. Elsewhere, Mitchell and I describe the use of the velar fricative -x- in this poem as an optional expressive feature that heightens the sense that Badger is behaving in an uncontrolled manner (Mitchell and Webster 2011; see also Reichard 1948). We also note that the
consonant cluster of -chx- phonologically echoes with the important Navajo term hóchxyó ['ugly, out of control, disorderly, evil'] and hence adds to the sense that Badger “lacks control.” Jim’s emergent spelling practice in the use of the -x- here, rather than being a spelling error, is actually a densely textured poetic accomplishment in Navajo that relies on the expressive potentialities of Navajo. To say that Jim has various spelling errors in his poetry is akin, then, to stating that William Blake or John Clare has numerous spelling errors and grammatical errors in their poetry; it is to miss the poetry entirely. When Jim ran for President of the Navajo Nation in 2009, a political advert in the Navajo Times included as one of his qualifications that he was “literate in Navajo” (5 November 2009). There is ideological value in being literate in Navajo.

Jim is, of course, not the only Navajo to write poetry in Navajo. As I noted above, Tohe (2005) has also written poetry in Navajo. The late Alyse Neundorf, who was a linguist by training, also wrote poetry in Navajo (Neundorf 1999). Not surprisingly, her poetry often aligns with the orthographic norm and, indeed, with her presentation of the Navajo line of poetry and then an English translation of that line directly below, her poetry is also reminiscent of the work of linguists. Nia Francisco (1977) is often credited by some Navajos with being the first poet to publish a poem in Navajo. The poem was published in College English. Vee Browne, Vénaya Yazzie, and Lorraine Dominique Nakai, and still others, also write occasionally in Navajo (some of which has been published, see below). Blackhorse Mitchell has written a number of poems in Navajo that have not been published and, indeed, a number of Navajo-language teachers have written poetry in Navajo that has not been published (Webster 2004). This poetry very much aligns with the orthographic norm.

Many Navajo poets resist the notion of evaluating their written Navajo poetry by the criteria of the orthographic norm. Indeed, they are often frustrated by Navajos who seem overly fixated on the orthographic norms and on their (the poets) success or failure in aligning with that norm. These poets encourage other Navajo poets to write in Navajo no matter the orthography, because writing in Navajo is important to them and allows them to express important ideas, emotions, cultural knowledge, place-names and the like in Navajo (Webster 2006a). Again, most Navajos come to Navajo poetry not as words on printed pages, but rather as sounds, as poetry performed orally at a variety of public venues on and around the Navajo Nation (Webster 2009). This trend can now be seen, for example, in Tááphonso’s (2008) most recent book of poetry that includes a CD of Tááphonso reading both recent poems in her new collection and particular fan favorites. Neundorf had recorded her Navajo-language poems published in 1999 on tape and graciously mailed me a copy after I had left the Navajo Nation in 2001. Interestingly, most outsiders — lacking any awareness of the orthographic norm — are less critical of Navajo hetero-graphy.

Lorraine Dominique Nakai (2006) and Vénaya Yazzie (2010) have also recently published poems in Navajo that align, to varying degrees, with the orthographic norm. They are certainly aware of the orthographic norms. So, for example, Yazzie (2010, 299) uses the “barred I” to indicate the voiceless alveolar lateral, vowel doubling for vowel length, the apostrophe for the glottal stop, and an acute accent for high tone. According to Yazzie, her recently published poem in Navajo is her first poem that she has written in Navajo and she took Navajo language courses at Diné College (Shiprock) to learn to write Navajo. Nakai’s (2006) poem is in a special
section of rattapallax 13 dedicated to “endangered languages.” Nakai has both a Navajo version of her poem and an English version. But here, the poetry in Navajo is not meant to be read for its semantico-referential and poetic meaning. Rather, like the signs discussed earlier or the Navajo used on the “Navajo Language Page”, the poems in Navajo serve indexical and iconic functions. They are both iconic of (with their myriad distinct orthographic norms) indigenous languages (or languages of the other) and indexical of indigenous identity. Indeed, over the years a few well-meaning editors have contacted me about recommending Navajo poets who “write in their language” (which, as I quickly discovered, means Navajo) for special issues on indigenous languages or endangered languages. I asked one editor how they would know if a poem written in Navajo was any good. They replied that they took my recommendation of the poet as a recommendation of the quality of the poetry. Clearly the poetry in Navajo – no matter the orthography used – was not meant to be read for its semantico-referential content or poetic meanings. It was, instead, an icon and index of the Navajo language and Navajo identity; of sympathy for indigenous languages and indigenous issues.

Neundorf’s (1999) poetry in the journal Red Mesa Review and Nakai’s (2006) poem in rattapallax 13 are not commonly found on the Navajo Nation and one could make an argument that their audience in those journals was not Navajos. None of the books of poetry written entirely in Navajo are widely available on the Navajo Nation. Jim’s books, for example, are not sold regularly on the Navajo Nation. Bookstores are uncommon on the Navajo Nation. Emerson’s coffee shop and bookstore, discussed above (see Figure 8), has since closed. The gift-shop at the Navajo Nation Museum does sell a number of books of poetry by Navajo authors. But Jim’s books are not sold there. According to one of the Navajos who worked the counter at the museum, the books at the gift-shop seem to be sold mostly to tourists. Many Navajos do not normally buy books so much as circulate them from reader to reader. A Navajo friend had read Tohe’s No Parole Today and had given it to her sister to read. Another Navajo had given her copy of Mitchell’s (2004) Miracle Hill to her daughter, who had in turn given it to a friend. In general, Navajos do not accumulate books in the ways that middle-class Anglo society does. In 2000, one Navajo told me that his house differed from many Navajos because he had shelf-upon-shelf of books. Since then, his claim has been largely confirmed (although there are, of course, exceptions and many poets fall into that category). This is not to say that Navajos do not read. They do. Many Navajos that I know are devoted readers of the Navajo Times. They simply do not accumulate books.

Conclusions

This article has sought to sketch some of the contradictions and tensions found in reading and writing poetry in Navajo. For most Navajos, written Navajo functions on signs and in the newspaper iconically and indexically; it validates and affirms Navajo as a language and creates a Navajo space. It does not necessarily function semantico-referentially. Written Navajo poetry functions in a similar manner. It indexes a Navajo identity and is iconic of Navajo as a language of value. Poetry written hetero-graphically can sometimes be read, and these poems do show an influence from the orthographic norm. But many of these uses are of culturally important formulaic phrases and words, and here their use acts as icons and indexes
of those cultural beliefs and values. They affirm the importance of kinship relations and place-names, of Navajo philosophy. Words written in the orthographic norm — by both non-literate-in-Navajo Navajos and literate-in-Navajo Navajos — confirm the social value of the orthographic norm (much like the signs on the Navajo Nation do) and they too may index important Navajo values and act as icons of Navajo-ness. But again they are not read for semantico-referential meaning. Like the emergent spelling forms, they can be “heard” for semantico-referential meanings, which is, again, how most Navajo poetry is appreciated today in the Navajo Nation, as an oral phenomenon.

Poetry written entirely or mostly in Navajo cannot be read by most Navajos and that poetry is often, although certainly not always, evaluated by those who can read it by whether or not it aligns with orthographic norms. This, of course, mirrors nothing so much as how many Navajos encountered English literacy (Webster 2011a). The question was not so much of content, but whether or not the writing aligned with the English orthographic norm. As my work with Mitchell has shown, poetry that was written in Navajo English, a grassroots literacy, was negatively evaluated by boarding school teachers because it violated the orthographic norms of English (Webster 2011a). Indeed, teachers were often unconcerned with the content of Navajo English writing, but instead with its faithfulness to the orthographic norm (Webster 2011a). A “great poet” was one that followed the orthographic norms of English regardless of the content or poetics (Webster 2011a, 76). It would appear that contemporary Navajo poetry written in Navajo is being “read” primarily by those not literate in Navajo (both Navajos and non-Navajos) as indexes and icons of the value of the Navajo language. It is also often being “read” by those Navajos literate in Navajo as icons and indexes of faithfulness and command of and alignment with the orthographic norm. In neither case is it being read as poetry. It can, however, still be heard that way.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was conducted primarily on the Navajo Nation in 2000–2001 and again in the summers of 2007–2011. The research was conducted under permits from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. The author thanks them. Funding for this research was provided by Wenner-Gren, the University of Texas at Austin, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, the American Philosophical Society, and the Whatcom Museum, Jacobs Fund. The author thanks them. The author would also like to thank the numerous Navajos, both poet and non-poet, who have taken the time to talk with him over the years. This paper greatly benefited from the comments of two anonymous reviewers for Social Semiotics. The author thanks them. The author thanks Aimee Hosemann for comments on an earlier version of this paper. Mistakes are, however, still the author’s mine. Finally, the author thanks Blackhorse Mitchell for his guidance over the years.

Notes

1. The role of educational institutions in the stigmatization of both indigenous Englishes and in the devaluing of Native languages has been expertly analyzed by Rosina Lippi-Green (1997), Ruth Stack (2002), and Barbara Meek (2011). See also the valuable articles in Paul Krooklity and Margaret Field (2009).

2. This is not to say that Navajos have only written in an alphabetic writing system. For example, the events from the Long Walk of 1864–1868 were inscribed as petroglyphs on rocks after the Navajo return to their homeland (Webster 2009, 155). Also, David
McAllester (1970) remarks on a Navajo medicine man creating mnemonic pictographs to aid in reciting a newly learned chant in 1950. As I note later on, one critique of the contemporary Navajo writing system is that it looks like the English writing system. McAllester’s discussion of the use of pictographs to write a chant also resonates with a question posed by a reviewer concerning Navajo songs. In general, Navajos that I have worked with classify poetry as hane (“story, narrative”) and not as sin (“song”) (Webster 2009). Although some poets – Luci Taphonso, for example – often insert songs into their poetry. This practice, of inserting songs into a narrative, resonates with Navajo oral tradition (see Webster 2011b). Taphonso does not, however, normally write the songs – often in Navajo – in her poetry. Rather the songs are a part of her poetry performance (Webster 2009). Other poets like Tacey Atsitty, for example, who also breaks into song when she performs her poetry, writes the song lyrics (mostly in Navajo) and vocals in her poetry. Songs – especially Christian hymns – are written in Navajo and hymnals can be found at churches and sold at flea markets (in Gallup, NM, for example). McLaughlin (1992) notes that songs were one of the kinds of writing the Navajos in the community he worked in engaged in. Outsiders, of course, have long documented Navajo songs.

3. I borrow the notion “orthographic norm” from Blommaert (2008). I return to this topic below.


5. It is still the case that some Navajos consider linguistic diversity in Navajo the norm and take great pleasure in describing how Navajos speak in other regions of the Reservation. I have also been told that, in the “old days,” you could tell somebody’s clan by how they spoke. Specific linguistic features concerning clan dialects have been hard to document, however. Other Navajos that I have worked with or heard speak have criticized linguistic diversity as linguistic deficiencies. Young and Morgan’s (1987) work, which is largely associated with what some Navajos call the “Chinle Valley dialect,” does include some examples of dialect variation (e.g. zas and yas (“snow”). Some Navajos that I have worked with, who have spoken fondly of the old clan dialects and of the linguistic diversity in speaking, are resistant to non-alignment with the orthographic norm in writing Navajo. For them, it appears, diversity in speaking is appropriate, but one should not diverge from the orthographic norm. This echoes a prevailing language ideology in the United States (see Lippi-Green 1997).

6. While it is outside the scope of this paper, let me say a couple things here about bilingual children’s book in Navajo and English. First, the history of bilingual children’s books coincides with the emergence of the current orthographic norm. One of the first examples that I have is the 1949 Coyote Tales (Morgan 1949), authored by Morgan and translated by Young and Morgan and “adapted” into English by Hildegard Thompson. The book (a blue cardboard cover with the pages stapled in) also included the art work by Navajo artist Andrew Tsinnaiji. The written Navajo used in this book was clearly in alignment with the orthographic norm. The book was published by the US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, as part of their “Navajo Life Series.” Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) have discussed the role of the Life Readers among Navajos and other Native peoples. They analyze the subtle and not-so-subtle difference between the Navajo and English versions of the Navajo Life Reader, Flag of My Country. As Lomawaima and McCarty (2006, 106) note: “The English is unrelenting, almost strident, in its essentialized patriotism, asserting one-to-one connections between homeland and family, possessions, and personal identity... the Navajo texts lack all connotations of patriotism... several Navajo words and phrases utilized throughout the text, however, are deeply evocative of a Navajo sense of identity and sacred landscape as homeland.” More recently, Salina Bookshelf, Inc. of Flagstaff, AZ has published a number of glossy bilingual children’s books authored by, for example, Navajo writer/educator Evangeline Parsons Yazzie (2005) (among others). Yazzie is also co-author of the Navajo-language textbook also published by Salina Bookshelf, Inc., Diné Biizaaad Binááhoot’ah: Rediscovering the Navajo Language (Yazzie and Spears 2007). The children’s books are often illustrated by Navajo artists as well and the production value of these books is quite good. Thus, unlike the examples discussed by Meek and Messing (2007), they do not iconically reinforce an association of indigenous language with economic inequality. However, they are still invariably bilingual
in Navajo and English and thus the books can be read without any knowledge of Navajo. The books are sold at a number of venues on the Navajo Nation, including NACE stores, but, again, in conversation with one of the women who works at the NACE store in Shiprock, she suggested that the books were sold primarily to non-Navajo tourists. More work on Navajo bilingual children's books seems warranted.

7. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%88iyis%C3%AD%C3%AD_Naatsoo. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting inclusion of this reference. As an aside, Kevin Scannell runs a blog concerning indigenous language on “Twitter” and has compiled data on the percentage of “tweets” in those indigenous languages (http://indigenoustweets.blogspot.com/). Here is the link to the data on Navajo: http://indigenoustweets.com/nav. As can be seen, while there are four Navajos who “tweet,” the use of Navajo language in those “tweets” account for 0.9%, 0.2%, 0.3% and 0.8% of their “tweets” (accessed 4 July 2011). Thus the “tweets” are predominately not in Navajo. In contrast, one Anishinaabe “tweeter” comes in with 24.3% of their “tweets” in Anishinaabe (http://indigenoustweets.com/ijf). I thank Corin Pursell for telling me about this website.

8. I use “emergent spelling” practices instead of “easy phonetics” because of its resonance with Paul Hopper’s (1987) concern with “emergent grammar.” Like the emergent grammar described by Hopper, emergent spelling practices are always partial, in process, and socially located. I thank an anonymous reviewer for challenging me to think more carefully about my use of “easy phonetics.”

9. *atsi* is not equivalent to “meat.” *atsi* “meat, flesh” is an inalienable noun stem (i.e. it must have a possessive prefix) and ‘a-’ is the indefinite pronoun possessive prefix “someone.” The form glosses, then, as “something’s meat.”

10. Diné College was founded as Navajo Community College at Many Farms, AZ in 1968. It moved to new campus in Tsaile, AZ in 1969. The name was changed from Navajo Community College to Diné College in 1997 (for a discussion of Diné College, see House 2002). When I did fieldwork on the Navajo Nation in 2000–2001, Navajo students often complained that various buildings still had NCC painted on them.

11. On the other hand, some Christian Navajos (including some Navajo poets) do support written Navajo. And, of course, saying “Christian” Navajo obscures a number of denominational differences as well. Not all Christian denominations agree on whether or not all parts of the Bible should be translated. Webster (2009, 106–107) discusses something of the complexity of writing Navajo by various Christian denominations. For a related case, concerning the language ideologies of various Christian denominations among Western Apaches, see David Samuels (2006).

12. As one reviewer noted, there has been ongoing discussion in western circles concerning whether or not “expressive forms” like weaving and sandpaintings can be read. As that reviewer notes, Susanne Langer (1957, 79–102), for example, distinguishes between “discursive” (alphabetic writing) and “presentationals” (expressive forms like weaving and sandpaintings) forms of communication. However, some of the Navajo poets I have worked with do not make a distinction between these kinds of reading. When they say that Navajos have writing in sandpaintings, weaving, and petroglyphs, they are arguing against a view that suggests that they “lacked” writing. They are, instead, suggesting that “white people” have misrecognized and misunderstood the inscriptive practices of Navajos (much as they have misrecognized and misunderstood other aspects of Navajo culture, see Denetdale 2007). As one Navajo said to me: “Navajos have always had writing.” He was talking about sandpaintings and he went on to note that most “white people” cannot read Navajo writing. In fact, they are arguing against the very dichotomy suggested by Langer. As Solomon (2001, 1) notes about Andean knotted-cord “writing,” “what is needed is a more inclusive ‘ethnography of inscriptive practices’ that does not exclude certain inscriptive practices a priori. Finally, Navajo poet Orlando White’s (2009) poetry takes the forms of English letters as an entry point into understanding the social and emotional relationships between those letters. In this way, English letters can be read in a similar (although not identical) manner to Navajo visual arts.

13. A fair amount of ink has been spilled trying to translate this important concept in Navajo. Here I yield to the translation offered by Jim (2000, 232). See also House (2002).
14. Speaking Navajo is also dangerous in ritual where exact repetition – given the contingencies of the world – is needed for chants (hátáál) to be efficacious. On this point, see James Paris (1994). Also, as Mitchell and Webster (2011) note, one should speak in a controlled manner and not say uncontrolled things (see also Witherspoon 1977; Toelken 1987; Rushforth and Chisholm 1991).

15. A distinction is sometimes made among some Navajos between Diné bizaad ["Navajo language"] and Diné'ehjí yáhíí ["he/she is speaking the Diné way"]; Speaking Diné bizaad does not necessarily entail speaking in a controlled and respectful manner (i.e. Diné'ehjí yáhíí). Conversely, one can Diné'ehjí yáhíí without speaking Diné bizaad. Field (2001) describes how one controlled way of speaking has persisted in use in local ways of speaking English (see also Webster 2011). The priest, while speaking Diné bizaad, was not speaking in a controlled manner.

16. This story can also be read as a critique of hubris and reveals a central tension for many Navajo poets. As a number of Navajo poets noted, calling attention to oneself is an unwelcome way of behaving and suggests a lack of proper control and restraint. In signing his name, the Navajo sand artist appeared to be calling too much attention to his own achievements. He lacked control (see Mitchell and Webster 2011). Many Navajo poets seek to mitigate their own importance when performing poetry before an audience by placing themselves within the Navajo clan system (Webster 2009). One reviewer suggested that it may be “possible that the signature on the sand art was intentionally spelled ‘incorrectly’ so as an ‘ingenious way...of keeping their culture from being taken away.’ This is a possible interpretation of the story, but it was not the view given by my Navajo consultants. They focused on the young man’s hubris (or lack of control) in writing his “Navajo name” incorrectly.” The young man is as unaware of what he has written as are the tourists in this case. Like the example from Ft. Defiance above, this is an unintentional pun that suggests a lack of cleverness to use Navajo (either spoken or written) (see Webster 2010b).

17. Jim is now (in 2011) Vice President of the Navajo Nation.

18. Although, to be sure, some of Jim’s books can be found at the libraries of Diné College. According to a catalog search of the Diné College library system, the Shiprock campus has Jim (1989) and the Tséinlání campus has Jim (1998). The book of poetry by Jim at Tséinlání is for Library use only. Neither campus has Jim (1995). On the other hand, a catalog search of the library at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, AZ, on 11 July 2011 turned up no entries for Rex Lee Jim.

19. The accumulation of things is often looked down on by any number of Navajos. Such accumulation of things is seen by these Navajos as an indicator that a person is not behaving in a Navajo way; that is, being generous and sharing. The accumulation of books, much appreciated in western academic circles, is understood instead as an indicator that a person is “stingy.” Scott Rushforth and James Chisholm (1991) outline the various contours of Athabaskan (including Navajo) beliefs and values concerning this point. On the other hand, economic realities also factor in here as well. More than one Navajo has told me that they cannot afford to buy various books of Navajo poetry. Poverty is endemic on the Navajo Nation.

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