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"Witty House Name": Visual Expression, Interpretive Practice, and Uneven Agency in a Midwestern College Town

Many students living in a college town located in the Midwest of the United States have put up large signs on the houses in which they reside. The signs' messages such as "Hangover Here," "Crammed Inn," and "Syc-a-College" create puns drawing on multiple domains of meaning from student or local life, including locations, institutions, and popular film or music titles. This article considers the different meanings and purposes of house signs as envisioned by different groups of residents of named houses in order to explore the contours of agency involved in house sign activity. Interviews with residents of named houses reveal that some groups' interpretive desires are salient to all residents of named houses, regardless of what they understand their house sign to do, while the interpretive desires of others are thwarted. Thus, this article argues that agency is mediated by house sign activity in uneven ways and, more broadly, uses the college house sign phenomenon to shed new light on the ways in which agency is mediated by language.

Oxford, located in southwestern Ohio, is a college town *par excellence.* In late August, approximately 16,000 Miami University students join the town's approximately 15,000 permanent residents. The vast majority of the students leave in May. The presence of students during the academic year has shaped Oxford's economy and constituent social identities in ways typical of college towns. For example, bars and a large dance club inhabit prime real estate locations downtown, only a short walk away from campus; many of the youths who attend private high schools outside of town are the children of professors; and so salient is the term "townie" that I have heard towns-people themselves use it with one another in conversations in barber shops, the supermarket, or Oxford's central park.[1]

However, there is an element that makes Oxford unique among college towns. Over two hundred "house signs" dot Oxford's residential landscape. Students attach signs made out of wood, metal, and/or plastic to their houses, exhibiting to passersby a myriad of messages, linguistic and pictorial. House signs invoke practices (e.g., studying), objects (e.g., beer cans), and/or physical conditions (e.g., a hangover) that are linked by their salience to "student life."[2] In a college town, perhaps one is not surprised to find messages such as "Boot and Rally" (vomiting and regrouping to drink

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more) and "Beer Goggles" (finding others more attractive than one would were one sober) attached to houses in which students "party."

In this article, I offer an approach to house sign activity that accounts for the uneven ways in which residents of named houses can realize their goals of participation. Such an approach, I argue, requires analytic moves that engage with increasingly sophisticated understandings in folklore and linguistic anthropology of the ways that participants in an expressive practice can share certain understandings of the practice at the same time that only the goals of some will be realized. I thus conceptualize agency, what Laura Ahearn defines as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001c:112), to be distributed unevenly across social actors such that only some interpretations of an expressive practice achieve widespread salience.

A few scholars, such as Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988), Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon (2003), Theo van Leeuwen (2004), and Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (2001), have begun to work outside of a traditional emphasis on verbal communication by considering the special complexities presented by visual language. One of the most powerful resources investigated by these scholars is the concept of indexicality, an idea that accounts for the ways in which signs rely on and point to context (Peirce [1894] 1998). Indexicality calls attention to the situation of linguistic elements in time and place and the seemingly limitless possibilities for sociocultural framing of persons, places, activities, styles, and so on (Blommaert 2005). Stressed in the work of the aforementioned scholars is the dual manner in which visual language engages its environment and other items of visual language. Viewed from this perspective, house signs are interesting in and of themselves for their puns, which can involve the location of the house and product names, such as the sign "West High Life" (Miller beer and the western side of town); the names of streets in Oxford, such as the sign "Poplar Cherry" (near the intersection of Poplar and Cherry streets); and institutions, such as the sign "Precinct Spread 'Em" (near the police station).

The same scholars point out—but largely leave to others to ponder—that a singular interest in such indexical relations begs the question of how social actors engage with them. In order to conceptualize agency as an unevenly distributed force in house sign activity, I argue that one must consider objects to be part of a dialectical relationship between habits of production and display, on the one hand, and interpretations through which they attain meaning, on the other hand. In this article, I take such an approach and explore the ways that social actors index themselves and others to be members of what a growing number of scholars call a "community of practice."[3] Harris M. Berger and Giovanna P. Del Negro explain that practice operates at the nexus of context, activity, and orientation toward consequences: "practice encompasses three elements: social context, which both constrains and enables the practice; social consequences, which can be intended or unintended; and the practice itself, which is influenced by context and oriented toward consequences" (2004:25–6). The fact that practice is "oriented toward consequences" invokes intersubjective alignments indexed in myriad ways. Furthermore, the concept of index can be used to examine communities of practice by showing how intersubjective alignments come to the fore when the construal of indexical phenomena differs (Urciuoli 1995).

For example, several colleagues of mine were intrigued by a particular house sign, "Che," understanding the name to refer to Che Guevara. They told me with skepticism that they were hopeful that the sign indexed a revolutionary spirit coupled with a socialist political-economic disposition within the student body, however limited in number the imagined young leftists might be. When interviewed, neither the residents of "Che" nor the residents of several other houses to whom the name was mentioned were familiar with the historical figure. Consistently in these interviews, respondents claimed that the interviewers' suggestion indicated that they "did not understand" house signs because they were "taking them too seriously." As I will explain later, "Che" refers to a man of no popular fame. When house signs in Oxford do include particular people, they are television or movie stars—for example, Gary Coleman of *Diff'rent Strokes*, David Hasselhoff of *Baywatch*, and Pee-wee Herman (Paul Reubens) of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*.

While the example points to a rather obvious way that interpretive habits involved in reading and reflecting on house signs mark social actors as belonging to different communities of practice, this article traces more subtle boundaries delimiting communities by what they hope their signs will achieve vis-à-vis the onlooker. On the one hand, I consider interviews conducted with residents of named houses that reveal that the residents understand their signs to involve a sexual element but dismiss its effects on onlookers. On the other hand, I consider interviews conducted with residents of named houses that reveal that the residents understand their signs to index their Christian faith and wish for their signs to offer an invitation to the onlooker. I explore differences in the ways that the two groups envision their signs' effects on

Figure 1. "Che."

onlookers in order to demonstrate that the differences embody the potential for the two groups to enact different types of agency.

Yet, merely attending to the two groups' underlying goals for the display of house signs cannot achieve the central goal of this article, to explore the ways in which agency is unevenly distributed between groups. Webb Keane points out that an interpretive practice can expose its practitioner to risk by virtue of the fact that she or he is embedded (and can become entangled) in larger fields of practice: "language is both intimately bound up with the subjectivity of its speakers and consists of linguistic forms and pragmatic conventions not fully of their own making" (1997a:676). Explored below are the "hazards of representation," in the parlance of Keane (1997b), that are involved when indexical connections between a house name and its residents' Christian faith are subjected to the interpretive practices embodying the larger house sign community of practice. While residents of houses with Christian signs have elaborate and passionate understandings of what they hope that their house signs will achieve, their participation in Oxford's world of house signs subjects their signs to interpretive practices out of their control. Thus, the conceptualization of agency requires attention to—but cannot be limited to—the ways that visual language is embedded in context and the ways that social actors engage with visual language through interpretive habits. Indeed, the concept of agency prompts me to ask whose meaning-making activity is able to cross the boundaries of interpretive habits and whose is not.

Scholars of folklore have been especially adept at showing how tradition (Handler and Linnekin 1984), nationalism (Abrahams 1993; Bauman 1993; Bendix 1992; Coe 1999; Herzfeld 1982), authenticity (Bendix 1997; Stewart 1991), textuality (Bauman 1995; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Briggs 1993; Briggs and Bauman 1999), heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and notions of the local (Shuman 1993) have provided organizing tropes by which people, sometimes participating in powerful institutions such as states, museums, schools, and scholarly publishing, have constructed and attempted to control means of ethnographic representation and interpretation. In the words of Amy Shuman and Charles Briggs, "Folklore is always already (in Derrida's terms) a politics of culture" (1993:112). Indeed, the aforementioned scholars engage the notion of agency because they demonstrate the ways that group-delimiting interpretive habits, organized by emergent tropes, can selectively enable people to define, interpret, authorize, decry, discount, or forget some practice. Questions of agency become apparent in the dialectic between interpretive practice and motive of display in Oxford's world of house signs, because there exists the risk of having one's motives subverted or the luxury of having one's motives realized. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, residents of named houses are largely in agreement about the ways that house signs should be interpreted, just as they imagine radically different purposes, vis-à-vis an onlooker, for their signs. Oxford's world of house signs presents the study of folklore with the opportunity to show the relevance of agency to a practice wherein there is an absence of a will to power, authority, or even description of alterity, because the selective subversion of interpretive desires happens outside the conscious awareness of participants. In other words, residents do not

seem to be aware that different motives of display might lie behind the presentation of house signs, just as they subvert those motives with their interpretive practices.

Ethnographic Methods

This article emerges from a much larger ethnographic research project. Students in my class, Seminar in Linguistic Anthropology, wanted to apply theoretical concepts in the class to an ethnographic situation. A student asked, "What about house signs?" and everyone in the class agreed that a concerted focus on a single phenomenon would provide a common ground of discussion. First, students and I photographed the signs, each person being assigned a section of Oxford. In the first year of the project, I took the photographs while touring the town with members of the class (producing the images presented herein), and, in the second year of the project, students and I were responsible for photographing house signs individually in assigned areas. Second, students made a list of four house names whose houses' residents they wanted to interview. Most students created lists centered on what they took to be common themes, such as signs involving alcohol or street location. Less commonly, students picked their "favorite" signs in terms of especially noteworthy artwork or vibrant colors.

After accounting for duplication, the students approached their choices, explained the project, ascertained interest, made an appointment for an interview to be conducted at the house, and left a copy of the consent form for those residents not present. Houses with uninterested or inaccessible residents were replaced by the next house on the student's list until the student had interviewed two houses' residents. Each student interviewed residents of a third house whose name was drawn from a pool of the houses not selected. Because interviews were scheduled beforehand, students were able to ensure that most residents would be home. All interviews were done with a group of residents that was comprised by at least half of the total of four to twelve residents. In one class, nine students interviewed twenty-seven houses' residents, and in the following year's class, seventeen students interviewed fifty-one houses' residents. The class created a list of ten questions, but students were encouraged to deviate from the list and conduct open-ended interviews. Interviews ranged in length from approximately twenty minutes to two and one-half hours. Students could accompany each other on interviews or could conduct them alone. Students requested my presence in nine interviews (including the two from which the extended excerpts presented below come).

Students taped their interviews and used three- to five-minute segments to write a final paper. Upon completion, as stipulated in the course syllabus and in the proposal approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, students gave me all of their photographs and tapes. I have deliberately excluded the exact dates from descriptions of fieldwork and presentations of transcripts, which all took place in the last ten years. In their consent forms, the researchers agreed to keep the identities of the informants confidential, and because the residents of the houses change from year to year, withholding the exact date of the research is necessary to maintain this

confidentiality. For example, the transcripts presented in the article below do not necessarily come from the inhabitants of the houses whose signs are depicted in the figures. House residents identified themselves with numbers in interviews, and I have given house residents and student interviewers pseudonyms in the transcript excerpts presented herein.[4]

Habits of Display and Interpretation Within the House Sign Community of Practice

Ultimately, it is impossible to explain why house signs mushroomed in number and came to inhabit public space in Oxford. Nevertheless, many residents, whether students or not, know that "Ivy League" was the first house sign, appearing in the early 1970s. The appearance of the first house sign corresponds to massive shifts in Oxford's residential pattern. The census of 1960 shows Oxford's population as 7,828, the highest until that time. The census of 1970, however, shows that Oxford's population rose drastically to 15,868, a figure surpassed in censuses since. The period of massive population increase coincides with the construction of new residential housing beyond Oxford's "Mile Square" (Figure 2), the town's original boundaries measuring one square mile (Blount 2000). Many residents in the "Mile Square" moved to Oxford's new neighborhoods, renting their former houses to students at Miami University. While some students do live in large apartment buildings built to the north, west, and south of the "Mile Square" during the same period of growth, they do not display house signs. Thus, house signs are found in and all over the "Mile Square" and, by association, have come to index their houses' residents as Miami University students renting off-campus.

The one exception to this pattern is an area north of the "Mile Square" on the east side of town where house signs can be found. Again, the association with student renters is unambiguous. The area of town is called "The Ghetto," and, in interviews, students explained that the label mirrors the shoddy construction of the houses, the comparatively cheap rents, and the lax atmosphere conducive to partying. Some house signs located in the Ghetto use the label in their messages: "Ghetto Fabulous," "Ghetto Superstars," and "Too Poplar for the Ghetto." Very few students who were interviewed were aware that the Ghetto is nearly as old as the "Mile Square" and that the Ghetto used to be the African American section of town.

For many students, living in a house is an attractive option after the first two years of required residence in the university's dormitories. An interview conducted with four sophomores shows that houses offer special qualities not found in other residential possibilities in Oxford, continued residence in the dormitory, or residence in an apartment. These qualities include freedom, space, self-sufficiency, and solidarity with friends.

> Vicky [student interviewer]: Now are you guys interested in living in a house, and, if so, why or why not?
>
> Liz: Um, I really wanted to live in a house this year—next year—but my friends and I couldn't find one, so, and because you have to get houses so early in Oxford, we ended up just getting an apartment because it was just a whole lot easier in the end.
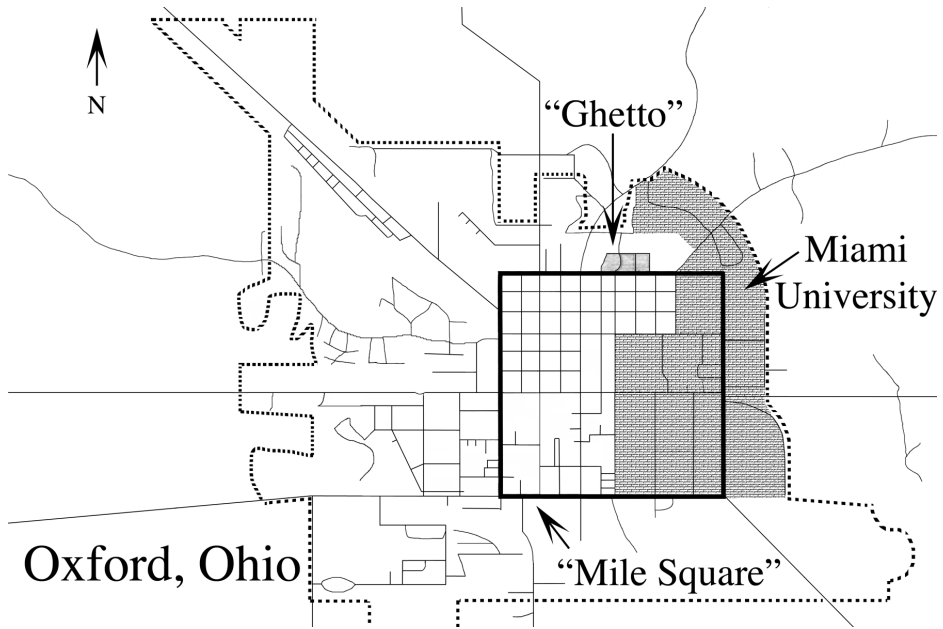
Figure 2. Map of Oxford with the "Mile Square" and the "Ghetto."

ROBBIE: Um, I'm really interested in living in a house. I like the freedom, and, uh, you can be in a house all year. You don't have to leave for special breaks or anything like that. You can do whatever you want.

STACEY: Um, I definitely wanted to live in a house. I wanted that over an apartment because I wanted to have more living space and I thought a lot of the apartments in Oxford didn't really offer that. And the house that we found was really cool and had everything that we wanted like our own washer and dryer and all that stuff. So yeah, I definitely wanted to live there.

REBECCA: I'm really excited about living in a house only because of my friends. I really just wanted to live close to them and that's . . . I mean if everyone had wanted to live in the dorm, I probably would have done that too.

When asked whether the interviewees would want to have a house sign, even the interviewee who will live in an apartment and, therefore, will not have a house sign, replied affirmatively.

VICKY: OK, would you guys want to have a house sign? Why or why not?

LIZ: Uh, yeah, because I think it just makes living in the house a whole lot more fun, even though that sounds really stupid. I think it just shows the personality of the people that live there.

ROBBIE: Um, I agree with that too. It, uh, shows a little bit of our personality. It kind of shows who we are. People can sort of see . . . you know, get an idea of who we are from looking at our house name. It's neat.

STACEY: Yeah, it's . . . seeing the house names around, it like kind of just gives a little bit of spice to the off-campus life, so it looks really cool and I think it'll be cool.

> Rebecca: Well, the house I'm moving into is already named. It's called "Animal House," but I think it's a really crappy name so I'm sure we'll change it as soon as we move in.

Notice that Robbie, the second respondent, speaks in the present tense about his own—forthcoming—house sign.

Rebecca, the last respondent, invokes the very uneven ways that house names change. Since the "baptismal event" by which "Ivy League," the first and oldest house with a sign, was named, a house's "tradition" has come to depend on its name's "inheritance" or "maintenance" by successive inhabitants (Kripke 1972). Many signs include the year in which the house was named, sometimes with some abbreviation for "established" preceding the year. In some interviews, students invoked the dates included on signs in order to substantiate the house name's "tradition" or "pedigree." In many interviews, residents gave evidence that the "baptismal event" of naming a house was a complex mediating factor long after those who "baptized" the house moved out (Rymes 1996, 2001a, 2001b). Some residents of named houses reported that they promised previous residents to maintain the house's name; others reported having to decide whether to keep the name or change it (as in Rebecca's case above); and others reported holding competitions and voting on the most "clever" name (whether for an unnamed or previously named house). A particularly complex case was the aforementioned house name "Che." In an interview, the residents explained that the previous residents named the house after a "drunk Mexican man" they met while transferring buses in Buffalo, New York, during spring break. The house residents wanted to keep the name, thereby maintaining its "tradition," but also to make it "our own." In order to achieve both aims, they decided to change the pronunciation of the name from "chay" to "chee."

The various constraints on naming houses, however, intersected with no discernable types of houses from the perspective of names or signs. Only two house signs seemed to be too salacious for prolonged public display. While walking to the university, I would see "Three Chicks and a Cock" (three chicks and a rooster or three young women and a penis), spray-painted on a dilapidated piece of plywood that was positioned in different areas of the front yard of a house for a two-week period before it finally disappeared. In several interviews, house residents explained that the only house sign that had to be removed by its house's residents because of complaints was "Nothing Butt Sex." I was never able to confirm who had asked for it to be removed or to which house it was attached. Note that both signs involve a sexual element, a factor that will become relevant in the discussion below.

In Oxford, house names can be found outside of their depiction on house signs, and house signs can be found outside of their placement on houses. The contexts in which names and signs can be found reinforce their association with Miami University students. For example, student interviewers arrived at one house to find residents dressed in t-shirts of a matching shade of green with their house name written across the front. They explained that they wear the t-shirts when they host parties or attend parties together in other houses. The student interviewers, however, discovered only two other houses wherein the residents engaged in the practice. A university-spon-

sored newspaper advertising entertainment venues conducted a poll of the ten most "infamous" house signs. Both "Morning Wood" and "Octopussy," discussed later in the article, made the list. And finally, a sandwich shop near campus that is patronized predominantly by university students used house names for several of its menu items. No particular domain of meaning dominated, as the manager explained to me that anyone could suggest names and sandwich ingredients and that suggestions were hardly confined to house names. The only place in which I could find house signs detached from their houses was in one of Oxford's bars, across the street from the sandwich shop. A number of examples of a handful of house names—"Morning Wood" and "Octopussy" among them—were attached to the walls of the bar. A bartender told me that when a number of house residents graduate together, they "retire" their sign to the bar so that other students will see their sign there. New residents of the house sometimes use new pictorial and design elements but maintain the house's name. I noticed that most of the house names in the bar still exist around town, and the bartender explained that during homecoming or while visiting, alumni come to the bar having checked to see that the particular house in which they lived still bears the same name.

Oxford's house signs present a bewildering array of messages and images to their viewers. Yet, what the house signs present is neither random nor captured by a single frame of meaning. House signs provide a space in which messages and images index different locations or practices, some emergent from the students' lifeworlds of renting houses, attending college, or throwing parties, and others emergent from the more mundane lifeworlds of street names, policing the town, or cautioning motorists and pedestrians. In many conversations, residents of named houses remarked upon the ways that different house signs "talk to each other" or even "mimic" or "copy each other." Indeed, the indexical relationships between messages and images, on the one hand, and locations, living arrangements, and practices, on the other hand, can be demonstrated, as in Table 1, by arranging house names in sets configured by various semiotic relationships.[5]

For example, an onlooker of the first grouping of house signs might perceive that the signs are linked by their houses' shared position on the street whose name is part of each of the house names. An onlooker of the second grouping of house signs might perceive that the number in the sign refers to the number of residents of the house (by a one-to-one or a two-to-one ratio). An onlooker of the third grouping of house signs might perceive that the signs are linked by their shared pun on the commercial practice of offering temporary lodging for a fee. And the onlooker of the fourth grouping of house signs might perceive that the signs are linked by their shared index of the use of alcohol.

But members of the house sign community of practice did not focus on such relationships when reflecting on the meanings of house signs in the interviews. This necessitates an analytic shift from semiotic relations presented within visual language to interpretive practices by which subjects render house signs meaningful. The example of my colleagues' understanding of the house sign "Che," introduced above, demonstrates that practices and beliefs taken by just any onlooker to be indexed by a house sign are unreliable indicators of the "interpretive frames" that made house

Table 1. Clusters among house signs around indexical relations (Examples that fall into two clusters are italicized).

Indexical relationship	Cluster of house signs	
Name of street on which house is located (Beech Street)	Beech Bunnies Pebble Beech *Sex on the Beech*	South Beech Spoiled Beeches
Number of house's residents	4 Non-Blondes *12 Feet Inn* Casual Six Dirty Dozen Unisix	Ho-Tel 6 Octoballs Octopussy Six Appeal
Temporary occupation of shelter for a fee (Inn)	*12 Feet Inn* Cornered Inn Inncoherent Inn Pursuit	Moon Inn Stagger Inn Stop Inn
The consumption of alcohol at parties	Absolut Angels Absolut Chaos Ale Road Crossing Cocktail Cocktales Liquor Juggs Liquor up Front Poker in the Rear	Pitcher Perfect *Sex on the Beech* Tappa Kegga Day The Pour House Typsy Chicks West High Life Whine Cellar

signs salient to the house sign community of practice in our interviews (Hanks 1993:130). Indeed, during interviews, residents of named houses rarely invoked construals such as those presented in Table 1 to interpret house signs, confirming Joseph Errington's (1985) observation that speakers' reflections on the indexicality involved in some linguistic element consistently fail to include the full range of its indexical relationships.

Three indexical relationships emerged consistently within the community of practice comprised by people who reflected on house names in interviews. In the parlance of Michael Silverstein (1993), the three habits of interpretation are "overtly metapragmatic," because they describe three effects that house signs *ought* to accomplish. While the three habits of interpreting house signs emerged in every interview, residents of named houses only occasionally reflected on the complex negotiations involved in the decision to maintain or change the house's previous name. By consistently invoking only the three habits of interpreting house signs, residents engaged in what Gal and Irvine (1995) and Irvine and Gal (2000) call "semiotic erasure," wherein beliefs about linguistic practice make certain linguistic practices invisible. Indeed, across interviews, the three interpretive habits erased the complex parameters of constraint and possibility faced by a house's residents when they are in the process of naming their house.

First, residents of named houses judged house signs to be either "clever" or "dumb." It was impossible to determine why residents judged some signs to be "clever." Many interviewees explained that their approval was due to personal preference. Much more consistent was the rationale for declaring a house sign to be "dumb," "weird," or "gay." On several occasions, interviewers asked for an explication of "gay." Respon-

dents claimed that the term means "weird," "strange," "abnormal," or "different," and, therefore, it has no relationship to sexual identity. Residents consistently remarked that "dumb," "weird," or "gay" signs are those whose cleverness must be a "private joke" shared among its house's residents. This characterization, in turn, fits nicely with the way that many residents elaborated on the universal "clever." Typical elaborations included, "y'know, they're funny," "they are just fun," and "the trick is not to take it too seriously."

Residents singled out "The Dresden" in several interviews, adding such comments as "I just don't get it" and "It's weird." When we interviewed residents of "The Dresden," I discovered first-hand what it is to be an outsider of the house sign community of practice. I asked the residents whether the matchbook pictured on the sign intersected the linguistic elements "Dresden" and "Night" (of "Get a Night Life") to create an index to the bombing of the German city during World War II (Figure 3). The bombing was salient to none of the residents. They explained that the house sign had "nothing to do" with my explanation. The residents explained that the house's

Figure 3. "The Dresden Get a Night Life."

name was inspired by a popular movie, *Swingers*, wherein various characters frequent a bar called The Dresden. In addition to the sign they have hung and anchored to the exterior of the house, the residents of "The Dresden" have affixed a large commercial poster to their living room wall that depicts the movie's bar scene. Each member of the house has found a character in the movie with which his habits—especially his favorite drinks—resonate. Residents of "The Dresden" reported that sometimes they employ their roommates' movie names, especially when talking about upcoming parties or favorite alcoholic beverages. In keeping with the notion that house sign activity must be considered as emergent from a community of practice, one might explain it thus: residents of other houses do not understand the basis upon which "The Dresden" might be judged as creative.

Second, students consistently explained that referring to a house's name is much easier than referring to a house's address. A practice that occurred in every interview was a student's mention of an actual address of the student's own or some other house, or a student's typification of an address (e.g., "One two three so-and-so street"). Subsequently, the student would explain that the use of the house name was an "easier" and/or "more efficient" way of referring to a house than the use of the house's address. When one of the interviewers would ask about typical scenarios in which such references occur, residents offered the identification of their places of residence, the invitation to others to "come over and hang out," and the identification of the location of a party.

And third, residents consistently characterized the messages displayed by house signs to be about "sex, drugs, and alcohol." Several interviewees invoked one house sign in particular, presented in Figure 4. The house's name, "Witty House Name

Figure 4. "Witty House Name (Preferably with a Drug, Sex, and/or Alcohol Reference)."

(Preferably with a Drug, Sex, and/or Alcohol Reference)," instantiates the notion that house signs *do* include some indexical relation to sex, drugs, or alcohol. One resident clarified, "most of 'em [house signs] are about partying or sex references," and another resident explained, "y'know, they're [house signs are] about partyin'." Indeed, "partying" was offered in many interviews to cover the ubiquitous mention of "sex, drugs, and alcohol."

When one considers the already limited number of examples presented above in Table 1, it becomes obvious that not all house signs have indexical ties to "sex, drugs, and alcohol." By typifying house signs with the mention of these three elements, residents of named houses again engage in semiotic erasure. In the discussion below, I explore residents' reflections on house signs through interviews conducted with residents who understand their signs to involve a sexual element and also with residents who understand their house signs to involve their Christian faith. The process of semiotic erasure is crucial to the discussion below in two respects. First, such typification anticipates the great lengths to which residents who understand their houses' names to have an indexical tie to one or more of "sex, drugs, and alcohol" went to justify or excuse their own responsibility for the sign's existence. Residents of houses with sexualized signs decried responsibility for their sign in ways that were far more elaborate and complex than those employed by the residents of houses whose signs involved alcohol or drugs. Second, "partying," the shorthand used to characterize "sex, drugs, and alcohol," allowed the residents of houses who understand their houses' names to index their Christian faith (discussed below) to claim a place—albeit an ambivalent one—within the interpretive frame in which house signs index the activity of partying generally. In an interview with residents of "Crib of the Rib" ("crib" originally being an African American Vernacular English term for dwelling), one resident explained, "we're wild and crazy in the fellowship of God." Another resident added, "yeah, we party." Immediately, however, residents explained that neither alcohol nor drugs had ever been present at the house's parties.

(Excusing) Responsibility Toward Onlookers: Agency and Its Denial

Alessandro Duranti provides a definition of agency useful for exploring the multifaceted notion of social action necessary for exploring the house sign community of practice: "Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)" (Duranti 2004:453). When applied to the residents of named houses, Duranti's definition includes practice (residents' naming of houses and displaying of signs), habits of interpretation that make sense of practice (the three interpretive habits described above with which residents make sense of house signs and that index them as a community of practice), and differences between residents of named houses in the ways they reflect on the relationship between the sign and the onlooker.

In this section of the article, I focus on the third, reflexive part of Duranti's definition wherein "actions are the object of evaluation" in order to show that constructions

of responsibility that underpin understandings of action and its effects shift within the house sign community of practice. Laura Ahearn suggests the possibility that agency is mediated differently within different communities of practice when she poses the question, "What types of supra-individual agency might exist?" (2001a:8). In this section, I show that the answer depends on the nexus of interpretive habit and groupness, such that one answer emerges for the house sign community of practice as a whole but another answer emerges for the two groups marked by more delimited interpretive habits. For example, the interpretive habits outlined above help to create the boundaries of the house sign community of practice as a whole in that any interpreter of a sign who finds in a sign an indexical relation not included by the three habits of interpretation indexes her- or himself as an outsider. Such a person becomes, in the rubric of the house sign community of practice, someone who takes house names "too seriously." Agency is mediated because the significance of someone's offer of disobedient indexical connections between house sign and social practice can be dismissed or ignored.

But, do the three habits of interpretation in the encompassing house sign community of practice exhaust the possibilities of how house residents reflect on their sign's relationship to those who might look at it?[6] Most interviews gave evidence that house residents find the mediating power of the three interpretive habits described above to be airtight indeed. In interviews with residents of most named houses, by far the most common way that a resident dealt with the issue of responsibility was to dismiss it by appealing to the interpretive habit by which house signs can be judged to be "clever." Many students explained that the cleverness of the signs reveal that the whole house sign phenomenon is "just for fun," "not serious," or "just a joke," thus absolving the residents of named houses of responsibility toward onlookers.

However, when compared to residents of houses with other kinds of names, the degree to which residents of houses whose signs include references to sex decried their own culpability in their sign's display is extreme. In other words, interviews conducted with the residents of houses with names such as "Deez Nuts" ("nuts" being a euphemism for testicles), "Hot Box" ("box" also being a term for the vagina), "Morning Wood" (waking with an erection), "Octopussy," and "Panty Shanty" demonstrate that those residents sense in some way that their culpability for the display of the sign is in need of explication. Indeed, the methods that such residents use to explore such culpability are complex and elaborate, but they consistently reduce their responsibility for the display of their sign. The especially complex constructions of responsibility that emerged within interviews conducted with residents who understand their signs to contain a sexual element give evidence that there exists a community of practice within the larger whole.

Another element that creates a group out of residents of houses whose signs make a gesture to sexual matters is the type of onlooker they foreground when the issue of responsibility is raised (Hill and Irvine 1992). Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia—his demonstration that language practice involves a complex interplay of language and perspective—is helpful in understanding why it is that certain types of people emerge when the issue of responsibility is raised in discussions with residents who understand their house names to involve a sexual element. Bakhtin notes, "Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying

degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,' varying degrees of aware-ness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (1986:89). At one level, all house signs are "heteroglossic" because they use language not their own.[7] For example, they borrow street names; the jargon of commercial activity; brand names; or popular film, television, and music performers and titles. Deborah Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong usefully warn that the notion of heteroglossia can "threaten to dissolve difference into a pool of homogenization" when scholars fail to pay careful attention to contextual features of interpretive practices (1999:240). The discussion of the three interpretive habits helps to avoid the risk of "homogeni-zation" because the habits show how the house sign community of practice narrows the indexical possibilities of house signs and marks other interpretations to be those of nonmembers. In the parlance of Bakhtin, members of the house sign community of practice "rework" house names within a relatively narrow regime of interpretation. But what of the heteroglossic possibilities that signs might present to people who (house residents sense) do not participate in the house sign community of practice? Are the possible interpretations of nonparticipants rendered moot by the three in-terpretive habits? The three interpretive habits create, in part, the possibility of a Bakhtinian "other"—a figure who may or may not be present or explicitly addressed and to whom justifications are made in interviews. The awareness of such an other indicates that house residents sense that the three habits of interpretation might be insufficient to account for the interpretive habits of some viewers.

An interview with the residents of a house named "Morning Wood" illustrates that they sense exactly this possibility and that they have fairly clear notions about the types of people whose alternative perspectives might raise the issue of the residents' culpability. However, in the interview, the residents claim that such others lack access to the sign's meaning, lack access to the sign physically, or are simply ridiculous. In short, the residents of "Morning Wood" sense that some types of people might in-terpret the house signs in such a way that suggests the house residents are doing harm, but the house residents make claims about such types of people, or comically imitate them, in a way that obviates any responsibility for the display of the sign (Figure 5).

I present an extended excerpt from the interview in order to demonstrate the complexity with which the residents of "Morning Wood" handled the notion of re-sponsibility toward onlookers. Further below, I present a shorter excerpt from an interview with the residents of "Octopussy" in order to demonstrate the ways in which the same issue was handled in a house of women. The first interview segment begins with a response by the residents to a question posed by Jay, a student conduct-ing the interview with me, about whether anyone "in the Oxford community" has "ever said anything" about "Morning Wood." Although the residents respond nega-tively, the issue of responsibility hardly disappears.[8]

    BEN: no not that I've noticed
    JAY: no like negative, criti ⌈cism
    CHUCK: ⌊not like directly to us, but I'm sure ⌈it exists
    AL: ⌊**oh I mean**
        like yeah, no one's ever directed like stuff **towards** us but I'm sure
        it's been ta::lked about

Figure 5. "Morning Wood."

ED: I'm sure strangers with candy that's right across the street ⌈from a
nursery school has more problems than ⌈us
CHUCK: ⌊that's what
I was thinking . . .   ⌊**Strangers with Candy** (5)
BEN: I don't think it's too offensive. if you don't know what morning wood
means which <u>most of the kids</u> **don't,** I mean, it's not really a big deal
ED: **yeah,** most townies, they probably don't know what morning wood is,
they just. you know. ⌈I gue . . . **I mean the only time,** <u>like I told you</u>
<u>about that guy stopping his</u> ⌈car
CHUCK: ⌊**hold it**
DAN: ⌊what **is** morning wood. <u>I don't really</u>
<u>know.</u>
ED: <u>I don't wanna give a definition of it,</u> **pervert**
CHUCK: <u>pe::rve::rt</u> (4)
AL: u::m, yeah, <u>I don't think,</u> like nobody's given us, any grief about it
I don't think

Ben answers Jay's question with a denial of ever hearing comments made about
"Morning Wood." When Jay makes explicit that he is asking about "negative criti-
cism," Chuck and Al too assert personal ignorance but surmise that such criticism
probably occurs. Rather than guessing what the talk of others might include, how-
ever, they deflect attention from their own sign by mentioning another. The mention
of "Strangers with Candy" is particularly appropriate because the house sits opposite
a school, making the house name's index of predatory activity that much more ro-
bust.

The implied victims of the "strangers" of "Strangers with Candy" are the focus of the next few lines as the residents of "Morning Wood" shift their focus from the names of houses to their viewers. They differentiate "kids" and "townies" from others and claim that the first group is incapable of understanding the house sign. This is the first moment in the interview that the residents of "Morning Wood" identify who might be reading their sign, and they identify those groups that might invoke their culpability in and responsibility for the sign's display. Ben focuses on "kids," indexed previously by "Strangers with Candy," and argues that the meaning of "Morning Wood" is probably opaque to them and, thus, insignificant. Ed expands the group from "kids" to "townies" and begins to recount a story told earlier in the interview that constitutes an example of a "townie" recognizing the meaning of the sign. Ed's mention of his earlier story is interesting because it provides evidence that "townies" do indeed have the ability to understand what "Morning Wood" means. Ed seems to sense this as he qualifies his reminder with "the only time." Ed's original telling in the interview drew the response from Chuck, "fucking townie," after which the focus was moved back to parties held at the house. In the excerpt presented here, Chuck likewise changes the frame of the discussion, contravening the presentation of exceptions.

Dan continues Chuck's interruption, inhabits the point of view of an onlooker, and initiates a momentary "breakthrough into performance" (Hymes 1981:12) of a modeled conversation. Dan's question, "What is 'Morning Wood'?" is "double voiced" in a Bakhtinian sense in that Dan takes up the perspective of a person who, unlike everyone present, cannot understand the sign (Bakhtin 1981). For example, Dan does not use "I" of "I don't really know" only to referentially index himself as a participant in the interview. Never made explicit is who Dan might be when asking the question, whether a "townie," another college student, or, as a reviewer intriguingly suggested, the engaged professor. In any case, there are several aspects of the interactions that ensue that indicate that they take place in a different frame than that of previous interaction and that, in this segment, Dan, Ed, and Chuck mean to be seen as not playing the role of members of the house sign community of practice (Hill 1985). Rather than answer the question, Ed calls Dan a "pervert" simply for asking it. Ed's tone is indignant as he accuses the character Dan plays of being a "pervert." Chuck returns interaction to its previous frame of students being interviewed with his laughter as he isolates "pervert" for repetition. The playful frame that double voicing makes possible allows Dan, Ed, and Chuck to invoke the capacity to offend, to raise the specter of its criticism, and to laugh off such criticism as ridiculous. Chuck's contribution affirms that the voices are overly sensitive and can be dismissed safely. Al confirms that no actual person enacted in the segment has existed as far as the residents know.

While in the previous excerpt the residents of "Morning Wood" focus on house names and their viewers and perform personae not their own, they shift in the next excerpt to focus on themselves. In arguing about whether they consider themselves to be part of the town of Oxford, the residents mitigate their own responsibility for the display of the sign yet again. Immediately following the previous excerpt, Jay asks whether some of the house signs are "inappropriate," to which the residents respond:

Dan: na::h, 'cause I'm a college kid and I don't really ca::re
All: #
Al: yeah, I don't care
Dan: I mean, like yeah, this isn't really our, like ⌈my **town**
Al: ⌊**we don't really care**
Ben: I think that it kind of **is,** but I mean. it's a small town and all . . . just kids,
    walk by like big parties every day. and they're used to it . . .
Chuck: well, **it's not like,** I don't think like **residents** are in, this, this **area**
    that much, I mean there are . . . the residential area's not really **he::re,**
    kids don't walk by here going to school (2)
Al: I know people from other schools that think it's really . . . I mean, I guess
    just **co:ol** that like, all the different houses around here have names,
    it's kinda funny
Dan: y'see, stuff on TV that's a hell of a lot worse than the sign on the
    front of the house anyway, so. I don't think we're really exposing them
    to too much more than anything else that, they can get
Chaise: sure, I mean, was that part of the reason of making the sign was
        ⌈to push boundaries
Al: ⌊**no.**   ⌈not real . . .
Ben: ⌊kinda just part of tradition of, campus, I think it's I think
    it's really cool, like other schools, they just know the houses by address
    and stuff like that, I think it's a really cool tradition they d::o.

The town of Oxford emerges in this excerpt as a location mediating relationships already identified in the interview, "kids" and "townies" on the one hand and people like the residents of "Morning Wood" on the other hand. Dan expands his status to that of "college kid," explaining that the category implies a general indifference. Al agrees. Dan then uses the possessive to argue that Oxford is not his "town," drawing a distinction between "college kid" and Oxford (and its "kids" and "townies"). In short, Dan and Al decry any displayer's responsibility for a house sign because the students living in Oxford have no possessive investment in the place where they live.

  Ben, however, offers an alternative spatial rationale. Ben disagrees with Dan and Al but, in doing so, maintains a responsibility-mitigating stance while shifting its parameters. Ben envisions the residents to be part of Oxford but argues that "kids" have become used to the parties that take place there. The smallness of the town serves to habituate "kids" to signs through maximal exposure. Chuck, however, gives an explanation that is contradictory to Ben's in that it argues for the inaccessibility of "Morning Wood" to "residents" and "kids." Whereas the meaning of "kids" in Ben's usage could follow Dan's usage of "college kid," Chuck's usage refers specifically to children and youths who are younger than college students, indexed by "school." And rather than foreground desensitization, Chuck presupposes a contrast between the "residential area" where "kids walk to school" (and "townies" live) with "here" (where "college kids" live). Whereas Ben argues for desensitization through habitual exposure, Chuck argues that younger town residents have no immediate access to house parties (and signs) in the first place.

Al changes the parameters of discussion by shifting the referential index of "here" from the house to the town. Al thus takes the focus off of distinctions of people and places within Oxford and makes the existence of house signs stand in for the town as a whole. "People from other schools" find Oxford "cool" by virtue of its house signs. Dan, however, explicitly reintroduces issues of culpability and responsibility to the interview. Dan repositions the house sign phenomenon entirely by opening up a seemingly limitless frame of comparison, what one might see on television. In doing so, Dan invokes Susan Gal and Kathryn Woolard's idea that "The notion of public need not even rely on the idea of a concrete readership or spectatorship, but rather on the projection or imagination of groups or subjectivities in print or other mass media" (2001:8). And notice that by saying, "we're exposing them," Dan for the first time represents the house residents as agents—in a grammatical sense—of an act, but one trumped by its ability to harm by a pervasive social phenomenon, the television.

It is worthwhile to note Dan's representation of the house residents as grammatical agents by offering "to push boundaries" as a characterization of the sign's display. The characterization is rejected immediately. Again, the residents use a number of techniques to reduce their own responsibility. Ben invokes "tradition" that inherently includes the residents of "Morning Wood" by his use of "campus." His use of the adjective "cool" invokes the interpretive habits whereby house signs can be judged to be "clever." And the invocation of "tradition," when viewed from the standpoint of responsibility, is reminiscent of Bauman's claim that "When one views the item of folklore as the collective product and possession of society at large, the performer is reduced to the role of passive and anonymous mouthpiece or conduit for the collective tradition" (1986:8). Ben has some trouble with the strategy that Bauman describes, however. His statement, "it's a really cool tradition they do," is slightly awkward because, ostensibly, he includes himself.

The final excerpt contains a surprise in light of the myriad responsibility- and culpability-reducing techniques that the residents of "Morning Wood" have engaged in so far. Initially, they maintain the stance of the previous excerpt:

CHUCK: we weren't, we weren't trying to push. boundaries, ⌈ just trying to be
    funny.
AL: ⌊ **we just thought**
    it was funny. yeah, we just wanted to do this funny ⌈house thing
DAN: ⌊ as funny as
      ⌈possible
AL: ⌊yea::h we were going for the humor factor
Chuck: a::h definitely
AL: no **boundaries** [sarcastically], I don't think we care about
      ⌈**boundaries** at a::ll
ALL: ⌊ #
BEN: I know people from other schools that think it's really, I mean, just **cool,**
    that like all the different houses around here have names.
AL: we took it over the edge
BEN: it's kind of funny . . .

Chuck begins by rejecting my description, "to push boundaries," and offers "to be funny" as an alternative. Al and Dan agree, casting the intentions of the house members with different uses of "funny." Al offers "the humor factor" as a gloss for "funny." Al then indexes my use of "boundaries" by employing it himself, but he revoices it with sarcastic intonation and dismisses the use in a way reminiscent of "pervert" in the first excerpt. In both cases, the revoicings serve to "rework," in the parlance of Bakhtin, the words of others such that they become injected with a severity that creates a ridiculous image. Their views then can be safely dismissed. As in the previous excerpt, Ben deflects attention from local surroundings when he invokes the point of view of college students elsewhere.

Al claims, "I don't think we care about boundaries at all," yet, just four lines later, he makes a strong claim of agency in the display of "Morning Wood." Al's final comment, "we took it over the edge," is remarkable given its invocation of an image of boundary crossing and its contrast with his previous denial. What Al seems to accomplish in this segment is an index of register difference between the overly serious "boundary," to be mocked and dismissed, and the much "cooler" "over the edge," illustrating Asif Agha's observation that "registers are 'heteroglossic' phenomena, typically uniting several types of conventional pragmatic value" (1998:154). Ben ends the segment with "funny," completing a set of descriptors—"cool," "over the edge," and "funny"—that contrast with "boundaries" and that cast it as overly serious.

Laura Ahearn (2001b) has pointed out that people can downplay or decry their own agency, while, at the same time, they point to its expanding horizons. This bivalent process seems to pervade the interview segments presented above. The residents of "Morning Wood" engage in responsibility-reducing techniques for the display of the sign by pointing to another sign as worse than their own, arguing that "kids" and "townies" cannot understand the sign, lampooning as ridiculous any concerns about the meaning of their sign, removing themselves as "college kids" from the activity of the town, arguing that "kids" have become used to house signs, arguing that "kids" have no access to their sign, pointing to the positive feelings of students at other campuses about house signs, calling the house sign phenomenon a "tradition," and rejecting overt claims to be doing anything with their sign other than "being funny." The reduction of responsibility in the interview is a complicated affair indeed. At the same time, however, the residents of "Morning Wood" index the charged presence of their sign by invoking another sign's sinister index of children, by taking care to insure that such people have no cognitive or physical access to "Morning Wood," and by noting overtly that they have pushed some unidentified practice "over the edge."

This Janus-faced phenomenon emerged in all of the interviews with residents of houses the names of which might be construed to involve a sexual element. Sally, a student interviewer, began an interview with the residents of "Octopussy" (Figure 6):

> SALLY: OK, did you all <u>name your house</u>.
> ALL: no
> AMY: from what we <u>understa::nd</u>
> ALL: #

Figure 6. "Octopussy."

    Amy: it was <u>named</u> that in the late seventies or the early eighties after the James
        Bond movie, Octopussy (2)
    Sally: do you think that's the only reason they named the house, that
    Amy: **n::o**
    Beth: **ei::ght gi::rls.** might've have had something to do with it

Other participants proceeded to explain that eight women have traditionally occupied the house. When Sally asked later in the interview whether the residents have ever been targeted with negative criticism, they explained that they have not and pointed to the James Bond film and the number of house residents to explain the meaning of the sign. Yet, at various points throughout the half-hour interview, one resident in particular interjected such exclamations as "it's hot in the pussy!" and "party in the pussy!" Uproarious group laughter followed these outbursts. Thus, the residents index a popular film and the circumstances of residence when imagining an on-looker of the sign and her or his interpretation, but they sometimes index the sexu-alized potential of the sign in its use. Indeed, I witnessed the overtly sexualized use of "Octopussy" (in which the movie title plays no part) outside of an interview con-text. Early one morning, I was having a cigarette in front of the building in which I was about to teach. A young man passed a young woman and exchanged greetings with her approximately fifty feet in front of me. I surmise that one of their quick exchanges involved the night's plans because several seconds after their parting, the young man turned and screamed, "party in the pussy tonight!" He then turned to continue on his way and whooped, throwing a fist high in the air.

A Different Agency: House Signs as Invitations

In certain respects, students who live in houses with names such as "Cornerstone," "Crib of the Rib," "Inn Pursuit," "Paradise City," "Green House," "The Living WC" (with Christ), and "The Rock" comprise yet another community of practice within the larger house sign community. While they share with all residents of named houses an appreciation for signs that evidence cleverness on the part of their creators, the belief that a house name is more convenient than an address, and the understanding that a house sign entails a party, they differ from residents of houses such as "Morning Wood," "Che," and "The Dresden" because they intend for their house names to index an ethos characterizing the house's residents as a group. Among the first topics discussed in an interview with the residents of a house named "Inn Pursuit" was the ethos that the residents wish the house's name to reflect.

> CHAISE: and what does the:: sign mean (2)
> KIM: well, Hil . . . (3)
> HIL: well, it's called Inn **Pur**suit, <u>and um</u>, basically I think everyone is
>   in pursuit of something, um, if it's mo::ney:: po::we::r relationships, like
>   everyone's looking for something, happiness. um, but ou::r Inn Pursuit,
>   <u>is our friends' too</u>, pursuit of Jesus Christ and a personal relationship
>   with him. so that's what we're in pursuit of (5)
> LYNN: you'll notice like, the *t* is a **cross** (4)
> KIM: and in part it's just, because it's a house and so we spell it with two *n*s.
> PEG: it's the little cute thing
> ALL: #
> LYNN: 'cause of the cross.
> PEG: 'cause of the cross

The residents' appreciation of their own creativity or cleverness is evidenced by their remark about the spelling of the "Inn" in "Inn Pursuit" with two *n*s to be "the little cute thing." Such appreciation of creativity shows that, at one level, the residents of houses with names that denote Christian faith enact interpretive practices of the house sign community at large.

But the ways that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" imagine their name to correspond with an ethos marks them as a community of practice different from residents of houses such as "Morning Wood," "Che," or "The Dresden." Hil uses the name to characterize the residents in a common activity. And not only does she characterize the residents of the house, she illustrates a handful of ways, held together in their differences by the house's name, in which other people might be different. Unlike the residents of "Morning Wood" and "Octopussy," the residents of "Inn Pursuit" make no attempt to downplay or decry their responsibility for the existence of the sign or for its effects on onlookers.

In the next excerpt, the residents of "Inn Pursuit" show not only that they wish for their house name to index their Christian faith but also that they wish for the house name to index the offer of Christian community in the house. In other words, the

residents of "Inn Pursuit" mean for their house sign to serve as an invitation. Thus, religious house signs have underpinning their display a more specialized form of agency than that underpinning the three interpretive practices of the house sign community generally (including residents who understand their house signs to involve a sexual element). The specialized form of agency is captured by Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs as "the capacity to act in accordance with a concrete plan" (2003:22). The invocation of a "concrete plan" captures the way in which the house residents see their sign as an indication of their Christian faith and the way in which they hope that it will serve as an invitation to others.

> CHAISE: did you choose ⌐your
> HIL: └we **did** choose our house because, it's like a nice house
> CHAISE: ya::
> HIL: it's a nice house, we've enjoyed it, and we knew the girls who had it before a::nd we just got it passed down to us and and (2) I don't think we chose it necessarily on the **basis** of its name, but it was just kind of an added bonus that it was this. y'know it was kind of **known** for being this house of like Christian women and . . . y'know we just really appreciate the community that we have within the house, there's ten of us total
> CHAISE: oh my good ⌐ness
> HIL: └and so, there's two downstairs three up here and five upstairs (2) and so . . . we just really appreciate the fellowship and the friendship that we have around here so . . .

Hil begins by asserting that the residents did choose "Inn Pursuit" but then blends representations of the house's residents as both agents and patients vis-à-vis the actions of (unnamed) others. For example, she explains, "we just got it passed down to us." She says that the current house residents take their place in a lineage of "Christian women" who have occupied the house previously. She uses three words to characterize the atmosphere within the house: "community," "fellowship," and "friendship." Among the three, "fellowship" indexes a whole host of possible practices and beliefs that specify that the house residents are Christians. Later in the interview, the residents confirmed this, explaining that they come from a number of denominations. They also argued, however, that they had been able to transcend denominational difference by a focus on the Bible.

In the next excerpt, the perspective is shifted from looking into the house at its residents to looking out of the house at others.

> LYNN: and even how we can use this house to like just minister to other people, and um reach other people, serve other people (2) what we desire to do.
> CHAISE: what sorts of things does that include
> LYNN: well, for example, a couple of weeks ago we had friends over and cooked them dinner, just little things like that
> CHAISE: these are friends from college
> LYNN: yeah (3)

> KIM: um or just how, like our one, our one girl that we know doesn't really live
>   in the best environment will sometimes just come over here to hang out
>   and get away.
> JAY: environment, like, how d . . . how d'ya mean, like what kind of
>   environment
> KIM: like she lives with peo . . . with like <u>potheads basically</u>
> LYNN: <u>she doesn't have a lot of fellowship</u>
> KIM: yeah, and so . . . so she comes here to get away from that (3)
> LYNN: even just like, like, some of us lead Bible studies, and just being able
>   to have them over he::re

Lynn shifts the disposition of this cluster of terms from within the house, shared among its members, to outside, shared, potentially, with anyone. Whereas Hil uses the nouns "community," "fellowship," and "friendship," Lynn uses the verbs "minister," "reach," and "serve" and envisions the house as a tool—"we can use this house"—to facilitate such activities. It is in this sense that, in the eyes of the residents of "Inn Pursuit," the agency underpinning their display of the sign is part of a "concrete plan."

The residents of "Inn Pursuit" offer three examples wherein the house is a focal location of activity. Lynn states that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" had friends over for dinner, minimizing the example's gravity with "just little." Kim, however, projects the house as a refuge from places that are described, initially, in vague terms. When asked to clarify, Kim explains that the friend's roommates are "potheads," a gently derisive term for people who consume marijuana. Lynn describes such a scene to lack "fellowship," something previously stated to exist at "Inn Pursuit." Kim again characterizes a trip to "Inn Pursuit," this time as "to get away." Lynn offers a third, more generalized, example: leading Bible studies.

Susan Harding has written about her encounter with a preacher who tried to persuade Harding to accept Jesus as her personal savior (2000:40). The preacher built complex verbal tableaus of sacrifice meant to place Harding increasingly in a position of involvement. During the interview with "Inn Pursuit," the residents never attempted to alter our roles (as interviewers and interviewees), nor did they give us the impression that they wished to attempt emotional conversions of the kind about which Harding has written. Nevertheless, they used transitive verbs to describe what they and their house offer. Furthermore, they created a picture of an environment from which there is the need of escape. In the next section, I explore the ways that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" envision their own sign to be like those whose house residents are like them and to be unlike those of others. The boundary between the two, after all, is what gives force to the offer of "fellowship" in "Inn Pursuit."

House Signs, Group Boundaries, and Interpretive Ambivalence

The residents of "Inn Pursuit" reflect on the sign's ability to index them as a group that, in turn, is tied to residents of other houses sharing their Christian faith. Notice in the excerpt the use of "the groups we hang out with" to specify knowledge of the group-denoting ability of the house sign.

Kɪᴍ: withi::n, the groups we hang out with like everyone knows where Inn
    Pursuit is like even if they've never, seen it like, a lot of people have just
    heard of it, just with the girls that have lived here, the past couple years
    and then, the:: like people we know now, like they know where it is so, I
    would say the name's kno::wn definitely, but . . .
Hɪʟ: yeah like I met some girl once and she was describing to me where,
    she lived, or where she was going to be living next year, this was last year,
    and she was like well it's a great location it's right down the street, from
    The Rock and from Inn Pursuit, and I was like, I'm going to be **living** in
    Inn Pursuit # next year, so like among like our groups like it's kind of
    a well-known place. I guess more well known than the people that are
    gonna **live** in it 'cause she didn't even know, I lived in it.
Kɪᴍ: and I don't even think our address is outsi::de, so ⌈just
Lʏɴɴ: ⌊I think it ⌈is
Kɪᴍ: ⌊the
    two thirty but not the, street name
Hɪʟ: yeah so, it's just easier to say, I live in Inn Pursuit (3)

Kim asserts that house names can circulate in conversations so that one can know of
a house without having seen it. She reiterates the legacy of Christian women who
have previously inhabited the house. Hil makes use of the perspective of another
student who describes her new residence as "a great location" near "The Rock" and
"Inn Pursuit," both of whose residents understand their signs to index their Christian
faith. From Hil's perspective, the other student indexes herself as a member of "our
groups" by orienting her future residence by the landmarks "The Rock" and "Inn
Pursuit." Hil thus highlights that the house signs index the Christian faith of residents
by virtue of shared knowledge among "our groups," playing off the irony that the
fellow student is a member of "our groups" but does not realize the indexical con-
nection between "Inn Pursuit" and Hil's place of residence. Hil's lesson is that the
discursive use of these particular names can clarify group boundaries. Kim, Lynn,
and Hil then enact the interpretive habit by which a house name is a more convenient
locator than an address. Kim overstates the case and is corrected by Lynn. Hil then
sums up the interpretive habit with "It's just easier. . . ."

   From the perspective of residents of houses who believe their house signs to indi-
cate their Christian faith, the excerpt presented above can be considered inward-look-
ing. Among people who share the knowledge that such house signs do indeed indicate
their residents' Christian faith, there is no interpretive problem.

   But what of an outward-looking perspective? How do the residents of "Inn Pursuit"
understand house signs to mediate boundaries between groups—"ours" versus those
of others? Whereas the residents of houses who understand their signs to involve a
sexual element pick out particularly vulnerable onlookers, "kids," and downplay their
own responsibility for the display of the sign, the residents of "Inn Pursuit" imagine
their ideological others to be residents of houses in which transgressive practices go
on (such as the already-mentioned use of marijuana). The next excerpt from the
interview with "Inn Pursuit" follows the residents' claim that they do indeed "party."
In the excerpt, they characterize their own parties via the absence of what happens
at some others.

> CHAISE: some signs like are about **partying,** y'know overtly, like Boot and Ra::lly
>   or . . . uh what else is there, High Life, u::m. Happy Hour
> HIL: At Church and Almost High or something <u>like that</u>
> CHAISE: At Church and Almost Hi::gh. do you think that your parties are a little bit
>   different than the parties that go on in those houses or . . .
> HIL: to some de . . . **yeah,** mostly definitely
> KIM: yeah.
> HIL: they tend to be <u>tamer</u>.
> CHAISE: tamer
> PEG: there ten . . . there doesn't really seem to be, any <u>llegal activities going on</u>
>   I would think, at our parties (4)
> CHAISE: what sort of activities do you mean?
> PEG: like getting high
> ALL: #
> PEG: not that **I**:: know.
> KIM: and dri . . . like drinking under a::ge

Hil's offer of "At Church and Almost High" is interesting. One might argue that it is yet another sign that indexes partying, or one might argue that it achieves a degree of parallelism with the "High" of "High Life" offered by me. Unlike the ones I have just offered, Hil's example puns on the Christian ethos that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" understand their sign to index. When I ask just what differentiates parties at those houses from those that take place at "Inn Pursuit," Hil offers "tamer" for her own. When Peg elaborates on the parties that do take place at "Inn Pursuit," she does so negatively by describing what they exclude. She offers "illegal activities," and, when I ask for specificity, she offers "getting high," followed by a caveat espousing ignorance. Kim follows with the underage consumption of alcohol. Sexual activity, the second element of the trio made explicit in "Witty House Sign (Preferably with a Drug, Sex, and/or Alcohol Reference)" and in countless characterizations of house signs in interviews, is absent, but only momentarily.

An excerpt of the next moment in the interview shows that residents of "Inn Pursuit" decry any direct knowledge of such transgressive practices:

> CHAISE: did you guys ever go to parties at those houses, or . . . (2)
> HIL: other people's houses
> KIM: yeah
> LYNN: yeah (2)
> CHAISE: but any of tho::se that have the signs about partying, like Boot n' Rally.
> HIL: **probably** none of the real fam::ous ones just 'cause I don't know anybody
>   who lives in those
> CHAISE: what are the famous ones
> HIL: oh the ones you mentioned well I've never heard of, Boot and Rally like,
>   but, <u>I don't know</u>. u::m, nothing that's really na::med <u>for anything like that</u>
>   but.

How then, with the absence of experience, can the residents of "Inn Pursuit" maintain that ideological others exist, some of whom are in need of the house's Christian atmosphere? In the next excerpt, the residents seem to arrive at a solution. They do so

by replacing experience at transgressive parties with house names and signs themselves.

> CHAISE: but when you say famous houses are there, d'you, do you think
>   that there are some houses that have, y'know, infamous parties, or they're
>   well known ⌈t' . . .
> HIL: ⌊**well** I wouldn't know necessarily about the **parties.**
> LYNN: just like the **names**
> HIL: just the names are funny I think, and when you drive by everybody like
>   kinda **knows** where it is 'cause they've seen it around, but you don't
>   necessarily know, **oh** at this house there's this certain kinda party
>   or anything like that . . .
> CHAISE: right. what are those names, I mean . . . (2)
> KIM: oh. It's hard to remember 'cause, like you walk down the street and it's
>   all about like, getting drunk or having sex pretty much like, all of the
>   streets or all of the houses so it sort of runs together after awhile like I
>   don't know of any infamous. houses . . .
> LYNN: like the one morning woo::d. ⌈and like the picture on it
> PEG: ⌊**oh** yeah . . .
> HIL: I've never seen the picture.
> KIM: it definitely gives you an impression of what might go on in the house
>   whether it's true or no::t that's what you think.

After several statements from the previous excerpt in which Hil claims not to know anyone in "famous houses" nor to have heard of "Boot and Rally," in this excerpt, she claims general ignorance of what happens in houses known for partying. A major shift ensues over the next several lines in which ambivalence about indexical connections between house sign and the kind of partying done inside the house disappears. Lynn initiates the shift by changing the focus to what is publicly accessible (rather than experienced within the house), houses' signs and the names displayed therein. Hil separates the house name, which is "funny," from the activity that might happen inside. Kim shifts the focus to the names (and away from in-house activities). For the first time in the interview, a resident, Kim, characterizes the house sign phenomenon as a whole in a manner similar to the ubiquitous claim that signs are about sex, drugs, and alcohol (Figure 4). In this case, Kim uses the activity of walking down the street to create a totalizing image of Oxford as a place bombarding one with messages and images—too numerous to remember—of "getting drunk and having sex." Whereas this served one of the residents of "Morning Wood" in his argument that kids have grown used to the signs, Kim seems to find in the ubiquity of house signs an environment that must be tolerated at best. Kim finally shifts the focus of house sign interpretation from the intentions of residents who display the signs to the understandings of the people who view them. The burden of the interview's earlier problematic—that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" cannot attest to the indexical ties between names of houses and the activities of parties within such houses—is lifted. No longer is experience within the house necessary to draw conclusions about what happens within the house.

   The replacement of experience with house names, however, opens up the possibil-

ity of indexical indeterminacy. In other words, the replacement of narratives of experience with the mention of house names opens up the possibility that a resident of "Inn Pursuit" can divorce the residents of houses with transgressive names from transgressive activities. This potentially releases the house residents from membership in a group to which the residents of "Inn Pursuit" oppose themselves. In an interpretive move reminiscent of the ways that residents of "Octopussy" and "Hot Box" appeal to indexical connections that reduce their own responsibility for the signs' display, a resident of "Inn Pursuit" appeals to the gender of the residents of "Poppin Wood" to argue against a construal of the house name as sexual.

> Chaise: hm, why do you think people put up signs like that (2)
> Kim: hm. I guess to portray an ima::ge, that they think is cool, or, good
>   ⌈or . . .
> Trish: ⌊or they think it's fu::nny. I have some friends who named their house
>   this year <u>Poppin Wood</u> (2) it's at the corner of Poplar and Woodruff, and.
>   it wasn't necessarily any . . . ˈcause it's a bunch of girls. so:: it doesn't
>   necessarily carry any meaning but the two street names it was just
>   something clever and creative that they thought was funny

The excerpt shows that the residents of "Inn Pursuit" do not always disavow knowledge of signs (and their houses' residents) that can be taken to index sex, drugs, and/or alcohol. Trish uses the familiar "funny" to replace Kim's more removed "cool" and "good." Trish goes on to explain that "Poppin Wood" is "clever" and "creative" because of its play with the names of the streets on which it is located. But, in noting that the residents of "Poppin Wood" are "a bunch of girls," Trish betrays the fact that she has imagined a meaning for the house name that might be deemed vulgar. Indeed, she seems to be arguing that the sign is not about sex because the genitals of the house's residents do not match those referenced by the house's sign.[9] The claim that the residents of "Poppin Wood" are women, and thus uncoordinated with the name's potential to index an erection's ("Wood") growth ("Poppin"), contradicts the interpretive practice argued for earlier by the residents of "Inn Pursuit": that a house sign in and of itself indexes the residents' practices as embodying an ideological other, making such house signs as "Inn Pursuit" indexical of practices particularly Christian.

The ambivalence and indeterminacy involved in the group-indexing capabilities of house signs, evidenced in the interview excerpts from "Inn Pursuit," demonstrate that house signs in and of themselves are unreliable indexes of the very practices from which residents of "Inn Pursuit" hope that their house provides a refuge. When the interpretive practices of residents of houses who do not understand their house signs to index their Christian faith are considered, the group-indexing function salient to the residents of "Inn Pursuit" disappears.

The Agency of "Inn Pursuit" Thwarted

Umberto Eco raises the question of the relationship between an interpreting subject and the interpretive practices that index membership in a community of practice when he writes, "The *possibilities* which the work's openness makes available always work

within a given *field of relations*" (1989:19). Further, he invokes the possibility, explored in this article, that interpretive desires of authors might vary via a common linguistic phenomenon when he writes, "The invitation [to interpret] offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion [making improvisation possible] into something which always remains the world intended by the author [wherein the improvisation might not be seen as such]" (1989:19). Divisions within the house sign community of practice allow an investigation of the connections between Eco's two assertions. What happens to the desires of "Inn Pursuit" when their messages are interpreted in the larger house sign community? In the parlance of Eco, what is the relationship between "the world intended by the author" of house signs like "Inn Pursuit" and "the field of relations" that shapes possibilities of interpretation in the house sign community of practice? The answer is that the index of religion and the agency underpinning it—the reasons for which the women have chosen to live in the house and the reasons for which they display the sign—vanish. Whereas interviewed residents of named houses regularly found "Che" and "The Dresden" to be "dumb," "weird," or "gay," they did not necessarily make such judgments about houses' names that are meant by residents to reflect their Christian faith. But the fact that interpretive practices in the house sign community of practice do not necessarily lead to negative judgments about names whose houses' residents understand to be Christian hardly renders such interpretations fulfilling of the authors' intentions. Indeed, most residents of other types of houses did not recognize the indexical connection between house name and the Christian faith of the house's residents. Yet they recognized something in the house name, to be sure. It was precisely such interpretive possibilities that thwarted the agency—the provision of an invitation for refuge—envisioned by residents of Christian houses.

In the interview segment below, Ben (of "Morning Wood") responds to a remark made by Jay, the student interviewer, about the category of houses that are "religious."

> BEN: which one's **religious.**
> CHUCK: yeah
> AL: At Church and Almost High.
> BEN: no, that's more, that's ⌈**drugs**
> CHUCK: ⌊that's not ⌈**religious**
> ALL: ⌊#
> DAN: no no no, that's sorta::'s against, like.
> CHAISE: which ones
> JAY: the::re's one called The Rock, or something like that, and ⌈uh
>   Inn Pursuit
> CHUCK: ⌊hm.
>   is that a wrestler
> JAY: ⌈**no, n::o,** it's a biblical reference
> ALL: ⌊#
> CHUCK: OK, alright alright, I understand that

It is impossible to know whether Al was trying to be funny by offering "At Church and Almost High" (Figure 7), a house sign that utilizes the names of the streets closest to the house. In other words, one cannot know from the transcript whether Al

Figure 7. "At Church and Almost High."

was aware of his example's playfulness vis-à-vis notions of "religious." He does not speak again in the segment, whether to take credit for the ensuing laughter or to acknowledge recognition that his example misses the mark (as Chuck does). Indeed, after Al's mention of "At Church and Almost High," the interviewers introduce new examples of house names. But even after Ben, Chuck, and Dan participate in the clarification that "At Church and Almost High" has to do with drugs and not religion, Chuck interjects "a wrestler" as a possibility for "The Rock" (Figure 8). When Jay, the student interviewer, corrects him, all laugh uproariously. Jay does sound a bit exasperated as he explains this, and his tone might contribute to the ensuing laughter.

   It does not seem that active play with Christian house names and their other possible meanings is something that is routine at "Morning Wood." Thus, I do not wish to argue that the residents of "Morning Wood" purposefully invoke house names that involve drugs or mass entertainment to create a humorous juxtaposition with a religious sphere of meaning. Rather, what seems to be happening is that the residents of "Morning Wood" are enacting what they earlier described to be their motive for displaying their house sign: to be "funny." To be "funny," in turn, sits comfortably under the umbrella of the explicitly metapragmatic and universal "to be clever." In short, that there are houses that are intended to be religious comes as a bit of a surprise to the residents of "Morning Wood." They interject examples, guess at the possible referents of others, and then laugh about the unfolding incompatibility of these with the category of religion.

   This is a practice that is hardly confined to our interview with the residents of "Morning Wood." "The Rock" is a house like "Inn Pursuit" in that its residents understand their sign to indicate their Christian faith. Yet, only in interviews with resi-
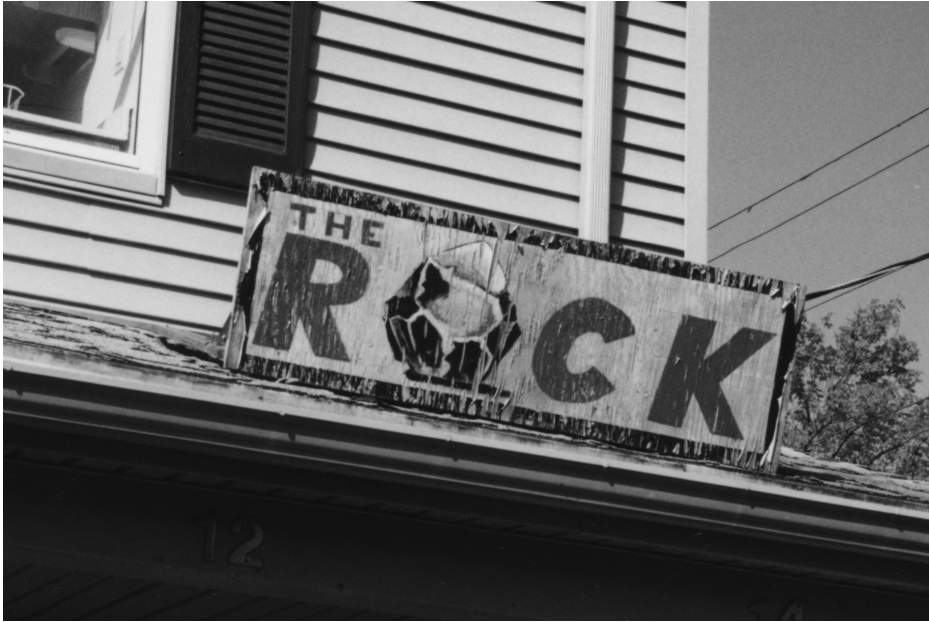
Figure 8. "The Rock."

dents who understand their house signs to indicate their Christian faith was there recognition that "The Rock" was related to Christianity. Residents of other kinds of houses consistently thought "The Rock" to be "clever" but had divergent rationales. Some interviewees—all of them male—mentioned, like Chuck of "Morning Wood," that "The Rock" involves a professional wrestler of unusual bravado. Several of these interviewees included that The Rock had been a college football star before taking up a career on television. One interviewee explained that The Rock has a signature facial expression and proceeded to open one eye wide while squinting with the other.

Yet other interviewees—both male and female—explained that "The Rock" fits into a larger category of signs involving drugs. Those mentioned across interviews include "Rolling Stoned" and the already mentioned "At Church and Almost High." They also include three signs involving the animated television show *Scooby-Doo*: "Scooby," "Scrappy," and "The Green Machine." Interviewees explained that "Scooby Snacks" are good to eat with marijuana-induced "munchies," and one interviewee explained that Shaggy, one of the main characters of the show, "was a model pothead." However, some interviewees pointed out that whereas most signs involving drugs are about "weed," "dope," or "getting high," "The Rock" is not. They explained that "The Rock" is not indicative of the kind of drugs recreationally used by students in Oxford. Indeed, any interviewee making the argument that "The Rock" is about drugs was explicit about the kind of drug involved: either "crack," "cocaine," or "crack cocaine." In most instances in which students discussed house signs that they believed involved drugs, "drugs" sufficed without further specification. Some interviewees who argued for the connection with drugs mentioned the object depicted on the sign and serving as the "o" of "The Rock." In one case, the student explained, "it matches

the substance it shows." And, in another case, a student explained, "it's exactly what it says, rock," employing the term for its colloquial ability to mean crack cocaine.

Not all—or even most—house names understood by the houses' residents to indicate their Christian faith drew such comments during interviews. For example, "The Living WC" emerged in many interviews as an example of a "dumb" house sign. Some interviewees ventured a guess that "WC" must stand for "water closet," but this possibility too was described as "dumb." In one interview, a student compared "The Living WC" to "The Dresden," saying of both, "must be a private joke." "Crib of the Rib" surfaced in an interview as being about barbecue. And finally, "The Green House" was taken to be "dumb" for its inferred relationship to the residents' love for plants. Another student in the interview interjected that biology majors must live in the house. In another interview, "drugs" surfaced as an explanation. Whether eliciting ridicule or prompting the excitement of explanation and comparison characteristic of signs judged to be "clever," the potential for signs to indicate Christian faith was absent in interviews with all but a handful of students. And those students were already in the know (and of that faith).

Conclusion

This article's presentation of house signs demonstrates that one's very interpretation of visual language implicates one in the complexities of the boundaries between groups that, in turn, shapes one's ability to participate. Scholars who study the social life of language must not take for granted that indexical relationships between linguistic forms and groups are achievements already accomplished. Any speaker of English, for example, might see in a house sign an indexical tie to historical figures, events, and practices or might see across signs a common indexical tie to a street, the number of residents living in a house, or commercial practices of lodging. But foregrounding such features as the most important indexical relations will itself index the interpreter as an outsider to the house sign community of practice. For a member, the signs' abilities to show that a particular sign's creators are "clever" or "dumb," to provide a locator for a house that is much easier than an address, and to indicate the practices of engaging in sex and consuming drugs and alcohol, captured in the word "party," are paramount. Those who foreground other sorts of indexical relationships "don't get" house signs because they "take them too seriously." In the particular world of house signs, one might put it thus: in order to be taken seriously, one must not take house signs too seriously.

But this insight foregrounds only one level of complexity in the ways that practitioners of folklore indicate differences between themselves and others. If taken to be sufficient, this insight can actually hide different motives presupposing different ways of reading signs, different viewers, and different consequences of display. Scholars must also be aware that once a set of interpretive practices can be identified with a group, issues of agency, underpinned by responsibility, can reveal yet subtler boundaries. On the one hand, the residents who understand their house signs to involve sexuality engage especially complex constructions of self ("college kids"), places ("a nursery school," "town," "residential area," and "other campuses"), and others

("kids," "townies," and the user of the phrase "to push boundaries") in order to obviate their responsibility for the sign's display. On the other hand, residents who understand their house signs to index their Christian faith do not decry their responsibility for the house sign's display. They look outward, to other houses, and find that the majority indicate residents' need for "fellowship."

Each of these two groups can be defined, in part, by its central problematic regarding agency. The residents of "Morning Wood" give evidence that they sense that someone might be offended or even harmed by their sign at the same time that they claim to have a particularly charged sign by "taking it over the edge." They mediate the contradiction by arguing that "kids" do not have access to their sign and by lampooning someone who wishes to engage in a particular explication. In short, they reject engagement with Bakhtin's other. The residents of "Inn Pursuit" replace experience with transgressive practices with transgressive house names in order to distinguish themselves from people who attend "infamous parties," adding salience to an offer of refuge. Their central problematic lies in the ways that residents of "Inn Pursuit" can themselves recognize indexical ties between other signs and practices that obviate the offense or harm done by those signs. In other words, the strategies through which they identify Bakhtin's other leak. Unlike in the case of "Morning Wood," neither the residents of "Inn Pursuit" nor the residents of other houses with Christian signs engaged in a set of strategies to resolve the problem.

The kind of interpretive indeterminacy illuminated by the argument that "Poppin Wood" "doesn't necessarily carry any meaning" because its residents are "girls" is exacerbated when signs understood by their houses' residents to offer Christian "fellowship" are viewed by residents of other kinds of named houses. Thus, a type of boundary can be crossed whereby the agency that a group hopes that its sign embodies is thwarted. This boundary encapsulates the ways that the house sign community of practice "grant[s] some individuals or groups the right to interpret while depriving others of the right to reclaim their original intentions" (Duranti 2001:130). Indeed, the boundary is selective with regard to interpretive salience and agency. When signs considered by the people who display them to offer Christian refuge pass over the boundary, the offer is no longer salient. Indeed, residents of many houses connect signs meant by those who display them to indicate Christianity with the very transgressive practices that Christian residents see as their other. The agency embodied in the ability of "Morning Wood" to be considered "over the edge," however, is preserved when presented to the residents of "Inn Pursuit." The boundary between the two types of houses is selective in that the agency embodied by only one survives the boundary's crossing. Although an understanding of the ways that the practice of some form of folklore mediates agency must rest in part on the interpretive desires and practices of practitioners, such desires and practices do not necessarily reflect the risks involved in participation.

Notes

1. This last example exposes the class bias of the town/gown divide. "Townie" does not just mean something like "permanent resident of the town who is unaffiliated with the university." "Townie" can refer to clerical and maintenance workers who are employed by the university (but who do not necessarily live in town) but never to professors or administrators, even those who live year-round in Oxford. The town/gown divide is particularly problematic for many Miami University students who grew up in Oxford, "townies" who later donned the "gown." Several such students have told me that they feel their origins are suspect. One such student stated, "I feel like I have some explaining to do."

2. Indeed, one might argue, Oxford's unique house sign phenomenon renders its designation as a "college town" insufficient. The ways that house signs mediate understandings of relationships between students and other town residents are too complex to be explored here.

3. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet define a "community of practice" as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" (1992b:464). Community of practice is a conceptual device that replaces a focus on a linguistic form and the identification of its users and contexts of use with a focus on an interpretive habit within and across contexts (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). Eckert writes that the notion of community of practice embodies the "mutually constitutive nature of individual, group, activity, and meaning" (2000:35). Jean Lave, a pioneer of the idea, writes, "Meaning is not created through individual intentions; it is mutually constituted in relations between activity systems and persons acting, and has a relational character" (1993:18). Bourdieu (1977, 1990) was inspirational to scholars who developed the notion "community of practice," especially in their conceptualization of the notion's relational qualities. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992a, 1992b, 1999) have applied the concept very fruitfully to gender in the social life of language, and Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, and Cain (1998) have applied the concept to the analysis of culture generally. See Ortner (1984) for a widely cited overview of the influence in anthropology of Bourdieu's ideas, as well as a call for further application.

4. No one from either class wrote on the topic dealt with here nor took the approach of this article.

5. The semantic clusters chosen, the weight of the number of examples per cluster, as well as the number of multicluster examples are not representative. Were all house signs included, the figure would contain a bewildering number of semantic clusters, alcohol would contain many more examples, and many more signs would fit into more than one cluster.

6. This analytical move is inspired, in part, by Amy Shuman's (2005) notion that an interpretive "remainder" always exists in any narrative and that interpretive finality is but one ideological construct operating in a community. Here I point to the existence of such an interpretive remainder within the "Morning Wood" residents' own understandings of how others might read their sign. This foregrounds questions of responsibility amid its overt denial.

7. Julia Kristeva (1980) introduced the somewhat parallel notion of "intertextuality," which has been applied to practices of folklore by Bauman (2004) and Kapchan (1996).

8. Transcription Conventions:

,	short pause (less than one second)
.	long pause (approximately one second)
(2)	pause of indicated number of seconds
::	preceding sound lengthened
……	said quickly

$\sim\sim\sim$	said laughingly
bold	said loudly
. . .	speech trailing off / fading
$\ulcorner$	beginning of overlap with speech positioned below
$\llcorner$	beginning of overlap with speech positioned above
#	laughter
[]	transcriber's comments

9. In this interpretive moment, the residents of "Inn Pursuit" fit Barbara Johnstone's description of nearby residents of Fort Wayne, Indiana, as "literalists": "For Fort Wayne storytellers, stories are true recounting of facts, not fictional entertainments, and the meaning of a story is to be found in what the storyteller says, not in the audience's interpretation of the storyteller's words. Storytellers, then, need to provide all the details that might be necessary to make the facts clear and the meaning recoverable" (1990:108). Trish also demonstrates Vincent Crapanzano's (2000) insight that "literalism," understood as an interpretive strategy in the United States, is never found in an absolutely pure form and often runs the risk of drawing attention to itself.

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