

Following the Signs: An Ethnographic Study of the
Berryville Community Center from a Signage Perspective

A Going Indigenous Project at the
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

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Introduction [\[↑\]](#)

Berryville, Arkansas is a small, rural village in the northwest corner of Arkansas (United States). It is a town of approximately 5,400 people and sits within a county of about 30,000. The county is primarily rural agricultural. Berryville has a fairly diverse ethnic community considering its small size.

As many towns do, Berryville has a community center. Although I have lived here for five years, I know little about the community center beyond the fact that it exists. The center is not on the main road, so I don't pass it often on my drive home.

Whenever I have had occasion to pass by the center, there is an array of obviously well-organized activities in progress on the outside of the facility. There are cars pulling in, cars pulling out,

games being played on the soccer field, and children playing on the playground. People are walking into the facility and people are walking out of the facility. I'm also aware, from posters dotted about the community, that an international food fair is held yearly at the center.



This is why I chose the community center for this ethnographic study – because it appears to be a fulcrum of the community.

Narrative [\[↑\]](#)

I visited the center on two separate occasions; one visit to take photos (early on a Sunday morning when there were few people around) and another visit to tour the facility. On the day of



the tour, I arrived at the community center at approximately 10:00 am on Saturday morning, April 21, 2018. As I approached the facility, I slowed my vehicle to a walking pace and rolled the windows down to listen to the sounds coming from the facility grounds. I could hear the voices of children and adults coming from the west side of the facility, where the playground and soccer field is located. There were shrieks of laughter and squeals coming from the playground.

I exited my vehicle. It was one of those April days caught in between the end of winter and the beginning of spring. The air had that indistinguishable sweet fragrance that can only be enjoyed at the beginning of spring. The wind was bracing, just enough cool in the air to invigorate the body, but also warrant the wearing a sweater: Like the weather, the body had trouble regulating its temperature.



As I walked towards the front door of the facility, I observed a young woman and a child of about ten heading towards the door from the opposite direction as me. Our speed and trajectory would have us arrive at the door at the same time, so I slowed my pace to allow them to enter the building ahead of me. As they approached the door, the child was fumbling with her

sweater: one arm was out of the sweater and the other was in. The woman was looking down towards the child as she moved forward towards the door and, though her words were indistinguishable, her voice had an explanatory tone. I paused and waited for the woman and child to enter and exit the facility foyer and then I stepped inside.

Entry into the facility begins in a foyer: about a four-by-twelve foot area, with a silk tropical plant in either corner and various signage and posters on the wall. (I didn't know it yet, but signage would soon become an emergent theme I would identify as I set about gathering my data.)

On the east end of the foyer, mounted on the wall, was a 48 x 36 information board, with a locking, glass door. "September is Volunteer Appreciation Month" was across the top of the information board, spelled out with individual letters, cut out of construction paper. Photographs of volunteers pasted on top of star shapes, also cut out of construction paper, were sprinkled across the display. Each star had the volunteer's name and how many hours he or she volunteered. At the bottom of the display were the total number of volunteer hours.



As I stood observing the bulletin board and contemplating the faces of the volunteers, a young Latino boy of about twelve and a Latino man of about thirty entered the foyer and quickly exited it and went into the facility. I entered the facility proper a few seconds after the man and boy exited the foyer; they were nowhere to be seen. The space was an open-plan area with vaulted ceilings up to the second floor. The area was well-lit and had a peaceful air about it.

Some people judge books by their covers, I judge a place by the way it smells. Smelling for judgment is not a deliberate action on my part, it just happens. To qualify this statement: My husband often jokes about my almost ridiculous sense of smell. I have no control over what my sense of smell decides to communicate to me, however. On no less than two occasions, a government building has been evacuated based on intelligence gathered from my olfactory communications. In both cases, there was a gas leak that no other nose detected except mine. As I entered the community center proper, I expected a discernible contrast of odors between the outdoors and the inside of the facility. However, there wasn't any. Given the amount of bodies that must pass through the facility, I was pleasantly surprised, and grateful, that it didn't smell like a dirty sock soaked with a cleaning agent. It passed my initial smell test.

Smell test passed, I scanned the area to get my bearings. To my right was the reception area, to my left was a games area, and straight across was a series of three doors and a set of stairs going up and to the left. Between the doors and the stairs was what appeared to be a concession area: it had one of those rolling, pull down, over-head doors. (I guess you could also call it shutters.) The door was pulled down and there was a lock on it. There was a sign taped to it indicating it was closed.



I walked over to the reception area, towards a woman who was sitting behind the counter and who appeared to be in-the-know. The reception area was a closed-in space with a fairly long countertop, probably about ten to twelve feet in length. Positioned on the far left side of the countertop was a membership ID barcode scanner and a digital keypad. In the middle of the

counter was an acrylic ink pen holder filled with about two inches of marbles and holding three ink pens: One ink pen was topped with a yellow, plastic flower. Positioned on the far right of the countertop was an acrylic literature holder. In the literature holder were various tri-fold brochures with an array of information about various community related topics. There was a sign above the literature holder about putting the “unity in community.”



As I approached the in-the-know woman, she looked up and asked me if she could help me. I asked her if it would be possible to be shown around the facility. She seemed happy to inform me that I could “go and have a look around” on my own. (See [Interview 1.](#)) Remembering the “September is Volunteer Appreciation Month” display in the foyer and having the “put the unity in community” tagline fresh in my mind, I asked the woman if she was a volunteer. She said she was not. As I was speaking to the woman, three Caucasian men, all about six feet in height, walked up behind me. The men were all wearing similar brownish-tan canvas work jackets. By the look on the woman’s face, I wondered if these men might be unknown to her. However, she asked the men a question that led me to think she was somehow aware of the reason for their visit: She asked, “Oh, are you looking for the basketball court?” One of the men replied, “No. We just want to grab something out of the vending machine.” The three men headed in the direction of the games area.

As I observed the exchange between the woman and the three men, I spotted a sign on the wall, directly behind the woman.



I asked the woman if there was ever any trouble at the facility? She did not ask me what I meant and told me that she did not. I thanked the woman, collected a few brochures from the acrylic literature holder, and began my self-guided tour.

The games room

Directly across from the reception area was a fairly large games area. On two of the walls was a series of full length windows about two feet wide and eight feet tall. One series of windows looked out over a well-landscaped park and the other series faced the soccer field and playground. The games room had two pool tables, two foosball tables, three video game machines, three vending machines, and several chairs. There was a poster on the wall about keeping the facility clean and attractive.



As I walked toward the vending machines, I realized there was an elderly Caucasian man sitting in a chair next to one of the snack machines. I did not know if he had been sitting there very long. He looked up from his snack and said hello. “Hello,” I replied. I asked him a few questions about why he was at the facility and his general response was that the indoor walking track was easy on his bad knees. (See [Interview 2](#).)

The gymnasium

From the games room, I walked back towards the reception area and diverted to the left in the direction of a sign over a door that indicated it was leading into a gymnasium. As I approached the gymnasium door, there was a wall to my right filled with signage and posters explaining, by various persuasive means, *do this* and *don't do that* and what *this and that* means.

[SIGNAGE↓]

Memberships: Membership Type and Fees: ... **FAMILY is defined as: Husband[sic] & wife or mother & father, single parent, or legal guardian(s)** & the dependent children under the age of 22 residing in the household who are claimed on income taxes by the parent(s) or guardian(s).

[SIGNAGE↓]
No running. No fighting. **You must** wear shoes and a shirt at all times.

I walked through the gymnasium door and was surprised at how large it was: It even had bleachers all across one side of the room so guests could enjoy the games. There was a sophisticated volleyball net system suspended from the ceiling that appeared to have motorized winches to raise and lower it. The entire right wall of the gymnasium was splattered with signage and posters of all types and sizes with a

[SIGNAGE↓]

Volleyball Schedule

Court 1

Has Beens | One Hit Wonders
TOC 2 | Arm & Hammer
After School Specials | Alvarez
Out of the Box | TOC 1

Court 2

Gerster | Just Spike It
Living Faith | Untouchables
TOC / Moore | Spike It Like It's Hot

[SIGNAGE↓]

BANQUET HALL Available to for your quinceanera. Host your next family reunion, recital, company party or band performance.

variety of messages targeting a variety of audiences, trying to persuade them to become involved in an array of activities. Signs full of colorful art and gesticulating figures communicated

enthusiastically with the young (Soccer League! Basketball! Volleyball! Ballet Classes! Tap Classes! Karate Lessons! Swim Club! Summer Youth Program! Softball.). Signs reached out empathetically to the old (*Gentle Yoga. Silver & Strong Splash. Silver Sneakers.*) Signs spoke emotively to everyone in-between (Lose those pounds. Zumba. Yoga. Get Fit. Workout. Aqua Aerobics. Weight training.).

There were signs full of suggestions and ideas on how to make use of the Banquet Hall, the meeting rooms, the swimming pool, and the full-sized gymnasium.

The Walking Track

After reading the wall of signs, I walked across the length of the gymnasium. On the far right was a set of stairs that went up and to the left. I walked up the stairs and found myself at the beginning of a fairly wide walking track. The track was U-shape. One could walk around the track and look down on the gymnasium, which I did. Exercise bikes with digital displays were placed intermittently, and singularly, along the sides of the walking track. There was a lone, elderly woman on one of the exercise bikes, pedaling slowly and looking out a window that was facing west, towards the nicely landscaped parking area. A towel hung around her neck. As I headed in her direction, she wiped her forehead and pedaled. She never removed her gaze from the window, so I didn't engage her.

I reached the end of one leg of the track's U and turned left to continue on around the track. Reaching the last and final leg of the track's U, I was faced with either going down a set of stairs to my right or crossing paths with the weight-training area.

Weight training area

Two men, that did not appear to be working out together, were training on the weights. A Caucasian, middle-aged man was sitting on a butterfly machine. A young, Latino man was using barbells. Considering there was weight training going on and bikes being pedaled, it was quiet; which made me realize for the first time, that no music was playing. I liked this. I couldn't help but observe that, for such a small weight training area, there was an abundance of signage and posters on the wall and on a door that lead back downstairs to the main floor. There were signs talking about blood-pressure; signs explaining how to measure your level of fitness; and signs reminding members that weight training is GOOD. I observed that the barbells were color-coded and labeled in some meaningful way that linked up with a laminated chart on the wall. Also on the wall was a color coded 'Fitness Heart Rate' sign and a 'Rating Of Perceived Exertion and Talk Test' sign.



A children's playroom was situated between the weight training area and the yoga and Zumba rooms. The playroom was closed as were the yoga and Zumba rooms.



Locker rooms

As I entered the women's locker room, I expected to be hit by an amalgamation of steamy smells that might include sweat, soap, and stale perfume. I was surprised at how fresh it smelled – as in fresh air. And it was clean. There was a middle-aged, Caucasian woman at the locker room counter, wrapped in a towel; her hair also wrapped in a towel in a turban-like shape. She was busy putting on mascara and didn't seem to notice me as I looked in. Quiet.

The indoor swimming pool

As I opened the door to the swimming area I expected to be slapped in the face by the smell of chlorine. Surprisingly, I was not. Like all the other spaces in the facility, the indoor swimming area was of a modest, though sufficient size. It appeared to be clean.

The pool was heated. It was well organized with markings and information on the floor around the pool. Three of the walls in the pool area were made entirely of glass. One faced the west and

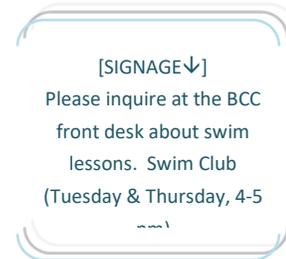


looked out over the soccer field, one faced south and looked out into the games room. The third faced the men's and women's locker areas. On this wall was also a door that led into the swimming area. There was a poster on the door about mermaids and fins.

I entered the pool area. An older Caucasian man was standing approximately in the middle of the pool, gently bobbing up and down, his hands laying on the top of the water, palms down, eyes turned down to his hands. He moved slowly, almost as if he did not wish to make

waves. He looked up at me as I entered and then looked back down at his hands. A young Latino girl sat in a chair on the side of the pool adjusting a non-slip water shoe on her foot. She looked up at me and then went back to attending to her shoe. There was no one else in the pool. Silence.

End of tour



I exited the facility the same way I entered. As I walked in the direction of the outdoor walking trail, I was surprised that shrieks of laughter and squeals continued to come from the playground. I walked over to the soccer field where a soccer game was in session. The goalie on one team was a middle-aged Caucasian woman with short, blond hair. Each soccer team had a fairly diverse ethnic mix of players.



I also observed that there was a mix of children and adults playing as well.

As I was getting in my vehicle to leave, I was caught off guard by a conversation I overheard between several children on the playground. Before I could turn my head to see who-said-what, I heard, “Get away from me you red-neck.” Still another child’s voice rebutted, “Get away from me you black person.” These statements were punctuated by more shrieks of laughter. As I turned my head to look at the goings-on, I observed a young Caucasian boy, about ten years old, running towards the merry-go-round, packing a black plastic pistol with a long barrel.

I felt a bit deflated.

Interviews [\[↑\]](#)

Interview 1: Woman in reception area [\[↑\]](#)

Rhonda Thomas (RT): Are you a volunteer?

Woman (W): No, I give Silver Sneakers and Silver Fit classes on a Wednesday and I work here part time on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

RT: What kind of work do you need volunteers to do?

W: Mainly sit here behind this desk.

RT: Do you ever have any trouble here?

W: No. I've never seen anything like that here. Nothing like that happens here.



Interview 2: Man sitting next to vending machines [\[↑\]](#)

Rhonda Thomas (RT): Are you a member here?

Man (M): Yes.



RT: Have you tried the pool?

M: No, I come here to walk around the track.

RT: Is it a good track?

M: Yes. It's good for me. I have bad knees and the track is nice and flat, easy on the old knees.

Sometimes I try to walk up and down the stairs.

[SIGNAGE→] The Doors Are Open. Get Out of the House and Come Play!!!!

[SIGNAGE→] Puppy & Adult Dog Training: Professional Positive Reinforcement Dog Training

[SIGNAGE→] BCC Shock Waves Swim Club Tuesdays and Thursdays 4:00 - 5:00 Swim

Strong & Fast with Glenda & Renee

[SIGNAGE→] POUND: Rock Your Workout every Friday 5:30 - 6:30 with Danielle \$5/class pr

5 classes for \$20

[SIGNAGE→] Dance with Ms. Pam: Ballet, Tap and Modern Jazz ages 3+

[SIGNAGE→] Silver Splash Mondays, Wednesday, Fridays 11:00 -12:00 with Susette FREE for Silver members; \$5/class for non-member

Reflection [\[↑\]](#)

This was an interesting exercise. Trying to keep myself out of the observations was not easy. An emergent theme going on inside of the center was the use of signage: an array of posters display throughout the facility communicating a number of messages. Messages about what was going on, what was appreciated, what was not appreciated, and how members should behave. Messages conveying rules, regulations, instructions, advice, and information. Messages with photos, colorful graphics, icons, and images. Some were polished, others were full of bling.

Setting aside the cognitive dissonance going on in my head as a result of the statements made by the children on the playground, the writing on the wall, or the array of signage, throughout the facility utilized a consistent rhetoric that persuaded at least this audience, that the center's ethos is one of inclusion.

I would have liked to have had more time and opportunity to interview individuals; the day I toured the facility turned out to be a rather slow period. I would like to have asked participants their thoughts about the community center.

For example, one of the signs on the wall said, “We put the unity in community.” It would be interesting to ask random members what that statement means to them. Does unity begin with a community center? Does unity facilitate the success of a community center?

If I were going to structure a proper ethnographic research project around this experience, I would want to spend an appreciable amount of time at the center, at repetitive intervals. I would want to anonymously observe a number of activities and the groups that participate in the activities. I would put together a series of questions, print them, and place them in strategic locations for members to answer in confidentiality and anonymously. I would want to get their thoughts on the community center, the idea of community, and the idea of inclusion.