

“The Service is at Four”: Expressive Culture and Community in a University Residence

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When we think of customs – and expressive culture more generally – in the context of college and university residences, froshing or hazing practices that serve as initiation rites for new students often come to the fore. Every September, these traditions find their way into the news cycle, usually because of the hazardous or humiliating tasks that students are asked to perform, or because of the risky drinking practices associated with them. In searching the published literature on residence customs, one easily finds articles addressing the injuries seen by emergency room doctors (Finkel 2002), the potential liability for institutions regarding initiation practices of student groups (Spaziano 1994), the attitudes of students toward such practices and their reluctance to report incidents (Silveira and Hudson 2015), and means of better managing the risk of such “crimes” on campus from an institutional perspective (Hollmann 2002). More recently, racist or sexist practices and language in chants and songs are gaining broader attention, sparking criticism from students, the broader campus community, and the general public, and action by administrators.¹ With froshing and hazing practices in the news, the lasting impression of residence life and campus culture is often negative.

It is true that the songs and chants associated with campus residences (“houses”) that are taught and performed during “frosh week” (the first week that residents are on campus) are often problematic, rife with themes of excessive alcohol consumption, stereotyped and offensive gender representations, and sexually aggressive language (see, for example, descriptions in McDavid 2002) – and this article is not a defence of them or a discussion of how such traditions are changing in response to internal and external forces. However, following that intense week of initiation, designed to transition students to their new “roles” as residents and integrate them into the community of the house, other customs and lore (music and song included) often serve as important, positive expressions of community and become an integral part of both everyday life in residence and the festival-like celebrations that occur periodically throughout the year.

During my own university experience spanning more than a decade, I lived in five different residences at three different institutions (two in Canada, one in Europe) – an undergraduate all-female dormitory, an undergraduate co-ed dormitory, an under-

graduate apartment-style residence (shared with strangers one year and friends the next), a co-ed dormitory for “mature” students (graduate students and/or students older than the average undergraduate), and a co-ed dormitory for international students. Sometimes I integrated into the community and sometimes I actively avoided doing so. I sang house songs and chants, though I admittedly can’t recall the lyrics now. I also performed in a talent night during winter carnival, helped rehearse an elaborate lip-sync routine performed by members of my house in another winter carnival, and organized a small group to perform hits from the *Phantom of the Opera* as a house activity (I sang the role of Christine). These types of musical expression are positive examples of the community-building processes that occur within college and university residences, but largely remain unaddressed in academic (and popular) literature.

In an attempt to address this lacuna from a folklore perspective, graduate students at Memorial University published a special issue of *Culture & Tradition* devoted to university life in 2004. Contributors wrote of campus legends, rumours, foodways, rites of passage, and customs, specifically seeking to understand such expressive culture in context.² Missing from that special issue was a focussed discussion of musical practices, though McDavid (2004) did reference the songs and chants discussed in her thesis. In this brief article, I provide a description of one musical moment in residence life that I witnessed, and offer comments on the processes at work. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how spontaneous moments of music-making emerge in a residence context, while highlighting the functions of such expressions.

On a bright November day during one of my many residence experiences, I recall overhearing one resident of my house say to another, “The service is at 4 p.m.” I was curious as to what that meant, but I was also busy working on a presentation, so I didn’t bother to pursue it. A few minutes later, I saw a number of residents streaming past my door, dressed in black. Some of them wore dresses, others suits – in all cases, they wore their “Sunday best”. Not long after, I heard a few of them singing “Amazing Grace” as they processed out of the building. Clearly the “service” was a funeral.

From my open window, I peered out at the group of about 20 residents as they gathered a few metres from the main entrance of the building, stood in a

semicircle, and then eulogized Captain Morgan, someone's pet frog who had passed suddenly.³ He had been placed in a small coffin marked with a cross. One of the residents read a passage from the Bible. Then the "Last Post" and the "Rouse" were played on trumpet, bookending a moment of silence for their fallen friend. The group processed back into the building. I was told later that they continued to a nearby pond where Captain Morgan would be cremated and his ashes spread (part of the ceremony that I did not observe).

I remember my surprise that day – that someone had a frog in the building (against the rules), that someone had a trumpet in the building (not a music student), that the "Last Post" had been part of the service (not common). For a long time, it was simply a funny story to tell. But this musical moment has stuck with me through the years and is worthy of deeper consideration.

The funeral for Captain Morgan did not follow any standard order of service from a particular faith. Rather, it was a combination of elements selected by the community members for how to appropriately honour the dead – wearing formal attire, singing "Amazing Grace", standing in a semi-circle with someone officiating, offering a eulogy of the deceased, reading from the Bible, playing the "Last Post", observing a minute of silence, playing the "Rouse" to mark the end of the silence, and then proceeding to another site for cremation and scattering of ashes. This selection of elements and combination of them into a funeral for a deceased pet recalls the process of bricolage (Hebdige 1979), in that they were chosen from a variety of resources (personal experience, religious background, public memorialization, popular culture) and reassembled into a means of honouring the life of a pet in the social context of a newly-formed community of young adults who reside in the same university residence.

The members of the community generally shared the same regional cultural background and were predominately of Christian faiths or backgrounds (though, certainly, there was diversity within the group). Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that there was a reading from the Bible and that "Amazing Grace" was sung. The funeral of Captain Morgan was also informed by some residents' expectations for how mourning (or memorialization) should occur, either through personal experience of public Remembrance Day celebrations that honour veterans or through representations in popular culture. I suspect this explains the incorporation of a minute of silence demarcated by the "Last Post" and the "Rouse" on trumpet, which would normally be reserved for military funerals and Armistice Day observances.⁴ Similarly, practices such as dressing in black may have

stemmed from residents' personal experiences attending funerals or through popular culture representations of them. In short, members of the community determined for themselves how to appropriately honour the loss of a resident's pet, informed by a variety of resources but undirected by any authority.

It should be noted that the service was approached in a serious fashion befitting such a solemn occasion. It wasn't a mock funeral of inversions, nor conducted tongue-in-cheek, but a serious and genuine attempt to appropriately mark the passing of a pet and help a fellow resident grieve. It was clear that some planning had gone into it, and news travelled through the building by word of mouth. The funeral for Captain Morgan was an important coming together of residents to support a fellow community member during a time of mourning.

The support of the community would not exist without the initiation rites that occur during the first few weeks of the academic year. Many (including McDavid 2002, 2004) have noted that froshing and hazing practices serve to transition students from living with their families in their hometowns to being university students who live with fellow students in a new city. These rites incorporate students of diverse backgrounds into a new community (or "family") during a time of significant change and upheaval. Even those writing about ways to limit risky initiation practices recognize the importance of them (see, for example, Hollmann 2002).

Buote et al. (2007) have noted just how important the establishment of new social bonds (friendships) is for residence students who experience a more dramatic break from their established social networks than commuting students who return to them at the end of the day. These new friends "provide a sense of belonging, give both emotional support and tangible assistance when needed, offer advice and counsel, and serve as role models with regard to appropriate behaviour in the campus environment. Friends are also a source of fun and enjoyment, balancing out the many stressors that students experience in adjusting to university life" (Buote et al. 2007: 685-86). House activities, customs, and lore throughout the year reinforce the bonds established during the intense social integration work of frosh week. The moments during which community members come together for a common purpose (such as the funeral for a pet) demonstrate just how strong these bonds are and support Buote et al.'s observations regarding emotional support.

There is much more to be learned about the customs and lore of student communities in college and university residences, particularly when one looks past froshing and hazing customs to consider expressive culture that occurs throughout the academic year

in a newly established and temporary folk group that, by virtue of its members' roles as college or university students, experiences an "extended liminality" (McDavid 2004: 95). Future studies of student life might interrogate the role of music in identity representation (both individual and collective), ubiquitous theme parties, festivities such as winter carnival, studying, or other aspects of everyday life that are more mundane than the heightened period of frosh week. They might also centre on moments of communal and small-group music-making within the context of residence life.⁵ Such studies would better help us understand music and music-making among young adults in a living-learning environment, and temper the negative associations of chants and songs during initiation rites with the tangible, positive outcomes of such integrative processes. Further, they would reveal a more nuanced understanding of the function of music in student life, particularly in the production and reproduction of new relationships.

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Notes

¹ Though not specific to residence customs and practices, readers may recall the student orientation chant at Saint Mary's University in 2013 that raised issues of sexism and rape culture (see Auld 2013).

² Readers may also be interested in Nathan (2005), which recounts the experience of an anthropologist living in a dormitory to better understand student culture.

³ Given the prominence of drinking culture in residence, it is not lost on the author that the pet frog was named after a brand of rum.

⁴ I am assuming, of course, that Captain Morgan did not die in battle or serve in the military.

⁵ More broadly, studies of esoteric language, house colours, house t-shirts, house mascots, house legends, formal banquets, pranking customs, drinking games and strategies for avoiding them, and games (like Assassins) and how they are being modified in a world where violent school shootings have become too common would be valuable.



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