

CHAPTER 2.

THE YIN-YANG OF LITERACY

While I didn't grow up with it formally, the philosophy of Taoism offers me a way to understand my own literacy practices and some of Freire's ideas about critical reading. That is, several of Taoism's core principles describe my own language habits. I don't know how this is, but it is.

Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophy that explains the order of the universe and everything in it, and it is often encapsulated in the Yin and Yang symbol. Yin and Yang are two entities, male and female energies, that are joined and interconnected. They are interdependent, or mutually dependent on one another, in order to exist. They make each other. Both are necessary for the other's existence. Night needs day and day night. But when does day become night? When is dawn or dusk day or night? The idea is that yin and yang need each other, define each other, thus their borders blur into each other.

Each has the essence of the other in them, hence the circles of the opposite color in both the yin and yang swirls.¹ We need our material world, our reality, to make meaning of words or the symbolic world, while simultaneously, we need words (the symbolic) to help us make sense of our material world. The two elements and forces coexist and flow back and forth between each other. In some sense, they are each other. In Buddhist traditions, one might say these two energies or realms of experience “inter-are.”² They are interdependent. Reality is symbolic, and the symbolic is reality. In Christian traditions, a similar concept exists in the idea of consubstantiality.³

Cultural psychologists explain that Chinese Taoist dialectic is one that accepts a unity of opposites, accepts that contradictions or tensions in the world

1 To learn more about the roots of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, see Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. David Hinton (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2015); see also, Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

2 The Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh explains interbeing elegantly in *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 95–98.

3 In Christian theology, consubstantiality describes the relationship between God (the Father), Jesus Christ (the Son), and the Holy Spirit. They are of the same essence. See Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology: A Guide to Study, Conversation & Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 117–118. There is also a decent Wikipedia page on the concept; see Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, accessed February 20, 2021, s.v. “consubstantiality,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consubstantiality>.

are inherent and are not really contradictions.⁴ So when conflict arises, there is not an inherent need or urge to resolve it, as in Western and Greek traditions. This is the interdependent nature of paradoxical things. What appears as contradictory or in conflict in the world or among ideas and positions is simply the necessary unity of opposites, yin and yang coexisting, commingling.

In Western philosophy, the word “dialectic” comes from ancient Greek ideas about dialogue. To the Greeks, opposing ideas are tested together in order to come to the Truth (capital “T”), or a singular truth, which the ancient Greeks called *Episteme*.⁵ In Western thinking, a single truth is the goal of a dialogue or dialectic, two or more opposing voices, ideas, or words that produce one conclusion about the question or issue at hand.

This is linear thinking and can be visualized as a straight line with hierarchical points or steps in it from an origin to an end point. Think of it as an outline with topics (e.g. I, II, III, IV) and subtopics (a, b, c, d) under each topic. It’s what most people in the West consider “logical,” but actually it’s just one kind of logic or orientation to the world, one of many.⁶ It’s the logic of Plato and later Aristotle that prevailed and was passed on, but there’s nothing inherently better or clearer about linear thinking than some other way of thinking or ordering ideas or the world. It’s just the kind of thinking that gained dominance for a number of reasons, which is an entirely different book.⁷

4 Kaiping Peng, Julie Spencer-Rodgers, and Zhong Nian, “Naive Dialecticism and The Tao of Chinese Thought,” in *Indigenous And Cultural Psychology: Understanding People In Context*, ed. Uichol Kim, Kuo-Shu Yang., and Kwang-Kuo Hwang (New York: Springer, 2006), 247–262. Peng and his colleagues also provide a good explanation of Chinese Taoist thought in the chapter.

5 Technically, during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE in the area of what is today called Greece, there was no nation-state or country called Greece. The area was a collection of city-states, each self-governed, often referred to as *Hellenes* after the 4th century. This is called the Hellenistic period. For simplicity’s sake, I refer to such city-states as “Greece.” Most of the ideas and art that I discuss are from the Hellenic city-state of Athens. To read a good history of ancient Athenian rhetoric, see chapters 1–5 of George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); or see Richard A. Katula, “The Origins of Rhetoric: Literacy and Democracy in Ancient Greece,” in *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 3rd ed., eds. James J. Murphy, Richard A. Katula, with Forbes I. Hill (Mahwah, NJ: Routledge, 2003), 3–19.

6 I should note that even the distinction of “West” and “East” as a cultural or spatial concept or reference is Western European, as it tends to assume a White, Western, European global center. Re-center the globe on the continent of North America, and Europe is now the East, while Asia is the West.

7 Besides ancient Greek (Hellenic) philosophy and thinking that gained dominance in the medieval era of Europe when monks and priests copied and harmonized their texts with Christian doctrine, one can look to the Enlightenment for ways that Western dialectic became dominant in language and thinking, most notably in science and philosophy. While each are quite

Many cite Aristotle's use of dialectic as one origin of Western European traditions of logic. He inherited his ideas from his teacher, Plato, who got his ideas from his teacher, Socrates.⁸ Socratic dialogue, as illustrated in Plato's dialogues, is a linear argument that consists of a question followed by an answer that leads to another question and another answer. It's a back and forth that is often adversarial. The answerer isn't usually on the side of the question-asker, Socrates. And the dialogue ultimately leads to the Truth, *Episteme*. For the ancient Greeks, to argue meant you engaged in conflict, comparison, and resolution.

This same dialectic logic can be seen all over ancient Greek culture.⁹ The Olympic games are one example, with lots of individual contests and few team activities. The way the city center, or *agora*, operated is another. The *agora* was where most civic and economic exchanges occurred, where one argued and haggled as a matter of course. *Agon* or conflict was how life was transacted in ancient Greece.

Thus, one's life and success in the civic or economic spheres were centered on conflict. If you were lucky or good enough, the conflict ended with your success and triumph over others. Conflict also defined the realm of home and family, or *oikos*. Many scholars of antiquity consider Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, to be a kind of encyclopedia of ancient Greek culture. The telling of the poem was how knowledge and practices were passed down from one generation to another. It exemplified the culture and its ideas through a series of individual conquests and triumphs over a variety of obstacles and creatures, all so that Ulysses, the hero, could make it safely home to wife and hearth, yang returning to its yin.¹⁰ But for the ancient Greeks, getting home, being safe and in one's place, was dependent on previous conflict and winning. The epic poem's central lesson could be: Life is a series of contests that prove oneself and one's virtue, or *arête*.

The material conditions that made ancient Greek life afforded a particular set of relations to words, or *logoi*, that we inherit today in dominant English

different, thinkers like Kant, Bacon, Descartes, Hume, Locke, Adam Smith, and many others worked from linear and binary dialectic habits of language that created hierarchies and categories of phenomena and ideas.

8 To read more about dialectic, see Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954); Aristotle, *Topics*, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge (Internet Classics Archive, 2009), <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/topics.html>; and for discussion of Aristotle's works, see chapter 4 of James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).

9 Richard Nisbett, a cultural psychologist, discusses the themes of "personal freedom, individuality, and objective thought" in ancient Greek culture in *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . And Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 30.

10 To read about epic poetry as an encyclopedia of ancient Greek culture, see chapter 4 of Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963).

language practices because of their Western roots. The term *logos* actually means “word,” “idea,” and “reason” itself. Since ancient Greece was primarily an oral society, logos was mostly spoken, breathed between people in exchanges. It makes sense, then, that the term used for words would also be the one used for ideas and reason in these conditions. The way one might experience an argument would be from the mouth of another person in front of them, coming from inside them, perhaps understood as a part of their essence, their virtue. Logos was a part of a person. It’s easy to see how a person’s ideas spoken, coming out of their body, might seem essential to that person, an inherent part of them. And in these conditions, words, ideas, like people are distinct from one another.

It also isn’t hard to see how a back and forth, or “dialectic,” is at the heart of most language practices. Our ideas about dialectic make up much of our orientations to the world and language. But how might dialectic in our world share in both the natures of conflict and consubstantiality, logos and Taoism? As you may be able to hear in my cursory description of Chinese Taoist and ancient Greek dialectic, they are quite different orientations to languaging and the world.

Of course, no orientation is unified, and there are lots of differences and nuances expressed through the ages; even the idea of a Western vs Eastern dialectic orientation is artificial. But my point in this chapter is to reveal the broader outlines of each orientation that are often embodied in habits of language that create us, so I’ll speak mostly in generalities, knowing that while they break down eventually, they are still helpful. In the process, I want to argue tacitly that Taoist and Western dialectics are a part of my literacy story.

TAOIST DIALECTIC LANGUAGING

Almost every semester in the writing courses I teach, which can range from first-year writing to graduate courses on rhetorical theory, I get a few students who are brave enough to ask me about my writing assignments. Their confusion is not in how I’m asking them to engage in the writing but in what I’m expecting from them as a product of that labor. They are used to teachers assigning categories of writing. This week, we are writing an essay that explores . . . Next week, we are writing a research paper on . . . The following week we are writing a journal entry on . . . These categories of writing, or genres, are assumed to have essential or inherent features in them that a student will practice doing when they write them. These features make the genres known to everyone. I do not make this assumption. I don’t think in terms of essential or distinct categories of writing assignments. This isn’t how I understand languaging.

Part of my students’ confusion comes from how I assign things. I pay careful attention to the process of labor I want them to engage in. The instructions are

written as step-by-step processes. They are more minimal in describing what that labor produces, since I don't know what it will produce exactly for every student. I don't find it particularly fair to assume that all students in my courses will want or be able to produce the same kind of writing, the same kind of draft, for instance. I don't know if I'd want to read the same kind of draft from every student.

I also don't think it is necessary to fit every differently shaped student literacy into the same square hole of the assignment. Instead, I want to open up the act of writing so that it simply becomes labor. I give them simple expectations that provide estimated time spent on each step in the process (in minutes) and the number of words written or read (depending on what they are doing). I'll also give them key things I want them to engage in, like questions to address or ideas to wrestle with as they write.

Recently a student asked me in class, "What's a 'narrative inquiry?'" I looked it up on the Internet but couldn't find any description or example of one." I called our assignment a "narrative inquiry" because the central goal was to inquire about or investigate some narrative in popular culture. Now, my labor instructions were clear about what and how I wanted them to do the work, but because some of my students had expectations about genres in such a course, they were trying to nail down the assignment as a category of writing. They were looking for the kind of document, the category, to draft that they thought I was telling them to write; meanwhile I was more interested in how they labored toward whatever draft they produced. Their orientation to school work was not to think in terms of labor instructions but to think primarily in terms of the category of product expected of them. And so I often ask some version of, "what happens in our class when the expectations for our languaging are not about a product to submit but labors to do?"

In my instructions, I give loose guidelines for the product that the labor will produce, such as "a document of about 3,500 words that focuses on one question you have about a narrative found in popular culture that you find interesting. Your central question should investigate how this narrative is made, understood, or created in a U.S. context." Now, this is just the description. The majority of my instructions offer a step-by-step process to engage in.

My larger purpose in such writing labor is to have a dialogue with each student through my responses to their work about what they've created and how it exercises the goals and competencies we are shooting for. Both writer (student) and readers (teacher and peers) are vital in assessing whatever they produce because we must dialogue, have a give and take. The assessment they receive on their writing is going to be a dialogue. It's gonna require both of us, and their colleagues' responses too. We can only make sense of the writer's work when we understand how it is read by others and ourselves in this classroom context.

This approach to writing assignments I consider a Taoist dialectical approach to languaging and learning. I resist a number of assumptions about writing assignments and how they are assessed that are conventional in most classrooms, which are informed by Western dialectic traditions. I resist an essential and knowable (nameable) list of distinct categories of assignments, making the yin and yang of each laboring process that leads to a product possible. I resist a focus on products that are categorized as learning, which often ignores the processes, the laboring and diverse learning that emerges in classrooms organically. I resist the practice of the teacher evaluating alone, then dialoguing with the student after judgements are made, since I find the student and I must assess together from our own positions and habits of language. We must inter-judge. This last resistance of mine also rejects a strictly hierarchical arrangement in the judgement of language. Both yin and yang are needed in evaluating language. Why hobble ourselves, hopping on one leg of our dialectic, in the most important part of a class, assessment and feedback?



I find myself flying across the country often these days, giving lectures and workshops on antiracist writing assessment, talking about White language supremacy in schools and disciplines. When I'm on an airplane and I strike up a conversation with the person next to me, inevitably I'm asked, "So what do you do?" I don't like to say what I do precisely. In fact, I try to avoid this conversation. I know people will change when I tell them what I do, and in my view, not usually for the better.

But if I'm pressed I'll say something like, "I'm a professor and associate dean. I do research on writing assessment and racism." Often I get surprised looks after "professor and associate dean." I don't look like a professor, let alone a dean. I've been mistaken for an athletic coach, even an athlete, but never a professor. I know why. I'm a brown guy who looks considerably younger than he is, mostly because of the standards of youth and age that circulate in our culture. I'm only 5'7" but athletically built, having worked out in gyms for the last thirty years.

When you are steeped in a culture that uses Western dialectic orientations to language, it's easy to make these kinds of categorical judgements about people without seeing the flaws in such categorical logics. Many would call them harmless mistakes, others, unfair assumptions and prejudices. Maybe they are harmless, maybe not. How harmless are they if they are ubiquitous, happening all the time everywhere? How harmless are they if they affect other judgements and decisions that circulate around them, many of which matter more, like who gets a job or who seems dangerous in a routine traffic stop by a police officer?

These are not just categorical assumptions we make but ones that have inherent hierarchies of value attached to them. Who seems more trustworthy on a

plane, the mysterious, short, brown, muscular guy with black hair next to you—is he Mexican, Cuban, maybe Puerto Rican?—or the taller, White guy with thinning sandy brown hair on the other side of the aisle—is he a banker or businessman? The associations that are tacitly linked to each of these categorical bodies are different and have consequences beyond innocent mistakes on a plane. What my Taoist dialectical orientation helps me see in these occurrences is that they are a product of language and logic systems that afford us these mistakes in judgement. It's not our assumptions that are the problem. It's our unchecked logic that creates such judgement problems.

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In school, I never really understood the five paragraph theme. I mean, I knew we were asked to write it, but I had a hard time doing that. Its linear structure didn't feel right to me. It was hard to fit the discussion in my head into that linear structure, even when I was trying really hard to do it. Why? Well, things just didn't fit into topics or points so neatly for me. Discussing one idea always seemed like five or six things at once. The claim I might start with was not necessarily my thesis or central idea, but I wanted to start with it because it made sense to be in a different spot on a journey than where I would end up. And sometimes, it felt—and still does feel—more right to just cut to a new topic, a new scene. No transitions. They just slow things down, keep the reader from the joy of figuring out the connections.

I also feel that my readers need to know more, need to know about the things on the borders and edges of a topic, in order to know something as I do. I hope this means that they also need to do work. You cannot have meaning just handed to you. Reading and communicating are hard labors for everyone, readers and writers.

Say I was writing a paper in school about time and clocks. I might start thinking about the way we have a twenty-four-hour day, how clocks represent this in twelve-hour halves, and how this system comes from Egyptians' methods for counting daylight and night. This would lead me to consider the Babylonians' numbering system, which was sexagesimal, or based on units of 60. I'd realize quickly that I don't need that word, "sexagesimal," but I like saying it, so I keep it. It's a gift to my readers. This system is similar to Sumerian-Akkadian systems that were based on sixes. Do the Babylonians or Sumerians have something to do with our idea of time and clocks? Did the Babylonians and Sumerians talk to each other? They lived near each other, right? Was there commerce among any of these ancient civilizations? If so, could that affect these systems, which are representational, like the alphabet and hieroglyphics? And what about H. G. Wells' famous novella, *The Time Machine*, published in 1895? It compares

different civilizations. That story explores time travel. Morlocks and Eloi. Hierarchical societies in time. Bad people of the dark and caves. Good people of light and the surface. But are these their essences or just categorical appearances? Do Morlocks and Eloi sound racialized? Is that racializing a function of time, day and night, light and dark, Eloi and Morlock? Cultural anxieties? Racialized projections? Do the symbols in front of us that create time also create race?

And a clock itself is just a symbol made up of other symbols. This would then make me think of the way divisions of six numbers are all over the place today—they are symbolic to us in a number of ways. Units of twelve, a dozen eggs, twelve inches makes a foot. This could lead me to think about the influence that ancient Egyptians (and Babylonians) had on what we buy today in stores, like a dozen eggs, or what seems complete. There are many religious traditions and myths that identify twelve as a sacred and complete number. Can you imagine buying just one egg, or three, or seven in a store? If there were just piles of eggs in bins at the supermarket, how many would you take at a time? Why? There seems to be a connection, a logic or link that connects our sense of time to Sumero-Akkadian counting systems and how many eggs we buy at any time, which is about what symbolizes wholeness or completeness. Twelve hours in a day. Twelve eggs in a dozen. Twelve Hebrew tribes. Morlocks and Eloi. Yin and yang. Time and the spaces it makes. Race and the divisions it makes. Symbols and the meanings they make. Division and the conflict it makes. Wholeness and the unity of opposites.

This kind of non-linear, even associative, logic did not pay off well in school for me. But it felt natural. It makes sense. It's fun. Perhaps my own languaging came about because of the dialectic I had grown in my home with my twin brother, grown through our twin ways of languaging together.

WESTERN CATEGORIZING AND ESSENTIALIZING

What made my literacy road rockier was that I enjoyed, even reveled in, paradox and contradictions, at least in thinking and writing, even for school purposes. The point of the Western dialectic is not to embrace opposing arguments, not to provide ambiguity and paradox, not to consider how those other voices might be reasonable or probable. The goal in Western dialectic, when translated to written argumentation in classrooms today, has been to offer an unambiguous answer and defend that answer, to present a strong and unified position which allows the writer to win the argument.

But I've never really been that interested in winning arguments. I have always been more interested in playing with language, playing with people together, and participating in verbal exchanges. Competing and conflict ain't comfortable for me.

But in classroom writing, the point usually wasn't to hold opposing ideas next to each other, to juxtapose them and let them be, although that can happen. The point was to compare and evaluate, then decide which is stronger. The point was never NOT to win the argument. But I wonder: Why must we have winners and losers at all in such language games? Why must the goal in any persuasive moment be to win the discussion or argument? Why can't the goal be to explain and understand your ideas next to others? Why can't our goal be to dialogue, or protect and encourage, even aid the one with whom you are engaged?

Western notions of logic that are encased in standards of English writing in schools tend to ask students to counter or synthesize opposing ideas into a singular, unambiguous conclusion. This is the definition of clarity, order, control, and logical organization in most standards of written English, and it comes straight out of Aristotle. It's one of the most common habits of White language (HOWL) in English. And it works with an assumption that there is usually one best view, one winner. It says that focusing mostly on one position is a stronger, clearer way to understand things. What I'm describing are two habits of HOWL, a universalized and naturalized orientation to the world (habit one) that is combined with categorizing and essentializing. The categorizing is understood as clarity, order, and control in language practices (habit two).

Growing up with a twin brother by my side who was always ready to discuss and test ideas with me made me perhaps more willing to sit with ambiguity and see questions less like linear problems to solve than as a give and take, a back and forth, a dialogue. Compromising with him or understanding my brother was always more fulfilling than winning or chancing a loss. I often say I think in webs of ideas, but maybe it's just that I don't usually think linearly. I don't think in terms of wins and losses, of hierarchies, of steps or things like that. I can, of course, and I'm often asked to think in linear terms, but it has not been my first inclination. But even after I'd figured this out, I still couldn't shake the Taoist-like orientation in school.

In my senior year's advanced writing class, I had to write a paper about some issue or question I was interested in understanding better. I was in a new school, having just moved to Corvallis, Oregon, and living with my nana, who would die of cancer less than a year later. I wrote a paper about how science and the arts might not need to be in contradiction to conservative Christian values and beliefs encapsulated in the Bible. I essentially was arguing that maybe I could be both a Christian who believed in the infallible word of God in the Bible, believed that my nana had a soul and was going to heaven, as well as someone who accepted scientific explanations of the world like evolution and carbon dating that showed the planet to be much older than many in my church and family seemed to believe.

I asked: Why can't I accept the idea that we don't have any proof of something called the soul, that there is no way to know for sure? Why can't I believe that there is no good reason for my nana's chronic, debilitating pain from cancer and chemotherapy, that her life makes no sense, hurts all of us, and depreciates the image of God? Why can't I hold equally to the belief of a loving God who would not hurt his flock, who has some kind of plan that we don't know? And yet, by having no evidence of such a master plan, it is right to question the existence of such a plan, to question the grounds of my own faith and that of my nana's, even as I hold tightly to that faith because it was all I had at that time to give me comfort? Why can't faith not be enough and simultaneously more than we need?

I showed this paper to my uncle Bill, whom I admired. He was a microbiologist, a professor and scientist at Oregon State University, and a respected member of our church, the Church of Christ. He baptized me earlier that same year. I figured he would have a foot in each world as I thought he did. I wanted his feedback before I turned in the paper. I wanted that paper to be good, and I wanted the conversation with him because he was the only man in my life. The question was important to me, as was my nana.

We sat on his bed in his two-story house on Roosevelt Drive in Corvallis, and he told me that I couldn't have it both ways, that if I believed in God and the Bible, then I couldn't believe this other stuff. He was expressing his Aristotelian and Western orientation to the world that he wanted me to accept, but I struggled with the categories, the essentializing, the this-or-that-ness of his response. I struggled with his HOWLING at me. I wanted things to be this-and-that. He called me agnostic, said I should be careful. I'm dancing with blasphemy, or worse, apostasy.

I thought it ironic that he would be so closed off given that he was a scientist himself—wasn't his own research a paradox in this question about God's plan and everlasting souls? The experience made me deeply sad and unsettled inside. I was disappointed that I wasn't encouraged the way I envisioned his words to me would be. I thought my words were good. I thought he would be understanding or at least provide a way to inquire with me about the questions I was asking. I didn't really want his answers. I wanted to have the questions. But to him, he was saving my soul, saving me from a Godless life, or a life of equivocation. He was demonstrating his Christian love for me. This paper, to him, led to hellfire and damnation. There was only belief and faith or nonbelief and equivocation. These were distinct opposites in his life. They shared no borders.

I thought he'd say that this paper really opened his eyes, that I was smart, that I could be someone like him. But I couldn't be someone like him, a White scientist from the Midwest, a mostly yang. I wanted both yin and yang. I wanted both the sciences and the arts, and I wanted my faith. It turns out ultimately I couldn't have the latter, the faith, at least not like his. I didn't lose it, as the

popular saying goes. I never actually possessed it, but I know exactly where it is, where people keep it, and how they nurture it and often overfeed it. But in my youth, I just wanted faith like his. It seemed like the right thing to believe because everyone around me seemed to believe in it. It was comforting in the way a child believes his dad or mom can do anything, knows everything, so they don't see the weaknesses, the contradictions, the paradoxes. It's fast thinking.

Maybe what saved me at this moment when I could have taken a dive into a darker place was the considerably warmer response my teacher gave me. His name was Mr. Baldwin, a kind, soft spoken, platinum blond haired White man of about forty or so with a dry mouth. I could hear his tongue smack dryly in between his words. I remember very little of that class except this paper and one comment he wrote on it.

Beyond the many scribbles and circles scratched on my draft that noted the errors, he wrote at the top of the first page: "Most students your age don't think this deeply about such topics." That comment sustained me into my senior year of college, when another middle aged White male English professor would affirm me as a writer. I like to think that Mr. Baldwin looked past most of my non-Western orientation to language and saw the thinking on its own terms. But I don't know. What I know is his comment and how I read it as affirming, next to the errors and the "B-" grade.

PLAYING D&D AS LOGOS-CONFLICT

Because we were twins, my brother and I shared everything. We were always by each other's side. My brother and I played lots of games together. In part, we did so because we were latchkey kids. My mom could not afford babysitters, so when she was at work and we were not at school, we were behind a locked door in our apartment or trailer. The games we gravitated to eventually were not board games. Our games were language and dialectic games.

I had one problem though. I hate conflict and competition. It's a disposition I still carry today. All through childhood, I tried very hard to avoid conflict and situations that required a winner and loser. I disliked most board games because of this. Monopoly, Risk, chess, checkers, Stratego, you name the board game, and I likely couldn't handle playing it. I just felt awful and uncomfortable while playing. I didn't mind losing, but I really disliked seeing others lose. The competition was like razor blades on my feet.

I felt uncomfortable for those around me when someone publicly lost at a game or was losing. Sure, I wanted to win, but I didn't want to win by having others loose. Perhaps a part of this disposition against direct conflict was the fact that much of the time, I was playing with my twin brother, and I really didn't like to see

him lose. It felt like I was losing, and in a way I was. In Buddhist terms, winning and losing inter-are. They share in each other's essence. They require each other.

When I think about winning that second grade reading contest, I realize that most of my experience of it was not of competing against my colleagues in school, even though technically I was. Most days, there was no face-off with my competitors. The play of the game itself was reading after school. It was a daily practice of opening books and fingering lines of text, speaking words, of pushing myself to read more, to do something I was just finding out that I loved. So I don't consider that contest a competition in the same way that I grew to feel chess or Monopoly was. It was a daily practice more than a competition to win. I really just wanted to read. I don't have those trophies anymore, but I still have my reading practices, my words, the daily practice of conjuring words.

I realize that I was also younger then, just figuring out who I was, and it isn't like the reading contest was not uncomfortable at times. On Mondays, the teacher would color in the bar graphs on the back wall of the classroom. Each bar had a student's name next to it. The wall showed our relative progress at reading books. It compared each student's progress next to their peers. How many books did each student read? The graphs were meant to help us set goals, but what I felt was this burgeoning sense of dislike for competition through quantified comparisons that made hierarchies, that is, a winner and levels of losers.

So when Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) came along, I jumped at it. I was fanatical about the game. My brother and I played that game just about every day from the sixth grade until we graduated from high school, then into college. If we weren't playing it, we were thinking about it, reading up on it, creating adventures and characters. We still play today.

In D&D, there is no winning, not in the traditional, board game sense. There is just never-ending play. A game or campaign never has to end. There's always another quest, another problem to solve, another land to explore. There is conflict, but that conflict is with creatures and people that are not real. They are make-believe, just words with relations to people who only exist in our minds. Playing was living and breathing a fantasy. Playing D&D did not feel like a conflict where someone in the room had to win and another lose. We were not pitted against each other. One of us was the Dungeon Master (DM) creating the adventure for the player, and the other was the player, the one who went on the adventure.

Playing, then, was a collaboration. It felt like acting and telling a story all at once, which is why it is called a "role playing game." Each session was a story in which neither of us knew what the next stage or step was going to be because that was determined by both of us together in concert and organically. For instance, Tad created a situation as the DM, and I as the player reacted to it in whatever ways I saw fit within the confines of my character, the context, and

my present purposes, then he reacted, then I did. And the story continued in unexpected ways.

The characters and contexts continually changed. Most adventures were journeys, quests, and long strings of actions and reactions. The point of the game—and the fun of it—was the process, the journey, not an endpoint, not competition, not some signal that someone “won” at some point. D&D is a game that resists conventional winning and losing. It even resists thinking of the game as achieving a single goal or outcome, like scoring the most points, winning against other players. Instead, for us, it was about the ever-unfolding story we told and acted out together. And since everyone loves stories, everyone wins, especially since everyone has a hand in making the story.

The game should have been called Dialectic and Dragons. To play means a back and forth between the DM and players, players and NPCs (or nonplayer characters that the DM controls). D&D is a game made entirely of language. While it is only ostensibly about fighting and conflict, really it is about wording, creating, and collaboratively telling a story that always has a next chapter. And so, it is also about an endless cycle of ups and downs, of new contexts, and change, of endless creating with words.

This game nurtured my language dispositions, but more importantly, it offered a way for me to do Freireian critical practice as play. We were creating worlds and characters that required us not just to understand or invent such things but to question them, create opposing ideas, characters, motivations, and worldviews—and all through words written and spoken, all through interactions that required a yin and yang, a this-and-that-ness of play.

In a way, to engage seriously in the play of D&D, as we did, we had to engage in Freirian critical reading, pose questions about paradoxical word-worlds and word-characters. And the game was better when all sides were compelling, when choices and decisions were difficult to make because it was not a question of right or wrong, good or evil, but a question that presented one paradox after another. It was two boys of color storying themselves into existence.

I’m reminded of one refrain in Thomas King’s autobiographical book on stories, a refrain that he repeats in each chapter: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”¹¹

~ ~ ~

“Okay, what are you gonna do?” Tad asks me. We’re sitting cross-legged on the floor in our bedroom in the trailer, *Dungeons and Dragons* books arranged neatly around us, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, *Player’s Handbook*, *Monster*

11 King, *Truth*.

Manual, Deities and Demigods, the good one, the first edition with Cthulhu and Melnibonean Mythoi in it.

My brother has a DM's screen up to hide his notes and maps. It's late on a Friday night, our prime time for playing D&D. We've been playing for hours already. There's a pad of graph paper between us. We're using it to sketch out complicated arrangements: who is where, what rooms look like, etc.

"How many orcs jumped out in front of me? Where are they exactly?" I ask, scanning my character sheet, which has my magic user's stats, abilities, equipment, and spells written on it. His name is Schmindrake. He is my favorite character and will continue to be as I grow older, enter high school, college, and later. In fact, I'll end up keeping this character sheet, recopy it a few times, for another thirty-five years in real life, and slowly let the character retire.

Schmindrake the character will eventually become an Arch-Mage, a very high level magic user, and he will define me as a D&D player. I'll get to know him, flesh out his personality, use him as an archetype for other characters, a test case for ideas. He will come to voice many different things in my life, frustrations, joys, pains.

I'll think of him as my alter-ego of sorts, the mage who could do just about anything. The words that make him make me in the process, words I have made. And so, I have been Schmindrake, yet he isn't real. Through him, I will save cities, conquer empires, and build my own floating castle in the clouds. I will travel to different planes of existence. I'll go to Hell, the Astral and Ethereal planes, searching, usually finding. Schmindrake will save me as a boy from the cruelty of neighbors and teachers, from the racism around me. In critical moments when I needed an escape, Schmindrake's magic was real to me. He took me away to other lands where I was the hero.

I see now that being a professor in real life is very much like being an archmage in D&D. Both have their books and incantations, their spells and words that do things in the world. Both are magic users. Both must study. Both conjure things, one with the arcana of fantasy, the other with words, theories, and ideas. It's clear I have always been on the mage-professor path, even as a boy.

Sitting on the floor in our room, I have the *Player's Handbook* open to the page where the second level spell, "Web," is described. My character recently acquired the spell, and I'm excited to use it.

"There are just two orcs. Here's what it looks like." My brother draws the dungeon hallway on the graph paper. He draws the alcove where the orcs originally jumped me and puts little "O"s where they are and an "M" where my character is. "They are about ten feet apart, here and here." He points at the "Os." "And you are here, about ten feet from them." We had just rolled initiative, and I had the higher roll, so I get to go first.

"I'm going to cast my web spell at their legs and feet, anchoring the web to the floor right there and there. My range is two, so I can reach them."

"Saving throw?" he asks, his eyes stay looking down at his notes.

"Negate or half strength, depending on circumstances."

"They have room to jump out of the way, so if they make their saving throws, it would negate the web. Is that what you want to do?" Tad asks.

"Yes, I want to question them. I know Orcish." I make a web shooting sound and a motion with my hands, like I'm casting a spell. My brother rolls the twenty sided die twice. He makes a note on his paper, looks back at a page in the *Monster Manual*.

"Okay, you speak your incantation, and as you do this, you can see the orcs get nervous. You know they don't like magic. They seem scared now."

"You are mine, bitches!" I say, as my brother talks.

"The spell is verbal, material, and symbolic, so your web springs forth from your hands in a shimmering silver light as you speak. It comes through your hand gestures and sticks to one of the orc's feet, catching him in the gooey threads. He's stuck. He can't do anything."

"What about the other one?"

"The other one jumps free. He's now here." Tad erases one of the "O"s on the graph paper and puts it in a new spot near the middle of the dungeon hallway twenty feet from the webbed orc and in front of my character.

"Is it my turn still?"

"Yes, the orc used his action to jump out of the way. He had to re-adjust himself, but he will get to attack this round after you." Tad takes a sip of his iced tea. "What are you gonna do? You can see he's about to make a run for it."

"You mean like retreat?"

"Yes, he looks scared of your magic." Tad makes a scared face, imitating the orc's reaction.

"You cannot escape, orc! I'll say to him, and I'll hit him with my magic missile." I point on the graph paper at the free orc in the hallway. "I only need one of em to get the info." I make a laser sound. Magic Missile is my favorite spell. It doesn't miss. There's no saving throw. The only downside is that it doesn't do a lot of damage, but I don't need a lot in this case.

"You sure you want to do that? He looks scared, like if you did nothing, he'd run. Also, you may need that spell later." My brother is reminding me slyly that I have options, that it's not necessary to kill everything. I pause in my excitement at killing the evil orcs who just tried to ambush me. It's an ethical paradox for a fourteen-year-old boy. Do you kill the orc who is about to retreat, or do you let him run and live his life, perhaps to do more bad things or change his ways?

“These mother fuckers just ambushed me! They were gonna kill me. They were likely part of the orc clan that slaughtered the villagers. Don’t I have to kill him? I mean, they did hire me to take care of this problem.”

“But what does ‘taking care of this problem’ mean? Kill everyone?”

“Scorched Earth, man!” I yell. We both chuckle.

“Remember, you don’t know if these orcs are the same orcs that attacked the village. For all you know, these orcs are just protecting their underground lair. This is an abandoned temple. Besides, Lord Vain never said you had to kill them all, just that he wanted to be free of the orc problem. Orcs are not that smart, nor brave. The villagers are mostly lawful good.”

“Hmm. Right. What do I really know here? I’d probably do the same thing if I were these guys. I am good, but I’m chaotic good, so I don’t have to always abide by the laws.”

“You are more about good with personal freedom.”

“Whatever gets the job done. Ends over means, man.”

“Yes, but what means really help you get to your ends here? Your end could be to scare them off, or to kill them all, or something else. Keep in mind, you are fifth level. If you shoot magic missiles at him, he’s likely dead. Just saying. And of course, you’ll only have one more magic missile spell today. Might need it later.”

“Well, he could run off and tell his buddies that I’m coming, and that wouldn’t accomplish the mission. There could be a hundred of them.”

“Actually,” Tad looks at the *Monster Manual*, fingers the page, “between 30 and 300.”

“So a lot more than I can handle at once,” I smile at my brother. He raises his eyebrows and gives a look like, who knows? “Do I know how many orcs the villagers saw? Did they tell me?”

“Roll your intelligence.” I roll the twenty-sided die.

“Sixteen after my bonus.”

“Okay, you recall that Lord Vain said there was a *legion* of them.”

“Legion? How many is a fuckin’ legion?”

“In the ancient Roman army, that shit was thousands.” I look at him with a flat, close-lipped smile and a raised eyebrow as if to say, how the hell do you know that? My brother knows I’m wondering that. “I looked it up, dude. DM-prep.”

“So there’s like thousands?”

“Not likely, given that you know they don’t have clans much bigger than a few hundred. You think he meant that there were a lot of them, more than he could count.”

“Okay, that settles it. While I hate to kill a dude running away, I’mma have to do that in this case. Ma job is to protect the village. This is the safest choice.”

“You can see the orc is already turning to run away. ‘Aaaaahhhh,’ he’s screaming in terror of the magic he just saw. If there is anyone around, they’ll hear him screaming.”

“I fire my magic missiles.” I wave my hands in mock spell-casting and make more laser sounds. “Shut yo ass!” I say as if I’m speaking to the orc.

“They automatically hit. Roll damage.” I roll a four-sided die twice.

“That’s three, seven, plus two—nine points, baby!” I’m excited. I know orcs do not usually have that many hit points.

“He turns to run away screaming, ‘aaaah, no, no!’ The blue magic missiles tear into his flesh, one in his back, one right at the base of his spine and head. His orc flesh peels and burns away.” Tad makes an explosion sound. “The orc cries out in pain. ‘Aaarrrgh!’ You can see his eyes are wide with fright as he dies. The orc crumples to the floor, dead. His corpse is smoking. The other orc drops his rusty sword and cowers. You can see he’s scared shitless. He’s stuck in the web up to his waist.”

“I turn to him and strike a wizard pose, like I’m gonna cast something at him.”

“He whimpers. ‘Oooh, please, please,’ he says, ‘don’t kill with your powerful magic! You great wizard.’ He’s speaking Orcish. He bows his head.” I can tell Tad is trying to make the orc sympathetic, more interesting than what the *Monster Manual* describes him as. He may be an evil orc, but he ain’t just that. Tad’s roll playing the orc. I want to go along with it. It’s more fun.

“I ask him in Orcish, ‘Where can I find your clansmen who attacked the villagers?’” I wiggle my finger as if I’m going to cast another spell. “I will spare your life, orc, if you tell me the truth—and I’ll know if you’re lying,” I say in an authoritative voice. Another finger wiggle.

“You can see that he pisses himself. ‘But Wizard Lord,’ he says, ‘Spilge Bottom bound to orcish ways.’ He pleads with you, ‘Please do not kill poor Spilge Bottom. I have sworn my bones to clan of Flesh Eaters. For generations Lord Vain’s family slaughter us. We fight back. We survive. This is our way,’ the orc tells you.” Tad is doing his best orc imitation.

“Well, does he seem like he is lying? Can I tell?”

“Roll your wisdom.” I roll the twenty-sided die.

“Fourteen.”

“You think, he’s too scared to lie to you and too dumb.”

“I say, ‘Well, Spilge Bottom, you have chosen the wrong side; therefore, I have no choice.’ I raise my staff in a menacing way, and see if this convinces him to tell me what I want.” Tad thinks for a second or two.

“Okay, roll charisma.” I roll a twenty-sided on the hard back of the *Player’s Handbook*. The die makes the familiar sound, a thick crackle.

“Eighteen with my bonus, good?”

“Spilge Bottom says, ‘Ol’ Spilgey tell you all. It not Spilgey fault. Spilgey forced to take bone-oath in clan. Spilgey just want to live.’”

“Okaaay,” I say, squinting my eye at him. Finger wiggle.

“Spilgey have new master, Master Wizard Lord. Please, please, Master, please, Ol’ Spilgey realize me no match for Master Wizard Lord. Ol’ Spilgey promise to do all Master ask. Spilgey tell you all.” A chaotic good magic user taking on a lawful evil orc as a henchman, I think, it is odd, but those are our games, odd in their deviations from the rules, like real life, I think. Rules are artificial, just made on top of life. Besides, I feel I’m starting to like Ol’ Spilgey. Maybe I can change him, help him. He’ll bring spice to the campaign. The game is always better when I feel like we are breaking old rules and making new ones.

“Okay, Spilgey, you are gonna have to do what I say and change your ways. Got it? I’ll take care of you.”

“Oh yes, Master Wizard Lord, Ol’ Spilgey change good, change every which way.”

“Well, Spilgey, let’s get to the bottom of things. Sounds like we got work to do.”

THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF TWIN LANGUAGE

My brother, Tadayoshi (or Tad), and I are identical twins. Growing up, most people could not tell us apart. Shortly after we were born, my mom had to return us to the hospital, have our feet dipped in ink and printed again, to find out who was who. She couldn’t tell the difference. When we were toddlers, Tad and I had our own “twin language.” That’s what my mom called it. We spoke it to each other only. No one could understand it but us. It was fun to be a mystery to those around us. Perhaps we understood intuitively how powerful and magical words are. They create us. And so, you don’t give them to just anyone. And many of us practice giving them to ourselves first.

Growing up, we talked the same, liked the same things, and were always together, usually playing D&D. Even today, most of these things have not changed. We loved each other, always have, and yet wanted to be different from one another. I wanted to be my own person, to be recognized by others as such, yet also deeply appreciated my twinness and the fact that no one could tell us apart. We liked the same movies but sometimes for different reasons. We both loved the films *Dragonslayer*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and *Excalibur*. They were fantasy adventures like those we enacted in our D&D language games. Tad liked the films for the dragon, Conan, and King Arthur. I liked Ulrich, the wizard (played by Mako), and Merlin, all mages.

Tad was always there for me, always supportive, always had my back, always. He has understood me. I can trust him with anything. To family and friends, we were “the boys,” and Asao and Tad, the individuals. In fact, most of our lives, my brother and I have joked that the other is the “yin to his yang,” meaning that we made each other whole when we needed to. Together we have been complete.

But being a twin also created material conditions that produced a natural unity of opposites for me. We were the same to others, yet different to ourselves. We were the same to ourselves, making each other whole, yet different in some likes and dislikes. My brother did not pick up reading nearly as quickly as I did, for instance. He also is not much of a planner, is much more impulsive, and listens to his intuition to make most decisions. I like to plan, then deviate from it, but I want the plan. I’ve never really considered my intuition in most decisions, big or small. I have leaned on my wife, Kelly, for that.

We know these differences, yet feel and see many other similarities. So we were independent and strong willed but also needed each other, wanted each other in our lives. Sometimes my brother took the lead in social situations, at other times I did. The context and people determined when we would adjust our roles, so we were both leaders and followers. We shared a bedroom and bed for most of our growing up, well into junior high school years, when we got bunk beds, a bed that is two beds yet one bed. Through these material conditions as a twin, I was primed to accept more freely ambiguity and paradox, primed to resist categories and the essential characteristics that often went with those categories. Perhaps many twins feel this way.

Of course, I didn’t understand any of this growing up. I was not raised in a culturally Japanese household, and my family did not practice Taoism, Shintoism, or Buddhism. And yet, our material conditions encouraged an orientation to the world and language that agrees with East Asian dialectic. In my preteen years, I experimented with various religions: Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Latter Day Saints, among others. I read other faith’s literatures, even read the *Book of Mormon*. I went to their churches. Nothing about this seemed odd to me. Mom was okay with my experimenting.

As we’ve grown older, my brother and I, unbeknownst to the other, acquired Buddhist practices in our work and lives. Tad even got a degree in religious studies, went to Wesley Theological Seminary as a grad student (not a seminarian). Today, my brother is a diet coach and nutritionist, and he conducts his business with a strikingly similar philosophy as I do my teaching. His focus is on enjoying the journey of the diet or context prep (for athletes), not an outcome like some ideal weight or trophy.

Believing and not believing. Being this and that religion. Looking back now, it all fits the orientation to ideas and language that I see in my story. I didn’t

see why I couldn't have all of those religions, or all the good parts as I saw them at the time, while acknowledging the bad parts too. Richard Nisbett, a distinguished professor at the University of Michigan, offers another important element of Taoist dialectic that coincides with this impulse of mine:

The Chinese dialectic instead uses contradiction to understand relations among objects or events, to transcend or integrate apparent oppositions, or even to embrace clashing but instructive viewpoints. In the Chinese intellectual tradition there is no necessary incompatibility between the belief that A is the case and the belief that not-A is the case. On the contrary, in the spirit of the Tao (道) or yin-yang principle, A can actually imply that not-A is also the case, or at any rate soon will be the case. (“物極必反”) Dialectical thought (Chinese version) is in some ways the opposite of logical thought. It seeks not to decontextualize but to see things in their appropriate contexts: Events do not occur in isolation from other events, but are always embedded in a meaningful whole in which the elements are constantly changing and rearranging themselves. To think about an object or event in isolation and apply abstract rules to it (as in Western intellectual tradition) is to invite extreme and mistaken conclusions. It is the Middle Way that is the goal of reasoning.¹²

Nisbett explains the way context and the embeddedness of ideas and words in the world help make meaning for Chinese Taoist dialectic orientations. Contradictory traits or essences are allowable, even inevitable, in the world. Chinese dialectic presumes that you cannot separate abstract ideas, like “cow,” from the cow you know (or don't know) in real life, or the cow in the context by which you know cows, or will know them, or the way others know them. This is similar to Freire's ideas about posing problems in his critical reading practice. The questioning Freire asks of us helps us keep the ideas and words in front of us contextualized, embedded in our unique histories, in our own material conditions. It helps us experience and feel the this-and-that-ness of our words and world.

In my early years growing up, I struggled with language in school work, yet I was deft at it on the block and in D&D sessions. I hated reading in school. It was the symbol of me as a remedial failure. At home with my brother, I loved reading and language, had a science fiction and fantasy book club membership. Language was the power I had. I was a mage, a spell caster.

12 Richard Nisbett, *Geography*, 27.

I had a White mom, but no one saw me as White. I was Brown. It all made sense if you knew my life, knew the story of my mom and dad. I was Japanese, but everyone saw me as a Mexican. I was a contradiction, a paradox. I was a member of the Church of Christ, actually enjoyed the sermons on Sunday, the hymns. I enjoyed the language of church, yet I struggled to buy into the doctrine, the extreme conservatism, the gender hierarchy that relegated all women to subordinate roles. Meanwhile in my real life, women were the most important people, doing everything. They were the leaders.

I also found beauty and elegance in the idea of grace while I resisted church doctrine and practices. Today, I still have fond feelings when I hear the sad hopeful sounds of the hymn, "Amazing Grace." It is my nana's voice, her sentiment to me as she held me in her warmth and rocked me in her green chair, singing me into being. It was reassuring to a poor kid in the ghetto to listen to hope in a song. Life may be shitty here, but not for long. I'll be bright and clean and, yes, angelic and White.

I lived with these contradictions as the landscape on which I cultivated my dispositions toward language and my love of language. Unfortunately, doing so didn't solve all the problems in my life, especially not the racism. Racism was connected to my own embodied languaging. And I did not control much of it. How does a twelve year old come to terms with such things? How does he acquire the language needed to understand and thrive as a languageling in a White world filled with White words?