Binary Oppositions in American Society and Culture
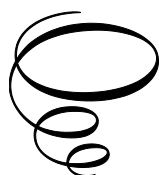
Binary Oppositions in American Society and Culture:

A Socio-Semiotic Analysis

By

Arthur Asa Berger

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For my children, Nina Savelle-Rocklin and Gabriel Berger

EPIGRAPH

The cultural studies theory known as Structuralism uses a term of art called "binary opposition" to explain human knowledge and to explain how many naturally occurring phenomena are constructed. Systems are "binary" when they are composed of only *two* parts. It's easy to imagine things "in opposition," like the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees, or the World War II alliances known as the "Axis Powers" and "the Allies." For an opposition to be truly "binary," however, the opposing classes of thing/idea must be *mutually exclusive*. That is, membership in one class must make impossible membership in the other….True binary oppositions that organize a class of thing are not supposed to allow confusion, that is allowing a thing to claim membership in both simultaneously, or exclusion, non-membership while still belonging to the class of things organized by the binary. The most obvious place in which binary oppositions work to structure knowledge is in computers' "machine code," the most basic level of programming which tells each tiny microprocessor switch whether it is to be opened (0 or "off") or closed (1 or "on"). Everything you see on this screen, together with instructions for how it is to be displayed and where it is to be stored, is expressed to the computers in enormous strings of zeros and ones, a binary code that cannot fail if properly constructed…. In the world of human cultural artifacts, binaries are much likely to be ambiguous if pressed to their limits, but they can function perfectly well as principles we use to navigate culture from day to day. For instance, we conventionally call "day" the period between sunrise and sunset, and "night" the remainder (or is it vice versa), although poets and painters long have drawn our attention to the beauties of the transitional moments at the dividing point between them. "Legal" and "Illegal" similarly function to help us distinguish between kinds of behavior even though a whole industry has grown up to argue the ambiguous points, and every year decisions it makes are found to be deeply disturbing to portions of the populace.

http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng105sanders/binary_oppositions.htm

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PREFACE

This book, which explores the social, psychological, cultural and political significance of the concept of binarism, is, like all books and creative works, intertextual in nature. That is, it borrows from the ideas and writings of many scholars whose ideas help us understand binarism and from some of my previous writings in modified and updated versions.

Figure 0.1

M.M. Bakhtin

The concept of intertextuality is derived from the writings of the Russian communications theorist, M.M. Bakhtin, and his theories about dialogism, which are of central importance in this book.

Intertextuality is a concept that refers to the interconnectedness of texts, where one text refers to quotes, or incorporates elements from another text. It is the idea that no text exists in isolation, but it is influenced by and refers to other texts that came before it. These references can be explicit or subtle, and they can include direct quotations, allusions, parodies, or even structural and thematic similarities.

Intertextuality recognizes that every text is part of a broader network of texts and that the meaning of a particular text is shaped by its relationship to other texts. It emphasizes the interplay between the creator, the text, and the audience, as the audience's understanding of a text is often enhanced when they recognize and interpret these intertextual references.

Intertextuality can occur across various forms of media, including literature, film, art, music, and even advertising. For example, a novel might allude to a famous work of literature, a film might reference a classic scene from another movie, or a song might sample lyrics from a previous song.

Binaries is also multi-disciplinary and is a cultural studies analysis that uses semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, sociological theory and Marxist theory to investigate the role binary oppositions play in shaping American culture, character, and society.

I have provided a substantial glossary which deals with some of the central binary oppositions discussed in the book and with notes about some of the more important theorists and their works that are foundational for cultural studies research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TAKEAWAYS

This book deals with the ideas and in many cases offers brief passages from the works of some of the most important writers, theorists, and scholars who have had interesting things to say about binary oppositions and their role in American culture, character, and society.

1.

Semiotics is the science of signs—a sign being anything that can stand for something else, whether that something else is real or imaginary. Signs have two elements: a sound or object (called in semiotics a *signifier* and the meaning of that signifier, namely a *signified*). The relation between signifiers and signified is arbitrary, which suggests that the meaning of signs can change over time.

2.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguistics professor and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, who worked independently, were the two "founding fathers" of the science of semiotics.

3.

Binary, when referring to cultural phenomena, can be defined as oppositional, having two parts. Members of the LGBTQ community describe themselves as non-binary, meaning that they do not accept the binary notion that there are only two genders: male and female.

4.

Yin and Yang are two complementary, interdependent, and opposing forces that exist in everything in the universe. They represent the balance and harmony of the natural world. Yin: Often associated with the feminine, passive, dark, cold, receptive, and internal aspects. Yin represents the shady side of a hill. Yang: Often associated with the masculine, active, bright, hot, assertive, and external aspects. Yang represents the sunny side of a hill.

Yin and Yang are not independent of each other but depend on each other for their existence. They coexist in a dynamic relationship, with each containing a seed of the other within itself. For example, day turns into night, and night turns into day in a continuous cycle.

The Yin-Yang symbol is a famous representation of these concepts. It consists of a circle divided into two parts: one black (Yin) and the other white (Yang), with a smaller circle of each color inside the opposite side. This symbol visually represents the interconnected and complementary nature of Yin and Yang.

5.

Umberto Eco was an Italian semiotician and novelist who made important contributions to semiotic theory and to the application of semiotics to media studies, literary theory and popular culture analysis.

6.

Daniel Chandler is a British semiotician who wrote an important introduction to semiotics, *Semiotics: the basics,* now in its fourth edition. Codes, Chandler writes in his book, "provide relational frameworks within which social and cultural meanings are produced." He adds, "Sociologists argue that each individual has a repertoire of codes and that access to codes is unevenly distributed in society but is largely shared by those within particular social groups."

7.

There are certain dominant oppositions that exist in societies, and these oppositions shape the thinking and behavior of people in that society. I offer a list of some of these oppositions, taken from Chandler's book.

8.

The term "digital" refers to anything related to data expressed in discrete numerical form, often represented as binary digits (0s and 1s). In a broader sense, it pertains to technology, systems, or processes that use digital data in some way. Here are some common uses of the term "digital":

Digital Technology: This refers to any technology that operates using binary digits or digital signals. Examples include computers, smartphones, digital cameras, and digital audio players.

Digital Data: Data represented in a digital format, which can be easily stored, processed, and transmitted electronically.

Digital Communication: The exchange of information using digital signals through various channels such as the internet, emails, instant messaging, and social media.

Digital Media: Content that is stored and distributed in digital formats, such as digital images, videos, e-books, and online articles.

The digital revolution has significantly affected various aspects of our lives, from communication and entertainment to business and education, leading to a highly interconnected and digitized world.

9.

Analog refers to a type of data or technology that represents information in continuous, non-discrete form. It exists in contrast to digital, which represents data using discrete values (usually binary digits 0 and 1).

Analog Signal: In electronics and telecommunications, an analog signal is a continuous electrical signal that varies over time, representing some physical quantity. Examples of analog signals include the voltage output from a microphone or the continuous waveforms in an analog radio broadcast.

Analog Devices: Analog devices or components are those that manipulate and process analog signals. Examples include analog integrated circuits (ICs), operational amplifiers (op-amps), analog-to-digital converters (ADCs), and digital-to-analog converters (DACs).

Analog Technology: This refers to any technology that uses analog signals or methods to operate. In the past, many electronic devices, such as radios, televisions, and cassette players, operated on analog technology. However, with the advancement of digital technology, many of these devices have been replaced by digital counterparts.

Analog Clocks: A clock with analog display represents time using rotating hands (hour, minute, and sometimes second hands) over a circular dial, as opposed to digital clocks that show time in numerical format.

Analog Photography: The use of traditional film cameras and chemical processes to capture and develop images, as opposed to digital photography that relies on electronic sensors.

Analog technology was prevalent in much of human history, but with the advent of digital technology, many systems and devices have transitioned to digital because of its advantages in terms of accuracy, reliability, and efficiency. However, analog technology is still used in various applications, especially in situations where continuous signals or interactions are necessary, or in specific specialized fields.

10.

Transgender refers to individuals who are nonbinary and who may be in the process of changing from the gender assigned to them at birth to the gender they prefer.

11.

Gender dysphoria is the feeling of discomfort or distress that might occur in people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth or sex-related physical characteristics. Transgender and gender-diverse people might experience gender dysphoria in their lives.

12.

LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

13.

Judith Butler is the author of an important book, *Gender Trouble,* which argues that gender is something we can choose and can be seen as a performance and not something that cannot be changed.

14.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, who became one of the leading figures of the transcendentalist movement in the 19th century. He was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts, and grew up in a religious and intellectually stimulating environment. Emerson's father was a Unitarian minister, and the young

Ralph was exposed to various intellectual and philosophical ideas from an early age.

In the 1830s, Emerson became one of the central figures of the transcendentalist movement, which was a philosophical and literary movement that emphasized individual intuition, self-reliance, and the importance of nature and the spiritual world. Transcendentalists believed individuals could transcend the limitations of the physical world and connect with a higher spiritual reality through intuition and self-reflection.

Emerson's most significant works include essays like "Nature" (1836), "Self-Reliance" (1841), "The Over-Soul" (1841), and "The Poet" (1844), where he expounded his transcendentalist ideas. His writing style was characterized by a poetic and philosophical approach that inspired readers to think deeply about existence and their place in the universe.

15.

The Nature/Culture bipolar opposition, and the binary oppositions that logically stem from this binary opposition, tell us a great deal about American culture and society.

16.

Urban/Rural is one of the most important binary oppositions in American culture and society and has had a major impact on everyday life and politics in the United States.

17.

Cosmopolitan beliefs refer to a worldview that emphasizes a sense of global interconnectedness and shared responsibility among all human beings, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or cultural background. The term "cosmopolitan" comes from the Greek word "kosmopolitês," which means "citizen of the world." Cosmopolitan beliefs advocate for recognizing and valuing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their geographical location or societal context.

Some key aspects of cosmopolitan beliefs include:

Universal Human Rights: Cosmopolitan beliefs hold that all individuals have inherent human rights that should be respected and protected universally, regardless of their nationality or citizenship status. This

includes rights to life, freedom, equality, and necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare.

Global Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism encourages the idea that people have a moral obligation to show solidarity and empathy toward others, especially those who are suffering or facing injustice, regardless of geographical or cultural boundaries.

Cultural Diversity and Respect: While cosmopolitan beliefs promote a sense of global community, they also value and celebrate cultural diversity. It emphasizes the importance of respecting and understanding different cultural practices, traditions, and values.

While cosmopolitan beliefs are often associated with ideals of global harmony and unity, they can also be met with challenges, such as differences in cultural norms, national interests, and political ideologies. However, the core value of cosmopolitanism lies in recognizing our shared humanity and the importance of working together to create a more just and compassionate world. (See Urban.)

18.

The term "highbrow" is an adjective used to describe something that is considered intellectually or culturally sophisticated. It is often used to refer to art, literature, music, or other forms of media and entertainment that are considered being of a high intellectual or artistic quality. The opposite of "highbrow" is "lowbrow," which refers to things that are less refined or intellectually challenging.

The concept of highbrow and lowbrow has its roots in cultural distinctions and preferences, but it's essential to note that these terms can be subjective and may vary across different societies and individuals. What one person considers highbrow might be viewed differently by another, based on their personal tastes, interests, and cultural background. It's important to recognize that different forms of art and media can hold value and significance for various people, irrespective of their classification as highbrow or lowbrow.

19.

"Lowbrow" is a term used to describe a style, culture, or form of entertainment that is considered not sophisticated or intellectually demanding. It is often used in contrast to "highbrow," which refers to things that are

considered more cultured, refined, or intellectual. Lowbrow culture can be found in various forms, such as comic books, graffiti art, street art, tattoo art, certain types of music, and even some forms of internet humor. It often celebrates and embraces aspects of popular culture that may be dismissed or overlooked by mainstream or more traditional artistic and cultural circles.

It is important to note that the distinction between lowbrow and highbrow is subjective and can be influenced by cultural and personal biases. Different people may have different opinions on what is lowbrow or highbrow, and there is no universal standard for making such categorizations. As with any form of art or cultural expression, it's essential to recognize that tastes and preferences vary widely, and what one person might consider lowbrow, another might find enjoyable and meaningful.

20.

Marshall McLuhan is a Canadian media theorist who wrote many important books such as *The Mechanical Bride* and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* His ideas have been very influential in communication studies and in many other disciplines.

21.

Li'l Abner was a long-running American comic strip created by cartoonist Al Capp. The strip first appeared on August 13, 1934, and ran until November 13, 1977. It gained immense popularity and became one of the most widely read and influential comic strips in American history.

The comic strip is set in the fictional hillbilly town of Dogpatch, in the Appalachian Mountains. Abner Yokum, the main character, is a lazy, good-natured, and often clueless young man who is the son of Mammy Yokum, a tough and strong-willed woman who often has to take charge of the family and the town's affairs.

The central theme of the strip revolves around satirical commentary on various social and political issues of its time, often parodying the government, bureaucracy, and the American way of life. It also frequently poked fun at corporate greed, media, and societal norms.

The strip featured a memorable cast of characters, including Daisy Mae Scragg, Abner's beautiful and love-struck girlfriend; Marryin' Sam, the local matrimonial expert; and Evil Eye Fleagle, the town's resident villain, among others.

Li'l Abner's success extended beyond the comic strip. It was adapted into a successful Broadway musical in 1956, featuring music by Gene De Paul and lyrics by Johnny Mercer. The musical received critical acclaim and several Tony Awards, further cementing the strip's cultural significance. *Li'l Abner* was the subject of the author's Ph.D. dissertation.

 22.

Popular culture, often referred to simply as "pop culture," encompasses a wide range of ideas, practices, beliefs, images, objects, and phenomena that are prevalent and enjoyed by many people within a society. It is ever-changing, influenced by various factors, and represents the collective preferences and tastes of a particular time and place.

Key aspects of popular culture include:

Entertainment: Movies, television shows, music, literature, video games, and sports are all major components of pop culture. Celebrities, artists, and athletes often become significant figures within this realm.

Fashion: Clothing trends and styles that gain widespread acceptance and popularity are integral to pop culture. Fashion icons and designers shape these trends.

*Internet and Social Media***:** The rise of the internet and social media platforms has had a profound impact on popular culture, with viral challenges, memes, and online influencers significantly shaping cultural conversations.

*Technology***:** Technological advancements and gadgets, such as smartphones, tablets, and wearable devices, become intertwined with daily life and pop culture.

Trends: Pop culture is characterized by trends and fads that can range from language and slang to viral dances and challenges.

*Food***:** Culinary trends and popular dishes often become symbols of a specific era or region.

Gaming: Video games and gaming culture have become a significant part of pop culture, with esports and gaming events attracting massive audiences.

***Comics and Superheroes*:** Comic books and their characters, particularly superheroes, have a significant impact on pop culture, as is clear in the success of many movies and TV shows based on them. I have published a book, *The Comic Stripped American,* which deals with the way comics reflect important aspects of American culture and society.

***Influencers and Brands*:** Pop culture is heavily influenced by social media influencers and the brands they promote, driving consumer trends and behaviors.

***Celebrations and Holidays*:** Pop culture often shapes how holidays and celebrations are observed, with certain traditions gaining popularity through media representation.

It's essential to recognize that popular culture is not homogenous and varies across different regions, age groups, and social backgrounds. It reflects the diversity and complexity of society, and its influence can be both positive and negative, shaping values, opinions, and beliefs in various ways. As the world continues to change, so too will popular culture, adapting to new technologies, emerging trends, and changing social norms.

23.

Dean MacCannell is a semiotician who taught at the University of California at Davis for many years. He is the author of an influential book about tourism, *The Tourist.*

24.

Discourse theory, also known as discourse analysis or discursive theory, is an interdisciplinary approach to studying language, communication, and social interactions. It seeks to understand how language shapes and constructs social reality, power relations, and the formation of meaning within various contexts, such as politics, culture, media, and everyday life.

In this context, "discourse" refers to any form of communication, including spoken and written language, which influences how people think, behave, and interact within society. Discourses can be found in various institutional contexts, such as legal, educational, political, and religious institutions, and they can be embedded in everyday conversations and media representations.

Discourse theory recognizes that language is not neutral and that it plays a significant role in the exercise of power. Certain discourses can promote or

suppress particular ideas, identities, and social norms, reinforcing existing power structures and social hierarchies.

Discourse analysis employs various methods to examine language use and its implications. Some common approaches include:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): CDA focuses on revealing power relations, ideologies, and hidden meanings within texts or communication. It aims to expose how language is used to maintain or challenge social inequalities.

Conversation Analysis: This method focuses on analyzing the structure and organization of spoken interactions to understand how meaning is created in everyday conversations.

Narrative Analysis: Narrative analysis examines how stories and narratives shape individuals' perceptions and experiences, influencing their understanding of events and identities.

Overall, discourse theory offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between language, power, and society, and it has applications in various fields, including sociology, linguistics, media studies, political science, and cultural studies. I discuss many aspects of discourse theory in my book, *Applied Discourse Analysis: Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life.*

25.

Structuralism refers to a diverse set of intellectual movements that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries across various disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, psychology, literature, and philosophy. It aimed to analyze and understand phenomena by examining the underlying structures that give rise to them. Structuralism is often associated with the works of prominent thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure (linguistics), Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology), and Roland Barthes (literary theory).

Key Characteristics of Structuralism:

A Focus on Structure: Structuralism emphasizes the importance of underlying structures and systems that shape human experiences, behaviors, and meanings. It seeks to uncover the hidden patterns and relationships that govern various phenomena.

Binary Oppositions: Many structuralist theories rely on the concept of binary oppositions, which are pairs of contrasting elements that help define

each other. For example, good/evil, male/female, culture/nature, etc. These binary pairs and several others are fundamental in constructing meaning and understanding the world.

Universality and Structure over Content: Structuralists sought universal structures and principles that underlie various cultures and phenomena, downplaying individual differences and focusing on common underlying patterns.

While structuralism was influential and provided valuable insights into the organization of various phenomena, it also faced criticism. One of the main critiques was that its approach could be overly rigid and reductive, overlooking historical and cultural contexts and the importance of individual agency.

26.

Comedy is a form of entertainment that aims to make people laugh. It can take various forms, including stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, sitcoms, movies, and more. Comedy often relies on humor, wit, wordplay, satire, and absurdity to amuse its audience. There are many styles and genres of comedy, each appealing to different tastes. Comedy is subjective, and what makes one person laugh might not resonate with someone else. The beauty of comedy is its diversity and ability to cater to various tastes and sensibilities. I have published two books on literary comedy: *The Art of Comedy Writing* and *Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors.*

27.

Tragedy is a literary and dramatic genre that depicts the downfall or suffering of a protagonist, often because of their tragic flaw or a combination of external circumstances. Tragedy has been a fundamental element of storytelling throughout history, dating back to ancient Greek theater with playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These playwrights established the conventions of the tragic form, which have been influential in shaping tragic narratives across cultures and time periods.

Key elements of a tragedy typically include:

A Protagonist*:* The tragic hero or heroine is a character who possesses admirable qualities and noble status but also has a fatal flaw (hamartia) or makes a significant mistake that leads to their downfall.

A Tragic Flaw: The protagonist's tragic flaw is a character trait or weakness that ultimately contributes to their tragic fate. It can be a personal trait like hubris (excessive pride), ambition, jealousy, or a lack of judgment.

Fate or External Forces: Tragedies often involve the interference of external forces or circumstances that contribute to the tragic outcome, emphasizing the theme of inevitability.

Catharsis: One of the primary purposes of tragedy is to evoke catharsis in the audience. Catharsis is an emotional release or purging of emotions, particularly feelings of pity and fear, as the audience witnesses the protagonist's downfall and the consequences of their actions.

A Downfall or Suffering: Tragedies revolve around a central conflict that leads to the protagonist's suffering, culminating in a tragic ending, such as death, madness, or utter ruin.

Morality and Ethics: Tragedies often explore complex moral dilemmas, highlighting the consequences of unethical choices.

Tragedy can be found in various forms of literature, theater, film, and other media. It continues to be a powerful and resonant genre, as it allows audiences to reflect on the human condition, the consequences of our actions, and the unpredictable nature of life. Some famous examples of tragedies include William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet," Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex," and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman."

28.

There are four dominant theories of humor, each of which argues that its theory is the correct one. These theories can be described as the Superiority theory (we laugh at people we feel are beneath us); Psychoanalytic theory, derived from the writings of Sigmund Freud (humor involves masked aggression); Incongruity theory (there is a gap between what we expect and what we get); and Cognitive theory (which focuses on paradoxes in communication). There is a great deal of interest in humor by sociologists, psychoanalytic theorists and linguists.

29.

There are, I suggest, 45 techniques of humor, such as insult, exaggeration, and satire, which help us understand what it is in humorous texts that generates mirthful feelings or laughter.

These 45 techniques are based on research conducted by the author and are discussed in his books, such as *An Anatomy of Humor* and *The Art of Comedy Writing* and many articles he has written.

30.

The Tan Joke is offered as an example of how some of the 45 techniques of humor can be found in a humorous text.

31.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a prominent Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician, and scholar of linguistics. He is widely known for his influential work in the fields of literary theory, aesthetics, and the philosophy of language. Bakhtin's ideas have had a significant impact on various disciplines, including literary studies, cultural theory, and communication studies.

One of Bakhtin's central contributions was the concept of dialogism, which he developed in his writings on literary criticism. He believed that language and communication are dialogical, meaning they are shaped by a continuous interplay of voices and perspectives. According to Bakhtin, meaning is not fixed, but emerges through the dynamic interaction of different voices, viewpoints, and cultural contexts. This idea laid the groundwork for a more interactive and social understanding of language and discourse.

32.

Socio-economic class refers to a system of categorizing individuals or households based on their social and economic status within a society. It is a way of classifying people based on their income, education, occupation, and overall economic situation, as well as their social standing and access to resources and opportunities. It's important to note that socio-economic class is not solely determined by income. Factors such as education, occupation, and social status also play a crucial role in defining one's class. Additionally, social mobility, the ability of individuals to move between classes, is an essential aspect to consider when discussing socio-economic class in a dynamic society.

The basic unit of semiotics is the *sign* defined conceptually as something that stands for something else, and, more technically, as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept. The sign is this unity of word-object, known as a *signifier* with a corresponding, culturally prescribed content or meaning, known as a *signified*. Thus, our minds attach the word "dog," or the drawn figure of a "dog," as a signifier to the idea of a "dog," that is, a domesticated canine species possessing certain behavioral characteristics. If we came from a culture that did not possess dogs in daily life, however unlikely, we would not know what the signifier "dog" means. . . . When dealing with objects that are signifiers of certain concepts, cultural meanings, or ideologies of belief, we can consider them not only as "signs," but *sign vehicles*. Signifying objects carry meanings with them.
—Mark Gottdiener, The *Theming of America: Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces*.

Since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Indeed, we cannot grant something the status of a sign if it does not function within a code....The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating with a broad cultural framework....When studying cultural practices, semioticians treat as signs any objects or actions which have meaning to the members of a cultural group, seeking to identify the rules or conventions of the codes which underlie the production of meaning within that culture.
—Daniel Chandler. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

"The Universe is Perfused with Signs if not Made Entirely of Signs."
—C.S. Peirce.

CHAPTER 1

THE SEMIOTICS OF BINARISM

Figure 1.1

Ferdinand de Saussure

Most people had never heard the term "binarism" until the development of the LGBTQ+ movement and articles about transgender people defining themselves as "non-binary."

The term "binary," as we shall understand it (while avoiding its use in mathematics) comes from linguistics. It was explained in the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), one of the founding fathers of the science of semiotics—the study of signs. A sign can be defined as anything that can be used to stand for something else.

In his book, A *Course in General Linguistics,* he writes (1915/1966:117):

> Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system.

Later, he adds (1966:117):

> The most precise characteristics [of concepts] is in being what the others are not.

Saussure explains that for concepts (1966:118):

> Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position.

Although many people have not heard the term "semiotics," everyone, I would argue, is an amateur semiotician and functions as a semiotician in all of their everyday interactions. Words are signs. So are facial expressions and body language.

Figure 1.1

Yin and Yang Symbol

Saussure wrote that signs have two parts whose relationship is arbitrary and thus the meaning of signs can change. Think of a sign as a coin. One side is a word or object or sound, which Saussure called a *signifier.* The other side of the coin is the meaning, which Saussure called a *signified.*