

FEMINIST PHILOSOPHICAL TOY #3: CIRCULAR CONVERSATIONS

By Rebecca Rouse & Nassim Parvin

Begin this activity with a conversation focused on relevant feminist scholarship that emphasizes the circularity of conversations, struggles and/or structures that maintain the status quo. Seeing the circular and recursive patterns of these struggles enables us to identify practices and possibilities for breaking free from oppressive cycles. Questions you might discuss include:

- What are some of the ways that institutions produce or strongly encourage circularity in action in order to maintain stasis?
- How can we bridge awareness of oppressive cycles with action that moves us toward liberatory patterns?
- What are the powers of both performativity and complaint in seeking to address oppressive structures, systems, or groups?

Formal Inspiration

The form of this toy is inspired by the volvelle, examples pictured below. This movable book structure features a paper disc that can be spun, or removed and reversed or switched out for another paper disc.



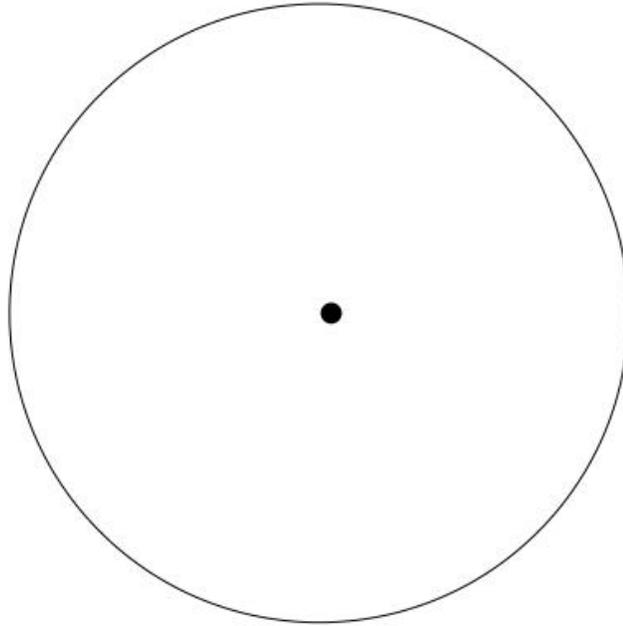
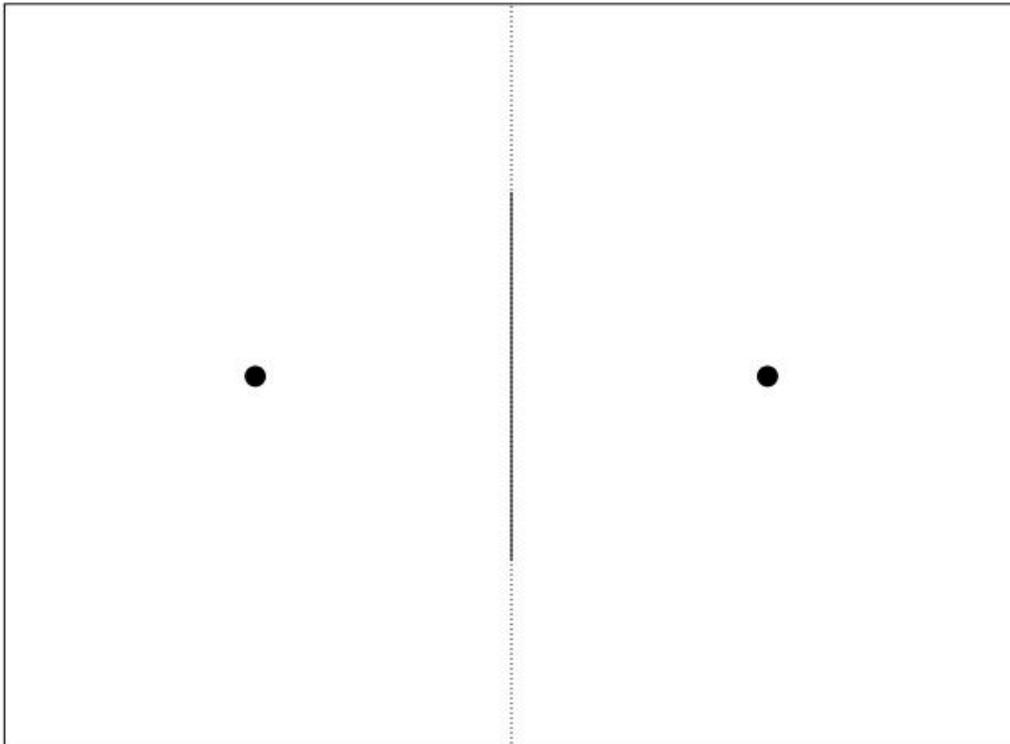
Image 1: Medieval volvelles were complex instruments, such as this one for allowing readers to perform astrological calculations. This example, "Dess Menschen Cirkel" was made by Leonhard Thurneysser in Berlin, Germany in 1575 and features multiple layered paper discs that are intricately cut. In this case a central string is used by the reader to manipulate the interlocking discs. Staatsbibliothek Berlin.

Materials

Paper, scissors or Xacto knife, metal brad, and markers/paint/pen etc.

Template

1. Cut solid lines
2. Fold dotted lines
3. Use an awl, compass point, or knife to cut centre holes
4. Cut 'window' in front of 'book' into desired shape
5. Fold rectangle and place circular disc inside
6. Use metal brad to secure and enable rotation



Prompts

Work with a partner to share these prompts and sketch initial ideas, then develop as a volvelle. Be in discussion with your partner as needed; each of you will work to craft your own personal volvelle.

1. Consider a **circular conversation or situation** that you have experienced, or are currently experiencing, that is oppressive to you or which you struggle against.
2. Use the **template** to cut out and assemble the basic form of the volvelle, making any modifications that may better help to express the particularities of your own experience.
3. Write text or draw or paint imagery on one side of the paper disc that **expresses the circular nature of the oppressive conversation and/or situation**.
4. On the reverse side, or, on a second paper disc, write text or draw or paint imagery representing **an interaction that has the potential to break the oppressive cycle** in some way, or provide you with some opportunity for liberation or finding a way out.

Work alone/with a partner for 1 hour to develop your volvelle and multiple discs, or multi-sided disc. Then come back together as a group to share and reflect on the activity together.

Closing Questions

Questions to consider for guiding your closing conversation include:

- What was it like to revisit a circular conversation or situation from your own experience? Did you choose a circular conversation that you are still engaged in, or one that you have broken free from already?
- If you chose to work with a circular conversation that you are still engaged in, were you able to imagine a possible mode for breaking free from it? If yes, do you think you will try this strategy out in real life?
- Can you share about the decisions you made in terms of how to represent your experiences in terms of color, shape, form, text, or any other elements you chose to incorporate?
- Did this exercise change how your understanding or reflection on the experience?
- Can you think about ways you might incorporate this toy in your own practice such as a design or educational setting?
- How would you modify or redesign the exercise?

Feminist Theory Resources for Circular Conversation

Ahmed, Sara. (2021) *Complaint!* Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Boal, Augusto. Trans. Adrian Jackson. (2006) *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. London and New York: Routledge.

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Harro, Bobbie. (2018) "The Cycle of Liberation." In: Adams, Maurianne, et. al, Eds. *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice, Fourth edition*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 627-634.