

UNIT PROJECT #1: BUILD-YOUR-OWN SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

Socrates: Do you seem less sense about rhetoric.

Phaedrus: True. What?

— *From the Socratic Dialogue Generator*

For this assignment, **you will craft your own Socratic dialogue to plumb an ethical or moral quandary you see relevant to contemporary life.** In it, you will model a philosophical conversation between two speakers: one being the Socrates figure, mentor, or leader, or however you see fit to construct them; the second being Student, the Seeker, or the representative of the *hoi polloi* or Most People (as Callard puts it). You can either use the figures from *The Republic* we've encountered and transport them to 2021 (too bad for them), or create new ones. For clarity, I will refer to them as Socrates and the Student throughout this prompt.

****If you are feeling fancy and want to craft a dialogue with more than one Student figure, you may do that! But be intentional: How would adding another voice augment or enhance your particular line of questioning?***

The initial question should arise naturally from an ordinary situation or conversation from the Student. What cropped up in your summer reading/viewing? What ethical and moral quandaries surround aspects of our modern world such as AI, automation, climate change responsibility? What does it mean to be just, or to be a good society, in an era of mass incarceration, voter suppression, police brutality, et al? Additionally, your dialogue might fall into one or traverse between several of these following categories, and part of your project will be to be critically aware of what further questions and lines of questioning arises throughout your dialogue from combining different branches of ethics. For example:

- **Descriptive ethics:** What do people think is right?
- **Meta-ethics:** What does "right" even mean?
- **Normative (prescriptive) ethics:** How should people act?
- **Applied ethics:** How do people take moral knowledge and put it into practice?

Note that your inciting question does not have to be as fully formulated or complex as, for example, a research paper prompt, nor does either figure begin the dialogue with a "hypothesis" already built. Refer back to Oluo's essay on discussing race with her mother; that argument arose out of what was on its surface a rather mundane exchange. The beauty of the Socratic dialogue, to me, is its *revealing* nature; through his questioning, Socrates illustrates just how complex seemingly simple questions are. He invites us into the layers of existence, into an opening up of discussion, rather than a shutting down. **Can you reveal the layers of complexity in your topic via your dialogue? Can you model what a productive, generous conversation on a difficult topic could look like, using Socratic tools and inspiration from our modern writers?**

Some further thoughts on framing the primary roles of the dialogue:*

Socrates...

- Asks questions, rather than giving answers (except, perhaps, in response to the Student's questions). Remember, Socrates is not a preacher.
- Might use wit and humor to combat an arrogant or a purposefully/willfully ignorant Student, but the Student should never be unfairly treated, put down, or preached at. (Neither should the reader, for that matter.) This wit and humor can also illustrate the joy of inquiry for Socrates; this is a man doing what he loves.
- Sees himself and the Student as mutually seeking the truth. No winners and losers here. The arguments must always be the object of attention.

The Student...

- Responds to answers with further questions, which then requires Socrates to develop and clarify his own thinking. The Student is an equal (if not more so) driver of the dialogue, the one unsatisfied, the one stimulating the conversation.
- Seeks to understand their/Socrates own beliefs and follow the implications of those beliefs through further questions. The Student wants to get down to the nitty-gritty. No resting on platitudes or assumptions here.
- Treats all assertions/comments as a connecting point to further thoughts and treats all thoughts as needing to be developed further.

Project Specifics:

- **Length: 5 full pages total of formatted dialogue.** For ease of reading, I prefer play style; that is, names + colons each time the speaker switches, no quotation marks, and other other stage directions included in italics separate from the dialogue.
- **Format:** Times New Roman, 1" margins, 1.5 spacing, clever/creative title.

Due Dates:

- **Rough draft: Thursday, September 30th (Week 4)**
- **Final project: Thursday, October 7th (Week 5).** Be prepared with a partner to perform at least 2 pages of your dialogue for our mutual edification. Bribery to get someone to read with you is obviously allowed and encouraged.

***The above notes are heavily cribbed from Peter Kreeft's *Socratic Logic*, which also inspires us to begin the drafting process with an open mind:**

"Use your imagination, between Socrates and his dialogue partner...let the two personalities carry you wherever they naturally go, like a river."

Other Resources:

- Jon Reeve, *Socratic Dialogue Generator*:
 - <https://jonreeve.com/2016/10/socratic-dialogue-generator/>
- Circe Institute, "What is a Socratic Dialogue?"
 - <https://www.circeinstitute.org/2011/03/what-is-socratic-dialogue>
- The Socratic Method: What It Is and How to Use it in the Classroom
 - <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/810>

UNIT PROJECT #2: INTERSECTIONAL LIVES + CREATIVE MEMOIR-COLLAGES

This is a poor translation, like all translations.
— Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*

In this unit, we have explored the complexities of identity and power through philosophical writings, memoir, poetry, and more. One theme has consistently cropped up among our various authors: **the necessary acknowledgement of intersectionality, i.e. the way disparate identities and their attendant positions of power commingle within a single person or community.** Paulo Freire's work centers around the fact that within each of us lies both an oppressor and an oppressed. Making visible that (seeming) contradiction is, according to him and other scholars, the first step toward liberation.

Complexities of intersecting identities require an equally complex smushing of genres to express themselves thoroughly, no?

For this assignment, you will take inspiration from the collage/braided work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Natalie Diaz **to craft a creative nonfiction piece around the following themes...**

- Identity & community
- Intersectionality
- Language & voice
- Power & oppression

...all in your own life. (Yep, that makes it a memoir!) **Start with the intersectionality exercise in your notebook** and notice areas of contradiction or tension you want to dive into. **What elements of your identity make sense together, in your mind? Which create some crunchy tensions? What symbols, objects, images, etc. are representative of those tensions?** Think about ways either you personally are or your community at large was rendered voiceless and/or powerless and how you challenge and/or survive it. You might take inspiration from Diaz and explore a specific topic or relationship within these multigenre borders. You might already know exactly what you want to write about.

Both Anzaldúa and Diaz remind us that philosophical works need not be formal, emotionless, or even restrained to a single language to be meaningful, complex, or deeply intellectual. For these writers and others, politics and philosophy spring from their actual fact of existence in the world. Imagine what tools we might use (or need to create) to enact necessary, future social change on a broad scale. **A key question to mull over:** How has language been used to restrict or oppress, and how can it be used to humanize and liberate?

Be free with genre-blending; these authors express serious ideas using tools of voice, story, and poetry to great effect. Metaphors, figurative language, surrealist imagery, poetic line breaks, I wanna see it all. Get narrative, imaginative, braided! Break out of the genre box!

Project Specifics:

- **Length: 4 full pages**
- **Format:** Times New Roman, 1” margins, double spacing, creative title.
- **Other formatting tools at your disposal:** Italics, bold, capitalizations, even a few well-chosen images, etc. Just take care to adhere to the above page count!
- **Secondary sources:** Quotes from at least 3 outside sources, integrated into your piece in a creative fashion. One of these must come from our works from this unit, listed below. The others can be critical, popular, or memefied at your discretion.
 - **How do I cite sources within a creative piece? Up to you!** At least, within the text itself; you can do this lightly, invisibly/not at all, or in a creative manner of your choosing (footnotes???). However, you will include a traditionally-formatted Works Cited page (MLA please) at the end.
- **One last thing: Metacognitive writing due with final.** Half page single spaced, explaining your drafting process, what creative tools you used, and what, if anything, you learned throughout the process.

Due Dates:

- **Rough draft: Week 7.** I would like to workshop these but want to acknowledge the feelings we might have about sharing sensitive content. Let’s chat about it!
- **Final draft: Week 8.** Maybe an opportunity to share?

Sources/Resources:

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
- Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”
- Natalie Diaz, selections from *Postcolonial Love Poem*
- Kimberle Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality” and other reference texts
- Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Action” and “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

Remember, one of your required three integrated works must come from this list!

Note on identity and the stickiness of privilege: Much of what these authors call us to do is accurately and intentionally unpack our own privilege so that we can more accurately see both the limits and opportunities of our own power. You won’t get points just for conjuring up “trauma” in this project; it is not the Oppression Olympics in written form. **On the same point, acknowledging one’s privilege and oppression is hard work!** The Powers That Be would *much* rather we not talk about the tacit (and sometimes not so tacit) ways we benefit from and/or are harmed by our identities, so we’ve been conditioned that admitting privilege is a very awkward and difficult thing. We shall persevere, though! I ask that you noodle through it best you can and present an accurate and honest accounting through your creative literary tools. If you’re really stuck or struggling, let’s have a conversation. As always, I’m less interested in strict adherence to assignment guidelines, and much more excited to see how you interpret this project to come up with something really new, evocative, and meaningful.

UNIT PROJECT #3-4: ALTERNATE REALITY SHORT FILM Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love TikTok

“The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent, but if we can come to terms with this indifference, then our existence as a species can have genuine meaning. However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.” — Stanley Kubrick

As we watch & analyze films this semester, we return to the idea of *choice*. A director (and many others, of course) makes choices that create opportunities for meaning in the resulting film. How might we, as budding filmmakers, effectively communicate important messages or images to an audience? For this project combining theories and texts from Unit #3 and #4, **you will craft a 3-5 minute short film exploring an alternate reality or alternate history premise of your choosing**.

In *The Man in the High Castle* and *Goodbye Lenin!*, the alternate history/altered reality premises lead us to question **cultural values and norms**. The “alternate” histories presented in Zinn’s work and the 1619 Project also cause us to examine **what is at stake when we look at history from a new perspective**, especially one not often explored. Finally, as we dig into semiotics and the simulacra, we’ll see these same themes of arbitrariness, (over)reliance on language, and creation of reality really warp and twist. How do the personal/subjective and global/objective collide when we try to tell tales of history?

That’s your boss mode task—can you reveal some juicy tensions between reality as it is and the values we espouse? What is the artistic and cultural utility of alternate history? **By reversing some aspect of reality or history as we know it, what part of *actual* reality are you putting the spotlight on?**

****IMPORTANT NOTE:** You may do this project solo, in partners, or in groups of three! I want to know ASAP who you are working with. If you need assistance facilitating these choices, let me know.**

Project Specifics:

- **Length: 3-5 minutes**
- **Format:** whatever software/app you use is up to you. Ideas and resources are below!
 - At least 3 distinct stagings of mise-en-scène (video under Resources.)
- **Content:** actual film footage? Animation? Machinima? Options abound here.
 - *Narrative vs. Abstract:* Will you tell a brief story, with plot & character? Or will your film focus more on the sensory, collecting images and collaging them together in an evocative manner?
 - *Realism vs. formalism:* Strictly grounded in the "real" world or floating off into the fantastical?
 - Think about the other tools discussed in *Looking at Movies*. What's your "cinematic language" you'd like to express/explore here that will best support your content/ideas?
- **Metacognitive writing due with final.** You know the drill. One page single spaced, explaining your process, what creative/cinematic tools you used, and what, if anything, you learned throughout the process. You will specifically address your three moments of mise-en-scène as well. **Bonus requirement:** bring Hayden White’s theory of narrativity into this conversation and explain how it inspired or how it relates to your project.

Some Ideas to Get You Started

(some ideas here too: <https://www.wired.com/2011/05/alternate-histories/>)

- **What if certain famous political elections/campaigns/assassinations (gulp) went differently?** JFK? Clinton vs. Trump? Archduke Franz Ferdinand? Abraham Lincoln? Nixon? Brexit? An American female president much, much earlier??
- **Inventions great and small:** What if we take them out of the timeline? No printing press? No internet? No smartphones???
- **Question hegemonies, cultural and imperial.** What if the sun set on the British Empire quite a bit earlier? What if American pop culture *wasn't* the primary export it was? Who would arise as a heavy hitter on the world stage?
- Deep-cut Year 1 flashback ahead: remember *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*? **What kind of time travel / alternate reality premises arise from placing one historical figure, with very certain knowledge, into another timeline?**
- **Take inspiration from your People's Encyclopedia entries!** How might certain current events play out differently/in unexpected ways?
- **AND MORE.** I am happy to entertain many a creative take on this assignment. The key is that your premise, whatever it is, addresses the boss mode task above! How can we use alternate/altered history to shine a spotlight on questions that are very much relevant now, in *this* timeline?

Due Dates:

- **Rough draft: Week 12.** Your “rough draft” will consist of an outline/storyboard, props/materials needed (this includes people!), and software/technology used. Basically, write up your plan! This will be due right after Thanksgiving break. **Note: You should TEST your tech/software/app/whatever you're using during this time.** That's an important part of the prep!
- **Check-in: Week 13.** You'll need your materials gathered, your filming either partially underway OR scheduled, and a brief write-up turned in to me about your current status.
- **Final draft: Week 14.** We will watch your films in class, right before we head out on winter break.

Resources:

- *Looking at Film*, "Chapter 2: Principles of Film Form"
- Mise-en-scène recap: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3euNFd7-TCg&t=341s>
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Goodbye Lenin!* and *The Matrix*
- *The Man in the High Castle* (chapter excerpts)
- Modules on Baudrillard, post-modernism, and the simulacra
- Charles D'Ambrosio, “American Newness” and “Hell House”
- Michael Pollan, “Big Organic” (chapter from *The Omnivore's Dilemma*)
- Software/app options: <https://www.theedadvocate.org/5-movie-making-apps-student-projects/>
- Other thoughts on how to make a short film with smartphones and similar tech:
 - <https://momofilmfest.com/the-ultimate-beginners-guide-to-smartphone-filmmaking/>
 - <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-classroom-filmmaking-resources>
 - <https://commonslibrary.org/beginners-guide-to-making-video-with-your-smartphone/>
 - <https://www.howtogeek.com/234077/how-to-make-a-movie-with-imovie-on-an-iphone-or-ipad/>
 - <https://www.nfi.edu/how-to-make-a-short-film/>

UNIT PROJECT #5/FINAL SEMESTER WORK: Theater of the Absurd + the Quest for Meaning

“There is so much stubborn hope in a human heart.” — Albert Camus
“Hell is other people.” — Jean-Paul Sartre
(i.e. the two genders.)

During this unit, we are going to explore absurdism as both a philosophical concept and a genre of art. For this project (which will be our last of the semester!), you will craft your own absurdist creative work. This project, coming on the heels of such works as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and more, will give you the opportunity to build your own absurdist response to the world. How do we/you/your characters find hope in the face of a world that just doesn't make sense? How do we choose to assert our rebellious human character against this unfeeling, uncaring, super-flipping-random (according to Camus) existence?

Rules / Required Themes (largely adapted from PhilosophyInFilm.com!):

- 1) **The inherent meaninglessness of life:** One or more characters must become conscious of it through the situation of the work
- 2) **Repetition:** This can include the devaluation of language, a sense of futility attempting to combat life's meaninglessness
- 3) **Isolation:** This can be expressed/explored interpersonally, situationally, environmentally, existentially, or even just inwardly
- 4) **Chaos:** Things and people and events continue haphazardly beyond the control of the protagonist or other characters.
- 5) **Seemingly insurmountable obstacles:** Note that the smaller or more insignificant these can seem, the more your characters can and should struggle to overcome them!
- 6) **Confusion or a lack of comprehension with one's own life and surroundings:** Pretty self explanatory/relatable. What kind of situation can you put your characters in that lends itself naturally to this lack of understanding?
- 7) **Finally, the Absurdist Choice:** do we a) give in to the hopelessness/meaninglessness of life? OR do we b) enact or exhibit some kind of defiance, rebellion, etc. in the face of these hopeless conditions? Do these two choices even look markedly different?

Your piece should wrestle with this question in some way.

Genre options:

- Short story
- Play
- Epic poem
- Short film
- ...something else entirely? Wanna be extra creative? Let me know!

Length for creative work:

Written works should be in the neighborhood of 4 pages. As usual, I am less interested in page count and more interested in a cohesive, engaging, creative work. A film or some other non-textual genre will have different requirements; discuss that with me individually. I'm less concerned with strict adherence to a page count and more interested in your effort, creative approach, and depth! This should be a complete, standalone work, not an excerpt.

Critical Analysis:

In addition to your creative piece with the above length requirements, you will craft and turn in a 2ish page (double spaced) critical analysis of your piece, explaining your thought process and approach, pulling in at least 2 sources from this unit as secondary sources.

Project Specifics:

- **Length: 4-5 full pages**
- **Format:** Times New Roman, 1" margins, 12pt font, appropriately creative title. Typical business! (You can get weird with other formatting choices if you'd like, but make sure they are necessary and needed within the project you're crafting.)
- **Critical Analysis** separately written and crafted in a more formal, academic style.
- **Works Cited page** listing all sources used & referenced in your critical analysis

Due dates:

- Topic proposal / rough outline **due Week 15 (when we get back from break)**
- Rough draft / peer review workshopping **due Week 16**
- Final project **due Week 17 (last week of the semester!)**

Bibliography / Texts to Consider:

- Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"
- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*
- *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
- Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"
- Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis"
- Martin Esslin, "The Theater of the Absurd"
- Videos we've watched on the Theater of Absurd
- ...a million other things I'll send you in the coming weeks!