

We Are the Drama and the Drama Is in Us: A Long Road to (Self-) Discovery Through Researching and Teaching

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
1–5
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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on my experience as a social sciences researcher critically analyzing children's movies for more than 10 years. I also reflect on my work as a university professor. This essay is also a play that remains unfinished. I summarize here an experience I have shared with my students since May 2013, in which we co-create the script for a play to criticize, shatter, and rebuild legitimized social models that have shaped our dreams as media-consumer-children.

Keywords

performance ethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, arts-based inquiry, methods of inquiry, critical pedagogy, pedagogy

Waking Up Snow White: The Story of a Betrayal (Theater)

Characters

Students as themselves

Norman Denzin as himself

Henry Giroux as himself

Alejandra, the professor as herself

Disney characters

Voice in off

ACT 3¹

Darkness

Voice in off: Shhh . . . Silence. What are we doing here? Is this a stage or is it a classroom? Is the professor a professor or is she an actress? Is she a scriptwriter? Maybe she is a little of all three. Students are actresses and actors, and they are also the audience. They will be scriptwriters, too, but they do not know it yet. Silence. Did the play begin? I couldn't tell you. I do not quite understand what is happening here . . .

Day light. The curtain has been open since the beginning and it never closes during Act 3.

The professor is sitting on the only chair on the stage, writing something on a notepad. There is no other scenery or props. There is no table, so she seems to be very uncomfortable as she writes. While she tries to keep the notepad in the air, she drops a bunch of yellowish papers on the floor by accident. Papers scatter on the worn wood of the stage.

Voice in off: Four thirty

Professor: Thank you, I'm almost ready

The woman picks up all the papers. As there is no table, she throws the papers on the floor again.

Voice in off: Four thirty-five. They are almost here.

Professor: Thank you. Are buses on strike again today?

Voice in off: No they are not. Well, not yet . . .

Professor: Is the street blocked because of the demonstration of . . . ?

Voice in off: The factory workers?

Professor: Uh huh.

Voice in off: Nope. They weren't out there at noon

Professor: Good. Dr. Denzin, are you ready?

A bright spotlight illuminates the stage. A very loud voice comes from above.

Norman Denzin: I am ready.

The spotlight turns off.

Professor: Great! Dr. Giroux?

A very bright spotlight illuminates the stage again. Another loud voice comes from above.

Henry Giroux: Ready.

Professor: Thank you, I appreciate you being here, I need your help for this.

The professor sits and mumbles something to herself. She may be practicing the class that she is about to teach. The spotlights turn on and off when Norman Denzin and Henry

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Giroux speak during the third act but this time the spotlights remain off.

Henry Giroux: Do we still have parts in this play?

Norman Denzin: I guess so . . .

A group of students stands at the door. One of them asks,

Student: Um, excuse me. Is this the Sociology of Media class?

Professor: One moment please. It is . . .

Voice in off: Four forty-four.

Professor: I'm not ready yet.

The students look at each other, doubtful.

Student: But . . . is it?

Professor: Just a second . . .

Voice in off: Four forty-five

The professor changes her facial expression, straightens her back and smiles. She stands up and leaves the notepad on the chair.

Professor: Come in, welcome. Please, have a seat.

Student: Is this the Sociology of Media class?

Professor: I'm so happy you got here on time!

Voice in off: Four forty-six.

On stage, there is only one chair and it is occupied by the professor's notepad. The students look around, confused. Then they shrug and sit on the floor. They are used to doing whatever professors ask of them, so they just obey.

Professor: Ok, so today we'll begin with an exercise. Former students and I have been writing a play called "Waking Up Snow White, the Story of a Betrayal." The script is still incomplete, so what we'll do is to finish it. All right? Good. I will read what we have so far and we'll begin brainstorming.

Student: Excuse me, professor, but this will not be one of those crazy sociological experiments, right? Because I do not want to be socio-analyzed.

Professor: Shh! Next time leave your ugly positivism at home, ok? No sir, we do not experiment here.

A knock on the door makes everyone's heads turn.

Voice in off: Come in!

A group of characters appears at the door. It is not difficult to recognize them, as they are wearing traditional costumes from Disney stories: there is Snow White, beautiful, although looking quite shabby. Behind her stands Prince Charming. He is wearing his cape and sword but it is quite obvious that he is losing his hair. Next to him stands Hercules, less muscular and quite overweight. Merida, the heroine of the movie Brave, has dark circles under her blue eyes. She pushes the wheelchair of Maleficent, the anti-heroine of the film Sleeping Beauty. Behind the group, there is a cloud of colorful birds, and at the characters' feet, there is a group of squirrels, rabbits, and moles. An owl has nested in the lap of Maleficent. Her expensive black dress is ruined, all covered with white feathers.

Snow White (timidly): Yes, hi. Sorry for the interruption. The union sent us here.

Merida (pushing Snow White out of her way): YOU!

She points accusingly at the professor, who is looking at the group of newcomers with surprise. Students giggle and nudge. The visit is completely unexpected.

Snow White: Sweetheart! We are in a classroom! Please, show some education. Good morning little ones! (She speaks to the students, scratching their heads and speaking with a baby voice.) Cute, cute babies. How old are you sweetie? Who do you love more, your mom or your dad?

Student: I am 22. I think both my parents have some virtues and a lot of defects, but thank you for asking.

Merida interrupts Snow White's conversation with the students.

Merida: You, woman, are responsible for our lack of jobs!

Professor (shocked): I beg your pardon? I think you are confusing me with someone else.

Merida (dramatically): Let's free the minds of our students. Let's hear the voice of the voiceless. Let's co-construct a new ideal story in which beauty, richness, and thinness are not necessary for happiness. Let's change the world! I say bullshit!

Snow White covers her mouth.

Merida: Look at poor Prince Charming! Look what happened to him after one of YOUR students forced him to come out of the closet!

Everyone looks at the prince, who waves timidly from behind the group.

Merida: Why didn't you let him live happily ever after? He could have ignored his passions and deepest desires, in favor of the hygiene of the story and the socialization of children. Now nobody wants to hire him anymore (a gay prince?), so he works at a Seven-Eleven near Disneyland!

Some students laugh.

Merida (shouts): It's not funny, it's terrible! And Hercules, a man destined for glory, power, and wealth, he works at the Caesars Palace in Las Vegas as a croupier. And the tourists take stupid photographs, and leave a dollar tip!

Snow White: I had to leave my apartment and now I live with my stepmother and a possessed talking mirror . . .

Professor: Excuse me for interrupting, but there is nothing we can do. I cannot retreat in my attempt to uncover the ideological structures that underlie the discourses within children's films. Tell me, don't you worry about the cultural products your sons and daughters consume?

Snow White (her face glows suddenly): Sons and daughters! Do I have sons and daughters?

Merida (to Snow White): No honey, you don't. Be quiet. (To the professor) We will never have children. The sign "and they lived happily ever after—THE END" doesn't tell you anything? Sex is strictly prohibited in Disneyland! The hero and heroine meet, they go here and there, the prince kills the witch, and then they get married. THE END. The thing just ends right there.

Snow White: Except for Pocahontas, poor thing . . .

Hercules (nervous): We don't talk about that!

Merida: Interracial marriage is forbidden in Disneyland.

Hercules (tense, with greeted teeth): We don't talk about that!!!

Merida: And then there is the sign—

Snow White: The horrible sign.

Professor: And after the "THE END" sign?

Merida: Nothing. Everyone goes home. A little kiss and that's it.

Snow White: Like in *The Bachelor*.

Merida: Sex is STRICTLY forbidden in Disneyland. Little nephews and nieces are ok, but there are no pregnant women in Disneyland.

Snow White: To get pregnant, you need to have sex.

Merida: That's why there are so many single-parent families in Disneyland. Dad alone. Mom alone.

Snow White: No sex sex sex sex sex.

Merida (softer): Calm down honey . . . Did you take your pills?

Snow White smiles at Merida and then turns her attention back to the students.

Snow White: You could be my babies, my teeny-weeny babies . . .

The birds perch on Snow White's head and shoulders, giving her a bizarre look. Squirrels hug her ankles and rabbits nibble her feet. Students recoil with apprehension.

Student: Yeah, right, "Mom," you look strange.

Professor: Hey! Show some respect to the animal-infested lady.

Student: Sorry, infested lady.

Prince Charming: Mine is the worst situation of all.

Merida: Homosexuality is forbidden in Disneyland.

Snow White (increasingly burdened by the animals' harassment): It is considered a disease.

Hercules: We don't talk about that!!!

Merida: So it is because of you, professor, and because of your students, that we don't have a job anymore. And it was even worse for secondary characters.

More animals climb Snow White's body.

Snow White: Mexicans and Cubans who populate Walt Disney's stories as secondary characters. You know, hyenas, vultures, and funny turtles on drugs.² They—(to the animals) Hey, get off me!!!!

Birds and squirrels run away, scared. Snow White jumps hysterically to shake them off.

Professor (intrigued): What happened to the secondary characters?

Prince Charming: Deported.

Professor: Oh no!

Hercules (increasingly nervous, looking around): Shhhh!!!!!! Shhhh!!!!

Voice in off: Five twelve.

Merida: Your intention to "enlighten" your students has caused us so much harm, so we decided to deliver a law suit.

Merida searches in her pockets until she finds a faded parchment. The professor hesitates at first, but then she takes the paper and reads it.

Voice in off: Former Disney characters, stripped of our jobs due to the emancipatory urges of a professor and her students, require new positions according to our new situation. We are aware that the demanded are writing a play and we demand to be hired as characters. Otherwise, we will proceed to establish a legal claim against the professor. This claim has been signed and sealed at the county clerk's office: Cinderella, Ariel the Little Mermaid, Sebastian the crab, Snow White . . .

Professor: Ok, I understand your complaint, but I'm not sure if we can do anything for you. We are not willing to accept traditional models anymore. No more anorexic princesses getting married to strangers because of their money and crown. We are committed to our struggle!

Snow White weeps. Merida hugs her tenderly.

Merida: There, there . . .

Voice in off: Five fifteen.

Professor: I'm sorry, guys, I just can't!

The professor takes center stage and begins a monologue. She stares at a distant point beyond the last row of seats.

Professor: Reflective music, please.

Voice in off: In three, two, one . . .

Slow, melancholic music begins to play. Stage lights dim and turn blue.

Professor: For ten years, I have analyzed animated movies. I have denounced the sexism, racism, consumerism, and colonialism present in children's movies. Animated movies are performative! (I have said.) They shape children's minds! They deliver a message from a dominant position to uncritical audiences . . . Then, I teach. I tell all these things to my undergraduate students. For ten years, I have been researching and teaching. I have become very good at delivering my message. I have developed strategies that make my students arrive at exactly the same conclusions as me. One year ago, I started wondering: Am I any better than Disney productions? Do I give space to my students to think for themselves? When I am teaching, I produce a performative discourse. I do things with words. And as a professor, I used to silence my students' voices.

Merida: Ok then, so if you are so worried about silencing and stuff, you can ask your students to do the job. You have a responsibility to us! You did what you know you did . . . you know? The emancipating, whatever . . .

Student 1: Professor? We could do it, if you tell us how to begin . . .

Student 2: And how to end . . .

Student 3: And don't forget the middle part . . .

Two spotlights illuminate the stage from above. Everybody looks up, frightened.

Norman Denzin (to the students): "create oppositional utopian spaces, discourses, and experiences"! (2003, p. 193).

Henry Giroux: “. . . offer alternative models of radical democratic culture rooted in social relations that take seriously the democratic ideals of freedom, liberty and pursuit of happiness”! (2001, p. 9).

Norman Denzin: resist “injustice while celebrating freedom”! (2009, p. 261).

Henry Giroux: “exercise control in wielding power over organizations . . . : the government, workplace, media culture, and school” (2001, p. 9).

Norman Denzin: “make sites of oppression visible . . . affirm an oppositional politics that reasserts the value of self determination and mutual solidarity” (2003, pp. 192-193).

The professor kneels on stage.

Professor: You are right. Both of you are right. Students, think with your own minds and let us hear your voices.

The teacher collects her papers from the floor and then she presses them against her body. She turns to the students.

Professor: It is time for you to speak with your own voice. I shall leave.

The students (horrified): But we don’t know how to do that! Please give us questions, answers, guidelines, marks . . . we need you to tell us what to think! How are we supposed to speak with our own voice? Give us the guidelines!!!

The bright spotlights illuminate the stage once more.

Norman Denzin (to the students): “Unsettle, criticize, and challenge taken-for-granted, repressed meanings”! (2014, pp. 78).

Henry Giroux: “take risks, ask questions, challenge those with power, honor critical traditions, and be reflexive about how authority is used in the classroom and other pedagogical sites”! (2001, p. 18).

Norman Denzin: “Engender resistance and offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different”! (2014, p. 18).

Henry Giroux: “alter the structure of participation and the horizon of debate through which (your) identities, values, and desires are shaped” (2001, p. 18).

Spotlights turn off, sudden silence.

Professor: Remember, the drama is in us, and we are the drama (Pirandello, 1921/2004).

Now she turns to the Disney characters.

Professor: They will write your story, and in that story nothing will be forbidden.

Voice in off: Five twenty-five.

Professor: It is time for me to go.

The professor disappears from the scene. She will not return to the stage. The students stand up and run to the characters.

Students: The drama is in us, and we are the drama. We are impatient to play it. Our inner passion drives us to this (Pirandello, 1921/2004).

Silence. Students freeze on stage. Lights go off.

Voice in off: Time stops. The students need to destroy the characters before they recreate them. They are the drama and the drama is in them, so they have to shatter what is within them before they can create something new.

Silence. Progressive darkness.

Voice in off: Shhh . . . Silence. What are we doing here? Is this a stage or is it a classroom? Is the professor a professor or is she an actress? Is she a scriptwriter? Maybe she is a little of all three. Students are actresses and actors, and they are also the audience. They are scriptwriters, too. Classrooms are stages, and stages are somewhat classrooms. There is no difference at all. Did the play begin? I couldn’t tell you. I do not quite understand what is happening here . . . Silence. It is time to hear the voice of the voiceless.

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Notes

1. Act 1 is available in Martinez (2014) and Act 2 is available in Martinez (in press).
2. In Spanish-Latino version of Disney films, characters that are represented by African American actors and actresses in the original movies are dubbed mostly as Mexican and Cuban (e.g., the *Lion King*’s hyenas and the vultures in *The Jungle Book*).

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