


# The Story of a Betrayal: Performing Disney With My Students

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies  
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## Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on what happens when professors allow students to express themselves, intellectually, creatively, and emotionally, applying their interpretive skills to achieve this expression. I present, through performance, the results of an exercise that I developed with my undergraduate students in the city of Cordoba, Argentina. I asked them to analyze children's films and then perform this material, inspired by their own analysis. This is a play within a play; a play about writing a play.

## Keywords

performance ethnography, critical methodologies, children films, Disney

*Previously, on Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*<sup>1</sup>

*Waking up Snow White: The Story of a Betrayal*<sup>2</sup>  
A theatrical experience (based on true events)

## ACT 1<sup>3</sup> (excerpt)

The classroom darkens with the shadow of evil. Alejandra, the professor—representing Cruella de Vil—has just shattered her students' Disney dreams.

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Racism . . . Sexism . . .

**Student F as himself (devastated):** Stop! Why do you tell us this? Why do you do this *to me*?

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Colonialism . . . Consumerism . . .

**Student as Young Hercules:** We will feel betrayed and disappointed. Why do you have to say that? Why do you do this to us? *Often I have dreamed / Of a far off place / Where a hero's welcome / Would be waiting for me . . .* (He sings while he sobs)

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Knowledge sometimes brings pain . . .

**The spotlights fade and the characters freeze. A student representing a squirrel stands up in the center of the stage.**

**Student as a Squirrel:** In the first act of the play, the princesses Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Hand, 1937) and Merida (*Brave*, Andrews

and Chapman, 2012) meet in the forest. Snow White is longing to be rescued by a prince and marry him. Merida tries to make her understand how ridiculous her expectations are. When Prince Charming arrives, instead of being gallant and courageous he looks scruffy and decayed. Feminism, he says, has complicated his situation. Snow White decides to ignore him as his looks and attitude differ from her own image of what a prince should be. Merida offers to help him improve his appearance, in exchange for a percentage of the profits from selling Disney merchandise.

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## ACT 2<sup>4</sup>

### Characters:

Students as themselves  
Students as Disney characters  
Norman Denzin  
Alejandra as herself  
Alejandra as Cruella de Vil  
Aldo  
Willie Nelson

\*\*\*\*

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## Scene 1

The curtain rises and reveals an office in which there are several desks and computers. A woman in her early 40s works silently. The snow falls outside. The door opens and Aldo walks in, brushing snow off his clothes.

**Aldo:** Hi! You are so focused! What are you doing?

**Alejandra as herself:** I'm writing a play within a play . . . a play about writing a play. Actually, the play is an essay . . . and vice versa.

Aldo looks at her, trying to understand what she is explaining.

**Alejandra as herself:** Do you remember that in July I wrote the first act of a play called *Waking Up Snow White: The Story of a Betrayal*, with the help of my former students? Well, I'm writing the second act of the play with the help of a *new* cohort of students. So, it is a play, but it is also an essay about the whole pedagogical experience. Listen . . .

She reads aloud.

**Alejandra as herself:** "This exercise will be a collaborative process between my students and me, a co-performance (Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003a) . . . a 'coperformative representational strategy.'" (Hamera, 2013, p. 323)

Aldo and Alejandra smile at each other. He knows he will be asked to read the piece before it is finished. Aldo sits and freezes in front of his silver laptop.

## The spotlights concentrate on Alejandra.

**Alejandra as herself (stands up and monologues):** I have recently realized that professors, myself included, say many things but ask few questions. When we ask a question, the goal is generally to evaluate students, causing them anxiety to do their best. It is rare, however, to ask students what they may feel about what they learn in the classroom. In this piece I reflect on what happens when we allow students to express themselves, intellectually, creatively, and emotionally, applying their interpretive skills to achieve this expression. I describe a different approach to analyzing film content, embracing a critical, collaborative, and performative perspective with students. This piece is a proposition and a provocation, moving away from the positivist parameters which formed my outlook and methodologies as a social scientist.

**The Weather Channel (off):** *January 2014 will be remembered as the coldest winter in decades. An alert*

*was issued today: Winter storm Maximus will bring more snow to the Midwest . . .*

**Darkness. Strong wind.**

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## Scene 2

*Indications for the mise en scène:* Sound and lighting effects should be followed carefully (the variation of lights and sounds will be indicated in bold letters in the text).

The stage must be divided in two areas, clearly defined by lighting effects.

The left side of the stage will show Norman Denzin's office at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The right side will show a classroom at Universidad Siglo 21 in Cordoba-Argentina.

**Darkness. Increasing (country) music.**

**Willie Nelson:** In the twilight glow I see them, blue eyes cryin' in the rain, when we kissed goodbye and parted, I knew we'd never meet again . . .

**Warm colors illuminate an office, on the left side of the stage. It is noon in a summer day.**

Two characters are sitting in silence, staring at the floor. Except for two wooden chairs, the staging consists only of books and yellow folders. There are thousands of books. They are on the shelves, on the chairs, and on the floor. In one of the corners, there is a stack of yellow folders. It almost reaches the ceiling.

**Alejandra, as herself:** It feels like . . . you know? I used to enjoy working . . . I used to love analyzing children films, but now it is like . . .

*(. . . It's like I don't find the way anymore: I keep saying the same old things, I am bored and frustrated. I feel that nobody cares about my research work. I need your help. Help me, please!).*

She does not say it out loud, but professor Denzin understands.

**The music stops suddenly** (even Willie Nelson knows something important is about to be said).

**Norman Denzin:** Have you considered your own feelings when you analyze these films? Have you reflected on what happens to *you* when you work on these pieces?

**Alejandra as herself:** My . . . my own . . . feelings?

**A choir of young people voices (in off):** Our own feelings?!

The stage suddenly darkens.

A spot illuminates just the right side of the stage. There is a classroom. A group of university students and Alejandra (the professor), representing Cruella de Vil, are discussing.

**Federico:** Profe, I don't understand. Do you want us to consider *how we feel*?

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Yes, that is exactly what I want. I would like to know how you feel while analyzing animated movies and also while you are developing the second act of the play.

**Federico:** But . . . using which author's theory?

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** No author—just how *you* feel, as human beings that feel. How many of you are human beings with feelings?

Silence and stares.

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Ohhh, you've got to be kidding me! The educational system can't have harmed you that much! Let's see: How many of you are human beings?

Several hands rise, tentatively. Some of the students laugh.

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Ok, then, what did you *feel* when we analyzed the movies?

**Marcela:** Mmmm . . . betrayed?

**Diego:** Disappointed.

**Marcos:** Surprised!

**Carolina:** Curious . . .

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** AWESOME. Thank you!

**Darkness. The left side of the stage lights up. Twilight.**

Alejandra is alone at Norman Denzin's office.

**Alejandra as herself:** My own feelings?! Why my feelings would matter at all? Oh Dr D! Why do you ask questions? You should tell me exactly what to do! I don't want this freedom. Feelings? What is that? People in Academia are not supposed to show any feelings! How can you trust my ability to figure this out? This is outrageous. Please tell me what to do next!

Why do you do this *to me*?!

While Alejandra speaks, she checks every book at the office looking for an answer that never comes.

**Willie Nelson:** Oh, oh deep water, black and cold like the night . . .

**Darkness.**

**Spotlights now illuminate the classroom on the right segment of the stage.**

Alejandra, as Cruella de Vil has just finished reading the first act of the play *Waking Up Snow White* to her students. Now she looks at them.

**Alejandra as Cruella de Vil:** Now you are invited to write Act 2. Ok? You are free to do whatever you want.

**Students (horrified):** What do you mean *free*?????

**Darkness.**

**Orange spots illuminate the left side of the stage. Sunrise.**

Alejandra sleeps on a huge pile of books. The office door opens. It is Professor Norman Denzin coming in. The person sleeping on the floor does not call his attention. He turns the CD player on, and takes the yellow folder that is on top of the stack. He sits and starts reading.

**Willie Nelson:** My head's under water, but I'm breathing fine . . .

**Darkness.**

**On the right side of the stage, the spotlights show a group of students.**

Five students are working on their version of the second act of the play *Waking Up Snow White*. Lilly Allen's song "F\*ck you" is on. Two students, dressed as Disney princesses, dance and hold a blackboard in which a phrase is written:

*"What we have learnt from Disney"*

Another student, dressed as Princess Rapunzel (*Tangled*, Greno and Howard, 2010) approaches to the other two girls. She carries a poster that says,

*"If you're a beautiful woman, do not solve your own problems! Look for a man to do it"*

**Music:** *F\*ck you, 'Cause we hate what you do, And we hate your whole crew . . .*

Another student, dressed as Princess Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, Geronimi, 1959) appears on stage, showing a new poster:

*"If you're gorgeous, even if you're almost dead you can get a rich man"*

**Music:** *F\*ck you very, very much, 'Cause we hate what you do, And we hate your whole crew, So please don't stay in touch . . .*

**Darkness. Sudden silence.**

**A blue spotlight softly illuminates the left half of the stage.**

Alejandra is alone at the office, sitting on a wooden chair in an awkward posture. She sleeps. The floor is covered by hundreds of pieces of crumpled paper. Outside, it is dark and the crickets sing their summer song.

Suddenly, she wakes up, takes a notepad out of her pocket, and writes something down:

*Alejandra as herself is alone at the office, sitting on a wooden chair in an awkward posture. She sleeps. El suelo está cubierto de papeles abollados. Suddenly she wakes up. Saca la libreta de su bolsillo y escribe.*

She falls asleep again.

**The lights diminish, but they do not turn off completely.**

**On the right side of the stage, the spotlights reveal a group of students performing.**

Two people are sleeping on a bed, completely covered by a blanket.

**Sergio as Prince Charming (sitting on the bed):** What a night last night . . . Oh! And who are you? A girl came home with me . . . Gooood! I don't remember anything, how many bottles did I drink? I may have used drugs again . . .

The person sleeping by him begins to move. A male voice greets,

**Marcelo as Justin:** Good morning, you . . .

**Prince Charming (jumps out of bed and screams, horrified):** You? Did we . . . ?

**Justin:** You know this is what you want.

**Prince Charming (screams his lungs out):** And what I cannot have!!!!

**Complete darkness. The spots illuminate the left segment of the stage.**

At his office, Norman Denzin organizes a group of yellow folders in several piles. Alejandra, sitting on the floor, reads aloud.

**Alejandra as herself:** "With the exercise of writing a play with my students I seek to provoke 'conflict, curiosity, criticism, and reflection.'" (Freire in Denzin, 2003c, p. 226)

**Norman Denzin:** You will also create a space for dialogue and questions, giving a voice to positions previously silenced, or ignored. (2003b, p. 247)

**Alejandra as herself:** Wait . . . I have to write what you have just said: "a space . . . of . . ."

She writes down the phrase on her notepad and keeps reading.

**Alejandra as herself:** "As Giroux (2010), I believe there is a need to produce a critical language in order to begin dismantling the discourse of innocence proposed by companies like Disney."

Alejandra looks anxiously at Norman Denzin, waiting for a criticism. He smiles, gives her a piece of chocolate and keeps working.

**Alejandra as herself (reads and chews at the same time):** "Through performance I strive to disrupt, dislodge, and dislocate hegemonic constructs of gender, family, race, class and imperialism. I like to think of this exercise as a personal/political praxis and an aesthetic/epistemic performance." (Spry, 2011)

Both characters freeze.

**Darkness. The right segment of the stage illuminates.**

Three students work on their version of the second act of the play. One of them plays Snow White and the other two represent animals.

**Snow White (sings):** *One day my prince will come . . .*

She dances around the stage awkwardly, and—accidentally—falls upon a tree that is part of the staging. She screams and shakes violently. Snow White has just electrocuted. When she gets up from the floor, her face is a blackish mask. The animals leave the stage, frightened by her hideous appearance. She screams and cries desperately for having lost her beauty. Depressed, she goes back to the electrified tree and holds a branch firmly with both hands. She shakes only once and falls to the ground, lifeless.

**Darkness. Now the office lights up.**

Alejandra is sitting on the floor over a huge pile of books. She writes, crosses out, and rewrites sentences on her notepad. She searches inside her pockets and finds a crumpled paper. She stretches it with her hands. Norman Denzin is sitting on his chair, reading what is inside a yellow folder.

**Alejandra as herself (reads what is written on the paper):** "The systematic observation of film's contents as well as the performative stimulus, awakened some kind of rebellion in the students. Such feelings can be expressed in creative pieces in which the crudest aspects of reality come into play."

**Norman Denzin:** When these performances take place shared emotional experiences are created, and in these moments of sharing, critical cultural awareness is awakened. (2003c, p. 56)

She writes every word he says on her notepad. Outside the office, sirens can be heard. Norman Denzin and Alejandra look out the window just for a moment. Then he returns to his reading and she continues to write.

### Scene 3

**The stage continues to be divided in two spaces, but now the spotlights illuminate both sides of the stage. The characters on each side now are aware of what the other characters are doing. Sounds of sirens.**

On the right side of the stage, the characters have gone mad. Snow White, Prince Charming, and Merida—the main characters of the play—interact with Margaret Thatcher, Barney the Dinosaur, Gru Minions (*Despicable Me*, Coffin and Renaud, 2010), Pinocchio, Lord Voldemort (the villain in Harry Potter), and a huge variety of princesses. Each student represents a character. Each one of them insults or hits another. All princesses cry inconsolably.

Alejandra and Norman Denzin now look at what happens on the opposite side of the stage.

**Alejandra as herself:** There are no happy endings in this story, nor are there easy ways out. Anger, disappointment, sadness, and rebellion abound. What my students have proposed does not conform to the typical content of animated films. Their ideas come from the context to which they belong, contrasting sharply with the pink promises of the children films we analyze in class.

**On top of the stage, a very bright spotlight turns on. The characters, frightened, shut up at once.**

**Walt Disney (in off):** I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written in the pages. The quality of that writing will affect him profoundly. (in Giroux, 1999, p. 17)

**Students as several characters (shout):** IT'S HIM!!! LET'S GET HIM!!!! Kill! Kill!

They leave the stage.

**Alejandra as herself (writes on her notepad while speaking aloud):** The distress of my students' awakening becomes evident seeing the violent content in their play, including the murder of Walt Disney. To them, he is no longer the beloved "Uncle Walt" but a kind of evil traitor who deserves punishment.

One of the students comes back to stage. His hands are covered in blood. He stands in the center of the stage and speaks as himself.

**Student as himself:** They made us believe that our world is pink, that love lies in royalty and not in real people, that we need to prove again and again that we deserve being what we are. We were taught that we cannot be happy forever without someone to save us from loneliness. The truth is that everything we have been told is a fable, so it's time to turn the page, put an end to this fantasy world, and write our own story.<sup>5</sup>

The student freezes. On the left side, Norman Denzin and Alejandra dialogue.

**Norman Denzin:** I imagine a world where race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation intersect; a world where language and performance empower, and humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination. (2001, p. 23)

**Alejandra as herself:** This is not the world animated movies bring to life. It is what students claim when they are given the tools and the possibility to speak. They created a less ideal and much harder world, in which conflicts are not resolved by fairies.

**Student as himself (shouts):** We feel betrayed by the conservative, patriarchal and separatist message that Disney offers!

**Alejandra as herself:** My goal is to help students identify and combat the kind of discrimination we observe in cultural products. The first step in achieving this goal is to awaken in my students a more realistic perception of cultural products. This awakening may allow them criticize Disney-like models and stop reproducing such models in their own work as professional advertisers and graphic designers.

Another student approaches to the center of the stage. She is deceased Snow White.

**Student as Snow White:** When we are asked to create our own script, we depict social problems, such as sexual repression, drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence, and the unhappiness that can produce non-conformity in society, possibly ending in suicide.

Two more students take the center of the stage. Both represent Snow White's Dwarfs.

**Student as Dwarf 1:** Many of our life expectations are the product of a set of cultural influences. How could we not be discontented at the notion of not owning our own dreams?

**Students as Dwarf 2:** We take the pedagogical exercise to a field in which criticism flourishes, not only to denounce something that makes people unhappy, but to transform, through performance, what might harm ourselves.

**Alejandra as herself:** My students will be professional advertisers and graphic designers, and I believe awareness is essential to disrupting sexist, racist, and consumerist communication models. I strive to awaken in them the idea of moral, social, and political responsibility.

**All together:** It is certainly an ambitious aim . . .

**Alejandra as herself:** . . . but not impossible.

Norman Denzin takes a huge tablet of chocolate out of his bag. He gives it to Alejandra and she divides it into small pieces. He approaches the CD player and turns up the volume.

**Willie Nelson:** I could not see for the fog in my eyes, I could not feel for the fear in my life . . .

**The curtain begins to close (but it does not close completely). Darkness.**

**The left part of the stage illuminates softly.**

Norman Denzin and Alejandra are sitting in silence.

**Norman Denzin:** How about feelings?

**Alejandra as herself:** I'm still working on them . . .

**Norman Denzin:** So what did you find in this journey?

She thinks for a moment and suddenly her face glows.

**Alejandra as herself:** I found . . . passion. Passion is back!

**Norman Denzin (nods, satisfied with the answer):**  
Well . . . passion

is a gift.

**Curtain.**

**The End**

(Urbana–Champaign, Winter 2014)

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### Notes

1. See Martinez (2014)
2. **Note to the reader:** English is not my mother tongue. A native speaker usually checks the use of English in my papers, so they do not sound “unidiomatic.” In this piece, there are some parts in which it is very important for me to use my own English-speaking voice, imperfect as it is. Thank you for reading.
3. Written at Urbana–Champaign, during summer 2013.
4. Act 1 is available in Martinez (2014).
5. This paragraph was entirely written by students Carlos Llanos, Marcos Dalmasso, Martin Vinograd, and Stefano Brizzio.

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