

## After Positivism

### 3 Scenes in a Bricolage

Scene 1: Gene Fellner

Scene 2: Helen Kwah

Scene 3: Peter Waldman

#### Abstract

In this article we explore the use of arts-based methods within a bricolage research approach (Kincheloe et al., 2011) for exposing and reflecting upon power, relationships, and meaning-making in educational settings. As three teacher-researchers oriented towards critical pedagogy and inspired by Joe Kincheloe and Ken Tobin's (2009) critique of the endurance of positivist onto-epistemologies in education, we present a bricolage of three narratives that employ drawing, collage-making and fiction in order to critically examine and evoke, in non-linear and

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visual ways, our experiences and struggles within positivist educational regimes. Through our explorations, we hope to challenge the dualistic and objectifying views that underlie positivism, and to situate arts-based methods as a powerful tool for engaging in a bricolage approach to critical pedagogy research.

### Introduction

In 2009, Joe Kincheloe and Ken Tobin described how positivist onto-epistemologies remained tacitly embedded in Western culture and within the fields of educational research and practice. Following a critical pedagogical framework, they argued that alternative voices and views were needed and best situated to challenge crypto-positivism's hold on power and knowledge systems. We recognize Kincheloe and Tobin's critique and seek to continue their discussion by taking up arts-based research methods (Barone and Eisner, 2012) as alternative and critical means for exploring how power and difference mediate our experiences of teaching and learning. Kincheloe, McLaren and Steinberg (2011) advocate for bricolage as the central research approach of critical pedagogy because it entails the use of multiple perspectives, logics, methods and modalities for analyzing and producing knowledge in response to the complexities and conditions of social life. We situate arts-based research as a powerful tool within a bricolage approach, and the particular forms of drawing, collage-making and fiction as evocative and particularly apt modalities for critically exposing and reflecting upon power, relationships, and meaning-making in educational settings.

In this article we share three arts-based research narratives that critically explore our experiences as teachers and participants within positivist educational regimes through the modes drawing, digital collage and fiction. Our arts-based narratives are presented as three scenes in an unfolding research bricolage where each scene plays with the conventions of research methodology (e.g. autoethnography and mixed methods) in order to refuse a naïve concept of realism. In so doing, we challenge the dualistic views of subject-object/ knower-known that underlie crypto-positivism. We found that the artistic modes of drawing, collage-making and fiction provided us not only with means for critically exploring questions of power and difference, but they also provided us with evocative and non-linear ways of *sensing* the subjective and intersubjective meanings we enact with each other in educational spaces and institutions. We recommend further explorations of arts-based research modes for any bricolage approach to critical pedagogy research.

## After Positivism: Scene I

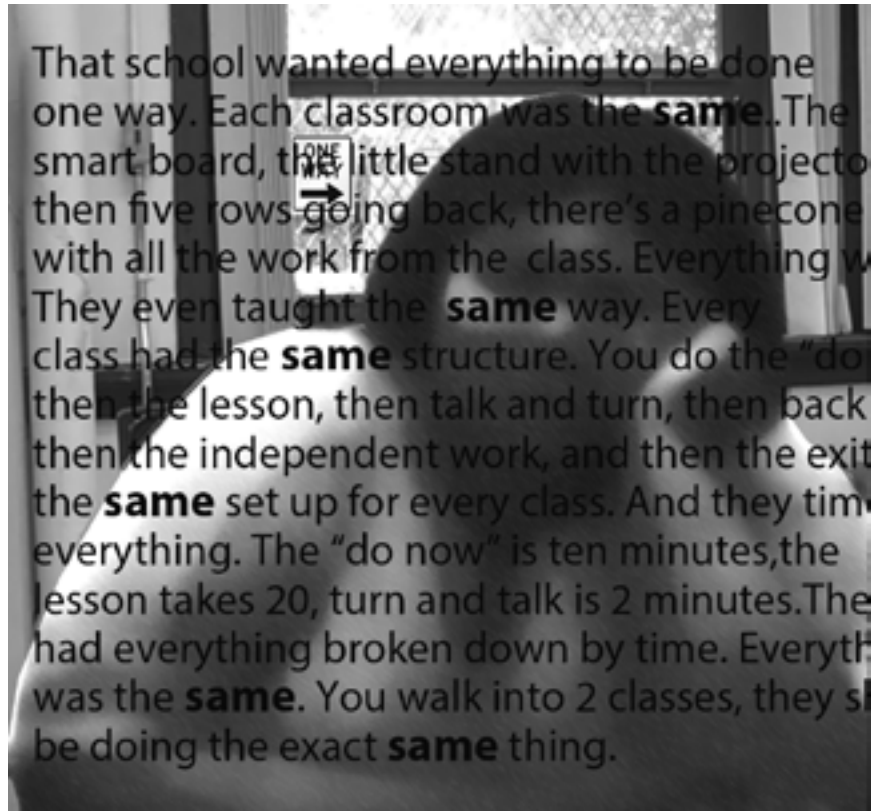
*Gene Fellner*

Figure 1

The power of positivist thought to worsen the lives of our most undeserved students remains alive and well in the school system, hence the legitimate claim by Joe Kincheloe and Kenneth Tobin that the death of positivism has been “much exaggerated” (2009). Alysha, an 18-year-old African-American student living in one of the poorest communities in the United States, understands this well. (Mis)diagnosed with ADHD in the fifth grade, Alysha was suspended at least once a year between 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Though her image above is blurred, estranged as she is from the institution that is supposed to nurture her abilities and help her know herself better, she understands that there is a negative relationship between her daily confinement in school and her aspirations as a human being. “I so hated school,” she tells me, “Everything was the same... Every class had the same structure.... Everything was timed. You walk into two classes, they are supposed to be doing the exact same thing.” Smothered under the imposition of sameness and the

accompanying drudgery, categorized and ranked only by standards that could be measured and which consequently ignored her spiritual health and the depth of her thinking, and overwhelmed with lessons that seemed irrelevant to her situation and far removed from the context of her life, Alysha failed every class year after year. Her transcripts only report failure.

What a different Alysha reveals itself when, by chance, we begin to talk about art. Alysha shares that her favorite artist is Frida Kahlo and her favorite painting is *The Two Fridas*:

It was deep. Like you really have to look at it, analyze it. Like in one of the pictures she has on regular Mexican attire, and she has a broken heart, she's basically suffering from a broken heart. You see like arteries bleeding out, scissors in her hand, blood all over her clothes, and then next to her is another Frida, but she has on like very nice clothing and her hair is done, and like her heart is healed. It touches. [You know] to notice there's like two sides to everybody, and I feel like she was the one with the broken heart, but she wanted to be the nicely dressed Frida with the healed heart. She wanted to be a strong woman but she was broken in some way.

Asked if she thinks she understands Frida so well because of her own struggles as a woman she pauses for a few seconds and then, looks distantly outward before making eye-contact with me, smiling and replying, "You know, I do. Yes I do think so." Nowhere do the official transcripts that represent Alysha to the world admit the searching sophistication of her thought. Nowhere in those documents can you find clues to her potential. Nowhere in the transcripts can you hear how Alysha connects her own life as a third-world woman with a disability to that of the famous Mexican painter who also had a disability—a human connection over time and space that makes her understand herself better.

Alysha is not alone. Ana, an African-American 7<sup>th</sup> grader reading at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, wants to know "If god and the bible is on my side." Her conversations at home with her mother's friend seem like "heaven," "A place I can ask questions and feel alive asking them." She contrasts this feeling of aliveness to the dullness of school, "All we do here is sit, listen to this, listen to that, do this, do that. I don't want to step into the school building."

Meanwhile, Laritza, 14-years-old, was placed in a self-contained class for students with special needs in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade because, "I was slow." She tries to resist her official categorization as "special" which she sees as disabling, "I don't have to be what they label me as," she insists, "I can prove them wrong." Laritza, officially defined by her disability rather than seen as a whole person, understands her situation and seeks to "emerge" from it (Freire, 1970, p. 109), but official policies are unable to see her expansively or represent her according to her many abilities that can't be measured—her great capacity for reflection and self-reflection, her artistic talents, her persistence in defying expectations, her anger at injustice, her caring for others. Why should she be defined only by her measurable academic



Figure 2

weaknesses rather than recognized and respected for her strengths and her personhood?

Schools are to so many of our students what factories are to the traditional worker. The work they do is “external to them,” it does not “affirm” them but “denies” them, dehumanizes them, renders them “unhappy,” and “mortifies” their bodies and “ruins” their “minds” (Marx, 1964, p. 30). It is the “recognition of dehumanization” as a “historical reality,” and the “central problem” of humanization, clearly apparent in our schools, that Paulo Freire wrote about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire argued, as did Marx before him, that in order to become fully human we must “intervene in reality,” by becoming conscious of “of our situation” (p. 109) and then by transforming the forces that stultify our humanity. The dialectical world of Marx and Freire contests the positivist vision of the world. It understands reality not as an inert thing whose truth can be contemplated and deciphered from afar but a dynamic world that is constantly negated by the forces that comprise it and transformed by the activity of men and women as they seek, together, to better their lives. Half a century after Freire’s text and almost 150 years after Marx, the tension between the demands of a system fueled by dehumanization and the quest to become “fully human” remains the overwhelming challenge confronting us in schools and in society. The stories of Alysha, Ana and Laritza highlight this situation.



Figure 3

### After Positivism: Scene 2

*Helen Kwah*

#### Past, present, future

”...in a positivist framework the mind is separate from both the physical and social world of phenomena, and anytime this boundary is crossed in the research process the objectivity of the inquiry is contaminated” (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, p. 11).

#### Speaking out loud:

There is experiencing and bringing focus to the stream of sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings—my own, and from others—other beings, other things, in any given moment of time, space, place... All entities—appearing and disappearing.

#### Aug. 3, 2016:

We park the car in the lot and enter the brick building from the side entrance. A hot summer day. Sunlight glinting on black gravel. We walk in. I am nervous,



and have dressed deliberately—wearing a brightly colored shirt and earrings, wanting to generate liveliness. Alysha is there and we are introduced. Orange, red, and pink stripes of her shirt. Pink drink – strawberry smoothie. She smiles but is watchful. I want to connect, and comment on how her drink matches her shirt.



Figure 1

### Knowledge and research methods

Positivist research assumes that “there is one true reality that can be discovered and completely described by following the correct research methods... It is profoundly difficult to escape this culturally conditioned way of seeing that simply takes for granted the veracity of the Western gaze as well as dominant socio-cultural ways of being in the world” (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, p. 7-8).

#### Speaking out loud:

The world and all of its objects do not exist out there in some fixed, permanent, absolute way. It and we are all aggregate phenomena, changing, and vibrating with life. ‘Knowing’ is an emergent and interdependent event, it is not the property of the knowing subject. We need different research methods for this kind of knowing. Collage is an arts-based method that exposes the indeterminate space between objects by juxtaposing seemingly disparate images. In so doing, collage allows new meanings to arise and disrupts the power relations that render appearances seamless:

Collage apprehends the unstable and shifting images and ideas that deconstruct assumptions that are historically and socially determined (Garoian, 2008, p. 4).

**Aug. 3, 2016:**

I speak with Alysha. I say that in many ways we are different but we share some common ground in being women of color. I tell her that I was inspired when I heard her talk about Frida Kahlo. I brought up the painting of the “Two Fridas” that she had described to Gene, including her ideas about the broken hearted Frida on one side and the healed Frida on the other. The two Fridas, broken and healed, are joined their hands meet at the center. I realize I am talking too much, and Alysha has said very little.

### Making relationships

“This slipperiness of knowledge is well illustrated by positivist-based objectivist claims to the separation of the knower and the known, specifically the researcher and the researched” (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009, p. 13).

**Oct. 5, 2016:**

Months later, I am recalling my meeting with Alysha. I start a series of collages and drawings. The meeting left me with impressions of my inability to know her and the intense longing to heal my feelings of being broken and outside, of not belonging in the spaces of dominant (white, male, capitalist) culture. I speak with Gene about the collages:

There are certain traces of images that are important, like the image of hands meeting. I guess the whole thing started as this encounter with me wanting to reach out to Alysha, through the actual meeting and the image of meeting in the two Fridas (painting), the joining hands and healing in that way... I also started drawing because my own hands, the longing for my hands and body to be present in the research process and the object of research... to make my body and our non-white, Other bodies materially present in a resonant way.

**Speaking out loud:**

Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013) are critical of academia’s demand for the pain narratives of the colonized Other. In resistance, they posit Desire:

I am invited to speak, but only when I speak my pain (hooks, 1990). Instead, I speak of desire. Desire is a refusal to trade in damage; desire is an antidote... Desire, however, is not just living in the looking glass...

Desire is complex and complicated. It is constantly reformulating, reconfiguring, recasting. Desire makes itself its own ghost, creates itself from its own remnants. Desire, in its making and remaking, bounds into the past as it stretches into the future (p. 648).





Figure 2

**Speaking out loud:**

The relationship between knower and known is an illusion-like arising of interdependence. The post-humanist philosopher Timothy Morton (2013) asks how we know what an object is—for example, a spider web:

If we could only read each trace aright, we would find that the slightest piece of spider web was a kind of tape recording of the objects that had brushed against it, from sound wave to spider's leg to hapless housefly's wing to drop of dew...

Although the two worlds don't intersect—the spider can't know the fly as the fly, and vice versa—there are marks and traces galore... (and even if the spider web existed on its own) it would exemplify how *existence just is coexistence* (pp. 112 – 3).

### The haunting of positivism

**Speaking out loud:**

There is no conclusion to this research, that's beside the point. No summary, no thing in itself to hold onto. Only the un-ending collage of Desire, making with and traces of our collisions with one another. In this, new appearances are possible



Figure 3

and resistance is staged against becoming objects for positivist/humanist/colonialist/capitalist consumption. In this, we haunt our past, present and future. Tuck and Ree (2013) see the presence of Others within the spaces of settler colonialism as a form of haunting:

Haunting... is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances... Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop. Alien (to settlers) and generative for (ghosts), this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved (p. 642).

And again: “Desire makes itself its own ghost, creates itself from its own remnants. Desire, in its making and remaking, bounds into the past as it stretches into the future” (p. 648).

September 8, 2017:

There was a chance to have an exhibit of the collages and drawings inspired by my meeting with Alysha last year. She refused permission to have her images be shown. Is her refusal generative of her desire not to be consumed? Does her refusal give her time and space for desire to become urgent? Or maybe she is dying. I don’t know. The traces of my meeting with her haunt me. There is no conclusion.

### After Positivism: Scene 3

Peter Waldman

“Confessions of a Wayward Positivist”

#### I. Observations

“Just the facts, ma’am.”

That was the motto for the Conference of Hardboiled Detective Fiction (CHDF) in beautiful Sausalito California. Earlier in the evening, a pasty-faced Encyclopedia Brown ghostwriter asked Sam Spade’s granddaughter, our closing speaker, to elaborate on the distinction between a fact and The Truth. This little pallid gentleman was escorted from the premises to jeers of “Lock him up!”

“That’s what you’d call an ‘academic question,’” was Samantha Spade’s muffled reply to the banished one. “Give me a cup a joe, a pack of smokes, a .357 snub-nose and I’ll take it from there!”

Did they forget? ‘Just the facts, ma’am’ was stolen, no pun intended, from *Dragnet*, a show about *cops*? Let me ask you, who hates private eyes more than cops? That’s right, *nobody*! And why...? Exactly, because a P.I. can’t cut it on the force.

So, I rotated back east on the Silver Star and was waiting to purchase my week’s-worth of organic TV dinners when I recruited my first subject. In between impatient smirks—the teenaged assistant manager had misplaced the register key—Cory (pseudonym) and I discussed the lazy benefits of prewashed salad.

The following Monday night and the diner on Boyd Ave. is nearly empty. Outside it’s rainy and cold and Cory isn’t in the mood to cook. Neither was I in the mood to preheat the oven for my organic mock duck. From my booth where I’m enjoying a large plate of *sarmale* on a bed of spiced quinoa I wave him over.

Cory is recently divorced and sad, sad, sad in the way that a basset hound seems sad. Truth be told, I was sad, too, as my cat Lenny was dying of late stage kidney failure.

~~“But if I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride, and hug it in mine arms.”~~

~~“That’s beautiful,” Cory says with choked sarcasm as I’d quoted the Bard’s words involuntarily. But since I could neither quantify the effect of his sarcasm nor deduce a correlating postulate from which to generalize, I redacted the exchange as you can see.~~

## 2. Hypothesis: is not a Greek philosopher.

Cory is a grey and morbid-looking middle-aged, middle school English Language Arts teacher with the bathetic eyes, again, of a basset hound, and a Ph.D. in adolescent education.

~~Apropos of nothing he says, “Brackets are for bookshelves!” referring, I assume, to Husserl’s Eidetic reduction. Turns out I’m a great guesser! I tell him I’m trying to be philosophical about Lenny but not in the sense that I think he thinks I mean, i.e., 20<sup>th</sup> century Continental gobbledygook. Then I slap myself hard in the face (but not really) because I’d just broken the blood-brain barrier (again!) between researcher and researched, knower and known, dick and mark, and I’d brought myself (and poor sweet Lenny!) into the theater of operations, as it were. I must learn to keep my big mouth shut!~~

By the time Amanda’s (pseudonym) name arrives so has dessert and an early/rude presentation of the check. I’m working over a toothpick in between mouthfuls of gratis pineapple chunks when Cory says we should meet, Amanda and me, because of my interest in the comparative case study as a plot device.

“You’d definitely get along,” he says. “I can tell about people.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t cotton to intuition.”

“What do you cotton to?” he says, the wiseacre.

“Facts, sir, facts. Social facts, and to the logical interpretation of social facts to arrive at positive truths. Truths that are, nonetheless, falsifiable. After all we are not savages.”

“I had you all wrong,” Cory says. “You’re not Philip Marlowe, you’re Thomas Grandgrind.”

“Who?”

“Well, well, another dick who doesn’t read Dickens. Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“I read Dickens...”

“I mean, what do you make of all this?” he says, indicating the *cosmos* with a broad sweep of his short arms. “What are your pre-theoretical givens and your historical biases, your cultural commitments and sociopolitical obligations to scientificity?”

“I don’t know what you’re...”

“In this world,” he says, “There are winners and there are losers. Which are you?”

I try talking him down with logic: “It’s called metaphor, Cory, and a metaphor cannot be verified. That sentence has meaning only within a set of signifiers that ferry meaning across diverse fields of representational signification, but without a necessary relation to objective reality.”

“No,” he says returning to his flan, “That’s how Amanda thinks, ‘winners and losers.’” Then he insists on a 33% gratuity, which is absurd given the service.

I indulge him, however, since I am (a) starved for company and (b) still trying to scrounge up a case. Also, I have nothing on the calendar except to watch my cat die, so I’m thinking an after-dinner drink might be salubrious.

“Drink?” I say. “I’m buying.”

“Sure,” he says. “Why not?”

### 3. Experiment

The rain has let up but the bar across the street from the restaurant is empty too. A small group of pool players populates the area in the back by the jukebox and four shadowy regulars genuflect over boilermakers at the bar. Cory’s drinking beer, says his stomach can’t handle anything stronger. I order a single malt scotch, neat, which is part of a contractual obligation I have with my imaginary publisher.

“That’s Amanda’s drink,” Cory says.

“Sounds like you’re very close friends.”

“We’re friends,” he says simply. But when he turns to face me his eyes are wet and flashing with tears.

#### 3a. Proceeding then...

Both human subjects are middle-aged teachers (*homo pedanticus*) in large, urban public school districts in the Northeastern corridor of these United States, on Earth as it is in our solar system, among the frothy cosmic dust of the Milky Way, part and parcel of the Uni- and Multiverses during the unseasonably warm autumn

of 2017, *après les deluges* (Harvey, Irma, Maria). ~~A distinct tone of madness in the air.~~ The interviewer/principal investigator, hardboiled detective fiction author, \_\_\_\_\_, begins the study with that most general of questions:

“What in God’s name has happened to our country and to the world, more generally, because I’m getting very upset?”

Cory and Amanda, isolated in separate soundproofed booths, pantomime their answers. The first round of coding will excise all allusions (gestures) of ‘hope’ (smiling, laughing), ‘indifference/apathy’ (sleeping, watching screens), and/or ‘despair’ (weeping, howling psychotic break, catatonia, death).

Thank you very much.

—The mgmt....

#### 4. Results

...oh, sweet Lenny! Sweet, sweet Lenny. His meows going unheard for hours while I ran my useless experiments! While I pursued...while I pursued...*while I pursued I don’t know what!* I’m weeping into my corn flakes. I’m asking, *why?* I’m asking unanswerable questions, *metaphysical* questions, God help me!

Meanwhile, in between mixed martial arts bouts—the only truly violent aspect of my methodology, all other violence is strictly symbolic—Amanda gives moving testimony to chemistry’s causal coercions and readies her seniors for high-stakes tests. Later in the afternoon, Cory lectures his middle schoolers on that hideous 20<sup>th</sup> century invention, the H-bomb, and scares the nightlights out of them.

“The ultimate ‘achievement’ of the positivist philosophy of science and of the method of natural science,” he proclaims. “Observation, hypothesis, experimentation, replicability. ‘Replicability’ as in Hiroshima *and* Nagasaki. And quantifiable, *always* quantifiable, as in two hundred and forty thousand murdered within the first four months of the bombings. Such numbers are quaint, however, compared with the millions that Teller’s fusion device would yield.”

He dismisses his charges with dark thoughts of annihilation in their little heads and tells me in unambiguous terms that he feels unsafe. He says I’m not looking out for his ‘best interests’ and that I don’t give two shits whether he lives or dies. He threatens me with official sounding names and a half dozen acronymic agencies.

#### 5. Discussion

Inquiry aborted.

I don’t want to discuss it.

## 6. Conclusion

How could I have known that among the urine-scented upholstery of the cat lady's apartment (sexist/misogynistic term, 'cat lady') and the chirp-like mewing of kittens, that Lenny was *mine*? All mine and that I was *his*? No doubt about it, as he'd already burrowed deep into my corduroyed lap and was purring contentedly.

Fast-forward twenty-one years, the best twenty-one years of my life, and I'm weeping until my eyes are red and swollen shut. I'm weeping for those twenty-one years ripped from my prune-shaped heart...

As he lost strength Lenny sort of hunched around splayed and spread with his shoulder scruff up like a buffalo full of woe. Later that night, I found him shivering in the foyer, without the strength to make it back from the litter. I wrapped him in my arms—he weighed four or five pounds at the most, down from fifteen—and I laid him across a cushion of fresh towels. I stroked his fur, which was beginning to smell of something dark and unfamiliar. But for his shallow breath, then, he hardly moved at all. When I awoke at dawn Lenny was gone.

He looked beautiful, though, like an orange angel, still swift in death's burgeoning embrace. Quartz and emerald of eye...

“Goodnight sweet prince,” I cooed, knowing nothing else to say,  
“And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

Good old Horatio, the sentimental simp.

'Time to hang up the fedora,' I mused and set alight my hardboiled bona fides: My gumshoes and my Luckys and my noncommittal street-smarts. I bury the ashes in the woods with Lenny's remains, which I conceal in an old beach towel. Then I tamp down the dirt and go home.

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