



A Conversation Between Kip Jones and Patricia Leavy: Arts-Based Research, Performative Social Science and Working on the Margins

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This paper reports a conversation between international pioneers in Arts-Based Research and Performative Social Science, Patricia Leavy and Kip Jones. They begin by delineating the differences between research and/or dissemination that use tools from the Arts in their production. Leavy turns to her fiction writing as an example, while Jones discusses the making of his research-based short film, Rufus Stone. The conversation then turns to how these novel approaches have changed the way in which they work and these efforts in relation to the academy. The concept of “audience” is raised. Both then give examples of taking alternative routes in their career paths and funding for this kind of work. Jones specifically talks about using creativity in all our approaches, including small-scale projects that rely on creativity rather than money. He suggests being creative in the ways in which we write for publication and present our work to other academics. Leavy ends the conversation by discussing taking risks and walking through fear. Jones recommends not working in silos, but letting all parts of our lives influence our outputs. Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Creativity, Film, Fiction, Performative Social Science, Qualitative Research, Relational Art

Patricia Leavy: Kip, people often ask me to define arts-based research. How do you describe ABR and specifically, how do you describe what it is that you do.

Kip Jones: Yes, you use the term “Arts-Based Research (ABR)” and I like to use the term “Performative Social Science (PSS).” I believe it was Norm Denzin (Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 23-26) who first coined the term PSS. I define PSS as the use of tools from the Arts (and Humanities) in carrying out Social Science research and/or disseminating its findings. Philosophically, I no longer consider Art and Science a binary, but both as a result of the same activity: creativity. For me, creativity is about working within certain boundaries while, at the same time, somehow changing them. PSS is still a new(ish) paradigm in the Social Sciences, but I believe that both concepts (ABR and PSS) occupy the same broad church: the use of the arts in discovery and communication of scholarship.

Next question: How would you describe the difference between “arts-based research” and “arts-based dissemination?” For example, I know that you write fiction, but what is “arts-based” about the research that goes into your writing? Or is the novel itself the arts-based component?

Patricia Leavy: That’s a really interesting question. I think of arts-based research (or what you understand as performative social science) as any social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology. So, the arts may be used

during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination (I talk about this in my book [Method Meets Art](#)). Like you, I also reject the science-art binary and see them both as the result of creativity.

I often get asked about the difference between a novel I would write as research and one a novelist would write, as a work of fiction. In many ways the processes are similar. Novelists often do copious research to get the details right and capture verisimilitude just as an academic researcher would. Both are also storytellers. I wrote about this in my book [Fiction as Research Practice](#).

In my own work I think of both the process and outcome as arts-based. During my research and writing process I work rigorously with literary tools and so the process itself is grounded in the arts just as much as the research I am drawing on. In [American Circumstance](#), for example, I used interview and autoethnographic data as a point of departure but I used literary impressionism, narrative gaps and other literary or artistic tools during the entire process. Then of course the end result, the novel, is itself arts-based. I consider my novels both art and research, or arts-based, because of both the process and the intent in creating them.

This makes me think about your work with film, and specifically your film [Rufus Stone](#), which as I understand was based on a multi-year qualitative research project. How do you go from qualitative data to film? What does that process look like and do you think of it as one of translation from one medium to another or as something else?

Kip Jones: That project was very much grounded in qualitative research practice at first. In-depth biographic interviews, focus groups, and visual anthropological site visits were going on simultaneously over three years. Nonetheless, I had a concept for a film developing in my head at the same time. It was very difficult not to solidify what I was imagining, but wait for the data and its interpretation (we even used two days of theatrical interpretation at one point). I knew, however, that any film that we produced would not be convincing if it were not firmly rooted in the data. In the end, I came back to my own personal story (auto-ethnography) to flesh out the characters and plot. All this accomplished, I then had to be brave enough to turn it all over to a film director to create the final script! (I have written about this “letting go” process in Jones, 2013)

In hindsight, I am glad that I went through so many processes as it was very much a learning and development process. I think that now I can do the next one with much less ruminating, time and even funding! The end result is very much more than a sum of its parts, if it is carried out creatively. This is what I mean by working within boundaries while changing them.

Okay, Patricia: How has working within an arts-based approach (in doing research, writing, making presentations, etc.) changed the way in which you work? Do you find yourself doing other tasks differently than you might have previously?

Patricia Leavy: Absolutely. Partly I think this simply comes from having more learning experiences. I feel like my approach to all of my work has changed after writing my novels, which were a huge learning experience as you describe making *Rufus Stone* was for you. But I think beyond that we grow from all of our experiences, using an arts-based approach has done three interrelated things for me. First, I have a new set of tools in my little researcher-artist toolkit so I feel like when I am interested in working on a project there are more options available to me. Second, I have a different perspective, and perhaps this is really the heart of the question. I look at a whole range of tasks from an artistic perspective, whether it's writing an op-ed or blog, analyzing interview data or whatever. I also have a heightened sense of the power, beauty and utility of language. It's kind of exciting because in some ways it's the

closest I have come to that feeling you have as a student when you are learning to see and think in new ways. That's how I felt when I first developed my sociological perspective and I feel that way again.

Finally, and perhaps what has ultimately been the most important for my work is that I think about issues of "audience" much more seriously. Like you, I believe in public scholarship and making our work accessible to broad audiences. I believe there is an ethical and practical mandate for getting our work beyond the academy. And frankly from a personal point of view I think about the overall impact of my work and the further we disseminate our work the higher the impact. Now no matter what I am working on I think seriously about issues of audience. My work writing arts-based novels has thus changed the way I approach writing nonfiction, op-eds, blogs, conference presentations and so on, all with respect to audience and being the best story-teller I can be for particular audiences I aspire to reach.

Kip, the issue of audience makes me think about something you and I have chatted a bit about briefly, and that's what it means to do this kind of work as scholars: what it means to work on the margins. How do you think about yourself and your work in relation to the academy? What are the challenges?

Kip Jones: Well, Patricia, you bring up "audience" and that relates for me in terms of screenings of *Rufus Stone*. Over the past two years, *Rufus Stone* has been shown to academic audiences, but also (and more important to its purpose) to a wide range people from the community. Gay, straight, young, old, rural or city dwelling, these audiences have really run the gamut. Of course, academic audiences can be just as diverse, but they do tend to come with their mortarboards on at times. I recall one such group at a London University that seemed to want to make the film only relate to their very specific theoretical bent. Now that's fine, I suppose, but not really why we made the film. Other University audience members, who are more interested in an "arts-based research" approach, are clearly relating the film in terms of the potential for their own work, yet are also expressing their anxieties and the imagined pitfalls of "moving into the margins." I try to guide them past those, but it really is a shame not to see the movie for what it is first. The purpose of making *Rufus Stone* has always been to change hearts and minds. On many occasions audience members are really inspired by it, and that makes me most grateful.

Working in a university setting where most colleagues are lecturers presents its own set of problems when "working on the margins." I was hired to do research and so that is what I do, in spite of several rounds of central reorganization and "visions" for the university over the time that I have worked here. I have shared my work and approach with colleagues and even did an arts- base change management project for the entire School a while back. A blog article (Jones & Thomas, 2013) about that arts-based approach to change management went viral (4,000 views in the first 30 days), so alternatives to the status quo in change management seemed to create a lot of interest in the wider academic sphere.

I am currently hosting an "Arts in Research" support group for others interested in this approach in their own work at my university. When I do a guest lecture for colleagues, I am very aware that this generation of students is not convinced by lecturers' recitations of PowerPoint slides. They certainly are not stimulated by such a shop-worn approach. Attention to audience means that we are sensitive to these issues and use creativity and imagination in designing our presentations for both students and colleagues. "Be present in the room. It's a unique opportunity" is my personal approach as well as my advice to audiences. I think a lot of the equipment, furniture, etc. that we use in University lectures is mostly there to assuage our own anxieties, not to engage our audiences. Step into the middle of the room; there is an amazing amount of energy there (a lesson learned from dance, by the way). I still want to do a petal drop at the end of a lecture. Someday I will. I've already used a shiny silver show

curtain on several occasions.

Because I started from a point of learning the rules first before attempting to bend them, I really don't consider my work to be on the margins at all, although others might. I see it as a progression from one point to the next, a natural evolution. I guess I am just waiting for others to catch up.

Okay, now the big question! You gave up your teaching post and decided to write and publish as your main occupation. A brave decision! How's that working out for you? Secondly, (and the question I get most): "Where can those interested in doing 'arts-based research' find funding for this kind of work?"

Patricia Leavy: Thank you for your kind words. It's funny because when I published my first novel, [*Low-Fat Love*](#), I received countless emails from colleagues including many scholars I have long admired but never met, all telling me I was brave. It's one of the comments I get most at academic conferences as well and the same has happened since I left my academic job. Of course people also ask if something "happened" at my job which couldn't be further from the truth and makes me laugh. I had a fantastic position and supportive colleagues. But the bravery thing is kind of funny because while I appreciate the compliment, I didn't see the decision to write arts-based novels as brave or the decision to leave academia to be independent. For me it simply had to be this way. I had to find a way to write and publish the first novel and the same was true for writing and public speaking full-time. I believe that as our time isn't unlimited, we need to make the most of it and while I loved teaching and see it as a privilege to be able to teach, writing and advancing arts-based research and public scholarship are my passions. I was at a place in my career where I had more publishing opportunities than I could take advantage of while teaching full-time, and more ideas I wanted to pursue. So after talking with my spouse who agreed there was no choice, it was just that clear, I left my job of 10 years (in the process of being promoted to full-professor so of course many people thought I was crazy, but those who know me best got it). I haven't looked back.

When you ask how it's going the truth is that it's going quite well but there are shadow sides too. I absolutely love my work and I feel privileged to get up each day and forge my own path. I am actually busier than I ever expected I would be, currently editing 5 book series and with 2 books that just came out in 2014 and 6 more under contract and I spend a lot of time writing blogs, op-eds, a column for the *Huffington Post* and an arts-based column called A.R.T for [creativitypost.com](#) and so on. I continue to speak at conferences and do invited talks at universities which I enjoy because it is another way of teaching and reaching student audiences. I'm busier than I have ever been which has been challenging. For example, someone asked me if I had a certain holiday off and I thought, "Gee, I don't know"-- when you work for yourself there is a tendency to work all the time and so balance is a challenge. What I enjoy most about my work life is the freedom which I think fosters creativity. I love being a free agent. I'm learning that like with just about everything else, there is a skill to being independent too. You need to think about when you want to bring other voices, perspectives and opinions in-- at what stage you share your work and get feedback. I don't have review boards or academic constraints to contend with, but if I want the work to be strong, at some point I need to invite others into the kitchen to try the soup. Sometimes these folks are colleagues, publishers and editors I respect, or my local writing buddies. The good part about making up your own rules is kind of the same as the downside.

There are also practical, daily life kinds of challenges that sometimes people don't talk about. I spend most of my time alone in my home office. We're all social beings and so this has been a big change. I've tried to compensate by joining a writing group and I have two writing buddies and I meet with each weekly. Social media has become more important to me

though then I ever thought it would. I have a community of peers I connect with daily on Facebook and this has become quite necessary for me. There is also a need to promote one's work, when your livelihood depends on it. This can be time consuming and emotionally draining.

The issue of livelihood brings me right to your question about funding. I get asked that a lot too and I never have a good answer. For those with academic positions I always suggest seeking internal funding which I had great luck with for many years. Now I use my publishers as my funding sources, through advances, grants, signing bonuses and royalties. Of course royalties are ultimately funds you have to earn by selling your books, which is one of the risky parts of working this way. I have also invested my own funds in my writing career, at times paying everything from production costs to marketing fees. I did this at first when I really couldn't afford to but I looked at it as a person starting a small business might. You take out loans you worry about paying back and bet on yourself and your own hard work. I think one of the best positions to be in is when funders or publishers are willing to fund your projects *and* you don't have to compromise or give it all away; they will fund the work that you want to create, as you envision it and they will fund it at a high level. I didn't give up my teaching gig until I had achieved that. Of course things can change quickly, and there are no guarantees, so I try to maximize opportunities when I have them.

What about you, Kip? How have you funded your projects and what is your advice to others?

Kip Jones: Wow! Great answer, Patricia. Your answer flowed so naturally. I am very much a "tale of two cities" in a sense, because I have also "flown solo" in my career before and know some of which you speak. I worked as a painter for about five years in the 1980s, living in a store-front studio and making a living by modeling for other artists and students and selling my work when and where I could. I laughed when you mentioned holidays and weekends, because I remember needing to allow myself to have them at the time. Although it was one of the most difficult periods of my life financially, it was also very rewarding in other ways and I never regret having had the experience of it.

Financial circumstances, but also because of the death of a former lover from Aids and a need to feel that I was contributing something more, made me return to community work. A lot of that work was loosely based in the arts, but the main component was people. I then decided to return to university and learn more about ways of working with people; that was when I first fell in love with doing research. Later in academia, I discovered the philosophical principles of Relational Art (Bourriaud 2002), which include concepts such as involving the public (even as co-creators) in our work through social exchange, interactivity, bring people together and creating modest connections by using the intuitive and associative aspects of communication. I knew that I had found a way to fuse my art and community interests into one dimension. Relational Aesthetics is the theoretical basis for my work in PSS.

Performative Social Science can be carried out on a small scale as well as a larger one. It is really about approaching a problem or question that we are given with a different set of tools. If you teach, for example, you already have a "captured audience" with which to experiment. In terms of funding larger projects, I like to recommend stealth. By this I mean including an arts-based research or dissemination component in a more traditional project application. Because "impact" and "public involvement" are required of funders more frequently, opportunities are presented in which to make a case for an arts-based element that addresses these newer requirements.

Even with no funding per se, we can work creatively. I really enjoy doing what I term "kitchen sink" work, that is, work that is small in scale with few resources and mostly brought about by the need to be creative, rather than answering a specific problem or question or

requiring major funding. Through this compulsion to create, I have thrown myself into making short videos, experimenting with editing, creating soundtracks, and even pushing the possibilities of PowerPoint to its very screaming limits! One of my experiments, "[I Can Remember the Night](#)", a three-minute audio-video based on a few lines from an interview, has been viewed tens of thousands of times on the Internet over the past ten years or so. It was made with basic PC software and the goodwill of a few friends. The [Sociological Cinema](#) recommends the video for classroom discussion and follow-up projects.

I will end by saying that we can write creatively as well. As academics we become very skilled at a writing style that is often criticized for being too dense and convoluted for more general audiences to grasp. I have personally found that writing a blog has not only broken many of those "bad" habits, but also allowed my writing generally to become more communicative, even poetic, and hopefully more engaging for the reader. Academic publishing is in a period of great upheaval at the moment and the need to write "journalistically" (i.e., in the style of academic journals) may all but disappear in years to come. New channels for communication are opening up to us exponentially. Creative people will naturally gravitate towards them. By communicating across platforms through social networking, a new and powerful distribution system is developing for our creative outputs. Any final thoughts, Patricia?

Patricia Leavy: Well, first I have to say that I absolutely love learning more about your creative journey. It's such a powerful example of the relationship between our personal lives and our work, how passion for creativity pushes us and the importance of learning, evolving and growing. I think you and I both chase the muse so to speak. I guess I would end with a message I have said so many times at conferences and to students which is this: be unafraid to take risks in your work, or even if you are afraid, walk through that fear. I believe that courage is rewarded, and there is nothing more rewarding than doing work you are passionate about, work that engages and pushes you. Carve your own path. Even if others see you as on the margins, like you said, Kip, others will catch up.

Kip Jones: This has been a treat to do, Patricia; thanks. My last advice would be not to live and work in silos, but let all parts of your lives flow in and out of each other. Work to play and back to work again. And really learn to see. There is a lot to be learned by looking as well as listening.

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