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Author(s): Rachel C. Fleming

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# CREATIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, AND EXCLUSION IN RURAL AREAS\*

RACHEL C. FLEMING

**ABSTRACT.** Creative economy projects appear appropriate for sustainable rural development, but the benefits and challenges of initiating a creative economy in a rural setting are not well understood. Descriptive data and qualitative research with artists, planners, and residents of Chatham County, North Carolina, suggest that, in terms of sustainability, creative economic development projects can be more effective as economic strategies than as environmental and social justice strategies. In this article I suggest that difficulties stem from conditions specific to a rural setting, including a particular relationship with landscape, scarce resources for arts-based development, social isolation and fragmentation, different concerns for artists and planners, and the nature of rural gentrification. In Chatham County, arts-development discourse, particularly the idea of “arts space,” is used as a way in which to envision the diverse rural community that artists value yet may work to obscure the exclusionary processes based on race and class that operate in rural gentrification. *Keywords:* creative economy, discourse, North Carolina, sustainability, rural gentrification.

It could be a market niche, “Pittsboro, the antidote to the hectic life.” . . . Someone needs to write a scenario to see what Pittsboro could be like in ten years if we use art, or if we have pawn shops and fast food. It’s a cross-roads community: it could be a disaster or a diamond. Art is the difference.

—Artist, Chatham County, North Carolina

As rural economies restructure, will creative economy strategies that nurture the arts and heritage resources be appropriate for the transition? Creative economy strategies often build on existing assets and are relatively economically and environmentally sustainable when compared with large-scale industry. Arts-based projects also recognize the value of art in our society and can be an important source of pride in rural communities. However, the benefits and challenges of initiating a creative economy in a rural setting, and its links to the concept of sustainability, are not well understood.

In this article I seek to determine the unique characteristics of creative economy strategies in Chatham County, North Carolina and, in a context of rural gentrification, examine links between the creative economy and sustainability. I address quantitative trends and describe creative projects in the county, then turn to qualitative research on the challenges and benefits of creative economy in a rural setting and a critical examination of sustainability, exclusion, and discourse. Although creative strategies

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✉ Ms. FLEMING is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado 08390.

appear to contribute more effectively to economic goals than to environmental and social justice goals, as is often the case in urban locales, conditions specific to a rural setting affect the outcome. These conditions include ideas about landscape and community change, few formal resources for artists, the nature of rural gentrification, social isolation, and debates over art and development.

Economic development strategies based on the arts are part of a larger shift in economic theory that prioritizes knowledge, ideas, and creativity (Castells 1996; Venturrelli 2001). Arts advocates, academics, and governments treat cultural or creative industries as a fundamental part of modern, particularly urban, economies (Mount Auburn Associates 2000; Scott 2000; Psilos and Rapp 2001; O'Connor and others 2003). Richard Florida argued that arts activity will help encourage a socially tolerant atmosphere and a revitalized downtown, which in turn will attract knowledge-based workers, or the creative class (2002). Arts projects are often put forth as examples of sustainable development because they improve community collaboration, learning outcomes for children, and civic participation, bridge ethnic and class divides, and contribute to environmental sustainability through connections with nature and "clean" industry (Darlow 1996; Matarasso 1997; Adams and Goldbard 2001; Reardon 2005).

Much of the literature on creative economies has focused on urban settings, yet many artists choose to live in rural locations near metropolitan areas because of affordable living costs, access to markets, and the attractiveness of a rural landscape (Bunting and Mitchell 2001; Mitchell, Bunting, and Piccioni 2004). Based on evidence from case studies in rural Minnesota, Ann Markusen finds that artists' centers, artist live/work spaces, and performing arts facilities are attracting extralocal spending and new residents (Markusen 2007). And David McGranahan and Timothy Wojan apply quantitative analyses based on Florida's model to find that natural amenities in U.S. rural areas are the strongest lure for creative class workers (McGranahan and Wojan 2007). Rural examples of successful arts-based strategies—such as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts; Asheville, North Carolina and its surrounding counties; and the Rockingham Arts and Museum Project in Bellows Falls, Vermont—share key characteristics, such as long-term backing by energetic leaders and multiple organizations, locations with established tourism ties, access to larger populations, and a historic downtown building stock (Zukin 1995; R. Phillips 2004; *Handmade in America* 2007). It is also important to consider sustainability in a rural community as different from that in an urban setting. A rural landscape is a place of imagination and idealized lifestyles, resulting in complex layers of urban-to-rural migration, class conflict, and land-use change (Clope and Thrift 1987; M. Phillips 1993; Halfacree 2006). Rural gentrification can stimulate rural economies and environmental preservation in a simultaneous, if contested, process (Ghose 2004); and rural environmental justice movements, particularly in the U.S. South, have linked social justice and environmental aims under a concept of "just sustainability" (Bullard 2000; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003).

Examining creative projects in terms of sustainable development offers insight into the complexities of rural and creative economies. Sustainable development is most often defined as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” from the 1984 U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development meetings (WCED 1987, 43), further refined by the 1995 U.N. World Summit on Social Development’s “Copenhagen Declaration” to include “economic development, social development and environmental protection” (United Nations 1995). Many authors have explored contradictions in the combination of “sustainable” and “development” (O’Riordan 1985; Sneddon 2000); others argue that sustainability discourse is used in a superficial manner to make development projects appear more palatable (Wilbanks 1994; Gunder 2006). The search for alternative development strategies is taking place in the context of neoliberal restructuring, in which cities and regions have had to become increasingly entrepreneurial (Harvey 1989; Jessop 1997). Place-marketing competition, which includes creative city development, can lead to increased surveillance and elite-controlled spaces (Zukin 1995; Peck and Tickell 2002), and creative strategies often neither address social inequality nor benefit local residents (Waterman 1998; Eisinger 2000). Malcolm Miles and Jamie Peck both contend that, although in theory creative economy rhetoric promotes social tolerance and environmental preservation, its implementation facilitates status quo urban development and elite-centered policies (Miles 1998; Peck 2005).

The relationship between creativity and the economy is complex and problematic, for the value of the creative process cannot be explained in economic terms and cannot be directly induced by policy (Grant 1991; Caves 2000; Leslie and Rantisi 2006). The concept of “cultural economy” has been the subject of lively debate in recent geographical literature that, according to Chris Gibson and Lily Kong (2005), has focused both on the economic geography of creative activities and on a more poststructural understanding of culture and the economy as mutually constitutive ideas (Bridge and Smith 2003; Castree 2004; Amin and Thrift 2007). David Throsby suggested that we add “cultural capital” to traditional economic categories of physical, human, and natural capital, as a way of measuring items and activities that have cultural value in that they contribute to “shared elements of human experience,” such as a historic building, a novel or a poem, a work of art or a piece of music (1999, 6). Cultural capital, which Throsby also suggests using to evaluate “culturally sustainable development” (2005, 13), is a particularly useful concept for rural settings, for it not only relates to economic value and tangible products but also encompasses subjective qualities such as place, well-being, and aesthetic values.

#### LINKING ARTISTS, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND SUSTAINABILITY

This study derives from interviews and participant observation conducted in the winter and spring of 2005 in Chatham County, North Carolina. While studying economic and community development at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I worked with a local nonprofit organization assessing the economic

impact of the arts in the state. Because many arts-based policy ideas come from macrolevel economic data, I sought to discover and address the practical obstacles in implementing arts-development projects on the ground. I chose Chatham County, south of Chapel Hill, as a research site because it has a well-established artist community and arts activities with economic development implications, yet official economic policies do not center on the arts.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the county is experiencing intense development pressure, has a growing Latino community, a historic African American population, and marked income inequality, making it well suited to an exploration of questions about arts-based economic development, rural transition, inclusion, and equity.

My approach builds on the extended case study method, combining qualitative research with quantitative contextual data (Burawoy 1998; Yin 2003), and on the ethnographic “snowball” method, which asks an initial set of contacts to name additional contacts (Bernard 2000, 179). I collected social, political, and economic statistics about Chatham County and identified organizations and actors likely to be involved in economic development and arts-related activities. I identified artists through the directory of local artists and word of mouth, attempting to gather a diverse group in terms of financial success, affiliations with local arts groups, ethnic background, and artistic medium. For arts organizations, I began with the Chatham County Arts Council and extended my research to other organizations and arts-related businesses, such as galleries, cafés, and music and art stores. I identified economic development actors by focusing on local planning, administrative, educational, and community development entities.

I interviewed thirty-eight people, including fifteen artists, fourteen arts-support actors, and nine economic development actors (Table I).<sup>2</sup> Approximately 80 percent of my interviews were formal, lasting from twenty to ninety minutes, most often at the interviewee’s home though occasionally at a public café, and the remainder on the telephone, all recorded in handwritten notes. I focused my questions on whether my interviewees saw a role for the arts in economic development and on whether they perceived obstacles or useful strategies in potential and existing arts-related projects.<sup>3</sup> I also attended several arts events—including a play, gallery openings, music concerts, an annual studio tour, and street fairs—participated in three Arts Council board meetings and one planning board meeting, and made several site visits to arts projects.

#### ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN CHATHAM COUNTY

Chatham County is in central North Carolina, adjacent to two major metropolitan areas with more than 1 million inhabitants each: the Research Triangle area, encompassing Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, three major research universities, and Research Triangle Park; and the Piedmont Triad area, including Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and High Point (Figure 1). Chatham County, by contrast is rural, with a population density of seventy-two people per square mile in 2000, compared with the state average of 165 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). It had a

TABLE I—CHARACTERISTICS OF CHATHAM COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA STUDY PARTICIPANTS

	TOTAL	MALES	FEMALES
Group			
Artists	15	7	8
Arts-support organizations, arts-related small businesses	14	8	6
Economic development, local, and county representatives	9	6	3
Total	38	21	17
Ethnic background			
White	31	17	14
African American	4	2	2
Hispanic	3	2	1
Total	38	21	17
Medium			
Visual arts (painting, ceramics, sculpture, woodworking)	10	4	6
Music (bluegrass, blues, old time)	3	3	0
Literature	1	0	1
Drama	1	0	1
Total	15	7	8

population of more than 55,000 in 2004 and is growing fast, with a population increase of nearly 12 percent between 2000 and 2004, 5.5 percent higher than the state as a whole for this period (NCOSBM 2004) (Figure 2).

The county's municipalities comprise Pittsboro, 2007 population 2,490, on the county's eastern side, Siler City, population 8,372, on the western side, Goldston, population 352, on the southern end of the county, and part of Cary, population 88, a Raleigh suburb that barely stretches into Chatham County (NCOSBM 2008) (Figure 3). Residential development is generally dispersed, most often single-family homes surrounded by acres of open space but with several upscale planned communities between Pittsboro and Chapel Hill. Between 1990 and 2000 the white population in Chatham County increased by 21 percent; the African American population decreased by 5 percent, and the Latino population increased by a remarkable 741 percent (Table II). In 2000, Chatham's population of about 50,000 was 72 percent white, 17 percent African American, and 10 percent Hispanic or Latino. Significantly, the white population of Pittsboro grew 36 percent but decreased in Siler City by 18 percent, the African American population of Pittsboro grew 48 percent yet decreased by 5 percent in the county as a whole, and the Hispanic populations in both towns grew by more than 1,000 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1991, 2001). In 2007, only one-fifth of the county's population lived in its municipalities. Between 2000 and 2007, Pittsboro grew nearly 12 percent, Siler City grew 20 percent, and the part of Cary that lies in Chatham County grew 363 percent, indicating suburban growth (NCOSBM 2008).

Chatham County's economy historically relied on agriculture, livestock, and textile production, but these have declined because the residential tax base now far outpaces commercial revenue. The homeownership rate was about 77 percent in 2000,

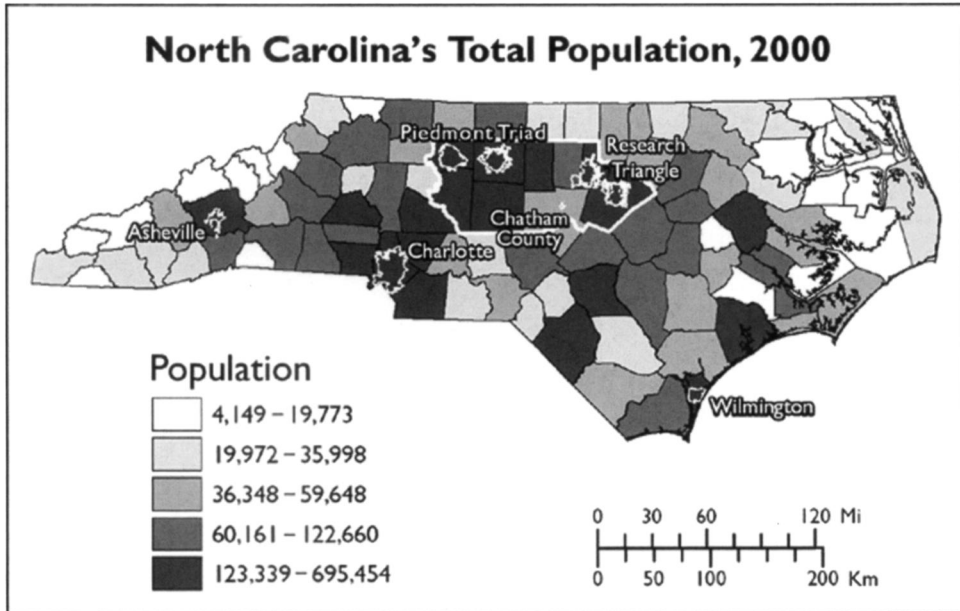


FIG. 1—The total population of North Carolina in 2000. *Source:* U.S. Census Bureau 2001, based on a map at NCSDC 2000. (Cartography by William A. Allen, Columbine, Inc. of Maine)

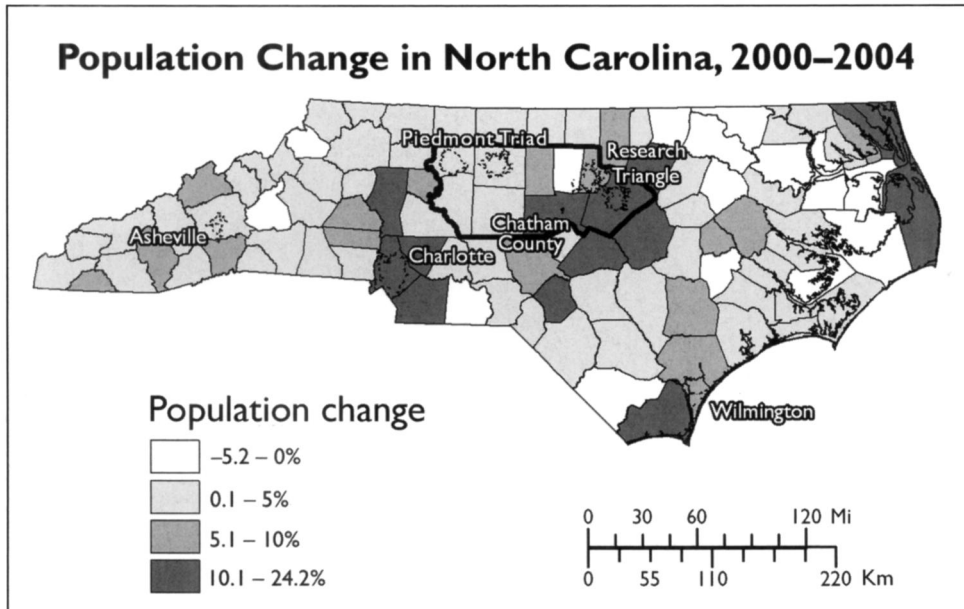


FIG. 2—North Carolina population change, 2000–2004. *Sources:* U.S. Census Bureau 2001, 2005, based on a map at NCREDC 2004. (Cartography by William A. Allen, Columbine, Inc. of Maine)

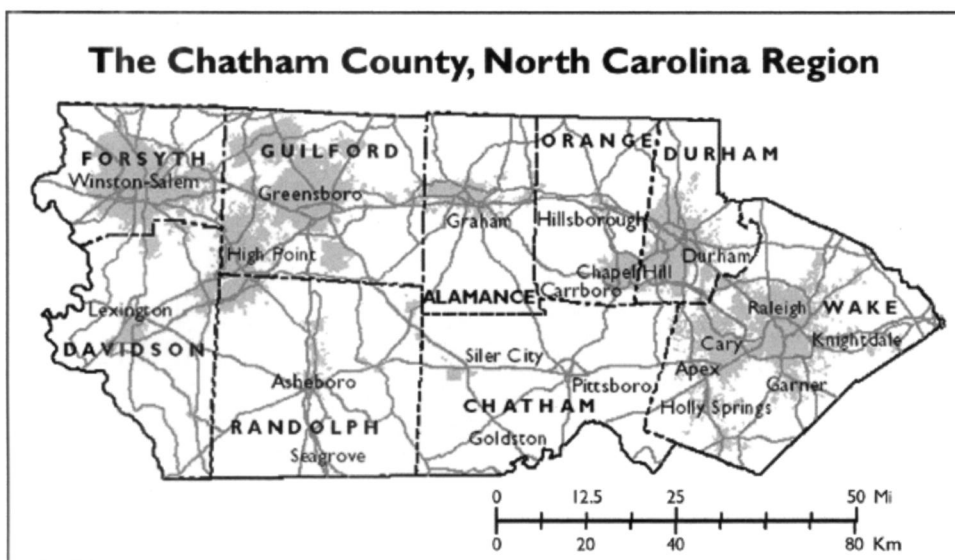


FIG. 3—The Chatham County region. (Cartography by William A. Allen, Columbine, Inc. of Maine)

TABLE II—DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN PITTSBORO, SILER CITY, AND CHATHAM COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, 1990 AND 2000

	TOTAL	WHITES		AFRICAN AMERICANS		HISPANICS	
		Number	% Change	Number	% Change	Number	% Change
<b>1990</b>							
Pittsboro	1,436	1,001		412		17	
Siler City	4,808	3,393		1,293		184	
Chatham County	38,759	29,194		8,794		564	
<b>2000</b>							
Pittsboro	2,226	1,362	36	610	48	196	1,053
Siler City	6,966	2,774	-18	1,336	3	2,740	1,389
Chatham County	49,329	35,322	21	8,355	-5	4,743	741

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau 1991, 2001.

and the median value of an owner-occupied house was \$127,000, both above state medians. The median household income was nearly \$43,000 in 2000, the sixth highest in the state; median incomes in Pittsboro and Siler City were nearly 20 percent lower (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). In 2000, more than 55 percent of Chatham residents commuted outside the county for work (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). In 2007, the private sector accounted for 94 percent of all county employment; manufacturing, for 31 percent; and arts, for less than 2 percent (BLS 2008). Finally, Chatham had the lowest retail sales in the region in 2005, having lost an estimated 55 percent of its potential retail sales to surrounding counties (CCE 2006).





FIG. 4—Downtown Pittsboro, Chatham County, North Carolina. (Photograph by the author, spring 2005)

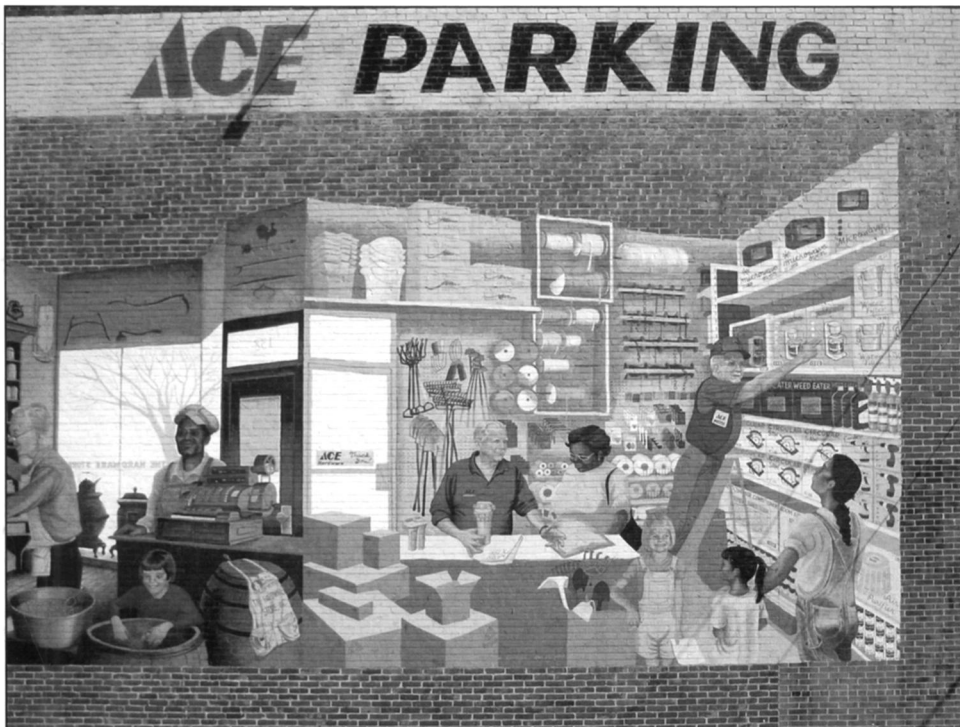


FIG. 5—Muralist Stacye Leanza's depiction of the diverse history of this hardware store in downtown Siler City, Chatham County, North Carolina. (Photograph by the author, spring 2005)

Demographic and economic trends in Chatham County indicate challenges in providing employment, retail establishments, and infrastructure for its growing population. In coming years the county will likely struggle to update its roadways, sewer and water pipelines, reservoirs, and school system, given the 15,000 new homes whose construction had been approved for construction over the next ten years and given a populace reluctant to vote for increased property taxes (Friedman 2007). Residential development is a source of fierce controversy, as a local newspaper report noted: "Chatham, which has long offered an affordable retreat for young professionals, retirees, artists and nature-lovers, is headed for widespread clear-cutting in the Triangle's most unregulated county" (Strom 2004). The controversy has effectively split the county: The eastern portion, tied to Chapel Hill and Raleigh, has organized several antigrowth citizen advocacy groups; the western portion, more closely tied to the Piedmont Triad area, is generally progrowth because it will benefit from greater tax revenue without landscape change or infrastructure problems. Although the situation in 2005 was characterized by growth, the current downturn in the housing market and overall economy is affecting the outlook for housing construction and population increase in Chatham County, at least in the short term. For example, residential building permit requests have dropped sharply, and some developments have been put on hold or are seeing slow home sales because of general problems in the housing market (Eby 2008).

#### ARTS ACTIVITIES IN CHATHAM COUNTY

Chatham has historically been home to potters, craft artists, bluegrass and blues musicians, and writers. Since the 1970s artists have been drawn to the county by the rural landscape, affordable housing, proximity to an academic community and metropolitan areas, and, over time, by the presence of established artist networks (Figure 4). More than 240 artists live in the county, working in visual, literary, and performing arts, and several arts-based projects related to development are in the area.

Many projects and activities in Chatham help artists participate in the community and local economy. A long-running annual studio tour features nearly sixty juried artists, clustered mainly in and north of Pittsboro, who sell their work to visitors from their home studios. An arts-based small business incubator, funded in part by state and local government and recently opened in downtown Siler City, provides business assistance, inexpensive studio space, and a gallery for twenty artists. Siler City also has a public art program, including murals on downtown buildings (Figure 5). The Chatham County Arts Council coordinates an online Artists' Directory (CCAC 2008), a gallery in Pittsboro, business-skills workshops for artists, an artist-in-residence program for local schools, a summer arts festival, and charity fund-raisers using donated art (Figure 6). Pittsboro also has a contemporary art gallery, a café that presents live music and sells work by more than fifty local artists, and a renovated textile mill containing small businesses, an organic food cooperative, and art and performance space. Tourists visit the county for writing work-

shops run by local authors, cooking schools at high-end restaurants, and agrotourism at one of the more than forty organic farms, some of which also offer work by local artists. Several public music events are held, such as a summer music series at a historic general store near Pittsboro and a large-scale, three-day music festival at a nearby farm.

Artists have made innovative connections with environmental and social justice causes. Several artists who first worked together making life-size chess sets from scrap metal recently founded a biodiesel plant, which makes alternative vehicle fuel. They use their metalworking skills in their new enterprise and draw visitors to the grounds through large outdoor sculptures, informal dance performances, and amateur film shoots. Artists are also part of a green building boom in Chatham, collaborating with builders on homes that feature green design and custom interior painting and detailing. The local community college is a site of informal networks, drawing artists and environmentalists through thriving programs in ceramics, sustainable farming, and green building. In addition, artists volunteer their time in local schools and social service organizations, help run a foundation that supports local blues musicians, and regularly donate work to charity fund-raisers.

Minority populations in Chatham have a wealth of talented artists and artistic entrepreneurs who are not well represented in formal art organizations. African American artists in Chatham include painters, quilters, writers, and a large group of musicians who draw on traditions in blues and bluegrass-style string music. One African American musician and entrepreneur owns a successful music staging business, allowing it to employ local youth, support gospel music in church, and run a small recording studio at reduced rates. An artist from the substantial Latino community in Siler City creates complex airbrush paintings for automobiles and restaurants, and another makes decorations from dolls, glassware, and craft trimmings for weddings, baptisms, birthdays, quinceañeras, and other events. Latino artisans are employed in the construction industry, and musicians play in mariachi bands for hire. However, at the time of this research, the Chatham County Arts Council board had only one Latino member and no African American member (CCAC 2008), very few minority artists are listed in the Arts Council's Artists' Directory, and none is either on the studio tour or represented at the arts incubator.<sup>4</sup>

#### CREATIVE ECONOMY IN A RURAL SETTING

Its rural setting offers a particular set of resources to artists in Chatham, who expressed a great appreciation for the beauty of the rural landscape, in addition to county's affordability, access to a large market, and nearby university communities. One successful artist explained that he had moved to a rural part of Chatham from elsewhere in the state for several reasons, including "the beauty of the county, its artistic reputation, a diverse and tolerant community, and the ability to afford a nice house." Another artist described the intangible value of the setting, saying, "I live in an old farmhouse on many acres that feed my growth and development but that wouldn't show up on economists' radars!"



FIG. 6—The Chatham Arts Gallery in Pittsboro, Chatham County, North Carolina. (Photograph by the author, spring 2005)

All groups expressed some ambivalence about the role of the arts as an economic engine and provider of a social good. Most of the economic development actors considered the arts important for society but did not think they should be publicly subsidized, in part because of their subjective, unquantifiable value and because other demands, such as maintaining the county's infrastructure, were more pressing. Arts supporters countered that arts should be publicly subsidized because of their role in the community, variously stating that the arts "enrich people's lives through enjoyment and participation," "contribute to learning, especially for children," "create a unique identity for Chatham and Pittsboro," and foster an inclusive community by "creating meeting places for different people." Although some artists referred to their role in the local economy, they emphasized how art contributes to personal growth, helping people express their identity and putting emotions into tangible form. Artists were split about whether they should receive subsidies, some insisting they should succeed or fail like other entrepreneurs, others explaining that the market does not account for the full value of their work. One artist expressed both a desire for support and fierce economic independence: "I'd love to be able to work less and be paid more! But so does everybody else in the world. My biggest need is for the economy to remain healthy, for people to have good incomes

to spend on art. I also need more time to develop my ideas. I'd like more freedom from economic constraints, . . . but I'm not expecting it to be given to me." Despite this tension, artists suggested many avenues for government assistance, such as helping them find health insurance, marketing the arts, giving grants to individual artists and art in the schools programs, and sponsoring festivals and performance venues.

Art differs from other industries because of its solitary nature, which is amplified in a rural setting. All of the artists said they tend to work alone, and a writer added, "Writing doesn't have any visual or immediate result. . . . It's very contained, solitary, reserved work." One person suggested that artists in general are individualistic and hard to organize, so, without a representative organization or an official spokesperson, their concerns are difficult to represent to politicians. Most artists also pointed out that the arts are difficult to promote in an organized way because they are so diverse and unique, explaining that word of mouth and self-promotion were more effective than formal marketing campaigns. They did, however, appreciate limited collaboration in the Artists' Directory, participation in the studio tour, and sharing Web site and mailing costs. Other artists said they do not need local promotion because their market is international and Internet based.

The individual isolation of artists and paucity of resources for arts projects contribute to a fractious environment for arts-support groups. The Arts Council negotiates a tension between its aim to assist artists and its need for artists' donations and volunteer time. After collaborating for more than ten years, the studio tour formally split from the Arts Council, at least in part because artists on the tour felt that the council was more involved in bringing art to the public, often by asking artists to donate work or volunteer for charity events and festivals, than in assisting artists as businesspeople. Other artists chose not to participate in the tour because it is juried, which they viewed as overly exclusive. Most artists were skeptical about the incubator project, one because it only allows incubator artists, not artists from the studio tour, to display their work in the gallery; and another described "geographical cliques" of artists in particular areas of the county.

I found little interaction between artists and economic development actors, due in large part to the divergent nature of their daily activities, and almost no common places where artists and government representatives cross paths or have occasions to work together. For example, both groups considered the café in Pittsboro that sells art a gathering place for artists but not government representatives, even though it is adjacent to municipal buildings. None of my interviewees was a member of both an arts organization and the county's economic development commission, and few artists or arts supporters had participated in local government beyond antigrowth advocacy. Furthermore, planning and creating art are fundamentally different activities. One planner insightfully characterized the difference: "Art is transformative, while business is a transaction, and can the two ever meet?" The planner went on to note that planning has a regulatory nature and takes a long time to produce something, whereas art is not regulated, does not need much infrastruc-

ture in order to create, and visible results occur relatively quickly. Artists speculated that they differed from economic development actors because they did not prioritize economic success. For example, some artists said they did not want to expand their business, despite high demand, because they were satisfied with their current level of work and income, and other artists said they would not sell their work to developers or other projects with which they did not agree.

Each group's perceptions of the other groups of interviewees were generally misinformed and at times overtly judgmental. Several in the economic development group speculated that artists would be difficult to work with because they imagined artists to be poorly organized and not serious businesspeople. One suggested that, for artists to be taken seriously, "They have to dress the part—they have hands covered in paint and clay, or they're in tie-dye dresses—they must come in with a business plan." Some countered that they saw artists as intelligent and hard working; others stressed their respect for artists who held a second job, as many of them did. However, several interviewees wanted to see economic data on the contribution of the arts to the local economy and expressed concern about artists who avoid paying sales tax on their work by selling it "under the table." When informed of these speculations, the artists emphasized that they did pay sales taxes; one exclaimed, "I'd be afraid not to!" When asked whether they worked with "economic development officials" on any projects, many artists thought I meant developers. When I clarified that I meant local government officials, several artists reported that they did not work with economic development entities except when applying for home studio permits. Planners, however, did not see themselves as aligned with developers, but rather as intermediaries; as one said, "We're more involved in just dealing with all the new development requests and trying to manage them in a controlled way." A businessperson remarked, "The common ground is money: Everyone wants money, but it will take work. Each group needs to come to the table and let down the barriers," suggesting that a partnership between artists and planners must come from mutual interests.

Social fragmentation also affected the involvement of minority groups in the arts. As noted, few minorities were involved in the studio tour, Arts Council, or the arts incubator despite some efforts to reach out. For example, when the Arts Council noticed that few minorities were at a summer music festival in 2003, they invited local African American gospel choirs and a school step group to the 2004 event. These performances attracted a large African American audience, but, as an observer noted, "the council got people there, but they still stood separately." A spokesperson told me that the arts incubator was trying to establish ties with Siler City's Latino population by working with a nearby Hispanic store owner and by looking for a translator, remarking, "We've been trying desperately to get Hispanics here . . . and we've been doing some things for low-income people as well, such as offering free space and help with business plans." However, another incubator affiliate thought that the Latino community was "more interested in soccer and their own social events" and added that the language barrier was a major problem. An African

American arts supporter suggested that the low level of minority participation in formal arts activities had to do with a lack of initial contact and cultural differences: "There's talent out there, but who's tapping it? No one is bringing them forward. African American artists do want to become known, but they don't know who to ask about how to do it and aren't comfortable asking people of another culture about it. They need to have a place [in which] people feel welcome, comfortable." African American musicians were also negatively affected by the lack of performance venues and the critical mass of people and other musicians who typically support live music in urban settings.

Given the level of social disconnects in Chatham's creative economy, how do people connect through art projects? Art engages people in dialogue because it is often intentionally challenging or disturbing; as an arts supporter noted, "People are afraid of art. If it's cows it's fine, but a naked woman! Not fine." Several projects rely on people who have experience in many social groups and work as intermediaries, translating literally and culturally. For example, the art incubator's founding director convinced public officials to offer financial support because he could, as one explained, speak to them "in numbers."

#### RURAL DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, AND EXCLUSION

Groups in Chatham County saw the role of development differently, each in a distinctly rural context and with different implications for sustainability. For the most part, economic development actors saw the definition and purpose of development in terms of growth, specifically attracting commercial and industrial development, creating jobs, and increasing the tax base. Many felt that economic development should also contribute to the quality of life in an area, and one mentioned "sustainable growth" as important. A major concern for economic development actors was the lack of infrastructure in the county, in terms of old or insufficient water and sewer systems, roads, and public schools, whose maintenance directly affects low-income populations. Many were concerned that residential taxes would rise due to development, resulting in a lack of affordable housing, and many felt an urgency to attract industry and commercial development to relieve some of this tax burden. One lamented Chatham's uneven wealth distribution, noting that the county does not qualify for many state rural development grants due to its wealthy northeastern section. Artists saw development in a similar way, in that they believed it should provide jobs and help county residents make money. However, all respondents emphasized that maintaining a high quality of life is a crucial goal of economic development, and several talked about equitable distribution of benefits from growth, environmental stewardship, growing in a "controlled way," and improving educational opportunities for residents. Arts supporters also thought development should improve the local economy and quality of life for everyone. Significantly, most also thought the purpose of economic development was not to develop the county too much or too fast, stressing the need for sustainable small businesses, maintaining the character of the area, reducing out-commuting, and encouraging tourism. One

planner remarked, “There is no good communication; everyone says they’re not in the loop with development.” Overall, most of my interviewees seemed confused about the evolving characteristics of impending development.

The nature of rural gentrification seems to pit different groups in Chatham County against one other. Many artists and arts supporters saw this division as one side of the county against the other, or as liberal newcomers against conservative old-timers, and as a choice between “good” development, with arts-based businesses and restaurants in small towns surrounded by preserved countryside, or “bad” development, in the form of homogeneous subdivisions and big-box stores. Although some artists and arts supporters realized that they could not begrudge new residents—because some are recent arrivals themselves—they wanted the county to retain a sense of rural beauty and uniqueness. An arts supporter argued that the county needed to attract people with innovative ideas, “well-paid people with time on their hands to support the arts,” through promoting the arts, a healthy environment, and other amenities, such as “dark night skies, a rural landscape, a healthy riparian zone, recreational opportunities, and high-tech connectivity”; an artist suggested that arts-based businesses would “bring quality people out.” This awareness of the benefits of attracting the “creative class” acknowledges that this type of growth has a better chance of supporting the arts and protecting the environment than do other types—and also that it is a form of gentrification.

When discussing the issues of impending development, gentrification, social divisions, or what government could do to support the arts, artists and arts supporters expressed a desire for “arts space” or “community space,” often envisioned as a way to “bring people together,” twenty-six times in twenty-nine interviews. Representative examples of arts space discourse are:

A performing arts center . . . with gallery space, and exhibits . . . would bring community together, artists together.

A performing arts center would foster community spirit.

Art space could bring a sense of cohesiveness. . . . You’d work with people you’re not politically aligned with, you could help at-risk teenagers, there would be less litter, less crime. It would be a good image for the town.

We need venues for artists to sell work and for performing[,] . . . we need a space for crossing over of social and economic groups.

Public music brings different populations together in Chatham.

The problem is there is [a lack of] community space in Chatham; there is no regular space in Chatham where I see black people and will run into them. How can we have economic development and arts without having space to have a burger with a black person? The dilemma is [that] most people in Chatham . . . like diversity and are open-minded, but it’s also [highly] segregated.

We need a community space, but it’s not on the agenda because the energies are directed now for or against the new development.



People from different backgrounds and social groups do communicate through creating and consuming art, and public art programs have turned out to be impressive community development strategies. However, in Chatham what art spaces would offer minorities or low-income residents, or how they would bring people together, is not clear. Just because people are in the same room does not necessarily mean that they will make a genuine connection or that institutionalized racism or poverty will be affected. The sentiment reveals good intentions about a figurative space to connect with different people, and perhaps anxiety about the trade-offs of gentrification, in that the arts community clearly values a diverse community and wants to help marginalized people. The artists' antigrowth efforts may slow gentrification, which may keep the cost of living affordable, but neither result is guaranteed. If sustainability includes meaningful action to improve the quality of life for low-income residents, then the economic development actors, who must address infrastructure and affordable housing due to the nature of their jobs, are thinking more concretely about equity. Members of the arts community involved in social justice charity and volunteer work are also working toward social equity. Instead of talking openly about race, class, and gentrification, however, envisioning a future with a physical space for the arts becomes a way to avoid these uncomfortable topics while expressing a desire for social and economic equity. Arts development discourse is not used in a pernicious way to justify capitalist development, but it can nonetheless work subtly to steer the debate away from equity and toward obscuring the injustice of gentrification.

#### TOWARD MEANINGFUL SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL CREATIVE ECONOMIES

My study of Chatham County identified several challenges to sustainability efforts in rural creative economies, with implications for geographical theory, further research, and practical application in terms of resource availability, social fragmentation, and the role of arts discourse in gentrification. First, rural settings have resources, such as natural beauty, rural landscapes, and small-town social communities, that are not necessarily available elsewhere. However, rural governments and organizations do not often have the resources to support artists formally, because of a lack of funds, but also because the artists are relatively few in number and because supporting entities do not have common goals. Building trust through projects that benefit both policymakers and artists, along with understanding creative workers as a diverse group, are important features of successful creative economy projects (Banks and others 2000; Lloyd 2002; Markusen 2006).

Second, although arts organizations run by artists themselves seem to be most useful in negotiating for artists' needs, in rural settings artists are often socially and geographically isolated, making organizing or planning projects more challenging. In addition, though by no means limited to rural settings, lack of social overlap between artists and planners contributes to competing discourses. Social fragmentation can be exacerbated by the particularities of rural development, which in this case is relatively secretive and divisive. A clear, open dialogue between developers

and community members would help guide development to fit the landscape and community goals.

Third, gentrification and exclusion are complex processes whose ties to race and class are referenced in particular discourse. In his study of urban change in London, Peter Jackson found that race is talked about not directly but through discourse about “modernity,” “neighborhood change,” and “Englishness” (1998, 103). Loretta Lees found that governments in the United States and the United Kingdom use the terms “livability,” “environmental sustainability,” and “sense of community” to promote urban redevelopment and obscure the inherent inequality in gentrification processes (2000, 393). Although the presence of artists often presages gentrification, David Ley reminded us that this is not the artists’ fault but the result of factors largely beyond their control, with artists often themselves the victims of rising prices (2003). In North Carolina, as elsewhere, Community Land Trusts have been effective in creating affordable housing for artists as well as other low-income residents and merit consideration for more widespread application.

Further study of rural gentrification through the lens of creative economy, using qualitative and quantitative methods, would contribute to understanding the role and meaning of art in our communities. Music is a promising topic for research on social interaction, particularly for understanding minority participation in the creative economy. In addition, it would be useful to more specifically characterize social relationships, such as applying a networks concept to trace economic interactions and social processes, and to better define the role of intermediaries. Finally, if the goal of sustainability is to benefit everyone in a community, under what conditions can arts-based activities effectively accomplish it? Further defining the meaning of sustainability for creative projects will shed light on this and other issues in the culture/economy debate.

In the preface to his treatise on arts and the economy Bruno Frey stated, “Without a sound economic base, art cannot exist, and without creativity the economy cannot flourish” (2000, v). In practice, creativity and economics are intertwined: Artists must become businesspeople to have a career; a strong economy leads to greater support for the arts; and innovation and creativity contribute to ideas and a vibrant society. Still, involving art in a planned project is complicated, in part because art expresses intangible values and ideas that are intensely personal, intuitive, and resistant to being induced. As the situation in Chatham County indicates, we should strive to better understand the complexity of these projects. Involving artists in sustainable planning holds great potential, but such efforts, if implemented with the boilerplate superficiality present in so many civic arts plans and without talking directly about uncomfortable issues like race and inequality, will lack the vitality and meaningful treatment of sustainability that inspire personal commitment and true innovation.

#### NOTES

1. The Chatham County Arts Council lists more than 240 member artists in its online directory, but because there is a fee for listing, many artists are not included in it (CCAC 2008).

2. In order to protect the confidentiality of my interviewees' statements, I describe my respondents only in general terms. The real world is not as simple as my three-part grouping suggests: Many interviewees fit more than one category, each category is nuanced, and views differ markedly within each group.

3. Although I used specific questions to guide formal interviews, I allowed interviewees to expand on topics that interested them. The questions covered such items as: how the interviewees defined "the arts" and "economic development"; what they thought the role of the arts and of economic development should be in the community; whether they believed that the arts had a role in economic development and, if so, how the arts were currently contributing to these strategies or could be used in the strategies; whether tensions or barriers might be preventing these strategies from working or being initiated; and what means of addressing tensions were currently working. I also asked artists about their major career concerns and whether any organization or network was helping them in their work, and questioned both artists and economic development actors about whether they could see benefits or drawbacks to working with each other. I ended each interview with an open-ended question about any issues the respondents believed were important but had not yet been addressed.

4. I evaluated minority participation in arts organizations in 2005 through personal experience with the Chatham County Arts Council board meetings and by cross-checking member directories with personal communications and some field visits. Because statistics on ethnicity are not recorded for these organizations, no definitive figures on minority participation exist, but by investigating several sources I believe my evaluations are reasonably accurate.

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