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Rethinking the Creative Economy: Utilizing Participatory Action Research to Develop the Community Economy of Artists and Artisans

Leo Hwang

Artists and artisans have a crucial role in the sustainability of the creative economy. By utilizing a participatory action research approach seeded by the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Julie Graham's study of community economies in the Pioneer Valley, The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project demonstrates how a collaborative research methodology can reappropriate development from the exploitation of artists and artisans as a panacea for economically challenged communities and as a tool that can help perform a postcapitalist environment. The project seeks to promote the specific assets and strategies of artists and artisans in ways that will benefit the broader community by providing a thriving cultural milieu in which creative expression is valued and embraced and in which the explicit inclusion of a diverse economy fosters both the possibility and the reality of an improved quality of life.

Key Words: Community Development, Community Economy, Creative Economy, Participatory Action Research, Performativity

Many of the methodologies used to approach development of the creative economy are based on traditional metrics and need-based approaches that were developed for industry. The traditional metrics often disenfranchise people from the statistics that represent them and often have little bearing on their day-to-day activities, even as the statistics define the possibilities and capacities of artists and artisans. The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project seeks to validate the diverse economies of artists and artisans using participatory action research and asset-based community development methodologies to create alternative narratives, landscapes, and approaches to performing the community economy of artists and artisans through community-produced knowledge.¹

1. Henderson (1995) helps conceptualize participatory action research as a methodology that emerges out of Paolo Freire's blending of scientific research with education and activism. Participatory action research utilizes a collaborative research process that includes participants in the design and execution of the study; gives value to experiential and popular knowledge; focuses on empowerment and power relations; participates in raising the consciousness of all participants; and generates political and social action to change unequal power distributions in

The project co-coordinators, Abby Templer and I, propose that a noncapitalist framework allows the reconceptualization and redefinition of economy and economic development in a way more inclusive of marginalized populations—in this case, the artists and artisans of Franklin County, Massachusetts.² What we have found in working with community-based researchers is that the artists and artisans are capable of producing a rich representation of a rural postcapitalist economy and a rich milieu of assets and successes, as well as challenges and complications, that are framed by the artists and artisans' own conceptualizations of economy and economic success. With the Fostering Art and Culture Project (a network of artists and artisans, cultural and civic organizations, and businesses seeking to strengthen the creative economy through the dissemination of best practices and fostering collaboration), we are creating a venue where these data can be shared and disseminated across Franklin County and beyond so that what is initially discounted as anecdotal or fringe data can be embraced as valid and important knowledge about the region.³

The research project explores three main concepts: How can a community shift from a narrative of subjugation to a narrative of empowerment? What alternative realities are generated when the knowledge of artists and artisans are valued? And, what can we learn from the ways artists and artisans participate differently in a diverse economic setting?

Shifting from Needs to Assets

Within a regional context, Franklin County is variously perceived as a place of postindustrial detritus littered with vacant buildings, high unemployment, and deep-seated poverty; a rural frontier region rarely explored and, in many places, untouched by cell towers or high-speed Internet; and in comparison to the counties

society. Asset-Based Community Development emerges out of the work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), who present an alternative model for development that forgoes a fixation on needs and instead focuses on a community's capacities. By mapping the assets of individuals, associations, and institutions, an inventory of possibilities emerges. Utilizing endogenous strengths allows for action and agency in contrast to a needs-based assessment that is reliant on exogenous sources of funding or action for solutions.

2. While Abby Templer, co-coordinator of the project, was unavailable for writing this article, she was a central figure in generating the study and is, at least epistemologically, an invisible co-author of the piece.

3. Emerging from a study commissioned by Congressman John Olver in which Mount Auburn Associates identified health, renewable energy, and the creative economy as clusters to pursue in the Northern Tier (the Route 2 corridor along the northern border of Massachusetts), the FACP was formed in 2005. This partnership currently includes area artists, the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce, the Shelburne Falls Area Business Association, the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, the Franklin County Community Development Corporation, town planners from Montague and Greenfield, RiverCulture, Double Edge Theatre, and Greenfield Community College. The FACP pursued and received initial funding through the Massachusetts Cultural Council's John and Abigail Adams Grant and subsequently pursued and received funding from federal appropriations through FIPSE and the Department of Transportation and also a subsequent round of the Adams Grant. The author has served as chair of the FACP and currently is a board member.

to the south (with the Five College system) and west (the Berkshires), a place that is defined by its absences, whether they are cultural venues, restaurants, or places of employment. What we have found, to the contrary, is that Franklin County is a place burgeoning with assets. When we ask the community to redefine Franklin County as a place with agency and possibility rather than as a place of only needs and passive subjugation or neglect, the county becomes a fertile place for developing alternate visions of a community economy. The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project is a way to allow the rural artists and artisans of Greater Franklin County, Massachusetts, to define their own economic activities and contexts.

Within the broader creative economy discourse, Richard Florida introduced many to thinking about the creative class as an economic engine. For Florida (2002), this translates into a cluster economy stratified by a hierarchy of job skills, focusing primarily on urban and suburban settings that have a much higher population density than Franklin County. The focus remains on developing a capitalist economic structure, one that replicates centers of industry and manufacturing. The work of Markusen (2007) on the rural creative economy, particularly her work to develop a consumption-base theory, introduces an idea of utilizing art and culture as a means to move away from a lack of agency to an opening of possibilities. Markusen's "non-economic" practices are a transition point from where one can enter into the broader structure of Gibson-Graham's diverse economy and build on the practices we first learned about from the Community Economies Collective to generate empowerment and self-definition within communities by communities. When looking at development from only a needs-based perspective (what is lacking in an economy), the data are incomplete and the solutions that emerge are therefore inadequate and dependent on funds, skills, and people found outside the community.⁴ A community economy approach seeks to fill the lacunae with a more inclusive vision of a diverse economy where a focus on noncapitalist economic practices allows us to envision a postcapitalist existence that is inclusive rather than exclusive of noncapitalist and alternative capitalist practices.⁵ Furthermore, taking a performative stance as a researcher allows for the research team to privilege the knowledge generated from the project to promulgate an alternate reading of the economy and offset the customary privilege of a capitalocentric reading of the economy.

The dominant narrative of Franklin County is one of deficit, absence, and lack, which feeds into a negative subject position for those living in the region and which restricts the horizon of possibility. Cameron and Gibson (2005, 319) portray a similar narrative in the Latrobe Valley:

Our concern is that this dominant and oft-repeated local representation of a destroyed Valley hides and even undermines the diverse range of economic

4. I insert a clear bias in that any development tactic that willfully, or by neglect, does not utilize data that could assist in aiding a community is not going to be as successful as an endeavor that is intersectional, inclusive of both assets and deficits, and recognizes a diverse economy.

5. As Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) relate, a glass that contains water is neither empty nor full but is both half-full and half-empty simultaneously. To ignore either reality is deficient.

activities that are practiced in the alternative sector, and that might be the basis for further economic development.

Perhaps even more concerning is that the constant repetition of the representation of a destroyed and decimated Valley fuels the despair and hopelessness felt by many. It robs residents of any sense of economic possibility other than to be dependent on special assistance packages from government or the benevolence of a yet-to-be-secured major employer. It reinforces the subject position of dependence prevalent during the days of the SEC [State Electricity Commission of Victoria] and reinforces a sense of powerlessness and victimhood.

Similar to the Latrobe Valley, Franklin County in recent history has been challenged and at times defined by the “dominant and oft-repeated local representation.” This negative representation manifests itself in a sense of disconnect between Boston and its suburbs, where policy and budget are created and prioritized, and rural Franklin County that is neither Cape Cod nor the Berkshires (the traditional tourist attractions for Massachusetts).

On a more personal level, one of our interviewees, Deborah, relates, “One of the things that you guys may have discovered or may not, is that when you’re looking for work and you’re not working, you’re isolated and that isolation diminishes your sense of yourself and your capacities, and anything you thought you might be able to do, or that came naturally to you, is gone.” This is the same loss of agency that Cameron and Gibson write about with the coal miners in the Latrobe Valley. To varying degrees, as manufacturing, farming, and the associated industries and small businesses have shifted to urban or overseas locations and to larger-scale or more specialized production and as the multiplier effect of an export-base economy has dissipated, many of the residents of Franklin County have experienced a similar sense of isolation and the loss of an irretrievable industrial past. This sense of isolation and loss manifests itself in high rates of substance abuse, spousal abuse, and financial distress and low rates of education, in addition to high levels of unemployment or underemployment.

To shift away from a portrayal of need and absence in Franklin County as the defining narrative and to focus instead on assets (the existing local capacities and practices that can improve the quality of life for a community) requires an activist stance by the research team. Clearly, there are real needs and challenges to the artist and artisan community in the region that range from a lack of affordable live-work housing, to inadequate access to healthcare, to challenges stemming from a lack of access to consistent sources of income. Additionally, as identified by the Fostering Art and Culture Project’s own regional marketing plan, there is a need for advertising and outreach to tourism markets. However, the assets of artists and artisans and the ways they manage to find ways to subsist and sometimes thrive are often overlooked as marginal and irrelevant to the economic identity of the region.

The multiplying effect of the artist and artisan’s noncapitalist economy extends far beyond just the artists and artisans. It includes farmers who barter food for art, music, or skills; local hospitals and doctor and dentist offices who commission art, barter for services, and support local cultural events; restaurants and bars that incorporate informal gallery and performance space in their venues, and that may

exchange food, drink, under-the-table pay, and sponsorship for services. These relationships are reciprocal and symbiotic. Artists and artisans give farmers access to publicity and design work that they might not otherwise be able to afford; they help create aesthetically pleasing environments for patients in medical offices, whether art lovers or not; in some instances they extend an educational component to the public through commissioned work; and in a rural region, a small increase in customers to local eating and drinking establishments can make the difference between a successful evening or one that does not cover expenses.

The Quality of Life

When we set forth to strengthen the creative economy, there remains the question, why do we want to do these things? Segedy (1997, 66) reminds us of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society as a way to center the work of economic development and the creative economy: "The Great Society is concerned not with how much, but how good—not with the quantity of goods, but with the quality of our lives." First Lady Michelle Obama (2012) writes, "The arts and humanities define who we are as a people. That is their power—to remind us of what we each have to offer, and what we all have in common. To help us understand our history and imagine our future." However, many of the advocates of economic development within the creative economy utilize a capitalocentric discourse driven by a fixed vision of what constitutes an economy as used by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) in their document, *The Creative Economy: A New Definition*.

All of these efforts reflect NEFA's goal to update New England's creative economy data and analysis using a more consistent framework focused on the production and distribution of cultural goods and services, and to collaborate with others engaging in this research on the local, state, regional, national and international levels. Our creative economy model purposefully upholds a conservative definition of the standard, U.S. federal data categories that should be used as a foundation for research, while allowing for local refinement and adjustment to these categories to account for local geographic differences and advocacy purposes. (DeNatale and Wassall 2007, ii)

By utilizing a standardized definition of economy to define success, the solutions to problems emerge in a standardized capitalocentric export-base epistemology driven by a needs-based approach. The apparent solution to identified needs is to fortify capitalism in order to address absences:

In order to meet this goal, [the Fostering Art and Culture Project] is working to design and implement a marketing strategy that will help to improve the income of local artists and performers by targeting new audiences for their products, as well as to enhance the image of the region as a center for creative industry development. This will help to improve the quality of life for residents. In order to achieve these goals, emphasis will be placed

on attracting outside dollars into the region by targeting both day trippers and overnight visitors, as well as those interested in purchasing art produced in Franklin County through eCommerce. (Fostering Art and Culture Project, 2010)

Clearly, for certain segments of the creative economy, increasing exchange within a market system can increase artists and artisans' ability to address needs such as healthcare and housing. However, for a rural region without easy access to capital, funding diverted for marketing tourism often must come from existing allocations, such as employee wages, or must be garnered through often unpredictable grant cycles. The actual increase in earnings for individual artists may be small. Alternatively, utilizing an asset-based approach to a diverse economy where a definition of economy is inclusive of noncapitalist practices—and utilizing that as a starting point rather than as an afterthought or counterpoint—we can begin to examine the multiplicity of activities that help shape the quality of life for the people we most wish to impact.

While some of the aspects of quality of life can be addressed through capitalist practices, the noncapitalist practices of the diverse economy are just as (if not more) important and valuable for sustaining the quality of life that artists and artisans are seeking. Says Rethinking the Creative Economy Project researcher Jeanne Douillard:

She has a cooperative gallery, that's how I learned about her, and I started working here. She has a couple of [pottery] wheels. Just about the time I was trying to figure out where I was going, her mom developed a serious medical issue so she could no longer work in the gallery. So we came to an agreement. When I am there I cover the gallery, I answer the phone, I help customers as they come in, and I make things for her that that she needs for her work. In other words, it takes away some pressure and that's the way it worked out. We work collaboratively with developing glazes with colors and our work is very different so it has been a really nice working relationship that is mutually beneficial to both of us. I am not paying a fee to work there, but I am working in lieu of paying a fee. It is helping me because I am learning a lot of things about areas of clay work that I really don't have much experience with.⁶

Jeanne has found an arrangement that utilizes her assets: she is a vivacious wonderful person with a lot of experience in gallery sales and working in collaborative studios, and this enables her access to a studio within her limited monetary means. Jeanne's partner gains a gallery and studio assistant to ease the situation with her ailing mother, and both of them are able to continue a creative practice.

6. The interview with Jeanne Douillard and all following interviews were conducted by Abby Templer, Leo Hwang, and the Rethinking the Creative Economy researchers from Fall 2010 through Spring 2011. Transcripts are available by written request to the author.

Embracing Diversity

Carla, one of our interviewees, talked about how people of varying incomes seem less segregated than she has experienced elsewhere (what she calls “higher economic situations” and “lower”). This desegregation enables the possibility of a relationship between the producer (artist) and appropriator (patron/collector), and the possible redistribution of assets that can occur with it. “I think what I really love about being out here is that there is a really strong sense of community between people of higher economic situations and lower. I don’t feel like it is segregated at all like it is in other places where I have been. So I feel like people of different backgrounds, especially economic backgrounds, all seem to mix together out here over cultural connections.”

It is through cultural connections that segregation breaks down so that diversity can be experienced rather than just perceived. This diversity is an asset that is clearly utilized in noncapitalist exchanges, where a patron with excess assets might gift space (an underutilized barn, for example) to a painter who possesses no such resources. Such exchanges enable a redistribution of wealth or assets garnered from a primarily capitalist economy, albeit temporarily, to a noncapitalist mode that otherwise might not exist.

In a 2001 lecture to the Community Economies Collective, Julie Graham described the diverse economy as embodied in Ken Byrne’s illustration of an iceberg (Gibson-Graham 2006, 70). The section of iceberg that rises above the water is visible and therefore tangible. In our case, this is the capitalist wage-labor economy. The diverse economy encompasses all of the activities held within the upper (therefore visible) and lower (below the waterline) sections of the economy. The noncapitalist economy is hidden below the water but is often far more massive in scope and size than the visible capitalist economy.⁷ What we see and recognize depends on the theoretical choices we make.

My interpretation of the underlying message of the iceberg metaphor is that the prominence of the capitalist economy is dependent on the noncapitalist economy and that it could not maintain its visibility without the accompanying buoyancy of this submerged (and therefore sometimes unnoticed) part of the economy. I like to imagine that we are swimming in this very cold ocean, and even as our heads are above the water and fixed on the capitalist economy, our bodies are entirely submerged in the noncapitalist economy. Extending the metaphor, to not recognize the scale and scope of it is to risk a tragedy of Titanic proportions because a capitalocentric focus on the economy inflicts a damage on noncapitalist economies through neglect, willful or otherwise, which in turn could have a correspondingly large impact on the broader endeavor of an economy.

A diverse economy is recognized as an asset, often subconsciously or implicitly (rather than consciously or explicitly), by many in Franklin County who purposefully choose to live in the region in order to balance quality-of-life issues with the potentially fewer or lower-paying sources of income from capitalist exchange. For Carla, who very consciously engages in diverse economic practices that prioritize

7. For a detailed description of the categories constitutive of the diverse economy see Gibson-Graham (2006, 71).

noncapitalist production and exchange, the community economy enables her to exist outside of the stigma and lack of agency that she might otherwise be placed in if she were valued solely on her annual income or material assets:

I don't feel the people around here are bursting at the seams with all kinds of money, but I do not feel like this is an impoverished area because I don't think that I am unique in the sense that I grow my own food and I barter and trade for things and I save scraps of material for projects and things, and I think that this region is very rich with resources and resourceful people. They do anything and everything they can to live very fulfilled lives even if it is not monetary fulfillment.

Within the rural environment of Franklin County, a community economy is not a panacea. Clearly, there are challenges and needs that can be difficult to address solely through the community economy. When the relationships that generate exchange within the community economy break down, particularly in a rural region where distance and isolation can accentuate the loss or absence of a service or need, the delicate balance that many of our artists and artisans tread between agency and a lack of agency, or subsistence and a more dire poverty, can be easily upset. Nevertheless, the fact that the balance is fragile or imperfect does not negate the positive impacts that most certainly alter the life circumstances of artists and artisans. The challenges that emerge from a community economy need to be examined as grounds for possibility, just as incipient with flaws, imperfections, bounty, and capacity as a capitalist system. However, in a postcapitalist framing, the community economy has a greater capacity of possibility than in the capitalist economy, primarily because policy and practice have not yet fully embraced its existence and potential.

Revealing the Unknown

The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project proposes that utilizing a performative approach—where artists and artisans are both the source of knowledge for factors that impact their quality of life and the source of solutions to their economic challenges—can raise awareness about creative approaches to a diverse community economy and can create better pathways to development of the creative economy than can standard export-base economic practices. By raising the profile of artists' contributions to the economic sustainability of the region, we can better value the endogenous assets already present in the region.⁸ By strengthening assets, like Carla's self-provisioning and bartering networks, communities can generate a greater return on an investment that directly impacts people, rather than hiring a firm to modestly increase tourism through a campaign targeting international travellers. We can also

8. Sustainability in this context is created by economic practices that express conservation and reuse of resources, practices that for artists may originate from limited access to capital but that also emerge from an ethic that usurps profit for creative expression and the ability to maintain that creative expression even with limited resources.

begin to imagine an alternative way of surveying an economic landscape and creating economic development plans that serve to subvert and invert the paradigm so that noncapitalist and alternative capitalist practices are primary and capitalist practices are relegated as secondary, less successful options for improving the quality of life for individuals and communities.⁹ At the core of our research is defining the purpose of any economy as an inclusive system that seeks to improve the quality of life for all people,¹⁰ and to do that, communities need to reappropriate how development efforts and funding are distributed and theorized.

The research team is taking a performative approach to research, starting from the epistemological position that “knowledge [is] a practice of performing the world that we live in, and perhaps more importantly of performing the world that we *might* live in” (Cameron 2008, 6). This approach follows the intellectual tradition of J. K. Gibson-Graham to highlight and support existing diverse economic practices through our research, aiming to enact the world we want to inhabit. A performative approach recognizes that research is not value-neutral; rather, the research team’s values become the launchpad for performing the community economy.

When asked in one of the initial training exercises to define an economy, our artist and artisan researchers spoke predictably of stock markets, commodity speculation, and a disconnection of the economy from the actual lived lives of most people. But once we reframed the question with the concept of a community economy, utilizing Gibson-Graham’s iceberg diagram, demonstrating how a clock can be utilized to inventory the work contained within a day, collaboratively defining what qualified as work and what was a thing of value, and mapping individual and group assets, the concept then felt like common sense and like something the artists and artisans were already intuitively engaged in.

To reframe how and what we question and what we assume to have power, each of our activities, each of our actions, becomes a feature in the landscape of an interconnected socioeconomic geography. Capitalist practices, diverse economic practices, and community building practices all work together to help produce the environment we inhabit and seek to inhabit.

For another of our interviewees, Lynn, using a different measure allows one to step outside of a predetermined vision of success. Hers is a measure that prioritizes a vision of life that is less tied to hierarchy, prestige, or revenue, and more intrinsically linked to exploration and creativity. “I think the best reading of success [is to ask], do I have a really interesting life that sustains itself? Yes.” Certainly, Lynn is concerned with generating income from her work as a printmaker, but she is aware of maintaining a sustainable balance between her ultimate goals and what she needs to generate to afford rent and her other basic needs.

9. We can see some of these techniques in action with the hybrid research collectives occurring in Mindanao and Australia (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009).

10. From personal communication with Julie Graham, 12 August 2008. In my first encounter with Julie, on a sunny afternoon in August on the patio outside Rao’s Café in Amherst, Massachusetts, she posed the question, “What is an economy?” We settled on this definition, and I think in later years she would have expanded the definition to include all living things in our biota.

To reconfigure epistemology is to reconfigure ontology in a way that is not so different from the willing theater patron.¹¹ The world is one that unfolds with a complexity that asks to be contemplated and not taken as a random moment in time but as an act that has been carefully crafted and shaped by a community. The world that unfolds asks for imagination to fill in the space between ideas and gestures, and the mind, when goaded to comply, does. What we see are not actors on stilts waving flags but great windmills on a landscape.

It is here that we confront a choice: to continue to marginalize (by ignoring or disparaging) the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration, or to make them the focus of our research and teaching in order to make them more “real,” more credible, more viable as objects of policy and activism, more present as everyday realities that touch all our lives and dynamically shape our futures. This is the performative ontological project of “diverse economies.” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 6)

This “performative ontological project” creates new physical environments of reality, and within this action is the formation of an ethics that embraces performance, that asks us as academics to pursue the imaginative, to embrace the empathic exhortations of the players, and to succumb to the desire to join in the act of creation.

If the capitalocentric form of fulfillment comes from consumerism—the ownership of products, of things—then the fulfillment of a community economy comes from the act of creation, the fruition of creativity (creative expression), the manifestation of an ethical imagination.¹² To become aware of creation is to spawn the desire to contribute to its creation, to foster its fruition, to honor its emergence into the reimagined space of possibility. “What if we were to accept that the goal of theory is not to extend knowledge by confirming what we already know, that the world is a place of domination and oppression? What if we asked theory instead to help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility?” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 7). By sharing the ethics of possibility and diversity, we can help others recognize that different realities are being performed constantly all around us. By recognizing the action and actors, how we are participating as passive or active subjects, and that there are reliable and unreliable narrators, these realities are drawn into focus and begin to take form. We can become literate participants rather than passive observers.

11. We pondered the direction of this relationship: can people whose ontology is based on a capitalocentric worldview engage in diverse economic practices that become the transformative medium through which they rethink their ontology and engage with the world through an altered epistemology? We are excited at the prospect of both flows.

12. One of my esteemed reviewers asks if there is no creativity in capitalism. Most certainly there is, but an ethical repurposing of that creativity can redirect its energy, profit, or benefit in different directions. Within the community economy, the artists and artisans, singly or in groups, decide how to embark on endeavors and how the benefits from those endeavors are distributed. In the capitalist system, the profit from the creativity is presumed to trickle down to local communities, but rarely is there an intentional mechanism for this to occur.

By extending the understanding of space, possibility, and reality, we simultaneously clarify how the performance is constructed and make even more transformative the capacity for the performance to transcend the perceived limitations. Environment becomes a metaphysical construct as well as a physical one, and this expands and enriches an understanding of how we interact with the performed reality. "With this vision, rather than treating the local as naturally inward-looking and parochial, we might engage in ethical projects of extending the local imagination to what is outside, enrolling an understanding of place 'as generous and hospitable' ... The academic task becomes not to explain why localities are incapable of looking beyond their boundaries but to explore how they might do so" (Gibson-Graham 2008, 10).

The creativity of performance is built upon interactions that extend across a whole community. It is the recognition of the linkages of interconnectivity that help produce assets that are tangible and real for people. And it is through the interconnectivity of relationships that the value of these assets can increase. According to our interviewee, Will: "The folk artist is someone who recreates a traditional piece and filters it through their own sensibility, and their own intelligence, and lets it come out the other side as something that is faithful to ... the tradition but maybe even adds, changes it some way, and then you give it to somebody else and they change it in some way and you don't own it any more. They own it." For Will, the storyteller's tradition is constantly evolving, but it is dependent on interconnectivity, not only with an audience, but with an audience of other storytellers who can utilize a knowledge-commons resource, claim ownership of that resource, and then return it back to the knowledge commons, whereby the knowledge commons increases, the variation of a story increases, the capacity to communicate with people from varying locations and backgrounds increases.

Building from assets is a fortifying action, one that calls upon individuals to work within expanding circles of radii encompassing greater definitions of community. The closeness of an immediate family grows to encompass all the actors who are upholding an environment. For an alternate environment to exist, to be hewn out of the capitalocentric space, the actors need to be recognized and nurtured. What is beyond the capitalocentric experience, beyond its capacity for empathy, is a richness filled by the diverse activities that build the community economy.

Performing a Community Economy

Inhabiting the diverse space of a community economy are people like Moonlight Davis, one of our researchers, who was able to perform an alternate reality in the small downtown of Millers Falls, a former tool-manufacturing community. Moonlight is a talented musician and photographer and, at the time of the research project, was the proprietor of the Faces and Places Gallery. In our conversation with Moonlight, he talked about the role of the gallery as a community gathering space. He welcomed community members coming in and talking about their problems and dreams, and

though initially worried about the impact of his gallery on the community, he came to see the gallery as a way to give something back to the community he grew up in.

A lot of the local people came in, and some man who was sort of ignorant cried, because he had never been to any kind of a gallery before in his life. None. So that sort of changed me some, and so after that, a benefactor ... said, "This community needs you, Moonlight. This community needs you to do what you do right here, right on this corner. Don't quit it." And I said, "But I don't have no money to keep this up." And she said, "Don't worry about it. I'll cover you for a few months."

Moonlight's vision was not without substantial obstacles. As an African American man in a county that is predominantly white, he faced bias and prejudice even while economic and social difficulties continued to create substantial challenges, including the eventual closing of the Faces and Places Gallery. Despite the hardships Moonlight has endured, he continues to persevere with an openhearted approach to serving his community and his vision of humanity through his music, photography, and interactions with people in a broad community that extends beyond Millers Falls or the boundaries of the county. His experiences add to the community-generated knowledge about what is possible in Franklin County.

Exploration of diverse community economies can create change that strengthens community on a local scale and that opens up opportunities by recognizing existing strengths and identities and by simultaneously bringing into existence—into possibility—multiple identities, multiple realities, multiple narratives.

In most PAR [participatory action research] the subject is understood as having a deep and pre-existing identity that is repressed or alienated by structures, like capitalism and patriarchy. With the right trigger— involvement in PAR—"hitherto stifled thoughts and voices" and the "capacity to envision a freer world lying dormant in the oppressed consciousness of subjugated people" will be released, placing the subject on the road to emancipation and liberation. In poststructuralist thought there are no depths to plumb for the subject's true essence or identity; rather the subject is understood as always in the process of becoming, of being shaped in a multitude of ways by various discourses and practices. (Cameron and Gibson 2005, 317)

We aim to work with individuals to define their own narratives within a diverse context of noncapitalist, postcapitalist, poststructural identities where the intersectional contradictions are embraced and/or discarded.

Fabiola, an interviewee, is a Haitian American dancer, painter, jeweler, and activist, who seeks to empower people who have experienced social or economic disparity. She has done this through collaborative teaching projects where she helped young people express themselves and their identity by deconstructing connotations of color and then creating their own artwork where they were able to define how gender, race, and identity could emerge on their own terms.

Fabiola expresses a spiritual worldview where her life's experiences and aspirations lead her to believe one must give to others in order to receive what one needs. This outlook has enabled her to maintain a faith in possibility even when faced with adversity. At the same time, Fabiola has been able to find ways to be resourceful, whether by selling her art and jewelry in consignment shops in Brazil as her only source of income or in her choice of materials from nonmarket settings.

I care about my work, but I don't ever feel like I am limited by money at all in what I can and can't do. Since I know and I feel that there is such an abundance of things, if I financially can't afford them, just thinking outside of that construct, maybe it's \$10 for this tube of paint ... You can't have this unless you have \$10. Well maybe if that's the case, instead of paint I would use mud. And that ends up being more powerful than any \$10 tube of paint that I could use on a painting.

Fabiola also highlighted the importance of barter, not only for physical goods, but also for knowledge.

I also love exchanging knowledge for knowledge. I know how to do this and you know how to do that. And you teach me how to do this and I'll teach you how to do that. That's what makes us family, and that's what the brother does with the sister, and a mother does with her daughter, and the dad does with a son. So when you do that, that interconnectedness and mingling, there is so much to learn and to benefit from.

The interconnectedness that occurs between people when they share knowledge is explained by Fabiola as the generation of family. Like Will, the storyteller, or Moonlight with his gallery, when knowledge becomes an exchange, people achieve a deeper connection that is more akin to a familial relationship.

As Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004, 116) remind us, "Communities produce knowledge. The personal beliefs an individual holds only become knowledge when they have been legitimated by society." The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project aims to collect stories, narratives, practices, information, and data from individuals, to utilize the skills of a small group (our researcher cohort), to use individual experiences to develop broader but applicable ideas or themes, and then to carry those back to the larger community on individual scales, small group scales, and in large community gatherings. Our goal is to facilitate the creation of community-produced knowledge.

In his interview, researcher Eric Deluca, a musician, consultant, and current U.S. representative for the United Nations Year of Cooperatives, talked about the generation of data by artists:

In the creative sphere, you're actually creating your data. And the ... U.S. Patent and Trademark Office supports that. So if you create something that's new and you codify it: "Here's the words, here's the chords, here's a recording of it," and you send it down to the Library of Congress, they'll be like, "OK, that is now data." It was nothing and now it's something, and

because it's original, that's the criteria for making it data. So rather than thinking of it as visual thinking, I would think of it as kind of cultivating a relationship with pattern recognition.

In thinking about creativity, art making, and songwriting specifically, Eric relates the generation of data to pattern recognition, an ability to pull together impulses and disparate thoughts into something coherent. Often, in our meetings with the researchers, Eric would draw during our discussions and then share a diagram or visual mapping of the ideas we were working on. I likened it to a kind of visual thinking, but for Eric it was more akin to songwriting, or pattern recognition. These elements of a diverse economy exist in the environment we live in, they impact our lives; therefore, arranging them in a recognizable way allows abstract ideas to take on meaning that may be personal for both the songwriter and the listener, for example, even if their personal connection points do not emanate from an identical experience.

Phyllis Labanowski is a researcher and multigenre activist artist focusing on issues of race and class in her work. Phyllis's personal practices mirror her professional aspirations, where she participates in a community that pools resources for mutual and individual assistance. She organizes Water Dances, a series of interactive community performance art projects that integrate music, visual spectacle, and a spiritual connection to the environment. She is a curriculum developer and trainer for Class Action: Building Bridges across the Class Divide, she publishes small handmade books focusing on social issues, and she most recently contributed to *Created Equal: A Curriculum for High Schoolers and Middle Schoolers on Class and Classism*.

Phyllis is working to collectively educate and empower artists to utilize their assets as things of value for their community. Rather than allowing these talents and skills to be counted as free resources, Phyllis wants both artists and community members to recognize them as assets that can be exchanged for other things of value, whether that is currency or seed garlic.

I say the time of the lone wolf is over and we've got to start organizing ourselves. There's these arts organizations doing some really fun things and there's a funding cycle that it comes and it goes, but we need to strengthen ourselves so we are no longer allowing ourselves or our brothers or sisters get exploited. "We want you to give us another free ... Can you organize this for free for us?" No! I need to be able to pay my bills too. I think it's trying to figure out an equitable redistribution for labor where we all make it together.

Artists and artisans are central to the creative economy. By incorporating the diverse economies framework in a way that is inclusive of their assets and the full range of work they do, a reality can manifest itself in a way that strengthens communities and enables the realization of new possibilities through a new localized understanding of development and agency. The needs experienced and expressed by regional artists do not go away, but foregrounding the tools artists use to achieve success, as Lynn the printmaker defines it, opens a window into a new way for artists to think about the

work they do—it opens new sources of valuation. By disrupting the over-focus on needs, asset framing opens the door to revaluating existing practices.

Deborah, an interviewee, is a painter, community activist, and consultant. She was an art major in college, but it wasn't until late in life that she returned to painting. After a threadbare but utterly exciting pilgrimage to New York City, where she held a series of jobs to finance her art classes, she moved to Franklin County where she hoped to find an easier balance between the cost of living and quality of life. Deborah discussed how important the gifting of studio space was for her as she established herself as an artist in the area. The space was invaluable for the actual creation of her paintings, but also was instrumental in inspiring her creativity.

I was at a political meeting at Greenfield's Coop Market and met Ava ... and when she learned I was an artist and didn't have ... studio space, she said, "Oh, we live on this farm and we have all these buildings and they're not being used, come on down!" So I went down ... and spent quite a bit of time cleaning that out and then brought down all my paintings and set up ... It was just a wonderfully productive time, so I exhibited those paintings. And when I first exhibited them at McCusker's I was able to thank them, in a sense, for the opportunity.

Deborah's experiences seem to have imbued her with a focused sense of purpose and the fortitude of perspective. Her actions have direct connections to her passions and aspirations. She walks through her life seeking opportunities that allow her to continue pursuing her passions and aspirations, and because she seeks out those opportunities, she is able to find and act upon them.

Simultaneously, as Deborah seeks out opportunities to pursue, other people in the community, affected by the passion and dedication Deborah demonstrates in her painting and community activities, respond in kind, helping open doors to possibilities that might be readily available but that are not often utilized, like the barn turned into a painting studio.

Conclusion

Calling the everyday practices of artists and artisans economic moves the economy from an abstract thing that individuals have no control over to something tangible and actionable. This provides both an opportunity to validate the creative economic arrangements of the artists (allowing them to see themselves as economic actors) and also a set of practices that can be a model for other artists and regional developers.

Julie Graham advised us, "Start where you are." Utilizing the assets of our researchers, our artists and artisans, we started with their assets and gifted them with value. From there a transformation occurred from an identity wrought with needs into an identity of power and agency, where they then had the capacity to induce change within themselves and the population of peers that they interviewed.

And finally, artists with transformed identities can then perform that agency in the broader community in which they participate.

The Rethinking the Creative Economy Project uses poststructuralist participatory action research to disrupt the capitalocentric and needs-based development discourse for the creative economy in Greater Franklin County, Massachusetts. We have borrowed this strategy from Jenny Cameron, Katherine Gibson, Julie Graham, and the Creative Economies Collective. It is an approach that uses disruption to foreground economic diversity and community assets—a particularly good fit for the creative economy.

Much of the economic activity of this sector falls outside of traditional measures that rely on lodging statistics, tax receipts, and household income. By focusing on noncapitalist practices and a diverse economy, we can engender agency where there once was a narrative of subjugation.

Similarly, when we place value on practices that artists and artisans are engaged in, narratives of survival and success, as defined by the artists and artisans, emerge. Even the narratives of failure have inspired our research team to learn and try again. We found that artists and artisans in the region are motivated by a variety of values—community building, creating and sharing beauty, and working for sustainability and social justice.

By disrupting the capitalocentric needs-based development discourse, a space has opened for regional artists and artisans to define themselves as economic agents and to see their work and values as supportive assets with the potential to transform and perform what was once seen as marginal into a viable alternative, a resource to nurture and grow. By defining their own vision of success and prioritizing creative expression, a quality of life can be experienced by artists and artisans, even if it is simultaneously experienced with challenges and hardships. This recognition of a poststructural existence and its multiple realities is central to helping artists and artisans recognize avenues for expanding possibility, and it is central to helping a community evolve to provide more inclusive and intersectional resources for all of its people.

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