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The Rise of the Creative Underclass

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10 ABSTRACT. In this article, Tyler Denmead draws upon critical race theory to argue that the  
11 creative city discourse reproduces racial injustice for youth. In particular, the creative city  
12 invests in the property rights and profitability of whiteness by inscribing creative superiority on  
13 the bodies of young people who are more likely to be privileged by virtue of their race and  
14 class. Through evidence collected by both autoethnographic and ethnographic methods,  
15 Denmead discusses how his history as an arts educator has been entangled in the manifestation  
16 of this racist reconfiguration of urban space in one particular American city, Providence, Rhode  
17 Island. He discovered that the racial dynamics of the creative city discourse have productive

1 power over how young people construct their identities and make life choices in this city and,  
2 further, that those dynamics operate in and through artist partnerships between those  
3 positioned as creatives and those positioned as troubled youth. As a result, Denmead argues  
4 that white arts educators, in particular, must disinvest themselves from notions of creativity  
5 that enhance the profitability and power of whiteness. This move requires advocating ceding  
6 land and resources that have been acquired through the creative city discourse and committing  
7 to reframing culture-led urban renewal in terms of the economic and creative flourishing of  
8 communities of color.

## 9 Introduction

10 In this article, I argue that the creative city is a racist expression of urban life, one that  
11 reproduces racial inequalities for young people of color, particularly from low-income and  
12 working-class backgrounds. As a policy discourse, the creative city constructs cultural  
13 representations of young white people as the right kind of creative and the shift toward a city  
14 with more young white people as the right kind of urban renewal. In so doing, the creative city  
15 disproportionately accrues property advantages to those who benefit from whiteness.  
16 According to critical race theory, the property advantages of whiteness include, broadly  
17 speaking, disposition, reputation, and status, as well as the right to exclude and displace.<sup>1</sup> I  
18 argue that the creative city invests in the profitability of whiteness by valorizing cultural norms  
19 and practices associated with young white creatives — their dress, speech, local knowledge,  
20 and consumer preferences.

21 To illustrate, I present autoethnographic and ethnographic evidence collected through  
22 research conducted in Providence, Rhode Island, over the course of several years. This research  
23 is situated in a city that engaged in state-sanctioned urban renewal efforts aimed at building an  
24 association between Providence and the image and identity of creative youth. I show how arts  
25 and humanities education for youth can become implicated in the manifestation of structural  
26 racism mobilized by this now conventional script for urban renewal. Opposing the racial

1 injustice of the creative city requires both disinvesting in the property rights of young white  
2 people as creatives and reconceptualizing creative urban renewal in terms of investing  
3 primarily in the creative and economic flourishing of young people of color.

4         Here, I offer a brief account of my history in Providence, to set the context for my  
5 research. In 1997, I founded New Urban Arts, a community-based arts and humanities  
6 organization, in Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>2</sup> I led this interdisciplinary storefront studio until  
7 2007, when I left the organization to begin graduate school. On returning to New Urban Arts in  
8 2012, this time as an ethnographic researcher, I set out to investigate young people's  
9 interpretations of their symbolic cultural practices in the storefront studio. New Urban Arts  
10 provides predominantly low-income and working-class youth of color between the ages of 14  
11 and 18 free space, materials, and support after school and during the summer as they engage in  
12 and celebrate their arts and humanities inquiry. Their inquiry is supported by trained artist-  
13 mentors who are often former youth participants in the program and/or undergraduates,  
14 graduate students, and alumni of local elite higher education institutions including Brown  
15 University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

16         During this ethnographic research, I encountered perspectives from some youth alumni  
17 of the program that suggested to me that I needed to reflect critically on how my own  
18 leadership, particularly as someone who was positioned as a young white creative, as well as  
19 young people's relationships with artist-mentors, have become entangled in contradictory ways  
20 with the urban renewal process. On the one hand, these young people's perspectives pointed to  
21 the fact that I had played a key role in creating the pedagogic conditions for young people to  
22 develop and to theorize creative practices that trouble their subjectification as culturally  
23 deprived members of an "underclass."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, I was a "gentrifying force," as one  
24 former youth participant put it, who had helped to reconfigure Providence at the expense of its  
25 youth participants. This irreconcilable record unfolded as Providence embraced the  
26 conventional creative city script in order to transform itself, through the discourse of creativity,  
27 from a depressed postindustrial city into a young and hip, affluent and white, lifestyle

1 destination.

2 My leadership was a contradiction because at this point in time Providence, branded the  
3 “Creative Capital,”<sup>4</sup> presented claims and intentions that were never compatible. Chief among  
4 these was that programs such as New Urban Arts could and should transform its “troubled  
5 youth,” in the words of Providence’s cultural plan,<sup>5</sup> into “creative youth.” That is to say, the city  
6 was invested in a new political subjectivity —what I am calling the *creative underclass* — that  
7 comprised working-class and low-income young people of color who are legible within the  
8 context of the Creative Capital as creative. Forming a creative underclass is at odds with itself  
9 because it professes social inclusion and economic mobility for young people of color from low-  
10 income backgrounds (“troubled youth”) while, at the same time, remaining invested in the  
11 cultural and economic dominance of young, educationally credentialed, politically liberal,  
12 relatively affluent, and often white people (“creative youth”). This contradiction was easy for  
13 me to ignore because I was set to profit from this new urban vision as one of the good white  
14 creatives who transformed troubled youth and cultivated this creative underclass through my  
15 leadership at New Urban Arts.

### 16 Providence, the Creative Capital

17 When Providence branded itself the “Creative Capital” in 2009, this was just the latest  
18 iteration of the city’s longstanding effort (beginning in the 1990s) to use arts and culture as a  
19 means of urban renewal. There are different ways to theorize the emergence of Providence as  
20 the Creative Capital. From a Marxian perspective, globalization could be interpreted as the  
21 determining factor. Following the Second World War, Providence endured decades of industrial  
22 decline as capital sought cheaper means of production elsewhere. Providence was particularly  
23 valuable because of its reliance on low-skilled jewelry manufacturing and textile jobs.<sup>6</sup>  
24 Providence had the country’s highest unemployment rate during the Global Financial Crisis,  
25 and manufacturing employment has declined 43 percent since 2000 to 41,000 workers.<sup>7</sup> In the  
26 context of this local economic crisis, Providence has been attempting to transform its  
27 postindustrial economy into a symbolic consumer economy, as Sharon Zukin describes it.<sup>8</sup> That

1 is to say, the city is turning to personal consumption and the service industries to revive its  
2 economy, and it can be more successful in that effort if the city's brand conveys to consumers  
3 that they acquire creative status through their consumption of lattes and lofts.

4         The emergence of the Creative Capital could also be interpreted as a response to a local  
5 political crisis. When I arrived in Providence in 1994, the city had suffered for decades from  
6 political corruption. The city's longest serving mayor, Vincent "Buddy" Cianci (first serving in  
7 that role from 1975 to 1984, and then again from 1991 to 2002), resigned from office twice as a  
8 result of felony charges: one charge was for an altercation with the alleged lover of his wife,  
9 from whom he was separated at the time, and another for racketeering conspiracy. The brand of  
10 "creativity" provided Providence with a positive image; its uplifting creativity rhetoric was  
11 useful to rising politicians, who attempted to distance themselves from the political corruption  
12 of the old guard by associating themselves instead with the creative cool of youth.

13         While these political and economic factors are crucial to understanding the emergence of  
14 the Creative Capital in Providence, my focus in this article is on the interplay between the  
15 rhetoric of creativity and the social and cultural factors of race and class in the city. The reason  
16 for this focus is that Providence has historically been divided along lines of race and class. In  
17 1950, Providence was more than 95 percent white. Today, Providence is a "majority minority"  
18 city; 62 percent of the population is non-white. Latinx individuals, who may or may not identify  
19 as white, comprise more than 40 percent of the overall population (180,000 in the 2010 census),  
20 as well as a majority of the public school population. These residents are often first- and second-  
21 generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, and Colombia. As  
22 Providence diversified in the twentieth century, it became racially segregated through a history  
23 of discrimination, including redlining. At the same time, Providence is home to two elite higher  
24 education institutions that stand on College Hill, a neighborhood overlooking the city. Forty-  
25 two percent of students at Brown University are white, and the median income of students'  
26 parents is \$204,000, the highest among Ivy League universities.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Providence has  
27 struggled with one of the highest rates of urban childhood poverty in the country.<sup>10</sup>

1 I would argue that race has the greatest explanatory power in interpreting the need for  
2 state-sanctioned urban renewal projects such as the Creative Capital. Race has been a key factor  
3 in shaping symbolic interactions and the social distribution of power and resources in American  
4 life, particularly in cities. When I arrived in Providence in the mid-1990s, for example, Brown  
5 undergraduates such as myself were often warned not to go off campus due to the fact that the  
6 city was presumed to be disorderly and dangerous. This representation of the city obviously  
7 ignored the fact that our own campus was a place where young people did drugs as the city's  
8 total population, drank excessive amounts of alcohol, roamed the streets in unruly and loud  
9 mobs, and committed sexual assault. In other words, how was it safe to stay on campus?

10 The reality of life in Providence during the 1990s was, for the privileged, distorted by the  
11 lens of race. Richard Lupo, owner of a longtime music venue in downtown Providence,  
12 described the dominant perspective on the city among white people at that time as follows:  
13 Providence was seen as a place where "scary youths" traveled the downtown streets in cars,  
14 making it "scary to stand on Westminster street at 10 p.m."<sup>11</sup> While the race of these youths is  
15 left unstated, the image that this cultural representation conjures up for white people is  
16 predictable. They are young people of color, and their threat to society is manufactured and  
17 distorted through this representation of them as "folk devils."<sup>12</sup> Crucially, Lupo argued that this  
18 image stood in the way of real estate speculation and property development. To renew the  
19 downtown area, Lupo appeared to suggest that these youth needed to be contained and  
20 managed elsewhere.

21 In 2003 Richard Florida published a proposal for the creative city that provided a  
22 different image of urban youth, one that would be key to the racial and economic  
23 transformation of cities throughout the United States.<sup>13</sup> The image of urban youth as "creatives"  
24 suggests, as Arlene Dávila puts it, "the highly educated, white, liberal, Brooklynite independent  
25 writer."<sup>14</sup> Such a connotation is just the kind of image that disinvested and politically corrupt  
26 cities need, one that appeals to property developers seeking to capitalize on real estate  
27 speculation. From this perspective, creativity is not framed as a psychological skill. Creativity is

1 a performative lifestyle, an aesthetic, that is now associated with white youth. Young people  
2 perform this creative subjectivity, and this subjectivity performs on and through them, in the  
3 clothes they wear, the movies they listen to, the coffee they drink, the technology they use, the  
4 urban gardening they do, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> I know this performative script well because I have  
5 lived it.

6 Crucially, the performance of this urban subjectivity (that of the creative) has become  
7 integral to the notion of urban progress through this creative city discourse. In terminology  
8 used by Frantz Fanon, cities become better as they are “lactified” or whitened.<sup>16</sup> This whitening  
9 occurs as these young white creatives move into the cities that their parents and grandparents  
10 had fled, a move that is not simply a matter of choice or the invisible hand of the free market,  
11 but, significantly, the culturally produced desire to acquire creative status by living in cities  
12 represented as newly hip and cool (and increasingly white). By contrast, young people of color,  
13 whether they are engaged in creative practices or not, are linked to trouble and to the past. They  
14 represent stagnant cities or cities on a downward spiral, and, indeed, are scapegoated as the  
15 cause of that stagnation or downward trajectory. As a result, these youth are positioned as those  
16 who need to be contained and managed, or developed into creatives.

17 If James Baldwin were alive today, he might say that the creative city is code for  
18 removing communities of color.<sup>17</sup> It accelerates that removal through investing in and protecting  
19 the property of rights of whiteness. Given this racist dynamic of urban renewal, the creative city  
20 must be interrogated with the help of critical race theory in the formulation of political  
21 strategies that fight for racial and youth justice.

## 22 Critical Race Theory and the Creative City

23 Race is what Stuart Hall refers to as a “master category”: a system of classification that  
24 has had great purchase on American social life.<sup>18</sup> Race is insidious because it has no basis in  
25 biology, yet power operates through race, producing material effects by insisting that race is  
26 natural. Race works culturally through the social exchange of language, signs, and images,  
27 producing meanings that are inscribed on people, that bring into being possibilities for how our

1 racial lives are lived and understood, as well as how power and resources are shared and  
2 distributed (or not).<sup>19</sup> Race is a master category, Stuart Hall argues, precisely because it can  
3 “float” as a signifier.<sup>20</sup> Precisely because it has no basis in the natural world, difference and  
4 relations of power can be structured and restructured dynamically through constructed  
5 associations with ethnicity, religion, caste, nationality, language, and other identities, such as  
6 that of the creative.

7         In the United States, white people have historically invested in racist cultural  
8 representations of themselves as superior and representations of people of color as inferior  
9 because it has been profitable for them to do so.<sup>21</sup> These representations help support and  
10 legitimize the unequal profitability of whiteness in various ways, such as guaranteeing higher  
11 wages for white people, buttressing real estate speculation in white neighborhoods, and  
12 securing intergenerational transfer of white wealth. Whiteness then is not only a racial identity  
13 but valuable property, one that white people invest in and protect through their everyday  
14 interactions, institutional arrangements, and the law.<sup>22</sup> It is easy for white people such as myself  
15 to invest in the idea of the creative city and ignore its racial injustices because it is profitable for  
16 us to do so. We can guarantee and protect our upward trajectories through, as Charles Mills calls  
17 it, “white ignorance.”<sup>23</sup> The creative city positions us alone as people in society with the best  
18 skills and dispositions needed to kickstart the economic and cultural life of cities. That symbolic  
19 terrain opens doors for us.

20         Key to this critical interpretation of the creative city as racist is what bell hooks calls  
21 “real estate racism.”<sup>24</sup> Hooks argues that “racial apartheid (in the United States) is maintained  
22 and institutionalized by a white-dominated real estate market.”<sup>25</sup> Race and racism influences  
23 which neighborhoods white individuals choose to live in, who landlords rent property to, and  
24 who is able to borrow and buy. Historically, white people have associated the increased  
25 presence of people of color in neighborhoods, especially blacks, with the downward trajectory  
26 of property values.<sup>26</sup> White people fled urban neighborhoods when people of color, particularly  
27 black people, moved in, and they then fought hard for policies and practices that benefited

1 them, including school segregation.

2 Curiously, real estate speculation and stagnant wages have made it increasingly difficult  
3 for young, class-privileged whites to find housing that is affordable for them in cities where  
4 they are finding jobs. As a result, these young people have been far more likely than their  
5 parents to move into neighborhoods historically populated by poor and working-class people of  
6 color. Ironically, these white young people enhance their cultural status by signaling that they  
7 are politically progressive and racially tolerant through their proximity to people of color while,  
8 at the same time, participating in a social pattern that is ultimately racist and classist.<sup>27</sup> Their  
9 class power and their symbolic status as racially tolerant white people lead to increases in rent,  
10 taxes, and the cost of housing that, in turn, displace people of color.

11 Significantly, the state has engaged in activities to accelerate this dynamic through the  
12 creative city discourse. In the case of Providence, the city and state of Rhode Island have used  
13 various strategies — including marketing, property tax subsidies, and development subsidies  
14 — to transform (or lactify) the class and racial composition of Providence neighborhoods.<sup>28</sup>  
15 Providence’s creative city plan celebrated young graduates, such as myself, who “chose” to  
16 remain in the city after graduating from Brown and RISD, crediting us with driving  
17 redevelopment in neighborhoods and city streets, breathing life into the city’s aging industrial  
18 infrastructure, and serving as catalysts for civic engagement.<sup>29</sup> I was recognized in the local  
19 press as one such catalyst — a monthly magazine even named me Rhode Island’s “best role  
20 model” for choosing the path of creativity.<sup>30</sup> Today, research has shown that several  
21 neighborhoods in Providence are being gentrified or are at risk of becoming gentrified.<sup>31</sup>

22 Valorizing white creativity as a means to spur real estate speculation is an example of  
23 what hooks refers to as “state-orchestrated, racialized class warfare.”<sup>32</sup> Creativity is useful to  
24 this rhetoric precisely because it is both positive and ambiguous. It is hard to argue against a  
25 city becoming more creative, whereas it is easy to argue against racist classism. But creativity  
26 muddies the potential for critique because it is an uplifting word. Moreover, given the now  
27 widespread belief that anyone can be creative in the twenty-first century, creativity appears

1 color-blind. That is to say, the expectation is that given that any person of any race can be  
2 creative, then any person of any race should have equal chance to succeed in the creative city.  
3 The color-blindness of creativity camouflages the ways in which the creative city is primarily  
4 invested in the self-interests of dominant groups in the city, including real estate developers, or  
5 Brown and RISD graduates such as myself.

6 One way of illustrating the fact that creativity is imagined as white within this policy  
7 discourse is the fact that no city government in the United States has, to my knowledge,  
8 launched a state-sanctioned project to market itself as, for example, the “Hip Hop City.” But  
9 creative musical innovation by young people of color has been a key feature of urban life for  
10 decades, long before Richard Florida discovered that cities become creative when race- and  
11 class-privileged youth such as myself decide to live and work in them. But the creativity of  
12 people of color has never been constructed as a valuable catalyst in relation to urban  
13 redevelopment. As a result, people of color have never profited from state efforts to rebrand  
14 cities in their image.

15 So, the creative city discourse presumes that the desirable form of urban creativity is  
16 primarily located in and on the bodies of white young people. Moreover, it inscribes racial  
17 difference on bodies in the distribution of power through what Fanon calls “epidermalization of  
18 inferiority,”<sup>33</sup> thus making it seem natural or truthful that young white people are creative urban  
19 redeemers and young people of color are displaceable barriers to urban progress. But the  
20 whiteness of creativity can be left unsaid in order to obscure its racial and class antagonism. It is  
21 no surprise then that we have seen the emergence of terms such as “Black creatives” and  
22 “POCreativity” on social media sites. These identities serve as rhetorical reminders that  
23 creativity is not a white possession and that creative flourishing is, for example, a fundamental  
24 aspect of communities of color, partly born out of the collective experience of racial  
25 discrimination and class struggle.

26 Through this “creative” classification, or epidermalization of youth, the creative city  
27 discourse invests in the property rights of white people. These property rights include, as

1 Cheryl Harris theorizes, the right to disposition, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to  
2 reputation and status, and the right to exclude.<sup>34</sup> For example, the creative city discourse  
3 rewards young people who adopt cultural norms and practices, such as dress, language, and  
4 unsanctioned forms of knowledge, associated with the highly educated, white, liberal,  
5 Brooklynite independent writer. As a result, the disposition of the white creative is understood  
6 to be transferable, property that can be acquired, and desirably so. Young white people are  
7 presumed to already possess the right kind of skills and dispositions that are necessary to  
8 compete in a symbolic economy that prizes creative thought and self-expression. This  
9 representation rewards them in the gig economy. The creative city discourse also promotes the  
10 viewpoint that it is acceptable, if not desirable, for young white creatives to move into lower-  
11 income non-white neighborhoods because profits from real estate speculation will be enhanced  
12 as they “breathe life” into those city streets. And young white creative producers and  
13 consumers also move through the city with relative impunity, enjoying themselves as they go  
14 from underground show to hip bistro. In sum, the property rights of whiteness are enhanced  
15 and respatialized through the creative city discourse.

16 In retrospect, I now appreciate the performative nature of the creative city discourse in  
17 my life. I appeared to live out a life in my twenties and thirties based on a script that had  
18 already been written for me.<sup>35</sup> I walked off College Hill and moved into an apartment in the  
19 West End, a predominantly Latinx, not Black, neighborhood — a well-established racist pattern  
20 of white gentrifiers.<sup>36</sup> I started a nonprofit organization that was designed to promote the  
21 creative practices of young people who were, for the most part, people of color from low-  
22 income and working-class backgrounds. I created arts mentoring partnerships between them  
23 and other youth, who, like myself, were invested in arts and education. Together, we  
24 appreciated the urban turn to arts and creativity because it enhanced the value of our work,  
25 making arts education more accessible for the youth we served, *and* enhanced our social  
26 position within urban life.

27 In this way, I became entangled in state-orchestrated, racialized class warfare that has

1 left me feeling ambivalent about my own history as an arts educator, as a creative. On the one  
2 hand, I appreciate how much New Urban Arts has become a place of powerful and critical  
3 ideas, where young people engage in creative practices that are often antiracist, antipatriarchal,  
4 and antiheteronormative.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, I recognize that my capacity to establish this  
5 valuable learning space beyond the borders of schooling also manifested a logic that is racist  
6 and classist.<sup>38</sup> My understanding of this contradiction, my feelings of ambivalence, were in part  
7 a result of the critical perspectives of young people I met through my ethnographic research.

### 8 Learning to Idolize the Creative Underground

9 In 2015, I conducted several interviews to ask young people of color from New Urban  
10 Arts how they perceived the Creative Capital and their opportunity to participate in it.  
11 Oftentimes, one of the first aspects of the Creative Capital that they mentioned was the city's  
12 creative underground scene. This scene came into prominence in Providence during the 1990s  
13 when I was an undergraduate at Brown. At that time, the Fort Thunder artist collective, started  
14 by RISD graduates, established a local noise and printmaking music scene that has since gained  
15 international notoriety.

16 People who now participate in this scene in Providence have high cultural status in the  
17 city, and they have historically tended to be graduates of Brown or RISD. The signifiers of those  
18 who participate in this scene include, for example, homemade clothes, handcrafted bicycles, a  
19 passion and knack for printmaking and sharing prints for free, as well as messenger bags,  
20 tattoos, and piercings. At New Urban Arts, youth participants often form very close and  
21 personal relationships in the studio with artist-mentors who participate in this scene. Through  
22 this relationship, they learn the cultural resources that are necessary to participate in this scene,  
23 such as the speech, the dress, and the knowledge about who and which events matter in the  
24 creative city.

25 In one interview about the Creative Capital, I spoke with Lunisol, a former New Urban  
26 Arts' participant, four years after she graduated from high school and four years after she

1 stopped participating in New Urban Arts. Lunisol’s parents emigrated from the Dominican  
2 Republic, and she was the first member of her family to go to college. At the time of our  
3 interview, she was about to graduate from an elite art college, and she had accepted an offer  
4 from another art institution to pursue her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. Throughout her  
5 postsecondary educational career, Lunisol, like dozens of alumni of New Urban Arts, posted  
6 requests on social media sites asking people to donate her money for food, rent, and school  
7 supplies.

8           During our interview, Lunisol looked back on her time at New Urban Arts with some  
9 ambivalence. She was thankful for her experiences there, but she also questioned her  
10 relationships with artist-mentors in the studio, people who were being credited by the city with  
11 driving redevelopment in neighborhoods and city streets. Four years after graduating from high  
12 school, she described to me how she idolized them at first:

13           I wanted to be part of that. I’m thinking that I’m going to, like, live broke  
14 [laughing]. I’m going to live broke in a loft in some sort of space and I’m not  
15 going to have a real job because I want to stick it to the man. I’m going to go to  
16 all of these urban punk shows where everyone is beating each other up, and  
17 everyone is drunk and high because it’s so cute. I’m going to make this space  
18 where we all love each other, and everything’s great, even though there is no  
19 heating in our abandoned warehouse, and we are all dying of frostbite in the  
20 winter.

21 Lunisol refers on this passage to several additional markers of the creative underground scene  
22 in Providence. These creatives live as a collective in underutilized factory buildings. They  
23 choose not to have “real” jobs. They put on punk shows in these once-abandoned industrial  
24 spaces. Here, according to Lunisol, they make a space where everyone loves one another, which  
25 includes, according to her, “beating each other up.” While these creatives in Providence’s  
26 underground may not get a real job, they earn cultural status in the city through adopting these  
27 markers of creativity. And Lunisol wanted to be part of this high-status scene. Moreover, New

1 Urban Arts had clearly become a place for her where she had learned what it would take to  
2 participate in this underground and achieve this cultural status.

3 Other alumni had far more positive views on this scene and their roles in it. In 2015, I  
4 also interviewed Laura who identified as white and poor. When I asked Laura what the  
5 Creative Capital meant to her during our interview in 2015, she said that, during high school,  
6 she would hang out both in New Urban Arts' studio and on Thayer Street, a commercial district  
7 in the affluent, predominantly white neighborhood of Providence that tends to appeal to  
8 students from the nearby campuses of Brown and RISD, as well as teenagers living in the city.  
9 Laura said that hanging out on Thayer Street was "so cool" because "you're seeing gender non-  
10 conforming people, people with cool haircuts, happy kids, sad kids, and angsty kids that you  
11 can relate to." These types were similar to those who stuck around New Urban Arts, and some  
12 of those types were artist-mentors from Brown and RISD.

13 Laura also said that whenever she tells people that she is an artist living in Providence,  
14 she is then often asked whether she went to RISD. Laura told me that she has had nothing to do  
15 with RISD and considers the institution "pretty fucking classist" because it offers "essentially no  
16 financial aid whatsoever." By contrast, she said that she admired New Urban Arts because it  
17 made her feel like she could be part of the Creative Capital even though she never had a chance  
18 of attending RISD because of her family's financial situation. Through arts mentoring, the  
19 studio provided Laura access to the social and cultural capital that was necessary for her to  
20 participate in this underground scene even if she lacked the economic capital required to go to  
21 RISD.

22 At the same time, Laura acknowledged that this underground scene in Providence was  
23 encoded as a white scene. As a result, Laura reported to me that it was perhaps natural for her  
24 to assume that she should have access to this scene because she was white. But she said that she  
25 appreciated that there were other youth members from New Urban Arts "who were just so  
26 drastically different from me who were feeling those same things. In retrospect, I think that is  
27 really cool." Laura was referring to young people of color from the studio, such as Lunisol.

1 Theo, another former youth participant of New Urban Arts, offered a similar  
2 interpretation of their experiences (note gender-neutral pronoun) in Providence and New Urban  
3 Arts. In 2015, I interviewed Theo, a Latinx gender nonconforming individual a few years after  
4 they graduated from high school to ask what the Creative Capital meant to them. Theo said that  
5 their understanding of the Creative Capital was that this new vision for the city privileged  
6 affluent and white people on the East Side where Brown and RISD are located. They said,  
7 [the Creative Capital] is for Brown and RISD students who move to Providence  
8 as students and then try to stick around and make it as artists in the city. The city  
9 is supposed to provide them access to cheap rent so they can make art. It's for the  
10 East Siders and it's very divisive.

11 Here, "East Siders" could signify Brown and RISD students. It could also signal the affluent  
12 residents who live in the neighborhood where those two institutions are located. These  
13 residents, who are much more likely to be affluent and white, are also more likely to attend  
14 Providence's museums and theaters, which Theo called the "bougie art scene" later in the  
15 interview.

16 Theo said that they did not think of this bougie art scene when they thought of the  
17 Creative Capital. They said that Providence is the Creative Capital because of its creative  
18 underground scene, which they argued, is populated with "real artists," including both artist-  
19 mentors and youth alumni from New Urban Arts. Theo described the creative underground as  
20 "really rad," "the most amazing artsy experience ever," and "beautiful and really wonderful to  
21 experience." Theo participated in this scene and described their enjoyment in attending punk  
22 shows in "old factories that are now someone's house." By contrasting the "bougie art scene" of  
23 Providence and this "real" underground, Theo showed their contempt for what they saw as the  
24 vulgar materialism and tasteless preferences of the "East Siders."

25 Theo also noted that "most people do not have access" to the "really rad" underground  
26 in Providence. But Theo said that they gained access to these spaces through relationships with  
27 artist-mentors at New Urban Arts. Like Lunisol and Laura, Theo learned from these "real"

1 artists about upcoming events in old factory buildings. While Laura argued that this  
2 underground scene was white, Theo had a different perspective. They said that this creative  
3 underground was beautiful because it featured a lot of young people of color. This scene,  
4 according to them, was “not very white.” Theo felt part of the scene as a young person of color.  
5 At the same time, Theo’s perspective also supports Laura’s claim that there were people in the  
6 studio “so drastically different” from her that were “feeling those same things.” In other words,  
7 young people of color such as Theo were able to access this underground scene, and feel they  
8 could be a part of it, through their participation in New Urban Arts.

9 Theo also noted that they felt part of this scene because its punk music was politicized.  
10 Its musicians, Theo said, were “very vocal about their politics and really radical and really  
11 affirming of my identity and my existence in a way that other spaces weren’t.” As an example,  
12 Theo mentioned Downtown Boys, a punk band that was becoming well-established in  
13 Providence at the time I was interviewing young people about the Creative Capital. Named by  
14 *Rolling Stone* magazine as America’s most exciting punk band, Downtown Boys sings about  
15 economic justice, the prison-industrial complex, racism, queer justice, and so forth.<sup>39</sup> Its  
16 frontwoman, Victoria Ruiz, foregrounds her Chicana identity in the band’s music. A few of the  
17 band members, both current and past, have been involved in New Urban Arts as artist-mentors.

18 Theo contrasted this Providence underground with the one that they encountered in  
19 Boston as a college student, which they described as a “white hipster scene.” Theo wondered if  
20 the main difference between these two scenes in Providence and Boston was New Urban Arts, a  
21 place that provided young people of color access to relationships with artist-mentors. In the  
22 process, these young people participated in a creative underground that affirmed their existence  
23 as white youth, young people of color, gender non-conforming youth, angsty kids, happy kids,  
24 sad kids, and so on. Theo and Laura went further and both argued that young people from New  
25 Urban Arts have played a role in transforming this scene so that was is not simply a “white  
26 hipster” scene. The creative scene now recognized their presence and their identities through  
27 their transformational work.

1           From these three youth perspectives, one can then begin to see how some young people  
2 at New Urban Arts are actually transformed as “troubled youth.” These young people are  
3 troubling representations of themselves as members of an underclass, which might presume  
4 that they lack the social, cultural, and even economic capital to participate in this high-status  
5 creative underground scene because they are not white or they did not go to Brown or RISD.  
6 Relationships with artist-mentors formed through New Urban Arts become a conduit for  
7 gaining this social and cultural capital. For example, these relationships teach some of the  
8 mentees how to talk the talk and look the look of this high-status group of creatives in  
9 Providence. Moreover, artist-mentors support young people and affirm their identities in the  
10 studio as they become “very vocal about their politics.”

11           For some young people, New Urban Arts thus plays a role in cultivating the embodied  
12 “habitus” that is necessary for them to participate in and belong to this high-status  
13 underground scene. They develop what Shamus Khan describes as a “corporeal ease”: the  
14 bodily knowledge necessary to carry oneself within a particular social world, a form of tacit  
15 knowledge, often unnoticed and unnamed, that distinguishes one as a member of that world.<sup>40</sup>  
16 As such, through the arts mentoring model I established, New Urban Arts is a place where  
17 racial social order of the Creative Capital can become inscribed in and through the bodies of  
18 some youth participants in complex and contradictory ways. Through arts mentoring, New  
19 Urban Arts has, in the past, taught a creative style of living that is prized because of its  
20 associations with white urban creativity. Of course, there is no “authentic” performance of  
21 race.<sup>41</sup> But my point is that the creative city constructs this disposition as a property of  
22 whiteness and therefore desirable. Some young people have been confronted with the choice to  
23 live broke in a loft and not get a real job because they wanted to “stick it to the man.” From this  
24 perspective, New Urban Arts has been a place that does indeed transform “troubled youth” into  
25 “creative” youth.

26           But Lunisol, Laura, and Theo differed in their understanding of whether young people  
27 from New Urban Arts are affirmed or excluded by this creative underground scene. On the one

1 hand, Laura and Theo celebrated this scene for being radical and politicized, for affirming the  
2 social identities of young people from New Urban Arts even though they did not have the  
3 money to go to RISD, or, in Theo's case, even though they were not white. On the other hand,  
4 Lunisol began to question this performative desire to live in an abandoned warehouse where  
5 she might die of frostbite in the winter:

6       Some of the artist-mentors [at New Urban Arts] talked about how they were  
7       struggling so hard and wouldn't be able to eat tomorrow and would have to go  
8       to Price Right [a discount grocery store]. But they were living in broken down  
9       houses and going to Whole Foods [an up-market organic grocery store]. When I  
10      started to get to know them better ... as I was about to graduate from high  
11      school, I asked them how they could do it ... How could they live like this? How  
12      could they work on commission, give away their artwork, give out posters for  
13      free, and eat at Whole Foods? Then I learned that their parents were there to  
14      support them if they fucked up or if shit got too hard. I learned that that they had  
15      these college degrees at places like Harvard and RISD that they could fall back  
16      upon. We didn't have conversations about how they were able to live like this. If  
17      we had brought that up, if we asked them, "How could they do this?" Then the  
18      questions become: "What does that look like for us?" "Would we have idolized  
19      you in the same way?" "Would we have looked up to you?" "Would we have  
20      even built that relationship with you?" Looking back at it, I'm thinking that they  
21      are living that life, and I can never live that life ... I mean ... that is my life ... that  
22      is my reality ... but without the Whole Foods [laughing].

23 After this illuminating portion of our interview, Lunisol told me that she still was thankful for  
24 her relationships with artist-mentors from New Urban Arts. She said that they were "real  
25 gems." She noted how much she learned from them and how much they supported her. Still,  
26 Lunisol emphasized the fact that she never had the choice to live in poverty like these bohemian  
27 creatives. She inherited her poverty as a child. Choosing this creative lifestyle that would give

1 her higher status in Providence working on commission, giving away posters for free, going to  
2 punk shows, living in an abandoned warehouse without heating, and not getting a real job did  
3 not feel like an option for her because she had not inherited a private safety net from her  
4 parents. She did not have parents who were there to support her if she fucked up or if shit got  
5 too hard.

6 The Creative Capital, perhaps unsurprisingly, was not there for her either. For example,  
7 Providence has not produced many jobs for young people that will provide much opportunity  
8 for economic mobility, including in the creative sector.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the state of Rhode Island has  
9 eliminated welfare in the form of cash assistance over the past two decades.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the  
10 Creative Capital privileges those young people from racially and class backgrounds who inherit  
11 a safety net, and only invests in their future profitability, while investing in the cultural status of  
12 low-income youth of color who choose creativity without making it economically feasible for  
13 them to make that choice.

14 Yet performing this aesthetic of the creative as a young person of color in places such as  
15 Providence fuels real estate speculation and obscures the costs for communities of labor. Their  
16 participation as creatives shows instead how the city has succeeded in transforming some  
17 “troubled youth” into creatives. These young people help populate the city with a “real” image  
18 of creativity, as Theo put it. These “transformed” youth join already “creative” youth in  
19 building bikes, making stuff with their hands, and giving away posters for free. Together, they  
20 generate the buzz that the Creative Capital repackages and uses to promote itself through place-  
21 marketing campaigns. At the same time, this new political subjectivity of the creative underclass  
22 is tempted with acquiring the high status of the cultural underground, and perhaps, the  
23 newfound dignity that comes with rejecting “real jobs” that never existed for them in the first  
24 place.

25 So, it seems to me that the racial organization of social and economic power in  
26 Providence would be quite satisfied with young people of color, gender non-conforming youth,  
27 and poor youth choosing a collectivist, utopian, bohemian lifestyle in abandoned warehouses

1 without heat (until capital is ready to speculate on the future value of those warehouses). Their  
2 choices as a creative underclass can legitimize the image of the Creative Capital as inclusive and  
3 trendy. Their performances project the look and feel of both creativity and racial inclusion.

4 If cities such as Providence expect to profit from poor young people of color who choose  
5 not to get a real job and breathe life into the city's aging industrial infrastructure, then a living  
6 wage, or better, universal basic income, as well as rent controls, are going to be necessary to  
7 level the playing field for those who have not inherited the private safety net needed to endure  
8 sustained periods of high risk and high uncertainty. Of course, there will be resistance to this  
9 kind of creative welfare because it interferes with white capital accumulation. But what this  
10 white dominant perspective fails to acknowledge is that the Creative Capital is already  
11 providing a public subsidy for the property rights of white creative youth. Structural racism is  
12 reproduced through the automatic presumption that young white people are entitled to subsidy  
13 and youth of color are not.

14 To achieve racial and economic justice for youth in the creative city, white people must  
15 disinvest in the profitability of whiteness, transforming their own symbolic capital into real  
16 estate capital that they protect only for themselves. Such disinvestment, it seems to me, should  
17 include reparations for past injustice, including the redistribution of land. Only when such  
18 white disinvestment occurs will young people of color who choose to participate in New Urban  
19 Arts be in a position to look back at their important relationships with artist-mentors, whom  
20 Lunisol considered "real gems," without asking, "Would I have idolized you in the same way?  
21 Would I have looked up to you? Would I have even built that relationship with you?"

22

23 1. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791.

24 2. For more information this organization, see <http://www.newurbanarts.org>.

25 3. The "underclass" theory of poverty suggests that people are poor because they have failed to  
26 acquire, either through biology or culture, the right kinds of dispositions that lead to economic  
27 success. These dispositions include, for example, a strong work ethic and respect for property.

1 This theory has been used to legitimize the withdrawal of public welfare for people in poverty,  
2 based on the presumption that welfare interferes with the acquisition of the right kinds of skills  
3 and dispositions needed to succeed. This theory of poverty often intersects with race and space.  
4 For example, white supremacist representations of low-income people of color living in cities is  
5 used to explain their social position as a product of their cultural deprivation rather than of  
6 shifts in global capital or racist policies and practices, such as white flight or redlining. For  
7 further discussion of the cultural deprivation theory of class and its relationship to race, see  
8 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston:  
9 Beacon Press, 1998).

10 4. The creative city plan developed by Providence — and that introduced this brand is titled  
11 “Creative Providence.” See Dreeszen and Associates, New Commons, and City of Providence  
12 Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, *Creative Providence: A Cultural Plan for the Creative*  
13 *Sector* (Providence, RI: Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism, 2009),  
14 [https://www.providenceri.gov/wp-content/.../City\\_of\\_Providence\\_Cultural\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.providenceri.gov/wp-content/.../City_of_Providence_Cultural_Plan.pdf).

15 5. *Ibid.*, 4.

16 6. David H. Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson, “Untangling Trade and Technology:  
17 Evidence from Local Labour Markets,” *Economic Journal* 125, no. 584 (2015): 621–646.

18 7. Rob Wile, “What’s the Matter with Rhode Island?,” *Business Insider*, August 8, 2014.

19 8. Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

20 9. Gregor Aisch, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox, and Kevin Quealy, “Economic Diversity and  
21 Student Outcomes at Brown,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2017, sec. The Upshot.

22 10. Rhode Island Kids Count, “Child Poverty in Rhode Island: A Statistical Profile” (Providence:  
23 Rhode Island Kids Count, January 2006).

24 11. Anne Wootton, “Downtown Providence of Today Vastly Different from City of Early ‘90s,”  
25 *Brown Daily Herald*, March 13, 2006.

26 12. Stanley Cohen used the term “folk devils” to refer to marginalized groups and social  
27 outsiders who are ascribed blame for social problems. This ascription of blame circulates

1 through cultural representations often found in the media, and these representations, in turn,  
2 prompt legislation that seeks to manage and contain these groups. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk*  
3 *Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

4 13. Richard Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," *City and Community* 2, no. 1 (2003): 3–19.

5 14. Arlene Dávila, *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (New  
6 York: New York University Press, 2012), 73.

7 15. I am drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity as I theorize creativity in the  
8 creative city. Here, Butler refers to the dynamic in which cultural representations, most  
9 powerfully expressed in the form of language, bring into being that which they name. That is to  
10 say, how we interpret our social identities and interactions, and construct those interpretations  
11 through, for example, a binary gender classificatory system, produces the gender identities that  
12 we perform. Our embodied enactments of complex identities become attached to and  
13 interpreted through these powerful and ready-made subjectivities. One example is "creative."  
14 From this perspective, the discourse of "creativity" helped to perform the life I have lived and,  
15 as I have suggested, manifested in reproducing the unequal distribution of power, resources,  
16 and opportunity in the city according to race. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*  
17 *Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

18 16. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008),  
19 29.

20 17. I am referring to a television interview of James Baldwin by Kenneth Clarke, in which  
21 Baldwin describes urban renewal in San Francisco and other American cities as "negro  
22 removal." For the relevant clip of the interview, see Vince Graham, "Urban Renewal ... Means  
23 Negro Removal. ~ James Baldwin (1963),"   
24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Abhj17kYU>, (1:14 minutes, posted on June 3, 2015).

25 18. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University  
26 Press, 2017), 32.

27 19. *Ibid.*, 31–79.

- 1 20. Stuart Hall, interviewed by Sut Jhally, *Race: The Floating Signifier*, videorecording  
2 (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1996).
- 3 21. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working*  
4 *Class*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2007); and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in*  
5 *Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, revised and expanded ed. (Philadelphia:  
6 Temple University Press, 2006).
- 7 22. Harris, "Whiteness as Property."
- 8 23. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon  
9 Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13–38.
- 10 24. bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 131.
- 11 25. *Ibid.*, 132.
- 12 26. *Ibid.*, 135.
- 13 27. Hooks writes about this dynamic in liberal college towns where she has lived as a scholar:  
14 "This type of shift often occurs in college towns where there is a liberal white constituency who  
15 want to find affordable housing and to live in a racially / ethnically mixed environment" (hooks,  
16 136). Stuart Hall writes of a similar dynamic, what he refers to as the "spectacle of ethnicity."  
17 (*The Fateful Triangle*, 93).
- 18 28. Tyler Denmead, *The Creative Underclass: Youth, Race, and the Gentrifying City* (Durham, NC:  
19 Duke University Press, in press).
- 20 29. Dreeszen and Associates, New Commons, and City of Providence Department of Art,  
21 Culture and Tourism, *Creative Providence*, 4.
- 22 30. Ann Moan, Paula Bodah, Sarah Francis, Lisa Harrison, and Megan Fulweiler, "Role Model,"  
23 *Rhode Island Monthly*, August 2003.
- 24 31. Fay Strongin, "'You Don't Have a Problem, until You Do': Revitalization and Gentrification  
25 in Providence, Rhode Island" (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2017).
- 26 32. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 137.
- 27 33. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xv.

- 1 34. Harris, "Whiteness as Property."
- 2 35. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
- 3 36. See Jackelyn Hwang and Robert J. Sampson, "Divergent Pathways of Gentrification: Racial  
4 Inequality and the Social Order of Renewal in Chicago Neighborhoods," *American Sociological*  
5 *Review* 79, no. 4 (2014): 726–751.
- 6 37. See Denmead, *The Creative Underclass*, chaps. 1–3.
- 7 38. For one of the most important articles on the role out-of-school arts and humanities  
8 programs play in the lives of marginalized youth, read Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Craig Centrie,  
9 and Rosemarie Roberts, "Educating Beyond the Borders of Schooling," *Anthropology and*  
10 *Education Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2000): 131–151.
- 11 39. David Grossman, "Downtown Boys: Meet America's Most Exciting Punk Band," *Rolling*  
12 *Stone*, December 11, 2015, [http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/downtown-boys-meet-](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/downtown-boys-meet-america-most-exciting-punk-band-20151211#ixzz46yJEF6gS)  
13 [americas-most-exciting-punk-band-20151211#ixzz46yJEF6gS](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/downtown-boys-meet-america-most-exciting-punk-band-20151211#ixzz46yJEF6gS).
- 14 40. Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*  
15 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 86. Khan drew heavily on the work of Pierre  
16 Bourdieu, especially his idea of "cultural capital," in developing his own concept of "corporeal  
17 ease." See also Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*, trans. Laretta C. Clough (Stanford, CA:  
18 Stanford University Press, 1996); and Shamus Khan and Colin Jerolmack, "Saying Meritocracy  
19 and Doing Privilege," *Sociological Quarterly* 54 (2013): 9–19, esp. 11.
- 20 41. See E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*  
21 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 22 42. See Denmead, *The Creative Underclass*, chap. 4.
- 23 43. See *ibid.*, chaps. 3–6.