The Creative Underclass

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The Creative Underclass: Youth, Race, and the Gentrifying City.
Troublemaking is a privilege. I learned this theory from Gabriela, a young woman I first met as a high school freshman when she joined New Urban Arts in 2004.¹ When I returned to the studio as a researcher in 2012, I met Gabriela for a second time after she had transitioned from a youth participant to an artist-mentor. That year, Gabriela participated in a few interviews with me and others to describe and theorize the creative practices of young people in the studio. Her keyword in these interviews was “troublemaking.” In a reflective interview with a staff member, Gabriela chose Dennis the Menace as a figure to illustrate how she learned through New Urban Arts that troublemaking is a privilege. She stated, “Without New Urban Arts, I don’t think I would have ever learned to question privilege. When I think about troublemaking and privilege, I think of Dennis the Menace.”²

Gabriela’s theorization of troublemaking as a privilege is nuanced with many layers. And troublemaking, I believe, is key to understanding the cultural and political significance of New Urban Arts in the lives of young people at this particular historical moment. Moreover, through troublemaking, Gabriela offers insights into the cultural politics of young people at New Urban Arts that can complement youth activism in gentrifying cities.

Dennis the Menace is an iconic character in a syndicated newspaper comic strip. Unlike the British version, the American
Dennis the Menace is a lovable but mischievous five-and-a-half-year-old white boy with a blond cowlick. Dressed in overalls, he wreaks playful havoc in his suburban neighborhood in Wichita, Kansas. He resorts to pranks and practical jokes, as well as insults and annoyances levied against his parents and other adults. For all intents and purposes, Dennis is one kind of troublemaker—the misbehaving, antisocial type. Indeed, Gabriela referenced the activities that are associated with Dennis’s mischief: arguing with adults, writing on walls, being loud, and, more generally, roaming the neighborhood without much adult supervision.

Gabriela compared Dennis’s opportunity to be mischievous with her experiences growing up as a child and adolescent in Providence. She reported that her parents kept her close to home because of their fear for her safety in their neighborhood. She noted that her family lived in small, rented apartments. It was not until her participation in New Urban Arts as a teenager that Gabriela realized that she had neither the permission nor the possibility to make art in these rented apartments because her parents wanted to keep these borrowed spaces tidy and intact. She said that her parents were always preventing her from making a lot of noise because she might wake up other families who lived nearby—perhaps in one of the apartments above or below in the triple-decker homes typically found in the working poor neighborhoods of Providence. Her parents were also concerned that noise would draw the unnecessary scrutiny of the police.

In thinking about Dennis’s privilege, she also reflected on her public schooling, which she said tended to approach her as a “poor kid who always needed to be on task, following directions.” Her perspective is consistent with the research of scholars such as Jean Anyon who argue that the “hidden curriculum” of schools—the unwritten knowledge and practices taught in schools—reproduces social stratification through preparing students for their respective class positions. Learning to stay on mundane tasks, for example, prepares poor children for working-class jobs in which compliance is prized while performing alienated labor. Gabriela argued that the children and young people whom Dennis the Menace represents—suburban, middle-class, male, and white—instead grow up with the opportunity to, as Gabriela put it, “explore and to have freedom and space.” She noted that she did not grow up with this special advantage, which prepares young people with a sense of entitlement, an acquired right to explore space.

Gabriela explained this privilege in relation to discursive differences between her and Dennis the Menace as much as material ones, such as her rented apartments. Competing ways of ascribing meaning to her and to those
represented by Dennis the Menace imply differences in how power is expected to organize and to regulate different young people’s lives. For example, when Gabriela commented on the tendency of her schools to position her as a “poor kid who always needed to be on task, following directions,” she pointed to the presumption that she and her peers were already legible as troublemakers, or at risk of becoming troublemakers. She and her peers were pegged as “troubled youth.” This presumption, Gabriela argued, was stitched to her social class, to her poverty. The attitude was that she, as a poor kid, needed to be kept in line through a strict disciplinary regime and rote instruction because she was, or was “at-risk” of becoming, a troublemaker.

Through contrasting the lovable mischief of a young white boy in the suburbs and the threatening troublemaking of poor young people of color living in the city, Gabriela illustrated her belief that this perception and treatment is also tied to other social categories, including, for example, her race and geographic location. In fact, through her theory of troublemaking, Gabriela, who identifies as Afro-Latinx, engaged critically with the racist and classist representation of youth who participate in New Urban Arts as members of the underclass. The use of the term “underclass” has often been used to insist that the style, comportment, and values of poor people, including, for example, poor people of color living in cities, explains their poverty. What defines the underclass, as Robin D. G. Kelley has argued from critical race and cultural studies perspectives, is not the type of labor performed by the poor, or their minimum wages or their lack of wealth, but rather their culture, which is deemed by whiteness to be deprived, deficient, and often racially determined. When Creative Providence refers to youth in the city as “troubled,” it is recirculating this racist and classist system of meaning even if that was never the intention.

This cultural deprivation theory of poverty intersects with race to put forward the claim that those who are affluent, and those who profit from associations with whiteness, are deserving of such power, resources, and opportunities. Unlike the underclass, this logic of supremacy maintains that white people have learned respectable ethics, aesthetics, and behaviors that are needed to be successful—so they are deserving of the power, resources, and opportunities that they acquire. This discourse of social class and race mobilizes support, particularly among affluent and white people, for policies and practices that benefit them based on the presumption of their moral superiority, if not racial supremacy.

Gabriela provided an important example that illustrates how poor young people of color become implicated in this representation of the underclass—
that is, as troublemakers. In one interview, Gabriela referenced an education reform proposed by Newt Gingrich during his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012. During the campaign, Gingrich gave a speech in which he proposed that poor kids should be paid to do janitorial work at their schools. He asked, “What if they [poor kids] became assistant janitors and their job was to mop the floor and clean the bathroom?” Gabriela stated that she had a “real problem” with this argument. She expressed her consternation with his attitude that she should have to spend time cleaning bathrooms at school while affluent white kids were provided with the privilege to play. For this very reason, she prized the relatively unstructured nature of New Urban Arts, which, she said, provided her with autonomy as an artist and as a thinker.

Indeed, these doubts about providing poor youth of color flexibility and independence in their education, and Gingrich’s proposed education reform involving poor kids cleaning their school bathrooms, hinge upon a representation of Gabriela and her peers as members of the underclass, as troublemakers, who are a threat to their own future, a threat to the future of society, and a threat to the production of capital to be accumulated primarily by white people. His suggested policy insists that the reason poor people are poor, and that poor people of color are poor in particular, is that they have failed to learn respectable styles, values, and behaviors through their schools, their families, their neighborhoods, and so on. I am assuming that Gingrich has the tendency to see people of color only as poor. From this racist and classist position, the children of the underclass are born into troubled ways of life and therefore are likely to become troublemakers.

The problem with this theory of the underclass and childhood development is that it is nonsense. The theory of cultural deprivation would suggest that youth of color and/or poor youth could be cured of their ascribed moral inferiority by going to elite schools, and once there, immersing themselves in affluent white culture, where there is alcohol abuse, humiliating hazing rituals, sexual assault, racial hostility, loudness, and so on. The idea is absurd. But I was rarely asked by society to consider the cultural deprivation of my elite white culture. As one of the affluent white kids who grew up with a sense of an already guaranteed future, I learned through my upbringing that I was racially and culturally superior. As an undergraduate at an elite private prep school and Brown University, I had the privilege to roam my cloistered campuses making noise and havoc with impunity. I never thought about any infringements on my enjoyment because I assumed my enjoyment in public space was a natural right for me, something that I deserved and had earned.
The underclass assumption may be nonsense, but it has had violent and uneven effects. For example, when white people and/or affluent people engage in behavior that is troubling to society, their actions and their consequences are never used to make any essentialized claims about the nature of being affluent and/or white. White people’s race is never put on trial through the evaluation of their behavior, even when they are poor. That is the privilege of Dennis the Menace and the middle-class white children whom he represents. His mischief is never used to explain what it means to be a young boy, middle-class, suburban, and/or white. Dennis the Menace can be lovable to his readers precisely because his actions are considered inconsequential in relation to his race, class, gender, neighborhood, and so on. As a middle-class white boy living in the suburbs, the threat of Dennis’s mischievous troublemaking is never conflated with his threat to society or to his future. His promising future seems to be already guaranteed no matter his behavior or his aesthetics, which is probably true. The children and young people whom Dennis represents get to be troublemakers, and yet at the same time remain normal and untroubling. Their troublemaking remains in the realm of the playful. That is privilege indeed.

And yet, white people are constantly policing people of color based on the presumption that their behavior is troubling, at least to white people. Gabriela pointed out to me, for example, a white woman who called the police on an eight-year-old black girl who was selling water on the sidewalk without a permit. This woman, Gabriela said, owned a cannabis oil company, which she could do without being criminalized as a drug dealer. Gabriela also pointed out how she now lives on the edge of a gentrifying neighborhood in Providence where white people are constantly berating black people for loud music, riding mopeds, and so on. She described these cultural practices as central to her community’s vitality. Indeed, processes of gentrification seeks to displace these shared ways of life based on the presumption that these practices are “troubled,” that these ways of life need displacing, that these places are placeless, or without ways of life that matter, because of this ascribed cultural deprivation.

This construction of cultural hierarchies and the policing of cultural difference has its epistemological and ethical roots in America’s long and violent racist history. For example, in 1851, Samuel Cartwright, a physician, proposed that fugitive slaves suffered from a mental illness, which he called “dрапетомания.” According to Cartwright, this illness—that is, the desire of slaves to escape chattel slavery—was caused by their masters, who were too lenient with them and treated them as equals. This soft treatment, Cartwright argued, gave them a taste of freedom, or what Gabriela might call...
“space.” From this convoluted and self-serving perspective, this taste of freedom caused slaves to want to escape. Cartwright’s proposed preventative cure for drapetemonia was harsher, more violent treatment of slaves by masters. But presuming that the desire to escape chattel slavery is a mental illness is to deny the humanity of slaves, because being human comes with the inherent desire to resist being owned by other humans. The notion that young people of color today deserve harsher and more authoritarian regimes in their upbringings (because freedom is dangerous for them) finds its discursive roots in a violent, racist, and profitable system that hinged upon treating slaves as unhuman.

This racist logic in slavery reverberated in conversations about progressive education at the turn of the twentieth century. Charles Eliot, a former president of Harvard University, argued in 1909 that “savage or semi-civilized children,” as he put it, needed more authoritarian regimes in their education in comparison to their civilized peers. Eliot subscribed to the theory of recapitulation, which proposed that human development mirrors civilization. According to this theory, the “savage” child grows up into a “civilized” adult in ways that recapitulate the Eurocentric telling of history, that is, the progression of the human species from barbarianism to civilization. Again, from this convoluted and self-serving perspective, history has demonstrated that only the children of civilized adults, or those from white and Western European origins, naturally progress from the barbaric state of childhood to the civilized state of adulthood. Alternatively, “savage and semi-civilized children,” according to this theory, grow up and remain uncivilized. They do not recapitulate history. These “savage” adults remain fixed in the past, as uncivilized as children, even as they grow up.

The educational historian Thomas Fallace has shown that this theory of recapitulation was influential among nineteenth-century American progressive educators such as Eliot. For Eliot, the pedagogic implication was that children from civilized parents should be provided with the opportunity to explore the world as if they were uncivilized “savages,” or to have “space,” as Gabriela might put it. Under these conditions, due to some innate and superior characteristic, these children would naturally grow up into modern and civilized adults. By contrast, as Eliot put it, “for the savage or semi-civilized man, and for some children who pass through barbaric stages of development, authority is needed to restrain them from injuring themselves.” In other words, Eliot argued that these “savage” children, say African American and Native American children, could not be provided with opportunities for unsupervised spontaneous play because they were incapable of doing so with-
out harming themselves. For Eliot and other subscribers of recapitulation theory, stern chiding of “savage” children was the fix.

The echoes of recapitulation resound today in the notion that young people of color from low-income communities deserve harsher treatment in schools because they were born into troubling cultures that produce troublemakers. Insert here Gingrich’s absurd and pathetic proposal that poor young people of color should clean their school bathrooms.

Of course, Gingrich’s proposal has thankfully not taken hold in public schools. However, beginning in the 1990s, public schools across the United States did start to adopt like-minded practices and policies, which are now known as “zero tolerance.” Under this policy, students in schools, disproportionately students of color, began to be punished harshly no matter how minor the offense. Bans on particular forms of clothing, including hats; immediate suspension for school disruption; and heightened use of law enforcement in schools increasingly became the norm, despite the fact that incidents of school violence, for example, were decreasing prior to its widespread adoption. Federal policy expanded the number of “school resource officers,” or sworn law enforcement, in United States schools from 9,446 in 1997 to an all-time high of 14,337 in 2003. This authoritarianism, and the seeping of the justice system and its tactics into schools, is now often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This term is used to critique policies and practices designed to ensnare youth of color, particularly African American youth, into the criminal justice system at a young age, thus producing a series of outcomes such as school expulsion and a criminal record that increase the likelihood of their imprisonment later in life.

Behavioral management strategies rooted in policing have also tended to feature in charter school designs as charter schools have played a more prominent role in US public education in the early twenty-first century. Joan Goodman, for example, noted how the charter schools that she observed focused on creating a highly rule-ordered and regulated environment with “a blanketing emphasis on obedience that can create conditions for accepting instruction.” This environment, Goodman argued, might be good for rote instruction, but it also leads children to relinquish their sense of agency and the capacity to form their own moral compass. Gabriela noted this same phenomenon in her high school, where she believed that she was being transformed into a “receptacle” for instruction.

The notion that young people of color must be forced to comply, must be dealt with harshly and violently because they are less than human, or because they are already a threat to society, also resounds in their interactions
with the police, particularly for African American youth. To illustrate, consider what would happen to Dennis the Menace if his phenotype was black or brown. Juxtapose the loveable and livable, albeit fictional, life of Dennis the Menace with the very nonfictional deaths of black teenagers and children killed by the police. How long would a black Dennis the Menace live as he played with water pistols and slingshots in the park? How long would a black Dennis the Menace live as he started playful fights with other boys his age in his front yard? How long would a black Dennis the Menace live after he leaned out of the backseat window of the family car to tell off a police officer who pulled his parents over? Indeed, that is exactly what the fictional white Dennis the Menace did and said in his first appearance in American newspapers in the 1950s.22 “You didn’t catch us!” Dennis screamed at a white cop as he approached the family car, holding his motorcycle gloves, not his gun. “We ran outa gas!” The implausibility of this example for a black Dennis the Menace illustrates the stakes of troublemaking for young people of color and the privilege afforded to the children and young people Dennis the Menace represents. The stakes are survival. The stakes are life.

With these stakes in mind, Gabriela reframed troublemaking as a means of political opposition against the harsh, humiliating, and sometimes deadly logic of the underclass. Gabriela co-opted the discourse of troublemaking, which is used as an indication of her deprivation and her unhumanness, and then reversed its meaning into a good thing, a strategy for her and her peers to use against the organization of social power that has uneven material effects, including the opportunity for urban young people of color to not be displaced, to experience life pleasurably, to live. For example, when Gabriela was a youth participant at New Urban Arts, prior to becoming an artist-mentor, she screen-printed T-shirts for her peers that read, “Be the trouble you want to see in the world.” With a turn of phrase, Gabriela refracted Mahatma Gandhi’s mantra “Be the change you want to see in the world” through the prism of troublemaking.23 With these T-shirts, Gabriela argued that doing the work of social justice, the work of Gandhi and others, does not just involve being change but also involves being trouble or becoming troublesome to supremacy. She called on her peers to play with their subjectification as troublemakers, to become threats to the way things are—and rightfully so.

In an interview, I asked Gabriela how and why young people might go about being these kinds of troublemakers, not the mischievous sort represented by Dennis the Menace. Gabriela began by discussing her hair, and, as she put it, its “unprofessionalism”:
Tyler: So, I remember when that Gandhi quote became a mantra in the studio. But then you mixed it up with “Be the trouble you want to see in the world.” What was that about?

Gabriela: Well, in order to make change, you have to be a troublemaker, right? It’s this whole idea of existing, of being seen, of being seen as a person of color. Take my hair. I want to talk about my hair.

Tyler: Yeah, let’s talk about your hair.

Gabriela: It’s huge. It’s a huge, fucking Afro. How inappropriate is it for me to have an Afro? It’s unprofessional. It’s out there. It’s like, “Why don’t you do something with it?” I should braid it and make it straight, right?

Tyler: Yeah.

Gabriela: So, there’s troublemaking that comes with a huge fucking Afro. Angela Davis had an Afro. She was a troublemaker. She was a Black Panther. In order to exist in this world, in order for people of color to exist in this world, and to not conform to this idea of whiteness, that is what it means to be a troublemaker. Take this whole idea that things can be inherently white. For example, consider how nerd culture is assumed to be inherently white. Look around New Urban Arts. We have a bunch of black and brown nerds in here!

Tyler: What does that mean?

Gabriela: They are troublemaking. They are fucking up your ideas about what it means to be a black or brown child.

Tyler: Right . . .

Gabriela: They should be playing basketball, right?

Tyler: Or dancing to rap music or something . . .

Gabriela: Right, but they are not. They are being nerds. And that’s great. It’s actually really great.

In this passage, Gabriela describes how conscious and embodied cultural performances become a strategy to trouble racist discourses that are used against her and other youth at New Urban Arts. Gabriela, for example, pointed to her Afro, which breaches norms of what she calls “professionalism” but might also be read as “respectability.” Her Afro, in other words, does not conform
to aesthetics that whiteness has deemed respectable for black and brown life. Instead, to Gabriela, her Afro signifies the antiracist, anticapitalist, and anti-patriarchal politics of the troublemaker, Angela Davis. Through her “huge, fucking Afro,” Gabriela claims that the Afro is not a surface-oriented fashion statement but a visible and embodied politics of cultural resistance.

Robin D. G. Kelley has traced the cultural political significance of the Afro, noting its roots in the style choices of black women in the 1950s and 1960s who embraced a natural hairstyle over chemical hair straightening. Nine Simone, for example, wore an Afro at the time. This black cosmopolitan and bohemian style evolved to signify black power and pan-Africanism, with, for example, the Black Panthers adopting this hairstyle in the 1960s. Angela Davis feared in the 1990s that young people opted for Afros based on nostalgic desire, a sign for her of social and political atrophy, not activism. In the current Trumpian era of unbridled white supremacy, it should perhaps come as no surprise that young people of color such as Gabriela are reinterpreting the Afro as a cultural expression of black power and possibility.

This example illustrates how Gabriela’s troublemaking is expressed in language, carved out through style, and rooted in black cultural and embodied politics. Her personal experience, her body, becomes a legitimate site to understand and contest, or trouble, the way in which society is structured in and through social dominance in relation to race, class, and gender. Through engaging with the notion that her body and her personal experiences are always already politicized, she seeks opportunities to trouble the logics of whiteness and patriarchy through her body. With her troubling Afro, Gabriela is refusing the notion that if and when young people of color, particularly African American and Latinx youth, shed the signifying practices and styles associated with the underclass, and adopt an aesthetic deemed professional and respectable, then they will be treated as human, with a right to profitability and with a right to life. For Gabriela, troubling supremacy therefore means performing an image and identity that destabilizes the ways in which whiteness constructs expressions of racial identity that it deems acceptable.

Gabriela also pointed to young people in the studio at New Urban Arts who are “being nerds” as a form of troublemaking. Here, she referred to several pastimes in the studio at New Urban Arts, including young people playing Dungeons and Dragons fantasy games, reading and making comics, or designing cosplay costumes. For young people of color to engage in these practices, these “nerds” are claiming cultural practices that are deemed to be in the possession of whiteness due to the fact that these practices signify in-
intelligence, which is presumed to be a natural characteristic of white people and lacking in young people of color. So Gabriela sees young people at New Urban Arts reasserting their humanity through playing games in the studio that trouble the image and identity that whiteness demands of young people of color, that it demands of the underclass.

Through referencing both the troubling Afro of Angela Davis and the fissure of black and brown nerds, Gabriela drew upon examples from her own life and the life of the studio in which young people of color violated the white-constituted norms for what is deemed both respectable and possible for them. Their antinormative and antirespectable performances of identity and style reject the notion that there is a proper or singular, natural or essential way of being black or brown, and certainly not one that conforms to stereotypes of an underclass, which presumes an innate, socially learned, or culturally acquired lack of intelligence. For Gabriela, fucking up how I have been constructed, as a white person, to think about how young people of color should behave or stylize themselves is her politics of troublemaking. Her troublemaking is hypervisible, staring me in the face and troubling my gaze, a white way of seeing that is always being refracted through the logic of my culturally acquired sense of what is normal, what is supreme, what is guaranteed, what is profitable, what should live.

It is crucial to point out, then, that through her theory of troublemaking Gabriela did not conflate the antisocial behavior of Dennis the Menace with her oppositional politics. This point is crucial because there has been a tendency in youth scholarship, written in the Marxist tradition, to conflate the mischief of young people with their activism. More precisely, the overreaching assumption is that mischief is good training for becoming a socialist revolutionary. In their analysis of youth activism, the education scholars Pedro Noguera and Chiara Cannella challenged this assumption by arguing that cutting class, challenging adult authority, and committing acts of violence against other youth should not be read as political opposition or activist training. Doing so only valorizes troublemaking that does not contribute to social justice and may well be counterproductive. To avoid conflating young people’s antisocial behavior with activism, they point instead to education scholar Henry Giroux, who argued that young people’s activism must be “rooted in a deliberate critique of one’s circumstances.” Giroux’s theorization of youth’s political activism as deliberative and self-aware is rooted in the thought of the highly influential educational philosopher Paulo Freire and his notion of critical consciousness. Freire argued that the reproduction of oppression stems in part from the failure of the oppressed to see their
circumstances of oppression clearly. The key to their emancipation then is the development of a critical consciousness, which, Freire argued, emerges through an iterative cycle of action and reflection oriented toward social justice. Without such deliberate critique, Noguera and Cannella warn, youth defiance simply devolves into deviance.

Gabriela’s theory of troublemaking is clearly rooted in a deliberate critique of her circumstances and the circumstances of her peers in the studio. Yet troublemaking as a means of cultural opposition to whiteness and patriarchy is concerned with the visible and the symbolic, the lived and the felt, as much as it is concerned with abstract notions of consciousness. Her embodied cultural politics of troublemaking is not concerned with standing outside the structures of dominance to try to understand those structures more clearly, less falsely. Rather, she is concerned with standing within them, using her body and symbolic practices such as style to trouble the threat of racist, classist, and sexist discourses that are felt and lived, that are inescapable and entrenched.

The arts and humanities are key to this form of embodied politics because it is through these modes of inquiry that young people can give shape and form, light and color, texture and breath, rhythm and language—in short, an aesthetic—to these ideas and feelings of opposition. Places such as New Urban Arts may not be seen as outwardly political given that they are not explicitly training young people to become political activists or community organizers. But New Urban Arts has become a place where some young people develop cultural political strategies because it provides young people scope to reckon with the discursive and material realities of their lives, including their subjectification as members of an underclass.

To understand New Urban Arts and its significance, then, it is important to broaden the analytical focus beyond what counts as the arts and humanities in a traditional sense, as well as abstract commitments to critical consciousness as the correct basis for youth activism. The focus must also include how young people shape their shared ways of life and, relatedly, their bodies, to communicate ideas and feelings that are critical of the circumstances they have inherited.

“Take my hair,” Gabriela said. “I want to talk about my hair.”

Fashioning her hair is how Gabriela formulates a cultural politics of style, a politics of being seen in ways that fuck up my ideas about what it means to be a respectable black or brown young woman. Her proposed politics of troublemaking for youth of color in the studio is a means for them to recenter themselves symbolically in the world, a means of shaping what their
bodies mean and why, a means of resisting the closure of what their cultural performances might say about their social identities.

This interpretation of troublemaking resonates with other critical ethnographic scholarship on why young people participate in programs “beyond the borders of schooling.”36 Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Craig Centrie, and Rosemarie Roberts, for example, have argued that young people are constantly confronted with harsh and humiliating representations of their identities, and they therefore turn to spaces such as New Urban Arts “to re-educate” themselves.37 In these spaces, they trouble the discursive representation of their identities and invent new ones through symbolic creativity.

At the same time, there has been considerable debate for decades about the efficacy of young people’s cultural politics. In 1992, five years before I started New Urban Arts, David Bailey and Stuart Hall, for example, reflected on the contradictions of identity work and style as political resistance: “It is perfectly possible that what [identity] is politically progressive and opens up new discursive opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s can become a form of closure—and have a repressive value—by the time it is installed as the dominant genre. . . . It will run out of steam; it will become a style; people will use it not because it opens up anything but because they are being spoken by it, and at that point, you need another shift.”38

This perspective points to the paradox of Gabriela’s troublemaking. As young people such as Gabriela “open up” discursive possibilities for themselves through troublemaking, such as the black and brown nerd, or the next iteration of Angela Davis, troublemaking in turn produces styles with their own productive power and with their own power of closure. In other words, new styles, such as the brown or black nerd, which might have once been transgressive, become installed as the dominant genre. In that event, some young people of color who attend New Urban Arts might feel summoned to live their lives as black or brown nerds or as a simulacrum of Angela Davis. Performing these identities thus becomes a strategy of fitting in among their peers and conforming to the demands of the marketplace, not a strategy of troubling, for example, whiteness and patriarchy.

This paradox is important to consider within the logic of consumer capitalism, which is always at work transforming cultural transgressions into commodified styles. In 2018, for example, Sesali Bowen wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times titled “The New Black Hotties,” which commented on the emergence of “Black nerds, Black queers, and Black weirdos” as a style that has become installed in dominant popular culture.39 Bowen pointed to actors and actresses in Hollywood films, as well as popular musicians, including
Donald Glover, Issa Rae, and Janelle Monáe. For Bowen, the visibility of these celebrities affirms black eccentrics in everyday life. When people who transgress dominant cultural norms through their identity can recognize their identity in popular culture, they become affirmed as political subjects that are human, that deserve life.

This example is relevant to New Urban Arts because young people of color in the studio have tended to identify as nerds, queers, and weirdos who do not fit in elsewhere, and those identities are produced in part through the troublemaking that Gabriela has theorized. Through troublemaking, their innovations in identity, once signs of the outcast, once strategies for troubling violent norms, then become incorporated into the dominant culture. Given the history of racial capitalism in the United States, when a style becomes installed in dominant culture, it means that that style has necessarily become unthreatening to the possessive interests of whiteness.

Simultaneously, through this incorporation of the “New Black Hotties” into dominant popular culture, those young people who are not legible as black or brown nerds, as black eccentrics, are at risk of being positioned by dominant popular culture as those who are unfashionable, perhaps even stuck in the culturally inferior location of the underclass. That is to say, I am worried about the implications of this black eccentricity for those young people of color who do not perform this style, and therefore are reinscribed as members of an underclass because they have failed to “keep up” with the cultural innovations of their peers. Troublemaking is therefore at risk of producing styles that become incorporated into consumer capitalism, which, in turn, reproduces the same symbolic violence—this time against people of color who do not fit this style of the new black hottie—that troublemaking was seeking to counter in the first place.40

This point is important to consider within the cultural politics of the creative city, where bohemianism is often stitched semiotically to whiteness, even if there is no natural basis for this link. That is to say, young people of color who become legible to whiteness as creative—because they adopt hairstyles that whiteness can read as bohemian or play games that whiteness associates with its own intelligence—lose their political force within the establishing dominant white narrative for this new urban life. This depoliticization hinges upon the problematic assumption that white creatives’ dispositions can and should be acquired by other social groups if they want to gain status and be rewarded in the creative city.41 Young white people are presumed to naturally possess the creative skills and dispositions that are necessary to compete in a symbolic urban economy that prizes creative thought and self-expression.
This white creativity is signified by their bohemian stylistic choices, whether piercings and tattoos or fixed-gear bicycles and flat-brimmed baseball caps. Those young people of color who engage in troublemaking are always at risk of making stylistic choices that then become incorporated safely into the cultural style of the creative city, which, in turn, privileges the profitability of young white people who are already deemed to be creative, who are deemed to have a possession—creativity—that other social groups want. The meaning of the huge fucking Afro can thus easily slip from Gabriela’s radical intentions—she associated the Afro with black power—into a safe style of cosmopolitan creative eccentricity. Those young people of color who do not learn to perform these bohemian styles become repositioned as culturally deprived members of an underclass, as those who lack creativity. As a result, like any cultural political strategy in the age of consumer capitalism, Gabriela’s radical intentions for troublemaking are always at risk of becoming depoliticized, even counterproductive, in a city where young people’s style choices are key to manufacturing a new urban image based on the privileging of white creativity. Of course, such an outcome would not be the Gabriela’s fault or the fault of any other cultural innovator of color. The blame lies in processes of racial capitalism that are always at work attempting to extract and undercompensate their cultural wealth.

Nonetheless, Gabriela’s creative practice of troublemaking, which she has theorized as a racial privilege, remains an important intervention for young people at the precise moment they are figuring out how to survive and thrive amid the constant barrage of racist representations of them as “troubled youth.” Her troublemaking illustrates how New Urban Arts has served as an important place for Gabriela to develop an oppositional strategy that is rooted in both critical consciousness and embodied self-fashioning. And I do believe that I played an important role in establishing the pedagogic conditions in the storefront studio of New Urban Arts, where young people such as Gabriela can experiment with and test their ideas, ideas that fuck up white notions of what it means to be black or brown. The next two creative practices that I will present, the hot mess and chillaxing, perform similarly as embodied and lived symbolic cultural practices that will come in handy in opposing the cultural logic of the gentrifying city.