The Creative Underclass

Denmead, Tyler

Published by Duke University Press

Denmead, Tyler.
The Creative Underclass: Youth, Race, and the Gentrifying City.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72251

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2474155
Alicia developed big dreams for herself as an artist during high school while she participated in New Urban Arts. And she had the skills and the dedication to back up those dreams. She was one of the Silent Van Goghs in the studio, working quietly on the sidelines of the hot mess, producing work to be “gawked at in its pure awesomeness.” She made the Sasquatch sitting on the forest floor, looking down, introspective. She said her creature was a “misunderstood gentle beast.”

In the studio, Alicia painted great portraits of black girls. I read in one interview how she wrestled with questions of black girl identity in her artwork. In particular, she stated that she focuses on representing black love, innocence, and tenderness. That desire was easy to see in her work. For example, in one portrait that Alicia made at New Urban Arts, she represented a young, pensive black girl standing against a blank background. Her shoe is untied, and her trousers are ripped. Her arms hang at her side and she has a Band-Aid on her right hand (figure 3.1). She looks anxious. A thought cloud next to her reads, “Do I still have time to grow?”

---

**Figure 3.1** “Do I still have time to grow?” Painting by Alicia, 2015. Permission New Urban Arts.
TROUBLEMAKING

DO YOU HAVE A TIME TO CRY?
I asked Alicia what was going on in this painting, and she told me that she was quoting a Kanye West song. In the song “Streetlights,” West portrayed himself riding in a taxi at night, looking at the streetlights as they pass by above him.

“Let me know,” Kanye sings. “Do I still have time to grow?”

Through her portrait, Alicia told me that she was asking herself the same question. Her options for life after school had not met her expectations. She did not know if she would gain acceptance to the art college of her dreams or receive the financing that she needed to attend it. She wondered whether she should have already established herself as an artist with a record of exhibiting in galleries, as an artist who sold artworks.

“Do I still have time to grow?” Alicia was asking herself. “Have the streetlights already passed me by?”

I saw several portraits by Alicia like this one, showing black girls sitting and standing, looking wistful and pensive, appearing vulnerable and longing. They stare into the middle distance seeking connection. Looking at these portraits, I see Alicia representing a range of feelings that black girls obviously experience. But whiteness as an entrenched relation of power is always at work attempting to deny this emotional register for black girls. Through its pathetic sense of itself, anti-blackness expects black girls to be compliant, enraged, or indifferent to pain because compliance obeys its power, rage illustrates a lack of self-restraint that legitimizes its white policing, and stoicism in the face of pain demands even harsher punishment. Whiteness thus restricts the emotional register of black girlhood in its symbolic interpretations to provide the justification it desires to assert its power and control. Through her portraits of black girl love, innocence, and tenderness, Alicia combats these racist and gendered representations of black girlhood by giving black girls the full emotional register that they already possess. In this painting, inspired by Kanye West lyrics, she represents the socially produced anxiety of whether she, as a black girl, has done enough, been productive enough, to not be left behind amid an uncertain future, amid a sense of time lost.

Alicia was not alone in using her artwork to reflect on her fear that she had not accomplished enough as a teenager. For example, when I observed the studio in 2012, I stumbled upon a series of self-addressed letters left behind by Laura. Laura, a white girl from a low-income background, was a senior in high school when she left these letters next to a manual typewriter on one of the worktables. Rhode Island’s poet laureate, Rick Benjamin, who also helped support artist-mentors in the studio as they honed their pedagogic practice, had left typewriters in the studio as a way to prompt creative writing. Laura
used one typewriter to write ten versions of the same letter, and each letter appeared to be written in a moment of frenzy. Lines were askew, and letters were typed over one another. “Dear Laura,” she wrote at the beginning of each self-addressed letter. “Live goddammit.” Another letter continued, “This is my letter to myself. You’ve got to get back. You’ve got to get back to lief (that is: life) as you know it, life—not the passing of time. That’s not what I was put in my stead for. I am an artist (strike THAT: Artist). This is where my letter begins: Live harder. You aren’t happy, are you not complete?” In 2015, three years after she wrote these letters, I returned to Providence and interviewed Laura to ask her what she meant by them:

Tyler: So . . . live goddammit?
Laura: Live goddammit.
Tyler: What was that about?
Laura: It was my senior year and I felt like, “Oh well, I’m about to finish up this chapter in my life. I’m about to finish up childhood.” So, I was, like, all right, I better put as much time and energy into making sure I have the best goddamn time of my life.

Tyler: The best time of your life?
Laura: It was very time-bound. . . . Live goddammit and the letters were about reinforcing this idea that, “Oh my God, I have limited time. I have limited resources. I have to do it now!” But now I’m trying to focus less on the time-boundedness of stuff. I used to have anxiety about, like, age. I used to have a lot of anxiety, sitting and thinking, “Okay, how many years do I have left before I’m thirty?”

Tyler: So, what was this time pressure about?
Laura: I don’t know. It’s just hard.
Tyler: What did you feel like you had to do with your limited time?
Laura: I don’t know. I feel like, generally, for my entire life, I’ve sort of have had this, like, feeling that time is running out, like, I’m losing time . . . umm . . . And sometimes at night, I do have to reassure myself like, “Oh I’m still young, I’m only twenty years old.” That is such a weird thing for someone my age to be thinking about. I don’t really know where it came from . . . but . . . um . . . but definitely time, it feels like a pre-
cious thing to me. That is why I’ve been trying to do more with my time lately.

Laura continued in the interview by saying that she had met so many artist-mentors through New Urban Arts who participated in the city’s high-status underground punk scene. Laura was impressed with what they had accomplished so early on in life as musicians, punk rockers, and photographers. Laura thought that the window for young people from New Urban Arts to prove themselves, to make their mark as a part of this scene, was shorter given the fact that they were poor.

“I have to do it now,” Laura said to me in an interview a few years after she finished high school. “I have to have the time of my life and make art that matters.”

These examples show how two young people at New Urban Arts wrestled with what it means to be more productive with their time and their lives, what it means to transition from childhood to adulthood. Their perspectives illuminate a socially produced anxiety that appears to be manifesting itself through a compression of youth. That is to say, they appear to feel that they should have something to show for themselves as adults earlier in life. They are expecting the period of youth, often defined between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, to end sooner. What interests me analytically about this youth compression is what it reveals about the sociohistoric formation that they have experienced as young people growing up in Providence and how this internalized temporality is entangled in the reproduction of social inequality.

These two young people identified several markers for a successful transition to adulthood, and these markers are associated with the creative. That is to say, they were experiencing a youth compression in relation to their emerging identities as aspiring artists and as aspiring members of Providence’s high-status creative underground scene. Their aspirations were not what we normally associate with a normative transition to adulthood, such as getting good grades in school, graduating from high school and college, living on one’s own, getting a secure job, and so on. For them, the markers of transitioning from childhood to adulthood include exhibiting in galleries, selling artwork, having the time of their lives, making art that matters, and getting into art school. They expected to show these accomplishments early in life to the point that Laura noticed how weird it was that she was awake at night wondering whether her window of opportunity was closing by the time she turned twenty.

These examples illustrate how two young people at New Urban Arts have learned to internalize this anticipated transformation from “troubled youth” into “creative youth.” This compression produces an anxiety that is
represented in the blank stares of black girls looking out from paintings and the hurried lines typed across the page. As the Creative Capital foists precocious expectations on young people, to transform themselves as creatives, there is an obvious risk that young people internalize a sense of individual responsibility for these creative life outcomes rather than critiquing conditions that have demanded their “transformation” without providing economic opportunities or symbolic conditions that would make that “transformation” possible or sustainable. After all, Alicia wondered how she was going to go to art school without parents who could pay for it. This internalization of blame, this very recruitment of “troubled youth” as “creatives,” can thus interfere with the formation of youth activists who challenge these uneven and unjust conditions of the gentrifying city.

The risk for youth arts and humanities programs such as New Urban Arts is that they become entangled in reproducing this social anxiety, this sense that young people should become more productive sooner as creatives. This problem is acute for creative youth development programs such as New Urban Arts because they are always being pressed to demonstrate “impact,” to show that their participants are not being “left behind.” For places such as New Urban Arts, gallery exhibitions, selling artwork, making art that matters, getting into art school, and even having the best time of life are all indicators of high-impact programs. In their quest for funding, programs must produce evidence that these outcomes are occurring, and they inevitably pass this pressure on to their students. In so doing, these programs become imbricated in summoning the kinds of creative citizen-subjects that the Creative Capital desires.

New Urban Arts is vulnerable to this entanglement because of the arts mentoring model that I established. Youth participants in the studio such as Alicia and Laura were partnered with artist-mentors from places such as Brown and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Through their arts mentoring relationships, they become more aware of the cultural impact that has now become expected from creative youth in the city. Young people at New Urban Arts become more aware of the racial and class differences among creatives through these mentoring partnerships. After all, Brown University gave me a $4,000 fellowship to start New Urban Arts when I was twenty-one years old. Youth participants at New Urban Arts could do a lot of productive things for the city if they were given $4,000 to run projects as twenty-one-year-old creatives.

So, inevitably, the presence of Brown and RISD students as young creatives in the studio and in the city produces a social anxiety in their peer groups and across class lines, if not inflicting injury on young people in the city who learn that they will never have access to the same resources needed to give
them an equal chance as creatives (e.g., the tuition needed to go to art school). The production of this social anxiety becomes wrapped up in reapportioning blame on young people when they cannot meet the unrealistic, compressed, and socially produced expectations for young creatives in the city.

Given this creative youth compression and its related anxiety, I became quite interested in some young people at New Urban Arts who engaged in a cultural performance in the studio that challenged this temporality. Lewis, one of the Loudest Human Beings to Ever Exist, called this performance “chillaxing.” I looked more deeply at this cultural performance in the studio precisely because I thought it might prove useful in complementing youth strategies to fight for creative youth justice in the gentrifying city. Youth activism must be aware of this social anxiety and its temporal conditions, and can work with them to oppose the reproduction of youth inequality through creativity.

“THAT QUIET TIME . . . WEARING BERETS AND DRINKING CAPPUCCINOS”

“Welcome to the Zen Zone!” Lewis said. Lewis, one of the Loudest Human Beings to Ever Exist, was giving a tour of the studio to the plebeians who had just signed up to participate in New Urban Arts. In his tour, he brought the newcomers to a corner in the front of the studio where there is a riser that separates the Zen Zone from the rest of the studio. On this riser, there was a couch, chairs, a coffee table, and a few plants. Youth poetry was also written on the glass storefront in acrylic paint. Lewis introduced the newcomers to this space:

This is the Zen Zone. The Zen Zone is the place for you to do things when you don’t feel like doing art. You can go in here and you can chillax, text your homies, your bromies, your chicas, or whatever it is that you kids do these days. Check your Facebooks. You can just, you know, mellow out. Sit on a bean bag. Talk. Conversate. Read books. [Lewis paused and then began speaking more slowly, drawing out his vowels.] The Zen Zone is more of that quiet time in the studiooo. It’s coooool. You’re wearin’ berets and drinkin’ cappuccinos.

The plebeians smiled and laughed. I did too. It was funny to listen to Lewis act as an authoritative adult, speaking to the “kids these days.” Authority figures are not expected to give urban young people of color permission to chillax and text their homies, their bromies, and their chicas. That instruction would only conform to the representation of them as lazy, as members of the underclass who are not doing the work of lifting themselves up by their own bootstraps.

It was also funny to listen to Lewis represent New Urban Arts as if it were a Parisian café. Berets and cappuccinos, of course, invoke the Left Bank in
the 1950s and 1960s, where left-leaning philosophers had intellectual conversations at café tables on the sidewalk. Berets and cappuccinos thus signify highbrow intellectualism, cosmopolitanism, and relative affluence. His reference is comedic here because “troubled youth” are never represented as geniuses in their own right, as people who can profit in life by sitting around, thinking and talking on their terms. Indeed, two black men were arrested for simply sitting and waiting for a friend at a Philadelphia Starbucks in April 2018.\(^2\)

Time for chillaxing at New Urban Arts was built into the relatively complex, and difficult to manage, temporal structure that I established for New Urban Arts in 1997. With New Urban Arts’ first program director, Marcus Civin, we set the precedent that youth participants could join or leave the program at any time during the school year. They could also decide how frequently or infrequently they wanted to participate and for how long on any given day. At the same time, we guaranteed that artist-mentors would each be present two days per week for two hours at a time (3 to 5 p.m. or 5 to 7 p.m.). If youth participants wanted to partner with one artist-mentor in particular, then they would know in advance what day and time they should come to the studio. But artist-mentors would never know beforehand which youth participants would show up or when, which has always been incredibly challenging for most new artist-mentors to negotiate. Plus, a lot of youth participants come to the studio and choose not to work alongside artist-mentors. They work independently or with their peers.

In an interview with one former youth member, Theo described this temporal structure as “monochronic” and “polychronic.” In reflecting on their experience (note gender-neutral pronoun), they said that the studio provides a linear program model in which young people can meet regularly with an artist-mentor throughout the year. In this sense, the studio was “monochronic,” a bit like school. But the studio also provides a “polychronic” temporal structure in which young people can come and go as they wish, as well as participate on their terms. Those terms could include chillaxing in the Zen Zone, talking, conversating, and reading books while they text their homies, their bromies, and their chicas. As a result, there are always numerous events unfolding in the studio at the same time, and young people can choose among these events as they wish. Theo told me that studio is not a place that says to young people, “This is what it is and this is what everyone has to do at the same time.”

Of course, Marcus and I did not invent this temporal structure through New Urban Arts. Its historical precedent is the “open classroom” education model from the 1960s, associated with, for example, educators such as Herbert Kohl.\(^3\) But today, this flexible and dynamic temporal structure is more
likely to be found in elite private schools such as the MUSE School in Malibu Canyon, California, where students are expected to follow their passions and be nurtured into becoming “autonomous and innovative students.” Indeed, staff at New Urban Arts have noted to me that a flexible and exploratory program structure offered for free to children of the poor and young people of color can raise eyebrows concerning questions of rigor and impact. But if and when the same model is offered to children of the wealthy with high-price tuition fees, these staff suspected that those same people would not question its value. This disparity points to the social anxiety directed toward “troubled youth.” Can “troubled youth” actually be “transformed” by sitting around and talking to one another without any adult intervention? Can “troubled youth” be autonomous and inventive by sitting around, reading books, and texting their homies and their chicas?

Young people chillaxed in the studio in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons that mattered to them. For example, one young person, Leandra, established a ritual in the studio called “Tea Time.” Leandra gathered other youth members and artist-mentors to chat and drink tea in the studio. During Tea Time, they discussed current events, ranging from the mass shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, to marriage equality. At New Urban Arts, engaging in these intellectual debates about public events affecting their lives, and creating their own forums for these discussions, emerged as a priority for their use of time in the studio.

Other youth described this chillaxing in more aimless and unpredictable terms. Theo told me that “some folks go to New Urban Arts with intentions and would get what they wanted done. I wasn’t one of those. I would just show up, walk around to look for things to do, and then do whatever felt right.” With this observation in mind, I reflected on the times that I spent as a participant observer in the studio, wandering around looking for things to do and activities to observe. One day, I kept bumping into Frankie, a youth member who seemed to be wandering around the studio as well. I stopped and asked him if he ever had the feeling of not knowing where to be or what to do in the studio. “Duh!” he said. “That’s why I come here.”

When I asked him what he meant by that, he said that he comes to the studio to experiment with new artistic forms and to meet people that he might otherwise never meet. Wandering around without a clear purpose, he said, allowed for that creative experimentation and improvisation.

Young people also told me that chillaxing at New Urban Arts was a deliberate response to their racist experiences of schooling. The reality was particularly true for students who attended the selective admissions college
preparatory school. Processes of social reproduction such as tracking were becoming visible to them within the school. During an interview three years after she had left New Urban Arts, I asked Lunisol, the youth member who told me that “straight white men suck” on my first day back in the studio, to reflect on the importance of chillaxing in the studio. She said,

I have talked to other people from New Urban Arts about this question of productivity. For us, it was about dealing with the traumas of confronting, for example, the racist attitude of a guidance counselor during the school day. We were being told, “You don’t belong in that AP class.” We would come over to the studio after school and we were shell-shocked. For me, it was like, “Nobody is going to ask me to do anything here now. I am just going to sit here and regroup.” This is a means of survival, this being unproductive. I think it is good not to make sometimes. It’s good to talk, and I think, talking sometimes at New Urban Arts, that was enough for me. Talking is just loving, and loving is beautiful.

For her, “not belonging” in that AP class thinly masks the racial and class prejudices at work determining what is being taught on different tracks and who belongs on what track. Derailing students of color from AP classes in a selective high school therefore institutionalizes racial inequality. In this injurious climate, talking becomes loving after school at New Urban Arts. I have read that line by Lunisol over and over to let it sink in because it is so difficult for practitioners in the youth arts and humanities field to appreciate that loving and talking can be more than enough precisely because we are expected to “transform” “troubled youth” during the limited time that we have with them each day. In other words, the field tends to already presume that talking and loving is never enough. That argument would never win in a grant application or a fundraising appeal. But I think it should in these bleak times.

When I heard Lunisol’s perspective, I thought back to my time as director of New Urban Arts, when, almost daily, two girls sat by the window next to my office while I worked. I wrote grants and developed agendas for committee meetings while they sat there, looking back across the street at their school, staring at one another like two girls in Alicia’s paintings, sitting there in silence, sometimes chatting, sometimes crying. They laughed too, sometimes while they were crying. We listened to Yo La Tengo playing from my computer speakers. We sat together but were apart. When an art exhibition deadline approached in the studio, the two of them would disappear from their perch near my office and embark on a short but intense period of art making, which always culminated in several strong contributions to each exhibition.
I never asked them to do anything other than that because those tender moments by my office seemed too important to them, whatever it was that they were doing, chillaxing every afternoon at New Urban Arts. I never even asked them what they were up to. I feared that asking them would raise doubts in their minds about whether I thought what they were doing was a legitimate use of their time, perhaps thwarting these moments of self-care. I kept to myself and continued to reflect on what it meant to be productive at New Urban Arts and what it meant for me, as a white person, to question whether they were being productive enough with their time in the studio. Years later, after hearing Lunisol’s explanation of talking as loving and loving as beautiful, I thought of them. I called one up and asked why they sat by my office, doing nothing as if their nothing was enough. She mentioned the same experience of being excluded from an AP class by the school guidance counselor.

So chillaxing is healing from race and class traumas for young people of color, particularly young women of color and queer youth. The toxicity and trauma of social institutions for them, their everyday interactions that can quickly turn painful and/or violent, and the constant barrage of dehumanizing representations of their identities means that healing is a political strategy of recuperation, of preserving life that is always under threat and preserving life that is not deemed life. But chillaxing is always already political for young people of New Urban Arts through their social position. I am never questioned when I chillax due to my whiteness and my maleness. My race is never on trial when I simply sit in a café and wait for a friend; I am never going to be arrested for doing that.

Lunisol was also aware of how chillaxing was a struggle for some in the studio as they combatted internalized representations of themselves as, for example, lazy and worthless. During our interview, we discussed her repost of a quote by the African American actress Golden Brooks on her Facebook page, in which Brooks said, “Black people have been taught this idea that they have to constantly constantly constantly prove their worth and if there is a space of time where a significant amount of ‘productivity’ has not been made then we have fallen completely back into the realm of nothingness—valuelessness. It’s policing ourselves so harshly and it’s created out of internalized racism.”

In referencing Brooks’s discussion of productivity and internalized racism, W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of a “double consciousness” becomes useful for understanding Lunisol’s theorization of chillaxing. Du Bois described the psychological conflict for African Americans as they look at themselves.
through the lens of a white nation that holds them in contempt, unworthy of dignity and of life. From this perspective, chillaxing operates as a contradictory site for Lunisol. On the one hand, chillaxing is enough of a practice for her to recover from racist traumas. On the other hand, it is a practice where she has struggled with internalized racism because she was not being productive enough. Chillaxing then has two faces for Lunisol.

The need for young people of color to rest and to recuperate after yet another shell-shocked day at school can even be understood as a tax on them. In other words, while more affluent and white young people, for example, can use the after-school hours to enrich themselves further, poor young people of color at New Urban Arts sometimes need to use the after-school time and space as a means to sit and recuperate. They need to do nothing because doing nothing is doing everything that they need in that moment. But the time that young people of color must spend recuperating in the studio is time that they are not spending fighting to get ahead or struggling for justice. Chillaxing is thus a contradiction that is painful to acknowledge: It can both sustain and cost young people at New Urban Arts.

**TRANSFORMING “TROUBLED YOUTH” IS A MATTER OF TIME**

Programs such as New Urban Arts are under pressure to prove that they use time effectively to transform “troubled youth,” that young people in creative youth development programs are doing something far more productive than chillaxing. Indeed, time has been key to the formation of the youth development sector, which includes arts and humanities programs such as New Urban Arts. In 1992, five years before I started New Urban Arts, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued a report titled “A Matter of Time.” The title of the report, “A Matter of Time,” has a double meaning. On one level, the title was used to suggest the urgency of addressing challenges facing American youth at that historical moment. On another level, the title was used to suggest a correlative relationship, if not a causal one, between how young people spend their time at different times of day and the outcomes that they should expect in adulthood. Specifically, “A Matter of Time” warned against dangers facing low-income adolescents during the nonschool hours, particularly during the after-school period and particularly in cities. When this report was written, the dangers facing youth during the after-school hours were understood within the context of the AIDS and crack epidemics, which had become prominent social and health problems in 1980s cities. At that historical moment, “A Matter of Time” had a rather deprived view of youth as they confronted these dangers:
Lacking a vision of a productive adulthood and constructive activities to engage them during nonschool hours, [adolescents] veer into another course of development. Some injure their health by using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Some engage in premature, unprotected sexual activity, which the presence of AIDS now renders deadly. Some commit acts of crime or live in neighborhoods where fear of violence pervades their daily lives. Although all adolescents face at least some of these hazards, those who live in urban and rural poverty areas face a higher level of risk. They are likely to have a lower level of personal and social support than their counterparts from more affluent families. This problematic characterization reproduces the logic of “troubled youth” as youth who lack personal and social support because their cultures are deprived. This representation ignores the fact, for example, that American teenagers from every social station have sex but face different risks because they have differential access to birth control and reproductive medicine. But this representation presumes that poor urban youth are “troubled,” are inferior, for having sex too soon. The soundness of the argument, however, is not really the point. The argument is designed to produce social anxieties about the present and the future through pathologizing youth, which mobilizes support for policies and practices that are designed to regulate and police their behavior as much as support them, and demonstrates to publics that something indeed is being done about, for example, an urban crisis marked by HIV/AIDS and crime.

This moral panic about “troubled youth” became the primary justification for philanthropy to expand support for community-based programs that turned the unsupervised after-school period from one of risk into one of opportunity for youth. This report highly influenced the expansion of youth programs in the United States during the 1990s. If the report had not been published in 1992, I likely would neither have conceived of New Urban Arts nor received support in 1997 to launch it. And since New Urban Arts’ inception in 1997, the state has exerted increased influence over youth programs. Moreover, these programs have had to turn to the state for financial support because their students cannot pay tuition. As a result, the state has been able to exercise greater control over expectations for how young people in cities should spend their time during the after-school hours.

In 2003, more than a decade after “A Matter of Time,” Providence mayor David Cicilline held a press conference at New Urban Arts to announce the launch of a private/public partnership, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA). This partnership was launched to support and improve after-school
programs for youth in the city. The new mayor needed to make his mark on education. But public schooling did not provide a viable site for him to do so because of the encroachment of federal and state education policy, and, some would suggest, the intransigence of the local teachers union. So the after-school space provided a convenient and largely unregulated forum for him to make an impact on youth. The added rationale for intervening in the after-school sector was because, at least as the story was often explained to me when I was the director of New Urban Arts, Cicilline had inherited a highly corrupt and ineffective Parks and Recreation department from the previous mayor, Buddy Cianci. So he created a public/private initiative both to reform and to work around this department that needed to do a better job serving youth in the city.

The fact that Cicilline chose New Urban Arts to announce his new youth initiative was therefore symbolic. The mayor could use New Urban Arts as a setting to suggest what he meant by high-quality youth programs in the city. The possibility that the organization might receive more public attention and support meant that we welcomed the mayor into the studio to hold his press conference. But the city did not invest much in terms of financial resources into the program. Instead, Cicilline created a new initiative that competed with programs such as New Urban Arts for philanthropic funding, as well as introduced evaluative tools that were then used to evaluate the quality of programs such as New Urban Arts. The Wallace Foundation provided funding nationally for cities to build these citywide after-school systems overseen by new public/private partnerships, which, unlike public school systems, are not accountable to taxpayers and voters.

In a policy brief shared with youth organizations, Cicilline’s new initiative, PASA, and a new partner organization, the Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance, argued that after-school programs in the city could no longer “babysit” children in the city but rather needed to become enriching holistic programs with their own goals and objectives. To promote holistic youth enrichment in programs across the city, PASA introduced a standards-based auditing tool to measure the quality of after-school programs in the city. Soon afterward, funders of after-school programs in Providence, such as the United Way, began to require youth programs that received funding to be evaluated with this tool.

The PASA standards-based auditing tool for adolescent programs makes specific assumptions about what is desirable with respect to staff and young people’s usage of time. In other words, the tool holds certain beliefs about what should be considered “constructive activities” for “troubled youth” so that they can develop a vision for “productive adulthood.” According to the tool, high-quality after-school programs are those in which
· staff start and end session within ten minutes of scheduled time;\textsuperscript{14}

· staff have all materials and supplies ready to begin all activities (e.g., materials are gathered, set up);\textsuperscript{15}

· staff explain all activities clearly (e.g., youth appear to understand directions; sequence of events and purpose are clear);\textsuperscript{16}

· there is an appropriate amount of time for all of the activities (e.g., youth do not appear rushed, frustrated, bored, or distracted; most youth finish activities);\textsuperscript{17} and

· the program activities lead (or will lead in future sessions) to tangible products or performances that reflect ideas or designs of youth.\textsuperscript{18}

On one level, these indicators appear harmless. They reflect a fairly traditional approach to after-school programs in which adults design, structure, and direct activities for youth. Young people engage in an arc of performance from design to execution, follow the directions of staff who provide clear instructions, begin and end their activities within an appropriate amount of time, and produce tangible products and performances that reflect their ideas. It reflects a generally accepted understanding of what makes a good classroom.

But these indicators clearly do not value the more complex “monochronic” and “polychronic” structure of New Urban Arts, which allows youth to chillax after school because they have good reasons to do so (e.g., a troubling guidance counselor, the Newtown school shooting, the need to discuss marriage equality, etc.). Moreover, through troublemaking, Gabriela pointed to the problem that she has with the expectation that poor youth of color always need to be “on task, following directions.” So, for Gabriela, young people should always be troubling the ways in which authority figures, including funding bodies, expect them to be on task at a particular time based on the assumption that they have not acquired the cultural resources needed to succeed, to not be left behind. And through the hot mess, young people were interested in the unpredictability and randomness—the excessiveness of New Urban Arts—to strengthen social bonds and to sustain their work in troubling their social identities. These crucial aspects of young people’s cultural production at New Urban Arts is at odds with these temporal indicators of quality.

These tensions reflect the underlying problem of after-school program reform. These reforms are rooted in individualized assumptions about the social problems facing youth. They assume and expect that “high-quality” programs should affect youth by teaching them the skills and dispositions they need to have a successful and productive adulthood at the precise moment that the opportunity for young people to succeed and to be productive in a traditional
economic sense does not await them. These reforms invisibilize the systemic problems of, for example, rising student debt and declining wages that lie on their horizons. These are problems that youth programs cannot solve no matter how “high-quality” they are, and the belief that “quality” is the solution for them distracts from those more complex structural economic issues. Moreover, these standards ignore the need for “unproductive” self-care that young people require after another traumatizing day at school due to, for example, racist interactions with certain staff or the denial of access to AP courses.

It should come as no surprise then that program staff at New Urban Arts have struggled to reconcile the demands for productivity by the state and the demands for autonomy and experimentation of youth. Indeed, staff members asked me when I began this research project if I could produce evidence that would demonstrate New Urban Arts’ impact and prove its program quality so that the organization could push back against what one called “Big Brother.” Her use of the Orwellian term “Big Brother” suggests the ways in which staff at New Urban Arts feel they are under surveillance from the state. Indeed, a program consultant who reported to one of New Urban Arts’ funders told me that PASA’s quality-standards assessment tool was ineffective in evaluating New Urban Arts. It could not produce any data because the tool was not designed to capture what was actually taking place in the studio, shaped by its monochronic and polychronic structure. After her site visit, some staff were concerned that the failure of this tool to demonstrate the program’s impact would threaten future funding. As a result, staff felt pressured to make the program conform to these imposed quality standards.

Staff members at New Urban Arts are not alone in experiencing these tensions and pressures. In her educational research on youth centers, Jennifer Teitle has shown how program staff have reorganized their youth programs in response to the pressure for demonstrable results—from decisions concerning keeping old furniture that might interfere with funders’ expectations for a clean, safe learning environment to staff who pressure young people to comply with new externally imposed expectations for what “troubled youth” should be doing to appear productive. Her research shows how auditing tools in the after-school sector can reshape programs in the tool’s own image, as staff and youth are constantly revising their programs to be assessed by auditing tools in this quest for philanthropic approval. Teitle argued that this “audit culture coerces the transformation of autonomous organizations into auditable communities.” In her analysis, Teitle draws on Foucault’s panoptic theory of governance to claim that youth programs are regulating youth behaviors in ways that conform to the desired and distantly managed expec-
tations of the state. This finding resonates with Soo Ah Kwon’s notion of “affirmative governmentality,” in which she has observed and theorized the ways in which the state regulates youth activism programs, and the behavior of youth of color, in order to mitigate the oppositional force of their political activism. In this research, it is clear that chillaxing does not conform to the private/public construction of quality.

The panoptic power of audit culture in youth programs presents risks to New Urban Arts. One risk is that young people who need and want “monochronic” and “polychronic” temporal structures may find that they lose aspects of New Urban Arts they want most. Indeed, two youth members, Lewis and Dania, for example, told me in interviews why they started to come to the studio much less frequently in 2013. They were both key figures in the studio, active leaders in every facet of the organization—recruiting youth members, giving studio tours, meeting with donors, interviewing and selecting artist-mentors, and exhibiting and performing artwork. They were also youth members who identified as queer and had been kicked out of other youth programs in the city for being disruptive. I reached out to interview Dania because I noticed that she had stopped coming to the program. During the interview, she told me that she stopped coming because, she said, New Urban Arts was becoming “too rulezie.” She said that she was being made to feel guilty for not working with artist-mentors on art projects. She said that the space was becoming less open to “laying on the floor and staring into space or screaming unusually.”

The other youth member, Lewis, said that he was being asked to give tours to potential donors. He said that he felt like a “show puppet” during these tours because he felt compelled to hide the weirdness of New Urban Arts’ studio from these donors. He said that it was vital that New Urban Arts remains a “weird space.” If it cannot show off its weirdness, Lewis said, then it does not deserve funding anyway. There was also some evidence that young people in the studio were starting to police other youth members’ productivity. I heard some rumblings from youth members that newcomers had to earn the right to hang out and be silly in the studio. That is, they had to put in the time and the work, to prove themselves as artists, before earning the right to participate in the hot mess or chillax. These examples show that young people’s creative practices can be reshaped by the state through subtle and self-regulating ways, and that this result may have disproportionately negative effects on youth who struggle most to find social institutions where they fit in, where they are not “silenced” as they “scream unusually.”

A second risk from audit culture is that the storefront studio becomes a site where young people begin to internalize the far too simple—and, Lu-
nisol and Gabriela might argue, racist and classist—view that if only they worked harder and followed the clearly provided directions from adults better during and after the school day, then they should expect to transition from “troubled youth” into “productive adulthood.” This simplistic view only recapitulates the theory of the underclass—that is, if they learn respectable styles and comportments determined by the state, including a temporality of productivity and achievement, then they will be deemed human, they will be deemed to have rights to life and profitability. The second half of this book shows that the cultural political economy of Providence does not provide any evidence to support that claim.

So protecting the qualities that so many young people at New Urban Arts desire requires thinking about productivity in ways that are not measurable and assured by categories of audit, as Teitle argues, but those that awaken possibilities for life that are not tidy and predictable but messy and expansive. Productivity for young people at New Urban Arts may mean talking that is loving and loving that is living because talking and loving are beautiful. It may mean lying on the floor and staring into space and screaming unusually. It may mean reading books and texting homies and chicas while acting like they are wearing berets and drinking cappuccinos. Yes, chillaxing is contradictory because it reproduces their position as members of an underclass as much as it refuses the “constructive activities” that are intended for them. But, as Lunisol might put it, chillaxing is at least enough for now. This approach to “productivity” refuses the notion that young people at New Urban Arts need to be “on task” or “following directions” in order to get ahead. In other words, this approach to productivity refuses the proposed fix for young people based on their subjectification as members of an underclass under the rubric of “high-quality” youth development programs.

Ruth Nicole Brown, a key thinker in black girlhood studies, provides a good example of a leader in youth programming whose creative pedagogy refuses this logic of youth development. Brown celebrates black girl genius through her youth programs. She refutes the notion that black girls are people who need to be redeemed and resurrected, solved and fixed—in short, individually “developed” based on a normative, racist, classist, and sexist conception of what development means or why it should happen. Instead, Brown describes her social justice program for black girls, Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (sLHoT), in ambiguous terms. To Brown, sLHoT is “a collective workplay across black girl differences that make places out of our dreamworlds so we can be free, together, and unfree from those who we want holding us into forever.” As I read her books on sLHoT, I was struck by how Brown
does not offer a description of when SOLHOT meets, where it meets, how many people meet, or what its young girls do there. That is to say, as Brown represents SOLHOT, she unravels SOLHOT. She has refused to allow her program to be pinned up against a wall as a thing, thus making it harder to audit. By shielding SOLHOT from audit through ambiguity, and through celebrating black girl genius as feminist fugitivity, Brown is producing a “collective work-play” that allows black girls, black femmes, and black gender-nonconforming participants to be in pedagogic and political flight, together. The focus is on making places where they can be free, together, and unfree from those they want holding them into forever—not “developing” black girls based on a normative trajectory of black girlhood constructed by white patriarchy.

When young people sit in the window of New Urban Arts, caring for one another while listening to Yo La Tengo, reflecting on how they are going to negotiate and escape from the racism of their school guidance counselor, I see them engaged in similar collective work-play. In chillaxing, I see the politics of freedom and the politics of refusal that I read in Brown’s work with SOLHOT. This refusal also resonates with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s proposed method of pedagogic resistance in what they call the “undercommons.” Informed by the black radical tradition, Harney and Moten theorized spaces for learning where marginalized people come together to establish an independent settlement, a marooned space for learning, as it were, that resists surveillance and steals back a sense of productive time that cannot be calibrated and measured. Moten refers to the kind of activities that he anticipates in the undercommons as “study”:

When I think about the way we use the term “study,” I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. These activities aren’t ennobled by the fact that we now say, “oh, if you did these things in a certain way, you could be said to have been studying.” To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice.

Indeed, young people at New Urban Arts were often their best selves in the studio when they engaged in these everyday activities that do not need to be
ennobled or reduced through the self-regulating practice of audit. In the studio, there is a common intellectual practice that is always already present. Lewis already sees that intellectuality of New Urban Arts when he says that young people can sit in the studio and wear berets and drink cappuccinos—which are white markers of intellectuality and leisure. Their intellectuality, however, is hard to see and impossible to measure because it does not look like anything but “being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session.” Sometimes, often the best times, New Urban Arts does not look like anything but some young people sitting on a porch and other young people working together in a factory.

The problem, from my point of view, is the failure of people on the outside looking in, often white adults such as myself, to recognize this incessant and irreversible intellectuality precisely because we often cannot see past the social location of these youth as “troubled youth.” We cannot see their talking as intellectual. We cannot see these youth as daydreamers and time travelers. And that is why our tools that we design to audit quality in youth development programs cannot produce data when young people are chillaxing in the studio, doing the talking and the loving, the sitting and the staring, the laughing and the crying. When I look back on my own record as the founding director of New Urban Arts, who played a key role in shaping the pedagogic conditions of the storefront studio, including its temporal structure, I am confident that I did play a positive and productive role in creating “monochronic” and “polychronic” conditions where young people can be productive on their terms, where they can “study” and “chillax.”

My fieldwork for this project taught me that young people in the studio are indeed developing and theorizing creative cultural practices that they might sustain throughout their lives. These cultural practices that I have presented in this book challenge and exceed their subjectification as “troubled youth” as much as they conform to it. Supporting young people as they developed these creative practices was my aim when I started New Urban Arts. Due to the efforts of so many, I think it is safe to say, now more than two decades after its founding, that that aim is being achieved.

But I get only so much satisfaction from that finding after I analyze my role at New Urban Arts in relation to the cultural political economy of the Creative Capital in the next three chapters. With that in mind, I will demonstrate in the conclusion of this book how these three cultural practices developed in the storefront studio of New Urban Arts can buttress youth activism to resist gentrifying cities.