The Creative Underclass

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In the second half of this book, I turn to the ways in which my leadership has played a contradictory role for youth within the particular historical context of the Creative Capital. My contradictory leadership manifested in part through the pedagogic model that I initially developed at New Urban Arts, which is called “arts mentoring.” In this chapter, I show how arts mentoring is very much intertwined with the Creative Capital’s desire to transform “troubled youth” into “creative youth” in ways that produced contradictory effects for young people themselves. Understanding these contradictions requires analyzing the pedagogic model I established for New Urban Arts amid the cultural and economic conditions of Providence. Those conditions, as I have argued, place competing demands on programs such as New Urban Arts, its leaders, and the youth themselves. Acknowledging my own contradictions is useful in working toward creative youth justice in gentrifying cities. Through an analysis of my own entanglements in the cultural political economy of Providence, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of how and why the cul-
tural practices developed by youth at New Urban Arts can and must contribute to that activist project.

Each year, youth participants of New Urban Arts lead the selection process for new artist-mentors. Dozens of people apply to become artist-mentors by submitting a written application and participating in a group interview with youth participants. The participants that conduct the interviews tend to be individuals who have participated in the program for several years. After the interviews, these young people select their corps of artist-mentors for the year. This youth engagement in staff hiring at New Urban Arts is often recognized as a marker of its quality in the creative youth development sector, and it illustrates the nonhierarchical nature of New Urban Arts that is so cherished by its youth participants.

In the first interview that I attended as a researcher in 2012, the applicant for the artist-mentor position was clearly a member of the high-status creative underground scene of Providence. Her head was shaved on both sides with long dyed hair on top. She was white and had a septum ring, wore tight black jeans, had several tattoos, and carried a messenger bag. Each high school student on the committee took turns asking her questions about why she wanted to become an artist-mentor. One youth member asked her how she learned about New Urban Arts, and another youth member asked her how she handles chaos and messiness. The conversation started to turn when Laura, the youth member who wrote the letters to herself stating that she needed to “live goddammit,” asked everyone at the table to name their favorite word for a disease. Laura offered “lupus” as an example.

Everyone laughed and proceeded to name their favorite word. I contributed to the conversation with “impetigo,” which, incidentally, is not a disease but a bacterial infection that I used to get as a kid.

When it was her turn, the applicant said, “Rabies, because of all the nasty toxins.”

“So,” Laura then said to the applicant in a deadly serious tone as the group laughter ended abruptly. “What we really want to know is . . .”

Laura paused.

“What are your DIY ethics? How punk rock are you?”

Everyone at the table started to giggle while trying to maintain their composure because, after all, this was an official job interview.

“I’m pretty punk,” the candidate replied without missing a beat. “Somebody told me that this was going to be a question. So I had time to think about it.”

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“Oh, you know an insider!” another youth member on the interview panel said.

“Yeah, an insider!” she replied before continuing to describe herself. “All the stuff that I do is very much ‘Do It Yourself.’ I never say no to anything. I’ve learned to make basically everything by hand. I make my own paper. I print my own stuff. I learned to build bikes. I design my own clothes. Even though I love to draw and that’s where it comes out most often, there’s no holds barred with anything else. I really like to use my hands.”

The committee of youth participants smiled and nodded in approval.

Providence could legitimately brand itself the Creative Capital in 2009 because of young people such as this applicant. These young artists in the city had established a thriving underground scene in Providence for more than a decade. This applicant had all the markers of this scene. She made her own clothes. She built bikes. She printed her own stuff. She had a punk style, from her messenger bag to her septum ring. This scene came into prominence in Providence in the 1990s when I was an undergraduate at Brown University. At the time, the Fort Thunder artist collective, started by Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) graduates, established a local noise music and printmaking scene that attracted international notoriety. People who now participate in this scene in Providence have high status in the city, and they have historically tended to be graduates of RISD or Brown. That is to say, this scene tends to feature white youth from relatively class-privileged backgrounds who have overtly rejected the norms associated with their upbringings. This rejection occurs through conscious and overt cultural performances, such as dressing down, living in undeveloped industrial loft spaces, making art and music, and not choosing traditional career pathways that are normally enabled by their college degrees.

This interview illustrates how some young people from New Urban Arts have already learned to perform the talk that is required to participate in this high-status group in the city, whether it is an ironic discussion of names for a disease or how DIY and punk rock one is. This example shows how New Urban Arts can be a place where some young people develop access to cultural resources that are needed to participate in this scene. They learn to participate in this scene and be at ease with it—as evidenced by their line of questioning and their laughter—even though they lack the educational credentials and racial and class privileges that are historically associated with young people who have participated in this scene. In other words, New Urban Arts can be a place for some youth to be “transformed” from “troubled youth” into
the “creative youth” that are associated with Providence’s image as the Creative Capital.

However, I suspect this transformation is not the one that is normally envisaged in the field of creative youth development. Transformation through creativity is more likely interpreted as a pathway to upward class mobility, defined in terms of access to four-year colleges and better-paying jobs. This brief example shows how this “transformation” can also mean learning to be at ease in a cultural scene that has been coded as high, white, and affluent—even if the material conditions of that scene are not entirely dissimilar from living in poverty.

In 2015, I conducted several interviews to ask young people if they participated in this scene and how New Urban Arts prepared them for it, if at all. I interviewed Lunisol four years after she graduated from high school, and four years after she stopped participating in New Urban Arts. Lunisol was the youth participant who, on my first day back in the studio at New Urban Arts as a researcher in 2012, questioned my project and expressed her doubts about my position as the founder and as a straight cisgendered white man. Lunisol’s parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic. She attended the selective admissions college preparatory high school in Providence and understood New Urban Arts as a place to heal the racial and class injuries that she endured at school through talking and loving. She was also the first member of her family to go to college. At the time of our interview, she was about to graduate from an elite art college and had accepted an offer from another art institution to pursue her master of fine arts. Throughout her postsecondary educational career, Lunisol, like dozens of alumni of New Urban Arts, posted requests on social media sites asking people to donate money for her food, rent, and school supplies, revealing the material difficulty of attempting to move up the class ladder. Given these economic challenges, Lunisol’s educational trajectory is an example of precisely the kind of impact that is so often desired from programs such as New Urban Arts.

During our interview, Lunisol looked back on her time at New Urban Arts with some ambivalence. She was thankful for her experiences at New Urban Arts. But she also questioned her relationships with artist-mentors in the studio, people who were being credited by the city, as the city’s cultural urban renewal plan put it, with driving “redevelopment in neighborhoods and city streets,” breathing “life into our aging industrial infrastructure,” and serving as “catalysts for civic engagement.”

As Lunisol looked back on her relationships with these artist-mentors
four years after graduating from high school, she described to me how she idolized them at first. She said,

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

In this difficult passage, Lunisol referenced several additional markers of the creative underground scene in Providence. These creatives live as collectives in underutilized factory buildings. They choose not to have “real” jobs. They put on punk shows in these once abandoned industrial spaces. Here, according to Lunisol, they make a space where everyone loves one another, which includes, according to her, “beating each other up.” While these creatives in Providence’s underground may not get real jobs, they earn cultural status in the city through adopting these markers of creativity. And Lunisol had learned to want to be part of this high-status scene. Moreover, New Urban Arts had clearly become a place for her where she had learned what it would take to participate in this underground and achieve this cultural status. But she also recognized that this new citizen-subject made available for her to “choose” through New Urban Arts, through growing up in the Creative Capital, entailed living “broke.”

Other alumni had far more positive viewpoints on this scene and their roles in it. In 2015, I also interviewed Laura, who had asked the applicant her favorite word for a disease and how DIY punk she was. Laura identified as white and poor. When I asked Laura what the Creative Capital meant to her during our interview in 2015, she said that, during high school, she would hang out both in New Urban Arts’ studio and on Thayer Street, a commercial district in the affluent, predominantly white neighborhood of Providence that tends to appeal to students from the nearby campuses of Brown and RISD, as well as teenagers living in the city. Laura said that hanging out on Thayer Street was “so cool” because “you’re seeing gender-nonconforming people, people with cool haircuts, happy kids, sad kids, and angsty kids that you can relate to.” These types were similar to those who stuck around in the “weird space” of New Urban Arts, and some of those types were artist-mentors from Brown and RISD. Laura also said that whenever she tells people that she is an
Laura told me that she has had nothing to do with RISD and considers the institution “pretty fucking classist” because it offers “essentially no financial aid whatsoever.” By contrast, she said that she admired New Urban Arts because it made her feel like she could be part of the Creative Capital even though she never had a chance of attending RISD because of her family’s financial situation. Through arts mentoring, the studio provided Laura with access to the social and cultural capital that was necessary for her to participate in this underground scene even if she lacked the economic capital required to go to RISD.

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

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

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

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

Theo also noted that “most people do not have access” to the “really rad” underground in Providence. But Theo said that they gained access to these spaces through relationships with artist-mentors at New Urban Arts. Like Lunisol and Laura, Theo learned from these “real” artists about upcoming events in old factory buildings. While Laura argued that this underground scene was white, Theo had a different perspective. They said that this creative underground was beautiful because it featured a lot of young people of color. This scene, according to them, was “not very white.” Theo felt part of the scene as a young person of color. At the same time, Theo’s perspective also supports Laura’s claim that there were people in the studio “so drastically different” from her that were “feeling those same things.” In other words, young people of color such as Theo were able to access this underground scene, and feel they could be a part of it, through their participation in New Urban Arts.

From Theo’s perspective, young people of color who participated in this high-status cultural scene, which Laura thought was coded white, were not betraying their racial identities by, for example, acting in a way that might be coded as white and therefore inauthentic. Instead, they were transforming the scene through their very presence and participation. Theo contrasted this Providence underground with the one that they encountered in Boston as a college student, which they described as a “white hipster scene.” Theo wondered if the main difference between these two scenes in Providence and Boston was New Urban Arts, a place that provided young people of color with access to relationships with artist-mentors. In the process, these young people participated in a creative underground that affirmed their existence as white youth, young people of color, gender-nonconforming youth, angsty kids, happy kids, sad kids, and so on. Theo and Laura went further, and both argued that young people from New Urban Arts have played a role in transforming this scene so that was is not simply a “white hipster” scene. The creative scene now recognized and reflected their presence and their identities through their transformational work.

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

From these three youth perspectives, one can then begin to see how some young people at New Urban Arts are actually transformed as “troubled youth.” These young people are troubling representations of themselves as members of an underclass, representations that might presume that they lack the social, cultural, and even economic capital to participate in this high-status creative underground scene because they are not white or did not go to Brown or RISD. Relationships with artist-mentors formed through New Urban Arts become a conduit for gaining this social and cultural capital. These relationships with artist-mentors teach some of them how to talk the talk and look the look of this high-status group of creatives in Providence. Moreover, artist-mentors support young people and affirm their identities in the studio as they become “very vocal about their politics,” which is evident in artwork produced through their support and guidance, such as Thomas’s poem “Native Tongue” or Gabriela’s headless sculpture. For some young people, then, New Urban Arts had played a role in cultivating the embodied “habitus” that is necessary for them to participate in and belong to this high-status underground scene. This “corporeal ease,” as Shamus Khan describes Bourdieu’s concept, is the bodily knowledge necessary to carry oneself within a particular social world, a form of tacit knowledge, often unnoticed and unnamed, that distinguishes oneself as a member of that world and plays a role in the reproduction of social stratification. As such, through the arts mentoring model I established, New Urban Arts is a place where the social order of the Creative Capital becomes inscribed in and through the bodies of some youth participants. Through arts mentoring, New Urban Arts is teaching a *creative style of living*, whereby some young people, for example, are going to choose to live broke in a loft and not get a real job because they want to stick it to the man. From this perspective, New Urban Arts is place that does indeed “transform” “troubled youth” into “creative youth.”

But Lunisol questioned whether this “choice” to become creative entailed reproducing her subordinate class future. Indeed, Lunisol began to question
this performative desire to live in an abandoned warehouse where she might
die of frostbite in the winter. She said,

Some of the artist-mentors [at New Urban Arts] talked about how they
were struggling so hard and wouldn’t be able to eat tomorrow and would
have to go to Price Right [a discount grocery store]. But they were liv-
ing in broken-down houses and going to Whole Foods [an up-market
organic grocery store].

When I started to get to know them better . . . as I was about to
graduate from high school, I asked them how they could do it. . . . How
could they live like this? How could they work on commission, give
away their artwork, give out posters for free, and eat at Whole Foods?

Then I learned that their parents were there to support them if
they fucked up or if shit got too hard. I learned that that they had these
college degrees at places like Harvard and RISD that they could fall back
upon.

We didn’t have conversations about how they were able to live like
this. If we had brought that up, if we asked them, “How could they do
this?” Then the questions become: “What does that look like for us?”
“Would we have idolized you in the same way?” “Would we have looked
up to you?” “Would we have even built that relationship with you?”

Looking back at it, I’m thinking that they are living that life, and I
can never live that life . . . I mean . . . that is my life . . . that is my reality . . .
but without the Whole Foods [laughing].

After this illuminating portion of our interview, Lunisol told me that she
still was thankful for her relationships with artist-mentors from New Urban
Arts. She said that they were “real gems.” She noted how much she learned
from them and how much they supported her. Still, Lunisol emphasized the
fact that she never had the choice to live in poverty like these bohemian cre-
atives. She inherited her poverty as a child. Choosing this creative lifestyle
that would give her higher status in Providence—working on commission,
giving away posters for free, going to punk shows, living in an abandoned
warehouse without heating, and not getting a real job—did not feel like an
option for her because she had not inherited a private safety net from her par-
ents. She did not have parents who were there to support her if she fucked up
or if shit got too hard.

From this perspective, the transformation from “troubled youth” to
“creative youth” entails reproducing the same material conditions of poverty.
For Lunisol then, she would not be crossing a class boundary in a purely eco-

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nomic sense, but rather she would be reproducing her own poverty by becoming creative. Curiously, that would be a performative choice that the Creative Capital could not refuse because there simply are not good paying jobs for those who do undergo this creative transformation.

WHEN STICKING IT TO THE MAN DOES NOT STICK IT TO THE MAN

In learning the creative lifestyle of the underground scene through New Urban Arts, Lunisol mentioned that she learned to value the prospect of “not getting a real job” and “sticking it the man.” Then she realized that this choice would reproduce the subordinate class position that she had inherited as a child. Along similar lines, Laura recounted a discussion that she had with an artist-mentor from RISD at New Urban Arts. Together, they questioned the intentions of the city government in celebrating arts education as key to the futures of young people in the city. Laura said that she and her artist-mentor discussed a conspiracy theory in which Providence’s creative city strategy was designed to secure the political power of those who profit unevenly from creative capitalism. Here is how she described this theory: “The government wants us all to be artists so that we don’t take them down. That is brilliant. We’ll become broke starving artists and feel powerless. Or, we will become rich, successful artists who are unrelatable and don’t give a fuck about the communities where we come from.”

This conspiracy theory provides a strong indication of the class anxiety that Laura feels in the Creative Capital. She fears being broke and powerless or becoming wealthy and unethical. While it is easy to think about “conspiracy” in terms of an Oz-like figure working from behind a curtain, another way to think about conspiracy is that various institutions and individuals are working independently on their own agendas in ways that shore up dominant economic and cultural interests. In this case, Laura and her artist-mentor are beginning to connect the dots between different facets of the Creative Capital that are working against them. That includes the desire for the government to educate youth to become creatives, or “starving artists.” That desire is entangled in the fact that the labor market in Providence has not been able to support many transformed creatives who want good paying jobs. In other words, the labor market in Providence needs young people to “choose” to become starving artists, to be satisfied with the cultural status that comes with participating in the high-status underground scene, while at the same time living in an abandoned warehouse without heat in the winter. These are precisely the kind of citizen-subjects that the dysfunctional labor market of the Creative Capital needs.
Of course, that is not what government policy states. The creative city policy discourse in Providence appears to presume that young people in the city will have a better chance of getting a “real job” in the creative sector if they develop creative skills through programs such as New Urban Arts. This policy aspiration reflects a gradual historical shift in government support for the youth sector and workforce development. In 1973, for example, President Richard Nixon signed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which, among other things, provided summer jobs to low-income high school students in public agencies and private not-for-profit organizations to teach the marketable skills needed to acquire an unsubsidized job (while also providing indirect cash assistance to poor families). By the 1990s, funding for youth work experiences had diminished significantly. The new trend, reflected in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, the year I founded New Urban Arts, was to prepare youth for successful adulthood through teaching general skills and mentoring rather than restricting youth to particular job training experiences. The city’s government’s expectation that young people should become creative to succeed, to become upwardly mobile, is based on the assumption that that general skill is needed for them to thrive in a labor market where they are expected to have multiple careers and employers. This workforce development strategy still, however, hinges upon the assumption that there will be “real jobs” in the creative sector waiting for “troubled youth” once they are “transformed.”

*Creative Providence,* published in 2009, did acknowledge that it outlined “some bold outcomes that may take decades to realize.” And I am writing this book less than a decade after the plan was introduced, and less than two decades after Providence was branded the Renaissance City. Nonetheless, it is worth assessing whether “getting a real job” is a viable option for young people such as Lunisol if and when they decide that they do not want to become a “starving artist” with high status but no heat. After all, what good are creative workforce skills for young people if there are few jobs waiting for them that demand those skills?

*Creative Providence* reported that its creative sector has had an “astounding” economic impact on the city. This creative sector includes businesses in the arts, design, media, and technology sectors. The 2009 plan reported that there were 1,231 arts-related businesses in Rhode Island’s first congressional district, which includes neighborhoods on the north, south, and east sides of Providence. These businesses provided 6,318 jobs according to a report from Americans for the Arts published in 2008. More recent data by the Americans for the Arts showed that, as of January 2012, Providence County, which
includes all of the city, was home to 1,722 arts-related businesses. These businesses employed 8,509 people at that time, and accounted for 4.67 percent of the 36,871 total businesses located in the county, and 2.6 percent of the 326,699 people employed.

One could argue that these arts-related businesses occupy a small proportion of the labor market. The counterargument is that 2.6 percent of the labor market is significant, because more than one-quarter of Providence’s jobs in 2012 were provided by local universities, hospitals, and schools. This counterargument is a reminder that the diversity and availability of employment options in Providence are limited. So this relatively small proportion of the labor market in arts, media, and technology—2.6 percent—could qualify as significant. Moreover, creative skills are also relevant to working at local universities, hospitals, or schools.

It is also true that the arts-related sector in the area has been growing. But it is difficult to gauge this growth because the methodology for tracking these businesses is relatively new. At the same time, we do know that the industry that provided the most local jobs in this sector in 2012 was “crafts” (2,408 jobs, approximately 28 percent of arts-related jobs). This fact reflects Providence’s history as a major manufacturing site for goods such as jewelry and silver. But jobs in the jewelry sector in Rhode Island declined from 32,500 in 1978 to just over 3,000 in 2014. The Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training projected this industry’s continual decline in the region. In other words, the major employer in the arts-related sector was projected to decline. Other sectors in the arts would have to grow much more rapidly to compensate for those losses. Given this reality, the arts-related sector of the creative labor market in Providence likely does not provide a good chance for Lunisol or other “transformed” youth to get a “real job” as creatives.

Media and technology also have severe limitations as a strategy for creatives who want a “real job” in Providence. Providence does not have a history of technological innovation and it is competing regionally with Boston’s Route 128 Technology Corridor. In his assessment of Providence’s future as a creative city, Richard Florida noted that technology, which was one of his key variables in ranking creative cities, has been “frankly the region’s weakspot.” Rhode Island ranked thirty-seventh among the fifty states in technological innovation using metrics such as the number of patents issued to residents, the deployment of broadband services, a record of high-tech business formation, and federal health and science research grants received. Moreover, the Rhode Island media landscape contracted after Creative Providence was implemented due to shifts in digital media, with the local newspaper cutting
jobs as it was bought and sold, and the alternative weekly newspaper, the *Providence Phoenix*, publishing its last issue in 2014. New media companies have not emerged locally to replace the loss of these jobs.

Susan Christopherson and Ned Rightor have also pointed to evidence that suggests that taxpayer subsidies for relocating film and television production to Providence have not produced “real jobs” in these local industries. The Rhode Island Department of Revenue calculated that a film and television company would need to spend $3.57 in additional expenditures for each dollar in taxpayer subsidy in order for the state to break even on its public investment. A generous multiplier is $2.00. As Christopherson and Rightor put it, “The implication is that the Rhode Island tax incentives have to generate extraordinary purchases and job creation to make back the tax money lost in financing entertainment media productions.” They also point out that the stable jobs in the media industries remain in major media centers, such as Los Angeles or New York, while the people actually engaged in local media production through these tax subsidies are employed precariously. So state efforts to attract media companies in Providence both did not produce “real jobs” and also took away from taxpayer investments in other areas that might benefit “troubled youth,” such as investments in school infrastructure or art and music teachers in the Providence public schools.

In 2012, there was also a public scandal in Rhode Island over the state’s efforts to lure jobs in the video game design industry to Providence. The quasi-public Economic Development Corporation approved a $75 million loan guarantee to 38 Studios, a game design company started by Curt Schilling, a former pitcher for the Boston Red Sox. The loan was based on the promise of 38 Studios bringing 450 jobs to Providence by 2012. That year, 38 Studios defaulted on its state loan, laid off its entire staff, and declared bankruptcy.

Despite these setbacks, I understand why Providence would still tout its creative sector in 2009 as “astounding.” The city was trying to promote its creative sector to attract investment and grow it. However, the reality is that this strategy so far has not produced a viable pathway for some young people from New Urban Arts, if any, to work in the local creative sector. Lunisol would therefore have struggled to find a “real job” as a creative in this sector. As a result, “sticking it to the man” by not getting a “real job” was never really an option for her or other “transformed youth” in Providence.

Lunisol, Laura, and other youth from New Urban Arts would have had more luck finding a job in the low-wage service sector in Providence, perhaps the kind of jobs that Lunisol would have in mind if she chose to “live broke.” Jobs in this sector have comprised a relatively large and growing share of the
labor market in the Providence region. This trend is not unrelated to the vision for Providence as the Creative Capital. The Creative Capital is ultimately a place-marketing strategy designed to refurbish the city with a new image, an image of youth and creativity, which has been key to transforming the city into a consumer-oriented lifestyle destination for upmarket eating, shopping, and so forth. Laura considered the relationship between this symbolic economy and the low-wage labor market in Providence as part of her conspiracy theory. She said,

When we talk about creativity in Providence, we have to talk about tourism, because that is the ultimate ramification of it. If the government wants people to come to Broadway and eat at Julian’s [a funky bistro on the West Side near New Urban Arts] and go to the Columbus Theatre [a restored theater in the same neighborhood], then the tourists are going to have to stay someplace. Where are they going to have to stay? There are three hotels in Providence that have a living wage. The rest of them don’t, and most of them stay at the rest of them.

Laura’s analysis is backed up by evidence. Twenty percent of all jobs in the Providence region in 2014 were in the service sector, and hotel and food services accounted for 25 percent of the 6,700 new jobs created in the area between 2010 and 2014. Between 2012 and 2022, food service jobs are expected to grow by 19 percent in Rhode Island.

The replacement of higher-paying manufacturing jobs in Providence with lower-paying hotel, food, and other service jobs has correlated with declining income in the Providence region. The lowest average annual wages in Providence have been in hotel and food services. In 2014, those jobs provided an annual average income of $18,796. That income is $5,000 beneath the federal poverty threshold for a family of four in Providence. The growth of this low-wage sector provides one reason why the median annual income in Rhode Island, when adjusted for inflation, declined from a peak of $62,870 in 2003 to $54,891 in 2014. At the same time, the top 1 percent in Rhode Island, whose average annual income is $884,609, took in 15.6 percent of all income in Rhode Island in 2013. That number approaches or surpasses historical highs from 1917 to 2013. At the same time, the unemployment rate of Latinx workers in the Providence region was 25.2 percent in 2012. This rate was the highest unemployment rate of any Latinx community among all metropolitan regions in the country, and two and a half times the white unemployment rate in the same area.

The growth of the low-wage service sector in Providence reproduces
structural inequalities based on race, class, and gender. This point is relevant to my study because, in 2013, nearly two-thirds of the “troubled youth” at New Urban Arts identified as female, and 83 percent of participants identified as young people of color. Seven out of ten students who sign up to participate in New Urban Arts qualify for free or reduced lunch at school. Women and communities of color are more likely to be represented in the low-wage service sector. In 2015, 42 percent of the US labor market made less than fifteen dollars per hour, and women and people of color were overrepresented in these low-paying jobs. More than half of African American workers and close to 60 percent of Latinx workers made less than fifteen dollars per hour. Cashiers and retail salespersons had the highest number of workers who made less than fifteen dollars per hour, and food preparation and serving occupations, including fast food, had the highest concentration of workers making less than fifteen dollars per hour. As a result, cities that move to low-wage service industries rely upon exploiting the labor of communities of color and women, as well as undocumented workers—which, in the case of Providence, recapitulates its history of labor exploitation based on race, class, and immigrant origin.

In explaining her conspiracy theory, Laura also pointed me toward efforts by the state government to suppress wages in the service industries at the precise moment that they have turned to creativity and tourism as an economic development strategy, which played a role in producing these low-wage jobs. In Rhode Island, the Democrat-controlled state government passed a minimum wage local preemption law in 2014. This law blocked local municipalities such as Providence from raising their minimum wages. The minimum wage in Providence, as of 2016, stood at $9.60. Efforts by the state legislature to raise the minimum wage for 2017 were delayed. Although it is difficult to prove, local lobbying efforts from, say, corporate hotel chains expanding in the area have likely had an influence on this suppressed minimum wage. The city and state have suppressed the wages in the service industries and therefore have contributed to an economic system that extracts wealth from a labor force at the precise moment that the region needs low-wage workers to support the transformation of the city into an upmarket lifestyle destination.

So, as Laura’s conspiracy theory suggests, the trouble with the Creative Capital is that the capital cannot refuse a creative underclass, the “troubled youth” who are legible as those who have been transformed into good creatives. These creatives legitimize the image of the Creative Capital and yet they do not demand “real jobs.” They demand only the high status that comes
from living in an abandoned warehouse without heat, which reproduces the impoverished material conditions that they inherited as children. Moreover, the Creative Capital needs young creatives as baristas, barbers, and barkeeps who work in these low-wage service industry jobs that are produced through Providence’s new image as a Creative Capital. My contention is that young people of color who are legible as creatives in Providence are best poised to compete for these new service industry jobs when they transmute an image of youthful creativity. That image is desirable to affluent white people when they return to the city to shop, dine, and stay in hotels because they are searching for ethnic and creative props to fashion themselves as politically progressive and racially enlightened. In returning to the city from the spiceless (white) suburbs, they are searching for what Stuart Hall called the “spectacle of ethnicity.” So the Creative Capital profits from the competition from “troubled youth” who might choose to make it as “starving artists.” This reserve army of creative labor, a creative underclass, makes it possible for employers to keep wages low, wages that have been suppressed by state government and surely lobbied by service industries moving into the city.

WHEN STICKING IT TO THE MAN BECOMES ENTREPRENEURIAL

There is one important wrinkle to the argument that Providence reproduces racial and class inequality through its transformation of “troubled youth” into “creative youth.” The expectation today must not necessarily entail creatives finding “real jobs.” Indeed, creatives are now expected to invent jobs for themselves as entrepreneurs. Indeed, creative labor in the twenty-first century is expected to be far different from the rigid and pyramidal structure of corporations, factories, and armies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those hierarchies were suitable for the efficient organization of repetitive, mindless, and physical tasks, the kind of alienated labor that, Marx explained, distanced workers from the production of goods and services that they made and delivered, which made work itself less humane. By contrast, creative workers are expected to work best when they are organized in flexible and flat organizational structures, where they can flourish as inventors and problem solvers, critical thinkers and collaborators. According to the logic of the creative city, creatives are also expected to congregate in certain cities and navigate these structures with ease, making goods and services that are manufactured in other parts of the world, pushed from servers to personal computers and mobile devices, or performed on the local stage.

This new consensus about the organization of work in creative cities has placed new demands on the educational preparation of young people as
creative workers. Young people are expected to develop this specific set of creative skills and habits so that they are prepared to produce these new goods and services as entrepreneurs. While *Creative Providence* does not specify what it means for youth to become the next members in the city’s creative workforce, the skills and habits of creative workers are often associated with those who work at the convergence of the arts, design, and technology sectors of the economy. Specifically, to succeed in the labor market as creatives, to create jobs for themselves, young people are now expected to be

- prepared to engage in “individual and small scale, project-based or collaborative notions of commercial and non-commercial media production,”
- at ease within flattened organizational hierarchies that are designed to encourage divergent thinking,
- adept at sharing knowledge across disciplines in order to solve problems that working within silos inhibits,
- prepared to challenge authority and disrupt norms—before paying any dues in staid corporate hierarchies,
- able to thrive in open office designs where individual cubicles have been replaced with minimally partitioned rooms,
- willing to put in long hours for the sake of their projects and also comfortable blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, popping back and forth between the laptop and the ping pong table,
- eager to seek out co-working and hot-desking arrangements where they can enjoy the spillover effects of being around other creatives while simultaneously avoiding making capital investments beyond the life of their current gig, and
- highly mobile, searching for the next hive of creativity where their ingenuity will thrive amid the local buzz.

It is important to recognize that this model of production associated with the creative industries reproduces social inequality. In their analysis of how the UK creative industries do so, Doris Ruth Eikhof and Chris Warhurst argue that this model of production includes “irregular income and high employment insecurity, low or unwaged entry level jobs, network-based recruitment practices, and above-average requirements regarding workers’ temporal availability and geographic mobility.”

Due to this model of production, the creative industries have increas-
ingly favored those with higher education degrees, which serves as a proxy for those with privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. The data suggest that the creative industries have a systemic bias toward those who are born better-off.

But preparing youth for life and work in the twenty-first century is not simply about teaching young people to participate in this systemically biased model of creative production. It is also about teaching them a new orientation to citizenship. For example, Providence’s 2009 creative city plan argued that creative learning is essential to preparing students to “participate fully as citizens and members of the 21st century global workforce.” As Creative Providence put it, these youth are expected to breathe life into the city’s infrastructure and act as catalysts for civic engagement.

In Creative Providence, these creative citizen workers are expected to be entrepreneurs with politically progressive principles. The plan stated that creative entrepreneurs should be expected to use their creativity to meet the pressing challenges of the twenty-first century, including developing sustainable ecological practices and building an equitable education system. John Clarke, a professor of cultural studies, has pointed out that this brand of citizenship has become a hallmark of the contemporary discourse of creativity. Creative entrepreneurs are expected to have a conscience and to solve the grand challenges of the twenty-first century while at the same time to create their own gigs rather than find established jobs or expect the security of a lifelong company job.

It is hard to argue against forming a legion of dynamic self-employed creatives who make a city in their positive image, who are up to the challenge of solving climate change or inequitable school systems. No one wants to deny a vision for a city that allows young people to participate in playful, inventive, and autonomous forms of work in open-designed and shared studios. And it is easy to wax nostalgic about the idea of industrial labor, while ignoring its dangers and alienation. But the expectation that young people become creative entrepreneurs with consciences marks a subtle but seismic shift in how society conceptualizes individuals’ relationship to work, to social class, and to the state. Today, when young people are being asked to join a twenty-first-century global citizenry and creative workforce, they are being asked to be responsible for

- solving the problems of the world rather than expecting the state to intervene and solve them,
- shaping their own careers rather than expecting companies to provide them,
· providing their own safety net (or inheriting one) rather than receiving one from the state or the corporation,
· going it alone in society even if they are collaborating.

With this individualistic orientation to society, these creative entrepreneurs are not expected to organize and collectively challenge the “precariousness” of their new work lives, which include insecure and irregular labor patterns, no matter whether they are paid well or paid poorly.  

Rather than not getting a “real job” and “sticking it to the man,” as Lunisol put it, the actual expectation for creatives is that they create their own “real jobs” and stick it to the man. Creative labor is now fashioned as rebellious and disruptive, anticorporate and antibureaucratic, even if it is shorn of much personal fulfillment or conviviality, or political antagonism and utopian thinking. Max Haiven has argued that creativity has therefore become “privatized,” or reduced as a concept and deployed to organize subjective experience and social relations in service of capital accumulation, primarily through enhancing consumer lifestyle experiences and driving property development. From this perspective, the state has become invested in articulating creativity to individualized, market-based ideas in order to support capital accumulation and consolidate its own power. Transforming “troubled youth” through creativity thus entails teaching youth to adopt a “privatized” orientation to creativity, to become creative entrepreneurs who accept personal responsibility for their own futures. But the discourse of creativity is so effective at masking its own entanglement in the reproduction of social inequality because of our positive emotional attachments to the word.

There is some evidence that this discourse of creativity in Providence has been effective in recruiting “troubled youth” in becoming creative entrepreneurs. Indeed, several young people from New Urban Arts have tried to make it as creative entrepreneurs during and after participating in New Urban Arts. Some have become freelance DJs; others have aspirations of running food trucks. Some have started fashion design and consulting businesses. Others have opened their own photography businesses to varying degrees of success. Each of these efforts is commendable, and in fact, these stories have been celebrated in Providence’s local newspaper as evidence of New Urban Arts’ positive impact in transforming “troubled youth” as creatives. But the reality is that Creative Providence has expected poor young people of color to choose creative entrepreneurship at the precise moment that their parents were facing bleak economic times, only worsened by city and state policy.

As such, the reliance on creative entrepreneurship as an employment
solution in Providence has only enhanced the profitability of those, such as myself, who have inherited the capital necessary to withstand the high risks of failure that are associated with entrepreneurship. I launched New Urban Arts when I was twenty-one years old, backed by the social and cultural capital that comes with attending Brown University, and the economic capital it took to get there and the financial investments of the institution in my own public service. Since then, I have built a successful career based on this track record. One could say that I am continuing to cash in on this history by writing this book; my cultural status is enhanced by the prestige that comes with book publication through the academy. I could not have had this career trajectory without my access to elite educational institutions and their social networks, inherited wealth, as well as my legibility as a potentially successful nonprofit executive—which are all a product of my own investment in my whiteness. Of course, I worked hard in starting New Urban Arts and in writing this book. But I would have had to work much harder as a person of color to prove that I could launch and run a nonprofit when I was twenty-one years old, which, in and of itself, requires, I think, an incredible sense of white male entitlement. And I would have had a much harder time enduring the economically difficult times of starting a nonprofit if I had grown up poor.

So the creative policy environment in Providence and Rhode Island has not acknowledged the fact that developing twenty-first-century skills through creative learning is not an equalizer in the creative city because developing these skills is not all that is necessary to survive and prosper in these dysfunctional labor markets. Moreover, given the view today that anyone can be creative, this focus on creativity in urban renewal has only mobilized a brand of capitalism that has legitimized the erosion of support for those who are poor. In other words, when the poor fail to succeed in the creative city, their failure must have been caused by the fact that they have remained “troubled” not “transformed.” So being creative in Providence has simply become a euphemism for the practice of survival for far too many people. For Lunisol, the reality of being young, poor, and creative meant already living in a house without heat during the winter—dying of frostbite, as she put it—without resources or support available to her when shit got hard or she happened to fuck up.

But the perspectives and experiences of Lunisol, Theo, and Laura also complicate this neoliberal critique of creativity, work, and citizenship. New Urban Arts has never been concerned with cultivating individuals who see themselves as privately responsible for their own futures based on the market value of their privatized creativity. Through arts mentoring at New Ur-
ban Arts, while living through this conjuncture of the Creative Capital, some young people have come to desire living in a collective, and thus committing to radical politics that affirm their nonnormative identities. A collectivist and more politically radical orientation to creativity is also alive and well in both Providence and New Urban Arts' studio, and the studio is a place for some people to access and identify with this social scene in the city that affirms this emerging orientation to social life, culture, and politics.

At the same time, this collectivist orientation to creativity is also contradictory in the Creative Capital. It produces uncompensated cultural labor for the city through transforming some “troubled youth” into creatives, who help populate the city with a “real” image of creativity, as Theo put it. These “transformed youth” join already “creative youth” in building bikes, making stuff with their hands, and giving away posters for free. Together, they generate the buzz that the Creative Capital repackages and uses to promote itself through place-marketing campaigns. At the same time, the creative underclass is satisfied with earning the high status of the cultural underground and acquiring the newfound dignity of rejecting “real jobs” that never existed for them in the first place.

So it seems that the organization of social power in Providence would be quite satisfied with young people of color, gender-nonconforming youth, and poor youth “choosing” a collectivist, utopian bohemian lifestyle in abandoned warehouses without heat (until capital is ready to develop those warehouses). These “transformed” youth do not need to choose a privatized or market-oriented orientation to creativity to satisfy the Creative Capital’s market demands. Their choices as a creative underclass can both legitimize the image of the Creative Capital as inclusive and trendy, and also grease the local labor market with more desperate low-wage workers in the service industries who project the look and feel of creativity and ethnic difference.

If cities such as Providence are expecting to profit from poor young people of color who choose not to get a real job and breathe life into the city’s aging industrial infrastructure, then a living wage or, better, universal basic income, is going to be necessary to level the playing field for those who have not inherited the private safety net needed to endure sustained periods of high risk and high uncertainty as transformed creatives. If and when these policy conditions are met, young people who choose to participate in New Urban Arts might be in a position to look back at their important relationships with artist-mentors, whom Lunisol considered “real gems,” without asking, “Would I have idolized you in the same way? Would I have looked up to you? Would I have even built that relationship with you?”
Until those conditions are met, the conviviality of New Urban Arts will always be met with ambivalence from some youth participants later in life when shit gets too hard for them and/or they happen to fuck up. Until then, the arts mentoring model I developed will have to negotiate the contradictions of empowering some young people to embrace a creative lifestyle that affirms their nonnormative existence and transforms the cultural landscape of the city, while at the same time “empowering” them to “choose” to reproduce their subordinate class futures and service the cultural and economic demands of white capital accumulation in the creative city. That “line of tendential force,” as Stuart Hall would describe it, must be resisted.