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=2474165
After returning to New Urban Arts in 2012 to begin this research project, I started to notice how several alumni of New Urban Arts were discussing gentrification of their neighborhoods in Providence. A few alumni, for example, noted on social media how young white people were jogging on the South Side, a sight that they had never seen in their neighborhood. Another youth participant noted that challenging gentrification in Providence was an important yet complicated task for her. She said that she benefited as a young person from nonprofit organizations in the city, but at the same time she felt that these organizations were also “gentrifying forces.” New Urban Arts under my leadership was one of the organizations that she had in mind. Her account challenged me to reflect on the contradictions of my white educational leadership at New Urban Arts with particular reference to racist real estate practices. Like my critique in the previous chapter of how the model of creative production reproduces social inequality, this analysis is also necessary to inform youth activism in the gentrifying city.

As much as people might believe that American cities are experiencing a great recovery in the early twenty-first century, American cities have actually shrunk since 2000. The share of
Americans living in cities declined by 7 percent between 2000 and 2014. As cities have shrunk, high-poverty tracts have moved away from the downtown core and spread out both across cities and into the suburbs. As cities have become less populated and the suburbs have become poorer, cities have also become home to more young, rich, childless, highly educated, and white people. Individuals aged twenty-five to forty-nine who are in the top tenth of the income distribution were 11 percent more likely to live in an urban neighborhood in 2014 than in 2000. Moreover, affluent and white residents are now 33 percent more likely to live in higher-density urban neighborhoods than fifteen years earlier. These statistics point to the fact that pockets of cities are gentrifying or have already been gentrified as cities have shrunk. The rising poverty in suburbs points to the displacement of low-income people from urban neighborhoods, and the stagnant incomes of those who already lived there. So cities are becoming gentrified in the sense that higher-income households are replacing and displacing lower-income households. As cities gentrify, upwardly mobile and often white people bring their own ways of life and aesthetic preferences with them into cities. In other words, the gentrification of cities is not just a question of economic and residential displacement but also the displacement of how cities are, and might otherwise be, lived. These cultural ways of life tend to shore up the economic and political interests of white people who are more likely to own property and profit from real estate speculation after decades of what bell hooks calls “real estate racism.”

Clear and conclusive evidence that Providence is gentrifying, or has been gentrified, is difficult to find. It is true that the population of Providence has become more nonwhite since New Urban Arts was founded in 1997. But there are demographic shifts across certain tracts in the city that align with perceptions of gentrification by alumni of New Urban Arts. In her analysis of gentrification in Providence in 2017, Fay Strongin interviewed seventeen community development, housing, and planning practitioners in Providence and found widespread agreement that neighborhood change in some of the city’s neighborhoods qualified as gentrification, even as these processes of change have moved slowly due to real estate boom and bust cycles. Strongin compared demographic change across the city’s thirty-nine tracts and compared those changes to neighborhood types considered to be gentrified. In her analysis, Strongin found that twelve of the city’s thirty-nine census tracts are “potentially gentrifying.” Six of these potentially gentrifying neighborhoods surround New Urban Arts’ studio, and eleven of the twelve tracts are where the majority of New Urban Arts’ participants live. New Urban Arts is also based on the border of Federal Hill, a neighborhood with the most indi-
cators of gentrification among these twelve tracts. These indicators include the young adult share, the share of adults with a college degree, the nonfamily household share, the white share, average household income, and the share of Latinx residents. Gentrification is often dismissed as a social problem based on the assumption that these shifts are “natural,” shaped by the rational self-interests of people choosing where to live. But it is important to recognize that these emergent patterns of gentrification are by design and are inflected with historically enduring racist social patterns.

When I arrived in Providence in the mid-1990s, I often heard the city described in negative terms. Race and class were often unstated but implied in the everyday speech patterns that I encountered. Providence was “dangerous” and “seedy,” “gritty” and “rough.” It was also known as the “armpit” of New England. As a young, affluent, and white kid who went to a leafy private school while growing up in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, these subtle messages were reminders to stay on College Hill, the neighborhood overlooking downtown Providence. These messages were coded references to the disinvestment of the city as manufacturing moved elsewhere, as well as the people of color and poor people now living in the city whom I had become taught and habituated to see as culturally deprived and as threats to my white existence.

I do not want to downplay the social challenges facing the city at that time. After all, my roommate while I was a student at Brown survived being shot randomly in what was likely a gang initiation. Several youth participants at New Urban Arts often reported in its early years their own struggles with keeping themselves out of the grips of gang violence. My analytical concern, however, is how discourses around youth, race, and violence have been used to mobilize an urban reconfiguration in Providence that tended to privilege the social, cultural, political, and economic interests of upwardly mobile and white people—including the right to live. These discourses produce what Gramsci called “common-sense,” which combines elements of both truth and ideology to build contradictory coalitions that reward dominant interests. For example, one could imagine an urban script that attempts to address, for example, the scourge of gang violence, without using it as leverage to reward people like me. But that has not been the strong tendency in Providence. Instead, that social crisis was seized as an opportunity to shore up the interests of whiteness, and the discourses of youth and creativity have proved highly effective in that regard.

For example, Richard Lupo, an owner of a music venue in downtown Providence for decades, criticized the fact that people framed the city as dangerous and disordered in relation to youth. “In 1992, it was scary to stand on
Westminster Street at 10 p.m.,” Lupo said, as he described the dominant way of thinking about Providence in the early 1990s. “Cars would go by with four or five scary youths.”15 Lupo argued that this racist and classist representation of Providence as a dangerous and disordered place was articulated to youth. In other words, “youths”—a euphemism, I think, for young people of color—were seen as running interference on property developers’ accumulative desire. These youth were to blame for the city’s seedy image and they needed to be managed as a result if the city was going to attract capital investment to support property development. Indeed, these “troubled youth” needed to be transformed, managed, and relocated. Relatively affluent and white creatives from Brown and RIsc, such as myself, needed to move in.

When the once great proponent of creative city politics, Richard Florida, visited Providence in 2003, he argued that Providence exported too much of its college-educated talent from Brown and RIsc. He thus advocated for strategies to retain young creatives from these highly selective and private institutions of higher education.16 According to this script, more affluent creatives from these institutions, such as myself, would then launch dynamic start-ups and host art events, thus attracting inward investment, tourism, and additional creative workers. In retrospect, this script was designed to reconfigure the city precisely for the benefit of people such as myself, and at the expense of low-income and working-class communities of color who lived in the city prior to the city being rebranded as artsy and creative. I was hailed, as Althusser would argue,17 to a particular place in the social order of the city, living my life as one of the desirable white creatives committed to the common good, transforming the city’s image to attract capital investment. My founding and leading of New Urban Arts was entertainable only as an option for me and for others because Providence wanted creatives to transform “scary youths” hanging out downtown. Leveraging support for New Urban Arts in the aughts was always tied to this taken-for-granted sense that youth in the city needed to be kept off the streets, perhaps even kept out of downtown, and that it was desirable to transform the style and comportment of youth of color so that they seem less scary to white people as these new urban consumers were beckoned back to the city to live, shop, and dine.

So the structural conditions were set for me to become a gentrifying force the moment I arrived in Providence for the first time as a college student in 1994. My success as the founder of New Urban Arts—the very possibility of New Urban Arts’ existence—depended upon the subject position of the young white man as a creative force for good in the city. And my sense of who I was and what I could do was constituted by these swirling discourses.
of youth and creativity that were always stitched to questions of race and class. As much as I set out to serve young people of color through New Urban Arts, I was already entangled in racist cultural and economic processes.

This finding became clear to me when I started fieldwork for this book project in 2012. During this fieldwork, I reconstructed a chronology that shook me. But, over time, the analytical challenge for me was how and why I told this story now, in this book, in ways that did not simply recapitulate my own possessive investment in whiteness.

A FADED AREA FINDS FRESH APPEAL

I met Mariana in 2003 during her freshman year in high school. Mariana, whose parents immigrated to the city from the Dominican Republic, lived in the West End neighborhood where New Urban Arts has been located since 1998. When Mariana’s mother drove her home from middle school, she used to notice New Urban Arts and wonder what it was. Then she met one of New Urban Arts’ staff members who volunteered at her middle school, and this volunteer encouraged Mariana to join the studio once she started high school. The summer before high school began, Mariana found herself walking to the studio to check it out. She stopped several times on her way to the studio, and each time, she turned around to go home. She was afraid to go to the studio by herself. But one day, she turned herself back around again and forced herself to walk into the storefront studio for the first time.

On her first day in the studio, Mariana learned about a mural project that I had commissioned at New Urban Arts. A young artist who was an undergraduate at Brown University had received funding from the university to run a mural project at New Urban Arts during the summer. The purpose of the mural was to challenge stigmas associated with the West End and to celebrate the cultural vibrancy of this predominantly Latinx neighborhood. In other words, the mural was designed to trouble representations of the neighborhood as culturally deprived and deficient.

In a letter to youth members and their families, the young artist leading the mural project described how the production of the mural involved library research on Providence history and culture, interviewing residents in the neighborhood, photographing the city and its people, and painting a mural based on what they learned. The artist wrote that the mural was an excellent opportunity for young people at New Urban Arts to create a highly visible work of public art that positively affected the community. She explained that youth members would learn how the neighborhood has changed over time. These youth members would also reflect on what defines its landscape
and culture, what they value most about the neighborhood, and what they consider to be the neighborhood’s most pressing challenges. Recognizing the potential benefits of this mural to the street corner at Westminster and Dean Streets, I approached New Urban Arts’ landlord and asked the company to consider forgiving one month’s rent in return for making the mural and beautifying the neighborhood. New Urban Arts struggled to pay its $2,000 monthly rent at the time. The company agreed to the deal, and I was ecstatic.

With this artist and her peers, Mariana walked the streets of the West End that summer. She interviewed her neighbors, took photographs, and researched the neighborhood’s history as she and her collaborators developed and completed the mural. As figure 5.1 shows, their finished mural features several portraits of residents living in the neighborhood, standing before a few of the city’s architectural landmarks and proud symbols. Mariana loved the experience of making this mural.

“I came to New Urban Arts every day after that. I loved it,” Mariana said years later in an interview with me. “I was working on a mural, and the mural became really important to me. This was my neighborhood.”

Two years after completing the mural, in 2005, a photograph of it appeared in the Travel section of the *New York Times*. The *Times* article, written by Bonnie Tsui, is titled, “In Providence, Faded Area Finds Fresh Appeal.”

The photograph in the newspaper features two young Latinas smiling and walking home from school in front of the New Urban Arts mural. In the arti-
cle, Tsui celebrated the transformation of the West End from a “faded” neighborhood, as she put it, into a trendy enclave for young creatives. The article beckoned tourists to New Urban Arts’ neighborhood, to Mariana’s neighborhood, promising a creative and newly revitalized area, home to hip and cool coffee shops, boutiques, and lofts. The article suggested to readers—and potential real estate buyers—that they were in competition with “artists from elsewhere in the city” who “have flocked to the neighborhood in recent years looking for the last affordable loft spaces.”

The article suggested that the revitalization of the West End was, as Tsui put it, “community-led.” The meaning of “community” here is no doubt a euphemism for people of color, mainly Latinx people, who lived in the “faded” neighborhood prior to the arrival of these artists and loft buyers. The Times’ image of New Urban Arts’ uplifting mural, accompanied by the two young Latinas walking home from school in front of it, represented this “community.” The mural provided an image of diversity that new residents in the neighborhood would desire, what Stuart Hall has called a “spectacle of ethnicity.” That is to say, these smiling young girls of color and the mural backdrop behind them became ethnic props that appealed to affluent, highly educated, politically progressive, and/or white people being summoned back to the neighborhood—people like me. This rhetoric and the image worked together to suggest that “the community” was welcoming, if not leading, these neighborhood changes. This rhetoric of “community-led revitalization” appeals to the liberal politics of these new urban consumers and residents. In other words, they can imagine themselves as antiracist and antisettler even as they gentrify the neighborhood. This article represented residents as if they should expect to participate in neighborhood renewal that is welcomed, indeed led, by the low-income and working-class residents of color living in the neighborhood, including young people such as Mariana.

In 2008, three years after this article appeared in the New York Times and one week before her graduation from high school, Mariana and her family were displaced from their apartment in a duplex house in the West End located only a few blocks from the mural. An old brick mill building next to their apartment, where her family members had once worked in low-wage jewelry assembly jobs, was being converted into luxury-branded lofts. Their duplex was razed to make way for the lofts’ parking lot. The arrival of people who were called to the neighborhood by the New York Times led to her family’s displacement. And Brady Sullivan, a New Hampshire–based property developer, which purchased the building for $2.4 million, sold the loft building
a decade later for $13.4 million. Figure 5.2 shows the building in 2010, now named “Grant Mill,” after its conversion into lofts.

The troubling irony of this story is that Mariana did what I had hoped for her, and what the conventional creative city script called for her to do. She improved her neighborhood through making a mural with her peers. She developed new skills by executing a large-scale project from conception to completion. In the process, she and her peers transformed the landscape of their city, their “faded” neighborhood, and, as Creative Providence would have it, “transformed” herself into someone who loved the creative offer of New Urban Arts. Yet Providence turned against her.

As I have reflected on this story over the years, and my own role within it, I have debated with myself and with other people about questions of proportion and causality. How much was New Urban Arts, under my watch, responsible for Mariana’s eviction? Of course, it is impossible to know whether Mariana and her family would have been evicted from their home if the mural had not been made. It is impossible to know whether Mariana and her
family would have been evicted if youth participants at New Urban Arts had been led in making a mural that did not provide the West End a tidy and comfortable image of ethnic diversity. It is impossible to know if Mariana and her family would have been evicted if the New York Times had opted for a different and more critical narrative of cultural urban redevelopment. And it is worth noting that New Urban Arts has moved away from engaging youth in making public murals over the past few years because the organization is concerned about the role of these cultural artifacts in gentrification. But I think it is safe to say that Mariana’s family probably would have been evicted even if New Urban Arts had never made the mural or if a photograph of the mural had not appeared in the New York Times. So I could be fairly questioned for making too much of this story.

I have not only been questioned for insinuating causality. After I reconstructed this chronology, I went back to some of the youth participants in this research and asked them what they thought about this story. I suppose that I expected them to be surprised and outraged by my discovery. But that is not what I heard. Gabriela, for example, the theorist of troublemaking, responded with a resounding, “Duh.” In other words, while she did not know the specifics of the story, she already understood its general contours. That is to say, she understood already that when young people of color do something positive in their neighborhood, there is a tendency for whiteness to steal the fruits of their labor to expand its power. She suggested that I do my homework and look into the critical knowledge already present within communities of color about gentrification. As I have already noted, James Baldwin in the 1960s described “urban renewal” as just another word for state-sponsored “negro removal” as he examined changes in San Francisco at the time.23 And bell hooks, writing in the 1990s, described these urban renewal projects as “state-orchestrated, racialized class warfare.”24 In other words, Gabriela was suggesting that I should not congratulate myself for discovering a phenomenon that has already been well-documented and theorized from a critical race perspective. Indeed, if anything, I should recognize how my late arrival at this critical understanding is a historical product of my willful white ignorance.

Moreover, Gabriela wanted to know why I felt compelled to tell this story, to write about this story in this book. “Did I feel guilty?” she asked. With this question, Gabriela was engaging with the politics of representation in this book and the affective labor that white people do when confronted with causing racial injury.25 This labor always has the paradoxical effect of taxing people of color and protecting the interests of whiteness. In this case, I could be
telling this story to seek forgiveness from the young people that I hurt, thus absolving me of the guilt that I feel. I would then be centering on my feelings while distracting myself from the actions that it might take to attempt to dis-invest whiteness of its power and profitability, to repair its injustice of stealing land.

Resolving white guilt might not be the only self-serving motivation in play here. For example, I could be positioning myself as one who is now operating outside the racist logic of urban renewal, as one who possesses the critical consciousness needed to transform these conditions. In this case, I could be representing young people of color such as Mariana as those who suffer from “false consciousness,” who need my clairvoyance to see the injustice of the Creative Capital. Here again, I would be reproducing a white gaze that is only capable of seeing people of color as less than, as objects of history, as people defined by pain and suffering. My research encounters with young people of color shows that this dynamic is not the case. They were educating me.

There is a third problematic “move to innocence” that might also be in play here. I could be rerepresenting myself as someone who now sees the totality and near inescapability of my white-inflicted racist violence. In this case, I would be telling this story to signal my virtue, showing that I can see the racial injury I have caused. I would then be showing that I have overcome “white fragility” and can withstand the criticism that I deserve. I would be suggesting that, now, I am “woke,” standing on the right side of history, performing the right kind of white politics. The circularity of this white reflexivity would also be self-serving because it still distracts from repairing injustice, from disinvesting whiteness of its power and profitability.

Of course, I would never claim to know my “true” motivations in telling this story. My point is that each of these options—resolving guilt, reasserting critical consciousness, and performing wokeness—are all self-serving cultural scripts that are available to me and other white people when confronted with the racist injuries they cause. These scripts are inevitably recruiting me, being inscribed on and through me as I write this line. Nonetheless, awareness of these cultural scripts does count as knowledge, knowledge that can be generative of political action. Indeed, acknowledging the circularity of white reflexivity has clarified for me the need to write this book in this way, to analyze how I have been recruited by white creativity, and to commit to a book project that might contribute to youth activism in the gentrifying city. Working toward this cultural political strategy against the gentrifying city will benefit from an extended analysis of how this displacement by Mariana and her family was by design.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEW URBAN WELFARE KINGS

In 2001, two years before I commissioned Mariana’s mural at New Urban Arts, the state of Rhode Island passed legislation that provided economic incentives to rehabilitate historic property. Effective January 1, 2002, state income tax credits were awarded to property developers for up to 30 percent of qualified rehabilitation expenditures on historic properties. Qualifying properties had to be listed on national or state registers of historic places or located in a historic district. Through these tax credits, the state of Rhode Island provided $460 million in subsidies to 277 projects between 2002 and 2007. One of the qualifying projects was the 2005 loft-conversion next to Mariana’s home in the West End.

This building was eligible for state tax credits because it was included in the first thematic historic district in the United States. Old red brick industrial buildings in Providence are not uncommon, and after artists began settling in them in the 1990s, it became clear to developers that there was a market for retrofitting them for urban loft living.

To both fuel and satisfy this demand for loft living, these buildings were placed in a noncontiguous historic district known as the Providence Industrial and Commercial Building District (ICBD). This thematic district provided the means to subsidize the redevelopment of industrial buildings across the city associated with the image and lifestyle of the creative city captured in Tsui’s article. The ICBD was constructed as a district based on the historical value of these buildings, as well as the speculative profitability of their aesthetics, not one based on place or proximity. The displacement of Mariana and her family occurred because they lived next to one building that was included in this thematic district, not because they lived in a neighborhood targeted for investment. The physical separation of the buildings themselves make the effects of state-orchestrated, racialized class warfare seemingly more random and harder to resist.

The local appeal of living in these buildings was so strong that Lunisol, for example, mentioned it as a signifier of cultural status in the city when she was debating the lifestyle choices available to her in Providence as a creative. Another participant in New Urban Arts told me that her American Dream did not entail a suburban house behind a white picket fence but rather a spacious red brick loft with good city views. For her, class mobility meant moving into a loft in an increasingly affluent and white urban neighborhood, not the white suburbs. These examples show how the “transformation” of “trou-
bled youth” entailed the construction of a class fantasy to live in this thematic district.

A problem with the state tax credits used to subsidize the property developments in this thematic district was that their developers were likely to have been incorporated outside of the state. For example, the developer of Mariana’s building, Brady Sullivan, was incorporated in New Hampshire and therefore did not pay state income tax in Rhode Island. Brady Sullivan could therefore not profit from public subsidy unless there was a workaround. State law in Rhode Island solved this problem by allowing out-of-state property developers to sell their tax credits to brokers who, in turn, could sell these credits to Rhode Island–based individuals and corporations seeking to lower their state income taxes.31 These tax credits were sold at a discount to incentivize this transaction. In other words, to solve the problem of subsidizing out-of-state property developers, the state of Rhode Island, much like numerous other states in the United States,32 established not only a thematic district based on an aesthetic but also a complex financial market for the transferable tax credits based on this image and idea. This financial market has provided subsidies to socially connected and wealthy individuals, brokers, and financial advisers in Rhode Island who could take advantage of this complex market.33 This financial market reasserted the power, resources, and opportunities of affluent people, which, in Rhode Island, also means they are more likely to be white.

The city of Providence provided additional tax stabilization agreements to property developers in Providence. Property owners of these historic commercial and industrial buildings were provided relief from their city property taxes in addition to receiving state income tax credits. These municipal agreements were contingent upon property developers guaranteeing the addition of affordable housing in Providence and hiring local contractors and women and minority-owned businesses. Yet, in 2014, Providence’s internal auditor found that the redevelopment projects that received property tax stabilization agreements in Providence were not monitored and were not in compliance.34 While low-income families such as Mariana’s were expected to have greater access to affordable housing through these agreements, this opportunity never came to fruition in the ways that were promised, which is unsurprising.

Despite these shortcomings, the city of Providence proceeded to extend these tax stabilization agreements for these property owners at the height of the Great Recession (2007–9). These extensions were awarded because these property owners had, as a city ordinance put it, “suffered serious financial
setbacks and hardships as a result of the collapse of the real estate and financial markets over the past several years.”

Through these extensions, one major downtown property owner in Providence, Arnold “Buff” Chace, paid less than $1 million in property taxes over the span of fifteen years. Without these tax stabilization agreements, Chace would have paid an estimated $9 million.

Chace, a member of a well-established New England family that owned the textile manufacturing company Berkshire Hathaway that was purchased by Warren Buffet, was a major donor and supporter of mayor David Cicilline, the key figure in rebranding Providence as a creative city. It is plausible that Chace and his team contributed to the drafting of state law and city ordinances that provided these tax credits and subsidies. Nonetheless, according to the local news reporting of Michael Corkery, Chase saw himself as an urban benefactor, a person saving the city from urban decay. Indeed, Chace thought of the development of his property in Providence as a civic duty, and therefore himself as a person who would preserve and restore Providence to its historic majesty.

Of course, the rationale for these subsidies is that property development would not happen without them. Without state-subsidized property development, the city and state’s tax base would remain suppressed so that neither the state nor the city could provide adequate services to the public, including public education. Another argument is that taxpayers should expect to receive a financial return on the investment of tax dollars. Grow Smart Rhode Island, a nonprofit organization dedicated to “sensible alternatives to suburban sprawl and urban decay,” argued that $1.0 million of historic tax credits leveraged $5.35 million in total economic output in Rhode Island. The cost of the credits to the taxpayer was then recouped through added income taxes and sales tax revenue generated by new residents, workers, and consumers. Chace, who avoided paying $8 million in city property taxes, was a founding board member of Grow Smart Rhode Island.

The argument that providing Chace welfare is good for the city does not use good logic. It depends upon a false choice. The argument that urban property development would not happen without taxpayer subsidies and self-rewarding markets sets up a choice between property development with subsidies or no property development at all. But as a taxpayer with a commitment to young people and the common good, I am for sustainable property development in Providence and I am against Mariana’s displacement. But holding these two options together is not permitted through the construction of this false choice: one is either for or against creative property development.

The fact that tax credits may well leverage economic output also does
not specify who wins and loses from that output, or how those gains and losses might be divided unevenly across different social groups and space. In other words, some taxpayers in Rhode Island benefited from the subsidies, but others did not, and these costs and benefits can be predictably correlated with factors that include race, gender, class, and residential location in proximity to buildings subsidized for property development. The displacement of Mariana and her family from their home, adjacent to one such subsidized project, is a useful illustration of this unevenness. The fact that there were financial returns to Rhode Island taxpayers overall provides little solace or financial assistance to Mariana’s family when, in fact, public policy created the conditions for her family’s displacement.

To make matters worse, as I have already stated, the state of Rhode Island was also passing a minimum wage local preemption law at this time, which blocked municipalities such as Providence from raising minimum wages. The minimum wage in Providence, as of 2015, stood at $9.60. This step was taken as Providence continued its long transition from a higher-wage industrial economy to a lower-wage service sector economy. Businesses in this sector of the economy needed low-wage labor to make a profit and pay rents to their landlords, which, in the case of downtown Providence, was often Buff Chace.

Moreover, the total expenditures for cash assistance (federal and state) for families living in poverty in Rhode Island decreased from $126.5 million in 1996 to $35.6 million in 2014—a decrease of 72 percent. During that period, the state of Rhode Island decreased its share of contributions for cash assistance to poor families from $51.5 million in 1997, the year New Urban Arts was founded, to zero dollars in 2015. Austere state policy seemed to have little sympathy for poor families that suffered from “serious financial setbacks and hardships,” including being displaced from their homes. Perversely, this hollowing out of the welfare state depends upon representations of people in cities as members of an underclass. This logic maintains that the style and comportment of the underclass, which is framed as the cause of their lower socioeconomic position, can be changed only by weaning them off state dependency—thus the all-out assault on welfare assistance since the 1990s.

This erosion of the welfare state in Rhode Island for poor people, the expansion of welfare for gentrifiers, and the state interest in transforming “troubled youth” are not unrelated. Engaging “troubled youth” in public art projects is now often termed “creative placemaking.” Creative placemaking is considered a productive activity for both transforming “troubled youth” and transforming the disinvested city. In their report on creative placemaking for
the National Endowment for the Arts, Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus argue that creative placemaking contributes to “creative places,” which provide “training grounds for area youth” by incubating “the next generation of creative workers and entrepreneurs.” They continue that these youth participants develop “marketable skills and job savvy” by working “with artist mentors, gaining valuable professional experience and aptitude in their chosen artistic discipline.”

So, through creative placemaking, “troubled youth” are expected to play a constructive role in their neighborhoods. The implicit assumption then is that urban blight is caused by “scary youths” who destroy their neighborhoods and deter investment. Alternatively, through creative placemaking young people can acquire the cultural skills and dispositions that they need to get ahead. But the story of my leadership at New Urban Arts shows that the expectation that creative placemaking will lead to the prosperity of young people at New Urban Arts and will enhance the livability of their neighborhoods for them is a highly problematic assertion. Creative placemaking has become a tool that represents them as troubled and their spaces as placeless, while deploying their undercompensated or uncompensated cultural labor in support of the speculative and subsidized investments of real estate developers and property owners, and in support of whiteness.

Gabriela’s notion of troublemaking has been useful to me in thinking how to oppose this white-centered urban reconfiguration. People who have profited from their position as white creatives must trouble the ways in which we have been summoned to live our lives as particular subjects in twenty-first-century cities. We must trouble our position as people who desire living in “faded” areas, who want to be creative, who feel compelled to start nonprofit organizations, while at the same time allowing the politicians who represent us to suppress the minimum wage, hand out welfare to the wealthiest among us, and reduce cash assistance for poor families to zero. As Gabriela might put it, we need to start fucking up what it means to be white creatives, and we need to do it quickly. We must ask ourselves what it would take for us to disinvest ourselves from this subjectivity, from white creativity as supreme, as a source of profit. And we must ask ourselves what it would take to redress the injustices caused by stealing cities for our own creative benefit, without simply resorting to the facile move of repositioning ourselves as those who are now more race and class conscious. Refusing to do creative placemaking, as New Urban Arts has already begun to do, seems to be one step in the right direction. Supporting youth of color as they protest white conquest of cities is another.