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=2474170
“IS THIS REALLY WHAT WHITE PEOPLE DO” IN THE CREATIVE CAPITAL?

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed how the dynamic model of production in the Creative Capital, as well as its racist real estate practices, have reproduced racial and class inequalities. In this chapter, I turn to how shifts in consumer patterns privilege the cultural and economic interests of upwardly mobile and white people. This analysis is informed by both my interview with one youth alumnus and artist-mentor, as well as my own experiences moving through the city as a white consumer. Engaging with the dynamic consumer culture of the Creative Capital is necessary to inform youth-led political strategies that might oppose gentrification in the name of creativity.

In 2015, I spoke at length with one former youth participant, Luis, about how Providence had been gentrified through this creative city script. Luis’s family immigrated to Providence from the Dominican Republic. He had been a steady presence at New Urban Arts for nearly a decade, first as a youth participant then as an artist-mentor. Luis is an important perspective to include in this account of youth in the creative city. When I discussed the Creative Capital with Luis, he did not see himself as a young person...
who fit into the high-status creative underground scene of Providence. He did not feel that he belonged to this group even though he participated in New Urban Arts as a youth member for years. Here is how he explained his position in the Creative Capital and in this research:

Tyler: When you look back on the last decade in Providence, and you think about changes to the city as the Creative Capital, what do you think about Providence and what it means for you?

Luis: The thing is I don’t . . . I don’t know how to define myself within that. It’s interesting for what it does mean for me. But I think most of my identity is really tied to New Urban Arts.

Tyler: How are you defining yourself through New Urban Arts?

Luis: Well, that’s the thing . . . I don’t think I’m gonna be your guy. There are several other people involved in this place who have very much made this city their city by being people of color and infiltrating those scenes and then like being really well respected in them. They are recognized in those communities as people of substance, who make work and do that kind of thing. I think their idea of a Creative Capital is different because they’re actual creatives. I am just a guy who stuck around and didn’t really say no to much and now I’m here. You know what I mean?

Tyler: What do you mean when you say that you didn’t “say no to much”?

Luis: I don’t know. . . . It’s like, “Hey you! Do you want to do this thing?” And I’m like, “Yeah sure.” And now, I’m like, I’m in year four of arts mentoring at New Urban Arts! So, it’s different for me. I see these actual working artists who have big goals. They’re actually working towards them, whether it is in a political punk rock band or as a photographer in the city. Those are those people.

I’m not that person, I’m somebody who can come to New Urban Arts because it’s neutral. It’s not really downtown until you cross the bridge and you’re not deep in any neighborhood. You’re just kind of centered here. I get to work with youth here, which is really great. Then I get to go back to the
South Side where I live and stay there. So that’s what I mean by, like, I’m not that guy.

In this revealing passage, Luis said that he does not know how to define himself within the logic of the Creative Capital. He preferred to tie most of his identity to New Urban Arts. He then suggested that he did not think he was “gonna be my guy.” In other words, he did not think he would provide me the information about the Creative Capital that he thought that I wanted to hear. Instead, he implicitly pointed me to the “actual working artists” affiliated with New Urban Arts, those with “big goals,” including those who are “in a political punk rock band” or are “photographers.” These people of color, according to Luis, “infiltrated” the creative underground and have become recognized as “people of substance” in the Creative Capital. By contrast, he represented himself as a guy who was given opportunities at New Urban Arts that he could not turn down. He became an artist-mentor at New Urban Arts, for example, and he had the opportunity to help young people who wanted to go to college and pursue art degrees with their college portfolios. He later told me that he thought he had been “fucked” by this college application process when he was in high school, and he did not want the same thing to happen to young people from a similar background. So he helped them with their portfolios for their applications to art schools.

Luis also represented New Urban Arts as a “neutral” place—a place that was not downtown or too deep into any neighborhood. New Urban Arts is located geographically in a somewhat unique place in the city—not far from downtown but separated from it by Interstate 95 (a highway that cuts through the center of the city), and not far from the neighborhoods where young people who attend New Urban Arts live, but positioned at the starting point of three major roads that branch out and divide Providence into four different neighborhoods. As such, New Urban Arts is not semantically tied to those neighborhoods or their residents. It is “neutral.” By contrast, downtown Providence has been branded the Downcity Arts and Entertainment District. Federal Hill is known as the historic Italian neighborhood. The West End is a gentrifying neighborhood that has become a white hipster haven over the past two decades. And Olneyville is another low-income neighborhood with old red-brick factory buildings where the creative underground scene has taken residence since the 1990s. The South Side is a neighborhood largely populated with people of color and recent immigrants, but has been gentrifying, according to several young people based on the newfound presence of white joggers. Rather than being pegged to any of these places symbolically, for Luis, New
Urban Arts was a place where he could become “just kind of centered” as an artist-mentor, working with youth. He was not, for example, a creative associated with the Olneyville scene. After working at New Urban Arts, he went home to his place in the South Side. His sense of identity was tied to the neutral location of his work and his South Side home.

While Luis stated that he did not know how to define himself in relation to the Creative Capital, he also said, “It’s interesting for what it does mean for me.” Luis began to notice cues for when he might get priced out of his home on the South Side. For example, he saw what he described as “the first white guy at a chimi truck.” A chimi is a Dominican-style hamburger, and food trucks line up on Broad Street in the South Side to sell them. He noticed that the bodegas in his neighborhood, which used to be cash or food stamp only, were now accepting credit cards. He understood that there needed to be enough of an affluent clientele base with credit cards to justify the commercial cost of credit transactions. When I asked him what these changes meant for the South Side, he said, “I don’t want to pay more than five bucks for a chimi. . . . I don’t want to pay more than two dollars per pound for platanos. That shouldn’t be a thing, you know. That’s what that means. When I start seeing kale and cumin at fucking bodegas, I know something is up.” Luis’s perspective shows how the Creative Capital is haunting him. The prospect of gentrification by white people is threatening his way of life, his home, his access to affordable chimi and platanos.

Luis believed that the city’s dynamic consumer culture was part of this state-orchestrated script for racialized class warfare. Here is how our conversation unfolded when I asked Luis to explain the Creative Capital to me:

Tyler: So, are you familiar with the idea of the Creative Capital?
Luis: Vaguely. . . . It started during Cicilline’s run as mayor. So, basically, we have RISD on College Hill, and RISD attracts art students. These art students stick around and start moving into, you know, various neighborhoods, places like the West End. . . . It is an issue of gentrifying these neighborhoods. Providence started getting this underground music scene and these funky little restaurants like Julian’s and shit . . . where it’s just like, “Oh, we’re white and we can do these things because Providence is totally cool.” I don’t know, I don’t know what that means. I don’t know anybody who lives on Knight Street anymore. You know what I mean? What is now E&O, was, like, not E&O.
Tyler: What’s E&O?

Luis: It’s this little dive bar that people seem to enjoy. Next to it was a skate shop, and now the skate shop is gone and it’s a barber-shop, which makes more sense to me. But it was interesting to me, to see the dive bar, next to the skate shop, down the street from, like, the fuckin’ artisan pizza place. . . . So, I think the Creative Capital. . . . It’s just weird. Downtown is completely different. Now there’s Civil, which is a skate shop that I love . . . Sura, the sushi place . . . the Small Point Cafe is there . . . the Teriyaki House is there. . . . There used to be a furniture store. And Craftland is there now. So, there’s a lot of new businesses, which is great for the city, but none of this shit was here just, like, three or four years ago. And I don’t know if it’s because of this Creative Capital push. . . . But what’s the collateral, right?

Like other young people I interviewed from New Urban Arts, Luis was well aware that the Creative Capital was primarily invested in getting RISD and Brown graduates such as myself “to stick around” and “gentrify these neighborhoods.”

He also noted how these young people help to produce a cultural di-vide between him and them through their consumer patterns. For example, he described the South Side as a neighborhood for Caribbean Hispanic (Puerto Rican, Dominican), Southeast Asian (Laotian, Cambodian), African American, and African (Cape Verdean) people since the 1970s. He pointed to Sanchez Market on Broad Street as the historic “stopping point for white folk” on the South Side in the recent past. And then, he said, he started to notice how white people were reaching further and further past Sanchez Market until they started coming from “both directions” on Broad Street. When he started to notice white people biking up and down Broad Street in both bike lanes, he told me that he started to ask himself, “What are you doing? Who? What?”

Indeed, I was part of this wave of young white people who started to move into these neighborhoods looking for rents that were affordable to us, while signifying our new cultural status by living in neighborhoods that we thought were up and coming, diverse and hip. I moved to a house just off Knight Street in the West End, a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, which fits into a racist and colorist pattern of white people moving into Latinx neighborhoods, not predominantly black ones, based on the assumption that

“IS THIS REALLY WHAT WHITE PEOPLE DO?”
they are safer, better, and so on. Luis argued that these white people bring “fuckin’ artisan pizza places,” “dive bars,” and “funky little restaurants” into these neighborhoods, his neighborhood. In observing this trend, Luis said, “When you see white people on bikes in the South Side, you start thinking to yourself, ‘What’s the timeline for when I might get priced out?!’”

Not only did Luis provide an inventory of these new bars and restaurants opening up in his neighborhood, he described the rapid pace of their arrival (“Downtown is completely different.” “None of this shit was here just three or four years ago.”). Luis also attempted to interpret the meanings of those changes (“I don’t know, I don’t know what that means.”). His primary conclusion was that these new patterns of symbolic consumption in Providence privilege white people and their cultural status as cool people. As he put it, white people can go to these funky little restaurants and dive bars, and think to themselves, “Oh, we’re white and we can do these things because Providence is totally cool.”

Yet he argued that privileging white people in the city and their desire to be cool produced “collateral” damage. For example, he mentioned that he did not know anyone who lived on Knight Street (a street in the West End near the E&O dive bar) anymore. He appeared to suggest that he had lost his social network tied to that particular street. He mentioned the one shop that made sense to him, the barber shop, which actually provided the services, and perhaps social relationships, that he needed and wanted. But, with some exceptions, such as the skate shop, he argued that most of the shops were not meant for him. Moreover, the rapid arrival of the new shops, bars, and restaurants meant that he was at risk of getting priced out of his neighborhood as he was forced to pay more for chimis, platanos, and, ultimately, rent.

Later in the interview, I asked Luis how residents on the South Side—who lived in the neighborhood before the city was branded as creative—were expected to participate in the Creative Capital.

Tyler: What is the expectation of the Creative Capital for people living on the South Side? What are they supposed to do in the Creative Capital? How are they supposed to participate?

Luis: I don’t think they have to do anything for the Creative Capital. I think it is capitalizing on things that they already do. If you go by Broad Street, you’ll notice that now there are all these new street signs and banners. You know, where it’s like the Providence creative branding or whatever and then it’s like “Broad Street, The Food.” Have you seen these? And
there’s an illustration of, you know, the food. And it’s like “Broad Street, The Culture.” “Broad Street, The Music.”

You know, there are communities of color here who have brought with them their practices and art and minority-owned businesses who care for those things . . . Asian fish markets, bodegas, whatever. And you know, these spaces get that reputation . . . like, here’s this thing. But we knew that. This branding is for other folk who may not have known that.

Tyler: You know that because you have lived there?

Luis: Yeah, like I knew that, I knew Apsara (a Southeast Asian restaurant) was the shit because it’s down the street. You know what I mean? I don’t think that people in my neighborhood have to do a damn thing. I think the city is trying to, you know, capitalize on that, that there is this thing that they didn’t have to really fight for. You know what I mean? It’s not the same as like the bougie ramen place downtown, you know?

Tyler: Right. It’s the “ethnic” Apsara.

Luis: (Laughing.) That’s right, the “ethnic” Apsara.

Tyler: This is where you can get the “real” ethnic food in the Creative Capital.

Luis: Exactly, that’s exactly it. I think that’s the thought process behind that. You know?

Tyler: So, you can get your bougie hipster gluten-free kale over in this neighborhood, and then you can get your real ethnic chimi sandwich and your Apsara spring rolls over in that neighborhood?

Luis: Yeah. Pretty much. It’s hilarious. (Laughing) It just sounds so absurd right? “Broad Street, The Food.” It’s like, what are you? (Still laughing.) When you look at a place like La Sonrisa [Dominican restaurant] or at Pho Paradise [Vietnamese restaurant], like, first glance you think nothing of these places because they’re not, they’re not Julian’s [hip bistro in the West End]. There’s no kitsch, right? It’s very matter of fact. And then when you walk in and you actually have the food, it’s when it hits you . . . “Oh shit, this is great!” It’s always funny.
when you run into people who act like they discovered it.

(Laughing) You know what I mean? I’m pretty sure you’re not the first person to have pho at the Paradise.

In this passage, Luis argues that people of color in the South Side do not have “to do anything for the Creative Capital.” What they have done, Luis suggests, is already introduce cultural practices from their home countries and ethnic traditions, and they have “fought” to build minority-owned businesses in these neighborhoods before they were branded in ways that he thought were absurd. Luis thought that these branding efforts in his neighborhood were attempting to “capitalize on things” that people venturing into his neighborhood did not have to fight for. This capitalization was primarily for the benefit of “other folk,” presumably white folk such as myself, whose cultural status becomes elevated in the Creative Capital through our self-presumed discovery of authentic Vietnamese noodle soup (pho), aided by the city’s own branding efforts.

Three themes feature in Luis’s analysis of consumer patterns in the Creative Capital that privilege whiteness. He discussed white people desiring “matter-of-fact” ethnic restaurants, artisanal restaurants, and funky, hip restaurants with ironic kitsch. I analyze each of these themes more closely to probe how consumption structures the symbolic conditions in ways that make white people feel cool while they gentrify neighborhoods. I also consider my own professional trajectory and social interactions in relation to these new symbolic conditions associated with white creativity. This thematic analysis is not meant to be exhaustive of new consumer patterns in the Creative Capital, and it is important to recognize that consumer patterns are dynamic, and therefore this analysis is always in need of being updated. But critical interpretations of these consumer patterns and the racist and classist patterns they represent are useful in understanding how and why they should be resisted in order to support racial and economic justice for youth living in gentrifying cities.

“MATTER OF FACT” ETHNIC RESTAURANTS

In my conversation with Luis, he pointed to white people arriving in his neighborhood and acting like they had “discovered” places such as Apsara and Pho Paradise. He said that he already knew that these restaurants were “the shit” because, in the case of Apsara, it was located down the street from his house. He described these ethnic restaurants as “matter of fact.” He argued that the aesthetic sensibility of these restaurants contrasted with the hip
bistros and dive bars such as Julian’s, which were kitsch. For Luis, the juxtaposition between “matter of fact” ethnic restaurants and kitsch bistros is symbolically significant for white people coming into the neighborhood to dine and drink. In the case of the former, “real” ethnic restaurants, as I put it, are culturally desirable because they provide the opportunity for white people to taste what they think is authentically different.

In her essay, “Eating the Other,” the critical race and feminist scholar bell hooks critiques the white consumer desire for “real” ethnic difference. She draws metaphorically on the ancient religious practice of people ripping out and eating another person’s heart to embody that person’s spirit or special characteristics. hooks writes of “eating the Other” to speak of the ways in which white people assert their cultural supremacy by, for example, consuming the cultural practices of those that they have othered, while transforming themselves in the process. These white people make themselves “vulnerable to the seduction of difference” without relinquishing their position of dominance. They can experience their essentialized conception of otherness while at the same time signaling that they remain installed in a position of superiority. My white desire to start New Urban Arts and to write this book could be critiqued along similar lines. In other words, one could suggest that I started New Urban Arts (and even wrote this book) to locate myself in proximity to young people of color, to “taste” their difference, while also trying to elevate myself above them as a white savior founder of New Urban Arts or race-class-conscious author of the *Creative Underclass*.

The city of Providence has, as Luis put it, “capitalized” on this white desire to eat the Other through its own place branding efforts. Through “Broad Street, The Food,” the city has attempted to lure white people down Broad Street from both directions so that they can “discover” otherness. Of course, the counterargument is that the city attempted to build the market capacity of minority-owned businesses through its marketing efforts to attract new consumers. From this perspective, the marketing campaign is not racist; it is just that consumers with more money to spend happen to be white. But that argument misses the fact that the consumer marketplace is never “natural.” It is a product of history, a history of racial capitalism. State-orchestrated marketing campaigns cannot operate outside that history despite their best intentions. So, as much as these place-branding efforts are designed to spur consumer investment in low-income neighborhoods, this marketing is always already in entangled in a system of relations that privilege whiteness and open the doors to white-led gentrification.
DIVE BARS AND FUNKY LITTLE RESTAURANTS

In his analysis of consumption in the Creative Capital, Luis noted how funky little restaurants and dive bars are desirable to white people because these establishments have kitsch, not because they are “matter of fact.” Kitsch works through an intentionally low-brow aesthetic, which allows people to reassert their culturally elevated status through demonstrating their understanding of the intention to be low-brow. When I asked several young people from New Urban Arts about places in the city that represented this ironic hipster taste, several of them pointed me to Ogie’s Trailer Park, a restaurant that opened recently in the West End and is located up the street from New Urban Arts’ studio where many of them grew up.

Ogie’s Trailer Park traffics in the image and identity of low-income white people living in trailer parks, perhaps from Appalachian country. Restaurant goers can drink one of sixty-six types of canned beer while they eat a “Granny Boo’s Badass Bacon Burger” or “June Bug’s Seasonal Salad of the Moment.” This sort of restaurant, as well as the “dive bar” that Luis mentioned, provide symbolic experiences in which upwardly mobile and white people in Providence can perform a lower-class white identity while at the same time distancing themselves from an identity that they believe to be culturally deprived. They can thus experience this identity while mocking it, making themselves superior to poor white people through classist irony. When Luis talked about the “little dive bar” that white people seem to enjoy—he was referencing this tendency of relatively affluent white people to slum it, to disavow themselves, perhaps, from the vulgar materialism of “bougie” people on the East Side while also maintaining their superiority over poor white people living in flyover country.

This use of irony has played out in symbolic social interactions with respect to race, which helps to illuminate the relationship between ironic class-based consumption and gentrification. After moving back to Providence in 2012, I quickly found myself slipping back into a specific form of ironic racist banter that I learned as an undergraduate at Brown University. Lindy West describes this discursive mode whereby white people use racist language as a joke, to “prove we’re not racist by acting as casually as racist as possible.”4 This “hipster racism” is a way for white people who think they are race conscious to transgress the constraints imposed by political correctness. We can say racist thoughts that we are structured to think through self-aware racist jokes, which we think would normally be stated by people who are culturally beneath us.
I found myself resorting to this racist speech strategy once within days of returning to Providence in 2012 after a five-year absence. In doing so, it became obvious to me how Providence is a particular place that is structured in racial dominance through these kind of ironic performative speech acts, which privileges the position of white graduates from Brown and RISD. After all, I did not resort to this kind of speech act while studying at the University of Cambridge from 2007 to 2012, where, needless to say, conversations about race were absent in my chosen circles. Moreover, this ironic racist discourse was different from the overt white supremacist language that I learned growing up in Columbus, Ohio in the 1980s. But in Providence, I had discovered that this kind of ironic speech act had a special kind of currency, which perversely suggested to us our racial progress while at the same time keeping interpersonal and structural racism intact. When I resorted to this device once when I moved back to Providence in 2012, I apologized for the pain that I caused another person, and I realized that I was nowhere close to where I needed to be in terms of reeducating myself with respect to race and racism.

Eating and hanging out at Ogie’s Trailer Park shows that hipster classism, not hipster racism, still remains acceptable in terms of everyday consumption in the Creative Capital. People can elevate their cultural status by mocking the poor. But at Ogie’s Trailer Park, poverty is articulated to white people living in trailer parks, not to people of color living in the neighborhood. In this way, hipster classism obscures the role of upwardly mobile people and white people who are gentrifying the neighborhood at the expense of poor people of color living next to Ogie’s Trailer Park. The ironic register of Ogie’s Trailer Park would be less plausible to white consumers—at least I think—if it drew on culturally deficient stereotypes constructed by whiteness for people of color living on that same street. That symbolic consumption would make their own position as racist gentrifiers more visible and therefore less tenable. Instead, when white people want to consume “ethnic” difference in the Creative Capital, they want to consume the “real” thing, not an ironic rendition.

ARTISANSHIP

In his observation of consumer changes in the neighborhood, Luis noted the “fuckin’ artisan pizza place” down the street from the dive bar and the funky little restaurant. An artisan pizza place is one that serves high-priced and handcrafted pizza with fresh ingredients, perhaps cooked in a wood-fired oven. Luis was clearly deriding the pizza place as “fuckin’ artisan.” Luis also mentioned another example of artisanal consumption in Providence, namely
CHAPTER SIX

the store Craftland. Craftland features handcrafted work such as screen-printed baby clothes and posters, handmade jewelry, holiday cards, and home decor items. What Luis might not have known is that I played a role in launching Craftland in order to support New Urban Arts. Indeed, Craftland began as a holiday craft sale in New Urban Arts’ studio.

The purpose of Craftland was to provide a source of revenue for emerging artists, designers, and craftspeople in Providence, while fundraising for New Urban Arts. After a few years, Craftland, which is no longer affiliated with New Urban Arts, opened a permanent location in the newly fashionable shopping district in downtown Providence. On the one hand, Craftland could be considered a well-intentioned strategy to raise money for New Urban Arts. On the other, it could be critiqued as a “gentrifying force” that introduced the cultural tastes and preferences of affluent and white people moving into the West End and, later, downtown. This contradiction speaks to the very bind that I faced as a nonprofit leader at New Urban Arts given the fact that its youth cannot pay tuition. With fierce competition for philanthropic dollars, and minimal public funding, I was forced to turn to the marketplace to support New Urban Arts. One way to do that was to capitalize on, and contribute to, the new symbolic economy of Providence as a creative city and a city of artisanship.

After I left New Urban Arts, its new leadership started a new holiday sale, “Cardboard Pancakes.” This sale sells artwork produced by youth participants, artist-mentors, and alumni, as well as local artists. Luis himself has produced craft goods to sell through Cardboard Pancakes. One year, he stamped pieces of cardstock with snowflakes and sold them as stationary. When I asked him why he did that, he said he was trying to make stationary look “bougie.” In other words, Luis was making a product that appeared artisanal, or was artisanal, to appeal to consumers living in, and visiting, the Creative Capital.

In her article “Art, Design, and Gentrification” (2015), Rebekah Modrak critiqued what she called “bougie crap” and its relationship to gentrification. Modrak defined “bougie crap” as “a design aesthetic of calculated authenticity and elements of hand-craft or personalization to suggest that the product is motivated by these values and not by crass economic gain.” Through this motif of artisanship, consumers signal their honorific status by purchasing handmade crafts, not machine-made items produced on distant shores and sold in generic box stores. Modrak noted that these products often claim a connection with both rural and urban traditions of manual labor and work.

For Modrak the arrival of this bougie crap produces a two-tiered cul-
ural and economic divide between those who can afford these products and those who cannot. When affluent people move to a neighborhood marked by higher levels of poverty, they consume “bougie crap” that is accessible only to themselves. This imposition registers to those who lived in the neighborhood, before it became creative, that the economic and cultural quality of their neighborhood is changing and, for them, may soon disappear. Luis, it seems, was well aware of this calculated authenticity as he tried to make money for himself and for New Urban Arts. So Luis himself was confronting the competing demands of the Creative Capital—raising money for himself and the creative education of his peers while at the same time contributing to a symbolic economy that altered the cultural and economic fabric of the city at their expense and for the benefit of “bougie” people.

In summary, Luis’s analysis of shifting symbolic consumer patterns points to the fact that Providence has become a city where white people feel entitled to do things, including shopping for bougie crap and dining in authentic “ethnic” or “artisanal” restaurants as they gentrify neighborhoods, because Providence is cool and creative. This manufactured social understanding of the city as cool and creative, which Luis believed reasserted white entitlement and cultural supremacy, is at odds with a city meant to serve the cultural and economic interests of “troubled youth.” Of course, the counterargument is that this injection of consumers into the West End and the South Side attracts much-needed capital investment into those low-income neighborhoods, which would then expand the property tax base and the city’s capacity to deliver public services to young people such as Luis—a kind of “trickle down” creative city politics. But Luis did not trust this script, and for good reason. Instead, he laughed about the absurdity of the city’s efforts to rebrand his neighborhood and he feared the velocity of the changes near his home. After all, he did not want to pay five dollars for a chimi before being displaced from his neighborhood.

REBRANDING THE LIVELY EXPERIMENT

Luis could not stop laughing when he discussed the city’s efforts to rebrand Broad Street as a place for white people to consume ethnic culture, music, and food. He said that this branding campaign was “for other folk” who did not live in his neighborhood. “Other folk” is an obvious reference to people who are white and/or affluent. This particular marketing campaign on Broad Street was part of the city’s effort to alter the dominant way of thinking about different neighborhoods in the city and drive inward capital investment.

As mayor David Cicilline unveiled his creative city plan for Providence,
his administration hired a marketing firm, North Star Destination Strategies, based in Nashville, Tennessee, to lead a rebranding exercise for the city. North Star Destination Strategies describes itself as “community brand avengers” in their promotional materials online—a firm that is “saving the world one community reputation at a time.” Their list of clients includes Miami County, Ohio (“Home. Grown. Great.”); Brookings, South Dakota (“Bring Your Dreams”); Greater Lansing, Michigan (“Where culture and creativity come together”); and Cape Girardeau, Missouri (“Where the river turns a thousand tales”).

For Providence, North Star opted to focus on the city’s history of being a “lively experiment,” a reference to Rhode Island’s founding state charter that promised religious freedom through the separation of church and state. According to North Star, the essence of Rhode Island’s capital city, Providence, is its “openness . . . to experimentation, improvisation, self-expression and independence. In fact, original thinking is the mantra of Providence. Whether you’re talking industry, art, education or lifestyle the people of this dynamic capital city don’t want to be pigeonholed into a solitary way of thinking.”

Along with a new brand and logo, Providence launched a public relations and marketing campaign that solidified this new image of the city as a creative lifestyle destination. This campaign was designed to transform the image of the city from a dangerous city populated with “scary youths” into a city where upwardly mobile and white people could feel safe and secure as they experienced this sense of themselves as dynamic, self-expressive, and independent. But given that the city was not producing many jobs in the creative sector, people were going to experience this sense of creativity through consumption, not production, in the Creative Capital.

Jamie Peck, who is a professor of urban and regional political economy, as well as a critic of creative city politics, has argued that cities have turned to rebranding exercises through the conventional creative city script precisely because this strategy is inexpensive. In other words, city officials have tried to alter the image of their cities through cheap marketing ploys because they do not have the resources needed to invest in infrastructure and public services. Indeed, the city of Providence has had a structural budget imbalance, caused by both disinvestment, which led to a diminished property tax base, and existing expenditure commitments to police officers, firefighters, and teachers. This imbalance led to Moody’s Investors Service cutting its outlook on Providence’s credit rating to negative in 2015, which made it more expensive for the city to service its debt. In 2015, the city of Providence approved expenditures of over $678 million in its annual budget. The majority of those expenses were pegged to three sources: the police department ($68.6 million;
In stark contrast, the Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, the agency responsible for shepherding Creative Providence, had an approved budget of $629,000 (0.92 percent). This disparity points to how little the creative city strategy has cost Providence (other than the tax subsidies to wealthy landowners and property developers). Rebranding the city as creative was a cheap municipal strategy designed to drive upmarket property development with the hope of expanding the property tax base and, in turn, increasing the city’s capacity to provide better resourced public services.

The contradiction of this strategy is obvious to see. In a planning session for Federal Hill, a historically Italian neighborhood, Cicilline stated that the neighborhood could be, as Ian Donnis reported, “a local version of Boston’s Newbury Street—a place marked by astronomical rents and high-end boutiques—while also citing goals for the area of a good public transit, parks, and mixed-income residences.”

So, on the one hand, Cicilline wanted to transform a working-class neighborhood into an upmarket neighborhood to generate much-needed property tax revenue. And on the other hand, he was trying to deliver better public services, including transit, parks, and access to secure, low-income housing. Those two aims, which are structured through local property tax policy, are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile for mayors of American cities. There will always be “collateral” under this model for low-income publics, which, given the problematic and racist history of the United States and the city, are more likely to be communities of color. Moreover, majority white communities have long exploited this tax policy to reassert their position as beneficiaries of better resourced public services, such as public schools.

Nonetheless, media coverage in Providence has both amplified the city’s self-promoted image as the Creative Capital and obscured these contradictions and collateral damages. For example, in 2005, in an article in the New York Times’ Travel section titled “In Providence, Faded Area Finds Fresh Appeal,” Bonnie Tsui celebrated the West End for its coffee shop, high-end home furnishing store, and handmade stationary store, as well as a “bohemian-bistro” and a vintage home furnishing store on nearby Broadway. As I already pointed out, this coverage of the West End highlighted new hip consumer patterns in the neighborhood and claimed that those changes were led by the “community.” This absurd representation of the community leading its own displacement is designed to mask the collateral damage to “the community.”
In 2008, Elizabeth Abbott published an article titled “In Providence, Progress in Reviving an Urban Desert” in the *New York Times* Commercial Real Estate section. This article described a $300 million development project on a nearby 18.5-acre industrial complex, with plans for as many as five hundred condominium and rental units and nearly two million square feet of commercial and retail space. Like the vocabulary of “a faded area finds fresh appeal,” the phrase “reviving an urban desert” suggests that making a city more upmarket, and inevitably more white, is progress, an improvement over the days of “faded areas” and “urban deserts.” These representations suggest that no one actually lives in, for example, an “urban desert.” That place is placeless. The collateral damage to young people and their families living in these neighborhoods is also obscured by this construction of urban space as placeless. These representations thus support Luis’s claim that rebranding the Creative Capital is about convincing white people to believe they get to do things in the city and feel cool doing it, which requires invisibilizing the racist collateral damage caused by their own actions.

Magazine rankings have also glorified this new urban transformation. In 2013, *Travel and Leisure* ranked Providence as the fourth most “hipster city” in the country. According to the magazine, Providence now stands on “the cutting edge of culture” and embraces “simple, retro charms.” The magazine took special note of a chic downtown hotel located in a former brothel that features “peekaboo bathrooms.” In 2014, *Travel and Leisure* ranked Providence America’s “Favorite City,” noting that its downtown has “gone from seedy to hip,” where the nation’s oldest indoor shopping mall is now a retail hub with “micro-loft apartments.” Its downtown Westminster Street is now a Europeanesque “boulevard” with boutiques, galleries, and wine shops. In these rankings, Providence has been recognized as a culinary capital where people can “queue up for a table at North, a modern Asian hot spot by James Mark, a David Chang protégé, or book at Birch, an ambitious chef’s counter with a focus on local ingredients (whelks, quahogs, foraged herbs).”

Social media also contributes to this new and now dominant way of thinking about Providence as a city where white people get to be hip and do cool things. Zagat, for example, compiles on its website individual user reviews of different venues in Providence and makes them available through Google Maps searches. These reviews provide a glimpse into the meanings of new venues in Providence for its new consumers. For one bar in the West End, users note that it is a “speakeasy-esque bar” where “learned barkeeps” impress a “cool” clientele “of all stripes.” Another restaurant nearby, according to Zagat, is a “hip outpost” for “cutting-edge small plates.”
Through these various representations, affluent and white consumers are positioned as if they are headed into a lawless frontier, acting as pioneers who are titillated by the risk and the adventure that comes with hanging out in former brothels, sneaking into speakeasy bars, and encountering people of “all stripes.” People who move through the city with relative impunity—that is, white people—are privileged, whereas “striped” people become mere ethnic backdrops for white pleasure and self-proclaimed racial tolerance. “Striped” people are reduced to “spectacles of ethnicity.” The problem with this spectacle, Hall argued, is that it is a “willful diversion” from the “deeper structures of institutionalized racial disadvantage operative in housing, education, employment, wages, working conditions, and welfare.” The supremacy of politically progressive white people, such as myself, is reasserted through this spectacle because we can signal our virtue, as antiracist, by locating ourselves in proximity to people of “all stripes” amidst this new urbanism without ceding any power, resources, or opportunities. These representations show how the Creative Capital is invested in the unbridled enjoyment of white people as a special property right.

Property developers’ own branding efforts have also amplified this image of the city as a place for white people to do cool things. For example, the Armory Revival Company, once New Urban Arts’ landlord, started to develop old industrial properties in low-income neighborhoods that they touted as a “celebration of the city’s industrial past.” They claimed that physical sites in low-income neighborhoods were becoming places “where artists converge, businesses and nonprofits thrive, neighbors gather, and the community celebrates.” Here is another problematic and euphemistic use of “the community” that is somehow celebrating its own displacement. After all, one of Armory Revival’s realtors was caught on videotape telling a pair of prospective renters that an “us and them” atmosphere existed between the inhabitants of one refurbished mill and those who lived in the surrounding “ghetto.” The realtor told the renters that the company would have “bought out pretty much everything that we can buy—so, in two years, five years, we’ll pretty much have made this a really cool neighborhood to live in.” In this case, there was no shame in promising white people the opportunity to live in a really cool neighborhood, while those living in the “ghetto” would be pushed out over time.

These problematic representations in the media and by property developers have supported the city’s inexpensive rebranding exercise through the conventional creative city script. Together, they have been successful in transforming the dominant way of thinking in and about Providence, from an ag-
ing city that is populated with “scary youths” to a youthful city for upwardly mobile and white people to be cool and to consume difference without having to worry about collateral damage these actions cause to people living in the “ghetto.” Such an approach to place-based marketing is clearly at odds with supporting low-income youth of color who lived in the city before the city became creative in the white public imaginary. The city’s approach to funding the arts has also been key to this cultural reconfiguration of Providence.

ART WORKS IN THE CREATIVE CAPITAL

When Luis was giving me a symbolic tour of restaurants and bars in Providence, he also brought up Providence WaterFire, a public art installation and spectacle created in 1994 by the artist Barnaby Evans. At WaterFire, people gather around cauldrons of fire that are floating on rivers in WaterPlace Park, the park that mayor Buddy Cianci developed in the 1990s as a part of his “Renaissance City” renewal project. WaterFire occurs regularly throughout the year, but mainly in the summer. People gather in the evening alongside the riverbanks to look at fires burning in a row of cauldrons floating down the center of the river. They listen to dry firewood pop, as well as classical and world music projected from outdoor speakers. WaterFire has become a symbol of the city’s renewal and its creative brand. Indeed, an image of Providence WaterFire graces the cover of Providence’s creative city plan. This event is powerful symbolically for the city because water and fire suggest birth and baptism, rebirth and renewal. But Luis interpreted WaterFire differently:

So WaterFire is a way to get white people downtown to see these torches lighting these baskets of fire along the river. It’s something out of a fucking Stanley Kubrick movie, right? There is somber music playing and a bunch of people staring at flaming water. . . . I guess the point is that, since all these people are in the city, then they can go to restaurants or go to the mall. That’s how you generate more income. Maybe it was because I was a teenager, but I remember thinking to myself the one time I went, “Is this really what white people do?”

For Luis, downtown was now a place where white people could go to be cool, playing their part in a weird Stanley Kubrick film. Indeed, another young person that I interviewed said that they—note gender-neutral pronoun—were terrified the one time that they went to WaterFire to see a mass of white people engaged in this fire ritual, which, they said, felt threatening to them as a gender-nonconforming young person of color. But not all young people from New Urban Arts shared their perspectives about Providence WaterFire. Some
young people have mentioned to staff at New Urban Arts that WaterFire is a good option for a free date night. One young person also said to me in an interview that WaterFire is a symbol of Providence’s creativity. As a result, WaterFire was important to her because it helped her identify as a creative from Providence.

My intention, of course, is not to single out Barnaby Evans and Providence WaterFire as I share these contrasting perspectives. After all, some of these same criticisms could be levied against me and my leadership at New Urban Arts. I transformed a storefront shop in a low-income neighborhood into a studio gallery space with hardwood floors and white-painted walls. This studio gallery design served the needs of the program, but it also appealed to my own aesthetic sensibilities and some of the artist-mentors I recruited to participate in New Urban Arts. I did not consider how the design of the studio space imparts class- and race-based messages. I did not consider how New Urban Arts could function as a gateway into the neighborhood for future white gentrifiers, inviting more and more young creatives into the neighborhood until they transformed the social, cultural, and economic fabric of nearby neighborhoods. So both New Urban Arts and WaterFire were entangled in rebranding different parts of the city, suggesting to white people that these areas were now safe spaces for them to come and do things because Providence is totally cool, because they are totally cool.

But Luis’s perspective is important because it sheds light on how municipal funding of the arts has helped to reshape the symbolic meaning of the downtown area. As I have pointed out, New Urban Arts rarely, if ever, has been a recipient of public funding from the city precisely because it does not contribute to tourism. It helps “troubled youth.” By contrast, both the City of Providence and the Providence Tourism Council sponsor Providence WaterFire. And this funding approach by the city exemplifies the dominant approach to public funding of the arts during the past decade.

Rocco Landesman, the director of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) between 2009 and 2012, announced “Art Works” as the new slogan for this national public agency that provides grants and steers national cultural policy. This slogan suggested that art works are hard at work, as the NEA put it, “empowering creativity and innovation in our society and economy.”

For the city of Providence, empowering creativity and innovation has meant stimulating the economy through sparking consumer spending because, in actuality, the city has not produced “real jobs” in the creative sector. As Luis put it, the point is to get these white people into the city so they can spend money at the restaurant and the mall. Laura added to this observation when

“IS THIS REALLY WHAT WHITE PEOPLE DO?”
she said that the Creative Capital is designed to get people to stay in the city’s hotels, which most likely do not pay a living wage to its employees.

So, creative place-marketing and funding the arts have been designed to work in tandem to drive consumer spending in the city for the benefit of these consumers. Indeed, Angel Taveras, the mayor who succeeded David Cicilline in 2011, and who was also one of New Urban Arts’ founding board members, argued that the growth of Providence’s consumer economy through tourism was key to Providence’s future after the Great Recession. In his plan for “Putting Providence Back to Work,” Taveras noted that the demand for Providence’s hotel rooms has been driven by its image as “a hipster city,” which draws tourists and visitors to Providence’s restaurants, vibrant nightlife, and thriving arts and culture scene. In 2012, hotel occupancy rates in Providence reached a record high, increasing from 63.8 percent in 2010 to 67.9 percent two years later.

The theory for how and why tourism is significant in postindustrial economies depends upon what is called economic-base theory. Americans for the Arts, a national arts advocacy organization in the United States, explained this theory, and its relevance to arts organizations, as follows:

A common theory of community growth is that an area must export goods and services if it is to prosper economically. This theory is called economic-base theory, and it depends on dividing the economy into two sectors: the export sector and the local sector. Exporters, such as automobile manufacturers, hotels, and department stores, obtain income from customers outside of the community. This “export income” then enters the local economy in the form of salaries, purchases of materials, dividends, and so forth, and becomes income to local residents. Much of it is respent locally; some, however, is spent for goods imported from outside of the community. The dollars respent locally have a positive economic impact as they continue to circulate through the local economy. This theory applies to arts organizations as well as to other producers.

According to this perspective, the arts are economically significant in postindustrial cities because they can help redress the decline in export income due to the decline of manufacturing. The arts stimulate export income by producing new symbolic associations for the city, such as creativity, which then attract visitors and tourists who bring their money from elsewhere. They spend money locally at arts venues, restaurants, the mall, and new shops featured in travel magazines and newspaper articles.
Providence, of course, has needed this new source of export income. The city experienced a sustained decline in manufacturing employment as a result of global capital’s never-ending desire for cheaper and more desperate labor elsewhere. Rhode Island ranked third among states for the highest rate of manufacturing job loss between 2000 and 2012 (42.4 percent), and Providence experienced a 7.1 percent loss of manufacturing jobs during that same period. This city was so vulnerable to the uneven effects of offshoring because so much of its industry was low-skilled, thus making the jobs easier to relocate elsewhere. As a result, turning to the arts to drive tourism and export income has become an important economic development strategy in Providence.

Americans for the Arts has suggested that investing in the arts has produced good economic returns for the city. For example, the organization published a report that analyzed the economic impact of nonprofit arts and culture organizations, such as Trinity Repertory Company, Providence’s Tony-award-winning resident professional theater. In 2010, according to Americans for the Arts, these nonprofit arts organizations in Providence spent $84 million and generated $106.1 million in event-related spending from their audiences. This combined spending of $190.1 million was eight times greater than the median of similarly-sized cities. Americans for the Arts estimated that this combined income could be expected to support over 4,500 full-time equivalent jobs by generating $107 million in household income to local residents and producing $19.0 million in local and state government revenue. The data were used to provide evidence that public and private funding for arts and culture has been an investment, producing a return in the forms of jobs, local wealth, and municipal revenue.

But much like the financial figures on public investment in historic buildings with a creative aesthetic, these figures do not indicate who benefits and who loses from this return on investment. This public funding privileges these publics that have money to spend to travel, that have a possessive desire to assert their cultural status by going to the theater or symphony, or speakeasy bars and kitsch bistros. If we listen to young people at New Urban Arts, we can clearly see how they believe that the primary beneficiaries are young people such as myself who came to the city to attend Brown and RISD, the “East Siders” who participate in the “bougie” art scene, and the visitors to the city who stay in hotels that do not pay a living wage to their employees. From their perspective, this new symbolic economy is in conflict with supporting the cultural tastes and preferences of “troubled youth” who choose to participate in programs such as New Urban Arts. By the time expanded public
services for youth might come to the Creative Capital, they might no longer be able to afford to live in the city or see their shared ways of life represented there.

Fighting for their futures in Providence will require a far more politicized conception of culture in the Creative Capital. The city will have to move away from inexpensive rebranding exercises and funding artworks that especially drive tourism and consumer spending, thus enabling upwardly mobile people and/or white people to feel edgy as pioneers or race-conscious discoverers of difference. It will have to stop producing a symbolic economy that reasserts white people’s sense of entitlement to gentrify the city without having to worry about the racist collateral. But the fact is that successive mayoral administrations in Providence will have to negotiate the contradiction of expanding the property tax base and providing public services to low-income communities. Moreover, they are dependent upon the financial donations of affluent and white landowners and property developers who are invested in their own profitability and self-interested sense of civic duty. As a result, this politicized conception of culture will not come without direct political action, and such action can and should be complemented by the cultural strategies developed by young people at New Urban Arts.