



## *The creative underclass: Youth, race, and the gentrifying city*, by Tyler Denmead

*Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2019*

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## BOOK REVIEW

***The creative underclass: Youth, race, and the gentrifying city***, by Tyler Denmead, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2019

The recognition that he unwittingly played a role in the transformation of “talented” disadvantaged youth to a well-behaved supply of cheap labor for the city of Providence, Rhode Island, is a major form of angst for Tyler Denmead, the author of *The Creative Underclass*. In the 1990s, Providence re-envisioned its future to one of attracting/retaining young “creatives” from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design who could jumpstart revitalization efforts in downtown after decades of disinvestment brought on by deindustrialization. To protect the city’s investment, it was necessary to ensure that Providence’s disadvantaged youth become, at the same time, transformed into productive members of society. These “disadvantaged youth” are what Denmead refers to as the “underclass”; an economically and supposedly culturally deprived group (p. 12). Thus, Denmead, a 1997 graduate of Brown University, was charged with providing an outlet for disadvantaged youth of color by opening an after-school creative center known as New Urban Arts. This book is an ethnographic account of how disadvantaged youth in Providence negotiate the hardships of living in a city that has provided them with few options for a middle-class lifestyle. Denmead defines the “creative underclass” as marginalized young people who have been summoned to provide “cultural performances” that showcase their artistic ability but also ultimately subsidize urban revitalization. He argues that these individuals receive little or no remuneration for their creative works and that this contributes to intergenerational poverty rather than alleviating it.

The book is well organized and easy to follow. Denmead’s introduction includes a historical overview of racial inequality in Providence since the 1600s and illustrates that not much has changed in 400 years. In the 1600s, Providence’s White capitalists increased their wealth through the institution of slavery. In the 2000s, the capitalist system continues to extract value from the plethora of low-wage service jobs that are the only means for livelihood for the disenfranchised. What is missing from the introduction is a detailed literature review that discusses the “creative class,” the counterpart to the “creative *underclass*.” Richard Florida, a well-recognized scholar on the “creative class,” defines the creative class as predominantly White well-educated artists, scientists, and other professionals who not only lend a certain chic to cities but who have also stimulated economic and population growth in the post-industrial era. While Denmead references Florida’s work numerous times, a more detailed discussion of Florida’s argument would have been helpful. For instance, a working definition of “creative” is needed as Denmead’s and Florida’s definitions are not synonymous.

In Part I of the book, Denmead interviews young adults who attended New Urban Arts during their high school years. He found that while at the center, these participants learned to negotiate Providence’s unequal social structure through “troublemaking,” “creating a hot mess,” and “chillaxing.” Troublemaking occurs when members of the “creative underclass” adopt certain forms of dress or behavior that conflict with societal norms but allow the underclass members to make a social statement. Creating a hot mess is a way to engage in artistic activities that seem chaotic to mainstream society but allows members of the “creative underclass” to remove themselves from a society that expects order from its citizens and stifles creativity. In fact, it is this hot mess that contributes to the chic of the “creative city.” Chillaxing allows youths and young adults to step away from the racist/classist problems that they encounter in everyday life. Part I could have been shortened. The author uses lengthy excerpts from interviews including long poems or other wordy examples that while illustrative of the type of work at the center, are not needed if the intent of the book is to argue that the capitalist system in Providence has found a low-wage, high productivity labor reserve that will contribute to its designation as a creative city.

Part II of the book is devoted to Denmead's major argument. That by providing opportunities for disadvantaged youth to engage in the creative arts, Providence's privileged class and capitalists (mostly Whites): (1) limit the underclass' political and social action against social injustices, (2) provide a well-disciplined labor force that will accept low-wage service jobs, and (3) extract as much capital from the creative enterprises provided by the underclass with little or no compensation. By providing a space (New Urban Arts) for creativity, troubled youth learn behaviors that are beneficial to society and are employable in low-wage service-sector jobs. These jobs included, but are not limited to coffee shops and hotel workers that cater to tourists and Providence's middle/upper class. Other alumni from NUA have secured such creative jobs as DJs, food truck vendors, fashion designers, and photographers. Most of these jobs are freelance/part-time and do not provide benefits or a livable wage. Because Denmead interviews only a small percentage of the NUA graduates and this is not a representative sample, it is impossible to know whether the program has been a success in preparing disadvantaged young people in Providence for remunerative employment.

What is important is that jobs in the creative arts in Providence are insufficient to support all those who seek them. Denmead emphasizes that it is imperative that underclass creatives accept low-wage service-sector jobs as it draws tourists to the city that are attracted to their artistic contributions and need the service sector to wait on them. In true capitalist fashion, profit must be generated from this system to sustain the city. The creative underclass must be content with "cultural status" and not demand better paying jobs for the system to work. Providence can ill-afford political or social activism on the part of its disadvantaged members, and thus programs such as New Urban Arts perpetuate social injustices.

Denmead briefly mentions the process of gentrification and the displacement of low-income individuals in Part II. Not only is the "creative underclass" a low-cost labor reserve, but they can be removed from their neighborhoods by aesthetic catalyst to transform disinvested areas into attractive places for residential and commercial development. Informants from the NUA have noted a transformation of their West End and Southside neighborhoods (e.g., gentrification). These informants are also cognizant of the fact that gentrification is not only leading to a change in the types of businesses and built environment of their neighborhood but is ultimately pricing them out of these areas. Given that Providence has been unable to produce enough well-paying jobs in the creative sector, "creativity" has to be led by consumption (gentrifiers), not by production; that is remunerative employment for NUA graduates (p. 168). Denmead does not lose the chance to emphasize that post-industrial cities that have embraced the "creative cities" model of growth have become a place of consumption, not a place of production. This further exacerbates racial inequalities in that there are not enough remunerative employment opportunities for the "creative underclass." The "creative underclass" role in gentrification and its effect on the displacement of low-income populations could have received more attention in the book as it is at odds with the "traditional" types of gentrification/displacement that are initiated by the "creative class." This is an important distinction to make, in that the "creative class" benefits from the transformation of the urban landscape as a place to live, work, and recreate, while the "creative underclass" is displaced from gentrifying areas. Since Denmead provides no estimate of the number of "underclass creatives" in the West End and Southside, it is impossible to determine to what extent gentrification is a problem. The only evidence that Denmead provides of gentrification taking place in Providence is from a few NUA alumni who have observed changes in their neighborhood.

The Creative Underclass is appropriate reading for undergraduate courses in Sociology, Geography, Urban Planning, Urban Studies, and Political Science. However, the book needs to be paired with a book on the "creative class" (I suggest Florida's Cities and the Creative Class, 2005) to fully appreciate Denmead's argument and to allow students to compare/contrast the two "creative" types. Managers of nonprofit organizations working on social justice issues should also read this book to think about whether they are perpetuating racial and socioeconomic inequalities.

While I agree with Denmead that the “creative underclass” is subsidizing renewal efforts in Providence by not receiving remuneration for its artistic endeavors, it does not necessarily follow that individuals do not benefit from their experience with New Urban Arts in the long-run. To strengthen his argument, Denmead should repeat his analysis in a few decades to determine if and to what extent his participants attained upward mobility.

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