Understanding how New Urban Arts could be conceptualised as a gentrifying force requires contextual analysis. When I started New Urban Arts in the late 1990s, Providence had struggled for decades with deindustrialisation, as well as the exodus of white city-dwellers from racially diversifying neighbourhoods to more racially homogeneous suburbs. A succession of mayors tried to stimulate investment in the city through a cultural strategy that emphasised arts and creativity — a strategy copied from countless municipalities in the United States and beyond. Providence, with two elite tertiary education institutions — Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) — notorious for attracting young, affluent, artsy and politically liberal creative types to the city, was ripe for this creativity-to-urban renewal strategy. The city attempted to refashion itself as hip and edgy through the cultural productions of graduates of those schools who stayed in Providence, and this image supported speculative real estate development projects that targeted both young, affluent, and of white, residents being summoned back to the city. These real estate development projects were largely taking place in low-income and non-white neighbourhoods.

It comes as no surprise, then, that young people of colour at New Urban Arts started to report losing sense of control over how their neighbourhood communities developed, how those neighbourhoods were culturally expressed, and whether their neighbourhoods would remain affordable to them and their families. Indeed, my conversations with former youth participants suggested that the young person above was not alone in believing that New Urban Arts, under my leadership, was a gentrifying force. And they cited several examples. For example, youth participants interviewed and selected people to serve as artists mentors in the studio and many of those selected in the aughts were students and graduates of Brown University and the RISD. The studio thus operated as a gateway for the rising presence of those ‘creative’ in historically low-income and non-white neighbourhoods. In another example, New Urban Arts made a public mural nearby or any arts education setting, it requires taking into account social, economic, cultural and political factors ‘outside’ their borders. The second lesson is that arts educators must scrutinise how the arguments being made for the arts and education fit into cultural narratives that may, in fact, be working against the young people they intend to serve — and carefully consider how to avoid recapitulating those arguments and instead critiquing them. The third lesson is to support young people as they deconstruct those cultural narratives through their social and artistic practices.

This moment, while not new, is one in which youth and artists of colour have redirected their criticisms towards institutions that tend to be thought of as good things. Community-based arts organisations, galleries and museums are being called to account for their ongoing entanglements in colonialism and white supremacy. The arts and education institutions that will succeed are those that can subject themselves to a scrutiny, atone for past mistakes and do better moving forward by the communities they serve. Policymakers and funders in arts and education can help by creating the conditions where critical forms of knowledge production and action generated within arts and education institutions can be debated and discussed, and even used to value arts institutions measure themselves and their contributions to society. Other writers and I will continue to reproduce a social and, indeed, spatial imaginary that is invested in whiteness.

Cross-phase

This post had a major impact on my thinking about the arts and education. It was written around 2018 by a former participant in New Urban Arts, a youth arts organisation in Providence, Rhode Island (USA), that I had founded in 1997. In other words, this young person was likely suggesting that my own arts educational leadership was entangled in this contradictory effect. And I needed to consider this criticism carefully, particularly because I am white and this young person, racialised as Latino, grew up in a neighbourhood threatened by gentrification. How had New Urban Arts begun to exist in the first place and as a gentrifying force in the lives of young people living in communities of colour? And, how might others in the arts learn from this contradiction as they work towards racial, economic and youth justice?

Perhaps the studio that addresses the systemic denial of arts learning opportunities for low-income youth and those youth in communities of colour and of the white working class. The Arts in the late 1990s in Providence, Rhode Island, was a place where ‘young people come together to make a lot, make together and celebrate what they make until what they make ends up on the floor’. The studio was recognised by First Lady Michelle Obama as one of the best youth arts programmes in the United States and notable youth alumni of the programme include Monty Oum.

Dr Tyler Denmead, founder of New Urban Arts
Left: Site of participants of New Urban Arts
Private Collection
Right: Inside New Urban Arts © New Urban Arts
Embroidery by Sylvie Larmena, 2013, one of the New Urban Arts participants © New Urban Arts

"""Public support for New Urban Arts not only stemmed from the fact that it was doing good work with young people but, troublingly, because it also fit this racist narrative that was being deployed to transform the city, largely for the benefit of white accumulation""