

Introduction

In retrospect, the 1975 New York fiscal crisis changed everything. During the crisis, leaders of finance, leveraging the city's considerable debt, took over the city's management. They cut direct benefits, established tuition at CUNY, raised subway fares, and reduced the city's workforce by tens of thousands. In doing so, they foreshadowed what would soon happen on state, national, and international levels.¹ These leaders told everyone that austerity was the only way forward. The city, they argued, had spent too much, especially on those "peasants," in city commissioner Roger Starr's words, who kept coming to the city looking for work when everyone knew that all the jobs had gone away.² That last part was partly true. The city had lost some 500,000 manufacturing jobs in the previous decade, and more losses were coming. The city's housing quality had declined accordingly, and the board had a solution to that as well: cut rent control and let the market do its work.

Particularly in the past twenty years, and more so after the 2008 crisis, this story has become familiar. Reducing benefits, blaming the poor, and letting the market take over the role of government: these are the touchstones of a rising story about the state, its citizenry, and business that would be repeated with increasing frequency for the next forty years.³ Inevitably, too, public debt has been the lever used by financiers and right-leaning policy makers to break down the broad, if imperfect, safety nets put in place in Western countries during the post-World War II boom. In the 1990s, the International Monetary Fund used debt to reshape the economies of nations like Indonesia, Argentina, and Mexico. After 2008, debt was similarly leveraged against European countries—Ireland, Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal—to force austerity on these governments as well. In New York, these actions were anticipated by two organizations that acted together as a kind

of local IMF: the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC), established in June of 1975, and the Emergency Financial Control Board, established in 1978. Both organizations originated with the New York State government, both were intimately tied to the city's lenders and real estate industry, and both shared a mandate to implement austerity and refashion the city's government according to the needs of business. The policies they put in place accentuated the fiscal and social problems that the city had already been facing due to white flight, deindustrialization, and the decline of the city as a major shipping hub. The effects of such problems were felt with particular acuity in lower-income neighborhoods. *DIY on the Lower East Side* focuses on a neighborhood that was, in 1975, struggling, but by the 1990s had changed radically, becoming home to a much more middle- and upper-middle-class population.

The literature written in the city after the crisis records the impacts that changes forced by these boards made on the built environment, the poor, the creative, the entrepreneurial, the queer, the activist. It records the struggles to resist austerity, to build institutions that might supplement government aid. More broadly, it records attempts to make sense of the city's rapid shift away from a model of governance that served all citizens to a model of governance that served the elite. *DIY on the Lower East Side: Books, Buildings, and Art after the 1975 Fiscal Crisis* scrutinizes how the aesthetic productions of the Lower East Side of the 1970s and 1980s refracted the cultural shifts that profoundly shaped, and continue to shape, our current political conditions.

Standing in line for food stamps in June 1975, Kathy Acker heard the man next to her talk about how the federal government would soon close off the cities. She thought to herself that yes, something was up; perhaps the city was returning to the Middle Ages. Writing the introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry*, which would come out the next year, Miguel Algarín praised work that the Dynamite Brothers were doing but that the city was not: rehabilitating homes that had fallen into shameful disrepair. At Columbia, Sylvère Lotringer hosted Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault at the "Schizo-Culture" conference for his newly formed journal, *Semiotext(e)*. All three men showed up in part because of the city's reputation for danger. Attending the conference, the therapist Betty Kronsky thought the trio's ecstatic presentations were "glib and bizarre" in the face of "no jobs" and "a city about to default."⁴ Somewhere in Times Square, David Wojnarowicz stood in a doorway, talking to a down-and-out woman. He would go on to turn this and similar conversations into a project he

called the monologues, works that recorded life as it was lived in the cracks that opened up in the crisis's wake. At Pier 52, Gordon Matta-Clark cut holes into an abandoned warehouse building to create *Day's End*. In the Lower East Side, Adam Purple began his "Garden of Eden," one of many spontaneous gardens appearing throughout the neighborhood amidst the rubble. In Queens, Alanna Heiss prepared to open P.S. 1, a new art center in a school building that had been closed for twelve years. In P.S. 1's inaugural exhibit, *Rooms*, artists like Matta-Clark and Joseph Kosuth would incorporate the dilapidated building into their art, cutting holes in floors and writing on old chalkboards.

The 1975 crisis made bad conditions worse. Decaying buildings and vacant lots proliferated as landlords walked away from properties or had them burned down. For nearly everyone writing the history of the crisis, these buildings serve as potent symbols of social decay and of the city's death. Both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan toured the South Bronx during this era, each using the landscape as a powerful visual metaphor for what had gone wrong in the United States. Terms like "urban decay" and "underclass" became shorthand for falling productivity, the failure of the welfare state, and a general, national *anomie*. For many writers and artists, however, the city's landscape became something different: a site to experiment with new ways of living and new ways of creating.

This body of work produced by these writers reveals how the city's crumbling conditions allowed many to pursue literary projects often at odds with that being produced in creative writing programs at the high point of what Mark McGurl terms the Program Era in American literature. The DIY literature of the Lower East Side documents the shifting networks that made it possible for Acker to live on little money, for Algarín to start the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, for Wojnarowicz to pull himself out of an abusive childhood. At the same time, however, those who found themselves able to create in the ruins of the Lower East Side also closed off their own possibilities. First in SoHo and then in the Lower East Side, lots of people believed that art could bring magic to one of the city's key problems: a lack of middle-class housing. Rents went up accordingly.

Throughout these authors' lives, there's a running thread. They moved to New York, lived in a crummy apartment, wrote constantly, befriended and in some cases became visual artists, and got angry about how the other people living in the neighborhood were treated. They did it themselves—made careers out of limited circumstances—but were frustrated by the conditions that left their neighbors doing it themselves. Before her success, for example,

Acker lived in one terrible apartment in Washington Heights in 1971. After moving around, she ended up in a similar place on East Fifth Street. As her journals from the era detail, her struggles with money were real. At one point, she found herself in Columbia-Presbyterian's emergency room, sick with pelvic inflammatory disease, unable to pay the resulting bills. Acker incorporates these experiences, almost directly, into her early work. In a passage from *Blood and Guts in High School*, Acker's protagonist Janey lives on "a mat on the floor that belongs to the rats and four walls with tiny piles of plaster at the bottom." She encounters "continuous noise" and the smell of "garbage and piss" waft in from the "slums of New York City" while landlords burn their buildings down and the buildings that remain "have no hot water or heat."⁵ Sometimes, critics have figured Acker's work as largely nonrepresentational. But Acker's journals from the era show her drawing on lived experience, and the conditions listed in this passage were all real in the Lower East Side, especially after the city's 1975 fiscal crisis.

In the period before the crisis, New York had long, seemingly durable networks that connected its poorest citizens to its richest ones, its art institutions to its commerce, its unions to its government, its government to its citizens. These long networks didn't disappear in 1975. But almost everyone agrees that by a number of measures, those networks became shorter: shorter periods of employment, shorter extensions of the welfare state into neighborhoods, shorter ties binding together neighborhoods.⁶ The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes this shift as one from the "solid modernity" of the Fordist factory, government bureaucracy, and mandatory union membership to the "liquid modernity" of service work, deregulation, and short-term contracts.⁷ Actually, for Bauman, it's a wholesale transformation of social life, from individuals who saw themselves part of—though often trapped in—a rigid hierarchy, to individuals who see themselves as needing to serve their own needs: to do it themselves. The literature of *DIY on the Lower East Side* documents the colliding forms produced by the shift Bauman describes. Often, its attention to such colliding forms produces formal experimentation, as in Wojnarowicz's short monologues, Acker's appropriation, and the New Narrative work of Tillman and Indiana.

As these quick examples suggest, the writers I focus on throughout this study document the aftereffects of the 1975 fiscal crisis. It's true, though, that these aftereffects became clearer over time. As I'll discuss in chapter 4, there's a gulf between Tillman's *Haunted Houses* (1987) and her *No Lease on Life* (1998). The former focuses primarily on the ways that the restrictive gender identities of the suburbs haunt Tillman's protagonists. The latter addresses gentrification and homelessness head on; though set in 1994, it's a

post-crisis novel. In the 1980s and 1990s, these writers were often received in terms of an attack on repressive forms of culture. This question is at the core of Robert Siegle's landmark monograph on these writers, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (1989).⁸ Carefully documenting the literary production of the Lower East Side, Siegle finds the writers and artists working there resisting the constrained lifestyles represented by the suburbs.⁹ In 1989, it wasn't possible to see the long view from 1975, the austerity and income inequality that would dominate questions of governance from that point forward. As a result, Siegle draws different conclusions than does my study here. Yet his remarkable research and his *framing* of these writers' insurgency provide invaluable foundations for my work. In 1989, it wasn't fully clear that the ambush could work in reverse. The policies crafted in New York in the late 1970s would come to determine the structures of not just identity, but post-Fordist governance itself. As Richard Florida has ruefully observed, the jarring experiences of austerity, privatization, and income inequality felt by working-class New Yorkers in the 1970s have been increasingly felt in suburbs for the past forty years.¹⁰

A word about geography: definitions of the Lower East Side are notoriously slippery. In the accounts of real estate developers, geographers, writers, entrepreneurs, and historians, the boundaries of the neighborhood shift and assume new names: The East Village, Loisaida, Alphabet City. I use the term "Lower East Side" to describe the area in Lower Manhattan adjoining the East River below Fourteenth Street, east of the Bowery/Third Avenue, and roughly north of Canal Street.¹¹ While I invoke "the East Village" a few times in describing the neighborhood's art galleries, I tend to avoid this term because of the way it was used by real estate developers in the 1980s to make the neighborhood seem more acceptable to middle-class whites. "Alphabet City" was used in opposite ways but toward something of the same end, to depict the neighborhood as a lawless zone nevertheless full of thrills for nonresidents. While I praise the use of "Loisaida" by Puerto Rican writers, activists, and artists in chapter 2, this term was not widely used by the other culture workers I discuss here. "Lower East Side" is, then, at once an expansive and relatively neutral term for the geographical area I cover here.

Do-It-Yourself

Broadly speaking, the impetus of the 1975 crisis was away from collective activities—the welfare state, the large firm, and other durable institutions—and toward the individual. Do-it-yourself, which I interpret here as shorthand

for what the philosopher Isabell Lorey calls “an individualized capacity for risk management,” becomes an essential mandate. It’s true, though, that the particular manifestation of do-it-yourself depends on whether you’re a middle-class white man or an impoverished Puerto Rican woman.¹² Sustaining networks broke down at every level, but, as Lauren Berlant observes, “the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life.”¹³ In my project, do-it-yourself encompasses a range of activities driven by often quite different impulses. But as I’ll suggest, these activities have what Ludwig Wittgenstein might call “family resemblances.” They intersect with each other, find inspiration in the same circumstances, and share a drive to make something out of what seemed like ruins.

Do-it-yourself is perhaps most famous for being an ethos of punk: record your own music, make your own labels, get in the van and go on tour. The artists and writers of *DIY on the Lower East Side* take up this ethos by starting literary journals out of their apartment, starting theory journals out of their offices, establishing poetry cafés, rebuilding abandoned schools as cultural institutions, and, perhaps most famously, opening galleries in deserted storefronts. Other forms of do-it-yourself became necessary after the wide cuts in city funding: do-it-yourself tenant advocacy, do-it-yourself after school programs, do-it-yourself banking. This is the kind of do-it-yourself celebrated in the January-February 1985 issue of *The Quality of Life in Loisaida*, titled fittingly, “Do-It-Yourself.” Beginning publication shortly after the crisis, *The Quality of Life* showed readers how to make covers for their radiators to improve their efficiency, or how to save money by making your own Christmas gifts. For contemporary readers, DIY is best known in terms of home improvement, the kind of home renovation celebrated on *Home and Garden Television*. Own it yourself, get the drywall, run the electricity, drive to Home Depot, put up the tile. The writers Joel Rose and Catherine Texier literally undertook this process (without the Home Depot part), rehabilitating their apartment while working on their writing. So did Bimbo Rivas, the Nuyorican poet who helped convert another disused school building, P.S. 64, into El Bohío, a community arts center where Rivas would stage his plays. The other culture workers of my book undertook this process more metaphorically, using their art to improve their chances of survival. This spirit carried over into the creation of community gardens, homesteaded apartment buildings, and abandoned storefronts turned into galleries and places to sell handcrafted items. By the 1980s, the neighborhood had witnessed a range of innovative, DIY takeovers of space: from

the Hawaiian burger place called Hawaii 5.0 to a gas station repurposed for a performance space, to the many galleries that opened in storefronts.

DIY was brought to bear, too, toward more political interventions. In 1980, the members of Colab illegally occupied a Delancey Street building owned by the city. After breaking the lock, they used the space to stage an exhibition that critiqued gentrification: they called it the *Real Estate Show*.¹⁴ Police shut it down, but after the German artist Joseph Beuys publicly denounced the city, the city agreed to give Colab a nearby building for their use. That space became ABC No Rio, which became a center for community activism and art. Even before Fun Gallery, which kicked off the gallery explosion in the Lower East Side, DIY had been activated against the mandates of MAC and the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB).¹⁵ This tradition would continue with other activist art groups, notably Group Material, who staged a range of shows calling attention to the neighborhood's art-driven redevelopment. As I'll argue in my afterword, these small-scale actions built the groundwork for ACT UP, a powerful, art-inflected movement that managed to intervene sharply in the national politics of AIDS.

The withdrawal of the welfare state and the demand for market-based solutions gave DIY a double edge. Cuts to state and city funding forced more and more people to do it themselves, whether that meant knitting radiator covers, rehabilitating buildings, starting their own literary journal, or dealing drugs. It's all fine and good for the state to enable experiments by tacitly approving the appropriation of city-owned space. It's another thing when the state, and the economy, demands that you manage yourself. After all, as the literary critic Jasper Bernes observes, "new forms of autonomy and self-management . . . are really regimes of self-harrying, self-intensification, and interworker competition disguised as attempts to humanize the workplace and allow for freedom and self-expression in work."¹⁶ This self-management was a key facet of the version of capitalism that replaced Fordism, and it's not coincidental that the do-it-yourself aesthetic experiments of the Lower East Side happened at this moment.

DIY on the Lower East Side tracks all these versions of DIY, examining the multiple forms of do-it-yourself that became both appealing and necessary after 1975. Of course, going to New York in search of cheap rent and an artistic community is much different than starting a tenants' rights organization. When these writers and artists moved to New York, they were not necessarily interested in changing the lives of the impoverished around them, though each made impassioned cases for these lives' precarity. They sought mostly to make something out of the nothing of their own lives.

This something involved, for a time, developing ways of life that were outside of market-driven capitalism. That was the promise that post-crisis New York held for artists and writers: the possibility of focusing fully on aesthetic creation without the benefits of grants or the stability of creative writing programs. Because of the straitened circumstances of his background, Wojnarowicz had little choice. Acker, who came from money but broke with her parents in the late 1960s, made a more deliberate decision to work in the ruins. Both developed work that was open to the city around them. This was the old dream of bohemia that took shape in Baudelaire's Paris, whereby artists drew inspiration from desperation, borrowing autonomy from subjects denied access to the fullness of the economy.¹⁷ It all ends, though, in gentrification, and while some argue that one can separate the neighborhood's creative lifestyles from its eventual high rents and middle-class residents, there's ample evidence to suggest that culture workers like Acker and Wojnarowicz cleared ground for copywriters and bond traders.¹⁸

And yet. Once a crisis has become part of history, its outcomes seem inevitable. As I note above, the 1975 crisis is, now, primarily understood as the moment that kicked off the austerity, inequality, and low-waged labor that characterize neoliberalism broadly. But there's plenty of room for thinking, too, that crises are moments of potential shift, where other forms of life might have emerged. "The idea of a new life is at once realistic and illusory," writes the geographer Henri Lefebvre, "and hence neither true nor false. . . . The space which contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as prohibits what those preconditions make possible."¹⁹ The forms of life and work that took shape under Fordist capitalism seemed, for a time, inevitable, but as the Marxist historian Moishe Postone has demonstrated, over time these emerged as less an inevitable function of such capitalism, and more an ideological relationship between capital and labor. Waged work might seem to be an "ongoing process with no substantive end," but, at least for Postone, there is nothing inevitable about this state of affairs.²⁰ Thus while Fordism's decline, with its attendant wagelessness, indeed produces widespread precarity, it also presents a moment when the nature of work might be rethought.²¹

This is the utopian possibility at the moment of Fordism's destruction. What ultimately happened is that workers increasingly needed to go it on their own. But workers might have found a world where decreased labor time meant increased time to labor on their own creations: art, craft, the transformation of their living environments—away from what Postone calls "fragmented, empty work." DIY, then, may well be a way to insist, as

Kathi Weeks puts it, “that there are other ways to organize and distribute [productive activity]” and to “remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work.”²² At its best, DIY is a lived form of critique, an insistence that labor be free from the organized structures of capitalism. While some of the culture workers of the Lower East Side ended up being financially successful, by and large, they moved to the neighborhood in order to experiment with ways of life outside of the regular-wage system. The destruction of value in New York cracked open a brick wall and offered a glimpse of a beautiful city behind that wall: the light-filled sky of a Martin Wong painting. This was the unproductive city, where labor time might be decreased and the nature of individual labor transformed. Writ large, the experiments of the Lower East Side were ones of opening up, even as they eventually became ones of shutting down.

Using a term drawn from the writer Ron Kolm, Siegle describes these experiments as a “suburban ambush”: the writers, artists, and activists of the Lower East Side sought a world different from the Fordist world they’d fled, where workers owned their time and their labor.²³ While, by and large, DIY is absorbed into late capitalism itself, we can nevertheless see in DIY a *desire* for ways of living outside of the boundaries of work. “We loved Avenue A because we could be gay there,” reflects the writer Sarah Schulman, “live cheaply, learn from our neighbors, make art—all with some level of freedom.”²⁴ But as Schulman mourns, the suburban ambush could happen in reverse as well: the arc that begins in the 1975 crisis ends in widespread gentrification. Under gentrification, the lived critique of DIY folds into the self-management demanded by neoliberalism.

Books

These writers found literary forms that suited the ethos that Schulman describes—living cheaply, learning from one’s neighbors, making art. Learning from their artist peers, they developed innovative work that appropriated the words of others; found new ways of publishing; incorporated their writing into visual art; and wrote reflexive narratives that reproduced the vibrant exchanges in their neighborhood. Some of what they wrote evolved into polished work published by major houses, but even this work tended toward the fragmentary and biographical. Because of its very informality—demanded by the conditions of its production, outside of the protective and nurturing structures of the creative writing classroom—DIY literature

entails an immediate relationship to the historical circumstances in which it takes shape. As I will argue in the coming chapters, the forms taken up by the writers of my study are often ones of necessity: Wojnarowicz's highly portable sheets of paper, Acker's quickly composed journals, *Between C & D's* publish-it-as-it-came-in ethos of the dot-matrix printer. Other works are slightly more formal and therefore slightly more self-conscious: the nuanced assessments that Lynne Tillman and Gary Indiana make as art critics and writers. These are writers who did not see value in or have the time to create highly polished works of literature: they valued, instead, the immediacy that came from informal modes of production. Their improvisational works mirrored the improvisation happening elsewhere in the neighborhood, especially the interventionist work of PAD/D, Group Material, and tenants' rights organizations.

All of these writers form part of an alternative literary canon from the 1970s and 1980s: a group of writers who achieved notice at the time, but who by and large had receded from public view by the 2000s. This invisibility happens in part because these writers embraced modes of production that were out of step with the dominant mode of the creative writing classroom. For McGurl, the Cold War university generates high-quality fiction in much the same manner as it generates patents in the labs across campus. Drawing on the ideas of Nicholas Luhman, McGurl demonstrates (to the ire of many a creative writer) how the university became a system characterized by many of the same features that Bauman locates with solid modernity.²⁵ But while it's true that writers like Acker and Rose did have some exposure to the writing classroom, they sought out shabby tenement apartments as their preferred scene of writing—though some of the writers I discuss, especially David Wojnarowicz and the Nuyorican poets, often had little choice about their living spaces.²⁶ Nearly all of the writers in my study would describe themselves in the terms Rose and Texier use in the introduction to *Between C & D: New Writing from the Lower East Side Fiction Magazine*: as “voices . . . not being heard in the usual gamut of conventional literary magazines.”²⁷ None of the writers I recover would appear in the fifth volume of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* or the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Being outside the systems of conventional literary recognition meant that they were here for a moment and then disappeared, potentially forever.

The prose writers of my study work, by and large, in a mode of narrative experimentation that parts ways with the more visible, flashier experimentation taking shape under the sign of postmodernism—though at the

time, plenty of these writers were understood, and understood themselves, as postmodernists. Their work is reflexive and self-aware: concerned with how narrative and language create the self. Unlike postmodern writers like Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, they are less likely to see the self as a product of large systems—capitalism, the surveillance state, the consumer economy—than they are to see the self as a product of its immediate environment. That's not to say that writers like Acker and Indiana are unconcerned with capitalism or consumerism, just that these concerns are often secondary to a concern with the immediate. They do not generally abstract away their world, in order to make grand statements about the Kennedy assassination, supermarkets, or even—to invoke their privileged object of rejection—the suburbs. Their unevenness, their refusal of closure, becomes here not a product of postmodernism *per se*, which, in some broad sense, deals with ontological or wide-historical breakdown. Instead, their unevenness results from the specific types of breakdown immanent to austerity, crisis, and the breakdown of waged employment. They are documents of survival and precarity, even as the lives of the writers themselves were not always precisely precarious.

In this sense, *DIY on the Lower East Side* joins a growing body of work on the experimental writing that occurred in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This work has coalesced around the term “New Narrative,” a strain of writing primarily associated with Bay Area writers and characterized by awareness of its narrative frame, and self-conscious understanding of language.²⁸ Keystone articles by Rob Halpern and Kaplan Harris, the 2017 publication of *Writers Who Love Too Much*, a conference on New Narrative at UC Berkeley—have all served to shape New Narrative as an object of study. The frameworks that Halpern and Harris use for New Narrative are useful ones for thinking through the particular contributions of the DIY literature I take up here: reflexive, self-conscious, appropriating, informal. New Narrative dances with postmodern irony, but seeks instead a “textual performance that can recognize itself as a cultural construct.”²⁹ Embracing instability, foregrounding the artifice of narrative, these techniques are well-suited to the post-crisis, DIY moment I describe here.³⁰ It's true that notions of a contingent or unstable self can, particularly in poststructuralist approaches to politics, turn away from questions of political economy. But the openness and self-awareness of the New Narrative mode makes it well-suited to absorbing and relaying the new demands on the individual self that emerged after the crisis.

By and large, these experimental writers have seldom been read as engaging their historical contexts in a mimetic way. This results from a now-fading, but somewhat dominant divide in the way that postwar literature

has been received: properly postmodernist writers on one side, and realist, “identity” writers on the other side. Moreover, a larger divide—dating back to György Lukács—has marked experimental writing as non-mimetic and non-historical. For Lukács, it is realist writers who offer a “dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships.” Experimental writers, on the other hand, tend almost inevitably toward “a loss of perspective and historicity.”³¹ My study understands this divide as having been complicated in two ways. First, recent criticism from critics such as Tyler Bradway, Anthony Reed, and Alex Houen holds that experimental writing engages with its historical context in rich ways.³² Second, the particular forms of experimentation taken up by my writers lends itself to thinking through context. Incorporating, in the spirit of the New York School, the biographical “I,” these writers often see their narrative settings and living circumstances as blurred.

The conditions that made their projects possible are the conditions that make their writing experimental. Just as, for McGurl, the products of the creative writing program reflect the space of the seminar room, the products of the Lower East Side reflect the changing built environment of the Lower East Side. The space produced by the crisis is the setting of these works. The value of these literary texts lies with the way that they always offer *more*: more people, more spaces, more messiness. If the eventual result of bohemian incursion into the Lower East Side is gentrification, these texts, at least, hope that their spaces of creation will remain open with crosscurrents. Searching for settings beyond their apartments, these registered the colliding forces at work in the aftermath of a crisis that shook the city’s fundament.

Buildings

Not only do the writers who lived and worked in the Lower East Side in the wake of the 1975 fiscal crisis offer unique insights into emerging modes of living, working, and writing, they also invite us to continue to develop the methods by which we assess literature’s relationship to built environments. In *The New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (2011), Jini Kim Watson shows how written and built form alike refract systemic changes. Commenting on a selection of realist short stories from 1970s Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, Watson describes these works’ “use of built form to signal and work through a range of historical processes and contradictions. In analyzing and comparing them, we can again conclude that urban transformations are a primary mediator of struggles over moder-

nity, industrialization, and the place of the individual subject.”³³ Although the New Asian cities she studies have different orientations to modernity and industrialization than late-twentieth-century New York, her analytical method, which moves between urban planning, geography, and literature, is one that *DIY on Lower East Side* will similarly take up.³⁴

Watson’s work builds on important earlier work by Carlo Rotella. Rotella’s *October Cities* (1998) describes how literary writers “build textual places shaped by the minds of their readers”; these textual places draw inspiration from earlier literary texts while they also find their sources in “material places assembled from brick and steel and stone, inhabited by people of flesh and blood.”³⁵ Also drawing on Rotella, Thomas Heise’s *Urban Underworlds* (2012) considers how urban space creates collisions between impoverished and middle-class citizens. For Heise, such fiction “[encodes] for readers very abstract processes of capitalist development as dramatic stories of embattled communities that are struggling to redefine themselves.”³⁶ For Watson, Rotella, and Heise, to write literature about the city is to reproduce, on some level, the city’s built environment, to move through streets and into apartments and across parks, all of which are inhabited by a range of people from different social classes and ethnicities.

The texts the writers produced in these sites gave shape to forms of life that often seemed shapeless. Decayed buildings made the invisible problems of the welfare state’s recession, the rising practices of self-management, and the ascendance of private markets sharply visible. This is clear from retrospective analyses like those of Christopher Mele, Kim Moody, and others; it is also clear from the symbolic ways that the Lower East Side sought to imagine itself as a war zone, with two bars named Beirut. In his history of the neighborhood’s immigrant cultures published in 1995, the ethnographer Mario Maffi sets the scene for his book like this:

After the first rather bohemian blocks, a kind of no-man’s land opens up beyond Avenue A: the towering shells of empty tenements that stand as if bombed in some unheard-of war, the layers of debris scattered on the abandoned lots, the discarded furniture and household appliances cluttering the sidewalks, the hydrants turned open, feeding muddy puddles, and everywhere the hieroglyphs of signs, posters, graffiti. On the other hand, the city’s skin seems to change, while a new territory is entered—a land of faces, words and scenarios radically different from the glossy images of so many slick magazines or Hollywood movies.³⁷

Like many others, Maffi finds democratic possibility among the so-called ruins. For artists and writers, the built environment was at once means and theme. It offered a cheap place to work, but also inspired aesthetic imperatives about the nature of the crisis. Artists and writers found a wide range of ways to address this infrastructure, from cutting holes in it, to stenciling on it, to writing plays about it, to using it as setting, to making it into a living and working environment. They fulfilled what the philosopher Michel de Certeau wrote about in his famous chapter “Walking in the City”: “People are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions.”³⁸ Site of danger, site of decay, site of renewal, site of loss: in the Lower East Side, the meanings of abandoned space multiply.

These meanings are part of what Henri Lefebvre calls the production of space. Space, he argues, is neither a projection of the mind, nor dictated by power, nor merely a matter of everyday living. People do not bring themselves fully formed to space. Neither does space simply act on them. Instead, identities are a negotiation between the spaces an individual inhabits, their own ideas, and the ideas dictated by the state and other powers. Lefebvre maintains that “all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify.”³⁹ That is, people build their identities in an everyday life lived in an environment and make choices about their environment based on these identities. Indiana offers a quick example of what Lefebvre has in mind here. Out of a discomfiting environment, Indiana forges both a criticism and also an aesthetics. As I’ll argue in chapter 4, Indiana’s living environments inform both his mid-1980s art criticism for *The Village Voice* and his 1989 novel *Horse Crazy*. Good art, for Indiana, means art that speaks to the difficulty some people have in occupying space, and that reflects the many ways that power—what Lefebvre calls abstract space—seeks to control these people.

Lefebvre would classify Indiana’s project as one instance of the production of space, and he would argue that every society—and, to a degree, every individual—produces its/their own space. Lefebvre’s sense of production is linked to a Marxist sense of production, but it involves extra elements. Lefebvrian production necessarily entails “spatial practice[s]” that occur on the street. Consequently, Lefebvre’s project, as McKenzie Wark has recently noted, celebrates “ebullient” possibilities as “groups acting within everyday life pursue their strategies as far as they will go” and “inventiveness is born from the everyday.”⁴⁰ Therefore, although the phenomena Lefebvre observes

often happen on a grand scale—monasteries, manors, and cathedrals in the case of medieval society, and banks, business centers, and airports for neocapitalism—these phenomena can and must produce space at the level of the local. The people who tried to rebuild the Lower East Side knew that they needed to produce local space in order to be visible on the grand scale. The activists around Charas, for example, seized the opportunities the fiscal crisis created to inscribe the neighborhood's space with their own perspectives and agendas in mind.

I don't think that every project happening in the Lower East Side had some kind of Lefebvrian magic associated with it. At least some of the projects—especially some of the galleries—seem to have acted in bad faith with the neighborhood, using it not as a basis to build a new future but as a way to repeat the successes of SoHo. Likewise, as both Mele and the geographer Neil Smith emphasize, many of the ideas circulating in the Lower East Side turned out to be congruent with the objectives of real estate investors and city planners—representations of space, not represented space. But lots of culture workers sought ways to rework the crumbling buildings of the everyday into inventive formations. Not quite the Paris of the Situationists that Wark lovingly describes, but not wholly unlike it either.

These literary works challenge notions that these buildings were somehow a space apart from the larger nation—a kind of “frontier” that needed resettling if it was to become useful.⁴¹ As I note briefly above, these writers were hardly the only ones interested in the decaying buildings of the inner city. In the 1970s and 1980s, prominent sociological accounts framed the inner city as home to a population that had ostensibly found ways of living outside of waged work—but as welfare recipients and drug dealers. For critics of the welfare state, this was the “underclass,” a group of subjects who, residing in a destroyed inner city, were adopting values that were at odds with those of the mainstream. The underclass narrative coupled the so-called “urban crisis”—characterized by “deep urban racial segregation, concentrated poverty, deindustrialization, physical decay, and near-bankruptcy”—with the ostensibly failed federal policies of urban renewal and the war on poverty.⁴² Such policies came into particular focus around the 1975 crisis. Bankers, policy makers, and politicians pointed to the impoverished as the core problem of the city's overspending. The landscape of neighborhoods like the Lower East Side formed an essential precursor to contemporary conversations about poverty. Among others, Treasury Secretary William Simon's bestselling *A Time for Truth* presented the 1975 fiscal crisis as “America in Microcosm”: evidence of the collapse of the post–New Deal liberal order.

As a sense of crisis began to mount in the 1970s, the underclass became an object of simultaneous fascination and revulsion. In 1977, for example, *Time* magazine ran a lurid cover story on the underclass that blended inner-city residents with their environments, warning that behind the “crumbling walls” of “pock-marked streets, gutted tenements and broken hopes” lived a “large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined.” The underclass formation situated the city as alienated and estranged from the mainstream United States.⁴³ The worst of these accounts subsumed families receiving welfare, homeless alcoholics, street criminals, and the working poor into “one interchangeable unit identified not by income or dependence.”⁴⁴ By situating the impoverished as unproductive and alien, the underclass formulation helped support the benefit-slashing narratives that emerged from the 1975 crisis and continued at a national level in the administration of Ronald Reagan.

And yet, perhaps because the term references class, “underclass” could be reclaimed for more structured analysis of poverty, as does the sociologist William Julius Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Wilson did so in part to challenge the vicious narratives that had accumulated around the term. But he also found the term useful in outlining the shifts in work that had made the inner city a genuinely difficult place to live. For Wilson, the underclass is just that: a class formation that denotes a group left behind by working and middle classes alike. While the underclass narrative could be vicious, it dates from an era when notions of a “war on poverty” had not yet fully faded from the landscape. The inner city remained a problem to be solved, not a thing that could be dismissed fully from the public sphere. Today, when politicians talk about impoverished inner cities at all, they talk about them in terms of welfare that needs further cutting, or government waste, or criminality. The wide gentrification of the past thirty years is seen, from this perspective, as largely a good thing, a process that turns unproductive space into productive space. The debate about these spaces often seems settled; in the 1970s and 1980s, this debate remained lively. The term “underclass,” then, both challenges notions of permanent poverty and reminds us of the ways in which poverty was discussed at the dawn of the current crisis. The underclass was both the beginning of a long discussion of abjection and a hinge term that connotes the structural position of poverty for the cultures I take up here.

I find the term “underclass” productive because of the way it hovers between criminal and impoverished, conveying the tensions of how disadvantaged populations were imagined by outsiders and culture workers alike.

The first part of the word conveys an underworld, a strange, expansive site of pleasures, aberrant behaviors, and fascinations.⁴⁵ This imaginary world circulated through the galleries, journals, and literature of my study, particularly in the way that graffiti was sometimes depicted as a “primitive” expression of impoverished African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. The second part of the word, by invoking class, invites the economic-based analysis that suggests, often at odds with the intentions of those who deploy the term, that poverty is less a problem of will and more a problem of economic structures. Though its architects framed the problem in cultural terms, the 1975 crisis signaled a broad shift in the economy, toward decreased benefits and increased wagelessness. “Underclass” conveys the complex way in which poverty was during the era in my study: a way to simultaneously signal fascination and structural problems.

At times, the writers I study here both telegraphed and benefited from a sense that the Lower East Side was an underworld. The writers who submitted work to *Between C & D* often framed their work in terms of, as one of the key terms listed on the front put it, “danger.” Joel Rose’s *Kill the Poor* can be lurid, as can some of the stories published in *Between C & D*. Just as often, though, these writers challenged this order. I’ll argue in chapter 1, for example, that Wojnarowicz finds native intelligence and adaptiveness in the most down-and-out members of the underclass. Similarly, the Puerto Rican writers I take up in chapter 2 see richly bound networks around them, though networks that are under threat of fraying.

O what a town . . .
 even your drug-invested pocket parks, playgrounds
 where our young bloods
 hang around
 waiting
 hoping that
 one day they too will
 get well and smile again
 Your love is all
 they need to come around
 Loisaida, I love you

wrote the poet Bimbo Rivas in 1974, in the poem that named Loisaida. Some ten years later, the playwright Reinaldo Povod writes a piece about a violent lover’s quarrel that nevertheless reveals the block as a “temple” and

the neighborhood as “SEPARATED into clicks but forming a WHOLE.” These characterizations even carried over into the work of white writers like Catherine Texier. In *Love Me Tender*, Texier situates the Puerto Rican Mario as deeply tied to his community. And in Indiana’s *Horse Crazy*, the unnamed protagonist recognizes that his love interest, Geoffrey, views the Lower East Side as a distasteful means of furthering his art.

Particularly from the present-day standpoint of a world where classes have been increasingly severed from one another, these writers’ works retain something of what Samuel Delany, surveying his experiences in the Times Square of the 1970s and 1980s, praised as socially beneficial cross-class contact.⁴⁶ These writers worked, for a time, within what John Roberts calls art’s “second economy,” whereby the artist’s poverty is not merely a “picturesque fantasy” but “the means out of which the artist produces a transformative or emancipatory relationship with the world” such that “[p]recarity and underemployment become the praxiological and symbolic material of artistic labour and conceptualization itself.”⁴⁷ By the time they end their careers, writers like Indiana, Acker and Wojnarowicz have made it out of the second economy: their written works are published or their paintings hang in galleries. But in the beginning of their careers, which coincided with the 1975 crisis, they were alive to the precarity around them, in part because they lived such precarity. The relationship between these culture workers and the impoverished was characterized by lurid fascination and genuine sympathy, primitivism and nuanced analysis, opportunism and activism.

Art

In scrutinizing the transition from the 1975 crisis to post-Fordism, my study figures a changing art market as central to the formation of what would come to be called the “creative economy.” If the decay and rubble were the most visible aspect of the post-1975 Lower East Side, the rapid influx of galleries into the neighborhood was the second most visible. In the 1980s, at a regional, national, and global level, the Lower East Side was known for the bright-burning, but temporary rise of a visual art scene, a scene whose best-known names—Jeff Koons, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat—conjure a high-flying world of nightclubs, cocaine, and a booming art market.⁴⁸ But as commentators like Rosalind Deutsche note, this movement largely—though not wholly—swept in and out of the neighborhood without either changing it for the better or interacting with it.⁴⁹ Some one

hundred galleries opened in the neighborhood between the late 1970s and 1985, when the movement more or less peaked.

Intertwined with the art scene in significant ways, the writers of my study scrutinized the new networks that these galleries enabled. While “creative economy” refers to a cluster of wide concerns, here I will take it to mean two related ideas: first, the ostensive autonomy of post-Fordist workers who take artists as models; second, in terms of redevelopment, the template these artists and gallery owners were in effect setting for what Florida and others would later encourage cities to plan. While there were tentative efforts to deploy art on the part of development—in chapter 4, I’ll discuss the Edward Koch administration’s proposed Artists’ Homeownership Plan—these did not become full-fledged strategies for city planners until the 1990s. In tracing the ascendance of the creative economy, I extend conversations begun by Sarah Brouillette and Jasper Bernes. With different valences, both contend that literature and art entwine significantly with the forms of work that arose with Fordism’s decline.⁵⁰ But while for Brouillette and Bernes, literature often fills a negative function, soothing the post-Fordist worker into thinking her work is meaningful, I’ll sometimes depart from their conclusions in suggesting that literature can, at its best, also record the possibility for living and creating outside of the self-management demanded by post-Fordist work.

Writers, artists, and art critics worked closely together in post-crisis New York City. While its stories often castigated artists as superficial figures seeking cheap thrills, *Between C & D* included artwork from such artists in every issue. Wojnarowicz’s monologues evidence tender sympathy for figures marginalized by poverty, but his visual work made him a central figure in the gallery scene, such that Mele uses Wojnarowicz as an emblem of the artists’ misreading of their environment.⁵¹ While Indiana used his *Village Voice* column to lambaste an art world in which “the most celebrated art is that which better fulfills the condition of the commodity fetish,” his novel *Horse Crazy* depicts the strong appeal a young artist has for the Indiana-like narrator.⁵² Tillman was a close friend of Craig Owens, the author of one of the most scathing critiques of the gallery scene, but as I note above, it would take her until 1998 to include a sustained account of gentrification in her fiction. And although Sylvère Lotringer’s *Semiotext(e)* took up the powerful political projects of French Nietzscheans like Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, such projects competed with a sometimes uncritical embrace of downtown art. Lotringer would later struggle with his role in promoting the gallery scene, mostly as vectored through the legacy of Jean Baudrillard, a

figure embraced by artists. Given a front-row view of the creative economy's emergence, the literary productions of the Lower East Side document the problems and possibilities of art's increasingly central role in post-Fordist economies.

The Lower East Side's writers considered the figures enabled by new art networks, like the risk-courting bohemian artist, as well as the figures such networks excluded, including working-class Puerto Ricans and the homeless. If the neighborhoods' art networks sometimes seemed stable, the writers recognized that they were repeatedly disrupted by everything from queer encounters between bohemians and the impoverished, to the plague of AIDS, to the tentative, but genuine efforts on behalf of writers and artists to call attention to conditions in the Lower East Side. Wojnarowicz's monologues make queer encounters especially visible; Indiana's work frequently conflated AIDS and gentrification as twin plagues; the community workshop Charas was at once a source of advocacy for the impoverished and a workspace for artists.

My study, therefore, covers a historical moment when the certainties of the creative economy were far from solidified. The texts I examine are filled with chance encounters, failed recognitions, and missed connections. Although they frequently depict gentrification as a steady force, they just as frequently imagine moments of community that posit alternate futures. This is most true of the Puerto Rican writers I discuss in chapter 2, who often conceived of their literary projects as explicit rejoinders to gentrification. It is also true, however, of writers like Indiana and Tillman, both of whom figure gentrification as a crisis for their fictional characters. Acker's work, too, looks different when viewed in this light; as I'll suggest in chapter 3, her narratives' celebrated contradictions reflect a world where she could be mistaken for a prostitute and where Fun Gallery could welcome celebrities a few blocks away from open-air drug markets. Such contradictions resulted from the proximity these writers had with their artist peers, a proximity that became more uncomfortable as the gallery scene came under more critique.

Ways of Reading the Lower East Side

As is hopefully clear by now, I see the 1975 crisis as both a moment of possibility for new forms of life and a moment when the neoliberal policies of the past forty years first took shape. My account of this tension has been shaped by recent debates in literary studies about literature's relationship