

Arlene Dávila (2012)

**Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility Across the Neoliberal Americas**

New York: NYU Press, 231 p.

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“Neoliberal Americas” as a term is a tempting target for scrutiny. The Americas, in this case both North and South but also the Caribbean, hardly present a coherent analytic unit. And neoliberalism itself has become the subject of intense academic criticism, rejected as a type of aphorism lacking specificity, verging on meaninglessness, and applied to numerous capitalist logics and political-economic constellations. Yet broad structural change is invariably mediated by the messy realities of local context. It is reshaped by the relative strength of social movements, local nationalisms, and contentious politics. Neoliberalism may indeed be an analytic essentialism, but Dávila seems to suggest that it is a strategic essentialism worth keeping around. And despite divergent contexts – New York City, Buenos Aires, and Puerto Rico – the book holds together as a demonstration of the way in which neoliberalism – as a set of economic logics and a form of governmentality – structures space and social life in profoundly uneven ways.

*Culture Works* deals with the way in which value, space and mobility have become

circumscribed in the context of urban processes that legitimate certain kinds of bodies in particular places. In general, this access is structured by appeals to forms of culture. Economic sociologists have long studied the social nature of markets and the institutional organization of the art world. Dávila’s analysis recognizes that exchange values rely upon interpersonal, relational processes, yet she moves beyond this approach by turning a critical lens to the nature of value itself. Powerful actors manipulate the process of value production to serve their own symbolic and material needs, such that “culture is often celebrated because it is seen as an antidote to economic imperatives, rather than understood as a central component for neoliberalism’s work” (5).

*Culture Works* is divided into seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 examine consumption in shopping malls in Puerto Rico, followed by a discussion of authenticity claims in the context of artisanal markets, often housed within mall complexes on the island. The local economy is at once lauded by shopping mall developers as a bastion of hyper-

consumption, while at the same time chided for the indebtedness of its population and the wastefulness of consumption habits. Drawing upon interviews, Dávila unravels this contradiction, interrogating the way in which moralities of shopping operate in a context framed by the needs of investors on the one hand, and the ideologies of self-reliance and austerity on the other. In the same vein, chapter 2 examines the way in which artisan markets trade on the currency of authenticity, while excluding the very artisans that do not fit pre-established categories of state-sanctioned representation – categories that require artists to develop “Puerto Rican themes [...] such as its history, its fauna, flora, and the symbols of the traditional life of our people” (56).

Chapters 3-5 discuss identity politics in the context of Latinos in the United States. Dávila scrutinizes cultural policies and arts funding in New York City, the somewhat peculiar identity politics involved in the potential building of a national museum of the American Latino, and the artistic interventions of New York-based Puerto Rican artist Miguel Luciano, whose work identifies and challenges the cultural order of the city’s art market. It is remarkable how creative city policies are accompanied by a focus on marketing the identities of minorities, insisting upon a form of commodification that negates the political aspects of these groups’ interventions.

This insidious form of stratification is generated by the very nature of the contemporary art market. Dávila argues that only those who can appeal to notions

of “art for art’s sake” are acknowledged as artists. This conception has intrinsically classed meanings. Funding structures and elite institutions marginalize neighborhood organizations whose creative activities are part of broader political and social projects. Those who can make claims to represent “art for art’s sake” take the lion’s share of state financing. Thus, the chapter on Miguel Luciano emerges as a case study of the work being asked of “ethnic art” within the broader context of neoliberal institutional forms and funding structures. Luciano’s work is both critical of, yet in part emboldened by, the commodification of ethnic identity. Critics praise his work for its political-ethnic context, yet criticize it for being “identity trapped”.

Dávila skillfully perceives the systems of representation that structure access to space and value in New York and Puerto Rico. And it is this precision that is somewhat weaker in the chapters on Buenos Aires. These two chapters examine tango tourism and Western expat communities in the context of broader dynamics of local exclusion, such as those produced by migration to Argentina from comparatively less privileged countries. Dávila argues that tango’s international success meant that its popularity became “a medium for Argentines to belong to the ‘first world’ while still being recognized as Argentinian” (141). In analyzing the tourist economy and its effect on urban spatial politics, Dávila notes how visitors have contributed to an increase in gentrification, evictions, and policing of the poor. The economic uncertainty in the aftermath of

Argentina's financial meltdown of 2001-2002 meant that real estate became an attractive investment for a local middle-class skeptical of banks. In search of jobs and foreign exchange, the local and national states have accompanied this process of revalorization by upgrading the city center for touristic production. In fact, land prices have more than tripled in some areas of the historic center since 2001. Dávila explores how marginal groups have experienced these changes, noting that the tourist economy benefits relatively privileged sectors of the city, while causing displacement among others.

Yet these chapters might have benefited from complicating the antinomies that have long fascinated scholars of Argentina: the trope of a "European" city finding its Latin American destiny. As a number of local scholars have suggested, most notably urban historian Adrián Gorelik, these imaginaries are hardly so clear-cut. They are inflected with various modernity projects that in different periods have situated "Latin-Americanness" as a modernizing force, a fearful fate, or a return to some essential "Argentineness". While Dávila criticizes the romanticized notion that foreign tourists may be accepted locally for their love of tango, she fails to adequately elaborate upon the structure of feelings that characterize the micro-environment of tango halls. To this reader, it appears plausible that social distance is bridged through knowledge of particular forms of cultural production, bringing dancers together in ways that transcend nation and class for particular, if

limited, periods of time. Yet Dávila does not elaborate upon the sensorial or affective aspects of tango parlors, a gap that might have made her argument more incisive.

Despite these issues, *Culture Works* successfully develops themes that increasingly must be studied together. Culture, value, and spatial access produce new urban politics in multiple, but related ways. What connects these politics is the manner in which "creative cities" structure forms of stratification in ways that make them common to a quite diverse set of spaces. In this sense, Dávila's approach to studying the "neoliberal Americas" represents a bold effort that urbanists in other contexts should replicate. The text will be of use to a range of audiences, most notably urban scholars, but also those interested in critical cultural studies and anthropological approaches to the economy.