The final pages of *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) finds Zora Neale Hurston engaging in an imaginary exchange with a slave owner’s grandson. The passage is a powerful rejoinder to slavery’s supposed historical end. “Do you not realize,” asks her fictional other, “that the power, prestige and prosperity of the greatest nations on earth rest on colonies and sources of raw material?”[1] In *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility Across the Neoliberal Americas*, Arlene Dávila, like Hurston before her, takes readers away from ready assumptions about the power of structure, both locally and globally. Using ethnographic methods to explore the connections between the lives of working people and the cultural, economic, and historical realities they illuminate, both women use other places to confront their own well-known haunts. Seventy years after Hurston, Dávila brings a powerful voice to bear on people’s lives and work with both force and grace.

Dávila claims her primary goals in writing are to both explore the work of culture in neoliberalism with a critical eye and to challenge the belief that culture work as a strategy serves as an equalizing force. Drawing from fieldwork in San Juan, Buenos Aires, and New York, Dávila applies a materialist lens to the raw material of culture. Through a series of seven comparative ethnographic case studies, she explores questions of space, value, and mobility that are foundational to neoliberal conventions that surround ideals of culture. She traverses shopping malls in Puerto Rico, tango-inspired tourism in Buenos Aries, art galleries in New York, museum bills in Washington, and informal economies and art to realize this aims. These studies illuminate the many ways in which “it is becoming increasingly impossible to consider the cultural and economic realms in direct opposition to or irreconcilable with each other” (p. 193). Neoliberal policies enact culture as an economic resource, easily embraced and celebrated. The specificity of place and global scope of Dávila’s research into the contradictions that adhere in cultural contestations allow the “work” of culture, from economic revitalization to tourism as well as boosterism, to claims of authentic representation of historical identity formations, to illuminate the dynamics of space, value, and mobility.

Dávila begins by introducing Arjun Appadurai’s “tournament of value,” which seeks to apply material analysis to cultural economic exchange. This framework allows the author to explore the ways in which artists, cultural advocates, and activists are framed as both outside of and central to public and private economic strategies. Chapter 1 explores the politics of consumption, economic distress, and perception in Puerto Rico, centering on the ways in which citizens use the Plaza Las Americas, one of the largest malls in the hemisphere, as a site for public activism. Chapter 2 explores the rise of the informal economy in Puerto Rico, where economic opportunities at the edges of the formal economy provide refuge, but often at great peril. In a country that claims to celebrate entrepreneurship, the increasing push to shut down this economy as outside of the properly sanctioned economic order within the neoliberal framework of colonial bureaucracy creates a dangerous tension. Chapters 3 looks to the politics of value in the New York art world, where representations of vibrant diversity veil hierarchies of power, disenfranchisement, and exploitation. Chapter 4 explores the paradoxes of identity politics in early efforts to create a National Museum...
of the American Latino in the Washington Mall. Chapter 5 delves into the art of Miguel Luciano (b. 1972), whose work and trajectory, argues Dávila, speak to the larger issues of the commodification, politics of space, and the neoliberal logic of markets and values that are central to her own scholarship. Chapter 6 takes the reader to Buenos Aires and the largely celebrated rise of tango tourism as a marker of Argentina’s national financial success and worldly sophistication, a narrative that obscures economic complexity and uncertainty as well as the dynamic and uneven economic relationships at the global level.

The global landscapes shaped by neoliberalism are increasingly fluid and complex, and the strength of Dávila’s scholarship rests on her capacity to illuminate the complexity of these relationships in ways that encourage anyone from the casual reader to theory-immersed graduate students to rethink the work of culture and the cultural politics of neoliberalism. The ways that culture becomes a commodity marker of identity and exchange is a rich site for continued critical exploration. An elegant and compelling writer, Dávila leaves readers of the entire text wishing for stronger comparative assessments in a much too short conclusion after compelling stand-alone chapters. Dávila rejoins the idea that “creative economies are increasingly linked to wider structures of power,” with a brief plea to prioritize the needs of local producers of culture and sustain a “critical consciousness” (p. 199). This is a tough issue for members of the creative economy and cultural producers who, like Dávila, are not quite so vulnerable to the inequality engendered by culture work. Dávila very briefly explores these issues in the final pages of the text as she concludes her deft movements through landscapes ranging from the personal to the global in her exploration of the systems, structures, and processes that shape culture works. These contradictions mark the text, quite openly, and are among the many reasons it is an enjoyable and lively read. They are well-placed musings, leaving open the tricky question of the navigation between celebration and contestation in local and global cultural production.

Note


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