Introduction

Culture is on the rise. In most contemporary cities, there is not a project or policy without a “cultural” component, as discussion intensifies over the role culture plays in urban development projects. Tourism and shopping and entertainment-based developments are growing, while cultural workers and “creative classes,” including architects, entertainers, artists, and opinion makers, are increasingly recognized to be central to the economic vitality of modern cities. In this context, cultural initiatives take center stage, though not all manifestations of culture and creative workers benefit equally from this cultural turn. It is the work that culture is increasingly asked to do in neoliberalism, and the debates that ensue from the reduction and instrumentalization of culture into economic policies, projects, and frameworks, with which this book is concerned.

Specifically, the rise of neoliberal and privatizing governmental reforms are well known to have fueled disparities and struggles over cultural equity, representation, and citizenship throughout U.S. and Latin American cities. Skewed to middle-class and upwardly mobile sectors, representations of “culture” favored in urban investment projects exclude many cultural workers from access to economic investment while altogether bypassing many urban residents as consumers and beneficiaries of these initiatives. At stake are issues of space, in regard to who and what should be at the center or at the margin of cultural initiatives, and questions of value around what representations are considered more or less valuable or worthy of promotion—all of which reverberate on people’s social and physical mobility.

In this book, I aim to expose and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions around questions of space, value, and mobility that are sustained by neoliberal treatments of culture, by exploring some of the hierarchies of cultural work and workers that these treatments engender. I draw from ethnographic research, carried out in Puerto Rico,
Latino/a New York, and Buenos Aires to highlight dynamics that underlie different instances when culture is put to work, whether as anchor of urban development, tourism, or other creative economies that sustain neoliberal reforms throughout many cities across the Americas. The case studies place different emphasis on issues of space, questions of value, and the mobility of peoples because these elements are more salient in the cases chosen for this study, not because they are mutually exclusive to these locations. My goal is that readers will appreciate how similar dynamics of space, value, and mobility are brought to bear in each location, inspiring particular cultural politics with repercussions that are both geographically and historically specific but that are ultimately global in scope.

I argue that the contradictions that come about in representations and definitions of culture cannot be understood unless we take account of the different kinds of work that culture is increasingly asked to do, as well as of the constraints faced by those who seek livelihoods in the realm of cultural production. The work that culture is asked to do in neoliberal contexts ranges from producing “added value” to shopping malls to representing “authentic” views of national identity, to promoting tourism, to even becoming a decoy solution to massive unemployment. These uses point to the growing “expediency” of culture and its use as resource for local, national, and global projects, while demanding more careful ethnographic examinations of culture-based developments, of the dynamics that accompany culture’s instrumentalization, and of the cultural policies that are launched therein (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Carman 2006; Yúdice 2003). I further argue that the work of culture cannot be fully ascertained without foregrounding larger dynamics of political economy and how they may be affecting creative workers and industries within particular locations, or without accounting for the hierarchies of evaluation that invariably pervade most institutionalized cultural endeavors.

The book’s title reflects on some of the different work that culture does and is additionally inspired by a critical view of the new guiding principle of the National Endowment for the Arts: “Art Works,” a declarative statement of the more expansive meanings that “work” takes whenever art, and for our purposes culture, is involved. In this motto, “work” designates the products created by cultural creatives, the actions that are brought about through arts and culture, whether it is to inspire, to represent, to brand, or to instill change; and it points to the fact that arts and culture
jobs represent real jobs that contribute to the transformation of the U.S. economy. Certainly the linkage of work and culture predates these buoyant declarations. In particular, scholars of cultural policy have long linked the aesthetics of culture with the economic dimensions of work through analyses of the political economy at play in culture industries, especially in the fields of media and communication (Maxwell 2001; Lewis and Miller 2002). What is novel is the cheerful and widespread adoption of culture as an economic strategy freed from any critical caveat and its use as an anchor across a variety of culture industries. This context demands attention to the unique formulations of culture that are generated in different places, particularly to how dominant determinations of what is regarded as “most cultural” may affect how culture is deployed, and how cultural workers may position themselves and their work as they seek participation in diverse creative industries.

In particular, my analysis exposes the hierarchies that are created from the incorporation of culture into neoliberal developments in ways that push us to think through the very category of culture and the imperial legacies in which it is vested, and how these hierarchies may play out in contexts where culture is put to work. For one, trapped around notions of either heritage or particularities of space, location, and identity, on the one hand, and around universal notions of progress and civilization, on the other, the process of commercialization and commodification of culture into creative products and industries has never been free of contestation. While discussions of creative and symbolic economies have tended to mix shopping malls, advertising, art, heritage tourism, museums, and performance spaces without distinguishing the different institutional structures and knowledge regimes in which culture is differentially instrumentalized in these spaces, it is highly misguided to lose sight of the differences. In part, the tendency to conglomerate different realms of cultural production into generalized analyses corresponds to the complex nature of cultural industries, where genres as varied as art, music, and fashion—be they popular, commercial, or avant-garde—can work in close interdependency with one another (Currid 2007). This approach also stems from the dominance of macro geographical analyses within studies of creative economies and their tendency to prioritize urban-planning recommendations and the fostering of clusters of creativity within particular locations (Florida 2002; Currid 2007).

Yet distinctions among different types of culture and creative economies are hugely significant when determinations of value in neoliberal
Introduction
economies are concerned. When instrumentalized into a given festival, tourist initiative, museum, or any other creative industry, “culture” is objectified and almost always hierarchically ordered. The end product can be recognized to be in closer proximity to sanctioned Western-based forms of high art or music or else more or less inflected by mass media and commerce; it may be considered as more or less traditional or aligned to more elitist corporate visions or even sanctioned by any attendant nationalist ideology in place or else subjugated as the product of minorities. These differences are also hugely significant when assessing how neoliberalism impacts cultural production, given its proclivities for more mainstreamed definitions of culture that resemble high-art versions of Western-based culture or else for highly commercialized endeavors that are wrapped in culture only for the appearance of “distinctiveness.”

Moreover, neoliberal economic logics often demand the transformation and proper repackaging of culture for public consumption, and a distancing from popular classes and histories through processes of appropriation, transformation, and mainstreaming. The result is racial and class-based hierarchies that are not only marked by the politics of representation, in terms of the cultural content alluded to or appealed to by different cultural industries, but also by the exclusion of racialized others from the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products. These issues have long concerned Latin American scholars sensitized to how people’s culture and traditions have been linked to a variety of development projects and are summarized in the title of one of Nestor Garcia Canclini’s presentations on the topic: “Everyone Has Culture: Who Can Develop It?” which lays bare the gaps between the many bearers of culture and the increasingly selected few who can develop and profit from it (Garcia Canclini 2005, quoted in Lacarrieu 2008).

The blurriness that plagues many discussions of creative economies has also adversely affected the appreciation and analysis of some of the growing hierarchies at play among creative work and workers (McGuigan 2010). In the past decades, creative work, once regarded as the most protected and indispensable sector of the global economy, has become one of the most contingent and expendable types of work, especially in the most “developed” economies. Succumbing to privatization, flexibilization, and neoliberal restructuring, creative work has surfaced, in Andrew Ross’s words, as “nice work if you can get it,” in that it is highly regarded, creative, and sometimes highly remunerated but highly exclusive and selec-
tive, fleeting and volatile, and no more secure than work in low-wage service sectors (Ross 2009). Yet owing to the dominance of Richard Florida’s work on creative classes, analyses have concentrated on the fate of highly educated and skilled (white) workers who are located in the upscale sectors of advertising and entertainment or in the academy, rather than on the plight of the many grassroots “barrio creatives” I encountered in New York City, Puerto Rico, and Buenos Aires. These creatives are just as important to the health of global creative cities but are regularly discounted and bypassed from most national and global considerations of urban cultural policies, while they remain the most precariously affected by neoliberalizing reforms.

My analysis foregrounds these types of differences in creative work and economies through ethnographic explorations intended to purposefully expose and challenge the dominant view of many discussions of culture in neoliberalizing contexts, where 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. This approach also guides my attention to the plight of local cultural workers and their inclusion or lack thereof as both producers and consumers of these initiatives. Foremost, my goal is to explore the particularities of culture-based developments and how they intersect with politics around space, value, and mobility whenever culture becomes the anchor of urban development, tourist initiatives, and other creative economies as they play out in three neoliberalizing contexts that are very different yet also similar in distinctive ways.

There has been much discussion about what neoliberalism is, how it functions, and whether this is a helpful category or instead reifies what it describes as a static state, rather than as a process, or even if we may have moved past its dominance to a post-neoliberal era and to newer economic models (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2010). What remains undisputed is that neoliberalism is characterized by a range of policies and a worldview that promotes state deregulation and the privatization of services while fostering individualism, entrepreneurship, market logics, and free-market approaches in the guise of better and more efficient government. These strategies of market-driven reorganization of the economy to promote privatization have opened up fields for capital accumulation that different states would have once considered off-limits, such as health, education, cultural identities, sexuality, and natural resources, leading to social tensions and inequalities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Duggan 2004;
Harvey 2007). Neoliberalizing processes are also not arbitrary ones; they always involve particular states, as well as local, state, and global agents, policies, and institutions that can be ethnographically probed and examined. Moreover, research has shown neoliberalism to be a highly uneven and hybrid process—in a given society, some sectors may be undergoing neoliberalization, while others may not. In New York City, the privatization of government has coincided with the protection of taxes for government services, but mainly those services that assure the city’s “security” and readiness for business (Brash 2010). Neoliberalism can also coincide with a rise of social democratic discourses. The rise of neoliberal multiculturalism throughout Latin America provides a good example, given that neoliberal economic reforms have paradoxically been accompanied by a rise in new ethnic politics and by the introduction to public and political life of formerly marginalized political actors, such as indigenous communities, often facilitated by the work of nongovernmental organizations and investments from private entities (DeHart 2010; Hale 2006; Yúdice 2003).

Neoliberalizing processes can also thrive in contexts where neoliberalism is no longer the dominant discursive political strategy and in countries that have adopted a more socialist and emphatically anti-neoliberal agenda, or as “exceptions” to regimes for which neoliberalism is not itself the dominant formation for governing populations (Ong 2006). Venezuela’s hybrid “post-neoliberal order” is relevant here (Fernandes 2010). Despite Hugo Chávez’s emphatic anti-neoliberal positions, his socialist redistributive reforms are nevertheless subject to the external constraints of global capitalism, to which Venezuela needs to adjust to remain competitive in the global oil market, while neoliberal market rationalities often pervade the administration and the politics of redistribution (ibid.). Similar dynamics are evident in Buenos Aires’s economic restructuring. This understanding of neoliberalism as a global logic that can limit a state’s anti-neoliberal strategies brings up questions about whether it is possible to think of post-neoliberal solutions and alternatives just yet. What it surely does is lead us to probe more critically into how neoliberalizing processes work, without discounting the politics that are always triggered. Foremost, understanding the scope of neoliberalizing processes becomes vital for assessing some of the political claims that they help to obscure and delegitimize at the everyday level. In this regard, my concern is with the cultural politics around the management and representation of culture that are promoted and sustained in neoliberalizing contexts, to
expose how the spread of similar market logics and discourse of efficacy and profit may be affecting the fate and politics of cultural workers.

This stance informs my discussion of culture and neoliberalism in three very different regional spaces across the Americas, notwithstanding their unique political and economic conditions. First is Puerto Rico, the neoliberal island colony whose dependency on the U.S. economy has rendered it even more vulnerable to the transformative policies of its Republican pro-statehood governor, Luis Fortuño, who took office in 2009. Fortuño has become a favorite of North American Republican leaders for his vehement support of neoliberal fiscal reforms and for his aggressive penchant for privatization. His policies have led to a dramatic shrinkage of the public sector and to attacks on important civil-sector institutions such as the University of Puerto Rico. They have also expedited the privatization of space through shopping mall construction and led to the growth of the island's culture-based informal sector as a refuge for the unemployed and underemployed; both of these phenomena are examined in this book.

Second, I focus on U.S. Latino/a politics around the financing for arts and culture as they play out in New York City, the “global capital” of arts and culture where culture’s economic impact has long been recognized and where symbolic strategies of branding and marketing have been dominant for decades (Greenberg 2008; Brash 2010). Under the neoliberal administration of the billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the city has undergone rapid reforms to its arts/culture financing policy, embodying neoliberal principles that expose and exacerbate existing race and culture hierarchies among the diverse demographics that make up the city’s cultural workers. These policies have launched debates around the evaluation of Latino/a art among community cultural groups in the city, debates that also reverberate in national discussions around the feasibility of constructing a National Museum of the American Latino and in the evaluation of Latino art and artists, as can be seen in my discussion of the work of New York–based Puerto Rican artist Miguel Luciano.

Lastly, I consider the case of Argentina under the anti-neoliberal administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who is intent on reversing the ills caused by previous neoliberal reforms that led to the collapse of the country’s economy. Yet Kirchner’s policies have also been accompanied by a rise in entrepreneurial and consumption-based developments and by the continued privatization of natural resources, which have consolidated neoliberal class inequalities of the past. Most specifi-
cally, under the leadership of businessman-mayor Mauricio Macri, Buenos Aires has been consolidated as a city that is partial to first-class visitors and tourists, such as the many tango tourists and creative expats who are moving there on a more permanent basis, while it has become less accessible to local residents.

The similarities I found by looking comparatively at how the politics of culture play out in these three different spaces were uncanny and were revealing of some of the similar inequalities that follow the work of culture in neoliberalism, in regard to the politics of space, evaluation, and mobility. In all three cases, we see how the upscaling of culture is accompanied by salient racial hierarchies and social disparities, limiting which cultural workers and everyday people can access these spaces, while ranking their relative value vis-à-vis others and affecting their social and physical mobility.

Additionally, the three cases help to illuminate some of the racial, national, and colonial imperatives at play in neoliberalizing contexts, and how they help to inflect and politicize specific ethnic and national identifications across Latino/Latin America. The politics of ethnicity and race are most evident in the case of Latino/as, a racial minority within a nation-state, while the cases of Puerto Rico and Buenos Aires provide contrasting views of the politics of nationalism and of the colonial and imperial politics wrought by neoliberalizing processes. Cultural nationalism has historically provided Puerto Rico, as a colony of the United States, a central domain of local sovereignty, a space in which to counter its continued political and economic dependency on the United States. In this context, assertions of Puerto Ricanness have long been part of a common and contested political repertoire, as much for locals as for any major corporation seeking a stake on the island. In contrast, in Argentina—a country rich in resources that in 2010 celebrated its bicentennial as an independent nation-state—nationalism has been more subdued but not less present. It is especially expressed through the negation of Argentina's own political and economic marginality and by the affirmation of its racial and cultural synergy with dominant Western powers, a linkage that is affirmed through both tango and the immigration of international tourists. What I offer, then, is not a comparison in any conventional sense but, rather, three distinct cases that materialize some of the ethnic and national politics that accompany neoliberalizing processes across the Americas and a discussion of how these politics, in turn, intersect with particular politics of space, value, and mobility.
Finally, while my emphasis lies primarily on the work of culture as it plays out through particular creative industries and projects, this book is also about the challenges that culture poses to policies and frameworks that seek to reduce culture to economic logics. Here, it is imperative to remember that the objectification, commodification, and branding of culture that is becoming so essential to contemporary economies represents only one treatment of culture, not the whole of its meaning and what it can represent to people across the globe. Culture as industry is but a reductive treatment that cannot fully contain the variety of living and politicized manifestations and treatments of culture that are also on the rise and are mobilized as a challenge to its reduction on the basis of simple economic imperatives. These include cultural interventions such as the resignification of shopping malls as spaces for political protest; the many responses produced in the realm of expressive culture, ranging from the community-integrative work of Miguel Luciano to the alternative tango-dancing venues that thrive beyond Buenos Aires’s tourist circuit; and the popular demands about what should make a more representative Latino/a museum or cultural institution. These and other responses generate alternative and wider definitions of value in cultural production, while affirming culture’s capacity for inspiration and change.

**Connecting the Politics of Space, Value, and Mobility**

In regard to issues of space, geographers and urban scholars have long pointed to the central role that culture plays in the gentrification and transformation of urban landscapes. My own previous work on the gentrification of New York City’s East Harlem, or “El Barrio,” highlighted the role that consumption-based developments played in feeding residents’ dreams and aspirations for their future and in expediting the neighborhood’s gentrification. Projects were sold through culture (through appeals to Puerto Rican and Latino pride) in order to seek people’s acquiescence to projects that did not actually include them, conveying a sense of inclusion that was largely illusory but very effective in bringing about change (Dávila 2004). Culture’s capacity for illusion and for symbolically remaking spaces and institutions and products explains its predominance in neoliberal urban developments, reliant as they are on symbolic economies of spectacle, advertising, consumerism, architecture, heritage, and branding and on other placed-based, image-centered industries such
as tourism and real estate (Cronin and Hetherington 2008; Greenberg 2008). These symbolic industries and strategies have been shown to be highly effective, not only in culturally remaking spaces but also in symbolically “softening” the aggression of displacement and gentrification through developments wrapped in cultural offerings and choices that seem edgy, democratic, alternative, and even “authentic.”

This is one of the reasons why Sharon Zukin is so adamant in trying to rescue authenticity from its current relegation to a “style” or a marketing ploy for creating the experience of origin and uniqueness against the standardization of urban places that results from gentrification (Zukin 2010). As she notes, whether it is by branding a neighborhood or through the creation of heritage projects or commercial endeavors—for instance, a specialized gourmet shop or a coffee house—most current developments appeal to authenticity to appear to provide alternatives for consumption and leisure that are distinct from standardized experiences, at the same time that the possibilities for authentic urban places are eroded for most working-class residents. The re-creation of Old San Juan architectural landscapes inside Puerto Rico’s largest shopping mall, discussed in chapter 1, comes to mind here, especially when we consider the growing restriction and regulation of Old San Juan as a space of leisure and entertainment for popular classes. This involves restrictions on local establishments’ hours of operations and on popular congregations after “closing hours,” the closing off of streets to cars and pedestrians, and the greater policing and use of surveillance technology, which increasingly cloud most popular events. But it also involves higher prices at restaurants and parking lots that assuredly deter families and large groups from visiting Old San Juan as a leisure destination. Hence, as Zukin notes, “to speak of authenticity means that we are aware of a changing technology of power that erodes one landscape of meaning and feeling and replaces it with another” (2010, 220); it is to erode the illusion that neoliberal planning is fostering democratic spaces, when it is whitewashed, upscale, and segregated developments that are being built and promoted.

Throughout U.S. cities, however, the continued relegation of space as it is lived and experienced by living communities feeds the ongoing tension between “communities” and “capital,” well documented by scholars of gentrification. Zukin’s distinction between vernacular and landscape spaces, or spaces of everyday life and alternatively of capital and power, and Raúl Homero Villa’s discussion of the processes of barrioization and barriology are some important articulations of this tension, which at the
core is predicated on the also well-known tension between the exchange value and the use value of place (Zukin 1993; Homero Villa 2000). Accordingly, it is the exchange value of particular places for wresting rent and capital and for attracting the “right” cultural workers through the right cultural investments that is prioritized rather than the value that communities may vest in these spaces, especially in regard to a space’s memories, its history, and how it enables social reproduction. In sum, we value speculation; space becomes valuable for the capital that it may attract, never for the value it already represents to residents because of the histories, meanings, and value that it may sustain or help reproduce.

But what if we were to consider the exchange value that is always generated from the use value of a particular community, and the way it benefits local residents, but also how it contributes to the economic well-being of the city at large? In other words, what if we stopped defeatingly pitting “communities” and their cultural agents and products against the so-called more efficient, institutionalized offerings of “real” culture industries, and instead reevaluated the profits and value generated by communities, as I try to do in chapter 3? Is it possible for a bomba y plena outlet not to be at odds with the coming of a cineplex? Politicians and urban planners tell us that the cineplex will assuredly bring money; the bomba y plena music space, not so much. Yet does the bomba y plena space not also produce value, of both the economic and the social type, when it provides after-school programs to children, the same services that have been cut off by neoliberal policies? In fact, should we not consider it valuable simply on the grounds that it provides alternatives for leisure, congregation, and enjoyment?

Determinations of what uses of space should be favored and what constitutes “eyesores” transcend debates over the allocation of space; they also affect the type of cultural entrepreneurial activities that may be allowable or banned from refurbished spaces, as with the Puerto Rican artisans who are increasingly policed and banned from accessing festivals, a subject discussed in chapter 2. Shrinkage of public space for debate and social gathering is a well-known outcome of the privatization of space, but so is a decline of opportunities for where alternative economic activities can take place. The sanitization of space is often accompanied by the extension of neoliberal privatization logics that demand culture to be ordered and orderly, as in commercially packaged or aesthetically pleasing to audiences, who are increasingly narrowly conceived only as consumers. In particular, the privatization of space is predicated on ideologies of con-
introduction that are used to sustain neoliberal uses of space, as in the view that what people/citizens are most valuable for is their consumer power and that the needs of global modern residents are best met through more shopping and consumer-lifestyle alternatives rather than through jobs, public services, or affordable housing. These issues are also evident in the growth of consumption ideologies in Puerto Rico and how they are being used to sustain the development of more shopping malls, exactly the type of developments least needed in this shopping-mall-saturated island.

These determinations, in turn, are imbued with questions of value. As culture attains more “expediency” and is used as a resource for a variety of economic and political ends, it attains closer proximity with economic spheres, becoming more and more subject to issues of evaluation and management (Yúdice 2003). One outcome of the “expediency” of culture is a decrease in its “transcendency,” or the view that the evaluation of cultural spheres is either immeasurable or most purely defined on its own or else most starkly defined in direct opposition to commercial realms and the economy. Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of the field of cultural production as the “economic world upside down” is one clear statement of this position, in which pure value is given to those fields that can most successfully “disavow” economic interests and motivations (Bourdieu 1993). Today, however, the neoliberalization of the varying “fields” of cultural production has shattered the pretense that any realm is inherently free from economic evaluation, leading to many heated debates, with some scholars defending the economic incommensurability of many aspects of social life (art, intimacy, body organs, heritage, etc.) and others advancing arguments around the economic logics that always determine their value, which could be easily determined if we could only develop the appropriate models for measuring it (Ertman and Williams 2005; Zelizer 2007; Velthius 2005). For instance, some economists researching the arts have advocated for broader conceptualizations of value that account for art’s contributions to social cohesion and community development, as well as for more democratic assessments of value such as those coming from particular communities, not solely from grant makers or art professionals (Throsby, quoted in Ragsdale 2009; Holo and Alvarez 2009).

This awareness of the linkages between “value” and the cultural construction of systems for evaluation owes much to anthropological work, especially to Arjun Appadurai’s helpful exposition of value as a social construction, residing not in particular things themselves (be it a work of art, an object, or a space) but rather in their circulation and exchange (Appa-
And far from what neoliberal pundits would have us believe, circulation is never a naturally determined process; it is always a political one, measured and structured by a larger economy, such as by urban and cultural policies and economic incentives favoring one or another cultural initiative or one cultural product or representation over another. Take, for instance, the policies that allow a Starbucks and a movie theater to benefit from tax incentives when they are part of a development, especially if it is being built in a “minority” neighborhood, while local institutions languish. Or else consider the cultural policies that lock most of New York City’s government funding for the arts to a selected few institutions in the city, as I discuss in chapter 3.

In particular, Appadurai points us to the “tournaments of value,” or debates surrounding the cultural construction and organization of hierarchies around evaluation that may be normalized in any given society. These may be specialized fields and arenas that are removed from economic routines but remain central for the disposition, exchange, and evaluation of goods (Appadurai 1988). One example of these specialized fields concerns the intensification of “lawfare”—or the legal means for assessing the value of property, such as through copyright, trademark, and intellectual cultural property—that has accompanied the rise in the commodification and circulation of culture (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Not that decades of cultural policies and legislation have made issues of evaluation any less slippery when matters of culture are concerned. Issues of authorship, identity, and appropriation remain as contested as ever, if not more so, launching legal specializations each time proprietary rights are extended to cultural forms (Coombe 1998). What this increase in “lawfare” has certainly involved is an extension of market logics and governmentalities to newer realms of social and cultural life, triggering debates over whether there are intangible aspects of social life that should rightfully defy economic logics.

One of the many difficulties of these frameworks seeking broader conceptualization of value is that they attempt to find universal paradigms for value that are not applicable to all contexts. For instance, issues of social identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class may affect the evaluation of cultural forms but are seldom accounted for as variables that can affect evaluation. Instead, market determinations are seen as free of any racialized considerations even when they are vested in racial assumptions and hierarchies that limit the equitable assessment of value. This book confronts this view by exposing the racial politics of creative economies,
Introduction and how those politics complicate facile arguments about the value that is always supposedly added when “culture” is put to work. In particular, economic frameworks are often unequipped to assess cultural aspects of evaluation that may be considered intangible, beyond narrow economic determinations. These are issues that the appreciation of Latino art and culture bring especially to the forefront, given the minority status of the Latino ethnic identity, and the debate over the feasibility of building a national Latino museum in the nation’s capital also hones in on these issues. At the same time, the difficulties of assessing value in cultural matters should not deter us from striving for fairer cultural policies, institutions, and practices that may support more equitable relations between the cultural and economic realms. Vivian Zelizer’s discussion about the intersection of intimate relationships and the economy becomes relevant in this regard. As she notes, it is not the mingling of these supposedly antagonistic fields that should concern us but, instead, how the mingling works, how it is shaped and sustained by “institutional supports” (such as by laws, practices, and institutions), and how these in turn may lead to greater or lesser equality for the parties involved in these relations (Zelizer 2007).

Chapters 3 to 5 also point to the need to challenge the individualization of creative work as the dominant foundation for determining creativity and value. Writing about the transformations that labor in creative sectors has undergone under neoliberalism, cultural policy writer Jim McGuigan warns about the risks of romanticizing individualism in creative work (2010). As he notes, a legacy of European romanticism in aesthetics since the nineteenth century, the view of creativity as an individual matter has become complicit with the individualization of work so promoted in neoliberalizing contexts. However, as he also reminds us, under neoliberal economies, individualization has become an institutionalized condition that is hardly ever freely chosen by creative workers. Instead, it has become a mantra that sustains expendability and job uncertainty, such as by placing all responsibilities and contingencies on individuals, while undermining collective protections in creative work.

The politics of individualization are especially concerning to artistic fields of cultural production. Dependent as these fields are on distinctions around individual talent and merit, they are especially susceptible to distinctions among artists and their artistic output that can be easily activated in support of neoliberal cultural policies that reverberate across all cultural workers. In the case of Puerto Rico, these politics become a veil
for eliminating the little that remains of the government cultural infrastructure that has sustained the survival of Puerto Rican artisans, as well as a medium to disavow Latino artists’ connections with communities. The types of collective and community demands voiced by cultural workers hence surface as a challenge to processes of aesthetic individualization and as a means for anchoring and materializing some of the larger social and political dynamics that both impinge on and are so central to creative work.

In sum, to engage with questions of value is to engage with politics. It demands that we expose the premises and biases on the basis of which decisions about what is valuable and worthy of promotion and preservation are regularly made. It also requires that we suspend the uncritical view that only cultural workers and initiatives that are properly institutionalized, packaged, and profitable are valuable, in order to assess broader definitions of value that account for the intangibles of social life, which are positively affected by cultural initiatives that may be discounted as insignificant according to the premises of neoliberal development.

Finally, directly connected to issues of space and evaluation are processes of mobility, or the movements of people and things that are assisted or encumbered by the neoliberal restructuring of space and by dominant logics of evaluation in neoliberalizing contexts. These dynamics have local manifestations—for instance, in the segregation, surveillance, and policing of space that keeps minorities and those without purchasing power at bay in a given neoliberal development, city, or location—but also global ones, with regard to who can travel and can access the necessary paperwork to become “global,” versus others who are destined to remain undocumented or alien because of their race, class, or nationality.

Indeed, an extensive literature on transnationalism and globalization has alerted us to the uneven movements of people and things that accompany these processes; that transnationalism does not lead to the eradication of national, ethnic, and racial boundaries but to a heightening of differences; and that it highly favors finance and capital over people, unless they are part of upscale globalizing classes and groups (Sassen 1999; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1993; Appadurai 1996). These uneven dynamics are most evident in culture industries such as tourism, in which tourists, historically drawn from international middle classes, are consistently favored as primary targets and consumers for many developments across U.S. and Latin American cities, over and above the needs of local residents.
In this book, I use *mobility* to mark the politics involved both in tango tourism and in the expatriation of North Americans and Europeans to South America, discussed in chapters 6 and 7, but also to highlight how physical mobility can also have an impact on social mobility. While I am aware of a growing literature on mobility that seeks to anchor movement in political and economic processes that are often hidden when we summon categories of transnationalism, culture flows, or circulation, I use *mobility* to foreground the bodies of people involved in space and time, in ways that are not so easily acknowledged when summoning other categories. My concern is a simple one: to expose that creative industries generate particular mobilities, that they favor certain type of mobile bodies while circumscribing the social and physical mobility of others.

My interest in mobility stems also from the growing penchant for the mobility of creative classes, who, following Richard Florida’s mantra, have been so celebrated as the answer for transforming cities into magnets of entrepreneurship and creativity. These groups have become a core preoccupation of urban planners, politicians, and urban pundits, following Florida’s recommendations that attracting and keeping creative classes happy through diverse and stimulating arts and cultural attractions will definitely lead to a city’s growth and success. The global recession has since tempered urban planners’ honeymoon with Florida, whose views have been amply criticized for their tautological foundations, for their obliviousness to racial and class inequalities, and for furthering gentrification and class polarization as well as the uncritical spread of neoliberal planning logics (Peck 2005; Whyte 2009). At the same time, the preference for mobility has not waned; neoliberalizing projects still thrive on the notion that the more fleeting and mobile the capital or the group, the more value it should be given and the more incentives created to protect it. The result is hierarchies of mobilities, such as those in which “larger scales are regarded as masculine and agentive in relation to ‘smaller’ scales or spaces (like community) that are coded as feminine and stagnant,” which can be deployed to justify differential strategies for development (DeHart 2010, 19). The preeminence of tourists as engines for urban growth is one instance of this type of evaluation, as is most evident in the discussion in chapter 6, but these hierarchies are present in practically all instances in which consumption-based developments rule logics for city planning.

I also want to consider mobility in relation to the strategies of creative classes, as a tactic for maneuvering through their growing material pre-
cariousness as well as the general downgrading of creative industries and jobs. In this regard, mobility surfaces as a strategy for attaining “flexible class” in a way similar to the way Aihwa Ong described Chinese transnationals’ movement across states as part of their assertion of “flexible citizenship,” which allowed them to circumvent political and economic conditions and limitations imposed by different states while they sought to align their dreams, familial aspirations, and economic rationalities (Ong 1999). Granted, these strategies of flexibility through mobility across nation-states favor those with resources and capital. However, they have larger implications for all creative workers by exposing the scarcities created by a global political economy that is not fully able to award people equally or to align their class, race, social and national identities, and aspirations evenly. Hence, just as in Ong’s discussion the transnational Chinese’s citizenship claims in the United States are limited by their race, we may well consider how the mobility of North American creative expats to the Global South may be indicative of similar limitations, this time in regard to the shrinking space for attaining “creative” class identities and for fulfilling upwardly mobile aspirations in the United States. In this way, mobilities surface as strategies for maneuvering and maximizing ethnic, racial, and class capitals against larger political and economic constraints and the limits those constraints increasingly place on the attainment of middle-class livelihoods and identities.

From Puerto Rico to Buenos Aires via Latino/a New York

The politics and the political economy of space are more directly explored in chapters 1 and 2, with chapter 1 focusing on shopping mall construction and retail culture and chapter 2 on the informal economy in contemporary Puerto Rico. An examination of the rapid boom in shopping mall construction in Puerto Rico explores a key reason why shopping malls may be developing rapidly in places where consumers are presumably most limited in cash, rather than in the most “developed” economies, where urban planners are struggling to imagine new uses for these “old” spaces. This chapter links ideologies of overconsumption and of Puerto Ricans as “shop ’til you drop” consumers to the real estate speculation that has turned the island into a shopping mall haven, with one of the largest concentrations of shopping malls per square mile in the world. I show that we need to think of these developments as being intrinsically
tied to global real estate speculation, which is aided by neoliberal governmental policies that make these massive developments an attractive investment in Puerto Rico, despite and because of its distressed economy and weakened consumer base. I also examine how shopping malls are becoming “Puerto Ricanized” through cultural appeals to Puerto Rican culture as an example of the symbolic branding of space that accompanies many neoliberal projects.

Likewise, the culture-based informal sector on the island, described in chapter 2, highlights a common problem that accompanies the sanitization of space for tourist consumption elsewhere in the Americas, involving heightened contestation over space when some cultural workers are deemed more sanctioned than others. Similar dynamics are experienced anywhere that unemployment pushes more and more people to earn a living through artisanal and creative work. This chapter examines how neoliberal policies have led to massive unemployment and to thousands turning to culture to make a living. I also pay attention to the politics of space involved in vendors’ access to space, and to the distinctions among creative workers that ensue alongside these politics. Finally, I explore their quest to claim a legitimate space as “cultural workers” rather than “merchants”—the term preferred by many government officials imbued in the government’s neoliberal turn—as an instance of the type of resistances generated by local cultural workers.

Questions of value are key to most neoliberal debates over culture and development, and in this book, these issues are represented by chapters 3, 4, and 5, focusing on Latino art and community organizations in New York City, on the New York–based Puerto Rican artist Miguel Luciano, and on the debate over the feasibility of constructing a Smithsonian National Museum of the American Latino. Chapter 3 explores the cultural policies that have historically disenfranchised community organizations and placed them at the margin of the city’s creative economy, and it follows activism by black and Latino groups to reform New York City funding for the arts and to seek proper evaluation of their contributions to the city’s creative economy. This chapter exposes, disturbs, and ultimately challenges the hierarchies of value that, nationwide, have become naturalized in our neoliberal creative economy, to the detriment of myriad cultural workers. The question I ask is, how can the city be so widely considered the global arts capital when the majority of its residents remain at the margin of its creative economy? And how would the city’s economy be enriched or transformed if we began to account for
the hidden contributions of its cultural workers of color? I suggest that in order to fully consider these questions, we must first account for and address the prejudices that cloud our ability to formulate more expansive definitions of what should be considered as valuable in our contemporary cultural and creative economy. This task requires addressing head-on the elitism that dominates discussions of culture and globalization in the context or urban development.

Chapter 4, on the deliberation regarding the feasibility of constructing a National Museum of the American Latino, hones in on some of the issues that have had an impact on the evaluation of Latino/a art and culture as these play out at the national level against the larger context of contemporary U.S. racial/ethnic politics. It also examines responses at a public hearing debating the project, as a window into alternative and popular definitions of what would make a truly empowering and valuable cultural institution. Hierarchies of value also inform the work of local Latino artists, and chapter 5 focuses on the way one artist negotiates and subverts the dominant neoliberal postidentity frameworks that dominate mainstream artistic evaluation in order to produce work that remains culturally relevant and connected with particular communities.

Chapters 6 and 7, set in Buenos Aires, explore the mobilities, exchanges, and networks sustained and created through tango tourism and the racial and ethnic dynamics reflected in the global community of tango tourists, issues that are also central to many other cultural tourism initiatives launched throughout Latin America. Chapter 6 examines the rise of contemporary tango tourism in Buenos Aires and the city’s tango economy in relation to its urban development and issues of cultural equity in its creative economy. One of my arguments is that tango tourism functions as a key space for anchoring Buenos Aires’s new class dynamics and upwardly mobile aspirations as a “first-world” city, attracting first-class citizens from all over the world. In this regard, I explore tango tourism in a larger context in which Buenos Aires continues to redefine its identity as a white, European-like city, as the most stylish, developed city in Latin America. This time, however, this identity may not be constructed so much in reference to its European immigrant past but, rather, in reference to global tourists, on the one hand, and, on the other, to bordering immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, who are increasingly challenging Argentina’s dominant image as a white homogeneous country of Euro-descendants.

Chapter 7 connects the tango tourism economy to the growth of a transnational expat community attracted to tango but also to Buenos
Aires as one of the most affordable yet most “Western-looking” havens for displaced workers to live as first-class citizens. This chapter looks into how Buenos Aires’s bohemian identity intersects with the global need for playgrounds fit for North American and European middle-class professional workers to live as “Westerners” or to pursue economic risks that are no longer as viable back home, as those economies wither. This makes creative expats’ physical mobilities central to their strategies for social mobility amid declining economies, while exposing neoliberalizing processes to be centrally constituted by the connections between states that espouse it and those, like Argentina, that openly renounce its logics. I also explore expats’ aspirations to move and the critical alternatives they sometimes represent to some of the dominant premises of neoliberal economies.

Altogether, the chapters provide lessons about the cultural politics of neoliberalism, exposing some of their contradictions and some areas where significant responses and alternative imaginings may be on the rise. Not only are these evident in the varied cultural strategies and interventions by cultural workers that are described in these pages, but they are also central to what remains culture’s most hopeful and resilient trait: its power to evoke community and, through it, to bring about enjoyment and the possibility of change.