

---

Kathleen MILLAR, *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018)

---

Most of Rio de Janeiro's residents viewed Jardim Gramacho, the largest dump in Latin America, as hell. Located in a contaminated and crime-ridden peripheral neighborhood, the sprawling dump received thousands of tons of waste daily from its opening in 1978 until its closure in 2012. It also served as a site of work, leisure, and sometimes residence for thousands of *catadores*, who salvaged and sold recyclables from within. The *catadores* faced grueling working conditions, meager incomes, deadly accidents, hazardous contaminants, police harassment, gang violence, and social stigma. Thus, it is no wonder that most outsiders assumed that the only reason anyone would work in the dump was due to lack of alternatives. But in *Reclaiming the Discarded*, cultural anthropologist, Kathleen Millar, finds that most *catadores* left the dump periodically for other jobs, some of which even offered regular salaries and state benefits. But almost always, they returned to work at the dump. This motivates the central puzzle of Millar's superb ethnography: why did the *catadores* return to the dump, day after day, year after year?

Millar argues that in order to understand the circumstances, logics, and desires that drove Gramacho's *catadores* to work in waste, we must challenge longstanding assumptions about work and poverty. Historically, scholars have tended to define the working poor in the negative, in terms of what they lack relative to an implicit bourgeois ideal. A case in point, Millar argues, is the concept of "informality," a term that evokes a lack of form, structure, and order. Scholars first used the term to describe economic activities that lacked bureaucratic sophistication and, later, ones that lacked legal regulation. According to Millar, such negative definitions often proved inaccurate (e.g., many "informal" firms are bureaucratically sophisticated, and many "formal" ones skirt state regulations), and encouraged analytical laziness by allowing scholars to lump the poor into an amorphous mass. To this end, Millar quotes Keith Hart [2006] who, 50 years after coining the term "informal sector," lamented that it had "allowed academics and bureaucrats to incorporate the teeming life of exotic cities into their abstract models without having to confront the specificity of what people were really up to" [131].

It is just such specificity that Millar pursues in her own account, which draws upon 15 months of embedded and embodied ethnography, working in and living near the dump. Millar's thick, somatic description brings to life the dump's smells, tastes, textures, rhythms, and emotion. Through a series of "Magic Eye" moments, underlying structures and principles of the seemingly anarchic worksite become visible, and cacophonous heaps of black garbage bags transform into an intricate harvest of valuable materials. Millar avoids the traps of both romanticism and fatalism, painting an anguished tension between the highs and lows of life on the dump that captures both the violence of poverty and the ingenuity of the poor. Her innovative theoretical analysis yields many generalizable insights, but she cautions that "there is no singular experience of the dump" [33].

Although many state bureaucrats view work in the dump as a source of the *catadores*' precarity, Millar's findings suggest that it is better understood as a resource that *catadores* use to survive precarious circumstances, and even to salvage a measure of self-worth. Millar argues that unstable lives destabilize work, rather than the other way around [70]. The key advantage of work in the dump over more rigid forms of waged labor is that the *catadores* have a degree of control over when, where, and how they work. This enables what Millar terms "relational autonomy," that is, a degree of insulation from the despotic power of employers and the state. In contrast to individualistic, neoliberal conceptions of autonomy, relational autonomy is facilitated by and facilitating of community bonds. Such autonomy enables *catadores* to navigate life's daily uncertainties and urgencies. For example, if a *catador*'s child falls ill, she may choose to take time off to care for the child, to work extra hours to pay for medical expenses, or to solicit loans and childcare from other *catadores*. Also, relational autonomy enables *catadores* with addictions to support their habits in the company of the community, free from police persecution.

Relational autonomy not only facilitates the *catadores*' survival, but also their quest for meaning and dignity. Although bourgeois ideals of success (e.g., a stable career, upward mobility, a beautiful home) are beyond their grasp, *catadores* pursue their own vision of "the good life." Daily emergencies and debt make it almost impossible for *catadores* to save money, so they disengage from the rational capitalist ethic of treating work and accumulation as ends. Instead, they place high value on social relations and enjoyment of the present. They call people who do not take time to share and enjoy the fruits of their labor "ignorant." The *catadores* also defy strict leisure/labor dichotomies,

taking *breques* (transliterated from the English word “breaks”) to collectively cook, *bater papo* (chat), and lounge in the middle of the workday, and taking several full days off during the week to spend with their families. Indeed, *breques* are so ubiquitous to their lives that *catadores* apply the term to people, places, and things that they associate with relaxation. Millar thus argues that waste picking is not merely a livelihood, but a “form of living” that encompasses distinct rhythms and habits, forms of leisure, and systems of values and beliefs. Thus, many *catadores* claim that working on the dump “radically transforms the self in ways that make it impossible to readapt to the conditions of wage labor” [12].

The book’s final two empirical chapters analyze interventions that were designed to improve the standards of work on the dump, but which provoked resentment and resistance from many *catadores*. The interventions were flawed in that they sought to impose structures and logics upon the *catadores* akin to those of formal waged labor, rather than recognizing and supporting the existing systems of life and work in the dump. Chapter 4 discusses the municipal government’s efforts to “professionalize” the *catadores*, and the *catadores’* resistance: when authorities ruled that only registered *catadores* who wore ID vests could work in the dump, the *catadores* loaned their vests to friends or made counterfeit vests. When social workers organized classes to educate and professionalize the *catadores*, many refused to participate. And when authorities attempted to prohibit work at night, the *catadores* used disruptive protest to force them to reverse their decisions. Drawing on the work of philosopher Catherine Malabou, Millar argues that these everyday acts of subversion and non-compliance are examples of “plasticity,” that is, the *catadores’* agency both to give shape to and to receive shape from their environments. Millar prefers this concept to “flexibility,” a term that suggests that precarious workers passively submit to their economic circumstances.

While Chapter 4 describes a top-down initiative to improve the *catadores’* livelihoods, Chapter 5 describes a bottom-up attempt to do the same—one that suffered from many of the same problems. It recounts the story of a plucky crew of *catadores* who organized a cooperative in order to collectively sort and sell materials, and rise on the value chain. Impressively, the grassroots collective pressured the city to cede them a building, sorting equipment, and trucks, and won support from international NGOs and corporate foundations. In order to win recognition as a “respectable business” in the eyes of its elite benefactors and to compete in the capitalist economy, however,

the cooperative had to impose new rules on its members. It began paying members on a weekly basis, implemented fixed schedules, obliged members to wear uniforms, banned drug use, and prohibited the practice of salvaging food and clothes from waste. These rules ran counter to the desires, logics, and capacities of most members, many of whom quit and returned to work autonomously on the dump. Despite the promise of higher earnings and more dignified conditions, the cooperative only succeeded in organizing 50 *catadores*, less than 2% of Gramacho's total workforce. Millar argues that the non-participation of *catadores* in the cooperative should be read not as political apathy, but as a form of class critique against bourgeois values of subservience, punctuality, and industriousness [167].

Perhaps both the greatest strength and limitation of Millar's book is its razor sharp focus on life and work inside of Gramacho. On the one hand, the tightly bound field site facilitates an insightful, intimate and efficient (189 pages) account of the *catadores'* practices, perspectives, and lived experiences. On the other, it leaves many questions unanswered—making for a pressing and promising future research agenda. For example, as discussed above, had Millar followed the *catadores* outside of the dump into their other worksites, we could have learned more about why they found them so distasteful. Such data could also be used to address a plausible alternative explanation for why *catadores* returned to the dump: they may have simply experienced higher earning power there. Also, Millar criticizes state officials' treatment of *catadores*, but tells us little about how state officials' actions are constrained by other powerful waste management stakeholders (e.g., environmentalists, taxpayers, residents, waste management companies, the recycling industry). Finally, Millar provides little national and global context about labor rights organizing among *catadores*. She wrote at a time, however, when thousands of *catador* cooperatives were being built across Brazil, and national *catador* rights legislation was being written. Such context could help readers better understand both the sources of the policy dilemmas encountered in Gramacho and their relevance beyond her field site.

It has been said that the job of the ethnographer is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Millar does both in her gripping and provocative ethnography of people who eked out a living by salvaging recyclables from Latin America's largest dump. She makes work on the dump seem familiar, despite the danger and stigma that it entailed, by explaining how the dump enabled people whom society treated as "disposable" to construct "lives worth living." She

also makes waged labor—which tends to be idealized in rightwing and leftist discourses alike—seem strange, showing why many *catadores* refuse to submit themselves to its despotism, disrespect, and drudgery. Her findings regarding the contradictions of labor rights organizing and policy in Gramacho raise pressing questions for scholars, organizers, and policy makers: when state officials intervene to improve the conditions and incomes of workers termed “informal,” do they inevitably recreate the same barriers that excluded these vulnerable populations from the formal economy in the first place? How widespread are the policy dilemmas that occurred in Gramacho across worker groups and political contexts? And how can they be overcome?

MANUEL ROSALDO