



## THE PRECARIOUS PRESENT: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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“I found a job!” Rose snapped open a can of beer and quickly reached for my glass to catch the foam that poured down its sides. It was a quiet Sunday afternoon in Jardim Gramacho, the sprawling neighborhood at the base of Rio de Janeiro’s garbage dump. Rose and I lounged on overturned wooden crates outside her house, in a yard that was brown and barren except for a few scattered plastic bottles and tin cans. I first met Rose in 2008 while conducting research on the life projects of the roughly two-thousand laboring poor, known as *catadores*, who collect and sell recyclables on Rio’s dump for a living. Her husband, Carlos, often helped me heave my burlap sacks of wet cardboard onto the back of a buyer’s flatbed truck, and the two of them occasionally hung out at the bar in front of my house. Like other *catadores*, Rose had insisted many times that she would leave the garbage if she could: “The dump is pure suffering.” “In the garbage, there is no future.” Seu Marcão, a rather eccentric *catador* who had worked on the dump for over twenty years, would spontaneously shout over the clamor of unloading trucks, “Pay to enter and pray to leave!” an expression taken from the Portuguese-translated title of the horror film, *The Funhouse*. These were the common refrains of *catadores*.

Rose’s new job, however, meant more than an exit from the garbage dump. For the first time in her life, she had acquired employment with a signed worker ID (*carteira assinada*), a document guaranteeing a minimum wage, benefits, and

the recognition of a regularly employed worker in Brazil. She told me that she would receive the equivalent of two monthly minimum-wages—as much if not more than she was presently making on the dump. She would be cleaning the house of a couple who lived a relatively short twenty-minute bus-ride away, and she was due to start that Monday. After Rose shared the good news, I lifted my glass to propose a toast to her new work. No, not just work (*trabalho*), she corrected me—this was a job (*emprego*).

I was therefore surprised when, after a few weeks, I asked Rose how she was finding her new job and she replied with a brush of her hand, “Oh, I quit.” Rose’s employer insisted that she stay at work until seven o’clock in the evening even though she easily finished all of her cleaning tasks by two in the afternoon. The requirement to remain at work, while not working, struck Rose as absurd. Her three children would already be dismissed from school and she would rather be home with them.

A few days later I saw Rose back on the dump. She waved to me from across a pile of recently unloaded waste—balancing a barrel of plastics on her right shoulder as she carefully stepped through mud that oozed puddles from the drizzling rain.

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This article considers the work of catadores not as an end for Rio’s laboring poor, in the sense of the end-of-the-line, but rather as an experience of continual return. The image of the garbage dump often evokes finality, conceived as a place where society’s unwanted remnants go to decay and ultimately disappear. Though for different reasons, the concept of the *informal* economy—long conceived as an exception to the constructed norm of wage labor and the employment contract—also implies this sense of finality, a last resort (Denning 2010). Such a conceptualization of wageless work, however, fails to capture tensions in the ways social and economic precariousness is experienced and lived in Rio’s periphery. Like Rose, most catadores repeatedly insisted that they would leave the dump instantly if another work opportunity appeared, and yet those who did find work outside Jardim Gramacho often returned to the dump within a few weeks or months. Their departures and returns inflected life in Jardim Gramacho with a generalized quality of transience, captured in the common expression, *vou e volto, vou e volto* (“I go and return, go and return,” as in the idiomatic phrase in English, “I come and go”). Sometimes I would not see a catador for weeks on the dump and almost without fail, the person would reappear—often with a story of a

family visit to another part of Rio or a story of employment very similar to Rose's. My own comings and goings, as I strove to fit research trips into academic breaks before spending a continuous year in Jardim Gramacho, seemed easily understood in this world.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I explore how the comings and goings of catadores emerge from competing desires and demands in their lives. On the one hand, formal, stable employment is upheld by catadores as a dominant cultural value. In addition to regular income and employment benefits, a formal job with a worker ID brings the status of a respected *trabalhador*, a worker. Yet, on the other hand, the very regularity and stability of a formal job comes into conflict with the fragile conditions of urban poverty in Rio de Janeiro. Here, I draw on Ben Penglase's (2009) concept of "everyday emergencies" to grasp the ways that disruption and insecurity not only suspend but also constitute "normality" in Rio's favelas. While Penglase considers everyday emergencies in the specific context of drug trafficking, this article reflects on multiple forms of insecurity that destabilize daily life: health vulnerabilities, makeshift housing, environmental hazards, debt, incarceration, and crime and violence. It is my central argument that, paradoxically, the deeply painful and precarious work that catadores continually return to on the dump enables them to contend with insecurities in other dimensions of their lives.

My analysis takes inspiration from a growing anthropological literature on precarity. Conceived as a condition of post-Fordist capitalism, the concept of precarity has emerged as a way to capture both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers. In recent years, the term has circulated primarily among social-movement activists in post-industrial societies of Europe, North America, and Japan—places where Fordism was strongest in the twentieth century and which therefore have been most affected by its unraveling (Allison 2012; Neilson and Rossiter 2005). In many countries of the global South, in contrast, precarious work has arguably *always* been a part of the experience of laboring poor. Rose's grandparents were seasonal agricultural workers in Brazil's arid Northeast, a region marked by the uncertainties of drought and hunger. Her parents, part of a wave of rural–urban migration to Rio in the 1960s, worked as itinerant street vendors at downtown bus stops. In her own life, prior to her brief stint with a worker ID, Rose moved between a range of irregular forms of employment: selling garlic on the streets, cooking for a luncheonette, and eventually reclaiming recyclables from city garbage. Though Fordism might have existed as a dream, aspiration, or incomplete project in Brazil and

other countries of the global South (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012), full employment nonetheless remained the exception.

While attuned to the particularities of the Brazilian context, I adopt precarity as a useful analytic for conceptualizing the labor condition as inseparable from issues of subjectivity, affect, sociality, and desire. In other words, I am interested in the *relationship* between precarious labor and precarious life, or as Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008, 55) put it, between precarity as a socio-economic condition and precarity as an ontological experience (see also Molé 2010). It is possible to understand this relationship as a worldwide symptom of neoliberalism (Bourdieu 1998; Johnson 2011; Standing 2011), and indeed many theorists of late capitalism perceive insecure employment as an increasingly shared condition that is merging the destinies of the global North and South (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Wacquant 2008). However, the way that the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life is articulated depends significantly on the specific history and experience of capitalism in a given location, both in the sense of a geopolitical site (e.g., Brazil) and a social position (e.g., urban poor in the periphery of Rio). For workers who identified as middle-class where Fordism was strong in the post-war years of the twentieth century, work provided not only an income but also social belonging, a public identity, a sense of well-being, and future aspirations (Muehlebach 2011). Consequently, the dismantling of full-time, life-long employment under neoliberal regimes had the effect of disintegrating social ties and eroding the sense of having a place in the world. In such post-Fordist contexts, therefore, we can understand the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life as one in which “unstable work destabilizes daily living” (Allison 2012, 349).

In contrast, the continual returns of catadores to the dump suggest that many urban poor in Rio experience this relationship in reverse: unstable daily living destabilizes work. Taking a phenomenological approach to precarious labor, I reflect on tensions between the fixed conditions of waged employment and the uncertainties and disruptions that punctuate life in Rio’s periphery. I consider how catadores experience the garbage dump not only as a source of suffering but also, as they say, a “refuge”—a place to which they can turn in difficult times and which affords them greater autonomy in their everyday lives. Here, autonomy is conceived not in the liberal sense of the sovereign, independent, self-reliant individual, which fails to account for the ways “individuals are always already woven into relationships” (Han 2012, 15). Rather, this article contemplates what I call “relational autonomy,” exploring how a relative degree of control over work

activities and time enables catadores to sustain relationships, fulfill social obligations, and pursue life projects in an uncertain everyday.<sup>2</sup>

“The dump has a good side and the dump also has a bad side,” catadores often told me. I begin with this seeming contradiction, unpacking the ways catadores experienced and narrated their world of work. The particular characteristics of reclaiming material from city waste that emerge in these narratives suggest the need to better differentiate forms of post-Fordist labor that are frequently folded into categories of informal, irregular, or precarious employment. The next three sections return to Rose’s story. How can we understand her decision to quit what seemed a coveted job to return to the garbage and her work as a catadora? This question leads me first to consider the symbolic value that the worker ID held for Rose—the desire for a possibility that never became realized. I then explore how catadores perceive their experience of the dump as an inner transformation of the self. This new worker-subjectivity is one in which catadores, in their own words, “can no longer adapt” to conditions of waged employment. Finally, I explore how this inability “to adapt” is further compounded by a much broader and deeper precarious existence.

### THE DUMP AS REFUGE

In 1978, the City of Rio de Janeiro began dumping garbage in Jardim Gramacho, in what at the time was a mangrove swamp on the edge of the Bay of Guanabara. From the summit of the now thirty-meter-high mountain of rotting refuse, it is possible to watch planes landing at Rio’s international airport just across the bay and to view the sunrise on clear mornings over the city’s tourist attraction, Sugar Loaf. Until its closure in June, 2012, the garbage dump in Jardim Gramacho was considered to be the largest in Latin America. A steady stream of garbage trucks and semi-trailers from across Rio’s metropolitan area carried an average of eight-thousand tons of waste to Jardim Gramacho every day.

Contrary to popular images of scavenging as a marginal subsistence activity oriented toward personal consumption, the work of catadores on the dump transformed Jardim Gramacho into a sprawling market in recyclables, tied into a global recycling industry that generates an estimated US\$200 billion annually (BIR 2010). Though catadores sometimes set aside a pair of shoes, clothing, a book, or a household item that they discover while collecting, nearly all of the objects that they pile into their frayed burlap sacks consist of what they call “material”—that is, white paper, cardboard, aluminum, scrap metal, and plastics that they sell to dozens of scrap yards scattered throughout the neighborhood. These scrap

yards—most of which are unregulated enterprises that consist of little more than a yard, a truck, and a press to bale the material—sort and bundle the recyclables and then sell the material either to larger scrap dealers in Rio or directly to recycling plants located primarily in the south of Brazil. The processed paper, plastics, and metal are then sold to a range of packaging, construction, automotive, and textile industries, reaching the United States, Europe, and increasingly, China. This global trade in recyclables has greatly expanded in the last two decades; the single largest export from the United States to China in the first decade of the twenty-first century, for example, was scrap (Alexander and Reno 2012, 3–4). The growing market in recyclables has contributed to an explosion of waste reclaiming worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Though the collection of discarded materials is not at all new among urban poor (see Jesus 1962; Lomnitz 1983), this work has transformed in recent years from a small-scale activity involving primarily reuse into an alternative form of urban employment connected to global markets.

During the first decade of the dump's existence, the few hundred catadores who collected there were mostly migrants from the rural Northeast who came to Jardim Gramacho from other dumps that had closed—"following the garbage," as they recounted. However, beginning in the 1990s, the Jardim Gramacho dump drew increasing numbers of Rio's poor from across the metropolitan area. This period saw both the consolidation of democracy following the end of Brazil's military dictatorship, as well as the ushering in of neoliberal economic policies in the aftermath of Latin America's debt crisis of the 1980s—nicknamed Brazil's "lost decade" (Caldeira 2000). Neoliberal policies impacted Rio's poor from multiple angles, beyond the loss of jobs brought about by the deindustrialization of the city. Urban revitalization programs in Rio promoted the privatization of public space, thereby preventing unlicensed street vendors from selling goods in highly visible areas of the city and contributing to the enclosure of Rio's "informal economies" (Oliveira 2008). The reduction in public services and the state's conception of citizens as "consumers" accentuated economic inequalities (Biehl 2007, 56), and high rates of violence and incarceration of the poor made life in Rio's periphery all the more tenuous (Perlman 2010). Though conditional cash transfer programs (*Bolsa Família*), promoted by Brazil's leftist President Lula from 2003 to 2010, have helped reduce poverty and inequality figures, several scholars have argued that these programs brought about little structural change and functioned more like a bandage stemming the detrimental effects of neoliberal reforms (Rocha 2007). Moreover, many catadores in Jardim Gramacho, who held no birth

certificate or other state documents, remained invisible to the state and these social assistance programs.

For Rio's poor who came to Jardim Gramacho to make a life within these conditions, the garbage dump has often taken on contradictory meanings. Catadores commonly narrate their entry to the dump as an experience of severe shock, describing feelings of overwhelming nausea and paralysis. Their narratives testify to what they see as the everyday struggle of working as a catador. Most catadores arrive on the dump at dawn to collect for several hours before the sun becomes unbearably intense, or they work at night with a flashlight under their chin, a light attached to a headpiece, or with no light at all. Catadores use a plastic bag or barrel to collect material in the unloading zone and then carry it back to their burlap sacks, slogging through thick mud and uneven ground. They must work quickly, and closely to unloading garbage trucks, to collect as much material as possible before a tractor comes moments later to bulldoze the pile. At the end of the day or in the early morning, trucks from dozens of scrap yards arrive on the dump and catadores lift their several-hundred-pound sacks onto the flatbeds. This usually requires four catadores on the ground lifting the sack and two on top of the truck pulling the sack upward. Catadores work in the sun and rain with no shelter aside from faded beach umbrellas that they find in the garbage and stick into the tops of their filled burlap sacks. They breathe nauseating fumes of methane gas produced by the decomposing waste beneath their feet. And they spend hours bending over, racing to avoid oncoming tractors, and lugging heavy loads.

Anthropologists studying informal or illicit economies have often explained the decisions of laboring poor to work irregular jobs as a form of resistance to degrading or onerous aspects of wage labor. For example, in his study of crack dealers in East Harlem, Philippe Bourgois (1995) argues that the refusal of the drug dealers to take menial service jobs is a form of oppositional politics to demeaning, minimum-wage work. Dealing in East Harlem brings status, respect, and an affirmed masculinity utterly lost in "the humiliating interpersonal subordination of service work" (141). These explanations, however, do not correspond to the ways catadores experience their work. For catadores, working in and with garbage—far from bringing respect—is a type of work that is stigmatizing even within their own social worlds. Catadores who live in another favela of Rio carry with them extra clothes, rent tiny shacks as changing rooms, and often purchase body lotions and crèmes to mask lingering odors so that their neighbors, and in some cases their family members, do not know what they do. Even catadores

who proudly affirm that they work as a catador are aware that others perceive their work of reclaiming objects from garbage as not “real” work, as not any different from being a beggar or vagabond.

Other studies have argued that underground economies provide an alternative to strenuous employment, as in the case of undocumented Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic’s underground tourist economy, who seek to escape their only other option of hard labor in the sugar industry (Gregory 2007). But as poignantly expressed in their everyday refrains of the dump as “pure suffering,” catadores endure brutal conditions on the dump. They also risk injuries, some that can be fatal: a hospital needle that punctures a catador’s worn boot, a tossed rod that splits open the forehead of an elderly catador, a tractor whose driver fails to see a catador slip in front of his path.

However, the dump as “pure suffering” exists in tension with other ways that catadores experience and perceive their place of work. For many catadores, the garbage dump is a constant, one of the most stable sources of income in their lives. Trucks unload at the dump twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, allowing catadores to work day and night or to not work at all for several days or weeks. Access to the dump is relatively unimpeded, enabling catadores to leave Jardim Gramacho for stretches of time without concern that they will lose their right to work in this place, as can sometimes occur for street vendors who must maintain their claim to space (Anjaria 2011). Scrap dealers pay catadores at the point of sale and catadores decide when to sell their material. They can therefore wait to return to the dump until their previous earnings run out. Or, in the case of an unexpected expense, a catador can work continuously on the dump, day and night, knowing that she will have immediate payment in hand. There is a shared sense in Jardim Gramacho that the dump is always there, that work can be taken up when needed or desired. “The garbage never ends,” I commonly heard.

I do not mean to suggest that collecting on the dump is stable work in the sense usually invoked by this term. No prevention or compensation exists for the injuries that catadores suffer, and life itself is at risk on the dump. Rather, catadores *experience* the dump as a stable refuge in one, particular way that stands in tension with other dimensions of their work. In short, catadores can decide when and how much to work. It is this characteristic of the work of catadores that distinguishes it from full-time waged employment, as well as from other forms of post-Fordist labor, marked as such by their very contingency. Temp, part-time, or piecemeal workers must contend with the unpredictability of work and



wages. This distinction points to the importance of disentangling forms of precarious labor that hold very different relationships to a worker's experience of the everyday.

### THE WORKER IN BRAZIL'S MORAL ORDER

To understand Rose's initial excitement over acquiring a job with a worker ID, we must first consider the symbolic value of the formally-employed worker within Brazil's historical and political context. Unlike in other Latin American sites, most notably Argentina (Perelman 2007), the image of the worker has not always functioned as a primary source of identity and citizenship. Brazil's history of slavery, and the continued power of the oligarchy following abolition in 1888, had the effect of devalorizing manual labor. Many anthropologists have pointed to avoidance of household work among the middle and upper classes, and to the historic separation between service elevators and entrances in buildings from those used by residents as manifestations of this perceived indignity of labor (Goldstein 2003; Holston 2008). Others have suggested that the figure of the *malandro*—the trickster or hustler—that became exalted in samba lyrics in the 1920s, expressed in a different register this disdain for work (Oliven 1984).

In the 1930s, President Getúlio Vargas sought to radically transform the position of labor in Brazil by making working-class employment the basis and emblem of Brazilian citizenship (Holston 2008). Vargas passed a series of labor laws that positioned the state as the sole arbitrator between capital and labor. This functioned as a state technology to control the labor organizing that developed in conjunction with Brazil's industrialization at the beginning of the twentieth century and the high levels of European immigration that brought with it anarchist and communist influences. Through these labor laws, the state began regulating work organizations, defined what legally counted as a profession, granted rights based on one's status as a worker, and instituted the *carteira assinada*—the worker ID that Rose pointed to as the most important element of her newfound employment. Despite (or rather because of) the rights and benefits that workers gained through the *carteira assinada*, Vargas's labor reforms produced a new kind of unequal citizenship in Brazil (Holston 2008). On the one hand, labor became valorized for the first time in Brazilian history and workers could access rights on the basis of their labor; but on the other hand, those who were not employed in legally-regulated professions were excluded from this new citizenship status. In short, by exalting "the worker" as the model citizen, Vargas

created a worker–criminal dichotomy that continues to function in Brazilian society’s moral order.

In recent years, the symbolism of “the worker” has taken on added meaning in the context of drug trafficking, violence, and the fear of crime among the middle and upper classes in Brazil’s major cities. Rather than associate favelas with the working-class poor, elites have increasingly come to perceive favela residents as *marginais* (marginals), a word now signifying criminals and drug traffickers rather than the poorest of the poor (Perlman 2010, 157; Roth-Gordon 2009, 58). Many scholars have argued that this semiotic shift has justified extreme forms of police violence targeting favela residents and street children (Caldeira 2000, 138; Scheper-Hughes 2006, 154), as well as the elite’s disregard for the everyday struggles of Brazil’s lower classes, no longer deemed the hard-working, “deserving” poor (Skidmore 2010, 191).

In this context, favela residents have taken up the *trabalhador–marginal* (worker–marginal) or *trabalhador–bandido* (worker–bandit) dichotomy as a way to distinguish themselves from criminals in the eyes of the state and broader society. This is especially the case for poor, black, male youth who are frequently the targets of police abuse (Penglase 2007). For example, I observed one adolescent catador, who was stopped and shoved by police, plead his innocence by taking out his boots, gloves, and water bottle to try to prove that he was an honest worker. In such instances, *trabalhador* invokes the Vargas-era valorization of the “worker of Brazil” and becomes synonymous with law-abiding citizen. It also echoes strategies used to avoid police harassment during the period surrounding Brazil’s abolition of slavery, when vagrancy laws became a mechanism for addressing a severe labor shortage on plantations in the Brazilian Northeast (Huggins 1985). If the rural poor who flocked to cities at that time could not demonstrate to police that they had “honest” employment, they could be sent to agricultural penal colonies tied to the sugar industry. Brazilian anthropologist Leticia Veloso (2010) has argued that in the contemporary context, this slippage between worker and law-abiding citizen has led to the fetishization of the worker ID. During her fieldwork among poor youth in Rio, she observed several adolescents, who had acquired formal jobs through an NGO program, flaunt their worker IDs at every opportunity. Even though their employment consisted of minimum-wage jobs with no possibilities of advancement, it provided them with the status of worker and the ability to demonstrate this status through their signed IDs. The *carteira assinada*, according to Veloso, became more important than the

actual job because the worker ID proved that these young men worked and therefore were not bandits.

Rose's initial excitement about obtaining a job that came with a worker ID must be understood within this larger moral order situating the worker in contradistinction to the criminal or low-life *marginal*. Andrea Muehlebach and Nitzan Shoshan (2012) have argued that post-Fordist affect in places like Latin America and South Africa takes the form of a nostalgic longing for Fordist promises that never quite materialized. In certain respects, we can see the fetishization of the worker ID as an affective attachment to Fordism that in the Brazilian context became enshrined in the social rights and state protection bestowed on formally employed workers by Vargas's populist, paternalist state. I would add to this insight that, for many Brazilian poor, Fordist attachments are inflected with other anxieties and desires. The significance of the worker ID for Rose entailed not only the guarantee of full-time employment. It also, and perhaps more importantly, held the promise of shedding the stigma of an activity associated in the wider social imaginary with crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, and begging—a stigma that can carry violent consequences. However, as we will see in what follows, this aspiration clashed with other values and pressures in Rose's life.

### **“I CAN NO LONGER ADAPT”**

Rose, like many *catadores*, began working in early adolescence. She was raised by her grandparents in Brazil's Northeast region. When she was fourteen years old, she came to Rio to live with her mother who had moved there to find work when Rose was still an infant. Rose told me that she had trouble living with her mother, and so she moved out and began supporting herself by selling garlic on the streets of downtown Rio. Like Rose, the work histories of many *catadores* began on the streets or in some other context of informality. João shined shoes at busy transportation hubs. Adilson worked odd jobs as a bricklayer. Funabem sold snacks on the commuter trains that funnel workers into downtown from Rio's outskirts.<sup>4</sup> Dona Helena carried bags for customers at an open-air market, peddled juice on the beach, and sold mints at the entrance of a movie theater.

Most of these *catadores* recounted stories of the increasing difficulties faced by informal workers beginning in the 1990s. In 1993, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, César Maia, launched a series of urban reform projects that focused on the regulation of public space. The urban planner responsible for initiatives in Rio's central business district referred to this project as “straightening-up the house” or “cleaning the landscape.” Such “cleaning-up” involved burying telephone and electric

wires, as well as removing ambulant vendors, street children, and the homeless from highly visible spaces of the city in operations that have continued with subsequent mayors under the name, “The Shock of Order” (Oliveira 2008, 9; Veloso 2012, 664). The *guarda municipal*, a police force responsible for protecting the city’s patrimony—its parks, squares, gardens, beaches, and monuments—was also established during César Maia’s first term (Valverde 2009). The duties of the *guarda municipal* quickly extended to the policing of street vendors operating within these public spaces, actions further spurred by anxieties in recent years over pirated and counterfeit goods sold on the streets of Brazil’s major cities (Dent 2012). Though officers of the *guarda municipal* do not carry arms, they make use of clubs, handcuffs, and in some cases attack dogs when detaining unlicensed vendors and confiscating their goods. Most catadores who had previously worked as street vendors described the loss of merchandise as the harshest consequence of these police actions, which ultimately inhibited them from continuing to sell on the streets.

Thus, many catadores came to Jardim Gramacho not as a result of losing full-time, waged employment but as a consequence of the enclosure of Rio’s informal economies. Following the crackdown, few catadores who had worked as street vendors turned to regular employment. As one catador stated succinctly, “I worked for four years at a photocopier, I worked for six years at a grocer, and after *one day* of working as a street vendor, I never again wanted that life of having a boss ordering me around.” Certainly, not all catadores worked previously as street vendors or in some kind of self-employment. Many older men had work histories that included professions such as welder, metalworker, or machines operator. This type of employment, however, became increasingly scarce following the deindustrialization of Rio in the 1990s, and women and younger generations of catadores tended to find domestic work or work in the service industry.

In tracing their work histories, I often asked catadores to describe their first arrival on the dump and found that the verb “to adapt” (*adaptar-se*) or synonyms like “to get used to” (*acostumar-se*, *habituarse*) appeared repeatedly in these narratives. Catadores told me that, following an initial shock, they gradually adapted to the dump—to the smells, to the nauseating fumes of methane gas, to the movement of trucks and tractors, to the feel for distinguishing types of materials. What surprised me in these narratives was not the emphasis on needing to adjust to the grueling work of a catador, a process that resonated with my own experience of the dump. Rather, I was struck by the ways catadores often described their adaptation to the dump as the reason they could now “no longer adapt,” as

they said, to regular employment. This was especially the case for the few catadores who had worked formal jobs prior to coming to Jardim Gramacho and for whom the adjustment to work on the dump also involved the habituation to conditions of self-employment. For example, Alessandra, a catadora who had been employed with a worker ID before collecting on the dump, explained that she now had trouble re-adapting to formal jobs because of her work experience on the dump:

I got used to the dump (*me acostumei*). I have tried to work formal jobs since, but I'm not able to adapt (*não consigo me adaptar*). I worked as a maid in a hotel. I tried. I stayed one month at the hotel. It was so tiring! My boss was always saying, "Straighten up this room! Do this! Do that!" On the dump, this doesn't happen. You don't have a boss. You don't have a schedule. You don't even have days that you have to work. You make your own salary and your own schedule. The catador gets used to doing what he wants, when he wants. He gets used to not having orders. I got used to this too. So, I said, "Do what? I am going back to my dump, because there no one is trying my patience and pestering me."

For many catadores, adapting to the dump meant acclimating to a different temporality of work. When I asked Cordeiro why he had left a formal job for the third time, he told me that there comes a time when you can no longer adjust to a job with a *carteira assinada* because of its different orientation to time: "In a job like that, you have your shift and you have to clock in and out. And as catadores, we are used to a different rhythm of life—to not having a work schedule—and we just don't adapt." As you might recall, Rose's primary explanation for quitting her job similarly centered on time. She did not complain about the workload or an overbearing employer, but instead deplored the five hours she had to stay at work with nothing to do. For someone used to working hard and then taking a break, hanging out with friends, or going home, the requirement to remain at work without working struck Rose as absurd.

In his social history of industrial capitalism, E. P. Thompson (1967, 57) shows how the transition to wage labor entailed "a severe restructuring of working habits," and the creation of a "new human nature." The emergence of a new time-sense oriented by the clock, the moralization of regular work patterns, and a clear division between "work" and "life" were some of the values and dispositions instilled in workers through what Thompson argues was a process of *making* workers into proper waged-employees. When catadores speak of their adaptation

to the dump, they similarly express how the cumulative experience of a particular form of labor can remake inner processes and ways of being in the world. Catadores describe their inability to adapt to wage labor as a consequence of their lived experience of an alternative way of organizing work and life, a process that changed their desires and habits in ways incompatible with regular employment. Cordeiro points to his experience of working without a schedule on the dump as instilling in him a new orientation to time that conflicts with the regularity and stark divisions between working and not working in wage labor. Alessandra perceives the ability of the catador “to do what he wants” on the dump as a reason for her stress when working for someone else, for feeling a loss of control in formal jobs. Finally, Rose—someone long accustomed to coming and going from work, first as an itinerant street vendor and later as a catadora on the dump—expresses intolerable frustration at the demand to remain at work when she had nothing to do.

Just as the transition to wage labor in industrial capitalism entailed the creation of new worker-subjectivities, the transition to precarious labor in contemporary capitalism is also a process involving the transformation of desires, values, and arts of living. In other words, like wage labor, work on the garbage dump is a site of subject-making, which catadores experience and express as transformative of their inner dispositions. We can therefore understand Rose’s return to the dump, in part, as emerging from a worker-subjectivity fashioned under conditions very different than those of her job with the worker ID.

### **LIFE DISRUPTED AND THE DESIRE FOR AUTONOMY**

We can also see the inability of catadores to adapt to regular employment as compounded by the multiple forms of social and economic precariousness that unsettle life in Rio’s periphery. Incarceration, illness, and even the sudden death of a friend or relative are commonplace experiences for catadores. These everyday emergencies disrupt daily routines, stable living arrangements, and networks of care—straining families, especially women, with additional needs and obligations. Sometimes an emergency was the very reason a catador began working on the dump. For example, Ana Carla started to collect recyclables as a child to support her family after a leaking gas canister caught fire, burning their house down and killing several of her relatives. Another catadora, Jocimar, stopped working altogether for some time, relying on the support of friends in Jardim Gramacho, after her husband was shot and killed and her three-year-old daughter died of pneumonia within six weeks of each other. Less tragic everyday emergencies occur

as well: buses break down, houses flood in rain storms, creditors arrive to collect debts, long waits stretch indefinitely at understaffed health clinics, police invade favelas and stop residents for questioning. Life in Rio's periphery can feel continuously interrupted.

At the time that Rose accepted the job with a worker ID, she was living with her husband, Carlos, his two children from a previous marriage, and her own three children. She had also informally adopted the two-year-old child of a neighbor and friend who was dealing with an addiction to crack cocaine. Rose's oldest daughter, who was fourteen-years-old, had recently befriended a young man known for his involvement with drug traffickers in Jardim Gramacho. Rose feared that her daughter's mere association put her in danger and she furthermore worried about leaving the other children in her care. Prior to taking the regular job, Rose and Carlos had alternated the times they worked on the dump so that one of them could always be home to keep a closer watch on their children. Rose gained the stability and status of a worker ID, but as a result she lost control over her schedule and the ability to perform what she saw as important work of caring for kin.

As Rose's story makes clear, regular employment does not always fit easily into the precarious lives of urban poor. The returns of catadores to the dump—and their interpretations of these returns as the inability to adapt—point to the incongruence between their experience of the everyday and the demands of wage labor. In contrast, the ability to come and go from the dump allows catadores not only to manage everyday emergencies but to pursue life projects amidst these disruptions. Catadores often “double-shift” (*dobrar*), meaning that they work day and night consecutively, to earn extra money to pay a debt incurred from a purchase they otherwise could not have made. For some catadores, especially those in their youth, the dump allows a blending of intense work with an intense social life. Rose described her early years on the dump as a time when she alternated collecting with days spent barbecuing, drinking, dancing, and socializing with friends, many of whom have remained important figures in her life.

It might seem that the combined demand and desire for mobility in the lives of catadores echoes neoliberal logics that value flexible labor and flexible bodies (Martin 1994). However, the worker who is able to respond quickly to the changing needs of capital is quite different from the catador who moves between jobs or decides to work in a context with few controls on time and schedule in order, in Rose's case, to be present to her children amidst tension and threats of violence. In the first case, the flexible worker becomes radically individualized;

flexibility emerges from the worker's alienation from her social world. This dissolution of the social is one reason that many theorists have pointed to an emphasis on autonomy as a defining characteristic of neoliberal governmentality (e.g., Rose 1999). Autonomy in the neoliberal sense refers to individual empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and self-help, and to the conception of the self as an economic resource requiring investment, management, and care that the subject brings to social transactions (Brown 2005; Gershon 2011; Rimke 2000). The neoliberal subject is autonomous, Ilana Gershon (2011, 540) argues, in so far as the self is conceived as existing prior to relationships.

I suggest instead that we read the returns of catadores to the dump as a way of claiming what I think of as relational autonomy. By calling this autonomy relational, I seek to emphasize how the desire for mobility among catadores is tightly woven into other desires for sociality, intimacy, and relations of care. The boredom that prompted Rose to quit her job—the way she experienced the demand to stay at work while having nothing to do—became wrapped up with her desire to be attentive to her children at a perilous moment in their lives. Rose's autonomy, manifested in this instance as her ability to come and go from work as she pleased, emerged not from investment in the self but rather from immersion into relations of care. We might also see Rose's involvement in a vibrant party life with friends during her early years on the dump as similarly an entanglement of autonomy and sociality. By relational autonomy, I do not mean to index relational labor *per se*, such as caring for children or elderly parents (see Muehlebach 2012), but instead to underscore how autonomy, for catadores, is always already woven into relationships and forms of social belonging.

My understanding of autonomy among catadores, therefore, resonates more with an alternative meaning of this term that has emerged from social-movement struggles against neoliberalism. Ranging from the struggles of indigenous movements in Latin America to anti-globalization activism in Europe and North America, these movements share an affirmation of autonomy as a way to distance themselves from certain forms of power (see Nash 2001; Graeber 2009; Williams 2008). Autonomy for these activists refers to the relinquishment of state power as an end, to a withdrawal from capitalist markets and modes of consumption, and to the carving out of spaces in which other forms of sociality and co-existence can flourish. Rather than a technique of neoliberal governmentality, autonomy in this sense is an aspect of liberation (Williams 2008). And rather than the freedom of an atomistic self, the liberation that comes from autonomy is about the "ability to create new communities and ties of mutual dependence" (Graeber 2009, 266).



The desire for autonomy among *catadores* does not emerge from a professed, deliberate political project as it does for the social-movement activists mentioned above. That is, *catadores* express their autonomy not in terms of a political ideal to be achieved or enacted but as their inability to adapt to regular employment—an inability that stems as much from alternative worker-subjectivities as from the everyday emergencies that disrupt their lives. Autonomy for *catadores*, however, is similar to the political autonomy sought by anti-globalization movements in that both constitute a distancing, withdrawal, or release from particular relations of power. This parallel leads us to see Rose's return to the dump as an act of turning away from the employment contract and from relations of wage labor. By releasing the *carteira assinada*, Rose gains greater self-determination in her everyday labor—to reconfigure her work rhythms, to modify the length, frequency, and intensity of her labor, and to interweave multiple dimensions of her working and non-working life. Moreover, Rose's experience of relative autonomy in her labor enables her to attend to everyday emergencies and thereby sustain her social world. Relational autonomy can thus also be conceived as an art of living through the precarious present, as that which makes possible a continued, shared existence in delicate times.<sup>5</sup>

### THE POLITICS OF DETACHMENT

I began this article by arguing that we focus on the relationship between precarity as a labor condition and precarity as an ontological experience, and that the particular histories and experiences of capitalism in given locations shape how this relationship is articulated. For *catadores*, the everyday emergencies that disrupt the present in Rio's periphery often clash with the rigid conditions of regular, wage-labor employment. Life destabilizes work. The distinction between work and life, of course, is always partly an analytical construct since "life itself" is labor (Arendt 1958, 87), as we see in the work of care that Rose performs to sustain her family and in the work on the self that *catadores* perform in their efforts to adapt to the dump. The recognition that life is also work pushes us beyond the fetishism of waged employment to consider not only joblessness but also the family, home, or even the subject as sites of precarious labor shifting under contemporary capitalism. In short, the returns of *catadores* to the dump suggest that though irregularity and flexibility might be shared qualities of post-Fordist labor, the experience of these conditions shifts dramatically for workers in different class, cultural, and geopolitical contexts.

The returns of catadores to the dump, furthermore, expose the limits of survival and resistance as common analytical frameworks for interpreting the precarious labor of urban poor. The figure of the unemployed worker sifting through refuse on a city dump certainly evokes what Mike Davis (2004, 26) has termed “informal survivalism.” While an understanding of precarious labor as a strategy of survival draws attention to the everyday emergencies that unsettle life in Rio’s periphery, this account overlooks the aversion catadores express to conditions of waged employment as well as the fuller life projects and forms of sociality enabled by their work on the dump. Yet, this is also not a story of resistance, which fails to capture the tension between Rose’s desire for a “real” job with a worker ID and her desire for what I have described as relational autonomy. Perhaps even more important, the concept of resistance suggests an oppositional stance that does not resonate with the affective register of catadores’ returns. Rose’s nonchalant brush of her hand when she tells me she quit her job or Alessandra’s remark that she just can’t adapt to formal employment are expressions that convey detachment, not defiance or even refusal.

I want to conclude by suggesting, instead, that we understand Rose’s return to the dump as an act of release—in the sense of a relinquishment or withdrawal from particular conditions of labor. In the moment that Rose leaves her job to go back to the dump, she lets go of the employment contract and of the organization, subjectivities, and relations of work that it entails. I see in this act of release a politics of detachment that is quite different from the politics of precarity inspired by what Guy Standing (2011, 19) has called the precariat’s “four A’s—anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation.” Especially in post-Fordist contexts of the global North, these affective states and the politics (or anti-politics) of hopelessness that they activate emerge from the continued attachment to an imagined good life, promised by capitalism, that can no longer be realized (Berlant 2011). In contrast, Rose’s act of quitting her job entails a rupture with normative forms of capitalist labor that opens up the possibility of other ways of fashioning work and life. The precarious labor of catadores, at once suffering and refuge, allows relationships to be woven, life projects to be pursued, and social worlds to be reproduced amidst the disruptions of the here and now. The garbage dump becomes, then, not an overdetermined end for Rio’s poor. Rather, the returns of catadores to the dump constitute a politics of detachment that enables life to be lived in the precarious present.

**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the relationship between precarity as a labor condition and precarity as an ontological experience in the lives of urban poor in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The focus is on a garbage dump on the outskirts of the city where thousands of Rio's poor, known as catadores, reclaim recyclables for a living. Attending to cyclic moments in which these workers leave the dump for other jobs and then return, I explore how everyday emergencies in Rio's periphery often clash with the rigid conditions of regular, wage-labor employment. These comings and goings of catadores result from a tension between the desire for "real" work and the desire for what I describe as relational autonomy, made possible by the conditions of wageless work. The article considers how specific histories and experiences of capitalism in the global South differentially shape the articulation of precarious labor with precarious life. I conclude by suggesting that the returns of catadores to the dump do not signal an end for Rio's poor, but rather constitute a politics of detachment that enables life to be lived in fragile times. [precarity; urban poverty; unwaged labor; waste]*

**NOTES**

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1. Research trips included 1–3 month periods in 2005, 2007, and 2012, and a continuous year during 2008–2009.
2. For a different use of the term "relational autonomy" in feminist philosophy and ethics, see MacKenzie and Stroljar (2000).
3. See Medina (2007) for a global comparative perspective on waste reclaiming.
4. Funabem acquired his nickname because of his background as a street child who lived in facilities operated by Brazil's National Foundation for the Welfare of Minors (FUN-ABEM). Funabem is one of a few publicly known political activists in Jardim Gramacho who requested that I use his name to give credit to his views and life story. For those catadores who are not publicly active and did not make this request, I use pseudonyms.
5. See Clara Han (2011, 2012) for an analysis of an alternative, though similarly oriented, way of living through the present, by way of credit taken up by poor urban families in Santiago, Chile.

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