

12-1-2018

## Kathleen M. Millar. Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Daniel Ervin Ph.D.

UC San Diego Department of Internal Medicine, ervindaniel213@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ervin, Daniel Ph.D. (2018) "Kathleen M. Millar. Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 19.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1451

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Kathleen M. Millar. *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump*.  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.**

*Reclaiming the Discarded* delves into the lives and experiences of people working and living in and around *Jardim Gramacho*, a massive landfill on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This landfill was for a time the largest in Latin America and has been the focus of a number of scholarly works as well as an acclaimed art project and related documentary (*Waste Land*). Millar spent two years, from 2008 to 2009, living near the landfill and working as a *catador* (picker); she also made several shorter trips to the area bookending these dates. Millar's work consists of ethnographic research with *catadores* and residents of the neighborhood where the landfill is located as well as interviews with stakeholders from related organizations. The book is grounded in labor; Millar's central question is why *catadores* begin, continue, and return to this type of labor. Each chapter contains a mix of personal histories, which the author uses as a foundation to explore related ideas on existing academic research and novel ideas on semantics and ontology.

Millar begins with a lengthy and mostly theoretical introduction, which includes a geographic and political introduction to the area around *Jardim Gramacho*. Among other themes, Millar describes her attempts to view the *catadores*' activities outside of the boundaries of wage labor or capital exchange and instead through the anthropological frame of "forms of living." In this way, she draws parallels between the *catadores*' work and other types of household work. In Chapter 1, *Arriving Beyond Abjection*, Millar gives a history of the landfill in *Bairro Jardim Gramacho* and of people arriving to the landfill. She skillfully uses individual stories to connect to the larger histories of Rio and Brazil. Beginning in the 19th century, she paints the neighborhood as bucolic—though lacking in infrastructure before the land was designated as a landfill in the late 1970s. Many of the original *catadores* were part of Brazil's rural-urban migration to Rio, while others were already working as *catadores* at other landfills and "followed the garbage" to the site in Rio. She attributes the rise in *catador* numbers to changes in Brazil's economy and high unemployment in the 1980s. Relatedly, she asserts that the increase in street children at the dump in the late 1980s and 1990s was caused by police violence in Brazil's *favelas* and oppressive institutions for children. Finally, she notes a boom in counts of *catadores* in the 2000s despite the improved economy and existing social welfare programs and notes that many current *catadores* originally labored 'on the street' as vendors until their businesses were halted by a state crack-down on unlicensed vendors. Although it is probably a bit facile to connect each of these large social or macro-environmental changes to individual *catadores*—and Millar provides little evidence to do so—this chapter is interesting and useful to those unfamiliar with Brazil's history and serves as an excellent introduction.

In Chapter 2, *The Precarious Present*, Millar presents stories of why *catadores* leave the landfill and why they return. She posits that everyday emergencies and the insecurities of the poor can prevent *catadores* from keeping typical 'wage-labor' jobs, whereas the dump offers autonomy and flexibility, while the *catadores* themselves argue that dump work changes them in ways that make it difficult to stop working there. Repeatedly, the status of more 'formal' jobs lures *catadores* away, but they return after the strictures of such formal jobs conflict with other demands on their resources. Millar discusses how 'precarity' can be normality for those at the bottom of the hierarchy. While others have written that precarious employment causes precarious lives, Millar posits that for *catadores*, precarious lives cause precarious employment, leading to *catadores*' frequent return to the landfill. Unlike many other forms of part-time or 'piecemeal'

employment, the landfill is always available to be harvested, regardless of hour, season, or economic or political conditions. This flexibility enables *catadores* to structure their work around the ‘everyday emergencies’ of their lives. Even the multitudinous types of refuse in the dump offer a different type of stability, as *catadores* can collect and sell different materials to offset any changes in the prices of others.

Chapter 3, *Life Well Spent*, also concerns returns to the landfill but changes the scale to discuss how the landfill fills *catadores*’ day-to-day needs. This chapter is a bit of a mixed bag, also containing ideas about ‘living well,’ tenuous links to philosophy, an accounting of how a *catador* spends her money, as well as some discussion of addicts and addiction at the landfill. Chapter 4, *Plastic Economy*, moves focus from returns to barriers to returning, while also discussing political regulations at the landfill and how actors in this system interpret these rules in their own fashion. She describes how landfill and state organizations have attempted to formalize *catadores*’ work, which has primarily involved restricting or removing many of the freedoms and flexibilities that the author finds to be central to the *catadores*’ attachment to the landfill. A clear example of this is the regulation that *catadores* must wear numbered work vests to enter the site. Initiated as one of the means of formalization, this rule is circumvented by *catadores* to continue to work in the manner that they wish, and also used by those in the landfill system to extract bribes from or lower prices for materials bought from the *catadores*.

Chapter 5, *From Refuse to Revolution*, is a history of a *catador* workers’ collective and describes its initiation, expansion, formalization, and apparent breakdown. Millar convincingly argues that the increasing rules and structure of the association bring it into conflict with the desires of its members. Despite supporting the continuing theme of autonomy in the book, the importance of this association in the larger picture of *Jardim Gramacho* is not established. With perhaps 50 out of the approximately 2000 *catadores* as members at its peak, the association represented only a fraction of a percent of active workers. There is at least one other *catador* cooperative, organized by owners of the dump, which is mentioned only in passing, limiting the reader’s understanding of the context surrounding this association. The chapter also discusses informal chore-sharing groups called “unions,” the permanence and popularity of which (as a type of organization) she attributes to their flexibility, as the unions themselves often reform daily. The book concludes with the formal closing of the dump and *catadores*’ views on what comes next for them as they reminisce, ‘wait for what’s next,’ or seek employment elsewhere.

This book is a well written, engaging, clear-eyed ethnography of people who work in and around the *Jardim Gramacho* landfill. Millar wisely lets *catadores* tell their own story without inserting judgement or pathos. The theme that emerges from the book is one of freedom, as *catadores* repeatedly choose economic and personal flexibility and autonomy. Like similar works, this detailed and valuable description of quotidian life is accompanied by some dense and often impenetrable theory and philosophy. The book is at its best when discussing the ethnographic work and ideas that arise directly from this and can lose its way (or at least this reviewer) when discussing semantics or more distant theory. Despite these flaws, this work is a valuable and interesting addition to research.

Daniel Ervin PhD  
University of California, San Diego  
ervindaniel213@gmail.com