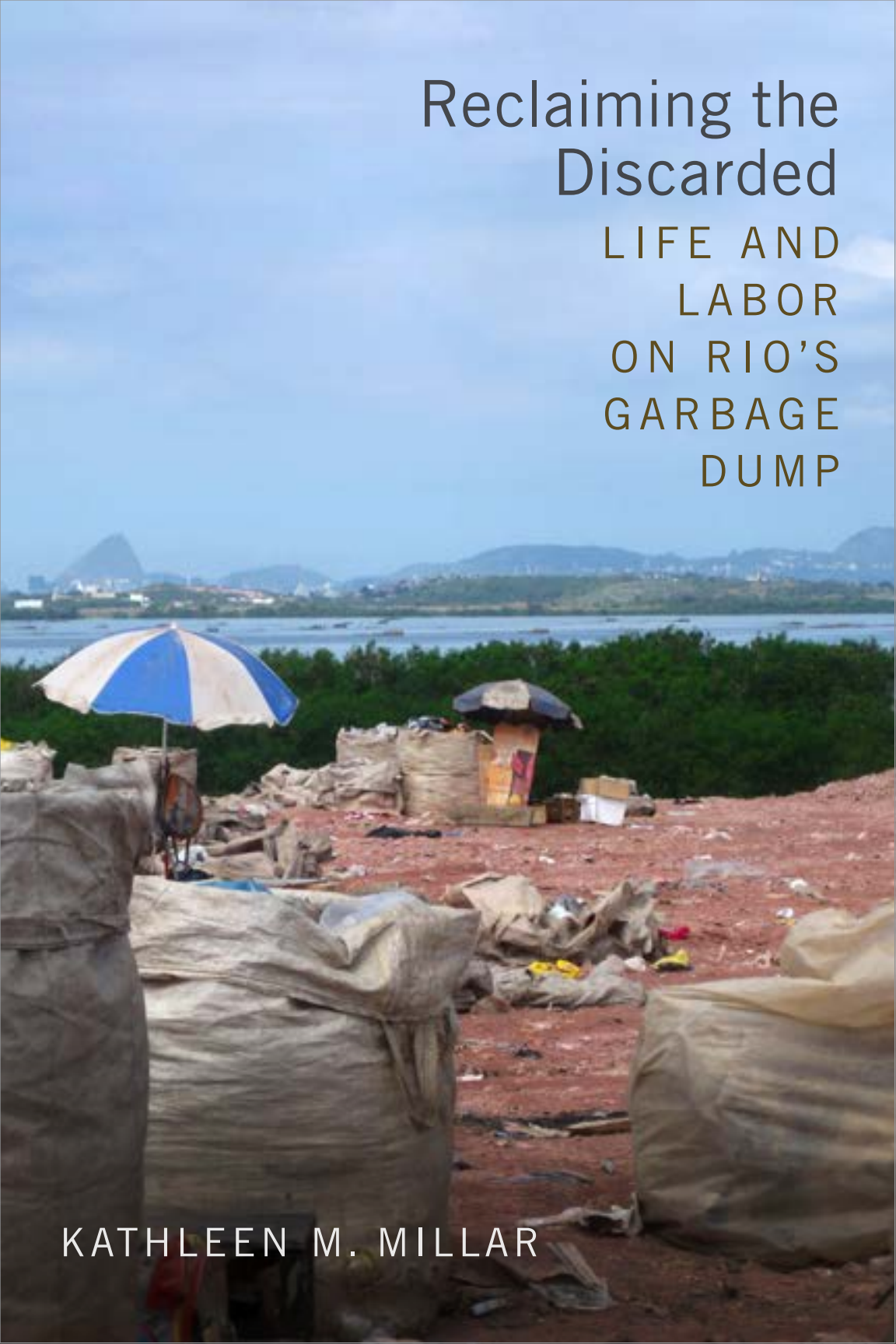
Reclaiming the Discarded

LIFE AND LABOR ON RIO'S GARBAGE DUMP



KATHLEEN M. MILLAR

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Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump · KATHLEEN M. MILLAR

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For Chris

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Introduction

The dump is a desert—dusty, shadeless, its dirt crust orange and cracked. Unless of course it rains, as it often does for days on end in the winter months in Rio de Janeiro. The rain turns the dirt into a thick sludge, revealing shreds of plastic bags buried just inches beneath the surface. Eighteen-wheeler trucks carrying hundreds of tons of garbage from across the metropolis sink into the muck, teetering dangerously to one side and then the other as they make their way to the unloading zone. But the rain seems a faint memory on this hot January morning. From the southeastern edge of the dump, we watch a hazy sunrise above Rio's tourist attraction Sugarloaf, fifteen miles away on the other side of Guanabara Bay. The murky water of the bay, well over a hundred feet below us, seems oddly inviting.

Seu Bernardo stops the truck, puts it in neutral, and leans over my lap to help pry open the rusted cab door.[1] He waits while I go to the back of the truck to grab my three burlap sacks. As I come back around to Seu Bernardo's side of the truck, he sticks his head out the window to tell me something about another load of plastics . . . back in the late afternoon . . . if I need a ride. . . . His speech is low and raspy, a consequence of having lost a lung to tuberculosis years ago, and I struggle to make out his words over the idling engine.

I watch as Seu Bernardo's truck pulls away, and then I hear a voice behind me, calling my name. I turn to find Eva and Fabinho waving me over to a cluster of burlap sacks overflowing with plastic bottles. Both Eva and Fabinho are *catadores*, or "pickers," who collect and sell recyclables on the dump for a living. Ever since trucks began emptying waste into the mangrove swamp at the edge of a peripheral neighborhood called Jardim Gramacho in the late 1970s, catadores have sorted through this garbage, retrieving scrap metal, plastic, and paper. In the early years, a few hundred catadores worked on the dump. Most came to Jardim Gramacho from other city dumps that had closed, "following the garbage," as they recounted. By 2005, the year I first came to Jardim Gramacho, the dump had become the largest in Latin America. Dozens of scrap yards dotted the neighborhood. Pigs, raised on reclaimed food scraps, roamed the streets. Used electronics shops, stands selling gloves and water, and shacks rented out for showers and changing rooms clustered at the base of the dump. Nearly all this activity was connected to the work of catadores. Their numbers now reached over two thousand.

As I approach Eva and Fabinho, I notice that Eva looks especially ragged. The hairnet and baseball cap she always wears are missing and a film of dust and sweat coat her forehead and arms. "I was buried last night," she tells me when I arrive. And then: "Do you have a cigarette?"

I drop my bundle of burlap sacks on the ground and rummage in my pouch for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. I hand them both to Eva, who pulls out a mashed cigarette and then passes the pack to Fabinho. "What happened?" I ask.

It was a tractor, Eva tells me. She had been collecting all night. By early morning, she was tired and her legs dragged, and she ended up slipping in front of a tractor that bulldozed a mound of garbage on top of her. She was buried. She couldn't breathe. The weight of all that garbage. The tractor driver did not see her fall, but luckily another catador noticed and grabbed her arm. And what if no one had seen her? Eva's voice begins to quiver.

"Easy, *calma*," Fabinho says softly.

I suggest that Eva go home. But she wants to wait until Seu Bernardo returns with the truck so that she can take down her two sacks full of plastic. Fabinho offers to tie up Eva's two sacks, and I help him weave blue cord through frayed slits in the side of each sack, cinching the cord tightly over an assortment of empty drink bottles. The bottles crackle under the pressure.

"This is my last time on the dump," Eva suddenly announces. "When I leave, I'm not coming back."

"*Calma*," Fabinho says again, "you just had a scare."

"No. I'm serious," Eva insists. "I'm not coming back."

BUT EVA DID RETURN. That evening she called me to see if I wanted to go collect with her the following morning—early, before sunrise, to avoid the worst of the heat.

The next morning, as Eva and I made our way to the dump in near darkness, I kept thinking of the very first conversation I ever had with a catador in Jardim Gramacho, named Tião. At the time, I was just visiting. I did not even know that I would later return, over several years, to conduct ethnographic research on the dump. As Tião walked with me to the bus stop at the end of my visit, he commented:

"Catadores often say: I came here and I thought it was a horrible place and that I would never stay. But that was eight years ago or ten years ago, and here I am to this day."

"Why do they stay, then?" I asked.

"Oh, you'll see," he replied. "You might leave Jardim Gramacho, but you almost always come back."

WHY RETURN TO the dump? Why go back to working as a catador? In both scholarly presentations and casual conversations regarding my research in Jardim Gramacho, I have been asked many questions: whether the work is dangerous, how bad the garbage smells, who controls access to the dump, whether as many women collect as men, what the most surprising or valuable object was that a catador ever found. I have never been asked why catadores keep going back to the dump. Over time, I realized that this question is never asked because the answer is assumed. That is, the seemingly self-evident explanation for why catadores collect on the dump is that they do so out of necessity, as a means of survival. Eva, who insisted that she was finished collecting for good, must have returned to the dump because she had no other option. The story ends before it begins.

The tendency to frame work like that of catadores in terms of necessity stems in part from its classification as "informal." Ever since Keith Hart (1973) first proposed the concept of the informal economy in the 1970s

to capture the income-generating activities of urban migrants in Ghana, wageless work in the informal economy has largely been understood as a recourse of urban poor who are left out or left behind by global capitalism. From this perspective, sifting through refuse on a city dump is one income-generating activity among a multitude performed by those who cannot find waged employment. Furthermore, unlike Karl Marx's (1990) concept of the industrial reserve army of workers who were meant to be brought back into employment once periods of stagnant growth had passed, the informal economy is increasingly seen not as a temporary fix but as a final destination for those no longer needed by global capital. The garbage dump thus appears as an end zone in a double sense: the burial grounds for unwanted things, the end of the line for urban poor.

This book takes a different perspective. It explores how work on the dump is not an end for Rio's poor but rather an experience of continual return. When I first began meeting catadores on the dump, I asked them where they lived, thinking they would tell me Chatuba, a bustling patchwork of scrapyards and makeshift bars at the base of the dump, or Maruim, a former swampland on the opposite side of the dump. To my surprise, many catadores told me that they lived on the far western side of Rio or in another municipality of the metropolitan area—a distance that required multiple buses to arrive home. Renting tiny shacks of reclaimed plywood in Jardim Gramacho, these catadores stayed near the dump for days or weeks at a time before returning home for periods that could also last days or weeks. Even in the case of catadores who lived in Jardim Gramacho, I found flows into and out of work on the dump to be common. Some departures, as in Eva's story, were abrupt. Others extended for so long that it could seem that a catador had disappeared. But almost always, as Tião had told me, catadores came back.

The comings and goings of catadores hardly fit the image of life subsumed by the work of subsistence. And yet persistent notions of informal labor as a product of scarcity or a last resort leave little room to ask why this work is *taken up* by those who pursue it, how it emerges from and fashions particular social and political relations, and how it expresses different visions of what life is for. As this book traces the departures and returns of catadores to the dump, it asks how wageless work coheres within the trajectory of a life as lived. These trajectories take their own paths. But as they do so, they weave together life and labor, value and waste, and the city and its margins in ways that this book seeks to understand.

WORK IN THE LANGUAGE OF WASTE

When I began studying the work of catadores, I was struck by the numerous references to waste that suffused scholarship on work and unemployment. In 2004, just prior to my first arrival in Jardim Gramacho, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman published his book *Wasted Lives* in which he describes how modernization has made the unemployed "redundant," a population that is "disposed of *because of being disposable*" (12, emphasis in the original). Many subsequent works denouncing the pernicious effects of neoliberal capitalism echoed this discourse, referring to those whose labor is not needed by capital as being made into a "superfluous population," a "surplus humanity," or even the "human-as-waste."[2] Of course, the association of the wageless with waste is not entirely new. In the late nineteenth century, Marx described the lumpenproletariat—his term for the unemployable fraction of the working class, consisting of vagabonds, petty criminals, and beggars—as both the "refuse of all classes" (1963: 75) and as a mass "living on the crumbs of society" (1964: 50).[3] As in Marx's depiction here, I started noting a slippage in contemporary works between being discarded (by capital) and subsisting on the discarded, indexing catadores in a double sense. It seemed no accident that the cover of Bauman's *Wasted Lives* portrays an emaciated figure scouring a garbage dump or that trash-picking is commonly cited as the subsistence activity of so-called surplus populations. In studies of contemporary labor conditions, the figure of the scavenger has reemerged as iconic of wageless life. This led me to ask what prompted a language of waste to be revived. More importantly, what were the consequences—both for theory and for politics—of understanding the unemployed in these terms?

Such questions can only be answered by connecting the discourse of disposable life to increasing concerns over a crisis of work. Beginning in the 1980s, deindustrialization in North America and Europe led to pronouncements that these societies had reached the end of work (Rifkin 1995), the end of the working class (Gorz 1982), and were facing a jobless future (Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994). In the 2000s, unemployment skyrocketed in parts of Europe, particularly among youth, spurring marches and demonstrations that converged on a new worker identity of the "precariat." A composite of the words *precarious* and *proletariat*, the term *precariat* indexed the unstable work and life conditions of those in search of employment or those perennially moving from one temp job to the next.

The 2008 financial crisis in the United States and the rise in unemployment and inequality that followed seemed to further erode the expectation that lifelong, full-time employment was guaranteed, if not for all, then at least for the middle class. Precarity soon became a recurrent theme in studies of life in advanced capitalism, fueling the sense that the historical present is a time of crisis, at the center of which is work—or rather, its loss.

This discourse around a crisis of work has furthermore become global, though its content shifts significantly in the case of Brazil or other sites of the Global South where full-time waged employment was never the norm, especially for the urban poor. Here the narrative focuses not so much on the erosion of secure employment once associated with the Keynesian-Fordist era of capitalism, but rather on the explosion of urban slums and informality. Early work on the informal economy viewed the income-generating activities of urban poor as a transitional moment in a country's modernization process, or as a means for poor migrants from the countryside to eventually find a job or open a small business in the formal sector. The assumption was that the informal economy would eventually disappear as developing countries industrialized and gradually adopted policies and practices associated with modern capitalist economies.[4] But by the turn of the millennium, the trend seemed to be occurring in reverse. Urban populations in the Global South were growing rapidly, and many of the inhabitants in these new megacities lived and worked in unplanned settlements increasingly referred to, despite their differences, as "slums." In several high-profile publications by both scholars and policymakers, informality was declared not to be the past but the future of the urban world.[5] A 2008 UN Habitat report estimated that 85 percent of all new employment worldwide occurs outside formal relations of production (UN Habitat 2008: xiv). In response, pronouncements proliferated that we are witnessing the rise of a "new wretched of the earth" (Davis 2004b: 11) whose main livelihood is "informal survivalism" (Davis 2004a: 24). The expulsion from work and the forms of social exclusion that result has appeared in policy and academic accounts—at times, almost apocalyptically—as the final destiny for a billion human beings across the globe.

Though these crisis-of-work narratives gave rise to the metaphor of disposable life, its use has since proliferated beyond studies focusing primarily on work and unemployment. In anthropology, expressions involving waste or its many synonyms have appeared in ethnographic accounts

of AIDS patients, indigenous communities, slum dwellers, refugees, the homeless, and marginalized youth. At times, the waste metaphor is part of a work's theoretical framework, as in Tova Höjdestrand's (2009: 20) conceptualization of the homeless in postsocialist Russia as "human refuse" and "excrement of the state," or as in João Biehl's (2005: 2) concept of a "zone of social abandonment" to describe an asylum in Brazil where those deemed unsound and unproductive are disposed of and left to die. In other cases, waste appears in isolated expressions that form part of a work's vivid, figurative language. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011: 129), for example, poetically describes indigenous Australians struggling in conditions of late liberalism as those "born at the far end of liberal capitalism's exhaust system." Anne Allison (2013: 16) similarly evokes this sense of exhaustion and exhaust in her powerful depiction of precarity as a kind of "straining"—both in the sense of pushing or stretching oneself to an extreme and in the sense of filtering out the undesirable. What results is a "social and human garbage pit." Each of these waste metaphors captures the extreme effects of today's global political economy, particularly its erosion of institutions and relations that once provided a degree of security and social belonging. However, when taken as a whole, these metaphors become a common refrain that reinforces the notion of human disposability. In other words, to repeatedly invoke images of waste, abandonment, excrement, exhaust, dumping, garbage, and disposal in contemporary ethnography "can lead us to imagine that there really are disposable people, not simply that they are disposable in the eyes of state and market" (Denning 2010: 80).

One reason that a vocabulary of waste has been taken up so readily is that it reinforces a persistent paradigm of seeing the poor, marginalized, and suffering in terms of scarcity. Specific concepts for understanding vulnerable human life have come and gone in anthropology and cognate disciplines, but they have all shared a tendency to define their object of study by what it lacks. In Latin America, for example, the concept of marginality arose in the 1960s at a time when huge numbers of rural poor were migrating to Latin America's growing cities. These migrants were perceived as marginal to mainstream society—as lacking the values and practices, including paid work, that would integrate them into the capitalist modernization process. Eventually debunked by scholars showing that the poor were bound into the political, economic, and social life of the city, marginality theory was quickly replaced by a focus on informality. The concept of

the informal economy recognized and drew attention to the kinds of activities the poor performed to construct their own housing or generate their own income. However, these myriad activities were theorized in the negative, as lacking the order, state regulation, or employment relations associated with normative conceptions of capitalist wage labor. By the 1990s, a new term—*social exclusion*—began appearing in studies of urban poverty in Latin America. Adopted from public policy discourses in Europe on the unemployed, immigrants, and "delinquent" youth, the concept referred to those excluded not only from work but also from political processes and cultural worlds. Though it offered a multidimensional perspective on the ways that urban segregation, social identities, and economic conditions compound the lived experience of inequality, the concept of social exclusion revived the idea from marginality theory that the poor are cut off from society.[6] It was not much of a leap to go from notions of exclusion and expulsion to metaphors of disposable life that began proliferating in the early 2000s. If, for much of the twentieth century, the poor were understood in terms of what they lacked, by the new millennium they were perceived as the very embodiment of lack—made superfluous to the point of becoming human waste.

This book is a critique of scarcity as a persistent paradigm for understanding lives lived in precarious conditions. As unemployed workers who sift through garbage on a city dump, catadores seem to exemplify in extreme form today's notion of disposable life. Yet to see the work of catadores through metaphors of waste forecloses the most important questions. If catadores are superfluous to capital accumulation, then it becomes impossible to ask how the materials they collect are tied into a 200-billion-dollar global recycling industry.[7] Or to ask how their work shapes and is shaped by the political life of the city. Or even to ask what else, beyond mere subsistence, is produced by their labor—what values, social relations, subjectivities, lifeworlds. Though the crisis of work is an issue I address in this book, I do not adopt it as an analytic through which to examine the lives of catadores. Rather, I am interested in how life becomes livable through forms of labor commonly defined in terms of redundancy, abandonment, or exhaust—that is, in terms of waste. How do these forms of labor forge particular life projects? And what connection does this work have to pursuits of the good life, conceived by those who seem to live beyond its bounds?

FORMS OF LIVING

I address these guiding questions in what follows by conceptualizing the act of collecting recyclables on a dump not as a survival strategy, not as informal labor, not even as a purely economic practice. Rather, I argue that the activities of catadores constitute what I call a form of living. This multivalent concept refers first to living in the sense of a means of income, sustenance, or livelihood, as in the idiom "to make a living." Work is thus a central dimension of a form of living, but it is not synonymous with the term. The word *living* in "form of living" is also intended to invoke its additional meaning as the pursuit of a specific mode of inhabiting the world. In other words, a form of living can be understood as, at once, both a livelihood and a way of life.

One of the values of approaching work as a form of living is that it departs from the attachment to waged employment. Wage labor has long been upheld as a source of social ties, dignity, and emancipatory projects in both liberal and critical leftist discourse (Weeks 2011). This is especially the case now that jobs, for many, are increasingly precarious or scarce—a situation that has prompted calls for "decent work" and "job creation," or what sociologist Franco Barchiesi (2011: 25) calls a "politics of labor melancholia." And yet what the celebration of labor and production ignores is wage labor's enduring history as a form of violence and technique of governance. Here I draw on Barchiesi's analysis of the "work–citizenship nexus," in which the linking of wage labor to state narratives of progress and programs of social security becomes a device for turning "unruly" subjects into a manageable, disciplined, industrious population (24). In the Brazilian context, the valorization of waged work as the foundation of the welfare state by President Getúlio Vargas in the early twentieth century, with lasting effects to the present day, has afforded social citizenship to certain (officially recognized, waged) workers while excluding those who do not conform to this model. The work–citizenship nexus is thus a useful reminder that capitalist wage labor is not only a socioeconomic relationship but also a state mechanism for forcibly reducing multiple subjectivities and modes of being in the world into just one—the predictable, governable subject of the worker (Barchiesi 2012b). My emphasis on forms of living aims to break open this reduction, allowing for a diversity of productive actions that do not fit easily into capitalist categories of labor and notions of work.

Wage labor as a reductive category is also echoed in the very language we use to speak about work. Beginning with the writings of Adam Smith (1976) and other political economists in the eighteenth century, the meaning of labor became narrowed from the sense of any productive action to specifically paid employment or work performed for someone else in exchange for a wage (Williams 1983). As capitalist production expanded, the meaning of "work" in common usage was similarly reduced to wage labor, making it possible, for example, for women caring for their households to be seen as "not working" (Collins 1990). Still today—despite several decades of critiques of the conflation of work with paid employment, largely from gender analyses of political economy—wage labor *as* labor remains hegemonic.[8] This is evidenced by the fact that the category of labor requires numerous qualifiers (such as informal, wageless, and unpaid) to accommodate the heterogeneity of productive actions that actually exist in the world. It is furthermore reflected in the idea that the loss of stable employment in neoliberal capitalism is a crisis of *work* that has made millions of workers across the world redundant and superfluous, as if those not employed in wage labor are not engaged in other productive efforts in their lives. In short, the tendency to view work like that performed by catadores in terms of what it lacks begins with the political economic category of labor.

By adopting forms of living as an alternative conceptual frame, I intend to leave open the question of what work is. Catadores were well aware that others often perceived collecting recyclables as akin to begging and therefore as not constituting "real" work, a notion they struggled to contest.[9] They also performed various kinds of activities on the dump in and amid the collecting of recyclables, such as constructing makeshift camps, cooking and sharing meals, playing soccer and other games, listening to the radio, lounging around, and chatting (*bater papo*), that defied work/life and labor/leisure dichotomies. Approaching these activities as composing a form of living draws attention to the ways different notions of work are fashioned, negotiated, contested, and performed in efforts to sustain and reproduce life. It furthermore allows us to consider how work as a category of action may be constituted by a wide range of practices beyond the purely economic.

My use of "form of living" also stems from my interest in the second meaning of "living" as a manner or style of life. This entails particular ways of constructing and inhabiting the world, values and beliefs about what

constitutes a "good life," and the trajectories taken in pursuing life projects. One of the problems with seeing the work of catadores as a survival strategy or a last resort is that it reduces their existential concerns to the (merely) economic, pragmatic, or compensatory.[10] Through forms of living, I explore instead how the returns of catadores to the dump express distinct conceptions of human well-being and ideas of what life is for. The double meaning of form of living—as both livelihood and way of life—thus aims to overcome what arose within modern capitalism as a conceptual division between work and life. As historians and sociologists of capitalism have long shown, by splitting the day into the employer's time and one's own time, capitalist wage labor made it possible to think of work as separate from "life" and introduced related social categories of "leisure" and "free time" (Lefebvre 2008; Thomas 1964; Thompson 1967). This binary between work and life has tended to generate separate conversations in the social sciences between issues of political economy on the one hand and those of phenomenology and subjectivity on the other.[11] Yet labor is constituted not only through states and markets but also through the very meanings workers ascribe to their labor. And forms of living are also formative—shaping life rhythms, habits, and orientations to the world.

In arguing that livelihoods cannot be understood apart from modes of life, I am inspired by the work of the historian E. P. Thompson. In anthropology, Thompson is primarily known for his concept of "moral economy," though this term has often been appropriated by anthropologists indirectly through the work of political scientist James Scott and adapted in ways that diverge widely from its original and specific meaning as a model of economy based on customary and class-specific rights, obligations, and practices (Edelman 2012). To a lesser extent, anthropology has also drawn on Thompson's understanding of class not as a structural category but as a social relationship and historical process—a definition that appears only briefly in the six-page preface to his otherwise momentous tome, *The Making of the English Working Class* (see Goldstein 2003; Mitchell 2015; Walley 2013). While these appropriations of Thompson's thought have certainly been fruitful, I am interested here not in extracting any one specific term or definition from his work but in considering them in the context of what could be described as his overall anti-economistic approach to labor and political-economic change. For example, in the essay that introduces his concept of moral economy, Thompson (1971) begins by critiquing standard historical explanations of food riots in eighteenth-century England as

"rebellions of the belly." That is, Thompson takes issue with the assumption that urban laboring poor rioted simply because they were unemployed, prices were high, grain was scarce, and they were hungry. Thompson notes that despite complex social analysis applied to other populations, somehow when it comes to laboring poor, the tendency is to interpret their actions through the reductive lens of economic need. But scarcity, Thompson argues, can never be the explanation for any human life. Instead, the question becomes: "Being hungry . . . what do people do?" (77). This leads Thompson into an exploration of deeply held notions of the good and the right among laboring people in eighteenth-century England, ultimately arguing that their rebellious actions were as much about moral outrage as they were about hunger.

The explanation of riots as "rebellions of the belly" parallels the assumption that collecting material on a garbage dump constitutes "informal survivalism." Not only does Thompson's anti-economistic stance help disrupt such conventional narratives of deprivation; it also reveals a profoundly humanistic sensibility in the way he constructed his histories of industrial capitalism, always showing how political economy is interwoven with what he called "the arts of living" (1967: 95). For Thompson, this meant that labor is not just a means of subsistence, source of surplus value, or structural condition; it is also fundamentally an *experience* that shapes inner life processes and modes of inhabiting the world. One of his most famous examples was that of the factory bell that rang at fixed times and partitioned the workday—a new experience for workers introduced to wage labor that radically shifted their inner sense of time as well as their rhythms of everyday life.

While retaining Thompson's emphasis on the phenomenology of labor, this book focuses on the experience of work not in wage labor but beyond it. Ethnographically, this has required paying attention to the somatic qualities of collecting on the dump, as in the *feel* different objects have through the lining of a plastic bag. It has meant staying attuned to catadores' own commentaries on their experience, such as their common claim that collecting on the dump radically transforms the self in ways that make it impossible to readapt to the conditions of wage labor. And above all, it has involved tracing how work is not only a livelihood but also a key site of struggle in everyday efforts to construct the good—not in the sense of the normative and prescriptive but in the sense of what is valued, desired, and aimed for in the living out of life—in this case, within the precarious con-

ditions of Rio's periphery. In short, the returns of catadores to the dump manifest how work is fundamentally entangled with moral and existential questions of what it means to live well.

Finally, by exploring forms of living, I aim to draw attention to form itself. Work that unfolds in relations other than those of wage labor continues to be described as informal, though what exactly it means for work to be informal remains an unresolved and heavily debated issue.[12] This is partly due to the expansiveness of the category, encompassing such a wide range of activities as street vending, home brewing, car-watching, busking, begging, shoe shining, domestic work, moto-taxis, piracy, pawnbroking, gambling, hustling, sex work, and drug dealing. What these myriad income-generating activities share is their divergence in some way from state-regulated, officially recognized, institutionally organized forms of work in capitalist societies. In other words, these diverse types of work are defined primarily by what they are *not*. In the case of catadores, their work does *not* occur in relations of wage labor. Their earnings are *not* recorded or taxed. Their presence at a waste disposal site, their activities there, and the conditions of the dump itself do *not* comply with several of Brazil's environmental laws. Their work is informal because it does not con*form*.

This does not mean that the work of catadores lacks form. If anything, collecting on the dump is all about creating form out of spaces and materials that are otherwise amorphous. I realized this for the first time on a day, early on in my fieldwork, when I arrived on the dump alone. That morning, having overslept, I had missed the stream of flatbed trucks that carry catadores to the dump's summit at dawn and had decided to hop a ride with a scrap dealer I knew during his midmorning trip to pick up a new load of plastics.

After the scrap dealer let me off, I stood at the edge of the staging area with my bundle of burlap sacks perched awkwardly against my shoulder and scanned the scene for someone I recognized. There was no one. Three garbage trucks had just pulled in, prompting most catadores to race off to the unloading zone a few dozen yards in front of me. I knew that all I needed to do was to spread out my three sacks on the ground, grab the oversized plastic bag I used to gather cardboard, and head out to the pile of freshly unloaded waste. But I had no idea where I should drop my sacks. There didn't seem to be an obvious spot unless I opted to leave my sacks quite far from all the action. I hesitated for several minutes, feeling increasingly

self-conscious, and then I noticed a fairly open space in the dense patchwork of burlap sacks before me.

Relieved, I dropped my bundle and began arranging the sacks one by one. Just as I spread out the third, I was startled by someone shouting obscenities at me. I looked up to see a young guy immediately in front of me, carrying what was clearly a heavy barrel of loose paper, books, and magazines. I quickly jumped to the side and he passed, swearing and yelling that I was in the pathway. What pathway?

But then I saw it. A gap between burlap sacks, barely a couple of feet wide, led all the way to the unloading zone. I was standing in the middle of this trail. During all the times I had trekked back and forth between unloading trucks and my partially filled sacks, I had never realized that I was following a passageway that was marked off and respected by catadores. Though previously unable to see any order to the sacks, their arrangement was now glaringly obvious. It was like looking at one of those "Magic Eye" posters whose hidden image had suddenly come into view.

This was not the only time I had had this kind of experience while learning to collect on the dump. The constant movement of trucks and tractors in open space—arriving, departing, backing up, stopping, turning, dumping, and bulldozing—felt chaotic before I gained a sense of their rhythms. And then there were the ubiquitous black garbage bags whose contents I struggled to discern. The trick, I was told, was to feel for different shapes through the bags and, once found, to distinguish types of plastics by the way their form gives or resists when squeezed. I began to see the flatbed trucks carrying neat rows of rectangular bales of plastic, all sorted by color, as a product of form creation. This plastic was once lumped together with a seemingly indiscriminate mass of stuff that poured from the backs of unloading garbage trucks. To collect on the dump, then, primarily involved recognizing and re-creating order—identifying, gathering, sorting, and bundling. The Portuguese verb *catar*, the root of catador, does not exactly translate as the English verb *to collect*. Rather, it means to sift, select, and separate. It is to search for by way of discriminating.

Given that creating form is central to the activities of catadores, it hardly makes sense to describe their work as informal. But when Keith Hart (1973) proposed the concept of the informal economy, he was not thinking of form in its multiple instantiations—as order, as shaped materiality, as distinction. Rather, he was drawing on a specific meaning of form found in Max Weber's (2003) concept of rationalization in economic life (Gandolfo

2013). For Weber, "the formal" referred to formal rationality, action based on abstract laws that enable systematic, means–end calculation. Hart saw the degree of rationalization of work—the extent to which an enterprise was bureaucratic, institutionalized, and amenable to enumeration—as the key variable separating the formal economy from the informal economy. The income-generating activities of the urban migrants Hart came to know in Ghana in the 1960s convinced him that these new city inhabitants were not so much unemployed as alternatively employed in enterprises with different logics and modes of operation than those of modern capitalism. Yet to call these activities informal inadvertently implied that only one form exists in the world—form based on rational, economistic behavior.

This book dispenses with the conceptual language of the formal and informal economies. In its place, I examine the specific form that work takes, which is why I consider the activities of catadores to constitute a *form* of living. Here, form is not just a synonym for "type" or "kind," but a means to call attention to the ways that different materials, relations, and practices in economic life *take shape*. That is, my aim is to theorize the positive qualities of the economic forms I encountered in Jardim Gramacho, positive in the sense of what something is rather than what it is not. I argue that much of what we associate with informality—the variability, transience, fluctuation, spontaneity, and imitation that characterize many of the practices deemed informal—is instead plasticity or the quality of changing form. However, plasticity is an attribute not only of the activities of catadores, but also of entities that would conventionally be categorized as "formal," such as the waste management company that owned the dump. Indeed, tracing the various actors involved in Jardim Gramacho's recycling industry shows how the plasticity of economic life often emerges out of the interplay between different forms of living, and is therefore fundamentally relational. Plasticity as an analytic thus breaks open the dualistic division of the world into the formal and informal, revealing an array of economic forms with the potential to both shape and be shaped. Ultimately, this inquiry into what form *is* constitutes a critique of formlessness—the notion that some things in the world, whether matter like garbage or an act like collecting recyclables on a dump—lack order in themselves.

By setting aside the concept of the informal economy, this book furthermore contributes to a growing effort to rethink the very idea of economy—arguably the last remaining concept in modern science to be deconstructed by critical theory (Mitchell 2002: 3).[13] Ever since Malinowski (1984) described

the Kula Ring in the Trobriand Islands as a system of exchange based on principles of gift-giving, reciprocity, and social prestige, anthropology has provided innumerable examples of societies whose practices of production and exchange diverge from the utilitarian and calculative orientation of modern market economies. However, by emphasizing alternative kinds of economies (gift economies, peasant economies, moral economies, among others), these studies reinforced the notion of the economy—that the economy as a distinct material domain of human life is something that exists everywhere, even if it looks different in different places (de L'Estoile 2014; see also Mitchell 2002). The concept of the informal economy continues in this vein. The "informal" functions merely as a qualifier, one that furthermore emphasizes lack, thereby leaving the unmarked category of *the* economy intact. As J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) has argued, the problem is not only that the economy has become naturalized by the failure to deconstruct this concept, but that this has attributed to the (capitalist) economy an internal coherence and totalizing force. In contrast to the category of the economy, the concept of forms of living emphasizes process and practice—how certain material relations take shape through everyday actions. Rather than implicitly invoking a norm, it draws attention to a multiplicity of forms, and it captures both material and existential dimensions of life, refusing to uphold the material as somehow more fundamental or "real." In short, forms of living as a theoretical frame allows us to ask what is entailed in producing and reproducing life without reifying the economy as a universal, eternal, and essential domain of social worlds.

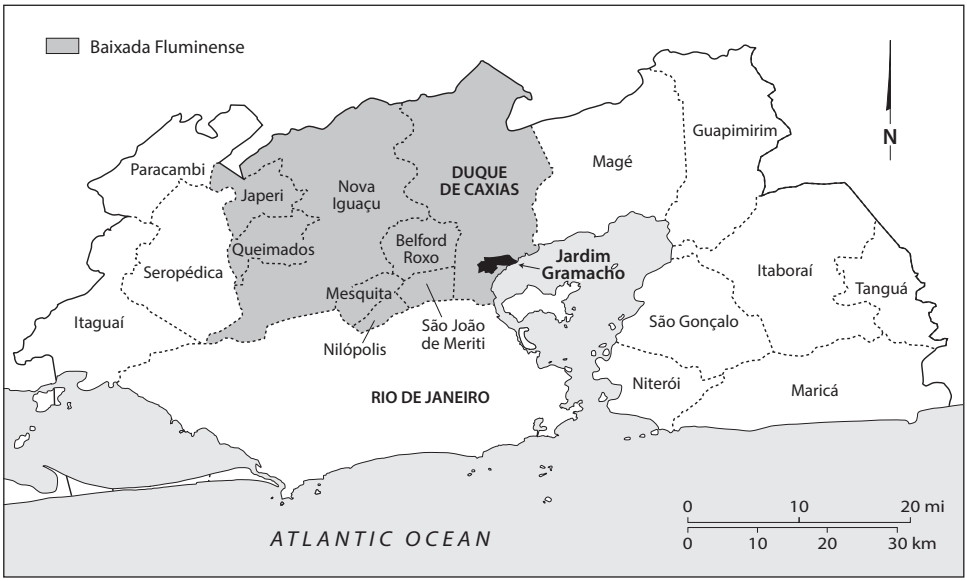
JARDIM GRAMACHO AND THE WORK OF THE FAVELA

Less than five miles as the crow flies from the international airport and less than twenty miles from Rio's downtown, Jardim Gramacho is not far from the center of the city. However, depending on traffic, it can take anywhere from forty minutes to two hours to make one's way from Rio's bus hub at Central Station to the last stop in Jardim Gramacho, located in the neighboring municipality of Duque de Caxias. Along this journey, the urban landscape changes. Rio's beaches, high-rises, and hillside favelas give way to congested highways and car, furniture, textile, and cigarette factories. A multitude of buses clog the side lanes, as they pause momentarily to let passengers on and off. Pedestrians and street vendors cluster at the base of

footbridges that span the highway, Avenida Brasil, every kilometer or so. At times, it is possible to catch a glimpse down one of the narrow streets that lead off the main highway and into dense neighborhoods of half-built houses, some piled three stories high. Merging onto the highway Washington Luiz from Avenida Brasil—thus crossing from Rio de Janeiro to Duque de Caxias—cheap motels and roadside restaurants are interspersed with industrial warehouses.

Bordering Rio's northeastern edge, Duque de Caxias is one of eight municipalities in the metropolitan area that together make up the Baixada Fluminense, a low-lying region of rivers, swamplands, and floodplains.[14] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Baixada's rivers irrigated plantations of sugarcane, rice, corn, and beans and served as transportation routes between the gold-mining region further inland and the ports of Rio de Janeiro (Ferreira 1957).[15] Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, however, intensive logging destroyed much of the original forest of the Baixada, leading to increased flooding, pools of stagnant water, and the proliferation of miasmas and malarial mosquitoes. Health and living conditions deteriorated to such a degree that many residents simply abandoned the area. The population of what is today Duque de Caxias plummeted from over 10,000 inhabitants in 1872 to 800 by 1910 (Beloch 1986: 22).[16] Still today, many residents of Jardim Gramacho, especially those who have built shacks on land below sea level, struggle to keep their homes from flooding during rainstorms. Mosquitoes are so prevalent that one subsection of the neighborhood bears the name Maruim, after a type of mosquito that thickens the air at dusk.

The relationship between the Baixada and the city of Rio de Janeiro has long been fraught. As Rio pursued modernization projects in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Baixada became the choice location for heavy industries, including the largest refinery of Brazil's petrochemical company, Petrobras. While many government officials and residents of the Baixada welcomed industrial projects in the hope that they would bring much-needed infrastructure to the region, the Baixada has also borne the wider social and environmental costs of these development projects. Nothing illustrates this relationship more powerfully than the Jardim Gramacho dump. In September 1978, garbage trucks began arriving in Jardim Gramacho to unload, at the time, three thousand tons of Rio's daily waste into the mangrove swamp at the edge of the neighborhood. Despite federal guidelines prohibiting solid waste dumping in waterways and federal



MAP 1.1. Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area. Drawn by Bill Nelson.

legislation that established mangrove swamps as protected areas, the City of Rio de Janeiro selected one million square meters of mangrove swamp in the neighboring municipality of Duque de Caxias as the new destination for the metropolis's refuse. The establishment of a garbage dump in Jardim Gramacho was considered a development project, sponsored and coordinated by FUNDREM, the Foundation for the Development of the Metropolitan Region, which was created by the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro in 1975 in an effort to recognize the urbanization of Rio's periphery and incorporate neighboring cities into urban planning projects. The site of the new dump belonged to a nineteenth-century plantation that had been appropriated by INCRA, Brazil's National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform. INCRA donated this land to the state of Rio de Janeiro, and FUNDREM coordinated an agreement among the city of Rio and neighboring municipalities to use the area as a garbage dump servicing nearly the entire metropolitan area.[17] Since 1978, roughly seventy million tons of garbage have been dumped in Jardim Gramacho. Ninety percent of this waste has come from the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Though nearly every banana peel, soiled napkin, or plastic wrapping thrown out in Rio de Janeiro eventually ended up in Duque de Caxias,

few *cariocas* (residents of Rio) ever venture into this part of the city. The Baixada has also received relatively little attention, either in the media or in scholarly work, in contrast to Rio's hillside favelas, some of which have featured in internationally acclaimed films, hosted "slum tourism" programs, and more recently become targets of urban development projects and "pacification" campaigns in connection to the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games.[18] This does not mean, however, that the Baixada is marginal to the life of the city. The region's role in the social and political life of the city became clear in several incidents, large and small, during my fieldwork. For example, during a spat between the mayor of Caxias and the mayor of Rio over maintenance of the access road to the dump, the mayor of Caxias shut down the road by bulldozing a trench across it. No trucks could pass, and Rio's garbage was left uncollected on the streets for several days. Outraged, one resident of Rio wrote the following in a letter to the editor in Rio's main newspaper, *O Globo:* "The mayor of Duque de Caxias does not want Rio de Janeiro's garbage deposited within his city. Now, imagine if the mayor of Rio prevented Rio's municipal hospitals from receiving residents of Duque de Caxias?"[19] The observation that Caxias is home to the city's dump, whereas Rio is home to the city's best hospitals, received no comment.[20]

There are other, more subtle ways in which places like Jardim Gramacho fail to be recognized within the social geography of the city. One of these concerns the ways Jardim Gramacho diverges from hegemonic notions of the "favela" through which poverty, inequality, and informality are understood in Brazil. Usually translated as "shantytown," the favela has historically signified an informal settlement constructed by the poor on illegally occupied land that lacks access to public services. In Rio, many of these settlements were built on the rugged hills that rise above the city's middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. The favela is therefore often defined in opposition to the *bairro* (an officially recognized "neighborhood" of the city) or in opposition to the *asfalto*, or "pavement," the part of the city with well-maintained urban infrastructure and public services. Though favela urbanization programs in the past two decades have brought pavement, sewage systems, and other basic services to favelas and many are now officially recognized by the city as bairros, the favela–bairro or favela–asfalto distinction continues to operate in the public imaginary (Cavalcanti 2014). Since the late 1980s when drug-trafficking organizations began operating in these hillside communities, the favela also became synonymous in the

public imaginary with drug dealing and armed violence, both between rival gangs and between drug dealers and police.

According to these ways that Rio's communities have been defined, Jardim Gramacho is *both* a bairro and a favela. Officially, the city of Duque de Caxias classifies the community as a "sub-bairro" of a larger area called Gramacho. The part of Jardim Gramacho that is closest to the bordering Washington Luiz highway, where various industrial warehouses are located, has long been paved and has received basic services for several decades. Many of the brick-and-mortar homes in this area are well constructed and in good condition. In contrast, the part of Jardim Gramacho that is closer to the dump, which residents often refer to generally as "the inside," is lined with shacks built from scrap materials or with partially built, autoconstructed brick-and-mortar homes. Some of this area was paved in the early 2000s, but sections of it continue to expand along dirt paths that flood in rainstorms. This area has also served as the location for Jardim Gramacho's *boca de fumo*—the name given to a site where drugs are sold, literally meaning the "mouth of smoke." While shifting its specific location periodically to avoid detection, during my fieldwork the boca always operated within one of the sections closest to the dump (or when hiding out during a police invasion, on the dump itself). Yet while Jardim Gramacho has elements of both a bairro and a favela, this is not to say that there are two separate, clearly demarcated areas of the community. Residents frequent the same schools, day care centers, bars, and grocery stores. Scrapyards, which cluster in the more favela-like areas, are also interspersed among other warehouses on the main road. Some residents rented homes on more established streets of the neighborhood and at a later point built their own shacks in areas of Jardim Gramacho that began expanding into land that was formerly mangrove swamp. And despite its official designation as a sub-bairro, Jardim Gramacho is part of the wider constellation of favelas in Rio whose relations to each other are shaped by the relations among drug-trafficking organizations. For example, it would be dangerous for a resident of Jardim Gramacho, which was controlled by the drug-trafficking organization Comando Vermelho (Red Command), to attend a *baile funk* party in a favela where a rival gang operates. The difficulty in defining Jardim Gramacho as a bairro or a favela demonstrates that this distinction is more of a symbolic construction than an objective representation of urban space.[21] This leads to the question of what ideological work the category of the favela performs—to ask not only what the

favela–bairro distinction reveals about poverty and inequality in Rio de Janeiro, but also what it masks.

One answer to this question of what the favela–bairro distinction masks is work. The favela has long been associated with the absence of work. In the early twentieth century, depictions of favelas as sites of vagrancy or *malandragem* were common in public debates on poverty. In her intellectual history of the favela, Brodwyn Fischer (2014) quotes a 1908 essay describing the people of a favela as "making merry in indigence rather than working, managing to construct a camp of indolence in the midst of a great city . . ." (18). By the late twentieth century, the association of the favela with the figure of the *malandro*, the vagrant or hustler who disdains waged work, shifted to the association of the favela with the *bandido*, the criminal involved in drug trafficking. Both of these figures have been perceived in Brazil's public imaginary as the antithesis of the "honest" worker. This is not to say that such portraits of favelas have gone uncontested. Many policymakers and social scientists have expended great effort on showing that favela residents are indeed workers. One of the best-known examples of this work is Janice Perlman's (1976) study *The Myth of Marginality*, which argued that favela residents contribute significantly to the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the city, including through their provision of labor. But even these critiques of marginality have tended to emphasize work that favela residents perform *outside* the favela, as domestic workers, repairmen, construction workers, janitors, doormen, and security guards in Rio's middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. That is, even if favela residents are perceived as workers, the favela itself is rarely seen as a space of production.

Much like the category of the informal economy, the favela has persistently been defined in terms of lack—a lack of order, services, security, and, most importantly for the case of Jardim Gramacho, a lack of work.[22] As a result, scholars of urban poverty have tended to represent the favela as a "symptom of contemporary crisis" and to focus on the more spectacular or dramatic aspects of favela life such as drug trafficking and urban violence (Fischer 2014). Certainly the voluminous literature on violence in Rio's favelas has provided much-needed insights into social relations among drug traffickers, residents, police, and the wider city.[23] But this predominant focus on armed violence has left other dimensions of life in urban poverty in the dark, fueling widespread notions that the drug trade, policing, and violence are the only, or at least the most significant, attributes of

favelas. The work that catadores perform in Jardim Gramacho's bustling market in recyclables complicates this singular portrait of Rio's favelas. Far from an absence, work is a central dimension to this community's history, development, and relationship to the broader city.

Jardim Gramacho not only defies dominant understandings of favelas as spaces of nonwork but, more importantly, reveals the centrality of work to the life projects of urban poor across Rio de Janeiro. Few catadores grew up in Jardim Gramacho, and even after coming to the dump, most continued to maintain a home, families, or friendships in other parts of the city. The time that catadores spent away from Jardim Gramacho led them to the far western side of the city, to favelas that rise above the wealthy South Zone, to other favelas that line Avenida Brasil in the north, to the Ilha Governador where Rio's international airport is located, to other municipalities of the Baixada Fluminense, and to other neighborhoods in Duque de Caxias. As home to the city's largest garbage dump, Jardim Gramacho is unique. Yet it is also a place where people gathered from the city's farthest reaches. This meant that when catadores returned to the dump, they brought with them histories, networks, and forms of living that crisscrossed Rio's urban expanse.

THE WORK OF ETHNOGRAPHY: INQUIRIES AND METHODS

I first came to Jardim Gramacho the way almost everyone does—by word of mouth. A street catador named Paulo told me about the place on a quiet morning in January 2005 when I met him while wandering through downtown Rio de Janeiro. I saw him from across a wide avenue, hunched over, methodically pulling a cart laden with flattened cardboard boxes. A flag pinned to the back of his cart caught my eye. Bright green with a simple black drawing of a cart at its center, I recognized it as the flag of Brazil's National Movement of Catadores of Recyclable Materials (MNCR). At the time, I was interested in the political mobilization that had recently sprung up around this type of work. I crossed the street.

"If you are interested in the movement here," Paulo told me, "you should also meet the catadores from Gramacho, Jardim Gramacho."

A few days later, I found a taxi driver who lived near Jardim Gramacho and knew where to go. When we eventually arrived in Jardim Gramacho, we pulled off the highway onto a dusty road, following a lumbering eighteen-wheeler truck with an orange trailer and the word *Prefeitura,* "The City [of

Rio de Janeiro]," painted in thick black letters on the side of the cab. The truck rocked clumsily on spots of broken pavement, making brutal sounds of stressed metal and engine as it pounded through the street. We drove by warehouses, corner bars, a grocer, a chicken shop, a bakery, and several evangelical churches. Children wearing public school uniforms chased each other. In front of a bar, several young guys gathered around a jukebox that played a music video accompanying the blaring *funk* song. A couple of pigs roamed at the edge of the sidewalk. Coming from the opposite direction, a flatbed truck passed us, stacked with bundles of crushed plastic bottles. Another truck followed, this one carrying a dozen or more burlap sacks filled with what looked like sheets of paper. Perched atop these sacks sat several men and women, all wearing tattered orange or yellow vests. Some of these riders seemed half asleep, while others shouted boisterously to acquaintances below. I began to notice many people on the sides of the street wearing these same vests and carrying bundles of burlap sacks or large plastic containers on top of their heads. The dust had now thickened into a haze, making the scenes to my left and right seem like photographs developed with a brush effect.

Transfixed by all this activity, I did not immediately notice the mountain rising up in front of us, nor the sign at the end of the road that read "The Metropolitan Landfill of Gramacho."

We stopped at the entrance. A guard approached the taxi and then directed us to a small, single-story white building that housed the dump's administrative offices. I spent the next several hours chatting first with the manager of the dump and then with Tião, who, at the time, was the twenty-five-year-old leader of a newly formed Association of Catadores. I learned in those initial conversations that trucks bring eight thousand tons of garbage to Jardim Gramacho every day. That the garbage dump rests on a former mangrove swamp, where locals once caught crabs. That dozens of scrapyards fill the neighborhood of Jardim Gramacho where materials are sorted, bundled, and then sent out again into the world. And that for the last thirty years, hundreds and eventually thousands of catadores have made their lives reclaiming plastics, paper, cardboard, metals, rubber, and a multitude of other objects that still hold some use-value.

I would return to Jardim Gramacho several times between 2005 and 2012, though the majority of this book is based on fieldwork I conducted in 2008 and 2009. During this time, I lived partly with a catadora, Glória (Tião's sister), and her daughter, whom I met during my first visit to Jardim

Gramacho. Later, when I found my own place, I lived in a small house located behind a bar on Monte Castelo, Jardim Gramacho's main street. This location had its advantages. It was a quick walk to the entrance to the dump and on the road where nearly every garbage and scrapyard truck passed. I also benefited from proximity to the bar, owned by my neighbor Deca, which served as a gathering spot not only for catadores but also for numerous truck drivers en route to recycling plants. Living on Monte Castelo, however, had its disadvantages. The constant traffic of eighteen-wheelers clunking along the pothole-filled road kept me awake at night and kicked up a thick, black dust that gathered on the house floors. It was necessary to sweep and mop the floors each day to keep the layers of dust to a minimum. At times I felt that much of my effort was expended on an unceasing battle against the rats, ants, poisonous centipedes (*lacraia*), cockroaches, and dirt that threated to overtake the house with any lapse in cleaning—the residue of a juice glass overlooked on the table, a couple of days without mopping floors, or a week without pouring bleach in the cracks of the wall where centipedes gathered and multiplied.

I spent much of my time in Jardim Gramacho collecting alongside catadores on the dump. I first collected cardboard because I found it to be one of the easiest materials to identify (though not to carry, as I quickly learned, given that it tends to be soaking wet and therefore heavy). When the price of cardboard dropped precipitously in October 2008, a consequence of the U.S. housing market collapse and ensuing economic crisis, I switched to collecting PET (polyethylene terephthalate), the type of plastic found in water and soda bottles, and other hard plastics. There were days, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, when all my energy focused on the physical act of collecting—identifying material, filling my sack, and carrying it back to the staging area, all the while paying attention to the pathways of trucks and tractors. But over time, many of my conversations with catadores occurred in the midst of collecting and pulled me into other kinds of activities on the dump, such as meals and soccer games. Furthermore, learning to collect as a *novata*, or "novice," as catadores called newcomers, inspired my interest in the phenomenology of work. That is, my own (terribly inadequate) training in the labor of catadores drew my attention to the ways experiences of work do work on the self—reshaping bodily sensations, daily rhythms, and ways of being in the world.

In addition to collecting on the dump, I spent time at a cooperative run by the Association of Catadores in Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG).[24] My first

visit to Jardim Gramacho in 2005 happened to coincide with the initial process of forming ACAMJG (pronounced *ah-cán-jee*), and I was therefore able to follow the development of this association from its beginning as an informal group of catadores who held weekly meetings at an outdoor neighborhood bar, to its creation of a separate, registered, self-sufficient recycling cooperative. This cooperative, which catadores referred to as the *Polo*, was inaugurated in May 2007 and consisted of an open-air shed and a small building with an office, kitchen, and bathrooms. Though catadores often circulated in and out of the cooperative, at any one time there were roughly fifty active members. These catadores collected material individually on top of the dump, brought it to the Polo to sort, and then sold everyone's material jointly, either to recycling plants or to larger scrap dealers—bypassing intermediary scrap dealers in Jardim Gramacho. Each catador received payment in accordance with the amount of material in weight that they contributed to the total sale.

ACAMJG's Polo became my own base for collecting. I often rode up to the dump on ACAMJG's truck, brought my sacks to the Polo at the end of the day, and sorted my material there if needed. I also helped out with day-to-day operations at the Polo, assisting with the week's accounting, sweeping and cleaning the patio, helping weigh material, running errands, and attending meetings. My involvement with ACAMJG enabled me to address questions regarding the potential for political mobilization and collective action. But I was also careful not to allow ACAMJG to dominate my focus. Most studies of catadores in Brazil (and elsewhere) focus on those who are members of recycling cooperatives, despite the fact that these catadores represent a small fraction of the laboring poor who collect on city streets or atop dumps.[25] This disproportionate attention on cooperatives might stem from what Orin Starn has described as a tendency for scholars to study social movements that meet their "own vision of the right kind of activism" (1999: 25).[26] By working with catadores who were involved with ACAMJG and with many who were not, I was able to explore a fuller range of collective projects among catadores and to question what counts as a politics of labor.

Though both the dump and the Polo were my two most important research sites, I also spent a great deal of time visiting catadores in their homes (sometimes in other parts of the city), chatting with neighbors, interviewing scrap dealers, visiting recycling plants, recording oral histories of the neighborhood, conducting archival research on the development

of the dump and the surrounding region, collecting cans on the streets of downtown Rio during carnival, and attending and hosting all kinds of social events—birthday parties, funerals, barbecues, dances, and gatherings at the Sunday fair. Accompanying catadores in their lives beyond the dump allowed me to trace the threads that weave together life and labor. It was also in moments and sites away from the work of the dump that I began to understand the stakes of catadores' returns.

OVERVIEW

Each of the chapters that follow provides a different piece of the puzzle of why catadores return to work on the dump. Most anthropological work on the experience of return, most notably in studies of migrants and refugees, examines the return to place. Though catadores certainly return to a place (the dump), I am more interested in their return to a condition—that is, to a particular form of living. Nonetheless, I draw from studies of return migration the emphasis on return as an ambivalent process with political, social, economic, and cultural consequences (Oxfeld and Long 2004). My adoption of return as an analytic thus differs significantly from the idea of a cycle frequently invoked in popular representations of poor families as trapped in "cycles of poverty." A cycle is a set of events that recurs again and again, leading back to the same starting point. In contrast, one can return to a place or condition and find that it has changed or that one's experience of it has shifted, as is often the case for refugees or migrants returning to a homeland after many years. Furthermore, a cycle suggests a fixed series or structure in which one can become "stuck," whereas returns are not necessarily either forced or liberatory. A return can be a relapse, but it can also be a response or an act of restoring something to the world, as in the act of picking up discarded objects and placing them back into relations of exchange.

As the book gradually unravels the puzzle of why catadores return to the dump, it simultaneously builds my conceptual approach to work as a *form of living*, a term I use to capture the relations between livelihoods and ways of life. Each instance of return illuminates how labor and existential conditions intersect in ways that defy standard interpretations of wageless work as either a strategy of survival or (more rarely) an act of resistance. It is a central argument of this book that work is tightly interwoven with val-

ues and beliefs about what constitutes a good life and with human struggles to realize these visions even within brutal social constraints.

Chapter 1 introduces the question of return by first examining narratives of arrival. Reflecting on the stories catadores told of their very first days on the dump, I consider what it means to arrive on the dump in a phenomenological sense and what this reveals about the ways catadores experience and perceive their place of work. These entry narratives, which span three decades (from 1978 to 2008), point to important historical shifts in the political economy of Brazil, while challenging standard depictions of Brazil's social and economic policy in the first decade of the twenty-first century. But most importantly, these narratives address the stakes of arrival—what catadores knowingly take on each time they hop a truck to the top of the dump. In these tales of both first arrivals to the dump and their arrivals on a day-to-day basis, catadores complicate the common notion that garbage is an experience of the abject. Instead, their stories speak to the ontology of the dump as a burial ground and the labor entailed in what I conceptualize as its vital liminality, the experience of being at the border of life and death. What it means to arrive, then, opens up the book's inquiry into labor not only as an economic relation but also as an ontological experience.

Chapter 2 begins to unpack the question of return by exploring moments in which catadores leave the dump for other jobs and then later go back. Specifically, it examines how everyday emergencies that disrupt the present in Rio's periphery often clash with the rigid conditions of regular, wage-labor employment. Such emergencies arise from multiple insecurities in the lives of Rio's poor, including urban violence, makeshift housing, deficient health care, poor infrastructure, and relations of debt. I argue that the comings and goings of catadores emerge 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. On the dump, catadores are able to collect at any hour of the day or night and can determine how frequently and intensely they work. Moreover, catadores perceive their experience of the fluidity of work on the dump as changing them in ways that make them no longer able to "adapt," as they say, to the structures of waged employment. Collecting on the dump thus fashions a distinct form of living that implicates everyday rhythms and embodied habits. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the act of leaving a job for wageless

work constitutes a politics of detachment that enables life to be lived in fragile times.

Chapter 3 explores the returns of catadores to the dump—not over weeks, months, or years, as in chapter 2—but rather within the microtemporality of the day-to-day. Attending to moments in which the earnings of catadores seem to "vanish," this chapter examines how income, expenditures, credit, and debt influence when and how often catadores go back to work on the dump. Faced with a continual barrage of financial needs and requests, the ability of catadores to earn cash payment each day they work on the dump takes on added significance and paradoxically transforms spending into a form of saving. The experience of being broke among catadores furthermore emerges from a moral critique of work as an end in itself, rather than a means to sustain life. Emphasizing the interlocking dynamics of economic and moral value, I argue that catadores' decisions on a daily basis to work on the dump (or not) constitute a diverse set of arguments about what it means to live well.

The conditions of return explored thus far in the book might suggest that catadores move in and out of the dump without restraint. Chapter 4 provides an essential, if complicating, piece of the puzzle by shifting focus from the question of what draws catadores to the dump to a question of what impedes their returns. For years, city waste-management personnel implemented a series of (continuously unsuccessful) policies and practices intended to shape the dump into a "proper work environment." One of these policies involved the requirement that catadores wear identifying work vests as a means of access to the dump and that they sell their material only to the scrap dealer who provided the vest. Yet despite the fact that every catador I encountered on the dump wore a vest (including myself), catadores continually insisted that the vests controlled neither access to the dump nor their sales to scrapyards. I unpack this apparent contradiction by tracing the social life of work vests as they circulate between the semipublic waste management company, unregistered scrap dealers, and catadores. This story illuminates how actors usually associated with different sectors or types of economy—the formal, informal, and illicit—are deeply integrated in everyday practice. Rather than ask what is formal or informal, I shift the question to how form is made. I am interested in the interplay between different forms of living that are fluid, mutable, and malleable—that is, plastic, to borrow a term from the most ubiquitous ma-

terial that catadores collect. This chapter thus contributes most directly to the book's aim to rethink economy. It is also about how struggles over the contours of what constitutes "work" are struggles over different forms of inhabiting the world.

Chapter 5 provides the final piece of the puzzle by examining the most contentious kind of return to the dump—one that occurs as a result of catadores withdrawing from ACAMJG's self-organized worker cooperative. This chapter traces the history of ACAMJG from its early years of mobilization, to its establishment of the recycling cooperative, to its increasing expansion and institutionalization. It seeks to understand why many catadores who were, at one point, centrally involved in ACAMJG eventually left the cooperative to go back to collecting on their own. Rather than frame these returns as "failures" in political consciousness and collective organizing, I consider how the withdrawal from ACAMJG enables catadores to pursue more anarchic forms of cooperative practice. These include work partnerships, a self-organized camp called "the union," and strikes in which catadores refused to sell their material to scrap dealers at different moments in the dump's history. I suggest that work outside conditions of wage labor is often seen as an unorganized, competitive, and apolitical space because the kinds of ephemeral, noninstitutionalized forms of collective action that do occur among wageless workers diverge from standard conceptions of what counts as politics. Yet, I argue, the very act of turning back to the dump can be understood as a political project. That is, to return to the dump is to break with normative forms of capitalist labor, opening up possibilities of other ways of fashioning work and life.

The book concludes with a description of my own return to Jardim Gramacho in July 2012, a month after the garbage dump closed. Taking catadores' insistence that "the garbage never ends" as a point of departure, I follow how catadores remake forms of living in the wake of this closure. Though at the time employment was said to be booming in Brazil and job-training programs were being offered to catadores to address the consequences of the dump's closure, few catadores pursued these possibilities. In addition, activities at ACAMJG's recycling cooperative—a possible work alternative to collection on the dump—nearly came to a standstill. Most catadores emphasized instead that they were "waiting" (*aguardando*), in the sense of holding out for something. Their waiting reinforces many of the themes of the book—particularly how wageless work is not simply a

last resort for urban poor, but rather articulates with visions of what constitutes a good life. Ultimately, I consider what it means to lose work outside conditions of wage-labor employment by exploring the significance of the dump as a site to which catadores can no longer return.

WRITING ON GARBAGE

When I told cariocas in the center of the city where I was conducting research, those who knew about the place told me that Jardim Gramacho is a "hell."[27] Indeed, the most common reaction to the image of human beings sifting through garbage is one of disgust and horror. Such revulsion resonates with the way anthropologists and other social scientists have long conceptualized garbage as the abject product of order creation.[28] This approach draws heavily on Mary Douglas's famous insight that dirt is "matter out of place" (1996: 36). For Douglas, dirt is what gets eliminated in the human effort to create meaningful order out of what is an inherently chaotic world. Dirt offends and disgusts us precisely because its presence threatens the integrity of the order we have produced.

This structural and symbolic perspective on waste might explain why the Jardim Gramacho dump was located in the outskirts of Rio or why visitors to the dump pinched their noses or rolled up the car windows when approaching the entrance. It says nothing, however, about what happens to garbage once it is dumped, what garbage produces over time, or how those who interact with (and not just produce) garbage experience it. In other words, it fails to account for the social life and generativity of waste itself.[29] Furthermore, the perception that garbage is disorder, nonbeing, or formlessness prevents any engagement with its specific qualities. As any novice quickly learns on the dump, not all garbage smells, feels, sounds, moves, rots, shrinks, or weighs the same. Knowing these differences, which is essential to the labor of catadores, means recognizing that garbage is matter and that all matter has form, even if it is not the form we might desire.

The refusal to engage with the materiality of garbage leads to a tendency to either sensationalize or aestheticize waste in its representation. Throughout my fieldwork in Jardim Gramacho, I witnessed numerous journalists and other visitors arrive on the dump and immediately pull out cameras to photograph it—often without asking catadores for their permission. In addition, several professional artists and filmmakers have developed photographic projects of Jardim Gramacho, including Marcos Prado's (2004)

film *Estamira;* Vik Muniz's (2008) series *Pictures of Garbage;* and Lucy Walker, Karen Harley, and João Jardim's (2010) Oscar-nominated documentary, *Waste Land,* which follows Muniz's project. For some of these image-makers, the picture of garbage is aimed at rendering brutal degradation, as in the case of a news crew that showed up in Jardim Gramacho to use it as backdrop for a live report on poverty in Brazil. For others, like the photographer Vik Muniz, the image of garbage is meant to turn waste into art—though the reason garbage is so compelling in such work is precisely that it is thought to be antithetical to beauty. Despite their differences, these images depict garbage as an indiscriminate mass, the particular contents and characteristics of which do not matter, either because garbage is taken to be the *totality* of all that society rejects or because the goal is to transcend this refuse by giving it aesthetic value. These two tendencies crystallized in a scene from the documentary *Waste Land* in which Vik Muniz's assistant photographer asks a catador, named Tião, to collect items from the dump that will be used in the pictures he is creating. After Tião responds by showing him the *specific* materials that catadores collect, the photographer decides that he wants mostly *carina*—a flexible plastic found in a wide range of goods, from flip-flops to tubing. Carina is best, the photographer explains, because it "gives the impression of *tudo*"—garbage as anything and everything.

But garbage is not *every* thing. To depict it as such is to erase the singularity of its contents. It is telling that in both English and Portuguese the word *garbage* (*lixo*) did not originally refer to refuse of any kind but rather to a specific thing that was commonly discarded: the viscera of butchered animals in fifteenth-century Middle English and the ashes of an oven or hearth in the Latin root of the Portuguese. Indeed, the very labor of catadores was premised on the fact that garbage consists of particular objects that are predictably present and identifiable. It mattered to catadores, for example, that certain known trucks or types of bags contained discarded medical supplies (usually to be avoided), stacks of used office paper (to be collected and sold), or nearly, but not yet, expired cartons of yogurt (to be enjoyed).

Furthermore, garbage is not *every* thing because it is its own thing—its materiality distinct from other materialities. Garbage is gaseous, belching methane and carbon dioxide that must be trapped and released lest the methane spontaneously erupt into fires. Garbage leaks, creating streams of black, noxious leachate that drain through its layers and, if not contained, seep into

surrounding groundwater. Some of its contents, in varying stages of decomposition, attract all kinds of critters including vultures, flies, and maggots as well as plenty of microbes invisible to the naked eye that catadores blamed for the occasional abscess or rash. All this belching, leaking, attracting, and infecting are part of the generativity of waste, as are the value, sociality, and forms of living produced through recognizing and reclaiming its contents. To embrace the materiality of garbage—what catadores did every time that they reached a hand into a ripped bag—is to confront waste as both toxic and life-giving. It means refusing to appropriate, glorify, or transcend its abject qualities and instead to engage with the vitality of waste that is concealed when we view garbage from the perspective of order, when we view garbage as merely the discarded.[30]

How to do this in writing, how to put the materiality of waste into words, is not an easy question. In writing this book, I have struggled with the images of garbage and of the work of catadores that I sketch on the page. In an effort to capture waste not as a symbolic category but as a lived experience, I have chosen to adopt the language and expressions that catadores use themselves in depicting their place of work. Most often, catadores referred to the objects they collected not as garbage but as "material," a semantic shift that signals the differentiation of what is usually assumed to be an indiscriminate mass. If garbage, I was told, is that which is worthless, then paper, plastics, metals, and other recyclables that still hold value cannot be garbage. For this reason, I retain the Portuguese term *catador* rather than rely on terms commonly used in English including scavenger, garbage picker, or trash picker—all designations that imply that the objects catadores collect are waste. However, despite passing under a sign reading "Metropolitan Landfill" every day that they worked, catadores referred to their place of work not as a landfill but as the dump (*lixão*), or simply the slope (*rampa*), the specific area within the dump's one million square meters where waste was unloaded at a particular time. In doing so, they refrained from participating in the sanitizing work that the word *landfill* does to hide the toxicity, contamination, infection, and inequality that catadores endured in their everyday labor.

I also seek to foreground catadores' own representations of the dump in the stories they tell each other, narratives that I present in the chapter that follows. These stories reveal that the materiality of waste can disrupt corporeal integrity, subjectivity, and everyday experience, but that this disruptive power also breaks open possibilities for transformation. In this

chapter and throughout the book, I approach garbage not as "the degree zero of value" (Frow 2003: 25) but as the material basis through which catadores rearticulate notions of value and the good life. As Gastón Gordillo (2014) suggests in his analysis of rubble produced by capitalist and imperialist projects, waste is often perceived as nothingness, negativity, or the void. The modern conceptualization of waste is thus similar to that of the informal economy. Both are characterized by the *absence* of particular qualities or values. Both are defined by lack. The forms of living catadores create through actions and materiality that are only seen by what they are *not* challenge us to rethink both work and waste. The smashed blue water bottle, the outdated high heels, the dented Coke can, the school notebook with half its pages still blank inside, the cardboard box soaked with the juice of rotting tomatoes, and even the ubiquitous black bag are not garbage in the sense of a homogeneous, worthless mass. In the pages that follow, I aim to show how the act of reclaiming these particular objects and many more is also an act of remaking the world. In doing so, this book illuminates how waste lies at the heart of both relations of inequality and transformative social projects.

INTRODUCTION

1 To protect their identities, I use pseudonyms for most people who appear in this book, with the exception of those who specifically requested that I use their names. These requests often came from catadores who were politically active and publicly known and wished to be credited with their own words, views, and life stories. I also use the real names of public figures.

2 See, for example, Mike Davis's account of the rise of a "surplus humanity" in Third World cities (2004a: 28); Loïc Wacquant's claim that "a significant *fraction of the working class has been made redundant* and constitutes an 'absolute surplus population' " (2008: 266); Achille Mbembe's call to consider "the human itself *as* a waste product at the interface of race and capitalism" (2011: 7; see also Yates 2011); Gavin Smith's arguments regarding how "surplus populations" are generated in capitalism (2011: 14); and Neferti X. M. Tadiar's analysis of what she calls "remaindered lifetimes," the modes of living people engage in "under conditions of their own superfluity or disposability" (2013: 23). For a different, though related, use of *waste* as a metaphor for understanding contemporary labor, see Melissa Wright's (2006) study of Mexican and Chinese female factory workers. In her account, she argues that the disposability of women workers forms part of the ideological framework of factory managers, who see these workers as easily used up, discarded, and replaced, and who therefore literally lay waste to their bodies (through repetitive stress injuries and other illnesses).

3 Marx also described the industrial reserve army (the unemployed or partly employed) as a relative surplus population that can be disposed of by capital in periods of crisis and stagnation (1990: 781–94). However, though Marx's discussion of the industrial reserve army provides much of the language used in accounts of twenty-first-century capitalism, his use of "superfluous" or "surplus" does not signify waste in the same way as found in contemporary accounts for two reasons. First, for Marx, the industrial reserve army is not disposed of indefinitely, but rather is at times expelled and at times reabsorbed within capitalist production cycles. Bauman (2004) makes this distinction explicit: "The destination of the *un*employed, of the 'reserve army of labour,' was to be called back into active service. The destination

of waste is the waste-yard, the rubbish heap" (12). Wacquant (2008: 266) makes a similar point by differentiating between a relative and absolute surplus population, the former constituting the industrial reserve army and the latter referring to those who will likely never find work again and are therefore permanently discarded. Second, in other parts of his work, Marx used waste metaphors to describe how capitalism "squanders" human lives and individual development (1991: 182). In contrast, Achille Mbembe (2011) has argued that capitalism is not just wasteful of human life, but rather turns *the human itself into waste*, adding that race has played a central role in capitalism's production of superfluous people. For a different history of the use of garbage metaphors to describe unproductive populations in the area of mental illness, see Lovell (2007).

4 Literature on the informal economy in the 1970s was dominated by a dualist approach that associated the informal with "tradition" and the formal with "modernity" and viewed the former as gradually withering away as developing countries modernized (Emmerij 1974; Sethuraman 1976). This view, however, did not go uncontested. Marxist critiques soon emerged that conceptualized the informal economy as a *consequence* of modernization and underdevelopment (see Castells and Portes 1989; Gerry 1987; Malaguti 2000; Moser 1978). Yet by arguing that the informal sector is a "reflection of the distortions and failures of the development process" (Centeno and Portes 2006: 24), the Marxist literature still implied that the informal sector might disappear if such "failures" were resolved. A third perspective, spearheaded by Hernando de Soto (1989), argued that the informal economy resulted from too much state regulation, which pushed small "entrepreneurs" to operate outside the law. Again, the implication was that if the problem—here understood as oppressive state regulation—were addressed, the informal would vanish or become merged with the formal.

5 See Davis (2006); Hall and Pfeiffer (2000); UN Habitat (2008). Ulrich Beck (2000: 93) goes so far as to argue that the rise of informality not only in the Global South but also in "late modern" societies has brought about the "Brazilianization of the West."

6 There has also been a revival of the very term *marginality* in notions of a "new marginality" or "advanced marginality" (Caldeira 2009; González de la Rocha et al. 2004).

7 Bureau of International Recycling, www.bir.org/industry/, accessed April 22, 2015. Journalist Adam Minter (2013) has estimated that the global recycling industry turns over $500 billion a year and is likely to reach $1 trillion by 2020.

8 Feminist critiques of what counts as labor in capitalism were part of the extensive domestic labor debates in the 1960s and 1970s. For an overview of this literature that also critiques its underlying assumptions, see Molyneux (1979).

9 As part of an effort to valorize their work as "real" work, catadores in Jardim Gramacho frequently corrected others who described them as *catadores de*

lixo (collectors of garbage) and not *catadores de materiais recicláveis* (collectors of recyclable material). Furthermore, Brazil's National Movement of Catadores (MNCR), in which catadores from Jardim Gramacho have participated, has fought for the recognition and valorization of the work of catadores as a "profession." However, a bill (Projeto de Lei 6.822/2010) that would have regulated the profession of catadores was vetoed by President Dilma Roussef in 2010 because it did not have the support of the MNCR. While the MNCR supported the law's recognition of collecting recyclables as a profession, it expressed concern that the regulations outlined in the proposed legislation (such as having to acquire documents) would become too bureaucratic and onerous for catadores. I discuss the place of catadores within Brazil's moral imaginary of work in more detail in chapter 2.

10 Here I am inspired by Claudia Fonseca's (2006: 28) critique of an "ethnographic refusal" in studies of urban poor, in which she argues that such studies tend to privilege the economic "as if the only concern of the poor ought logically to be survival and financial improvement" (my translation).

11 One area where these separate conversations have come together is in literature describing how the neoliberal erosion of stable jobs has produced pathological subjectivities of loss, anomie, and alienation. Richard Sennett (1998), for example, argues that the increasing demand for flexibility has led to what he calls the "corrosion of character" or an individual's personal incapacity to maintain loyalty to ethical values and social relationships (see also Standing 2011). As Franco Barchiesi (2012a: 239) astutely observes, "By casting precarious employment as a condition that obliterates the wholeness of personality and political agency, [such work] has achieved the result of silencing precarious workers' strategies, autonomy and signifying practices as effectively as the economic liberalization it deprecates." By instead examining forms of living fashioned beyond conditions of wage labor, I am interested in precarious work as a site of existential aspiration and political struggle.

12 For an overview of these debates, see chapter 4.

13 Timothy Mitchell (1998, 2002, 2005, 2008) and J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006, 2014) have been the most influential thinkers in this project to rethink economy. They have inspired and directly contributed to several edited collections devoted to this theme in recent years (see Lee et al. 2008; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Carolyn Nordstrom's (2007) work on contraband economies has also problematized the idea of economy.

14 While there is not a general consensus as to which municipalities make up the Baixada Fluminense, the following eight are usually included: Belford Roxo, Duque de Caxias, Japeri, Mesquita, Nilópolis, Nova Iguaçu, Queimados and São João de Meriti. Sometimes the eastern municipalities of Magé

and Guapimirim or the western municipalities of Itaguaí, Seropédica, and Paracambi are also included (Sampaio de Souza and Barbosa 2013).

15 See also Pires Junior and Santos de Souza (1996).

16 Cited by Cantalejo (2008: 22).

17 At the time the contract was negotiated, Duque de Caxias was considered an "Area of National Security" by the military dictatorship, meaning that its mayor was directly appointed by the military (Cantalejo 2008: 96–100).

18 See, for example, Freire-Medeiros (2009).

19 This letter to the editor appeared in *O Globo* on July 21, 2005.

20 For a fuller analysis of the role that the Jardim Gramacho dump played in the intermunicipal politics of metro Rio de Janeiro, see Millar (2012).

21 See also Cavalcanti (2014).

22 Alba Zaluar and Marcos Alvito (2004) describe how the favela has long been perceived as a lack or emptiness to be filled by humanitarian sentiments.

23 For some of the most influential work on drug trafficking and urban violence in Rio, see Arias (2006a); Gay (2005); Larkins (2015); Leeds (1996); Penglase (2014); Zaluar (1994, 2004).

24 ACAMJG stands for Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho.

25 For the Brazilian context, see Domingues Junior (2003); Freitas (2005); Gonçalves (2003); Kemp and Crivellari (2008); Magera (2003).

26 See also Gandolfo (2009: 110–11) for a discussion of how activism that does not conform to traditional workers' unions and movements is often dismissed as apolitical in social scientific research.

27 Garbage has often been associated with hell in the history of Christianity. John Scanlan (2005) notes that the iconography of hell in the Middle Ages included images of rubbish, excrement, and the discarded entrails of butchered animals.

28 The idea that garbage is the product of ordering the world or of "creating and maintaining form" (Reno 2016: 10) has long been a dominant approach to waste in the social sciences (see Scanlan 2005; Thompson 1979). Even studies that emphasize the materiality of waste (see Gille 2007; Hawkins 2006) take as a point of departure Douglas's conceptualization of dirt as a product of social classification (Reno 2014).

29 I follow other recent work in discard studies that has shifted focus to the afterlife of waste (Giles 2014; Reno 2015). However, I prefer to think of the social life of waste rather than its *after*life so as to emphasize that at no point is waste outside the social world.

30 My interest in the generativity and vitality of waste resonates with Jane Bennett's (2010) work on vital materiality, or what she calls "thing-power." Here I am more interested in exploring the phenomenology of waste—how catadores engage with and experience the materiality of garbage—than in demonstrating the agency of waste in itself.