

Recycling as Refusing the End of the World

Thoughts on Climate Change from Rio's Garbage Dump

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I met Glória the first time I arrived in Jardim Gramacho, a neighborhood that for over three decades was home to the main garbage dump for the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Until its closure in 2012, the Jardim Gramacho dump received over 9,000 tons of waste daily from across the metropolitan area of Rio. As an anthropologist, I had traveled to Jardim Gramacho to conduct ethnographic research with self-employed workers called *catadores*, who earned an income by collecting and selling recyclable materials on the dump. During multiple trips to Jardim Gramacho over the course of several years, I collected cardboard and plastics alongside *catadores*. During a continuous year of fieldwork (2008–2009), I lived first with Glória and then by myself in a small house that I rented near the base of the dump.

When I met Glória in 2005, she was one of the leaders of a recycling cooperative and later became one of the founders of a local association of *catadores* (Associação de Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho or ACAMJG). As the daughter of a *catadora* and of a shipyard union organizer, Glória's childhood was partly spent collecting cardboard, paper, and plastics on the dump with her mother, and debating politics at home with her father and seven other siblings. Glória was never shy about expressing her views and I quickly became accustomed to her sharp, fiery critiques of local and global politics, social inequalities, and the power relations that she encountered. I was nonetheless surprised one day when Glória's critiques turned to the Pantanal—Brazil's largest tropical wetland, known globally as an ecotourist destination.

"Fuck the Pantanal!" Glória exclaimed. "I've never been there. And I'll never go. It's for tourists. And man, you know what else it's good for? The Discovery Channel."¹

Part joke, part critique, part indignation, Glória's exclamations about the Pantanal were intended to shock. As an activist and leader of ACAMJG, Glória was long used to unannounced visits from NGOs that approached ACAMJG with ideas for joint projects. Her comments about the Pantanal were in response to the latest visit from the Donate Your Waste Institute (Instituto Doe Seu Lixo), which had recently received funding from Coca-Cola to organize a course on environmentalism for *catadores*.

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1. All quotations from *catadores* are from my field notes and recorded conversations and are my translation.



Figure 1. Sunflowers sprouting on the Jardim Gramacho dump. Metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (Photo by Kathleen M. Millar)

“You know what the woman said? ‘Ah, we are going to turn catadores into environmental agents.’ Who wants to be an environmental agent? What is an environmental agent, *really?*”

Glória was irate because both funders and NGOs failed to recognize the real needs of catadores. What would help the association and improve the lives of its members was equipment, Glória told me, not fancy courses. There was also the irony that the mostly white, middle-class NGO workers, who worked in downtown offices, would know more about caring for the environment than catadores, whose form of living involved actively recovering and recycling waste on a former mangrove swamp.

While I had heard Glória unleash such critiques before, her expletive about the Pantanal seemed new and out of place, an expression of a different and deeper frustration. Located in the western central region of the country, the Pantanal is over 2,000 kilometers away from the Jardim Gramacho dump where Glória worked. As Glória indicated, it was not a place she had

ever visited nor likely would ever visit. Most of those who travel to the region are international tourists who come to experience one of the largest wetlands in the world, spanning 150,000 square kilometers in Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay. The Pantanal is home to jaguars, giant otters, and hyacinth macaws (the world’s largest parrot), and a small portion of it, the Pantanal Conservation Area, is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. However, despite its acclaim as an ecotourist destination, over 90 percent of the Pantanal is privately owned, primarily by ranchers and land speculators.² Cattle grazing has been common in the region since the 17th century when cattle herders pushed indigenous peoples off their traditional lands. Today, only 11 indigenous territories remain on less than 7,000 square kilometers, including the territories of the Guató, Terena, Bororo, and Kadiwéu peoples.

More recently, the Pantanal has become a global symbol of the destruction wrought by deforestation and climate change. In the early 2000s, conservationists began sounding alarms that at the

2. Private ownership also includes private nature reserves owned by wealthy investors that function as recreational hobby ranches and fishing camps, as well as small claims by fisher-farmers who historically were squatters in the region (Chiaravalloti et al. 2017; Hoefle and Bicalho 2016).

current rate of deforestation in the Pantanal, fueled by intensified cattle grazing and agribusiness, all original vegetation would be destroyed by the year 2050 (Silva et al. 2011). Then, in 2020, the Pantanal made headlines around the world as wildfires burned roughly a quarter of the Pantanal biome (Einhorn et al. 2020; Modelli 2020; Petricic 2020). The drought season in the Pantanal had become drier in the previous 10 years, with 16% less water mass than in prior decades (Lázaro et al. 2020). Amid the 2020 wildfires, the *New York Times* reported that volunteers were “flocking” to the Pantanal to save animals. One veterinary student—who treated wild boar, marsh deer, and coatis, among other animals that were burned in the fires—told reporters, “We are working in the middle of a crisis” (in Einhorn et al. 2020).

Crisis

When Glória said, “Fuck the Pantanal,” what she could have easily said instead was, “Fuck the Crisis.” It was not that Glória was insensitive to the well-being of the varied life forms that comprise the ecosystem of the Pantanal. Rather, the Pantanal symbolized for her that *what* environmental activists were trying to save was not actually for her and that *how* it was being saved erased her own knowledge, experience, and creativity. The “Crisis” is the way the problems of climate change and environmental destruction have been framed by those occupying positions of power. Planetary in scale with apocalyptic overtones, the Crisis is understood as new and unprecedented, an extraordinary present or an impending future rather than a continuation of a long history of world-ending violence. As Kathryn Yusoff writes of the Anthropocene, the idea of a planetary Crisis is “configured in a future tense rather than in recognition of the extinctions already undergone by black and indigenous peoples” (2018:51). Once oriented to the future, the Crisis is perceived as breaking with the norm rather than being the norm. The definition of “crisis” in this discourse becomes a turning point, a tipping point, the beginning of the end.

The Portuguese word *catar* offers a different way of relating to crises, understood as a multiplicity. Its literal translation is to sift, select, separate, to search for by way of discriminating (Millar 2018). It points us to an original meaning of *crisis*—not the ancient Greek meaning of a crucial turning point but the prior proto-Indo-European root *krei*, “to sift” or “to sieve.” To make a livelihood collecting recyclables on a garbage dump requires the skill of sifting. It requires the ability to distinguish materials, to discern what to collect and what to leave behind, and to differentiate value—all of which are ways of seeing life where there seems to be none. Outsiders to Jardim Gramacho, and even novice catadores, commonly called the dump “the end of the world.” To breathe the fumes of burning methane produced by layers of decomposing matter beneath your feet; to feel your boots sink into viscous mud, dark puddles, and mounds of debris; to inhale the odors of rotten food scraps and groceries with expiration dates long past; to plunge one’s hand into oozing plastic bags again and again—was to experience “the end of the world.” At first, it could all feel like a descent into the apocalypse itself. And yet to be a catador, whose livelihood entails the recycling of waste, means learning how to remake a world amidst destruction. Crisis as catastrophe can suggest inevitability and the throwing up of hands; or alternatively, it can impel urgent interventions and the need to act upon the world. Instead, crisis as sifting is to pause, to discern, to recognize what does not serve and what can be fodder for renewal. It is to refuse the end of the world.³

Being

Glória’s refusal was also a refusal to perform the role of the “environmental agent” that the NGOs wanted her to perform. As poor, black, marginalized residents of Rio de Janeiro, catadores were usually perceived by government officials, social workers, and NGO personnel to be in need of an intervention. Such interventions often came in the form of courses or training programs that were meant to transform catadores into proper workers with the “right” kind of environmental

3. See also Krenak and Duarte (2021:76).

consciousness. This interventionist approach to catadores assumed that Jardim Gramacho was a source of all the problems, whether social or environmental, and the solutions necessarily came from elsewhere. In other words, the intention was to mold catadores into the anthropos of the Anthropocene—the ones who created the Crisis and yet somehow still had the answers to resolve it. As Glória's refusal to accept this identity made clear, the anthropos is not humanity in all its multiplicity. Rather it is a particular, albeit universalizing, version of humanity that Sylvia Wynter (2006) calls "Man"—a Western, white, bourgeois conception of the human.

The kind of environmentalism that catadores lived in their everyday went far beyond garbage, pollution, deforestation, or even carbon emissions. It questioned first and foremost the value of productivism—what Karen Foster (2016) describes as an ideational regime stretching back to the 1700s that assumes that more productivity is good in and of itself and leads to progress and prosperity. Until its closure in 2012, the Jardim Gramacho dump operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In any given week, catadores were able to determine how frequently they hopped a truck to go up to the dump to collect recyclables, how quickly or continuously they would work, and how long they would stay. They earned an income whenever they sold their burlap sacks of recyclables to scrap dealers who paid them in cash by the weight. Rather than work as much as possible to accumulate their earnings, catadores would often collect for a few days and then leave the dump for a stretch, returning only when they needed more money (Millar 2018). These rhythms of work diverged significantly from a capitalist work ethic and as a result, outsiders to Jardim Gramacho often perceived catadores as misguided, unprofessional, undisciplined, or simply lacking the knowledge of how to produce and to save. But for catadores, their work rhythms constituted a politics of labor that questioned the need to always act, make, build, grow, develop, and improve—to perform as a capitalist model worker.

If crisis is a sifting out of what does not serve, then any real reckoning with the climate crisis requires shaking the sifter so that productivism falls through the holes, giving way to other modes of configuring work and life. It might seem odd to suggest that the problem of climate change is at its root a problem of labor or that possible answers might come from a group of unemployed workers who make a living from waste in a place that can feel very much like the end of the world. But that is the problem with solutions to the Crisis. So long as the solutions remain embedded within a logic that valorizes doing over being—which is to say, economic growth and accumulation (for the privileged few) above all else—they will continue to be part of the history of world-ending violence. They will also continue what Yusoff calls a "color line of agency," in which those who bear the harm of colonialism and racial capitalism are only allowed to be the casualties of planetary collapse and never the source of alternative futures (2018:27).

For catadores, the garbage dump was a paradox. Collecting recyclables on the dump meant being present to the destruction and decay in their midst and in this presence, finding value and renewal. Their work was a call to inhabit the Crisis; to fully reckon with the destruction. All of it. Not only the leveled trees, dried riverbeds, and uncontrolled wildfires, but also the colonialism, racial capitalism, and regimes of productivism that continue in the present and that made the very tragedy Anthropos now aims to avert.

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