

Fall 2005

# The Needs of the Marginalized; Documenting a Crisis Defined as Such by the Catadores de Lixo of Jangurussú

Jane Hudson  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Social Welfare Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hudson, Jane, "The Needs of the Marginalized; Documenting a Crisis Defined as Such by the Catadores de Lixo of Jangurussú" (2005). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 451.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/451](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/451)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

The Needs of the Marginalized;  
Documenting a Crisis Defined as Such by the *Catadores de Lixo* of Jangurussú

by  
Jane Hudson  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill NC  
Bachelor of Arts; Curriculum in International Studies

The School for International Training  
Culture, Development, and Social Justice  
Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil  
Independent Study Project  
12 December 2005

## Preface

Salman Rushdie wrote, in *Midnight's Children*: “to understand just one life, you need to swallow the world.”<sup>1</sup> This sentence comes closer than any to describing how I feel when I consider the task I took on when I decided to try to understand the experience of a community of *catadores de lixo* through case studies of three women. The time I spent in Novo Perimetral brought me nowhere close to a complete “understanding” of anything, certainly not anything as complicated as a life, let alone three lives or an entire community. But, it did begin to answer the question driving me to spend almost a month of my time at a garbage dump. That is, *how do people draw all the things they need to subsist from a reality that to me appears so dismal as that of the catadores de lixo?*

When I was first starting my research and I saw pictures in newspapers of people in raggedy, stained clothing crawling over mounds of garbage, it was easy to feel like I had nothing in common with them -- that we were from two different worlds. I knew this wasn't true, and part of the reason I wanted to do the research was to figure out what were the differences and commonalities between my catadora sisters and I. What I wasn't prepared for was how often the only indications I wasn't with a friend's mother or grandmother were the material clues around me.

The definition of my research subject was a telling journey. I went into Novo Perimetral interested in studying how the catadoras identified their needs versus how the organizations there to help them defined their needs and how they were and were not

---

<sup>1</sup> Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Trade Paperbacks, 2003

being met. My time in the field taught me the significance of culture and that doing research in a different culture does not necessitate only an open mind for unexpected answers, but also a mind ready to contemplate a different set of questions. The questions I brought to the field didn't make sense to the people I brought them to and, after a while, they stopped making sense to me either. In an attempt to come closer to seeing the world from their point of view, I let my research linger on the topic about which the catadoras were most passionate instead of the one I brought with me and devoted my time to figuring out why it was so important to them. It was a fascinating and illuminating process.

### **Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible without the assistance of Sandra and the rest of my advising team, the Program de Saúde da Família; Fatima, director of the FAC school and her wonderful sisters; and Iara and Lindenburg from the Crescer com Arte program. Positive change is hard to perceive in the community, but much of that that is there is being driven by these dedicated people. And, of course, nothing would have been possible without the generous opening of home and heart of three wonderful women of Boa Esperança: Donna Glaucimar, Donna Maria Eroniza, and Donna Teresa. The community of Novo Perimetral received me well and I wish I had more time to spend with the jovial men and women of the *transbordo*. Finally, I'd like to thank Professor Bill for inviting me to ask elegant questions and, of course, Oélito, for his unfaltering patience and helpfulness.

## Table of Contents

Definition of Terms.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Importance of Research.....	7
Methodology.....	7
Location of the Research.....	9
The Employment.....	14
Dangers of the Employment.....	16
<i>Catadores de Lixo</i> in Context.....	17
The people who are the <i>Catadores de Lixo</i> .....	19
History of the Employment Struggle.....	20
Politics of the Employment Crisis.....	23
Explanation of the Crisis; Dependency.....	25
Interpretation and Implications of the Crisis.....	27
Conclusion.....	31
Indication for Further Research.....	33
Bibliography.....	34
ISP Appendix .....	36

## Definition of Terms and Acronyms

- BID/IADB (The Inter-American Bank of Development) financed the covering of the landfill and the construction of the EMLURB complex
- *Cascarer* (literally to peel) is the verb used by the residents of Jangurussú to distinguish the action of working on top of a large pile of garbage picking through it from the alternative activity, to *catar*, which has the sense to collect/gather/search for/pick up which takes place in a more orderly fashion, for example, on an assembly line. To *cascarer* is considered a more dangerous activity.
- *Catadores de lixo* is a general term used by Brazilians to refer to those people who in various capacities work with trash. The term encompasses a diversity of means of gaining or supplementing incomes in both the formal and informal sectors.
- COOSELCO (Cooperativa dos Trabalhadores Autônomos da Seleção e Coleta de Materiais Recicláveis Ltda) is the cooperative of catadores de lixo at Jangurussú
- DLU (Departamento de Limpeza Urbana) is the EMLURB department to which the Divisão do Destino final do lixo, which is the office of the prefecture located in the recycling/transfer complex belongs.
- DRUP (Diagnóstico Rápido Urbano e Participativo) is the instrument being used by the Crescer com Arte group to diagnose the needs of the community
- EMLURB (Empresa Municipal de Limpeza e Urbanização) is the municipal waste management cooperation of Fortaleza.
- FAC (Fundo de Apoio Comunitário) A NGO and school in Novo Perimetral
- FUNCI (Fundação da Criança e da Família Cidadão Prefeitura Municipal de Fortaleza) is a sponsor of Crescer com Arte
- *Gereba* is a derogatory term used to describe someone who lives in Jangurussú in substandard housing
- PETI (Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil) is a government program with the mission of reducing child labour. It gives parents money so that their children won't work.
- SANEAR – the state agency concerned with sewer, water, trash collection in Ceará
- *Transbordo* is a transfer station within the EMLURB complex where garbage is amassed to be brought to the active landfill in Caucaia. The trash here is available to be sorted through on Mon-Sat during daylight hours and it is not reserved for members of the cooperative.
- *Usine* (*Usine de Triagem de Empresa Municipal de Limpeza e Urbanização*) is the selection facility within the EMLURB complex where the conveyers are located which is reserved for members of the cooperative.

## Introduction

*Catadore de lixo* is a general term used by Brazilians to refer to those people who work with garbage. It encompasses those who work (and often live) in open landfills and scavenge for salvageable goods to consume, use, or sell; those who work in the street collecting garbage; those who collect only recyclables; and those who work within associations, companies, or cooperatives that sort, sell, and/or recycle refuse.<sup>2</sup> Such a cooperative and the *catadores* who comprise it is the focus of my research.

My objective for spending three weeks in the homes and community of the *catadoras de lixo* was to see how they define, experience, and satisfy their needs. During the period I was conducting my field research, the *usina de triagem* (the facility in which mixed trash is sorted into its recyclable components) where the *catadores* work in a cooperative had been closed for almost two months because of a combination of political and technical problems. Because of this closure, the *catadoras* were not receiving any income. In conversations with them, it became evident that the reopening of the *usina* was at the top of their priority list. They defined their needs very narrowly, with a unified emphasis on the need for the recyclable sorting facility where they were all employed to re-open and function so that they might earn an income, however meager. This paper explores why this need is so unanimously prioritized by the community. In doing so, it illuminates the reality of the some of the most marginalized citizens of one of the most marginalized regions of the developing world and documents an employment crisis which is devastating their lives but which is virtually invisible to anyone from outside the

---

<sup>2</sup> *Catadores do Lixo no Brasil; The Trash Scavengers in Brazil*, ed. Laura Firestone, 2003, Harvard University. <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/lixo/>>

*catadore* community. It discusses and describes the physical community, the people who are the *catadores de lixo*, the nature of their work, the history of their struggle for income, the politics at the heart of their crisis, how the *catadores* experienced and talked about the crisis, and what this reveals about their culture and experience of needs.

### **Importance of the Research**

The act of conducting research in a community such as Novo Perimetral is in and of itself an important political act because it is an acknowledgment of the existence of a people who are supposed to be suppressed in the consciousness of the modern consumer, just like all the nasty things we throw away. This research then, is important because it bares witness to a community that is a veritable showcase for the casualties of capitalism, its imagined commodities of nature and labour. It is a picture of only a tiny part of an enormous reality (that is, the reality of those who can only pick through the leavings) that I feel will be increasingly difficult to ignore as long as the capitalist system is permitted to continue its habit of consuming natural resources and transforming them into waste. The longer this continues, the greater the competition for the increasingly scarce resources will become and the more of us will be left to pick through the leavings to eek out an existence.

### **Methodology**

I entered the community of Novo Perimetral through an affiliation with Fortaleza's municipal *Program de Saúde da Família*. I also had an informal affiliation with the Community Health Agent, Deusinha, who introduced me to the three women from the

recycling facility who would be my primary respondents to talk about their reality and their needs. Because my the location of my research is considered dangerous, someone accompanied me to and from the homes of my respondents until I came to be recognized in the community. Most of my data was gathered through semi-formal and informal interviews in the homes of my respondents. I tried to stick as closely as possible to my plan of completing a series of 3 interviews, one to prompt the respondent to relate to me her life story (with an emphasis on her experience of needs), the second series of interviews to focused on the present and learn the specific details of the participants experience of needs, and a third series of interviews to called on the respondent to reflect on her philosophy of the future, hopes, fears, and dreams. Toward the end of the research period when I felt comfortably safe in the community I returned on a Sunday to experience a day in the home of a catadore de lixo, participating in meals, washing activities, etc.

In order to learn the history and gain some other perspectives on the community, I also interviewed some local NGO leaders who had years of experience working there. In order to better understand the employment crisis at the recycling facility, I interviewed a representative from both the municipality and the cooperative. I had access to background information on the community through a profile that the PSF team had recently completed. I also had access to some of the work that was being done at Crescer com Arte with the DRUP diagnostic instrument, and I was able to sit in on one of their community therapy activities. The remaining data was collected though observation as I

toured the community and loitered near the recycling complex and through the informal conversations I struck up with people working there.

## Location of the Research

My research into the needs of *catadores de lixo* took place in Novo Perimetral, a community of 436 families/1976 people<sup>3</sup> within the large city of Fortaleza in the Northeastern state of Ceará, Brazil. Flatbed trucks piled with pallets line the main avenue that leads into the community. High walls painted with the logos of recycling depots which run the length of the long, straight divided road and create the impression of an industrial park. The corporate anonymity is incomplete, however, because thousands of the stray plastic bags which blow around Novo Perimetral have caught on the barbed wire which runs along the top of these walls and now flap in the wind like forgotten Tibetan prayer flags<sup>4</sup> and the trucks are nearly outnumbered by *catadore* carts – the unmistakable oversized, square, pull-able wheelbarrows, sometimes painted with slogans like “*Jesus te ama*”<sup>5</sup> (Jesus loves you) that the *catadores de lixo* use to transport garbage and recyclables.

All the plastic bags and recycling depots exist because Novo Perimetral is a community built around garbage. One of the identifying geographical features of the community is the low, flat mountain covered in low, burnt-looking brown vegetation at the far end of the community. This is the old Jangurussú landfill. When it was deactivated, the people who had been living by scavenging for recyclable or otherwise valuable material on top

---

<sup>3</sup> Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

<sup>4</sup> 21/11/2005 - 8:30 – observation – work journal maintained by author

<sup>5</sup> 30/11/2005 – 9:00 – observation – work journal maintained by author

of it stayed behind instead of moving along to the next landfill, as is the traditional practice of their neo-nomadic culture, because they were promised jobs selecting recyclable material from mixed garbage in a cooperative.<sup>6</sup> Now, most of the heads of households in the community work as catadores. Just under ½ of the women in the community are housewives. The other people in the community work as domestics, drivers, masons, sales representatives, and a handful of other low-wage occupations.<sup>7</sup>

The great majority of households in Novo Perimetral - 72% - have an income of less than one minimum wage (300 reais/month). The rest have between one and 2 incomes - only 3 families have an income of 2 salaries or more.<sup>8</sup> Very few people from the community work at the recycling depots within the community because they do not have the necessary level of education.<sup>9</sup> They also have fairly good access to primary education such as the specially funded Andre Luiz Foundation school, the FAC - Fundo de Apoio Comunitario (an NGO) – primary school and several public schools.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, of the population between 3 and 14, 24% do not attend school. 23 children and adolescents from Novo Perimetral are enrolled in the Crescer com Arte enrichment program.<sup>11</sup>

The first road off to the right of this main avenue is Boa Esperança, home to my three primary research respondents Donna Glaucimar, Donna Maria Eroniza, and Donna

---

<sup>6</sup> Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview

<sup>7</sup> All stats are from the Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

<sup>8</sup> All stats are from the Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

<sup>10</sup> Lemos, Fatima, Personal Interview, 24 November 2004

<sup>11</sup> Programa de Saúde da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

Teresa, as well as to the FAC school which is an large, tall building originally built by the municipality to be a slaughter house. Boa Esperança is one of five streets that comprise Novo Perimetral. The houses on Boa Esperança are built one beside another in a such a way that they share a common front wall. The front of the houses are plastered and at some point in the distant past they were painted as well. 80% of the houses in Novo Perimetral are of this brick and mortar kind, the others are made out of wood, or fiber covered in clay, or some other improvised material. Because the insides of the homes are not plastered, there are a lot of rats in the houses, as well as spiders the size of crabs and large roaches.<sup>12</sup> All but 13 houses have electricity. Over 91% of homes have water in their homes delivered from CAGECE – a water delivery company. The others have wells or gather water from neighbors or from public taps. 41% of the people drink this water untreated. 250 of the 436 houses in the community have sewage systems, and 88 households have no system at all. Likewise, while many of the houses 394 have a garbage collection system, 29 families rely on littering.<sup>13</sup>

The situation of entertainment within the community is dismal. There is a football field which the community is very enthusiastic about<sup>14</sup> but there is no public square or other central area. There is nothing other than a few luncheonettes in the community for entertainment and drinking cashasha is reportedly the primary means of entertainment.<sup>15</sup> Although the community of Novo Perimetral is Catholic, only a handful of people take part in religious groups and the masses (given twice a month in a room in the community

---

<sup>12</sup> De Oliveira, Luciana Montese (Dulcie), Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

<sup>13</sup> All stats are from the a Community Profile completed by the Program de Saude da Familia in 2005

<sup>14</sup> De Lima, Lindenburg, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

<sup>15</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 Dec 2005

as there is no church) by are poorly attended.<sup>16</sup> An old-age club and literacy lessons were initiated but both closed due to poor attendance.<sup>17</sup> The community has relatively easy access to public transportation, but most report that they rarely leave the community because they do not have the money. Most of the transportation within the community is by bicycle or on foot, although there are a few people with motorcycles.

Access to health care is also difficult. Within the community there are high incidences of asthma, mental illness, hypertension, malnutrition, and physical disabilities. In case of illness or accident most families rely on emergency hospital services. The others rely on one of two health post located in nearby but not neighboring communities.<sup>18</sup> Many people also talk about the importance of having a health post closer to the community because they don't have the time to make the trip.<sup>19</sup> The *Programa de Saúde da Família* arrived in June 2005. Before that the access of the residents to vaccination programs, prenatal care, preventative medicine, and attention to minor illnesses was limited.<sup>20</sup> People from the community also report that at night it is almost impossible to get an ambulance because the community is considered very dangerous and the drivers fear assault.<sup>21</sup> They also complain that they get very little police protection, that they police drive through on a main road once a night and otherwise only come once someone is

---

<sup>16</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Lemos, Fatima, Personal Interview, 24 November 2004

<sup>18</sup> Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 Nov 2005

<sup>20</sup> Brito, Maria Augusta Neta, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

<sup>21</sup> Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

dead.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, most people report feeling safe in the community and feel that if you don't look for confusion, you won't find it.<sup>23</sup>

Walking through the community there are many dogs lying on the street and most of the people encountered wear very worn, polyester clothing that is very revealing such as tube tops and shorts. Men often wear no shirt, shorts, and, invariably, flip-flops. Many children play in the street naked or in only their underwear and many of them have the large, hard bellies and discolored hair that is evidence of malnutrition. Deusinha, the community health agent, reported childhood malnutrition to be very serious.<sup>24</sup> There seems to be a disproportionate number of women with small children and pregnant women, many of whom appear very young. During the period of my research 13 girls in the community between 10 and 18 were consciously pregnant. The population is very young with 43% 14 and under.<sup>25</sup> Child labor is a common occurrence, it is common to see 8 year old children sorting or carrying garbage in front of the recycling depots.<sup>26</sup>

They are not visible like the pollution and the malnutrition, but there are reportedly elevated levels of drug use and trafficking, alcoholism, and domestic violence within the community.<sup>27</sup> As serious as they are, these problems are considered very secondary to the problem of income by the *catadores*.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> For example, Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 Nov 2005

<sup>23</sup> For example, Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

<sup>24</sup> Francisca, Deusinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

<sup>25</sup> Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> 24/11/2005 – 9:30 – observation – work journal maintained by author

<sup>27</sup> De Lima, Lindenburg, Personal Interview, 25 Nov 2005

<sup>28</sup> For example, Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

## The Employment

The employment that some of the *catadores de lixo* define having as their “great dream”<sup>29</sup> must be understood to understand their lives. At the far end of the community lies the EMLURB complex, a large fenced-in compound into which speed modern, brightly colored ECOFOR garbage trucks all throughout the day. In the center of the complex surrounded by newly planted trees within a dainty fence sits the yellow Crescer com Arte enrichment program building which is painted with smiling flowers, butterflies and snails. Behind this sits: a large, almost empty warehouse painted with the EMLURB logo (where recyclables are weighed, stored, and compacted); a large concrete apparatus known as the *usina de triagem* sorting factory; and the *transbordo* transfer station, which resembles a low overpass without the key section, and a pile of garbage 8 meters in circumference.

ECOFOR trucks back up to the artificial cliff created by this overpass and dump their load of garbage into a truck parked below waiting to become full in order to transfer the garbage to the landfill in Caucaia more economically. This is the *transbordo* transfer station. Some trucks leave their garbage on a concrete pad beside the *usina*. This pile of garbage is currently the primary source of income for the community. Here, while the garbage is in limbo, men and women of all ages wearing sneakers and pants with extra cloth tied from the knees to the ankles so that garbage doesn't go in their shoes walk over the mounds of garbage with large poles and enormous bags in the glaring sun looking for

---

<sup>29</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glauimar, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

recyclable items which they will sell to the deposits around the community. This activity is known as to *cascarer*.

Because of the enormous (20 X 25m) canopy which protects the middle section, the usina de triagem is reminiscent of a gas station. To the side of the canopy closer to the landfill there is simply a large concrete platform where mixed garbage is delivered by ECOFOR trucks. The ECOFOR trucks are always the nicest, brightest looking things in the community with they shiny paintjobs of flowers and humming birds. A Bobcat, a small bulldozer, is normally at work here to move the garbage around. The canopied section is recessed about 9 feet and contains 5 conveyer belts. There is a wall dividing this section and the section where mixed garbage is delivered, but there are openings above each conveyer belt. Garbage is pushed to these holes by the Bobcat machine. When the usina is operating there are people sweeping constantly to push the garbage that doesn't fall onto the belt out of the way. The sweepings go to a recessed part under the beginning of the belts where it is collected in carts to be selected through at a later time. At the end of the canopied section there is another drop of about 5 feet and another concrete platform. Here, the picked-through trash is collected to be brought to the dump at Caucaia. A full-sized backhoe drones away loading the trash into an unmarked dump truck.<sup>30</sup>

When the conveyers are operating, men and women from 18 to 70 wearing flip-flops, shorts, tube tops, t shirts, ball caps and - in the case of women - often earrings, stand lines of 10 on either side of the conveyer belt. They sort through the trash without masks and mostly without gloves. Some have plastic bags over their hands. They open small plastic

---

<sup>30</sup> 30/11/2005 – 11:30 – Observation - Work Journal Maintained by Author

bags, usually covered with a black, damp dirt, and pick through their contents throwing what they have found into a number of large plastic and metal barrels behind them. The different barrels contain glass, aluminum, different grades of plastic, etc.<sup>31</sup> At the end of the shift what they have found will be weighed and at the end of two weeks they will receive pay of between 14 and 40 reals for their work.<sup>32</sup>

### **Dangers of the Employment**

In addition to dealing with the scorching sun, the people who work within the complex report many other workplace hazards. They say they have to watch out for trucks which speed through the complex without regard for the people working there.<sup>33</sup> People are also sometimes buried by bulldozers who do not notice them working on the transbordo.<sup>34</sup> The people who operate this equipment are all municipal (EMLURB) employees from outside the community.<sup>35</sup> In the rainy season the smell of the garbage is very pungent and it gets slippery and very dirty. People come down with colds. Sometimes in the trash they encounter dead cats and dogs. Because they are not provided with masks, goggles, and gloves some serious dangers are amplified. There is the danger of encountering syringes which people threw out in their household trash and catching a transmittable disease. Some of the trash has toxic trash mixed in and particles get in the eyes of the catadores and they breath in dangerous substances.<sup>36</sup> When people get cuts on their hands, which frequently happens, they do not have the economic conditions to

---

<sup>31</sup> 30/11/2005 – 11:30 – Observation - Work Journal Maintained by Author

<sup>32</sup> Number range of all the different wages reported to me by respondents

<sup>33</sup> 2/12/2005 - 13:45 – observation – work journal maintained by author

<sup>34</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

<sup>35</sup> Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 Dec 2005

<sup>36</sup> De Freitas Goustodio, Paulo Sergio, Personal Interivew, 4 December 2005

take the next day off of work, and in many cases they don't have gloves so they have to go back to the usina the next day and work with garbage with open cuts on their hands.<sup>37</sup> The usina does not have nurses present, they do not even provide a first aid box or even some alcohol for washing cuts. The closest clinic is 3 hours away (walking) and most catadores don't have time make the trip unless they are very sick or injured.<sup>38</sup> It is very sobering to realize that despite the difficulties of their working conditions, the people are pleading for this work.

### ***Catadores de lixo in context***

This research is focused on the *catadores de lixo* within the small community in which they regularly circulate which is described above. But any meaningful discussion of the issues confronting the *catadores de lixo* needs to include their socio/economic/historical context. The *catadores de lixo* of Novo Perimetral, like the people who work with garbage across the third world, are economic refugees. The increase in the volume of consumer-product packaging and the subsequent growth of recycling industries facilitate their activities, but the driving forces behind them are the rapid growth of Latin American cities, economic crisis, and the rise of unemployment rates.<sup>39</sup> Eduardo Galeano in *Open Veins of Latin America* is helpful in understanding the roots of these phenomena in the Brazilian Northeast. He explains that such poverty is a symptom of a colonial legacy that is perhaps the fundamental problem of inequality in Brazil – the mal-distribution of land. Galeano explains that because land is hoarded in underproductive latifundia holdings,

---

<sup>37</sup> Luciana Montese de Oliveira (Dulcie), Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

<sup>38</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Constance, Paul. "Dignidade no lixo," *BID America*, 2003  
<<http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/index.cfm?thisid=3079>>

rural families are unable to subsist and so send their offspring toward urban centers. The Northeast remains underdeveloped because wealth, industrial development, and power is concentrated in the South of the country (internal colonization). The factories that *are* built are designed to economize on labor, so there is a huge sector of unemployed people/cheap labour in cities like Fortaleza which impedes the development of an internal market and suppresses wages.<sup>40</sup> These unemployed people resort to many different means to survive. Some of them resort to landfills.

It is also important to understand the social service provided by the *catadores de lixo*. Although *catadores de lixo* are often categorized among beggars and scavengers, they are in fact an integral component of the sanitary infrastructure in the rapidly growing cities of Brazil.<sup>41</sup> *Catadores* are critical to the recycling industry, collecting and processing 90% of the material used by the recycling industry in Brazil. While less than 100 of the 5,500 municipal governments in the country have formal recycling programs, 3,800 municipalities have *catadores* who collect and sell recycling material.<sup>42</sup> By supplying resources, *catadores* reduce costs to domestic industries thus improving their economic competitiveness and decreasing the need to exploit new resources; and reduce the amount of garbage that is actually discarded, extending the active lifespan of landfills.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Galeano, Eduardo. *The Open Veins of Latin America; Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997.

<sup>41</sup> Constance, Paul. "Dignidade no lixo," *BID America*, 2003  
<<http://www.iadb.org/iadbamerica/index.cfm?thisid=3079>>

<sup>42</sup> *Catadores do Lixo no Brasil; The Trash Scavengers in Brazil*, ed. Laura Firestone, 2003, Harvard University. <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/lixo/>>

<sup>43</sup> Constance, Paul. "Dignidade no lixo," *BID America*, 2003  
<<http://www.iadb.org/iadbamerica/index.cfm?thisid=3079>>

## The People who are the *Catadores de Lixo*

Every *catadore de lixo* has a different story of how they came to the profession. The *catadores de lixo* at Novo Perimetral are first, second, third, and perhaps even fourth generation *catadores*. My three case studies, Donna Glaucimar, Donna Maria Eroniza and Donna Teresa are illustrative of how one comes to be a *catadora de lixo*. Donna Glaucimar's inherited the tradition from her parents. Before coming to Novo Perimetral, she lived in Barra do Ceará and Outra Nunes. Both of these places had landfills, and Glaucimar moved to the as landfills closed and others opened.<sup>44</sup> As Donna Glaucimar put it, "I am a *catadora*, I work with garbage, when the garbage moves, so do I."<sup>45</sup> Donna Maria Eroniza is a first generation *catadora*. Both of her parents died when she was 4 years old and she went to live with a guardian who also died not long afterward. She left the house where she was staying when she was 15 to live with a woman in Henrique Jorge. This woman brought Donna Maria Eroniza to Jangurussú.<sup>46</sup> When Donna Teresa was 5 years old her parents migrated from Macapé in the interior and began working as *catadores* at Barra do Ceará. When she was 10 years old Donna Teresa began working as a *catadora* as well. She moved to Henrique Jorge to work at the dump there and when the landfill opened at Jangurussú she came to work there. She was 20 at the time.<sup>47</sup> And so the tradition will continue, as all of these women have at least some of their children working in the *usina* or the *transbordo*.

---

<sup>44</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005

<sup>46</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

It is important to realize that no matter how subhuman their conditions appear, the *catadores de lixo* are extremely normal. The catadoras I spent my time with are Catholic women who, apart from their profession and the location of their homes, have a lot in common with my Catholic grandmother in Canada. Maria's stated sources of happiness are her health, having her family together, having work, and tranquility. Of everything in her world, she most values her children. It is her dream that she will gain retirement and to have peace and her grandchildren around her. She hopes that her children have good lives and that they will study.<sup>48</sup> Teresa most values her children and her health, and it is her great dream that her children will live well and have a good future.<sup>49</sup> Glaucimar most values the people of her household and likes the beach, looking at Christmas lights and dressing up nicely.<sup>50</sup>

### **History of the Employment Struggle**

The landfill was established in Jangurussú in the 1970s. In the beginning, *catadores de lixo* would travel back and forth from their homes near the recently closed Henrique Jorge other communities to work there. Eventually, some started to move to Jangurussú and build shacks. While the Jangurussú dump in Fortaleza was in operation, about 1000 people, about 300 of them children, worked on top of the landfill scavenging for recyclable material or anything else that could be used or sold.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

<sup>50</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005, 4 December 2005

<sup>51</sup> Mangurian, David. "O lixo como fonte de renda, » *Inter American Bank of Development*, 2000. <<http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/Archive/stories/2000/por/1-2h.htm>

In the late 1980s, there began to be some concern that the dump was approaching capacity (at was at one point 30 m high), that it was polluting the coco river, and that the catadores were living in subhuman conditions. In the early 90s, SANEFOR, Fortaleza's sanitation company initiated an expansion of the city's sewer and garbage collection infrastructure, including a plan for recycling. It was decided that the Jangurussú landfill would be covered over with soil and that the people who had been scavenging on the landfill would be invited to participate in a program offering low-cost housing and the organization of a cooperative.<sup>52</sup>

#### ***How does the Cooperative Function?***

EMLURB supplies unsorted trash Monday to Friday to the cooperative to be sorted at the *usina de triagem*. The cooperative functions under the following structure: There are 5 teams: A, B, C, D, and E. There is one team for each conveyer belt at the usina de triagem. At the end of a shift, the material collected by each team is weighed and noted. The cooperative takes responsibility for selling it. Some is sold directly to industry, reaping a better price, and other items are sold to deposits. At the end of 15 days, the total income of all the material sold by the cooperative is divided among the cooperated catadores depending on what percentage of material their team collected. Unless someone was absent from work, everyone from each conveyer receives the same amount. The president doesn't receive a salary, she receives 1% of what is earned. The vice president receives 0.9% and the secretary 0.8%. (Mescita)

SANEAR, the state agency in charge of sanitation financed the construction of the *usina de triagem* – the sorting facility and the *transbordo* – the transfer station. Jangurussú was transformed into a recycling and transfer site for Fortaleza's garbage, which began to be sent to the nearby city of Caucaia. The responsibility for the complex was later transferred over to EMLURB, the municipal sanitation company.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Mangurian, David. Inter American Bank of Development, 2000. Available at: <http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/Archive/stories/2000/por/1-2h.htm>

<sup>53</sup> Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 Dec 2005

Up until 2004 the prefecture/EMLURB was responsible for almost everything that had to do with the cooperative. Then, they began to reduce their assistance to the cooperative. Now, the prefecture only pays some functionaries, energy, fuel, maintenance of the machines. It employs 26 people who work in 3 shifts doing things like administration, repairing machines and conveyers, operating the bulldozer and bobcat. They are employees of the prefecture and so they are generally not from the community.<sup>54</sup>

When the prefecture withdrew their help, wages at the usina nose-dived. People who had been earning almost a full months salary (300 reals) in a *quinzane* (15 days) were seeing that reduced to 14-30 reals in the same period.<sup>55</sup> When the prefecture withdrew, more and more money out of the profits from recyclable materials went toward maintaining unreliable equipment and wages shrank. The quality of garbage being delivered to the *usina* and hence ability of the *catadores* to earn decreased as well – they received more garbage from poor, suburban neighborhoods and less private garbage – such as garbage from airports. Since the cooperative took responsibility of the *usina* there have been long periods during which many of the conveyers were not functioning or during which the *usina* was closed all together because broken machines remained in states of disrepair.<sup>56</sup>

In order to survive difficult times, the *catadores* resort to various means. People who could worked at the *transbordo*, those who couldn't relied on family members who did or suffered. After that, they survived off of government programs and community

---

<sup>54</sup> Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 Dec 2005

<sup>55</sup> Mescita, Regina, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

<sup>56</sup> Mescita, Regina, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

projects.<sup>57</sup> In order to get during the employment crisis, many resorted to stealing their electricity and not paying their water bills. Donna Maria Eroniza told me that she hadn't paid her water lately, and that she paid her lights with her childrens' *Bolsa de Escola*.<sup>58</sup> The PETI program – *Programa de Erradicacao do Trabalho Infantil*, which provides a salary of 40 reais for children who stay in school is an important part of many families budget because 155 members of the community between 7 and 14 are enrolled in this program.<sup>59</sup> A 14 year old girl I met, Anna Jessica, told me she took part in Crescer com Arte because her participation supplemented her mother's income.<sup>60</sup> All of Glaucimar's children participated in sponsorship programs, such as World Vision and Nova Vida. During the crisis, Donna Teresa supplements her income with sewing jobs<sup>61</sup>, but she is a rare case. Some people got through the crisis by begging<sup>62</sup>, stealing<sup>63</sup>, and relying on customs of reciprocal gifts with their neighbors<sup>64</sup>. Some also had to resort to using items recovered from the garbage and even it is rumored some were eating what others found in the transbordo.<sup>65</sup> Supposedly, the *catadores* are supplied with something called basic assistance by a team comprised of Banco do Brazil, the Prefecture of Fortaleza, and two Catholic organizations; Pastoral parade, and CADATE when the usina is defunct. The basic assistance consists of rice, beans, coffee, sugar, etc. It is helpful but not considered reliable.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

<sup>58</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

<sup>60</sup> Anna Jessica, Personal Interview, 25 December 2005

<sup>61</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

<sup>62</sup> Luciana Montese de Oliveira (Dulcie), Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

<sup>63</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

<sup>64</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

<sup>65</sup> Da Costa Lima, Iara Maria, Personal Interview, 25 Nov 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

## Politics of the Employment Crisis

In the words of the prefecture, the decrease in assistance was a planned step toward autonomy for the cooperative.<sup>67</sup> In an interview, Moaair Cunha, director of the *divisão do destino final de lixo* under EMLURB provided his opinion as to why “during the entire period of accompaniment everything was fine, and when EMLURB pulled out things fell apart” in this way: the problems of the Cooperative on internal disorganization of the Cooperative and the culture of the catadores, i.e. being unaccustomed to sustaining themselves and expecting to have things delivered to their hands for eternity. Also, he admitted when I suggested it, they are not educated.<sup>68</sup>

The cooperative does not view the rollback as a meaningful step toward autonomy, they refer to the change as an “abandonment.” They feel it was more the result of an unfavorable change in municipal government than any sincere desire assist the cooperative in gaining autonomy. If all the conveyers and machines worked and a higher quality of garbage was delivered, a representative of the cooperative told me, then things might be ok. But as it stands in this things the cooperative is still dependent on the prefecture and the prefecture frequently breaks promises.<sup>69</sup>

The *catadores de lixo* place the blame for the crisis on both the prefecture and the cooperative. The catadores accuse the prefecture of breaking promises and abandoning them. They criticize the that the cooperative is disorganized. In particular, they criticize the current president. She is criticized for not really having been a catadora (supposedly

---

<sup>67</sup> Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 Dec 2005

<sup>68</sup> Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 Dec 2005

<sup>69</sup> Mescita, Regina, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

she only ever worked up on the landfill for 4 months), for stuffing her pockets (supposedly she has a new car) for never having been properly elected by the people and for only really working for herself,<sup>70</sup> and for treating playing people off of one another and “treating them like dogs.”<sup>71</sup> They feel that no one is actually working for the people who are working on the ground, in the garbage and dealing first hand with low wages, broken equipment, and even total closure of the usina. In conversation after conversation they repeat that they are abandoned, that they are forgotten<sup>72</sup>.

### **Explanation of the Crisis; Dependency**

Despite the dangers and difficulties of their profession, the catadores define their greatest need as for the usina to re-open. Maria, Glaucimar, and Teresa all explained that this is because they are profoundly dependent on the garbage. It is difficult to say whether the *catadores de lixo* have other options, but it is possible to ascertain that they *believe* that they are *catadores de lixo* because they have no alternatives. This causes them to feel great desperation when their source of income is defunct.

The desperation is especially strong because the income they get is their means of buying food, a primary physiological need. The way the catadoras experience unemployment is shaped primarily by their poverty and veritable hand-to-mouth existence. As Donna Glaucimar explained, “when you don’t work, you don’t buy food.”<sup>73</sup> Maria explained to me, when the *usina* is working everyone works and earns and eats and is happy. When it

---

<sup>70</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

<sup>71</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

<sup>72</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005., Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

<sup>73</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005

doesn't, none of this happens.<sup>74</sup> There is also an impression that the entire community's economy is based on the complex. Alvernie, Glaucimar's son estimated that 90% of the people who live there work at the *usina* or the *transbordo*. If it ever closed, he told me, the entire community would fall apart.<sup>75</sup>

Very telling about the severity of the crisis and the state of desperation of the people is the virtual consensus that life was much better in the days when the landfill was active. Even though they lived in much worse conditions and faced greater dangers, the *catadoras* reminisce about the days when the landfill was open because people were able to earn enough to support their families. As Donna Glaucimar said, "when the dump was open we were dependent on no one but God, if you worked you earned."<sup>76</sup> People even reminisce about how when the dump was open, more people could contribute to the family's income because there was no age restriction on working like there is now. The community health agent herself said that life was easier because you could work from age 5 until 100. People died there because it was very dangerous, she said, and generally they don't die at the *usina*, but they were earning.<sup>77</sup>

The dependency that the *catadores* say they have on the *usina* is due to lack of alternatives to work at the *transbordo*. The *transbordo* serves as back-up option for the cooperated *catadores*, but for some, like Teresa who has high blood pressure, or Glaucimar who is physically handicapped, it is not an option. The problem of the *usina*

---

<sup>74</sup> Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

<sup>76</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

being closed and the wages nose-diving was felt especially hard by women because many do not have the strength to work out in the direct sunlight carrying heavy bags all day at the *transbordo*. This pressure is especially hard for single women like Teresa, who do not have a partner who can go to the *transbordo* and bring income to the household.

## **How the Catadores Interpret the Crisis and What this Means**

### *Abandonment by the State, Alienation from Society*

The catadores repeat that abandonment, in the form of both formal roll back of roles as well as broken promises, by the prefecture is at the heart of their problems. Glaucimar told me that “no one helps the people who work at the sorting factory.”<sup>78</sup> When the landfill closed, unlike previous times such an event took place in the lives of the catadores or their parents, they stayed. They received homes from the prefecture which are to them of high quality. Instead of working with complete access, complete autonomy, and no protection, as they did at the landfill, they are now working with little more protection, limited access, and no autonomy. The catadores can’t go the new landfill in Caucaia because it is forbidden to *catar* there. Some have gone to Sobral because the garbage is good there,<sup>79</sup> but leaving everything they have is difficult, especially, as Glaucimar said, “our houses only have value for we who live here.”<sup>80</sup> The houses and things like running water are greatly appreciated by the community members.<sup>81</sup> I could not know, but I feel for many the houses provided during the deactivation period are the nicest they have known. They are no longer only “dependent

---

<sup>78</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

<sup>81</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005.

on God.”<sup>82</sup> Rather, they are in the predicament of being dependent on someone who doesn’t exist, because as it seems EMLURB as it seems wishes to wash their hands of them and the Cooperative sees themselves *as* them, just another victim of EMLURB.

The abandonment felt by the *catadores de lixo* is a theme which transcends this one employment crisis. The police and ambulance to come to their community, they are not provided with a health post, and they have very little contact with anyone from outside the community. It is in the mentality of the *catadores* that they are not part of society. Lindenburg de Lima, who has been working in the community for 4 years, has the view that the *catadores* have internalized the idea of Jangurussú, that idea of being unwanted. In some cases they don’t want to step too far outside the community because they feel they are not wanted there. This reinforces low self esteem, non-agency, drugs and violence.<sup>83</sup> The community feels alienated and forgotten, with its one source of income and thus survival threatened. This is the source of the desperation they feel that makes them lies the re-opening of the *usina* as their primary need.

### ***The disorganization of the Cooperative***

The *catadores de lixo* blame their problems partly on disorganization of the cooperative, but in a very tangible sense they *are* the cooperative. Even if the organization of the cooperative were such that they did not feel part it, it is certainly a political entity very much within their reach. None of the *catadores*, through, made any mention of planning to do something about the cooperative. There is a lack of empowerment among the

---

<sup>82</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

<sup>83</sup> De Lima, Lindenburg, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

*catadores de lixo* that effects how they experience the income crisis and needs in general.

The desperation felt by the *catadores* is amplified by the feeling they are loosing everything because they feel it was their only option.

Because, it seems, they don't feel like they can change their reality, the *catadores de lixo* feel like they don't have options. They feel destined to be *catadores de lixo* and can do little more than wish this would provide them with enough to subsist. They feel they have no other opportunities because haven't a high enough level of education or because they are illiterate. The problem is not exclusively lack of opportunity. When there were courses offered, they were not attended.<sup>84</sup> Donna Teresa told me it was her dream to be a seamstress, but when a course was offered in this, she did not participate.<sup>85</sup> At a very young age people begin to speak about their lives as if they were behind them. Even Glaucimar's 18 year-old son spoke in this way in a conversation with me<sup>86</sup>. The story of Glaucimar and her children is illustrative of how the *catadore* culture reproduces itself.

Glaucimar, whose parents were also *catadores*, provides a text book example of the cycle of inheritance of the *catadore* life. She met a boy when she was 13 and got pregnant. She lost the baby but got pregnant again a year later and married the boy. She feels she missed out on her youth because, as she explained, you don't go out and do exactly what you want when you are married because if the other person doesn't want to go out you need to stay in. She intimated to me that her husband was ignorant and to himself, and he

---

<sup>84</sup> Francisca, Deusinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Teixeira, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

<sup>86</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

never believed in her.<sup>87</sup> In one interview, she said if she had studied she might have a nice job like secretary, but when she was young she wasn't interested.<sup>88</sup> In another interview she said if she would have studied it might have been different, she might have become an lawyer, she might have worked in advocacy. But she only studied when she was a little girl and her "letters are ugly." It's not her parents fault that she didn't study, she told me, it was the fact that at that time she wasn't interested.<sup>89</sup> Her oldest son (18) started working at the landfill when he was a child and now he works at the transbordo and supports his 16 year old wife and 10 month old son. He studied up until the 2<sup>nd</sup> grau (around 15 years old) and he too feels he doesn't have any other chance of employment. "I am not considered illiterate," he told me, "but I can't do much with what I have. To get employment you need some type of course, and I don't have the conditions to take courses like that. I can only do heavy, physical work."<sup>90</sup> Glaucimar's other son has become involved in drugs, does not go to school, and is not interested in any of the community programs. Her daughter, who Glaucimar describes as liberal, and to whom Glaucimar grants total freedom has an 18-year-old boyfriend whom Glaucimar invited to move into the family home whenever he wanted if he was prepared to be a good man.<sup>91</sup> Girls get pregnant and get married so early in Novo Perimentral, that if they ever dreamed of doing anything else, this idea becomes unviable before it can even mature.

---

<sup>87</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005.

<sup>89</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

Both Donna Fatima and Irara and Lindenburg said that the greatest need in the community was dreams.<sup>92</sup> I talked to the catadores about this and they disagreed, saying that catadores did have dreams, they were just realistic and knew they would never come true.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps then, the problem could be redefined as such – the catadores de lixo have dreams, they just don't believe in them. This lack of belief in their ability to change their situation increases the desperation the catadores feel then they see their means of livelihood being taken away.

## Conclusion

I hope that in this paper I have accomplished both documenting an unemployment crisis profoundly effecting some of most society's most marginalized, as well as implicitly informing my original research question, that is, *how do the catadores de lixo define, experience and prioritize their needs and how are they being met or not met?* My exploration of why they define the re-opening of a recyclable-material sorting facility where they work as their number one need revealed that needs are made salient by desperation, and that it is in the realm of income that they feel most desperate. The desperation they felt when the *usina de triagem* closed was fostered by two themes with run through their lives – abandonment and alienation. When they talk about the disorganization of the cooperative and the abandonment by the prefecture they are talking about more than simply a few months with out work, as grave as that is for their reality. When they talk about the abandonment by the prefecture they are doing so in the context of decades of being not only neglected but ignored by the government and society as a

---

<sup>92</sup> Da Costa Lima, Maria Iara, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005, De Lima, Lindenburg, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

whole. When they talk about disorganization of the cooperative, they are not only demonstrating the inadequacy of the president, they are doing so from a reference point of a culture that is chronically disempowered. So, when the *catadores de lixo* characterize their primary need as for the *usina de triagem* to reopen, as they invariably do, the desperation which propels their voice must be understood in the context of their feelings abandonment and alienation/disempowerment. In fact, then, all needs of the *catadores de lixo* can only be understood with this important cultural backdrop. The closure of the *usina de triagem* might look like a blessing to an outsider, but the *catadores* experience it as the feeling that their last option is being taken away.

Glaucimar, maybe one of the most empowered women in the cooperative, told me one day if anything was going to change, the *catadores* would have to do it.<sup>94</sup> I believe that, ultimately, this is true and I have confidence in Glaucimar that she will be a driving force in that change. But although perhaps the future lies with the *catadore*, the question still remains of the responsibility of EMLURB. The work of the *catadores* is dangerous and unpleasant, but they are willing to do it. They ask only for two things: 1. the opportunity to work i.e. functioning conveyer belts in the *usina* and functioning Bobcat and 2. a fair chance to earn by the delivery of satisfactory grade mixed garbage to the *usina* and 3. some basic safety equipment like gloves, masks, and maybe goggles and boots and a first aid kit. Conceivably, wish number 3 could be taken care of by a well organized cooperative. But it seems that for society's most marginalized who are providing an important social service for centavos, the first two wishes might be fulfilled. EMLURB may ignore the *catadores*, as it appears they are trying to do. To say, you are a scavenger,

---

<sup>94</sup> Da Silva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005.

you came with nothing and we owe you nothing. We have provided you with so many things, take what you can from the leavings and be pleased. Or, it would be possible for EMLURB to acknowledge in not simply the humanity than at least the citizenship of the *catadores* and recognize the social benefit they are providing by assisting the cooperative in becoming autonomous. It is telling that government will fund universities that only the wealthy can enter, but for the poor who are providing a public service they can not provide gloves and some organizational assistance. In my personal opinion, just as the neglect of the *catadores* extends beyond the prefecture to encompass the entire society so does the responsibility for acknowledging the problem. We, who benefit from the work of the *catadores*, should take political action to protect their basic human rights.

### **Indications for Further Research**

In truth, the findings above are only the background research for the paper I would like to write and feel should be written about the *catadores de lixo* of Jangurussú. Because so little has been written about the community, I spent three weeks in the field trying to understand what was going on at Jangurussú and then I ran out of time. It would be not only interesting and illuminating but also meaningful to return to Jangurussú and collect the narratives of the people who live there - to dig deeper into the effects of the politics on the people. I see in Donna Glaucimar a strong woman who identifies with and cares for all of her people. She is becoming increasingly politicized and tracing her empowerment would be a superb project.

## Bibliography

Brito, Maria Augusta Neta, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

*Catadores do Lixo no Brazil; The Trash Scavengers in Brazil*, ed. Laura Firestone, 2003, Harvard University. <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/lixo/>>

Constance, Paul. "Dignidade no lixo," *BID America*, 2003  
<<http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/index.cfm?thisid=3079>>

Cunha, Francisco Moaair Rodrigues, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

Da Bilva Borrelo, Alvernie, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005

Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005.

Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 24 November 2005.

Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005.

Da Bilva Borrelo, Maria Glaucimar, Personal Interview, 4 December 2005.

Da Costa Lima, Maria Iara, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005.

Da Silva, Maria Eroniza, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005.

De Freitas Goustodio, Paulo Sergio, Personal Interivew, 4 December 2005

De Lima, Lindenburg, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

De Oliveira, Luciana Montese (Dulcie), Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

De Oliveira, Luciana Montese (Dulcie), Personal Interview, 2 December 2005

Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development; The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Francisca, Deuzinha, Personal Interview, 28 November 2005

Galeano, Eduardo. *The Open Veins of Latin America; Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997.

Mangurian, David. "O lixao como fonte de renda, » *Inter American Bank of Development*, 2000.

<<http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/Archive/stories/2000/por/1-2h.htm>>

Mescita, Regina, Personal Interview, 2 December 2005.

Programa de Saude da Familia. Community Health Profile ; Novo Perimetral. Fortaleza: October 2005.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Trade Paperbacks, 2003.

Teixera, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 22 November 2005

Teixera, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 25 November 2005

Teixera, Teresa Jesus, Personal Interview, 30 November 2005

\* All observations and personal interviews can be found respectively in the Observations and Interviews sections of the ISP Work Journal maintained by the author.

## ISP Appendix

1. This project would not have been possible in the US as the *catadore de lixo* profession does not exist there in the form that it does in Brazil. Certainly it would be difficult to find people who had been dependent on garbage for generations in such a way that the lifestyle had become a culture.
2. I could not have completed any of the research in the US.
3. This is my first serious attempt at field based learning. Going into the field with a question and the knowledge that I had to write a large research project forced me to find my own sources of information and thus my learning style became more active.
4. Virtually my entire monograph is primary sources. There is one paragraph of social/historical context which is from a secondary source.
5. I chose to include data that I felt was essential for understanding the reality of my respondents or especially illustrative of certain aspects of their lives as well as information that informed my research question. I deemed irrelevant material that did not fit these criteria.
6. The field exercises taught me how to conduct interviews, make observations, take notes, organize a work journal, and prepared me for talking to strangers.
7. The FSS readings were the most helpful in the ISP process.
8. The principal problem that I encountered during the ISP period arose when I realized that my original research question was not very relevant to the community. I perceived this early on and was able to adapt the question.
9. I experienced a time restraint because the PSF, my affiliation to the community only felt comfortable with my presence there during the limited hours that they too were there. In order to work with this I followed their suggestions for the first week until I felt comfortably safe in the community and then I took the responsible risk of going unaccompanied during daylight hours. I also has a time constraint in that there was not a lot of background information on the community to be found so that too all had to be accumulated first-hand and that required a lot of time.
10. My original research topic changed when I realized that outside institutions played a limited role in the catadores lives and when I realized how salient the employment crisis was.
11. The community was small enough that I found all of the large NGOs by walking around and talking to people. The interviewees were introduced to me by the community health agent who my advisor introduced me to, and all the other informants I met by loitering around their place of work.
12. I used observation and interviews (semi-formal) in order to gather my data. I also spent some time in the home in order to get a sense of the reality of everyday life. I debated a homestay but when I weighed the health and safety aspects I decided against it.
13. My advisor was indispensable in that she was at the site and was my connection to the community. She was also helpful at answering questions about the community. In terms of the development of my paper, we had very little discussion. I don't believe that she saw her role in this way. Rather, I believe she

- saw herself more as an orientator and at this she was wonderful. I actually had a whole team of advisors, the entire progame de saude da familia team.
14. My first interview in Pirambú which was set up before I had really fine-tuned my question turned out not to be very helpful, except as a reference to what the catadores in Jangurussú were longing for. I reached a lot of dead ends in terms of the needs questions. In addition to the institutions not being very involved, the women didn't like talking about needs very much. Any question I asked they would find a way to bring it back to the closure of the recycling facility. This in itself was illuminating but made a paper on needs in general unfathomable.
  15. I gained insight into a demographic that I would never have had contact with if it were not for the ISP. Because of this, I had the opportunity to realized that the "problems" that exist in poor Brazil are the same problems that exist in poor Canada, except for a very select but serious few.
  16. During the ISP my Portuguese improved and I began to take on some Brazilian habits like allowing myself to linger and chat with people, since it was all helpful in my understanding of their reality.
  17. The principal lessons I learned during the ISP process were that human beings can get used to just about anything, and that no matter how different their "normal" and my "normal" are, we probably want more or less the same things out of life.
  18. If I met a student interested in pursing the same project, I would recommend that she pay a good primary visit to the community before defining her research project, that she look in the community of Beco do Boi, that she consider a homestay, even if just a short one, and that she spend some time at the transbordo because the people there are fantastic.
  19. I would defiantly undertake a similar project again, in fact, I can't imagine leaving what I have now as it is considering all the primary background information I had to find. I was just getting into the interesting interpersonal stuff when it was time to go!

## Abstract

*Catadores de lixo* is a general term used by Brazilians to refer to those people who work with trash, including: those who work (and often live) in open landfills and scavenge for salvageable goods to consume, use, or sell; those who work in the street collecting garbage; those that collect only recyclables; and those that work within associations, companies or cooperatives. Such a cooperative was formed out of the group of *catadores de lixo* who had been scavenging at the open landfill of Jangurussú when that landfill was deactivated by the municipal government. The idea was that the *catadores de lixo* would be given a place to live and steady work within the cooperative in a facility selecting recyclables from mixed trash. The *catadores* suffered, however, from great shortages in income and long periods without work. This is such a source of misery in their lives that they define the shortage of work as the greatest difficulty in their lives. They blame it on their abandonment by the prefecture (EMLURB) and disorganization of the cooperative. This way in which they discuss the crisis illuminates several attributes of the culture of the community which are necessary to understanding how they experience the crisis and needs in general. The *catadores* prioritize the re-opening of the recycling facility because of desperation. This desperation is a symptom of their dependency on the facility which can only be understood in the context of the feelings of disempowerment and alienation among members of the community which come to light in the way they discuss the disorganization of the cooperative and their abandonment by the prefecture of Fortaleza.