

Precarious Normal

Why care about
precarity?

Q: Why care about precarity?

A: It's all around you.

Synonyms for precarity

- >> Irregular
- >> Unstable
- >> Temporary
- >> Produces anxiety ("anxiogenic")
- >> Subject to ending abruptly
- >> Subject to interruption

"It's all built on sand, it could all
come apart."

What does this refer to?

On SunLearn (or on paper)

Name one way that student life is precarious.

On SunLearn (or on paper):

**Describe a precarious person that
you know.**

Why a class on "theory"?

(An interlude.)

How anthropology sees the world

- >> All social forms are historical.
- >> In any given site, many social forms converge and overlap.
- >> All social forms trail in their wake a cloud of ideologies.

How anthropology studies the world

- >> We start out with a set of analytical concepts.
- >> These concepts are historical products.
- >> Often they are borrowed from social actors themselves.
- >> Given one's concepts, one tries to make sense of the world.
- >> Often, one's concepts are not adequate.
- >> So one tries to make new ones.

Where do concepts come from?

- >> What makes a good concept?
- >> What are the limits of a concept?
- >> How does a concept focus us, and how does it blur our vision?

Back to precarity

Kathleen Millar

The Precarious Present: Wageless
Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de
Janeiro, Brazil

Catadores commonly narrate their entry to the dump as an experience of severe shock, describing feelings of overwhelming nausea and paralysis. Their narratives testify to what they see as the everyday struggle of working as a catador. Most catadores arrive on the dump at dawn to collect for several hours before the sun becomes unbearably intense, or they work at night with a flashlight under their chin, a light attached to a headpiece, or with no light at all.

Catadores use a plastic bag or barrel to collect material in the unloading zone and then carry it back to their burlap sacks, slogging through thick mud and uneven ground. They must work quickly, and closely to unloading garbage trucks, to collect as much material as possible before a tractor comes moments later to bulldoze the pile. At the end of the day or in the early morning, trucks from dozens of scrap yards arrive on the dump and catadores lift their several-hundred-pound sacks onto the flatbeds. This usually requires four catadores on the ground lifting the sack and two on top of the truck pulling the sack upward.

Catadores work in the sun and rain with no shelter aside from faded beach umbrellas that they find in the garbage and stick into the tops of their filled burlap sacks. They breathe nauseating fumes of methane gas produced by the decomposing waste beneath their feet. And they spend hours bending over, racing to avoid oncoming tractors, and lugging heavy loads. (38)

Why would someone
want this job?

Cordeiro points to his experience of working without a schedule on the dump as instilling in him a new orientation to time that conflicts with the regularity and stark divisions between working and not working in wage labor. Alessandra perceives the ability of the catador “to do what he wants” on the dump as a reason for her stress when working for someone else, for feeling a loss of control in formal jobs. Finally, Rose—someone long accustomed to coming and going from work, first as an itinerant street vendor and later as a catadora on the dump— expresses intolerable frustration at the demand to remain at work when she had nothing to do. (45)

Just as the transition to wage labor in industrial capitalism entailed the creation of new worker-subjectivities, the transition to precarious labor in contemporary capitalism is also a process involving the transformation of desires, values, and arts of living. In other words, like wage labor, work on the garbage dump is a site of subject-making, which catadores experience and express as transformative of their inner dispositions.

What's "subject-making"?