

**"I'M NOT A GARBAGE-WOMAN; I'M A SCAVENGER OF
RECYCLABLE MATERIAL!"
WOMEN, WASTE AND WORK IN SOUTHEASTERN
BRAZIL**

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[...] Today, I have decided to read two testimonies for you. [...] I have the testimony of Maria Madalena Rodrigues Duarte, from Itaúna, Minas Gerais. When Madalena met Antonio, she had been working in the garbage dump of her city since she was seven. Where are you, Madalena? [...]. When Madalena was twenty years old, she met the metallurgist Antonio, who came from a neighboring city and was two years younger than she. Their relationship was all love and happiness but Madalena hesitated. She had a secret that Antonio should know. Just like in a telenovela. "One day," Madalena said, "I gathered all my courage and said, 'Antonio, I have to tell you something: I work as a scavenger,'" she recounts.

Antonio was surprised. His wide-open eyes said more than his voice. He asked, "What is it that you do?" without hiding that the term "scavenger" did not sound good. "When I explained what I did," Madalena says, "he looked at me and said, 'If it is an honest job, and it is a way to earn money like any other, then it will help us build a life together.'" [...] And this is what Madalena says today:

Now, at the age of forty-six, and still a scavenger, I see myself among the highest authorities in the country. And that's not all. I hear the President say to the whole country that my work is dignified, that it is important for the whole society and for the Planet's future. My God!¹ (Excerpts from a transcription of President Lula's speech at the national meeting of scavengers of recyclable material in São Paulo, October 29, 2009).

Was this the same Madalena I met in May 2009, during my fieldwork? I recognized the life story, I recognized the words, but I was surprised that they were now being spread to a very

¹ All translations in this text are mine, unless otherwise noted.

broad public, and retold by the Brazilian president himself, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

A few months earlier, in 2009, I had gone to the city of Belo Horizonte to begin fieldwork with a larger research project about garbage, social inequality, consumption, and citizenship among urban women living in southeastern Brazil. The project asks an apparently simple question that unfolds into several others: What is garbage and for whom?²

In this article, I look at a fairly recent process of social inclusion of waste scavengers in the city of Belo Horizonte by analyzing some fragments of the life stories of three women who actively participated in organizing this group.

My purpose is to identify some common aspects in the narrative of these three women in order to understand how a process of mobilization is started; the context that enabled this very process to start; and the movement of social inclusion through management of that and those who are excluded and discarded. I will proceed by retracing the life trajectories of these three women and by analyzing how their lives are intrinsically bound up with struggles for participation and inclusion in society. My material consists of a series of interviews and conversations, and of other texts and academic works in the area.

Geralda, Maria, and Madalena³

“Dona Geralda” is her nickname and the way she is known and presented everywhere. Her real name is Maria das Graças

² The first year of this research was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida/SAREC). Funds for continuing and extending the research are provided by the Swedish Research Council (VR).

³ Following the request of my interviewees, in this text, I use their real names.

Marçal. Dona Geralda was born in 1950, in a *favela* on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, to parents who came from a small city in the countryside of the state of Minas. Her mother needed medical assistance and her father dreamed of finding a job and building a better life in the big city. Soon after their arrival, Dona Geralda's father died. Alone with her unemployed mother, she spent most of her time in the streets of downtown Belo Horizonte, where they begged for money and food.

Dona Geralda grew up in the streets; she had her first son at the age of sixteen. "I have nine children and had three miscarriages." At a very early age she started helping her mother beg and soon learned that certain kinds of discarded paper could be sold by the kilo to recycling warehouses on the outskirts of the city. "That was the way we managed to survive," Dona Geralda recalls.

Dona Maria Bráz is sixty-three, mother of seven children and adoptive mother of three more. She came to Belo Horizonte from a small city in the countryside south of Belo Horizonte. She has been working as a scavenger in the streets of the city for thirty-five years, twenty of them within the *Asmare* association.

Madalena is forty-six, married, and mother of two grown children. She was born in Itaúna, a small city southwest of Belo Horizonte where she still lives and works. Madalena started working at an open-air garbage dump at the age of seven, in order to help her parents and fifteen siblings with some extra money. She is now one of the front figures of a local cooperative of scavengers and of a regional movement bringing together scavengers from several small cities situated around Belo Horizonte. Together, they are opening a factory to recycle plastic.

Belo Horizonte and Social Exclusion

Like Brasília, Brazil's capital, Belo Horizonte was planned and built to become the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The city was inaugurated in 1897. It has a population today of approximately 2.5 million people spread through a mountainous landscape. With increasing urban migration,⁴ the city has received people from rural areas who moved to the capital in search of better opportunities. According to Pochmann et al. (2005:24), the transition from rural to urban landscapes has happened without any kind of social rupture: miserable life conditions in the countryside have simply been replaced by other forms of exploitation in urban settings. As the city has expanded, *favelas* and *aglomerados* – low-income urban settlements, most of them situated on the periphery of the city, with little or no infrastructure (water, sewers, electricity) and oftentimes built through auto-construction in squatted areas (Holston 2008) – have become a part of the urban landscape. It is estimated that about twenty-five percent of the city's population, i.e., more than 500 thousand people, live in such areas (Libânio 2004). Needless to say, the contrast in standards of urbanization and living between poor and wealthy neighborhoods is astonishing.

Freitas (2005) presents some statistics about the growth of the city of Belo Horizonte during the second half of the 20th century. Until 1945, the population of the city grew with the influx of people coming from nearby peripheries. From 1945 onwards, the city's population increased mainly due to rural migration. In 1940, the population of the city was 211,377 inhabitants. In 1960, it reached 693,328 people, and in 1970 the city counted a population of 1,255,415 inhabitants (Freitas 2005:64).

⁴ Nowadays, according to Luna and Klein (2006:226), only nineteen percent of the Brazilian population lives in rural areas.

Dona Geralda and her parents were one of the many families that moved to the capital in search of better life opportunities:

My mother moved here in search of a better life. She came from the region of Serro [northern Minas], where she worked in the fields. She knew how to work, how to use a shovel, she planted and she got a little food. She was a citizen despite all misery. I lost eight or nine siblings because of hunger. But despite all misery she had her citizenship. Then, when she came to Belo Horizonte, everything changed. And she lost everything. She had to beg, she was beaten by the police because begging was not allowed. So instead of building something here, she lost all she had – her self-esteem, everything. My mother suffered a lot in this city. She had a dream and that dream didn't turn out right. She went through a lot of things. You know, people coming from the interior are more naive. It was easy to con her. These are people who move to the city to suffer. But despite all that, she managed, in her own way, to take care of our family (Excerpt from an interview).

Cities are the setting where “dramas of citizenship” (Appadurai and Holston 1996:200) are enacted. As Caldeira (1996, 2000) has argued, Brazilians experience a climate of growing social segregation. The organization of urban space and the organization of labor within this space reflect the extension of social inequalities and the process of social exclusion in the country. As will be shown, politics of exclusion and struggles for social inclusion can be tightly connected to the production and management of garbage.

The city of Belo Horizonte produces approximately 4,900 tons of garbage every day (IBGE 2000). These numbers stand for the refuse that is taken care of by the municipal sanitation services. There are also unofficial and improvised open-air deposits of garbage all over the country.

In 2000, fifty-nine percent of the collected refuse in Brazil was simply dumped in open-air garbage deposits. More recent statistics say that only fourteen percent of the Brazilian population benefits from a source segregation system and only three percent of all solid refuse collected is recycled (IPEA

2009). Belo Horizonte has one major garbage station on the outskirts of the city. Situated on the BR-040 road, this garbage station is not an open-air garbage deposit but a sanitary landfill or *aterro sanitário* – solid refuse that arrives at this station is crushed and dumped onto a soil made impermeable by layers of clay. It is then covered with several layers of earth, and packed down by tractors. The artificial landscape that is thus formed⁵ is also perforated by pipelines intended to conduct the *chorume* – liquid wastes of decomposed organic garbage⁶ – to large tanks so that it will not contaminate the soil. The *chorume* produced then has to be treated before it can be released in nature.⁷

This landfill, created in 1975, reached its maximum capacity in 2007 – approximately 20 million tons of refuse are compactly packed beneath its surface. Neighboring cities, after intense negotiations, have opened new areas for the controlled “final” destination of garbage (*O Estado de Minas*, May 17, 2010).

But it is not only garbage that is rejected, transported, and moved around in the city. Freitas (2005) and Pochmann et al. (2005) suggest that in observing the life trajectory of excluded people, it is possible to chart a common path throughout urban space: upon their arrival in the city coming from the countryside, they are relegated to the city’s outskirts, where housing is precarious and work is often nonexistent. Facing misery and hunger, they are then forced towards the hyper-center of the city, the geographic core of commerce,

⁵ See, for instance,

http://www.biblioteca digital.ufmg.br/dspace/bitstream/1843/VCSA-6XYP5B/9/anexo_d_foto_a_rea.pdf for an aerial photograph of the area.

⁶ Of the garbage collected by the municipal sanitation services, forty-five percent is organic material (*O Estado de Minas*, May 17, 2010).

⁷ This is a simplified, lay description of a much more complex process of waste management.

characterized by an intense flow of people and goods, and marked by the leftovers of consumption.

Dona Geralda recounts:

My mother and I used to beg for money and food at Rua Rio de Janeiro, right beside a well-known perfume shop. At the time it was forbidden to beg in the streets, so the police came, beat us, and took us to a place where beggars and other miserable people were gathered. This was supposed to be a place to help poor people, but they treated us really bad. We had to wear a kind of shapeless gown and take cold showers. And they beat us. In the head. So we lived in the streets, me and my mother. And we learned, from other people who also lived and begged together with us in the streets, that we could earn some money by selling used paper. I was like eight years old and I helped my mother gather paper that we found in the streets. And I carried it on the top of my head. To sell to a warehouse that bought old paper (Excerpt from an interview).

Though they had not yet met each other, the paths of a young Dona Geralda crossed those of a young Dona Maria Bráz in the streets of Belo Horizonte. After moving to the capital, Dona Maria Bráz went through a series of underpaid jobs in order to earn money for herself and her growing family:

When I moved to Belo Horizonte, I started working as a domestic servant. Then I learned how to cook and started working in a restaurant. As things were not working that well, I learned how to sew and started working as a seamstress. But I wasn't getting enough money, because I like to work and see the money rolling in, I like to see the result of my work in the shape of money. Because it is like this with some kinds of work: if you sell something, then you have to wait for the person to pay and the money to arrive. It takes time. [...] So I quit my job as a seamstress and started scavenging. And here I am. Thirty-five years of *recycling* (Excerpt from an interview).

Several studies of the life of waste scavengers in Brazil (Freitas 2005; Kemp et al. 2008; Magera 2003) point to a series of challenges these people had and still have to endure in order to survive. And because their survival depends on the scavenging of that which is considered to be useless garbage, these people

are oftentimes taken to be as disposable and as repulsive as the discarded objects they work with.

It is difficult to find statistics about the exact number of persons working with informal waste management. A survey conducted in 2007, with 363 organized scavengers in the region of Belo Horizonte, delineated a certain profile of the persons in this group: fifty-five percent of them had four years of school or less, only ten percent had completed their high school studies. Fifty-five percent were women and only eleven percent of them declared themselves to be white (thirty-six percent stated they were black and fifty-three percent auto-classified themselves as being *pardo*, “blended” (Survey conducted by the organization *Lixo e Cidadania*, 2007, in Barros and Pinto 2008).

Accounting for the situation of waste scavengers in Belo Horizonte, Barros and Pinto (2008), Freitas (2005), and Kemp (2008) explain that until the late 1980s scavengers had to spend most of their time in the streets, either because they did not have a home of their own, or because they had to stay close to and watch the material they had gathered so it would not be stolen, burned, or removed by the local authorities, who would mistake it as “just garbage.”

Dona Maria Bráz remembers:

I have a long story of fighting. My whole life has been a fight. Take for instance the neighborhood where I lived: when we moved to that part of town there was nothing there. I think it is my destiny, to be close to things that are starting. Anyway: there were no schools, the houses were very poor, and most of them were just small sheds made of pieces of wood, canvas walls, or zinc plates. And we started with campaigns to improve things and build a church, [...] build a school [...]. But it was a constant struggle [...]. I used to go from my neighborhood to the center of the city, to work. But then I separated from my husband. I had small kids and I didn't want to leave them alone. My priority was to work surrounded by the kids. So they stayed with me while I was working. I used to take a big cardboard box, put a piece of wood on the top of it, and there we had a table. I used another box, put a bucket with

water in it, and washed the kids before they went to school. They all went to school. They studied in the center of the city [...]. I took good care of them; they had no reason to be ashamed of anything. I never had any problem because of the kids, *graças a Deus*. And I never went to their father, I never asked him to give me anything, not even a grain of dust (Excerpt from an interview)

Until late 1980s, scavengers worked on a non-organized basis, either individually or together with other family members. They had no place to gather the material they collected; they were not allowed to sort it in the warehouses that bought the material, so they were left to do their work in the streets, under bridges, and in hidden backstreets of downtown Belo Horizonte.

Excluded from the formal work market, scavengers were not seen as dynamic actors in the urban landscape. On the contrary, they experienced exclusion in the gazes of people who happened to meet them in the streets.

Dona Geralda recalls:

We were seen as second- or third-class beings. We were not seen as workers, as citizens, as people. [...] Some people held their noses when they passed us. This has really left marks on me. Just because we were there, mixed with everything that surrounded us, mixed with garbage, trying to earn a living. [...] We were not seen as workers. We were seen as garbage. I'm telling you. People held their noses; they called us garbage-women (In Freitas 2005:81,100).

The feeling of being objectified, of being seen as garbage, as disposable, unwanted, and inconvenient, was painful. On the other hand, Dona Geralda is quick to stress that, in spite of all the suffering,

[...] from the day I learned how to pull a cart [to gather and pull all the collected material] I didn't starve anymore. My kids would come with me and stay in the streets. I had a little house in a neighborhood far away from here, but we couldn't be there since I had to be close to my material. People would steal the cart, the material, everything that was

left unwatched. So we slept with the things I'd gathered and I used to leave the kids on a street corner in the center while I went around in search of paper (Excerpt from an interview).

The fact that scavengers lived and worked in the streets was a matter of conflict with the local municipal authorities, which saw their practices as polluting and unhygienic.

Surviving as a Scavenger in the Streets of Belo Horizonte

Freitas (2005) and Kemp et al. (2008) describe in detail the life and working conditions of scavengers before they started organizing themselves. As these authors affirm, the narrative of street scavengers is also that of unemployment or underemployment. The number of people living *in* the streets and *of* the streets increased as the economic situation in Brazil reached a critical point (the 1980s and early 1990s).

But let us stop here for a while for a more detailed piece of information about scavenging practices: most of the persons who started scavenging the streets in search of reusable or recyclable⁸ material were initiated by a friend or an acquaintance who told this person that scavenging was a way to earn money. Freitas (2005:125) emphasizes the importance of this precarious sociability. For someone living in absolute poverty, contacts were needed in order to survive. To start scavenging, a person needed to be introduced to other persons who would teach her (or him) what to gather, how to separate the collected material, and, maybe most important of all, she or he needed to agree on ways to share the territory where scavenging was done. Every scavenger has his or her *pontos* – points where waste paper is fetched (outside shops, banks, offices) or where other kinds of recyclable material can be

⁸ I deliberately use the words reusable and recyclable to signal a change in terminology as a discourse of environmental issues gains more strength.

found (outside concert halls and restaurants for aluminum cans, for instance).

The most miserable scavengers used to carry the material they gathered on their heads, bringing it to a place in the street where they lived and where they could sort the material. After that, they would find a way to make it to one of the warehouses of recyclable material, or "junk deposits" (*depósitos de sucata*) as they are commonly known, where the material was weighed and sold by the kilo with different prices for different things (cardboard, white paper, newspaper, magazines, plastic, disposable plastic glasses, aluminum cans, plastic bottles – each has its own kilo price).



More established scavengers used and still use the cart (*carrinho*), a wooden construction in the shape of a huge box with no upper lid, two small wheels on its bottom, and two handles connected by a front bar, as a more efficient way to navigate the city and gather material to be resold. The scavenger stands in the middle of the wooden rectangle formed

by the handles and the front bar, and pulls the cart throughout the streets, together with cars, busses, and the busy city traffic. Experienced scavengers manage to pull, on a daily basis, up to 500 kg of recyclable material.

Until the end of the 1980s, the warehouses buying reusable material owned the carts, which were rented to scavengers for a certain amount of money, generally subtracted by installments from the scavenger's daily earnings. Should anything happen to the cart, it was the scavenger's responsibility to pay for repairing or replacing it. This kind of deal is still a reality for many scavengers who do not belong to any association.

While scavengers sold what they gathered and sorted to the local "junk deposits," the material they collected made a much longer journey and passed through the hands of several actors: from the first middlemen in the local deposit, the material was sold to other persons or enterprises that added value to it by cleaning, crushing, and preparing it for resale to recycling industries that, in turn, transformed the material into new products that appeared anew in the marketplace.

Scavengers, as Freitas (2005:143) indicates, saw themselves as workers, but their way of working and living in the streets – drinking in large quantities (as a way to socialize, fall asleep, feel comfort, and endure), pulling their overloaded carts, and scavenging among what was left to be taken away by the sanitation services – was considered marginal and deviant by most of the people who saw them out in the streets.

Still according to Freitas (2005), Jacobi and Teixeira (1997), and Samson (2009), the group of scavengers in Belo Horizonte was not unified until the late 1980s; it worked in small isolated enclaves and had no dialogue with the local municipal authorities, which did not know how to approach this part of the population by means other than coercion and repression. Without a united voice from the scavengers' side, dialogue with

the authorities was nonexistent. Dona Maria Bráz recalls that "there was a time when people from the municipality would treat us like bandits, like dirty dogs." But – as their narrative goes – things were about to change.

Moving in the Same Direction

Geographically, most of the warehouses for recyclable material in Belo Horizonte were (and still are) situated in the same area – a few blocks behind the station for inter-municipal bus transportation, the *Rodoviária*. This part of Belo Horizonte borders the commercial hyper-center of the city (also known as *centro* or *centrão*) and the road to the periphery. Significantly, this location behind the *Rodoviária* signals the beginning of a peripheral space and marks a movement away from the city.

For practical reasons, until the late 1980s, scavengers lived and gathered their material in forgotten, hidden spaces close to these warehouses. As warehouse owners did not allow them to gather or sort their material on warehouse property, they had to occupy "public spaces" (or perhaps it would be better to say "public non-spaces") in order to survive.

One such space, almost in front of several "junk deposits," was an abandoned warehouse, property of the National Railway Company. Gradually, this space turned into a meeting point for several scavengers and their families, who started living and working in the area, under improvised cardboard ceilings and canvas tents. This was the time, according to Dona Geralda and Dona Maria Bráz, when the *Pastoral de Rua da Arquidiocese de Belo Horizonte* – the street ministry of the Catholic Church, aimed at helping people in absolute poverty – appeared in their lives.

According to Dona Geralda, Dona Maria Bráz, and other people who worked in that area, in 1987, the *Pastoral* started to work

more closely with the population of scavengers. As Barros and Pinto (2008) and Freitas (2005) affirm, the work methodology of the *Pastoral* consisted in learning about the life conditions of the persons in need, trying to create the conditions for these persons to socialize with each other (through gatherings, meetings, and parties) in order to create a feeling of sociability and belonging and, later on, to start discussing dreams and actions for future changes.

Both Dona Geralda and Dona Maria Bráz recall this period of meetings and gatherings as important moments in their lives:

I started going to these meetings [organized by the *Pastoral*]. In the beginning I didn't believe they would lead anywhere, but I liked them and I started coming to everything. We had meetings in the streets, under trees, everywhere. And the idea of creating an association started. There weren't many of us at the beginning; we were like twenty people. And if I hadn't believed in the idea of the association, I wouldn't be here now. [...] Sometimes life is so miserable to you that you don't even know who you are anymore. I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a mother. But to be a mother is so much more than feeding your kids with beans and rice. I had to find out who I was. I had to discover myself and that was when the *Pastoral* reached me a hand (Dona Geralda, excerpt from interview).

Dona Maria Bráz has a similar narrative of the events:

We had all these meetings, you know, everywhere. We were now occupying this space where we are now. We lived here, with all the kids, all the material, all the rats, you know? Sometimes we were sleeping and a rat would crawl over your face. [...] In order to get what we have now, we had to fight a lot. And we had the help of the people from the *Pastoral* to start negotiating with the mayor about the appropriation of this area (Excerpt from an interview).

The work done by the *Pastoral de Rua* enabled these persons – economically and socially marginalized and with very precarious forms of sociability (based mostly on mutual help and a daily struggle to survive) – to start talking and knowing

each other, to start sharing experiences. As Dona Geralda recalls,

[W]e only had time to work. We didn't have time to talk. There were some people who worked close to me that I really only got to know after the association started, many years later (Excerpt from conversation).

As Freitas (2005) explains, the work methodology of the *Pastoral de Rua* differs from other approaches directed at these segments of the population. Traditional kinds of interaction would generally be based either on supervision, coercion, and punishment (generally by local authorities), or on the practices of giving – things, clothes, food – but not listening or interacting on a closer basis with the people in need. The *Pastoral*, as one of Freitas's informants puts it, "taught us how to fish using a hook, instead of simply giving us the fish" (2005:196). Again in the words of Dona Geralda, "[A]fter a while we started having dreams in common."

After three years of intensive meetings, conflicts, and conversations, the group of scavengers, with the support and monitoring of the *Pastoral de Rua*, started delineating common aims for their struggle. One main objective they agreed upon was to fight for the right to work. That, in turn, implied having the activities of scavenging, gathering, and sorting *recognized as work* by the municipal authorities and by the population of the city. The right to work implied, moreover, the right to have a workplace.

It is important to remember that the creation of this movement coincides with the period of change to a democratic regime in Brazil and the writing of the new Constitution (1988), also known as the "*constituição cidadã*," or the Citizen Constitution. As Goirand (2003:18) comments,

[T]he 1988 Constitution broadened citizens' rights in civil, political, and social areas, since in addition to fundamental freedoms, it also

guaranteed social rights such as the right to housing, education, and health.

This was a period of economic hardships but also of great expectations and social mobilizations. During the late 1980s and 1990s, a redefinition of the concept of citizenship as “the rights to have rights” was increasingly being adopted by Latin American social movements (Dagnino 2003). This redefinition provided a common ground for the articulation of social movements, and it contributed to the

[...] emergence of new social subjects actively identifying what they consider their rights and struggling for their recognition. In contrast to previous conceptions of citizenship as a strategy of the dominant classes and the state for the gradual and limited political incorporation of excluded sectors with the aim of greater social integration or as a legal and political condition necessary for the establishment of capitalism, this is a conception of noncitizens, of the excluded, a citizenship from below (Dagnino 2003:5).

However, it was also in 1988 that the municipality decided to remove the scavengers from the territory they were occupying. Bulldozers and policemen came in the middle of the night and started “cleaning up” the place. As Freitas’ (2005) informants describe it, this raid had terrifying consequences since it took scavengers by surprise, in the middle of the night and unprepared to react, taking away their personal belongings, documents, and the material they were working with.

As a response to these events, scavengers and the *Pastoral* wrote an open letter to the city. This letter, addressed to the whole population, was distributed en masse throughout the city and sent to the media and to different institutions dealing with human rights issues. In it, the scavengers presented their situation as excluded people and their activities as honest work:

[W]hy does the municipality treat us so badly?
You have families; you are human beings, just like we are.

Would you like to live the same life as we live, living under bridges, under improvised roofs, running from the police?

Why did they take us away when we were only trying to earn our daily bread?

You depend on other people and we depend on garbage to live.

We have no place to go.

What can you do for us?⁹

Building the Association

Following the events of 1988, a process of negotiation began with the municipality with the purpose of finding a solution to the illegal occupation of the 1,000-square-meter area that was still a property of the National Railway Company but was no longer used in its operations.

On the first of May, 1990, the *Associação de Catadores de Material Reaproveitável de Belo Horizonte (Asmare)* was created, and its members gained the right to use the area they were occupying as their workplace.¹⁰ Scavengers were only seen by the

⁹ See Freitas (2005:195) for a transcription of the letter in its entirety.

¹⁰ *Asmare* is an association. According to the *Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio à Micro e Pequenas Empresas (SEBRAE)*, associations and cooperatives are two kinds of organization based on similar doctrinaire principles. Cooperatives and associations are defined by law, built and based on revised versions of the Rochdale (1844) ideal of cooperative movement (Magera 2003:58-64). Basically, cooperatives and associations need to have a minimum of initial members. Cooperatives and associations are civil organizations with the aim of improving the working and living conditions of their associates. These organizations should be democratic in their structures (no unchangeable or static hierarchies and no bosses, all associates should have the right to be informed about and participate in all of the organization's decisions, all associates should have the right to vote and elect representatives to occupy different positions in the organization), and the results of the associates' collaborative effort should be divided on equal terms among all associates. An essential difference between an association and a cooperative, according to SEBRAE, is that associations are organizations whose aim is of a social character (social, educational, and cultural assistance aimed at political representation and defending the interests

surrounding society once they got together and recognized themselves as a unified group (Freitas 2005; Jacobi and Teixeira 1997; Kemp et al. 2008).

New phases of negotiations and conversations with the municipality started – the appropriated area was to be used as a workplace, and not as a place to live. Those who had homes but stayed in the area to watch over their material were asked to move back to their neighborhoods; those who had the means to have a house, or had a relative they could live with, were encouraged to do so; and those who were homeless began, with the help of other associates, finding un-urbanized areas on the periphery of the city where they could build their own houses.

Dona Maria Bráz recalls:

We had several demonstrations. I remember when we were demonstrating to have water and electricity in the warehouse that we had just conquered. Every time we organized a demonstration, there were lots of people, right? Scavengers, homeless people, everybody went with us and made that loud crowd, that huge mass, with drums and everything. We got together and went to the streets. We brought our carts, they were all pimped up, and we went to the mayor's office. When we arrived there, they closed all the doors. Then we started making speeches. One person spoke, another one spoke – at the time we borrowed a van with loudspeakers from the "Workers' House" and we spoke. People from the *Pastoral* spoke, Dona Geralda spoke, everybody

of a certain group). Cooperatives, on the other hand, have a more defined economic aim.

Magera (2003:68) reports that in 1994, a national decree established that there were no formal obligations regarding employment legislation (unemployment, social security taxes, retirement) when it came to the link between cooperatives and their associates. While, on the one hand, this law might have had the aim of facilitating the work of these organizations, freeing them from taxes and bureaucratic work, on the other hand, it opened the possibility for eager entrepreneurs to bypass employment legislation and disguise purely economic activities under cover of a cooperative. See Magera (2003) for a further discussion of this topic.

spoke. And while a colleague was speaking, I started to feel an excitement, you know, a heat from inside that crawled up my legs to my chest and I said, "I need to talk, too! If I don't talk I will faint! For God's sake, give me this microphone." Then I took the microphone and I spoke, I screamed so that everybody could hear: "Open the doors, Mr. Mayor, open the doors! Because if you are in there, it is because of us, the poor people.¹¹ If it wasn't for our votes you wouldn't be there. Please, open these doors and receive our team." And they opened the doors; a man from security came out and said that the group would be received. Five of us went in. The rest waited outside. Then, afterwards, the mayor came out, he spoke in the microphone, he talked to me, he said he was sorry, he apologized to me and I thanked him and said, "You should never lose respect for poor people, because poor people are those who make the powerful ones. Help us carry our flag, because our struggle must not die out!" And from then on, things were happening, they gave us the means to build our warehouse and we started with the construction (Excerpt from interview).

The elements of voice ("I need to talk, too! If I don't talk I will faint!"), rights ("You should never lose respect for poor people"; "our struggle must not die out!"), participation ("And they opened the doors; a man from security came out and said that the group would be received"), and democracy ("If it wasn't for our votes you wouldn't be there") – all of which are parts of the redefinition of the concept of citizenship (Dagnino 1994, 2003; Holston 2008) – are tightly connected in Dona Maria Bráz's retelling of this important episode in her life.

In 1993, the movement of scavengers and the work done in *Asmare* gained a new dimension as the new mayor, from the Workers' Party (PT), decided to sign an accord on the management of municipal garbage. This accord involved several actors: the municipality, the department of urban sanitation, the Mitra Arquidiocesana (represented by the *Pastoral de Rua*), and *Asmare*. The municipality agreed to help

¹¹ In Portuguese, Dona Maria Bráz uses the words *pequenos* and *grandes* (small people and big people) to refer to the poor and powerless, and to the rich and powerful. Her use of "small" and "big" in depicting a moment of resistance indicates how she situates herself in a subordinate position in relation to those in power.

the association, finance the acquisition of building materials for the association's workplace and warehouse, and help the members of the association with know-how and training courses. Most important of all, the municipality agreed to give *Asmare* priority in gathering recyclable material, instead of offering the gathering of recyclable material to already established sanitation companies.

Asmare's role, according to this accord, would be to coordinate and take care of gathering, sorting, packaging, weighing, and selling the recyclable material. In its turn, the Mitra Arquidiocesana, represented by the *Pastoral de Rua*, would help with administrative issues and see to it that *Asmare* fulfilled its obligations. Samson (2009:54) emphasizes that this accord "was a landmark achievement in that it was the first time that a Brazilian municipality negotiated a comprehensive agreement to formally integrate *catadores* into the municipal waste management system."¹²

Dona Maria Bráz recalls a song the scavengers sang during these initial times:

I'm a scavenger, my work is to gather paper/ My hands are calloused from working/ I work hard through the streets of this city/ Making a lot of effort to raise my family/ We struggle for the whole society/ Commerce, industry, and for all those who want to join us/ We believe that united we are stronger/ Together, we will take good care of gathering recyclable material¹³ (Sung during an interview).

¹² According to Samson (2009:50), the subsidy given by the municipality to the *Asmare* association comes from the social welfare budget.

¹³ In Portuguese: Sou catador, vivo de catar papel/ Tenho minhas mãos calejadas sim senhor/ Vou dando duro pelas ruas da cidade/ Com muito esforço, pra família eu criar/ A nossa luta é pra toda sociedade/ Comércio, indústria e pra quem quiser somar/ Acreditamos na força da união/ Faremos juntos, a coleta funcionar.

Struggles of Belonging

From 1993 onwards, the work done by the association increased. With the sealing of the new accord, the working conditions of scavengers changed radically. The association nowadays has approximately 280 associates (Gonçalves, Oliveira and Silva 2008) who agree to pay a small monthly fee to the association. They work on a daily basis, Monday through Friday, with no fixed working hours but seeing to it that they achieve the minimum production quota of 1,500 kg/week (Kemp and Crivellari 2008). Associates are supposed to take turns in cleaning common spaces (bathrooms, areas for socializing, spaces outside individuals' boxes,¹⁴ and the open-air area). They are paid at the end of the week, and their salaries vary according to their individual production. Kemp (2008) estimates that associates' salaries fluctuate between two to six minimum wages,¹⁵ depending on their individual production and their access to recyclable material. Associates also have the right to have their bus fares to and from work paid by the association. They are not allowed to drink during working hours and are supposed to learn and respect traffic rules in pulling their carts through the city.

¹⁴ *Asmare's* first and main warehouse has several subdivisions: an area for compressing, packaging, and weighing the sorted material; another area consisting of several "boxes" – small spaces divided by side-walls where the scavengers can keep and sort their own material; a small office; a canteen; a woodworking shop; and an open-air area for bringing recyclable material in and out and for parking carts.

¹⁵ In February 2009, the minimum wage for a Brazilian registered worker was 465 Reais per month. In January 2010, it was raised to 520 Reais (Portal Brasil 2010). It was calculated that the monthly cost to buy 6 kg of meat, 7.5 liters of milk, 4.5 kg beans, 3kg rice, 1.5 kg flour, 6kg potatoes, 9 kg tomatoes, 6 kg bread, 600 g coffee, 7.5 kg bananas, 3 kg sugar, 900 ml oil, and 750 g butter (the so-called basic necessities or *cesta básica*) was 232 Reais in January 2009 (Dieese 2010).

Dona Geralda recalls:

There weren't so many of us in the beginning. People have to see in order to believe. But when the warehouse was ready and we were working there, they came and they started believing that it was possible. We struggled a lot to get what we have now. To get all these people together, people who came from everywhere – some stole, others were drug addicts. [...] I used to drink two liters of *cachaça* (sugarcane rum) every day. And then I quit. I became the president of the association and I had to be a good example. So I quit. I haven't drunk for eighteen years now (Excerpt from interview with Dona Geralda).

Nowadays Dona Geralda no longer pulls the cart. Besides being involved with the organization of *Asmare*, she sometimes helps out with sorting material and attends conferences and meetings where she is invited to speak:

I experienced a lot of humiliation. My children felt proud of me only when their teacher said, in front of the whole class: "Do you know that their mother was invited to the USA? That she spoke at the United Nations?" Then I wasn't the garbage-woman anymore, I was the woman who had been in the US. Today they are all proud of me, proud of having helped me in the streets, gathering paper with me in the streets. And proud of being citizens, right? (Excerpt from an interview).

The move away from a life in the streets, to work in a warehouse, to wearing a uniform and being recognized as workers, are all conquests cheerfully remembered by the first generation of *Asmare* members.

In Dona Maria Bráz's words:

We got the accord with the municipality; we started working together with the municipal sanitation service. They accepted us as partners. We got another warehouse that is used for sorting the material. And the association is still standing, right? But it is a bumpy road we have. Sometimes we stumble; sometimes we stumble and fall so hard that we break our nose. But we put some bandage on, recover, and start again... So *Asmare* is still standing, I'm still standing and as long as I'm able to open and close my eyes, I'll be working here. [...] We have to remain united. [...] (Excerpt from an interview).

In her imagery, Dona Maria Bráz blends the body of the association with her own body: "we stumble," "we break our nose." Later on in the same statement, she disembodies the association only to confirm, after a short while, that as long as her own body works, she will be staying with *Asmare*.

As Dona Maria Bráz also mentions, *Asmare* got a second warehouse that is used exclusively for sorting, compressing, packaging, and weighing recyclable material. Most of the people who work there (approximately fifty) are women who are either the younger relatives of street scavengers, or women who used to be homeless or lived under miserable conditions. The workers in this second warehouse are also paid at the end of the week, but their salaries have been based since 2009 on the collective production of the group, corresponding to approximately one and a half to two minimum wages per month.

The story of this association is an example of the capacity to mobilize and organize people focusing on common interests. It also shows the cooperation among several actors: scavengers, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, and the local government. But there is still a lot to struggle for. Workers in the association do not have the legal right to retire with a monthly pension. Their work is not formally registered (no social security taxes are paid) and associates claim they do not have the money, individually, to pay for these taxes. Hence, even if the changes this first generation of organized scavengers struggled for and experienced are milestones that transformed their lives, it is important to keep in mind that we are talking about a move from misery to poverty.

The story of this transition is narrated with pride by the first generation of organized scavengers. It is also a narrative that is repeated and studied by academics interested in the study of social movements, and spread throughout a large part of the

population that recognizes that “these people are well organized.”

It was due to the reverberations of the association’s conquests that Madalena contacted people from *Asmare*.

Inspiring Others

I was seven years old when I first went to the *lixão* (an open-air garbage dump). I went to school, and after school I went to the garbage dump. I had fifteen siblings and I wanted to help my parents. There were several families working in the area. We were like 150 families, more or less, panning garbage. The families moved with the garbage dump. So when it changed place, we moved with it. [...] I got married; we moved to the countryside and stayed there for eleven years. Then we moved back to the city and my husband started working in a metallurgic industry. I was unemployed and couldn’t find a job. So I went back to the garbage dump (Excerpt from an interview with Madalena).

Madalena’s story is similar to those of other scavengers who found in garbage dumps a means to survive. It is a story of unemployment and underpaid work, and of moves between the city and the countryside, and within the city, in a flow that follows the path of disposable objects. It is also a story about the tortuous conversions of value in society (Laporte 2000 [1978]), crystallized in speech by Madalena’s use of the verb *garimpar*, “to pan.” Generally used in the context of prospecting for gold, Madalena’s choice of verb summarizes the precariousness of her life conditions at the same time that it also illustrates that garbage is not always only “garbage” for everyone.

Madalena continues:

Around 1998 [i.e., five years after *Asmare* was founded and approximately ten years after the first mobilizations of scavengers in Belo Horizonte], we had the idea of starting a local cooperative of scavengers. We had lots of conversations with the Syndicate of Metallurgists and we also started talking with the municipality. The idea was to negotiate the right to use an abandoned space in the

garbage dump as our working space. I took part in all of the meetings. But I was really shy at the time. Six months after we had started our own cooperative, we saw a television program about *Asmare*. We phoned *Asmare* the next day and made an appointment. We wanted their support and we wanted to learn how to go about organizing ourselves. And we are still partners (Excerpt from an interview).

Nowadays, Madalena's working day is very different than it was when she worked in the garbage dump. She is the front figure of an inter-municipal cooperative of scavengers, the *Cataunidos*, which gathers nine different cooperatives and 432 associates with the objective of having their own factory for recycling plastic (Oliveira 2009). This factory would enable the associations to become more autonomous. As it was explained to me, disposable goods gain more value when they are processed and transformed into a recyclable mass that can be resold to industries that, in their turn, will cut their costs for producing products from the very beginning. So far, scavengers have only been able to sell material that is sorted and packaged but is not processed. It is not yet recycled, only potentially recyclable. The factory would be a means for the cooperatives to add more value to a *reusable* object, transforming it into a *recycled* product that can be sold at a higher price. The idea is certainly good, but the challenges ahead are huge.

Organized Female Scavengers – Recurring Topics and Common Trajectories

The life stories of these three women coincide many times with the stories of the associations they helped build. They all tell of a journey from a life in miserable conditions where, as Dona Geralda once put it in an interview, people "didn't even have time to think, because they're so occupied with surviving the day," to a more structured life, with more decent (but still far from satisfactory) working conditions. These women are certainly proud of the changes they have accomplished. I have already identified some recurring topics and common

trajectories in their life stories, but here I want to take a closer look at the way they see themselves and how they talk about their work and the collective effort of making the move from exclusion and anonymity to inclusion and participation in society.

For Dona Geralda, Dona Maria Bráz, and Madalena, one of the most important changes brought by the transition from unorganized individual scavenging to the building of a cooperative of scavengers has to do with the recognition of their scavenging activities as a form of *honest work* and not as an expression of misery or helplessness. Reporting on the initial meetings held between scavengers and the *Pastoral de Rua*, Freitas (2005) mentions that many hours were spent not only in making scavengers aware of themselves as workers but also in reflecting on the ways to pass this image further on to the rest of society. The right to work and the right to be recognized as a worker were watchwords that united this first generation of organized scavengers. The quote from Dona Maria Bráz illustrates well the pride of being a worker:

I'm well known in this neighborhood. So, anywhere I go, I might even go barefoot, but my head stands high and I'm well received. From the time we organized ourselves, from the very moment we wore our first uniforms [...], we were always respected... Sometimes I meet a scavenger who says, "How can I go into a bank, dressed in these clothes?" And I say, "You just go in, like everybody else! We're citizens, too! Is it just because I'm wearing my work clothes? That's even better, because it shows that I'm working, right? How many well-dressed people aren't in there who in fact are not honest? You shouldn't be ashamed of such things!" (Excerpt from an interview).

The pride in having an honest job comes bound up with an idea of citizenship as the right to participate in society. Dona Geralda explains:

People used to call me the garbage-woman (*lixreira*). It was so humiliating. But I've always been very proud of working with recyclable material. For us, that was never garbage, right? That enabled

me to buy my own house, raise my children. I bought a house with the money I got from scavenging. So for me that was never garbage. It was always a dignified job. And there are so many families like mine... Look at Dona Bahiana, for instance, who raised all her children. They are all adults now and they work here, have their own families and children who go to school. [...] There are so many people here who were homeless. And now they've managed to win their citizenship back (Excerpt from an interview).

In a study of the understanding and practice of citizenship in Brazil, Holston (2008) points to the fact, also acknowledged by other studies (Barbosa 1992; DaMatta 1978; Goldstein 2004; Velho and Alvito 1996), that the country has a national citizenship that is universally inclusive in membership but utterly unequal in its application. In other words, different kinds of treatment are applied to different kinds of citizens.

In my previous research on Brazilian media (Machado-Borges 2003), I came to notice that a series of everyday practices in the lives of many Brazilians consists of efforts to make themselves seen, heard, and taken into account. To be recognized as a person, a citizen, or simply as "someone who counts" is anything but self-evident for the majority of the Brazilian population.

Dona Maria and Dona Geralda use the concept of citizenship (of being a citizen; recovering one's citizenship) to refer to their increased access to the city, to their success in making themselves heard, and to their struggle towards the right to work and participate in society.

However, the acquisition of certain rights is also connected to the acquisition of certain goods (one's own house, clothes, etc). As Bauman (2007, 2008), Cohen (2001), Sansone (2003), and Zaccai (2007) have discussed, the concept of citizenship is

gradually being entangled with consumption and with the capacity to acquire goods.¹⁶

The fruits of hard work are also many times recalled and remembered with pride. Children are often presented as the reason these women had to work hard and believe that things could change. Just as with Dona Geralda, it was through hard work that Dona Maria brought up her ten children:

My three youngest sons learned the skills of carpentry here, in the association. But now they are working elsewhere, they have formal jobs (*carteira assinada*). [...] There is another one, a girl, that I raised as mine and she works here, in the administration. [My connection with] this girl was the result of an affair I had with her uncle. Her mother drank a lot and she was always by herself, out in the streets. So I took care of her and her two siblings. And now she has her own home, and is all independent (Excerpt from an interview).

Madalena too reports on the results of her hard work:

My daughters are grown up now. Both of them study. One of them is already married. They never worked as scavengers or in the garbage dump. They wanted to help me but I told them they should study first. But so far, none of them has been working in the streets or in the dump. My youngest daughter told me, "One day I'm taking your place at the cooperative." They are both proud of the work their mother has and of the fact that I was able to raise them through the effort of my own work (Excerpt from interview).

Another common point in the life stories and narratives of these three women has to do with the environmental aspect of their work. According to Kottak (2005:45), environmental awareness in Brazil began to grow in the mid-1980s. It is a growing political force in the urban regions of south-central Brazil. Indeed, garbage management, its environmental consequences, and its articulations with citizenship are part of the agenda of several Brazilian institutions and NGOs. As the street

¹⁶ I plan to develop a discussion elsewhere on the link between citizenship, consumption, and consumerism. Here I simply acknowledge further ramifications of the concept of citizenship.

scavengers organized themselves, they also gained an increasing awareness of the environmental side of recycling. Dona Geralda recalls, for instance, that

[w]hen I got to know that our work of scavenging used paper was also helping to save trees and forests, I became really proud. When I understood that we were also contributing to saving room in the sanitary landfill, I got even prouder (Excerpt from an interview).

Madalena's initial testimony (quoted at the beginning of this article) goes in the same direction: "I heard the President say to the whole country that my work is dignified, that it is important for the whole society and for the Planet's future. My God!" (Excerpt from speech, 2009). I also noticed from my interviews, the way terms such as "recycler," "recycling business," were employed as alternatives to the term scavenger (*catador*) and scavenging (*catação*), perhaps as a way to further legitimate their work through signaling its environmental aspect. This environmental awareness is illustrated by the title of the present article, a phrase uttered by Dona Geralda in recalling moments of her life and restating where she stands: "I'm not a garbage-woman; I'm a scavenger of recyclable material!"

Madalena reports, however, on a double-sidedness to this stronger social awareness about the importance of recycling:

Sometimes we are invited to lecture about recycling to people who work in industries. What happens, many times, is that people in the industries learn that certain things they thought were useless are worth money and start selling nice and clean material themselves, giving us only the leftovers that are dirty and mixed up with other stuff (Excerpt from an interview).

The chain of use and exploitation of people and goods crosses the path of environmental awareness.

A final point in common in the narratives of these three women is closely related to a discussion about gender. Knowing that

almost half of the scavengers in the region of Belo Horizonte and its surroundings are men, I asked Dona Maria and Dona Geralda why, in their opinion, women were the front figures when it came to organizing and mobilizing scavengers as a group. Their answers were not gender-neutral. Both Dona Maria and Dona Geralda referred to women's perseverance and loving strength as sources of explanation:

Women are more caring, they give more value to everything, you know? Women don't just leave something. For instance, if I'm cleaning a room, I won't leave it half-done. No, I'll be working until everything is clean. So this is the way women are. They care, you know? They put love on what they do... men are not like that, men don't care. They leave things easily, right? If there is anything bothering them, they leave and move on. It can be their home, their family, their work. Women are not like that (Excerpt from interview with Dona Maria Bráz).

Without picking a fight with men, I would say that women are more sensible. They have a broader perspective. Women are believers, they don't discourage, and they want to see things happening. They are also patient, so that's also a difference. Men are more laid back. Women are mothers. And to be a mother is a challenge. It is a challenge and you have to struggle. Kids give you lots of strength. Men become fathers but they don't carry a big belly for nine months. I think we learn to fight for our children and then we also learn to fight for another person too. Women never stop. Now I do stop, but back then, never. I was pregnant, but I was pulling the cart. I had a baby and I went back to the streets. I put the baby in a little paper box, in the cart, and we went together. Now we have the day care center. It is all so different! (Excerpt from an interview with Dona Geralda).

A Few Words to Conclude

The aim of this article has been to present and discuss the way female waste scavengers have been organizing themselves in movements and associations in order to claim rights to participation in society. As I looked at the fragments of the life stories of three women, I also showed how their lives were connected with the cooperatives and associations they helped to create. My observations were based on fieldwork material

and on previous collections of narratives about the creation of the *Asmare* association.¹⁷

These are the stories told by the first generation of organized scavengers, and the changes they accomplished transformed their lives in radical ways. However, it is important to keep in mind that these transformations mark their path from living in miserable conditions to living a poor, but more bearable, life.

Besides identifying common trajectories in these women's narratives and situating them within a local and national context of change to a democratic regime, I also identified other topics that appeared in Madalena's, Dona Maria Bráz's and Dona Geralda's stories: their pride in being recognized as workers; their realization that the work they were doing had an environmental aspect and their consequent emphasis on this aspect as a way to legitimate their occupation; their feeling of having recovered their citizenship (understood as their right to participate in society); and their view of women's perseverance and loving strength.

The excerpts of life stories presented here can be read as testimonies about an exploitative chain linking people and goods, garbage and peripheries, scavengers and reusable material, recycling and profit. The value of people and goods fluctuates as they move about in the urban landscape.

It is also important to keep in mind that the work of scavengers, organized or not, consists of recycling the refuse that they have not produced, since they often do not have the economic means

¹⁷ I acknowledge especially the work of Freitas (2005) as a major source of information, confirming and filling in the gaps of narratives about the creation of *Asmare*. Narratives that, I noticed, continue to be repeated with pride through the years by the first generation of organized waste scavengers from that association.

to consume goods. Through physical work (scavenging, pulling, carrying, gathering, sorting, packing, and carrying again) they turn garbage into recyclable material, a material that has a certain value but that comes to gain even more value once it has been resold and is far from the hands of those who first collected, but did not produce it (Magera 2003; Singer 1995).

During fieldwork in 2010, I read in the newspapers that the municipality of Belo Horizonte is planning to open a station to incinerate at least twenty percent of the garbage collected in the city (*O Estado de Minas*, May 17, 2010). These plans will certainly give rise to polemic discussions and negotiations about who has the rights to pan garbage.

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