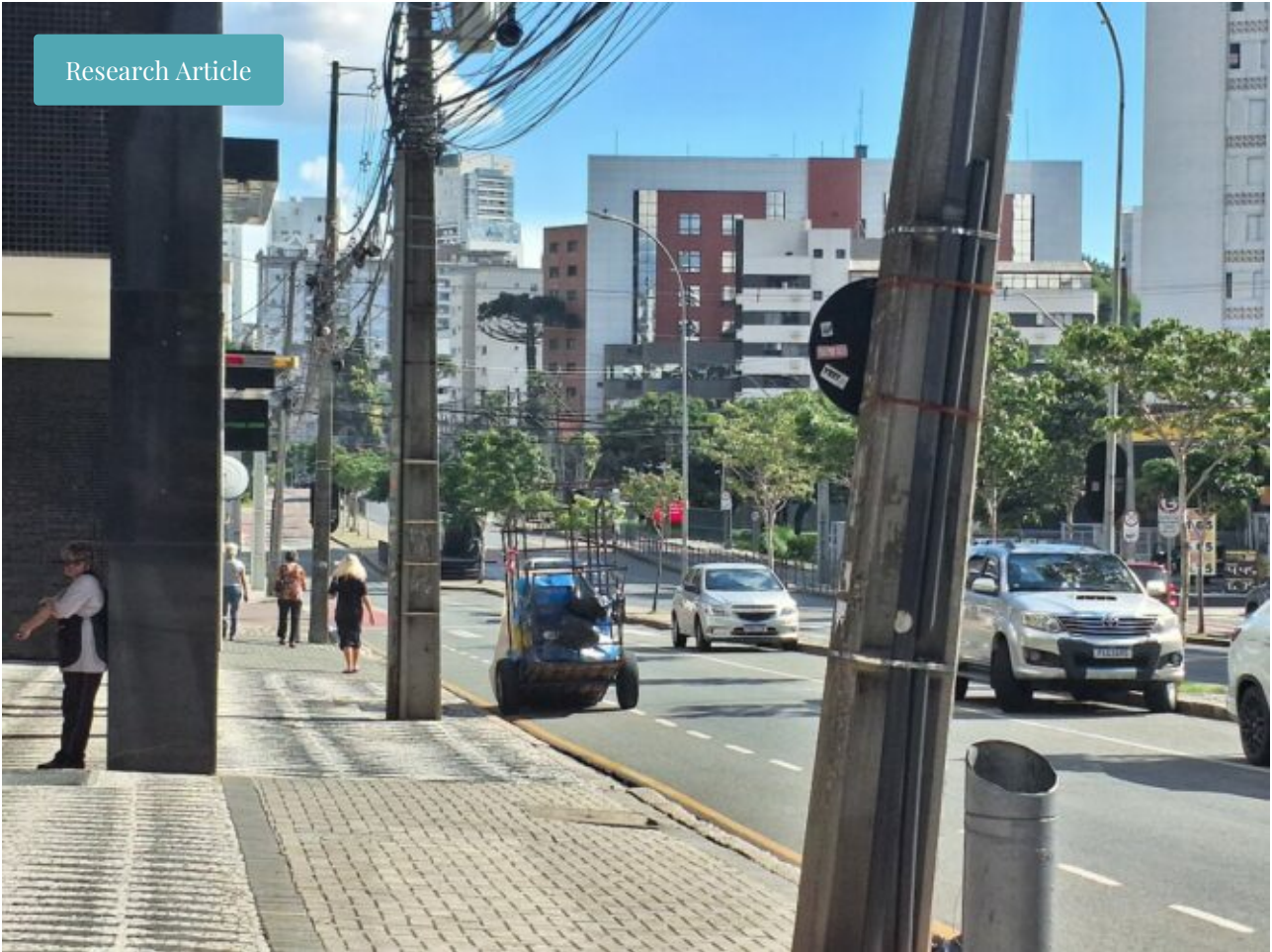


Research Article



The Work on Waste as a Work of Care

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This paper expands the category of reproductive care work, inviting reflection on how the case of waste pickers of recyclable materials in Brazil, who perform the work of cleaning and maintaining the city as a shared space, fits within this category. The well-established associations that frame domestic work as feminine, familial, affectionate, unpaid, and confined to the domestic sphere are not reflected in the work dynamics of waste pickers. The case of waste pickers constitutes an exercise in examining work that is predominantly performed by men, not familial in nature, clearly embedded within economic dynamics, and whose spatial context and object of labor are centered on the city. This study proposes a reflection on this practice, which appears antithetical to the conventional image of care work, with the city as its object. Thinking in these terms not only complicates and problematizes the category of care work, but also interconnects the work of waste pickers with other themes through dialogue, thereby contextualizing the systems of invisibilization that, we argue, also operate upon this form of reproductive work.

We argue that breaking down the essentialized bond between women and care work enables public policies relating to care work to be formulated more effectively. The intertwining of these dimensions prevents a sophisticated analysis of the conditions of care work at the urban level since, as will be demonstrated throughout this text, it is also necessarily constituted by work carried out by men. Thus, we emphasize the need to base public actions on new parameters that allow for the recognition, inclusion, and creation of better living conditions for those who carry out cleaning work in Brazilian cities.

Furthermore, the process of decoupling gender from care work opens up the possibility of reconceptualising reproductive labour beyond women's bodies, allowing us to imagine futures with new distributions of care work. This process of decoupling and reconceptualization can also create new public imaginaries regarding the image of Black men in the Brazilian urban context, who are routinely stigmatised as figures associated with violence and danger.

This reflection arises from a perspective that can only emerge through the territorialization and contextual localization of the debate. Those who work collecting recyclable materials are commonly referred to as *catadores de lixo* (waste pickers) or *carrinheiros*—figures firmly established within Brazilian reality. These workers operate informally, either independently or affiliated with recycling cooperatives, collecting waste left outside homes for pickup by garbage trucks. The term *carrinheiros* derives from their typical tool of trade: a two-wheeled cart with a metal frame used to carry collected materials (such as cardboard, metal, and plastic). The nature of this work is precarious due to associated environmental conditions: exposure to the filth of mixed waste in a country where waste-separation culture is still consolidating, vulnerability to weather hazards due to working without protection, and the physical exertion required to push a cart laden with recyclables up steep streets or through traffic.

To propose this analytical exercise, we will first outline the characteristics commonly associated with care work that are not reflected in the case of waste pickers. Next, we will offer a counter-argument that problematizes the category of care work, thereby justifying the inclusion of these workers' dynamics within it. Finally, we present a critique

concerning the dangers of essentialization and the necessity of reflection grounded in engaged scholarship attuned to the nuances that constitute local sociabilities.

The premise of care work as feminine, familial, and affectionate labor: unpaid and confined to the domestic sphere

In this section, we will present the interweaving of the dimensions of reproductive work that characterize it as feminine, familial, and affectionate labor, unpaid and domestic. These associations are frequent and their relationships well-established. Therefore, it is relevant to understand them collectively in order to subsequently subject them to critical tension.

The apparently indissociable articulation between reproductive work and the domestic sphere seems inevitable. Melo and Castilho (2009), in analyzing microdata from the PNAD/IBGE on reproductive work in Brazil, define this type of activity as the performance of domestic tasks related to family care. Care work is thus associated with an internal activity, belonging to the domiciliary dimension. The spatial delimitation of where the action occurs becomes a characteristic associated with its very nature. The publication *Cuidado em Debate* (Care in Debate), which discusses the Conceptual Framework of Brazil's National Care Policy (2024), defines care as daily work involving the production of goods and services necessary for the sustenance and reproduction of human life, ensuring well-being. Regarding its location, the publication states that care work can be carried out within the domestic or familial sphere, the community, or in public or private institutions. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of the possibility of care work taking place on the street, as is the case in the current study.

The economic dimensions of reproductive work are frequently disregarded and invisibilized. This is a type of work that relates directly to human well-being, yet it lacks an explicit market character, a fact stemming from the sexual division of labor. There is an underestimation of care-related activities, alongside the establishment of a divide between the public and mercantile sphere, a masculine domain, and the domestic and reproductive sphere, a feminine domain. Even when considering the global level, as in the works of Yin (2024) and Gruszka et al. (2024), which discuss domestic work from the perspective of the gig economy and its implications for the invisibility of subjects in precarious situations, there remains a strong linkage between the reproductive and the domestic. This work, typically performed by women, sustains the global economy, and there is a consensus across various studies regarding the precarious conditions into which these workers are forced.

In Latin America, paid care work has expanded dramatically in recent decades. Approximately 15% of the urban female workforce in Latin America is employed as domestic workers (ILO, 2015). According to Guimarães and Hirata (2021), the result is an unequal societal dynamic dependent on paid domestic workers in both formal and informal arrangements. Typically, these workers are women of peripheral origins and racialized backgrounds, working within homes to enable the outsourcing of reproductive labor by wealthier families (Blofield, 2012).

These associations reinforce the idea of reproductive work as feminine labor, performed exclusively within homes, familial, infused with affect, and separated from the economic dimension. It is also important to recall, as Gutierrez-Rodriguez (2014) argues, that reproductive work is also affective labor, circulating feelings and emotions that impact bodies, objects, relationships, and spaces. By articulating reproductive work with the “pulse of life,” one can perceive how this type of activity presupposes a “living together” that permeates and constitutes social life. This notion of the pulse of life can be linked to Batthyány’s (2021) argument regarding care as a universal right. This right must entail that care is not a natural obligation of women and families, but is accompanied by dignified labor conditions of socioeconomic value. It is necessary to recognize care activities in daily life in order to assess their scale and respective value. Engaging with the recognition of this work and stating its responsibility allows for the redress of asymmetries created within reproductive work practices.

By emphasizing the collective that constitutes “living together,” care as a basic right, and the centrality of these social dimensions for understanding the urban sphere, conceptualizing care beyond the home contributes to reflecting on the various other forms reproductive work can take. At this stage, other figures of care work may also be considered. To argue for a perspective that seeks to disarticulate and de-essentialize femininity from care work, we reflect on the figure of waste pickers and their relationship of care with the city.

The counter-argument: Waste, the maintenance of life, and invisibilization

This section seeks to problematize the category of care work by focusing on the figure of Latin waste pickers (*carrinheiros* or *catadores de lixo*), considering their contribution to the cleaning and daily maintenance of life as a care task. In presenting this idea, the characteristics of these figures and their work will be highlighted. Thus, in this section, we will explore the masculine, non-familial, remunerated, and urban character of this function within the city, and its fit within the care category.

We argue that it is also possible to conceptualize waste pickers, and their function in the city and with the environment, within a circuit of care and reproductive work, which sustains urban daily life in the short and long term. Waste collection and its recycling are commonly mobilized in discourses on sustainability. Waste pickers stand at the interface of this process, in the contact between the city and the recycling industry. The circuit established between the work of waste pickers and recycling chains at the national level situates this type of work on a transnational care scale. However, despite the positive tenor related to recycling, the narratives involving waste pickers are different. The dirtiness and informality of “street” work are markers of the image of danger associated with these workers.

Cleaning and the promotion of a vital continuity aimed at the future, generally associated with the home, take on new meanings and dimensions in this context. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) study dirty work. It is work that is associated with tasks and occupations considered disgusting or degrading. Although necessary for the reproduction of life, the

figures who engage in dirty work are often invisibilized. *Carrinheiros* are distanced by society from “clean work” not only due to their daily relationship with waste, but also due to the informal character of their profession, unlike municipal employees who work with the official municipal waste collection.

The wife of the main informant in Natalino’s (2003) work was organizing herself with a group of women to become domestic workers. It is possible to draw a parallel between waste pickers, responsible for part of the maintenance of the city’s cleaning work, and domestic workers. The city in this case presents itself as the opposite of the home. The space for the poorest urban female population to work with care is inside homes, unlike waste pickers. Thus, we observe the interweaving of the gender relation with the place of care work. The possible domain for masculine care work is not alongside families in their homes, but on the city streets.

While the Conceptual Framework of the Brazilian National Care Policy does not consider the possibility of street care work, the activity of *carrinheiros* produces a service responsible for the sustenance and maintenance of collective life, proper to the urban environment and its internal logics. Natalino (2003) analyzes the condition of *carrinheiros* as the other of the urban middle-class man. In his field study in Porto Alegre, capital of the southern region of Brazil, the author observed that the majority of waste pickers were men. The relationship that these workers established with other people in the metropolis revealed specific sociabilities arising from the work of waste collection. The relationship with doormen of buildings with many towers could enable early access to the waste of that building, showing an economic opportunity of the work. Based on her work, it is relevant to consider how the relationships of waste pickers with these other urban figures expose the urban characteristic of their existence. There would be no *carrinheiros* without the urban sphere and the high population density of Latin American cities.

Zelizer (2005) highlights how there is an illusion that the payment for care corrupts the idyllic sphere of affections, which normally directs and makes familial work compulsory. Since in the studied case the recipient of care is the city, which possesses a depersonalization when compared to tasks related to the domestic care of a family, this distances the affective dimension of the task. In this way, despite the reproductive demand for care work that cities require regarding their cleaning and urban maintenance, its image moves away from familiarization. The failure to recognize the work of *carrinheiros* as care work is also a reflection of people’s relationship with the city itself and their sense of ownership. Downtown residents whose trash is collected by waste collectors do not recognize their role as contributors to the city’s shared urban fabric, a perspective from which it would be possible to acknowledge this relationship as one of care.

Leff (2015) highlights how the environmental crisis relates to the saturation of modernity, which is founded on the premise of a subject that dictates humanitarian and planetary directions. He defends the conception of a subject that re-identifies and counter-identifies within the structures in which it is inserted, articulating in this process the responsibility for living conditions with an ethic based on solidarity. To scale reproductive

work in this context is to take it out of the home and towards the world, disarticulating its essentialist association with the feminine to make it a sign of human responsibility. In this exercise, caring for the city is work that is as much care or reproductive work as domestic labor. Defending this position requires an ontological and epistemological repositioning, which allows for rethinking some assumptions considered basic in the debate on care.

It is interesting to territorialize care work studies and, from this localization in Latin American reality, the figures of *carrinheiros* propose a reconfiguration of the category itself. This figure allows for the displacement of the association of care work with feminine, domestic, and familial labor, allowing us to see more clearly its association with economic dynamics.

The dangers of essentialization and the necessity of engagement with local sociabilities

To make sense of how perceptions of waste pickers diverge from expected images associated with reproductive and care work, it is relevant to address the ways in which these individuals are socially marked in everyday life. Considering that this is a case strongly characterized by Brazilian modes of urban production, we argue that it is necessary to articulate these experiences with scholarship engaged with the nuances that constitute local sociabilities. A project of local knowledge that seeks to respond to these phenomena is carried out through the study of social markers of difference. This concept emerges from the work conducted by the Núcleo de Estudos dos Marcadores Sociais da Diferença (Numas—Center for Studies on Social Markers of Difference) at the University of São Paulo (USP), which developed the concept in response to the need to understand how certain social categories, such as gender, race, disability, class, etc., generate new and multiple meanings through their combinations. Schwarcz (2019), when discussing the concept, argues that the combination of markers constructs subjectivities and alterities, while translating social hierarchies into their processes, imposing ambivalences upon subjects, who in turn manipulate self-classifications even as they classify others. The theoretical production of Bhabha (2012) and Brah (2005) has guided much of the effort focused on understanding Brazilian urban sociabilities, demonstrating how modes of social differentiation articulate in ways that are not necessarily coherent, potentially generating experiences marked by contradiction and conflict.

Schwarcz (2019) defends that the major contribution of social markers lies in their potential to think of differences as social derivations related to different modes of inequality and hierarchization. Difference ceases to be conceived as something neutral and innate, and instead enters a political arena that both produces social relations and generates impacts in the realm of representations. It is therefore necessary to consider how race, gender, generation, and class, among many other markers, are categories that participate in the historical and cultural processes of subjects and groups, tensioning the boundaries between the particular and the public, or between the local and the international. Because markers operate at both the symbolic and material levels, they end up mitigating social discriminations and regulations.

Facchini's (2009) emphasis on difference, when discussing intersectionality, is of immense relevance for understanding this theoretical-political project. Difference is a category that refers to a designation of "others," without this other being essentialized as something inherent to existence. It is therefore necessary to avoid reducing and deriving all differences from a single, uniquely determinant instance, since difference only occurs through the articulation of multiple social markers of difference. Almeida (2012), when discussing the necessary intersectional perspective, highlights the need to "abandon simple and mechanistic arithmetic reasoning, which equates greater vulnerability to the mere sum of social markers, without problematizing their interference in the particularity of the studied contexts" (2012: 515, free translation). This abandonment is fundamental to understanding the phenomenon discussed in this work.

Waste pickers, by combining and articulating markers of race, class, and gender, often perceived as men, end up acquiring contours that, when viewed through the public gaze, become entangled with figures of urban danger. This phenomenon can be understood through the images circulated by the Brazilian media, which creates a historical essentialist narrative linking Blackness and poverty with violence, as demonstrated by the works of Penglase (2007) and Rodrigues (2025). The rigorous works of Munanga (1998, 2019) and Schwarcz (1993, 2013) highlight the centrality of Brazilian racial historical processes in contemporary sociability. Together with Gonzalez's (1984, 2020) intersectional analysis, which sought to understand how analyses of race and gender in Brazil cannot be dissociated, and contemporary efforts such as those of Layton and Smith (2017) in analyzing how inequalities emerge from these articulations, it is unavoidable to perceive waste pickers without considering their social markers.

Focusing solely on the elements that constitute the practice of these social agents would allow us to insert them into an analysis of reproductive work. However, since reproductive work is so closely associated with a perspective of care work, thinking about the practice of these subjects in reproductive terms becomes incredibly challenging. How can we conceive that someone who generates urban fear is, in fact, caring? Yet, merely disregarding this type of work and displacing it from the reproductive category only reiterates an essentialism of social markers, and does not directly engage with the problem of tensioning this articulation. The supposed incoherence of this social practice reveals how, in fact, there is no essentialism in reproductive work: it is not necessarily performed by women, not necessarily familial, and does not necessarily imply a figure perceived as socially harmless. Detaching from these essentialisms is perhaps what will allow us to recontextualize what effectively constitutes reproductive and care work, conceived from the perspective of urban waste management, and then to reevaluate current public policies through a lens that tensions historical and cultural processes that become naturalized in everyday practices.

Understanding the practices of waste pickers presents a challenge of immense significance in the field of social studies, as their existence and practices generate positive and productive friction regarding social divisions of labour that are taken for granted in everyday urban life. Thus, we return to the argument that an in-depth analysis of the subject can contribute to breaking the essentialist bond between care work and women,

paving the way for the reconceptualization of reproductive work from the perspective of different bodies. This exercise also provides fundamental insights for reframing the figure of poor Black men in the Brazilian urban context, creating new possibilities for everyday perceptions of these individuals, alongside the construction of new horizons of possibility for life in the city.

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