



'The landfill has always borne fruit': precarity, formalisation and dispossession among Uruguay's waste pickers

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Abstract

Precarity has often been considered a hallmark of waste-picking, a survival activity whose practitioners are exposed to health risks, exploitation and fluctuating commodity markets. Adopting a three-dimensional approach to precarity that centres on 'exposure to danger', 'uncertain tenure' and 'dependence', this paper compares Uruguayan waste-pickers' (*clasificadores*) experiences of precarity at the Felipe Cardoso landfill, its related cooperative, and a formal sector recycling plant. *Clasificadores* at Felipe Cardoso characterise the landfill as a 'mother' who dependably provides them with food, clothes and construction materials. Recently, the Uruguayan state has sought to divert *clasificadores* to what is regarded as more dignified labour in recycling plants. I argue that the formalisation of some waste-pickers creates a cleavage within the occupation, dispossessing and delegitimising those who continue to work 'informally'.

Keywords Recycling · Waste · Precarity · Formalisation · Dispossession

Introduction

'*Siempre rindió la cantera*', Big Bea told me: 'the landfill has always borne fruit'. Bea, if anyone, should know. The veteran waste-picker has recovered materials from the landfills of Montevideo, the capital of the small south-east Latin American state of Uruguay, for over 40 years. Bea was my neighbour when I conducted doctoral fieldwork with Montevidean waste pickers, known as *clasificadores*, in 2014. Three years later, when I unexpectedly found myself in Montevideo, her house—the first in a row of rural homes situated on the outskirts of the city and in the shadow of the Felipe Cardoso landfill—was my first port of call. Her husband popped his head out of the couple's self-built front porch, suspiciously eyeing up the plush white airport taxi until I stepped out. 'Patri! Have you been chucked out your country?!'

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he laughed, ushering me into the porch where Bea sat smoking and peeling apples for a fruit salad. Conversation soon turned to the landfill, where her son Juan still worked. 'It's getting complicated', she told me: 'they are erecting a seven-wire fence and you know what that means'. When I confessed that I did not, she said that this established private property, and that anyone caught inside without formal permission, like the scores of waste pickers who laboured alongside her son Juan, 'could be shot with impunity'.

Bea's concerns hinted at the terrible violence that waste pickers in and around the landfill have suffered over the years. Juan's brother-in-law Leo, for example, was shot and injured by a drunken policeman there when he was just fifteen. The evocation of the new fence and its implications contrasted with Bea's previous assertion, likewise uttered in her shady patio when I interviewed her in 2014. Was the landfill dependable, allowing Bea and others like her to raise their sons on the back of its strange fruit? Or was it a precarious place where *clasificadores* could be excluded at any moment and risked being injured or killed with impunity? From whose perspective could it be understood as precarious or secure, and in relation to what? This article seeks to explore and compare the question of precarious labour by drawing on participant observation conducted at the Felipe Cardoso landfill, the Felipe Cardoso cooperative (COFECA), and the Planta Aries, one of four recycling plants launched in Montevideo in 2014 as part of the implementation of a recycling and packaging law (*Ley de Envases*).

Waste pickers are often regarded as precarious labourers *par excellence*, exposed to the vagaries of commodities markets, exploitation by intermediaries, health risks, discrimination, and stigma (Neiburg and Nicaise 2010; Whitson 2011; Singh and Chokhandre 2015). Routh, for example, argues that Indian waste pickers are 'the most precarious workers among precarious workers' (2014: 217). As Reno notes, the news media 'often uses scavenging as an index of global inequality' (2009: 32) and landfills have been depicted as spaces of 'squalid phantasmagoria' (Stam 1999: 72) and 'hell on earth' (McPherson 2016). However, such assumptions have been challenged in recent years by waste pickers' incorporation into trade unions, cooperatives, NGOs, and partnerships with the state (Marello and Helwge 2014; Pereira and Cristina 2016; Carenzo 2016).

This article challenges the idea that formalisation automatically implies a transition from precarity to workplace security, and resists 'easy binaries one might construct between formal sector privilege and informal sector poverty' (Sanchez 2012: 811). Recent studies have also begun to move in this direction. Sternberg critiques the recent regulation of waste-picking in Buenos Aires as 'compatible with the logic of the local neoliberal urban projects, focused on disciplining the city's physical and social landscape as new opportunities for growth and development continue to emerge' (2013: 194). Kathleen Millar (2014) asks whether informal work at the Rio de Janeiro landfill might not in fact be thought of as a refuge from wage labour. Finally, Samson (2015) focuses on Soweto's Marie-Louise landfill, where neoliberal waste management policies sought to include 'recoverers' only so as to establish a monopsony reliant on their cheap, unprotected labour.

Whereas neoliberal regimes have often taken 'workers formally reliant on state institutions' and 'recast them as autonomous subjects responsible for their own welfare' (Johnson 2012: 769, also Molé 2010), I argue here that the Uruguayan *Ley de Envases* takes a group of formerly autonomous *clasificadores* and makes them dependent on a paternalistic state. Just as neo-liberalism involves both the rolling back of the welfare state and the rolling out of a market-logic and certain forms of regulation (Peck and Tickell 2002), it could be argued that the shift from promoting waste-picker cooperatives to forming private-public recycling

partnerships was a manifestation of Uruguayan neoliberal statecraft. Certainly, it was an explicit attempt to make the recycling industry more streamlined, efficient, and regulated. Yet the implementation of the *Ley de Envases* also represented a much greater public and private investment in waste pickers than cooperativisation, which enjoyed ideological but little material or financial support from the state.

If precarity is to have purchase as a concept, a structural position, and a lived experience, it is important to set out what it means for people in the specific context of their labour. Within anthropology, scholars have been quick to challenge assertions of a global precariat subjectivity (c.f. Standing 2011), pointing instead to how the ‘contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated – grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss’ (Muehlebach 2012: 298). While Uruguayan social workers and policymakers regularly describe the situation of informal sector *clasificadores* as precarious [*precario*] (see IM 2015: 20, 21, 54), I never heard waste pickers using the term themselves. Yet the way that many interlocutors described ‘living from day to day’ did seem to suggest a kind of precarious presentism that the *Ley de Envases* sought to remedy through waged employment and permanent formal jobs at its recycling plants.

Temporality is only one piece of the puzzle that needs to be assembled in order to understand Uruguayan waste pickers’ approach to their labour. Another is the strong feeling of autonomy generated in *clasificadores* by boss-less work at the landfill and on the streets. In order to attend to such embodied experiences, in this article, I elaborate on three dimensions of precarity sketched out briefly by Jan Breman (2013). The Latin root *precari*, notes Breman, means to beg, pray, or entreat and hence to be ‘dependent on the favor of another...exposed to danger, with uncertain tenure’ (ibid). Adapted to the workplace, the idea of ‘uncertain tenure’ corresponds to workplace insecurity, while that of being ‘exposed to danger’ can be translated as suffering unsafe working conditions. The final dimension, that of being ‘dependent on the favor of another’, is less common in the literature, but provides an interesting entry point for a discussion of autonomy, dependency, and reciprocity at Montevideo’s landfill and recycling plants. Rather than using these dimensions as a check list to define labour as precarious *ipso facto*, however, I argue that precarity is a fundamentally relational concept. Ultimately, labour is only subjectively considered as precarious in comparison with past experience, other available forms of employment, and other dimensions of people’s lifeworlds (c.f. Sanchez 2018).

The first part of this article focuses on the relationship of waste pickers like Bea and her son Juan to the landfill. By characterising the dump as a ‘mother’, I suggest that waste pickers consider it a source of reliability rather than uncertainty. The second part of the article turns to the Planta Aries, to which workers transitioned from COFECA, and argues that precarity is reconfigured rather than extinguished as workers enter a reciprocal relationship with the state. I then show how the formalisation of some waste pickers creates a cleavage within the occupation, dispossessing and undermining the legitimacy of those who continue to work in the informal sector. Experiments in the cooperativisation of waste pickers embodied in COFECA are shown to have been a missed opportunity for combining oversight and regulation with elements of waste-picker autonomy. The landfill, meanwhile, continues to fulfil its historic function as a refuge for the excluded as it provides succour for those unable to meet the demands of formal work in the recycling plants or dispossessed on the streets. Thus, against the conventional narrative of labour formalisation mitigating precarity, my research demonstrates how the availability of informal labour can mitigate the precarity of waged work.

Labouring at the landfill

Montevideo's Felipe Cardoso landfill receives c.2600 tons of waste daily, delivered by c.600 vehicles (LKSUR et al. 2013:8). When I conducted fieldwork in 2014, around 38 men and 2 women made a living from daily toil at the dump, their presence an open secret. On entering the landfill, one would find waste pickers spread out in small groups over the uneven surface of the tipping platform. Known as *gateadores* (crawlers) because of the way they have had to sneak into the site in the past, landfill waste pickers generally worked with one or two *socios* (partners), although some laboured alone. From a relatively secure base where they stockpiled diverse materials in large sacks, *gateadores* would venture over to dumping trucks to survey their loads. Generally uninterested in the municipal compactors that brought household waste, *gateadores* would focus instead on private transport companies that dealt in commercial waste. The hope was that such trucks might contain large quantities of desirable recyclable materials (plastics, metals, cardboard, paper) or clothes, food, and furniture that could be consumed domestically or sold at markets, the latter category of objects referred to by *clasificadores* as *requeche* ('leftovers').

There are many reasons why waste-picking work at Montevideo's landfill might be considered precarious. *Clasificadores* weaved between dumping trucks and compacting machines, relying only on tacit communication and patience from drivers to avoid injury. They had no agreed health and safety standards, and wore neither high visibility uniforms nor, for the most part, gloves, when rifling through potentially contaminated materials. They dressed in dirty, ragged clothing that seemed to indicate poverty. They were able to enter the dump only thanks to the implicit agreement and tolerance of municipal managers, and the police officers who observed their presence could seemingly remove them at any moment. Wageless workers depended on whatever they could unearth at the dump, living hand to mouth or as they put it, 'from day to day'. Changes in materials and commodities markets completely outside their control could significantly reduce their income, as evidenced by the dramatic fall in the price of PET in the Uruguayan market in recent years (CEMPRE 2016).

Yet the *clasificadores* with whom I worked tended to view the landfill as a bulwark against precarity rather than a symbol of it. For them, it was the *madre cantera*: the mother dump or quarry. In referring to the landfill as a *cantera* (quarry), *clasificadores* referenced the fact that Montevidean dumps used to be situated at old quarries—waste was used to fill in geographic depressions—and indicated waste pickers' extractive relationship to the space. A key element of this landfill-mother metaphor, meanwhile, was the idea that, whatever you had done, you could always (re)turn to both your mother and the *cantera*. The first thing my friend Samuel did upon leaving prison a decade ago, he told me, was to make for his maternal home, and then for the *madre cantera*. Samuel is from one of the largest waste-picking families in the neighbourhood where the landfill is situated, and was in his fifties at the time of my research. A long scar from a botched hernia operation ran along the bottom of his gut; more visible was a picaresque smile, always on the verge of muttering a dirty joke, or directing a flattering comment at one of the female social workers who assisted the recycling cooperative where he worked. He had been imprisoned years before for wounding an officer in a shoot-out with police, after being called to the aid of a brother. This was a time when his family—the Trastos—was a formidable force in the neighbourhood, and on whose occupied land police would only enter armed, and with great caution. The Trastos are an example of the close links between the worlds of crime and *clasificación*, but rather than organised crime controlling the waste trade, as has been documented in other countries, the decision to (re)turn to the *cantera* was in this case a decision to move away from criminal activity and to earn an honest living from discards.

Samuel's brother Ruso, another former jailbird, spoke of *requecheros* who would 'turn up at the mother of the rubbish with a pot, fill it with food, and leave'. 'She was everyone's mother', my neighbour Pelado explained, 'because you went there and rescued something to eat, somewhere to sleep, with sheets, mattresses, and no-one would bother you'. In and out of care and foster homes, Pelado had eventually found his way to the *madre cantera*. Faced with precarious human relations, *clasificadores* conceptualised and relied upon an unconditionally caring and giving maternal landfill. This observation is rather important for a discussion of precarity which takes seriously the term's Latin root (*precari*), which means to beg or entreat. In this sense of the term, work at the landfill is not fully precarious, because *clasificadores* do not usually need to beg, demand, or reciprocate in return for its fruits.

Gorda Bea's son Juan would arrive back from the dump like Father Christmas, spilling out the contents of a large sack onto the living room floor, to be perused by his excited wife and children. Soft drinks, biscuits, colouring books, pieces of chicken, sachets of shampoo, bottles of beers, fruit, vegetables, and yerba mate tea would tumble out: food for his family but also to share, so that my fridge was often overflowing. There were different types of firewood; sheet metal to repair his horse's stable; and colourfully printed cloth that his wife washed, cut, and hung as curtains. Many neighbours made their fences from pallets, while the bars on my windows were soldered from *requeche* metal. Ruso's daughter Jessica told me that her family only had to buy bread and milk, with the rest of the week's groceries taken from what she called 'the big shop'. In such narratives are echoes of hunter-gatherers who perceive the environment as 'giving normally in abundance but at least sufficiently to meet requirements' (Bird-David 1990:194) and other marginal urban groups who 'live more or less in poverty ...[but] appear to take a 'natural' abundance for granted and to forage for their subsistence' (Day et al. 1999:1).

With regard to earnings, I was able to calculate a 2014 mean of US\$6500 pesos (US\$295) per week for the core *clasificadores*, ranging from a low of \$2000 pesos (US\$91) for Ruso's daughter and daughter-in-law, to \$12,000 pesos (US\$545) for one of the more established and hardest working men. The divergence between the earnings of different *clasificadores* was explained by days worked; the quantity and value of materials that entered; productivity; materials classified; and the landfill division of labour. If the price of a particular material fell too dramatically, *gateadores* quickly switched to another. Even considering these variables, the unskilled jobs available to many *gateadores* simply did not match the hours:income ratio possible in the *cantera*, recourse to which gave them greater choice over what jobs to accept.

Did *gateadores* accept more precarious working conditions—more 'exposure to danger'—in exchange for a higher income? There is certainly something to this argument. But certain *gateadores* insisted that they had better informal health and safety procedures than recycling plants or cooperatives. I discussed the issue with Chino, one of the most respected *clasificadores*, while he classified hunks of metal at his home in the thin strip of shantytown that ran along the road leading up to the landfill and where, over two generations, a small community of waste-picking families had built homes. Chino was hard-working and generous, a man who could be relied upon for a favour in times of need. Physically, his long black eyelashes softened his features and contrasted with his muscular frame, while the dirt of a day's labour darkened further his tanned, leathery skin. He argued that:

In the plants and cooperatives, they break open little bags [*rompen paquetes*] but we don't. We have contact with the rubbish because we walk on top of it. But we all have suitable clothing: boots, gloves. Nobody wears normal trainers or sandals on top of the

rubbish. We don't break open the rubbish [*romper basura*] or chemical things, or things from the hospitals. We work with things that are useful for us: it's more hygienic. The problem is that people don't know how we work. In the plant, they have a conveyer belt, where people open bags which could have something contaminated inside. That's the issue.

I heard of few illnesses caused by the consumption of *requeche* food, as *gateadores* used their senses and common sense to distinguish the *feo* (putrid) from the *sano* (intact, fit for consumption). Samuel told me that he had never become ill when working bare-chested at the landfill and had built up a resistance to germs, but had begun to be dragged down by flus and bugs since beginning work in a closed cooperative space. There were also very few accidents at the landfill, because *gateadores* were experienced at navigating the 'waste-scape'. Kathleen Stewart's evocation of the way 'the precarious, ethereal existence of a place gets hard-wired into senses in a state of sheer attunement' (2012: 159) seems fitting here. Only once during my fieldwork was a waste-picker half buried by a compacter, as he grasped for a bag of copper before it was swept away. He had been under the influence of *pasta base*, making him less aware of his surroundings, more desperate not to lose his treasure.¹ After pulling him out, senior *clasificadores* were enraged that his carelessness had put their jobs at the landfill at risk, because a serious injury or death would surely lead to a police enquiry and exclusion, in the short term at least.

The landfill had been there for Jessica, Ruso, and Juan when formal sector jobs had proven unreliable. Jessica had held several jobs in the private sector, but was fired from her last after a dispute. She lived close to the *cantera*, and made more in a morning's work than she could in a full day on the minimum wage. Ruso had lost a job in a plastics factory and then decided, in words repeated to me by other *clasificadores*: '*Bueno, me voy pa'la cantera* (Well then, I'm off to the dump!)'. 'At my age, where else could I find work?', he asked rhetorically. For Clara, a widow who started classifying in 2000 after falling on hard times, the landfill was more secure than her previous job attending clients for a corrupt notary. 'The notary asked me to return after she was released from prison but it would have been risky', she told me. The *cantera*, by contrast, was 'easy, in the sense that you made money, took home *requeche*, and worked when you wanted'.

There had been periods when *gateadores* had been expelled from the landfill, and a change in landfill management might bring with it a less-tolerant approach. But not all *gateadores* perceived this as an important threat. The most recent large-scale eviction of waste pickers was in 2002. After they blocked the gates to the landfill in response, *gateadores* were granted permission to receive waste on a closed part of the landfill (the *Usina 5*), where they formed COFECA. Cooperative work and pooled earnings were advantageous for female waste pickers who saw their incomes increase. Others, like Chino, did not last long in the cooperative, unhappy at the loss of income and privileged access to trucks. They stubbornly returned to the landfill, and persisted in the face of police repression. The fact that Chino had survived different periods of harassment led him to assure me that 'there will always be *gateadores* in the *cantera*'.

While *gateadores* were exposed to danger, then they mitigated it through experience and informal health and safety precautions. Those engaged in substance abuse were clearly in more danger, but for these young men, work at the landfill could be the least precarious element of

¹ A substance similar though not identical to crack cocaine.

their lifeworlds, providing them with a work-based source of identity and self-esteem, as well as the resources to sustain a livelihood. The informal nature of *gateadores*' access to the landfill put them at risk of eviction, but in response, they developed a series of strategies to deal with this threat. For the most part, *gateadores* did not have to reciprocate in return for access to the landfill, which they characterised as a caring mother who gave unconditionally. By framing the landfill in this way, they could maintain a sense of autonomy and pride as they seemingly produced value from nothing, and in return for nothing. The following section explains how life at a recycling plant brought about a reconfiguration of risk, insecurity, and dependency in ways that were welcomed by some but soon brought others back to the porous perimeter of the *cantera*.

Three-dimensional precarity in the formal sector (recycling at the Planta Aries)

'I've seen them at the landfill, carrying bags like slaves', observed the loquacious and affable Richard, one of the NGO plant coordinators at the Aries recycling plant. Aries was one of the four plants built as part of a packaging law (*Ley de Envases*) first approved by the Uruguayan parliament in 2003 but only implemented in Montevideo in 2014. After a decade of promoting cooperatives (PUC 2008), the different state actors involved in implementing the *Ley de Envases* opted for an NGO-based model where *clasificadores* would be employees categorised by the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES) as vulnerable workers in protected jobs. Indeed, the supposed precarity of informal sector waste-picking was used to justify the need for NGO managers. 'We contracted organizations with a strong socio-educative background to coordinate the plants', noted municipal official Leticia Beledo, 'because we took into account that although the workers had experience with classification, this had been gained in very precarious and informal conditions' (IM 2015: 109).

The language of precarity can be deployed to justify processes of dispossession. The bulk of Aries' workforce came from COFECA, the landfill cooperative adjacent to the *cantera* proper whose numbers had fallen to around 40 by the time I began fieldwork in 2014, roughly split between men and women. Landfill waste pickers had been encouraged to form the cooperative in the mid-2000s, when the incoming centre-left *Frente Amplio* government began promoting cooperatives in low-income sectors. Despite some institutional support, COFECA never managed to formalise its structures or gain legal personhood. Nevertheless, it maintained rudimentary cooperative structures, notably the equal distribution of income according to hours worked. Decision-making was nominally collective, though without transparent assemblies vulnerable to being inflected with neighbourhood and gender hierarchies. By 2014, the government considered waste-picking cooperatives to have failed due to problems of internal organisation (enduring hierarchies, individualism, etc.). COFECA workers were told that their cooperative would be disbanded and that they would be evicted from the site; they were offered places at the Planta Aries as an alternative.

Workers had conflicting views about the move, which took place in May 2014. This was hardly surprising, given that they were being 'socially included' while being forcibly dispossessed of an autonomous space. In fact, many workers felt that a move to the plant increased what I have called 'uncertainty of tenure' rather than alleviated it. At COFECA, you could not be fired or sent home for having a few drinks before work or taking a puff on a joint during a break, but this was a distinct possibility at the formal sector plant. Many men were also

reluctant to take orders and resisted outside authority. One older worker, Sergio, worried prior to the move:

Being bossed around (*mandado*) and taking orders when I've always worked as my own boss will be difficult. If they come and shout 'you can't smoke, you can't go to the toilet three times, you can't stop work!' at me, how long will I last in this business? Two days? And then what will I do?

Superficially, the plant seemed to tackle the precarity of bodily risk. Hands were protected in gloves and bodies in uniforms, cranes, and forklift trucks did the work of heavy lifting, the waste that arrived was ideally pre-classified, and understanding NGO managers took a tolerant approach to employees from troubled backgrounds. But did workers necessarily perceive of work at the plant as safer and securer? We might recall Chino's criticism that plant workers had to break open every small plastic bag that they encountered on the conveyer belt, exposing themselves to unknown substances. More thorough classification meant the increased possibility of encountering unpleasant or dangerous domestic substances, like used toilet paper, bloodied tampons, or even hypodermic needles. As Brian Wynne observes, the category of hazardous waste should 'strictly include municipal, household waste, because the toxicity of many domestic wastes—batteries, cleaning and polishing fluids, cosmetics, medicines, etc.—is higher than that of some industrial wastes' (1987:46). If you are principally scouting for large lots of metal, plastic, or cardboard, as those at the *cantera* do, then the chances of encountering unwelcome domestic waste are comparatively slim.

The move from the exposed yard at COFECA to the sheltered surroundings of Aries also brought its own risks, alongside the advantage of protection from the elements. On one occasion, workers thought that they could smell gas from a pile of waste that had been unloaded, and the NGO decided to close the plant for the day and call the fire brigade. In the end, this turned out to be a false alarm, but it was a reminder that the provenance and composition of the truck-loads that arrived were not always what they should be. To some degree, employment status was also somewhat less secure at the Planta Aries, given that at both the *cantera* and the cooperative, workers could be absent for days to weeks at a time and subsequently return to work. This was not the case at the recycling plant, although the managing NGO did prove to be significantly more tolerant than *clasificadores* had expected.

Formal work at the Aries plant marked a shift from a 'giving' to a 'reciprocating' environment (Bird-David 1990: 191): from the unconditional giving of the *madre cantera*, to reciprocal relations between workers and the state. 'We are constructing citizenship through accompanying people', plant manager Richard told me, and like any liberal citizenship project, this involved the reciprocal flow of rights and responsibilities (Marshall 1983 [1950]: 253). Just as many pastoralists view the environment as giving 'in return for appropriate conduct' (Bird-David 1990: 190), the NGOs that managed the plants predicated wages and work on *clasificador* employees' appropriate behaviour. Numerous workers were suspended or eventually fired for their physical or discursive violence, poor timekeeping, or absenteeism. Further, whereas the landfill was a maternal environment where one did not have to ask to receive, the shift to Aries encouraged and enabled workers to make demands on a paternalistic state. During the course of my fieldwork, these demands included the right to receive valuable commercial waste, wage increases, Christmas hampers, and subsidised transport.

I have already mentioned my interlocutors' phrase 'living from day to day' as potentially constituting a vernacular expression of precarity. Work at the plant was meant to improve this

situation by replacing a fluctuating weekly wage with a fixed monthly wage. Yet, strangely, the payment of a monthly wage complicated rather than alleviated precarious presentism, at least initially. *Clasificadores* at COFECA had previously organised spending and the contraction and servicing of debt around the receipt of a weekly income, and the new monthly arrangements put this system out of kilter. For workers with problematic consumption habits and unorganised household budgeting, there was also a danger that the monthly wage might be spent in a massive blow-out. I feared as much when I surprised three of the plant's livelier characters, Nestor, Matero, and Oscar, enjoying whiskies in a bar one morning. They had been paid just a few hours before and had decided to treat themselves to a day off.

We can use the trajectories of these very workers to exemplify the uneven effects that the move to the plant had on *clasificadores* with similar backgrounds. For Nestor, both COFECA and Aries offered islands of stability and support in the face of an extremely difficult and abusive private life. He was sent home from the plant on several occasions after arriving drunk or smelling of alcohol, but to my surprise was still employed there when I returned in December 2016. Matero, meanwhile, had initially embraced life at the plant, toning down his drinking and leading locals in his neighbourhood—where he was a popular feature of street life—to remark that they had never seen him looking so good. But Matero was ultimately unable to marry working life at the plant with his consumption and eventually left, after a series of suspensions.

Workers were exposed to less danger in the plants through shelter from the elements, the provision of statutory sick pay, and contact with a restricted waste stream. Such protections I have associated with a transition into the formal economy. Although the focus of this article is on precarity, I maintain the formal/informal binary intact, principally as an ethnographic rather than an analytical category. Others have chosen to jettison it altogether, with one of the most persistent critiques being that rather than formlessness, there are 'forms' at work in wageless, non-contractual labour. Another is that so-called informal (in the sense of illegal, unregulated, or untaxed) practices can also be pervasive in formal industries (and vice-versa), making the tracing of a line between 'sectors' misleading. In this case, I am not arguing the working practices at the *cantera* or COFECA lacked form, but use formalisation as a shorthand for the introduction of social security, waged labour, and taxation into the recycling economy.

Rather than jettison the concept then, I am more interested in questioning the assumption that it unproblematically decreases precarity for the workers caught up in its grasp. It is worth remembering that the construction of recycling plants and the closure of COFECA were not waste-picker demands, and the very changes that lessened some risks, workers perceived as creating others. The leniency of the plant NGO meant that many workers' fears of immediate dismissal went unrealised, but several workers were fired because they could not reconcile substance abuse and timekeeping patterns with the demands of formal work. From a position of relative autonomy at the landfill and its associated cooperative, workers became dependent on the state, which could dismiss them, but upon which they could also make a series of new demands, as they adjusted from being from 'children of the dump' to employees of a paternalistic state.

Relational precarities and dispossession through difference

Having outlined workers' perceptions of precarity at the landfill and at the Aries plant separately, in this section, I look at the effects that each had upon the precarity of the other,

while also asking whether COFECA constituted a middle ground between the types of precarity workers were exposed to at the formal sector plant, and at the dump. As scholars have noted (e.g. Doerre 2014; Sanchez 2018), precarity is a relational concept. There is no such thing as absolute precarity, only manifestations of different dimensions that take on meaning when measured up against norms and experiences. Relationality lies at the heart of the diagnosis of a new European labour precarity, for example, which is often compared to a past Fordist regime of labour protection. Relative or relational precarity also features in the analysis of non-European situations, such as Sanchez's (2012, 2018) work on scrap workers and employees at Tata's flagship plant in India. Workers at Planta Aries did not perceive workplace precarity in a vacuum: they compared it to previous work around the landfill.

In the past, when intermittent COFECA workers who had been fired from a formal sector job or finished a temporary contract arrived at the gates of the cooperative, they were rarely turned away. With COFECA's disbanding, this possibility was denied to them. During a suspension, Sergio returned to the *Usina 5* only to find that it was being used to classify materials in a deal struck between a municipal employee and a *clasificador*. He was refused access. *Clasificadores* could still turn to the *cantera*, however, and this is where several of the male leadership figures in the Aries plant soon returned. Unhappy with their loss of authority and autonomy at the new plant, and in most cases after conflict with management, they went back to classifying metal at the landfill. As if to mock state policies of formalisation and health and safety, they even began sporting their *Ley de Envases* uniforms at the dump. To be the children of the *madre cantera* was one thing for these men; to be treated like children in the factory classrooms of the plants was quite another.

There was a clear gender split in these cases. No women returned to the *cantera*. Most of them lived near the landfill, and instead of a 10-min walk and a 9 am start at COFECA, they had to take two buses to reach the plant and arrive by 6.30 am. Yet female workers placed more importance on the new sanitary facilities, and were less tied to a masculine practice of heavy lifting. While conflict between female workers and NGO supervisors was not uncommon, most incidents were with men, suggesting that the latter were less amenable to management. Women did not benefit more financially from formalisation, since male and female workers earned equally at COFECA and at the plant. Rather, the difference lies in values, where women valued clean facilities and educational opportunities over autonomy and bossless work. The men who left did not shun progress—they just did not conceive of this as occurring through educational attainment and formal employment. Carlos, one of the most difficult characters in the plant, invited me to visit the apartment he rented for his wife and children, and which, he insisted, he could only afford by seeking higher earnings at the *cantera*. Securing an apartment—some of the waste pickers were in shanty housing—was seen by Carlos as an indicator of his attempts to '*salir adelante*' (get on in life, or progress).

The possibility of returning to the landfill thus acted to lessen the precarious nature of work at Planta Aries for some men while, at the same time, the formalisation narrative of the plant's architects was embraced by most women. The provision of employment for some *clasificadores* has made it easier for the local government to undermine forms of recycling labour that it considers illegitimate. Recyclables deposited by the public in hermetic containers were redirected to plants, away from kerbside waste pickers who were also prohibited from circulating in certain areas of the city, and from collecting waste from commercial enterprises. Back at COFECA, workers had control over what waste to accept, and rejected trucks from areas where they knew other waste pickers were operating. Not only did the municipal and NGO managers at the Planta Aries have no such qualms, the infrastructure of collection—

closed containers—was specifically designed by municipal authorities to prevent access by informal waste pickers. In the words of a senior local government figure whom I interviewed:

The *clasificadores* who are in the street today... will they be able to continue classifying materials? No, not really. Those who sign up for recycling plants will, but those who don't, will not. Alongside the intermediaries, the profession of informal *clasificación* will disappear.

Kasmir and Carbonella's (2008) focus on 'dispossession as the production of difference' can prove helpful for analysis here. They argue that political dispossession is 'frequently compounded by structural violence connected to the recategorization and reclassification of working classes' (2008:13). One example they give is the recategorization of the London riverine poor in the eighteenth century, as documented in the work of historian Peter Linebaugh (2003). In a consolidated shift towards wage labour, the previously common practice of workers receiving wood known as 'chips' from the shipyards as a form of payment was outlawed, creating in the process a fission between the waged and unwaged, so that 'the literal policing of the division between waged laborers and the wageless poor effectively separated the struggles of workers within the labour process from those outside it' (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 14–15).

Historically, the *clasificador* trade union, the UCRUS,² had campaigned to protect the rights of *clasificadores* to gather materials at the landfill and on horse and cart in the city. With the advent of formal sector recycling plants, the union was tasked with representing a divided workforce. At a demonstration in the working class district of El Cerro, home to one of the recycling plants as well as a large population of horse and cart *clasificadores*, the union assembled both informal workers and uniformed plant workers. The first group demanded open access to containers, the second pay rises. Although conflict between the groups did not surface openly on that occasion, informal workers complained to me that the plants were pushing them into criminal activity of the kind that the *madre cantera* allowed Ruso and Samuel to leave behind. State-engineered processes of class formation and cleavage thus impacted on the ability to mobilise and unionise workers on the basis of common interests and demands. Unlike the more discussed union challenge of whether to represent subcontracted workers who could potentially undercut established contract-workers, the UCRUS was faced with the challenge of representing an emerging base of formal sector wage labourers, alongside its more traditional constituency of wageless, bossless workers.

Disenfranchised kerbside *clasificadores* began to appear at the landfill, bringing greater competition for materials and undermining the fragile détente that existed between municipal workers and waste pickers like Chino who respected minimal safety measures. According to the president of the UCRUS, numbers at the *cantera* rose from 50 during my fieldwork period to over 200 in 2017 (Lopez Reilly 2017). This increase in numbers in turn brought increased media attention and complaints from municipal employees, leading the local government to announce that *gateadores* would be excluded from the site (ibid). The attempt to lessen precarity for small number of workers in the plants (128), I suggest, increased it for the much larger number (3000–9000)³ for whom there was no room in the 'craft-in-making' (Carenzo 2016) of formalised waste-picking.

² Union de Clasificadores de Residuos Solidos Urbanos [Union of Solid Urban Waste Classifiers]

³ The numbers are disputed. The latest study carried out by the Intendencia et al. (2012) estimated a figure of 3188, while the *clasificador* trade union, the UCRUS, regularly cites figures upwards of 7000 (e.g. Lopez Reilly 2017)

Plant workers were also dispossessed by the move into wage labour. Just as eighteenth century London dock workers lost their prescribed right to remove 'chips' to supplement their wages, plant *clasificadores* were also nominally banned from taking home *requeche*. 'Requeche won't exist at the plant... if you find a watch, you'll have to hand it in; if you find money, you'll have to hand it in', Sergio had worried, a policy subsequently confirmed to me by a Uruguayan Chamber of Commerce (CUI) representative, although never fully enforced. I asked Aries worker Veronica what she missed about the landfill:

What do I miss? That in the *cantera*, for example, one day you didn't have anything to eat and from a truck you got chicken, meat...bags of pastries, fruit. There was a truck of burgers from MacDonald's. You didn't have anything to eat and you took them home [and] stuck them in the oven...These are things that you miss.

COFECA was in some ways a bricolage that combined elements of landfill work that *clasificadores* valued with structures that lessened risk, particularly for the most vulnerable. Instead of recovering waste on the unstable landfill mountain, they did so on a level platform workers themselves had asphalted. Instead of an income that depended on accessing trucks individually, they received a weekly average more evenly distributed between men and women. At COFECA, workers could freely take home whatever *requeche* they wished, while limiting exposure to a more select number of dump-trucks. Cooperativised waste pickers, with their democratic control over the conditions of their labour, also had the power to make ethical decisions about what waste to receive, thus restricting the dispossession of unorganised waste pickers. Yet this experiment in precarious cooperativism stumbled on the failure to ensure a regular delivery of valuable waste, a lack of financial support, and shifting political priorities.

Conclusion

The standard narrative found in Uruguayan and international policy circles is that landfill waste pickers are profoundly precarious because they lack social security and adequate health and safety conditions, and are dependent on the price of recyclables and political permissiveness. Rather than simply identify analytical markers of precarity, in this article, I have allowed an alternative conceptualization of the landfill to emerge from within its porous perimeter. *Clasificadores* viewed the *cantera* as a providing mother who could be relied upon, and they acted to mitigate precarity through informal health and safety measures, strategic friendships, and strategies of resistance.

Just as much research ties a series of positive associations to formality, and negative tropes to informality, waste-picker scholarship often makes a simplistic division between dignified, solidary, organised waste pickers, and individualistic, precarious, and informal waste pickers (Carenzo and Miguez 2010). Such research is heavily weighted towards the ethnography of organised workers, in part, I suspect, because they are easier to establish institutional relationships with. This article has suggested that the border between 'informal' and 'formal' waste-picking is porous. Uruguayan waste pickers move between formal labour contracts, vernacular cooperative arrangements, and wageless landfill work according to their own priorities and those of the government. There are multiple factors, including alternative conceptualizations of precarity, which lead workers to return to the dump. As such, this article calls for a rethinking of waste-work research and its focus on exploitation.

In the context of research on the integration of waste pickers into formal waste management systems, it is not enough to study experiences in isolation. Rather, it is necessary to adopt an approach that considers the effects of formalisation upon the wider waste-picking milieu. Viewing the Uruguayan experience in such a fashion brings to the fore the way that this creates new precarities, patterns of dispossession, and forms of exclusion, as well as opportunities and benefits for workers. At the same time, the idea of the precariat as an emergent class-in-the-making rests on such assumptions of novelty. We should be attentive to dynamics in waste economies that have a longer *durée*. Viewing the landfill as a giving mother can be seen as echoing hunter-gathers' conceptualizations of their environments as unconditionally giving parents. The transfer of *clasificadores* into recycling plants is discussed in a twenty-first century discourse of social inclusion but in many ways can be seen as a reconfiguration of the paternalistic social state. Finally, in including just a small part of the informal labour force, state initiatives like the *Ley de Envases* risk re-enacting centuries-old forms of dispossession that rest on the fracturing and partial delegitimization of the working class.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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