

Situated waste discourses and *gancheros*' lived experiences in the context of the closure of the Cateura landfill in Asuncion, Paraguay – Report of Field Research

Abstract

This project analyzes competing discourses around the closure of the Cateura landfill in Asuncion, particularly when looking at the labor of *gancheros* or *recicladores* (informal waste pickers working in the site). It focuses on the discursive portrayal of the role of waste pickers in the urban metabolism of the city of Asuncion, in contrast to their own material lived realities as waste pickers. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding approach to discourse analysis, I will examine discourses produced by the media and municipal authorities, as well as waste pickers' lived experiences. My goal is to better understand the narratives that compose the urban waste imaginary. Through these discourses and experiences, we can learn about waste management practices in Asuncion, and think about what comes next after the closure of the landfill. With my research, I aim to illustrate the stories of the spaces *gancheros* occupy and the services they provide to the AMA, as well as the impacts of the dump closure on their labor and livelihoods. This can lead to a broader understanding of dominant discourses that contribute to the marginalization of *gancheros*, limiting their opportunities outside of waste work. The conversations created through this research can help municipal authorities reframe their perception of the labor of *gancheros* and start a collaborative process to create opportunities with waste workers so that they can sustain their livelihoods after the closure of Cateura. The closure of Cateura represents a critical point in the domestic waste management crisis in the Asuncion Metropolitan Area and studying this moment can illustrate the dynamics of the city's urban metabolism, as a case study for waste geographies in the global south.

Keywords: Waste pickers, waste management, discourse analysis, Paraguay, urban metabolism

Research Report

The purpose of my field research trip was to conduct fieldwork in my home country, in the city I grew up in. The focus of my research is to highlight the situated discourses of waste and lived experiences of informal waste pickers in the context of the closure of the Cateura landfill in Asuncion, Paraguay. With the data collected during this trip, my final goal is to illustrate the impacts of the closure of the landfill on waste pickers' labor and livelihoods in my professional paper project. The CLAG Field Study Award allowed me to cover accommodation and local transportation expenses, including paying for public transport and ride-share trips while in Asuncion to move between sites.

The main two sites where data collection took place were the Municipality of Asuncion and the Cateura landfill. The process of field research has been more challenging than I had previously anticipated. Although, originally, I planned to secure temporary accommodation somewhere close to at least one of the sites, this was not possible due to the current high demand in the housing market in Asuncion. Instead, I did spend a few nights in a hotel in the Asuncion city center on the days before I had early morning interviews in the city, to avoid traffic delays. Because of limited funds, I could only do this a handful of times, and for most of the interviews, I did not manage to do this. This meant that transportation costs and the time to get to and from each site was significantly higher, since I mostly stayed with my family who live in the outskirts of Asuncion, and with traffic it would take me around two hours to get to and from the sites.

Additionally, there were difficulties with reaching out and hearing back from local contacts to secure interviews. While many collaborators agreed to participate in the research, some stopped responding after the initial contact via WhatsApp or Twitter. Another factor that complicated the process of contacting people to interview from the waste picker side was the fact

that many waste pickers do not have a personal cellphone, so they were contacted through someone else, such as a neighbor or family member.



Pictured: Municipality of Asuncion building, where some interviews with municipal officials took place

After getting IRB approval in June 2022, I started conducting interviews. First, I contacted municipal officials through social media, namely Facebook and Instagram. Out of the 15 people I reached out to, 7 replied that they would be willing and able to participate in the project, 2 stopped responding after the initial contact, and I was able to secure interviews with 5 of them. These officials included city council members and technical officials who had experience with the city's waste management system. The interviews took place during the month of July. I conducted interviews in some of the council members' offices in the municipality of Asuncion, or otherwise at an agreed upon location such as a coffee shop in a

shopping mall. These interviews lasted between 30-120 minutes, depending on the flow of the conversations. I collected useful information from these public officers regarding the official narrative that surrounds the landfill closure.

Another objective accomplished in the field was to conduct interviews with 10 waste pickers. This task was significantly more challenging to accomplish and took more time than I had anticipated. First, it was difficult to gain access to the waste picker community because I did not have the right contacts. It was only after speaking to a technical official from the municipality that I was able to make initial contact with a waste picker, who said that they would help me contact more people who would be willing to be interviewed. Contacting more waste pickers was difficult because, as mentioned above, many in the community do not have access to a personal communication device, and the information was relied to them by a third party. Additionally, some of the waste pickers contacted would agree to meet at a specific time, but then would not show up and there would be no way to reach out to them. I used that time to engage in participant observation in the site.

This challenge in communication meant that the process to establish a rapport with waste pickers and conduct interviews took longer than originally planned. I was able to start conducting interviews with waste pickers in early August and conducted all 10 interviews by the end of the month. The interviews with waste pickers lasted between 20-90 minutes. In some interviews the participants were not willing to share too many details about their lives or labor, so they varied in length. Despite this, these interviews provided useful information about the lived experiences and livelihoods of local waste pickers, and the differences in the understanding of the landfill closure from the municipal perspective. I did not manage to take pictures of the landfill site while conducting interviews with waste pickers because of cultural implications and

the vulnerability of the participants. In Paraguay, it would be considered invasive and weird to ask to take pictures of people while being interviewed. Many of the participants also live in vulnerable conditions, so taking pictures of the neighborhoods or houses would have been inappropriate.

The data collected during the months of field research in Asuncion will be used to finish my professional paper, which I anticipate presenting to my committee in April 2023. This is my first experience in international field research, and while it has been challenging, I learned a lot from the process and enjoyed the experience. One advice I would give to someone who is planning to conduct field research abroad is to learn how to come to terms with the unexpected. Things might go wrong, and you might not get everything you had planned for accomplished, but do not let that ruin your trip. There are many factors that are out of our control as researchers, and while it can be frustrating, and it could feel like you are “wasting” time, it is part of the process and it’s best to not get too stressed about it and enjoy your experience anyways. It is such a big privilege to be conducting this kind of research, and I am grateful to CLAG for the support they have provided during my research process.