



Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment

João Biehl, Torben Eskerod (Photographer)

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Zones of social abandonment are emerging everywhere in Brazil's big cities—places like Vita, where the unwanted, the mentally ill, the sick, and the homeless are left to die. This haunting, unforgettable story centers on a young woman named Catarina, increasingly paralyzed and said to be mad, living out her time at Vita. Anthropologist João Biehl leads a detective-like journey to know Catarina; to unravel the cryptic, poetic words that are part of the “dictionary” she is compiling; and to trace the complex network of family, medicine, state, and economy in which her abandonment and pathology took form.

As Biehl painstakingly relates Catarina's words to a vanished world and elucidates her condition, we learn of subjectivities unmade and remade under economic pressures, pharmaceuticals as moral technologies, a public common sense that lets the unsound and unproductive die, and anthropology's unique power to work through these juxtaposed fields. *Vita's* methodological innovations, bold fieldwork, and rigorous social theory make it an essential reading for anyone who is grappling with how to understand the conditions of life, thought and ethics in the contemporary world.

Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment Details

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From Reader Review Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment for online ebook

Nutsa says

This book is not only one of the greatest ethnographic accounts of "the end-station on the road of poverty" but one of the most powerful enquiries into the nodes of existence "where living beings go when they are no longer considered people"

Janelle says

A lovely example of a case study. Biehl uses the example of a single woman to explore gendered medical policy, family structure and psychology in Brazil. Theoretically strong and fascinating. I felt that it could have drawn upon bio-cultural theory more.

Jerry says

For all its problems, I think this book is a beautiful combination of narrative, ethnographic detail, archival research, and scholarship. It's much less jargony than other anthropology texts, while retaining a theoretical and academic rigor.

It's a beautiful ethnography/narrative of the life of one woman in a 'zone of social abandonment' in Brazil, detailing the way that the family organization, the medical establishment, and the democratization of Brazil came together to label her as a madwoman, strip away her ability to speak for herself, and make her into what Biehl calls a 'pharmaceutical subject.'

Good reading!

Sokolov says

Had to walk away from this book in amazement many times, either to cry or to talk about it with the person nearest me. Demonstrates so clearly the ways in which psychiatry, hospitals, and family interact and collude to alienate and exclude defective or troublesome persons. More importantly, Biehl facilitates Catarina's telling of her own story, which, like the stories of all those consigned to social death, need to be heard.

Shom Dasgupta says

um. wow.

Bella Pascal Zionts says

highly highly recommend

Amy says

Vita is a beautiful ethnography and perfect example of a case study done right. Biehl masterfully sculpts the story of Catarina's life through his passion to find answers and through his substitution of the common terminology with powerfully fresh terms such as "social death" and "ex-human." This book will leave the reader heartbroken, but inspired to enact change. It is a must read.

Danny Cardoza says

This is life changing ethnography.

Lupe Marin says

This book really opens your eyes to people like Catarina and makes you think about our societies. It makes you question how is it that we cast away our own family simply because they are "different." This is a must read for everyone. Truly enjoyed reading this book despite the heartbreak.

Bri says

One of the most beautiful and devastating ethnographies I've ever read. I recognize its problems. It is not very reproducible. It is hard to know where Catarina begins and ends and where Biehl begins and ends. It is not always clear what he is trying to say, and there are gaps that would be useful to have more information on. His point is not always entirely clear. That being said, this is a sensitive piece of work that looks with empathy and grace at the life of a remarkable woman who was abandoned by family, the medical system, and the state. His privileging of her voice, language, and concerns is beautifully done. I was at times uncomfortable with how things went but it demonstrates the messiness of fieldwork and ethics. I also think he does a fantastic job of tracing what forces affected Catarina's life and how multiple parties influenced and altered the course of life. I could say more but I have to write papers on this sucker, so suffice it to say, highly recommended if you are interested in topics like creative ethnography, social death, biopolitics, regimes of care, etc.

Meghan says

My favorite ethnography this year, Biehl's person-centered ethnography is historical, political and personal. Seamlessly connecting macrostructural shifts in the global economy to individual lived experience, Biehl's critical interpretive approach uses the story of one woman to address key questions in medical anthropology.

Not surprising that the book won just about every anthropology book award.

Jen says

If navel gazing is the opposite of informed research, then this is the other opposite of navel gazing.

An ethnography of one person.

Biehl writes so beautifully that one can almost forget that he is actively personifying and attributing meaning to the actions of a very mentally ill person. Its emotional and claims to be theoretical. Its highly involved, and yet claims to be observational.

Very frustrating to read

What the hell, Joao? What the hell.

Brittney Sanderson says

Visceral and insightful. Biehls writing is captivating.

??Erica?? says

Okay okay okay okay. OKAY. this ethnography. is WOW.

I know this is definitely not a pleasure read nor will my review ultimately convince anyone to read a heavy ethnographic account of the mental health industry in Brazilian society. BUT this book is fucking worth it anyway.

I know I am super biased because cultural anthropology was what I studied during college, but this is mind-blowing. PLEASE BELIEVE ME.

I live really close to Princeton University and when I found out the author WORKS at Princeton I pretty much died. I literally, actually, and in all seriousness WENT THERE (its only like 10 minutes away but still) and pointlessly searched the campus attempting to run into him.

I didn't find him.

But I will still attempt in the future.

M says

absolutely heartbreaking story, brilliant analysis of abandonment in Brazil. beautifully written as well
