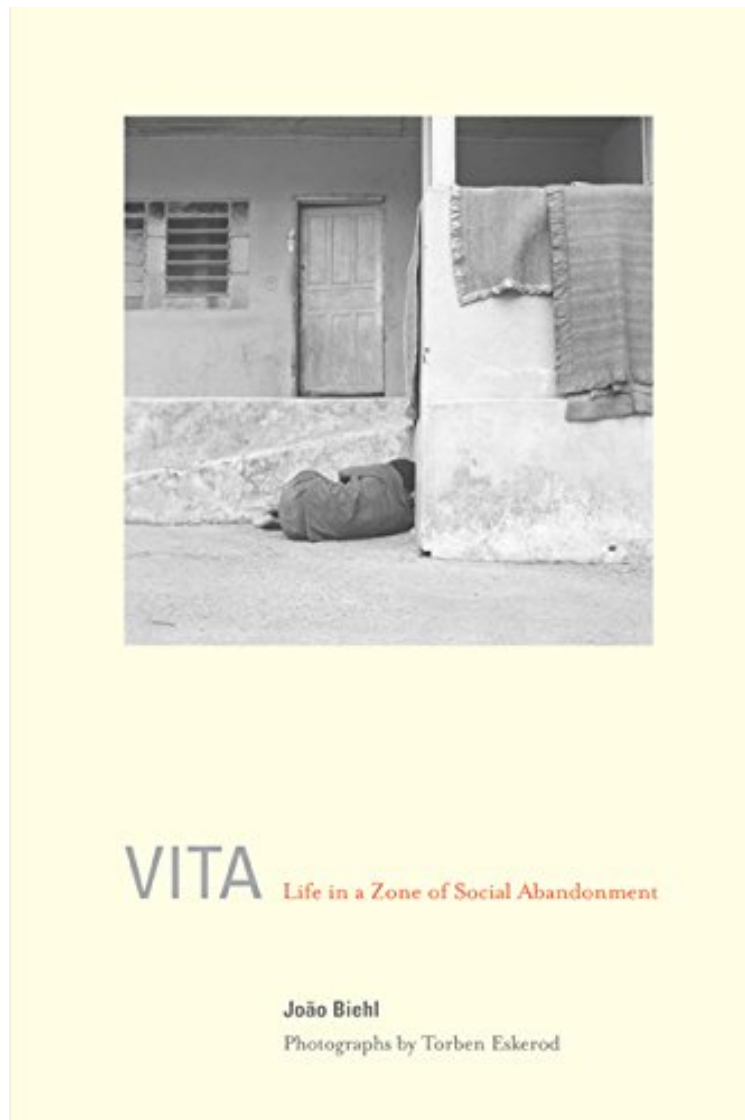


(Read now) Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment

## Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment

*Joo Biehl*

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**Joo Biehl : Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment:

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Between Art and EthnographyBy Etienne RPHaunting. Arresting. Inspiring. These are some of the adjectives that come to mind to characterize Joo Biehl's Vita : Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment. These words are usually used in the context of a work of art or a fiction. And indeed, as other reviewers have noted, Vita reads like a novel, and it presents itself like an art book, with its black-and-white photographs and coated pages. Vita carries anthropology to new grounds where boundaries between aesthetics and social science are

blurred, and engages the reader with her senses and emotions as well as her intellect and academic references. At the same time, *Vita* is a work of social science, distinguished by the prestigious Margaret Mead Award of the American Anthropological Association, and it has become an instant classic, as testified by the revised edition by the University of California Press. How can we disentangle art from science, and how to account for the lasting impression this text makes on the reader's mind? According to Joo Biehl, *Vita*, a rehabilitation center for drug addicts and social outcasts in Porto Alegre, is much more than a locale. This is how an informant introduced the center to the author: "It's a dump site for human beings. You must go there. You will see what people do to people, what it means to be humans these days." And he was right. As Biehl discovered, "*Vita* is the end-station on the road to poverty; it is the place where living beings go to when they are no longer considered people." "Zones of social abandonment" such as *Vita* "accelerate the death of the unwanted". They make visible "realities that exist through and beyond formal governance and that determine the life course of an increasing number of poor people who are not part of mapped populations." One strategy for ethnographic writing would have been to make a theory out of this single case study, and to develop a social critique of the political economy that makes places like *Vita* possible. This is in part what the author does when he characterizes *Vita* as a "zone of abandonment" and its occupants are "abandonados" or "ex-humans". These concepts, used or accepted by the respondents themselves, allow to move beyond the case for moral indignation and to operate the shift from the particular to the general that represents ethnography's core method of inquiring. The *abandonados* do not just speak for themselves; they are "the carriers and witnesses of the ways in which the social destinies of the poorest and the sickest are ordered." They show the limitation of policies and projects of social inclusion for which the municipal government of Porto Alegre and the state of Brazil under Workers Party's rule are often credited. Joo Biehl's concepts of social abandonment and ex-humans resonate with the theoretical constructs of authors with which he enters into dialogue: Michel Foucault's notions of "biopolitics" and "neo-liberal governmentality", or Giorgio Agamben's philosophical descriptions of "bare life" and "homo sacer". These short theoretical engagements with renowned modern philosophers are weaved into the text or developed into endnotes, and they will be of interest to academic readers. They may open the space for future epistemological developments or new lines or ethnographic inquiry. The book will also be valuable for social activists or human rights militants, who will see in the descriptions of the zones of liminality such as *Vita* a vindication of their fight for justice and recognition. As Biehl underscores, "the ethnography of *Vita* makes it painfully clear that there are places in the present, even in a state founded on the premise of inviolable human rights, where these rights no longer exist, where the living subjects of marginal institutions are constituted as something other, between life and death." But *Vita* is not a theoretical treatise or an ethnographic description of a single locale. It is an anthropology of a single person or, as the author puts it, "the thick description of a single life". There are precedents in the discipline for such endeavour. One can mention in passing works as diverse as Laurence Caillet's *The House of Yamazaki*, the life story of a Japanese business woman raised in the countryside and who became the manager of an upclass hairdressing salon, or Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*, a post-modern experiment in psychoanalytic ethnography. But *Vita*'s portrait of Catarina is different. For a start, the central character should never have been allowed to have her say. Successively diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia, post-partum psychosis, unspecified psychosis, and then mood disorder, she had been muted by the institutions of medicine, family, and social policy. Her abandonment reflected her progressive physical deterioration. The author and his wife first met her training on a stationary bicycle. Thereafter, her limp became more severe, and she was assigned to the immobility of a wheelchair. Her complaints from the ailments she suffered, described as "rheumatism" or "chronic spasms", were never heard by the doctors and social workers who handled her case and who kept her heavily sedated. Pharmaceuticals substituted for her estrangement from social links, and she was categorized as a case of mental illness without due consideration for her physical condition or social environment. Despite the crumbling of all hope, she was able to cling to life and to articulate her interior life in the diaries she constantly kept. Referred to as her "dictionary" ("I write so that I don't forget the words"), these lists of words and sentences scribbled with a trembling hand mirror her personal struggles and provide a document of extraordinary power. Catarina's dialogue with Joo Biehl goes much beyond the ethnographic encounter between the anthropologist and his informant. It is she who sends him on a quest in order not only to recollect her life story, but to recapture her connection to the living. The result is "a progressive unravelling of the knotted reality that was Catarina's condition - misdiagnosis, excessive medication, complicity among health professionals and family in creating her status as a psychotic - and the discovery of the cause of her illness, which turned out to be a genetic and not a psychiatric condition." It is this connection with Catarina that allows the author to move beyond a monography on *Vita* to a multi-sited ethnography of the web of institutions, medical and familial, that produced her abandonment. As Biehl notes, "her presumed madness was intimately related to changing political and labor regimes as well as to pharmaceutical forms of knowledge and care that were embedded in nets of relatedness, intimacies, and betrayals." In part, the book reads like a detective story. There are unexpected turns, progressive discovery of the character's background, disclosure of secrets buried deep in medical archives or family closets, and an astonishing finale, which connects Catarina's body to the most generic aspects of human life. *Vita* is also a first-person narrative, where the author is always present in the account. The book is truly a collaborative work or a dialogic construction of knowledge

between the two characters, and its progression mirrors the development of their joint work. Catarina's words, her "dictionary", transform the ethnography into an elegy - we must read them "in the same way we face poetry." They express "the unspeakable of the ordinary", and demonstrate that "a human form of life that is no longer worth living is not just bare life - language and desire continue." 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy CustomerAmazing and sad story1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy SwimmingpoolBrilliant book

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 Joo 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.

From the Inside Flap "Joo Biehl's Vita is a greatly arresting work. The tale of Catarina is one that haunts the reader. This book's central character is sure to become an anthropological classic, her humanity reaffirmed by the author." Arthur Kleinman, author of Writing at the Margin: Discourse between Anthropology and Medicine