



Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment

Jo Biehl

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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.

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