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VITA: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment (review)

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a firing squad shortly after being captured. The end of this section is characterized by one very popular picture of a triumphant Fidel and his rebel soldiers entering Havana on a tank being followed by the Cuban people that are celebrating his victory. Nonetheless, in contrast to those pictures, as if to illustrate the more horrific side of Castro's victory, in the following two pages the authors show the shooting of Batista's chief of maritime police in Santiago de Cuba on January 2, 1959. In this photograph René Rodríguez Cruz, chief of militias in Las Villas, delivers the coup de grace. The photographs at the end of this section are of great political significance and allude to the public and sometimes televised shootings of Castro's enemies. These shootings not only helped Castro's government to get rid of any internal opposition but also helped to create a generalized political terror never before experienced by the Cuban people.

In the fourth section of Babun and Triay's book, the authors begin with a short introduction to the events that brought about the first massive exodus of Cubans from the island to the United States between the years of 1959 and 1962. In the narrative, the authors provide a detailed summary of some of the events that triggered the end of relations between the United States and Cuba. Some of these critical events in history were Operation Peter Pan, as well as the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. The photographs show many Cuban families arriving in the United States by plane or ship. One of the most important photographs relates to the ship African Pilot. This ship played an important role in facilitating the arrival of many Cuban exiles to the U.S. and later was chartered by the U. S. Department of Commerce to deliver humanitarian cargo in exchange for many of the prisoners of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Another photograph captures the images of some of the more than 14,000 children that were sent unaccompanied to the United States in Operation Peter Pan. However, the most symbolic picture is that of a Cuban exile kissing American soil. For many Cubans, this act was an expression of gratitude to the new land for helping them escape certain death on the island. The last set of pictures in

this section pertains to the Bay of Pigs invasion and shows many of the participants that played an important role. Some of the most dramatic pictures relate to the return of the members of Brigade 2506 and their families. As the authors explain, most of the survivors of the Bay of Pigs invasion had not seen their families in twenty months or more, and in many other cases, families were unaware if their loved ones were still alive. Teofilo "Tofi" Babun himself is pictured during the celebrations of the return of the Bay of Pigs veterans. However, probably the most important set of pictures in this section relate to President John F. Kennedy officially welcoming Brigade 2506 before twenty thousand exiles at the Orange Bowl. Ironically, sitting to President Kennedy's right, is Jose Miro Cardona, who as previously mentioned became the first prime minister of Castro's government and shortly after was forced to go into exile. The picture of President Kennedy is of great importance because to many Cuban Americans, President Kennedy was personally responsible for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

The Cuban Revolution: Years of Promise is a well planned, historical depiction of contemporary Cuban history and a great testimony to the didactic power of the visual image as a means of transmitting history. It is to the credit of Teo A. Babun and Víctor Andrés Triay, who possess a very keen understanding of Cuban history, to produce such an interesting and fascinating book.

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VITA: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment
University of California Press, 2005
By João Biehl

João Biehl's *VITA: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005) is a study of the increasing prevalence of urban places in appallingly inhumane conditions that house the social outcasts of contemporary Brazil. Biehl refers to such

places as “zones of social abandonment” (2), that is, places that lack medical and governmental attention and are ultimately treated as “dump” sites for the ill, the impoverished, the mentally challenged, the jobless, and the homeless. Biehl focuses on Vita, one such place in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. Considering Vita “the end-station on the road of poverty; [...] where living beings go when they are no longer considered people” (2), he examines life in Vita as a death catalyst for its occupants due to the ill-equipped staff, medical misdiagnoses, lack of funds and inadequate infrastructure. By choosing to pursue an ethnographical study of one of Vita’s most lucid inhabitants, Catarina, Biehl exposes the consequences of the multiple and complex interactions of the social, medical, familial, and governmental negligence and malpractices. Working within an interdisciplinary framework of anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry and cultural history, Biehl’s study painstakingly traces Catarina’s brutal and irreversible exclusion from society as well as her own struggles against this exclusion manifested through her incessant writing at the indigent asylum.

In addition to the introduction, conclusion, and postscript *VITA: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* is divided into six lengthy parts. Each part is broken down into a number of entitled sections and accompanied by several photos of Vita and its occupants and of Catarina and her immediate family. Part I of this study, “Vita,” gives a brief background on the “deinstitutionalization” of the mentally ill in the nineties in Porto Alegre, thus shifting “the burden of care from state institutions to the family and communities” (48). As Biehl demonstrates, this nationwide phenomenon intensified the emergence of socially marginalized and decaying areas such as Vita. In addition, Part I deals with both the background and mental conditions of the occupants and the staff at Vita, addressing the infrastructural and medical (AIDS and tuberculosis) difficulties they endure on a daily basis. In Part II, “Catarina and the Alphabet,” Biehl relates his initial encounters with Catarina and his discovery of the lists of words and

phrases she compiles in spite of her progressive paralysis and dependence on her wheelchair. Biehl then relates his conversations with Catarina about the writing of her “dictionary” in order to retrace her alleged mental illness and the rejection she experiences from her family, friends, medical institutions, and society as a whole. Parts III and IV reveal the findings of Biehl’s ethnographic explorations outside Vita. The third part, “The Medical Archive,” narrates Biehl’s search for and examination of Catarina’s medical files at different psychiatric institutions, revealing the inadequate and not careful mental health treatment (misdiagnoses and unnecessary medication) she received. The fourth part, “Family,” details Biehl’s encounters and conversations with Catarina’s immediate and extended family in Novo Hamburgo. Through these encounters the reader learns about the attitudes and misconceptions Catarina’s family held about her health. The contacts with Catarina’s immediate family allow Biehl to conclude that she “had become a leftover in a domestic world, [...] the negative value, the unnecessary component of a migrant and urban poor culture” (247). The book’s penultimate part, “Biology and Ethics,” offers an insightful discussion of Catarina’s illness—Machado-Joseph disease—a hereditary degenerative ataxia that was the cause of her suffering and death, and was threatening her brothers as well. A series of Catarina’s writing from 1999 to 2003 constitutes the last part of Biehl’s study, “The Dictionary.” Through an examination of Catarina’s writing, Biehl exposes the structural violence that irrevocably led to her “social death,” but also her rebellion against her fate. Quotes from Catarina’s conversations with Biehl pervade this study as a whole, yet her voice is made most prevalent in the last portion of the study through the inclusion of excerpts of her dictionary.

One can quibble with what the book does less persuasively. The introduction announces Biehl’s aspirations to write a book of a “texture [that would] stay as close as possible to Catarina’s words, to her own thinking-through of her condition” (19). This could have been strengthened however with the inclusion of the quotes,

interviews and Catarina's writings in Portuguese. The insertion of Catarina's dictionary in her native language would have further authenticated her self-representation in this study in general and the last section in particular. Moreover, Biehl's criterion for including only certain portions of her dictionary in the last section remains unclear. It would be interesting to know if Catarina herself took any part in the selection of these portions. However, these criticisms aside, *VITA: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* is a well-researched study with a fine balance between theoretical discussions and thorough fieldwork, offering a complex and original insight into the dynamics of social abandonment in contemporary Brazil. Biehl's thought provoking study not only renders visible the appalling experiences of the marginalized individual(s) at the asylum, but also shows the impact of social, political and cultural aspects of Brazil that further deepen the desolation of the poor as well as perpetuate the infringement of basic human rights.

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Don Quijote, Don Juan and Related Subjects: Form and Tradition in Spanish Literature, 1330-1630

Susquehanna University Press, 2004
By James A. Parr

James A. Parr es profesor de literatura española en la Universidad de California, Riverside, y fue presidente de la *Cervantes Society of America* desde 2004 hasta el año corriente. El profesor Parr es uno de esos hispanófilos que aparecen con alguna frecuencia en la intelectualidad norteamericana, capaces de moverse con la agilidad de cualquier enclaustrado investigador hispano por los caminos sembrados de abismos de la literatura española.

Con su reciente libro, *Don Quijote, Don Juan and Related Subjects: Form and Tradition in Spanish Literature, 1330-1630* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2004), dice apartarse del circuito de profesionales, por así decirlo, que

se sienten mediatizados por determinadas modas académicas o para quienes la teoría literaria no es herramienta para la investigación, sino su propósito y fin mismo. Para Parr, todo estudioso que se case con teorías de moda en busca de mecanismos favorables a sus tesis, pecará no sólo de arbitrario, sino de doctrinario. El autor parece estar reaccionando a la conocida tendencia a la sobreinterpretación, tendencia cuyo caldo de cultivo ha sido la ideología oficial que se ha extendido por nuestra profesión en décadas recientes. Se me ocurre que el peligro de esta actitud, revolucionaria y peligrosa, es quedar sin domicilio conceptual fijo. Sin embargo, los beneficios saltan a la vista: la ideología académica oficial hoy desempeña un papel jaculatorio parecido al que hace una generación tenía la lista de logros del Movimiento Nacional en aulas españolas. Escaparse del destilado ideológico que segregan los estudios culturales, poscoloniales y de género—con sus cánones, pontificados e inquisiciones—es hoy la mejor manera de formar juicios de inconformismo intelectual. La aparente disposición de ánimo del autor es una de tantas que anuncian el comienzo de la decadencia, a causa de sus propios excesos, de la moda hiperinterpretativa que tan a menudo ha llevado a tantos investigadores a conclusiones ficticias. Dicha propensión se nota en estudios mucho más escépticos, basados casi con exclusividad en lo documentable y documentado; así, en el prefacio de su texto, Parr ofrece algunos juicios que casi podrían interpretarse como heraldos de esta bienvenida tendencia.

Un investigador que propone lo antedicho promete aportar valiosas y novedosas intuiciones y una especial sensibilidad hacia el objeto de su atención intelectual; promete, en fin, “hablar” inteligentemente de literatura. Hasta cierto punto y por un lado, Parr cumple con su promesa implícita, demostrando una fácil familiaridad con los textos que maneja, circunstancia que le permite hablar de ellos con perspectivas relativamente frescas. Por otro lado, sus largas e interesantes disquisiciones en relación con la teoría literaria en cierto sentido revelan su relación ambivalente con la “herramienta” de su profesión, aunque no desmantelan su argumento esencial.