

Title: But Is She Negro? Bare Life, Custodial Detention and J. Edgar Hoover's Hunt for an African-American Communist.

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In his groundbreaking writings since the 1990s, Italian philologist Giorgio Agamben expands on prison and Holocaust studies by Foucault and Arendt, positing the camp as the West's current "fundamental biopolitical paradigm" (181). Agamben identifies camps (Nazi extermination, Bosnian Serb rape, Guantánamo Bay detainment) whose founding is enabled by the suspension of law; they incarcerate a subset of persons whose previously qualified life is reduced to "bare life" and whose killing is not regarded as homicide.

Agamben's paradigm explains other American "states of exception" suspending law and reducing groups to "bare life": involuntary sterilization, syphilis and radiation-fallout experiments, 1919-20 Palmer raids, WWII internment camps. Here, I will discuss J. Edgar Hoover's nearly-unknown 1939-1940 plan to establish custodial detention camps for American communists. Hoover's ideas surface in the FBI file of Williana Burroughs (1881-1945), NYC schoolteacher and Communist Party member who worked in the USSR in the 1930s and 1940s. Burroughs' FBI file, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, reveals Hoover's obsession with finding and detaining her, perhaps as one of the most dangerous, or first wave, of African-Americans for the camp Hoover envisioned.

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