

## Chapter 2

# Exceptional Space: Concentration Camps and Labor Compounds in Late Nineteenth-Century South Africa

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**Abstract** This chapter explores and compares the causes and effects of colonial labor camps and concentration camps in nineteenth-century southern Africa. This comparison is an attempt to understand the relationship between the lethality of wartime camps and labor camps in the modern era. While concentration camps and worker labor camps were established according to ostensibly different power regimes and causal factors, British wartime concentration camps established different camps for Boers and Africans—the latter being structurally identical to preceding labor camps established on the South African Diamond Fields.

## Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to understand the phenomenon of the camp through events that occurred in late nineteenth-century colonial southern Africa. I will explore the camp both through the lens of war and the lens of labor, exploring both the creation of closed worker compounds for miners working on the Diamond Fields and the subsequent establishment of British wartime concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. The colonial context reveals important contiguities between camps associated with wartime (and thus state-sanctioned modes of killing) and those labor camps which perpetrated more mundane forms of killing. The point of comparing these two forms of the camp (wartime camps and “work”-time camps) is to understand the seamlessness with which the more visible sovereign violence of the camp has long intersected with a more dispersed, biopolitical mode of state- and market-sanctioned violence.

This historical case study problematizes the contemporary distinction between “state killing” and the more amorphous condition of “letting die”—a distinction

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that frequently occludes the lethal workings of neoliberal markets and states today (Povinelli 2008:512). Concentration camps, labor camps and sites of institutionalized violence are central to our engagement with the dispersed workings of violence and power in late modernity, particularly as we attempt to examine these institutional forms in a global context (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Casella 2007; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008).

## The First Camps: The 1886 Closed Labor Compounds

It is important to examine the camps that existed at the peripheries of overt warfare. In the case of colonial South Africa, problems of labor, mineral wealth, speculative fever and security concerns emerged with the discovery of diamonds in the 1870s and subsequently with the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand reef in the 1880s (Turrell 1982; Worger 1987). These concerns revolved around securing the profits of diamonds from illicit trade, precipitated closed worker compounds and labor barracks, and set the administrative and architectural groundwork for aspects of apartheid. As Van Onselen explains,

[b]y their very nature the concentration camps, prisons and compounds exercised a high degree of control over their black inmates. *This was not solely a wartime exigency*, for these institutions represented the vanguard of those oppressive instruments that continued to function under the post-war administration (Van Onselen 1978:79, emphasis added).

The suspension of ordinary law and the juridical state of the exception were both events which, in South Africa, *preceded* the emergency of a wartime state and largely centered on the exceptional conditions of black markets thought to be siphoning the profits of the diamond trade away from monopolist coffers (Worger 1987). The worker compounds of the early mining companies of the Diamond Fields not only segregated and incarcerated laborers for the duration of their contract, but they also relied upon strategic suspensions of the law—invoking a state of exception, even if only for the purpose of commodity security. The relationship between the 1880s labor compounds of diamond mining companies such as De Beers and the subsequent network of industrial labor systems under apartheid later raised concerns among company directors about comparisons to the infamous relationship between the I.G. Farben corporation and the Nazi regime (Ibhawoh 2008:281).

Even as the space of the camp came to center around wartime detainment, the camp's suspension of political and physical life, as well as the biopolitical production of race in South Africa, was always intricately interwoven with the material and speculative economies occupying sites of mineral wealth and production (Hayes 2001). The discovery of mineral wealth in South Africa accelerated a twinned production, one of the actual substances of diamonds and gold, the other of war for secure access to these goods. Both processes produced a class of laborers who were presumptive criminals and whose "bare life" materialized within the space of the camp (Agamben 1998).

## The Precedent of Concentration Camps and Labor Camps in Southern Africa

In 1939, the British government reluctantly issued their White Paper on Nazi concentration camps in response to anti-British Nazi propaganda in which concentration camps were portrayed as having been “invented” by the British army during their war campaigns in South Africa (Struk 2004:28). Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, had notoriously traced the term “concentration camps” to this British implementation of internment camps during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902 in South Africa, attempting to situate the architectural and political precedent for Nazi concentration camps within British imperial rule (Stanley 2006:7).

These British camps had resulted in thousands of deaths due to disease, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. Historians have recently suggested that the pivotal colonial precedent for the Nazi camps in fact emerged within the context of 1904 colonial South-West Africa, where German colonists actively inflicted a policy of *Vernichtung* (annihilation) upon the Herero and Nama under the military directives of General Lothar von Trotha (Lindqvist 1996; Madley 2005). These German colonial camps were produced as a result of Ratzel’s notion of *Lebensraum*, or “living space.” According to this idea, the colonial mandate for more space became paramount in order to accommodate the expanding populations and markets of the ruling race, precipitating the mass dispossession and relocation of Herero and Nama people into what were termed *Konzentrationslager*. Hitler was known to have read Ratzel’s *Anthropogeographie* when writing *Mein Kampf* in prison, and the Nazi death camps may have been similarly inspired by *Lebensraum* (Ratzel 1899; Lindqvist 1996:145).

In British southern Africa the ravages of colonial encroachment following the discovery of diamonds and gold have been depicted as unfolding according to a far more pragmatic capitalist tack. Historian Benjamin Madley suggests that had British imperialist Cecil Rhodes “not decided that funding such a [genocidal] war would be prohibitively expensive, Southern Rhodesia might have become, like German South West Africa, a site of genocide” (Madley 2005:431). The analogy of British wartime camps to Nazi concentration camps has been viewed, largely, as a product of the distortions of the memorializing and mythologizing of the Afrikaner martyrdom under the apartheid regime (Stanley and Dampier 2005). The estimated 28,000 deaths which the condition of these camps brought about have not been understood as the result of an explicitly genocidal project but instead as the result of what has been termed an unfortunate case of “collateral damage” (Stanley and Dampier 2005).

The connection between the nineteenth-century German and British colonial concentration camp system in southern Africa fades, however, when the full story of the British administration of camps is examined in detail (Madley 2005). Tens of thousands of Africans died in camps, as a direct result of forced labor, inadequate shelter, negligible food supply and nonexistent medical attention: some war camps established for African detainees were reported to be subsisting on nothing more than rotting animal carcasses (Kessler 1999; Warwick 1983:149). Under the

supervision of the Native Affairs Department, these camps created conditions of radical poverty and despair. Importantly, the notion of the superfluity of African life first emerged within the camps for profit and mineral wealth, camps which seem to have escaped eventful equivalence with sovereign-issued camps established for warfare and explicit territorial expansion, though their market-based motivations were no less lethal (Povinelli 2008).

## The Diamond Fields of South Africa

In southern Africa, the discovery of mineral wealth began with the rush for diamonds in the northern frontiers of British colonial territories. The Diamond Fields emerged in the 1870s after a series of prominent diamond finds, with thousands of prospectors congregating around the confluence of the Harts-Vaal Rivers in what is today known as the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. While this region was swiftly incorporated as a British Protectorate (Worger 1987:17), the rule of law and police enforcement were frequently seen as inadequate to the community's preoccupation with the specter of rampant illicit diamond trading. The impetus for isolating African laborers from the general population of the fields was the result of widespread anxiety over the rumors of rampant illicit diamond buying. Anxiety over illicit diamond buying had already led to a series of exceptional legal moves, many of which were implemented under the Diamond Trade Act of 1882: for instance, suspending presumption of innocence and placing *onus probandi* upon the African discovered with diamonds on his person—a process handled by special illicit diamond buying courts (Smalberger 1974).

In the wake of several sharp declines in diamond prices, and the flooding and depletion of diamondiferous soil lenses on the fields, mass paranoia emerged about the ubiquity of illicit diamond buying. Failing prospectors may have questioned whether their claims were truly running out of diamondiferous soil, or whether concealment and illicit trade were the cause of their misfortunes. This widespread suspicion catalyzed the containment scheme which would see diamond diggers fenced in. Key proclamations and movements had led up to this event, including the Searching Ordinance 11 of 1880, establishing a comprehensive searching system for miners exiting the mines, and the Diamond Trade Act of 1882, which codified a set of trapping laws and punishments for illicit diamond buying (Smalberger 1974:410–412). Despite these laws, it was the growing sense of the *inadequacy* of these various searching ordinances and legislative security measures which gave rise to the consensus that some sort of camp or enclosed compound would be the only viable solution.

The synthesis of penal and labor architecture at Kimberley in the 1880s provides an important precedent for the subsequent urban formations of Johannesburg and other labor centers in southern Africa (Bozzoli 1981:71–72; Home 2000). The twin processes of proletarianizing and criminalizing southern African migrant laborers have been lost to some degree in the process of chronicling colonial projects of labor

control. Yet, it is this criminalization in its built form and spatial logics which continues to resonate with urban landscapes in post-apartheid South Africa and marks a genealogical foundation for contemporary discourse of criminal violence and disorder in the postcolony (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). During the outbreak of violence between British colonial forces and Boer commandoes at the end of the nineteenth century, while the Boer concentration camps were explicitly modeled after “protective custody” for purposes of wartime security, African concentration camps, in contrast, were conceived of with the goal of establishing “the supply of native labor to the Army” (Warwick 1983:149). Thus, in 1901, the Native Refugee Department was created, inmates characterized as receiving “aid” from the British army, yet in reality Africans were compelled by military force to enter what were self-supporting camps. Inmates were promised that for their loyalty to the British they would receive Boer farms at the end of the war (Kessler 1999:123). Instead, refugees were released from the concentration camps either to private employers, to return to labor on their original farms, or to join compound systems in the gold mines on the Witwatersrand (Kessler 1999).

## **The Birth of the Closed Compound on the Diamond Fields Circa 1886**

In January 1885, the process of compounding officially began when one of the three major amalgamated companies, the “French Company,” marched 110 African workers into a set of closed barracks, where they were detained for 6 months (Worger 1987:144). The architecture of segregated worker housing was widely replicated in industrial areas throughout southern Africa, with suburban cantonments for European supervisors and closed barracks for African laborers. This style of labor incarceration was thought to really be about securing cheap labor (workers notoriously leaving the fields during poor wage conditions), but it is also important to understand that this architectural precedent was formulated according to the question of the laborers as presumptive diamond thieves. Thus, this architecture infused the labor environment with all the issues of the camp: security, custody and the biopolitical administration of human life (Smalberger 1974; Worger 1987). Worker housing at the diamond mines became a disciplinarian-bachelor space for African laborers, and a private residential area for European laborers.

When the compound became “closed,” it became a penal landscape. The architect of the compound, Thomas Kitto, a mining inspector from Cornwall, had been commissioned in 1879 to write a report on the Kimberley mines; Kitto explicitly based his architectural proposal on Brazilian Diamond Field slave lodges (Turrell 1982:57). Kitto was effectively advocating the architecture and regimented lifestyle of slave labor as a form of disciplinarian reform—the only alternative being a scenario in which the African laborer would remain “a lean, trembling debauch” (Worger 2004:70). Referring to the Brazilian slave barrack system, he describes the proposed security enclosure for African laborers:

The blacks are lodged in barracks, which are built in the form of a square, the outer wall being much higher than the inner wall; the roof slopes inside. The entrance to the place is by a large gate, over which at night hangs a powerful lamp . . . Men and women answer to the call of their names while passing out at the gate in the morning and in the evening when entering. They retire to rest early, and an overseer locks up the premises each night . . . in another 22 years, or thereabouts, all will be free; by which time . . . they will be ripe for the occasion. I believe the natives of South Africa, under European supervision, are capable of being made almost—if not quite—as good as the blacks of Brazil, provided they are dealt with in the same manner. (Kitto 1882 cited in Turrell 1987:97)

Robert Turrell states that the Kimberley compounds “were indeed, intended to prevent theft, and they later grew to be *structurally identical to convict stations* with entrance and exit tunnels to the mine, wire mesh over the barracks and detention cells for workers to flush out stolen diamonds when their contracts expired” (Turrell 1982:65).

The searching system that African laborers underwent at the end of their labor contract was almost exactly the same as that practiced at the Diamond Field’s enormous central prison (Simons and Simons 1983:25). The convergent architectural signatures which stretched from Brazilian slave barracks to South African labor compounds and ultimately to concentration camps, demonstrate how easily systems of confinement and criminalization incorporate and transfigure landscapes. The penal pedigree of the compound space, in its extra-legislative capacity to order and punish by race, was an architectural product of a “state of exception” in which the security of commodity flow came to usurp extant political and legal infrastructures, and ultimately came to inform the broader move toward containment of Africans who appeared to be “living large” without “visible means of support” (Turrell 1982:57). It was through the compounds, the prisons, labor depots and camps that Rhodes and other mining capitalists “came to define the black worker not as a legitimate part of an economic structure or of a growing city but as a presumptive criminal” (Worger 1987:111).

## From Barrack to Compound to Concentration Camp

A little over a decade after the implementation of the closed compounds on the Diamond Fields, the first wartime implementation of the concentration camp occurred in South Africa, during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 (Agamben 1998:166). Considered by some to be the first modern war of the twentieth century, it began in 1899 between British colonial soldiers and Boer commandoes primarily over the territorial right to recently discovered gold-bearing regions—part of the wider “scramble for Africa” (Pakenham 1979). The motivations and political alliances were complex (Ally 1994; De Kiewiet 1966), but “whatever the ideology, the motive for the Boer war was gold” (Hobsbawm 1987:66).

British forces eventually put the Boer commandos on the defensive and combat moved toward guerilla-style tactics, precipitating the infamous scorched earth policy of the British. This involved the building of block-style forts, strung together with

barbed wire and the burning of Boer homes and farms (Pretorius and Slater 2001). Central to this strategy, led by Lord Kitchener, was the building of concentration camps. Beginning in 1900, thousands of civilians, mainly women and children, were brought to approximately forty concentration camps in attempts to limit the mobility and subversive capabilities of these individuals. These concentration camps resulted in high mortality rates. One estimate is as high as 50,000 deaths in the course of only a few years, approximately a third to a half of the confined.

Much as with European worker housing, the war camps for Boer women and children were less explicitly disciplinarian as they were emphatically residential—and this distinguished them as the first modern form of concentration camp, “with the appearance of something like government custody rather than of government punishment” (Netz 2004:140). Echoing the landscape of the Diamond Fields from decades earlier, the South African landscape came to be crisscrossed with barbed wire and blockhouses, and controlling roving Boer commandos (Netz 2004:142). Camp administrators found it increasingly difficult to perpetuate the rhetoric of British humanitarianism in the face of forcible enclosure (Netz 2004:144).

Within the Boer camps power was asserted through the controlled meting out of food and privacy, with priority afforded to those families thought to not be linked to Boer commando fighters. Camps established for southern African refugees were operated according to an entirely different vision; inhabitants were expected to build their own shelters and dwellings; privacy, domesticity as well as food and basic medical care were methodologically neglected (Kessler 1999). The public veneer of “protective custody” in the instance of the exclusively African camps gave way to “disciplined existence” and extractive labor, extracted according to the presumptive criminality of the African—who, either voluntarily or involuntarily, would otherwise have become complicit with the dispersed guerilla campaigns of the Boers. The logic of security in colonial South Africa, both in the context of mineral extraction as well as in guerilla warfare, came to center around apartheid-style concentration camps.

## Discussion

The social topography of the illicit diamond trade, questions of security and the “commodity-exception” were the formative discourses for the first detainment camps in southern Africa. This point conceptually realigns the early compounds of the Diamond Fields with security concerns that re-emerge in the twentieth-century militarized reforms of the National Party of South Africa under P. W. Botha (Louw 2004:88), and, more broadly, discursive anxieties that continue to circulate about crime and race in the contemporary South African neoliberal landscape (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). The broad-reaching social effects of the compound’s disciplinarian effects were not limited to the material architectural form of the actual compounds but circulated throughout the southern African landscape. By 1889, there were 10,000 Africans living in closed compounds at any



given moment (Meredith 2007:157), yet on any given month, thousands of these laborers were being rotated with newly contracted laborers. The net effect of these sorts of spaces, and their work of removing previous habits and dispositions, effectively radiated across the entire southern African landscape with each new rotation of miner contracts. The hallmark of apartheid-style policies was about a negativity of space—as much about removal and relocation as it was about the imposition of disciplinarian spaces (Bremmer 1999; Judin and Vladislavic 1998; Robinson 1999).

The closed compound, like the concentration camp, seemed to address the inadequacy of either legal or renegade justice upon African migrant laborers as they became icons of the widespread perception of illicit trade and theft. They came to personify cracks in the surefire get-rich-quick life of the rush camp that seemed to threaten the general well-being of colonial project. This contains an obvious analogy to the Nazi obsession of the Jew “everywhere and nowhere,” the figure that anti-Semitism classed as simultaneously economically all-powerful and subhuman, a figure at the root of Germany’s historical failures (Arendt 1966:87). The excess of violence that created these camp landscapes was rooted in fantasies of unbridled wealth, both colonial and totalitarian alike (Arendt 1966:87). It is this syncretism between the traditional legislative form of sovereign exception and the biopolitical administration of labor that marks the contemporary space of the camp.

What was most obviously at stake in the construction of the compound spaces was the immediate suspension of the rights of citizenship, which came to set a profound precedent for the urban existence of twentieth-century South Africans. As Mahmood Mamdani put it, “[b]etween the rights-bearing colons and the subject peasantry was a third group: urban-based natives, mainly middle- and working-class persons. . . [n]either subject to custom nor exalted as rights-bearing citizens, they languished in a juridical limbo” (Mamdani 1996:19). Within this disenfranchised limbo came the historical process by which compound-dwellers and their dependents experienced a broad and debilitating set of suspended rights, dealing a crippling blow to any emergent sense of political or personal possibilities. It was this sort of suspension of full citizenship within the urban context that was to persist and become the hallmark of apartheid-style civil society.

In *A Bed Called Home* (1993), Mamphela Ramphele examines the effects of the hostel and compound culture in the urban South African context. Her conclusion is a powerful one, and it draws directly from the material conditions of camp life in making the comparison between life in the Nazi camps and life in the twentieth-century South African worker hostels. Above all, it signals how profoundly these artificially demarcated spaces came to signal an entirely different political universe of rights and needs—and how powerfully these sensibilities came to blur with the razor wire and fences and brittle planking within which this environment was constructed. It evidences the potent way that even the most artificially constructed physical habitudes come, from this initially brittle and foreign implementation, to occupy what can be called a profound phenomenological space of dwelling for the resident. Citing an account of life in a concentration camp, Ramphele attempts to convey life in the compounds:



Shut up behind barbed wire, robbed of all rights including the right to live, we had stopped regarding freedom as something natural and self-evident. Gradually the idea of freedom as a birthright became blurred. . . [it] has to be earned and fought for, a privilege that is awarded like a medal. It is hardly possible for people to live for so many years as slaves in everyday contact with fascists and fascism without becoming somehow twisted, without contracting a trace of that dry rot unwittingly and unwillingly. (Kovály 1988 in Ramphela 1993:134)

The similarity of the experiences is rendered most explicit when the dehumanizing process of preparing the laborer to leave the compound is understood in detail. The final process of leaving the labor camps—which extended into the mid-twentieth century—was profoundly dehumanizing. Political disenfranchisement, by comparison to the merciless and traumatizing prioritization of the diamond over the workers privacy, health and bodily autonomy, would have imperceptibly become a natural state of affairs.

For one week they have to live naked, and in complete imprisonment, not being allowed any communication with their comrades of the 'compound'. They have to wear hard leather fingerless gloves of enormous dimensions, which prevent them from using their hands, and oblige them to take their nourishment like four footed animals. Their belongings are taken away and searched, and during the week they have but a blanket belonging to the company to cover them. Their bodies are examined in every part, and never was this expression used with stricter exactness. Their teeth even are examined; and if they have swallowed some precious stone; the gloves prevent the possibility of their handling it to swallow it again. (O'Rell 1894:269)

This somatic process was enacted on every single one of the tens of thousands of workers who left the compounds, and marked a foundational set of biopolitical impositions that primed the labor system for the twentieth-century apartheid project.

The effects of compounding and camp sequestering were more than just spatial separation; however, these spaces were enacted through an absolute segregation of modes of consumption, exchange, socialization, access to privacy, sexual practices, childrearing, leisure activities, eating and sleeping. The workings of incarceration operated through a mesh of associated material culture, architectural landscapes and objects of disenfranchisement (Casella 2007:84). Within the compound, as soon as one set of potentialities was restricted, almost immediately emerged a new sort of life, and with it, the "internalization of hostel [compound] life" that culminated in the twentieth-century phenomenon of refusing, on the part of hostel dwellers, to revert to domestic unit-style accommodations—a refusal that Ramphela understands within the broader debates surrounding prisoner reentry (Ramphela 1993:8 in Mamdani 1996:262). While it is true that firm solidarities, distinctive practices, moral economies and subcultures also emerged in these spaces such as the hidden network of informal rules, known as *mteto* (Crush 1994:314; Moodie and Ndatshe 1994), it is also true that during the critical late twentieth-century years of resistance to apartheid, the practices of these hostel dwellers had come to be derided by African urban township residents, that they were dismissed as *ama-overalls* (those who wear overalls) and marginalized from full inclusion within the struggle against apartheid (Mamdani 1996:263).

Local debates surrounding the establishment of African concentration camps hinged around a very similar set of topics, essentially the camps were subject to a great deal of complaints by local shopkeepers who had lost business. In response, Major G. F. de Lotbinière, acting head of the Transvaal Native Refugee Department, wrote to the Deputy Administrator of the Orange River Colony, validated the conditions of his internment system by citing the precedent of the worker compound system, explaining “that he had, ‘developed a *compound system* providing everything the Natives may require in the camps themselves. . .keeping the Natives together in the camps as far as possible” (Kessler 1999:122 emphasis in original). This was because the newly established Native Refugee Department was, in reality, charged with the twin task of supervising African refugees, and “also for recruiting workers from among them to release those mineworkers in military employment” (Warwick 1983:149).

These camps preceded and surpassed the wartime impetus for “protective custody,” their framework for profitable containment reproduced the established tradition of closed compounds for labor, a project which, in turn, had been explicitly based on the architecture and disciplinarian concerns of the slave barracks in Brazil. This material and architectural genealogy, it is imperative to underscore, was not only established in response to the exceptional circumstances of the present, but called upon successive colonial states of exception, each moment facilitating massive appropriation of laboring bodies—and the relegation of those unable to labor to the state of what the Nazis termed *Lebensunwerte Leben*, or “lives unworthy of life” (Madley 2005:438). This would be a spatial enactment and imperial tradition employed in the mid-twentieth-century Eastern Europe where Nazi governors, such as Hans Frank of Poland, would proclaim that “that the region shall be treated like a colony [in which] the Poles will become the slaves of the Greater German Empire” (Madley 2005:438).

## Conclusion

The implementation of worker compounds and concentration camps in British southern Africa in the late nineteenth century problematizes the discrete consideration of wartime labor camps, detention camps and labor compounds that were ostensibly solely about labor. The genealogy that links the establishment of these historical camps traces some contiguities of the biopolitical project, which reinscribed the laboring body as a sort of *Homo sacer* (as a figure both sacred and subhuman). The workers’ presumptive criminal condition intrinsically demanded their excision from the fabric of society and which ultimately entered them into the bare life of the camp, a state which arguably exceeded their physical containment within the confines of the camp (Agamben 1997, 1998). It is important to emphasize, however, that for all their wire meshes, panoptical towers, rigorous scheduling and denuding of privacy, these spaces never obtained any hermetic sort of state of exception outside of their abstract conceptualization. These spaces continually set

into motion flows of people, commodities, and contraband, and fantasies of limitless profit which collectively constituted a transfiguring force which always exceeded the bounds of the modern political sovereign power as construed within Agambenian terms.

The materiality of the Diamond Fields, the story of the flows of diamonds, and the spatial refiguration of this trading population as well as the subsequent wartime concentration camps which emerged in the scramble for gold, all contribute to an important historical contextualization of the story of the camp. This materially inflected narrative demonstrates that narratives about colonial and financial speculation were always complexly intertwined with political projects of racial rule and even genocide. The contiguities between the colony and metropolis illustrate the readily transposable wartime state of exception and broader political and economic concerns about risk, security and profitability. The archaeology of the contemporary past has enormous potential for illustrating the genealogies of contemporary notions of dispersed and domestic enemies, both real and conjured, as well as how such discourses ultimately precipitate exceptional forms of detainment and continue to produce global sites of apartheid.

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