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Biopolitical Choreographies: Performing the Body as Racial and Political Space
Metaphors of Dancing and the Human Body in Nazi Concentration Camps

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In my essay I discuss literal and metaphorical uses of dancing in the context of Nazi concentration camps in memoirs and novels of (Polish) survivors of the Holocaust. I look at ‘dance’ and ‘dancing’ as an act/art/performance acquiring various meanings in the situation of a destabilization of the human body and the blurring of gender differences in concentration camps. In addition to drawing on Georgio Agamben’s and Judith Butler’s views on the modern idea of gender of the human body, I also use notions of Black feminism, especially concepts related to the implications of the “theft of the body” on gender and sexual identities (Hortense J. Spillers). In my essay I show how the act of dancing (as a performance and act) is utilized by prisoners as a means of expressing sexual identities. I also look at (gender specific) usages of the metaphor of dancing and see them as ways of expressing a unity of the female/male body and as survival tactics in the Nazi concentration camps.

The recent revival of interest in the Nazi concentration camps is connected to the fact that, in the memories of survivors, the camps represent a scene of terror and all-powerful authorities, which motivate and determine the limits of human behaviour. It is thus a system of power which does not depend on the number of guards but on the physical and psychological refusal to grant the prisoners the right to be human, giving them instead the status of objects and of limiting their lives to the performance of basic bodily functions. It is a system which Foucault calls “biopower”, or the power over the life (and its quality) of a prisoner. Sovereign power, traditionally characterized through the right to control life and death with the arrival of the administrative apparatus overseeing the life and health of the subjects, has changed the above formula ‘to create life or allow to die’. As Foucault puts it, “While in the right of sovereignty death was the point in which the sovereign’s absolute power shone most clearly, now death instead becomes the moment in which the individual eludes all power, falling back on himself and somehow bending back on what is most private in him” (qtd. in Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz 221).

According to Giorgio Agamben in Remnants of Auschwitz, the camp is a paradigm of post-modernity and hence in describing and analysing it one should, when considering the documents of survivors who experienced the camps, search for the answers to the most important questions concerning contemporary humanity. And the limit of humanity is the descent into the desperate clinging to life and, more properly, to “naked life” (Homo Sacer) reduced in fact to the mere performing of basic human functions. Humanity,