“Dancing with Freud: Female Sexuality, Modernist Women, and the Intoxication of
Movement.

Kimberly Engdahl Coates

My new work is intent on viewing the world through what Donna Haraway refers to as a
“feminist optics,” an optics which “produces not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of
embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere we may yet learn to see and build
here and now.” A politics of perception as advocated by Donna Haraway and other feminist and
cultural theorists foregrounds how what we see or fail to see is constantly shaped by larger
cultural frames and narratives that once made visible can be broken and reassembled so as to
diffract rather than merely reflect hegemonic norms and values. It is this notion of perception as
inherently political and Haraway’s “feminist optics” as emphasizing perception as embodied and
situated that will inform my new project tentatively titled ‘Come See My War’: Feminism,
Politics, and the Performance of Affect in British and American Women’s Literature, 1900-1945.

This book length project, which is still in its very early stages, will define war in broad social and
historical terms. By this I mean that while I will be examining texts by women produced in
response to WWI and WWII, I will also be recovering British and American suffrage militancy
(1903-1914) as central to feminist political and cultural theories of modernity and women’s
modernist literature. While there has been a fair amount of work by feminist historians engaged
in reconstructing this period and by feminist cultural theorists and literary scholars of modernism
analyzing the forms of the movement’s political activism as expressed in art, literature, and
visual iconography, there has been no effort to theorize this early militancy and its affective
resonance with a feminist political philosophy and activism as it develops in women’s literature,
art, and performance before, during, and between the wars. The longer manuscript will attempt to
trace a historical aesthetics of the female body—corporeal and textual—and that body’s performance of affect as a means for dissolving traditional binaries and as a political protest against reactive triumphalism and the megalomania that leads nations into wars.

Today I will be drawing on what I imagine to be three chapters of the larger manuscript, the first “The Army of the Dispossessed,” will address the Suffrage movement, the second that I am currently calling “Dancing with Freud: Female Sexuality, Modernist Women, and the Intoxication of Movement,” will focus on psychoanalytic conceptions of female sexuality as refracted through modern dance and politics. And the third, “Refusing Maternity,” will examine what in psychoanalytic terms might be described as the hysterical female body—or what Foucault refers to in The History of Sexuality as the “hysterized female body”—as it moves, and in some cases literally dances, through the pages of women’s fiction published between 1930 and 1937. There I will be arguing that novels like Emily Holmes Coleman’s The Shutter of Snow (1930) and Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood (1937) politicize the hysterical female body and mobilize it so as to perform a critique not only of Freud’s hetero-normative narratives of female sexuality circulating at this time, but also of the nationalist rhetoric that between WWI and WWII was exploiting the maternal body. In each of these novels, a refusal of maternity is paired with women who dance or wander excessively. I am exploring these wandering and/or dancing women within the larger cultural and political context of modern dance as it emerged alongside a modernist literary aesthetic and contending that their movement performs a feminist politics of refusal and a complex aesthetic unraveling of dualisms that have traditionally and historically contained and restrained women—spirit/body, self/society, private/public, masculine/feminine.

I’ll begin by introducing you to Emily Holmes Coleman, a writer still unfamiliar to many modernist scholars. I will then suggest the way in which Coleman’s novel The Shutter of Snow
unfolds several historical moments and movements, which I will sketch out in broad terms and then tie to a close reading of a few resonant nodes within the text. I will close by very briefly suggesting the way in which the radical poetics and the performative energy of Coleman’s prose also move us to think through contemporary theoretical approaches to aesthetic forms as mobile suspensions saturated with affect that, to borrow Lauren Berlant’s words, “communicate the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment,” and “unravel normative social conventions,” thereby offering us the possibility “for inventing new rhythms of living” (8).

It is still the case that most modernist literary scholars, if they have heard of Emily Holmes Coleman at all, know her only as the tenacious friend of Djuna Barnes, who convinced T.S. Eliot, then a literary editor for the publishing house Faber and Faber, to publish Barnes’ unconventional novel *Nightwood* in 1937. Coleman, however, was not only Djuna Barnes’ self-designated literary agent. She was also a poet and a writer in her own right. Her only published novel, *The Shutter of Snow*, appeared in Britain and America in 1930. A vast amount of unpublished poetry, short fiction, essays, and over 19,000 pages of journal writing are held along with numerous letters and other papers at the University of Delaware. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to make the trip to Delaware to read in the archive, I will certainly be doing so in the near future.

The novel, which some critics have suggested should more aptly be called a prose-poem, resists any tidy plot synopsis. But if forced to trace a narrative arc, we could say that *The Shutter of Snow* moves readers through two months in the life of Marthe Gail, who, after giving birth to her son and declaring herself to be Christ, is diagnosed with “toxic exhaustive psychosis” and committed to the Gorestown State Psychiatric Hospital. Throughout the text, Marthe inhabits an
institutional space that literalizes the patriarchal constraints of her outside world at the same time that it quite surprisingly fosters moments of affective intensity that ease her beyond and suspend her above such constraints. Certainly readers can find here the horror of locked wards and the punishing regimens associated with early mental hospitals—tight mummy like wrappings, needle showers, and six hour tub baths during which patients were again bound up in tightly wrapped cloth and covered with canvas sheets that allowed only their faces to show. These grim details and the fact that a woman’s “madness” takes center stage were more than enough to trouble Coleman’s contemporary reviewers: The New York Post declared, “It is difficult to see the point of Mrs. Coleman’s book” and the Saturday Review admonished, “There are abysses into which it is hardly fair to lead a reader.”

These reviews and others like them, focused on the novel’s sensational-subject matter without addressing the text’s aesthetic opacity. Current criticism of the novel, with only a few exceptions, has also failed to account for the poetic complexity of the prose, which sails through a vertiginous spin of episodes and throws readers’ epistemological desire for narrative coherence and certitude off at every turn with a refrain of bizarre images, hallucinatory escapes, and surreal, incongruent metaphors: “That night was a steel helmet set on a mushroom head” (38). The critical tendency has been to read the novel as an autobiographical account of the two months Coleman herself spent in the Rochester State Psychiatric hospital in New York following the birth of her son in 1924. However, as Susan Rubin Suleiman argues in her book Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde readings of highly experimental women’s fiction that focus “only on the novel’s feminist meaning, [and do] not take into account its formal complexities, can only fall flat” (172). While the polemical content of women’s experimental writing may “tempt us to overlook the way it is framed,” Suleiman goes on to say that it is in fact
the framing that is part of the content (172). Thus to read experimental writing as autobiographical and curative is to ignore such work as a complex artistic endeavor in its own right.

The *Shutter of Snow*, clearly affected by Coleman’s time in Paris during the mid 1920s, when she was publishing in Eugene Jolas’ well known avant-garde journal *transition*, pays little if any attention to the conventions of grammar or punctuation. Dialogue is not clearly marked so delineations between subject and object, Marthe and her fellow inmates, and/or Marthe and what literary convention prompts us to call a 3rd person omniscient narrative voice blur vertiginously. The text is broken up into brief episodic chapters, which like the “shutter” of a camera open up a moment at the same time they attempt to freeze an event that refuses to remain completely within the perimeters of the present. Like Christopher Isherwood’s narrator in *Berlin Stories* who declares, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. [. . . ] Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed” (1), Coleman’s novel gestures toward a similar moment of transparency or revelation as Marthe struggles to communicate the denials and deception that wrack women’s daily lives and to find an alternative plot that remains “shuttered” or hidden in those lives.

However, the reader is asked to rest only momentarily on a given picture and is much more frequently left suspended by Marthe’s lines of flight. Here I am invoking the Deleuzian notion of “lines of flight,” a notion that emphasizes connections over representations, assemblages or multiplicities over a “reality” that merely repeats the past, and events, be they textual or actual, as an unfolding of forces—bodies and their powers to be affected and to affect—rather than static essences. To be more specific, I want to read the text as itself a fold, yet another Deleuzian metaphor. Mieke Bal in her essay “Enfolding Feminism,” borrows the
Deleuzian notion of the fold to imagine a politics of embodied, enfolded vision that replaces the stasis of representation with the performance of attention: “Its narrative dimension derives instead from its appeal to an interaction with the viewer, to its own processing in time rather than to representing time in a represented fibula” (328). The fold, Bal insists, offers a material, bodily index without a romanticized or sentimentalized subjectivity; it offers an alternative telos, not linear or purely progressive but recursive, an enfolding or embracing of the past—a bringing into the future. Due to the obstacle posed by the fold to any stable notion of seeing, Bal suggests that the figure become an allegory for feminism as it consistently disallows a master viewer. “It requires time,” Bal tells us and during that time, “the relation between the subject and the object of looking hurts your body.” In other words, the fold calls forth a concerted effort of attention that has somatic consequences for the viewer/reader. While The Shutter of Snow plunges readers into the thought sensorium of Marthe Gail, it also demands that we see what at first glance cannot be revealed. It enfolds bodies and histories that while they may not find explicit mention in the text are, I would like to suggest, affectively mobilized in an effort to suspend predictable divisions so as to disable our desire for redemptive finishes and enable our capacity to invent, and as we shall see to dance, what Berlant refers to as those “new rhythms of living.”

**FREEZE FRAME: FREUD’S FEMALE SEXUALITY**

Initially Freud’s theory of hysteria, as outlined in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) focuses on a reading of the body; the body is encouraged to “join the conversation” in order that it might reveal the hidden meaning behind a patient’s symptomology. By the time he publishes *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), however, the body is no longer the primary vehicle of expression. Instead, the body as a legible sign system is superseded by the patient’s spoken narrative. The body, then, merely manifests the meaning of the hysterical’s words, and it becomes
the role of the analyst to interpret the hysterical’s language. In Freudian theory, as language becomes determinant, the body escapes; it is the body of the narrative rather than the patient’s body that becomes Freud’s focus. In a similar vein, Felicia McCarren points to Freud’s infamous misreading of Dora as an example that something remains in excess of the analyst’s therapeutic dialogue as Dora’s frequent fingering of her reticule, which Freud reads as a symptomatic act, makes evident: “Dora’s freedom of movement (or the sexual freedom that it mimics) points to the physical remainder that continues to accompany therapeutic talk, a vestige of the movement cure overtaken by the talking cure” (171).

Female sexuality was an excess that Freud spent his entire career trying to explain and contain. Long before he publishes his 1932 essay “Femininity,” where he tells women that they are the problem and that their clitorises must relinquish their active pleasure to their passive vaginas, Freud was attempting to yoke what Teresa de Lauretis refers to as that “unmanageable excess of affect” constituting the polymorphously perverse sexuality of *Three Essays* into the freeze frame of the Oedipus complex (245). One of the most radical claims that Freud makes in his 1905 *Three Essays on Sexuality* is that psychology and sexuality are not dependent on anatomy. There are in fact, Freud contends, so many deviations possible in sexual object and aim that the question becomes whether or not such deviations themselves are actually the norm.

Indeed, in his 1920 essay “Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” Freud finds himself in analysis with a woman who, though homosexual, exhibits no neurotic symptoms or anatomical deviations whatsoever. However, in his 1925 “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” Freud is already convinced of the “inferiority of the clitoris,” which he supports by his observation that “in general, women tolerate masturbation worse than men, that they more frequently fight against it and that they are
unable to make use of it in circumstances in which a man would seize upon it as a way of escape without any hesitation. . . . [I]t appeared to me as though masturbation were further removed from the nature of women than men, and that [. . . ] assisted by the reflection that masturbation, at all events of the clitoris, is a masculine activity . . . that the elimination of clitoridal sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity” (312). By the time “Femininity” is published the theoretical debates surrounding female sexuality, prompted in large part by women psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, Joan Riviere, and Helene Deutsch, are well underway. Hence, “Femininity” reads as a rich rhetorical performance of Freud’s ambivalent, yet ultimately definitive explanation of how a little girl attains “normal” femininity, which, readers find, is no easy task as it involves the disavowal of the little girl’s original love object—the mother—and a replacement of her primary erotogenic zone, the clitoris, with the vagina. Briefly, Freud’s little girl has a choice between three possible lines of development: 1) she can continue to enjoy her phallic sexuality, which inevitably, due to penis envy, means that she will lose her sexual pleasure, renounce masturbation and sex in general, therefore becoming frigid; 2) she can pursue masculine goals and thus fall victim to the masculinity complex essentially meaning that she refuses to relinquish her clitoral pleasure and therefore regresses to the phallic phase, which for Freud can only be masculine as there is no accounting for a female libido; or 3) she can follow the path to “normal” femininity, meaning that she abandons her clitoral pleasure, succumbs to a wave of passive instincts and turns away from her first love object—the mother—towards her father. She thus successfully represses her penis envy, gets married, and is rewarded by a penis baby—a little boy—who supposedly more than makes up for her lack of sexual pleasure and agency.
While I’ve not time today to address all of the female analysts’ responses to Freud’s account of normative femininity, I want to briefly mention Helene Deutsch, who, in her essay “The Significance of Masochism in the Mental Life of Women” (1929) offers a quite different explanation for penis envy and women’s possible sexual frigidity. Of penis envy, Deutsch writes, “So long as onanism affords female children an equivalent pleasure [as it does for boys] they deny that they lack the penis, or console themselves with hopes that in the future the deficiency will be made good. A little girl, whom I had the opportunity of observing, reacted to the exhibitionistic aggression of an elder brother with the obstinate and often repeated assertion: ‘Susie has got one,’ pointing gaily to her clitoris and labia, at which she tugged with intense enjoyment” (49). According to Deutsch, the phantasy of parturition—the girl’s desire to receive a child from her father—opens a gulf between instinctual and reproductive tendencies that she informs us is bridged by masochism. A woman who successfully commandeers “the whole of her masochistic instinctual energy for the purpose of direct gratification and abandons sublimation in the function of reproduction” (56) entirely becomes a prostitute. The mater dolorosa or ideal mother, is the woman “whose masochism has come to reside in the relation of mother to child,” who accepts the sexual act as of importance only to the man, and who sublimates her own frustrated sexual desire into maternal giving. Deutsch closes her theoretical speculations by telling us that this latter type “of woman is dying out and the modern woman seems to be neurotic if she is frigid (56).

If Deutsch fails, like Freud, to free sexuality from biological sex, she nevertheless makes the radical claim that women are put in the position of “employing masochistic instinctual forces for the purpose of race-preservation,” which she declares represents “in the mental economy an act of sublimation on the part of the woman” (57). While she problematically ends by suggesting
that culture has endured because women have successfully sublimated the possibility of other sexual gratifications into the function of reproduction, she opens the door for a theory of female sexuality that might abandon the binaries determined by Freud’s Oedipal plot and suggests that women’s frigidity is a by product of a “masochistic maternity” (56). Her notion that “masochistic instinctual forces” are employed for the purpose of “race-preservation,” begs the question: employed by whom?

**MOVING VIOLATIONS: SEXUAL AND POLITICAL**

In the early half of the twentieth century, the answer to this question had already become quite clear to many women: that employer was the patriarchal state. Freud’s inability to see beyond the Oedipal framework was in part a product of his own cultural prejudices; he admits as much in “Femininity” when he states that “we must beware [. . .] of underestimating the influence of social customs” which “. . . force women into passive situations” and likewise men into active ones. As we’ve already seen, he fails to heed his own warning and ultimately assumes a passive femininity to be normative. Beginning circa 1890, women, however, had already challenged the notion of a passive femininity confined to the domestic sphere and an active and/or aggressive masculinity, whose terrain was the public sphere. The “New Woman,” as anxious patriarchs referred to her, was swimming against the matrimonial tide and demanding sexual independence. In both the United States and Europe, the New Woman represented the university educated, sexually adventurous and independent cultural anarchist who, as Elaine Showalter has noted, “threatened to turn the world upside down and to be on top in a wild carnival of social and sexual misrule” (38).

Late Victorian rhetoric was specifically bent on spatially controlling what was quickly becoming an uncontainable flood of female movement, defined by opponents as a “swarming out
of doors” that threatened to overwhelm and then eradicate house and home. Suffrage organizations exploited these anxieties about women’s uncontainability, for they quite literally did “swarm out of doors” becoming what we now might now refer to as performance artists engaging as they did in “spectacular gestures that emphasized the occupation of public space” (3). Redefining notions of female citizenship, the suffragettes staged events like the Women’s Coronation Procession of June 17, 1911 (which included a ‘Pageant of Empire’) and flamboyantly entered public space with performances that directly challenged the subjugation of women to the nation-state. The fact that the suffragettes took to the streets bearing banners that were artistic symbols of their domestic labor also blurred distinctions between public and private space, and demanded recognition of female labor as conducive to female political agency. That said, suffragist iconography was also distinctly invested in disavowing the notion of woman as national mother or nurse, a representation produced over and over before and during WWI, with that of a chaste, independent, spiritual warrior often instantiated with the figure of Joan of Arc. Although women’s expansion into the public sphere was not without its costs and contradictions, there was no doubt that the staging of massive demonstrations, performances, agitations, interruptions, and in some cases militant activism, commended a united front of mobile, intelligent, and able-bodied female citizens in both Europe and the States that would not be easily brought to rest.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, female bodies moving in a new and audacious manner could be found not only on the streets of Europe and America but upon their stages as well. More conspicuous and daring than Henrik Ibsen's Nora or George Bernard Shaw's Major Barbara were the women who irreverently bared skin and legs while dancing before live audiences. Amy Koritz, notes that prior to 1910, circa 1890, London's music hall audiences had
already been introduced to the dazzling Lottie Collins whose "wildly energetic and sexually risque dance "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" with its "morbid contortions" was associated with performances that could be seen in the less than reputable dance halls of Paris. For patriarchs already nervous about "mentally unstable" women visiting scandalous exhibitions of modern art and shouting their demands for women's suffrage in the streets, Lottie Collins's performance of hysterical contortions for public consumption only exacerbated concerns about rampant hysteria and women's capricious nature and seemingly uncontrollable sexuality.

Indeed, dance and excessive movement were widely believed in medical circles to be indicative of hysteria and of woman's "natural" proclivity for heightened displays of emotion. In the nineteenth century especially, medical science's discovery that an idea can manifest itself physically in the form of a mental illness corresponds to the emerging literary enthrallment with dancers and their unique ability to substantiate an idea. Both dance and medicine were choreographing the mind's mysterious hold over the body. The most notorious example of nineteenth-century medical choreography was Sigmund Freud's early mentor Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot is most frequently remembered for his public lectures at the Salpetriere where he orchestrated, using a female hysteric as his model, the various stages of a hysterical attack. Twentieth-century sexologists like Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis confirmed these links between dance and hysteria by asserting that woman's "insatiable need for rhythmic motion" could best be explained by her close kinship to children and "savages," both of which were deemed liable to ecstatic outbursts of energy and movement (Dijkstra 243).

The most notable commentators on medical definitions of symptomatology were dancers like Loie Fuller, Maude Allan, Ruth St. Denis, Margaret Morris, Isadora Duncan, and Martha Graham who, as heirs to Lottie Collin's Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay, celebrated the female body and its
capacity for movement and expression publicly and to great success. Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan accentuated the display of movement as a liberatory expression of self by deciding to strip their performances of narrative and theatrical trappings. Loie Fuller discovered dancing almost accidently while performing in a play called "Quack M.D." which opened at the Columbus Theatre in New York on October 20, 1895. In her famous “Serpentine Dance,” Loie Fuller performed as a woman alone on a stage, ignited by the intensity of light and color she and her movement created. Movement, rather than herself as object to be displayed, became Fuller's hallmark. Turning yards of cloth into rapidly transforming images that shimmer and fade in the light, Fuller was both hypnotic performer and "technical wizard” fully controlling the production of her own image" (McCarren 157). What medicine and technology had employed to contain the hysteric's multiple and mobile subjectivity, Loie Fuller used to release and accentuate the body's powers of expression and freedom of movement, thereby as Felicia McCarren has noted, “de-anatomiz[ing] femininity (166).

Like her predecessor Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan made movement and its expressive possibilities the center of her art. Duncan worked hard, both in her performances and in her writing, to urge women to shed the unnatural attire that rendered them decorative objects and to yield to the body's natural sensuality and the joys of expressive movement. Whereas Fuller as a woman often disappeared into the voluminous folds of her costumes and the dazzling effect of lights, Duncan danced on a bare stage before dark velvet curtains dressed simply in a light Greek style tunic gathered discreetly around an uncorsetted waist and breasts. Her dance was not about transforming the self into another being or object, but instead sought to celebrate the female body as both the source and the expression of an interior emotional life. The body in motion, the body dancing, became for Duncan an expression of the irrevocable connection between the body and
the soul. Rejecting the illusion of buoyancy produced by the ballet and its ballerinas, who were deformed through "incorrect dress and incorrect movement," Duncan stressed the dancer's connection to the earth. The lower body was to remain grounded and to follow the movements generated by the upper regions of the body. These upper body movements were to originate from the solar plexus—the very area of the body, between the lower ribs and above the stomach that corsets cramp. Unashamed, Duncan performed while pregnant, took countless lovers, and yoked motherhood to sexuality by arguing against illegitimacy in support of unwed mothers.

Continuing Isadora Duncan's legacy, Martha Graham, a protegee of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis's famous Denishawn school of dance, invigorated American and European audiences with her intense movements originating as they did in the center of the torso and reverberating through her arms, legs, head, and out into a space that itself became a presence. Graham's contractions, her belief in the power of movement to convey truth ("movement never lies"), were first inspired by her father, Dr. George Greenfield Graham, a specialist in nervous diseases who carefully observed the way his patients moved in order to discern the etiology of their illness. Graham found herself translating the symptomology of gestures and contortions exhibited by those patients into her art. For Graham, the body represented an enhanced language and a vitally organized instrument capable of invoking and stirring a deep and creative communication. Like Duncan, Graham sought to manifest externally the impulses and emotions happening internally. In turn, Graham also emphasized the primacy of movement; however, her movements were less fluid than Duncan's, less continuous. They were instead based on a technique that she came to call "contraction and release." Whereas Allan and St. Denis exposed the midriff and allowed the waist to be mobile, and Duncan proclaimed the solar plexus as the source of movement, Martha Graham relied on female anatomy as central to her technique. For Graham, the impulses of
movement, inspired by the breath, did not begin in the diaphragm but in the pelvic region, the area that houses the vagina and the womb. Highlighting the very aspect of the female body that medical science was so busy pathologizing, Graham's movements "concentrated, asymmetrical, percussive—in complete revolt against the languorousness, the even flow, the softness of the more sentimental approach" defined the body as “series of dynamic alternations, subject both to moments of surrender and moments of resistance (Dempster 28).

Refusing to be defined by any one symbol or dualism, these dancing women performed female identity and sexuality as always in a state of becoming. The connection between the modern dancer’s feminist poetics and the suffragette’s feminist politics becomes clear in less familiar iconography of the period like that associated with the Suffragette’s Ball and/or this image of a woman, dressed like a Duncan dancer, proudly holding up a flag reading “Votes for Women.” Here it is more than evident that the unfettered female body whose limbs extended beyond the arc of patriarchal confinement resonated with women who were seeking political and sexual empowerment through full citizenship.

FANTASTIC FEARS: BACKLASH

All of this marching in the streets and bearing of skin and legs, however, brought on a fierce backlash. Both organized and informal anti-suffrage imagery characterized the suffragettes not as individuals or members of a social constituency but rather as pathologized stereotypes: the masculine woman, the unsexed woman, the sexual deviant, the hysteric, and as Amy Erdmon Farrell argues in her book Fat Shame the corpulent, “out of control beast,” who “posed a significant danger to the social order, pulling men and women into a chaotic, primitive world” (88). George Dangerfield in The Strange Death of Liberal England published in 1935, blames the fall of the Liberal party on the Suffrage movement. In his account of Black Friday,
November 18, 1910, Dangerfield refers to the suffragettes as “monsters,” while inadvertently offering a vivid depiction of state brutality: “Bannerettes were torn and trampled; women were struck with fists and knees, knocked down, dragged up, hurled from hand to hand, and sent reeling back, bruised and bleeding into the arms of the crowd. They were no longer demonstrators; they were monsters, their presence was unendurable. They were pummeled and they were pinched, their thumbs were forced back, their arms twisted, their breasts gripped, their faces rubbed against the pailings: and this went on for nearly six hours” (159). These so-called monsters were also presented as evidence of new forms of insanity and mania.

The suffragettes countered these pathologizing images with their own representations: the Working Woman; the Modern Woman; the Militant Woman, which Lisa Tickner argues “gains its resonance from the principal anti-type, the Hysteric” (173), and the Womanly Woman, all images that also refused the popular iconography associated with woman as National Mother. This refusal of the nurturing, selfless mother, who was conceived as willing to sacrifice her children and her body to the state was, as Jane Marcus notes in her Introduction to Suffrage and the Pankhursts, arguably at the heart of the suffragette hunger strikes: “When woman, quintessential nurturer, refuses to eat, she cannot nurture the nation. . . . [T]he tactic was a symbolic refusal of motherhood” (2). The hunger strikes began with that of the British suffragette Marion Dunlap in 1909 and were carried to America as a form of protest by Alice Paul. Refusing to allow the suffragists to have a martyr, the British state began the practice of forced feeding, a practice the suffragists equated with state sanctioned torture. Although the hunger strikes provided suffragists with a powerful refusal of state sanctioned definitions of femininity and also brilliantly put on exhibition state sanctioned brutality against women’s bodies, it was a form of political protest that irreparably damaged many women’s health.
According to the British Parliament and its disciplinary forces, the biggest threat to the British Empire was perceived to be the suffragettes. Hence, the state sanctioned rape called forcible feeding was a justifiable method of disciplinary action—more aptly defined as torture—against enemies of the state. I have only just recently discovered that in 2003, the BBC revealed photographs uncovered by the National Archives, which reveal that in addition to forcible feedings, police were spying on suffragettes, who had refused to have their photographs taken, so as to document these dangerous insurgents. Modern photographic surveillance thus began in 1913. Although prison inmates had been photographed regularly, the photographing of suffragettes at Holloway by Scotland Yard marked a new era of surveillance and intelligence gathering. The type of camera used was also new: a Wigmore Model 2 reflex camera and an 11 inch long Ross Telecentric lens, the cost of which was charged the British taxpayer. Since photographing the suffragettes had proven a chore—they would screw their faces into funny contortions and expressions so as to make themselves unrecognizable—Scotland Yard placed detectives in vans who, armed with this camera and its 11 inch lens, could snap pictures of the women without being detected. Once the women were released from prison, the plan was to distribute copies of their photographs to agents who were then assigned to follow and keep track of them, and also to guards stationed at venues where the suffragettes had already attacked or it seemed likely they would in the future. For each suffragette, the police then created a file containing photographs, physical description, and surveillance reports of their ongoing activity.

The dancing female body was also coming under surveillance. In her autobiography, *My Life*, Isadora Duncan reports police standing in the wings while she was dancing on stage poised and ready to take action should she indecantly expose herself. In 1918, the dancer, Maud Allan, was invited by J.T. Grein of the Independent Theatre Society, to perform the role of Salome in a
production of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*, written in 1891. It is worth noting before moving further that Allan’s already famous dance “Vision of Salome,” while it would be later equated as identical to Wilde’s rendition, had nothing to do with Wilde’s play but was instead inspired by Gustave Flaubert’s short story “Herodias” (1877). Departing from her earlier classical motifs quite radically, Allan’s “Vision of Salome” was performed to the exotic strains of an oriental sounding musical score arranged by her friend, the Belgian composer Marcel Remy (Walkowitz 342). In 1907, Maud Allan had performed for Edward II and in 1908 was commissioned by Alfred Butt, the manager of the Palace Theatre, to perform there. For two years she was a London sensation with top billing, and her performance regularly broke box office records. Curiously, Allan’s “Vision of Salome” was most popular with women. Allan’s performance notably overlapped with the entrée of women into more public spaces via the cry for suffrage. Her dance attracted women from the upper classes as well as suburban mothers and their daughters, who came happily equipped with their binoculars. The liberal *Daily Chronicle*, a staunch supporter of women’s suffrage, noted in 1908 that an estimated 90% of the audience were ladies: “It might have been a suffragist meeting . . . the ladies were of all ages, well dressed, sedate” (qtd Walkowitz 360). Her most infamous female patron was Margot Asquith, wife of then Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith. Opposed to women’s suffrage, Margot Asquith was nevertheless a rebel who it was rumored had “Sapphic” tendencies and who was known for her unconventional taste and self-appointed status as modernity’s most visible bad girl.

What distinguished Maud Allan from her contemporaries and kept her from being merely an icon of male fantasy was the overt sexuality not only of her performance but of her own gaze, which was intense, sensual, unrevealing, and confident. Her performance confronted the Victorian dualism of virtue and vice, dramatizing a modern woman aware and in control of her
own sexuality, while simultaneously calling attention to the voyeuristic and insatiable male gaze. As Judith Walkowitz remarks her “solitary, autonomous, unfettered, mobile, weighted, and scantily clad female body, whose movements delineated emotional interiority, shifting states of consciousness, and autoeroticism . . . gave unusual status to a self-pleasuring, embodied, and expressive female self . . .” (340). It is precisely this unfettered, self-pleasuring, expressive female self that no doubt caught the attention of Britain’s gatekeepers of morality.

Despite her own independent success, in 1918 Allan agreed to perform the role of Salome and appeared in several private performances of Wilde’s play at the Court Theatre in London. With the exception of one extreme right wing member-of-parliament by the name of Noel Pemberton-Billing, the play was well received. Billing was well known as a leader of the British campaign for greater moral purity in public life. In his periodical the *Vigilante*, which he used primarily to call attention to what he saw as Britain’s failing efforts in WWI, Billing published the following on February 16, 1918 written upon instruction by his close ally, Captain Harold Spencer: “The Cult of the Clitoris: To be a member of Maud Allan’s private performances in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* one has to apply to a Miss Valetta, of 9, Duke Street, Adelphi, W.C. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt that they would secure the names of several thousand of the first 47,000” (qtd Kettle 18-19). The 47,000 referred to what Billing claimed to be a secret Black Book kept by the German government allegedly containing a record of British men and women who were addicted to unnatural and unsavory vices. The book listed what Billing suspected were 47,000 of these individuals many of whom he claimed were no doubt on the subscription list of the Independent Theatre Society. Maud Allan was particularly suspect according to Billing, as she had studied music earlier in her career in Berlin. No such Black Book was then or has since been found.
As Billing had anticipated, J.T. Grein and Maud Allan filed a libel suit with the allegation that Billing had publicly slandered the dancer as a lesbian. The trial began on March 12 and Billing conducted his own defense. He began by defending his use of the word “clitoris,” which he claimed to be a medical term and therefore a word with which only medical practitioners, scientists, and/or what he termed “the initiated—those who had already been corrupted by immoral influences” would be familiar (535). As Michael Kettle details in his vivid recounting of the trial, Maud’s guilt or innocence was premised on her knowledge of her own female anatomy. We already know, given Freud’s account of clitoral pleasure, that such pleasure was aligned with those the analyst referred to as deviant and “masculinized” women. Billing claimed that if Maud knew the word “clitoris” well enough to accuse him of libel, then she no doubt was “a lewd, unchaste, immoral woman,” who was intending to give a private performance of an obscene and indecent nature so designed as to foster and encourage obscene and unnatural practices among women” and that she was thus guilty of affiliating herself with people “addicted to obscene and unnatural practices” (Kettle 65). As Jennifer Travis reminds us, at the time of Allan’s trial there was no legislation in place referring to women’s “acts of gross indecency” with other women. Thus Allan, unlike Wilde, ultimately did not suffer criminal prosecution. “The legal definitions of female sensuality in England,” writes Travis, “had remained confined to and obscured by the only imaginable sexual object available to women: men. Because sexual acts between women were largely undefined in the English law, ‘homosexuality’ for women took on very different meanings in that law” (148). In the Maud Allan trial, the “ultimately unknowable notion of female homosexuality” was deployed at a time of national wartime paranoia to suggest what Jodie Medd refers to as the “the threat of lesbian espionage”: “The very phrase ‘The Cult of the Clitoris,’ combines the shock of anatomical reference with the suggestive
danger of female sexual and political independence. . . [It] grafted the aesthetic decadence of ‘the cult of Wilde’ onto the concern that women’s citizenship would free them from their traditional role of bearing and raising citizens for the empire” (29).

Coming at the end of WWI, Maud Allan’s trial points to the way in which the war exacerbated long fraught tensions surrounding women’s place in society and their responsibility to the nation. The war’s assault on masculinity—the loss of thousand upon thousands of young men’s lives as well as the loss assumed by the soldiers who had returned home either physically or psychologically damaged—increased the social pressure on young women to marry so as to replace the nation’s lost sons. This in turn led to more virulent pathologizing of same sex relationships between women; it was hardly the case, in other words, that the war had led to women’s sexual liberation. “The woman who flinches from childbirth,” declared Theodore Roosevelt, “stands on par with the soldier who drops his rifle and runs in battle.”

There were certainly still efforts being made to secure women’s sexual liberation, even before the 1920 passage of the 19th Amendment in America guaranteeing women the right to vote and the equivalent for British women in 1928. In March 1918, for example, Marie Stopes had published Married Love, reviews of which could ironically be found in the papers alongside accounts of the Billings/Allan trial. Stopes’ book was revolutionary in its emphasis on the importance of the clitoris to female sexual pleasure both within marriage, as the title safely announces, but also most radically outside of marriage and beyond reproduction. In America, Margaret Sanger had begun her campaign for birth control as early as 1914 when she launched her monthly newsletter The Woman Rebel and two years later opened the first birth control clinic in the United States. During the twenties, though birth rates were lower there was a notable increase in maternal mortality, which gradually led to the medicalization of childbirth. The move
from home to hospital was alienating and frightening for women, and ironically increased their risk for infections like puerperal fever due to doctors’ failure to wash their hands effectively. In addition, as Judith Leavitt has argued in her study *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950*, the move from home to hospital deprived women of a female-centered experience:

“In the twentieth century, when birth moved to the hospital for the majority of women, women lost their domestic power base and with it lost certain controls they had traditionally held. The exclusion of attendant women friends and relatives from the hospital birthing rooms both represented a weakening of the female network and further encouraged that weakening” (107).

Continued low birth rates, due in part to the fact that the practice of birth control was on the rise, resulted, according to historians like Jane Lewis and Angus McLaren, in an increased emphasis on women’s duty to bear children, louder medical opposition to contraception, and an increased legal obstruction to the dissemination of family planning information laws like the Comstock Laws passed in France and Germany. Thus the non-procreative female body came under siege. Contraception was associated with loose living; Eugenicists disseminated discourse about preserving the race and fueled fears that a decline in fertility meant a decline in the Anglo-Saxon middle class.

Margaret Sanger’s fight for birth control marshaled arguments for voluntary motherhood while nevertheless couching arguments in favor of birth control in ostensibly conservative rhetoric that stressed the benefits of limiting reproduction for women, families, and race. Nevertheless, her 1922 book *The New Motherhood* and by extension her 1928 *Motherhood in Bondage* presented women pleading for birth control. In the latter, organized loosely under aspects of “enforced maternity,” “confessions of enslaved mothers,” “cries from the inferno of maternity,” Sanger documented the voices of women who vividly described the pain of
childbirth, the fear of maternal mortality, and the exhaustion and sense of entrapment associated with a relentless series of pregnancies and births. The chorus of voices Sanger asks us to hear in *Motherhood in Bondage* is astonishing: mothers trying desperately to save their daughters from the traps of maternity, daughters taking care of mothers as they are dying following a life of multiple childbirths, words from women who feel desperate enough that they fear harming their children. Sanger blames women’s subjection to church, state, tyrannical husbands, and doctors as well as women’s own inability to control the consequences of their sexual desire for the state of affairs documented in her books. Unable to control their own reproduction, contended Sanger, women essentially become brood animals.

**The Shutter of Snow**

*The Shutter of Snow* is a text marking not only an impasse in the life of its protagonist, Marthe Gail, but in that of all women who found themselves suspended anxiously between two world wars. If the years before WWI had been rife with new possibilities marshaled by audacious female bodies demonstrating in the streets and dancing their desire for sexual agency on stage, WWI and the sexual panic induced by post-war hysteria had stalled their forward momentum. During the decades between the wars, as I have been able to only briefly present here, women faced the reality of increasing infringements by nation and state on their lives and reproductive bodies, and anticipated yet another conflagration, which promised to be more violent than the first.

Coleman’s novel plunges the reader into the midst of Marthe’s harsh new reality: the enclosed space of the institution, which certainly references the enclosed spaces outside its walls. She is in East Hall, the ward for more difficult patients and the place to which patients are consistently told they will be returned should they fail to behave: “Behave yourself, or you will
have to go back to East Hall.” Marthe lies on a bed, wrapped tightly in a hot blanket, in a dark room, alone. There are voices—“sobs and shouts and the drones of those beginning to sleep” (3)—the red light from the hall, which leads Marthe to think she’s in a “bawdy house,” and the bars, everywhere the bars: “The window was closed and the bars went up and down on the outside. [. . .] There were six bars to the back of the bed” (3). As the novel proceeds, Marthe’s fellow patients move into view, a large number of whom, like herself, are married with children: Mrs. Welsh, who has had four children and regularly tries to convince Marthe to pray with her; Mrs. Glope, whose hair “was done up on her head in gray snails, [with] the ends look[ing] out.”; and Mrs. Sarah Kemp, who consistently declares herself to be the most miserable of them all and whose last name interestingly echoes that of the eccentric medieval mystic Margery Kemp, who gave birth to fourteen children and descended into madness. “Deathheads,” thinks Marthe later, “rattling in a Bluebeard closet . . . I am the Christ and cannot do for them” (108). The sense that the institution is filled with women who have lost their bodies circulates as an elegiac refrain throughout the novel: “They are corpses she said. They were all there, lying under the canvas sheets . . . Thin crunching arms and screaming fingers to the light. The have lost their bodies, their bodies have melted away, she said” (13). In contrast to these lost bodies there are the nurses, for the most part young, and unmarried, who jangle the keys of confinement and issue repeated instructions to “stop talking” while filing by “like moving picture actresses” (5). Complicit not only in the imprisonment of these patients, these women, unaware of the role they play in their own oppression, are repeatedly presented as the enemy. And then there are the female doctors, notably Dr. Halloway, whose well-coifed presence Marthe remembers as a version of her former self, and whose name uncannily echoes another famous institution known for its confinement of rebellious women: Holloway Prison in London.
While there is no direct mention of the suffrage movement or the suffragettes in the novel, the women’s situations are hauntingly similar and familiar. In a reading of a short story, “The House of Clouds,” by Coleman’s close friend and fellow writer Antonia White, Jane Marcus reads a scene of forcible feeding in a mental hospital after the war as vividly “recall[ing] the experiences of suffragettes who hunger-struck in Holloway Gaol before the war and were forcibly fed on government orders. . . The madwoman and the suffragette are joined in this scene, as they are joined in women’s history” (140). In The Shutter of Snow, the recognition that the madwoman and suffragette are kindred sisters, also reverberates through the text. At moments quite literally: “Every time they brought me some food I fired the whole damn tray at the wall. The dishes broke all over, [Luella] said excitedly. . . . How did they feed you? Forcible feeding. Look at my arms. Got those from the nurses” (36). And at others in far more subtle tones: “The voices were carrying stones from one field to another. They dropped the stones and their voices picked them up and threw them into a loose-planked wagon. One of them came from the other side of her bed, the other side of that wall” (3). In their suggestion of female comradery and their hint of insurrection, these words vaguely recall those of Christabel Pankhurst, who in her prison narrative entitled Unshackled writes: “Window breaking began that night. It was women’s first use of the political argument of the stone” (97). Moving against the enclosure of walls, rooms, sheets and the tyranny of the keys then and now, Coleman’s prose resounds with “the voices carry[ing] stones,” plotting their escape, while they form female bonds that transgress and yet are paradoxically also enabled by institutional boundaries: “The only thing to do is to put hammers in the porridge and when there are enough hammers we shall break down the windows and all of us shall dance in the snow” (8).
The affective economy put into play by the novels enfolding of female bodies past and present is poignantly dramatized in a moment where the death of a fellow patient is folded into Marthe’s memory of her own traumatic childbirth, which gets equated throughout the novel with death. Coleman intentionally confuses first and third person so that the reader has difficulty identifying whether it is Mrs. Higgins, who lies dying in the room that was formerly Marthe’s, or Marthe herself who is being referred to (passage 78) The “injected body” that was Mrs. Higgins so easily disposed of by the men in white suits who take her away—“white and stiff . . . beneath the enfolding sheet”—is also the body of Marthe’s mother—“There had been the burial. She was lying quietly in the bed being covered over her face. She was carried out quietly out and put in the casket. Down, down she went in the rectangle that had been made for her”—and finally her own—“They took away her little baby. Down with her chin in the silk and sunk, and flowing up around her cheeks the dying” (4).

With her mind “new, … bright like tall razors. Her fine mind green and cutting,” Marthe moves toward what can only be referred to as erotic encounters with other women. It is Annabel Neuman, “a brilliant young Jewess,” who affects her most powerfully (49). If we read the “garden” here as a referent for her own body, it is clear that Marthe is having a sensual autoerotic encounter with the body that was hers “before the baby was born,” an encounter spawned by her desire for Annabel.

What follows is, much to the horror of the nurse Miss Wade, Marthe’s seductive dance in the nude (51-52). Recalling the autonomous, unfettered, weightless, mobile, self-pleasuring and fully embodied female subjectivity of an Isadora Duncan or a far more sexually daring Maud Allan, Marthe unravels the layers of inhibition and the constraints of patriarchal femininity thereby staging her own process of becoming and transports herself, however temporarily, into a
different social space. These moments of erotic self-transport appear elsewhere in the text and are at times expressive of the newly found female desire Marthe has for some of the women who share the asylum with her and at others are expressive of an exuberance alien to her in a world that involves her husband Christopher and the baby who supposedly waits for her on the outside. And at others, such as the time she miraculously unravels the mummy tight strips of cloth patients were wrapped in before being immersed in a six hour tub bath, she emerges a resurrected and defiant Ophelia—“her arms long slender stems of pond lilies, and the water cress of her breasts float[ing] and sink[ing] in the depth of the stream”—vibrantly alive and awake to a body she refuses to allow be constrained by “the spiral casket”—a reference back to the asylum, to the patriarchal constraints of her own marriage, and to her mother’s own “carcass of black silk” as it had “whispered into her coffin” (18).

The novel, however, does not end on a moment of transport nor does it posit any final escape route. Instead, release from the institution promises only a possible return to another, more ominous institution: her marriage. While Marthe’s delusional sense that she is “God” and her newly awakened sexuality at times move her passionately toward Christopher, her sexual overtures are consistently rewarded only with remonstrations of “you must get better” and reminders that the baby is waiting. Concerned, but cold and calculating in his efforts to manipulate Marthe back into her domestic role, Christopher’s approach often confused with that of her own father, is increasingly ominous: “He was coming today. . . . He would look up from under his eyebrows and demand to know what she meant. . . . He would bring her a casket of roses and she would crush them on the floor. And there would be under his coat the little snow-haired baby with clenched hands” (14). More disturbing still is the knife he consistently brings out—“he felt down in his pocket and brought out a knife which he opened and began neatly to
sharpen her pencil. She was kissing his hands and his fingers. He looked at her as he pushed the knife” (41). In her unpublished story “The Fugitive,” Coleman describes a father and daughter paying a visit to his wife and her mother, in an asylum. The father clearly is intent on making the daughter into a substitute for his absent wife, and he too carries a carving knife. Similarly, Marthe’s memories of her father whisper the terror of incest and shudder with wary anticipation. And so Marthe’s release from the Gorestown State Hospital though it is signaled in the text, may in fact be no release at all: “Alone in her room at night she stood and pressed her face against the window. It was the end of March and had turned cold again. And all the thumbs of ice began to whirl in shaking circles, keeping with the wind. I shall have snow on my glassy fingers she said, and a shutter of snow on my grave tonight. Trees bold and stiff in the hollow moon, move to the crunch of heels of gold below you. Stars fling past you to ribboned houses beyond. And your hair falls to your feet and hears no wind” (125).

In her anti-war treatise *Three Guineas*, published eight years after Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow*, Virginia Woolf argues convincingly for a link between patriarchy and war. She asks her readers to revisit the Oedipus complex and to recognize that it is the infantile fixation of fathers on their daughters, husbands on their wives that fuels the voices of future dictators and to see that “the public and private are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of another” (168). Woolf goes on to say that “we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure. . . . [W]e are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can change the future” (168). Coleman’s cryptic ending, while it gestures toward the cold grip of that infantile fixation and its potentially fatal consequences, also implicates the reader in its first and only use of the second person pronoun “you,” forcing we the reader, as she does throughout the text to perform an
attention difficult enough that we will feel it in our bones. One of the consistent refrains in current variations of what is being called “affect theory” is a revaluation of aesthetic forms as putting into circulation affective relations that cross historical, temporal, and even subjective divisions and as performing an attention to the present moment, which is also, as Lauren Berlant has suggested an “intensely visceral moment,” thereby offering us the opportunity to “invent new rhythms of living.” It is in this sense that Coleman’s The Shutter of Snow, though it refuses our optimistic desire for escape or redemption, archives a moment of suspension that requires attending fiercely to what has been lost but also to what still could be and has not yet taken form.
Works Cited


