

Magic and Madness: An Autoethnographic Creative Nonfiction Arts-based Research Project
Exploring the Makings of *Mad Home* Within and Outside of Dance Spaces

by

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Abstract

The following thesis is an artistic exploration interested in discovering how *Mad Home* (Eales, 2018) can be crafted within dance spaces. In doing so, I discovered how my experiences with madness have infiltrated, inhabited, and influenced my experiences within normative dance spaces and beyond. My main objectives were to: (a) highlight and critique the sanism typically present within conventional dance spaces, (b) explore how these spaces could be made more madly accessible for Mad, psychiatrized, and/or neurodivergent folks, and (c) encourage others to dream of these spaces for themselves. To support the ethics of Mad creation and culture, I chose to use an arts-based methodology to autoethnographically examine my own experiences of madness within and outside of dance spaces. I then began writing an autoethnographic creative nonfiction piece in the form of a whimsical fairy tale that sought to deconstruct my personal experiences and connect them to greater Mad literature (Smith et al., 2015). One of my findings throughout this process of creation was learning how engaging with art can foster a deeper and more sensorially immersive relationship with my own mind. I also began noticing similarities between my personal experiences of dance and my personal experiences of madness, making me realize how madness has infiltrated and connected seemingly separate world(s) of my life. Finally, I began to recognize how the political shapes the personal, or rather, how my own realities of madness are continually crafted by and through the normative bodies and spaces I interact with. In my quest to build a *Mad Home* inside dancing spaces, I learned how these spaces are reflections of the much broader systems that construct and uphold them.

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Introduction

I remember as a young dancer trying to fit into a mold that my body would not allow: my hair was never long enough to put up into a refined bun, my legs seemed to resist the idea of turn-out, and my ankles were never strong enough to support my moving body. I remember wishing for a different body, a body that “made sense” and could meet the demands and expectations placed on it. I remember eating a baggie of sugar snap peas for lunch laden with the fear of possibly gaining weight due to my botched metabolism from anorexia while everyone else ate pasta and sandwiches. I remember being the first person to enter the studio so that I could warm-up before warm-up began – but maybe today would be the day I would actually see some improvement? Maybe today my tailbone would perfectly align beneath my pelvis and my shoulder blades would remain flat against my upper back. I remember standing tall at the *barre*, hoping that the confidence I tried to display would silence the screaming I felt in through my knees and hips. Maybe today would be the day where my body would finally “get it” and stop being an annoyance to my teachers.

I remember as a young child trying to fit into a mold that my mind would not allow: I was told that I was too sensitive, that I needed to toughen up, and that I needed to stop fretting about the things I was fretting about. I remember wishing for a different mind, a mind that “made sense” and could meet the demands and expectations placed on it. When I was thirteen, I would become debilitated any time there was a cloud in the sky, convinced that a tornado would soon follow and destroy my home. At sleepovers, I remember being consumed by the idea that my parents were dead, all the while my friends would gleefully play truth-or-dare and watch movies – but maybe tonight would be the night I would stop the intrusive thoughts? Maybe tonight I would be able to stay over without having to call my parents at 3:00am in a panic, convinced that

if they didn't answer that they were gone. I remember staying at my friend's cabin for a weekend, hoping that the confidence I tried to display would silence the screaming voices in my head telling me that my friend was just pretending to be my friend and that I wasn't pretty-smart-good-enough for anyone to love me. Maybe today would be the day where my mind would finally 'get it' and stop being an annoyance to my friends and family.

Within the world(s) of my body and mind, worlds that I often treated separately, I had been made to believe that my hardship was something I had brought on myself. If my hips were structured differently, I would be able to turn out my legs; if my brain was normal, I would be able to stop 'catastrophizing' possible events and their outcomes. I remember the embarrassment I felt any time a dance instructor would correct my posture, again, for what felt like the thousandth time, or any time my friends or family would observe my body overtaken by inconsolable panic and darkness. Why couldn't I be normal? Why was my body broken? Why was my mind an 'irrational' enigma? I never felt like spaces could hold me and my body-mind the way it was. I had difficulties being accepted inside of the dance spaces I occupied (and yearned to occupy) as well as the spaces of my day-to-day life. I felt stuck, broken, and defective, incapable of change no matter how much I wished for it.

But what if I didn't need to be the one who changed?

Fast-forward to November 2018, a seemingly normal day that would take everything I thought I knew about my "place" in the world and shake it, flip it, break it, and (re)create it. A professor of mine (who would later become my supervisor) suggested that I attend Lindsay Eales' doctoral dissertation presentation, as they thought I would find her research of interest. I had to triple check the room number, as it was held in a location I did not know existed. But as I made my way through the winding halls of the building, I came across a few other people who

looked just as lost as I did. We all sort of fumbled our way through the hallways together and somehow ended up in the right spot. Unlike previous dissertations I attended that were held in smaller conference rooms or classrooms, Lindsay's presentation looked to be held in a studio of sorts. I had no idea what to expect, but I was eagerly waiting for the room to open so I could see what was inside.

As the door opened and I walked inside the studio, I entered an entirely different world. I met this world first by walking through brain fog: an array of paper streamers hanging from the door frame that tickled my face as I passed through. I smiled, knowing and not knowing this feeling all too well. Half of the studio was painted black from floor to ceiling, with displays and, what appeared to be, sensory "stations" scattered throughout the space. Rather than being called to sit and listen to Lindsay present her work, she invited us to experience her work for ourselves by inhabiting and exploring the space. The space contained a few of her published pieces, most notably her autoethnographic work entitled "Loose Leaf" (Eales, 2016), dispersed inside a recreation of one of her research chapters, *Mad Home*:

a sensorio-political participatory performance... [with choices and learnings including] becoming affected by friends and ancestors across time and space; decorating our walls with the stories we want to tell; finding home through dialogue; honouring our needs and desires in collaboration; inviting into discomfort and distress; curating for anti-pathologization, access, and support; curating for memory and breaking-as-resilience; [and] curating Mad sensory worlds. (Eales, 2018, p. ii-iii)

This variety of *Mad Home* gave opportunities to make-your-own glitter jars, bite into dates stuffed with garlic, cut and paste magazine clippings, move as we needed to move, feel as we needed to feel, talk as we needed to talk, and to just be in space together. I never wanted to leave.

I felt held, met, and accepted in this weird and wonderful world. I met others who felt the same. This space, this *Home*, was something made of magic to me.

I left with a burning desire to find such a space again, a space where I could be as in or as out as I needed to be in that moment. A space without expectation that could hold me as I was; a space that met me where I was, rather than bend me to fit inside. I needed this space in many ways and in many of my worlds, both past and present. What would have happened if these spaces had been available to me when I was younger? What would have happened if these spaces were available to those who felt as broken as I did, who grew up believing that their body-minds were not enough or too much of something? Maybe we are not the problem – maybe we never were the problem. Maybe the problem was rooted in the immovable systems and structures that stifled alternative ways of being, or alternative spaces to inhabit. What could these alternative spaces look like? What could they offer?

The following thesis is an arts-immersive exploration into these questions and more. The main research objective for my thesis was to deconstruct the common narrative of brokenness that infiltrates normative conceptions of madness within dance culture. More specifically, I wished to create my own *Mad Home* inside a fictional dance space to support the creative potential of my madness within and outside of dance contexts, and to invite others to dream of and craft these spaces for themselves. I will first conduct a review of the literature pertaining to Mad studies and the history of madness representation within dance spaces to establish context and provide the necessary background information for my work. I will then discuss the methodological approach(es) I employed to explore my research objective. My next chapter creatively compiles my learning from the literature and my personal autoethnographic archives into a fairy-tale. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts and observations I have made

throughout this entire process and highlight how I hope this work will be received and embodied within and outside of my own communities.

Literature Review

Psychiatric Narratives: Coming to ‘Know’ Non-Normative Minds

The Pathology Paradigm

“Madness will never again be able to speak the language of unreason, with all that in it transcends the natural phenomena of disease. It will be entirely enclosed in a pathology” (Foucault, 1988, pp. 196-197).

The dominant narrative within modern psychiatric discourse, known as the medical model of mental health or pathology paradigm, assumes that any deviation from psychiatric “normalcy” can, but more importantly should, be cured (Barnes & Schellenberg, 2014; LeFrancois et al., 2016). According to Barnes and Schellenberg (2014), the medical model “assumes that ‘the truth is out there’” (p. 179) and that it is possible to “ascertain what is normal and what is illness” (p. 179). Under this paradigm, those who stray from “the norm” are considered “defective” or “broken” and require necessary intervention – by whatever means necessary – to fix and make whole again. The pathology paradigm is founded upon the belief that “there is one “right,” “normal,” or “healthy” way for human brains... to function” (Walker, 2013, para. 18). Consequently, minds that do not fit within the narrow definition of what is “right,” “normal,” or “healthy” are thusly flawed and undesirable. In their report on the experiences of mental health service users, Beresford, Nettle, and Perring (2010) reported that mentally ill individuals feel the medical model contributes to public misunderstanding(s) of

mental illness, associating psychiatric deviance with “fear and danger” (p. 13)¹. In addition to public aversion, the pathology paradigm treats psychiatric ‘abnormalities’ as intrinsic flaws, casting both blame and shame onto those who are or have been psychiatrized (Beresford et al., 2010).

Neurodiversity and Madness: New Lenses

The neurodiversity paradigm seeks to challenge the narrative of brokenness that permeates conventional psychiatric discourse. In contrast to the pathology paradigm, in which one can either have “normal” or “abnormal” psychology, the neurodiversity paradigm “does not recognize ‘normal’ as a valid concept when it comes to human diversity” (Walker, 2013, para. 32). Graby (2015) highlights that these neurological variances “should not be seen as pathologies needing a ‘cure’ but as natural differences which should be accepted and accommodated” (p. 233).

To gain a better understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm, it is important that we come to know the movement from which this paradigm was established. As articulated by Walker (2014), “the neurodiversity movement is a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent” (para. 31) and is an evolution of the Autism Rights Movement. Seeking social reformation, the Autism Rights

¹ There are many different terms used to describe those with non-normative psychologies within academic and colloquial conversation. These terms include, but are not limited, to “patient, ex-patient, psychiatric prisoner, psychiatric inmate, ex-inmate ... psychiatric survivor, Mad, ... consumer” (Diamond, 2013, p. 67), mental health service user (Beresford et al., 2010), and “mentally ill.” The language one adopts is strongly rooted in paradigmatic assumptions, one’s relationship to or with psy-systems, and the constituency/ies (i.e. psychiatric survivor, Mad, anti-psychiatry) one identifies most strongly with. Considering this, I will be using terms such as Mad, neurodivergent, and psychiatrized to describe those (myself included) with non-normative ways of thinking. However, when referencing the work of others, I will use their terminology and language of choice to maintain appropriate context and to avoid disseminating misguided information.

Movement was founded upon the understanding that autism is not a condition in need of “cure” or “eradication,” but rather a natural difference in human experience that should be fully valued and embraced (Graby, 2015). The neurodiversity movement embodies these values and extends its application beyond autistic communities to include all neurominority groups including, but not limited to, psychiatrized individuals (Liebowitz, 2016).

Walker (2013) outlines the three fundamental principles of the neurodiversity paradigm as follows. Firstly, proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm argue that “diversity of brains and minds... is a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human diversity” (para. 22). Secondly, this paradigm is structured on the notion that the concept of a “‘normal’ or ‘right’ style of human brain or human mind” (para. 22) is as absurd as assuming a ‘normal’ race or gender. The final principal of this paradigm is recognizing the dynamic social relations that privilege some neurotypes over others. Walker writes that:

the social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of race, culture, gender, or sexual orientation). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power relations – the dynamics of social inequality, privilege, and oppression – as well as the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential within a group or society. (para. 22)

In the case of neurodiversity, those who are neurotypical, or have “a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014, para. 49), are the dominant neurotype while those who are neurodivergent, or have “a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Walker, 2014, para. 37), are minority neurotypes. Echoing the

experiences of other minority groups, neurodivergent individuals are subject to “various forms of stigma, blatant discrimination, and a host of microaggressions” (LeFrancois et al., 2013, p. 339, quoted in the context of madness) because of their departure from dominant or conventional ‘norms.’

This minority model of social oppression resonates with what a range of psychiatrized folk have long termed as sanism, or “the systematic subjugation of people who have received ‘mental health’ [*sic*] diagnosis or treatment” (Chamberlin, 1979 as cited in Poole, et al., 2012, p. 20), as well as people who are perceived to exhibit traits or behaviours that are perceived to relate to such diagnoses. Sanist attitudes lie at the core of sanist stereotyping, fostering perceptions that psychiatrized and potentially other neurodivergent individuals are “incompetent, unable to do things for themselves, constantly in need of supervision and assistance, unpredictable, [and] likely to be violent or irrational” (Chamberlin, 1990, p. 325). Not only are these stereotypes carried throughout the public, but they can become internalized by psychiatrized and neurodivergent individuals themselves. Chamberlin (1978) writes:

for too long, mental patients have been faceless, voiceless people. We have been thought of, at worst, as subhuman monsters, or, at best, pathetic [individuals], who might hold down menial jobs and eke out meager existences, given constant support. Not only have others thought of us in this stereotyped way, we have believed it ourselves. (p. xi)

Chamberlin’s (1990) reference to internalised oppression is prevalent across other marginalized populations as well. Referencing the works of Williamson (2000) and his contributions to gay men’s health literature, Aguinaldo (2008) states how “internalised homophobia presents itself as ‘feelings of inferiority, being evil, lacking self-worth and social value ... guilt, shame... self-defeating behaviors, and self-destructiveness’” (p. 90). Drawing

from personal experiences, the experiences of other neurodivergent scholars, and the experiences of neurodivergent individuals within my community, I believe that the deleterious effects of internalised sanism are strikingly similar (Hinshaw, 2007 as cited by Poole et al., 2012).

Mad Movements Theory

The systemic subjugation faced by neurominorities and other psychiatrized individuals has led to the development of social movements seeking to disrupt sanist paradigms that aim to “cure” nonnormative psychologies. Leading these movements were past and present inmates of psychiatric institutions who refused to yield to “the efforts of ... society to label, categorize, and ‘treat’” (Starkman, 2013, p. 27), what they refer to as, madness. This new discourse led to the generation of the Mad movement: a movement made up of individuals from “different backgrounds and experiences ... who share a common concern about how people ... defined as Mad within dominant culture are ... treated, particularly under the current psy regime known as the ‘mental health system’” (Diamond, 2013, p. 64). As articulated by LeFrancois and colleagues (2013), Mad narratives seek to “invert the language of [psychiatric] oppression [by] reclaiming disparaged identities and restoring dignity and pride to difference” (p. 10). Building on this, Eales (2018) writes that “engaging playfully, critically and artistically with our own [Mad] subjectivities can be an important mode of resistance to dominant knowledges and power relations” (p. 8)

Within these psychiatrized communities, Diamond (2013) identifies “three main constituencies, which overlap a great deal in their goals and ideologies... [while also having] distinct ideological and strategic trends in their approaches to community activism” (p. 65). These three constituencies are the psychiatric survivor constituency, the Mad constituency, and the antipsychiatry constituency. While there may be more than these three constituencies present

within psychiatrized communities, for purposes of this thesis, I will direct my focus on those outlined by Diamond. My hope for future academic endeavours is to continue exploring the various intricate and meaningful compositions of Mad communities.

Diamond (2013) describes the psychiatric survivor constituency as “the heart of the community, representing those who are most deeply affected by the practice of biological psychiatry and sanism in dominant culture” (p. 65). They go on to iterate that “psychiatric survivor initiatives tend to prioritize connecting people who have experienced the psychiatric system and improving the conditions in their lives, alleviating pain and suffering, and finding ways to meet their needs” (p. 65). Overall, this constituency aims to create a sense of community and support for those who face the discriminatory, oppressive, and omnipresent consequences of sanist discourse. This is accomplished through actions such as “curtailing forced psychiatric interventions, ending stigma... and creating accessible survivor-positive employment opportunities, affordable housing options, and other non-psychiatric alternatives” (p. 65).

The second constituency outlined by Diamond (2013) is the Mad constituency – “a newer phenomenon within the community that reflects contemporary complexities, divisions, and theoretical trends” (p. 65). Whereas the psychiatric survivor constituency centers on disrupting psychiatric oppression, the Mad constituency focuses on celebrating and prioritizing the unique knowledges and experiences of Mad folk. The Mad constituency seeks to celebrate the identities of individuals deemed ‘mentally ill’ and to challenge the dominant pathologizing narratives responsible for psychiatric oppression and discrimination.

The third and final constituency Diamond (2013) explores is the antipsychiatry constituency – a constituency “based on a rich history of resistance efforts led by ex-patients, ex-inmates, psychiatric survivors, academics, and professionals” (p. 66). This constituency is

centered around “abolish[ing] institutional psychiatry, or at least undermin[ing] [it’s] power and authority” (p. 66). While the previous two constituencies seek to disrupt sanist discourse by increasing life-chances and enhancing the well-being of the psychiatrically oppressed, the antipsychiatry constituency seeks to eradicate or significantly dismantle all psy-systems and forms of psychiatric power.

While there are dustings of each constituency present within my work, I feel the most at home within the Mad constituency. By exploring the generative potential and processes of Mad creation, my work aims to “explor[e] and celebrat[e] individual experiences of madness [while contributing to] developing Mad culture” (Diamond, 2013, p. 66) to highlight the importance, beauty, and necessity of our existence.

My desire to dive deeply into the Mad constituency has been heavily influenced by the recent work of Eales and collaborators (2018) in their creation of *Mad Home*. The following excerpt from Eales’ doctoral dissertation provides a brief overview:

We wanted and needed Mad home, so we made one. Below is a collaboratively crafted invitation welcoming a select audience to our performance of Mad Home, which was posted on a private Facebook event page:

Mad Home is a research-creation performance installation by Lindsay Eales, Nathan Fawaz, Sarah Hamill, Alexis, and dales laing. Through this immersive participatory performance, we invite you into a Mad Home of our own making. It is a place of darkness and light, a site of intense sensory experiences, and a space of caring for ourselves in pieces. We share food, we turn soil, we paint, we craft, we lie face down on

the floor, we talk to bananas, we say it out loud, we shape space, and we work to bring more of ourselves more of the time. (p. 94)

For so long we have existed in spaces that were not built, nor meant, for us to occupy. *Mad Home* acts as an alternative world, one that “celebrat[es] ... mad [*sic*] community and experiences... without glamorizing or effacing what at times may be experiences as unbearable distress and deep pain” (LeFrancois et al., 2016, p. 2). The centering of Mad knowledge(s), creation, and identity in the production of *Mad Home* emulates the values of the Mad constituency and acts as the foundation for my thesis.

Dance and Madness: Performance, Therapy, and Empowered Approaches

The persistent pathologization of “mental illness” is widespread in arts-based psychiatric interventions targeted to “fix,” abnormal psychologies (Crawford & Patterson, 2007; Rosal, 2016; Jeong et al., 2005); dance, particularly, has been “used to enhance expression and modify emotions for centuries” (Jeong et al., 2005, p. 1712). There is little research examining how individuals with “mental illness” experience themselves and their environments without pathologizing undertones, and even less research available examining how individuals with “mental illness” can find empowerment, voice, and identity through the creation of safe spaces in artistic contexts.

The following sections explore the relationship(s) between dance and madness through past and present times. The first section will examine how madness has been (and is) performed and represented within Eurocentric dance culture. More specifically, I will examine the time-period encompassing the early years of classical ballet and the beginnings of psychological pathologization. I will then explore a more modern relationship between dance and madness, particularly the utilization of dance as therapy. Within this section, I will critique the

pathologizing nature of contemporary practices that aim to “fix” nonnormative psychologies through dance, and provide a counter-narrative articulating the powerful, generative, and creative capacities of dancing with(in) and through madness.

Dance Performance and Madness

In their book *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine*, McCarren (1998) explores “the long-standing link between dance and madness” (p. 16) by analyzing the concurrent histories of psychiatric pathologization and the (re)presentation of hysteria within dance performance. The relationship between these two phenomena developed at a time where mind-body dualism, or the idea that the experiences of the mind are independent of experiences of the body, was called into question within European medical discourse. McCarren writes:

French nineteenth-century medicine was marked by the development of thinking about how the body expresses itself in and through illness, how that illness can be caused by, or can reflect, the mind, and about how medicine itself should organize and approach the problem of mind-body relations in illness. Perhaps the tightest knot that medicine tried to untie was the knot of illnesses grouped under the heading ‘hysteria.’ (p. 16)

Dance provided a platform to redeem “what was ‘lost’ in hysteria” (p. 17) through a visual and embodied art-form. McCarren (1998) argues that “in its withholding of speech and its use of movement, dance functions as a form of symptomatic expression” (p. 24) that has the capacity to “[express] non-hysterically what only hysteria had been able to express” (p. 17). They go on to articulate that “the dancer’s willful withholding of speech ... makes her art enigmatic, multivalent ... and rich in signification” (p. 17) when it comes to expressing and performing hysterically.

While evolutions in nineteenth-century medicine and accessibility of professional dance brought elements of madness out of the shadows and into the public eye, these “frequent performances of Mad subjects as spectacular, dangerous, murderous and obscene ... stigmatize[d] madness” (Eales, 2018, p. 31). These performances presented hysteria as “a feminine illness, ... linked conceptually to the womb from which it gets its name, and ... as a sexual disorder” (p. 17) in need of eradication. In *Giselle*, “the quintessential Romantic ballet” (Wainwright & Williams, 2004, p. 79), Giselle is “driven to madness” (p. 79) upon discovering the man she loves is betrothed to another woman. Wainwright and Williams (2004) articulate how “Giselle’s madness distils the history of hysteria – theories that link hysteria to sex and the womb, to locomotor ataxia, and to the tertiary stages of syphilis” (p. 80). Within the ballet there is an entire scene dedicated to Giselle’s “Mad dance,” followed promptly by her death. There is debate as to whether Giselle’s cause of death is from a broken heart or suicide, but the underlying narrative, nonetheless, casts stigmatizing and harmful assumptions surrounding who has madness, what madness is, and how madness is. Rather than celebrating Mad identity, the ways in which madness is produced and performed within historical dance repertoire echoes the pervasive belief that madness is something frightening, performative, and undesirable.

Dancing with Madness: Contemporary Approaches and Alternative Narratives

While dance has played a leading role in disseminating harmful portrayals of madness to the public, it has also been prominently utilized within medicalized institutions in attempt to “cure,” “treat,” and “fix” psychiatrized individuals’ body-minds (Jeong et al., 2005). Dance therapy is a commonly used creative-arts therapy that uses the psychotherapeutic processes of dance and movement “[to further] the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of [an] individual” (American Dance Therapy Association, n.d., para. 1). Central to the axis and

praxis of this therapy is the belief that one's mind can be "healed" and wholeness of their personhood can be 'restored' through the creative, somatic, and embodied practices of dance (Pratt, 2004).

In exploring the effects of dance/movement therapy and mindfulness practices for individuals with "severe mental illness," Barton (2011), a mental health clinician and licenced dance/movement therapist, observed "amelioration in pro-social behaviors, stress management, and communication skills" (p. 157) following the therapeutic intervention. In another study, Hackney and Earhart (2010) "aimed to determine social dance's feasibility and effects on mood, functional mobility, and balance confidence" (p. 76) in people with "severe mental illness" and found that social dancing significantly improved mobility and "demonstrated nonsignificant improvements in anxiety, depression, and balance confidence" (p. 76). However, Mad activists and scholars have critiqued the underlying implications of using such techniques and experiences for "treatment" purposes (Henzell, 1997; Reid et al., 2019).

From the foundation of its definition, dance therapy enables attitudes that cast our madness into unwanted and broken waters that only art can save us from. Neihart (1998) writes how "there are numerous examples of artists who used their work to save their minds. [...] A basic premise of the expressive therapies (e.g. art, music, and dance therapy, etc.) is that writing, composing, or drawing, etc., is a means to self-understanding, emotional stability and resolution of conflict" (p. 47-48). Neihart's claims continue to perpetuate sanist assumptions that the arts are used to "understand," "stabilize," and "resolve" our "painful" nonnormative psychologies. These attitudes assume that we use art to "escape the burden of our minds," "save us from ourselves," or "come in-touch with reality," rather than use art to explore our unique knowledges, creativity, and experiences in ways that make meaningful (non)sense. In this sense,

we *can* use art to save our minds, but not in the way dominant discourse wants us to — we can use art to *preserve* our messy, unexplainable, paradoxical, and magical body-minds. I no longer wish to dance in spaces that breed normalized and “easy” body-minds. I yearn to dance in spaces that encourage the weird, the complicated, the scattered, the shattered, the broken, and the holistic; I yearn to dance in spaces I can call home.

Methodology and Methods

Research Paradigm

To explore unconventional and neurodivergent minds, I felt an imperative call to house my research within a paradigm deemed conventionally “unconventional.” This paradigm must be able to hold space. And by hold space I mean it must cradle the incongruent; the illogical; the irrational; the contradictory; the non-linear; the disordered; the embodied; the sensorial; the whimsical; the fanatical; and the magical (Eales, 2018). It must be willing to break-open in order to break-through. It must have the capacity to comfortably hold the uncomfortable and to find meaning within the pieces of its own shattering. It must hold space for paradox and be open to continual and cyclical (re)creation (Eales, 2018).

I have been drawn to explore and come to know my own madness through the unconventional world of art. Art inherently opens the possibility of embodying contradiction and paradox while harnessing the capacity to both (de)construct and reconstruct assumptions of our world(s) (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Multiple meanings are brought to life in ways that are evocative and representative of Mad experience: sensorial, confusing, and deeply nuanced realities that cannot be adequately captured or explored through conventional literary expression (Eales, 2018). Art provides the canvas necessary to paint my world (and create new worlds) in

ways that see beyond any need for absolution. Art makes a home for the unreasonable; for the messy; for pain; for celebration; for destruction; and for (re)birth. Art holds me as I dance along liminal edges and straddle the boundaries between a mosaic of realities. As articulated by Barone and Eisner (2012), art grants me space to “exploit the idea of ‘vagueness’ to ‘get at’ what otherwise would seem unrecoverable” (p. 4). Ultimately, art makes a home for madness (Eales, 2018). Thus my research paradigm, or the “worldview that defines... the nature of the ‘world,’ [my] place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107), is arts-based.

Ontological Assumptions

Central to any research paradigm are its ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Ontology, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), governs how one views the nature of reality. Ontological assumptions can range from positivist attitudes, where one believes in a singular reality, to postmodern views, where one believes in multiple realities. According to Conrad and Beck (2015), the ontology of an arts-based paradigm is grounded in the “belief that we are all, at a fundamental level, creative and aesthetic beings in intersubjective relation with each other and our environment” (p. 5). They highlight that “aesthetic,” in this context, goes beyond the common understanding of beauty to capture the sensorial, perceptual, and feeling dimensions of human experience. This draws upon the sentiments of Kelly and Leggo (2008), who attest that creativity is essential to how one makes meaning and comes to understand the world. Further yet, this echoes the work of Indigenous communities and scholars who have continually acknowledged the life-sustaining and life-enriching qualities of art and expression (Kenny, 1998). These notions of art as “life-sustaining” and “life-enriching” deeply resonate

with me. Art – whether it be through dance, music composition, gardening, or writing – has undoubtably shaped my way of seeing, sensing, surviving, and thriving in the world madly.

Epistemological Assumptions

Related to ontological assumptions are epistemological assumptions, or how one comes to know and understand knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Similar to ontology, epistemology sits upon a wide spectrum that ranges from believing that a singular, objective truth can be found if one follows correct procedure (i.e. positivist paradigm) to believing that many truths exist and can be accessed through multiple avenues (i.e. postmodern paradigm). The epistemological assumptions of an arts-based paradigm are grounded in the belief that we come to know knowledge and understand our world through aesthetic (i.e. sensorial, perceptual, emotional) practices (Conrad & Beck, 2015). Multiple meanings are believed to be crafted through the processes of creating, embodying, feeling, and internally knowing what lies beyond our cognition of knowing (Conrad & Beck, 2015). Evoking the unexplainable, housing the illogical, and being open to feeling are all sentiments of an arts-based paradigm that Eales (2018) argues as “especially suited to exploring madness” (p. 66). Madness dances inside my body and shapes how I experience the world and how the world experiences me. Much like how the senses are evoked in crafting meaning through art, there is a parallel sensorial engagement in crafting meaning through madness.

Axiological Assumptions

Axiology is the final foundational dimension of any research paradigm and concerns itself with the “ethics, aesthetics ... and role of spirituality in human inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 116). In other words, axiological assumptions govern what is perceived as beautiful, important, and valuable. From an axiological perspective, Conrad and Beck (2015) acknowledge

that “an arts-based research paradigm encourages contributions towards honouring relations, human and non-human flourishing, and celebrates art’s potential to transform the world” (p. 13). In other words, an arts-based paradigm is rooted in the understanding that art has the capacity to question, disrupt, and remodel social convention through relational ethics. Relational ethics “explicitly situates ethics in relationship” (Upasen, 2017, p. 3) and is founded upon the cornerstones of engagement, mutual respect, embodiment, and interdependent environments (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005).

Central to the element of engagement is the capacity to both acknowledge and empathize with the experiences, perspectives, and realities of others (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). As articulated by Barone and Eisner (2012), works of art make it possible “to empathize with the experience of others. [...] Such empathy is a necessary condition for deep forms of meaning in human life. The arts make such empathic participation possible because they create forms that are evocative and compelling” (p. 3). Creating an empathic experience can become especially meaningful when dealing with communities whose experiences are often overlooked and/or, I would argue, gaslighted. In this way, art allows me to explore and mobilize Mad knowledges in ways that are meaningful to Mad experiences. Through art, I can evocatively engage with madness and give voice to Mad knowledges – knowledges that are often forgotten, silenced, or filtered out of conversation.

Mutual respect involves an ongoing deference to differing “attitudes, genders, experiences, knowledge, beliefs, [and] cultures” (Upasen, 2017, p. 3; see also Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). The heart of my work lies within creating worlds that inherently value Mad realities that are often dismissed and ridiculed in neurotypical environments. My work is for those who have ever felt defective, ashamed, discriminated against, invalidated, abused, unheard,

oppressed, or silenced because of their madness. Through artistic exploration, I hope to not only bring light to the oppressive and violent forces/structures present within a sanist world, but to foster worlds that innately treasure the beauty and necessity of madness in a world afraid of difference.

Embodiment is the understanding that meaningful human relations can only be formed through fully embodied engagement, in which the boundaries between the mind/body, the self/other, and the objective/subjective are blurred (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). In other words, embodiment encourages one to understand and view human relationship through a holistic, as opposed to a dualistic, lens. The blurring of binaries and departure from absolute certainty hold extreme relevance within the context(s) of art and madness. As highlighted by Barone and Eisner (2012), art “promotes a level of dislocation, disturbance, disruptiveness, disequilibrium that renders it sufficiently – even highly – useful” (p. 16) in articulating the nuanced realities of human experience. Along these lines, the creative and exploratory nature of art harnesses the capacity to “dislocate” conventional assumptions of what is subjective from what is objective; “disturb” the norms that compartmentalize the self from the other; “disrupt” the dualistic tendency to view the mind and body separately; and evoke “disequilibrium” upon these and other (sanist) binaries. To dive fully into the artistic experience (as viewer or creator) is to completely embody the nuance and to explore what lies within blurring boundaries. Art recognizes that a painting is much more than a series of colour swatches, but that there is life inside the composition shaped by the interaction between and within brushstrokes. A parallel can be drawn to madness in the context of the mind-body relationship. Mind-body dualism undervalues how madness is embodied and felt within human experience. Removing madness from my being

would unravel parts of myself that extend beyond what I know. Madness is, and always will be, a deeply embodied experience that exists inside me no differently than the blood inside my veins.

The final cornerstone of relational ethics is interdependent environments, or where one understands how personal, social, and political contexts interact and consequently shape human relationships (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). To evoke meaning and create an empathic response, I argue that it is paramount for art (especially in the research context) to engage with and foster the development of interdependent environments. As articulated by Conrad and Beck (2015), “openings, becoming-other, standing up against oppression, and bringing value to all aspects of human life ... [are] efforts that must be undertaken through the arts in/as research” (p. 13). In other words, it is crucial that researchers who align their work within an arts-based paradigm understand how human experience is shaped, moulded, and influenced by social and political factors. Through use of evocative aesthetics, art “can redirect conversation about social phenomena by enabling others *to vicariously reexperience* the world” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 20) in ways that may not be meaningfully conveyed through conventional representation. To achieve this, it is imperative for arts-based researchers to: carefully investigate the dimensions of social world(s); transform aspects of these dimensions into an aesthetic form; and instill feelings that question comfortable assumptions of social phenomena through vicarious (re)experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In this way, art grants me the ability to represent existing worlds and highlight the political/social dimensions of Mad experience. But more importantly, I would argue, art allows me to invite others inside newly (re)imagined worlds that are more inclusive of madness.

Methodological Approach

Arts-based Research: Disrupting Convention

Complimenting my arts-based research paradigm, I explored my research objectives using arts-based research. Arts-based research is understood as “an umbrella term that covers an eclectic array of methodological and epistemological approaches... [whereby] art *is* research; and one or more art forms or processes are involved in the doing of the research” (Greenwood, 2019, p. 1). Rather than using art as a means of collecting or representing data, investigators utilizing arts-based research are encouraged, if not required, to engage with art “in ways that are foundational to, and generative of, the process of meaning making and knowledge production” (Eales & Peers, 2016, p. 57). Barone and Eisner (2012) go on to describe arts-based research as “an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (p. 1) through more conventional methodologies. These sentiments echo those of Haywood (2010), who articulates how “arts-based research methodologies ... are capable of yielding outcomes taking researchers in directions the sciences cannot go” (p. 110). Arts-based research aims to explore and represent experiences in ways that challenge conventional practice to “convey meanings that [would be] otherwise unavailable” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 20).

Echoing the arts-based paradigm, engaging with arts-based research “implies a fundamental shift away from the conventional assumption that all research is meant to bring us closer to a final understanding of the social world” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 14). Engaging with arts-based research encourages researchers to look beyond the quest for absolution and certainty and to find meaning in the grey spaces – spaces that are generally more representative of human experience. Art holds space for multiplicity and asks us to question if the search for objectivity disembodies and undervalues what it means to be human. Barone and Eisner (2012)

expand upon the possible consequence of seeking absolution within the world of art itself, asking “if a work of art is viewed as a vivid representation of ‘reality,’ or as endorsing a singular ‘correct’ interpretation of social phenomena, then is it really art” (p. 15)?

An important clarification should be made on why I chose to frame my work within the context of arts-based research as opposed to research-creation. Research-creation, as a process set primarily within fine arts contexts, has a deep dependency on the art itself and “integrate[s] a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of the study” (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 6). In other words, the quality of the work produced through research-creation relies heavily on the quality of the art produced throughout the research process. One must demonstrate proficiency in the artistic discipline(s) utilized in the work, as the work itself would not be possible to pursue any other way. Conversely, arts-based research generally concerns itself more with the process(es) and experience(s) of engaging with art as a means of generating and accessing knowledge, and thus does not necessarily require a high level of training in the specific artistic discipline(s) involved in doing so (Barone & Eisner, 2012). As such, I situate my work within the field of arts-based research as opposed to research creation, as my focus was seeing what art could draw out of me and my body-mind rather than creating professional-grade artistic content itself.

Arts-based Research: An Aesthetic Commitment

Central to engaging with arts-based research is the purposeful use of aesthetics within the inquiry and compositional phases of the research process. Barone and Eisner (2012) outline how these two dimensions connect, synergize, and mutually reinforce each other, and how these dimensions may occur simultaneously throughout the generative process of making art. It is important to note, however, that the breadth, depth, and purpose of artistic engagement differs

significantly between an arts-based research and an arts-informed research practice (Haywood, 2010). Drawing from the work of Eisner (1997), Haywood (2010) articulates that “arts-informed research isn’t necessarily focused on the arts at all, reflecting instead a researcher who has been inspired by a work of art, art methods, or a body of work to attempt to represent their research in a novel format” (p. 105). In other words, arts-informed research concerns itself more with using art to depict or represent research findings. Arts-based research, in contrast, is a practice-based research “that exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 5). Arts-based research is not simply an artistic representation of data; it is a practice of crafting knowledge and making meaning through intentional artistic engagement(s). Within the context of my work, “metaphor... analogies... cadence... innuendo... simile... and other such devices are used to create the expressive form” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 9) in specific ways that will be highlighted in later sections of this thesis.

Arts-based Research: Relating to Madness

Arts-based research encourages both researchers and viewers to examine the world in ways that may ultimately destabilize what is socially conventional and “to revisit the world from a different direction ... calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 16). In this way, arts-based research enhances the dissemination of discourse that may not be adequately mobilized through text, demonstrating a strong social and political commitment towards making marginalized knowledges known (Eales & Peers, 2016). Due to the unconventional, inexplainable, paradoxical, and unstable nature of Mad realities, arts-based research gives space – and in a way, permission – to fully embrace alternative ways of existing in the world. I used arts-based research to express my experiences of madness that would be

otherwise disembodied in scholarly (read sanist) textual representation. Arts-based research houses the opportunity for me to mobilize my madness in ways that are meaningful to Mad experiences themselves.

Research Design

The genesis of my research was the creation of personal autoethnographic archives. I generated these archives through use of dance, music composition, poetry, and journaling that helped initiate a sensorial engagement with madness. I had originally planned to create prompts to help guide my autoethnographic exploration but felt the process to be inorganic. Most of my autoethnographic exploration was triggered by events or situations that were happening in real-time and highlighted a particular memory, experience, or feeling. In this way, generation of my source material occurred in an extremely non-linear – and often sporadic – way that I could not force out of me. There were days, sometimes weeks, of apparent nothingness followed by a seemingly random outpouring of painting, journaling, and dancing. The days where I sat down to “try” to create often ended in disappointment. I needed to be patient and wait for the sparks to appear on their own, and when those moments came, I ran with them.

While not every creative session led to useable material, each “entry” helped me flesh out and “see” my world through fresh eyes. Some of the time I was even able to connect my experiences to something I read in Mad or disability literature. This allowed me to reframe what felt solely “personal” into something much larger than myself, taking into consideration how the “personal” is shaped by and through social and political climates. An example of this autoethnographic cross-over with the literature can be seen in my journal entry from February 2019:

This entry is a messy one. Inspired by Eli Clare and his 2017 book *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with a Cure* and my most recent visit to my doctor's office.

Earlier this week I realized that I needed to book an appointment with my doctor for a prescription refill before I left for New York this upcoming Saturday. Upon calling his office I was told that my doctor was currently out of town and would not be back in time for my trip. As protocol normally goes, the other doctors in the office were responsible for caring for my doctor's patients until his return. So, I booked in to see one of them, expecting the typical "get-in and get-out" routine I'd been practicing for the last few years for an appointment of this nature.

I check-in as normal and take a seat in the waiting room. A few moments later I am called back to the front desk by the receptionist who proceeds to hand me a clipboard with a form attached.

"The doctor wants you to fill this out before she sees you," the receptionist states.

I glance down at the clipboard expecting to see some sort of patient information form in need of update. It's been a while since I've updated my file and I have yet to change my last name on my AHC card since getting married, which has been administratively confusing at times. But rather than asking for my home address or emergency contact information, I am asked to rate my feelings of internal hopelessness on a scale of 0-3.

Not this again.

I feel a familiar heat rising from my chest and choking up my throat. I did not ask to be "psychiatrically re-assessed" by this total stranger, as if the 10 generalizable questions before me are expected to reflect the inner workings and nuances of my mind in the first

place. As if they are to offer any type of explanation into my life at all. As if I am able to recall how many times over the last two-weeks I have felt like a burden to my friends and family. As if marking anything other than “0” is an incorrect and unwanted answer that indicates how severely I need reconstruction. As if my conscientiousness, sensitivity, and empathy are in need of eradication because alongside them come feelings of personal failure. As if I am wanting to say goodbye to the qualities of myself I find the most beautiful.

As if I can be explained by 10 questions.

But things are more complicated than that.

I am brought back to the first time I came across these questions in my doctor’s office nearly three years ago. Brought back to one of the darkest periods of my life that I literally thought would kill me. Back to a period where I yearned for immense physical pain, because pain (at the time) was a sunny alternative to the unrelenting numbness I was living in. I felt like answering those 10 questions was the only thing that could possibly relieve me from my nightmare, because those questions came with a diagnosis. And that diagnosis came with recognition. And that recognition came with external validation. And external validation from a medical professional felt like my only way out of hell. Those 10 questions acted as my lifeline, the means by which I could communicate my needs to my doctor and access the support I felt necessary. As generalized, oversimplified, and elementary the questions seemed, I trusted in their ability to appease my doctor. So, I answered them willingly and without hesitation.

If you couldn't already tell, my relationship with these 10 questions is rather complicated. Three years ago, I felt universally indebted to these questions, as if the "solution" to my depression was contained somewhere within the rating of my sleeping habits and the intensity of my anhedonia. But as I gaze upon these questions now, I feel enraged. I am not a code that needs to be cracked, nor the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle that can be found in 10 sentences. These 10 questions do not open a boarded window into my soul that can only be accessed through an external source. My own experience within my body/mind complex is not inferior to the subjective interpretation and "expertise" of a stranger.

So here is my query: how could the same 10 questions feel like they have both worked for and against me? How could these questions once make me feel in charge of my own personhood, but now make me feel objectified and overlooked? How could these questions once make me feel empowered and heard, but now make me feel silenced? Furthermore, what are the implications of my answers to these questions right now? How "should" I answer them? How can I answer them in ways that distinguish between an external appearance of dysfunction to what actually dysfunctions me?

Why should I have to answer them in the first place?

I stare anxiously at these unanswered questions. I worry that if I leave them blank, I will prolong my stay at the office when all I came in for was a slip of paper. So, I randomly start circling numbers onto the questionnaire, the questionnaire that speaks so little yet holds so much weight. Are my answers accurate? Honestly, I don't think they could ever be. But what I do know is that no matter how "accurately" I answer these questions they will only (at best) reflect a fraction of my mind.

Of course, not all of my autoethnographic re-collection was explored through text. Dance, painting, and poetry were other artistic modalities I used in coming to know and embody my lived experiences. Figure 1 is a water-colour experimentation piece I created in January 2020 upon asking myself “what does madness look like?” This pink, abstracted water-colour gradient displays a visual aesthetic of madness: disordered, swirly, organic, shadowed, layered, and beautiful. Pink is a colour of deep meaning to me: something I once feared as a child for being “too feminine” (much like how my mind was always considered “too much”) but have since come to adore and embrace. Pink is also a colour that is not often associated with depression, as depression is often viewed as bleak, dark, and/or grey. I too often viewed my depression this way, and as something I wanted to eradicate within my own body-mind. However, I have since come to know and understand my depression as something integral and valuable to my Being. Depression, not without its moments of immense distress, has fostered the desire to connect intimately and to feel deeply with others.

Figure 1

My Mad Mind. A pink, swirly, water-colour gradient.



The following poem is another piece I created in response to the “Bell Let’s Talk” initiative:

I have never had a problem talking about my mind, you see, because it's all I have ever known to be a mind.

Let me explain.

... on second thought, maybe I can't.

I have never tried to hide. I have never tried to make my mind something it's not -- something it never will be, or should be.

In fact, I have been anything but quiet. I have always been, what they call, a 'deep feeler.' An 'old soul.'

Complicated. Difficult.

And these were not labels borne onto me for keeping quiet, for how does a child know what shame is unless they are told to feel it?

I have never been allowed to trust my mind because I never knew when something was real or Real. Because there is apparently a difference. I've been told that there are things that happen and things my mind happens... and I have never been good at distinguishing between the two. Speaking was a risk; feeling was a risk. But I've never been good at hiding, you see, because isn't honesty the best policy? I pride myself in not being a good liar.

Although maybe I shouldn't... maybe that is my mistake. Maybe I should be better at hiding myself because people always seem to care about the lost ones. The ones that carry a little secret. They are the strong ones. They are the ones we want to find and hold. And help. And heal. Honesty is a sign of weakness. We seek out the most 'vulnerable ones' because those who feel vulnerable are made to believe that there is something to feel vulnerable about. That there are some things that should be hidden. And we all love secrets. We all love the heroine with the key to free tied tongues. Self-liberation, you see, is too straight (while also being the least predictable). We thirst to place chains so we can be the ones to set them free. But it's those who do not see these chains who are in the deepest prison.

So no, dear reader, I am not afraid to talk.

I never have been afraid to talk.

You have been afraid to listen.

While not every reflective or creative piece became an obvious part of my final work, each creation served its own purpose in leading me to develop what would become my creative product.

Ethnographic Creative Nonfiction: An Assembly of Senses and (Re)Creation of Worlds

The artistic processes I engaged in led me towards what would become my final creative piece for my thesis – writing a fairy tale that would capture elements of autoethnography and scholarly engagement with Mad text(s). This type of writing in academic contexts has been described as ethnographic creative nonfiction. Smith et al. (2015) describe ethnographic creative nonfiction as “a type of creative analytic practice (CAP) that tells a story which is grounded in research data and draws on literary conventions” (p. 59). Through ethnographic creative nonfiction, I strived to craft a fairy tale that was of equal parts magic and madness. Although my fairy tale is fictitious in nature, the themes and messages conveyed throughout are rooted in real-world experiences. Smith et al. (2015) write how within the realm of ethnographic creative nonfiction, stories may be “fictional in form yet factual in content... [and are] grounded in real events and people’s lived experiences” (p. 59). Gullion (2016) goes on to write how this form of writing “is called a representation, but should more rightly be viewed as a (re)presentation ... and we have a multitude of forms at our disposal that do that (re)presenting in a manner that is the most authentic to our findings and to our participants” (p. 12). Thusly, (re)presenting madness through fairy tale becomes a politically congruous way to convey a very much nonfictional Mad experience.

The act of crafting this fairy tale harnessed the theoretical and aesthetic dimensions of arts-based research and simultaneously engaged with the social, political, and personal dimensions of madness. In this way, I would classify my writing as autoethnographic creative

nonfiction. Ellis (2004) details autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. xix).

Autoethnography allows researchers to deconstruct their lived experiences and to explore how their experiences are related to much larger social and cultural phenomena. In the case of my own work, stepping inside of my personal stories of madness allowed me to, in a way, step beyond them and into the stories of others. The actual process of creating the fairy tale was generative and organic, as described in the following reflective journal entry:

I’m finding that the story is almost writing itself. I’m really surprised by how the creative process flows when it’s time to flow. Imagery pertaining to dance and mental illness is coming up in ways I never thought of before as I start to develop these tiny woodland creatures and share their stories. I honestly don’t know where any of it is coming from, apart from these deep inner spaces that have been crafting them without my conscious thought. I feel like my experiences have become embodied, and that embodiment is coming out as new experiences on paper. It all feels so new but also so familiar to me. In creating this world I’m called to bring pieces of my own worlds – worlds that have formed from the worlds I have lived in, with, and through. I’m starting to get very emotional about the whole experience. It’s strange to see tethers emerge in ways that I have never explored. This process of art is fragmented, unexplainable, but so deeply familiar (May 15th, 2020).

The three main elements of my fairy tale creation process included world making, autoethnographic reflection, and literature engagement. These processes occurred in no particular order and were often layered within and on top of each other. Some days I drew from personal experiences to create the fairy tale world, while other days I used Mad literature for inspiration; many times, these two fed into one another. I wrote and then found unknown connections to

what others have written or themes carried across Mad literature. Other times, I read things within the literature that then stimulated a personal memory. I describe this cyclical process in the following reflective entry:

I've been excited by what I have been finding in the literature. I have realized that I have written things linked to Mad Studies in ways I didn't even realize. The tree root motif and Van Gogh, for example, was something that really struck a chord in me. Yes, this description of tree roots was prompted by Danielle, but I wonder if they knew about the deeper implications, symbolism, and connections to Mad literature (although they probably did and I'm just late to the draw).

I am deeply encouraged by the recent works I am finding from other scholars looking at madness and art. While most of their artistic references pertain to visual art, I am actually finding some work that looks directly at madness and dance! It's been relieving and encouraging to see similarities in approaches and connected threads of experience woven between projects. I feel like these people speak my language and that my work is intimately related to theirs. I don't feel so alone or like I'm doing things "wrong." I know that this dichotomy of right-wrong is a sanist, white, colonial binary, but when working within sanist, white, colonial institutions I have carried some skepticism regarding the "validity" of my work (June 16th, 2020).

Examining my autoethnographic experiences and those found in scholarly writing led me to create a fairy tale world that evokes the worlds I inhabit and craft the worlds I wish I inhabited. Ethnographic creative nonfiction gave me the opportunity to 1) sensorially explore what could not be expressed conventionally, and 2) disrupt the unwavering, pathologizing narratives of madness embedded within common discourse. Through epistemological and ontological

awareness; evocative and embodied text; character and plot development; scene setting; dialogue; theoretical analysis and engagement; and sensorial writing and illustration, I was able to craft a story I hoped would be meaningful to those experiencing psychiatrization or neurodiverse minds, while simultaneously challenging the assumptions of outside bodies and systems (Smith et al., 2015).

Additional Benefits of Creative Nonfiction

Smith et al. (2015) succinctly assembled seven benefits associated with creative nonfiction drawn from the work of several other scholars engaged with this type of work. Firstly, creative nonfiction can “provide a valuable analytical dimension to a project” (p. 62) by offering new ways of understanding and relating to the topic at hand through the process of creative writing. Within my own work, my goal was to disrupt medicalized interpretations and renditions of mental illness by bringing mental illness into a fantastical world. I hoped to unsettle the psychiatric lens that typifies mental illness by bringing elements of magic and wonder into conversation, while creating a story “familiar enough” for others to relate to.

Secondly, creative nonfiction can add theoretical dimensions to a project by showcasing “multiple theoretical points in one paper... [and encouraging] additional theoretical insights beyond what the researcher considered” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 63). Throughout my crafting and refining processes, drawing upon a multitude of scholarly texts and Mad works helped to deepen the impact of my writing and encouraged an ongoing reflexivity. Engaging with theory not only encouraged me to view my autoethnographic work through new lenses but invited me to consider and showcase Mad experiences beyond my own.

Thirdly, creative nonfiction invites me to analyze real-world events while presenting them in ways that do not implicate specific individuals, keeping identities concealed without diminishing the realness of experience (Smith et al., 2015). This proved to be a challenge: how was I supposed to discuss my personal experiences without discussing my personal experiences? I quickly came to learn that my experiences were not really my own but were extremely relational in nature and required careful crafting if I was to discuss them at all. My first few attempts of autoethnographic creative nonfiction were messy and did not do a good job of concealing the identities or maintaining confidentiality. I had to learn to analyze my own stories to pull-out themes or motifs that were simultaneously presentational and somewhat “generalizable.” I use the term “generalizable” cautiously, as my research paradigm does not seek to generalize experiences for universal cohesion or public consumption; but I did need to find ways to take myself (and others) out of my stories while retaining the “meat” and realness of my experiences.

Fourthly, this type of writing allows me to (re)contextualize experiences more poignantly to convey the gravity of their meaning beyond what may “naturally” occur in space and time (Smith et al., 2015). In other words, taking experiences out of isolation and finding ways to “combine” them in story may be more representative of their weight and overall impact. From an autoethnographic perspective, the experiences and feelings conveyed through my story’s protagonist are ones that have been collected over a lifetime. Similarly, literature has been assembled and (re)constructed throughout my fairy tale in ways that allow multiple perspectives and various topics to be communicated poignantly and interrelatedly. This created space for a much more expansive collection of sources to be drawn upon which served to enhance the depth and nuance of my writing and created world.

Fifthly, creative nonfiction invites readers to bear witness to themselves and others within their own (re)imagination and (re)presentation of the story, ultimately encouraging the story to be spread to others (Smith et al., 2015). Although my writing may be catered towards an adult audience, I chose to present my work in a fairy tale format to enhance its accessibility. My hope in doing so was to allow readers to identify themselves more easily within the story's characters and general context. While not everyone reading the story may personally identify as Mad or mentally ill, I worked carefully to develop characters, to provide contextual footnotes, and to write sensorially so readers could empathize with the content and perhaps challenge their own perspectives and assumptions.

Sixthly, "creative nonfiction offers a deeply embodied, sensorial and relational account of human lives" (Smith et al., 2015, p. 63), resembling that of human experience and thusly drawing the reader inside created worlds. As mentioned previously, I worked hard to create an immersive experience for readers by taking them inside my created world. Through character development and sensorial writing techniques, my hope is for readers to *feel* and embody my writing, thereby feeling their way into my world.

Lastly, creative nonfiction holds the capacity to reach across multiple audiences and disseminate information beyond those in the academic community (Smith et al., 2015). It is my hope that (re)presenting my autoethnographic work and the works of other scholars as a fairy tale will enhance the accessibility of information that may be otherwise unreachable or unavailable to folks inside and outside of academic environments.

Evaluative Criteria

In my attempt to encompass the characteristics of an arts-based paradigm, arts-based research, and narrative nonfiction, I wish for the quality of my work to be evaluated based on an

assortment of criteria adapted from Smith et al. (2015); Tracy (2010); Barone and Eisner (2012); and Warren (2009). I have consciously chosen to either omit or alter certain parts of their criterion that do not align with Mad theory, as I do not wish to disseminate more harm onto a community that is abhorrently misrepresented and misunderstood by making sanist assumptions. In doing so, I have omitted or altered any criteria containing sanist language or sanist ideology (i.e. credibility, coherence, concision). May my work:

- Be socially significant and generative by mobilizing Mad knowledges, deepening the understanding of Mad experience, and making Mad experience known (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Tracy, 2010).
- Be substantially contributive by providing “new knowledge, fresh insights, [and] a deeper understanding” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 70) into the social, political, and personal dimensions of madness and Mad representation.
- Be evocative by illustrating madness in ways that build connection and evoke an emphatic response to those inside and outside of Mad communities (Smith et al., 2015; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Tracy, 2010; Warren, 2009).
- Be aesthetically crafted and engaging through meaningful language, scene setting, character development, sensorial evocation, and illustration to keep the reader invested and interested (Smith et al., 2015; Warren, 2009).
- Be citational by offering a channel to explore new texts, worlds, and knowledges (Warren, 2009).
- Be transparent, self-reflexive, and honest upon exploring the incongruent, dissonant, paradoxical, confusing, and comforting world(s) of madness (Tracy, 2010).

- Be playful by challenging sanist ways of mobilizing knowledge and evoking new ways of thinking through and about madness (Warren, 2009).

Before We Begin...

Before diving into my fairy-tale, there are a few intentional artistic choices I wish to make note of. The font-sizes and styles I chose to use throughout my story have been carefully selected for both personal and political reasons. The 10-point font size acknowledges how I was conditioned to perceive my mind. For so long, I was taught to keep my feelings to myself as they were considered “dramatic” or “pessimistic.” As a result, I grew up often feeling small and silenced, undeserving of the same amount of space occupied by my peers. I tried to make my way through the world unnoticeably and unproblematically, shifting the focus away from my own needs to favour the preferences of others’ comfort. The Calibri font style, to me, is a much more comforting and wholesome typeface when compared to the rigidity of Times New Roman. As such, I wish for my story to be read as more than an academic thesis, but to embody a sort of “realness” that takes the reader into an inner experience.

Creative Output

Nuts

"It is my contention that reality is a performative, relational, and interpretive practice." (Harpin, 2018, p. 110)

Once upon a time, in a land near, near to here, there lived a baby squirrel. Baby squirrel lived a simple life, doing all the activities that baby squirrels ought to be doing, like organizing acorns and burying all their nuts underground.

Baby squirrel lived in the small village of Oakerville, home to squirrels, mice, and all other critters alike! Oakerville was a quiet and proper little village, one where residents always followed the rules, and everything was in its place. The grass was always neatly trimmed, fallen leaves were routinely raked, and picket fences were painted the crispest white. Every rodent in Oakerville always looked their best, with freshly groomed tails and manicured paws -- nobody would dare leave their burrow without trimming their whiskers! Inhabitants of Oakerville were friendly and polite and always acted on their best behavior. All in all, Oakerville was a pleasant place to live and baby squirrel was quite content to be there.

One of the things that Oakerville was known for, other than its tidiness, was its ballet school. Every critter in Oakerville grew up attending Miss Maple's Ballet Academy and received the best education in the entire forest. Beyond receiving forest-renowned ballet training, students would learn valuable life skills by taking classes tailored towards developing into upstanding and presentable Oakerville citizens. Some of the most important classes each student was required to take included "Manners 101," "Developing Social Competency," "Grooming and Keeping-Up Appearances," and "Oakerville Etiquette²." It was expected that each rodent would arrive to school on time with neatly combed fur and perfectly brushed teeth, equipped with everything they needed for their long day of learning and dancing. Anybody who failed to meet Miss Maple's standards would face dire consequences. Following Miss Maple's rules were necessary measures each rodent was expected to uphold to ensure Oakerville remained well-adjusted and free of disorder. Afterall, one bad nut could spoil a bunch.

Every school day began in the dance studio with a ballet warm-up. Students would arrange themselves alongside the wooden barres located around the edges of the studio and wait for Miss Maple to arrive. Each rodent would stand still in their respective spot at the barre with their eyes straight ahead, bellies held in, tails tucked under,

² "Passing as normal is a requisite for sustaining relationships" (Voronka, 2019, p. 572). This notion of passing as "normal" is a constant theme for baby squirrel throughout the beginning of this story.

arms by their sides, and feet in first position³. Baby squirrel squirmed as they tried to position themselves correctly but adjusting one part of their body seemed to cause another to move out of place.

Come on tail, stay down!

No belly, you need to stay sucked in.

Turn your feet out more...

Don't look down at your feet!

And remember to breathe.

Take a deep breath in... no, not that deep, look at how your belly ballooned!

Keep your chin up!

Smile!

Baby squirrel could hear the footsteps of Miss Maple approaching the studio as they struggled to correct their posture. Just as baby squirrel tried to turn their feet out just a little bit more they could feel a shooting pain move up through their knee and collapsed to the floor.

THUD

Nobody blinked or turned their head to see if baby squirrel was okay. Each rodent remained completely motionless.

Did they even notice?

Miss Maple opened the studio door and immediately stared at baby squirrel, still a mess on the floor.

Get up! Get up!

Baby squirrel scrambled to stand up and regain a sense of composure. They slicked back their tousled fur and stiffened into proper form. Maybe this wasn't as bad as they thought?

But it was.

Miss Maple slowly walked towards baby squirrel, each footstep sending tremors through the floorboards. Baby squirrel could feel their heart beating in their throat and tried to swallow it back down to where it belonged. Miss

³ "The soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning into the automatism of habit" (Foucault, 1979, p. 135). While Foucault may have been referencing the disciplinary techniques utilized to create docility and obedience within the army, scholars have found these same techniques to be present within ballet contexts (Alterowitz, 2014; Clark & Markula, 2017; Dyer, 2009; Green, 2003; Pickard, 2012).

Maple stood beside baby squirrel and slowly scanned their body from head to toe. Baby squirrel remained still, their eyes looking straight ahead at the back of baby mouse's head. Miss Maple reached out her paw towards baby squirrel's tail and plucked out a stray hair. Baby squirrel tried not to flinch. Miss Maple did one more scan of baby squirrel's body and walked away without saying a word⁴.

"Let us begin," Miss Maple said to the class.

Each rodent stood a little taller as they waited for the music to begin. Baby squirrel felt like they were the smallest in the room.

"Plie one... two... up, three... four... and down... two... up three... four... grand plie down... two... three... four... come up five... six... seven... eight..."

The students all moved in time with Miss Maple's cueing, the whole classroom bobbing up and down, and up and down together⁵. Once plies were finished, the students moved on to tendus, dégagés, développés, and grand battements.

"Lovely focus, baby mouse," Miss Maple praised.

"Excellent posture, baby chipmunk."

"Beautiful feet, baby bunny."

Baby squirrel was having trouble focusing on the exercises after their encounter with Miss Maple. Why was it so hard for them to be a well-adjusted ballet dancer? Like every other rodent in Oakerville, baby squirrel was groomed for ballet-dancing from when they were first born. But no matter how hard they tried, they could never get it right. Their fur wouldn't stay put, or their posture wouldn't stay straight... something always seemed to be wrong with baby squirrel.

⁴ "The space reserved by society for insanity would now be haunted by those who were 'from the other side' and who represented both the prestige of the authority that confines and the rigor of the reason that judges" (Foucault, 1988, p. 251). Miss Maple represents that authority figure 'from the other side' of insanity (i.e. those who are 'normal') who upholds normative standards and judges whether such standards are met by others. This creates the narrative of "us vs. them."

⁵ "Ritualized dance training practices like performing a series of nonvarying exercises, codified techniques, or repertory dance works could be seen to reflect values such as ... acknowledging the knowledge of authorities and experts, and achieving consistent and repeatable ... results" (Dyer, 2009, p. 117). In many ways, this directly parallels some of my earlier experiences of psychiatrization, in which psychiatric "experts" must be obeyed, and their orders must be followed unquestionably. They were assumed to be the experts of my body/mind experience, with little to no regard of my voice. As Fernandez (1981) writes, "since physicians were the only therapists who could claim expertise in medical treatment, their claim to expertise in moral treatment became more acceptable" (p. 242).

“Alright, everyone, last exercise before I see you off to Mr. Elmwood for the rest of the of morning. Adagio. Ready... and...”

The pianist struck the first chord as each critter placed their right paw on the barre. Everyone’s left arm passed through first position and opened to second in time with the music, with chins lifted and tails tucked under. The soft, soothing melody began pouring out of the piano as baby squirrel lifted their left foot to retiré.

Keep growing, supporting leg, don’t drop into the hip.

Baby squirrel visualized their right leg growing deeper and deeper into the ground, like the roots of the biggest oak tree in the forest. They could start to feel magic budding in the soil, the same magic that helped tree roots dig deeper and tree trunks grow taller⁶.

Baby squirrel! Stop imagining this here! You’re going to get in trouble.

This magic helped branch baby squirrel’s left leg into a développé devant and sprout leaves past their tiny toes. Baby squirrel never felt this big before. They slowly gathered their leg back into retiree for the développé derrière, the root system further expanding to compensate for the change in weight distribution.

Cut down this tree! You’re not paying attention!

But the tree was strong.

Next came the penché. Baby squirrel took a deep inhale and paused for the slightest moment to give their breath time to reach beyond the soles of their feet. As they exhaled, they began to tip forward and stretch their left branch-leg higher behind them.

Baby squirrel finally gave in. The tree was too strong to cut down.

Well, okay.

I guess this is okay if nobody knows.

There we go.

Nice and steady, little tree.

Grow deeper, little roots.

Their roots buried deeper and deeper underground, twisting and knotting to create an even stronger system. Baby squirrel lightly touched the earth with their paw to feel the warmth of the soil and...

⁶ “‘Psychosis’ might be defined as a loss of touch with reality by scientists, but for those who experience it, it is a reality which can be magical” (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1510).

“Baby squirrel! Open your eyes!”

The music came to a halt. Baby squirrel snapped back to attention, embarrassed to be called out in front of the class.

Miss Maple walked over to baby squirrel and crossed her arms.

“Baby squirrel,” Miss Maple sighed, “how many times do I need to tell you to keep your eyes open during ballet class?”

Baby squirrel didn’t dare say anything. It was more than a few times.

“What on earth were you thinking about?”

Baby squirrel remained silent.

Miss Maple started getting frustrated.

“Baby squirrel, are you trying to escape? Is this class not good enough for you? Is there somewhere better you would rather be? Need I remind you that this ballet academy is the top school in the forest, and the second best in all the land?”

“No, ma’am. This class is not too good for me, and I am not trying to escape,” baby squirrel replied, meekly. “I just...”

Baby squirrel paused.

“You just what?” Miss Maple retorted.

“I... I guess I just... I didn’t even know that my eyes were closed is all, Miss Maple, because I was a tree and my roots were growing deeper into the ground so that I could lift out of my supporting leg, like you always say, but also help anchor me to the ground, and I guess I must have had my eyes closed but I swear I didn’t mean to but my leg felt like it was so high because it was a tree branch and my toes were leaves and I think that was one of the best times I’ve ever done this exercise before because I wasn’t really me, you know, I was a tree, and I felt really strong and like I could have grown six thousand times bigger and my arm-branches grew too which is why I must have accidentally touched the floor, but I promise, Miss Maple, I didn’t even know my eyes were closed⁷.”

Miss Maple stood stunned. The whole class was staring at baby squirrel in disbelief.

⁷ “[There] is a ‘medical’ narrative of madness as illness. But there are other ways of decoding insanity... for example, of madness as the ‘price of genius,’... or of the mad [sic] as touched by the gods... and/or ‘more in touch with nature’” (Maitland, 2001, p. 72).

"You... you were a tree?"

Baby squirrel stood frozen. Miss Maple tried to stifle her laughter. Everyone else was whispering to each other.

"Baby squirrel, that has to be the most irrational, illogical, nutty thing I have ever heard of⁸."

The whole classroom now erupted with laughter. Baby squirrel's fuzzy cheeks grew hot.

"Oh, baby squirrel. Do you know what you sound like when you say silly things like that? You sound like... like... like, a dysfunctional... like a contemporary dancer!"

Baby squirrel's eyes started burning. The laughter in the classroom grew louder.

"Baby squirrel," Miss Maple began with a serious tone, "ballet dancers never say such outlandish things, and certainly never in such a disorderly way. I thought you were doing well in your grammar lessons, but I think I will have to talk to Miss Stonewall about this and arrange for you to see someone to correct this behaviour. Oakerville citizens are to conduct themselves in respectable, palatable, and ordinary ways at all times⁹. Speech is no exception. If you want to go ahead and spew out nonsense like I have heard from other contemporary delinquents, Oakerville is not a place for you. Understood?"

Baby squirrel sheepishly nodded.

"And now, what is this about being a tree? Surely you must understand how absolutely ridiculous that is. We are ballet dancers, not props or parts of a set. Trees are inanimate objects, for goodness sakes! Why would you want to be a tree when you are something far more evolved as a rodent¹⁰? 'Becoming' a tree is something abstracted and irrational, things we would expect contemporary dancers to embody. And what do we say about contemporary dancers, class?"

"THEY'RE NUTS!"

⁸ "To speak 'logically' becomes a requirement if you wish to speak at all ... [and] to speak outside the fairly limited framework of 'logical' syntax [is] regarded as a [symptom] of mental illness" (Maitland, 2001, p. 78-79).

⁹ "Madness is a threat to good order and to [one's sense of self] as human and rational. Madness is dangerous" (Maitland, 2001, p. 75).

¹⁰ In the 1920's, mentally ill individuals were described as "'mentally dead' and 'on an intellectual level which we only encounter way down in the animal kingdom'" (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 27).

Baby squirrel was the only rodent in the room who remained silent. They were not sure if their silence was by choice or not¹¹.

“And finally,” Miss Maple continued “ballet dancers must have their eyes open! Ballet is about poise, elegance, and precision. There is no room for us to exhibit such dysfunctional behavior if we are to do exactly as the syllabus says and become upstanding Oakerville citizens! That’s what you want to be, isn’t it, baby squirrel? To become an upstanding Oakerville citizen?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied baby squirrel.

“Very good. Now, do you understand how all of these things combined – the way you speak, the irrational stories you tell, and the way you conduct yourself in class – may make me believe that you are not developing into a well-adjusted ballet dancer or Oakerville citizen¹²?”

Baby squirrel nodded again.

“And do you also understand that if you were to become something as flawed and broken as a contemporary dancer, there would be no place for you here in Oakerville?”

“Yes, ma’am,” baby squirrel repeated.

“Who here knows why contemporary dancers cannot function in Oakerville?”

Baby rat shot their tiny paw high into the air. They were always trying to become the teacher’s pet.

“Because they are delinquents! They are always off in their own worlds and do things that are simply unruly. They dance with their feet flexed, they wiggle around on the floor like vermin, they dance to strange sounds rather than to music, and they can never keep up their appearances¹³. They simply ruin Oakerville’s reputation by being so unpredictable and never following simple rules! Oakerville is known for its tidiness, its order, and the beautiful

¹¹ “The failure to use logic ‘properly’, or to speak appropriately, is then deemed to be yet another symptom that renders whatever [the Mad] wish to say even less audible. The mad are silenced” (Maitland, 2001, p. 79). When expressing my own mind, I have regularly encountered phrases such as “how could you think such things,” “you’re being crazy,” “that makes no sense,” among others – even when I have been asked to speak up. This consistent gaslighting has taught me, from a very young age, to remain silent.

¹² “Jones et al. proceed to identify six dimensions of stigma... [the degree to which someone can] conceal their condition, ... whether the stigmatizing condition is reversible over time, ... the extent to which a mark strains or obstructs interpersonal interactions, ... the extent to which a mark elicits an instinctive and affective reaction of disgust, ... how the condition came into being, ... [and] the feelings of danger or threat that the mark induces in others” (Link et al., 2004, p. 512).

¹³ “Stigma takes places when the mark links the identified person via attributional processes to undesirable characteristics that discredit him or her in the eyes of others” (Link et al., 2004, p. 512).

ballet dancers that graduate from Miss Maple's Academy. Ballet represents everything that Oakerville believes in, and these contemporary vermin are like a bunch of bad nuts -- they will ruin everything about Oakerville!¹⁴

Baby squirrel's eyes widened.

Am I like this?

"Very good, baby rat," Miss Maple praised, "that is exactly what happens."

Miss Maple turned to face baby squirrel, who was doing everything they could to stop their legs from trembling.

"Now, do you understand why contemporary dancers are so dangerous?"

Baby squirrel nodded.

"They simply cannot function in Oakerville, and we certainly do not want a baby squirrel like you to turn into one of those bad nuts now, do we?"

Baby squirrel nodded. Then shook their head. Then nodded again. They weren't quite sure what they were supposed to do.

Miss Maple lifted baby squirrel's chin with her paw. She looked coldly into baby squirrel's terrified eyes.

Instinctively, baby squirrel looked down at the floor between their feet. Miss Maple huffed and dropped her paw back to her side. She turned away from baby squirrel to address the class.

"Now, where were we? Ah, yes! I believe our warm-up is done! Off you little rodents go to Manners 101! I will see you all in the afternoon for center work."

All the students gathered up their things and started to scurry towards their next class, but nobody scurried faster than baby squirrel.

¹⁴ Eugenics within the context of psychiatry and mental illness has a devastating history. "Although the Nazi genocide of Jews during World War II is well known, the concurrent Nazi genocide of psychiatric patients is much less widely known. An attempt was made to estimate the number of individuals with schizophrenia who were sterilized and murdered by the Nazis and to assess the effect on the subsequent prevalence and incidence of this disease. It is estimated that between 220 000 and 269 500 individuals with schizophrenia were sterilized or killed. This total represents between 73% and 100% of all individuals with schizophrenia living in Germany between 1939 and 1945. [...] Nazi genocide of psychiatric patients was the greatest criminal act in the history of psychiatry. It was also based on what are now known to be erroneous genetic theories and had no apparent long-term effect on the subsequent incidence of schizophrenia" (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 26).

For the rest of the day, baby squirrel could not get the words of Miss Maple and baby rat out of their head. Even though they were trying to concentrate in Manners 101, they couldn't seem to shake off what had happened earlier that morning.

Take some deep breaths, baby squirrel.

Deep breath iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii... and ooooooout.

Breathing didn't seem to help. Their mind was still spinning.

Okay, okay. Let's try something else.

Baby squirrel was nervous to do what they were about to do, as it was something that Miss Maple or Mr. Elmwood would call 'nutty.' But what else were they to do? They were going to get in trouble if they couldn't calm themselves down and pay attention, so what's the harm in...

Baby squirrel thought of the wind in the trees. The leaves and branches swaying melodically with the warm, summer breeze. They were running through the forest, leaping over exposed tree roots and rolling across fallen logs. *Come for a dance*, a nearby stream called. Baby squirrel happily obliged and dipped their toes into the cool clear water. Smooth pebbles tickled over their feet as the stream flowed past causing baby squirrel to giggle. *What color shall I be today*, the stream asked. "Well since you were purple last time and peach the time before... could you be a rainbow today?", baby squirrel responded. *I can be whatever you need me to be*, replied the stream. Soft shades of blues and greens began to dance their way within the stream and were met by the appearance of pinks and purples. Each color was connected, yet entirely separate from one another. *Go on now*, the stream called out, *go make your magic*. Baby squirrel walked out into the middle of the stream and began to play in the water, laughing and splashing and eventually painting the entire forest in rainbow. The wind gently picked up to spread color beyond where baby squirrel's splashes could reach. Baby squirrel allowed their body to melt into the river and wind, and...

"BABY SQUIRREL!"

The river immediately evaporated as baby squirrel jumped back in their seat. Mr. Elmwood's booming voice shook their desk.

Uh oh.

Mr. Elmwood slowly started approaching baby squirrel's desk, each footstep becoming more and more intimidating the closer he got. Baby squirrel gulped and looked around the room. Their classmates were silent.

"Baby squirrel," Mr. Elmwood began, "do you know why I called your name?"

"Is it because I wasn't paying attention?" baby squirrel quietly asked.

“Yes, it is because you were not paying attention,” Mr. Elmwood replied. “And how did I know you were not paying attention?” he asked.

Baby squirrel thought for a moment. Were their eyes closed again? Surely, they mustn’t have been after Miss Maple’s class this morning. Baby squirrel knew to be extra careful and was trying to keep their eyes open. They even forgot to blink sometimes.

“Baby squirrel?”

Baby squirrel realized they were taking too long to respond. They shook their head “no.”

Mr. Elmwood sighed and put his paws on his hips. He did not look very impressed.

“Does anybody in the classroom know how I could tell that baby squirrel wasn’t paying attention?”, he asked the room.

“I do! I do!” a voice exuberantly called from the front of the classroom. Baby squirrel turned to around in their seat to see who it was. Baby rat’s paw was waving high in the air, eager once again to call out baby squirrel.

Mr. Elmwood smiled.

“Yes, baby rat? Do you know why?”

Baby rat cleared their throat and brushed down their fur. Why did they suddenly look so big to baby squirrel?

“It’s because they were doing that thing with their head again! It was like they were dancing to music when there wasn’t even any music playing... and it sure didn’t look like ballet dancing¹⁵.” A wicked grin grew across baby rat’s face.

Baby squirrel instinctively placed their hands on both sides of their face trying to stop any residual movement that may be happening, unbeknownst to baby squirrel. What was happening to them?

“I swear I didn’t even know I was doing it!” baby squirrel cried. “I promise! I was just thinking about what Miss Maple said to me in warm-up this morning and I couldn’t stop! My body was just moving that way with the wind without me even knowing it!”

Mr. Elmwood stared straight into baby squirrel’s eyes and didn’t say a word. Baby squirrel looked down at their own paws and noticed that their fists were clenched so hard that they started to lose feeling. Baby squirrel tried to relax but couldn’t seem to find a deep breath.

¹⁵ “Survival strateg[ies] [are] a meaningful experience to be explored not destroyed” (Harpin, 2018, p. 112).

“Baby squirrel,” Mr. Elmwood began, “I heard about this morning’s incident from Miss Maple already and was told that this wasn’t the first time you have been demonstrating such defective and unsightly behavior. I think that it would be best for everybody if you went to talk to our guidance counsellor¹⁶. Perhaps she can get to the bottom of things and figure out what’s wrong with you¹⁷.”

Baby squirrel began to collect their things. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

“But I must warn you,” Mr. Elmwood continued, “from what we have all been observing, your... *situation*... is not looking very promising.”

Baby rat began to snicker. Baby squirrel hated that rat.

“Have fun with the guidance counsellor, baby squirrel,” baby rat mocked. “Be sure to tell my mom I say hi.”

The whole classroom began to laugh. Baby squirrel quickly wiped the tears from their eyes and walked out of the classroom.

Baby squirrel cautiously approached the hallway leading to Ms. Rat’s office. The walls were stark and bare, and the floor felt hard and cold. Each step baby squirrel took sent chills up their spine and seemed to take them farther away from where they were supposed to be going¹⁸. While baby squirrel had seen Ms. Rat in passing, they didn’t know all that much about her. Baby squirrel tentatively knocked three times on Ms. Rat’s dark door and waited. Before long they started to hear footsteps approaching the door from inside Ms. Rat’s office. The door opened.

Ms. Rat looked just like baby squirrel remembered, with large brown eyes and silky grey fur. Her claws were perfectly polished, and her whiskers were neatly trimmed.

“Hello, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat spoke. She stepped aside and motioned for baby squirrel to enter. “Please come in.”

¹⁶ Baby squirrel’s experience is outside the boundaries of Oakerville normativity and, within the context of the medical model, is thusly viewed as inherently “wrong” and “unwanted.” As such, their “unusual” experience of reality is considered lesser than the dominant discourse and must be ‘treated’ or ‘corrected’ to maintain good order (Maitland, 2001). As Harpin (2018) states, “some realities are more equal than others” (p. 110).

¹⁷ “Madness provokes very strong feelings of unease” (Maitland, 2001, p. 75) to the point where “one can be detained and forcibly treated for experiencing certain perceptual phenomena” (Harpin, 2018, p. 110).

¹⁸ This description of the hallway is a metaphor I use to reference psychiatric hospitals. I chose to use the phrase “farther away from where they were supposed to be going” for its double meaning: 1) the dread one can feel seeking ‘help’ from someone who will likely not understand them and/or paint them as broken, and 2) a critique of forcible inpatient programs or other “treatment” practices. What are the costs? Are such measures necessary?

Baby squirrel hesitantly entered Ms. Rat's office. It was a rather ordinary office, looking no different than any other office in Oakerville, with white walls and darkly coloured furniture. The only thing personal in Ms. Rat's office that baby squirrel noticed was a photo of Ms. Rat's family perched on the corner of her desk.

Ms. Rat pulled a file from out of a cabinet and started flipping through the pages. She gestured baby squirrel to have a seat on the twiggy couch. It didn't look that comfortable. Baby squirrel tentatively sat down and winced from the pokiness beneath them. It felt like they were sitting on a bed of needles. Baby squirrel tried to distract themselves from the pain by continuing to stare at Ms. Rat's family photo. The picture must have been relatively recent, as baby rat still looked the same as they did today. Baby squirrel noticed that baby rat's beady eyes and sharp nose matched those of Mr. Rat, while Ms. Rat's features appeared a lot softer. Although Ms. Rat's proper posture mirrored the posture of baby rat and Mr. Rat, there was something familiar about the look in Ms. Rat's eyes that made her look different from the rest of her family.

No, baby squirrel, stop letting your eyes wander!

When will you learn?!

Baby squirrel immediately fixated their eyes straight ahead towards Ms. Rat.

"So, baby squirrel," Ms. Rat began. Her voice was soft and steady. "I would like to hear from you, in your own words, what brings you into my office today."

Baby squirrel took a deep breath. "Well," they began, "I guess I have been doing some rather, um... improper things lately."

"Would you mind telling me what some of these things are?" Ms. Rat asked. "What happened today in your classes?"

"Well, in ballet warm-up this morning I was closing my eyes during some of the exercises at the barre," baby squirrel said shyly. "I didn't even really think it would be a big deal, and it just felt like something I needed to do," they continued.

"In what way?" Ms. Rat questioned.

Baby squirrel paused. "Well... it helps me sometimes to think that I'm like a tree, I guess, and when I close my eyes, I can feel the roots in my feet and my trunk growing taller, and... I... I know this sounds nuts."

"Was this the first time you tried dancing with your eyes closed?" Ms. Rat inquired.

"In class it is," baby squirrel replied. "But... but at home I sometimes... no, never mind. It's just silly stuff."

Ms. Rat looked directly into baby squirrel's eyes, but not in the same way that Miss Maple or Mr. Elmwood did. Baby squirrel felt safe with Ms. Rat, which was rather odd since baby squirrel just met her... and that she was baby rat's mom.

"Baby squirrel, I want you to know that you can trust me" Ms. Rat assured. "No matter how silly you think you sound, I would really love to hear what you have to say."

Baby squirrel took a few moments to gather their words before answering. "Well, sometimes when I am at home and nobody is around," they began, "I like to listen to other types of music and move with my eyes closed."

"What do you mean by 'other types of music,' baby squirrel?" Ms. Rat asked.

"What I mean is... I sometimes listen to music that Miss Maple doesn't like us to listen to, you know, like music that isn't ballet music," baby squirrel remarked. "And then my body just starts dancing, but not in the way Miss Maple wants us to dance, because I like to roll around on the floor a lot and move in ways that I've never been taught to move before, almost like I'm playing, and I imagine I'm in the forest somewhere and I don't care about what I look like because I know nobody will ever see it, and to be honest, Ms. Rat, I don't even really know what it looks like because at home I dance with my eyes closed and it's something that just kind of pours out of me, you know, and I can really feel myself being like a tree and it makes me feel, and can't really stop it even though I've tried, Ms. Rat, I promise that I've tried to stop it, but the more I try to forget it the stronger the urge to dance this way becomes and it feels so good when I do it."

Baby squirrel took a big breath. Baby squirrel had never told this stuff to anyone before, but once they started talking to Ms. Rat they couldn't stop.

"So, I guess... I guess I thought that if I closed my eyes during ballet warm-up, I might be able to feel the same way I feel when I'm dancing at home by myself. Because I'm not that good at ballet, Ms. Rat. I try really, really hard to be good at ballet and I seem to get by okay most of the time and do exactly what Miss Maple wants us to do. But sometimes it's too hard. And so I think about dancing in my room by myself and of the forest and of the trees and hoped today that I could make it through class without anyone seeing how hard it has been for me."

Baby squirrel finally took a breath to take a sip of dew water that Ms. Rat had set on the table. That was the most talking they'd done in a long time.

"And what about in Mr. Elmwood's class today, baby squirrel? What happened in your manners class this morning?" Ms. Rat asked. She seemed interested in what baby squirrel had to say.

Baby squirrel looked at Ms. Rat with worried eyes. "Well... this one is a little more complicated" baby squirrel spoke.

"I like complicated," Ms. Rat reassured.

Baby squirrel liked Ms. Rat a lot. She was different than the other rodents in Oakerville¹⁹, especially those who worked at Miss Maple's Academy.

"I guess I was just thinking about what Miss Maple said to me earlier about being a contemporary dancer and how I am not growing up to be a well-adjusted, upstanding Oakerville citizen and I started to panic. I couldn't stop thinking about it and I knew that Mr. Elmwood would get mad at me if he saw I wasn't paying attention and that I was distracted so I really needed to calm down fast. So I went to my forest and talked to the stream and painted everything in rainbow to help relax me because that's always what I do before I fall asleep at night, you know, to help me settle and have good dreams. And I just wanted to be good. But I guess I was taking too long in the forest and Mr. Elmwood saw me in there or something because he said my head was moving, I think it was moving with the wind, and got mad at me for not paying attention, but I was only in the forest to help me pay attention but I guess it didn't work out. I had a feeling it wouldn't, but I just didn't know what else to do because my head was hurting and my heart was racing and I just needed to feel better, you know?"

Ms. Rat sat contemplatively for a few moments before she started to scribble something down onto a strip of bark. She handed the bark to baby squirrel.

The Old Mushroom Cap

Tonight, 8pm

"I think it would be really helpful for you to meet me here tonight, baby squirrel," Ms. Rat said with a smile. "There are a few other folks who have their own forests, in a way, and it is important that they get together to talk."

Baby squirrel nodded.

"Very good," Ms. Rat replied as she stood up from her chair. Baby squirrel collected their things and started walking towards the door.

"I guess... I guess I will see you tonight then," baby squirrel said in parting.

"Yes, I will see you tonight, baby squirrel. Thank you for stopping by," she replied, "and baby squirrel?"

Baby squirrel turned around with wide eyes.

¹⁹ Ms. Rat represents the psychiatric professionals who were/are proponents of the antipsychiatry movement (Cooper 1967, 1980; Laing, 1998). Antipsychiatry can be described as "a social movement that question[s] not only the legal privilege of psychiatrists to detain and treat individuals with mental disorders, especially in a compulsory manner, but also the increasing 'medicalization' of madness" (Berlim et al., 2003, p. 61). As Harpin (2018) writes, antipsychiatry activists view Mad experiences to be "meaningful and can offer insight rather than being simply a 'neuro chemical glitch to which the only proper response is medical, pharmaceutical treatments'" (p. 111).

"Don't be afraid," Ms. Rat assured. "I am only doing this to help you. Everything will be fine, I promise."

As eight o'clock approached, baby squirrel began journeying towards The Old Mushroom Cap. The Old Mushroom Cap, or The Cap as locals called it, was an abandoned fungus that used to be the epicentre of Oakerville. It grew along the northern shore of Tadpole Pond and had been there for as long as any rodent could remember. On long summer days, baby rodents would splash and play in the warm waters of the pond while parents would visit underneath The Cap for shade. No rodent could ever imagine a summer without going down to The Cap with their families, but everything seemed to change overnight. A few summer's ago, on a day like any other day, The Cap began to emit a very foul-smelling odor. Some believed this occurred because The Cap had finally reached maturation, while others believed The Cap was beginning to rot. Nobody really knew why The Cap suddenly began to smell, but everyone had since been avoiding the area and started to gather along the southern shores of Tadpole Pond instead. The Cap remained abandoned for many, many years, so baby squirrel was rather puzzled by Ms. Rat's request to meet there²⁰.

Just as the smell grew stronger and stronger, the landscape became less and less familiar to baby squirrel the closer they got to The Cap. Baby squirrel didn't know that grass could grow so tall! Or that there were so many different types of plants! Tree roots grew out from the ground, making for an exciting obstacle course for baby squirrel to navigate through. Loose rocks and twigs were scattered across the forest floor, making the path baby squirrel was to follow a little less clear. Baby squirrel allowed their eyes to explore the array of colors surrounding them.

Look at all of those yellow dandelions!

And creeping thistles!

Is that a white clover?!

Baby squirrel had heard and read about these flowers before, but they would never be found contaminating Oakerville soil. "These are all weeds²¹ and would completely take over and ruin Oakerville's reputation," Mr. Elmwood would say. "They are a disgrace and must be eradicated before they spread everywhere²²!"

²⁰ "The mad live, or are perceived as living, on the boundaries: the boundary between the wild and the civilised; between the human and the non-human; between the rational and the divine" (Maitland, 2001, p. 75).

²¹ Eugenacists have often compared the Mad and disabled (often called 'degenerates') to weeds – they are "unsightly" and must be eradicated (i.e. "weeded out") to prevent their "defectiveness" from spreading (Bobbitt, 1909; Mottier & Gerodetti, 2007; O'Brien, 2011; Richardson, 1973).

²² "Hitler was interested in these ideas [of killing patients in psychiatric hospitals] and is said to have discussed a program to kill chronic mental patients in 1933, shortly after assuming the chancellorship. He said that 'it is right that the worthless lives of such creatures should be ended'" (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 27).

How strange, baby squirrel thought as they examined a cluster of wild violets.

How could we destroy something so beautiful?

Baby squirrel continued through the bush along the path to The Cap. As they approached, they could see Ms. Rat waiting.

"Good evening, baby squirrel," Ms. Rat said with a warm smile on her face. "I'm so glad you decided to join us."

"Us?" baby squirrel remarked. They didn't see any signs of other rodents— nobody really came down this way.

Ms. Rat chuckled and squeezed baby squirrel's arm.

"Follow me this way, I want to introduce you to everyone."

She began scurrying towards the tall grass behind The Cap. Baby squirrel had to run to keep up.

"Where... are we... going?" baby squirrel asked in between breaths. Ms. Rat could sure scurry quickly.

"You'll see!" she called over her shoulder.

Before long Ms. Rat came to an abrupt halt and started uncovering a secret door beneath a bed of black soil. Baby squirrel's eyes widened.

"Woah!" baby squirrel exclaimed with excitement, "A secret door!"

"Shhhhhh" Ms. Rat replied as she continued dusting off the door with her tail. Once most of the soil was brushed off, she began to knock on the door in a very peculiar fashion.

Knock-knock... knock-knock-knock... knock... knock-knock-knock... knock... knock-knock

Almost immediately after her final knock, baby squirrel could hear what sounded like a dead-bolt unlocking. The door began to lift open and a long black nose peeked from underneath it. The nose began to wiggle as it sniffed at their feet.

"Good evening, Ratty!" a voice called out from beneath the door. "I smell you've brought some company to join us this evening?"

Ms. Rat laughed. "Yes, Mole, I'd like to introduce you to baby squirrel. I think they will make a lovely addition to our group, if they decide to come back!" Ms. Rat winked at baby squirrel. Baby squirrel smiled.

"Well, what are you waiting for?!" Mole called out. "Come on down!"

The door flung open and Mole climbed out of the hole. Baby squirrel peered inside and saw nothing but a long dark chute going straight underground.

“Wow!” baby squirrel exclaimed, “Are we going down there?!”

“We sure are, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat answered as she approached the chute. “Follow meeeeeeeee...” Ms. Rat’s voice echoed as she jumped down into the chute. Baby squirrel promptly followed.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!” baby squirrel squealed with glee. They came to land on a soft bed of squishy moss in a room unlike any room they had seen before.

“Welcome to the Underground²³,” Ms. Rat said warmly, as baby squirrel stepped off the mossy bed. The dirt beneath their feet was rich and warm, the most fertile soil baby squirrel had ever felt. The walls and ceiling of the Underground were composed of twisty tree roots that weaved in and out of each other, making them almost impossible to distinguish between. Art was hanging on the tree roots, but it was not the type of art that baby squirrel was used to seeing.

“Ms. Rat,” baby squirrel began, “what happened to those paintings?”

Ms. Rat looked at baby squirrel with a quizzical look on her face.

“What do you mean, baby squirrel?”

“Like, how come they don’t look like anything?” baby squirrel continued. “Did they get left out in the rain and turn all splotchy and weird?”

Ms. Rat smiled. “What do you see in the painting, baby squirrel?”

Baby squirrel squinted and tilted their head to the side. Maybe the painting was upside down? No, that didn’t seem to help. It still looked like random paint splotches.

“What am I supposed to see?” baby squirrel asked.

“That’s not what I asked, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat chuckled. “What do *you* see?²⁴”

Baby squirrel kept staring at the painting. They’d never been asked what they see in a painting before. The paintings baby squirrel learned about in Art History class were very life-like and looked like how things are supposed to look. Flowers looked like flowers, trees looked like trees... but this? This wasn’t like those other paintings. This didn’t look like anything at all. At least, not like anything that was real in the world. Baby squirrel walked up a little closer to the painting. Perhaps they were missing something?

²³ “People are fascinated by madness, by what it hides. The art world is the world where madness belongs, where it should belong: in the narrative of the ‘unknown’, of the unexplored” (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1510).

²⁴ “Engaging playfully... and artistically with our own [Mad] subjectivities can be an important mode of resistance to dominant knowledges and power relations” (Eales, 2018, p. 8).

As baby squirrel continued to look at the painting they started to get lost in the colours. Shades of pinks, blues, yellows, and greens were smeared across the canvas with brushstrokes of different sizes. They overlapped, mixed, and fit perfectly together in a very unusual and surprising way. The paint was thick and textured, mountains and canyons spread across the canvas's landscape. It reminded baby squirrel of the tree roots surrounding them in the Underground.

How can a painting contain so much life²⁵?

"Baby squirrel?"

Baby squirrel immediately snapped out of their daydream. Hopefully they weren't in it for very long...

"Do you see something?" Ms. Rat earnestly inquired.

Baby squirrel remained quiet.

What do I say that won't make me sound more nuts than I already seem?

"Um... no, ma'am," baby squirrel replied, "I just see some colours smeared around the canvas."

Ms. Rat sighed and her eyes looked sad. Did she know that baby squirrel saw something? Did she know that baby squirrel felt something²⁶?

"Very well, then," she said.

They both stood quietly for a few moments until the sound of soft drumming broke the silence. Baby squirrel's ears perked. Where was the drumming coming from?

Ms. Rat looked over at baby squirrel and smirked. "Follow me," she called as she began scurrying towards a tunnel.

Baby squirrel approached the passageway and paused.

How am I supposed to fit?

"Um, Ms. Rat?" baby squirrel called. Ms. Rat had already disappeared into the darkness. "I don't think I can fit in here."

²⁵ "Unlike the modern diagnoses, art gives us the possibility to explore, to venture into different views and interpretations. It gives us stories and a narrative behind. [...] The art and painters ... always explored and continue to explore the remaining mystery of 'madness.' They paint us stories and possibilities of different interpretations. As human beings, we always want 'stories,' we want more detail of real human life, hiding behind the increasing number of diagnoses" (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1514).

²⁶ "Art could be rescued from the exclusive world of formalism or decorative artifice, and applied instead to the real and pressing problems of people—including their wild or 'unauthorised' forms of consciousness" (Henzell, 1997, p. 180).

Baby squirrel heard some scuttling from inside the tunnel, followed promptly by Ms. Rat's reappearance. She was covered in dirt with pebbles tangled in her now messy fur. Baby squirrel giggled upon seeing Ms. Rat in such a state. Oakerville citizens could never look out of place.

"You need to crawl, baby squirrel!" Ms. Rat responded.

"And get all dirty?" baby squirrel asked.

Ms. Rat smiled; her eyes were sparkling. "It's really okay to be dirty, baby squirrel," she calmly reassured. "We are allowed to be messy every now and then." She paused. "Actually, we are allowed to be messy whenever we want!"

Baby squirrel was still uncertain. For their whole life, they were taught that they must always look presentable. And presentable had a very particular look to it. Neatly trimmed whiskers, shiny coats... every citizen in Oakerville was expected to be in tip-top shape no matter the occasion. Mrs. Maple would have a field day if she ever found out that baby squirrel was about to crawl through a dark, dirty tunnel and matt up their fur. Baby squirrel was never allowed to crawl, as it was something considered to be beneath Oakerville citizens. Upstanding citizens don't crawl! What baby squirrel was about to do went against everything they had been taught was right.

Yet there was a part of baby squirrel, perhaps a part much larger than baby squirrel would have liked to admit, that was excited to wiggle their way through the dirt. Something about it made baby squirrel feel... well, they weren't entirely sure. But they couldn't ignore the warmth they felt spread across their belly or the tingle in their paws. Baby squirrel was ready.

Baby squirrel laid down on their belly at the entrance of the tunnel and felt the soft dirt press into their chest. Ms. Rat had already turned around and must have been halfway through the tunnel at this point, but for some reason baby squirrel wasn't worried about catching up. Baby squirrel moved slowly through the tunnel, discovering that they had to twist and bend their tiny body in unusual ways to continue through. Baby squirrel loved moving this way. Dirt cascaded from above baby squirrel's head and dusted across their eyelashes, causing them to feel heavy and weighted. They took this as a sign to close their eyes and let their body morph on its own and follow the twists and turns of the tunnel by feeling.

The percussive and rhythmic sounds of the drumming grew louder and louder the longer baby squirrel crawled. They could also begin to hear voices echoing through the tunnel. Baby squirrel must be close! Sure enough, after a few more crawls forward baby squirrel began to feel a warm light spread across their face and the walls around them expand. Baby squirrel stood up as they rubbed off the dirt from their eyelids. When they finally opened their eyes, they couldn't believe what they saw.

The room itself looked like the art room baby squirrel was just in, with tree roots sticking out from the walls and dark soil beneath their feet. Rodents of all kinds were filling the room with dance, but it wasn't the type of dance

baby squirrel was used to seeing. There were no bars along the perimeter of the room, or mirrors spread across the walls. Rodents weren't lined up in rows and there was no instructor leading a class. Instead, rodents were randomly scattered throughout the space. The lighting in the room was soft and dim, distorted shadows painted across the walls. The shadows danced alongside each rodent in what was the most enchanting pas de deux baby squirrel had ever seen. Except it wasn't really a pas de deux – pas de deux's were meticulously choreographed and arranged, each movement a careful calculation led by one partner and performed onto the other. This was much different. This felt more real to baby squirrel. The movement was messy and unrefined, with no clear leader between rodent or shadow²⁷. Both danced with flexed feet and explored the movement of their bodies from all levels: jumping, standing, crawling, sitting, and even rolling. Some danced with their eyes open, while most danced with their eyes closed²⁸.

A gopher sat cross-legged near the centre of the room with his eyes closed, beating on a hand drum. Rodents were dancing with and around the gopher, laughing and stomping, their movements almost becoming a part of the music... or was the music becoming a part of their movement? Baby squirrel couldn't really tell. All they knew was that they wanted in.

Ms. Rat glanced down at baby squirrel. Baby squirrel was lightly tapping their left foot to the beat of the drumming. Ms. Rat smiled – baby squirrel probably had no idea they were doing this. “Well,” she began, “what do you think?”

Baby squirrel looked up at Ms. Rat with wide eyes and excitement beaming through their smile. “This is AMAZING,” baby squirrel began. Before they had a chance to ask Ms. Rat their questions about what was going on, the drumming stopped and the room erupted in applause. The gopher smiled and bowed his head. He stood up but left the worn drum where it was. As he began to walk away, a tiny vole took his place and sat next to the drum. They hovered their paws above the drum and looked down at the floor. Their paws began tapping the drum a lot slower and more gently than the gopher. About half the rodents kept dancing, while others sat or laid down on the

²⁷ During a particularly intense panic attack, someone suggested I try to “dance it out.” This led me to a very interesting experience of moving with and alongside my shadow. Seeing my shadow allowed me to, in a way, see my mind; shadow dancing helped me find my ground again. I was able to see what I was experiencing and embody it through multiple senses. I found the core of my movement originated from two particularly interesting spaces: 1) my mind moving my body, and 2) my body moving through my mind. Having a visual and kinesthetic experience immediately helped to settle and understand the distress I was experiencing in a surprising way.

²⁸ “Mad art as an invitation... to disrupt the biomedical gaze” (Reid et al., 2019). Within the context of this story, ballet is akin to the biomedical gaze, while more contemporary/improv type dance is akin to Mad art. The dancing present in the Underground disrupts the rigidity and normativity of Miss Maple's Academy, and Oakerville as a whole.

floor. Some were in groups, others were alone, but the whole room felt to be connected in some strange fragmented way²⁹.

The gopher waved at Ms. Rat as he began to approach them. He was a scruffy looking gopher, with long yellow teeth and an unruly tail.

"Hello, Gopher," Ms. Rat happily greeted. "Wonderful drumming this evening!"

"Thanks, Ratty! Tonight was a fun one. I see you brought a new friend here this evening!" Gopher noted excitedly, looking at baby squirrel.

"Ah yes! Gopher, I'd like you to meet baby squirrel."

Gopher reached out his little paw towards baby squirrel. Baby squirrel returned the gesture and Gopher tightly squeezed their paw. Gopher's hand felt like a keeper of many stories that felt both foreign and familiar to baby squirrel. They were taken aback by the instant connection they felt towards him.

"I'm so happy you could join us tonight, baby squirrel" Gopher said, his warm paw still holding baby squirrel's.

"You must be something special."

Baby squirrel had never been called special in that way before. They felt flutters in their belly and a smile creep to their face.

"Hey Gopher and Ms. Rat, do you mind if I ask you both a question?" baby squirrel inquired.

"Of course!" they responded enthusiastically.

"What exactly *is* this place³⁰?"

They both smiled and looked at one another. "I think the better question to ask is *who* is this place," Gopher chuckled. Baby squirrel looked confused. What did that mean?

²⁹I use this segment in my story to link to the idea of "prescription" present in ballet to the prescription of psychiatry. Within the context of my ballet experience, autonomy is a foreign concept. We are taught to obey instruction without critique or question, even if it comes at the expense of injury. I have also encountered a similar narrative regarding lack of autonomy when examining some of my earlier experiences of mental illness. There is a fluid and cyclical relationship between the generation of normativity, normative systems, and normative bodies. Prescription, whether it be under movement or psychiatric conditions, is often given without true consent or consideration of alternative approaches. In the Underground, rodents act autonomously and can choose whether they continue dancing, rest, or engage with other activities that best suit their needs at that moment.

³⁰ Within the constituencies outlined by Diamond (2013), the Underground falls primarily under the Mad constituency, where madness is revered and culturally generative. Eales (2018) builds upon this foundation in her creation of Mad Home. The Underground, essentially, is my (re)creation of Mad Home: "a place of darkness and light, a site of intense sensory experiences, and a space of caring for ourselves in pieces" (Eales, 2018, p. 94).

"Can I tell you my story?" Gopher asked.

Baby squirrel nodded. "Please!"

Gopher took a deep breath. "You know, I always thought there was something wrong with me," he began. Baby squirrel could see tears forming in Gopher's eyes. "I knew I was never meant to be a ballet dancer. Miss Maple would always yell at me for how long and yellow my teeth would get."

Baby squirrel felt a wave of sadness spread throughout their body. While they never had a problem with their teeth, they could sure relate to how broken Gopher felt in the eyes of Mrs. Maple, and well, all of Oakerville.

"I would try so hard to keep my teeth clean and short, but no matter how hard I scrubbed or how many carrots I ate, they would grow back even yellower and longer the next day. I even tried going to the dentist, but it was no use. My teeth could not be fixed. Mrs. Maple told me that I should just have my teeth pulled out because I would look more like an upstanding Oakerville citizen. I never felt so sad. The next day, I decided that enough was enough... I needed to get rid of my teeth. I found an old shoelace deep in the woods and tied one end to my teeth and the other end to a tree branch. It was the first time I ever climbed anything so high and I was really afraid, but I knew I had to do it. I counted down from three, closed my eyes real tight, and jumped."

Baby squirrel stood there in shock. They couldn't believe what Gopher had been through.

"Anyways," Gopher continued "it didn't work. The shoelace must have been very old, and it broke. I fell straight to the ground onto a pile of dead leaves and touched my face, hoping to feel holes where my teeth once were. But they were still there, shoelace and all -- I felt hopeless. No matter what I tried, I just would never be able to get rid of these teeth." Gopher paused for a moment. "But it's okay, because then I met Ratty. She saw me crying on that pile of leaves on her way to the Underground and asked if I wanted to tag along. I've never looked back from there."

Gopher flashed Ms. Rat a big yellow smile and looked down at baby squirrel's concerned face.

"My oh my, how I like to ramble," Gopher chuckled, wiping his eyes.

"Gopher," baby squirrel began, "I ... I don't even know what to say." Baby squirrel was fighting back their own tears.

"Oh, it's okay, baby squirrel!" Gopher replied. "Sometimes there isn't anything to say. I really appreciate you listening to me so thoughtfully... that means so much more than just feeling bad for me."

Baby squirrel nodded.

I get it³¹.

"Sometimes I still feel sad about my teeth and wish that they were more normal³²," Gopher continued. "But whenever that happens, I come straight down here to drum or dance. Even if I don't entirely feel better afterwards, it's nice to know that I can come here to be with other rodents who get it."

There was a shared silence between Ms. Rat, Gopher, and baby squirrel. Baby squirrel understood what Gopher was saying, and they had a feeling Ms. Rat did too.

"Actually," Gopher piped up again, "I have found a great use for my teeth down here! Which reminds me..." Gopher looked over his shoulder and then back to baby squirrel. His eyes were sparkling. "I should get going!"

Baby squirrel turned to look where Gopher was looking. An old mouse was laying out sheets of canvas in a corner of the room. A chipmunk was scampering towards the same corner and began pulling out what looked to be acorn caps filled with some sort of paint or dye from their cheeks.

That must be where those paintings are from!

"Maybe I will see you around the room tonight though? I'd love to get to know more about you, baby squirrel! Everyone who comes to the Underground is here for one reason or another, but we are like a family here."

Baby squirrel smiled and nodded. "I'd like that very much."

"Awesome! Well, I'll see you both around!" Gopher speedily scurried away.

Baby squirrel was very curious as to what Gopher would be up to. They looked up at Ms. Rat who was already looking at baby squirrel with a smile on her face.

"Don't worry, baby squirrel," she began "we will definitely stop by the painting station before the night is over."

Baby squirrel nodded. "So... will all of this fix me, Ms. Rat?³³"

Ms. Rat laughed. "And what is it that needs fixing, baby squirrel?" Ms. Rat questioned.

³¹ Holding space is something I have learned to be of immeasurable value both with my relationship with Self and others in madness.

³² Personally, it has been quite challenging to change my inner dialogue from thinking I am "broken" to coming to see the value of my mind. The dominance of the medical model within society has engrained in me the belief that I am somehow the "problem" and that I (and others) would be better off if I had a "normal" mind. Although I am coming to understand that the root of my most distressing experiences stems from how I am (p)received by the world, I have often wondered if things would be "easier" for others (and for myself) if I could just have a "normal" mind.

³³ "When mad art is relegated to the therapeutic realm, understood only as a benevolent force in the lives of mad people, it is decontextualized and positioned as apolitical" (Reid, 2019, p. 257).

Baby squirrel paused. "Well... with everything that happened with Miss Maple and Mr. Elmwood. Does this place sort of get all of the nuttiness out of me so that I can be normal back in Oakerville?"

Ms. Rat looked at baby squirrel and squeezed their arm, reassuringly.

"Not exactly, baby squirrel" Ms. Rat replied.

Baby squirrel was confused. "Well... what is the point of this place then?³⁴"

Ms. Rat smiled softly at baby squirrel and gestured for them to hold her paw. "Let's take a walk and chat. Are you comfortable with that?"

Baby squirrel nodded again. With their hand in hers they began to explore the Underground together.

³⁴ The Underground is the counter narrative to the medical model. In the Underground, baby squirrel confronts their internalized oppression: their own feelings of brokenness projected onto them from their peers and teachers. As Chamberlin (1978) writes, "not only have others thought of [mental patients] in this stereotyped way [of being akin to monsters], we have believed it ourselves" (p. xi). The Underground is baby squirrel's first exposure to an alternate world where they are finally given permission to be themselves without hesitation. This mirrors my own experiences of coming to know Mad studies.

Conclusion: Final Pieces

Looking back, I wonder how I arrived here. How did this fairy tale happen? Why did this fairy tale happen? To be honest, I don't have any answers – and I don't think I ever will. The work seemed to unfold right before my eyes, my body and fingers apparently connected to something deeper inside that I cannot regularly or consciously access. There were periods of silence where I was sure nothing would ever be created, followed by periods of immense imagination that took me for a ride. These moments seemed to be stirred by things that were seemingly mundane and regular in my day-to-day existence: a conversation with a friend or family member, an experience teaching a dance class, an appointment with my family doctor. These moments would often catch me off-guard and pull me out of my thinking-mind and into my feeling-mind where the work would bubble out. In terms of my final written piece, I remember writing “once upon a time” and then remember nothing else. I have come to believe that the fairy tale was in existence before I even put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard, if I'm being completely honest), and it was my job to piece it together using my own stories and the stories of others.

One of the original objectives of this project was to discover how *Mad Home* could become embodied within dance spaces, as I often felt these spaces to be alienating and oppressive. I chose to explore and approach my work through an arts-based paradigm, using arts-based research as a means of knowledge generation and discovery alongside Mad literature and media. Engaging with art, for me, seemed to be the only way I could: (a) ethically conduct this project in order to dismantle and challenge the sanist approaches prevalent throughout most mainstream research methods, and (b) communicate in a language that would (hopefully) be meaningful to Mad, psychiatrized, and neurodivergent folks. What I also learned throughout the

process of creating art was how the creative process mirrored processes of my mind: disordered, sometimes unappealing, and messy. The very process of engaging with art simultaneously engaged me more deeply with Mad knowledge(s) and other Mad works. Art invited me to sensorially experience my own stories and had the unintentional effect of opening new chapters I did not know existed. I have always been taught to run away from my mind, but art invited me to run into it, to hug it, and to love it instead. Beyond the mirroring of art and madness, this project also highlighted how paralleled my own stories of dance and madness are. This realization connected seemingly separate chapters of my life into a space of familiarity. It made me realize how intimately madness has been woven into my own stories and how it continues to shape the world(s) I encounter and inhabit. This realization brought with it a sense of understanding that has helped me work through processing difficult moments (both past and present) by offering an alternative lens.

While another focus of this project was to address how madness is demonized within dance culture, my final fairy tale ended up going beyond this to explore how madness is demonized within greater society and simultaneously drawing connections to my own experiences inside and outside of dance spaces. Using autoethnography and engaging with Mad literature allowed me to see how my own stories (and the stories of others) are influenced by and reflect the ideologies of much larger political systems and structures. What I thought were my own stories are actually stories that are continually (re)crafted through and by the spaces I live in along with the voices that dominate those spaces. My dancing is no more broken than my mind is, even though normative bodies have suggested otherwise. While these realizations may not make the realities of living in sanist institutions any easier, observing how intimately connected (a) my dance experiences are to my madness, (b) my dance experiences are to the greater Mad

experience, and (c) my madness is to the greater Mad experience makes me feel less alone. And when I say less alone, I am not exclusively referring to the deepening of relationships I have experienced with other psychiatrized or neurodivergent folks (although that has definitely occurred), but rather, I feel a comfort in knowing that madness has always been a familiar undercurrent in my world(s), realities, and spaces. It is my deepest desire for this work to perhaps spark other Mad, psychiatrized, and/or neurodivergent folks to discover a similar familiarity within and between their own stories – to find ways to see and love on the magic they can sprinkle inside their spaces, narratives, and places they call *Home*.

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