

# *Mad Conductors:* Pathways of Attention and Dramaturgies of Care

Stephanie Heit and Alexis Riley

*Mad Conductors* is a participatory performance that arises out of a desire to transmute and transform personal experiences of electroshocks and psychiatric memory loss. It is an exploration of electricity, shock, connection, memory (loss), and collective mad ways of being. What happens when energy is transferred? Who or what conducts the ensemble? How can we hold memory as a community? How can we hold the gaps? What resources do mad ancestors and archives offer? In *Mad Conductors*, we investigate and play with these questions through writing, movement, doodling, sound, and other mediums we invent. Our engagements have happened in community settings, universities, nature, and especially with people with lived mad experiences. Together, we work to create supportive spaces to tend to ourselves and each other while we imagine and experiment with new openings, pathways, and futures of care.

Our essay examines our collaboration as an embodied form of dramaturgy. While psychiatric memory loss can be (and often is) deeply painful, we also suggest that these experiences can point us toward new strategies for collectively holding and narrating memory. Accordingly, we structure our performance engagements not only in relation to our subject matter (psychiatric memory loss) but also in relation to the supports we need as mad collaborators to safely and joyfully engage this material. Rather than scripting a set production, we use our skills as artists to build a diverse range of containers, from participatory performances, university workshops, and house visits. While not necessarily conforming to conventional definitions of performance, we consider each engagement to be equally on par with the others; they are all *Mad Conductors* performances. The resulting project

offers a flexible set of environments, actions, and modes of engagement, all while inviting participants into dramaturgical contact with mad forms of knowledge production.

In this essay, we weave photos, questions, and responses from *Mad Conductors* events with individually authored vignettes addressing our personal experiences as both collaborators and friends. Taken together, this divergent compositional structure reflects the nonlinear, fragmentary, and partial qualities of memory loss, conveying alternate qualities of mad experience in both content and form—what we understand as a mad dramaturgical praxis.



Figure 1. Stills from memory neuron film, 2024. Film editing by Alexis Riley.  
(View the film at <https://vimeo.com/1147444730>)

Image description: Stills from a 2024 film of memory neurons overlaid on moving bodies of the *Mad Conductors*' directors as they experiment with synaptic connections in the Turtle Disco garden on Anishinaabe land in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

## How Do You Remember?

### ***Make Lists. Set Alarms Daily. Send an Email to Myself.***

Stephanie: This project is collaboratively conceived and directed by us, two disabled artists coming together from unique backgrounds and experiences. At the heart of our crip collaboration, we prioritize spending time together regularly, deepening our understanding of one another, and valuing friendship as a critical dramaturgical foundation for performance queries, support, and joy. In our process, we've considered how people enter into questions and

relate to potentially traumatic content. Our performance workshops offer multiple possibilities for engagement—such as words, movement, sound, witnessing—as an access feature so participants can tend to their own energy households and bodymindspirit needs in the moment. This access feature is a significant part of our dramaturgical structure in considering audience. Audience here is not a passive collective receptacle but individuals who are welcome and encouraged to choose how they inhabit space and how they interact with *Mad Conductors'* themes. As set-up, we open each workshop with a disability culture protocol invitation. We want to extend this to you as an audiencing/reading procedure as you engage with this essay. Take a moment to notice how the next paragraph lands, what pathways or permissions or reactions it evokes. Pauses and check-ins are another important part of our dramaturgical care practices.

Disability Culture Protocol Invitation: We welcome you to tune into your own being, notice the depth of your breath, feel the temperature of your skin. Is there anything you need to be more comfortable? If needs outside this essay arise, please feel free to take care of them. Perhaps you want to read or listen from beginning to end. Or maybe you want to dip in and out in a nonlinear fashion. We hope to honour and represent the fragmentary nature of our creative process and the divergent twists of our mad beings. And play. Always curiosity and play.

***Say It Out Loud to Myself. Make a Scrapbook. Writing on Limbs and Hands.***



Figure 2. *Mad Conductors* participatory performance at Riverside Arts Center in Ypsilanti, Michigan, as part of a four-day Disability Arts & Culture Gathering, 2024. Photo by Petra Kuppers.

Image description: Performers with colourful scarves explore memory connections while honouring the gaps.

Alexis: We begin with a query: What have you forgotten?

It is an impossible question, but one we find ourselves asking nearly every day. As two mad-identified people, we are all too familiar with memory's contingencies—its inherent slip and slide. Such instabilities come to us through various means: depression, electroshock therapy, psychiatric medication side effects: those repertoires of mad life that produce memory loss or prevent new memories from forming. A quick review of cultural

representations of memory loss does little to capture the nuances of these experiences, preferring to depict such losses in spectacular (and, often, difficult to witness) forms. Take Jack Nicholson’s performance in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; his character emerges from psychiatric treatment zombie-like, unaware. Or consider *The Notebook*, where increasing memory loss precipitates death. In both of these examples, the loss of memory is framed as a world-ending event; it precipitates loss of self and loss of life. Taken together, such representations rely on a particular dramaturgy—one that distinguishes between the “before time” of whole memory and the “after time” of fragmented memory, that is, memory loss. In response, *Mad Conductors* seeks to offer an alternate grammar for memory loss, one attuned to the particularities of mad life. Indeed, as disability performance scholars such as Petra Kuppers, Jess Watkin, and Lindsey Barr have observed, performances created by disabled people often produce new dramaturgies grounded in lived experience. Inasmuch as change in capacity might be an ending, it can also be an opening, an invitation to inhabit new sustainable and supportive dramaturgical structures. And so, a new question takes shape:

## How Do We Remember?

***Ancestor Worship. Food and Ritual. Archives.***



Figures 3 and 4. A *Mad Conductors* performance at Riverside Arts Center in November 2024. Photo by moira williams.

Image descriptions: In the left-hand image, Stephanie and Alexis are both seated. Alexis holds a microphone and gestures toward Stephanie who is smiling. In the background to the right of them is the projection of a memory

neuron branching and in front of that a chair and a table that holds the projector with electrical cords snaking down. The photo on right offers a bird's-eye view of a group of people lying and crouching in a circle around a piece of butcher paper to respond to the question asked at each performance: How do you remember? Participants hold brightly coloured markers to draw or jot down their memory strategies (or invite someone else to be a scribe). The bold text between the sections of this essay are a selection of the responses. We invite you to think about how you individually and collectively hold memories.

Stephanie: *Mad Conductors* originated from a desire to make a performance piece based on *PSYCH MURDERS*, my book of hybrid memoir poems about my lived experience of shock treatments, psychiatric wards, suicidal ideation, and extreme bipolar states. Alexis was going to be a dramaturg for the piece. As we began working together, text and themes from *PSYCH MURDERS* provided a launch pad for us to float and play in a space that didn't fit into the traditionally defined director/dramaturg roles. It quickly became clear that something else wanted to emerge drawing from both of our experiences, with an interest in collaborative direction and indirection. An integral component to our dramaturgy has been acknowledging and amplifying the juice of the unknown and the unexpected; the mad dramaturgy of the unreliability and thus deep reliability of the creative moment.

My life has been shaped by disability from an early age (I'm now fifty-two), which I've been out about by necessity and as an activist choice. My education was derailed by illness and hospitalizations; it took almost a decade to get my undergraduate degree. I identify as bipolar, a poet, a shock/psych system survivor, a dancer, a mad activist, and a teacher. I'm not economically active in a traditional sense, receiving social security disability. I codirect, with my spouse Petra Kuppers, Turtle Disco, a somatic writing space on Anishinaabe land where I am a white settler in Ypsilanti, Michigan. My training in poetics and contemplative and somatic awareness practices at Naropa University informs my practice, as well as deep immersion for the last decade in disability arts and culture.

When I met my wife, I'd spent the prior five years in and out of psych wards. She asked me if I knew about the psychiatric survivor movement. In my over twenty hospitalizations throughout my life, I'd never heard those words. In that moment, my world changed.

***Repeating Phrases. Google Calendar. Tell It as a Story.***

Alexis: I am a white disabled psychiatric survivor and interdisciplinary artist from Shawnee and Osage land—colonial West Virginia. I have not always gone by these names. Psychiatry first came to me at age seven; a counter to my anxious child mind. Later, in middle school: a childhood bipolar diagnosis, an appellation that gathered additional modifiers and comorbidities before culminating in an autism diagnosis at age thirty-one. For nearly twenty-five years, I have walked with various shades of madness, but it is only in the last five that I have found mad community. As an artist privileged with an academic appointment, I spend most days searching for mad ancestors in the archives of Oregon State Hospital, wading through case files, newspaper articles, and documentary photographs, uncovering mad community in the past. Webinars and peer support groups hosted by Project LETS, Fireweed Collective, and the Institute for the Development of Human Arts (IDHA) have extended this sense of mad community into the present.

Although we had not yet met, Stephanie was a critical contributor of my growing circle of support. I read her writing while isolated during early COVID lockdowns; her words were a soothing balm. Our current collaboration relocates this exchange from words in print to bodymindspirits in motion, opening up new pathways of attention, new dances of care.

**Physical Habit. Using Colour. Draw or Map It out.**



Figures 5 and 6. *Mad Conductors* performance. Left, *Underwater Green Breathes Vulture*, title by Orchid Tierney, watercolor by Beth Currans. Photo by courtesy of Beth Currans. Right, Beth and Orchid. Photo by Petra Koppers.

Image description: The watercolour image on the left pictures a close-up of an orange kayak surrounded by water and green lily pads with a vulture. In the image on the right, Beth and Orchid sit next to each other, masked, playing a rain stick and a guiro as part of an ensemble soundscape for a memory. In this *Mad Conductors* performance, we paired up to share a memory of a pleasurable place and asked our partners: Will you hold my memory? Then the partner wrote down three words to capture the memory and a title.

Stephanie: Brunch as dramaturgical method. We use brunch as a nurturing infrastructure for our *Mad Conductors* practice, chatting over blueberry pancakes, veggie omelettes, killer croissants, seated outside for COVID protection in various nearby restaurants. In that slippery, often productive realm of the liminal—not one thing, not the other, but its own between meal—brunch offers us expansive time, a slowing, an alternative capacity. We slide into that space to talk about everything from how we are personally, to

questions about how to navigate trauma responses and activating material in a workshop, to how we mediate our own responses, to small sharings about communication preferences (both of us often find writing emails stressful), to our first memories of electricity.

The conversation darts and zig-zags in disjointed lines that we each manage to follow. Or interrupt. Mad constellations proliferate the space around us. We are conductors of our own frequencies that get to compare, investigate, and hum together. I return home full and enlivened by being witnessed, witnessing, and some other thing that feels like spinning, the dizziness, but also the act of casting a line, of making something new, and of adding to an existing web.

***Flash Cards. Singing It. Affirmations.***



Figure 7. Left to right: Bhumi Patel, Stephanie Heit, and Raven Malouf-Renning, early exploration of *Mad Conductors* in “Queer Mad Electrics,” part of the Co-Dreaming: Improvisation Toward Liberatory Worlding symposium, 2023. Photo by Petra Kuppers.

Image description: The three participants are seen in silhouette with arms reaching to gather currents from the air, water, and each other in electrical play along the Oakland Bay at Township Commons Park.

Stephanie: As new collaborators and friends, we have been engaged in the dance of slowly learning each other's moves and how we each navigate space as artists with shared and unique disciplines and disabilities. Alexis comes from a more theater-informed background while mine is more movement informed. I tend to offer prompts that are intentionally open and abstract, such as this one for a twenty-minute improvisation about electricity: Take charges and currents from the environment and move them through your body. Where do they enter? Where do they exit? How do you direct the energy? These leave room for a lot of play and possibility but can also result in discomfort and frustration at not knowing what is expected and what one is supposed to do.

Alexis facilitated an exercise where we played with sound scores for memories. Each person in the circle offered a gesture combined with a sound that the group then repeated. We continued building slowly with multiple steps until we had a menu of options to use for a more open improvisation. This kind of score creates a vocabulary and the satisfaction of completion yet also runs the risk of being prescriptive. In *Mad Conductors*, we've thought about if we are exploring a question, an answer, or both simultaneously to inform our dramaturgical structures. What kinds of access and experiences do certain approaches offer? What is most effective in which community settings? Is frustration ok?

***Ask Others to Remember. Ask People to Email Me. Take a Picture.***

Alexis: Community is vital; and yet, community is often difficult to find. As my archival research reminds me, people with mental health differences were and are often subject to isolation and confinement, stigma and shame. These conditions make it difficult to find one another, particularly in public spaces. And so, Stephanie and I have taken a different tack. In addition to hosting open workshops for groups, we also make house calls.

Today we are welcomed into the home of a new friend, where we co-create our own mini *Mad Conductors* event. Together, we gather around what hurts—and how we support one another through that hurt. A loose dramaturgical structure informs our exchange, gently flexing as our tolerance for difficult experiences shifts. We compare notes, fill in the gaps of our individual experiences with the memories of our makeshift collective. There are no gasps in our exchange, no expressions of disbelief (however well intentioned).

Only affirmative nods, small statements of “yes,” “of course,” “me too,” a far cry from the spectacular dramaturgies offered across other media. Buoyed by these affirmations, I begin to experience a kind of yielding, a softening of my own mental borders as I attune to the recollections of my interlocutors. I wonder: Instead of thinking about memory as something one person holds, how might we understand memory as something that is held by a collective, in this case, our trio?

The scaffolding of this small performance—the supportive container held by mad kin—that allows me to broach this question.

***Post-it Notes. Mementos. Place Objects (Keys) Where I Will See Them.***



Figure 8. A group of University of Michigan theatre students participating in a *Mad Conductors* workshop in winter 2024. Photo by Stephanie Heit.

Image description: Six people of various races and genders move in a group from right to left, their feet bare, as they channel the energy of neurons forming connections in the brain. Each person assumes a different posture. Some bend their knees and reach forward, others curve their spines and hang their hands over their feet, others still place their hands on their faces, elbows pointed.

Alexis: When I think about my collaboration with Stephanie, I often wonder at the similarities of our experiences, each conversational anecdote a testimony to the political contours of mad life. At the same time, I linger on what we do not share. My relationship with Stephanie is the first time I've had access to an *intergenerational* mad friendship. Difference sparks curiosity, and my attention turns. Rather than focusing on my individual mad memory—gaps and all—I find myself lingering on the possibility of a collective mad memory...

These ideas emerge while workshopping a two-person exercise. One participant offers three words associated with a memory while the other generates a short movement sequence in response, creating a dramaturgical exchange in which the weight of memory is shared. Stephanie chose Crystal Lake, her sacred space. As she allowed me to hold her memories in my movement, she simultaneously allowed me to hold her mad history. In response, I invited her to do the same, to embody the calming rustle of my grandmother maple. As we took turns passing memories between us, I felt a lineage emerge, a performance-based record of intergenerational madness—those aspects of lived experience often absent from official accounts and, at times, from my own bodily memory.

***Movement Patterns. Storytelling. Do Something Weird.***



Figure 9.

Left to right:  
Stephanie Heit,  
Liz Orvis, and  
Alexis Riley,  
masked with  
smiling eyes,  
taken as a selfie  
in Liz's living room  
in Redford,  
Michigan, 2024.

Stephanie: I had an important realization as we were driving to meet community participant Liz Orvis, author of *I Can Do Hard Things! My journey of Thriving with a Serious Mental Illness*. Liz is a mental health advocate who lives with bipolar 1 and has lived experience with ECT (electroshock). In the nearly twelve years since my own shock “treatments,” I haven’t actually spoken in depth with anyone else who has had ECT. Of course, I talked with other people while I was in the psych ward but, even then, that was more about procedure details and not the impact on our lives. After discharge, I didn’t find any opportunities to talk with other shock survivors. On this first meeting, some of the questions we explored and reflected on were

- What has supported you in healing from shock treatment?
- How have you integrated the experience?
- How have you worked with memory loss?
- What do you wish people asked you about your shock experiences?

These questions provided a dramaturgical framework to facilitate conversation and direct the topic away from the often traumatic recollection of the shock experience itself. This structure inherently has a generative aspect with the answer to the last question offering more questions that could be used in future rounds. In a dramaturgy of care, how can we create structures for emergence?

***Count on Fingers. Journal. Computer Tabs.***



Figure 10.

Left to right: Sarah Dean, Beth Currans, Ashwini Bhasi, and Slade Billew during Memory Lanes workshop, Turtle Disco garden, 2023. Photo by Stephanie Heit.

Image description (previous page): Ashwini reaches her arms up in a memory gesture while Sarah witnesses and Beth and Slade improvise a sound score with xylophones and instruments laid out on colourful beach towels, with red camping chairs and a zero gravity chair in a circle.

Stephanie: We are outside in the Turtle Disco garden on a beautiful spring Saturday for a *Mad Conductors* workshop called Memory Lanes. There are red beach chairs, zero gravity chairs, towels for lying on the ground, options to accommodate different comfort needs. Some of us take our shoes off. We start by moving around the yard while listening to Barbara Streisand sing “The Way We Were.” In the course of the two-hour workshop, we play with “scattered pictures,” recalling a pleasurable place and all of its associated sensations. We write words that capture the essence on orange and yellow paper strips. As a group, we experiment enacting the memories using gestures, voices, words, and instruments—a delicious range of sounds possible from egg shaker, steel drum, xylophone, bells. We each act as conductors for our own memory, tweaking the score as we see fit (more bells, quieter at the end). These tweaks, adaptations, and experiments exemplify our dramaturgical approach where bodymindspirits and different ways of being are foregrounded and privileged over any production mechanisms.

My interest in this query was how we might collectively hold memory. As a shock survivor with profound memory loss, I’ve had to rely on loved ones to fill in and recall the blanks. This has often felt like a deficit, with shame or frustration attached, grief for the missing. On this morning, I had a gestalt-like experience of the group’s holding of my memory, making it more luminous. We all entered into a contract to create and embody each other’s memory place; it didn’t feel like a favour or disability service but rather an opportunity to rub against someone else’s experience and feel it as vibration, word, gesture, with forgotten or unrealized parts just part of the fabric.

## ***Sometimes I Don't.***



Figures 11 and 12. *Mad Conductors* performance at the Center for Mad Culture in Chicago, Illinois, as part of the Dunning Asylum exhibition opening, November 2024. Photo by aL mccarthy.

Image description: In the photo on the left, we see the backs of a full audience seated in front of a screen showing the memory neuron film with some participants reaching and extending their arms in multiple directions, a synaptic dance. The photo on the right features four participants who are engaged in sharing memories and witnessing and holding those memories for each other. One person is a wheelchair user, another is seated on a chair, another on the floor, another on a windowsill. They are holding green and yellow flashcards and colourful markers with their attention and gaze toward the person sharing.

Alexis: Our dramaturgical engagements weave networks of memories, each passed and held between the multiple bodymindspirits who join in our performances. These small moments of exchange sustain us in the present; at the same time, I also wonder how these dramaturgies might stretch into the past. The archival documents I study daily are almost exclusively clinical in nature: written by doctors, nurses, and staff; held in university libraries; and preserved for academic purposes. While I cannot speak for the dead, the absence of mad perspectives within these archives attests to the catastrophe of medical incarceration, its world-ending capacity. Despite this, I am always startled by the overwhelming amount of joy I routinely encounter preserved in these documents. Plays, dances, films, photographs, poetry—all of these practices run through historical records of medical incarceration,

preserving memories of mad friendship, connection, and care. Sometimes, if the light hits just right, the archival photographs I've saved begin to resemble a *Mad Conductors* performance.

Years ago, off balance, I felt swallowed whole by madness, isolated and afraid. Today, over brunch, I tell Stephanie about the photographs I found, mad people joining hands to "trip the light fantastic," at a midcentury state hospital social dance. Together, we feel their energy radiate off the page, calling us to embrace the dramaturgical capacities of our mad bodies, to hold one another's memories, to embrace the gaps.

What did mad people do at the end of the world? They danced.

## References

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