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## Documenting Methods & Process

*Borderland* was a Research and Development project funded by The Arts Council. The performance was inspired by *The Yellow Wallpaper* by 19<sup>th</sup> century American author Charlotte Gilman-Perkins, as Gilman's novella addresses key concepts that were explored through the dramaturgy. The project sought to interrogate stigmas evident in contemporary discourses surrounding women and mental illness. The methodology drew on contemporary women's experiences of peri-natal psychosis facilitated through a series of meetings with the Ruth Jackson CEO and founder of the Bluebell Charity Trust, an organisation that offers services and support for women affected by perinatal mental health difficulties. Through a series of meetings, where we discussed women's direct experiences of peri-natal illness in the context of treatment and recovery, and the prevailing stigmas surrounding peri-natal illness derived from historical discourse on the subject of madness. This method of interweaving historical accounts of the illness, and references to the medical intervention that Gilman-Perkins describes in her novella, as she was prescribed the 'rest cure' by physician Silas Weir Mitchell in the USA in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Which entailed prolonged bed rest and seclusion, overfeeding, and electrotherapy, which Gilman-Perkin had nearly driven her mad. Her response to this treatment was to write the *The Yellow Wallpaper*, to expose the misogyny of 19<sup>th</sup> century medical practice. The stigma attached to mental illness is rooted in socio-historical medical psychiatric practices such as this treatment.

The prevailing trope of the 'Madwoman in the Attic', embodied in the character Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, provided a lens through which to explore imagery and stories in the practice. This practice is informed by feminist theory as a framework to analyse this prevailing representation of madness, drawing on feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter (1987), literary critics Sandra Gilbert and author Susan Gubar (1984), and literary critic Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1996), who contests aspects of Gilbert and Gubar's thesis of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literacy*. The dramaturgy sought to draw on historical narratives and representations and interweave these with the contemporary experience in this context, to address prevailing narratives whereby 'the dual images of insanity - madness as one of wrongs of women; madness as an essentially feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality - suggest the ways in which the relationship between women and madness has been perceived.' (Showalter, 1987, p. 3) As Showalter says 'madness has often been a historical label applied to female protest and revolution' (1987, p. 4), and perceived as the 'authors anger against the rigidities of patriarchal tradition.' (1987, p 4) The romanticising and endorsement of madness as protest is contested in both Showalter and Caminero-

Santangelo, and as these ideas are thought through this practice, *Borderland* conveys these as spectral presence of historical discourses and narratives of madness that pervade current stigma surrounding women and mental illness. These stigmas, as Showalter discusses, are drawn from Darwinian psychiatry, which 'the most characteristic and revealing metaphor of Darwinian psychiatry was that of the 'Borderland' the shady territory between madness and sanity, which sheltered 'latent brain disease' and the seeds 'of nervous disorders'. (1987, p.105)

The practice sought to interrogate this 'Borderland' and to draw out the spectral agency of these narratives. The processes and presentation of the research and development period are highlighted through the central image that drew on *Jane Eyre's* iconic 'madwoman in the attic' Bertha Mason, symbolised through her 'red dress' (as can be seen on the poster for *Borderland*). The practice sought to explore the ways in which images and tropes of the past pervade and feed into current discourse, as Foucault says 'confronting this discourses, with their tireless dialectic, confronting these discourses constantly reworked and reworded, a long dynasty of images, from Bosch down to Brueghel. Indeed, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards has haunted the imagination.' (1965, p. 15) These representations of women and madness in cultural forms inform social and cultural perspectives and prevailing stigma, and the practice was a starting point to unravel these images as embodied in the performer's roles and actions on stage. The scenography drew on the image of the 'Wallpaper', to entrap the women, as if these images confine them to *The Yellow Wallpaper* - in Gilman-Perkins story she begins to hallucinate the many women who 'creep' beyond the walls. The presentation sought to point to real and embodied experiences of psychosis as these are juxtaposed with a stifling romanticism of representations of madness. Through this project I was able to identify an area of practice-based research that can contribute new knowledge to the field of dance-theatre practice with regard to the subject matter of feminine experience and 'madness', but the most pertinent outcome was to identify how the spectral presence in discourse can pervade current discourse, which has become the central focus of my subsequent and current practice-based research into Hauntology in performance practice.