Way Markers in the Practice of Shambling: A Method for Communal Discernment

Introduction

Retracing the Lines of Discovery

This paper retraces the lines of a discovery process that has been shaping our shambling practice since we first virtually crossed paths in 2021 during Covid19, thanks to a mutual mentor. As we worked on bringing together a journal special issue on listening to marginalised voices in education, we asked ourselves what it would mean to turn away from exploitative terms of exploration and towards ones guided by Indigenous wisdom, not just as a rhetorical flourish, but as everyday embodied keeping faith with Indigenous epistemologies. In this process we tried to re-imagine collaborative research practices and presentations. We experimented with a more Indigenous grounded, post humanist attuned practice and in so doing, we developed a process that is pre-method, laying the ground for defining and designing research, that plays a fecund role during method in sensing together with others using earth and arts-based practices within a research inquiry, and that, also, most significantly for us, has transformed our post method practices as the conversations in this time circle back round to pre-method’s time of fallow gestation. This work is development, not so much of skills, but of orientation. As Ulus (2020) has written, “In the spirit of acknowledging that our embodied positioning in the world is a part of, not separate from, our observations and writings, (2020:1)” we call this work Shambling, unabashedly aware of its messy makeshift, institutionally incompatible (Burner 2016: 363) even, connotations that we argue are appropriate to agential realism in these cacophonous times.
This work has been a dialogue between academics bridging (Kirton 2022) quite different starting points, settler and indigenous. As Author One seeks to decontaminate practices that are too script-bound, shambling was undertaken to disturb the fundamental practice of field notes and memos that has underwritten her academic practice for twenty years. Guided by Author Two she is seeking to retain the polyphonic and nonlinear presence of the lived world within what she crafts and shares with the wider research community.

**Place Recognition: Where We Write From**

Author1 is descended from generations of settlers but has lived and worked in Scotland for several years and counts as her most formative learning experiences time with Scottish Traditional Travelers, an Indigenous nomadic people of the British Isles, particularly her time with one of its heritage bearers, NAME. What he taught her about how story is part of relationship making and community has underpinned all her community work and research since (Author1, 2009). Author2, working in the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai), the Tsuut'ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Good Stoney) First Nations, and the homeland of the Métis Nation of Alberta (Districts 5 and 6), has centred Indigenous voices in her scholarship and research. She prioritizes community-based research partnerships and engages in critically reflexive dialogue around reconciliation (*Author and Other*2018). The insight drawn from this work is that it is not the rubric or wheel, that is, the resulting artifact of such practices, that makes for holistic learning, it's the process and relationships formed in creating together in which holistic learning resides. From these backgrounds we came together to work with the question:
how can our understanding of embodied learning lead to habits of embodied inquiry that better shift our relations to what socio-ecological justice means in this time?

We began experimenting with practices that are more consistent with our values and stated academic commitments. We wanted to step away from note-taking that produce boxes of justified text that fit neatly within grids and take up processes that reconfigure knowing as ongoing entanglements. Aware that Barad argues that, “practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world (2008:91), we wanted to seek out practices that relied less on the frame of the mirror, again drawing on Barad’s observation that reflexivity like reflection still holds the world at a distance (2008: 87). And so, we embarked on a writing/making/sensing time with a series of participants in different academic workspaces to see what would emerge.

**Will You Recognize It When You See It?**

What follows in this paper is a bricolage of dialogue, observation and provocations that gesture towards (Andreotti, Jimmy and Cahoun 2021) our understanding and hope for what shambling is and affords us. We want to give the reader some sense of how the methodology developed so that you might find your bearings before we share examples of what the process yields. Because we want your engagement with the relational experience to take precedence, we present our turns in the dialogue writing in the first-person singular and prefacing these passages with the name of who contributes this passage, and where passages represent the outcome of our dialogue, we write in first person plural. We also want the reader to engage in an imaginative experience of shambling first and use those examples to make further
connections to theory in the discussion section that follows with the hope readers will also bring in what speaks from their situations and relations. We close with our poetic working through of our methodology, each our perspective on a joint planning session for shambling set side by side, as a further move away from conventional academic text towards knowledge as sharing (Wilson 2008) that brings in more of the human.

Like many Indigenous and arts-based research methods, we see the concept as living, vibrant and in flux. It can become greater than the confines of our present imaginations. For these reasons, we avoid being prescriptive and tend towards presenting examples that might open spaces of possibilities for living differently as researchers, creators, collaborators, and relatives. Like Rosiek and Adkins-Cartee we want to develop a way of research engagement that “invites connection but does not deductively coerce conclusions,” (2023:157). Shambling is a method of grounding inquiry within a playful and embodied engagement with one’s context that is not background but as agentive co-creator of the possibilities that can be present (Marker 2018), aware that ethical research is not achieved by transcending context, but by being responsive to it (Wilson 2008). It is a practice that brings the weight of our experiences, knowledges, and personhoods to the fore, and asks us to locate and presence ourselves in and with the breath of the world. We see this as place based as the practice seeks to always ground the work that we do, wherever we are, in first attending to that place and our sense of our relations within it. Thus, we give examples of doing it within our homes as we work, but also the space of academic conferences, where we can sometimes be least mindful of place. We are arguing that each place has particularities we should attend to, rather than place based method as attending to a particular place.
Here, author 1 shares her story of its beginnings: A Shambles is a device for “exploring the universe” primarily using what is to hand, of the present place and what is in one’s pockets as the provocation. Fiction can often get to the nitty gritty that straightforward social science methods too often skirt round. And it is fiction’s jesters, fools and outcasts who voice what most bears paying attention to. So, when the corner of my eye keeps being drawn to a fictional trope that my task-focused mind keeps dismissing as absurd, something Ramos (2020) refers to as “weak signals”, I’ve learned to stop and pay attention. Terry Pratchettian1 “Shambles” is one such raven in the periphery of my vision that had been cocking its head at me. One passing comment to Author2 brought it into the firelight of our conversation.

Here is Pratchett’s description of the witchy practice of shambling:

Some things start before other things. It was a summer shower but didn’t appear to know it, and it was pouring rain as fast as a winter storm. Miss Perspicacia Tick sat in what little shelter a raggedy hedge could give her and explored the universe. She didn’t notice the rain. Witches dried out quickly. The exploring of the universe was being done with a couple of twigs tied together with string, a stone with a hole in it, an egg, one of Miss Tick’s stockings which also had a hole in it, a pin, a piece of paper and a tiny stub of pencil. Unlike wizards, witches learn to make do with a little. The items had been tied and twisted together to make a . . . . Device. It moved oddly when she prodded it. One

1 An autodidact who left school to become a journalist, Pratchett mercilessly parodied the worst excesses of academic culture in his depiction of the Wizards of Unseen University in the thought experiment on humanity known as the Disc World. We hope he has yet a twinkle in his eye at our reference to his work as Pratchettian.
of the sticks seemed to pass right through the egg, for example, and came out the other side without leaving a mark. Yes, she said quietly, as rain poured off the rim of her hat.

There it is. A definite ripple in the walls of the world

In our different ways we both have come to believe it is quite urgent that we attend to the “ripples in the walls” of that which sustains us and our world. There is much about Terry Pratchett’s witches that is worth taking on board as we consider being a professional otherwise. We took this passage as an invitation to borrow shamble making and repurpose it, much as Miss Tick repurposes her stocking with a hole in it.

What Are We Rubbing Up Against or Pushing Back From?

Within our academic practices, we are often expected, if not required, to follow well-established norms of structured methods. Customarily, we are initiated into these practices early in our studies. We read and cite the canon and stand on the shoulders of our disciplinary predecessors. Eventually it becomes habit. These are the familiar and taken-for-granted practices of thinking and performing academically which require unlearning, picking apart. Like Rosiek and Adkins-Cartee, we are concerned that euro-centric entrainment of scholarly practices incapacitates, “imagining a relation other than being a spectator of objects” and, “requires a more profound form of therapy to grow beyond” (2023: 165).

Shambling, as part of this unpicking, makes a mess-- yet it can be an expansive and beautiful mess. Like other embodied practices such as forum theatre (AUTHOR 1, 2015), it can take one back to unfamiliar or long forgotten places from childhood spent fashioning things together out
of twigs and mud and pinecones and other precious found items, immersed in learning with one’s world. As antithesis to academic work, it invites disruption of our somewhat rigid tendencies about what research is, who we are in it, and how it is presented. If we are to move beyond the hierarchical to the holistic, these structures must give way for processes that let us come along side what is to be known. If we are to authentically engage with indeterminacy (Rosiek and Adkins-Cartee 2023) the structures of past violence (Burman 2016) need to be unsettled. A shambles is a bringing together of disparate intuitively chosen parts, where elements sit loosely beside one another, with meaning imbued by the teller and witnessed by the audience and, as such, may rekindle the spirit of our earliest researcher-selves.

**Why Shamble?**

We work in heterogenous academic spheres where for some Indigenous or decolonising work holds no importance, for others there is an acquaintance signalled through passing reference to it, while still others, many of those in the community of this journal, have been doing the slow careful work of deeper engagement for some time. As we retrace our steps we are aware they will be familiar to some and provocative to others. We want to question binaries that privilege the theoretical over and against the practical and the worldview substantiated. What if what we know is under-theorised until we experiment with how our theorising meets our embodied practices? Shambling is a playful way to make visible agential realism, to acknowledge the ongoing performative acts of meaning making, within our readings of our rippled reality. Posthumanism asks us to become more aware of complex interactions in which
we are enmeshed and to locate our agency as at once impacted and impacting upon a meshwork of agents/actants we find ourselves alongside (Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2013).

Author 1 recounts her early steps towards shambling further: Early on in thinking through what Shambling means I find as companions other women who before me deconstructed norms. In Composing a Life, Mary Catherine Bateson observes:

Nothing in our tradition gives interdependence a value comparable to symmetry. It is difference that makes interdependence possible, but we have difficulty valuing it because of the speed with which we turn it into inequality. This means that all of the relationships in which two people complement each other -complete each other, as their differences move them toward a shared wholeness . . . are suspected of unfairness unless they can be reshaped into symmetrical egality. But symmetrical relationships and exchanges alone are limiting. (1989: 104)

This encapsulates one of the affordances of shambling—shambles invite us to explore various weights as part of the whole that are not congruent. In a way it asks what is the constellation, the dangling mobile of elements that are important now? A shambles, by its very name suggests there will be asymmetrical, woven with spaces and elements of difference.

Bateson writes further:

If differences multiply ranking is harder. If one attends to multiple dimensions, superiority becomes as elusive as simple equality. (1989: 105)

Bateson touches on an important facet that urges on our exploration of the different ways to discern that shambling offers. If we are to become more adept at appreciating the
interdependence, even getting to the point that we better acknowledge its existence and its fundamental role in our existence, we need ways to readjust our sights from linear lines of progression to wider appreciation of multiple differences acting together. In reading Bateson I am not unaware of the parents that shaped her and their impact on academic thought. This brings to mind Rosiek and Adkins Cartee’s working through of agential relations and the citational choices we make. They argue the merit of our choices lies,” in the consequent conditions it enables” (2023: 167).

Barad (2008: 179-180) becomes very salient here. She draws our attention to the possibility that time is not fixed and unidirectional, but that time is not separate from spacetimemattering, and that changes in patterns, their impulse and effect, are open to further change influenced by later events pulsing across their trajectory. And so, Bateson provides some enabling conditions that help me stumble over the blinkering modernist conceptions of equality. As they come into view, I move a step towards expanded possibilities of how I can sense right relationships, not fettered to a scale, a one up-one down crudeness. This opens a way for me to read Rosiek and Carthee (2023) and through them to come to Marker's (2018) work that walked me through the importance of place as a whole having agency, an agency that meets with the agency of those who are in who form together a different kind of agency, not possible for any one alone. Weighing each or attributing a hierarchical order to any aspect gets one no closer to understanding or acting ethically with this agency. To see from this standpoint is many steps away from an academic standpoint framed in an actuary mindset.

 Relatives, my relationality with them, have moved from a marginal position barely thinkable to primacy of place. How I come to this is through relations: both those connections made earlier
and those more recent, coming together to surround me as I chose a path that is nearer a right relationship with Jennifer, with the beavers and the light the river casts into the sky and this wider relating world that asks for our respectful attention.

The practice develops skills in making intuitive choices to represent assembled relationships that we can then examine for possible meanings. Through repeated attempts we become more adept at discerning with intuition. We create a dialogue between that which we intuit, a more distributed sense making, and the thinking we do textually. Over many dialogues we become conversant in a diffracted sensemaking that pulls away from hierarchical modes of representation that have done much violence.

Methods

Method as repurposing a stocking with a hole in it

We brought to shambling a desire to incorporate walking inquiries into our daily academic practice. This is the practice of taking your questions for a walk, or, as Luca, Ingold and Vergunst (2008) have suggested, taking a line for a walk. Before the assembling of shambles, we first needed to locate and take stock of our wayside.

So, we evolved this practice of orientating through walking in our surroundings before attending to our internal environment. For others joining us, at first, we gave instructions something like this:
Looking around your workspace, what objects do your eyes alight in that say something about what values you bring to your work, what perhaps keeps you going?

Going a little further afield, literally into a field of green space, what says something about the areas you are most comfortable working in, what says something about what you always wish you could get to or had time for, and what is like a gift, something from your work that you’d want to be in everyone’s pocket. Keep a raven’s scavenging eye out as you roam for threads, something with a hole in it, and something that is living. These things are good to think with. If you turned your pockets out from this time of rambling, how do they land on the table, how do they want to be arranged, is there a thread that runs through them? If we make sense of them aloud to each other, what stories, what sense making emerges that makes visible common way markers across our experiences?

These directions have become condensed to sharing our experience and prompting:

- Walk
- Notice
- Relate
- Allow time for meaning to web
- Be patient with divergent and convergent webs

**THERE IS NO WRONG WAY TO DO IT**

**What We Noticed About How To Do Shambling:**
Shambling happens with an ebb and flow.

It is a meeting point but not a resting point.

It is not a definitive world view but a pulse taking.

Shambling is permission to return to ourselves.

**Examples**

**Author 2’s First Attempt at Shambling (while walking with Author 1 in Scotland):** In this instance we are using shambling as an alternative to making planning notes for a co-facilitated workshop. Right from the beginning I took liberties with the shambles. I had listened to Author 1 describe it. The contents of a pocket strung together on a string. There were certain parameters. Something with a hole in it. Something living. The words of Terry Pratchet replaying in my head as told from Author 1’s end of the call. I love the idea of this. Having participants head outside and walk and find things to string together.

As I walked and visited with Author 1 in my place of newfound relationships—part of a lifelong assignment inspired by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Cree Nation (Author 2, 2023; 2020)—I could picture the thin black string of the paved path I had taken from my house. If you were to zoom way out, it would appear thin and wispy like a string (liberty number one). I imagined myself at home afterward with a pen carefully drawing the thin line just as I had walked hundreds of times in the last year. Then selecting the photos to attach along the thread (liberty number two).
I begin by attaching the image of the poplar stumps. It was taken at the first place along our walking meeting where I turned my phone so that Author1 could see the many stubby, rough-cut stumps right near the path. The distinct evidence of beavers.

Next, I include the image of the moon. She was over my shoulder, to the north, nearer to the river and gleaming white against the grey sky of midday. Grandmother Moon, beside the up-reaching branches of leaf-bare trees in late fall. The photo—and the memory it holds—is a treasure on the string, representing the excitement of that moment we both realised we could see her at the same time. Grandmother Moon connecting us across time zones and geographies yet holding a shared space of experience.

Third, I place a short cheater thread to have the next image dangling off the main thread to represent the steps I had taken on a secondary path to show Author1 the river flowing beside the path. She had heard it and asked to see it. It was an unexpected detour for me. I rarely veer from the familiar path. But I was grateful for the request because it reminded me that I should be visiting with the river more intentionally too. Attuning to her. And expressing my gratitude for all the life she supports in this place.

Finally, I string the image of the swans resting on the frozen pond. White against white. Difficult to see unless you know to look for them, or at very least, to be curious about the round figures on the otherwise smooth surface.

The shambles, as I have pictured it, has these pieces: stubs of tree trunks gnawed by beavers; Grandmother moon low in the overcast sky; the slow moving yet rumbling river; and a few resting swans—heads tucked in—atop a frozen pond. None have a particularly apparent hole.
All are living. And what is holding them together is a path and my memory of walking with them. For these reasons, a shambles necessitates a storyteller and an audience.

Author 1: Shambles as space to see the intra-actants

Stories that sit alongside is an aspect of this work that I explored whilst shambling once a month with two work colleagues (Figure One) in this instance shambling replaces the more traditional field notes as the main text that formed our inquiry.

Our purpose in doing this was to better understand what professional development was called for as we emerged from Covid lockdown. For this shamble, I worked with a necklace which I had often donned whilst online to put on my professional self during meetings. If not exactly armour this necklace was a way of donning a professional mantle. I let it be the string that formed the web for this shamble, falling as it would on the page creating spaces that could diffract against each other. I then spent time writing into these spaces, letting intuition guide which noticing I placed where. I started by noting the key phrases that were gaining prominence at the time “hybrid”, “inclusive”, “new normal”. These words buzzed angrily in my head and the shambles was an attempt to think through how I might relate to them, how I could best be a professional in this time. To do this I brought Mary Catherine Bateson’s book into the frame. I noticed the necklace sparked many observations: made of shell, a natural living resource, shiny plastic and humanly fabricated, it stood in for the clash in my workplace. The different shapes the necklace made prompted me to think about home as workspace and office as no longer quite the home of my work that it once was. Thinking further about how these thoughts butted up against each other, I noticed that the necklace has within each disc a
small hole through which the thread is strung. It occurred to me these small holes can be like “the small moments between each task that there can be to let the deeper well up”. Finally, I asked how can those whose writing I have turned to in the past be present in this shambling moment. Life seemed bitty, as we attempted to patch back together working practice in a stop-go time of partial recovery. Thinking of the different bits of the necklace, the bittiness of work life, Mary Catherine’s reflection on quilting came to mind: that this is a female practice of often making do, bringing bits together into a coherent shape, repurposing, reconstructing wholeness out of broken-ness. These thoughts sit alongside remembering the many metaphoric meanings Bachelard (1958) explores for shells in *The Poetics of Space*. For me writing in the space of the web, thinking about their shapes and juxtapositions is an important part of Shambling. These shapes may have something to say about the diffractive agency of the different interactants in the assemblage of the professional experience. Here I notice that I’ve pushed Mary’s book with the little penguin on its spine well under the necklace. It’s as if the necklace is putting an arm out to include, to bring further into my teaching her words. How would my teaching be different if her observations about interdependence were more central in my thinking? This shambles spurs me on to more actively watch for this in the weeks ahead. Sharing this shambled way of bringing theory to bear on practice with my colleagues felt like a dialogue at a different kind of pace, less of an imposition of one theoretical stance over another and more of walking with each other’s lines of inquiry.

**The Ripples of Shambling**
Author2: I am struck by how my Indigenous worldview informs my conception of shambles differently; all the inanimate pieces found in the natural world are living—imbued with spirit (Little Bear, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Abram, 1996). I am also attaching new meaning to my shambles as I move through my day-to-day. Globally, historically and at present, there is a shared experience of persecution for those who hold the mysteries of the world in reverence, for those who see the magic. Believers. Practitioners. Healers. Children. As we have looked for opportunities that could be shambled, we have shared it within several hybrid conferences with the intent, not to present as usual, but to invite people to use that convergent time of online conference where we were at once together and also in our local spaces to co-create contemplative space that incorporates practices more akin to Indigenous wisdom. Then, finally, came the time we met in shared physical space and offered a shambling session to those at the conference with us:

**Shambling Together:**

Author1: In this instance we offer shambling to colleagues who are at different stages of diverse research projects to explore what use they may make of it. This is the first time we facilitate shambling while physically present in the same space. Our interactions for the first time were not mediated by online connectivity, and yet, neither of us were in our home space, we would be shambling out into a shared unfamiliar space along with our colleagues at the congress. In introducing shambling as an activity, I am suddenly reminded Pratchett relates that you can struggle to make a shamble. It can explode and you can have egg on your face. For the main character in Pratchett’s book, shamble-making only works when it's really needed. It’s not to be performed as a trick.
Author2’s Second Attempt at Shambling (in A Caruña, Spain): I was enjoying the semi or non-permanents of it. The idea that it was a coming together of people in a moment, creating with what was on hand, but, also, what it signified of that moment and our shared time together (Figure 2). What did I have in this hotel room, in Spain, that could be strung together and would hold any meaning or semblance of a story? I hesitated to choose the disposable mask I had worn on the plane. It was a bittersweet choice. The remembrance of the years of not coming together for Congress. Not seeing our critical pedagogy family from around the world. The reminder that we are still keeping each other safe but finally able to travel again. The mask is a happy-sad element that captures the joy of returning to normalcy after years of being apart. And, it has a hole in it for ease of attaching to a string. Next, I chose a blue-green piece of sea glass I had collected on the beach earlier that day. It was pretty and of this place, just steps from the site of Congress. I had filled my pockets while walking with Ineke and Yoni, while listening to stories of Yoni’s recent move and renovations with young baby at home. Picking sea glass is playful and innocent, yet the wear of tumbling over rocks has made the glass’s once transparent quality, opaque. It conjures a sense of what is not seen and reminds me of the podcast started by Judith and her colleagues, which they renamed along the way to shield the subversive nature of social justice dialogues from those who might not approve. I believe that Renee was experiencing this in her new role as well, having to work within challenging systems and find creative ways to support people who are really struggling, en masse. The notion of working within systems to make change also harkens to a conversation we had had after a panel presentation at the University earlier that day about EDI/DEI initiatives
(Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion). These efforts are problematic on many levels due to rampant occurrences of tokenism, overt racism, scholar isolation, and over-working people for their service without providing support for their programs of research, to name a few of the issues. Yet, we can choose to work within these moments of opportunity to try to change the systems for our students and colleagues while we have the power, space, authority, and impetus to do something great, rather than publicly criticize and disavow the movement into non-existence before the focus has had its due time. The final element in my shambles is the bag of hand-picked tea from Author1, that to me represents good medicine—nurturance and love. It is sustenance for my soul, akin to coming to Congress. As illustrated by my example, shambling is a provocation for us to knit together our experiences and create narratives from our areas of interest and expertise, with each other.

Author1: Author2’s shamble really showed me a person can take anything, the most unlikely things/beings/relatives and they can speak important values or concepts powerfully—much more so than the ordinary alphabet-- the mask, a thing with a hole in it bearing witness to a time with many holes born through. Hearing her shamble, I see more vividly, I sense with more of my being, that the world around us matters. We are in story with it. She uses a piece of sea glass to “think with” what shielding may mean.

When we came back and shared about our shambles, there was a sense of dropping into deeper levels as people spoke. I sensed I was connecting with them on a more genuine level. Those who participated express the wish we had done this earlier in the week and continued doing it through the week as a way to be together, as a way to mark the evolving relations and understanding that happens in around and across the formal programme of the congress. This
opens us for a possibility of collective shambling not just over a week, possibly over a semester, or time frames more in keeping with seasons that break with modernist conceptions of time. The head teacher with us says “our students are not ok, staff are not ok, we are not ok”. This pushes me to think of how a small time walking here could be used to walk through and process and mark the meaning of the longer journey over this past three years of Covid. Could this be repurposed for grief work? As we become more sensitised to the elements of trauma that decolonising requires, enabling grief work is becoming more important.

On my own shambling journey, I surrendered my need for a continuous thread to secure my web. In a way this was a walk with many kinds of grief that I live with. I learned my shambles can be made of broken threads, the web not holding together, the plastic particularisation thrown up from the ocean insists on being included in my shambles, bits of nylon fishing rope, plastic so eroded its manufactured purpose becomes unrecognisable. Also: a small band aid, a red coffee stirrer. This broken shambles seems a necessary step on paths towards reparation and regeneration (Burnam 2016:366), a step of shambling where violence is present in this moment here. A small feather among the detritus, this relative is harbinger of the tensile strength resurgence requires. This time I experience most strongly a sense of creating an alphabet of meaning with context as co-creator, a semantic process that brings me back to a more intimate relationship between the world as it speaks and the fashioning of my own utterances. Here I am drawn to think of the many indigenous practices that speak with more attunement to the living world that Abram (1996) alerted me to. In this moment I come closest to a sense of unlearning my over-reliance on a sign system abstracted from the living world. It
presses this question forward: How is my web building congruent with the wider web I want to be in right relationship with?

At this congress we sense most palpably shambling as an alternative to field notes at all the points they are normatively used: during pre-method, helping some of us orientate research, during method helping others of us in the midst of research bring themes more viscerally out into the open, during analysis and in that interim space, looking back on just completed work the shambling is a way of sketching out further possibilities of relational work that can grow from it. For some of us, it is doing important shifting work as we see the relations between different projects at different stages with more of a sense of the significance of the gaps and threads between the projects.

Discussion

Some Theoretical Waymarkers for Us

Our conception of shambling as a method of research is at the confluence of three interconnected and interrelated spheres: 1) Bahktin’s (1981, 1996) carnival and dialogic perspectives especially situated in response to societal unrest and walking outdoors or other experiential/embodied provocations; 2) Irwin’s (2005) A/r/tography as a space of coming together to create while inquiring about or responding to the world through an “ongoing process of art making”; and 3) Wall Kimmerer’s (2013) notions of Indigenous wisdom and ways of being in the world that recognize cycles of renewal and ceremony. Engagement with these cycles involves practices of honourable harvest and gift economy, storytelling and attentiveness for what is known beyond words. These ways of being in research are held together by a
purposeful thread of experiential engagement. They form a theoretical framing akin to a family of practices that gestures towards decolonizing futures (Stein et al, 2022).

We imagine ourselves like Wall-Kimmerer’s (2013) foragers for white spruce roots who come to the same part of the forest from many different paths. And so, in the forest glade we greet others such as Barnard & Van Gedler (2009:817), like them interested to develop an inclusive epistemology that does not privilege any one standpoint and seeks out the intentionally unnamed. We see a kinship to Fendler’s (2013) nomadic development of social cartography, Koro & Tangaard’s (2022: 326) who employ speculative methodologies that seek to care, connect, and create “educated guesses” building on the exploratory and imaginative, rather than verifying fixed solutions.

Wall Kimmerer’s account of searching for roots makes us aware that beneath a surface layer of herbal roots that can be peeled back, within rich black humus, is a vibrant meshwork of roots. She reminds us that the Apache word for root is akin to mind and that, “Gathering roots holds up a mirror between the map in the earth and the map of our minds” (2013:236).

Wall Kimmerer’s further observations give insight into the spirit of our shambling process:

I came looking for raw materials, for something I could transform into a basket, but it was me who was transformed. The crisscross patterns, the interweaving of colors—the basket was already in the ground, stronger and more beautiful than any I could make. Spruce, blueberries, deerflies and winter wren, the whole forest held in a wild native basket the size of a hill. Big enough to hold me too. (2013: 236)
It is important to bring that awareness and humility to our work. What we bring to a shamble is traces of something greater. As a methodology, shambling gives pause to consider our agency, relationality, and place-ness — temporally and corporally. The places that hold and sustain us are as important to the practice of shambling as the ideas and priorities that hold space in our minds. Shambling necessitates us to make the connections between place-based gathering and context-specific thoughts explicit in the telling. Objects and their placements or connections to one another matter. The stringing together of our lives and stories matters. Shambling orients us, but for a moment, to where we are in space and time, physically and mentally. It attends to the immediacy of our surroundings and our minds. It involves presencing (Bouvier and McDonald 2019)) ourselves and being presenced by others—the listeners—who attend to our offerings. All are central to methodology—the physical journeying out, the travelling inward, and the relational connecting along.

Trying to reach out to connect to theory that might be a way in for readers is like listening to bird calls in a forest and sending a few of our own, something akin to echo location. It is an attempt at honing diffractive sense making, both the receptive and agentive moments of agential realism. This sense making is underpinned by a conception of place very similar to Booth’s (2010) where “place is constituted by relations that are never static as they ebb and flow in situationally unique ways; and (are) unbounded—constituted by relations that are implicated within, and have implications for broader, wider, or deeper web works”. With Tuck & McKenzie (2015) we are interested not only in how place is experienced but how it is practiced and the “polylogics” (Anderson, Adey & Bevan, 2010) of this we may need to open ourselves up to.
Author 1: Shambling is an attempt to bring into embodied practice (Author & others, 2021) the theoretical frame that I have been working with for some time (Figure 3). This frame encourages a thinking through of multiple arcs of agency which occur simultaneously. This simultaneity is comprised of acts that ripples out within different assemblages of agency: agency within choices we make just for ourselves, also those choices make as we act in concert with a few close to us in organic or informal forms of agency, yet at the same time, the ripple of these choices act as part of organisations where we are also instantiating institutional agency, reinforcing or reinscribing its norms or slowly working to move them in new directions. We may be doing this on a very localised level, but it is likely our agency is also working, whether through union solidarity, academic conferences or other supra-organisational spaces, with larger forms of institutional activity, disruptive or constitutive, or somewhere in between, or at once acting in contrasting ways to disrupt in some aspects but reinforce in others. This frame grew from Bakhtin’s (1981) observation that we participate in multiple situated speech communities in ways that are both centrifugal and centripetal. Reading De Landa (2001), Barad (2008) and Rosiek and Adkins-Cartee (2023) helped me think further through how this frame may help us locate ourselves within entanglements as researcher/activist.

Shambling provides impetus to map some of these overlapping arcs as well as those arcs emanating around us that impinge on us. Whether I start by drawing with pen a large web like shape or let actual materials, (such as string, the necklace I wear to look more formal on zoom calls, or the phone charger) fall into a coiled tangle, I then let my gaze explore these spaces for
their metaphoric potential—how are they like the contingent overlapping movements both theoretical and actual that make up my practicing experience within today?

Author 2: The idea of shambling, as Author 1 has described it, has my mind racing. It reminds me of Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony, dialogue, and carnival, as shared by Sidorkin (2005); specifically carnival’s propensity for suspension and inversion of established norms. He states that carnival’s playful chaos “... is a way of ensuring that human culture remains a non-linear, non-deterministic system,” (2005: 285) He sees such playful disruptions as a conscious mutation of existing discursive patterns, which lead to evolving new patterns of discourse. The only way of producing new cultural meanings includes producing a text of nonsense, which then becomes meaningful. (2005: 285)

Creating a shambles, then, is experiential but also performative as it invokes/requires storytelling to give it meaning. Thus, creating a shambles becomes an event. It is not permanent because of the livingness of the elements. It is art and craft. String and story. Collecting nature’s gifts and imbuing them with meaning. The “taking” of items is not transactional, but part of a gift economy (Hyde, 1979 as referenced in Wall Kimmerer, 2013). There is a dynamic interplay—a weaving together of an honourable harvest and gift economy (Wall Kimmerer 2013; Bouvier & MacDonald, 2019), storytelling, and reverence for what is known beyond words. Shambling orientates towards recognizing and celebrating the unabashed complexity and beauty of the natural world—a place where we as humans clumsily and sometimes artfully
string things together to make sense of it all: all the complexity, beauty, mystery, and livingness. It engages literacies of mind, body, spirit, and emotion.

Shambling has brought into sharper focus an awareness that how we read the world connotes our relationship to/with the world. In opening opportunities for creative expression and dialogue—, like Vicki Bouvier and Jennifer MacDonald’s (2019) methodology of the spiritual exchange, we were looking for processes and practices that might take us outside of the conventional norms—but would the method be received as a valid form of scholarship? Bouvier and MacDonald aptly described the tensions they experienced in educational research by saying: “it became evident that learning in a seminar room, and subsequently using normative modes for doing research, privileges cognitive modes of inquiry. To create better stories, we attest, we must attend to our bodies, hearts, and emotions, and to how our whole selves experience the places we live with” (2019: 1).

**A Basket of Limitations**

Sharing this has not been without resistance, our own anticipatory resistance and that we encountered within the workshops. Yet resistance itself is an important waymarker or landmark that requires attention. Its signals give us their information about the landscape and right relationships within academic work. This knowing is not quick. We can’t just turn our heads to the window like a tv screen and say, “okay, enlighten me, counterbalance these words with the depth missing”. It takes more of a journey. We are working in a vein of post humanism (Kuby, Spector, Johnson Thiel, 2019) that does not intend to be the -ism to trump the last -ism but rather a reorientation to the muchness and liveliness beyond the traditional
cuts and folds of academic practice. As we have worked, Author 2 noticed that Author 1’s insertion and reliance on text within shambling relaxed and made room for sand, plastic particulates and their relations to speak for themselves. This was not without resistance. We know this is provisional and, as others experiment, their practices will diverge from ours, perhaps later to flow back together, braid with ours (Wall Kimmerer 2013). Material relations/instantiations that do not resemble webs will also emerge. As we keep asking what are the elements of the gift economy that we want to have a correspondence with in our Shambling practice, we have to assess where is the gratitude, the returning back to nature of what we have borrowed. A shambles is not complete until our small complex of sense making is seen in light of the wider one. Until we step outside again and look for how we are already held in a shamble, already the living thing stepping through it, we still resist gift economy’s most crucial aspects.

Conclusion

A Conclusion of Well-Placed Pebbles

This is the place where academic readers are most used to look for certainty from us. Let us condense, let us place on the table a few pebble-like statements:

We think we have brought to an inquiry an acknowledgement of surrounding relations with our environment and in doing so contribute to “critical place inquiry” that centres “the ethical imperatives of relational validity” in a way that “responds to people and place” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015:633). We have developed a process that allows material relations and layers of
associations to become present *without hierarchical impositions* of order. We have found doing this *precipitates sharing of perceptions at a deeper level of depth and attention*. Our intention has been to provide space that allows participants to give themselves permission to bring into inquiry elements often subject to self-censure, those places *where the walls between worlds wear thin*. If we are moving into a post-method era, we hope shambling opens up the possibility of learning from older practices, such as ceilidhs and sweat lodges.

In doing this we have learned there are important methodological considerations. The work requires a relational contract, or at minimum a willingness to be vulnerable and take risks while also acknowledging the generous gifts that are shared by others in the process. Shambling allows someone to get outside of their writing self into tangible practices with meaning-making. It can be a struggle to resist compartmentalising elements of ourselves and our inspirations and influences, rather than leaning into the co-creative experience—being present, open, and engaged. As Bouvier and MacDonald describe:

> Acknowledging ourselves as storied beings interacting (mind/body/spirit) with and through places is the “field” of our research. ... It becomes a ritual. As we journey together through the process, we see ourselves in relationship all the time; we are being trained to be in ceremony and ritual, and to see gifts of kinship in our everyday lives.

*(2019: 3)*

In their practice with photography, reflection, and ceremony, Bouvier and MacDonald foster a deep relationship with place. Similarly, through shambling, we deepen our connection to
place through simultaneously engaging in arts creation and personal discernment through sharing our stories and ourselves in raw and vulnerable ways.

Early in the writing process we decided whatever we wrote, however that exploration developed, in the end we would want to come back to some of our earliest writing and working together. This moment during Covid of finding a way to work, aware of the precarity of our local places, whilst at the same time working across the ether, felt like an inflection point—felt like a moment of practice to open up to others. We end our article with these poems with the intention that they initiate a circle that opens out, with a space for your story.

---

### Working with the Moon
It’s just my neighbourhood, not a likely place of inspiration or rewilding.
Its small brick houses built on old factory land,
it’s street that ends at the beachfront.
I walk over the packed earth of the informal parking lot
That a plot without planning permission has become,
The camper van with chimney is there, as always,
Always a different one.
This walk retraces ones of so many Covid days
This walk my one break from the screen on so many Covid days.

I am walking again but with you on the phone,
Not just your face but also a glimpse of your place and your walk
I see the falling back of high stands of

### Under the Same Moon
Outside along the path
In nature
Together, under the same moon
But across the ocean
From each other
We share in a walk
And our hearts imagine
A different way of communing
Creating
Conversation
That speaks to mind, body,
And spirit

Though it begins with spirit
And body
And mind
In that order

Lifting up our eyes
and phones
to capture the grace of the moon
in day, here
bracken,
A wideness that stretches to a far tree line
The sense of water beyond it somehow in
the sky
A pale sky growing brighter
Over your shoulder.
And here on the phone you can see my
darkening day,
The long twilight of afternoon here.
Where I come to the widening strand of
shore
Dark silhouettes, dogs, toddlers,
pensioners, gulls moving along the low
lapping tide.
You are listening to me, how I am, what I
have done in this day.
This settles me.
I can hear my words,
My pace of thoughts slowing, tuning in
to that of my heartbeat.

This is a work meeting we have chosen to
do as a walk--
One of the ways we are edging out into
what is easier to only talk as if we could do.
Twenty minutes of a standard conference
presentation slot
Where people will be expecting to hear
- Rigour of sampling
- Persuasively strong statistics
- A few pithy points of
  commentary

And we want to say instead:
  There is another way to be
  academics together.
  There is more that we can share of
  how we are finding our way through
  these times
  --More that we can show each
  other of how we really cohere sense
  from all around us
  --More we can do to leave

in night, there
She is with us both
Like magic

Giving us a gift
Of beginning
And always
Friendship
And past

Across time
And space
And temporality
waymarkers to encourage others.

If we take time, if we take breath, and look around our workspaces, What could we share with each other of that which grounds us, renews us and help us make sense?

We will just have to trust some will be brave Some will be curious Some at a conference on social justice and marginalised voices Will not be too averse to a marginal way of using 20 minutes of academic conference space.

You caution we should have a clear brief and examples, in a voice resigned to compromise. I am listening with pauses in between that take in the tide surging and drawing away. I press my lips together and bite down on the urge to say:

The more we tell them what to do, the less they we listen to what might guide them from within,
The more time we take to explain, the less time they have to wander into deeper soundings of their space.
Why can’t people just jump in, unafraid about doing it wrong?
Why can’t they just see where the prompt readings take them?
Why are we afraid to explore questions about our own practice?
Why do we hem ourselves in with lack of permission?
How could a chance to take stock of our own sensemaking ever be something we could get wrong?

I hear you, dear Author1, I hear you.

I have these fears too.

But I also have faith that people will need to enabling constraints (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008) to have enough to run with.

If we give them too little description, example, or instruction, it will be debilitating. They will not feel like they have enough to know what to do.
The not doing it often enough is the only wrong.
But trust can never be presumed; always it must be earned.

Three crows are picking through the seaweed.
A fourth nervously hops closer, takes a cautious peck,
The largest of the three makes for it, wings arched, beak poised
And the smaller hops out of danger’s way.
I follow it down the beach.

We piece together a broad outline of our twenty minute possibility
We come to a sense we’ve the same shape of the session in mind,
We’ve parsed the time into
5 minutes to introduce,
7 minutes time they take to themselves,
7 minutes back together sharing what’s come from that.
The tide is still shifting. You are closer to the trees and the river beyond.
I turn and walk up a small stream from where it spreads across the sand
To its tumbling steps coming from the city.
We make a moment each in our own space
To listen to the water with us,
Its conversation threading along with ours,
braiding into our shared thoughts.
We talk of how we are
With our families
You talk me through the work of your wider relatives—
Beavers choosing their trees carefully,
letting the saplings stand.

Just as if we give too many rules, or prompts, or parameters, it will also be debilitating because their creativity will be stifled—confined.

We need to hit a sweet spot.
I trust we will.

As a teacher, I trust in the vibrant collectives of people coming together to work and learn together.

We will give them,
Just enough,
Vulnerability (from ourselves)
That they will take risks,
And see possibilities,
In shambling.

I trust us,
And
I trust them.

Our pieces will all come together.
And some, we will carry with us,
Beyond today.
I turn back home along the backs of houses built in different centuries.
You are also turning homeward,
Turning towards a work day ahead,
While I am rolling my shoulders to lift my work day from them.
As you turn – you ask—can I see?
There she is in a lilac sky
A pale knuckle, just off full.
Our work together has always been across hours of distance
Always with an absence of shared space,
that sense that comes with being shoulder to shoulder—
but here,
You have turned your shoulder open
And share with me the moon.
This act speaks more than pages of theory-

To look up and wide is all that is needed
To be oriented together
By shared sky.

This possibility pulls my feet,
Running now back out of the squares of houses that cut what I can see
I come down to the shore again, the tide edging in.

Fear that I will be too early, or with the banks of clouds closing down, too late
Means at first,
I don’t recognise what the horizon is offering me.
She is just lifting over the edge of the sky,
A bright yellow version of herself so fierce, so close, so solid and splendid
I have no words that can bound the gift of her.
This moment allowed to share the moon with you speaks for herself.
It comes home to me: we really are
standing on the same round world,
I can feel her curvature between us,
in such different places making common sense.
Our phones are dying, and I am beyond words
As I watch her lift into the clouds
Leaving a burnished path across the water
as reminder.

References:


Author (2009)

Author and other (2015)

Author (2020)

Author and others (2021)

Author (2023)


Figures

Figure One: Author One Shambling with “Zoom” necklace and Bateson book.
Figure 2: Author 2 Shamble at Conference

Figure Three: Arcs of Participation/Agential Interactions