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**Author(s):** Bradley, Jessica Mary; Pöyhönen, Sari

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Jessica Mary Bradley\* and Sari Pöyhönen

# Walking with: understandings and negotiations of the mundane in research

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**Abstract:** Disruptions, and indeed spectacular disruptions, are understood and experienced by people in many different ways. They serve to both highlight and embed deep-rooted inequalities, changing experiences of the everyday and even challenging the very right to have an everyday. In this joint article we critically engage with conceptualisations of the mundane, exploring how people negotiate everyday life in contexts of unprecedented change. We take up Georges Perec's call to take account of the everyday, focusing on examples from two ethnographically informed projects, both of which engage with creative practice. The first is long-term research in forced migration settings in North-Western Finland, which explores how people negotiate and re-negotiate linguistic citizenship and everyday life, in a policy context which restricts and limits. The second is a community arts and wellbeing project in the North of England, which investigated creative approaches to re-emergence from the Covid19 pandemic among people who had been particularly affected by isolation, including new mothers. In both projects, our data are drawn from fieldnotes from observations, reflections from our own participation, interviews and creative artefacts made by participants. In our analysis and discussion, we foreground ephemeral everyday moments and how individuals aim to hold up the mundane in the middle of major, internal and international crises. We consider how the 'right to an everyday' is central to understandings of being human, and draw on these experiences to show how ethnographic research, with particular emphasis on language(s) and creative practice, can shed light on lived experiences of the mundane and unequal experiences of and rights to the everyday.

**Keywords:** everyday; ethnography; creativity; documentation; infra-ordinary

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**\*Corresponding author: Jessica Mary Bradley**, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK,

E-mail: [jessica.bradley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jessica.bradley@sheffield.ac.uk). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4232-1983>

**Sari Pöyhönen**, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: [sari.h.poyhonen@ju.fi](mailto:sari.h.poyhonen@ju.fi). <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1507-7206>

# 1 Introduction

In this article we present a metacommentary on our recent and ongoing research which engages in different ways with creative practice and the arts in contexts of mobility and rapid change and with participants who are often considered socially marginalised. We are two academic researchers who collaborate with each other transnationally on arts-based and arts-informed research (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2013, 2019) relating to language and communication (Bradley and Harvey 2019; Harvey and Bradley 2021). Sari is a professor of applied linguistics in central Finland, whose work has engaged with creative practice and collaborating with artists since 2011. Jessica is a senior lecturer in literacies and language in the North of England and her research explores everyday experiences of language through creative practice and in creative arts contexts. We both broadly situate our approaches to research within linguistic and visual ethnography (Copland et al. 2015; Pink 2021), and we are increasingly engaging with questions relating to the relational, the temporal and the spatial in ethnographically-oriented research. In our work – individually and collectively – we draw on ethnographic approaches to researching everyday lives and practices and we both have ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad 2007) questions around observations of public and social life and of documenting the everyday actions and interactions of ‘others’, in contexts in which we – as researchers and outside that role of researcher – are also deeply implicated. Our questions include how we account for what we observe, what we have taken notice of, and how we document these observations. We are committed to exploring how we might make these often invisible processes *visible* and how attention to research process, and attention to process in creative practice and literature, help us to engage both with the ethical implications of what we do as ethnographic researchers and with the implications of what we have considered interesting or noteworthy (Figure 1).

The rapid emergence and everyday centrality of digital spaces, blogging, social media platforms that blur boundaries between the personal, the professional – and everything in between – suggest a certain hint of democratisation of who gets to observe and who gets to document ‘the everyday’. Questions of ‘who’ is able to do this extend to how these observations engage with ideas of the individual and/with the collective, and how these multimodal and often ephemeral documents become public (Pöyhönen and Simpson 2020). The right to an ‘everyday’ and to documenting an everyday therefore becomes an important ethical and epistemological concern.

In considering some of the questions we have been exploring over the past decade through our research collaboration, including through the AILA research network for creative inquiry and applied linguistics (Bradley et al. 2018-2021), we offer here methodological and epistemological reflections on two research projects.

The first of these has been completed in a formal sense [Jag bor i Oravais 2015–2018] and the second is ongoing at the point of writing [Connect, 2022–2024]. Jag bor i Oravais is a programme of long-term research in forced migration settings in North-Western Finland, which explored how people negotiate and re-negotiate linguistic citizenship and everyday life in a reception centre while waiting for a decision for their asylum claim, in a policy context which restricts and limits (Pöyhönen and Simpson 2020; Pöyhönen et al. 2019, 2020). Connect (anonymised) is an arts and health project in the North of England, which investigates creative approaches to social inclusion and recovery from the Covid19 pandemic for people who have been particularly affected by isolation, including new mothers and parents of young children. We focus on the notion of the ‘everyday’, or ‘infra-ordinary’, taking inspiration from experimental author Georges Perec as well as literary works by writer Annie Ernaux, as a creative tool for exploring experiences of undertaking ethnographic research which engages with creative practice, in changing and shifting contexts. We argue that this focus on what is understood so often to be mundane and uninteresting sharpens our perspectives not only on what is and is not deemed to be important, but on who gets to decide what is worth paying attention to.

Our conceptual framework of the everyday, in dialogue with the examples from our research, engages with the central concerns of this journal special issue in terms of art – and perhaps *creativity* more broadly – as a social practice in contexts of marginality. Our research projects take place with people in different stages of and different kinds of marginality – marginality relating to borders and nation-states and marginality relating to COVID19 lockdowns at a time of big changes in life circumstances. In the research we present, marginality can be understood as complex and changing, entangled with wider social, economic and political change. The excerpts of data we discuss include fieldnotes, artworks, and reflections on workshops and meetings with participants, and shed light on everyday identities as constructed through arts activities, both individual and collective, and by and through the research itself.

## 2 Notes on documenting everyday life: Perecquian sensibility

We start with a quote from Georges Perec, an author, artist, film-maker – and arguably ethnographic researcher (Forsdick et al. 2019) – writing about what he terms the ‘infra-ordinary’ and his own ‘method’ for observing and documenting everyday life in all its mundanity:

*Places**(Notes on a work in progress)*

In 1969, I chose, in Paris, twelve places (streets, squares, circuses, an arcade), where I had either lived or else was attached to by particular memories.

I have undertaken to write a description of two of these places each month. One of these descriptions is written on the spot and is meant to be as neutral as possible. Sitting in a cafe or walking in the street, notebook and pen in hand, I do my best to describe the houses, the shops and the people that I come across, the posters, and in a general way, all the details that attract my eye. The other description is written somewhere other than the place itself. I then do my best to describe it from memory, to evoke all the memories that come to me concerning it, whether events that have taken place there, or people I have met there. Once these descriptions are finished, I split them into an envelope that I seal with wax.

(Perec, [1973] Perec 2008 [2008]: 55)

Perec is known for his work with the OuLiPo – (*Ou*)v<sup>roir</sup> de (*Li*)ttérature (*Po*)tentielle (Workshop for Potential Literature) – group, a collective of writers who sought to engage with a playful and constrained style of writing (Elkin and Esposito 2012; Forsdick et al. 2019; Phillips 2018; Symes 1999). Substantively, the themes in which he was interested included but were in no way limited to:

...cities and streets; homes and apartments; conceptions of space and place; mathematical and textual spaces; imagined, utopian and dystopian spaces; time and the city; landscapes of memory and trauma; consumption and material culture; everyday life, the everyday, the quotidian; ordinary, endotic and ‘infra-ordinary’ places (Forsdick et al. 2019: 2).

In addition to his contribution to experimental writing, Perec has been positioned as something of a pioneer for experimental (Forsdick et al. 2019; Phillips 2018) or ‘literary’ (Viart 2016) fieldwork, including in terms of the attention to everyday places by different actors and approaches to research which are often considered radical or unusual in social sciences. Geographer Richard Phillips (2018) attempts to define a Perecquian fieldwork tradition (we choose the word ‘attempts’ deliberately as he also has done, following ‘essayer’ as to try (173)). He suggests that Perec was more of an artist and writer than an activist (175) and offers three current themes in fieldwork which engage with Perec’s works: playful and ludic fieldwork, exploring ordinary places, and writing as fieldwork practice. We find these three themes productive as we critically examine not only our approaches to our own fieldwork but also our engagement with participants throughout (and beyond) our research. In particular, a Perecquian approach to fieldwork will be iterative and responsive, as mirrored in the excerpts and reflections we present in this paper:

Rather than leading forward in a progressive or linear way, genuinely experimental Perecquian fieldwork will continue to explore and to attempt, proceeding tentatively, essayistically, experimentally (189).

The notion of ‘proceeding tentatively’ is particularly relevant to our work in complex and changing environments (see Bradley 2017 for an exploration of ‘liquid’ methodologies’ which adapt to and with people’s movements in space and time). Perec’s methods, and perhaps even more his meticulous attention to methods, therefore align with aspects of ethnographic research, and indeed his practice drew from ethnographic approaches and orientations to observing everyday city life. Ideas, and complexities, of observing and documenting place, everyday lives, mundanity, and the ‘infra-ordinary’ (Perec 1973) are not new, and certainly have been a central concern of researchers and writers within a critical ethnographic space for many years if not decades (Blackledge and Creese 2019; Hall 2020; Tivers 1978). Aligned with critical reflections on researching the mundane are disciplinary shifts within applied linguistics towards creative practice and research orientations which push away from more traditional social sciences methods, most notably in research which invites collaboration with creative practitioners and with participants, in line with a participatory and a creative turn (Creese 2020; García 2020; Holliday and Macdonald 2020).

### 3 The creativity of the everyday

We also take inspiration from other authors documenting daily life in the city, including writer Annie Ernaux, whose work engages with everyday life in France, including Paris and the surrounding areas. Ernaux’s writing and broader intellectual project have propelled ideas of the ‘*je transpersonnel*’, or ‘transpersonal I’, as an expansive means to acknowledge collective experience. Ernaux describes her use of the ‘*je transpersonnel*’ in an interview with writer Lauren Elkin – whose idea of the ‘right to an everyday’ we find persuasive for framing our discussion here – for The White Review as ‘a *je* that is marked by the communal experiences which many of us have known’ (2022: np). This position that the individual is always implicated in the collective, and, of course, vice versa, aligns to some extent with notions of the ‘transrational’ voice (Harvey et al. 2021), as both ‘individually uttered and collectively produced’ (p. 1). Here we draw on Ernaux’s impersonal (Baisnée 2018; Jordan 2011) autobiography ‘*Les Années/The Years*’ (2008/2018) and her diary-style book ‘*Journal du dehors/Exteriors*’ (1993/2021), a ‘disconcerting mix of confidence and commentary’ (Lancaster 2000: 398). The latter is made up of small observational vignettes from Ernaux’s everyday movement across Paris and the surrounding areas and offers, alongside Perec’s observational projects, alternative insights into the documentation of the everyday life of the city and the intertwined individual and collective experience of the infra-ordinary.

Elkin also takes inspiration from Perec and Ernaux in her short book, *'No. 91/92: notes on a Parisian commute'* (2021), and uses a notes app on her 'yellow iPhone 5c' (xi) to document her daily journeys across the city to teach at a university. She states that 'The goal was to observe the world through the screen of my phone, rather than to use my phone to distract myself from the world' (xi). The diary entries vary in length and in content. At times she comments on the other passengers, including what they are wearing:

20/11/14

Thursday morning

Blue tutu Chanel bag fake lashes girl you look amazing. (35)

She documents examples of misconduct and – indeed – racism:

20/10/14

Monday afternoon

A woman being harassed by a ticket agent. Apparently she didn't buzz in her Navigo pass. The machine on the right was broken. The ticket agent thinks she should have tried the one on the left. 'But I pay my bills every month!' she protests forcefully. 'I pay my fare! What does it matter if I touch in!' It matters. Her African accent and dress work against her. He's trying to give her a ticket. They're still arguing three stops later when I get off. (22)

And she observes social faux pas:

24/03/15

Tuesday morning so far not a single man has given up his seat for me, my friend J said when she came to town, 6 months pregnant. The only people who stand for me are women. (71)

Elkin also reflects on her own changing situation as she experiences an ectopic pregnancy and her experiences of being in Paris during the 2015 Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan terrorist attacks, which she refers to as 'the Event'.

What is particularly interesting about Elkin's work for the research we present relates to method and the deliberate and methodical documentation of thoughts and observations during a specific time period on a regular basis. She also theorises what she is doing, or thinks she is doing by writing this diary, within the diary entries, reflecting on why she is doing it, referring to Perec:

17/11/14

Monday morning

Reading *Species of Spaces*. Why have I never noticed before how much Perec likes the word 'paralelepiped'? Every time I teach Perec I'm more convinced I need to teach an entire class on his work. The way he sees the world, his awareness of how difficult it is to really 'see' it, what does it mean to 'see' it, when we can only see bits and pieces of it. When we go to new cities we climb up to high places to try to see it all at once, to take it all in as a whole; Perec goes to his cafe and writes the city bit by bit piece by piece. (34)

Elkin speaks of the influence that writer and memoirist Annie Ernaux has on her writing. Like many of her generation, studying for A Levels in England in the 1990s, Jessica first came across Ernaux's work at 16 and a student at sixth form college as part of the 'Advanced (A) Level' French curriculum. Ernaux's *'La Place'* (A Man's Place 1983) was a set text at that time, chosen perhaps in part because the simple sentences enabled accessibility to learners of the French language. *'La Place'*, which is 'neither entirely autobiographical nor entirely fictive' (Anderson Bliss 2013: 164), explores the narrator's relationship with her father, and documents her social and economic shift, away from her earlier life and the role of education in this. Ernaux's 'flat writing' has been described and critiqued in different ways, including as auto-ethnography (Fell and Welch 2009; Jordan 2011). *'Les Années'* (The Years, 2008) is a collective autobiography, using 'she' and 'we' to narrate the individual life in dialogue and entangled with social, historical and cultural change in France from 1941 to 2006. Ernaux states, 'La langue continuera à mettre en mots le monde' (2008: 19) (Language will continue to put the world into words).

Ernaux's *'Journal du Dehors'* (1993) takes the form of a series of diary entries made in transit in and around Paris, in the metro and in supermarkets, in railway stations and in city squares. Described by Valérie Baisnée (2002) as an 'anti-diary' the book also 'is about what is one's own, what belongs to others; about how this ragged division is a fact of language; and implicitly about how reading the facts of identity in language is what makes her a writer' (Miller 2008: 130):

La petite fille, dans le train vers Paris, montée avec sa mère à Achères-Ville, avait des lunettes de soleil en forme de coeur, un petit panier de plastique tressé vert pomme. Elle avait trois ou quatre ans, ne souriait pas, serrant contre elle son panier, la tête droite derrière ses lunettes. Le bonheur absolu d'arborer les premiers signes de "dame" et celui de posséder des choses désirées.' (64)

The little girl, on the train to Paris, boarded with her mother in Achères-Ville, had heart-shaped sunglasses, a small apple-green woven plastic basket. She was 3 or 4 years' old, unsmiling, clutching her basket, her head straight behind her glasses. The absolute happiness of displaying the first signs of being a 'lady' and that of possessing the things she desired. (tr. Tanya Leslie, 1996 [2021])

Ernaux observes and writes what she sees, with the short vignettes offering us tiny and limited insights into the 'transitory exchanges of everyday life' (Miller 2008: 135). These tiny and limited insights are of daily life in and around Paris, and they are always as observed by Ernaux, always partial.

The partiality is important and does not necessarily suggest a deficit. As Elkin writes, 'There is so much we miss; none of us can have a total vision, or total understanding of even just one place in our cities. This is a powerful and humbling thing to be aware of' (Elkin 2021: 113). We observe, we document, we explore these



experiences through writing, through visual arts, in dialogue, through other means, despite knowing we can only ever know a tiny fragment, if indeed at all. An example of this can also be seen in the short fieldnote vignettes written by Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese during their ethnographic fieldwork in Birmingham's Bull Ring market, which resonate strongly with the projects of both Elkin and Ernaux:

A blonde woman with butterfly tattoos on her shoulder and neck flies through the market. She cradles a young baby in her arms. She is followed by a young child pushing a younger child in a pushchair. The blonde woman presents the baby to one of the fishmongers. He smiles broadly, takes the baby, holds it aloft to admire it, and hands it back to the woman. (Blackledge and Creese 2019: 59).

Research for the 'Translation and Translanguaging' research programme (2014–2018) across four cities in the UK – Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds and London – took linguistic and visual ethnographic approaches to exploring everyday life in work and social settings. These included volleyball teams (Blackledge and Creese 2021), basketball (Callaghan et al. 2017), capoeira (Baynham and Lee 2019), karate clubs (Hua et al. 2020), libraries (Creese and Blackledge 2019), corner shops (Hua et al. 2020) and meat markets (Blackledge and Creese 2020). Data, analysis and synthesis from this multi-sited ethnographic project has been explored in multiple creative ways, including by various creative practitioners. These creative engagements extended to a creative arts lab programme which focused on creative interpretations of data in dance and music (2017; 2018), visual interpretation of the four Leeds case studies working papers by a visual artist and researcher (Atkinson et al. 2019) and a series of dramatic and experimental texts and essays (Blackledge and Creese 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). These examples, produced over a period of almost a decade, demonstrate the trajectory of research that starts with the everyday in terms of methodological progression and research communication and dissemination. They also show the gradual interweaving of wider voices to engage with data and analysis, leading to the challenging of perceptions of the everyday and subjective experiences and interpretations.

## 4 The everyday as creative research practice

Researching the everyday extends beyond disciplinary boundaries. Shashini Ruwanthi Gamage (2019) focuses on the seemingly mundane act of watching television in her ethnographic study of a teledrama club in Melbourne led by migrant Sri Lankan women. Yiling Hung (2016) reports on 'infra-ordinary ties' in what is described as a 'seemingly unimportant location' – a convenience store. Creative or experimental research approaches, including arts-based research (Barone and

Eisner 2012) and creative inquiry (Bradley and Harvey 2019) are perhaps aligned with a focus on what might be considered infra-ordinary. These include walking methodologies (O'Neill 2014; Pink et al. 2010; Vergunst and Ingold 2008). Henry Mainsah and Carolina Sanchez Boe (2019) describe a photo-walk method for exploring migrants' experiences of being evacuated from camps in the 18th arrondissement in Paris, suggesting that the experience and process of walking open up a focus and reflection on the 'minutiae' of everyday life. Badwan and Hall (2020) use a 'walk along' in Manchester's (UK) curry mile to attempt to decentre research narratives, enabling participants to lead, while Andrew Cox and colleagues (2020) used participatory walking methods to critically examine students' experiences of a university campus. Sotkasiira and Ryynänen (2022) have studied practices of everyday bordering and de-bordering in encounters with civic activists and people from asylum-seeker and refugee backgrounds through collective walks or 'a methodology of drifting'.

Walking *with* someone directly means an agreement to share space and participate in a communal activity, aligning with what has been broadly and critically defined as creative inquiry (Bradley and Harvey 2019; Harvey and Bradley 2021). Here we develop this notion further in presenting short vignettes and reflections on our two projects and we suggest that doing and being with participants in everyday life is creative practice, offering further insights into liquid and responsive methodologies which evolve and adapt with what participants are doing in their everyday lives. Our data show examples of what we frame as 'walking with' participants.

## 5 Partial fragments from the everyday

We now offer two snapshots from our research, drawing on ethnographic data which focuses on everydayness. We present these as work in progress and to illustrate some of our ongoing considerations.

### 5.1 Fatema (Finland, Sari)

In my experience, the everyday life of asylum seekers and refugees in the country where they have sought refuge is barely considered worth reporting. This is of course understandable, because the research's gaze naturally focuses on what shows value – trauma stories, reasons to flee, pain and sorrow. The fact that a child snatches a chocolate bar from their mother before mealtime, or a spouse constantly takes the laundry shift, can be left aside. The researcher points their attention to discussions

about the security process, to the minutes of the Immigration Office, and to something that leaves a better documented trace to talk about and which is stuck in being written as an academic text and therefore acceptable. But why does their research (including mine) so often resemble a war journalist's piece of writing? This may sound just a naïve question, but inherently it is an epistemological invitation to set the focus on repetitive everyday situations.

Observing everyday encounters is not easy. Georges Perec might have been very excited for the first hour – so are ethnographers themselves. After that, the attention has probably become less, because observing “everything” and “exhaustingly” is not possible once and for all. Even I, as a researcher, may aim for a holistic view, but no matter how perceptive I am and no matter what kind of technical arsenal I have, I can only document fragments: interpretations of other people's lives – choices about what was possible to see and what I consider worth seeing and telling about.

My research context is in forced migration, in a life situation, which has resulted from extreme, exceptional feelings and actions. Finland has systematically received people seeking asylum since late 1980s, but the country's asylum administration has been both strict and slow. For example, in the years 1990–1999 nearly 19,000 persons were registered as asylum seekers and only 122 were granted asylum based on international protection (Finnish Immigration Service nd.). It takes several months if not years to receive a decision on one's asylum claim. In 2011, before the so-called refugee reception crisis in Europe (2015–2017), the average waiting time for the first decision was up to 370 days. Therefore, it is highly relevant to critically examine everyday life in reception centres, because persons waiting for asylum may stay in these places for years, trying to turn the circumstances as home-like as possible or on the contrary regarding them as prison-like facilities in which they are trapped for no reason (Kelahaara and Mattila 2017; Marucco 2017; Pöyhönen et al. 2019).

The project *Jag bor i Oravais* (I live in Oravais) began in 2015. Why the name? It was in autumn 2014, when I visited a Swedish class for adult beginners. The students introduced themselves in a manner familiar to all who have studied foreign languages: “My name is Ali, I'm 24 years old and I live in Oravais.” I found out that Ali was an asylum seeker and lived in a reception centre for quite a long time. The first question I had in mind – but didn't ask – was: How does it feel to live in a reception centre in the Swedish-dominant village Oravais?

We met with Fatema for the first time in early autumn 2015 in the reception centre where she was living with her two children. Fatema was around 45 at the time we met. She was born in Iraq, and had a long career in governmental administration before she had to flee the country. In the reception centre she identified herself first and foremost as a mother, whose main responsibility was to look after her children, take care of the daily routines and offer a safe environment.

In comparison to single men living with their children at the reception centre, Fatema had fewer relationships as well as fewer opportunities to establish new relationships. Gender roles in the reception centre were traditional: men were offered as volunteers for fixing apartments and other ‘men’s jobs’, while women took care of housework. Fatema’s relationships focused on her children and their well-being. That was also her deliberate choice.

The relationships with the children were not only important in themselves, but also other relationships that Fatema had at the reception centre evolved around her children in the reception centre if at, then the other sentences should perhaps be changed as well. Family relationships turned out to be the common ground and shared experience that enabled trust to be built, not only between the children’s school but also between Fatema and me. I wrote about the first meeting in a research article (Kokkonen and Pöyhönen 2024):

We talked for hours. We drank Assam tea. Cried. Laughed. Compared our notes of how to be a mum and fail every day. (Sari’s fieldnotes, October 2015)

What I could have written would resemble a letter, a shared note and memory of the encounters:

Dear Fatema,

It’s October 2015. We’re sitting in your kitchen opposite to each other, sipping Assam tea. Your children are playing in the living room. They’re having a fight over who gets to play FIFA on PlayStation. The younger one comes to the kitchen, complaining about his brother. You’re trying to make them calm down and behave, because you have a guest. The younger one seizes the opportunity and asks for a chocolate bar. He shows the cupboard, he knows exactly where all the good stuff is. You say no. It’s dinner time soon, and he should wait. Apparently you were not firm enough, because he keeps on begging. Eventually he gets what he wants. You lost this round. You say to me that your younger one needs to lose weight, but it’s difficult to say no. The older one criticises your parenting skills. I just wonder how physical and emotional your journey as a mother has developed throughout the years and after you fled to Finland.

We’ve only known each other for a few hours. I’m a researcher, you an asylum seeker. I’m interested in your arrival in Finland, your everyday life in the reception centre, your thoughts about the future. Your spouse is missing or dead. I don’t know which is the more comforting option. You are trying to survive everyday life, to offer your children a safe school and a future. Your own future is scary. You don’t want to talk about it and I don’t find any meaningful questions, which wouldn’t hurt you. You show your wedding picture instead. It’s wrapped in a Lidl plastic bag and placed behind the hall cabinet. I can’t really say anything. I dare not ask why the picture is not in the sitting room. Instead this stupid, awful question is just coming out of my mouth:

I ask: “Do you have any idea for how long does it take to get the decision from the Finnish Immigration services Asylum applicants (1990)?”

You are quiet and then answer: “Sari, I don’t have a plan B.”

According to UN sources, in 2015 there were estimated to be more than 60 million refugees in the world, more than a third of them from Iraq and Syria. The year 2015 was also exceptional in Finland. More than ten times the number of asylum seekers, at most more than 200 reception centres and group homes for unaccompanied minors. Finland’s immigration, refugee and asylum policies were defined both in the Government and at local petrol stations. Volunteers signed up to help, digging through their closets for winter clothes and children’s toys. There were also those who had made Molotov cocktails and thrown them through the windows of the reception centre. You comment on the news and terrorist attacks in Paris. You thought that Finland would be a peaceful, quiet enough and safe place for you and the children.

You ask: “Do I have to be afraid here?”

I answer: “I honestly don’t know.”

It is September 2016. You have received a four-year residence permit with your two children. You are one of the few whose decision is “positive”. We are sitting in your kitchen. Opposite to each other, sipping Assam tea. You have just finished Finnish classes. My colleague is playing chess with your older one. You still don’t know what happened to your husband. You try to turn a new page in the book of your life, but the old pages forcefully curl up for you to read. However, I see new confidence in your eyes.

I ask: “What do you think about your future?”

You answer: “I want to grow old here.”

It’s Spring 2018. You call me and tell me the big news. Your husband was found and he’s moved to Finland. He’s badly injured, and you have become his career. Your children have grown so much and act like typical teenagers do. Your days are organised around work, school, therapy, cooking, laundry ...

I ask: “How are you?”

You answer: “I don’t want to think about it. Life goes on. I’ve decided so.”

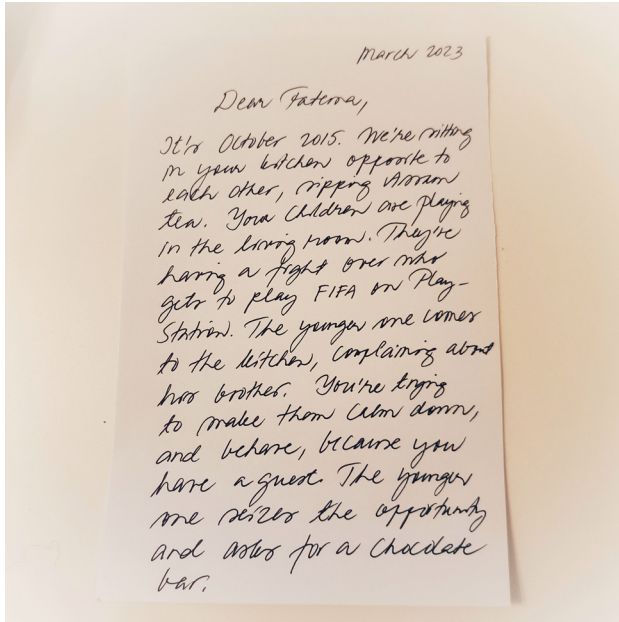
It’s Spring 2023 and it’s been awhile since we last met, because Covid19 forced us to be physically isolated. Your children and mine are growing up, getting independent. It’s time for a new page in our lives, a new kind of motherhood.

You say: “Sari, I think you need to reopen my case again.”

I answer: “I’m here, Fatema. When can we meet?”

Love,

Sari



March 2023

Dear Fatema,

It's October 2015. We're sitting in your kitchen opposite to each other, ripping Orangetan. Your children are playing in the living room. They're having a fight over who gets to play FIFA on PlayStation. The younger one comes to the kitchen, complaining about his brother. You're trying to make them calm down, and behave, because you have a guest. The younger one seizes the opportunity and asks for a chocolate bar.

**Figure 1:** Sari's letter to Fatema, March 2023.

The letter is a summary of encounters since we have known each other. Besides having conversation in Fatema's kitchen, we had long walks in Oravais and later in Helsinki, where she currently lives. Those walks made it possible to have uninterrupted conversations, going through everyday incidents in Finland, memories from Iraq and glimpses of an unclear future. The aim of the walks was also to disrupt the often innate power differentials between a researcher and a research participant: Walking side by side towards the same direction at the same pace, and allowing us long silent moments helped us both overcome certain feelings of sadness, distress and grief. Walks became a routine that gave us safety and a possibility to set boundaries on what questions to ask or respond (Alessi and Kahn 2023).

## 5.2 Re-emerging? (Yorkshire, UK, Jessica)

We now turn to consider reflections from the second research project, Connect, which is situated at the intersections of arts and health. Connect is led by a Yorkshire-based arts organisation and consists of a series of participatory arts programmes (in ceramics, printmaking, photography, creative journaling) aimed at communities who are considered to have been particularly affected by Covid19 (including new

mothers, people with dementia and their carers, parents of children with special needs, inter alia) (Figures 2–4).

My role is as researcher and evaluator, and yet so my experience of being part of this work is very fluid, something I am very familiar with from my previous research with creative practitioners.

*I am researcher, I'm also evaluating the programme, as participant observer in workshops I'm embedded, (as a mother AND because of the broadness of the scope of 'communities who struggled in Covid') I share characteristics with some of the communities the project is aiming at, I've led a series of 'spin' off, public engagement projects, I've facilitated sessions when practitioners are unwell, I've held babies in the creche for the women's group so we have the right ratios for the numbers, I've co-curated exhibitions, I've co-created a zine. To put it briefly – my role is complicated, never the same from session to session and in constant negotiation.*

*In the decade I've been doing ethnographically-oriented research with artists and creative organisations this has always been my experience. So how do I document, what are my data, and how do I account for what is happening and what I am doing? The longer a project runs, the more embedded I am in the organisation and associated groups, networks, wider organisations, the more I see, the more I hear – to what do I pay attention? (Jessica's reflections, March 2023)*

I focus here on the strand of the Connect project which engages particularly with everydayness: creative journaling for mothers and birthing parents (Godfrey-Isaacs and MacGowan 2021). This is a 10-week course for mothers (broadly and gender-inclusively defined – anyone who identifies as a mother can join, although in practice this has tended to be new mothers who have recently had babies in the last



**Figure 2:** Table set out for maternal journal workshop with paper, pens and glue.





**Figure 3:** Pencil and watercolour sketch of the women around the table at maternal journal from Jessica's fieldnotes, 23 January 2023. My Amazing Hands' activity, Jessica's fieldnotes.

12 months) who are referred in to the programme by support services, including perinatal mental health expert midwives. Practitioners leading the journaling workshops include midwives, community arts practitioners and family support workers. There is a crèche for the babies/toddlers in an adjoining room and the focus is on the mothers themselves – in contrast to a mother [parent]-and-baby group, for example, for which the activity would often focus on the babies, or the babies with the parents. Each week involves a different activity, for example, poetry, collage, or automatic painting, all of which are drawn from a recently published book (Godfrey-Isaacs and MacGowan 2021) which includes activities from across creative fields, written and designed by practising creative practitioners from across artistic disciplines. The arts organisation leading the project is located in the building that





**Figure 4:** ‘My Amazing Hands’ activity, Jessica’s fieldnotes.

was, during my childhood, the city library, making research visits reminiscent of psychogeographical exploration as the space connects me to Saturday mornings and exchanging library books in the 1980s with my father. The wooden library bookshelves are now repurposed into commissioned printed artworks, three of which I now have up on my dining room wall.

The creative outputs by the participants are private, collated in individual journals given to participants at the start of the programme. However, pages are shared if desired (the workshop leaders always emphasise that there is no obligation), in the workshop and on the project Instagram page, seen as a digital extension of the workshop community. Importantly it is not ‘art therapy’:

Each session is guided by a different journaling exercise to encourage exploration of creativity, emotions and experiences.

One of the best things about journaling in a group is sharing a safe space to connect with other people.

A group should be facilitated by a midwife, birth worker, mental health professional or experienced workshop leader. Please be aware that strong feelings can emerge during the group workshops, and they are not recommended for people with a history of severe mental illness.

(<https://www.maternaljournal.org/setting-up-a-group>)

Each two-hour workshop takes roughly the same shape:

- The table is set out with pens, paints, pencils, glue, paper, coloured stickers and other creative resources
- The mothers arrive gradually, greeting each other and settling their children into the crèche
- The group practitioner leads a short mindfulness exercise
- The group practitioner introduces the activity, sometimes showing what she has done herself in preparation for the session
- The mothers work on the activity individually, showing their work in progress from time to time, chatting about what they are doing and why, sharing ideas
- Topics range from school options, childbirth, pregnancy, rail strikes, holidays, weddings, work – to return to work or not return to work, husbands and partners, autism assessments, tattoos, doctors' appointments, asthma
- Babies and toddlers move in and out as necessary, being brought in to be changed or fed
- The mothers are invited to share their work at the end of the session, describe what they did and their creative choices
- The babies are returned to their mothers and the session ends

Within all of this I am constantly questioning how I might observe, and then subsequently document, this world, by what I choose (individually) to pay attention to, whether consciously or not, and how our individual experiences and choices entangle with those with whom we share public, social and private lives. By contrast this also links to that which is not observed or documented: that is deemed un-noteworthy. Here, this includes which I have chosen not to document in order not to undermine the workshop focus – for example, it would not be possible to record interactions (audio or video) within the workshops, so this aspect of the ethnographer's toolkit is not available. In Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*, 'for the commuting author/narrator, tiny moments of life are selected, then scrutinized' (Lancaster 2000:

401, see also Elkin 2021). Like Ernaux's and Elkin's 'commuting author/narrator', I grasp onto tiny moments of life in order to scrutinise, albeit within the wider institutional framework of university research. Similarly, the practice under observation itself – the practice of creative journaling – encourages the observation, scrutiny and analysis of everyday moments.

My questions currently relate to how this documentation in my own journal – fieldnotes and creative outputs – rather than simply my own 'outputs' as someone who is part of the group, change shape as 'data', as documentation in a space where words don't do justice to what is happening and where documentation and what is/is not/can be/cannot be noted is also an ethical question. Being part of these groups, the practice of which also deliberately engages with personal and shared experience, and thinking about what I might choose to document as both a participant and as a researcher (and what is left undocumented, which is, of course, so much) pushes me to reflect on experience and the strangeness of memory, individual and collective. Ernaux's idea of 'je transpersonnel' becomes interesting in the creative endeavour of the group itself, but also within how this might be approached as research, in how I approach my own writing and analysis about these practices.

The conference room is also busy with 7 participants, 6 with babies and 1 who is pregnant, due in March. The table is set out as usual, with prams around the outside of the room and in the corridor between the activity room and the baby room. Pens, paper, paints, pastels, collage, sheets of paper, felts are all across the table. It is a welcoming and friendly space. The women have been given registration forms to fill out at the end if they want to keep participating. Most have already filled them in. There is a steady stream between the baby room and the activity room as the morning goes on. Towards the end, a number of babies are in prams and being pushed to sleep. Babies are passed in and out to feed as needed. The other childcare assistant, L, arrives at 10.45. She also knows the babies well, they attend a mother and baby group.

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The activity is about hands and is called 'My Amazing Hands' by artist Alice Simpson, the same activity we did at the training last week. The group don't hesitate in getting started, using paints, collage, pens, etc.

The last times I have done this activity I found I focused on my mornings, listing the different things my hands do from waking up and on the school run. I decide to focus on the evenings, thinking about what I do before I go to bed. I resist the urge to use pen or paints straight away and instead go for pencil. I sketch out my hand, frustrated by my clumsiness and how bulky I manage to make my fingers. I start to try and shade, focusing on knuckles and my bitten, short, unsatisfactory nails. My wedding ring that won't actually come off. A sleeve. I then write around my fingers, rather than on the insides of my hands as I have done in previous activities. In pencil I write 'holding my book as I try to read, turning off the light, running a bath and filling glasses with water and ice taking out the uniforms'. The small rituals of evening, of attempting to find time to read a few pages of my book, of thinking of a bath as E does, as a way to slow down and be ready for sleep.

As we draw, paint, collage the room moves as people go between the baby room and the corridor when needed. It is something of a dance, one that is made easier by the experience of the practitioners in the baby room, their calmness, their understanding that the MJ space is for the mothers and yet that the babies are part of this.

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Close to the start of the session, before sketching my hand, I draw the group, I draw the table and loosely sketch the women around it. I do it quickly to try and capture the moment, to capture the participants and think about the movement, the lightness of the morning, the lightness of the chatter. The art materials, the drinks, the coffee cups, bottles, milk, baby snacks, biscuits that are like malted milk biscuits but not malted milk biscuits, the mince pies (don't eat them, they are past their sell by date).

(Jessica's fieldnotes, 23/01/23).

## 6 Reflections on everydayness as research practice

The two examples of ethnographic research in this article are very different, offering diverse insights into documentation of everyday and creative practices and ongoing reflexive engagement, with an orientation towards 'walking with' and a foregrounding of the mundane, the everyday. Where this comes back to research orientation is in terms of deciphering lived experience, and the different and entangled ways we approach this mundane and yet so extraordinary practice. Ernaux, in stating her case for 'I' in her Nobel acceptance speech (2022, nd), explains:

Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation. But as all things are lived inexorably in the individual mode – 'it is to me this is happening' – they can only be read in the same way if the 'I' of the book becomes transparent, in a sense, and the 'I' of the reader comes to occupy it. If this 'I', to put it another way, becomes transpersonal.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2022/12/ernaux-lecture-english.pdf>

This leads to how we might decipher a lived situation in research. Attention to this entanglement, and to perhaps expectations of boundaries – in terms of the how but also the what (is bounded) – pushes us to scrutinise our own research practices, as entangled with our own lives. Georges Perec's experience encapsulates the goal of research behind it: to observe everyday life and those fleeting moments, which – as far as we often remember – seemed insignificant, but which still give life a rhythm.

We have presented a metacommentary here, and reflections on the different contexts we are researching – from different perspectives (Jessica reflects on a

project in progress, while Sari considers a project which officially ended a few years previously, but is still continuing in different ways). Our reflections point to the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of ethnographic research which engages with communication and language in different ways. Although different in scope and scale, both projects deal with women documenting the everyday – and the politics of this: what is deemed important and what is considered unimportant. Our own positions – fluid and changing – in the research relate to decisions we might make to document or not to document. These are also framed by what we understand as having meaning within the field.

In setting out these experiences, we call for epistemological reflexivity in research and how we consider and engage with the everyday, including through creative practice and the arts, but also in smaller, domestic moments in contexts of social marginalisation. We argue that these slices of everyday life are not ‘less significant’ but in fact offer rich opportunities for understanding communal lives and individuals’ experiences in the mundane, in the everyday. We also call for wider engagement with the poetic, with the creative and with other ways of documenting and making meaning. And finally we ask researchers to question what is ‘gathered’ or ‘collected’ or ‘generated’ through research and our responsibility to account for what we do.

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## Bionotes

### Jessica Mary Bradley

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

[jessica.bradley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jessica.bradley@sheffield.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4232-1983>

Jessica Mary Bradley is Senior Lecturer in Literacies and Language in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK. She is known for her research in applied linguistics and the arts, and she has conducted research with diverse communities, including creative practitioners and health-care professionals.

### Sari Pöyhönen

University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

[sari.h.poyhonen@jyu.fi](mailto:sari.h.poyhonen@jyu.fi)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1507-7206>

Sari Pöyhönen is Professor at the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research and writing focus on language, identity and belonging; minorities and language rights; migration, asylum and settlement; adult migrant language education policies; linguistic ethnography and creative inquiry in applied linguistics.