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BIOGRAPHY AS METHOD: REMEMBERING JUDITH OKELY

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There is much that could be said about Judith Okely's intellectual legacy, but I want to begin with what it meant to encounter her as a mentor. When I arrived at Oxford University in 2005, coming from a Roma neighbourhood in Eastern Europe, I experienced a profound sense of displacement. This dislocation was not simply social or institutional, but bodily and affective. Judith was one of the first people who recognised that this experience was not an obstacle to anthropology, but a condition of ethnographic knowing. Long before embodiment and autoethnography became established methodological vocabularies, she insisted that biography should not be bracketed out of anthropological analysis, because it shapes what can be perceived, interpreted, and rendered meaningful. In doing so, she exemplified the core argument of *Anthropology and Autobiography*: that objectivity does not require emotional distance, and that proximity can sharpen, rather than undermine, analytic acuity. Knowledge, for Judith, emerged through attentiveness, relationality, and embodied presence, not despite them.

Her contribution to Romani and Traveller studies must be understood in this light also. In *The Traveller-Gypsies*, Judith moved the field away from folkloric and problem-oriented approaches to studying Roma and Traveller communities. She foregrounded the textures of everyday life: women's labour, domestic space, gesture, mobility, moral reasoning, and the politics of representation. These were not treated as descriptive detail, but as sites through which power, belonging, and relations with the state could be theorised. By insisting that Gypsy and Traveller worlds deserved the same ethnographic seriousness as any other field site, Judith repositioned Romani studies as a space of conceptual innovation rather than sociological marginality. Equally important was her refusal of detached authority. Judith made her own presence methodologically visible, not as self-centring, but as a way of clarifying the conditions under which knowledge was produced. This insistence on embodied and relational

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ethnography anticipated later developments in feminist, phenomenological, and experiential anthropology, yet remained distinctive in its empirical precision and ethical restraint.

These commitments were inseparable from her practice of mentorship. Judith opened her personal library to me, took me to meet Traveller families living outside Oxford, and offered intellectual and practical support well beyond what formal supervision required. Through this, she introduced me not simply to anthropology as a discipline, but to ethnography as a lived method, grounded in care, attentiveness, and responsibility to others. That care extended beyond academic boundaries. Judith remained in contact with my family over the years. My mother referred to her for a long time as 'Professor Judith', a title spoken with warmth as well as respect. One of my most enduring memories is of my graduation at the Sheldonian Theatre, with Judith seated beside my parents, all of us visibly moved. It was a moment that captured her generosity of spirit as much as her intellectual presence.

Judith taught me that anthropology begins in attention: to bodies, to relationships, to the textures of ordinary life. She taught that autobiography is not indulgence, but epistemology; that the ethnographer's body is not an obstacle to knowledge, but one of its primary instruments; and that care and rigour are not opposites, but mutually constitutive. Her legacy endures not only in her publications, but in the methodological and ethical orientation she passed on to generations of scholars. That legacy continues to shape how many of us think, teach, and practise anthropology today.

Judith Okely will be deeply missed.

Bibliography

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