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REFLECTIONS ON JUDITH MELITA OKELY: ANTHROPOLOGY NOT QUITE AT HOME, INTELLECTUAL CHIMERAS, AND THE TRAVELLER-GYPSIES

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Judith Okely, the name conjures up images of Gypsy sites in the home counties, feminism in ivory towers, draconian English boarding schools, and most significantly a particular moment in British Social Anthropology. When conducting a fieldwork visit to North Devon as a fledgling ethnographer, I strolled along a meandering pathway leading down to the sea with David Shankland. As we conversed, David told me that Judith Okely was currently a visiting professor at Bristol University. Judith Okely, her name reverberating in my consciousness evoking the photograph that graced the cover of her classic monograph *The Traveller-Gypsies*: a 1970's Traveller trailer with no sink, an important detail used to great effect by Judith to demonstrate how Travellers and Gypsies draw boundaries between inner and outer parts of gendered bodies and between themselves and non-Travellers. 'Is she working at Bristol?', I was impelled by something, a feeling, one that now escapes me. 'You should contact her to discuss your research', David replied.

Judith entered the seminar room and gave a wide-ranging lecture on social anthropology. Employing what was her signature medium, she illustrated her talk with photos printed onto acetate sheets beamed onto a screen from an overhead projector. In characteristic style she discussed Travellers and Gypsies, research methods, and other extra-academic intrigues. At one point Judith said, 'What do Gypsies call non-Gypsies', then glancing at me continued, 'he'll know'. 'Gorgers', I replied, using Romany Gypsy phonetic pronunciation and, as they say, our fate was sealed. As a prelude to cementing our relationship over the next seventeen years, Judith and I reconvened in the anthropology common room and talked for hours. I can remember having a headache afterwards through remaining focused and

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attentive. On reflection, I guess that I wanted to make a good impression so that she might take me under her wing, goodness knows where that would lead us.

In order to demonstrate my academic worth, I sent Judith an essay critiquing the Writing Culture project, conceptualising it as an 'intellectual chimera'. Little did I know then, Judith was inspired by Clifford and Marcus, but their analytical frameworks sounded old hat to me after completing a BSc in Social Sciences which focused intensively on Foucault's early epistemological work. Nevertheless, she kindly agreed to supervise my master's thesis on the agentic qualities of horse-drawn Traveller art motifs and material culture. Ever idiosyncratic, Judith mailed her hand-written comments on the thesis to me in Somerset. They were difficult to read and often came across as something approximating to Brion Gysin's cutup technique, which, in a strange way helped me to think more creatively about my material.

Raised in the post-industrial English North East at the height of Thatcher's socio-economic restructuring, I admit that I didn't have the faintest idea about Oxford or Cambridge, but Judith gave me the confidence to apply. It seemed reasonable to assume that I would only do one PhD, so, after seeing photographs of Tibetan *drokpa* (people of the pasture) on the Chantang Plateau, I was captivated by this topic-area and applied to Cambridge to conduct a study on mobile pastoralists' experiences of climate change. Judith backed my decision to move from studying Travellers and Gypsies in Europe to the *drokpa* in Inner-Asia and wrote a reference. To cut a long story short, Tibet became difficult and, in a pragmatic move I shifted my research area across the Himalayas into Far West Nepal to the Humli-Khampa, a group of mobile-trader pastoralists of Tibetan derivation. Eventually, due to a range of difficulties, I changed topics back to Travellers and Gypsies. This meant that I would not only have to change supervisors but also continents from Asia to Europe. Cambridge had concerns but, due to Judith stepping in as second supervisor, they eventually conceded. Judith had recently published a book on the messy contingencies of fieldwork and was fascinated by the process of moving from Tibetans to Travellers. I guess it further proved her point that anthropology was much more than a research endeavour and was firmly rooted in the vicissitudes of life.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are often considered as an easy research option. Perhaps this is because many of these groups live in Europe and speak national languages that either correspond to the anthropologist's own mother tongue or are not too distant from their linguistic heritage. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, as many Gypsies, Travellers, and Roma speak many different ethnolects and, more significantly here, do not usually associate with outsiders beyond economic matters. Though previously spending years living 'on the road' with my family when I began conducting research with Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers, it quickly became apparent that finding a place to live on a site with different groups other than my own, and as an anthropologist, would be an extremely difficult endeavour. Here it was difficult to insert oneself into a group of people who mix primarily with their own kin and are extremely mistrustful of outsiders. (And while there are multiple reasons for such insularity, suffice it to say here that this has contributed to the endurance of these groups despite centuries of persecution). 'Entre', as Judith referred to it, was proving to be extremely difficult. After several months of riding around on the Tube visiting Travellers' sites across London, it appeared that I might have to conduct a study of urban public transport.

However, I had learned from Judith that everything during fieldwork was significant and could be put to good analytical use. In the intervening period between 2002 (when I had last lived on the road) and 2015 when I conducted fieldwork, the space available for Traveller-Gypsy sites had lessened and there were even fewer extra-legal encampments and stopping places. The implementation of a series of state-ordained anti-nomadism laws had affected Traveller-Gypsy lifeways meaning most of the latter now lived in 'conventional' housing.

In the end, I found a site to live on. And although this meant that I could conduct co-residential research, my problems did not abate. I recall one occasion, when I was living with an extended family of Irish Travellers in East London, sitting in my trailer wondering about how to actually conduct research. It wasn't that I didn't understand Irish Travellers' lifeways; I had a pretty good idea about them, it was anthropology that was the problem. I contacted Judith and she gave me the best piece of methodological advice I've ever had: 'Just live your life and keep your eyes and ears open, and write everything down'. My previous training in the broader social sciences had blinded me to the fact that living with people and participating in their lives, was the best way to understand what might be termed 'the Travellers' point of view' (Howarth 2026).

Over the years I would often visit Judith arriving at all times of day and night, in a variety of vehicles, and with my kids and an extremely excitable bull terrier in tow. She was an 'owl' not a lark, staying up late into the night working at her desk. Ever the raconteur, on these visits Judith would wax lyrical about Godfrey Lienhardt's experiences with the Dinka, and Edmund Leach's Malinowski course at Cambridge (where her cohort would read all of his published works), interspaced with bitter memories concerning her English boarding school, sexism in top British universities, and other intrigues. We would also discuss the reasons why Travellers' living trailers were now less elaborate, the changing state of the scrap metal trade, and the history of anti-Traveller legislation.

For someone like me, who had been raised with notions of class struggle at the forefront of my political sensibilities, Judith was a complex case. Although she was undoubtedly middle-class, with her father attending Oxford and her mother's family having made a decent living from mining in Cornwall, she had experienced marginalisation and the effects of oppressive societal structures. I once said to her that I couldn't understand why middle-class socialists supported working-class politics: 'What was in it for them?', I asked rhetorically, 'Surely, they were working against their own interests by supporting those who sought to replace them in labour markets and social hierarchies, if given the opportunity?' In true Judith style, she looked at me and said 'oh?' the lifting cadence of her polished English accent and the brevity of her exposition demonstrating her mischievousness; she was a lover of controversy, critique and dissension.

Judith was always very supportive and extremely loyal to me and my family. She was far more than a supervisor, but a very dear friend and mentor. She monitored most of her students' career progress, always stood up to injustice, and pioneered the position – then atypical in Gypsy, Traveller, and Roma studies – that the latter invert and thereby negotiate the non-Traveller world to their own advantage. This didn't mean that she was unaware of the historical oppression that these groups had faced, but she was wise enough to understand

that their endurance was testament to their skilful ability to persevere despite what states had levelled against them.

On one of the last occasions that I saw Judith we attended a lecture on the Nazi Holocaust at Oxford's Wolfson College. Judith slept through most of the presentation but once we moved onto questions, she awoke immediately and said with characteristic flair: 'What about the Gypsies?' The speaker, a young scholar, qualified the remark, 'Yes, we must not forget the Gypsy Holocaust' (what in Anglo Romani is known as the *Porrajmos* (in Romani: the devouring)). Judith's comment was not meant to trivialise the horror experienced by Europe's Jewish communities, far from it, but it was to draw attention to the 500,000 Roma and Sinti people who also died in the camps. Judith's championing of Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers and the compassion and care that she extended to these groups, have often been misinterpreted as controversial. This, however, is not the case. She was a steadfast defender of all oppression and, due to her resolve, had herself paid a price (often from other scholars, who ought to have known better).

Judith once remarked that she believed that anthropology was safe in my hands. The reason given for this was that she was consoled by her belief that I knew how to conduct ethnographic research 'properly', (meaning long-term co-residential fieldwork), in order to carry the torch into the future. This was a huge accolade to receive from such a careful ethnographer, trained by some of the discipline's foremost historical figures. Although I'm certain that I am not alone regarding her intention to pass on the baton, the comment does motivate me when writing and researching, hoping that I can in some small way live up to her expectations.

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