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Judith Okely

Life story interview with Paul Thompson

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Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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Judith Okely

Interviewed by Paul Thompson

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1: Hybrid roots

I was born in Malta, during the Siege of Malta in 1941, and my mother looked out on to Valetta Harbour, watching the bombing in the harbour from her birthing bed, and that hospital was destroyed by German bombers a year later. ... They both met in Berlin as ex-pats. My mother was au pair to some of the leading Jewish families there, and my father was teaching English at the Berlitz School, so they met there.... And then, under Colonialism, there was a suggestion that you could go off to one of these lovely places – it was before the War – and he went off to Malta with my mother. They'd married, been married for a year, and they thought they were just going to a lovely Mediterranean place, in about 1938, and he was Head of Supplies. Then, of course, the War came and that was a disaster. Malta was one of the most bombed places in the whole of Europe. He was Head of Supplies. Again, I've written an article, it's called "Hybridity: Birthplace and Naming", about the fact that my second name is "Melita", after the Island. I was brought up, for a while, on stories of the horrors. They didn't have food. Nothing. And my mother said she saved a packet of biscuits, and she finally gave it to me when I was a year, and I sat on the table and she picked up all the crumbs. (pp. 1-2)

2: Downwards from the upper bourgeoisie

My family, my mother's family were upper bourgeoisie. But in those days, you didn't own houses, you rented, and they had a lovely house in Martock, next to the church where my mother had married – there's a photograph there. I just remember being in this wonderful place, and hearing the bells of the church, and having that teddy. So those are my earliest memories....

My grandmother was one of 17 children, many of whom died. Her parents had died by the time she was about seven, and she was brought up by older brothers. But they were called Stocker, and they owned the kaolin mines in Cornwall, and also something to do with china up in the Midlands, and so it was private enterprise. ...

My grandmother had an arranged marriage. She was white, upper middle-class. She was 18. She was married off, at 18, to a lovely guy, from all I know, called Bradford. A Branston Bradford. And his family were coal and corn merchants. ... She was, apparently, a brilliant singer, and I think my grandfather got all her money, of course, when she was 21, and he forbade her ever to sing again, because she was a real latent opera singer. ... But she became an alcoholic, apparently, in her twenties. My mother's memory of her was of a total alcoholic. My mother had to go to the bottom of a tree and get my grandmother to climb down in order to come in for supper. Because she disappeared into alcoholism. And so there's the historical position of bourgeois women not being allowed to develop their talents. ...

Then my father's mother was extremely gifted as well... But she, in a way like Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, she took to her bed, and so all my memories of her is visiting her and my grandfather in Wimbledon through the fifties, and she was lying in the back room, in bed, and my grandfather, who was a civil servant, would just wait on her. And my cousin – that's my father's brother's son – I see him every Christmas, we both agreed that we think this was psychosomatic, that she was a brilliant, gifted woman, who could never go to university, who read books but like Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, you take to your couch.

Ironically, my mother was considered to have gone downwardly mobile in marrying my father! I can't understand it! Because he didn't come from a family of property! And he was a graduate of Oxford, but that just shows the anti-intellectual streak in British upper class culture. (pp. 4-6)

3: Silencing death in a total institution

I was nine. We were all destined to go on holiday in Cornwall, picking up my mother's mother, who lived in Yeovil, Somerset, on the way. We had a tiny little rented cottage in Lincolnshire, and the night before we – my mother and I, and my sister, I don't know if my grandmother was with us then or not – we had supper, and my father said, "Do you know, I feel very stiff. It's like I've got polio". And my mother said, "Oh, don't be silly!" He wasn't going to come with us because he was going to stop off in Wimbledon to see his parents. My last memory is of him standing at the door, in his pyjamas, waving goodbye with his toothbrush – he was just cleaning his teeth – you know, I thought I was going to see him in 48 hours. I never saw him again.

We got down to Yeovil, and suddenly - I've since heard later, that the police turned up at the door at 4 a.m. or something, and they said to my mother, "Your husband has got in hospital, paralysed from the neck down". In those days you had what they called the "milk train" - we didn't know any of this, all we knew is that my grandmother and I and my sister and the nanny were there, and they just said, "Daddy's got 'flu, so you won't be able to go on holiday". And always mysteriously, my grandmother would shut the door, and talk on the phone in the corridor, every morning, talking to my mother. And do you know, at one point, I actually said to my sister, something like, "Daddy's ill", or "Daddy's dying", I just picked it up.

In the end, after about - maybe that was July/August/ September, you know, we just said, "My mother's ill". We didn't know, my mother, with shock, nearly died of double pneumonia, and she was in the same hospital. And my grandmother – that's my mother mother – sat Elaine and I down, and just said, "Well, Daddy's been ill with polio, but now he's better, and he's out of the iron lung, and he's happy. But you're going off to boarding school". ... So we were packed off to boarding school. And the Headmistress had said we could be there free for a term.

I kept thinking, "Why do we miss our holiday, just because Daddy's got 'flu?" And you can imagine the guilt that a child would feel later! The anger I feel about it, you know. And then on the hockey pitch, a girl came up to me and said, "We've been told to be nice to you, because you're Daddy's dead". Can you imagine that! I said, "He's not dead! He's fine!" And then suddenly, in this terrible regime ... we were suddenly called out of

Prep on a Friday, which you never do, because you only see your parents if they visit at the weekend, and we were summoned to the Headmistress's section of the house, and there was my mother, in a suit, all dyed, and I recognised it. Children notice these [things]. I said, "Mum! Your suit! It was your check suit. Why is it black?" "Oh, I like the colour". And then she sat with us at supper, and I said, "You're wearing Daddy's ring". "Oh, he gave it to me". Then she was staying in a spare room in the Headmistress's luxury part of the house.

Then finally, at about 2.30 on the Sunday I think it was, I was sitting reading the *Illustrated London News*, and Elaine and I, we were very happy, we're sitting with our Mum, and my mother just said, "I've got something to tell you. One day Daddy was taken up to Heaven by God". And I remember sort of staring at the *Illustrated London News*, and then we started crying. And then she had to take the train back to London.

I was asked to give a lecture, in Oxford, about five years ago, and [I was asked], "When did you become an anthropologist?" And I said, "I'll tell you when". I said, "I went back to the dormitory, eight people in the dormitory, and the great sin was to talk after lights out. I was sitting there, weeping, on my bed, and the Matron said, "Why are you crying?" – the lights weren't out then – and I said, "My Daddy's died". She said, "I know. But you're not to cry, because you'll keep the other girls awake at night". And I said, "I think that's when I became an anthropologist without knowing it. I thought, 'I hate this culture'". (pp. 8-10)

I've been to psychotherapy and all sorts, and one woman said – I went to a therapist here who specialises on people who go to boarding school – and she said, interestingly, "Judith, no wonder you've emphasised autobiography, because that's the only thing you had. You had to retreat into yourself". I would imagine that my father was still alive, and that one day he would be wheeled out in a wheelchair, and they were hiding him. I'm saying it's retrospective, but I hated the rules. I wasn't sporty ... and it was all orders, orders, orders, whistle, whistle. (p. 27)

4: Parents: models of intellectuality and feminism?

My memory is, through those three or four years before [my father] died, he would sit me on his knee, and he had – and I've still got these books somewhere – there were French cartoon-like stories for children, and I remember him - I was in awe, because I could see it was French, and he would read out the English, so I understood something about this mystery of translation. (p. 8)

My mother was left with nothing, and no education. She took a degree, part-time, at the LSE, by the way, in sociology and social administration, to the horror of her brothers. She was a widow. She'd been a voluntary worker in the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and ... she was in the WVS as well. She did all that, all voluntary. She was a hive of activity. I mean, she had an overactive thyroid, I have an underactive thyroid. Then she was widowed, and my father hadn't left a Will, so what tiny amount of money he did have, one-third was left to me, one-third to my sister, which we'd get when we were 21, and a third to my mother, which was enough for a [house] deposit. She spent the next 20 years paying interest...

But she then applied for a job in old people's welfare in Hammersmith – she saw it advertised – and she got the job... So then she started getting interested in a social work certificate, and she started going to evening classes. It was like you did an External Degree at the LSE, you hardly went to any lectures, and there was this amazing man called Skidelski, who was a White Russian, who lived in Notting Hill, and in the holidays Elaine and I would sit in the car, and Mum would go and have a tutorial with him... There's a wonderful picture of Gaugin somewhere, a self-portrait, and he looked like that. To me, this was the ultimate intellectual. He wandered around with just two blankets pinned together with safety pins! And he was a White Russian! He was actually a Marxist Communist but he'd fled Russia because of the killing of all these White Russians. And there were books everywhere, and he was so brilliant. And, in fact, my mother paid for him to prepare me for the Oxford Entrance...

So she did 'A' Levels, and then she did her degree part-time, and ... finally got her degree at the LSE, in about the year before I left school, I think it was about 1958. ...

She became a lecturer at Battersea, and then she ended up as a lecturer at Surrey University. So that was quite a meteoric rise.

And did you talk together a lot?

We did. But she had no idea how dreadful the institution was – the School. Because for her, she'd had a governess until she was 16. (pp. 11-13)

I'm still a bit confused about your mother's feminism – because you've described her as having rampant Feminism.

Well, women must fight to have employment, she knew, because she was left a widow with £1,000. ... She just said, "Whatever you do, you've got to have qualifications. Either you become a secretary, or you become a buyer in Harrods" – because she knew I was interested. It hadn't really occurred to her to think about university because she thought she would have to pay.

And didn't she give you J.S. Mill at some point?

Yes, that's right. Yes. The night before I went to Paris, that she packed up *The Subjugation of Women* into my suitcase. You know, I think she'd changed radically under Mr. Skidelski. ...

When my father taught at East Grinstead Grammar School. But apparently – I hear from my mother – that he hated being a crowd controller. He was a real intellectual. My mother said he was nose was in a book all the time. And again, I've got half his books here. He actually said to her, to her horror, you know, "I don't care if I live in a pigsty". He was no domestic interest in nice furniture or anything, he was just always reading – in German, in English, in French (pp. 21-23)

5: Escaping school control

That's why one of the most inspiring books I read later was, *Discipline and Punish* by Foucault. So it was bodily control. I knew this inner resentment. Every book you had that was your own, it had to be passed by the Headmistress. She would look at it, and put a signature, in pencil, to see if it was all right.

And how much could you talk?

Well, you couldn't talk in the passage, you couldn't talk after lights out. When could you talk? You had break time at eleven - the bell, the electric bell would go every 20 minutes. When the bell, electric bell, rang in the morning, and you were lying in bed, you had to be standing by the time the bell stopped, which was maybe three minutes. So it was all orders, orders, orders, discipline, discipline. (pp. 27-28)

When my brother-in-law, who was very very upwardly mobile, he thought when he'd got a lot of money, he said he'd send his boys to boarding school. My sister threw a fit. She just said, "There's no way. I'm not going to have a job", you know, "I'm going to …" And the care and the love she devoted to her boys was just to compensate for the lack of love that she received in our dreadful institution. (p. 18)

But it was when I was about 15, I said I couldn't stand the School any more, and of course, tremendous pressure, because my mother had thought, when she went to the School, she was going to Paradise. Because she'd had [and] her two sisters had the governess, her best friend who'd shared the governess with my mother until she was 12, and then she went to school, [so] my mother was totally isolated. Suddenly she was sent to boarding school, though she said she stood outside the school dining room, was totally terrified to hear 200 voices of children, girls, but for her, it was liberation....

So I said to my mother, "I can't take this". I was weeping, I wasn't eating, because you weren't allowed to read or do anything. I used to read with a torch under my blankets at night, and I hated sport...

I don't want to say too much about this, but my sister is, in the long run, [suffered more than I did].

Apparently - I'd forgotten this, but my sister, in the middle of a row, suddenly said, "You saved me" – this was years later – she said, "You saved me". She said, "You wrote a long letter to our mother saying that I must leave the School". And my mother agreed, and my sister went to the Ealing Tech., and she got mega marks, although because she hadn't done Latin, or physics, she couldn't go to any British university to do zoology. She even got a State Scholarship. But she went to Trinity, Dublin. She was always much better than me at unseen exams, she's always got top ... She's an amazing one for memory. But again, she was always tormented because the School had always told her that she was no good. (pp. 13-15)

6: Paris: finding freedom to be an intellectual

I actually was interviewed for a Secretarial College – Mrs. Hoster's – it was a terribly upper class private place; but fortunately, after leaving school, I - a contemporary of mine, they would go to Paris, usually to learn to speak French in order to go to Finishing School, and in those days, one of my contemporaries, she went to the Sorbonne for a one-year course called "Civilisation Francaise", which was geared for foreigners. It was actually the Baccalaureate, and my mother was very positive, and in those days, it was I think it was only £20 a term fees. You went to a hostel ... So I went to the Sorbonne for a year, and this was my freedom. I went at the age of 18... I went to the Sorbonne, I could read and read and read. I didn't need to read with a torch under the bedclothes! I wandered free through all the streets – I've written about this in my de Beauvoir book – and I was just blotting paper. (pp. 20-21)

I could read, I went to those lectures, and I was an intellectual, I could celebrate being an intellectual, for the first time.... I just absolutely soaked up everything, and I read from dawn till dusk. I didn't have a mad sex life or anything, I thought that I was - Mariam, she influenced me a lot, because all these men were making passes at me.... And Marianne was very influential. She had this notion of a unique love, that one day you'll meet a unique love and all that sort of thing, so I thought I would meet somebody at one point.

But I was very devoted, and I'd go to the Louvre every week, and all these art galleries, and these wonderful little tiny cinemas where every two hours there was a new programme, and you could go in the afternoon, and I'd watch French films, because as I said, we didn't go to the cinema at school. It was just a cultural paradise. (p. 40)

I was very political, because in France I became a Socialist and an atheist. I was already an incipient critic, because I said I got up in the Civics class and complained about the Suez thing, and I also complained about Cyprus... I became atheist/agnostic – again, it was an anthropological moment, because I would go, every week, originally with those two English girls, to the Anglican church in the centre of Paris, the elite faubourg, and I went in, and I was ready to take Communion after the ordinary mass, and it was a St. Paul's moment on the road to Damascus. Because there was this English clergyman talking probably about warm beer and cricket, like John Major, and I thought, "We're in the middle of Paris, and we're talking as if this little island is in England, and we're talking about cricket and class. What am I doing?" I said to my English friend, "I literally, I've come in to take Communion", and I said, "I'm not staying for Communion". I was still a Christian, and I walked out of that church, and then I bought a Bible in French, because I still believed in the King James Bible. And gradually, it was just another story. So that was it. (p. 44)

7: Hidden behind *Inishkillane*

Hugh [Brody] had a wonderful way of getting to know people beyond his class, and I'm sure it's something to do with him being an outsider. He was Jewish, one side of his ancestors were Austrian and disappeared in the camps and whatever, and then I went, with him, to the West of Ireland, as his wife – with a Belfast Woolworths wedding ring – and I learnt about fieldwork.... This was the time of the Swinging Sixties, and yet we were going to the West of Ireland, living with the most amazing people who just lived off potatoes and an egg a day or something, and when I did my anthropology course, Leach had a whole course on Malinowski... I also had learnt, instinctively, that your gender and your ethnicity - because Hugh was Jewish, called "Brody", but they all relabelled him "Brady", they thought he must have Irish ancestry, he never revealed that. His supervisor, Brian Wilson, absolutely bonkers, told him, "You mustn't go with anybody else", because

he knew we lived together. "You've got to be a bachelor, and you've got to say you're Catholic". Well, how can you say somebody who has been brought up as an Orthodox Jew, to pretend to be Catholic and go to Confession? ...

Then he wrote up this book, *Inishkillane*, and I didn't feature in at all. So this is the thing about what is actually going on in the field? I went there with my Belfast wedding ring, in a Catholic community. You couldn't say, "Look, you know, we're living together. We've been together for two years", and "Can we have a double room?". We were greeted, and they would say, "When did you get married?" and all that sort of thing. We had to invent a date and all that.

What shocked me – I think this must have been the trigger – was to read this book. He came and gave me a copy, we met up in a pub in London. I was, by then, employed on the Gypsy Project at Regent's Park, and he put the book down on the table, and he said, "You're going to be very angry when you read this". I was just fascinated – and I've written it all up in this article – that I didn't feature! And it actually starts in the first person, "When I arrived at Kate Neagh's place."

Because we got to know of Kate Neagh... in Lower Heyford. ... So when we turned up at that place, we just said, "Look, we're friends of Maud [Kennedy the painter]". And Kate said, "Oh, me darlings!" And Hugh's book starts out with, "Oh, me darlings! And then we had tea." So I was written out!

Obviously your presence was crucial, but did you actually do some of the research for him?

Well, I was easing [it for him], as John Blacking – who was Professor of Anthropology at Belfast, he's since died – I told him about it, and he said, "You eased it, because the bachelor from Britain is, they're dodgy! There are plenty of bachelors in rural Ireland, but who is this stranger? Whereas if you come with a wife, you're a normal couple". And Blacking said, "You eased the way for him". He was human. Also, of course, I would report to Hugh any women's conversations. Sometimes there were young women that were mesmerised that I'd lived in London, Swinging London, you know! They

thought, "Oh, God! Let's hear about it!" I wore a mini skirt. So they would invite me to tea, and then I would come back to Hugh and tell him some of the things I witnessed. I worked behind the bar, I helped bring in the turf on my back. ...

But Hugh's interpretation I didn't agree with. And also, the key thing was that his whole thing was that the West of Ireland was decaying and demoralised, and I saw stamina, ingenuity, persistence. I admired these people. And women were invisible in his text! So I began to look at gender and what was the construction of a monograph? Because I knew that there was a monograph that was fake. I mean, not all fake, but he'd written me out. And he'd been praised for being this lone man who'd broken through the jungle of the boom docks of West of Ireland, and actually gone and talked to peasants! (pp. 32-35)

8: Oxford: fighting for women –

The Oxford Union and St Hilda's College

I think I got it into my head even before I went to Oxford, I said, "I'm going to get women into the Union", because women were not allowed to be members of the Oxford Union.... When I came, we women had to be up in the balcony, like in a mosque or a synagogue, looking down at our male undergraduate contemporaries debating. We had to look down at them.

I befriended a very very clever guy called Roderick Floud, who's now Sir Roderick Floud, who became professor and all that, and he was a very very good organiser, and we formed a committee, and there was Roderick, there was me, later Michael Beloff joined the bandwagon, later Jonathan Aitken, so we had Liberal, Tory, Labour, all on a committee. I've since been told by students at the Union, that you can no longer lobby, but what Roderick did, because his father was to be an MP, he said, "You go round to all the Colleges, lobbying, finding out the members, male members, 'Are you in favour of women joining the Union?' and if they are, then you put a tick, and then on the day" - And then we proposed it, not "we", but others, and then there was a vote, and we lobbied for 24 hours before, and it was my duty, like others, to go round all the Colleges, like with the Labour Party, "You said you would vote. Have you voted yet?"

We lost it the first time, and we joked, because John Sparrow, who was Head of All Souls, there was a huge letter in *The Times* saying, "All life members, please come, wherever you are, and vote against accepting women in the Union". So there was a huge group of people, they all came in coaches or something, and they probably died on the way back! So Roderick was so clever, he said, "Let's have a vote the next term, very quickly", and we said, "Half these octogenarians had died on their way home", and we won the vote the next time.

Roderick was an ace. As the vote was announced, he said, "Judith, go out to the corridor, there's a list up there where you put down your name, wanting to be a member". He knew the strategy, and I put my name there, and I got world publicity! ... I've got photo cuttings of me, front page of the *Daily Express*, "The first woman member of the Oxford Union".

But it was symbolic. Because I had never really learnt to speak. ... I knew I wasn't going to stand for office unless I was a good speaker, and I was totally inexperienced, so I didn't. I never stood as a speaker, or for office. It was a symbolic gesture, that was all. I spoke once in a follow-up debate, but I wasn't interested in high office. (pp. 45-46)

At St. Hilda's, you had to sign a contract to say you wouldn't marry, and that was when abortion was illegal, birth control for unmarried people was illegal. There's a Reunion picture. I refused to join the school photo of first years because I thought, "This is just like boarding school". But I was sent it the other week from St. Hilda's because they desperately want money, and there's going to be another Reunion. And there, very poignantly, is one girl, she was found in bed with her boyfriend during visiting hours, and she was expelled. And Miss Major, the Principal, wrote to every university she applied to, and to her grant authority, saying she was unfit for education.

I wrote, recently, to the Principal of St. Hilda's, and I said, "You have the audacity to name the library after Miss Major". And then another woman, she got pregnant, she secretly married. She very naively told her history tutor that she was suffering from early morning sickness so her essay would be late. The woman rushed to the Principal, and this girl was banished to Reading. She was not allowed any lectures, tutorials or library, and

she was allowed back to Oxford to take the Finals, eight months pregnant, and she wept throughout and got a Fourth.

It was boarding school. And when that woman was sent down by Miss Major, some of us had a petition. And then there was another woman who had a counter-petition. She married A.N. Wilson, and she was set for a job, she's got a lectureship here, and she wrote a counter-petition saying, "We support Miss Major, and we support her against girls that bring St. Hilda's into disrepute". So the women at this Reunion, they said, "Judith, ... Judith, you were a figurehead for us. You were a figurehead, but we didn't realise it much at the time". (pp. 50-51)

9: Constraints of a questionnaire

So [a social researcher at Nuffield] had all this money, and he recruited me and the American wife of an academic, as usual – there were lots of intelligent women around who didn't have jobs. She and I were both recruited to conduct questionnaire surveys around Cowley.

It was terribly informative to me, because (a) I didn't know Cowley – it was white working-class, Morris Motors and Cowley Motors then, it was full employment. You had to go to every third house, and you had this questionnaire of about three or four pages, and it was all about shopping habits, and you had "Yes", "No", "Don't know" – they were pre-ordained answers. And then there was, right at the end, there was two inches, "Any other comments". And that was one of the most important lessons for me later, to learn about the limitations of questionnaire, because you would knock on the door and there would be an elderly woman who was desperate for company, and "Come in and have a cup of tea". And then you'd say, "Do you buy your Sunday joint on a Friday or a Saturday?" And she'd say, "Look at me. I live alone. Do you think I'm going to have a Sunday joint? Do you think I can even afford it? I go to the butchers when it's closing, and I might get a chop at a discount". There wasn't room for those answers. And then I would keep filling up the later paragraph, you see. So that was the most useful practical lesson in scepticism, with pre-ordained questions. (pp. 53-54)

10: Qualitative and quantitative

But would you argue, then, that that kind of quantitative survey work is more vulnerable to false information than qualitative?

Yes. Well, I made some scribbled notes, there were various articles that I later listened to over the years. There was another book called *The Official Statistics* - I've got upstairs - showing (that came out the time when I was at Essex) how you could have 80% answer yes, but it's actually 80% inaccurate. So just because it's the majority said X, it doesn't mean it's true. And I remember this wonderful guy – I made notes – he was talking on the radio years ago, and he said, "The more you generalise, the more you lose the detail, and in the end you're left with banalities". And that's what I felt. But, of course, you know, I'm more sympathetic to Barbara now, retrospectively, but she kept saying, "This is a policy-oriented (the dreaded word!) policy-oriented project", and "The government will only respond to numbers". She actually said, "The ideal for this report" - which is what we thought we were going to produce – was to have tables on every page, of figures. You know, totally bogus! I began to look at that, government Census, and in the Census it talked about real Romanies and reproduced the stuff, and she had a photograph of a gypsy marriage in that Census – I've got it upstairs in my attic – and it said, "A gypsy marries for life". She just repeated what a gypsy said, which when you began to unpick it, of course - of course, my wonderful (what would I say? "weapon") is a brilliant article by Edmund Leach...

The point, the crux of that article is that Leach had done over a year's fieldwork in one village called "Pul Elia" (?? – sp. 30.28), and he was looking at a report based on a survey of 52 villages. Ironically, one of the authors was a certain man called Tambiah, who was then a sociologist, and I think it was Leach's influence that transformed Tambiah later into an anthropologist, whose lectures I followed in Cambridge. And Leach showed the wonderful argument that the one intensive study shows the system, <u>the system</u>, and numbers and all that don't show the system. They concluded that the majority of people in these 52 villages were landless peasants, and Leach said, "I know, from studying the one village, I know the inheritance system, and the majority of those so-called landless

peasants are going to inherit". So they're not landless peasants. Just simple things like that.

Of course, I didn't have any of that argument to defend me, I just knew instinctively, with this Barbara, that I was suddenly getting there. I was getting these insights. But I'd been inspired by Malinowski – I said that before. The anthropologist pitches his or her tent in a village. And again, always with introductory lectures, I put that photograph – the famous photograph of Malinowski's tent in the Trobriand Islands. (pp. 79-80)

11: Researching The Traveller-gypsies

Well, I moved into [Norman McCabe's] caravan – the Warden's caravan, [while he was away] you see – that was provided by the Local Authority.... But anyway, I moved on to that site, and ... then I told Barbara how good it was, so then I was allowed to rent in a B&B, for several weeks, just up the road, near St. Alban's, near Cotton's Wick, and then visit daily. Then ... at some point Don Byrne met me, and he thought I was from the Ministry. I was working with a seconded Ministry person. But he was so brilliant, he said, "You can have a caravan owned by the Local Authority, on any site, and you can do whatever you like". Because he thought, in blissful innocence, that I would then write a rave report about the wonderful project. I was very complimentary, but in this book, it's this book here, the first one [*Gypsies and Government Policy in England*], that was what I came up with with Barbara. That came out in 1975. That came out of that project....But he was very upset with the bit I wrote about Hertfordshire. I was critical as well.

Because he assumed that they would all want settlement and assimilation. He was kind, but there was all this thing about, they all want wage-labour jobs – there were a few more in those days – and they want housing. Barbara Adams thought that. They all thought, and Barbara Adams was just so naïve. She just said, "Well, we can get to the women because they'll want kitchens, and they'll like washing machines. So if we can convince the women, then they'll move into housing". It's just naïve, ethnocentric – that's the word I learnt from Cambridge! So then I moved to this other site...

Then I moved, but that was the other thing. During those two weeks, you see, I had to take on the role of the Warden and collect the rent, and that's when I found it really problematic. Because then I was immediately identified as an official, and, of course, they played it! They said, "We've paid two months in advance", and "Norman knows that". And was I there to defend the Council? I wasn't even an employee! But that was when Don said to me, "You don't need to collect the rent. You don't need to be a Warden"...

Then I moved, then I was allowed to stay on all these different sites. But then the problem started with Barbara. After about two or three weeks, I think it was before I moved on to that second site, and when I was in the B&B up the road, she summoned me back to the office, and she said, "Right. Now, will you compose a questionnaire?" And then she kind of sighed and said, "Oh, of course, you're totally inexperienced. You wouldn't even know how to begin to compose a questionnaire".

I knew, from what I'd said last visit, that having conducted questionnaires round Cowley, how even when you're finding out about shopping habits, how inept they are. And my heart sank! I said I didn't know what to do. And then she sat down, and she composed, honestly, about 15-20 pages – you know, date of birth, experience of housing - and I used this particular question, by the way, it was not in that one, but it was in her Census, the Census question, "Why do you travel?" Do you ask nomads, "Why do you travel?" My answer, when I give lectures is, "Judith", the gypsy children would say, "Judith, what's it like living in a house?" How can I answer? I said, "It's got a ceiling, it's got walls, it's got electricity, it's got a floor". How can I tell? So how can you ask nomads, "Why do you travel?" You might be saying, "Why do I live in a house?" So, you know, anyway, this 25 page questionnaire - and I was already established rapport with some of these people.

I wrote a paper, which I've never published, about the importance of people who come to you at the beginning, and it's rather like you being a hitch-hiker. I was seen as somebody transient, and there was one woman in particular, called Jean – I can give you her name now – but she had lost a child that had been run over by a Gorgio... A year before, or more, a Gorgio, yobbo, was visiting the site, and just backed, at full speed, in the middle of the site - which no gypsy would do, because there was a circle, and gypsies had a

circle, and the children would play in the centre - and her lovely little two-year old was run down and killed. She was still in desperate mourning, and I was saying that she welcomed me. It was in that first site when I was there for the two weeks. They had a caravan, but they had a old burnt out van, no wheels or anything, and they cut a hole in the roof so they could have a coal fire, or some burner, and she would invite me there, and we'd be talking till two in the morning, as she went over and over the horror of when he was taken to the hospital, and the baby was wrapped up in a sheet after he'd died, and they had to walk past the waiting people, and she said, "They treated my baby like a pillow and he was my boy".

So then that was when she started telling me about fortune telling, and I've never had, before or after, any such amazing detail, which became the core of the article in *Own or Other Culture*, on fortune telling. She told me how she told fortunes, and that she had her little other boy, John, sit next to her, so he'd learn what to do. And I explained it to myself, and later impressed - it was actually very good psychotherapy. But the interesting thing is that the outsider is actually somebody to be welcomed by specific people.

Now Barbara Adams would say, later, a year into the field, "We're not getting <u>real</u> gypsies. We're not getting <u>typical</u> gypsies. The people who talk to you most are those who've lived in a house". Now Jean, her father was a gypsy, her mother was a Gorgio, she was brought up in a council house, she didn't join the road until she was 18, when she married, and her father was a great horse dealer, and she was literate, but she said to me - and I found it in the notes - she said, "I sympathise with you, because you were making the same mistakes as I did". And that was the key thing. Barbara kept thinking, with good old positivism, that you've got to find the typical informant to find the uncontaminated culture, whereas I realised that the people that were most articulate were those who'd seen both sides, so they could express the difference. They were hybrids. ...

But going back to the questionnaire, my heart sank. I thought, "This will ruin my relationship. I will immediately be identified as a researcher". I knew that this was all wrong. So I gave it to Penny, who agreed to do it – I wasn't there – she administered it to some of the families that she knew, and it was wonderful, because what she said was, she knew that many of the answers were lies. Like, "Have you been married before?" She

knew they'd been married before. "No, no, no, gypsies marry for life". But she had to put down what they'd chosen to tell her. And then it was an own goal, because then when Barbara looked at these questionnaires, she said, "It's chaos. It can't be coded", because she could see the inconsistency. Even within the course of the interview they would contradict what they'd said at the beginning. (pp. 76-79)

[Barbara Adams] had a well-meaning view, but her well-meaning view was, in the end they all want to go to school, they want factory jobs, and they want housing. So my difference was that these people were not a deprived group, they were a highly dynamic, amazing, resourceful, brilliant culture – if you'd like to use the word. But I never saw myself as a spy.

You didn't see yourself as a spy, but some of them thought you were, didn't they?

Yeah, well, that's always the fate of anthropologists, because you're not using questionnaires. You're actually using the same strategies as a spy, which is to join the group. And that's a spy's strategy.

So going back to the gypsies, how did you actually get close to them? You've mentioned these exceptional people, but how did you get close?

Well, gradually. Because Jean took me under her wing, and she even instructed me about clothes. I was so cold, I wore trousers, but then I was taken aside, and I was told – of course, it's all very different now - that you can only wear trousers if you have something like a Pakistani gear, you mustn't show your hips. Well, this is okay, but nothing lower, nothing tight.... So she took me under her wing. ...

It's the shape. You mustn't show the body. You mustn't show the body. But I'm saying everything is transformed now, and that's why *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, that was a disgraceful film, disgraceful series, they just looked at all the exotic. And the voice over! I've lost all respect for her. All the clichés! But then, you had to be modest. And never talk to a man on his own.

Didn't you say about a physical pose, that you had to change your pose?

Yeah, well, I didn't have to. In my *Anthropology and Autobiography* book, I reproduced this photograph – and that was taken by Barbara's husband, because we went to different locations and said to the people, "Do you mind if we take photos of you?" And I was with this woman, Beatrice, who actually lived in a tent, and I said that I unconsciously – when I looked at that photo ten years later – she had agreed to be photographed, and Diana Allen, the lawyer, facilitated the photographer. Beatrice knew me, and I said, years later, I realised that she had got the barrier pose, meaning, "I agree to be photographed because Diana Allen has helped me a lot with the legal cases, but this is a stranger". ... I've imitated her posture of the barrier ... I've drawn on my interviews showing how they learn with the body. Again, that was the wonderful thing about fieldwork, you escape from the desk and the library, so I acted with my body.

But then the breakthrough came when I moved on to the other site. Again, the people that befriended me were sort of in between. They were half show people, and Rina, she'd run away from her husband, and she'd been married into really big circus/show people, she said they were huge bungalows in a great circle, and she'd escaped, with her child, and she was living with her mother, "Aunt Doll" and the husband, who had his own lorry. They were literate, show people are literate. Aunt Doll wore glasses, which was very unusual. She said, when I first moved on the site, they said, "Oh, my God! Here's the Welfare", because she wore glasses!

And then, how did it happen? I needed, I had to learn to drive. I hadn't even learnt to drive then. I took driving lessons, and then thanks to this grant, I was able to buy a vehicle, but mind you, it was cheap, I got it at an auction, it was a 15cwt van, and I said I was picking up what I'd learnt in Ireland. Actually, it was an ex-police van, so I knew it would be in perfect nick, but it looked old, and actually, they were pretty suspicious when they saw it! (LAUGHS) But I thought, "That's it! I learnt from you, which is go out to work!" So I said, I said, "I've got this van", and I said to Aunt Doll, because they were stuck, because the husband, the older man - I mean, it was just a non-marriage really, he would disappear and go out all day. I said, "I've got this van, would you like to go out calling with me?" And they all - "Oh, Judy! Oh, great!", so then I took them out.

Then when we arrived back with the first load of old batteries and scrap ... You go to doors, and, of course, they knew the areas, or they would spot them. They'd say things like – "Judith, cor, those are nice houses there!" And I was thinking, "Yeah, they've got lovely interiors", and what they meant was "nice for calling, for getting, they'll be rich people". So you'd go round amazing areas in Hertfordshire. I, of course, wanted to stand next to Aunt Doll or Rina, and watch how they performed. They were time and motion people, they said, "Judith, you're wasting time. You go over and call there, and we'll call at this door", you know, "because we'll get extra". Of course, I didn't say, "I'm an anthropologist finding out how you do it". I've lived off these jokes for years ... I'd try and drop my "H's" and extend my vowels, and say, "You got any old scrap, any old rags?" like that, and the women would say, "Oh, what's it for?" And I looking at people like the mothers of my school friends, and in the end I said, "Oh, Save the Children Fund". And then I came back to them, and they said, I said, "Do they ask you what's it for?" "No, they never ask what's it for!" "Did they ask you, then?" And I said, "Yeah!" And they said, "What did you say?" And I said, "Oh, Save the Children Fund". "Hey, Judith's on to a good one there". And then when I said, "Save the Children Fund" to one of the other places, she said, "Oh, I'm Secretary of the Local Branch"! And I gave a friend's address in Hemel Hempstead, and I told them, "I said it was the Hemel Hempstead branch and I gave Connie's address". "Judith, we always say 'Three Beech Drive. We always say that's our address'".

But it was, honestly, I said it was a liberation. A liberation. But I saw however bungling, just as I've said in my chapter on participant observation, you never perfect the skills that the people have, but you learn also, crucially, you learn through your mistakes, and you learn to admire those skills. But when we came back with the van, and we unloaded things, they said, "Judith, we're gonna rip." The other gypsies were all jealous because they hadn't had the idea of using me. And then they said, "We're going to report you, because you're earning money on the side", because they still thought I was a Council employee. But I never said that.

So what other activities did you do with them?

I joined the potato gang, picking potatoes.... The gypsies were responsible for most of the fruit picking and agricultural seasonal work in this country, and it's because of the controls on movement, thanks to John Major, 1994, Criminal Damages Act, that the gypsies are less mobile. They daren't move. So now we have slave labour from Ukraine and wherever, who are living under plastic sheeting, at below the legal wage, doing all the fruit picking and the potato picking. It was the gypsies work.... The gypsies would come with their caravans and park, the farmer didn't have to provide accommodation. They came with their families. And the other thing that nobody realises is that, I think it may still be the law, technically, gypsies didn't have to go to school in the summer, because they were allowed to travel with their parents for agricultural work, so the State recognised that. ...

But one of the things that you say is that you were treated as a gypsy by the police.

Yes. Yes. Until I opened my mouth, you know! (pp. 82-86)

12: On fieldnotes

You were doing this fieldwork, and you said, earlier, how you were taking notes. So that was a sort of diary, is that right?

I'll say about the notes, because I've written in this article that's in press with a German journal, is that there was nothing on how to write field notes, absolutely no literature. I've got shelves upstairs, my study above here, is just lined with books on fieldwork methods [but on] writing field notes and all that, absolutely nothing. I did write, after my first two weeks, a report on Cottons Wick site, but what I did was have headings like, "travel", "kinship", whatever, I was deciding, in advance, what to record. That was a report to Barbara to show that I was doing something, because she was worried, she thought, "Why is this woman staying there? I'm losing control of her. You've got to come back to the office". And that was when I thought, instinctively, is there any guidance about writing field notes? Nothing.

There's a lovely quote there, Malcolm McLeod... I visited Cambridge, because my boyfriend then was at King's, Cambridge, and he just said, wickedly, "Judith, you've got to write down everything you see, you smell, you hear, and you should, ideally, fill up an exercise book for every day". And that was the best and the only advice I got. Of course I couldn't fill up a whole exercise book every day, but that was the thing where you did not decide, in advance, what was relevant – which again is consistent with my scepticism of questionnaires, because you decide, in advance. I gave a description of a woman, in the first two weeks, wearing an apron. Little did I know that an apron was crucial in terms of their pollution beliefs, and the apron was to shield the genitalia from the food. It's nothing to do with keeping your clothes clean, it was a symbolic barrier. And then I went back and I thought, "God, they've all got aprons!" So it was that minutiae that -

That's an interpretation, but how would you be sure that was true?

Well, that's a good point. It's again and again, you don't fix on the one episode, you have it – I hate the word, I don't agree with the word "triangulation", because "triangulation" means you compare the qualitative and the quantitative – and what I meant was, after a while it's repeated so often. (pp. 94-95)

13: Flexibility and "the funnel method"

It's a wonderful joke, ... the "funnel method", which was that you're open to everything, and then you refine it. So I've made lots of jokes in lectures saying, the "funnel method" ... I'd say the "funnel method", and it shut them up! I said, "It's phallic, it's hard. It also appeals! It's a tool!" I was lecturing in Nottingham about four years ago, and they said, "Thank God, Judith, we're now going to introduce the funnel method", it means being open. There's a wonderful passage which I used to quote in lectures, "When you go into the field, you arrive with part of your life history, the latest novels, everything, you go with yourself. You go with everything. And then that is a resource". Again, talking about my lecture in the Czech Republic where I did an overrun of the *Anthropology and Autobiography*] book, my main theme was quotes from the people I've interviewed. And I said, "Every one of them changed their focus when they were in the field".

So you change your focus, but it's no good a grant body saying, "What hypothesis are you testing?" ... When I was helping to fill in ESRC forms, the students would come to me – in Edinburgh – and it would say, "What hypothesis are you testing?" They were bewildered. And I wrote to the ESRC, and I said, "This is not how anthropology works". Now they've changed it. I haven't looked at one recently, but it says, "What research questions?" That's good, "research questions," you can have these puzzlements and you may change... (p. 117-18)

14: Anthropology as wandering

It fits with my continuous argument that even if you have a brief, and I did keep studying the aged, but the directions it goes, you can't predict, and you shouldn't predict, and that's where my reading of Andre Breton, *L'Amour fou* in 1961, in Paris, the surrealist, brilliant writer, he talked about being "disponible", and there he used it about love. It's a brilliant book, I don't think it's ever been translated into English, but it's about wandering, going wandering. He wanders through the markets, and he was looking at objects and this, that and the other, and finally he just encountered a woman, and they fell madly in love, and that was how love should be. It was a brilliant romantic book.

I transposed that – and I've got it, again, in my book. To be an anthropologist, you wander. You're a flaneur or flaneuse. But, of course … and, you know, there's a whole literature now on "flaner". Keith Tester, whose book I quote, is now a professor at Hull, in sociology – I've not met up with him. Then there's a lot of Feminist writing about the "flaneurs". The flaneur was actually the 19th century gentleman who wandered the streets, but he wasn't looking for people, he was loving the architecture and the streets and the boulevards, and I said, "We wander, but we're open to what comes our way". (p. 126)

15: Fieldwork paths to empathy

It was the celebration of the Armistice of the First World War, that Sunday, and I thought, "Now I'm free, I can do fieldwork". I drove, I parked in the town side street, I went to the

church, and there were still, in those days, octogenarians, because France celebrates the First World War, but not the Second, because of the shame of the loss, and also the betrayal, the collaboration. I saw a woman just walking towards the church, and I said, "Excusez moi, je suis anglaise. Est ce que je peux participer a cette ceremonie dans l'eglise?". She said, "Mais, oui. Vous etes anglaise. Mais, bienvenue. Mais allez vous en, mademoiselle. Mais je suis dans le choeur, il faut dire au revoir mademoiselle". So I went into the church, sat obediently at the back, saw all this procession of these lovely 90-year olds, heavy with metal medals and the French flag. And then afterwards they processed out, and there was laying of wreaths at the memorial outside the church, and then a band started up, and then there was a procession to the Town Hall.

I stood, a bystander hanging around, and the same woman who saw me, she was in the procession! She said, "Alors, venez, mademoiselle, venez avec nous!" And then I processed with the band to the Town Hall. I mean, what a launch! And then we were in the Town Hall, and there was what they call "vin d'honneur", you have a toast, and it turned out this woman's husband was Deputy Mayor! And she said, "Vous etes anglaise", and "Tell me why you're here". And there I didn't have to hide anything – compared to the gypsies. I just said, "I've studied the aged in England, and I – "Je voudrais faire un comparison en Normandie. Et je suis la pour six mois". So she whispered it to her husband, who whispered it to the Mayor, and there were about 50 people there, and he said, "Alors, nous avons avec nous une anglaise professeur, et elle veut etudier les personnes ages dans notre petite ville. Alors, le vin d'honneur a une nglaise!" - and all these 80-year olds lifted their glasses! Then I was swept off for lunch, you know what French lunches are! We went to her sister-in-law. I was driven around the country, I was put down to my gite at midnight. Now, this is what I mean about being "disponible". My fieldwork was launched.

Fantastic start! Now, later on, you say there was a crucial moment with, I think, a Jacqueline Gregoire?

JO: Oh yes, yes. Wonderful woman. I know. I said there were urban clubs because Mitterand was giving loads of money for clubs at that point, very clever idea, of course. You imagine Cameron doing that! So everybody was setting up little clubs. The one in

Forges les Eaux was totally dominated by the bourgeoisie, and a lot of the retired so-called peasants, they were brought to the Maison de Retraite, and they suddenly found themselves being dictated to by their former schoolteachers, who were telling them how to sing. But anyway, I thought, "Well, there are clubs in rural areas". And somebody said, "Madame Gregoire, in this tiny village, she is Presidente of the local club". I went, drove round there, and she wasn't there, just her husband, and I said, "Est ce que je peut venir, je suis interessee dans les personnes ages". It was always good to say, "comparing with England", so you weren't just objectifying them.

Then finally I arrived, and it was the afternoon, and it was a beautiful building with the old wooden panels, like Elizabethan – the old barns. There she was, she was unusual because she was six foot tall, her husband was probably about 5' 6" - and I went in, and there again, questionnaires were a mode of entry. It was useful to say, "Can I interview you?" as a strategy. And she invited me in, and she was plucking a chicken, and all the way through, she was answering me, you know, "How many people?" "What do you do?" What they loved was having coach trips to Rouen or something like that – not reading groups – and she said she objected to all this singing and whatever, that these people wanted adventure. And having plucked the chicken, and me having asked these questions, she said, "J'ai du travail a faire". I thought, "Well, bloody hell, you've been doing work all the way through!" (LAUGHS) And then she said, "Je vais traire les vaches". I said, "Est ce que je peux venir?" "Vous etes professeure – venez, venez!" Then she went into this [barn].

This was December, God it was cold! It was wonderful! And she opened the doors of this barn, and the heat of these cows just hit the air. There were maybe 13 cows in there. There were old swallows nests, it was just amazing! She started hand-milking, and ... I was talking to her as she was hand-milking, and what I learnt from being with Hugh, which is, "Can I help?" This old trick! Wonderful! ...

And she said, "Alors c'est une vache un peu en colere, il faut attendre. Il faut avoir Mere No-no" –"Mother No-no". She had names for them all! And she took me, and she said, "Mere No-no, c'est Judith", and Madame No-no turned her head round, "Il faut introduire. Judith, c'est Mere No-no". So we were introduced. Then she was very worried.

I've still got my Jaeger duffel coat that I bought in 1976, in Oxford, and I was wearing that, and she was terribly worried about any dirt. And then the three-legged stool. I was really angry because I had a three-legged stool in my office in Hull, and I used it for my inaugural lecture. I put it in front, and I said, "This is my anthropological chair – my milking stool", but some bastard stole it from my office.

I started, and again, it's whether you can do things. Nothing came out. It's delicate. You can't just pull. And then she said, "Attendez, je reviens." And then she came back with a flash camera, and she took a photograph of me. And I said, "Isn't this wonderful, the return of the gaze". It was, in those days, developed in the local chemist, and I got copies, and I use it again and again as an example that the person was so amazed that the anthropologist was doing this. It was just incredible. And that was a breakthrough.

Then right at the end of the day of the milking, she had all these buckets, and a container, and she said, "Buvez!" And she got a glass, and "Alors, c'est ;pure. Il n'y a pas de concentre" – "My grass doesn't have pesticide. This is pure milk". That's when I said I was drinking the landscape. Honestly, I went back to my gite in a total buzz. I just thought, "My God, this is it, you know". I was like her adopted daughter! (pp. 129-31)