

Locked out in Oxford: a review

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Introduction

This article explores some implications of the experience of being locked down in the city where the author lived as undergraduate and as postgraduate following anthropological fieldwork. The author returned to Oxford after early retirement and university appointments around the UK and Europe. Enforced residence for months in one dwelling and location triggered past incidents linked to place. A 21st century perspective provoked contrasts with sexist and racist bias in past regulations and legal priorities. The experience also points to differences in communications and new significance in rare encounters.

This is the work of an anthropologist who is used to studying and understanding ANOTHER culture by extended shared living with the others. She had originally confronted the relevance of the specificity of the fieldworker such as gender, age, ethnicity and age.¹ In this instance she is faced by an entirely different context. Thanks to the Covid crisis she, like all others, was not permitted to socialise let alone move beyond her home, familiar territory. Instead she utilised the long term methods in new ways, namely visiting or passing through the familiarity of parts and a place of her own culture where she had studied as undergraduate and post graduate then after extended absences elsewhere as retired professor. Here the power of place acted as triggers of memories of past events and experiences. Some so far back in time could now be seen as a new other. There was little or no conversation with other inhabitants but internal dialogues with the lone self. Instead phone calls and emails however rare, as one to one exchanges could not take the place of conventional anthropological fieldwork. The relevance of place as memory triggers through decades can contribute to wider anthropological theories about experience through time and space.

Natural distractions

It might be presumed that an academic, used to writing and reading, (besides teaching), would find little difference being locked in. The house, with study and all the familiar interior spaces ever there containing computers, book-packed shelves, filing cabinets, TV, music players and every domestic support system. But given lockdown, the unexpected and changing delight is my garden, fully visible from the kitchen table. Winter branches, cleared flower beds and stone paths, gradually, then suddenly transform, as spring emerges from tiny to dramatically enlarging leaves, soon sporting white or pink blossoms.

Birds give reassuring living signs. They graze on the seeds I scatter and visit the squirrel proof feeders. Frogspawn floats in the pond. Another regular visitor is the nightly badger who fearlessly stares at me while scrunching the remaining seeds. Behind the end garden fence are giant chestnut trees. From bare trunks and branches, new shapes and colours appear with the spring season. An efflorescence of leaves then weighs down the branches, followed by upstanding white blossom which, by mid-June, metabolises into green nodules nurturing brown conkers.

Driving escapes with visual resonance

External sights have the potential to become free association triggers of the viewer's past. The celebrated Proustian narrative of the

taste of Madeleine cake can revive memories of distant years. In my case it is sight that rejuvenates long gone experience, good or bad.

Newly noticed change and freedom are my unexpected experiences of short drives away from housed incarceration. Trips to local supermarkets are permitted. Here the journey, however short, has recently become more important than the destination. Traffic is minimal, if not absent. My driver's eyes are drawn to the full façade of each Oxford building and the golden Cotswold stone. When driving over Magdalen Bridge, the familiar College Tower, dominating the skyline, is even more appreciated. In the distance are celebrated lines of buildings, including Queens College and the Radcliffe Camera. Then the distant St Mary's university church where last year, I attended a memorial service for the sculptor Michael Black. He renovated those fearsome stone heads around the Sheldonian. He was briefly my landlord offering a return to housed reality after anthropological fieldwork in a caravan on Gypsy sites.^{1,2}

My short drives often lead to Longwall Street flanked by Cotswold coloured walls. Above those stone boundaries are massive trees, their heavy laden branches hanging downwards. With few if any pedestrians, nature in full bloom has become the dominant perspective, enhanced by the decline in traffic pollution. The route continues past newer buildings, some under construction, then on South Parks Road, a multi-floored science complex being turned to rubble, thanks to its deadly asbestos.

My former routine drives, from A to B, have become spatial adventures for their own sake, with special landmarks. I more fully understand the deep pleasure voiced by the octogenarian WW1 Deserter Harold Busby² when, in the 1970s, I drove him to visit a friend some 30 miles from his Oxfordshire village. He had become near housebound. Throughout the trip, partly down a seemingly boring dual carriageway, he gave a running, detailed commentary on the landscape. He exuded happiness.

A route beyond South Parks Road leads past Keble College with magically patterned red brick, all opposite the Natural History

¹'Gypsy' derived from 'Egyptian' remains the preferred self-ascribed label of this English group, not the preference for 'Roma' elsewhere.

²Thanks to my anti-racist widowed mother, we had Caribbean tenants in the middle floor of our west London home, to the astonishment of white suburban neighbours. Our black tenants varied from telephonists to diplomats. I had superb discussions e.g. about the end of Empire with these co-residents, welcomed as equals. Thus, when I moved to Oxford, conversing with Malcolm, the black American, was nothing strange.

Museum. This includes the Pitt Rivers where, last year, I presented a seminar on 1970s Romany/Gypsy photos, mainly by local journalists in my field area. The newspapers having long disappeared, my rare collection will be donated to the Pitt Rivers archives.

Involuntary triggers of the past

Crossing Magdalen Bridge unexpectedly triggered a long repressed, disturbing undergraduate event which now points to the shocking contrast between women's legal protection then and now. In the early 1960s, when walking towards the town centre, I greeted a male undergraduate colleague coming the other way. Suddenly, a man jumped out from nowhere and attempted to throw this imagined male 'rival' over the bridge into the river. This menacing postdoc whom I encountered only briefly through other college networks, had been stalking me; even hiding in the bathroom adjoining my college room. Given the all female college's then misogynist Panopticon regulations, I dared not seek staff help. Today at least, 'stalking' is recognised in law and the victim not blamed. In those days, even male students insisted that any female raped was because 'she' had 'asked for it'.

To save the other student whose life I saw at risk, I ran away up the High Street anticipating the maniac would follow. At the Carfax crossroads, I rushed up to a policeman and begged for help, explaining the maniac's violence. The policeman just laughed and turned away. I continued running to some friends' lodgings. The maniac followed. My friends witnessed his crazed diatribe and finally believed me.

I only became free and safe, thanks to Maurice Bowra, Head of an all male College whom I personally contacted. I produced the maniac's handwritten letter to me on his college headed paper. This post doc, recruited for a prestigious research project, insisted that unless I agreed to his 'every wish', he would 'beat me black and blue'. Bowra responded seriously. Within days, the stalker was sectioned in the local mental hospital. Weeks later, that institution requested I attend an appointment. Without preliminaries, the psychiatrist asked me when I had 'broken off the engagement' with this patient, implying I was the guilty initiator. I had never even shaken his hand. Seemingly, even such a professional lacked analytical intelligence. Decades later, after national publicity for my de Beauvoir book,³ the former interne sent a letter to my then university. He was still thinking of me and requested a visit to his high-rise council flat, far from Oxford.

Thankfully, happier associations have also been evoked by the unlocked escapes. Familiar drives up the Banbury Road, bring emotional memories of deceased friends' former homes. Those locations trigger gratitude for creative, shared experiences. One turning leads to the final home of Helen Callaway, my co-editor for *Anthropology and Autobiography*.¹ A mundane street sign can trigger fulsome experiences, past friendships through decades and global adventures. As the earlier stalking example has shown, (and one below) there are parallels with Tony Seaton's notion of 'Thanatourism' (1998) favouring journeys to past dark places. But along with recalling the homes of dead friends, the very trigger of their names has also brought inspiring recollections.

Female college incarcerations

A drive takes me past my student lodgings: as final undergraduate year in a 19th century mansion on the Banbury Road. Highly visible are the massive bay windows of my former room. Doubtless that once cheap flat has been sold to oligarchs in the billionaire takeover of North Oxford. What a contrast that final year was. I could live as free adult. Previous years in my all female college, rules demanded we be locked in before midnight. Otherwise, latecomers risked clambering

over the brick wall topped by barbed wire. Our beds were checked to see if we had slept in them. I knew of no male college where students had such surveillance. Porters had even to tolerate the overnight presence of prostitutes in some male colleges. By contrast, to the incredulity of contemporary students, we women had to sign a legal contract confirming we would not marry.

This spring, my escapee drives regularly passed that college. Again events, decades past, are evoked, in one case, because of the shocking contrast with this century. Surely today's law could now contest what once ruined a woman's academic potential. One of my college contemporaries, ignoring the above signed contract, secretly married because pregnant (Abortions were illegal). She naively explained to her tutor that 'early morning sickness' had affected the quality of her essay. Her tutor rushed to the Principal. The student was promptly banished to Reading (though not imprisoned there like Oscar Wilde). She was deprived of access to university libraries, all lectures and tutorials, only permitted back 8 months pregnant to sit her finals, and publicly mocked by male examinees.

Despite being a university scholar, this potentially outstanding student was given a 4th class degree. Yes, the laws have changed. Would a university today have the right even to ban a student from coming within 25 miles of Oxford? When I mentioned this recently to some current female students, one superbly asserted that the college had neglected their 'duty of care' to a pregnant student.

Later male careers

While past contacts return to haunt this living individual, now deprived of taken-for-granted face-to-face exchanges, other unexpected triggers assume greater power, thanks to over watched TV. The name of a fellow student appears on the credits for some *Inspector Morse and Lewis* programmes. He mentioned an interest in filming when an undergraduate. This past link reaffirms living continuity for the house-locked viewer.

Another fleeting male friend from student days suddenly appears, now grey haired, on the international news. He was updating an unsolved, child abduction. Already, he had published a best seller on the death of a Hollywood celebrity. I recall his 1960s invitation to attend a Magdalen College ball. Before global fame, the Rolling Stones had been booked as full time performers. Legally obliged, they flew in from the USA and played sulkily only at intervals. Nevertheless, desperate ticket-less fans gate crashed by climbing those Cotswold walls.

A series of BBC 2 programmes viewed this June: '*Thatcher: a very British Revolution*', included retrospective comments from another contemporary. He was the Conservative member of our committee to lobby for women's full membership of the Oxford Union. After the vote was finally won, I signed up to become the first woman member. The Conservative's biography is ever dramatic: from MP to Thatcher's Minister, then a lost libel case and imprisonment. Subsequent repentance brought promotion as Bishop of prisons.

One conservative student provides a further insight into 1960s class and gender Oxford inequalities. University regulations could be subverted by the wealthy. Students were forbidden cars. But this Etonian stored a vehicle in a village. He paid a handyman to drive it to and from the city for the student's use. We outsiders also heard of the now celebrated Bullingdon Club where millionaire male undergraduates competed in the 'Potlatch' destruction of celebrated restaurants.

Black lives

Clearly, current external events learned via TV, newspapers, or computer, affect the housebound isolate. Images of the final moments of George Floyd and the global protests 'Black Lives Matter' enter one's soul, body and memory. There are again links via friends and shared pasts. My college contemporary, Chloe Stallibrass telephoned some weeks into the lockdown. In recent years we agreed to be interviewed on film about meeting Malcolm X when he visited Oxford in December 1964.

Initially, I had been invited by the Jamaican Union President Eric Abrahams to meet Malcolm with a select few the day before his famous televised debate. At that morning coffee, in contrast to what we called the 'grey men', I talked fearlessly to Malcolm across the table. Preparing an essay on Edmund Burke, I volunteered comments linked to the forthcoming debate.

The next morning, after the coffee meeting at the Union President's office, an African postgraduate traced me to my college saying Malcolm would like to meet me that afternoon at the Randolph Hotel. I was not to come alone (presumably to avoid misunderstanding). Fortunately, Chloe Stallibrass, another anti-racist, was available. We spent some two hours with Malcolm. A decade ago, Chloe and I tape recorded what we could recall of that amazing encounter. We realised that most of the exchange consisted of Malcolm asking us questions. I have a letter sent to me by the African postgraduate on February 3rd 1965 (tragically the month Malcolm was later assassinated). It includes: 'I have just received a postcard from Malcolm X to say he enjoyed your wit and company and sending his best wishes'.

In those days, we rarely watched television and were unaware that Malcolm was a controversial icon. After his visit to Mecca, where he first witnessed the multi-racial mass of pilgrims, he had become more open to learning about a wider range of humanity, including anti-racist white students.

As for Chloe's recent May phone call: she had been contacted by the black American who had filmed us in 2018, recalling meeting Malcolm. This producer emailed us to say Malcolm's daughter wanted to make contact and that his film was nearing completion.

The recent global protest marches and the revival of images of Malcolm X, alongside Martin Luther King, resurrected parallels between past and present. Again the locked down status of this individual unexpectedly revived submerged subjective linkages. So I joined a BAME virtual discussion among students at a postgraduate college to which I am attached. Here visualised spontaneous exchange, confirmed key aspects of human sociability which risks being lost by lockdown.

As a senior participant, I inserted contrasts with past legal contexts. For example, landlords in the 1960s could publicly reject would-be tenants on racial grounds, using offensive posters. To the head of the LGBTQ college society, I described a shocking 1960s event. An undercover police operation on a young gay academic at an Oxford hotel bar led to his imprisonment, homosexuality being then illegal. I met the man after his release and forever ruined academic career.

To the BAME event, I was asked to repeat my advance query, namely why do politicians believe they can enhance their electoral chances by being anti Gypsy? Patel, at the last election, proposed that trespassing Gypsies be criminalised and their caravans and vehicles confiscated and destroyed.⁴ Fortunately, the police objected. How ironic that the Home Secretary proposed the destruction of peoples' homes and when there is a serious shortage of affordable housing.

Patel was outraged when slave owner statues were vandalised, but she had planned to legalise a far greater destruction.

Sexism of the past

In this text, I include other contrasts hitherto unpublished. Today one hopes, as occurred in my case, that a white female undergraduate will not be raped, without legal consequences, in this instance, by a fellow student for appearing too friendly with a member of another ethnic group, namely a black Jamaican postgraduate. My accounts of this trauma have only recently been conveyed to a personal circle of friends. In those days only stranger rape, and of a virgin, were likely to be recognised as such and taken seriously. This is what occurred to me at a conference. As it never went to a court of law, this becomes a 'contested' issue for some of the acquaintances I have shared this with. A male contemporary protested this now famous 'friend', (and millionaire, with every legal security), could never have done such a thing. I have only recently fully confronted the never forgotten horror. The Lockdown experience helps rethink the 'Me Too' movement. In changed times victims even of the powerful seek greater protection.

The 'Black Lives Matter' revival simultaneously sharpened this home-bound woman's thoughts about sexism alongside racism. Already the above example confirms the interconnection. There are utterly valid complaints about the grim colonial white bias in the teaching of history, but something could also be said about male bias in any university or school syllabus. A number of us Oxford social anthropology postgraduates in the 1970s started an all women's weekly seminar. This became the International Gender Centre. My 1974 seminar on Gypsy women was published in a pioneering volume.⁵

But would the following be acceptable today? In my 1976 CV application for a temporary and first anthropology lectureship at one University, I included that article and that I was the 1st woman member of the Oxford Union. At the interview, the professorial head of department, surrounded by an all male committee, asked: 'We see you're a feminist. Would you *still* be interested in the job if you couldn't teach *anything* about women?'

Thus I had to promise to teach a discipline that apparently only studied males around the globe. Two years later, applying for the permanent job, I had to pretend I had broken up with my partner in London. Otherwise, I would not be 'fully committed'. Simultaneously, applications from married men were preferred because 'reliable'. Married women were rarely shortlisted. My predecessor's CV was so outstanding, she was shortlisted, despite being married. At the interview, the same professor asked her what would happen if she got pregnant. She covered her face apparently sobbing that she was barren. She got the job. Within a year, the Holy Spirit descended. She had a baby.

After my successful appointment, I was warned by the only supportive male colleague, not to propose a course with 'Women' in the title. The professor would be 'embarrassed'. Instead, I successfully proposed a course titled 'Race and Gender'. Thus race was seen as uncontroversial. I included Malcolm X's *Autobiography*.⁶ Wonderfully, one student who wrote a brilliant essay on Malcolm is now Warden of an Oxford College. Unpredictably, more male students than females signed up. But there was minimal literature on masculinity.⁷ It was taken for granted that the human universal or key representatives in any culture were masculine, so never problematised.

Today's demand that white man's colonial supremacy be challenged is increasingly foregrounded. But questioning taken-for-granted

masculine supremacy is still subject to horrendous stereotyping. I have published details of the sexist discrimination, (comparable to the experience of black individuals), which I experienced in academia. As a rare female lecturer, in my first university job, I was presumed to be an intruder and ordered to leave the staff room. I was then accused of fraud when applying for a staff library card.⁷

External communications

Given the locked down minimum or banned face-to-face communications with friends and family, there has, by contrast, been a wonderful increase of emails, phone calls and video links from unexpected others. Thus human contact of a different kind has become extra special and has increased. I have had in-depth phone calls from my nephew in the USA, from previously mentored anthropologists now in Malta and Helsinki and emails from friends in Prague, Japan, Paris and Canada. It has been a delight to communicate regularly with postdocs from France, Switzerland and Bulgaria and a postgraduate in Italy. One French anthropologist completed her phd on caravan dwelling Roma in France. Last autumn when she and her partner passed through Oxford, we met in the café near the Pitt Rivers which enthralled them. Strengthened by past encounters, emails have continued. She is now investigating the often forgotten Gypsy/Roma genocide. I supplied examples of some scattered Roma in my fieldwork whose Yugoslav grandparents 'disappeared'.

We exchange publications and photos of different fieldwork. Such enthusiasms undermine isolation. They are evidence that we have experienced variegated lives outside and in unusual places: all so different from the present.

Wonderfully, many Roma, Gypsies or Travellers continue to like my monograph *The Traveller-Gypsies*.⁸ Some doing phd's have visited me for advice in Oxford before lockdown. One such individual has been homebound in another county. Instead we had a two hour telephone conversation. This, paradoxically, without face-to-face mind reading, was wonderfully free ranging. Later, she thanked me by email. Here a voice only, locked in exchange had unexpected value.

For an April doctoral viva, a video group communication replaced the customary face-to-face examination. The other external and I were known to each other for decades. We had to curtail our exchanges as the official processes began. Our need for prolonged conversation is proof of the need to grab a now rare intellectual and social escape from lockdown with long-term associates, once professor and postgraduate.

I subsequently learned of a viral death relating to one of the staff I had met virtually at this viva. This was via the university's public announcement. Thus the reasons for our internment became all too clear through one tragic named individual encountered directly through 'normal' working commitments. The virus thus has meaning beyond mass statistics.

Direct social encounters

Rare face-to-face speaking encounters, albeit spatially distanced, would become ever more valued when available. I met one-to-one with different friends and a visiting Greek professor distantly seated in front gardens or an Oxford park. Passers by unusually smiled. The rarity and strange, distanced seating stimulated special, in-depth discussions never previously explored.

But in some cases, such events were only retrospectively recognised as special rather than 'normal', ingredients of daily banality. One May afternoon I returned to the Coop car park in Summertown, North Oxford when a bearded man spoke from a distance. Politely,

he said he had recognised me as a generous person. I guessed he was a homeless man. We talked for half an hour. He had been released from prison two days ago and without support. I recounted how I had taught inmates in Hull prison and that two had eventually come to my university department enrolling for a degree. When I revealed pleasure at the outstanding achievement of one ex prisoner, the homeless man declared: 'Thank you. I never realised how teachers, not just students, feel rewards from the teaching'.

Eventually, I gave him some money and we exchanged names saying we would look out for each other. Retrospectively, I realised I had received as much if not more from him. I had needed to talk with a living human being in reality. The same could be said of friendly conversations with a supermarket employee. I recognised a former café worker disinfecting the trollies. After months of depersonalised service in the café (now closed), this new context encouraged my greeting. He was from Barcelona. Pleased I had visited his town, we discussed Gaudi and more.

Similarly, it was extra special communicating with the taxi driver taking me for a routine hospital check-up. I commented on the fearlessness of pedestrians crossing the road. We exchanged experiences of lockdown. Revealing Ethiopian descent, he asked if I knew Africa. I mentioned having lectured at a Kenyan university. Accepting payment, he unexpectedly thanked me for our conversation. We both gained something extra special in that socialised escape from lockdown.

Health issues

Just as lockdown has affected healthy lives, the Corona virus has disrupted other NHS concerns with illness and routines. Again here is a personal example. My health conditions, demanding regular check ups, were interrupted and rendered chaotic. In the middle of my conducting the distanced doctoral viva, someone telephoned. My Wednesday hospital appointment was cancelled. I should wait for another phone call. The next day I had a vague, depersonalised exchange. Eventually, a copy of a hospital letter arrived informing my GP I had refused to attend the appointment! Two weeks later, I received a midday letter ordering an appointment in Banbury that evening. The letter demanded 48 hours cancellation notice. This first class letter had taken seven days. Fortunately, an Oxford alternative was arranged. But seriously ill others may suffer worse than social isolation.^{9,10}

Conclusion

This internment has ironically proved less personally productive. Re-reading books for review, vetting articles and preparing an edited book have been huge time consumers. Outside distractions such as regular swimming, seminar attendance, restaurant and cinema outings with friends have been customary rewards for an ordered timetable and intellectual originality. As ever, long-term rapport and spontaneous, unregimented face-to-face sociability, beyond all boundaries, reaffirm the fullest meaning of life.

Deprived of unfolding spontaneous and direct experiences with multiple individuals and social gatherings, the very location in which the individual is politically obliged to remain brings unusual consequences. Visual relics in a city inhabited decades back, provoke submerged memories. Some are triumphs and pleasures. Others are finally acknowledged as psychic or sexual violence and gross injustice. The locked-in individual's new understanding is facilitated by the transformed cultural and legal hegemony with sensitivities to racism, sexism and human rights.

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