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## Sally Merry: Mentor Extraordinaire

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Melissa Lefkowitz

The first time I spoke with Sally Merry as an official graduate student in New York University's (NYU) PhD program in socio-cultural anthropology, we were meeting in Vanderbilt Hall at the NYU School of Law, an impressive place to me partially because I had worked there for the past 3 years. In that building, I had served assistant and bureaucratic roles, and my engagement with professors extended to their thanks for catering their food and scheduling their conferences. Meeting Sally in Vanderbilt Hall as a PhD student was the first time that I had a meeting with an NYU Law professor as an academic-in-training, as someone who might contribute to scholarship collaboratively and even collegially in the future. Suffice it to say that I was nervous.

Sally's bucket hat put me at ease. As I recall, it was lavender, and it matched a suit of the same color. But I could be wrong. In any case, just settling into the space, I felt an inviting energy from Sally and sensed that I could speak candidly. I decided to tell her my biggest fear about my project. I thought it was too topical, too news adjacent. Would it be "anthropological" enough? Sally put a stop to my handwringing immediately. She told me that she thought my project was important and that news-adjacent was good. It meant that the project had relevance not only in an academic circuit but in the field of things that mattered to larger publics. I went home that day feeling like I was on the right track. And that my project excited Sally, which made me more excited in return.

In the following 5 years, Sally would continue to infuse me with a very grounded sense of direction around my research topic and the thought processes that helped me shape it. Graduate students, even when they have the chops, often suffer from imposter syndrome. Sally saw my skillset and conveyed that I could do the job. She was a mentor in the truest sense through her

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encouragement, candor, and willingness to get her hands dirty with me as I brainstormed ideas in one-on-one sessions in her office and over Skype from the field. I appreciated the moments when she helped me separate the signal from the noise while I was deep into my fieldwork in Nairobi. When I came home, I was moved by her palpable sense of excitement as she listened to me rattle off anecdotes and play with big arguments. And when I began writing up, I was soothed by her confidence that a dissertation could be written in a year, that it did not need to be comprehensive, and that it had to have an argument and a point.

As Sally ushered me into NYU's PhD program through her solid encouragement, she also gave me the thumbs up after reading the first chapter of my dissertation. In all honesty, I had written it for her. While the dissertation could be seen as a product borne out of individually pursued research, most know that it is in actuality a conversation between a student and their mentors. Chapter 1 was for Sally, and I am so grateful that she was the first to read and comment on it. In Sally fashion, she complimented me ("it is very impressive") and also pushed me to aim for clarity ("as is always the case, you now need to go back to the beginning and put in the insights you got to at the end to help your reader through"). When I began to apply for post-PhD opportunities, her message was the same. In August of this year, she told me: "[Y]ou are in a good position in a competitive competition. Just don't make it too complicated...Start with your most interesting finding and don't think you have to put everything in. You don't. And don't bury it in jargon. Your language and ethnographic experience are very impressive." Words like these don't simply whet people's egos. They serve as bright lights in dark caves that PhD students feel their ways through for 5, 6, 7, and 8 years at a time. We need those lights to help us find our ways through, even though we have been trained to navigate on our own. I am so grateful to have been guided by Sally's light, and—to break this metaphor—her kindness, support, and honesty.

*Melissa Lefkowitz is a PhD candidate and filmmaker in the Department of Anthropology at New York University. Her dissertation examines shifting social imaginaries of the China-Africa relationship through a focus on China-based educational and volunteer tourism programs designed for young middle-class Chinese nationals in Nairobi, Kenya. This project has been funded by the Association for Asian Studies, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, New York University, and the Social Science Research Council. Previously, Melissa received a BA in East Asian Studies and Literature from New York University and an MA in East Asian Studies from Harvard University.*