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FEATURE

The Trials of Alice Goffman

Her first book, 'On the Run' — about the lives of young black men in West Philadelphia — has fueled a fight within sociology over who gets to speak for whom.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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Before the morning last September when I joined her at Newark Airport, I had met Alice Goffman only twice. But in the previous months, amid a widening controversy both inside and outside the academy over her research, she and I had developed a regular email correspondence, and she greeted me at the gate as if I were an old friend. A 34-year-old untenured professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Goffman had just begun a year of leave at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, which she hoped she might use to escape her critics and get back to work. Now, though, she was returning to Madison for a four-day visit, to deliver a lecture and catch up with her graduate students.

The object of dispute was Goffman's debut book, ''On the Run,'' which chronicles the social world of a group of young black men in a mixed-income neighborhood in West Philadelphia, some of them low-level drug dealers who live under constant threat of arrest and cycle in and out of prison. She began the project as a 20-year-old undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania; eventually she moved to be closer to the neighborhood, which in the book she calls ''Sixth Street,'' and even took in two of her subjects as roommates. While most ethnographic projects are completed over a year and a half, Goffman spent more than six years working in the neighborhood, which evolved from a field site into what she still basically considers her home. Her field notes, which she kept with obsessive fidelity — often

transcribing hourslong conversations as they happened in real time — ran to thousands of pages. She had to spend more than a year chopping up and organizing these notes by theme for her book: the rituals of court dates and bail hearings; relationships with women and children; experiences of betrayal and abandonment. All those records had now been burned: Even before the controversy began, Goffman felt as though their ritual incineration was the only way she could protect her friend-informers from police scrutiny after her book was published.

At the gate in Newark, Goffman unshouldered a bulky zippered tote bag. ‘‘I’m so happy,’’ she said with visible and somewhat exaggerated relief, ‘‘that I didn’t give you this to take through security yourself.’’ Over the course of our correspondence, I had asked her from time to time if she had any book artifacts that escaped destruction. In this tote was some material she had forgotten about: unpaid bills, bail receipts, letters from prison and a few extant fragments of hastily scrawled *in situ* field notes. But it wasn’t until the security line that she remembered what the tote probably once held, memorabilia from her time on Sixth Street: bullets, spent casings, containers for drugs. She passed safely through the scanner in a state of agitation, not about the risk she took but by how blithely she was treated by T.S.A. agents.

‘‘And who did they stop?’’ she said. ‘‘Not me and my bag of contrabandy stuff, but a young man with brown skin. I tried to exchange a look of solidarity with him, but he wouldn’t look at me. Compare that to the interactions I’ve had at this airport — people smiling at me, holding the door for me. You don’t think, as a white person, about how your whole day is boosted by people affirming your dignity all day long. This isn’t news. But it is stuff that, for me, at the beginning. ...’’ She didn’t finish the sentence.

When the University of Chicago Press published ‘‘On the Run’’ in 2014, it was met with a level of mainstream attention — profiles, reviews, interviews — that many sociologists told me they had never witnessed for a first book in their field. Malcolm Gladwell called the work ‘‘extraordinary,’’ and in The New York Review of Books, Christopher Jencks hailed it as an ‘‘ethnographic classic.’’ Despite the many

years it took Goffman to finish the book, its timing turned out to be propitious: The work of scholars like Michelle Alexander had turned America's staggering incarceration rates, especially for black men, into one of the very few territories of shared bipartisan concern. In the year after publication, Goffman did 32 public speaking appearances, including a TED talk. But by the time that TED talk received its millionth view, a rancorous backlash to the book had begun.

Within her discipline, attitudes toward Goffman's work were conflicted from the beginning. The American Sociological Association gave ''On the Run'' its Dissertation Award, and many of Goffman's peers came to feel as though she had been specially anointed by the discipline's power elite — that she had been allowed, as the future public face of sociology, to operate by her own set of rules. As a qualitative researcher, Goffman paid relatively scant attention to the dominant mode of her data-preoccupied field, instead opting to work in a hybrid fashion, as something between a reporter and an academic. She has also mostly refused to play the kinds of political games that can constitute a large part of academic life, eschewing disciplinary jargon and citing the work of other scholars only when she felt like it.

Worse, perhaps, was Goffman's fondness in her writing for what could seem like lurid detail. Some of the flourishes in ''On the Run'' were harmless or even felicitous — one character's ''morning routine of clothes ironing, hair care, body lotion and sneaker buffing'' — but others seemed to play up her own peril or pander to audience expectations. In one scene, two white officers in SWAT gear break down a house door, ''with guns strapped to the sides of their legs.'' She continues, ''The first officer in pointed a gun at me and asked who was in the house; he continued to point the gun toward me as he went up the stairs.'' In another, Goffman writes that the house of a family ''smelled of piss and vomit and stale cigarettes, and cockroaches roamed freely across the countertops and soiled living-room furniture.''

Above all, what frustrated her critics was the fact that she was a well-off, expensively educated white woman who wrote about the lives of poor black men without expending a lot of time or energy on what the field refers to as

‘‘positionality’’ — in this case, on an accounting of her own privilege. Goffman identifies strongly and explicitly with the confident social scientists of previous generations, and if none of those figures felt as though they had to apologize for doing straightforward, readable work on marginalized or discredited populations, she didn’t see why she should have to. As another young professor told me, with the air of reverent exasperation that people use to talk about her, ‘‘Alice used a writing style that today you can’t really use in the social sciences.’’ He sighed and began to trail off. ‘‘In the past,’’ he said with some astonishment, ‘‘they really did write that way.’’ The book smacked, some sociologists argued, of a kind of swaggering adventurism that the discipline had long gotten over. Goffman became a proxy for old and unsettled arguments about ethnography that extended far beyond her own particular case. What is the continuing role of the qualitative in an era devoted to data? When the politics of representation have become so fraught, who gets to write about whom?

These criticisms, though heated, had been carried out in the public, respectable, self-correcting way of any social-scientific debate. Last spring, however, the discussion lost its academic gentility. In May, an unsigned, 60-page, single-spaced document was emailed from a throwaway address to hundreds of sociologists, detailing a series of claims casting doubt on the veracity of events as Goffman described them. The book, according to the anonymous accuser, has her attending a juvenile criminal proceeding that must have been closed to outsiders; it misrepresents the amount of time she spent living in the neighborhood; it describes scenes containing characters that by Goffman’s own account were by then dead. In one place, the document notes, Goffman says she went to nine funerals, while in another place she says 19. She claims that her close friend ‘‘Chuck’’ — she uses pseudonyms for all her subjects — was shot in the head but also describes him in his hospital bed as covered in casts. The allegations, some of them trivial in isolation, seemed in their profusion hard to write off.

At the recommendation of her trade publisher, Goffman prepared, but did not distribute, an almost equally lengthy point-by-point response to the charges, and her department investigated the accusations and declared them without merit. But

journalists and legal scholars had seized on the anonymous critique, and over the course of last spring and summer, critical pieces appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education and The New Republic. Her critics compared her to fabricators like Stephen Glass and Jonah Lehrer, who invented quotations or characters out of whole cloth. Some went so far as to accuse her of a felony, based on a brief but vivid account in the book's appendix. Chuck, her friend and sometime roommate, has been murdered by neighborhood rivals, and Goffman describes driving her other roommate, Mike, on his manhunt for the killer — a de facto and prosecutable confession, her critics said, of conspiracy to commit homicide. Goffman generally refused to respond to the allegations against her, but she did come forward to recharacterize this episode, despite the stark blood lust she originally described, as something akin to a mere mourning ritual. This made for a considerably attenuated version of the story, and her critics responded that she was thus either a felon or a liar.

I reached out to Goffman last summer, at the height of the controversy over her work. She responded to me in part, I think, because despite the sleeplessness, depression and anxiety the scandal provoked, she was unable to quiet her curiosity about the norms and social structure of a discipline — i.e., journalism — that is so similar to and yet so different from what she herself does. We struck up a correspondence based on the comparison, about how we each balance what we owe to our professional communities and what we owe to our subjects, and about how to seduce subjects to cooperate in the first place. She saw the ethical predicament of her tribe as arguably worse than that of mine. ''People aren't letting you in because they want to be seen,'' she wrote, ''because you're an academic and nobody's gonna read what you write. They're letting you in because you're friends by now, and they forget that you're writing a book at all, even when you keep bringing it up. So it's more like the betrayal of telling secrets about your own family members, of selling out the people you care about most.''

The discipline as a whole does not seem to know quite how to react to Goffman's case. Sociologists are proud that the work that comes out of their departments is so heterodox and wide-ranging — and, especially when it comes to issues like mass

incarceration, so influential in policy debates — but it is a fractured field, and many sociologists worry that over the last few decades they have ceded their great midcentury prestige and explanatory power to economists on one side and social psychologists on the other. There has been a lot of hand-wringing about Goffman, and even her sympathizers mostly declined to speak to me on the record for fear of contamination. ‘‘I’ve done nothing for months but talk to my colleagues about Alice,’’ one sociologist told me, in the context of how much he admires her and her work. ‘‘But we’re in uncharted waters here. There have been a hundred years of debates about the reliability of ethnography, but this is the first time the debate is being carried out in the Twitter age.’’

It does not help that Goffman, when challenged about her book — or about the privilege, defiance and sloppiness to which critics attribute its weaknesses — tends to respond with willful naïveté or near-grandiose self-possession. Once, when I asked her what she made of a sustained series of attacks by one critic, a respected quantitative sociologist, she said it was hard to pay proper attention to him when other people were accusing her of felonies. Besides, she said, in a world in which a majority of black men without high-school degrees have been in prison, she had little patience for internecine quarrels. ‘‘I can’t even muster that much interest,’’ she wrote by way of conclusion. ‘‘Because there’s a big, mysterious world out there, and I want to understand a little more of it before I die. That and tear down the prisons.’’

A kind of benign self-neglect, along with a comprehensive absent-mindedness, extends outward to everything in Goffman’s life that isn’t fieldwork or her students. People who spend a lot of time with her often arrange themselves to take care of her, lest she get lost. I knew her for only two days before I found myself making sure, for example, that her phone was plugged in. In our four days in Madison, she could not remember that her room was a right turn out of the elevator. Goffman is short, with big, round chestnut eyes, dirty-blond hair that she rarely knows what to do with, a slightly reedy quaver in her voice and a performatively childlike manner that softens a relentlessly inquisitive and analytic intelligence. If she ever stopped asking questions, you might notice her only as someone’s tagalong little sister.

This mien helps her enlist everyone she meets as a cooperating informer. In Madison, we were picked up between appointments by an Uber driver in blue scrubs; he told us he was studying radiology at a local community college but had taken the year off to earn money as a transport coordinator in a hospital. He was from Jackson, Miss., and had arrived in Madison via Milwaukee.

Goffman turned to the driver, who was black, to ask — in the offhand way you might ask an Uber driver about his experiences with the company — ''What have your local experiences with racism been like?''

He thought for a moment. ''It's like, people smile at me, smile at me, smile at me, and then BAM!'' He paused.

''Something happens, and you feel put in your place?'' Goffman said.

The driver nodded emphatically and asked Goffman what she did for a living. When she answered, he told her he saw the social forces that organized human behavior as if they were a school of fish guiding each member.

''Go on,'' she said, taking notes on her phone.

''You just can't go from A to Z,'' he continued. ''You go from A to B and then maybe to C, but then you're back to B again, then to C and back to B, and you never know why.''

''That's so good,'' Goffman said. She gave him her email address and asked him if she could persuade him to switch over to sociology, and he laughed. By the time we got out of the car, he seemed a little dazed, unsure how he came to talk about this stuff over the course of a five-minute ride.

Goffman was raised to be a sociologist, though she tends to prefer the homelier designation of ''fieldworker.'' Her father, Erving, who died at 60 of stomach cancer when she was an infant, was perhaps the most important sociologist of the last 50 years — and easily the most consequential sociologist in the public discourse. Though Erving's work was varied and deliberately unsystematic, he is best known for his elaboration of the self as a series of performances. His daughter has taken

over his idea that static character is less interesting or relevant than the dynamics of exchange. ‘‘I don’t think,’’ she once told me — after calling herself ‘‘chameleonlike’’ — ‘‘that I have real preferences, just desires that emerge in social interactions.’’

Her mother, Gillian Sankoff, and her adoptive father, William Labov, are eminent sociolinguists themselves, and when Goffman was a child, she was sent on the full-time, perpetual errand of collecting noteworthy linguistic misunderstandings for her parents’ collection. Goffman was partly raised by an Italian family in South Philadelphia whom her mother found through a want ad for child care; they were so different from her ‘‘professor parents’’ that she got in the habit of taking field notes on family conversations. Goffman spent a gap year between high school and college volunteering for U.S.A.I.D. in the Philippines, and her parents remember that she sent home pages and pages of letters that said little about her own life and quite a bit about, for example, the local varieties of queue formation.

In her first semester as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, she took a graduate-level class on urban sociology, and within a few weeks it was clear to her professor, David Grazian, that she was the most talented and committed person in the class. ‘‘I sent her out on a fieldwork assignment to sit at a diner and record what she saw, and she came back after an hour with 14 single-spaced pages.’’ Through a project for that class, on the lives of the mostly black cafeteria employees at Penn, she came to tutor a teenager named Aïsha, the granddaughter of a cafeteria supervisor. Goffman grew close to Aïsha and her family, and it was through them that she met the men whose lives she describes in ‘‘On the Run’’: an intermittent drug dealer she calls Mike, as well as a family: three brothers, Chuck, Reggie and Tim, and their mother, Miss Linda.

Even while Goffman was still an undergraduate, word of her intensive fieldwork circulated among senior ethnographers, and one recruited her to study under him in a Ph.D. program at Princeton; she commuted to New Jersey from Philadelphia, and the project she began at 20 ultimately became her dissertation. The general impression was that, as a member of the Princeton department told me, her work was brilliant but not all that dissimilar from other contemporary works of

ethnography, except in the depth of her fieldwork. Recent years have seen comparable projects on drug dealers in an unidentified city, by Waverly Duck of the University of Pittsburgh; on drug robbers in the South Bronx, by Randol Contreras of the University of Toronto; on reform-school students in Pennsylvania, by Jamie Fader of Temple University; and others. One member of that cohort described Goffman to me as ‘‘very humble, very down to earth,’’ and Goffman herself has always categorized what she did as only an incremental contribution to the cumulative work in the field.

But from the beginning, critics worried that her book, which refused to contextualize itself with ‘‘positional’’ humility or some powerful theory, would serve only to reinforce popular stereotypes. The most glaring such stereotype was that young black men are invariably involved in crime, and critics felt that she drastically overstated the extent to which her characters were representative, rather than anomalous, in their criminal activity.

Sociologists who distrust her strain of richly descriptive ethnography saw this as an unfortunate consequence of the ethnographer’s tendency to become ‘‘too close’’ to her subjects, to forgo rigor and skepticism in favor of taking at face value the accounts that subjects give of themselves. In Goffman’s case, this extended both to discussions of criminality (her subjects, some critics suggested, played up their exploits to impress her) and to the various exigencies that shaped their lives. When her subjects told her that they were afraid to go to the hospital to witness the birth of their children because it was standard practice among police officers to check visitors for arrest warrants, she was deemed too quick to accept their beliefs and superstitions as accurate representations of police practice. Too often she presented events or descriptions without qualifying comment — a perfectly valid approach for a journalist, who often tells a particular story and leaves the reader to do the generalizing, but a more problematic one for a sociologist, who is expected to do the generalizing herself.

It was the media’s celebration of ‘‘On the Run’’ — and particularly of its more sensational elements — that turned the response within the discipline from contentious to personal. This ill will was made explicit at the 2014 annual meeting

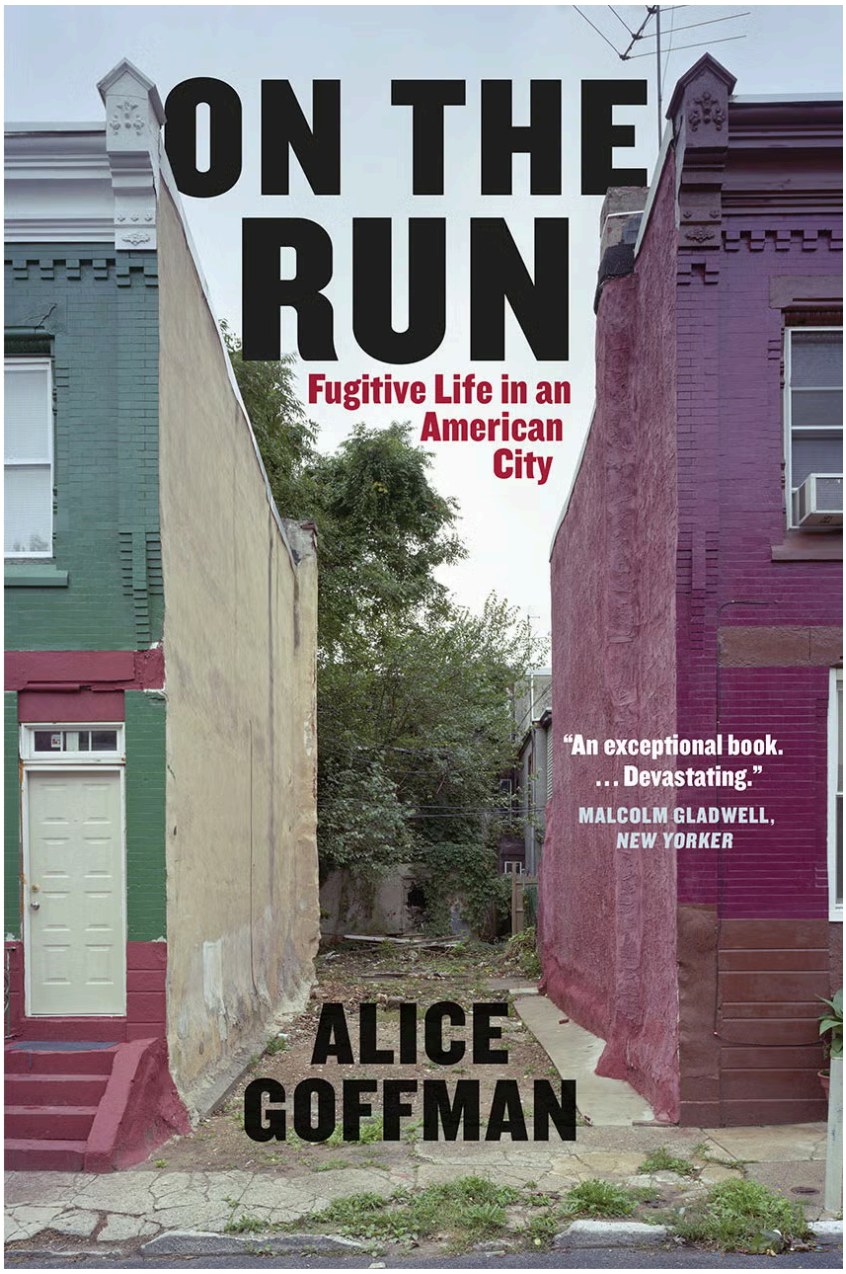
of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco, where it seemed as if Goffman had become a celebrity: Some attendees remember seeing a poster-size photo of her, hands in her jeans pockets, outside a prison. Goffman had been chosen for an ''Author Meets Critics'' panel, an honor rarely visited upon a book so soon after publication. The event was, extraordinarily, standing room only; people in neighboring panels reported that they could barely pay attention to what was going in front of them because of the fanfare down the hall. Two people told me they tried to get in, were turned away and went to their hotel rooms to watch the drama unfold on Twitter.

By all accounts, the session felt unusually hostile. As Victor Rios, one of the panelists and a sociologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who studies similar communities, framed the problem, she had engaged in the ''Jungle Book trope'': She visits the jungle, sees the wild animals in their natural habitat, loses her way and, thanks to the kindness of beasts, lives to tell the story.

Rios, a former gang member, told me later that he understood the pressures on Goffman and that he was urged to write his story in a way that would command broad attention — ''My best friend was killed in front of me; I ended up in juvie.'' But he resisted it, out of worry about his tenure prospects and also on principle. ''How much do we sacrifice to become public intellectuals?'' he said. ''At the end of the day, we have to be careful about how much pandering we do to the masses.''

Sociology as a discipline emerged, in the late 19th century, from the idea that things called ''social facts'' might be studied the way a chemist studies compounds or a biologist studies organisms. While political economists and psychologists studied the individual actor, with his or her particular preferences and utility-maximizing behavior, sociologists believed that the group was primary to its members — that we are evolving products of contingent social norms. What this insight has subsequently produced in practice is a discipline that now encompasses everything from statistical analyses of census data to accessible monographs about why people shoplift or the social processes of divorce. Over the past few decades, the field has gone through cycles of tribalism, rived by arguments among quantitative analysts; theory-heavy scholars working in the tradition of the French sociologist

Pierre Bourdieu; critical race scholars, who have brought up important but tricky points about who gets to study whom; and the urban ‘‘symbolic interactionists’’ with whom Goffman identifies.



The media’s celebration of ‘‘On the Run’’ turned the academic community’s response from contentious to personal. The University of Chicago Press

People in Goffman’s camp trace their work to Robert E. Park and the so-called First Chicago School, which set itself to the project of understanding the new vigor and clash of the American city, then driven by the dynamism of industrialization and

immigration. Park had spent 10 years as a journalist and was working for Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute when he was asked, in 1914, to join the young sociology department at the University of Chicago. This was a Chicago that would produce new sorts of Americans, characters like Saul Bellow's Augie March, and Park's team went on to put together canonical, sympathetic studies of the city's black, Jewish, Chinese and Polish neighborhoods. As Richard Wright put it in his introduction to ''Black Metropolis,'' St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's classic study of Chicago's ''black belt,'' the ethnographers of the First Chicago School ''were not afraid to urge their students to trust their feelings for a situation or an event, were not afraid to stress the role of insight, and to warn against a slavish devotion to figures, charts, graphs and sterile scientific techniques.''

Their painstaking empirical efforts, modeled on the anthropology of Franz Boas, were carried out in the hope that they might refute the reigning theoretical paradigm of the day, which looked to eugenics and social Darwinism to explain racial inferiority and the ''social problems'' introduced by immigration. The project was explicitly liberal and meliorative, of a piece with the work of journalists like Jacob Riis and early social workers like Jane Addams. The first step toward sensible policy-driven solutions, the First Chicago School believed, was work that would convince the broader public that these immigrant enclaves, which seemed so foreign and inscrutable, actually represented ordered social worlds structured by familiar norms.

This sort of detail required deep, sustained, participatory attention. Some monographs produced by Park's team were written by ''native informants'' — Louis Wirth on the Jewish ghetto, Paul Siu on the Chinese laundryman, Drake and Cayton on the black belt — and others by outsiders. These practitioners, especially when they sought to examine and explain criminal behavior, faced many of the same problems Goffman did as a participant-observer: William Foote Whyte, in his 1943 study of Boston's North End, admitted in his methodological appendix that he had been an accessory to election fraud. But it was understood that part of the

ethnographer's project was a suspension of belief in conventional assumptions about deviant behavior, and that if you wanted to understand more fully how and why people broke the law, you had to see their world from the inside.

Part of the problem for both native informants and outside observers, Wright saw at the time, was that this sort of detail-heavy, participatory intensity was always in danger of being taken the wrong way. As Wright put it in his introduction to ''Black Metropolis'': ''This is no easy book. ... There is no attempt in 'Black Metropolis' to understate, to gloss over, to doll up or to make harsh facts pleasant for the tender--minded.'' The work represented important racial progress insofar as it treated black lives as worthy of full, lavish, unblinkered description.

After World War II, immigration slowed and the university was expanding, and what became known, under the leadership of Everett Hughes, as the Second Chicago School was less interested in ethnic minorities than it was in the processes of professionalization — how some people come to self-identify as ''doctors'' or ''lawyers'' — as well as the mechanics by which some subcultures were labeled ''deviant.'' Though Erving Goffman did only two stints as a fieldworker — once in the Shetland Islands, the work that ultimately became his 1959 classic ''The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,'' and again for a year in a mental institution, the experience that was the basis for his 1961 book ''Asylums'' — he had a strong affinity with this school, especially with the work of Howard S. Becker, who wrote widely read essays about the socialization of marijuana users. These books, lucid and elegant in their style and argumentation, were acclaimed far outside sociology departments and often led their writers to positions of influence on policy. (Goffman ended up on an important committee to review the mental-health system.)

But by the 1970s, this style of qualitative work was threatened on all sides. It became easier, in the context of the Cold War expansion of the American university, to secure funding if you could point to exactly the figures, charts and graphs that Wright considered sterile. Universities were turning out a newly diverse array of graduates, and the critical race studies movement arose to question the methods and prejudices of ''intrepid'' white scholars in pith helmets. As these young

scholars pointed out, especially in Joyce Ladner's landmark 1973 anthology, ''The Death of White Sociology,'' a number of the books produced by the First Chicago School did, despite their best intentions, traffic in sensationalism and stereotypes. At the same time, sociologists — keen to keep up with their colleagues in economics departments — strove to put themselves on the secure path of a science. The view was that statistics were facts and everything else mere impressionism.

And, worse than impressionistic, ethnography had also come to seem exploitative. The most glaring case was that of the Washington University scholar Laud Humphreys, who wrote in 1970 about anonymous sex between men in public restrooms. As part of his research, he took down the license plates of the ''tearoom'' visitors, and many months later went to interview them, under false pretexts, at home and often in front of their families. The press attacked the work as unethical, often in the same language with which Goffman was criticized. The scandal destroyed Humphreys's entire department, and the moral was clear: Ethnography was shady work.

On our flight back from Madison, Goffman came to find me in the rear of the plane and silently handed me two black notebooks, both marked 2003. She used them during her sophomore and junior years of college, when she and Mike and Chuck were first getting close. She had hesitated to show them to me because they were one of the few sentimental things she had left from that time, and now, she figured, she would have to destroy them just as she had destroyed her field notes.

The notebooks are extraordinary records of a young scholar's intellectual and personal development. They present two parallel processes of socialization. In the fall of 2003, she is about to turn 22; she is in her junior year at Penn, but she is already applying to graduate school. Her life on Sixth Street has become much more real to her than her life on campus, but still she remained committed to sociology. The notebooks show her makeshift attempts to reconcile what she is learning in class with what she is seeing on the street. She is taking a course, with the eminent sociologist Randall Collins, on the history of sociological theory; another class on the history of the South; a third on African-American literature; and a fourth, which she will drop, on statistics. The only time either notebook

mentions Erving Goffman is on the first page, where she takes down what seems to be a quote from a posthumously published talk on fieldwork: ‘‘The most difficult thing about doing fieldwork is remembering who you are.’’

In class, Goffman is learning about the history of racial discrimination, and on Sixth Street, she is witnessing Mike’s inability to secure a job. ‘‘After months of limited involvement in the drug trade,’’ she writes, ‘‘his man [Chuck] is home and he is ready to stop being broke and get back in more seriously.’’ She moves easily in and out of an academic register, writing in one sentence about her attempts to ‘‘chart Mike’s socio-econ wave’’ and elsewhere on the same page about the minor transactions of their growing friendship: ‘‘I tell him to call PO [parole officer] — it’s the 15th — and ask if he’ll help me move my couch tomorrow and he says I got you.’’

Mike and Chuck come to her house — they’re not living with her yet — to do their laundry. They tease her, often for what she’s wearing, and she teases them back. It’s clear in her mischievous play, her ability to generate urgent affection and her speed on the uptake that this is the same Goffman I have gotten to know. At a certain point, the group returns to a waiting black Lincoln Navigator, and her friend Steve has taken her seat: ‘‘I say Get the [expletive] out of my seat [Steve]! And he and [Mike] think this is the funniest thing they ever heard and [Mike] says proudly: Yo she be gangster sometimes.’’ There are moments where she pauses to reflect on the changes she has undergone since she started her fieldwork — ‘‘I’m a vegetarian and used to be a gymnast’’ — but for the most part she does nothing to indicate that she feels as though she is being transformed or remade by the experience.

Threaded through her descriptions of these young-adult encounters — in between her course notes on Richard Wright, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ned Polsky and Emile Durkheim — is the sort of sociological work that David Riesman described as a ‘‘conversation between the classes.’’ Over the course of the final few weeks of that notebook, jottings on the theories of Georg Simmel or an outline of the history of the Scottsboro boys alternates with a comprehensive lexicon she begins to

assemble: ‘‘fall back: to cool it. fall back! said to a boy trying to holla. ‘I’m falling back from hustlin’.’’ There are entries for ‘‘cake/cakin’ ’’ and ‘‘to smash,’’ followed by pages with definitions of Weber’s concepts of ‘‘*erklären*’’ and ‘‘*verstehen*.’’

Critics have been quick to point out, implicitly and otherwise, that the similar code-switching in ‘‘On the Run’’ looks a lot like what Erving warned about: forgetting who you are. As one detractor told me, it seemed to many people as if ‘‘Alice thought she was turning black,’’ and Philadelphia magazine has compared her to Rachel Dolezal, the N.A.A.C.P. president in Spokane, Wash., who was revealed to have been passing as black. On occasion, this discomfort has been crudely sexualized; when Goffman was an undergraduate, professors in her department asked her advisers if she was sleeping with her informers, and that insinuation makes regular appearances in anonymous posts about her on sociology message boards. The conversation between the classes had grown so obviously intimate that a lot of people could understand it only in terms of lust and fetish.

It’s true that ethnography has come somewhat back into fashion since the 1970s and that no contemporary sociologist would agree with the call, tweeted by a Buzzfeed writer and echoed elsewhere, to ‘‘ban outsider ethnographies.’’ As one sociologist put it to me, ‘‘If Alice Goffman isn’t allowed to write about poor black people, then sociologists who come from poor communities of color, like Victor Rios, aren’t allowed to write about elite institutions like banks or hedge funds, and that, in the end, hurts Victor Rios much more than it hurts Alice Goffman.’’

But even within sociology departments, there isn’t a lot of agreement about how to go about the process of bridging social distance in a way that is both respectful and rigorous — a researcher is always in danger of being accused of having stayed too far away or gotten too close. Ethnographers have always dealt with questions about where their allegiances lie, and more than one ethnographer has been accused of being too close to her subjects to evaluate their self-reports. I asked Goffman’s undergraduate adviser, Elijah Anderson, an august ethnographer — mostly of urban black communities — now at Yale, about the criticism of Goffman as an adventurer or tourist, or as a wide-eyed, credulous observer. He said she had carried out her work just as any ethnographer should. He elliptically handed me a

copy of ‘‘Stigma’’ — one of Erving Goffman’s most famous books, from 1963 — and invited me to look up the part on ‘‘courtesy stigma.’’ Erving anticipates exactly the sort of criticism brought to bear five decades later on the work of his daughter:

> The person with a courtesy stigma can in fact make both the stigmatized and the normal uncomfortable: By always being ready to carry a burden that is not ‘‘really’’ theirs, they can confront everyone else with too much morality; by treating the stigma as a neutral matter to be looked at in a direct, offhand way, they open themselves and the stigmatized to misunderstanding by normals who may read offensiveness into this behavior.

Most of the problems ‘‘On the Run’’ has encountered, especially outside the field, have to do with the fact that it falls between the stools of journalism and ethnography. If the book was too journalistic — too descriptive, too irresponsible, too sensationalistic, too taken with its own first-person involvement — to count as properly rigorous sociology, it was too sociological to count, for many journalists, as proper reporting. Most journalists believe that true stories are necessarily personal, about the ways particular people choose to act in the world; the language of journalism, like the language of law, is almost always the language of individual moral responsibility. For a sociologist, whose profession since the turn of the century has taken it as axiomatic that society is primary to the individual, the language of individual moral responsibility is often a way of avoiding talk about structural conditions that favor the powerful.

Many of the things for which journalists and legal scholars have berated Goffman are considered standard practice for sociologists, and most sociologists have found the mainstream criticisms of the book to be baseless. Procedurally, journalists object to the pseudonymity of sources and the destruction of her field notes; sociologists point out that institutional review boards mandate that identities be obscured and that they often require the destruction of field notes that could be subject to subpoena in a criminal investigation. Regarding most of the book’s internal inconsistencies, virtually every single ethnographer I talked to described the enormously difficult logistical problem of how to keep track of pseudonymous notes over years and admitted that if you subjected almost any work in the field to

that kind of punitive audit, you would almost certainly come up with similar trivial confusions. This is true of even the most organizationally composed people, of which Goffman is not. She cannot off the top of her head remember which year she finished high school, which year she finished college or which year she spent three months in the hospital after almost being killed on her bike by a bus.

Goffman has declined to make public the long, point-by-point rebuttal of her anonymous attacker, but after we got to know each other well, she shared it with me. It is blunt and forceful and, in comparison with the placidity of her public deportment, almost impatient and aggrieved in tone, and it is difficult to put the document down without wondering why she has remained unwilling to publicize some of its explanations. She acknowledges a variety of errors and inconsistencies, mostly the results of a belabored anonymization process, but otherwise persuasively explains many of the lingering issues. There is, for example, a convincing defense of her presence in the supposedly closed juvenile court and a quite reasonable clarification of the mild confusion over what she witnessed firsthand and what she reconstructed from interviews — along with explanations for even the most peculiar and deranged claims of her anonymous attacker, including why Mike does his laundry at home in one scene and at a laundromat in another.

Many claims against her are also easy to rebut independently. Some critics called far-fetched, for example, her claim that an F.B.I. agent in Philadelphia drew up a new computer surveillance system after watching a TV broadcast about the East German Stasi. If you search the Internet for ‘‘Philadelphia cop Stasi documentary,’’ a substantiating item from The Philadelphia Inquirer from 2007 is the second hit. When it comes to Goffman’s assertion that officers run IDs in maternity wards to arrest wanted fathers, another short Internet search produces corroborating examples in Dallas, New Orleans and Brockton, Mass., and a Philadelphia public defender and a deputy mayor told me that the practice does not at all seem beyond plausibility. The most interesting question might not be whether Goffman was telling the truth but why she has continued to let people believe that she might not be.

The hardest elements of her story to confirm are the ones that feel like cinematic exaggerations, especially with respect to police practices; several officers challenged as outlandish her claim that she was personally interrogated with guns on the table. To Goffman, however, the fact that a journalist or a legal scholar would turn to the police to confirm accusations against them is representative of the broader failure of American society to take seriously the complaints of disempowered minority communities. It's the definition of institutional racism. When I reminded her that it was my job to try to find independent confirmation of some of her claims, she understood my own disciplinary needs and was forthcoming, if slightly begrudging, in helping me out. But at one point, when I pressed her on one of these issues, she wrote back that I seemed to be saying, ''The way to validate the claims in the book is by getting officials who are white men in power to corroborate them.'' She went on: ''The point of the book is for people who are written off and delegitimated to describe their own lives and to speak for themselves about the reality they face, and this is a reality that goes absolutely against the narratives of officials or middle-class people. So finding 'legitimate' people to validate the claims — it feels wrong to me on just about every level.''

In this her discipline stands behind her, over and against journalistic or legal practice. As Randall Collins, whose course she was taking when she was writing in the black notebooks, put it: ''She got in deep enough so that not only does she understand things from their point of view, she doesn't give priority to laws, official morals, all the things that conventional people take for granted. I not only am not going to play the shock game, but I don't have much respect for people who can't see that their being shocked is part of the way their social world is constructed around them.''

What has united her critics, academic and otherwise, is the accusation that in going ''deep enough'' to disregard laws, she did in fact lose herself in the process and confuse her own ethnographic standing with actual membership in the community she studied. This comes to the fore in the book's final scene, the nighttime drive to

find Chuck's killer. The legal and journalistic position would stipulate that either the last scene occurred as it was initially written, as a manhunt, or it occurred as she later described it — as a mourning ritual and face-saving ceremony.

But what her critics can't imagine is that perhaps both of the accounts she has given are true at the same time — that this represents exactly the bridging of the social gap that so many observers find unbridgeable. From the immediate view of a participant, this was a manhunt; from the detached view of an observer, this was a ritual. The account in the book was that of Goffman the participant, who had become so enmeshed in this community that she felt the need for vengeance "in my bones." The account Goffman provided in response to the felony accusation (which read as if dictated by a lawyer, which it might well have been) was written by Goffman the observer, the stranger to the community who can see that the reason these actors give for their behavior — revenge — is given by the powerless as an attempt to save face; that though this talk was important, it was talk all the same.

The problem of either-or is one that is made perhaps inevitable by the metaphor of "immersion." The anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom, who studies economic relationships, explained to me that it's a metaphor her own field has long given up on. The metaphor asks us to imagine a researcher underwater — that is, imperiled, unreachable from above — who then returns to the sun and air, newly qualified to report on the darkness below because the experience has put a chill in her bones. This narrative of transformation is what strikes critics like Rios as so patronizing and self-congratulatory. But Goffman herself never understood her work to be "immersive" in that way. The almost impossible challenge Goffman thus set before herself is the representation of both these views — of drive as manhunt and drive as ritual — in all their simultaneity.

Goffman could have covered herself by adding another paragraph of analysis, one that would have contextualized but also undercut the scene as the participants experienced it. Almost all of her early readers thought she should do that. It would

have made her life easier. But she didn't. This was a book about men whose entire lives — whose whole network of relationships — had been criminalized, and she did not hesitate to criminalize her own. She threw in her lot.

For the last five years, Goffman hadn't had the opportunity to spend much time in Philadelphia: after finishing her dissertation in 2010, she spent two years on a postdoctoral fellowship in Michigan (she threw away the two years of field notes she took there, fearing an even worse version of the criticisms she got for ''On the Run'') and then moved to Madison for her new job there. But now that she was in Princeton for the year, she had told her Sixth Street friends that she would be back on the block again.

It had been at least a year since she visited Miss Linda, and when we went to see her in October, she engulfed Goffman until her tiny person almost disappeared into the embrace. Reggie, himself a man of considerable bulk, stood there on the sidewalk, his phone ringing unanswered, for two minutes until Goffman was put down and it was his turn. Goffman had come down in part to catch up with the family and in part to distribute the royalty checks she shares evenly with the book's central characters. (She did the math last year without setting aside money to cover taxes, so she had to pay them out of pocket.) She chose that Friday because it was Reggie's birthday and because Mike had called to tell her that he might be getting out of prison that day, though he had been thinking that for a few weeks.

The Sixth Street neighborhood, four or five square blocks in all, is bounded by some geographical features that make it feel mostly self-contained; it's not an area one would be likely to pass through en route to anywhere else, so it was, Goffman explained, not a place for strangers. She wasn't sure how they would receive another outsider, but it was clear from our arrival that Goffman was family, so anyone she brought along was family, too. Reggie wore a black T-shirt over the contours of a black tank top and fitted gray sweatpants; he had a short fauxhawk and a wide, pointy beard, which gave his large head the shape of a big, dark diamond. He removed his headphones from his ears and put his sunglasses —

large and round and stylishly effeminate in an early-1980s way, like the sunglasses Mia Farrow wears in ‘‘Broadway Danny Rose’’ — atop his mohawk, then smiled broadly and extended his hand to introduce himself.

‘‘You write books, too? Like Alice?’’

‘‘I do, yeah.’’

‘‘I write books, too.’’ He explained that he had done a lot of writing in prison, but that being back at home was too distracting to get much done. Alice fished in her wallet and handed him a check. ‘‘This for our book?’’ She nodded. He asked me if I had read their book. I said that I had and that I really liked it. He was pleased. He said ‘‘our book’’ a few more times. Goffman was clearly happy that he was so proud of it.

After a while, Goffman, who eats an astonishing amount of junk food, was hungry and wanted to go to a Jamaican place nearby. She asked Reggie and Miss Linda if they wanted to come, but Miss Linda was happy sitting in the sun, and she told us that as long as Reggie’s phone was ringing off the hook, he wasn’t going anywhere. We went to get food and bring it back, and Reggie came over to the car to make sure we would be joining him for his birthday party that night. Goffman got out and gave him a hug and said she would be in touch. As she got back into the car, she called out, ‘‘I love you.’’

I had spent a lot of time with her, and I had never seen her in such high spirits as she seemed in the car that day, crisscrossing Philadelphia to see everyone she was close to. We were off to meet some of her other friends from the book, one group in what she described as a poorer neighborhood nearby, then a quick visit to a friend of hers in the hospital, and finally to a more middle-class, mixed-ethnicity neighborhood in another part of the city. Before we arrived at each stop, Goffman gave me a demographic and historical rundown of the block and the community it hosted, with the sort of fine-grained understanding of the class differences in the community that she was accused of lacking in the book. She seemed entirely herself: an observer upon whom nothing is lost, an irremediable sociologist and the prodigal baby sister of Sixth Street home at last.

Many of the people we met knew that Goffman hadn't had the easiest year, and they greeted her like an infantryman on leave from a traumatic campaign — though each seemed to have a slightly different idea of what it was Goffman actually did. Most of them knew she wrote books, and some thought she was a teacher. She told some of her friends that she was thinking about quitting her job, and she asked them what they thought she could do if she moved back to town. They said that she would be a great schoolteacher, but that unfortunately she was a little too small to be a home health aide. By the end of the night, Goffman was beginning to drag, and she told Mike's mom, with whom she is particularly close, that she didn't know what to do.

Mike's mom smoothed Goffman's knotty hair, then gave her a stern lecture about persistence. ''You just got to pull your pants up,'' she said, ''and keep going.''

Corrected on Jan. 31, 2016: An article on Jan. 17 about the sociologist Alice Goffman misstated the academic affiliation of the sociologist Jamie Fader. She is at Temple University, not SUNY Albany.

We acknowledge mistakes in our reporting with corrections. If you spot an error, please let us know at corrections@nytimes.com. Learn more.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a contributing writer for the magazine. He last wrote about the founding of Liberland, a would-be libertarian microstate in Eastern Europe.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Page 31 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Changeling