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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-KRAUSJAN. 12, 2016

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.

‘How much do we sacrifice to become public intellectuals? At the end of the day, we have to be careful about how much pandering we do to the masses.’

“And who did they stop?” she said. “Not me and my bag of contraband 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.”

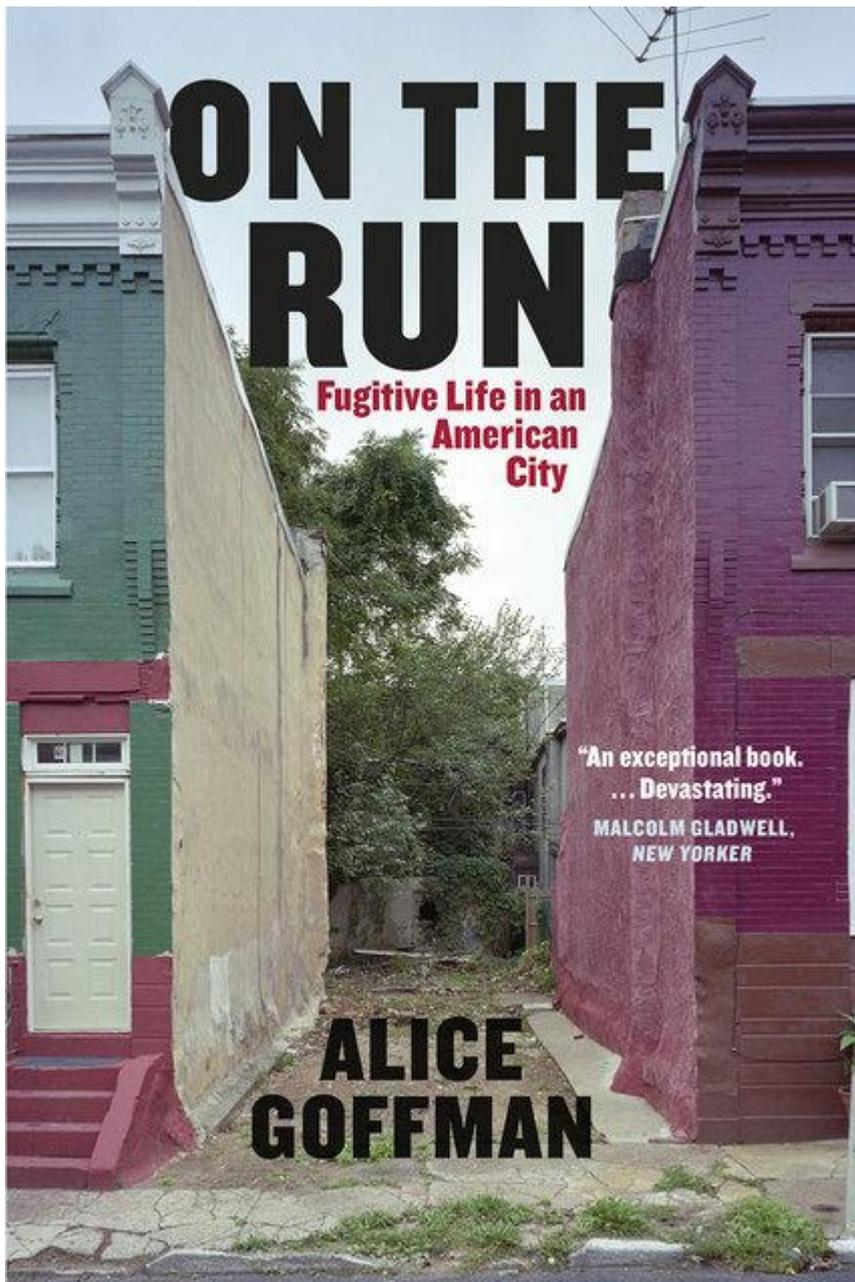
Her mother, Gillian Sankoff, and her adoptive father, William Labov, are eminent sociolinguists themselves, and when Goffman was a child, she was sent on the full-time, perpetual errand of collecting noteworthy linguistic misunderstandings for her parents’ collection. Goffman was partly raised by an 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 Aisha 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.



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

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 on 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.

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.

‘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.’

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.”

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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 department, 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.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

‘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.’

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.”

Correction: January 13, 2016

An earlier version of this article misidentified the academic affiliation of the sociologist Jamie Fader. She is at Temple University, not SUNY Albany.

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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M. Proschmann

PA [11 hours ago](#)

Ethnography has been overrun by Deconstructionists. This is no longer a science, it is a social cause. This book, which I read last year, is nothing more than a tissue of critical legal theory that denies objective reality in favor of discourse, narrative, and biased opinion. That being said, the book was very engaging and her slightly unhinged writing style is unique among books in the field.

- Reply
- 5Recommend

MHW

Raleigh, NC [11 hours ago](#)

My experience in multiple top-shelf academic institutions has been that major facet of academic culture is profound conservatism. Anything that challenges established dogma and academic/peer-review literature power structure is often vigorously, sometimes brutally censured. Academia, disappointingly so, is often not a place for truly open, intellectual thought.

- Reply
- 5Recommend

Ruben Kincaid

Brooklyn [11 hours ago](#)

Does Sociology really change anything? As they say, "well-off, expensively educated" people writing about poor people and presenting TED talks to other well-off people doesn't mean much in the long run.

This appears to be mainly about petty academics jealous of one another. And in Goffman's case, I wonder if she would have come under such fire, or gotten as much attention, if she were a man.

- Reply
- 5Recommend

Robert Roth

NYC [11 hours ago](#)

“My best friend was killed in front of me; I ended up in juvie.” But [Rios] resisted it, out of worry about his tenure prospects and also on principle. “How much do we sacrifice to become public intellectuals?” [Rios] said. “At the end of the day, we have to be careful

about how much pandering we do to the masses.' So he winds up (very understandably) pandering to a select committee of people who have contempt for the "masses."

- Reply
- Recommend



Fredda Weinberg

Brooklyn [11 hours ago](#)

Once again, "Who's your Daddy?"

Every assertion I made in my master's thesis had to be proved. But sociology was the softest "science" I studied and yes, we covered , "Talley's Corner" and the fact that a white academic could describe another culture. Ignore the value differences it describes at your peril. But this author? Hold her to the same standards I faced; anyone willing to cooperate should be warned of possible consequences.

- Reply
- 1Recommend

viable system

Maine [11 hours ago](#)

Very nice piece of journalism!

Erving [Goffman's] notion of "framing" gets at the dilemma of distinguishing ourselves from what we attempt to observe and understand. Your picture of Alice sounds like she's [dutifully?] dealt with the issue.

Ethnographers such as James Spradley made students aware of this up front as he mentored them through their work.

Inquiry that is conceived in terms of the methods of physical science with quantified problems, hypotheses, variables, controls, and experiments, is inadequate to the hardly visible, complex, and constantly adaptive processes of social systems. Are there sociologists still wrestling with this?

- Reply
- 4Recommend

Liz

is a trusted commenter Raleigh, NC [1 day ago](#)

I didn't realize that ethnographers aren't required to save supporting evidence for their work. What's to prevent them from making the whole thing up?

- Reply
- 36Recommend

Fred

is a trusted commenter New York City [1 day ago](#)

It sounds like many of her Goffman's detractors, both inside and outside of the academy, are jealous of her success. However, my issue is with the field of ethnography. My mother, an African-American woman, was a University of Chicago-trained sociologist, and still, I'm not convinced of the purpose of sociology. I think as a public policy tool, journalism does a much better job. And since sociology doesn't even pretend to be neutral, I don't believe that it can be widely persuasive or enlightening.

- Reply
- 22Recommend

LLK

Stamford, CT [1 day ago](#)

I'm slightly troubled that she pays participants royalty fees, I haven't read the book yet and plan to this weekend.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

David

NJ [1 day ago](#)

So was she getting it on with these dudes, or what?

- Reply
- 19Recommend

ESS

St. Louis [11 hours ago](#)

I can't tell whether or not this is a joke, because the article mentions that people have often asked that.

- Reply
- 1Recommend

brownie lover

[1 day ago](#)

This was a great article. I remember much and learned more about the ebb and flow of sociology over the years. My sense is that she deserves the benefit of the doubt as a sociologist although burning her records does cause my eyebrows to raise a bit. I have not read the book, but did see a few long form excerpts and her TED talk. At a guess, knowing a bit about the criminal justice system (from a career as a researcher/program evaluator), she did select a group to embed with that is more troubled than the average person in that demographic category. Some of this sounds like sour grapes (sociologists are people too!). I guess what I have not heard or read about is critique from the community she inhabited. What do they say or think? Surely, she knows she is privileged and her lens is distorted by that, but do the members of the community think she is telling essential meaningful truths.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

Ross Salinger

Carlsbad Ca [1 day ago](#)

Sometimes I think I am the only one who ever clicks on a link. The Phil Inq article is not about a "surveillance system" at all. It's about using mapping to locate people who might have committed a crime or know something about it. There's no surveillance involved at all. Frankly, this kind of thing has been around since we had computerized mapping data back in the 90's. It sounds as if she (I have not read the book) may have distorted things in this case. Strange to see another person claim rebuttal based on this article.

- Reply
- 19Recommend

Andymac

Philadelphia [1 day ago](#)

I've lived in or near Philadelphia for more than 20 years but Alice Goffman's book was a real eye-opener. The guys she writes about are obviously no angels, but it was infuriating to learn what people who live just a few miles from me must go through in their dealings with law enforcement. Alice, please continue what you're doing, and thank you.

- Reply
- 24Recommend

PK

Gwynedd, PA [1 day ago](#)

I haven't read her book, but this remarkable report calls to mind the cliché that academic politics is so vicious because so little is at stake. So little in the actual world. Retired now, but as working journalist I saw my job as touching people with other people's lives. Whatever

anyone calls her, journalist, academic or make-up-a-word (as some academic will surely try to do and try to base a career on it, the Ms.Goffman as seen in this story, has told true things that we need to know and with courage and a human heart.

- Reply
- 25Recommend

NSH

is a trusted commenter Chester [1 day ago](#)

It was an interesting article but I did not understand the writer's obsession with the state of Ms. Goffman's hair, or indeed much of the poor waif motif that from alternative descriptions it sounds like she would object to.

She has grandiose possession? What? Would you say a man has grandiose possession? No, you would say she is confident and single-minded, and you would respect that. If she didn't pay attention to details like dress, or direction that would not be a sign of her inability to take care of herself, but only her single-mindedness.

I can not help but think that much of the furor comes from the fact that she is a woman, and a not a world striding, gorgeous blond everyone is supposed to worship or the political, "angry" (note the quotes please) black woman we are supposed to fear but the kind of short, unprepossessing white woman people overlook and condescend to only she's done work you can't condescend to. Work for whatever its flaws that is big and dramatic, and that is reserved for men in all caps.

- Reply
- 41Recommend



Passion for Peaches

[1 day ago](#)

Oh, good grief. The self-righteousness of this woman, who feigns drama and shock at the TSA line for not having been stopped and frisked for carrying a -- gasp! -- bag that may have at one time held -- gasp! -- spent bullet casings...maybe. And the "brown" person going through with her was stopped, even though she had that suspicious looking BAG! Full of RECEIPTS!

This just confirms my feelings about sociologists.

- Reply
- 31Recommend

LLK

Stamford, CT [1 day ago](#)

She's young, that will all change

- Reply
- 4Recommend



A. Stanton

Dallas, TX [1 day ago](#)

Let me get this straight. Is this the same Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton that Albert Einstein used to play ping-pong at? Cause if it is, I would like my deposit back.

- Reply
- 19Recommend

Ted Pikul

Interzone [1 day ago](#)

Dolezal without the cosmetics.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

Stephan

Austin TX [1 day ago](#)

As the author of this article suggests, Alice's father, Erving, is widely considered the most influential sociologist of the 20th century--per his wiki page, "an outlaw theorist who came to exemplify the best of the sociological imagination", and "perhaps the first postmodern sociological theorist". He's best known for his work on the social construction of self--that is, the thoroughly postmodern notion that the self is just a construct that changes depending on the situation. He died the year she was born, but were he alive, I have no doubt he would be proud of his daughter. Her compassion and empathy are thoroughly welcomed in a field that has in recent years become overly dominated by statistical analysis.

- Reply
- 29Recommend

Aaron

Boston, MA [1 day ago](#)

I suggest commentators read the article before posting a comment. A large number are focused on the tagline at the very top of the article (concerning who gets to speak for whom) and not the body of the article itself, which deals mostly with the complications of doing this type of research, how her field got to its current ideas about what proper work it, how she got to this point in her life, the criticism her work has received from inside and outside of her field, and how she handles it. It's a very interesting article, more than a mere launching pad for your rant about political correctness or reverse racism.

- Reply
- 25Recommend



William LeGro

Los Angeles [1 day ago](#)

Terrific article! Illuminating about the field of sociology - told me much I didn't know and, more important to me, didn't know I would be interested in knowing. Illuminating, too, about the character of Alice Goffman. And fair, in my view, justly balancing criticism and sympathy. Goffman could not have asked for a better depiction of her and her work. She is, after all the academic jargon and prestige and backbiting and all the media representations and misrepresentations, just a person like the rest of us who have to pull our pants up and keep going. Thank you.

- Reply
- 20Recommend

Bert

Philadelphia [1 day ago](#)

I'm a little confused here. 6th Street in North Philly is certainly a ghetto neighborhood, but there is no 6th Street in West Philly. In Philly, the numbered streets run North-South, starting near the Delaware River in the eastern part of the city. West Philly begins around 30th St or so.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

Zach

Nichols [1 day ago](#)

It's a pseudonym used in place of the neighborhood's real name. Like her use of fake names to protect the identity of her informants.

- Reply
- 11Recommend

FJP

Philadelphia, PA [1 day ago](#)

I haven't read the book, but I assume she changed the street to protect the privacy of her subjects. I kinda wonder if it was along 56th Street and she just dropped the first digit. It would fit.

- Reply
- 9Recommend

hugh prestwood

Greenport, NY [1 day ago](#)

This seems ultimately like a very long rationale as to why it isn't fair to hold blacks to middle-class societal norms. To this I respond:

The Law of Double-Standard Decline: Any systematic attempt to help a group which involves holding members of that group to lower standards of societal norms will result in decline rather than improvement.

- Reply
- 18Recommend

atb

Chicago [1 day ago](#)

Um, I'm a white woman and I'm stopped by the TSA and have had the pat down about a million times. Because of her experience, she sees everything, literally, as black and white and it just isn't. That said, she has the perfect right to write about whomever she wants to. I don't understand why what she has done is in any way a problem.

- Reply
- 22Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

(Not Mark) I think the problem is she destroyed her notes. How do we know any of this is actual and not made up. We don't. Period.

- Reply
- 15Recommend



RamS

New York [11 hours ago](#)

People have taken all kinds of things via TSA. They are not that observant or attentive.

- Reply
- 1Recommend

[See All Replies](#)

Ted Pikul

Interzone [1 day ago](#)

So people are okay with the fetishization of blackness?

Ted Pikul

Interzone [1 day ago](#)

Radical chic royalty.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

Terry

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Contrary to the author's assertion, what frustrates critics most of all is not Goffman's race or how expensively educated she is. What is most frustrating is that she appears to be a fabulist, whose claim of destroying her notes to protect her sources should be viewed with very healthy skepticism.

- Reply
- 45Recommend

Tom

San Jose [1 day ago](#)

In this day and age it seems Ms. Goffman's crime, in the eyes of much of the establishment, is that she has portrayed the people on the bottom of American society as human beings. Too bad the learned Dr. Rios can't understand something so simple as that.

- Reply
- 10Recommend



Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Dear Tom,

Actually from the article it seems Ms. Goffman's crimes were primarily aiding someone in an attempted homicide, and in fabricating an anthropological study. Nobody minds her treating humans as humans, it's the exaggerations or untruths in the book that are a problem. That and, of course, aiding someone intent on murder.

- Reply
- 18Recommend

Daniel

Brooklyn, NY [1 day ago](#)

It's absurd that "tone" is the issue here. Accuracy, relevance and intelligence: these are important. Self-flagellation as a penance for the sin of being a white woman writing about black men is not only unnecessary, it is a distraction from the subject.

- Reply
- 27Recommend

Connecticut Yankee

Middlesex County, CT [1 day ago](#)

This reinforces an old saying: There's nothing so savage as academic politics.

- Reply
- 18Recommend



Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

The Daesh who urged their followers to commit cannibalism beg to disagree.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

Edward Flores

University of California Merced [1 day ago](#)

Critic of Goffman are beyond insider/outsider debates, and I wish the journalist would have interviewed a few who framed it as such.

This piece quotes someone who says that Victor Rios claims whites cannot study people of color, but that is untrue. At the author-meets-critics, Victor was holding Jamie Fader's book-- which is an example of a white person doing good, reflexive, urban sociology.

- Reply
- 5Recommend

Jason Shapiro

Santa Fe , NM [1 day ago](#)

So what exactly did the “born on third base-Princess-of-Sociology” Ms. Goffman produce that had not already been produced by Elliot Liebow in “Tally’s Corner” in 1967? As far as I can tell (and I have not read her book but I read Liebow’s) she pretty much reprised the same fundamental study as did Liebow and therefore the initial reaction to her work seems a bit over-the-top. Do not misunderstand, there is nothing wrong with adapting and using an approach developed by a colleague – academics do that all the time – but what cannot ever happen is to have one’s basic integrity challenged. It is one thing to be considered a sloppy researcher; it is another thing entirely to be considered a dishonest one.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

NSH

is a trusted commenter Chester [1 day ago](#)

Well she produced something about people living 48 years later which matters. And why would it be dishonest?

- Reply
- 11Recommend

Carrol

Virginia [1 day ago](#)

Ms. Goffman seems to embrace much from Critical Race Theory as does much of the university today.

Per CRT, storytelling and counter-storytelling create narratives which illuminate and explore experiences of racial oppression. The personal narrative and "naming one's own reality" is of critical importance. Issues can be framed almost completely through the experiences of the writer. The stories can be based completely or only partially on actual events - just as long as they convey "truth". This is very much how Ms. Goffman's writes. As such, the claim that she is using a "writing style that today you can't really use in the social sciences" rings false. She uses a style widely found in academia today.

OTOH, some say that her problem is with "positionality", white privilege, and the supposed limitations of empathy that prevent Ms. Goffman from being able to write credibly about Blacks. Worse, her efforts can be seen as yet another round of exploitation. She appropriates (even if unintentionally) the Black experience and benefits from Black bodies through her studies and books.

On one side, her storytelling is acceptable within the university because tells politically correct stories. On the other side, her stories are not acceptable because she is a privileged White woman writing about Blacks. Bravo to Ms. Goffman, but I am afraid that she is the victim of both her own worldview, and that of the modern university.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

NYT Pick

Carolyn

[1 day ago](#)

Ten cheers for Alice Goffman. Her book is an amazing ethnographic accomplishment, and has the practical and important effect of informing middle class and white communities about the conditions of black urban lives, and particularly how the criminal justice system traps them. Such reporting and insight are needed for thinking about how to shape a better, fairer justice system that does not multiply the disadvantages already faced by the urban poor. These folks struggle to keep their lives and families together in our cities partly because of what those in power don't know about the effects of that system in contributing to the cycle of poverty and despair.

- Reply
- 64Recommend

JaimeBurgos

Boston, MA [1 day ago](#)

Why do so many members of our society need well-off white people to tell us the same things black people have been saying for decades before we pay attention?

- Reply
- 8Recommend

Peter Jacobs

Tx [1 day ago](#)

If Goffman grew up poor white trash, and her father was not an eminent professor, few people would care.

Take that to the bank.

- Reply
- 18Recommend

Robert Muckelbauer

Sault ste Marie,MI [1 day ago](#)

The people that need to read this book probably never heard of it and will never read it

- Reply
- 4Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

(Not Mark) Yes it would have mattered. How can we tell if she is telling the truth? We can't. She supposedly destroyed all her notes, how convenient. So she writes a story that confirms what she believes. It's not fact, it's not truth. It's a novel.

- Reply
- 11Recommend

Laura Robinson

Columbia, MD [1 day ago](#)

Interesting...I don't recall any of this kind of heated criticism when Alex Kotlowitz wrote, "There Are No Children Here" 25 years ago.

- Reply
- 12Recommend

Ted Pikul

Interzone [1 day ago](#)

Maybe it was a better book. Methodologically and otherwise.

- Reply
- 5Recommend



Padraig Murchadha

Lionville, Pennsylvania [1 day ago](#)

Why did Elinor Carruci rip off Vermeer for Goffman's portrait? Is it meant to suggest that Goffman's melodramatic pose as an ethnographer may have been inspired by her father's seminal "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"?

- Reply
- 10Recommend

James Ngure

Wilmington, DE [1 day ago](#)

I have not read her work - but from this article, it's quite clear that she's held affectionately by the community she was studying. In fact, well enough for her to go back there many times.

Also she was not dishonest about her true job at any point.

Some of the criticisms she faced seem to me to come from two things:

1. Journalists who do not understand the methodology of that type of research - so they declare it terrible or against their 'journalistic' standards.
2. Some of the discouraging pettiness that pervades Academia when a member suddenly gains fame with the rest of us. It reminds me of the pettiness that followed Carl Sagan, who was disparaged as a 'TV Celebrity Scientist' by colleagues for his willingness to use mass media to popularize the sciences. This is in spite of the real ground breaking work that he was doing in Cosmology/Astronomy/Planetary Science.

Ms. Goffman is doing very difficult, often very controversial research and (at least to my eyes) seems very self-aware and introspective about it and has the right intentions. That is enough for me.

- Reply
- 65Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

No it's not. If something is true then show the notes to back it up. Redact the names if you need too. Destroying the notes destroys the evidence either way.

- Reply
- 10Recommend

Michael Rothman

Minneapolis [1 day ago](#)

As an 'American studies type,' I've always loathed the walls of academe that shut out social truths. Alice Goffman is to be commended. She is a participant/observer in the best sense. The recent fame of *The Making of a Murderer* on Netflix, should dispel anyone's belief in the criminal justice system's legitimacy-- and this is in rural Wisconsin white people, so that class issues and bureaucratic corruption are central. Remember: lies, damn lies and statistics.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

NYT Pick

DMutchler

[1 day ago](#)

Ethnography is akin, if not tantamount to, storytelling. Truth? Fiction? Likely a blurring of lines. But ultimately, in an academic sense, it is anecdotal and it is certainly not generalizable, which most "science" is wont to do.

As well, to not cite others' work is to plagiarize, and if she does not know why that is improper, then she is not deserving of her PhD. Too, jargon is jargon, and in that sense it is only important to the field to which it belongs; its importance is one of communication, viz. speaking the language which, ironically, she should understand quite well, presuming some of the language in her work constitutes jargon of a population, thus seems to be important.

As for her immersion, well, it seems rather obvious and in arguable that if one becomes 'X' to understand 'X' (murder, junkie, rapist, politician, mother, etc.), one is not an observer only; one is a participant; one **is**. And, all crimes, responsibilities, and consequences that come with being a participant cannot be excused in any way.

Were it otherwise, one would simply have to decide to indulge in auto-ethnography, commit whatever crimes one desires to commit, write it up, publish it (perhaps earn a PhD along the way), and viola, Get Out Of Jail Free...and perhaps a teaching position.

That would be quite wrong.

- Reply
- 14Recommend

frugalfish

rio de janeiro [1 day ago](#)

From the article (I have not read Ms Goffman's book) it certainly sounds to me as if what she was doing used to be called anthropology. It involved the study of societal cultures by a researcher, typically an outsider. And the great "danger", according to the anthropologist establishment, was "involvement" by the researcher in the local culture and society, which would (theoretically) impede their "scientific" detachment.

I was a Peace Corps Volunteer for 3 years and the worst epithet any of the bosses could utter about volunteers was that they had "gone native". Never mind that, if you didn't go at least partially native, you couldn't get anything done. From the article, it seems that what Ms Goffman did was "go native"; as a result she has produced a work that makes most of us, who are not anthropologists, think about a situation in an entirely different way.

So, bully for her! say I.

And congratulations to the Institute for Advanced Study for having hired her.

- Reply
- 47Recommend



muezzin

Vernal, UT [1 day ago](#)

‘Alice used a writing style that today you can’t really use in the social sciences.’

The social sciences of today are an irrelevant navel-gazing discipline hijacked by the politically correct crowd. "Positionality" is an oxymoron.

- Reply
- 54Recommend

Working Class Intellectual

Steel Mill, PA [1 day ago](#)

Never met an ethnographer in the late 20th and 21st century conducting longitudinal ethnographic research who never used an audio recorder for interviews and transcriptions to ensure that the data was accurate. Never. The ability to keep such detailed field notes in a seemingly chaotic environment by hand borders on the absurd and any ethnographer conducting this kind of work knows that. It is literally impossible to accurately account conversations without recorded interviews to supplement the field notes and more importantly to triangulate whether what the ethnographer observed is indeed accurate. Methodologically, cannot begin to grasp how an IRB would even let some of these issues go unchecked.

- Reply
- 25Recommend

Ana

Orlando [1 day ago](#)

Goffman is not conducting interviews. She lives on Sixth Street and is part of the community. On its face, it is stupid to suggest that she walk around with an audio recorder.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

Just a poor capitalist

Ithaca, NY [11 hours ago](#)

She didn't live on "Sixth Street", she 4 blocks west of the University of Pennsylvania in a nice community. She just visited sixth street (and lived there for about 8 weeks). Her lack of notes and purposely evasion when pushed for specific dates allows some to think she lived there, or that "Sixth Street", about 8 blocks from St Joe's University, is some "other" that needs a Penn undergrad to decipher.

- Reply
- 1Recommend

[See All Replies](#)

Simon

Tampa [1 day ago](#)

From my perspective is that Goffman is a sociologist doing ethnography without any anthropological training which is why there are so many flaws in her data collection process. It has left her open to criticism from sociologists who generally do not respect ethnographic research and the ones with strong qualitative training who clearly see the flaws. Even this article focuses on the politics of the criticism leveled at her and not the flaws that are obvious in her work to any anthropologist.

- Reply
- 24Recommend

Sam I Am

Santa Fe, NM [1 day ago](#)

The kind of rancor Goffman's intrepid work calls forth demonstrates the sad state of academia: more concerned with political correctness and backbiting than compassion or social change. I would posit that most of her colleagues are in fact jealous of her intrepid work, and prefer to remain behind the gloss of criticism (or hide behind Anonymity, i.e. 60-

page accuser). Let's now reflect on how many white folks are content to hand-wringing at the quantitative level of statistics about inequity, yet never set foot in a neighborhood like West Philadelphia (unless you count stepping foot on the gas while they swiftly pass through to their comfortable suburban enclaves). I'm not calling Goffman a hero, but Good Lord! Wake up America! You created an enormous underclass still suffering the effects of slavery. You hate to see what you've done, but even more you hate when those of your kin in academia best you at what you do at a safe remove. Let's celebrate courageous research and reporting, in the service of social change, instead of nit-picking such compassion and bravery to death. Our culture needs more confrontations with truth, not less. Even if she embellished some facts, look at what it's in service of. Now, look at what you work in service of, each and every day. What you toil at your desk for. Weigh the two. Tell me who is succeeding-- at breaking down barriers and serving the dignity of the dispossessed. Tell me who is succeeding at keeping their heads in the sand

- Reply
- 38Recommend

NYT Pick

Been There, Caught That

NC mountains [1 day ago](#)

For Alice Goffman to destroy her Philadelphia field notes and later to throw away two years' worth of her post-doc field notes suggests awareness of doing wrong, not just an effort to protect informants.

As someone who studied and practiced participant observation and field work back in the day, I can state that there are many legitimate and accepted ways to preserve informants' anonymity, up to and including coding or changing informants' names in field notes during or after observation.

Also, one of the major lessons taught in sociology and cultural anthropology courses is to avoid over-identifying with those who are being observed, a not uncommon phenomenon referred to in the old days as "going native," which inevitably colors or even distorts one's research and writing. While every observer of course has some bias, it is expected that true scholars will make a concerted effort to identify and disclose their own biases, and to communicate how these biases might have affected their observations, analyses and conclusions.

It seems that Ms. Goffman is trying to walk an untenable line between sociology and journalism/activism, and will need to make a choice whether to become a recognized scholar or an object of ridicule like Sean Penn the journalist/activist/actor (or is it actor/journalist/activist).

- Reply
- 91Recommend



Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

I believe it's Sean Penn the actor/meddler/self-publicist.

- Reply
- 4Recommend

huh

Upstate NY [1 day ago](#)

I've not read Dr. Goffman's work so I'm reacting only to what I've read in the article. Two things strike me. First, why is no one from her dissertation committee at Princeton University speaking up? She was recruited to their doctoral program by some unnamed professor. The juxtaposition of many academics' voices reaching back 14 years or more and the lack of any voice from her more recent Princeton years is striking. And having defended a dissertation myself, which requires committee approval, I'm aware that one only is awarded a degree if the work is "blessed" by the committee. Bottom line: They approved her work. And by inference her methods. Remember too that women were only admitted there a few years before Dr. Hoffman was born. I leave it to the reader to connect any perceived dots. Just sayin'

Second, if she spent three months in hospital recovering from a near fatal accident while bike riding, it seems completely logical that she suffered major head trauma. Her inability to recall dates, lose focus easily, not remember to charge her phone or recall which way to turn in a hallway may not be the ditzzy, charming ways of a modern day absent-minded professor, but sequilae to traumatic brain injury.

Full disclosure: I lived in Princeton Township for 10 years and have two masters degrees and a doctorate in three disciplines, none sociology. I am also very familiar with TBI.

- Reply
- 15Recommend

Robin

Manhattan [1 day ago](#)

You have "a doctorate in three disciplines"?

Now, what kind of school would grant that kind of degree?

And having lived in Princeton Township affects your qualifications in what way??

Proximity to greatness?

- Reply
- 9Recommend

schbrg

dallas, texas [1 day ago](#)

The question of who speaks for whom is among the most loaded today in the academy and the arts.

For a white person to write about a non-white person is considered racist and neo-colonialist. Not of course, the other way around.

The zeitgeist that created this falls under the heading of "Political Correctness." Totally corrosive to creation and intellect.

BTW, a certain Donald surfs ably on this zeitgeist.

- Reply
- 11Recommend

TAF

LA, CA [1 day ago](#)

Goffman is a fabulist, but she is no dummy. She has crafted a narrative that somehow strengthens her hand, taking in journalists, despite writing outlandish things and contradicting herself. She'll go far, I fear.

- Reply
- 21Recommend

S

H [1 day ago](#)

This is a thorough article on the issues at stake in sociology, but it could benefit from closer consideration of the current political-economic context of academia more generally.

When 2/3's of college instructors are working as low-paid part-timers and a whole generation of PhD candidates in the social sciences are facing an employment black hole, the meteoric rise of Alice Goffman, (a woman that, yes, was born into the academic .00001 percent) was clearly more than many in sociology could tolerate quietly, particularly when her work is considered by many (and perhaps even herself, as discussed in this article) to be pretty derivative. In the words of her taxi driver interlocutor, the well-connected Goffman moved with shocking speed from A (undergrad) to Z (tenure track hire at top program with book deals, Ted talks, breathless media profiles, and the wholesale endorsement of disciplinary elites) at a time when many aspiring social scientists find themselves, despite doing decent work, lost in a sea of 1,000 + applications for underpaying jobs at failing universities.

Goffman's book had been written numerous times already, by other authors, but perhaps without the cinematic panache that she gave it. Did this warrant her being so quickly anointed as the public face of sociology? For many in sociology, no.

DrS

NJ [1 day ago](#)

It's not at all uncommon for social scientists' notes to contain information that could be damaging to the people with whom they work. Longstanding, commonsense precautions are used to protect identities and I've never heard of anyone voluntarily destroying their data.

- Reply
- 20Recommend

Barry Fitzpatrick

Baltimore, MD [1 day ago](#)

This is an incredibly informative piece thanks to the care and detail provided by Mr. Lewis-Kraus. He has pushed me to order and read "On the Run." This is almost like a primer on the recent history of two fields, sociology and journalism, unfortunately held in low regard by some who enjoy white privilege to the max. Without having read Goffman's work, I would still say that there is lasting value in telling peoples' stories. She seems to have acted as the caretaker of those stories for her 6th Street family members. What they think of a white woman writing their story can only be answered by them. It seems to me that objecting to the validity of her work because she is white and they are not (oversimplified, I realize) is simply an attempt to suppress the facts embedded in the story. I would love to hear what Goffman and her 6th Streeters think would be initial steps toward bettering their conditions and the future for their children. Thanks, Gideon, for an eye-opening piece.

- Reply
- 7Recommend

dimasalexanderUSA

Virginia [1 day ago](#)

The author's "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 ..."

Ms. Goffman, you received all that comfy treatment because you are a young and good looking woman, not because of the color of your skin. Take it from an old, fat white guy, at whom nobody smiles and for whom holds doors open.

When your looks fade with age, you'll find those smiles few and far between.

Your assumptions are appalling.

- Reply

- 33Recommend



Concerned Citizen

Anywheresville [1 day ago](#)

LOL, that is precisely what I thought, only my version was "just wait until you are over 50 and not cute anymore". You won't get any of that warm smiling and doors being held open. It has nothing to do with skin color.

I absolutely assure you that Beyonce is treated with warm smiles, and doors held open, too.

- Reply
- 21Recommend

NYT Pick

Lara

Brownsville [1 day ago](#)

This article brings back to my mind the hope that sociology can still be a humanistically relevant field. It refreshes my disappointments with "establishment" sociology. Sociology used to be in the United States what it still is in Europe: a source of learned information and knowledge about the important issues of the day. In these critical days we are living through it is difficult to find work of sociologists that makes a difference. There is not understanding of what the French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu has called "reflexive sociology," that is to say, a sociology that finds a place in common political discourse. Infatuation with mathematical models and the pretense of scientism dampened the enthusiasm of young sociologists who wanted to do research of the kind done by Alice Goffman. This is, I think, an epoch making study in the tradition of participant observation that made sociology a field of importance by the 60's for the changes it helped promote at that time. Obviously, an academic discipline like Sociology does not have color. It is stupid to think that only blacks can understand the black experience. They may have an existential understanding of it, but that does not mean that they can always explain and express the way a social scientist (properly understood as such) can. I have read Christopher Jenckins review in the NYReview of Books and I fully agree with him in regarding Goffman's work as theoretically and methodologically extraordinary.

- Reply
- 30Recommend

lorenzo212bronx

bronx [1 day ago](#)

Unfortunately, many in the African-American world of academia, have made their history their sole property, and this mindset has become almost politically correct. However, in the 50's, 60's. etc/. during the Civil Rights very active movement years, it was permissible for non-African-Americans to write, to report, to bring the news of injustice to the rest of America. Here, the latter mindset hasn't either spoken of, or found actions to handle the issues Ms. Goffman raises, and so she is condemned. Hypocrisy is a two-way street.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

What Would Omar DO?

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Thanks for the excellent history of sociology that provides essential context for understanding Alice Hoffman's work, and the controversy it inspires. I'm not sure why she can't simply turn herself into a journalist. Would her methods inspire equal doubt, and equal vitriol outside the academic world? Or does her work rely in part on inspiring debate within the academy? Why not quit the academy, Alice?

- Reply
- 7Recommend

Carrol

Virginia [1 day ago](#)

Goffman says Philly cops put guns on the table. I believe it.

My team was implementing a city wide information system for the City of Philadelphia. We had to visit each department individually to explain the system and gather any unique requirements a department might have.

Several senior officers came into the requirements meeting room and sat down at the large table. The first thing they did was put their service weapons on the table. The next thing they did was present several non-negotiable requirements.

IMO the system changes they wanted would make it difficult (but not impossible) to detect fraud and corruption. They claimed the changes were necessary because of the unique aspects of police work, the type of schedules they worked, and so on. Maybe those were the real reasons - who knows? Either way, their guns were on the table.

We took their request back to the Administration. The cops got their requirements approved, no questions asked.

- Reply
- 28Recommend

K Yates

CT [1 day ago](#)

Her biggest sin appears to be saying what people don't want to hear, in language that forgets to stop and genuflect before proceeding.

Positionality, indeed. For Pete's sake--is there truth in her portrayals, or not? What else really matters here?

- Reply
- 96Recommend



Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Seems to me that it's fine that Ms. Goffman is white and privileged but writing about black, impoverished people. It would be fine for a black woman from the South Bronx to write an ethnography about the Princeton rowing team, right?

I don't think it's fine to make stuff up in an academic book though, it's not supposed to be fiction. And it seems undeniable that this is what she did. Destroying all the notes doesn't look like the best course of action in this case, since there's no accounting for why her narrative contradicts itself.

Overall I think she got too close to her subjects, and that whether she knows it or not, she's lucky to be alive. When she rode out with the guy set on revenge, she could easily have been involved in the traditional shoot out and gotten plugged. When the SWAT team busted into the den of thieves she was residing in, she could have made a too-hasty move for her Dictaphone and been riddled with bullets.

I'm sure some of her work is useful but then again, it seems to just confirm what people already suspected about the life of impoverished criminals in an urban environment. Turns out they do not run well-managed apiaries, or spend a lot of time crocheting, but we sort of suspected as much.

- Reply
- 17Recommend

nedskee

57th and 7th [1 day ago](#)

the african american woman could write about the sociology of the Princeton players , but only if she lived with them and handed out checks to them like Ms. Goffman did. Both the Times writer and Goffman abanoned all clains to credibility because they got too enamored

of their subjects. It befuddles credibility to say that Goffman refuses to give out her defense to critics of her book, but then hands them over to the obscure New York Times , which then paraphrases them in this very friendly Sean Penn form of "journalism".

- Reply
- 8Recommend

Nicholas Palgan

Boston [1 day ago](#)

As someone who has been following the controversy around Goffman with interest, I'm disappointed that the reporter devoted so much space to mind-numbing sociological verbiage but didn't give the reader more detail about Goffman's explanations for her more outlandish claims.

For instance: "Around that time a friend of Chuck's had been shot and killed while exiting my car outside a bar; one of the bullets pierced my windshield, and the man's blood spattered my shoes and pants as we [presumably Goffman and Chuck] ran away. I had been staying at Mitch's spare apartment in Princeton for a few days until things calmed down." Umm, what happened when the police came calling about her car with the bullet hole in the window that had been abandoned at a murder scene? It doesn't sound like the sort of thing that they would forget about after a few days. The reporter refers to "a quite reasonable clarification of the mild confusion over what she witnessed firsthand and what she reconstructed from interviews", but this seems more like Goffman 'sexing up' her book than justifiable anonymisation for her informants' sake.

This issue is important as how can we judge controversial and important claims about police misconduct - like Goffman personally witnessing three men arrested on the maternity floor of a hospital (including her friend for a very minor parole violation) after police check the visitors' name list - if we still don't know whether they are really just nth hand urban legends?

- Reply
- 44Recommend

Campesino

Denver, CO [1 day ago](#)

Sorry. Ethical social scientists don't destroy field notes that are the basis of published research.

- Reply
- 80Recommend



uy gavalt

New Mexico [1 day ago](#)

uy gavalt, she did what few others would dare to do, and did it with passion and conviction - of course the decencers would line up to bash her into dust - that's what cowards do best.

- Reply
- 9Recommend

BB

NYC [1 day ago](#)

uy vay, it would appear that alice goffman's brand of research is analogous to sabrina erdely's brand of journalism. passion and conviction are great, but they should never be confused with verifiable data and replicable research.

- Reply
- 11Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

You mean she made stuff up that certain people like to hear?

- Reply
- 7Recommend

lamplighter55

Yonkers, NY [1 day ago](#)

If an affluent white woman can be criticized for writing about non-affluent black men (apparently because she, allegedly can't relate), then can we also criticize a black man for writing about white women. Or an Asian female for writing about American Indian culture, etc, etc. This is a ridiculous argument.

- Reply
- 56Recommend

nedskee

57th and 7th [1 day ago](#)

just as Goffman could not write critically about her "friends" the Times writer grew too intimate to speak objectively about Goffman. One example: if Goffman's reply to her critic is so top secret, why would she let the author read it and talk extensively about it. This smells like Sean Penn journalism to me.

- Reply
- 18Recommend

John Lubeck

Livermore, CA [1 day ago](#)

An anonymous email that was nonetheless investigated and discounted by her department.... That says more than enough.

- Reply
- 10Recommend

[See All Replies](#)

John

C [1 day ago](#)

Good for her. Academia writes for 8 other people who don't really read the work. Meanwhile the world ignores us. Surprised?

She is the way forward. Making an impact with thousands of hours of hard work, writing and traveling.

As it is, you spend 10 years writing a dissertation/monograph nobody on earth cares about, even your partners or parents.

- Reply
- 22Recommend

Crusader Rabbit

Tucson, AZ [1 day ago](#)

One gets the sense that the criticism from academia stems from idiotic identity politics, political correctness and plain envy. If academia is looking for a systemic problem they ought to visit their optometrist- no doubt the diagnosis will be myopia .

- Reply
- 37Recommend

bronx refugee

austin tx [1 day ago](#)

What a mess. As a work of journalism, ethnography or sociology, there doesn't seem to be enough academic rigor present to make her work useful - in fact, the book has been deemed by many to be unapologetically sloppy; though her clever to this criticism is that as a "privileged" white person, my validation of her work is unimportant.

The for whom and for what was this book written? The author doesn't seem to know or care. I suspect it was written for herself, meant to affirm a bizarre sense of righteousness. As a helpful work of academia: Failure. What does it reveal that is not already common knowledge?

As a docu-drama, maybe - but I feel this ground has already been covered by "The Wire".

- Reply
- 10Recommend

Just a poor capitalist

Ithaca, NY [1 day ago](#)

What a weak article for both sociology and the reporter. She did not see 3 men arrested in a maternity ward in Philadelphia. If you bothered to check police records, you would see it didn't happen. While she hides her lies behind the shield of anonymity the very community she claims to represent, support, champion, and even be a member of, suffers from real problems. Alice is a distraction for the field and needs to get off the stage... Her book is full of inconsistencies that morphed into lies. This doesn't belong in the academe or journalism...

- Reply
- 32Recommend

AJF

SF, CA [1 day ago](#)

Ah yes, "police records", those bastions of truth and accuracy.

- Reply
- 6Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

You're kidding, right? The cops changed the records, nobody in the hospital noticed or said anything, etc. Yeah, her records are air-tight.

- Reply
- 9Recommend

[See All Replies](#)

Emmet G

Brooklyn [1 day ago](#)

The profile is marred by the too-long delayed fact that Alice is Erving Goffman's daughter. It makes sense not to overemphasize the point, but there's not good way to slip it in as the profile attempts as her personal'background.

- Reply
- 8Recommend

Carolyn

[1 day ago](#)

and your point is?

- Reply
- 3Recommend

__main__

New York City [1 day ago](#)

"I'm sorry, you do not meet the racial purity standard to hold a valid opinion on this subject."
Ad hominem, plain and simple.

- Reply
- 7Recommend



Peter Olafson

La Jolla [1 day ago](#)

We're going through a strange new era of cultural segregation. I think the point is self-assertion rather than actual separation and perhaps it will finally lead to somewhere better once it works itself out. But it seems seems a twisted path that at its heart fails to see people as people.

- Reply
- 10Recommend

S.D.Keith

Birmigham, AL [1 day ago](#)

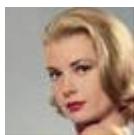
This is an article about the academy, i.e., about academia, i.e., specifically about the sociology academy, talking to and arguing with itself. There is nothing more banal than the

academy talking and arguing with itself, particularly when it is over who among them should be afforded status as their celebrity sociologist.

Woody Allen might have been able to make this tale interesting, in an obsessive/compulsive NY Jewish sort of way, but that's only because he would be do so by poking sardonic fun at the idea of a celebrity sociologist and all the inane jealousies and backstabbing that afflict academia.

In all this internecine squabbling, nobody seems to mind much that nothing of mankind's sociological problems are getting fixed in the process. And fixing some human problem is the point of studying it, no matter the discipline. Isn't it?

- Reply
- 10Recommend



Tess Harding

The New York Globe [1 day ago](#)

Started to read On The Run and found it lacking in and POV that made me question veracity of whether these people were real or not.

Decide for yourselves...

- Reply
- 8Recommend

Working Class Intellectual

Steel Mill, PA [1 day ago](#)

Its interesting that white scholars particularly ethnographers are privileged in the academy to talk about positionality in their work, never read an ethnography by one scholar of color where the academy romanticizes their positionality in conducting similar work with similar populations. If a white scholar engages poor communities on the ground its exotic, if a scholar of color does it, there is no value in the work, which is insane because scholars of color often face similar if not greater challenges with conducting ethnographies in poor communities. Determining the accuracy of her account is debatable but had she been a scholar of color doing the same work, the work would have never gained the same kind of attention because no one cares about the positionality of scholars of color and it would be impossible for a scholar of color to gain access to a similar socioeconomic class of whites to conduct a study. Image rural or suburban America granting access to a scholar of color to study whites addicted to heroin or meth. Never going to happen and if it did, highly doubt that the academy would embrace the positionality of the researcher. Her race, gender, age and class benefited her, it was really the backdrop for the academy to make her the darling of

urban ethnography, now the very same factors in addition to her questionable narratives have raised more scrutiny. How ironic.

daniel o mc cabe

Gaithersburg,MD. [1 day ago](#)

Sorry. Just another white apologist.

- Reply
- 9Recommend



Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

That's OK, Mr. McCabe, we accept your apology.

- Reply
- 7Recommend

Irene

Denver, CO [1 day ago](#)

This is a well researched book and a good read. Young black men used to write books back in the 1960s and 1970s. Now so many tell their stories through their music. Different but the same in so many ways.

- Reply
- 2Recommend

yoda

wash, dc [1 day ago](#)

She is white and writes about inner city black youth (emphasis on black). Hence academia thinks she is a criminal (because of her "whiteness"). This is her crime. Another example of PC racism and irrationality running amuck.

It really forces one to ask the question of whether or not universities are "centers" of learning. Have they lost that function?

- Reply
- 5Recommend

Mark Rogow

TeXas [1 day ago](#)

No, her crime is that she lies. She can't back any of her story up because she conveniently destroyed all her notes.

- Reply
- 7Recommend

Brad

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Of course she has the right to write about anyone she wants. It's ridiculous to suggest otherwise. The real issue is did she fabricate, embellish or manipulate her research for the sake of sensationalizing her work? Her credibility and integrity as a scholar is the key, not her gender or race.

The teaser copy underneath the headline certainly doesn't help. One wonders if it's intentionally misleading to sensationalize the article. The very crime Ms. Goffman is accused of.

- Reply
- 64Recommend

bb

berkeley [1 day ago](#)

Hats off to Alice for sticking to her beliefs even when being criticized by those in her field. Academia is stagnant with its mandate to push young scholars onto the path that has been laid before their time. Are her critics jealous that she has a book and had been able to cross class, race and socioeconomic boundaries? Ethnography is the real way to study populations, subsets etc. It is this method that puts meaning and a face on those being studied. Statistics merely are numbers, hard cold and perhaps unreliable. For validation Alice might want to study another similar population in another part of the country and compare notes. I sometimes provide ethnographic research for corporations studying their consumers. We don't spend as much time as Alice but hopscotch the country speaking with our target. End result is a story of who these people really are.

- Reply
- 18Recommend



joel bergsman

st leonard md [1 day ago](#)

I worked during 1960 to 2000 as an economist, and frequently observed, and occasionally experienced, the tension between qualitative and quantitative analysis. In my view, which is clearly supported supported by changes in the literature, economics (after Adam Smith!) before the mid-20th century was too heavy on theorizing without empirical investigation. During the second half of that century, the availability of computers facilitated an exaggerated shift to the other extreme; in the 1960s there was a common joke about the grad student who said, "I'm ready to do my PhD dissertation; I have a computer program to do the statistics; now all I need is a subject and some data." The profession more recently has reversed that over-correction and is again interested in details about how actual people and actual institutions behave -- inserting what could be called "field work" where unsubstantiated but computationally convenient assumptions used to reign.

The odyssey of sociology described in this essay is different but contains this same tension. It is impossible to avoid because neither discipline has neither theories (I would prefer to say "models") that contain all the possibly relevant variables, nor data that closely approximate the variables in the theory. Empirical testing of theories, which is crucially important, is therefore unavoidably limited.

Unfortunately the goodwill and the wisdom needed to balance these tensions is hard to find in today's academic world.

- Reply
- 51Recommend

XY

NYC [1 day ago](#)

I cannot address Professor Goffman's work directly as I have not reviewed it.

However, I strongly believe that anecdotal reporting in the social sciences is of more lasting value than analysis or statistical work.

As time passes today's theories will fall out of fashion to be replaced by new theories, which in turn will be replaced themselves. Moreover, due to confounding most statistical work in the social sciences is of little value.

However, witnesses' accounts, even if they come from adventurers serve as primary sources and are of continual value.

The charge that whites shouldn't report on black culture, or the other way around is without merit. Sometimes an outsider will see things that an insider will take for granted. The best situation is when you have both sorts of accounts, from both inside the group, and from outside the group.

If Professor Goffman is not citing others work, work which she takes credit for, that would be a serious offense if true; as would publishing a fictional or sloppy account.

- Reply
- 26Recommend

M. Proschmann

PA [11 hours ago](#)

"However, I strongly believe that anecdotal reporting in the social sciences is of more lasting value than analysis or statistical work. "

Gibbering radical subjectivism.

- Reply
- Recommend

Daniel

New York [1 day ago](#)

Something about this research seems to treat poor blacks like a different species to be observed like zoo animals. Something about it rubs me the wrong way, never mind the citation issues and other issues.

- Reply
- 18Recommend

Bruce Martin

Des Moines, IA [1 day ago](#)

I found "On the Run" singularly informative. It altered my outlook on lots of things, which is what great writing can do. Thanks for this account of Alice Goffman, and thanks to her.

- Reply
- 22Recommend

Laurence Svirchev

Vancouver, Canada [1 day ago](#)

There is a rule in science, be it 'hard' or 'soft' science: if you can back up your case with solid research, then it is up to others to disprove it or take the hypothesis and run it to another level. The research rests on the data, analysis and findings. If you had to be a certain gender, skin color, cultural background to have valid social findings, then valid research would be a hell of a harder to do. I found that qualitative research has amazing rewards, and includes recognition by 'hard' scientists, as in my research on the social effects of earthquake in China, and I am not Chinese. The "Chicago" school was great, because it insisted that you do field research and experience, directly view, and interact with people. The article quotes one youngster researcher saying Goffman's writing was dated. That young man needs to put on

some walking shoes, get out of his office chair, and learn something about real life, not just the academy.

- Reply
- 30Recommend

Greg

California [1 day ago](#)

At least for hard science, you have it backwards. The standard is not whether others can disprove your claim. The standard is whether they can prove it.

If you have excellent research that can't be reproduced, then it goes into the trash bin with the rest.

This is why many people trained in hard science have trouble taking sociology seriously. discourse in that field can't seem to ignore irrelevant ad-hominem questions like positionalism, and instead focus on core issues like documentation and burning the research notes.

- Reply
- 4Recommend

BobR

Wyomissing [1 day ago](#)

I took sociology courses at Penn while an undergraduate there in the late '60's.

Reading this article rekindled my intense dislike for the field, its verbosity, and the inanities of its precepts and methods.

- Reply
- 30Recommend

DMutchler

[1 day ago](#)

Was it the class where you're taught it is okay to write checks to those who you "observed" for their assistance with your book that turned you off?

Oh my!

- Reply
- 2Recommend

BobR

Wyomissing [1 day ago](#)

Nope.

- Reply
- Recommend



jon norstog

pocatello ID [1 day ago](#)

I read the book soon as it came out. It is great. I lived in those Philadelphia neighborhoods about five years and settled in pretty good. Goffman's book has the ring of truth about it. Appalling truth: when I lived in South an West Philadelphia, it seemed there was hope that life was getting better and that the dominant society was going to let black people enjoy a taste of peace, prosperity and respect.

There have always been white people who have integrated themselves into black families and neighborhoods, adopting roles and responsibilities. Go to an African-American family reunion and see who shows up. Goffman was no more an adventurer than any of those people.

My own feeling is that the reaction against her and her work is partly because it so vividly describes the terrible conditions the dominant society imposes on black people, partly a turf battle among academics, and partly because some people see her as what used to be called a "race traitor."

- Reply
- 127Recommend

DL

Pittsburgh [1 day ago](#)

The "positionality" issue is addressed in detail in the book's Methodological Afterword. It's hard to escape the impression that Goffman's accusers haven't actually read carefully what she wrote and are reacting out of a combination of fear of what her work implies about our society, or from professional jealousy, or some combination of these. On the Run is essential reading for people who aren't afraid to learn something of what life is like for communities that many of us would prefer to blame for their own problems or just forget about.

- Reply
- 69Recommend

Robin

Manhattan [1 day ago](#)

Excellent comment.

- Reply
- 1 Recommend

tadon

baltimore, md [1 day ago](#)

"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."

Since when is citation a "political game"?

- Reply
- 119 Recommend

schbrg

dallas, texas [1 day ago](#)

tadon, I think we are getting a close-up of the Academy as it is today.

- Reply
- Recommend

Prince

Myshkin [11 hours ago](#)

Since always.

All is political--especially in academe.

- Reply
- 1 Recommend

See All Replies



naive theorist

Chicago, IL [1 day ago](#)

excellent article. well done!

- Reply
- 14Recommend

Jonathan Katz

St. Louis [1 day ago](#)

Anyone gets to speak for anyone he (she in this case) wants to.

It's called free speech and free press.

If you don't like it, use your freedom of speech and press to disagree. But don't try to bully others; they have those rights too.

- Reply
- 95Recommend



Joe

Iowa [1 day ago](#)

"...a fight within sociology on who gets to speak for whom."

I have visions of angels dancing on a pinhead. Anyone can write a book and speak for anyone. It's called free speech.

- Reply
- 44Recommend

George

NY State [1 day ago](#)

Yes, but not anyone can expect that sociology recognizes their writing as being sociology. And that's essential for Goffman because she needs tenure.

- Reply
- 1Recommend

JSDV

NW [1 day ago](#)

I don't know... what's the point of this "research?"

It's hard being poor.

It's hard being black.

It's really hard being poor and black.

What academia should be focused on is how to alleviate the poverty, the dysfunction, the lack of real role models within these communities (that aren't ministers...).

I partially blame the white culture for making successful black men--- those outside of the rap or sports cultures--- invisible.

It's time to publicize, widely, the success stories of the men (and women) born in poverty that choose other paths besides crime--- and succeed.

Goffman's work isn't even interesting: it's exactly what one would expect.

- Reply
- 27Recommend

alan haigh

carmel, ny [1 day ago](#)

You miss the point. The point is to bring the story to those that haven't experienced it. The middle class doesn't care enough about the poor because they have no stories in their heads to inspire the necessary empathy. This book carries those stories.

- Reply
- 4Recommend

CityBumpkin

Earth [1 day ago](#)

Well, I think the book does help to alleviate poverty. It's not as sociologists have a laboratory with big microscopes and what-not they get into to figure out how to alleviate poverty. They do their part by studying and chronicling the phenomenon.

As someone who grew up in affluent suburbs, I had no real appreciation at how much more difficult and complicated life was until I was an adult and had a job working with low-income people. It's one thing to know in the abstract that being poor is hard, it's another to really see HOW it is hard.

It's like asking a doctor to cure a disease, but saying it's not really necessary for the doctor to see the patient. "Well, all you need to know is the patient is sick. That's obvious."

As for the lives of those who escape poverty, that may well be a worthwhile project. But there are multiple sociologists capable of multiple projects. It's as though we fear too much knowledge.

- Reply
- Recommend

[See All Replies](#)



Michael Mahler

is a trusted commenter Los Angeles [1 day ago](#)

When white authors write about minorities, this question about their "right" to do this always comes up. When minority authors write about whites, they are often applauded for their imagination; authentic, original insights; and courageous portrayals of contemporary society, even when the characters are quite stereotyped. Do only minorities have the ability to understand someone else? Goffman's work should be judged on its merits, not her personal demographics.

- Flag
- Reply
- 156Recommend
- Share this comment on FacebookShare this comment on Twitter

Jane Mars

Stockton, Calif. [1 day ago](#)

Did you read the article closely enough to notice that was addressed? The article points out that if you deny her legitimacy in writing about a socio-economic or ethnic group that is her own, it would also delegitimize scholars who grew up poor and/or in marginalized ethnic groups who research economically elite or demographically privileged groups, and that would obviously be unjust: thus it is unjust to challenge her on this.

- Flag
- Reply
- 6Recommend
- Share this comment on FacebookShare this comment on Twitter

Working Class Intellectual

Steel Mill, PA [1 day ago](#)

Name one ethnography when a scholar of color has written about whites from similar or even a different socioeconomic class? When you find that ethnography let us know.

Dan Stackhouse

NYC [1 day ago](#)

Dear Workingclass Intellectual,
Actually you bring up a good point. There are many ethnographers who are women or minorities, here's a list of 50:

<http://www.krazykioti.com/articles/anthropology-was-not-all-white-males-...>

However, hardly anyone ever does ethnographies on whites at all, and those few that are done are written by white people. They don't get a lot of public notice either. I think the unconsciously racist attitude causing this is that white peoples' lives are normal, standard, and thus uninteresting sociologically, and mostly the lives of minorities merit study, because they're departures from the norm.