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Deep Cover: Alice Goffman's 'On the Run'

By ALEX KOTLOWITZ

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Alice Goffman Credit Ricardo Barros

“On the Run” is, first and foremost, a remarkable feat of reporting. Its author, Alice Goffman, a young sociologist, had an ethnography assignment for an undergraduate class at the University of Pennsylvania, and she, the daughter of the renowned sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-82), didn’t take it lightly. She hung out with an older African-American food service worker at the university, and one thing led to another. Before long, she had moved into an apartment in a poor, largely black neighborhood in Philadelphia, her housemate a young man whose family lived down the block. Goffman became such a part of the fabric of the community that she was harassed by the police, witnessed someone getting pistol-whipped, and was even set up on a blind date. And all the while she was furiously taking notes, trying to make sense of what at first glance appeared to be utter chaos going on around her.

But where others might see bedlam, Goffman finds patterns, even logic. When it becomes clear that many of the young men won’t go to the public hospital for treatment — she recounts watching one of them prone on his kitchen table, having a bullet removed from his thigh by a neighbor who is a nurse’s aide — Goffman begins to ask questions and learns that the police often loiter near the emergency room, scanning the visitors list, looking to arrest anyone who might have an outstanding warrant. This could be a metaphor for what Goffman comes to realize: The young men in this community feel hunted. Their mental energy is spent trying to elude the police, so much so that they impart words of advice to younger siblings, including this from a man Goffman calls Chuck, speaking to his 12-year-old brother: “You hear them coming, that’s it, you gone. Period. ’Cause whoever they looking for, even if it’s not you, nine times out of 10 they’ll probably book you.” Chuck’s warnings, it becomes clear, have merit. In fact, Chuck’s brother receives three years’ probation when he’s given a ride to school in what turns out to be a stolen car. Many of the men Goffman encounters have recently been released from prison and are on parole. And as she points out, our parole and probation system is set up for people to fail. She introduces us to Alex, whose parole stipulations forbid him to visit his old neighborhood or be out past curfew. It’s as if the system is just waiting for his first misstep, ready to pounce.

“On the Run” serves as a kind of coda to our war on drugs, an effort whose very rhetoric suggested it was us against them. The criminal justice system became a kind of invading force, aimed mostly at young black men. There was, of course, the inexplicable sentencing disparity between those caught with powdered cocaine and those caught with crack cocaine. States were emboldened to be equally punitive.In Illinois, for instance, the Legislature passed a law that automatically transferred a juvenile to adult court if caught with drugs within 1,000 feet of a public housing complex — a law clearly directed at African-American teenagers. The war on drugs mangled, if not destroyed, any trust between residents of distressed urban communities and the authorities. And when we speak of the authorities, it’s the police who on a day-to-day basis must contend with the rubble left behind from more than two decades of disturbingly misguided public policy. Goffman describes how “a climate of fear and suspicion pervades everyday life,” with the result that “a new social fabric is emerging under the threat of confinement: one woven in suspicion, distrust and the paranoiac practices of secrecy, evasion and unpredictability.” To her credit, she didn’t set out with this notion; rather, it’s where she landed after six years of up-close observation.

Goffman spent her time in a Philadelphia community she calls 6th Street, which consists of a commercial strip and five residential blocks. There she came to know the locals intimately, not only the young men but also their girlfriends and families. She became so embedded in the community that she witnessed 24 police raids, including one in which she herself was handcuffed. Her guide is a man in his 20s she calls Mike (Goffman changed everyone's name), who introduces her to friends as his adopted sister. Mike has a low-paying warehouse job and supplements his income by selling crack, getting in and out of trouble with the law. Like the others we meet, he's neither hero nor villain. He's simply trying to get by.

The level of detail in this book and Goffman's ability to understand her subjects' motivations are astonishing — and riveting. Indeed, it's a power of "On the Run" that her insights and conclusions feel so honest to what she's seen and heard. She depicts a community where trust has evaporated, where young men like Mike often avoid girlfriends for fear that the women, for their own reasons, might turn their paramours in. And she describes an underground economy that has sprung up around what she calls the fugitive life, including entrepreneurs who sell their clean urine to those on parole. (One entrepreneur jokes that his trade encourages him to stay clean: "If you sell one dirty bag, you're done.") More than anything, Goffman helps us understand why residents of this neighborhood make the seemingly cockeyed choices they do, often for very rational reasons, often because they know well the repercussions of the alternative. She learns that many refuse to call the police not because of a cultural aversion to "snitching," but because they fear it will only expose them, especially if they're on parole or have an outstanding warrant. You can't read this book without a growing sense of understanding as well as outrage.

Still, Goffman is an ethnographer, not a storyteller, and it's challenging to keep track of the large cast of characters. I often wished that she had given us more to hold on to, that she had let us get to know some of her subjects in all their fullness and richness. Because she's so focused on their relationship to the law, we don't learn much else about them. Their interests. Their aspirations. Even just their quirks and idiosyncrasies. They undoubtedly have more dimensions than Goffman allows them in these pages.

There's been a good deal of buzz about this book, in large part because of the reporting techniques, a kind of über-version of immersion journalism. And it's these techniques that make "On the Run" both exciting and troublesome. In a 50-page appendix titled "A Methodological Note" that is as compelling as the body of the book, Goffman lays out her reporting approach. It will leave many shaking their heads, both with admiration and uneasiness. As I mentioned, Goffman ended up living in the community, and her housemate, Mike, and his two friends who regularly crash at the house are the book's main characters. Goffman becomes so much a part of their lives that she starts to be a participant as well as an observer. She talks about cutting herself off from her previous friends, of restricting herself to only the media Mike's group indulged in, which was mostly hip-hop, R&B and gangster movies. "After spending a few months with Mike and his friends," she writes, "I moved even further away from their ideals of beauty or femininity, in part as a strategy to conduct the fieldwork, and in part because I was, as a participant observer, adopting their male attitudes, dress, habits and even language." This made me squirm. Something feels calculating here. I've spent a good deal of time in similar communities (though unlike Goffman, I've never moved in), and I've always felt it was best to

be myself, to acknowledge the differences. I have to admit I write this criticism with both awe and discomfort. Could she have had this same access if she remained true to who she is? Goffman may disagree, but I think she could have.

There's something more disquieting, though. Goffman at times makes rather sweeping statements or offers up the occasional anecdote, mostly relating to law enforcement, without an indication of the source. At one point, she asserts that "the police typically take whatever cash they find" during drug raids. On another occasion, she writes of an F.B.I. agent who, in an effort to track people with warrants, supposedly developed a computer program inspired by the Stasi, the East German secret police. Nowhere does she tell us where she got such information. But what I suspect will be most debated, especially among ethnographers and journalists, are ethical questions raised by Goffman's status as a participant observer. She witnesses a number of beatings and, by my count, two murders, one at the hands of a young man she was following, the other at the hands of a police officer. In a recent interview with Philly.com, Goffman mentions that she destroyed all her field notes so that they couldn't be subpoenaed. That seems to answer a practical question, but not the moral one. I should be the last to pass judgment, given incidents I've seen and heard. I'll also concede that I've never witnessed something as profoundly disturbing as a murder, and if I did, I suppose under certain circumstances, especially if I feared for my or my family's safety, I might be torn about coming forward. But I wish Goffman addressed this dilemma head-on, especially because enduring such regular acts of brutality undoubtedly weighs on the souls of those like Mike and his friends.

Ultimately, what Goffman experienced living alongside these men is both revelatory and sobering. The question we now need to ask is clear: How do we emerge from the wreckage left by a public policy that posited young black men as the enemy? As a guard at a halfway house tells Goffman: "It's a tragedy. It's a crime against God. Sometimes I think, in 50 years we are going to look back on this and, you know. . . . This was wrong."