

Book Review: "On The Run" by Alice Goffman

Alice Goffman's new book, "On The Run: Fugitive Life in an American City," is, even as a premise, inviting to controversy. It recounts her seven year immersion study of life in a relatively poor black community on the outskirts of Philadelphia, primarily in a neighborhood she calls 6th Street, with a group of boys she aptly names the 6th Street Boys. She first gains access to this world through a job her sophomore in the UPenn cafeteria, where she becomes close with her supervisor, an older black lady named Miss Deena. After some time, she starts tutoring Miss Deena's granddaughter Aisha, and from there is introduced to Aisha's cousin, Mike, and his friends, Alex, Chuck, Tim, Reggie, and Steve, among others. Goffman soon moves off campus into an apartment in the 6th street neighborhood, and begins spending her every waking hour with them and their families, taking detailed field notes as she goes along. Her purpose gradually evolves, eventually transforming into a full on ethnography of, in her words, "an on-the-ground account of the US prison boom: a close-up look at young men and women living in one poor and segregated Black community transformed by unprecedented levels of imprisonment...policing, and supervision (xii).

In the 6th street neighborhood that Goffman studies, her insights on relationship dynamics, legal entanglements, and the roles that community members play are powerful. She presents the 6th street men as prey to the punitive tactics that police consistently employ. Her second chapter begins with Chuck teaching his younger brother Tim how to run from the police, a veritable male rite of passage for these boys passed down from man to man just like learning to shave or throw a football. Sadly, as she describes, this knowledge is so critical to their boyhoods because it will be inevitably useful in the course of their young lives. As she

notes in her introduction, "so many Black people have been imprisoned and returned home with felony convictions that the prison plays a central role in the production of unequal groups in US society" (3). She provides telling examples of this, such as when Mike gets booked for a fight in school and is sent to prison. As a consequence, he misses his senior year of high school and then is not allowed to return and graduate. Without a diploma, a job is hard to find, and an illegal income, such as selling crack, becomes an attractive option. This is just one way in which the young men of 6th street become dragged into the vicious cycle that entraps their neighborhood. Over the course of her life on 6th Street, Goffman witnesses the vast majority of the boys eventually leave for jail or prison, often multiple times- they cannot remain on the run forever. The irony is that they are trapped no matter where they are, on the run from the law, unable to live a public life, or in jail, physically barred from going anywhere. As she states in her conclusion, to be on the run is also to be at a standstill" (196).

Throughout all of this documentation, Goffman tries to remain inconspicuous as possible; she takes the "fly on the wall" (235) approach, as she mentions in her methodology. Obviously, this is initially challenging, as she both physically stands out as the only white girl hanging around the 6th street boys, and behaviorally as a foreigner to their culture. In her methodology section, she discusses how she blended in with the group and "negotiated her privilege," which she acknowledges played a pivotal role in allowing her to conduct as intensive fieldwork as she did. She takes on a little sister role to Mike, and a "cousin" relation to the others, often having to adapt to various situations. This tactic is documented by others in the field, particularly in the paper "Performing the role of ethnographer: processing and managing the emotional dimensions of prison research" by Deborah H. Drake and Joel Harvey. Drake and Harvey speak about the importance of this adaptation, adding, "the ethnographic researcher must manage his or her role in these varying contexts through a

range of 'virtual identities' (493). Interestingly enough, this paper also builds on the work of acclaimed sociologist Erving Goffman, who mentioned in the same paragraph, is Alice Goffman's late father. In negotiating her place on 6th street, Goffman honestly divulges how stupid she felt trying to learn the ways of the community, and the blunders she made along the way, perhaps the most blatant being breaking up the wrong two people during a fight. She writes about her genuine embarrassment in these situations, and how she became obsessed with trying to fit in in order to view life in the neighborhood without her presence interfering.

It is maybe this goal to provide an objective account that at times sends her narrative into both a social and academic gray area. Throughout the methodology, she talks about her reactions to the events she witnessed, such as the particularly moving section at the end about Chuck's death. She contributes to the dialogue at Chuck's bedside in the hospital ("I said that if Reggie came home, all he was gonna do was shoot someone" (256). Finally, she ends the book with a haunting thought, about how her "desire for vengeance scared [her]" (261), and more than anything else.

On the one hand, I understand the placement of this subjective outlook in the methodology section- her reactions and emotions to her experience guided the way that she viewed her research. At the same time, I could not help but feel like this aspect of her perspective was necessary throughout the entire book. Rather than appreciating the cold objectivity she used at some of the book's most drastic moments, it felt like there was an aspect of subjective commentary that had been consciously omitted. At the same time, I debated whether it really was the responsibility of an ethnographer to include personal emotion and opinion in her narrative at the risk of biasing it. To resolve this question, I turned to a scholarly paper entitled "Objectivity and Subjectivity in the Ethnographic Method" by Allan Hegelund. Hegelund gives an example that I think vouches for the inclusion of

emotional experience in ethnographical research. He gives the example of a teacher who has an aversion towards a particular student, be it because of his political views. "By not being aware of [her subconscious aversion], the teacher could easily end up giving a lower grade than the student's performance would actually indicate." As Hegelund states, the resolution to this problem is not to ignore that this bias exists, but rather to acknowledge it, and account for it. Throughout the main body of "On the Run," there were times when I wanted Goffman to present her emotional reaction to a situation. One scene particular is when she experiences the police raid in Ms. Linda's house and is violently thrown to the floor and threatened. Clearly, she must have had an emotional reaction to this, but it was not expressed, for me causing more uncertainty than if she *had* stated how she felt, but in a poised and retrospective way. Directly addressing her personal reactions throughout the book rather than just at select parts would, I believe, have made her dramatic immersion in the 6th street community feel more natural to the reader.

Another gray area that I found unsettling at times was Goffman's consistent categorization of people in the neighborhood, be it the jargon of academia or the street. From the beginning she uses terms such as "clean/dirty", "hot/cool," "rider/snitch," to describe the various roles people play in the community, despite the mention they are fluid and fickle labels. My qualm is not with their ephemeral status, but rather that, like her tendency towards strict objectivity, they occasionally limit her narrative and reduce its complexity. I understand their usefulness in distinguishing between behavior, and even that they are terms used between community members themselves. But to write an ethnography with such a pervasive system of categorization is at times objectifying. This is not to say that the people she write about are not complex, because I think she portrays them as so, especially in the middle chapters that focus less on crime and more on social lives, subversion of the legal system, and

the privileges that a "dirty" status can grant. It is to say, however, that these labels should not define the people she talks about, but rather be, as I just used, as a marker of temporary status.

In the end, I agree with Alex Kotlowitz in his New York Times book review of "On the Run," in which he states that it is "first and foremost, a remarkable feat of reporting." The bonds that Goffman makes with the members of the 6th street community and its associated members fosters an intricate analysis of life under constant police surveillance. Her inroads into the community give an outsider perspective on what normally is not seen, or at least understood, by those living outside of it. At the same time, this is not groundbreaking content, as noted by Christina Sharpe in a rather scathing review for *The New Inquiry*, and Goffman pays very little homage to other scholars and activists like Mariame Kaba, Angela Davis, Ruth Gilmore, Beth Richie, and The Black Youth Project, who have performed similar work. I do think her revelations are important though, both from a sociological and social perspective, not to mention they arrive at a particularly convenient time. Overall, "On The Run," is impressive although imperfect work that nonetheless adds deeply to the narrative of divisive race relations currently plaguing our country.

Works Cited

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