

THE LIMITATIONS OF A “DIRTY” WORLD

Laurence Ralph

Departments of Anthropology and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

ALICE GOFFMAN, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, New York: Picador USA, 2015, 304 pages, ISBN 978-1-250-06566-7. \$16.00

VICTOR M. RIOS, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, New York: NYU Press, 2011, 237 pages, ISBN 978-0-814-77638-4. \$24.00

Ethnography is a colonial enterprise. It sprouted its wings from nineteenth century travel diaries in which bold adventurers embarked on a perilous journey, straight into “the heart of darkness,” and emerged to tell the tale.¹ Within these ethnographies, the idea of the “savage” helped constitute the notion of “civilization” that these adventurers took for granted (Trouillot 1991). Ultimately, in these fable-esque stories, the adventurer realizes that the exotic inhabitants are more similar to people in the West than different, and therefore argues that their culture should be seen as legitimate. This revelation, in turn, leads the adventurer to reflect upon his or her own society. Such is a prominent strand of ethnographic research in the traditional sense.

But while notable nineteenth century ethnographers imagined themselves embarking on a journey to “discover” tribes and medicine men, some twentieth century ethnographers examined the “modern” world, focusing on latter-day “hobos” of the American city (Anderson 1923) instead of “primitive” tribes of the African hinterland. Today, twenty-first century scholars have tinkered further with these tropes in ways that redefine traditional approaches. In the wake of the critiques of ethnography delivered forcefully in the 1980s and 1990s by feminist and postcolonial scholars, urban ethnographers are frequently compelled to position their projects against antiquated tropes of the lone ethnographer, making his or her way amongst the “savages” (c.f. Asad 1973; Behar 1996; Fabian 1983; Geertz 1988; Spivak 1988). Instead of “hobos,” contemporary ethnographers study Wall Street brokers who

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remake society in their image (Ho 2009); they explore the sex industry as a microcosm of the global economy, a critical space where business deals are hashed out in Vietnamese brothels as opposed to boardrooms (Hoang 2015); and they examine the historical legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois through Black “city makers” who find a way to mobilize against the structural violence of gentrification (Hunter 2013). These recent ethnographies are remarkable for the way they force us to rethink what it means to conduct research in “urban” spaces.

Still, no urban ethnography can completely relinquish its colonial roots. The most present-day ethnographers can do is be clear about how their projects are implicated in this genealogy. When ethnographers choose not to acknowledge the past, implicitly or explicitly through the design of their study, and through the analytic categories they employ, their work runs the risk of rehearsing what Victor Rios (2011) refers to as “the jungle-book trope,” the idea that the researcher got “lost in the wild,” the people of “the wild” subsequently adopted her, put her on a pedestal, and she has “lived to tell civilization about it.” Regrettably, Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* falls into this trap.

Consider the praise collated on the book’s cover jacket and opening pages: Cornel West calls *On the Run* an exemplary treatment of “the *wretched underside*” of Capitalist America; Elijah Anderson refers to it as a riveting account of African Americans who inhabit urban “*killing fields*”; and, according to *Baltimore City Paper*, Goffman “*opens a window*” into what it means to be Black and live in low-income Philadelphia. These reviews gesture towards a point that this essay promises to make clear: the critical acclaim of *On the Run* can be explained, in large measure, by its success in implementing a well-worn motif.

In short, if urban Philadelphia is “the wild,” then Alice Goffman is Tarzan.

It should be said that *On the Run* makes a compelling case that “historically high imprisonment rates, intensive policing and surveillance...are transforming poor Black neighborhoods into communities of suspects and fugitives” (Goffman 2015, p. 8). Moreover, the book gives us insight into how and why people may become career criminals, forced to live a life “on the run” (p. 8). Alice Goffman raises awareness about these critical issues so that her readers may reflect on what the 1990s’ “tough-on-crime” movement and “zero-tolerance policing” have done to urban African American communities. Yet, Goffman does not address any of the issues that have made urban ethnography a historically fraught practice in any sustained way.

In what follows, I argue that some of Goffman’s conceptual and aesthetic choices—particularly her distinction between “dirty and clean people”—serve to reinforce ethnography’s colonial legacy by: (1) uncritically rehearsing stereotypes about Black urban poverty, and (2) failing to theorize the way that the ethnographer, herself, is implicated in the analysis. Part of what gives the reader the sense that Goffman is operating as a lone adventurer is the fact that, as Sudhir Venkatesh (2015) has mentioned, her analysis lacks a sufficient discussion of community institutions and brokers. In this regard, my review of Victor Rios’s ethnography, *Punished*, serves as somewhat of a corrective. Rios’s ethnography adds additional scales of analysis to the study of crime and surveillance by pointing to institutions and brokers that mediate the way policing is experienced. The result is that, rather than locating explanations for a fugitive lifestyle in an individual’s psyche (as Goffman tends to do), people are criminalized through social processes in Rios’s work. These processes are bolstered by the *youth control complex*, “a system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, businesses, and other institutions systematically treat young people’s everyday behaviors as criminal activity” (Rios 2011, p. xiv).

My review of *Punished* highlights the role that one particular institution—the school—plays in criminalizing Black and Latino boys since, as Rios reminds us,

criminal encounters do not merely take place in the streets: a host of other institutions converge to influence the conduct and worldviews of urban youth. By comparing some of Rios’s findings in *Punished* to Goffman’s analysis in *On the Run*, I do not mean to suggest that Goffman’s ethnography should have focused on schools, nor do I mean to suggest that schools operate the same way in Oakland as in Philadelphia. My purpose is to demonstrate how an analysis of institutions and brokers enhances our understanding of the way a “fugitive life” is constituted.

LIVING “ON THE RUN”

On the Run sheds important light on the intimate experience of mass incarceration in the post-1960s United States. Astounding in its clarity, the book launches a successful appeal to the moral consciousness of the “mainstream” reader (more on this below). To do so, Goffman deftly answers the question of why young Black men might run from the police when they are confronted by them, regardless of whether or not they have committed a crime. She shows that, for Black Philadelphians, fear and suspicion of the police is inculcated from a young age. Many of her informants are socialized to see the police as a threat. The young men on 6th Street have reason to believe that if the police corner them, they will be arrested—and not because they have committed felonies, whether in the course of robberies or murders or for instances of narcotics trafficking. Rather, most of them have been delinquent with court fines, they have missed court dates, or they have failed a drug test and therefore violated parole. These minor infractions pile up throughout adolescence into adulthood, leading these men towards a life “on the run.”

This real life game of cops and robbers has deleterious effects for the young men at the heart of this story. When a man lives like a fugitive, he forfeits the everyday forms of citizenship that most Americans hold dear: he can no longer contact the police when he is robbed or assaulted; he must maintain a secret schedule; he must cultivate a spontaneous air about himself; he must lie about where he will be and when, refusing to pin down plans in advance. Such a lifestyle hinders a person from holding down a job. But even when a fugitive *does* earn a wage, he might need some of his hard earned cash to pay off witnesses in an impending case, or pay a neighbor to alert him when the cops have raided his mother’s house. Worrying constantly that he might be taken into custody, all of his relationships come under scrutiny: the police and the courts have made it perilous for him to visit friends to hang out, family for support, hospitals for emergencies, and funerals for mourning (Goffman 2015, p. xi). What is more, the people he loves most also get stuck in this sticky web of entrapment. Sure, his girlfriend, wife, or the mother of his children might vow to protect him, proclaiming that she is fully committed to him (i.e., a “rider”); but, as Goffman tells us, most women fold under such pressure, “they cut off ties to the man they had promised to protect, or they work with the police to get him arrested and convicted” (Goffman 2015, p. 75). Spinning examples like these into an intriguing tapestry of ethnographic vignettes, *On the Run* demonstrates how some low-income Black Americans are relegated to a second-class citizenship.

DIRTY AND CLEAN PEOPLE

The most damning analytical misstep that Goffman makes, in my opinion, is her distinction between “dirty” and “clean” people. In this scheme, dirty people have pending “legal entanglements” that would likely lead to their incarceration if confronted by the police. Goffman tells us that these labels are not only related to contact with the police: they are “linked to distinct kinds of behavior, attitudes, and capabilities,”

as well (Goffman 2015, p. 6). These designations are primarily meant to describe a person's risk of arrest: a clean person can rent a car or check himself into a hotel, for example, while a dirty person cannot. When a dirty person attracts police attention, unlike a clean person, he is likely to be arrested; dirty people do not make it home from their court dates, if they even attend them; dirty people do not pass "piss tests" when they're on probation. Someone who is "riding dirty," might be carrying guns or drugs, or may be driving a car with a warrant out for his arrest.

Sudhir Venkatesh recently offered a critique of the neat dichotomy that Goffman draws. He notes that such polarities have very little empirical support, and argues that they neglect the role that institutional brokers play in mediating conflicts between the police and the communities they are assigned to serve (Venkatesh 2015). Building upon this criticism, I would like to further develop the critique that *On the Run* does not harbor any sustained analysis of institutions or the brokers that operate within them: schools and teachers, churches and pastors, non-profits and volunteers, newspapers and journalists, universities and researchers. If 6th Street did not have these organizations, that would truly be astonishing. Alternatively if, as I suspect, these institutions and brokers do in fact exist, Goffman ought to have mentioned them. Doing so establishes a more nuanced portrait of what it means to be dirty or clean. What of the reformed gang member who volunteers at a violence prevention program, the recovering drug addict who takes advantage of a rehabilitation center, the journalist who foments a moral panic about inner city "danger" that may not match reality? These figures are prevalent in urban ethnographies that take up similar themes (Duneier 1994; Hagedorn 2009; Ralph 2014; Rios 2011; Venkatesh 2006), yet have no place in Goffman's treatment.

Another problem with the dirty/clean distinction is that there is a troublesome slippage in which these categories of analysis map onto people's bodies, morphing into attributes. There are instances where "dirty people" (i.e. people at greater risk to live a fugitive lifestyle) are actually *dirty* (i.e. unclean, filthy). Consider Goffman's description of Mrs. Linda's house:

Small roaches and ants crawled incessantly across the countertops and floors, over the couch and TV, and frequently onto the house's inhabitants. The house itself reeked of cigarette smoke, urine, vomit, and alcohol. In the kitchen, cabinets were sticky with grease and dirt; cat urine and feces covered a corner of the floor. Ashtrays in the kitchen, dining room, and living room collected mountains of old cigarette butts and would frequently topple to the floor, dumping their contents into the carpet....The upholstered couches, the living room carpet, and the walls were stained a monochromatic brown—the aftermath of years of smoke and dirt...(Goffman 2015, p. 178).

The fact that Mrs. Linda lives in squalor, and that she likewise epitomizes what a fugitive lifestyle is all about, does not help Goffman's analysis. Such descriptions lead her down a slippery slope that plays into racial stereotypes—stereotypes about the Black urban poor that she never bothers to address.

In this regard, matters only get worse when Goffman reveals that some "clean people" are actually clean. Consider her description of Mr. George's house:

I had seen Mr. George's apartment only once....As he opened the door, I glimpsed shiny white linoleum floors and a spotless countertop. I'm not sure if he was able to keep the roaches out—they had so deeply infested the rest of the house—but I saw none on the walls or the floor, and the room itself smelled fresh, like clean laundry (Goffman 2015, p. 179).

Mr. George is Mrs. Linda’s father. They live in different floors of the same building. Yet Goffman insists on keeping their identities separate, despite compelling evidence that they are deeply intertwined. Why? By describing the material hardships of a fugitive life in terms of “smoke, urine, vomit, and alcohol,” Goffman provokes a visceral reaction from her readers. The most generous reading of this narrative framework is that Goffman is playing upon the moral sensibilities of her audience as a way to condemn the excessive policing that is the target of her critique. But this moral appeal becomes a problem when the titillating qualities of the narrative overwhelm the argument of her book. Goffman’s insistence that policing-run-amock has created a “fugitive community” could thus be displaced by the conservative reading her emphasis on discrepant living conditions potentially facilitates. Readers might come away with the idea that *Dirty people choose to be dirty. If they didn’t want to be dirty, they would just clean up their houses, and clean up their lives. They would call the cops on “criminals,” just as Mr. George would do.*²

Goffman could have fended off such a perverse reading by describing how media representations construct African Americans as criminals who are unclean. Furthermore, if she was really wedded to the dirty versus clean distinction, she could have more forcefully demonstrated how police raids “dirty” homes, flinging belongings to and fro, sending mold and dust into the air. Such an emphasis would better align with the thesis of her book. The narrative could have still been crafted in an enticing way, but would not have alienated some of her readers, particularly those sensitive to representations of Black pathology.

I mention this sense of alienation because there has long been a backlash against these kinds of representations among intellectuals and scholars who study Black communities (see Chin 2001; Duneier 1994; Kelley 1997; Reed and Warren, 2010; Rose 2008). Personally, I do not agree with the notion that Black representations need to be “positive.” Still, I reference Goffman’s regrettable reliance on racial stereotypes, because it points to the absence of scholarship on Black representations in the media and on Black respectability in Goffman’s work—two academic literatures that strike me as essential for her to consider if what it means to be “dirty” or “clean” is to have sufficient nuance. It also partially explains the animosity that has emanated from members of the Philadelphia community in response to her book.

This leads me to my final point about the dirty/clean divide. There is an institutional “broker” in *On the Run* that the author does not mention as such, one that plays a crucial (if subterranean) role throughout the text, whose relationship to 6th Street subverts the distinction between dirty and clean in a profound way: Alice Goffman, herself. Goffman tells us that as an undergraduate she took urban ethnography classes where students could have studied in the surrounding community, if they so chose. Sure, her classmates might not have ventured into 6th Street. But, I would be quite surprised to discover that an “urban researcher” was foreign to this community, a community so close to the University of Pennsylvania—one of the oldest sociology departments in the nation—once home to eminent urban ethnographers like Elijah Anderson, Camille Charles, Philippe Bourgois, and John Jackson. Let us not forget that W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1899 *The Philadelphia Negro*, which arguably birthed American sociology, focused on a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood in the city of Brotherly Love.

As a researcher in such a community, Goffman is herself a broker: someone who mediates the causes and circumstances of police violence in the inner city. In what has now become the most controversial scene of the book, Goffman accompanies her companion, Mike, to search for the person who killed their mutual friend, Chuck. Mike thinks he spots the killer and jumps out of the car with his gun. Goffman remains

in the driver's seat, anticipating Mike's return, ready to speed off, if need be. Ultimately, Mike doesn't do the deed—he had spotted the wrong person. The incident causes Goffman to reflect:

“Looking back,” she says, “I'm glad that I learned what it feels like to want a man to die—not simply to understand the desire for vengeance in others, but to feel it in my bones, at an emotional level eclipsing my own reason or sense of right and wrong” (Goffman 2015, p. 263).

She goes on to say that this “desire for vengeance” scared her, more than any other fear that she experienced while living on 6th Street. Is the Ivy League graduate student who drives the get-away car for a hit “dirty” or “clean”?

Steven Lubet (2015) has recently called attention to this passage, claiming that it amounted to “conspiracy to commit murder” under Pennsylvania Law. Goffman evaded the allegation by asserting that she was in fact conducting research, and that she had reason to believe that a crime would not have occurred in this instance. Still, this issue reveals the stakes of her ethnographic analysis. Conjuring a titillating scene in which she searches for her friend's murderer, Goffman positions herself as a “true rider,” creating a false equivalence: no matter what she went through during her years on 6th Street, she does not have the same social standing as her informants. There are crucial differences. Were she to be charged with conspiracy to commit murder, as a professor, published author, and daughter of a legendary sociologist, she would likely have easy access to a lawyer (whether by means of her own financial resources, those of her university, or at the behest of her press). What's more, a cadre of academics (myself included) would have been willing to come to her defense by testifying in court about the greater merits of urban ethnography. Does her access to these kinds of social and economic capital mean that she was “clean,” all along? In *On the Run*, clean people remain so by cutting off their associations with dirty people, and reasserting their lawfulness. But real life is much more messy. If dirty and clean are viable ethnographic categories, then we have to believe that Goffman is one of the few people on 6th Street that benefit from a “clean” life, yet do not want to relinquish their ties to so-called “dirty” people. Is Goffman the exception to the rule? Or are there others in urban Philadelphia who she did not study (perhaps—teachers, social workers, reformed felons, pastors, block club presidents), who do not feel like their relationships with legally compromised people are wholly burdensome? They might be connected to the criminalized among them because they believe those “criminals” can succeed one day. And they care for them deeply. Apart from Goffman herself, we do not hear about these institutional brokers in *On the Run*. But I wish we had. They blow up the binaries this book leans on—binaries that have the potential to distract from the many merits of this study.

A PUNISHED LIFE

In a sense, Victor Rios's *Punished* is the inverse of Alice Goffman's *On the Run*. Goffman's book is an outsider's narrative; Rios's book is an insider's account. In *On the Run*, the most explicit mention of violence comes when Goffman searches for the man who killed her friend. The episode serves as her “crowning war story,” according to Dwayne Betts (2014), “the moment when she finally understood what it meant to be one of the young men of 6th Street.” Conversely, in *Punished*, the most explicit mention of violence comes at the beginning, when Rios describes a close friend being shot. Rather than a “war story,” it serves as the moment he realizes he wants to study

violence instead of enacting it. This points to the more general fact that *On the Run* is structured through moments of exceptional violence, which Goffman interprets to make theoretical points, while *Punished* eschews the exceptional, focusing instead on the everyday practices through which young Black and Latino men are criminalized.

Despite these differences, the main arguments of these books complement each other quite nicely; therefore, it is productive to examine them in relation to one another. Both authors show how criminalization in an age of mass incarceration is a “central, pervasive, and ubiquitous phenomenon” that impacts the daily lives of urban youth (Rios 2011, p. xv). Rios’s focus on institutions—particularly the school—only enhances this point.

In *Punished*, school is a place where both the bully and the bullied will be victimized, which is to say, they will be both labeled “at risk” and likely “truant” because the days someone spends away from school recovering from a violent attack may justify his expulsion. School is a punitive institution—an institution where crime-control discourses and techniques of policing are embedded. School is the place where many young people first encounter the police (in the Oakland communities where Rios conducted his work, police and probation officers have offices next to the principal). Besides keeping students in line, police officers fulfill other duties, such as academic advising. In some cases, the very same police officer that patrols a boy’s neighborhood, the same officer that has brutalized him countless times before, may counsel him on what courses to take or career path to pursue. In this way, police officers in schools can potentially intensify the individual experience of criminalization.

According to Rios, school is not merely a space of learning. It is a site of punishment and control, a space where teachers, police, probation officers, and administrators alike anticipate wrongdoing, and translate inadequate forms of etiquette into crimes: a student who, for instance, talks back to the teacher might be charged with “disturbing the peace.” When students misbehave, teachers threaten to call the police officer stationed down the hall, or their probation officer, or their parents. As a result, many of the boys in Rios’s study do not trust their parents, believing their mothers and fathers would have them locked up for a petty disagreement. In school, on the street, at home—everywhere they go—the boys in this book are forced to assert that they are not criminals, but law-abiding youths.

A heartbreaking example of this kind of socialization comes when one of the teenagers in this study, Ronny, goes to a job interview at a local restaurant. Having coached Ronny on how to perform, Rios watches the interview unfold from a few tables away. He is pleased by what he observes. Ronny engages his potential boss with enthusiasm and confidence. He smiles politely and answers questions assertively. But when the interview ends, Rios witnesses an awkward moment in which the youngster does not shake the restaurant manager’s hand. Instead, Ronny leaves abruptly. Rios meets Ronny outside of the establishment and asks him why he did not end the interview with a handshake. The youngster explains:

“Because it was a White lady. You not supposed to shake a White lady’s hand. They be scared of a nigga. They think I’m a try to take their shit or fuck ‘em. I just said thanks and walked out.” Ronny did not get the job (Rios 2011, p. 100).

Rios explains that school is where Ronny had learned “to go the extra mile” and prove that he was not threatening and disrespecting the White women in his orbit (Rios 2011, p. 101). He felt that his teachers (many of them White females) were afraid of him. He thought: this is why they were so adamant about telling him to never touch a White woman or invade her space. As this example demonstrates, being criminalized

in school means that Ronny has to situate his body in relation to the wider stereotypes of Black men as “criminals and sexual aggressors” (Rios 2011, p. 101).

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE LAWFUL

Victor Rios’s engagement with schools is but one example of how incorporating institutions and brokers into an analysis of urban criminality can help explain how and why people may become career criminals, forced to live a “fugitive life.” Many of the boys in Rios’s study turn to crime *after* being subject to constant searches, harassment, and humiliation. Based on their experiences, they make the calculated decision that they will be criminalized whether or not they are lawful, and turn to crime because they feel like they have “nothing to lose” (Rios 2011, p. 50). Some young people in Rios’s study conclude: *If I am going to be harassed whether or not I am committing a crime or involved in a gang, and if my efforts to live a lawful life are invalidated or ignored, “might as well grind big things and make some money”* (Rios 2011, p. 61). Though not everyone in this Oakland community will settle on the same conclusions about what it means to be criminalized, all young people must develop strategies for managing the fact that they are constantly seen as a threat. As one young man put it: “Even though I have never got wrapped up [arrested], I still get treated like I am about to commit a crime every day” (Rios 2011, p. 148).

As this quote implies, even the boys in Rios’s study who have no warrants or infractions must manage the perception of their criminality. While most boys feel that they are constantly being treated as if they are guilty until proven innocent, some dedicate themselves to acting “lawful” (Rios 2011, p. 19). Recall that Goffman also studies a group of young men with no legal entanglements. But for her, the secret to their success is that they steer clear of “the dirty world” by remaining indoors, cutting themselves off from neighborhood life, and relinquishing connections to people who have trouble with the law. This suggests a level of agency that the boys in Rios’s study do not possess. They cannot move out of their neighborhood, nor can they choose not to be brutalized. Even when they quarantine themselves from people with legal entanglements, this does not stop them from being monitored by the police. The constant police surveillance does, however, force them to be aware of their bodies and actions such that they “act lawful,” especially in the presence of institutional brokers.

What if the young men that Goffman labels as “clean” in her study had similar experiences to Ronny growing up? What if, from an early age, they were taught to proactively prove to others that they were not criminals or sexually aggressive deviants? In that case, a young man might feel compelled to “act lawful” precisely when he is around a researcher, and play down his countless encounters with the police so that he can be seen as a respectable citizen, someone who is “clean” by the grit of his own determination. This alternative reading highlights a point of contention between *On the Run* and *Punished* that Rios brings to the fore in his study.

Victor Rios explicitly mentions Alice Goffman’s 2009 article (the core argument of which resurfaces in her book) when he attempts to dismantle the popular misconception that delinquents are “dirty” because they break the law and fail to take ownership for their actions. He writes:

Sociologist Alice Goffman argues that young, Black, male felons “maintain self-respect in the face of failure” by telling “half truths,” by using their wanted status as an excuse not to provide for their families or show responsibility: “Being wanted serves as an excuse for a variety of unfulfilled obligations and expectations” (Rios 2011, p. 71).

According to Rios, this was not an accurate description of what he observed. The boys he encountered “did not blame the system to maintain self-respect,” he argues (2011, p. 71). To the contrary, in an era of “personal responsibility,” in which their schools, police officers, and parents, had instilled in them a sense of self-blame, they had internalized these ideas and readily confessed that they had “fucked [messed] up” (Rios 2011, p. 58). But while schools, probation, and parents were successful at forcing these boys to reflect on the consequences of their actions, and to take responsibility for them, they did not provide them with any tools for desisting from crime.

This analysis gives great context to the lives of career criminals. Take the 6th Street boys, for instance. We meet them as young adults, high school dropouts, who have been relegated to a life “on the run” because of constant police harassment and surveillance. But, this may be only part of the story. Rios’s work suggests that people drop out, commit crimes, and adapt themselves to a “fugitive life” because they are unable to find an institution that grants them the acknowledgement and dignity that they are systematically denied.

CONCLUSION

On the Run and *Punished* convincingly address the “collateral consequences” that mass incarceration has for families, communities, and individuals (Rios 2011, p. 36). I have argued that reading them together paints a fuller picture of the cycle of policing, punishment, surveillance, and incarceration that marginalized young men face today. While Goffman’s text brings awareness about the issue of criminalization, fear, and suspicion that leads to “legal entanglements,” Rios addresses institutions and brokers as well, such that his theoretical contributions dovetail with the policy solutions he eventually advances. He urges police and probation officers, teachers, policy makers, researchers, and program workers to attune themselves to the “seeds of transformation” that young people possess (Rios 2011, p. 166). For many urban youth today, Rios argues, criminalization is becoming a conduit through which they gain political consciousness. Such a finding has obvious implications for contemporary movements like #BlackLivesMatter, which have taken the issue of police violence as a central concern. Movements like these are explicit about critiquing the notion that some urban youth are troublesome (i.e. “dirty”) and therefore deserve whatever comes of their encounters with the police. This is not Goffman’s claim. So it is even more unfortunate that, through the analytic binaries she employs, her work could be used to rationalize such a problematic notion of guilt.

In order to understand *On the Run* in a way that does justice to the hardships of a “fugitive life,” readers should attempt to set aside the colonial tropes that distract from the overall message and diminish the argument. Goffman’s rhetorical strategy is to begin her study from a point of ignorance about “street” life. In an attempt to appeal to the moral sensibilities of her readers, she makes the 6th Street boys even more exotic than they actually are. An alternative approach is to begin from a position of commonality (c.f. Jones 2009). This is not to say that she need be someone who once lived a “street life,” like Rios, or someone who shared the same complexion as her informants, like Du Bois. There are all kinds of possibilities: are we to believe that Goffman never knew anyone who was arrested or spent time in prison before moving to 6th Street? Growing up in Philadelphia, had she never encountered any victims of police violence? What about the African American students who might have been harassed by law enforcement on her very own campus? Goffman could have forged a bond of commonality with the people on 6th Street by being upfront about her aspiration to study the police state in urban Philadelphia. Given the urgency of the problem, it would be

surprising if she did not find some eager allies. Instead, her deliberate way of narrating experience (which strips away any mention of IRB or scholars that have written about similar methodological concerns) feeds into the colonial fantasy that an adventurous researcher “got lost in the wild,” and was taken in by people from a strange land who bestowed lessons that she will now share with the world. Even though this trope has been criticized in the social sciences, it is still widely deployed.

All of this to say, there are high stakes for how scholars narrate their research experiences. As a new generation of urban researchers emerges, it may be time to raise the question of whether or not ethnographers have now crossed a threshold in which we all must account for how colonial tropes impact our categories of analysis.

If one prominent version of the traditional ethnography invokes the image of the war-torn researcher emerging, fully transformed, from the jungle, then when we hear from reviewers who claim that *On the Run* has become an “ethnographic classic,” perhaps we should not view such an assertion as a compliment. It may just be the case that some of our ethnographic tropes have become “traditional”—i.e. ‘relics of the past’—for good reason.

Corresponding author: Laurence Ralph, Departments of Anthropology and African and African American Studies, Harvard University, Barker Center, 12 Quincy Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. E-mail: lralph@fas.harvard.edu

NOTES

1. *Heart of Darkness* (1899), written by Joseph Conrad, chronicles a perilous journey up the Congo River into the African jungle. Conrad’s sensational depictions of the Congo Free State are used as a rhetorical strategy to make a comparison between Europe and Africa. Because of its mode of comparison, the novella is often cited in relation to the traditional ethnographic approach: there is little difference between “civilized” society and those presumed to be “savage.”
2. For an example of this genre of conservative critique see, Mac Donald (2015).

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