

Michelle Alexander: "The New Jim Crow." April 18, 2015. Re-Visioning Justice.

- open hearts and minds to think about what we can do to help end the system of mass incarceration
- caste system
- radical title; how can you say that after electing our first black president?
 - o Wanted to challenge people
 - o Imagine people to understand that we are not yet beyond our system of creating massive social and prison control
 - o 300,000 to over 2 million inmates
 - o most punitive nation in the world
 - o unprecedented in world history
 - o not simply a function of crime rates
 - o crime is not the control; reality is much more disturbing and complex
 - o even in age of "color-blindness," we have managed to re-create a caste system
 - o if you are born into a poor community of color, you are born into a system that is under control
 - your parents most likely have a criminal record
 - legal discrimination for rest of lives: employment, housing, education, public benefits
 - targeted by police
 - no matter what you're doing
 - eventually, you will be caught for *something*
 - because you're human, and you make mistakes – like all young people do
 - once arrested, swept into system from which real escape is only a dim hope
 - denied meaningful legal representation
 - threatened with harsh, mandatory, minimum sentences
 - o yes, I'll just take the plea.
 - o Saddled with record where you are denied basic civil and human rights
 - o Check felony box
 - Housing
 - Financial aid
 - employment
 - o you are trapped; not for a little while; for life
- most people return to prison in matter of months/years
- much more to do with racial history, than with crime
- wanted to connect the dots between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration
- we have managed to re-birth a caste system
- our unwillingness to muster the courage to face our history has allowed us to unleash a magnitude to punitive actions that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago
- not so much how we can improve the system, but how we can end it
 - o reimagine what justice really looks like
- Vignettes in book: coming out of celebration of Barack's election
 - o In Columbus, OH
 - o Black man handcuffed in ditches / poor, maybe homeless / officers laughing, ignoring his very existence
 - What does the election of Barack Obama mean for him?
 - A long way from justice for him
- Did she expect it to be a best seller?
 - o Closest friends said "you're crazy"
 - o Functioned much more as a caste system than a system for crime control
 - o People don't want to talk about race
 - o Can't argue that we haven't learned the lessons of the past
 - o Now so grateful that it came out as we have a black president so that we don't become confused or distracted by the symbols of racial progress while millions of poor people of color are stuck in criminal status
 - o We think "bad white racists" create these systems, when in reality people of all colors are complicit in the perpetuation and the existence of the caste-like system
 - o Relatively small number have achieved wealth, power, fame
 - Doesn't mean that we have overcome our habit of

- o Helps to bring into sharper relief the challenges and the realities of the realities that we faced
- Once actually rejected the argument she makes!
 - o From a young age cared about racial and social justice
 - o Wanted to dedicate her life to racial and social injustice
 - o Blind to reality that system had been born that operated like a caste system
 - o We talk about “classes,” but not about the underclass, and we never think about society as having a “caste” system
 - o ACLU rights lawyer – drug law enforcement showed her the true craziness
 - o Series of experiences that led to her “awakening”
 - o Isn’t simply poverty, bad schools, and broken homes that have created this”
 - The reason so many young black men find themselves locked up is more complex....
 - All of the reasons that are typically given can’t explain what is actually going on
 - Disagree with the Bill Cosby explanation
 - Black communities have had to adapt: saggy pants mimic prison
 - Literal wars declared on these communities
 - o Explosion in incarceration was driven by the drug war
 - Declared almost exclusively on poor communities of color
 - Decades of studies show that blacks are no more likely to buy or sell illegal drugs
 - But focus on poor black communities
 - WE did that to our communities
 - Not because they lacked a good education; because they were making the same mistakes that Barack Obama, bill Clinton, etc. make because they’re young folks
 - The same could be said for the rest of us
 - o One of the most important things that we can do is to admit our own criminality out loud
 - o “we’re all sinners’ AMEN
 - o “we’re all criminals” UH OH
- we’ve all broken the law at some point in our lives
 - o but only some of us are forced to pay for those mistakes
- vignette
 - o “ah hah” moment as civil rights lawyer at ACLU in northern California
 - o Driving all black around campaign
 - o Sued California highway patrol drug and highway patrol
 - o Created hotline number for people to call if they thought they were being discriminated against because of race
 - Thousands of calls / system crashed temporarily
 - One man had pages and pages of specific details
 - Maybe he could be lead in this case
 - He said that he was a felon
 - They were screening out felons!
 - Can’t put someone with a felony record on the stand
 - “I cannot represent you”
 - o I’m innocent! I just took the plea! So I could get felony probation and just walk right out!
 - o “What’s to become of me”
 - I can’t get a job anywhere because of my felony record
 - Can’t get public housing because no one else will take me in
 - How am I supposed to take care of myself? I can’t even get food stamps
 - o Good luck finding one young man in my neighborhood that they haven’t gotten to yet
 - o “I can’t believe I trusted you. You’re no better than the police”
 - months later, trying to get people to march on capitol in his neighborhood
 - the minute the show comes off the air, he comes bursting in the studio, carrying dirty potted plant. I’m just here to say I’m sorry. I should have spoken to you better. I snatched this plant from my grandma’s front porch.
 - He runs out the building, and disappears

- A gang of police officers had been planting drugs on suspects, and beating them up : it was the same officer that the young man said had planted drugs on him
 - Moment of realization; she realized that she was no better than the police
 - How come we couldn't have found one black man that they "hadn't gotten to yet"
 - LISTENING to the stories of the people cycling in and out of the criminal system
 - o more black adults in criminal system than in slavery
 - o more than half suspected to legalized discrimination
 - o felon disenfranchisement MORE than in Jim Crow era
 - o awakening in large part due to the courage, honesty, and boldness of young man that held up a mirror
- more focus on "sexy" issues than these root issues
 - o why haven't we stepped up more courageously?
 - o Reality is: many civil rights organizations have been reluctant to champion these causes because throughout our nation's history, we have found the few examples who define racial stereotypes, and have held them up * (Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks – black people who conform to white values: doesn't work so well in the era of mass incarceration)
 - o We are called to stand with those who have been labeled as the criminals, as the felons
 - o Have been reluctant, with the exception of death penalty cases
 - o Shine light on "respectable negroes," and turn a blind eye to those who are looked at with embarrassment
 - o Even those who have made mistakes are people who deserve respect – dignity and honor
- What about people who have done terrible things?
 - o We've all done terrible things
 - o The bad people are over there, and not us
 - o We need to overcome this tendency to "otherwise" criminals
 - Their stories are very similar to ours
 - Their mistakes are very small given all of the obstacles they face
 - o Punitive impulse toward others is magnified when there's race involved
 - o The most punitive nations in the world are the most diverse
 - o The most compassionate nations are the most homogeneous
 - o We are more punitive toward those we view as the "others"
 - o What do we do about "them," the criminals?
 - I think we have to be much more imaginative about how we handle harm
 - Should be looking at the use of drugs by youth as a public health problem, not as criminals
 - If we don't criminalize the activity they're engaged with, then they won't be "drug criminals"
 - Portugal
 - De-criminalized all drug
 - o Treated as someone who may have a public health problem, not funneled into criminal system at all
 - o 10 years in, drug use DELICINED
 - o people seeking help increased
 - o drug-related crime decreased
 - models of restorative justice and transformative justice
 - better ways of responding to people who are threats to themselves and to others
 - caging people – inflicting another form of violence on them – to teach them that we do not believe in violence – is not an effective way of inspiring someone
- white reaction
 - o first reconstruction
 - o "slavery by another name"
 - o another reaction to second reconstruction not very different than reaction to the first reconstruction
 - o the story taught in our schools suggests linear progress
 - that after Kings' speak, we magically woke up and realized our mistakes
 - o lined up in support not of segregation, but of harsh criminal laws

- o occurred at precisely the same moment that cities were suffering from economic collapse (50s, 60s)
 - jobs vanished overnight : When work disappears
- o more than 70% of men in Chicago area held a factory job, but in the 80s, fell to 20%. More crime rate
 - depression
 - no economic stimulus plans
 - could have invested in education so that the young generation could make transition from industrial based to service based industry
- o we didn't invest: no economic or educational stimulus
- we ended the war on poverty and started the war on drugs
 - o perfect storm
 - o backlash on civil rights movement at same time war on drugs was coming out with economic instability
 - o we chose the more familiar path of punitive: led us back to very familiar place
- so, where's the hope?
 - o Everywhere I go, I see people in communities waking up and taking bold and courageous action to begin the process of movement-building to end massive incarceration and to transform the criminal justice system
 - o Greatest hope from people who have been previously incarcerated, and have been able to survive, and who have committed their lives to ensuring that no one would have to do through what they went through
 - Susan Burton
 - Off-duty police officer ran over her 5 yr old boy in the street
 - If she had money, she probably could have had access to legal drugs
 - Only put into a cage, never treated
 - Just keeps getting put onto the street
 - When finally given a treatment and help, she dedicated her life to working on skid row (women's prison from buss) bringing people home you don't have to live on the streets tonight – 5 safe homes, training people to help restore basic civil and human rights
 - Let people have their voices heard
 - We demonize them, dismiss as statistics, until we hear their stories
 - Begin to understand and to organize
- ALL former inmates are men of color
- News coverage
 - o Michael brown
 - o Eric garner
 - o Walter scott
- Rate of police killings of black americans is about the same of lynchings in the Jim Crow Era
 - o Not the only thing wrong, but the ugliest, most brutal reflection of a much larger system and problem
 - o As we speak out and organize against police brutality and excessive force, that we always connects the dots
 - o Not just about police killings, it's about a much larger system that these killings are a reflection of
 - o In the media it's always nice to define the problem in the narrowest possible terms
 - o Very narrow, technical solutions offered to a so much larger, deeper problem
 - o So important for us to resist the temptation to tinker with the machine, and to instead commit to movement-building
 - Not reform, but transform
 - Large-scale human rights movement to honor the dignity and humanity of each and every one of us
 - Every human being has basic human and civil rights that should be honored
 - Need new moral consensus in this nation of how we treat people, particularly people of color
 - o Support efforts to reduce our prison population

- o But, those kinds of reforms are not a substitute for the much harder work of movement building that is necessary today
- o consider the sheer scale of the system
- o if we were to return to the rates of the 70s (when we *thought* we had a problem), we'd have to release 4 out of 5 people in jails today
- o need to have those difficult conversations

QUESTIONS

- police the district attorney and the police
 - o show up in the courtroom, show up in the jail – it does make a difference
- foundation : white supremacy
 - o what impact on white people? And on black people?
 - o In Selma, police chief black, mayor black... but 70 year old man killed and nothing happens
 - o Invitation to go back where all this began
 - o Birth of the lie that there is something about “whiteness” that is superior to people of other races
 - o Slavery not birthed out of hate, but out of GREED
 - Easy to change to all black system of slavery
 - The lie has become so deeply imbedded in our subconscious and in our collective unconscious, that it continues over and over again
 - o Man that came from Ghana at the height of the civil rights movement in Ghana
 - “I experienced it differently, because I already knew that I was free”
 - have to overcome own internal oppression that needed to be overcome
 - remains true today
 - critique of black exceptionism
 - same time police forces are more diverse than ever before
 - complicit and we end up buying into the logic
- those cities who have been “waged war on,”
 - o direct correlation criminalization with gentrification and displacement
 - o re-new Chattanooga platform
 - third highest rising rents in the country
 - 7 to 47% white
 - o criminalization → then viewed as valuable in housing for re-vitalization and gentrification → displacement
 - o “black lives matter” → applicability across all issues
 - o some lives are treated as though they just don't matter
 - o criminal justice system is the most obvious literal disposal of black lives
 - o exactly the same thing comes during gentrification
 - o can be cleared away to make room for a different kind of a community
 - o opportunity for profit
 - o deliberate effort by politicians to exploit social anxieties for political gain
 - then private interests came in to profit
 - are very profitable to be kept behind bars
 - their lives “don't matter,” but displacing them/disposing them is extremely profitable
 - are our policies showing care, compassion, and concern
- attorneys: we can't legislate this away
 - o Nashville campaign to end the new Jim Crow
 - o Electorate is informed about the issues
 - o Ask DA questions just about her book
 - o April 29 mayoral conversation
 - o Have to change hearts and minds
 - o How do we change hearts and minds?
 - We must changes our laws and policies
 - Lawyers have a critical role to play; but lawyers cannot take over: grassroots movements to purely legal campaigns. Meeting with mayor, and leaving community out
 - Thinking there is a way to litigate our way to shift consciousness

- One of the ways to shift consciousness is to engage in bold, courageous acts of _ that force the conversation
- A group of young people said “enough” – force a conversation
- Force a conversation that people in America want to have
- o Forcing a confrontation and dialogue
- o Think CREATIVELY
- o What sort of direct –action tactics will force a public conversation in dialogue that people often don’t want to have
- o If our goal is cultural transformation and not just tinkering with the machine, we need a wholesale reform
- o **We must MODEL the kind of society and community that we’re hoping to create**
- o **Speak from a place of love, care, compassion**
- o **Courageous, radical honesty**
- o **BE what you want to happen**
- o **Model the practices that you hope come about**

* talk about this with students. I want to apologize for all of the times I have failed you, and all the times I will fail you, and all the times that people like me will fail you. I’m sorry for all of the racism and the prejudice. Has anyone ever apologized to you for this? I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry. The reason I say you’re loved is because you are. Not perfectly like me. I will fail you. But by one who will never fail. Never forget, you are so, so loved. I haven’t made this project very clear. Maybe because I don’t really have the answer. I’m still trying to figure it out. But I do want to think about the way we live with each other. I – like you, maybe – recognize the issues. I see that the world is messed up, but I don’t really know how to fix these problems. I’m interested in this question because it’s something *I* want to figure out. So I’m inviting you to consider this with me. If we were to start over – to begin again – what changes would we make? What philosophies would guide our communities? If you *could* change the world, what would you do? I invite you to consider this with me, and to join this journey with me as *I* try to navigate how to be a person in this messed up world.

I like it. I think you should definitely share your thoughts with students and that its good for them to see us as human. I think apologizing is tricky because sometimes apologizing almost obligates the other person to forgive, or it makes it seem individual, but I get what you mean. I have thought about saying similar things but always stop myself when it gets to sorry. I feel like there is another nuanced way to express the same sentiment. Like --- **this is messed up and needs to be acknowledged. I see you. I want to see you. I hear you. I want to continue to hear you. You are affected. You have a story.** I don’t know. Thoughts? These are just my thoughts. I think it’s so important to acknowledge these issues within the classroom though and I think next year I really want to see more strong black women teachers and black women role models because I think they have an insight I don’t have.

The Koch brothers, look them up. They are evil. Wealthy. Sick. Not coke. They own.. everything. They funded anti insure tn stuff and essentially

- o ***is there anything that needs to be said?**
- o Punished by victor rios
 - Criminalization in Oakland, CA
 - Youth control complex
 - Minor drug crimes are done by all groups of people; but only a small group is targeted
 - For ridiculous crimes
- o we want to avoid race because it makes everyone uncomfortable
- o how much progress can we make without breathing a word about race
- o extremely dangerous
- o if we don’t ever face the relational dimensions, I think we are doomed to repeat it
- o paramilitary (EOC) revert back to militaristic approach
- o crime rates are at historical lows, money for inmates is at all time high
- o if we aren’t talking about the PEOPLE, we are missing the point in terms of basic thoughts and impulses toward people of color
- o cheaper to put a GPS tracking system on someone for 15 years than have a 3yr prison sentence?

- o Installing cameras at home, on people.... UGH 1984 / dystopian / we are becoming a ray Bradbury novel
- o Let's read every book EVER written
- o Are we changing our minds about people? Or about money?
- Koch: strike out every progressive movement
- Most people that are the problem Just like me
 - o That we're on the right narrative, just have a long way to go
 - o Haven't woken up yet
 - o Helping folks who care
 - o Who think of themselves as committed to racial and social justice
 - o Radically different approach to civil rights advocacy as well
 - o Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results
- City planning : expressway
- 17yoldson who thinks he has equal rights
 - o but "you can't wear a hoodie. You can't stand on the corner. You can't be out late at night."
 - o What do I do? To make sure that I don't have to bury my child, because he feels he has equal rights
 - o How do I tell him his black life matters, when society tells us it doesn't?
 - o When all the marches are gone and protests are gone, there is still a mother that has to bury her son?
 - o How do we raise our youth believing they have these rights, when they don't?
 - o **No, there's not going to be a trial.** Because he's a young black man, there's not going to be a trial
 - o They're God's children, their lives matter. We value them. They have to value themselves. Their lives matter, even though a lot of people (police) will act like they don't
 - o Know your rights training. Not that helpful because they don't actually have them
 - o Police brutality beginning with people asserting their rights
 - o I can't tell people they have rights, until those rights mean something in the real world
 - o Beauty-filled, value-able, and be honest with how things are
 - o Talk to kids a lot about all of the courageous young men and women historically and now, but that there's lots of people who are bold and brave and who believe it is possible to create something new
 - o Imagine that they can be a part of bringing about that train