*The New Jim Crow*

Michelle Alexander, [*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*](http://www.amazon.com/New-Jim-Crow-Incarceration-Colorblindness/dp/1595586431/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1434035945&sr=8-1&keywords=the+new+Jim+crow) (New York: The New Press, 2010)

Summary:

“More African American adults are under correctional control today…than were enslaved in 1850.”

Law professor Michelle Alexander argues that the War on Drugs came as a result of white Americans wanting a new system of control after the progress of civil rights. But institutional control of this type can be traced all the way back to pre-slavery days when aristocrats gave special privileges to middle- and lower-class whites to create a distance between them and the black bond workers, in order to prevent multiracial political alliances. These policies were institutionalized and later became slavery, which became Jim Crow, which became mass incarceration.

Now, a felon is the new slave, barred from the very services that would help maintain a steady, civil citizenship: voting, jury duty, and receiving food stamps, an education, public housing, employment, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Alexander examines the help and hurt of policies such as mandatory sentencing and affirmative action, concluding that we “have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”

Themes:

* Jim Crow. The book compares Jim Crow to mass incarceration in the criminal justice system. “Today’s lynching is incarceration.”
* Being Black. Alexander shows the historical progression of what it means to be black: a slave (exploitation) > a second-class citizen (subordination) > a criminal (marginalization).
* Colorblindness. Many consider our present society a “post-racial” one. However, “[c]olorblindness…is actually the problem.” MLKJ wanted people to practice love *and* see color, not to pretend race isn’t there. Indifference has replaced hostility.
* War on Drugs. Rising crime rates don’t explain the jump in our prison population from 300,000 to over 2,200,000. But the War on Drugs, plagued by *structural racism*, does.
* Rage. Those who’ve endured incarceration express rage. Alexander pleads with society not to douse it with “doubt, dismay, and disbelief.”

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the book’s most convincing argument?
2. Alexander several times mentions “education inequity.” What is this, and how does it relate to the book?
3. What is the psychology behind the conscious embrace of criminality and rebellion by some black youth?
4. Do you agree that the “prosecutor is the most powerful law enforcement official”?
5. Should the United States decriminalize marijuana?
6. Discuss how each stage of the criminal justice system creates an undercaste: the arrest, prosecution/sentencing, incarceration, and release.
7. Guilt should not be the final response to this book. What should?
8. “Screwing up…is part of what makes us human.” Is this true?
9. Where does personal responsibility play a role? Does Alexander acknowledge this?
10. Drug offenders make up only a minority of the prison population (about 25 percent). Does Alexander ignore the violent offenders? Regarding this book, Professor James Forman writes, “Even if every single one of these drug offenders were released tomorrow, the United States would still have the world’s largest prison system.”