

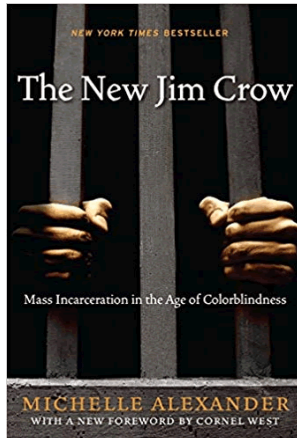
“Everything and Nothing has Changed”

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So writes Michelle Alexander in an [essay](#) accompanying the release of the 10th



anniversary edition of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, her best-selling book first published in 2010. She says she wrote that book “to challenge our nation to reckon with the recurring cycles of racial reform, retrenchment and rebirth of caste-like systems that have defined our racial history since slavery,” calling our nation’s use of mass incarceration – locking “millions of poor people and people of color in literal and virtual cages” – another caste system.

The decade since that book was published was characterized by what some have called a “post-racial” era following Barack Obama’s election, only to be replaced by what some see as a resurgence of white nationalism following Donald Trump’s election. (Hence, her observation that “everything and nothing has changed.”) This dichotomy calls to mind Bryan Stevenson’s discussion of dueling identities in his [2012 TED talk](#), “We need to talk about an injustice.” The *Just Mercy* author challenged the audience to try to integrate opposite realities:

... in this country, in the states of the Old South, we execute people – where you're 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white than if the victim is black, 22 times more likely to get it if the defendant is black and the victim is white – in the very states where there are buried in the ground the bodies of people who were lynched. And yet, there is this disconnect.

Well I believe that our identity is at risk. That when we actually don't care about these difficult things, the positive and wonderful things are nonetheless implicated. We love innovation. We love technology. We love creativity. We love entertainment. But ultimately, those realities are shadowed by suffering, abuse, degradation, marginalization. And for me, it becomes necessary to integrate the two. Because ultimately we are talking about a need to be more hopeful, more committed, more dedicated to the basic challenges of living in a complex world. And for me that means spending time thinking and talking about the poor, the disadvantaged, those who will never get to TED. But thinking about them in a way that is integrated in our own lives.

In other words, Stevenson was asking people in positions of privilege to be intentional about how they think about people who do not share those privileges. In her essay, Alexander amplifies the point:

In my experience, those who argue that the systems of mass incarceration and mass deportation simply reflect sincere (but misguided) efforts to address the real harms caused by crime, or the real challenges created by surges in immigration, tend to

underestimate the corrupting influence of white supremacy whenever black and brown people are perceived to be the problem. “Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question,” W.E.B. Du Bois famously said back in 1897: “How does it feel to be a problem?” White people are generally allowed to have problems, and they’ve historically been granted the power to define and respond to them. But people of color — in this “land of the free” forged through slavery and genocide — are regularly viewed and treated as the problem.

This distinction has made all the difference. Once human beings are defined as the problem in the public consciousness, their elimination through deportation, incarceration or even genocide becomes nearly inevitable.

White nationalism, at its core, reflects a belief that our nation’s problems would be solved if only people of color could somehow be gotten rid of, or at least better controlled. In short, mass incarceration and mass deportation have less to do with crime and immigration than the ways we’ve chosen to respond to those issues when black and brown people are framed as the problem.

My take on these thoughts is that, as a society, we risk oversimplifying complex problems by thinking in terms of “us” versus “them.” Both Stevenson and Alexander are calling on each one of us – especially people blessed with privilege – to expand our identities in ways that allow us to see the humanity of “the other.” This is nowhere more urgent than in our response to crime. A bedrock principle of Restorative Justice is that all voices (victims, offenders, and community members) are heard, meaning that everyone’s dignity is respected. Differences in race, class, and privilege may never change ... what can change is how we choose to respond to them.