

Mend

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 11

2024

Revisiting the New Jim Crow

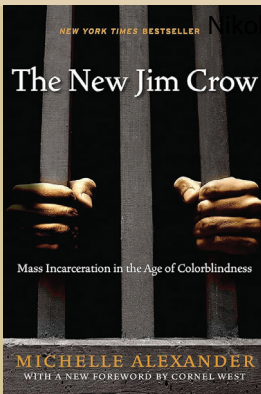
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Recommended Citation

Nikolau, Katherine (2024) "Revisiting the New Jim Crow," *Mend*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/mend/vol2/iss1/11>

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Nikolau: Revisiting the New Jim Crow

Revisiting the New Jim Crow

Katherine Nikolau

It's been over a month since crowds piled into Maxwell Auditorium at Syracuse University to hear civil rights activist Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, discuss her paradigm-shifting book and speak about the racialized issues within the criminal justice system. But the legacy of the event lingers for one group of attendees: the formerly incarcerated.

“One of the main things that really helped me,” explained attendee Vince Moody, “was the way [Alexander] broke down the new Jim Crow, [showing] how in today’s world so much has changed, but then again, so much has not changed.”

The insights gained from Alexander’s lecture were significant; still, Vince would never have stumbled upon the event without his involvement with Project Mend, a publishing initiative that brings justice-impacted people to the Syracuse University campus. The event was a reminder of the need to build connections between the university and the larger Syracuse community, spaces that feel distant despite their proximity.

Alexander’s talk—part of the Maxwell Tanner Lecture Series—was moderated by Maxwell Professor Grant Recher, who noted

that Alexander had been invited to speak as part of the series twice before. The third time was the charm. In the next hour and a half, Alexander and Recher engaged in a wide-ranging discussion on topics that included e-carceration, spiritual as well as civic awareness, and the ongoing lack of resources faced by communities of color.

While acknowledging that public awareness had grown since the publication of her book more than a decade ago, Alexander emphasized the lack of systemic change. She also spoke of the increased prevalence of e-carceration—through the use of tools such as ankle monitors and facial recognition apps that create new forms of control and surveillance.

During the Q&A, another *Mend* editor, Michael J. Willacy (*right*), took the mic. He told Alexander and the room his own story—how he and others in prison had formed a study group around *The New Jim Crow*, carefully reading and annotating the book.

“It was one of the defining moments of... my rehabilitation, changing my perspective on how I see myself,” Michael reflected, considering the impact Alexander’s work had had on his life. As Michael shared his

Layout by Illy Gomez Del Campo Rojas. Left photography by Patrick W. Berry.



Nikolau: Revisiting the New Jim Crow



Sherba Whitehurst & Michelle Alexander



Vince Moody & Michelle Alexander



James Seibles & Michelle Alexander



Theodore Robinson & Michelle Alexander



Daquan Noel & Michelle Alexander

Photographs courtesy of *Mind* editors.

powerful connection to the book, Alexander expressed appreciation. It was an electric moment, a coming together of author and reader, that felt important—and that would never have occurred without Michael’s participation in Project Mend.

Calling *The New Jim Crow* one of the pillars of his rehabilitation, Michael later discussed how Alexander’s work had given him deeper clarity about the system of mass incarceration, articulating the racialized barriers that had influenced his experiences within that system.

“It showed me that a lot of things were set in place for me to really lose,” he continued.

This realization allowed Michael to redefine the contours of his own identity: “[I began] seeing myself not just as a criminal, but as a person who was being oppressed by the system, having it used against me, to keep me down.”

After leaving prison, Michael went on to use his own experiences to help bring others within the system up. As a case manager for the nonprofit organization PEACE, Inc., Michael currently supports people recently released from prison—advocating for them legally and helping them find housing and employment.

Vince and nearly all the other editors stood in line to meet Alexander after her lecture. Vince beamed with a new copy of the book. “I have always enjoyed her knowledge and the work she’s done as an abolitionist,” he said. “It was very, very, very enlightening for me.”

He wasn’t the only one who felt that way. “Although I studied a lot and read a lot, learned a lot, when she [Alexander] was speaking,” noted Theodore Robinson, “I

realized that I got caught in someone else’s plan. And I just kept repeating it and repeating it.”

Like Michael, Theodore had gotten from Alexander more than just greater clarity about the systemic issues in the criminal justice system—she had given him another lens through which to see and understand his own experiences.

Grinning and throwing out a peace sign, editor Sherba Whitehurst seemed over the moon as she posed for a photo with Alexander. She described the experience of seeing a powerful Black woman on the stage as “moving.”

“It was a great moment for the group,” Michael asserted.

For him, it was also a moment to tell Alexander how much her writing had meant to him and changed him.

“It was big for me to get to see her, speak to her, and let her know that,” he said.

The fresh copy of the book that Vince had bought was a gift—signed by Alexander for his daughter, whom he described as still being in the process of reading it.

“She’ll pick it up, put it down, pick it up, put it down,” Vince said. “What it has done in my relationship with my child is open up dialogue for us around that whole piece...it’s probably one of the most rewarding things.”

When the *Mend* editors returned to work on the journal, there was a sense of appreciation for what had just taken place. As usual, their lively conversations took surprising twists and turns as they shared stories, asked questions, and supported one other—all while learning valuable skills in publishing.