The Invisible Cage

Michaela Thorley
Syracuse University

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I’m sitting at a Greyhound station in upstate New York, and my bus is going to be late. There’s a crowd of people and we’re all waiting to leave this tiny town to go somewhere different. Out of all the people huddled on the sidewalk, I am lucky enough to be sitting on a hard wooden bench, next to a man in simple clothes that don’t look like his own. I lean my head back against the brick of the building and look him over. He is one of several men wearing the same outfit, holding nothing but a plastic bag. A handsome man with a face that has been kicked around by life, but still holds sweetness. I feel inclined to talk to him. I turn and ask where he’s going and if he’s heard anything about the buses. He seems anxious to talk to someone, and soon he’s telling me that he has just been released from a prison nearby, and that he’s heading home to the city. He can’t wait to get out of these clothes, to go to the Bronx and buy new ones, and to eat a hot meal. He’s got a woman at home, and even though she never made it up to visit him, he knows she’s still waiting for him because they’ve got love like that.

In this moment, I am moved by a vision of his future. I’m sitting with his girlfriend. I taste the Philly cheesesteak he eats and feel her hand in the back pocket of his new jeans. I believe in his freedom. But I am not naïve. I know that he is heading back into the world with a label that he did not have before he went to prison. I didn’t need Michelle Alexander, a law professor and author of *The New Jim Crow*, to tell me that his life after prison will be a changed one. Whatever his intentions may be with his newly acquired “freedom,” there is something about him that may never have been free, and that now, surely never will be. It is on the face of the old white woman who looks at us from the corner of her eye. Several feet over on the same sidewalk, she clutches her purse to her chest and avoids eye contact. When I catch her eye, she is issuing me a warning. She didn’t need to hear this man’s story to know that he is a “criminal.” She can see the bars around his body. As a black man in the United States, he was born into a tentatively constructed trap, one with few ways out. He was not expected by most to avoid his current situation. He has lived his life in an “invisible cage,” which solidified around him when he left the prison with his newly
granted “freedom” (Alexander 186).

A month later, I am at a movie theater with my best friend, L. We are here to see *Fruitvale Station*, a movie based on the story of Oscar Grant, who was shot and killed by a police officer in Oakland, California, in 2009. After traveling through Oscar’s last day with him, we are present for his death: shot facedown while handcuffed by a white officer who claimed that he confused his gun with his Taser. L and I squeeze each other’s fingers and I feel her flinch as the shot runs through us, reverberating, not as a single shot, but as one small piece of a collective injustice. We sit in our seats longer than I have ever sat after a movie is over, drive home silently, and park in front of my house, where we both start to cry. We are not shocked. We are aware. That black and brown bodies, especially those that are male or masculine, are not safe in our country. That black and brown bodies are treated like they don’t matter. That black and brown bodies are disposable.

And so it is not surprising a few weeks later when we are driving home from a weekend in Pennsylvania that we are followed into the parking lot of a rest stop by a state trooper. He drives up behind us in his big white van and parks, blocking us in, and steps up to the window. I am sitting in the passenger seat and fight the urge to roll my eyes as he authoritatively asks me to show him the contents of a plastic bag on the floor of the car, clearly implying that he believes there are drugs inside. The bag contains a paper towel and the crumbs of a turkey sandwich.

“Oh,” he says sheepishly, “I guess you must have had sandwiches.”

L is a masculine-of-center black woman with a shaved head and a Yankees fitted cap, so when he asks her to step out of the car and step back, it is an all too familiar scene. I know that we are both flashing back to *Fruitvale Station*. We both know that to be young, black, and male or masculine-identified is to be “equated with reasonable suspicion” (Alexander 199). We tread lightly, delicately. For a white friend or family member, my fear is of tickets and fines, but with my black and brown loved ones, I am afraid of arrest, physical brutality, and even death.

I grew up in a mixed black and white neighborhood in Syracuse where I spent all of my grade school years going to a public school. Part of a white minority, I was both surrounded by and separate from what it meant to be “black” in the U.S. When we were kids, the boys I knew said that they wanted to be rappers and ballplayers. From a young age, the ideas of success and possibility for many of the black boys I went to school with were limited—in their heads, and in the heads of the mostly white authority figures in their lives (teachers, administrators, principals, etc.). As we got older, these same authority figures began instructing black boys in their criminality. The Syracuse city schools have been known for their high suspension rates of black boys; according to a 2013 UCLA study, “Fifty-two percent of black male students in Syracuse’s middle and high schools were suspended at least once during the 2009-10 school year” (Reide).

Black boys grew accustomed to punishment and harsh judgment. On some mornings, school security would roll the metal detectors to the front doors of my high school. The line stretched out to the parking lot, where we would wait
regardless of the weather, sweating in the sunshine or blowing our breath out in the cold as we waited to be searched. Both female and white, I watched from the sidelines of a system that treated me with much more respect than my black male peers. Black male students were much more likely to be pulled aside and searched with more authority and suspicion. They were subject to significantly more “random and degrading” searches, and it was clear that they were always “potential suspects” (Alexander 200). This no doubt stemmed from the view of young black men as criminals in the making and was one of many “racially biased school discipline policies” that pushed my black male peers out of our “underfunded, crumbling schools” (Alexander 199).

On one particular morning during a search, our valedictorian was found with weed. After a short suspension, his only punishment was a weekly appointment with the school psychologist. One of the few upper-middle-class Jewish kids at my high school, he was still allowed to give a speech at graduation, to walk the stage, and to go on to NYU with no marks on his permanent record. Had he been poor and black, he would not have received such light treatment. This stems from the same system that rarely arrests white drug offenders and that consistently treats them more favorably. The same behavior from a white student did not warrant the same treatment. Although his behavior was criminal, he was not “made” criminal in the way that a black male student might have been.

Coming to college was a rude awakening. Entering into an arena of deeply unexplored privilege and “colorblindness,” I was (and continue to be) struck by the differences in perspective that drastically separate me and the kids I grew up with from many of my college peers. In one class, which grappled with issues of class, race, and education, I was stunned by the ways in which students continued to cling to the “American Dream,” the ways in which they looked to stories of success to appease any guilt or fear that might arise when confronted with their privilege. But this is not a singular experience. It is repeated in most classes in which issues of race, class, ethnicity, and opportunity appear. Alexander points out that many people’s eyes are “fixed on people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, who have defied the odds and risen to power, fame, and fortune” (180). There is rarely a discussion of what odds are being defied, but on numerous occasions, I have heard these extreme success stories referenced as proof that those who deserve success will earn it and that, if you try hard enough, you can achieve anything. But I have the feeling that if you asked the kids I went to high school with, they would have a different opinion. For a white friend or family member, my fear is of tickets and fines, but with my black and brown loved ones, I am afraid of arrest and physical brutality, or even death.
When I walk through the university area on a Friday night, I often hear the shouts and screams of young white men. Unburdened by insecurity and perceived criminality as they are, I have seen them break exit lights in dorm building hallways, kick trash cans, and snort cocaine on a frat house sink. The point is not that all white men conduct themselves in this particular way, but rather that these examples of disrespect and misconduct tend to go unnoticed. People turn blind eyes to youthful blunders based on privilege. Boys will be boys. Unless the boys are black boys. Privilege erases slates and provides second chances in ways that go unrecognized.

This is how I know that “denial… is complicated” (Cohen in Alexander 182). Those who are not forced to face their color are allowed to believe in colorblindness. Those who are not forced to face their privilege believe in free will and choice, unburdened by structural inequalities. Thus, those who are not affected by or close to those affected by racism often incorrectly believe that “those who are trapped in [systems of inequality] were free to avoid [them]” (Alexander 184). So when Alexander states that “schoolchildren wonder out loud how discrimination could ever have been legal in this great land of ours,” it hits home for me (192).

My childhood was shaped by an attention and proximity to issues of race and class that might have startled some suburban white parents. My own parents, open-minded and aware in many respects, still can’t fully grasp the depth of attachment I have to my school culture. I have not yet learned how to take my anger and outrage and shape it into something informative and telling. I have not figured out how to transform the moments of ignorance that I witness into moments of illumination. I am still grasping, tripping, falling over myself. My voice still shakes, my breath speeds as I struggle to verbalize things so deeply embedded, to forgive the white people who surround me now for the unexplored privilege that makes them selectively colorblind. I forget that these were things I learned early on—on a school bus, in a lunchroom, on the playground, in the back row of churches.

I will never see what kind of future he headed into. But I think of him often, singing hopefully through the bars of his invisible cage.
I know that a resolution cannot be found in defensiveness or fear of acknowledging privilege. The point is to open your eyes if you are in a position of privilege and to recognize that this is a position of power and influence, no matter who you are. White people are often able to put off facing the realities of racism that many black and brown children must face at a startlingly young age. A fundamental misunderstanding exists about racism, especially within the white community. Much of this stems from the belief that racism is based on “a function of attitudes” (Alexander 183). But it is the natural, invisible functions of structural racism that are to be feared.

I am asking for an acknowledgment of, as Alexander puts it, the “state of perpetual insecurity and fear” faced by black men in the United States (210). Born with the mark of criminality, black boys are expected to “be on their best behavior,” whatever that may mean at any given moment (215). Please recognize, however, that Oscar Grant placed his hands behind his back, let himself be handcuffed, trusting the administration of justice, and was shot in the back for it. And that this was not a solitary story.

Michelle Alexander’s argument began in a church, and mine ends there. Over the past several years, I have attended church services at a black Baptist church in my neighborhood. I have had the unique privilege to be present in a space that is generally not seen by those outside of the black community. I have heard, from the mouths of pastors and their congregations, stories of struggle, lack of options, and fear. Through their stories, the stories of my loved ones, and the stories of those I grew up going to school with, I know that race has a strong influence on the “administration of justice” (Alexander 187). I know that black men and black masculine women are never truly free—even when they are technically free—because of the fear and intimidation that is used against them as a means of control.

I don’t want to eliminate the acknowledgment of those boys who made it out, or the presence of hope. Because I have seen boys slip through the bars they were born with, to raise beautiful children, go to college, manage businesses, and make five-year plans. And I recognize that not everyone can or will hear these stories directly from the source—either those of fear and intimidation or those of unexpected triumph and hope. It scares me that many people in positions of power and privilege will never see for themselves the effects of mass incarceration and structural racism on a human level. Without this, I do not know how people are supposed to resist the seductive “myth of choice,” to look beyond the labels of criminal and non-criminal and recognize that “all people make mistakes. All of us are sinners. All of us are criminals” (Alexander 197, 215).

At the Greyhound station, they make a final call for my seatmate’s bus. I will never see what kind of future he headed into. But I think of him often, singing hopefully through the bars of his invisible cage.

Works Cited