Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“Globalization and American Culture Since 1945” Book Reviews

Author: Michelle Alexander
Title: *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
Publisher: The New Press, 2010
Reviewed by: Gracie Pearlman

**From Plantations to Penitentiaries**
*Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration*

In *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that mass incarceration in modern America acts similarly to the methods implemented during the Jim Crow era in the 19th and 20th century. Her book details a racial caste system that has evolved throughout time, and places black men in a “racial undercaste” (pg. 36). Despite the gains made by black men during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, Alexander explains that the history of black civil rights is one of retraction as opposed to teleological; there were moments of freedom, and those freedoms were then stolen time and again. Alexander begins her book by outlining the transitions from slavery to reconstruction, from reconstruction to Jim Crow laws, from Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement to mass incarceration as it relates to the War on Drugs. Alexander claims that the War on Drugs uses the criminal justice process as a veil for “color blind” race discrimination to ensure the subordinate status of a racialized group of people, which in this case study are black men.

Alexander preemptively states what problems historians, scholars, and readers alike will have with her own argument: that she focuses on black men and did not include women or Latinos, and that she claims that in post-emancipation
America, methods of political, legal and social racial repression still exist. She states that Americans focus “on people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, who have defied the odds and risen to power, fame, and fortune” (pg. 156), as prime examples of “how far we've come” in post-Civil Rights and “post-racial America.” However, when looking at the number of black people incarcerated each year, one looks to Obama and Winfrey as the exception, not the rule.

Then, Alexander hits her stride: she clearly, concisely and strategically captures the judicial process during the War on Drugs from beginning to “end” [if there is one]. She explains that “our understanding of racism is shaped by the most extreme expressions of individual bigotry, not by the way in which it functions naturally, almost invisibly, when it is embedded in the structure of a social system” (pg. 159). Therefore, by explaining that from initial contact with the police, typically in a “DWB” [Driving While Black] or a stop-and-frisk situation, to “invisible punishment,” due process does not exist. She concludes this explanation by stating that after being released from prison, black men are often denied the right to vote, excluded from juries and refused rights they may have had prior to incarceration, comparable to the Jim Crow era. It then becomes impossible for these men to elevate their status in society: once a felon, always a felon.

Alexander clearly articulates the extent to which Americans think they know what racial oppression means. Americans look at images of black protestors being violently sprayed by water hoses and the lynchings that happened in the south [and north], and “understand” racial oppression. With this mindset, Alexander argues that because mass incarceration is not necessarily the most visible method of
oppression, it is hard for Americans to understand it as an example of racial subordination. What I think Alexander could have explored more in depth is just how visible this methodology of racial profiling actually is: with the advent of technology, it has become easier to capture these moments of flagrant violations of the law. Videos, sound clips, and other recordings of sorts have surfaced and circulated around the internet, revealing the immorality of law enforcement throughout the War on Drugs, and the racial oppression that still exists in America today.

She begins her book by explaining that her purpose was to spark a conversation about a modern racial caste system, however ends the book heavy-handed: she discusses Rosa Parks, education reform, other root causes of mass incarceration problems, and why the Civil Rights activists aren't doing anything. While these are valid points and questions, it seems a little too late in the reading to bring them into discussion.