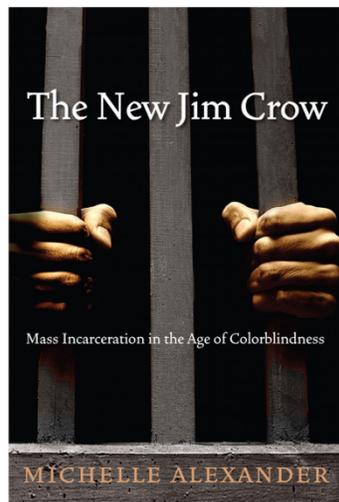


A Unitarian Universalist  
Introduction to  
*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration  
in the Age of Colorblindness*  
by Michelle Alexander

Companion Guide to Samuel DeWitt Proctor  
Conference, Inc. *The New Jim Crow* Study Guide



By David H. Slavin



Unitarian Universalist Association, 2012



## **Creating Beloved Community**

Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* poses a question to Unitarian Universalists that it asks of all people of conscience dedicated to creating the Beloved Community. Can we stand in solidarity with the incarcerated and former prisoners? In other words, can we stand on the side of love with the hundreds of communities targeted by the drug wars and millions of individuals targeted as enemy combatants in the drug wars. Relegated by criminal convictions to the status of irrevocable second-class citizenship, they are in effect condemned to a life sentence. As part of our commitment to respect and honor the dignity and self-worth of every individual, Unitarian Universalism implicitly mandates us to abolish the New Jim Crow and mass incarceration. General Assembly resolutions explicitly call upon us to dedicate ourselves to dismantling institutionalized racism and to striving to achieve an anti-racist, multicultural, equitable life.

The UUA, the Journey toward Wholeness Transformation Committee, Allies for Racial Equity and other entities have declared our intention to engage in right relations and hold ourselves accountable to communities of color within the Association and in the wider world. To do so, the UUA introduced the concept of becoming allies for racial justice. Can we be more than allies? The Standing on the Side of Love Campaign calls forth possibilities for a model of accountability that erases the line between "us" and "them" -- solidarity. In the parables of Jesus, what you do to the least among us you do to me, a Samaritan counts the world as neighbor. He and all other great ethical and spiritual teachers preach "do unto others" in many forms. Social gospel, social justice and labor movements affirm an injury to one as an injury to all, another version of the golden rule. Solidarity thus embraces a vision of a just society, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. It resonates with the vision of Beloved Community in the writings of Dr. Howard Thurman and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave his life, lest we forget, in support of a strike in Memphis.

## **Solidarity and the Repudiation of Privilege**

As a goal, solidarity helps us rethink the tortuous conundrum of how class interacts with race-gender identities. Solidarity conjures an antidote to ruling elite social control. It poses a "power with" relationship that contradicts ruling elite "power over" -- motivation by coercion and setting us against each other. Solidarity expresses our common interest in resisting exploitation by the 1% while recognizing divisions between privileged and subordinated social groups that fracture and weaken us. Ultimately, of course, our moral position is in the interests of the 100%. Racial privilege, however, clearly underpins the entire mass incarceration, the New Jim Crow system. The paradigm of privilege-as-benefit, however, has led to competition. It obfuscates the exploitation at the heart of the system and throws the variables of race, gender, and

class out of balance. If we discard this paradigm and redefine privilege as the means elites use to maintain social control, we can focus on how illusory interests as "whites" undermine the real interest in resisting exploitation by the dominant financial forces. "Privilege as social control" reveals that privileged working people have a stake in solidarity. And since privilege is a crucial ingredient to maintaining power, the elites impose it on them/us. It cannot be given up. It must be repudiated.

Repudiating privilege empowers us all. Recognizing our common interests, we are motivated not only by helping others but by helping ourselves. Working towards equality strengthens ties that lead to right relationship with brothers and sisters in DRUUMM (Diverse and Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries), with other Unitarian Universalists of color, with people of color in our day to day lives, in the world around us. All-pervasive, virtually invisible to those who think and act "white," privilege produces "the Blind Spot in the eye of America," as W.E.B. DuBois called it. Mindfully "unlearning" all that normalizes inequality and dehumanization, we once were blind, but now we see instances of inequality all around us. Attention drawn to the inequality, we can take specific, concrete steps to make things right. These steps and actions express the power of love that will go viral as other European American ("white") working people around us also embrace the nobility and courage of suffering humanity and see in the struggles of others their/our own struggles. The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Guide to *The New Jim Crow* can guide our work in building solidarity, repudiating privilege, and empowering a new mass multiracial social justice movement that will fulfill the promise and complete the work of the civil rights era.

## **The 2010 Georgia Prison Strikes**

Events in Georgia eighteen months ago illustrate the potential of this movement to stop mass incarceration. On December 9, 2010, the largest prison strike in US history erupted. Most of Georgia's 54,000 inmates in seven different state prisons refused to leave their cells and go to their prison jobs. Meticulously planned by inmates using bootleg cell phones, this protest was not a riot but a true job action, the largest strike in the state since the 1930s. The Prison Industries Corporation of the Department of Corrections leases inmates to large corporations, and under the rationale that they are paying for their upkeep inmates are required to work but are not paid. The strikers demanded basic human rights: pay for their labor, healthy food, improved medical care, educational opportunities, an end to arbitrary punishments, and clear and objective requirements for parole.

Ironically, prisoners are state employees, and at the time legislators and governors in the Midwest states were launching an all out attack on the union rights of their state workers. Yet the prison job actions in Georgia, California and Illinois went virtually unreported in the press (two NY Times articles did appear on December 12, 2012) and ignored by the mass movements that arose in Ohio, and especially Wisconsin. The sources of the defeat in Wisconsin are many, but this blind spot to the Georgia prison struggle suggests that solidarity was limited those who met certain stereotypical criteria.

Madison's crowds could see all the way to Tahrir Square in Cairo, but the human rights struggle much closer to home escaped their eye.

## **A Unitarian Universalist Application of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Guide to *The New Jim Crow***

In the face of caste, underclass and self-perpetuating wealth, the Proctor Guide declares that "we affirm the self-worth and equality of all God's children and that African Americans are equally and fully created in the image of God!" It urges us to disarm the war on drugs, dismantle the system of mass incarceration, and pursue the unfinished business of the civil rights movement. These views are virtually identical to Unitarian Universalist teaching.

The authors of the guide address an audience of African American Christian clergy and lay leaders. Reviewing *The New Jim Crow* chapter by chapter, they include key quotations and concepts, short answer questions, questions for deep reflection, passages on social justice in Old and New Testament, and connections to the Afro-centric Sankofa and Kwanzaa traditions. African American and Latino Christianities differ from European-centered traditions, and it behooves religious progressive to familiarize ourselves with them, as a matter of multicultural competency and as part of an effort to support Christians of color in presenting social gospel traditions to the members of white Christian institutions implicated in perpetuating and justifying the separate and unequal system. White Christian churches remain among the most segregated institutions in American society. Yet when demographic changes create transitioning neighborhoods and members can ill-afford to move, individual congregations have transformed themselves.

Unitarian Universalist faith traditions embody these contradictions in our tragic-heroic history, as Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed called it. But we also bridge the racial divide. We can help white institutions connect or reconnect with the social gospel and begin to integrate on equal terms. If liberal religion performs this service, it will more directly address the lives of European and African American working people and contribute to defending the interests of all working people. Synergies flow from social activism that crosses the color line. Social justice aspects of Christian faith communities are strengthened; white Christians gain greater respect for and attraction to the Black church; the Black church is empowered to imagine more radical possibilities.

The Proctor guide's Afro-Christian orientation may help reach white working people who hold fast to Christian beliefs. The evangelical tradition, as distinct from the fundamentalist Christian right, has participated in past social justice movements, but today's secular, overtly political approaches fail to break through to them.

Since the Proctor guide is addressed to African American Christians, our congregations will need to use it differently. African American Christianity, with racial equality at its heart, squares with our faith tradition. Where the guide calls for faithful reflection and

action, UU readers are encouraged to do so from our own faith perspective on the questions it raises. The guide alerts us to the limits of our own vision and action, and challenges us to invite European American Christians into a conversation with us around racial equality. All of us have been blind to the New Jim Crow, and all of us need the humility to pool our collective wisdom to remove the mote from our eye.

[Matthew 7:1-5 " Judge not that ye not be judged....first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother's eye."]

**The Proctor Guide *New Jim Crow* Chapter One** asks a key question: "What roles have poor and lower income whites played in the American caste system]?" (p. 12). For European Americans this question is key to opening the door on the book. The Guide references the Exodus story, a central theme of African American Christianity. We might ask if Egyptian working people, the "whites" of this mythistory, benefited from enslavement of the Hebrews. Despite having been written six hundred years later, during the Babylonian Captivity, the question is central to our own country's history. Did poor whites benefit from American slavery?

In W.E.B. DuBois' masterwork, *Black Reconstruction*, chapters one and two, he reflects on this question and challenges the assumption that immunity from enslavement conferred a benefit. Both he and Frederick Douglass point out that poor whites were almost as much slaves as the slaves themselves. The slave system undermined their standard of living and the privilege system stripped them of power to resist. The master class used privilege to enlist whites in slave patrols and later to draft them as cannon fodder in the war to defend the property of the master class. Privilege prompted poor whites to see the slaves rather than the slave system as their enemy; to fear competition brought on by abolition rather than see emancipation as the basis for solidarity; and to police each other to squelch human impulses toward empathy with the enslaved.

Does this same system of social control over those who think and act "white" still operate today? As the Proctor Guide points out in its exegesis of the Exodus story, a caste system "destroys possibilities for intimate relationships between peoples of different heritages who share a common experience" [p. 13] of economic exploitation and hardship.

***The New Jim Crow, Chapter Two*** is called "The Lockdown," a prison reference to social control imposed by tactical force. A "lockout" is the most aggressive anti-labor tactic of employers, shutting a plant, firing the workers and hiring scabs.

"Every system of control depends for its survival on the tangible and intangible benefits that are provided to those who are responsible for the system's maintenance and administration." [*The New Jim Crow* p. 71] What is the situation of white working people? The privilege system of social control seems to provide whites benefits. Yet defending these apparent benefits means pitting themselves against working people of

color and losing sight of real interests common to all working people. Thus whites relinquish the power to fight for themselves.

What Fourth Amendment rights are protected for Black men? The Supreme Court has stripped the right to sue for racially discriminatory unreasonable search, suspicion, pretext stops, SWAT team home invasions. The targeting of the men of poor communities of color, with most whites exempt from being detained, presumed guilty, or having their homes invaded. But the Supreme Court decisions are colorblind, so could whites be subjected to the same treatment as Blacks?

Since the purpose of racial privilege is to maintain social control, the legal apparatus allows police and prosecutors wide discretion to practice a double standard. If "whites" engage in protest or resistance that could lead to solidarity with people of color, police power will be aimed at blocking those acts. European Americans who have stories about being detained by the police are few and far between, and their stories contrast with African Americans' stories: a. rarely are whites arrested, convicted, or acquire criminal records; African-Americans are about seven times more likely to have a prison record than whites; b. often they are stopped for transgressing a color line, e.g. being in the "wrong" neighborhood. This kind of intimidation is recounted by The Rev. Dr. Thandeka in *Learning to Be White* and her essay "The Cost of Whiteness" (Tikkun, Jan. 1998).

The message in exercising repression over whites is that resisting inequality is futile. Michelle Alexander notes that the Supreme Court "has made it virtually impossible to challenge racial bias in the criminal justice system." (*The New Jim Crow*, p. 106.) In Georgia this spring, an Occupy effort to support striking Verizon workers with civil disobedience led to an attempt to pass laws imposing felony charges for trespassing. Most white Georgians approve such repressive measures, yet they undermine their own interests by making it harder for them to fight for their own needs. It is crucial for progressives to begin educating whites around why the New Jim Crow hurts them.

***The New Jim Crow, Chapter Three ("The Color of Justice")*** acknowledges that avoiding arrest and prosecution seems to benefit whites, but what costs to European Americans are hidden in the system?

Drug use among whites exceeds drug use among people of color (*The New Jim Crow*, p. 97), yet drug rehabilitation has been underfunded in favor of prosecuting young Black and Latino men. Treatment for addiction, including legal substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, prescription medications), has left all but the wealthiest whites neglected.

Violent crimes bear little relation to incarceration rates (*The New Jim Crow*, p.99) and rarely cross racial lines. Domestic violence, however, is widespread in all income and racial groups, and as resources are diverted to the war on drugs, prevention of and intervention in domestic violence receives less attention and funding. Prosecution of rape has been neglected; across the country hundreds of thousands of rape kits

languish unprocessed in medical examiners' offices.

Violent crime costs society orders of magnitude more than use of marijuana and other illegal drugs. One death penalty murder trial costs society \$17.25 million, taking into account loss of victim's earnings, devastation of both victim and perpetrator families, trial, incarceration. The cost per rape is \$450,000. (See Prof. Matt DeLisi, Iowa State University, [www.archive.news.iastate.edu/news/2010/sept/costofcrime](http://www.archive.news.iastate.edu/news/2010/sept/costofcrime)). Preventing violent crime is a far more effective use of policing investments, but because since the Reagan administration federalized policing policy, with its steering of local police forces into the war on drugs, all other use of police resources has been downplayed.

Racial bias in the criminal justice system means that police and prosecutors cut corners, plea bargaining 95% of cases. The right to trial by jury has been abrogated. When I reported for jury duty at the Montgomery County courthouse in the white flight suburbs northwest of Philadelphia in the mid-1990s, the jury pool contained 250 people. All but four were white, while the defendants were young Black and Latino men from the city of Conshohocken, where the court was located. With underground parking and special elevators to the jury room, these white potential jurors were whisked in and out in the same "non-non-white zone" in which they lived and worked. A video played for our edification touted the right to trial by jury as one of our most important rights. Yet the defendants there probably would have done anything to avoid the risk of facing a jury of such "peers." Not only is it a "just us" system, we are all being told we have rights that have lost their meaning. Ordinary white folks may be treated more leniently than people of color, but they don't get fair trials. Bias adulterates the entire justice system. In the final analysis, an effective defense depends on the financial resources defendants are able to bring to bear.

The greatest deception is the failure to prosecute white collar crime which promotes the culture of impunity that now pervades corporate and financial boardrooms. All these years that white suburbanites were defending their homes from a "Black invasion" they feared would undermine their property values, the banks through reckless speculation took away a third of the value of their homes. And as the aging white population grows, non-whites in the workforce who will be paying into the Social Security and Medicare systems that sustain the retirees are losing the ability to earn any living at all. To leave this growing workforce under-skilled and underemployed is to destroy the seed corn from which future crops are to grow. [Report on 2010 census by William H. Frey, PhD. of Brookings Institution, 17 May 2012 PBS Newshour; see also Julian Bond UUA GA Ware Lecture 2005.]

**In Chapter Five of *The New Jim Crow*** the guide asks two questions that are crucial for individual UUs and our congregations to answer:

- a. Why is it difficult to convince whites of the existence of a new racialized caste system?
- b. In what ways does this new racialized caste system hurt whites?

Michelle Alexander presents some thoughts on the first question. "The current [colorblind] system invites observers to imagine that those who are trapped in the system were free to avoid second-class status or permanent banishment from society simply by choosing not to commit crimes. It is far more convenient to imagine that a majority of young African American men in urban areas freely chose a life of crime than to accept the real possibility that their lives were structured in a way that virtually guaranteed their early admission into a system from which they can never escape." [*The New Jim Crow*, p 178-79].

"The sense that black men have disappeared is rooted in reality....The claim that we really know where all the black men have gone may inspire considerable doubt. If we know, why do we feign ignorance? Could it be that most people really don't know? Is it possible that the round up, lockdown and exclusion of black men en masse from the body politic has occurred largely unnoticed? The answer is yes and no." [*The New Jim Crow*, p 174, 176].

"Mass incarceration thus perpetuates and deepens preexisting patterns of racial segregation and isolation, not just by removing people of color from society and putting them in prisons, but by dumping them back into ghettos upon their release...By contrast, whites -- even poor whites -- are far less likely to be imprisoned for drug offenses. And when they are released from prison, they rarely find themselves in the ghetto. The white poor have a vastly different experience in American than do poor people of color. Because whites do not suffer racial segregation, the white poor are not relegated to racially defined areas of intense poverty." [*The New Jim Crow*, p. 191.]

**Conclusion:** Throughout this groundbreaking work, Michelle Alexander points to the real inequalities between poor whites and people of color, and the radar of avoidance that gives whites the pretense to justify their passivity in the face of an unjust system.

For Unitarian Universalist congregations the task ahead is to transcend our isolation and build bridges among African American Christians, ourselves, and low-income white communities. Repudiating privilege-as-social-control takes a necessary step towards abolishing Jim Crow injustice and dismantling mass incarceration. The question for us is devising specific ways to carry out that repudiation individually and as a community. Through solidarity we can understand how this system traps us all and can set ourselves firmly on the road to reclaiming the power of love.

About David H. Slavin: David H. Slavin (Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, GA) is a member of the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee and a UU since 1993.

He grew up in NYC where he spent a decade as a rank and file labor organizer and "troublemaker" in blue collar workplaces, later serving as the research director of the city's 100,000-member hospital workers union. David holds a PhD. in modern world history from the University of Virginia and is the author of *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France: White Blindspots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Johns Hopkins Press) and a dozen peer-reviewed journal articles. He has been awarded a number of research fellowships, including one from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's institute for advanced study. David has taught labor history and world history for several decades, including a dozen Adult Religious Education courses for UU congregations on the interaction of race and class.