

Michelle Alexander on the War on Drugs: The Color of Drug Users Got Whiter, the Nation Got Nicer



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Michelle Alexander delivers keynote address at 2017 Drug Policy Alliance International Drug Policy Reform Conference in Atlanta. (Kirsten West Savali/The Root)

The Drug Policy Alliance opened its 2017 International Drug Policy Reform Conference on Thursday with acclaimed scholar Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, making it clear that whiteness is at the root of the war on drugs, and anti-blackness ensures that black and brown people in the United States continue to be criminalized in occupied communities.

More than 1,500 drug reformers from around the world attended the three-day conference. With over 50 breakout sessions ranging from “Changing Demographics of Criminal Justice: How Are Drug Use and Mass Criminalization

Impacting Rural America” to “The Global War on Drugs: A Tool of Oppression Against Black Lives Around the World” and “Mass Criminalization Is the Problem: Broadening the Mass Incarceration Approach,” the truth that drug policy is race policy was never allowed to be forgotten or minimized.

Visionary author, journalist and prison abolitionist Asha Bandele, who is senior director of the Drug Policy Alliance, introduced Alexander, who received a rousing and sustained standing ovation from the crowd.

Then Alexander took the audience to school.

She pulled no punches, exposing capitalism—as well as a fraudulent “free market” that uses black and brown bodies as commodities—for the dehumanizing vulture that it is.

“Can we honestly imagine that the drug-reform victories last year in all those states would have been possible in the midst of the crack epidemic? Just for a moment, try to imagine the nation legalizing any drug, of any kind, in the middle of any drug epidemic that was affecting primarily black and brown people,” Alexander said, urging the rapt audience to interrogate the truth in front of us and the scars we bear.

“Then try to imagine that all of the new, legal drug empires that are being launched were being led by young black men with wild Afros and tattoos, rather than hipster white men with cute ponytails and beards,” she continued.

Class was in session, and Alexander did not hesitate to connect the dots. As Bandele said, “There was no stone left unturned.”

The election of Donald Trump was an inevitability, Alexander said, because this nation has always fought furiously to curtail any fragment of racial progress.

“Throughout our nation’s history, there has always been fierce, overwhelming backlash against even the appearance of great racial progress. Always. You can set your watch to that one,” Alexander said. “And while some might argue that the racial-justice gains offered by Obama’s election were mostly symbolic, the symbolism was powerful and deeply disturbing to millions, helping to incite an electoral backlash that we should have seen coming.”

U.S. Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III—a man known for being a slithering bigot and unambiguous racist committed to draconian white supremacist drug policy—has continued to link cannabis with criminality. When it comes to the opioid epidemic, Sessions acknowledges that treatment is necessary, but he is still doggedly determined to bring back lengthy mandatory sentences.

“We must create and foster a culture that’s hostile to drug use,” Sessions told the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children in August.

Sessions has faced intense criticism because of his renewed escalation of the drug war. Alexander makes it plain that it is not just shifting views on drugs that makes the pushback against Sessions so widespread; it is the shifting face of drug addiction.

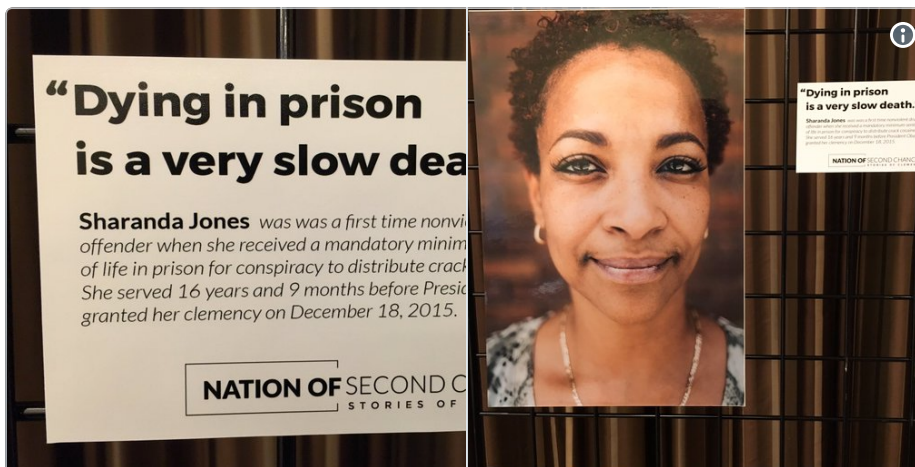
“White people now feel a kinship to drug users and abusers that they did not feel when the faces of addiction were black and brown,” Alexander said.

Make no mistake: Mainstream media is and has always been complicit.

“Changing attitudes and policies became possible in large part because the media was no longer saturated with images of black and brown drug dealers,” Alexander noted. “The color of drug users and dealers got whiter in the public imagination, and so we, as a nation, got nicer.”

She continued:

That’s not to say that these changes were inevitable; that’s not what I’m saying at all. An enormous amount of hard work, blood, sweat and tears went into those victories. I just am asking us today to pause long enough to absorb the truth. That the white face of medical marijuana in the media, and the white male face of legal pot entrepreneurs, and the white male face of drug users and abusers in this current opioid epidemic, and the white face of drug heroes in the media, such as those featured in *Breaking Bad*, made it possible for mainstream white voters to feel a kind of empathy that was utterly lacking for black and brown folks just 20 years ago.



Kumar Rao 
@KumarRaoNYC



Powerful photo exhibit at [#reform2017](#) on stories of clemency. Here, someone w/ a 1st time nonviolent drug offense: received life in prison.

6:17 PM - Oct 12, 2017



During the live town hall Friday evening—“Case for Reparations: 50 Years After the Drug War and Mass Incarceration, What Does America Owe Us?”—held in partnership with AfroPunk, the reckoning that the United States must have with its long, violent history of lynching and locking up black and brown people for profit took center stage.

Panelists Iva Carruthers, co-founder and general secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference; Janvieve Williams Comrie, human rights strategist for 4 Americas Consulting and the United Nations; Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter; Kassandra Frederique, New York state director of the Drug Policy Alliance; pastor Kenneth Glasgow, founder of the Ordinary People Society; and Ira Glasser, board president of the Drug Policy Alliance and former executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, all spoke about the insurmountable debt that this nation owes not only black Americans but black people around the world who have been victims of the United States’ war on the most vulnerable and targeted communities among us.

“Here’s the thing about the conversations about reparations: Ta-Nehisi Coates is not the first time we had a conversation about reparations, but that’s the first time that a lot of white liberals felt it was acceptable to have a conversation about reparations,” Frederique said.

“I thought when I described what it meant to be snatched from West Africa, to be plopped down in the Caribbean, to be invaded by the United States, that was enough for people to realize that my life, and my humanity, needed repair, but it was not,” she added. “It wasn’t until someone said, ‘Well, you arrested all these people for marijuana, and now only the white people are making money off it; this might be a problem.’ But if you never understood why reparations in general, around black people, was important, then the conversations around reparations and marijuana is fake. It is an insult.”



Kassandra Frederique (video screenshot)

“A plant will not legalize black people,” Frederique continued. “When we talk about why white liberals are scared, it’s not because they don’t understand; it’s because they have to give something up. They don’t want to do that. The conversations stop because they say, ‘I didn’t do that.’ But you sure do benefit from it.

“The conversation around reparations and marijuana, to me, is shallow,” she added. “Because you cannot repair the harms caused by marijuana prohibition if you don’t want to repair the harms associated with why I’m on this fucking continent in the first place.”

The drug war has intentionally and methodically terrorized poor black and brown communities, and we must not be hesitant to call a thing a thing.

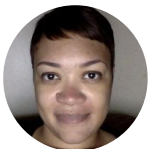
Faced with addiction and structural harm, black and brown people in the United States have not been treated with respect and dignity; we have come under enemy fire.

“It was a purely punitive, militaristic response,” Alexander said during her keynote. “We were treated as despicable scum of the earth that must be gotten rid of by any means necessary.”

If black and brown people were still being centered as victims of the drug war, “police departments wouldn’t be fighting over whose department is showing the most compassion,” she continued.

Throughout the entire 2017 International Drug Policy Reform Conference, Drug Policy Alliance, once again, showed its commitment to reframing dangerous narratives around the drug war and fighting for justice, healing and policies for those of us—both in this nation and around the world—who have been most affected.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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