SECTION ONE:
THE RECURRING CYCLE

(\textit{Introduction and Chapter One of The New Jim Crow})

The fate of millions of people—indeed the future of the black community itself—may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society. The fact that more than half of the young black men in many large American cities are currently under the control of the criminal justice system (or saddled with criminal records) is not—as many argue—just a symptom of poverty or poor choices, but rather evidence of a new racial caste system at work.

\textit{(The New Jim Crow, p. 16).}

We live in a time of great paradox. Our nation has elected (and re-elected) its first black president, something that seemed a distant fantasy just a few decades ago. African Americans are no longer forced to use separate bathrooms, eat at separate lunch counters, or sit at the back of the bus. Jim Crow laws that authorized race discrimi-
nation in employment, housing, and education have been
struck down. Poll taxes and literacy tests that once operated to keep black people from voting have been abandoned.

Most people of all colors will say so much has changed in the United States. They’ll say, just look at all the black lawyers, doctors, and athletic stars. Just look at Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Colin Powell. Our nation has come a long way. And then the familiar line, “but of course we still have a long way to go.”

This kind of talk, this familiar line, implies that we’re on the right path; that if we just keep plodding along, keep forging ahead, sooner or later we’ll reach the Promised Land.

In 1968, after the major civil rights victories had been won, and the old Jim Crow had been brought to its knees, Martin Luther King Jr. warned that things are not always as they seem, and that a parallel universe continued to exist for poor people of color in the United States. He said:

There are two Americas. One America is beautiful. In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits. In this America children grow up in the sunlight of opportunity. But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair. (From “The Other America,” March 14, 1968).

In the introduction to The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander acknowledges her own reluctance, because of
her biases and assumptions, to accept the harsh realities that her experience and research came to teach her about race, drugs, and criminal justice in the United States. Even though she was an African American woman dedicated to racial and social justice, she had failed to see—she did not want to see—the “other America” that was hidden from her in plain sight. A new “caste system” had emerged, one that shuttles children in ghettoized communities from rundown, under-funded schools to brand new, high-tech prisons. A system that locks poor people—overwhelmingly poor people of color—into a permanent, second-class status eerily reminiscent of an era we supposedly left behind.

In chapter one, Alexander relates what she saw after the blinders—the long-held biases and assumptions—that had fallen from her eyes. She starts by locating the rise of the system of mass incarceration within its historical context. Since our nation’s founding, African Americans have repeatedly been controlled through white supremacist systems of racial and social control which appear to die, but are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the times. Time and again those who benefit from racial hierarchy have exploited our nation’s racial divisions, stereotypes, and anxieties for political or economic gain—typically by pitting poor and working class whites against poor people of color. It seems that nothing is more threatening to the racial status quo than alliances that are formed across racial lines among poor and working class people. And nothing is more successful at destroying those alliances than introducing new caste systems aimed squarely at poor people of color, our society’s chosen inhabitants of the “other America.”