Caste

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ISABEL WILKERSON

Isabel Wilkerson was born in Washington, D.C. in the early 1960s to parents who'd left Virginia during the Great Migration—the movement of six million African Americans from the rural South to the Northern, Midwestern, and Western states between 1916 and 1970. Wilkerson attended Howard University, where she studied journalism and acted as editor-in-chief of the college's newspaper, *The Hilltop*. After college, she pursued a career in journalism and soon became the Chicago Bureau Chief of *The New York Times*. She received a Pulitzer Prize in Journalism for her reporting on the Midwestern floods of 1993—she was the first African American woman to receive the honor. She has taught journalism at Emory, Princeton, Northwestern, and Columbia, and she is the author of *The Warmth of Other Suns* and *Caste*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Caste spans many centuries and many continents, from the ancient invention of the caste system in India many millennia ago to the arrival of Africans on American shores in 1619, and all the way up to the 2019 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the major historical events Wilkerson touches on include the 2016 United States presidential election, the September 1935 meeting at which high-ranking Nazi officials began drafting the Nuremberg Laws, and the 1989 murder of Carol DiMaiti Stuart. By crafting a wide-ranging, global portrait of how caste poisons societies by turning people against one another, Wilkerson illustrates that, unfortunately, the arc of history does not always bend toward justice. She posits that caste has essentially defined the trajectory of U.S. history. But she also suggests that by paying attention to the details of that history—such as the brutal 1921 lynching of Wylie McNeeley, the horrific crimes of the Holocaust, and the public health discrepancies exposed by the recent global pandemic—Americans might be able to collectively dismantle the country's caste system.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Throughout *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson draws on the writings of caste scholars who have informed her research into the U.S.'s own caste system. She was particularly inspired by Bhimrao Ambedkar, a Dalit activist, economist, and politician who wrote *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development and Annihilation of Caste*. Ambedkar's work seeks to understand the inner workings of India's caste system, and why this ancient hierarchy has so long held an entire country in its clutches. Wilkerson also references writings on American casteism and racism, such as Alden T. Vaughan's *Roots of American Racism* and Allison Davis's *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, which he researched and wrote alongside his colleagues Burleigh and Mary Gardner. James Q. Whitman's *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* further examines how the Nazi Party drew inspiration from the U.S.'s Jim Crow laws in the creation of its own discriminatory Nuremberg Laws.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents
- **When Written:** Mid-to-late 2010s
- **When Published:** August 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction; History; Social Criticism
- **Setting:** The U.S.; India; Germany; England
- **Climax:** After a frustrating encounter with a white plumber who ignores Wilkerson's plight because of her race, Wilkerson breaks through to the man by connecting with him over their mutual losses of their mothers.
- **Antagonist:** Casteism; Racism; White Supremacy
- **Point of View:** First Person; Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's in a Name. By subtitling *Caste* as "The Origins of Our Discontents," Wilkerson invokes a recognizable line from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he references the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent" and his hopes for its transformation into an "invigorating autumn of freedom and equality." That section of King's speech is itself a reference to the opening lines of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in which a character speaks of England's transformation from a "winter of [...] discontent" into "glorious summer" due to the end of a long, drawn-out war.

PLOT SUMMARY

Author Isabel Wilkerson argues that life in the United States is defined by a dual-poled caste system in which white people comprise the dominant caste while Black people comprise the subordinate caste. Throughout U.S. history, she suggests, a collective scrambling to get as close to the dominant caste as possible has defined relations among people of different races and ethnicities who have come to the U.S. in search of better

futures.

Race is the visible agent of caste, while caste is the unseen "infrastructure" that holds each of American society's racial and ethnic groups firmly in their places. The hierarchy of caste defines every aspect of contemporary American life—and it's why the U.S., in spite of its vast wealth and political power, continues to lag in terms of overall happiness, literacy, and social programs like universal healthcare. In seeking to uphold the dominant caste's superiority at every turn, Wilkerson argues that the U.S. has handicapped itself greatly. The U.S. is like an **old house**, Wilkerson suggests. And unless Americans begin to really examine what it is that keeps that house standing—and what problems threaten its structural integrity—they will never be able to repair their country's ills.

Wilkerson sharpens her arguments about the existence of an American caste system by drawing comparisons to the world's most recognizable caste system—the Hindu caste system which has existed in India for millennia—and the caste system manufactured by the Nazi Party during the Third Reich. While these systems were (and are) very different from the one in the U.S., every caste system is defined by how it forces people to play a role assigned to them at birth. This makes people unable to recognize others' humanity—and once someone has been dehumanized by the caste system, it's easy to continue perpetuating violence and humiliation against them.

There are many "pillars" that keep the caste system standing: the Indian caste system, for instance, posits that the god Brahma created the castes from different parts of his body). In the American caste system, white, European Christians used the biblical story of Noah's curse on the dark-skinned sons of his child Ham to justify enslaving African people. Other pillars that uphold caste include caste-based violence and terror, caste's perceived heritability, and the idea upper castes are inherently pure while the lower castes are inherently polluted.

Caste intrudes into every aspect of daily life in the U.S. and India—in large part because of the "urgent necessity of a bottom rung" to keep the dominant castes feeling secure in their social positions and their power to influence the world around them. This means that members of the subordinate castes will often physically or emotionally harm one another in an effort to get as close to the dominant caste and its attendant privileges as possible. It also means that when the dominant caste's power and longevity is threatened, chaos can break loose.

Toward the end of the book, Wilkerson seeks to tie upper-caste anxieties about losing power and authority to the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and to the rise in anti-Black and anti-Semitic violence, police brutality, and flagrant racism. These phenomena led to violent conflicts like the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Any "change in the script," Wilkerson argues, leads to a sharp resurgence of caste. The presidency of Barack Obama, a Black politician, was a major deviation in a centuries-long script where the dominant caste was able to punish, humiliate, brutalize, and murder the subordinate caste with impunity.

The only solution to the problem of caste, Wilkerson argues, is a collective societal effort across the spectrum of the caste system. Upper-caste individuals must shed the false belief that they are inherently superior or entitled to special privileges and power. Instead, they must work to elevate the voices of those in the subordinate castes. Societies around the world are being held back from progress due to their allegiances to their caste systems—social programs are suffering, violence rates are increasing, and people are more divided than ever. But with open-hearted attempts to connect to people of other castes and focus on what all humans have in common, society may be able to achieve a world without caste. Only them, Wilkerson suggests, will everyone truly be free.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isabel Wilkerson – Isabel Wilkerson is the author and narrator of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Wilkerson who is African American and therefore a member of what she deems the U.S.'s subordinate caste. Throughout the book, she weaves personal anecdotes about moving through the world as a Black woman in with historical evidence of how caste has shaped and divided the U.S. society. By examining the origins of the country with the arrival of English settlers in the 1600s, Wilkerson explains how white Europeans created a hierarchy based on race that would allow them to render entire groups of people subhuman, or subordinate, and thus endlessly exploitable in terms of the labor needed to build a new nation. The book draws connections between the world's three major caste systems: the Indian caste system, the caste system created by the Nazis during the Third Reich, and the American caste system. Wilkerson compares the intricate, multi-layered caste system in India to the polarized caste systems of Nazi Germany and the U.S.—which placed white people in the dominant caste while subordinating Jewish people and Black people, respectively. In doing so, she shines a light on how the dominant castes in each caste system internalize their inherent superiority and seek to retain that sense of supremacy, no matter the cost. Wilkerson examines how caste handicaps societies—because when a country is built around the subordination and humiliation of a certain group, no group can achieve its fullest potential. Comparing the United States to an "**old house**" with cracks, leaks, and rot that most Americans are too terrified to examine, Wilkerson examines the "pillars of caste" that tenuously hold the country up. *Caste* is book that seeks to reframe Wilkerson's readers' understanding of American culture through the lens of the dominant caste's desire to maintain their long-held illusions of innate supremacy.

Adolf Hitler – Adolf Hitler was a German dictator and the leader of the Nazi Party. He rose to power as Führer ("Leader") in 1934. He initiated World War II in Europe by invading Poland in September of 1939 and engineered the Holocaust. Hitler was a fascist despot responsible for the deaths of millions—including six million European Jews who were murdered in concentration camps across Germany, Poland, France, Latvia, Austria, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands. Hitler's racially motivated ideology—designed to preserve the "purity" of the manufactured Aryan race—led to the large-scale extermination of Jews, Slavs, Sinti, Roma, people with disabilities, gay men and lesbians. Hitler and his followers also targeted members of numerous other political, religious, and social minorities whom they deemed *Untermenschen*, or subhuman. Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, 1945 as Soviet troops advanced on his residence. He is widely regarded as one of history's most murderous, immoral figures.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American activist and Baptist minister who brought his faith in the value of nonviolent resistance to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1955, King—a pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery—was chosen to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. He and his fellow Alabamians engaged in acts of civil disobedience that eventually led to the desegregation of the city's bus system. Following the success of the boycotts, King became a renowned and respected civil rights leader. He led more nonviolent demonstrations, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery—but as progress stalled, radical factions of the civil rights and Black Power movements doubted his nonviolent strategy. King himself admitted to mounting frustrations with going to jail repeatedly and "living every day under the threat of death." In 1968, on a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, King was assassinated on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel. Throughout *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson draws attention to how King's time in India studying caste opened his eyes to how the American caste system functioned—and how difficult it would be to dismantle it.

Robert E. Lee – Robert E. Lee was the commander of the Confederate Army during the American Civil War. While Lee was considered a skilled tactician at the time, his rebellion against the United States ultimately failed. Yet following the end of the war, Lee—a slaveholder who had committed treason against his country—was not arrested or punished in any way other than losing the right to vote. President Andrew Johnson pardoned him, and he soon became president of a college in Lexington, Virginia. Since the Civil War, monuments to Lee's memory have been erected throughout the United States, and schools and major institutions have been named in his honor. Isabel Wilkerson calls attention to the gentle—even reverent—treatment that Lee received following the war as emblematic of his privileges as a member of the dominant caste. Only in the 21st century have some begun to question Lee's legacy and begin taking down statues commemorating him or renaming schools founded in his name. Members of the dominant caste—such as a group of white supremacists who protested a removal of a statue of Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017—have objected heavily and violently to these changes, which Wilkerson argues they perceive as threats to their dominant status.

Bhimrao Ambedkar – Bhimrao Ambedkar was born in India in the late 19th century to a family from the "Untouchable" caste—the bottommost rung of the Indian caste system. In spite of the circumstances of his birth, Ambedkar achieved academic success and, in 1913, traveled to the United States to study economics at Columbia University. Ambedkar soon began working alongside civil rights activists like W.E.B. DuBois, finding many commonalities between the struggle of his people and the struggles of Black Americans. As the "patron saint of the low-born" and the "father" of the anti-caste movement in India, Ambedkar advocated for the Untouchables to become known as the Dalits—a word for "broken people" who'd been unfairly excluded from society for millennia. Ambedkar dedicated his life to raising awareness about caste systems around the world, as well as to dismantling them.

Barack Obama – Barack Obama is an American lawyer and politician who served as the 44th president of the United States from 2009–2017. He was the first Black person elected to the office. While his campaign messaging of hope and resilience won over many voters who were frightened and demoralized by a terrible financial crisis, his election resulted in many members of the United States' dominant caste trying to undermine Obama's presidency with racist smear campaigns. At the same time, many people declared that his very ascendance to the presidency marked the beginning of a "post-racial" society where neither race nor caste defined what a person could achieve in life. Yet Wilkerson believes that such claims ignored the dominant caste's anger that a Black man was president.

Donald Trump – Donald Trump is a "celebrity billionaire" who served as the 45th president of the United States from 2017–2021. Some people believed that he was unqualified for the position, and his victory in the 2016 election came as a shock to many. But Isabel Wilkerson suggests that Trump's rise to power stemmed from a nationwide panic of lower-class white people who believed that whiteness was endangered, and that the dominant caste would soon lose control of the country. Wilkerson believes that the white supremacist violence, anti-Semitic terrorism, and police brutality that took place during Trump's presidency are examples of the dominant caste's attempts to reassert their status following Barack Obama's eight-year presidency.

Hillary Clinton – Hillary Clinton is an American political figure who served as the 67th U.S. Secretary of State; a U.S. senator; and the First Lady of the U.S. during her husband, Bill Clinton's,

presidency. She ran against Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election and lost, an outcome that shocked many people. Wilkerson argues that Clinton's loss in spite of her qualifications for the office was a side effect of the dominant caste's fear of losing power to the subordinate caste following Barack Obama's presidency.

Satchel Paige – Satchel Paige was one of the greatest baseball pitchers of all time—but because he played in the first half of the 20th century, he was excluded from the major leagues and sidelined in the segregated Negro Leagues. In the late 1940s, Paige pitched for the Cleveland Indians at the age of 42—but he was past his prime, and his career never received much attention.

Charles Stuart – Charles Stuart was a white man living in Boston who, in 1989, violently murdered his pregnant wife. Then, he shot himself in the stomach and claimed that an armed Black assailant had attacked them both. While Stuart's brother—an accomplice in the crime—eventually confessed to Stuart's involvement, Stuart's decision to scapegoat the Black community illustrated the profound effects of caste. As a white man, Stuart belonged to the U.S.'s dominant caste—and Wilkerson uses his story to illustrate that a member of the dominant caste will always be believed over a member of the subordinate one.

Freddie Gray – In 2015 Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man, was arrested in Baltimore after running away when he saw police patrolling his Baltimore neighborhood. He was later found to be in possession of a knife, though the knife he was carrying was legal under Maryland law. Gray's arrest was violent, with officers pressing their knees into his neck and apparently resulting in Gray's inability to use his legs. While being transported to a nearby police precinct in a van, Gray was given a "rough ride"—a form of police brutality in which a prisoner is denied a seatbelt and then driven around in such a way that causes harm or confusion. The force used during transport snapped Gray's neck, causing him to die of his injuries a week later. His death set off a wave of protests, having taken place shortly after the murders of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown by law enforcement.

Tamir Rice – Tamir Rice was just 12 years old in 2014 when he was shot and killed by Cleveland police for playing with a toy gun in a public park. His murder—one in a string of many instances of police brutality that gripped the U.S. in the early 21st century—set off a wave of protests against the violent killing of young Black men.

Cotton Mather – Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister and amateur scientist who lived in Boston in the early 1700s. When a smallpox outbreak struck the city, a man named Onesimus whom Mather had enslaved recommended an inoculation technique that he'd seen used in his homeland of West Africa. Using Onesimus's advice, Mather helped other scientists develop a method of inoculation that saved many lives and formed the foundation of our modern-day vaccination techniques. Yet he never gave Onesimus any credit and never freed Onesimus from slavery.

Onesimus – Onesimus was a man from West Africa who was enslaved by Cotton Mather. During an 18th-century smallpox epidemic, Onesimus suggested to Mather a method of preventing the disease that originated in his homeland. Onesimus's method helped pave the way for scientists and epidemiologists to discover the precursor to contemporary inoculation.

Allison and Elizabeth Davis – Allison and Elizabeth Davis were a married Black couple who traveled to Natchez, Mississippi in the 1930s to conduct an immersive, groundbreaking anthropological study of caste in the Jim Crow South. Because the couple was Black, they were forced to hide their academic accolades—and the true purpose of their visit. They had to publicly defer to a white couple, Burleigh and Mary Gardner, who were also participating in the study (though in a lesser capacity). The Davises published their findings in a 1941 text—but because of racial and caste barriers, the publication was heavily delayed. Several other white scholars of caste in the U.S. published their own works first, leading the Davises' text to languish in obscurity for some time.

The Plumber – The plumber visits Isabel Wilkerson's **old house** to investigate a leak in the basement. He's initially unhelpful and standoffish, which Wilkerson intuits is due to the underlying effects of casteism that impact all Americans. But Wilkerson manages to get through to the plumber after connecting with him about their shared losses of their mothers.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Hale – Miss Hale is one of Wilkerson's interview subjects. Her father gave her the first name "Miss" after growing up in the mid-20th century and witnessing how white people refused to call Black people by the honorifics "Miss" or "Mister."

Wylie McNeely – Wylie McNeely was a Black teenager who was publicly burned alive in 1921 in East Texas.

Willie James Howard – Willie James Howard was a Black teenager who was lynched in 1943 after sending a Christmas card signed "L" (for "love") to a white coworker at the dime store in Florida where he worked.

Mrs. Elliott – Mrs. Elliott was an elementary school teacher in 1960s Iowa. She conducted a caste-based experiment in her classroom by ranking students and affording them certain privileges based on their eye color. The exercise illustrated the arbitrary, unfair nature of casteism and racism in the U.S.

Tushar – Wilkerson met a man named Tushar—a member of the Kshatriya caste—at a conference on caste in London. Wilkerson and Tushar bonded over the idea of being "miscast" in their respective caste systems.

Burleigh and Mary Gardner – Burleigh and Mary Gardner were a married white couple who traveled to Natchez, Mississippi in the 1930s to conduct an anthropological study of caste in the Jim Crow South alongside Allison and Elizabeth Davis.

Heather Heyer – Heather Heyer was a Virginia woman who was killed at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017 after a white supremacist agitator drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors. Heyer was 32 years old at the time of her death.

Gwen Ifill – Gwen Ifill was an American journalist, newscaster, and writer. In 1999, she became the first African American woman to host a nationally televised politics and public affairs program.

TERMS

Caste – Caste is a person's perceived rank in their society's social hierarchy. Under a caste system, those in subordinate castes are denied "respect status, honor, attention privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness" based on their ranking. Those in dominant castes, meanwhile, are seen as inherently superior and deserving of those things. Caste divisions can be based on a number of different factors: the U.S.'s caste system is intimately tied to race, for instance, while India's caste system is based on birthright and bound by the Hindu religion.

Casteism – Casteism is the practice of discriminating against a person based on their caste, or their perceived category in society.

Post-Racialism – Post-racialism is the theory that categories of race are no longer relevant, and that racial discrimination no longer exists. Some people believe that **Barack Obama**'s presidency signaled a post-racial United States. **Wilkerson**, however, points out that the majority of white Americans didn't vote for Obama—and many people resented the fact that a Black man was president of the United States.

Third Reich – The Third Reich, meaning "Third Realm" or "Third Empire," was the name the Nazi Party gave to their era of totalitarian governance in Germany (and, eventually, throughout Europe as they occupied countries like Poland and France). Defined by an obsession with creating of an Aryan ethnostate and removing Jews, Sinti, Roma, homosexual people, and disabled people from society, the Third Reich was led by the dictator **Adolf Hitler**. The Third Reich lasted from 1933–1945.

Nuremberg Laws – The Nuremberg Laws, enacted in Nazi Germany in 1935, were antisemitic and racist laws created to protect the "purity" of the manufactured Aryan race in the Third Reich. They outlawed intermarriage between Aryans and Jews and declared that only Germans were considered citizens under the Third Reich. In this way, the laws paved the way for an exponential increase in violence against Jews and other minority ethnic groups, like Sinti, Roma, and Black Germans. The Nuremberg Laws were modeled in large part on American Jim Crow laws—but in some cases, even the Nazis felt that Americans' definitions of what constituted a Black person were too extreme for their purposes. (For instance, some Americans believed that "'an American man or woman who has even has even a drop of Negro blood in their veins' counted as blacks.") As the Third Reich progressed, the higher-ups within the Nazi Party continually created addendums to the laws that further marginalized Jewish people throughout Germany and the Reich's occupied territories.

Aryan – The word "Aryan" was initially used to define a group of ancient Indo-European people who invaded modern-day India and conquered its indigenous people many millennia ago. But by the early 20th century, some scholars and eugenicists seized upon the idea of a pure, Nordic-adjacent "Aryan race" defined by fair skin and hair and light eyes. **Adolf Hitler** and the Nazis devoted their political agenda to the purification and preservation of this Aryan race, instituting labor and extermination camps to rid European society of "non-Aryans"—Jews, Sinti, Roma, and other ethnic and sexual minorities (as well as disabled people) who did not fit with the Nazis' ideal.

Eugenics – Eugenics is the study of controlling reproduction in humans to encourage certain genetic traits that are considered desirable. Eugenics was largely discredited as unscientific and racist after **Adolph Hitler**'s Nazi regime used eugenics (specifically the idea that there was a superior "Aryan race") to discriminate against Jewish people and other subordinate-caste groups.

Jim Crow – The Jim Crow era (which lasted from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century) and its attendant Jim Crow laws created a violent atmosphere of racial segregation throughout the American South. Jim Crow laws were aimed at disenfranchising and humiliating free Black men and women by mandating segregation, insisting that "separate but equal" facilities would be provided for them. But Jim Crow ran deeper than mere segregation—the atmosphere of Jim Crow allowed white people to harass, disparage, attack, and publicly lynch their Black neighbors with impunity.

Reconstruction – The Reconstruction era lasted from 1865–1877, following the American Civil War, and was aimed at rebuilding the South and helping masses of formerly enslaved Black Americans secure rights and adjust to life as newly free men and women. Unfortunately, Reconstruction was short-lived and relatively ineffective. while Black Americans were granted new Constitutional protections, those protections were rarely (if ever) enforced, and jilted ex-Confederates began seeking new ways to police, brutalize and control free Black people.

Varna – The *varnas* are the four major traditional castes in India's caste system: the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra. Based on ancient definitions of caste, the Untouchables—now known as the Dalit—existed outside of the caste system until about the 20th century.

Jati – *Jati* is the term for the many thousands of subcastes, or castes within castes, that make up Indian society.

Dalit – Formerly known as "the Untouchables," the Dalits comprise the bottommost rung (or subordinate caste) of India's ancient caste system. In fact, they've been considered and treated so lowly throughout history that they exist almost parallel to or outside of the system. The Untouchable activist **Bhimrao Ambedkar** offered the term "Dalit," meaning "broken people," as a dignity-restoring alternative to the term "Untouchable" in the 20th century, hoping to highlight his people's arbitrary and unnecessary suffering. Historically, Dalits have been conscripted to lowly and unclean jobs and forced to publicly prostrate themselves before higher-ranking castes should their paths ever cross. While today, members of the Dalit caste are permitted to pursue higher education and work in the public sphere, the deeply entrenched protocols of caste continue to impact how Dalits interact with higher-ranked people. This is evidenced by **Isabel Wilkerson**'s interactions with Dalit scholars who speak of the traumatic, long-lasting side effects of being defined by caste.

Shudra – The Shudras are the second-lowest caste in the modern-day Indian caste system. They're traditionally categorized as the "bearer[s] of burden" and often conscripted to service roles in society.

Vaishya – The Vaishyas are the third-lowest caste in the modern-day Indian caste system. They were historically defined as the "engine" of the caste system and traditionally occupy merchant and trader roles in society.

Kshatriya – The Kshatriyas are the second-highest caste in the modern-day Indian caste system. Traditionally defined as warriors, protectors, and rulers, Kshatriyas enjoy relatively high regard and privileges in Indian society.

Brahmin – The Brahmins are the highest caste in the modern-day Indian caste system. Said to have been created from the mouth of an ancient god known as Brahma, the Brahmins are considered "nearest to the gods" and often occupy sagely or priestly roles. As the dominant caste, Brahmins control the entire caste system. All other castes must defer to them by stepping aside for them in public, affording them attention, and allowing them to speak first in conversations.

THEMES

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CASTE, RACE, AND SOCIAL DIVISION IN THE U.S.

Throughout *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson argues that the United States has always structured its society around a polarized caste system. A caste system is a social hierarchy created on the basis of characteristics like race or religion, in which dominant castes control subordinate ones. While the word "caste" is most commonly associated with the caste system in India, the book suggests that the U.S. has its own caste system that divides citizens based on "rigid, arbitrary boundaries" centered on race. In the U.S. caste system, white people make up the dominant caste, and Black people make up the subordinate one. Race and caste are both social constructs—but Wilkerson describes race as the visible "skin" of social hierarchy in the U.S., while caste is the invisible skeleton. The book argues that present-day divisions in the U.S. along social, political, and economic lines are all rooted in American society's allegiance to its race-based caste system.

U.S. society, the book suggests, is organized by a caste system in which race is the "visible cue" that indicates which caste a person belongs to. The U.S.'s caste system has only two poles: the dominant caste, comprised of white people, and the subordinate caste, comprised of Black people. "Race is what we can see," writes Wilkerson, suggesting that physical traits (like skin color) have arbitrary meaning in U.S. society and are used to entrap people in the caste system's prescribed categories. But caste, unlike race, is unseen—it's the invisible "infrastructure" that holds each group in its place based on the group members' physical traits. By dividing people based on their appearance, caste creates a value system that exists "beyond the reaches of [one's] awareness." Caste is, essentially, the invisible guide to how people automatically assess those around them.

This rigid caste system in the U.S. has created intense social division throughout the country's relatively young history. In the colonial era, white European settlers used biblical scripture—the story of Noah cursing his son Ham's dark-skinned sons, for example—to justify their enslavement of Africans. The settlers needed a labor force to help bring the New World into being—and by making an arbitrary distinction between whiteness and Blackness, they were able to dehumanize and control an entire group of people. By the antebellum (or pre-Civil War) era, a huge swath of the U.S.'s economy depended on slave labor. White people brutalized and killed enslaved people of the subordinate caste in order to maintain their own power. The dominant caste was seen as inherently superior, while the subordinate caste was seen as inherently inferior. And having even "one drop" of African blood excluded a person from entry into the dominant caste. Society

was, in short, rigidly stratified. After the Civil War, there was a brief period called Reconstruction during which newly free African American people were granted new rights as they adjusted to life outside of slavery. But this period was short-lived, and soon, Jim Crow laws (which were designed to segregate society and excuse continued violence against Black people) were enacted in the South. These laws upheld casteism, maintained a deeply divided society, and kept the dominant caste in power.

Even today, the book suggests, caste continues to define how U.S. society functions. Members of the subordinate caste are more likely to face health problems brought on by the stresses of the dehumanizing caste system. For instance, in the U.S., Black people suffer from higher rates of high blood pressure and diabetes, conditions associated with elevated levels of stress hormones. The dominant caste's fear of losing power in society dictates the U.S.'s political climate at any given moment. For example, Wilkerson argues that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, "celebrity billionaire" Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton by appealing to a white voter base who feared losing power following the presidency of Barack Obama, a Black man. And even basic, everyday interactions—like dining in a restaurant, seeking help with home repairs, or traveling on public transportation—are defined by caste-based power struggles. In *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson (who is Black) recalls an instance when she and a white friend experienced terrible service while dining in a restaurant. Her friend was enraged to realize that the way the staff was treating them (compared to other tables of all-white diners) was due to Wilkerson's subordinate caste position. But Wilkerson thought that "If I responded like that every time I was slighted, I'd be telling someone off almost every day," making it clear that caste severely impacts her everyday experience as a Black woman.

The present-day social divisions in the U.S. cannot be mended until the country recognizes caste's role in creating those divisions and resolves to dismantle the caste system. What Isabel Wilkerson calls "the radicalization of the dominant caste" is the first step to getting rid of caste in the U.S. It is those in power—white Americans—who need to acknowledge the caste system and advocate for the subordinate caste. By reckoning with the truth about what the U.S. was founded on—that is to say, a system that subordinates anyone who isn't white—more and more upper-caste people might be inspired to speak and act out against the American caste system. What will ultimately dismantle caste, the book suggests, is people's capacity to responsibly educate themselves about caste and work to dismantle it through interpersonal connections. For instance, Isabel Wilkerson speaks of how she got through to an aloof white plumber who came to her **house**, connecting with him by confiding in him about the recent loss of her mother (which led him to open up about the loss of his own mother). The artificial divisions that have defined the United States' society, politics, and economy keep people from true freedom. But by recognizing, rejecting, and replacing caste with empathy and advocacy, the U.S. may yet be able to create a society in which everyone is truly "free."

CASTE AS A GLOBAL PROBLEM

While the concept of a caste system (or social hierarchy) might be most closely linked with the Hindu caste system in India, caste systems exist all around the world. As early as 1916, American eugenicists pointed to the caste system in India as the inspiration for and parallel to the Jim Crow (or racial segregation) laws in the U.S.'s Southern states. And in 1934, when the leaders of the Nazi Party gathered in Berlin to begin drafting the Nuremberg Laws—the codes they would use to dehumanize Jewish people and exclude them from participating society—they turned to those very same Jim Crow laws for guidance for implementing a rigid, arbitrary hierarchy in their society. Caste's arbitrary divisions affect societies around the world, dehumanizing and subordinating many different groups of people. As such, Isabel Wilkerson argues that caste is a global problem—one that must be carefully, systematically dismantled if global society is to flourish.

The U.S., Nazi Germany, and India all structure (or once structured) their societies based on caste systems. The caste system in India is the world's oldest and most intricate. By dividing individuals into five major varnas (main castes) and thousands of jatis (subcastes based on the divine will of the god Brahma), Indian society has kept its society divided for millennia. Those in the subordinate caste (the Untouchables, or Dalits) are relegated to menial jobs and excluded from public spaces, while those in the dominant caste (the Brahmins) wield power over the members of every caste below them—all because of the category a person is born into. Similarly, the U.S. caste system—in which white people comprise the dominant caste and Black people comprise the subordinate caste—is centuries old. It has defined the country's social relations, politics, and economy since its foundation, stigmatizing African Americans and excluding them from equal opportunities. Yet the book points out that it's still difficult for Americans to recognize that their society is indeed structured around caste. Perhaps the most infamous example of a caste system is Nazi Germany's, in which "Aryan" Germans comprised the dominant caste, and Jews and other marginalized groups comprised the subordinate caste. This system was "accelerated" in the sense that it was created, enforced, and dismantled all within the span of about a decade. Yet the swiftness with which the Nazis were able to sequester, dehumanize, and exterminate a whole subset of their society speaks to how powerful caste is. By examining these societies' very different (yet fundamentally connected) caste systems, the book suggests that caste itself is a cruel, arbitrary way to organize a society. Just as the Nazis' campaign

of dehumanization and terror was eradicated, so too must societies like the U.S. and India dismantle their caste systems in order to restore dignity and humanity to the people they've subordinated.

The book suggests that it is important for humanity as a whole to recognize and abolish castes for the good of the "collective human body." As long as people rank others based on arbitrary, fixed traits, there will never be meaningful social progress or an end to caste-based violence. Wilkerson suggests that in the U.S., the brutal lynchings of the Jim Crow South have been transformed into the police killings of the 21st century. Moreover, the segregation laws that kept the subordinate caste confined to certain jobs and restricted from certain public spaces still ripple through society in the form of housing projects and other unofficially segregated spaces. Caste continues to unconsciously drive how people in the U.S. interact with one another—and until more people awaken to caste's continued hold on U.S. society, it will continue to claim lives and limit what certain people can achieve. In writing about attending various conferences on caste in India and London, Wilkerson was taken aback by how upper-caste people infringed thoughtlessly on the conversations of lower-caste people. She also observed how lower-caste people struggled against the forced subservience that Indian society ingrained in them even after immigrating to other countries. This illustrates that caste still dictates how people in India—and even those living abroad—relate to one another, preventing lower-caste people from truly participating as equals in society. "We are responsible for our own ignorance or, with time and openhearted enlightenment, our own wisdom," writes Wilkerson in the concluding passages of *Caste*. Here, she uses the plural pronoun "we" to illustrate the fact that caste is indeed a global issue—one that affects everyone who lives in a caste system. Caste, she implies, can't be dismantled by an outside force, nor can this process happen all at once. Individuals need to take accountability for the "ignorance" that has allowed caste to become a global problem and invest in their own "enlightenment" and the enlightenment of others regarding caste's harmful effects.

The book offers a view of what global society might look like if, beginning on the individual level, people in societies around the world began resisting caste. In a world without caste, Isabel Wilkerson writes, people might stop trying to constantly assert their dominance over others. Rather, people free from caste would "look upon all of humanity with wonderment" and see one another as members of the same remarkable species. By dismantling caste, countries around the world would be able to invest in their citizens' well-being and in humanity's collective survival. In an age of climate crisis and global political turmoil, caste only impedes global society's ability to move forward. By working together to dismantle caste around the globe, the "succeeding generation" after our own will learn from our successes. But if humanity doesn't do so, caste will only continue to limit how unified, how healthy, and how successful global society can be.

HOW CASTE SUSTAINS ITSELF

Throughout *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson explores the many ways that caste sustains itself in the United States and around the world. The book points to many examples of how caste systems—which place people in a social hierarchy based on arbitrary categories—keep themselves going. These examples include scapegoating or dehumanizing people in subordinate castes (the lowest categories), as well as suppressing them through police brutality and cruel cultural stereotypes and narratives shown in media. Moreover, those in subordinate castes are given very limited opportunities to escape their stations. The book suggests that caste is a phenomenon of "madness" that echoes through every level of global society, engineered by a dominant caste seeking to "sustain [its power] at all costs."

In a section of the book entitled "The Pillars of Caste," Wilkerson calls attention to the many ways through which caste keeps itself going. First, caste sustains itself include reliance on narratives about divine will (the idea that deities or religious figures have willed the existence of caste) and the inherent purity or inherent pollution of different castes. The creation of the Indian caste system by the god Brahma and the accursing of dark-skinned peoples the biblical figure Noah have historically been used to enforce caste. According to Hindu text the Laws of Manu, the god Brahma created the different castes, or varnas, from the different parts of his body. From his mouth he created the Brahmin, the dominant caste; from his limbs he created the middle castes, consisting of warriors and merchants; and from his feet he created the Shudra, or the servant caste. The Untouchables, or the Dalits—the subordinate caste—weren't even mentioned in the creation of the castes, illustrating that this caste was engineered to exist in such a lowly position that it was outside of the system entirely. Thus, the Untouchables could never rise in society because they weren't really part of society. In U.S. history, white Protestant colonists from Europe who came to the New World wanted to justify their enslavement of Africans. They turned to the Bible, which featured a story in which the patriarch Noah cursed his grandson, who had dark skin, and claimed that all of his descendants would become the slaves of their betters. These myths suggest that caste systems are natural and morally right—that religious laws predetermine caste. But Wilkerson argues that in actuality, these constructed ideals are arbitrary and false.

Caste also sustains itself by controlling which castes have access to certain social spheres and financial positions. By enforcing endogamy, meaning that members of a certain caste cannot marry outside of their own group, caste controls

peoples' exposure to people from other social classes. This creates even more social insularity while reinforcing the idea that the dominant castes are inherently superior to the subordinate castes. And by controlling which occupations are available to certain castes, the caste system is able to keep subordinate-caste people in demeaning jobs that reinforce the idea they're not fit for socioeconomic advancement. For example, "Untouchables," or Dalits, in India—members of the lowest caste—were historically confined to "humble or dirty work" like latrine cleaning. Black Americans were also limited to menial, low-paying jobs after slavery was outlawed in the U.S. The dominant caste is then able to claim that these kinds of jobs are the only jobs the subordinate caste is fit for, because the dominant caste itself has placed them in these roles.

Caste also sustains itself through psychological manipulation of the dominant and subordinate castes through terrorism, dehumanization, and stigmatization. In Nazi Germany, Jews and other oppressed groups were categorized as *Untermenschen*, or "under-humans." By stripping these groups of their humanity and stigmatizing them as unfit to live and work alongside the dominant caste, the Nazis were able to manipulate the dominant caste into caring little about the subordinate caste. In India, the "Untouchables," or Dalits, were also categorized as lowly, unclean, and not even fit for inclusion in the caste system. The stigmatization of the Dalits—and the violence that the upper castes inflicted on them with impunity—kept the "machinery" of caste working.

In the U.S., lynchings were used to terrorize Black people across the country. By reminding African Americans that if they pushed back against the limits of caste, they would be punished with their lives, the dominant caste disincentivized any pushback at all. For instance, a Black boy named Willie James Howard was just 15 in 1943 when he wrote a sweet, vaguely flirtatious Christmas card to one of his white coworkers at a dime store. When the letter was discovered, a group of white men kidnapped, bound, and tortured Howard, ultimately forcing him to jump into a river at gunpoint and drown while his father looked on. Contemporary instances of police brutality, such as the killings of Tamir Rice and Freddie Gray, also psychologically terrorize African Americans. When white officers are able to take the lives of Black people with impunity, the "machine" of caste illustrates that Black lives are not as valuable as other lives. By creating an atmosphere of terror, the dominant castes maintain control over the subordinate castes. In highlighting the myths, narratives, and social practices that sustain caste, the book suggests that the dominant castes have carefully engineered these "pillars" and mechanisms in order to keep power on their side.

THE COSTS OF CASTE

All of global society, Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* suggests, pays a price for a caste system (a social hierarchy that ranks people based on fixed, arbitrary categories) that rewards few while punishing many. The book suggests that the United States in particular suffers because of its allegiance to a rigid caste system, resulting in an inaccurate understanding of their country's history and unequal access to things like healthcare and education. By pointing out how societies around the world are hindered by their devotion to caste, the book suggests that members of the dominant castes will often act and vote against their own interests—no matter the cost—if it means upholding the caste system that gives them a sense of worth, power, and dominance.

The general welfare of caste-based societies always suffers, because people in dominant castes don't want people in subordinate castes to have privileges that those in dominant castes want reserved exclusively for them. One of the costs of caste is that societies centered around caste systems often have false understandings of their own histories. And what's worse, a nation that won't look back on its past is fundamentally incapable of recognizing what's happening in its present. The U.S., which downplays the impact of slavery on its present social atmosphere, has very little understanding of how its own caste system has influenced it over the years. A country that can't even see the costs of caste, then, cannot understand how caste is hampering its progress. Another cost of caste is the loss of potential. By dehumanizing, stigmatizing, and ostracizing the subordinate castes, countries actively hamper their own growth. Albert Einstein—widely considered to be one of the greatest scientists who ever lived—was a member of the subordinate (or even subhuman) caste in Nazi Germany's caste system because he was Jewish. By referring to Einstein as an example, the book implies that many brilliant minds may have been suppressed by caste. In this way, the world's collective progress may have already been stymied by caste in unknowable ways.

One of the most damaging costs of caste can be seen in the U.S.'s healthcare and education systems. Though the U.S. is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, it lags behind other developed countries on several fronts. The U.S. does not provide its citizens with any form of free or low-cost healthcare coverage, and many people who need affordable healthcare or government benefits aren't able to access that aid. The U.S. also has the highest incarceration rate on the planet, the highest rate of public mass shootings, and the highest infant mortality rate among the world's richest nations. Moreover, American students' test scores compare poorly to those in other developed nations, and the U.S. ranks only 18th in global happiness. All of these problems disproportionately impact the subordinate class, which is comprised of Black Americans—so remedying them would mean that the U.S. would have to invest in the health, success, and well-being of its subordinate caste. But the book suggests that the country would rather let all of its citizens suffer than treat them all equally, because to do so

would be to afford equality to the subordinate caste. Furthermore, scientists have tried to understand the psychological and physiological costs of casteism. New research shows that the psychological trauma of living in the subordinate caste is linked to high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. It can also result in shortened and weathered DNA strands (which shortens lifespan) as well as high blood pressure, diabetes, and other diseases. These health problems disproportionately affect Black people (the subordinate caste) in the U.S.—and yet they're often blamed on the subordinate caste, rather than the dominant caste's poor treatment of the subordinate caste.

The book posits that even when all of these societal costs are considered, the dominant caste will continue to see them as necessary or inevitable because of their own desire to cling to power. The dominant castes' power comes from the historical precedent of that power—caste is an often irrational (yet still powerful) enclosed loop. By keeping the subordinate castes down, the dominant castes are able to sustain their claims to superiority. In the U.S., especially, the creation of healthcare and education initiatives, stronger social programs, and even reparations for slavery (repaying descendants of enslaved people) would require the dominant caste to relinquish some of its power in order to invest in the prosperity of the subordinate caste. Wilkerson terms this phenomenon "dominant group status threat," and she suggests that when a dominant group's status is perceived to be under threat, an attempt to restore that power through any means necessary is inevitable. Even though these initiatives would improve U.S. society as a whole, preserving the caste system is, to the dominant caste, seemingly worth the costs that they, too, incur. The challenge of contemporary times, the book posits, is finding a way to "see through the [...] layers of a caste system that has more power than we as humans should permit it to have." In the process, humanity may yet be able to honestly weigh the costs of caste against its ever-diminishing benefits to a small subset of global society.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE OLD HOUSE

Throughout Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste*, the old house in which the author lives symbolizes the "old house" she believes the United States to be. In stating that the U.S. is an old house, Wilkerson calls attention to the deterioration of the country's "skeleton" (underlying social structure) due to its having been built on the "mudsill," or foundational stone, of casteism and slavery. Throughout the book, Wilkerson argues that old houses need even more attention than modern ones—and failing to keep up with the house's maintenance will lead to it crumbling. In several chapters, Wilkerson describes the overwhelming and often uncomfortable maintenance her own house requires. This suggests to her readers that Americans must collectively come together to do maintenance on the "old house": that is, expose the deep societal flaws in the country's foundation. The U.S. must root these problems out and replace them with a new underlying structure, otherwise the country will continue to decline into a state of unmanageable disrepair.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Caste* published in 2020.

Chapter 2 Quotes

America is an old house. We can never declare the work over. [...] When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces the central symbol at the core of Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste*: the old house in which she and her family live. The symbol of the old house represents the United States—and the country's refusal to examine the metaphorical cracks in its foundation. Old houses, as this passage outlines, need consistent upkeep and repair. Without constant attention, things may rot and "fester" deep in the house's foundation. While many people might not want to look at what is "lurking" below the surface, avoiding an old house's problems will only make them worse. The U.S., too, has many problems lurking below its surface appearance of prosperity and freedom. In order to keep the country in working order, its leaders and citizens must look at its foundational elements and understand how

those elements influence the way the country operates today.

In this metaphor of the old house, caste is what's is rotting in the U.S.'s foundation. While it may hold the "house" of the country up, it's not doing a very good job. Throughout the book, Wilkerson will go on to examine the U.S.'s many social, economic, and political problems—and she'll suggest that all of them are rooted in the country's loyalty to its divisive, cruel, and arbitrary caste system. "The consequences of inaction" are vast: Americans are dying due to health problems caused by the stresses of living in a caste system; instances of race-based violence and police brutality are on the rise; and most Americans don't even fully understand that a caste system is at the root of these issues. Until the American people begin to examine what's wrong in the "old house" in which they live—and taking steps to fix the house's issues—American society will continue to suffer and deteriorate, just like a building that has fallen into disrepair.

> Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton, a caste system that is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order. Looking at caste is like holding the country's X-ray up to the light.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the book continues to elaborate on the idea of the United States as an "old house" that is rotting from the inside out due to the caste system that upholds it. Caste, this passage alleges, is the "unseen skeleton" of the United States. Every political policy, every social interaction, and every economic gain (or loss) is rooted in the caste system. Yet many Americans would never dream that the word "caste" could be what defines their country. This is where caste gets its power: from its invisibility. As long as Americans refuse to hold their country's "X-ray up to the light" and take a look at its most deeply rooted problems, the invisible "infrastructure" of caste will continue to define life in the U.S.

This passage notably uses the language of building: "infrastructure," "architecture," "studs," and "joints." But while the language Wilkerson uses in this passage suggests stability and structural integrity, caste's rigid, arbitrary boundaries are actually unstable foundations on which to build a society. There's no doubt that the U.S. has a solid skeleton—but caste's rigidity and solidity are not reassuring in the least. Instead, caste creates an infrastructure defined by social division and prejudice. So, as the passage progresses, Wilkerson suggests that her readers should start to see caste's fixed organization not as reassuring but as terrifying. A country that's built around a system that's so embedded and so expertly constructed—yet so detrimental to all who live within it—is a country with a set of problems that won't be easily solved.

An Invisible Program Quotes

> The great quest in the film series *The Matrix* involves those humans who awaken to this realization as they search for a way to escape their entrapment. Those who accept their programming get to lead deadened, surface lives enslaved to a semblance of reality. They are captives, safe on the surface, as long as they are unaware of their captivity. […] People who do not know that they are captive will not resist their bondage.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the book compares Americans' ignorance about caste to the ignorance of the characters in the film series *The Matrix*. Her intention is to show how easy—yet how "deaden[ing]"—it can be to be a passive participant in the caste system. In *The Matrix*, a select group of characters awakens to the fact that their lives are not what they seem: a hidden, complex computer program is creating an illusion of life for them to enjoy as it secretly drains their life force. Isabel Wilkerson, the author of *Caste*, asserts that the caste system in the United States plays a similar role: it holds people "captive" yet keeps them "unaware of their captivity" as it divides people into a hierarchy and pits them against one another. And if people are unaware that they're being manipulated or corralled into certain social roles, they cannot even begin to fight against the system that keeps them in "bondage."

The only way to begin resisting caste's influence on daily life—an influence that is, in the book's estimation, equivalent to "programming"—is to realize that the hidden "skeleton" of caste exists in the first place. Once a person awakens to the truth of their reality, they can then begin working to change it. In the first section of the book, Wilkerson points out that one of the biggest hurdles for many Americans is accepting that the U.S. is organized around a caste system in the first place. But once Americans make this intellectual leap and accept that whether they've been aware of it or not, their lives are organized around the lines of caste, they will be able to start seeing the role caste plays in everyday life. And once they recognize that caste has "programm[ed]" them, people can start to deprogram themselves and one another. Throughout the book, Wilkerson will assert that caste relies, in part, on invisibility and passivity to sustain itself. The only way to recognize the costs of caste and work to resist its influence is to recognize it and call it out.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Day after day, the curtain rises on a stage of epic proportions, one that has been running for centuries. The actors wear the costumes of their predecessors and inhabit the roles assigned to them. The people in these roles are not the characters they play, but they have played the roles long enough to incorporate the roles into their very being, to merge the assignment with their inner selves and how they are seen in the world.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the book compares the compulsory roles caste creates to the roles actors perform during a stage play. By drawing attention to the daily performances of caste that take place every day, all around the world, the book implies that caste systems are arbitrary and even ridiculous. A caste system forces everyone who lives inside of it to speak, act, and behave in certain ways—so the charades of costumes, scripts, and characters are apt comparisons to how caste prevents people from being their true, authentic selves. This denial of a person's true self is one of the many costs of caste, as many people born into subordinate castes around the world are unable to behave in certain ways or pursue certain goals. This is because the caste systems in which they live have forced them into certain societal positions or adopt certain behaviors and characteristics.

This passage also shows that caste sustains itself by keeping the "long-running play" of caste going. It forces people to "merge" themselves with the qualities expected of them, acting out the parts their "predecessors" played rather than creating something new for themselves. In order to dismantle caste's influence on societies in places like the U.S. and India, this passage suggests, it's necessary for all of the actors in a caste system—those at the top of the system and those at the bottom, as well—to reject the "assignment[s]" caste has given them and put a stop to the endless charades that caste requires.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Caste is a living, breathing entity. It is like a corporation that seeks to sustain itself at all costs.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this short quotation, author Isabel Wilkerson gets at the heart of why caste continues to endure in contemporary society: it has become something that is almost alive, and it fights to keep itself animated "at all costs." This passage helps illuminate why modern societies—societies that claim to value freedom, individuality, and equality—remain completely bound by the caste. Caste today might not take the forms it took in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) U.S., Nazi Germany, or the British colonial period in India. But it still exists, and it is still a global problem. Caste isn't fixed in the past—because it is, in essence, alive, that means it is constantly evolving. Caste serves the most powerful people in any given society—and so those in power know that caste must be sustained if they are to continue enjoying special privileges.

By comparing caste to a "corporation," this passage implies that caste doesn't necessarily play by society's rules. Caste is vast, it is profitable, and it keeps many people metaphorically employed (in other words, it gives certain people access to lots of power, money, and social clout). But like a corporation threatened with a scandal or a period of financial difficulty, caste doesn't just fade into the background—instead, it finds new ways to assert itself. As

the book continues, Wilkerson will point to the many forms that modern caste hierarchies take. Caste sustains itself through things like police brutality and governments' unwillingness to invest in social security programs and universal healthcare. Even though caste systems, like the ones in the U.S. and India, cost their societies greatly, those in power work to keep them alive.

Chapter 8 Quotes

The Nazis needed no outsiders to plant the seeds of hatred within them. But in the early years of the regime, when they still had a stake in the appearance of legitimacy and the hope of foreign investment, they were seeking legal prototypes for the caste system they were building. They were looking to move quickly with their plans for racial separation and purity, and knew that the United States was centuries ahead of them with its anti-miscegenation statutes and race-based immigration bans.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Adolf Hitler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson illustrates how Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party looked to the United States for guidance as to how to construct and uphold their "accelerated" caste system. While it might be shocking for many readers to learn that the Nazis took inspiration from the U.S. in order to institute a campaign of violence, terror, and extermination throughout Europe, it is important to recognize that other countries have long been aware of the U.S.'s caste-based hierarchy. Like Americans, the Nazis sought to create a dual-poled caste system. In the U.S., the dominant caste was comprised of white people, and the subordinate caste was comprised of African Americans. In Nazi Germany, the Nazis sought to make Aryans the dominant caste and create a subordinate caste primarily consisting of Jews (but also of Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, disabled people, and political enemies). To maintain an "appearance of legitimacy," they looked to the U.S.—where Jim Crow (racial segregation) laws kept American society, especially in the South, rigidly segregated through legalized terror and violence.

This passage illustrates that the "seeds of hatred" that defined the Third Reich weren't necessarily unique to Nazi Germany. The U.S., too, used many tactics to keep its subordinate caste of Black Americans cut off from the rest of society. These included extreme violence in the form of lynchings; laws preventing interracial marriage; and segregation laws meant to enforce the idea that Black people were somehow inherently polluted. By illustrating how different caste systems use similar methods of control to sustain themselves, the book suggests that caste is not a problem restricted to any one country or society: it is a global issue that has haunted the world for millennia.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The villagers were not all Nazis, in fact, many Germans were not Nazis. But they followed the Nazi leaders on the radio, waited to hear the latest from Hitler and Goebbels, the Nazis having seized the advantage of this new technology, the chance to reach Germans live and direct in their homes anytime they chose, an intravenous drip to the mind. The people had ingested the lies of an inherent Untermenschen, that these prisoners—Jews, Sinti, homosexuals, opponents of the Reich—were not humans like themselves, and thus the townspeople swept the ash from their steps and carried on with their days.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Adolf Hitler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson paints a portrait of daily life in a German village adjacent to an extermination camp at the height of the Third Reich. Importantly, she illustrates the horrors that can occur when people are silent and passive in the face of injustice. Even though not all of the villagers who lived in this small town—which was regularly blanketed by the ash of human remains from the crematorium at the nearby deathcamp—they were all complicit in the Nazi Party's atrocities. The caste system that the Nazis instituted convinced ordinary German citizens that they were part of the dominant caste—and that they were entitled to all the rights and privileges that came with that social station. Meanwhile, the Reich taught these same ordinary people that the members of the subordinate caste—which consisted primarily of Jews, but also of several racial and sexual minorities and political dissidents—were subhuman.

Thus, these ordinary citizens were able to convince themselves that no matter what was being done to the

subordinate caste, it didn't matter—because they weren't even human. Caste sustains itself in any given society by convincing two or more groups of people that they are profoundly different from one another—and that those differences are profound enough to excuse violence against the subordinate caste.

Pillar Number One Quotes

The United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts of their respective cultures. In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the book explores how caste systems rest on a foundational "pillar" of supposed divine will. Essentially, this chapter argues, people create caste systems often use religious myths to explain and excuse the subjugation of the peoples it deems inferior and places in the subordinate caste. In Indian society, a religious text called the Laws of Manu (which told the story of how the god Brahma created the castes from different parts of his own body) was used to justify the intricate Hindu caste system. And in early American society, white European colonists claimed that in the biblical story of Noah, Noah cursed his dark-skinned grandson Canaan and condemned his descendants to become "the lowest of slaves." These religious myths were so powerful—and so resisted any questioning or resistance—that the dominant castes were able to use them to justify dehumanizing the people whom these myths suggested were somehow inferior.

This passage illustrates how caste systems insinuate that certain people are "deserving" of debasement or cruelty. Even though both the U.S. and India have long been democracies, their societies are undemocratic in many ways, due to the influence of these harmful religious myths about caste and divine will.

Pillar Number Two Quotes

It is the fixed nature of caste that distinguishes it from class, a term to which it is often compared. Class is an altogether separate measure of one's standing in a society, marked by level of education, income, and occupation, as well as the attendant characteristics, such as accent, taste, and manners, that flow from socioeconomic status. These can be acquired through hard work and ingenuity or lost through poor decisions or calamity. If you can act your way out of it, then it is class, not caste.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson examines how caste-based societies lean on the concept of heritability—or the idea that one is born into a certain social position and must remain there—in order to keep caste alive and functioning. The concept of heritability truly does fix people within certain roles for life. In the Hindu caste system, the concept of "karma" suggests that a person is born into a certain caste due to the sins (or good deeds) of one's past life. In the U.S. caste system, the concept of karma doesn't dictate one's status—but the caste one is born into remains fixed nonetheless. Successful, intelligent, high-achieving subordinate-caste people in the U.S.—such as Black athletes and celebrities—are still often stigmatized and dehumanized.

This passage also suggests that the inescapability of caste is different from other forms of social division. While a person can alter their class and attempt to alter how others perceive them, caste's fixed heritability will always put people in their place and remind them of their position in the caste system. A caste system sustains itself by ensuring that those in it can never truly escape from it—no matter how far society progresses and no matter how much a person achieves individually, caste will always define people.

Pillar Number Three Quotes

Endogamy enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage outside of one's group and going so far as to prohibit sexual relations, or even the appearance of romantic interest across caste lines. It builds a firewall between castes and becomes the primary means of keeping resources and affinity within each tier of the caste system. Endogamy, by closing off legal family connection, blocks the chance for empathy or a sense of shared destiny between the castes.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

This passage investigates how endogamy—laws or social norms that forbid or discourage marriage outside of one's caste—keeps caste systems alive. There are many ways that caste infiltrates every aspect of life in a caste system. By preventing marriage between different castes, races, or religions, those in power accomplish a twofold mission. First, they preserve "purity" along lines of race, caste, or religious affiliation—and this is often used as a cover for enforcing endogamy. But in reality, endogamy serves a much darker purpose. By keeping people within their own caste and preventing them from associating or developing close relationships with people of other castes, caste systems slowly erode a society's capacity for empathy and diversity.

There can be no sense of a "shared destiny" or collective humanity in a caste system that forbids emotional or physical intimacy between people from different parts of society. And this is caste's ultimate goal: to enforce division between different kinds of people, and to encourage the dominant castes to dehumanize and stigmatize those in the subordinate caste. By preventing people from recognizing one another's humanity, caste is able to convince dominant-caste individuals that they don't need to worry about—or even really consider—what life is like for the people whose lives are marred or destroyed by caste.

Pillar Number Four Quotes

❝ Their exclusion was used to justify their exclusion. Their degraded station justified their degradation. They were consigned to the lowliest, dirtiest jobs and thus were seen as lowly and dirty, and everyone in the caste system absorbed the message of their degradation.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the book calls attention to the unique paradox that emerges when caste systems use rhetoric concerning the purity of the dominant castes versus the pollution of the subordinate ones. In both the U.S. and in India, the subordinate castes were created so that the dominant castes didn't have to do the more tiresome, unclean jobs needed to sustain society. In the U.S., African Americans were subordinated and enslaved to do the back-breaking labor of building, farming, and harvesting. And in India, the Dalits (or Untouchables) were forced to do society's most unclean jobs, like cleaning latrines. By forcing the subordinate castes into taking these jobs, both caste systems were then able to claim that because Dalits and African Americans had lowly or dirty jobs, they were lowly or dirty people. But of course, the dominant castes themselves created these narratives. And so, the exclusion and degradation of the subordinate castes was used, over centuries (or millennia, in the case of India) to justify their continued exclusion and degradation.

This passage unveils the arbitrary, constructed nature of caste. Everything about a caste system is carefully engineered to keep power and status firmly with the dominant castes. And for one group to retain power, they must turn the rest of society against a powerless group. Wilkerson intends to highlight the cyclical, inescapable nature of these manmade power struggles, suggesting that caste will always try to sustain itself even in the face of its own paradoxes.

Pillar Number Five Quotes

❝ When a house is being built, the single most important piece of the framework is the first wood beam hammered into place to anchor the foundation. That piece is called the mudsill, the sill plate that runs along the base of a house and bears the weight of the entire structure above it. The studs and subfloors, the ceilings and windows, the doors and roofing, all the components that make it a house, are built on top of the mudsill. In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

This passage suggests that any given caste system relies upon the subordinate caste remaining in a fixed position at the bottommost rung of society. Caste is artificial, in the

sense that it's a constructed hierarchy meant to control a population and consolidate power with one certain group. By fixing one group of people—in the case of Indian society, the Dalits (or Untouchables, as they used to be called)—at the bottom floor or "mudsill" of society, the dominant caste can control everyone in between. Indian society has five major castes and hundreds of *jatis*, or subcastes. But the Dalits are, ironically, the most important part of their caste system's framework, because they "bear the weight" of the entire system above them. By aligning several hundred smaller groups of people against the subordinate "mudsill" caste, the members of the dominant caste can manipulate all of society in their favor.

Here, Wilkerson also reanimates the central symbol of the "old house," expanding that symbol's meaning from a strict reference to the "old house" that is the United States. This passage suggests that every society is its own "old house"—and that every "house" is built on the arbitrary but fixed subjugation of a subordinate caste.

Pillar Number Six Quotes

Both Nazi Germany and the United States reduced their outgroups, Jews and African-Americans, respectively, to an undifferentiated mass of nameless, faceless scapegoats, the shock absorbers of the collective fears and setbacks of each nation. Germany blamed Jews for the loss of World War I, for the shame and economic straits that befell the country after its defeat and the United States blamed African-Americans for many of its social ills. In both cases, individuals were lumped together for sharing a single, stigmatizing trait, made indistinct and indistinguishable in preparation for the exploitation and atrocities that would be inflicted upon them. Individuals were no longer individuals.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores how caste sustains itself through the dehumanization and stigmatization of a subordinate caste. By pointing out the fact that all three major caste systems the world has seen—India, Nazi Germany, and the United States—relied on the dehumanization of a subordinate caste, the book suggests that dehumanization is a key component of caste's longevity. By erasing the humanity of an entire group of people, the dominant caste can distract from their own cruelty and focus society's ire on an "outgroup".

In the antebellum South, dominant-caste slavers stripped subordinate caste Africans and African Americans of their humanity by taking away their names, branding them, displaying their naked bodies on auction blocks, and violently punishing them. In Nazi Germany, Jewish people arriving at concentration camps were forced to abandon all of their possessions, wear uniforms and yellow stars, and shave their heads. And in India, Dalits were made to wear certain fabrics, don bells when they walked through the streets, and hide their face from any members of the upper castes they came in contact with.

All of these tactics were used to make the subordinate caste seem "indistinct and indistinguishable" so that their abominable treatment wouldn't be seen as the atrocity it was. By erasing the concept of the individual, this passage suggests, a caste system can make bystanders care less about violence and atrocity. It can even make people think that the subordinate caste has done something to deserve the cruelty committed against them.

Pillar Number Seven Quotes

The crimes of homicide, of rape, and of assault and battery were felonies in the slavery era as they are today in any civil society. They were seen then as wrong, immoral, reprehensible, and worthy of the severest punishment. But the country allowed most any atrocity to be inflicted on the black body.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

This passage draws a connection between an era when "most any atrocity [could] be inflicted on the black body"—the era of slavery—and the tacit policy of "cruelty as a means of control" that is still leveled against African Americans today. Since its inception, the United States' caste system has kept African Americans in a subordinate role through terror, violence, and cruelty. The earliest settlers to arrive in the New World and enslave Africans knew that one of the most effective ways of consolidating and maintaining power was through violence. By dehumanizing and brutalizing Black people, early Americans ensured that the caste system they were trying to implement would never be threatened. Structuring daily life around terrorizing enslaved Black people thus became

socially accepted and ingrained in U.S. society.

Wilkerson suggests throughout this chapter that modern-day police brutality against African Americans is linked to this centuries-old method of control. By inspiring terror in an entire group of people, that group can be manipulated and excluded. Even in a society that publicly frowns on race-based violence, caste restrains Black people from certain roles, public spaces, and opportunities.

Pillar Number Eight Quotes

From the beginning, the power of caste and the superior status of the dominant group was perhaps never clearer than when the person deemed superior was unquestionably not.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation suggests that even "unquestionably" dull or cruel members of the dominant caste are, in a caste-based society, still elevated as inherently superior to even the brightest, kindest, most high-achieving members of the subordinate one. Caste creates a hierarchy in which the dominant caste is able to trumpet its inherent superiority while claiming that the subordinate caste is inherently inferior. This illogic, presented as fact, is used to justify the ongoing subordination of an entire group of people. By dehumanizing subordinate-caste people and suggesting that they deserve an inferior role because they're inherently inferior, the dominant caste prevents the subordinate class from believing that they could ever be worthy of more than they have.

This passage illustrates the illogic of caste—even as it shows how caste in fact *uses* faulty logic to sustain itself. The dominant caste becomes so fiercely protective of the illusion of its superiority that its members cannot even entertain the idea that a member of the subordinate caste might be intelligent, capable, or good.

Brown Eyes versus Blue Eyes Quotes

An otherwise neutral trait had been converted into a disability. The teacher later switched roles, and the blue-eyed children became the scapegoat caste, with the same caste behavior that had arisen the day before between these artificially constructed upper and lower castes. […]

Classroom performance fell for both groups of students during the few hours that they were relegated to the subordinate caste. The brown-eyed students took twice as long to finish a phonics exercise the day that they were made to feel inferior.

"I watched my students become what I told them they were," [Mrs. Elliott] told NBC News decades later.

Related Characters: Mrs. Elliott, Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes an experiment conducted by an Iowa schoolteacher, Mrs. Elliott, in the late 1960s. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Mrs. Elliott felt compelled to teach her students about the destructive nature of racism by granting them privileges based on an arbitrary trait: eye color. At first, blue-eyed children were assigned to be the dominant caste and brown-eyed children to be the subordinate one—then, the hierarchy was reversed.

This passage illustrates that there are emotional, intellectual, and even physical costs to those in the subordinate caste of any caste system. Mrs. Elliott's experiment surprised even her, showing her firsthand that there were swift, observable changes in her students based on the caste they'd been assigned. The dominant-caste students acted cruelly toward the subordinate-caste ones, while the subordinate-caste students became suddenly and deeply despairing, believing that they were inherently inferior to their classmates.

The real-world costs of caste, Wilkerson will go on to suggest, are even more debilitating and dehumanizing. It is no wonder that caste systems rely on the subordinate caste's sustained disbelief in their own worth—and their resulting willingness to take part in the narratives that the dominant caste tells them about themselves. To tell someone they're subordinate is to make them act in a subordinate matter—and so the dominant caste cruelly makes the subordinate caste complicit in their own oppression.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ [Tushar and I] had both been miscast, each in our own way, and could see through the delusion that had shaped and restricted us from the other side of our respective caste systems. We had broken from the matrix and were convinced that we could see what others could not and that others could see it, too, if they could awaken from their slumber.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Tushar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson recalls meeting a man named Tushar in London, at a conference about caste. Tushar was a shy, bookish man who belonged to the "warrior" caste in India, while Wilkerson was a successful journalist who belonged to the subordinate caste in the U.S. Both of them bonded over having been "miscast" in their respective caste systems.

This passage illustrates how illogical and inappropriate the logic of any given caste system is. Wilkerson and Tushar were both implicitly told, from birth, that certain things were expected (or not expected) of them due to the castes into which they were born. But neither of them fit with their caste's stereotypes of what a person of that caste should be. Throughout the book, Wilkerson repeatedly expresses a desire to help other people—especially Americans—"awaken" to the illogic of the caste system in which they live. She offers this anecdote in service of that goal. By highlighting how ridiculous and arbitrary caste delineations are, she's urging her readers to divest from the caste systems that define many societies around the world.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ If the lower-caste person manages actually to rise above an upper-caste person, the natural human response from someone weaned on their caste's inherent superiority is to perceive a threat to their existence, a heightened sense of unease, of displacement of fear for their very survival. "If the things that I have believed are not true, then might I not be who I thought I was?" The disaffection is more than economic. The malaise is spiritual, psychological, emotional. Who are you if there is no one to be better than?

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This passage highlights the "precarity of the highest rung" by illustrating the dominant caste's fragile narrative of its own superiority. Even though the dominant caste enjoys social, economic, and political power, that power only comes from the subjugation and oppression of the subordinate caste. So, when a member of the subordinate caste rises to greatness—as in the case of Barack Obama, the first African American president—it leads the dominant caste to experience "dominant group status threat." This phenomenon is rooted in the fear that the dominant group will lose its status because of the subordinate caste's free participation in society. Any given caste system's legitimacy and longevity depend on the dominant caste's ability to convince the rest of society of their inherent superiority and their right to power. When that is interrupted, it creates a kind of identity crisis that is existential in nature.

This passage highlights how, in spite of worldwide narratives about caste's inescapability, the dominant caste's claim to power is actually very fragile. If something as simple as a Dalit (an "Untouchable" in the Indian caste system) pursuing an education or a Black person achieving political success can take down the dominant caste's entire self-image, that is proof that caste is arbitrary and constructed.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ This was the thievery of caste, stealing the time and psychic resources of the marginalized, draining energy in an already uphill competition. […]

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief quotation, author Isabel Wilkerson discusses one aspect of how caste intrudes into every part of daily life in the U.S. (and in any society where caste exists). This passage highlights how those who live in a caste system are unable forget—even for a day—that they are defined by and effectively trapped in their caste. The dominant caste steals "the time and psychic resources"—that is, the mental energy—of subordinate-caste members by finding new,

cruel ways to dehumanize and other them.

In this way, a caste system sustains itself by making the subordinate caste unable to even consider a way of life that isn't defined by caste. Members of the subordinate caste are placed forever on the defensive, forced to steel themselves against the cruelty that they will no doubt face each day. Even in a society like the U.S., where the dominant caste claims to value freedom and equality, members of the subordinate caste find themselves judged and policed as they move through the world.

Chapter 16 Quotes

It can lead those down under to absorb into their identities the conditions of their entrapment and to do whatever it takes to distinguish themselves as superior to others in their group, to be first among the lowest.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson examines a strange and tragic phenomenon in caste-based societies: members of the same caste harming one another in order to be "first among the lowest." Caste warps every aspect of society—even convincing its own victims that their fellow sufferers are their enemies. Throughout this chapter, Wilkerson compares the structure of caste to that of a tall apartment building in which the dominant caste sits comfortably in the penthouse while the subordinate caste is packed into a lowly basement.

But caste is so cruel makes the subordinate caste feel as though the basement is "flooding"—in other words, that they desperately need to get out of the basement. Not everyone can make it out, though—and so members of the subordinate caste, the book suggests, often end up hurting one another and pushing one another down to make it to the top. This metaphor suggests that caste sustains itself by forcing members of the subordinate caste to see one another as their primary enemies—when really, their true oppressors are far out of reach at the top of the "building" (or, more literally, in the highest caste).

Chapter 18 Quotes

Under the spell of caste, the majors, like society itself, were willing to forgo their own advancement and glory, and resulting profits, if these came at the hands of someone seen as subordinate.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Satchel Paige

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wilkerson examines one of the costs of caste by telling the story of Satchel Paige, a talented pitcher who was excluded from playing Major League baseball because he was Black. Satchel Paige's story speaks not just to caste's illogic, but to its costs to the "advancement and glory" of entire societies. Paige was a talented and skilled pitcher who was confined to the Negro Leagues at the height of his power as a player, in the 1930s and 1940s. Because the Major Leagues were racially segregated, Paige—widely regarded today as one of the greatest pitchers of all time—could not participate in mainstream baseball. His talent was wasted, which Wilkerson suggests is a shame.

But even beyond that sad fact, Wilkerson argues, American baseball suffered needlessly. Since dominant castes are so dedicated to enforcing their absolute power, caste systems often hamper society. The Major Leagues couldn't allow Paige to play ball with white players because to do so would be to suggest that he wasn't subordinate—that he wasn't inherently inferior or incapable. And if Paige wasn't all of those things, it would also mean that not all African Americans were the kinds of people that caste painted them as being. So, the dominant caste in the U.S. expressed greater allegiance to hierarchy and segregation than to its own interests. Wilkerson uses this passage to suggest that caste-based societies regularly handicap themselves by prioritizing caste's arbitrary rules above all else.

Chapter 22 Quotes

One cannot live in a caste system, breathe its air, without absorbing the message of caste supremacy. The subordinated castes are trained to admire, worship, fear, love, covet, and want to be like those at the center of society, at the top of the hierarchy. In India, it is said that you can try to leave caste, but caste never leaves you.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

This passage discusses how the subordinate castes are trained to "worship" the dominant castes due to constant societal messaging about dominant castes' supremacy. As a result, subordinate-caste members develop a kind of Stockholm Syndrome—a phenomenon in which hostages or victims develop an attachment to their captors or abusers. Wilkerson suggests that breathing the metaphorical "air" of a caste system's polluted atmosphere has destructive effects. Any society that is organized around a caste system—whether it is done so openly, like in India, or more subtly, like in the U.S.—sends the message that the dominant castes are inherently pure and that the subordinate castes are inherently polluted.

This corrupts society from the top down: the dominant castes become narcissistic (obsessed with their own supposed power and supremacy), while the subordinate castes absorb and often internalize the idea that they're inferior. Unable to aspire to better quality of life or entrance into the dominant caste, they can instead begin to "worship," emulate, and defer to those in the dominant caste.

This is one of the ways that a caste system victimizes everyone who lives in it. Caste's lessons are incredibly hard to leave behind. Wilkerson uses the example of Indian people who struggle to abandon caste's messaging after leaving their country because "caste never leaves" a person. It is clear that caste forces the subordinate caste to adopt its messaging simply to survive, and that this survival tactic isn't easy to avoid or let go of once it becomes normalized.

Chapter 23 Quotes

People who appear in places or positions where they are not expected can become foot soldiers in an ongoing quest for respect and legitimacy in a fight they had hoped was long over.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, author Isabel Wilkerson examines what happens when "the borders of hierarchy" are blurred. In other words, she discusses how the presence of subordinate-caste people in places historically reserved for the dominant caste often reveals society's ongoing casteism. She relays an anecdote about a group of Black women who were kicked off a wine tour bus in Napa Valley in the 21st century alongside an anecdote about a group of Black passengers on a steamboat in the 1800s who were forced to dine after white passengers had already finished their meals. In doing so, the book illustrates how caste polices who has access to certain spaces. Even today, caste continues to dictate what kind of people are allowed in certain establishments or permitted to participate in certain activities.

In describing this enduring cruelty, Wilkerson compares the subordinate-caste people who assert their right to occupy the same spaces as dominant-caste people to "foot soldiers." This language is significant, because it speaks to both the bravery and, unfortunately, the anonymity of these individuals. Those bold enough to resist the caste system—whether they did so 200 years ago or in the current decade—are doing their part to dismantle caste. But resisting caste's power is often incredibly difficult and even dangerous. By seeking basic "respect and legitimacy," these individuals are often putting their lives on the line. This passage implies that it shouldn't be subordinate-caste people's responsibility to dismantle caste. It must be a collective effort, one in which dominant-caste people reject the cruel system that has given them power and agency.

Chapter 27 Quotes

In Germany, displaying the swastika is a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. In the United States, the rebel flag is incorporated into the official state flag of Mississippi.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker), Robert E. Lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation investigates how the symbols of caste in any given society directly correlate to caste's longevity. Wilkerson suggests that a society that elevates caste-related symbols implicitly condones the continuation of its caste system. In modern-day Germany, there are no memorials to or statues of Nazi leaders. The swastika (which the Nazi Party used as their insignia) isn't allowed to be displayed. Young Germans are educated about the

atrocities of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in schools. But in the U.S., the truth about the American caste system isn't taught in schools. The rebel (Confederate) flag—which Wilkerson argues symbolizes the dehumanization, enslavement, and torture of African Americans—is regularly flown and even used in official state imagery. There are statues of Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee across the nation, and just as many schools named in his honor. In America, the caste system endures; in Germany, it was dismantled in the 1940s.

What's important about this passage is that even though modern-day Americans might claim that symbols are merely symbols, they are much more than just imagery—they are ideology. Flying a flag that was once used to declare one's allegiance to the institution of slavery implies that it's okay to long for a return to that institution. But a place that makes sure these symbols are recognized for the harmful ideologies they're associated with is signaling to its citizens that it does not condone the caste system's cruelties. In order for the U.S. to heal the wounds of its caste system, this passage suggests, the country must commit to banning symbols that excuse, tolerate, or even encourage caste.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ Compared to our counterparts in the developed world, America can be a harsh landscape, a less benevolent society than other wealthy nations. It is the price we pay for our caste system. In places with a different history and hierarchy, it is not necessarily seen as taking away from one's own prosperity if the system looks out for the needs of everyone.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson highlights how, in spite of being one of the wealthiest countries in the developed world, the U.S. is still held back by a lack of universal healthcare, an insufficient education system, and high rates of poverty and gun violence. Wilkerson alleges that the reason the U.S. suffers so greatly in so many ways is because the country refuses to let go of its caste system. The U.S. was built on a system that afforded wealth and privilege (or at least the opportunity to pursue those things) to the dominant caste (white people), while barring members of the subordinate caste (Black people) from even trying to participate in society or share in the U.S.'s great wealth.

Today, caste is not rigidly enforced through Jim Crow (racial segregation) laws or other official rules—but the caste system still keeps subordinate-caste people from achieving as much as dominant-caste people. And so, if the U.S. were to extend social security protections to its citizens in need, retool its education system, invest in vulnerable communities, and make things like healthcare easily accessible to all, the subordinate caste would be able to enjoy a better quality of life. And this, the book suggests, is something that the U.S. caste system cannot abide.

In a time when white supremacy is no longer acceptable, white citizens who don't want to lose the power that caste has long granted them must rely on the system already in place to keep subordinate-caste people down. If the system took care of everyone's needs, as this passage states, the upper caste's prosperity would be diminished. And this, Wilkerson suggests, is the reason why the U.S. refuses to equally serve and protect to all of its citizens.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ For most of his life, he had worn the sacred thread as if it were strands of hair from his head. Removing it amounted to renouncing his high caste, and he considered the consequences, that his family might reject him if they knew. He would have to determine how to manage their knowing when the time came.

He was now born a third time, the shades lifted in a darkened room in his mind.

"It is a fake crown that we wear," he came to realize.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 364

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, author Isabel Wilkerson relays an anecdote about an Indian man born into his country's dominant caste—the Brahmins—and his decision to reject the "fake crown" of his position in the caste system. While caste is a deeply entrenched part of life in India, there are still opportunities to resist caste on an individual level. The unnamed young man in this anecdote underwent a ceremony when he reached puberty where he was anointed with a sacred thread that he was instructed to wear throughout his life as a reminder of his identity as a Brahmin.

But as the man grew older—even though the thread was as much a part of him as his own hair—he began to recognize that the thread didn't symbolize his greatness. Instead, it symbolized a system of dehumanization and subjugation. By awakening to caste's cruelties and refusing to be a part of the system any longer, this young man began the process of disavowing caste, refusing to let the system sustain itself through him any longer.

Throughout the book, Wilkerson repeatedly calls attention to how difficult it is to extricate oneself from a caste system. And indeed, for subordinate-caste people, making the decision to reject caste wouldn't mean much. But it's significant and powerful for someone who has historically benefited from the caste system to reject its false ideology and its cruelties. If humanity is truly to create a more just world—a world without the global issue of caste—resistance must begin on an individual level.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ In a world without caste, being male or female, light or dark, immigrant or native-born would have no bearing on what anyone was perceived as being capable of. In a world without caste, we would all be invested in the well-being of others in our species if only for our own survival, and recognize that we are in need of one another more than we have been led to believe. […] We would see that, when others suffer, the collective human body is set back from the progression of our species.

A world without caste would set everyone free.

Related Characters: Isabel Wilkerson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 388

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson imagines what humanity could achieve "in a world without caste." Caste, as the book has already explained at length, is a system that divides and disorients people. But caste is often so invisible that people can't recognize why their societies are so stratified, tense, and violent. Like the people awakening from their captivity in *The Matrix* movies, humanity, this passage suggests, needs to awaken to how caste divides everyone and instead focus on what people have in common.

Caste's divisive nature, Wilkerson suggests, keeps humanity from ever achieving true, collective freedom. Caste creates arbitrary categories that highlight how people are different from one another. But true freedom from caste can only be achieved by people working together. So, the book suggests that people all around the world—whether they are aware of how caste oppresses them or not—need to think more about the "collective human body" and humanity's overall progression and achievement.

By focusing on humanity's collective well-being—especially in the face of forces like climate change, political unrest, and economic hardship—people might be more motivated to find solutions to the problems that threaten that well-being. Rather than living under a system that prioritizes the survival and prosperity of a chosen few, humanity must begin aspiring toward "a world without caste." Only then, the book suggests, will people be able to help one another achieve true liberation from the artificially constructed categories that divide us.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: THE MAN IN THE CROWD

Author Isabel Wilkerson writes about a famous black-and-white photograph taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, at the height of Hitler's Third Reich. In the picture, there's a lone man in a sea of shipyard workers who is refusing to perform the heil, or Nazi salute. The man is now believed to have been named August Landmesser—a former member of the Nazi Party who rejected the Party's campaign of terror after he fell in love with a Jewish woman, a member of the subordinate caste in the Nazis' regime. As someone connected to the scapegoated caste, Landmesser could see past the lies that the dominant caste—the Aryans—embraced.

Here, Wilkerson begins her book about caste systems around the world by focusing on a lone conscientious objector to the cruelties of caste. August Landmesser isn't a major historical figure—he was just an average man, and a member of the dominant caste at that. By calling attention to an average dominant-caste person's resistance to the caste system in Nazi Germany, Wilkerson illustrates what needs to happen on a global scale in order for modern-day caste systems to be dismantled.

Though everyone, Wilkerson writes, wants to believe that they would be like Landmesser and stand against the tide of evil, resisting an "ocean" is not so easy. Unless people are ready and willing to face scorn and exclusion, Wilkerson argues, it is not possible for everyone to exhibit Landmesser's bravery. She asks her readers what it would take for someone living in today's era to be like Landmesser.

In this passage, Wilkerson implies that all of humanity is currently facing the conundrum Landmesser faced: the question of whether relinquishing the power his caste position gave him was worth it for the greater good. It is up to members of the dominant and middle castes to resist the allure of caste—which is as powerful as the sea—and stand up for those in subordinate castes who are being stigmatized and dehumanized.

CHAPTER ONE: THE AFTERLIFE OF PATHOGENS

In 2016, a heat wave struck Siberia—parts of Russia reached above 95°F, and wildfires spread throughout the region. Soon, many people living in remote parts of the area—indigenous herdsmen and their children among them—fell ill with a strange sickness, and a few even died. Scientists soon realized that the heat had melted the Russian permafrost, exposing toxic anthrax particles that had been frozen in the ground for decades. When the pathogen was exposed, it was as toxic as it had ever been.

In this passage, Wilkerson figuratively compares the toxicity of caste to the toxicity of dormant disease particles. Through this metaphor, she's showing that while most people today might not think of caste as a widespread problem, it is—and most people have ignored it for a long time. But ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away—and just because it's not obvious at the surface doesn't mean it's not doing damage.

At the same time, on the other side of the world, the United States was preparing for an election that would become seen as a "psychic break" in the history of the country. Many Americans claimed that they no longer recognized their country—but Wilkerson knew that what was happening in the U.S. was in fact reflective of the country's long-held values. The first female candidate for president was running against an "impetuous billionaire" who claimed that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue without losing his followers' support. His base, the country's Republican Party, appealed mostly to white voters, believed he would "restore [Americans'] sovereignty."

Without naming the players in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Wilkerson characterizes the event as a moment when white Americans—the dominant caste in the American caste system—were seeking leadership from an unpredictable outsider because they feared that their "sovereignty," or power, was slipping away. The idea that white Americans believed this suggests that many Americans know, on some level, that they live in an established hierarchy based largely on race.

The 2016 presidential election was an "existential" fight for primacy. It took place in a country whose rapidly shifting demographics threatened the dominant racial caste in an unspoken hierarchy that had existed since the country was founded. Experts predicted that by 2042, white people will no longer be the majority in America—a country that had never known another structure. The 2008 election of the first African American president—a man from the lower, or subordinate, caste—caused some people to declare the arrival of a post-racial world. But it caused others—members of the dominant caste—to fear that there was no more "hope for white people."

By pointing out the societal factors that led up to the 2016 victory of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, Wilkerson suggests that the U.S. is centered around protecting the dominant caste, which is comprised of white people. Any threat to this is downright "existential" in nature, which reveals how deeply entrenched in its caste system the U.S. is. By contrast, myths about post-racialism, equality, and freedom for all dominate how people talk about what makes the U.S. unique. By highlighting white people's anxieties about shifts in the U.S.'s social hierarchy, Wilkerson suggests that most Americans know, on some unspoken level, that they live in a caste system.

The 2016 election further pushed the United States toward isolationism and tribalism. Members of the dominant caste felt comfortable admitting that they were ready for a return to "a time when everybody knew their place." Hate crimes and instances of mass violence and police brutality increased: in the summer of 2017, a white supremacist drove into a crowd of "anti-hate" protestors and killed a young woman named Heather Heyer; in the fall of 2018, 11 people were killed while attending services at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh. Even as the new administration faced claims that the new president was a "malignant narcissist" or an agent of a foreign power, the dominant caste continued to rise in power.

This passage illustrates how caste has come to the forefront of discourse about U.S. society over the last several years. The dominant caste's desire for "a time when everybody knew their place" suggests that these people derive power and worth from being part of a racial hierarchy. Wilkerson implies that Donald Trump's messaging emboldened the dominant caste to inflict violence on the subordinate caste. So even if these people might not have used the word "dominant caste" to describe their social position, they were well aware that their whiteness afforded them certain powers in U.S. society—and they did not want to have those powers stripped.

Even after an impeachment trial and the botched handling of the worst pandemic in over a century, the new president retained the firm support of his base. Millions of people in the U.S. and abroad wondered why it seemed that the ground had shifted almost overnight. But what scientists know about earthquakes is that the worst of them are often preceded by longer, slow-moving disruptions, too deep beneath the surface to feel.

This passage begins to illustrate the costs of caste. Wilkerson believes that Donald Trump's presidency was disastrous for the U.S. in many ways, and that he represented a return to prioritizing America's dominant caste. And this, to dominant-caste members themselves, was worth the suffering of countless others.

Returning to the outbreak of anthrax in Russia, Wilkerson recounts the extensive cleanup and containment process the affected regions of the country had to go through. The military needed to dispose of the reindeer carcasses that were spreading the disease after consuming grass grown out of contaminated ground, bleach the earth, and eradicate a "long-buried threat." Even then, complete protection couldn't be ensured—this contagion could only be "managed and anticipated" through vigilance and indeed reverence for its power.

This passage returns to the metaphor that opened the chapter: that of resurgent disease. This passage suggests that even though caste may, to many, be a "long-buried threat" that doesn't require their immediate attention, caste is in fact extremely toxic and very difficult to eradicate. More people, Wilkerson suggests, should view caste as a global threat.

THE VITALS OF HISTORY

When someone goes to the doctor, their physician will not treat them without first examining their family's history. Similarly, looking through the history of one's country can often feel like discovering that an ailment or addiction runs in the family. But just as one can't hide one's medical history from one's doctor and ignore their problems until they go away, Wilkerson argues, Americans must educate themselves about the full history of their country. This way, they can take precautions that will protect future generations from the threat of history repeating itself.

This short chapter illustrates the book's intent to look through the U.S.'s history to search for the truth. Only by understanding the past—and how caste has sustained itself in the U.S. for centuries—will Americans be able to understand the problems plaguing the nation today.

CHAPTER TWO: AN OLD HOUSE AND AN INFRARED LIGHT

Author Isabel Wilkerson and her family live in an **old house**. She recalls a housing inspector using an infrared lens to test a bulging leak in their ceiling and see what was happening inside, where human eyes couldn't reach. "America," Wilkerson writes, "is an old house"—she means that it must be continually maintained, and that those who live inside of it must not be afraid to examine the damage within it. While the "house" that modern-day Americans live in may be beautiful on the outside, they cannot delude themselves into thinking that just because they weren't here when the house was built, they aren't responsible for the problems with it now.

This introduces the book's central symbol: an old house. Comparing the U.S. to a house that's badly in need of examination and repair suggests that Americans must participate collectively in the upkeep of their society. But that's not possible, Wilkerson posits, without first investigating what exactly is wrong with the house. This kind of deep, existential reckoning is necessary if society is to dismantle caste.

Like all **old houses**, the U.S. has an "unseen skeleton"—a caste system that is as central to its operation as wooden beams are to the houses that we live in. Just because a caste system is an artificial construction—something that has been placed into society and that uses arbitrary boundaries and divisions—doesn't mean it doesn't have the power to define all of our lives.

Here, Wilkerson suggests that caste is the unseen skeleton of the United States—it's the framework that holds up and, in many ways, defines the country. But that can change if Americans work together to expose how arbitrary caste is and decide, collectively, that the U.S. can function without the framework of caste.

Three major caste systems have stood out over the course of human history: the caste system of Nazi Germany, the millennia-long caste system of India, and the race-based caste system of the United States. Each caste system demands that those "deemed inferior" are stigmatized in order to be kept at the bottom, and each caste system draws its power from some kind of "divine will," whether that comes from a sacred text or a socially accepted (but ultimately false) law of nature.

In this passage, Wilkerson introduces the three major caste systems that the book will discuss. What all of them have in common is the stigmatization and dehumanization of a group of people at the bottom of society. But the specifics of how these caste systems have decided which kind of people to oppress, and how to keep them oppressed, varies.

The hierarchy of caste guides us all by controlling power, resources, and the way we relate to one another. People in the U.S. participate in the caste system without even being aware of it—Americans have learned to unconsciously divide other humans on the basis of their race, or appearance. Wilkerson likens race to the "language" Americans speak, and caste to the "underlying grammar" that they unthinkingly encode as children. It is an invisible guide to how they process the world around them.

By comparing the instincts that one develops when living in a caste system to a kind of language or grammar, Wilkerson suggests that it's difficult to forget or change the lessons that caste teaches. She's urging her readers to see that in a caste system, every participant—whether aware or ignorant of the fact that they're living in one—unconsciously adopts prejudices.

The race a person has been assigned "or are perceived to belong to" is the "visible cue" to their caste. It determines where others, upon seeing them, expect them to live and what jobs others expect them to hold. The words "black" and "white" long applied to people who are neither color but rather some gradation in between, set people at opposite poles and extremes from one another.

By organizing society around a racial hierarchy, the U.S. caste system has reduced its citizens to their outward appearances. Regardless of the fact that race is a social construct (meaning that it's a social category rather than a biological one), all Americans now find themselves obligated to define themselves based on this dual-poled caste system.

Caste and race are not synonymous, nor are they mutually exclusive. In the United States, race is the visible agent of caste, which is a force that remains unseen. Caste is the infrastructure that holds each group in place, whereas race is a kind of "shorthand" for where a person belongs in the caste system. Caste is rigid, but race is fluid—and while what qualifies as "white," or belonging to the dominant caste, has changed over time, the very fact of a dominant caste has not. And even more significantly, the "subordinate caste" is fixed as a kind of "floor" beneath which there is nothing.

A caste system can be based on any criteria: station of birth, religion, or skin color. In the U.S., race happens to be what caste is organized around. But the arbitrary nature of caste doesn't mean that those who live in the system can see through its cruelties or its lies. Instead, those in a caste system generally learn and abide by its rules unconsciously.

Everyone, Wilkerson argues, is born into a silent, ancient game, and enlisted onto a team they never chose. We all wear our "team uniform[s]" that signal who we are to everyone else. Caste, more than gender or race, is the category of human division that ranks highest in intensity and in the drive for subordinating others.

This passage illustrates Wilkerson's weariness with the inescapability of caste. Throughout the book, she will suggest that in order to continue, a caste system relies on the "team" mentality it inspires almost subconsciously in all its participants.

CHAPTER THREE: AN AMERICAN UNTOUCHABLE

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife Coretta traveled to India in the winter of 1959. King had long dreamed of making a kind of pilgrimage to India, the place whose struggle against freedom from British colonial rule had inspired his own fight in the U.S. King had read of the caste system in India, and he wanted to meet members of its lowest caste—the Dalit, or Untouchables. But when the principal of a school King was visiting introduced him as an American "untouchable," King was taken aback. It took him a moment to realize that he was an Untouchable, and that every Black person in America was an Untouchable, as well. In that moment, King realized that America had a caste system of its own.

This passage shows how even one of the most renowned civil rights activists in American history did not fully understand how completely caste ruled American life until he was confronted with another country's caste system. This illustrates how insidious caste in the U.S. truly is—and how Black Americans have historically been forced to exist outside of society, just like the Indian Dalits.

The seeds of the American caste system were planted over 150 years before the American Revolution. The white men who wanted to overtake and "civilize" the new world they'd discovered knew they needed to conquer, enslave, or otherwise remove the people already living on it—and find "lesser beings" to do that work for them. Through a warped interpretation of the Bible, these men created a "ladder of humanity" that placed European people (particularly English Protestants) at the top, and African captives transported to build this new world at the bottom.

The language Wilkerson uses in this passage illustrates the desire for dominance that the American settlers possessed. They wanted to tame, rule, and enforce a hierarchy that would place themselves at the top. Caste, the book will show, uses irrational concepts to rationalize one group's absolute power.

The invisible caste system these men created has lasted so long precisely because it is so difficult to see. While few people apply the term caste to American life today, many throughout history—including antebellum abolitionists—have named caste as a very real threat to the fabric of the United States. Attempting to uphold the hierarchical pyramid of the American caste system has been at the root of the American Civil War, the 1960s civil rights movement, and even the U.S.'s contemporary political configuration. While race is a social invention, humans have nonetheless found themselves trapped in its "mythology."

This passage illustrates how the system that 17th-century colonists created to establish power in a land that was not theirs has become a value system that modern-day Americans are still forced to buy into. This centuries-old hierarchy continues to define the fabric of life in the U.S. today.

White supremacists and eugenicists in the 20th-century U.S. proudly compared the Jim Crow laws of the Southern states, which dictated what Black people could do and where they could exist in public, to the efforts of the Indian caste system to "preserve the purity of [the upper caste's] blood." Under the American caste system, even the lowliest of white people who worked menial jobs and suffered in poverty could feel they were better than the most successful Black person.

The caste system created many laws and regulations—some official, some unspoken. Each of these strictures—particularly Jim Crow laws—consolidated upper castes' power, reassuring dominant-caste people of their supremacy no matter how society changed around them. U.S. society has grown and changed—but caste has remained the same, and it keeps everyone in the past.

In 1913, a man named Bhimrao Ambedkar—born into the Untouchable class in India—arrived in New York City to study economics at Columbia University. He went on to study in London before returning to India, where he became the leader of the Untouchables and gave his caste the name Dalit, meaning "broken people," to illustrate how the caste system ruined countless lives. Indians had long been aware of the plight of Black people in the United States—and it is clear that Ambedkar's education in the U.S. taught him the importance of understanding the relationship between Dalits and Black Americans.

This passage continues to show how people around the world can learn about the their own caste system by observing another caste system. Just as King didn't fully understand caste in the U.S. until visiting India, Ambedkar drew strength from seeing that he and his people were not alone in their suffering. Later on in the book, Wilkerson will discuss the importance of people around the globe awakening to the damaging effects of caste in order to dismantle caste systems. This passage lays the groundwork for the idea of caste as a global issue that must be resolved collectively.

Wilkerson began researching this book in hopes of understanding how caste began in the U.S.—and why it's persisted in U.S. society for so long. The specter of caste haunted Black people who fled from the American South just as it haunts Indians throughout their own global diaspora. And as a member of the United States' subordinate caste, Wilkerson wanted to identify the shared characteristics of the caste systems of India, the U.S., and Nazi Germany. Only by understanding all three side-by-side, Wilkerson believes, can one fully understand the roots of hierarchy and inequality around the globe.

This passage consolidates one of Wilkerson's major arguments, and one of the book's core concerns: caste is not an isolated problem, but rather a global issue. Countries can learn from the rise and fall of other caste systems, as well as from caste system that still exist—but the issues of caste will not be solved without a widespread understanding of how these systems function and sustain themselves.

Throughout the book, Wilkerson uses the terms "dominant," "favored," and "upper caste" instead of "white" and "lowest," "disfavored," or "stigmatized caste" instead of "Black." She does so in hopes that her readers will reimagine how they see themselves and others. She also announces her intent to use "original, conquered, or indigenous peoples" instead of "Native American" and "marginalized people" instead of the terms "women" or "minorities."

By using terms that may seem stilted or foreign to talk about race and caste, Wilkerson hopes to draw attention to the profoundly strange, unsettling nature of the U.S.'s caste system. To truly understand the caste system, she's suggesting, Americans must see how it looks from an outsider's perspective.

Wilkerson stresses the importance of understanding the American caste system in relation to the caste systems of other countries by relaying an anecdote about traveling to a group of Indian scholars' conference on race and caste in Massachusetts. After speaking about the similarities between the American caste system and the Indian caste system, the organizers of the conference presented Wilkerson with a bronze bust of Bhimrao Ambedkar. Countless presenters and attendees talked with Wilkerson about their experiences of caste. On the way home, a Black TSA worker flagged her bag for inspection and pulled out the small bronze statuette, asking who the statue depicted. "The Martin Luther King of India," replied Wilkerson. After scanning the statuette, the TSA agent carefully, almost reverently, wrapped the bust back up and placed it gently into Wilkerson's suitcase.

The anecdote Wilkerson shares here shows that even without understanding the intricacies of another country's history, one can still understand what a global end to injustice might look like. The TSA agent's reverence for the work of a man he'd never heard of—but was able to compare to the worthy mission of someone from his own country—shows that many people are willing and eager to learn about the struggles of people from other caste systems.

AN INVISIBLE PROGRAM

Isabel Wilkerson describes the popular film franchise *The Matrix*, in which artificial intelligence has overtaken humanity and placed humans in a virtual reality that controls every aspect of the human experience. In the world the artificial intelligence force has created, it's impossible to differentiate between what is real and what is not. Over the course of the films, some humans awaken to their condition and search for an escape from their captivity. Yet many remain unaware of the fact that they're captives at all. The caste system in the United States, Wilkerson suggests, is similar to the program running the Matrix. The institutions that uphold caste are so omnipresent—and so skilled at making caste look normal—that no one even questions "the matrix" that maintains the primacy and power of those belonging to the dominant caste.

One of the ways that caste sustains itself is by remaining invisible. Comparing the caste system in the U.S. to The Matrix, *underscores the fact that many Americans are not aware of the reality of the world around them. Caste is silent and insidious, and while it dictates almost every aspect of life in the U.S., many people don't even recognize that their society is controlled by caste. Americans—like the protagonist of the film—have a choice between educating themselves and others about the realities of caste and awaking to its horrors or remaining complicit in a system that subjugates Black people.*

CHAPTER FOUR: A LONG-RUNNING PLAY AND THE EMERGENCE OF CASTE IN AMERICA

Each day, Wilkerson writes, "the curtain rises" on a huge stage, and a play that has been "running for centuries" begins anew. Each actor wears a costume assigned at birth and performs a role they never chose—one they inherited from those that have come before them. Everyone in the cast knows who the lead is, who the sidekicks are, and who is working hard backstage. Cast members become associated with their characters and absorb how they've been typecast to the point that they become the roles assigned to them. Everyone is playing a part—and veering away from the script has serious consequences. No one in the modern-day U.S., Wilkerson argues, is really themselves; everyone is just a "player on a stage," an actor in a drama that began long ago.

Here, the book introduces a new metaphor: the concept of society as a stage play, and the people who live in that society as actors playing roles and reading from scripts. This metaphor draws out the compulsory nature of caste, highlighting how even if one doesn't want to play a certain role, there's not necessarily a choice about whether or not to walk across the stage. In order to challenge these prescribed roles, people must reckon with the full history of what has brought them to this point in the "drama" of their society.

Before the United States of America was even formed, a caste system was born in the colonies. Initially, one's religion—not skin color—defined their place in society. So, Africans and indigenous people were seen as belonging to the lowest rung of society because they were not Christian, not because they weren't white. But more and more Africans began converting to Christianity in the years following their arrival in the new world in 1619. As a result, colonists were threatened by the "full participation" in society of people who were supposed to be the laborers that would extract wealth from the soil of the new world.

This passage shows how arbitrary the modern-day, race-based caste system in the U.S. is. White European settlers wanted to be able to dehumanize a group of people who could be easily identified so that they could transform them into an enslaved workforce—the basis for that exclusion and dehumanization didn't matter.

The struggling colonies desperately needed manpower to cultivate tobacco, sugarcane, rice, and cotton—crops that many Africans were already familiar with. African laborers could be identified easily because of the color of their skin, whereas English or Irish laborers who escaped bondage could easily hide out and blend in due to their white skin. So, they were quickly seen as the logical replacement for the source of labor that many white Europeans didn't want to provide.

By dehumanizing and othering an entire group of people, white Europeans created a myth about their own supremacy that would become woven into the fabric of the nation they were forming.

Many modern-day Americans would like to see slavery as a "sad, dark chapter" in the nation's history. But slavery was, in fact, the basis of the social and economic structure that persists in the U.S. to this day. For a quarter of a millennium, Wilkerson writes, slavery defined America—and in many ways, it still does. Slavery was a part of everyday life in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century—and even though some people decried it as a horror and an abomination, it was legal and sanctioned by the state and by a complex "web of enforcers."

Contemporary narratives about slavery often minimize the influence that these decisions made in the 1600s have on the modern-day U.S.—perhaps to obscure the ongoing, daily effects of caste. But the reality is that slavery defined the U.S. for so long that the country's social, political, and economic structures are still built around it in many ways. Even though slavery has been abolished, the myths, lies, and cruelties it created have become ingrained in American culture.

Under American slavery, human beings were transformed into currency. Because Black people were considered subhuman (and incapable of feeling pain or injury), they were tortured in uniquely horrific ways—and any enslaved person who tried to defend themselves was subjected to even more violence. Enslaved people were forced to work for upwards of 15 hours a day until 1740, when their workdays were capped at 15 hours during the summer months and 14 during the winter months. Extracting the most profit possible from each enslaved body was the only goal slaveholders had. And yet no one in the South—or anywhere else in the fledgling country—was willing to admit that "they lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture," writes historian Edward Baptist.

The "torture" of enslaved African Americans was necessary to keep the economy running at the pace the settlers wanted it to—and so their dehumanizing treatment worsened as time went on. By treating enslaved people like they were subhuman, slaveholders were able to reinforce the narrative that they actually were inferior. Others in U.S. society internalized this and accepted it as fact for centuries.

The goal of slavery was to tilt the balance of power so profoundly that the degradation of the subordinate caste became normalized—and even righteous. Plantations were, in reality, forced labor camps—and the genteel, upstanding men and women who ran them were torturers. It took war, the deaths of nearly a million soldiers, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to bring slavery to its knees. But even then, the dominant caste was not done inflicting its wrath upon the subordinate one.

Once these messages of subordinate and dominant castes of people had become entrenched in U.S. society, the abolition of slavery wasn't enough to get them out. Dominant-caste people had grown too used to the convenience of their unchecked power.

After slavery was abolished, the dominant caste turned to a "labyrinth" of laws and the pseudoscience of eugenics in order to keep the subordinate caste at the bottom of society. Already, the dominant caste had, through their paternalistic control of enslaved people and their refusal to pay or educate them, created a group of people whose every action could be criminalized.

Even after enslaved people were freed, members of the dominant caste came up with new ways to continue dehumanizing and stigmatizing members of the subordinate caste. U.S. society was trapped in a paradox: it now centered around the false, arbitrary ideas that the powerful planted in order to remain in power.

As new immigrants began arriving in the U.S. from Europe, they walked into a bipolar caste system in which whiteness reigned supreme. Each new European who arrived was suddenly classified as white—a designation that only existed in opposition to Blackness. But becoming white meant that these new immigrants were forced to participate in the subordination of the lowest caste and become oppressors themselves.

This passage illustrates that a caste system demands all who participate in it to play by its rules. Whiteness wasn't a concept in much of Europe at this time—but when these new immigrants arrived in the U.S., they had to learn to strive toward whiteness and, in the process, dehumanize and terrorize the subordinate caste (Black people).

Because members of the subordinate caste were forced to repress everything about themselves—their emotions, their talents, their bonds with one another—the members of the dominant caste could live under the delusion that they were innately different from and superior to the very people whom they controlled. This hierarchy was handed down from generation to generation, and today, Americans continue to inherit "distorted" perspectives of one another. Caste is the blueprint for their social, economic, and psychological interactions at every level of society.

Again, this passage illustrates how caste was able to sustain itself in the U.S. through a series of paradoxes and self-fulfilling prophecies. The dominant caste placed heavy restrictions on what the subordinate caste was and was not allowed to do—and soon began claiming that the things the subordinate caste was prohibited from doing were things that they were inherently unable to do. Because other members of society never saw these traumatized, oppressed members of the subordinate caste do certain things, they assumed that people in the subordinate caste were fundamentally different from those in the dominant caste. This "distortion" continues to define race relations in the U.S.

Wilkerson reflects on a talk she gave in London, England many years ago. A Nigerian-born playwright approached her after her lecture and stated that there were "no black people in Africa." The woman went on to elaborate: Africans define themselves based on their historic tribes and ethnic groups, such as Igbo and Yoruba and Ndebele. "They are not black. They are just themselves," the playwright said, and it is only upon arriving in America that Africans "become black." This statement fueled Wilkerson's belief that caste deprives people of their most essential selves, slotting them into roles they never asked to play.

Just as there were no "white" people in Europe, this passage offers a perspective from a Nigerian woman who asserts that there are no "black" people in Africa. This illustrates the fact that both race and caste are social constructs (rather than biological categories) created to lock people into certain "roles" for the benefit of those at the top.

CHAPTER FIVE: "THE CONTAINER WE HAVE BUILT FOR YOU"

Isabel Wilkerson describes meeting with a Black woman named Miss, who was born in the 1970s in Texas and whose parents gave her that name because, historically, Black women and men were never permitted to be addressed as "Miss" or "Mrs." or "Mister." Miss's father, Harold Hale, attended the march from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965, and the violence he saw directed at his fellow civil rights activists galvanized him. He decided that he would name his firstborn daughter "Miss," so that no one in the dominant caste would ever be able to deny her the respect that was denied to her forebears.

This passage illustrates the extreme lengths to which subordinate-caste people must go to assert their humanity to those who have historically oppressed them. Miss Hale's father knew that no matter how successful his daughter was or who she grew up to be, the dominant caste would still try to strip her of her humanity and disempower her. Naming her Miss was his attempt to safeguard her against some of the cruelties of caste—but this impulse in and of itself is one of the costs of caste, an emotional toll that all members of the subordinate caste must pay.

But when Wilkerson met with Miss while conducting research on the American caste system, Miss stated that Black people are still forced to stay in "the container" that white people have built for them. Miss cited numerous incidents from her youth that reminded her that members of the dominant caste still sought to control the members of the subordinate caste—long after the civil rights movement ostensibly brought progress and equality to the nation.

Even though Miss's father tried to protect her from being judged or treated differently based on her caste, Miss could still feel the restrictive effects of growing up in a caste system. Her language about being put in a "container" speaks to how caste tries to constrict those in the subordinate caste and prevent them from ever moving beyond the category that society has assigned them.

Everyone, Wilkerson writes, is in a container of some kind—in a caste system, no one can escape being labeled and sorted based on how others perceive them, even if the label is wrong. Wilkerson herself recalls trying to interview a store owner in Chicago for an assignment she once took on as a journalist for *The New York Times*. The store owner walked in, and Wilkerson introduced herself to him—but he said he had no time to talk to her, because he was late to meet with a journalist. Wilkerson explained that she was the very journalist he was slated to meet, but the man refused to believe her and asked her to leave the store. These instances will never stop, Wilkerson predicts, unless the U.S. as a whole recognizes the roots of its caste system from which all prejudice stems.

Because Wilkerson, a Black woman, didn't come in the "container" that her interviewee expected of her, she was dismissed out of hand. Wilkerson's use of anecdotal experiences from her own life throughout the book expand on this idea of the subordinate castes being restricted to certain roles. Wilkerson's and Miss's experiences illustrate how caste keeps power with those who already have it.

CHAPTER SIX: THE MEASURE OF HUMANITY

Wilkerson crafts a fanciful tale about a civilization in a universe parallel to this one. On that planet, short people are the dominant caste, and tall people are the subordinate caste. "Shorts" around the world unite against "Talls," enslaving them and torturing them. Wilkerson points out the ridiculousness of such an organization of hierarchy in order to show that race is just as absurd a system of categorization as height. But no matter how ridiculous the metric of differentiation between subordinate and dominant castes, those in the middle play up whichever traits are in power in order to inch closer to supremacy. To the world of Talls and Shorts, Wilkerson argues, a caste system based on skin color would seem just as ludicrous.

By using the example of "Talls" and "Shorts", Wilkerson is able to lampoon how ridiculous caste is and also provide a cautionary tale about how difficult it is to escape a caste system. Essentially, those with power don't want to relinquish their power—no matter how arbitrary the quality that gave them that power is.

Race is a "recent phenomenon," and it's an entirely socially constructed concept. Race has no basis in science or biology—though white supremacists and eugenicists have certainly tried to justify the "arbitrary" elevation of whiteness by suggesting that there are biological differences between people of different races. Race was created to defend the privileges of the dominant caste. Today, when people "see" race, what they're really seeing are the learned social stereotypes that the dominant caste has created in order to protect itself.

By calling attention to how new, strange, and random racial categories are, Wilkerson is likening the metaphor of "Talls" and "Shorts" to global society. Race and racial stereotypes only exist because of the dominant caste, who secured their power by inventing reasons for their own supremacy. This shows that race and caste were carefully created—and that they can be dismantled.

Contemporary racism has evolved significantly over the last several decades, and now, the idea of being labeled a racist is "radioactive" to most members of the dominant caste. But racism is not, as many people think, overt hatred of another group based on race. Rather, racism is a continuum—the "polluted […] air of social instruction" that every American receives from childhood onward is rooted in caste.

By metaphorizing racism as a kind of polluted air that everyone breathes, Wilkerson suggests that no one is immune to racism's toxic effects. When something is so widespread and ever-present, people can't avoid it even though they might try to.

Caste is a "living, breathing entity" that enforces structures, rankings, and boundaries on the basis of someone's perceived rank. Though casteism and racism are intertwined in the U.S., they can be differentiated. Racism, Wilkerson suggests, is an action that mocks, or harms, or attaches stereotype based on the construct of race. Casteism is any action that seeks to limit, hold back, or rank someone. All actions in such a society, Wilkerson argues, are based on elevating one's rank by denigrating someone else's. So, in the U.S., racism and casteism often overlap. One can be casteist without being explicitly racist, but all racists are seeking to uphold casteism.

In this passage, Wilkerson explains the complex relationship between racism and casteism. She implies that because U.S. society is so polarized and so structured around dominance, power, and wealth, casteism affects all aspects of life in the U.S. And because the caste system in the U.S. is based on race, acts that uphold caste inevitably uphold racism as well. Someone might not actively believe that Black people are inferior to white people—but that doesn't mean they don't participate in a structure that was built entirely around that racist belief.

People at every level of U.S. society have internalized the caste system in which they live, and what matters is whether one tries to uphold it or dismantle it. Caste is a factor in so many social interactions that one might not even perceive their own casteism. Post-racialism is still a faraway dream precisely because of caste's invisibility—and in order to end this cycle, caste needs to be a factor in any plan to address the country's present trials.

While many people in the U.S. might like to think they're living in a post-racial society—one in which racial categories and discrimination no longer affect people—the reality is that caste is so entwined in American life that many people can't even see it. The book suggests that Americans need to learn to see how caste tries to hide itself, then draw it out into the open and reject its influence.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THROUGH THE FOG OF DELHI TO THE PARALLELS IN INDIA AND AMERICA

In January of 2018, Wilkerson traveled to Delhi, India for the first time. As she wandered the city streets on the way to the conference she was attending, she thought about the differences—and unlikely similarities—between India and the U.S. Both countries are defined by their caste systems, and both employ similar methods of maintaining distinctions between their castes. Though both countries have officially abolished the laws defining their caste systems, those systems live on in both places.

This chapter outlines several similarities between the U.S. caste system and the Indian one in order to highlight the fact that caste is a global issue. Furthermore, one group's suffering can ripple outward to enable or excuse another group's suffering.

Many scholars throughout the years have written about the similarities between the Dalits and African Americans. Both groups were enslaved and confined to a system of sharecropping (or *saldari*); both continue to occupy the lowest social positions in their respective societies; and both are singled out from other groups based on characteristics ascribed to them by the dominant caste.

This passage illustrates that while the foundational reasons for the dehumanization and subordination of Dalits and African Americans are different, there are many similarities in their histories. While specific caste systems differ from country to country, the methods that dominant castes use to dehumanize subordinate castes have a lot of overlap.

The Indian caste system is different from the American one in that there are many subcastes, or jatis. Surnames rather than physical features tell others about a person's caste—though a person's accent or clothing can also indicate which caste they belong to. The biggest single difference between the two systems is that the Indian caste system is bound by religion—and the Hindu belief that one's caste is reflective of the good or bad karma they accrued in their previous life.

This passage illustrates how the Indian caste system is bound up in a series of paradoxes and self-fulfilling prophecies. The Dalits were dehumanized, much like African Americans were, based on an arbitrary religious belief. But over time, the simple fact of their ostracization was used to justify their ostracization. By sidelining people from mainstream society, the caste system can then claim that subordinate castes aren't fit for mainstream society.

But the members of the Dalit caste do not, as many outside observers might like to believe, accept their position in the caste system. In fact, the Dalits have a vibrant history of resistance, inspired in large part by the American civil rights movement. A 1970s-formed resistance group, the Dalit Panthers, were inspired by the Black Panther Party—and Dalits to this day feel kinship with Black scholars and sociologists who visit from overseas, even welcoming one group of African American professors visiting India with a rendition of "We Shall Overcome," an anthem of the American civil rights movement.

This passage shows that just as caste is a global issue, its solution, too, must be a global one. When members of subordinate castes from around the world recognize and participate in one another's struggles, they strengthen one another's resistance movements and illustrate how arbitrary and damaging caste truly is.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE NAZIS AND THE ACCELERATION OF CASTE

In the late spring of 1934, a committee of Nazi bureaucrats met to draft the Nuremberg Laws—a legal framework for the Aryan nation they hoped to create. In order to do so, the Nazis turned to the caste system in the United States, determined to glean what they could from its strictness in guarding its "ruling white citizenry" and its longevity. The Nazis wanted to quickly, efficiently institute plans for racial separation and purity, and they turned to the U.S. for a blueprint. The Nazis coined the term *Untermensch*, or subhuman, to refer to those they would place in the subordinate caste: its Jewish citizens, along with several other minority groups.

By communicating a fact that readers may not be aware of—that the Nazis used the U.S.'s caste system as inspiration for their own—the book illustrates the undeniability and severity of the U.S.'s casteism. This passage also suggests that caste is a global problem because the brutality of one caste system may inspire another that is equally—or even more—brutal.

Hitler had long studied the U.S. from afar—and he believed it was a successful nation because of its "Aryan stock." He admired how the U.S. had decimated its indigenous population, and the country subjugated its subordinate caste through lynchings. Hitler knew that Americans were perpetuating "mass death," yet he idolized their "robust innocence" in the face of heinous crimes.

The U.S. provided an example of the kinds of laws and strictures the Nazis wanted to enforce. What the Nazis needed to model was both the severity of the U.S.'s caste system and the country's total denial that there even was *a caste system.*

Hitler rose to power as an "outside agitator," and by the time he and his party secured control of the country, there was little anyone belonging to the old guard could do. The Nazis set to scapegoating Jewish people—who were seen as dominant in banking and finance in the first decades of the 20th century in Germany—for the loss of World War I. By convincing ordinary Germans that Jewish people didn't deserve the wealth they'd come to possess, the Nazis began a campaign of mockery and intimidation against the caste they'd decided would be subordinate. After turning to U.S. race laws for guidance as to how to separate German Jews from other German citizens, many Nazi officials believed the U.S.'s segregation laws were too extreme.

Hitler, and those who held roles in his Nazi Party and S.S. force, are widely reviled as immoral and murderous historical figures. And yet in this passage, the book asserts that their actions were influenced by laws and procedures that already existed in the U.S.—and that some of the U.S.'s policies on race and caste were too extreme even for the Nazis. By recontextualizing the severity of the U.S.'s caste system, the book illustrates how caste can hide in plain sight in one place, even as its existence inspires atrocities in others.

The Nazis proceeded with creating legal definitions for Jews and Aryans and preventing intermarriage between the two groups. Some in attendance at the drafting of the Nuremberg Laws suggested making intermarriage punishable by law, as the Americans had; others insisted that doing so would be too harsh. In spite of many in attendance believing that American miscegenation (or "race-mixing") laws were "primitiv[e]," the Nazis continued debating which measures were too "radical" for their purposes.

This passage introduces the concept of "anti-miscegenation" laws, also referred to as endogamy. By preventing intermarriage and close relationships between the castes, the dominant caste can effectively cut off any means of one caste growing to know, understand, and thus humanize another.

By September of 1935, Hitler would announce the Blood Laws—laws that defined what "counted" a person as a Jew. From there, the Nazis continued making their Laws for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor more and more stringent. Yet even the Nazis, who defined a Jew as a person with three or more Jewish grandparents or as a person who had married a Jew, felt that the Americans' rule about categorizing "an American man or woman who has even a drop of Negro blood in their veins" as Black was too extreme.

Once again, the book highlights a caste-based policy in the U.S. that was too extreme for even the Nazis. The book continually points out the severity and intensity of caste organization in the U.S. to highlight how unfathomable it is that so many Americans continue to deny that caste exists in their country. Racism and casteism largely define U.S. history.

CHAPTER NINE: THE EVIL OF SILENCE

The townspeople who lived outside of the death camp at Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin, watched their town become covered in ash, a result of human remains being burned at the camp's crematorium. Even though the town was "covered in evil," they ignored the fact that they lived just beyond the walls of an extermination camp. Not all of the villagers were Nazis—but they had ingested the lie that some people were inherently less than human. So, they turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Jews, the Sinti, homosexuals, and any other enemies of the Reich.

This passage shows that even when a place is "covered in evil," completely saturated by the destructive forces of caste, people still may not be aware of what's going on around them. Alternatively, people living in a society whose caste system benefits them might not want to see what's going on around them—by admitting that their power came from the subjugation of others, they'd have to acknowledge the immorality of that power.

Meanwhile, on the Main Street of a Southern American town, many townspeople contended with the annoyance of a huge old tree at the center of town. The tree was an eyesore and an impediment to traffic—but it was the local lynching tree, so it could not be cut down. It had to serve as a reminder to the members of the subordinate caste that there were consequences for attempting to escape their station.

Here, the book illustrates how another society relied so heavily on its unspoken (but brutally enforced) caste hierarchy that it was willing to endure a constant reminder of death and violence if it meant keeping the dominant caste (white people) in power. This is one of the costs of caste: everyone in a society suffers on some level, even the dominant caste, in the attempt to keep the lines of power clearly drawn.

In the fall of 1921, in the East Texas village of Leesburg, 500 people gathered to watch 19-year-old Wylie McNeely, a Black teenager, be burned alive. Before they burned him, the leaders of the lynching drew straws to see who would get to keep which "souvenir" from McNeely's body after his flesh had burned away. Lynchings were an American phenomenon—"part carnival, part torture chamber"—that hundreds and sometimes thousands came to see from far and wide. Photographers created postcards of the lynchings—and by 1908, the lynching postcard trade was so widespread (and so vile) that the postcards were banned from being sent in the mail. But instead of stopping the production or purchase of these postcards, people simply hid them in envelopes.

Many people question how the Nazis were able to get away with their large-scale atrocities—while at the same time completely ignoring that the U.S. turned its own atrocities into a form of entertainment for its dominant-caste citizens. By holding this part of American history up to the light, the book shows how caste normalizes and even celebrates extreme forms of violence and cruelty against members of the subordinate caste.

In September of 1919, Omaha newspapers advertised an upcoming lynching that would take place downtown. Fifteen thousand people gathered to watch the spectacle—Will Brown, a Black packinghouse worker, was arrested because a local white woman claimed that a Black man had molested her while she was out on the town. There was no trial or investigation for Brown—instead, a mob set ablaze the courthouse where Brown was being detained, tortured him, shot him, burned him alive, then dragged his body through the streets. Pieces of the rope were later sold as souvenirs.

The subordinate caste in the U.S. was, like the subordinate caste in Nazi Germany, seen as so subhuman that their torture and murder was a kind of sport. The cruelty of caste is the point of caste: by reminding those at the bottom of society that those at the top consider them playthings, caste keeps itself alive over the course of centuries or millennia.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS

Wilkerson writes that there are "pillars" that uphold the belief system of caste. It doesn't matter whether or not these tenets are true—they are ancient and ingrained, and they are common to the three major caste hierarchies the world has seen. These pillars, or beliefs, are buried deep within the subconscious of the people in the caste-based societies that the pillars hold up.

This short chapter introduces the section of the book that will discuss the many ideals that keep caste ongoing. Even though caste systems are violent and cruel, these core "pillars" keep them functioning at the bedrock of many major global societies. It is important, Wilkerson implies, to understand how the pillars perpetuate caste.

PILLAR NUMBER ONE: DIVINE WILL AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

According to ancient Hindu texts, caste is rooted in the creation myth of the awakening of the universe. "The One" created the Brahmin, the highest caste, from his mouth; the Kshatriya (warriors) from his arms; the Vaishya (merchants and traders) from his thighs, and the Shudra (servants) from his feet. The Untouchables (or Dalit, as they would later be called) are not even mentioned in this myth—they are beneath the feet even of the servant caste and exist outside of the system entirely.

This chapter introduces the idea that ancient religious myths are used to explain, excuse, and perpetuate caste over centuries (or, in the case of the Hindu caste system, millennia). While the Indian caste system is more intricate than the dual-poled one that exists in the U.S., the two share a reliance on a bottommost rung of people who are forced to exist outside of society.

According to the Bible, the sacred text of the Western world, Noah (who helped humanity continue after God's Great Flood wiped the earth clean) had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japeth. One night, Ham stumbled on his father naked and drunk in his tent. He told his brothers, and Shem and Japeth walked backward into the tent to cover their father's nakedness. Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, condemning his descendants to become "the lowest of slaves." Some interpretations of the Old Testament claimed that Ham had dark skin—and so this passage was used to justify the enslavement of all humans with dark skin.

Slaveholders cited the "curse of Ham" as a reason why slavery was actually their divine right. Just like the Indian caste system, the U.S. caste system used a religious text to justify itself. By claiming that the subordination and enslavement of dark-skinned people was ordained by a holy figure, these people made their claims of superiority ironclad.

Both of these countries—United States, the world's oldest democracy, and India, the world's largest—are built on caste systems that are buffeted by a grounding in religious texts. In other words, the caste systems in these countries are, to this day, rooted in people's interpretation of a creator's divine will.

The book lists divine will as the first pillar because it's a powerful excuse to create a caste system. By claiming a divine right to power, members of the dominant caste are able to set up other "pillars" that further ostracize those they deem inferior.

PILLAR NUMBER TWO: HERITABILITY

In order to work, caste systems require the inheritance of a rank and corresponding role at birth. In India, this inheritance is patrilineal (inherited through the father), but in the U.S. it has traditionally been matrilineal (inherited through the mother)—and in both places, children generally take on the status of their lowest-born parent. Thus, enslavers in the U.S. could claim the children of their enslaved property and thus create even more property and more profit. No one could earn or marry their way out of their ascribed caste—and this fact is essential in distinguishing caste from class, which is more mutable.

By suggesting that caste is inborn, the "pillar" of heritability makes caste a fixed part of a person's identity and indeed of their destiny. Caste cannot be outrun or outgrown once others see it as an intrinsic part of who a person is. Thus, the assertion of heritability is one of the most effective ways to subordinate and control a large group of people.

Throughout American history, Black people have been "ritually separated" from the rest of the population, and nothing they did could elevate them out of their caste. This is, unfortunately, still a present-day reality. For instance, in 2013, the award-winning actor Forest Whitaker was accused of shoplifting from a deli, and in 2015 and 2018, police officers brutally attacked two well-known athletes. These incidents make it clear that no measure of fame, wealth, or class mobility can change the facts of caste.

This passage shows that while a subordinate-caste person living in the modern-day U.S. might be able to achieve wealth and social mobility associated with higher classes, the forces of caste remain unchangeable. The U.S. caste system is designed around making sure a person can never escape the caste into which they were born.

PILLAR NUMBER THREE: ENDOGAMY AND THE CONTROL OF MARRIAGE AND MATING

Endogamy, or restricting marriage to people within the same caste, is a measure that's been taken in every major caste system the world has seen: India, the U.S., and Nazi Germany. Under the edicts of endogamy, intermarriage between castes is prohibited—but so too is any sexual congress or even the expression of romantic interest. On a practical level, this reduces empathy or any sense of commonality between the castes, and it reinforces the idea that the subordinate caste is a threat or menace to the dominant one.

This passage illustrates how the dominant caste engineers the caste system to suit their needs and prolong their ability to oppress the subordinate caste. Marriage laws may be presented as a way to preserve the purity of a bloodline, but in reality, they keep members of the dominant caste from developing attachments to—and thus recognizing the humanity of—members of the subordinate caste.

In 1630, a colonist named Hugh Davis was publicly whipped after "lying with a Negro" (having sex with a Black woman). His public humiliation wasn't just a warning to members of the dominant caste, but to those of the subordinate one as well. The lower caste could be exploited—white men had (often nonconsensual) sexual relations with African women throughout U.S. colonial history. But despite their affiliation with upper-caste men, lower-caste women could not approach anything close to equality. Legal prohibitions of intermarriage—first signed into law in 1691 in Virginia—were not officially overturned until 1967. In Alabama, the law was not repealed until 2000.

This passage shows how important endogamy is to the survival of a caste system. As far back as the 1600s, members of the dominant caste knew that in order to maintain the illusion of their supremacy, they would need to frame relations with the subordinate caste as intolerable—even though they happened frequently. These societal messages became so embedded in the American colonies that these laws remained part of U.S. society into the 21st century.

Through endogamy laws, the state could create and enforce race. Dominant-caste men could essentially have their way with lower-caste women without facing consequences for much of American history. But any lower-caste men who were even suspected of making advances toward upper-caste women were made to pay dearly, often with their lives. In December of 1943, a 15-year-old subordinate-caste boy, Willie James Howard, signed a Christmas card to his coworker at a local dime store—a dominant-caste girl—"with L," meaning "love." The girl's father and two other white men captured Willie James, dragged him to a nearby river, hog-tied him, and forced him to jump in and drown while his father watched. The boy's murderers were never charged or indicted.

This passage illustrates the double standards created by caste. Upper-caste men were allowed to assault and rape lower-caste women in order to demonstrate their power over them. But even a sweet Christmas card from a subordinate-caste member to a dominant-caste member was seen as a threat to the caste's system's power structure—and Willie James Howard was punished with his life. Howard's murderers faced no consequences for taking his life, because they were doing what caste instructed them to: violently asserting their power over the subordinate caste.

PILLAR NUMBER FOUR: PURITY VERSUS POLLUTION

The fourth pillar of caste is the belief that the purity of the dominant caste must be protected from pollution by subordinate castes. Within caste systems, purity amounts to an obsession. In India, certain rules once existed that defined the number of paces that a subordinate-class person had to stand away from any dominant-caste person. Some of the lower castes even had to wear bells so as to alert members of the upper castes that they were near. Anything that had been touched by an Untouchable was considered polluted and could not be handled by a member of another caste. In Nazi Germany, the Nazis banned Jewish citizens from visiting beaches and public pools.

By creating the narrative that members of the subordinate caste are somehow dirty or polluted, the dominant caste can continue to excuse and perpetuate their exclusion from society. While myths about a person's inherent cleanliness or dirtiness are, of course, false, the idea that the dominant caste could be polluted, and thus could decrease in power, is used to make even the most basic interactions between dominant and subordinate castes extremely taboo. So, over time, the dominant caste buys into these myths.

In the United States, the subordinate caste was essentially "quarantined" in all aspects of life into the middle of the 20th century. In some places, the books used for Black and white schoolchildren weren't even allowed to be stored in the same place. Segregation throughout the U.S. was so intense and so violent that white ambulance workers wouldn't even touch a bleeding Black man as he lay dying on a set of railroad tracks in Memphis.

By using the word "quarantine" (as a person with a contagious disease might be quarantined from other people), the book is calling attention to just how polluted the dominant caste felt the subordinate caste truly was. Ambulance workers' refusal to touch the body of a man who needed help shows that members of the dominant caste bought into the idea that having any contact with the subordinate caste would somehow contaminate them.

Members of the subordinate caste in the U.S. were banned from beaches, lakes, and pools—just like the Dalits in India and like Jewish people in Nazi Germany. In 1919, when a young Black swimmer accidentally crossed the invisible boundary between the "white side" and the "black side" of Lake Michigan, he was stoned and drowned to death, and his murder set off some of the most intense race riots in U.S. history. The dominant caste refused to share public pools with the subordinate caste, in some cases demanding that pools be drained, cleaned, and refilled after Black people swam in them. Even young Black children were forced to stand behind chain-link fences and watch as their white playmates enjoyed the water.

Once again, the book compares the interconnectedness of the world's three major caste systems. All three categorized baths, pools, and even lakes and oceans as places where contamination between the castes could occur. Of course, the true "contamination" that the upper caste feared was the idea that subordinate caste people might be able to share their spaces—and thus see themselves as equal, which would erode caste's flawed logic.

The caste system of India derived specific rules for the separation of the castes from the sacred text the Laws of Manu. By contrast, the U.S. had to shape its upper caste—and police the maintenance of its purity—as it went along. The U.S. caste system was based on absolutism—that is, the idea that a single drop of blood belonging to another race was pollutive and barred one from belonging to the upper caste. Even South Africa granted privileges on a graded scale based on how much European blood a person of any race was thought to have.

Physical contamination wasn't the only thing the upper castes sought to control and prevent—the "contamination" of a person's lineage, too, was used to restrict certain people to the subordinate caste. Again, allowing the subordinate caste to enjoy privileges afforded to the dominant one would be a threat to the very foundation of caste in the U.S.

When the U.S. Congress restricted American citizenship to free white people, whiteness still hadn't been fully defined. Even Southern European and Eastern European immigrants were seen as insufficiently "pure," and so as late as 1924, immigration acts restricted immigration to certain quotas. Additionally, in the 1920s, many Southern states began defining, in deeply specific terms, what certain amounts of "African blood" designated a person. A "marabon" was a person who was five-eighths Black, a "mulatto" was one-half, a "sextaroon" was one-sixteenth, and a "sangmelee" was one-sixty fourth.

The U.S's obsession with keeping whiteness separate from any contamination or pollution defined every aspect of Americans' lives throughout history. By tracing Black ancestry as far back as possible, the dominant caste was able to ensure that the caste system continued functioning smoothly and always in their favor. Creating absurdly specific categories and tracing ancestry back several generations was a way to make sure that no one with even a shred of connection to the subordinate caste might enjoy the privileges of the dominant one.

Those in the middle castes, then, found themselves scrambling to "get under the white tent"—in other words, to be seen as white. Because the U.S. caste system was essentially two-tiered, immigrants from places like Cuba, Japan, and even India were baffled as to how to define themselves. The U.S. rescinded the naturalized citizenships of many people of East and Southeast Asian descent, constantly "shape-shift[ing]" in order to keep the upper caste pure.

As more and more immigrants arrived in the U.S., they were not automatically placed in a middle caste or shunted into the subordinate one. Black people continued to remain the "floor" of American society, and the minorities who found themselves participating in the caste system also began dehumanizing Black people. By making whiteness (or even close association with white people) seem valuable to these new immigrants, the caste system continued to perpetuate itself in an entirely new group of people.

While Black Americans comprised the subordinate caste in the U.S., they were essentially treated more like the Dalits in India: outside of the caste system entirely. Just like the Dalits, Black Americans could not drink from certain fountains, live in certain towns, walk through certain doors to certain buildings, or attend public gatherings like circuses or political rallies. As was the case with the Dalits, soon the exclusion and degradation of Black people was used to continually justify their exclusion and degradation.

This passage explores how caste systems around the world sustain themselves by creating self-perpetuating myths and cycles of exclusion. On a long enough timeline, the initial "pillars" of caste might fade into the background, and the simple fact of one group's historic dehumanization becomes the excuse for their continued oppression.

Members of the dominant caste in the U.S. were taught, from birth, that the members of the subordinate caste were quite literally untouchable. Wilkerson cites an interview with a man who moved from the South to the North for a career as a magazine editor. Even in adulthood, having dedicated himself to unlearning his racist and casteist upbringing, he felt the self-described "madness" of an inexplicable urge to wash his hands after shaking hands with Black coworkers.

This anecdote illustrates how deeply ingrained caste becomes over time. Even those who want to divest from caste's cruelty and violence find themselves unable to shed the negative associations caste creates from birth onward. Caste sustains itself by becoming the underlying "grammar" of how people interact with the world, so that even a conscious rejection of caste's strictures isn't enough to eradicate the system.

PILLAR NUMBER FIVE: OCCUPATIONAL HIERARCHY: THE JATIS AND THE MUDSILL

The first wood beam hammered into place to anchor a new home's foundation is called the mudsill. It is, in Wilkerson's estimation, the most important piece of the framework. In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottommost caste. Even in the mid-1850s, American politicians like Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina spoke of the necessity for a class to perform "menial duties" and "drudgery"—they themselves used the word "mud-sill" to describe the role this class of people would play. By defining the subordinate caste's role as society's "mud-sill," he revealed the economic purpose of such a hierarchy and cemented the fact that the dominant caste knew exactly what they were doing by creating a floor from which all else would rise.

This passage illustrates that caste is not really about a genuine belief in the inferiority of a certain group of people. Rather, it's about consolidating and maintaining power and wealth no matter the cost. Members of the dominant caste are aware that they're manipulating those around and beneath them into a set of false beliefs. Moreover, the only way to sustain those beliefs is to keep those in power from having to perform "menial duties" or "drudgery" when building a society.

Like the Dalits in India, African Americans were conscripted to the lowliest, dirtiest jobs available—and these restrictions were often written into law throughout the Southern states. When slavery was over, the government was already attempting to place a cap on what Black people in America could ever hope to achieve.

Even after slavery was abolished, the dominant caste could not allow the "mud-sill" of their society to shift. They found ways to keep power and opportunity away from those they relied on to do the work that kept American society functioning.

Because Blackness became so intimately associated with menial labor, a vicious cycle began to emerge, entrapping Black people in a "circle of subservience." They were essentially being punished for existing in the conditions that the dominant caste had forced them into. Caste didn't just enforce a certain type of labor, though—it enforced a certain role that Black people were forced to play, and it entrenched harmful stereotypes that still exist to this day.

Again, this passage highlights the circular, self-perpetuating nature of caste. By conflating a person's job or role with their inherent makeup, caste suggests that people are in certain roles for certain reasons—even though this idea is false.

Enslaved Black people were forced to dance or perform for their masters under the threat of a whipping, and the caste system "took comfort in black caricature" as the dominant caste created a stereotype of Black people as "court jester[s]." The first African American to win an Academy Award, Hattie McDaniel, won for her portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*, in which her character confirmed many of these stereotypes for white audiences. Yet this kind of trope or character was an invention of "caste imagination." In Nazi Germany, too, SS officers in charge of death camps frequently forced Jewish prisoners to dance and perform for them.

By using subordinate castes for their own entertainment, dominant castes remind their subordinates that they reign over their entire lives. The goal of caste is to make any social mobility or change impossible. So, even as slavery was abolished and U.S. society began to grow and progress, the subordinate caste played subservient roles in other ways. And other caste systems around the world—including the one in Nazi Germany—emulated this.

PILLAR NUMBER SIX: DEHUMANIZATION AND STIGMA

The dehumanization of a subordinate caste is a fight against truth—yet it is necessary in order to manufacture a caste hierarchy in any given society. The dehumanization of a group is a long process, but it is one of the most effective methods of programming a society against the subordinate caste of choice.

By dehumanizing a group of people, the members of a dominant caste can do whatever they want to that group. By claiming that a certain group isn't capable of certain feelings, emotions, thoughts, or actions, that group is effectively thought of as existing entirely outside of human society.

The dehumanization of Jewish people in Nazi Germany and Black people in the U.S. was calculated and methodical. For instance, upon arriving at death camps like Auschwitz, European Jews were forced to abandon their possessions, had their heads shaved, and were given identical uniforms to wear. This made it easier for the SS officers in charge of policing and exterminating them to see them as a faceless, homogenous mass. The same thing was done to Africans arriving in the U.S. to be sold into slavery—they were stripped of their given names and past identities and displayed naked at auction blocks. And in India, members of the Dalit caste were assigned surnames connected to the menial work they performed, so that their degraded social position preceded them.

All of these methods of dehumanization were carefully calculated and meticulously implemented by the dominant caste in order to justify the abuse, torture, and murder of the subordinate caste. By taking away a person's name, defining features, personal possessions, and connections to others, they appear to be stripped of everything that makes someone human and feeling. This excuses the unconscionable actions toward them that the dominant caste takes to demonstrate their own power.

Dalits, Jews, and enslaved Black people were punished for any display of human emotion or any attempt to push back against the forced starvation and deprivation visited upon them by their oppressors. Jewish prisoners were forced to work in the bakeries of the concentration camps, but they were punished or killed for stealing bread. Dalits and Black people, too, were whipped, lynched, or beaten to death if they stole small bits of food or other necessities.

The unusually harsh punishments leveled against members of the subordinate cate were meant to further dehumanize them. Once a person or a group of people has had their humanity stripped away, they can be treated terribly with impunity. This cycle serves to perpetuate caste by suggesting that only those belonging to upper castes are fully human, and thus fully deserving of the privileges of power.

Jews and African Americans alike were experimented on during their imprisonment in concentration camps and on plantations. Because they had been so thoroughly dehumanized, it was easier for their torturers (and ordinary upper-caste citizens) to turn a blind eye to their profound, horrific suffering. By desensitizing members of the dominant caste to violence against the subordinate caste, the dominant caste ensured its youngest members would perpetuate its supremacy as they grew older.

This is yet another way that caste sustains itself. When a person grows up in a certain society and sees that certain members of that society don't count as human, they learn to treat others of the same caste that way as well. Thus, caste effectively breeds people who will automatically do the work of keeping it alive on their own, simply due to having observed and internalized how caste functions.

PILLAR NUMBER SEVEN: TERROR AS ENFORCEMENT, CRUELTY AS A MEANS OF CONTROL

To keep a group of people in a falsely rigid, subordinate place, the dominant caste must employ psychological and physical violence and terror. Caste structures incentivize the terrorization of the subordinate castes by the dominant ones—and in India, the U.S., and Nazi Germany, fear and dread were useful weapons of the dominant caste. Physical violence, mind games, and sexual assault were used as methods of control in all three caste systems, and the disregard for those being terrorized was easy because the system had already dehumanized them entirely.

This passage illustrates how dominant castes around the world have historically used calculated, pointed methods of instilling fear and terror into the subordinate castes in order to control and manipulate them. The dominant caste used threats of assault, rape, and murder to make displays of their unchecked power.

Public displays of violence, like lynchings and hangings in Nazi labor camps, were used to frighten other members of the subordinate caste into continued submission. In all three caste systems, members of the subordinate caste were often forced to exact cruel and unusual punishments against others of their caste who had gone against the grain. This ensured that those meting out the punishment knew all too intimately what would befall them if they, too, stepped out of line. *Kapos* (the head prisoners in each bunk at a concentration camp) and plantation overseers (enslaved Black people in charge of a large group of other enslaved Black people) were forced to punish their own people.

Fear tactics and terrorism allowed the dominant caste to create environments of total control and fear that would last decades. And by turning certain members of the subordinate caste against other members, the dominant caste was able to make subordinate castes feel insecure and unmoored at all times.

PILLAR NUMBER EIGHT: INHERENT SUPERIORITY VERSUS INHERENT INFERIORITY

By creating a presumption of "inborn superiority" in the dominant caste, upper-caste members can control the subordinate castes by making it seem absurd—even criminal—to question the inferiority assigned to them. For instance, laws in the Jim Crow South forced Black people to walk in the gutter rather than on the sidewalk, and there were restrictions in India on what Dalits could or could not wear. This reinforced, at every level of society, the idea that there are privileges to which only the dominant caste is entitled.

While connected to illusions of purity and pollution, the idea of inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority is perhaps even more insidious. By creating laws that constantly reminded the subordinate caste of their inferiority and unimportance, the dominant caste could terrorize and psychologically manipulate the subordinate class into acting as if they were inferior.

Even drunken, illiterate, cruel members of the dominant caste are seen as inherently superior to the most intelligent and moral members of the subordinate caste. This creates an atmosphere of dehumanization in order to preserve a social system based on the subordination of an entire group. As the dominant caste becomes more and more accustomed to the "embedded superiority" that defines their lives, the chasm between them and the subordinate caste continues to widen. This, in turn, makes it easier to justify violence, injustice, and degradation.

The idea that all members of one caste are inherently superior to all members of another is used to keep the lines of power in a society firmly drawn. It doesn't matter how intelligent, empathetic, successful, or upstanding a member of the subordinate caste is—they will still be considered inferior to even the cruelest members of the dominant caste. This demonstrates caste's fixed nature and shows how difficult it is to dismantle a system that disempowers people in this way.

BROWN EYES VERSUS BLUE EYES

Wilkerson writes about an experiment that took place in the town of Riceville, Iowa in the late 1960s. All of the children in Mrs. Elliott's third-grade class were white—but after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the teacher wanted to teach her dominant-caste students what it felt like to be judged by something arbitrary. So, one morning, Mrs. Elliott announced that for the rest of the day, brown-eyed students would be entitled to lesser privileges than their blue-eyed classmates.

In this section of the book, Wilkerson pivots from how caste sustains itself to what caste costs global society. Here, by turning to an experiment that took place among a group of schoolchildren, Wilkerson shows that teaching young and impressionable people about caste's arbitrary, cruel nature is an important step in dismantling caste systems.

After essentially ascribing Jim Crow law to the brown-eyed students in her classroom, Mrs. Elliott noted that those children performed poorly in class and faced cruel taunts from their blue-eyed classmates. When the roles were reversed, the brown-eyed children delighted in the opportunity to take vengeance against their former oppressors. The experiment revealed that a lifetime of being oppressed because of an arbitrary physical trait has intense psychological ramifications.

Mrs. Elliott's experiment showed her students the unfairness of caste—and also revealed that even on an incredibly short timeline (for example, the length of a school day), being separated into castes harms and destabilizes people. Only by showing how ridiculous caste is—like in this experiment, or through Wilkerson's earlier example of "Talls" versus "Shorts"—can societies begin to grasp the senseless harm caste has done to the world.

CHAPTER TEN: CENTRAL MISCASTING

In December of 2017, Isabel Wilkerson arrived in London to attend a conference on caste. At the convention center, she noticed that there was no one else of African descent in the audience. She had come to study the caste system in India—and she was hoping that after the successful publication of her first book, she would be recognized as a legitimate scholar and a "well-spoken and focused" person. But when she approached an Indian woman whom she could tell was upper-caste and asked for a packet of papers that had been presented earlier that morning, the woman questioned why Wilkerson needed a copy and refused to give her the materials.

This passage shows that even between different caste systems from different parts of the world, social hierarchies can define people's relationships and their treatment of others. It doesn't matter than in India, Black people aren't a part of their caste system—this upper-caste woman was taught that she was superior, and she likely knew that in Wilkerson's home country, Wilkerson was a member of the subordinate caste and could be treated as such.

At lunch, Wilkerson sat next to an Indian man who was sitting alone. They began talking, and he told her that his name was Tushar and that he belonged to the second-highest caste—the warrior-soldier caste. Wilkerson was intrigued by Tushar's bookish appearance and felt struck by the phenomenon of "miscasting" that caste creates. Tushar continued to tell Wilkerson about how growing up in India, he'd felt moved to help members of the lower castes he saw struggling on the streets—but he was always told to stay in his place and ignore their plight because "caste [was] created by God."

This passage highlights the tensions that emerge when outdated caste hierarchies continue to define modern-day people's lives. Though Tushar would never be considered a fit warrior or soldier, he felt constrained to operate within the bounds of his caste because of the "pillar" of divine will. Once again, the book is showing that caste is entirely arbitrary and often absurd.

When Tushar asked Wilkerson what caste she belonged to in the U.S., she told him that she was an "American Dalit"—but that she was living proof of caste's arbitrary nature and artificiality. The two continued to trade stories of their heartbreaking experiences bearing witness to their countries' respective caste systems. Each of them was miscast, meaning that they had defied their caste assignments and refused the definitions thrust onto them at birth.

Just as Tushar proved the irrelevance of his own caste system, Wilkerson, too, proved that the U.S. caste system could be overcome and perhaps even dismantled. By learning from each other's upbringing in their respective caste systems, Tushar and Wilkerson were both able to see their own "miscasting" in a new light and better understand the arbitrary, ridiculous nature of caste.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: DOMINANT GROUP STATUS THREAT AND THE PRECARITY OF THE HIGHEST RUNG

In 2015, economists at Princeton University announced the results of a study: the death rate of middle-aged white Americans was rising for the first time since 1950. Every other ethnic group in America had seen their mortality rates fall during the same period. The deaths—largely from alcoholism, suicide, and drug overdoses—were termed "deaths of despair," and they were linked to the most precariously situated members of the U.S.'s dominant caste. Political scientists gave the deaths a name: "dominant group status threat." In other words, sensing the success of an outgroup, the dominant group begins to feel threatened and indeed despairing.

In contemporary U.S. society, caste continues to define daily interactions and acts as an underlying "grammar" through which people perceive and rank others. But formally, the U.S. caste system is being challenged—and the dominant caste is beginning to fear that they are losing their grip on society. The dominant caste's "despair," and their violent reactions to social change, illustrate how difficult dismantling caste is.

Working-class white people in the U.S. are the members of the dominant caste who most "need the demarcations of caste" in order to feel secure and superior as their societal position erodes. Reliant on the illusion of their inherent superiority, these people were losing everything—even the protective barrier of their whiteness.

As society expands and progresses, members of the subordinate caste in the U.S. are able to achieve more and resist the boundaries of caste. But this causes members of the dominant caste to panic, as they're used to having free reign over all of society. In this way, caste harms and destabilizes everyone who participates in it.

In the 1960s, when civil rights legislation opened up the labor pool to members of the subordinate caste, members of the dominant caste—who'd been sold lies about their inherent superiority and given total control of the social system for centuries—suddenly had to contend with the potential possibility of a subordinate-cast person subsuming their own place in society. A caste system, Wilkerson argues, "makes a captive" of everyone who lives inside of it.

Assumptions of superiority and inferiority burden everyone. Here, Wilkerson sympathizes with people in the dominant caste who have become "captive" to caste's absurd illogic. Caste spares no one—even those it claims to elevate and empower.

Caste, then, became something anxious white people in the U.S. began feeling the need to protect at any cost. Even though white families presently have ten times the wealth of their Black counterparts, those same working-class white families saw the socioeconomic prosperity of Black families as a direct threat and began to perceive themselves as being suddenly vulnerable.

Caste—especially the dual-poled caste system in the U.S.—sets up members of the dominant caste to see the subordinate caste as a direct threat to their power. Caste is organized around consolidating power with the dominant caste—and as society progresses, and caste's firm boundaries begin to erode, the entire system is thrown into chaos.

As the subordinate caste in the U.S. won greater protections and opportunities for social mobility throughout the second half of the 20th century, overt racism transformed into a more hidden form of silent antagonism and unconscious bias. Negative messaging about African Americans and other racial or ethnic minorities persists in American culture, and the tiers of caste continue to inform these unconscious stereotypes that people begin internalizing in infancy. White felons are still likelier to win jobs than African Americans with no criminal records, and they are still more likely to be refused medical attention or prescribed life-saving medications. This ongoing exclusion costs lives.

Even though the U.S.'s caste system has been challenged in recent decades, its most deeply-encoded messaging about white supremacy endures. So even as the dominant caste panics about losing their power or their social status, the subordinate caste must still struggle to be seen as equals. Again, the book is illustrating how profoundly caste warps and corrupts societies around the world.

In spite of the inequities and stereotypes that perpetuate the U.S.'s caste system, working-class white people continue to perceive any erosion to that system as a threat. When Barack Obama instituted the Affordable Care Act, one white taxi suffering from liver problems driver told a physician conducting research on the health of disaffected white people in Middle America that he'd rather die than sign up for Obamacare—and, unfortunately, that is exactly what happened to him.

By including this anecdote, the book shows that members of the dominant caste still try to retain their power at all costs. This is especially true when the members of the subordinate caste succeed in a way that threatens the dominant caste's supremacy.

CHAPTER TWELVE: A SCAPEGOAT TO BEAR THE SINS OF THE WORLD

The term "scapegoat" comes from an ancient Hebrew ritual in which one goat was sacrificed to the Lord to cleanse and atone for their peoples' sins, while a second goat was kept alive. The high priest would confess all the misdeeds of the Israelites to the second goat, then cast it out into the wilderness to suffer for the sins of others. Now, a scapegoat is a person or group blamed for causing or attracting misfortune. And in a caste system, the lowest caste is often the scapegoat cast: Jewish people were scapegoated for Germany's failure in WWI, for instance, and the Dalits were scapegoated for the sins of their past lives. After the Civil War, Black people in the U.S. were scapegoated for the loss of that war and the end of slavery.

Here, the book examines the origins of scapegoating, or placing undue blame onto a certain person or group. It is significant that scapegoats were once literal goats—animals that existed outside of the bounds of human society. Now, caste creates groups of people who can be similarly dehumanized and seen as fit to bear grievances of the dominant caste.

To this day, Black Americans are scapegoated for the problems that disproportionately plague Black communities because of casteism and inequality. Scapegoating blames larger societal ills on those with the least power—and scapegoating always worsens in times of social, political, or economic strife.

Again, this passage calls attention to the cyclical nature of scapegoating and caste. Caste is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which any behaviors or problems that the dominant caste has ascribed to the subordinate class are then seen as the subordinate caste's fault.

Wilkerson tells the story of a Boston couple, Charles Stuart and Carol DiMaiti Stuart, who were expecting their first child in the fall of 1989. While driving home one night through a working-class neighborhood, they were allegedly attacked by a Black man in a jogging suit. Carol was shot in the head, and Charles was shot in the stomach. Charles lived, but Carol and her unborn baby died. Authorities instituted a manhunt for the person responsible. But as the investigation continued and Charles picked out a Black suspect from a lineup, inconsistencies in his story began to emerge. It turned out that Charles had, along with his brother, plotted his wife's murder because he was too cowardly to ask for a divorce. When Charles's brother came forward, it became clear that Charles had counted on society's impulse to scapegoat Black people for violent crimes.

Charles Stuart knew that no matter how flimsy his story was, the authorities would believe a white man over a Black one. He knew that if he simply stated that a Black person was responsible for his wife's death, he would be able to let caste take control of the narrative and punish whomever they deemed fit to punish. This story is illustrates just how aware, on some level, the dominant caste is of its power over the subordinate one.

In 2018, a series of bombs went off around the Austin, Texas area—they were being left on people's doorsteps as packages, and they killed several people. Because the bomber's first victims were African American and Latina, no one paid attention to the stories or suspected that a serial bomber was on the loose—but when a bomb went off in a more affluent, whiter neighborhood, the authorities got involved and threw all of their resources into tracking down the bomber. They found him within 24 hours, illustrating the fact that scapegoats are, by definition, unimportant and expendable.

This passage illustrates how caste still defines many aspects of life in contemporary society. Victims who belong to the subordinate caste—or even those who simply aren't a member of the dominant one—are disbelieved and deprioritized. The book suggests that this indifference to the suffering of lower-caste people is a form of modern-day scapegoating; the lives subordinate-caste members are seen as disposable.

The 2014 Ebola epidemic began in West Africa—but the Western world paid little attention to the hemorrhagic disease until it reached the shores of the U.S. Eleven thousand people died—but Ebola wasn't seen as a global problem because it didn't primarily affect white countries. It would take another, deadlier outbreak for global society to recognize just how inseparable and interconnected the world truly is, regardless of race, class, or caste.

Issues that primarily affect people whom the caste system considers expendable aren't important to members of the dominant caste. Even with global issues like viruses that don't discriminate based on race or class, caste influences how people all around the world prioritize and respond to these problems.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE INSECURE ALPHA AND THE PURPOSE OF AN UNDERDOG

Wilkerson looks back on her struggles to help her pet West Highland terrier adjust to the new social order in her home following her divorce from her husband years ago. While consulting a canine behavior specialist, Wilkerson learned a lot about how to present herself as the new "alpha" to her dog. True alphas, command authority not through rabid assertion of strength and power, but through "calm oversight" and the use of ancient, invisible signals of strength and assuredness. A real alpha, she learned, never needs to bully or attack those below them in order to gain respect and authority. Eventually, Wilkerson got another dog that silently and swiftly established itself as the alpha dog of the house, and order returned to the home.

By including a seemingly unrelated anecdote based on her personal experiences as a dog owner, Wilkerson actually shines a light on how even animals' social hierarchies are more intuitive than ours. The idea of an "alpha" is something that global society is in many ways obsessed with—and the creation of a caste system is little more than an attempt to create an entire class of "alphas" whose power is absolute and unquestioned. But in reality, true "alphas" aren't violent or manipulative—they use their power to protect others and keep the peace.

In packs of wild dogs and wolves, the alpha is at the top of the pack's hierarchy. But at the bottom is the omega, or the underdog, who takes on a court-jester role within the pack: he is, essentially, the pack's scapegoat. But the omega is also venerated and important—and when omegas die, the packs often enter periods of prolonged mourning and sometimes struggle to replace the missing omega. Humans, Wilkerson suggests, could learn a lot from wolves: we associate "alpha" positions with the dominant caste, and so we overlook potential alphas from subordinate groups. Thus, we find ourselves beholden to miscast alphas who resort to cruelty, violence, and shows of power to maintain their positions.

"The purpose of an underdog," this chapter purports, is not for there to be a bottom floor or "mud-sill" below which the dominant caste can't sink. In canine social orders, those at the bottom of the hierarchy are still respected and included. A misunderstanding of how power functions—and what power ought to accomplish in a society—is at the root of caste's ill effects.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE INTRUSION OF CASTE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Wilkerson shares an anecdote about a father and his young son who were dining at a restaurant in Oakland after the death of Tamir Rice. Rice was a 12-year-old boy who was shot and killed by Cleveland police officers for playing with a toy gun—in spite of the fact that Ohio is an open carry state, and many young boys play with toy guns. As the father fretted over how to prepare his young son for the realities of growing up in the U.S.'s caste system, the son began crying about wanting to drink some juice before eating his vegetables. A white woman sitting at a nearby table came over and told the young boy—ignoring his father's presence entirely—that he could drink his juice first.

This instance represents the U.S.'s long history of allowing upper-caste people to control lower-caste people without consequences. Even in an atmosphere of heightened tensions related to caste violence, many members of the dominant caste don't see their intrusions and violations as products of the caste system.

Caste can affect even the most ordinary daily interactions. Wilkerson shares several more anecdotes to illustrate how caste interferes with everyday life. She shares an anecdote about a Black woman who went to a neighbor's house to introduce herself, only to be mistaken for a dry cleaner and handed a bag of dirty clothes. A Black college professor opening his mail in the elevator with his neighbor was mistaken for a mailman and accused of mail fraud. A white engineer dealt with repetitious calls from a white contractor who refused to communicate with a Black engineer at the firm.

The anecdotes in this passage illustrate the conundrum of caste that defines many daily interactions in the U.S. The underlying grammar of caste continues to affect how people see one another—and the dominant caste, used to the supposition of their own power, still assumes that members of the subordinate caste belong in subservient positions.

Black citizens in the U.S. are disproportionately surveilled and are all too often accused of being intruders in spaces that some feel "belong" to members of the dominant caste. For instance, when a Yale student called the campus police on a Black student napping in the library, the Black student had to prove to them that she attended the school. A Black babysitter driving two white children he cared for around town was tailed by a white woman who called the authorities, accusing him of kidnapping them.

All of these anecdotes show how lower-caste people must contend with their lives being derailed by caste on a daily basis. This is due to the dominant caste's damaging, deeply entrenched perceptions of who the subordinate caste is, and of where its members belong. The preservation of the dominant caste's power is at the heart of many of these interactions, whether people are conscious of that or not.

Wilkerson shares a personal anecdote: after rushing through an airport on her way to an interview following a delayed arrival in Detroit, she was accosted by two white people who told her they were with the DEA and demanded to know what her business in the city was. They demanded to follow her on the shuttle to the airport's rental car agency, even after she told them she was a journalist on assignment. It was only when she pulled out her notebook and began taking detailed notes about them that they apologized for their mistake and left her alone. Instances like this illustrate "the thievery of caste," and how caste continues to steal time, energy, and emotional bandwidth from members of the subordinate caste.

This anecdote illustrates the ongoing costs of caste in the U.S. Caste-based power struggles and steal the time, energy, and indeed the dignity of subordinate-caste people. It is wearying to know that one's actions will always be viewed through the lens of caste—and yet everyday interactions like this one reaffirm to subordinate-caste people (like Wilkerson herself) that no measure of success, fame, or social progress will fully erase caste.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE URGENT NECESSITY OF A BOTTOM RUNG

The greatest threat to a caste system is the success of the lower castes—the idea that members of the bottommost caste will achieve success. In World War I, Black American soldiers fought with the French—but when the French Army treated the Black soldiers as they would treat white soldiers, with respect and dignity, the American military command clarified that the French Army should treat the Black soldiers as inferior. Even when two Black soldiers died bravely in the line of duty and were nominated for Medals of Honor, the American government refused to grant them the awards posthumously.

At a certain point in history, the dominant caste recognized that the subordinate caste was beginning to pursue opportunities and achievements that were perceived to be beyond their station. So, the dominant caste sought to keep them on the "bottom rung" of society.

In 1946, after the end of World War II, a Black sergeant who had fought in the Pacific theater asked a Greyhound bus driver if he could step off the bus to relieve himself at a pit stop. The driver called the authorities, who arrested the sergeant at the next stop and beat him with a club, permanently blinding him. The courts brought the case before the then-president, Harry S. Truman, who demanded a federal investigation—but during the trial, it emerged that the sergeant had used the word "yes" instead of the phrase "yes, sir" while dealing with the police at the bus stop. The police chief went free.

Structures that were initially created to uphold caste—in this instance, the police force and the U.S. courts—will never act in the best interest of the subordinate caste. A system that was created to strip the subordinate caste of its humanity cannot be reformed easily, even as social norms change.

In the early 1900s, as Black Americans began achieving success across the nation due to the initiatives of Reconstruction, a wave of anti-Black violence swept the nation. Tulsa, Oklahoma's Black Wall Street was leveled and burned, its citizens massacred; Black business owners were lynched so that white business owners could take over their properties. Any subordinate-caste person who was seen as "forgetting [their] place in the hierarchy in the white world [they] lived in" was swiftly, inhumanely punished.

This passage shows that any success or joy the subordinate caste found was perceived as a direct threat to the dominant caste. The dominant caste sought to stamp out any threat to the "hierarchy" that served them—even if many lives were lost in the process. Through terror and dehumanization, the dominant caste was trying to keep the subordinate caste from bettering their lives.

When a smallpox epidemic hit Boston in 1721, people quickly began dying. Cotton Mather, a minister and scientist, owned an African man named Onesimus, who told him about a procedure he'd undergone in his homeland, Africa, to protect him from the very same illness. By inoculating themselves with a specimen of fluid from an infected person, people in West Africa knew, they could lessen the impact of the sickness on their community. Mather tried to persuade others to take up the method, but many found it repulsive. Nevertheless, some scientists and physicians tried the method and were able to save many lives. But Onesimus is not credited with creating our modern-day inoculation practices—in fact, he never even won freedom for his contribution to the world.

This passage illustrates how the dominant caste profited off the subordinate one yet never afforded the members of that caste any reprieve from their subjugation. Though Onesimus's contribution to society was enormous, he was never even freed from enslavement. Again, this illustrates how no measure of wealth, fame, or intelligence ensures that a member of the subordinate caste will ever be able to rise out of the "container" society has placed them into.

Throughout the 20th century, the white establishment actively tried to handicap Black communities and keep Black people from learning, achieving, or rising through society's tiers. Just as the Nazis sought to exclude Jewish people from any position in which they might match or even outshine Aryans, white Americans purposefully underfunded and even sabotaged Black schools and businesses.

In any caste system, any of the subordinate caste's successes prove that the dominant caste's lies about them are false. But if those lies were to be widely recognized as false, the dominant caste's power would crumble. So, it's very important for the dominant caste to keep the subordinate caste in lowly positions and menial jobs to continue perpetuating the myths that caste relies on.

Throughout the 20th century, the culture worked to keep the subordinate caste in their place—and even in the 21st century, U.S. society continues to disregard the achievements and successes of the lower caste.

The caste system prevails by changing the rules constantly; by wielding power against the powerless; and by enforcing arbitrary, cruel boundaries meant to keep the lower caste at the bottom rung of society.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: LAST PLACE ANXIETY: PACKED IN A FLOODING BASEMENT

By using the analogy of a high-rise building, Wilkerson suggests that caste places the dominant caste in the penthouse. It places everyone else in descending order on the floors beneath them, consigning the subordinate caste to the basement. But caste also creates an illusion that the basement is "flooding"—in other words, that their only competition is one another. This creates a situation in which the lower castes reject and "stratify" their own, because "no one wants to be in last place."

Caste systems thrive on social division and envy. By pitting members of the subordinate caste who struggle to rise above their station against one another, caste essentially forces a society's most vulnerable citizens to harm one another and to participate in the very system that has put them in such a position.

The modern-day criminal justice system—which descends from the criminal codes of slavery and Jim Crow—is perhaps the most potent example of how the caste system teaches people which lives are valued, and which are not. Immigration is yet another arena in which the lines of caste and the value of a life become clear. Immigrants from Asian, South American, Caribbean, and African nations are taught that they must find a way to differentiate themselves from the subordinate caste in America.

This passage shows how caste continues to divide modern-day Americans based on race and class. Caste sustains itself by forcing people to participate in the system and to subordinate those at the bottom just to get by.

Caste also helps explain why members of the subordinate caste who rise to positions of power or authority often subjugate their own. Three of the officers involved in Freddie Gray's 2015 death were Black. These stories, Wilkerson suggests, make sense when viewed through the lens of a caste system and its cruel demands.

Everyone living in a caste system—even subordinate-caste members—are taught to do the dominant caste's bidding. Caste sustains itself by forcing the people it's made most vulnerable to exploit and harm one another in the pursuit of more power and agency over their lives.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: ON THE EARLY FRONT LINES OF CASTE

In 1933, a Black couple traveled to Natchez, Mississippi. Their names were Allison and Elizabeth Davis, and they were married academics. Having fled their studies at the University of Berlin when Hitler took power, the pair of Harvard anthropologists had decided to put their very lives on the line to study caste in the Jim Crow South. Along with white couple Burleigh and Mary Gardner, who were also anthropologists at Harvard, they planned to embed themselves in the community of Natchez and study how race, class, and caste worked there.

While many people living in the U.S. today may be surprised or offended by the idea that the country revolves around a caste system, Black and white scholars alike were using the term "caste" to describe the U.S.'s social hierarchy in the early 20th century. Caste sustains itself by hiding in plain sight—so even though many have recognized caste's existence in the U.S. for decades, some people still balk at the terminology because they don't want to see the ugly truth.

Because the laws in the South were so restrictive, the Davises had to claim that they were there to study the church. They also had to find bizarre, secretive ways to meet up with the Gardners to share their research, as Black and white people in Natchez did not socialize or even interact. A fifth researcher, a Black man named St. Clair Drake, traveled to Natchez to embed himself in the lower-class Black community, ensuring that the team would have access to all levels of Natchez society. Though the teams knew they were being constantly surveilled, they nevertheless conducted their research, determined to do the work they'd set out to do.

This passage shows how caste forced the Davises to downplay their intelligence, their authority, and their friendship with a white couple in order to survive in the Jim Crow South. Caste ruled every aspect of life in places like Natchez in the early 20th century—and anyone who traveled to those places was forced to abide by caste's unfair, arbitrary rules.

By 1941, Davis and Gardner emerged with a 538-page manuscript entitled *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. It was a comprehensive look into the caste system of Natchez, and how the town's caste system and economic system enforced each other. But a white anthropologist from Yale, John Dollard, had published a similar study of Indianola, Mississippi in 1937, and yet another academic published a similar book in 1939. Davis and Gardner's research was overshadowed. Some leading Black social scientists even objected to their findings, perhaps not wanting to believe that the American caste system was as rigid, fixed, and insidious as the one in India.

Even when a pair of Black researchers led a comprehensive investigation into caste in the South—a topic that had defined their very lives—white scholars were still rewarded earlier and more enthusiastically for their research on the subject. This example illustrates how difficult it is for even the most intelligent, successful members of the subordinate caste to compete with the dominant caste, because the system is rigged to prioritize dominant-caste people no matter the situation.

Even though Davis and Gardner's research struggled to find an audience, as the middle of the century approached, more and more sociologists began studying the concept of caste in the U.S. The argument as to whether the U.S. truly had a caste system was a contentious one, but the debate had arrived nonetheless—all because of Davis and Gardner's bravery.

Like Onesimus, the Davises were not properly lauded or credited for their impact on society. Members of the subordinate caste, this passage shows, have historically had to struggle for even a fraction of the recognition freely awarded to dominant-caste people.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: SATCHEL PAIGE AND THE ILLOGIC OF CASTE

LeRoy "Satchel" Page was one of the greatest pitchers in baseball—but because he was Black, and because began his career at the height of Jim Crow, he never rose to the fame or success he could have. He could throw a fastball at over 100 miles an hour, and Yankee star Joe DiMaggio described him as the best pitcher in history. Paige and his teammates in the Negro Leagues made major contributions to the sport—but poor record-keeping and little press coverage showed how little the country valued these players.

By telling the story of Satchel Paige, the book points out one of the many costs of caste. Caste systems sideline even the brightest, most talented members of the subordinate caste—and so rare talents like Paige are relegated to the sidelines because of a fixed, arbitrary system.

In 1946, when major league baseball opened up to African American players, Paige was nearly 40—he was well past his peak. Yet at 42, he played for the Cleveland Indians and helped them win the World Series. He pitched a few more seasons, but his most successful years were behind him.

Paige was cheated out of the career he deserved by a cruel, rigid caste system—and baseball itself was cheated of what Paige (and countless other talented athletes like him) might have brought to the game.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE EUPHORIA OF HATE

At a Berlin museum, looping footage of Saturday, July 6, 1940 plays constantly. The footage shows Hitler returning to Berlin after the Germans seized Paris, with a deafening parade of citizens packed together to cheer him on. Wilkerson recalls watching the footage on a trip to Germany and feeling sickened by it—she could not believe that Germans knowingly cheered the extermination of their neighbors and the destruction of neighboring countries. But the dehumanizing pattern of caste explains why Jews, African Americans, and Dalits were all considered so lowly and irrelevant that their deaths did not matter.

In this passage, Wilkerson examines how caste solidarity and alignment against a perceived enemy or threat can lead people to excuse terrible evils. The cruelty inflicted on the subordinate castes in the U.S., India, and Nazi Germany didn't rankle the members of the dominant castes in those societies—in fact, it united them and inspired a bizarre collective "euphoria." And this euphoria continued to sustain the dominant caste's desire to remain in power.

Even though modern-day people like to imagine that they never would have attended such a rally or cheered on such horrors, the reality is that such blind accordance with terror has happened time and time again throughout history. Evil doesn't just lie in one person—the enemy, Wilkerson suggests, "lurk[s] in humanity itself."

The book suggests that oftentimes, those in the dominant caste are swept away by the power that the caste system affords them. Recognizing that fact is essential to dismantling caste around the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE INEVITABLE NARCISSISM OF CASTE

Caste systems center the dominant caste as "the sun around which all other castes revolve." Because the dominant caste is constantly surrounded by images of its beauty and messages of its inherent superiority, the dominant caste is unable to see the world from the perspective of others—or to resist the "narcissistic isolation" from the lower classes that their superiority provides.

Everyone in a caste system is trained to envy the dominant caste. And the dominant caste in any given caste system is reassured constantly of their supremacy—and, in some cases, their divine right to their role in society. So, caste causes its dominant members to become narcissistic, or self-obsessed.

The dominant caste is "caught in an illusion" of superiority and sovereignty—and history has shown that those at the upper echelons of society will do terrible things to maintain their station. Fascism and authoritarianism, Wilkerson suggests, are byproducts of "group narcissism," a phenomenon that distorts and inflates a group's sense of worth and inherent righteousness. And the wrong kind of leader can goad a narcissistic group into doing unspeakable things to maintain that sense of specialness.

The dominant caste, afflicted by the narcissism that societal messaging about their own supremacy causes, can be convinced to do terrible things in order to maintain the "illusion" of their superiority. This is one of the ways caste sustains itself: by seducing and entrapping dominant-caste people who get used to power, glory, and the feeling of being extraordinary.

The narcissism of the dominant caste is so prevailing and so profound that its members become obsessed with finding ways to rank nearly everyone they meet in the caste system by asking probing questions about their familial origins and ethnic heritage. The desire to constantly rank others—and to take comfort in being reminded of their superior station—is one of caste's most insidious mechanisms.

Caste sustains itself by encouraging dominant-caste people to be obsessed with the caste rankings of others. Narcissism is a bolstering force, but it's also a destabilizing one, because having power and glory means those things are precious and can be taken away. So, obsessing over the caste rankings of others becomes a way for narcissistic dominant-caste people to assess themselves against others in order to reassure themselves of their superiority.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE GERMAN GIRL WITH THE DARK, WAVY HAIR

At one point during World War II, most every Jewish citizen had disappeared from German life, hidden away in concentration and death camps. Without a scapegoat caste, Germans became fixated on ranking one another, trying to determine how pure, how Aryan, their friends and neighbors were. Wilkerson relays an anecdote about a young German girl with dark, thick, wavy hair—her most striking physical attribute raised suspicions that she was of Middle Eastern (or even Jewish) blood.

This chapter gives a real-world example of the narcissism that the book introduced in the previous chapter. Narcissism doesn't just lead to euphoria and an inflated self-image—it can also lead to an obsession with any imperfection, and the constant, debilitating fear of being removed from the dominant caste against one's will.

The comments people made about the girl frightened her, and she began measuring her facial features in a mirror. She had pictures taken of herself with measuring tapes held up to her face, and her family began looking into their genealogy but could find no trace of foreign blood. Decades later, when the girl's granddaughter found the picture of her grandmother measuring her face, she finally understood the paranoia that even the dominant caste faces as they struggle to uphold their superiority.

This dominant-caste narcissism creates an environment of extreme instability and paranoia. This, of course, means that dominant-caste people who perceive any threat to their power and supremacy react violently and erratically in order to stave off such threats.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE STOCKHOLM SYNDROME AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE SUBORDINATE CASTE

Caste requires people at the margins to study the behaviors, protocols, and boundaries of the upper castes simply in order to survive. Navigating the caste system from the bottommost rungs can be a matter of life and death. Not only must lower-caste people learn to carefully intuit the patterns and moods of the upper castes—they must also adjust their own performances based on how they understand the upper caste to perceive them, defaulting to a "script" issued to them long before they were even born. This pattern, Wilkerson suggests, is similar to Stockholm Syndrome—a phenomenon of people bonding with their abusers or captors.

This chapter focuses on how difficult it is for the subordinate caste to survive in a caste system that strips them of their humanity. Resisting dehumanization and stigmatization can lead to further ostracization—and even punishment or death. So, members of the subordinate caste are forced to submit to the dominant caste—and sometimes, they even develop a strange allegiance to the caste system.

In the fall of 2019, a white female former police officer killed a Black man who was watching TV in his own apartment after she accidentally opened the unlocked door to his apartment believing it was her own. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison with eligibility for parole after five years served. At her sentencing, the brother of the victim and the Black bailiff both approached the crying white woman and hugged her. Then, the female Black judge came down from her bench and prayed over the white woman. If the inverse scenario had happened—a Black man shooting a white woman in her own apartment—such a display would have been unthinkable. This moment, in Wilkerson's estimation, was a perfect example of the "Stockholm Syndrome" of caste in action.

Caste sustains itself by forcing members of the subordinate caste to behave like the people whose stories are relayed in this passage. Subordinate-caste members must prove their fealty to the dominant caste in order to survive—but sometimes, this gets out of hand. Instances like this one reveal that a caste system can hold an entire society hostage—and hostages sometimes develop unhealthy attachments to their captors.

Wilkerson cites another instance of this phenomenon: in 2014, in the midst of the post-Ferguson protests against police brutality in the U.S., a picture of a Black child holding a sign that read "free hugs" at a group of police officers went viral. The picture disturbed Wilkerson for reasons she couldn't put her finger on. Years later, it was revealed that two Minnesota women, who were white, had adopted the boy—and five other Black children—to receive money from the state. They held the children captive and starved them. When the authorities began closing in on them after reports of abuse surfaced, the women packed the children into a car and drove them off a cliff, killing everyone in the vehicle.

Caste sustains itself when members of the dominant caste buy into narratives about the subordinate caste feeling indebted to or camaraderie with their dominant-caste oppressors. And in instances like this one, white people were so willing to believe that a young Black child was pliable, open, and forgiving that they overlooked the abuse he was enduring. This young boy was another victim of caste's ravages.

Many sociologists and cultural critics have observed that when Black victims forgive their white oppressors, they do so in order to survive. But the dominant caste takes that survival mechanism as absolution, or as proof of their superiority. One cannot live in a caste system without absorbing these messages and behaviors. Wilkerson cites the behavior of Dalit scholars she's met who speak similarly of their fear of members of the upper caste and the compulsion to defer to them at all costs. Even in the U.S., these people feel the need to protect themselves against anticipated rejection and brutality—and so patterns of subservience continue on and on.

This passage shows that even in countries outside of the U.S., caste takes people hostage and brainwashes them with messages about constantly deferring to the dominant caste. This erodes individuality and any real resistance to caste. A caste system is always seeking to keep power firmly in the hands of the dominant caste—and so the dominant caste will accept any narrative, no matter how forced it is, that affirms their supremacy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: SHOCK TROOPS ON THE BORDERS OF HIERARCHY

In the 1800s, free Black passengers on a steamboat in the South weren't permitted to dine at the same time (or even in the same space or with the same utensils) as white passengers. So, these passengers—who threatened the hierarchy of the South—were forced to eat, standing up, in the ship's pantry. Those in a caste system who rise above their station become "foot soldiers" at the borders of caste hierarchy, breaking down barriers that the dominant caste doesn't want challenged.

By comparing subordinate-caste members who are able to find success in society to "foot soldiers," the book is speaking to their bravery—but also unfortunately to their anonymity and expendability. These people put their lives on the line each time they resist the caste system.

In 2015, a Black women's book club took a trip to Napa Valley, where they were kicked off of a train for laughing too loudly. And in 2018, a group of Black women golfers were asked to leave a golf course for allegedly taking too long on the green. Wilkerson herself was bullied by a white flight attendant who refused to help her lift her bag into a first-class overhead compartment. On a different flight, she was terrorized by a man sitting behind her who began kicking and punching her seat on a redeye after she reclined her seat just a few inches to get some sleep. And on yet another flight, a fellow passenger leaned on and physically intimidated her while retrieving his bag from an overhead compartment—no one who saw the incident did anything to help her.

The caste system ensures that anyone who deviates from their assigned position is forced back into that category. In all of these anecdotes, Black women who occupied spaces that are typically reserved for members of the dominant caste were swiftly and cruelly punished and removed. Those in the subordinate caste must fight to take up space in places that the dominant caste wants to exclude them from.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: CORTISOL, TELOMERES, AND THE LETHALITY OF CASTE

Wilkerson tells the story of a young man who emigrated from Nigeria to the United States at 17 to attend college. He was shocked and disgusted by how he was treated—he was "seen as black before anything else." He noticed that people were shocked when he spoke English; that women clutched their purses when they passed him on the street; that he was followed through stores; that he struggled to get and keep jobs. At just 54 years old, after a lifetime of living in the States, he was diagnosed with high blood pressure and early signs of diabetes. Sub-Saharan Africans do not have high rates of high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart disease—but African Americans have the highest rates of those conditions out of all the ethnic groups in the U.S.

This chapter calls attention to one of the many costs of caste: its "lethality." The stress of living as a member of the subordinate caste can literally change the course of a person's life. And yet caste's role in these life-altering issues are generally ignored, as many people believe that such problems are somehow the fault of the subordinate caste.

Caste, Wilkerson suggests, is quite literally killing people. The constant fear and trepidation associated with moving through dominant-caste spaces as a subordinate-caste person has been directly linked to higher blood pressure and levels of cortisol, the hormone generated by stress.

The panic that members of the subordinate caste continually experience puts them at bodily risk every day. An atmosphere of constant stress isn't just psychologically debilitating—it's physically dangerous.

The telomere lengths—or lengths of the repeating sequences of double-stranded DNA at the end of a chromosome—of African Americans versus those of white people has also been the subject of study and discourse. Weathering is the measure of premature aging of the cells, which results in shorter telomeres and shortens a person's lifespan. Unsurprisingly, the kinds of hypertension and stress experienced disproportionately by members of the lower castes significantly shorten the length of their telomeres. The average white American is likely to live five years longer than the average Black American. The heightened vigilance that African Americans must adopt as they move through their own communities—as well as spaces traditionally reserved for the upper caste—amount to a kind of "tax" on their bodies that can, quite literally, condemn them to premature deaths.

By calling attention to the biological effects of life in a caste system, the book suggests that caste is still claiming lives each and every day. While instances of state-sanctioned violence against members of the subordinate caste might be more frowned upon today than they have been in the past, caste is still killing subordinate-caste people in other ways. And because these deaths are ignored or discounted, caste continues to weave its way through society unnoticed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: A CHANGE IN THE SCRIPT

The election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, represented the greatest departure from the script of the American caste system in U.S. history. Obama was a Harvard-trained lawyer, a U.S. senator, a Constitutional scholar, and an idealist. He was also a family man whose biracial identity told a story the caste system was willing to accept. After his inauguration, Americans began telling themselves that U.S. society was post-racial—but this ignored the fact that the majority of white Americans did not vote for him.

In this chapter, the book alleges that Barack Obama's presidency represented "a change in the script" of the long-running play that is the U.S. caste system. But many people saw Obama's election as a sign that racism (and casteism) were over. This, the book posits, is false—in fact, his election ushered in a period of backlash that allowed caste to resurge in the U.S.

Since Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, white voters began moving away from the Democratic Party, anxious about the erosion of their "sovereign place" in the world. For many of these voters, the election of a subordinate-caste man to the highest office in the land was a "nightmare" that would need to be resisted and remedied. Throughout Obama's presidency, the opposition party obstructed his proposals and harassed him in Congress. Jan Brewer, Arizona's white Republican governor, was even photographed wagging her finger in his face and shouting at him during a visit to Phoenix.

Though Barack Obama attained one of the highest possible achievements in American society, he faced racism throughout his time in office. His presidency suggested to some that white people no longer had supreme power in the U.S.—and many dominant-caste people found themselves terrified and affronted by that prospect. Though the U.S. appeared to be in a period of social unity, social division was on the horizon.

The rise of the right-wing Tea Party movement vowed to "take [their] country back," while the birther movement claimed that Obama was a foreign national who hadn't been born in the United States. Republicans purged voter registrations lists and made registering to vote more difficult across the country. Anti-Black hate groups and police violence against Black Americans skyrocketed.

Wilkerson suggests that the dominant caste wanted to take power back and restore the U.S. to an earlier era—one defined by casteism and white supremacy. The dominant caste feared that it was losing power—and it was not shy about resisting that loss.

In spite of the roadblocks in his way, Obama managed to push through meaningful legislation on healthcare, climate change, clean energy, and more. But each accomplishment only flared the anger and resentment of members of the dominant caste, who saw his presidency as an inexcusable disruption of the status quo. When Obama was elected to a second term in 2012, a white 64-year-old Floridian man, who'd joked about killing himself if Obama won reelection, was found dead in his Key West home of a prescription pill overdose.

The fact that a white man committed suicide after Obama's reelection—preferring to end his life than live in a country with a Black president—speaks to how serious an issue caste still is in the United States. Many members of the dominant caste could not tolerate a social hierarchy that was not centered around their supremacy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: TURNING POINT AND THE RESURGENCE OF CASTE

On New Year's Eve 2015, Wilkerson attended a gathering of political insiders in Washington D.C. There, she confided in the legendary Black journalist Gwen Ifill that she felt the celebrity billionaire running for president had a chance at winning—largely because of white Americans' fears of becoming the country's minority by 2042. Ifill agreed—the billionaire had a shot. As 2016 unfolded, Wilkerson continued to believe he might win, even as those around her insisted that the U.S. would never let such a thing happen.

This passage references Donald Trump's presidential run—a run that many people considered a long shot. But people like Ifill and Wilkerson—who belonged to the subordinate caste—knew that anyone who stoked the dominant caste's fears about their threatened social status would surely win them over.

Caste, however, is a perfectly reasonable explanation for the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the highest office in the country. White voters across the U.S. were willing to risk anything to preserve what they valued most: their role as the dominant caste in the country. The desire to protect their collective interests and waning status motivated white Americans to cast their votes in such a way that would "reassert a racial order" that placed their group at the top. While many lamented that white Republicans were voting against their own interests, they were, in fact voting in favor of the only interest that mattered to them: white supremacy and the protection of caste hierarchy.

The 2016 election was a "turning point" in the U.S., as this chapter's title suggests, because it represented a moment when members of the dominant caste broadcasted their desire for a return to caste's control over everyday life. Leaders like Trump, whom Wilkerson suggests appealed to white voters' anxieties about losing power and influence, emboldened members of the dominant caste to make racist and casteist statements about their longing for caste's subordination of Black people.

Those living in a caste system will do whatever it takes to survive within it. So, in 2016, white voters who perceived a threat to their survival and their domination acted in "white solidarity" by electing Trump. Meanwhile, Democrats focused on winning Republican voters—a lost cause—while ignoring the subordinate caste that has historically made up a consistent section of their voter base. White evangelicals rallied around Trump, who they believed would preserve their "white Protestant nation." Ultimately, 62 percent of white men and 53 percent of white women voted for Trump. Meanwhile, 94 percent of Black women and 82 percent of Black men voted for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate.

By dissecting the demographics of the 2016 election in the U.S., the book suggests that white voters rallied around a candidate whom they believed would restore their dominance and protect the "purity" of their caste.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE SYMBOLS OF CASTE

In the summer of 2017, the city of Charlottesville, Virginia covered its statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee after a rally of white supremacists converged around the statue weeks earlier. On the day of the rally, marchers flew both Confederate and Nazi flags and chanted "Sieg Heil" and "Jews will not replace us." After a white supremacist drove a car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer, the city shrouded its statue but didn't removed it.

The Confederate and Nazi flags aren't just flags—they represent all of the racist, casteist ideologies of those regimes. This passage shows how symbols associated with the dominant caste's supremacy can embolden members of the dominant caste to assert their power over the subordinate caste, or anyone who associates with them. Caste systems sustain themselves through symbols, even after they have been officially dismantled.

The end of the American Civil War didn't really mean the end of slavery—instead, lawmakers just found new ways to justify the debasement and enforced servitude of the subordinate caste, such as sharecropping and the creation of the Ku Klux Klan. Confederate monuments sprung up throughout the South—and by the 21st century, over 230 monuments to Lee existed throughout the States. Lee was a racist, a eugenicist, and a violent slaver—yet even after leading a treasonous war against his country, he faced few penalties or repercussions and was later glorified. At one point, the U.S. Postal Service had five different stamps bearing his face in circulation.

This passage shows how in the U.S. specifically, a refusal to reckon with the truth about caste can mean that caste's most violent enforcers are elevated as icons. This suggests to both dominant- and subordinate-caste members that caste is an acceptable—even ideal—social structure. When the image and name of someone like Lee is everywhere in society, it's hard not to internalize the message that society still condones violence against the subordinate caste.

That same year, in 2017, a SWAT team clothed in masks and garb that obscured both their identity and the color of their skin removed the first of four Confederate monuments in the city of New Orleans in the dead of night. Since the mayor had called for the removal of the statues in 2015, the city had faced threats of violence and terrorism should they make good on their promise to actually remove the statues. At the same time, Alabama passed a bill preventing the removal of any statue that had been in place for 20 years or more.

At the same time, places around the U.S. are working to remove these images from public sight. Many people do recognize how damaging these symbols can be, and how they help sustain caste throughout the country.

In Berlin, Germany, there is a 4.7-acre space dedicated as a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. A vast "modernist Stonehenge," the site bears no signage or information—instead, 2,711 concrete rectangular stones form an indiscernible pattern. Germany has erected many memorials to the different groups of victims of the Holocaust—Jews, homosexuals, Sinti and Roma—but there are no memorials dedicated to the leaders of the Nazi Party and the SS troops who perpetuated unthinkable violence. In fact, the site of Hitler's bunker is now a paved-over parking lot, nondescript and unmarked.

In Germany, on the other hand, there are no memorials or tributes to the people who committed terrible atrocities. Instead, the victims of caste-based violence are honored in many different ways. This suggests that while Germany remains stigmatized because of its violent history, the government is actually trying to prevent caste-based violence from happening again.

Displaying the swastika in Germany is punishable by up to three years in prison—but in America, the Confederate flag is part of the state flag of Mississippi. While some German families might privately mourn family members lost in the war, they know that there should be no public memorial of the men and women who perpetuated war crimes and atrocities. Restitution has been paid to the survivors of the Holocaust—but in the U.S., it was white slaveholders who received reparations for the loss of their property. While former Nazis were tried and, in some cases, put to death, former Confederates wound up in leading roles in government.

Again, by highlighting the differences in how Germany and the U.S. have reckoned with their caste-centric pasts, the book shows that caste must be denounced and eradicated in order to stop its influence from continuing over time. Germany condemns the Nazis' violence, and Wilkerson suggests that the U.S. should similarly condemn caste-based violence that happened in the past and continues to happen in the present.

In modern-day Germany, young people are properly educated in school about the realities of the Holocaust and their country's true history. Even they are aware that while they may not be responsible for the sins of their forbears, they are responsible for acknowledging the horrors of the past and becoming "guardians of the truth."

The book continues to suggest that the most effective way to ensure that caste doesn't resurge is to make people fully aware of the truth. Then, they may feel a responsibility to be "guardians of the truth."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: DEMOCRACY ON THE BALLOT

In 2014 and 2015, the Charleston church massacre occurred, and there were mass demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. These events, and other "unmask[ings]" of racism in the U.S., led Wilkerson to write a piece on what was happening across the country. One of her contacts, a historian named Taylor Branch, told her that it seemed as if the country had been hurled back into the 1950s. The two met again for coffee in 2018, just after the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh. They agreed based on the state of the nation that things were looking more and more like the late 1920s—the end of the Weimar Republic in Germany. They wondered aloud how many people would, if given the choice between democracy and whiteness, choose whiteness—but neither was willing to answer the question.

Throughout the book, Wilkerson expresses her desire for social change in the U.S.—and her belief that the country's caste system can still be dismantled. But this passage illustrates her and her colleagues' fear that those in power will always try to remain in power, even at great cost to those around them. Caste has dictated much of the U.S.'s development over the centuries—and if the dominant caste has panicked so severely in the last decade, it's likely that they'll continue clinging to their power to the detriment of others.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: THE PRICE WE PAY FOR A CASTE SYSTEM

The U.S., when compared to its counterparts in the rest of the developed world, is a harsh place to live. There is no universal healthcare, little diversity, a severe crisis in the education system, and an epidemic of incarceration. All of this, Wilkerson suggests, is the price Americans pay for life in a caste system.

This chapter ties issues in the U.S.'s social structure, government, and economy to the country's caste system. Caste, Wilkerson argues, still dictates public policy in the United States.

The U.S. provides its poorest citizens with little aid, and it has the highest rate of gun deaths and incarcerations in the developed world. Life expectancy has fallen as maternal and infant mortality rates have skyrocketed. The U.S., in spite of its vast wealth, ranks 18th in global happiness. And when a global pandemic arrived on U.S. soil, many Americans were forced to "go it alone." They were faced with the vulnerability of their social and medical systems and the inescapable hierarchy of a caste system in which racial minorities occupied the lowliest—and suddenly most dangerous—jobs in the country.

By listing some of the many social, political, and economic problems that plague the U.S.—one of the wealthiest countries in the world—this passage suggests that the U.S. intentionally allows these problems to simmer. To remedy them would require the nation to extend greater protections and social privileges to the subordinate caste (which is comprised of Black Americans). In other words, the country is forcing its general population to suffer rather than helping the people whom the dominant caste wants to keep at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

All of these issues, Wilkerson argues, are because of the U.S.'s insistence on perpetuating its caste system. The country has "dehumanized others to build its civilization"—and now that civilization is, in essence, faltering.

Because American civilization is built on cruelty and lies, this passage suggests, it cannot be sustained in its current form. Swift structural change is needed to reform and rebuild U.S. society.

CHAPTER THIRTY: SHEDDING THE SACRED THREAD

Wilkerson shares an anecdote about a man who'd been born to the highest caste in India—the Brahmins—but experienced an awakening. As a child, he'd been anointed in a Brahmin ritual with a sacred thread that hung around his neck and draped across his shoulders and chest. This was his initiation into Brahmin manhood, and he was to wear the sacred thread at all times and replace it only if it became frayed or polluted. When the man, as a young boy, watched his father refuse to punish a Dalit, he was crushed when his father fled the village because of the shame he faced for failing to uphold the caste system.

This passage shows that while many narratives about caste suggest that the caste system is fixed—and that the participants of any given caste system are comfortable in or resigned to their places in it—the truth is much more complicated. The young man's father clearly struggled with the expectations his caste position placed on him—and yet he couldn't deal with the shame and stigma associated with rejecting his caste.

Years later, the young man could no longer see the Dalit as subservient people who belonged at the bottom of society—he began to admire them and loathe the caste system. He saw his own superiority as an illusion, and he began to feel a great sense of shame of his own. Eventually, he ripped off the sacred thread, calling it a "poisonous snake around [his] neck." With his "fake crown" discarded, he felt he could truly begin his life's journey.

This passage illustrates the fact that it's necessary for those who have historically benefited from caste to awaken to the "poison" caste creates in societies. By realizing how arbitrary and false caste systems are, these people can reject them entirely and set an example for others to do the same.

THE RADICALIZATION OF THE DOMINANT CASTE

Wilkerson recalls going out to dinner with a longtime family friend of hers who happened to be from the dominant caste. It took them a long time to get any attention from their waiter—even though the table beside them had no trouble ordering drinks and appetizers. As the meal progressed, Wilkerson's white friend continued to notice that they were receiving subpar service. Their waiter ignored them, refused to give them the free bread he gave to other tables, and, when their entrees finally came out, the food was cold. Wilkerson's friend called the manager over and made a scene, calling the restaurant a racist establishment and railing loudly against the treatment she and Wilkerson had received.

While this incident wasn't surprising to Wilkerson—as a Black woman, she was used to receiving poor treatment in public—her friend, a member of the dominant caste, was outraged about receiving unfair treatment. This anecdote illustrates the necessity of the dominant caste becoming aware of the daily injustices that the U.S.'s caste system still causes. If the people with the most social power don't speak out, nothing will change.

As the two of them walked out of the restaurant without paying for their lukewarm, subpar meals, Wilkerson wanted to ask her friend to imagine what it was like to experience the world in such a way every day. Part of her resented her friend for being able to get away with making such a scene—and with being so blind to the way casteism works in the first place. But another part of Wilkerson was happy to see her friend's "righteous indignation" on behalf of all the people of the subordinate castes who endure such slights every single day.

Wilkerson's friend's "righteous indignation" is the "radicalization" that's needed to spur the dominant caste to action. By awakening members of the dominant caste to the everyday injustices the subordinate caste must contend with, the subordinate caste can raise awareness about the power imbalance that still defines American life. People in power aren't always willing to admit to or surrender that power—but those who have subordinate-class friends or family members may become angry enough to start working against caste in their own daily lives.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: THE HEART IS THE LAST FRONTIER

In December of 2016, Wilkerson called a plumbing company because she'd discovered flooding in the basement of her old home. A dominant-caste plumber in a red cap came to her door, and she led him to the basement, where she began sweeping water toward the drain in the middle of the floor. She explained the situation to the plumber, noting that her husband—who'd recently passed away—used to be the one to take care of household matters. She recalled a visit, weeks earlier, from an HVAC contractor—an immigrant from Central America—who went above and beyond during his visit to her home.

This passage illustrates the prejudices the caste system creates. The white plumber whom Wilkerson, a Black woman, hired didn't give her any attention or validation, even though he was performing a service for her. The power dynamic went against the traditional structure of caste. Wilkerson, as a scholar of caste, could see what was happening—and why an earlier service call from a person who wasn't white went very differently. But the white plumber was perhaps unconsciously abiding by the lessons that the caste system teaches people. In other words, he might not have even realized that he was allowing caste to influence his interaction with Wilkerson.

As the white plumber surveyed the basement, Wilkerson hustled to move boxes and old furniture around and to offer hypotheses as to what could be causing the flooding. The plumber didn't lift a hand to help her or offer his opinion about what might be wrong. Frustrated, Wilkerson broke down and admitted that her mother had died last week. She asked the plumber if his mother was still living, and he said that she had been dead since 1991. As they began exchanging stories about their mothers and their grief over losing them, the plumber began to open up.

Wilkerson couldn't get through to the plumber until she took a chance and opened up to him. By breaking down the caste-based barrier between them, she was able to connect with him on a human level. By writing about this interaction, Wilkerson is suggesting that people need to see and relate to one another outside of how caste has taught them to do so for centuries.

Soon, the plumber was helping Wilkerson navigate the basement and looking for things that might be wrong. He retrieved some tools from his truck and investigated, eventually finding that the water heater was out of order. He promised to set her up with a new one. Wilkerson marveled at how different things had been between them just minutes before. After the plumber left, he returned a few minutes later to shut off the gas to the water tank so it wouldn't be heating an empty vessel. As he was heading out for the second time, he handed Wilkerson a stray box containing old photographs, insisting she take care of her precious memories.

This passage shows that the plumber's demeanor changed entirely once he realized that he and Wilkerson had more in common than met the eye. Wilkerson's anecdote implies that because of caste, this man saw her as different from (and subordinate to) him. But connecting over a shared experience—especially a shared trauma—allowed them both to recognize and celebrate each other's humanity.

EPILOGUE: A WORLD WITHOUT CASTE

The human species has, over the course of history, suffered unquantifiable, terrible loss due to the false divisions that caste creates. Eleven million people were killed by the Nazis, nearly one million Americans were killed in the Civil War, and millions more have been lost on farms and plantations in India and the antebellum American South. It is impossible to know where humanity as a species might be if not for these staggering, arbitrary, painful losses.

This passage emphasizes the human toll of caste around the world. In each caste system the book discusses, millions of lives were seen as expendable, and they were effectively laid at the altar of caste as a sacrifice to the dominant castes. With this, Wilkerson implies that the world needs to stop normalizing systems that treat human lives as insignificant and disposable.

In 1932, Albert Einstein arrived in the U.S. after fleeing the Nazis. He was repulsed and shocked to find that he'd fled one caste system for another. Throughout his life in the U.S., he was outspoken about the horrors of casteism. As a Jewish person himself, he felt he could empathize with the plight of Black Americans. So, he joined the NAACP and the civil rights movement and spoke at historically Black universities about the "disease of the white people" that was ravaging the country.

This passage shows that caste is a global problem whose solutions, too, must be global in nature. People who have suffered the injustices and indignities of caste must unite and speak out about the "disease" that caste really is. When people who have been oppressed by one system find that another system gives them a measure of power and privilege, they must use that power to advocate for those without it.

Caste divides people based on things they can't change about themselves: their skin color, their religious identity, the family to which they were born. Around the world—and especially in the U.S.—these systems persist because the general populace allows them to by buying into the lies these systems sell. But once awakened to these lies, everyone has a choice in whether they will continue to uphold caste or whether they will work to dismantle it. This work is difficult because caste is a disease, and yet it is an attractive, seductive mechanism.

Those who benefit from the way a caste system structures power can easily be convinced to maintain caste—or simply not to speak out against it. But in reality, caste damages everyone—even those at the top of a caste system. So, members of the dominant caste need to take stock of how caste influences their lives, too, and reject the power it has arbitrarily afforded them throughout history.

While the demographics of the United States are indeed changing, the subordinate caste is still hundreds of years behind achieving equality with the dominant one. Political and social authority are likely to remain with the dominant caste unless there is a concerted effort to overturn casteism, reject the price Americans currently pay for their caste system, and fight for justice.

A changing society won't erase the problems of caste on its own—too much of society still relies on the unspoken language of caste that keeps people in rigid categories. Instead, there needs to be a collective reckoning with what caste takes from people each day.

Germany, Wilkerson argues, is living proof that a caste system can in fact be dismantled. But the Third Reich was not a "bizarre aberration"—caste systems that subordinate and dehumanize exist throughout the world, and there is no one person, no matter how evil, who is responsible for such societal divisions. It is difficult—but not impossible—to escape caste's tentacles and to reject its toxins.

Just as many people might like to think that slavery was one isolated, uniquely "dark" period of American history, others might like to think that the caste system in Nazi Germany was extreme and unprecedented. But awakening to the reality of caste means understanding that caste has played a bigger role in global history than anyone would like to imagine.

Wilkerson suggests that in order to extract themselves from the vortex of caste, Americans must first recognize that they live in a system in which certain groups of people are excluded or disqualified. There must be a public accounting of what caste has cost this country—and how past injustices will be healed.

By not talking about caste, everyone perpetuates it and gives it even more power. Much of caste's power rests on people's silence about how caste dictates daily life, even in modern times. To dismantle caste, people need to have ongoing discussions about how caste intrudes into everyday life.

Every citizen of the U.S., Wilkerson argues, needs to adopt an allegiance to radical empathy—that is, putting in careful and considered work to educate oneself about another person's experience from their perspective. While empathy isn't a substitute for experience, it is necessary that Americans begin to truly see and connect with the humanity of those around them. If millions of people could commit to such a promise, the country would indeed be transformed. It is not enough to be tolerant any longer—Americans must not simply tolerate one another. They must love and uplift and fight for one another.

Much of caste's endurance in the U.S. (and around the globe) is predicated on social division and the dehumanization of the lower castes. In order to combat this, members of the dominant caste need to repair those divisions by trying to understand subordinate-caste members' feelings and experiences. Action rather than passivity is needed in order to remedy the wounds of caste.

Each of us, Wilkerson suggests, is cast into a role at birth. But as we grow, we must decide whether we are going to accept or challenge those roles—whether who we are on the inside is more important than what we seem to be on the outside. Though no one chooses the circumstances of their birth, one can absolutely choose how they treat those around them. Each person must accept responsibility for the horrors that have come before us—and for the commitment to enlightenment and change in our lifetime.

In this passage, the book suggests that both individual and collective action are needed to dismantle caste. Only awareness of the "roles" society tries to cast people in will create lasting change. Dismantling caste means learning about it, calling it out, and refusing to participate it any longer. And because caste prolongs its influence through social, political, and economic structures, it is up to individuals to start doing this necessary work in their families and communities.

In a world without caste, Wilkerson says, the world would be a healthier, more bountiful place. People's accomplishments and successes would be celebrated rather than limited based on the color of their skin, the place of their birth, or the religious tradition they follow. We would seek not to hold one another back, but to invest collectively in the progress of our human species. A world without caste would "set everyone free."

While modern-day societies celebrate the freedom of people who were once enslaved, true freedom is still, in the book's estimation, far from reach. There will only be true freedom around the globe when the caste systems of the world have been thoroughly dismantled, and historically oppressed groups are no longer affected by the caste-based cruelty they've endured for millennia.

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