

CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS. By *Isabel Wilkerson*. New York: Random House, 2020, xviii + 476 pp., \$32.00 hardcover.

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Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents is the second book by Pulitzer Prize–winner Isabel Wilkerson, best-selling author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (2010). As with her first book, *Caste* is an historically illuminating literary work that contributes to our understanding of how black Americans have come to regard ourselves in society. In *Caste*, Wilkerson organizes her thoughts into seven parts, proceeding from “The Eight Pillars of Caste” to “Awakening.” Here we will address four of those parts. Wilkerson follows in the great tradition of African-American writers and her fellow alumni of Howard University, including Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, who write of the American experience through lenses unclouded by the dominant culture’s impingements and delusions.

Addressing the realities of racism is a heavy lift. Wilkerson accomplishes it by enlisting relatable metaphors throughout the book to speak in displacement. With this approach, she creates space in which one can think and possibly gain deeper knowledge of the emotionally charged topics of racism and casteism. This potential space is important because exploration of these topics understandably raises defenses that can hinder thinking. Within this space, Wilkerson links the caste systems of India, the U.S., and Nazi Germany. She introduces material, largely unfamiliar to the general reader, about Hitler’s envy and admiration of America’s ability to legally establish a system of racial oppression. Wilkerson notes that Hitler “attributed” this feat to America’s “Aryan stock.” Nazi Germans were further inspired by America’s near-genocide of indigenous peoples, including the “exiling” of the survivors to reservations, as well as by the institution of slavery. American ideology, turned law, inspired

and strengthened the Nazi system of race-based separation, dehumanization, torture, and annihilation of six million Jewish people.

Wilkerson articulates the dynamics of domination and subordination in this country succinctly: race in America exists along a spectrum, one end being white and the other black, and everyone else lying somewhere in between. As mental health clinicians with various interests other than racism, we choose for a number of reasons to theorize about the United States' collective psyche as it relates to being on this black-white spectrum. One of these reasons is that we believe black people—the subordinate caste—are used to anchor racism in America. Thus, understanding how black people are perceived and treated in the U.S. helps us understand any system (e.g., Nazism) in which rationalization is used to justify the arbitrary subjugation of other human beings. Wilkerson's conceptualization of splitting black from white comes close to Melanie Klein's ideas of the splitting that occurs in the paranoid-schizoid position. Wilkerson takes us on a journey intended to highlight the need to integrate one's bad parts (such as slavery) with one's good parts (such as the idea of liberty for all) in order for our country to achieve wholeness. Those familiar with Kleinian theory will recognize Wilkerson's description of the primitive defensive operations activated when one perceives a threat to one's survival.

Wilkerson's writing in *Caste* is such an emotionally near experience for us as black Americans that we frequently had to pause while reading in order to attend to our pain. We had to read slowly to allow our feelings to rise and calm; this was necessary for us to take in Wilkerson's words and impressions. Frequent breaks were required to ask "Am I okay?" "Am I allowing myself to feel the emotions that are coming up?" "Are my defenses blocking out any of this?" In *Caste*, Wilkerson does what we as mental health providers—whether with subordinate, dominant, or middle castes—attempt to accomplish in teaching our patients to understand the course of trauma and the emotional wave-riding required to embark on that process. This includes understanding how trauma affects the psyches of the tortured, the torturer, and those descended from both.

Part One, "Toxins in the Permafrost and Heat Rising All Around," opens with a metaphor parallel to the image, often used by psychoanalysts, of the "tip of the iceberg": the conscious part of our mind, with the unconscious mind a larger mass submerged under water. Wilkerson relates a more complex "glacial" occurrence, in which political decisions about the

environment result in the release of a pathogen that manifests in today's atmosphere. Part One foreshadows her argument for interconnectedness, an ideal shared by indigenous people—the view that we are interdependent with the earth, and that how we treat the earth impacts how she treats us. In this context, Wilkerson discusses the consequences of historical separatist hatred and tribalism, which have surfaced in the U.S. as the political atmosphere in the country has heated up. An example she uses to make her point is that in 2017 the U.S. had more mass shootings than at any other time in its history. We could not help but note that currently our country also has the highest number of recorded serial killers in the world (Sheth 2018). Wilkerson seems to suggest that what might be revealed, in the heated social and political climate of our nation, is what is really plaguing our society—and the earth itself—beneath the surface.

We enjoyed Wilkerson's rhythmic weaving of past and present into a seamless tapestry of American life. In the section "The Vitals of History," her extended metaphor approximates the experiences of receiving and providing medical care. Wilkerson explains that the patient's history is taken because of its possible impact on current somatic and psychological functioning and well-being. Just as our psychoanalytic tenets direct us to examine how the there-and-then impacts the here-and-now, Wilkerson affirms the vital importance of knowing a person's history, including family and environmental factors and stressors that impact the organism (the biopsychosocial model in action). We believe that knowing relevant historical and environmental factors gives us a full picture that in theory allows us to assess the patient and provide more effective treatment. Yet, black and brown people are often viewed without consideration of their contextual histories and experiences (e.g., the disavowal of racism as a variable), with the result that clinicians provide treatment based on a priori diagnoses. It is here that Wilkerson demonstrates what the empirical data have shown for at least three decades: black and brown people are perpetually misunderstood and misdiagnosed, which frequently results in their being mistreated. Although much-needed attention is increasingly given the impact of race and racism on marginalized individuals and communities, Wilkerson's identification of *caste* as an organizing principle of structural racism expands our conceptualization of the deeper maladies at the root of symptomatology.

In Part Two, “The Arbitrary Construction of Human Division,” Wilkerson quotes James Baldwin: “For the horrors of the American Negro’s life . . . there has been almost no language” (p. 47). Wilkerson aptly names the lived experience of the subordinate group (black Americans) in a culture organized by and around the dominant group (white Americans). As she explains the U.S. tapestry, she does so using the pronoun “we.” She thus requires that each of us accept accountability for the part we play in what she calls a “script,” highlighting the inescapable collectivism in our country: a land stolen from indigenous peoples and occupied by white immigrants.

Part Three, “The Eight Pillars of Caste,” explores race-based traumas. Although Wilkerson writes that she will hold back on the “grisly” tortures performed to terrorize the bodies and psyches of black people to keep them subjugated, she proceeds to review the seminal work of Harriet A. Washington, author of *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006). Washington’s work exposes how black people, including living babies, were used as subjects in novel medical experiments. Before the police murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in rapid succession, Washington’s work was largely unknown and possibly uninteresting to many of us in the health care industry and in society at large. In referencing this work, Wilkerson is again a truth-teller who accurately labels plantations as forced labor camps, the act of returning enslaved persons to their captor-owners as kidnapping, and black women’s wombs as profit centers. Wilkerson’s work ensures that these aspects of our collective history are made evident.

In Part Four, “The Tentacles of Caste,” Wilkerson addresses a question that many have asked: Why would white people who struggle financially in our capitalistic society support government actors who vote against their interests of having accessible health care, unpolluted water and air, and jobs? Remarkably, she gives a simple and plausible answer: to support and maintain their dominant position in our caste hierarchy; if nothing else, at least they are part of the dominant “white” caste. Being white and dominant appears to be such a powerful combination of aphrodisiac and sedative that individuals and groups will act against their own well-being in order to maintain the high of white status.

The quest to be proximate to the dominant caste explains, to some extent, non-black immigrants’ readiness to relinquish parts of their

connection to centuries of rich cultures (within which are elements of caste) and histories upon entering the U.S. After all, while whiteness is a social construct and neither biologically nor scientifically based, the privileges conferred by identification with the dominant caste are very real indeed. What we found most interesting about this section was the chapter titled “Dominant Group Status Threat.” The response of manic defenses to this threat can be seen playing out in real time in our communities and in the news. We imagine that it is difficult to be white in America at this time, particularly if one has been “miscaste,” in Wilkerson’s apt term. When the theoretically superior white person is with people of color who perform at a superior level, or are in a “superior” position, that white person’s reality is challenged. This experience, for a miscaste white person (of being inferior in performance or position), might evoke some confusing and disturbing feelings—ones that will likely raise defenses. As Klein has taught us, realizing that we, and those on whom we depend, are not just good but also bad can cause oscillation to the depressive position. And that is what happens to the miscaste white person. Those who have been placed by caste in a superior position that is unrealistic for their aptitude or skills may feel pressure to perform in ways that are beyond them. The miscaste white person will then employ primitive defenses, scapegoating and attacking members of the subordinate caste to secure dominant status. This miscaste-ing not only puts pressure on the dominant member’s ego; it also weakens our entire societal system.

Much as comedy is used as a higher-order defense to communicate and process painful truths, Wilkerson’s poetic language operates as a conduit to deliver truths about our America. We agree with her that until the country integrates its past with its present, its bad and good parts, we will not be whole, nor will we be sturdy. We welcome a continuation of the expansion of lexicon that promotes dialogue, which is essential for insight that will better guide us to evolve toward the system we intend and see ourselves as being.

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