



Caste: the origins of our discontents

By Isabel Wilkerson

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of *Caste*, author Isabel Wilkerson compares American racial hierarchy to a dormant Siberian virus. What are the strengths of this metaphor? How does this comparison help combat the pervasive myth that racism has been eradicated in America?
2. Wilkerson begins the book with an image of one lone dissenter amidst a crowd of Germans giving the Nazi salute. What would it mean—and what would it take—to be this man today?
3. What are some of the elements required for a caste system to succeed?
4. Wilkerson uses many different metaphors to explain and help us visualize the concept of the American caste system: the bones inside a body, the beams inside a house, even the computer program in the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Which of these metaphors helped the concept click for you? Why was it successful?
5. Caste and race are not the same thing. What is the difference between the two? How do casteism and racism support each other?
6. Discuss how class is also different from caste.
7. Who does a caste system benefit? Who does it harm?
8. “Before there was a United States of America,” Wilkerson writes, “there was a caste system, born in colonial Virginia.” How can Americans reckon with this fact? What does it mean to you to live in a country whose system of discrimination was cemented before the country itself?
9. Did learning about the lens and language of caste change how you look at U.S. history and society? How?

10. Wilkerson discusses three major caste systems throughout the book: India, Nazi Germany, and America. What are some of the differences that stood out to you among these three systems? What are the similarities? How did learning about one help you understand the other? For instance, did the fact that the Nazis actually studied America's segregation practices and Jim Crow laws help underscore the depth of our own system?

11. Harold Hale, an African-American man, helped his daughter defy the "rules" of their caste in 1970s Texas by naming her Miss. As Wilkerson illustrates throughout the book, the dangers of being seen as defying one's caste can range from humiliation to death. What do you think of the lengths he felt he needed to go to assure dignity for his daughter? What are the risks he put her in by doing so? Should Miss have had a say in her father's quietly revolutionary act? Explain.

12. Discuss the differences and similarities between how Miss was treated in the South, where racism and casteism have historically been more overt, and in the North, where they still exist, but can be more subtle. Do you think these various forms of racism and casteism must be fought in different ways?

13. Wilkerson quotes the orator Frederick Douglass, who described the gestures that could incite white rage and violence: "in the tone of an answer; in answering at all; in not answering . . ." These contradict each other: One could incite rage by answering . . . or by not answering. Discuss the bind that this contradiction put (and still puts) African-American people in.

14. Wilkerson frequently uses her own experience as an African-American woman to illustrate her points regarding caste—and the confusion when someone "rises above" his or her presumed station. What do readers gain from hearing about Wilkerson's personal experiences in addition to her deep historical research?

15. "Indians will ask one's surname, the occupation of one's father, the village one is from, the section of the village that one is from, to suss out the caste of whoever is standing in front of them," Wilkerson writes. "They will not rest until they have uncovered the person's rank in the social order." How is this similar to and different from the process of determining caste in America? Have you ever, for instance, asked someone what they did for work or where they lived or went to school, and been surprised? Did you treat them differently upon hearing their answer?

16. Analyze the process of dehumanization and how it can lead to people justifying great acts of cruelty.



17. “Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing,” Wilkerson writes. Whether in the dominant caste or not, what are some of the ways that each of us, personally, can stand up to the caste system?

18. Wilkerson gives examples that range from the horrifying (lynching) to the absurd (the Indian woman who walked across an office to ask a Dalit to pour her water from the jug next to her desk) to illustrate caste’s influence on behavior. How do both of these types of examples—and everything in between—help cement her points? Why do we need to see this range to clearly understand caste?

19. Discuss how overt racism subtly transformed into unconscious bias. What are the ways that we can work to compensate for the unconscious biases inherent in a caste system?

20. Wilkerson writes about the “construction of whiteness,” describing the way immigrants went from being Czech or Hungarian or Polish to “white”—a political designation that only has meaning when set against something “not white.” Irish, Italian . . . people weren’t “white” until they came to America. What does this “construction of whiteness” tell us about the validity of racial designations and the structure of caste?

21. It is a widely held convention that working-class white Americans may often “act against their own interests” by opposing policies designed to help the working class. Discuss how the logic of caste disproves this concept and redefines that same choice from the perspective of maintaining group dominance.

22. How does the caste system take people who would otherwise be allies and turn them against one another? 23. Wilkerson describes dinner with a white acquaintance who was incensed over the treatment they received from the waitstaff. Why did the acquaintance respond the way that she did, and how did it hurt or help the situation?

24. What do we learn from Albert Einstein’s response to the American caste system upon arrival from Germany?

25. What are some of the steps that society, and each of us, can take toward dismantling the caste system?

Questions courtesy of the publisher:

http://www.randomhousebooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WILKERSON_Caste_HC_DiscussionGuide.pdf





Interview with Isabel Wilkerson

It's More Than Racism: Isabel Wilkerson Explains America's 'Caste' System

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Heard on [Fresh Air](#) (NPR) with Terry Gross

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. When my guest Isabel Wilkerson was writing her book "The Warmth Of Other Suns" about the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North looking to escape the lynchings, the cross burnings, the terrorism and the lack of opportunity in the South, she says she realized she wasn't writing about geography and relocation; she was writing about the American caste system.

Now she's written a new book called "Caste" that explains why she thinks America can be described as having a caste system and how if we use that expression, it deepens our understanding of what Black people have been up against in America. She compares America with the caste system in India and writes about how the Nazi leadership borrowed from American racist laws and the American eugenics movement. Wilkerson won a National Book Critics Circle Award for her book about the Great Migration called "The Warmth Of Other Suns," and she won a Pulitzer Prize when she was a reporter at The New York Times.

Isabel Wilkerson, welcome back to FRESH AIR. It is really a pleasure to have you on again, and congratulations on the book. Ten years ago, when you wrote "The Warmth Of Other Suns," you used the word caste system to refer to the segregated South. And you wrote, (reading) in the decades between Reconstruction and the enforcement of civil rights laws, nearly every Black family in the American South had a decision to make. The decision was to stay in the South's segregated caste system or make the pilgrimage North or West in the hope of escaping racism and having more access to jobs, housing and other opportunities.



What made you think of using the word caste system to describe America as a whole? In that paragraph, you used it to describe the American South.

ISABEL WILKERSON: Well, I found that the word racism, which is often applied to discussions of interactions among and between African Americans and other groups in this country - I found that term to be insufficient to capture the rigid social hierarchy and the repression that they were born into and that, in fact, everyone in that regime had to live under. And so I turned to the word caste, which is a word that had been used by anthropologists and social scientists who went in to study the Jim Crow era in the 1930s in particular. And they emerged from their ethnography, they emerged from their time there with the term caste as the language to use to describe what they found when they went there.

And so I came to that word as had they. That is the term that is more precise. It is more comprehensive, and it gets at the underlying infrastructure that often we cannot see but that is there undergirding much of the inequality and injustices and disparities that we live with in this country.

GROSS: What do you think the difference is between using the word caste system or systemic racism?

WILKERSON: Well, it's a difference in some ways between what one would consider caste versus race to begin with. I think of caste as the bones and race as the skin. And that allows us to see that race is a tool of the underlying structure that we live with, that race is merely the signal and cue to where one fits in the caste system. And caste system is actually an artificial hierarchy. It's a graded ranking of human value in a society that determines the standing and respect, the benefit of the doubt and access to resources, assumptions of competence and even of beauty through no fault or action of one's own. You're just born to it. And so caste focuses in on the infrastructure of our divisions and the rankings, whereas race is the metric that's used to determine one's place in that or one's assignment in that caste system.

So that while there's an interaction between the two of them, caste is the much older term. It's a term that's been around for thousands of years, predates the idea of race, which is a fairly new concept. It's only 400 or 500 years old, dating back to the transatlantic slave trade. And so race is the newer concept, and it was, in some ways, created to maintain - to delineate, categorize and create the caste system that underlies our society.



GROSS: We know about the laws on the segregated South that kept Black people separate from white people and defined what they could do. But during the Great Migration, when Black people - many - 6 million Black people migrated north in the hope of better opportunity, what are some of the laws and regulations that they found in the North that prevented them from realizing the opportunities that they sought to have in the North?

WILKERSON: Oh, exactly. In fact, they left one hierarchy - rigid formal hierarchy known as Jim Crow, in which it was against the law for a Black person and a white person to merely play checkers together, with all of the restrictions that attended that and also the enforcement that was often brutal, but then they migrated away from that and found and discovered that, actually, caste shadowed them wherever they went and that the response to their arrival was, in fact, the methods that became known, as Northern people at the time called it, James Crow, in which there were restrictive covenants that meant that white homeowners, even if they wanted to sell to Black people, Black potential buyers, were prevented by the restrictions that were embedded in their deeds and, also, of course, redlining, which meant that the government would not back mortgages in neighborhoods where there were - where African Americans lived, which meant that it was exceedingly difficult for African Americans, until the 1960s, to merely get a mortgage to buy a home, which is, of course, one of the most prominent and relied-upon methods of building wealth in America, which means that there have been continuing generations-long disparity in access to the most basic American dream.

And so that is what they discovered when they got to the North. And, in fact, these apparatus of control and delineation and segregation were created in the North as a result of the response to the Great Migration.

GROSS: You were talking to a Nigerian-born playwright, and that playwright told you there are no Black people in Africa.

WILKERSON: Yeah.

GROSS: Africans aren't Black. What did they mean?

WILKERSON: Well, it's so shocking to our ears because, of course, we say that there is an entire subcontinent of people who we would view as Black. But what she was saying was that until you come to the United States, they themselves do not see themselves as Black. They are Igbo, or they are Ndebele, or they are Yoruba. Whatever it is that they are in terms of their ethnicity and identity, it is only when they enter into a hierarchy such as this do they then have to think of themselves as Black. But back where they are from, they do not have to think of themselves as Black because Black is not the primary metric of determining one's identity.



GROSS: You say that the idea of white - of being white - is an American innovation.

WILKERSON: Yes, it's an innovation that is only several hundred years old, dating back to the time of the transatlantic slave trade. And that is because before that time, you know, there were humans on the land wherever they happened to be on this planet. And because of the way people were living on the land, they were merely who they were. They were Irish or they were German or they were Polish or Hungarian.

And only after the transatlantic slave trade, only after people who had been spread out all over the world converged in this one space, the new world, to create a new country, a new culture, where all of these people were then interacting and having to figure out how they were going to relate to one another - that is when you have a caste system that emerges that instantly relegates those who were brought in as to be enslaved - relegated them to the very bottom of the caste system and then elevated those who looked like those who had - who created the caste system, meaning those who were British and Western Europeans, at the very top of the caste system. And anyone who entered that caste system had to then navigate and figure out, how were they going to manage? How were they going to survive and succeed in this caste system?

And also, upon arrival, discovering that they were assigned to a particular category whether they wished to be in or not - and that means that until arriving here, people who were Irish, people who were Hungarian, people who were Polish would not have identified themselves back in the 19th century as being white. But only in connection to the gradations and ranking that occurred and was created in the United States - that is where the designation of white, the designation of Black and those in between came to have meaning.

GROSS: If you see America as still having a caste system, where do you see people of color fitting in?

WILKERSON: Well, there was a tremendous churning at the beginning of the 20th century of people who were arriving in these undetermined or middle groups that did not fit neatly into the bipolar structure that America had created. And at the beginning of the 20th century, there were petitions to the Supreme Court, petitions to the government for clarity about where they would fit in. And they were often petitioning to be admitted to the dominant castes.

One of the examples - a Japanese immigrant petitioned to qualify for being Caucasian because he said, my skin is actually whiter than many people that are identified as white in America. I should qualify to be considered Caucasian. And his petition was rejected by the Supreme Court. But these are all of - examples of the longstanding uncertainties about who fits where when you have a caste system that is bipolar such as the one that was created here.



GROSS: Bipolar - you mean Black and white?

WILKERSON: Yes.

GROSS: What impact do you think that that had or has on white people who are poor or who are in the lower part socioeconomically of the working class?

WILKERSON: Well, it creates a false pedestal of standing that has nothing to do with what one does. It's what you're born into. It also, though, creates an invisible false pedestal. It's a pedestal that people cannot see. As we can - as I speak about, the caste system itself is like a building. And the building has joints and beams and the structure that we cannot see, but the building is there. And what makes it especially troubling is that if one cannot see that there is a pedestal that one may be standing on that was - that you had nothing to do with and that was created well before you were born, then you may not even recognize the advantages that you actually were born to.

The other thing is that it can create easily activated resentment at anything that does not track with how one perceives oneself. In other words, the perception that someone who has been deemed lower or that one perceives to be lower than them - any advancement by someone in that group can be seen as a greater threat than it otherwise would be. There would be a greater investment in maintaining the caste system as it is and maintaining the hierarchy as we have known it to be.

And I think that one way that it, you know, shows up a lot is that we often say in our era that - you know, people say that white working-class voters will often be acting against their own interests in opposing policies, for example, that may be geared toward working people, you know, like universal health care, for example. But from the lens of caste, it would not be surprising that they might oppose policies that they fear could threaten their own status by assisting those that they perceive as being beneath them. And so from a caste perspective, it could be argued that they are actually acting in what they perceive to be their best interests if their best interest is maintaining the hierarchy as it has always been.

GROSS: I think this would be a good time to take a short break. Let me reintroduce you. If you're just joining us, my guest is Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book is called "Caste." We'll be back after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF ALLEN TOUSSAINT'S "EGYPTIAN FANTASY")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with journalist Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book "Caste" suggests we look at America as having created a caste system to keep down African Americans.

So, you know, you write that, like, the Nazi regime could not understand why Jews in America qualified as white.



WILKERSON: You know, I have to say that, you know, what propelled me to Germany to begin with - a study of the Nazis had to do with Charlottesville, really - you know, the contention over statues, and the Confederate and Nazi symbolism that fused among the ralliers there and the battle over memory, the memory of the Civil War and the role and the realities of slavery. Those are the reasons that I ended up even looking into what was going on with the Nazis. So this was - that was a long road to getting to what you just said (laughter). And I have to say that my focus was not initially on the Nazis themselves but rather on how Germany has worked in the decades after the war to reconcile its history. But the deeper that I got and the more that I looked into this, the deeper I searched, I discovered these connections that I would never have imagined.

And it turned out that, you know, German eugenicists were in continuing dialogue with American eugenicists. Books by American eugenicists were big sellers in Germany in the years leading up to the Third Reich. And then, of course, the Nazis needed no one to teach them how to hate. But what they did was they sent researchers to study America's Jim Crow laws. They actually sent researchers to America to study how Americans had subjugated African Americans, what would be considered the subordinated caste. And they actually debated and consulted American law as they were devising the Nuremberg Laws. And as they were looking at those laws in the United States, they couldn't understand why, from their perspective, the group that they had identified as the subordinated caste was not recognized in the United States in the same way. So that was the unusual interconnectedness that I never would've imagined.

GROSS: Let's look at South Africa for a moment. You don't include them in your three major caste systems. You include America, Nazi Germany and India. But I think it's fair to say South Africa during apartheid was a caste system, yes?

WILKERSON: Oh, absolutely. And I considered it. But I needed to narrow it down. I would still be writing it into the next decade...

GROSS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

WILKERSON: ...If I had included the others.

(LAUGHTER)

GROSS: I'm glad you finished it.

WILKERSON: Yeah (laughter).



GROSS: We wouldn't be talking now if it wasn't done yet.

WILKERSON: Exactly.

GROSS: Yeah. But - so in South Africa, it wasn't bipolar. It wasn't, like, a division between white and Black. There were other divisions in between. Would you describe what those categories were and how you qualified for those categories?

WILKERSON: Well, the categories were primarily white, colored and then African or Black. And there were - there's a reason why there was that middle category that was codified and recognized in the way that it was. And that has to do with the composition and demographics of that country in which the white population was in the extreme minority in the country. And in order to wield and hold power, they needed to have divisions that were a little different from the way that the United States hierarchy happens to be. They had great incentive to include and to expand the definition of who could be in the upper rung because of - their numbers were so small.

And so it worked to their advantage to have that middle group be more formally identified, portioned specific benefits and rights and privileges that those on the very bottom would not have had - those on the bottom being, you know, the mass majority. And so they had a different imperative than the United States had, the United States having been predominantly - the majority has always been people who were identified as white. And the incentive was not, at a certain point, necessary to involve - to bring in any more people than already were there. And, in fact, there was a desire to cordon off those who could qualify to be at the very top because the numbers were already there to begin with.

GROSS: You say that, you know, the U.S. used immigration as a legal way to maintain the caste system. What do you mean by that?

WILKERSON: That in order to curate, you might say, the population - curating the population means deciding who gets to be a part of it and where they fit in upon entry. And so there was a tremendous effort at the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the 20th century, with the rise of eugenics and this growing belief in the gradations of man, of humankind - that they wanted to keep the population to what it had been - closer to what it had been at the founding of the country.

And so there was an effort to restrict who could come into the country if they were not of Western European descent, tremendous back-and-forth, tremendous efforts on the part of eugenicists, who then held sway in, you know, the popular imagination - tremendous effort to keep out people who we now would view as part of the dominant group. So there was - it was a form of curating who could become a part of the United States and where they would fit in. And they used immigration laws to determine who would be able to get access to that dominant group.



GROSS: Now under the Trump administration, we've seen the Muslim travel ban, building the wall, trying to end DACA and send back DREAMers. How do you see that - do you see that as being part of what you describe as the caste system?

WILKERSON: Well, it shows the enduring nature of this impulse to maintain the idea of America as it had originally been created, this idea that it is a country where certain people are viewed as American and certain other people are not viewed as American. And this is a continuation. I see all of this as a continuum, where we make great strides toward embracing others. And then there's a backlash. And then there's a plateau. And then there's yet another progress. And then there's a backlash. And then there's a plateau. And so we're in the middle of a cycle. But this is an ongoing continuum in which there is this effort to curate and to chisel and control who can be admitted into this caste system that was created so long ago.

GROSS: Well, let's take another break here. And then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book is called "Caste." We'll be right back. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF HERLIN RILEY'S "RUSH HOUR")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with journalist Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book "Caste" suggests that we look at America as having created a caste system to keep down African Americans.

In the comparisons that you make between the Nazi regime and the caste system in America, you describe, like, what qualified in each country as being white. Like, how much, quote, "blood" - nonwhite blood - did you need to have in your system in order to disqualify as being white? Would you compare the two countries in defining that?

WILKERSON: Well, that was a source of tremendous debate, I came to discover. I had no idea how they had arrived at their delineation of people. And they sent people to study the United States and how it had defined and codified, categorized and subjugated African Americans and delineated who could be what in the United States. They studied the - also studied the marriage laws - intermarriage laws. And in doing so, they debated as to who should qualify to be considered Aryan in Germany at that time.

And in studying the United States, they were - they themselves were stunned to have discovered the one-drop rule that was the common distinction in the United States for determining whether a person could be identified as Black or African American. At that time, they would've been called colored or Negro. That idea of the one-drop rule was - that was viewed as too extreme to them. That...



GROSS: Too extreme to the Nazis.

WILKERSON: Stunning to hear that. I mean, it's stunning to see that, stunning to discover that. The Nazis, in trying to create their own caste system - what could be considered a caste system, went to great lengths to really think hard about who should qualify as Aryan because they felt that they wanted to include as many people as they possibly could, ironically enough.

In trying to define who could qualify to be Aryan, the Nazis were more concerned about making sure that those who had Aryan blood would be protected - that a person who had a significant amount of Aryan blood should still be considered Aryan. They actually had greater latitude in defining who could be Aryan and who would qualify as Jewish than the United States had determined with who could be African American or who could be white.

GROSS: Germany passed the Law for the Protection for German Blood and German Honor to define who was a Jew, and you're right. Here's how it was defined - that Hitler defined a Jew as a person with three Jewish grandparents or anyone descended from two Jewish grandparents who practiced Judaism or was accepted in the Jewish community or was married to a Jew. The law also banned marriage and intercourse out of marriage between Jews and Germans and forbade German women under 45 to work in a Jewish household. I assume that was because the Germans assumed that over 45 you would no longer be of childbearing age, and so if you had consensual sex with the white men of the house or if he raped you, you wouldn't be bringing a Jew into the world.

WILKERSON: Absolutely. That was how they interpreted or adjusted the - what they discovered when they came and researched the United States. That's what they ended up with.

GROSS: How do you see yourself within the caste system in America?

WILKERSON: I was asked that by an Indian immigrant in London once. He did not - he was an immigrant to England but born in India, and he asked me that. And I found that question to be a stunning one because I did not - it was surprising to me that he was not aware of the dynamics in the United States. He was not aware of what the messaging might have been exported to the world about the role and the ranking of African Americans.

So I answered the question by indicating to him that - described to him the caste system in the United States, described the hierarchy. And I said to him that I was born to what would be considered the subordinate group in the United States. And so that is what people like me have been born to. It does not mean that that is actually who we are. It just means that that is what society has assigned people who are of African descent. African Americans have been categorized from the very beginning as being at the very bottom of the hierarchy, bottom of the caste system.



GROSS: But although you see yourself as having been defined as a member of the lowest rung of the caste system in America, I mean, you're a successful author. You won a Pulitzer Prize when you were a New York Times reporter. You won a National Book Critics Circle Award for your book about the Great Migration north in America, and now you have a new book. So, like, you have - I think by anyone's standards, like, you're very successful. So how do you reconcile that with thinking of yourself as being on the lowest rung in a caste system? And caste systems, by definition, don't allow you to move up higher.

WILKERSON: Well, that's where the issue of class comes in. So if caste is the bones and race is the skin, then class is the, you know, the clothes, the diction, the accent, the education, the external successes that one might achieve. But that does not protect a person from the intrusion of caste, the intrusion of boundaries because caste is essentially - you know, it's an effort to control and restrict and to tell people where they belong. It's a focus on this autonomic impulse to keep people in their place no matter what. And it's - you know, and that is fueled by, you know, unconscious biases that kick in before a person can even think.

And so people like myself can - might move about the world as, you know, as objectively successful people, but that does not protect against the intrusion from others who might try to put someone in their place by setting boundaries, suggesting or responding as if they actually don't belong where they are.

I mean, I had this, you know, experience in Chicago years ago when I was reporting a story that was fairly routine. I made arrangements to interview all these people. I made the arrangements over the phone to interview a number of people for this story. And all the interviews had gone well until I got to the last one. It was the last interview of the day. I was very much looking forward to it. The person that I was speaking with - or going to speak with - had been very excited to talk with me over the phone. But when I got there, he happened not to have been there at the time. And the place that I went, it was an establishment, a retail establishment, happened not to have other people in it. And so I was waiting for him to get there. The door opens. And this man comes in. He's very harried. He's got this coat - his overcoat on. He's late for an appointment, ultimately, with me. But he's harried. He's frazzled. He's anxious.

And the clerk who had helped me earlier told me to go up to him and that this was the man I was there to interview. And I went up to him. And he said, oh, no, no, no, no. I can't talk with you right now. And I was flummoxed by that. I mean, we're here for the interview. Why are you - why are you saying you don't have time to talk? And he said, no, no. I can't talk with you right now. I'm getting ready for a very, very important interview. I cannot talk with you right now. And I said, well, I think I'm the person interviewing you. I'm Isabel Wilkerson with The New York Times. And he said, oh - he said, well, how would I know that? How do I know that you're Isabel Wilkerson?



And I said, I am here. This is the time. It's 4:30. We're here for the interview. And he said, well, do you have a business card? And I said - I actually happened not to have had any because I - it was the end of the day. And I'd been interviewing people all day. And this was the last interview, which I was very much looking forward to. And I said, I'm sorry. I'm out of business cards right now. He said, well, do you have something that - do you have some ID? Can I see some ID? And I said, I shouldn't have to show you ID. We're already into the time that we were to have the interview. We should be talking right now.

And he said, well, I need to see some ID. And so I pulled out my driver's license to show it to him. And he said, you don't have anything with The New York Times on it? And he said, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to ask you to leave because I have a very important interview coming. She'll be here any minute. I'm going to have to ask you to leave. So I was actually accused of impersonating myself because I was not perceived as being the person - I was not perceived as being someone who should have been in the position of a New York Times national correspondent there to interview him.

GROSS: Who do you tell after an incident like that? Did you talk to your editors about it? Did you just share it with friends and family? It seems like it would be such a maddening episode.

WILKERSON: I have to say that I would share it with friends and family but would not have shared that with editors because I would not want it to be seen - you don't want to emphasize the barriers that you face. In other words, you don't want to suggest in any way that you're not able to do your job. You just have to find other ways to do it. And so that's something that I shared with friends and family, people who were close to me.

But then I just soldiered on in order to get the work done. I mean, I wrote the piece. The piece was fine. No one needed to - you know, the editors - no one else needed to know the trouble that I had to do. And, in fact, we don't really like talking about the challenges to what we do. We want to just focus on getting the job done like anyone else.

GROSS: Let me reintroduce you here. If you're just joining us, my guest is Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book is called "Caste: The Origins Of Our Discontents." We'll be right back after we take a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE ROOTS SONG, "SACRIFICE")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with journalist Isabel Wilkerson. Her new book is called "Caste: The Origins Of Our Discontents." It suggests we look at America as having created a caste system to keep down African Americans.



There's another story that we won't have time for you to tell. But you're on a business trip. You need to take the shuttle to get to the Rent-A-Car place. And you're stopped by two DEA - Drug Enforcement Agency - guys. And it's like, why (laughter)? And they get on the bus with you. They ask you questions. And finally, they leave you alone. But, you know, you write about the psychic cost that this has on you, how it was just really upsetting to you and also the amount of time it takes to deal with these kinds of sleights - like, whether it's the restaurant or the DEA agents, this kind of profiling. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

WILKERSON: Well, it takes a toll on the lives of so, so many people. And I think that this is one of, you know, the consequences of caste is that it actually has measurable impact on the lives and the health of people who are subjected to this on a regular basis. Of course, we've seen so many videos of people whose daily lives may be interrupted by someone who calls a police on them for this or that thing that they're doing that's a perfectly ordinary thing but that people feel the right to police, surveil and control the actions of people. And when these things happen, they are disorienting. They are disruptive. And they are heartbreaking. I mean, they're absolutely gut-wrenching when they occur.

And yet, you have to still soldier forth. You still have to find a way to push through. In this case, though, I would say that this is also a way that the caste system affects, you know, the larger society. And that is, if you have a significant number of workers, a significant number of people who are part of the machinery of the economy, who are being derailed, held back, delayed, disrupted as they go about their work - I mean, here I am doing - you know, I'm a national correspondent for The New York Times there for work. And these are the kind of things that, in just my own experience, as we're describing it, that derailed, delayed, affected my ability to be able to do my job. Multiply that by, you know, millions of other people who are in different aspects, different parts of our society, who are being delayed, derailed as they try to do their work. You multiply that times all of these millions of people and you can see how this affects, very likely, you know, productivity of people, employees and, ultimately, companies and ultimately industries and ultimately the country itself.

GROSS: You tell a story in your new book about a conversation that you had with Gwen Ifill, the late journalist who - I think she was probably covering the presidential campaign in 2016 when you were talking with her about this. And she - and you were talking about why - she was saying Trump could really win the election, if I recall this story correctly from your book. And you were asking her why, and you said it's because of 2042. And 2042 is the year that the census predicts America will stop being a majority-white country.

WILKERSON: Actually, I have to say it was the inverse (laughter).

GROSS: Oh, you were saying that?



WILKERSON: Yeah, yeah (laughter).

GROSS: OK. Sorry, I scrambled that in my brain. So why were you saying that to her?

WILKERSON: Well, I went up to Gwen at a party basically - actually, it was New Year's Eve going into 2016. And I went up to her and just thought I would ask her about it partly because I am not - I focus in on, you know, the narrative nonfiction and the history. And obviously, she is - was one of the preeminent political journalists of our time. And I said to her - I said, well, I really think that - you know, that he could win. I think people are not seeing that right now, but I really think that he could win. And she said, well, absolutely. And I said, I think that it has to do with 2042. And she said, well, yes. That is exactly what is happening. That's exactly what this is.

And I mentioned this because the prospect of a completely different configuration of the country has consequences for the nation and not just for people who have been historically in the dominant group but for anyone in the country. This is a configuration that no one in the United States has ever lived with, has ever had to deal with. And so it requires a rethinking. It requires a new way of thinking about oneself, ourselves. At the same time, though, it could also be perceived as threatening to people who might not be certain as to what that means for them. So this is, in my view, all part of the churning and the dislocation and the uncertainty of the times in which we live.

GROSS: When you talk about America being a caste system, do you think the caste system is as strong now? Obviously, it's not as strong as it was during segregation. But do you see the caste system starting to disintegrate or not?

WILKERSON: It has mutated to the times, and that's the reason why it's an enduring fixture in the infrastructure of our divisions. I mean, it is the architecture of division. And because people don't recognize it and may not be able to see it, we accept it and act upon it without even realizing it. That is actually one of the reasons why I think caste is actually the more appropriate and enlightening - in some ways, actually liberating - term to describe where we happen to be right now because it is not about feelings and opinion, you know, race and racism seeming to suggest, you know, personal animus, prejudice. It triggers the, you know, such emotions as guilt and shame and blame.

But caste is about structure. It's about something that is inherited, that we have inherited as a country. It suggests something that is perhaps not seen but still affecting us but not personal. I would not hazard a guess as to whether we're on the way toward ending it now. I'm only saying that we can now better see it for what it is. We can now better see the infrastructure beneath what we have inherited in ways that we couldn't see it before.

GROSS: I know a lot of people say, I'm not responsible for racism in America. My family was immigrants, or I always lived in the North. I've never owned slaves. I'm not a racist myself. What do you say to that?



WILKERSON: I say that when you buy a house, you are not responsible for how it was built unless you had it built yourself. But if you buy an old house, you are not responsible for how it was built. You did not build the beams and the posts and the pillars and the joints that may be now askew. But it's your responsibility once it's in your possession to know what it is that you now occupy. And it's your responsibility to fix it.

No one had anything to do with the creation of the caste system that we've inherited. But now that we are in it and we recognize it and we are here however we got here, whether we were brought over and - where we came over in ships either of our own choice or not, whether we have recently arrived, we are now in the structure in the old house that now belongs to us. And it's our responsibility now to deal with whatever is within it. Whatever's wrong with it is now our responsibility, those of us alive here today.

GROSS: Isabel Wilkerson, thank you so much for coming back to FRESH AIR and talking with us.

WILKERSON: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

GROSS: Isabel Wilkerson's new book is called "Caste: The Origins Of Our Discontents." After we take a short break, John Powers will review a book causing a stir in literary circles. This is FRESH AIR.

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