

From the Bookshelf: *Cast(e): Diana, Gene, Jill, Sally, and Dan*

Diana Carleton
Galveston, Texas, USA

Gene Combs and Jill Freedman
Evanston, Illinois, USA

Sally St. George and Dan Wulff
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

We (Diana Carleton, Gene Combs, Jill Freedman, Sally St. George, and Dan Wulff) had all just read the book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020) by Isabel Wilkerson and decided that each of us would write a brief reaction to the book and then pool them for this “book review.” Each of us eagerly looked forward to reading this book and we each had different “take-aways” that will shape this review.

Racism has been getting even more public attention due to high profile cases of racial violence in the United States, and conversations have spread throughout the world in many ways on many platforms. We share an appreciation of Isabel Wilkerson’s calling out of oppression and injustice through this book and join with those who have praised her work.

The five of us share an interest and commitment to collaborative and narrative ideas in the therapy field. We are keenly aware of the value of diverse perspectives in understanding and relating to our worlds and it is in that spirit that we have bundled our thoughts together about *Caste*. Our comments are clustered into three themes. The first describes how social arrangements that privilege some and marginalize others circulate and grow in our world, the second describes elements that could suggest a pathway out, and the third worries that the word “caste” may unfortunately “sanitize” the brutality embedded into these oppressive practices.

Social Arrangements Privilege/Marginalize



Dan was intrigued by Wilkerson’s depiction of caste as the “the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance” (p. 17). This highlighted the everyday, automatic nature of how caste operates. We may not even sense how we are taking part in a performance—simply being in our assigned seats within the audience, we are an integral part of the event, we are part of

the “caste-ing.” Diana also noticed that caste behavior need not be intentional—its effects operate whether or not one *intends* them or not. This connects with Michael White’s notion of the “absent but implicit”—many aspects of our lives are animated by processes and ideas that are not apparent. Their lack of visibility does not diminish their abilities to influence.

Jill offered the phrase “. . .protecting our way of life” as an illustration of how words and phrases can escape critical reflection, furthering the forces of caste or racism largely “under the radar.” I wonder who we are protecting our way of life *from*? Who is trying to take it away? This accentuates how consequential these unexamined words and ideas are—they operate to maintain our identities and places in the world. These are not trivial distinctions. If we sense that these divisions and social hierarchies/orders are pivotal in our lives and for our security, our investment in them is extremely high.

Sally brings out the point that in our hierarchical caste system, competition and rivalry emerge among those closest together on the rungs of the ladder. A sense of scarcity coupled with a competitive neoliberal dread of falling behind, encourages us to become combatants. “Be sure you take care of yourself first.” Kendi (2019) reminds us of the battle to fight off those ethnically different just below us on the ladder to protect our place: “. . .racist ideas we consume about others came from the same restaurant and the same cook who used the same ingredients to make different degrading dishes for us all” (p. 66). The racist or caste system ensnares us all, one way or another.



How Do We Escape This?

The second theme for our group was what it takes to resist or counter caste structures and processes. Wilkerson does a fine job of providing many evocative illustrations throughout her book and Sally and Jill each chose one of these stories that address this point.

Sally focused on the chapter entitled “The Heart is the Last Frontier” where Wilkerson relates a story of calling a plumber to respond to a flooding problem in her basement. This interaction began by standoffishness and indifference but a shift to talk about Wilkerson’s mother’s recent death and inquiries in the plumber’s mother led to a change of heart that turned an unhelpful interaction into a mutually beneficial and supportive one. We often fail to know our common humanity and life threads that we have in common. Separateness creates a lived experience of isolation that works hard against noticing our shared/common humanity.





Jill mentioned Wilkerson’s discussion of a photograph of shipyard workers in the era of the Third Reich. One man in the photograph stands with his arms folded across his chest, while the other hundred or so workers have their arms raised heiling. This Aryan man, August Landmesser, stepped away from the dominant caste’s positioning and Jill wonders “What would it take to be him now?” Seeing Landmesser stand in outright opposition to all those around him seems appropriate from our current point in time, but in the moment when the photo was taken, the courage being demonstrated probably involved a great deal of danger. Do we have situations now where this sort of resistance is needed? Our answer is. . . of course.



Diana explains: “A pickup truck with several young white males drove by. I had no fears or concerns for myself but had a new understanding that my Black colleague could have actually feared for her life given the political climate at that time. I realize I do not live afraid as I go about my day as my Black colleague frequently does.” Becoming aware of what caste marginalization feels like can awaken us to what may have been unknown to us before. The same situation can evoke different reactions and consequences, depending on your social position/caste.

Can We Relate to How Bad It Is?

Gene cautions us to consider what the term “caste” may do that is unwanted. He wonders if the word “caste” may inadvertently shelter us from understanding the brutality and heartlessness of racism and oppression. By broadening the influence of marginalizing forces into the world to include more groups under a more inclusive word like “caste”, are we sanitizing the crushing reality that we are trying to foreground? Is there a difference in how the terms “caste” and “White supremacy” move us?

We were glad we read the book. It prompted us to think, reflect, and to pick out ideas that could inspire and guide us. We share a hope that this moment in time might lead to real and substantial changes in the long-held patterns of trampling others by those who have power to do so. The civil rights movement, legal initiatives to protect the marginalized, public campaigns to put an end to

racism and caste-ism, books that have been written and movies made, and deadly tragic events that have exploded in our communities have only produced halting moments of improvement. What will it take to make some substantial and durable change?

We all hold positions of considerable power in our worlds, being members of socially dominant groups in many ways and we ask ourselves, “How do we acknowledge and address the ways our privilege invisibly guides us in our everyday lives?” Where do we look to open our eyes? Are we looking in the right places? Can the pillars of privilege be shaken enough to permit a world that welcomes equality? Wilkerson offered some clues. We will keep searching.

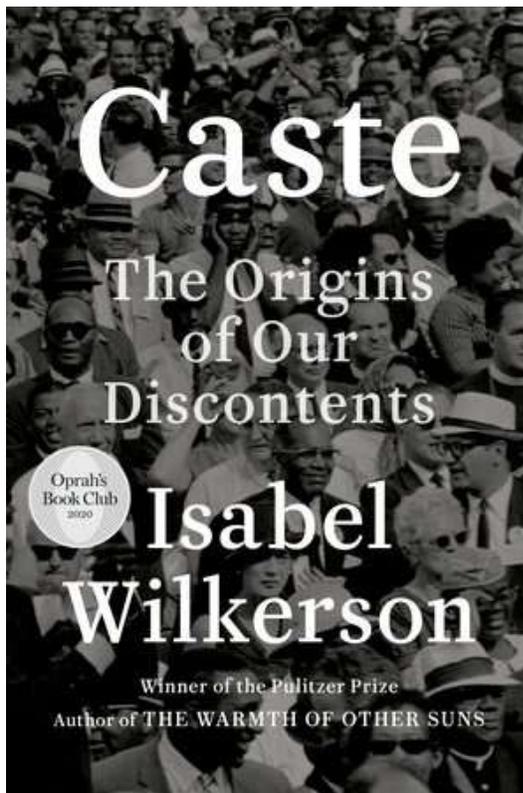


Reference

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents

Wilkerson, Isabel (2020). New York: Random House.



Author Notes:

Diana Carleton, Ed.D.
Faculty, Houston Galveston Institute
Galveston, Texas, USA
dianacarleton@sbcglobal.net

Gene Combs, M.D.
Evanston Family Therapy Center
Evanston, Illinois, USA
gnc@narrativetherapychicago.com

Jill Freedman, MSW
Evanston Family Therapy Center
Evanston, Illinois, USA
eftc@narrativetherapychicago.com

Sally St. George, PhD
University of Calgary (Canada)
sstgeor@ucalgary.ca

Dan Wulff, PhD
University of Calgary (Canada)
dwulff@ucalgary.ca