

America's Unspoken Caste System

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SPEAKERS

Nguhi Mwaura, Priti Krishtel, Alessandra Orofino, promotional message, Christian Happi, Nguhi, Courtney Martin, Isabel Wilkerson, Elizabeth Alexander, Tricia Johnson, Rodney Foxworth

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- P** promotional message 00:00

Before we get to today's show, we invite you to join a virtual celebration of literature. Aspen Words, a program of the Aspen Institute, is holding its literary prize ceremony on April 21, at 7:30pm EST. NPR's Mary Louise Kelly will moderate the hour-long program, which will include conversations with prize finalists. The winner of the prize, a \$35,000 award for fiction with social impact, will be announced at the free event. Register at Aspenwords.org.
 - T** Tricia Johnson 00:36

This is Aspen Ideas To Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. Author Isabel Wilkerson says there's an unseen phenomena in America today: A hidden caste system that ranks human value. Race is the metric by which one's position in the caste system is determined. It's about power, says Wilkerson, which groups have it and which ones don't. And it was born out of American history.
 - I** Isabel Wilkerson 00:50

These are inherited rankings that have been passed down through the generations from the very founding of our country when the colonists created, you know, a bipolar system in which they established themselves. The English colonists established themselves as the

dominant group.



Tricia Johnson 01:17

Today Wilkerson talks about her book "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent." Aspen Ideas To Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from Aspen Words' Winter Words author series. Isabel Wilkerson, a Pulitzer Prize winning author says she began using the word caste after studying and writing about the Jim Crow South. The terms racism or prejudice don't sufficiently describe what survivors of this era endured. She says America's caste system is alive and well today. It's the underlying architecture of division that determines things like whether someone has access to resources and receives respect in society. In her book, she writes about the health costs of caste on depression and life expectancy and how this hierarchy affects our culture and politics. She speaks with Elizabeth Alexander about the cruel logic of cast. Alexander is a poet and leads the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Here's Alexander.



Elizabeth Alexander 02:19

Welcome, Isabel. It is so wonderful to be here with you. Well, we have many, many, many things to talk about in this extraordinary book. And in this extraordinary book alongside your your body of work. I wanted to start by asking you first and also by saying the writerliness, the beauty of Caste, the sort of genre defying-ness of Caste, which I'd love to talk about later. It's got hardcore historian work, it's got hardcore social science work, there's allegory, there are personal stories, there are pithy, philosophical meditations. So it is it is a book of many voices. And I would love to ask you to start by reading a section of your choice.



Isabel Wilkerson 03:11

So the passage I'm reading, it's from the epilogue, regardless of who prevails in any given election, the country still labors under the divisions that a caste system creates, and the fears and resentments of a dominant caste that is too often in opposition to the yearnings of those deemed beneath them. It is a danger to the species and to the planet. To have this depth of unexamined grievance, and discontent in the most powerful nation in the world. A single election will not solve the problems that we face, if we haven't dealt with the structure that created created the imbalance to begin with. As it stands, the United States is facing a crisis of identity unlike any before, the country is headed toward an inversion of its demographics. With its powerful white majority expected to be outnumbered by people not of European descent within two decades. This is unknown territory for everyone in the hierarchy and ethnic distribution that could potentially look

closer to that of South Africa than to what Americans have grown accustomed to. anticipatory fear seems already to surfaced. But if history is any guide, a change in demographics might have less of a material effect on the dominant cast than imagined. A 2016 study found that if disparities in wealth were to continue at the current pace, it would take black families 228 years to amass the wealth that white families now have, and Latino families another 84 years to reach parity. Thus, as in South Africa, there would be no reason to believe that economic, social and an America political die dominance would not still remain in the hands of those who have held it for the entirety of the country's history. This will be a test of the cherished ideal of majority rule, the moral framework for caste dominance in America, since its founding, white dominance has already been assured by the inherited advantages of the dominant caste, and most every sphere of life and of governing, from gerrymandered districts to voter suppression to the Electoral College, which favors a dominant caste, whatever the numbers, will the United States adhere to its belief in majority rule, if the majority does not look as it has, throughout history, this will be a chance for America either to further entrench its inequalities, or to choose to lead the world as the exceptional nation that we have proclaimed ourselves to be.



Christian Happi 05:54

Thank you. And I should add to the genre's the sermon that had me making noises. As I was listening to you preach the sermon of this very moment. Yeah, of this very moment. So I mean, you've taken us, you've situated us at this crossroads, or a potential crossroads, let's say, and I think that you've brought us there now. But that's also where the book has taken us. Right there. Can you say more about what you chose to read.



Isabel Wilkerson 06:30

I wanted to read it because essentially, that this is again from the epilogue. And that means that by the time a reader has arrived at this passage, they have been fully immersed in this phenomenon, the phenomenon of cast, and the reader now knows, realizes the stakes and the gravity of the situation of this reckoning. By this time, the reader has felt the full weight of the history we've inherited, and the reader knows by this time, that we must understand this if we are to transcend it. And this was written by the way before the election, clearly. But it's written with an awareness that it would be true, because of the enduring nature of the caste system.



Christian Happi 07:13

Mm hmm. And you, of course, you also set us up I mean, the book is, is not only organized

around elections, but you have some scenes previous to the 2016 election, where you're beginning to think about how to read the country, in the terms that you lay out for us in this book. And so I would love for you to talk about the choice of caste, the term, the choice of caste that can carry race and other categories with it, but is not what you might expect race.



Isabel Wilkerson 07:51

Well, you know, I came to use of the term caste, through the first book, "The Warmth of Other Suns," and which, as you know, was, it was about the out migration, the defection really of 6 million African Americans from the south to all points up in the rest of the country. And in doing so I was, you know, charged with, you might say, describing what it was that they were fleeing, I mean, why did 6 million people evacuated the Jim Crow South during much of the 20th century. And in doing so I was, you know, describing, re-creating, you might say, the world that they were, they were forced to flee. And in doing so, I realized that the term racism, which is a significant and important way of understanding aspects of our country's history, but racism alone did not seem to capture the depth of control, the totalitarian authoritarian impulses, the depth of control of the boundaries, the effort to remind at every step, every moment of one's life, a reminder of the hierarchy. And a reminder that any breach of that hierarchy could literally mean your life a matter of life and death. This is a world where was against the law for black people and white people to merely play checkers again, in Birmingham, it was a world where and courtrooms throughout the south was actually a black Bible and an altogether separate white Bible to swear to tell the truth on in court that meant that, that, you know, the very word of God was segregated. That's how seriously they took this, you know, hallmark of caste, which is purity and pollution, which meant that the same sacred object could not so much as be held and touched by hands of different races. So this went beyond, you know, not, you know, prejudice and it's just not liking a group of people or hating group of people. This was this went far beyond that. And so, you know, and in the process of not only, you know, hearing the testimony of more than 1200 people who survived the Jim Crow caste system, I also, you know, became aware of and studied the work of anthropologists who had gone into the Jim Crow South. During the depth of that of that regime, and had emerged after, after immersing themselves with it and participant observation and ethnography, they emerged using the term cast, they had lived it, they had studied it, they were experts, and human interactions. And they emerged with the term cast. And so that's how I came to use the word cast in my own work. And then when I went out talking about the morphett assigns, and of course, the many people who read it, it seemed as if it just sort of rolled into the consciousness, people seem to just roll with the word. And as I would talk about it, no one was, you know, people truly got it because it was clear that this was a repressive regime. It wasn't, it was so extreme. And, of course, this

is the birthplace you know, Virginia was the birthplace of our country, this is the birthplace of the caste system itself. And it you know, this was the most extreme manifestation of what I'm calling a caste system in our country, which of course, had manifestations in the rest of the country. But in the end, what I'm trying to say is that, that is how I came to use the word cast in my own work, and then that just sort of was the way I began to see the world.



Christian Happi 11:13

And also to see the world because, you know, we have travels, where you go deeply into understanding the Indian caste system, where you are thinking deeply about how caste plays out in Germany and Nazi Germany, and between those places and the United States, I think, maybe some some surprising but fascinating historical connections in those ideologies.



Isabel Wilkerson 11:41

Well, I would say first is to give a, you know, what I came to see as the definition of caste, as it manifested in these different societies, that I chose to focus in on and so, caste essentially is an artificial, arbitrary graded ranking of human value in a society. It is what determines one standing respect benefit of the doubt that is accorded or withdrawn access to resources, which again, are recorded or denied assumptions of competence, intelligence, resourcefulness, beauty, even these are core to the person or withheld from them, no action on your part is required. You know, these are inherited rankings that have been passed down through the generations from the very founding of our country where the colonists created, you know, a bipolar system in which they established themselves, the English colonists establish themselves as the dominant group, and then decimated the numbers of indigenous people and drove them from their land, and then transported Africans to be enslaved to build the colony and thus the United States out of wilderness. And so doing with the laws that ensued and in Virginia colony and Maryland, that they thus enshrined, what would ultimately be a caste system in which everything that you could and could not do is based upon what you look like, where race became the metric by which one's position in the caste system was determined, but caste itself is the underlying architecture of division. It's the underlying infrastructure of division, that that allows us to see what we have in common those points of intersection with other societies that have caste hierarchies. And so, you mentioned India and ways in which purity and pollution ism is a salient hallmark of that society in which people are assigned to the dock to the lowest caste subordinated caste, known as untouchables, and now known as delegates were to many of the people with the lowest caste and are many, many castes within Casco but any case those at the bottom were to remain as many as 96 paces away

from those in a dominant or upper caste, they of course, could not use the wells, the Commonwealth, this idea of water, the sacred nature of water of this, you know, element of life itself was strictly controlled, and, and kept separate. And each of these these systems that I looked at, of course, you know, I looked at India, which was the oldest caste system on a planet really. And then, of course, looking at Nazi Germany, which was a compressed 12 year reign of terror, in which they applied many of the hallmarks of a caste system and building up the Third Reich. And they across time and across space across oceans. All three of them had a fixation with purity and pollution with water as one of the main main ways of setting a boundary so that they that the Germans of the areas would would keep the Jewish people from being able to use the waters, the pools and beaches, that the areas we're using, and in our own country, you know, throughout the country, not only in the south pools and beaches and waterways were that were designated for the dominant group many white people or strictly for him. from African Americans, black people were prohibited from using them. And this these were matters of life and death in Chicago, for example, 1919, a young teenager happened to wade into what was seen as the white water, whatever that means, because the water looks the same, but there was a dividing line. And you happen to wade into what was seen as a white water, and he was stoned to death for having done so in this set off, one of the riots, that race riots of 1919, red summer. And so these, these things, any breach of the caste system in any of these three societies, could mean your main your very life.

C

Christian Happi 15:38

And as I listened to you speak, I think about the perverse imagination, of caste, the perverse interest in the details of language and symbols, you know, a black Bible, a white Bible, 96 steps, different bodies of water, you have a whole chapter where you talk about the enduring symbols of caste in the United States, in the Confederate monuments. And that is, is really some chapter because you juxtapose the hundreds of Robert E. Lee's on it, you know, in statues and and other kinds of public spaces, with a conversation about Germany, and the swastika as an outlawed symbol, no statues, venerating Hitler and so forth. Could you talk more about, first of all, just why that difference in those two societies, your theories, and about the power of those material symbols.

I

Isabel Wilkerson 16:44

You know, the histories are very different. We all have these, these three societies are very, very different, there are these points of intersection. And this is a place where it diverges. I mean, one of the reasons it diverges is because that was a compressed 12 year reign, they were defeated, completely in war, they have been spending the decade since that time, you know, attempting to atone, reconcile, understand, study, and then also more

importantly, teach, you know, young people and everyone in the country, what happened, it was a complete and total vanquishing of that system. And, you know, they have now converted, you know, the symbols of Nazi ism, the places that you know, the various departments of the Third Reich, they have converted those into museums for where people are now anyone from around the world can now study and learn, walk along those corridors, and learn what happened there. So that they will never ever, ever, ever happen again, there are no symbols or no monuments whatsoever to any of the Nazis, none of them, so that there's a complete and total vanquishing of the Third Reich. And anything that would elevate them. There is however, on the other hand, not a wiping out of the history, there is an actually a going deep into the history so that it won't happen again, here, we have so far to go because we are not on the same page. As a country, we're not on the same page, we're not even on the same page about we're not on the same page, I'm not nearly enough people really understand or know what happened in the Civil War people not even always an agreement of what the cause of the Civil War was, and not certainly not often aware of the meaning of reconstruction, and then what happened afterward. And I can say this as a fact, because you know, when the warmth of the sons came out, and I would, you know, go out and talk with people about it, and I would hear people's response to it. And the response that I got over and over and over again, was, I had no idea I would hear that from people no matter of their background, part of a country that they were from a lots of people would even say the older people would even say I had no idea this happened in my lifetime. So that means that you know that they did not know basic facts, you know, basic realities about what life was like, in a major part of our country in the south. And even in the north, where a lot of people didn't know about redlining and restrictive covenants. I mean, these are, these are facts of life, particularly for people who are who were born to what I would call the subjugated group. But what were unknown to so so many other people, people will say they didn't they didn't have it, they have no idea. Well, not having an idea has consequences. You know, it has consequences in terms of you know, who people people's assumptions about entire group, but it has consequences on you know, who people will hire and you know, who where they choose to live and where they choose to send their children and you know, where they are willing to invest. I mean, all of these things have consequences, of course, how people vote. So these are the ways that not knowing our country's history has real consequences for everyday lives and for the policies and the direction of our country. Whereas in this other country that has really done the hard work of educating people, and of interrogating their history, they have, you know, found ways it doesn't mean that everything's perfect, but it means that they are at least on the same page about what happened in that country.



Tricia Johnson 20:23

This is Aspen Ideas To Go Thanks for listening. Today's global problems are complex, entrenched and intertwined. The Aspen Ideas team has partnered with the Skoll Foundation to produce a new podcast about solutions. Solvers features social innovators from around the world. We think you'll like the show. Here's the trailer.

- N** Nguhi Mwaura 20:47
Some of the most important problems that we're facing right now, as humans everywhere in the world feel really intractable.
- C** Courtney Martin 20:54
I know what you mean - overwhelming, so big, like democracy, or coronavirus, climate change, racial inequality, right and actually inequality in so many areas like access to medicine that can save your life.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 21:11
And access to money, capital, resources and...
- C** Courtney Martin 21:14
...an economy that's not built for you or access to energy, which helps you, well, you know, live, work, feed your kids.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 21:21
How do we go about solving these problems? And whose job is it to solve them?
- C** Courtney Martin 21:26
Solvers is a podcast where we get to talk to people who are taking on our most pressing problems, and coming up with solutions. I'm Courtney Martin.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 21:35
I'm Nguhi Mwaura. Courtney's in Oakland, California. And I'm in Nairobi, Kenya. And together, we're the hosts of a truly global show.

- C** Courtney Martin 21:42
And the people we talked to aren't in love with the idea of solvability, but complexity, because these are complicated problems.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 21:50
Wrestling with that complexity is key. And it's hard to do.
- C** Courtney Martin 21:54
These solvers come with a deep sense of optimism.
- P** Priti Krishtel 21:58
There's something being birthed right now that's really beautiful to watch, where everyone has decided that their job is to become a communicator,
- C** Courtney Martin 22:08
Of obsessiveness...
- C** Christian Happi 22:10
And they will keep innovating and will keep on hearing from Africa. So in a way, you can see that we're changing the narrative.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 22:16
And imagination.
- A** Alessandra Orofino 22:17
And if we lose heart, or if we lose sight of democracy, then it can be gone in a minute.
- N** Nguhi Mwaura 22:25
And of being connected with and accountable to a community.

- R** Rodney Foxworth 22:29
In our time as people we will solve these things. I don't know how much of that will be solved in my lifetime. And I'm totally okay with that.
- N** Nguhi 22:37
These conversations are revealing...
- C** Courtney Martin 22:40
...insightful, nuanced, and often uncomfortable. But if you're discouraged by the problems we're facing today and think they're intractable, unsolvable. Come along with us. Meet some folks who could change your mind.
- N** Nguhi 22:53
The first episode of solvers is out April 22. So hit the subscribe button now and we'll come to your feed. You can listen on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening to this.
- T** Tricia Johnson 23:06
Like you just heard, the first episode of solvers drops April 22. Subscribe now. Let's get back to today's conversation. Here's Elizabeth Alexander.
- E** Elizabeth Alexander 23:23
And so what could truth and reconciliation look like in a country like this, which is also so big, so diverse. And as you've also I think, compellingly laid out so contradictorily and insufficiently educated about our history. When you think about truth and reconciliation, what could it look like?
- I** Isabel Wilkerson 23:49
Well, you know, I say in this book that I am presenting to everyone who chooses to read it a report, I'm like, the building inspector, all our country. And, you know, we you know, that I'd say that you know, the caste system or caste is like the bones and races, the skin caste is what we cannot see race as a visible manifestation. It's the metric by which people are assigned a space in the in the hierarchy going back to the time of enslavement. And so

what I say there is that, you know, this is an X ray of our country, you can see myself see me as sort of like a radiologist. And you know, I am presenting the X ray and describing the X ray. It's the surgeon who does the actual operation. And so I do not present myself and I would also say that the people who were born to what was historically the subjugated group in our country is in some ways in the least position and bears the greatest burden. It's such that you know, that the burden should not be on people from the subordinated group, to have all the answers for a structure that they did not create and that their ancestors were in fact, the top. gets up and that they even today we live under the shadow of and maybe targeted as well. And so I do not present myself as having all the answers because it took all that I could do to just present this document with a general diagnosis. But I, you know, came to the idea of, you know, truth and reconciliation is one possible way to approach it. There are many, many, many things that need to happen, because this is a structural problem. It's the infrastructure of our divisions, we don't even use the language in lay terms. I mean, social scientists use the term, but but you know, lay people don't use the terms, it's almost like it's almost like a new concept, and language for for most of us. And so this is a way of getting us to be able to think differently about what we think we know about our country, the ways that we've been talking about it have not solved all of the problems, sometimes the ways that we talk about it can obstruct and obscure what we're dealing with. And so I think that the whole point of this is to allow us to see ourselves differently, so that we can find ways to, to go directly to the infrastructure thing, as opposed to what is the physical manifestation, but the idea of Truth and Reconciliation, if it were to be done, well, if it were to be done, right, if it were to be done efficiently, and effectively, it would force us all to confront and to engage with what has happened before we came on the scene, it would force us to, to look at where we are. And you know, this, these are the kinds of things that that did happen under different, you know, names in Germany, they have happened in other places where people have had to really look deep at their history. And if you don't look at the history, then there's no way that you're going to engage with the history, learn from the history, and then you thus find yourself in this loop of not understanding how things happen to me, I often say that, you know, we as Americans are like people who walk into a theater in the middle of a movie. And there we are, we're seeing we see a bus, chasing a car chasing a motorcycle, and you know, we're looking at it when the millah movie, we're like, why is the bus chasing the car chasing the motorcycle? And none of it makes sense. You can even watch to the end of the movie, and it still doesn't make sense, because you didn't catch the first half. And really, that is what history is history is what happened in the movie before you entered the theater. What happened in the first half before you enter the theater? And so that is what a Truth and Reconciliation Commission if done seriously, if done correctly, if done with seriousness and purpose, then it would force us and allow us all to see what has happened in our country to get us to where we are.

E

Elizabeth Alexander 27:42

Wouldn't that be something? The sustained metaphor of the old house is, is powerfully carried all the way through the book, beginning with as anyone who has an old house knows that if you don't attend to something, if you don't figure out the source of something, it's not going to go away, and the way that you then bring us to that powerful exchange in the basement in the leaking basement, in the literal leaking basement, where there is a moment of, I would say, cast confrontation that feels like something different is going to happen. Yeah. So it's quite an accomplishment, how you how you do that.

I

Isabel Wilkerson 28:30

Thank you, I mean, this is something that comes out of the accumulated observations, you know, the depth of thinking that goes into something like this, the, you know, you know, tremendous amount of, you know, sitting with the research that you've come across, sitting with experiences, listening, listening, listening to people, as they describe what they've been through. And, of course, you know, all of the, you know, that the traveling that had to go along with this. So this ended up all being a distillation of all of that. And that ending with just speaking about, which I don't want to spoil for people. I will leave that to people to read, but it actually is the it's an opening, it's a portal to hopefulness and shows what can happen, even in the smallest, seemingly smallest of interchanges, that you know, that sort of like idea about the flap of a butterfly's wing that that can then shift the wind of the coast of Africa and then lead for hurricane, you know, in theory in our everyday lives, maybe there are ways that we can transcend what seems impossible and to cross those, those boundaries. And that there that these things actually can happen and you think about I'm not being pollyannish in any way that no one would ever call for that but, but I do believe that you know, when we have so many challenges, and these challenges are, you know, economic they are political. They are having to do with education, our criminal justice system, you know, all systems. And and yet, even in the moment as much as we have yet to do, there are things that an individual can do in the moment that can help shift the wind of not, you know, overall, but just in our own spaces, and that we all have responsibilities to educate ourselves, and then to take the responsibility to make sure that others around us know, I think the era that we've been in is sort of revealed to us who everyone is around us. I mean, I think a lot of us have discovered, you know, these are the people we're surrounded by, these are the things that they believe, and there have been a lot of surprises, I think, for a lot of people in the recent years. But what I think it does is it calls upon us to take the responsibility within our own lives to see what influence can we have, what influence can we have first on ourselves and on those that are closest to us, and in those openings that might present and that miracles can happen? I mean, that actually was a miracle. Hmm.

E

Elizabeth Alexander 31:02

I wanted to talk about the epics that you write, and about your writing process, you know, a an acclaimed journalist for many years bureau chief at the New York Times in Chicago, and hearing and reporting some of the stories that eventually became a part of a lead into the warmth of other suns. And that book is an epic, it tells an epic American tale, it has so many voices in it, it crosses the decades. And so to these many years later, you've you've not written a small treatise, but rather you've written something that I consider, you know, an epic, in its in its ambition in its in its reach. And in the cases of both books, the work that it does for us when it moves around in the world. So I want to talk about about the work in the world in a minute. But first, I would love to talk about form and moving from journalism and editing and long form into these books.

I

Isabel Wilkerson 32:08

I have always been a narrative writer, I mean, that's just who I am. And and wherever I've been, I work in narrative, and I even you know, the, the most straightforward, hard news story didn't have my byline on it, it was gonna have something narrative in it, and it would be the thing that would make it on the front page. So, so I've always been, that person has always been narratively inclined. So my inclinations were to do this kind of writing. And, of course, you know, at the, at the New York Times, most of the stories that I wrote, were much, much longer than most stories with it would usually run. So I have always been, you know, drawn toward long form. And this was a natural progression. This felt very, very much like an evolution that was sort of organic, moving toward what I had always been inside, which was, you know, narrative writing, I found that, you know, what ends up happening with this kind of work is that, you know, you go out and you find the individuals, or you first figure out what it is that you want to say, and then you find the individuals, I'm always open minded, because I'm just I don't know, where the people are gonna leave me, I have no idea what the story will ultimately be until I find the people for it. I mean, with one of the sons, you know, I ended up having a casting call I audition people for the role, agonist in this, this book, and in doing so, I had a chance to, you know, hear the testimony of 1200 people who were my spiritual guides, tour guides through the era that I would be describing, you know, when I was doing more of the sons, I mean, the choice was, do you go into the archives first? Or do you go to the people first, and I'm always the type of person I mean, no matter what the form is, I'm, I'm always looking at the people because that's where the story is going to be. And that's where the heartbeat of the piece will be, whatever it might be. So I that's what I did. And, and I, I had the tremendous honor and good fortune to have, you know, to have been able to meet so so many people and have more people than I possibly could have included, in fact, a lot of them are, you know, make cameos in that book, but to settle on those three and and to hear their stories, in terms of the writing, you know, the writing and the research is all

embedded. I would say that with all the work that I do, it is usually multidisciplinary. I mean, I am calling upon anthropology, participant observation as a big part of what I do in sociology, psychology, history, of course, you know, all of these different disciplines to be able to pull together, whatever is necessary in order to tell that narrative and the work itself is very much. Much like sewing a quilt, you know, I take these fragments of fabric, some of the fabric, I feel I have to weave myself, actually. And it does not appear in the beginning how it's going to end up. But you it takes a bit of faith, to know that ultimately, in the end, all of these disparate scraps and remnants of fabric will somehow come together to make this whole. And that that's how I approach any of the work that I do. But certainly with these two books *Cast* and *More of the Sons*, that was the approach, and that's, that's just the way that it works for me.

C

Christian Happi 35:39

And then, you know, they, they, they, they sit on the shelf, they come in the hands, and then they work in the world. I remember, when many years ago, when you came with *Warmth of Other Suns* to New Haven, one of the things that just stayed with me so powerfully was there was an African American man, probably in his 60s, and he had his very elderly father with him. And his father asked you a question. And he said, we've been reading this book together. And my father never spoke about his migration. And now he won't stop talking about it, that the book opened up the ability for him to talk about the enormity of that story and what it meant. And I just thought that was and you said at the time, you said, pretty much every reading some version of that happens. So you know, now we're not able to be with each other in quite the same way. But you are moving around with *Cast*. And so I would, I would love to know how the, how the audience experience is going?

I

Isabel Wilkerson 36:48

Well, I wanted to say one other thing that has happened in the time since the visit there at Yale is that it's really stunning to me that I hear from more people than you would imagine, who will come up to me, and they will say that, again, their parents, their grandparents never would talk about it, it was too painful, post-traumatic stress. And that, that once they got to a certain point, and many of the people would get very ill in the process of life, and that they would come to me and they would say that this book, *The Warmth of Other Suns* was the last book that their parent, their grandmother, whoever it was, was reading before they passed. And that they would say that that brought them a sense of closure, a sense of peace, a sense of having, of being able to put into context what they had suffered. And that is just, you know, a tremendous, you know, overwhelmingly powerful thing to hear from someone and I, you know, I every time I think

about it, I just, you know, get really overwhelmed at the power of that.

E

Elizabeth Alexander 38:01

Oh, my goodness, that is overwhelming. Wow. There was here in caste one chapter that really flattened to me: cortisol telomeres, and the lethality of caste. And that is where you talk about and I wanted to get this very precise how people of color with more education, experience lower life expectancy, because they quote, continually press against the borders of caste. And then what you say is that the caste system and being on its lower rungs certainly takes years off your life. But the contestation with the caste system, even more. I thought about this zone a whole lot across my life. But I had not seen that distinction made. So clearly. Could you say more about that?

I

Isabel Wilkerson 39:08

Yeah, it's it's really stunning. And it turns out that there are several studies that have made that, you know, shocking, and in some ways, you know, in Congress revelation, because this is not to say that people who are impoverished do not suffer tremendously in our society. That's not to say that at all, and that people who have had the luxury of being able to get an education and be able to get positions of some influence, do not have advantages being that are part of the economy, the way that things work. But what is to say is that that caste is in some ways, a way of sharpening the awareness class allows us to, in some ways, be able to be the marker, you know, it's the thing that that creates the boundary. It's the thing that sharpens the awareness of what caste Actually is because when you've accounted for everything else, you know, when you have accounted for, you know, actually described caste, as the bones, races, the skin and then class is the education, the accents, addiction, the clothing, all the other things that we do have control over. And and yet, when you have accounted for all of that when you have factored in all other possible characteristics that could affect how a person is being treated, how they're seen how they're, you know what happens to them in this world, then you're left with only one thing and that is hast which of course, in our country and other countries and other societies, the metric may be religion, or ethnicity, or whatever it may be. And ours is phenotype and, you know, once presumed or declared, quote, unquote, race. And that is the that is the signature of what I'm just I'm saying, as caste is essentially is nothing more in some ways than policing the boundaries, keeping people in a fixed place. And so when you breach that boundary, when you step out of the place where you're where people like yourself are expected to be, that is when you're bumping up against caste, you're bumping against the unconscious biases, the unconscious expectations of where an individual should or, or deserves to be, or is worthy of being in our society. And so the people who are more likely to be bumping up against the

breaching the walls of cast would be those who are stepping outside of the presumed roles that have been in place in our country for longer than they were not because we have to remember it, we have to remember that, you know, the the mainstreaming of African Americans into into the body politic of the country to be able to enter into spheres where they had not been before, primarily didn't open up for the masses of African Americans until after the Civil Rights Movement, which was resisted for so long, that actually didn't go into effect until the 1970s. So this idea of African Americans moving into the mainstream, and being able to do all of the kinds of things, presumably that they have been prevented from being able to do before means that this is all relatively new, this is really relatively new only within a couple of generations. And so within the lifespan of many, many, many people live today. And so when people are in these positions, professional positions, middle class, upper middle class, they are often more likely to experience that, you know, the shortening of telomeres, and you know, higher cortisol levels and higher indicators of stress, stress, it's related to being in contention, on a regular basis with the assumptions about where people look like them should be class, in some ways, becomes like the contrast dye that's used to be able to see where the arteries are, when you can see, the class class allows you to see Oh, this is where they're supposed to be. And this is where they're running into problems, because they are not supposed to be there. You know, we can see what happened with one of the greatest breaches in our country's history, you might say, of caste, which was was 2008, when we had the first black president, and we could see the pushback, and the resentments that occurred, you know, someone standing and open, you know, session, you know, of Congress and saying, You lie, I mean, all these things that we're here, there's there are many, many, many, many ways of of cataloging the many unusual shows of disrespect and resistance, because this is not where people are presumed to be. And that's writ large, but of course, in you know, everyday experience of so many people, the health outcomes, you know, tell the tale that when you are up against the restrictions that have been embedded over generations, there will be consequences, pushback, and resentments that actually, you know, speak their names on the bodies of people who are having to deal with this on a regular basis.

E

Elizabeth Alexander 44:02

I am so grateful to you for the generosity of this conversation. I am so grateful to you for all of your work. I'm so grateful to you for this book. Again, you know, it's it's doing its work. And it's it's only the beginning. And there are so many conversations that we need to have that it will help us have. And so for that I thank you deeply.

T

Tricia Johnson 44:36

Isabel Wilkerson is a leading author in narrative nonfiction. She has won a Pulitzer Prize

and National Humanities Medal. Her latest book cast is a New York Times bestseller and Oprah's book club pick and made the long list for the National Book Award. Elizabeth Alexander is a poet, educator memoirist, scholar and cultural advocate. At Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration she delivered her poem, Praise Song for the Day. Their conversation was held by Aspen Words as part of their Winter Words author series. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas To Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's discussion is from Aspen Words and this show is produced by Marci Krivonen and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.