



Caste

The Origins
of Our
Discontents

Isabel
Wilkinson

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Author of **THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS**



CASTE
THE ORIGINS OF
OUR DISCONTENTS



ISABEL WILKERSON



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Because even if I should speak,

no one would believe me.

*And they would not believe me precisely because
they would know that what I said was true.*

— JAMES BALDWIN

*If the majority knew of the root of this evil,
then the road to its cure would not be long.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

The Man in the Crowd

There is a famous black-and-white photograph from the era of the Third Reich. It is a picture taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, of shipyard workers, a hundred or more, facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are heiling in unison, their right arms rigid in outstretched allegiance to the Führer.

If you look closely, you can see a man in the upper right who is different from the others. His face is gentle but unyielding. Modern-day displays of the photograph will often add a helpful red circle around the man or an arrow pointing to him. He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest, as the stiff palms of the others hover just inches from him. He alone is refusing to salute. He is the one man standing against the tide.

Looking back from our vantage point, he is the only person in the entire scene who is on the right side of history. Everyone around him is tragically, fatefully, categorically wrong. In that moment, only he could see it.

His name is believed to have been August Landmesser. At the time, he could not have known the murderous path the hysteria around him would lead to. But he had already seen enough to reject it.

He had joined the Nazi Party himself years before. By now though, he knew firsthand that the Nazis were feeding Germans lies about Jews, the outcasts of his era, that, even this early in the Reich, the Nazis had caused terror, heartache, and disruption. He knew that Jews were anything but Untermenschen, that they were German citizens, human as anyone else. He was an Aryan in love with a Jewish woman, but the recently enacted Nuremberg Laws had made their relationship illegal. They were forbidden to marry or to have sexual relations, either of which amounted to what the Nazis called “racial infamy.”

His personal experience and close connection to the scapegoated caste allowed him to see past the lies and stereotypes so readily embraced by susceptible members—the majority, sadly—of the dominant caste. Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of

the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see.

In a totalitarian regime such as that of the Third Reich, it was an act of bravery to stand firm against an ocean. We would all want to believe that we would have been him. We might feel certain that, were we Aryan citizens under the Third Reich, we surely would have seen through it, would have risen above it like him, been that person resisting authoritarianism and brutality in the face of mass hysteria.

We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?

Part One

TOXINS IN THE PERMAFROST

AND HEAT RISING ALL AROUND

CHAPTER ONE

The Afterlife of Pathogens

In the haunted summer of 2016, an unaccustomed heat wave struck the Siberian tundra on the edge of what the ancients once called the End of the Land. Above the Arctic Circle and far from the tectonic plates colliding in American politics, the heat rose beneath the earth's surface and also bore down from above, the air reaching an inconceivable 95 degrees on the Russian peninsula of Yamal. Wildfires flared, and pockets of methane gurgled beneath the normally frozen soil in the polar region.

Soon, the children of the indigenous herdsman fell sick from a mysterious illness that many people alive had never seen and did not recognize. A twelve-year-old boy developed a high fever and acute stomach pangs, and passed away. Russian authorities declared a state of emergency and began airlifting hundreds of the sickened herding people, the Nenets, to the nearest hospital in Salekhard.

Scientists then identified what had afflicted the Siberian settlements. The aberrant heat had chiseled far deeper into the Russian permafrost than was normal and had exposed a toxin that had been encased since 1941, when the world was last at war. It was the pathogen anthrax, which had killed herds of reindeer all those decades ago and lain hidden in the animal carcasses

long since buried in the permafrost. A thawed and tainted carcass rose to the surface that summer, the pathogen awakened, intact and as powerful as it had ever been. The pathogen spores seeped into the grazing land and infected the reindeer and spread to the herders who raised and relied upon them. The anthrax, like the reactivation of the human pathogens of hatred and tribalism in this evolving century, had never died. It lay in wait, sleeping, until extreme circumstances brought it to the surface and back to life.

On the other side of the planet, the world's oldest and most powerful democracy was in spasms over an election that would transfix the Western world and become a psychic break in American history, one that will likely be studied and dissected for generations. That summer and into the fall and in the ensuing years to come, amid talk of Muslim bans, nasty women, border walls, and shithole nations, it was common to hear in certain circles the disbelieving cries, "This is not America," or "I don't recognize my country," or "This is not who we are." Except that this was and is our country and this was and is who we are, whether we have known or recognized it or not.

The heat rose in the Arctic and in random encounters in America. Late that summer, in New York City, an indigo harbor in a safely blue state, a

white man in Brooklyn, an artist, was helping a middle-aged white woman carry her groceries to a southbound subway in the direction of Coney Island.

By then, it was impossible to avoid talk of the campaign. It had been a political season unlike any other. For the first time in history, a woman was running as a major party candidate for president of the United States. A household name, the candidate was a no-nonsense national figure overqualified by some estimates, conventional and measured if uninspiring to her detractors, with a firm grasp of any policy or crisis that she might be called upon to address. Her opponent was an impetuous billionaire, a reality television star prone to insulting most anyone unlike himself, who had never held public office and who pundits believed had no chance of winning his party's primaries much less the presidency.

Before the campaign was over, the male candidate would stalk the female candidate from behind during a debate seen all over the world. He would boast of grabbing women by their genitals, mock the disabled, encourage violence against the press and against those who disagreed with him. His followers jeered the female candidate, chanting "Lock her up!" at mass rallies over which the billionaire presided. His comments and activities were deemed so coarse that some news reports were preceded by

parental advisories.

Here was a candidate “so transparently unqualified for the job,” wrote *The Guardian* in 2016, “that his candidacy seemed more like a prank than a serious bid for the White House.”

On the face of it, what is commonly termed race in America was not at issue. Both candidates were white, born to the country’s historic dominant majority. But the woman candidate represented the more liberal party made up of a patchwork of coalitions of, roughly speaking, the humanitarian-minded and the marginalized. The male candidate represented the conservative party that in recent decades had come to be seen as protecting an old social order benefitting and appealing largely to white voters.

The candidates were polar opposites, equally loathed by the fans of their respective adversary. The extremes of that season forced Americans to take sides and declare their allegiances or find a way to dance around them. So, on an otherwise ordinary day, as the Brooklyn artist was helping the older woman with her groceries, she turned to him, unbidden, and wanted to know who he was voting for. The artist, being a progressive, said he was planning to vote for the Democrat, the more experienced candidate. The older woman with the groceries must have suspected as much and was displeased with his answer. She, like millions of other Americans in the

historic majority, had brightened to the blunt-spoken appeals of the nativist billionaire.

Only weeks before, the billionaire had said that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and his followers would still vote for him, devoted as they were. The woman overladen with groceries was one of them. In the bluest of sanctuaries, she had heard his call and decoded his messages. She took it upon herself to instruct the artist on the error of his thinking and why it was urgent that he vote the right way.

“Yes, I know he mouths off at times,” she conceded, drawing closer to her potential convert. “But, he will restore our sovereignty.”

It was then, before the debates and cascading revelations to come, that the Brooklyn man realized that, despite the odds and all historic precedent, a reality star with the least formal experience of perhaps anyone who had ever run for president could become the leader of the free world.

The campaign had become more than a political rivalry—it was an existential fight for primacy in a country whose demographics had been shifting beneath us all. People who looked like the Brooklyn artist and the woman headed toward Coney Island, those whose ancestry traced back to Europe, had been in the historic ruling majority, the dominant racial caste in an unspoken hierarchy, since before the founding of the republic. But in the

years leading to this moment, it had begun to spread on talk radio and cable television that the white share of the population was shrinking. In the summer of 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau announced its projection that, by 2042, for the first time in American history, whites would no longer be the majority in a country that had known of no other configuration, no other way to be.

Then, that fall, in the midst of what seemed a cataclysmic financial crisis and as if to announce a potential slide from preeminence for the caste that had long been dominant, an African-American, a man from what was historically the lowest caste, was elected president of the United States. His ascension incited both premature declarations of a post-racial world and an entire movement whose sole purpose was to prove that he had not been born in the United States, a campaign led by the billionaire who was now in 2016 running for president himself.

A low rumble had been churning beneath the surface, neurons excited by the prospect of a cocksure champion for the dominant caste, a mouthpiece for their anxieties. Some people grew bolder because of it. A police commander in southern New Jersey talked about mowing down African-Americans and complained that the woman candidate, the Democrat, would “give in to all the minorities.” That September, he beat a handcuffed black

teenager who had been arrested for swimming in a pool without authorization. The commander grabbed the teenager's head and, witnesses said, rammed it "like a basketball" into a metal doorjamb. As the election drew near, the commander told his officers that the reality television star "is the last hope for white people."

Observers the world over recognized the significance of the election.

Onlookers in Berlin and Johannesburg, Delhi and Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo, stayed up late into the night or the next morning to watch the returns that first Tuesday in November 2016. Inexplicably to many outside the United States, the outcome would turn not on the popular vote, but on the Electoral College, an American invention from the founding era of slavery by which each state has a say in declaring the winner based on the electoral votes assigned them and the outcome of the popular ballot in their jurisdiction.

By then, there had been only five elections in the country's history in which the Electoral College or a similar mechanism had overruled the popular vote, two such cases occurring in the twenty-first century alone.

One of those two was the election of 2016, a collision of unusual circumstance.

The election would set the United States on a course toward

isolationism, tribalism, the walling in and protecting of one's own, the worship of wealth and acquisition at the expense of others, even of the planet itself. After the votes had been counted and the billionaire declared the winner, to the shock of the world and of those perhaps less steeped in the country's racial and political history, a man on a golf course in Georgia could feel freer to express himself. He was a son of the Confederacy, which had gone to war against the United States for the right to enslave other humans. The election was a victory for him and for the social order he had been born to. He said to those around him, "I remember a time when everybody knew their place. Time we got back to that."

The sentiment of returning to an old order of things, the closed hierarchy of the ancestors, soon spread across the land in a headline-grabbing wave of hate crime and mass violence. Shortly after Inauguration Day, a white man in Kansas shot and killed an Indian engineer, telling the immigrant and his Indian co-worker to "get out of my country" as he fired upon them. The next month, a clean-cut white army veteran caught a bus from Baltimore to New York on a mission to kill black people. He stalked a sixty-six-year-old black man in Times Square and stabbed him to death with a sword. The attacker would become the first white supremacist convicted on terrorism charges in the state of New York.

On a packed commuter train in Portland, Oregon, a white man hurling racial and anti-Muslim epithets, attacked two teenaged girls, one of whom was wearing a hijab. “Get the fuck out,” he ranted. “We need Americans here.” When three white men rose to the girls’ defense, the attacker stabbed the men for doing so. “I’m a patriot,” the attacker told the police en route to jail, “and I hope everyone I stabbed died.” Tragically two of the men did not survive their wounds. Then in that summer of 2017, a white supremacist drove into a crowd of anti-hate protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing a young white woman, Heather Heyer, in a standoff over monuments to the Confederacy that drew the eyes of the world.

The year 2017 would become the deadliest to date for mass shootings in modern American history. In Las Vegas, there occurred the country’s largest such massacre, followed by one mass shooting after another in public schools, parking lots, city streets, and superstores across the nation. In the fall of 2018, eleven worshippers were slain at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh in the worst anti-Semitic attack on U.S. soil. Outside Louisville, Kentucky, a man attempted a similar assault on a black church, yanking the locked doors to try to break in and shoot parishioners at their Bible study. Unable to pry the doors open, the man went to a nearby supermarket and killed the first black people he saw—a black woman in the parking lot

headed in for groceries and a black man buying poster board with his grandson. An armed bystander happened to see the shooter in the parking lot, which got the shooter's attention. "Don't shoot me," the shooter told the onlooker, "and I won't shoot you," according to news reports. "Whites don't kill whites."

In the ensuing months, as the new president pulled out of treaties and entreated dictators, many observers despaired of the end of democracy and feared for the republic. On his own, the new leader withdrew the world's oldest democracy from the 2016 Paris Agreement, in which the nations of the world had come together to battle climate change, leaving many to anguish over an already losing race to protect the planet.

Soon, a group of leading psychiatrists, whose profession permits them to speak of their diagnoses only in the event of a person's danger to oneself or to others, took the extraordinary step of forewarning the American public that the newly installed leader of the free world was a malignant narcissist, a danger to the public. By the second year of the administration, brown children were behind bars at the southern border, separated from their parents as they sought asylum. The decades-old protections of air and water and endangered species were summarily rolled back. Multiple campaign advisors faced prison terms in widening investigations into corruption, and

a sitting president was being described as an agent of a foreign power. The opposition party had lost all three branches of government and fretted over what to do. It managed to win back the House of Representatives in 2018, but this left the party with only one-sixth of the government—meaning one-half of the legislative branch—and thus hesitant at first to begin impeachment proceedings that were its purview. Many feared a backlash, feared riling up the billionaire's base, in part because, though it represented a minority of the electorate, his base was made up overwhelmingly of people in the dominant caste. The single-mindedness of the president's followers and the anguish of the opposition seemed to compromise the system of checks and balances thought to be built into the foundation and meant that, for a time, the United States was not, in the words of a Democratic Party chair in South Carolina, a "fully functional democracy."

At the start of the third year, the president was impeached by opponents in the lower chamber and acquitted by loyalists in the Senate, their votes falling along party lines that reflected the fractures in the country as a whole. It was only the third such impeachment trial in American history. By now, more than three hundred days had passed without a White House press briefing, a Washington ritual of accountability. It had fallen away so quietly

that few seemed to notice this additional breach of normalcy.

Then the worst pandemic in more than a century brought humanity to a standstill. The president dismissed it as a Chinese virus that would disappear like a miracle, called the growing uproar a hoax, disparaged those who disagreed or sought to forewarn him. Within weeks, the United States would be afflicted with the largest outbreak in the world, governors pleading for test kits and ventilators, nurses seen wrapping themselves in trash bags to shield against contagion as they aided the sick. The country was losing the capacity to be shocked; the unfathomable became just another part of one's day.

What had happened to America? What could account for tens of millions of voters choosing to veer from all custom and to put the country and thus the world in the hands of an untested celebrity, one who had never served in either war or public office, unlike every man before him, and one whose rhetoric seemed a homing device for extremists? Were the coal miners and auto workers restless in a stagnating economy? Were the people in the heartland lashing back at the coastal elites? Was it that a portion of the electorate was just ready for a change? Was it really true that the woman in the race, the first to make it this close to the nation's highest office, had run an "unholy mess" of a campaign, as two veteran political journalists put it?

Was it that urban (meaning black) voters did not turn out, and the evangelical (meaning white) voters did? How could so many people, ordinary working folks, who needed healthcare and education for their children, protection of the water they drink and the wages they depended upon, “vote against their own interests,” as many progressives were heard to say in the fog of that turning point in political history? These were all popular theories in the aftermath, and there may have been some element of truth in a few of them.

The earth had shifted overnight, or so it appeared. We have long defined earthquakes as arising from the collision of tectonic plates that force one wedge of earth beneath the other, believed that the internal shoving match under the surface is all too easily recognizable. In classic earthquakes, we can feel the ground shudder and crack beneath us, we can see the devastation of the landscape or the tsunamis that follow.

What scientists have only recently discovered is that the more familiar earthquakes, those that are easily measured while in progress and instantaneous in their destruction, are often preceded by longer, slow-moving, catastrophic disruptions rumbling twenty miles or more beneath us, too deep to be felt and too quiet to be measured for most of human history. They are as potent as those we can see and feel, but they have long gone

undetected because they work in silence, unrecognized until a major quake announces itself on the surface. Only recently have geophysicists had technology sensitive enough to detect the unseen stirrings deeper in the earth's core. They are called silent earthquakes. And only recently have circumstances forced us, in this current era of human rupture, to search for the unseen stirrings of the human heart, to discover the origins of our discontents.

By the time of the American election that fateful year, back on the northernmost edge of the world, the Siberians were trying to recover from the heat that had stricken them months before. Dozens of the indigenous herding people had been relocated, some quarantined and their tents disinfected. The authorities embarked on mass vaccinations of the surviving reindeer and their herders. They had gone for years without vaccinations because it had been decades since the last outbreak, and they felt the problem was in the past. "An apparent mistake," a Russian biologist told a Russian news site. The military had to weigh how best to dispose of the two thousand dead reindeer to keep the spores from spreading again. It was not safe merely to bury the carcasses to rid themselves of the pathogen. They would have to incinerate them in combustion fields at up to five hundred degrees Celsius, then douse the cinders and surrounding land with bleach to

kill the spores to protect the people going forward.

Above all, and more vexing for humanity at large, was the sobering message of 2016 and the waning second decade of a still-new millennium: that rising heat in the earth's oceans and in the human heart could revive long-buried threats, that some pathogens could never be killed, only contained, perhaps at best managed with ever-improving vaccines against their expected mutations.

What humanity learned, one would hope, was that an ancient and hardy virus required perhaps more than anything, knowledge of its ever-present danger, caution to protect against exposure, and alertness to the power of its longevity, its ability to mutate, survive and hibernate until reawakened. It seemed these contagions could not be destroyed, not yet anyway, only managed and anticipated, as with any virus, and that foresight and vigilance, the wisdom of never taking them for granted, never underestimating their persistence, was perhaps the most effective antidote, for now.

The Vitals of History

When we go to the doctor, he or she will not begin to treat us without taking our history—and not just our history but that of our parents and grandparents before us. The doctor will not see us until we have filled

out many pages on a clipboard that is handed to us upon arrival. The doctor will not hazard a diagnosis until he or she knows the history going back generations.

As we fill out the pages of our medical past and our current complaints, what our bodies have been exposed to and what they have survived, it does us no good to pretend that certain ailments have not beset us, to deny the full truths of what brought us to this moment. Few problems have ever been solved by ignoring them.

Looking beneath the history of one's country is like learning that alcoholism or depression runs in one's family or that suicide has occurred more often than might be usual or, with the advances in medical genetics, discovering that one has inherited the markers of a BRCA mutation for breast cancer. You don't ball up in a corner with guilt or shame at these discoveries. You don't, if you are wise, forbid any mention of them. In fact, you do the opposite. You educate yourself. You talk to people who have been through it and to specialists who have researched it. You learn the consequences and obstacles, the options and treatment. You may pray over it and meditate over it. Then you take precautions to protect yourself and succeeding generations and work to ensure that these things, whatever they are, don't happen again.

CHAPTER TWO

An Old House and an Infrared Light

The inspector trained his infrared lens onto a misshapen bow in the ceiling, an invisible beam of light searching the layers of lath to test what the eye could not see. This house had been built generations ago, and I had noticed the slightest welt in a corner of plaster in a spare bedroom and had chalked it up to idiosyncrasy. Over time, the welt in the ceiling became a wave that widened and bulged despite the new roof. It had been building beyond perception for years. An old house is its own kind of devotional, a dowager aunt with a story to be coaxed out of her, a mystery, a series of interlocking puzzles awaiting solution. Why is this soffit tucked into the southeast corner of an eave? What is behind this discolored patch of brick? With an old house, the work is never done, and you don't expect it to be. America is an old house. We can never declare the work over. Wind, flood, drought, and human upheavals batter a structure that is already fighting whatever flaws were left unattended in the original foundation. When you live in an old house, you may not want to go into the basement after a storm to see what the rains have wrought. Choose not to look, however, at your own peril. The owner of an old house knows that whatever you are ignoring will never go away. Whatever is lurking will fester

whether you choose to look or not. Ignorance is no protection from the consequences of inaction. Whatever you are wishing away will gnaw at you until you gather the courage to face what you would rather not see.

We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, *“I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves.”* And, yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it. We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now.

And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.

Unaddressed, the ruptures and diagonal cracks will not fix themselves.

The toxins will not go away but, rather, will spread, leach, and mutate, as they already have. When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They

put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be.

The inspector was facing the mystery of the misshapen ceiling, and so he first held a sensor to the surface to detect if it was damp. The reading inconclusive, he then pulled out the infrared camera to take a kind of X-ray of whatever was going on, the idea being that you cannot fix a problem until and unless you can see it. He could now see past the plaster, beyond what had been wallpapered or painted over, as we now are called upon to do in the house we all live in, to examine a structure built long ago.

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

A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.

Throughout human history, three caste systems have stood out. The tragically accelerated, chilling, and officially vanquished caste system of Nazi Germany. The lingering, millennia-long caste system of India. And the shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the United States. Each version relied on stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement. A caste system endures because it is often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature, reinforced throughout the culture and passed down through the generations.

As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats

for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources—which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence—who is accorded these and who is not.

As a means of assigning value to entire swaths of humankind, caste guides each of us often beyond the reaches of our awareness. It embeds into our bones an unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules, expectations, and stereotypes that have been used to justify brutalities against entire groups within our species. In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America, race is the primary tool and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste.

Race does the heavy lifting for a caste system that demands a means of human division. If we have been trained to see humans in the language of race, then caste is the underlying grammar that we encode as children, as when learning our mother tongue. Caste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only to how we speak, but to how we process information, the autonomic calculations that figure into a sentence without

our having to think about it. Many of us have never taken a class in grammar, yet we know in our bones that a transitive verb takes an object, that a subject needs a predicate; we know without thinking the difference between third person singular and third person plural. We may mention “race,” referring to people as black or white or Latino or Asian or indigenous, when what lies beneath each label is centuries of history and assigning of assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy.

What people look like, or, rather, the race they have been assigned or are perceived to belong to, is the visible cue to their caste. It is the historic flash card to the public of how they are to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold, whether they belong in this section of town or that seat in a boardroom, whether they should be expected to speak with authority on this or that subject, whether they will be administered pain relief in a hospital, whether their neighborhood is likely to adjoin a toxic waste site or to have contaminated water flowing from their taps, whether they are more or less likely to survive childbirth in the most advanced nation in the world, whether they may be shot by authorities with impunity.

We know that the letters of the alphabet are neutral and meaningless

until they are combined to make a word which itself has no significance until it is inserted into a sentence and interpreted by those who speak it. In the same way that *black* and *white* were applied to people who were literally neither, but rather gradations of brown and beige and ivory, the caste system sets people at poles from one another and attaches meaning to the extremes, and to the gradations in between, and then reinforces those meanings, replicates them in the roles each caste was and is assigned and permitted or required to perform.

Caste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. They can and do coexist in the same culture and serve to reinforce each other. Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin. Race is what we can see, the physical traits that have been given arbitrary meaning and become shorthand for who a person is. Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the United States. While the requirements to qualify as white have changed over the centuries, the fact of a dominant caste has remained constant from its inception—whoever fit the definition of white, at whatever point in history, was granted the legal rights and privileges of the dominant caste.

Perhaps more critically and tragically, at the other end of the ladder, the subordinated caste, too, has been fixed from the beginning as the psychological floor beneath which all other castes cannot fall.

Thus we are all born into a silent war-game, centuries old, enlisted in teams not of our own choosing. The side to which we are assigned in the American system of categorizing people is proclaimed by the team uniform that each caste wears, signaling our presumed worth and potential. That any of us manages to create abiding connections across these manufactured divisions is a testament to the beauty of the human spirit.

The use of inherited physical characteristics to differentiate inner abilities and group value may be the cleverest way that a culture has ever devised to manage and maintain a caste system.

“As a social and human division,” wrote the political scientist Andrew Hacker of the use of physical traits to form human categories, “it surpasses all others—even gender—in intensity and subordination.”

CHAPTER THREE

An American Untouchable

In the winter of 1959, after leading the Montgomery bus boycott that arose from the arrest of Rosa Parks and before the trials and triumphs to come, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta, landed in India, in the

city then known as Bombay, to visit the land of Mohandas Gandhi, the father of nonviolent protest. They were covered in garlands upon arrival, and King told reporters, “To other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.”

He had long dreamed of going to India, and they stayed an entire month, at the invitation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. King wanted to see for himself the place whose fight for freedom from British rule had inspired his fight for justice in America. He wanted to see the so-called Untouchables, the lowest caste in the ancient Indian caste system, whom he had read of and had sympathy for, but who had still been left behind after India gained its independence the decade before.

He discovered that people in India had been following the trials of his own oppressed people in America, knew of the bus boycott he had led.

Wherever he went, the people on the streets of Bombay and Delhi crowded around him for an autograph.

One afternoon, King and his wife journeyed to the southern tip of the country, to the city of Trivandrum in the state of Kerala, and visited with high school students whose families had been Untouchables. The principal made the introduction.

“Young people,” he said, “I would like to present to you a fellow

untouchable from the United States of America.”

King was floored. He had not expected that term to be applied to him.

He was, in fact, put off by it at first. He had flown in from another continent, had dined with the prime minister. He did not see the connection, did not see what the Indian caste system had to do directly with him, did not immediately see why the lowest-caste people in India would view him, an American Negro and a distinguished visitor, as low-caste like themselves, see him as one of them. “For a moment,” he wrote, “I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an untouchable.”

Then he began to think about the reality of the lives of the people he was fighting for—20 million people, consigned to the lowest rank in America for centuries, “still smothering in an airtight cage of poverty,” quarantined in isolated ghettos, exiled in their own country.

And he said to himself, “Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable.”

In that moment, he realized that the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India and that he had lived under that system all of his life. It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in America.

What Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized about his country that day had begun long before the ancestors of our ancestors had taken their first breaths. More than a century and a half before the American Revolution, a human hierarchy had evolved on the contested soil of what would become the United States, a concept of birthright, the temptation of entitled expansion that would set in motion the world's first democracy and, with it, a ranking of human value and usage.

It would twist the minds of men as greed and self-reverence eclipsed human conscience to take land and human bodies that the conquering men convinced themselves they had a right to. If they were to convert this wilderness and civilize it to their liking, they decided they would need to conquer, enslave, or remove the people already on it and transport those they deemed lesser beings to tame and work the land to extract the wealth that lay in the rich soil and shorelines.

To justify their plans, they took preexisting notions of their own centrality, reinforced by their self-interested interpretation of the Bible, and created a hierarchy of who could do what, who could own what, who was on top and who was on the bottom and who was in between. There emerged a ladder of humanity, global in nature, as the upper-rung people would descend from Europe with rungs inside that designation, the English

Protestants at the very top as their guns and resources would ultimately prevail in the bloody fight over North America. Everyone else would rank in descending order on the basis of their proximity to those deemed most superior. The ranking would continue downward until one arrived at the very bottom—African captives transported to build the New World and to serve the victors for all their days, one generation after the next, for twelve generations.

There developed a caste system, based upon what people looked like, an internalized ranking, unspoken, unnamed, unacknowledged by everyday citizens even as they go about their lives adhering to it and acting upon it subconsciously to this day. Just as the studs and joists and beams that form the infrastructure of a building are not visible to those who live in it, so it is with caste. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and recede in times of relative calm, it is an ever-present through line in the country's operation.

Caste is not a term often applied to the United States. It is considered the language of India or feudal Europe. But some anthropologists and scholars of race in America have made use of the term for decades. Before the modern era, one of the earliest Americans to take up the idea of caste was

the antebellum abolitionist and U.S. senator Charles Sumner as he fought against segregation in the North. “The separation of children in the Public Schools of Boston, on account of color or race,” he wrote, “is in the nature of Caste, and on this account is a violation of Equality.” He quoted a fellow humanitarian: “Caste makes distinctions where God has made none.”

We cannot fully understand the current upheavals or most any turning point in American history, without accounting for the human pyramid encrypted into us all. The caste system, and the attempts to defend, uphold, or abolish the hierarchy, underlay the American Civil War and the civil rights movement a century later and pervade the politics of twenty-first-century America. Just as DNA is the code of instructions for cell development, caste is the operating system for economic, political, and social interaction in the United States from the time of its gestation.

In 1944, the Swedish social economist Gunnar Myrdal and a team of the most talented researchers in the country produced a 2,800-page, two-volume work that is still considered perhaps the most comprehensive study of race in America, *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal’s investigation into race led him to the realization that the most accurate term to describe the workings of American society was not *race*, but *caste*, that perhaps it was the only term that addresses what seemed a stubbornly fixed ranking of

human value. He came to the conclusion that America had created a caste system and that the effort “to maintain the color line has, to the ordinary white man, the ‘function’ of upholding that caste system itself, of keeping the ‘Negro in his place.’ ”

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu was among the first to argue that race is a human invention, a social construct, not a biological one, and that in seeking to understand the divisions and disparities in the United States, we have typically fallen into the quicksand and mythology of race. “When we speak of the race problem in America,” he wrote in 1942, “what we really mean is the caste system and the problems which that caste system creates in America.”

There was little confusion among some of the leading white supremacists of the previous century as to the connections between India’s caste system and that of the American South, where the purest legal caste system existed in the United States. “A record of the desperate efforts of the conquering upper classes in India to preserve the purity of their blood persists until this very day in their carefully regulated system of castes,” wrote Madison Grant, a popular eugenicist, in his 1916 bestseller, *The Passing of the Great Race*. “In our Southern States, Jim Crow cars and social discriminations

have exactly the same purpose.”

A caste system has a way of filtering down to every inhabitant, its codes absorbed like mineral springs, setting the expectations of where one fits on the ladder. “The mill worker with nobody else to ‘look down on,’ regards himself as eminently superior to the Negro,” observed the Yale scholar Liston Pope in 1942. “The colored man represents his last outpost against social oblivion.”

It was in 1913 that a prominent southern educator, Thomas Pearce Bailey, took it upon himself to assemble what he called the racial creed of the South. It amounted to the central tenets of the caste system. One of the tenets was “Let the lowest white man count for more than the highest negro.”

That same year, a man born to the bottom of India’s caste system, born an Untouchable in the central provinces, arrived in New York City from Bombay. That fall, Bhimrao Ambedkar came to the United States to study economics as a graduate student at Columbia, focused on the differences between race, caste, and class. Living just blocks from Harlem, he would see firsthand the condition of his counterparts in America. He completed his thesis just as the film *Birth of a Nation*, the incendiary homage to the Confederate South, premiered in New York City in 1915. He would study

further in London and return to India to become the foremost leader of the Untouchables and a preeminent intellectual who would help draft a new Indian constitution. He would work to dispense with the demeaning term *Untouchable*. He rejected the term *Harijans* applied to them by Gandhi, patronizingly so to their minds. He spoke of his people as *Dalits*, meaning “broken people,” which, due to the caste system, they were.

It is hard to know what effect his exposure to the social order in America had on him personally. But over the years, he paid close attention, as did many Dalits, to the subordinate caste in America. Indians had long been aware of the plight of enslaved Africans and of their descendants in the pre-Civil War United States. Back in the 1870s, after the end of slavery and during the brief window of black advancement known as Reconstruction, an Indian social reformer named Jotiba Phule found inspiration in the abolitionists. He expressed hope “that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide.”

Many decades later, in the summer of 1946, acting on news that black Americans were petitioning the United Nations for protection as minorities, Ambedkar reached out to the best known African-American intellectual of the day, W.E.B. Du Bois. He told Du Bois that he had been a “student of the Negro problem” from across the oceans and recognized their common fates.

“There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America,” Ambedkar wrote to Du Bois, “that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.”

Du Bois wrote back to Ambedkar to say that he was, indeed, familiar with him, and that he had “every sympathy with the Untouchables of India.” It had been Du Bois who seemed to have spoken for the marginalized in both countries as he identified the double-consciousness of their existence. And it was Du Bois who, decades before, had invoked an Indian concept in channeling the bitter cry of his people in America: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”

I embarked upon this book with a similar desire to reach out across the oceans to better understand how all of this began in the United States: the assigning of meaning to unchangeable physical characteristics, the pyramid passed down through the centuries that defines and directs politics and policies and personal interactions. What are the origins and workings of the hierarchy that intrudes upon the daily life and life chances of every American? That had intruded upon my own life with disturbing regularity and consequences?

I began investigating the American caste system after nearly two

decades of examining the history of the Jim Crow South, the legal caste system that grew out of enslavement and lasted into the early 1970s, within the life spans of many current-day Americans. I discovered, while working on *The Warmth of Other Suns*, that I was not writing about geography and relocation, but about the American caste system, an artificial hierarchy in which most everything that you could and could not do was based upon what you looked like and that manifested itself north and south. I had been writing about a stigmatized people, six million of them, who were seeking freedom from the caste system in the South, only to discover that the hierarchy followed them wherever they went, much in the way that the shadow of caste, I would soon discover, follows Indians in their own global diaspora.

For this book, I wanted to understand the origins and evolution of classifying and elevating one group of people over another and the consequences of doing so to the presumed beneficiaries and to those targeted as beneath them. Moving about the world as a living, breathing caste experiment myself, I wanted to understand the hierarchies that I and many millions of others have had to navigate to pursue our work and dreams.

To do so meant, for one, looking into the world's most recognized caste

system, India's, and examining the parallels, overlaps, and contrasts between the one that prevailed in my own country and the original. I also sought to comprehend the molecular, concentrated evil that had produced the caste system imposed in Nazi Germany and found startling, unsettling connections between the United States and Germany in the decades leading to the Third Reich. Searching the histories of all three hierarchies and poring over a wealth of studies on caste across many disciplines, I began to compile the parallels in a more systematic way and identified the essential shared characteristics of these hierarchies, what I call the eight pillars of caste, traits disturbingly present in all of them.

Scholars have devoted tremendous energy to studying the Jim Crow caste system, under whose shadow the United States still labors, while others have intensely studied the millennia-old caste system of India. Scholars have tended to regard them in isolation, specializing in one or the other. Few have held them side by side, and those who have done so have often been met with resistance. Undeterred by what, for me, became a mission, I sought to dig up the taproots of hierarchy and the distortions and injustice it yields. Beyond the United States, my research took me to London, Berlin, Delhi, and Edinburgh, following the historic threads of inherited human rank. To further document this phenomenon, I chose to

describe scenes of caste throughout this work—some drawn reluctantly from my own encounters with caste and others told to me by the people who experienced them or who had intimate knowledge of them.

While this book seeks to consider the effects on everyone caught in the hierarchy, it devotes significant attention to the poles of the American caste system, those at the top, European Americans, who have been its primary beneficiaries, and those at the bottom, African-Americans, against whom the caste system has directed its full powers of dehumanization.

The American caste system began in the years after the arrival of the first Africans to Virginia colony in the summer of 1619, as the colony sought to refine the distinctions of who could be enslaved for life and who could not. Over time, colonial laws granted English and Irish indentured servants greater privileges than the Africans who worked alongside them, and the Europeans were fused into a new identity, that of being categorized as white, the polar opposite of black. The historian Kenneth M. Stampp called this assigning of race a “caste system, which divided those whose appearance enabled them to claim pure Caucasian ancestry from those whose appearance indicated that some or all of their forebears were Negroes.” Members of the Caucasian caste, as he called it, “believed in

‘white supremacy,’ and maintained a high degree of caste solidarity to secure it.”

Thus, throughout this book you will see many references to the American South, the birthplace of this caste system. The South is where the majority of the subordinate caste was consigned to live for most of the country’s history and for that reason is where the caste system was formalized and most brutally enforced. It was there that the tenets of intercaste relations first took hold before spreading to the rest of the country, leading the writer Alexis de Tocqueville to observe in 1831: “The prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known.”

To recalibrate how we see ourselves, I use language that may be more commonly associated with people in other cultures, to suggest a new way of understanding our hierarchy: *Dominant caste, ruling majority, favored caste, or upper caste*, instead of, or in addition to, *white*. *Middle castes* instead of, or in addition to, *Asian or Latino*. *Subordinate caste, lowest caste, bottom caste, disfavored caste, historically stigmatized* instead of *African-American*. *Original, conquered, or indigenous peoples* instead of, or in addition to, *Native American*. *Marginalized people* in addition to, or

instead of, women of any race, or minorities of any kind.

Some of this may sound like a foreign language. In some ways it is and is meant to be. Because, to truly understand America, we must open our eyes to the hidden work of a caste system that has gone unnamed but prevails among us to our collective detriment, to see that we have more in common with each other and with cultures that we might otherwise dismiss, and to summon the courage to consider that therein may lie the answers.

In embarking upon this work, I devoured books about caste in India and in the United States. Anything with the word *caste* in it lit up my neurons. I discovered kindred spirits from the past—sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, writers—whose work carried me through time and across generations. Many had labored against the tide, and I felt that I was carrying on a tradition and was not walking alone.

In the midst of the research, word of my inquiries spread to some Indian scholars of caste, based here in America. They invited me to speak at an inaugural conference on caste and race at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, the town where W.E.B. Du Bois was born and where his papers are kept.

There, I told the audience that I had written a six-hundred-page book about the Jim Crow era in the American South, the time of naked white