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>> Novella: Good evening from New York City. I'm grateful to share this virtual space with you, so thank you for being with us, we're live from NYPL at home, featuring Isabel Wilkerson, the author of the latest "s Caste," the origins of our discontent. I'm Novella ford and I'm at the center for research and black culture. We're a research center at the New York public library dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of materials focused on global black experiences. Now, before we get to this evening's program, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the one-year anniversary of the passing of our literary icon, Toni Morrison. She was a lifetime trustee of the New York public library, the first black woman awarded the Nobel prize in literature and a gifted writer who gave us memorable lines from her novel, "beloved" that resonates with so many of us. She wrote "this is a piece of my mind, the pieces I am, she gather them, and gave them back to me all in the right order. Toni Morrison did that to me as a writer, a reader, and this is what we have in Wilkerson who's given us a sense of where we are in this country and the ways in which we might move forward if we decide to collectively. As an editor at a Random House, Toni Morrison introduced us to writers. So I have the distinct pleasure of introducing the program with Isabel Wilkerson in conversation with John Dickerson, journalist, and also a history buff.

Tonight is the kickoff virtual event for "Caste, the origins of our discontent," you may have heard Oprah, you know Oprah. She said of the Oprah book club pick, I don't think there's been another pick that has been as vital as this one, Caste is a must-read for humanity. While no one book can save us, it can help us to be in the same conversation. And inside the same consciousness, and hopefully spur us all to collective action. Isabel's previous book was featured in the New York public library's list of 125 books we love released earlier this year as part of the library's 125th anniversary. It's also a feature of the shamburg's center's black liberation reading list. Both can be found at NYPL.org and you can explore much of the digital collections as we're still partially closed due to COVID-19, so I invite you to visit our website at any time. If you haven't already, purchase Caste through shop. Go to NYPL.org/live. You'll find it on the link on youtube and drop it in the chat as well. Before I invite on, there are a few quick housekeeping items I have to go over. This event is being recorded, not you, only the event itself. Isabel will be taking some of your questions at the end. So you can

send them along at any time during the conversation by typing your questions in the Q&A box at the bottom of the Zoom app. We'll make sure they get to her and she'll answer as many as she can. With that, please settle in. I think you're going to enjoy this conversation, please welcome, John Dickerson and Isabel Wilkerson.

>> John: All right. Thank you very much, Novella. Welcome, everybody. We're here to discuss Isabel Wilkerson new book, "Caste, the origins of our discontent." As Isabel was saying, this is an important book. Isabel worked on it for so many years and it feels so immediate to the conversation we're having right now and it's going to enrich and sharpen our thinking and challenge us and I know having read it, it's done that for me. So, Isabel, welcome. Since it's done all of these things for me, thank you for writing in this book.

>> Isabel: Thank you, so wonderful to be here.

>> John: So we've done a little bit of housekeeping. 45 minutes of conversation, then your questions. What I'm going to try do is -- is look at the argument the heart of the book without robbing you, the reader of the revelation that comes from engaging with the book. Dwight Garner in "The New York Times" wrote that this kind of book changes the weather inside of a person. We're not going to be able to do this in 45 minutes.

It's a 400-page carefully argued reasoned and beautifully told story. So I want to engage with it. And finally I want to ask some questions at the end of Isabel about her process if we have time for that.

So, Isabel, to start, give me the origin story of this book.

>> Isabel: Well, the origins of this book are -- would be the warrant of the suns which, of course, was the story of the great migration of 6 million African-Americans fleeing the Jim Crow south. And working on that book, that book took me many, many years and I interviewed 1200 people for that book. And then telling their stories or seeking to tell their story, I had to make the decision about how I was going to characterize the world that they were in. And it turned out that I -- the word "racism" did not in the context of what they had endured and the social structure, infrastructure of what they had been born into, that the word "racism" was not sufficient to capture the enormity of what they had endured. So the word "racism" does not appear in "the warmth of other suns." Many people will read it they'll describe it later as they were fleeing racism. I, myself, do not use that word. The word I came to is the word Caste, Caste system is the word I used to describe the Jim Crow hierarchy, the artificial hierarchy in everything that you could or could not do is based upon what you look like. Be people who read it will have seen the word many, many times. So this book, "Caste, the origins of our discontent" is a continuation of that journey to understanding. And that's where I came to that word.

I would also like to say that I don't really view it as -- I don't view it as an argument. I view it as an invitation to understand, an invitation to seeing ourselves differently than we have before. And the idea that we can have new language to help us see

ourselves differently and allow ourselves to see beneath the surface of what we have been told, see beneath the surface of the language we've gone accustomed to so we can have another lens through which to understand ourselves.

>> John: Let me pick up on that. You are asking, in a sense, to take on a whole new language, to engage with this, the beautifully-told stories in here that you bring people along with are not just ladled over them, you are asking them to engage with a new kind of language.

>> Isabel: Yes, the idea of the language we're accustomed to means you can get fixed in your minds about how things are. You almost stop hearing the words. One reason I chose not to use racism for the "Warmth of the Sun" because it's a word that's used so frequently. With reason. Racism absolutely exists. It's not to say it doesn't exist. It's not capturing the embedded artificial hierarchies that seem to be so -- that seem to be so enduring in the ways that people interact with one another and the way groups interact with one another. So, the idea of looking beneath the surface of what we're accustomed to using as language would help us see ourselves differently. We're in an area of great upheaval. And it calls for new ways of looking at ourself, new possibilities for resolution, and this is one way -- one out of many, many ways that we could -- we could try to reach that place of healing and understanding between and among ourselves.

>> John: So I can do the unfair thing, which is to ask you to bear down 400 pages to one question. But I'll do it anyway, if race is insufficient to the moment because it's too weak, its's sloppy, and it can over -- it can miss the larger story and isn't useful, help us understand, then, what Caste exactly is.

>> Isabel: It's essentially an artificial hierarchy, a graded ranking of human value in a society wherever it may appear in many, many Caste systems throughout the world. And a Caste system is this artificial hierarchy that determines the standing, the respect, the benefit of the doubt, access to resources through no advantage or fault of one's own. You're born into a Caste system. It's something that you are born into and you have nothing to do with your having been there or your replacement in that Caste system. So it's our joint inheritance. But you find yourself in a particular place on that Caste system based upon who is valued and who is less valued in a society so that is essentially what Caste is.

Race, however, is in a Caste system, there are different metrics to determine who should fit where. There are measures and metrics to determine the ranking. In Caste systems, they might use religion or geography or other aspects of human delineation. In the United States, going back to the colonial times, the delineation. The measure of where one would fit in the hierarchy would be determined by one's race. In some way, if you think about it this way, Caste is the bones and race is the skin. Caste is the infrastructure that we cannot see, and race is a cue, it's the physical manifestation of where you fit in a Caste system. Race is then used as a -- as the signal as to where a person fits in the hierarchy, how one is ranked or graded in

terms of historically speaking, going back to enslavement. And then the continuing -- the continuing shadow with which we live today. And race in some ways is the tool of the -- of the underlying infrastructure known as Caste.

>> John: You said class would be the clothing if you continue the metaphor?

>> Isabel: Class is the clothing if you think about it. It's the thing you can adjust. The act sets, the diction, the education, it's the bearing, all of the things you can do to present yourself to the world as -- or what you aspire to be. You have control over that. What you do not have control over is this -- where you happen to be born in the underlying structure. And it stays with you because the nature of the Caste system as defined here is one in which it's what you look like. So one way of looking at it is if you can act your way out of it, it's class. If you cannot act your way out of it, then it's Caste.

>> John: And this structure is invisible, it is embedded, it is rich all the way to the beginning of American history. I liked another analogy you used which is it's the role -- you are Caste at birth. You are given a role. Your expectation. What I love about that metaphor is your expectation for how you're supposed to behave and the lines between which you are supposed to walk. But everybody else on stage also expects you to stay in that role as well.

>> Isabelle: It's interesting that you mentioned that metaphor. Because, in writing this book, I think all of the writers in the audience will -- will see what I mean here is that, you know, you -- you sit with whatever you're doing. And I sat with the word "Caste" and I thought about what are the other ways the word is used and I looked up, searching for ways to convey what it is that you're writing. And I became fascinated with the many different iterations of the word. It's the Caste holds your bones in a place in a fracture. It's to hold you in a fixed place. You think of a "cast" in a play, everyone has the role, you have the leading stars of it. You have the -- you have the supporting characters. You have the -- the chorus. Everyone knows the lines. They have to memorize the entire script. That's what you have to do a good job of it. Everyone knows where everyone is supposed to be. That's the iteration of the word "Caste". It all speaks to the very thing that Caste is a phenomenon of human behavior. How they all have one thing in common, that is to stick to a particular place, holding a person, whoever is speaking about it, in a fixed place. And that in some ways speaks to what -- one of the things I hear all the time in speaking with people during the -- who survived the Jim Crow era is they often said, well, everyone needs to know their place. They must stay in their place. Everyone must stay in their place. That's a continuing through line to the language that I'm speaking of here.

>> John: It is. And I want to come back to that in a way that it affects our public life and our politics. Because what I love about that idea of staying in the role that's assigned you is if somebody doesn't play their role, the whole play is ruined. So everybody's expectation, we're all taught in the ending, you're ruining your

larger thing -- you're not just doing your own thing, you're running to the larger goal. Help people to understand -- or do you have some examples where you could say, you know, this would be classified as racism, but a more precise way of thinking about it is to think of it as Caste.

>> Isabel: One of the things I think of is first of all, I don't really think -- I don't use the word "racism" as much because I believe what we're dealing with now more is Caste. And that's why I tend not to use the word. And it's such a fraught word that has -- that means different things to different people depending on where they are in society. We could spend so much time talking about what is the racist, who is a racist. Who will admit to being one? Most people will not admit to being one, even if they -- even if they're displaying the confederate flag or whatever it is they might assume associate it. So I tend not to use that because I think what happens is in society that many, many people -- too many people, think of it in terms of the emotions. I think they think of it in terms of -- about hate and demonstrations of hate. They think of hate groups. They think of, you know, the Klan, they think of recognizable groups that represent that. And they also think about, it makes you a bad person. It means by definition you are -- there's all of this additional freight to the word that's a necessary word, it does exist and there's a place for it.

But the way we think about the word has moved it toward a focus on -- on the personal -- on -- and away from actually the sociological definition, which would be group an entire -- an entire group that has -- that has to do with power plus prejudice coming together to have an institutional impact on -- on groups and individuals. But the idea of -- the idea of being a -- of accusing someone of a race -- or being a racist gets to be in some ways a distraction from the larger issues that are affecting everyone. And the goal here is to focus in on the framework, the -- the infrastructure that's beneath what we think we can see. And then, so -- so several examples are, the ones that we see in the videos that every other week there's a video of someone -- some African -- an African-American person, a person of -- a black person generally, who's going about their day, one case comes to mind of a man who was trying to get into his own condo building in St. Louis. And as he opened the door to get in the lobby of his building, there was a woman, a white woman man, dominant Caste, that she blocked him to getting to his own apartment building and demanded that he show proof he lived there. Demanded that he prove that he could be located in that, in other words, he was out of his place. He was not seen as being -- as being appropriate or the right group to be in that place. She then showed no fear of him as she -- once he finally made it in to the lobby, she then followed him on to the elevator. She followed him all the way up to his floor, got off of the elevator when he got off of the elevator and followed him all the way to his apartment door to see for herself, to make sure, to police him, to surveil him. And what she was ultimately doing was she was surveilling the boundaries because that's what Caste is about. Again, holding us in a fixed

place. It's note necessarily about, you know, emotion s, feelings of guilt and shame and blame. It's about -- this woman -- and so, so many examples we see, we could rattle down all of these examples of people policing individuals who because they're seen as being out of their place. And that's essentially what a Caste system enforces.

>> John: The way you put it so well in the book is the container we have built for you. I love the idea once they get out of their container they are to be surveilled like that. As you talk about this powerful language, to talk about race is to confuse and distract from this larger structural idea of Caste. You went to India? Why?

>> Isabel: If I understand Caste, I have to go to the originating source of it. It's the culture and the Caste system that we -- that comes to mind first when you hear the word. It's the most recognizable Caste system in the world. And I felt that it was necessary for -- in order to understand this and to take this seriously, there was no choice, I had to go. And the goal was to -- to see it for myself, to be able to experience what it was like to be in that space and also to meet with people as best I could who had either experienced it and also who were studying it.

>> John: What does it do to the American reader? Tell me if I've got it wrong. You hear about the Indian system, you think this is so arbitrary, you know? And presumably what revelation am I supposed to have next?

>> Isabel: Well, the revelation is how we are delineated and labeled in this country is -- with accept it pause it's all we've known. One of the things I discovered in this process is that race -- there are many people who will describe race as a social construct. We don't think of what that means. We don't think about when and how was it constructed? And that was one of the things that I was searching for and what I'm speaking of the origins of our discontents. So, if you think about it, Caste is many, many millennia long. The idea of human beings deciding to rank one another and create some type of boundaries between people on -- most dominant, privileged, or in charge and those falling beneath them, those at the bottom, that's not unique to any one player, it's a human thing to do. So the idea of trying to express this in a way that makes this sense forced me had to look deeply into India, to be able to see how it was that they did that. So, one of the things that you know you mentioned the arbitrary nature of it is they happened to use religion as the basis of it. And the received wisdom of the laws of man, which is one of the -- the sacred texts that they refer to. But delineated what were the four main groups, and then the thousands of groups that were beneath them. That's how they set that up. But in the United States, you know, Caste is so much older and race is really only four or five -- 400 or 500 years old, it really is, as a concept.

You think about it, before there was the new world, before there was the Americas as we now know them, people in other parts of the world -- the places that populated ultimately would populate this land that had been the preserve and the sacred land of the indigenous people. But when people arrived, they did not arrive

here in the 17th centuries, the 16th and 17th centuries with the idea that they were white or black. That language did not need to exist because people were just -- they were the individuals in the places they lived. They were Polish or Hungarian, or Irish. They were Ebu or Yorbo -- whatever they were where they were. They were not thinking of themselves nor did they need to have to think of themselves in terms of a race and of color. They didn't identify themselves in color. It was only arriving here that people began to be assigned into queues based upon what they looked like which was then connected to lineage and that's how race as we now know it came to be.

>> John: If the transatlantic slave trade is the beginning, you also in part three, you go the eight pillars of Castes taking from the different cultures to show while it may not be religion, but it's slaves in America, there are nevertheless all of these commonalities of the way in which they assign people to a Caste and then suggested there were all of these intrinsic problems that they had in order to keep them in their position?

>> Isabel: Yes, what I found was -- I began -- when I was open, I didn't know much except it was a word that had been used by anthropologists and sociologists when they were studying the Jim Crow south. I was aware of the Caste system as defined and described by anthropologists and sociologists in 1930s. I did not know what was going on in other parts of the world. In the process of studying and researching this, I began to recognize and compile eight different characteristics that seemed endemic to any Caste system. The one that's is the most readily seemingly instantaneously recognizable to -- to the people who are creating these to the architects of any Caste system is the idea of purity versus pollution. The concept that those who are ranked at the top. Those most value in the society and, in fact, run the society. And not everyone in the group is running a society. But they're part of a group that's running society, that that group has to be protected and kept pure at all costs. So that each of these -- each of these Caste systems would go to great lengths to create these delineations to create these buffers, these barriers, and these protections. So one of the examples of it is the idea of water being the element that represents purity to begin with. It's a life-giving element of -- on our planet, yet, that was the thing that all of these different -- these different Caste systems in India, I think in particular in the United States went to great lengths to control. So, for example, one of the -- you know, if we scroll back 100 years to the race riots of 1919, the red summer of 1919, one of the biggest, you know, race riots that occurred in American history was when a young boy -- a young teenager, actually, in Chicago was swimming in Lake Michigan and he happened to wade into the water past this imagination line that separated the black swimmers from the white swimmers.

And when he did that, he's swimming underwater. He's swimming and crossing this line. And then he was pelted and stoned to death in the water as a result of that, that is the idea of keeping the groups apart, maintaining the protecting one group from the

pollution of the other group. Another example of this is that at the -- after the many pools and public places, public spaces where were integrated or ordered to be integrated in the 1950s and 1960s, some places went to such lengths to mixing the two groups that they would drain the pool rather than to allow the African-Americans to swim in the same pool as white swimmers. They would attack and force people out of the pool if the pool is opened up to them. There are all kinds of things they would do to keep the space pure. So one that's one of the pillars that I speak about that is endemic to all of them. In India, for example, there's restrictions on many, many restrictions on what was then called the untouchables are now called -- they could not drink from the same cup. They bathed in the same waters. The similar restrictions occurring across time, across oceans, across cultures. That's why this is actually a human story, not about one country or another, this is a human story.

>> John: And why -- we'll get to that a little later, why these are not just events in the past, we are all still human. The residue of this lives on. We'll talk about some of the ways it does. Those are barbaric ways of the past, we've evolved but your point is this architecture, this structure, in some cases unseen, still exerts tremendous influence on the relationships in order that we have here in America?

Before we get to that, I want to go from India to Nazi, Germany. Tell me why you went there. We were talking about this. Every book is a journey. Tell me the book you were on you went to Germany and then you ended up in a peek of the writing process who are fans of it.

>> Isabel: Something that sparked my interest in Germany was Charlottesville. Charlottesville, that summer, brought together this symbolism, the symbolism of the confederacy and the symbolism of Nazi Germany through the ralliers who adopted those symbols and marched together in their effort, in their protest against the potential removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee. So there was before all of us, the symbolism of the two different cultures. And this is what they brought together. So this is what they brought together. And it was these were in some ways, it was a battle over memory. It was a battle over how do we remember the Civil War? How do we remember enslavement? How do we remember American history? So that sparked my interest in thinking that there is a connection here, that they, themselves, are make. So, of that, I then decided I was going to go to Germany, go to Berlin, and see how is it they have been dealing with memory. How had they been reconciling atoning for their history after World War II. I could only understand it by going and seeing for myself what happened there and how they were remembering it.

So when I started -- the deeper I got, I discovered I had no idea of additional connections that I never would have imagined. For example, it turned out that American eugenacists were studying and dialoguing with Germany Eugen cysts. They were reaching out and in dialogue with and admiring of American eugenacists. They wrote books that were big sellers in Germany. All of these connections I had no

idea. The Nazis needed no one to teach them how to hate. Absolutely not. But it turned out they sent researchers to the United States to study how the United States used its laws to subjugate African-Americans. They sent researchers -- the Nazis sent researchers to study the United States and the Jim Crow laws and the anti mysogination laws that were around the country, it was gutwrenching to discover that. These are the additional connections that I never would have imagined.

>> John: One of them that's striking is one of them is skeptical of the reports that he gets back from the United States saying there's no way they do that, that they have that lattice work of structure. He didn't believe that is what was happening in the Jim Crow south?

>> Isabel: Some among them were arguing against it and trying to move away from it. It's stunning to think about the stunning to illustrate that.

>> John: You go to India to illustrate the idea that the rules that keep the Caste system in different cultures are arbitrary. It felt like there was a similar lesson in Nazi, Germany, because they thought, wait, if you have this strong Caste system in America, why aren't they excluding Jews? How are Jews not a part -- tell us about that?

>> Isabel: From their lens, because of the arbitrary nature of delineating who can do what in society, for them, it's the deciding factor on what could be the subordinated Caste if you can think of the terms there. Each country, culture would look at the other culture and say why would you divide people up that way, when obviously this is the most important reason to divide people. All of this speaks to the arbitrary nature of how human beings decide to divide themselves up and create these hardened lines that are presumably are not crossable because they have decided to do that, only because they have artificially decided to draw a line some place and the debate there that they were speaking about is they were trying to figure out how to draw the line and couldn't understand how and why the United States drew the lines it did.

One of them even said they made the decision in the United States to divide people up in each state differently -- each state had a different distinction as to who could fit and fit the definition of what was white or black. So, for -- as -- it's just a stunning thing to even imagine when you think about it.

>> John: The story you tell is all to the goal of giving us the right language and the right understanding about the architecture of our world so we can improve it. And what do you say -- what is the residue of this -- of this -- the stories you tell in your book are -- of lynchings and of the treatment of black Americans are tough to get through and read. Some people see that and say we don't do that anymore. This is a time of the past. Explain your view of the residue and how this history doesn't just get turned off, but continues.

>> Isabel: You know, to carry forth the example, the one out of many examples having to do with the water, and the importance of maintaining purity, there's been similar cases recently involving --

involving pools and patrolling and policing of African-Americans. There's a case that got a lot of attention in McKinney, Texas in 2015 where these young people, African-Americans, were at a pool party in this -- in the summer, and they arrived there and upon arrival, the police were called on them. And a police officer arrived and then he actually held a young girl down, I think she was a 14-year-old girl still in her swim suit. He held her down by -- by his knees and kept -- kept her you know held down that way. Other people were horrified, other teenagers were horrified at what was going on. And they instinctively went to help their friend and he pulled a gun and waved it toward them. So it's a viral video that got a lot of attention at the time. So this was yet another example of how we live with the shadow of the instantaneous recognition that someone is out of their place. Someone is out of their place. And when it comes to water and interaction in that kind of intimate space, there can still be the unconscious decision that it's not right, it should not be that way.

There are many examples of the many, many cases of officer-involved killings that, of course, are also the -- the heart breaking wrenching videos that we have been exposed to over the years, particularly the last five or six years. So, these are all continuing shadows of the readiness to surveil and police people who had been consigned the lowest Caste upon arrival. These are the through line of that.

>> John: And the -- and the larger societal effect this has is that -- it's going back to your metaphor. If Caste is the bones of the house, if it's the internal structure of the house that somebody who is out of line with the Caste system threatens the very foundation of the house, in other words, to try to explain the way in which individual events become larger and more -- have a greater salience because they threaten this -- this view of a Caste system that's supposed to operate in America?

>> Isabel: One of the ways it gets tested is someone moves in a space they're not expected to be doing. There are many, many examples of that, that are in the book as well the sense of -- of putting pressure on the system because one is not expected to be where they are -- they stepped out of their place by doing that.

>> John: Do you -- is that how you see the movement, I guess, that Donald Trump led for five years in questioning Barack Obama's legitimacy as he was basically out of his lane?

>> Isabel: Well, I would say that, you know, Caste is such a long-standing phenomenon in our society that it's not about one person or one election or one individual or one President. But, clearly, when you have someone who breaks a barrier of any kind, there are often -- there's a response from the -- from the Caste system itself. And you might say that some of the -- some of the pushback and additional questioning and the additional scrutiny that fell to -- to President Obama as he became the first African-American President would be a reflection of that -- would be a reflection of how does one -- how does a Caste system respond to -- to something that goes against what is expected -- first often will experience that.

>> John: And what -- what -- what is the success of Barack Obama and others who achieve the highest level of success, some would say that's showing the promise that anybody can achieve the highest levels. Where does the success of individual black Americans fit in the larger understanding of Caste?

>> Isabel: I think when you have a system that is as -- as tightly controlled as it is, I think it says a lot about the people who have been able to manage to break through. It takes a tremendous amount of fortitude and will to be able to push through. You know, one of the reasons the Caste system is really a human tragedy is that so many people throughout history have not had the chance to be who they really probably were. You think about those cotton fields and those tobacco fields and the rice plantations and the sugar plantations. On those tobacco fields and cotton plantations and sugar plantations were opera singers and jazz musicians and playwrights and all of the people who never had the chance to be who they could have become. We have had tremendous, tremendous hard fought hard won gains, you know, here we are. We just lost a lion of American history in John Lewis as a reminder of what it took for people to be able to get the -- you know, just the opportunities to be able to become who they were intended to be. So there's been a tremendous loss because of Caste, because of the restrictions, because of the artificial hierarchies about who could do what, when, what space, and how, that we have lost, as a country and I would say as a species, we have lost so much because people have not been permitted to be who they really were intended to be. And I -- one of the reasons I think, you know, the desire to be able to transcend Caste would be the ultimate goal, because that would allow people to be who they're intended to be. We are losing so much in the way of talent and ability, genius, and potential when we are not allowing people to be who they are really truly intended to be. We cannot make up for the millions upon millions of people who never got a chance to become who they could have become in India or in the United States going back for centuries. We cannot make up for all that was lost in that era. And that's a loss of what we have now. Transcending Caste, the false boundaries, expectations about each other, and assumptions about those consigned to the bottom and to be able to allow and see the strength that it gives all of humanity, all of the species, if we are making the most of everyone.

>> John: I was about to ask you what you hoped for this book to bring about, but that was such an excellent articulation of it. I was looking at the line you wrote, any answer one might ever come up with to address our current challenges is flawed without it, meaning it's without an understanding of Caste in America. Before we turn to questions, a quick question about the creation of this book.

It's been in your head for so long because it's -- it was built out of your previous book. What does it feel like to -- to -- is it still in your head as if you're writing it? Or do you -- how does it feel?

>> Isabel: I spent so much time with it, I feel it's a part of me. It's the way I talk normally and anyone who knows me knows I talk this way normally. It just allows people to see how I talk normally. This

is the language I use and how I see the world. I see the world this way because once you see it, it's almost as if you have x-ray vision. It's an x-ray of our country to see what's underneath it. Once you see what's underneath it, the goal would be that -- you know, once you're able to see the pillars and the joys and the beams, then one could -- if you see it as a problem with them, then you can fix it. You can't fix it if you can't see it. And that's why I wanted to write this book.

>> John: Another one of the analogies, we are the inheritors of a house that has the structural challenges and we have to find some way to fix it so we can pass it on to the others who will inhabit the house. Let me ask you a few questions.

Is there a Caste system that you know of that's been deconstructed and what would an anti-Caste work look like?

>> Isabel: That's a wonderful question too. That's one of the things that led me, as I said, to Germany after Charlottesville and after this connection had been made before all of our eyes between these two-countries that we might not think of. And that's an example of one.

I mean, the -- the third Reich came in to existence, the horrifying, you know, just incomprehensible 12-year reign of the Nazis did come to an end. We -- we all know what -- the role of the United States in helping to bring it to an end. And once it ended, then there has been an effort to try to understand what can be learned from it. And how we -- how could they grow from it? And how they could -- how they -- one of the things they do is turned many of the sites that had been dominated by, run by, or the headquarters of various department of the third Reich, they turned them to museums for the people who perished and suffered under that regime. Multiple museums deconstructing every aspect of that 12-year period of time. There are these beautiful memorials to those who died. They're called stumbling stones that are placed -- brass plates that are placed in the last known residence of the people who perished in the holocaust. And when you look at them, you see them embedded in the cobblestone and it forces you to look down and to -- and in some ways bow to them in honor of them. So, these are some of the things that they have done to reconcile their history -- first of all, to learn their history, to teach the history. To make sure it's required for everyone to know the history. And then to begin the work and the continuing work of reconciling and atoning for it. And we know that it's an ongoing effort because even with all of that, there can still be resurgence. So this is an ongoing effort. I describe in the book that -- I described the book of a -- of the country as like an old house. If you have an old house, it's -- it takes constant work. The work is never done. This is an example of that.

>> John: Your help is to uncover parts of the house that needs fixing that we might not have seen, but was growing weaker outside of our vision. Trying to get in on your metaphor there.

You tell the story of Dr. King being introduced as a fellow Caste member during his visit in India. Tell a little bit of

that story. And this question, part of the same question, why were blacks delineated to a low level in society, you sort of answered that earlier. But tell the story of Dr. King in India?

>> Isabel: You know, Dr. King in his -- in the nonviolent movement, of course, had been inspired by mahatma gandhi. So in the winter of 1959, he made a journey to India the first time there. And he wanted to see the land of Ghandi. Upon arrival, he was covered in Garlands and recognized on the streets because people were following what was going on here. There was great interest what was happening here in the United States in the civil rights movement. So on -- during that trip he was taken to a school in a -- in a -- in a region, actually, a village that was run by or -- where untouchables live, untouchables were the lowest-ranked people in the Caste system. And they were called dalit is what they called it knockout. They went to one of the schools. And there he was introduced to the students. The principal introduced him to the students by saying, well, students, I want to introduce to you a fellow untouchable from America.

That's how he was introduced. When this was said, Dr. King was a bit nonplussed. He was not -- it did not land very well to him. It did not sound -- he did not see himself in that way. He was a bit peeved at the association. He didn't -- there he had been -- he dined with the -- with the prime minister. He had been recognized on the streets.

And, yet here, the people who were in the lowest Caste or the subordinate Caste of India instantly recognized him as like themselves, again, speaking to class being a totally different issue here. And, so, when he -- so when he heard that, he was peeved. He started to think, that was what he devoted his life to, the liberation of a people who were in fact the bottom of the hierarchy. He thought about the conditions of the people and the kind of work they had been consigned to do and the fact that they were being lynched and beaten at, you know, in a way that was -- that was -- seemed to be connected to their positioning in the Caste system and what he recognizes as a Caste system. He started to think about it. Yes, I am. I actually am an untouchable. I'm an American untouchable. And every black person, every negroe in America is an untouchable. He made that recognition. He thought about that. He didn't speak of it until he delivered a -- a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist church on July 4 of 1965. And he talked about this revelation, this recognition that he had had. He was one of the people who identified the hierarchy that we lived in and acknowledged the hierarchy that we live in as being a Caste system, Dr. King himself.

>> John: Is there a difference or is there a useful way of thinking about Dr. King could use America's own ideals to push -- push America into a better place of a greater equality and towards what America believes it stands for which is equality for everyone. In the Indian system, was there more acceptance of the untouchables of their rank in the Caste? And/or did they not have the same kind of tools that Dr. King could use to basically try to attack the Caste system by embarrassing essentially those in the higher order with the promises they had made with their own country.

>> Isabel: That's an excellent point. One of the -- there's a -- there's a man known as -- who predated Dr. King by several decades, but was the leader of the revered leader of the dollets in India. And he was also incredibly well educated as was Dr. King. And he was one who -- who advocated on the behalf of the dollets there. He also was significant in creating the Indian institution. So, there are some parallels. But that is one place it appears. The United States has a -- it has a different creed, and it -- it presents itself as viewing itself as being exceptional and of being a democracy that represents and envelopes everyone and had not been living up to that. It was the efforts of, of course, Dr. King, to be able to enter -- and those many, many people who were part of the civil rights movement. And, of course, people elsewhere who were of many different backgrounds who were active to push the country towards this. The situation is a very different one in India, of course, and what happens there, the dollets look to the United States, and interestingly enough, just as the United States had the black panther movement, there also is a dollet panther movement in India as well.

There are many differences between the two-countries. The politics, the history, the economics. There's so many different things that make these countries and the trajectory of their liberation movements very, very different. But what they do share is a recognition of their plight. Also a recognition from their perspective more recognizing the American perspective because of the massive impact that the United States has in terms of culture, a recognition from across the -- the oceans, a recognition and a connection to African-Americans in this country. That, you know, perhaps could build over time.

>> John: Right. Another question, is tribalism at the root of any Caste system or economics?

>> Isabel: How do you separate those two?

>> John: The answer is yes.

>> Isabel: The answer is yes. Ultimately I believe that a Caste system is in place primarily for economic reasons. It's about control of resources. It's about control of the -- of land. It's about control of even opportunities to gain resources. So, in that respect, it's impossible to separate economics from the -- from the -- the building of a Caste system, the architecture of a Caste system, the origins of a Caste system go back to -- in this case, for example, in the United States, for example, the perceived need to develop this land and the perceived need to get the cheapest labor possible. And the -- the reckoning, the desire to do this by using people of African dissent as enslaved people to build the country. It started economically. And economics is embedded in all of this.

>> John: Also as you pointed out, tribalism and economics don't need to be synchronous, which is to say somebody may vote or behave in their short term economic disinterest in order to maintain the larger Caste system which gives comfort and order to their tribal world.

>> Isabel: A lot of it comes down to what people are comfortable with and what they have come to expect as they go about the world and how they are treated, how they -- these are things that we often, again,

if you're in a play and you memorized the line, you don't even think about them, they just come out without your having to think about it. The idea of the people who decide to follow or surveil and police people, for example, is one of which -- where is that coming from and what is making you feel that this person, that you have the right to surveil or police someone. That has to do with a sense of ranking above someone else that you have the right, you have the entitlement to interject yourself and to correct someone else. And this is all interconnected there.

>> John: Question about your process, what coping strategies do you call upon to immerse yourself in studying this Caste system. I feel so grateful that you enlightened us with these ideas. I wonder what price do you pay by helping to understand Caste by your outstanding research writing and speaking?

>> Isabel: I would like to thank the viewer for saying that. I tend to go in this deep space of working on whatever it is I'm doing. Often in the acknowledgments, I turn to music a lot to help me through it, especially with this book, I found that I -- I relied upon that all the more.

And the music finds you, you don't necessarily -- it just comes to you. And one of them was this -- was this string quartet No. 5 from Philip Glass which was repulsive and meditative at the same time. It just came to me. I also ended up to on the other hand parliament funkadelic. Depending on where I happened to be in the work. I -- I also listen to the sound track to this lovely sleeper of a film out of France called "Diva" and it's a film that is -- has a beautiful, beautiful sound track and a fascinating storyline underneath it. It's about an African-American opera singer in Paris and some -- it's kind of a thriller that is -- that hinges on her disinterest in being recorded. Interesting thing. But sort of the -- it's a beautiful sound track. That helped me through that as well. I needed all of those things.

>> John: We're almost at the end. Two more questions, one is how does intersectionality fit in Caste systems?

>> Isabel: Obviously the -- what I describe, the Caste system is the underlying infrastructure for all of the other characteristics that may intermingle, interact, intersect, and in ways that also affect where one fits in the Caste system. So, if the -- if you have an underlying need as the founders of the -- of what in the United States ultimately felt they had, to make sure that certain things were done in order to build a country, and they then assigned certain roles to people on the basis of what they looked like, and then had delineating additional subsets within those groups, then that's where you get the intersectionality. You get -- you get gender as a factor that interacts with and melds with and then affects your positioning in that Caste system. You have your -- the places within the Caste. One Caste, for example, the dominant Caste could have people who are from -- from northwestern Europe. There are people from southern Europe. And eastern Europe and our immigration laws have indicated that they

fall in different categories in the past. They've fallen into different categories that indicated their -- where they fit in the graded ranking. So, in my view, the Caste is -- is the underlying infrastructure upon which various characteristics then get added to even further complicate where a person fits in a Caste system.

>> John: Final question is, one reason I found "warmth of other sons" so engaging because it's spoken through actual persons. Is this book formed the same way through the lens of other persons?

Is it important to read "the warmth of other sons" before "Caste." The origins of discontents? Can you add in the answer why story telling is so important.

>> Isabel: I write from a tradition of narrative nonfiction. And in narrative nonfiction, one of the reasons it takes so long is the goal is to create a world in which you re-create a world that exists. These are real people and you have to learn their experiences. Spend enough time with them and do enough research to re-create that world and allow yourself in some ways the hearts and the minds of people who are actually real people. In that respect, then, my whole approach is to show and not to tell. I would rather not tell you, I'd rather you come to the conclusion on your own. And so I think anyone who reads the book will find that there are many, many stories, anyone who has read the book knows there are many stories. These people are real. The stories are revelatory, some of them are hard breaking, some can be hopeful. But they're all in there and they're all necessary to show rather than tell, because that's what I prefer to do.

>> John: And that's what makes a great book. Isabel Wilkerson, thank you so much. Thank you, all of you, out there, the book is "Caste: The origins of our discontents." It's been a great pleasure talking to you about your amazing book.

>> Isabel: Thank you so much.

