

## Isabel Wilkerson on “Labeling the Human Container”

Excerpts from her 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, p. 59 and p. 18

“Each of us is in a container of some kind. The label signals to the world what is presumed to be inside and what is to be done with it. The label tells you which shelf your container supposedly belongs on. In a caste system, the label is frequently out of sync with the contents, mistakenly put on the wrong shelf and this hurts people and institutions in ways we may not always know” (p. 59).

“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” (p. 18).

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. New York: Random House.