



Caste

The Origins
of Our
Discontents

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Author of **THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS**



CASTE
THE ORIGINS OF
OUR DISCONTENTS



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Part Three

THE EIGHT PILLARS OF CASTE

The Origins of Our Discontents

These are the historic origins, the pillars upholding a belief system, the piers beneath the surface of a caste hierarchy. As these tenets took root in the firmament, it did not matter so much whether the assumptions were true, as most were not. It mattered little that they were misperceptions or distortions of convenience, as long as people accepted them and gained a sense of order and means of justification for the cruelties to which they had grown accustomed, inequalities that they took to be the laws of nature.

These are the pillars of caste, the ancient principles that I researched and compiled as I examined the parallels, overlap, and commonalities of three major caste hierarchies. These are the principles upon which a caste system is constructed, whether in America, India, or Nazi Germany, beliefs that were at one time or another burrowed deep within the culture and collective subconscious of most every inhabitant, in order for a caste system to function.

Divine Will and the Laws of Nature

Before the age of human awareness, according to the ancient Hindu text of India, Manu, the all-knowing, was seated in contemplation, when the great men approached him and asked him, “Please, Lord, tell us precisely and in the proper order the Laws of all the social classes as well as of those born in between.”

Manu proceeded to tell of a time when the universe as we know it was in a deep sleep, and the One “who is beyond the range of senses,” brought forth the waters and took birth himself as Brahma, the “grandfather of all the worlds.”

And then, to fill the land, he created the Brahmin, the highest caste, from his mouth, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaishya from his thighs, and, from his feet, the Shudra, the lowest of the four *varnas*, or divisions of man, millennia ago and into the fullness of time.

The fragment from which each caste was formed foretold the position that each would fill and their placement, in order, in the caste system. From lowest to highest, bottom to top: The Shudra, the feet, the servant, the bearer of burdens. The Vaishya, the thighs, the engine, the merchant, the trader. The Kshatriya, the arms, the warrior, the protector, the ruler. And above them all, the Brahmin, the head, the mouth, the philosopher, the sage, the priest, the one nearest to the gods.

“The Brahmin is by Law the lord of this whole creation,” according to the Laws of Manu. “It is by the kindness of the Brahmin that other people eat.”

Unmentioned among the original four *varnas* were those deemed so low that they were beneath even the feet of the Shudra. They were living out the afflicted karma of the past, they were not to be touched and some not even to be seen. Their very shadow was a pollutant. They were outside of the caste system and thus outcastes. These were the Untouchables who would later come to be known as Dalits, the subordinate caste of India.

In the words of the sacred text of the Western world, the Old Testament, there had been a Great Flood. The windows of heaven had opened, along with the fountains of the deep, and all of humankind was said to have descended from the three sons of the patriarch Noah. By divine instruction, they survived the floodwaters in an ark, for more than forty days and forty nights, and thereafter, Noah became a man of the soil. His sons were Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who would become the progenitors of all humanity.

One season, Noah planted a vineyard, and he later drank of the wine of the fruit of the vineyard. The wine overtook him, and he lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, who would become the father of a son, Canaan, happened into the tent and saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders. They walked backward into the tent and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned in the other direction so that they would not see their father unclothed. When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what Ham had done, he cursed Ham's son, Canaan, and the generations to follow, saying, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers."

The story of Ham's discovery of Noah's nakedness would pass down through the millennia. The sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth spread across the continents, Shem to the east, Ham to the south, Japheth to the west, it was said. Those who decreed themselves the descendants of Japheth would hold fast to that story and translate it to their advantage. As the riches from the slave trade from Africa to the New World poured forth to the Spaniards, to the Portuguese, to the Dutch, and lastly to the English, the biblical passage would be summoned to condemn the children of Ham and to justify

the kidnap and enslavement of millions of human beings, and the violence against them. From the time of the Middle Ages, some interpreters of the Old Testament described Ham as bearing black skin and translated Noah's curse against him as a curse against the descendants of Ham, against all humans with dark skin, the people who the Europeans told themselves had been condemned to enslavement by God's emissary, Noah himself.

They found further comfort in Leviticus, which exhorted them, "Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids." This they took as further license to enslave those they considered religious heathens to build a new country out of wilderness.

And thus, a hierarchy evolved in the New World they created, one that set those with the lightest skin above those with the darkest. Those who were darkest, and those who descended from those who were darkest, would be assigned to the subordinate caste of America for centuries.

"The curse of Ham is now being executed upon his descendants," Thomas R. R. Cobb, a leading Confederate and defender of slavery, wrote, 240 years into the era of human bondage in America. "The great Architect had framed them both physically and mentally to fill the sphere in which they were thrown. His wisdom and mercy combined in constituting them thus suited to the degraded position they were destined to occupy."

Slavery officially ended in 1865, but the structure of caste remained intact, not only surviving but hardening. "Let the negro have the crumbs that fall from the white man's table," Thomas Pearce Bailey, a twentieth-century author, recorded in his list of the caste codes of the American South, echoing the Indian Laws of Manu.

The United States and India would become, respectively, the oldest and the largest democracies in human history, both built on caste systems undergirded by their reading of the sacred texts of their respective cultures. In both countries, the subordinate castes were consigned to the bottom, seen as deserving of their debasement, owing to the sins of the past.

These tenets, as interpreted by those who put themselves on high, would become the divine and spiritual foundation for the belief in a human pyramid willed by God, a Great Chain of Being, that the founders would further sculpt in the centuries to follow, as circumstances required. And so

we have what could be called the first pillar of caste, Divine Will and the Laws of Nature, the first of the organizing principles inherent in any caste system.

Heritability

To work, each caste society relied on clear lines of demarcation in which everyone was ascribed a rank at birth, and a role to perform, as if each person were a molecule in a self-perpetuating organism. You were born to a certain caste and remained in that caste, subject to the high status or low stigma it conferred, for the rest of your days and into the lives of your descendants. Thus, heritability became the second pillar of caste.

In India, it was generally the father who passed his rank to his children. In America, dating back to colonial Virginia, children inherited the caste of their mother both by law and by custom. And in disputes beyond these parameters, a child was generally to take the status of the lower-ranking parent.

The Virginia General Assembly declared the status of all people born in the colony. “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free,” the Assembly decreed in 1662, “be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand Assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”

With this decree, the colonists were breaking from English legal precedent, the only precepts they had ever known, the ancient order that gave children the status of the father. This new law allowed enslavers to claim the children of black women, the vast majority of whom were enslaved, as their property for life and for ensuing generations. It invited them to impregnate the women themselves if so inclined, the richer it would make them. It converted the black womb into a profit center and drew

sharper lines around the subordinate caste, as neither mother nor child could make a claim against an upper-caste man, and no child springing from a black womb could escape condemnation to the lowest rung. It moved the colonies toward a bipolar hierarchy of whites and nonwhites, and specifically a conjoined caste of whites at one end of the ladder and, at the other end, those deemed black, due to any physical manifestation of African ancestry.

Tied conveniently as it was to what one looked like, membership in either the upper or the lowest caste was deemed immutable, primordial, fixed from birth to death, and thus regarded as inescapable. “He may neither earn nor wed his way out,” wrote the scholars Allison Davis and Burleigh and Mary Gardner in *Deep South*, their seminal 1941 study of caste in America.

It is the fixed nature of *caste* that distinguishes it from *class*, a term to which it is often compared. Class is an altogether separate measure of one’s standing in a society, marked by level of education, income, and occupation, as well as the attendant characteristics, such as accent, taste, and manners, that flow from socioeconomic status. These can be acquired through hard work and ingenuity or lost through poor decisions or calamity. If you can act your way out of it, then it is class, not caste. Through the years, wealth and class may have insulated some people born to the subordinate caste in America but not protected them from humiliating attempts to put them in their place or to remind them of their caste position.

Centuries after the American caste system took shape along the Chesapeake, the most accomplished of lower-caste people have often found ways to transcend caste, but rarely to fully escape it.

“Like the Hindu caste system, the black-white distinction in the United States has supplied a social hierarchy determined at birth, and arguably immutable, even by achievement,” wrote the legal scholars Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J. Cottrol. “Blacks became like a group of American untouchables, ritually separated from the rest of the population.”

In the winter of 2013, the Academy Award–winning actor Forest Whitaker, a distinguished, middle-aged, African-American man, walked into a gourmet delicatessen on the West Side of Manhattan for a bite to eat. Seeing it crowded or not finding what he wanted, he turned to leave without

making a purchase, as many customers might. An employee thought it suspicious and blocked him at the door. That level of intervention was uncharacteristic at an establishment frequented by celebrities and college students. The employee frisked him up and down in front of other customers. Finding nothing, he allowed Whitaker, visibly shaken, to leave. The delicatessen owners later apologized for the incident and fired the employee. But the degradation of that moment stayed with the actor. “It’s a humiliating thing for someone to come and do that,” Whitaker said afterward. “It’s attempted disempowerment.”

Neither wealth nor celebrity has insulated those born to the subordinate caste from the police brutality that seems disproportionately trained on those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In 2015, New York City police officers broke an NBA player’s leg outside of a nightclub in Manhattan. The injury left the player, a forward for the Atlanta Hawks, disabled for the rest of the season. It resulted in a \$4 million settlement, the proceeds of which the player promptly said he would donate to a foundation for public defenders.

In 2018, police officers slammed a former NFL player to the ground after a disagreement he had with another motorist who had thrown coffee at his car, according to news reports. The video that surfaced that spring shows officers twisting Desmond Marrow’s arms and legs and shoving him facedown onto the pavement. Then they turn him over and hold him down by the throat. He passes out under their weight. After the video went viral, an internal investigation was conducted and an officer was fired.

“No matter how great you become in life, no matter how wealthy you become, how people worship you, or what you do,” NBA star LeBron James told reporters just the year before, “if you are an African-American man or African-American woman, you will always be that.”

Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating

The framers of the American caste system took steps, early in its founding, to keep the castes separate and to seal off the bloodlines of those assigned to the upper rung. This desire led to the third pillar of caste—endogamy, which means restricting marriage to people within the same caste. This is an ironclad foundation of any caste system, from ancient India, to the early American colonies, to the Nazi regime in Germany. Endogamy was brutally enforced in the United States for the vast majority of its history and did the spade work for current ethnic divisions.

Endogamy enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage outside of one's group and going so far as to prohibit sexual relations, or even the appearance of romantic interest, across caste lines. It builds a firewall between castes and becomes the primary means of keeping resources and affinity within each tier of the caste system. Endogamy, by closing off legal family connection, blocks the chance for empathy or a sense of shared destiny between the castes. It makes it less likely that someone in the dominant caste will have a personal stake in the happiness, fulfillment, or well-being of anyone deemed beneath them or personally identify with them or their plight. Endogamy, in fact, makes it more likely that those in the dominant caste will see those deemed beneath them as not only less than human but as an enemy, as not of their kind, and as a threat that must be held in check at all costs.

“Caste,” wrote Bhimrao Ambedkar, the father of the anti-caste movement in India, “means an artificial chopping off of the population into

fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.” Thus, “in showing how endogamy is maintained,” he added, “we shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of Caste.”

Before there was a United States of America, there was endogamy, said to be ordained by God. One of the earliest references to what would come to be known as race in America arose over the matter of sexual relations between a European and an African. In 1630, the Virginia General Assembly sentenced Hugh Davis to a public whipping for having “abused himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a Negro.” The assembly went to the trouble of specifying that Africans, who might not normally be permitted to observe the punishment of a dominant-caste man, had to attend and witness the whipping of Davis. This served a dual function in the emerging caste system. It further humiliated Davis before an audience of people deemed beneath him. And it signaled a warning to those being banished to the lowest caste in a country that did not yet even exist: *If this was the fate of a white man who did not adhere to caste boundaries, so much worse will it be for you.*

By the time of Davis’s sentencing, European men had been having sex with African women, often without consent or consequence to themselves, throughout the era of the slave trade, and had grown accustomed to acting upon their presumed sovereignty over Africans. So, for the colonial fathers to condemn Hugh Davis to public humiliation for behavior that many took as a birthright meant that he had crossed a line they found threatening to the hierarchy, something about the way he related to his mate that got their attention and required their intervention. The emerging caste system permitted the exploitation of the lowest caste but not equality, or the appearance of equality, which is why endogamy, which confers an alliance between equals in the eyes of the law, was strictly policed and rape of lower-caste women ignored. The case of Hugh Davis was not only the first mention of race and hierarchy in America, but also the first attempt at setting the boundaries of publicly known relationships across caste lines.

Ten years later, another white man, Robert Sweet, was forced to do penance when it came to light that he had gotten an enslaved black woman,

owned by another white man, pregnant. By then, the focus of caste enforcement had shifted. In that case, it was the pregnant woman who was whipped, a sign of her degraded caste status despite a medical condition that would have protected her in most civilized nations.

In 1691, Virginia became the first colony to outlaw marriage between blacks and whites, a ban that the majority of states would take up for the next three centuries. Some states forbade the marriage of whites to Asians or Native Americans in addition to African-Americans, who were uniformly excluded. While there was never a single nationwide ban on intermarriage, despite several attempts to enact one, forty-one of the fifty states passed laws making intermarriage a crime punishable by fines of up to \$5,000 and up to ten years in prison. Some states went so far as to forbid the passage of any *future* law permitting intermarriage. Outside of the law, particularly in the South, African-Americans faced penalty of death for even the appearance of breaching this pillar of caste.

The Supreme Court did not overturn these prohibitions until 1967. Still, some states were slow to officially repeal their endogamy laws. Alabama, the last state to do so, did not throw out its law against intermarriage until the year 2000. Even then, 40 percent of the electorate in that referendum voted in favor of keeping the marriage ban on the books.

It was the caste system, through the practice of endogamy—essentially state regulation of people’s romantic choices over the course of centuries—that created and reinforced “races,” by permitting only those with similar physical traits to legally mate. Combined with bans on immigrants who were not from Europe for much of American history, endogamy laws had the effect of controlled breeding, of curating the population of the United States. This form of social engineering served to maintain the superficial differences upon which the hierarchy was based, “race” ultimately becoming the result of who was officially allowed to procreate with whom. Endogamy ensures the very difference that a caste system relies on to justify inequality.

“What we look like,” wrote the legal scholar Ian Haney López, “the literal and ‘racial’ features we in this country exhibit, is to a large extent the product of legal rules and decisions.”

This pillar of caste was well enough understood and accepted that, as late as 1958, a Gallup poll found that 94 percent of white Americans disapproved of marriage across racial lines. “You know the Negro race is inferior mentally,” a southern physician told researchers back in 1940, expressing a commonly held view. “Everyone knows that, and I don’t think God meant for a superior race like the whites to blend with an inferior race.”

As this was the prevailing sentiment for most of the country’s history, an unknowable number of lives were lost due to this defining pillar of caste, the presumed breach of which triggered the most publicized cases of lynchings in America. The protocol was strictly enforced against lower-caste men and upper-caste women, while upper-caste men, the people who wrote the laws, kept full and flagrant access to lower-caste women, whatever their age or marital status. In this way, the dominant gender of the dominant caste, in addition to controlling the livelihood and life chances of everyone beneath them, eliminated the competition for its own women and in fact for all women. For much of American history, dominant-caste men controlled who had access to whom for romantic liaisons and reproduction.

This inverted the natural expression of manhood—total freedom for one group and life-or-death policing of another—and served further to reinforce caste boundaries and the powerlessness of subordinated men who might dare try to protect their own daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers. At the same time, it reminded everyone in the hierarchy of the absolute power of dominant-caste men. This was a cloud that hung over the lives of everyone consigned to the lowest caste for most of the time that there has been a United States of America.

In the mid-1830s in Grand Gulf, Mississippi, white men burned a black man alive and stuck his head on a pole at the edge of town for all to see, as a lesson to men in the subordinate caste. The black man had been tortured and beheaded after he stood up and killed the dominant-caste man “who owned his wife and was in the habit of sleeping with her,” according to a contemporaneous account. As he faced death for taking an extreme and assuredly suicidal step to protect his wife in that world, the doomed husband said that “he believed he should be rewarded in heaven for it.”

More than a century later, in December 1943, an earnest fifteen-year-old boy named Willie James Howard was working during the holiday school break at a dime store in Live Oak, Florida. He was an only child and, having made it to the tenth grade, was expected to exceed what anyone else in the family had been able to accomplish. That December, he made a fateful gesture, unknowing or unmindful of a central pillar of caste. He was hopeful and excited about his new job and wanted so badly to do well that he sent Christmas cards to everyone at work. In one Christmas card, the one to a girl his age named Cynthia, who worked there and whom he had a crush on, he signed, “with L” (for love).

It would seem an ordinary gesture for that time of the year, sweet even, but this was the Jim Crow South; the boy was black, and the girl was white. She showed the card to her father. Word got back to Willie James that his card had somehow disturbed her. So, on New Year’s Day 1944, he hand-delivered an apologetic note trying to explain himself: “I know you don’t think much of our kind of people but we don’t hate you, all we want [is] to be your friends but you [won’t] let us please don’t let anybody else see this I hope I haven’t made you mad...” He added a rhyme: “I love your name, I love your voice, for a S.H. (sweetheart) you are my choice.”

The next day, the girl’s father and two other white men dragged Willie James and his father to the banks of the Suwannee River. They hog-tied Willie James and held a gun to his head. They forced him to jump and forced his father at gunpoint to watch him drown. Held captive and outnumbered as the father was, he was helpless to save his only child.

The men admitted to authorities that they had abducted the boy and bound his hands and feet. They said he just jumped and drowned on his own. Within days, the boy’s parents fled for their lives. A young Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP alerted the Florida governor, to no avail. The NAACP field secretary, Harry T. Moore, managed to convince the boy’s parents to overcome their terror and to sign affidavits about what had happened the day their son was killed. A local grand jury refused to indict the boy’s abductors, and federal prosecutors would not intervene.

No one was ever held to account or spent a day in jail for the death of Willie James. His abduction and death were seen as upholding the caste order. Thus the terrors of the southern caste system continued, carried forth

without penalty. Sanctioned as it was by the U.S. government, the caste system had become not simply southern, but American.

Purity versus Pollution

The fourth pillar of caste rests upon the fundamental belief in the purity of the dominant caste and the fear of pollution from the castes deemed beneath it. Over the centuries, the dominant caste has taken extreme measures to protect its sanctity from the perceived taint of the lower castes. Both India and the United States at the zenith of their respective caste systems, and the short-lived but heinous regime of the Nazis, raised the obsession with purity to a high, if absurdist, art.

In some parts of India, the lowest-caste people were to remain a certain number of paces from any dominant-caste person while walking out in public—somewhere between twelve and ninety-six steps away, depending on the castes in question. They had to wear bells to alert those deemed above them so as not to pollute them with their presence. A person in the lowest subcastes in the Maratha region had to “drag a thorny branch with him to wipe out his footprints” and prostrate himself on the ground if a Brahmin passed, so that his “foul shadow might not defile the holy Brahmin.”

Touching or drawing near to anything that had been touched by an Untouchable was considered polluting to the upper castes and required rituals of purification for the high-caste person following this misfortune. This they might do by bathing at once in flowing water or performing Pranayama breaths along with meditation to cleanse themselves of the pollutants.

In Germany, the Nazis banned Jewish residents from stepping onto the beaches at the Jews’ own summer homes, as at Wannsee, a resort suburb of

Berlin, and at public pools in the Reich. “They believed the entire pool would be polluted by immersion in it of a Jewish body,” Jean-Paul Sartre once observed.

In the United States, the subordinate caste was quarantined in every sphere of life, made untouchable on American terms, for most of the country’s history and well into the twentieth century. In the South, where most people in the subordinate caste were long consigned, black children and white children studied from separate sets of textbooks. In Florida, the books for black children and white children could not even be stored together. African-Americans were prohibited from using white water fountains and had to drink from horse troughs in the southern swelter before the era of separate fountains. In southern jails, the bedsheets for the black prisoners were kept separate from the bedsheets for the white prisoners. All private and public human activities were segregated from birth to death, from hospital wards to railroad platforms to ambulances, hearses, and cemeteries. In stores, black people were prohibited from trying on clothing, shoes, hats, or gloves, assuming they were permitted in the store at all. If a black person happened to die in a public hospital, “the body will be placed in a corner of the ‘dead house’ away from the white corpses,” wrote the historian Bertram Doyle in 1937.

This pillar of caste was enshrined into law in the United States in 1896, after a New Orleans man challenged an 1890 Louisiana law that separated “the white and colored races” in railroad cars. Louisiana had passed the law after the collapse of Reconstruction and the return to power of the former Confederates. A committee of concerned citizens of color came together and raised money to fight the law in court. On the appointed day, June 7, 1892, Homer A. Plessy, a shoemaker who looked white but was categorized as black under the American definition of race, bought a first-class ticket from New Orleans to Covington on the East Louisiana Railroad and took his seat in the whites-only car. In that era, a person of ambiguous racial origin was presumed not to be white, so the conductor ordered him to the colored car. Plessy refused and was arrested, as the committee had anticipated. His case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled seven to one in favor of Louisiana’s “separate but equal” law. It set in motion nearly

seven decades of formal, state-sanctioned isolation and exclusion of one caste from the other in the United States.

In southern courtrooms, even the word of God was segregated. There were two separate Bibles—one for blacks and one for whites—to swear to tell the truth on. The same sacred object could not be touched by hands of different races.

This pillar of purity, as with the others, endangered the lives of the people in the subordinate caste. One day in the 1930s, a black railroad switchman was working in Memphis and slipped and fell beneath a switch engine. He lay bleeding to death, his right arm and leg severed. “Ambulances rushed to the man’s aid,” according to reports of the incident. “They took one look, saw that he was a Negro, and backed away.”

The Sanctity of Water

The waters and shorelines of nature were forbidden to the subordinate castes if the dominant caste so desired. Well into the twentieth century, African-Americans were banned from white beaches and lakes and pools, both north and south, lest they pollute them, just as Dalits were forbidden from the waters of the Brahmins, and Jews from Aryan waters in the Third Reich.

This was a sacred principle in the United States well into the second half of the twentieth century, and the dominant caste went to great lengths to enforce it. In the early 1950s, when Cincinnati agreed under pressure to allow black swimmers into some of its public pools, whites threw nails and broken glass into the water to keep them out. In the 1960s, a black civil rights activist tried to integrate a public pool by swimming a lap and then emerging to towel off. “The response was to drain the pool entirely,” wrote the legal historian Mark S. Weiner, “and refill it with fresh water.”

Decades before, in 1919, a black boy paid with his life and set off a riot in Chicago for inadvertently breaching this pillar of caste. Seventeen-year-old Eugene Williams was swimming in Lake Michigan, at a public beach on the city’s South Side, and happened to wade past the imaginary line that separated the races. He unknowingly passed into the white water, which

flowed into and looked no different from the black water. He was stoned and drowned to death for doing so. The tensions over the breaching of boundaries that summer incited the dominant caste and set off one of the worst race riots in U.S. history.

In the decades after, in middle American places like Newton, Kansas, and Marion, Indiana, in Pittsburgh and St. Louis, people in the upper caste rose up in hysterics at the sight of a subordinate-caste person approaching their water. In August 1931, a new public park opened in Pittsburgh, with pools the size of a football field and big enough for ten thousand swimmers. But soon afterward, as the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported, “each Negro who entered the pool yesterday was immediately surrounded by whites and slugged or held beneath the water until he gave up his attempts to swim and left.”

In the summer of 1949, the city of St. Louis had what was considered the largest city pool in the country, at its Fairground Park. When the city, under pressure from black citizens, took up the issue of allowing black people into the pool, the backlash was immediate. A man who happened to have the same name as the official in charge of integrating the pool required police protection due to the mistaken threats against him. Lifeguards considered quitting in protest.

The day the first African-Americans arrived to swim, a crowd gathered with knives, bricks, and bats. They set upon the black children who had come to swim, forcing them to walk a gauntlet, striking and taunting them. The mob grew to five thousand people, who chased after any black person they saw approaching the park—children on bicycles, a man stepping off a streetcar, a truck stalled in traffic, a black man on a porch at a house next to the park. They kicked him as he lay on the ground, limp and bleeding.

The town of Newton, Kansas, went to the state supreme court to keep black people out of the pool it built in 1935. The city and its contractor argued that black people could never be permitted in the pool, not on alternate days, not at separate hours, not ever, because of the type of pool it was. They told the court that it was “a circulatory type of pool,” in which “the water is only changed once during the swimming season.” White people, they argued, would not go into water that had touched black skin. “The only way white residents would swim in a pool after blacks,” wrote

the historian Jeff Wiltse, “was if the water was drained and the tank scrubbed.” The operators couldn’t do all that every time a black person went into the pool, so they banned black people altogether. The court sided with the city, and, for decades more, the town’s only public pool remained for the exclusive use of the dominant caste.

A public pool outside Pittsburgh solved this problem by keeping black people out until after the season was over in September, which meant it was closed to black swimmers at the precise time that they or anyone else would have wanted to use it. The manager said this was the only way the maintenance crew could get “sufficient time to properly cleanse and disinfect it after the Negroes have used it.”

A white woman in Marion, Indiana, seemed to be speaking for many in the dominant caste across America when she said that white people wouldn’t swim with colored people because they “didn’t want to be polluted by their blackness.” Far from her, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, whites blocked African-Americans at the stairwells and entrances the week the city first allowed black swimmers to its public pool. There, and elsewhere, “every black swimmer that entered the water quite literally risked his or her life,” Wiltse wrote.

It was in this atmosphere, in 1951, that a Little League baseball team in Youngstown, Ohio, won the city championship. The coaches, unthinkingly, decided to celebrate with a team picnic at a municipal pool. When the team arrived at the gate, a lifeguard stopped one of the Little Leaguers from entering. It was Al Bright, the only black player on the team. His parents had not been able to attend the picnic, and the coaches and some of the other parents tried to persuade the pool officials to let the little boy in, to no avail. The only thing the lifeguards were willing to do was to let them set a blanket for him outside the fence and to let people bring him food. He was given little choice and had to watch his teammates splash in the water and chase each other on the pool deck while he sat alone on the outside.

“From time to time, one or another of the players or adults came out and sat with him before returning to join the others,” his childhood friend, the author Mel Watkins, would write years later.

It took an hour or so for a team official to finally convince the lifeguards “that they should at least allow the child into the pool for a few minutes.”

The supervisor agreed to let the Little Leaguer in, but only if everyone else got out of the water, and only if Al followed the rules they set for him.

First, everyone—meaning his teammates, the parents, all the white people—had to get out of the water. Once everyone cleared out, “Al was led to the pool and placed in a small rubber raft,” Watkins wrote. A lifeguard got into the water and pushed the raft with Al in it for a single turn around the pool, as a hundred or so teammates, coaches, parents, and onlookers watched from the sidelines.

After the “agonizing few minutes” that it took to complete the circle, Al was then “escorted to his assigned spot” on the other side of the fence. During his short time in the raft, as it glided on the surface, the lifeguard warned him over and over again of one important thing. “Just don’t touch the water,” the lifeguard said, as he pushed the rubber float. “Whatever you do, don’t touch the water.”

The lifeguard managed to keep the water pure that day, but a part of that little boy died that afternoon. When one of the coaches offered him a ride home, he declined. “With champion trophy in hand,” Watkins wrote, Al walked the mile or so back home by himself. He was never the same after that.

The Hierarchy of Trace Amounts:

Griffes, Marabons, and Sangmelees

The American caste system was an accelerated one, compressed into a fraction of the time that India’s caste system has been in existence. Its founders used the story of Noah and his sons to justify the bottom of the hierarchy but, without further biblical instruction, as in the Laws of Manu, they shaped the upper caste as they went along. This policing of purity in the United States began with the task of defining the dominant caste itself.

While all the countries in the New World created hierarchies with Europeans on top, the United States alone created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that a single drop of African blood, or varying

percentages of Asian or Native American blood, could taint the purity of someone who might otherwise be presumed to be European, a stain that would thus disqualify the person from admittance to the dominant caste. This was a punitive model of racial superiority as opposed to the South African model, which rewarded those with any proximity to whiteness and created an official mid-caste of colored people as a buffer between black and white. South Africa granted privileges on a graded scale based on how much European blood was thought to be coursing through one's veins, seeing "white" blood as a cleansing antiseptic to that of lowlier groups in the purity-pollution paradigm. Both were forms of white supremacy crafted to fit the demographics of each country. South Africa's white minority had an incentive to grow its power and numbers by granting honorary whiteness to those deemed close enough. The white majority in the United States had no such incentive and, in fact, benefited by elevating itself and holding those fewer in number apart and beneath them to serve as their subordinates.

"Degradation, resulting from the taint of blood, adheres to the descendants of Ham in this country, like the poisoned tunic of Nessus," wrote Joseph Henry Lumpkin, the antebellum chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, managing to combine Greek mythology and two pillars of caste—divine will and pollution—into a single ruling. (The mythical tunic was the blood-soaked garment of the fallen centaur Nessus, which came to represent inescapable misfortune and ruin to those who wore it.)

The founders labored from the start over who should be allowed into the dominant caste. The vast majority of human beings, including many who are now considered white, would not have fit their definition. Twenty-five years before the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin worried that, with its growing German population, Pennsylvania would "become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion."

Ultimately, the dominant caste used immigration and marriage law to control who could join its ranks and who would be excluded. That took constant redefinition. "The law could not separate what it failed to categorize," wrote the legal scholars Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J.

Cottrol. “A legally mandated caste system needed at a minimum to define caste membership.”

At first, Congress, in 1790, restricted American citizenship to white immigrants, “free white persons,” according to the statute. But “whiteness” had yet to be settled, and by the mid-nineteenth century, with millions of people immigrating from Germany and fleeing famine in Ireland, supremacists on both sides of the Atlantic fretted over what was to become of a country flooded by “the most degenerate races of olden day Europe,” in the words of Arthur de Gobineau, a widely read nineteenth-century advocate of Aryan supremacy. “They are the human flotsam of all ages: Irish, cross-bred Germans and French, and Italians of even more doubtful stock.”

For most of American history, anyone not Anglo-Saxon fell somewhere on a descending scale of human “pollution.” Like a field marshal defending his flanks in multiple theaters, the dominant caste fought the “tainted” influx of new immigrants with two of the most stringent immigration bans ever enacted, just before and after the turn of the twentieth century.

The country tried to block the flow of Chinese immigrants into the western states with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Then it turned to the immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe, the “scum and offscouring,” as a former Virginia governor put it, newcomers who purportedly brought crime and disease and polluted the bloodlines of America’s original white stock. Congress commissioned an analysis of the crisis, an influential document known as the Dillingham Report, and the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization called hearings as the United States tried to further curate its population.

“The moral fiber of the nation has been weakened and its very life-blood vitiated by the influx of this tide of oriental scum,” Rev. M. D. Lichliter, a minister from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, said in his testimony before the committee in 1910. “Our grand Anglo-Saxon character must be preserved, and the pure unmixed blood flowing down from our Aryan progenitors must not be mixed with the Iberic race,” a term applied to southern Italians in the era of eugenics.

The findings set the stage for the 1924 Immigration Act, which restricted immigration to quotas based on the demographics of 1890—that is, before

Poles, Jews, Greeks, Italians, and others outside of western Europe had arrived in great numbers.

Their status contested, these groups were not always extended the protections accorded to unassailably “white” people, not then anyway. There was an attempt to exclude Italian voters from “white” primaries in Louisiana in 1903. The decade before, in 1891, eleven Italian immigrants in New Orleans lost their lives in one of the largest mass lynchings in American history, after the police chief was assassinated and the immigrants were seen as the prime suspects. After the lynching, hundreds more were rounded up and arrested. One of the organizers of the lynch mob, John M. Parker, later described Italians as “just a little worse than the Negro, being if anything filthier in [their] habits, lawless, and treacherous.” He went on to be elected governor of Louisiana.

Later, in 1922, a black man in Alabama named Jim Rollins was convicted of miscegenation for living as the husband of a white woman named Edith Labue. But when the court learned that the woman was Sicilian and saw “no competent evidence” that she was white, the judge reversed the conviction. The uncertainty surrounding whether she was “conclusively” white led the court to take the extraordinary step of freeing a black man who in other circumstances might have faced a lynching had she been seen as a white woman.

By then, a majority of the states had devised, or were in the process of devising, ever more tortured definitions of *white* and *black*.

Arkansas first defined *Negro* as “one in whom there is a visible and distinct admixture of African blood.” Then in 1911, the state changed it to anyone “who has...any negro blood whatever,” as it made interracial sex a felony. The state of Alabama defined a black person as anyone with “a drop of negro blood,” in its intermarriage ban. Oregon defined as nonwhite any person “with $\frac{1}{4}$ Negro, Chinese or any person having $\frac{1}{4}$ Negro, Chinese or Kanaka blood or more than $\frac{1}{2}$ Indian blood.” North Carolina forbade marriage between whites and any person “of Negro or Indian descent to 3rd generation inclusive.” The state of Georgia defined *white* to mean “no ascertainable trace of Negro, African, West Indian, Asiatic blood.”

Louisiana had a law on the books as recently as 1983 setting the boundary at “one-thirty-second Negro blood.” Louisiana culture went to

great specificity, not so unlike the Indian Laws of Manu, in delineating the various subcastes, based on the estimated percentage of African “blood.” There was griffe (three-fourths black), marabon (five-eighths black), mulatto (one-half), quadroon (one-fourth), octaroon (one-eighth), sextaroon (one-sixteenth), demi-meamelouc (one-thirty-second), and sangmelee (one-sixty-fourth). The latter categories, as twenty-first-century genetic testing has now shown, would encompass millions of Americans now classified as Caucasian. All of these categories bear witness to a historic American, dominant-caste preoccupation with race and caste purity.

Virginia went all in and passed what it called the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which besides prohibiting interracial marriage, defined a white person as one “who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.”

“The ‘traceable amount’ was meant to ensure that even blacks who did not look black were kept in their place,” wrote Diamond and Cottrol. “Tracing black ancestry as far back as possible became a prerequisite to the smooth functioning of the caste system.”

The Trials of the Middle Castes:

The Race to Get Under the White Tent

By extending the dream of dominion over the land and all others in it to anyone who could meet the definition of *white*, the American caste system became an all-or-nothing gambit for the top rung. Which is why, when Ybor City, Florida, began segregating its streetcars in 1905, Cubans, who had been uncertain as to how they would be classified, were relieved and overjoyed “to discover that they were allowed to sit in the white section.”

Those permitted under the white tent could reap the rewards of full citizenship, rise to positions of high status, or as far as their talents could take them, get access to the best the country had to offer, or, at the very least, be accorded respect in everyday interactions from subordinate groups who risked assault for any misstep. A two-tiered caste system raised the

stakes for whiteness, leading to court dockets filled with people on the borderline seeking admission to the upper caste.

A Japanese immigrant named Takao Ozawa had lived in the United States for more than twenty years. He tried to make the case that he was worthy of citizenship and should qualify as white because his skin was lighter than that of many “white people.” He argued, what really was the difference? How could he not be white if his skin was white? What did it mean to be white if someone with actual white skin was not white?

His case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1922, the Court held unanimously that *white* meant not skin color but “Caucasian,” and that Japanese were not Caucasian, notwithstanding the fact that few white Americans had origins in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia either and that those who did were at that very moment being kept out, too.

After the ruling, a newspaper that catered to Japanese immigrants mocked the decision: “Since this newspaper did not believe whites are the ‘superior race,’ it is ‘delighted’ the high tribunal ‘did not find the Japanese to be free white persons.’”

A few months later, an immigrant from the dominant caste of India sought to make common cause with his upper-caste counterparts in America when his application for citizenship made it to the Supreme Court. Bhagat Singh Thind argued that he was Caucasian, Aryan in fact, descended from the same stock as Europeans, given that it was widely held that Aryans migrated south to India and formed that country’s upper caste. It could be said that he had a more rightful claim to being Caucasian than the people judging him. After all, the Caucasus Mountains were next to Iran and closer to neighboring India than to western Europe.

The Court did not agree and rejected Thind’s quest for citizenship in 1923. “It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity,” wrote the Court, “but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today.”

These decisions were a heartbreaking catastrophe for Asians seeking citizenship. With pro-western European sentiment running high, the government began rescinding the naturalized citizenship of people of Asian descent who were already here. This amounted to an abandonment of

people who had lived legally in the United States for most of their adult lives, as would echo a century later with immigrants crossing the southern U.S. border with Mexico.

It could lead to tragic consequences. Vaishno Das Bagai, an Indian immigrant, had been in the United States for eight years by the time the Supreme Court ruled that Indians were not white and thus were ineligible for citizenship. He had a wife and three children and his own general store on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. He tended his store in three-piece suits and kept his hair cut short with a part on the side. Bagai lost his citizenship in the crackdown on nonwhite immigrants. He was then stripped of the business he had built, due to a California law restricting the economic rights of people who were not citizens. Shorn of a passport, he was then thwarted in his attempt to get back to India and was now a man without a country.

Far from his original home and rejected by his new one, he rented a room in San Jose, turned on the gas and took his life. He left a suicide note, in which he lamented the futility of all that he had sacrificed to come to America: “Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and bridges burnt behind.”

No matter which route a borderline applicant took to gain acceptance, the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms. What a thin, frayed thread held the illusions together. A Japanese novelist once noted that, on paper anyway, it was a single apostrophe that stood between rejection and citizenship for a Japanese Ohara versus an Irish O’Hara. These cases laid bare not just the absurdity but the inaccuracy of these artificial labels and the perception of purity or pollution implied by them. At the same time, they exposed the unyielding rigidity of a caste system, defiant in the face of evidence contrary to its foundation, how it holds fast against the assault of logic.

Defining Purity and the Constancy of the Bottom Rung

As the middle castes pressed for admittance to the rungs above them, what was consistent was the absolute exclusion of the “polluting” lowest caste.

African-Americans were not just *not* citizens, they were, like their Dalit counterparts in India, forced outside the social contract.

They and the Dalits bore the daily brunt of the taint ascribed to their very beings. The Dalits were not permitted to drink from the same cups as the dominant castes in India, live in the villages of the upper-caste people, walk through the front doors of upper-caste homes, and neither were African-Americans in much of the United States for most of its history. African-Americans in the South were required to walk through the side or back door of any white establishment they approached. Throughout the United States, sundown laws forbade them from being seen in white towns and neighborhoods after sunset, or risk assault or lynching. In bars and restaurants in the North, though they might be permitted to sit and eat, it was common for the bartender to make a show of smashing the glass that a black patron had just sipped from. Heads would turn as restaurant patrons looked to see where the crashing sound had come from and who had offended the sensibilities of caste pollution.

Untouchables were not allowed inside Hindu temples, and black Mormons in America, by way of example, were not allowed inside the temples of the religion they followed and could not become priests until 1978. Enslaved black people were prohibited from learning to read the Bible or any book for that matter, just as Untouchables were prohibited from learning Sanskrit and sacred texts. In churches in the South, black worshippers sat in the galleries or in the back rows, and, when such arrangements were inconvenient to the dominant caste, “the negroes must catch the gospel as it escapes through the windows and doors” from outside. To this day, Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour in America.

Well into the civil rights era, the caste system excluded African-Americans from the daily activities of the general public in the South, the region where most of them lived. They knew to disregard any notice of a circus coming to town or of a political rally; those things were not intended for them. “They were driven from Independence Day parades,” wrote the historian David Roediger, “as ‘defilers’ of the body politic.”

What a British magistrate observed about the lowest castes in India could as well have been said of African-Americans. “They were not

allowed to be present at the great national sacrifices, or at the feasts which followed them,” wrote the colonial administrator and historian W. W. Hunter. “They could never rise out of their servile condition; and to them was assigned the severest toil in the fields.”

Their exclusion was used to justify their exclusion. Their degraded station justified their degradation. They were consigned to the lowliest, dirtiest jobs and thus were seen as lowly and dirty, and everyone in the caste system absorbed the message of their degradation.

The burden fell on those in the lowest caste to adjust themselves for the convenience of the dominant caste whenever in contact with white people. An African-American man who managed to become an architect during the nineteenth century had to train himself “to read architectural blueprints upside down,” wrote the scholar Charles W. Mills, “because he knew white clients would be made uncomfortable by having him on the same side of the desk as themselves.”

Well into the twentieth century, a panic could afflict people in the dominant caste if ever a breach occurred. A frantic white mother in civil-rights-era Mississippi yanked her young daughter inside one day, held her over the kitchen sink and scrubbed her little hand with a Brillo pad as if both their lives depended on it. The girl had touched the hand of a little black girl who was working on the family’s land. The mother told her never to touch that girl’s hand again, though that was not the term she used.

“They have germs,” the mother said. “They’re nasty.” The mother’s fury frightened the little girl and brought her to tears as they stood there, bent over the sink. And the daughter’s tears brought the mother to tears over the manufactured terror she had allowed to consume her and over the box that she realized in that moment had imprisoned her for all of her life.

This was a sacred prohibition, and it was said that, into the 1970s, the majority of whites in the South had not so much as shaken the hands of a black person.

A young dominant-caste man raised in the Depression-era South had been well taught the rules of the caste system and adhered to them as expected. When he went north in the mid-twentieth century and joined the military, he had to confront the mythologies of his upbringing.

“Strange things pop up at us like gargoyles when we are liberated from our delusions,” the white southerner said.

Up north, on occasion, he found himself in situations where black people were permitted in the same work settings as whites. “I thought I was entirely prepared, emotionally and intellectually,” the man, an editor at *Look* magazine, recalled years later.

But he discovered that he was a captive of his own conditioning, which he called a certain madness.

Every time he reached the point where he had to shake hands with a black person, he felt an automatic revulsion that had been trained into him. He recoiled even though it had been black women who had bathed him as a child, had mixed the dough for his biscuits, and whose touch had not repulsed him when extended in servitude. But with presumed equals, “each time I shook hands with a Negro,” he said, “I felt an urge to wash my hands. Every rational impulse, all that I considered best in myself struggled against this urge. But the hand that had touched the dark skin had a will of its own and would not be dissuaded from signaling it was unclean. That is what I mean by madness.”

Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill

When a house is being built, the single most important piece of the framework is the first wood beam hammered into place to anchor the foundation. That piece is called the mudsill, the sill plate that runs along the base of a house and bears the weight of the entire structure above it. The studs and subfloors, the ceilings and windows, the doors and roofing, all the components that make it a house, are built on top of the mudsill. In a caste system, the mudsill is the bottom caste that everything else rests upon.

A southern politician declared this central doctrine from the floor of the U.S. Senate in March 1858. “In all social systems, there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life,” Sen. James Henry Hammond of South Carolina told his fellow senators. “That is a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have....It constitutes the very mud-sill of society.”

He exulted in the cunning of the South, which, he said, had “found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand....Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slaves.”

Hammond owned several plantations and more than three hundred souls, having acquired this fortune by marrying the plain and callow young daughter of a wealthy landowner in South Carolina. He rose to become

governor of the state and a leading figure in the antebellum South. Well before making this speech, he had established himself as one of the more repugnant of men ever to rise to the Senate, one scholar calling him “nothing less than a monster.” He is known to have repeatedly raped at least two of the women he enslaved, one of them believed to have been his daughter by another enslaved woman.

His political career was nearly derailed when it became public that he had sexually abused his four young nieces, their lives so ruined that none of them ever married after reaching adulthood. In his diary, he spoke blithely of the nieces, blaming them for the “intimacies.” For these and other things, his wife left him, taking their children with her, only to later return. He rebounded from these malefactions to be elected to the U.S. Senate.

But he is best known for the speech that distilled the hierarchy of the South, which spread in spirit to the rest of the country, into a structure built on a mudsill. In so doing, he defined the fifth pillar of caste, the division of labor based on one’s place in the hierarchy. Therein, he identified the economic purpose of a hierarchy to begin with, that is, to ensure that the tasks necessary for a society to function get handled whether or not people wish to do them, in this case, by being born to the disfavored sill plate.

In the Indian caste system, an infinitely more elaborate hierarchy, the subcaste, or *jati*, to which a person was born established the occupation their family fulfilled, from cleaners of latrines to priests in the temples. Those born to families who collected refuse or tanned the hides of animals or handled the dead were seen as the most polluted and lowest in the hierarchy, untouchable due to the dreaded and thankless though necessary task they were presumably born to fulfill.

Similarly, African-Americans, throughout most of their time in this land, were relegated to the dirtiest, most demeaning and least desirable jobs by definition. After enslavement and well into the twentieth century, they were primarily restricted to the role of sharecroppers and servants—domestics, lawn boys, chauffeurs, and janitors. The most that those who managed to get an education could hope for was to teach, minister to, attend to the health needs of, or bury other subordinate-caste people.

“There is severe occupational deprivation in each country,” wrote the scholars Sidney Verba, Bashiruddin Ahmed, and Anil Bhatt in a 1971

comparative study of India and the United States. “A deprivation—at least in terms of level—of roughly similar magnitude.”

The state of South Carolina, right after the Civil War, explicitly prohibited black people from performing any labor other than farm or domestic work, setting their place in the caste system. The legislature decreed that “no person of color shall pursue or practice the art, trade or business of an artisan, mechanic or shop-keeper, or any other trade, employment or business (besides that of husbandry, or that of a servant under contract for labor) on his own account and for his own benefit until he shall have obtained a license from the judge of the district court, which license shall be good for one year only.” The license was set at an intentionally prohibitive cost of \$100 a year, the equivalent of \$1,500 in 2018. This was a fee not required of the dominant caste, whose members, having not been enslaved for a quarter millennium, would have been in better position to afford.

The law went nominally out of effect during the decade known as Reconstruction, when the North took control of the former Confederacy, but it returned in spirit and custom after the North retreated and the former enslavers took power again, ready to avenge their defeat in the Civil War. In North Carolina, during slavery and into the era of sharecropping, people in the lowest caste were forbidden to sell or trade goods of any kind or be subject to thirty-nine lashes. This blocked the main route to earning money from their own farm labors and forced them into economic dependence on the dominant caste.

“The caste order that followed slavery defined the Negroes as workers and servants of the whites,” wrote the scholar Edward Reuter. “The range of occupations was narrow, and many of those outside the orbit of common labor were closed to the Negroes.”

The South foreclosed on them any route to a station higher than that assigned them. “Anything that causes the negro to aspire above the plow handle, the cook pot, in a word the functions of a servant,” Gov. James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said, “will be the worst thing on earth for the negro. God Almighty designed him for a menial. He is fit for nothing else.”

Those who managed to go north after the Civil War and in the bigger waves of the Great Migration, starting in World War I, found that they could

escape the South but not their caste. They entered the North at the bottom, beneath southern and eastern Europeans who might not yet have learned English but who were permitted into unions and into better-served neighborhoods that barred black citizens whose labor had cleared the wilderness and built the country's wealth. While there was no federal law restricting people to certain occupations on the basis of race, statutes in the South and custom in the North kept lower-caste people in their place. Northern industries often hired African-Americans only as strikebreakers, and unions blocked them from entire trades reserved for whites, such as pipe fitters or plumbers. City inspectors would refuse to sign off on the work of black electricians. A factory in Milwaukee turned away black men seeking jobs as they walked toward the front gate. In New York and Philadelphia, black people were long denied licenses merely to drive carts.

“Every avenue for improvement was closed against him,” wrote William A. Sinclair, author of a history of slavery and its aftermath, of the fate of the subordinate-caste man.

There were exceptions—those select enslaved people, often the children of slaveholders, who were permitted to serve as carpenters or blacksmiths or in other trades as would be required on large plantations like Thomas Jefferson's at Monticello.

Even in India, where there are thousands of castes within castes, within the four main *varnas*, “no one occupation has but one caste assigned to it,” wrote the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis. “While in theory caste demands occupational specialization, in practice even the most ideally organized of the several castes, the Brahmans, have a great variety of occupations.” The French anthropologist and philosopher Célestin Bouglé wrote that, in the Indian caste system, “one can distinguish six merchant castes, three of scribes, forty of peasants, twenty-four of journeymen, nine of shepherds and hunters, fourteen of fishermen and sailors, twelve of various kinds of artisans, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths and potters, thirteen of weavers, thirteen of distillers, eleven of house servants.”

Thus, the caste lines in America may have at one time been even starker than those in India. In 1890, “85 percent of black men and 96 percent of black women were employed in just two occupational categories,” wrote

the sociologist Stephen Steinberg, “agriculture and domestic or personal service.” Forty years later, as the Depression set in and as African-Americans moved to northern cities, the percentages of black people at the bottom of the labor hierarchy remained the same, though, by then, nearly half of black men were doing manual labor that called merely for a strong back. Only 5 percent were listed as white-collar workers—many of them ministers, teachers, and small business owners who catered to other black people.

North and south, the status of African-Americans was so well understood that people in the dominant caste were loath to perform duties they perceived as beneath their station. A British tourist in the 1810s noted that white Americans well knew which tasks were seen as befitting only black people. White paupers in Ohio, “refused to carry water for their own use,” wrote the historian David R. Roediger, “for fear of being considered ‘like slaves.’”

The historic association between menial labor and blackness served to further entrap black people in a circle of subservience in the American mind. They were punished for being in the condition that they were forced to endure. And the image of servitude shadowed them into freedom.

As the caste system shape-shifted in the twentieth century, the dominant caste found ever more elaborate ways to enforce occupational hierarchy. “If white and colored persons are employed together,” wrote the historian Bertram Doyle in the 1930s, “they do not engage in the same tasks, generally, and certainly not as equals....Negroes are seldom, if ever, put into authority over white persons. Moreover, the Negro expects to remain in the lower ranks; rising, if at all, only over other Negroes.” No matter how well he does his job, Doyle wrote, “he cannot often hope for promotion.”

Your place was preordained before you were born. “A Negro may become a locomotive fireman,” Doyle wrote, “but never an engineer.”

Thus, caste did not mean merely doing a certain kind of labor; it meant performing a dominant or subservient role. “There must be, then, a division of labor where the two races are employed, and menial labor is commonly supposed to be the division assigned to Negroes,” Doyle wrote, “and he must look and act the part.”

A black man in the 1930s was on his way to pay a visit to a young woman he fancied, which occasioned him to go into the town square. There, some white men approached him and “forced him to procure overalls, saying he was ‘too dressed up for a weekday.’”

Slavery set the artificial parameters for the roles each caste was to perform, and the only job beyond the plow or the kitchen that the caste system openly encouraged of the lowest caste was that of entertainment, which was its own form of servitude in that world. It was in keeping with caste notions of their performing for the pleasure of the dominant caste. It affirmed the stereotypes of innate black physicality, of an earthiness based on animal instinct rather than human creativity and it presented no threat to dominant-caste supremacy in leadership and intellect.

Making enslaved people perform on command also reinforced their subjugation. They were made to sing despite their exhaustion or the agonies from a recent flogging or risk further punishment. Forced good cheer became a weapon of submission to assuage the guilt of the dominant caste and further humiliate the enslaved. If they were in chains and happy, how could anyone say that they were being mistreated? Merriment, even if extracted from a whip, was seen as essential to confirm that the caste structure was sound, that all was well, that everyone accepted, even embraced their station in the hierarchy. They were thus forced to cosign on their own degradation, to sing and dance even as they were being separated from spouses or children or parents at auction. “This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy,” wrote William Wells Brown, a speculator’s assistant before the Civil War, whose job it was to get the human merchandise into sellable condition. “I have often set them to dancing,” he said, “when their cheeks were wet with tears.”

African-Americans would later convert the performance role that they were forced to occupy—and the talent they built from it—into prominence in entertainment and in American culture disproportionate to their numbers. Since the early twentieth century, the wealthiest African-Americans—from Louis Armstrong to Muhammad Ali—have traditionally been entertainers and athletes. Even now, in a 2020 ranking of the richest African-Americans, seventeen of the top twenty—from Oprah Winfrey to Jay-Z to Michael

Jordan—made their wealth as innovators, and then moguls, in the entertainment industry or in sports.

Historically, this group would come to dominate the realm carved out for them, often celebrated unless they went head to head against an upper-caste person, as did the black boxer Jack Johnson when he unexpectedly knocked out James Jeffries in 1910. The writer Jack London had coaxed Jeffries out of retirement to fight Johnson in an era of virulent race hatred, and the press stoked passions by calling Jeffries “the Great White Hope.” Jeffries’s loss on that Fourth of July was an affront to white supremacy, and triggered riots across the country, north and south, including eleven separate ones in New York City, where whites set fire to black neighborhoods and tried to lynch two black men over the defeat. The message was that, even in an arena into which the lowest caste had been permitted, they were to know and remain in their place.

For centuries, enslaved people had been ordered to perform at the whim of the master, either to be mocked in the master’s parlor games or to play music for their balls, in addition to their hard labors in the field. “Menial and comic roles were the chief ones allotted to Negroes in their relationships with white people,” wrote the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis of slavery-based caste relations that worked their way into American culture.

The caste system took comfort in black caricature as it upheld the mythology of a simple, court jester race whose jolly natures shielded them from any true suffering. The images soothed the conscience and justified atrocities. And thus minstrelsy, in which white actors put burnt cork on their faces and mocked the subordinate caste, became a popular entertainment as the Jim Crow regime hardened after slavery ended. Whites continued the practice at fraternity parties and talent shows and Halloween festivities well into the twenty-first century.

At the same time, black entertainers have long been rewarded and often restricted to roles that adhere to caste stereotype. The first African-American to win an Academy Award, Hattie McDaniel, was commended for her role as Mammy, a solicitous and obesely desexed counterpoint to Scarlett O’Hara, the feminine ideal, in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*.

The Mammy character was more devoted to her white family than to her own, willing to fight black soldiers to protect her white enslaver.

That trope became a comforting staple in film portrayals of slavery, but it was an ahistorical figment of caste imagination. Under slavery, most black women were thin, gaunt even, due to the meager rations provided them, and few worked inside a house, as they were considered more valuable in the field. Yet the rotund and cheerful slave or maidservant was what the dominant caste preferred to see, and McDaniel and other black actresses of the era found that those were the only roles they could get. Because many of these women had been raised in the North or the West, they knew little of the southern Negro vernacular that scripts called for and had to learn how to speak in the exaggerated, at times farcical, way that Hollywood directors imagined that black people talked.

This mainstream derision belies the serious history of arbitrary abuse of African-Americans under slavery when their degradation was entertainment for the dominant caste. In one case, two planters in South Carolina were dining together at one of their plantations. The two were passing the time, discussing their slaves and debating whether the slaves had the capacity for genuine religious faith. The visiting planter said he didn't much believe they did.

The planter who was hosting begged to differ.

"I have a slave who I believe would rather die than deny his Saviour," he said.

The guest ridiculed the host and challenged him to prove it. So the host summoned an enslaved man of his and ordered him to deny his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The enslaved man affirmed his faith in Jesus and pleaded to be excused. The master, seeking to drive home his point to the fellow slaveowner, kept asking the man to deny Jesus, and the man, as expected, kept declaring his faith. The host then whipped the enslaved man, now for disobedience, and continued to whip him, the whip cord cutting to bone. The enslaved man of faith "died in consequence of this severe infliction."

Similarly, soldiers of the Third Reich used weakened and malnourished Jewish prisoners for entertainment. An SS squad leader, who oversaw the construction of the firing range at Sachsenhausen, forced prisoners to jump and turn like dancing bears around a shovel for his amusement. One of

them refused to dance and, for this, the SS squad leader took the shovel and beat him to death with it.

Every act, every gesture, was calculated for the purpose of reminding the subordinate caste, in these otherwise unrelated caste systems, of the dominant caste's total reign over their very being. The upper caste, wrote the nineteenth-century author William Goodell, made "the claim of absolute proprietorship in the human soul itself."

Dehumanization and Stigma

Dehumanization is a standard component in the manufacture of an out-group against which to pit an in-group, and it is a monumental task. It is a war against truth, against what the eye can see and what the heart could feel if allowed to do so on its own.

To dehumanize another human being is not merely to declare that someone is not human, and it does not happen by accident. It is a process, a programming. It takes energy and reinforcement to deny what is self-evident in another member of one's own species.

It is harder to dehumanize a single person standing in front of you, wiping away tears at the loss of a loved one, just as you would, or wincing in pain from a fall as you would, laughing at an unexpected double entendre as you might. It is harder to dehumanize a single individual that you have gotten the chance to know. Which is why people and groups who seek power and division do not bother with dehumanizing an individual. Better to attach a stigma, a taint of pollution to an entire group.

Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. Dehumanize the group, and you have quarantined them from the masses you choose to elevate and have programmed everyone, even some of the targets of dehumanization, to no longer believe what their eyes can see, to no longer trust their own thoughts. Dehumanization distances not only the out-group from the in-group, but those in the in-group from their own humanity. It makes slaves to groupthink of everyone in the hierarchy. A caste system relies on

dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as reasonable.

Both Nazi Germany and the United States reduced their out-groups, Jews and African-Americans, respectively, to an undifferentiated mass of nameless, faceless scapegoats, the shock absorbers of the collective fears and setbacks of each nation. Germany blamed Jews for the loss of World War I, for the shame and economic straits that befell the country after its defeat, and the United States blamed African-Americans for many of its social ills. In both cases, individuals were lumped together for sharing a single, stigmatizing trait, made indistinct and indistinguishable in preparation for the exploitation and atrocities that would be inflicted upon them. Individuals were no longer individuals. Individuality, after all, is a luxury afforded the dominant caste. Individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatized.

We are sorrowfully aware of the monstrously swift murder of 6 million Jews and 5 million others during the Holocaust. What we may not be as familiar with are the circumstances leading up to that horror and the millions who suffered in the labor camps of the Third Reich, the process of dehumanization before any of those atrocities could be conducted and the interconnectedness not just of humanity but of evil within it.

Held hostage in labor camps in different centuries and an ocean apart, both Jews and African-Americans were subjected to a program of purposeful dehumanization. Upon their arrival at the concentration camps, Jews were stripped of the clothing and accoutrements of their former lives, of everything they had owned. Their heads were shaved, their distinguishing features of sideburns or mustaches or the crowns of lush hair, were deleted from them. They were no longer individuals, they were no longer personalities to consider, to engage with, to take into account.

During the morning and evening roll calls, they were forced to stand sometimes for hours into the night as the SS officers counted the thousands of them to check for any escapees. They stood in the freezing cold or summer heat in the same striped uniforms, with the same shorn heads, same sunken cheeks. They became a single mass of self-same bodies, purposely easier for SS officers to distance themselves from, to feel no human connection with. Loving fathers, headstrong nephews, beloved physicians,

dedicated watchmakers, rabbis, and piano tuners, all merged into a single mass of undifferentiated bodies that were no longer seen as humans deserving of empathy but as objects over whom they could exert total control and do whatever they wanted to. They were no longer people, they were numbers, a means to an end.

Upon their arrival at the auction blocks and labor camps of the American South, Africans were stripped of their given names and forced to respond to new ones, as would a dog to a new owner, often mocking names like Caesar or Samson or Dred. They were stripped of their past lives and identities as Yoruba or Asante or Igbo, as the son of a fisherman, nephew of the village priest, or daughter of a midwife. Decades afterward, Jews were stripped of their given and surnames and forced to memorize the prison numbers assigned them in the concentration camps. Millennia ago, the Untouchables of India were assigned surnames that identified them by the lowly work they performed, forcing them to announce their degradation every time they introduced themselves, while the Brahmins, many quite literally, carried the names of the gods.

In the two more modern caste systems, at labor camps in central and eastern Europe and in the American South, well-fed captors forced their hostages to do the heaviest work of inhuman exertion, while withholding food from those whose labors enriched the captors, providing barely enough to sustain the human metabolism, the bare minimum for human subsistence. The Nazis approached human deprivation as a science. They calculated the number of calories required for a certain task, say, chopping down trees and digging up stumps, and fed those laborers one or two hundred calories fewer as a cost savings and to keep them too weak to fight back as they slowly starved to death.

Southern planters provided their African captives, who were doing the hardest labor in the hierarchy, the least nutrients of anyone on the plantation. Both groups were rarely allowed protein, restricted to feed rather than food, some taunted with the extravagance of their captors' multi-course feasts.

They were under the complete control and at the whim of their captors who took every chance to reassert their debasement. Jews were given prison uniforms of coarse fabric in sizes that were purposely too big or too small.

Enslaved African-Americans were allotted garments of coarse gray cloth, a cross between an “undergarment and an ordinary potato bag,” that was made “without regard to the size of the particular individual to whom it was allotted, like penitentiary uniforms.”

Beyond all of this, the point of a dehumanization campaign was the forced surrender of the target’s own humanity, a karmic theft beyond accounting. Whatever was considered a natural human reaction was disallowed for the subordinate caste. During the era of enslavement, they were forbidden to cry as their children were carried off, forced to sing as a wife or husband was sold away, never again to look into their eyes or hear their voice for as long as the two might live.

They were punished for the very responses a human being would be expected to have in the circumstances forced upon them. Whatever humanity shone through them was an affront to what the dominant caste kept telling itself. They were punished for being the humans that they could not help but be.

In India, Dalits, suffering the deprivations of their lowly status, were nonetheless beaten to death if ever they stole food for the sustenance denied them. As with African-Americans during the time of enslavement, it was a crime for Dalits to learn to read and write, “punishable by cutting off their tongue or by pouring molten lead into the ear of the offender,” wrote V. T. Rajshekar, editor of *Dalit Voice*.

In the United States, African-Americans, denied pay for their labors during slavery and barely paid afterward in the twentieth century, were whipped or lynched for stealing food, for the accusation of stealing seventy-five cents, for trying to stand up for themselves or appearing to question a person in the dominant caste. In Nazi labor camps, one of the many cruel details a prisoner could be assigned was to work in the bakery. There, day in and day out, starving captives, forced to subsist on rations of watery nettle or beet soup, kneaded and baked the breads and pastries for their SS tormenters. They were surrounded by the scent of fresh-rising dough but risked a beating or worse if caught taking a crust of bread.

In America, slave auctions became public showcases for the dehumanization project of caste-making. As the most valuable liquid assets in the land, combined, worth more than land itself, enslaved people were

ordered to put on a cheery face to bring a higher profit to the dominant-caste sellers who were breaking up their families. Women were forced to disrobe before the crowd, to submit to hours of physical probing by roughhousing men who examined their teeth, their hands, or whatever other parts of their bodies the potential bidders decided to inspect. Their bodies did not belong to them but to the dominant caste to do whatever it wished and however it wished to do it. At auction, they were to answer any question put to them with “a smiling, cheerful countenance” or be given thirty lashes for not selling themselves well enough to the seller’s satisfaction.

“When spoken to, they must reply quickly and with a smile on their lips,” recalled John Brown, a survivor of slavery, who was sold away from his own mother and subjected to these scenes many times thereafter. “Here may be seen husbands separated from their wives, only by the width of the room, and children from their parents, one or both, witnessing the driving of the bargain that is to tear them asunder for ever, yet not a word of lamentation or anguish must escape from them; nor when the deed is consummated, dare they bid one another good-bye, or take one last embrace.”



In the United States, there developed two parallel worlds existing on the same plane with flagrant double standards to emphasize the purposeful injustices built into the system. Presaging the disparities that led to mass incarceration in our era, the abolitionist minister William Goodell observed the quandary of black people in antebellum America. “He is accounted criminal for acts which are deemed innocent in others,” Goodell wrote in 1853, “punished with a severity from which all others are exempted. He is under the control of the law, though unprotected by the law, and can know law only as an enemy.”

In Virginia, there were seventy-one offenses that carried the death penalty for enslaved people but only imprisonment when committed by whites, such as stealing a horse or setting fire to bales of grain. Something as ordinary to most humans as a father helping a son with his lessons was

prohibited. A black father in Georgia could “be flogged for teaching his own child” to read. Free black people were forbidden to carry firearms, testify against a white person, or raise a hand against one even in self-defense.

“Richmond required that Negroes and mulattoes must step aside when whites passed by, and barred them from riding in carriages except in the capacity of menials,” the historian Kenneth Stampp wrote. “Charleston slaves could not swear, smoke, walk with a cane, assemble at military parades, or make joyful demonstrations.”

Just as enslaved and malnourished Africans had to drain the swamps, chop down the trees, clear the land to build the plantations and infrastructure of the South, the starving captives of the Third Reich had to drain the swamps, chop down the trees, dig up the tree roots, carry the logs to build the infrastructure of their torment. They worked the clay pits and quarries to make bricks for the Reich. Under both regimes, the hostages built the walls that would imprison them and often died as they did so.

Each day during the early years of Nazi expansion, some two thousand prisoners were marched through the village of Oranienburg, north of Berlin, over the canal bridge, from the concentration camp to the clay pits, and would often return that evening with a cart filled with the people who had died of exhaustion or had been killed that day.



At the depths of their dehumanization, both Jews and African-Americans were subjected to gruesome medical experimentation at the hands of dominant-caste physicians. In addition to the horrifying torture of twins, German scientists and SS doctors conducted more than two dozen types of experiments on Jews and others they held captive, such as infecting their victims with mustard gas and testing the outer limits of hypothermia.

In the United States, from slavery well into the twentieth century, doctors used African-Americans as a supply chain for experimentation, as subjects deprived of either consent or anesthesia. Scientists injected plutonium into them, purposely let diseases like syphilis go untreated to observe the effects, perfected the typhoid vaccine on their bodies, and

subjected them to whatever agonizing experiments came to the doctors' minds.

These amounted to unchecked assaults on human beings. One plantation doctor, according to the medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington in her groundbreaking book *Medical Apartheid*, made incisions into a black baby's head to test a theory for curing seizures. The doctor opened the baby's skull with cobbler's tools, puncturing the scalp, as he would later report, "with the point of a crooked awl."

That doctor, James Marion Sims, would later be heralded as the founding father of gynecology. He came to his discoveries by acquiring enslaved women in Alabama and conducting savage surgeries that often ended in disfigurement or death. He refused to administer anesthesia, saying vaginal surgery on them was "not painful enough to justify the trouble." Instead, he administered morphine only after surgery, noting that it "relieves the scalding of the urine," and, as Washington writes, "weakened the will to resist repeated procedures."

A Louisiana surgeon perfected the cesarean section by experimenting on the enslaved women he had access to in the 1830s. Others later learned how to remove ovaries and bladder stones. They performed these slave cabin experiments in search of breakthroughs for their white patients who would one day undergo surgery in hospitals and under the available anesthesia.

Their total control over black bodies gave them unfettered access to the anatomy of live subjects that would otherwise be closed to them. Sims, for example, would force a woman to disrobe and get on her knees on a table. He would then allow other doctors to take turns with the speculum to force her open, and invite leading men in town and apprentices in to see for themselves. He later wrote, "I saw everything as no man had seen before."

We would all like to believe that we would resist the impulse to inflict such horror on fellow members of our own species, and some of us very likely would. But not as many as we might like to believe.

In a famous though controversial 1963 study of people's threshold for violence when ordered to inflict it, college students were told to administer

electric shocks to a person in an adjoining room. The people “receiving” the shocks were unharmed but yelled out and banged on the walls as the intensity of the shocks increased. The conductor of the study, the psychologist Stanley Milgram, found that a majority of participants, two out of three, “could be induced to deliver the maximal voltage to an innocent suffering subject,” wrote the scholar David Livingstone Smith, who specializes in the study of dehumanization.

In a similar experiment, conducted at Stanford University in 1975, the participants did not have to be ordered to deliver the shocks. They needed only to overhear a single negative comment about the students facing potential punishment. The participants were led to believe that students from another college were arriving for a joint project. Some participants overheard the experimenters, presumably by accident, make neutral or humanizing comments about the visiting students (that they seemed “nice”). Other participants heard dehumanizing comments (that they seemed like “animals”). Participants gave the dehumanized people twice the punishment of the humanized ones and significantly more than those they knew absolutely nothing about. The participants were willing to go to maximum intensity on the dehumanized group.

“Dehumanization is a joint creation of biology, culture and the architecture of the human mind,” Smith wrote. “The human story is filled with pain and tragedy, but among the horrors that we have perpetrated on one another, the persecution and attempted extermination of the Jewish people, the brutal enslavement of Africans, and the destruction of Native American civilizations in many respects are unparalleled.”



In America, a culture of cruelty crept into the minds, made violence and mockery seem mundane and amusing, built as it was into the games of chance at carnivals and county fairs well into the twentieth century. These things built up the immune system against empathy. There was an attraction called the “Coon Dip,” in which fairgoers hurled “projectiles at live African Americans.” There was the “Bean-em,” in which children flung beanbags at

grotesquely caricatured black faces, whose images alone taught the lesson of caste without a word needing to be spoken.

And enthusiasts lined up to try their luck at the “Son of Ham” shows at Coney Island or Kansas City or out in California, “in which white men paid for the pleasure of hurling baseballs at the head of a black man,” Smith wrote.

A certain kind of violence was part of an unspoken curriculum for generations of children in the dominant caste. “White culture desensitized children to racial violence,” wrote the historian Kristina DuRocher, “so they could perpetuate it themselves one day.”

Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control

The only way to keep an entire group of sentient beings in an artificially fixed place, beneath all others and beneath their own talents, is with violence and terror, psychological and physical, to preempt resistance before it can be imagined. Evil asks little of the dominant caste other than to sit back and do nothing. All that it needs from bystanders is their silent complicity in the evil committed on their behalf, though a caste system will protect, and perhaps even reward, those who deign to join in the terror.

Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe, African-Americans in the antebellum and Jim Crow South, and Dalits in India were all at the mercy of people who had been fed a diet of contempt and hate for them, and had incentive to try to prove their superiority by joining in or acquiescing to cruelties against their fellow humans.

Above all, the people in the subordinate caste were to be reminded of the absolute power the dominant caste held over them. In both America and in Germany, people in the dominant caste whipped and hanged their hostages for random and capricious breaches of caste, punished them for the natural human responses to the injustice they were being subjected to. In America, “the whip was the most common instrument of punishment,” the historian Kenneth Stamp wrote. “Nearly every slaveholder used it, and few grown slaves escaped it entirely.”

In Germany, the Nazis forced and strapped Jews and political prisoners onto a wooden board to be flogged for minor infractions like rolling

cigarettes from leaves they gathered or killing rats to augment their bare rations. The captives were forced to count out each lash as it was inflicted upon them. The Nazis claimed a limit of twenty-five lashes, but would play mind games by claiming that the victim had not counted correctly, then extend the torture even longer. The Americans went to as many as four hundred lashes, torture that amounted to murder, with several men, growing exhausted from the physical exertion it required, taking turns with the whip.

In the New World, few living creatures were, as a class of beings, subjected to the level of brute physical assault as a feature of their daily lives for as many centuries as were the subjects of American slavery. It was so commonplace that some overseers, upon arriving at a new plantation, summarily chose “to whip every hand on the plantation to let them know who was in command,” Stamp wrote. “Some used it as incentive by flogging the last slave out of the cabin in the morning. Many used it to ‘break in’ a young slave and to ‘break the spirit’ of an insubordinate older one.”

A teenager endured a whipping that went on for so long, he passed out in the middle of it. “He woke up vomiting,” the historian Edward Baptist recounted. “They were still beating him. He slipped into darkness again.”

One enslaver remarked “that he was no better pleased than when he could hear...the sound of the driver’s lash among the toiling slaves,” for then, Baptist wrote, “he knew his system was working.”



Human history is rife with examples of inconceivable violence, and as Americans, we like to think of our country as being far beyond the guillotines of medieval Europe or the reign of the Huns. And yet it was here that “Native Americans were occasionally skinned and made into bridle reins,” wrote the scholar Charles Mills. Andrew Jackson, the U.S. president who oversaw the forced removal of indigenous people from their ancestral homelands during that Trail of Tears, used bridle reins of indigenous flesh when he went horseback riding. And it was here that, into the twentieth century, African-Americans were burned alive at the stake, as seventeen-

year-old Jesse Washington was in Waco, Texas, in 1916 before a crowd of thousands.

The crimes of homicide, of rape, and of assault and battery were felonies in the slavery era as they are today in any civil society. They were seen then as wrong, immoral, reprehensible, and worthy of the severest punishment. But the country allowed most any atrocity to be inflicted on the black body. Thus twelve generations of African-Americans faced the ever-present danger of assault and battery or worse, every day of their lives during the quarter millennium of enslavement.

Advertisements for runaways record a catalog of assaults upon them. A North Carolina enslaver took out an ad for the return of Betty and reported having burnt her “with a hot iron on the left side of her face; I tried to make the letter M.” A warden in Louisiana reported that he had just taken custody of a runaway and noted that “he has been lately gelded and is not yet well.” Another Louisianan reported his disgust for a neighbor who had “castrated 3 men of his.”

An order from the justices went out in New Hanover County, North Carolina, in the search of a runaway named London, granting that “any person may KILL and DESTROY the said slave by such means as he or they may think fit.” This casual disregard for black life and the deputizing of any citizen to take that life would become a harbinger of the low value accorded African-Americans in the police and vigilante shootings of unarmed black citizens that continued into the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Some argue in hindsight that people who were enslaved were seen as too valuable to be hurt or killed. That argument disregards the many instances of humans trashing their own property, of absentee slumlords who get by with the least maintenance of their buildings, for example, with often catastrophic consequences. But more important, it misinterprets violence as merely damage to one’s property, presumably rare and against the interest of the “owner,” when it was actually a terror mechanism that was part of the regular maintenance of an unnatural institution, part of the calculus of American slavery. A Louisiana planter once left his plantation in the care of an overseer and staff. Upon returning after a year’s absence, the planter discovered the overseer and his men had beaten and starved the enslaved

people while the planter was away and that his inventory had shrunk. On that one family plantation, “at least twelve slaves had died at the overseer’s hands,” Stamp wrote. The planter would have to factor that “loss” into the cost of doing business.

Nazi Germany and the American South devised shockingly similar means of punishment to instill terror in the subordinate caste. Hostages in Nazi labor camps were subjected to public hangings, in front of a full assemblage of camp prisoners, for any minor offense or merely to remind the survivors of the power of their captors. In the special prisons inside the concentration camps, there stood a lynching post designed to draw out the agony of the captive being killed. Across the ocean, in the same era, lynchings, preceded by mutilation, were a feature of the southern landscape.

Both the Germans in the Nazi era and the descendants of the Confederacy used ritualized torture for arbitrary infractions, some as minor as stealing shoes or pocket change or, in the case of the American South, for acting out of one’s place.

It was during the era of enslavement that Americans in the South devised a range of horrors to keep human beings in the unnatural state of perpetual, generational imprisonment. Fourteen-pound chains and metal horns radiating two or three feet from the skull were locked onto the heads of people who tried to escape. Slave pens had flogging rooms in the attics where rows of wooden cleats for the reaving cords were screwed into the floor to tie people down for their floggings for “not speaking up and looking bright and smart” to their potential buyers. “Every day there was flogging going on,” wrote John Brown, a survivor of slavery.

The tortures were elaborate enough to be given names. One was called “bucking,” in which the person was stripped naked, hands and feet tied, forced into a sitting position around a stake and rotated for three hours of flogging with a cowhide, as other enslaved people were forced to watch. The person was then washed down with salt and red pepper. An enslaved man named John Glasgow was punished in this way for having slipped away to see his wife on another plantation. Then there was “the picket,”

which involved iron cleats, pulleys, and cords that formed a gallows, along the crossbeam of a whipping post, and the sharp end of a stake. John Glasgow suffered this, too, after attempting to see his wife again. His fellow captives were made to take turns whipping him or face the same punishment themselves. “He was left to die or recover, as might be,” Brown said. “It was a month before he stirred from his plank, five months more elapsed ere he could walk. Ever after he had a limp in his gait.”

After slavery ended, the former Confederates took power again, but now without the least material investment in the lives of the people they once had owned. They pressed down even harder to keep the lowest caste in its place. African-Americans were mutilated and hanged from poplars and sycamores and burned at the courthouse square, a lynching every three or four days in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

A slaveholder in North Carolina seemed to speak for the enforcers of caste throughout the world. “Make them stand in fear,” she said.



The dominant caste demonstrated its power by forcing captives to perform some of the more loathsome duties connected to the violence against their fellow captives. People in the upper caste did not often trouble themselves with the dirty work, unless specifically hired for the job of enforcement, as were the plantation overseers in the American South. It was caste privilege to order the lowest caste to do their bidding and dirty work.

It was part of the psychological degradation that reinforced one’s own stigma and utter subjugation, so dominated that they were left with little choice but to cooperate if they were to save themselves for one more day. The Nazis in Germany and the planters in the authoritarian South sowed dissension among the subordinate caste by creating a hierarchy among the captives, rewarding those who identified more with the oppressor rather than the oppressed and who would report back to them any plots of escape or uprising. They would select a captive they felt they could control and elevate that person above the others.

In Nazi labor camps, it was the *kapo*, the head Jew in each hut of captives, whose job it was to get everyone up by five in the morning and to

exact discipline. In exchange, he would get a bunk of his own or other meager privileges. In the American South, it was the slave driver, the head Negro, who served this role, setting the pace for the work at hand and elevated with the task of watching over the others and disciplining them when called to do so.

The dominant caste often forced its captives to exact punishment on one another or to dispose of the victims as their tormenters watched. In Nazi Germany, the SS guards were not the ones who put the prisoners into the ovens. The captives were forced into that grim detail. It was not the SS who collected the bodies of the people who had died the night before. That was left to the captives. In the American South, black men were made to whip their fellow slaves or to hold down the legs and arms of the man, woman, or child being flogged. Later, when lynchings were the primary means of terror, it was the people who had done the lynching who told the family of the victim or the black undertaker when they would be permitted to take down what was left of the body from the lynching tree.



One day in the mid-eighteenth century, an elder of the Presbyterian Church was passing through a piece of timbered land in a slaving province of the American South when he heard what he called “a sound as of murder.” He rode in that direction and discovered “a naked black man, hung to the limb of a tree by his hands, his feet chained together and a pine rail laid with one end on the chain, between his legs, and the other upon the ground to steady him.” The overseer had administered four hundred lashes on the man’s body. “The miserably lacerated slave was then taken down and put to the care of a physician,” the Presbyterian elder said.

The elder asked the overseer, one of the men who had inflicted this upon another human being, “the offence for which all this was done.” He was told that the enslaved man had made a comment that was seen as beyond his station. It began when the owner said that the rows of corn the enslaved man had planted were uneven. The enslaved man offered his opinion. “Massa, much corn grow on a crooked row as a straight one,” the enslaved man replied. For that, he was flogged to the brink of death.

“This was it, this was enough,” the Presbyterian elder said. The overseer boasted of his skill in managing the master’s property. The enslaved man “was submitted to him, and treated as above.”

A century later, slavery was over, but the rules, and the consequences for breaking them, were little changed. A young white anthropologist from Yale University, John Dollard, went south to the Mississippi Delta in 1935 for his research into the Jim Crow caste system. He noticed how subservient the black people were, stepping aside for him, taking their hats off, and calling him “sir” even if they were decades older.

One day he was out riding with some other white men, southern white men, who were checking out some black sharecroppers. The black people were reluctant to come out of their cabins when the car with the white men pulled up. The driver had some fun with it, told the sharecroppers he was not going to hang them. Later, Dollard mentioned to the man that “the Negroes seem to be very polite around here.”

The man let out a laugh. “They have to be.”

Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority

The Hollywood still is from a 1930s movie released during the depths of the Jim Crow era. A black woman, ample in frame and plain of face, wears a headscarf and servant's uniform. Her arms are wrapped around a white woman, slender, cherubic, and childlike, her golden hair and porcelain, air-brushed skin pops against the purposely unadorned darkness of the black woman. When they begin to speak, the dark woman will utter backward syllables of servility and ignorance. The porcelain woman will speak with the mannered refinement of the upper caste. The fragile frame of Mary Pickford is in direct contrast to the heft of Louise Beavers in a set piece of caste played out in a thousand films and images in America, implanting into our minds the inherent superiority in beauty, deservedness, and intellect of one group over another.

As it happens, the black actress, Louise Beavers, was nothing like the image she was given little option but to play. She grew up in California and had to learn and to master the broken dialect of southern field hands and servants. She was frequently under stress in the narrow box she was confined to, which led her to lose weight on set. The filmmakers made her attach padding to her already full frame, to ensure that she contrasted all the more with the waifish white ingenues who were the stars of whatever film she was in.

Beneath each pillar of caste was the presumption and continual reminder of the inborn superiority of the dominant caste and the inherent inferiority of the subordinate. It was not enough that the designated groups be

separated for reasons of “pollution” or that they not intermarry or that the lowest people suffer due to some religious curse, but that it must be understood in every interaction that one group was superior and inherently deserving of the best in a given society and that those who were deemed lowest were deserving of their plight.

For the lowest-caste person, “his unquestioned inferiority had to be established,” wrote the anthropologists Audrey and Brian Smedley, and that alleged inferiority would become the “basis for his allocation to permanent servile status.”

At every turn, the caste system drilled into the people under its spell the deference due those born to the upper caste and the degradation befitting the subordinate caste. This required signs and symbols and customs to elevate the upper caste and to demean those assigned to the bottom, in small and large ways and in everyday encounters.

“He must be held subject, like other domestic animals,” observed the nineteenth-century abolitionist William Goodell, “to the superior race holding dominion over him.”

African-Americans during the century of the Jim Crow regime and Jews during the murderous twelve years of the Third Reich were often prohibited from sidewalks and were forced instead to give way to the dominant caste or to walk in the gutter as a reminder of their degraded station.

“If a Negro, man or woman, met a white person on the street in Richmond, Virginia,” for example, wrote the historian Bertram Doyle, they were “required to ‘give the wall,’ and if necessary to get off the sidewalk into the street, on pain of punishment with stripes on the bare back.”

During the height of the caste systems in America, in India, and in the Third Reich, the lowest caste was not permitted to bear the symbols of success and status reserved for the upper caste. They were not to be dressed better than the upper caste, not to drive better cars than the upper caste, not to have homes more extravagant than the upper caste should they manage to secure them.

In India, the caste system dictated the length and folds of a Dalit woman’s saris. Dalits were not to wear the clothing or jewelry of upper-

caste people but rather tattered, rougher clothing as the “marks of their inferiority.”

In America, the South Carolina Negro Code of 1735 went so far as to specify the fabrics enslaved black people were permitted to wear, forbidding any that might be seen as above their station. They were banned from wearing “any sort of garment or apparel whatsoever, finer, other or of greater value than Negro cloth, duffels, coarse kerseys, osnabrigs, blue linen, check linen, or coarse garlix, or calicoes,” the cheapest, roughest fabrics available to the colony. Two hundred years later, the spirit of that law was still in force as African-American soldiers were set upon and killed for wearing their army uniforms.

In Germany, one of the characteristics that enraged the Nazis was the wealth and success of German Jews and any public display of it. Late in the Second World War, a young Jewish woman in Berlin had on a fur coat when the Gestapo rounded her and others up and shoved them onto cattle cars to the concentration camps. Upon arrival, the SS were incensed to see a Jewish woman in fur that their wives could likely not afford, and, out of hatred, forced her into the camp’s pigsty and rolled her in her fur coat, over and over, in the icy muck, leaving her to die in the bitter cold. But this was just days before the Allied forces reached them, and this was how she survived, eating the food scraps thrown into the sty. She huddled beside the pigs and stayed warm until liberation.



From the beginning, the power of caste and the superior status of the dominant group was perhaps never clearer than when the person deemed superior was unquestionably not. Given that intelligence is distributed in relatively similar proportions among individuals in any subset, it was a special form of human abuse that everyone in a particular group, regardless of intellect, morality, ethics, or humaneness, was automatically accorded control over everyone in another group, regardless of their gifts.

The historian Kenneth Stampp described the arbitrary nature of life for enslaved people in the caste system, the terrifying forced submission to individuals who were unfit for absolute power over the life and death of

another. “They were owned by a woman ‘unable to read or write,’” Stamp wrote, “‘scarcely able to count to ten,’ legally incompetent to contract marriage,” and yet had to submit to her sovereignty, depend upon her for their next breath. They were owned by “drunkards, such as Lilburne Lewis, of Livingston County, Kentucky, who once chopped a slave to bits with an ax,” Stamp wrote; “and by sadists, such as Madame Lalaurie, of New Orleans, who tortured her slaves for her own amusement.”

In order to survive, “they were to give way to the most wretched white man,” observed *The Farmers’ Register* of 1834.

For much of the time that African-Americans have been in this land, they have had to find ways to stay alive in a structure that required total submission, a close reading of their betters and the performance of that submission in order to avoid savage punishment. “They must obey at all times, and under all circumstances, cheerfully and with alacrity,” said a Virginia slaveholder. They had to adjust themselves to the shifting and arbitrary demands of whatever dominant person they happened to be encountering in that moment.

This created a nerve-jangling existence, given that “any number of acts,” according to a North Carolina judge during the time of slavery, could be read as “insolence,” whether it was “a look, the pointing of a finger, a refusal or neglect to step out of the way when a white person is seen to approach.”

To these, the nineteenth-century orator Frederick Douglass added the following gestures that could incite white rage and violence. “In the tone of an answer,” Douglass wrote, “in answering at all; in not answering; in the expression of countenance; in the motion of the head; in the gait, manner and bearing.” Any one of these, “if tolerated, would destroy that subordination, upon which our social system rests,” the North Carolina judge said.

This code extended for generations. Years after the Nazis were defeated across the Atlantic, African-Americans were still being brutalized for the least appearance of stepping out of their place. Planters routinely whipped their sharecroppers for “trivial offenses,” wrote Allison Davis and Burleigh and Mary Gardner in 1941. A planter in Mississippi said that, if his tenant “didn’t stop acting so big, the next time it would be the bullet or a rope.

That is the way to manage them when they get too big.” In 1948, a black tenant farmer in Louise, Mississippi, was severely beaten by two whites, wrote the historian James C. Cobb, “because he asked for a receipt after paying his water bill.”

The most trivial interaction had to be managed with ranking in mind. Well into the 1960s in the American South, the mere boarding of a public bus was a tightly choreographed affair devised for maximum humiliation and stigma to the lowest caste. Unlike dominant-caste passengers who climbed aboard, paid their bus fare, and took a seat, black passengers had to climb up, pay their fare, then get off the bus so as not to pollute or disturb the white section by walking through it. Having been forced to disembark after paying, they then had to run to the back door of the bus to board in the colored section. It was not uncommon for the bus to drive off before they could make it to the back door. The passengers who had the least room for error, the least resources to lose the benefit of the ticket they had paid for, the least cushion to weather a setback, would now be humiliated as the bus pulled off without them, now likely to arrive late for work, thus putting already tenuous jobs at further risk.

“The Negro occupies a position of inferiority and servility, of which he is constantly reminded when traveling, by restriction and by the attitudes of his white neighbors,” wrote the historian Bertram Doyle.

The laws and protocols kept them both apart and low. The greater the chasm, the easier to distance and degrade, the easier to justify any injustice or depravity.

“The human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety,” wrote the preeminent American scholar of caste, Gerald Berreman. “A description of caste which fails to convey this is a travesty.”

In the slaveholding South, some in the dominant caste grew so accustomed to the embedded superiority built into their days, and the brutality that it took to maintain it, that they wondered how they might manage in the afterlife. “Is it possible that any of my slaves could go to Heaven,” a dominant-caste woman in South Carolina asked her minister, “and I must see them there?”

A century after the slaveholder spoke those words, the caste system had survived and mutated, its pillars intact. America was fighting in World War II, and the public school district in Columbus, Ohio, decided to hold an essay contest, challenging students to consider the question “What to do with Hitler after the War?”

It was the spring of 1944, the same year that a black boy was forced to jump to his death, in front of his stricken father, over the Christmas card the boy had sent to a white girl at work. In that atmosphere, a sixteen-year-old African-American girl thought about what should befall Hitler. She won the student essay contest with a single sentence: “Put him in a black skin and let him live the rest of his life in America.”