



CASTE AND COMMUNITY

By. Ketterick Waddell

On January 6th, 2022 I boarded a charter bus with a gang of students and three professors from Temple University en route to the nation's capital, Washington, DC, as part of the "Rocking The World" study away program. For the week-long program, we read "Caste" by Isabel Wilkerson. "Caste" vividly and metaphorically weaves together a narrative which paints a digestible picture of how slavery in the United States, the Indian caste system, and the Holocaust took place in separate cultures and communities at different points in history. Yet still, they were cultivated by the same language, systems of oppression, and structures of power that exist in contemporary culture. The course enabled us to engage in dialogue that was simultaneously vulnerable and formative. In DC, we marched down the national mall and visited two museums relevant to "Caste" and the rhetoric that arose from the book; the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as the Holocaust Memorial Museum. The trip to DC and the museums we visited immersed us in the experiences and communities of the groups with whom we engaged in the program. We were also present in the city where the systemic and political forces that led to the oppression of these groups were cultivated. For this article, I spoke with the professors who led the program as well as with a few students to reflect on our experiences from the trip.

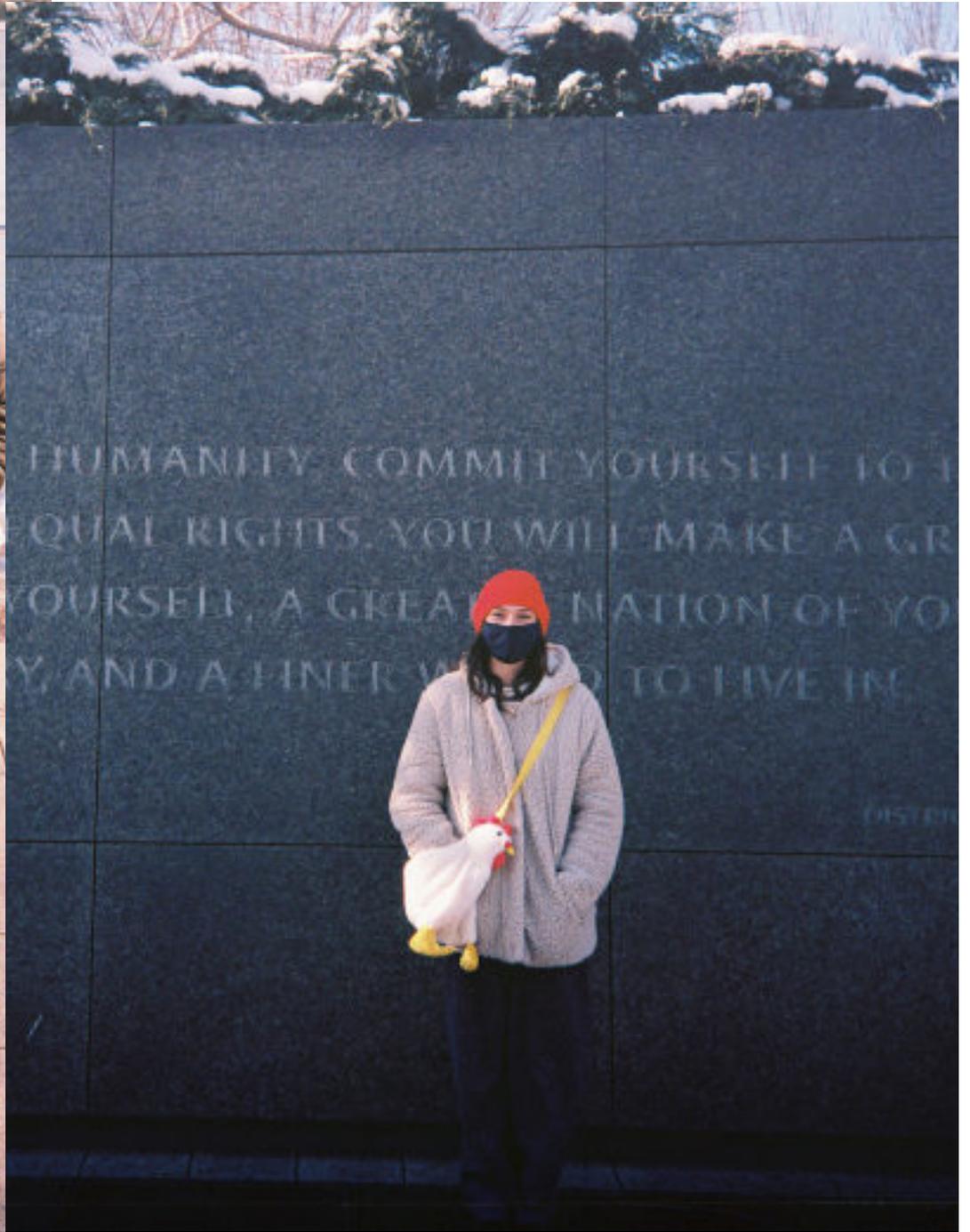




The program was led by Professor Dana Saewitz, Dr. Meghnaa Tallapragada, and Professor David Brown. These academics brought varying fields of studies with their backgrounds, along with their cultural identities that reflect the notion of caste which was at the focus of the program's dialogue. During the program, the professors shared with us personal accounts of how their identities and cultures connect to the book "Caste" and the program. In DC, we formed a community that was supportive of each other's physical and emotional journey as we confronted elements of caste from the past and present.

When I spoke with Professor Dana Saewitz on developing the program, she stated “I have been reading about the Holocaust all my life.” After a trip to Poland, she was inspired to teach a course on the Holocaust. After reading “Caste”, she felt the book would provide an amazing opportunity for a study away program in Washington, DC. She then reached out to Professor David Brown and together they reached out to Dr. Meghnaa Tallapragada to plan the program. Speaking on how he became involved with developing the program, Professor Brown stated after reading “Caste”, he felt compelled to share his insights with others as an African American communications professional. He also added on developing the program that “...it became clear to me that no one perspective could do it well. But the collaboration of our respective life journeys made it both easy and necessary for us to pursue this together.” Dr. Tallapragada shared similar sentiments in stating “I can’t imagine myself as one person teaching this program.” She also shared personal anecdotes regarding her relationship with the Indian Caste system when remarking on how her assumed identity and privilege relate to the systems we addressed in the program. She added “...no matter where you are in it, you can disrupt the system.” Their collective efforts to approach the course with intent and vulnerability aided in cultivating an enriching and validating atmosphere.





Our DC group was primarily composed of communications focused undergrads whose interests and backgrounds reflected a diverse array of perspectives. While visiting the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, I spoke with Mackenzie Kurtz about “Caste”. She stated “It definitely gave me a new perspective on my position in the caste system because I’ve learned that I’ve been lucky to be high enough in the caste system to the point that I didn’t know it exists until reading about it.” Later I spoke with Alex Akers regarding the book and trip, he stated that the experience provided new awareness to how he sees himself in the world. He added “Prior to the book and the trip, I never really considered my “role” in the caste system, but now I find myself with a new confidence and simultaneously a new fear of acting outside of my role.”

While reading quotes carved into the wall at the MLK Jr. Memorial, I spoke with Sean Driscoll on the influence of “Caste”. He stated, “I have been able to put language to more abstract concepts and understand how the caste system manifests in all of us.” He added “Part of my experience is my identity as a gay man. I feel strongly about the importance of intersectionality, especially in activism. This program inspired me to consider more creative and effective ways to disrupt.” Eva Davis added more insight in stating “[Caste] gave me some more perspective as to why some people hate one another, how and why some people stay in their own lane (perhaps too often), and the trip overall reaffirmed myself that there isn’t a specific way for anyone to act. The culture in America is so heavily influenced by media and it’s almost humorous to see how people act in real life because you can tell where they get their behavior from.”





During the trip, it was never lost on us that we were visiting DC a year after an insurrection that was led by supporters of the previous president. The presence of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic was also evident by the negative test results required to attend the trip and by closed exhibits at the museums we visited. Our group was present in the moment by supporting the mental and physical health of each other through our individual actions. On a day that was curtailed by museum closures due to a snow storm in the area, we chose instead to come together and reflect on what we were experiencing and learning instead of wandering aimlessly through the city. This opportunity for communal dialogue proved fruitful for all, especially amidst an academic climate where zoom meetings do not satiate us in the way in person engagement does. Our discourse traversed various topics including performative social media activism, weaponizing identity when speaking on social issues, the role of technology in the public sphere, and the absence of the government in supporting our mental and physical health during this pandemic. This formative conversation reflected the collective experiences we've shared over the last couple of years, as well as what needed to be discussed in order for us to address how we can collaboratively support and survive an unforeseen future.

In “Caste”, Isabel Wilkerson posits “You cannot solve anything that you do not admit exists, which could be why some people may not want to talk about it: it might get solved.” This point resonated with me as I walked the national mall and reflected on politicians who are dismissive of the January 6th insurrection, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. While their backgrounds and identity play a role in their incompetence, it is also their communities and culture that enable them. We exist in an oppressive American caste system, it is our communities and those we engage with daily who will actually educate, support, and validate our experiences going forward.

