

BUUF Racial Justice Ministry

Suggested Video of the Month – July 2021

Ken Burns & Isabel Wilkerson: In Conversation

Penny Stamps Distinguished Speaker Series, UM Stamps, University of Michigan, October 7, 2020. (video -- 1:23:01)

<https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/unum/playlist/wilkerson-burns#ken-burns-isabel-wilkerson-conversation>

Information about the video

This is a joint interview with Isabel Wilkerson and Ken Burns, moderated by Lynette Clemetson, a journalist at the University of Michigan. The interview brings together 2 well-known and insightful observers of America's past and present for a wide-ranging conversation that includes, among other topics, Covid-19, Civil War monuments, optimism, the Statue of Liberty, and the competing 1776 and 1619 Projects. The moderator uses clips from Burns' films and readings from Wilkerson's book to introduce several of the questions, resulting in long, thoughtful responses from both guests.

Several questions to consider and discuss with others

- Isabel Wilkerson opens *Caste* with an analogy comparing the US to an old house. Is this an apt analogy? In what ways does it fit? In what ways does it NOT fit?
- Ken Burns refers to "evergreen themes" in history that connect past to present. What value do you see in understanding these themes? What do we do with our new knowledge?
- Both guests express optimism for the future ("hopefulness" to Wilkerson). To what extent do you share their optimism? What is your sense of the future based on?
- Near the end of the interview, Ken Burns tells a story in which Frederick Douglass, near the end of his life (1895) is asked by a young man what he should do. Douglass' advice is to "agitate, agitate, agitate." What might this look like today?

Additional resources

- Terry Gross (2020). It's more than racism: Isabel Wilkerson explains America's "caste" system. Fresh Air, NPR (audio – 38:09). <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system>
- Krista Tippett (2020). This history is long: This history is deep. On Being (audio – 52:11). <https://onbeing.org/programs/isabel-wilkerson-this-history-is-long-this-history-is-deep/>
- Isabel Wilkerson (2020). America's "untouchables": The silent power of the caste system. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/28/untouchables-caste-system-us-race-martin-luther-king-india>
- Isabel Wilkerson (2020). America's enduring caste system. *The New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/magazine/isabel-wilkerson-caste.html>