

# Is Sociology Worth Saving? A Conversation with José Itzigsohn and Vilna Bashi

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity  
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**José Itzigsohn, Vilna Bashi,  
Freeden Blume Oeur, and Mo Torres**

## INTRODUCTION

*Conversations* is an occasional feature which brings people together to discuss urgent topics for the study of race and ethnicity. Freedden Blume Oeur and Mo Torres had a chance to speak with the leading scholars José Itzigsohn and Vilna Bashi on the state of the sociology of race and ethnicity today, and learned more about what they study and how they teach and mentor. Itzigsohn and Bashi reflect on challenging the mainstream of sociology, nurturing decolonial and other critical practices, creating networks of mutual care, reimagining what is possible, and whether sociology is worth saving at all. This conversation was edited slightly for length and clarity.

### **Freedden Blume Oeur**

How would you characterize the sociology of race and ethnicity today?

### **Vilna Bashi**

I'm really heartened by the conversations we're having supporting critical race studies, about decolonizing various parts of the discipline. It feels like people are galvanized because of the hard Right turn toward authoritarianism and even fascism. And I feel like we are responsive and thoughtful, but I still feel like we need to be even more critical because the turn is so hard Right. If you look at what's happening in Florida, what's

literally in the forefront is whether or not we're allowed to speak about certain things. That's the same thing that happened with the 1619 Project. Are you even allowed to say something that goes against erroneous common knowledge? So, I don't know. I'm feeling a little torn about the future, or rather where we are today and where we're pointing toward. There's a lot of good work, but I think there's still a lot of challenges out there. What do you say, Jose? Am I on the same track you are?

## PARTICIPANT BIOS

**Vilna Bashi** is the Osborn Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. Her scholarship theorizes about international migration, race and ethnicity, and the dynamics of hierarchical socioeconomic structures both domestically and internationally. Her books include *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fictions into Ethnic Factions* (2013). In 2020, she was recognized with the American Sociological Association's Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award for scholarship in service to social justice.

**José Itzigsohn** is a Professor of Sociology at Brown University. As a social theorist, his scholarship aims to help develop an antiracist and anticolonial Du Boisian sociology, with particular attention to global intersections of class and race in racial and colonial capitalism. He is the author (with Karida L. Brown) of *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line* (2020).

### José Itzigsohn

I'm close to your view. I was trying to think about this in a historical perspective. In 1990, James McKee published *Sociology and the Race Problem*, which was a scathing critique of the sociology of race and ethnicity. And it was right for that time. But I think that since then, starting in the 80s with Omi and Winant's *Racial Formations in the United States*, in the 90s with the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Joe Feagin, and up to today, really there has been a change and a large amount of very good work. I mean, including the work of Zakiya Luna and Whitney Pirtle on Black feminist sociology<sup>1</sup>; the work of Victor Ray on critical race theory; the work of Dan Hirschman and Laura Garbes on race and economic sociology; the work of Karida Brown on African American communities in Appalachia; and Ricarda Hammer's work linking race to colonialism and rethinking the history of modernity, colonialism, and race. And it's a huge change and a good change. I want to mention also the rise of Du Boisian sociology.

And I want to point out that in this change, *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* has played a very important role publishing really good papers, particularly bringing to light questions of Indigenous people and settler colonialism that were absent in sociology. I'm teaching sociology of race and ethnicity now and I'm teaching tomorrow an article from *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* by Dwanna McKay titled "Real Indians."<sup>2</sup> And I think that the work that the journal has done is fantastic. For me, today it's the best journal in sociology. On one hand, there has been all this work which has been in a sense reflecting and contributing to a change in how we see American history and American society, and on the other hand, there has been a reaction, and that's the history of American cultural politics. We have posed a powerful critique of how we see American history, how we see the American present. And there is a powerful reaction to that. And if we look historically as sociologists, in the American public sphere, these debates have not been linear. There has been a constant back and forth. And we are in a place, as Vilna suggested, where we may see a big backlash, and we need to be aware of that too. I'll just mention that I think it's very important that now the American Sociological Association (ASA) has a section on Indigenous People and Native Nations. Until recently, there was no research on Indigenous people, or the little research that it was, was in the frame of ethnicity, which was terrible. So that's among the good things I think have happened. But yes, I agree with Vilna, we are

seeing a backlash, and we can't predict how things are going to unfold.

### Blume Oeur

It sounds like you both agree that the study of race and ethnicity has advanced in important ways, but it could be more critical, as you mentioned, Vilna. And so what do you think as a field we can do to be more critical?

### Bashi

I echo what Jose said, just the idea that this journal is off the ground and so successful. It's really a welcome addition. First, I think, I actually do think we, and I include myself, we had a harder time getting the message out. I feel like that's the thing. All of the wonderful work Jose has mentioned, there wasn't a real . . . When I was coming up as a scholar, we had *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, which wasn't even published here. And it published wonderful work, but it did not have this frame. There was no place for critical scholars to convene in the same ways in print. And also I think there's a hunger for the work that we do, and getting it to the right people was hard. So this journal made it a lot easier. And the ASA Section for Racial and Ethnic Minorities has always been a home for me. Because academic spaces don't necessarily welcome critical voices—even if they're heard, they're certainly not in the forefront of what the discipline is doing. We're not understood to be mainstream. It seems to me that race and ethnicity is always a side conversation. Even if you want to say sociology is about race, class, and gender, everybody knows, and I've argued about this before, every new PhD has to know Marx but we're still fighting for ground for Du Boisian sociology, which again feels like home to me. So, I just think we have to continue to make space and fight to maintain the space of the voices and the success of the journal and the section as vibrant critical spaces. Those really need to be protected and fortified. And I think that's a start, but also just look at the way Du Boisian sociology has really revolutionized the way many of us think and think we need to teach. I'm gratified about that.

### Itzigsohn

Well, how will we move forward? I think there is a lot of people doing a lot of great work in related but different directions and not necessarily talking to each other. And Vilna was saying how these voices were not heard and how we are not in the mainstream. I think we need to generate more momentum for critical approaches within the discipline. I

used to say that the generalist journals are the journals that publish things that don't have to do with race, class, or gender. Articles that interested the general sociologists were those that didn't deal with the really important things. I think that's changing. I think that *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) and the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) are slowly becoming a little bit more open and realizing that you cannot say anything about anything without talking about race, class, and gender. But still it's just the beginning. And I think there are a lot of different directions of related research. And we all come from different places and with different paradigms, but with the same related interest in changing what is considered the mainstream or the right way of doing sociology. I think that as academics, we are trained to be very individualistic and to do our own projects and to carry our own individual agendas. And I think we need to talk much more and come to a shared understanding of the things that we would like to see and the change in the discipline so we can all push together for them and we can support each other in hirings, in promotions, and all that.

Freeden, you were at the event we did for Michael Burawoy a year and a half ago at Brown, in which I was talking about the idea of the united front, the popular front.<sup>3</sup> And that's what I think somehow needs to happen. We need to talk among the many people that are working with somehow different premises, but we are all interested in seeing some kind of change in what the "mainstream" is or what we consider to be sociology. And we need to come together to act in more concerted ways. It is just not enough for each of us to keep pushing our own agendas. Because the gatekeepers act in concerted ways in defense of the boundaries of the discipline as they understand it. They know what they want to keep out. And we should work together to push against the mainstream understanding of the discipline. I know that that's not very popular with academics because everyone is very focused on their own work. But as sociologists, I think we can agree that change happens only when people come together to push for change.

#### **Bashi**

I think that's right. I think that's a really good point, too, because the individual nature of sociology, of academia, makes it really hard for the group of people I wrote about as outsider sociologists, people who took nontraditional tracks to get to the academy, people who are writing for the communities

from which they came. The academic system is organized to amplify the voices that helped build it. And for outsiders to be at home, we really do need some way of organizing to make space for ourselves, I think. I think you're absolutely right. That individual nature also goes with the idea of a meritocratic academy where you just toil away and somebody will reward you later. I don't think it works that way at all, but that's kind of the okey-doke we've been sold. And so people are toiling at that. But I also think the discipline is being challenged.

This is the oldest question in sociology. What are we here for? What are we supposed to be doing? Are we supposed to be . . . ? Just like Jose was saying, the mainstream will study something, make sure the *p* values are right or whatever the case may be. Or even with some qualitative work, scholars sometimes study marginal communities in ways that support, I would say, their oppression. We have to decide if that's the kind of science we're about. Or is there a social justice mission to what we want to get behind? Du Boisian sociology would say you can have objectivity of methods, but the objective is to have a better society that's free of those oppressions that are literally killing people. And it is not our job to excuse those oppressions or just document them. It's our job to show the injustice that's there to make the society a better place, or at least stop lying about how great it is for everyone when it's not good for everyone. So, I still think sociology is wrestling with that question. And I do still think there's a way that sociologists of race, ethnicity, international migration, and global inequality have to justify the social justice ends we might be caring very much about. Somehow that makes us lesser scientists because we actually care to apply our skills to making the world better. I really think we still have a lot to do to push back against that argument.

#### **Itzigsohn**

I agree with Vilna on that point. Durkheim himself wrote in the preface to *The Division of Labor in Society* that "because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we should give up the idea of improving it," and he added that our work was really not worthy if it was merely speculative. This was Durkheim, mind you, a fairly moderate thinker, not a radical decolonial. And that's an issue that has been at the center of American sociology from its early institutionalization at the University of Chicago. Park and his colleagues purposely pushed away anything that had

to do with social reform to make the discipline supposedly more scientific. And the argument that we are not scientific because we have a social justice concern, I think, is preposterous. This morning before joining this conversation, I was working on a chapter on a book I'm writing with Ricarda Hammer and Zophia Edwards on decolonizing sociology, and the chapter I was working on was one on methods and methodology. We think that if we want to change the discipline, we need to offer an alternative of how we practice it every day, how we do the everyday tasks of research and analysis. If we just leave the discussion at the level of theory, the discipline can ignore us and keep doing the same things. So in addition to developing the theoretical and epistemological critique, we are trying to articulate what decolonizing the discipline means for us in our everyday activities.

And I was trying to write about how our methodology changes and how our methods change. And although it is going to be contentious, we need to rethink the central role we give to the analysis of causality and causal mechanisms. We need to ask what are the stories we want to tell? Do we want just to find a neat causal model or mechanism? Is that the story we want to tell? Or rather, we want to tell how systems of exclusion work and how people have organized to live within them and sometimes resist them and change them? And I think a decolonial sociology ought to do the latter. And that does not mean giving up on understanding causality because any story that you tell implies, in more or less explicit ways, causal relations. But the question is not what is your causal model or what is your causal mechanism: the questions our students are trained to address. Instead, the key question is how we can contribute to understanding structures of oppression? How can we help people that are working for a more just world? How the stories we tell change the ways in which we understand and act in the world in which we live?

And it's startling how disciplinary socialization works because my students often do what I'm suggesting and when they go and present their work with other students—not faculty!—their friends ask them the following: What is your causal model? What are your causal variables? That mode of thinking is strongly internalized. And that is one of the forms of the coloniality of the discipline. And one of the things we need to change is the internalization of those practices. If sociology wants to be part of an effort to change the world in which we live and that we think is highly problematic, we need to learn the tools to tell different stories. It's

not enough just to criticize Eurocentricity and coloniality at a theoretical level, we also need to think how to do things differently. If we want to go in a decolonial direction, or a Du Boisian one, or embrace critical race theory, what does it mean concretely for us every day in relation to what we publish or what is considered valid knowledge? How we incorporate the question of using experience as a basis for knowledge, something in which American Studies, Africana Studies, Ethnic Studies, are light years ahead of us in doing. We are still stuck with a model of science that embraces the detachment of the scholar and the search for a “universal” position and we need to go beyond that.

### Blume Oeur

I sense there are two big messages or themes so far. Vilna, to go back to how you started the conversation, you were mentioning the need for sociology to critique this Far Right turn outside the field and to be able to be critical of what's happening in Florida with the AP African American Studies ban. But there's also a backlash within the field, too. And so you both have mentioned this long-standing tension between folks who think that sociology should be primarily about research and others who are pushing for a more activist orientation. But my sense is that there's a backlash even to this idea that it's a debate and many people believe sociology shouldn't be as activist. ASA leaders in recent years have tried to really push social reform and social justice in the field. And so how receptive do you think the mainstream of sociology is to the kinds of critical approaches that you're promoting. Have we made a lot of progress?

### Itzigsohn

I've been thinking about this for a while. And if you look at who gets elected to the leadership of ASA, I think that the discipline as a whole is open to this kind of argument. But at the same time, there are gatekeepers—and the gatekeeping is done mainly, though not only, by the top departments and journals—which are trying to keep the critique of the discipline at bay. And there is a tension there. I think that to some extent, the top departments are slowly changing, and I think that to some extent, perhaps because of the pressure from below, *ASR* and *AJS* are becoming a bit more open to critical scholarship. But I still think there is a very strong backlash from the defenders of the “detached-neutral” mainstream. And I often get surprised, I really shouldn't be, but I often get surprised about

how sometimes you need to explain some very basic things about how racism works in the production of knowledge to our colleagues. It seems that we sociologists are very good at using the sociological imagination to analyze everything but ourselves. And I can understand that sociologically, this is our understanding of the world, our lived experience, and we intuitively justify it and we don't want to change. This has been part of sociology from its very beginning, and it was the basis for marginalizing Du Bois from the discipline. And his marginalization from the discipline was in part the result of his activist position. And this is not going away and I don't think that we can really make the discipline fully in our image. But I don't think either that the mainstream can really root us out from the discipline and push us out as they did to Du Bois.

And I have to say, Vilna, I was so happy when you went to the Sociology Department at Northwestern. You were previously in a Black Studies Department, which I think is great, but I want you in sociology, and I want other people in sociology too. And I understand why people go to Black Studies, Africana Studies, or Ethnic Studies because they are tired of hearing the question about how what they do is sociology. I have this conversation with many people and the answer always is that in other departments they don't have anybody bugging them about the legitimacy of what they do. But I think we need to create the space in sociology so people don't have to go away from the discipline to do critical work.

### **Bashi**

I don't want to interrupt you, but I'm just itching to respond because, well, my story is one of being ejected from sociology. I was denied tenure at Rutgers. And I ended up in Black Studies trying to find a way to stay in the academy. So it really resonated with me when Mary Romero gave her ASA president's keynote that she found that all of the women presidents of the ASA have spent good chunks of their careers outside of sociology, and that sociology hasn't necessarily welcomed those voices. And I also noted how many people walked right out of the room during her talk because they didn't want to hear it and they thought that these things were inappropriate.

But there are mechanisms. I always tell my students, society isn't this thing that's in the clouds looking down on us. It's us, society's us. So yeah, there are people who actively decided not to give me tenure, and yet here I am and I manage to have myself in a really fortuitous position now. I feel

grateful for it, but I also want to acknowledge the structural ways that have impinged on my career and the careers of many others. Thank you for your comments, Jose. I really feel honored by them and I also know that there are lots of people as smart, smarter than me, who just aren't given spaces and resources and their voices aren't heard.

So, in some ways I guess that goes toward the mentoring conversation you wanted to lead us to, Freeden, because I feel like the story of my own survival in the academy is not . . . What's the word I'm looking for? I'm not that unique in the sense that there are so many struggling. There are so many who even if they have jobs, the jobs aren't permanent. There are ways that people who don't want to support critical voices can choose not to publish them, and then those people don't stay in their jobs. And I feel that a lot of the ways that I mentor are to get to the hidden curriculum, as we call it.

How does the academy really work? How do you manage to survive in a place like this? Yeah, you got to put in your work, you got to pay your dues. It's not easy for anybody, but just because everybody says they work hard doesn't mean that we have equality in this place. So, I really try to mentor people in ways that have me speak that truth about what's happening in the academy. And I feel that there's a little bit of tension there because maybe I'm airing dirty laundry. Maybe there are people who don't want to believe how hard it is for some people when they didn't have it so hard. Maybe if I tell the truth, not enough changemakers want to stick around for the pain to make that change. It can be hard. But I feel like there are plenty of other people who will just say, "Yeah, keep going, let's go. You can do it." And I want to say, "Yeah, this shit is hard. Let's talk. We'll put some ice on our bruises and I'll let you know you're going to get bruised up some more." I'm that person. But I am also going to stick around and say, it can be worth it, but it's never going to be easy.

### **Blume Oeur**

Vilna, I appreciate you bringing up mentoring and I think our readers and especially our students would love to hear more about your mentoring philosophies and what steps we can take as a field. Mentoring can be a black box. I'm still sort of confused how it happens at a lot of places and it varies quite widely between faculty and departments. I'd love to hear your general thoughts on the state of mentoring and what we can do to mentor students,



especially those who are hoping to embrace the kind of critical approaches we need in the field.

### **Itzigsohn**

Mentoring is indeed hard because of the things that Vilna has mentioned. The field is complicated, and it can be nasty. And how do you prepare people for that? We need to tell students that this is a field which is contentious. And I think that students are fast to understand that. They are under no illusions of this being an open debate of ideas, meritocratic and that. And given that, a key thing is to support them so they can do what they want to do, rather than disciplining them into the discipline. And in my case, I have been incredibly lucky to work with incredibly smart people that have really changed me. In part, the point is being open to listen to what people want to do. And I know that my students have been very successful and if I have a secret on how I mentor it is just not disciplining them into to the discipline so they don't immediately apply these cookie cutters I was speaking earlier: What is your model? What are your variables? What are your mechanisms? I came to this insight because I realized that if I tried to do that I would be really pushing incredibly smart, creative, critical people out of the discipline. I encountered very bright students that were not willing to be disciplined and I said, okay, let's support them in not being disciplined and in doing their work as well as they can while pushing the limits of the discipline.

And thankfully, it has worked so far, which means that there are many people that recognize great work and understand the blindfolds of the discipline. But it's tough because you ask yourself, am I doing good for this person? Students want jobs, and I want them to get jobs. And you ask yourself, am I helping them? And you don't know. What I tell every student is, look, it's going to be difficult, but if you go the mainstream route, it's also going to be difficult. There are bottlenecks in the discipline, so there may be fewer positions for the kind of work we want to do, but there are also not that many people pushing the boundaries of the discipline. So if students are very good at doing critical innovative work, they have a chance because their work is very original and different. And for the time being, it has worked. But no one can predict how things will look in the future, particularly in light of the political backlash we were talking about earlier and in light of the backlash of gatekeepers.

So mentoring is tough because basically it involves the lives and livelihoods of people, their chances of getting a job, and also entering a field,

which in many ways is going to be nonreceptive and even hostile. We have all experienced that. And this is another reason why I always emphasize the importance of organization because we need to create an organizational frame that provides support; that is academic support, network support, and also emotional support. We tried to do it with the Du Boisian Scholar Network and it was going well, but the pandemic threw too many wrenches and I don't know what will happen to the network.<sup>4</sup> But we need a place in which people with critical approaches come together, a place to exchange experiences, both intellectual experiences and practices of activism. And also a place where young people can find a home, can find other people that listen to them and support them, that have connections and all the networking that mainstream people have in their own organizations, because that's one the main functions that organizations fulfill. So that was my goal in pushing the Du Boisian Scholar Network. Some people are trying to keep it going or maybe we need a new organization, I don't know. But we need something that will do that for people who are critical, who look at the discipline from outside of the mainstream, who try to do things differently.

Ultimately, we are sociologists, and we know the discipline is to a large extent about networks, who write letters of recommendation for you, who you know, who knows you. We have all been in committees and we know that who gets chosen is not necessarily the best, but the person who appeals to most. Which doesn't mean that they are not good, but in the presence of a lot of people doing good work and very few jobs, ultimately it's about who appeals to most. And that has to do with your networks, with the language you speak, with what is considered legitimate forms of knowledge. In my mentoring, I try to talk about that with my students. I know that the academy has a very strong individualizing dynamic that swallows us all. But I think it's important to the extent possible to change that, to build an ethic of cooperation and mutual care, to reimagine the discipline and its practices, and the academy in general.

### **Bashi**

If I can respond, I'm really in agreement, and I kind of sit in admiration hearing you speak about the ways that organizing within the academy can help us. And I think you're absolutely right. If it's the Du Boisian Scholar Network, which I really enjoyed participating in, or some other way of building this community, I'm all in. So if you're on the team, Jose, please reach out to me because this

is something I definitely want to see happen. I want to add one more thing and that's the dues paying part: I feel like it's difficult. I taught classical theory to grad students last term and it was really difficult because we had to have several conversations about the canon and why are we reading these thinkers, which included Du Bois, by the way. And what I feel we have to do is kind of like my early research on immigration and race, about the way we make these hierarchies of humans. The academy also is a hierarchical part of society where to make it, you are going to have to know how to speak with the gatekeepers and know how to push back in ways that they can understand. They don't have to agree with you but you have to be able to talk in the ways that can get you through the gate. I want to say there's this tension between our progressive or even revolutionary ideas and ideals and the ways we need to move forward in the discipline, which is monitored and maintained by people who don't necessarily think like we do or appreciate alternative perspectives.

So I just want to acknowledge the difficulty of having to do that extra work because it does feel like extra work to me. But we don't own the discipline yet. We are making some structures, but we still have to wrestle with that difficult academic language to share an understanding what's happening. For example, the way Aldon Morris did with *The Scholar Denied* to show us the ways that academic structures operated and the ways people got out their ideas and how they got them into the mainstream, and made those ideas the mainstream! And there have been other people arguing for more critical understandings of the ways sociologists have shorn up these nonprogressive ideas.

I just want to say that part of our work should be getting to know those mainstream ideas well enough to be able to critique them. And that's a hard part of mentoring, too. Yeah, we're going to have to learn that stuff at least well enough to then code switch and do our thinking in these ways. But until we're making an alternative academy, this is what we have to do to keep going . . . We want to have food, clothing, and shelter, too! So there are ways we have to play the game to keep our jobs and keep going and be able to take our place in the front of the classroom. We can't put our ideas forward if we're not the ones at the podium.

### **Blume Oeur**

Are there scholars who are doing work under the radar, areas of research that you think we haven't touched on yet that you think deserve mention?

### **Itzigsohn**

One of the things that we need to grapple with is the question of the provinciality of American sociology. And I understand the focus on the United States, the need to be relevant to the here and now, particularly in a field like race and ethnicity. But if we are going to take a decolonial lens, and see our forms of knowledge as rooted in a long history of racism and colonialism—and for me this is an extension of the Du Boisian sociology that I was trying to develop with Karida Brown in the book we wrote together—then the question is what do we do with colonialism and empire? And the answer is not doing more comparative work on race here and race in other places, but it's looking at race in the context of racial and colonial capitalism, of global systems of domination.

I'll give you an example. I have a student, Syeda Masood, currently writing her dissertation, looking at the forms of racialization created by the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan. And she is applying to positions in race and ethnicity because she sees herself as doing race and ethnicity. And indeed, this was a form of empire treating an occupied population in terms that were racialized. Her work is truly original and superb and I support her in doing that, but, speaking of mentoring, I also had to tell her that many people in American sociology, including people doing critical work on race and ethnicity, were going to have a difficult time relating to what she was trying to do: that very few scholars of race and ethnicity were going to see what she does as race and ethnicity. And I understand why we look at race as what happens here because we want to be relevant here, but the United States is present all over the world, racializing the lives of people all over the world. So what happens all over the world is not detached from what happens here. This is something that Du Bois understood very early. And this is something that eventually Martin Luther King realized when he came to the conclusion that he could not push his program for change here without criticizing the Vietnam War. And this is something that Malcolm X understood when he traveled to Mecca and to Africa and realized that the struggle against racism here is tied to anticolonial struggles everywhere. They understood that there is no freedom here without liberation everywhere. Each struggle is different and has specific characteristics, but they are all parts of a common structure and common process that we call racial and colonial capitalism. That's something we need to discuss, the way in which this global work on empire and racialization is part of what we do.

I think that we need to talk more about how the field of race and ethnicity relates to the questions of empire, colonialism, and in particular U.S. empire and colonialism. Because the situation has been one in which the scholars of empire and colonialism don't pay attention to race and ethnicity and the scholars of races and ethnicity don't pay attention to empire. And that's one of the things we need to address. Julian Go wrote an excellent article about the need for a postcolonial sociology of race, and katrina quisumbing king has done excellent work linking the study of race and the U.S. empire.<sup>5</sup> But this is one of the areas we need to talk more about. We need to understand that U.S. racism extends far beyond the political borders of the United States. The hard separation between national and international fields is to a large degree an arbitrary one. So we need to understand how racialization and racism here link to racialization and racism in other parts of the world. And as I mentioned, that is something that Du Bois saw very clearly. He starts *Black Reconstruction* by saying that he is going to tell us the story of how the structures of racism in the South worked and how they changed, and how the end of Reconstruction meant the failure to create a true democracy in the United States, the consequences of which are still with us. But he emphasizes that that is just part of a larger history of racial and colonial capitalism, that the color line was global. Du Bois was very clear about that. So for me, the decolonial view is tied to Du Boisian sociology.

### Bashi

I agree 100 percent. And in fact, that's exactly where my own work is. And I feel the same way when we look at international migration. I purposely don't say I study immigration because I'm not just looking at the United States and people who cross the border here and then only what happens to them on this territory. That's not the whole story of migration. So, to link race with human history and movement and empire and colonialism, I guess I'm coming full circle. There are still fights that we're having to have about these being legitimate topics of research and study in mainstream fields like theory and methods and just looking at social inequality writ large.

I feel like this is the hardest thing to do. I feel like I've spent my career trying to show how macro and micro processes are linked across the globe. And in some ways, I've succeeded, in some ways, I've failed, but I'm still trying. And so, like all the people you named, Jose, in the beginning of when

we started speaking today, I'm glad to know many of them so personally and to be in the trenches in writing about these really difficult topics. And I have people all over the world who I know through the International Sociological Association who are working on similar things. And it's a good time to be in that kind of movement. And we all should take this opportunity to be grateful we're still here and caring about the work we do, and that we should continue to care for each other as we do that work. And yeah, let's get organizing the way Jose is saying we ought to. He's absolutely right. Let's go.

### Mo Torres

So both of you talked about mentorship and the gatekeeping in the discipline and the differences between sociology and Black Studies. As a grad student, one question that I'm wondering about is, is sociology worth saving? And if so, what is the role of race and ethnicity scholars in actually doing that work?

### Itzigsohn

Well is sociology worth saving? That's a question that I have asked myself many times. Because there are those that say, let's go to Black Studies, let's go to Ethnic Studies, let's go to American Studies. Maybe, who knows, maybe that's the right thing to do. For me personally, there is a very strong appeal of the way in which, for example, Du Bois defined sociology as the study of law and chance, the study of how structures impinge on human action and how humans can struggle to create their world and making that the core of sociology. C. Wright Mills put it in a different words. He talked about linking history, biography, and structure. And that's what brought me to sociology originally. That's how I understood sociology always. And to me, that's worth saving as a mode of analysis that exists not only as part of sociology, but that has a long tradition in sociology. Now, if sociology is going to be just about building causal models and finding causal mechanisms, I don't know, maybe it's not worth saving it. And I don't want this to be interpreted against quantitative methods because I think we can do a lot of good things with quantitative methods. And I don't buy into the qualitative/quantitative divide, as if qualitative is good and quantitative is bad, you know, ethnographic methods have historically been the most extractive and colonial methods of all. We definitely need to rethink how we use our methods.

But I think that this kind of Du Bois-inspired sociology of looking at the possibility of human



action, of making sense of what structures are affecting our lives and what we can do about this. It's what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences: to me, it's worth fighting for. And that's what I've been trying to do, working to have a space to do that. Now, you can tell me you can do that better in American studies, or Ethnic Studies, or Global Studies. Maybe so, but I am not sure, those fields have their issues too. In any case, I see sociology through a Du Boisian perspective, as a way of analyzing the structures of racism and colonialism and how people can work to undo them and build a more just world, and for me that's what's worth saving. Now, should we call it sociology or historical social sciences or do you want to change the name of the discipline, the boundaries? I don't have a strong attachment to names and labels. For me, sociology has been a field in which the kind of work Du Bois outlined for us can be done and that is worth fighting for.

### Bashi

I echo that. You said it so well. I have to say that I feel at home in sociology because I too have embraced a structural way of looking at the world. I embrace the idea knowing how the world works requires analysis. That there are also people actively working to hide the truth of how the sausage is made. And sociology, I think, allows me to go find out for myself, this is how the sausage is made, and I can tell you and I can prove it. That is so powerful to me, and there's nothing that's going to make me let go of that. I believe that sociology gave me tools to be a revolutionary academic. And if I didn't have that, I probably wouldn't stick around. And for that reason, I think it is absolutely 100 percent worth saving. I think many sociologists, not the ones I'm buddy-buddy with, but many sociologists are out there fighting the fight of, why is everybody listening to the economists? So they're trying to snatch some of that, the spotlight

from the economists. I couldn't care less about that. That's a different agenda. And the way that structural analysis of historical, contemporary, and future formations of oppression, the promise that that has for making the world better, I'm on the team that works toward that. And I think that's sociology. Other groups are doing similar kinds of work, but this focus, I feel like that's the sociologist's purview, and I like it.

## NOTES

1. This volume was the subject of an earlier Conversations feature. See Mariam, Luna, and Pirtle (2022).
2. See McKay (2021).
3. This symposium on "Decolonizing Sociological Theory and Knowledge" was held on October 22, 2021, at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. See <https://watson.brown.edu/events/2021/decolonizing-sociological-theory-and-knowledge>.
4. For more information on the Du Boisian Scholar Network and details on the most recent (2019) convening, see <https://www.duboisiannetwork.com/>.
5. See Go (2018); and quisumbing king (2019).

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