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Learning to Think for Ourselves and the Work of Sociology

Ilaria Pitti in Conversation with Patricia Hill Collins

Ilaria Pitti* [a] Patricia Hill Collins [b]

[a] Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna (Italy)
[b] Department of Sociology, University of Maryland (United States)

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Abstract

In this wide-ranging conversation with Ilaria Pitti, Patricia Hill Collins retraces the interplay between her personal biography and intellectual trajectory. She reflects on the evolution of intersectionality — its promise, risks of depoliticisation, and practical uptakes — while insisting that social-justice ethics remain central. The dialogue also explores "othermothering" as a historically Black, collective-care practice that can inform contemporary struggles in historical times marked by loss and powerlessness. Throughout, Collins positions sociology as a "border discipline" uniquely equipped to analyse structural power, cultivate reflexivity, and foster social change.

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* ilaria.pitti@unibo.it

Ilaria Pitti: Professor Collins, I would like to start this interview with a question concerning the intertwined relationship between your personal and academic path. How has your personal experience influenced your interest in gender studies and the way you have navigated your academic journey?

Patricia Hill Collins: I'd like to start off by saying that I didn't start in gender studies at all. I began as a high school student coming of age during the civil rights and Black power movements in the United States and this speaks to the whole question of how activism informs ideas. Back in high school, my main goal was simply to get through my studies; activism wasn't on my agenda, and although I never participated in protests, I always kept a deep interest in ideas. When I reached college, I became attracted to topics related to activism and social injustice, especially racial injustice. I was one of the early students on a desegregated campus, which influenced this focus. At first, I thought about majoring in mathematics or music. However, once in college, I discovered a passion for political science. Yet, it seemed too challenging — or at least I perceived it that way at the time. Even though I now realize I enjoyed philosophy, I was drawn instead to sociology, because it provided tools to discuss social institutions, organizations, and change. Importantly, sociology was the only field that explicitly brought race into conversation, so I decided to major in it. I eventually recognized, though, that sociology had its limits. I've always approached my education with a critical mindset, constantly questioning what I'm learning and my role within it. I wanted to work on Black youth and education, but I soon realized that traditional sociology didn't have space for this because "race" and "blackness" are not the same things — they have distinct histories. That realization led me to develop my senior honors thesis, which set me on a path toward activism. Gender entered my work later, particularly during my involvement in Boston's Community Schools movement. As a teacher and curriculum developer, I was tasked with creating a Black Studies curriculum for middle school children. At that point, I wasn't writing for academic or scholarly audiences; rather, I was bringing ideas from my academic studies into the schools. The work was always informed by practical experience: demonstrating how certain ideas could be applied in different contexts. It was not about having all the answers, but about engaging in a dialogue between what was learned and what was practiced. In this context, gender emerged as I noticed that women, and Black women in particular, were the ones carrying out all the care work. They were doing the real work, bearing a significant load that was never acknowledged as a distinct race and gender burden. This dynamic changed my perspective on Black politics within the community, as well as on my experiences in the colleges and universities I attended. It also influenced my view of feminism — a movement that, at the time, could essentially be prefixed with "white". I realised that I simply didn't fit that mold, and I was perfectly okay with that. I had to create the conditions for my own work, and as I look back now, I can see the narrative of that journey. In the beginning, I was often asking myself, "What shall I do?" It was a process of finding my own way — a process I refer to as "learning to think for oneself". This idea is fundamental to my work in both race and gender studies, as well as other issues related to lived experience and alternative modes of nurturing. Throughout my career, I've embraced the willingness to walk away from something if it doesn't work. This willingness is especially important in our current era, where risks abound. I am accustomed to living with risk, with the understanding that nothing is permanent and that what we have may not last forever. Recognizing that we might not belong in every space or that our gains might be temporary gives us the courage to take political and intellectual risks. That, in a nutshell, lays part of the foundation of my work.

IP: This is already very inspiring. You mentioned the challenges of fitting in as a Black woman in academic or educational contexts. I was wondering if you could share some specific challenges or key events that you would identify as turning points in shaping your perspective on systemic inequalities.

PHC: I think the turning point for me, first of all, was realizing that I was not interested in becoming a faculty member within a sociology department. I was working on my doctorate in sociology when I landed a job in what is now called Africana Studies or African American Studies. I completed my degree while holding that position — a tenure-line job that lasted twenty-three years. My day job in Africana Studies paid me to do intellectual work. I look at my work as intellectual labor, and coming from a community where Black women are rarely paid for such work — while the only available jobs are care work, where you look after others without adequate compensation — I was determined to find a way to be an intellectual while getting paid. I was less concerned about the pay, as I know how to live on very little, given that I come from a background that is neither middle class nor affluent. What mattered most was the intellectual freedom that being in Black Studies provided, allowing me to do the work I wanted. At the same time, this position placed me directly in the firing line of what I would call Black patriarchy: the masculine traditions within the field. Managing my career meant periodically stepping back to assess what was happening. It was in that environment that I wrote *Black Feminist Thought*. I wasn't in a traditional sociology department, and I wondered if people would take me seriously. Yet, having my degree did count for something — I always believed in finishing school unless it became unbearably painful. I was already in a department, seeking tenure, which in the United States system was seen as the gold standard of stability: a day job with a steady paycheck. And that's what I wanted. The day after I secured tenure, I set out to actively work on *Black Feminist Thought* and to get the book published (Collins, 1990). The constraints I faced were those invisible constraints of epistemology: navigating the academy meant making continuous political or intellectual concessions to be seen as a good citizen of the university. Early on, I recognized that I did not want to accept that model. Although it wasn't as clear to me then as it is now, I was very strategic about avoiding situations where I might be punished, abused, or exploited. When my book was finally published, I became a whole new person. My colleagues looked at me in surprise — I had been very quiet about these kinds of issues for five years. With that degree of certainty, I felt empowered to speak out in the ways I wanted. Even convincing others outside the university presented its own challenges. For instance, when presenting *Black Feminist Thought* at a feminist conference, I deliberately chose not to cite much of the classic feminist work. Instead, I focused on citing every Black woman who had ever made a contribution — even those whose work was anonymous — to acknowledge that Black women's contributions have long been overlooked. I explained that there are countless instances where a Black woman has done important work and remained anonymous, and it was high time we recognized that. I've always seen my role as paving the way for those who come after me. I don't dwell on the abuse I've experienced as a Black woman, even though there have been hard times. Instead, I emphasize that if you truly set your mind to something, you must think creatively, be nimble, and strategic about every position you hold. The tools of sociology have been wonderful: they allow us to see individuals, institutions, work, social groups, and even the workings of ideology. Sociology, if it could shed its tendency toward self-deprecation, has the skill set to answer not just my questions but many others as well.

IP: True! Sociology has an emancipatory power that we often forget. However, I genuinely fell in love with this discipline exactly because of its radicalness and ability to give practical, everyday navigational tools; abilities that are often downsized by the contemporary challenges related to hyperspecialisation.

PHC: That's it! I perpetually fall in love with sociology, and I hope that comes through in this interview. Each phase of my life has revealed new tools for me to use. For example, while working on a paper about Black women — it's included in my book *Fighting Words* (Collins, 1998) — I was writing the chapter on Black women sociologists. I went back to the origins of sociology and refused to assume that sociology is only done by people with certified sociology degrees. There are those who never had the chance. So I asked: Who are those people? When I looked at early sociology journals and the work that was published, I saw completely radical ideas positioned right next to eugenics. The field was open to a range of ideas because it was still a generalist discipline. In contrast, today the specializations have become very narrow. They can only see each other, without realizing how myopic and stale their ideas have become. For me, the interplay between the general and the specific, the academic and the everyday is vital. I carry my little sociological toolkit with me wherever I go, always staying engaged with the question: What exactly are we doing? For instance, when I travel — especially when I'm with graduate students — I often ask, "Where do you all go to hang out? Can I come with you?" Sometimes, I simply invite myself along, even though they look a little shocked, thinking, "Aren't you a fancy lady or something?" I assure them, "No, that's okay. Just tell me what's appropriate, and I'll join you." I cannot begin to tell you about the wonderful, ordinary places where graduate students hang out and the rich conversations that have taken place there.

IP: You mentioned *Black Feminist Thought*, and I'd like to delve deeper into that discussion. Could you elaborate on how the book was received at its initial publication and how that reception has evolved over time? More broadly, has the intellectual contribution of Black women gained greater visibility and transformed understandings within academic contexts, or do significant challenges and barriers still persist?

PHC: It's a big question and the best way to answer that is to consider the three distinct moments when I worked on *Black Feminist Thought*: each moment was different. The first moment was when I initially wrote the book (Collins, 1990). At that time, I was young and worried about everything. The reception was fascinating and I wasn't prepared for it. Black women were incredibly eager for that book, and apparently, others were too. In the first year after its launch, my original publisher was sold to a larger company, and the new publisher didn't promote the book. It sat on the shelves for a year after the book launch, leaving me with no idea what was going to happen. People began contacting me asking, "Do you have a copy?" Since there was no copy available, it was extremely upsetting to see all that time pass without any support. It was an important lesson: the politics of how we do our work can never be taken for granted, and you always have to be prepared for it to be taken away. But it wasn't taken away because people found ways to share ideas. During that early period, people copied it, shared it, and spread the word. I've even seen this phenomenon happen with my ideas before they were officially translated. I once spoke with a translator in Brazil who explained that a friend in the UK had obtained my book and translated parts of it, which then spread among reading groups in São Paulo. I was amazed by that. That early experience convinced me that my work was important and that I had to set a high bar for myself. However, that doesn't mean everyone will love everything I write. In 1989, Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989) — naming things that had been happening for decades, including

in my work on *Black Feminist Thought*. I revised the book, not with a complete overhaul, but with a significant update by 2000 (Collins, 2000). That revision introduced a more international discussion, a tighter focus on epistemology, and marked the growth of what came to be known as the classic edition of the book. It was during that time I began to realize that I was becoming a classic myself. That realization was a little unnerving, but it also marked a pivotal moment when we began to see that the gains from mid-20th-century social movements were beginning to erode. The period prior to 9/11 was pivotal, as was the middle of COVID — when the 30th anniversary edition of *Black Feminist Thought* was published (Collins, 2022). These moments prompted the question: Which ideas have endured over time? Now, in 2025 — and reflecting on a revision I did in 2022 — I considered major shifts. One major change is the massive transformations in information technologies and cultural politics, which now offer new possibilities for Black women. Today, Black women no longer have to fit our ideas into the narrow confines of academia or rely on a few limited platforms. There are many more paths to entering the public space. With these opportunities come tremendous possibilities, and also a great responsibility, especially when we see the irresponsible use of propaganda and fake news. Black women now hold degrees, jobs, and receive recognition in the media — but I think we have to remind ourselves not to become complacent. It challenges us to continue pushing forward. The last revision of *Black Feminist Thought* included a section titled "Intergenerational Hope". For me, this is about passing the work on to those coming after us, ensuring that the work isn't limited to Black women alone, but is carried forward by others as well. While it's not my job or anyone's job to predict exactly where change will come from, it's clear that the future of *Black Feminist Thought* will be built on the contributions of many generations, rather than expecting linear progress forever.

IP: Your scholarship critically examines traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. If you could propose a reform that encourages academic institutions to elevate more diverse, original voices and challenge established standards of what is considered valid knowledge, what specific changes would you recommend?

PHC: I'm going to argue with your question. I think — in a sociological sense — that institutions don't have agency: they are designed in a certain way, they're set up on a particular path and continue on that path until people inside or outside of them decide to change them. In many ways, what we're witnessing now is a beautiful test case in the United States. In the past month, we saw an administration essentially instruct institutions to purge any mention of diversity, equity, and inclusion from their websites, courses, and materials. Now, whether that particular executive order is legal or not will be resolved in other ways, but what fascinated me was how quickly institutions — both higher education and corporations — saluted the order and said, "We're on it right now". That is just the nature of institutions: they don't change easily unless someone tells them to change. It may sound a bit gloomy, but it's a pragmatic perspective on expecting change from within institutions. It's crucial to not expect too much from institutions. Take the United States Constitution, for example. Although it is one of the oldest democratic constitutions, it needs fixing; yet, its ability to last so long — even with its compromises, like the inclusion of slavery — illustrates how enduring these institutions can be. A similar dynamic applies to higher education. Some institutions, especially many in Europe, are very old and storied, steeped in tradition, but also very slow to change: I've heard that sometimes you have to wait for someone to die before a position opens up. On the other hand, there are newer colleges and universities — in state systems, private institutions, religious organizations — that offer a cornucopia of educational experiences. The range is huge, and it

makes you ask: Who is really going to want to change, and who is not? I believe real change comes from individuals, from those marginalized people — even though this term annoys me: I prefer saying that change comes from the voice of Black people, Indigenous people, women, LGBTQ people, poor people, and so on. Voice is ours: I can think what I want and I can say what I want.

IP: I wanted to move to another topic in this interview. The concept of intersectionality represents a large part of your work and has become a sort of cornerstone for understanding the overlapping systems of oppression. How do you see this concept evolving since its inception?

PHC: I'm very encouraged — truly encouraged — by what I see. I think many of us have been doing "our homework": instead of trying to change the minds of administrators, we've been focused on creating words that people can use without micromanaging the meaning of what we have created. What's interesting is that the term "intersectionality" has become much more elastic. It began with race, class, and gender, and has expanded to include sexuality, ethnicity, ability, nation — each expansion broadening this "big tent" umbrella. But with that expansion comes a responsibility to remain committed to intersectionality's core principles rather than appropriating the term for personal projects. I can imagine a future where people start selling intersectionality jewelry — using the term for profit rather than its intended transformative purpose. So, we must be mindful of the pressures of commodification and exploitation when a concept becomes popular: people want to either make money off of it, or attach it to their own personal agendas. Where is intersectionality now, where is it going, where might it go? I've been working on these ideas since 2015, dedicating the past ten years to intersectionality. I wrote an initial article on intersectionality, outlining definitional dilemmas and following up with three books that tackle various aspects of those dilemmas — ranging from introductory texts with Sirma Bilge (Collins & Bilge, 2016 & 2020), to works positioning intersectionality as a critical social theory (Collins, 2019). Through this work, I've come to see an important issue. Intersectionality has become closely aligned with aspects of identity politics — focusing largely on race, gender, and sexuality, and fostering a kind of individualistic identity narrative. This resonates with current poststructuralist or postmodernist tendencies, where the focus is on the individual and personal identity, rather than addressing structural changes through collective movements. Today, we often think that we don't need those big stories anymore, we don't need those big movements anymore. Instead, the concept of intersectionality is used to advance ideas of personal freedom, the plurality of identities, and the multiple identities that are in each individual. This is fine, I am not opposed to it, but it is just a part of intersectionality. This overemphasis on individualism actually maladapts us to deal with the structural changes that are happening around us right now. My most recent book, *Lethal Intersections: Race, Gender, and Violence* (Collins, 2024), tries to intervene in this situation by demonstrating how intersectionality can be used to conceptualize violence as an important social problem that, because it has structural roots, requires structural solutions that go beyond fixing it one individual at a time. Returning to sociology, I find that the structural categories that need to become central in how we think about intersectionality today are "class" and "nation". Instead of reducing class to individual identity — "I'm working class, so I'm an expert in class because I've had working class experiences" — we need to use an intersectional framework to analyze the structural politics of class. This approach can help build alliances and coalitions, moving beyond personal identity narratives. The individualism inherent in capitalist society tends to commodify everything, and if we focus solely on identity, we risk neglecting critical questions about structural inequality. Similarly, the structural dimension of nation and national sovereignty

is crucial. Nationalism provides important analytical tools regarding political power and organization in our globalized economy. Yet, some within intersectionality prefer to stay within a zone of comfort, concentrating only on identity and not engaging with these broader structural issues. I'm happy to connect with others who share similar experiences, but if we ignore these larger structures, it limits our effectiveness. Looking ahead, I see the future of intersectionality as requiring a commitment to defining itself on its own terms. If we let external forces — like the media — define intersectionality, it risks being watered down or co-opted. I believe the talent is there, and the field is moving in the right direction, as long as we don't get stuck in endless administrative meetings in higher education, where progress often gets bogged down. I used to hate faculty meetings, and while there's value in them, they can stifle the transformational work we need to do.

IP: I've never met anyone who truly enjoys a faculty meeting! But here's what I'm wrestling with: how can we do justice to the full complexity of intersectionality within the tight limits of a research proposal? In practical terms, what makes intersectional analysis clear and convincing in grant or PhD-application writing? The term has become an academic buzzword: nearly every proposal now claims to be "intersectional", yet the treatment often feels superficial — reduced to listing a few identities or their simple overlaps. How do we move beyond that reductionism and make intersectionality genuinely intelligible on the page?

PHC: We're not there yet, but that's precisely where we need to go. I recently read two grant proposals submitted to major funding agencies, each claiming an intersectional approach. One was outstanding: I told the team, "You've captured the complexity! Fingers crossed you get funded." The other came from a colleague who truly understands intersectionality yet struggled to express it in the funding narrative. The challenge was finding language that would win support without diluting the concept or slowing the field's progress. That dilemma is where I'm putting my energy now. I'm finished writing books on intersectionality, but I'm certainly not finished with the idea. In summer 2025 I hope to return to the Intersectionality Training Institute in Philadelphia. It's a five-day program where scholars refine their projects, focusing on methodological questions: What makes a project genuinely intersectional? How are you applying intersectionality in your design, methods, and dissemination? The institute offers space to explore these issues and to recognize that there are no absolute right or wrong answers — only better and worse ones, which is exactly where the field stands today. I spoke there two years ago, and I'm going back because this is the moment to work on the nuts and bolts: helping researchers move intersectionality from theory to practice. That's what most engages me right now.

IP: Building on the challenge of translating intersectionality from theory to practice, what I value most in your work is the way you keep social justice at the center of intersectional research. You stress that intersectionality is inherently tied to social-justice aims, yet this dimension is often muted, especially within academia, where the term has been largely depoliticized. How can we reclaim the social-justice ambition of intersectionality when we design and conduct academic research?

PHC: No, the university is not designed to produce social justice. That goes back to the issue of institutionalization: universities are organized around "truth", "knowledge", and the belief that truth is an apolitical, objective thing. Those are useful ideas, but they only take us so far. Social justice reminds us that everything we do carries an ethical dimension. Many of us teach in secular institutions where ethics is often claimed by religion — or by religion-

like projects such as nationalism. Nationalism, in fact, occupies an ethical position, which explains the passion we see on the far right. In academia, we keep hearing, "Let's calm down, have civil conversations, and leave politics at the door." To me that is limiting. I can think, be passionate, and be ethical at the same time; I don't have to keep them in separate boxes, and I believe most people feel the same. We simply need to articulate our ethics more clearly. For me, the nearest term is social justice — quite different from "diversity, equity, and inclusion", which are administrative program labels that may (or may not) lead to social justice. Words of power, however, are easily hollowed out, commodified, and resold: social justice could be the next lipstick slogan. When a term is de-contextualized, it can lose its value. I hope someone is earnestly reclaiming social justice; ethicists and Black feminist scholars have long done that work. People want to live in a world where good people do good things. Intersectionality is powerful, but if its power is attached to an agenda that is not about social justice, the term is cheapened. Should that happen, we might eventually need to let it go — though I hope we won't. While I can, I'm trying to leave a clear record: here's where we are, what must happen, where we might go, and why I feel this so strongly. We live in a desegregating, interconnected world. Colonialism created boundaries and boxes that confined people's imaginations, but today we know better. Thanks to media and communications technology, you and I can hold a Microsoft Teams interview across six time zones — that's unprecedented. These are new tools for social-justice work. The question is: what will we do with them? I believe in people, in humanity, and in their capacity for goodness — if we encourage them to be good. That is why I remain optimistic. I no longer want to stand in the middle of the fray; I'd rather sit in a café with a cup of tea and cheer on those who carry the work forward: that is my role now.

IP: That's a beautiful view: actually, it's healing! It is so difficult to remain optimistic in this moment and, sometimes, I have the feeling that our critical tools of analysis make being optimistic even harder.

PHC: I believe that. I've traveled enough to meet many people, and some are very timid. One young woman in Brazil said, "Dr. Collins, thank you so much for what you said about hope. I needed to hear that." Our analyses are often so negative. If you're eighteen and you've just taken an oppression class — well, at the end of the racial-oppression course I used to teach, after we showed how terrible racism is, the students would ask, "What shall we do?" I'd answer, "The semester is over now; I've given you the tools for analysis: go use them!" Intellectually solid, perhaps, but not necessarily helpful. So I keep asking how we ourselves may be contributing to the very problems we claim to solve: that's the self-reflexive part of my work. I'm trying to rise above the fray and be a light; I'm aiming for wisdom. You can't be wise at twenty — you're too young, but you can be wonderfully experimental. I'm going for wisdom, and I'd like to think even the most "evil" people have been scared, hurt, or scarred so deeply that they carry that pain and pass it on. Think of school. I taught children and middle-schoolers for years. Who becomes a bully, and why? What do they get from bullying? Babies aren't born bullies: you see them in the hospital; they can't even open their eyes yet. How could they be inherently cruel? I could see the pain within my middle-school students who bullied others. It's much harder to see those wounds in the cruelty of adults who abuse their power to bully others. We can't change everything, but if we give up the belief that change is possible, that is when it becomes impossible. That's what I would say.

IP: This really resonates with my experience. I teach a youth studies class to young people who are 20–23 years old. Because of the conditions of living of young people in Italy, everything I teach them is quite depressing, and I am always worried about what their mood will be like at the end of the course. So I am always trying to find ways to keep their hope up but it's not easy. In relation to these intergenerational dynamics, I wanted to consider another topic in this interview: that of "othermothering". It's a concept that is obviously deeply rooted in Black communities, in the relationships within the Black communities. I would like you to explain the origins and significance of this concept as well. How do you think it can help us understand caregiving and kinship beyond biological relationships today?

PHC: Let me begin by stressing how deeply this idea is rooted in African American history and culture. When you are forced to create families, communities, and relationships from scratch, when you arrive with nothing but your memories in a setting designed for your exploitation, not your survival, everything has to be reinvented. That was the reality of chattel slavery in the United States: an inter-generational system in which the child's legal status followed the mother, no matter who the father was. Black women's bodies literally carried the lineage of slavery. Against that backdrop, deciding to bring a child into the world and love that child — regardless of the circumstances that created that child and the circumstances in which that child would live — was a profoundly political act. From that rejection of bondage grew new ways of organizing Black social, intellectual, and political life, including the practice we now call "othermothering". Othermothering simply recognizes that you may be unable to raise your biological child by yourself; the responsibility must be shared; that maybe we are going to have to share this responsibility among the women. If my child were sold to another plantation, I would hope another woman there would take in, raise, and love my baby. This ethic of collective caregiving produced a different sense of family and community. Over time it attached itself to each new political moment faced by Black people. Until the mid-1960s Civil Rights era, Black life in the United States remained precarious: your job, your savings, even your children could be taken away. Holding fast to love — and, if possible, to hope — became a survival strategy. For me, survival with humanity is a form of resistance. Today, mass incarceration is the latest iteration of those old problems. It targets Black men (and increasingly Black women), picking up where slavery and forced labor left off. When men are murdered or imprisoned, women pick up the slack. Drugs pushed into Black neighborhoods have made the strain even worse, forcing communities to reorganize those traditional values of survival and care. Othermothering is about recognizing our obligations to one another. It can't be legislated or micromanaged; it is fundamentally an ethical commitment. People often seek that commitment in religious spaces: places that support life rather than perform hierarchy. Historically, many Black women who practiced othermothering were single and child-free: the community itself was their child. Hpwever, this family rhetoric sometimes clashes with feminist critiques that see the family mainly as a site of patriarchy. Those critiques are real. The key is ensuring that othermothering is not exploitative. If we expect people — mostly women — to perform all this invisible care work, whether inside Black communities or in the wider society, then the first step is to pay them for care work. Look at the toll of holding two jobs: cleaning someone else's house on a brutal shift and then coming home as a single parent. People need help, and we should offer it. Still, the moment we package "othermothering" as a social-policy buzzword, the term can slip and lose its meaning. So, we need to study these longstanding traditions of care in depth before rushing into policy. Public policy is a different arena: full of cost-benefit calculations. We must be prepared before we enter it.

IP: While reading about othermothering, I was struck by its ethical strength. It seems like a concept that could help us face today's big challenges — such as climate change, for example — because it reminds us how deeply we are connected to one another. Do you see the same potential in the idea when we move it beyond its original context? And are there risks in opening it up too far?

PHC: I haven't thought about this for a while, so I'm glad you asked. As you spoke, I realized I may have been acting as an "intellectual other mother" — drawing on my own work to nurture these ideas. If we carry othermothering into a different arena — say, climate-justice activism — we first have to ask: Who is already there? Why are they passionate? What intersectional power structures shape that space? How are its organizations set up? Who's doing what and why? What kind of new communities might you have to build to move that forward to make this idea? That will take work. Othermothering could be a great idea to help build broader coalitions. However, the real challenge is to keep the essence of othermothering intact — without turning Black women and many others who do care work, who live this practice every day, into perpetual standard-bearers (who have to do the explaining, organizing and emotional labor for everyone else). Others must pick it up while honoring the groundwork those women have laid.

IP: Now that we are nearing the end of the interview, I would like to ask you a question out of curiosity — and also because right now I feel I need answers from you to everything! What is going on in the United States today? How do you read the beginning of this second Trump's administration?

PHC: I don't want to claim leadership before I know what I'm talking about, and complex situations rarely have simple answers. What we're seeing feels historic — something we must think through carefully. I compare it to 9/11: after those planes hit, everything shifted, in ways we now see as both good and bad. This moment may be similar. So far, not much concrete has happened beyond replacing some officials and cutting certain funds, all of which are being contested in the courts. The American public should steel itself or the erosion of basic rights of what makes the United States a democracy. Still, when basic assumptions are shaken — especially by people who benefit from them without realizing it — you start to see what really matters. The current administration has four years to make these early changes stick. This past election has tested the beliefs of many who assumed they could keep everything they already had. I said earlier: things you take for granted can be taken away — your loved one during COVID, your "secure" job, even someone you love lost to suicide. That's something that's taken away from you without you having any control over that. So the notion of loss is central. The Trump campaign — which was based on the idea that many people in the United States have lost all kinds of things — tapped into that sense of loss quite accurately. Unfortunately, the analysis blamed Black people, women, LGBTQ folks, immigrants and other cultural scapegoats. That framing won't restore lost jobs, housing, or hope. We have a major housing crisis in the United States. We have people sleeping on the streets. There are certain things that are, in fact, general public concerns that affect everybody, and we need to be reminded of that everybody. Make no mistake — I'm not optimistic about the near future, but I'm trying to be pragmatic and prepared for it. But big disruptions that push people to think for themselves, and not blindly follow the rhetoric of leaders, can foster real change. I'm hoping that this period of great uncertainty will encourage people to think for themselves about what they want to see for America's future. In the United States, we spend endless energy fighting about gun rights, yet we have overlooked another constitutional protection just as vital: free speech. That,

I believe, is going to be the main battleground: to see what gets said, what doesn't get said, and what gets done. The United States is a young nation — practically a baby compared to Italy — and our oldest ideas are still evolving. Right now, it's just too soon to draw firm conclusions.

IP: One last question. You've emphasized that people need to stay mindful of loss — the fact that what we have can be taken away. In that light, what can sociology — and we sociologists — do? How might our discipline help keep the public keenly aware of this possibility and respond constructively to it?

PHC: No one has asked me this before, so you're hearing my thoughts in real-time. First, remember that sociology is a border discipline. We draw on the sciences for hard data — numbers, surveys, trend analyses — and we draw on the humanities for history, narrative, and ideology. That puts us in a unique position to take a concept like loss and ask: how did feelings of loss shape the voting behavior of Trump supporters? What, exactly, did they believe had been lost — by whom, and why? On the other side, some people assume they'll never lose anything. Look at the new wave of casino capitalism: online sports-betting apps now let you gamble on what a single player will do in the next five minutes. All this has to do with a deep loss of certainty about the future — something that was never certain, to begin with. Many — also on the Left — have grown complacent, trusting in their own insular linear narrative of progress. But social change is cyclical: every forward step provokes a backlash. This period of backlash may cast a wide net of harm that people who've grown up very affluent with futures assured may find shocking. Consider, for example, the case of the young man — Luigi Mangione — who is accused of having killed the CEO of UnitedHealthcare: he was from an affluent background, attended elite schools, and "everything going right for him". I am not saying he is a test case and we still don't know his inner story, but the act. But the public reaction to this young man's action fascinated me; it exposed people's deep anger and helplessness fostered by loss: people are upset by our healthcare system, they have felt powerless to do anything about it. Many have lost loved ones because of our healthcare system. This is an important social issue that cross-cuts the American public. It will never be solved scapegoating one another. Dealing with this kind of loss requires sustained collective effort on the part of the public. Health care is one of many important social problems. I can't say exactly what sociology can do, but I'd love to see a conference that does that kind of thinking. Or maybe I'll write a paper or I'll give a talk on this!

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Ilaria Pitti – Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6270-501X | ilaria.pitti@unibo.it
https://www.unibo.it/sitoweb/ilaria.pitti
Ilaria Pitti is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Youth Studies at the University of Bologna. Her research investigates youth activism, everyday practices of civic participation, and the intersectional inequalities that shape them. She has also examined how women navigate and transform highly masculine arenas such as organized football fandom and male-dominated labour sectors. Her most recent publications include the articles "Young Women's Informal Leadership: Reflections on Taking Responsibility in Youth Participation" (*Young. Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 2024, online first, with. J. Lütgens & A. Walther) and "More than Crumbs: Emotional Entanglements and Situated Ethical Strategies in Qualitative Research" (*American Behavioral Scientist*, 2024, *68*(5), 678–695 [original work published 2022]).

Patricia Hill Collins – Department of Sociology, University of Maryland (United States)
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7934-0691
https://socy.umd.edu/facultyprofile/collins/patricia-hill
Patricia Hill Collins is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, and former President of the American Sociological Association. Her groundbreaking work on intersectionality, race, gender, and Black feminist thought has profoundly influenced contemporary social theory. Among her most influential books are *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990, Unwin Hyman) and *Intersectionality* (2016, Polity Press, co-authored with S. Bilge). She is the recipient of numerous awards for her scholarly contributions and social justice advocacy.