

Two Geniuses Walk into a Zoom

October 20, 2020

>> Joan Donovan: All right. Hello, everybody, and welcome to Two Geniuses Walk Into a Zoom, and then Joan shows up. We are so excited to have Mary Gray and Tressie Cotton for a discussion about their incredible work and a celebration of being named McArthur Fellows, which is known as the genius fellowship, if you didn't know.

Which is a pretty big deal. I'm not gonna lie. Every year this list gets put out, and every once in a while I know someone on it or I've heard of someone on it, and I'm pretty excited to have had a moment in time with them.

But this hits different because these are two of my favorite scholars. And the public recognition of their work is something that I -- I've always, you know, tweeted about and am really delighted to hear them at conferences and other social spaces as well as at home, at work, at play.

And so by way of introduction, I'm not going to flatter them too much by reading these very long and labored bios that are on their websites. But I do suggest that you check out Mary L. Gray.org, the "L," of course, stands for lesbian? I don't know. I'm just joking with you. We're going to joke a little bit today.

And tressiemc.com. I highly recommend you check out their websites that have all of their work and everything. And I told them there would be a little bit of embarrassment, a little bit of cheese for today. On the MacArthur Foundation website, I'm going to read just the simple -- the simple text here under their awards.

But I want you to know that they are just pathmakers and breakers in their field. There's a way in which you're taught to be a scholar and you're taught to be pragmatic in the choice of your projects, you're taught to be careful in the ways in which you speak in public, and these two do it better than anyone I know.

Not, like, to demean everybody else I know, but, I mean, pretty big shoes to fill. So Tressie is known for shaping discourse on highly topical issues at the confluence of race, gender, education and digital technology for broad audiences.

And I highly recommend if you haven't gotten a chance to read her book Lower Ed to take a look at that because it is a phenomenal, close ethnography in the way in which privatized education and the business of education as it becomes digital takes really -- takes big advantage of the most vulnerable.

And Mary's bio here says, Mary is known for investigating the ways in which labor, identity and human rights are transformed by the digital economy. And her book Ghost Work was

something of a labor of love as she put it together and crafted the different narratives around how we should understand where humans fall into the loop between technology and how work gets carried out.

She also has a really great body of work early on about gay -- gay youth, LGBTQ youth in rural contexts. And I think that's where I first got to know her public scholarship because nobody was studying that at the time. It was just not a huge field. And as well with Tressie's work in sociology, I'm sure none of the sociologists would be shocked to hear this, but studying the things that happened online ten years ago sounded really far afield from what you would want to do

If you wanted to land yourself a job. And Tressie's work hasn't just been about lower ed or the educational transformation through the digital world but has also been really about building a field of digital sociologies and bringing everybody to the table that has been doing this work for quite some time, despite, you know, chair committees and reviewer 2 asking the very same question over and over, which is does social media even matter?

Does technology even matter for the reorganization of society? Can't we just do this without technology? And I think that Mary's work also has been confronted by very similar critique without evidence, where in anthropology, you know, the way in which you study technology has to be connected to the everyday practices of people as they deal with, you know, regimes of digitization.

Welcome, my friends.

How's it going?

Tressie McMillan Cottom: It's going pretty good. Hey. I tell people when they ask me that lately, I'll go, are you kidding? What do you mean, how's it going?

[Laughter]

It's great! Everything's great! Even the things that aren't great are great. I'm not an optimist by nature, but even I wake up on the right side of the bed these days.

>> Joan: Good.

>> Tressie: Good to see you all.

>> Joan: Yeah, it is. Mary?

>> Mary Gray: This is what I have to do to get in the same room with Joan and Tressie at the same time. This is really high bar. I can't keep this bar.

>> Joan: Yeah? No? No? I had to embarrass you first, but there will be plenty more to come. I actually think it's important, though, that we do talk a little bit about the ways in which our identities are part of our entry into our fields of scholarship.

Especially as we talk about early careers and our choices that we make in deciding, you know, I'm sure there's a lot of graduate students listening, and they receive different kinds of advice about, you know, following your passion versus following trends in the fields and how important certain kinds of methods are going to be.

Like in my day, it was big data. If you didn't know how to do big data, you weren't going to get a job. And I was, like, I don't really care. Like, it's not driving me to want to know more. I want to know people in their individual situations.

So I'd love to hear a bit about your early career research choices and the balance of picking a project that you're going to, you know, really love to hate by the end of it and how that has really shaped part of your entry point into your new work which we'll get to in a little bit. Whoever wants to go first.

>> Mary: Tressie, do you want me to --

>> Tressie: Mary, you go. It's that question -- we get a version of this a lot. I know Mary does. Who frankly has been out there sort of, you know, creating a conversation certainly longer than I have. And I've been in the rooms where students have come just to ask Mary basically that question.

Which is how do you survive, right? And then when you ground that in identity, the question of survival is actually about more than just professional success. I think people are quite literally asking us, how do I survive? Me, the person before we even get to, like, being the thinker or whatever.

And, you know, my answer for that is a really complicated one, which I'm not sure people really like. I think people want a, you know, Chicken Soup For the Soul kind of answer. And there isn't one, I don't think.

So the first thing -- I had a dissertation adviser, Rick Rubenson very early on. He's just a really practical guy, which was perfect for me. . He's very pragmatic. He was just very, like, you'll be fine. And as someone -- when you're living in a constant state of high anxiety, that's so thrilling.

And so I go to Rick's office, you know, spinning out. And he'd go, eh, you'll probably be okay. And it was just so nice to hear. But one thing he told me about, you know, choosing a project. And I can't say he was thinking about the identity piece.

But he did help me understand what a commitment it was to choose your project. I mean, when you choose a project by a committee, I tell people it's like choosing a spouse by committee.

>> Mary: Yeah.

>> Tressie: Because that's how you're living with it. And Rick was, no, you need to choose something -- people are asking to ask you about this for 20 years.

>> Mary: Yeah.

>> Tressie: And nobody had sort of put that frame of reference together for me. And, you know, that helped me a lot. It helped me understand the risk of choosing what I was going to do.

Because it's a different risk assessment, to my mind, if you're saying it's something I'll do for three, four years. I'll get the project out of the way and move on. But when you tell me it's something I've got to live with for 20 years, that changes the game for me. I wish we talked about career not as your first job but as your last job.

What do you still want to be doing on your last job?

>> Mary: Yeah. I like that reframing of it because I think in many ways, I have maybe the benefit -- and now it feels like a benefit, but going into graduate school before I understood this was a job or was a career path, the program that I went to, UC-San Diego Communication, the Communication Department, for the most part was a setting for misfit toys.

Like, it was folks who were coming to graduate school because they had political questions they wanted to answer or to address, at the very least. But I don't know how many people at the time how many of us thought were being developed for a career track. I think some people were just more aware of that than I was.

And so I feel like in a good way through most of my graduate training, I didn't understand that I was making a decision to live with something for my natural-born days. I mean, it's like Free Bird, you know, when people contact you and want to talk about, you know, your earliest work. I love that work, but I like that -- your point.

Like, I can't even imagine settling on a topic based on following what I think a committee might be warm to. And at the same time, when I started my academic career, it was quite startling to realize I did need to explain it in terms that were going to be palatable, that would have a clean narrative about this is why I study what I study, because I also think that when you follow those trends,

That narrative is kind of handed to us, right? So it's really working without a net to follow what feels like personally, I mean, Joan, to your question and point, like, these questions are deeply personal, incredibly important to me, and that means I'm always pursuing them with a certain kind of peat and charge, then I take it personally when people aren't, you know,

Invested in them in the same way. And that can mean I've got enough energy to keep going, but it's also quite draining. So I think -- I love your point. When people approach you and say how do I survive this, they really are thinking, I think, about that similar sense of you're doing this because you know it's important, and there are folks who don't think it's important, and how do you deal with

That constant friction of pushing and pulling these topics along. .

>> Joan: You know, I ask you this because I think it's important to set expectations for people that are in these fields that want their work to be seen, want it to be read, and to know that it's okay to question the advice that you get along the way. It's okay to think about what paths are going to be important to you.

You know, I'm one of the unfortunate sociologists that have never been able to really land an article in a sociology journal because they just don't -- you know, there's just, like, this kind of way of writing, kind of way of doing things, the approach. Our award-winning article white supremacist use of DNA was rejected several times from very prominent journals before we found a place to publish.

And I do think, though, there is an expectation in some respects, especially when you're doing work that matters is that it's going to defy some of the conventions of the discipline. It's going to make the discipline have to think about where it grounds its priorities. I'm thinking here, too, about Coleman's work on hackers, you know, and how that fits into the anthropological landscape, which I'm sure it's very uncomfortable.

Right? But you do have to balance that curiosity with also thinking about everybody else and how your work is going to land in this world if you are doing things that are both interdisciplinary and may eventually end up affecting either corporate policy or government policy.

Can you speak a little bit do that balance of, I have some questions, some maybe more esoteric than others, but how do you balance that study where you think about where do I go deep, and how do I then take what I've learned and make it generalizable and understood well enough that people who are practicing in these fields could take this knowledge and potentially even redesign the way they operate?

>> Tressie: I never imagined talking as much as I do to policy people, which may have helped. I mean, I just -- it's just not my jam. I mean, God bless the people who do that work. But it's just

not my jam. And so -- but my first job was in Richmond, Virginia. So I was within, like, a stone's throw of D.C. So it was just, like, a geographic convenience.

And then the second thing is that I was doing this thing that was really present, you know, it was a present-tense sort of project. And so much of it was unfolding in the policy work. So I ended up talking to policy people.

And also it was a learning curve. There was probably less of a learning curve for me talking to publics, and even talking to other sociologists. While it's always going to be weird and stilted, eventually, I think, got that genre of how do it.

Speaking to policymakers was actually not as natural to me. The things that I thought -- and what I finally figured out is that even when we agreed on the end, we were starting from such different ideological points of view, there are different ideologies under our shared ideology of, like, yeah, we might be progressive and yes, we believe in these basic democratic principles or something.

But let me just be even more concrete than that because I'm trying to be kind and maybe it's okay if I'm not.

[Laughter]

You know, and I think I'm there to talk about the work that I do. And my work is absolutely just grounded in a set of basic assumptions, which is that black people are human. Black women are rational. That women's economic lives matter. That constrain choices, are political decisions and we can just make different political decisions, right?

So they would agree on the parts where, like, yes, you know. Profit extraction is predatory. But they're not getting to the room and realize they didn't share any of my other priors.

>> Mary: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

>> Tressie: So it took me a while to understand that even when we were sharing the language, we were not sharing ideological priors. And I had to make some decisions about how much of that I wanted to do. And I do it now, not because I feel responsible to the policy world, I do it because I feel responsible to the people whose lives I've used, you know, as data, that it matters that I'm in that room on their behalf to the extent that I can be.

And so, you know, I'll take an "L" for the team. But I still at not always sure speaking to policy people. But, you know, we're sociologists and I get it. I don't want to be one of those people that becomes precious about power.

>> Mary: Mm-hmm.

>> Tressie: This is how it works. And I'm always befuddled by sociologists, especially, who want to pretend that status and power don't shape our own work. So I really try to, like, you know, keep a check on myself about becoming too precious to deal in policy circles and conversations. Because that is where power is often negotiated. And that is shaping people's lives about the things that I have said I care about.

So I do it and try to learn the genre and try to participate in the -- in that discourse and conversation so I think I can do it in a way that's variable and doesn't compromise me too much. But, yeah, I do it because I just think that's our fundamental responsibility when we extract people's experiences from them.

Like, I can't always, because of the nature of what I do, I can't always have, you know, do some of the full-circle research processes where you bring the data back to the community and et cetera. Do it to the extent that I can.

But I can't always. So I have this think about sort of, like, broader public way of having a check on the ethics of my research. And that's one of the ways I try to do it, by going out into, like, public policy circles.

But I'll be honest with you, I'm still a little uneasy about it, but to be fair, I want to stay uneasy about it. I don't want to feel comfortable in those rooms.

>> Mary: Actually, I love -- I mean, I think it's making sure those rooms still feel unsettling to me is my way of checking where I'm at. And I think, like, Tressie, for me I know how much I owe the people that I've learned from for all of my work.

Like, I owe them to be able to be in a room and interest their interests and voice their concerns. Like, that's always in the back of my mind. Like, I have what I have, and I'm able to do what I'm able to do because they gave me their time, quite literally.

To share their experiences, to let me in their lives. And so I do feel a sense of not just -- probably responsibility and debt, quite literally. So I feel like certainly that's my sense of Tressie's power in these conversations is that she's bringing the public into settings where they really are excluded by structural oppression.

And so being able to come into -- and a policymaker should resonate with publics, and they don't. They often don't share those priors. They really do have -- it's quite -- it's still quite surprising how much they work with an assumption that's demeaning and belittling of the people they -- they're there to either represent or to serve in some capacity.

And, yeah. I feel like being able to be in those settings and not leave them unsettled with their own assumptions is actually -- maybe that's part of the job. But, yeah. I couldn't agree more. Like, folks who feel like it's -- that they're somehow outside of those course of power or that they can rise above it all. Like, that just drives me bananas.

>> Tressie: Me, too. I can almost get absent-minded, you know, and don't notice it, but the people that think they're above it. That one's the personal affront to me. Of course, because, you know, not all of us can choose to be above it. And so. . . Mm-hmm.

>> Mary: Yeah.

>> Joan: I agree with you and I feel that same uneasiness when I am called into rooms that aren't fluent in the debates that I'm fluent in with the kinds of disciplinary commitments that we make and also they haven't done their homework. I mean, they literally have not read.

But some of their aides and some of their staff have, and that's why we end up there.

>> Tressie: Oh, the aides save it for me. Because the aides tend to be younger and more diverse than the candidates or, you know, in the policy world, you know, the talking head or the lead researcher.

Yeah, it's the aides. Really, they -- who often get -- and will be honest with me. They'll go, listen, we are trying to get them to see X.

>> Mary: And these are our students, right? These are our students.

>> Tressie: Yep, yep, yep. They're usually fresh out of a program -- yeah. That -- yeah.

>> Joan: What I often tell my students at HKS in the policy school, I say, you know, power really lies in that middle range with the people who get you in front of the people who say they matter, right? And even with corporations, too. If you want to move policy within corporations, you really want to talk to people who are in that middle range that understand the complexity and then also know which levers they've got to pull to make things happen.

Before I get to the next question, I do want to let people know we're using the chat function. Feel free to drop a Q&A in, and I will ask the question if it's, you know, going to help us move the conversation along as we do this. So please feel free. And you two sit tight. You don't have to read those things. I'll take care of it. That's my job as moderator.

[Laughter]

>> Tressie: Ignore the comments.

>> Joan: Ignore the excellents, you know.

>> Mary: If I go in there, I just start trolling.

>> Joan: Mary in the background is posting as anonymous attendee. What kind of shampoo do you use? Why does your hair look so good today? Yeah. Really. Or, you know, our spouses sometimes will pop up in the comments. Can you come out --

>> Mary: Come down and feed the cat.

>> Joan: Yeah. You know. Let's pivot a little bit to talk about your new works and the new places you have found yourself. Especially as we think about -- we talked a little bit about the support that you've gotten from mentors and colleagues, but both of you are in, you know, different positions. Tressie just made a very big move over to UNC, is going to be really pushing that institution to think more deeply about the work that is -- that is foundational to her scholarship.

But also be mentoring probably some of the best scholars in the field as they learn from her. And Mary, you're situated at Microsoft Research where you do quite a bit of teaching and education around ethics and getting people to understand that you don't just drop a new technology in this world without really thinking about, you know, how to land the plane.

And so I'd love to talk a little bit about these new projects, things that are happening or on the horizon, ways in which, you know, your current book *Ghost Work*, for instance, how that has changed the direction and the course of the research moving forward.

So I'll start with you, Mary, and then we'll go to Tressie.

>> Mary: Yeah. So that work is a collaboration with computer scientists at R3. And it was -- it was really the first time, you know, I really moved out of the comfort in some ways of doing ethnological, ethnographic work and focused on folks experiencing technologies that were clearly not built for them. They were clearly not who technologists had in mind.

And, again, the folks who built these technologies did not have workers in mind. They were thinking, we're just going to build software that can, you know, manage what workers might be doing and then sell it as software that doesn't involve people at all.

So much of the, you know, the what follows from that project is to keep raising this question of what assumptions are we making about who can value these technologies, who can get something out of them, and what are the obligations of companies building technologies to -- to the folks who they imagine will be either end users -- I hate that phrase --

Or consumers and to see more broadly, you know, these are not objects. These are not, you know, technologies aren't, you know, CD-ROMs in shrink-wrapped boxes on a shelf anymore. They are really social environments. And so what are the obligations that come with building social connections and environments?

I mean, I think we are genuinely at the beginning of that collective conversation, to see technologies as conduits connecting us. That's now mainstreaming. I mean, I think we're still stuck in these conversations about it being it being addictive. Like, I will be so happy when we turn a corner and start talking about us.

What do we want to do with these opportunities to connect in different ways? But that, you know, for me, that means continuing to push what are the ways in which work environments that are happening through ways of distributing contract-based work are done with awareness of the employment conditions, the work conditions, the opportunities that they are going to produce and constraint.

It won't be one or the other. It's always going to be both. So what are we doing here when we think about technologies as sites of employment and not go to easy answers. I hate easy answers. Like something that really keeps us on the hook for what that means as companies decide their procurement of formulae.

Boring stuff like that. That I find fascinating. Like, what is this new supply chain, that language? You know, how do we -- how do we really think the ways in which we've treated contingent labor as disposable? How do we rethink everything about our valuing of service to each other, if we're in a world of service economies.

And the more immediate thing I'm working on is actually around COVID-19 and what it means to think about telehealth from this perspective. If we think of, you know, whether it's caring for an elderly parent in prompting them to take their medication, that that can now be a kind of work that creates opportunities and certainly serves a need in society.

So what's going to -- what's going to maximize the way in which that becomes sustainable for the people doing it and for the person who's receiving the consumable service of that kind of care. Like, what does that look like in the thick of this pandemic?

>> Joan: And, you know, I can't appreciate more the ways in which you're able to make science and technology studies sound so digestible, especially as you just talked through that project. In my head, I'm hearing echoes of Susan Lee Starr and as well as Tom Bellstorf and other friends and fam from the field and that attention to the ways in which we're shaped by the study of boring things, right?

If I told people all I really care about is how infrastructure connects together and how that changes the way people do things in the world, people would be, like, your scholarship is so boring, right?

But the point is to figure out how to connect those theories and ideas and concepts and then evolve them as conditions change like the different kinds of study that we have to do in the midst of a pandemic that feel nonnegotiable in the sense that if we don't deal with the ways in

which people are relating to one another through technology, then we're susceptible to all other kinds of problems including capture by the market.

And one story about when I first met you, me and Kevin Driscoll drove down from L.A. to the big conference being hosted by Jeff Bowker and Tom over at UC-Irvine.

>> Mary: Oh, my gosh, that's right.

>> Joan: You had an amazing slide deck that day. Just chef's kiss and you talked about data being people and not to forget that. It's just been something that I've kept with me as I think about those moments around we shouldn't treat people as data being circulated through these technologies.

We do have to move from the it to the us if we are going to make a difference.

>> Mary: Can I even say it's more pressing in the thick of a pandemic because data capture, that's we're in the middle of a pandemic is gut-wrenching. That we are still so able to fall for the story that if we just have enough -- enough data, that that will solve the problem means that we're not paying attention to people who are sick.

We're literally just trying -- and trying to make them, you know, healthy again. We're focused on can I get the data from those three hospitals that seemed to be the site of, you know, huge events? They're not even seeing the people and the families connected to those bodies.

And it's just, like, I can't even talk about it without getting angry. But that's -- you know, I think for me right now, that's the most pressing thing is to get people to stop repeating this belief that, oh, you can just divorce data from people, and that's the cleaner way of learning what you need to do next, that there's some extraction that can -- abstraction that literally means we'll get to the bottom of things because we don't have to interact with people.

>> Joan: You should blame sociologists for that. That's on us for some of it, anyway.

>> Mary: No. It's a teeny bit but, you know (Indiscernible) --

>> Joan: There's a whole field that loves to play that game of making individuals into aggregates. And speaking of sociologists, Tressie I'm not going to let you off the hook here. You just made a big change. You are now a host, a cohost, of an incredible podcast. You have a new book out, *Thick and Other Essays*, and you're at a new institution.

So I'd love to get the update on you from, you know, where things are transitioning and how you're thinking about your research in this moment.

>> Tressie: At the end of Lower Ed, I talked to a few hundred students and for-profit colleges about how people perceive their credentials which is really questions about their aspirations

and their constrained choices and the gap between what they think they're doing and what they can ascertain other people think that they are doing, because somewhere in between the two are where constrained decisions. And they are overwhelmingly women because most students in that sector are women and \$190,0

In student loan debt. They're in an online for-profit Ph.D. program in clinical psychology or organizational psychology or any of the health sciences or in education. Those are the leading ones. Of the health degrees and education degrees, we created that mess. And they would say, oh, well, if people don't think, you know, I qualify for a job, I don't get the promotion I'm going after, this thing doesn't turn into the occupational mobility I think that it should, I'll just go into business

At the same time, I'm going back and forth to D.C. and all these other policy places and structurally the way policy is made is that you do higher education and you do workforce development. And the two actually rarely speak to each other.

They're rarely the same people. But one of the things that technological change does -- and it happened with the telephone, it happened with the railroad -- this part isn't new. Scale and efficiency are new. But the underlying social relations which is anything that networks the globe more tightly to each other, one of the things that that technological change does is more tightly couples things like credentials and work.

So the way that we govern and make policy and understand those things as being distinct is a holdover from, like, the early 20th century model where you either go to school or you go to work. Right?

You're either getting a certificate that says you are qualified to do this thing at a school, or you're going to work and getting hands-on experience.

. And those are even sometimes thought of as separate subdivisions of the labor market. Right? As if they are governed by entirely different rules and assumptions.

But one of the things that digital technologies had done is it was collapsing. It always been or had been for quite some time and was collapsing. And I just kind of couldn't let go of the idea that I wondered what happened to those women when they went out there and decided to quote/unquote work for themselves.

Because here's the story about women trying to work for themselves. You don't do it -- women by and large don't go into business for themselves no matter what the narratives about girl boss are, you know, all those kinds of things.

We're usually pushed into entrepreneurship. It is not the pull of entrepreneurship. It is the push out of the paid labor market. The push gets stronger the browner and poorer you are.

You know, by the time you're, like, a black trans woman, you're actually being kicked, you know. The shove becomes, you know, kicking the ass out of the paid labor market.

And so entrepreneurship is doing something very similar to my mind of what higher education attainment had been doing the last 20 years, which is we had written this narrative of economic opportunity to cover up a more efficient regime of predation and abstraction. So what we told people for 30 years as it became almost impossible to move from the income quintile of birth or basically to earn more than your parents over their lifetime to move up, become

Almost impossible for people the last 30 years because we just told everybody to go to college.

>> Mary: Right.

>> Tressie: So we've written a narrative of economic opportunity out of what was potentially a structural problem of extraction and predation and we're doing the same thing with these conversations of entrepreneurship. And when I talk about it, one of the things I want to do is move this conversation -- one of the things I'm working on doing -- is moving that conversation so narrowly out of.

Job work, you know, job-focused work. As important as that literature in, the gig economy literature, is to that work, I come from, you know, a different understanding of black political economy where all of the underlying social relations of something like Uberization has been true for black workers since they entered the paid labor market.

So I call it the hustle economy, and that's just to try to get at a broader set of social relations, and particularly try to capture the work that women are doing. Because what women's work increasingly looks like, especially during COVID, we're just seeing a sort of distillation or crystallization of it is when women are being pushed out of the paid labor market, there's also a pull at them back into the private sphere.

So the economic activity is happening in these places that aren't marketed as economic platforms, right? So when you're making money on eBay, this, we understand. It's an auction. Right? And we've got all the economic rules. We know how that goes.

Well, what happens when that economic activity happens on Instagram instead? Which, by the way, happens a ton. Instagram is actually one of the most popular economic platforms for women who are doing microentrepreneurship. And we do not think of it as an economic platform.

So one of the things that we're doing with that work, my move to UNC, is sort of building on what the hustle economy looks like. We're doing a study right now. Our timing was just fortuitous in that we started speaking to women the week before the very first shutdowns happened at the start of the U.S. response to COVID.

And so what we've been able to do is kind of follow them through the cycles of grief, as we call it. The cycles of grief that are basically happening because everybody was gung ho the first couple weeks. Talking to women who have totally bought into, you know, I work for myself. Again, girl boss, lady boss.

Boss boss boss up, all these wonderful terms. Somebody should do a paper on those, by the way. And, you know, this is their time to shine. They're getting ready to rock 'n' roll. They hustle! You catch them about three weeks later when that child care has kicked in, three more weeks after that when it becomes increasingly clear that social policy is not coming.

Right? That there will not be another stimulus check, et cetera. When the partners that they had in their lives who maybe understood their hustle six months earlier suddenly become less understanding. And the gender divisions of labor become more stark. And so we're just following those right now over time.

But as part of sort of a bigger project of what happens if we understand women's economic lives as being indicators of how all of our occupational lives are changing and our delimited by these structural changes in how little occupational mobility and income mobility is possible.

And we're starting with the narratives of the lives we start to tell, first of all. What happens is the minute that becomes branded as economic opportunity, it mobilizes a whole set of policy assumptions but also intellectual assumptions.

About who's doing it and how that works and what the rules are. And I think much like Lower Ed, I think the rules have changed, and nobody was keeping their eye on the ball. So I'm doing that -- more importantly I think in the short term is I think I'm writing about Dolly Parton, and that's super important.

>> Joan: Tell me more. Like, you're just, like, this is how you end your podcast, right? Is, like, and tune in next week.

[Laughter]

>> Tressie: If I've got to explain why writing about Dolly Parton is critical --

>> Joan: I'm with you. I've got albums. She's got albums full of truth. Like, I'm ready. I'm ready.

>> Tressie: I realized I had never done it, and I thought sh I should do that. So one of the first or second or third thing that happened to me after they call you is, like, damn, I can do anything I want to do. And so what do I want to do? And what I wanted to do was write about Dolly Parton, so that's what I'm doing.

>> Joan: That's amazing. I think that it's important, too, that we not rule out the role that culture plays in setting those ideas of what our goals can be, what people do. I have a friend and colleague Kelly Neilsen who's got some new research out about education. I think, Tressie, I think you blurred the book and this idea that if you've got a bunch of nurses in your family.

You're probably going to grow up to be a nurse, right? And so the ways in which people learn and have role models and have interactions with different culture, the way in which they're motivated by music especially is really important way of understanding how people end up in these positions and how they rationalize what's happening around them and how they can communicate with their friends and family about that.

We have some interesting questions in the chat. I'm going to try to roll some together. One from a person who could very easily take any one of our roles here, at least Anakamura who is asking about --

>> Tressie: (Indiscernible).

>> Joan: Like, Lisa's watching. Everybody get -- straighten up in your chair, you know. Lisa has been sort of one of those people that's been doing this forever and has inspired us.

But one of the questions is about this notion of, like, how do you center people who are unseen in your research and how do you take account of the way in which their practices -- you know, inform other policy or other ways in which we should be paying attention, right?

This is a question about the ways in which we often overlook and want to get at things that are a bit more mainstream. But if you study people that are not marginal but living on the margins that are doing -- that are living in a kind of brick allage world where they're taking things and repurposing them and making it work, how do you translate that into more bigger-picture stakes in the work that you do?

And then we have a couple of different questions about COVID, but I'm going to hold off on those. But thinking about that you know, making the folks that are often less visible, putting them in the center of the work that you're doing. How does that -- how does that really impact both the field and potentially at least in the U.S. anyway, our way of doing things?

>> Mary: I mean, it's funny because I used to -- I don't know if I joked about it -- but I feel like part of my career has been finding the people that people think are hard to find. And they're not hard to find. We don't look for them. And so, you know, I think in many ways the politics of visibility for me -- and I certainly learned this from my adviser -- it's about looking at the construction of who's seen and not seen. Like, how is that amplified? How is it muted?

And to see that as power moves all the way through. And people contending with those power moves. Sometimes being less seen is a safer place to be. So centering -- and I love that question, Lisa, because I feel like centering their experience, it starts withdrawing the reader's

attention to reflect on why they are hearing something or hearing from someone they've never heard from before.

That's about them. That's not about those people. So particularly for the most recent project, like -- and I really got a lot out of comparing the U.S. and India because in so many ways being able to draw attention to these workers who know each other, are connected to each other, that was probably the most mind-blowing thing for my colleagues and co-author was, wow, they connect with each other.

And that is the most obvious thing that people would connect with each other, to be able to survive and navigate work settings where they are not just discouraged from connecting but technically blocked in most cases from connecting.

That they would see each other and that they would be forming as many opportunities as possible to connect with each other. They are not invisible. There's nothing invisible about them. It's the construction of their seeing right through them, of not seeing their experience. That's the thing. Like, I think that's, for me, what I'm centering is attention to -- for, again, the reader to see the assumptions they're making about who is there, who they expect to see, what they expect to see fro

And I wanted to circle back. I think from Lower Ed, I really learned from Tressie thinking, skill. I stopped really using that word in any uncritical way after your work, precisely because -- you know, especially the idea that education is about skilling up and what people are missing is they haven't skilled up enough. How insulting. How completely we are missing the construction of who achieves and where they move in life and how we've hooked it to this idea of self-improvement.

That education is this, you know, this way of getting the right skills and that that somehow can lead to particular outcomes. Well, it's the whole story we've been telling about how concrete skills are as little blocks we acquire that is the problem. Like, how do we -- how do we challenge that?

So center -- I feel like that, to me, is for any project, I think I've done, that it's centering that through the experience of people who themselves are living that and are swimming in that story as well. And not dismissing, you know, their sense that they are lacking something or that they need to acquire these skills. Like, I take at face value their belief that that's true.

And I can still critique that we all are asked to believe these things. And, yeah.

>> Joan: Love that idea, too, of, like, finding the people that people say you can't find them, because, yeah. They're everywhere.

It's just nobody's asking, right? Nobody's looking. Tressie?

>> Tressie: Yeah, I say the same thing. I think there's something about the idea -- I hate this whole construct of the hidden history of X or the secret we didn't know which, of course, is a popularization of the idea that there's such a thing as an official archive and that the archive is definitive and authoritative.

When all of it is, of course, just a negotiation of social constructions and ideologies and money. I always like to throw that one in there because I don't want to get too far away from the fact that the money matters. The money matters.

And when I talked about -- I said to someone yesterday, like, it's not hard for me to center black people in my work because I think black people are human beings. And so --

[Laughter]

-- My job is to study -- that's actually the easiest part of my work. I think the question for me is like, why is that so hard for you? When she gets to Mary's point which it's not about the centering of the people so much for me about centering the eyes that are seeing in that if I focus on why is this so phenomenal to you, that you get to sort of, like, the everyday life of social distance and the everyday life.

That, to me, we talk about how we make and remake racism and sexism and classism. And I go, you know, it quite literally is in your choice of seeing.

>> Mary: Yeah.

>> Tressie: And so, yeah, it's just so not ever hard. It is harder for me to locate in others, the presumed reader or who I'm trying to convince with the argument. It is harder for me to locate the weakness in their assumptions than it is for me to center people that I think are human beings in my own work.

That is for me the intellectual exercise of me -- you know, it is kind of what makes it challenging and therefore enjoyable to me because I'm easily bored. I'm so easily bored. So I have to find a challenge. And one of the challenges for me creatively is when I find that -- when I find that moment, when I find that weakness in the presumed readers' ideological assumptions and argument and I worm my way in there.

I mean, one of the greatest -- I don't want to say compliment because there are other compliments that mean a lot to me personally. But one that I will say the most gratifying reader responses I get is that white men love to write me. I mean, I just can't fathom how much free time they have.

I mean, God bless them. But, you know, I get so many letters. Not a week has gone by, for example, that hasn't come out, and they overwhelmingly start the same way. I know I'm not your audience, but.

I know I'm not your audience, but you actually taught me something. I know I'm not your audience, but you made me consider. And it's fascinating to me how similar the construction of that is across a categorical group of people because I think what they are saying is you made me care about something that I have a lot of incentives not to care about.

And what it usually signals to me is I found the most basic unit of shared humanity in an argument. That means I kind of got -- I found the weakness in their own ideological scaffolding. And so that often means that the craft of the argument worked. And so it's enjoyable for that reason.

And also just, like, really fascinating how surprised they are to have found in themselves, because they think they're flattering me, but they're flattering themselves. They have found some new dimension of their own humanity by acknowledging that other people are human in the same way they are human.

So that's the reason why it's worth doing. And then it's also just, I think, worth doing if I do nothing else in the public anyway, in public's what I try to do, is model what it looks like to take us seriously.

What does it look like if we actually lived the principle of humanism? What does it actually mean for me to think that black lives matter or that black intellectuals are worthwhile or, you know, that women's lives are worthwhile, and their intellectual energies are worthwhile.

And if I just model that then that's always worth it for me.

>> Joan: I couldn't agree more. And it's a very -- it's a very difficult thing to hone an argument style, and that's one of the things that I find both very compelling and admirable almost to the point of envy of the works that you put together is that the stories feel like you're being led along a journey around a very particular lived experience.

That then it becomes incredibly illuminating for how structure and agency tend to struggle with one another, right? So I'm not going to close out by asking you to fix society and just tell me exactly what we need to do to make sure that, like, people start reading you more getting this. I think society has always been a process, not a product.

And the way that we approach this world should be with the possibility for change. And so I would love to hear from you a little bit, though, as we close about gratitude. And to talk maybe about one or two people in your lives that have really sustained you as a scholar has fed you when you refused to put the computer down and go to bed.

And just, you know, speak back to folks about, you know, recognizing the unseen labor in our lives that make sure that we do hang up the phone eventually and come to bed.

Just because I think that it's an enormous and -- I couldn't agree with MacArthur more, an enormous recognition of the work that you all have brought into this world and cultivated over years and years and years of deep thinking.

But I know it ain't all about you. And so if you want to just recognize someone or a few people in your life that have really made sure that you are able to do that work. We'll start with you, Mary.

>> Mary: My partner, Katherine Guthrie, who's read every word I've ever tried to write, and not always in most cases not that willingly, but was willing to do that. And we've been together 22 years. I feel incredibly humbled and fortunate that I've had that support, and I feel I fit that statistic about academic partners who have somebody in the background who's supporting them. Like, I'm painfully aware that, you know, it's a privilege to have that support.

You know, social media collective has been incredibly nurturing precisely because it lets me Rome. So I have to give a shoutout to the folks in that collective. And honestly, a group of old friends who, you know, at different moments, I really didn't know this was a job, and I really didn't think it was a job for me.

And having people along the way who said, we're going to love you. They weren't in this job in this racket either. And they literally said, we're going to love you the same. You don't have to keep doing this.

>> Tressie: Yeah.

>> Mary: And I think one of the most valuable things I ever heard was from really good friends who said you don't have to finish your dissertation. That's not important. That doesn't tell us to love you less, so I could finish the dissertation. And the same thing happened with the first book. The same thing happened with the next book and the book after that.

So, like, you know, there before the grace. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing any of this.

>> Tressie: One of my mother's favorite sayings, there before the grace of God.

[Laughter]

Yeah, I'm a product -- you know, I come from a community people. I come from a village people. That's just the way we get down. I don't understand myself as a -- I mean, some of this is also about, you know, I've recently moved home. North Carolina's home for me. My parents are getting older. So I'm very emotional about these things right now. I think I feel in just a very concrete emotional way.

My ties to generational lineages and generational community, to my family and to place. So, like, I am a product of an inherited set of ideas and beliefs and, like, women who just made decisions at really important political junctures that just changed everything.

That just changed everything. I think about -- I have a book upstairs. The letter that -- and in the book is -- it's a 1990 copyright -- a 1919 geography book, and it was my great-grandmother's that she had gotten from one of the children's schools because she herself didn't finish the eighth grade.

And so she was clearly tutoring herself at home through her grandkids' school books.

And you can see her notes throughout the geography book. And in the back is a letter that was sent from an employment agency in New York, Harlem, to, you know, poor black rural communities throughout the South, throughout the great migration, encouraging the women to come north and do domestic labor to change their families' economic lives, and it's a letter that was sent.

And my grandmother and her sister answered that call and went to New York. And I just think about these really portentous moments, made them seem like individual choices, but, like, every single one of those shaped and made me possible, so I think about them a lot so much these days.

And what a kick they would get out of how those choices manifested in me. They would just think it was remarkable that so many white people listen to me. They would certainly think that's hilarious. But I also think they would just be deeply proud of the fact that their choices had lived on in these sort of generational ways, and I hope I pay those forward.

And my friends, I mean, I do have some of the best friends, and my friends are like my family which is what happens when you're an old child. So to call them a friend is an understatement. In many ways my closest friends are my siblings and who said to me at every point in this juncture when it was not clear that the decisions I just knew were the right decisions for me were the decisions that other people would honor who just said to me every step of the way --

And they still say to me, you have never made a wrong decision for yourself. Why are you doing this today? Like, you've never made -- and they keep me grounded in this sort of, like, my own historical narrative, right? And so often give me the confidence when it's most lagging to make the choices that I think are the best choices for me that honor what I believe in.

And then, you know, I'd be run out of here if I didn't name my mother, Vivian, and all of those people.

>> Joan: She's a bit of a meme.

>> Tressie: A bit of a meme, yeah. There's going to be a documentary one day about that woman becoming a meme. I'd be run out of town if I didn't acknowledge her. And if I didn't acknowledge and I had an opportunity to see some of them recently because, again, one of the great things about being home is seeing so many of the people who play important roles in your life.

One of them is a professor at my undergraduate institutions, the first person who forced me to go online. So actually, you can blame a colleague for everything that has happened after that point. She forced me to start a blog for a group writing assignment.

And look what the hell happened.

[Laughter]

>> Joan: You're going to get thank you notes now. Exactly. Exactly. Way ahead. Way ahead of the rest of them. I want to say thank you to you both for entertaining me for this hour and to Berkman Klein Center for hosting us. I think it's really important that your work is acknowledged for what it really is, which is a big, steaming pile of intelligence.

Okay? I know it's so hard to take a compliment.

[Laughter]

But I tell you, I can't recommend your work enough to people in the field and then also just the ways in which you comport yourselves and the graduate students, the mentorship that you provide to people in the field, the opportunities that you open up for everyone.

It doesn't go unnoticed. I being one of the early beneficiaries of a flight out to social media collective all so many years ago. And I just want to say that as you're, you know, now fully recognized as geniuses, you know, let Katherine and Vivian know as they're telling you politely to take out the garbage and keeping you grounded in your worlds.

Thank you --

>> Tressie: Keeping us grounded? Is that what we call it? Joan: Yeah. I often think about what people would think of me if they saw me sleeping on the floor of the airport as often as I've had to do it. You know, they'd be, like, oh, John Donvan, world-renowned scholar and airport sleeper, right? There's always a little bit of humility with the humor.

But, again, thank you so much for spending this hour with us. I couldn't have had, you know, a better person to cheers. And so thank you and I will see some of you sooner than later. And let's keep it live online. Everybody feel free to put in their mentions, compliments and that you enjoyed the talks today. Thank you.