00:04 Iane Romero: You're listening to Between, Across, and Through.

00:22 IR: Researchers often try to answer a small aspect of a really big question. Individual research becomes a part of a body of work that analyzes and explains the mechanics of our world. Sometimes so, topics are so complex that the only thing you can really do is ask more questions, questions that will guide and organize future research, and that can become a research project of its very own. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, speaks to Professor Tania Li, from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, to talk about the kind of questions you have to ask when doing research on the idea of the proper job. Please join us as we travel between, across, and through.

01:15 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Hi, I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill and I'm speaking with Professor Tania Li. Welcome to the show. Tania, you're asking some really big questions. Where did they come from?

01:26 Professor Tania Li: Well, first of all, this is a project generated together with a colleague, Jim Ferguson at Stanford. And I think the origin of all of this was in 2010, both of us wrote pieces for a geography journal and we realized we'd kind of made the same argument but completely independently; something about collapse of work and what comes next. And me writing mainly about Asia; him writing mainly about Sub-Saharan Africa. So we'd sort of arrived at the same point through quite different trajectories, and so we decided to put our heads together and figure out so what does it mean that from vastly different continents... In my case, I was also teaching a class in the University of Toronto called Work, Welfare, and Distribution in Precarious Times, and I realized from dialogue with my students that they were in the same position; catastrophically worried about work and their future.

02:26 PO: And so you saw a parallel between your own research in Asia and your students here in Toronto.

02:32 PL: Yeah, and Jim's work in South Africa. It's like there's something going on here which we need to be concerned with.

02:38 PO: Is there anything in those preliminary moments that you could spot that was parallel? Was it just a set of anxieties or structural relations?

02:48 IR: Well, I think the literature coming out at the time was all about precarity and precarious work. But for people who work in the Global South, the response to that was, "Well, welcome to our world. We've always lived precariously." But that seemed, while correct, kind of not enough to end the conversation there. So we've always been precarious. There's nothing new. Well, there are
things which are new, both in the South and the North, and we thought that we needed a way to try to put our finger on. So what, in fact, is changing? And presumably, it's not changing in the same ways in all these different places, so one needs a framework where you can begin to get at the changing world of work and what it means in people's lives without being kind of overly linear, overly narrow in focus, but you still need a framework, right? You don't wanna be just in the dark.

03:42 PO: Yes. And what makes this question about work big is its scale, so that it comes from observations from Africa, Asia, here in Toronto. From your own work, what were some of the more specific examples or genesis of these bigger questions?

04:01 PL: Well, where I work in Asia, it's in a context where people... And I work in rural Asia, specifically, Indonesia, where people have relatively recently been losing access to land in the context of land grabs, heightened commodification of agriculture. So these are the kinds of people who one narrative says, "Well, the consequence of a land grab is everybody becomes a proletarian." And I'm thinking, "Well, you wish; they wish, but the jobs are not there." And it's not as if they can just march off to the city and get a job; these things don't exist. Cities are already stuffed with people who are more savvy than they are, who've adapted to the informal urban environment and found their niche. So for the people newly shoved off the land in Asia, this is a really scary moment.

04:55 PL: So there was that kind of side of it. But there's another story of Asia and it also exists in my field work, the young educated, unemployed. So these are the kinds of people who work for all the NGOs in Indonesia, the people I work with; they will have a degree, and they're creating the appearance of a job or they're certainly creating meaning in their lives through their activist work in the NGOs, but it's not what either they or their parents would consider a proper job; it's not salaried. Usually, they're sleeping in the back of the house and someone's providing food. So this was going on around me in my field side, I would say.

05:37 PO: And it does seem distantly familiar when I speak to students at the university, and I'm sure students in your course as well or classes as well. There is this sense of, "Well, what is the future of this work? And what does the future look like when it comes to earning money?"

05:54 PL: Yeah, I tried this out with my students in that class. On the one hand, we were reading historical and ethnographic accounts of this question of, "Well, when did work become the center of it all? When did we begin to peg our meaning and identity and our place in the world and our sense of adulthood on the job, the proper job? When did that happen historically? How has it been differentiated globally?" But then they also brought it back to their own lives, and it became very clear that most of them... Well, many of them did not expect to be able to replicate the class position of their own parents.

06:29 PO: Wow.

06:29 PL: And for those who are immigrant, which is very common in Toronto, there was this huge burden that their parents had made big sacrifices for higher education for their children and they were gonna disappoint. So on the one hand there is that frustration and disappointment, but on the
other hand, and when we started talking about, "Well, then, how then do you live? You don't just crawl into a hole. What does give you meaning and membership and a sense of purpose in your life? If it's not gonna be the job and the career, which has been my experience and perhaps their parents experience, what then?" It's not anomie but it opens up a series of questions, how then do they create meaning? And rather than... That was part of the stimulus for the paper, rather than attempt to answer that question, we wanted to pose it.

07:22 PO: 'Cause it seems like there are at least two moments to this idea of the proper job and this incredible realization that you're identifying that a generation of students don't anticipate or find it difficult to match or exceed their parents status. The proper job is about... It seems earning money and some sort of bear, how does one pay the bills? But there seems to be a lot packed into the idea of proper, that proper is about meaning and satisfaction and significance. Is that right?

08:00 PL: Yes, I think that's true. I mean, I think that's what's happened historically. And one of the things we try to do in the paper is to identify how weird is that actually. For a lot of people, historically, work is something you have to do, it's not something you love. But we, in the 20th century, were educated in this idea, first of all, that work becomes the pillar of other things like the breadwinner in the family, your community, your colleagues, your political party in many contexts and a lot of issues to do with membership and politics and identity were hung on the proper job for certain, mainly white male kind of group of people. So there's that question of like how did it happen? But I would say today it's still happening. And I was very struck by the French philosopher, Frederic Lordon's marvelous book Willing Slaves of Capital, where he talks about how we're being passionately attached to work. It's supposed to be your passion, your meaning, your identity. So we're still doing this to ourselves and to our students, even in a context where jobs kind of worthy of that degree of passion and detachment like, I've had to my work, for example, which I love are simply not available to them, right?

09:26 PO: Because you're... I mean, your profession as a professor and as professional researcher is this extraordinary opportunity to do anything and everything that you find meaningful.

09:40 PL: Absolutely, so I mean we're in this way, this sort of the apogee of this, both proper and meaningful. It's well-paid, we have proper pensions and we think we feel we're doing something useful, interesting, whatever. Most jobs are not like that. Nevertheless, people are encouraged to be attached to them. So there's that shift but another part of it has to do with, again, Global South stuff. We're dealing with one of the first generations in history, where almost everyone has been at least to secondary school. And a secondary school leaver in what, Slana or Indonesia, or Cambodia doesn't want to be either probably farming or hustling in the informal sector as their parents may have done, but this massive parental investment, in at least secondary if not higher education, comes with this idea that children will have proper jobs, they will be modern people, they will go to work in a clean environment. All of those hopes are fervently attached to this idea even in places where such jobs have always been scarce. They've really caught people's imagination, the imagination of parents, the imagination of young people. And so what's a kind of a crisis here in one historical context is a crisis, not of the collapse of proper jobs, they were never there, but a huge anxiety around, well, what then that we educated our children and we still don't have what we thought we would have, a proper job?
11:25 PO: How have you found people defining the norm what it means to have a proper job?

11:30 PL: Well, one of the interesting things we found when we started looking at this is how the official agencies define it. And that's one of the kind of cues for us into the need for new research in this area because the ILO, the International labour Organization for decades had this category called standard employment which then cast most of what most people in the world as non-standard employment. And if you think about the proper job, as opposed to all the negative images like informal, casual, temporary, precarious... Most of the ways we have of describing work are the negative image of what is assumed to be the proper job. And that's standard employment. The ILO has now broadened it slightly and they've come up with this category that they call Vulnerable Employment, but again it's the mirror image of the non-vulnerable employment and they've decided that 50% or they've concluded that 50% of the world's population are in vulnerable employment of which 10% in the northern countries, and 80% in South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. So again, you've created a big box vulnerable employment which is the mirror image of the non-vulnerable and which tells you nothing about how 80% of the populations of huge continents actually survive. So clearly, even from the people whose job it is to study these things, there's a need for a conceptual rethink.

13:14 PO: And these are all of ILO's standards. So a classic standard job is a vision of...

13:21 PL: Yeah, it has regular wages, it has an employment contract, it could be blue-collar work, it could be office work but it comes with a package of benefits which are historically pertained to our jobs and to many jobs in the OECD increasingly but are extremely rare in other parts of the world.

13:43 PO: Well, as you speak and my own research in Central America, you're right, though. The aspiration towards this proper job is palpable, but it has no real grounding in anything in the region. I mean, the well-educated oligarchs would certainly provide employment to their children but only a third of Guatemala works in the formal economy and yet, there is this aspiration towards it.

14:09 PL: Yeah, so we felt it was necessary to do things, on the one hand recognize the aspiration, like recognize the extent to which this aspiration for the proper job where it has never existed and the nostalgia for the proper job in places where it was imagined to have exist even though we know even here, it was only a small sector of the mainly male White group. Nevertheless, the nostalgia for, hopes for, you've gotta understand the aspiration on the one hand and then you have another job, which is, well if people are not doing that kind of work, how then do they live, how do they create meaning and what does this mean in terms of political commitments and affiliations? If it's not gonna be unions, well, what other forms does it take? And if you're not gonna join a party based on your labour affiliations, how else do you select your politicians? I mean, there are a whole bunch of questions which were rolled up in this notion of how work and its affiliations, its social membership and so on seemed to be one tidy package. So there's a new comprehensive research agenda of a set of questions which are not only about what kinds of work do people then do but what kinds of social attachments, what kinds of meaning, what kinds of membership, what kinds of politics which... But they may seem like separate questions but there was a period in which they were all rolled up in this notion of the job.
15:38 PO: And from a certain perspective, the idea of this proper job could be a matter of economics or the study of who is earning what and how? But this is a fundamentally anthropological set of questions about belonging and membership and participation with the assumption that if the job is not as you say, the pillar of people's, not even just civic engagement but just their whole existence, then, what is? Are we in any position at this moment to answer what is that pillar of people's identity or social belonging?

16:13 PL: Right. Well, when we started to write this paper, initially, I think we were trying to answer that question, and then we took a hard look at ourselves and we thought, "Well, first of all, there's a load of research in all corners of the world, looking at these questions and if we were to try to answer it, we would probably draw on what we know, in my case, rural Southeast Asia, in Jim's case, mainly urban Southern Africa. And that would be attempting to answer a question in too narrow a frame so that we backed off trying to answer and thought that the more useful task we could do, having thought about this question quite deeply for many years and discussed it at length, would be to pose the questions as empirical researchable questions. If we had tried to draw on all the existing literature which answers one or rather of these questions we could have written an enormous encyclopedia but that wasn't the purpose.

17:12 PL: What we thought would be more useful would be to say, "Well, let's check." Like even in Toronto, let's check. I have a little bit of a sense from my tiny survey among my students what they think. No way I could speak for young people in Toronto, that would be a research project. We'd have to go and check it out in different neighborhoods, in different racialized gendered components of the city in order to find out well, how then do people create meaning, form, social membership, find political outlets, activism, affiliations etcetera? Here we would need to research it here just as we would need to research it everywhere. So we thought that the more useful task would actually be to pose a series of questions and not attempt to answer them but just make them available for researchers to ask in the conditions in which they're living. So that was why it took a question format in the end. So the questions are many but they're not random. They follow an arc of analysis.

18:15 PO: How? 'Cause it's extraordinary, 'cause the scale of the question exceeds Indonesia, South Africa... I mean, but as you say the answers are gonna be really quite specific. And as you were organizing the paper, which as you say, opens up terrain through a series of questions, what were some of the organizing principles, for you and Jim, when thinking through these questions, how did they unfold?

18:40 PL: The first thing is we both are committed to what we call in the paper as a political economic style of analysis. So our starting point is that uneven access to resources is the consequence of unequal powers. So whether those resources are jobs or land or the networks or whatever it is, we're always interested in well, if you have something which is of value, which is enabling you to live or to live well, what are the relationships through which you were able to access that thing? And that's gonna be both a social question and a question about power. So that's what we see is the kind of fundamental political-economic orientation. So that was one pillar. The second pillar was what we call, in the paper, global and differentiated. So we don't think anywhere is an island. We are in a globally interconnected world, but the way global processes play out in different places has everything to do with their local histories, what was laid down in the past, in the
case of Asia and what happened during the Cold War and its aftermath. These places have distinct path dependence depending on what's gone on there, and so there's a national level differentiation, but then even within that, you know there's gender, there's class, there's race, there's all these other elements which are going to shape this question of who can access a decent livelihood, on what terms and through what processes? So it's globally connected but the world is not flat, right?

20:27 PO: Yes.

20:28 PL: So one has to always be interested in the differentiation like why is it taking this form in this place, at this time, for this group of people? So understanding those different environments through a common set of questions, we thought we could produce some useful comparative insights.

20:46 PO: And your reference to that the world is not flat is quite specific. It cuts against the myth of globalization that the world is becoming increasingly equal or homogenous. But what you find in your research and I assume other anthropologists like myself find in our research is that local histories have powerful impacts on this increasingly interconnected world.

21:10 PL: That's right. So neither is it globalization as this kind of homogenization or rising tide lifts all boats kind of idea. But nor is it what Jim rather cheekily calls a question of apocalyptic Neo-Liberalism, right? This idea that everyone is doomed, the poor are doomed most of all, and everything's getting worse everywhere. Because that again does not really match what we find in empirical research. And for some groups of people in some parts of the world, it is the apocalypse, right? Catastrophe. But for others, remarkably, even slum dwellers in Jakarta, for example, for some of them, they may think that incrementally actually their lives are getting a little bit better. The house which had a mud floor now has a concrete floor. It may be tiny but they actually think they're on an upward trajectory not a downward one. So one has to have a kind of a research agenda which is open to these differentiated experiences rather than being too homogenizing. It's all in the way up, it's all on the way down like neither of those really covers it. Our questions need to be much more specific and agile and adequate to this differentiated terrain.

22:39 PO: And what sits at the core of this differentiated terrain though is a consistent observation that the nature of work is forever changing or in flux. Or is it that it just never matches the ideal that has become this kind of global standard?

22:57 PL: I guess, we thought it was actually a question of the... Arenas of questions, the first one we posed was, what is or is not changing about work, as an empirical question. So in the particular area you're interested in, in Guatemala, for example, are formal sector jobs increasing? Are they evaporating? Were they ever there? Is it to do with urban versus rural? What is happening to work?

23:23 PO: Just fundamental empirical questions.

23:25 PL: Is an empirical question, right?

23:26 PO: Yes.
23:26 PL: And in some sectors it could be expanding, in others contracting for a particular class, to racialized or gendered group, let's see. So what is or is not happening to work is an arena of inquiry. I don't think we know. Secondly, the question was what are the changing uses and meanings of land? For a lot of the world agrarian livelihoods, agriculture is still a huge thing. And the land was the job. If you had land, you were a farmer that was the thing. But again, we need to take another look at that. Many people who have, who hold land are not treating it as the basis of a job as a farmer, let's say, but as a place holder, a place where you can... Where Granny is there with her five chickens, where you can go when sick or injured, where pensions and other remittances can be pulled. It may have all kinds of functions in livelihood, which are not really tied to the job of being a farmer. So we need to investigate that.

24:28 PL: What are the meanings and uses of land? And then our third question, like what are the other ways in which people access livelihood resources? Well, on the one hand, through different kinds of work but then also through distribution. This idea that most people live through their work has always been a myth. Or it would depend on, of course, how you define work, but for lots of people, state pensions, welfare payments, but also other kinds of distributive claims, you know, I can live because I have worked my way into and forged and I'm working on sustaining a relationship with a person who has an access to an income. So that's what Jim calls distributive labour is all work people do to put themselves in a stream of distribution, that too is work, but it's not the direct work of picking up an axe or clocking in at the factory or something like that.

25:34 PO: That last scenario is also familiar to a generation people usually call millennials who are working quite hard to maintain familiar relationships, so that they stay within streams of income with their parents.

25:44 PL: Well, there's that kind of thing and then think about all the other distributed labour they're doing like the unpaid internships, they're trying to impress someone to build a network, there's huge amounts of work that people do, which is not actually gaining them an income, but which is part of how they're surviving and or how they hope to get ahead. So these are familiar from sort of kinship studies, but it's actually a much more global question.

26:12 PO: Yes. And it's a fascinating empirical question. If one would pose to, for example our students, whether they would recognize the extraordinary amount of hours and work they put into their, for example, their social media presence or in their professional efforts at professionalization and skill-building, whether that's work for them.

26:31 PL: Well, it could be. Or there could be something else. Our next question what are the changing forms of social membership? If you're not gonna hang your membership on identity on a job, it might be on something else. It might be on consumption, community, the kinds of clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the food you eat, the places you hang out. So one doesn't want to assume all of that is instrumental. It's about the income. Some of that is simply how do I get to be someone in a world which apparently does not have much use for my labour, however qualified I may be? These other things come up. So I think, again, that's an empirical question. What is the role of social media. It could be on two fronts; the angling towards income and livelihood distribution, and simply trying to be someone in the world.
27:30 **PO:** Another empirical question, which I don't know if you have a sense of is whether joblessness and precariousness, the anxieties around both, are more intense right now.

27:39 **PL:** I think certainly it's hit the media. Everyone is talking about it. It's hard to know whether... And certainly there was, in 2008, recession, etcetera. Mobilizations in lots of countries around work, think about the Spanish chant, Bread, roof, and work. Pan, techo, y trabajo. I mean, the demand for work, the worries about the collapse of work, really had a very strong moment. Again, I think one would have to look at it a bit empirically whether work has actually collapsed and in which countries and for what reasons. If I see this sort of the bigger generational shift though, I mean, clearly there was a change in the character of work, this part-time, the gig economy, those things have become more common here. My son is a lawyer and he's doing contract work. Who ever heard of a lawyer working on short-term contracts? But it's invaded every sector of also professional work, where firms are not hiring people onto a career track, or many fewer, and then contracting out big projects so they don't have to hire full-time.

29:00 **PO:** Do you have a sense as to how people respond to this distance between expectation and reality, the jobs that they get and the jobs that they have?

29:11 **PL:** Well, one way to think about that, as usual, is to go specific. I'm thinking of a case study. Craig Jeffrey's book on India called Timepass. And this is the study of a medium-sized Indian city in which, according to his research, a quarter of a million young men stand on street corners and pass time hence, timepass, sitting in tea shops, etcetera. All of them with one and two and sometimes three higher degrees. So these are very well-educated people and this is a context in which for every formal sector job there are 5000 applicants. So you think about their parents' expectation, these are often, in fact, first, in his study of first generation urban people these were the sons of prosperous peasants, people who profited from the green evolution, parents did well in agriculture; finance education of their sons with this expectation. And now here the young men are in this city. So they're not destitute, because they're from families with some resources. But they're probably couchsurfing at their auntie's. They're using their distributive network to manage to stay in the city. It's even more embarrassing to go back to the farm to stay in the city and they're hustling, they're doing political organizing. They're basically trying to find a place, be someone, do something, find a way.

30:45 **PL:** But the question... One of the interesting questions is well what do their parents think of this? Do they blame their sons for their failure, or is there some recognition that it's the system that's broke? It's not that their sons individually have failed. They did what they were supposed to do, then this is the condition. So I think that's one of the interesting empirical questions, is the failure to get the proper job a source of shame and embarrassment and among one's peers, or in the community, in front of one's parents? Or is it kind of understood that well, that's the conditions we're living in, mate. We knew that your education was not going to produce a job. You just hustle like everyone else and try to make the best of it. But that, again, I think is an interesting question, right?

31:34 **PO:** Yes.
31:35 PL: I would say here there's still significant shame. And I think it's especially gendered. I think here in Canada, for young men like you hear these newspaper articles about a 30-year-old young man with a degree in his parents' basement. And that's a figure of fun, a figure of derision and scorn. There's not a lot of sympathy for the guy.

31:54 PO: Of emasculation.

31:55 PL: Yes. It's to do with masculinity and not being a proper adult. I think for young women it's a little different, a little bit less harsh, perhaps. Maybe they could create meaning in some other way. But I think this is an empirical question to ask in different contexts.

32:11 PO: Absolutely.

32:12 PO: Like is it something... How do people, not just the young people themselves but the community around them, read this situation and respond to it? And so that would really figure when someone's expectations are not met, is this a huge embarrassment and a catastrophe? Or is this more or less the way it was going to go? And everyone understands the deal, right? Empirical question.

32:41 PO: Yes. And so the kinds of terrain that this essay creates for future scholars to engage, do you and Jim have a sense as to the possibilities of such a line of research? What this could uncover, what this could do?

33:00 PL: Well, we are hoping that it will be widely read and taken up. We wrote it in a fairly accessible style, I think. It's not heavy on the theoretical terms and so on. I think anyone could read it, if they were interested in these questions. My sense is that when you read it as a whole, it seemed a little bit overwhelming. Most people are not going to study all of these questions. But even if you are interested in one particular angle of it, being able to situate it in the context of the other questions that we posed, I think is a useful exercise.

33:36 PO: For me, and I would love to hear how your students have reacted, I would think one of the powerful contributions of an essay like this is to students to situate themselves within history, to be able to historicize this ambition for a job, and a nostalgia for a kind of work that may never have really existed. It may give them some kind of relief as they're trying to navigate their own university... I don't know, it seems like such a good message.

34:03 PL: Well, it's true. And that really comes back to C. Wright Mills. I mean, to be able to situate your personal troubles, or what seemed to you as personal troubles in a historical milieu so that you understand the era that you are living in and the constraints that it's... Yeah, so in that sense it could be sort of personally liberating. But there's a really serious scholarly agenda here. There's a lot of useful research that could be done. A lot of it already is being done, but it isn't being kind of joined up in quite the way that we've tried to do. And so by laying it out, it might enable some of these huge compendium of existing studies to be brought into conversation with each other in a useful way.

34:49 PO: Of all of the questions that you've laid out in this essay is there one that for you
35:00 PL: Well, I am interested in all of them. And then in some extent, have been working on all of them, in my own kind of empirical research. I think I would perhaps hone in a little bit on the question of politics. That seems to me a crucial question for all of us. And for me the question of politics is this sort of broadly understood. So at what point does a person shift from a sort of personal, visceral sense? "Something is not right here, like the way things are set up, my life, my conditions, something is not right here." To actually articulate that, join up with others, find a mode of expression, and then act on that to change the situation, right? That is the kind of the Politics 101 for me. So it's like the basic process of politics is changing from a sense things are not right with the world to expressing it, joining up with others and acting on it.

36:01 PL: So I think that is interesting like what do people do with a situation which appears to be set up through these political, economic, distributive modes in a way that a great number of people do not have the decent livelihoods, the life that they should have. So what do people do about that? What are the modes of expression? So I think that's something we need to really understand. So there's that which would just sort of lead towards Big P politics that are what kind of politicians you vote for? But I'm also interested in the other modes of political expression, which may not take that form. So when slum-dwellers mobilize against eviction, for example, they are not only making a claim to a right to be in the city. It's also a claim to livelihood 'cause if you evict them as you know very well, to some new site 20 miles outside the city limits, their petty income sources would not cover the commuting costs, right?

37:15 PO: Yes.

37:15 PL: So you are not only removing them, you're removing their livelihood. So mobilization against an eviction may actually be the equivalent to a labour strike in the old days, alright.

37:27 PO: That's right.

37:27 PL: In the days where what you do is you withhold your labour and that's how you exert leverage. Well, for somebody who's working in sort of petty trade, living in a city centre, staying in place could be the politics. So I'm interested in that kind of politics as well; the different ways in which people make a claim and attempt to hold on to whatever it is that's helping them both to stay alive and also these other things; create membership and community and so on. So the question of politics, I think, would be the one where I myself am sort of very orienting more these days, yeah.

38:08 PO: That's excellent. Thanks so much, Tania.

38:11 PL: Okay.

38:13 IR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill in conversation with Professor Tania Li from the University of Toronto. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor Ken MacDonald to discover what nationalism, identity and big, big money have to do with cheese. Please subscribe on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite app, so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was
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