

Zoomcast with Tricia Lootens

Speakers: Tricia Lootens (guest), Pearl Chaozon Bauer (host)

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- Hello and welcome. I'm Pearl Chaozon Bauer, one of the co-founders and organizers of Undisciplining the Victorian classroom. As one of the forms of content that we're generating for this site, these zoom casts are meant to be a mechanism that will allow us to stage conversations, to think together about our classroom practices and about our processes of learning and unlearning as teachers. How we can grow together as a community of scholars and learn from one another, especially in moving beyond the boundaries of our field and training. This is a first in a cluster of zoom casts on positionality as scholars initially trained in a national literature that has been integral to producing fantasies of white British superiority. But more importantly, why we advocate undisciplined Victorian studies as a way to inspire new modes of anti-racist teaching in our classroom spaces. Please note that these reflections come from our personal experiences. We don't intend to speak on behalf of others, and are sharing from the position of our own identities, bodies, institutional locations and backgrounds, as a way to spark thought and discussion. Today I'm joined by Tricia Lootens, Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at the University of Georgia, to discuss our academic journeys, how students inform our pedagogy and reflections on the precarity of higher education, particularly as it affects our most structurally vulnerable faculty. Well, thank you so much Tricia for joining UVC today this morning. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us and walk us through your journey and your learned, you know what you've learned and so forth.

- Thank you. This is I've, I've said this to you unofficially but this is one of the most exciting things I've been asked to do. I am so deeply honored by this and so excited by y'all's project.

- Oh, thank you. Will you, will you sort of share a little bit about you before we get to our questions? Little introduction.

- Sure. Yeah. You asked how I've kind of got into this. And, a shout out to my first great English teacher, Velma Harrison, who's I was in, I think her first year of teaching English and she taught English through African-American studies when I was in high school. And really kind of set me on my, so it's, it's been a long route. I think that because of my generation, it didn't, there were plenty of amazing white African-American studies students in my generation. And at the same time, it was a moment when in many ways if you were white, it, it seemed to me, it made more sense to move as an ally. And in some ways I think I succeeded at that and another way I serially failed. So I want to start by saying, you know, we're talking about teaching and that is succeeding and failing and you never know when you walk into the classroom which way it's gonna go. So I, I think that kind of leaping forward I got into trouble in graduate school my first American studies class, cause I asked what about black people in, in colonial new England then my professor said there weren't any. And that kind of, we kind of hit, that was a, that was a wall that was hit and continued to be hit. But obviously there were, again, in the first feminist criticism class I took Arlene Stetson who did the amazing anthology Black Sister came to that class an extraordinary class taught by Susan Goobar. And Arlene Stetson just came and was there with us and for us. So, you know, incredible moments of generosity. And then there were people whose writing I was too shy to kind of contact them, but there were people whose writings kept things going, Jennifer Toba Brady, Gretchen Gudsiena, Cora Caplin. And then people, I did get to know Marjorie Stone for example. So there is, I am part of a long kind of tradition in a way. But in another way, I started working on political power tests in the 1990s and it, it was pretty isolated and it took about 20 years to finish. And I do think that Victorian studies still resists a lot of the major points. It's trying to make a lot of art central Trump's Victorian studies are racist, separate spheres. We, you know, so that's the trajectory in a, in a weird kind of way. But most of it comes through classrooms. I think that my students now as before have been struggling to undiscipline Victorian studies from the very beginning, and they all I had to do was step back. All I have to do is step back and listen. Give them attention and they will, they will push me in the right directions. I'm not always competent at that just as, I'm not always competent at being an ally in, in other contexts. But my experience has been, if I take the lid off if I try to take the lid off, they'll do the rest.

- Do you have a specific moment in time that you're thinking of maybe?

- Yeah. The first time I taught Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point, which I still Barrett Browning, I which still makes me deep. It's a, it's a very troubling text on virtually every level, right?

- Yes.

- And yeah. And it's a real question. Whether, whether we should be teaching it, whether a white woman should be teaching it what the context to teach it. I never know from semester to semester when I put it on the syllabus whether I think I'm gonna be able to manage it, but the first time I taught it, it was absolutely explosive. The students cried and they laughed and they talked and we had to, you know, at the end of the hour I had to say, okay, you people standing in the hall we're gonna have to leave. And at that point I thought, you know I may not be the one to teach this in every case. I may not be competent, but what this cultural work that this

conversation can do is just, yeah. So tell me, how did you move into this?

- I guess just, just to respond to that, I think it's, there is something really powerful about giving power to the students, right? Because we, because teaching is not a one-way street, right? It is definitely, we, we learn from our students as much as they learn from us. And when we allow for these spaces, explosive I think was a good word that you used because, you know I think as a facilitator and I think of myself more as a facilitator than as a teacher, because you you create a safe space or a safer space for things to unravel. And then you're there to, as a kind of safety net, right? To allow all of these feelings and experiences to arise to and questions to arise. And even if the facilitator doesn't necessarily have the answer, we, you know you come to the answer together. And I think students know that and appreciate that.

- I, I really think that's true. What I, what I try to think about is that I'm structuring and I'm staging, but I'm not scripting.

- Yes, that's right. I love that.

- And one of the hardest things is speaking of disciplining and undisciplining is, is remembering that, that if I do something wrong in a class if I think I've done something wrong, I can come back in the next class and say, I've been mulling this over. I've been thinking about what you all said and, and how this played out. And I, let's talk some more about it. So, you know, I think that not containing what we're doing within a class period that, that has ended up seeming really important.

- Yes, absolutely. And I think even just having the, I, I'm using the word courage, but it's not even courage but it's the courage to say I, I'm sorry. I made a mistake or I don't know. I think that's such a powerful moment for a facilitator teacher to, to say, to, to own because students respond well to that. It's not, it's the opposite. I think when I was a grad student as first starting off teaching, I was so nervous to get a question that I did not know the answer to. And so I only asked questions that I knew answers to. And obviously the discussions are just going like this. Right. And I realized once I started saying, I don't know that's a great question. Let's figure this out together. The dynamic change it became real and students appreciate that, you know.

- So do you have a moment when you realized that you were involved kind of consciously in trying to undiscipline Victorian studies in the classroom?

- Yeah, actually for me, it was, it started in my job at Notre Dame de Namur University, which is an HSI and AANAPISI institution. So it's, most of our students are diverse. I, I think at this point, we have like a 60% diverse student body. And I realized really in that first semester, and I, I was hired as a generalist too. So I think that helped because I had to really think outside of the discipline and I ended up actually appreciating that part of my personality. I think I like, you know, I like a lot of wearing a lot of different hats, and I like learning with the students. But so those two things, one, I knew that I had to start thinking of classes not simply as Victorian, but really how it's situated in other fields and other time periods and other thoughts right? And then

my particular students. I had to really think about the, it helped me think about the kinds of materials that I was teaching to them, you know? And I didn't actually think about this, any of these questions as a grad student. I kind of bought into the, the Victorian fantasies in a way. Probably because of my own, like, you know, I, I was born in the Philippines, you know, Spanish colonized country, and the materials that we were taught in school and also that what we were reading, or just really, and all things like Little Women or Anne of Green Gables right? So like that white fantasy was just in my head, I think. And so I didn't even really think about it until I was really faced to think about it. And that's how I started thinking and undoing terms, so.

- So it really was explicitly your students who called you into that.

- Yeah. Yeah. What about for you? I mean, you so how long have you been teaching in Georgia?

- A long time, since 1988.

- So, I mean, you've probably seen a change and shift in student body since then, or?

- Goodness. Oh my goodness. The student body and the department. When I came into the English department, it was a very different place than it is now. That having been said, the first time I taught a woman in literature class so I, I decided to focus it on immigration and exile, on kind of mother-daughter relations in that context. And I walked into the class and I thought, okay, here we go. We're all, you know, everybody's white everybody's Southern sense. And within two or three weeks it became clear that about a quarter to a third of the class were kids of immigrants.

- Right.

- Maybe a fifth of the class did not speak English at home. And I had just walked in and assumed I knew who Georgia students were and I was so wrong, you know? I mean, now it's true. We're, we're doing better. We're not doing as well as we should be, like University of Georgia at, at recruiting and supporting students of color. We're, we're not, but we're doing better. But, but even then, I mean, that was, that was a real lesson I think, for me in not assuming who was in my class. Yeah.

- Yeah. And so when you, I mean, I think I was just interested already that you started thinking about it through the lens of immigration. That was just because what, what sort of prompted that lens or that theme?

- Class, I think. Trying to think about class. It's the big thing we don't talk about, isn't it?

- Yes, yes, exactly.

- And it structures our classrooms in so many ways. And I think that questions of immigration

and exile are so suffused with class, that's so, it's so intense, isn't it? That connection. And so can be so unexpected. And that, it seemed to me that if I talked about that, about movements of population and class movements together, that it would be a way that we could begin to address social power in these texts. And again, I mean, the students, the students are they were though, I, you know, I had this vague idea. They were the ones who really took off with it. Yeah.

- That's wonderful. And then, you know, we can fast forward to 2020, 2021, in light of the pandemic, the BLM protests, the election year in Georgia. How was that for you and for the students and navigating the classroom space?

- We're, I'm learning to do this with the new class this semester and we're having to do it differently. I mean, one, one thing that you and I talked about with, with zoom teaching is how deeply experimental it is right now and how important it seems to resist a push to, to assume that we should all be teaching the same way, that there is some kind of, for this model there were boxes we should check off. There were bells, we should use whistles we should use, you know. And, you know, again, I'm, I'm learning from the students and one of the things that that really became clear to me was that last semester, there were plenty of moms. I, I had to interrupt the zoom hour, I felt I had to not have had to because other people would have to, but because that's the way I teach. I would have this impulse to interrupt the hour and leave for three to five minutes and say, what do I, you all talk to each other? What do I need to know about the class? about your shared situations? And so I'm trying to structure that in now so that we have, I started this semester with hallway hours that we're trying to replicate what you do in the hallway. I decided, I realized that I needed to have something else. So now we have a five or 10 minute buffer zone that's not hallway for just chatting that comes beforehand. But the five or 10 minute buffer zone is for people to come in and talk in a more concerted way about where everybody is. Total absolutely invitational. I tell my, you know my little feelings will not be heard if you don't show up. And sometimes they don't but sometimes a bunch of people do. Then, you know we do take a break because zoom is so hard physical. So we break in the middle. So what about you?

- Oh, wow. Well, I just want to kind of visualize that. So you have a class, right? So it's the classes 10:00 to 10:50, let's say. And then at 10:30 you have this, what you're calling what do you, what are you calling this five minute?

- I don't, I don't even know a name for it, but I can give, I can give an example. And I, we had talked about doing this. Anyway I'm teaching a class that's Brit lit from 1700 to the present. And we started in the present. And we started with YouTube clips as well as readings from a wide range of African and West Indian and South Asian a whole group of extraordinary writers, arguing. It's what the North it's, you know, nation, empire language et cetera, arguing over English and English literature. And we did, we did Claude McKay and if, If We Must Die. And I talked about If We Must Die as as a sonnet, and then I thought I need to take a break. And I said, okay, everybody let's the three minutes, you know, we're gonna run around. And then three minutes, we're gonna come back and you all are gonna meet without me. We're gonna talk about the Claude McKay poem and what else we have to say about the Claude McKay

poem. And so they had a chance, it, it it could be really intellectual, it could be emotional. And it ended, it ended up as a wonderful kind of mixture of both, you know talking about how Winston Churchill uses this poem without attribution, as a kind of, you know, rallying cry for World War II and talking about, you know, how the students felt about their particular relationship to the poem. So that was a case where it worked. There were other cases where it really doesn't, you know. I will, I interrupt a class in the middle and I say, I'm gonna leave for three minutes. Let me know if there's something I should know about, you know, and I come back and they haven't seen it.

- Yeah. But I do think, yeah I do something similar because of the students I mean, they asked for it, right? So I, I always start with some kind of active listening, active sharing activity. So it's a time where it's, you know, we talk about the practice of really listening without responding so everybody has a minute to two minutes of time where they're, they're the only ones talking. And usually it's been done in pairs or trios, so I do it in breakout rooms. And I have them time themselves right? And it's a really, they can share whatever they want about the reading, about how they're feeling, or silence is also, you know, share a kind of share. So if they don't have anything to say vocally, they can just kind of sit there quietly and then listen you know, and then we come back to the big group and then we do a little check-ins like, you know, anything that any of you need to share for the bigger group? Yes, no, maybe so. And then we'll, we'll move on. And then beyond that last fall, my students, and one of my bigger classes said that they really appreciated the, the one-on-one time to talk about things, so.

- So does that happen at the beginning of every comment?

- The active share? Yes. So the active share always begins, always happens at the beginning. And then, and then I started sort of peppering the class with these little discussion sessions where, you know either whatever we're reading, I would have them, you know, I would either post it on a share or give them the page number, and then they can talk about amongst themselves about the passage.

- Yeah.

- You know, they come back and they said that those are actually, they said it was more useful. And, you know, sometimes I think as a, as an instructor, I, I wonder if they're using the time productively. But what does that mean? I mean, any time, even if they're not talking about the passage and last year has been so trying for our students that anything is productive, you know. So.

- Yeah. I, I love, I love that. So how, how the beginning of the class, how long do you give them?

- For the active share, it's about three minutes. So it'll, it'll be a minute and a half, about a minute with the switch. So about three to five minutes.

- That's fabulous. I'm gonna try.

- Yeah, good. Great. I'm looking at our time. So maybe we can, you know segue into our final sort of thoughts for today. Just we were talking last time about the present constitution of our field and how you know, the precarity of it, specially for BIPOC scholars, early career scholars, contingent faculty, all of whom are so structurally vulnerable and impacted by the effects of neo-liberalism in higher education. So what are your thoughts on that? Like how, how do you like with everything that we've been talking about, like how do you kind of navigate that? How, where do you find yourself in the middle of that and, and maybe any advice that you have for people in, in those, you know, categories?

- I think you're more likely to be able to give advice in those categories. I , I can give some reflections.

- Reflections would be great.

- From my own position, I have been so outraged by the kind of FedEx and of the university that in strange ways, it has been hard for me to register the extraordinary achievements of instructors in my department. I, I think for, for people in my position, there's a really delicate balance there between our, our justifiable outrage, and our need to, to honor and to celebrate what people are managing. And that's, that's so hard because it's not all right. It's not all right that these junior colleagues are having to work under these conditions and figuring out a way to say you all hung the moon. I can't believe how splendid your work is. Your students are so lucky. You know, the people reading your work are so lucky. Figuring out a way to do that without, and to make their, that on a personal level, I, I feel as if, that's one challenge. I think I've kind of gotten there. But how to say publicly look at what this generation is doing. How to do that. It's the old victim survivor thing, isn't it?

- Right.

- Right? I mean, if, as a senior scholar I say, these people are thriving. These people are the future of our field and they're already doing that, then to what degree am I opening myself up? Not myself. Am I, am I giving ammunition to people who wanna suggest that this is all fine? This is great. This is working right?

- Right.

- People are thriving, people are doing, no, it's not great. It's not right.

- And people are doing an extraordinary job. That's one part of it. Another part of it just, you know really personally is thinking about retirement that, you know, there was a period in my career where I really understood the argument that people should retire earlier rather than later, so as to make room for new tenure track professors. Now when I go, I go. They're not getting that line back.

- Right. Right.

- So it's a really different situation. So tell me, seriously advice for, for, and I mean advice from the middle of not knowing is, in some ways the best advice I think. That's probably right. Yeah.

- I don't, I don't know if I have any advice. I mean, I think, I think it's a tough time. And honestly, before Undisciplining of the Victorian classroom, I was feeling really frustrated about not having an avenue to be an advocate. So like you, I was just, been so frustrated with higher education and I'm one of the lucky ones because I got a tenure track, you know, lucky ones. But as you just rightly said, it's crazy the amount of pressure that's put upon us. And it's, self-imposed too right? Because we think, I mean we're all living through this sort of imposter syndrome. And we live in the 21st century where it's just go, go, go. So even having a break feels like a luxury that we shouldn't be giving ourselves. So I think, but because I was able to get the, the job that I was supposed to get, I I see it through this different lens that this is, this is just not right. Like, you know, all of us are, you know, ill in some form. Like emotionally or physically or something like we're just overworked. And, and there's just so much pressure, especially I think for, for maybe for women, to take on that emotional labor that you and I have been talking about too. So I, I, I don't know if I have an advice for people, but I do know that with putting together UVC, and finding colleagues who not just the four of us who are you know, the co-organizers, but all of you guys who's just been supportive of the project and are willing to help us through the project. We are doing some kind of undoing work too, in terms of the that hierarchical mess that higher education is really founded on. So our project, our mission is really focused on caring for these, you know, structurally vulnerable faculty members and grad students. And we're trying to, you know, in our little way just try to switch some of those change, some of those pressures and change some of those, I don't know, what do you call them? Like hierarchical positionalities. And that feels so good for me, because then I feel like while I'm actually doing something to change our field, and hoping that, you know, it's and other people are doing it too, I'm sure it's just, I didn't know how I could do that myself on this space and I'm able to do it through UVC. So

- That makes so much sense to me. And I think one of the things that, that I find some moving and inspiring about it is that emphasis on collectivity, and, and and emphasis on creating a relationship to history by out of our everyday lives, out of our everyday practices. To, to me, that's, that's really deeply moving. And it really is sustaining because you, I mean we know that at the, at, at the, at its worst the classroom is a horror, at its best, it's it reminds you why you're doing this. And, and I think the undisciplining move in, in a really in a larger sense reminds us why so many of us are, are doing this.

- I love that sentiment. And that's a great sentiment to end with. So thank you so much. This was such an amazing conversation with you. Thank you for sharing your thoughts to our viewers. I know that they will really appreciate it and hopefully learn something from our conversation. Do you have any last thoughts to broadcast before I turn off our recording?

- No, just to say these, these are really hard times, but, but and there were moments that remind us how extraordinary they are too. And for me getting to do this is one of them. So thank you so

much.

- Thank you.