

# Zoomcast with Jason Rudy

**Speakers:** Jason Rudy (guest), Ryan Fong (host)

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- So, hello and welcome to everyone who is joining and watching or listening in. I am Ryan Fong and I'm one of the co-founders and organizers of Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom. And I'm really pleased to welcome you to this Zoomcast. So as one of the forms, different forms of content that we're generating for this site, these Zoomcasts are meant to be a mechanism that will allow us to stage conversations where we can think together about our classroom practices and our processes of learning and unlearning as teachers. It's a space where we hope that we can think about how we can grow together as a community of scholars and learn from one another, especially as we're all undertaking the work of undisciplining and moving beyond the boundaries of our fields and our training. So in this first cluster of Zoomcasts that I will be hosting, I will be focusing on moving beyond the strict and traditional confines of the “literary” and how moving beyond these confines is so important to the work of undisciplining Victorian studies, especially as we endeavor to build anti-racist and anti-colonial practices in our classrooms practices. And today I'm joined by Jason Rudy, who is a professor of English at the University of Maryland College Park. And we'll be thinking together today about visual art as a framework and archive for developing Indigenous-centered frames for engaging with 19th century Australia, specifically. As friends and colleagues who share a deep interest and ethical commitment to studying issues of Indigeneity and Aboriginality in Australian and other colonial contexts, this is, in many ways, part of an ongoing conversation between the two of us, that we've been having, I think, for several years now. And we are really pleased to invite you as our viewers and listeners into that conversation and to share and converse with one another and hopefully to give you so awesome things to think about and maybe take away. Okay, so just to get started, I'm wondering Jason if you can talk a little bit about how you came to study and teach about Australia or the place that has come to be known as Australia in your work, in your courses, and especially how thinking about Indigenous and Aboriginal frameworks and perspectives came to be especially important for you.

- Yes. Well, thank you, Ryan for inviting me to join you in this. So, I started thinking about Australia in graduate school but it was very peripheral. There was a special issue of the journal, Victorian Poetry on Australian Victorian poetry and I read it and we had a reading group discussion of it, and it just struck me that so much of our endeavors as Victorianists were focused on the United Kingdom. And that was when I began the process of asking, well that was why we weren't looking out more at the world at large. And this was in the early 2000s so, almost 20 years ago. At Maryland I was invited to teach an education abroad class in Australia in 2007 and that was the first real opportunity I had to go to Australia and to begin this long process of learning about Australia. The course, it was inherited from someone who was a drama professor, so it was originally conceived as a course about performance in Australia but I changed that quite a bit. And from the very beginning, it was looking into colonialism and Australian Indigenous culture and history and the intersection of those two different narratives. And I was very fortunate along the way, I, the first iterations of the course were run through a program that organizes education abroad courses. And they were good at putting me in conversation with Indigenous scholars and advocates, people working in government and land conservation. So really, my conversations and thinking about Indigenous Australia began most meaningfully in conversation with Indigenous Australians that was largely framed around the visual arts. So for me it was never a question of turning to the visual arts as a way of understanding Indigenous Australian history and culture, that was just built into it. And, so just to fast forward right now, my current project is writing a biography of an Indigenous Australian painter named Gordon Syron. He asked me to do this project, I note that just as the kind of point of where I am right now, in terms of my thinking, and one of the reasons why it makes sense to work on this project with Gordon and why he wanted me to do it is because his work is so situated historically. He is thinking about the invasion of Australia, he's thinking about the long process of colonialism, violence and dispossession, genocide and his work tracks that and critiques it and asks us as viewers to negotiate that history. So he knew that my knowledge of the 19th century would be an appropriate frame for thinking about what he is doing. So we've had many conversations and continue to and as well as with his wife, Elaine Syron, who's a very well-known and respected photographer who has photographed the Indigenous civil rights movement in Australia from the 1970s to the present.

- Great, great. Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, I think my interest in Australia, specifically, also comes from study abroad. And it's funny how our teaching and our research start to overlap in various ways. It's not to say that I wasn't interested in Australia as a site and the colonies more broadly and questions of empire as a Victorianist for a long time. But Kalamazoo College has a study abroad site in Perth, which is the traditional lands of the Noongar-speaking people. And so, as I was thinking about teaching courses that would prepare our students for study abroad, which is kind of one of the programs that we have, I really wanted to kind of think through that. And it was certainly, you know, my approach and kind of the importance of that was framed by being in relationship with a colleague of mine who has since left the college to go elsewhere for another position but Reid Gomez, who is Diné or Navajo, was a professor in Critical Ethnic Studies and she really just kind of blew my mind about thinking about questions of Indigeneity. And I have also another scholar who works on American Indian literatures, Amelia Katanski, in

my department. And so, there's just been a lot of conversations that I've had, and then just taking those conversations into Victorian studies and the conversations that aren't happening at Victorian studies, I think, at multiple levels when it comes to Australia. I mean, I think one just having Australia as a site to think about, that Victorianist should think about, is often not something, I mean, it's like, we talk about it when we talk about *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* and like that's about it. But, that it's a really important site to think through, and then you can't think through that site without thinking around questions of Indigeneity, at least for me. So, I think how you do that, how we incorporate that, I think is really important. And like you, I found visual art to be just a really important place to do that work because it's such a place--for lack of a better word, and we can kind of think about the translation or transmissibility of the word--but for theorizing about history and coloniality, and thinking about the past and that visual art is just such a ripe place to do some of that thinking.

- And I think specifically thinking about mediation, thinking about how art works mediate, that the narrative devising and transmission of those stories, right? So I'm thinking of, I'd like to share an image.

- Yeah, please do. Yeah, please.

- So, if people know anything about indigenous Australian art, a lot of times, what will come to mind as a painting that looks something like this one, which is by Emily Kame Kngwarreye. This is from 1991, and she's painting from Central Australia, the desert regions. And this is a painting at the art gallery of New South Wales. It's huge, it takes up an entire wall and it's just mesmerizing. It's generally taken to be a landscape to reflect the land on which she lived. So it's a mapping of her country, right? And some of the questions that can be asked about this, involve the medium itself, right? The paints that she's using, the canvas that she's painting on, these are techniques and it's a medium that's taken from Western art. But what is crucial to understand is that the aesthetic qualities themselves have been a part of Indigenous aesthetic tradition for tens of thousands of years. So, even though the manifestation of this particular artwork takes a Western concrete form, it's aesthetically framed very much in a lot, much longer in non-Western tradition. So that's a real starting point for conversations that I have with my students to think about how we encounter Indigenous history and culture, what is legible to us and what might be outside, you know things that we can make sense of and comprehend and how to respect those places of not knowing.

- Yeah, absolutely. And I think I do a similar thing with my students and because I think the point of entry for so many settlers in various parts of the world for understanding Australian Aboriginal culture and art is through the "dot paintings," right? I mean, this is the aesthetic that is very, very familiar--if it's familiar at all. And I mean I think it's in line with, you know, what we're hoping these conversations will be--the ways that you have to kind of break open even what counts as aesthetic, right? So like, on the one hand, it's a painting, right? So it's a set of materials and pigments on a canvas or on some kind of surface, right? But then to think about exactly that, like, what is the long, millennial-long tradition, of media that are used, right? So that it's like, if this is adapted from a tradition, that is place-based and land-based, and then thinking about it

as a site, right? It's not just, "Oh, I'm gonna represent the landscape," but that art.. that art itself was the landscape and landscape was art, right? Like that those categories weren't separate things, right? And that it's such an important lens into the need for us, especially in the Western academy, to break kind of our epistemological frames.

- And one of those epistemological frames is our sense of permanence and that an aesthetic object has this permanence, right? So in its earlier manifestations, that kind of an artwork would have been made on the landscape itself with different pigments. It might've been painted on the body and both of those would have been a part of ceremony.

- Right, yeah.

- And they were made with the knowledge that they were impermanent. So there's some, you know the original aesthetic process is necessarily, it's not going to be there the next day. And so what we're talking about then is a form of knowledge that is passed down through long cultural memory, down through the generations in a way that's much more profound I think then, when it's on a canvas on the wall, there's something really easy about that in terms of imprinting the image and you can always go back to it. The reason we have these art forms is because they were handed down through the generations and there are very specific rules within the Indigenous communities about who has the authority to produce a work of art within a particular aesthetic tradition, and those have to be honored and respected as well.

- Yeah, Yeah. And I think, one of the things that's been really productive for me in teaching, it's using this as a starting point. It's like even the question, asking students to question the category of what a map is. And so I often put up, a map of the British Empire, with the pink kind of spread out across a Mercator projection, and it's like, "Okay, what happens when we understand this other form, this other visual form as a map?" And it also opens up, I think, what you're getting at here too, is a really important conversation about what we as settlers don't know about this map. What we, as outsiders to this community and to this landscape, don't know, and possibly we'll never know, because certain knowledge is important to keep in the community itself and it's not to be shared. And so it's like, what does that mean? And, how do we signal our relationship to that? And I found that really useful especially in framing myself as a non-Indigenous settler scholar coming to this tradition that it's like, I'm not a professor who can just explain everything about the visual codes here and give you the key to the map. It's like, no. But how do we grapple with what this is and think about what can we know from it? What conversations can we have about this? And then how can that really start to transform our understanding of this site, of this place, of this land, of this community. And that is such an important foundation for the starting point of that.

- Absolutely. And then in my courses, I use that framing as a way to pivot to thinking about oral culture and our privileging of the printed text. What makes it onto the printed page, but circulates, what eventually gets put into an anthology? That is our sense by and large of a literary tradition or of an aesthetic tradition that takes the form of language. And that's not the case in Indigenous communities, which are largely oral in their history. So, in the same way that

the kind of the impermanence of the visual art work on the landscape is passed through generations, so too are the communal stories and songs that are handed down, and we have some of those, they've been recorded, they were recorded in the 19th century by colonialists, by white colonialists for lots of different reasons, some of them good, some of them not so good. And to the present day there are people who still speak the language and work to record those traditions. But when we encounter them on the page, as a printed and fixed form, it's a version of encountering the painting on the canvas and the art gallery. It's pointing to a much larger tradition and it is a part of that, but in a different way and it's important to note that distinction and to think through it and to really make that the tension they're part of your, the way you inhabit, what you encounter on the page.

- Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I'm gonna share a particular image that kind of speaks to some of this. I'm gonna do this and hopefully it's showing up. So, this is making me think of some of the artists that I've been interested in, which are actually artists from the 19th century. So I think one of the things that's interesting, especially in approaching questions of Indigeneity, is that there's often an assumption--especially because these issues around oral culture and printed culture and how print cultures are not necessarily privileged in Indigenous communities in the 19th century--that it's like, "well, we can't study them because there's nothing there to do or for us to study." And I've gotten really interested in some of these 19th century visual artists, and these two artists are also featured, for people listening, in Andrew Sayers's really great book, "Aboriginal Artists Of The 19th Century." He catalogs a lot of this and these images and these two artists, Tommy McCrae and William Barak, as well as some other Aboriginal Australian artists who were working in the 19th century. And I've gotten really interested in Tommy McCrae specifically around the issues that you're raising Jason because, although this image is not one of them, he was the uncredited artist in a collection of Australian Aboriginal oral culture called "Australian Legendary Tales" collected by K. Langloh Parker, which was published in 1896. And so it's a collection of these stories that are kind of devoid of much cultural context. It's kind of a classic example of a Victorian collection of oral culture, but McCrae illustrations up here are throughout and they were illustrations that were actually sent to Andrew Lang--for people who are interested in print culture, he's a big name. He was the editor of this volume, and it was only discovered fairly recently that McCrae was the artist because in Lang's papers there was an inscription by McCrae. And it's one of these things that it's like, if we as scholars, like, look--this is like in plain sight, it's on the page here. But what kind of knowledge, what kind of expression is happening here even in this colonial archive? And so how can we use this as the visual, as this point of entry for thinking about a really mediated and problematic text in many ways of oral culture that's been transcribed and kind of calcified, but the visual art kind of disrupts some of that in some important ways. So how do we start to think through that? So, and it's like, there it is, in the 19th century. These contestations are happening in the archive. And if we just kind of learn to read in a different kind of way or look in different kinds of ways.

- Yeah. That's fascinating. And it brings to mind other examples of print where either an Indigenous artist or writer is not attributed or it's unclear what the line is. So for example, translations are what are called or identified as translations of Indigenous literary works or oral culture and it's almost impossible to know where these actually are coming from depending on

whom you talk to, if you ask indigenous scholars now, what do you make of this? There's a lot of tension around what to do with it.

- Yeah.

- And I think the way to handle that in the classroom is just a foreground, the methodological challenges. You don't need to know the answer in some ways talking about the problems of knowing, is the most productive way to engage.

- Yeah yeah, absolutely. And kind of on that, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about what learning you feel like you've had to do beyond your training as a Victorianist, to be able to engage in this work and even what learning do you feel like you still have to do as you're engaged in this long process?

- I am definitely in the midst of becoming a better thinker with respect to Indigenous history and culture and theory. I am making my way through a sizeable bibliography of works that are methodologically really distinct from what we tend to find in Victorian studies. So that's been really good at stretching my mind and it's changed also my teaching, in addition to how I think about my scholarship and then the visual arts of course is an entirely other discipline to my training as a literary scholar. So, I've been reading a lot of art historians, both of Indigenous art and other forms so that, it's, I guess this has been one of the real pleasures of getting to where I am right now in my career is to have the opportunity to stretch my knowledge base. I feel like that the pleasure of continuing to learn and continuing to feel like a student is really important to me.

- Yeah, yeah. And I'm wondering if you could talk about your relationship with Gordon in that process too, right. I mean, there's the reading that we do in terms of reading in other fields and reading other scholars and all of that but it seems just knowing from my conversation with you, like a site of profound learning has been Gordon for you.

- Right, well, I lived with him and the Elaine for two weeks back in 2018 and they invited me to come to their home on Magnetic Island, which is in Northern Queensland and it's just an extraordinarily beautiful and remote place. And I learned more in that two week period than I think in any other similar period of my life. And a part of it was just his passion for his ideas, it's one thing to read about dispossession and to read about genocide. It's very different to spend time, to spend extended time and lots of downtime, so not professional time, that's kind of structured, right. But to be having dinner and sharing a bottle of wine and chatting into the wee hours of the night, and to hear firsthand about the pain that has been experienced, not just individually, but kind of accumulated pain, generational pain, it's really hard to listen to and it really changes one's perspective. You know, I went into it fully on board with the project. So it's not as if I suddenly became aware that colonialism has this horrific past, I knew the past, it just became so much more present to me. And that changes the way that I teach this material and it definitely will change the way I write about it.

- Yeah, and I mean, I haven't been fortunate to have that same kind of depth of relationship with folks as you've been able to develop with Gordon, but when I was in Perth, I was able to talk with folks at Curtin University Center for Indigenous Studies and kind of share with them and think about that. And I was also able to talk with the contemporary Noongar writer that we both love, Kim Scott for probably like an hour and a 1/2 conversation with him. And it just really speaks to, like relationality is so important in all kinds of Indigenous frameworks, but it really speaks to that and it raises and brings to the surface those ethical stakes of what it means to grapple these questions and kind of what our work is about. What we need to do and continue to learn and think about. And yeah, and it's a process, right? It's not just gonna be like, okay, yep, we got the checklist from Gordon or from Kim Scott and, like, now we know how to do this. It's like, we're bearing the weight of centuries of colonial oppression that shape the institutions that we work in, that we produce our work in and the field itself. I mean it's the air we breathe. So it's just such important, it's such an important process to be in relationship.

- And I think in terms of teaching to whatever degree those kinds of interactions can be replicated or created, I would just really encourage that. So, in my education abroad program, I have a collaboration with the Nintiringanyi Center, which is in Cairns and it's an outreach program for at-risk indigenous teenagers and I've been really fortunate to develop a relationship with one of the directors of the program there. And so my students get to spend a day with some of the kids in his program, and it's centered around really just conversations, for them to get to learn a little bit about us and for us to get to know a little bit about them. And every single time this happens, my students at the end of the course say that day is the highlight. They do a lot of amazing things, they go snorkeling on the Great Barrier Reef, they go to an opera at the Sydney Opera House, but spending time at the Nintiringanyi Centers for almost all of them, the most meaningful part of the trip, because there's nothing that can take the place of those kinds of one-on-one exchanges. And, one of the things that Edward who's my collaborator at the center there, always says is that for a lot of indigenous youth, there's a lot of shame attached to their cultural heritage. And one of his main goals for the center is to allow young people to feel pride in who they are, and in the long history of who they are. So, to have a group of American students come and want to learn is kind of indirectly a way for the young people in his program to understand that their culture has this meaning, that it is something to be proud of. And so, I suppose this is all a long way of saying that it's really important to me but what we're doing when we go there is not on a model with like a cultural anthropology, where we're extracting knowledge and then leaving with some sense that we have, that we're not experts, but instead that this is a very much a two way engagement that we're giving of ourselves. And, you know, we're learning about ourselves in the process of coming to know a little bit about the people that we're interacting with and vice versa.

- Yeah, yeah. And I mean, that makes me think too, just that kind of place-based experience of being at that site and having those relationships. And for me, one of my big goals too, is to ask my students and ask myself in the process as well, "what are the ways that I need to do this work in the place where I am," so that it's not just temporally dislocated in the 19th century. Like, "oh, those Victorians did these awful things." It's not just like, oh, well the Australians are doing these things and this is what Indigenous folks in Australia are experiencing and how

they're doing things. But it's like, how can I connect that to an awareness of where my classroom is in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and what responsibilities and lack of connection do I have with the Potawatomi folks, who are the traditional keepers of the land that we're on? Then, how do we think about that dynamic as well? And it's been powerful to have those conversations with my students and to just really think about that work. And I think it really just underscores what we can bring to the table, by studying the 19th century in these different contexts--to just continue to think through the different models and the different moments that these places allow us to think through and especially the ways in which Indigenous and Aboriginal folks and Torres Strait Islander folks in the context of Australia, it's like, they give us so much to think through these possibilities.

- And if I could share another image that I think will follow well from this. So this is one of Gordon Syron's paintings, it's called Invasion. And so, this is a whole series of paintings. He has many of the Invasion series and three of them right now are hanging on display at the Museum of Sydney. So that would be for my students, that would be the first place we go as a class to see these artworks and to be able to talk about what's happening here and what Gordon is doing here and in so many of his other paintings is really turning the tables of perspective. So he's showing the arrival in Sydney Harbour of the First Fleet, which is celebrated as Australia Day, a national holiday in Australia but within indigenous communities and increasingly among allies, there's a real shift to wanting to call it Invasion Day and that's why the painting is called Invasion Day and Gordon is showing the perspective from indigenous Australians who are silhouetted here of this very ominous arrival in Sydney Harbour. And so, if this is the starting point for thinking about Australian history for your students, then it makes it really hard to follow through on the kind of celebratory settler colonial narrative that we would often find otherwise. So I guess for me in the classroom using the visual arts, whether we're actually in Australia or on campus and college park, it's one of the mechanisms for turning the tables on those narratives. And I find my students are often better visual thinkers than they are otherwise at the beginning of the class. So various visual artworks are a kind of key opening to shifting someone's perspective.

- Yeah

- And then the next step would be for example, to look at a novel that I've just become really fascinated by, which is by Thea Astley, it's called "The Kindness Cup." And it's a book about 1880s, just North of Brisbane in Queensland. And it's about a town that is participated in a genocide. They have slaughtered the local indigenous communities. And this is a celebration, 20 years after the fact and the town is coming together to celebrate the town's 25th anniversary and almost everyone in the town is determined not to acknowledge the violence that was at the very beginning. And there's one man who insists that that be recognized, acknowledged, made a part of history and things don't turn out well for him. So it's not an uplifting novel, it's such an important novel and I think really so useful in just kind of laying bare the ways that the narratives that we think we know have been created and passed down through the generations.

- Yeah, I mean, it strikes me because actually next term, I'm gonna be teaching Kim Scott's



most recent novel "Taboo", which is also about a massacre and kind of reckoning with that, although in a contemporary context. And so, it would be interesting to, I haven't read the Astley novel, but it would be interesting to put those two next to each other, for a lot of reasons, right? Like one, if we think about kind of Australia as a category, it's like, there's a kind of connection in terms of thinking about massacre, genocide and colonial violence, as a kind of through line but then to go from Brisbane to Albany, which is in the far Southwest, to think about the really diverse different Indigenous contexts that are in each one of those places too 'cause I mean, I think that's one of the things that a lot of folks, especially outside of Australia, but even within it, that it's like there's hundreds and hundreds of different diverse Indigenous populations with their own traditions and languages. And so, it's like to think about, like, how you move between the kind of colonial scale and then down into the kind of communal scale, what does the landscape look like? What is the relationship to place? What are the different traditions that emerge across the continent in very different places? And to kind of bring it back to the visual, the way that the visual can serve as a point of entry for thinking about that, for thinking about the visual traditions in these different places, which are different than the the quote unquote dot painting, that you put, you shared as your first image. So, just so much richness to dig into and think through. But we're out of time for today, was there any kind of final things that you wanted to leave with?

- I'm just so glad that you are doing this project Ryan, and I'm grateful to have been invited to be a part of the conversation.

- Yeah well, thank you for being a part of this as well and I hope that all of our viewers and listeners got a lot out of this as much as I did. And just as I emphasized in the beginning, Jason and I have been having these conversations for a long time and we'll continue to have these conversations and it's such a process of learning and unlearning and going deeper and just recognizing just the breadth of knowledge and beauty that there is in these different traditions. And that we often have to break outside what we think of as the literary, what our traditional objects are, what are our proper objects, in order to be able to perceive and think about them for our benefit and for the benefit of our students. So, thank you, Jason. Thank you everyone and take care. Bye bye.