Zoomcast with Zarena Aslami

Speakers: Zarena Aslami (guest), Pearl Chaozon Bauer (host)

Date: March 17, 2021

Length: 30:36

Zoomcast Series: Positionality

Citation: "Zoomcast with Zarena Aslami." Hosted by Pearl Chaozon Bauer. *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, 2021, https://undiscipliningvc.org/html/zoomcasts/aslami.html.

- Hello and welcome. I'm Pearl Chaozon Bauer, one of the co-founders and organizers of Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom. And as one of the form of content that we're generating for the site, these Zoomcasts are meant to be a mechanism that allows us to stage conversations, to think together about our classroom practices, 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. And so this is the second in a cluster of Zoomcasts on positionality as scholars initially trained in a national literature that's been integral to producing fantasies of white British superiority, and more importantly why we advocate to undiscipline 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 Zarena Aslami, associate professor of 19th century British literature and culture at Michigan State University to discuss her academic journey, the collaborative nature of her second book project, and her reflections on how to teach Victorian studies as an undisciplining practice. So welcome Zarena, thank you so much for being part of this UVC Zoomcast project. We appreciate your assistance.

- Thank you so much, Pearl. Thank you to you and Ryan and Sophia and Adrian. I think the project is so awesome and it's really, it's very exciting to be invited to do this.

- Thank you for being here today. And so we can just start with your journey, you know from grad student to your job and then teaching maybe the students at Michigan State.

- Sure, I think, you know this is a question that I've had before and I think I always sort of mess it

up. And now I've just decided it's overdetermined how it is that I, you know, became a Victorianist. And how my thinking about it has shifted from the first book to the second book. And so I think, you know, what I, you know, for me... And thinking about the journey of becoming a Victorianist I think it really, a lot of it has to do with reading Victorian novels like for a lot of us. And I think finding them to be both very, you know, inclusive and exclusive at the same time. And I speak as someone who, you know, is in between cultures, you know, not only like a family within a larger culture but actually within that family, right? So as a, you know, half-white, half-Afghan, reading something like Dickens or Eliot, I think that I could feel sort of fascinated by, you know, the proximity to this white world. But I can also somewhat with, but not identify with. And of course you have the time distance and the spatial difference as well. But I think there was something kind of fascinating about being able to read about that whiteness. But of course those novels are also, the ones that I loved at least, also have so much to do with like the poor.

- Right.

- And women and like underdogs, like kind of Victorian underdogs too, right, to some degree. So, you know it's a kind of confusing, you know, again, it's sort of... There's a lot of things that drew me to it while also sort of being positioned outside of it and finding it somewhat exotic, right? It's somehow different from me.

- Right.

- I think too, the language could be both very inclusive, in the sense that with Dickens you really feel like you're in on the joke with him.

- Right.

- Or Eliot makes you feel like you're her intellectual equal when you're reading it. So again, I think that I just had a lot of, you know, ambivalent feelings about those texts but that they really drew me in. And then when I went to graduate school, I really did want to specialize in the 19th century, in part because of that fascination with Victorian novels. But also because what I've been learning about history and the kind of Anglo-Afghan contact in the 19th century helping me sort of explain something again, as personal as my dad's British accent, you know. Growing up in Kabul, going to a British high school in the thirties or forties, forties, I guess. But kind of, you know British imperialism the way that it existed at that point. But the first book, as we were talking about before, really didn't deal with Afghanistan except one chapter that I wrote as an assistant professor. But in the dissertation, again, I felt like I wanted to write about Thomas Hardy. I wanted to write about political fantasy, that felt really important to me. And I felt like I wanted to be able to do that and not be judged for doing it. And perhaps, again, I think we talked about this before, a kind of reverse Orientalism, that kind of fascination with white culture but not really calling it out as such. So it's only later that I think in this moment after just years and years of teaching and researching and thinking and living in the U.S., I think has made it feel much more urgent to me to think much more about how whiteness is functioning, how it's being

centered. And I will say that there's quite, you know, there's a long history of that in our field in Victorian studies, too. That people, especially since the nineties I think, especially those moments when Victorian studies and post-colonial studies came together.

- Right.

- Where there's a lot of possibility. And then sometimes there's like amnesia around that or it gets dropped or people don't read it, you know. Maybe their grad student training doesn't take them to that. And that's a question we should be asking, too. Like, why aren't we doing more of that work and building on it, developing it so that it is more relevant to the present, even? 'Cause, you know, even from the nineties to now, I think there's continuity, but there's also new historical circumstances that I think we can address.

- Right, I was so curious about that sort of that liminal position that you were talking about, just the outsider insider. Is that something that you were always aware of even as a child or was that something that you're able to theorize now as an adult looking back? I'm reading "Great Expectations" so that's on my mind right now.

- Yeah, totally. No, I think I was very aware because it was like, you know I've lived that experience very much in my household of, you know, you know, having, you know, the kind of white American side of the family and then a brown Afghan side of the family, and feeling both identifying with both and disidentifying.

- Right.

- From the beginning I felt that very strongly. And I do think that in part, did, you know, there's aspects of that experience that did draw me to Victorian literature because there is a sense of, you know, even with Dickens as white as he is and as bad as he was to his wife, you know a sense of being on the inside and the outside.

- Yeah.

- You know, his own experience, you know, the imprisoned father-

- Exactly, right.

- That those novels can actually pick up on something that we can, you know, develop further or identify with. But also critique.

- Yeah, that's a really good point. And I was also drawn to your comment about grad school and just maybe not being prepared for this kind of thought. And I find that really, it depends on the professors in your program at the time you're in the program, right? Because our faculty are teaching their expertise.

- Yeah.

- And so it does feel like there isn't enough maybe being done nationally to try to make those stances, although maybe that's changing in the current times.

- Yeah, yeah.

- Yeah, yeah, I would hope so. I mean, I do think we're struck, I mean, just on the practical level, you know, our program, grad program is getting smaller, which means we offer fewer grad seminars.

- Right.

- Because to get them to even fill is gonna be an issue. And so in terms of the number of 19th century British courses we offer, we're gonna maybe offer one every other year. So then, you know, we do independent studies and we figure out ways to address that. But I do think that can be an issue with the grad education. And so it's great to see so many wonderful grad students at MLA and NAVSA, and really, and especially with COVID, showing up for Zoom talks where it's more affordable to do that, to pursue the things that are interesting them. And, you know, I think a lot of faculty, you know want to help their grad students and are leading them in those directions, even if they can't do it formally in a course.

- Has your department started talking about these kinds of you know, issues, concerns and maybe shifting the grad program and...?

- Yeah absolutely. Colleagues like Yomaira Figueroa and then my current chair Justus Nieland, they worked very hard to develop a program that we call MUSE, which is Mentoring Underrepresented Scholars in English.

- Oh, nice.

- But we suspended it during COVID but ran it the previous two years where we brought you know, really talented scholars who are from underrepresented groups and, you know, had them see, we invited them to campus and got them in our grad seminars. And then we met with them to help them with their application materials. So it was very much a recruitment technique.

- Wow.

- You can apply here, too. Look how great we are. You know, it's a mentoring that we're going to offer. And so we have really made that commitment to really trying to diversify our grad student body in the hopes of, you know, contributing to a more diversified professoriate across fields.

- Yeah, and actually that leads us to the next question because there is this collaboration happening there, right? Bringing in people who have other expertise or, you know positionalities

that we may not have to support everyone, right?

- I've learned so much from my colleagues across fields. It's amazing what you learn, like from your Victorianist colleagues but then what you learn from your department colleagues because there might just be one Victorianist in your department. I have three actually. I mean, I have two colleagues-

- Wow.

- Have, you know, just to be in discussion with other colleagues. So again, my colleague Yomaira Figueroa had the idea of starting, you know, requiring a course that really thinks about race at the grad level.

- Yeah, so, very good.

- That's gonna start next year. So it'll be a requirement, in addition to pre-1800 grad students will take race, gender, and the human course that really gets them to think about, no matter what you're studying, you're studying it in the U.S. in a institution of higher ed that has a particular kind of history.

- Exactly.

- And so it really, you know, it takes very strongly from ethnic studies, I think, and critical race theory-

- Right.

- institutional conditions of producing knowledge.

- Yes, exactly.

- That by making them really aware and talking and reading, that no matter what they end up specializing in they'll take that knowledge with them.

- Oh, that's fantastic, I love that. And I think that I'm sure, or I hope anyway, that these moves are happening elsewhere at other programs, other universities. It seems like it. It seems like there's a lot of talk right now. I mean, my fear is that this is the flavor of the month and you know, it's going to be forgotten, but maybe not. And I think if more people like us are continuing to move this kind of thinking and project forward, it won't be forgotten.

- I agree. And I do think the idea of collaboration is so critical to that. Like the idea of collaborating with your colleagues outside your field, but also the kind of collaborations that's happening among faculty, grad students, and undergrads. Because it's the undergrads and the grad students and the faculty, we all want the same thing.

- Yes, exactly.

- To work together to get the university to do it, you know?

- Yes.

- Intergenerational and

- Yes.

- Different Because I do feel like it's very responsive to students but I also think the students, you know, that it's not all students, it's some students. But that everybody can, you know, will benefit from this. Everybody will benefit from that kind of education.

- Right. Speaking of students, have you had your teaching shift when you started teaching at Michigan State? What's your demographics?

- Yeah, you know, I think, you know, it's interesting because at Michigan State, I would say it felt a lot whiter than before, but it also felt like that the students seemed much more aware of kind of class politics than where I'd been before. And so, you know, it's Michigan, we have a lot of students coming from rural Michigan, a lot of students who are first generation. And I think that they had, like they were really attuned to labor issues in a way.

- That makes sense to me actually.

- Yeah, so teaching Marx it'd be like, well, of course, you know, like there'd be a lot of-

- Yeah.

- You know that would go over really well. Sometimes talking about race wouldn't because there was a sense of like, "Well, we're Michigan racism happens in the South.

- Right, right.

- But that I think has been less true since I started there in the early two thousands. I think that our student campus is very aware of racism and has been very active in making demands of the university and the community. So that I think has shifted in the, gosh, the long time that I've been here.

- Oh, that's great though. And I love that student agency, and that the administration is listening.

- Yes. I'm think they are. I mean, they have to.

- They have to, yeah, exactly. And I hope that this is a shift that happens just really again, nationally, globally in higher ed.

- Yeah, and by formalizing it, that's kind of our hope, too. Like by making this a required course, making it part of the curriculum, you know, we want it to live on with our students.

- Yeah, perfect. Well, so kind of changing our direction a little bit. Let's talk about your second project because your first book project and your second project were very different in terms of the collaboration that occurred in the second book, right?

- Right, absolutely. So a question, so the second book is, you know in some ways the reason I went into grad school. Although, you know, I still think the first book was an important part of my development and something that I wanted to do. And I still really like that book. But the second book looks at basically Victorian representations of Afghanistan. And it emerges, again, out of my interest in my heritage. And just thinking about how obscure Afghanistan was even when I was growing up until 9/11. Had never talked about it. Even with the Soviet invasion and cold war stuff, It was really not. And then, and then it was just in the news everywhere.

- Yeah.

- Continues to be, right? It hasn't, it's like in the news, I feel like I see it in the paper all the time.

- Yeah, for sure.

- But it struck me that, especially the way in which it wasn't mentioned is also present in say Victorian studies, as well as in post-colonial studies, that even though the British fought two wars there in the 19th century it's barely mentioned in Victorian studies or histories of British empire. Postcolonial studies really only seems to talk about Afghanistan post 9/11, but not the kind of two imperial Wars in the 19th century. 'Cause it wasn't colonized, right?

- Right.

- Afghanistan wasn't colonized, but it was invaded, it was occupied. And then the British kind of shaped the foreign policy like with collaboration from the emir. But you know how much choice they had in the matter is another, but yes. So there's, so they, you know, the British were invested in keeping Afghan sovereign and not like a colonized site, but they really did want to control it. And there's all kinds of failure around that. Failure that continues into the present. But a question I would get, and I just thought, you know at first I thought there's enough of an intervention in Victorian studies and histories of British empire and post-colonial studies to just talk about Afghanistan and to pull together an archive of Victorian representations of Afghanistan. But I kept getting the question from the very beginning. What about Afghan voices? Where are those texts?

- Yeah, yeah.

- And I had to finally agree that that was a really important question. And also I think I thought at the time, "Well, I don't speak Farsi or Pashto. "I don't have to, and I can't." But as you know, and you know, I think I did like I mentioned to you, I talked with Ryan about this at one point, you know, we can hire translators. And so I'm working with a translator now who's based in Kabul. And so she's gonna help me with a war poem written after the first Anglo-Afghan war that circulated. Because I'm really curious to see how the first Anglo-Afghan war, you know, became part of like an epic poetry in the Afghan tradition.

- Yeah, right.

- So I think that'll, you know, so that's gonna be exciting. And so this is a project I can't do on my own. And I didn't want to just not do it, not include the Afghan voices, nor did I just not want to do the project. But I think, you know, we can hire translators and we can collaborate with other people. And so that's a really exciting part of this process, which is really different from the first book.

- That's wonderful. Have you learned anything about yourself, maybe just in terms of the researching the history? Or even working with an Afghan speaker, Farsi?

- You know, it's funny, there's, it's a great question. I have loved connecting with scholars of Afghanistan whether they are American or Afghan themselves. And I have been able to reach out and get in touch with various Afghan scholars. And they've all been just so supportive, I think. It doesn't feel like there's any competition in this field.

- Ah, so nice.

- What you're doing is great. And people need to learn about Afghanistan. Thank you for doing this, this is awesome. Here's more resources. Here's someone you can talk to. That, I've loved. So I've loved feeling like I'm part of a community that's different from say just my family community, but like actual Afghan scholars. So in terms of what I've learned about, I have thought about like wanting to do more research of my family. And maybe that would be a future project. There's challenges just with finding archival materials in Afghanistan where I can't travel. Just, you know, what does it mean to, you know in a war torn country, where does that stuff go?

- Yeah.

- But it is something that I would like to... It's part, you know, I feel like I'm learning about myself when I'm doing this work.

- That's amazing.

- Or at least part of me.

- Yeah, and maybe that third project can be a little different, right? I mean, like those questions could be the central questions, right? So maybe the answers won't matter as much but the process will matter, right?

- Yeah, I think that's true.

- Part memoir, part research, part I don't know.

- No, I think that's, I think totally. I think they're very impossible to separate those kinds of questions as we're doing any kind of project.

- Right, yeah.

- Even if it's not based on your identity necessarily, but any, you know, I think it's there, we bring ourselves into it, so.

- Right, exactly. I mean, I'm sure, you know, you brought yourself into any of the work that you were writing on Hardy or, you know, Dickens or whatever, right?

- How is Hardy so depressing and awesome?

- I know, I love him so much. He's so depressing though.

- It's great.

- Well, we talked about our third question being around teaching, right? So our big project or our big focus in UVC is thinking about anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom. So what are your thoughts on that? How have you incorporated that in your own classes or potentially, you know, maybe dream classes that you haven't yet taught but are now thinking about because of the shifts that are happening?

- Yeah, no, I think I am learning so much from you and the website. I think it's, I don't feel like an expert at all in anti-racist pedagogy. I'm really trying to unlearn a lot of things and learn new things. And I am afraid of making mistakes, and I know I will. But I've started to think more. And, you know, it's, as many people other than me have said, it's not even just about including voices of color in the classroom in terms of what you're reading, but it's it's about how you're reading things.

- Yes, exactly.

- So you know, to people who say, "Oh, my God, we're never gonna teach Dickens again." I would say, "No, absolutely. "Like, I love Dickens and I will totally teach Dickens. "But I will also, we will also read things that expose the limits of Dickens."

- Right.

- Kind of habits of racism on which that the authority of the novel grounds itself.

- Right, exactly.

- You know, we have to do that, too, and it's gonna be uncomfortable. And so I want to think about that. I want to think more, you know, I taught, I collaborated with two colleagues Andrea Tange and Mary-Catherine Harrison. We came up with a course on Victorian race. And we taught it, I think in 2017 in our different institutions, our different locations. And, you know, the course was really coming out of like, you know, we don't, the 19th century is a place where race really gets formalized. Race science appears, race really shifts from how we think about it in 18th century to the end of the 19th. Let's do a whole course around it. And I learned a lot. All my students were white. And I wonder if, how the class would have been different if it had been mixed. And I think about that a lot because some of the stuff was really racist and uncomfortable, and what that how that would have made certain students feel in that space. So I have more thinking to do. And I think more collaborating with others to get better ideas about how to teach certain kinds of material but also how to engage students around it. But one of the things I really liked about that assignment was it was, again, collaborative because what all the students in the different classes had to do is annotate an out of print text by a person of color. So we had... Oh, I was gonna look it up before I talked to you.

- That's okay.

- I'm gonna have to... Ugh, I'm blanking on it. Anyway, it's not "The Ancient Traveler". "Voyage to England" I think is what it's called. I'm blanking on it. Out of print, HathiTrust had it scanned. And so then we used Hypothesis, the annotation tool. So all students were annotating pages. And then we came up with the final edition, which was, we wanted them to think of it as a broad view edition.

- Yeah.

- That we annotated. And then each class among the students, they worked in groups, to come up with the topics for an appendix at the end, where they had to find primary documents to explore an aspect. Whether it was like a religion or, you know, women's issues at the time, colonial law. Like, you know, so they really had to do that. And it was great to see students across three institutions work on that text together. And, you know, and think about what this Indian traveler to England's experience was like. And to really unpack that as well. And then their final project was to write the critical introduction to what this whole package was. That was the kind of individual project. That I love, I love how that project worked out. You know, as I think about things that aren't even Victorian, you know, I think for me, I've just started to really foreground questions or critical questions around race right at the beginning of the class. So that even as we turn to gender and sexuality, we're thinking about race. Because I think about how

I've taught like an intro to literary theory course in the past. And you follow the sequence of the literary theory anthology. You're typically gonna get feminism first, then queer theory, then it's gonna be race

- Right.

- And colonial theory. And so I flipped that the last time I taught that class. So we started with race and post-colonialism. And so then as we moved to early feminism early queer theory, the students were like, "Well this presumes whiteness."

- Right, exactly.

- "How about blackness with this?" Like, wow, you just did all my work for me.

- Yeah.

- I think that, that I really will hold on to that. You know not that the goal is to bash feminism or queer theory but also like that's really important.

- Absolutely, I mean, these are sort of the structural inequities that we're missing, let's say for feminism, like first and second wave, right? So it's so great that students are already seeing that because they had the background.

- Yeah, so let's start with these questions and then move, and then see what's the value of this text, what its limits are, you know, and So, but I, you know, and I also think, you know, innovations and transformative teaching I think I'm really gonna be trying to learn more about like how to, you know, have a contract at the beginning of the class where we talk about all kinds of things, including the use of the of the N word and all-

- Yes.

- You know, there's things that, as we... I just think we're gaining a lot more understanding of how to teach in a way that is not gonna be harmful to our students.

- Yes.

- But it involves having that conversation. And a contract at the beginning of the class that students are participating in actively, too. And so I have colleagues who are way better at that than me. So that's what I mean by collaboration. I intend to, you know, get their help and just ask for their advice, too. But those are the things that are important to me as I think about returning to the classroom.

- Yeah, I mean, I think that is the key. It's just asking ourselves these questions and saying you know, "What are my strengths? "Where do I need to learn? "And who can I go to for help?" And

then other people doing that will, you know, obviously we'll come to us, too. And so it's just this web of helping each other. That's really, I think at the heart of undisciplining, I think.

- Yeah, yeah. And not making claims toward expertise.

- Yes, exactly, right.

- I don't know.

- Yeah, exactly.

- And I know who to ask.

- Exactly, yeah. And then I think importantly working with the students is key. I mean, that's the agency, but also just making them active participants in their learning and the importance of classroom culture that really comes from the class and not just from top down model, right?

- I mean, it sounds like you, yourself, you've got a lot of experience in informative teaching-

- Yeah.

- And those principles, so I'll probably be hitting you up with questions.

- Absolutely, yeah. And I learned from other people, too. I mean, for me it was all about a collaboration, just working at a institution that's HSI and AANAPISI and having to really rethink my pedagogy because I wasn't trained to do any of this in the grad school level, you know?

- Right, right. It's an incredible amount to learn on the job and have that become your job.

- Yes, exactly, yeah. We're almost out of time, but I was so curious to hear about, you know, how you co-taught or you taught a class that had the same syllabus but in three different institutions. What were the experiences of your other two collaborators?

- I think, so one was at Macalester, and then one was at University of Detroit-Mercy and then I was at MSU. And so we initially had wanted our students to Zoom together and the three classrooms to like have moments where we would come together and talk about the texts. And I think that, you know, I think it was difficult for the students at University of Detroit-Mercy, many of whom work like almost full time, you know, more complicated schedules. A lot of my students also had that problem.

- Yeah.

- We found that that some libraries had more access to resources than others.

- Yeah.

- And so I think some of the just differences, like structural differences, came out. And then I think the students were a little maybe shy about talking to each other about particularly, you know, thinking about how race is being constructed, you know. So that's something else that I want to think more about to empower students to analyze the thing that makes them uncomfortable but to also be mindful not to be harmful to others.

- Right, yeah.

- That was interesting 'cause we were at very different institutions

- Which is also an interesting conversation, right? Like why are some institutions more funded in terms of library and support than others? And you know, you look at the kinds of student populations that you have and just make that part of the conversation, which is exciting.

- Yeah, absolutely. No, I think that there was a lot, I think we learned a lot from that whole experience. And the final product with everyone's input was really fantastic.

- I know, I was thinking, I was imagining an edition. Like you reaching out to MLA or something like that and putting together all those annotations as the work is there. So how cool would that be? Well, I think we are out time. Last thoughts or comments to our UVC viewers?

- No, I think the work of UVC is fantastic and it's gonna be a great resource for me. And, you know, I'm honored to be, you know, for my thoughts to be asked and to be in conversation with you. I don't know, I think there's exciting work going at all levels. So I'm hopeful for our field.

- Me, too. I'm hopeful for our field and for higher ed in general. And then appreciating the kinds of collaborations that people like you are bringing to our DH project. So thank you so much for your time and for your thoughts.

- My pleasure.

- I'm sure the viewers will appreciate everything that you said.

- Well, I look forward to collaborating with them as well some day.

- Wonderful, thank you.

- Thank you so much, Pearl.