

Zoomcast with Alicia Walters

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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 Zoomcast are meant to be a mechanism that will allow us to stage conversations, to think together about our classrooms 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 third in a cluster of Zoomcast on positionality, as scholars initially trained in the national literature that has been integral to producing fantasies of white British superiority. And most 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 Alicia Walters, Assistant Professor of 19th Century British Literature and Culture at Penn State University Abington College, to discuss her academic journey, the use of differentiated pedagogy to reach her students, and her reflections on the changing landscape of higher education. And so thank you so much for joining us today, Alicia. Welcome to UVC.

- Thank you so much for having me.

- So glad, so glad to have you here, appreciate your time

- Of course. and your thoughts that our viewers, I'm sure, will appreciate.

- That sounds great, so.

- Fire away?

- All right, yeah sure. Yeah let's go.

- Great. Yeah, well, I thought it would be good to begin with your personal journey, right? Leading up to where you are now at Penn State Abington.

- Yeah, I liked the way that you discussed the fact that we were all trained in a certain way and this movement, much needed, comes at a time where all of us are really querying how we were trained, right, and how to untrain ourselves and retrain ourselves. I went to the University of Toronto for all my graduate work and it's a deeply historicist department, it still is. And so, it's been a process. Um, even when I sort of step away from strict historicism, even now it feels sort of sacrilegious.

- Yeah. Right.

- But, it's necessary. So in terms of how I got to where I am now, my first real teaching gig was at a university in Waterloo, Ontario, and the student demographic is completely different from the kinds of students that I teach now. So initially those students, it's a largely white institution where I was teaching, a lot of their parents had gone to college. So there was some literacy and like what college means, it means turning stuff and these kinds of things. But it also meant that my way into talking about race was very different than in the American classroom, suburban Philadelphia where I teach right now. So the way that I would first sort of really want to introduce students to these texts when I was first teaching, you know, a lot of texts that are deeply problematic, as you talked about constructing standards of racial superiority, like Kipling's "Kim",

- Right.

- the way in was for me to talk about whiteness, right? Because that's something that I felt was necessary to name, but it was not easy

- Hm.

- because for one thing, I'd often get this really polite wall of silence. And part of that is I think my students, for a number of reasons, one of them being like, Canadians don't really don't talk about race in the same way Americans do. There's a cultural difference there. And we have this national discourse of multiculturalism. So what that can do is actually close off a lot of querying of what race is doing,

- Hm-hm.

- because the official national narrative is so multicultural. So, full stop, right?

- Hm-hm. And so also I had a lot of students who just never talked about this at all. And so there would be like, a sort of shriveling up. Even so, we could eventually sort of have conversations, even if they were a little bit more tepid. But I found that when I came down here, even though Penn State itself is a largely predominantly white institution, my campus, at Abington, is not.

- Hm-hm.

- Most of my students are on Pell grants, they're almost all first-generation students, no matter what their ethnicity is. I think as much as like 40% identify as not white. So it's a completely different situation in the classroom. And so what I found in terms of, you know, shifting pedagogy in this classroom, it requires so much more work and less work. So, when I came down here, I was, I started teaching in 2016, which was a crazy year.

- Oh, wow.

- Yeah. Like, okay, fish out of water. I was teaching a class I think, that I teach on the Victorians and Race. So what it didn't require was having my students understand that race was still a "thing".

- Right. They were like, "no, no, we get that." Sometimes, before, in previous classrooms, it was like, "no, it's still a "thing". These students, no matter what, they did not need that like, "oh no, we get that." So there was a lot of, because of their lived experiences and my students too, they just, were living

- Right.

- in this environment, they just kind of saw things that, and we live in a culture and the States where we talk about things,

- Right.

- and whether we want to or not. So that was refreshing, but also, the kinds of connections that they were able to make because they could still see, like for instance, I would, a lot of my teaching is through primary documents theory but also we get there by primary documents, right? So I would show them stuff written in Jamaica by slavers, like Bryan Edwards, and so they would read these horrifying things describing the African population there. You know, these typical things that actually construct modern white supremacy,

- Hm-hm.

- and in their journals, their response in class they would, without prompting, just say something like, "yeah, I heard that on a speech, on TV, the other day,"

- Wow. Yeah

- And just like, they make these connections that were both
- Wow.
- Yeah, so the connections were impressive but deeply depressing, if you know what I mean?
- Yeah.
- Yeah, so that's the kind of thing that was a different buy-in, is what I'll say is what, is what shifted, and it made different conversations possible. But it also meant that I had to do a lot of rethinking about things like relevancy, right?
- Yeah.
- Who were our students, right, in this classroom. And they needed to see more than just blackness or brownness linked to the abject or linked to, you know, violence, right? And then, so as an instructor, you're like, well, I'm teaching at one of the most violent histories in the world, so it's very difficult for me to like, I don't want to put this sort of "kum-ba-ya" spin on things, when that's not how,
- Right.
- As an instructor, you have this push back of no, it's my job to actually tell you what's going on.
- Right.
- But what actually can happen in a classroom where there's more, where you have like black and brown students especially, is it a little, it's a lot for them. And so I, so managing their own aspect when they're living this stuff,
- Right.
- every day and then we're reading it,
- Right.
- and it's like this unrelenting assault, and it's like 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020. And so it felt sort of like, how do I negotiate these two things, if you know what I mean?
- Yeah.
- And I think a lot of us struggle with this.

- Right, right. Because there is emotional, right, I think you're talking about sort of the emotional labor too, that goes into the classroom. It's not just about the texts. And it never is anyway, or shouldn't be, I think, as a teacher, we have to be mindful about how, what we teach affects our students.

- Hm-hm. But it sounds like, especially with 2016 to 2020, and talking about these, you know, race. I mean, was that a culture shock for you, coming from Canada?

- Yes.

- And how did you, how did you kind of, you know, approach that as your own lived experience? I mean, you come from a place where people aren't talking about it and then all of a sudden, it's sort of everywhere.

- Yeah. I, it's hard for me to even process what that felt like at that time. It was really, I was in survival mode a lot of times.

- Oh no.

- Because I was terrified, like, I was looking for a place to live, with a brand new job and under these circumstances, but you know, funnily enough, it's when I forged some of the most important friendships that I've made down here.

- Hm-hm. And I think it's because it was one of those times when you really kind of had to show up,

- Right.

- and make it clear what you stood for. Right?

- Yeah.

- And so I think that enabled a sort of realness, and also to be honest, with a lot of our colleagues in the field, our field is largely white.

- Yeah.

- And so like in terms of the practitioners, so even though a lot of people I know were teaching this stuff it was the first time, and this goes back to the whiteness conversation, that a lot of people were confronted with their own whiteness as racial category.

- Yes.

- I remember being kind of blown away when a friend of mine told me that she was walking

down the street and some kids had said to her, "Hey, white lady, did you vote for Trump?" And she said, "no." And they were like, "good." But she was like, "I'm the white lady," you know? And I remember thinking yes, in my mind, that was like, one of the first times that, I mean, when I sort of confronted her with that, and that was just something that is enabled down here because of the structures we live in. So it was interesting to be on the ground floor for a lot of those conversations personally. And then of course, we're having this talk now because it's out of left field, as well.

- Right, right.

- And so, but like interrogating whiteness as this positionality that is constructed, at the same time as blackness, and we're all studying it, you know, it's kind of not a coincidence that the two are emerging at the same time,

- Exactly. Exactly, right.

- They are related to each other. And you can't construct white supremacy without its opposite, right?

- Right.

- So, yeah, and so it was, it was an interesting time, to say the least living down here in 2016. I had like a couple months before the election day and then election day. And we all know kind of what's happened since.

- Yeah. Because I think actually, you know America changed drastically in 2016, about talking about race. I think before, it probably, we did have this fantasy of you know, the melting pot, or even the mosaic and everybody getting along. And I think the silver lining of the Trump administration is really just to pull the blanket off

- Hm-hm.

- and the realities are there

- Hm-hm.

- and people are actually seeing it.

- Many people are seeing it for the first time, right?

- Yeah. Yeah right, yeah.

- Like their whiteness and all these things. And so it was such an interesting time. I think it just, that you moved at that time, really just...

- Yeah. It was so talk about the difference. I mean, you know, exactly. And so it's, but in a way, as I say, it's refreshing in some respects

- Hm-hm.

- to like actually be able to name the thing.

- Right, exactly.

- And not dance around the thing, like you know,

- Right.

- we all see this thing, right?

- That's right.

- Can we acknowledge that this is what we see.

- Yeah.

- You know? So you know, yeah.

- And then I think just going back to something that you said, which we talked about before too and my intro actually talks about it too, it's this, we weren't trained to teach in this way, especially the Victorian studies,

- Hm-hm.

- which is such a white field still to this day. So did you feel like, do you have to do a lot of kind of work for, you know, within yourself and/or reach out to others outside of our field, that's part of the undisciplining, right, methodology?

- Yeah. I mean, so in terms of classroom, I think a lot of us may have had experience where our students don't really know what , what they should mean.

- Right.

- So like that's less work for me,

- Right.

- if I'm doing work, whatever. So they're not worried about it. But yeah, I think in the last couple

of things I've written, for example, I have really made an effort to engage with like, black studies, but also, 19th century American studies, because really kind of the moves that are suggested in the undisciplining articles that are needed. And I sort of felt like doing these things before, in our discipline, sometimes reviewers might say like, well why are you doing that, or,

- Right.

- you know, or, or sort of even I might be self-censoring, thinking, well, how's that going to be received if I'm shown to engage with this scholar,

- Right.

- and a lot of that because our field is so delineated, you know?

- Right. Right, right. And so I think it's, that's been great to be able to do that. And also just, yeah, it makes me think about this is maybe something will come up later, but the idea of what we want our field to look like.

- Yes.

- Yeah, now I think I've hit my stride a bit more and I'm more confident in what I want to say in my own writing. And so I feel like making those gestures more and not being so concerned with is this "sufficiently Victorian", has been liberating for me.

- Hm-hm.

- And so, and I think that's what the field needs, if it's going to survive.

- Yeah, exactly. And it is refreshing. I mean, I think part of my work with UVC has been really empowering,

- Hm-hm.

- because I felt like, you know, we've been complaining about our field in this way for so long, and not being able to, I felt like I couldn't do anything about it, you know, you go to NAVSA and it's like a sea of white.

- Hm-hm.

- And it's not to say that we're not doing, some people are doing good work. We are, but as a field, there's still this pushback. Right, so,

- Totally.

- to see a lot more people being able to think in these opening sort of ways, it's just amazing.

- Even just having different scholars. So for me, the turning point, like just we might've discussed this, but there was the conference in Florida St. Pete, it was an outward conference.

- Oh yes, that's right, that's right.

- And that was the first time that I really felt like, I felt like, this NAVSA, I could be here. This fields like resonant with me. And it was a great conference, one of the best NAVSAs. And one of the things that also made it great was because we were in Florida, there were more scholars from the global South that were actually physically there.

- Ah.

- You know, from the Caribbean or wherever else I was just like, why isn't this like this all the time? Are we really even bounded by the Northeast so, I mean, obviously it's not, you know, it's just, it's so geographically specific within Victorian studies,

- Right.

- that it doesn't even like, physically, people aren't even allowed to come sometimes, you know?

- Yeah, exactly.

- You know. Yeah.

- Yeah, and I think in our field too, there is still this, you know, privileging North America and the UK. Right?

- Hm-hm.

- Above all other. So, you know, there's so much to be thinking about, just in terms of Victorian studies,

- Hm-hm.

- but then, you know, we expand that to higher ed.

- Hm-hm.

- And we talked about that too, Right? It's like, you know, what are the kind of questions that we should be asking ourselves now, in this changing landscape or hopefully changing landscape of higher education, as faculty and scholars.

- I struggled with these questions too. I think part of it is this question of what should our new or old new foundational texts be like, you know? What are the sort of, what do we want to organize ourselves around, intellectually?

- Right. Okay.

- And like, how might that really change the field? Is there like, I've kind of alluded to before, but I was at a recent MLA conference that was online,

- Yup.

- the other day, so that allowed for me to go to a lot more panels that I normally would go to. And just being in a lot of the black studies panels, or like American panels, panels or just post-colonial panels, right?

- Hm-hm. These are all things that my work engages with, that I'm doing a lot of these things, but there's never like time or space for that.

- Right.

- And what if, what if we opened up or dissolve, if there's sort of, let those things be really more integral to what we do. Of course, there's the argument that hopefully you'll say it is not necessarily that outside of some of what we do,

- Hm-Hm.

- but I think it's come in fashion. And I sorta feel like making that much more intentional would necessitate,

- Right.

- insular vision of our field. Like how could, how, if we were reading Christina Sharpe and like a lot of different texts, how could we remain so insular, right?

- Yeah.

- So that's one question we'd have to ask ourselves, but I don't know what you think, but like I think we all need a bit more literacy with those different kinds of texts.

- Yeah. I absolutely think that's necessary and true. And I agree with you with post-colonial. I mean, we do have a post-colonial field within Victorian studies,

- Hm-hm.

- but it does feel more siloed, right?
- Hm-hm.
- Of course we, a lot of people engage. We engage, there's like a, there's a weaving,
- Hm-hm.
- but it still feels like it's separate thing.
- Hm-hm.
- Oh, that's post-colonial studies.
- Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- And how do we break? I think it's true. Like, how, those are the questions, like, how do we break those silos? Or I don't even know what it is. It's like a, people maybe even we think, it's like, "Oh it's this thing." And then it's this thing, it's this thing instead, it's actually, we're all part of the same conversation.
- Hm-hm.
- So we need to figure out how to talk and work together. And, I'm sorry.
- No, I'm just agreeing like, totally. Yeah. I was at, before everything shut down, the COVID, last symposium I went to was an Irish studies conference organized by Mary Mellon at Villanova, and I went, I was wondering I'm like, where have you been on my life? This is like, so relevant to everything that I do. And I was just like, on fire intellectually. And I just thought, and then I got mad because I was like, why is this separate from what we were doing?
- Yeah.
- This is ridiculous.
- Right.
- And it, and I remember Amy Martin was reading a paper, and she was reading. I think it was some kind of like, I don't want to misquote her, but it was sort of like a revolutionary writing in Ireland, but he was quoting Bay, you know,
- Wow. Yeah.
- like the revolutionary in the 19th century, that these are united struggles.

- Yeah.
- Where's this conversation?
- Right.
- Where I have to hear about it in Irish studies conference.
- Right.
- You know?
- Hm-hm.
- That kind of thing. There's some talk about silos.
- Yes, exactly.
- Yeah.
- And that is the question with higher education, right? Because I mean, even as a grad student, I don't know if you if you felt like you had to, I mean, we all had to pick a field, right?
- Oh yeah.
- We have to specialize in something, and then we specialize in something and that's our specialty, right?
- Hm-hm.
- And that's part of, and that's our training, and though we're realizing, especially for me, I teach, I'm a generalist,
- Hm-hm.
- at NDNU and so I've had to become a specialist in other things
- Yes.
- that I wasn't natural, you know, trained in,
- Initially.

- yeah, exactly. And that was refreshing for me because it actually opened my eyes and I had to do this undisciplining work without really thinking of it.

- Yes.

- You know,

- Yeah.

- it was just of necessity. At the same time I realized I became a better teacher and scholar because,

- And scholar.

- right, Because I was reading all these things. I mean, I think this comes back to your point about literacy. I mean, I think there, we do need to read, and we do need another kind of training. Right?

- Exactly.

- But how does, how does that work? I mean, A, how do we, the buy-in, right?

- Yeah, yeah.

- For a lot more people, not just in Victorian studies but in all of higher education, you know, how do we get everybody to realize the importance of that and then 2, the conversation. So like, I think what's been great about COVID, one of the silver linings of COVID are the fact, you know, is the conferences that have become virtual,

- Hm-hm.

- have been so easy to attend and,

- Yeah.

- you know, inexpensive especially if you're thinking about, you know, grad students

- Equity.

- Equity.

- Yeah, looking forward to grow these things, hm-hm.

- Hm-hm. And I don't know what's going to happen post COVID. Right? So I don't know.

- Yeah. Well, we obviously are longing for that in-person contact, but it's going to replicate those things, like keep so many people out when we're back face-to-face and that, as you say, it like that was, it was refreshing that I could be in a different conversation in different rooms

- Wow.

- at the virtual MLA and like, just listening to these things that are so, speak to what I do so directly, but like I never get to, because our literal rooms silos or discipline silos.

- Right. Right, right, right. And I know, I don't, the question of buy-in, it's got to be so many levels and we face market pressures, right? So, because of the field is contracting, actually, sometimes it seems like there's more desire for us to market ourselves along the older lines.

- Right, right, right.

- We are we're Dickens, we're Bronte, right?

- Hm-hm.

- And so one of the things I thought about is like what would it actually look like to confront, say Dickens as racist, like, is he seriously, and what would that do for our field? Cause like, I feel like there's a kind of tiptoeing around it

- Hm-hm.

- because of the fact that he's our most marketable, you know, guy.

- Right.

- And so, and I don't answer that that comes down to these questions to buy into, like, I don't know what that would look like, or if we would face intense pushback within for trying to do those things, if you know, we can not really see that sort of happening. So I don't know to what degree is a cataclysm supposed to happen, or if it's re-contextualizing the people that are most identifiable in the 19th century, like, you know, to outsiders and making, say, it clear that Jane Austin isn't just, she's not necessarily Victorian but I'm just thinking of a 19th century idea and making sure that like Bronte or Austen they're not just in parlors, right?

- Right, right, right.

- Like there's definitely international movement. And like, you know, there's much more context that sometimes these texts that does not necessitate us reading them in these ways, of course, we've been, a lot of us, have been doing this for years but making this more legible outside,

- Hm-hm.

- would maybe make us more seemingly engaged with what's going on.

- Right.

- Like, I feel like the outside perception of what we're doing is that we're just not you know, "Oh, wait, there's concern with them now?" And how do we keep touching the "now" without relinquishing those things that make us recognizable? I don't know.

- Yeah.

- This is a struggle.

- Right. And I think you're right. I mean, it's interesting, I mean, Victorian studies, feels backwards in a way or behind, I don't know,

- Hm-hm.

- Behind

- Yeah, yeah, yeah.

- Other fields. And I don't know if it's because of what you were just saying maybe, and not to say that there aren't important work being done because there are,

- Yes, of course.

- I mean, we wouldn't be able to have this conversation if the work wasn't there already, right? There's a lot of foundational things that have happened, you know, as we've been progressing.

- Of course. Yeah.

- But I think we're saying now, like we need more.

- Yes.

- And we need more people to be doing this work.

- Yes.

- And, for me personally, too, like, it was so easy for me to not even think about race when I was doing my dissertation.

- Hm-hm.

- A, nobody was asking me to do that.

- Hm-hm.

- And B it was the thing like, well, I have to have a, so I wrote on poetry, but after I have a chapter on Tennyson, I have to have a chapter on Hopkins. It's like, I have, you know. _ Yes.

- Rossetti.

- You gotta cover these bases.

- Yeah, exactly. To get the job.

- Yeah.

- And so I think that's so important too, in terms of having to change those narratives, even at the grad level.

- Especially at the grad level.

- Especially at the grad level.

- Yeah, exactly. I think it's going to be messy, whatever it looks like. I don't, you know, I don't have the blueprint, these complications are necessary and it's gonna, I mean, you know, honestly with scholars sort of coming up now like this is really kind of when the change has to happen, and there needs to be sort of a new push for a new foundation, whatever that looks like. And of course, as we respond to the pressures of the market, we don't really have much of a choice. There probably will be more collapsing of finals just because of budgetary things

- Right.

- that may actually enable, it's kind of, it's grim. I laugh at things that are like horrible,

- but the flip side of that is that and I think this came up in a talk the other day at MLA is that this may actually ironically allow, right? For a lot of these lateral connections

- Hm-hm.

- to be made in a way that we weren't

- Yeah.

- doing voluntarily.
- That's true. I didn't even think about that, right? It's like the collapse of, you know, the English department into like a humanities department
- Hm-hm.
- is so depressing too.
- It is.
- But at the same time, maybe, yeah, there is this interdisciplinary forcing
- Necessity.
- necessity that happens then. And then also you have to really rethink your curriculum
- Hm-hm.
- and, you know, have to change the way that we've been thinking about English departments,
- Oh yeah.
- or everything, like Victorian studies and stuff, right? Period. Exactly.
- Yeah. So, and even the name itself Victorian, right? So as we've been talking about it, just to speak to a certain colloquialism
- Exactly
- It's interesting because like, what's Victorian? Last night, when I was should have been sleeping, I came across this genealogy website that is specifically tailored to 18th and 19th century Jamaica records. 'Cause my background's West Indian. And then I find all like, you know, just the cache of things and family history. And, but what was interesting is just, these are people you know, with flavors, whatever they're living in Jamaica, they're writing to Scotland or wherever else. And they're very much like Victorian as everyone else but that's not the narrative, right? It just stopped, even though we kind of, we know, that things happen over there, but how many times, honestly, and in Victorian studies would you, in the lessons of enslavers writing back
- Yeah.
- to the home country.

- Right, right. And so like, this is part of what it is.
- Right.
- This international movement of people. And I just think there are still like, when we call it Victorian, and it's just like there's a limit to even
- Right.
- what we can imagine.
- Right. Exactly. Exactly. And so it's about intention, right?
- Yeah.
- And it's about breaking old patterns and it's scary. And I think it's really scary for some people
- Hm-hm.
- because I think the fear and it is a fear, the fear is, "Oh, we're not teaching Dickens anymore?" No!
- Hm-hm.
- Absolutely, we're going to be teaching Dickens,
- Yeah.
- because you know, he's important. And I personally liked reading Charles Dickens, but we have to think about teaching him in a very different way.
- Right.
- And we have to think about the relevance in a different way, right? So.
- Exactly. Yeah. I totally agree. And I think our students will continue to demand it or we won't have the students anymore.
- Exactly. Exactly. Well, so we're almost out of time,
- Oh, that was pretty quick.
- last thoughts or comments? I know, right? Thoughts or comments for our viewers?

- I'm always terrible at endings, I guess. I think I'm returning back to a question more than a settled statement is, if we're all invested in preserving something of our field, what do we imagine that will really look like? And how uncomfortable are we going to get

- Hm.

- in order to get there?

- Hm-hm. Uh, that's beautiful. It's a great way to end. So excellent ending. But thank you so much, Alicia. I appreciate your time. And I know.

- It was great.

- Oh great. And our viewers are going to enjoy this, I am sure. So thank you so much.

- Thank you.

- Right.