Zoomcast with Haejoo Kim and Anoff Nick Cobblah

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- So hello, and welcome. My name is Ryan Fong, and I'm one of the co-founders and organizers of Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom. Hopefully, all of you who are watching and listening have had a chance to view some of our other Zoomcasts, and already know that we're using them to stage conversation and create spaces where we can think together about our classroom practices, and about our processes of learning and unlearning as teachers. As with all our content at UVC, our goal is to grow and learn together as a community of scholars, especially as we take up the challenge of moving beyond the boundaries of our field and training to address issues of race and racism in our field and classrooms. This is the third in a cluster of Zoomcasts on moving beyond restricted traditional confines of the 'literary'. And how and why this move is so important to undisciplining Victorian studies in building anti racist and anticolonial practices in our classroom spaces. Today, I'm thrilled to be joined by Haejoo Kim and Nick Cobblah. Haejoo is an instructor of English at Syracuse University, where she recently earned her PhD. She's working on a book project on representations of medical liberty and alternative health practices. And her essays have appeared in "Literature and Medicine," and "The Journal of Victorian Culture." Nick is a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan, where he's writing a dissertation on the function of play in 19th century science. He has also presented work from a second project on race and transatlantic discourse on the telegraph at NAVSA and the Northeast Victorian Studies Association. So welcome, Haejoo and Nick. I'm so pleased that you're here and willing to talk with us today.

- Thank you, Ryan.

- So maybe to get us started, I'd like to just kind of begin, because I'm curious, to have you talk about what kinds of textual materials, and even non-textual materials you've worked with and encountered in your research from science, medicine, and technology studies. And talk a little bit about what insights they've given you into studying race in the 19th century. I don't know who wants to start here?

- I can go first.

- So for me, scholarly works that unpack the social construction of medical expertise were very helpful and much of it come from the field of medical history or the cultural history of medicine, like more recently, Michael Brown's work. And these scholarly works reveal how the construction of medical expertise in the 19th century was negotiated at the cultural and rhetorical level, as well as what people assume drawing on scientific methods, which is self. It needs to be unpacked as well. So really inspired by those works. I looked into the counter group, medical dissenters and their use of rhetorical strategies and how they deployed certain rhetoric and metaphor to oppose professional medical authority. And I kind of realized that race is really important factor here because medical dissenters call for medical liberty, which is the topic of my research, which seems to be some sort of democratic aspiration towards accessibility, health and sort of this kind of anti-elitism, actually that desire for medical liberty and the pursuit of that desire really relies a lot on the rhetoric of natural self, which conflicts health and able bodied whiteness. So medical dissenters drew a lot from a very romanticized notion enough nature, which overlaps usually with the idea of racial purity, as you can imagine. And medical liberty was understood as part of this larger constellation of English liberties. So always medical dissenters saw themselves as these British agents, English subjects who are different from people with the colonies who are used to despotism, who are used to tyranny. And the fact that depression was here in England was the thing they were the most ambient about. So really thinking about that universal rights to health and how having that medical agency was really dependent upon the subject being white subject, who is basically claiming middle class body.

- Great. Excellent. Nick?

- So when I started studying the history of the telegraph, I became really fascinated with the anecdotes that appeared in scholarship on that history. Scholars like Richard Minky have kind of written about the telegraph, but also used anecdotes as interventions to contextualize Victorian thoughts about that technology. And we all know that's a move that literary scholars do a lot taking an anecdote and using it as a way of talking about the history of some topic, but we rarely consider those anecdotes in the context in which they were originally presented. So where did those anecdotes come from and how do they circulate? And when I started looking into this question, I realized that a lot of the anecdotes that people use to contextualize what Victorian's thought about the telegraph come from 19th century periodicals, where they were frequently

reprinted and were recirculating in the United States, in Canada, in Britain, in Australia, just around the world. As these anecdotes circulated, they ended up being re contextualized and adapted for different audiences. And as you trace that circulation, you can both see how these anecdotes form different ideas about who is the telegraphic community, who can actually use the Telegraph and who is expected to use the Telegraph, but also they adapted to meet local concerns. So for example, if an anecdote had a kind of racist implication that the Telegraph was only for white users of this technology, as many anecdotes did, then that might be differently in an American context than it did when that same anecdote was reprinted in a British periodical. And so one of the things that I've really found fascinating is how you can find these anecdotes in 19th century periodicals and in anecdote books and trace their circulation to understand how the ideas about who the Telegraph was for were really constructed by these anecdotes.

- That's really interesting. And I'm struck--kind of in--as you were both talking, as kind of follow up to this question, is really kind of the way that you're engaging with the archive, right? And so this series is about kind of beyond the literary. And one of the other folks or group of folks that we talked to was the Anglophone Chile project, which is also really based in periodicals. So, I think one of the things I'm curious about is, is kind of just your engagements with and the usefulness of turning to periodicals as a really important source that often doesn't fall, in the categories of the 'literary'. It's not a poem. It's not a novel, right? But it generates particular kinds of information and knowledge. And so I'm wondering if you could kind of just talk about like your experience wading into the world of periodicals, because I get the sense that it's both scientific periodicals of the day and also kind of popular periodicals of the day--and often that's a blurry category between those two things. So I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit about kind of yeah, entering the archive and engaging with these different kinds of materials and what you're able to see and glean from those.

- That's a really good question. And I think periodicals are fascinating for many different reasons, but one of it is because it is actually one of the main methods for scientific knowledge production, right? So development of medical professionals as this professional group relied on the circulation of peer reviewed medical journals, such as the Lancet, which was founded in early 19th century. So this is a system that we still have peer reviews journals as this main method of knowledge production. And what fascinated me was there were all these, what we now understand that's popular journals, but these people saw themselves as this counterpart, these professional journals and was drawing on a lot of, for example, anti-vaccination journals, they draw a lot of information from statistics. So they are actually, they wouldn't think themselves as an anti-scientific. They would think themselves as scientific, but again, that elitist structure of medical science that marginalize Plebeians voices, for example. So there is really interesting rivalry that's going there intervening with the scientific method, the system of science, and really allows us to understand scientific system as this cultural construct.

- It's really interesting.

- In a lot of my work, I do also study scientific periodicals and I want to echo that point about how the scientific periodal article is often kind of not taken into account as one of the main spaces where scientists are constructing scientific knowledge. I also wanna point out that when you're studying the circulation of anecdotes or any kind of text among 19th century periodicals, you very quickly realize one that anonymously written works play a much more important role in the 19th century than has previously been accounted for. I think that we tend to focus so much on works so we can clearly point to an author and ascribe some kind of authorial intent that we often ignore the works that don't have a clear author, but can be just as interesting when you're chasing their circulation. And I also think that it's really important to talk about the fact that as these accounts circulate in the 19th century, you can really see the connections between communities that you might think of as being completely insular if you are only the focusing just on one account from one periodical. So even in the case of scientific periodicals, you might see someone in the same article be republished in various journals, and that changes the context in which you might understand the way that people would actually interpret the scientific information being presented. So I think that there's a lot of really fascinating work to be done on scientific periodicals and really any kind of periodical work.

- Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I mean, I think that the... And of course, scholars of periodicals, you know, have long documented like just how important it is to treat them and to bring our skills as literary critics to bear on those and to take these other kind of contextual pieces of information and incorporate that into our understanding--and book historians that do very analogous work in that. But I think the way that you're really both highlighting, the ways in which even our kind of gold standard today of knowledge of the peer reviewed sort--like when we put that in a historical context, it's very easy for us to be like, oh, well they were getting all this science wrong, or this even didn't understand these technologies and they were doing these nefarious things with it. But it sheds so much light on how we still construct knowledge and the models of expertise and kind of amateur or layperson kind of approaches--and the tensions kind of between those. Which I think would be really interesting for our students to kind of think about, especially our non-majors, non-English majors, the ones who are coming from the sciences, who often, I don't know, always think of themselves as producing a kind of cultural knowledge right in the ways that we kind of understand as literary critics. Which brings me to my now next question, which is about students, right? And thinking about this in the classroom. And so I'm just kind of curious: what experiences you've had bring some of these materials into the classroom or how you might imagine bringing them into the classroom, and how you would help students kind of start to unpack what these materials are doing, especially from these periodical sources and this information from the scientific and technology materials from the 19th century. How might you give students a bit of a foothold into thinking about those?

- So I am actually teaching health and medicine in 19th century Britain. In an upper division course this semester. And I'll start from a very concrete example of what I'm doing in that class, in a class session that's actually happening today. I am making students read an introduction to Sir Patrick's medicine tropical diseases, a manual of the diseases of warm climates that was first published in 1898. And it is basically a textbook for tropical medicine. And the introduction is relatively very short and kind of easy to grasp on. And I'm pairing that with slightly older text from medical history, Mark Harrison's, "The Tender Frame of Man": Disease, Climate and Racial Difference in India, West Indies, 1760 to 1860. It was published in 1996 and that's a really good job of how the cultural and political need for colonial governance shapes, scientific knowledge production in terms of imagining racial difference. And they are talking about similar things, but not quite the same thing. So I think the ways in which they reflect each other really helps students to grasp what's going on here. And the introduction to tropical diseases is really interesting because it is an introduction to a textbook, but it lack the kind of confidence of how to define tropical diseases. And it sort of kind of rambles on about what tropical disease can be. Is it about the climate? Is it about the temperature or is it about the flora and fauna from that climate? And at the end of the introduction, there is this paragraph where the author is, well, I'm just also going to talk about leprosy and bubonic plague, which are not diseases that are dependent on temperature in its infection, but still kind of prevalent in tropical and subtropical climate because they have backward sanitary system. Sort of like really revealing that the discipline of tropical medicine that he's talking about here is not drawing from what could be understood as this solid and clear scientific principles, but rather the kind of social and political need for colonial governance to regulate disease circulation. That's enhanced by global mobility and really closed reading what we now understand as scientific and medical text helps student realize that well, actually, it's very similar to literary text that we have been reading and sort of closing the gap between those two categories of writing in the classroom, demonstrating that and helping students to do that, I think is one of the most effective ways to introduce these texts to classroom.

- Great. Great. Nick, I don't know about you.

- Yeah, so I haven't had the chance to actually bring these materials into my classroom, but I have had the chance to talk with my students about the research that I do, and they always seem very interested and engaged when I'm telling them about out, you know, how the circulation of these short accounts about a technology can help to frame expectations about who belongs to that community. And I think the reason for that is that students are already very aware of the fact that, you know, these kinds of stories circulate. They circulate much more quickly now, but I think they already have an intuitive sense of how circulating stories can bring communities together and help people frame who is, or is not inside a certain community. I think my students also have a clearer sense of the ways in which the stories that we tell about technology can influence who thinks of themselves as being included or excluded. So for example, some people might recall that in 2009, there was a viral video in which an HP computer couldn't use its face recognition on

a black man, but his white coworker could be seen by the computer and there was a similar issue with iPhone X's a few years ago. And when those things become viral and they start to circulate, you see very similar mechanisms to what you saw in anecdotes about the Telegraph. You see different people focusing on different parts of the story and different details being highlighted or being underplayed. And I think students have a good sense of that fact that these things are still happening today, I would love to be able to teach a class in which I ask students to focus on some anecdote from some 19th century periodical and trace its circulation, actually map it along with the rest of the class. 'Cause I feel like when you see the places where these anecdotes are reprinted, you get a much clearer sense of the interconnectedness of readers in the 19th century, you undo that kind of insular feeling and realize, oh, people were reading things that were printed originally in London, in the United States, in Australia, things aren't just British. And I think that's an important thing for students to feel, to be aware of. And then I also also think that by choosing an anecdote themselves and chasing its circulation, students can get a much clearer sense of the fact that you aren't just, the only options for research are not the canonical texts that we might think of as proper subjects for literary study. There are really interesting things you can discover about texts that might seem far more trivial because they are anonymous, but you could still come up with really interesting arguments by chasing the circulation of these things, seeing where the gaps are, where was this not published? How did it get to the places where it was published? Lots of really interesting questions emerge from that. And I'd love to have the opportunity to encourage students to do that kind of mapping work and that kind of archival research themselves.

- Yeah, that's awesome. Yeah, and I love that sense of kind of using our own research practices and kind of the techniques that we've developed, which I hear in kind of both of your responses to that question, of like how you can become a model, for how to engage this. And then our own enthusiasm becomes infectious for them. And all the things that we learn I think can become a kind of pathway for their own learning and their discovery too. That sounds really, really exciting. Nick I think you kind of, oh, sorry Haejoo, were you gonna follow up or something?

- No, I just wanted to add to the kind of geographical connections that Nick keeps pointing out. I think it's also interesting to may be sort of show that temporal connections as well, because one of the activities that I'm planning to do in the second section of my class, which is about medical professionalization and its content. I am gonna give them, because the Lancet has all its archive on its online homepage, which you know Lancet is still a very, it's a top journal in the field of medicine, right? And then they have like that you can search on their homepage, their initial issues, their issues from early 19th century. And I am going to ask my students to explore that early archive from the Lancet. And it's gonna be in a way pretty shocking, which was shocking to me actually, when I was going into the research, because it's really, there's a lot of opinion pieces of how doctors should be perceived, how doctors should behave. There were a lot of these political opinions largely from the founder of the Lancet, sort of like seeing that in relation to

what looks much more professional, what looks like much the present day Lancet which look much more professional to our own eyes will be an interesting practice to understand the history of the development of that scientific discipline of biomedicine.

- That's fascinating. And I think all of these responses, I think are also pointing to, I'm sure all of our viewers and listeners are feeling the kind of resonance and timelines of your projects to today with the COVID pandemic, with the ways in which information and disinformation is traveling and what gets marked as information and disinformation by whom and in what communities. I think your research and the way that you're approaching these topics speaks so much to that. So I'm wondering if you could just say more about that. Like what kinds of stakes have gotten raised for you for thinking about these materials in our present moment and, you know, as two scholars of Victorian studies, right. In Victorian technology, Victorian science, Victorian medicine, kind of just what's hitting you and how that's infusing the kinds of conversations that you're having or wanna have with your students about the relevance of these issues and materials.

- I mean, anti-vaccination movement, it's just, what can I say? And that's some questions and issues around the anti-vaccination movement has been coming up in my class, even though we have not yet been reading the pamphlets themselves together, which is gonna be coming the second half of the class. But I wanna talk a little bit about kind of a general framework that I am trying to bring in when I'm teaching 19th century medicine. So what I'm trying to do is, when I'm putting together the syllabus together and sort of introducing my class to my students, I am really focusing on the present moment rather than 19th century. So instead of giving them a lecture about 19th century medicine and ask them to think about the implications today, I am sort of turning that around and talking about 21st century moment that we are living in together first. And then in order to actually understand that anti expertise sentiments today, anti vaccination movement today, we really have to look into 19th century because that's when the anti vaccination movement, for example, first arose. And if we don't understand the very specific ways in which medical expertise was negotiated in 19th century and how many people were actually against that idea of forming a professional community, we really cannot understand what's going on today. My approach, well with my students has been, let's look at 19th century because if we don't do that, we cannot really understand what's going on today. And students have been responding pretty well so far now, to that approach.

- Yeah, I think that, from my perspective, what I have been learning about these stakes of my project over the last couple of years is the importance of my project as an example of how techs continue to circulate today, continue to be a adapted in ways that people might not be aware of. The 19th century has a similar circulation of texts, but it is a somewhat easier model to look at partially because of the incompleteness of databases, where you only have so many examples of an anecdote that it was reprinted, but you can look at that and you can understand how different details are preserved and when something is reprinted or recirculated, it might not have all of the

context of the original version. So for example, in 1900, there was a newspaper account. It was the first positive account I had found of two black people being married by telegraph. One was 9th Cavalry trooper in New Mexico. He married his wife, Lizzie Hummonds by telegraph, and she was in Kentucky. And when that anecdote circulated, the fact that they were black, did not always appear. And sometimes that information was conveyed just by the fact that he was a member of the 9th Cavalry, which has historically been a black unit. And so when that anecdote appears in Australia, it doesn't mention that the two people getting married are people of color, it just says that he was a member of the 9th Cavalry. That context is completely taken away, but it wasn't a purposeful censorship I do believe. I believe that it was simply the fact that context changes as that anecdote circulated to a new audience. And we do see similar things happen today. Sometimes the changes are purposeful. Sometimes it's just the nature of circulating text, but I do feel like understanding those kinds of mechanisms is an important part of digital literacy. And so anytime I can help my students to improve their digital literacy and realize, okay, when let's say a politician retweets something that's been retweeted 20 times in a very short period of time, it might not have all the details that were originally present in that work. And it's important to know how to trace the circulation of something if you think that it's meaningful and find the original version with that context.

- That's great. And it's making me think too. I mean these strategies of putting our moment and the materials that you're looking at in conversation with one another, where you start. I mean, I think Haejoo the way you're talking about, I mean-- it's like a classic pedagogical principle of starting where your students are. And it just kinda, what do they know? What do they assume? What are they at? And I think Nick, you're doing this too and then like historicizing that, bringing that back and saying, how is it so important that we understand and know what's going on in the 19th century context, can help us understand why things are the way they are today? Yeah and also I think is a really great strategy for grappling, I think often, with the really overt racism of these texts, right? The really uncomfortable nature of the materials themselves and figuring out how to deal with them, honestly, seriously, rigorously, but not apologetically. And to kind of think about this kind of presentist move, I think, is a kind of anti-racist strategy. Like we're not separate from that racism there. It's like, this is directly connected to racist memes that circulate, right? It's connected to the overbearing and overriding whiteness of strains of the anti vaccination movement today. It's like, how we can kind of make those connections seems really, really powerful.

- Yeah, I've also been thinking recently, to continue that thought, about the ways in which we as scholars are part of that continued circulation of these texts. We are providing context. We are hoping that the context we provide is worth dealing with these unpleasant top topics, because we can learn something by continuing to talk about them. But in the age of, you know, Zoom meetings and remote conferences, I've become more aware of the fact that if I share a slide deck with somebody, it is out there and able to be recirculated fairly easily in a way that maybe things

weren't when people were doing in-person conferences and giving handouts. The fact that we are part of the circulation of these things has always been true. But I do think that it's something to keep a, that we should be actively thinking about and it shouldn't be something that we just assume is not going to be a problem. We need to be thinking about the fact that anytime we talk about these things, we do risk that context being removed in the same way that anything can lose its context.

- That's a really powerful insight. And we're unfortunately running out of time here, but I think that's a just a great way to end. To think about our teaching as its own technology of circulation. And to think about how we're in embedded in the processes of circulation and recirculation and contextualization. So what kind of work do we need to do and be mindful of, I think is just a really great place to end our conversation. So thank you so much both. I really enjoyed this and appreciate it so much.

- Thank you so much Ryan--

- Thank you so much for having us here and letting talk about these.

- Yeah, take care, all right. Bye-bye.