

# Zoomcast with Pearl Chaozon Bauer

**Speakers:** Pearl Chaozon Bauer (guests), Tricia Lootens (host)

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- Hello and welcome. I'm Pearl Chaozon Bauer, one of the co founders and organizers of Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom. As one of the forms of content that we're generating for this site, these Zoom casts are meant to be a mechanism that will allow us to stage conversations, to think together about our classroom practices, and about our processes of learning and unlearning as teachers, how we can grow together as a community of scholars and learn from one another, especially in moving beyond the boundaries of our field and training. In today's episode, Tricia Lootens, Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching professor emeritus at University of Georgia and I, are reframing our first Zoom cast to discuss our recent shifts in academic positionality with respect to undisciplining and redefining the classroom. Please note, that these reflections come from our own 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.

- Great. I'm gonna start, and say that the last time we talked, we were both speaking as university classroom teachers. This time we're not. And so I'm gonna ask you to start by talking about, giving kind of the basics on your transformed relationship to the Victorian Classroom.

- Yeah, it's been such a huge change for me leaving academia, being forced to leave academia really, because my institution, Notre Dame de Namur University, has been struggling financially to stay open. And while they are still open, they've now become a graduate only program and online institution for the moment in the hopes that they will enlarge their institutions again. And I felt that there really wasn't a place for me there to be in the classroom in the way that I wanted to be. So I wasn't pushed out in the way, they wanted to keep me there, they wanted me to

become a curriculum director for potential new programs that we were thinking of developing, but I didn't wanna be an admin. And I decided to leave higher ed. I wanted to stay in the Bay Area though, my husband and I realized that we did not want to be moving to the middle of the country and starting over. We like our place here and our family, our community. So I ended up taking a K to 12 job, and I'm now teaching Upper School, English and teaching 10th grade and 12th grade at a gifted program here in San Mateo.

- Right, yeah. I'm gonna move in with my own story, which in some ways is oddly parallel to yours, and I think this has to do with this moment in history probably, very different positions of course. I had not intended to retire at this age. I had planned to teach for much longer, not just hope, but actually planned. But because of the situation at Georgia, which has to do with COVID, has to do with university policies, has to do with the State of Georgia, I moved into a position where in order to keep my health, I was going to have to cut down radically on what I did and I basically felt I was driven into a choice of either teaching well and giving everything else up or teaching badly, or ceasing to teach in the classroom. And that pause between ceasing to teach and in the classroom is pretty deliberate, because one of the things that I think Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom has really brought home to me especially since this transition which is still ongoing, I only retired in January, is how permeable and capacious the concept of classroom is, and how at the same time, how crucial it feels, living in a context where state legislatures are increasingly trying to, from my perspective, invade and control the very particular kind of private-public space of classrooms. I don't wanna downplay the literal force of academic classroom teaching, but one of the things that undisciplining now, that the website now makes me, I've been pushed to think about, is how I can continue to be a teacher. And you're formally continuing to be a teacher. So can you talk a little bit about that transition? The last time we talked, you talked about a pedagogy of radical care. And can you talk about what that was, and how that's been transformed?

- Yeah, I think it's been really interesting for me. I graduated with a job, with a tenure track job. I was only on the market once, I was really lucky. I received a few offers, and I really felt like I made it. And then to get, I was tenured two years ago, and it felt like being, I use this metaphor all the time, just being given the job of a captain of the Titanic. And realizing that even though logically, we know that tenure doesn't really mean as much as maybe it did before, just to have that realization that it really is very tenuous, a lot of people, not only me, but in other institutions, who are on tenure were getting fired or let go as tenured or tenure track professors. And I left on my own, but I felt like I just couldn't stay there anymore in the way that I wanted to, it wasn't the dream job that I had. At the same time, even though it was my dream job, I always felt complicit in higher education, because I was one of the few people who were still able to get a tenure track job and be tenured, like that are, what is it, it's like I think 70% of classes nationally are now taught by contingent faculty or visiting professorships. Like it's such a problematic issue in higher education that I just felt I didn't have a power to change. What's really ironic is that, as I

was leaving higher education, we started *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, and I'm now able to feel empowered in a way that I never did when I was fully in higher education. So when I was feeling complicit and really powerless about that positionality, is very different now. I actually feel like UVCs are making changes especially in terms of radical care. Like, we are really making sure to help people who are contingent, who are independent scholars, who are not teaching in four year institutions, who are not tenured or tenure track, and giving them the care that frankly, higher education doesn't. And I think that really, the face to face time that they have with our students is probably even more important or more, I don't know, tangible in a way, if that's the right word, to making a difference, especially for BIPOC faculty. And so I'm able to enter the field in a way that I think I wasn't able to, or make these changes, these real important changes in higher ed, and in Victorian studies specifically, to maybe effect some changes that I always wanted to change.

- Make sense.

- Being outside of higher education also has given me a sort of a new perspective on how damaging higher education, and like the pressures that higher education puts upon teachers like from contingent all the way to tenured. I mean, I just think that it's, I knew it then, I knew it when I was in it, but I didn't realize that I was on the hamster wheel and the way that I was, just the pressure to continue to produce, and to be there for your students, and service. It was just incredibly exhausting. And at NDNU, as a teaching school, as a teaching college, I didn't even feel the pressures that other colleagues of mine feel in terms of getting tenured. It was actually a very easeful process for me. But I didn't realize that I was putting all this pressure on myself until I've left. And I can see it now, and I'm frankly glad I'm no longer in higher education. I'm not looking to return in any way. I just think for my health, where I'm at, and my life. It doesn't seem sustainable. And so I wanna make those changes for people in general.

- Yeah, yeah. So if you're thinking about having partly stepped out of, partly been pushed out of this kind of, I almost wanna say anxiety loop between productivity and privilege, to come back to UVC. So it helped you in the past with the transition, is I think what I'm understanding you saying. What about if when you think about the future with *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* starting on a personal level, how are you beginning to think about that or feel about that in terms of the site as a kind of resource for communities of teachers?

- I mean, I think that's really what the, for me the magic of UVC is, the community. So I think that's the key word for me. It's, yes, I'm one of the four founding figures of UVC along with Ryan Fong, Sophia Hsu, and Adrian Wisnicki. But our vision of UVC has always been beyond us. So it's all about giving agency and empowerment to others who are frankly not voices we often hear in Victorian studies, primarily for these reasons, because I think research is still so much more. I don't know, put on the pedestal above pedagogy and service and so forth, and, with

regard to contingent faculty, or faculty who are teaching in four year institutions or non tenured faculty, they don't have as much time to think about their research. I mean, actually most of their time is spent on thinking about the classroom. And we are actually a space now that provides access for them I think, to showcase how important the work they're doing in the classroom is. It's like justifiably as important as research. I think there's like research, whenever we think we're intentional about our building of curriculum and pedagogy, especially in light of what we're terming undisciplining, just thinking about how race and systemic racism is really central to the kinds of classrooms that we should be building. Like, this takes a lot of thought and research. And so this kind of pedagogy is actually I think, so important to really consider as a something that needs much more, I don't know what the word I'm looking for is. I think we need to realize how important it is and make sure that the people doing this work is given the spotlight. And also that it helps them get a job because everyone still needs a job, right? And also just shows people that there are scholars like this, doing such important work that we should be thinking about too. I don't know if I'm expressing myself clearly.

- No, I think you are and I have to say that having gone back to UVC as somebody who doesn't have an official classroom at this point, I think probably pretty naturally, I'm suddenly registering the force of this project as a research project in ways that I haven't before, and I just really wanna underscore the point you're making about how this kind of teaching takes real research, it takes serious research. And I think that a lot of people in the past sort of felt a kind of panic, research panic, I can't do enough research to do this, and that was gonna be particularly true for contingent faculty, for people who were institutionally vulnerable, right, 'cause you're out on two limbs at once in a way. And so yeah, that has really, I found that really moving. And I've begun to realize that in fact, as a researcher, I can't imagine at this point, starting out on a new project without checking UVC first.

- That's really great to hear. And I think also, I do think that's so important to think about the vulnerability piece, because, people who are contingent faculty often teach at multiple institutions at once. They just don't have the extra time. Or if they do, they're not sleeping, they're not taking care of their health in a way that they need to, just so that they can continue producing research that would be published in a journal for their CV or something like that, right, to get a job. Even now, it's so hard, it's so important, nearly impossible to get a job, like you need multiple books to even get an interview. It's just so maddening how our infrastructure of higher education hasn't been revised and changed. It's just so unsustainable. And then back to UVC, back to space where people can publish actual research materials, that's not only useful for them, but useful for everybody, right? So I think that's one part of UVC is obviously to help people from this like radical care position, who need extra care, extra help, but also to change the way globally, nationally, we are teaching Victorian studies. We need to be thinking about other voices, we need to be thinking about decentering the Canon, we need to really speak to the current time so we live in a post George Floyd world, and 19th century studies really needs to

evolve for us to survive. And I think it's just responsibility, the reason I considered even thinking about approaching Adrian, Ryan, and Sophia with this idea, with UVC, was because I felt like Victorian studies needed to really speak to what was happening in terms of BLM movements, and obviously with Amy Wong, Chatterjee, and Christoff's article to make us think about undisciplining, like sort of from a research perspective. And I thought well, we need to be talking about this in the classroom because that's actually where we are having as much impact with students.

- So yeah, so what about on a personal level 'cause we've talked a little bit about this, the challenges in your case of negotiating your new range of kind of privileges and demands in terms of undisciplining your own classroom. So here you are, you're now in a very different context, what kind of context is this for you as a teacher with your commitments?

- Yeah, well, I think I shared with you that, I mean, I think one of the big things that UVC talks about is the fact that as graduate students, you don't get this kind of training. So we have to do it ourselves. Like I went to UC Davis, I loved my experience at UC Davis, but I did not get any sort of undisciplining my pedagogy training at Davis as a grad student. And when I started teaching at NDNU, NDNU is a Hispanic serving institution. It's a minority serving institution, it's like we have more, we have students who are just underserved generally. And so I felt like I needed to change the way I taught from the get go. So that was fall of 2015. I'm realizing I have a new student population, that the way that I was teaching 19th century studies, or just generally any of my repertoire had to significantly change. I needed to really think about differentiated learning, and bring in more marginalized voices to actually speak to my students. And that's actually how I even got involved with this kind of undisciplining thinking because I had to do all that research on my own to get better as a teacher to serve my students. And what's interesting is the job at Nueva School, I got that job I think, because of my background in undisciplining, curriculum is postcolonial decolonial thought. And my 12th grade seminar this semester is on the Afterlives of Othello. It's really centered on racism, and the lingering effects of that. And so even though I'm now teaching at a school that's deeply privileged and that's really not diverse at all, and so I had sort of my own feelings of complicity in that regard, which is for a different conversation. But I feel like I'm being a much more responsible teacher in the classroom, because I'm able to teach material that is like so central to UVC's mission. So I taught a Victorian serials class for seniors last fall at Nueva School, and I started with a politics of location assignment. And so some of my students were like, what does this have to do with Charles Dickens and Braddon, and Wilkie Collins. And I said, you'll see. And then, we started with them, how are you coming in to this classroom on 19th century text? And then they realize as we were doing different, our lessons on location, on identity and so forth, it's like, oh, now I understand why we have to start with ourselves. And that's something that I would never have done before if it wasn't for UVC. Like, when I was creating my, I had taught my Victorian serials class at NDNU a long time ago, I think starting off, and it was not undisciplined in any way. And I really

was trying to focus on positionality here and also like, yes, we're centering on Dickens, Braddon and Collins, but we're also decentering them at the same time. It's like a spiral. And I think that it's so important for us teaching 19th century text to keep really doing that. And what's really been wonderful just working with the people we've been working with at UVC is like, the realization that the BIPOC faculty who've just had to think about this, because they've had to, have so many ideas that they bring to the classroom that we can all benefit from, right? Like the whole discipline can benefit from. And my hope is that UVC continues to grow, and we talk about it amongst the four of us, is like, we don't see ourselves just being in the front and center all the time, especially for me, and now that I've left higher education, like I would love for somebody else to eventually take that sort of center stage where they can actually benefit from this in terms of getting a job in higher education. And like, I don't need that, I don't need that help, like with the kind of publicity and spotlight that UVC is getting. I would love for other people to benefit from that. And so we've seen our UVC founders, have seen ourselves sort of eventually having other people being central, we could be like editorial board or whatever and letting the legacy of the project continue as time passes. I mean, younger people will have more ideas than we did. So it'll continue to grow in this organic way that's exciting to me certainly.

- That strikes me as kind of dramatizing the extent to which UVC is a teaching project. And I should say that I can imagine similar interviews with the other three people who are keeping this going, who started this, and I think it would be fascinating at some point to have a kind of roundtable. But yeah, I'm always thinking of things we're not doing. That does sound marvelous. And I wanna bring up with that kind of theme that I saw in your wonderful introduction to your up and coming special issue. With the theme being that kind of stepping back, getting out of the way.

- Yes, exactly.

- Yeah, and on a personal level, I'm beginning to think that that's a, I was thinking of it particularly in connection to retirement. Whose way do I get out of? What can I make possible? Sometimes it seems like a dance, sometimes it seems like I'm doing horrible things and knocking people over, it doesn't just seem like it, I'm sure it's happening. But it's more than that, isn't it? That getting out of that, stepping up and then getting out of the way, that has a lot to do with teaching itself I think. And so, if you're thinking about the most challenging moments for you in terms of anti racism, getting out of the way, and it can be somebody not getting out of your way, or you dealing with that, are there things that immediately spring to mind?

- I mean, institutionally for sure, or I think that the most pressing thing is just, our institutions are just founded on racist beginnings. And so even the classroom itself, I think the four walls, it's something that I've consciously been trying to push against, into the way in which the classroom is set up is actually our, it's lineage is church pews from England, or even I think probably

before. It's just one person in front, the priest teaching to the people who are just passively listening. And I think even just having classroom engagement really pushes against that .

- Yeah, yeah, I think you're right. And I mean, I have to say, we've talked a little in the last, last time we talked about Zoom experiences, and that would be another whole thing to discuss, wouldn't it, because the Zoom classroom is such a challenge. But on the other hand, there were ways in which because people's parents, siblings, roommates, kids, dogs, cats, show up on screen, it brings home to me the degree to which often when the teaching works, you have whole families who are committing to this, including families of affinity.

- Yeah, and I think also just brings home that people are whole beings, right? It's not just the people that you get in the classroom, but it's their whole positionality, right? Their politics of location is really front and center in that experience. I think also just having everybody especially if you have the gallery view where everybody's in small boxes, it decenters the teacher, and so we're moving to again to Friere's non banking system of education, where you really have to engage. And I think Zoom has forced people I think, if they were really intentional about it to change the way we teach, right? It's like differentiated methods of teaching, because you're evolving. And so if anything, maybe I would close with UVC just promoting the evolution of teaching in whatever way you see that, and we don't have to get stuck in these limited ideas of what teaching is, and how we've taught it before. Oh, well, this is how I learned to teach. Again, so I'm going to teach it this way, which is just unsustainable, and it's just, we need to be evolving with the times, and responsibly, and ethically, and intentionally. And we can do that anywhere. We could do that, you could do that in your new, your own new positionality, I can do that at the high school level, other people can do that at two year institutions. I mean, like really, we have to kind of stop thinking in hierarchies and we have to really think about how to support each other in the best way for ourselves, but also for our students. It's the only way we will survive really.

- And it's freeing, isn't it? It's something that allows us to celebrate together as well as fight.

- Yeah, or maybe not even fighting, I think that for me what my problem is with the job market, is it becomes such a competitive space. I mean, you go to MLA, you already feel the nerves and the anxiety, right? I think, why does it have to be so competitive and why can't we just come back to community building and helping each other out, which I hope is what UVC is feeling for people, that it is a helping assisting kind of community, it's a community of love rather than hate.

- Perfect. Thank you, I think we're past our time. This has been a delight.

- Yeah, thank you so much for suggesting this revisit and reframing of our initial talk. And I hope our viewers have found it productive in some form or helpful, and yeah, I would love to continue this conversation maybe about Zoom in classrooms. Thank you so much, Tricia, I

appreciate it.

- Thank you. Bye, bye.