

EXTRA CREDIT

A SUMMER & WINTER SESSIONS PODCAST

Season 2, Episode 1 Transcript

[00:00:00] Introduction: Welcome to Extra Credit, hosted by the Rutgers University Office of Summer and Winter sessions. Listen to hear from students as they share their experiences at Rutgers and some tips on how to navigate a condensed semester. Also gain the perspective of professors and learn more about the courses they teach.

[00:00:21] Kylie: Welcome back to the second season of Extra Credit. We're really glad that, you know, everyone can join us. So today, we have a Winter Session instructor. Can you introduce yourself and tell our audience a little bit about yourself?

[00:00:38] Al Valentín: Yeah. So my name is Al Valentin. I am a PhD candidate in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies here at Rutgers-New Brunswick.

[00:00:46] And I'm the instructor for The Gendered Body. And the subtitle of the course is Horror and the Grotesque.

[00:00:53] Kylie: What an interesting title.

[00:00:56] Al Valentín: Indeed. yeah.

[00:00:59] Kylie: Awesome.

[00:01:00] Yeah. Um, so why... first off, um, why did you get like, into your fields?

[00:01:10] Al Valentín: So, why I'm interested and how I got into the field, it's a little multi-layered. Um, I originally went to Brooklyn College as an undergrad, and I was planning on studying journalism, specifically entertainment, journalism, but then I took my first women's studies class, um, while I was there and I immediately just felt drawn to it.

[00:01:31] It sort of, um, gave me a language to understand the world around me, things that I had experienced or felt that I didn't necessarily have, um, concepts to explain why they happened or what it meant. Um, I sort of got that through there and, uh, then I decided to leave the journalism program to do women's studies instead.

[00:01:51] Um, as for my specific research interests, um, you know, I've always been sort of a nerd. The fact that I was going to be an entertainment journalist, uh, means I was always interested in pop culture. So. You know, it just became really natural for me to be thinking about the sort of frameworks and theories that I was learning in women's and gender studies. And then just start applying them to the things that I was consuming, video games, anime, film, um, television, all that sort of stuff.

[00:02:19] So, uh, yeah, it's just been sort of like my natural proclivities blinding with the things that I really gravitated towards, uh, as an undergrad.

[00:02:29] Kylie: I love that, honestly. Cause you always hear like, oh, I wanted to be an engineer. I wanted to do this. And then you take one class, just like a random one off gen-ed or, you know, it could be like an elective or something, that you're just like, oh, this looks kind of fun.

[00:02:41] And then it totally changes your perspective and you know, like your future, which is like one of my favorite things about, I think, college at like any level, um, and education really at any level you just... That I love that moment when you walk into a class and like the instructor's just doing their thing, but your mind is blown.

[00:03:02] Like you're just like having like an out-of-body experience and like no one else knows it because of like what this professor is saying to you. Um, yeah, it's one of my favorite things about learning. So that's so cool.

[00:03:14] Al Valentín: Yeah. And I think that that's, you know, that's the strength of being at a university that has a lot of, um, you know, I know sometimes people get frustrated with like core requirements or things that they feel like they have to take that are outside of their major, but, you know, that's the way that you become a better learner, a better thinker.

[00:03:31] Um, yeah. Those are the small things that you don't necessarily think will have an impact on your career, or it might not seem useful, but they actually can be super useful, so.

[00:03:40] Kylie: Definitely, definitely. So, um, that's great that you were able to mend your two passions, you know, pop culture. It's like so relevant and so crazy like that it's always changing and stuff, but then you found like a, a connection with women's studies.

[00:03:57] So I hear that you wanted to potentially start a nonprofit, like a media literacy nonprofit too. First, like, what is the, like, what is media literacy in your opinion? I can't even say that, media literacy... in your like, definition of it. And then what would your nonprofit really be all about?

[00:04:18] Al Valentín: Yeah. So media literacy is sort of essentially the skill or ability to critically evaluate whatever types of messages are in a given piece of media. So whether that's news, whether it's a film cartoons, Anything of that nature. And I think it's important to always be aware, um, that even though we think of it as like maybe just entertainment, you know, like, uh, air quotes or whatever, uh, it is always coming from a particular point of view or the particular points of views of the creators.

[00:04:50] Um, and so being able to sit with that, understand what is trying to be said or what the sort of point of the media is, and then being able to determine where you land on that. Like, do you agree with it? Do you disagree? Why or why not? To what extent?

[00:05:05] Um, You know, because I think that when we can really sit with media, something that we all engage with pop culture, especially right on a daily basis. It's giving us a chance to understand something larger about the, the inner workings of the piece of media, but also the world at large.

[00:05:21] Right. Um, how are these choices that are being made by the creators reflecting the world that we live in? How is it helping us understand ourselves better when we take the time to sort of think about it critically, uh, to determine, you know, where we land on certain things. That's sort of how I see

media literacy in general, right? Like what does a given piece of media teach us about ourselves, about the world and about, you know, the object, the item itself?

[00:05:46] Um, um, you know, the idea for a non-profit is still a bit nebulous. Um, I do want it to be sort of nerd culture themes, because that's like my wheelhouse, right? My dissertation is about video games and the class I teach is horror films. I've done work about, uh, cartoons, like Adventure Time, Steven Universe, right. So definitely within that realm, since that's what I'm super passionate about.

[00:06:10] Um, I do think that I would want to have it geared more towards maybe like high school, middle school, because I love teaching at Rutgers. Right. I love my students and I feel like, you know, uh, teaching at a university has such a, uh, you know, great chance to work with all these different types of kids with, or students rather with all these different perspectives and points of views.

[00:06:35] Um, but you know, students that are a bit younger and like middle school, high school don't necessarily get the same, um, chance to take a class like this. Right. Uh, and I think by having like earlier intervention into making sure that people have, you know, sort of critical thinking skills around media, I think that will help with things like misinformation in the news, as much as it will help, you know, prep students to go to college and be able to write effective essays, um, to be able to break down the texts that they're reading in class.

[00:07:04] Right. Like even though, pop culture sometimes gets a bad rap. I really think that the skills that we can learn through it are so fundamental for the rest of our lives, right?

[00:07:15] Kylie: Like media literacy is huge right now. False news is a huge issue. Like not just in America, everywhere. And so I think that educating people on, you know, like what is a relevant source? How do I find it? What should I be looking for in this article that I found on social media? Like that, okay, this is a relevant source or, okay, this is a guy that's bored in his basement. What's the difference?

[00:07:38] And I think it's, so, there's so much information out there which is like amazing for the, what and why we use the internet, but then there's not enough to... there's like people still are so misinformed so easily because there's so much out there. And so I, I always say that I can go on the internet and find like anything, I want anything. Like Big Foot. Any topic, any side of the topic, like left, right, up, down, whatever, you can find an article supporting those facts. And so...

[00:08:15] Al Valentín: For sure.

[00:08:15] Kylie: I just think that it's, it's going to be a, it's already a problem, but if it's not, if kids are not taught now, it's going to be devastating come, like in a few years down the line.

[00:08:29] Al Valentín: Yeah. Yeah. We're already seeing sort of like the ramifications of that and, and yeah, it's, it's only gonna get worse if there's not interventions now.

[00:08:36] And, you know, I think, uh, you know, I also taught the Expos class that we have here at Rutgers. And I think that that is also such a, a really effective and useful class for getting students to start doing some of that work. But then, like we were saying earlier, intervention is always better to, to get kids doing some of that critical thinking skills and to have like, um, you know, curriculums that really value critical thinking over a memorization and standardization is like, so key to ensuring that, um, people are able to like, um, you know, take in knowledge effectively and then wield it responsibly.

[00:09:11] **Kylie:** Yeah. No, I love that. I love that. Yeah. I think my, my personal experience for the longest time with education was just like robotic. It was like, okay, read this, memorize it, spit it back out on a test. And what I struggled with when I came to college was okay, read this, digest it, think about it now, form an opinion based essay and back it up, you know, and we dabbled in it in high school, but then that was it in college. Like that's all you did.

[00:09:41] **Al Valentín:** Yeah. And like, that's one thing I'll say about women's and gender studies in general, right, is that the emphasis, especially pedagogically is all about making sure that you're treating your students more as equals than, as just these little containers that you're filling up with information.

[00:09:55] And so, you know, that's another reason why I really loved teaching, um, because students will bring up, you know, different perspectives that I never even considered. Right. Uh, I've watched a movie, let's say four or five times, you know, every semester that I've taught this. And then somebody brings up a scene that I never thought of in a particular context, right. And it just, it makes for just so much, um, you know, a more rich conversation and just better learning in general. So, yeah.

[00:10:21] **Kylie:** Yeah. That's great. So specifically with the winter, your horror course for the winter, how would you say that kind of mixes in with your research and your previous research?

[00:10:34] **Al Valentín:** Yeah. Um, so *The Gendered Body: Horror and the Grotesque*, it's really just blending, um, I would say, you know, my love for horror films alongside one of the major themes of all the research that I do, which is really about, um, human and non-human difference. Right? How are the categories of human and what gets put outside, sort of constructed together. Um, and like, what does, um, you know. How does the way that we value those differences or choose to devalue them really alter people's lives, opportunities, their level of safety and success, right?

[00:11:10] I would say that all of my research, uh, is really thinking about that, how different categories of difference make people get treated differently, you know, to use the word a million times, um. So I've always, and then, like I said, I've always been interested in the pop cultural analysis. Right. So, um, other research has dealt with cartoons and like animated media.

[00:11:31] Um, I also have done work about like YouTube gaming streamers. Um, so this is just taking like a lot of the, uh, the key themes that I'm working with and then like the tools of analysis, but then turning it to, um, horror. So, you know, it's just like a way to branch out into a different, um, bit of media that, uh, I've been super enjoying, right.

[00:11:53] **Kylie:** Yeah. That's awesome. So do you, did you like, would there ever be down the line this version of the course, but with like a cartoon? I don't know why, but I always think of like *Pokemon* or like the old, old *Power Rangers*, but that's probably, there's probably more relevant things.

[00:12:10] **Al Valentín:** No, like, yeah, I think that like a class that's thinking about animation and like, uh, cartoons would be fantastic, right. Um, and you know, I'm the type of instructor that even if I'm teaching, just like, uh, gender studies 101, I'm like always trying to find ways to put in music, videos or media. Cause I really do think it's so useful for, um, making concepts seem more concrete and like giving students something and like sink their teeth into.

[00:12:36] Um, so yeah, I could totally see, uh, something like that being useful. If I were even expanding this course into, uh, like a spring or fall semester, I would definitely consider doing maybe like animated

horror films, also video games, right. 'Cause there's just so many different ways, we could do literature as well, just different ways to think about, uh, the genre of horror, yeah. And, and difference.

[00:13:01] Kylie: So then for developing this course, did you choose the films to examine based off of like directors or producers that you were interested or like, do they have, is it like a certain type of theme, like overall that, you know, you're like, oh, this is really good. Is it just like your favorite horror films or, you know, like how did you kind of pick and choose?

[00:13:21] Al Valentín: Yeah. So it was super hard to pick and choose. And then especially given that we're working with such a short span of time, uh, it's really about trying to cram in as much that is working with the themes of the course.

[00:13:34] So like, because it's a women's and gender studies. You know, first and foremost, and because we're trying to think about human difference, right. Um, it's really organized around different categories. Um, so like sexuality, gender, race, um, disability. In the summers, we do class, um, and like body size as well.

[00:13:54] And so, you know, just figuring out ways to pick films that are, um, doing something interesting or different around that category. So. You know, for, uh, gender, we used *Scream 4*, in the *Scream* series and also the movie, *Teeth*. Um, for racial difference, we use *Get Out* and *The Girl with All The Gifts*, which is like somewhat of a lesser known film. Um, when we do disability, we talk about *Hush* and then *Split*. So like a movie that's thinking about physical disability and then also like, um, mental disabilities and mental health, right.

[00:14:30] Um, but then, you know, in developing the course. So it's a couple of readings alongside two movies per week. And then that way we can sort of compare and contrast what they're doing similarly and differently.

[00:14:42] Um, but then, because, um, you know, the framework that I use is very much steeped in like black feminist thought and intersectional analysis. So because of that, even though they're like these separate or distinct categories of difference, we're always trying to weave them together. So like, we may be talking about gender, but we're still also trying to think about all the other, you know, sort of categories alongside it.

[00:15:05] Um, Yeah. So it was trying to balance both thing, things that I think would be fun and interesting to watch alongside things that really speak to the themes in a, in a useful way, uh, that worked well with the reading materials. Yeah. There was a lot to balance, but super fun to make the syllabus, for sure.

[00:15:24] Kylie: Yeah, but that's awesome.

[00:15:26] I, I have seen a couple of the films that you've mentioned or more specifically, I Wiki-ed them to see like what happens in the plot because I'm just like, this looks really interesting, but I cannot watch this right now. Horror is like, not my favorite genre, but I know like *Get Out*, it sounded super crazy, so intense.

[00:15:44] And then *Split*. I knew I was like, I cannot do this to myself. So I like read up on that too. And that was like such raving reviews about it, just like how well it was played and acted and how it was, it

was almost sad in a way because the, the mental handicap part, you know what I'm saying? Like, he, he was sick, you know?

[00:16:07] Al Valentín: Yes, yeah. And I think that's one of the fun things about it, right, is that then you can take like the depiction of, for the example of *Split*, right, disassociative identity disorder, or what people think of as like split personalities, and then you can compare and contrast them alongside like the real manifestations of it in our daily life to understand like exactly, right.

[00:16:27] Um, you know, when we think about disability, people who are the killers or the bad guys are often framed as being mentally ill. Whereas in real life, mentally ill people are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it, right. So like, thinking about that is super useful.

[00:16:43] And yeah, I mean, I used to be a scaredy cat when I was a kid, um, so like, I don't think, I thought when I was younger, I'd be teaching class about horror, but you know, over the years I've really come to love it. And it helps you like, you know, master your fears alongside, uh, learning stuff, which is always great.

[00:17:01] Kylie: Yeah, no, it's fun. Now, do you think that you would ever do, cause I feel like, movies are still really popular, but, um, the whole like Netflix, you know, and like the binge watching thing is also like really picking up speed now.

[00:17:14] And I mean, obviously you can't hold like a quick class around like a four season show, but maybe like certain episodes and stuff doing, um, like *Black Mirror* or the one with like Eleven, what is that?

[00:17:28] Al Valentín: Uh, *Stranger Things*.

[00:17:29] Kylie: *Stranger Things*, thank you!

[00:17:30] Al Valentín: Yeah, no for sure. I mean, I think it would be great. And sometimes, you know, um, the way that the class works too is at the end of the semester, I have them do like a blog project where they take a piece of horror media that they want and then they can unpack it. So I'll encourage people to do, um, specific episodes of a series if they want.

[00:17:49] Yeah, TV would be definitely interesting to do. And there's so many different, um, conventions that you have to work with, right? Like I was watching a, an interview with the director, Mike Flanagan, who did *Hush* and also *Doctor Sleep*. And he did the two shows, *Haunting of Hill House* and *Haunting of Bly Manor* on Netflix. And he was talking about how, the way that you have to work with her and like build the tension over a series of episodes. It's like so much more fun, so much more different, right. There's just a lot more room to work with.

[00:18:20] So I think, yeah, if, if it was like a class about a specific series, like you could do a whole class on *Stranger Things*, you could do a whole class on *Haunting of Hill House*. I think that that would be super, super cool.

[00:18:31] Kylie: Yeah. I mean, just, it's just like, you know, I think that like movies are, like you said, there's more to work with when you have like, there's just more time, you know? So like the characters, you can see more of a development, and you know, like stuff like that with your, with the themes that you mentioned, that's really awesome. What a fun class.

[00:18:49] Al Valentín: I love teaching it. It really is super fun, uh, for me, you know?

[00:18:53] Kylie: Yeah. I mean, it's like super, you're taking things that kids are already really into and like watching and now they just get credit for it. Woohoo!

[00:19:02] Al Valentín: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

[00:19:05] Kylie: You don't go into like a horror movie thinking, "oh, I'm going to, you know, like all these themes are going to be really present and I'm going to like notice all of this stuff." So I think it, it adds another kind of dimension, besides just like being scared.

[00:19:19] Al Valentín: For sure. And that's one thing I love, right. I often have, especially because I'm choosing a lot of films that are like more modern, right. I have students that come in and they've seen the bulk of the movies that we've watched, but then when they sit with the lectures, with the readings, they always tell me, right. Like it was like watching it again for the first time, um, or watching a totally different movie because you're just looking with a different eye.

[00:19:41] And so that's one of the most rewarding things is that usually my students will tell me, "After taking your class, I can't watch anything without, you know, analyzing it in that way." You know, sometimes it's good to turn your brains off, but it's also good to be aware, right. Um, so, you know, that healthy balance is, uh, a good thing to strive for.

[00:20:02] Kylie: Yeah, no, definitely. Definitely. That's awesome.

[00:20:06] So, what is, uh, just advice that you have for students taking your class or just a winter class in general?

[00:20:15] Al Valentín: Yeah. Um, you know, in taking a winter course, I think what's really important is because of the sort of time constraints that happen with a winter or summer course, you have to be really intentional about how you're managing your time.

[00:20:30] You know, for my students, I say that it's good to sort of break things down, right? Like maybe set aside a specific chunk of time to just watch the films. Um, and then the next day maybe go through the lecture. Um, you know, so you're just sort of blocking out the specific times to do each thing.

[00:20:48] Uh, I think that that can help prevent things from getting sort of crammed into one day, if you find that that burns you out or makes it harder to give like a thoughtful response on a forum post. Um, that being said, though, it really is about the person's individual capacity. Like if you are the type of person that feels super energized by like, marathoning through it, then go with that, right.

[00:21:10] It's really about figuring out what works for you as a student, and then making sure that those decisions are intentional and not just because of a time management sort of, uh, issue that comes up. Cause you know, we all have lives outside of the university and things will happen.

[00:21:27] Um, You know, and then also I think that taking notes is really key. And I think that the way that we take notes is something to be very aware of, right. For a class like mine or probably any class, I think it's always good to be trying to not just like make notes of definitions or like key terms, but also like where do you see connections happening? Whether it's between the two films that you're watching, between the reading and one of the films, between like an outside experience that you have, um, that

you see sort of like implicated within that. Uh, I think that that's a really important skill to have, right. Because when you take good notes, it makes it so much easier, uh, to study so much easier to write.

[00:22:05] Kylie: No, I think it's important to, especially during, when you have like the holidays coming, you know.

[00:22:10] Al Valentín: For sure.

[00:22:10] Kylie: Like families coming in or, you know, like you're going somewhere and it's sometimes it's a lot to handle. So I give credit to the students who successfully do. But I also think that now more, like during these sessions, it's more, it's very helpful when an instructor comes in saying, "Hey, I know you have a life. So like to work with like, let's work with each other." You know, so that's awesome.

[00:22:34] So during, you know, obviously these times and stuff for students, it can be a little stressful. So how do you promote good communication in a remote environment?

[00:22:42] Al Valentín: I think it's so key, like my class is an asynchronous one. So it becomes even more important to ensure that that happens. Um, you know, I tried to make sure that my Canvas site is laid out really effectively. Like I, I love, I love a module. I think they're so useful and I will always have like, week one: here's what you're watching, here's what you are reading, everything, so that it's just right where you need it.

[00:23:05] Um, I also think that announcements are so key. Like I am that professor, that's sending out an announcement every week, if not every couple of days reminding people like what's done, um, and what's going on. So that way it's just, there's like clear expectations of what is going on.

[00:23:23] I also tend to make like, Uh, not just written announcements, but I'll often make little videos explaining, like, or going over the syllabus, going over a project, um, just to make sure that there's multiple ways that people can access the information that might be, you know, more helpful, whether they're like visual learners or, you know, so on.

[00:23:42] And, you know, just like in terms of what we were just talking about, right. Flexibility is so important, right. Um, you know, I think that it's important for work to get done, but I think it's important as instructors to not create more obstacles to the work getting done, and a certain amount of flexibility can be really helpful in ensuring that the student, even if things are a little late, are gonna get, uh, the most that they can out of the work, because they're giving it their all when they have the capacity to, right.

[00:24:08] So I really try to tell my students, like there's no problem too small to email me about. Um, and when you can let me know what your needs are and like, what will help your success in the class. That's always very useful for me because then I can try my best to work with you, to get you that. Um, so yeah, just trying some individualized, like care and attention, I think is super important. And in any classroom.

[00:24:30] Kylie: Yeah. I think that's what makes a great teacher great. You know, just being, like taking a couple minutes aside and like being like, "Hey, what's going on? Like, you don't have to tell me everything. Every detail. But like, let's have an open conversation. Like, are you okay? Okay, great. What can I do to help you?"

[00:24:49] Al Valentín: Being passionate, uh, alongside being, caring and understanding, it just creates such a better learning environment. So I'm glad that I get to teach a class where my passion for both the content and material and like the, the form of media, I hope really shines through and then.

[00:25:05] Kylie: I think it does, just like our little chat here. Yeah, it sounds awesome. It's so, it's so cool. And I think it's, it's just different, you know, it's not just like your same run in the mill kind of thing. It's horror, but with a twist and who doesn't love that.

[00:25:20] So thank you for joining us. Thanks for taking time out of your day and coming to chat with us about you and your course. Here's to a good fall, but also a good winter.

[00:25:30] Al Valentín: For sure. Thank you for having me.

[00:25:33] Conclusion: Thanks for listening. And we'll catch you next time on Extra Credit.