

EXTRA CREDIT

A SUMMER & WINTER SESSIONS PODCAST

Season 2, Episode 5 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: So, thank you for coming. This is another episode of Extra Credit. We have a professor here today with us, you know, to share their uh, course with us and just a little bit about themselves. So, can you start with introducing yourself and, um, telling us a little bit about yourself?

[00:00:36] Hyacinth Miller: Sure. My name is Hyacinth Miller and I'm an assistant teaching professor, full-time, at the Rutgers-Newark campus. However, I've been a lecturer on the Rutgers-New Brunswick campus for Latino and Caribbean studies since 2012.

[00:00:53] Kylie: Wow. That's like a good chunk of time.

[00:00:55] Hyacinth Miller: It's a lot of time.

[00:00:58] Kylie: Yeah. So, what inspired you to kind of like do this, uh, field of study?

[00:01:03] Hyacinth Miller: Okay, so I teach in three different fields that I see have some synergy. So, on the New Brunswick campus I teach for Latino and Caribbean studies, I teach West Indians in the diaspora. I teach Intro to Caribbean Studies, I teach Caribbean politics and I teach the Other Caribbean. On the Newark campus, I teach, uh, in the African-American and African studies department, as well as political science. So, I teach Intro to AfAm I and II and Comparative Politics. And of course, Caribbean Studies series.

[00:01:45] Kylie: Wow.

[00:01:46] Hyacinth Miller: Yeah. So, it's a lot of teaching, but I enjoy it because I have an interest in seeing how things from the past inspire what's happening contemporaneously and in the contemporary sphere. And, um, I was inspired because as a senior in college, I had fallen under the wings of a Caribbean Studies professor who taught in Africana studies. And as a senior, he brought maybe 10 or 12 of us to the Caribbean for Caribbean Studies conference in Grenada. And Grenada, uh, a few years back, was just overcoming, um, a mini revolution. And so that experience in connecting what's happening in the classroom to what's happening in the actual country that I had just finished learning about inspired me to continue, um, studies about not just the Caribbean, but African descended people in a diaspora.

[00:02:50] Kylie: What is a diaspora?

[00:02:51] Hyacinth Miller: So, a diaspora is when you have, and anyone, any ethnic group can be part of the diaspora or diaspora. And in essence, I study the African descendant diaspora, which means people who can trace their lineage to the African continent, who lived in different countries all over the world. So, there is a Caribbean diaspora. There is an Italian diaspora. There is a Korean diaspora. So, I'm interested in, after the forced removal of Africans from the continent, where they've settled and in particular, how they have integrated politically.

[00:03:32] Kylie: What would you say the intersection of these fields as taught you?

[00:03:37] Hyacinth Miller: So, what I like to share with students is that we all know the dates for World War I. We all know the dates were World War II. Oftentimes we're taught history in silos. So, we may be taught, you know, where the Americans participated in World War II, but we don't necessarily talk about what was happening in the Caribbean and Latin America or in Africa that may have precipitated these event or their contributions, because at the time they were colonized to the success of the allies in World War II.

So for me, um, resting in these three or four spaces has allowed for me to see the bigger picture, the broader picture. So for example, 1917 is a pivotal year under President Woodrow Wilson. I hope I'm getting it correct. And so not only was World War I wrapping up, but the United States was further cementing its empire in the Caribbean by purchasing the former Danish West Indies. And then you're looking to Russia, that's about to have a revolution. And then you're looking to China, that's having some internal conflict. So all of these events are not happening in a vacuum. They're actually influencing the other countries to do what it is they're doing. So, um, it's helpful for me to step back and not look at history in a silo, but look at history more globally.

[00:05:11] Kylie: I will say that's something that I, I had a great, uh, history professor, my junior year of high school. And he, one day he was like, 'y'all, you just don't get it. You don't understand.' And I was like, what are you talking about? Okay. And so then he made a timeline. And he was like this, while this was happening in America, this was happening in Europe. This was happening Australia. This is what happens around the world. And I was just like, oh, I didn't get it. Cause the dates they're like kind of arbitrary. It was a timeline for each like continent. It was like very, very broad. But he was like, these are major events that happened in the United States history that you have been learning about since you were in the fourth grade.

[00:05:48] Hyacinth Miller: Right.

[00:05:49] Kylie: And then he was like, what was happening around the rest of the world? And we didn't know.

[00:05:52] Hyacinth Miller: Of course not.

[00:05:52] Kylie: No one knew. Or I knew something happened in China, but I don't know when.

[00:05:57] Hyacinth Miller: Sure, sure.

[00:05:58] Kylie: And I don't know the relation to what was happening in America when that was going on in China, it was mind opening. And I just don't understand why they didn't. I've been in U.S. History I since the end of my elementary school career. Why can't you expose me to other things?

[00:06:14] Hyacinth Miller: So in my comparative politics course, I, uh, implore the students to de-center the U.S. and to de-center the west. And so if you're not teaching the subjects, dare I say, from a critical perspective, then it's impossible for you to grasp what actually is happening, why it's happening. And also to a certain extent, predict what will happen in certain spaces. Politics isn't a predictable, but human behavior is more predictable.

[00:06:49] Kylie: Definitely, definitely.

[00:06:50] Hyacinth Miller: And one of the examples that I cite throughout all of my Caribbean courses is that liberation independence owes a lot to Haiti. If Napoleon did not lose Haiti, then the middle of the country may still be French.

[00:07:07] Kylie: Wow.

[00:07:08] Hyacinth Miller: He knows because he lost his cash cow or his bag that he had to sell the middle of the country to the U.S. in order to get some funds because Haiti was the pearl of the Caribbean. And when you lose your golden goose, then you have to figure out where am I going to get money from? So, you know, different things like that are not necessarily explained in an American institution, but there's many Haitian students are like, oh yeah, that's whatever. We, we learned that in our classes, we don't know why you don't know that. To be fair or, I tell students that I have 40 hours to make you experts in this field.

[00:07:47] Kylie: Right.

[00:07:48] Hyacinth Miller: And it's 40 hours is a normal, used to be normal workweek. Right. And so when you're a teacher, you have to make the decisions, what do I want the students to absolutely know at the end of this semester or year. And if you're in a non, if you're in grades K through 12, you have different mandates.

[00:08:07] Kylie: Definitely.

[00:08:08] Hyacinth Miller: So they have to pass exams. So.

[00:08:10] Kylie: Yeah.

[00:08:10] Hyacinth Miller: I understand it. I don't like it, but I understand it.

[00:08:12] Kylie: Right, I can see the reasoning and I could see the reason why. It's not great for grasping.

[00:08:17] Hyacinth Miller: Correct.

[00:08:17] Kylie: You know, like the linear is just, yeah, okay. Another lesson on the World War I. Woohoo.

[00:08:23] Hyacinth Miller: Right, or on Nazi Germany.

[00:08:24] Kylie: Right?

[00:08:24] Hyacinth Miller: Yeah.

[00:08:25] Kylie: And then it's just like, okay, next, right. Yep. You know, it's becomes so mundane.

[00:08:29] **Hyacinth Miller:** Right, instead of being contextualized.

[00:08:32] **Kylie:** Right. And so I think too, it's, people have a tendency, like you were saying, history is more human behavior. And so that tends to be repeated.

[00:08:42] **Hyacinth Miller:** Yes.

[00:08:42] **Kylie:** Um, and so then I feel like I don't, it's hard for me to see that pattern because I'm not getting the whole picture.

[00:08:50] **Hyacinth Miller:** Right. That's the point to get the whole picture.

[00:08:52] **Kylie:** I would hope, you know, those textbooks are thick.

[00:08:55] **Hyacinth Miller:** Very thick.

[00:08:55] **Kylie:** Like, I would hope that I, by the end of it, like 24 chapters deep, I would get some sense of the picture. Um, yeah, but I think that's great, that's like, you strive to give students that worldview.

[00:09:09] **Hyacinth Miller:** Absolutely.

[00:09:10] **Kylie:** Yeah. That's great. So what made you teach at Rutgers?

[00:09:13] **Hyacinth Miller:** Well, I'm a New Yorker. I'm a Brooklynite. I moved to New Jersey and I always knew I wanted to be in an institution of higher learning, so that I can get access to the next generation and hopefully inspire them the way I was inspired in junior high school and high school and college by, um, people who I really admired. I thought they knew everything about everything and that they took care to make sure I understood what it is they were trying to impart. And so I wanted to follow in those footsteps.

[00:09:50] **Kylie:** That's a big venture.

[00:09:51] **Hyacinth Miller:** Yes.

[00:09:51] **Kylie:** I definitely think you're up for the challenge, but it's the challenge, nonetheless.

[00:09:55] **Hyacinth Miller:** I, I've found since 2012 that, um, I've been able to make some dents here and there. Not all 45 students, every class, every semester, but yeah, a few come back and say, Hey, this was helpful.

[00:10:09] **Kylie:** That's great.

[00:10:09] **Hyacinth Miller:** Yeah.

[00:10:10] **Kylie:** It's the beginning.

[00:10:11] **Hyacinth Miller:** It's beginning.

[00:10:12] **Kylie:** So, can you tell me about your accelerated course, the Intro to Caribbean Studies?

[00:10:17] **Hyacinth Miller:** Absolutely. So first of all, this course is not offered a lot anywhere in the world. Um, so taking this course will certainly expose you to information that you wouldn't otherwise know about or hear about. Intro to Caribbean, well, everyone has their imagination about what the

Caribbean is. You know, it's an imagined place, it's imagined geopolitically because the Caribbean region was created by colonizing powers.

And so, um, it's my goal to ensure that students recognize why it is a global vacation destination. And also to humanize and visiblize the Caribbean people that live there, other than the wonderfully shot commercials with the beautiful people, always smiling and always looking to serve you and make you happy. But you know, to have them walk away with the fact that there are more than 10 Caribbean countries. And there's a reason why there are Chinese people there and Indian people there, Portuguese people there. And so, yeah, just, uh, an in-depth exposure to what has happened in the Caribbean for the past couple of hundred years.

[00:11:38] Kylie: That's great. So why specifically is this course topic important to you?

[00:11:42] Hyacinth Miller: It's important to me because the Caribbean is a cross roads of the world. Without the Caribbean, other countries wouldn't have been freed from enslavement. Without the Caribbean, I would argue based on my research and those of other scholars who have several more decades ahead of me, um, Europe wouldn't be Europe. So the British Empire was able to be the British Empire, empire, because at some point they colonized 25% of the world, which is why so many people speak English.

[00:12:16] Kylie: Yep.

[00:12:16] Hyacinth Miller: And much of those resources came from the Caribbean region. Again, France became France because of all the sugar they were extracting, stealing, from their colonies in the Caribbean. Same with Spain, same with Denmark. Even Denmark had a hand in the Caribbean. Even Sweden had a hand in the Caribbean. Sweden colonized St. Barts. And so, it's fascinating, it's exciting. I am always learning as well as teaching. I hope to learn from my students who may be from the region who may have visited the region. And, um, I'm truly inspired to continue growing the knowledge about the Caribbean, as well as making sure people know that this region exists.

[00:13:04] Kylie: That's great. Wow, I didn't, I didn't even know about Sweden. I heard Denmark, but I never knew Sweden.

[00:13:11] Hyacinth Miller: Lots of colonizers...

[00:13:13] Kylie: Yeah, wow.

[00:13:13] Hyacinth Miller: That made Europe the empire that Europe was... the empires that they were.

[00:13:19] Kylie: Right.

[00:13:20] Hyacinth Miller: And P.S. some still continue to have colonies despite what the UN says.

[00:13:25] Kylie: So what specifically is your favorite thing to teach students about the Caribbean?

[00:13:29] Hyacinth Miller: Um, my favorite thing to teach students about the Caribbean is that there's a reason why so many Caribbean islands depend on tourism, much of it, not their fault, but it is largely a residue of, um, colonization and exploitation and imperialism. I also like to teach students about their role when visiting the Caribbean as a tourist, uh, what do they want their role to be? Is it to go there to

extract, to exploit? We definitely, uh, broached the topic of sex tourism and also human trafficking that takes place in the Caribbean. So I would like for students to be aware that those are things in their wonderfully beautiful tropical space, where the sun always shines and the weather's always perfect.

I also ask them to consider whether or not the Caribbean even wants you there, because think about it. You know, you have countries and you have to entertain millions of tourists a year. What does that do to your environment? What does it do to your resources? How is it sustainable over time, especially with all the discussions about climate change and the fact that the Caribbean is not predicted to exist in another hundred years because of, um, flooding, earthquake, tornadoes, everything else that has happening since they sit on tectonic plates that are shifting all the time.

Another thing I want them to understand is just how the diversity in the Caribbean they're politically diverse. There are some countries that are independent. There's some countries that are autonomous. Um, the ethnic diversity, as I mentioned, you know, uh. In Curacao, they have some buildings that were erected by the Sephardic Jews. Why do some countries boast Chinese and in Havana, there was a Chinatown. So it's a diverse place, it's a multi-lingual place. Uh, They have Haitian Creole, and they have Sranan Tongo spoken in Suriname. They have English, they have Spanish, they have French, uh, and the Creole spoken in Haiti is not necessarily to Creole spoken in Dominika or in St. Lucia. So to understand and appreciate the diversity and why this region is the most divided, yet unified region and politically stable region in the world.

[00:15:57] Kylie: Definitely.

[00:15:58] Hyacinth Miller: Everything is compounded by their relationships to the global powers and global economic institutional structures. And the fact that they're having to pay debt, that they incurred as a result of their post colonization process.

[00:16:16] Kylie: Right, yeah.

[00:16:18] Hyacinth Miller: Hence tourism.

[00:16:18] Kylie: Yeah, I've seen the, um, the not so good side of that and how it's not sustainable over a long period of time, which, you know, it's a shame, but.

[00:16:29] Hyacinth Miller: It's a shame and it's not unique to the Caribbean, but it certainly is pronounced there.

[00:16:33] Kylie: Definitely. Definitely. Yeah. So then what advice do you have for students taking an accelerated course?

[00:16:40] Hyacinth Miller: So, an online course is not easier than a face-to-face course. So, once you recognize that, um, I think that's the first step. The second step is pace yourself. It is a course, it's a semester course in a truncated amount of time. So there's no such thing as saving up. You should, uh, do the work as you're given the work in order to keep pace, because instead of 14 weeks, you have four to get all of the information.

And in my course, I don't shortchange you when it comes to the information or the readings of the work, because my mandate is to give you a semester's worth of knowledge in a shorter amount of time. So the first advice is don't expect an easy course. There's no such thing. This is an institution of higher learning.

Uh, the second thing is, you know, approach it like a real course. Um, some students have said, oh, it's of course about the Caribbean. That means an A, because I'm from the Dominican Republic. And then they start reading. It's like, oh, so I do have to do work. And I'm like, yeah, you do have to do work, just because you're from the region doesn't mean it makes it any easier. Because my parents are from Jamaica and that doesn't mean I know everything about Jamaica.

[00:18:01] Kylie: Right.

[00:18:02] Hyacinth Miller: So I'm still learning as well as you're still learning. So yeah, take it seriously.

[00:18:08] Kylie: I mean, the course topic is pretty serious and, but it's, it's serious, but it's interesting.

[00:18:14] Hyacinth Miller: It's a place where a lot of innovations have happened and continue to happen.

[00:18:18] Kylie: I always like the underdog stories, but the fact that they were colonized for so long.

[00:18:23] Hyacinth Miller: Centuries.

[00:18:24] Kylie: Right. And they were just, I mean, they were just so taken advantage of it. It's just...

[00:18:28] Hyacinth Miller: So, there are a lot of discussions about what could have been, what would have been, because most of the people that are in the Caribbean are, were imported or brought to the Caribbean. The indigenous groups were there. The Africans were imported. The Europeans were imported, the Chinese and Indian indentured laborers were imported. Um, at what point the Netherlands had control of, uh, Indonesia Java. So the Indonesians, the Javanese were imported, and then there's a fair amount of intra-Caribbean. And so if we take everyone away that was brought there, then it would largely still be an indigenous place or space. So what would have been if the indigenous were allowed to grow and not be, um, almost become extinct.

[00:19:22] Kylie: Right.

[00:19:22] Hyacinth Miller: On that happy note, right?

[00:19:23] Kylie: Yeah. Yeah. Topics that you can discuss further. Well, thank you so much for being here for, you know, sharing about your course and about you. Um, I really enjoyed the topic. I mean, I've learned a lot, honestly today, so. And that's always fun. What higher education is for.

[00:19:40] Hyacinth Miller: Yes.

[00:19:41] Kylie: So thank you very much.

[00:19:42] Hyacinth Miller: Thank you for having me. This was great. I appreciate the opportunity to share all the time information about the Caribbean. So I hope the listeners and viewers enjoy it.

[00:19:53] Intro / Outro: Thanks for listening. And we'll catch you next time on Extra Credit.