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Interview with Professor Teofilo Ruiz

Below is UCLA PhD candidate Nicole Gilhuis' interview with Teo Ruiz, Professor of History and Chair of the Spanish and Portuguese Department at UCLA. Professor Ruiz, who has fourteen books, Guggenheim, NEH, and Mellon fellowships, as well as the National Humanities medal, to his name, answers questions about the many paths for historians, the struggles facing academia, and the endless potential we can achieve when we pursue our passions.¹

Nicole Gilhuis: Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with us today, Teo.

Teo Ruiz: It is a pleasure.

NG: We have a couple questions about history and the direction it's going. So let me just start off with the first thing most of us wonder about at one time or another: what is the usefulness of a PhD?

TR: Well I think that in a society that requires people to be more and more educated, the college degree is almost equivalent to what the high school degree was 25 or 30 years ago. So a doctorate will always help you, in every profession. It is now expected of people entering the job market, either as teachers or anything else, to have a higher degree. And a PhD will certainly be something that will be good in your file, whether you are applying for a teaching position or the state department or a museum or a learned society or even business. So, a PhD is strategically and practically a very good idea to have.

But I think there is something else that is important, because of the manner in which you age today as opposed to the way I aged. You have a much broader horizon than I did. The ability to spend six or seven years of your life reading and writing and exchanging ideas is a treasure that you will always have with you. I think that there can be no better reward than having gone through the processes of learning things, selecting a research topic, touring abroad in most cases, living

¹ This interview has been edited for clarity and length by Journal Editor Rhiannon Koehler.

abroad in most cases, and then putting it into words. I think that is a [once-in-a] lifetime experience.

NG: I agree and I think that it seems like there are a lot of articles that are written about people having PhDs and not getting jobs, but there are a lot of counter-arguments coming out saying that it is more about knowing how to use the degree you have. Is there anything you can say about how you would suggest students come forward about utilizing those skill sets [they develop in graduate school]?

TR: Well I think part of the problem is with us, I mean with the faculty, because essentially we think of this discipline as a way, and of teaching graduate history as a way, of reproducing ourselves. I think that the discipline in the United States has now moved away from that and that Anthony Grafton, the former President of the AHA, really put an emphasis on not getting into only teaching and research, but also offering many different paths and I think that this is very important.

NG: What are some opportunities or experiences a PhD student interested in teaching should look for during their time at UCLA?

TR: There are several things you can do to prepare yourself for the market and I think that it is very important for you to decide early on whether this is the life you want. If you get a job in a college or university, you get a job in the discipline [where] there are no positions in the United States, [and] no positions at all which are research oriented only. You will teach, whether it is [at] Princeton or Harvard or Cal State Long Beach. In most cases, even at the great research universities, it is going to be an important part of your tenure process.

So what will I suggest? One, that as you begin to TA, you [decide that you] are committed to this. If it is painful, quit. Right now. It has to be joy. You know writing is an incredible experience, writing is lovely

and wonderful to do; if it is pain, I think your body and your mind is telling you very clearly that it is time to choose something else. So that is the first thing, you need to be aware that you really want this, that it is not just because you love the idea of having summers free, that you really want to be in the classroom with the students and that you want to research and write and that is something that would bring joy to your life. So that's the first thing.

[The] second thing is that decisions are being made in the job market now in which certain fields, certain areas, [and] certain training is preferred to others. One of them is of course the importance of world history, the global approach. The other one is the ability to go across fields.

[Also,] a dissertation is not a finished product. It should not be a finished product. You should not spend 15 years of your life trying to finish a dissertation—in fact the game here is to finish as quickly as possible. It has to be presentable. It has to be engaging. It has to be something that will be read

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by others and said, “there is something here that we really like.” So without necessarily spending an extraordinary number of years trying to polish it into a finished work (for that you will have 6 years before you come to tenure), you want to have something that is exciting and novel. And that also means that while you are still in your PhD program, you should absolutely try to publish some articles and some reviews, attend conferences outside of UCLA, and essentially have a CV that will show that you are intellectually engaged with a profession, both as an author and as a speaker.

NG: So when our graduate students are looking for TA positions should they try and go outside their comfort zone and pick classes that are really different?

TR: Absolutely. Because essentially it’s not only that it will expand your teaching profile, you can [also] bring a perspective to your own work that is very different. I didn’t teach world history until the fall of 2010. That means I was almost 37 years into my teaching career before I taught world history. Well, it was a revelation and I have done it now three times and I will do it again in the fall, and to me it was the most exciting thing that I have ever done.

NG: What are some of the biggest problems or mistakes that students make when they’re trying to prepare themselves for the job market?

TR: I think that there are three great enemies of graduate work and of professional historians. The first one is the idea that you have not done enough research. I am in favor of, essentially, beginning to write as soon as you can and targeting your research to your own writing. Now this is not a complete form, but you could research for the rest of your life. Students sometimes get lured into the idea of research, which is very wonderful, but do not translate that into writing. And then they delay it, and that happens also to people who are already employed, so they delay it and nothing comes out.

The second [enemy] is that you have to use everything that you have researched. Really, all of the material you will collect will be material that you will use in the future for articles and other things, not everything has to go into a dissertation. Remember, the dissertation is an exercise, it has to be lucid, it has to be interesting, it has to be original, but it is not a finished work. That’s why you get 6 years to turn it into a book.

And the third problem is that...well...your writing is never perfect. And, then, there is a tendency to continuously edit and revise and never move away from the first three lines you wrote. You could revise and edit for the rest of your life and it will never be perfect. Flaubert said that and it is absolutely true. My advice, and this is how I have written all my books, 14 of them, and many articles and how I wrote my dissertation on a very fast schedule, is that I try to write three pages every day. Because you can only write when you get a rhythm for writing. And I will not stop until I get to the point where I know what’s coming next. And I will write myself a reminder for the next day where to pick up the story.

I do not spend time putting down perfect footnotes—I will just make myself notations—and I do not edit as I write. Strangely enough, it seems that usually the first thoughts are the best thoughts. And you have to choose, also, the time in which you write best, for me it's the morning, which is why I teach only in the afternoon. And sometimes I don't have the time, I have to come to a meeting so I will write two sentences, but I will write every day. Every day I will write something so that there is a sense of continuation. You cannot write by writing intensely one week and then spending a month without writing. That just doesn't work.

NG: That's fascinating. And I wonder if that also removes some of the fear that students have, that idea of impending perfection that they can't attain.

TR: Yes, generally, then you will come back to it in two, three weeks and you will have a distance from what you had written which allows you to see, "hmm, this is not too bad" or "well, I need to do something..." But it also tells you what it is you need to research. Where are your holes here. What did you miss that you need to fill in. One of the things that students forget is that dissertations are really exercises. If you have five chapters...there will be two very original chapters, and then there will be a contextual chapter, historiographical chapter, and things that are...not difficult to put together, even without having gone to the archives.

NG: Well that's very [helpful to put into perspective. But after the dissertation, there is the job market and trying to choose the best first step for the rest of your career.] In your opinion, if a student is offered a beginning lecturer position at a bigger university like UCLA and they are also offered a tenure track position at a smaller university, what is best for that student to prepare for that career?

TR: Well, I think if you get choices in the job market then you are a very lucky person. Chances are that most people don't get these choices. But, the truth is that in the end, the purpose of life is to be happy. And it's not because you are going to go to the most prestigious research university, although if that is what makes you happy by all means, but it is a very complex combination of many things. It's a question of location, it's a question of where your partners or the people you love want to be, it's a question of how comfortable you feel in a place like that, it's also what would you like out of life.

The truth is that I always dreamed of teaching in a small liberal arts college, where I could have this very close relationship with my undergraduate students, but I never had that experience and maybe if I did I would not like it as much as I thought I would have. So it's very difficult, the market being what it is, you need to address whatever comes. I, for one, was very clear when I came out of Princeton in '74. It was also a critical period in the profession, as there was a tremendous crisis. There were no jobs, but it was very clear in my mind that there would be places where I would not want to live. And so, location for me was

very significant and important. So I did not even apply for many jobs that were in parts of the country where I didn't want to live.

NG: I like the holistic view—it's not just about the job, but it's so much more than that and thinking about where you'll actually be happy. Now you're someone who has been on many hiring committees, so what helps you stand out? Or what should you not do in an interview?

TR: Well there was a colleague here that is now teaching in British Columbia whose name is Henry Yu and he said, "be yourself, unless you are a jerk, in which case be somebody else." I think that the interview process is very pressure-filled. You have to articulate in two or three minutes what it is you are doing, you have to talk about your teaching passion, you have to try to avoid being too nervous, you have to be honest, and you have to want this. You have to show them not that you are desperate for this job, but that you essentially care about what you do, as a researcher and as a teacher and as a future colleague. Because interviews are about your abilities as a scholar and your abilities as a teacher, but also about can we live with this person for the next 40 years? So you have to be agreeable and amiable and charming and wonderful.

NG: Has there been anything that has stood out to you as being "Oh that was a faux pas. That was something you shouldn't have done."

TR: People who talk evil of their present colleagues. If they are doing this to us, are they not doing that to other people about us? You can disagree and have differences with some scholars, but you also have to be courteous in doing that.

NG: [Both pertaining to a candidate on the job market and in general, w]hat do you think is the role of archives, archival research and field work in making a well-rounded professor or academic?

TR: In most fields, it is essential to have the archival experience—for many reasons. One, because you may be a person who will train in this, in the art of working in archives. Two, because, there is nothing more extraordinary than having in your hands something which is a remembrance of the past that connects you to your subjects, to your protagonist, which is not something that you read in a book. It's not a printed document, but you are the first one to really read it in this fashion. You can be reading a parchment or a piece of paper from the 13th or 14th century, that is 700 or 800 years old or even older, depending. So for me, for medievalists at least and for early modernists [too], the experience of the archive is absolutely necessary. And having no knowledge of the archives will affect your ability to get a job.

NG: Also, adding to that as well, is the experience of getting to the archive and seeing some of these physical locales, going to Paris for example, [or] going to any of these locations.

TR: I am a great believer that place is of great significance in our writing. So when I wrote a book about Cascadian rural life in 1994, which won an award and all that, I spent more than two months just traveling along the routes that I could reconstruct from my documentation—going from little town to little town in a car, traveling about in the their same manner, [as] if I should have done it either on foot or horseback or on monkey or on a mule. But it is a very important experience that is also associated with the archives.

NG: Stephan Palmie writes about Cuba, and he talks about this idea of the spirits of the past walking behind you.

TR: Well I tell my students in Paris, “look, here we are, the dead [are] all around us, the dead [are] clamoring for our attention. And the dead [are] as alive today as many of us are, or more than many of us are.” Because in every building, in every monument, in every piece of work, in every piece of art, there is someone who essentially extends his hand beyond death to remembrance. We are nothing but memory, and what is history but the reconstructions of memories?

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NG: [And an experience that connects you to those memories is important for emerging historians. You] can’t do that in your pajamas in your house. You need to go and feel and breathe it.

TR: Plus the fact that you get to meet people who are doing work that is perhaps connected to your own and you create networks that are going to be with you for the rest of your life. And this is something very important to say, that as you move through graduate

school, there will be people that will be your readers for the next years. They are precious. And they have to be readers who are also willing to offer you criticism and to tell you this doesn’t work, throw it out. And, so you need to create a network of readers and you’re going to be reading for each other for the rest of your life.

NG: That’s a great point and it actually speaks to the community building that we should be doing in graduate school. Do you think it is beneficial to have readers that are outside your field?

TR: Absolutely. My teacher at Princeton, Joseph Strayer, who was one of the great medievalists, always kept telling me “You are not writing for yourself, you are writing for others.” And you know the material very well, but it’s incomprehensible to people who don’t know the material as you do. So, you need to explain, to others, what it is that you’re doing. Otherwise, it’s worthless, who is going to read it? The three people who work in the same field as you? Two of them are you friends and one hates you, so what else is new?

NG: What do you think about the future of history? Where do you think the current trends or the next trends might be moving towards?

TR: I am afraid that I am in the pessimist mode when we talk about this. I hope it will change, but it is very obvious that the humanities as a whole are being underfunded and neglected. Schools have not become a place where you can go to learn, [but] where you go to prepare yourself for a job. And that parents, and students themselves, are being pushed into a more vocational path. That is obvious in the decline in the enrollment in history and it is obvious in the decline in the study of most languages, with some exceptions in which the languages are important because they are practical—Spanish, Chinese, Arabic. So in that sense, the whole humanities field is very much under attack, not only here, [but] in other parts of the world as well. Now is not [what] you might call a very positive time. That does not mean that you should not do this. You should do this because you love to do it. I wrote this once for an award that I got for teaching, which is to be human is to teach and to be taught. But you have to love what you are doing, and you have to love those you do it with. Obviously you're going to have the students that haggle you for grades and drive you crazy and don't come to class. But then there are the ones that do. And the[n there are the] ones that really respond and there is that moment of recognition in the classroom where a light goes on in their brains and you say to yourself, "Ah, something is really going on here." And that is, 43 years I have been doing this, it still is, a tremendous thrill.

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NG: That comes through clearly, going back to your excellent teaching record, and the fact that students love you, which I can attest from my students who love you and keep taking classes with you.

TR: But the secret is not that the students love you, the secret is [that] you love the students. And I love the students. So somebody said to me, "Oh the students love you!" And I said, "Oh no you got it wrong, I love the students. I really love the students." Yesterday some student gave me a letter, which I didn't read until I got home. And it was a lovely letter. She had been in another one of my courses and thanking me for this and that. And I was so moved by this. And so I have been doing this for 43 years, and I still can be moved by the reactions of a student. I don't know that I am the best teacher there is, and there are many other methods of teaching—everyone has a different method. And you have seen me teach, I go crazy and run around, and you know [I can be] very dramatic. I never thought that was the way I wanted to be a teacher. But I cannot be the professor who stands behind [a podium] and read[s] a very polished lecture. I cannot do that. So I do this.

NG: It sounds like...going back to again, if this is your calling, if this is something you know you want to do, you just have to [do what you can do and] be honest with yourself.

TR: This is my faith. I tell that to the students at the end. I don't believe in God, I believe in you. I believe in what I do. Not to you, but with you. That learning process in which I learn as much as you do.

NG: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, Teo, I really appreciate it.

TR: Pleasure, Nicole.