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The Career of Education Tenure Anyone?

by Oanh Ly | photos courtesy of Viet Thanh Nguyen

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They say some things are lifelong pursuits like martial arts, parenting, traveling, building towards retirement or building a dream house. The same can be said of a life dedicated to academia. With a masters or doctoral degree, a career in education can be rewarded with job security, solid pay and publications in respected journals. Teaching at the university level is a proven way to build a stable life and fulfill the noble need to touch the future.

They also say, "Those who can't, teach." But, for those who teach with tenure, it is a completely different story. According to one Vietnamese American Professor, the tenure track leaves little to complain about. Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen gives us the scoop on an academic's life.



What and where are you teaching now?

I'm teaching in both the Department of English and the Program in American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, where I've been for nine years.

What led you to your educational specialty?

I became passionate about Asian American literature because I felt that it told a body of stories that mattered by recording the experiences, hopes, passions and tragedies of people who were invisible and inaudible in mainstream American culture.

My specialty is Asian American literature but, like most professors, I teach outside of my specialty. In my case, I also teach American studies and American literature of all kinds, everything from the 18th century up to the present, and my students range from freshmen to Ph.D. candidates.

Have you taught at other institutions in the past?

I was a graduate student instructor at the University of California at Berkeley, and I tutored for the Upward Bound program at the National Hispanic University in Oakland.

What was your first job out of undergraduate school?

For better or worse, I'm a career academic; I went straight from undergraduate to graduate school, and from there to being a professor.

Have you always been interested in pursuing education as a career choice?

When I went to college, I majored in English because I loved to read literature, but I never thought I was going to be a teacher. I had no idea what it meant to be a teacher and I had vague plans to be a writer. But I never thought of doing English as a career because it seemed relevant only to myself and my own pleasure in the aesthetic, but irrelevant to the world.

Only after I added a second major in Ethnic Studies did I start making connections between literature and the world, between aesthetics and politics. Only then did I

begin to think that literature matters because it was through literature that voiceless people could tell urgent, vital stories about histories, communities, and families that America would rather ignore. Without literature and other cultural work, these histories, communities and families—of the poor, the weak, the powerless—would vanish.

I was turned on to this idea that literature matters by my professors at Berkeley, pioneering intellectuals like the late Barbara Christian, who could lecture passionately for hours on the history and literature of African Americans, without a lectern, without notes. And by Elaine Kim, who wrote the first book on Asian American literature and showed that such a thing as Asian American literature existed, and had been written by authors decades before Amy Tan. My professors were my role models because they showed to me that teachers, educators, and scholars played a crucial role in transmitting knowledge, preserving memory and cultivating a tradition that students can build upon.

How many years of schooling did you endure?

I had a checkered undergraduate career, studying at UC Riverside, UCLA and UC Berkeley, which was, for me, the promise land. My life was transformed for the better because of the political and intellectual environment at Berkeley. I graduated from there with two bachelor's degrees in English and Ethnic Studies. I didn't want to go into the real world,

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The Career of Education [p.2]

because all the little jobs I'd had in school were mind-numbing, and I didn't need a real job to tell me that I would hate the 9-to-5 life. So I went straight into graduate school, staying at Berkeley for my Ph.D. in English. I finished in five years because my parents kept asking me when I was going to get a job and reminding me that my brother did his M.D. in four years.

What is your advice for students who may be interested in pursuing teaching as a career?

Teaching is incredibly rewarding, regardless if you're teaching kindergarteners or graduate students. My advice for those who think they want to teach but never have done so is to try it out first, through tutoring and outreach programs. Not everyone should be a teacher, so it's important to find out whether you have the aptitude and personality for it.

What are the pros of being a professor and working for a college/university?

For the most part, I love being a professor. Unlike just about anybody else you know, you get your summers off, and all the vacations the students have. Your friends will be jealous. You have opportunities to travel the nation and the world, attending conferences and meeting interesting people in the intellectual fields, or spending your sabbaticals living for extended periods of time in wonderful locations. You live a relatively sheltered life where all you do is work with ideas and with smart, idealistic people.

Teaching is one of those occupations where you will see the immediate consequences of your work in the classroom or as a mentor. It's also one of those occupations where you can see these consequences years later, as students who keep in touch will tell you what has happened to them, and you can see the shy high school student you once tutored, who came from a family where no one had gone to college, become an intellectual property lawyer. Most of the pros in academic life come from the fact that being in academia is a vocation, a calling, and a passion.

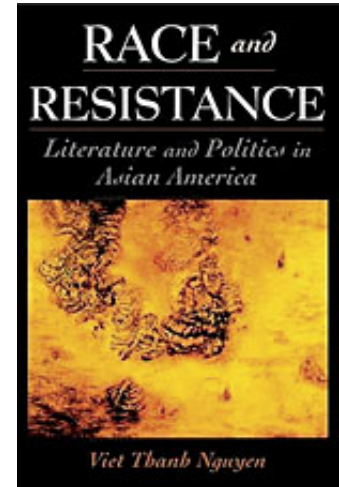
What are the chief complaints about your job?

The major drawback to the academic life is that there's no guarantee you'll get a job after your Ph.D., and there's certainly no guarantee that even if you got a job, it would be in a place you would want to live. Among the stressful aspects of being an academic are getting into the school of your choice, writing a dissertation, finding a tenure-track job and getting tenure.

Although you'll never make as much money as your friends who became lawyers or doctors or engineers, you'll make more money than high school teachers or police officers or truck drivers. You'll be distinctly middle-class. The university is your boss, and academic petty politics can be a misery, and grading is a chore, but for the most part, you are left alone to do the research you want and the teaching that you want.

What are some of the highlights from your own career?

I was tenured, which is the academic equivalent of getting permanent job security,



and I had a book published through Oxford University Press in 2002. After tenure, I was able to take a two-year sabbatical and lived for seven months in Paris and another seven months in Viet Nam, which were magical experiences. I spent an additional seven months on fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA, where I struggled with a short story collection, the first piece of which is forthcoming soon in *Best New American Voices 2007*.

What makes a student stand out today?

As a professor, you're always encountering new generations of students who are full of hope and promise, even as you yourself get older and older. This difference between myself and students leads me to think that students as a rule are always impressive, because as a group they're young, energetic, and looking forward to their entire lives. Even among all of these exciting students, there's always an elite that stands out because of their dedication to something outside of the immediate demands of your classroom.

They could be leaders and organizers of student groups, or they could be outstanding intellectuals in terms of their major, or they could be emerging artists with lots of talent, or they could be student-athletes. The common denominator is their high degree of passion and commitment to what they believe in.

Viet Thanh Nguyen was born in Buon Me Thuot, came to the United States in 1975, and grew up in San Jose, California. He was educated at the University of California at Berkeley, and is an associate professor of English and American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, and has fiction forthcoming in *Best New American Voices 2007*.

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