

happens, people try to do something about it, and tell stories about it and bequeath them to the future.”

Natalie Davis lives according to her convictions: she did and does something about it, she tells stories—accurately and sincerely—about it, and bequeaths them to the future.

WOMEN AND OTHER MULTIPLE STORIES IN NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS' HISTORICAL CRAFT

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It is an honor to be allowed to contribute to honoring Natalie Zemon Davis at this occasion. By pointing to her pathbreaking contributions to women's and gender history, I do not wish to imply that this is the one single most outstanding part of her manifold *œuvre*, since the latter has many other striking dimensions. Rather I wish to point to the fact that she has demonstrated to a long generation of historians, of which I am a part, how to practice women's and gender history and how to integrate it into the overall *métier* of the historian, while at the same time redefining the historian's craft.

When I first met Natalie Zemon Davis, over three decades ago, she did not know that we met. Much later, in her 1997 Charles Homer Haskins Lecture at the American Council of Learned Societies—*A Life of Learning*—she recalled that situation by pointing to the two great events of the 1970s that influenced her historian's craft: one of them was the emergence of the new women's history (the other being the important role which anthropology began to play for her).¹ At the 1974 meeting of the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, then held at Radcliffe College, a few hundred people were expected, but about two thousand were found in attendance. I happened to be one of the two thousand, and Davis' keynote lecture on “Women's History' in Transition”

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Life of Learning*. Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1997, American Council of Learned Societies, *ACLS Occasional Paper*, 39 (1997): 14–17. This text, as many others, has also been published in various other languages; in German in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Lebensgänge*. Glikl. Zwi Hirsch. Leone Modena. Martin Guerre. *Ad me ipsum*. Aus dem Amerikanischen von Wolfgang Kaiser (Berlin Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1998), 75–104. The edition includes a bibliography of Davis' works and German translations. – The following text is a slightly reworked version of my presentation at the Symposium in honor of Natalie Zemon Davis held at Central European University, March 4, 2005.

became a key for my own historical work, as it did for many others.² Since 1951, so Natalie said in 1997, after having written an essay on Christine de Pisan, she kept a folder called “women” in which she placed historical documents on pregnancy dresses, baby food, times of weaning etc., and over the years the folder swelled and turned into a filing cabinet. By 1974, at “the Berks,” the filing cabinet must have reached sizable proportions. But most of all, her keynote lecture gave directions and visions of lasting value. Let me point to some of them and some that go beyond.

First: In the title of her lecture, she placed “women’s history” in quotation marks, because we should “be interested in the history of both women and men” and not assume a history of women as being separate from that of men: this would lead to an impossible “historical fragmentation”.³ Instead, the historian’s task is to discover “the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past” (the term “gender” in this sense was very novel at the time and not yet widespread). This implied, among many things, that not only women, but men, too, have a history as sexual human beings—much later this implication developed into a new field of research: of “men’s studies” as part of an overall gender history.

Secondly: Natalie suggested that it should become second nature for any historian, whatever her or his specialty, to consider “the consequences of gender” as readily as any other historical issue, such as class, power, social structure. She envisioned what she called a “multidimensional charting of social structure” in which male and female, lower and upper classes, cleric and lay, and many other social and cultural relationships would have their place.⁴

² Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case,” in *Feminist Studies* vol. 3, no. 3/4 (1976): 83–103. We thoroughly met then in 1987, when we taught a summer course on gender history, along with Leonore Davidoff and Karin Hausen, at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

³ Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition,” 90. The meaning of the quotation marks is underlined in Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women’s History, Multiple Stories,” in *Jaarboek voor vrouwen geschiedenis* 11 (1990): 99–106, 99. The problem of “historical fragmentation” is mentioned with regard to Mary Beard, *Woman as a Force in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1946) in Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women’s History as Women’s Education,” in *Women’s History as Women’s Education. Essays by Natalie Zemon Davis and Joan Wallach Scott*, Symposium in Honor of Jill and John Conway (Northampton, MA, 1985) 13–14.

⁴ Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition,” 90–91. She also formulated, like many other women’s historians at the time, the claim that the study of gender in history would change historical periodization (p. 90). That this did not come true, was due to many factors; see Tommaso Detti, “Tra storia delle donne e ‘storia generale’: le avventure

Subsequently Natalie was one of those (rare) scholars who were willing and able to put this into practice, and never was she satisfied with unidimensional approaches, structures and meanings.

Thirdly: Natalie claimed that gender does not mean any one thing, not even one or two sexes, but a relationship, or rather: manifold relationships between human beings. In particular she rejected the assumption, widely held in the 1970s—but also much later—that there were just one or two major relationships between the female and the male, symbolized by the polarities of “nature and culture” and/or “private and public.” The sources in Natalie’s filing cabinet had shown to her that such universal and universalizing polarities were not only historically misleading, but also somewhat boring. Instead she insisted that “What is striking about sexual symbolism is not its poverty, but its richness”.⁵ She made this point for the early-modern period, and meanwhile we know that it also holds for the late-modern period and many other situations inside and outside Europe.

Fourth: Natalie Zemon Davis conceived of gender relationships not only as relationships *between* the sexes, but also those *within* the sexes,⁶ that is, not just between women and men, but also between women and women as well as between men and men. In other words: she claimed that there is not one single female voice over time, just as there is not one single male voice over time, and that we must expect “multiple voices.”⁷ Women do not all have the same history, and Natalie was out for studying the likeness as well as the difference among women, and the difference as well as the likeness between women and men.⁸ And she spelt this out in many ways. One of them has been her pathbreaking study on “women on top,” dealing with unruly women, with sexual inversions and “topsy-turvy” as an important part of sexual symbolism in the early-modern period,⁹ another was the study on “Iroquois Women and European Women.”¹⁰

della periodizzazione,” in *Innesti. Donne e genere nella storia sociale*, ed. Giulia Calvi (Rome: Viella, 2004), 293–303.

⁵ Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition,” 92.

⁶ Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition,” 88.

⁷ Davis, “Women’s History as Women’s Education,” 16.

⁸ Davis, “Women’s History, Multiple Stories,” 105.

⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Chapter Five: “Women on Top,” (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 124–151.

¹⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Iroquois Women, European Women,” in *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 243–258.

Fifth: A further instance of Natalie's search for multiple voices simultaneously overturned the relationship between the assumed margins and centers of history; it is best represented by the inspiring portrayals in her *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* which brings back to life the Jewish merchant Glikl bas Judah Leib who crossed borders between Germany and France, the Catholic nun Marie de l'Incarnation who crossed the Atlantic between France and Canada, and the Protestant artist Maria Sibylla Merian who crossed from Germany to the Netherlands and to Surinam.¹¹ All of them were marginal in the male as well as in the female world; they moved in novel directions and new worlds and were involved with other marginal peoples, among them Amerindians and black slaves. Most importantly, it was Natalie who moved these figures from the margins of history to the center of our historical attention and even affection. And she never forgot to remind us, as she did in her lecture in Amsterdam at the symposium for the tenth anniversary of the Dutch Yearbook of Women's History, that women's history is not just one story, but "multiple stories" and "the multiple telling of stories," which she views as "a way to end rigid dichotomies once and for all."¹²

Natalie's view of the multi-dimensional, manifold and plural character of women's lives in the past and the present has been a great inspiration to many practitioners of historical research. Of course this vision of human and historical plurality concerns not only the history of women, but also that of men. Yet I venture to say that the study of women's past and of gender relations has contributed much to this view of human plurality in general. I do not really wish to compare Natalie's historical thought in this matter to anyone else, but I cannot avoid seeing a parallel in the thought of another Jewish woman: Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt grounded her own strong vision of human plurality on the creation story in the biblical Genesis (1: 27): "Male and female created He *them*." In Hannah Arendt's eyes, humankind existed, from the outset, not in the singular (nor, one might add in this context, as a polarity), but in the plural.¹³

Just a few words on Natalie Zemon Davis' use of "stories" for and in "history." This leads to what one may call—with some reluctance—her "method." My first point here is on "theory and historical sources," the second on "stories and dialogue."

¹¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹² Davis, "Women's History, Multiple Stories," 106.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 8.

Over the decades, Natalie moved from the history of ideas through social history to cultural or anthropological history and to the relationship between literature or fiction and history. Yet she adhered to none of the theories that are usually linked to those approaches, though she freely used some of their concepts and elements. Her insistence on the "multiple meanings" of the historical documents was, as she said in a lecture of 1985, "a needed antidote to claims for totalist or hegemonic theory," and in 1997: "I like the concept of multiple axes around which the same society is organized and moves, as contrasted with my earlier two-dimensional Marxist model."¹⁴ One might add her reluctance toward other two-dimensional models, such as the notion that all women are victims and all men oppressors: Natalie was foremost among those who rejected this—supposedly—"feminist" model, both for the past and the present.

Yet her reluctance toward theoretical models results mostly from her eagerness and her constant joy¹⁵ to listen to the voices of the past which usually do not fit today's models; here she practices what the historian Reinhart Koselleck called "das Vetorecht der Quellen," the right of the historical sources to a veto against historical model-builders. On the other hand, Natalie insists that a historian is not, and should not be, just a tape recorder for the sources.¹⁶ So what is between the veto right of the sources and their today's reading? Of course it is the historian's craft, as practiced by Natalie, and it includes creativity, imagination and immersion. Her introduction to the best-seller *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the story of a marriage imposter with an uncertain identity and "his" wife, concludes with a phrase which illustrates finely her close reading of the historical texts as well as her intuition and the balance between both: "What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."¹⁷ In her *Fiction in the Archives*, where she analyses the tales formulated by convicts in sixteenth-century France who appealed for pardon, she reflects on the relation between the crafting, by men and women, of past

¹⁴ Davis, "Women's History as Women's Education," 16; Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 11.

¹⁵ Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 23.

¹⁶ Politics, Progeny and French History: An Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis, in *Radical History Review* 24 (1980): 115–139, 132.

¹⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). While this book has been read by many non-historians too, it is mostly historians who are fascinated by Natalie's response to some other historians' attack against her "method," including what is compressed in the above-quoted sentence; see Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lame," in *American Historical Review* 93/3 (1988): 572–603 (Part of "AHR Forum: The Return of Martin Guerre").

narratives under duress and the realities underlying them.¹⁸ Yet when some people after a lecture on social and cultural history which Natalie gave at the University of Bielefeld in 1993, assumed (happily or critically) that in cultural history hard facts would be replaced by fiction, Natalie responded: "I like facts!" And when around the same time the historical study of gender, in the Western world, focused ever more exclusively on the "cultural construction" of gender, up to a point where women and men (and various other categories) appeared to be nothing but fiction, she held against this trend the words of a young Russian historian who, as she reported, had "enough of *mentalités* and cultural history;" instead: "We want realities!"¹⁹

For Natalie Zemon Davis, the voices of the past—whether literary, legal, or criminal sources—are also sources of storytelling.²⁰ And she is a storyteller of sorts. Her study on "Iroquois Women, European Women" concludes with an Iroquois tale of the origin of stories: it is a magical stone that introduces the Iroquois audience to storytelling ("What does it mean—to tell stories?" the boy asked. "It is telling what happened a long time ago...").²¹ In Natalie's interaction with her sources she enters into dialogue with the multiple and often contradicting voices of the past. While immersing herself fully into the meanings of past voices, at times she imagines debate, such as in her Prologue to *Women on the Margins*: the Jew, the Catholic, and the Protestant protest *unisono* against the author for having placed them alongside each other in one single book, for no other reason than being women and regardless of the overwhelming differences among them: religious, professional or familial. The author intervenes, responds to her subjects' puzzled questions such as "*Gender hierarchies? What are gender hierarchies?;*" attempts to explain the meaning of "margins" (against objections such as "Margins are where I read comments in my Yiddish books ... In my Christian books ... River margins are the dwelling place of frogs") and the dialogue concludes: "NZD: You *found* things on the margins. You were all adventurous ... *Maria Sibylla Merian*: It sounds to me, historian Davis, as though *you're* the one who wanted adventures. NZD (after a pause): Yes, it was an adventure following you three to so many different climes. And I wanted to write of your hopes for paradise on earth, for remade worlds, since I have had those hopes, too. At least you all must admit that you loved to describe your world. Glikl and Marie, how you loved to write! And Maria Sibylla, how you

¹⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives. Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 1987.

¹⁹ Davis, "Women's History, Multiple Stories," 102.

²⁰ Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 20.

²¹ Davis, "Iroquois Women, European Women," 258.

loved to look and paint! *The Other Three Women*: Well ... maybe, maybe..." Altogether, this Prologue may be read as a subtle statement on method, as well as on multiple axes and voices in society. Moreover, it includes that element of fine irony which is so special in Natalie's texts.

Dialogue is at the center of Natalie's craft as a historian. In an interview of 1980 she argued that we, as historians, "have a dialogue and sometimes a debate with the past ... How can I recreate these people without molding them in my own image?" One of her techniques of doing so is "to imagine my subjects in a dialogue with me." Even if she does not always understand or agree with them, she tries "to let my text give them a chance to defend themselves, to answer me back even if I have the last word." She thought that there is "something partly maternal in me with regard to the past. It's wanting to bring people to life again as a mother ... It's a re-creation."²²

I take all this as a symbol of Natalie's intellectual generosity. In one of her more recent books, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*²³ (this project was on her mind as early as 1980), she explores a society where gifts—and not so much market exchange—were a major language for creating reciprocity and obligation. And she called her work on the old sources in the libraries also a gift.²⁴ She has turned this gift to herself into a gift to all her dialogue partners: because her partners in dialogue are not only the people of the past, but also—and perhaps most of all—today's historians and non-historians. Thank you, Natalie, for your gift of multiple stories of women and men.

²² "Politics, Progeny," 132.

²³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

²⁴ Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 21.