

“A Force of Nature”, Natalie Zemon Davis’s Legacy for Historians

Interview with Lynn Hunt¹

“Uma Força da Natureza”, o Legado de Natalie Zemon Davis para os Historiadores

Entrevista com Lynn Hunt

“Una fuerza de la naturaleza”, el legado de Natalie Zemon Davis a los historiadores

Entrevista con Lynn Hunt

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Lynn Hunt is a Distinguished Research Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), renowned for her work on 18th-century France, including *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) and the recently published *The Revolutionary Self* (2025). She previously taught at the University of California, Berkeley, where she met historian Natalie Zemon Davis (1928–2023). Davis made a significant impact on Social and Cultural History through her groundbreaking studies of marginalized groups – including women, workers, and the poor – in Early Modern Europe. Her most famous book, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), was a landmark in historiography, setting new standards for historical narrative and analysis. An active scholar throughout her career, Davis published numerous influential works and taught at leading universities, such as Berkeley, Brown, Toronto, and Princeton. In light of Davis's recent passing, the following interview pays tribute to her life, work, and enduring legacy.

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to you, Prof. Lynn Hunt, for accepting our invitation to contribute to this special dossier in honor of Natalie Zemon Davis. It is a privilege to talk to you and to include your insights as part of this tribute. To begin our conversation, I would like to ask you about your relationship with Natalie Zemon Davis. Since you were colleagues at Berkeley, could you share your thoughts on your first encounters with Davis and her work? How did she influence your understanding of historical scholarship? And how do you see the interactions between your work and hers? Were there moments where your approaches converged, diverged, or complemented each other?²

I first met Natalie Davis in 1974, when I was interviewed for a position at the University of California, Berkeley, where she was teaching at the time. I had never met her before. I, of course, had heard all about her, because she was already a very well-known figure in Social History,

2 Those present at the interview were: Marcella Miranda, Jonathan Dias Portela, and Verônica Calsoni Lima.

and especially in trying to bring in the history of women to the study of Social and Cultural History.

Once I got the job at Berkeley – and of course, I was incredibly lucky to get that position – she very quickly had me over for dinner. It was a dinner, frankly, that I have never forgotten, even though it was now 51 years ago. I was a beginning assistant professor. She was already a senior professor and a very well-known figure. I had not even published my first book yet. I had published two articles, but that was all. The only other person present at the dinner – because her husband was living in Canada at the time – was Svetlana Alpers, who was a very well-known art historian and becoming an even more famous art historian. It was just the three of us. It was, frankly, kind of the perfect introduction to the intellectual life of the university: two senior women who were doing incredibly influential, cutting-edge work in their separate fields, because they were not at all working in the same area.

We had just an amazing conversation that was not just about History. I remember we had an especially intense conversation about a new book by Juliet Mitchell (1974) on psychoanalysis and its relationship with other fields. We were talking about Freud, psychoanalysis, history, and women in the academy. It was amazing, because what was perfect about it – and this was so typical of Natalie – was that it felt like we were all in the same position, even though I was the beginner and they were much more experienced with the university, with teaching, with scholarship, with everything. But it was not like that. That was the thing about Natalie: she was incredibly egalitarian. She thought, correctly, that anybody could be interesting. She had no sense of hierarchy – that the famous people were going to be interesting, and somehow the less famous people were not going to be interesting. She was so enthusiastic about new ideas and new people. As a result, she was incredibly welcoming. It was welcoming, but not as if it was a social event. It was like we had this incredibly intense intellectual conversation over dinner in her dining room in Berkeley, and we could have been anywhere.

I was fortunate enough to find myself at Berkeley. I was very influenced from the beginning by Natalie’s way of relating to people.

What was so great about Natalie was that she always tried to figure out the best that she could get out of anyone she talked to. She was never interested in judging, trying to figure out if somebody was important or not important, or whether their ideas were really fantastic or not so fantastic. She was always looking for what was great in a person, in a conversation, in a situation. She brought this luminous enthusiasm about intellectual life, about doing History, about scholarship, about research, but also about teaching and about relating to people.

She was herself an incredibly attractive woman in the sense that she was just vivacious and incredibly alert and engaged. She was just a fantastic, charismatic person to start with. She was also somebody deeply interested in what you could contribute – not just what she could contribute to you, but what you could contribute in a more general way. She was just always incredibly full of life.

Do you think meeting her had a great impact on the topics you chose to study?

Yes, of course. It did because, even before I met her, she was a figure in a field who was making you think about things in a new way. The thing about Natalie was she never stood still. She was always going on to new kinds of approaches and new kinds of documents. I did not, of course, follow her in all of that. I did not switch things around as much as Natalie did. I did have my own course to follow in that, which was partly influenced – in fact, greatly influenced – by the many friends I had at Berkeley, who were fantastic historians, art historians, literary scholars, and a whole range of people.

Natalie left not that long after I went to Berkeley. I was there in 1974–75, and then I was on leave the next year. And she was in the process of leaving after that. I did not have that much time with her as a colleague. It was more that she was an inspiration. Also, it was very clear that she was always thinking about how she could help me, even long after she was gone. She was always recommending me for positions. It was not so much that I was following her in terms of the kinds of things that she was doing historically. After all, her field was the 16th

century, and my field was the French Revolution. We did not really work in the same archives or the same kinds of documentation. But it was more that I knew she was there, thinking about anything she could do to help me. It was more than trying to do what she did, because the thing about Natalie was that you could not do what she did. She was so original and so ahead of everyone else in terms of the kinds of things that she was doing that you would not want to just follow what she was doing. You wanted to take the inspiration to figure out your own path. That was what was great about her.

Natalie Zemon Davis often navigated the intersection of history and storytelling. She was great at combining imaginative interpretation with rigorous historical analysis. How did she strike a balance between historical evidence and creative reconstruction? What insights does her approach offer to historians today?

Again, one of the things that was so striking about Natalie was that she was able to combine really an intense interest in archives – she had spent many years in archives, and she paid very close attention to what archives were like – and, at the same time, the will to speak more broadly to people.

For example, in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, she does have sections that have been criticized for trying to reconstruct what somebody was feeling or thinking, as if conveying how they might have expressed it. But she was always very clear about when she was speculating or using the evidence she had to fill in the blanks, to fill in the parts that people might not get – in a way that she could see where it was pointing. But if you just put it on the page, in black and white, you would perhaps not see where that was leading.

She forced historians to think about where the line is between reporting what you have found and trying to figure it out, how to interpret it. Because there is always an element of interpretation. She made this element, I think, much clearer to people. What was so successful about what she did was that you did not have to agree with all the conclusions that she drew, but it made you have to realize that we are always

reconstructing. There is always some element of reconstruction in what we do. In *Fiction in the Archives* (1987a), she is very clear on the fact that we need to tease things out of the archives – they are not going to just come out and tell you what you want to know.

This was already true in the kinds of Social History that she did at the very beginning. Simply knowing the occupations of people does not tell you everything you want to know. You have to figure out what you can take from that to develop a fuller picture of the humanity of the people that you are talking about, given that the scraps of evidence that we have – such as in *Fiction in the Archives* – often come from petitions, from people talking about things that they hope for, or from police records, records kept by the authorities, not kept by the people themselves.

In all her work, she was always trying to push further. She made everyone think about the proper boundaries for interpretation. Whether you agree exactly with how she did it, I assume, is not really the important point. The point is that she made people think about that. It is also what she was doing in the case of *The Return of Martin Guerre*. She went out and found a lot of documentation in order to help the people make the film³ that would have probably gone unnoticed if she had not gone out and tried to tell this story – a story which now thousands and thousands of undergraduates have imprinted on their minds because of reading that book.

Do you think historians today should embrace more of this creative sensitivity in constructing the past – that which Davis mastered so exceptionally?

I think Natalie was one of the first – there are many more now – to say we have to get out of just speaking to other specialists in our field. We have to not only speak to students – which, of course, she was extremely accomplished at – but also write books that students could read. And not just write books that students could read, but write books that other people might also like to read and learn something from. She was, again,

3 *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*. Daniel Vigne. France: European International, 1982. Film, 122 min.

a great enthusiast about bringing the richness of historical work to a much broader audience.

Now, increasingly, we take this for granted. There is enormous pressure to do this. Even people who are just beginning are now thinking about this in a way that, in my generation, we did not. She really got the ball rolling in terms of thinking about that kind of issue, which has become so important. Because the thing is – I am sure this is also true in Brazil, because it is true everywhere – many people in the general public are extremely interested in History, if somebody will just tell them the story in a way that grabs their attention. Natalie was very good at this, without losing sight of the need for research and archives, and carefully understanding why documents are framed in the way they are. She never left any of that behind. But at the same time, she was interested in stories that could help people understand themselves today by thinking about the past.

Natalie Davis was renowned for her groundbreaking contributions to Social and Cultural history. How did her methodological innovations reshape the field, especially in expanding the study of marginalized historical actors?

I think that Natalie was always somebody – and this is what I remember, again, from that first dinner with her and Svetlana Alpers – who read very widely. She was one of the first people to really bring anthropological insights into History. She was very much influenced by Victor Turner, actually. She was very interested in the kinds of things that anthropologists said about the way societies were organized. The famous essay on the Charivari in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), the first collection of her essays, for example, had such an enormous impact.⁴ She was very interested in how anthropologists could help historians think about why societies are organized the way they are. In other words, to make sense of things that seemed not to matter, or that seemed to be outside of what really counted in History. If what

4 Chapter 4: The Reasons of Misrule.

really counted where battles, rulers, elites, and political documentation, where would a Charivari fit into that? She was incredible at showing how it reveals the way society is structured in the most fundamental ways – in terms of precisely what you mentioned: insiders and outsiders. Who is the victim of a Charivari? Is it somebody who sort of breaks the rules of a local community on what is an appropriate marriage, what is an appropriate relationship? She had this incredible talent, while using historical sources, to show how these underlying rules about social and cultural organization worked.

She was able to do that because she read very widely in things like Cultural Anthropology. She may have been, in fact, the first to make this an important source for historians – by bringing the pure and the impure with Mary Douglas (1966), and the liminal and the non-liminal with someone like Victor Turner (1969). She was just very good at not importing it, not slapping it on, and not saying “let’s prove this hypothesis,” but allowing herself to sort of figure it out: “this is how social organization works in this community”. That is what I thought she was very good at. It was never heavy-handed. It was never the application of a theory. It was always an insight that she would then show how it could really transform our understanding of how things work.

It reminded me of a section in *The New Cultural History* (1989) introduction, where you noted that Cultural History is not just the selection of different themes, but an approach, it implies an epistemological way to deal with documents. I think that Natalie Davis’s relationship with Anthropology gave her a new way to think about the cultural part of society.

Right. Without saying, “Now I am going to apply Mary Douglas,” “Now I am going to apply Victor Turner,” or “Now I am going to make sense of things.” It is a much more nuanced interaction between her reading and then always going back to the sources and figuring out how she can understand the material in a new way. I think that is what was so incredibly inspiring about her, because it was never something that you

had to sort of follow in some lockstep fashion. It was not a recipe. It was a much more complicated and subtle interaction.

You know, professor, you have also played a key role in shaping Cultural History. You are a reference we have here in Brazil and in many places in the world, particularly through your studies on the French Revolution, human rights, and the interplay between narrative and historical analysis. How do you evaluate the current state of the field and its most pressing challenges? In your recent book, *The Revolutionary Self*, you examine the tensions between self and society in the age of revolutions, highlighting shifts in social practices and the way Enlightenment framed society. Given the contemporary concerns in Cultural History, especially regarding identity, power, and social transformation, how do you see these historical tensions between society and the individual shaping both modern life and contemporary debates within the field?

I think that there is more than one question there, and that is very important. First, there is the general question of where History is today. History is going in many different directions. I think one of the things that is happening – which is a little separate from your question, so forgive me for going off on a bit of a tangent, but it goes back to what we were talking about before – is that there is a much greater emphasis now on being able to write for a broader public. Someone like Darrin McMahon (2023), and many others – like David Bell (to speak of people who are more or less in my field) – are writing much broader books. In David Bell’s case, in *Men on Horseback* (2021), he is comparing Trousseau [L’Ouverture], Simón Bolívar, Napoleon [Bonaparte], and [George] Washington... Which shows he is going outside of his own area. Darrin McMahon is writing on equality in a very general way. Annelien De Dijn (2020) is writing on freedom... Historians now want to write on a broader canvas, to speak to a broader public. I am totally in favor of that. But I still believe that the kind of thing Natalie did – and that I tried to follow her in doing – still matters: which is to look at something with

great intensity, to dig deeper into the archives, to try to figure out how they might illuminate contemporary issues.

This gets back to the question of my most recent book: how those deeper archives might illuminate current problems? By giving us a historical perspective on them, without trying to cover all the different ramifications of the problem. In my book, for example, I believe that the tension between individual autonomy and community belonging – or the construction of social identity – is still very much an issue that we are thinking about today. It is worth thinking about specific historical cases that might bring this home to us in new ways and also help us better understand the 18th century. I am a big believer in the kind of thing that I think Natalie did: dig in deeply, and then broaden out the implications.

I think there has been a big move towards much broader histories – global histories, transnational histories, talking about more than one country at the same time. I am not opposed to that. I think it has its role. But I still think there is a role for the deeper study, which requires the expertise of language, and knowing how to read the documents of a particular time and place. For example, there is a very recent book that I like a lot by Marcy Norton (2024). I have always liked her work. She is not in my field; she works on Spanish America and Spain. Her recent book is on animals and history, but within the context of the areas that she knows well. I like that kind of approach – where you try to do something broad, but you stick with the material you can actually illuminate in new ways.

There are many different ways of doing history, and I am not opposed to any of them. In my most recent book, for example, I have an entire chapter on the military. I think military history is coming back now. I think diplomatic history is being done in new ways, thanks to new approaches. There are many exciting things going on. Of course, the issue will be whether there will be any universities left to do them in. This is another issue. I think there is great pressure on the universities – which should make Natalie very sad – in many places in the world, not just most strikingly in the United States. There is a lot of pressure on the

universities in many places, and not even just from authoritarian governments. There are perfectly Republican and Democratic governments that are also putting pressure on the universities. I think, for example, of the UK, where they have really transformed the life of professors. The life of professors has always been difficult in South America – I know that it is much more difficult than it has been in Europe and the United States. But now Europe and the United States are moving, unfortunately, more in that direction of uncertain employment, low salaries, and difficulties in being able to carry out your research. These are really big issues that I am not able to solve myself. I know these exact kinds of things also concerned Natalie, because Natalie was always very involved in current events. She was very involved in the Israel–Palestine question – she had relatives on both sides of the problem. She was very concerned with the relations between Islam and Christianity. She was always very involved in current events.

Considering the situation you mentioned – the pressure on the universities, how professors are being treated right now, and the difficulties we are facing –, do you think this reflects a broader issue of how science is viewed right now?

Yes and no. I mean, the fact is: I do not know anybody who, if they had a sharp pain in their left arm, would not go to a hospital, see a doctor, and hope that somebody would do something for them. So yes, there is a suspicion of science in a kind of general way, but not necessarily in the specifics. One does go on an airplane and hope that somebody understands the aerodynamics of the airplane – because I certainly do not. I would not want to go too far with that. I think we are in a period, obviously, of suspicion of so-called expertise. But that is, I think, partly because of a natural increasing specialization of knowledge, which makes it very hard for people who are not familiar with the university to understand why the specialization of knowledge actually has many positive aspects. Somebody who is studying, for example, fear reactions in frogs, who is in a psychiatric research unit, is finding out things that eventually will matter to people who have anxiety disorders. It is

hard for people to understand how that works. But if you are in the university, you have a better sense that the specialization of knowledge actually does have some very positive effects in advancing the frontiers of knowledge. But we are not perhaps as good at explaining that to the public as we need to be.

Professor, in this sense, do you feel that American universities are increasingly concerned with the formation of the public intellectual?

I am not sure. I think there has been a move, but I do not think it is so much that universities are concerned with it as that there has been a natural move in a new direction. In a sense, it is a move away from hyper-specialization towards broader synthetic understandings. This is even true in the sciences. There are many more books now than ever before explaining the recent discoveries in astronomy, or in brain science, or the general issues in philosophy of mind, to a broader reading audience. On the one hand, you have hyper-specialization; on the other, you also have attempts to overcome it with a greater emphasis on synthetic forms of knowledge, which I think is a good thing. In terms of History, we still need specialization in order to find out new ways of doing things. The broader books – many of which I read and many of which are written by friends of mine – are very important for reaching a broader audience and even for reaching students. But, as you know, they are based on what has been found in this hyper-specialized form of knowledge. This is what makes it possible to do the synthesis. You cannot do the synthesis in an interesting way if you do not have any new knowledge. It is like the self-society tension that I tried to talk about in my book: it is a tension that is never going to go away. We see specific forms of it now that we do not yet know how that is all going to work out, but we hope it will work out.

Coming back to Natalie Davis, I guess what you were talking about reflects the way she publicized her work. The fact that she helped in making a movie about her research – it is, in a sense, the very intention of a public intellectual who truly speaks to society.

Yes. This did not keep her from going on. It was after that that she wrote the book about the three women figures to show how important women were in different societies.⁵ This was a sort of transnational study of individual women. Then, in her book on Leo Africanus,⁶ there is a whole other side to histories that we have had in the past, that we would get to if we paid more attention to the Muslim side of these stories. And we are less completely absorbed in our own Judeo-Christian-oriented vision of history. Again, she was very alert to the problems of the day, but she had these wonderful ways of digging into the problem in a way that also brought new things to the forefront. They were never just polemics about the present for her.

In her later work, Davis appeared to embrace new lines of inquiry, especially when we see books like *Trickster Travels*, or *Leo Africanus Discovers Comedy* (2021). These texts delve into themes of cultural exchange and resonate with current discussions in global and decolonial studies. How do you feel about this evolution in her scholarship? What do you make of her engagement with wider global and intercultural dynamics?

This was one of her great strengths, that she was always thinking. She was very alert to the kinds of things that were changing and the kinds of issues that were coming up as she went along in her own career. She was always trying to address issues that were on people’s minds, but addressing them again by looking for historical instances, because she was still working on the 16th and the 17th century, especially the 16th century. She was finding cases from the past that she could use to illuminate issues in the present, and always finding out new things about them. She

⁵ *Women on the Margins* (1995).

⁶ *Trickster Travels* (2006).

was not just picking out a case and then using it to make her point. She always went off – she was doing research right up to the end of her life. I mean, she was amazing that way. She never lost interest in finding out new documents, new ways of looking at things, or trying to learn new languages, or being in contact with whole new historical communities. There was, in essence, a natural progression that had to do with her interests, the general culture, and the kinds of interests that were coming up. She had always been concerned with the Israel-Palestine issue, and she had always had strong views on that subject, but she was also always very interested in how you could bring people together. That was always her number one concern: not in proving the superiority of one group over another, but talking about how people interacted, and obviously choosing to talk about these interactions in ways that showed that there were interactions always in the past.

This concept of interaction is not new, and this was very important. She could be both about transnational interests, global interests, how these things work, and, at the same time, be true to sources and always finding new things. That is just the thing about Natalie: she was always coming up with a new idea. Despite the fact that she was spending an enormous amount of time encouraging other people in their ideas, she was somehow, herself, she just had an irrepressible curiosity about the world that meant that she was always finding something new to be enthusiastic about.

Both Davis and you have played a very important role in advancing the studies of women and gender within the historical scholarship. Davis through works such as *Women on the Margins*, which you just mentioned, emphasized the significance of women’s experiences in Early Modern Europe; and yourself, professor, with your contributions to the study of gender, women, sexuality, and the body. How do you assess Davis’s influence on the study of women and gender? In what ways does your own work intersect with or build upon her contributions in the area?

First of all, Natalie brought the general question of women’s roles when she first taught this subject in Toronto. She was teaching “society and the sexes.” She was not using the concept of gender, which became much more current thanks to Joan Scott (1986), and that was only in the late 1980s. Natalie was teaching these courses in the early 1970s, almost two decades before, so she was calling it “society and the sexes.” She was trying to say that the relationship between men and women has always been an important part of social organization and tracing it over time. She was an incredible pioneer in that.

What I always admired about the way Natalie did this was that she was always interested in recapturing experiences from the past. She was not just interested in explaining how sexual difference worked in past societies. She wanted to find out more about the experience of women and also the experience of men in situations like a Charivari, which relates to both men and women. I was always influenced by the fact that she was always looking for new evidence, not just a way of framing the question, but also finding new evidence to show that there were all kinds of things that had been overlooked before.

With *Fiction in the Archives*, all of her books are this way... She is always bringing to the fore new evidence that enables us to look at the past in a different way. I always admired that about her work. I always felt this was so important because it is not that I am against theory – I have written about theory and history in various ways. It is not that I am against it. It is not that Natalie was against it either, but that is not what she did. I would say this is also true of myself. For example, in my book

on *The Family Romance [of the French Revolution]* (1992), I am more interested in how sexual dynamics play out in the political world than I am in theorizing how they play out in the political world. Yes, I talk about Freud, and I do think Freud is an important source and one that historians should not just reject out of hand, but I was not interested in just applying Freud to the past. I was instead trying to show the resonance between what happened in the past and something like Freud's view of how human sexuality works. That is what I admired about her: she was always finding new evidence, new ways of thinking about the past that came out of the evidence.

Besides sharing a scholarly interest in women's history, both Natalie Davis and you have been deeply committed to feminism with a strong focus on advancing the inclusion of women in academia. I believe this is a commitment that was shaped by your own experiences in university. It is striking, for instance, that in 1971, when Davis went to Berkeley, she was one of the very few women in the History Department. I imagine that when you arrived at Berkeley, the situation may not have been much different – you had to navigate a profession still dominated by men.

When Natalie went to Berkeley, she was the only female full professor, and it was a department that had 55 professors. When I was promoted to full professor in 1985, at Berkeley, Natalie had already left. I was the only female full professor, and there were 40 male full professors. The other people were associate professors or assistant professors. That did not last for long, but even when I went there, there were only four women in a department of 55 men.

That is awful.

This is the thing about Natalie, though, and I tried to follow her in this: it actually was not awful. I mean, it was awful in some objective, universal sense. But I think she would say, and I certainly would say, I actually had an extremely good experience. I was helped enormously by my male colleagues. Of course, there was some discrimination, but

there was a very small amount of that compared to the amount of help I got from my male colleagues. Berkeley was a fantastic place to be. One of the reasons it was a fantastic place to be was that it had people like Natalie, like Svetlana Alpers, who was there the whole time that I was there. There were some fantastic women on the faculty, but there were incredible numbers of fantastic men on the faculty who were seriously interested in intellectual exchange and were incredibly helpful to me, I have to say. Natalie was very much that way. She was somebody who – I thought she was incredibly good at, and I tried to follow her very much in this – when unpleasant things would happen, she would just try to forget about them, go past them, not dwell on them, and just look forward. She was so good at looking for what was positive in the situation, focusing on that, and moving forward.

Do you think you had to overcome many barriers during this period? I mean, of course, Berkeley was a great work environment... But when it comes to the recognition of women in academia, do you think it was different back then compared to now?

Yes, there is no question. There were barriers to overcome, but that is not exactly how it felt. For example, when I arrived at Berkeley, and Natalie had already been there for four years, I heard immediately from people that there had been people — men on the faculty — who had opposed hiring her on the grounds that she was not good enough, which would seem sort of laughable in retrospect. The hurdle to overcome was that women had to be exceptionally good at what they were doing. The problem that came up was with people who were having more trouble. It was easier for men who were not doing so well to get ahead than it was for women who were not. It is hard for me to explain this, but as long as you kept focused on doing your own work, and you did it unbelievably well, and quickly, and whatever, you got rewarded. If you were kind of in the middle, that was not so great.

You would have to look at it in the aggregate to get a real sense of what the obstacles were. My personal experience was that I did not [have to overcome barriers]. I was encouraged. I did not feel that I had

to overcome any resistance to the way I was working, or the way I was thinking. I am sure there was, but I did not see it. Because I think one of the things that you do in a situation like that is you just shut anything like that out, and you focus on the positive, and then you move forward. Natalie was incredibly good at that. Natalie was a person with no bitterness. She was a person who always looked at what was positive in a situation... Forgetting that she had an extremely difficult early career, because her husband had been forced out of the United States because he would not sign a loyalty oath. They moved to Canada because that was where he could continue to do his work. This was always very difficult, because he was not about to come back to the United States, given this experience. She had children to raise, and she had to spend time away from the family. She never complained about these things. I do not mean that she was stoic, she just did not focus on those things. She focused on what she liked.

Her resilience was fantastic. She put energy into the work while everything was happening.

Exactly. And that is why, again, I think she was so important to so many of us as a personal example of somebody who was generous, open-hearted, and just willing to talk to anybody, and never lost that kind of relationship to the world – of being welcoming to everything and everyone.

That leads to another question: having known Natalie Davis both professionally and personally, could you offer any reflections on her intellectual character, her working habits, and her scholarly approach? What was she like on a daily basis?

I still remember a time, it must have been in the mid-1980s, I was invited to give some seminars at the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris. I remember meeting somebody – I cannot remember exactly who it was of the historians I met there, but I am pretty sure it was Jacques Revel – who then became a very good friend of mine. He described a recent visit of Natalie; she had just come and given some seminars at

the *École des Hautes Études*. I will never forget that he said: it was like a tornado touching down. Natalie was famous for this. Natalie had a sort of shocking level of energy. It always made other people feel that they were somehow sluggish in comparison, slow, and that they just did not have the same vim and vigor as Natalie.

I have a very close friend here, Teo[filo] Ruiz, who would often put Natalie up when she came to visit UCLA. And he said it was just exhausting because the minute she was up in the morning, she was ready to have a conversation about the latest book, or the latest historical issue, or the latest political issue. While he was like, "I have to have coffee. I have to have coffee first before I can have this conversation." He is a tremendously energetic man himself! But I think this is the number one thing that everybody was most kind of dumbstruck with about Natalie. She was a person of staggering levels of energy, which came out as enthusiasm. She just could live every minute.

This was hard, I think, for people who were her actual students –which I was not. I was actually glad I was not her student because I think it would have been very difficult to be the student of somebody with that amount of intellectual curiosity, and that amount of engagement in the world, and that amount of energy – to have children, and a husband, and not be treated well at the beginning of her career, and to be giving lectures, and to be in demand everywhere by everyone. If Natalie came to an event, everyone wanted to talk to her, and you never had the feeling that she was not able to do it. She just had staggering levels of energy and engagement. That is the thing I was mainly struck with about Natalie: she was engaged with everyone she talked to. She was engaged with all the subjects that she worked on. She was engaged with current events. She just was always on. I am sure she must have had moments when she relaxed somewhere, somehow, but one had the feeling that she just was a dynamo.

I was once asked to speak at an event in her honor. There have been many events in her honor, but this was long ago. This was when she was certainly very much alive. This was many years ago. I remember I got up and said that Natalie reminded me of nothing so much as a

hummingbird — that is, the little birds that are just in constant movement in the air. They are absolutely beautiful. They are small, and Natalie was a relatively small person. But she was just always in movement. She was, without seeming rushed, truly a charismatic person.

This is something all the obituaries have mentioned – she was a force, yet incredibly kind and always available to others. I would like to add that a few years ago, we reached out to her for an interview. Unfortunately, due to her illness, she could not speak with us, but she was willing to. She responded with great kindness and genuine interest. It means a lot to us to honor her now by publishing something in memory of her and her work.

This is the thing that everyone noticed about her. Like I said, the French, when she would come to town, it was like a force of nature was coming to town. And when she was gone, everyone was like, “Wow, what happened here?” Because that is the way she was. She was a force of nature.

How would you characterize the most enduring aspects of Davis’s legacy? I am thinking not only about her work and professional conduct but also about her books and the subjects she explored.

I would say what strikes me most about both was her openness. In terms of her work, she did not have anything like a set agenda. She was always looking, listening, and new things would come to her. As a result of this – in many ways as a result of her talking to other people and talking to the archives – she was always listening to what people could tell her, or what the archives could tell her. She was always led by what she heard, not by some pre-arranged plan that she had about what she was going to do. And that is why all of her work has always seemed both fresh and original, but it also never seems pre-packaged. It never seems like it is for a certain point. It almost always leaves you with questions – like the one Jonathan asked me about speculating about the motives of people in the past – it always leaves you with questions and wanting to know more.

The openness – and then, of course, in a legendary way, her openness to absolutely everybody she met – and the way this meant that she encouraged everybody to do their best.

Again, going back to that dinner party with the three of us — with Natalie and Svetlana — what struck me, and we had a conversation about this, is that they felt that they were very different as graduate advisors from their male colleagues. Because when they met with students, they were not evaluating them so much as they were trying to figure out how they could encourage them to do their best possible work. They were more interested in what they could get people to do than in saying, “Well, this person is not that good, and this person is better, and this is how I rate them.” They were always interested in getting the best out of people rather than figuring out where somebody fit on a scale. Natalie was famous for her ability to encourage young people, middle-aged people, old people – everybody. She was an enthusiast.

Professor, I have one last question. It is not about Natalie Davis, but I really have to ask you that: how do you interpret the role of the academic community in the USA regarding the new Trump administration? And how do you see the far right in the West establishing itself as a dominant political force on this side of the globe?

First of all, I do not believe that it is the dominant political force anywhere, including in the United States. It is not the dominant political force in the United States. Much less than 50% of the population voted for Donald Trump because we have such a high rate of abstention in the United States. It is not true that it is a dominant political force. It is true that right now it has a very loud voice – that is not the same thing as being a dominant political force. It has a very loud voice in many places, Hungary, Türkiye, for example. Türkiye just arrested a whole bunch of people. Why do they do these things? Because they know precisely that they do not have the support of everyone, and not even the support of the majority. I do not believe it is true that they are the dominant political force – they are just the loudest voice.

It is not the role, it seems to me, of the university to lead some kind of imagined resistance. The role of the university is to do what it has always done, which is to educate young people to be able to think for themselves – not that they should think X as opposed to Y, but that they should learn how to evaluate, criticize, read documents critically, be able to write their own thoughts, be able to figure out what they actually think themselves – which is not that easy for 18- and 19-year-old people to do. The universities should do what they have always done, which is to concentrate on educating the next generation. How things are going to work out politically is to be determined. I do not think universities are going to be at the forefront of this battle in this sense. The universities will need to explain again and again why research is valuable, why critical thinking is valuable. These are, I think, values that are going to be very difficult to make disappear forever. There can be all kinds of repression and discouragement, but I think the important thing is not to be discouraged, and to realize, as I said, that it is not true that this is the dominant force of our times.

I think the dominant force right now, actually, is uncertainty – at least in this country. There is great uncertainty about what is going to happen. I know what everybody I know thinks about what is happening – and they are horrified, and it is a travesty – but that is part of the point. Right now, actually, the latest thing that I am writing on is the origins of authoritarianism, which is on the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who invented all of the things that are now happening. What I have discovered in doing this – which I certainly did not appreciate so fully before – is that what he was doing, and what is happening now, is a reaction against democracy. The point is: you would not have authoritarianism if you did not first have democratic aspirations. It is a reaction. It is not a return to something from before. It is actually a new form that has to do with the prevalence of democratic forms of government. I think it is very important to understand that, because authoritarianism is not just a return to tradition – it is a bizarre combination of claims of innovation and claims of reviving tradition. Its “greatness” is not about just going to the past – it is also about the future. It is a bizarre combination of

claiming to be in favor of equality, but in fact, promoting inequality; claiming to be in favor of women, but in fact, promoting patriarchy. You have to understand it as this strange combination of things. It is a hybrid form that would not happen – it shows us that there are issues about democracy. In particular, it is very difficult for people to understand the idea of someone “like them” running the government. They want it to be somebody different. They want it to be somebody better in some way – or worse, in our case.

Thank you, professor, so much. Considering everything that we have discussed today, I would just like to ask if there is anything else that you would like to add or reflect upon regarding History, Natalie Davis, or Cultural History?

We have covered a huge amount of ground. I am very happy to have had this chance to talk about Natalie, because I really have not had a chance to talk about her in this extended way – except with friends, just saying it was hard to imagine the world without her, which is true. But this has reminded me that Natalie was precisely the kind of person that stands out against what is happening now. It is good to be reminded of the fact that she had to deal with a lot of issues starting in the 1950s. She did it, and we will too.

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