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DOING DECENTERED HISTORY

2.

STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

Natalie Davis is a quintessential storyteller in the way theorized by Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Michel de Certeau. Her work decenters history not simply because it grants agency and so historical visibility to those who have been hidden from history or left on its margins, but also because her stories reveal the complexities of human experience and so challenge the received categories with which we are accustomed to thinking about the world.

*Keywords:* storytelling, narrative, history, Benjamin, Arendt, Certeau, Geertz

“Le passé est une histoire que l’on conte.”  
—Natalie Zemon Davis<sup>1</sup>

It is a commonplace that historians are storytellers. So much so that the Graduate Record Exam (the test taken by candidates for various university graduate programs in the United States) uses as one of its “issue questions” the following: “When we concern ourselves with the study of history, we become storytellers. Because we can never know the past directly but must construct it by interpreting evidence, exploring history is more of a creative enterprise than it is an objective pursuit. All historians are storytellers.”<sup>2</sup>

The question sets up a familiar opposition: between facts and interpretation, objective science and artistic creativity, reality and fiction. The best answers will try to negotiate some balance between these contradictory categories, arguing, for example, that interpretation is necessarily reined in by evidence, or that creativity is also an attribute of science. Storytelling itself will get short shrift in the responses—at least that is what I conclude from reading the sample good answer provided on the GRE website. And yet storytelling is central to the writing of history, not the least because narrative is a way of making human experience

1. Natalie Zemon Davis, “Les conteurs de Montaillou,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 34, no. 1 (1979), 70.

2. Graduate record examination, sample question. <http://www.educers.com/gre/sampleissues07.htm> (accessed May 13, 2010).

meaningful. The “ability to produce stories,” Hannah Arendt wrote, is the way we “become historical.”<sup>3</sup>

Our personal, individual stories, however, require something more to become history than our own telling of them. Arendt argued that “human essence . . . the essence of who somebody is—can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story. . . . Even Achilles . . . remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile.”<sup>4</sup> It’s this after-the-factness that historians are charged with providing; the stories they tell can make the difference between immortality and oblivion.

Yet not all histories are the same. True, most adhere to some form of narrative presentation—chronology provides a ready format. And they are based on information gathered from at least some narrative sources: memoirs, diaries, letters, and the like. But this information is typically used in the service of historians’ stories, the ones they have constructed on the basis of the evidence at hand. Whether the goal of such history is the transmission of information or the consolidation of collective identities (as members of nations or tribes or social movements—based on class, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality), whether it is more or less aimed at securing an emotional effect, it tends to undervalue the richness of the stories from which it is drawn. Unless the object of inquiry is biography (and not always even then), the original archival stories are left aside, so many hulls from which all the meaty substance has been extracted.

For Walter Benjamin, the transmission of information has nothing to do with the art of storytelling, even if its presentation takes narrative form. “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”<sup>5</sup> The best storytellers interpret, but they don’t offer easy explanations for what they recount. The interpretation is not didactic, but more like what a pianist does when he “interprets” a musical composition. Through the subtlety of their presentation and the deftness of their interpretation, storytellers open their readers’ imaginations; in this way the “story’s richness and germinative power endures.”<sup>6</sup>

In Benjamin’s conception, the historian-storyteller is part of a chain of storytellers, an intermediary, perhaps a midwife, who understands that she is bringing forth something that did not originate with her. “Storytelling,” he writes, “is always the art of repeating stories.”<sup>7</sup> Reading Arendt in this light elaborates the point. Action and speech are what make us human, she notes, “and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made ‘products’” are “the deeds and stories which are their outcome.”<sup>8</sup> It is those stories that give us insight not just into the particularities of historical experience, but also into the very meaning of the human. For the historian to ignore the stories themselves—their form and content—is to deny agency to historical subjects, to overlook the choices they made

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 97.

4. *Ibid.*, 59.

5. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 87.

6. *Ibid.*, 90.

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197–198.

and the ways they found to explain their actions to themselves and others. It is to refuse to engage with the novelty of the old, the strangeness of the new, or the irreducible difference of the other—to insist instead on sameness, on the comfortable familiarity of the already known.

Precisely because they take us somewhere else, “every story is a travel story,” says Michel de Certeau.<sup>9</sup> Stories organize space and mark out boundaries and, at the same time, enable us to transcend them. Certeau uses the figures of the bridge and the frontier to talk about the story’s “logic of ambiguity.”

As a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place, [the bridge] represents a departure, an attack on a state, on the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case the “betrayal” of an order. But at the same time as it offers the possibility of a bewildering exteriority, it allows or causes the re-emergence beyond the frontiers of the alien element that was controlled in the interior, and gives objectivity (that is expression and re-presentation) to the alterity which was hidden inside the limits, so that in recrossing the bridge and coming back within the enclosure the traveler henceforth finds there the exteriority that he had first sought by going outside and then fled by returning. Within the frontiers, the alien is already there, an exoticism or sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity. It is as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its others.<sup>10</sup>

Certeau is here making a point about the formal properties of stories, which we can also use to think about storytellers. The stories they choose to retell become a way not only of exposing us to differences beyond our frontiers, but also open us to other ways of thinking about the present, the place we live now. In this way, storytelling has a decentering effect; it offers epistemological challenges to whatever are the orthodox categories of current historiography: surprising them, throwing them off their guard.

Storytelling is a quintessentially social activity. It requires not only readers or listeners, but other storytellers. Stories are at once the raw material and the cultural product of memory. Their telling creates a sense of immediacy (even when they are about very old events and actions) and what Kant (in a different context) referred to as “the universal feeling of taking part.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, what they impart is highly particular: descriptions of individual actions, emotions, and outcomes that may be idiosyncratic or unique. (Indeed, it is precisely this uniqueness that often makes for a most compelling story.) Samuel Weber suggests that the always ambivalent combination of the universal (“taking part”) and the particular is what makes the humanities human; it is another way of thinking Certeau’s alien within the frontiers.<sup>12</sup> Arendt rests “human plurality” on “the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while.”<sup>13</sup> Weber reminds us that psychoanalysis

9. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115.

10. *Ibid.*, 128-129.

11. Samuel Weber, *Institutions and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 143.

12. *Ibid.*, 144.

13. Arendt, “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern,” cited in Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, transl. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 25.

posits the human subject as psychically divided, depending for its sense of self on the recognition of others. To be human is to be endlessly entwined in complex relationships of difference that don't settle comfortably into neat, prefabricated categories. From this perspective, stories are the mark of the human, and the historian-storyteller is the muse of the humanities.

Natalie Zemon Davis is such a muse. To read her work and to think about it with her is at once to theorize storytelling as a historical practice and to recognize the distinctiveness of her craftsmanship. There is no mistaking her imprint on the compilations of stories that make up her books. A comment of Benjamin's is aptly applied to Davis: "The traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."<sup>14</sup> In Davis's work the imprint is ethical and that in two senses: it respects the integrity of stories from the past while at the same time making them relevant for our thinking in the present. But it is also about pleasure: the sheer delight that comes from gathering and relaying stories is a distinctive mark of Davis the storyteller.

Davis's historical materials are the stories told by people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They give her, she says, access to real lives, to the hopes and feelings of those once referred to as "the common man" or, more unfortunately, "the inarticulate." That last phrase came in the late 1960s and early 70s, as social historians argued that demographic and other quantitative sources were the best way to reconstitute the lives of those who left no written records of the kind historians customarily employed. In order to learn something about the experience of those who had become invisible in the annals of history, one had to impute meaning to the statistical categories by which state administrators had measured their lives. (I think here of Edward Shorter's contention that the high rate of illegitimate births among girls new to the industrial labor force was a sure sign of their sexual emancipation.<sup>15</sup>)

Davis chose another path, ingeniously turning up sources that gave voice to *le menu peuple*. She wasn't alone in this, of course, but she was distinctive in her insistence on letting *their* stories constitute the substance of *her* history. "I let all my characters have their say," she wrote in response to a critic who had accused her of, among other things, misreading her sources in *The Return of Martin Guerre*. "I try to construct their stance toward the world so that they are understandable in terms of the range of values of their day."<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on voices recurs in book after book. "Here are some voices of the sixteenth century" is the opening line of "Printing and the People," one of the essays in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*.<sup>17</sup> The introduction to *Martin Guerre* tells readers that what will follow is "part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."<sup>18</sup>

14. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 92.

15. Edward Shorter, "Female Emancipation, Birth Control, and Fertility in European History," *American Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (1973), 605-640.

16. Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lame," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988), 598.

17. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 189.

18. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

After a discussion of method in *Society and Culture*, Davis turned the matter over to her subjects: “But let the reader hear what the Lord of Misrule and Ghostly Sally have to say about that.”<sup>19</sup> *Fiction in the Archives* takes letters of remission, written or dictated by sixteenth-century French people accused of heinous crimes, as a form of voice, however constrained by juridical formalities. *Women on the Margins* begins with a conversation in which her three protagonists (one Jew, one Catholic, and one Protestant) give voice to their objections to each other and to the author’s texts. Davis tries, without success, to explain her frame of reference to these women who will have none of it. The imagined exchange points up the difficulty that storytellers have in being heard outside the contexts of their cultures and times, but also the possibility of making differences—among contemporaries as well as between past and present—apparent, even playful, and so a source of understanding rather than violence.<sup>20</sup>

Citation of these voices is not Davis’s way of decorating her text with lively anecdotes and a few entertainments. Rather, she considers voice to be the way people construct agency. Stories are, for Davis, a form of action in Arendt’s sense: “In word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world.”<sup>21</sup> The “storytelling features” of documents yield insight for Davis into the way people think, the kinds of intellectual and cultural resources they mobilize, the interplay among social determination, strategic adaptation, and individual invention.<sup>22</sup> This doesn’t mean taking words at face value, but examining them in the (social, economic, political, religious, institutional) contexts they are offered, as engagements with circumstances, attempts to exert some control over difficult or, for that matter, ordinary occurrences. The historian, of course, interprets and intuits; but if she supplements her knowledge of contexts with a trained ear, she can turn up some startling news.

It is this news, I want to argue, that decenters history and not simply because it grants agency and so historical visibility to those who have heretofore been “hidden from history” or left on its margins. The stories, sometimes even those recounted by the powerful, reveal complexities of human experience that challenge the categories with which we are accustomed to thinking about the world. There are all sorts of ways in which Davis’s histories reveal this to be the case: particular exchanges—between judges and peasants; Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims; the learned and the illiterate—reveal a remarkable fluidity. Referring to the complexities of pardon letters, Davis notes, “We have here not an impermeable ‘official culture’ imposing its criteria on ‘popular culture,’ but cultural exchange, conducted under the king’s rule.”<sup>23</sup> The best metaphor for this is Certeau’s notion that “every story is a travel story.” Davis’s storytellers are voyagers whether they migrate or stay at home; they take us to places we haven’t considered, remind us of the strangeness that refuses to be systematized (or centered) by the order we

19. Davis, *Society and Culture*, xviii.

20. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–4.

21. Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 25.

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

23. *Ibid.*, 112

want to impose on things. In their particularity they resist the simplicity of universal assumptions based on sameness; instead they remind us that difference is the very ground of our common humanity.

It is, perhaps, the literal travel story of Leo Africanus, also known as al-Hasan al-Wazzan, that best illustrates the way Davis's stories confound our sense of order and, in so doing, bring to historical study a deeply felt ethical concern. She begins the story of this remarkable man, who recounted his experiences in several manuscripts as he moved from Africa to Europe, from Islam to Christianity, living among "Berbers, Andalusians, Arabs, Jews and Blacks," traversing the Mediterranean world in the sixteenth century, this way:

Through his example, I could explore how a man moved between different polities, made use of different cultural and social resources, and entangled or separated them so as to survive, discover, write, make relationships, and think about society and himself. I could try to see whether these processes were easy or a struggle, whether they brought delight or disappointment. Like some others I have written about, al-Hasan al-Wazzan is an extreme case . . . but an extreme case can often reveal patterns available for more everyday experience and writing.<sup>24</sup>

Those patterns, she maintains, are ones in which people intermingled, in which difference was no barrier to contact, and in which people made choices that defied the determining boundaries of the structures and institutions we think contained them. "Al-Wazzan's book," she concludes, "was used for many purposes, but for the myriad educated readers it reached over the centuries, it bore witness to the possibility of communication and curiosity in a world divided by violence."<sup>25</sup>

In his review of *Trickster Travels*, Clifford Geertz makes the connection to the present explicit:

The combination in Davis's book of an intensified consciousness of religio-cultural difference and increased migration, increased contact, and more and more intimate interaction—distinction and mixing, purity and hybridity, resistance and adaptation—does indeed remind us of the present. Birds among fishes and fishes among birds now seem almost the rule. Leo's world and ours are hardly the same; nor are the shapes of change and the forms of politics the same. But the intermixture of civilizations in the lives of displaced and peripatetic individuals, born into one tradition and carrying it forward in the homeland of another, intensifies by the day. Movement between ways of being in the world defines our times as much as do contrast and tension between them. The confusion of forms of life is, increasingly, the common state of things.<sup>26</sup>

However sharp the ideological lines of difference, Geertz notes, they were "continuously traversed by merchants, embassies, pirate ships, travelers, scholars, and refugees coursing back and forth across the Mediterranean sea-street, then as now as much a connecting force as a dividing one." So much for a clash of civilizations, then or now.

There is one more aspect of Davis's storytelling to note, and that is the obvious pleasure—indeed the passion—she takes in her craft. Her pleasure in retelling

24. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 11.

25. *Ibid.*, 260.

26. Clifford Geertz, "Among the Infidels," *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 5 (2006). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/mar/23/among-the-infidels/> (accessed March 18, 2011).

those stories deepens our own in hearing them, and makes it more likely we will remember what we have heard. For that reason they are transformative; decentering becomes not an exceptional experience, but the delighted mode of our seeing and remembering. This is what Benjamin calls “the gift of storytelling”—a gift that keeps on giving. I was reminded of this a few days ago by an email from a former student, one of the first PhDs I supervised in the early 1970s. I had written telling him why I was coming to Bergen. “I well remember,” he wrote, now some forty years later, “the excitement you communicated to me in the department office . . . about this great paper you had heard at a conference—something about ‘Women on Top.’”<sup>27</sup>

Davis’s stories teach us to read both past and present in terms not of sameness or irreconcilable difference, but as instances both of the difficulty and the possibility of human communication. They decenter us not only by introducing us to people we might otherwise not have met (those on the other side of the bridge of time or culture or class or race or gender), but also to the differences within and among ourselves. In that way, Benjamin tells us, “the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for the many, like the sage . . . the storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man [here we should say woman] encounters [herself].”<sup>28</sup> There is no better illustration of this point than Davis’s comment in an article called “Stories and the Hunger to Know.” On the question of the decentering effects of storytelling, I give her the last word:

History is simultaneously a form of literature; a mode of inquiry and proof, about whose fruits we have an obligation to fellow historians, to dead subjects of the past, and to readers of the future; and an arena for struggles of power and collaboration. Of especial importance to me is the historian’s compact with the past . . . and the historian’s promise to the future. It is a compact sealed in the blood of birth and death, and our stories must respect that stain.<sup>29</sup>

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27. Personal email correspondence, May, 2010.

28. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 14.

29. Natalie Zemon Davis, “Narrative as Knowing,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5, no. 2 (1992), 163.

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