
“Being speculative is better than to not do it at all”: an interview with Natalie Zemon Davis

JESSICA ROITMAN and KARWAN FATAH-BLACK

Jessica Roitman and Karwan Fatah-Black meet Natalie Zemon Davis outside the University Library in Leiden for lunch and an interview. Although Davis is eager to study a Sranan-German dictionary she retrieved from the library, the three of them sit down for an engaging conversation on the historian’s craft, its societal relevance and the future of early modern studies.

Zeitgeist

Jessica laments that she discovered what she thought was an incredibly original idea for her dissertation—Sephardic intercultural trade—was already being done by Yale historian Francesca Trivellato.¹

NZD: That happened to me, too. Some fifty years ago, I wrote an essay on the French *charivari*. At the time I did it, as far as I knew, there was no literature on it. This was partly because *charivari* seemed very folkloric, and to the French, folklore was still associated with the Vichy regime. It seemed to them like a fascist topic, so historians stayed away from it for quite a while after the war. In fact, I found out much later that one of the only articles discussing *charivari* was in a Vichy-sponsored publication called *Études agricoles*. It was actually a good article on rural folklore—ethnographic rather than historical. Anyway, I sent my *charivari* essay to *Past & Present*. This was around 1970, right after 1968, when I had been in Berkeley during all the student uprisings and political action. I got a letter back from E.P. Thompson, whom I had not yet met, but whose work of course I knew, saying “I was absolutely delighted to receive your paper on the Reasons of Misrule. I have myself been working for some time on a short study of ‘rough music’ (our version of *charivari*.)” I didn’t mind. I thought, “That’s great!” And he was doing it in England and I was doing it in France and we had different takes on the subject. But these things happen because there’s something in the air...

JVR: The *Zeitgeist*?



NZD: Yes, if you will. Political events, cultural problems at the time, current styles of action along with the issues being raised in one's scholarly field—these lead attentive people like yourself and Francesca, or like me and Thompson to ask the same questions. In our case, you can sort of see the political trajectories at work – the world was being turned upside down around us—though I was maybe more into the New Left than he. But this kind of mutual discovery happens and it's even a good sign.

When I joined the Renaissance Society of America (RSA) in the 1950s, we were a little bitty group. Now there are 4,000 members. They come from all over to the meetings—three thousand people just attended the most recent one in New York. I think it's really important for Renaissance scholars to situate themselves in a non-European space some of the time. Some of the young people are doing this: I went to some very exciting sessions on Christian-Muslim relations – looking at both Latin and Arabic texts and exchanges. And though I didn't get to hear them, the papers on Jewish-Christian relations also seemed to be expanding the very concept of the Renaissance world. But many sessions were on traditional themes being discussed for decades—say, Florentine poetry. Fine—do Florentine poetry! I'm sure these papers were excellent. But at this juncture, don't think about the world as if it were only Florence or only Italy. Young people are doing this now—working on, say, Italy and Africa. But even if you don't do Italy and Africa, you can bring a wider mentality to your poetry—and who knows what surprises you might find, even while you're reading the very same texts.

In 2001, I was planning a book with a chapter on the Muslim Leo Africanus, a chapter on Stedman and the slave Joanna, and a chapter on the Suriname Jew David Nassy, all of them examples of people between worlds. Then 9/11 happens. I said to myself, "I'm just going to do this book on Leo Africanus." I didn't publish it until 2006 because I had a huge amount of research to do. I did a lot more work with Arabic. I didn't learn to read it, but I learned to recognise the letters and to identify words with a dictionary. I travelled to European libraries. I found manuscripts by him I didn't know existed. That was the first time I had really taken time to work on a non-European. I'm sorry I still have to call it my "Leo Africanus book."² I tried to recreate him as he was, reinvigorate him as an Arab and a Muslim, give him back his Arab name. But people who don't know Arabic can't say the name al-Wazzan. I probably don't even pronounce it right. Or they won't say it. They just keep calling him "Leo Africanus." The purpose of the book was to say, "No. That's not how he looked at himself. That's how the Christians remade him." Anyway, people are reading it—the Turkish translation has come out—and I have a couple of wonderful spinoffs from the book that are really quite exciting.

Dictionaries and creole languages

KFB: We met you outside the University Library on the Leiden University campus. Why were you there? What were you reading?

NZD: Well today I was reading the Sranan-German dictionary created with great care in the late eighteenth century by the missionary Moravian brother Christian Ludwig Schumann. A Dutch doctoral student named André Kramp did a really excellent edition, and I have been waiting to see it. As I said to you when I came out of the library, over the years I have been profiting from Schumann’s Saramacan-German dictionary, which was published almost a century ago. Schumann did this first one with help from the great Saramacan Maroon chief Alabi, who became a Christian under the name Johannes. Language is an avenue into the mental world of the past. Schumann, with Alabi’s help, gave context for the words—words like *kangra*, which is an ordeal Africans used to establish guilt or innocence after someone had been accused of a crime.³ And now I’ve got Schumann’s Sranan-German dictionary for the other main Creole spoken—with lots more words. Schumann had six or seven Blacks serving as his informants. He doesn’t give their names but he quotes directly from them all the time. “We black people say...” It’s like listening to an eighteenth-century conversation. I’m so happy to have this book—I can’t tell you. I’m going to use it for a talk I’m giving next week on language in Trondheim, Norway. The talk is called *Dealing with strangeness: Language and information flow in colonial Suriname*. I want to look more closely at the creation of these dictionaries—Schumann’s and others. Dictionaries usually come out under one person’s name. But there’s no way that a man like Schumann could find out about these Creole languages without collaborators who speak them. There is a flow of information about language and life, despite the situation of asymmetrical power between them. I mean, some of Schumann’s informants were slaves.

In preparation for her lecture at the Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology at Trondheim, Natalie Zemon Davis started investigating the Sami.

NZD: It turns out that eighteenth century, Trondheim was a really important scholarly and religious centre, and being so far north, some of the priests got the idea of converting the Sami to Christianity. The first book on the Sami language was written by a missionary from Trondheim—not too different in time from when Schumann was working on his dictionaries in Suriname. And so I’ve added a little section to my lecture on these Sami dictionaries and ethnographies and show where you can see input from the Sami themselves – sometimes even their own names are there. When I’m in Trondheim, I’ll go to the Academy library there, which was founded in the eighteenth century. I’ve already ordered my some books, including by the first Sami to become a priest. He wrote about the language, too. He converted, but always stayed loyal to his language.

Thematic Unity of Her Work—Boundary Crossers

NZD: I’m working on this manuscript on the four generations of a family in Suriname. I am hoping to have a draft by the end of the year, but as I work I see new issues, new problems I’d like to resolve. It’s so hard, to get evidence about individual

slaves, about how they thought and felt and made choices when and if they had a chance. It's hard, but I'm stubborn and quite committed to my decision to write about an individual family, rather than do a general social study of masters and slaves. A general study is important, for sure... but I want to capture the slave experience in its complexity up close. The struggle for direct evidence has come up occasionally in my earlier books—in *Martin Guerre* and also in the *Leo Africanus* book.⁴ For al-Wazzan—that's the real Arabic name of "Leo Africanus"—I was able to find several manuscripts. But even then, there were aspects of his life he didn't talk about. He didn't say anything about whether he had a wife or not, or whether he ever had more than one. Just because he was silent, am I not going to broach the subject of marriage? How could I do that? I write about the history of women and gender—it's against my principles not to pose such a question. So you take what clues you have from his writing and collateral evidence from others around him and you make a "thought experiment." You speculate and you make it clear you're speculating. But even if you can't resolve the matter, it's important to venture it. Resorting to speculation is better than not asking the question at all.

How do you tell the individual biography of enslaved persons when you don't have a self-narrative? How do you do it? How do you try to construct a life? I'm enjoying it. But, you know, sometimes it's like trying to squeeze water out of a stone.

There are things that I've been looking for for years for my history of the Suriname family, such as deeds of manumission. I have for an ironic experience, when I turn to the white people in my story—it's really a braided history—since three of the slave women have long intimacies with white men. The minute I start working on these white men, a world of archives and source materials opens up on them individually and their families. The difference between slave and free is so reflected in this disparity in direct sources. It's an experience I should be used to by now. But every time it happens, I chafe at the difference. I say to myself that the extra work I'm doing for the enslaved persons is a rightful act of reparation.

I also have a modern project going on a Jewish Romanian linguist—a man named Lazare Sainéan. Another crosser of boundaries. I first knew his name because he wrote a big book on the language of Rabelais back in the 1920s – still a classic. But then I started working on Glikl, and I was trying to get background in Yiddish, because that's the language in which she wrote her autobiography.⁵ So I'm reading a collection of essays by a Yiddish specialist and I suddenly see an essay entitled "Lazare Sainéan's contribution to Yiddish." "What?" I said. "What's he doing here?" And sure enough, Sainéan had a whole other life as a pioneer in the Yiddish and Romanian languages and folklore before he came to France and ended up writing about Rabelais.

Though it may not seem like it, the *Leo Africanus* book, the Suriname project I'm working on, and the project about the Jewish Romanian linguist have a lot in common. The thematic concern has been to look at what happens when people find themselves in unusual places or are crossing some kind of boundary—a linguistic boundary, or a religious boundary—What happens? Sometimes this is very transgressive. I'm very

interested in both the maintaining of separate identities in separate spaces but also in crossovers. That’s common theme.

Accidents in the archives and sources

JVR: I think we’ve all had wonderful accidents where we’ve come across things that have surprised us, startled us, but also inspired us. What was the most serendipitous discovery that you’ve had?

NZD: Serendipitous? I’ve certainly had that happen, including early along, when I was working on my doctoral thesis on “Protestantism and the Printing Workers of Lyon”—a social history approach to the Reformation. This was during the Red Hunt of the 1950s, and my passport had been taken away. So instead of getting to the archives in France, I was working in the rare book libraries in New York and using books published in sixteenth century Lyon. At the Columbia University Library I came upon a fabulous collection of early modern books on commercial arithmetic and accounting. Looking at the catalogue, I came across a name I knew—during my six months in Lyon before I lost my passport, I had found this man on a list of Protestants. I decided to take a quick look at the book, even though it wasn’t on religion. Sure enough, it turned out be written by the man who had been described as a modest “reckonmaster” on a list of heretical Protestants drawn up by the Catholic authorities of Lyon. But here in a book published only a few years later, he was presenting himself as a “noble,” with a fancy author portrait and Latin poems—and this in a book designed to teach commercial arithmetic to merchants and traders. Now this may not seem so surprising today, but in the sixteenth century in France, nobles were not supposed to be involved in business, buying and selling. Some of them actually were, but it was considered lowering, and they could lose their status. And here was their teacher presenting himself as a noble. And the book also had unapologetic sections teaching how to calculate interest on loans, even though that was condemned by canon law as “usury.” I thought, “this is a surprising text.”

So I put aside my thesis research on the Protestant printers for a while to do a study. Since we were far away from my university at that point, I didn’t have a thesis director to say “don’t do it.” I published an essay, one of my earliest, called “Sixteenth-Century French Arithmetics on the Business Life.” I took the whole genre and related it to both the history of business and its validation and to the history and teaching of arithmetic. It was quite interesting and is still useful to people in the field. I’m married to a mathematician and so I had extra fun in writing it.

The Martin Guerre story certainly came as a surprise—a total surprise. I heard about it in 1976 from a wonderful graduate student in Chinese history, who decided to take my seminar at the University of California at Berkeley on “Family, kin, and social structure in early modern France.” She was going to do her dissertation on the history of adoption in China. I said, “Why don’t you do your term paper on adoption in early modern France? It’ll give you some ideas for your thesis.” I sent her to the rare books at the law library, and she came back and said, “I came across a book on a

criminal case you'll find very interesting. It was Jean de Coras's book about the Martin Guerre case!⁶ She had used it for one sentence on adoption. I read the book and thought, "This has got to be a movie!" I had two interests at that point: one was anthropology, the other was outreach to a larger public through film. And here was this book that fell into my lap—I could use it to make an ethnographic study of peasants and it could be the basis for a great movie. Then when I was trying to contact a film director in France, by good luck I heard about Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne, who coincidentally wanted to make a movie on the Martin Guerre story. They asked me to work with them from the start. I helped them with the scenario and tried to make it as plausible as possible—a wonderful experience, I learned so much. But when I saw some of the directions the film was going to take, I realised I had to do a history book as well. This whole thing was serendipity. Completely. Other examples... I got interested in Stedman because I was working on Maria Sibylla Merian in Suriname.⁷

People on the margins

JVR and KFB: That was one of our questions. How did you get into Suriname? Or even outside Europe?

NZD: Well... outside Europe? In a way it grew out of the course I had been teaching since 1971 on the history of women in early modern Europe. Right from the start, I knew I was not going to do only European Christian women. A literary friend of mine told me about Glikl, a seventeenth-century Jewish merchant woman, who left us the first major autobiography we have from a Jewish woman, besides being a very important text in the history of Western Yiddish. So I had the students read an English translation of Glikl's autobiography from the beginning. And then I was living in Canada in 1971. I wanted to bring in a person who could connect the students with the Canadian world of women. I came upon Marie de l'Incarnation, who started off as a French artisan, and then became a nun and founded the Ursuline house in Québec to try to convert the aboriginal women to Christianity. She left letters and an autobiography, and I translated some of this into English for the students. Meanwhile feminist scholars were just beginning to produce books on women artists, and I came across Maria Sibylla Merian. She was an artist and an entomologist and she used her skills to represent the world of insects and the plants they ate. And her most important book was on the insects and plants of Suriname. She was a natural for me, and I loved telling the students about her.

I lectured on these women for years in my courses. Then around 1990, I decided to put them together in a book.⁸ Up to then, women had had a role in my books—especially, Bertrande, the wife of Martin Guerre—but now I wanted to do a book where women were at the centre of the narrative. I wanted to show how varied women's lives could be. The three were all seventeenth century city women, but they had different occupations and religion. Glikl Hamel, a Jewish merchant who lived in Hamburg and Metz; the Ursuline Marie de l'Incarnation, who went from Tours to

Québec—and by the way, my husband has told me she has just been declared saint—too late for my book! And the German Maria Sibylla Merian, who started off as a Lutheran in Frankfurt, became a radical Labadist for a time in the Netherlands, and then spent two years in Suriname before coming back to Amsterdam. I loved writing about them, and yet, as I was doing it I began to think about the non-European women in their lives. Glikl told a moralising story about a cannibalistic “savage” woman and her intimacy with a pious shipwrecked Jewish man. And what about those Algonquian and Iroquoian girls and young women whom Marie de l’Incarnation was trying to convert to Christianity? How were they reacting to her efforts? And what about the Amerindian and African slave women who went into the rain forest to find insects and plants for Merian? Was I going to write a book celebrating the adventures of European women and simply glide over the others? I did what I could to give these other women a voice. So I tried to imagine how the African slave women, with their story-telling Anansi the spider would have looked at Merian’s picture of tarantulas in a guava tree.

That book really changed me. It was published in 1995, just before I retired and had more time to go in a new direction. I was already crossing boundaries with those three women. Now I wanted to try to write a book that would be located in a non-European space. I wasn’t going to pretend to an expertise I didn’t have, but I wanted to situate myself mentally in a place that wasn’t just Europe. From then on, even when I’m doing a totally European topic, I try to look at it from a wider point of view—to turn it around, ask what a non-European would make of it.

JVR: You have an abiding interest in people on the margins—women, Jews, Muslims, Protestants in Catholic France—was that a conscious choice?

NZD: It just happens. That’s what I get interested in.

JVR: They find you?

NZD: Yes, they find me! They jump at me out of the sources. That’s what happened with al-Wazzan. I knew he was a character. I knew he was unusual, in some ways like Martin Guerre, a sort of impostor. Al-Wazzan had been kidnapped from North Africa by Christian pirates in 1518 and taken to Italy. After a time, he converts and spends the next seven years as a seeming Christian. He learns Italian and Latin well and to write from left to write, and then composes all these books to tell Europeans about the lands and religion he’d supposedly left behind. And then he goes back to them. I called the book *Trickster travels: a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds*. I did not start out thinking of al-Wazzan as a trickster, but I was trying to figure out what patterns of legitimation he had for the role he played for seven years—performing as a Christian while planning one day to go back to Africa and Islam. How did he justify this dissimulation, I was asking myself. And I found out that there’s an Arabic genre like the European picaresque and its medieval equivalent called the *maqâma*. It’s always written in a characteristic form called “rhymed prose.” The story is always about a vagabond poet, who disguises himself in different ways. A storyteller meets him in all these different places and ends up recognizing him when he starts to recite poems. The vagabond poets gets into scrapes, but he uses his wits and his tricks to land on his feet. The storyteller recounts all this to his friends. It’s a

beloved Arabic genre, copied and recopied, and I knew that al-Wazzan had read one of the most famous examples because he refers to it in his writing. There are also fool figures in the North African tradition, and like the vagabond poet, they use their tricks to truth tell. So I decided to use them to help me to interpret al-Wazzan.

You asked about people on the margins. Al-Wazzan is a kind of marginal figure. He was on the margins of Roman elite life, and he had relations with two learned Jews, who were as marginal as he was. I didn't know anything about this before I started doing research on him. To start off with, I just knew he'd been kidnapped and had written a big book about Africa. But only when I started the research and found other manuscripts did I discover that he had collaborated on an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary with the physician Jacob Mantino. And then I also found out that in the household of al-Wazzan's Christian godfather, to whom he was teaching Arabic, there was also a Hebrew teacher, who turned out to be a fabulously interesting man. So given 9/11 and all the Palestine-Israel issues, I was delighted to discover these relationships. Of Jewish background as I am myself, I ran with it. I felt like it was a gift. Thank you! Thank you, al-Wazzan!

KFB: Your new book will be about Joanna?

NZD: Not just Joanna. Four generations in her family.

KFB: But Joanna was the starting point?

NZD: Initially, Joanna and Stedman were the starting point. And I was planning to do something on the son they had together. But then I started reading about Joanna's mother and her twenty-year relationship with Joanna's white father. They had five children together. So I've devoted long chapters to them. Ah... but what about the African generation? The ones who were kidnapped and came to Suriname on a slave boat? Already back in 1996, when I had just started thinking about Joanna, the wonderful Africanist Paul Lovejoy asked me, "Where was Joanna born?" "She was born in Suriname," I answered firmly. But his question remained in the back of my mind in the years when I turned to al-Wazzan and learned so much about the Land of the Blacks (as they called sub-Saharan Africa) during the sixteenth century. Then a few years ago, when I was back to Joanna's family, some young colleagues at Toronto—of course, everyone is young to me—asked me to do a paper for them on the Suriname slaves' experience of crime and punishment. And to do that, I realised I had to look at the memories of African crime and punishment that the slaves had brought over with them across the Atlantic. Once I saw how important those memories were in shaping Suriname ways of living, I realised I really must try to do it for Joanna's family, no matter how hard it was, figure who her grandparents were and where in Africa they came from—what gods and customs they brought with them. I was able to get strong evidence for Joanna's African grandfather. I'm OK there. It's much more speculative for Joanna's grandmother. But I think I've got the right person. A very interesting woman—another gift from the past.

The narrative of the book is hard to construct because I'm trying to show lots of cultural entanglements, especially in relations between black and white, slave and free. It turns out that three of the slave women had relations of some duration with white men.

These are delicate to interpret. Today, some people simply condemn them, seeing the women as either forced into these relations or as “sell-outs.” But if you look into the eighteenth century evidence, it’s more complicated, more interesting, even more poignant than that. I’m trying to tell the story the way Joanna and her family saw it.

Historians, filmmakers and public debates

KFB: In *Slaves on Screen*, you talk about movies and how they’re able to reach a far larger audience than historians mostly reach.⁹

NZD: In *Slaves on Screen*, I concentrated on films about forms of slave resistance—*Spartacus*, *Burn* and *The Last Supper* (both great films about the Caribbean), and *Amistad* and *Beloved*. Today there are important new movies, which are bringing the story of slavery to even larger audiences, films like *Twelve Years a Slave*. Many people have said they never realised how brutal a slave regime could be until they saw that movie. I went to the premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival with Henry Louis Gates, who heads the W. E. B. Dubois Centre at Harvard and was one of the historians who read the script for director Steve McQueen. It was packed, really exciting. I wrote two reviews of the film, one for the African-American online daily *The Root* and the other for a round table in *Civil War History*, where I was the only Caribbeanist and the only one who had ever actually worked on a film. Some of the historians were critical because McQueen had done nothing with slave resistance. All you see in the movie is Solomon Northup’s individual struggle to get back his liberty and Patsey’s desire to get away from the horrid sexual abuse of her master by suicide—though she doesn’t end up doing it. It’s true that there are accounts of slave uprisings in the book Northup published after he was restored to freedom, though he himself did not participate in them. But that’s not the kind of movie McQueen wanted to make. He wanted to follow in a slave context the themes from his earlier films—on the individual, his body, his moral struggles. So the movie focuses on Northup, how he reacts to punishment and how he gradually realizes that, free-born though he was, he was not that different from those around him born into slavery. This is so beautifully shown in the acting of Chiwetel Ejiofor. I thought McQueen missed a few points from Northup’s books that would have strengthened his own focus on the individual’s moral struggle. I mean Northup was actually black driver on his plantation for eight years. Some of the ways he and the other slaves devised to get around his whip would have made great scenes. But still, it’s a powerful film. I felt that one of the reasons McQueen decided to use Northup’s book for a movie was not only that he descended from West Indian slaves, but also that he lives in The Netherlands, where much public attention was finally—belatedly—being given to the history of slavery in the Dutch colonies.

KFB: It seems to be a commonplace among historians that we should stay away from community debates and the opinions of the public about what history is. How do you feel about that?

NZD: What would be an example of staying away from a debate?

KFB: Well, for example, in the Netherlands, the reparations debate and the debate about slavery and how it connects to the present.

NZD: OK. I'm glad you mentioned that. I mentioned this question at the end of my review of the movie in *The Root*. The historian has to understand the period he or she is dealing with. You have to work within it, you look at the judgments within the frame of the time—what were the people who lived then accepting or rejecting? What were *their* voices of criticism? But that doesn't mean you're inattentive to the issues in your own time, and how the past may help you understand contemporary struggles. Wherever you come down on the question, the subject of reparations is a great one for debate—it really opens up a lot of important perspectives. In the eighteenth century, the vast majority of people in many parts of the globe accepted and practiced forms of enslavement. The kidnapping of Africans and the Atlantic slave boats, including those of the Dutch West India Company, were particularly ghastly—with huge loss of life—but as the Martinique movie *Passage du Milieu* and other African movies and African historians have pointed out, African rulers and traders were complicit with and benefitted from the dreadful European trade. What kind of reparations can the twenty-first century best make for these cruelties and set-backs of the past? And how would you figure out whom to compensate and how much to give? On the economic side, the wealthy countries should simply give to African countries—and forgive their existing debts—not only because of the damages wrought by imperialism, but because of inequities and racism in our own day. And the aid should not be benefiting already rich African elites. For reparations specifically for slavery, I like the approach of Ruth Simmons, the recent president of Brown University and the descendant of American slaves. It turns out that Brown University was founded in the eighteenth century partly with money from the slave trade. So Simmons founded an Institute for the study of slavery and the history of abolition at Brown University, and set up fellowships for young people from the Caribbean to come to Brown. Historians can certainly be helpful in the current debates.

Early Modernity

JVR: One of the staple *Itinerario* questions is how did you become an historian? What attracted you to history? We wanted to know what attracted you to the early modern period?

NZD: I was already attracted to it an undergraduate at Smith. I thought it was a wonderful period. I think it had to do with the origins of modernity, which was so interesting to me. Now I have a different take on it, because “modernity” gets you into stage theory—which brings so many problems. But I was making these decisions in the late 40s early 50s. I was engaged in politics and so I wanted to think about the origins of modern capitalism and the modern ethos, modern values. And also it was the sixteenth century and I thought it was such a wonderful century. It was such an inventive period. Shakespeare and Rabelais lived then. I would read about these printing workers and their strikes in the sixteenth century and at the same time I'm

caring about strikers in the twentieth century—handing out pamphlets for them and such. I was so interested. I came across these fabulous cases concerning them. Many of the Protestant printing workers fled from Lyon to Geneva, where they got into huge amounts of trouble for the clandestine trade union they were organizing. They were carrying this on from their days in France, and it wasn't going to be allowed. The trial records revealed the secrets they had—their rules, their secret ceremony, their secret nicknames, their passwords. I think if I met one today I could get in to their union. I could do the secret handshake. So I published one of my earliest articles about that—I called it “A trade union in sixteenth-century France.” They didn't use that term—they called it a “Company”—the French called it a *compagnonnage*. But it was the origin of modern trade unions. So I guess it was the sense of origins that got me excited about the early modern period—I thought of it as the beginning of so many modern things. It was also a period of much violence, but it wasn't till later that I turned to the violence of the Reformation. At the start, I was caught by the excitement of the new movement. At the time, back in the 1950s, I would have been called “progressive.” This wasn't just because of my political leanings, it was also the language of the time, even though the Protestants thought they were restoring the church to what Christ had wanted in the beginning. I long since stopped using that as a descriptive term, but even though I'm now working on the eighteenth century and afterward, I still think of the sixteenth century as endlessly interesting. Just endlessly interesting.

KFB: You've mentioned that your outlook on the early modern period has changed. Where do you think this field of early modern studies is going? It's not looking for the origins of the modern world. It's not looking for change.

NZD: By the mid-1960s, I became dissatisfied with the term “early modern” because it went along with the theories of “modernisation” that emerged after the Second World War. And these carried with them a picture of stages of development by a western model, and other parts of the world had to catch up and follow it. “First the West, then the rest.” Already when I was studying working people and artisans, I had wondered about this—the Reformation did not quite give them their due, and early capitalism had its costs for them. And then when I started to work on women, I realised that the stages of change were very irregular. Catholicism and Protestantism couldn't just be put on some simple ladder of improvement or backwardness. They had different meanings and problems for women; and there were changes in both religions. There was no single “right path” to the future. No single definition of “modernity.” Another thing about a Western-defined “early modern” as a category or chronology—it doesn't fit with the world of Islam, it doesn't fit with the chronologies or periods in Asia. If we want to think of history in different parts of the world, either we need a new terminology or we have to redefine our terms so they can apply much more widely. And the best way to do that is in collaboration with historians from other parts of the world.

NZD: What do you all think?

JVR: One scholar I know in America uses “first global age” but, of course, that has problems as well. It can be clunky.

NZD: I have questions about that, too. And global is becoming a publisher's cliché. It makes it sound as though "global connection" is the most important thing, but much of life in the past is carried on locally. To me being conscious of the larger world historically does *not* mean you're just looking at trade connections or travel or diasporas or encounters or maps and the like—important though they are. It means you think of different ways that people live and change in different places during the same time period. You don't assume that only one place is important. You think comparatively. I tried an experiment in a paper I wrote in the wake of publishing about Marie de l'Incarnation. I called it "European women, Iroquoian women." I tried to think of interesting parallels between certain processes of a cultural kind that affected women and that were operating in both the Canadian forest and the European city at the same time. Oratory was a male preserve in Europe—public speech. Among the indigenous people along the St. Lawrence River, oratory was a male preserve as well. Women were very active in these tribes, but not in public speaking and treaty making. They prepared the wampum belts for the treaties, but didn't voice them. I wondered whether the interest of a few of these women in Catholicism was to have a public voice. Marie de l'Incarnation describes one of them as women preaching in her long house. And Katherine Tekakwitha did the same thing. You see something similar with European women in Catholic and Protestant movements. Of course, in both places the men tried to shut them up. You can also do diplomatic history, which shows parallels in treaty formation. The Iroquoian league is created in treaties at the same time as certain European formations are made. The Maroons in Suriname and Jamaica should be looked at as equivalent forms of diplomatic history. I think you can talk about these processes comparatively, extend the same respect to them as historical events as you would to those going on in Europe. I think that there are ways in our historical practice than we can make it expansive and inclusive. Even if we don't have the chronological terminology that quite fits, we can be making ourselves be part of the same world.

KFB: Without reducing it to a word game.

NZD: Yes.

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Notes

- 1 Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*.
- 2 Davis, *Trickster travels*.
- 3 Davis, “Judges, Masters, Diviners,” 957.
- 4 Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre*.
- 5 Glikl bas Judah Leib (Hamburg 1646, Metz, 17 September 1724), also known as Glückel von Hameln, or Glikl Hamel, was a Jewish-German businesswoman. Natalie Zemon Davis wrote about her extensively in Davis, *Women on the margins: three seventeenth-century lives*.
- 6 Jean de Coras, also called Corasius (1515–1572) was a French jurist. In 1552, Coras became a member of the Toulouse parliament and participated in the famous trial of the man claiming to be Martin Guerre, of which he wrote the best-known record, *Arrest Memorable du Parlement de Tolose* (1560).
- 7 John Gabriel Stedman (1744, 7 March 1797) a Scottish–Dutch soldier who wrote *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) and who had a relationship with the slave woman Joanna. Natalie Zemon Davis refers here to the entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian, who went to Suriname in 1699 to 1701 and was one of the figures in her *Women on the Margins*.
- 8 Davis, *Women on the margins: three seventeenth-century lives* (1995).
- 9 Davis, *Slaves on Screen* (2000).