

This article was downloaded by: [University of Navarra]

On: 21 March 2013, At: 01:18

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrhi20>

### Performative academic careers: Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Davis

Jaume Aurell <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of History, University of Navarra,  
Pamplona, Spain

Version of record first published: 12 Mar 2009.

To cite this article: Jaume Aurell (2009): Performative academic careers: Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Davis, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 13:1, 53-64

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642520802639652>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages

whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Performative academic careers: Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Davis

Jaume Aurell\*

*Department of History, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain*

This article studies Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Z. Davis' autobiographical essays to understand the specific function of academic life-writing in defining, developing and contextualizing not only an area of specialization but also the process of writing about history. These 'informative' narratives become 'performative' and influence historiographical discourse, since they do not only describe lives but also examine the mechanisms for understanding academic discipline. Spiegel and Davis have both marked new critical directions in historiography, fostering dialogues between history and other disciplines in the area of humanities and social sciences. Spiegel and Davis' texts reflect the crossroads between life and intellectual activity, a vital discursive point of historiographical evolution.

**Keywords:** academic autobiography; historian's autobiography; historiographical discourse; Gabrielle M. Spiegel; Natalie Z. Davis

Current criticism on the intersection between autobiography and historical writing increasingly demonstrates how historians use autobiographical narrative to define, develop and contextualize not only their area of specialization but also the process of writing about history. These 'informative' narratives become 'performative' as they affect the course and discourse of historiography. In our increasingly self-reflexive world, issues of authenticity and faithfulness to historical truth have become vital epistemological concerns. Autobiographies by academics therefore provide crucial information for understanding these intellectual phenomena. Historians who have protagonized innovations in their disciplines are especially likely to develop autobiographical discourses of real interest.

Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Z. Davis have both marked new critical directions in historiography, fostering dialogues between history and other disciplines in the area of humanities and social sciences, particularly anthropology, linguistics and literary criticism. Both were trained within the

---

\*Email: saurell@unav.es

dominant paradigms of the post-war period (quantitative methodologies and the focus on socio-economics), but gradually shifted towards a kind of history whose methodology resembled narrativism and whose subject matter was cultural. Both women have recently published succinct but eloquent autobiographical accounts, the empirical basis for this essay. Spiegel and Davis' heightened aptitude for evaluating new trends and putting them into practice make their autobiographical essays unique epistemological exercises of enormous historiographical interest.

Spiegel, a medieval historiographer who began her career deploying traditional methods of analysis, shifted towards championing the introduction of postmodern tendencies. Her work has alerted historians to the complexity of the relation between text and context and between the historical object and referential discourse. Nonetheless, she has consistently defended referentiality in history, postulating a 'third way' between traditional and postmodern holdings, a moderate position defined as a 'middle ground'. Davis was a modernist historiographer who began her career committed to post-war Marxism, both in her private life and in her academic methodology based on social history. She eventually evolved towards practising gender history, applying narrative methods to her historical writing, and giving particular importance to historical imagination. Both these scholars' personal essays are magnificent testimonies of the value of academic autobiography as an exercise in self-awareness as they trace not only their professional trajectories, but mark the intellectual mutations undergone by the discipline itself. These accounts enable us to examine not only how academic autobiographies increase our understanding of intellectual phenomena, but how personal stories cause these phenomena to develop and change.

### **Gabrielle Spiegel and the theory of the middle ground**

From the perspective of the 1990s, historians may perceive clearly that the transformations in historiographical theory and practice in recent decades had not been mere fashion, as Eric Hobsbawm (2002, 293–7) had noted in his autobiography, but were shaking the foundations of their discipline. Traditional historians denounced both the break with tradition and the way postmodern historians challenged the very possibility of historical objectivity and access to the past. On this question, traditional historians showed a great deal of caution, and some of them were totally opposed to it. Spiegel ardently defended the need to moderate the scope of the postmodern revolution without dismissing it completely. She maintained a balanced dialogue with postmodern thought, observing that it has alerted us to the mediating function of language in our access to the past. Together with other mediaeval scholars, such as Nancy Partner, and modernist historians, such as Davis and Lynn Hunt, Spiegel advocated an alternative or 'third way', a compromise between the post-war models and the more radical

postulates of the new linguistic approach that emerged in the 1970s (Appleby et al. 1994; Spiegel 2005).

For Spiegel, the advantage of poststructuralism was that it called people's attention to the relation between words and things, or between language and extralinguistic reality. However, she did not think that this constituted a real alternative as a historiographical current. Although she accepted that mental activity develops within language and that there is no meta-language that permits us to observe reality from the outside, she believed that if texts only reflected texts, without referring to reality, the past would dissolve into mere literature, which was clearly not the case. The key therefore seemed to lie in remaining aware that every text emerges from a real context. Using an interesting two-way syllogism, she came to the conclusion that language itself only takes on meaning and authority within specific social and historical contexts; just as linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language. The role of language would then consist of mediating between the text and reality.

Spiegel's autobiographical essay, 'France for Belgium', was published in the volume *Why France?* (2007). Her opening statement demonstrates her certainty regarding the constant interaction between historians' research activities and their personal beliefs: 'It is my profound conviction that what we do as historians is to write, in highly displaced, usually unconscious, but nonetheless determined ways, our inner, personal obsessions' (Spiegel 2007, 89). The course of her life and her academic career establishes the accuracy and depth of her reasoning. If she at first embraced postmodernism, it was precisely because of her obsession with recovering a past that was no longer recoverable: the world that was lost when Nazi persecution forced her family to leave Belgium and emigrate to the USA. This is, in fact, a very postmodern concept; it recognizes that the past existed and forms an indelible part of one's personal identity, but knows that it is impossible to re-experience it.

Spiegel was born in the USA of a Belgian father and Austrian mother who had arrived in 1938. Hoping to return to Antwerp when the war ended, they were therefore not overly concerned with ensuring that their four children learned English. Spiegel's early childhood was thus predominantly French-speaking and also German-speaking, due to her mother's friendships. When English did filter into the family conversation because of the children's increasing and natural inclination towards this language, their parents would shift to German because their mother was more at home in that language. Their father, who spoke eleven languages, would give in with no arguments. As time passed, however, French was gradually dropped by the family and, given the course events were taking in Europe, German was also lost. By the time the war ended, all of the family's German and Austrian friendships had completely disappeared and English had taken over, albeit for negative reasons. Nobody spoke about returning to Antwerp and the Spiegels became American 'for better or for worse' (Spiegel 2007, 90).

This dramatic family history left the American medievalist with the bitter feeling of 'lost memory' for all things French, especially those related to the family's country of origin, Belgium. At the same time, she had a deep sense of being an outsider in the worlds in which she lived: 'I offer this family linguistic history because I believe that it left us children with a profound sense of marginality in relation with the worlds we inhabited' (Spiegel 2007, 90). Both within the family and at school, she was a notorious linguistic misfit. From this, Spiegel draws what becomes a vital conclusion regarding the enormous importance of language in social and cultural life, because she underwent a 'Linguistic turn' in practice, rather than in theory. The persistent feeling of linguistic non-belonging motivated Spiegel – and other historians of her generation who had emigrated to America – to unconsciously search for new ways of historical expression. She sustains that the first wave of postmodernism was to a great extent caused by the sense of loss – of history, of language, homeland, and identity – experienced by an entire generation of European and American historians. People had lost their belief in the continuity of modern progress because of real-life events, and this created favourable conditions for postmodern thought. Her generation oscillated between a strong desire to regain the past and the painful awareness that the past was irrecoverable. Therefore, their yearning for history had the bittersweet tinge of feelings that accompany the death of something loved that already belongs to the past: 'Our desire for history has an elegiac component, by which it becomes a kind of mourning for the unpossessed dead that is the past' (Spiegel 2007, 92).

This perspective incorporates the paradoxical awareness that, though the past was irrecoverable, history was a nostalgic refuge. The past, recognized as an absence, aroused nostalgic feelings for this unattainable object of desire. Spiegel sums this up in a lucid postmodernist statement: 'the desire to recuperate the past and the recognition of the impossibility of doing so'. This formula sums up the contradiction of early postmodernism. On the one hand, there was a painful desire to recover a lost past; on the other, the anguished recognition that this was impossible in real terms. This intellectual frustration was, in turn, projected in the form of epistemological convictions.

The author explains that, at the time, her generation did not consciously come to terms with this postmodern awareness. It was simply suffered passively and perhaps fairly unconsciously. However, things began to change when a group of medievalists who shared her interest in medieval historiography – Nancy Partner, Robert Hanning, and Robert Stein – adopted an approach to reading historical texts that focussed on their specifically literary character (Partner 1977, Spiegel 1997). To do so, they based themselves largely on Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), in which theories from literary criticism were applied to the analysis of

nineteenth-century historical texts. They were also inspired by the new poststructuralist tendencies in anthropology and literature. Thus, some medievalists, and even some high modernists, such as Davis, Carlo Ginzburg and Simon Schama, embraced a series of interpretation techniques imported from literary criticism, specifically the “Linguistic turn”, a phrase that became the trademark of a growing feeling that perception, cognition and imagination were always mediated by linguistic structures and projected in the form of discourses of one kind or another (Harris 2004; Aurell 2004). Spiegel applied these theories in *Romancing the Past* (1993), her book on the emergence of historiography in the vernacular language in France in the thirteenth century. This work, she notes, is based on post-structural theories of language and textuality, and plays with the two aspects of historical texts: the *contextual* aspect, which is governed by the material and social reality in which historical narratives are put together, and the strictly *textual* aspect, conditioned by linguistic structure, constitution and expression.

Interestingly, Spiegel associates writing this work with a second personal experience of ‘loss’, which occurred when her children left home for university. Significantly, she focused on the anti-French reaction of the French-Flemish nobles in the early thirteenth century, who were afraid of losing their autonomy under the pressure for centralization exerted by the French monarchy. At this time of change of status, a period of anxiety when the aristocracy felt they were losing prestige due to an increase in the authority of the monarchy, the Flemish aristocracy forged a new language – historical prose – in order to rid the noble culture of problems. Given the author’s Belgian origins, study themes and personal experiences had converged once again: at the beginning, she had decided to become an historian because she was convinced that

it was this perduring sense of not belonging, of intense marginality and linguistic discomfort, of having lost a past and personal history for which I felt that I had been intended but which had been taken away from me by history itself, that generated my need to be a historian

(Spiegel 2007, 90)

Then, she chose to be a medievalist because of her fascination of Henri Pirenne’s work: ‘This encounter with Pirenne set me on the path of medieval history, from which I never wavered. [. . .] Looking back, of course, it seems clear that the decisive factor was that Pirenne was both a medievalist and a Belgian.’ (Spiegel 2007, 91).

Spiegel’s books on medieval historiography posit that a change in linguistic structures reflect a transformation in social structures. However, the question Spiegel repeatedly poses is whether language not only *reflected* the reality of a changing social context but also *influenced* and *reactivated* the social transformation. According to the weight given to each

of the terms of this equation one has a more traditional view of history – the text conditioned by the context – or the less traditional view that takes the postmodern tendencies associated with the Linguistic turn into account – the precedence of language over society. Spiegel swung back and forth between her commitment to postmodern ideas and her respect for tradition. She was especially captivated by White’s *Metahistory* and Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Dissemination*. Although she never radically adopted Derrida’s notion of ‘textuality’, she was convinced that it was no longer possible to sustain the positivist notions of referentiality and empirical truth that had been the dominant paradigm of scientific or objective historiography since nineteenth-century historicism. Her dramatic experience of the familiar, language, national and collective rupture has led her to consider history as (postmodern) fragmentation rather than as (modern) continuity or progress. Her sense of loss was always stronger than her sense of belonging and durability:

For ours is a generation that has labored under the sign of loss, itself symptomatic of the postmodern conundrum generated by the simultaneity of our desire for history and our recognition of its loss, a recognition that paradoxically nourishes the very desire it can never satisfy. In that sense, we hover between a desire for the past and the sense of its irretrievable absence.

(Spiegel 2007, 91–2)

Nevertheless, she could neither accept the disappearance of the past, implicit in the poststructuralist and postmodern concept of ‘textuality’, nor feel satisfied with the excessive ingenuousness of fully representing the past that characterise the different forms of positivism and historicism. This constituted the logocentric mirage and was precisely what deconstructionism tried to dethrone. Spiegel found herself staunchly defending a ‘third way’, her ‘middle ground’, which was the subject of one of her most important articles, published in *Speculum* in 1990. There, she proposes the expression ‘the social logic of the text’, that emerged from her obsession for making her awareness of the absence of the past compatible with the need to recover it. In this formula the context (*social*) and the text (*logic*) are represented by a dichotomy she frequently employed: the content and the form. One single form embodies both the passive and active functions of language: language as a static image of the context and language as an agent that helps create context. Thus, Spiegel’s lost language becomes again the keystone of her historiographical structure:

In examining the literary modes and narrative economies of medieval chronicles, I was, of course, employing a technique of interpretation that in its largest sense has been termed the “linguistic turn”, the hallmark of which has been a growing awareness that perception, cognition, and imagination are mediated by linguistic structures cast into discourses of one sort or another.

(Spiegel 2007, 95)

Nevertheless, her leaning towards the postmodern attitude of emphasizing the power of language over the reality is balanced by her conviction of the realistic strength of the history in nations and people's life. In fact, Spiegel's life and intellectual academic career attest to her belief that

we may recover some sense of the material world of the past but also the recognition that language intervenes and mediates the ways in which we know and constitute it. Translated into autobiographical terms, it expresses the dual gesture that stands at the core of my work: the desire for history and commitment to its recovery and the equally powerful belief in the past's erasure and loss.

(Spiegel 2007, 97)

Spiegel appears here as a transactional or intergenerational historiographer, as she accepts the new tendencies with enthusiasm but does not allow herself to be completely dazzled by their attractive radicalism. Both her academic work and life writing exercise negotiate this tension between a purely linguistic understanding of the nature of knowledge and historical writing of the referential kind.

### **Natalie Z. Davis and the historical power of narrative**

In 1982, Natalie Davis published *The Return of Martin Guerre*, one of the most influential books in contemporary historiography. Her commitment to narrative history and a rational use of historical imagination have made her a champion of the more possibilist postmodern movements, central to the New Cultural History. She has made her academic reputation based on her ability to open new horizons in the study of history, especially in the cross-disciplinary links between history and anthropology, and of studies on women and gender. Her autobiographical essay, 'A Life of Learning', delivered at the Charles Homer Haskins society in 1997, shows that her tendency to opt for the lesser-known historical genres (narrative history) and concentrate on marginal historical figures (women, peasants, heretics) is rooted in her sense of belonging to an ethnic minority (Judaism) and also in her political activism in favour of counter-culture ideologies. Davis has always tended towards historical analyses of the subjects to which she is committed in her private life, such as the history of women, the problem of slavery, and social life. Her profound moral and political commitment has brought greater vitality to her academic rigour.

Davis was born in Detroit in 1929. From an early age she was keenly aware of her family's particular configuration of their Jewish identity and immigrant perspective: 'loyalty to the present and the future' (Davis 1997, 1). Her parents 'bought a house distant from the Jewish quarter and we lived a few *landsleit* scattered among the gentiles' (Davis 1997, 2). Yet, at school she experienced what happened when her Jewish self and the world of

the ‘gentiles’ came together, something that would be crucial to her understanding of the multireligious societies of modern Europe. Her position in the margins of society during her childhood and youth – her Jewishness, her radical political preferences and her liberal ideological commitments – enabled her later, as a historian, to pose the great question of the relation between the ‘central’ and the ‘peripheral’. Her choice of subjects for research – religious minorities in early modern France (Davis 1979); a woman farm-worker in an abandoned village in the Pyrenees (Davis 1982); women ‘on the margins’ of society (Davis 1995); the cultural dimension of gift objects (Davis 2000) – all reflect her tendency to settle in the margins rather than in the mainstream. Her progression from traditional historiography to narrative experiments reveals her disposition towards new ideas and ability to combine tradition with much-needed innovation.

Choosing to study at Smith College allowed Davis to realize her experiential and academic concerns, as the atmosphere in this women’s college accentuated her rebellious spirit and inclination for political activity. The complex political situation (the beginning of the Cold War, the setting up of the first Communist regimes, the Korean War) led her to the centre of an elite intellectual world defending the ideas of the political and liberal left. At the time, Marxism and socialism believed to offer political and social hope. Revealing an attitude typical of those times, both in real life and academic circles, Davis (1997, 4). ‘imagined a future where changed structures truly transformed human behaviour’. She found herself working with her comrades on concrete issues involving racism, union rights, and free speech. Satisfying both her political loyalties and her scholarly appetite, she chose a radical philosopher, Pietro Pomponazzi, for her senior honours thesis. Her radical education was completed by readings of Marxist theory by Giambattista Vico, and by *Strange Defeat*, by Marc Bloch, from whom she learned that a historian can also be a hero.

Like many other historians of her generation, Davis’s graduate training led her to focus on social history. Her thesis on the grain riots, the strikes of the printing workers and the religious uprising in sixteenth-century Lyon, enabled her to apply Marx’s theories of religion as a super-structure reflecting material interests and Max Weber’s theories of Protestantism as encouraging the capitalist spirit. In 1952 she moved to Lyon for the first time, to research in the local archives. There she familiarized herself with the methods of quantitative social-history. Interestingly, she only resorted to non-quantitative documents to rest, demonstrating how practitioners of quantitative methods looked down on narrative evidence as secondary documentation of little scientific value: ‘When my eyes needed a rest, I moved over to the *Réserve* for “qualitative” evidence (as we called it): printed pamphlets, playlets, sermons, and polemics connected with the Protestant and Catholic movements in the city’ (Davis 1997, 8). Nonetheless, Davis soon found herself turning away from the quantitative

method towards narration, because she felt sure that this would lead her to focus more closely on the *human aspect*.

Soon afterwards, what seemed at the time to be a personal setback (her passport was confiscated by the FBI owing to the political activities she carried out) caused her to move on from the strictly historiographical approach. She was obliged to focus on whatever printed documentation about the religious disputes in early modern Lyon she could find in the libraries of the New York area. This made her emphasize the importance of putting the history of printed material to the service of social history. The results were important for her thesis; she found out, for example, how printers disguised Protestant propaganda so that it could pass unnoticed by censors and inquisitors. It also provided her with material for diversifying her own research sources as she encountered ‘somewhat by accident, a lifelong style of research, in which I have combined archival work with the study of printed texts of multiple genres, an especially important move if one wants to understand the *menu peuple* and “popular culture”’ (Davis 1997, 10). Significantly, this development shows great similarities with the thematic interests of other narrativists of her generation, such as Carlo Ginzburg and Le Roy Ladurie. Interestingly, Davis (1997, 12) articulates an ostensible difficulty in her academic career – bringing up her three children – as vital to her work as a historian: ‘It humanized me; it taught me about psychology and personal relations and gave flesh to abstract words like “material needs” and “the body”’; it revealed the power of family, rarely treated by historians in those days’.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s she lived through the political protests and student demands, but from the academic point of view what most influenced her were the studies on French folklore carried out by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep and those of Mikhail Bakhtin, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz and Sidney Mintz. Davis tackles history without looking directly for ‘solutions’; but by engaging questions, processes and diverse approaches. She notes how she abandoned the naive assurance of the historians of paradigm – Marxists, structuralists, cliometric historians – in search of the specifically human aspects in cultural, intellectual, and religious documents. For this reason, her methodological reference points came from the work of anthropologists, literary critics and linguists rather than that of sociologists and economists. This enabled her to examine the social and cognitive meanings of symbolic and ritual forms of behaviour, which had been previously accounted for only in terms of group solidarity and through quantitative evidence. Her previous naive confidence in the linear progress of history collapsed before her own historical findings. As she confesses,

I began to doubt my earlier commitment to a single “progressive” trajectory toward the future, assessing Catholic and Protestant paths as alternate forms of movement, rather than as just old and new, the traditional and the

innovative. Indeed, I began to see the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as generating more than “modernity”.

(Davis 1997, 14–15)

At the end of the 1970s, she discovered the sixteenth-century book, *Memorable Decree*, by Judge Jean de Coras, the famous story of a peasant impostor in a Pyrenean village: a man who seemed to have been accepted as a husband by another man’s wife for at least three years, an unlikely story based on totally reliable documentation. Her first idea involved making it into an ethnographic film: ‘Imagining any scene – villagers greeting newcomers, sitting around a fire mending tools, talking, telling stories, quarrelling, answering judges – sent me scurrying back to sources to find out what was likely, what was plausible’ (Davis 1997, 18). Davis had always posited historical imagination as a vital part of the historian’s work, and she used it to construct the screenplay. Interestingly, the film was produced before the book was written. Although the language of film could not communicate the enormous complexity of the characters, Davis made use of its versatility to abandon the analytical genre in use and resort to narrative, using her imagination actively but trying to be faithful to the historical nature of the account. To do this she based her work on the models of *Montaillou* by Le Roy and of *Cheese and Worms* by Carlo Ginzburg, which had been labelled ‘microhistory’ but which Davis preferred to include in the genre of ‘ethnography’.

The intense debate on the use of ‘historical imagination’ generated by *The Return of Martin Guerre* is already part of the history of late twentieth-century western historiography. This close study of the formation of ‘identity’ was largely forged by the characters of the story by the narrative itself. With this book, Davis emphasized the strategy of entering the psyche of the characters brought to life in the narrative. In fact, that book was criticized for projecting the demands of twentieth-century women onto the peasant woman who was the main character of her historical account. Throughout the book, Davis deployed the complex thread of the story and the moral questions implicit in the situation created by the new marriage to project some of the postulates of twentieth-century feminism onto the text’s main character, a sixteenth-century villager. Her idea of changing society through her work started to appear as a real possibility, too far from the utopias of her beginning as historian: ‘American was near, and within the frame of my Utopian idealism, I worked with my comrades on the concrete issues of racism, union rights, and free speech’ (Davis 1997, 5).

Davis managed to put into practice the theory that White had developed a few years earlier: that narrative is not just a form but implies a content and an intention in itself, by deliberately choosing what it considers to be most significant and worth recording and by telling it in the *mode* which it considers most suitable. She introduced a new element into the field of

historical methodology: the imaginative faculty of the historian herself. Imagination is, of course, one of the keys of hermeneutics. Through it, the historian can reach the essential point of the historical object being analysed. Fact and fiction, verified and imagined circumstances combine effectively in her story of *Martin Guerre*. This 'fusion' goes unnoticed by the reader in Davis' *novel*, but this is not the case for the reader of her *historical narrative*. Her intention was to legitimize the ability of the historian to fill the gaps in the documentation using her imagination, a process that she called *invention*. However, she always made it quite clear what those gaps were, and stated what appeared in her sources and what did not.

In the 1990s, the project *Women on the Margins* enabled her to weave together all her previous areas of interest: social, anthropological, ethnographic, and literary. Interestingly, her negotiation with the new postmodern tendencies was rather distant and critical: 'Now I began to play with the idea of "margins", an idea important to me not because of recent de-constructionist use à la Derrida, but because of my own lifelong ambivalence about centres' (Davis 1997, 22). Her lifelong experience, characterized largely by attempting to change the 'centres' from the margins of political protest and intellectual activity, prepared her to enter the complex world of the careers of a few singular women who had struggled to be accepted within what was considered normal. All of these academic experiences finally convinced her that 'the study of the past provides rewards for moral sensibility and tools for critical understanding' (Davis 1997, 23).

The clearly transactional careers of Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Davis are eloquent examples of the transformations undergone by western historiography during the second half of the twentieth century. Historiography has shifted from naive assurance in historical paradigms or 'logocentrism' to a greater awareness of the mediating role played by language through discourses, expressed by the notion of 'textuality'. The past, whether individual, family-based or national, does not lie in a simple recompilation of data, but rather in the collection of stories that have reached us, whether in the form of documents, oral or written accounts, or images. Academic autobiographies such as those by Spiegel and Davis help us to understand that history is something more than a collection of objects analysed sceptically in the historian's laboratory. The autobiographical narratives by historians helps to enrich their historical accounts and to understand better their lives, political and ideological commitments, and academic choices. Indeed, one can argue that their works' moral dimension emerges with the writing of their autobiography. As Davis concludes, 'no matter what happens, people go on telling stories about it and bequeath them to the future. No matter how static and despairing the present looks, the past reminds us that change can occur. At least things can be different. The past is an unending source of interest, and can even be a source for hope' (Davis 1997, 23).

### Notes on contributor

Jaume Aurell is Associate Professor of History and Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Navarra, Spain. He has written *La escritura de la memoria. De los positivismos a los postmodernismos* (2005), and co-edited *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performance, Culture* (2007) and *Rewriting the Middle Ages in the Twentieth Century* (2005).

### References

- Appleby, J., L. Hunt, and M. Jacob. 1994. *Telling the truth about history*. New York: Norton.
- Aurell, J. 2004. Los efectos del giro lingüístico en la historiografía reciente. *Rilce* 20: 3–20.
- Aurell, J. 2006. Autobiography as unconventional history: Constructing the author. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 10: 433–49.
- Aurell, J. 2006. Autobiographical texts as historiographical sources: Rereading Fernand Braudel and Annie Kriegel. *Biography* 29, no. 3: 425–45.
- Davis, N.Z. 1979. *Les cultures du peuple. Rituels, savoirs et résistances au 16e siècle*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Davis, N.Z. 1982. *The return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, N.Z. 1988. On the lame. *American Historical Review* 93: 572–603.
- Davis, N.Z. 1995. *Women on the margins: Three seventeenth-century lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, N.Z. 1997. *A life of learning*, ACLS Occasional Paper 39. New York: American Council of Learned Societies.
- Davis, N.Z. 2000. *The gift in sixteenth-century France*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1980. *Writing and difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. 1983. *Dissemination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. 1997. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harris, R. 2004. *The linguistics of history*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. 2002. *Interesting times: A twentieth-century life*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Partner, N. 1977. *Serious entertainments: The writing of history in twelfth-century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spiegel, G.M. 1990. History, historicism and the social logic of the text in the middle ages. *Speculum* 65: 59–86.
- Spiegel, G.M. 1993. *Romancing the past: The rise of vernacular prose historiography in thirteenth century France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spiegel, G.M. 1997. *The past as text: Theory and practice of medieval historiography*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Spiegel, G.M., ed. 2005. *Practicing history: new directions in historical writing after the linguistic turn*. New York: Routledge.
- Spiegel, G.M. 2007. France for Belgium. In *Why France? American historians reflect on an enduring fascination*, ed. L.L. Downs and S. Gerson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. 1999. Literary theory and historical writing. In *Figural realism. Studies in the mimesis effect*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.