

Guest editors' introduction

Setting store by sources

Virginia Langum & Kristina Sehlin MacNeil

Sources are vital to research in the humanities. Yet their waters rarely run clear. They may demand certain skills – linguistic, historical, statistical – to penetrate them. They might lurk in incomplete catalogues or may branch off from other sources. They may be known but difficult to collect or filter. They might also be created out of confluence between researchers and research participants, for example through interviews. They may surface uncomfortable questions: are they representative; are they reliable; do they shore our conclusions? They may also be muddied with complex ethical issues.

In what follows, we, the guest editors of this thematic collection of *Kulturella Perspektiv*, offer two reflections on working with our own sources, before turning to the content and context of the included texts.

Archives and illness experiences: Virginia's reflections

When I first meet David Ewen, I am cross with him. David Ewen is a young Scottish doctor who is travelling far from home in search of a cure. He is afflicted with consumption, or what we now know as tuberculosis.

I am cross with him, because he is not telling me what I want to know. I have spent quite a bit of time with him in order to learn his handwriting. Nineteenth-century handwriting is less regular than older scripts. The type-writer has not yet been invented. It takes a while to get the sense of the writers and what they mean by their scribbles. All that effort, and David Ewen is going on and on about the wind and the latitude of his voyage to the Portuguese island of Madeira. I'm seething at him. Say something interesting! You say there is no surgeon aboard. But who *is* there? You must have observed *something* of note in their dress, conversation, person. Do you worry that you will die thousands of miles away from home? Are you scared? These are things that I, 170 years later, want to know.

The questions that he does not answer tell me plenty, of course. They tell me about David Ewen, and they tell me about myself. I probe the diary in order to find something new, something that has not been published elsewhere. Something personal. This is futile. Whether intended for publication or not, Victorian diaries tend to the practical and useful. He offers tips to an unknown reader in his diary that was never published, nor

cited. Yet I hear his fear and anger through an observation about the cynical hotel owners and landlords.

Working with sources can be both painful and pleasurable. When I become lost in my research, which is often, it is always my sources that bring me back. Now I am working on the early history of medical travel. This involves a lot of nineteenth-century diaries, letters, and travelogues (Langum 2022). That is how I came to know David Ewen's diary and some family correspondence, which are safely tucked away at the National Library of Scotland (MS.15945).

Almost every grant application has an "ethical considerations" box. For at least a decade, I have been ignoring that box or gliding past it with a terse and confident "N/A". I work with historical materials. All the writers and people within these sources are long dead. There are no ethical considerations. Or so I thought.

I began to have doubts when I began working with sick people. Dead sick people. Although he died in the 1840s, David Ewen, for example, is "embodied as a living presence in the materials" (McKee and Porter 2012: 60). However *living* these bodies (my sources) seem, they cannot provide consent, nor can they collaborate with me. As far as I can tell, no one has ever cited David Ewen. He died almost immediately upon return from Madeira; he had a life cut short. In *The wounded storyteller*, Arthur Frank argues for an "ethics of listening" which demands a reciprocity and reflexivity in witnessing the voices of ill people: "in listening for the other, we listen for ourselves" (Frank 1995: 25). I continue to parse the ethics of retelling and reframing historical illness experiences. In the meantime, I will remember David Ewen in my research.

Sources – voices released into the research arena: Kristina's reflections

For as long as I can remember, I have observed human interactions, while questioning, reasoning and speculating how they unfold. I am endlessly fascinated by interpersonal interactions, intragroup communications, and international relations. Conflict and power relations are the types of communication that interest me the most. Why do people act the way that they do? Why do they say one thing and mean another, why do they choose to stay angry rather than resolve a problem?

Though my very winding path took me to many countries and many professions before becoming a researcher, there was a common theme – I was drawn to the mysteries of conflicts and how to manage or transform them, and I used interview or conversation as my method for understanding human experience.

At some point I was introduced to Indigenous communities in Australia – and learned the great value of oral knowledge, passed down from generation to generation. These sources, sometimes a single word in a language foreign to me, are incredibly rich and can unfold as a map of sorts to tell members of a community how to exist.

The Adnyamathanha word *Muda* is such a source. Adnyamathanha are an Aboriginal people in South Australia and hold limited land rights to parts of their traditional lands in and around the Flinders Ranges. Working with the Adnyamathanha Elders and Camp Law Mob – a group of Elders who were born “on Country” and brought up under Adnyamathanha law, not “Whitefella law” – I was taught about the *Muda* (Sehlin MacNeil 2019). *Muda* is a concept that informs Adnyamathanha people about how to live sustainably on the land and that connects people with resources – cultural and natural (Marsh 2013). It includes story and song lines that explain the creation of the land and how to care for it and its inhabitants. Shortly, *Muda* guides Adnyamathanha people in understanding who they are, where they belong and how to behave. It is knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation.

In my experience, working with interview and observation data as sources in Indigenous contexts, rigorous ethical conduct is required. Indigenous peoples unfortunately carry experiences of being researched as curious objects and subjected to unethical research methods. Hence the field of Indigenous research today holds ambitions to involve Indigenous peoples as equal parties in research processes; we conduct research *with*, not *on*, Indigenous communities. Therefore, the researcher is accountable to the research participants and avoids simply extracting information, consequently interview processes need to contain a certain amount of flexibility. While this can be time consuming and thus off-putting to a researcher weighed down by deadlines, it can also be incredibly rewarding to both researcher and research participants. As suggested by Dean (2010), to have the opportunity to listen to human experience and help release it into the research arena is a privilege.

About the thematic collection

This thematic collection is a project of the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College (FADC) at Umeå University. FADC develops generic skills useful in academia and beyond. Our current course package consists of a first-year course called Developing as a Doctoral Researcher, which includes sustainability in humanities

research, basic academic writing, public presentation, and a conference. In the second year, doctoral researchers further develop academic writing in an advanced course where they work in writing groups to give and receive feedback on each other’s work in progress. In the fourth year, we offer Leadership and Career Planning, which includes project management, media relations, career planning, writing a CV and collecting academic merits, and seeking grants and funding. In addition to the course package, FADC offers a range of optional seminars, workshops and events on other aspects of research, academic life and career opportunities beyond the academy, as well as social events.

As FADC serves doctoral researchers across some 15 fields in the arts and humanities at Umeå University, bringing researchers together under a common theme can be challenging. However, one thing that unites all our researchers is sources. In compiling this thematic collection, we asked our doctoral researchers to reflect on the sources under study in their doctoral research projects: how they are developing the use of their particular sources, what are the ethical issues involved, how do they define or problematize the use of sources, and what challenges do they have in accessing their sources or collecting data. In this thematic collection, seven of our doctoral researchers tackle sources as diverse as Old Norse names and contemporary online Indigenous activist platforms in Brazil. Working with sources can raise different questions across various research fields, as the articles here demonstrate. They probe critical questions about how scholars interpret the same sources differently, as well as conceptual and practical issues in compiling sources. Some of the articles reflect immediate concerns posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to accessing their sources, suggesting both difficulties and opportunities. The articles also consider overlooked sources. Together, these articles illustrate rich and diverse thinking in relation to sources and scholarship ongoing at the Faculty of Arts, Umeå University.

Presentation of authors

Solveig Bollig is a doctoral researcher in Nordic languages. In her article, she considers “a source within a source” – i.e., personal names within the Icelandic sagas – which can illuminate belonging and otherness.

Camila Emboava Lopes is a doctoral researcher in media and communication studies. In her article, she documents the challenges and opportunities presented to ethnographers by the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, she considers the use of livestream events to observe Indigenous movements in Brazil.

Tabea Hochstrasser is a doctoral researcher in the history of ideas. Her article explores the image of mosaic to explain how historians interpret sources and arrive at different conclusions.

Johan Malmstedt is a doctoral researcher in media and communication studies. His article problematises the sound archive as a largely untapped source and suggests that further research and debate can help alter its status.

Malin Niklasson is a doctoral researcher in comparative literature. By investigating the complexities of using a literary motif, namely floods, as a common denominator, she discusses her sources and data collection as searching and gathering.

Kajsa Törmä is a doctoral researcher in English linguistics. With a focus on conceptions of outer space, her article considers the challenges of cross-linguistic (Swedish and English) research drawing from corpora.

Elin Wallner is a doctoral researcher in ethnology. In her article, she considers the ethical challenges and advantages of conducting ethnological interviews online, particularly when these interviews concern sensitive topics.

Presentation of guest editors

Virginia Langum is professor of English literature and director of the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College at Umeå University. She also serves as editor of the *Nordic Journal of English Studies* and coordinator for the Umeå Medical Humanities Network. Her research concerns the inter-relationship of medicine, literature and culture, extending from the Middle Ages to our own period. She also conducts research in higher education and academic writing.

Kristina Sehlin MacNeil is a research fellow and the deputy director of Vårdduo – Centre for Sámi Research

at Umeå University. She also serves as the co-director for the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College. Her research concerns conflicts and power relations in interactions between Indigenous peoples and extractive industries and international comparisons of these. She is a management committee member of the European Non-Territorial Autonomy Network, a co-researcher in the Canadian research network mining and Indigenous livelihoods MinErAL, and a member of the University of Sydney Indigenous Research Network.

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