University of Tübingen

Department for Anthropology

Seminar: Introduction to Media Anthropology

Gulzat Baialieva, M.A.

Winter Semester 2021/2022

Blogpost:

Introduction to Investigative Ethnography

What Pocahontas can teach us about a promising ethnographic

research approach

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5th Semester

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05.03.2022

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Access the Inaccessible: Introduction to Investigative Ethnography

Dear readers,

This article is aiming to introduce you to a certain research approach, which is quite new to academic literature and yet very promising for the discipline of media anthropology: *investigative ethnography*. By showing a link between recent publications on investigative ethnography and *digital ethnography*, I will define the main elements of the approach. The second part of this article will discuss the work of well-known German literature scholar Klaus Theweleit and his analysis of the American founding myth *Pocahontas* as a possible example for investigative ethnography.

Stephen Schwartz, the songwriter behind the soundtracks of Disney's version of Pocahontas, inspired my post with a quote in 'Colors of the Wind':
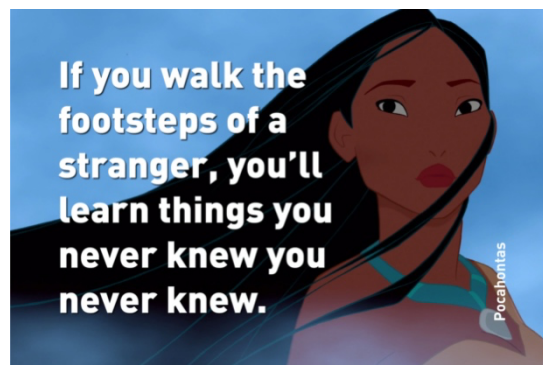
Pic. 1: Portrait of Disney's Pocahontas; quote, Schwartz 1995

In the broadest sense, this is what investigative ethnography is about. According to peace and conflict scholar Teo Ballvé, it "combines techniques of investigative journalism with the conceptual and methodological commitments of ethnographic inquiry" (Ballvé 2019: 1). How is this approach different from 'classical' ethnographic fieldwork that investigates cultural and social phenomena in a chosen environment? Read further for an answer:

> The first key element of investigative ethnography is a clear *focus on studying one specific case*, story or, in the example below, myth.

The outcome is an ethnography that actively engages in the research matter by following 'the footsteps' of a specific case and the actors involved in it. Just like in investigative journalism, investigative ethnography aims to uncover social injustice or publicly relevant wrongdoing (Ballvé 2019: 3-4). The ethnographic part, on the other hand, lies in reflecting the meaning of this wrongdoing and analyzing its effects in present-time societies.

> "In other words, whereas investigative journalism is about getting to the bottom of "what really happened," ethnography deals with meaning and lived experience while considering "truth" in these realms as always multiple, murky, and socially produced." (Ballvé 2019: 4)

> The second key element is *dislocation* from a single research field to access information laying beyond on-site experiences or empirical research.

Investigative ethnography is more personal and open than classic ethnography, allowing the researcher to step away from a single research destination[1] (Ballvé 2019: 1-2). This is quite similar to what Sarah Pink, one of the leading experts in visual ethnography and media anthropology, describes as a principle of *digital ethnography* (Pink et al. 2016: 11). Digital and investigative ethnography have a lot in common, but the focus is different. Investigative ethnographic research evolves around the chosen case, making it multisited, dislocated and independent from on-site fieldwork. This characteristic is especially important for studying in violent settings and inaccessible social or geographic spaces (Ballvé 2019: 3). For example, Teo Ballvé used the approach to access information on corruption and violent economies like drug markets in Colombia. Whereas a field study in the classical sense would have been physically dangerous to him and his informants, methods of investigative journalism enabled a more distant, neutral, and safe analysis (Ballvé 2019: 4-5).

> The third key element is the *analysis of media* and *digital research*. These two methods can be seen as essential to ethnographic interpretation and documentation of the case.

The attention and use of media for research purposes is another link to digital ethnography. Investigative ethnographers should remain open to any kind of resource, whether it is an online-forum, mass media, public records or direct intel of informants (Ballvé 2019: 9). Media is not only essential for analyzing and interpreting the case, but also for documenting and publishing it. It takes a high degree of reflexivity to incorporate subjectively consumed media in academic research (Pink et al. 2016: 12). In Sarah Pink's words, this is why digital ethnography can be called 'unorthodox' to classic academic works, which aim to produce 'neutral' or even 'objective' knowledge (Pink et al. 2016: 13). I adapted this term to investigative ethnography for the last key element:

> The fourth key element is the accessibility of investigative ethnography to the wider public through media publishing. Investigative ethnography in unorthodox to academic publishing formats and therefor part of applied science.

In the discipline of anthropology, investigative ethnography can be used as a tool in the field of *applied anthropology* (Van Willigen 2002: ix), or more exact *applied media anthropology*.

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[1] In classic, analogue ethnography, a research destination could be a 'culture', a 'tribe' or a region.

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Example: The Truth about Pocahontas? #metoo in American mythology and colonial history

My initial motivation for this blogpost was the publication series 'Der Pocahontas-Komplex' by German cultural and literature theorist Klaus Theweleit. The series is a great example to illustrate the opportunities and challenges of investigative ethnography. In its first volume


Pic. 2: Painting 'Baptism of Pocahontas' by John Gadsby Chapman, exhibited in the Capitol

'Pocahontas in Wonderland. Shakespeare on Tour. Indian Song' (first published in 1999), Theweleit gathers an enormous amount of sources and documentation material to question the historic background and the political correctness of the Pocahontas-myth, which is one of the most influential founding myths of the USA (Theweleit 2020: 13).

The most common version of the myth tells a story of a brave Native American woman, Pocahontas, who risked her life to protect her love. The key scene shows Pocahontas rescuing her

Pic. 4: Cover of Peggy Lee's 'You give me Fever' 1993, reference to Pocahontas Listen on Youtube: Link
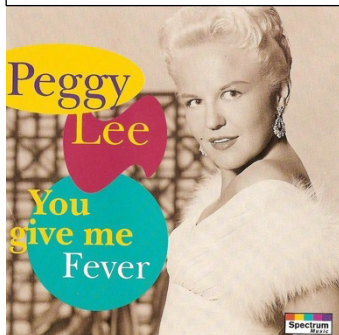
lover, the English colonizer and captain John Smith, who was sentenced to death by her father, the mighty tribal chief Powhatan.

Pic. 3: Artwork by Keith Lence, illustrating the key scene of Pocahontas

For the past centuries, Pocahontas was depicted as a heroine in a colonial dispute (Theweleit 2020: 46-76). In Western mass media her character was the inspiration for lots of songs, movies and art.

But by researching indigenous versions of the myth, Theweleit reveals a rather cruel and ugly version of Pocahontas: He tells the story of a 12-year-old Algonquian[2] girl, possibly being kidnapped, raped and Christianized by English colonizers (Theweleit 2020: 5-6). On nearly 700 pages, he investigates the historic case of Pocahontas, refutes romanticized versions of what happened and links it to a general discourse about sexism, racism, colonialism and the present #metoo debate (Theweleit 2020: 6-10).

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[2] The Algonquin are a Northamerican indigenous group.

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Conclusion: Is Theweleit's case of Pocahontas a good example for investigative ethnography?

My answer to this question is both, yes and no. Although the author didn't label his work this way, I decided to choose it as an example of investigative ethnography. Like most people reviewing and citing Theweleit's work, I struggled in describing his style of writing. The University of Virginia describes it as a "non-orthodox, highly personal and associative style. His books are heavily illustrated" (University of Virginia 2013). This description fitted well into the definition of investigative ethnography as mentioned above. 'Pocahontas in Wonderland' successfully combines historic, ethnographic, and investigative research.

But despite the detailed data he presents, Theweleit's work lacks reflexivity. It is natural to be persuaded by shocking and emotionally charged stories and media representations. This fact has to be considered when engaging with material about an event that happened in the past. Today's Algonquin versions of the Pocahontas myth have a right to be publicly discussed. But we still need to remind us that the connection between media and reality is complex and in the case of Pocahontas, the truth remains uncoverable.

Therefore, I chose the book to illustrate both: the opportunities and the challenges of investigative ethnography.

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Literature

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Sources

Pic. 1: *Portrait of Disney's Pocahontas; quote, Schwartz 1995* [online]
https://www.nightskycreative.org/nsc-blog/disney-business-wisdom [2022/03/05].

Pic. 2: *Painting 'Baptism of Pocahontas' by John Gadsby Chapman, exhibited in the Capitol* [online] https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/baptism-pocahontas [2022/03/05].

Pic. 3: *Artwork by Keith Lence, illustrating the key scene of Pocahontas* [online] https://www.istockphoto.com/de/vektor/pocahontas-lässt-captain-john-smith-retten-gm1150012778-311169054 [2022/03/05].

Pic. 4: *Cover of Peggy Lee's 'You give me Fever' 1993, reference to Pocahontas* [online] https://www.discogs.com/de/release/3419546-Peggy-Lee-You-Give-Me-Fever [2022/03/05].

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Declaration of Authenticity

I, Anna-Luisa Krug, declare that I completed this paper independently and used only these materials that are listed. All materials used, from published as well as unpublished sources, whether directly quoted or paraphrased, are duly reported.

Furthermore I declare that the paper, or any abridgment of it, was not used for any other degree seeking purpose.

Plochingen, 05.03.2022