
The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast

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THE TRANSNATIONAL TURN IS accelerating simultaneously with the digital turn, and it is no coincidence. Source digitization has transformed historians' practice in ways that facilitate border-crossing research in particular. Web-based full-text search decouples data from place. In doing so, it dissolves the structural constraints that kept history bound to political-territorial units long after the intellectual liabilities of that bond were well known. Digital search has become the unacknowledged handmaiden of transnational history. It is time to take stock of what that partnership enables—and what it obscures.

Digital search offers disintermediated discovery. Algorithms fetch for us, doing away with the need for intermediaries like brick-and-mortar stores (if you are Amazon.com) or regional expertise, bibliographies, and immersive reading (if you are a historian). For the first time, historians can *find* without knowing where to look. As a result, at an unprecedented rate we are finding connections in unexpected places: powering publication on mobile ideas and international audiences; circuits, networks, and border-crossing flows. Technology has exploded the scope and speed of discovery. But our ability to read accurately the sources we find, and evaluate their significance, cannot magically accelerate apace. The more far-flung the locales linked through our discoveries, the less consistent our contextual knowledge. The place-specific learning that historical research in a pre-digital world required is no longer baked into the process. We make rookie mistakes.

Moreover, historical inquiry that is powered by patterns in the digitizable detritus of the modern world will tend to foreground certain kinds of actors and certain aspects of their lives, pulling toward “a kind of international provincialism” that fails to note key local and national dynamics.¹ We risk overemphasizing the importance of

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¹ Marc A. Hertzman, “The Promise and Challenge of Transnational History,” *A Contra corrie: A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America* 7, no. 1 (2009): 305–315, quote from

that which connects, and underestimating the weight of that which is connected: emplaced structures, internal societal dynamics. The prestige of archival research remains high, as our footnotes and letters of recommendation attest. Yet the length of stays shrinks as destinations proliferate and technology speeds capture. We treat archival citations as evidence that the experiential education that fieldwork once provided has been gained, but this is a questionable presumption. As digitization expands, and demand for the multi-sited research that seems apt for a “global age” remains high, we risk creating an increasingly partial aggregate portrait of the wide world’s past.

You may think none of this concerns you. The phrase “digital turn” evokes specialized techniques like text mining and distant reading.² Tools for counting, graphing, and mapping we recognize as “digital methods.” But the mass of historians’ research is about finding, and finding out. That so many of us are now finding and finding out via digital search has significant consequences, regardless of whether we count, graph, or map anything at all. Only a tiny fraction of historians are tackling Big Data with tools that quantify or visualize. Vastly more of us use Google, Google Books, JSTOR, newspaper databases, Ancestry.com, and the like as we seek qualitative information on topics, people, places, or eras.³ And the pedestrian reality is that

312. See the cautions in Anna Tsing, “The Global Situation,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 327–360.

² See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York, 2005); Andrew Stauffer, “Introduction: Searching Engines, Reading Machines,” *Victorian Studies* forum “Evidence and Interpretation in the Digital Age,” *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2011): 63–68, and the essays in that dossier; and for applications by historians, Joanna Guldi, “The History of Walking and the Digital Turn: Stride and Lounge in London, 1808–1851,” *Journal of Modern History* 84, no. 1 (2012): 116–144; James Grossman, “‘Big Data’: An Opportunity for Historians?,” *Perspectives on History*, March 2012, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2012/big-data-an-opportunity-for-historians>; *Digging into Data Challenge*, <http://www.diggingintodata.org/>; E. Thomas Ewing, Samah Gad, Bernice L. Hausman, Kathleen Kerr, Bruce Pencek, and Naren Ramakrishnan, “Mining Coverage of the Flu: Big Data’s Insights into an Epidemic,” *Perspectives on History*, January 2014, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2014/mining-coverage-of-the-flu-big-data%E2%80%99s-insights-into-an-epidemic>. An illuminating account of initiatives and modalities taken up over the past decade and a half is Paul Turnbull, “Margins, Mainstreams and the Mission of Digital Humanities,” in Paul Longley Arthur and Katherine Bode, eds., *Advancing Digital Humanities: Research, Methods, Theories* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014), 258–273; and on the limited impact of many, see Andrew Prescott, “Consumers, Creators or Commentators? Problems of Audience and Mission in the Digital Humanities,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 11, no. 1–2 (2012): 61–75.

³ See Roger C. Schonfeld and Jennifer Rutner, “Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians,” Ithaka S+R, December 10, 2012, <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/supporting-changing-research-practices-historians>; Robert B. Townsend, “How Is New Media Reshaping the Work of Historians?,” *Perspectives on History*, November 2010, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2010/how-is-new-media-reshaping-the-work-of-historians>. Commenting on the results of Townsend’s survey, Rwany Sibaja concluded, “Tools that have the potential to change how we ‘do’ history—text mining, social media, GIS/mapping, and data visualizations—received few responses in AHA’s survey”; Sibaja, “Teaching and Learning History in the Digital Age,” National History Education Clearinghouse, March 11, 2011, <http://teachinghistory.org/nhec-blog/24526>. His conviction that the “digital cameras, scanners, search engines, word processors, and online archive searches” that are now pervasive cannot have a radical impact on “how we ‘do’ history” seems commonplace among mainstream historians. It is media historians, historians of rhetoric, and those identifying as digital humanists who have taken the lead in insisting otherwise. See Janine Solberg, “Googling the Archive: Digital Tools and the Practice of History,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 15, no. 1 (2012): 53–76; Bob Nicholson, “The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives,” *Media History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 59–73; Ted Underwood, “Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago,” *Representations* 127, no. 1 (2014): 64–72; and multiple

in terms of discipline-wide transformation, shifting the outer bound of the possible matters less than shifting the center of the easy.

Precisely because web-enabled digital search simply accelerates the kinds of information-gathering that historians were already doing, its integration into our practice has felt smooth rather than revolutionary. But increasing reach and speed by multiple orders of magnitude is transformative. It makes new realms of connection visible, new kinds of questions answerable. At the same time, the new topography of information has systematic blind spots. It opens shortcuts that enable ignorance as well as knowledge. Digital search offers release from place-based research practices that have been central to our discipline's epistemology and ethics alike.

Theorizing this mass "digitized turn," as distinct from the more specialized digital one, is urgent. Scholars self-identified with digital history have well underway debate over the methodological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of technological innovations.⁴ In contrast, the digitized turn is one that all historians, however traditional, are enacting, and about which the great majority of us have had nothing to say. Assessing the aggregate consequences of the coinciding digitized and transnational turns requires treating as remarkable that which has become, almost overnight, quotidian. The information landscape within which historians labor has been remade by two overlapping and accelerating developments. First, beginning in the late 1990s, the time cost of accessing secondary texts located by title or topic dropped precipitously, as JSTOR and publishers' initiatives made large swaths of scholarship accessible via web-based metadata search.⁵ Second, beginning in the mid-2000s, web-based discovery of primary and secondary sources by granular content rather than metadata exploded, as optical character recognition (OCR) software made full-text searchability the norm, and Google Books and newspaper and other digitization projects boomed.

interventions from Tim Hitchcock, including "Digital Searching and the Reformulation of Historical Knowledge," in Mark Greengrass and Lorna Hughes, eds., *The Virtual Representation of the Past* (Burlington, Vt., 2008), 81–90; "Academic History Writing and Its Disconnects," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/academic-history-writing-and-its-disconnects-by-tim-hitchcock/>; and "Confronting the Digital: or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot," *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 1 (2013): 9–23, and the response by Ludmilla Jordanova, "Historical Vision in a Digital Age," *Cultural and Social History* 11, no. 3 (2014): 343–348. Toni Weller's recent collection seeks precisely to foreground not particular digital tools but the broader questions raised by, in her phrase, *History in the Digital Age* (Abingdon, 2013).

⁴ Important examples (in addition to those cited above and below) include Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 735–762; Daniel J. Cohen, Michael Frisch, Patrick Gallagher, Steven Mintz, Kirsten Sword, Amy Murrell Taylor, William G. Thomas III, and William J. Turkel, "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 452–491; Jim Mussell, "Doing and Making: History as Digital Practice," in Weller, *History in the Digital Age*, 79–94; Scott Weingart, "The Moral Role of DH in a Data-Driven World," September 14, 2014, *The Scottbot Irregular: I Am* (blog), <http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/?p=40944>; Cameron Blevins, "The Perpetual Sunrise of Methodology" (paper prepared for AHA Session 158, "Authoring Digital Scholarship for History: Challenges and Opportunities," 129th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, New York City, January 4, 2015), <http://www.cameronblevins.org/posts/perpetual-sunrise-methodology/>; Tim Sherratt, "Unremembering the Forgotten" (keynote address from DH2015, the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations conference, Sydney, Australia, July 3, 2015), *Discontents* (blog), <http://discontents.com.au/unremembering-the-for-gotten>.

⁵ Accessible to whom and at what cost are key questions, of course. See Robert Darnton, "The National Digital Public Library Is Launched!," *New York Review of Books*, April 25, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/apr/25/national-digital-public-library-launched/>, and further discussion below.

Those linked shifts in the possibilities of discovery are a sea change at the core of our collective practice. If we have hardly remarked it, it is because the same changes have permeated daily life in the wi-fied world in the same years. How can typing words into a search box—which feels as revolutionary as oatmeal—be a sea change? Yet those of us trained in an analog age can look back at how information used to work, and measure the transformation.

To the rich debates underway among those scholars already attentive to the “conceptual impact of the digital age,” I seek to add the simple point that the affordances of digitized search are particularly salient for the international past.⁶ The disintermediation characteristic of digital information flow shrugs away the nation- and empire-specific archives, indices, and historiographies that have been central gatekeepers within historians’ practice. To the likewise rich debates theorizing history’s transnational turn, I seek to offer something equally simple: the suggestion that we could not be doing what we are, at the pace that we are, with the range that we are, if it were not for the search box before us.

For historians, borders are not what they used to be. Instant access to topic-specific secondary sources has made glancing outside the boundaries of place-based expertise effortless rather than extraordinary. To underline that this is a method, a procedure worth thinking about as such, I will call it side-glancing. Meanwhile, as primary as well as secondary sources are uploaded from an increasingly broad swath of the globe, full-text searchability has made seeking individuals, place names, phrases, titles, and organizations across hundreds of thousands of publications a viable way to trace international movement. Together, side-glancing and borderless term-searching radically change the questions we are likely to ask and the stories we are able to tell.⁷

The impact of digitization on the knowability of past processes of whatever scale and locale is significant. But the impact on the knowability of supranational or transnational processes is overwhelming. To see why, we need to consider the topography of physical information that long shaped scholars’ choices. Once we grasp how radically that topography has changed, we can assess the costs as well as the benefits. We can scope the blind spots of the brave new world of sources at our fingertips, and we can ask what transnational history loses when the real-world friction that international research once demanded is radically reduced.

THE REAL-WORLD GEOGRAPHY of textual sources used to define our work. Information in physical form (whether manuscript documents, government publications, scholarly articles, or books) tends to cluster in administrative centers near where it was produced. And, with important exceptions—shaped predictably by imperial rule—information tends to be produced in the places that information is about. Thus, in a

⁶ See Toni Weller, “Introduction,” in Weller, *History in the Digital Age*, 1–20, here 2.

⁷ As I address below, this is currently most true for the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Anglophone worlds, but the time horizons of the “infinite archive” are rapidly expanding, and its global reach is likewise. See William J. Turkel, “Methodology for the Infinite Archive,” April 5, 2006, *Digital History Hacks* (blog), <http://digitalhistoryhacks.blogspot.com/2006/04/methodology-for-infinite-archive.html>; Tim Hitchcock, “Lives in the Infinite Archive,” January 1, 2009, *Historyonics* (blog), <http://historyonics.blogspot.com/2009/01/lives-in-infinite-archive.html>.

world before digitization and web access, historians' geography of information potential—"Where should I look to find out?"—spread outward in steps something like this: (1) my institution's library; (2) the biggest university library I can reach; (3) archives and libraries in the relevant imperial center (Rome/London/Washington, D.C.); (4) archives and libraries near where it happened.

Thus, accessing in depth information about things that happened elsewhere carried extremely high fixed costs—airplane tickets and house-hunting, say—even if language acquisition was not an issue. Fishing expeditions that defied that predictable geography of information-clustering were prohibitively expensive. We looked for information in books we knew would have it, or in newspapers we knew would have it, or in archives we knew would have it.

Source-anchoring reinforced the nation-state bias that was built into our discipline from the start. The founders of nineteenth-century national states built archives in part to facilitate the immortalization of what in Latin America is called *historia patria*, affirmative history of the nation. We hewed to the geography those founders had traced, or subsections of it (provinces, municipalities), whether we wanted to or not. What was the alternative? Even the quickest lateral glance across national bounds would require a trip to the library, a hunt through a card catalogue for publications about the newly targeted locale, perusal of footnotes to see what archives there might hold, a separate search for a mailing address for the archive, and a letter of inquiry as to which series, for which years, in what quantity might be available. Did I mention the postage stamp? And all of that constituted just the fishing expedition necessary to discover whether a fishing expedition might be desirable.

Just as governance is structured in nested geographic units, so too is the information generated by governing. Local, provincial, and regional archives housed documents, and scholarship was generated at each of these scales. But national and imperial states poured extra resources into capstone institutions—academies, archives, libraries, multi-volume histories—that covered their territories as a whole. This created economies of scale for nation- or empire-specific information: economies of scale that functioned as a distorting subsidy, making it much cheaper to trace processes within a polity's borders than to determine whether they ended at the polity's edge. Once you knew a lot about, say, modern Mexico, finding out one more thing about modern Mexico was easy. You owned some of the right books, you knew where others were, you knew which guides indexed scholarly publications for that topic—you might even already have a trip to Mexico City planned. Under these structural circumstances, it made perfect sense for those who studied the past to invest heavily in national and regional expertise. The marginal value of extraregional knowledge was slim. An extra day's reading on nineteenth-century Guadalajara could point toward a new filing cabinet in the Archivo General and a significant intellectual payoff. A single day's reading about Prussia got a Mexicanist no closer to Berlin.

Thus, we trained graduate students in national or at most regional historiographies; we looked in card catalogues under MEXICO—SOCIAL LIFE AND CUSTOMS for publications we might have missed. Investigating the history of places smaller than the nation was both possible and common. But when we were seeking to contextualize or compare those local or provincial findings, it was the national

frame that seemed most apt—most vital for debate, most open to collective advances in knowledge—because it really was.

Investigating the history of labor migration to and through Caribbean Costa Rica for my dissertation in the late 1990s, I read anthropological literature on present-day “transnational migrants,” and noted the similarity to the turn-of-the-century lives my sources captured. But “my sources” meant the sources I could track down in person, which meant judicial cases from the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, newspapers held at the Biblioteca Nacional de Costa Rica, and the few travelers’ accounts with descriptions of Limón Province that I managed to stumble across in other people’s footnotes or on the shelves of my university’s library.

It’s like the joke about the drunken partygoer looking for his keys under a lamppost: “Didn’t you lose them on the other side of the street?” “Yeah, but the light’s better here.” Economists tell the joke to encapsulate their dependence on questions for which statistical indicators can be found. But it is equally relevant to the qualitative research that the majority of historians rely on. Before the Internet, it was certainly possible to look for information beyond the lamppost of a given national archive’s index files. Doing so, though, was the equivalent of arming yourself with a penlight and heading off to search for keys in the dark. The odds that you were going to stumble upon anything that would make the effort worthwhile were overwhelmingly slight.

So even though I was explicitly looking for evidence of connection *across* borders, borders circumscribed my research throughout. My best bet was to count on the anchoring of documentation to place. I pored over judicial cases from the port at the nexus of migration, since judicial testimonies occasionally mentioned where people had come from or left for. I sought out oral history transcripts from places I knew migrants had hailed from—like Jamaica—or where I knew some had stayed—like Limón, Costa Rica.⁸

This points to a broader truth. Obviously, historical research into transnational processes predates Google Books. Indeed, by the mid-2000s, commentators were already describing a “transnational turn” *accompli*, reflecting a rising wave of publications, each year in the making.⁹ These had been conceived and conducted in a world of grounded information that made certain kinds, but only certain kinds, of transnational research possible. Historians of international relations had long explored links driven by diplomacy or war. Other projects followed the contours of a single institution that had assembled data from multiple sites. The British Empire at one’s fingertips from the reading room at Kew is an iconic example, but important,

⁸ Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870–1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), chap. 2.

⁹ C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “On Transnational History,” *AHR Conversation*, *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464; Ian Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (2009): 453–474. See the insightful historical overview offered by Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Learning by Doing: Notes about the Making of the *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*,” *Journal of Modern European History* 6, no. 2 (2008): 159–180; and the usefully international histories of thinking across national boundaries in Saunier, *Transnational History* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2013), and Diego Olstein, *Thinking History Globally* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2015). A crucial and enduringly influential articulation of the methodological traps of reliance on nations as units of analysis is Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301–334.

too, were non-state institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation, into whose archives historians were invited in the 1990s, producing a wealth of studies that illuminated the cross-border interactions that shaped the making of international public health.¹⁰

In another longstanding model for transnational research in an analog world, a single scholar might build expertise on a small number of sites whose density of connection remained visible, making in-depth knowledge acquisition a reasonable bet. Thus, in order to understand migrants' lives in turn-of-the-century Limón, it made sense to put time into learning about both Jamaica and Costa Rica. But Harlem or Grenada? New Orleans or Notting Hill? The barriers to adding research into tertiary locales were logistical rather than conceptual. That did not make them less real, but rather all the more so.

Densely knit transnational systems, in sum, could be studied pre-internets, and were. But peripheral vision was prohibitively expensive. Border-crossing movement of people, ideas, or goods that was low-intensity, diffuse, and extra-institutional tended toward invisibility, however recurrent or enduring. Those things were in motion far from the lamppost, and the penlight's beam was tiny.

WEB-BASED DIGITAL SEARCH repriced this information landscape. Calls for transnational studies sounded in multiple disciplines by the start of the 1990s.¹¹ But transnational approaches among historians did not become commonplace until technology radically reduced the cost of discovering information about people, places, and processes outside the borders of one's prior knowledge. While the increasing availability of digitized primary sources is one piece of this transformation, near-instantaneous access to secondary sources has been critical, too. Be it Wikipedia or JSTOR or Google Books or HathiTrust or Amazon's "Look Inside" feature, digitized secondary and tertiary sources allow quick eyeballing of the bigger picture or of doings next door: a sideways glance that can uncover connections or commonalities worth exploring. Where were those exports going, anyway? What was going on there? Why was that place sending missionaries (or migrants, or movies) over here to begin with?

The impact of such side-glancing—formerly rare, as each glance would have demanded hours or days of effort with no likely return; now quotidian, requiring

¹⁰ E.g., John Farley, *To Cast Out Disease: A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, 1913–1951* (New York, 2003); Steven Palmer, *Launching Global Health: The Caribbean Odyssey of the Rockefeller Foundation* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010).

¹¹ E.g., Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1031–1055; Sally Engle Merry, "Anthropology, Law, and Transnational Processes," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 357–379; Paul Giles, "Reconstructing American Studies: Transnational Paradoxes, Comparative Perspectives," *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1994): 335–358; Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1995): 48–63. On parallel and intersecting discussions within European, especially German, academia, see Kiran Klaus Patel, "'Transnations' among 'Transnations'?: The Debate on Transnational History in the United States and Germany," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 54, no. 3 (2009): 451–472; Patricia Clavin, "Time, Manner, Place: Writing Modern European History in Global, Transnational and International Contexts," *European History Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2010): 624–640.

nanoseconds to search and minutes to read—has been profound. It routinizes peripheral vision that opens us to the possibility of cross-border dynamics of manifold scales and kinds. It allows us to wonder about international connections far more varied than the institutions, investments, and invasions we already knew of. Just seeing matters, a lot. Eschewing formal modeling (for reasons good and bad), historians confidently believe that we know causation when we see it. We do not build in systematic checks against omitted variable bias. Instead we read primary sources with care, noting how things are related from the author's viewpoint or our own, and then build stories in which those things cause each other. Just *seeing* new things can transform historians' arguments more immediately than in a discipline whose evidentiary paradigm imposed a little more ballast.

Transnational history, proponents explain, is about seeing connections across borders and taking seriously both the connections and the borders. "It does not have a unique methodology," Patricia Clavin suggests, "but is motivated by the desire to highlight the importance of connections and transfers across boundaries at the sub- or suprastate level, the composition of categories, and the character and exploitation of boundaries."¹² Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel likewise describe transnational history as a congeries of approaches that "share the conviction that historical and social processes cannot be apprehended and understood exclusively within customary, delineated spaces or containers, might they be states, nations, empire or regions. Consequently, all of these tools or perspectives stress the importance of the interaction and circulation of ideas, peoples, institutions or technologies across state or national boundaries and thus the entanglement and mutual influence of states, societies or cultures."¹³

Note that it is not just that which circulates that one needs to see in order to describe transnational connection, but also that which is getting connected: regions, societies, economies, cultures. Side glances that reveal where goods/people/ideas were coming from or going to, and what was going on there at the time, generate hypotheses of entanglement that we could not generate without the glancing. When glancing becomes faster by many orders of magnitude, and national boundaries no longer constrict our range of vision, the number of transnational hypotheses shaping our collective mission is necessarily going to rise.¹⁴

¹² Clavin, "Time, Manner, Place," 625.

¹³ Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, "Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History," *Size Matters: Scales and Spaces in Transnational and Comparative History*, Special Issue, *International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 573–584, quote from 573–574. Similarly, Pierre-Yves Saunier's definition focuses on the researcher's openness to finding explanations across boundaries: "Going transnational is not moving to a different field of study, shifting allegiances and references. Rather, it is something that many historians can do to find a way to respond [to] questions that lay unanswered on their working desks since a while. Maybe, after all[,] one does not decide to do 'transnational history,' but it is rather the research one is developing that calls for the development of a transnational angle. To explain briefly what it means, I would accept the simple definition that the transnational angle cares for movements and forces that cut across national boundaries. It means goods, it means people, it means ideas, words, capital, might, and institutions. It may be useful to have a more sophisticated definition later, but that will do for now." Saunier, "Going Transnational? News from Down Under," *H-Soz-Kult*, January 13, 2006, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/id=877&type=diskussionen>.

¹⁴ Timothy Burke offers a brilliant breakdown of the rapid-cycle informed judgments and return-on-investment estimates that go into what I call here side-glancing. Burke, "How I Talk about Searching, Discovery and Research in Courses," *Easily Distracted* (blog), May 9, 2011, <http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/blog/2011/05/09/how-i-talk-about-searching-discovery-and-research-in-courses/>. In contrast, what

The effects become even greater as full-text searchability becomes the new norm. Granularity matters, a lot.¹⁵ When discovery of primary and secondary sources relied on someone's indexing, people and places in secondary roles could be tracked only if you knew beforehand where to look. Bit players who never got star billing were invisible, no matter how many plays they were in. That threshold meant that not just specific examples, but whole categories of connection were unrecoverable via analog sleuthing. Here again, that which the speed, range, and granularity of digital search make possible resonates precisely with what transnational history announces as its particular contribution.

Although in some summations transnational history is grouped with global and world history as privileging the study of the big, those who have theorized it most carefully instead argue that what distinguishes it is its attention to multiple scales of observation and geographic scopes: scales and scopes determined empirically, in accordance with the dimensions of the historical processes under study, rather than *a priori* by political boundaries.¹⁶ Pierre-Yves Saunier suggests that “the transnational” should be understood not as “another scale located near the top of the nested scales, but rather a foray that cut through levels and partly shattered their conception as distinct social entities.”¹⁷

The distinction between geographic scope and scale of observation is crucial here, for as certain scholars have underlined, very large processes—large in geographic extension or impact—can be driven by dynamics that function at a small scale of interaction, which are visible only when we reduce our observation to that level.¹⁸

that process required even just five years before, in the midst of the information transition, is captured in John W. East, “Information Literacy for the Humanities Researcher: A Syllabus Based on Information Habits Research,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31, no. 2 (2005): 134–142; Andy Barrett, “The Information-Seeking Habits of Graduate Student Researchers in the Humanities,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31, no. 4 (2005): 324–331.

¹⁵ For a discussion penned in the infancy of Google Books, see Gregory Crane, “What Do You Do with a Million Books?,” *D-Lib Magazine* 12, no. 3 (2006), <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march06/crane/03crane.html>; and more recently Solberg, “Googling the Archive”; Underwood, “Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago.” Solberg underlines the fallacy of imagining “the speed associated with those time-saving tools” as “function[ing] along a single vector, such that the speeding up could occur without meaningfully altering the aim or outcome of the research project, or by extension reshaping the larger scholarly, disciplinary enterprise of which that project is a part”; “Googling the Archive,” 68.

¹⁶ On the distinction between scale and scope, see Christian G. De Vito, “Micro Spatial-History of Labour” (vision paper for panels on “Translocal- and Micro-Histories of Global Labour,” European Social Science History Conference, Vienna, Austria, April 23–26, 2014).

¹⁷ Saunier, “Learning by Doing,” 19–20, further developed in Saunier, *Transnational History*. Struck, Ferris, and Revel argue similarly in “Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History,” 573–584. The intellectual utility of multi-scalar analysis is likewise highlighted by Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann, “How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History,” *AHR Conversation*, *American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1431–1472, although these authors do not tie this intellectual move to the term “transnational” in particular.

¹⁸ See Rebecca J. Scott, “Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000): 472–479; Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615–630; Filippo de Vivo, “Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 387–397. I am grateful to Laura Edwards for illuminating discussions of the local-scale dynamics of national governance and international trade. Note that this understanding of the function of microhistorical investigation runs counter to the typology offered by David Armitage and Jo Guldi, whose usage of “microhistory” and “*longue durée*” frequently conflates scale of observation, topic of inquiry, and temporal scope. Armitage and Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, 2014), <http://historymanifesto.cam>

Finding ways to operationalize this insight has been a hallmark of recent work in Indian Ocean history, so much so that some suggest it can be understood as an “Indian Ocean World method” ripe for export.¹⁹

The relevance of mass digitization to these analytic aims should be obvious. Text-searchable sources make it possible to trace individual people (or songs, or pamphlets, or phrases), allowing us to observe at the micro level the processes that generate, in the aggregate, macro-level flows and connections. As repositories digitize and upload ever more quotidian sources, the possibilities of using online term-searching for what historians used to call nominal record linkage expand and expand. Ancestry.com offers a single portal to a wide range of government documents, including census sheets, port records, and draft cards, alongside an expanding array of non-governmental texts: obituaries, city directories, and more. Demand from amateur genealogists is driving Ancestry to digitize ever more countries’ nominal records—900 million new records from 27 new countries in 2014 alone—with the potential for fruitful poaching by historians expanding apace.²⁰

Let me give one example of how digitization makes possible the use of micro-level data to reconstruct the diffuse dynamics shaping cultural exchange. The *Limón Searchlight* was a weekly newspaper published by British West Indians in Costa Rica in the late 1920s. I consulted it on microfilm in the Biblioteca Nacional in San José in 2008, seeking information about music, dance, and youth culture in Limón. One 1931 editorial, calling for racial pride among local youth, compared the homegrown Central American Black Stars Combination Company to “Benbow’s Follies.”²¹

Three years later, when I was turning my notes into a chapter about the racial politics of music and dance in the circum-Caribbean, it occurred to me to wonder who exactly these “Benbow’s Follies” were. Google Books allowed me—in the space of three minutes at my desk, rather than a day at the library—to find out enough about African American showman William Benbow to know that I wanted to know more. The brief mentions I found showed me his New Orleans origins and his ties, via the black-owned “chitlin circuit” of vaudeville theaters, to key figures in 1920s jazz. Figuring out what the “chitlin circuit” was and where it fit into the entertainment ecology of Jim Crow-era black America required more side glances, into scholarship outside my discipline as well as my region. But how had they heard of Benbow in Limón? I turned to the (digitized) *Kingston Daily Gleaner* and *Pittsburgh Courier* and discovered scores of articles and ads documenting decades of circum-Caribbean

bridge.org/read/. For an important earlier call for historians to engage with urgent public questions, on the scale appropriate to each question, see Barbara Weinstein, “History without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma,” *International Review of Social History* 50, no. 1 (2005): 71–93.

¹⁹ See Antoinette Burton, Madhavi Kale, Isabel Hofmeyr, Clare Anderson, Christopher J. Lee, and Nile Green, “Sea Tracks and Trails: Indian Ocean Worlds as Method,” *History Compass* 11, no. 7 (2013): 497–502, and the essays that follow, in particular Clare Anderson, “Subaltern Lives: History, Identity and Memory in the Indian Ocean World,” 503–507.

²⁰ See mentions in Clare Anderson, “Subaltern Lives,” and Lisa A. Lindsay, “The Appeal of Transnational History,” *Perspectives on History*, December 2012, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2012/the-future-of-the-discipline/the-appeal-of-transnational-history>.

²¹ “Another Function by the Star Combination Company,” *Limón Searchlight*, January 10, 1931, 1.

tours by Benbow's troupes, something that none of the U.S. music histories had mentioned.

Reconstructing the story of Benbow's travels from this suddenly copious mass took much longer. (One thing you can count on with showmen seeking sales is that they know how to make the papers.) But since I knew from the first term-fishing expedition that there was much material to work with, I could make a rational guess that it was worth investing my time, and it was.

The serendipitous discovery of Benbow's Caribbean tours could not in itself sustain strong claims about impacts or trends, but it could reinforce patterns that other sources revealed. Most importantly, it offered a window onto the micro-level dynamics of how dance and music from afar came to be part of debates over racial belonging in disparate locales. Together with similar findings, it pushed me to argue that circulation and exchange between different sub-spaces of the African diaspora in the early twentieth century forged new notions of black commonality and, indeed, helped create the very idea of an "African diaspora."²²

The particular intersection of my research trajectory with the chronology of technological shifts makes me hyper-aware of the shifts' impact. I first read the *Limón Searchlight* at the Biblioteca Nacional in the late 1990s, when Larry Page and Sergey Brin were first meeting at Stanford. I went back to that library to reread and transcribe in the mid-2000s. And I revisited my transcriptions in 2011, reading them on a laptop with instant access to the now-text-searchable *Courier* and *Gleaner*. The *Limón Searchlight* was the same source in the same analog format it had always been, but I was reading it differently because web-based full-text search had transformed which questions about items within it were efficiently answerable, and therefore worth asking.

This underlines the synergy between term-searching and side-glancing. Web access to digitized and text-searchable primary sources can make possible microhistorical reconstruction to answer questions answerable only at the micro scale. But key historical questions are rarely *generated* from the micro alone. They come from observing trends across space over decades or more: shifts in musical taste or rhetorics of race, labor systems or economic growth. Our discipline's core irony—and methodological fuel—is that large-scale patterns are often invisible in precisely those local sources that can reveal the micro-level dynamics that drove them. Online access to digitized secondary and primary sources lets us move fluidly between scoping large patterns to generate questions and using microhistorical reconstruction to answer them—all with no *de facto* presumption that causes and results sat within the same territorial boundaries.²³

²² Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), Conclusion.

²³ Building on Katy Börner's conceptualization of the "macroscope" in Börner, "Plug-and-Play Macrosopes," *Communications of the ACM* 54, no. 3 (2011): 60–69, Tim Hitchcock argues that the ability to shift smoothly between different scales is digital history's greatest potential. Hitchcock, "Big Data, Small Data and Meaning," November 9, 2014, http://historyonics.blogspot.com/2014/11/big-data-small-data-and-meaning_9.html; see likewise Shawn Graham, Ian Milligan, and Scott Weingart, companion website for *Exploring Big Historical Data: The Historian's Macroscope* (London, 2016), <http://www.themacroscope.org/2.0/>; and, earlier, Seth Denbo and Neil Fraistat, "Diggable Data, Scalable Reading and New Humanities Scholarship," in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Culture and Computing* (Los Alamitos, Calif., 2011), 169–170. See also Hitchcock, "Digital Searching and the Reformulation of

HOW WIDESPREAD ARE THE digitized research practices described above? If a text-mining historian offers N-grams as evidence, it's as plain as the graph in front of your face. But to what extent have the books and articles you have recently read relied on digital side-glancing or term-searching? I have given examples from my own work because in regard to others, I simply don't know. Such practices fall into the realm of invisible method, the black box where by consensus we leave so much of our discipline's heavy lifting. The extensive discussion of digitization underway in information science journals stands in sharp contrast to the silence on this theme in mainstream historians' publications.²⁴ Are librarians and database vendors wrong about their target clients? Am I the only historian hitting search?

Surely not. In 2010, a survey sponsored by the American Historical Association found three-fourths of historians to be "power users" or "active users" of new technology; of them, nearly 100 percent reported using library-supported databases (JSTOR and kin), more than 95 percent used online search engines in their research, and more than 90 percent used primary sources accessed online.²⁵ In a jaw-dropping study of the impact on Canadian historical research of the digitization of two newspaper runs—the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail*—Ian Milligan found that citations of these two newspapers in history dissertations increased *tenfold* in the wake of digitization, while citations of their undigitized contemporaries remained steady or fell. Meanwhile, in articles in the *Canadian Historical Review*, "the *Globe and Mail* went from being rarely cited between 1997 and 2002 to being by far the most cited newspaper between 2005 and 2011."²⁶ This profound aggregate shift came with essentially zero acknowledgment from authors that anything other than physical papers had been consulted via any means other than a page-by-page survey. (As Milligan wryly notes, "given the high use of online databases, perhaps one needs to be explicit about consulting the analogue version instead.")²⁷

In a 2013 essay that should be on syllabi everywhere, Tim Hitchcock demands both collective interrogation and individual acknowledgment of this shift. "The vast majority of both journal articles and early modern and nineteenth-century printed sources are now accessed online and cherry-picked for relevant content via keyword searching. Yet references to these materials are still made to a hard copy on a library shelf, implying a process of immersive reading."²⁸ If we refuse to discuss whether

Historical Knowledge"; Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Making History Online," Royal Historical Society/Gresham College 2014 Colin Matthew Memorial Lecture, <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/making-history-online>.

²⁴ But see Hitchcock, "Confronting the Digital"; Michael O'Malley, "Evidence and Scarcity," *The Aporetic* (blog), October 2, 2010, <http://theaporetic.com/?p=176>; and Sean Takats, "Evidence and Abundance," *The Quintessence of Ham* (blog), October 18, 2010, <http://quintessenceofham.org/2010/10/18/evidence-and-abundance/>. Fred Gibbs and Trevor Owens call for historians to "foreground methodological transparency" regarding digitized sources' new role in the hermeneutic process; Gibbs and Owens, "The Hermeneutics of Data and Historical Writing," in Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty, eds., *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2013), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12230987.0001.001>.

²⁵ Townsend, "How Is New Media Reshaping the Work of Historians?"; similarly, Alexandra Chasanoff, "Historians and the Use of Primary Source Materials in the Digital Age," *American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 458–480.

²⁶ Ian Milligan, "Illusionary Order: Online Databases, Optical Character Recognition, and Canadian History, 1997–2010," *Canadian Historical Review* 94, no. 4 (2013): 540–569, quote from 542.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 566.

²⁸ Hitchcock, "Confronting the Digital," 12.

best practice has changed and yet decline to acknowledge when we do otherwise, we are deceiving ourselves and each other.

A 2013 report by Ithaka S+R, based on in-depth interviews with three dozen historians, captured a remarkably consistent digitally pervaded methodological eclecticism—remarkable because each individual reported rarely discussing practices of discovery with advisors, advisees, or colleagues. “Everything in my field is out of copyright and digitized. It’s all there. I feel like I’m cheating half the time.”²⁹ The report’s authors classify all this under “research practice,” which they differentiate from “digital research methods.” As should be clear by now, I disagree.

THE WORLD LIES WITHIN REACH as never before. The radically reduced time cost, geographic un-anchoring, and heightened granularity of digital discovery have transformed the structural conditions shaping the generation of historical knowledge. The information-market protectionism imposed by brick-and-mortar archives and libraries has collapsed—at least for scholars with the subscription price of admittance (on which more below). The web-accessible “infinite archive” dissolves the economies of scale that made polity-specific research distortingly cheap and made side knowledge a bad investment. The time-cost disparities created by those *de facto* tariffs have disappeared. This has greatly increased the likelihood that historians will formulate hypotheses about causes or impacts outside the national or regional scope of our initial expertise. And it has enabled new forms of old methods, microhistory among them, that we can use to test those hypotheses.

Yet the digitized revolution is not inherently egalitarian, open, or cost-free. To the extent that digital search has become the unacknowledged partner of the transnational turn, the transnational turn now carries more baggage and follows paths more rutted than we have yet to admit. Of course, not everyone wrote national history before the digitized turn, and not everyone is writing transnational history now. The radical repricing of the information landscape does not dictate the choices any given researcher will make. But it exerts a strong underlying pull on historians’ production in the aggregate. As a result, the systematic blind spots, the disparities of access, and the particular shortcuts that digitized sources afford will add up to real trends—and real losses, unless we work actively against it.

Most obviously, the universe of digitized text is anything but representative of the temporal and geographic contours of human life in the past. The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Anglophone world has been ground zero of digitization. In part, that reflects disproportions in the historical generation of easily digitizable sources. Production of typescript material exploded with the massification of printing and literacy. That massification happened in some places and not others, driving deep geographic disparities in digitizable source generation then and in digitized source availability now.

This pattern from the past is exacerbated by disparities in the present. Digitization projects centered initially in English, secondarily in other Western languages.

²⁹ Schonfeld and Rutner, “Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians,” 19. Ithaka S+R is part of the non-profit that includes JSTOR.

This imbalance, though, is changing rapidly, from Oslo to Buenos Aires to Shanghai.³⁰ One can point to initiatives from the small—efforts to digitize Harvard College Library holdings in Amharic, Berber, Mandinka, Oromo, Somali, Swahili, Tigrigna, and Wolof—to the unimaginably large. Digitization of the copious Chinese print production of the last thousand-odd years is underway. More than 1.5 million documents have been digitized and linked to a centralized database already as part of the Qing History Project, with the goal of eventually encompassing the roughly 20 million files from the Qing Dynasty held in repositories in mainland China.³¹ If language acquisition among researchers worldwide shifts in rational ways, this will be the most productive frontier of historical research for the next generation.

The fact that Anglophone overrepresentation in the digitized world is changing so rapidly is what leads me to assert that a sea change is underway for our discipline as a whole, rather than just for English speakers studying English speakers' pasts. As regional and language disparities lessen—as more and more of the world's textual heritage comes online—the range of histories and historians facing dilemmas other than regional and language-based disparities will grow.

A half-century ago, E. H. Carr wrote about historians and fish. “The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab,” he warned those who claimed a simple empiricism. “They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.”³² A text-searchable world offers Carr's descendants space-defying superworms. Toss your line in, and if the fact is out there anywhere, it will be on your hook in a nanosecond. Yet history still means interpretation. We are still choosing our bait and our tackle. And when we fish in digitized text, we are fishing in a very particular sea.

GAZING AT THE PAST through the lens of the digitizable makes certain phenomena prominent and others less so, renders certain people vividly visible and others vanishingly less so. First, pages of the periodical press make up a major portion of the raw material now accessible to digital search. This means that topics foregrounded in newspaper debate are disproportionately visible, and the readers, intellectuals, and activists who debated there are enticingly within reach. As noted above, historians tend to attribute causality to what we see, without formal modeling to act as a brake on our tendency to do so. If suddenly it is much easier for us to see circulating prints, globetrotting activists, and globe-circling debates, we are likely to start attributing

³⁰ See the breathtaking panorama captured by papers presented at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' Newspapers Section meetings from 2003 to 2005, collected in Hartmut Walravens, ed., *International Newspaper Librarianship for the 21st Century* (Munich, 2006).

³¹ As of this writing, access to the database is restricted, and it is not yet text-searchable. Liping Mao and Zhao Ma, “‘Writing History in the Digital Age’: The New Qing History Project and the Digitization of Qing Archives,” *History Compass* 10, no. 5 (2012): 367–374.

³² E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*, 2nd ed. (London, 1987), 23.

causal impact to those prints, those activists, and those debates. We are going to have to remember not to mistake the window for the why.³³

Meanwhile, we are going to have to work actively so those systematically less present in printed sources do not fall out of view. Size up the absence. Who wasn't publishing papers or pamphlets, or wasn't reading them, or was far from the people who did? Rural people, illiterate people, people who stayed put: all stand in the shadows that digitized sources cast. "Without serious intent and political will," warns Tim Hitchcock, without "a determination to digitise the more difficult forms of the non-canonical, the non-Western, the non-elite and the quotidian—the materials that capture the lives and thoughts of the least powerful in society—we will have inadvertently turned a major area of scholarship [into] a fossilised irrelevance."³⁴

In some ways this problem is not new. Social historians in the 1970s and 1980s spent long hours compiling data by hand: aggregating state-generated sources to track demographic shifts, labor patterns, and market trends and show us the masses *en masse*, at least. I wish I could believe that a dissertation proposal to spend multiple years reconstructing basic sociodemographic patterns in a single locale would still be funded, because such basic research remains urgently lacking for much of the world, and the utter idiosyncrasy of manuscript forms in which relevant data is preserved means that no digital magic wand is in the offing.

To be sure, in the 1990s postcolonial scholars developed techniques for reading "against the grain" of official documents of the kinds now digitally plenteous—discerning popular logic and moral economies through the lens of outsiders' complaints or condemnation. But the systematic underrepresentation of whole strata of people in our now-massive digitized source base is not likely to be countered by such techniques, in part because their absence is accompanied by a fantastic new presence. Possibilities beckon. Intellectual histories can be written about tranches of society (from suffragist women to non-metropolitan jazz hounds) whose ideas were once only painstakingly accessible and impossible to follow across national boundaries. The bit players can finally seize center stage, and it turns out that they have so much to say! The optic of the digitizable world captures history made not from the top down but from the bottom of the top and the top of the bottom.³⁵

Social history and Marxian debate wrested our profession away from the conviction that great men made history. The twinned digitized and transnational turns push new models, as a result of source availability and scholars' excitement more than systematic evaluation. Did middling and mobile men and women make history, albeit never as they pleased? What about people who didn't cross borders? What about land access and labor process? One notes with some trepidation the burgeoning genre of "transnational lives"—not because the stories told are not valuable and

³³ Having published a book in which traveling activists and the periodical press play a sizable role, I am especially alive to this tension. I find my evidence persuasive—yet recognize the systematic bias of the evidentiary base I rely on. See Putnam, *Radical Moves*, chap. 4.

³⁴ Tim Hitchcock, "A Five Minute Rant for the Consortium of European Research Libraries," October 29, 2012, <http://historyonics.blogspot.com/2012/10/a-five-minute-rant-for-consortium-of.html>. See also discussion of what a small portion of past documentation is in fact available online in Robert Darn-ton, "The Good Way to Do History," review of *The Allure of the Archive* by Arlette Farge, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton, *New York Review of Books*, January 9, 2014, 52–55.

³⁵ George M. Fredrickson writes of history made "from the top of the bottom" in *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995), 7.

true, but because an aggregate account of the past in which these stories crowd out others will be as distorted in its own way as *historia patria* before us. Again, distinguishing the window from the why will be crucial.³⁶

DISINTERMEDIATED SEARCH IS VAST and fast. It also risks undercutting our discipline's core strengths. I noted above that for historians before the digital age, peripheral vision was prohibitively expensive. But ironically, the same source-based constraints that made geographic peripheral vision expensive made topical peripheral vision artificially cheap. Working with tax data or police correspondence in a national archive forced you to read through a lot of evidence of political struggle and state formation even when what you really wanted to get at was grain prices or prostitution—and vice versa. Analog exploration of written sources—the longtime bread and butter of our craft—built in multidimensional awareness. As a result (again, because if we see it, we think it matters), our disciplinary practice favored multi-causal explanation. There is a structural reason, in other words, for the caricature that social scientists throw around: that historians are the scholars who answer any yes-or-no question with “It’s more complicated than that.”

Digital search makes possible radically more decontextualized research.³⁷ Discovery via algorithm offers instant reward. In doing so, it deprives you of experiential awareness of just how rare mentions of your term were, of how other issues crowded your topic out in debates of the day. It erases the kind of *sitzfleisch*-based test of statistical significance on which our discipline has implicitly relied. As Ted Underwood notes, “In a database containing millions of sentences, full-text search can turn up twenty examples of anything.”³⁸ Paging through a newspaper in print, in contrast, makes the competing concerns of that place and time inescapable, from popular culture to crises of labor, theology, or high politics. Digitized sources do not preclude contextual browsing—quite the contrary.³⁹ But they make it possible to bypass it, and life is short, and time-to-degree ticking past.

³⁶ See, for instance—with no wish to impugn these particular authors—the essays in “Transnational Lives in the Twentieth Century,” *AHR Forum*, *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2013): 45–139. A crucial elaboration of the methodological issues such projects sometimes duck is Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>. The epistemological limitations parallel those affecting the “telling example” as discussed in Putnam, “To Study the Fragments/Whole.”

³⁷ As Underwood notes, not only can “full-text search . . . confirm almost any thesis you bring to it,” it “also tends to filter out all the alternative theses you didn’t bring”; “Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago,” 66. Similarly, Milligan, “Illusionary Order,” 560; and Hitchcock’s discussion of the “deracination of knowledge” that keyword searching brings: “Confronting the Digital,” 14–15. On the separate problems arising from the alternating drought and overabundance generated by full-text searches, see Charles Upchurch, “Full-Text Databases and Historical Research: Cautionary Results from a Ten-Year Study,” *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 1 (2012): 89–105. Mussell, “Doing and Making,” Hitchcock, “Confronting the Digital,” and others emphasize as well the problem of “lossy” OCR. Still, historians have never enjoyed complete access to source sets as originally created. Problems of preservation uncorrelated with content (whether bookworms or OCR failure rates) are limiting, of course, but they are not systematically distorting.

³⁸ Underwood, “Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago,” 66.

³⁹ The serious play of browsing is illuminated by Stephen Ramsay, “The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books,” in Kevin Kee, ed., *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12544152.0001.001>.

We need a full accounting of the hidden benefits of the unsheddable contextualization that makes work with analog sources so inefficient. For me, the dynamic is most vivid in transcribed oral historical sources, such as the “Autobiografías campesinas” project that generated hundreds of submissions of life histories in Costa Rica in the late 1970s, now archived at the Universidad Nacional in Heredia, or the oral history project led by Erna Brodber at the University of the West Indies in the same era, which generated hundreds of transcripts preserved at the Sir Arthur Lewis Library of UWI, Mona.⁴⁰ Such sources capture, in a varying and not always knowable mix, the priorities of those who organized the project and the priorities of those who recounted their lives. Either has the possibility to be a useful corrective to the researcher’s own convictions.

Analog reading of such sources forces you through an awful lot of information about topics that people other than you found important. Is that a bug or a feature? Certainly it demands a greater investment of time than current doctoral expectations make feasible—especially if there is a perceived need to cover more than one country to produce a dissertation with a chance of landing you a job. But being forced to pay attention to other people’s priorities has been a crucial moral motor for our discipline. To take just one example, scholars working with life stories are commonly confronted with subjects’ insistence on talking about domestic violence even when the questions posed do not include it. Intrafamilial violence is routinely undercounted in official statistics, in part due to hard choices made by those subjected to it. But that violence is routinely foregrounded by some of these same subjects when, absent threat of outside intervention, they are asked about what shaped their lives.

“I had to beat her so she would leave me.”⁴¹ “When de baby born, de baby was dark, and it should be brown . . . well that was the breaking up of dat. She go away and go to Panama.”⁴² “I turned 17 on a Saturday and the mistress gave me the beating of the century . . . I begged the Virgin from my heart to protect me and that I would leave before dawn.”⁴³ “I always thought of my children. How he treated me I wouldn’t treat even an animal, but there I was, bearing his insults and jealousy, but one day I couldn’t bear any more anguish, and I decided that when he returned from his drinking spree, already 15 days, I would no longer be there.”⁴⁴

The records of human social life now captured in the digitized world tell us so much about so much that we might forget to remember the systematic absences within them. If our accounts of the movement of people, ideas, and things echo the

Meanwhile, microfilm reels defy browsing in either the analog or the digital sense: battling motion sickness, you tend to read only what you know in advance that you have to.

⁴⁰ “Autobiografías campesinas” (mimeograph, 1977), Biblioteca Central, Universidad Nacional Autónoma, Heredia, Costa Rica [hereafter AC]; “Life in Jamaica in the Early Twentieth Century: A Presentation of 90 Oral Accounts” (Institute of Social and Economic Research Documentation Centre, University of the West Indies at Mona, Kingston, Jamaica, 1980). See discussion in Erna Brodber, “Oral Sources and the Creation of a Social History in the Caribbean,” *Jamaica Journal* 16, no. 4 (November 1983): 2–11, accessed via Digital Library of the Caribbean, <http://dloc.com/UF00090030/00041/3>; Brodber, *The Second Generation of Freeman in Jamaica, 1907–1944* (Gainesville, Fla., 2004).

⁴¹ “Autobiografía de M.G.L.,” AC, vol. 26, pt. 1, 163. Here and below, my translation.

⁴² “Life in Jamaica in the Early Twentieth Century,” Vol. Portland, 31PFa, “A Father’s Daughter,” April 1975.

⁴³ “Autobiografía de O.C.C.,” AC, vol. 23, 322.

⁴⁴ “Autobiografía de A.C.C. de G.,” *ibid.*, 84.

patterned silences of the sources most available to us, certain drivers of those flows and certain constraints on mobility and voice will be absent—not because no one thought them important, but because no one said so in print.

A final aspect of decontextualization is the flip side of the fact that an apprenticeship in place-specific historiography is no longer a prerequisite to accessing primary sources. Now you glance, you fish, you feast. But how much do you really know about the sources you find: about where they're coming from, literally, politically, culturally? Students often begin courses in history confident that primary sources are "better" than secondary because they are "firsthand" and thus "more true." At which point the instructor explains: It's more complicated than that. The multiple stages of analog search used to be where we built the contextual knowledge needed to turn the partiality of primary sources into insight rather than misinformation.

In this context, it is worth noting that until recently, works of transnational history tended to be written toward the ends of long careers, reflecting the painstaking accumulation of expertise as well as evidence amassed over decades.⁴⁵ The current boom in transnational dissertations is thus a particularly radical shift. That such projects seem feasible reflects our implicit accounting for technologies that reduce the time cost of information-gathering. But can deep familiarity with multiple place-specific historiographies be gained as quickly as the profession now seems to demand of its young? And if not, is sending ABDs off to collect a globe-trotting plethora of primary sources that they can at best read with a tin ear really the best use of their energies?

THE TEXTUAL REMNANTS OF THE world's past are increasingly available from the comfort of your own home—if your home is wired and you have access to the right databases. It is ever more possible, for some people in some places, to do history largely as a desk discipline. What will be the collective result? The geographic emplacement of physical information bears the imprint of past structures of power. But unhinging data from place does not erase global disparities. On the contrary, it may break down barriers that worked against disparities in important ways.

There are real reasons one might want to tie data to place. The marble-lined national archives built by nation-states-in-the-making sought to facilitate *historia patria*, and did. Oral historical initiatives in multiple sites in the 1970s reflected a related project: the desire to capture the experiences of those whom *historia patria* had pushed to the margins. In these and many other cases, such material sits on the shelves of university collections. Of course, the tomes could be digitized and uploaded. Increasingly, they will be. But—even setting aside the questions of who pays and who guarantees subsequent access—their conservators have every right to be wary. Why make it possible for scholars from afar to access even more of the raw materials of scholarly knowledge with even less obligation to do some processing locally, with the externalities that local processing implies?⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For instance, Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).

⁴⁶ See discussion in Allen F. Isaacman, Premesh Lalu, and Thomas I. Nygren, "Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: The Aluka Project,"

Some of those externalities benefit in-country institutions. It helps to be able to point to physical visitors when defending an archival budget. But many others benefit sojourning researchers and the histories they write, whether they realize it or not. To assess those benefits and their aggregate consequences, it is necessary to recognize the outsized weight in our discipline of scholars based in the Global North, who enjoy a disproportionate share of research support and have a disproportionate impact on publication and debate.⁴⁷ They have no monopoly, however, on historical knowledge.

Things happen in archives and libraries and on the way to them. This experiential friction, the very thing that made international historical research in an analog world inefficient, tends to teach border-crossing researchers things they need to know, whether they know it or not.⁴⁸ When foreign researchers slog away in archives day after day next to in-country intellectuals, they can be forced to confront the value of locally produced expertise. Such intellectuals may have no publishing profile in the venues that graduate students at northern institutions routinely survey. But many have extraordinary erudition, only partly captured, given resource constraints, in locally printed booklets, theses, and low-circulation journals. Lucky visitors will find themselves schooled by in-country experts and should count themselves lucky whether that “schooling” comes in the form of generous instruction or an intellectual whupping. Being forced to acknowledge one’s ignorance early and often is the gift offered by academic exchange, whether across borders or within them.

Digitization and uploading make it increasingly possible to do history as a desk discipline, at least for scholars who are linked to well-funded institutions in the Global North. The last clause is crucial. It would be great if the unanchoring of historical texts from sites of preservation brought a compensatory shift, in which researchers based in Panama or Paraguay would now find themselves technologically empowered to write transnational histories from the South responding to questions deemed urgent in their particular contexts, perhaps topics such as “How much profit did that U.S. company actually extract from investments here?” or “Which politicians from here went north to drum up support for that invasion?” Technology, of course, is not the problem. Digitized document or newspaper collections belong to someone and don’t come cheap. Scholars in resource-poor institutions in the Global North confront this same barrier, and work around it as best they can. Some efforts have

African Electronic Publishing, Special Issue, *Africa Today* 52, no. 2 (2005): 55–77; and Premesh Lalu, “The Virtual Stampede for Africa: Digitisation, Postcoloniality and Archives of the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa,” *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa* 34 (2007): 28–44.

⁴⁷ See discussion of “the geopolitics of history at world scale,” especially the gravitational pull of U.S.-based resources, in Saunier, “Going Transnational?” A similar question is raised, and then side-stepped, by Matthew Pratt Guterl, “Comment: The Futures of Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2013): 130–139, here 138–139. On disparities within northern academe, in particular the dominant position of English as the *lingua franca* for global/transnational histories, see Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla, “‘Localism,’ Global History and Transnational History: A Reflection from the Historian of Early Modern Europe,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 127, no. 4 (2007): 659–678, especially 675.

⁴⁸ Here my conclusions differ from the insightful discussion by Sean Takats, who sees less substantive intellectual loss in the compression of field time than I do (or maybe is graciously trying not to whine about spending less time in Paris than he used to): “The End of (French) History,” April 8, 2011, <http://quintessenceofham.org/2011/04/08/the-end-of-french-history/>; and “Time Shifting and Historical Research,” April 20, 2011, <http://quintessenceofham.org/2011/04/20/time-shifting-and-historical-research>.

been made to address issues of international access.⁴⁹ But at least for the moment, global disparities in access to sources for international or transnational history are profound.

Digital photography (and to a certain extent, photocopying before it), by making it possible to gather large amounts of data quickly without processing it on-site—“processing” being a technical term meaning, in qualitative research, *reading and thinking about it*—tends in this same direction. When historians research far from home but don’t stay around long enough to be inconvenienced, insulted, or instructed, the quality of their analysis suffers. Again, the forced contextualization that made traditional historical research inefficient looks, on reflection, like a significant contributor to knowledge production in our discipline. One need not be a self-deluding Luddite (“It’s just not the same as back when I had to travel five days by mule train to get to the archive . . .”) to argue that something is at risk when the broader world becomes simultaneously more present in North-based scholars’ narratives and less present in their working lives.⁵⁰

Literary critic Shalini Puri articulates the value of fieldwork in the humanities, underlining the multifaceted impact of presence. Fieldwork not only “invites us to achieve a textured and embodied knowledge of place,” but offers the irreplaceable contribution of “render[ing] the researcher vulnerable to history. When a researcher reads in a library, nobody is reading her back. When one reads in the field, one is constantly being scripted, being made the object of a countergaze, and is thereby forced to confront not only one’s geographical but also one’s historical location.”⁵¹ Classic fieldwork has not been the custom of document-based historians. But for those seeking international knowledge, international *presence*, until now, has been. So even as Puri calls for the humanities to recognize the moral and intellectual value of fieldwork, technological shifts suggest that the practice of history, especially global, international, and transnational history, may trend in the opposite direction. Substantial data collection—the collection of enough data to generate publishable findings—is increasingly possible without venturing into “the field” even in the limited sense of visiting a capital city for its archive.⁵²

Those cities have stories to tell. They are palimpsests that bear marks of colonial rule, postcolonial dreams, intraregional migration, aggressive free trade treaties, and more.⁵³ And they don’t only have stories to tell in some metaphorical sense. They are

⁴⁹ The British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme, <http://eap.bl.uk/>, carefully builds attention to such issues into digitization projects where local resources cannot fund urgent preservation. The Digital Library of the Caribbean, <http://www.dloc.com/>, is another effort to harness the potential of digitization in a project led by in-country scholars and promotes international exchange within the Greater Caribbean first and foremost.

⁵⁰ I owe Paul Eiss for the mule train.

⁵¹ Shalini Puri, “Finding the Field: Notes on Caribbean Cultural Criticism, Area Studies, and the Forms of Engagement,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 2 (2013): 58–73, quotes from 69 and 70. See also Shalini Puri and Debra Castillo, “Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities” (vision paper for a colloquium at the University of Pittsburgh, March 28–29, 2014).

⁵² For an important discussion of the real-world factors, including family needs, that can keep researchers at home, see Barbara Weinstein, “Historians and the Mobility Question,” *AHA Perspectives*, February 2007, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2007/historians-and-the-mobility-question>.

⁵³ I compiled the list thinking of cities in the former colonies, but of course each item holds true, albeit in different ways, for former metropolises as well.

full of people who insist on talking, asking questions and offering answers of their own. The historian more often finds herself forced to listen to other people's concerns when queuing for a crowded bus than when scrolling from the comfort of home. The cacophony of contemporary reality, especially in the developing world, confronts historical researchers with the real-world stakes of past processes of global connection—a kind of moral peripheral vision parallel to the topical peripheral vision detailed above.

A grimmer reading of the coinciding digitized and transnational turns, then, would conclude that over the course of the past decade, it has become much easier for North-based historians to publish about places they have never been and may know very little about. At a 2013 American Historical Association session on the possible costs of the transnational turn, Melanie Newton pointed to the growing number of histories of France, empire, or modernity that include a half-chapter on the Haitian Revolution, yet decline to engage in any significant way with Haiti's established historiography and its debates, much less with its current realities or scholars' efforts to address them. The pages on Haiti, Newton suggested, can seem more concerned with signaling transnational cachet or non-Eurocentric bona fides than with any effort to build collective understanding of the past.⁵⁴

How common is this kind of gesture, what we might label “drive-by transnationalism,” today? How common will it be tomorrow? Pierre-Yves Saunier suggested almost a decade ago that we should be relieved that “going transnational is not as easy as it sounds.”⁵⁵ In a world of massified web access to texts of and about the past, it is getting easier every day. Ensuring that the transnational tales thus enabled are full and fair renderings of our interconnected past will require more self-conscious attention to evidentiary paradigms than our discipline has so far embraced. The challenge is to take advantage of the optics and methods that digitization enables while remembering those who stand in the shadows, making time for contextualization, and spurring the dialogue that counteracts the ignorance of the privileged.

BUILDING DEEP PLACE-BASED KNOWLEDGE, then, is no longer the path of least resistance within our discipline—yet it may remain the path to greatest insight, even or especially for those pursuing the transnational angle. Will transnational history come to define itself as requiring place-based learning, both in the sense of learning about

⁵⁴ Melanie J. Newton, “‘We Are All Haitians Now’? The Caribbean, Transnational Histories, and Empire” (paper presented at AHA Session 96, “Are There Costs to ‘Internationalizing’ History? Part 1: The Intellectual and Geo-Politics of Research Agendas,” American Historical Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, January 4, 2013). Similarly, see Matthew J. Smith, “Footprints on the Sea: Finding Haiti in Caribbean Historiography,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 1 (2014): 55–71, especially 68. On legitimate reasons for remaining invested in national historiographies, including the persistent importance of national states as a framework for rights claims within an unequal global system, see Louis A. Pérez Jr., “We Are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International,” review of *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender, *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 558–566; Ann Curthoys, “We’ve Just Started Making National Histories, and You Want Us to Stop Already?,” in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, N.C., 2003), 70–89.

⁵⁵ Saunier, “Going Transnational?”

particular places and in the sense of learning from physical presence within them? It could, if enough practitioners see the need.

Transnational studies emerged with a self-imposed mandate to fight the tyranny of area studies. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam argued two decades ago, “Area studies can very rapidly become parochialism,” with “an insistence, taken to the limits of the absurd, concerning the unity of ‘Southeast Asia,’ ‘South Asia’ or whatever one happens to study . . . [T]hese conventional geographical units of analysis, fortuitously defined as givens for the intellectually slothful, and the result of complex (even murky) processes of academic and non-academic engagement, somehow become real and overwhelming”—“Frankenstein’s monsters.”⁵⁶ Brief years later, area studies is no dragon to be slayed. Grant cachet and federal funding, once plentiful for area studies in U.S. academia, are scarce. In many social sciences, support for graduate language study and region-specific interdisciplinary training is shriveling. Historians, recognizing an underserved niche, could double down on place-based expertise.⁵⁷

In some subfields, cyberinfrastructure is being deployed in ways that can foster precisely this direction. Geoparsing and georeferencing tools, rapidly advanced by public funding for biological Big Data and corporate pursuit of social network monetization, have been put to good use by pioneering scholars.⁵⁸ Visualizations of geotagged data can free us from reliance on predetermined spatial units to summarize data—which most often meant administrative political units, national or sub-national—and recognize other spatial patterns instead.⁵⁹ Collective projects have emerged that make available tools for geocoding and linking large source sets, and offer online interfaces that aggregate sources by location. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and others have conceived these as a new genre, “deep maps”: collaboratively curated open-access cartographic interfaces for investigation and scholarly exchange.⁶⁰ Large-scale, large-scope

⁵⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–762, quote from 742.

⁵⁷ See Sidney W. Mintz, “The Localization of Anthropological Practice: From Area Studies to Transnationalism,” *Critique of Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (1998): 117–133, especially 132; Sidney Ali Mirsepassi, Amrita Basu, and Frederick Weaver, eds., *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World: Recasting the Area Studies Debate* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2003); Puri, “Finding the Field,” 64–65. Andrew Zimmerman’s call for a “multi-sited” transnational history is very relevant—and underlines parallels with an earlier set of debates in anthropology. See Zimmerman, “Africa in Imperial and Transnational History: Multi-Sited Historiography and the Necessity of Theory,” *Journal of African History* 54, no. 3 (2013): 331–340; George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95–117, especially 100; and elaborations such as those collected in Mark-Anthony Falzon, ed., *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research* (Farnham, 2009); Simon Coleman and Pauline von Hellermann, eds., *Multi-Sited Ethnography: Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods* (New York, 2011).

⁵⁸ Geoparsing automates the location and identification within text of place names; georeferencing or geocoding tags items or mentions within them by geographic coordinates. For a broad overview of developments in critical geography, on the one hand, and GIS, on the other, see David J. Bodenhamer, “The Spatial Humanities: Space, Time, and Place in the New Digital Age,” in Weller, *History in the Digital Age*, 23–38.

⁵⁹ See the inspiring blueprint offered by Timothy R. Tangherlini, “The Folklore Macroscope: Challenges for a Computational Folkloristics,” 2012 Archer Taylor Memorial Lecture, *Western Folklore* 72, no. 1 (2013): 7–27, <http://tango.bol.ucla.edu/publications/A99.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Deep Maps: A Brief for Digital Palimpsest Mapping Projects (DPMPs, or ‘Deep Maps’),” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2011): 1–31, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/92v100t0>; David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris, eds., *Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives* (Bloomington, Ind., 2015). See also the earlier, similar vision in Tom Elliott and Sean Gillies, “Digital Geography and Classics,” *Changing the Center of Gravity: Transforming Classical Studies*

undertakings such as *Pleiades*, the Pelagios collective, the Global Middle Ages Project, and the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) all offer variations on this theme.⁶¹ Similar in linking data to place, although covering a far smaller geographic scope, are projects such as *Locating London's Past* and *Digital Harlem: Everyday Life, 1915–1930*.⁶²

Multiple elements of such projects are exciting. They offer new structures for linking scholars to data, but also new venues for linking scholars to each other, and new ways to bring students and non-specialists in to explore. Local, provincial, and national archives aggregate a jumbled variety of traces of the past based on geographic origin. Local, provincial, and national newspapers, read page by page, do likewise. Collaborative portals to georeferenced sources do the same, at a much finer degree of granularity, if one wishes, and with unprecedented possibilities for aggregation and visualization. Such virtual crossroads might even serve the international sharing/ignorance-baring function that archival small talk once provided. That ECAI workshops have been held, over recent years, in Macau, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore bespeaks significant multilateral scholarly engagement.

THE RISK, IN SUM, IS THAT digitally enabled transnational history can let us think we are speaking of the world and to the world while actually insulating us from it. Digital search can permit us to string anecdotes into compelling tales without really seeing the terrain they span. Analog search both requires and provides crucial learning along the way to discovery. Digital search requires almost no learning: that's what happens when you piggyback on commercial technology honed to connect people to purchases as easily as possible. Of course, it can provide it—if we push ourselves to seek out information on OCR loss rates, proprietary databases, built-in algorithms, and better alternatives.⁶³ But, however crucial, that learning is not coterminous with the content- and context-specific learning that analog search required. It cannot substitute for it. And the more automated and efficient our systems of digital discovery become, the harder it can be to look away from the flood of data before us.

Computational tools can discipline our term-searching if we ask them to. By measuring proximity and comparing frequencies, topic modeling can balance easy hits with evidence of other topics more prevalent in those sources. But the last phrase is key: in those sources. This brings us back to what is really new about this millennium's

through *Cyberinfrastructure*, Special Issue, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2009), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/1/000031/000031.html>.

⁶¹ <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>; <http://pelagios-project.blogspot.com/p/about-pelagios.html>; <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gma/gmap/>; <http://ecai.org/>.

⁶² See <http://www.locatinglondon.org/> and discussion in Hitchcock, "Digital Searching and the Reformulation of Historical Knowledge"; and <http://digitalharlem.org/> and Stephen Robertson, "Putting Harlem on the Map," in Dougherty and Nawrotzki, *Writing History in the Digital Age*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12230987.0001.001/1:8/-writing-history-in-the-digital-age?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1#8.2>.

⁶³ See Caleb McDaniel, "The Digital Early Republic," *Offprints* (blog), April 7, 2011, <http://mcdaniel.blogs.rice.edu/?p=150>; and the project conceived in response, now co-directed by Steve Brier and Eileen Clancy at the CUNY Graduate Center, *Beyond Citation: Critical Thinking about Digital Research*, <http://www.beyondcitation.org/>.

iteration of the digital age. After all, historians' ability to compute is nothing new. The surge of social history in the 1970s and 1980s was partly driven by the newfound ease of applying computing power to historical documents that could, through manual processing, be turned into data sets. We took the enduring remains of state and church recordkeeping—censuses, parish records, tax rolls—and coded and calculated. What is new now is not computation per se but digitization and OCR, which make *words* above all available, whether for web-based discovery or for automated analysis. This mass data-fication of words is just one subsection of “the digital” impacting academe, but it is a huge one. Not only is it the shift that has remade the information landscape for search, but it is also the driver for those tech-engaged historians experimenting with topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and other text-mining computational approaches.⁶⁴

One might then note that the digitized turn has multiplied the methods for working with the same source base—official, elite, and middling discursive texts—most intensely mined by history's “cultural turn” in the preceding decade. Even if you, like me, deeply appreciate the insights that the cultural turn brought us, this should perhaps give you pause. There is a real world out there. The totality of sentences that have ended up in print in no way corresponds to the proportions of past human life. Who stands in the digital shadows? What friction in our digital workflow will push scholars—just some; it need not be all—to step outside into the still-existing world of non-digitized sources, to explore the unique things they have to tell us about other places, other problems, other lives?

The transnational angle, in this context, can push our gaze in useful directions. Efforts to trace the overlapping systems that have shaped human communities over time can and should encompass topics from climate change to capital flows, and bring attention to the optimal sources to track them—which include many things other than text. Illuminating the contours and consequences of such linkages is exactly the kind of multi-scalar, geographically capacious research that a digital era enables.⁶⁵

If we are committed to the transnational angle, however, we must be committed to the health of a disciplinary ecosystem that supports local, regional, and national research *as well as* larger-scoped approaches. Historians are notoriously disinclined to collaborate, but in part that is because diffuse asynchronous collaboration (which is to say, reading other people's work and building on it) functions remarkably well for us. Artisanal history has a long half-life. Descriptive inference built on immersive engagement with disparate sources, guided by contextual knowledge of the processes that shaped them, turns out to be pretty enduring. And those descriptions—of land tenure patterns, political participation, gendered labor within households, capital flows, and so much more—are key building blocks for scholars arriving at a transnational angle from afar. Can we ramp up the prestige, and support, given to place-

⁶⁴ See William G. Thomas III, “Computing and the Historical Imagination,” in Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, eds., *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Malden, Mass., 2004), 56–68.

⁶⁵ Thus, while skeptical of Armitage and Guldi's claims for the revolutionary potential of *longue durée* analysis powered by the text-mining tools collected in *Paper Machines*, I am very sympathetic to their calls for historians to reengage with non-textual data, matching our skills of source critique with a reintroduction of quantitative analysis. *History Manifesto*, 97–103.

based expertise? Otherwise, a transnational history that aspires to place-based contextualization is going to be a free rider on the underfunded labor of others.

Meanwhile, historians pursuing the transnational angle should consider the value of practices that ground their work, not just those that speed and expand it. We need to complement side-glancing with settling in: taking time to learn about the fullness of what was going on in particular times and places, not just the fragments surfaced among search results. Language study matters, not only for the nuance that Google Translate lacks, but for the ancillary learning that comes with efforts to speak someone else's language, badly. Local debates about a locality's past—and national debates about a nation's past—matter, not because you need to care about those questions, but because understanding why others do will illuminate the partiality of your own interests. The labor conditions of scholars in the places you are studying matter—not just for ethical reasons (although that would be enough), but because their particular knowledge of sources and prior debates is irreplaceable. And if you care about their knowledge, you should care about their getting published, and read. The disintermediation and reduced transmission costs of the digital age can match researchers from across the globe and speed dialogue among them, but the enabling conditions of that dialogue include employment and institutional stability as well as platform specifications and bandwidth.

All of this takes time. Among other things, we are deluding ourselves if we pretend that this kind of engagement can be built for multiple places within the time frame of dissertation research. You should not have to use archives in five countries to get a job. And if you do use archives in five countries, as readers we must presume that you did not get to know all five especially well.

Technology is not destiny. As researchers, advisors, peer reviewers, and panel members, we have choices to make. The digital revolution has made finding things out about distant places and the people, goods, and ideas that moved between them cheaper than ever before. The potential is real. But nothing guarantees that the growth of knowledge brought by fallen barriers, broader vision, and multi-scalar research will not be canceled out by increased superficiality and new blind spots. If globe-spanning shine is perceived as the currency with which fellowships, article acceptances, and jobs are acquired, we will encourage scholars to invest in the most far-flung circuit plausible. Is this the best use of our hard-pressed humanities dime? Or should we take the digital dividend and invest it in building friction back in: expecting and rewarding engaged fieldwork, deep learning, and international collaboration designed and guided from South as well as North?

Ultimately, there is nothing inherently equalizing about the conjoined digitized and transnational turns. But one can hope. The changes in the information landscape that have lowered the barriers to international research by scholars from the Global North may increase their interest in the kinds of scholarly connection that can diffuse resources in new directions. Deep maps could provide new venues for international encounter and exchange. Virtual communication could lead to sustained collaboration. There could even be plane tickets. Putting scholars into new places for extended stays—including but not only from the Global South into the Global North and vice versa—has a great track record of building depth, contextualization, and geopolitical

awareness. Digital research that carries us deeper into real-world connection may indeed create the border-crossing wisdom that our border-riven world needs.

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