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A trove for historians of Africa: reflections from the International Studies Group and research associates

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ABSTRACT

Trove opens possibilities for collaborative, transnational and comparative research from scholars in the Global South, who often work with limited financial resources. Indeed, Trove has been indispensable for the South African-based historians in the International Studies Group, who would otherwise face difficulties accessing Australian primary sources. It also enables Australian perspectives to be incorporated into African histories, fostering the emergence of new historical insights. However, mass digitisation has the potential to create an unevenness in transnational history by privileging certain connections, particularly between British settler colonies. These reflections will offer crucial perspectives from a network of early career historians outside Australia.

KEYWORDS

Digitisation; Trove; Africa; transnational; comparative; history; Global South

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Because he thinks that South African history as now presented is prejudiced in favor of Europeans, B.W. Vilakazi, a Bantu, who is [a] language assistant in the Department of Bantu Study at the Witwaters[r]and University, intends to rewrite it.

'Will Rewrite African History,' *Border Watch*, Mount Gambier, 26 October 1939.¹

Less than a decade prior to the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948, South Australia's *Border Watch* presented the possibility of a critical history that was resistant to the rise of white nationalism in South Africa. These reflections about Zulu scholar, poet, novelist and educator Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–1947), the first Black South African to be awarded a Doctor of Philosophy, are only visible for historians living and working globally on account of Trove.² As historians of Southern Africa, Central Africa and the British Empire who use methods associated with transnational, comparative and global history, we consider Trove to be a gift to the historical community.

The twenty-first century's digital revolution has resulted in an uneven uptake of the digital humanities between the Global North and South, with digital methods and research centres across the United States, Europe and Australasia.³ The most robust digital collections reflect these geographical and national boundaries, often with an Anglophone bias.⁴ By comparison, South Africa has a particular paucity of digital archival production, with access further hindered by the expense of paid subscriptions.⁵ For historians of Africa, settler colonialism and the British Empire, Trove enriches transnational and comparative approaches to social, cultural, media, medical and economic histories.

This remarkable resource has enabled certain connections to be explored with greater ease than even 20 years ago. As Lara Putnam argues, 'the transnational turn is accelerating simultaneously with the digital turn'.⁶ Since scholarship about historical and contemporary connections between Africa and Australia is limited, Trove is useful simply because it exists. Its availability is in contradistinction to the financial and visa challenges that scholars from the Global South routinely encounter, as well as the ethics of travel in an era of climate change. This overlaps with the experience of Australian historians beyond capital cities, but is ultimately more acute. Consequently, Trove reduces the need for speculative research trips, while offering long-term exposure that could lead to proper archival research in Australia.

¹For newspaper article, see: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article78156969>.

²Nompumelelo B. Zondi, 'Resurrecting the "Black Archives": Revisiting Benedict Wallet Vilakazi with a Focus on the Utility and Meaning of African Languages and Literatures in Higher Education', *Education as Change* 24, no. 1 (2020): 1–20.

³Claire Brennan, 'Digital Humanities, Digital Methods, Digital History, and Digital Outputs: History Writing and the Digital Revolution', *History Compass* 16, no. 10 (2018): 2–4.

⁴Bob Nicholson, 'The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives', *Media History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 59–60.

⁵Keith Breckenridge, 'The Politics of the Parallel Archive: Digital Imperialism and the Future of Record-Keeping in the Age of Digital Reproduction', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 499–519.

⁶Lara Putnam, 'The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast', *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2, (2016): 377.

The digitisation of African newspapers remains in its infancy, so we use Trove deliberately and strategically. Most broadly, Trove aggregates generic news from global media conglomerates in Australia and beyond. Early settler newspapers in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Australia speak to similar concerns regarding Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over land and resources, the territorial incursion of Europeans and a shared settler identity based upon whiteness.⁷ This illustrates the historical connectedness of British colonies and dominions, generating fruitful points of comparison that challenge historical exceptionalism.

Trove enriches our understanding of how colonial subjects interacted with one another. Letters from the First World War illuminate the experience of Australian soldiers as they voyaged between the empire's African ports, including Cape Town, Durban, Freetown and Dakar.⁸ Many viewed South Africa as another white settler society, drawing on discourses of empire, modernity and civilisation. Remarking upon Cape Town's 'excellent streets' and 'cleanliness,' one soldier found the city reminiscent of Sydney and Brisbane.⁹ Private Kennedy felt fondly of Greenpoint Common, 'bounded by Australian gum trees which gave it a homely appearance,' and was relieved to taste 'the first decent cup of tea since leaving Adelaide'.¹⁰ In contrast, another soldier thought Cape Town's streets were 'narrow and crooked, and the place looked dirty'.¹¹ Some Australians found its racial and cultural diversity distasteful, including the mixed-race coloured community and the Dutch-descended Afrikaners.¹² For these soldiers, this diversity evoked un-Britishness and, accordingly, disloyalty; indeed, Cape Town's atmosphere reminded Sergeant-Major Brownhill 'that we belonged to another land'.¹³

COVID-19 initiated conversations about the history of global biomedical emergencies as well as globalisation's threat to public health. In 1899, Australia proclaimed South Africa a red zone with regards to the bubonic plague and recommended that vessels be thoroughly overhauled before entering Victorian ports.¹⁴ Medical historians seek to understand the epidemiology of past epidemics, including detection, transmission, containment or treatment and prevention, as well as how communities coped. Trove illustrates that many Australian newspapers devoted considerable coverage to the Spanish influenza in South Africa, reporting on cases detected among Africans,

⁷Alan Lester, 'British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire', *History Workshop Journal* 54 (2002): 25–48, 30.

⁸For Anzac soldiers through a tourist lens, see: Richard White, 'The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War', *War and Society* 5, no. 1 (1987): 63–77; Bart Ziino, 'A Kind of Round Trip: Australian Soldiers and the Tourist Analogy, 1914–1918', *War & Society* 25 (2006): 39–52; Anna Maguire, 'Looking for Home? New Zealand Soldiers Visiting London during the First World War', *The London Journal* 41, no. 3 (2016): 281–98.

⁹Private Puddicombe, 'Life on a Troopship', *Grafton Argus and Clarence River General Advertiser*, 13 April 1917, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/235740527>.

¹⁰M.E. Kennedy, 'A Soldier's Diary', *Pioneer* (Yorketown, South Australia), 17 February 1917, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/199101073>.

¹¹'Soldiers' Letters', *Port Fairy Gazette* (Victoria), 5 October 1916, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/88010903>.

¹²"Personal," *Southern Times*, 4 November 1916, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/157551338>; "For the Empire: Australia's Heroes," *Avoca Free Press and Farmers' and Miners' Journal*, 25 November 1916, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/151687679>.

¹³'Charming Capetown: Some Interesting Sketches', *Forbes Advocate*, 19 January 1917, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/100282505>.

¹⁴'Board of Public Health', *Age*, 24 August 1899, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/202630454>

quarantine, impact on industry and debates about vaccine effectiveness.¹⁵ Historical innovations have continually been adapted and remain relevant, offering useful insights for managing global epidemics today.

The digital turn is not an unequivocal good, however. Putnam warns that greater availability could facilitate a kind of ‘drive-by transnationalism’ that disincentivises true immersion in the sources and historiography of a particular locality.¹⁶ Digitised newspapers include nuance and context that non-specialists in Australian history may fail to appreciate. One possible oversight is that Trove is not, in fact, a repository of all Australian newspapers in the public domain.¹⁷ Its representativeness has improved, yet specific debates about its limitations and omissions may be less visible globally.¹⁸ This raises questions about whether Trove helps historians access perspectives that traditional archives have too often marginalised.

As *Border Watch*’s account of B.W. Vilakazi demonstrates, Trove does illuminate some important perspectives. But Trove may also contribute to historical unevenness because it facilitates analysis between particular geographies. A scarcity of funding, travel restrictions and publication pressures create incentives to investigate connections at the lowest cost and highest ease, which risks placing greater emphasis on Australia’s imperial connections.¹⁹ How can the immense resources that digitisation produces be used to develop narratives about the past that look beyond dominant perspectives?

As historians with direct access to archives in Africa, Trove enables us to develop comparative histories that are otherwise beyond our reach. For example, historical accounts of trade and financial interactions between colonial Zimbabwe and Australia lag behind connections with South Africa and Britain, largely due to a lack of access to Australian archives. As early as 1899, Minister of Agriculture J.W. Taverner held discussions with founding imperialist Cecil John Rhodes about the prospect of developing trade between Victoria and Southern Rhodesia.²⁰ Early discussions matured into a formal Trade Agreement, signed in April 1941, and became the basis of a booming trade, particularly in tobacco.²¹ Thus, economic historians can use Trove to trace the evolution of intercolonial trade relations and financial connections. Trove also illuminates party politics and public opinion during the era of decolonisation.²² In 1965, the white minority regime’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain made Rhodesia a pariah state. Trove’s fragmented sources reveal white fears and anxieties during the Second Chimurenga, Zimbabwe’s war of liberation. Ideas about kinship animated New Zealand’s efforts to welcome white South Africans and

¹⁵ ‘Influenza in South Africa,’ *Australasian*, 12 October 1918, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/140212959>; ‘Influenza in South Africa,’ *Age*, 11 April 1919, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/155207054>; ‘Influenza in South Africa,’ *Argus*, 22 October 1920, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4576091>.

¹⁶ Putnam, ‘The Transnational and the Text-Searchable’, 397.

¹⁷ Nicholson, ‘The Digital Turn’, 60.

¹⁸ Donna Benjamin, ‘Digitise *The Dawn*: Campaigning for Louisa Lawson’s Journal for Australian Women to Be Digitised and Made Available Online’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 26, no. 68 (2011): 225–7.

¹⁹ Duncan Money, ‘“Ain’t I a bastard, well I received my training in Aussie”: The life of Frank Maybank, an Australian trade unionist in Central Africa’, *Labor History* (forthcoming).

²⁰ ‘Trade with Rhodesia’, *Ballarat Star*, 6 May 1899, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/215324295>. This took advantage of the Portuguese port of Beira, which had been connected to the colonial capital, Salisbury, via rail.

²¹ ‘Trade with Rhodesia’, *Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania), 10 April 1941, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/52412074>. Cordial trade relations also saw an Australian firm, Minerals Separation Limited, invest in Alaska Mine near Chinoi, see: ‘Business Man’s Diary: Minerals Separation Limited’, *News* (Adelaide, South Australia), 9 May 1930, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/129002317>.

²² Colin Legum, ‘Massacre must not deflect search for peace’, *Bulletin*, 99, no. 5116, 11 Jul 1978, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1606056588/>.

Rhodesians as ‘refugees’ during the 1970s, arguing that ‘these people are our kith and kin’.²³ The plight of white Rhodesians generated mixed feelings amongst white-dominated governments, shaping postcolonial patterns of migration across the Commonwealth that continue to reverberate today.²⁴

Trove supports collaborative digital research amongst historians in the Global South and beyond. That some of us have developed our own digital history and archival projects raises questions about whether such exposure sparks an interest in pursuing digitisation.²⁵ These reflections also offered us the opportunity to come together across three continents and four countries during the global pandemic. From personal, collaborative and scholarly perspectives, Trove remains a gift to historians of Africa – for it allows us to rewrite history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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George Bishi is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Rhodes University African Studies Centre and a 2021 African Humanities Program Postdoctoral Fellow. In 2019, George was awarded his PhD from the University of the Free State. A historian of Zimbabwe, his research interests include archives and chieftainship histories, settler colonialism, whiteness, Britishness and decolonisation within the British Empire.

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Duncan Money is a Lecturer in History at Leiden University and a Research Associate of the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State. A historian of mining, labour and race in Central and Southern Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth century, his first monograph is entitled *White Mineworkers on Zambia’s Copperbelt, 1926–74: In a Class of Their Own*. Duncan also manages a project to preserve and digitise the archives of the Mineworkers’ Union of Zambia.

²³New Zealand – South Africa’s “Kith and Kin”, *Tribune*, 27 September 1978, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/260214383/>.

²⁴David Cate, ‘Slow death of White Rhodesia’, *Bulletin* 100, no. 5168, 10 July 1979, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1552764140/>.

²⁵Duncan Money, ‘Rebalancing the historical narrative or perpetuating bias? Digitizing the archives of the Mineworkers’ Union of Zambia’, *History in Africa* (2021): 1–22; Ana Stevenson and Kristin Allukian, ‘The Suffrage Postcard Project: Transatlantic Suffrage History and Feminist Digital Archiving’, *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, no. 8 (2021): 1–25.

Ana Stevenson is a Lecturer in the Pathways Program on the Nguma-bada Campus of James Cook University and a research associate of the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State. Her research about women and social movements brings transnational perspectives to the history of feminism and media across the United States, Australia and South Africa. Ana's first book, *The Woman as Slave in Nineteenth-Century American Social Movements* (2019), appeared with Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements Series.

Rebecca Swartz is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of the Free State and a historian of British imperialism, focusing on childhood, race and humanitarianism in the nineteenth century. Her research explores histories of education, child migration, and missions in settler colonial contexts, including South Africa and Australia. Rebecca's first book, *Education and Empire: Children, Race and Humanitarianism in the British Settler Colonies, 1833-1880* (2019), appeared in the Palgrave Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series.

Sarah-Jane Walton is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State. An urban historian, her research focuses on the history of Cape Town during the First World War. Sarah-Jane is currently working on her first monograph, which seeks to expand understandings of the First World War as a global phenomenon by relating the experience of Cape Town to other dominion and colonial cities across the British Empire.

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@TroveAirRaidBot, a 24/7/365 research assistant

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ABSTRACT

Like many other historians I use Trove for both targeted searches and exploratory ones, which in itself has revolutionised my historical research practice. However, I have recently been exploring the potential of Tim Sherratt's concept of 'Trove bots' – Twitter bots which tweet links to random Trove Newspaper articles – as, in effect, automated research assistants, as well as public engagement tools. Here, I will discuss how I have been using one such bot, @TroveAirRaidBot, in my current writing project, and its limitations and hopefully its potential.

KEYWORDS

Trove; Twitter; digital humanities; aerial bombardment