Digital textual analysis tools currently provide us with the means to perform algorithmic reading of collections of texts, or text corpora, that use a variety of techniques. It is often a matter of technical feasibility as to which techniques will be most usefully applicable for a particular collection of texts, depending on our project’s interpretive needs and on practical factors, such as the size of the text corpus being analyzed. For example, the need for varying algorithms to obtain statistical robustness of the results often determines the threshold above which the amount of textual data must lie. Contingent factors like these often determine the choice of tool or technique.

In this chapter I address a different issue relating to the choice of digital tools: Are there also considerations related to fidelity to the forms of thought in a field that should be kept in mind when choosing methods or tools with which to undertake analysis? Of course, nothing inherently prevents us from applying any digital analysis method to any conceptual field or to the work of any thinker, yet questions of epistemic appropriateness should also be taken into consideration. Any technology for inquiry comes laden with conceptual metaphors, and the metaphors we choose shape the kinds of questions we can ask. In this chapter, which takes the Black Atlantic as a field and focuses on C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, and Édouard Glissant as key thinkers within it, I reflect on how text analysis may or may not be in epistemological alignment with key trajectories and crossings of their thought.

As a Caribbean Marxist intellectual, C. L. R. James had a deep interest not only in race but also in questions of working-class organization, anticolonial movements, and socialist revolution, and these concerns are reflected in the contents of his writing. In particular, the articles that James wrote in left-leaning political magazines between 1935 and 1950, a period of surging leftist activism, reveal the multiplicity of his overlapping interests. Many of these writings relate the struggle for socialist revolution to racial issues, with most published in magazines with names like *New Leader, Fight, Controversy, International African Opinion, Socialist Appeal, New International, Labor Action,* and *The Militant;* a few were even published in
the internal documents of left-leaning parties, such as the Socialist Workers Party Internal Bulletin and the document of the Workers Party. Typical titles from these articles provide a sense of their contents: "White Workers’ Prejudices," “Intervening in Abyssinia,” “‘Civilizing’ the ‘Blacks’: Why Britain Needs to Maintain Her African Possessions,” and “Labor Will Take Care of Its Own Union Problems.” As this sampling indicates, James was interested in race, class, and colonialism, as well as in the relationships between them. A sentence selected from one of the articles illustrates his preoccupation with the tangled relation between race and class during this period: “Discrimination in the unions is the business of the unions and of those Negroes who attack discrimination, not as enemies of unions, but because they wish to participate in the benefits of unionization as free and equal members of the working class.”

The topicality of concerns expressed in these articles and the urgency of their tone make their register different from those of his longer, more deliberate writings. In his book-length work about the Haitian revolution, The Black Jacobins, as well as in his stage play on the same topic, James suggested that naïve certitude about the universality of the Enlightenment’s emancipatory promise endangered the self-emancipation of racially subjugated colonized peoples. In contrast, these articles, by and large, seem to stress a different insight: although race cannot be elided from the narrative of human emancipation in the contemporary world, the kind of difference that race represents is not necessarily inconsistent with a universal emancipatory project. Intended for a mass audience of workers and party colleagues, the articles speak in a more direct tone than do his longer-format works. In them, James addresses, with a sense of immediacy, events taking place on both sides of the Atlantic as the participation of Black workers both in the industrial workforce and in the labor movement and the participation of Africans in anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles kept growing.

Race and class are not discrete, separable categories for James in his writings. Thus, thinking of the semantics of race or class in isolation from each other, as separate and reified particulars, would not do justice to his thought. Looking ahead to Édouard Glissant’s metaphor of archipelago that I describe later, concepts like race and class are not island-like and isolated concepts but point to a commonality that subsumes the particular. They exist in association, both shaping and being shaped by each other as an archipelago of concepts. As such, we must ensure proper alignment of the epistemological commitments of tools with the epistemological commitments of the discursive field that we explore using those tools.

We may want to give the names “anachrony” and “anatopy” to two tropes that are particularly significant in the context of the Black Atlantic. They denote the cutting through (or cutting across) of time and space, respectively. These slices of time, space, or both stand in a relation of analogy with each other. Certain peculiarities of the history and geography of the Black Atlantic make these tropes useful to think with. In thinking of anachrony in the context of the Black Atlantic, I have in
mind Andrew Hartman’s suggestion that whereas the Marxist approach to history is highly historicist, the Black radical tradition has “a touch of the trans-historical,” so that certain continuities can be seen in the Black Atlantic across historical time and space.3 Anachrony is simply the relation that establishes these continuities between different slices of historical experience. In line with Hartman’s example of the “transformative continuity” that exists between the concepts “slave” and “revolutionary,” we can recall that James, in The Black Jacobins, offers a vision of the world of racialized plantation slavery that anticipates industrial capitalism: the plantation, with its high degree of organization and division of labor, resembles latter-day capitalism in some important ways.4 The conceptual analogy, or continuity, is yet more in evidence when the Haitian Revolution, in James’s telling, anatopically resembles the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century, with the trio of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henry Christophe roughly resembling Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, respectively. Furthermore, a concept like “race” or “class” itself encompasses a relation of anachrony/anatopy, because such terms signify differently at different times and places.

Let us now consider two statements that have acquired canonical status in Caribbean history. The first is Aimé Césaire’s letter of resignation to the French Communist Party, written in 1956, in which he stated, “I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the universal. . . . My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.”5 It is useful to compare this with Glissant’s articulation of the importance of archipelagic thought in Caribbean Discourse: “This place is not only the land where our people were transplanted, it is also the history they shared (experiencing it as nonhistory) with other communities, with whom the link is becoming apparent today. Our place is the Caribbean. . . . [In] the Caribbean each island embodies openness.”6

Thus, Glissant emphasizes the relationality underlying the concept of archipelago. In addition to each island possessing its own respective specificity, islands are connected with each other in relations of solidarity. The particularity of each island is enriched and informed by its relation to other islands—in the same way that, for Césaire, the particular and the universal enrich each other. Both these remarks express the idea of being open to universality without relinquishing the particularity that derives from being situated in particular contexts. We see this same dialectic at work in James, when the semantic field of a word like “Negro” is constituted, for him, by a relation of chronotopical double senses—with the word implicated in both the figure of the insurgent anticolonialist Black subject in the colonies and the anticapitalist Black worker in the metropolis.

This contextual multiplicity behooves us to be cautious when using text analysis tools, because lexical elements like words, in contrast to the concepts and senses
they denote, may seem to possess a unity that is merely illusory. This can lead to a version of the empiricist fallacy: the false notion that the objects of one’s inquiry have an empirical reality continuous in space and time. Kwame Anthony Appiah has drawn attention to a related issue while speaking of the idea of cosmopolitanism; he points out that the misleading sense of conceptual unity fostered by the apparent coherence, across space and time, of reified lexical units can blind us to the cosmopolitanism that operative concepts actually encode. Culture, Appiah notes, is often imagined as “the expression of an essence—a something,” which has been transmitted along its historical trajectory. This is dangerous, Appiah observes; regardless of whether religion, nationality, race, or culture is at stake, their apparent coherence across time and space leads to the incorrect assumption that these concepts must therefore share a common essence. In reality, of course, words tend to change their meaning when they are projected into the past. What complicates the misunderstanding is that it is nevertheless true that there is also some constancy of meaning (even if retrospectively constructed) to such words—although, perhaps, this constancy is unfolding according to a narrative or spatial sense; that is, contextually, rather than in a context-free manner. Thus, although such word-concepts undoubtedly function as reified constructions when they are used transhistorically and trans-spatially, claims to their coherence cannot be completely dismissed.

This is where many methods of text analysis prove problematic, because they make an unwarranted assumption about the stability and constancy of the relation between words and their meanings across time. Archipelagic thinking in space (and its counterpart in time) invites us to pay attention to variation within, as well as to the specificity of, word-concepts. In the writings of C. L. R. James, for example, it would not be adequate to use a text analysis method that simply assumes that words pertaining to race, such as “Negro,” can be treated as equivalent or self-identical across the corpus, even when they are being used in different contexts (such as the United States, the Caribbean, or the African continent). However, at the same time, it would not make sense for the method to treat them as wholly different word-concepts. As Paul Le Blanc writes, James had an uncanny capacity to identify “fruitful connections between seemingly disparate phenomena, and consequently possessed a remarkable ability to take what seemed ‘peripheral’ and show that it was, in fact, central to an adequate understanding of politics and society.”

In terms of Glissant’s metaphor of the archipelago, James could be said to constellate the specificity of outlying islands of a metaphorical archipelago into an integral part of the archipelago.

An archipelago is a space in which any assumption of epistemic homogeneity cannot hold, because the universal, in this space, is constituted out of particulars that do retain their particularity. To take an example, James writes that “the Negro people . . . on the basis of their own experiences, approach the conclusions of Marxism.” As Brett St. Louis notes, James tends to describe Blacks engaged in struggle as separate, historicized class subjects who “nevertheless uncover an organic,
unspoken grand narrative.” Their own experiences retain their specific validity but are nonetheless part of something bigger. The narrative so constituted seems to be, for James, what Césaire describes as a “deepening and coexistence of all particulars,” in which the particulars are not dissolved but retained; while also universal, they are heterogeneous, not homogeneous.

Algorithmic text analysis usually depends precisely on a strong assumption of homogeneity: words are typically treated as neutral, unproblematicized objects that are proxies for concepts within a stable architecture of concepts. Peter de Bolla, for example, considers “networks of associated and differentiated concepts” as the “architecture” of the concept-space. The implication is that although individual concepts are distinguished from each other, each concept is internally coherent and invariant. Such a notion of words and concepts is, therefore, likely to prove inadequate for the thought of writers like James, Glissant, or Césaire. However, new computationally tractable ways of representing words in text as vectors—as elaborated, in particular, in the work of Tomas Mikolov and his colleagues on word-embedding models—may turn out to be epistemologically opportune models for texts from the Black Atlantic; they may facilitate compatibility between the affordances of these models and the heterogeneous ways in which key concepts tend to manifest themselves in texts from the Black Atlantic. By taking the relationships between words (expressed as cooccurrences of words), rather than the words themselves, as the basic unit of representation, this way of computationally representing text ends up treating the meaning of words as following from the relationships and dependencies between words or sets of words, rather than as properties of the individual words.

Such representations and the affordances they offer for analysis provide, as Michael Gavin proposes, a way to implicitly represent how meanings are transformed in context. Thus, word vectors are not only a convenient technology to capture semantic relationships but also are, as Ryan Heuser points out, forms of representation of text that are productive for problematizing concepts in the text and even for raising epistemological questions about the status of concepts themselves in relation to the text. For example, word vectors make possible relation-to-relation comparison. Comparing the relation between two words (such as the words “worker” and “Black”) in a particular text collection (e.g., the corpus of texts that consist of essays about the United States) with the relation between the same two words in a different collection of texts (e.g., the corpus of texts that consist of essays about Africa) can enable us to distinguish between those separate particularities that constitute the same word-concept for a particular writer; that is, distinguishing between the word “Negro” in James’s essays that are primarily about Africa and the word “Negro” in his essays that are primarily about the United States. Of course, the sizes of the corpora involved constrain whether such analysis can be carried out, because corpora that are too small may not permit statistically significant results.

The Black Atlantic may also have something significant to offer to text analysis tools. How texts help us see the power and limitations of tools is as important as
what those tools can tell us about texts. The inquiry opened up by Paul Gilroy in his pioneering study of the Black Atlantic performed an epistemological decentering. By posing a challenge to the normative Eurocentric rationalism of the project of the European Enlightenment as traditionally understood, Gilroy’s work decentered some long-held assumptions about method and historiography. Perhaps the Black Atlantic can perform a similar decentering of the epistemological assumptions that underlie digital humanities in general by problematizing its tools. The polysemic and multilingual textual world of the Black Atlantic, in which the meanings of European words change and often take on additional layers of meaning, provides to digital humanities a test bed that is likely to challenge these tools in ways that lead to increased understanding of both the limits to and the ranges of their scopes of applicability.

**Notes**

1. See Bhattacharyya, “Words in a World of Scaling-Up.”
7. Appiah, “There Is No Such Thing as Western Civilisation.”
9. James, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States.”

**Bibliography**


