Austin Clarke's Digital Crossings

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The erasure of Austin Clarke from the Canadian literary canon is both an indictment of that canon and a demonstration of the need for new methods for reading Black Canadian writing in the shadow of the nation. Indeed, despite being one of Canada’s earliest and most-awarded novelists, he is one of our least-studied authors.¹ His biographer, Stella Algoo-Baksh, argues, “There has been a dearth of comprehensive examinations of Clarke’s life and writing,” whereas critic W. J. Keith describes Clarke’s work as “characteristically neglected.”² Clarke himself hints at an explanation for his exclusion from the canon in an unpublished interview with Dionne Brand and Rinaldo Walcott when he explains, “There are no Canadian critics qualified to look at the things I write.”³

Where traditional forms of literary analysis have failed to locate Clarke’s work in relation to Canadian literature, digital forms of analysis provide new tools and frameworks for interpreting Clarke’s writing. In this chapter, I describe the digital approaches I used in my forthcoming digital project, Austin Clarke’s Digital Crossings. This project offers a renewed interpretation of Clarke’s work and investigates the manner in which his Black diasporic politics and aesthetics trouble the relationship between the humanities and humanism within digital humanities. Yet this digital approach to Clarke’s writing does not simply affirm Clarke’s place in a national canon but rather uses his exclusion from that canon as the basis for a critique of canonicity more generally. In the same vein, there is an apparent incommensurability between Clarke’s “aesthetics of crossing”⁴—which privileges identity-in-difference, fraught yet productive connections between locales, and a creolization of form—and the digital methods of analysis that attempt to discern singular identities, construct positivist categories of knowledge and identity, and extract discrete identities from a creole mélange.⁵ Although Clarke’s work poses a unique challenge to digital forms of interpretation, the tension between his aesthetics of crossing and my digital experiments in topic modeling, mapping of diasporic movement, and analysis of nation language does not signal a fundamental incompatibility between the two. Rather, this tension calls for a reflexive method of worldly digital humanities that
brings Clarke's critique of the humanities to bear on the very concepts of humanities and humanism at work in the digital humanities.

My digital work takes its cue from Clarke's own attendance to the mutually informing structures of humanism and the humanities to query the category of the human in the debates concerning digital humanities. Ironically, both critics (e.g., Tom Eyers, David Golumia, Sara Brouillette, and Stanley Fish) and proponents (Steve Ramsay and Alan Liu) of the digital humanities tend to employ a conservative conception of humanities work to demonstrate either how digital humanities degrades or bolsters traditional humanities. Tom Eyers, for instance, attempts to defend the merits of “humanist sensitivity” that he perceives in the traditional humanities; such a formulation willfully ignores the entire legacy of postcolonial critique that has put to rest any myth of humanist “sensitivity.” Such ahistorical interpretations are commonplace; neither the critics nor the practitioners have adequately placed the debate over digital humanities into dialogue with postcolonial or Black Atlantic critiques of the latent forms of humanism at work in humanities scholarship. Indeed, it is ironic to see how little the work of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Paul Gilroy, and others—all of whom are deeply concerned with the role of the humanities in establishing a particular hegemonic conception of the human—is raised in digital humanities debates.

These digital experiments with Clarke's work demonstrate the import of attending to the incommensurability of computational and humanistic forms of interpretation. Where traditional forms of digital scholarship attempt to demonstrate, according to Stephen Ramsay, that “the narrowing constraints of computational logic—the irreducible tendency of the computer toward enumeration, measurement, and verification—[are] fully compatible with the goals of criticism,” a worldly digital humanities challenges the seamlessness of that compatibility. Ramsay's desire for full compatibility sidesteps the productive acts of translation required to move between the digital and the textual and that are inherent in the digital interpretive act. I suggest that Clarke's diasporic sensibility and his aesthetics of crossing find their formal analog in the acts of transformation in a worldly digital humanities framework. Susan Brown describes this as the promising act of “working at the interface” between the digital and the textual. Furthermore, Smaro Kamboureli, in her mapping of the overlapping genealogies of race, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and diaspora, argues that “a multicultural critical idiom cannot afford to lose sight of the meaning and function of diaspora: dissemination. This involves the constant disjoining and relinking of the chain of events that constitutes diasporic experience.” These acts of dissemination—the disjoining and relinking of diasporic cultural production evinced in Clarke's oeuvre—are modeled in the digital humanities acts of deformation that foreground subtle and seemingly unremarkable connections across a corpus and within an individual text.

My digital experiments took three forms: I engaged in topic modeling of Clarke's work, used GIS mapping to locate Clarke's depiction of diasporic movement, and
analyzed and created a dictionary of his use of nation language. In what follows, I indicate some of the initial difficulties and results of this work and suggest how Clarke’s writing offers an opportunity to develop a methodology of digital humanities research that emerges out of an engagement with Black Atlantic politics and textuality.

**Topic Modeling**

Topic modeling of Clarke’s work offers a promising method of identifying subtle and concealed themes and patterns that might concretely locate his writing in relation to Caribbean and Canadian canons. Yet this task is particularly challenging, because the aesthetic and formal aspects of his writing are at odds with the goals and algorithmic biases of topic modeling. Topic modeling is a form of distant reading that attempts to identify discrete topics across a corpus: to try and discover, or assert, the latent “topical” structure of a collection of texts. Where topic modeling algorithms reorganize a corpus to isolate the unique topics that comprise the thematic structure of a corpus, Clarke’s aesthetics of crossing resists such separation by blending together the themes, forms, and aesthetic modes of Canada and the Caribbean. An exemplary moment of this crossing occurs in Clarke’s *Amongst Thistles and Thorns* (1965) when the protagonist, Milton, a young boy living in Barbados, envisions a scene that crosses Black life in Harlem and Barbados. He sees

> guns were hanging out of the policemen’s holsters, as if they were too large for the holsters. . . . They were walking and sauntering up and down the street looking at the black people congregated at the corner of the street . . . they pulled their triggers on the people, and water came out of their guns . . . water, like the water from a fire hose. And suddenly the man’s words changed from hot air to fire. And fire was on everybody’s head. And the water shot all the people to the ground, soaking, wringing-dead; . . . and then Harlem changed into the Bath Corner. I could see the old slave house again, in flames now . . . and the tall ackee tree with its fleshy leaves and its fleshy fruits sweet as limes, on fire with the flames like leaves falling around it . . . and the Bath itself. . . . our village looked like the street in Harlem.

Milton engages in his own act of crossing by piecing together the stories he hears of Harlem and linking the rhetoric of Black liberatory apocalypticism with the iconography of slavery. His diasporic imaginary thus conceives of the space of the diaspora palimpsestically, as a layering of one diasporic locale on another. Such moments are common in Clarke’s work and bespeak his diasporic acts of crossing.

These acts of crossing, however, run counter to the intuition of topic modeling, which attempts to identify the thematic structure of a corpus and isolate themes from one another to make them readily identifiable. The difficulty of engaging in a
Topic modeling of a corpus that is so heavily creolized is evident in the topics themselves (Figure 8.1). The numbers in the left column of the figure provide probabilistic approximations of the extent to which that topic is present throughout the corpus, whereas the topical keywords are the words that best (probabilistically) represent that topic. The topic modeling algorithm reveals as much as it conceals in this instance: the first two topics are quite general and, in many respects, represent an almost universal vocabulary of the literary through words such as “man,” “time,” “good,” and “things.” Similarly, terms such as “man,” “woman,” “black,” “white,” “feel” and “time” recur throughout the model in a manner that indicates the crossing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Proportion</th>
<th>Topical Keywords</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.33139</td>
<td>man back time put thing make black good hand door long boy morning face things days place house white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.72472</td>
<td>woman man don people night knew looked told day thought mind talking made eyes heard hear felt sitting feel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.60639</td>
<td>time left years made times floor remember red glass hair short mouth passed father end friends long dressed blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12182</td>
<td>house large men water front small hand sea day life blood hear high hands running stood corner voice road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.91363</td>
<td>black body women face light mother sunday red afternoon touch deep read walking school green dark saturday coming college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.59658</td>
<td>home dead talk word called living late men found food changed story meaning straight eating today tired warm months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.25176</td>
<td>country read things bedroom listen smiled talked kind city family writing met driving news meet police question language printed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.13386</td>
<td>woman didn god damn don room love round barbados place toronto wife black hell white couldn bad girl life thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.08004</td>
<td>white god church morning head heart island bible side girl ring book neck horse rice round painted bed praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.97991</td>
<td>road arse dead night lord eyes yuh bad outta sir love run turn pon piece inside don laugh nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.88527</td>
<td>back street cold door hand eyes night words toronto voice hands smell left feel plastic walk silver steps iron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.79326</td>
<td>young music west bed woman life things winter apartment dream nice bathroom dollars radio making indians wearing television person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.74617</td>
<td>lights song thick leather sound darkness arms south full silence heavy smaller wooden pulled buried case message soft bottle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.63925</td>
<td>christ god damn hell heh ain bout jesus blasted bed money people head tonight hear children eh funny stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.50774</td>
<td>england lived young walk bus called country silver land didn hard hymn girls london public indian history aunt whirl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8.1. Topic model of Austin Clarke’s novels.
that is at the heart of Clarke's work. Furthermore, the stark decrease in topic proportionality after the first two topics indicates the algorithm's difficulty in identifying evenly weighted topics across the corpus. The seventh topic, however, with its combination of the language of the national and the domestic—themes common to Canadian literature more generally—suggests a latent point of connection between Clarke's writing and the Canadian literary canon. The tenth topic, with its use of nation language, suggests a promising method of further analysis of Clarke's corpus organized around where and how he deploys nation language. Although this is just one model, other sizes of topic models produce similar results and indicate the resistance of Clarke's aesthetics of crossing to such an approach. A reflexive approach to topic modeling evokes the incommensurability between Clarke's aesthetics of crossing and topic modeling algorithms. As such, I do not interpret the apparent tension between topic modeling tools and Clarke's forms of crossing as contradictory or necessarily a failure of method. From a methodological perspective, the resistance of Clarke's writing to topic modeling suggests the limits of the method or a need to conceive of the method differently.

**Mapping**

Clarke's writing also offers a strategic depiction of movement, which is influenced by his engagement with the work of Frantz Fanon. Fanon's articulation of the relationship between colonial subjectivity and movement is captured in his observation:

> The colonial subject is a man penned in; apartheid is but one method of compartmentalizing the colonial world. The first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits. Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing.13

Like Fanon, Clarke regularly depicts characters who dream of mobility and freedom of movement. Clarke reimagines this expression of colonial subjectivity to demonstrate the manner in which Black people in Canada, despite their purported freedom, remain “penned in” and victims of a compartmentalized world. His characters have freedom to move where they like, but the structures of racism and the monitoring and policing of Black bodies in Canada restrict their movement in much the same way as with Fanon's colonial subject. Indeed, Idora, in Clarke's final novel, *More*, narrates the entirety of her life in Canada while lying physically immobile in a basement apartment in Toronto. She is described as feeling “surrounded by her worries, quarried like an animal being hunted down; and disgusted, in her loneliness.”14

To account for Clarke's complicated depictions of movement, particularly as he demonstrates the manner in which the colonial structures of apartheid and containment continue to operate on Black people in Canada, I engaged in a digital mapping
of the locations where his characters go. This mapping reveals two intriguing dimensions of Clarke's work. First, it demonstrates the repetitious structure of Clarke's narratives: his works often conclude in the same location in which they began (The Origin of Waves, The Polished Hoe, More, “Sometimes, a Motherless Child”). This suggests that his works follow a pattern aligned with Kamau Brathwaite’s tidalectics and evoke the notion of the changing same; characters return to the space of beginnings, but they are not simply back where they started because things have altered over the course of the narrative.

Second, this mapping also reveals quite starkly that Clarke’s characters do not move throughout Toronto unhindered but rather are confined to a very particular circuit of movement in the downtown. His characters all move in very similar routes throughout the downtown in a manner that indicates very clearly that Fanon’s observation of “apartheid” remains very real for Black people in Canada. Indeed, in two of the few stories where his characters do venture out of their familiar spaces downtown, one of those characters is arrested, and the other is killed by the police. This mapping of the spaces depicted in Clarke’s work offers a new lens for seeing both how space is encoded in his writing and a visual, geographic representation of the racial division of space in Canada.

**NATION LANGUAGE**

Clarke employs nation language to insert the language of the Black Caribbean into Canada; it is an important dimension of Clarke’s aesthetic crossing, as well as a key way in which he attempts to rewrite Canada from the perspective of the Black diaspora. Clarke’s early short story, “The Motor Car,” is typical of his use of nation language throughout his writing:

> “Toronto in your arse, man!” The plane touch down, and the first man outta the plane is, well, no need to tell you who it was. Calfuckingvin! And he pass through the customs like if he was born in Toronto. The white man didn’ even ask him a question. . . . Before the first week come and gone, Calvin take up pen and paper and send off a little thing to Willy and the boys.\(^{15}\)

I have developed a dictionary of Clarke’s nation language, identifying all the words in his corpus that do not appear in standard English dictionaries and then tracking which texts include the most nation language (by calculating the ratio of nation language to standard English in a text). This dictionary is an important collection of Clarke’s particular articulation of nation language. Early results in this work reveal that speaking in nation language is a decidedly masculine pursuit in Clarke’s work: his female characters rarely use any improper English. Furthermore, Clarke’s nation language ratio is highest in texts that primarily feature men and are set in Canada. The Origin of Waves (a novel in which two men have a day-long conversation),
for instance, contains much more nation language than *More* (focused on a single woman over the course of a day). In Clarke’s Toronto Trilogy, nation language is almost exclusively dedicated to conversations between men. This suggests that nation language is a manner of articulating a Black, male, Caribbean identity *against* a white norm. Furthermore, there is a correlation between the letters in Clarke’s archives where white, Canadian editors express concern about the use of “dialect” and a reduced “nation language ratio” in those texts.

**Reflection**

My digital experiments with Clarke’s work revealed new dimensions of his writing, offered new ways of locating his writing in relation to the Canadian and Caribbean canons, and indicated the limitations of digital tools to textual and corpus interpretation. My hypothesis continues to be that if the work of writers such as Clarke is always at odds with the traditional forms of the humanities and their attendant notions of humanism, then digital humanities offers an alternative for thinking about their work and the humanities more broadly. Yet the results thus far demonstrate that digital humanities cannot merely be posited as a corrective or alternative to traditional forms of humanities work. Indeed, Clarke’s writing reveals the manner in which digital humanities experiments must be “read” differentially, wherein the digital experiment is used to reframe the hermeneutic and exegetical assumptions of interpretation.

Clarke’s writing, therefore, brings to bear the humanist critique of Black Atlantic theory of the digital humanities. His writing offers a timely intervention into contemporary debates that see the digital humanities as a Trojan horse of positivism in humanistic work by stressing that the humanities have always been sites of political and symbolic struggle. These digital experiments scaffold a theoretical framework that emerges out of the difficult dialogue between the texts we study and the digital tools we use. Dwelling in the space between the incommensurability of the text and the digital tools suggests the possibility of a worldly digital humanities practice that eschews traditional forms of humanities and humanism. By worldly, I refer to Said’s conception of the text and the critic as both a “network of often colliding forces,” as well as the importance of “being in the world.” Said argues that “criticism is worldly and in the world so long as it opposes monocentrism . . . which licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others.”16 Conceiving of our digital scholarship and of the texts we study as “networks of . . . colliding forces” allows us to engage in a worldly digital humanities while simultaneously using our projects to offer a refracted view of the humanities themselves.17

So far this project takes up three important dimensions of what might be conceived of as a critical digital humanities: rendering a text worldly, resisting the positivism of computational logic by working to represent the presence of absence, and recognizing that the act of “making it digital” is actually a re-formation of the text
into something new. Finally, this project makes the struggle over the category of the human a central concern for any kinds of humanities work. Both the insurrectionary energy of Clarke’s critique of the humanities and of the digital humanities’ transformation of our disciplines evoke Said’s provocation: “The task of the humanist is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider.” 18 As perpetual insider and outsider to multiple canons, Clarke’s career and writing provide an excellent model for engaging in digital humanities work that follows the diasporic lesson of dislocation and dissemination to critically unsettle the humanities and the human.

Notes

1. Clarke receives scant attention in Nick Mount’s 2017 bestselling Arrival: The Story of CanLit. His work is absent from both Bennett and Brown’s An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English and their Canadian Short Stories. Clarke’s work merits one entry (“Canadian Experience”) in Moss and Sugars’s Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Context. Clarke’s work was also excluded from the New Canadian Library collection, a collection of the most important Canadian classics, until 1999 when Amongst Thistles and Thorns was included, more than thirty years after its publication. Clarke is the only Black author included among the two hundred books in the collection.

2. See Algoo- Baksh, Austin C. Clarke, 78. Clarke is a complicated figure, and his early texts bear the marks of homophobia and sexist depictions of women that are all too prevalent in the works of male Caribbean writers of his generation. Although this may partially justify the neglect of his work (see Saunders, “Dear Austin”), it is more likely that the racism of early Canadian critics and of Canadian literary institutions means that Clarke’s Blackness is interpreted as a sign of his exclusion from the national literature proper. That racism continues today; James Grainger describes the mood when Clarke was awarded one of Canada’s most important literary prizes, the Giller Prize, for his masterpiece, The Polished Hoe: “When Austin Clarke confounded the oddsmakers and walked away with the 2002 Giller Prize for The Polished Hoe, murmurs spread through Canada’s tonier, gated literary communities that the wrong writer had taken the trophy this time out. The Polished Hoe was too long, they complained, its dense style too difficult and structureless, its tone too angry, too overtly political, too black.” The depiction of Clarke as “the wrong writer,” as “too angry, too overtly political, too black” is typical of his reception within Canadian literary discourse.

3. Brand and Walcott, “Untitled Interview with Austin Clarke, July/August 1996.”


5. Kamau Brathwaite’s description of the processes of “inter/culturation” and the experience of the subject “cracked, fragmented, ambivalent” (see Brathwaite, “Contradictory Omens, 6) that characterize creolized life finds no correlative in digital humanities work. If Clarke’s aesthetic and political project is to smash the cultural worlds of upper-class white Canada with the working-class Black Barbados, then a digital approach to his
writing works in the opposite direction: to try and render these discursive, aesthetic, and political threads separate and knowable in isolation from one another. Indeed, Glissant’s definition of “the practice of cultural Creolization” as “a cross-cultural relationship in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, between histories that we know today in the Caribbean are interrelated” (see Glissant, “Caribbean Discourse,” 249) works against the object-oriented logic of much digital humanities scholarship that attempts to render discourses and cultures atomic and singular.

6. See Eyers, “The Perils of the ‘Digital Humanities.’” Eyers’s formulation is by no means unusual. Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia argue that “digital Humanities . . . has played a leading role in the corporatist restructuring of the humanities [by means of] the displacement of politically progressive humanities scholarship and activism in favour of the manufacture of digital tools and archives.” As with Eyers, their argument that “digital humanities has often tended to be anti-interpretive” depends on a conservative notion of interpretation.

7. There are a few recent and notable exceptions that suggest the import of situating digital humanities within postcolonial theory and practice. Padmini Ray Murray applies a postcolonial critique to contemporary digital humanities networks (see Murray, “Locating the Digital Humanities in India”), Roopika Risam has identified the challenges and possibilities of a “global digital humanities” (2017) as well as postcolonial (2018) and intersectional (2015) conceptions of digital humanities (see Risam, “Other Worlds, Other DHs,” New Digital Worlds, and “Beyond the Margins”), and Alex Gil and Élika Ortega have located digital humanities scholarship within global contexts (see Gil and Ortega, “Global Outlooks in Digital Humanities”).

8. Ramsay, Reading Machines, 16.
11. For more on the difference between topic modeling’s acts of discovery or assertion see Barrett, “Paraphrasing the Paraphrase,” 208–25.
12. Clarke, Amongst Thistles and Thorns, 90–94.
13. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 15.
16. Said, The World, the Text, the Critic, 53.
18. Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, 76.

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