This is an excerpt from the CESTA Research Anthology 2022. To read the full Anthology, click here. To learn more about CESTA's Anthology series and read editions from previous years, click here.
I hypothesize that places are imbued and encoded with ideas, that some of these ideas correspond to the overall narrative structure of the nation, and that literature plays a big role in these processes of encoding. These places can either be named locations or a particular landscape; for example, the “frontier” is integral to the story of American individualism. I suspect that, for postcolonial nations, places are significantly encoded with colonial discourses. In this project, I ask: How have the nation-building projects of postcolonial nations been inhibited by, or built upon, these colonial encodings? Have these encodings changed since independence? Might knowing what has been encoded into postcolonial locales, and how, help to overwrite these encodings with new, local narratives? Can postcolonial nation-states account for these processes in their consideration of cultural, art, or tourism policies?

With the assistance of my intern, Katherine Wang, I am using computational methods, such as extracting the most distinctive words (MDWs) or most frequent collocations associated with a place, to trace the conceptual history of certain types of place or specific place names in selected postcolonial nations. At the same time, I am creating a digitized corpus of postcolonial literatures in collaboration with the Stanford Literary Lab and the Stanford Library, with the aim of making it available for other postcolonial research projects that might have been shelved due to the lack of such a corpus.

The top collocates found in a postcolonial literature corpus for three types of places.

Notable collocates for Compton and Brooklyn in American rap lyrics, suggesting a narrative of place.
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