

CESTA research anthology 2022

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Encoding the Postcolonial in Place

by Carmen Thong (English)

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.

JUNGLE - X		PLANTATION - X		SAFARI - X	
us	55	house	115	suit	20
tiger	54	plantation	72	white	17
animals	44	slaves	63	ultimate	12
came	43	life	57	safari	10
trees	42	main	49	jacket	8
way	42	even	42	adventure	7
away	40	family	41	african	7
night	38	sugar	41	can	7
kari	36	white	37	africa	6
elephant	34	de	36	dressed	6

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

Compton - "Real"

[26] "know im strapped a real compton resident yeah you know im" - "Twaet" by AB Soul

[488] "this out this a real compton thing goin on right now"

[552] "the real story of a compton native in the city that" - "Skill Still Appeal" by Kendrick Lamar

[1221] "menace ii society you from compton shit real if its about" - MC Eiht

Brooklyn - "Streets"

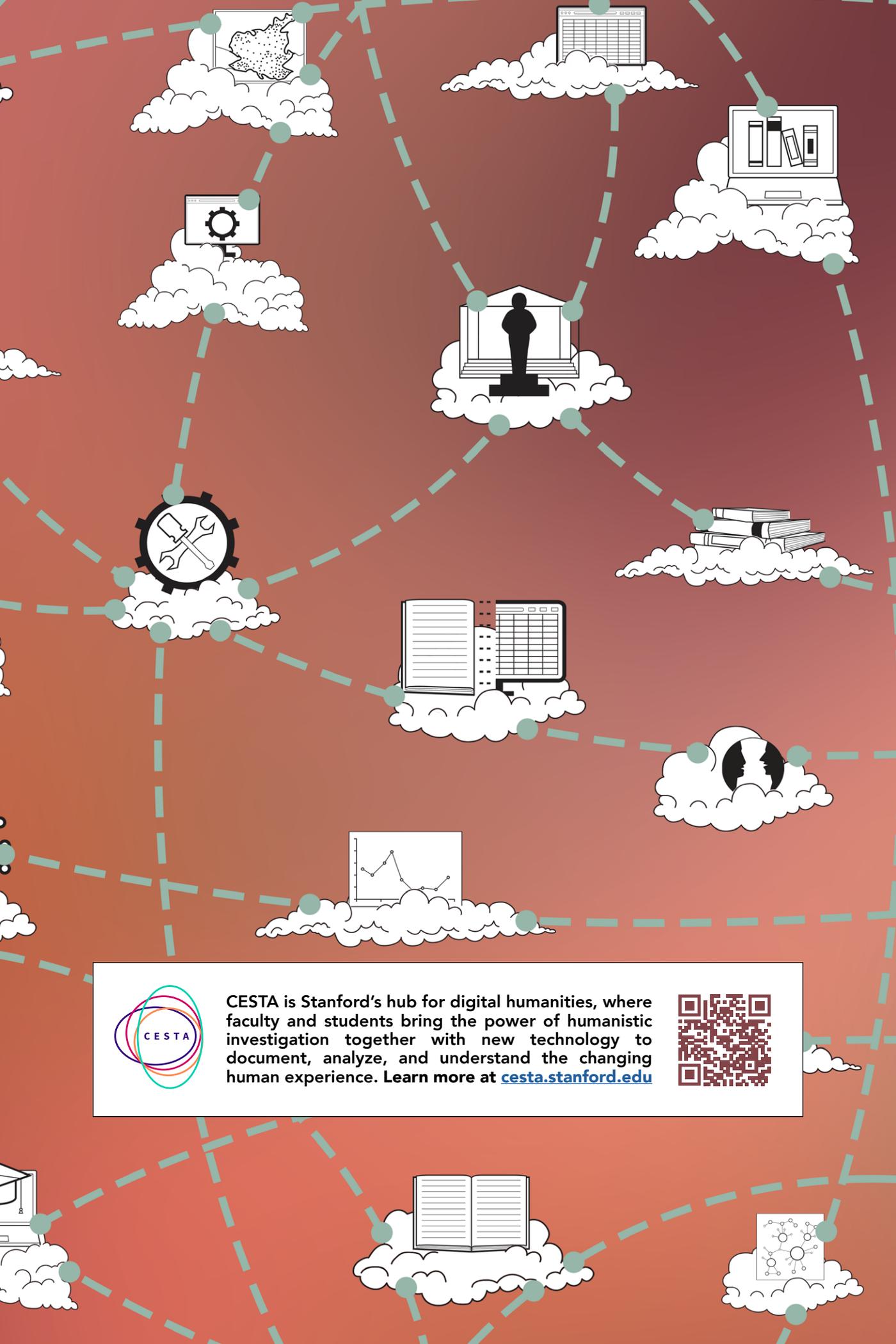
[148] "pon these streets spread love brooklyn on these streets and i"

[757] "came from the streets of brooklyn to be ya chief commander"

[929] "happened in the streets of brooklyn plus i played the whip"

[1106] "black growing up on these brooklyn streets it was hard for"

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



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