

**COLONIAL ENTANGLEMENTS IN EAST TIMOR:
MOBILIZING NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING TO DOCUMENT ERASURE AND
CONSECRATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Julian Torelli, McMaster University

Gregory Hooks, McMaster University

Did the social sciences ignore and erase Indonesia's genocidal occupation of East Timor (1975-1999)? Did the United Nations intervention in favor of East Timorese self-determination and accession of East Timor serve as consecration events that legitimized recognition and discussion of these atrocities in the social scientific field? Erasure and consecration are important and evocative concepts, but they are difficult to examine empirically. As erasure refers to people, places, and topics that are overlooked, it can only be inferred by absences. Posing similar challenges, consecration refers to an event that legitimizes the recognition and discussion of events and people that were heretofore marginalized. We mobilize large language modelling techniques (specifically, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify topics in a large corpus of English-language social science articles (approximately 600,000). This corpus includes *all* articles indexed by JSTOR (1800 – 2013, metadata and full-text) in: anthropology, sociology, political science, and criminal justice. Taking advantage of this large and comprehensive corpus, we provide an empirically rich assessment of erasure and reflexivity. We filtered social science articles for mentions of East Timor (fewer than 1%) – and of this relatively small set, mentions of the atrocities that occurred there (fewer than half of the article discussing East Timor). When we examined the pattern of topics found in social science articles that discuss East Timor, we found a great deal of continuity in social science articles. Our analyses provide evidence of UN-led consecration events. Change does occur; but this change appears to be disciplinary boundary maintenance. Large language models can be used to develop compelling accounts of historical change; these tools can also document change and stasis in social scientific accounts of society.