Translating the untranslatable
Khal Torabully’s poetics of Coolitude

Nancy Naomi Carlson

Nancy Naomi Carlson is a Professor of graduate counselling at Walden University. Her translation of Khal Torabully’s Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude (Seagull Books, 2021) was the winner of the 2022 Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize and was also a finalist for the Sarah Maguire Prize for Poetry in Translation.

ABSTRACT
In coining the term ‘Coolitude’ to re-imagine and re-vision the indenture experience, Khal Torabully has created a new identity and language, based on the strength and resiliency garnered through the rich intercultural exchanges among indentured workers. The central image in Khal’s seminal work, Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude, is a ship’s cargo hold from where its occupants – no matter their country of origin, language, religion, gender, caste or shade of skin – could still look up and see the stars. Believing that ordinary language was not capable of representing the myriad diverse voices of indenture, Khal’s ‘poetics of Coolitude’ or ‘corallian poetics’ intersperses French with Mauritian Creole, Hindi, mariner’s language, Bhojpuri, Urdu and neologisms, among other lexicons. To bring the music of this unique language into English, without sacrificing significant meaning, the translator employed a sound mapping technique to identify the salient patterns of assonance, alliteration, rhythm and silence that characterized each poem, performing a kind of ‘linguistic acrobatics’.

KEYWORDS
Khal Torabully, Coolitude, Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude, translation, sound mapping, poetry, indenture
On the evening of June 11, 2022, I was nervously sipping champagne at St Anne’s College in the UK, awaiting the announcement of who had won this year’s Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize. To reach Oxford and join the other finalists, I’d braved long lines at Dulles Airport. After the judges introduced the shortlisted books and their translators and we’d read brief excerpts from the books, I was stunned to learn that my translation of Khal’s epic poem, *Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*, was the winner.

Although my journey to the UK from Washington, DC, had taken almost an entire day, my journey with Khal had started eight years earlier, when I ‘met’ him in a bilingual anthology edited by Patrick Williamson, featuring poets from French-speaking Africa and the Arab world. I was intrigued by this first encounter with Khal, both by his Mauritian background – a part of the world I had to consult a globe to find – and more importantly, by his evocative poetry introducing the concept of Coolitude: ‘Coolitude: worker bees of the colonies; you were merchandise, and we, merchandising, or vice versa’ [my translation]. I reached out to Khal via social media, asking permission to translate his work. Eventually he agreed, although it took time for him to decide to entrust me with this project. Indeed, the actual project took four years to complete. In an interview with Chintan Girish Modi for *News9live* last May, Khal was asked, ‘How did you feel as you witnessed your book in French being translated/transformed into *Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*?’ He responded:

*At first, when Nancy Carlson contacted me, I thought she was rushing to a pile of difficulties, given the multiple layers of sounds and meanings the book contains … I used polysemy as a means of deconstructing language from which the coolie or indentured person was excluded. This ‘knot’ of possible meanings, connotations and webs of voices relate in a Bakhtinian configuration of carnivalization … After quite a few exchanges, I knew she was very open to discuss these issues with me … And I knew she was the right person to translate this foundational book of indenture.*
Early in our collaboration, after I’d done some preliminary research into the ugly history of indenture, including the arduous transoceanic voyages to the colonies and the cruel conditions on the sugar cane plantations indentured labourers were forced to endure, I recognized the importance of Khal’s work. In coining the term ‘Coolitude’ to re-imagine and re-vision the indenture experience, Khal had created a new identity and language for these workers, based on the strength and resiliency garnered through their rich intercultural exchanges. I was deeply moved by the central image of Khal’s book: a ship’s cargo hold from where its occupants – no matter their country of origin, language, religion, gender, caste, or shade of skin – could still look up and see the stars! I felt honoured to be part of Khal’s mission to bring Coolitude to the attention of an ever-widening audience, believing that my translation of this great work into English would be something in my power – a small act of social justice – to confront the injustice of indenture and reaffirm our common humanity. I proposed the project to Naveen Kishore, the renowned publisher and founder of Seagull Books, who shared my enthusiasm for Khal’s mesmerizing book, and especially for his innovative use of language.

The Oxford-Weidenfeld judges, in their citation, took special notice of Khal’s use of language ‘marked with lyrical richness, wordplay and corporeal imageries’. They continued: ‘Written in French interspersed with Mauritian Creole, Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Urdu, thereby reaffirming these labourers’ plurilingualism and multiple geographies of origin, this is a book where names, religions, languages and bodies combine to form an ever-resounding ode for the absented.’ Indeed, Khal has created a new language to bring to life the history of indenture – what he calls the ‘poetics of Coolitude’ or ‘corallian poetics’. Even the poems look strange on the page, sometimes appearing in groups of two or three, and usually without titles, like bursts of language issuing forth from the throats of indentured workers insisting on being heard.
Honouring Khal’s almost untranslatable language – what I’ve called ‘linguistic acrobatics’ – was a huge but essential challenge that had to be met. Aditya Bahl, reviewing Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude in The Nation, underscored the function of Khal’s wildly inventive language:

If colonial violence had unmoored the indentured laborer from all forms of historical fixity, then now, in a dialectical twist – a poetics of reparation, perhaps – Torabully’s insurgent whiplash of tongues seeks to unmoor the world itself from the strictures of border and nation, commodity and capital. ‘Ahoy,’ the speaker of his epic declares, ‘I will be the referent of men.’

To bring the music of the original text into English, without sacrificing significant meaning, I employed a sound mapping technique to identify the salient patterns of assonance, alliteration, rhythm and silence that characterized each poem. It was impossible to match sound for sound without straying too far from meaning; moreover, some French sounds do not exist in English, such as the French nasal vowels [on], [an], and [in]. My goal was to replicate the original text’s rich texture of sounds in order to give the English reader a sense of the brilliance of Khal’s language. For example, the following is a sound map for the entire poem ‘[As a guest at the bash]’ from Khal’s other poetry collection focused on Coolitude – Chair Corail: Fragments Coolies. The French text is characterized by its slant end rhyme pattern of the crisp French sound [é] that doesn’t exist in English, identified in the poem below by bolding and italicizing the words with their stressed syllable containing this sound (‘invité’, ‘enlevé’, ‘marché’, ‘drogué’, ‘jeté’). My translation set up its own pattern of slant end rhyme by employing the sound [oh], identified in the translation below by bolding and italicizing the words with their stressed syllable containing this sound (‘boat’, ‘lobes’, ‘show’, ‘thrown’, ‘hold’).
A secondary sound pattern ([ah]) is also part of the French, which I’ve bolded for the words whose stressed syllable contains this sound (‘canne’, ‘foire’, ‘cale’). I was able to create a secondary sound pattern in English ([uh]), which I’ve bolded for the words whose stressed syllable contains this sound (‘blunted’, ‘frontal’, ‘drugged’). To follow the rhythm of the French which stresses the last syllable of each line, I was able to repeat this pattern in my translation (noted with italics). I hoped to imitate the playfulness of the original’s language and tone so as to heighten the seriousness of the poem’s subject matter depicting how people were often tricked into indenture and brutally treated. Fortunately the French word ‘canne’ with its double meaning of ‘sugar cane’ and ‘a short stick, often with a curved handle, used for walking’, was easily transported into the English version. 

Khal’s fondness for neologisms presented the greatest translation challenges. Most of them were based on wordplay, so I highlighted them in my sound maps, then spent hours or even days trying to create ‘equivalents’. For example, Khal’s neologism ‘lèse-hommes’ became ‘lèse-men’ in my invented English expression. Both terms echo the expression ‘lèse-majesté’, which refers to the
insulting of a monarch or other ruler. Sometimes Khal’s neologisms arose from using words in unexpected and ungrammatical ways, including exchanging one part of speech for another, as ironically happens in the following stanza of ‘[Pas de grammaire pour dire/ No grammar can express]’ from *Cale d’Etoiles: Coolitude/Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*.

Et je lointaine l’épice qu’agace
la nuit sans vigie
je vorace la bouche qui m’embrasse

And I far-ling the spice
annoyed by the lookout-less night
and fervour the mouth

Despite my ‘successes’, it was impossible to keep up with the polysemy, homophony and near homophony in Khal’s complex wordplay, which sometimes proved to be untranslatable. In a few cases, I resorted to leaving them in the original and adding a translator’s note, as was the case for the line ‘tour abolie, tour à Bali’, where the pronunciation of ‘tour abolie’ (abolished tower) is a near homophony for ‘Torabully’, as is ‘tour à Bali’ (tower in Bali). Because I didn’t want to weigh down the translation with too many translator’s notes, sometimes I was not able to do justice to all the layers of meanings and sounds in a word or phrase. For example, the French word ‘cale’ (cargo hold) is pronounced the same way as ‘Khal’, but I couldn’t find a way to replicate this effect in my translation, except to mention it in my translator’s foreword.

The untranslatability I encountered in Khal’s work in some ways parallels what I experience in writing my untranslated poems, trying to ‘translate’ an experience or image or feeling into words. No doubt writing poems about human suffering, newly forged
identities, and Coolitude is fraught with its own set of difficulties and impossibilities. The Oxford-Weidenfeld judges, in their concluding remarks, categorized Khal’s writing as ‘flesh translated into a poem’. Khal makes this process seem easy, as in the following poem from *Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*:

*My skin sings more than I do. That’s why I was born in a country whose name is inscribed in the sea. My skin speaks more quickly than my voice. It is my true weight.*

*That’s why my cries are the backwash of men captured by silk, exiled by nutmeg and rooted by sugar. By islands and colonies.*

*My skin is caulkling for my flesh, and all the memories carried by pitching masts.*

*My song is therefore coolie; my coolitude is my only share of a memory tossed by the waves.*

*In the wakes of boats sowing men at the end of the world, I want to speak of my burden as a man and my flesh of ink. For my words were watching as open-hulled ships sailed by.*

Sing on, Khal! We are all listening!

**REFERENCES**


Torabully, Khal. 1999. ‘[As a guest at the bash]’, Chair Corail: Fragments Coolies. Translated from the French by Nancy Naomi Carlson (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge Editions).
