Coolitude
A geographer’s perspective

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Reshaad Durgahee is a geographer whose research has focused on the historical geography of Indian indenture. His research centres on the Indo-Pacific arena in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

ABSTRACT
In this short essay, the author examines the influence of the concept of Coolitude on his understanding of the Indian indenture experience. Parallels between patterns of immigration are alluded to – whether the indentured immigration of the nineteenth and early twentieth century or post-colonial immigration from those sugar colonies of empire to their former metropoles. Coolitude’s recognition of the role of space and place is at the fore and the author asks us to take this into account in our exploration of the global indentured story, making the case for a more concentrated address of the geography of indenture.

KEYWORDS
Human geography, interconnection, sugar plantations, labour, diaspora

Is Fiji like Mauritius? Do Indo-Trinidadians know about the Indo-Réunionnais? Why do my parents speak Kreol and not an Indian language? These were questions I grew up with living in a small market town in the English East Midlands in the 1990s. My parents had a large map of Mauritius, the land of their birth, hung up in the hallway at home. There were (and still are) artefacts of their Indian Ocean heritage scattered across our house. Seashells on
the mantelpiece … a landscape print of *Le Morne* on the wall … a jar of carefully rationed *piments confit* in the fridge …

We took sporadic holidays to Mauritius during my childhood; in pre-internet days, these trips were my immersion into Mauritian culture and I developed an interest in the history and geography of the island which ultimately led me to read Geography at university. It was during my undergraduate studies that I came across Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude*. Indentured labour was not a part of my degree curriculum and so it was more out of personal interest that I read *Coolitude* at the time. I came back to it years later and this time it spurred me to go and seek out *Chair Corail* and *Cale d’Etoiles*. To me, *Coolitude* signified a conversation between history and poetry concerning the indentured Indian experience. In *Coolitude*, Carter and Torabully conclude that, ‘Coolitude confronts the experience of Indians beyond the seas, and traces the elaboration of the awareness of the Indian who has accepted his exile, and acquired new forms of expression’ (p. 214). It is perhaps this aspect of *Coolitude* which has had the most profound effect on me, both academically and personally. Firstly, on my work as a Historical Geographer of Indian indenture – the experience (of indenture and post-indenture), the sea (as connector of these experiences), the awareness of the Indian accepting exile (can we say *agency*?) and expression (new languages of communication); and secondly, on a more personal level, all be it in vastly different circumstances – the mirroring of the voyage from India to Mauritius of my great- and great-great-grandparents with that of my parents from Mauritius to Britain.

*Coolitude* as a concept for me was (and still is) a way to think about a system which redefined the global post-slavery labour market of sugar producing colonies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rather than being a static snapshot of the Indian indenture experience, *Coolitude* brought to the fore the notion of the ‘continuing exile’ and the plunging of the indentured labourer ‘ever further into diaspora’ (p. 131). The
Geographer in me was excited by this; *Coolitude* seemed to recognize the role of space and place in indenture. It is perhaps this sense of the relationship between time and space within the Indian indenture system which I believe now warrants further attention and which my own work attempts to focus on. The transnational framework developed in *Coolitude* around migration, experience and memory hints at connections that were forged by Indian labourers between indenture importing colonies such as those Réunion Tamil workers who re-migrated to Mauritius and the labourers who travelled from Mauritius to Natal (p. 131). Yet there is scope for further exploration of this framework, which can only be realized if we take a step back from the experience of indenture within a colony to the experience between colonies. The indenture locations we know so well in the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans did not exist in isolation; many Indian indentured labourers worked in more than one colony. They were interconnected; emerald specks not at the periphery of empire as is the trope they are often subjected to, but at the core of an oceanic sugar producing arena. In light of this, the UNESCO International Indentured Labour Route Project, publicized at the 180th anniversary of the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius in 2014 can hopefully go some way to help the descendants of *all* indentured labourers engage with one another and recognize commonality and difference in their societies.

Though implicit in *Coolitude*, I believe that for the concept to evolve, the geography of indenture needs to be addressed more systematically. One of the aims of *Coolitude* was to ‘foster a larger community of vision encompassing experiences of people of African and Indian descent’ (p. 143). A distinct geography needs to be added to this assertion: that this community billows ribbon-like across three oceans and incorporates not just people of African and Indian origin but also other groups such as Pacific islanders, Javanese, Japanese and Madeiran peoples who also
indentured in large numbers on the sugar plantations of empire alongside Indians.

Carter and Torabully write that Coolitude is a ‘process of identity construction’ (p. 155), and it is a way for those of Indian descent in the former sugar colonies of the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans to engage with their heritage. Neologisms are of course malleable; they can be adapted to the contours of their subject. Coolitude therefore has the benefit of being a concept with which to acknowledge the pioneering work that has been done to date on Indian indenture and the diaspora left in its wake, but which can also be taken further as the children of that diaspora emigrate elsewhere and construct even newer identities. I will end this short piece as I began, on a personal note which dovetails with the Coolitude concept. I consider myself British, with Mauritian roots. My parents are Mauritian but of different religions. I am, I suppose, doubly creolized … I could definitely do with a further dose of Coolitude.