Coolitude, the concept, its resonances and afterlives

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Khal Torabully was born in Mauritius in 1956. He left for France to undertake higher studies. He completed his PHD (Semiology of Poetics) in Lyon in 1994.

Coolitude, a concept coined by poet and semiologist Khal Torabully, evolved from the poetics of indenture he framed in a series of seminal works, notably Cale d’Etoiles: Coolitude (1992) and Chair Corail: Fragments Coolies (1999). In its origin offering a rehumanization of the Indian indentured labourer and descendants, in the sense that negritude empowered ex slaves, Coolitude, non-essentialist in nature, has today evolved into a universalist philosophy which embraces the concept of ‘coolie’ as a means of reaching out to geographical and cultural migrants throughout the world. Devised to fill a gap in postmodern and postcolonial theories and to address cross-disciplinary analysts in an attempt to grasp the complexity of inter and transcultural exchanges in the modern world, Coolitude continues to gradually evolve and find new expressions. This special issue is a compilation of academic thinking, discussion and critiques of Coolitude, as well as a forum for those whose own academic and artistic
development has been influenced by this philosophy. As such it offers new theoretical insights into the multi-disciplinary world of scholars and creatives who have encountered and responded to interpretations of the historical Indian labour diaspora.

Coolitude took as its starting point the dispersal of colonial Indian labour migrants in the 19th century, also known as indentured labour migration, and by extension resonates with or otherwise incorporates global movements of ideas and peoples. In its original formulation in a series of French poetical works, Coolitude gave a voice to the indentured labourers in exile. Diasporic Indians had lived in relative absence and silence, in the sense that their role and place had generally not been properly defined in their adopted country, in spite of their common experience and history with ‘others’. While many academic studies have attempted to re-evaluate the role of the coolie in colonial societies, Coolitude brought out the aesthetics and imaginaries of Indianness, faced with alterity, in its migratory phase and its contribution to the foundation of new nation states.

French language analyses of Coolitude have considered its relationship with the related concept of Créolité (Hookoomsing, 2002) and have situated it within the traditions of diasporic literature (Bragard, 2008). The poetry of Torabully has also featured in works which look more generally at India and its ‘diasporic imaginaries’ (Christian and Misrahi-Barak, 2011). The writings of Torabully and its resonance with the history and literature of indenture was brought to the attention of Anglophone scholarship through the publication of Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora (Carter and Torabully, 2002) and offered insights into the experiences of the indentured labourer faced with alterity, or othering. The Coolitude concept, which is a continuum between the imaginaries, was represented here as an alternative vision of the modern history of diasporic Indians.

The present collection marks a new step in the evolution of Coolitude because it incorporates a series of studies by contributors
across disciplinary backgrounds who describe how the concept has impacted upon their work. It offers both a critique and an evolving paradigm of the theorectization of the Indian labour diaspora. Coolitude is envisaged as a means of re-humanization of the coolie. One part of this process is effected by giving new definition to the term ‘coolie’. The coolie labourers underwent difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences on board ships and also in their adopted countries: and frequently found themselves marginalized and muted. The poetic vision of Khal Torabully endeavours to give voice to the archival silences of this exile.

An important element of Coolitude, as depicted in the poetics of Khal Torabully, is the sea journey, which is seen as the agency of transformation, of change, as there is an intercultural interaction between migrants of diverse ethnic groups, taking place during the voyage on ships. The voyage represents the symbol for change in perception and hence is viewed as an important phase of migrant identity. This has resonances with broader transcultural processes in motion in diaspora. These processes bring about an international cultural identity – which is intended by the denomination ‘coolie’ – that in turn is therefore an identifier that can be appropriate to and appropriated by any migrant or traveller. As the interaction enriches the different cultural groups involved therein, Coolitude may itself be defined as a process of identity construction.

To understand how the identity of the migrants change, whilst in interaction with other ethnic groups both during the sea voyage and through socio-cultural and economic interaction in the adopted country, Torabully deconstructs the stereotypical meanings invested in the word ‘coolie’ by effecting a tabula rasa – so that the meaning of the word is freed of all negative connotations (sectarian influences) to become, in essence, multiple. In so doing, the diaspora is free to forge a new identity, whilst simultaneously keeping a connection with ancestral heritage. Diasporic groups in multi-cultural environments have experienced exile together, despite their
distinct configurations. This shared experience is a crucial and fundamental aspect of the new conscience which underscores Coolitude and gives it the energy and dynamism of a movement. Hence, contends Torabully, the denomination ‘coolie’, and by extension the term ‘indentured’ or ‘engagé’, can be applied to all labouring or disadvantaged groups sharing similar exiles: on plantations, in mines and on the railways and in factories. Metaphorically, all travellers in search of a fortune (or economic betterment) in a foreign country, are coolies, are load-carriers, are the voiceless of their journey, of their life crossing. Unlike Négritude, Coolitude is crucially and vitally non-essentialist in the sense that the historical or class position takes precedence over the idea of ethnic origin. It is a kind of hybridity, a cross-cultural, mosaic identity.

The vitality of Coolitude has brought academics from various disciplines to this field of study. The collection of articles in this special issue interrogates the evolution of the concept as a transnational framework for developing thinking around memory and migration through the work of contemporaries and reflects the diverse expressions of Coolitude in poetry, art, prose, music as well as academic thinking on the topic.

Stitching together the scattered sites of indentureship across the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Nalini Mohabir assesses the global reach of Coolitude, which, she asserts, transcends regions and empires, building a common cross-waters identity out of the experience of indenture. By acutely shining a spotlight on seemingly peripheral colonies and micro-histories, Coolitude achieves a rich register of horizontal linkages across space. Mohabir uses the term ‘register’ to signal her interest in the humanizing tone and context of speaking and writing about indentured labourers chosen by the authors. She aims to unpack examples of Coolitude’s moving register by demonstrating how it has been generative to her own thinking as an Indo-Caribbean scholar, in terms of interpreting historical texts, as well as situating quiet histories within larger social and political questions.
Nalini takes the discussion further by raising the question whether it is necessary for the term coolie to be applied to all, given the transformational ocean voyage, those whose histories have been impacted by the sugar plantation? She offers, for example, the word ‘dougla’ which can be both an Africanized Indian or an Indianized African experience. She says: “*dougla*-ness” speaks to those who form the growing category of “mixed race”, a lived experience not addressed in *Coolitude*, and an omission for creolized societies where ”race” is not a water-tight division.

In the next essay, Dr Michelle Mohabeer evokes forms of knowing that operate within ideas of memory and within an oracular view of history that engages with observation, intuition and self-reflexivity. She analyses the diasporic experience, assessing what it means for the diasporic subject to ‘be betwixt and between, in between spaces, never fully “belonging” to either place’. Of mixed race origin herself, and a queer diasporic woman born in Guyana who emigrated to Canada when she was 12 years old, when she returned home to Guyana to shoot a film, after two decades in Toronto, she found that she ‘was a foreigner – an outsider in my homeland – a place which could not and did not embrace what I was, all that I had become’.

Viewing Coolitude through the film-making lens of Dr Mohabeer we gain insights into the politics of diasporic media, ‘as evidenced in the fluid postmodern style and aesthetics that informs the intersectional politics of coloniality, post-coloniality, culture and identity, exile and displacement, sexuality, trauma and the body’ in two of her films: *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* and *Blue in You*. Through her journey as a film-maker Dr Mohabeer speaks to the language, aesthetics and forms of communication and address by alternative diasporic media to its audiences, underscoring the need for alternative diasporic media, as well as the criteria used to analyze, assess and situate all forms of diasporic media, its audiences and communities.

In the third contribution, Sarojini Lewis, a researcher and photographer, explores photography, moments captured in time,
in order to further understand the phenomenon of Coolitude. The collections of images she uses are from the Völkerkundemuseum, Herrnhut Archive (Germany) and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. The Herrnhut Archive showcases the work of Protestant missionaries, who were in Surinam from 1735 up to the latter part of the 19th century, while the ethnographic Tropenmuseum Amsterdam Archive, founded in 1864, holds a collection of over 100,000 images, many of which are of indentured migrants in Surinam. Her work seeks to ‘explore alternative ways of understanding the colonial Indian labour diaspora, to infuse new meanings into old pictures and to draw upon the reinterpretation of historical images to reframe personal migration stories from an artistic perspective’. She explains that photography had many uses in the 19th century: there were projects commissioned for the documentation of race and class of people in India; it was also used in anthropometric studies of people, such as the anatomical studies carried out by the phrenologist W.E. Marshall. She reveals that many of the images have an underlying agenda, staged to foster a particular idea. In so doing the photographed may have been further alienated. The author’s quest to understand her own Indian heritage becomes a questioning and a visualization of ‘how tradition, cultural performances and the Bhojpuri language are transmitted across generations’. Photographs of a personal nature, as well as the staged performance museum pieces, further elucidate the coolie odyssey here formulated as a genealogical journey as well as one of perception and performance. The gaze of each generation can be as transformative and dynamic as Coolitude itself.

In 2021 a major new development occurred with the translation of Khal Torabully’s Cale d’Etoiles into English as Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude. This was the culmination of several years’ painstaking collaboration as detailed by translator Nancy Naomi Carlson in her contribution. To those of us privileged enough to have followed this remarkable journey it came as no surprise when, in
June 2022 it was announced that the book had won the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize. Nancy has described Khal’s poetry as ‘wildly inventive linguistic acrobatics’ packed with neologisms and intricate wordplay. Rendering this into English was a virtually impossible challenge and yet, over four years, she not only conquered this Everest of ‘lyrical richness, wordplay and corporeal imageries’ but created what the judges of the 2022 prize called a ‘brilliant translation … that matches and reaffirms the multi-layered and multilayered and multilayered and multilayered French, through which Torabully and Carlson walk together hand in hand’.

Fellow translator and author Andrea Jurjević has pointed out that Nancy Naomi Carlson is ‘a celebrated poet in her own right’ and perhaps she alone could have taken on Khal Torabully’s visual, musical and linguistic virtuosity, rendering the ‘flow and weave between languages and neologisms … with dexterity and ease, and with true aesthetic force’. In so doing, Ms Carlson has made a song to humanity which celebrates diversity and resilience available to a worldwide audience.

One of the first ‘students’ of Coolitude, Christian Cuniah, the final contributor to the Resonances section of this special issue, has here translated and revised his French studies Birkbeck thesis on the language and themes in Khal’s epic poem Cale d’Etoiles. Cuniah’s work contextualizes the poetics of Coolitude in the tradition of and moving beyond the preceding Négritude, Créolité and Indianité movements. Quoting frequently from Torabully’s own expositions of his philosophy, he deftly summarizes the importance of Coolitude to what he terms the ‘poetics of the exiled’: its ‘reclamation of the word coolie, the notion of travel as a place of identity transmutation and the linguistic manifestations of this new “coolitude consciousness”’.

The briefer texts in Afterlives point to new trajectories for Coolitude as the concept and the movement extend to new disciplines and endeavours. Rajiv Mohabir evokes his own reactions to the discovery of Coolitude and through his poetry elaborates his
personal version of the concept, emphasizing that it is anti-racist, has the openness to change with those around us, enables us to see and relate to the suffering of colonized people and struggle with those around us for a common good. It serves also as a reminder of destitution: of being erased from land and name, an acknowledgement of the indigenous people on whose land we live. Coolitude is forever movement.

Mohabir envisions through his poems what survives in him from his ancestors’ strains and triumphs. He set out to explain that it is not only in his name and in the core of his being that he finds Coolitude, it is through many things: in the one variety of Bhojpuri spoken in Guyana – in the folksongs; in being a Desi; in the migration of the whales, as he depicts in his poems, whose ‘journeys’ he likens to indentured migrants; in being queer migrants, as in the story of a transgender woman named Rukmini in his ‘Coolie Oddity’. In his attitude towards the afflicted, his Coolitude is invested with compassion. More importantly, he sees Coolitude as a phenomenon in continuous motion, as movement in a continuum – in perpetual change and transformation: ‘I am a queer citizen of motion and movement. My home is in journey.’

Next, cultural studies lecturer and performance artist Andil Gosine demonstrates how Torabully’s Coolitude concept rejects biological essentialism and advocates multiple, fluctuating notions of ‘India’ and Indianness. In so doing, Torabully joins with other postcolonial thinkers in returning agency, and humanity, to the colonized subject. This important position offers a framework for the generation of complex identity production and history-telling. In his article, Gosine provides an autobiographical narrative to describe his own journey, via Coolitude, to ‘achieve humanization, to present these intimate details as sign of confidence in claiming my complex subjectivity, my own attempt to “man me”’.

Gosine argues that Khal Torabully’s poetics encourages three processes towards the re-humanization of the coolies. The first, he writes, is the ‘work of recognition, of coming to terms to the
brutal history of indentureship … strategies of dehumanization. Indentures’ low wages, torturous journey and living conditions were premised entirely on the assumption that they were lesser humans.’ The second kind of work is ‘grieving’, he writes:

Torabully’s poems are both an act of and call for grieving. His poem that most clearly communicates this manifesto is ‘The Tears of Exile’… Coolitude demands mourning not only as recognition for and tribute for indentures, but also as a healing strategy operating at both the private and public, a practice toward claim of a fuller humanity.

The third kind of work which Gosine believes is understated is the call for re-humanization. He questions the idea of ‘rejecting biological essentialism and advocating multiple, fluctuating notions of “India” and Indianness’.

Ryan Smith’s essay takes as its subject Gosine’s series of Cane Portraiture performances and demonstrates how they have expanded the field of relations surrounding ‘Coolitude’ – the dissemination of Indian labour during the 19th century – by redressing one of its most indispensable symbols and discourses, that of the ‘coolie odyssey’, into the vicissitudes of the present day. It is here in the artist’s uncompromising attempt to locate ‘home’ as a metaphorical and all too real voyage spanning land, sea and air that the initial kala pani – the ‘black sea’ crossed by all Indian migrants – has taken on new and unresolved forms. Gosine and his work stress that the pathos of displacement ebbs through generations like the ocean they once crossed. Those deep waters remain with them, yet the epic odyssey which historically defines subaltern ‘coolies’ and their descendants is shifting and unstable; it is, as Neil Bissoondath states, a state of being that neither gives up the past nor accepting the fate of the present.

Smith elaborates how Gosine’s work uses signs and signifiers that are familiar to the diasporic Indians to reinforce its cultural
heritage. For example, while Gosine was looking through his family photographs he found:

> backdrops displaying iconic architecture such as the Paris’s Eiffel Tower and London’s Big Ben clock tower, in addition to other European monuments. The existence of this vernacular imagery throughout the colonized Caribbean demonstrates a sense of longing, feeling of nostalgia, or idealization for Europe … that Gosine deconstructs such images of Europe by replacing them with signifiers of his birthplace Trinidad and the sugar cane plantations that grow there.

Those signifiers are also reminiscent of the journey of the coolie migrants, and in so doing, Gosine is mixing past and present histories to reinforce the cultural identity of the diasporic subjects. These objects and subjects in the collection of photographs are the cultural, social, political and historical components of Coolitude. Gosine is bringing back familiarity by using ancestral heritage objects; they also bring pain, those that represent the journey of migration, as they are loaded with meanings. Ryan Smith, however, explains that: ‘photographs are not easy recollections of the past; instead, they trace events, things, and sensorial experiences cut from the flesh of lived reality and preserved for posterity.’

Coolitude as a process of identity construction is addressed by historical geographer Reshaad Durgahee, who contends that while the concept has effectively acknowledged the pioneering work that has been done to date on Indian indenture and the diaspora left in its wake, it can also be taken further as the children of that diaspora emigrate elsewhere and construct even newer identities. Durgahee applies his expertise to the concept of Coolitude, by expanding on a new perspective of time and space in Coolitude. He looks at the trails of migrations, the chronology and the spaces of diaspora cultures and points out the interconnectedness of the transcultural process:
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.

Coolitude, given the history of migration worldwide, seemingly encompasses many countries already, in time and space, although proper academic work needs be carried out to ascertain the stretch of its trail/mark over the globe.

The various components of Coolitude: places, tools, experiences, etc., are partially brought back to life by historians who provide necessary context, factual accounts and data. In so doing, they not only supply the building blocks of the concept of Coolitude. Their work is enhanced and redefined by poets and artists, who collaborate to give voice to the voiceless. Diasporic subjects today have a history, and can also create a memory of the past through Coolitude. Hence Coolitude is found in the works of many local authors, and even in the local variations of words. Coolitude has evolved into an attitude of resistance towards fallacious post-colonial formal narratives and its very openness to new expressions and perspectives, contributes to and reveals the realities of Coolitude. In his contribution to this collection, acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh recalls his encounter with Khal’s writing and his experiences on Mauritius while gathering material for his novel *Sea of Poppies* – itself inspired in part by Torabully’s collaborative work – and reflects on the impact of fallacious western perspectives which of course Coolitude explicitly rejects.

‘Mapped onto the monolith of empire: mountain ranges, harbours and sugar estates inked degrees west from London. The colonizer etches boundaries and people in its name. An imaginary landscape of a cane stalk spun into your blood, the black and white photographs hang in the National Archives: Coolitude
survives.’ So writes Suzanne Persard in her evocative tribute to the memorialization of Indian labour migration. Coolitude, she tells us, is found in archival data and other primary sources. Diaspora brings renewal and hope: ‘Exile affords the genesis of a third dawn: our bodies forge contours of a new hyphenated history.’

The practice of photographing migrants who left India to work as indentured labourers in South Africa, Mauritius, the Caribbean and Fiji has produced a unique visual archive of ordinary working-class brown folk, then termed coolies. Although instituted, from the 1860s onwards, chiefly as a method of recording and policing colonial immigrants, these marks of otherness have taken on subsequent and important layers of meaning. The photograph was a weapon used to accompany the deportation of labourers who had been deemed ‘incorrigible vagrants’, persons unwilling or unable to work and thereby ejected from the colony and shipped back to India, along with a list of their misdemeanours and a photograph designed to ensure that officials would prevent the return of such individuals. The photograph was also used to demarcate the coolie – the person still serving an indenture – from those who had completed their contracts, acquiring the status of ‘old immigrant’ for which privilege they were forced to pay a large sum to acquire a ticket or pass which would permit them to travel freely. In the final contribution to this special issue, Danny Amos Flynn reflects on his encounter with the Coolitude corpus and his own collaborative work on the visual and written archive.

Coolitude as we have seen is embracing new perspectives. Academics, all over the world, from various disciplines, continue to contribute to and expand on this concept. This special issue reinforces our understanding of Coolitude as a dynamic movement which proposes an exchange between cultures and imaginaries on an egalitarian basis, by presenting a series of afterlives and resonances which together provide a framework for a continuing and expanding engagement in shared narratives and a mosaic of identity construction. The articles presented here
and a mosaic of identity construction. The articles presented here therefore collectively mark a new phase in the ongoing development of the Coolitude movement and it is hoped will be a considered a useful contribution to this growing field of study.

REFERENCES


Torabully, Khal. 1999. *Chair Corail: Fragments Coolies* (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge éditions)