In the registers of Coolitude
Speaking through speechlessness, interpreting inscriptions

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ABSTRACT
This essay offers a reflection on the interstices between words, silences, the unutterable, and the imaginary in Khal Torabully and Marina Carter’s ground-breaking work, Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora. Further, this essay ponders how these silent spaces relate to the archives, and points to how the act of re-voicing or reclaiming the ‘coorie’ might be envisioned through relational and/or paradoxical spaces.

KEYWORDS
Coolitude, indentureship, silences, embodied histories

Coolitude, a boundary-pushing collaboration between Oxford-trained historian Marina Carter and poet of ‘plural visions and peripheries’ Khal Torabully, seeks to re-contour the truth function of the Archives with a sotto voce of literary endeavours.¹ The book’s foremost contribution is to expand our imaginaire of indentured humanity beyond the gaunt body of a so-called ‘coorie’ labourer (a cog in the wheel of sugar production).² Through a wider scope, it echoes Césaire’s call to resist the imperial forces that ‘reduced humanity to a [monolingual] monologue’³. Coolitude’s reach is global. Stitching together the scattered sites of

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indentureship across the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, it transcends regions and empires, building a common cross-waters identity out of the experience of indenture.

Few book-length studies of Indian indentureship have attempted this breadth, as most scholars gravitate towards a national or regional focus, or singular empire lens. David Northrup’s *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism* has a similar scope, however it takes an analytical approach to the imperial system of indentureship. 4 Hugh Tinker’s sweeping tome, *A New System of Slavery*, does not shy away from affect in the archives; it combines systemic analysis with emotional testimony found in the archives, to give insight into the subjective experience of indenture. 5 In my view, *Coolitude* is an heir to this aspect of Tinker, building on the archive of indentured migrant voices to shape an imaginary of the indentured experience. Vijay Mishra’s *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* furthers the depth of this endeavour by theorizing indenture’s diasporic wounds (e.g., trauma, displacement, capitalism), based on psychoanalytic theory, and literary analysis. 6

*Coolitude* is primarily interested in writing across the iterations of connected experiences that compose sugar colonies. By acutely shining a spotlight on ostensibly peripheral colonies and micro-histories, Carter and Torabully reward their readers with a rich register of horizontal linkages across space. I use the term ‘register’ to signal my interest in the humanizing tone and context of speaking and writing about indentured labourers chosen by the authors. Their register, an interplay between the audible and the perceptible, attends to multiple modes of shared history, including traditional archives, fiction and poetry, and the spaces in between. I aim to unpack examples of their moving register by demonstrating how it has been generative to my 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.

I first arrived at *Coolitude* as a Master’s student in immigration studies with an interest in indentured returns to India. Debates over
the nature of indentureship raged – was it a voluntary or involuntary migration? Were they immigrants or ‘coolies’ trapped in a ‘new system of slavery’? Adrift in partial perspectives distant from the stories of my elders, I stumbled across these illuminating words:

*In essence, historians are still struggling with a system which was uncompromising in its unpalatability and harshness, and yet which produced, after decades of poverty, thriving, prosperous communities around the British Empire.*

I had an epiphany: why did the experience of indentureship have to be reduced to *either* surviving *or* thriving, when it could encompass the enigmas of both? This was my earliest encounter with a historically grounded argument that balanced the complexity of possibilities alongside the oppression of an imperially controlled labour system. Thanks to *Coolitude*’s insightful summation, I awoke to the necessity of holding on to contradictory tensions, balancing my own desires for wholeness (of understanding, as well as identity) with the fragments and incompleteness of scattered archives.

An introduction of textured complexity is by itself an important intervention into academic discourse because ‘the Coolie’s story … has been shipwrecked (‘erased’) in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse as well as a world of publication and criticism.’ Questions of epistemic responsibility concern not only academics but a range of communities as well. To this day, descendants of the enslaved and the indentured struggle with representations in history, as well as the politics of memories in the present. The question of what it means to build nations on top of plantation societies founded on white gold (sugar) is closely tied to ‘the quarrels of history.’ Can sugar colonies be spaces of History (with a capital H)? If so, how do we write about the contributions of ancestors if our lineages and linkages have vanished into the ocean? The imperative to remember is particularly salient for descendants of enslaved Africans, who became ‘native Creole’ (in the sense of a quintessential African-ness, that operated within, and eluded, European hierarchies, and shaped plantation societies). Acknowledging the trauma of slavery’s middle passage and the violent severing of
familial ties was an important catalyst for the philosophy of Negritude, which sought to heal the gap between the Antilles and Africa, and to challenge French assimilationist policies. ‘East Indians’, in contrast, were thought to stubbornly cling to their cultural traditions and homeland, resulting in their alterity from creolized society (and assumed resistance to mixing, a process fundamental to creole belonging). Neither view took full account of the complex ethno-racial-cultural mix of sugar colonies, including African, Asian, European and Indigenous influences.

Only upon my second reading of Coolitude did I come to understand the shifting memories (under the skin) that the poetic text represented. Disrupting geography as identity, Coolitude moves us from the surety of land to the uncertainty of the sea by envisaging roots, not in a totalizing ‘Mother India’, but in an oceanic cradle of origins. This is crucial because ‘coolie’ labourers, culled mostly from an Indian peasant population, would not have known the shipping distance to their various destinations (in some cases, places so small they are literally ‘off the [world] map’ of imperial cartography). Even if they had an inkling of the location of their final port, they would have found it hard to picture their new lives. They were entering a plantation modernity unlike their previous ‘village India’, a modernity that would eventually transform who they were as a people. Hence watery beginnings capture an inability to recover what was irretrievably lost at sea (a kind of purity of identity); the unimaginable voyage of change across oceans (communal transformation); as well as the imprecise point of rupture from homeland (the break, over dark waters). This shift away from a fixed point of origin represents simultaneously a complicated disavowal of nostalgic longing and a claim to underwater sea routes that connect the diaspora to India, and to each other. Departing from Negritude, however, Coolitude advocates for a loosening of genealogical traces, towards an acceptance of a creative, creolized condition that extends to all who are shaped by mutual encounters, as well as inherited scars, within and beyond a plantation imaginaire.
Coolitude is an inventive, bold intervention into the silences of ‘East Indian’ experiences, which often appear invisible under plantation hierarchies of suffering. A fluid understanding of the indentured Indian, shaped by oceans and sugar (is)lands as well as India, is necessary to locate the transformed social world of Indo-diasporic communities. However, a scholarly positioning of this journey within conversations of postmodern hybridity can be slippery. To be rooted in the composite character of Coolitude is still to locate India as a referent, albeit not the ultimate referent of homeland (i.e., calling attention to ‘Indianness’ in relation to ‘Otherness’).11 Most sugar colonies have histories of ethno-racial difference if not competition and/or conflict. A transformational ocean voyage that recuperates ‘the coolie’ is anchored in an Indo-centric experience, and thus is not necessarily a liberatory concept to include all those whose histories have been impacted by the sugar plantation.

In the years since Coolitude’s publication an alternative syncretic trajectory specific to the Caribbean has emerged – ‘dougla poetics’. Dougla (like coolie) is a reclaimed pejorative (dougla refers to a person of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean parentage).12 Dougla poetics, as outlined by Shalini Puri, engages with representations of both Africanized Indian, and Indianized African experiences.13 The popular reception of hybridity discourses is worth considering, especially if one is interested in shifting societal perceptions. Dougla poetics may go further than Coolitude in provocatively disturbing members of the general public (both Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean) who seek comfort in an essential subject formation. While a metaphor of tangled genealogies may conjure a continuum of fears including deracination or cultural loss, ‘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. However, some might argue, as has been the case at various historical points, that an over-emphasis on cultural mixing may obscure efforts at ‘decolonial love’ (an ability to love one’s
ethno-racial community free from colonially-induced self-hatred or cultural inferiority complexes). Each untidy conversation has its purpose, audience, and political context which register differently at different times. The main reason I highlight different conversational possibilities is to note the intricacies of Coolitude, grounded in the knowledge that shared spaces are always about inter-relations, and to suggest that the specificities of experience and located speech need not preclude recognition of the lived realities or historical sufferings of others. By placing the opening chapter of Coolitude in dialogue with or in contrast to Negritude, Créolité, or Indienocéanisme (the plurality of Indian Ocean communities), Carter and Torabully specifically aim to show us that we cannot understand Indo-diasporic experiences without a relational framework to Afro-diasporic experiences.

With each re-reading of Coolitude, I renew my appreciation for the fine-spun layers of historicist evidence and imaginative reasoning working together across multiple registers, to give voice or make legible that which may fall into the cracks of History. From my own position, as a scholar as well as daughter of the Caribbean, I am particularly struck by the relevance of language and literacy to understanding the implications of labour migration. Take, for example, Trinidad: amongst ‘East Indians’ who were not converted to Christianity (i.e., the majority), only 19 per cent were literate in 1942 (with the highest illiteracy rates found in the cane fields of Caroni). Before the extension of Trinidadian voting rights, a controversial English-language literacy test was proposed in 1943. This was essentially a manoeuvre to prevent Indo-Trinidadians from becoming a voting bloc via the disenfranchisement of estate labourers who did not have access to education. Fortunately, the proposal was defeated and universal suffrage was achieved in 1946.

Shifting to the present time of the continental Caribbean, Guyana has a reported literacy rate of 92 per cent. Yet a visible labouring or homeless/precariously housed child population implies continuing challenges for attaining basic literacy among those most marginalized. Aside from the material, there are also
representational challenges. Naipaul’s description of alienation while reading about daffodils during his colonial school days in the first half of the twentieth century haunts the twenty-first.\textsuperscript{18} It is not unusual for Guyanese schools to have primary books that reflect Western signifiers (e.g., folk tales about fairies), rather than local stories (in a country rich with its own supernatural lore). As Ngugi wa Thiong’o urges us to consider, the word can either be an intimate connection to place or an utterance of exile.\textsuperscript{19} To read words that reflect their usage in place (or placelessness) immediately draws you into the particularities of an emotional and aesthetic world, and one’s position in situ. Literacy is not simply about being able to read and write, but also being able to see yourself represented and validated. The word is also an expression of resistance, empowering one to participate in society, challenge structures of oppression and poverty, and advocate for one’s self without having to rely on someone else’s interpretation. Therefore language, reconfigured after the crossing, as well as literacy, ‘constitutes a space of resistance and residence’, within both past and present ‘Coolitude communities’.\textsuperscript{20}

An emphasis on language is signalled at the beginning of Coolitude when its authors cite Mikhail Bakhtin’s focus on ‘double-accented’ (i.e., polyphonic) and ‘double-styled’ (i.e., multivocal) language as a diasporic space of contestation – between the many mother tongues of ‘coolies’ and the language of colonial administration.\textsuperscript{21} Mediated tongues free the readers of Coolitude from an insistence on an absolute history of indenture experience, and instead open spaces of dialogue with the present, as well as the possibilities of impressionist language combined with institutional knowledge, to convey both individual and collective life. While Gayatri Spivak highlights her concern over the impossibilities of recouping subaltern voices embedded in dominant archivally crafted narratives, Spivak, like Coolitude, leaves open the rustle of papered-over experiences.\textsuperscript{22} Torabully describes his own dexterous use of the archives: ‘I played with languages and archives,
moved to silences of archives, sketched the centrality of the voyage of the coolie as a space of construction/deconstruction of identities, giving a primordial role to the ocean so as to move away from the ‘kala pani petrification.’ We might refer to his writing practice as moving through the gaps and silences of the archives, propelled by empathy. Below I illustrate nuances of a historical and emotional register uncovered by Coolitude by drawing upon two discursive practices, one that whispers to me (despite speechlessness), and the other that writes upon my mind (in enduring inscription). I conclude with recognition and appreciation for ways the registers of Coolitude work to name the hard-to-name, below-the-surface currents that flow through indentureship and its after-life.

NON-PAROLE/NON-DIT (NO WORDS/UNSAYABLE)

MC: According to you, a cultural and human non-dit (unspoken speech) needs to be expressed at the heart of Coolitude.

KT: … due to distance between the original country and the colony, and to the size of the indentured population as compared to other components of the plantocratic society, and also to the separation of coolie settlements and their geographical locations, the coolie experienced acutely the sense of the loss of his/her self.

The above exchange regarding an unsaid, unmapped past sparks central questions for the diaspora in the present. Who are we? How did we get here, and where do we go from here? These seemingly trite but nonetheless resonant questions of ‘becoming’ seek a form of legitimacy against colonial perceptions of a non-people temporarily passing through (i.e., cheap, tropical, migrant labour). Hence, the unfinished business of writing against the silences, absences and erasure of labouring lives in the archives
has been a key pulse behind postcolonialism for several decades. As Coolitude notes, however, sometimes one must dwell in the uncomfortable space of that which cannot be said.

Non-dit is not a large aspect of the text, but it is a significant one. Torabully offers a definition of non-dit as ‘unsaid conflicts’ and elaborates that in literature it is a moment ‘transmuted into l’incommunicabilité (non-communication) between characters who belong to two worlds’ (i.e., indentureship or slavery). Mutual incomprehensibility between indentured and enslaved/Indo- and Afro-Caribbean/present and past focuses attention on what underlines the unsaid – a lingering ‘struggle for territory and identity’ (within a system not of either’s making).

In English, non-communication and incommunicability have potentially slightly different connotations. Incommunicability suggests an inability to communicate due to a lack of common ground (e.g., in language, experience or history). An example of incommunicability, I would argue, is found within Trinidadian novelist Earl Lovelace’s Salt. It is epitomized by the encounter between Feroze, an Indian character, and JoJo, an African. JoJo is advocating for reparations for slavery, and Feroze, a time-expired indentured labourer, has been given land in lieu of a return passage to India. The dialogue is terse as the characters encounter each other for the first time:

‘Your contract? You have a contract? Who give you this contract?’ JoJo interrogating him as if he was Protector of Crown Lands …

‘Sorry’ Feroze tell him. ‘I just come here to work.’

‘Don’t worry to be sorry,’ JoJo tell him. ‘I will tell you what I doing here.’

‘Really,’ Feroze tell him, ‘you don’t have to tell me nothing. …’

Both Feroze and JoJo cannot understand each other’s experience of how they have come to be in this land. Non-communication, on the other hand, conveys a failure to communicate as a result of a
number of possible factors, including unwillingness. This case of *non-dit* is suggested by the uneasy subtitle of David Hinds’ book *Race and Political Discourse in Guyana: A Conversation with African Guyanese in the Presence and Hearing of Indian Guyanese*, which intimates an apprehension over mutual dialogue. A distinction should be made between total incomprehensibility, suggesting no points of connection (or at the very least a wearisome project, e.g., the latter example), and moments of incommunicability that attest to the gaps in communication that may, with effort, be bridged, providing telling potential for a shared future (the former example).

A more hopeful meaning of *l’incommunicabilité* concerns me not only as a point of entry into dialogue, but also a recognition of my own anxiety in finding the appropriate words to speak of history (e.g., Massacre? Vengeance?). Take for example, Guyana’s independence where the unspeakable acts as a reminder of fraught silence. Guyana celebrates Independence Day on May 26th, a date that coincides with racialized violence (murders, rapes, arson) against the Indo-Guyanese population of Wismar (a town on the Demerara River), prior to independence. However, to recall solely this event, and not others (such as the subsequent fatal explosion of the *Sun Chapman* ferry, killing its Afro-Guyanese passengers), is to be trapped within colonial binaries of docile/savage, while equating traumas risks false equivalencies. Both are positions of personal discomfort. On a national scale, a *non-parole/non-dit* acts to confine mourning to the sphere of the private or ethno-racial, without national reckoning or reconciliation. Unresolved for me, and more broadly for ‘all those involved, all those consumed’, is the question of an alternative to *non-parole*. What is the potential register that would avoid the silences of history without repeating prior exclusions of memory, reproducing conflations of events, or risking the competitions of others’ suffering?

Carter raises a possible register to surmount difference. Instead of focusing on historical divergence, why not convergences...
through ‘the cry from the hold’ (summoning a sound below deck that echoes across both the middle passage and the kala pani)?

Torabully specifies the ‘murmur from the hold’, which reflects the freedom of movement of indentured labourers on the ship, relative to the shackles of the enslaved. Whether a piercing cry or a muffled sob, each points to elements of history that cannot be repressed and may offer ways to understand – not alike histories – but interlocking histories. The image of the slave ship the Brookes was a deplorable blueprint of African bodies squeezed into the hold, with barely adequate oxygen for survival. It was selected by abolitionists for amplification in the cause of emancipation. Anil Persaud outlines an economy of the indenture ship’s hold in the era of ‘free labour’, from the minimal calculations of sleep space, the precise allocation of fresh air, to the doling out of food rations, all of which imply measured and meagre indentured lives. In her documentation of the rape and murder of Maharani, on board the Allanshaw, Verene Shepherd finds rumours in the archives of indentured women being allowed up from the hold to stay on deck, suggesting a coercive sexual economy on ships. However, a chronology of successive histories in the transition from forced labour to neither-forced-but-not-quite-free become either muted, or in the process of surfacing, transmuted into ‘the complex attitudes’ of living with difference in creole societies, i.e., parallel or periodized trajectories that results in collective amnesia over contingent points of history.

L’être sans parole (a portrayal of the ‘cooie’ as a wordless being) is another discursive site of suffering identified by Torabully. Similar to Spivak, Torabully takes notice of the way those who have no voice (e.g., ‘the cooie’) are authored by those with power to describe their lives. Although Torabully is drawing on an example from fiction, illustrations can also be found in the archives. Amar Wahab’s exploration of the deceased indentured labourer Kunduppa’s bloody footprint found in the archives suggests a visual, but wordless testimony to the limits of agency under the
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weight of colonial violence. Torabully is concerned with ‘the wordless being’ on the plantation periphery depicted as:

…crouch[ing] with his [or her] hoe in the sugarcane fields, with nothing to say in the elaboration of a mosaic identity. This is where Coolitude brings a humane dimension to light. It reminds one of the necessity of the principle of equality of social, cultural and historical components at the theoretical core of creolization.

Both Torabully and Spivak suggest that despite the unknowability of subaltern experiences (written into being by others), it is still important to search for springs that run counter to projects of oppression. For Torabully, this is the promise of creolization.

I am reminded here of a landmark moment in Indo-Trinidadian women’s political participation. In his capacity as then Opposition Leader, Basdeo Panday (later the first ‘East Indian’ Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago) appointed a sugar worker to the Trinidad and Tobago Senate in 1976, another first. He recalls:

When I was in Opposition, I appointed a cane cutter, Dora Bridgemohan, to the Senate. People said why are you appointing this lady? She can’t even speak properly. I told them I didn’t put her there to speak. … I chose a cane cutter because I wanted to show … you have a right to walk in the corridors of power.

Bridgemohan did not actively participate in the debates of the Senate (perhaps due to self-consciousness over her lack of formal education and Creole/‘Coolie’ language). There is, therefore, an ambiguity in Bridgemohan as an example of empowerment, since someone else is speaking for her, even if in the name of wider change. Nonetheless, Bridgemohan is remembered proudly as the ‘ohrni-cladded … Senator, whose “blood, sweat, and tears” on the fields of Caroni, was like an Olympic Medal to the grass-root sugar workers’. For her peers, Bridgemohan’s bodily presence spoke, even when her silence persisted. She constituted what
Carter and Torabully might term a humane dimension of resistance. I think it is important to remember her, ‘from below’ (i.e., from the perspective of her fellow sugar workers), for whom her symbolic non-parole was seen a precursor to emancipatory speech acts, articulating out of the stillness of silence an expression of Trinibagonian political belonging and cultural citizenship.

THE ‘SCRIPTURAL WOUND’

*I am a poacher

*I write the history of those who tore its pages

*Of runaway clerks fixing the seal

*On my surrender …

Torabully, responding to a question posed by Carter on the constituents of the ‘coolie’s memory,’ notes the colonial rationality and legal significance of having an individual name written on an indenture contract as a privilege of institutional memory. In contrast to slavery, this gave the labourer a recorded lineage, recognition of human status and rights to habeus corpus. Indian names, now Anglicized, transliterated into roman script and eventually conforming to European surname traditions, also signalled a ‘scriptural wound’ – as Torabully argues, a defining ‘point of no return’ in identity and place.

Even before the name, however, is the thumbprint. ‘The lives of indentured labourers were regulated by pieces of paper, generally written in unfamiliar languages. Their signature (or more usually thumb print) on an indenture contract … was therefore an act of trust.’

David Dabydeen, in his BBC documentary, imagines the performance of signing, or more precisely, pressing thumb to paper:

*There must have been a great moment of drama when they are asked to sign this piece of paper, and having to press their thumb into the ink, and
press it on this piece of paper … They would not have understood what pressing their thumbs on a piece of paper meant, because they wouldn’t have known that is the equivalent of a signature.\textsuperscript{44}

Thus whether the thumbprint was a mark of consent, confusion or compulsion (economic or otherwise) is ambiguous. How much clearer consent would have been if contracts were written in Indic languages with names signed. Nevertheless, the thumbprint is not altogether illegible; it survives as a nineteenth-century mark of biometrical border crossing.\textsuperscript{45} The ‘coolic’ is always a corporeal existence, especially when he or she comes into contact with the archives.

Even so, the contract was also the indentured labourer’s first scriptural entry into ‘the coolie code: colonial languages and legalities’.\textsuperscript{46} As a bureaucratic tool, the emigration pass formed part of the colonial inventory; it assigned each labourer a number that followed their institutional existence, as well as reached into the future. The number was duplicated in corresponding documents such as the ‘exemption of labour certificate’ (marking the end of servitude) or birth certificates of children providing a biographical paper trail for descendants. It has been a rich source of data for researchers and descendants alike. In addition to the thumbprint, the emigration pass recorded categories of information about the indentured: name, father’s name, caste, village and district of origin, bodily scars, year and ship of passage, as well as occupation. All entries were hand-written by an official, except the response to the question of occupation – invariably ‘labourer’ – which was typed.\textsuperscript{47} This standardized category constructed the ‘coolic’ as the labouring subject of the plantation, placed within a web of ‘colonial social and economic relationships’.\textsuperscript{48}

Carter and Torabully highlight the impact of print and paperwork culture on ‘coolies’. Indentured labourers quickly understood that ‘their very status and situation depended on the correct formulation of the written word’, that is, written in the
colonizer’s tongue. While mastery over imperial languages was a struggle, it is important to remember that not all indentured labourers were illiterate, especially in their native language. In his translation of Lalbihari’s Ḍāmarā Phāga Bahāra (1916), the first written book produced by an indentured labourer in Guyana, Narinder Mokhamsing states: ‘One can imagine that in the period that this book was published, it was not usual among poor immigrants or their descendants, to produce literary works, let alone their publication. The production of this book disturbs the image of universally impoverished, under-developed, illiterate ‘cooies’. Some had ‘a culture of the written word, and they set off on their voyage with books: the Qu’ran, the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana’. Written in familiar languages, sacred texts sustained the spirit through the language of the divine or mythical, and were an important way in which links to prior language and culture were brought forward in a new context, albeit under unequal conditions.

Regardless, theirs was no longer a language to return to, in terms of the day-to-day operations of the sugar estate. This new life required English. Not being able to communicate in the colonizer’s language could lead to adverse circumstances: ‘a misleading clause … or a mistaken spelling … could spell economic hardship or prison. Thus, indentured labourers had to start anew, not only by adopting a new tongue, but also attempting to understand how complex colonial codes were inscribed on, and circumscribed, their bodies. Within the attestations of various petitions, letters and court documents, we have hints of historical and psychological positionings navigated through the narrow openings of ‘the coolie code’. While under indenture, a labourer was not allowed to leave the plantation without permission in the form of a pass (hence elaborate vagrancy laws, which Torabully proposes was similar to the slave codes against marronage, i.e., used to curb resistance). Therefore, a written entreaty for leave ‘was a serious undertaking’ usually requiring the services of a letter-writer.
A letter-writer would convey formal deference to the colonial power, indicated by ‘the obsequious –honoured Sir’ or humbly address the Protector of Immigrants as ‘our mother and father’, a gentle reminder of the duty of care held by the office. These examples of submissive, self-effacing language denotes the cumulative papercuts of proving oneself ‘deserving’ of compassion under the hegemony of plantation authority.

For those who could not afford a letter writer, plaintive appeals written ‘in their own broken English’ demonstrate ‘the process through which the unfamiliar language was painfully acquired’. Carter and Torabully explain that missives, with names no longer signed by thumbprint but in native languages, suggests the indentured’s increasingly sophisticated understanding of their position on the plantation; in other words, language was a sign of agency. Although not all felt empowered, the extraordinary ‘bound coolie’, Bechu, who testified in front of the West Indian Royal Commission (1897), stated that fear of abuse from estate drivers kept complaints to a minimum. Aside from the form, there was also a performative aspect of language: dramatic signs of helplessness might be gleaned through threats of suicide (an ultimate expression of muteness), which were evidently ‘a notable feature of the petitions of indentured Indians’, and even appeared as a tool of protest into the mid-twentieth century, when a group of Indo-Trinidadians threatened mass suicide if they were not provided return passage to India (as stipulated in indenture contracts).

Gradually, bilingual facility became the every-day norm. For most, bilingualism reflected a mix of Bhojpuri (the lingua franca on plantations) and Creolese, together construing what Dabydeen ironically refers to as ‘coolie babble’. In my interview with a witness to the last ‘jahaj’ (ship) to return ex-indentured labourers from Guyana back to India, Mrs Ramcharan (then 83 years old) recalled that the night before the ship sailed, people were ‘talking coolie’ and singing ‘chela pardesh/hambi chela, let’s leave the foreign land/all ah we go’. While stigmatized, ‘coolie talk’ was also
the vernacular of emotions, conveying the thoughts and feelings of a people, against the din of the plantocracy.

Bilingualism in written form was necessary to pursue a status beyond ‘coolie’. My own grandfather, born in Guyana, received Hindi lessons from a Surinamese instructor (who crossed the Corentyne River border). However, this was not a return to ‘the authentic’. Hindi was prestigious. Connected as it was to a line of literary and devotional texts, it was viewed as a more refined, sophisticated language, compared to the earthiness of Bhojpuri linked to the plantation (through everyday language and folk songs). In this sense, even a ‘native’ language could be alienating.

Similarly, the acquisition of standard English was couched as a developmental aspiration (to move away from the plantation), both personally and communally. Fluency in standard English could lead to venerated public service jobs, even if merely low-level positions within the colonial state apparatus such as interpreter/translator. An ability to read and write in Hindi and standard English (acquired through a colonial education, e.g., texts such as the *Royal Readers*) enabled my grandfather to move to the city, and obtain the position of interpreter clerk in British Guiana’s Immigration Office. From there he was chosen to sail to India, representing British Guiana as the person charged with repatriating ex-indentured labourers (in 1955). When I travelled to India to research the journey of this last return ship from the Caribbean to India, he wrote me a formal letter of introduction, in lovely ‘bureaucratese’ complete with Latin phrases, a style of writing learned from his days in the British-ruled office. However, this textual style may conceal, as well as reveal aspects of diasporic life. Torabully points out that the singular mental energy devoted to master language and education, in order to climb out of grinding poverty, came at a cost – an estrangement from self. The effort detracted from ‘the aesthetic projection of [one] self in a literary and thus transubstantiated social dimension’. That is to say, it has been an arduous journey to move beyond literacy as a utilitarian
tool, towards language as an artful expression embracing the interiority and full complexity of labouring lives with the potential for healing.

**ON DIT (ONE SAYS)**

*Coolitude: to submit to the Word*

*Without losing the memory*

*Who yet remembers nothing …* 65

‘On,’ in French, is an indefinite pronoun (one), suggesting either a general or collective context. *One* might say, as Torabully suggests above, that the register of *Coolitude* is a memory both lost and found. *Coolitude* gifts us with a different kind of archive by weaving together ephemeral moments of silence read between the lines, together with enduring inscriptions in colonial texts and bodies. At the core of archival memory, however, remains the issue of language and literacy, as Raffique Shah’s recent tribute to his father reminds us:

> Fathers like mine – ordinary men who are barely literate in most instances and worked hard to provide for their families – are remembered only by their immediate families and maybe some friends and people in the communities in which they lived and died.

> In a society where success is measured by materialism or academic achievements available only to the few in his time, men like Haniff Shah – a sugar worker who garnered neither fame nor fortune – are consigned to mere statistics in dusty ledgers lodged in dank archives.66

On one hand, those who toil in the sugar industry are often reduced to minor characters in the catalogue of cane field capitalism. Cumulatively these ordinary lives have shaped a culture, but without writing are these memories destined for erasure? On the
other hand, institutional research into indentureship (and its afterlife), relying primarily on empirical methods, can provide insight into the vital statistics of colonial machinery, for example, the number of labourers shipped, tonnes of cane cut. But the colonial record is attuned to the racialized body (till it is no longer productive), not the life behind cutlass-carrying hands. A historical division between body, mind and soul (the coolie as an extension of sugar production, not a person with intellect, desire or vision beyond the estate) casts a shadow over indentureship.

In this regard, Carter and Torabully do not want us to forget our epistemic responsibilities to the in-between spaces of history. They ask us to consider: why have certain forms of knowledge carried authority, and others have failed to be seen or heard? By compelling us to ponder this question, the text guides us through porous and parenthetical spaces of existence across the diaspora. In the context of anxiety – both personal anxiety continuously driving the subaltern to seek out betterment, and the ‘civilizational anxieties’ embedded within the hierarchies of plantation society – the aesthetics of language act as a form of counter-speech, restoring human qualities to seemingly mundane existence.

But even if the experiences of ‘coolies’, coded in the complex textualities of the archives, could be recuperated, memory work through colonial archives (often concerned with sugar production, plantation discipline, and governance of black and brown bodies) can never be the final word. Archival memory privileges the written, leaving out many voices. Yet the language we speak differs from that which we write, and the unspoken escapes our lips only in sighs. On écoute (we listen). This is where the methodological intervention of Coolitude, through its use of evocative language to name sites of ‘coolie’ pain and pressure points, helps us to understand the full context and spirit of a sugar worker. Poetry and literary prose emphasizes the subjective, restoring words to the soul, creativity to the plantation, the aspiration and
love enlivening past lives. Such elusory and imprecise words challenge the methods of conventional historians. A poetic imaginary, however, tempers the conceit of historical authority, illuminating the gaps missed by a disciplinary focus, and through the genre of the subjective, offering a more emotionally honest way to encompass the truths of what happened after the break. This is the beauty of Coolitude, in acknowledging that the archives and its silences are not final, Carter and Torabully leave open the possibilities of emotionally nuances leaning into the present. Language points to both to agency and explanatory power – the hopeful possibility to challenge colonial narratives, and shift long-lasting divisions through the contingencies of knowledge, rather than categories of knowledge. Although colonial machinations have shaped lingering ethno-racial tensions and deferred dreams of decolonization, new words and ways of seeing have the power to animate alternative routes to community-building. The name given to this powerful current of historiography, at the juncture of the unremembered and the indelible, is Coolitude.

NOTES


2 The word ‘coolie’ remains a derogatory slur in much of the Caribbean (and in Guyana, when deployed as hate speech, a prosecutable offence) which is why I place it in quotes. While it has been reclaimed by many descendants of indenture (‘me neva shame me’s a coolie bai’), ‘coolie’ may have a different resonance in metropolitan contexts depending on who is interpellating whom.


5 Hugh Tinker, A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920. (New York: Oxford University Press, for the Institute of Race Relations, 1974). Tinker was the former head of
the Institute of Race Relations (UK), which also co-published this text, hence the work may be placed within a larger project for racial justice.


7 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 87.


9 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 15.


11 *Coolitude*, pp. 148, 168.

12 While ‘Afro-Caribbean’ has become outdated (especially in the UK), I retain its usage to reflect the indeterminateness of place embedded in both prefixes Afro- and Indo- that mirror the centrality of ocean crossings, and disruptions of geography.


15 A relational framework between Indo- and Afro-diasporic experiences should not overlook Indigenous peoples, and in the case of Fiji the relational framework would primarily be between Indo-Fijians and Indigenous Fijians.

16 Dennis Mahabir, ‘Teach Them to Read and Write’, *The Observer: An Organ of Indian Opinion*, 1(3) (1942), 28


20 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 182.


24 Carter and Torabully, Coolitude, p. 163.


26 Carter and Torabully, Coolitude, p. 169. A case in point, there was a proposal to divide Guyana into separate territories for Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese in 1962, when racial tensions were high.

27 Thank you to Joanna Clarke for pointing this out.

28 In terms of language, Torabully suggests that the persistence of mother tongues (such as Tamil) may have ‘increased this ‘impossible conversation’ of the African with the Indian’s imaginaire’ (Coolitude, p. 184).

29 Earl Lovelace, Salt: A Novel (New York: Persea Books, 1997), pp. 185–186. Thanks to Amar Wahab for highlighting the importance of this passage.


33 Carter and Torabully, Coolitude p. 170.


35 Verene Shepherd, Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002).

36 Carter and Torabully, Coolitude, p. 168.

37 ‘The morning he died, he had crept to the hospital on his knees from the mill where he had not received medical attention and food as punishment ...’ See Amar Wahab, ‘In the Name of Reason: Colonial Liberalism and the Government of West Indian Indentureship’, Journal of Historical Sociology 24.2 (2011), 209–234.

38 Carter and Torabully, Coolitude, p. 183.

39 Basdeo Panday, Interview by Nalini Mohabir, July 18, 2013.

41 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 120.
43 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 121.
45 For more on the governance of subaltern mobility around ‘racial lines’ see R.V. Mongia, ‘Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport’, *Public Culture*, 11 (1999), 527–556.
46 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 121.
48 Mohabir, ‘Women and Return Journeys’, 77. Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 120.
49 Coolitude, p. 120.
50 Demerara Phagwā Delight is the author’s personal ‘story’ of Demerara, as well as a book of Phagwā songs, written in Devanagari script. It was discovered in the British Library by Prabhu Mohapatra (Delhi University).
52 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 117.
53 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 120.
56 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, pp. 92, 124.
57 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude* p. 123.
61 Dabydeen quoted in *Coolitude*, p. 130.
62 Personal communications.
63 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 27.
64 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 191.
65 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, p. 223.