

# Man me

## *Andil Gosine*

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this short essay, **Andil Gosine** reflects on his use of ‘Coolitude’ as a pedagogical tool, particularly in considering the dehumanization of indentured subjects.

### **KEYWORDS**

**Pedagogy, Trinidad and Tobago, visual art, portraiture, Canada**

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Motifiez-moi

âmez-moi

humainez-moi

hommez-moi.

Word me

soul me

humanize me

Man me.

*Coolitude's* closing verse gets right to the heart of the matter: Khal Torabully's poetry, and the subsequent theorization of his work with Marina Carter, is an incitement to reclaim *our* – indentures

and their descendants – humanity. A century after the official end of the indentureship system, and living in a place far from, but certainly imbricated in, the dying sugarcane plantations I grew up in, in rural Trinidad, Torabully's plea is still mine, too. This task underlies both my scholarly and artistic practices.

I had not yet encountered *Coolitude* when I designed and began teaching the course 'Indo-Caribbean in Canada' in 2005, at York University in Toronto, Canada. Given carte blanche by a supportive curriculum chair, I decided then to make space at the university to consider a history and set of experiences that had not been made available to me since leaving Trinidad as a teenager. At first, I followed a mostly ethnography-centered programme, engaging students with Stuart Hall's and Edoard Glissant's theorizations of culture and *creolite* respectively, as they read through both historical and contemporary accounts of Indo-Caribbean peoples' experiences by sociologists and anthropologists, read novels like Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and completed assignments that took them to Toronto's roti shops and temples. Once I encountered *Coolitude*, however, it became the course's central framing device, and I eventually changed its title to 'Coolitude', reflecting this impact. For several years, the course began with oral readings and discussions of nearly all of the poems in *Coolitude*, usually in English, sometimes in both English and French. Students were also tasked with a written assignment at the end that responds to one question: 'Through his poems, how does Khal Torabully characterize indentureship, and explain its legacy?' Torabully's explicit work toward the re-humanization of indentures and their descendants motivated this shift.

Torabully's poetics encourages three kinds of work toward this reclamation. The first is the work of recognition, of coming to terms to the brutal history of indentureship. As is the case for nearly all forms of exploitation, indentureship required strategies of dehumanization. Indentures' low wages, torturous journey and

living conditions were premised entirely on the assumption that they were lesser humans than the British colonial subjects who managed their fates. From misstating their names and identities on documents, to packing them into confined spaces below ship decks, to starving them, to severe forms of psychological torture and physical violence, the message was certain: indentures were cargo, then labour, but never quite human.

Most other literary and scholarly evaluations of indentureship cite similar evidence of the system's brutality, but popular and formalized political renderings have yet to come to grips with this truth. Popular denial of indentureship's brutality is perhaps most evidenced by the celebration of 'Indian Arrival Day' in the four countries most engaged with the system: Guyana on May 5, Trinidad and Tobago on May 30, Suriname on June 5 and Mauritius on November 2. While the end of slavery is celebrated as 'Emancipation Day' in these countries, it is actually the *beginning* of indentureship that is marked. We weirdly still 'celebrate' the moment in which people become cargo and labour. Critics might note that it is not 'indentureship' that the day cheers, but its name itself suggests, the 'arrival' of the Indian in each of these places. But there is no possibility of excising indentureship from the story of arrival of the Indian in Mauritius, Fiji or the Caribbean. The Indian arrives *only* because through the facilitation of indentureship. Each indenture arrives as a worker obligated to duties of labour and a subhuman social position, as defined by contract. While Torabully does not specifically contest this marking of 'Indian Arrival Day', many of his poems challenge the silencing of the historical truths of Indians' 'arrival' beneath the veneer of state and ethno-nationalisms:

My country will have no statue  
Of the man of storm with bare feet  
I broke my tongue against memory

When night cheated death  
 At the toss of boats and ports

(Cale d'Etoiles, 16)

In *Chair Corail*, Torabully draws attention to the persistent, conflicting tensions of a Diwali celebration:

In the coolie village there is rejoicing tonight  
 Diwali is sewing its lights  
 In our eyes with their constellations of hope  
 Malini is burning incense of myrrh  
 Dancing to the jerky rhythm of the ship  
 Suddenly I see Malini as she was  
 When she left the quarantine depot  
 Her empty eyes wandering as in pain  
 Heavy with contempt

(115–119)

Beneath the celebrations, the truthful pain of history persists.

Torabully's meditation on Malini also gestures toward the second kind of work *Coolitude* advocates as a project of re-humanization: grieving. Whether speaking out for his 'dead brother/Thrown Overboard' (*Chair Corail*, 85) or recognizing that those who have survived, are 'Wounded by the designation of coolie', 'repatriated eternally/re-engaged without land nor country' (*Chair Corail*, 95), 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', in which he asks, 'Deep down in the hold, what eyes/can discharge their despair/without springing a leak on all sides?' (*Cale d'Etoiles*, 65). Against ethnonationalist celebration, which has become ever more seductive with the growing economic prowess of India in the last fifteen years, *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. 'When you reject part of your history, you reflect [that] you have not come to terms with it, and this is the source of many tensions ... and even, of self-denial', Torabully writes (*Coolitude*, 204). 'Coming to terms' demands both individual and social grieving processes.

The third, and perhaps most understated, call in *Coolitude's* project of re-humanization is for the regard of indentures, and their descendants, as complex subjects. Rejecting biological essentialism and advocating multiple, fluctuating notions of 'India' and Indianness, Torabully joins with other postcolonial thinkers in returning agency, and in so doing, humanity, to the colonized subject. This important position provides a basis for generation of complex identity production and history-telling. Indeed, while it is tempting, and certainly available, to view the final line of Torabully's poem as gendered and privileging to cis-male experience, I think it is better read as both an insistence of the poet's right to claim his own person and identity, and a broader recognition of personhood – not just a *human* but a person, with character and personality, stories of her/his/their own that take on specific contours.

The emergence of my artistic practice coincided with my encounters with *Coolitude*, which provided tools for critical reflection, and an understanding of the tensions that drove my creative process. My 2017 exhibition at the Glenhyrst gallery in Ontario, Canada, was in part manifestation of my engagement with Torabully. The show, 'Coolie, Coolie, Viens', comprised three rooms. The first, 'Cane Portraiture', hosted the performance project that involved photographing gallery attendees against the backdrop of sugarcane, and showing portraits from a previous iteration of it staged in Toronto in 2016. The third room, '1, 2', presented sketches done in collaboration with the Guadeloupian artist Kelly Sinnapah Mary to illustrate an 'adult children's story' about grey space between sexual desire and sexual awakening.

Both of these rooms provided historical context and directly allude to the social consequences of indentureship, and its aftermath. While both are deeply personal endeavours that share my sense of exile, my failure to make home and community and my solitary childhood, they invite a reading of them as community stories, whether of migrants who arrived to (or subsequently left) work on canefields, or for whom sexual abuse and violence marked the indentureship period and after. These rooms attended to the first two tasks of *Coolitude's* re-humanization project that I outlined above, coming to terms with and grieving the brutality of the indentureship project. The final room that these two bookend more explicitly spoke to the third task. '(Made in Love)' hosted a collection of various objects and videos that share intimate moments and feelings. Included here are: the video and ephemera from 'every day I remember something new', the four-hour performance in which I wrote four hundred postcards to my first love, each listing an activity I missed about our being couples; and 'Coolie Pink, Yellow, Red', a reframing of fey childhood photographs taken by my mother which, I have argued, demonstrate her refusal of strict narratives of gender. These pieces' manifestation of the particularities of my desires are an effort to achieve humanization, to present these intimate details as sign of confidence in claiming my complex subjectivity, my own attempt to 'man me'.

## NOTE

- 1 Tying the experiences of indentures and their descendants to the material experiences involved in migrating, to the ship journey, to labour and to their living conditions, as well as making clear that indentureship was intractably linked to slavery is a refusal of biological essentialism that has sometimes dominated the field.