

COOLITUDE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE
INDIAN LABOUR DIASPORA

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Khal Torabully



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Words finally burst forth from us
With majestic strength

Frozen lips on a devoured country
At the estuary of our checked speech
Here we are here we are!

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Some Theoretical Premises of Coolitude

This chapter reproduces the text of a lengthy interview conducted between Marina Carter (MC) and Khal Torabully (KT) in which the poet and author outlines his evolution and definition of the concept of Coolitude, particularly within the framework of négritude and créolité, and elaborates on key facets of Coolitude, such as the coolie memory and the role of aesthetics and literature. Khal Torabully draws attention to writers whose work may be placed within the literary definition of Coolitude, among them Naipaul and Rushdie.

1. Césaire, Négritude and Coolitude

MC: You had a very interesting encounter with Aimé Césaire, the great poet from Martinique who coined the word *négritude*, in December 1997. What is the link between *négritude* and coolitude?

KT: Aimé Césaire invented the word *négritude* in the 1920s, in the midst of colonial turmoil. Coolitude was framed in 1992. There are two principal similarities between *négritude* and coolitude:

- The recollection of a common phase of history and the need to redress the state of oblivion and neglect attached to the condition of the Negro, and to that of the Coolie. The descendants of indentured labourers, like those of slaves, often knew very little of their past history. They were ignorant of the cultural implications of the Voyage. One of the aims of coolitude is also to foster a larger community of vision encompassing the experiences of people of African descent and fostering interaction with the later immigrant groups in those colonial societies to which coolies migrated in the period immediately following the abolition of slavery, even though Indian labour was already present during slavery.

- Like *négritude*, coolitude originates from a debased and pejorative word – coolie. Césaire appropriated the term *negro* to give it new dignity and value and attached to it a system of thought which enabled the 'negro' to conquer his own place in the world. The term *coolie* like that of *negro*, has been used in the past, and continues even today to be used as an insult to the descendants of the overseas indentured labourers. I chose this word because the coolie was essentially the one who replaced the slave in the plantocratic society. The coolie's life-history, albeit in somewhat modified historical circumstances, resembled, in many aspects, that of the slave. The word dignifies this condition and aims to illuminate the plight of, to quote *Cale d'Etoiles-Coolitude*, 'les oubliés du voyage, ceux qui n'ont pas eu le livre de leur traversée' (the forgotten travellers; those who have no log-book to record their voyage). However, Coolitude is not *négritude* à l'indienne (or a kind of Indian version of *négritude*). It is not essentialist, i.e. referring to one people, or race, or religion. It springs in fact, from a word (coolie/indentured), which at the beginning, designated an economic status, and has been broadened to encompass a human situation. Before resorting massively to coolies from India, there were experiments to bring coolies from China, Ethiopia, Brittany, even, from Africa . . . The coolie symbolizes, in its broader definition, the possibility of building a composite identity to ease the pain and enrich culturally the lands in which he/she settled. As the vast majority of those described as coolies and who settled in ex-slave societies of the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, originated in India, it would have been unwise to overlook this historical and human fact.

MC: Was Césaire receptive to the term 'coolitude'?

KT: When I met Césaire at Fort de France in 1997, I offered him a copy of *Cale d'Etoiles-Coolitude*. He was immediately struck by the word *Coolitude*. He asked me to explain the concept, which I did, and he responded to me with the following words: 'Now I can die in peace. Coolitude is the poetic force I was waiting for . . .' These words are extremely important, and will have to be weighed against the proper situation of the 'Indian' in the West Indies. I remember having told him that coolitude comprises two main facets: a '*remise en perspective*' (recollection)

of the cultural elements of the coolie which were *mis à mal* (stifled) by colonial history, and, the interplay between cultures, mainly African and European, in the embryonic Creole society, often in a hostile environment, but which ultimately led towards the perception of a composite identity. Césaire explained how Creole society in the French Caribbean was in close interaction with, in his words, the 'Indian element'. He gave several examples, ranging from cooking (Colombo, a form of curry, is the national dish of Guadeloupe and Martinique) to religion (Marie-Aimée, one of the saints of the population, is a deformation of the Tamil cult of Mariamen).

It was a moving moment for me to have this exchange with the celebrated poet who, in his legendary *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, mentioned the coolie as '*l'homme hindou de Calcutta*' (the Hindu man from Calcutta), words which proponents of *Créolité* criticized as a form of ostracism for the coolie descendants, indicating that the Indo-Caribbean was still seen as a foreigner – an Indian, rather than as a part of the population of the *Antilles*. Raphaël Confiant, one of the principal advocates of the *créolité* movement, went even further – declaring that he could not understand how Césaire could omit the coolie element in his poetry, especially given that Césaire himself had a coolie '*da*' (nanny) when he was a child, as did Alexis Saint Léger, better known as the Nobel Prize winner, Saint John Perse. But whereas the latter refers to the cultural component of coolitude in his writings, Césaire is silent about it. I remember having been told about this influence of coolitude in the works of Saint John Perse by poet and psychoanalyst Joël Des Rosiers, a fine reader of the writer of *Amers*, while visiting the birthplace of the Martinican-born poet. Whatever the polemics, in relation to the 'Indian element' during our conversation, Césaire expressed pride in the cultural fusion between his ancestral Africa and India. And he was sincere about it.

MC: Do you share with Césaire the same definition of India and Africa?

KT: Césaire and I discussed the misunderstanding attached to geographical terms. I spoke of *les Indes*, not the mythical Indies of Columbus, but the generic name of plural India, and stressed the fact that India is not such a monolithic nation as one would sometimes think it is, being in fact a mosaic of Indias. From Bihar to Tamil Nadu, from

Gujarat to Maharashtra, there are so many different cultures and languages, religions and creeds, so many poetics or visions of the world, that one may described the subcontinent as itself the epitome of diversity. Césaire agreed and added that the same applied to Africa, which in fact should be referred to as the *Africas*, given the plurality within individual countries (Mali, for example with its Peuls, Bozos, Dogons, Tuaregs and its linguistic variety).

I thought then that Césaire had often been misquoted as a poet or a visionary whose scope was said to be limited to the plight of the Black man only, and who was moreover thought of as a Negro devoid of a diverse cultural background. *Négritude*, to quote another theorist and poet, Léopold Sedar Senghor, refers to the values of the Black man, and represented an attempt to give him his dignity in a colonial world in which the Negro seemed to be almost devoid of humanity. When Césaire speaks of his '*négritude universelle*', he points to the plural connections of African cultures and their ability to recognize their own varied roots, together with the possibility of proposing those values to other cultures, and, of being open to other cultural references. This seems quite far removed from the essentialist theory and practice often attached to *Négritude*, as founded exclusively on a monolithic negro *être* (being), excluding other cultures, in its extremely militant definition, and as limited or defined by the historical violence suffered by persons of African origin, whether as slaves or second class citizens in the USA and elsewhere during the decolonization period. Maybe, at that time Césaire had no choice. Given the context he had to bring out the more militant definition of his poetics.

MC: Nowadays, what is the perception attached to *négritude*?

KT: Generally speaking, *négritude* has kept this essentialism, (others would say 'fixist attitude', opposed to the hybrid nature of creoleness), and is usually understood as an ideology to restore to the Black his pride and place in a colonial and post-colonial world built on the assumption that the Black was inferior. I would underline one fact, however. Senghor, the other great *négritude* thinker, gave a potent definition to the term *métissage*: '*Notre vocation de colonisé est de surmonter les contradictions de la conjoncture, l'antinomie artificiellement dressée entre l'Afrique et l'Europe, notre hérité et notre éducation. C'est de la greffe de celle-ci que doit naître*

notre liberté (Our vocation as the colonized has been to overcome the contradictions inherent in the dichotomy artificially erected between Africa and Europe, our heritage and our education. It is from the grafting of the one onto the other that our freedom will be born.)'¹

History has rather negated the development of this poetics, as the proponents were entrenched in this binary opposition and desired exchanges between the Black and the White civilizations. Many have criticized Senghor for this bipolarization. Moreover, Black Power or Afrocentrism, to quote two movements which have had a long and durable influence in the Americas, have contributed to the entrenchment of an exclusivist view of *négritude* within the racist American context prevalent at that time. When I met Césaire however, he seemed very concerned with the possibilities of convergence with coolitude.

MC: You seem to be suggesting that Césaire did not see in coolitude the Indian alter ego of *négritude*, but rather that he was open to its dynamic, hybrid character?

KT: The enthusiasm with which Césaire welcomed the poetics of coolitude reveals one central idea in his vision of Caribbean society: the meeting between its different components, especially that of two peoples brought together by the abolition of slavery, the slave and the indentured labourer. As a man and as a poet of human encounters and human generosity, he readily understood that *Négritude* and Coolitude sprang from the same tragedy.

MC: Therefore, you would argue that you and Césaire were inspired by a similar vision in devising your concepts?

KT: When I left him, Césaire told me, 'you will do for India what I did for Africa'. These words suddenly brought home to me a difference in our poetics and in the foundations of our approach, anchored as they have been in different historical contexts, a generation gap indeed. In fact, if Césaire designated Africa as the reference from which his theory sprang and towards which it pointed, mine, despite having a basis in India, did not point to India as the nucleus, the apex of my vision or the 'Ultimate Referent'. It is certainly one of the starting points, but definitely not the final goal of coolitude, in an ontological perspective. I doubt even that

Africa had ever been the homeland dreamt of in the mythical return approach of Césaire and of the West Indians. Perhaps Césaire thought that the coolie descendant was not, even in present times, recognised enough in the West Indian context, and certainly his openness is not to be questioned.

However, we have a different approach. I would not say that coolitude would do something for India, but for the people of the West Indies, and elsewhere, indeed, for the 'Indians' born or living abroad. Depending on the social and historical circumstances, some of them are keen to remember and to retrieve whatever they can of a disappearing or evanescent culture. But at the heart of coolitude, there is a view that the 'Indian migrant' should become part and parcel of an identity open to the dynamics of cultural interplay. This does not mean doing away necessarily with India, as every cultural element is worth scrutiny and interplay . . . The views of Césaire can be explained by the fact that, at that time, he was engaged in a struggle to bring out a voice which was muffled, a culture which was in tatters, an identity which, in the context of the time, could be framed only by opposing the 'Dominant White', in a binary configuration of the 'Oppressor' and the 'Victim'. When he made the comparison between what he did for Africa and what I would do for India, he meant probably that a literary, a cultural voice was still to emerge to represent the 'Indian element' of Martinique, of the French West Indies, and that an identity which was bruised in History had to be restored. The reference to India as a cultural source to rejuvenate a fading culture was important to him, just as the fact of recovering the rhythm, the primitive force of Africa, had been important in his own poetic revolt. Coolitude, in any case, is imbued with the notion that this 'Indian element', which is to be taken into account, is already engaged in the interaction of the 'Diverse', and is an identity wrapped in *altérité* (Otherness).

MC: Can you, then, define the relation to India more precisely in your poetics of coolitude?

KT: For coolitude, India is a reference, just as Africa is present within the very weave of creoleness or creolization. It is the essence, or the essences, from which the 'self', the cultural perception and complex identity of the coolie originate. Where the original culture has been erased, tortured, threatened, or in its most positive configuration, partially, or more

fully preserved – as in Mauritius – the human suffering and the yearning for recognition which this obliteration or mutilation has created, cannot be ignored, and the reference to India is more than understandable as one cannot frame his relation to himself and the world *ex nihilo*.

Just as creoleness or creolization, sooner or later, is doomed to revert back to Africa as the first point of reference, so does coolitude exist in relation to India. But, this ontological perspective, in its proper historical and social context, does not mean that the dream of those originating from India is to return there, despite carving out myths of their ancestral homeland . . . In fact, it would be more appropriate to say that coolitude may help the descendants of Indians abroad, to realise that they engage India, or the Indies, in the process of the creation of a mosaic self in Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, Fiji, South Africa, Kenya, Zanzibar, Mauritius, or wherever they may be.

The craving for the 'mythical land of the ancestors' can create barriers in the elaboration of a wider identity, akin to the process of creolization, if it is not set against more exclusive definitions leading to a 'narrow identity'. Therefore, one has to be vigilant not to close on him/herself. However, the recourse to a lost origin is not in itself to be negated, provided this approach does not absolve an individual from the need to address the question of a present identity. A complex attitude can offer a balance to the interplay of relations in a number of social, human and cultural contexts.

Therefore, the India I would make reference to is one of Diversity, the Indies or Indias we spoke about, a reminder that even when searching for lost fragments of one's memory, to evolve a dialectics of identity, one should not forget that these origins cannot be exclusive of the differences of others, whether of language, creed or culture . . . The ontological approach must therefore be coupled with the approach of a complex identity, in which the source remains open to other sources.

MC: When Césaire read his famous verse 'l'Homme Hindou de Calcutta' did he express his fidelity to the concept of the original homeland to you? And since you say that the original homeland must also be subject to an open form of identity, or a complex identity, is this where you differ with his interpretation of the origins?

KT: Indeed, this is a major difference. The poetics of coolitude, engaged in complexity of societies and human situations, as you know, is itself not

simple in its definition. It is a complex and dynamic one, in which, depending on the social, historical, and cultural context, a single aspect may at any time be highlighted, but which should not, in any circumstances, lead to an exclusive vision of identity. To go further, the original homeland should also be the country where one lives, even if this must be built everyday.

MC: Does this mean that coolitude proposes to build a bridge between *négritude*, *indianité* and creolization, as a necessary step towards the creation of a composite identity?

KT: This dynamic is already at work where 'the Indian element' is present and engaged in 'postmodern' creations, like music, literature or films, for example in the UK and Canada . . . But to come back to your question, coolitude posits an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics or visions of the world, between those of African and of Indian descent, without excluding other sources. In the broadest sense the coolie was a labour migrant without the word of his Voyage, and as I said earlier, there were 'coolies' from Brittany, as well as from Africa, China and India. The coolie is not an ethnic definition *stricto sensu*; it is also a juridical one, as worded in the contract which placed the wage labourer, whether European, Asian or African, in a relationship of salaried servitude defined by penal clauses. Viewed from this angle, coolitude does redefine the concept of *indianité* when it is a fixist set of 'Indian' values, leading to the acceptance of the presence of other cultural facets. Coolitude also seeks to emphasize the community of visions between the slave and the indentured labourer, shared by their descendants, despite the fact that these two groups, were placed in a situation of competition and conflict. As such coolitude may be seen as an attempt to bring the past and present of these groups into contact and to go beyond past conflicts and misrepresentations. The necessity of a reconciliation, from the outset, was fully understood by Césaire when we met. Allow me to tell you an anecdote to illustrate this. When Césaire accompanied me to the entrance of the Fort-de-France town hall where he is the Mayor, he drew the attention of his colleagues to my presence, holding my hand, and joking. 'Ladies and gentlemen, what do you see? A coolie and a negro? Isn't that great? It is coolitude (*N'est-ce pas beau? C'est la coolitude*)'. This reconciliation of the descendants of African and Indian migrants is important from the social

perspective, from the point of view of living together, and of sharing a past, present and future.

many countries to which indentured labourers migrated, whole sections of the diaspora celebrate a faithfulness to Mother India. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this first step in the process of cultural reappropriation. But this is often at the expense of their own emerging national identities in the host countries, which depend upon the meeting with, and convergence of, other cultures, coolitude posits a complex attitude. I likened, at this stage, coolitude to creoleness, because compared to restrictive definitions of *indianité*, *créolité* seems to be a more open concept, as it tries to go beyond the essentialism of *négritude* and the geographical limitations attached to a subsequent concept, that of 'Caribbeanness' or *antillanité*. In *Eloge de la Créolité*, Confiant, Chamoiseau and Bernabé define creoleness as the 'annihilation of fake universality, of monolingualism and of purity'.⁵

MC: But the concept of creoleness is not itself without some residue of confusion . . .

KT: I think this has been seen as such by many critiques. For Edouard Glissant, for instance, creoleness is an ethno-cultural space extending from the West Indies to the Indian Ocean, but instead of building its identity upon the process of relationships, creoleness seems to choose the 'unique root' at the expense of the rhizome, which Glissant defined as a demultiplied root with no centre, from which identity can be considered as also a construction deriving from a relationship to 'Otherness'.

In *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Glissant is very clear:

'Pour moi la créolité est une autre interprétation (my own emphasis) de la créolization. La créolization est un mouvement perpétuel d'interpénétrabilité culturelle et linguistique qui fait qu'on ne débouche pas sur une définition de l'être. Ce que je reproche à la négritude, c'était de définir l'être: l'être nègre . . . il faut abandonner la prétention à la définition de l'être. Or, c'est ce que fait la créolité: définir un être créole. C'est une manière de régression, du point de vue de ce processus, mais qui est peut-être nécessaire pour défendre le présent créole. Tout comme la négritude a été d'une importance vitale pour la défense des valeurs africaines et de la diaspora noire. (For me, créolité is another interpretation of créolization. Créolization is a perpetual movement of cultural and linguistic interpenetration,

MC: If coolitude is not the 'Indian alter ego' of *négritude*, could it perhaps be described as the Indian version of creoleness or *créolité*?

KT: I wrote that 'Creoleness is to *négritude* what coolitude is to *indianité* (indianness)'.⁴ In that formula I equated indianness to *négritude* (even though Césaire says that '*ce n'est pas par haine des autres races que je me réclame unique bêcheur de cette race*') [it is not because of a hatred for other races that I proclaim myself the sole tiller for this race]), as defined by its essential relation to race and geographical origin and because of its geographical origin. I pointed to the danger of all exclusive celebrations of the origins, specifically the narrow definitions of *indianité*, forgetting the 'Indias': i.e. India as a cultural crossroads. In

which means that one does not necessarily end up with a definition of being. That is what makes *créolité*: to define a creole being. It's a type of regression, from the point of view of process, but it is essential in order to defend the creole present. Just as *négritude* was of vital importance for the defence of African values and of the black diaspora'.⁶

Glissant, by denouncing 'l'être', 'the Being', as an invention of the West, leading to conflicts and sectarian views, even in the hold of *créolité*, lays stress on a process, on an infinite web of relationships. In any case, what he underlines is the necessary predictable forms the relationships assume at a particular moment of history. This also means that coolitude and *créolité* must also take into account expressions and desires which form part of the whole process of creolization. This explains why in particular circumstances the retrieval of India is an inevitable recourse, to compensate for the 'sense of loss', but in the process, coolitude points to the indispensable fact that this construction must be linked to a wider process of identity.

MC: Coolitude is a process very similar to creolization, in the sense that it also springs from a complex situation in which cultural signposts, interplay with other cultures, and *imaginaires* are mingled?

KT: Coolitude is close to the spirit of creolization, even though, as I said before, in order to enable creolization to be furthered, one must not visualize, in some contexts, the relation to past culture purely as a land of desolation; one must endeavour to till this land again, in order to discover the riches it can bring, and in the process one must be open to other influences. Basically, the poetry of *métissage* (even if Glissant sees it as a remnant of a colonialist discourse with a predictable basis) has been taken to new heights by the author of *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*. When I developed the concept of coolitude in 1992 the idea of a process, of a '*mise en relation*' or cultural interweaving, was very much in my mind. I was not aware of the concept of *créolité* at that time. I became interested in the creole writers after my meeting with Chamoiseau in Lyon, just before he was awarded the Goncourt Prize.

The theoretical foundations of creolization were, *a posteriori*, to echo intuitions and thoughts of paramount importance to me. The first

proximity is that our poetics are based on a continuous process of relationships. It is in this complex exchange that a mosaic identity is framed, of which we cannot predict the results. This represents, for any artist or poet, the unpredictability of creativity, and this may be more potent in a society where contacts are multiplied between cultures and where a transcultural movement is generated.

MC: Therefore, creolization offers a system of references through which identity can be reconsidered . . .

KT: For me, creolization is more a 'structure' than a system, similar to the semiological structure as defined by Umberto Eco in *L'Oeuvre Ouverte*⁷, the 'structure' being open by nature, and able to enter into contact with other structures, whereas a system is quite closed by nature, being a construction with the idea of a totality, a centre. Therefore coolitude is for me a more formal relationship than a fixed content and as such very close to creolization.

MC: What is the consequence of this theoretical framework for identity?

KT: Coolitude is a process of identity construction which takes into account the impossibility of putting a full stop to this task, and not essentially a philosophy where the meaning is predetermined. It implies an approach in which the notion of a guiding culture, of a centre, of a *Logos*, becomes defunct. The questioning of univocity, of transparency, the decentralization of a *Sens Unique* (Univocal Sense) gives scope to the construction of a plural society. So often, people have been dismayed by the fact that creolization seems to be synonymous with chaos, as there is no peace or tranquillity in imagining a proteiform process. However, this 'chaos' allows us to determine a mental structure in which we can think, live, create and initiate a new definition for our own existence and identity.

Allow me to quote Glissant:

'La créolization, c'est l'imprédictible. On peut prédire ou déterminer le métissage, on ne peut pas prédire ou déterminer la créolization . . . On peut résumer tout cela en posant l'opposition entre une pensée archipélique et une pensée continentale, la pensée continentale étant

pensée de système et la pensée archipélifique étant la pensée de l'ambigu (Creolization is unpredictable. One can predict or determine métissage, but one cannot predict or determine creolization. This can be summarized by positing the opposition between an archipelagic thought and a continental thought, the continental thought being a systematic thought and the archipelagic thought being an ambiguous thought).⁸

The important element here, is that my identity is not closed on others, it is not the ultimate centre, it is one identity among others and the awareness that one's identity is also framed by meeting that of others.

2. Elements of the Coolie's 'Memory'

MC: As you said earlier, one of the principles of coolitude is to bring back part of a memory slashed by the violence of History, by conscious or unconscious censorship. Can you define the major constituents of the 'coolie's memory'?

KT: A very good way to answer this is to refer to Laurent Farrugia's book, *Les Indiens de Guadeloupe et de la Martinique*¹¹, which reveals, in many aspects, the tragic situation of the 'Indian' in the French Indies, and beyond. The author quotes Victor Schoelcher, the famous nineteenth century anti-slavery activist, who wrote that the indentured labourer was a '*serf de la glèbe vendu avec tête de bétail et outils aratoires* (a serf sold by the medieval land owner, with the cattle and the agricultural tools)'. The 'Indian coolie' oscillated between the slave and the wage worker – although he had a legal contract, his treatment approximated to that of a slave. The conditions of the indentured labourer differed from country to country, so that there were many situations and aspects of the first stages of coolitude, but, fundamentally, there is no serene voyage in coolitude. Therefore, though he/she was the bearer of an ancient, literate civilization, so much valued in the Western world, the coolie himself was treated as an 'object'. And even though he had his name on a contract, he had to fight to make his humanity respected. But the very fact of having this name on the contract is a highly significant aspect of coolitude, bequeathing on him a human status, at least from the legal point of view, thus, guaranteeing the coolie his/her *habeas corpus*. This scriptural mark, however, will also lead to the distortion of Indian patronyms as a sign of the 'scriptural wound' of identity. This original situation, as one can easily imagine, framed the later stages of the migrant's identity abroad. These early phases must be rediscovered. It is necessary to mediate this cultural and social trauma, through a new approach of identity, literature, culture . . . Therefore, a better knowledge of this period must not lead to a closed vision of identity, celebrating the past indefinitely, refusing the complexity of present societies, as the first stages implied contacts with languages, cultures and *imaginaires*.

MC: We know that many stratagems were devised by the coolie, from tragic scenarios to more indirect means of survival . . .

KT: One of the most tragic escape routes of the coolie was suicide. Farrugia has noted the prevalence of a particular way of killing oneself – letting oneself pass away or as he calls it, 'suicide by nostalgia', for the 'expiation of a fault one did not commit'. This sense of guilt at having left the original homeland with its cosmogony, its sacred rules, the attachment to purity, the loss of one's place in the cycle of reincarnation, besides other traumatic forms of abandonment and renunciation, are pertinent paradigms of these (and later) stages.

Another common stratagem was a particular form of '*marronnage*', that is, *vagabondage*, or vagrancy. Thousands of Indians condemned as vagrants for deserting their work, or through inability to labour through sickness, were confined in specially constructed colonial vagrant *dépôts*. In 'Coolitude'¹², attention was brought to the fact that vagrancy was the most common form of revolt, an alter ego of the '*marronnage*' of the slaves, with its own specificities. Basically, the slave was a maroon, the coolie a vagrant. This difference of perceptions and resistances must also be explored in relation to the construction of 'mixed societies', and literary and artistic productions cannot ignore them.

MC: In these early stages, the way the coolie was seen by the other is inseparable from his/her own elaboration of a set of references born in exile . . .

KT: Contradictions were abundant in colonial societies – for instance, the perceptions of the coolie, this newcomer whose image oscillated between the docile agricultural labourer and the vicious, dirty, rebellious, immature, subhuman malingerer. This is also part of the coolie's memory. In this respect, the indentured labourer was not fully recognised as a citizen of the countries where he/she had settled, sometimes for several generations. In Guadeloupe for instance, it was only in the first quarter of the twentieth century that the coolie descendant was granted his citizenship rights, following the legal struggle of an eminent lawyer of Indian origin, Henri Sidambarom. Sidambarom desired to be '*un fils du sol à part entière*', that is, a fully recognized citizen, with cultural, moral and political recognition, to achieve the historical legitimacy of his presence, as an integral part of

the host country. This marginalization of the indentured in the host country's social fabric is an important space of tension, frustration, and even, nowadays, in some countries, condones a sense of 'loss' and social trauma.

MC: Is it right to say, for example, that when the coolie achieved his/her economic and social settlement objectives overseas, he/she in fact transferred or 'spoiled', in some cases, the potential creativity of exile?

KT: The adaptation process was long. First, one pragmatic reaction of the indentured labourer was to aspire to possess the land, and this was in keeping with rural Indian culture, even if, in exile, there was greater social and economic mobility in the process. This ownership was seen by the indentured as the means of procuring affective, political and cultural security. This was to condition much of the coolie's social mobility strategy. On a basic social level, the coolie was largely successful in retaining the family unit intact, through the migration process, with increasing recourse to chain migrations of spouse and family members; an option which was scarcely available to the slave. Families who migrated into indenture could also be subsequently bought out of the system; so that the indentured labourer always had the goal of earning his/her liberation. However, we cannot overlook the degree of creativity necessary in those pragmatic strategies. Often more subtle and long term stratagems, usually involving a degree of cultural subjugation were also evolved. Those reactions show that the 'plural societies', Mauritius, for example, were often framed by antagonizing forces, and endless tensions . . .

MC: The 'plural society', even in its embryonic form, showed that exclusion was at work at an early stage . . .

KT: Indeed. Many writers and historians have pointed to this 'exclusive' foundation. This was apparent even in the 'mixed racial' stratum. Creole society gave rise of a class of mixed ancestry, the *sang mêlé*, who came to occupy an intermediate political and cultural position in the binary social structure of the plantocracy. The Indians, often, were to come between the emancipated slave and the European planter, and in some way, competed with the *métis*, in that intermediary social margin. But, in many of the countries to which Indians migrated, in the immediate post-emancipation period, the fact of being the mainstay of the plantation system,

after the abolition of slavery, earned him the reputation of salvaging the economy of the master, of being an 'ally' of the planter. This remains one of the principal causes of ostracism, and unspoken 'rivalry' between African and Indian descendants in many former colonies. This element of memory is still to be expressed, as it bears painful scars nowadays. This is why *Cale d'Étoiles* brings those two suffering memories face to face, more, it blends them in a common creation.

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

KT: Yes, there is a sense of loss and silence . . . For instance, in the French West Indies, 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. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the written text of the original culture was lost, and this was accompanied by the subsequent loss of the mothertongue and languages. This led in turn to what can be described as the '*culture de la trace*', (vestige culture) and to the task of 'rememoration' of the lost meanings of the original culture. Those Indians who migrated in small numbers, as in the French Caribbean, experienced a complete revolution of their social fabric. Castes, creeds, entire ways of life which had been kept separate, become entangled, and ultimately, the 'purification of the paria' was one result of the abolition of caste distinctions.

This social revolution brought by the indentured and exile created a more homogeneous Indian group, and at the same time, imbued its participants with a lasting sense of guilt linked to the loss of one's creed and also, the suppression of a taboo (crossing the *Kala Pani*, mixing castes and creeds, for instance). Moreover, the silence or strategy of withdrawal often developed, as a natural attitude to preserve oneself, to try to come out of an inhuman system is framed against this background of exclusion and adjustments, and we can understand that reflexive attitudes and subsequently, resistance strategies, mainly on the economic and political planes, alongside with the preservation of Indian values, did not leave much time and energy to the indentured to explore his/her tormented identity on an aesthetic level, and to develop a creative *imaginaire* of

exile. We have some examples of this desire to keep the signs of an original culture, and preserve them from the loss of the crossing. In the Coolie Museum of Mauritius, we have a copy of the Quran, entirely recopied by hand, in an attempt by an indentured to keep from loss his sacred text. Oral traditions, in Madrassas (Quranic schools) and Baitkas (Hindu sociocultural organizations) preserved what they could. This was the case in Mauritius, but not really in the French Indies. However, it is often reported that, there, the Indian story-tellers were really admired, but eventually, they also dwindled away . . .

MC: So the concept of a major guilt is important in coolitude . . . From this loss, and subsequent efforts to recapture, recreate and reinvigorate a new approach to identity, does coolitude call attention to those moments of trauma, both in literary and analytical terms?

KT: The 'primitive', symbolical trauma can be summed up in the emotive terms '*Kala Pani*', the Dark Seas . . . Indeed. This sense of guilt is significant with the prohibition of the crossing of the *Kala Pani*, a major taboo in Hinduism. The soul of the Hindu who left the Ganges was doomed to err perpetually, as it was cut from the cycle of reincarnation. So going on the high seas was a poignant existential decision, a major symbolical act, as the *Kala Pani* was peopled by *houglis*, foul spirits and monsters. Undertaking the 'Voyage' meant many deaths, a betrayal of one's beliefs, social tenets and culture. I have pointed to this guilt or fear in coolitude to explain why the trauma and the liberation of the voyage occupies an important position, so often neglected in collective consciousness. The crossing of, and the relation to the sea is an important unacknowledged aspect of the coolie's descendant's identity . . . In countries like Guadeloupe and Martinique, due to greater distance, the migration of souls cut off from the waters of the Ganges, produced a series of psychological disasters, as one can imagine. For example, there, the Hindu indentured labourers were forced to bury their dead, instead of burning the corpses as in their homeland. Many such factors or circumstances led, in varied degrees, to the dilution or loss of the Indian identity in many plantocratic societies. Needless to say that this sense of emptiness, of exclusion, of dereliction, needs to be transferred in a creative approach to exile and identity. People have often expressed their desire to be part of the countries where they

were born, and this means moving out of the negating strategies of the past . . . Therefore, a more constructive, creative approach to this period is needed. I think that a new definition must be achieved when thinking of Indian, European, African or other cultures, in this context.