Cultural Forms of Representation of 'Coolies': Khal Torabully and his Concept of Coolitude

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CREOLISATION AND *COOLITUDE*[1]

Cultural studies attempt to systematically conceptualise a "conviviality in peace and difference" in a wide variety of spaces around the world that have taken on a greater role since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Ette 2010: 169-170, 183). They have been developed in response to the failure of the label 'multiculturalism', or as a rejection of the essentialist concept of identity. For a number of obvious reasons, they are currently the subject of intense debates among intellectuals of the Caribbean and its diasporas (Müller 2012: 255-264). This literature-rich region, which is especially well suited to "literatures without permanent residence" (Ette 2005: 123–156), has also evolved in recent decades into one of the most privileged spaces of theory formation. Theories of *Négritude*, *Créolité*, *relationnalité* – in this chronological order – have attempted to take stock of conviviality in the Caribbean and its diaspora, and from there to develop universal categories, as Édouard Glissant (1999) did in *Poétique de la relation,* and as Benitez Rojo (1998) did in *La isla que se repite*. Here the question has been raised repeatedly as to how ethnic difference can be conceptualised without falling into essentialisms. In keeping with the critique of multiculturalism articulated by leading English-language intellectuals like Arjun Appadurai (2009) or Paul Gilroy (2004), Walter Mignolo (2000: 241-242) has expressed deep criticism of the discourse around creoleness:

1 Cf. Müller/Abel 2015; translation by Bill Martin.

"Creoles, Caribbeanness, and Creoleness are still categories that overlap but which belong to different levels. Being or defining oneself as Creole means identifying a group of people, differentiating them from others. Thus, to say that 'neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles' (Bernabé 2002 [1989]: 75) is an identification in relation to a territory, and to the historical processes that created that territory."[2]

In what way can this criticism be countered? Glissant (1996:15; [French quotation translated by Bill Martin][3]) called his alternative model "creolisation", which is:

"[…] an encounter between cultural elements from completely different places, which have really become creolized, really merged and got jumbled together to produce an absolutely unforeseeable, absolutely new thing, which is Creole reality […] The creolization that is taking place in [the Caribbean], and the creolization spreading to other parts of the Americas, is the same one everywhere around the world. The thesis I will defend before you is that the world is becoming creolized, that is to say, that the cultures of the world today are frantically and utterly knowingly coming into contact with each other, changing through this exchange, through irredeemable conflicts and merciless wars, but also through advances in moral conscience and in hope […]."

2 "Criollos, caribeanidad y criollidad son todavía categorías que se soplan pero que pertenecen a diferentes niveles. Ser o definirse a uno mismo como criollo significa identificarse con un grupo de gente y diferenciarse de otro. Así, decir que 'ni europeos, ni africanos, nos proclamamos criollos' [Bernabé et al. 2002 [1989]: 75] es identificarse en relación con un territorio y con los procesos históricos que crearon ese territorio." (Mignolo 2003: 197)

3 "Ce qui se passe dans la Caraïbe pendant trois siècles, c'est littéralement ceci: une rencontre d'éléments culturels venus d'horizons absolument divers et qui réellement se créolisent, qui réellement s'imbriquent et se confondent l'un dans l'autre pour donner quelque chose d'absolument imprévisible, d'absolutment nouveau et qui est la réalité créole […] la créolisation qui se fait dans la Néo-Amérique, et la créolisation qui gagne les autres Amériques, est la même qui opère dans le monde entier. Le thèse que je défendrai auprès de vous est que le monde se créolise, c'est-à-dire que les cultures du monde mises en contact de manière foudroyante et absolument consciente aujourd'hui les unes avec les autres se changent en s'échangeant à travers des heurts irrémissibles, des guerres sans pitié mais aussi des avancées de conscience et d'espoir qui permettent de dire […]." (Glissant 1996: 15)

Over the last few years, in addition to Édouard Glissant, more and more voices around the world have engaged with the theoretical concepts coming out of the Caribbean (Müller/Ueckmann 2013: 7). A prominent role in this new dispensation has been played by Khal Torabully, a Mauritian poet, filmmaker, and cultural theorist (Cf. Bragard 2008) who with his concept of *coolitude* both builds on Glissant's work and at the same time critiques its omission of an Indian point of view. Regardless of whether they ended up on islands in the Indian Ocean or in the Caribbean, indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent – who were recruited from 1830 on as an alternative to slaves – created a worldwide Indian diaspora that demonstrated its own unique mechanisms of acculturation and transculturation. After all, this "population with an autochthonous culture" consisted of people who were both "creole *and* Indian" (Glissant 2005: 41; italics in the original).

KHAL TORABULLY

Born in Port Louis, Mauritius, in 1956, and based today in France, Torabully launched his *coolitude* project in the 1980s. It constitutes a poetic and poetological attempt to develop, on the basis of including those who have historically been excluded, a vision and a revision of both historical and current globalisation processes and desires to give speech to all those living subjects who, due to their miserable circumstances, have been forced to hire themselves out as wage- and contract labourers (Ette 2012: 291)

Torabully's *coolitude* manifesto not only honoured the *coolies* – who came primarily from India, but also from China and other countries – with a literary memorial and a space of memory, as it were; it also developed for them a poetics of global migration, which he had first given voice to in his 1992 book *Cale d'Etoiles – Coolitude* (Ship-Hold of Stars – Coolitude):

"Coolitude, to lay the first stone of my memory of all memories, my language of all tongues, that part unknown which numberless bodies and histories have often cast in my self, my genes and my islands [...]. Here is my love song to our travels and our sea, the odyssey which my seafaring people have never written […]. As I know my crew will firmly dissolve frontiers to widen the country of Man." (Quoted in Carter/Torabully 2002: 219-220)

What is crucial for Torabully is that he deals not only with the memory of certain forms of barbarous exploitation, but also with a relationality that is both historical and constitutive of the space of intersecting movements of migration:

You from Goa, Pondicherry, Chandernagore
Cocan, Delhi, Surat, London, Shanghai
Lorient, Saint-Malo, people of all the ships
Who took me towards another me, my ship-hold of stars
Is my travel plan, my space and vision of an ocean which
We all had to cross, even if we do not
See the stars from the same angle.

In saying coolie, I am also speaking of every navigator without
A ship's register, every man who has gone towards the horizons
Of his dreams, whatever the ship he had to board.
For when one crosses the ocean to be born
Elsewhere, the sailor of the one-way voyage likes to plunge back
Into his history, his legends, and his dreams.
Even during his absence of memory.
(Torabully 1992; quoted in Carter/Torabully 2002: 226)[4]

Significantly, Torabully makes a point of never defining the concept of "coolie" in terms of exclusion. Furthermore, it is used much more in a figurative sense and illuminates specific phenomena of a globalisation "from below", a globalisation of migrants who traverse the sea in search of work. By means of lyrical condensation, a worldwide network emerges of all those "travellers", the objects of an extreme exploitation, who connect the islands and cities of India, China and Oceania with the colonial ports of Europe (Ette 2012: 293).

4 "Vous de Goa, de Pondicheri, de Chandernagor, de Cocane, de Delhi, de Surat, de Londres, de Shangai, de Lorient, de Saint-Malo, peuples de tous les bateaux qui m'emmenèrent vers un autre moi, ma cale d'étoiles est mon plan de voyage, mon aire, ma vision de l'océan que nous traversons tous, bien que nous ne vissions pas les étoiles du même angle. En disant coolie, je dis aussi tout navigateur sans registre de bord; je dis tout homme parti vers l'horizon de son rêve, quel que soit le bateau qu'il accosta ou dût accoster. Car quand on franchit l'océan pour naître ailleurs, le marin d'un voyage sans retour aime replonger dans ses histoires, ses légendes, et ses rêves. Le temps d'une absence de mémoire." (Torabully 1992: 89)

COOLITUDE

Torabully's inclusion of the ethnic complexity of post-abolitionist societies in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean allows one to grasp the process of creolisation in a less essentialising manner. With his concept of *coolitude*, he advances Franco-Caribbean models of archipelagic creoleness, such as *Négritude*, *Créolité*, *Antillanité* and creolisation, as well as the concepts of *Indianité* and *Indienocéanisme* (Carter/Torabully 2002: 5-7, 16). The concept of *coolitude* is not predicated by geographical affiliation or ethnic origin, but by the economic and legal situation of the coolies – contract labourers who made their way not only from India and China, but also from Europe and Africa to various archipelagic regions like the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. With his mosaic model of combined identities, Torabully introduces social status as a theoretically crucial factor in creolisation (Abel 2013: 65–81).

In his foundational works of poetry *Cale d'Étoile, Coolitude* (1992) and *Chair Corail, Fragments coolies* (1999), Torabully implemented the theoretical premises of *coolitude* for the first time. However, international reception and coverage were first achieved with the 2002 publication of the major work *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, co-written with the historian Marina Carter. This work is an anthology in more ways than one. It brings together Khal Torabully's own poetry on the global Indian labour diaspora with a literary anthology of prose and poetry by Indian diaspora authors from the mid-18th century onwards. It focuses above all on the Indian Ocean and Oceania, with works from Mauritius (from 1843 on) and Fiji, Java, and Goa (1860–1870); but it also includes writings from the Americas: from Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Guadeloupe, and Martinique (from 1846 onwards). Beyond that, it includes a study of the theory of *coolitude* and its poetics. Formally, *Coolitude* combines a historical anthology in the strict sense with a workbook of brief definitions and a theoretical exploration of *coolitude* in the form of interviews conducted by the authors.

This hybrid book offers both academic interpretations and artistic access to the world of the Indian diaspora by narrating the "essence, or the essences" (ibid.: 148) of the Indian colonial diaspora and by deconstructing traditional views of the British Empire.

The introduction sheds light on the theoretical genesis of the concept by presenting theories of creolisation and relationality produced by Glissant, Deleuze and Guattari, Confiant, Chamoiseau and Bernabe, Benoist, and many others. The second chapter presents the development of one of the key themes of *coolitude*, the "coolie odyssey" – the stigmatised overseas journey from the In-

dian subcontinent. Chapter three and four are devoted to cultural-theoretical aspects of the perception of coolies by others, as well as their threefold stigmatisation and experience of surviving indenture. According to Carter and Torabully (2002: 187-188), three dispositifs of othering embedded the coolie in victimhood: first, as a mirror to the "oriental mystery"; second, as a "barbarian [...] invader"; and third, as "an ambassador of exoticism and sensuality". Chapter five deals with the "coolie heritage" and considers the politics of memory of the Indian diaspora in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Before the anthology reaches its final chapter, "Revoicing the Coolie", and the concluding selection of Torabully's poetry and critical prose, it goes into a long interview between Carter and Torabully titled "Some Theoretical Premises of Coolitude". The first part of their conversation illuminates the relationship between Césaire, *Négritude,* and *coolitude* (ibid.: 143–159). Part two examines "Elements of the Coolie's 'Memory'" (ibid.: 160–165). In part three, the authors consider aesthetics and literature (ibid.: 165–189); while part four addresses "Tradition, Society and Indianness". In the fifth part – "Some Literary Characteristics of Coolitude" (ibid.: 195–213) – purely poetological features are defined.

The Belgian theorist Véronique Bragard, whose 2008 book *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Literature* has advanced the theoretical reception of *coolitude*, points elsewhere to an important poetological feature of *coolitude* – namely, that it is "not based on Coolie as such but relies on the nightmare transoceanic journey of Coolies as both a historic migration and as a metonymy of cultural encounters" (Bragard 1998, cited in Carter/Torabully 2002: 15). The literary focus is thus fixed on the overseas journey as a phenomenon that both destroys identity and continually reconstructs it. The journey comes to be understood as a *coupure* [cut], displacing the loss of home from the centre of diasporic identity. Thus on an abstact level, the journey is generally linked to a repressed meta-memory of diasporic island identities that would establish ties, or rather produce so-called *hommes-ponts* – "human bridges" – who in turn might serve as interpreters of world cultures in their respective island microcosms (Turcotte/Brabant 1983, cited in Carter/Torabully 2002: 216).

Torabully's special contribution to the figure of the transoceanic journey refers to a poetics of "Indian elements" (Carter/Torabully 2002: 148). The trauma of crossing the ocean takes on a particular significance in the Indian framework since it rests on the key role of the *Kala Pani* myth. The taboo of *Kala Pani*, "the black water" or "Dark Seas", refers to the levelling of caste differences in the liminal space of the ship. These psychosocial dimensions of

the transoceanic trauma are taken up in the language of *coolitude* and shape its particular aesthetic.

CORAL

A further aesthetic element resulting from the focus on the transoceanic journey is the search for maritime symbols. The central image of *coolitude* is thus the metaphor of coral, the *chair corail* (coral flesh), which stands for hybrid relationalities in island cultures: "No longer the Hindu man from Calcutta / But coral flesh from the Indies" (Carter/Torabully 2002: 223).

The coral metaphor is not unlike *Créolité*'s images of mangroves and rhizomes, but it is framed transoceanically. As a symbol of the fluidity of relationships and influences, it uses the characteristics of coral as a hybrid being of rock and animal that occurs only in the sea, primarily in the tropics. Coral thus stands for an archipelagic thinking à la Glissant, a *pensée de l'ambigu*, and for a permeability by different currents. The characteristic spiral formations, the corals' *circomvolutions*, suggest visualisations of fractal logic in the processes of creolisation. Not just theoretically, but aesthetically, too, *coolitude* demonstrates its affiliation with Glissant and the *Créolité* writers, who likewise viewed diaspora identities "as not static or fixed but rather as 'subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power'" (Stuart Hall 1993, cited in Carter/Torabully 2002: 11).

The coral can be observed in its living habitat, unlike the rhizome, which exists underground. Beyond that, it allows for a composite rather than just an erratic collectivity, one that grows, palimpsest-like, through layering, condensation and sedimentation, but that nevertheless retains the egalitarian aspect of its conjunctions and openness to being traversed by all currents. The coral is in its very nature a hybrid, for it is born of the symbiosis of a phytoplankton and a zooplankton. It is the perfect metaphor for diversity. It is simultaneously a root, a polyp, and a splitting; it is fluid in form, both pliant and hard, dead and alive; and beyond that, it has many colours. Although it is rooted, it dispatches the greatest migration on the planet, a migration of plankton that, if seen from the moon, would be as clearly visible as the Great Barrier Reef (which UNESCO has designated a World Heritage site). This coral archipelago is quite simply the most extensive living sculpture on the planet (Torabully 2012: 70; cited in Ette 2012: 295).

Aside from its "marine spirit" (Carter/Torabully 2002: 158), *coolitude* also entails more static moments of visualisation that hearken back not to three-

dimensional dynamic structures but to two-dimensional composite models, such as the mosaic, in which Indian-Creole tiles complete the overall picture of creolisation without the idea of fusion being privileged. Torabully refigures these composite parts of the mosaic for the third dimension as individual roots of the rhizome (ibid.: 152). The idea of stone, of something fixed, does not simply disappear in the coral metaphor, however, but continues to index the fundamental significance of Aimé Césaire for the development of *coolitude*. Torabully's invocation of *Négritude* and what may be understood as its inheritor, *Antillanité*, is essential for understanding how the theory of *coolitude* is framed. His deep empathy with the founder of the *Négritude* movement and the 1997 interview he conducted with him in Fort-de-France, Martinique – in which the legacy of that movement and its continuation in *coolitude* were discussed – are two of the foundational myths of this concept of creolisation.

Négritude and *coolitude* are connected by two ideas: the reconciliation of the "descendants of the oppressed" (ibid.: 172), which supports efforts to come to grips with the historical tensions between the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and that of the coolie in Creole societies, and the idea of conceptual negotiation and/or redefinition.

The model of *coolitud*e represents a possibility for overcoming the theoretical limits of *Négritude*, which with its calls for and recognition of a specifically black identity disregards the ethnic complexity of post-slavery creolised societies. Carter and Torabully argue throughout their book that *coolitude* is not an Indian version of *Négritude*. For one, it is not based on ethnic or essentialist categories (ibid.: 150, 153). Second, their focus is on the overseas voyage, not on exile or the myth of origins – instead, identity is dissolved in permeability. *Négritude* and *coolitude* share in the discursive reallocation of stigmatised colonial alterities. They diverge from each other, however, when it comes to recognising the cultural influence that the global migration of indentured labourers from India has had on modern societies – regardless of whether that influence has been extensive, as in Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, and Fiji, or more limited, as in Guadeloupe, Martinique, or Eastern and Southern Africa.

Coolitude indexes a conception of space that not only emphasises an internal archipelagic relationality of heterogeneous communications between islands and archipelagos, but also points to the dynamics of an external relationality (Ette 2012: 40). In this way *coolitude* becomes a case study of a history of space which is always simultaneously a history of movement. The forced deportations of enslaved persons, such as Indian indentured labourers, shows that the

connection between internal and external relationalities is necessary for understanding spaces in their entirety.

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