



Khal Torabully. "Coolies" and corals, or living in transarchipelagic worlds

Ottmar Ette

To cite this article: Ottmar Ette (2017) Khal Torabully. "Coolies" and corals, or living in transarchipelagic worlds, *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 11:1, 112-119, DOI: [10.1080/21674736.2017.1335948](https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2017.1335948)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2017.1335948>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Khal Torabully. “Coolies” and corals, or living in transarchipelagic worlds

Ottmar Ette

Department of Romance Studies, Universität Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany

ABSTRACT

Khal Torabully creates poetry and a poetics for those forgotten by history, a theorem and theory which construct a tangible and sensual landscape, allowing for an empathetically shared experience and expressing the dramatic climax of the third phase of accelerated globalization: a project that would be unthinkable without the cultural theory we now have at our disposal in the present surge of globalization. In his poetic and theoretical texts, he has paid a literary tribute to the Coolies, usually from India, but also China and many other countries. Given Torabully's Mauritian roots, but also the worldwide migration of the Coolies themselves, the world of Coolitude is culturally and linguistically extremely diverse, making the act of translation very relevant and giving it multiple meanings. Literature brings these forgotten lives back to life and allows us to share this experience thanks to its aesthetic force. It traces the movements, which sketch trajectories functioning to this day as palimpsest-like vectors of our own paths and trajectories. The author of *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies* breaks the chain of mutual exclusions, replacing it with a type of writing belonging to a wider array of expressive modes which in diasporic situations unleash polylogical and archipelagic imaginaries.

Khal Torabully¹, Mauritian poet, film-maker and cultural-theorist born in 1956, developed his project of *Coolitude* in the 1980s, expressing a double world-consciousness of history. *Coolitude* is the ethical, poetic, and poetologic attempt to formulate a vision for the future, which, relying on the principle of including those who have been excluded from history and its futures, reflects and revises historical and current processes of globalization. It treats as living subjects and gives a voice, gives speech to all those who spent their lives working as indentured labourers in a globally spread world of misery.

“Coolies” are the truly transtopic protagonists of the third phase of accelerated globalization (nineteenth century—1910),² a fact vividly expressed only during the fourth phase of accelerated globalization by the cultural theory and poetic practice of this author from Mauritius.

Khal Torabully completed a dissertation on the semiology of the poetic in Lyon and is a founding member of a French group of researchers on globalization (*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Globalisations*, GERM). In his poetic and theoretical texts, he has paid a literary tribute to the “Coolies”, usually from India, but also China and many other countries. Khal Torabully has created a place for memory, but also a

poetics of global migration—as expressed in his 1992 volume *Cale d'Etoiles—Coolitude* [Stardock—Coolitude]:

Coolitude, setting the first stone of my memory of all memory, my language of all languages, my part of the unknown, laid down by many bodies and many stories in my genes and on my islands.

It is the song of my love for the ocean and for travel, the Odyssey still unwritten by my seafaring people... and my deckhands will speak for those who erased the borders to expand the *land of mankind*. (7)

A clear, prospective dimension accompanies the memory of the forgotten, devoured by history, in this song of love with its Homeric reminiscences. From a family that had once come to Mauritius from India, looking for work, this *poeta doctus* is not so much concerned with an impenetrable memory of the past, seemingly in need of commemorative service at a closed grave. Rather, the collective and individual experience suffered by hired hands during the third phase of globalization, basically workers without rights, shines a light on the future and the present phase of accelerated globalization and its migrations. It allows the poet to devise a new poetics, which expresses global relations in its tropes. Thus, we read in *Cale d'Etoiles—Coolitude*:

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. (89)

[You from Goa, from Pondicherry, from Chandannagar, from
Cocane, from Delhi, from Surat, from London, from Shanghai,
from Lorient, from Saint-Malo, people of all the ships,
who took me to my other self, my stardock,
is my itinerary, my freedom, my vision the
ocean, which we are all crossing, even though we did not
see the stars from the same perspective.

If I say “Coolie”, I also say every helmsman off the
crew list; I say every man who ever left for the horizon
of his dream, no matter which ship he moored himself to or
was forced to moor himself to. For if one crosses the ocean to be born
somewhere else, the mariner on a voyage of no return likes to return
to his stories, his legends, and his dreams. The
time of absent memory.] (My translation)

The concept of the “Coolie” evokes a historical paradigm, but it is not an exclusionary term: Torabully also gives it a metaphorical sense as he illustrates specific phenomena of

globalization from a *subaltern* position, a globalization of migrants crossing oceans, searching for labour. This poetry is a dense image of a worldwide network made up of all these *voyagers* who, objects of extreme exploitation, connect the islands and cities of India, China, and Oceania to the European colonial ports.

The voice and subject of this poetry undergoes a transformation, showing that in every translation, in every trans-portion, in every transfer, there is always transformation turning the Self into an Other and opening up new spaces for development and perspectives. The ocean is a uniting and separating element, transforming the cities of this network of colonial exploitation into islands, each of which have an *angle* of their own, a perspective of their own. The *odyssey*³ of indentured workers, for many years a blind spot in the discourse on identity, takes place between these islands. But the logbooks and itineraries say nothing about a return to Ithaca.

Thus the Indian “Coolie” is reconstructed and depicted very clearly in his historical shape and form, without remaining confined to this precise historical figure. Rather, the “Coolie” expands metaphorically and—what is more—*figurally* (to employ Auerbach’s concept) as poetry and theory begin to speak for those who set out on a voyage, usually of no return, under inhuman circumstances. That was what never written down, what always escaped memory and remembrance, what nobody wanted in their construction of identity—in Khal Torabully’s writing it becomes a poetically and poetologically dense view of the relational aspect of historical processes. These processes should not be viewed in a territorializing sense, centred on a single point of view. Instead, they demand a history of movement—no longer a history of space—and an oceanic perspective (or the perspective of Oceania). Once one has *found* it, the *figura* of the “Coolie” is *present* everywhere. It is far more than a *figura* from *memoria*: in more than one sense, it speaks of another time, intersecting, somewhat cyclically and causally, the past, present, and future.

Even if the tropics always remain a burning wound due to their dependence on foreign powers—“I will one day discover another new world./From it I will burn the Tropics/And damn Columbus for his damned economics” (Torabully *Voices from Indentured* n.p.). They are still woven into a worldwide network of movement, whose symbolical founding father—Columbus—is accusingly evoked here. This brief retrospective glance at the first phase of accelerated globalization in Europe’s early modern period, with its worldwide lure of economic relations, quickly opens up to the future, to a different sense of the “New World”, in which new ideas for a different world are up for discussion. For a different world, basing itself in a future life-together in difference, a “New World”, in a sense, is possible. The aesthetics of Khal Torabully has an ethical foundation within its postcolonial tone.

In a volume of poetry entitled *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies* [Coral Flesh, Coolie Fragments, 1999], the Mauritian poet—who also is noted for his film-making and received the “Golden Award” for his *La Mémoire maritime des Arabes* at the Cairo International Film festival in 2010—introduced a metaphoric structure which—unlike the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari (1977)—revolves around the coral, symbiotic creature of the seas. “Dans ma mémoire sont des langues aussi/Ma coolitude n’est pas une pierre non plus,/ elle est corail.” (82) [“In my memories there are also tongues/my coolitude is not a stone,/ it is coral.” (my translation)] *Coolitude* is not a lifeless commemorative stone, but a living, tongue-like, speaking coral. However, “What is the poet trying to tell us?” Is this manner of putting it not too obscure, too *difficult*?

Let us react to the stimulus. A plurality of languages, important for Torabully’s writing, implies that translation is a trans-portion to other shores and ports, continuous

processes of transfer which—for their part—imply processes of transformation: “non plus l’homme hindou de Calcutta/mais chair corail des Antilles” (108) [no longer Hindu-human from Calcutta/but coral flesh of the Antilles (my translation)]. These mutations and metamorphoses give life to a practice of writing and a cultural theory which both rely on transarchipelagic structures. Torabully programmatically states in “Quand les Indes rencontrent les imaginaires du monde”:

L’imaginaire corallien qui fonde la coolitude est une proposition d’archipéliser ces diversités si nécessaires aux humanités. Il pose concrètement notre imaginaire des Indes, polylogiques, archipéliques dans la réalité contemporaine où économie, cultures et écologie ne peuvent être séparées, comme le prouve la mondialisation actuelle avec pannes récurrentes assorties de violences. (71)

[The coral imaginary established by Coolitude is a proposal aiming to archipelagize the differences so necessary to the humanities (*une proposition d’archipéliser ces diversités si nécessaires aux humanités*). It specifically transposes the imaginary of polylogical and archipelagic India to our contemporary reality, where economics, culture and ecology may no longer be separated, as present-day globalization and its repeated failures, full of violence, clearly indicate.] (My translation)

This transarchipelagic way of looking at things, historically based on the tortured lives of millions of Indian “Coolies”, who signed 5- to 10-year contracts in their desperate quest for labour and thus saw themselves forced to leave for islands in the Indian Ocean or Oceania, the British West Indies or French Antilles, merges with the coral theorem, decisive in Torabully’s writing. He explains:

Le corail est observable dans son habitat vivant, à la différence du rhizome, qui est souterrain. En plus, il me permet de développer une connectivité agglutinante, bâtissant par couches, par concrétion, par sédimentation, un peu comme un palimpseste, et non pas seulement une connectivité errante, tout en conservant l’aspect égalitaire de la connection, étant ouvert à tous les courants. Le corail est hybride dans son être même, car il est né de la symbiose d’un phytoplancton et d’un zooplancton. on ne fait pas mieux en termes de métaphore de la diversité. Il est racine, polype et plature, protéiforme, souple et dur, et de différentes couleurs. Tout en étant enraciné, il libère la plus grande migration sur terre, celle du plancton, visible depuis la Lune, tout comme la Grande barrière de corail, classé au patrimoine mondial de l’humanité par l’Unesco. Cet archipel corallien est tout simplement la sculpture vivante la plus étendue sur terre. Cet archipel corallien est tout simplement la sculpture vivante la plus étendue sur terre. (70–71)

[As opposed to the rhizome, which is in the earth, the coral may be observed alive in its natural habitat. Also, it allows me to develop an agglutinating form of being together, consisting of stratification, densification, sedimentation, not unlike the palimpsest, instead of an erratic form of being together. It maintains the egalitarian aspect of being together but is open to all currents. The coral is an essentially hybrid being, for it is born out of the symbiosis of phytoplankton and zooplankton. It is a wonderful metaphor for diversity. It is root, polyp and flattening, it is a changing form, warm and hard and even colourful. Even though it is rooted, it unleashes the greatest migration on Earth, the migration of plankton, visible from the Moon, just like the Great Barrier Reef, a UNESCO world heritage natural site. This archipelago of corals is simply the largest sculpture on Earth, alive and growing, and one can make it out from the Moon.] (My translation)

The recurring lexeme *vivant* (“alive”) at the beginning and the end of this passage expresses the importance of processes of life in Torabully’s coral theorem. Possibly, the poet and theoretician of *Coolitude* did not take the fact into account that he has a

prominent predecessor in Charles Darwin, who toyed with the idea of turning the coral, as Horst Bredekamp puts it, into a “symbol of the entire development of nature” and using it as a “model of evolution”, “anarchically growing in all directions and not—as in the tree-model—viewing humans as the culmination and conclusion of a development” (1). Torabully not only transforms the coral into a theorem of life, its properties as a living being also *embody* a knowledge of survival and living-together, allowing these communities of living creatures to grow to works of art of enormous proportions in their *sym-biotic* way⁴ of existence. Even Darwin’s “coralline inspiration” consciously relied on a line of tradition in the philosophy of nature in which “corals and the products they produce in their struggle for life belong to the realm of art” (Bredekamp 70). Leon Battista Alberti had already pointed to the fact that the human point of view tends to discover semantically potent works of art in complex living organisms (qtd. in Bredekamp 11).

Obviously, the author from Port-Louis uses the coral to compete with the post-structuralist concept of the rhizome; but it also becomes clear that both coral and rhizome represent un-centred, networked, non-hierarchical structures. However, as the coral oscillates between life-giving (and erotic) flesh—the *Chair Corail*—and its sculptural aspects as a stone of commemoration, it displays a dynamic relationship between geology and biology, the animal and the plant, life and death, society and community. Torabully’s writing thrives on this poetic valence. From a tropical perspective, the symbiotic world of the coral becomes connected to a form of *conviviality* or living-together which gives rise to a life-world above and below the sea-level. As a poetical trope, the coral embodies the tropical world of movement and is—due to its migrations—the transtopical creature *par excellence*.

The Mauritian author presents a fascinatingly dynamic and—with respect to a history of movement—mobile vision of the coral, which at first sight—especially looking at the Great Barrier Reef—one might have associated with rigidity and resistance. But Khal Torabully listens to the static hiss of history and its stratified layers, its living sediments. He draws our attention to it as a work of art, close to nature and palimpsest at the same time.

In the context of Khal Torabully’s imagery, the connection between coral and migration evokes the worlds of the oceanic and of migration. Thus, the Mauritian poet and theoretician of *Coolitude* explained in a lecture held before the UNESCO in 1996: “The essence of Coolitude is impossible to grasp without understanding their voyages across the ocean. This decisive experience, the odyssey of the ‘coolies’, has made an indelible mark on the imaginary landscape of Coolitude” (13). This passage implicitly addresses a *landscape of theory* contributing to the relational structures which the present volume is all about: relations unfolding transareally in the course of four phases of accelerated globalization, ranging from a self-sufficient *island-world*, to an archipelagic and trans-archipelagic *island-world*. The forms of life and patterns of movement of the “Coolies” abandoned to an unforeseeable future, but also the epistemological and poetological metaphor of the coral introduce a vivid and vivifying dynamic into this transtopical landscape of theory, reaching far beyond the level of intense metaphors.

The etymological history of the concepts proves the point. In a book published in cooperation with British historian Marina Carter in 2002, the concept of *Coolitude* is discussed systematically with reference to historical sources, thus anchoring it firmly in history and its futures. The volume clearly documents the brutal methods of recruitment serving to raise cheap labour.

An individual case will serve as an example. In 1882, a young boy by the name of Dawoodharree was recruited, as was often the case, with false promises to work as an indentured labourer on a plantation on the island of Mauritius. The plantation bore the promising name of “Sans Souci”, but its directors clearly denied the boy his right to leave:

Dawoodharree became an indentured labourer along with five or six other men, who had come with him from India. He was aware of the fact that he had gone to Mauritius on a five-year contract, that his passage as well as the passages of the other men had been paid by the Sirdar of the “Sans Souci” Estate and that the money put down by the Sirdar had been reimbursed to him by the company. (qtd. after Carter and Torabully 24)

Legality, legitimacy, and the inhumanity of a feudal-capitalist worldview are still inseparably interwoven in this post-abolitionist document, set in a juridical tone. Slavery has been reduced to a metaphor; but it is more than that: it is a fact of life and a reality of suffering for the “Coolies”. The contract is a contraption transforming the tropical promise of plenitude into a trap. Simultaneously, Khal Torabully creates poetry and a poetics for those forgotten by history, a theorem and theory which construct a tangible and sensual landscape, allowing for an empathetically shared experience and expressing the dramatic climax of the third phase of accelerated globalization: a project that would be unthinkable without the cultural theory we now have at our disposal in the present surge of globalization. Literature brings these forgotten lives back to life and allows us to share this experience thanks to its aesthetic force. It traces the movements, which sketch trajectories functioning to this day as palimpsest-like vectors of our own paths and trajectories.

This obviously is a transarea approach to a landscape of theory, which could not have expressed itself without the political, social, and cultural context of the island of Mauritius, politically independent since 1968. An uninhabited island of the Indian Ocean before its colonization, Mauritius was under Portuguese (1505–1598), Dutch (1598–1710), French (1715–1810), and British authority (1810–1968) and a focal point of those historical events characteristic of a trans-archipelagic set of connections which—as we have seen—manifested itself very specifically in the tropics. Resembling the level of religious practice, with Hinduism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam in close contact, the linguistic level features Morisyen (a French-based Creole used by almost the entire population), various Northern Indian varieties of Hindi, South Indian languages such as Tamil and various Southern Chinese dialects. English is the official language, whereas French is not only the native language spoken by the upper class, but also very present in the media. This is a linguistic, religious, and cultural microcosm, which Khal Torabully opens up to the macrocosm by aesthetic and etymological means.

Thus, given Khal Torabully’s Mauritian roots, but also the worldwide migration of the “Coolies” themselves, the world of *Coolitude* is culturally and linguistically extremely diverse, making the act of translation very relevant and giving it multiple meanings. Translating and trans-posing are a core aspect of what Khal Torabully and Marina Carter call *the Coolie Heritage* (117). Despite limitations to the cultural and trans-lingual capacities of the Mauritian author, it is very clear that his theoretical prose *and* lyrical practice are shaped by processes which constantly cut across different languages—not only in his public readings.

Even though there is good reason to speak of *Revoicing the Coolie*, as Carter and Torabully out it (214), we should nevertheless remember that the many voices of *Coolitude* never spoke in unison or a single language, nor will they ever do so in the future. At times,

Khal Torabully was criticized for, or even accused of a certain degree of essentialism, as in Césaire's and Senghor's concept of *Négritude* (*weltweit/worldwide* 63). In fact, terminologically, there may be a problem with the search for "identity"⁵, but there is no question about the great impact and relevance of the thinking and writing of the Mauritian author: "In the 'post-ethnic society' of Mauritius, where the 'impact of Modernity' eroded competing ancestral cultures, Khal Torabully appears as a 'homme-pont', a human bridge" (Carter and Torabully 216).

The author of *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies* breaks the chain of mutual exclusions—"Le blanc rejetant le noir qui rejette le 'coolie'- original" (*weltweit/worldwide* 68) [The white rejects the black who rejects the 'coolie' (my translation)]—replacing it with a type of writing belonging to a wider array of expressive modes which (often in diasporic situations) unleash poly-lingual "imaginaires polylogiques et archipéliques" (71) [the imaginary of polylogical and archipelagic]. They are open to the "contamination de discours, genres, lieux et meme de langues" (*weltweit/worldwide* 69) [contamination of discourses, genre, locations, and even languages (my translation)], which no longer obeys the laws of territory or the history of space.

India takes on a new, pluralized shape, assumes control over its *orientation* as *les Indes, las Indias, or the Indies*. East India and West India, Asia and Australia, Europe, America, and Oceania enter a system of multifarious figurations and poly-logical relationships on the levels of literature and cultural theory. Their wealth is a wealth in TransArea literatures and TransArea studies. The unfolding consequences of our very complex TransArea literatures and theories, this is for certain, will gradually change our worldview and world-consciousness, but certainly also our specific experiences of the world. *Coolitude* does not merely concern others: it gives us a new take on the literatures of the world and the world beyond literature, creating new concepts of understanding. It allows us to keep creating our world in poly-logical ways for and in new futures.

Translated from German by Mark Minnes

Notes

1. For more information on his work, see Bragard, *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Literatures*.
2. In my book *TransArea. A Literary History of Globalization* I argue that that globalization has been a continuous process that has gone through four phases acceleration since the early modern era (7). The phases can be classified as follows: (1) Colonial expansion at the start of the early modern era; (2) mid-eighteenth century–early nineteenth century; (3) nineteenth century–1910; (4) 1980–2020.
3. Cf. in this context the chapter "The Coolie Odyssey: A Voyage in Time and Space" in Marina Carter and Khal Torabully. *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (17–44).
4. For a more detailed discussion on the concept of living-together, see Ette, *Konvivenz: Literatur und Leben nach dem Paradies*.
5. The term is repeatedly used in the closing chapter of Carter and Torabully 215 and *passim*.

Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude goes to Khal Torabully for supplying additional information.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ottmar Ette, born in the Black Forest, Germany, has been chair of Romance Literature at the University of Potsdam Brandenburg since 1995. He wrote his dissertation on José Martí in 1990 at the University of Freiburg and his Habilitation on Roland Barthes in 1995 at the Catholic University of Eichstätt, Bavaria. He received the “Young Scholars Award for Romance Literature” for his book *José Martí* (1991) and the “Hugo Friedrich and Erich Kühler” award for his work on Roland Barthes (1998). His publications on “Literaturwissenschaft als Lebenswissenschaft” triggered wide-ranging reactions and discussions all across the world, thus renovating the field of literary studies for good. Furthermore, he has also received much attention for his work on and editions of the writings of Alexander von Humboldt and is considered a leading specialist on Humboldt’s original scientific approach and extremely prolific work.

Works cited

- Auerbach, Erich. “Philologie der Weltliteratur.” *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie*. Fritz Schalk and Gustav Konrad Bern. München: Francke, 1967.
- Bragard, Véronique. *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Literatures*. Bruxelles/Bern/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Bredekamp, Horst. *Darwins Korallen: Die frühen Evolutionsdiagramme und die Tradition der Naturgeschichte*. Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 2006.
- Carter, Marina and Khal Torabully. *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*. London: Anthem Press, 2002.
- Carter, Marina, and Khal Torabully. “The Coolie Odyssey: A Voyage in Time and Space.” *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*. Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, eds. London: Anthem Press/Wimbledon, 2002. 17–44.
- Ette, Ottmar. *Konvivenz: Literatur und Leben nach dem Paradies*. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2012.
- Ette, Ottmar. *TransArea. A Literary History of Globalization*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012.
- Torabully, Khal. *Cale d’Etoile – Coolitude*. La Réunion: Editions Azalées, 1992.
- Torabully, Khal. “The Coolies’ Odyssey.” *The Unesco Courier* 10 (1996): 13–17.
- Torabully, Khal. *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*. Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge Éditions, 1999.
- Torabully, Khal. “Voices from Indentured.” 2011. TS.
- Torabully, Khal. “Quand les Indes Rencontrent les Imaginaires du Monde.” *Weltweit/worldwide. Archipiélagos como espacios de prueba de una convivencia global*. Ottmar Ette and Gesine Müller, eds. Frankfurt am Main/Madrid: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 2012. 63–72.