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TRANSOCEANIC DIALOGUES

COOLITUDE IN CARIBBEAN AND INDIAN OCEAN LITERATURES

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Introduction

The globalization of our planet most probably started with the voyaging canoes of ancestral peoples and later accelerated with the Great Discoveries. Ever since, and increasingly so with such revolutionary inventions as the airplane and the Internet, populations but also identities have been shifting, changing places and forms, moving around numerous locations producing new configurations of self. Identities are ever more perceived as in flux, open to new elements and unpredictable changes. However, despite new thinking around the concepts of hybridity and cross-culturality, constructions of "pure" identities which follow the Manichean colonial agenda of us vs. them, authentic vs. inauthentic, seem on the rise in the face of increasing "epidemic[s] of separatism"[1]. Unstable identities scare as they destabilize secure ideas and disrupt the reveling in one defined dominant version of things. What is more, the fear of this 'chaos-monde' to use Glissant's term that emphasizes its unpredictability, has led to fanaticism or what Maalouf has called "identities meutrières."[2]

Although many displacements nowadays are voluntary, yet increasingly coerced by economic or political conditions, other migrational movements were forced by colonial circumstances. Indeed, from 1838 onwards, as the English needed more labor to continue trade on colonial plantations and reassert their authority after the official abolition of slavery, hundreds of thousands of Indian men and women were persuaded to leave their mother country to become slaves of another name: indentured laborers, later called coolies. This historical "Coolie odyssey"[3] further complicated racial, socio-political and cultural relations and constitutes an indisputable turning point in the development of the countries involved (the Caribbean – principally Guyana and Trinidad, Guadeloupe and Martinique, Mauritius and South Africa.)[4] Although

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1 Pauline Melville, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 355.

2 Amin Maalouf, *Les Identités meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset, 1998).

3 See the collection of poetry *Coolie Odyssey* (Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1988) by the Guyanese Commonwealth-prize winner David Dabydeen.

4 These regions are the ones that "imported" a very large number of indentured Indians. Fiji will not be considered in this study for two reasons: first because no writing by women was available and second, because the Fiji cultural situation is different from the regions examined here.

undoubtedly different from the Black slaves' lives and diaspora which has engendered another "poétique du voyage" as Mauritian poet Khal Torabully argues, the experience of descendants of indentured laborers from India testifies to a similar limbo consciousness as they are no longer Indian and they have to construct for themselves new identities while recovering from a past of unarticulated memories. This limbo-consciousness, a phrase used by Jeremy Poynting,[5] refers to a state of uncertainty but also to the distancing of coolies from "authentic" India as a result of their displacement. The limbo-consciousness echoes Wilson Harris's limbo dance concept which refers to a dance which originated on the slave ship and which, for Harris, serves as a living embodiment of Caribbean cross-cultural creative resistance.[6] The Indians' transoceanic crossing of the *kala pani* (impure/dark waters), their adaptation, cultural exchanges, the re-creation of their religious rituals e.g. have imaginatively reshaped their Indianness into a creative dynamic coolie identity.

My venture into these voyages was dictated by a twofold requirement. On the one hand, there was the urgency to give an account of all the contemporary seminal female writings from the coolie diaspora which have repeatedly been marginalized in male anthologies or discarded by South Asian studies which have privileged writings from India. Indeed, the treacherous waters of the western world of publishing and criticism have been rough for many coolie women writers. On the other hand, there was the wish to provide a comparative and textual analysis of those often neglected works through the concept of coolitude initiated by Torabully. Coolitude, which will be used to interrogate and refine the present analysis, invites a new approach to alterity for the texts under consideration. The recent publishing of several critical approaches such as Marina Carter and Khal Torabully's critical anthology *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2003), Brinda Mehta's insightful feminist approach to Indo-Caribbean women's writing *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (2004) confirm a growing critical interest in this direction. The francophone side, which is, to a great extent characterized by a lack of engagement with postcolonial discourse, has relegated the contributions of Indian Ocean literature to a marginal position in comparison with "the higher profile traditionally

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5 Jeremy Poynting, "Literature and Cultural Pluralism: East Indians in the Caribbean" (unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Leeds 1985), 406-429.

6 See Wilson Harris, "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 16.2 (1970), 1-32.

accorded to the Caribbean."[7] Recent monographs such as Peter Hawkins's *The Other Hybrid Archipelago* (2007) and Srilata Ravi's *Rainbow Colors* (2007) testify to a new critical interest in Indian Ocean creativity.

The present study, while engaging with the previous approaches, seeks to fill gaps and complement existing studies with a comparative bilingual and interdisciplinary survey that aims at establishing transoceanic and transregional dialogues between the Caribbean and the Mascarenes, via the South African Cape. While Indo-Caribbean literatures remain marginalized within the context of Caribbean studies, literature in French from the Indian Ocean remains to a large extent cut off from the Caribbean discourses of identity with which it nevertheless shares a number of similarities. This book seeks to respond to this isolation by exploring links between the Caribbean and the Mascarenes via a transnational and transcolonial approach to the coolie experience. More so, this work moves beyond the gender and feminist agendas to take into account the complexity of women's experience and literary expression. If Brathwaite's words "The Unity is submarine"[8] reflect my project to encompass several regions and move away from the homogenizing discourses of the nation state, it highlights how comparisons have been instigated by writers themselves. More specifically, my approach follows the bridges already established by Torabully whose work has been prefaced by the Martinican Raphaël Confiant and who has dedicated a poem to the Guyanese poet David Dabydeen who, in turn, had his novel *The Counting House* translated by the Mauritian writer Ananda Devi.

Although many writers have been considered, I focus here on only some twenty literary works. These works come from very distant geographical areas. The main bulk of Caribbean writings that I analyze originate from Guyana and Trinidad. The voices of Rajkumari Singh and Mahadai Das incarnate the very rising yet determined voice of the Guyanese coolie woman, which emerged in the 1970s. The work of the late Mahadai Das is analyzed extensively for its politically committed ideas and keen acknowledgement of the restrictions 'gender' forces specifically on women. Guyanese writers such as Narmala Shewcharan or Janice Shinebourne (of Chinese and Indian mixed background) write from England but deal with the Guyanese past inscribing violence and rapprochement in their works. The recent work of the Trinidad-born

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7 Peter Hawkins, *The Other Hybrid Archipelago* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 20.

8 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens* (Mona, Jamaica: Savacou, 1974), 64.

Lakshmi Persaud also focuses on the Guyanese situation, and thus illustrates a Caribbeanness of great interest to this analysis. Others like Marina Budhos put pen to paper from an extensively mixed background as she was born in New York, the child of an Indo-Guyanese father and a Jewish-American mother. Trinidadian-born authors who have also migrated write from Canada (Ramabai Espinet, Shani Mootoo), the Bahamas (Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming) and England (Lakhsmi Persaud) while remaining creatively attached to their spiritual and cultural heritages. Ananda Devi's prolific work, which problematizes the dictates of an ossified normative community, constitutes the leading voice for the francophone Mascarene Islands. For this reason and others, Devi's fascinating creativity, which has been recognized by numerous literary prizes (the Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie a.o.) has taken on a prominent place in my work. She is followed by two emerging authors, Shenaz Patel and Nathacha Appanah-Mouriquand, whose works also engage in disrupting walls of silence in the context of women's condition. Laure Moutoussamy's work provides one with insights into the experience of the Martinican migrant of mixed origins. Last but not least, the short stories of Agnes Sam, the great-granddaughter of Indian indentured workers, interrogate the coolie experience in the South African context. Despite disparate origins, readers of literary works by women descendants of indentured laborers are faced with a sea of commonalities and thematic echoes. Yet, what do coolie/Kala Pani[9] women writers, after several generations and diasporic experiences, still share? How do their writings convey or transcend the differences between the Caribbean and the Mascarenes?

In 1992, the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully coined the word coolitude, eventually granting the coolies' history a place and a name. Fully aware of the reservations expressed towards the concept which remains opaque and associated with a pejorative image of the coolie, I here wish to engage with the interrogations the concept has raised. The term 'coolitude*,'* which inevitably echoes *Négritude,* is defined by the author as the "alter ego de la créolité"[10] or the "acclimatisation de l'Inde en terre plurielle."[11] Positing a dynamic and open approach, coolitude challenges received ideas, urging one, on the one hand, to read the

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[9] Despite the differences in connotations, I will use Kala Pani/coolie alternatively in my study. My instistence on using coolie in meant to anchor my study in a decentered perspective and highlight the conflicts and historical elements encapsulated in the term coolie that informs the works analyzed here.

[10] Khal Torabully, "Coolitude," *Notre Librairie: Revue des Littératures du sud*, 128 (December 1996), 71.

[11] *Ibid.*, 71.

Indian element of the creolization process and, on the other hand, to capture the creolization of the Indian diasporic inheritance. In the Mauritian context, it defies the casteist and Indo-centric conceptions of identity that have idealized Indianness. In the context of the Caribbean where creolization is predominantly coupled with an Afro-centered approach and where *Négritude* somehow contributed to the repression of Indian elements, Torabully's term also opens up new dialogues between descendants of slaves and coolies. The present work aims to consider how the concept of coolitude is relevant in the context of coolie women's writings. If coolitude is to be regarded as the literary expression of the coolie experience and coolieness, how is this expression articulated by female writers? How does the term "ethnic" fail to encompass this imaginary? How do writers account for the distinctive intercultural exchanges that have taken place in regions like the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean? How can one cope and express mixed origins in a diasporic context? If Naipaul considers the Caribbean as a place where nothing was ever created or Bisoondath regards Caribbean history as a "big black hole,"[12] how do coolie women writers (mostly writing from outside their mother countries) confirm or challenge perspectives on these home cultures?

The present work is organized around the paradigm of the crossing in its concrete and metaphorical meanings. My main concern is to outline the possible significance of the distinct crossings that are foregrounded in the works under scrutiny. The first chapter surveys the history of the coolie diaspora as well as its literary figures, beginning with Naipaul's first engagement with coolie history to Torabully's concept of coolitude. The transoceanic crossing (along with the chronotope of the ship) constitutes the first moment in a series of traumatic and painful ordeals that were to shape a collective memory and imaginary. As writers inscribe the transoceanic voyage from India to the colonies along the bodily pain of cane cutting, they participate in shaping an imaginary community of the Indo-Black Atlantic that is discussed at length in chapter two. Chapter three examines the similar figures that compose the diasporic imaginary in question. Figures such as the grandparents, the mimic parents or the pluricultural narrators, epitomize divergent attitudes to home culture. They are studied in their symbolic dimensions and later interpreted according to Jung's archetypes. In a similar line, I investigate how archetypal spaces embodied in two antinomic sites, namely the plantation village and the dystopic city, are discussed along with their interrelationship with the retention or abandonment of Indian

[12] Marina Carter & Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem South Asian Studies, 2002), 13.

values. Coolie identities are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed by female writers who are preoccupied with gender issues and more particularly with the transgression of gender boundaries, a subject I address in chapter four. As they move away from the patriarchal enclosing space of oppression, women are faced with new interrogations. Chapter five considers new perceptions of identities in flux and their metaphorical expression in vegetal and culinary metaphors. Scrutinizing how the national discourse impedes the force of cross-culturality, the last chapter of this study offers a counterpoint to chapter five. While it raises the question of why, in certain contexts, political pasts need to be confronted, it examines how authors prominently engage in cross-cultural rapprochements. A reading of how the inscription of alterity defies the national agenda in Ananda Devi's work reveals similar concerns in the Indian Ocean region.

Opening this work, "Womanish Words," (reproduced on page 7) is a provocative piece painted by the Trinidadian Bahamas-based poet Lelawattee Manoo-Rhaming which conveys in many ways the theoretical and textual agendas of the present study. While the fingerprints recall the first coolies thumbing their contracts, the poet's and artist's act of lipsticking her lips and printing her open mouth on the paper conveys the issues of voicing and silence to which the painted hand adds a metafictional layer. The stamps of pioneering women allude to the ground-breaking generation of writers dealt with here. The layer of androsia fabric (batik created in The Bahamas) suggests the interweaving of heritages also at work in their literary styles. The poem "Womanish Words," that powerfully dialogues with the visual layer, celebrates the ways in which women speak, "write, weave, draw, paint, absorb from nature their truth and proclaim it to the world."[13] The reference to woman as a life-sucking soucouyant,[14] a very Caribbean folklore reference, engages in a challenging reevaluation of women's contribution to Caribbean societies. It is the aim of the present work to, in its turn, listen and elucidate the subtlety of those "mouths that want to shout" as the poem on the painting puts it.

Although this research strives for comparative scope, it retains certain western bias and hesitations linked with my background. In this context, I would like to respond with Derek Walcott's words that "I

[13] Comment of the author (E-mail, September 2006).

[14] The Soucouyant is a Trinidadian vampire who travels at night by shedding its human skin and turning into a ball of fire. It appears to people as an old woman and sucks the blood of its victims while they sleep.

prefer to be illogical and wrong than to be sure."[15] Moreover, comparisons might lead to perilous generalizations or even uniformization but it is a risk to be taken in the context of such analysis. In his initiatory voyage into the desert *Gens de nuages*, the Mauritian writer Leclézio writes: "Ce qui sépare le nomade du sédentaire (c'est-à-dire du citadin), c'est cette faculté qui est celle du marin sur son bateau, ou de l'Esquimau sur sa banquise, de distinguer le moindre changement, d'admirer la variété là où d'autres ne verraient que du vide."[16] His words remind us of Torabully's[17] *Cale d'étoiles, coolitude* where he engages, like a sailor, in revisiting the past of his people, to "remonter des ancres qui parfois raccrochent à sa vérité [à l'homme]"[18] pushing his imagination towards a borderless world reinvented by creative memory. The migrant poet and writer is in myriad ways this mariner who, like a child, observes and gives us the opportunity to see things again and anew. This image of the seafarer[19] echoes my own voyage into an unfamiliar field, which is perceived with my individual subjectivity, through the lenses of both a critic and human being eternally migrating in search of meaning.

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15 Enwezor, Okwui *et al.* (eds.), *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11_Pllatform3* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003), 19.

16 Jemia & Jean-Marie G. Le Clézio, *Gens des nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 126.

17 Khal Torabully, in an interview, reveals that his own father was a sailor born in Trinidad and whose ship wrecked in the 1940s along the coast of Mauritius. See Ana Couassi, "Rencontre avec Khal Torabully," *Jeune Afrique* (septembre 1998), 68.

18 Khal Torabully, *Cale d'étoiles, Coolitude* (Île Maurice: Azalées Éditions, 1992), 29.

19 I am of course here alluding to the allegorical medieval elegy whereby the sailor also embodies the one in search of meaning.