

From Négritude to Coolitude

Review >
General

**Define me pray:
What is a coolie?
One caught by his neck
And thrown over deck?
I am Lascar, Malabar,
Madras tamarind from the bazaar
Telegu to tell all to you...**

By Clare Anderson

Coolitude: *An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* aims to conceptualize the nineteenth-century dissemination of Indian labour in new and productive ways. Coolitude is a politically and intellectually ambitious book, and those with no knowledge of postcolonial theory will find it a challenging read, especially as there is no index to aid navigation of its complex ideas. Paralleling the ideas of 'Negritude' and Créolité pioneered by African and Caribbean intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, this book deploys the concept of 'coolitude' to describe and encapsulate the distinctive characteristics of the streams of indentured Indian migrants that shaped modern nations such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, and influenced others like Guadeloupe, Martinique, East and South Africa. In doing so, it emphasizes their shared history.

Marina Carter is perhaps the best-known historian of indentured immigrants in Mauritius, and has long wrestled with the epistemological problems of subaltern invisibility. Khal Torabully, descendant of a Lascar community (of Indian Ocean seafarers), is an acclaimed poet and film-maker based in France. The result of their collaboration is a collection of many previously unpublished texts, poems, and sketches that explore Indian plantation experiences and deconstruct traditional depictions of indentured migrants across the British Empire.

Given its authorship, it is perhaps no surprise that *Coolitude* is a fundamentally postmodern work. It combines empirical research with artistic immersion into what Carter and Torabully describe as 'the world of the vanished coolie'. The authors deconstruct representations of indentured labourers, seeking to move beyond both contemporary notions and historical reappraisals of their socio-economic 'otherness'. Historical imaginings of the experiences of indentured labourers are thus central to their efforts to redefine and re-appropriate the ways in which indentured immi-

grants coped with life on the plantation and produced meaningful forms of self and collective identity. Towards these ends, the authors explore the distortions and silences of the archives and early colonial literature, and assess the work of contemporary writers like V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie.

In this imaginative redefinition of the experiences of indentured labourers, the voyage across the sea (*kala pani*, or 'black water') is given special significance. It is described as a decisive experience that left an indelible stamp on the 'landscape' of coolitude, a place for the destruction and creation of identities. Moreover, the authors argue, this sea voyage encapsulates the essence of all migratory journeys, and the struggles, disappointments, and hopes of the coolie are those of universal human experience. In their evaluation of life on the plantation, Carter and Torabully go on to untangle the ways in which indentured migrants were 'thrice victimized': by nineteenth-century contemporaries who described them as pariahs among free men, by early literary accounts which rendered them exotic, and by historians who recast them as little more than slaves. By contrast, the authors explore ways in which Indians attempted to resist conditions on the plantation. These themes will be familiar to those who know the authors' earlier work, particularly Carter's nuanced reinter-

pretations of a system that other historians have uncritically presented as 'a new system of slavery'.

A new departure, particularly for Carter, is the exploration of 'indenture heritage': the experiences of the descendants of migrants and their feelings of social stigma. It is a pity that this is not examined more in-depth; the authors could have used the twentieth-century literary texts that they draw on elsewhere, as well as the recent work of anthropologists and others. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary musings of *Coolitude* will appeal to historians and literary theorists of the Indian diaspora, as well as those interested in slavery and other systems of unfree labour. <

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Hill Coolies landing at the Mauritius



Taken from the book under review