

## *On Organizing the Coolie's Karahee: The Diaspora's New Literary Directions*

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"You're Indian? Where from?" Answering this, I never had words like Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Malayali, Assamese, Kashmiri, or Sindhi. Rather, I had "Guyanese." My parents' fridge was always packed with empty yogurt containers filled with things like beans and potatoes. I look at my hands. They've always been called "East Indian," but "India" was never a home in any recent memory. According to family stories—sitting at my Aja's brother's side or reading my Nana's autobiography—I have discovered that my family left India in 1890 and 1885. They crossed the Kala Pani—a metaphor that haunts me today. This crossing of the "black waters" was to erase themselves from their ancestral lands, to disappear the ancestors and rishis from whom they descended. Crossing the Kala Pani was to allow the dark cloud of erasure a home in the chest. No more caste. No more kin. My ancestors were bound to serve the British East India Company for at least five years of labor, followed by a reneged promise of return to India.

About life before their thumbprints signed contracts, there's not much familial memory. Most of my ancestors left from Kolkata, then Calcutta, and some from Chennai, then Madras. I don't know who spoke what language or which castes were represented. What were their gotras? I don't know what ethnicities they claimed, which hills were sacred to whom, or in which fields their navel strings were buried. Were any of my ancestors "Hill Coolies," Adivasi—indigenous? I imagine the first contact that these people had in the loading docks, beginning to galvanize a lingua franca—a koine language—of mutually intelligible sounds and prayers of safe return from their incredible diverse beginnings. There was no one Indian. There still isn't, at least in India, nor in the different South Asian diasporas.

When my ancestors came to the Caribbean, they went through a process of Creolization and Koinization that was site-specific. Koinization is a linguistic process where North Indian languages coalesce to form a language variety that is mutually intelligible. We didn't start out as one people from one place. Empire made us into *Indians*, into *Coolies*. We worked to be legible to one another. It's through the homogenizing of state and colonial

approaches that we were written into one ontological whole—ironically fragmenting us further, barring us from alliances and coalitions with our siblings, who endured similar treatment and were dehumanized under British hands.

What is important is the consideration of the mythic webs we wend to bring us into this present space—a time where we remain indentured, whether through student loans, the glass ceilings of a capitalist meritocracy illusion, or the new forced migration arising from American consumerism and the global economy. We are at a time where we are doing the same, arriving into a new space. This time we are coming from various nations, learning to speak a mutual language—showing each other the white scars we bear, rising from British whips.

The cover image by the Trinidadian artist Renluka Maharaj shows a photo taken of a woman indentured from British India and shipped to the Caribbean to be exploited for her labor on the sugar cane fields. In the foreground of this piece called “Lalika’s Daydream 2023,” a sugarcane stalk grows out of the frame. This piece speaks to the communities of people descended of Coolie indentured labor, as through the use of added color, patterns, and texture, the past is literally reenvisioned and made beautiful through a woman artist’s reclamation of her history, her rereading it, and presenting it with new life, asking the question now of who is beholding whom: the power of the camera being wrested back into the reddened hands, reddened through the biting leaves of cane and decoration, of a surviving descendant. This image offers a deep framing of the writing and art assembled in this issue titled *Karahee from the Cane Fields: Writing from the Coolie Diaspora*—how the writers assembled add color and texture to the stories and songs after their ancestral surviving of indenture.

I would not spell the word “karahee” as N. Nardina Bi spells it in their piece; rather, I would err on the side of “kardhai,” which betrays the Creolese (Guyanese English Creole) pronunciation of this wok-shaped pot in which we fry, bhunje, paache, and boil ingredients to create nourishing foods. The karahee, and Bi’s spelling itself, is iconic to Coolie cuisine, descended of foodways from South Asia that grew into nuance and complication with every new space it entered, creolizing and matching local tastes and available foods. Taro for dasheen for bhaji. White bread to hold the curry of bunny chow. Daal puri and bust-up-shot/shirt. It makes sense to my own poetic mind that the meeting of these various writers can be held in the karahee, as I see it, put together to produce something new, something nourishing, something complicated and ancestral, something constantly evolving. What this something is, is how we survive our histories of forced labor, how our ancestors reach toward us, and how we, as writers, either reach back or reach away.

There have been few collections of creative writing from the Coolie Labor Diaspora, and those that are collected often function as comparison of

language, concerns, and expressed and received “Indiannesses,” created and maintained locally in the diasporic spaces. Before launching into the brilliance of these assembled writers and the new mehil they create in these pages, I must be clear about what exactly I mean by Coolie Labor Diaspora—why use this incendiary word to create and reify community bonds from disparate communities across the globe. What connects this particular constellation of writers is precisely this: a colonial-era inheritance of trafficking and labor. The term *Coolie* was given to the indentured laborers who the British kidnapped, lured, and tricked into replacing the cheap labor of enslaved Africans and indigenous populations of the places where their extractive colonies fruited sugar cane, rice, and other goods for global exchange. The coffers that were lined from this exploitation—by what David Dabydeen terms “a reinvention of slavery”—still keep the wealth and jewels purloined from *les damnés de la terre*.

The period of Indian indenture (India under the British Raj and not the India of today’s geopolitical borders) lasted officially from 1838 to 1917, but in practice, it began sooner and ended later (according to Ballengee, the period of indenture extended from the 1820s to the 1920s). As a poet and writer myself, I often wonder if this period ever ended, whether indenture has left its white scars on the bodies of the inheritors of indenture so much that our various communities remained plagued by the fallout of Empire: language attrition, misogyny, homophobia, racism, alcoholism and substance abuse, and diabetes—just to name a few of the demons. Whether or not these rakshasas, pretas, or jinns appear explicitly in the writing varies, as you, reader, will experience. The mere haunting of these things, indeed the hauntings from the cane field, ghosts the outlooks and sensibilities of our various worlds. This is not to say that we are still bound people without agency to create and evolve cultural practices—this is to say instead that we are taking the steerage of our courses instead of depending on some unnamed imperial patron.

And this brings me to why the word *Coolie*. There has been much work done by writers and thinkers (like Rajkumari Singh, e.g., who wrote the polemic “I Am a Coolie”) to use this word as one of empowerment, one that can be reclaimed and harnessed for its specificity and its power. The poet and cultural theorist Khal Torabully, in his cowritten book with Maria Carter, illuminates the concept of a Coolie becoming through his ideas around Coolitude: configuring the Coolie Labor Diaspora, its histories, and its literature. Christopher Ballengee in *Global Studies South* describes this concept as “framework for remembering dislocation.” He says,

As a creative practice, coolitude draws on traumatic memories of the past to inform post-indenture identities, importantly referencing the centrality of creolization and cultural mixing in present-day notions of self and community. As an analytical perspective, a coolitudian approach moreover provides poetic

context that informs histories of indenture and post-indenture along creolized trajectories in multicultural, postcolonial societies.<sup>1</sup>

I use this word personally because it evinces this particular history: a word that used to have an anti-racialized velocity but, wielded by imperialists, drove the people it sought to locate into racialized competition with Black and Indigenous people across the colonies. It is in this spellcasting that includes a rigorous backward glance that I predict a new, queerer version of community that reclaims the potential of this appellation—the word *Coolie* as descriptive of labor and relationship to Empire instead of referring specifically to India, the subcontinent, or other Asian countries (such as Java and China) that suffered this brand of dehumanization, a different species of Césaire’s *thingification*. For me, this word summons cane fields, razor-sharp leaves, survival despite the neglect of our masters.

There is a futurity to the term *Coolie* or even *Qoolie* (the “Q” here functioning, as Ryan Persadie writes, to locate the queer protentional of this word through the act of Derridian *différance* meaning delayed and deferred until beholding the written word, a metaphor for the queer in plain sight yet invisibilized<sup>2</sup>), since about this term Torabully and Carter write,

For many years, however, “coolie” was a symbol of economic degradation and social submissiveness, and the descendants of coolies felt themselves to be equally stigmatized, exoticized and ostracized. The reclamation of the “coolie” and the transformation of the indenture heritage is an ongoing process.<sup>3</sup>

It is in service to this ongoing process that I take this term and claim it as my own. As a writer, custodian of history, and editor, I, myself, am ever-evolving. Yet in a more personal way, I turn this word toward my own first person, tenderly holding the beauty of my mother, my Ayah, my Aji, my father, my Nana, and my Aja, while I call out to them through my writing. When my sister and I, now in North America, talk about meeting South Asian people, we speak in familiar terms.

After attending a party hosted by one of her queer friends, my sister called me on the phone.

“Raim,” she uses her name for me—my call name—“I just met a gay guy named Dinesh, and I think you would love him.” My sister, ever my wingman.

“Is he Desi or Coolie?” I ask.

“Dinesh a one Coolie bai,” she responds in Guyanese Creole.

This exchange is common for us, and it is a subtle yet powerful illumination of our South Asian diasporic dynamics. Desi is a word for immigrants and their children, more recently from India than our community is. Coolie is powerful; it proves an intimate connection of history and potential connections along those lines.

This special issue of *Mānoa* represents new writing from established and emerging voices from this particular diaspora, one that I am intimately tied to through my history and through the spirits that haunt me still. The British took Indians from the depots in the then ports of Calcutta and Madras in repurposed slave ships to their settlements and colonies in Fiji, Mauritius, Reunion, South Africa, Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and Surinam. This issue includes writers from these various sites and plantation communities who have Creolized and changed through staying past their indenture contracts. Several generations after this settling by ancestors who were coolies bound to Empire, these writers and artists practice. This issue of writing from the Coolie Diaspora asks: *what is the inheritance of the cane field, the cane-sap residue marking the descendants of this system of indenture?*

When approaching the writers to send their work for consideration, I wanted to highlight voices that were emerging and less well known in the field of Coolie Labor Diasporic studies, a field that has become trendy in recent years for people outside of the communities studied to build their careers on Coolie labor, still. We are more than those authors typically studied and overrepresented by academics still caught up on Kalapani Poetics, who do not read writing from the Coolie Labor Diaspora past the 1990s. I am not interested here, and neither are the writers only concerned with cultural holdovers and narratives of crossing the ocean. Our ancestors crossed long, long ago. Generations grew and fell. The writers assembled in this karahee, this mehil of flavors, ask, *what now?*

Punctuating the issue are the images from Andil Gosine's sequence called "Offerings," in which the artist presents images of the items that he offered to the ocean—that veritable god of migration—that set the tone for how readers enter and interact with the writing. These images move from object to object, insisting on the remembering of diasporic situatedness and the ways our various offerings have changed. Andre Bagoo's poem "The Inheritance: A Sequence" plays with memory—the trick of erasure, reinterpretation, and re-reinterpretations the speaker uses to make sense of the poem—and even the world. The poets Sudesh Mishra, Shivanee Ramlochan, C. Govender, Will Depoo, Chandanie Somwaru, Nicholas Augustus Peters, Gitan Djeli, and Francine Simon use their various local positionings to evidence their inheritance of labor and the forward look toward the future of their own lives that are context-specific while recalling, however vaguely, a Coolie inheritance.

I am excited that this issue also includes girmitiya<sup>4</sup> songs from Fiji translated by Alisha Prasad from Hindi/Bhojpuri as well as songs from Tamil via Mauritius translated by Ari Gautier. Original songs from the international musician Raj Mohan, written originally in Sarnami Bhojpuri and translated into English, read as poems, coupled with new translations of Mauritius's Ananda Devi, make this issue one whose

breadth spans the emerging to the established with breathtaking depth. Still, writers like Kevin Jared Hosein, Nadia Misir, and Jay Aja provide the clear inheritances of colonial dispossession: violence, poverty, trauma, and ecological crises, all while highlighting the act of survival as anti-imperialist.

I also include my own translations of, in my mind, important Indo-Caribbean music that I have been thinking through, including a ghazal and another song-text-read-as-poem in Urdu. The issue ends with a poem written by writer and poet Vinod Busjeet, who recasts his visit to Trinidad. A kind of Global South to Global South conversation. Originally from Mauritius, the poem's speaker's familiarity with Coolie culture from the Caribbean is routed through the touchstone of Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul, a writer beloved and reviled for his ideas of coloniality, Indianness, and Caribbean cultural productions. In the poem's speaker's beholding of others from the Coolie Diaspora, readers come away with the ideas of how, despite distance and divergent histories, we are connected through the experience of becoming *Coolie*, of the plantation. Of the cane-sap that still traumatizes us while delighting us.

There are so many writers and artists that I wish I could have included in this very special issue, including Aliyah Khan, Vidyaratha Kissoon, Kelly Sinnapah Mary, Ingrid Persaud, Subraj Singh, Jessica Nirvana Ram, Divya Persaud, Ian Harnarine, Nadia Bourne, Anu Lakhan, Naben Ruthnum, and so many more. I hope to think of our communities as expansive and dynamic, changing through time with the potential to create alliances with the folks that we encounter. When I lived in Hawai'i as a graduate student from 2013 to 2017, I was struck by the cultural similarities of my own Caribbean inheritance, my own familial pidgin, our own sugar traumas, and our own erasure of Indigenous and Black peoples in favor of national unity. It is my sincerest hope that this issue and these voices resonate with those that call out from the 'āina, those voices struggling and rejoicing toward Kānaka Maoli sovereignty. I hope that the resonances in these pages harmonize with the joys and heartbreaks of a kingdom overthrown.

I envision *Karahee from the Cane Fields: Writing from the Coolie Diaspora* as a cultural meeting place for a literary reconvening of those who are haunted by ancestors who suffered the punishment of the Empire's extracted labor. The karahee here is the issue itself; the writings are various foods to be cooked together on a chulha, or if in diaspora the earth stove is unavailable, then cooked on a makeshift fireside of cement blocks and whatever wood we can find. What is evident in these pages for you, reader, to discover, marvel at, and be astounded by is our survival and tenacity—that despite our destitutions and our impoverishments, we still grow tall and we still bend toward the light.

#### NOTES

1. Ballengee, Christopher. "Coolitude." *Global South Studies*, U. Va. <https://global.southstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/coolitude> (accessed December 22, 2023).
2. Persadie, Ryan. "'Meh Just Realize I's Ah Coolie Bai': Indo-Caribbean Masculinities, Chutney Genealogies, and Qoolie Subjectivities." *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2020, pp. 56–86.
3. Carter, Marina, and Khal. *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*. London: Anthem, 2002.
4. An Indian indentured laborer, the word derives from the émigrés pronunciation of "agreement" in English to "girit." The addition of the "-iya" suffix makes the word mean "those of the agreement."



Photograph by Andil Gosine





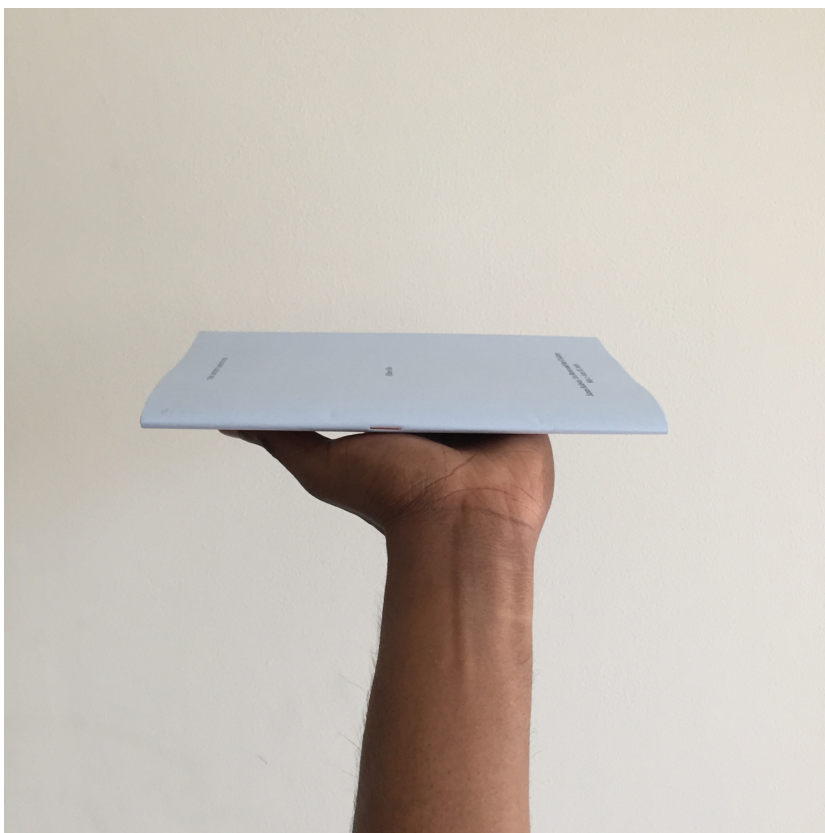
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