

## **From the Transarchipélique Antilles: The Coolitude of Khal Torabully**

See Ottmar Ette,  
*Transarea. A Literary  
History of  
Globalization*. Translated  
by Mark W. Person,  
Berlin, Boston, Walter de  
Gruyter, 2016.

<sup>1</sup> The manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* in which Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant develop a theory of culture, was originally conceived as an intervention for the “Festival caraïbe de la Seine-Saint-Denis” of 22 May 1988 and was published the following year by Gallimard. The three authors observe in this text the chaos of a new humanity that develops under the sign of creoleness<sup>[1]</sup>. A planetary dimension took its place there, with the French West Indies at its centre, and not entirely by chance. This planetary dimension is built on the background of a positive recovery by Édouard Glissant of the concept of chaos and, at its centre, the collective “We” of Creole is staged

as representing a new (genesis of) humanity. This dimension also includes the not so new conception of a "Caribbean civilization" which refers to Franz Fanon, René Depestre and then again to Édouard Glissant; According to him, it was in her infancy and was still hesitant<sup>[2]</sup>. A new concept of space, so to speak transantillais, became tangible. A postcolonial discourse here opposed both a colonial discourse with regard to Europe and an anti-colonial discourse oriented towards Africa; this postcolonial discourse has allowed a new conception of space, and thus of elsewhere, this time on a planetary scale.

- <sup>2</sup> In this context, we cannot explain how this new discourse has still remained anchored in a history of space and opposed the evolution of a history of the movement<sup>[3]</sup>. It seems important, however, to point out that, throughout Édouard Glissant's work, one can see the complex unfolding of a history of a "transaréal" movement [4] that culminates in the text, rightly considered as his literary testament, poetic as well as poetic volume, namely *The Magnetic Earth*[5]."

In this volume, which, from the West Indies, develops a transarchipelagic perspective on Easter Island, Rapa Nui – a mobile island that already embodies a history of movement on a geological level – expresses a form of life which, in a mobile system of transantillate coordinates, has a planetary dimension. How far do the West Indies go? This question finds its full significance not only at the level of the history of space but also at the level of the history of the movement.

- <sup>3</sup> The process of thinking of a life in a world made up of very different islands dates back to the 15th century, that is, it precedes the European "history of discovery" of the West Indies but is reinforced by this expansion. The idea of an "archipelique" and "transarchipelique" world is therefore much older than the cultural and literary theories of the late twentieth century. It is

embodied in a literary as well as cartographic way in the Venetian tradition of the *Isolario*<sup>[6]</sup>. What could a book of islands look like these days?

4 Since the 1990s – that is, at the same time as the reflections that led to the Praise of Creolism – Khal Torabully<sup>[7]</sup>, born in 1956 in Port-Louis, Mauritius, poet, filmmaker and cultural theorist, developed his *Coolitude project from a double historical awareness. This project is a thoughtful, poetic as well as poetic attempt to present, by including all the excluded from history, a vision and revision of the historical and current processes of globalisation, while giving voice to the living subjects who, all over the world, have had to work under miserable conditions as day labourers or temporary workers. The Coolies that Lafcadio Hearn had so prominently presented in his time in Two Years in the French West Indies are among the "trans-tropical" protagonists of the third phase of accelerated globalisation, a fact that the cultural theory and poetic praxis of the writer of Mauritius make tangible and this in a very lively way, today, in the fourth phase of accelerated globalisation that is nearing its end*[8]

5 Khal Torabully, who defended in Lyon a thesis on the semiology of poetry and who was one of the founding members of a French research group on globalisation (Groupe d'Études et de Recherche sur les Mondialisations, GERM), not only wanted to erect in its poetic and poetic texts a literary monument to the *Coolies* essentially originating from India but also from China and other countries, in a way a place of memory, but he has also developed a poetics of global migration, as can be seen in his volume *Cale d'Étoiles – Coolitude, published in 1992*:

Coolitude to lay the first stone of my memory of all memory, my language of all languages, my share of unknown that many bodies and many stories have often deposited in my genes and islands.

This is my song of love to the sea and to the journey, the Odyssey that my marine peoples have not yet written... and my crew will speak on behalf of those who erase borders to enlarge *the Land of Man*.<sup>[9]</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Land of Man opens here in its planetary dimensions as an archipelagic world. This song of love with homeric accents brings to memory all the forgotten of history and those it has devoured, prospective, oriented towards a common future. For the *poeta doctus*, who came from a family that left India to look for work in Mauritius, this is not a closed past whose grave should be honoured by bringing the small stones of a commemoration based on the feeling of duty. Starting from the individual and collective experiences that day-labourers and temporary workers largely deprived of rights had to endure, in particular in the third phase of accelerated globalisation, he developed a poetics placed under a different light, oriented towards the future and the current globalisation with all its migrations, and which is already expressed early in its global relationality, precisely in the region of the tropics. It reads as follows:

You of Goa, Pondicherry, Chandernagor,  
Cocame, Delhi, Surat, London, Shanghai,  
Lorient, Saint-Malo, peoples of all the ships  
that led me to another self, my star hold  
is my travel plan, My era, my vision of  
the ocean we're all going through, although we don't  
look at the stars from the same angle.

By saying "coolie", I also mean any browser without  
a log; I say every man who goes to the horizon  
of his dream, whatever boat he docks or should dock.  
For when one crosses the ocean to be born  
elsewhere, the sailor of a journey without return likes  
to dive back  
into his stories, his legends and his dreams. The  
time of a lack of memory.

[10]

- <sup>7</sup> The concept of coolie is historically rooted, but not exclusively thought out: the term is used by Torabully in a figurative sense, it sheds light on the specific phenomena of globalization "from below", a globalization of migrants who, in search of work, cross seas and languages. In a lyrical condensation appears then a worldwide network of all these "travellers" who, as objects of forceful exploitation, connect the islands and cities of India, China and Oceania with European colonial ports, both transatlantic and trans-Pacific.
- <sup>8</sup> The transformations of the lyrical self clearly show that in each translation, in each transshipment, in each transfer, there is a transformation that makes the self another and opens up new perspectives, new possibilities of manoeuvre and freedom. It is not in this sense another radically different but rather another self, an enlargement of that self. It is not an epistemology of otherness but rather of enlargement. It is not conceived exclusively but in an inclusive way.
- <sup>9</sup> The ocean becomes an element that separates but also connects all the elements, which also transforms the cities of this network of colonial exploitation into islands that each develop its *particular angle*, its singular perspective. Between all these islands, the "Odyssey"<sup>[11]</sup> of temporary workers, which has been ignored for so long by identity discourses, is taking its course as inconstant as it is global. However, a return to Ithaca is not foreseen either in the travel plans or in the logs: these are trips without return.
- <sup>10</sup> The Indian coolie is thus accurately captured and reconstructed in its historical dimension but does not remain a mere historical figure, it takes on a metaphorical dimension and even more *figural*<sup>[12]</sup> to the extent that all those who have undertaken a journey in inhuman conditions most of the time without a return are placed in the perspective of a lyric and a theory. What had never been written, what had escaped from

memory and memory, what no one wanted to integrate into its identity construction, is condensed in the writings of Khal Torabully, as poetic, as epistemological, in a relational understanding of historical processes. The latter are not to be conceived as territorialising and centralising from a point, but must be understood in a history of movement and no longer in a history of space, according to an oceanic (or oceanian) perspective. The *figura* of coolie, once “discovered” is everywhere *present* and figural. For *it is much more than a figure of memory*, it testifies, in many ways, to another time.

<sup>11</sup> Even if the tropics, in their dependence on external powers, remain an open wound: “I will one day discover another new world. / From it I will burn the Tropics / And damn Columbus for his damned economics”<sup>[13]</sup>, they are part of a wide network of movements, while their founder Christopher Columbus, who, in 1492, did not land in Mauritius but in the West Indies, is accused as an example for all others. This brief retrospective of the first phase of accelerated globalisation, with its economic system cast like a net over the whole world, opens up a future, a “New World” understood differently in which the possibilities of building another world are explored. For another world and in this new sense, based on living together in difference, is possible. Khal Torabully’s aesthetics have an ethical foundation, his movement is postcolonial.

<sup>12</sup> In his collection of poems published in 1999, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*<sup>[14]</sup>, the Mauritian poet, who is also a filmmaker and whose film *The Maritime Memory of Arabs* won the Golden Award at the Cairo International Festival, introduced a metaphorology that is not, as in Deleuze and Guattari, oriented towards the rhizome<sup>[15]</sup> but towards the corals, these symbiotic organisms of the sea: “In my memory are also languages / My coolitude is not a stone either, / she is

coral"<sup>[16]</sup>. Coolitude *is* not a commemorative stone, it is made up of living and talking corals: "What does the poet mean to us?" Does the language not become too obscure, too "difficult"?

- <sup>13</sup> The diversity of languages, so important for the writing of Torabully, and the translation as the transfer to another shore represent incessant processes of transfer that become processes of transformation: "no longer the Hindu man of Calcutta / but the coral flesh of the West Indies" From these mutations, from these deaf metaphors a practice of writing and at the same time a theory of culture both conceived in a clearly "transarchipélique" way. The Torabully essay, "When India Meets the World's Imaginaries", states:

The coral imaginary that founds coolitude presents a proposal to archipelize these diversities so necessary to the humanities. It concretely transposes our imaginary of the Indies, polylogics, archipelagic in the contemporary reality where economy, cultures and ecology cannot be separated, as evidenced by the current globalisation with its recurrent failures accompanied by violence. <sup>[18]</sup>

- <sup>14</sup> This transarchipelagic conception is historically based on the painful experiences of millions of *Indian coolies* who, in their desperate search for work, have signed contracts of five or ten years which have moved them on the islands of the Indian Ocean as well as in Oceania or on the islands of the *British West Indies* or on the French West Indies. This perspective is linked to the conceptual model of coral, so decisive for the writing of Torabully, which he explained as follows in 2011:

The coral is observable in its living habitat, unlike the rhizome, which is underground. In addition, it allows me to develop an agglutinating connectivity, building by layers, by concretion, by sedimentation, a bit like a palimpsest, and not just a wandering connectivity, while maintaining the egalitarian aspect of the connection, being open to all currents. The coral is hybrid in its very

being, because it was born from the symbiosis of a phytoplankton and a zooplankton. We are not doing better as a metaphor for diversity. It is root, polyp and plating, protean, flexible and hard, and of different colors. While rooted, it liberates the greatest migration on earth, that of plankton, visible from the Moon, just like the Great Barrier Reef, classified as a World Heritage Site by Unesco. This coral archipelago is simply the most extensive living sculpture on earth.<sup>[19]</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The recurrence of the living *lexeme* at the beginning as well as at the end of this passage underlines how important life processes are for Torabully in the coral model. The poet and coolitude *theorist* may not have taken into account the fact that a character as important as Charles Darwin once thought of making coral the “symbol of the whole of evolution” and using it as a “model of evolution”: evolution “which grows anarchically in all directions and does not conceive – as the tree model predicts – of man as the crowning stone of the end of evolution”. For Torabully, coral is not only a model of life but embodies – because it is alive – a knowledge of survival and of living together that transforms this community of living beings in their symbiotic form of existence into *works of art of impressive grandeur*. Darwin’s “coral inspiration” [21] was already established in a long tradition of art history and nature philosophy, in which “corals and their products from a struggle for survival belong to the realm of art.”

<sup>16</sup> It is obvious that for the author of Port-Louis, the coral is a concept that competes with the poststructuralist theory of the rhizome; on the other hand, it is clear that the coral and the rhizome represent in a comparable way the non-centralised, the networking, the non-hierarchised and, in its oscillation between on the one hand a carnal being, that of the *Coral Flesh*, which gives life (and possesses an erotic dimension), and on the

other hand, a sculptural potential as a commemorative stone, the coral establishes a dynamic link between geology and biology, between animal and plant, between death and life, between society and community, A link whose poetic valence finds its expression in the poetics of Torabully. The symbiotic world of corals is linked to a *convivance* or *convivencia*, that, from the perspective of the tropics, makes a world of life appear that is established and develops below and above the surface of the sea.<sup>923</sup> As a poetic trope, coral embodies the world in motion of the tropics and becomes, thanks to its migrations, the transtropical living being par excellence. Through the tropics it connects all the elements together.

<sup>17</sup> In the texts of Khal Torabully, the West Indies are inserted into a landscape of theory that connects the tropics to each other on a transarchipelal level. In this way, India is re-pluralised, it is known as *the Indies*, *las Indias* or the *Indies* an *autonomous orientation* in which East India, West India, Asia, Australia, Europe, America and Oceania are integrated and open according to a multiform reciprocity and a logic of plural relations. The West Indies constitute the fractal of a transarchipellic world in which everything is in motion and everything is interaction. The richness of the literatures of the West Indies is therefore not that of a world literature centralised by Europe or the United States, literature of Goethean or post-Goethean origin. This richness is much more that of *the World Literatures*<sup>[24]</sup> which, like a school of thought, show us that we can understand the world adequately only in relation to a history of the movement, using an approach from different perspectives and multiple perspectives.

---

<sup>[1]</sup>Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité*, Paris, Gallimard - Presses Universitaires Créoles, 1989, p. 22.

<sup>[2]</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>[3]</sup>See Ottmar Ette, “Imaginations from a History of Space to a History of Movement: Cuba between Island-World and World of Islands”, in Heike Scharm & Natalia Matta-Jara (ed.), *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature*, Gainesville - Tallahassee - Tampa - Boca Raton. Pensacola - Orlando - Miami - Jacksonville - Ft. Myers - Sarasota, University Press of Florida, 2017, pp. 46-68.

<sup>[4]</sup>See Ottmar Ette, *Transarea. A Literary History of Globalization*. Translated by Mark W. Person, Berlin, Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2016.

<sup>[5]</sup>See Édouard Glissant, *La terre magnétique. The wanderings of Rapa Nui, Easter Island. In collaboration with Sylvie Séma*, Paris, Seuil, 2007.

<sup>[6]</sup>See Ottmar Ette, *Transarea, op. cit.*, pp. 56-108.

<sup>[7]</sup>See on the work of Torabully Véronique Bragard, *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude and Indian Ocean Literatures*, Frankfurt am Main - Berlin - New York, Peter Lang, 2008.

<sup>[8]</sup>See Ottmar Ette, “Kann die Globalisierung ein Ende nehmen?” in Jürgen Kaube & Jörn Laakmann (ed.), *Das Lexikon der offenen Fragen*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler, 2015, pp.32-33.

<sup>[9]</sup>Khal Torabully, *Cale d'Étoiles - Coolitude*, La Réunion, Editions Azalées, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>[10]</sup>*Ibid.* p. 89.

<sup>[11]</sup>See chapter “The Coolie Odyssey: A Voyage In Time And Space” in Marine Carter & Khal Torabully, *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), pp. 17-44.

<sup>[12]</sup>Cf. Erich Auerbach, “Figura”, in the same author *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*, edited by Fritz Schalk and Gustav Konrad, Bern - München, Francke Verlag, 1967, pp. 55-92.

<sup>[13]</sup>Khal Torabully, *Voices from Indentured*, unpublished manuscript, 2011.

<sup>[14]</sup>Khal Torabully, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*, Guadeloupe, Ibis Rouge Editions, 1999.

<sup>[15]</sup>See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizom*, translated from French by Dagmar Berger & alii, Berlin, Merve Verlag, 1977.

<sup>[16]</sup>Khal Torabully, *Coral Flesh, Coolies Fragments*, p. 82.

<sup>[17]</sup>*Ibid.* p. 108.

<sup>[18]</sup>Khal Torabully, “When the Indies meet the imaginations of the world” in Gesine Müller & Ottmar Ette (ed.) *Worldwide. Archipelagos of globalization. Archipiélagos de la globalización. A Transarea Symposium*, Madrid - Frankfurt am Main, Iberoamericana, Vervuert, 2012, p. 71. See also these [statements](#) by Khal Torabully.

<sup>[19]</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>[20]</sup>Horst Bredekamp, *Darwins Korallen. Frühe Evolutionsdiagramm und die Tradition der Naturgeschichte*, Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 2006, p.1.

[\[21\]](#) *ibid.*, p.70.

[\[22\]](#) *ibid.*

[\[23\]](#) See Ottmar Ette & Gesine Müller (ed.), *Paisajes sumergidos, paisajes invisibles. Formas y normas de convivencia en las literaturas del Caribe*, Berlin, Walter Frey- tranvia edition, 2015.

[\[24\]](#) See Ottmar Ette, *Weltfraktale. Wege durch die Literaturen der Welt*, Stuttgart, J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017.