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Beyond Créolité and Coolitude, the Indian on the Plantation: Recreolization in the Transoceanic Frame

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This essay explores the ways in which Caribbean artists of Indian heritage memorialize the transformation of Caribbean history, demography, and lifeways through the arrival of their ancestors, and their transformation, in turn, by this new space. Identifying for this purpose an iconic figure that I term “the Indian on the Plantation,” I demonstrate how the influential theories of Caribbean identity-formation that serve as useful starting points for explicating the play of memory and identity that shapes Indo-Caribbean artistic praxis—coolitude (as coined by Mauritian author Khal Torabully) and *créolité* (as most influentially articulated by the Martinican trio of Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant)—are nevertheless constrained by certain discursive limitations. Unpacking these limitations, I offer instead evidence from curatorial and quotidian realms in Guadeloupe as a lens through which to assess an emergent artistic practice that cuts across Francophone and Anglophone constituencies to occupy the Caribbean Plantation while privileging signifiers of an Indic heritage. Reading these attempts as examples of decreolization that actually suggest an ongoing and unpredictable recreolization of culture, I situate this apparent paradox within a transoceanic heuristic frame that brings the Indian and Atlantic Ocean worlds into dialogue to revivify our understanding of creolization as a theory and process of cultural change.

Keywords: transoceanic creolization, recreolization, decreolization, Guadeloupe, Indo-Caribbean visual art, coolitude, *créolité*

Este ensayo explora las maneras en las que los artistas caribeños de herencia india guardan la memoria de la transformación de la historia, la demografía y los modos de vida del Caribe con la llegada de sus antepasados, y su transformación, a su vez, por este nuevo espacio. Identificando para este propósito una figura icónica que yo llamo “el Indio en la Plantación”, muestro cómo las influyentes teorías de la formación de identidad caribeña que sirven como útiles puntos de partida para explicar el juego de la memoria y la identidad que da forma a la praxis artística indocaribeña—la “culitud”, término acuñado por el autor Khal Torabully de Mauricio, y “*créolité*”, como lo han articulado mejor el trío martinicano de Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau y Raphaël Confiant—se ven sin embargo restringidas por ciertas limitaciones discursivas. Al revelar estas limitaciones, ofrezco en cambio evidencia del ámbito curatorial y cotidiano en Guadalupe como una lente a través de la cual evaluar una práctica artística emergente que atraviesa las agrupaciones francófonas y anglófonas para ocupar la Plantación Caribeña mientras privilegia a los significantes de una herencia india. Leyendo estos intentos

como ejemplos de descreolización que en realidad sugieren una continua e impredecible recreolización de la cultura, sitúo esta aparente paradoja dentro de un marco heurístico transoceánico que pone en diálogo a los mundos del Océano Índico y del Atlántico para revivificar nuestra comprensión de la creolización como teoría y proceso de cambio cultural.

Palabras clave: creolización transoceánica, recreolización, descreolización, Guadalupe, arte visual indocaribeño, culitud, créolité

She did not wear saris no more.
Calypso she liked and could wine down
with the best of them. She became deaf
to the melody of Krishna's flute.
She chose Manny, not Lord Rama in her

Hindu epic gone wrong. At her wedding
she never once uttered Ganesh's name,

loosened the grasp of Vishnu's
four hands from around her waist.

—Christian Campbell, “Curry Powder”

Introduction

Within Guadeloupean visual artist Kelly Sinappah Mary's multimedia work, *Notebook of No Return*, is a painting of a woman sitting on a reed mat, the kind called in different Indian languages *chatai* (Hindi), *madoor* (Bengali), and *pai* (Tamil). Not just the mat, but the way she sits with tucked feet and her long braid of hair together declare an Indianness of posture and habitus. Yet it is as a *matte*, a Guadeloupean French Creole word, that she knows the mat, and she has rolled it out amidst the tall spears of a Caribbean cane field. The woman wears a sleeveless red vest, and her skin is covered with strange thorns. Reminiscent of a sea urchin's spikes, they suggest the difficulties of memorialization after forgetting. “Although the community she investigates is absent, hidden from mainstream culture, it is still present, active, and indefinable,” declares Sinappah Mary's artistic statement.¹ “In her installation, she focuses on processes of domination that have torn thousands of men and women from the land of their birth and, although they were told that they could come back to India at the end of their contract, had to reconstruct their identities in the context of French, Caribbean, African, and Indian cultures.” I place Sinappah Mary's deployment of “hair braiding and the use of botany and fabric, . . . essential metaphoric actions for identity reconstruction in this creole context” against the woman in the poem that forms my epigraph. The same “Indian” habits she had shed are retrieved and

¹ Kelly Sinappah Mary's artistic statement, from which the quotes in this paragraph are taken, was given to me by the artist in personal communication, as were the linguistic details I have drawn on here. On Sinappah Mary's practice, including the importance therein of hair braiding, see Gosine 2019.

memorialized in a poem by her visibly African-descended great-grandson, the poet Christian Campbell of Trinidadian-Bahamian heritage (2010, 36–37).

Between Campbell's great-grandmother Nita and Sinappah Mary's woman seated on the *natte* are several divides: of generations, languages spoken ancestrally and on arrival, and imperial and postcolonial arrangements. But together, they communicate a shared condition: that of the Indian-descended Caribbean person, identified through the appellation "coolie," who is embedded within Sinappah Mary's "creole context." This iconic figure I term "the Indian on the Plantation." The problematics of memorialization she generates arises from the disjunction between two concepts crucial for Caribbean identity discourses: coolitude and *créolité*. Contested and competing politics of memory gave rise to both *créolité* as a manifesto for post-Plantation Caribbean identity, and coolitude as a poetics drawing on the Indian Ocean world through which Asian populations entered the Caribbean. Coolitude and *créolité* both seek to recognize, albeit in different ways, the contribution of these populations to Caribbean culture and the materiality of their interaction with this space. However, in theoretical terms, neither can explicate the praxis of the Caribbean artist who foregrounds the Indian on the Plantation as foundational memory, representing her(self) as confidently occupying, on her *natte*, the evacuated Plantation that still haunts Caribbean space.

My essay considers the play of memory and as identity within the work of Indo-Caribbean artists who, like Sinappah Mary, advance an interstitial and relational praxis of belonging that wants to enfold within itself multiple positions—being Caribbean, being of Indian heritage, honoring the ancestral journeys through *kala pani* (see below), participating with other Caribbean people in a collective, yet differently experienced, being-creole. This praxis performs Indo-Caribbean belonging in that precise gap between memory and theory that coolitude and *créolité* conceptually (and linguistically) inscribe through their noncongruence.

I present a rationale for this figure I have identified as "the Indian on the Plantation," and explicate the discursive complications around attempts to memorialize her. To do so, I draw upon my experience of cultural politics in Guadeloupe, which I visited twice in 2018: first, in March of that year, following a conference commemorating Édouard Glissant at the University of the Antilles in Martinique, and subsequently, in May, to attend the First Festival of Coolitude, organized by Khal Torabully. With Glissant's work being the starting point for theorizing *créolité*, and Torabully having coined the term "coolitude," these Guadeloupean journeys exemplified for me the uneasy coexistence of certain vectors of post-Plantation memorialization, which I analyze against the conceptual elaboration of coolitude and *créolité*. Through this endeavor, I aim to reinstate the Indian Ocean as an unavoidable frame in considerations of Caribbean identity formation. The relationality between the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean worlds is essential to understanding the work of Indo-Caribbean cultural producers, both because of the pressures it generates and the potential it releases. Their performative reoccupation of post-Plantation space draws consciously on Indic cultural presence in the Caribbean while responding to the Caribbean's specific geography and history. The creative practice of Indo-Caribbean artists, I argue, participates in and responds to ongoing processes of

creolization, decreolization, and recreolization taking place within this transoceanic frame on a quotidian level.

Of Calypso and Krishna's Flute

“Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous proclamons Créoles”—Not Europeans, or Africans, or Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles. This famous opening of *Éloge de la créolité* by Jean Barnabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau (1993, 13) places equal weight on all three axes of identity formation of the creole mix that they (pro)claim as their formative condition. In its tricontinental inclusivity, this pathbreaking manifesto of créolité seems *prima facie* to enfold comfortably the diverse peoples who have come to inhabit the Caribbean archipelago through the transoceanic displacement of their ancestors induced by European expansionism, colonialism, and Empire-building—as indeed the authors subsequently assert. A direct line is drawn between the Creole people of the Caribbean and créolité as shared condition and *modus vivendi*. A fundamental problem arises, however, in the simultaneity of filiation and evacuation that the structure of this sentence enacts. The thrice-emphasized “ni” (neither/nor/nor, not/not/not) is conjoined to the persistence of three mother continents that cannot be forgotten even in their disavowal. We come straight to the heart of the problematics of memorialization that créolité cannot escape: how does one praise that condition of newness that it is meant to characterize, when the highest praise that one can accord it is initiated as a three-fold evacuation rather than a plenitude? Moreover, and most pertinent to the present essay: is this tripartite pact of evacuation consensual between, and equally executed by, all parties involved? The latter question is particularly relevant to Caribbean people who claim Indian heritage and privilege that relationship in articulating their identity.

Stuart Hall's statement on “the relationship between créolité and the process of creolization” raises similar concerns (Hall 2010). For Hall, this relationship “defines the distinctiveness of Caribbean cultures—their mixed character, their creative vibrancy, their complex, troubled, unfinished relation to history, the prevalence in their narratives of the themes of voyaging, exile and the unrequited trauma of violence, expropriation and separation. These are all also, in different ways, what I would call translated societies” (2010, 29). This statement, too, ostensibly accommodates those from the Asian continent who voyaged across not one but two oceans—the Indian and the Atlantic—to enter the process of “translation” which Hall later equates to creolization. Yet the three categories—“présence africaine, présence européenne, and présence américaine”—that Hall uses to explicate creolization in the Caribbean have no lexical or conceptual space for a putative “présence asiatique.” Rather, this presence is incompletely subsumed under “présence africaine.” Hall admits that, as “the subterranean trace of voice of ‘Africa,’” “présence africaine” is nevertheless “not always africaine in the geographical sense—for example there is the powerful presence of the East Indian communities—who belong, for the purposes of this argument, to the experience of dispossession associated with the ‘présence africaine’, though the relationships between these minorities is also a deeply troubled one” (Hall 2010, 30). Despite recognizing that “the designation ‘African’ [is] itself one of the principal sources of antagonism” (2010, 30), then, Hall does not adjust his heuristic model so as to include Asian and Indic participation within creolization.

Within the development of creolization as a historical and cultural theory for archipelagic worlds, there thus appears some difficulty in theorizing the place of the Indian on the Plantation and the way she occupies history, memory, and the present. Indentured workers from Asia had arrived in the Caribbean to fill the labor gap created by the abolition of slavery worldwide in course of the nineteenth century (Kumar 2017). The labor diasporas from India in particular, that were superimposed on existent African-heritage and creole populations created through enslavement (Tinker 1974), introduced substantial demographic and cultural elements to insular and littoral Caribbean populations; these, in turn, have generated specific consequences within the project of creolization that the Plantation catalyzed. Indic contributions to the creolized cultures of the Caribbean have shaped their linguistic, sonic, kinetic, and gastronomic dimensions in ways both recognized (by local populations) and recognizable (Chaudenson 2002). However, in scholarly explorations as well as in public memorialization, attention has focused on how the European and African axes of ancestral belonging and postcolonial affiliation have been surmounted, or not, in the course of becoming Caribbean. The dialectics of creolization are widely understood as involving, in the aphorism by the Jamaican choreographer Rex Nettleford (1970), “the melody of Europe” and “the rhythm of Africa.” Resting on a barely-disguised Master-Slave binary that must be surmounted through the process of creolization as Hegelian synthesis, this schema excludes *ab initio* the Indic elements that entered the Caribbean at a historically later moment than the African and European counterparts.

In Campbell’s poem “Curry Powder,” his great-grandmother’s embrace of calypso meant that she became “deaf / to the melody of Krishna’s flute.” Calypso here is aligned to an African-descended performative memory, which, as Gordon Rohlehr observes, “had become the vehicle that diasporic Africans, *all the children of Anansi* (my emphasis) had perceived would take them into the freedom of ‘vacant interstellar space’” (2010, 173). Like Campbell, Rohlehr responds to calypso as a loaded signifier, already understood as the creolized product of “African rhythm” and “European melody” that arose through a “primal scene” of “violent expropriation and conquest as well as the site of a tabooed desire” (Hall 2010, 30). Forged through the trauma of the Plantation, it has the potential to retrieve an Afro-diasporic sacred identity that Rohlehr invokes through the trickster-divinity Anansi. Yet this potential colors his subsequent discussion of the relationship of soca pioneer Ras Shorty (Garfield Blackman) to the percussive rhythms of the predominantly Indo-Trinidadian village where he was born. By learning to “play the dholak and the dhantal and . . . experimenting with integrating these musics,”² Ras Shorty “effect[ed] the perfect blend of calypso and East Indian rhythms while paradoxically calling for a change in “the accent of Carnival / to a groovy, groovy bacchanal” (Rohlehr 2010, 179). The “paradoxically” suggests that for Rohlehr, East Indian elements can only impact already creolized products; they cannot recalibrate *tout court* the creolization process. The tricontinental evacuation proposed by Bernabé et al. as the basis for *créolité* thus rests on a willful forgetting of the

² The dholak and dhantal are percussive instruments used within Indo-Caribbean music. The dholak keeps the beat and the dhantal marks the off-beat. While the dholak has a clear genealogy that can trace it to the Indic peninsular world (and indeed is ubiquitous across South Asia and its diasporas), that of the dhantal is somewhat more mysterious, pointing to its emergence within Caribbean creolization processes—a hypothesis I develop in detail in Kabir 2016.

Indic sacred and secular realms that are condensed in Campbell's image of "Krishna's flute."³ It reemerges in formulations such as "Indo-creole" (Ballengee 2013), with the hyphen implying a basic tension between "Indo" and "creole," and "Asian Caribbean" (Gosine 2017), which places "Asian" and "Caribbean" in a similar relationship via the necessity of a qualifying adjective.

Indian (Temple) on Plantation's Edge

Within the Caribbean, a psychosocial compact maintains this symbolic charge of "Krishna's flute" at an orthogonal relationship to the dialectics of post-Plantation memorialization incessantly played out through the binary between "European melody" and "African rhythm." Instructive here are the identity and memory politics in Guadeloupe, that, together with Martinique, additional smaller islands, and French Guiana on the South American coast, constitutes one of France's overseas territories. As part of that very *département*, the French Antilles, which provoked the initial polemics around créolité, Guadeloupe suspends its population in a not-quite-postcolonial status (Haigh 2006); its civic and geopolitical participation within the "hexagonal" frame of the French mainland is offset by its geographical location within the Caribbean and its shared history with the islands closest to it (Guilbault et al. 1993, 3–19)—the smaller islands of the Guadeloupean subarchipelago, Martinique, Dominica, and St. Lucia—that regionally share the title of "Creole West Indies." A crucial yet largely sidelined aspect of that history is the arrival of Indian indentured laborers to serve the Plantation economy, whereby the French Caribbean islands became home to a largely Tamil-descended population from the South of India (Singaravélou 1990). The Francophone context impresses on Guadeloupe a compressed and complicated space within which Indianness appears constrained rather than freely maneuvered. Densely swirled into the creolizing matrix of the everyday are Tamil-derived last names, foodways, and religious practices. This is the context against which I place my experience of Guadeloupe's Memorial ACTe museum, a flagship "place of encounter" where, as its website declares: "Guadeloupians meet one another, the Caribbean and the rest of the world, [within] a catalyst for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Memorial ACTe website, n.d.).

This vast museum dedicated to the history and memory of slavery stands on the former Darboussier estate, the largest plantation in Guadeloupe, site of significant technological innovations in sugar and rum production, and home to masters, foremen, slaves, and, ultimately, indentured laborers (Schnakenbourg 1980). Built to a prizewinning design by a local architectural firm, which was chosen, as the Memorial ACTe website clarifies, for the idea of "silver roots above a black box," it has been realized with generous funding from the European Union, a reminder of the dissonance

³ Here, I will draw attention to my use of the word "Indic" to suggest a shared space of Hindustani culture within which select signifiers of the sacred, be they drawn from Hindu, Islamic, or even Christian religious domains, are consciously deployed to suggest what, in the context of the *tazia* processions in Fiji and elsewhere, has been called "a radical potentiality" of Plantation-based expressive culture (Mishra 2008, 93). This potentiality would be called "syncretic" in old-fashioned secular discourse within the peninsular Indian context. In keeping with my understanding of the potential of the Plantation and its diasporas to undo certain divisive politics of identity rampant within that context, I prefer to call it a "creole" potential. Hence, I deliberately advance a reading of Krishna's flute as Indic rather than Hindu. Interestingly, Muslim-identified artists from the labor diasporas now settled in The Netherlands, such as poet Zuleika Sheikh and dancer and performance artist Fazle Shairmahomed, respond to a common pool of such Indic or "Hindustani" signifiers in their work of "decolonizing ritual."

between political membership of Europe and Caribbean georegional identity. The museum is a source of pride for the inhabitants of Point-à-Pitre, a desolate town scarred by traces of past uprisings against the metropole. Wherever its streets open on to the water, the horizon is blocked by cruise ships looming balefully over dwarfed and decaying Creole architecture. In contrast, the shiny, self-assertive Memorial ACTe spreads out in a dialogue with the waterfront like the mangrove trees its architecture mimics. Its restaurants offer sophisticated Creole food, and public areas are tastefully covered by muted reproductions of Plantation scenes from colonial-era illustrations. The empirical richness of the collections showcase not just the enslaved and their memorialization through art, but maroons, creole gardens, plantation organization, carnival convoys, not to speak of buccaneers, corsairs, freebooters, and filibusters. But what about the thousands of Tamil laborers who had embarked at Madras and Pondicherry to work on the sugar plantations and rum distilleries of the French West Indies?

In the very last room of Memorial ACTe, we finally discover forty little photos of indentured laborers from India on the Darboussier estate itself, together with one set of small hand cymbals (*manjira* in North India; *taalam* in Tamil). The curatorial decisions that spatially marginalize this already paltry evidence of Darboussier's Indian laborers replicate the clustering of the material traces of the Indian on the Plantation along its literal and symbolic edges. One such trace is a dot on the map of Guadeloupe that appears as the eye follows the coastline of its westward wing of Basse-Terre in a southerly direction: the *temple hindu* (Hindu temple) at Changy, a small settlement near the village of Sainte-Marie. This dot is one of several that can be found all over Guadeloupe and Martinique on the edges of former plantations. Venerated and understood by locals as part of creole history, they nevertheless stand apart from the outward-pointing set of references for tourists seeking the Caribbean experience of beaches, rum, and popular music genres of the Creole West Indies such as zouk (Guilbault and Rommen 2019). They are not incorporated into theories of super-syncretism that foreground the African sacred. Changy's little *kovil* (Tamil, "temple") in macaroon colors, dedicated to Mariammen, Goddess of the Tamil diaspora (L'Étang 2000; Ganesh 2010), nestles in a grove of banana and papaya trees populated by large iguanas. Its present form, architecturally transmitting a recognizable Tamil Hindu identity, dates back only to 1972. Before that, there was a chapel to the goddess and lithographs to the Black Virgin of Montserrat (L'Étang 2000, 274; Leiris, 1955). In its front courtyard stands a little shrine resting under the shade of a lambrequin fringe, the kind that overhangs Creole verandas (Waters 2020, 152–53).

Across the motorway from the temple, one encounters another cartographic dot that goes unrepresented within Memorial ACTe's galleries: the point where Christopher Columbus disembarked in 1493 and named the island "Santa Maria de Guadalupe" after the Virgin Mary of the Spanish town of Guadalupe. A bust and inscription stands in the middle of the village square, testimony to the act of renaming: "Ici Karukera devint Guadeloupe" (Here, Karukera became Guadeloupe), *Karukera* being the Carib name for the island, often used by Guadeloupeans to assert an autochthonous sense of self. This statement elides, however, the early history of the island's transformation from the Spanish possession, "Guadalupe," to the French-administered "Guadeloupe." Side by side, but separated through memorializing practices, the *kovil* at Changy and the commemorative bust to Columbus

bookend two moments in the Plantation's history: its commencement and its abolition. If the first escapes grand commemoration, it is because it has been so thoroughly naturalized that there is no need to prize open the memory of the Plantation to make room for it. The second moment brings us to the essential problem that I address. The *kovil* at Changy has altered the landscape, but these alterations have not penetrated and reshaped the Plantation's symbolic economy, which draws on the "primal scene" (Hall 2010, 30) involving (European) master and (African) slave. Functioning as a "foundational scenario" (Taylor 2003, 16; Kabir 2020, 4), the memory of which is reactivated through performance, the symbolic economy remains resistant to the incorporation of new *dramatis personae* after the abolition of slavery.

Locus solus and Kala Pani

Glissant's presentation of the Plantation as a sealed-off space explicates this resistance to what Hall cannot even name as "présence asiatique." For Glissant, the Plantation system that "spread, following the same structural principles, throughout the southern United States, the Caribbean islands, the Caribbean coast of Latin America, and the north-eastern portion of Brazil," and was coterminous and congruent with what "Chamoiseau and Confiant call the territory of Créolité" (Glissant 1997, 63). Despite its emergence as a contact zone and its ubiquity, the Plantation remains a "*locus solus*," an enclosed place of autarchy (Glissant 1997, 67). The abolition of slavery signaled the dispersal and reconfiguration of the Plantation's symbolic economy, but it did not open up the *locus solus*; rather, "our memory is aggravated by the void, the final sentence of the Plantation" (Glissant 1997, 72). Into this space of psychic delirium haunted by the foundational Master-Slave scenario was interjected a new player: the "coolie" from Asia, crystallized in the figure of the Indian on the Plantation.⁴ Built on a dyadic principle of encounter, the symbolic economy was closed to this third player. Time and again, the interjected "coolie" is symptomatically pushed to the margins. Derek Walcott's *Night at the Gardens of Port of Spain* ends with daybreak and the coolie returning home with a cartload of beheaded coconuts (Walcott 1986, 67). His back turned to us, we do not see his face. Is this the Plantation's "final sentence," or is it its postscript? Either way, the poem evacuates the coolie from its center, just as we saw within the Memorial ACTe museum space.

In post-Plantation insular societies of the Indian Ocean, a different model of memorializing the Indian on the Plantation operates (Servan-Schreiber 2014): this memorialization is part of the composite national heritage and showcased grandly as such. Its public dimension is captured by the vastness of Mauritius's Aapravasi Ghat commemoration project, which, in contrast to Memorial ACTe, showcases the arrival and assimilation of Indians and other demographic groups from Asia (Swift 2007); a similar impetus fuels Réunion's commemoration site, Les Lazarets de la Grande Chaloupe (Waters 2020, 148). An Indian Ocean answer to the exclusions of créolité as a Caribbean

⁴ The word "coolie" now has different tractions across the Caribbean, ranging from being a grave insult to a relatively neutral descriptive term for person of Asian and Indian heritage, with its connotative charge also varying according to declared (and perceived) racial identity of those using it and those for whom its being used. It has been politicized and reclaimed in different ways within academic discourse, popular culture, and literary production. It is used in this essay in full recognition of the multiplicity and complexity of the term, to alert the reader to which scare quotes have been used wherever deemed appropriate.

identity poetics is also articulated by Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou (2012), through their manifesto for creolized identity through *amarrage* or “moorings.” From a vantage point in Réunion they “redraw the cartography of the world from the Indian Ocean viewpoint, here where France, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Muslim worlds cross paths” (Vergès and Marimoutou 2012, 2), to present the Western Indian Ocean as a “network of meetings and exchanges [that function as] a mode of re-inscription in diversity, of thinking of globalization as a series of meetings and exchanges in a multipolar world” (14). While *amarrage* levers the Indian Ocean world as an alternative to the sealed-off Caribbean Plantation, Torabully’s poetics of coolitude seeks actively to intervene therein. Torabully attempts to restructure the dyadic symbolic field, where the “coolie is only seen on the periphery of the plantation” (Carter and Torabully 2002, 183), into a triad defined by entangled memories of “master,” “slave,” and “coolie.” Recognizing that “the coolie is out of the discourse because he is between the Master and the Slave,” Torabully identifies the reduction of this third figure into an “*être sans parole* (wordless being).” Créolité perpetuates this “particular vision of the Indian descendant, who is not yet comprehended as an integral part of the Caribbean discourse” (183).

Torabully’s coolitude nevertheless diverges from Vergès and Marimoutou’s interest in moorings to converge, instead, with créolité’s emphasis on the voyage of departure. In “The Open Boat,” Glissant (1997, 5–9) had staged a lyrical return to the Middle Passage as abyss, from the horrors of the hold, to the depths of the sea, and, finally, the “panic of the new land” (7). This foundational experience sets the scene for what Glissant terms “Relation.” Although the experience of the abyss made the ancestral, original victim an exception, it became “something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others.” The “shared exchange,” of which “this experience of the abyss” is “the best element” (1997, 8), produces a lyricism that opens out to and accepts the world: “this is why we stay with poetry. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (1997, 9). Through the voyage and the cry it unleashes, Glissant establishes the traumatic origins of créolité’s opposition to the monolingual “root” and systems of “filiation” that drive the linear and classicizing tendencies of European cultures. Torabully shares Glissant’s view of the voyage as founding moment, and the open boat as foundational site. Nevertheless, coolitude distinguishes itself from “the cry from the hold, this traumatic moment of a stifled utterance when the ship was leaving native Africa for the slave” (Carter and Torabully 2002, 170). It affiliates instead with a “murmur from the hold,” which Torabully attributes to “the ability of the indentured to see, sometimes move, even speak when the ship was leaving native India” (170).

This murmur generated by the perception of disappearing Indian shoreline is proffered as coolitude’s founding memory. But is it also the founding memory for the coolie’s descendants? “Coolitude,” observes Veronique Bragard, “is not based on [the] Coolie as such but relies on the nightmare transoceanic journey of Coolies” (qtd. in Carter and Torabully 2002, 15). Torabully’s contribution towards theorizing the Indian on the Plantation is twofold. Firstly, his personal connection to the Mascarene islands sutures the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic world in which créolité remains anchored. Secondly, through this transoceanic perspective, coolitude foregrounds those who entered the Atlantic world through the Indian Ocean, across the infamous *kala pani* or “black waters”

(N. Mohabir 2019), and rounding the Cape of Good Hope. These are the peoples of Asia, including those who embarked from the ports of peninsular India. In Torabully's words: "[t]he sea voyage bears very strange, troublesome, muffled, and censored echoes among the Indian descendants" (Carter and Torabully 2002, 170). However, these echoes make Torabully himself claim as his ancestors neither slaves nor coolies but lascars—those freelance sailors of the Indian Ocean world who sailed of their own volition and agency. Torabully's lascar restlessness has to be reconciled with the claims to the space of the Plantation staked by those whom the master-slave binary, enacted repeatedly through the foundation scenario of Afro-European encounter, pushes into the position of the Plantation's postscript to instantiate its Glissantian "final line." Sinappah Mary's woman seated on her *natte* in the cane field suggests an Indo-Caribbean desire to be emplaced centrally, *within* the Plantation as memorializing space. To what extent can coolitude acknowledge that desire?

Too Creole to be Indian? The Pressure to Decreolize

The lascar's detachment from territorial modes of belonging is challenged by the Indo-Caribbean person's need to navigate between a history of arrival and settlement in a Caribbean location, and the postcolonial politics of a globally ramified Indianness. These tensions were palpable during the International Festival of Coolitude (FIC) organized by Torabully in Guadeloupe during May 2018, which I attended on his invitation. The confrontation between coolitude's poetic and philosophical aspirations and the Caribbean praxis of the everyday, as displayed by the Indian-heritage Guadeloupean community that hosted FIC, was intensified by individual agendas and interpersonal clashes. "The festival was pretty much a 'KhalFest,'" I wrote in my journal. "It was not about coolitude the concept, but about coolitude the text as authored by KT [Khal Torabully]. It revealed the limits of theory and its capitulation to the realm of the ego." Torabully had assembled academics and artists who perhaps turned out more critically disposed towards the authored text of coolitude than he had possibly imagined (Gosine 2019, 29). But the most complicating dimension was FIC's sponsorship by GOPIO (Global Organization of People of Indian Origin), which mobilizes a Hindu-dominant understanding of Indian culture and identity to facilitate business connections between Indian-descended people across the world (Hansen 2002). A contingent from India was also present, including the then-vice-chancellor of Pondicherry University and several Indians resident in Paris whose contributions to coolitude remained unclear. GOPIO's guests also included a group of women from St. Martin, representing the mercantile Sindhi diaspora whose lives straddled Mumbai and the Caribbean, and dancers and musicians from Guyana who showcased diasporic Indo-Caribbean culture at set moments during the festival.

These various groups, each with a particular claim to "India," congregated each day on the shady veranda of a spacious neo-Creole bungalow, the home of GOPIO Guadeloupe's president Michel Narayinsamy. Our (geo)political diversity manifested itself in discrete clusters that, despite the rum punch and *planteurs* offered by our host, were breached only when we gathered to serve ourselves food and eat at tables set up at one end. The women of Narayinsamy's family and the Sindhi ladies from St. Martin prepared meals on the veranda and in the kitchen that opened out onto the veranda in the Caribbean way. The menus tailored Caribbean creole cuisine to suit the perceived needs of

guests with more direct lines of affiliation to India than our Guadeloupean hosts. They served the ubiquitous gratin of *crisophene* (a local squash), and *colombo* (creolized from Tamil *koḻambhu*), though prepared with vegetables rather than the customary chicken or goat (Martín-i-Pardo 2006; Alexandre et al 2008). Conspicuously absent, too, were the *boudin* (creole sausages) and *lambi* (conch) dishes commonplace within French Antillean gastronomy. In effect, what our hosts prepared for us were versions of their everyday cuisine stripped bare of elements that had entered through the creolizing matrix, so as to bring that cuisine closer to what Hindutva (Hindu right wing ideology) declares as “Indian” (Banaji 2018; Gosine 2018, 18). The only “non-vegetarian” item that was allowed was the modern Indian tandoori chicken, as interpreted by the Sindhis, who vigorously repudiated the value of local cuisine: “Colombo?” they cried in horror when I asked if that was what they were cooking: “But that’s from here!” “But where are you from then if not here?” I asked, bewildered, only to be equally flummoxed by their response: “We’re from St. Martin!”

The food served at FIC revealed how new cultural and political forces destabilize the daily performance of a multilayered creolized identity. Since Guadeloupean gastronomy had already creolized by combining elements from diverse culinary cultures (Chaudenson 2002, 224–242), this attempt to re-Indianize it represents a conscious attempt at *decreolization* by the Indo-Guadeloupeans involved in FIC. Stimulated by the presence of delegates assessed as “Indians from India,” the task of culinary decreolization was further outsourced to the women from St. Martin who, despite a continuous Sindhi mercantile presence in the Caribbean for over a century (Khemlani-David 1998), were deferred to because of their lived connections with Mumbai. These decisions reveal an anxiety about accessing a reservoir of Indianness tantalizingly visible on the horizon of global popular culture from which Francophone Caribbean people remain cut off by geography, language, and postcolonial politics. GOPIO Guadeloupe’s partnership with Torabully was thus strategic. Mauritius’s Francophone heritage and geopolitical closeness to India thanks to its Indian Ocean location (for the significance of which, see, for instance, Carsignol-Singh 2014) transformed Torabully, himself of Mauritian heritage, into a lever to raise the community of Indo-Guadeloupeans to a recognizable level of Indianness. In return, FIC could deploy the creolized nature of that community to confirm the transoceanic pertinence of coolitude, while accessing the funds provided by the local chapter of a global organization with a nativist right-wing agenda. This was, however, a difficult balancing act for the articulator of coolitude’s lascar message. These ironies enveloping FIC shed light on the fraught and ever-evolving relationship between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds that I am tracking here.

Indo-Caribbean communities are susceptible to Hindu and Islamic religious reformism emanating from the Indic heartland. These nativist discourses had already started reaching the Caribbean long before the Partition of India confirmed the efficacy of religion-based identity politics (Khan 2004). Although modulated by intersections of global and local forces at specific historical moments, they continue to appeal as resources for self-fashioning. The Hindu-descended Indo-Guadeloupean population attracts and is attracted by soft cultural forms, especially those amenable to remediation through popular cinema, such as music, dance, and fashion, which are the benign vectors for the spread of a Hindu right-wing agenda at once insidious and aggressive. Being firmly interlocked with casteist interpretations of Hinduism and a brahminical drive for purity that manifests itself in an

ahistorical vegetarianism (Sunder 2019), these discourses are directly in confrontation with the creolized insular life-worlds of the labor diasporas from India, be those settled in the Indian or Pacific Oceans or in the Caribbean. The Guadeloupean case highlights the specific stimuli for creolization provided by French colonial and postcolonial cultural policies, as well as ad hoc decreolization measures provoked by purveyors of Hindutva agendas in the guise of cultural ambassadors. In Narayinsamy's garden, shaded by fruit-bearing trees, stands a little Creole shrine to creolized Hindu gods. They look like the Black Virgin and other Black saints adorned in the shiny stuff of diaspora and are reminiscent of what the *kovil* at Changy would have looked like before its remodeling. Now, they are accompanied by a square hearth for the practice of *yagna* (purification by fire), a rite that suggests brahminical aspirations to “purity” on the part of this Caribbean family.

“Coolie coolie viens”: Indo-Caribbean (as) re-creolization

The culinary alterations that the locals introduced for the benefit of their international guests assembled on Narayinsamy's creole veranda conform to visual artist Andil Gosine's observations that, in contrast to his Trinidadian family's lack of “an explicit, strong reverence for India,” more recently, even “as India itself became an economic superpower, there seemed to emerge a fascination with Indianness that is premised on an authentic version of it existing in the subcontinent, one that keeps others in the diaspora beholden to it” (qtd. in R. Mohabir 2017). In the face of this “authentic India” localized within the space of India, even though this localized authenticity is one that globalization relentlessly circulates through the fantasy channels of Bollywood, the strange shame of feeling not “Indian enough” compounds the psychic confusions generated by the incomplete assimilation of the “coolie” into the historical process of creolization that corresponds to Plantation as matrix for the Caribbean's collective imaginary. Gosine titled an ambitious collaborative art project “Coolie Coolie Viens” in reference to a Trinidadian taunt hurled at its Indian-descended population: “coolie, coolie, come for curry” (Gosine 2018). Writing about this project, Trinidadian author Ramabai Espinet asks: “Why must coolies come for curry? Who is producing the curry and offering the invitation/command? What does curry signify? Is there really an inversion?” (2018). Answers lie in Caribbean cuisine being one of the cultural arenas where Asian, African, and European elements enter in more or less equal measure to generate and sustain the creolizing process. Yet “curry” remains here a boundary-defining element. It can be pulled out of creolization at any point to highlight, retrieve, or simply assert Indianness: hence both the insult and its artistic recuperation; hence, too, Campbell's use of “curry powder” as the title of a poem on his Indian great-grandmother who determinedly shed identifiable signifiers of Indian culture.

Such boundary-defining signifiers of Indianness cut across different sectors of the Caribbean imaginary, suturing Anglophone and Francophone Indian-descended people together in a praxis of reconciliation—to each other as well as to their interpretations of India and Indianness. A cumulative response emerges that can enable us to detect trends and preferences on a collective level, as exemplified by Gosine's “Coolie Coolie Viens.” Running through the work it showcases are recurrent emphases on certain objects and habits that define the meeting of the transoceanic Indian and the local Caribbean and the ways in which a new *modus vivendi* develops through the attempt to balance

both dimensions. An illustrative example is Gosine's inclusion of the work titled "Le bébé Krishna bleu" by Trinidadian artist Wendy Nanan (Bagoo 2018). This baby Krishna with signature blue skin sports a miniature cutlass as coronet and jauntily-tossed scarf; he holds a croissant in one hand and conch shell in another. The transformed cutlass references Gosine's own artistic transformation of this implement for cane cutting that is also associated with Indo-Caribbean domestic violence (Trotz, 2018, 224). In contrast, the conch shell, used for Hindu worship as well as within *Abeng*, the practice of using it to sound early warning signals and calls to resistance amongst maroons (especially in Jamaica), enables a fortuitous conflation of Indo- and Afro-diasporic sacrality and as resistance together with a ubiquitous element of the Caribbean biosphere. It reminds us of the "conch shell's moan" with which Walcott (2014) opens *Omeros*, even as the cutlass coronet takes us back to the labor on the plantation and its endemic psychosocial toll on Caribbean masculinity (Barriteau 2004). Can Krishna and Anansi share a Caribbean sacred imaginary of which the conch shell is a metonym, even as they must share the devastating burden of the cutlass? Indeed, "Conch Shell," a 2020 soca collaboration between Iwer George, Skinny Fabulous, and Machel Montano, would seem to suggest so.

Like Sinappah Mary's depiction of the cane field on which the Indian woman sits, the cutlass presents Caribbean identity as the inheritance of deracination and wounding, as well as transformation of that trauma through the creative mobilization of available resources, including working the land. What the conch shell additionally indicates is the search for elements within the Caribbean environment that can simultaneously evoke Indic cultural specificities transported through the transoceanic passage. Importantly, these elements need not be autochthonous. Indeed, more often than not, they became part of the environment after also having been transplanted here in the course of colonialism and empire building. Instructive here is Gosine's work "All the Flowers," in which he "recreates the Ixora—a flower that is as commonplace as grass in Trinidad but is actually not indigenous to the Caribbean. The Ixora came with the indentures" (R. Mohabir 2017). Another multivalent signifier of both the journey to the Caribbean and the medium through which that journey was made is water itself. Whether the Atlantic Middle Passage or the transoceanic journey across the Indian and Atlantic oceans, all those who crossed the ocean(s) and their descendants share a foundational response to water. But there is an Indic relationship between sweet and salt waters, and between sacred rivers and tabooed oceans, that the memory of leaving the Gangetic plains to cross the *kala pani* must negotiate (Torabully 2018). In "Our Holy Waters, and Mine," Gosine's mixed media and performance piece within "Coolie Coolie Viens," mason jars filled with water are labeled with the names of waterways traveled by his ancestors in course of the long journey from their village to the Caribbean (Espinet 2018). The work also includes another identical set of jars, labeled with waterways from cities worldwide in which Gosine has lived. This iterated structuring of memories on personal and collective levels reflects the praxis of identity through their interpenetration.

Of these various signifiers of Indianness that Caribbean artists—whether identifying as Indo-Caribbean or not—reach for while working through the relationship between the particular, the collective, the shared, and the separate(d), the most potent remains the sari. If women of Campbell's great-grandmother's generation shed the sari, their descendants today have picked it up anew to

unravel through it their layered identities.⁵ For instance, Gosine’s piece “Hoodie” for “Coolie Coolie Viens” cuts up a sari and reassembles it into a hooded sweatshirt. An act of violence and desecration is simultaneously one of recreation and innovation. As Caribbean artist Marsha Pearce recognizes, this duality is precisely that which Rex Nettleford has called “the awesome process of ‘creolization with differing elements now coalescing, now separating, now being assimilated, now resisting, now counter-resisting in a dynamic contradictory relationship that produce[s] agony but also new life’” (Pearce 2018, 9; Nettleford 2003, xvi). This formulation by Nettleford contrasts to his aphoristic and, therefore, more frequently invoked summary of Caribbean creolization as the encounter between “European melody and African rhythm” (1970). As I argued earlier in this essay, his turn there to the Master-Slave binary excluded *ab initio* the involvement of the Indian of the Plantation within the creolizing matrix. However, the alternative approach articulated within the quote picked up by Pearce moves away from binaries and dualities to recognize a fluid and open-ended model of creolizing culture. As confirmed by its deployment within an essay on Gosine’s “Coolie Coolie Viens,” it is this model that can begin to accommodate a transoceanic reimagining of Caribbean creolization. Through it, we can interpret the Indo-Caribbean urge to decreolize in order to assert a specific history of arrival and adaptation, as acts of *recreolization* within more dynamic and long-term cultural processes.

Decreolization as Recreolization

This specific history of the arrival in the Caribbean of its Asian-heritage populations predicates what I called at the start of my essay its expanded transoceanic frame. What I have proposed, therefore, is an opening out of the Atlantic rim within which Caribbean identity-formations are commonly emplaced, by linking it to those journeys of diaspora that commenced in the Indian Ocean space. This expanded theatre for collective memorialization is more than a geographic sleight of hand; it offers us epistemic solutions for the literal double bind of the Master-Slave binary which, as I have demonstrated in the earlier sections of the essay, superimposes itself on the ratiocinative pathways of even the most radical of Caribbean thinkers. Torabully’s concept of coolitude gives us tools through which the binary can be dislodged by acknowledging the libidinal readjustments demanded by the entry of new dramatis personae into the post-Plantation symbolic economy, and the Middle Passage placed in dialogue with *kala pani*. Yet coolitude, like créolité, remains epistemically imprisoned by linguistic limitations. As concepts whose morphological structure draws directly on nominal/adjectival categories, the “coolie” and the “creole,” they cannot capture the dynamism of process. Moreover, créolité’s reliance on binary formulations forecloses the participation therein of the history of indenture, while coolitude’s privileging of the journey forecloses the consequences of arrival. Finally, neither concept can accommodate the seductive pull of the politics of populism and nativism that have gained traction globally in the past few decades, as they emanate from the Indian heartland.

⁵ It should be clarified that “sari” here refers back to Campbell’s quote and Gosine’s artwork. In my use, it stands in for a range of Indian women’s outfits that rely, like the sari, on a piece of cloth that passes from the waist diagonally upwards to cover the breasts and is secured over one shoulder. This cloth can, for instance, appear as the “odhni” or “dupatta,” paired with a long gathered skirt “ghagra” or “ghagree.” Like the Bhojpuri language, these outfits have also become marginalized or regionalized within peninsular South Asia while continuing to have validity and recognition as part of the Indo-Caribbean heritage.

However antithetical to more inclusive politics and philosophies, these trends must be accepted as competing consequences of the Caribbean's emplacement within transoceanic and not merely Atlantic histories.

I have responded to these complications by returning to creolization as process. This term already possesses a linguistic advantage through its mobilization of the “-ize” suffix to push the noun “creole” into a verb “creolize.” I extracted further epistemic possibilities from this advantage through reading quotidian and artistic attempts at restoring Indianness within a Caribbean praxis of culture, as a “decreolization” which effectively generates “recreolization.” To reconsider decreolizing impulses as recreolization is only a paradoxical move if we ignore the potential within creolization itself as a process and theory of cultural formation under duress. *Innovative adaptability* is a fundamental characteristic of creolized culture, and creolized cultural products must be assessed for their perpetual renovation rather than for their retention or preservation of those elements. Using creolization as a barometer to understand how cultures change where contact occurs under extreme conditions of inequality, we lever analysis away from concerns with sources, origins, and authenticity to probe the conditions and consequences of creolization. To then understand as decreolization the attempts to lift an Indo-Caribbean identity out of a differentially creolized cultural landscape and to affiliate across that landscape is merely the first analytical step; the next is the incorporation of these attempts into a fractal understanding of creolization within which recreolization is necessarily enfolded. Through this double move we can, on the one hand, destigmatize such attempts as somehow betraying an essential “Caribbeanness,” even while unlatching them from epistemic reliance on a territorial understanding of Indianness. In this way, responding to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's understanding of creolization as “a miracle begging for analysis” (2006, 1), we then open the door to recreolizing even what “Indianness” can mean within the transoceanic frame.

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