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To cite this article: Marina Carter & Danny Flynn (2017) Pulled through Time: Art and the Indian Labour Migrant, *South Asian Studies*, 33:1, 85-104, DOI: [10.1080/02666030.2017.1301724](https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2017.1301724)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2017.1301724>



Published online: 17 Mar 2017.



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Pulled through Time: Art and the Indian Labour Migrant

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This paper discusses the processes through which historical research, visual archives, and artistic production have interacted to produce a series of original artworks capturing some of the complexities of Indian indentured migrants' experiences and identities. The images from the 'Coolitude' series by award-winning artist Danny Flynn apply modern screen-printing techniques to archival photographs of Indian indentured labourers. The artistic reimagining of these historical images was inspired by the ideas of Mauritian poet Khal Torabully and the work of the historical research project, 'Becoming Coolies: Rethinking the Origins of the Indian Ocean Labour Diaspora'. The latter attempts to reinterpret the colonial Indian labour diaspora by drawing upon accounts of migrants themselves to reassess the mechanisms of migration and reassign subjectivity and agency to Indian labour migrants' experiences. The artworks themselves seek to interrogate and challenge the stereotypical image of the so-called 'coolie', presenting a more nuanced view of the Indian labour migrant. This paper discusses the creation of the visual archive from which the original images are drawn, as well as the conceptual and creative processes that underpin their reimagining as original works of art.

Keywords: Archives; artistic production; Coolitude; Indenture Photography

This paper discusses the processes through which historical research, visual archives, and artistic production have interacted to create a series of original artworks capturing some of the complexities of Indian indentured migrants' experiences and identities.[†] Long understood simply as 'a new system of slavery', indentured labourers have frequently been portrayed as passive victims of oppressive colonial labour regimes. More recently, the 'Coolitude' movement has sought to reclaim the indentured labour migrant, or 'coolie', both as an active agent within their own story and as a signifier of experiences of displacement, often an inescapable element of the human condition. The ethos behind the 'Coolitude' movement encourages reinterpretations of, and engagement with, migrant histories and identities through poetry, art, film, story-telling, and other creative media, as well as through more traditional historical approaches. This interaction between archival sources, historical methodologies, and artistic and creative processes has provided the inspiration for a series of screen prints based on archival images of indentured migrants, which have been exhibited in London, Leeds, and Edinburgh, and are published here for the first time. The purpose of this paper is to present these original artworks to a wider audience,

to provide context for their production, and to reflect on their potential significance. The paper will begin by explaining the historic and archival origins of the images themselves, delineating the establishment and operation of the indenture system in Mauritius, the creation of an Immigration Department, and the passing of legislation to provide forms of identification to distinguish new from time-expired migrants, resulting in the creation of portrait tickets (Figure 1). It will then go on to look in more detail at the conceptual approaches that have informed their reimagining through a discussion of the Coolitude movement, before moving on to discuss the creative processes through which they were transformed into modern works of art. The final section of the paper will present the images themselves, with a personal commentary from Danny Flynn, the artist responsible for their production.

The indenture system and the photographic archive

Around 455,000 indentured migrants arrived in Mauritius between 1834 and 1910 to work in the island's sugar economy. Their labour turned Mauritius into the British Empire's premier sugar producer and transformed the demography of the island. The term

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[†]'Pull' is the technical verb used to describe the application of a colour in screen-printing by pulling the squeegee (a rubber blade) over ink to flood the screen onto the paper.



1. Old Immigrant Ticket. Printed with the permission of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius.

indenture refers to a written contract entered into by labourers; an indentured migrant did not pay his or her own passage, but instead agreed to receive assisted

transportation to a colony in return for a fixed period of labour on arrival there. Because the terms of this contract did not allow signatories to benefit from

subsequent rises in the value of their labour, and provided for penal sanctions in the event of non-compliance, indenture has been presented primarily as an involuntary form of migration. Indeed, British abolitionists, Indian nationalists, and subsequent historians have all compared indenture with slavery at various times.¹ Certainly, experiences of indenture could be harsh – the labour was often hard, material conditions were basic, and unauthorized absence from labour could be punished with wage deductions, or even terms of imprisonment.² Yet, despite these onerous conditions, many indentured labourers prospered, earning enough money to send remittances home to family in India or to establish themselves in their new locations. Some settled in the sugar colonies, often acquiring land and becoming the founders of permanent diasporic South Asian communities. Others re-migrated to other colonies around the empire, while still others returned to India with the capital they had accumulated, sometimes becoming intermediaries, or recruiters, in the indentured labour system themselves.³

Although early, private experiments with indenture in the period between 1834 and 1838 were marked by problems and abuses, from 1843 onwards, the indenture system was increasingly regulated. A series of laws were promulgated in British India and her sugar colonies to oversee the mode of recruitment, transportation, and contractual arrangements made for migrant workers. As a result, a considerable paper trail has been amassed in colonial and metropolitan archives, as numerous documents were created that recorded and controlled many aspects of the indentured labourers' lives. One of the most effective means of monitoring the nineteenth-century immigrant workforce was to identify and limit the mobility of indentured labourers. Time-expired Indians, or those who had completed their 'industrial residence' and who were accordingly no longer under obligation to sign an indenture contract with an employer, were defined, according to Ordinance 22 of 1847, as 'old immigrants' and furnished with identification – a ticket. In July 1864, the Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, an Anglo-Indian named Henry Beyts, wrote to the Colonial Secretary suggesting that a portrait photograph should be added to the ticket 'as a means of checking the false personations, desertions, and other offences, of which immigrants often render themselves guilty by procuring and using tickets which are not their own'.⁴ This had been identified as a problem by the acting Protector, Mr Chasteauneuf, who reported that numerous 'old immigrants' had complained of being robbed of their tickets, which were then sold on to 'vagrants or new immigrants', and even of having their savings accounts emptied by persons possessing their stolen tickets. A photograph affixed to the ticket, it was argued, would

discourage theft and would 'supply the Savings' Bank Officer or Magistrate with a ready means of at once recognising the identity of any person presenting himself before them'.⁵ Beyts proposed that the cost of the photograph – then a relatively new and expensive technology – be charged to the 'old immigrants'. A photographer, Mr Lecorgne, was found, who offered to supply two copies of each photograph taken (one to be affixed to the ticket, and the other to be held by the Immigration Office) at a cost of four shillings per pair, and a pilot scheme was authorized by a Government Order dated 22 July 1864. In September of that year, the Protector, Beyts, reported to the Colonial Secretary that the experiment had been a success, recommending that the scheme be applied more generally and that a tender be issued to employ a depot photographer. In October, it was reported that the only tender received had been submitted by Mr Lecorgne, and he was accordingly appointed on a five-year contract.

At the close of 1865, the Protector of Immigrants reported that the replacement of the old tickets with new ones bearing photographic portraits was well underway and some 44,000 tickets had been replaced. He affirmed that 'the withdrawal of the Old tickets from circulation for the purpose of replacing them by others bearing portraits has led to the detection of numerous cases of false personation'.⁶ His enthusiasm was shared by the colonial Governor, Henry Barkly, with the following caveat:

There can be little doubt that the system of photographing the Portrait of each Immigrant on his Ticket at the time of engagement will, as pointed out, prevent personation now so extensively carried on for various fraudulent purposes, and thus tend to check desertion, but objections are I know, entertained by several Planters in the Rural Districts to the length of absence occasioned by the necessity of old Immigrants coming to Town to be photographed on re-engaging.⁷

At this time, the working male population engaged under written contracts on sugar estates was as follows:

Only 400 women were recorded as employed, and all of these were on verbal engagements. This was in

Labourers Employed on Mauritian Estates in 1866

	Engaged by planters	Engaged by job contractors
Old immigrants	48,658	5,795
New immigrants	25,726	740
Creoles of Indian origin	1,226	0
Creoles of African origin	546	0
Others	225	0

Source: NA CO 167/487 Barkly to Cardwell, 3 April 1866

marked contrast to the total number of women residing on sugar estates – estimated to be 24,656. The burden of procuring portrait tickets was confined mainly to men serving on formal contracts. Migrants who returned to India were required to give up their tickets and received a ‘passport’, onto which the photograph was transferred, at a cost of two shillings.⁸ Over the next five years, Mr Lecorgne took 116,333 photographs and received in payment, from the old immigrants, an ‘enormous sum’ amounting to £23,311, 12 shillings. Lecorgne did not take all the photographs himself; his establishment was a large one. He reportedly ‘kept eight or ten men in the office upstairs to make out the tickets’, employed another two clerks to assist with tickets outside office hours, and thirty more men on the ground floor of the Immigration Office in Port Louis to assist with the actual photography.⁹

The impact of the new policy requiring ‘old immigrants’ to update their tickets with a photographic portrait was dramatic. They had to travel – on foot – many miles from all parts of the island to the Immigration Office and Depot at the port capital, where they sometimes had to wait several days to be seen. As Rajchunder (Old immigrant, no. 188,928) explained:

In December 1865 I went to the depot to have my photograph taken. I had to go on five successive days, and was each day turned out with violence. There were Peons there with rattans, who struck me with them and then turned me out. I remonstrated against this. I had to travel 100 miles backwards and forwards, and pay 4 s. before I could obtain this photograph.¹⁰

A similar story was related by Moorooa (Old immigrant, no. 52,958), who also described the considerable time lost in being arrested and jailed for not having his papers in order, and the days spent endeavouring to obtain the photograph. This, he claimed, had a deleterious effect on his trade as a market gardener:

In the month of July 1868 I was frequently stopped by the police and told by them that I must have a photograph on my ticket, as otherwise I should be arrested as a vagabond. Accordingly I went to the depot for four successive days without being able to obtain this photograph. On the fifth day I obtained it, after the payment of 4 s., having walked for this purpose 100 miles backwards and forward. On account of my absence I experienced a loss in the sale of my goods which amounted to 14 s.

In the month of August, same year, I was arrested by a constable of the Long Mountain police station and told I must go to Pamplemousses to obtain a police pass. Accordingly I went there, and had to go during eight days, during which I travelled 112 miles backwards and

forwards. For seven days I was expelled from the police station by violence, and obtained my pass on the eighth day. I am a gardener, and am frequently stopped at different police stations by the police to show my papers. This not only causes me a loss of time, but also considerably injures the sale of the produce of my garden.¹¹

Some old immigrants continued to be employed on sugar estates, and in such cases, the employers also complained of the loss of time and labour resulting from the implementation of the policy. Mr Pitot gave evidence to the Royal Commission set up to investigate the immigration system in Mauritius in 1872, stating that he ‘thought it hard to compel a labourer who had already got his papers in order, not only to pay the sum of 4 s. for his portrait, but to undergo the trial and expense of a journey to and from town, and by staying several days in town to lose his wages for the time so spent, while the loss and inconvenience to the planter from the absence of so many hands is not less to be deprecated’.¹² Pitot was, moreover, doubtful as to the efficacy of the photograph system, adding, ‘experience seems to prove that these portraits, so liable to be disfigured or defaced, and, at the best, so little certain for identifying men who may have a motive in altering the appearance and expression of their features, are not effective for the supposed object’.¹³ Another group of ‘old immigrants’, who were described as ‘farmers’ renting plots of land from Madame Joly, were supported by their landlord, who complained that they had been unable to obtain the documentation needed to transport their produce out of the district, despite having their photograph tickets in order.¹⁴

Despite growing concerns, a new labour law – Ordinance 31 – was passed in 1867 that rendered the acquisition of a portrait ticket compulsory. When Lecorgne’s contract ended on 15 October 1869, it was considered preferable to employ a photographer on a salary of £300 per annum, ‘supplying him with the apparatus and chemicals requisite, as well as with any manual assistance which he might need’.¹⁵ A Mr Carbonel was provisionally engaged, but in August 1870, it was again recommended by Beyts that the former method of engaging the photographer to supply portraits – at a now reduced rate of two shillings per immigrant – be re-implemented. This measure took effect on 1 November of that year.¹⁶ Among Mr Carbonel’s assistants were Léon Bérenger, Alexandre Rambert, and Abraham Sinappa.¹⁷

In 1871, a Police Enquiry Commission was held in Mauritius to discuss the policing of old immigrants. The Chief of Police, Colonel O’Brien, opined that the

portrait system had a positive 'moral effect' on Indians, and acted as a deterrent to the commission of crimes because 'the Indian who has had his photograph taken believes that he is known'.¹⁸ The Procureur General and the Protector of Immigrants also reported on its supposed benefits:

The system of portrait tickets has been for some time past in operation, and has been productive of good results. Not only has it proved a check upon the use by Indians of tickets not belonging to them, and which have been stolen or purchased by them with a view to concealing their identity, but it has also proved of use in the detection of crime, the duplicate of every photograph being kept in the Immigration Department, where the portraits are taken.¹⁹

A very different appraisal of the functioning of the portrait ticket system had been presented to the newly appointed Governor of Mauritius, Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon. A petition, signed by 9401 Indian 'old immigrants', presented several case studies of the hardships occasioned by the police seeking to examine their passes, in what amounted to undue harassment. For example, Budha (Old immigrant, no. 180,788), residing on the estate of M. Tessier at Nouvelle Decouverte, reported:

About a year ago, during the night, towards morning, hearing a noise of voices in my yard, and going out to see what was the matter, I found my house, as well as those of my neighbours, surrounded by constables, whom I recognised to belong to the Pamplemousses, Villebague and Moka police stations; they entered into our houses, and compelled us to come out of them. They then asked us for our tickets and police passes. We were thirty-two in number, and had our photograph tickets, the leases for the ground we occupied, and our police passes for the district of Pamplemousses, in which district, as our leases showed, we resided; notwithstanding which we were forcibly tied two by two and marched from our homes and our hard-earned property, some of us leaving our wives and children weeping with grief; others, who had but little furniture, gardener's tools, and some fowls, and no one to take care of them during their absence, were obliged to leave them at the mercy of any evilly-disposed persons. This occurred on a Saturday. We were taken to Moka, locked up there from that day until Monday at 10 A.M., when we were taken before the Magistrate, who, after seeing our papers told us to return on Friday, and threatened that should we omit to do so, we should be fined \$5 each. Having no idea what the law was or might be, we clubbed together to procure legal advice, at the rate of \$1 per man, and accordingly were joined by an advocate at that Court on the above-mentioned day. When our case was called we did not know what was said by our advocate or the Magistrate, but the result was, that our case was remitted four days three times consecutively; after which we were released. We had thus travelled backwards and forwards about 200 miles,

having to suffer expenses, and some of us the total loss of our property.²⁰

The Royal Commissioners, found that, by 1872, when they conducted their enquiry, the regulations governing replacement tickets had become very onerous indeed. They explained that:

on his arrival at the Depot, and informing the Chief Clerk that he has lost his ticket, he is asked his name and his father's name, his number, and the name of the first master with whom he served, in order that he may be identified by the entry in the Register [...] Should the immigrant be able to give the number, his name can be turned up at once; but as the numbers up to date of 1st August 1873 had reached 365,319, it might be imagined that it very seldom happened that the Indian can remember his number.²¹

Accordingly, it was usually the case that the applicant would be asked whether a friend possessing a ticket who travelled on the same ship could be found, and if so, a pass was granted to enable him to procure the same. However, 'If he has made a mistake, and his comrade did not come by the same ship, he must go through the like process over again, until he does find one who has.'²² Once the task of finding the original number in a ship's register was completed, enquiries were made with the Inspector of Police or Stipendiary Magistrate of the man's district to ascertain that he was a bona fide 'old immigrant' and not a man still under contract of indenture. On payment of five shillings, a month-long permit to work was issued, during which time if he was not claimed as a 'deserter', he could return to the depot and pay two shillings for his photograph. Four days later, he would return to receive the new portrait ticket, for which another sum of £1 would be charged. The Royal Commissioners pointed out that an old immigrant living in the southern district of Mahebourg would have '180 miles of road to traverse, or 18 s. to pay for railway fares, exclusively of £1 7 s. paid in fees at the Immigration Office for the "permit to work", and the duplicate ticket, an amount of trouble and expense which fully substantiate the grievances complained of by the Old Immigrants in their petition'.²³ While some 'old immigrants' were engaged in entrepreneurial activities, others continued to labour on sugar estates, and their average monthly wage, being around sixteen shillings, the cost of obtaining the duplicate ticket amounted to around 15 per cent of their annual income.²⁴

It was evident to the Commissioners that these excessive costs were a means of punishing persons who lost their tickets, in order to prevent fraudulent trafficking in tickets. They doubted the efficacy of the

portrait photograph as a means of combatting crime, however, commenting that 'we do not see how the photograph can be of any assistance to the police unless they have first obtained a clue to the perpetrator, or what the photograph could in any case prove, beyond the fact that the ticket or pass tendered by any person is the right and proper ticket or pass of the person exhibiting it, by enabling the officer or constable examining the ticket to see at a glance the resemblance between the portrait upon the ticket and the bearer'.²⁵ Moreover, they did not believe that the photographs provided good likenesses: 'the portraits hitherto have generally been taken full-face, and with a fixed stare, which completely alters the natural expression'.²⁶ They carried out two experiments in support of their opinion, firstly with the Sergeant-Major of Police and a police constable at Moka, and secondly with the Stipendiary Clerk at Flacq. They described the result of their experiments as follows:

Out of eight men put up at Moka to be identified by the photograph only, the Serjeant-major wholly failed to identify two, whereas the less intelligent constable was unable to identify a single man; whilst at Flacq the Stipendiary Clerk, the officer on whom falls the duty of passing contracts of service between employers and immigrants (and consequently of providing against any false personation) on having 17 portrait tickets put into his hand, and being asked to pick the 17 men to whom they belonged out of a band of 38, only succeeded in recognising six.²⁷

The Royal Commissioners also noted that in their interviews with Mr Beyts and Colonel O'Brien, neither were able to provide evidence of how their system of portrait photographs had checked fraud. They added, somewhat ironically, 'The only case Colonel O'Brien could adduce of the utility of the photograph had nothing to do with Coolie immigrants, having occurred in London, and not in Mauritius, and was the case of the late murder in Park Lane'.²⁸ The Commissioners contended that Mr Douglas, the Procureur-General, 'could hardly have been aware of the method, or rather the utter want of method, with which these photographs are kept' at the Immigration Department, explaining:

the photographs are put into very large albums, each page of which is divided into thirty-six spaces. In each of these spaces is pasted the portrait of an Indian, with his name and number, and in the corner the serial number of the portrait. There is also a day-book kept, 'which is ruled for the serial number, the man's name and immigration number. Unfortunately, the serial numbers are not borne upon the nominal roll; and as there is no index either of names or of numbers, it is only possible for the Clerk to pick out the photograph of any individual by going through the album from first to last. Of these albums there are now twenty-one

volumes, containing up to date of 4th June 1873, no less than 129,617 portraits. And, even should the immigration number be known, it would be necessary to look down the day-book until the number be found, and then the serial number would become known and the portrait easily found.²⁹

When the Royal Commissioners published their report on the indenture system in Mauritius in 1875, they critiqued the Protector of Immigrants, Beyts, who 'appears to be under the impression that the immigrants have either a weakness or a liking for being taxed', described the fees for photographs exacted by Mr Lecorgne between 1865 to 1870 as 'extortion', and opined that 'it is not the immigrant, but the colony in general, that ought to pay' for the photograph ticket. They found no evidence to support Colonel O'Brien's assertion that photographing the old immigrants produced a 'great moral effect', and concluded that 'the Immigration Office, as a Registry of the Indian Immigrant population, is wholly inefficient; that the photograph affixed to the immigrant's ticket has hitherto, owing to the want of arrangement of the photograph albums at the Immigration Office, been utterly useless'. They recommended that an alphabetical register 'be kept of all immigrants, Old and New', along with a second register of 'immigrants in numerical order, containing the photographs'. They suggested that the photographs be 'taken three-quarter face, to be entered in a paged album with each immigrant's number in the order in which they are taken' and that the portrait ticket be issued free of charge, with a 'substantial fee' levied for duplicates, to act as a 'check upon illicit transfer of tickets'.³⁰ The Royal Commissioners' opinions did not meet with the entire approbation of the home authorities, who differed from them in their view of the photographs of the Indians, believing that they were indeed useful.³¹ The pass system continued, although some reforms of the unduly severe immigration ordinances inscribed in the 1867 law were reformed in legislation passed in 1878 and subsequently. According to Christian Le Comte, George Britter took over from Carbonel as depot photographer, and in 1879, his former assistant Abraham Sinappa acceded to the post of Head Photographer, on a salary of Rs1,200 annually, with the same three assistants as before, with the addition of Annassamy Poonoosamy.³² At this time, the recommendation of the Royal Commissioners appears to have been taken into consideration as the portraits taken by Sinappa are not face-on, but in three-quarter profile. In 1893, Daniel Sénèque took over as Immigration Office photographer until his retirement in 1913. He was not replaced. In 1914, the 1878 labour law was further modified to enable the 'Finger Print system' to be introduced 'as a means of

identification for immigrants in place of the photograph'.³³

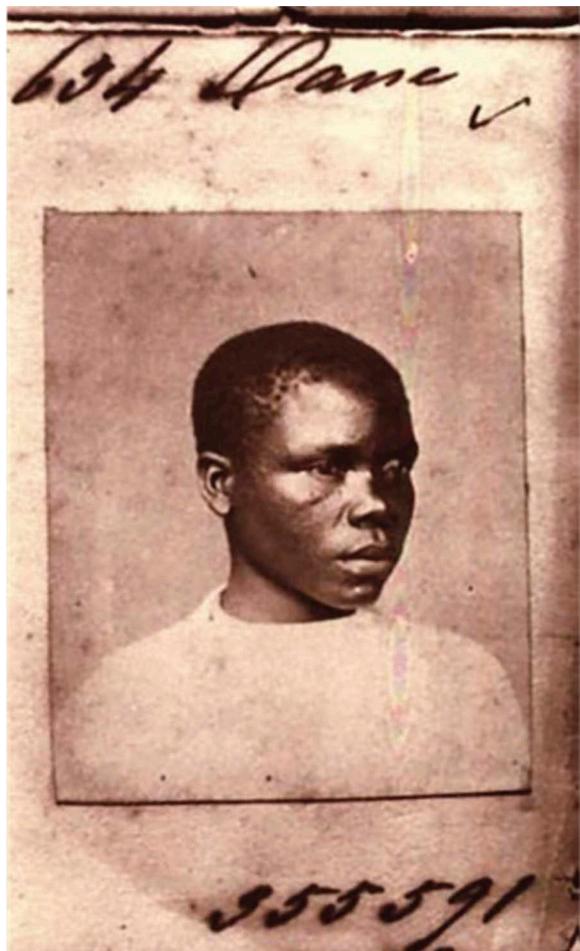
Today, the photograph albums, along with the ships' registers and other documents associated with the former Immigration Office and Depot, have been rebound in uniform red volumes and are housed at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Mauritius. It is fair to say that the statements of the Royal Commissioners remain largely true today. The photographs are ordered according to the date that the photograph was taken and, therefore, even with a knowledge of the immigration number of a particular individual, it is a time-consuming process to find the corresponding photograph. Indexing and an ongoing digitization programme will eventually make this unique database easily searchable. In addition to the photographs of 'old immigrants', the Immigration Archive contains portraits of vagrants, 'criminals' about to be deported, orphans, and, in a few cases, new immigrants. The archive is today recognized as a rich and unique resource, comprising around a quarter of a million portrait photographs, bound in sixty-five volumes as the PG (photographic) series of the archive, dating between 1864 and 1913. They constitute a fascinating record of the physiognomy and style of dress and ornamentation of the ordinary Indian village folk who came to Mauritius, of interest to historical anthropologists and other scholars of the Indian diaspora and of the Indian subcontinent itself. The head and shoulder portraits reveal, for example, the varying types of headgear worn by the Indian immigrants (see, for example, Figure 2), uniforms denoting occupational status (for example, railway workers in livery), the jewellery worn by women, the general attire of both males and females, and can even give away revealing details of medical conditions and forms of tattooing in practice amongst Indians.

The portraits serve to remind us, in particular, of the wide range of ethnic and caste groups incorporated within indentured migration from India. These include individuals who may well have derived from the Sidi communities settled in India, or more recently arrived African immigrants to the subcontinent. For example, Dane (Figure 3) was recorded in the immigration register as a Christian from Abyssinia, and the son of Allijah. He arrived in Mauritius as a fifteen-year-old in January 1872, from India aboard the ship 'Alumgeer'. He came with his seventeen-year-old brother, Tom. His brother returned to India in 1885, but Dane stayed on in Mauritius; his photograph was taken in 1910. While the PG series is comprised mostly of 'old immigrants' from India, there are some sets of photographs taken of newly arrived Indian immigrants (usually bare chested), many photographs of Indian women (ships' registers indicate that they were photographed when obtaining proofs of single status prior to marriage in the colony) and of groups



2. Burrun, dressed in a top hat and a British military jacket. Printed with the permission of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius.

of 'creole' – i.e. Mauritius-born – children, possibly photographed on being transferred to the orphan asylum or the borstal (for juvenile delinquents). The photographic archive also includes a few thousand freed slaves from Africa, and labour migrants from other parts of the Indian Ocean who arrived on the island during the indenture period. The 'liberated Africans' have a different numbering system to Indian immigrants (being designated AF or LA) and the few Africans who arrived from India under the indenture system. Portraits of Chinese and some white or mixed race individuals may be related to vagrancy legislation: persons convicted of or deported for vagabondage were frequently photographed. In a few cases, the photograph collection was also used as a means of reassuring relatives of migrants in India that their departed families were alive and well in Mauritius. For example, on 12 November 1874, the Protector of Immigrants wrote to the Collector of Ratnagiri (Maharashtra) in India enclosing portrait photographs of Jeejaba (no. 262,307), Oomajee (no. 262,308), and Babajee (no. 262,309), and



3. *Dane of Abyssinia, who migrated from India to Mauritius. Printed with the permission of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius.*

a letter to their friends, who had been enquiring after them. The three men, he was informed, were all market gardeners who 'would have returned to India but lost all that they had in the hurricane of March last and they wish to remain until they have saved something'.

Reclaiming the image of the 'coolie'

The images in the Mauritian photographic archive capture the complexities of the indenture experience on numerous levels. The context of their production reflects the coercive elements of the system. In order to create the images, the labourers were often subjected to both personal and financial inconvenience, and to the scrutiny and surveillance of the colonial state. The well-known images of bare-chested new arrivals in Natal, identified only by their number, have rightly been used to illustrate the dehumanizing elements of the indenture system. Yet, this is only part of the story. When taken

together, the images in the Mauritian archive also provide a compelling vision of multiple identities and diverse outcomes that made up the migrant experience. Traditionally dismissed as 'ignorant and helpless beings' caught up in the devastating machinery of colonial labour exploitation, these images are a powerful visual reminder that the so-called 'coolies' were very much more than simply passive victims of indenture. Long-standing and more recent trends in the historiography of the indentured labour diaspora have underscored the necessity of nuancing the debate about who 'coolies' were, where they came from, and how they experienced indenture.³⁴ Despite long-held assumptions about the lowly social origins of indentured labourers, recent research suggests that they came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, had a range of experiences, and achieved varied individual and collective outcomes. Many of those who 'became coolies' through the act of emigrating within the indenture system were not, in fact, manual labourers, as the term implies. They included teachers, policemen, clerks – persons of many backgrounds took passage on the 'coolie ships' for various reasons. Furthermore, for those who set out on the journey as 'coolies', it is important to recognize that indenture was not a permanent status. A significant number of those who migrated under this system were able to carve out new careers as carriage drivers, market gardeners, charcoal-burners, and even, in some cases, to acquire land and become sugar planters themselves.³⁵ By signing a contract of indenture, labour migrants may have become 'coolies' in the eyes of the colonial state, but they were rarely contained or defined solely by this externally imposed label. The history of the indentured labour diaspora is one of individuals engaging with, renegotiating, and transcending the limitations suggested by their ascribed status and imagined identity. It is this complexity, this multiplicity of identity, that the artworks in the 'Coolitude' series seek to capture, reimagining the images in the Mauritian photographic archive as conduits to individual identities and personal experiences that challenge the homogenizing victim narrative of indenture. In doing so, the artworks reflect on the theoretical and conceptual constructs articulated through the Coolitude movement (from which the series draws its name).

The word 'coolie' has negative connotations, and there is disagreement as to whether the term should be abandoned, or can be reclaimed. An early advocate for the preservation of the term wrote: "'Coolie' is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements. The word must not be left to die out, buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new lease of life.' This was the plea of Rajkumari Singh (1923–79), writer, political activist, poet, and author of a celebrated essay entitled 'I am a Coolie'.

Her great-grandmother had emigrated to Guyana from India as an indentured labourer. In her recent book, *Colonial Visions, Postcolonial Revisions: Images of the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia*, Shantini Pillai endorses this important plea. While admitting that the history of 'coolie' is 'tied to the sign systems of the colonial past' and that these were more often than not derogatory in nature, she urges scholars to give 'a new lease of life' to the word by focussing on 'the ways in which one can dismantle its foundation through a resistant mode of reading as well as writing, of colonial visions and post-colonial revisions'.³⁶ Another woman descended from Indian indentured migrants, Gaiutra Bahadur, chose to call her recent book in quest of her roots, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. The book opens with a three-page Preface entitled 'The C-Word', which offers a very useful summary of the history of the use and abuse of the term, 'coolie', through its etymology, to its application to a broad swathe of menial labourers in the colonial period, and, more recently, its reclamation across the francophone and anglophone worlds. This self-aware deployment of the word 'coolie' to frame and interrogate the histories of indenture by academic writers from and of the colonial Indian labour diaspora was inspired by poets such as Khal Torabully, and has found an echo in music and art, thereby extending and transforming the reach of the term 'coolie'.³⁷

In 1992, the volume of francophone poetry, *Cale d'étoiles-Coolitude*, published by Khal Torabully, explored a 'humanism of diversity' inspired by the history of indentured migrants. The book sang the song of the coolie voyage, whilst bringing forward the centrality of the ocean as a space across which identities were constructed and deconstructed. The poetics of coolitude elaborated further in *Chair Corail Fragments Coolies* (1999), and introduced to an anglophone audience in the co-authored *Coolitude* (2003), explores transcultural entities through the metaphor of the *kala pani* voyage.³⁸ Torabully's poetry universalizes the migration phenomenon and the phases through which the migrant transitions. Life is but a journey, and as we move from one phase to another – as we move to a new school, or start a new job, or arrive at a new destination – we all experience what it is to be a 'coolie'. We begin each phase as the 'other', the unknown new arrival, someone to be wary of, to be feared, not yet trusted, not yet a familiar. Migration, whether as a result of economic necessity, or political conflict, or social deprivation, or a myriad other causes, is key to the human condition. New arrivals are commonly subjected to discrimination and attempts to dehumanize and categorize them. One of the most powerful ways of interrogating these labels and unravelling them

is to demonstrate that there is no 'them' and 'us', there is only 'we'. Coolitude is thus about explaining, poetically and historically, how and why we are all, more or less, at one time, or all the time, 'coolies'.

Coolitude:

I will always be elsewhere than in my own self.
 I can but imagine my native land. My native lands?
 In our tongues, we are at the fertile frontiers of codes,
 to hear speeches between our vocabularies of masters and slaves.
 Is this why my real mother tongue is poetry?
 That my only native country is the Earth?
 For all this, I am ready to silence all border quarrels, to show our star
 and share our common heritage: flesh and blood.
Coolie because my lost memory chooses its roots in my veracity.
 But if I seize this tongue, it is because it has adopted me,
 and no longer cuts me from my word.
 At the threshold of vowels and consonants I knock at meanings
 differently. For I love words before all, even before my wounds.
 For all time.

At a time when thousands of new migrants are knocking on our doors, and when words like 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' are readily hijacked to represent something fearful and shameful, this non-essentialist, inclusive philosophy is peculiarly significant, reminding us that we have all been 'migrants', we have all been in the position of the 'coolie'. In this context, we should not be asking 'is it appropriate' to engage with such words, we should be seeking to understand the complexities of those who 'became coolies', to empathize with their life stories, to recognize that it need never be a dualistic story of 'us and them', but simply one of 'us', with a shared future. Academics, poets, writers, and intellectual citizens have to engage with the uncomfortable, and change perceptions. It is our role not to censor or to judge, but to reinterpret, reimagine, and reclaim. The re-envisioning of 'convict' heritage in Australia is instructive in this regard.³⁹ As other papers in this collection demonstrate, the exploration of 'coolie' identities through the creative processes is an important element of this reclamation. The Coolitude series of screen prints brings together evocative photographic images with archival text and Torabully's poetry to provide an artistic reinterpretation of the visual archive of indenture. The following section presents the images themselves and provides a narrative of the artist's personal and professional engagement with them. It explores both the techniques employed and the meanings invoked in creating the artworks – the interaction between process and interpretation, the historical source, and the creative vision – from the point of view of the artist.

The artist's view

On first looking at the photographs from the Mauritius Photographic Archive, they appear achingly beautiful and profound. The subjects of the photographs had endured being crowded together on ships and transported over the great expanse of the Indian Ocean from the various regions of India that they left behind. Sometimes immediately upon arrival, but more commonly after years of labour in their new home, they had to sit alone in an inert stillness to have their likeness captured. Any movement would cause their features to blur, as the cover on the ferrotype, or tintype camera lens, would have been removed for a long time in order for the aperture to take in the correct amount of light. There is no ownership of the process on behalf of the migrants captured within the photographs; they are the item, they are the subject, they are giving themselves over to scrutiny. They are on pause, waiting for their so-called identities to be captured and numbered. The requirement of remaining expressionless is an attempt to neutralize any emotions from being conveyed, as the skin and fascia are relaxed and uninterrupted by any voluntary muscle control. It is the most unsocial state for a person to be in. The minuscule amount of movement sent involuntarily through the extrapyramidal neural network would go undetected at a quick glance, but it is there – you just have to look. Careful observation allows you to see beyond the static image and detect the expressions that have been recurring in a person's face even when they are no longer expressing them. You can detect, for example, that the stranger in the image has just had their long hair cut short, even though the hair is no longer there and you have no prior knowledge of it. You know it because the short bob hangs loosely and slightly curls up in a fashion that betrays the fact that it has been cut instead of styled, because the elasticity has just been relaxed.

Those with their faces fixed towards the camera seem to be confronting the viewer in a head-on challenge, with a look that could even be viewed as accusatory. On the subject of the gaze, Reza Tavakol writes:

And if not at the photographer, who were these gazes aimed at? Were they coded signals to some future empathetic human beings that could some day capture these long travelling gazes, decipher their messages and at long last hear their painful tales of by-gones? What does it take, what depth of solidarity, to truly capture the messages in these gazes?⁴⁰

In contrast, those portraits faced off to one side enforce a more voyeuristic engagement. All are unblinking as they concentrate, some are watery as if they have the ocean in their eyes, all partaking in the same process, but each in varying states of being – abandonment can be seen, and uncertainty in some of the young. There are visibly sad and broken men. There is weariness and even

madness in some, yet also the dignified defiance of the women, along with the more grandiose adorned with beads and jewellery. All are looking off into the distance, from a distance.

The people in the migrant archive looked extraordinary, and the photographs were technically remarkable, impeccable even, and because of this, there is something eerily anachronistic about them. Like an object being resourcefully used for a purpose other than that for which it had been designed, the transition from the functional identity photo documentation into the arena of fine art and graphic design transforms the individuals photographed. The mechanism in place in the original portrait acts to objectify and commodify them. Yet, through the transformation of this antique, archival material into a contemporary artwork, and more specifically artistic portraiture, they regain their humanness. In this way, the reclamation of the visual archive allows this vast group of remarkable people to bear witness themselves to their own endeavour, and to speak of who they were, what they went through, and what they achieved. Their faces tell stories. Referencing Emmanuel Levinas' notion of the face, Judith Butler writes:

[...] the 'face' of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning, and the imperative it delivers is not immediately translatable into a prescription that might be linguistically formulated and followed [...] Observing a person from behind, or looking at the back of a person's neck for instance becomes the 'face'. [...] it is precisely the wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation here. The face, if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense [...] And the fact that in mainstream media we are denied access to the 'other's' face. We are prevented from seeing the face of the enemy that we are causing damage to.⁴¹

Screen-printing is often associated with the works of the Western pop artists of the 1960s. The method had been used in the commercial trade for putting down perfectly flat colours since the 1920s, continuing until the computer printing of the 1980s began. When this new technology took over in the 1990s, it made screen-printing commercially obsolete. More recently, vinyl cutting has offered another alternative method, which is even more conducive to modern signage and display requirements. Screen-printing within the fine arts continues, however, and is attractive precisely because it offers a fallible human element. The ink lays thick on the surface of the paper, noticeable to the touch. The possibilities of imperfect ink coverage and ink squash along with miss-registration are some of the valued qualities that are synonymous with hands-on printing

methods. These visual aesthetics remain a primary function and the reason for choosing to use the method today; indeed, they are used in the advertising industry in an attempt to humanize the corporate product in order to better connect with the consumer.

Photography development is the only printing method able to deal with tone (shades of light and dark). The process uses light-sensitive chemicals coated on the surface of the photographic paper and further paper immersion in activating chemicals. As all other forms of printing onto regular paper have to apply one colour (shade) of ink at a time, the tonal quality of the image has to be determined by using a screen of a solid pattern (small black dots will show a lighter shade and larger dots will show a darker shade).⁴² The time-consuming method of screen-printing requires a frame of tightly stretched nylon fibre mesh to be thinly coated in a light sensitive chemical emulsion that is exposed to an intense UV light through a transparent acetate or paper photocopy that holds the black-and-white image. The black of the image blocks out the UV light, preventing it from reaching the light sensitive emulsion coat on the screen, and wherever the UV light is allowed to reach the image, it hardens it so that when the screen is washed in water, the printable areas fall away. This enables ink to be pushed through onto the paper with a squeegee (rubber blade) in a flatly pulled motion when printing the image. The technical term for the clear area that accepts the ink is known as an island.

Building upon a body of work already completed, including large screen-prints of well-known rock stars and filmmakers taken from the archives of the English photographer, Derek Ridgers, I experimented with two-colour prints and overprinted typography. Some were subtly blended in as typographic aesthetics that were not intended to be read, while others employed a bolder typographic approach in which the text was starkly competing with the image. A few had the typography sacrilegiously laid right over the famous faces like the branding on the backside of cattle. These subjects were boastful and brilliant, very different from the moving sombre depictions of a monitored workforce, which required a more subdued yet dignified presentation. One print approach in particular seemed appropriate, however. It used a rather moody portrait of Nick Cave, the Australian singer, novelist, and screenwriter, which was reversed (or inverted) and printed onto a black card stock and brushed with a light gold powder that was applied over the wet ink, forcing it to float to both the image and an overlay of manual typewritten words. It had a certain gravitas to it that seemed appropriate for the 'Coolitude' images.

The 'Coolitude' concept, coined by the poet Khal Torabully, builds on Aime Cesaire's concept of 'negritude'. It can also be viewed as a linguistic compound of the words 'coolie' and 'attitude', equally appropriate for

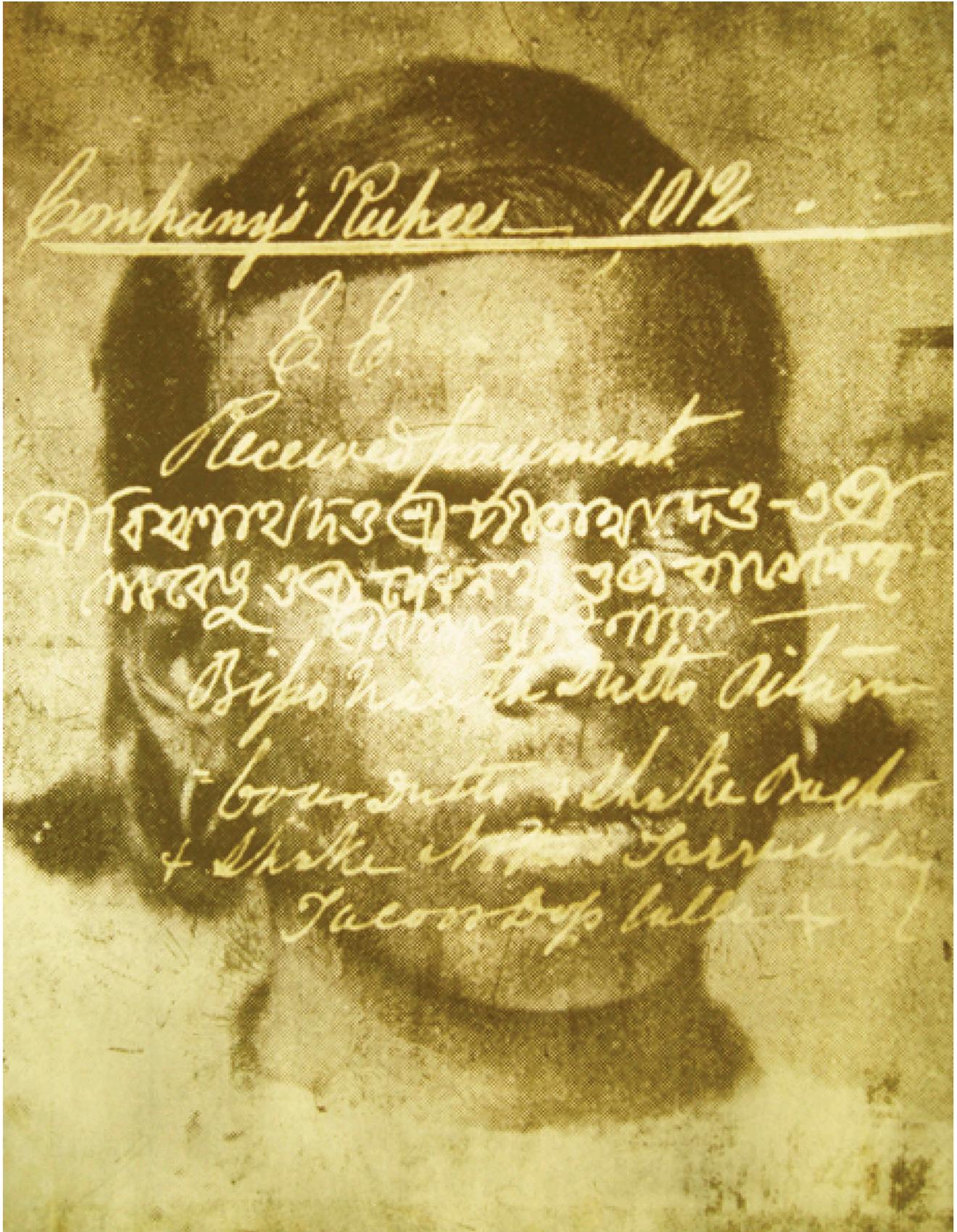
a movement that embraces modern day 'cultural migrants'. This empathetic approach echoes the way 'beatitude' was attributed (in a linguistic pun) to the 'Beatniks' and the 'Beat Generation', coined by the American poet and writer, Jack Kerouac, in the 1960s, and is therefore an apt term for the artwork. For this screen-print, the lettering has been turned into a logotype and initially printed using individual letterpress wood type, which would have been physically hand-cut in the 1800s. All the Coolitude prints were produced in a crude 20dpi or 30dpi (dots per inch). The subject matter itself came to the forefront rather than the medium used to express the work. The collection already provided a strong congruence through the subject matter and the standardized approach taken as a result of the circumstances of the images' original production. Fractured elements of official documents were overprinted because these bore words that would have been so important in the decisions being made on these people's lives. Some were printed with extracts from the poetry of Khal Torabully. Abstracted from the 'Old Immigrant's Ticket', the word 'DUPLICATE' features on several screen-prints of individuals within the series, and is intended to signify the printing method of reproduction as well as to point to the dehumanizing aspect of duplication and policing of the migrants. Gold powder was used on many of the portraits to underscore the notion that the prospect of finding financial security – 'gold' – served as a lure to indenture. For this depiction, three very strong distinctive people looking straight into the camera were selected.

In [Figure 4](#), depicting Naroor (no. 330,818), there is a tightening above the eyes that forces the skin together between them and raises a crease, presenting an attitude in the same way a celebrity would pose for their portrait today. The harsh and revealing centralized lighting caused the sides of the face to darken in the same way in which lighting would be applied in contemporary portraiture by the likes of David Bailey. Naroor's haircut, lifting above his neckline and sticking together possibly with the use of hair oil, is like the feathers of a bird that lift upwards towards his traditional conical shaped hat. It is hard not to think of a rocket. He has been printed using gold powder. There is something hip, intelligent, and magnificent about him. His portrait has been overprinted in white employing a double overlay of handwritten documents set at perpendicular angles to form a cross-hatched aesthetic, and therefore rendering the words unreadable and insignificant as though whatever they once attributed no longer has a relation to him.

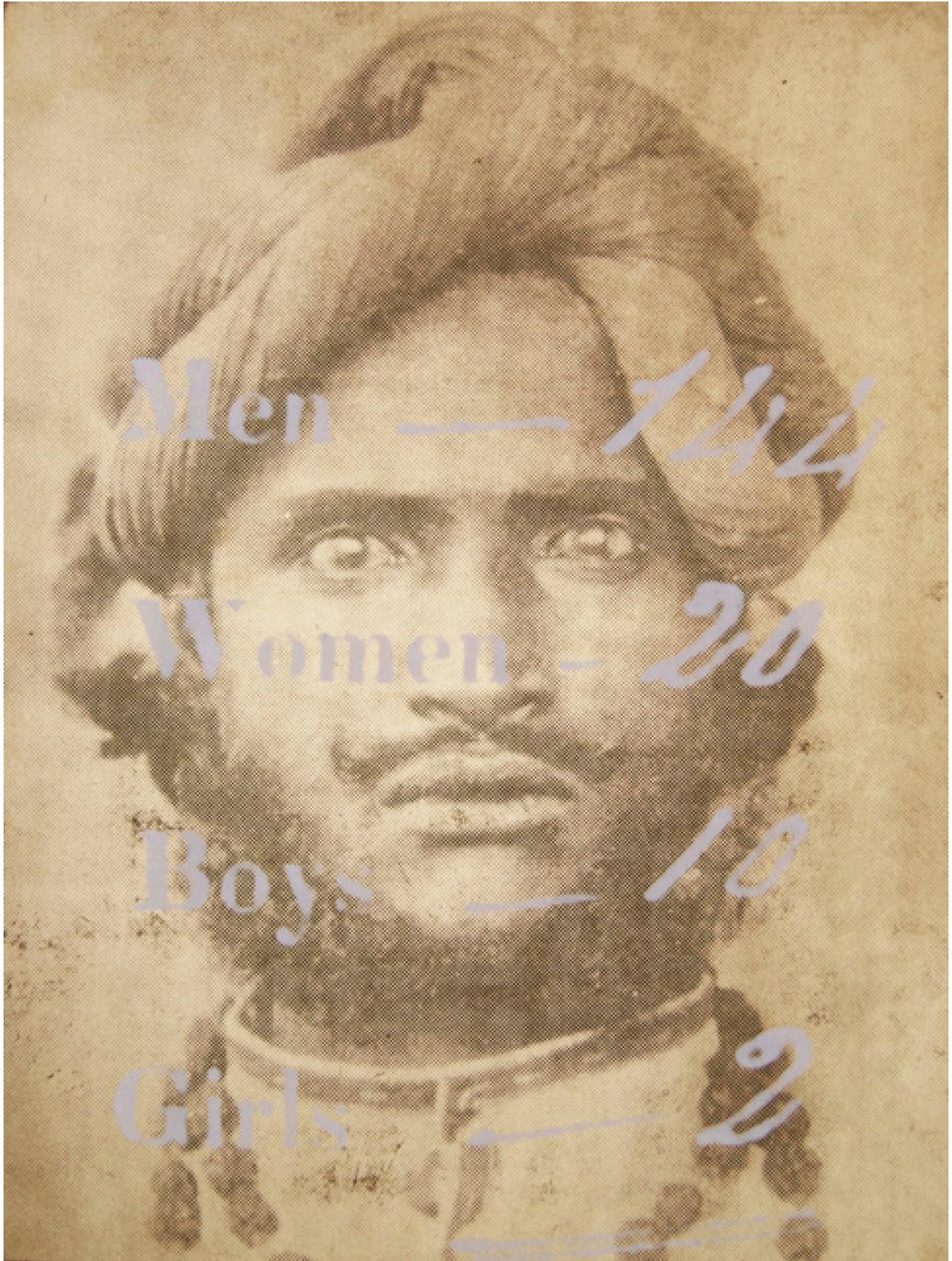
In 1872, Beekano ([Figure 5](#)) was condemned to spend two years in a juvenile reformatory for the 'crime' of absenteeism from work. His mother successfully petitioned to secure his release on the ground that



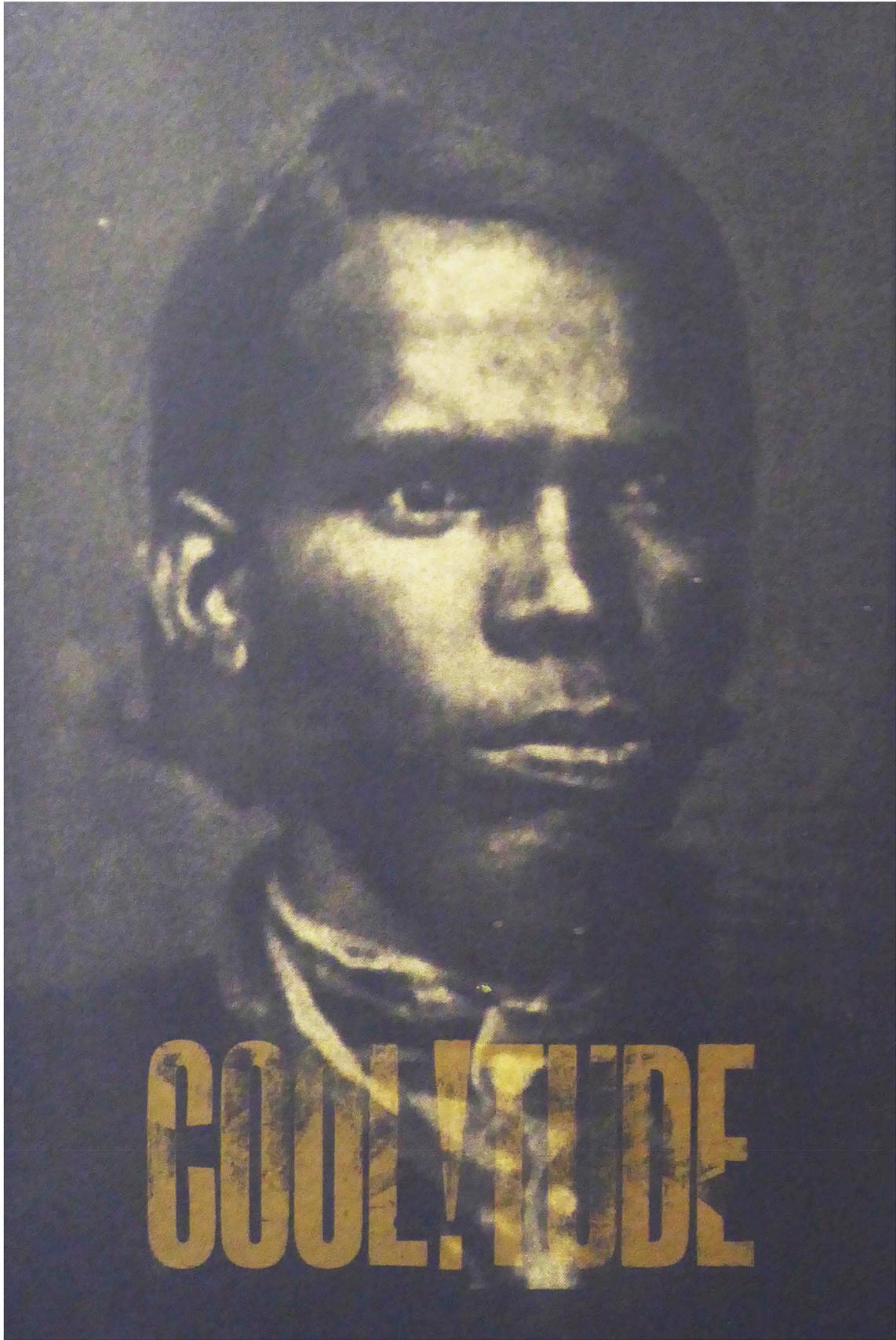
4. *Naroor* (no. 330,818). Copyright: Danny Flynn.



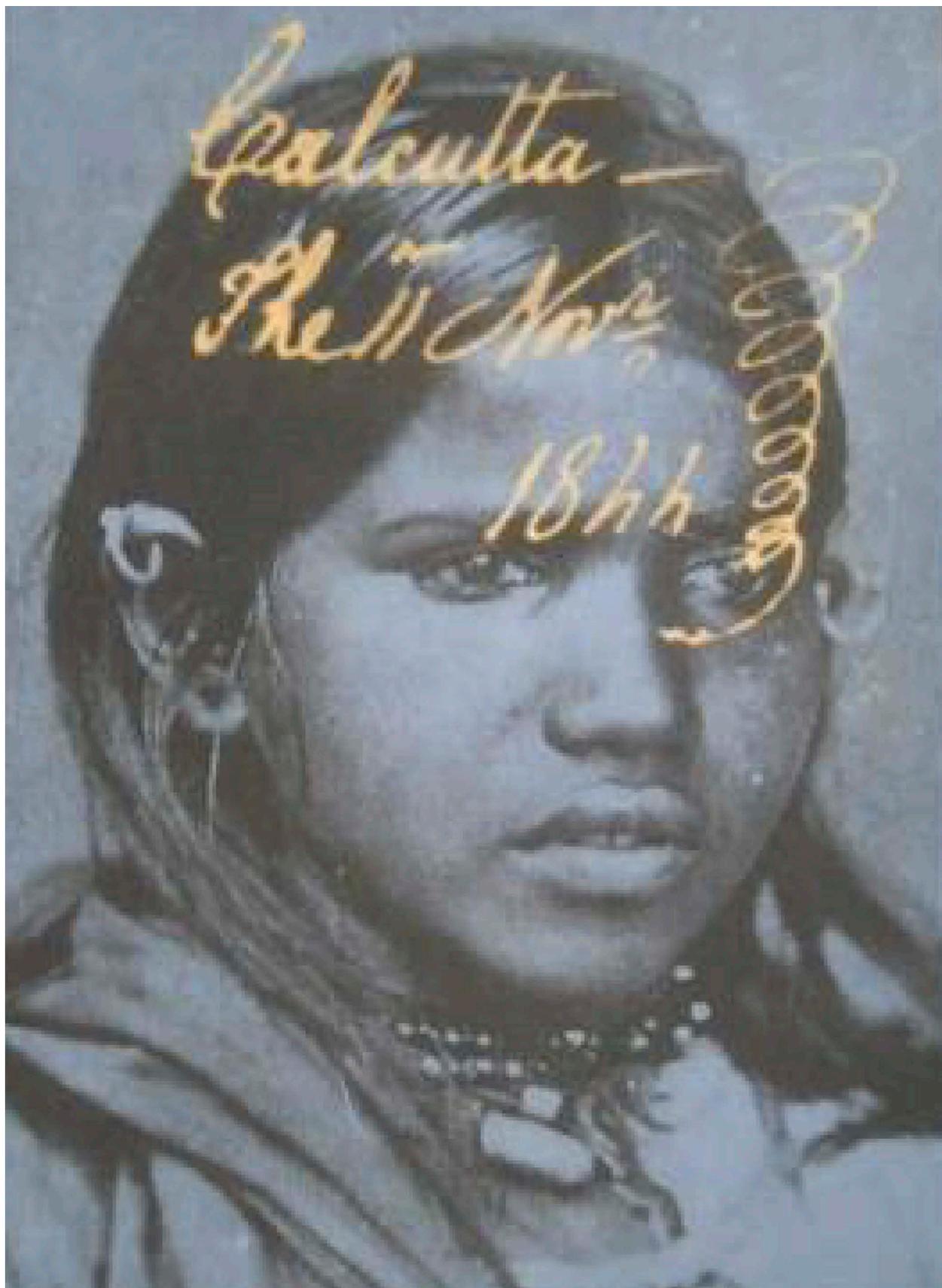
5. Beekano (no. 326,164). Copyright: Danny Flynn.



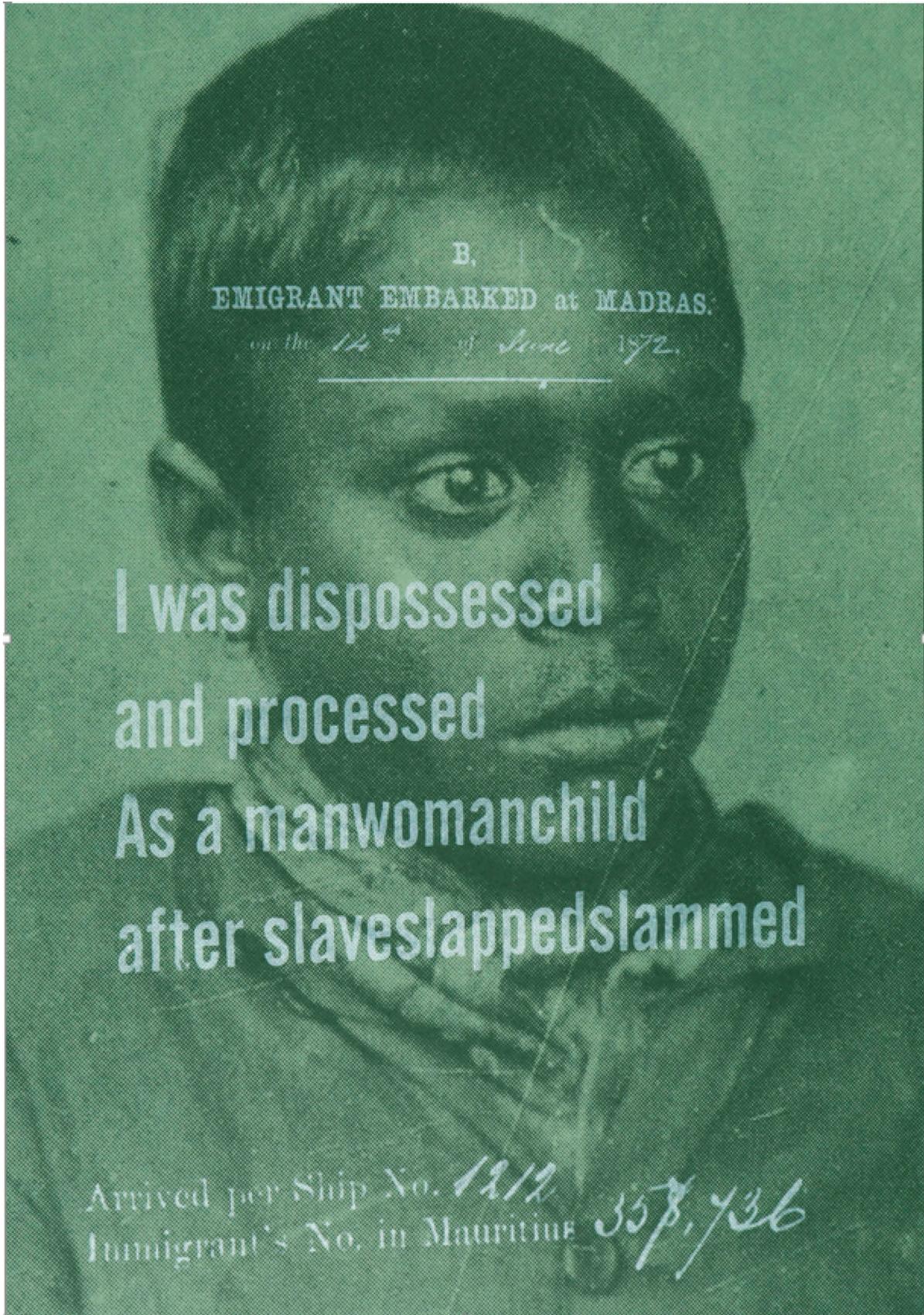
6. This immigrant's regal appearance provokes many questions about his status and story. Copyright: Danny Flynn.



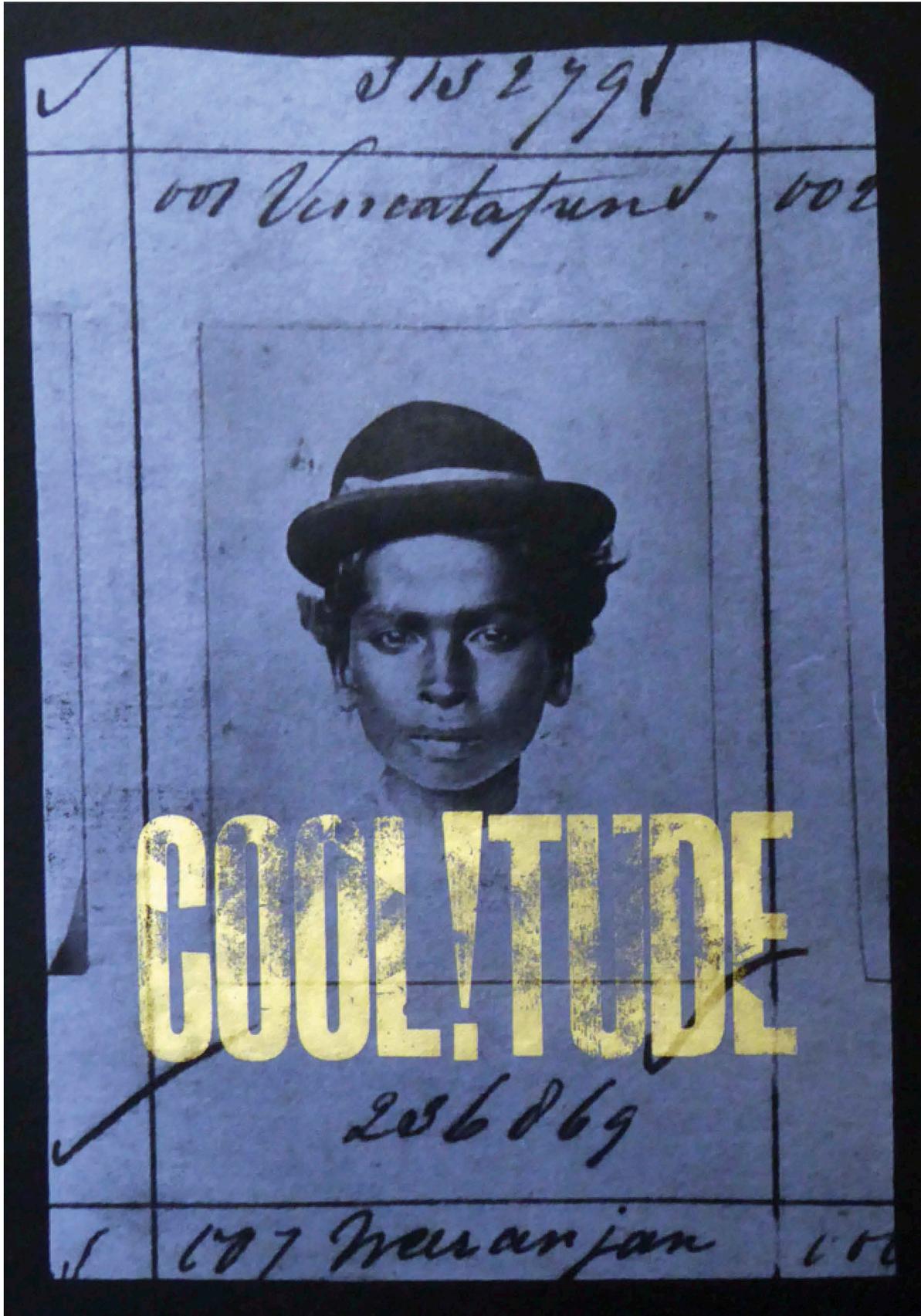
7. *Sohodew* (no. 384,891). Copyright: Danny Flynn.



8. *Boodheea* (no. 367358). Copyright: Danny Flynn.



9. U. Dorgana (no. 375,074). Copyright: Danny Flynn.



10. Vencatapuram (no. 236,869). Copyright: Danny Flynn.

he was the sole breadwinner of the family. It could be imagined that it was his mother who combed his hair in an attempt to make him appear more presentable at the sitting. One can try to undo all the combing to see what he would have looked like before. His fringe is cropped very short, high above his forehead, yet there is a length of hair that is combed over this. There is also a shoulder length of hair that the oil fails to flatten down, it tufts up at each side of his ears like bunches. What makes him stand out is the fact that he is positioned to face towards the side, instead of directly at the camera, yet unlike the other subjects, he is looking towards the camera as if he is facing it directly, and if you look closely, you will notice that he appears wall-eyed.

The individual in [Figure 6](#) was chosen for his perfect Hollywood film look. Rudolph Valentino's stylists in the 1940s would have been looking at similarly 'exotic' people when fashioning that star's iconic look. His eyes are staring into the light, which is directly illuminating his face, causing his pupils to disappear in reflection like glass beads. His hair is wrapped up in a turban like a pile of ship's rope and appears as heavy as rolled and pleated dough atop his head. The beads around his neck hang like the chartered courses of planets. The overprinted list in white was taken from a document that totalled the number of migrants on board one of the ships, more men than women, more boys than girls.

Sohodew ([Figure 7](#)), a Kurmi by caste, from the village of Domroa in Bhojpur, Arrah, in the present-day state of Bihar, arrived in Mauritius as a twenty-year-old, and was registered as an 'old immigrant' (time expired) in 1883. Sohodew recalls photographs of the Belgian singer, Jacques Brel. He has a similarly self-assured presence. Boodheea ([Figure 8](#)) was an infant when her mother migrated to Mauritius. After her parent's death, she was the victim of trafficking by her female 'guardian', who attempted to sell her into marriage with successive male partners. Her case was eventually brought before the Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius. Boodheea looks very young in the photograph; her beauty but also her vulnerability are striking. The overlaid gold text emphasizes the value of the jewellery she wears, as well as the double-edged 'value' ascribed to an attractive young woman in a migrant society where men still predominated.

U. Dorgana (no. 375,074) ([Figure 9](#)) has a look of uncertainty and abandonment about him. It is hard not to feel pity for him. His hair has been harshly cropped. His dress is plain and appears coarse, impoverished even, and there is a casual, ruffled scarf around his neck. An abstracted title from a document has been printed as if it has been stamped across his forehead. Below this are printed words, which were written in the first person and come from a brutally honest poem by

Khal Torabully. Vencatpin (no. 236,869) ([Figure 10](#)) could not be more different, with a serene look that somehow manages to appear timeless. It is as if the straight-on directional gaze toward the camera has been conferred by status, and the fact that he wears a jaunty hat appropriated from Western culture suggests he is comfortable in Mauritius, having left India as a young child and accommodated himself to the new island setting.

Conclusion

Despite its inception as an arm of the repressive state to police the immigrant workforce, the photographic archive of indentured and ex-indentured labourers created in Mauritius is today recognized as a unique collection of exceptional value. The concern for accuracy in representation, the care taken to position those photographed, and the photographer's love for his art combine to produce a technically admirable corpus of work. Most importantly, the diversity of origins of the archive's subjects and the communications of their physical selves (dress, medical conditions, ornamentation, etc.) reach out and inform us about who they were, enabling us to imagine their sufferings, their sense of self-worth, their ambitions, and expectations. These historical photographs are an ideal subject for the artist to embellish, accentuate, and even puncture the work of the photographer. Reactions to the exhibitions of the 'Coolitude' prints have underscored how everyone can relate to the migrant theme, including many people who have relatives who have migrated for work or who are immigrants themselves. This focus has prompted further reflection on identities and cultures, and the continued exploration of how portraits presented with words and the injection of aesthetic paraphernalia offer additional narratives to describe and display subjects' lives.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

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3. M. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
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5. Report of the Royal Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in Mauritius *Parliamentary Papers*, (C.1115), 1875 (hereafter, RC Report).
6. NA CO 167/487 Beyts to Colonial Secretary, 20 March 1866.
7. NA CO 167/487 Barkly to Cardwell, 3 April 1866, and enclosures.
8. RC Report, p. 211.
9. RC Report, pp. 215–16.
10. Petition of Old Immigrants, RC Report, pp. 2–7.
11. Petition of Old Immigrants, RC Report, pp. 2–7.
12. Evidence presented before the Royal Commission to inquire into Treatment of Immigrants in Mauritius, printed and bound as *Mauritius Papers*, Royal Commonwealth Society Library.
13. *Mauritius Papers*.
14. MA PL 34 J. Joly to Protector of Immigrants, 28 July 1868.
15. C. Le Comte, *Portraits from the Immigration Archives in Mauritius* (Singapore: author, 2015), introductory notes.
16. The appointment of Mr Carbonel was notified on 10 November 1869, according to a letter written by the Protector to the Colonial Secretary on that date. See MA PB 13.
17. Deerpalsingh, 'The Photography and Ticket Branch'.
18. This report was published in 1872 and reprinted as Appendix H of the RC Report, 1875.
19. RC Report, p. 219.
20. Petition of Old Immigrants, RC Report, pp. 2–7.
21. RC Report, para. 1125, p. 221.
22. RC Report, para. 1127, p. 220.
23. RC Report, pp. 221–22.
24. RC Report, pp. 221–22.
25. RC Report, para. 1101, p. 218.
26. RC Report, para. 1102, p. 218.
27. RC Report.
28. RC Report, para. 1111, p. 219.
29. RC Report, para. 1115, p. 220.
30. RC Report, Chapter XXIV, Summary of Conclusions, pp. 577–85.
31. NA CO 167/566 Mr Williamson, 16 April 1875, 'Observations on Lord Carnarvon's remarks on the Royal Commissioners' Report'.
32. Le Comte, *Portraits from the Immigration Archives in Mauritius*.
33. This measure was passed as Ordinance 45 of 1915.
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35. R. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); D. Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
36. S. Pillai, *Colonial Visions, Postcolonial Revisions: Images of the Indian Diaspora in Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).
37. G. Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013).
38. The Coolitude poetry of Khal Torabully was first published in French: see *Cale d'Etoiles Coolitude* (Basse-Terre: Azalee Editions, 1992); *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies* (Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge, 1999); and 'Coolitude', *Notre Librairie*, CLEF Paris, October 1996. An English translation and interpretation of Coolitude was first articulated in *Coolitude*, ed. by M. Carter and K. Torabully (London: Anthem Press, 2003). *Kala Pani* translates as 'black water' and refers to a cultural ambivalence within Hinduism towards crossing the sea.
39. Convict sites are commemorated as UNESCO world heritage sites and convict trails have been set up as a collaboration between historians and tour guides. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306> and, for example, <http://greatnorthroad.com.au/> (last accessed 5 January 2017).
40. Reza Tavakol, 'Distant Gazes', in *Coolitude 2*, ed. by M. Carter and K. Torabully, forthcoming.
41. J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 206.
42. Technically, for a single colour treatment, Danny Flynn used Photoshop to crop and resize the original photographic images. Even though they are originally all mono coloured, they were snapped in the archives using a colour camera. They therefore had to be transferred over to a greyscale, in order to discard all of the colour information before creating a bitmap and choosing a halftone screen of round dots.