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ARTICLE

Transformative Mobilities and the *Non-dit*: Constructing Whiteness Across Two French Colonial Spaces

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Between 1860 and 1890, several thousand migrants from Reunion Island settled in New Caledonia. Most were fleeing poverty after the collapse of the sugar industry. While local legend has it that these settlers comprised a handful of rich, white planters and a contingent of Indian coolies, recent research into this group has demonstrated that the migration was on a far greater scale and was racially and socially diverse. Indeed, most Reunionese migrants, both indentured and free, were of African, Malagasy or Creole ancestry. They had either been slaves themselves or were the descendants of slaves in Reunion. Welcomed by a new colony that was desperate for settlers and workers, the racial and social characteristics of these new French citizens were erased as was their presence in the New Caledonian historical narrative. The tradition of the *non-dit* (the unsaid or unspoken) teamed with French social structures and the needs of a settler colonial society facilitated this disappearing act as descendants melded into the local white settler population. Yet, there were cracks in this colonial white-wash (photographs, recipes, language, songs), traces of a hidden black migration to the Pacific. With reference to these traces and artefacts, and drawing on oral histories of descendants, I highlight in this article some of the voices, faces and stories of these settlers, while reflecting on their social transformation and the extent of their agency in constructing their whiteness in New Caledonia.

Article

Influenced by postcolonial scholarship, the transnational turn in imperial history has seen a shift in focus from a traditional core-periphery or wheel-spoke model of empire to a reimagining of imperial spatialities as a web of connections not only between centre and colony but between colonies themselves (Lester, 2006). This model highlights the importance of 'horizontal mobilities' (from colony to colony) for cultural transfers and extends our understanding of how people from colonies interacted and influenced each other (Ballantyne, 2002). While histories of colonial migration to New Caledonia have traditionally focused on arrivals from the Metropole (missionaries, free settlers, convicts) (Saussoil, 1969; Merle, 1995; Baronnet & Chalou, 1987; Barbançon, 2003; Terrier, 2000) or on the recruitment of indentured labourers, primarily from the New Hebrides, Java, Indochina¹ and Japan (Shineberg, 1999; Devambeze-Armand, 1994; Maurer, 2006; Bencivengo, 2012), the transnational turn in the New Caledonian context has seen growing interest in movements between French colonies.

Lallaoui (1994) and Ouennoughi (2006) have, for instance, drawn attention to the significant number of Algerian prisoners in the New Caledonian convict population and described how they preserved and modified their culture (and made an impact on both the physical and cultural Pacific landscape) despite draconian measures taken by the colonial administration to erase it (and them). Recent research into the 19th-century movement of people from Reunion Island to New Caledonia, also reconceptualises it as an important horizontal migration, a transnational or, more precisely, transcolonial movement of a racially and socially diverse group of people from an established French colony to a new one.

Rather than the small-scale concern involving a few rich, 'white' sugar planters and their Indian 'coolies', as it has been depicted in New Caledonian histories (Savoie, 1922; Brou, 1973; Brou, 1980; Roux, 1984; Merle, 1995; Chevalier, 1997; Delathière, 2004), my 'against the grain' (Stoler, 2009) reading of the colonial archive has revealed the establishment of a large number of Reunionese individuals and

¹ These were the colonial names for today's Vanuatu, Indonesia and Vietnam.

families and provided information on their arrivals, places of settlement, patterns of marriage, births, deaths, movements within and out of the colony, involvement in local government, community groups and crime (Speedy, 2007a; Speedy, 2007b ; Speedy, 2008; Speedy, 2009; Speedy, 2012; Speedy, 2014).² However, the archives are relatively silent on the lives and experiences of the vast majority of the settlers, the 'ordinary people', and they and their contributions to New Caledonian society have, effectively, been buried.³

Escaping poverty in the wake of the 1860 sugar industry collapse in Reunion, the Reunionese were welcomed into what was the newest French colony in the Pacific, a colony that was desperate for settlers and workers. How did such a numerically important (and visibly different) population almost disappear from the historical record? And how did black, marginal migrants (for many of them were former slaves or descendants of slaves) from one colonial space transition into settler whiteness in another? Did nationalist imperatives of settler whiteness deliberately exclude their voices (and faces) from the New Caledonian historical narrative? Were their stories hidden by an official whitewashing of colonial history? Or, did the Reunionese intentionally hide their backgrounds, actively constructing their whiteness in New Caledonian settler society? How did factors of time and space affect the degree of silence around these stories? This article draws on oral histories of descendants of the Aymard-Elphège families and refers to both archival documents and colonial artefacts to highlight some of their experiences in New Caledonia. This enables us to draw a more nuanced picture of the settler group and reflect on their agency in negotiating their place in a new colonial context.

² Jerry Delathière has also written about the Reunionese in New Caledonia in his quite detailed book on the sugar industry. His focus, however, is mainly on the rich planters and their 'coolies' (Delathière, 2009).

³ In Speedy (2012), I reproduced some family photos of the Montrose family, Creoles from Reunion. I also published excerpts from letters written by Ernest Montrose to the Governor of Fiji. In the letters, we do hear his voice and understand his mounting desperation in his attempt to extricate himself from debt owed on rental arrears. He also clearly expressed the pride he felt in having introduced vanilla cultivation to Fiji.

Breaking with the *Non-dit* and Archival Silence

In late 2014, I received an email from Brisbane woman, Chris Vidal. She had come across my research into the 19th-century migration from Reunion Island to New Caledonia and wondered if I would be interested in talking to her. Chris, a TESOL teacher at the University of Queensland, is a descendant of Reunionese migrants who settled in New Caledonia. Her mother, Simone (1925–2010) (**Figs. 1 and 2**), whose grandparents were *Bourbonnais* (as Reunionese migrants were often called in New Caledonia), had gone to Australia in 1948 as a war bride, marrying Australian Navy man Frank Nicholson.⁴ Chris' childhood 'had been filled with colourful stories' of her 'family's Reunionese heritage and their arrival and life in New Caledonia'. She was particularly thrilled to discover my 'research on the former slave connection' (CV, Email, 10 October 2014).

The opportunity to speak to a descendant of Reunionese settlers, a group who I had come to know through traces, clues left in the archive (family names, occupations and off-the-cuff or 'humorous' remarks made by officials or journalists), was an exciting prospect. Oral history is accepted as an effective means for gathering information about marginalised groups in society and the data gathered can fill in some of the gaps in histories that have been erased from national or regional narratives.

According to Michael Frisch, oral history is:

a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them. (qtd in Perks & Thomson, 2004: 2)

While oral history has been critiqued in the past for its reliance on memory as unstable and subjective, its very subjectivity forms part of its strength as 'the

⁴ Reunion Island was originally named *Bourbon* but the name was changed to *La Réunion* post-Revolution in 1792. The British takeover in 1810 saw the name change back to *Bourbon* and it remained so after it was returned to the French in 1815 and until the Revolution of 1848 saw the Bourbon Restoration fall. The name *La Réunion* was then re-adopted.

subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity' (Thomson, 2007: 54). Family stories that had been passed down orally through the generations, memories of memories, narratives that had shaped the lives of Chris and her siblings, would help address the gaps and silences in the archive and complement, through details of lives in the private sphere, the picture of life in the public sphere that I had extracted from archival records.

When I first spoke to Chris Vidal in 2015, she said to me:

Yours was the very first published work I had ever read that mentioned the Reunionese migrants to New Caledonia as being former slaves. And before I read this, my story seemed to me a history that was going to be impossible to trace in any great detail. I was so delighted when I saw you mentioned the *non-dit* the "it was not said" as I thought that was unique to my family! And when that theme emerged in your research, I thought, oh, this is a social construct, ok. (CV, Interview, 11 Feb, 2015)

Indeed, the transcolonial migration from the 1860s of several thousand Reunionese, many of whom were *affranchis* (freed slaves) or descendants of slaves, was a hidden history. Although seen as representative of the Reunionese settler group, the 'white' planters who made the newspapers (de Greslan, Nas de Tourris, Duboisé, Lalande-Desjardins etc.), were in the minority. Reunionese settlers, irrespective of social group, were generally referred to as 'Créoles de la Réunion', which, in the Reunionese context, simply meant that they were born in Reunion (Chaudenson, 1992: 9).⁵ What this appellation, along with *Réunionnais* or *Bourbonnais*, did not signpost, however,

⁵ Governor Guillaïn, for example, made an appeal to the 'Créoles de la Réunion' to settle in New Caledonia (see *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 6 November 1864, no. 267). See Nicole (1996: 32–5) for a discussion on the use of the term 'Creole' to designate the Reunionese population. Slavery was abolished in Reunion in 1848 and New Caledonia was annexed by the French in 1853. 'Settlement' was initially slow as few French people were keen to move to such a distant colony. In the early 1860s, Governor Guillaïn called for the Reunionese, who he knew to be suffering economic hardship, to settle in New Caledonia (Speedy, 2012).

was that many of the Reunionese had origins in East or West Africa, Madagascar or India.⁶ As was common among (former) slave populations, they often had European ancestry too.

If, as I have argued elsewhere (Speedy, 2007a; Speedy 2012), it was such an important migration numerically, socially, technologically and linguistically, why and how could it have remained hidden for so long? It would seem as if both the colonial social and administrative structures and the tradition of the *non-dit* (the unspoken or unsaid) (cf. Barbançon, 1992), which became more or less restrictive in different times and spaces, enabled this disappearing act as social-climbing descendants merged into the *Caldoche* (or New Caledonian 'white' settler) population.

First, any sort of 'racial' differences of the migrants in the colonial archives were obscured by official record-keeping, guided by French Republican 'values' that eschewed any mention of the 'caste' of French citizens in official documentation. Second, most Reunionese arrived as free settlers and, as French citizens, they were simply counted as French in such documents as shipping records and censuses. It was in birth, death or marriage certificates, where the place of birth of the person concerned (or his or her parents) was mentioned, that Reunionese origins could be discerned. This was in contrast to records kept on the servile (*engagé* or 'coolie') population where racialised 'caste' (*Cafre*, *Malabar*, Creole) or place of origin (Malagasy, Mozambican, Indian, Bourbon) were always mentioned (Speedy, 2007a: 135–40).

The Construction of Blackness and Whiteness in Reunion

In Reunion, pre-abolition society was divided into two main groups: the free and the enslaved. Within the free group, there was a distinction made between whites on the one hand and freed slaves (*affranchis*) and free people of colour (*gens de couleur libres*) on the other. However, Reunion has a long history of *métissage* and racial fluidity (Nicole, 1996; Fuma, 1998; Fuma, 2000) so this was less about ethnic

⁶ While the Indian or 'Malabar' indentured workers who replaced the free slaves as plantation labour from the 1820s and especially post-abolition were not called 'Creoles', Indians had been enslaved and a number of Indian and Indo-Portuguese women were among the 'founding mothers' of the Reunionese white population (Boucher & Barrassin, 1978; Bourquin, 2005; Fuma, 1998). Descendants of these Indians were integrated into either the French, free people of colour (former slaves who had been liberated prior to the general abolition of 1848) or *affranchi* of 1848 populations and were consequently called 'Creoles' too.

origins or phenotype than it was about social status. And, as Sudel Fuma (1998) has demonstrated in his study of the Nicole family, it was possible for someone to change status from slave to *affranchi* to white in his or her lifetime through enfranchisement, marriage and/or official 'recognition' by a white father. Slaves freed prior to 1848 were usually women or children, often mixed race (children of slave owners) or elderly house slaves of both sexes. Some were gifted with land or money upon their liberation, which allowed them to become landowners and slave owners themselves (Bourquin, 2005: 46).⁷ What distinguished the white population from the freed slaves, free people of colour (and, of course, the slaves) was the possession of a French patronym. Free people of colour were not legally entitled to use a family name until 1832 (Cercle généalogique de Bourbon, 2007) although some used their mother's first name as a surname (Nicole, 1996: 17).⁸ The fact that they carried only a first name marked their social difference, their intermediary position in the social hierarchy, but they were, nonetheless, free – and this was of great importance in a slave society built upon vast power inequalities.

As for the slaves, they were all '*nègres*' or black regardless, again, of their origins or skin colour. In his work on the slave family in Reunion, Gilles Gerard recorded an observation made by Dr Yvan Melichor, a visitor to Reunion in 1843:

Lorsqu'on observe avec quelque attention la population de Bourbon, on reconnaît avec surprise qu'elle ne se compose pas seulement de nègres, mais encore de Malais, de Bengalis, de Malabars et même de blancs. . . Je ne saurais désigner autrement des hommes aux formes accusées, à l'épiderme d'une blancheur égale à celle des plus purs délégués coloniaux, et des femmes dont la peau transparente et lisse surpasse en éclat et en beauté celle des plus grandes dames créoles. (Gerard, 2011: 61–2)⁹

⁷ See Allen (2011) for an interesting microhistory and insights into the life of Marie Rozette, a freed slave in Mauritius, landowner and slaveholder, who was extremely active in protecting and controlling her financial assets.

⁸ It was usually the mother's name but sometimes the father's if the couple was living together as a family.

⁹ My translation: 'When we closely observe the [slave] population of Bourbon, we recognise with some surprise that it is not composed entirely of blacks but also includes Malays, Bengalis, Malabars and even whites. . . I do not know another way to designate men with such distinctive silhouettes, with

Inquiring as to why these barefoot, white slaves had not been manumitted, he was told, 'Monsieur, ce sont des nègres' (Gerard, 2011: 62).¹⁰ This was not to say that the Reunionese did not 'see' colour. Gerard (2011: 236–7) also noted details on the vast spectrum of slave skin colours as perceived and recorded by the slave owner of a large Sainte-Suzanne plantation in 1845. These included deep black, mahogany, chocolate, bister, bronze, red, yellow, olive, pale and white. However, in terms of social classification, these slaves were all black.

Blackness and whiteness in pre-abolition Reunionese society, then, was constructed around the dichotomy between enslaved and free. The general slave emancipation of 1848 abolished the legal distinction between the two groups, bestowed the status of French citizen upon all of the *affranchis*, and allocated each a patronym, the traditional passage into whiteness in Reunionese society. However, the entrenched prejudices against the slave group, the so-called '*nègres*', teamed with the labour demands of a sugar-based economy, meant that the *affranchis* of 1848 were subjected to continued unequal treatment through compulsory indentures, what Fuma (2001) termed 'servilism', and ongoing marginalisation. The new *affranchis* were set apart by their trades, recognisably those of ex-slaves, and their similarly identifiable slave names (Speedy, 2012). These names, given to them by their former masters upon emancipation, were supposed to be different from any of the white surnames of families on the island. They included first names, feminine first names and anagrams, were sometimes introduced by '*dit*' (known as) and were often fantastical or derogatory. Some examples from the New Caledonian archives are Antoine, Colette, Frias, Jean-Baptiste dit Doudoute, Héros, Festin, Faucher and Leriche (Speedy, 2012). Markers of blackness in Reunion, these unusual names teamed with certain occupations (carpenters and seamstresses in particular) were what initially alerted me to the presence of significant numbers of Reunionese *affranchis* in New Caledonia (Speedy, 2007a: 108–10).¹¹

skin as white as that of the purist colonial administrator, and women whose soft, transparent skin is more luminous and beautiful and that of the richest Creole ladies'.

¹⁰ My translation: 'Sir, they are blacks'.

¹¹ Creole slaves were often trained in a trade in Reunion. Hintjens (2003) and Fuma (2000) have both noted the prevalence of seamstresses among freed women. Carpentry was a similarly ubiquitous trade

Despite their freedom and citizenship, many of the formerly enslaved Reunionese remained on the outer limits of society at home. Facing increasing destitution as the sugar industry went bust, a move to a new colony was an opportunity to start afresh for them and other sectors of the population (the poor 'whites' and the pre-abolition *affranchis* and free people of colour) who were also suffering from the economic downturn (Bourquin, 2005). The division of New Caledonian society into free settlers, convicts, indentured labourers and indigenous people (free, unfree, and indigenous), allowed all Reunionese, somewhat serendipitously, as French citizens, to enjoy their social status as part of the white settler population. In New Caledonia, the blacks were the indigenous Kanak. They were assigned inferior social status and were subject to extreme prejudice born of 19th-century scientific racism and the exigencies of settler colonialism. In this climate, silence or the *non-dit* in New Caledonia assisted the Reunionese to negotiate their new settler whiteness while enabling the colonial administration to populate/occupy the land with French citizens; the silence and silencing allowing for the emergence of a settler colonial narrative centring on the white (or, more precisely, French) settler/black Indigenous binary.

Transformative Journeys

Fascinating

fabricated

family histories

that create

a certain cosiness

in inhospitable

social climes

Transformative journeys

west to east

north to south

black to almost

exercised by freed men.

white
or French
at least
Camouflaging
marks
still fresh
still raw
in shackled flesh
concealed beneath
the frothy skirts
of settler society
Hiding pasts
still manifest
in the
rougail
served with *kari*
consumed
with relish
but never
questioned
A new beginning
a second chance
Hush
don't ask
stick together
the seamstresses
will stitch
a new family
tapestry¹²

¹² Original poem by Speedy entitled #FantasyLives. It was first performed by Speedy during the 'Race, Mobility and Imperial Networks: Charting the Transnational Asia-Pacific World, 1800–2015' confer-

The Aymard Family

Chris Vidal was born Christine Nicholson in Bexley, Sydney in 1954 to Frank Sydney Nicholson and Simone Germaine Renee Yvette Nicholson (née Aymard). Frank had met Simone at a chaperoned dance at the Nouméa Town Hall when his Australian Navy ship had visited New Caledonia in 1946:

He had no idea she was of mixed race. They corresponded with each other for a couple of years and she came out to Australia as his fiancée in 1948. I think at some point after that, because Dad was still in the Navy, he went back to New Caledonia and he met the family which was why, even though they were madly in love and had married in 1948, I wasn't born until 1954 because my father was apparently terrified that the children from the marriage would be black! And he was so relieved when I was born that I wasn't black that he accepted that I wasn't male. (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015)

The Nicholsons had two other children and Simone, Chris and her younger sister and brother all went to New Caledonia at the end of 1960:

Possibly, my parents had separated. Nothing was ever said. When we returned to Australia in mid-1961, it was to Brisbane and my father had left the Navy. We settled in a new weatherboard house in an outer suburb of Brisbane. I then embarked on the project of trying to be an Australian. I succeeded academically, but was less successful sartorially. My classmates had plaits and wore skirts made of plaid. I wore mu'u mu'us of bright floral with pom poms at the hem. (CV, Email, 17 April 2017)

Growing up in 'White Australia', in Brisbane in the early 1960s, Chris Vidal felt and was made to feel her difference. In this particular time and place where racist laws against non-white migrants were still in effect and non-whites in society were

ence held at RMIT University and La Trobe University, 9–11 November 2015.

treated with suspicion if not hostility, the family story was kept firmly in the private sphere:¹³

For most of my life, Reunion and even New Caledonia were “personal” or “private” knowledge. We, that is my generation of the family, knew no one in Australia who shared our ancestral background, no one had ever heard of Reunion and we had no way of accessing verified written information. We only had the oral traditions that my mother insistently shared and were a huge part of our childhood. (CV, Email, 21 February 2015)

At home, she was nourished by her mother’s cooking:

We grew up eating *rougail* which we thought was French, we assumed anything my mother cooked was French, we had a lot of rice as well, a lot more curry too than the average French family. The way our curry was served was with lots of grated coconut, rice, banana and a side of *rougail*. So that’s definitely something that comes from Reunion. (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015)

She was also regaled by her mother’s stories ‘of who we were and where we had come from, tales we accepted without questioning the contradictions. Aristocrats? Owners of chateaux? Then later, slaves?’ (CV, Email, 17 April 2017). These stories were repeated many times over as her mother instilled the family history in her eldest daughter. The *non-dit*, however, played a role in the fashioning of family myths, not least around their origins. Chris’s mother Simone claimed that the family had descended from French aristocrats who had had to make a hasty retreat from France as ‘*Bourbonnais*’ (members of the royal Bourbon family) to Reunion around

¹³ Despite never quite fitting in, Chris went on to win a Commonwealth scholarship to the University of Queensland and commenced a B.A. Before finishing her degree, she married and by 1975, had a son. The marriage didn’t last, but she finished her degree. She completed a Diploma in Education but her political activism was an impediment to employment in Queensland so she returned to Sydney to teach in inner city high schools for several years. A holiday in Bali in 1983 led her to new directions and the setting up of a clothing business with a new partner. This (both the business and her new partner) lasted until around 2005. She then returned to teaching, this time as an ESL teacher in Surabaya, East Java. Due to her mother’s failing health, she returned to Australia in 2009 and started work as a TESOL teacher at the University of Queensland.

the time of the Revolution. 'We were ousted, abandoning the château somewhere in an unclear location in France', said Chris, 'this was the myth that I grew up with despite numerous things that appeared to be quite dissonant with that apparent background' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015).

One of the things that caused Chris to question this assertion was another story her mother told about Chris's great-grandparents, Gustave Aymard and Marie-Alexandrine Elphège, both of whom had migrated from Reunion and settled in Ouégoa in the north of New Caledonia where they married in 1877 before moving to Nouméa. Their marriage certificate tells us that Marie-Alexandrine was a seamstress while Gustave, along with two of his wife's brothers (Monier and Faustin Elphège) were carpenters or, more specifically, boat builders. The three men would soon turn their hand to mining when copper deposits were discovered transforming the formerly sleepy village into New Caledonia's busiest mining town. Later, Monier and Faustin set up home together on a remote northern island where they built boats (M-FA, Interview, 25 October 2016). It is notable that all of those witnessing

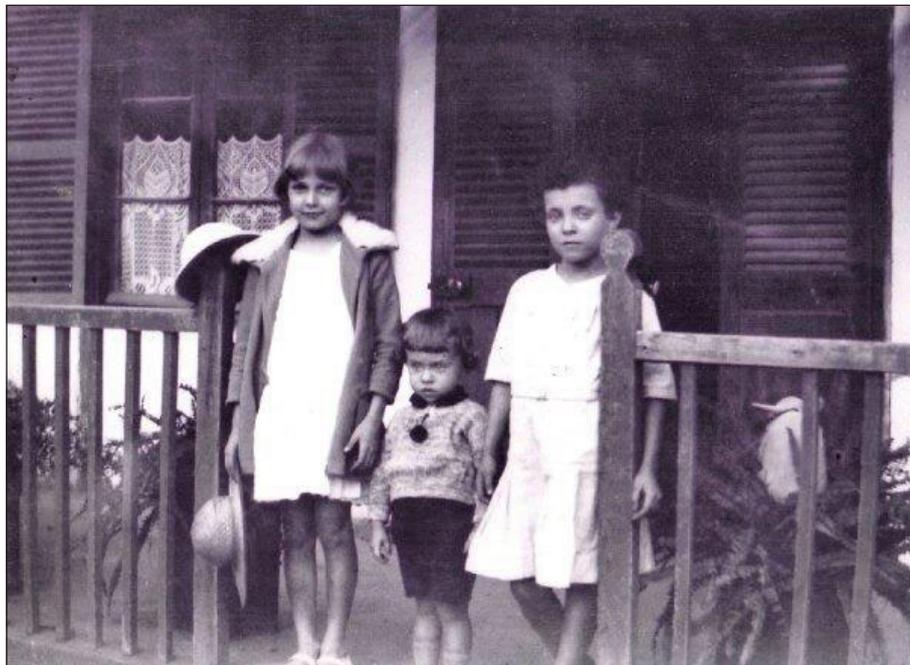


Figure 1: Simone Nicholson née Aymard, far right, early 1930s. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

the wedding signed the marriage certificate, which suggests a certain level of literacy amongst the group. Gustave and Marie-Alexandrine had three children: Louis Léon, Simone's father, born on 6 May 1878 in Ouégoa, Léonie Augustine, born on 18 February 1880 in Ouégoa, and Alexandre Joseph Frédéric, the youngest, born sometime in 1883.¹⁴

Chris understood that her family was black or mixed race through her mother's recounting of the 1878 Kanak revolt. Although there was no fighting in Ouégoa, the excitement and ferment expressed by neighbouring Kanak caused authorities to move women and children to Pam for a time (Saussol, 1979: 159). 'During the uprising', Simone would say, 'the Aymards would hear footsteps walking around their house at night, all through the night, but they were safe because they were not white' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015). Chris noted the shift in the narrative but of course could not ask – and her mother would not tell her – at least not until she had come to terms with it herself:

It was all the, you know, "it is not said", even growing up in Australia, my Mum would get this sort of particular expression, it was like a shutting down, she would look into the far distance and say, "it is not said". She would say it in English, "it is not said, it is not done" so this is three generations and another migration and yet that behaviour and attitude were firmly continued. (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015)

Chris acknowledged that New Caledonia was like a second chance for her family and 'this is why there was the emphasis on the *non-dit* as they were trying to create this sort of patina or air of respectable society. And they were all desperately trying to be French' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015). She continued:

After it was eventually revealed that there was a slave background and we dropped the aristocratic pretensions, Mum used to tell a little story to

¹⁴ Although his birth certificate has not yet been located, Alexandre was listed on his father's (Aymard, Léon Gustave Désiré) death certificate as being 25 years old in 1908, ANOM, Acte de décès, Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouméa, 27 August 1908.



Figure 2: Simone Nicholson née Aymard, Nouméa, 1952. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

explain the name “Aymard”. She said that when slavery was abolished, their ancestor was so keen to get out of slavery that he pushed his way to the front of the queue and that’s how we got a name that starts with A – a story that is probably as mythical as the one it replaced! This creates a different narrative but still one of “we are the first” so there’s a certain pattern in that. There was a shift from the original myth in which we were told that we owned the sugar plantations to being owned by the sugar planters. There was a move from an active to a passive role. And it took a lot longer for that part of the story to emerge. (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015)

Chris’s suspicions about the accuracy of this story were confirmed when I contacted her cousin, Marie-France Aymard, daughter of Simone’s older brother Robert (Roby), who lives in Nouméa. Marie-France too has a strong interest in the family history and has done some genealogical research into their roots. She kindly sent me a copy of a prized family artefact: the manumission record of her and Chris’s great-great grandfather Léon who had been granted his freedom on 16 April 1832 (**Fig. 3**).

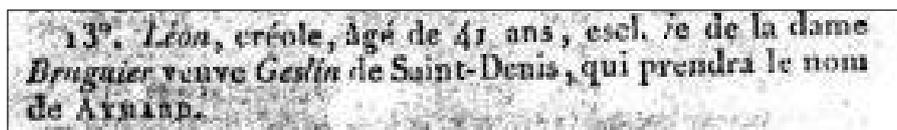


Figure 3: Manumission announcement of Léon. Photo: Marie-France Aymard. Reproduced with permission.

His manumission announcement reads: ‘Léon, Creole, aged 41, slave of dame Bruguier widow of Geslin from Saint-Denis, who will take the surname AYMARD.’ He was not freed in the general slave emancipation of 1848 and there was therefore no line up on the plantation and no elbowing to the front of the queue. He received the name Aymard, chosen by his former owner, as it had been decreed that slaves to be freed on that day were all to have surnames starting with the letter A. Ironically, considering the family narrative, his name was found at the bottom of the list.

When I followed up with some archival sleuthing, I found the birth certificate of his son, Gustave (who had migrated to New Caledonia), who was born ‘legitimately’ to Léon and his wife Augustine Désirée in the commune of Sainte-Marie.¹⁵ This document showed that in 1840 he was still employed as a steward by the same dame Bruguier who had emancipated him. Of course Chris was excited to learn of this but also reflective, as she said, ‘of the implications of now knowing that the family name “Aymard” was so arbitrarily allocated, and that there can be no tracing back before that date’ (CV, Interview, 26 May 2015).

The Elphège Family

If Chris felt some disappointment to learn the relatively recent history of the Aymard family name, her spirits revived when we turned our attention to the formidable figure of her great-grandmother, Marie-Alexandrine Elphège (**Fig. 4**), born in 1842 in Saint-André, Reunion, whose rich family tapestry provides another window on the family narrative. While described as a seamstress on her marriage certificate, Marie-Alexandrine was, in reality, a midwife, herbalist and healer and, according to Chris, ‘a

¹⁵ ANOM, Acte de naissance, Réunion, Sainte-Marie, 16 March 1840.

quite extraordinarily powerful woman' who 'emanated a tough life, a tough perspective' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015).

Chris recounted how one day when Marie-Alexandrine was pregnant, she went out riding her horse up in the north in the bush. 'She went into labour, she was miles away from home, delivered the baby, got back on the horse and went back home' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015). The family told stories of her African origin:

She was quite famous in her later years for sitting under a tree with her legs stretched straight out eating pieces of bread with chillies in them and that she was a very dark woman, as black as boot polish. Other people in the family were described as "mahogany coloured", and in the current generation, every now and again, someone pops out who is described as "golden". But

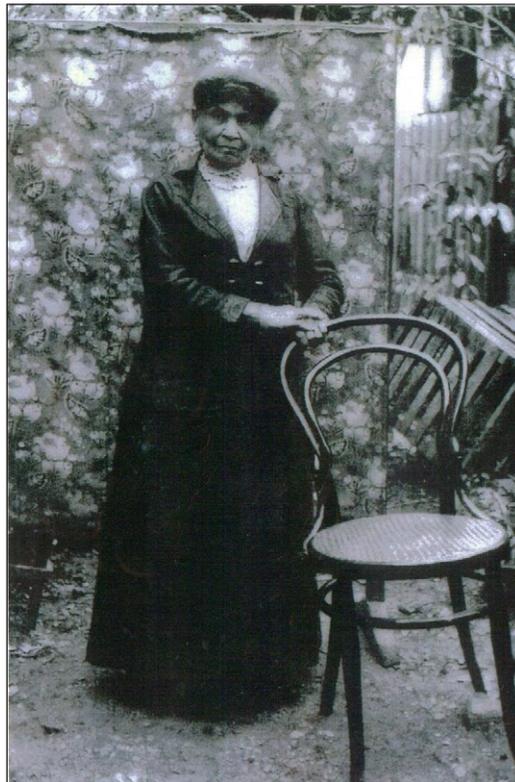


Figure 4: Marie-Alexandrine Aymard née Elphège. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

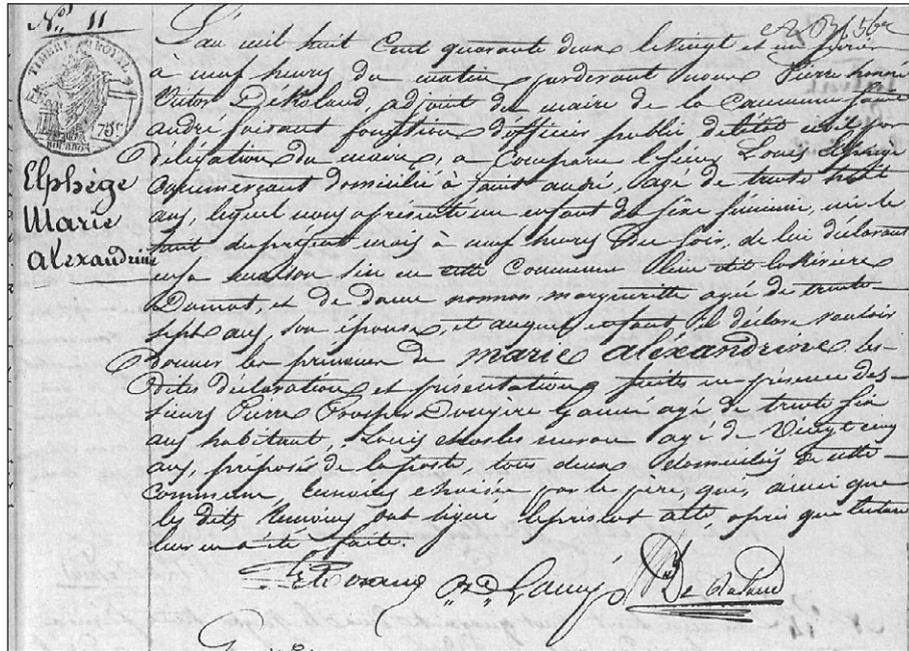


Figure 5: Birth certificate of Marie-Alexandrine Elphège. ANOM, Acte de naissance, Réunion, Saint-André, 8 February 1842.

the colour issue is sort of. . . well we have had so many issues about that.
(CV, Interview, 3 March 2015)

Marie-Alexandrine was associated with magic and she 'knew the herbs'. Simone and her brother would be sent to gather wild herbs, 'they were taught how to identify them, particularly healing plants and so forth, so that was knowledge passed down from Reunion' (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015).

Through archival and genealogical records, I was able to trace Marie-Alexandrine's genealogy back to some of the first inhabitants of Reunion (**Figs. 5 and 6**).¹⁶ Born in 1842 to Louis Elphège, *commerçant* (trader or shopkeeper) and 'la dame Nannon Marguerite' in Saint-André, Marie-Alexandrine's family were free people of colour.

¹⁶ Louis Elphège's family tree is available on geneanet.org through the Family Tree of Nathalie Jovanovic Floricourt: <http://gw.geneanet.org/njf?lang=en&pz=louis+jean+baptiste&nz=floricourt&ocz=0&p=louis&n=elphege>

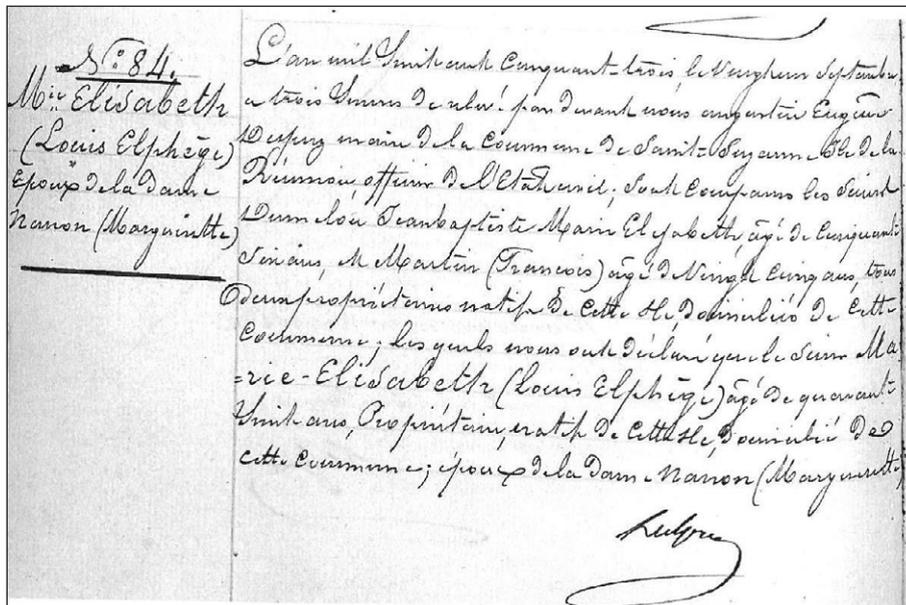


Figure 6: Death certificate of Louis Marie-Elisabeth (Elphège). ANOM, Acte de décès, Réunion, Sainte-Suzanne, 28 September 1853.

While her mother, described in the birth certificate of a sibling, Augustave Nanon, born in 1828,¹⁷ as a '*filie libre*' (or free girl), her maternal grandmother, Marguerite, was noted as an *affranchie*, (freed slave) on her death certificate so it is impossible to trace her line any further back in the archives.¹⁸ In these certificates, however, we can see the practice of the adoption of the mother's first name as the child's surname. This is also evident when we look at her father, Louis Elphège's archival records. Interestingly, the name 'Elphège' was perhaps as arbitrarily assigned as 'Aymard' as Louis was also known as Louis Marie-Elisabeth, the first name of his mother.

Marie-Elisabeth, 'a native of Reunion' who outlived her son, Louis, died in 1854 in Sainte-Suzanne at the age of 84 (**Fig. 6**).¹⁹ She, along with her sister Marie Onésime and their mother Marie Honorine had been freed 'on 2 March 1789 for 20 years of

¹⁷ ANOM, Acte de naissance, Réunion, Sainte-Suzanne, 16 October 1828.

¹⁸ ANOM, Acte de décès, Réunion, Sainte-Suzanne, 11 June 1821.

¹⁹ ANOM, Acte de décès, Réunion, Sainte-Suzanne, 29 September 1854.

good service' (P-LL, Email, 8 April 2017). Pierre-Louis Laude, descendant of Marie Onésime and distant cousin of Chris believes that Louis Elphège was the illegitimate son of Antoine Jean Baptiste Antoine Maunier de l'Étang (1749–1814). 'On the 1806 census of Sainte-Suzanne (ADR L189-1)', he writes, 'Marie-Elisabeth has quite some land in Riviere St-Jean [. . .] Jean-Baptiste Maunier is living on her property' (P-LL, Email, 8 April 2017). A number of children are listed including Louis 'Olphège' (Elphège). He notes that on other censuses, the same family group is listed on the property and Marie-Elisabeth 'has up to 22 slaves, depending on the census, which is a lot' (P-LL, Email, 8 April 2017). He also points out that Louis Elphège signed his marriage certificate, indicating that he was likely able to read and write. Interestingly, Louis named his first son Antoine Monier Elphège and, as I discuss below, 'Monier' was retained and passed on in New Caledonia as a surname. This family of 'freed people of colour', it seems, had gained access to education and were able to accumulate some wealth through land and slave ownership. Marie-Elisabeth, like so many freed slaves at the time, appeared to have no qualms about becoming a slave owner herself.

Marie-Elisabeth, '*femme de couleur libre*' is also listed on the Jovanovic-Floricourt family tree.²⁰ Going back through this genealogy, we find that through the maternal line of Marie-Elisabeth's (supposed) father, Eugène Calix Pantaléon (Léon) Welment, the family descended from the German pirate, Henri Guilbert Wilman and his wife Jeanne Royer. Jeanne was the daughter of Frenchman Guy Royer, born around 1644 in Paris and Françoise Rosaire, an Indian or Indo-Portuguese woman who had arrived from Goa and is celebrated as one of the founding mothers of Reunion.²¹

Whether Marie-Alexandrine and Gustave knew each other before their departure for New Caledonia is not known. However, there was certainly a group of Reunionese

²⁰ Family Tree of Nathalie Jovanovic Floricourt: <http://gw.geneanet.org/njf?lang=en&pz=louis+jean+baptiste&nz=floricourt&ocz=0&p=x&n=marie+elisabeth&oc=1> (Last accessed 19 August 2017).

²¹ Some caution must be exercised here as Léon Welment does not appear to have officially recognised his daughter and only one child of Marie Séverine, Laurent Augustin Pantaléon, born in 1795, bore his family name: <http://gw.geneanet.org/njf?lang=en&n=honorine+severine&nz=floricourt&ocz=0&p=marie&pz=louis+jean+baptiste> (Last accessed 19 August 2017).

who settled in Ouégoa, suggesting, as I found with the Reunionese living in the south of the colony, that there was a tendency to cluster together, at least among the first generation (Speedy, 2007a). Given the numerical importance of the Reunionese migrants, the fact that they arrived in extended family groups and that they shared the same cultural practices, it does not seem unusual that the first generation of Reunionese settlers intermarried and lived in close proximity to each other. Whether or not racism against their group played a role in their choosing of partners has not been remembered by the descendants. It is possible that this was the case but it must not be forgotten that they were clearly categorised as settlers and French citizens. Their colour supposedly had no bearing on their access to the same rights and privileges as their light-skinned settler neighbours.

Christian Aymard, brother of Marie-France, shared some of his knowledge of the family story, advising that 'numerous relatives: cousins, uncles, aunts etc. arrived at the same time or after' his family (CA, Email, 21 September 2015). Monier Elphège, Marie-Alexandrine's older brother, arrived with his wife Marie Constance Fayeul/Fayelle/Fayeul/Fayeulle (**Fig. 7**) and at least one daughter, Marie Laurencia (**Fig. 8**), who was born in Sainte-Suzanne, Reunion in 1874. The two women posed for a photograph taken presumably on the same day and in the same location (a family house?) as the one taken of Marie-Alexandrine.

Marie Constance and Monier had more children in Ouégoa. Consulting some of their birth certificates, however, we notice a certain slipperiness or inconsistency in the use of a 'family name'. For instance, in 1881, Monier Elphège, carpenter, declared the birth of a daughter, Léonore Monier, to himself and his wife, Marie Constance Fayeul, seamstress, on 29 November in Ouégoa. In 1883, however, he registered the birth of a son, Antoine Monnier Elphège followed by Louis René Elphège in 1885 and Edouard Raoul Elphège in 1886. This practice of using a first name as a surname was common in Reunion among the free people of colour (as we have seen with Louis Elphège) and this type of inconsistency of naming within families was something that I had also noticed in the recording of the names of 'Malabar' or indentured workers' children in New Caledonia (Speedy, 2007a:



Figure 7: Marie Constance Fayel. Photo: Marie-France Aymard. Reproduced with permission.

133–5). It certainly raises questions as to the significance of a ‘family name’ for people who had only recently been allocated one in an entirely random and violent fashion. Or, in the case of the ‘Elphège’ family, perhaps they simply wanted to keep their real, if officially unrecognised, family name (Monier from Maunier) in the family.

The Second Generation

If the first-generation Reunionese migrants tended to marry amongst themselves (Speedy 2007a: 103–6), their children born in New Caledonia were not necessarily inclined to do the same. Again, there is no memory of racism or hostility from white in-laws toward the Reunionese partners. None of Gustave and Marie-Alexandrine’s



Figure 8: Marie Laurencia Elphège. Photo: Marie-France Aymard. Reproduced with permission.

children married people with Reunionese ancestry. Nonetheless, there was still transmission of knowledge, culture and memory. Louis Aymard, Simone's father, for instance, firmly believed in magic and went 'in for séances and table turning'. Simone too accepted that magic exists and when her sister Dedette (Georgette), who died in 1998, was ill and said that she 'had been the victim of black magic', she accepted this. Louis was a staunch atheist who 'hated the Church, the clergy and all they stood for' and would 'slam the door when nuns came calling' (CV, Email, 5 October 2015). Chris shared a story about how her grandfather turned to magic in an hour of need:

So, things were a bit tough in 1932. Apparently, there had been a massive cyclone and there had been a lot of damage to the house, the roof came off and all the fruit trees had been damaged. So what did my grandfather do? He wrote to a *mage noir*, a black magician, in Paris and asked him for the winning numbers in the lottery in Sydney, the lottery that later became Tatts Lotto. And so the magician sent him the numbers and he entered and he won! He won £5000! (Fig. 9)

This was a huge sum of money in those days yet, by the time Louis died in 1937, he was penniless. Chris remarked:

In time honoured Creole fashion, my grandfather then started to spend money, lots of money, flashing it around. He shared the money with his two oldest sons, my uncles, Louis and Marcel. So my grandfather bought a very fancy car from the Mercier family, a very prominent family at the time and my uncle Marcel went to Sydney and bought a blue and gold striped blazer that was very flash. And Uncle Louis used the money to buy that house where we used to stay when we went to Noumea as kids. (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015)

Chris's grandfather had moved from Ouégoa at some point to Nouméa where he worked as a clerk of the court. He married Josephine Wenzel in 1905 and the couple had

105th LOTTERY.

First Prize to Noumea.

The major prizes in the 105th State lottery were drawn at Her Majesty's Theatre yesterday morning by Mr. H. J. Lowe, a Melbourne business man. The winning numbers were:—

First prize (£5000)	85,701
Second prize (£1000)	62,149
Third prize (£500)	23,102
Fourth prize (£300)	80,270

The winning ticket was held by L. Aymard, of Noumea, New Caledonia; the second by the "For the Sake of Others" syndicate, Mrs. A. Phillips and Mrs. E. Donchue, Sempire-street, West Maitland; the third by the "A.G.D.O.L.N.E.L.R.E.J.I.M." syndicate, M. Partridge, Dowling-street, Arncliffe; and the fourth by the "Now or Never" syndicate, M. P. Finn, Bryan's Gap, Tenterfield.

The 106th lottery will be drawn on Monday.

Figure 9: Louis Aymard's Lottery Win. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1933, p. 14.

eight children. They lived in a house that they shared with another large Reunionese family on the hill overlooking the Baie de l'Orphélinat. In the late 1920s, Louis became a landowner, buying a house on the road to Magenta. The house no longer stands as the road was widened and the house bulldozed but it was likely located very close to where Rue Louis Aymard, named after Chris's grandfather, is today (**Fig. 10**). The house came with a reasonable amount of land that the family quickly exploited:

They planted every kind fruit tree, every kind of food crop, but just for domestic consumption. They even had their own coffee beans and made their own coffee. They killed and butchered their own food and there were chickens and all the rest of it and there seems to have been a sort of informal barter system with local neighbours – not out of necessity but of sharing abundance. (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015)

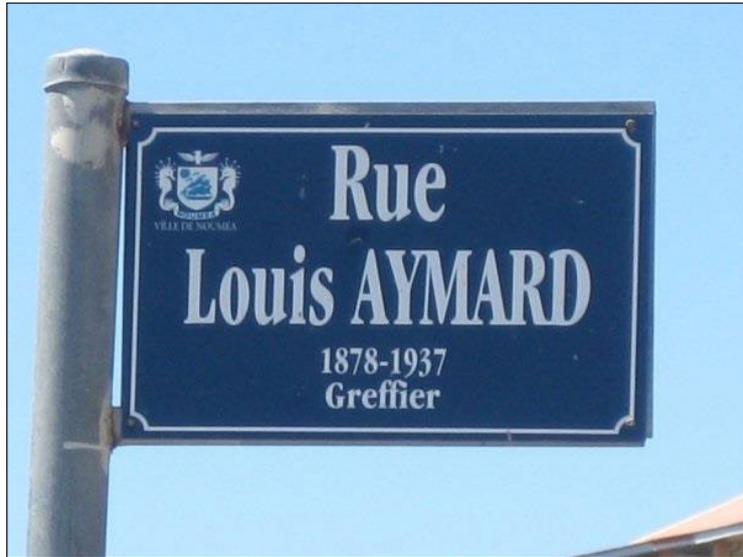


Figure 10: Street sign indicating Rue Louis Aymard. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

Cuisine: Melding the Old with the New

Food was something that played a very important role in family life. The Reunionese took with them seedlings and plants from the Indian Ocean that they cultivated in New Caledonia including lychees, the flame tree, coffee plants and numerous herbs (Speedy, 2007a: 52; Speedy, 2012). While some of the richer planters imported nurseries, the poor migrants filled their pockets with seeds. Christian Aymard, who left New Caledonia many years ago to live in metropolitan France, mentioned the Reunionese *rougail* and curry, dishes that had also marked Chris's childhood, as recipes which had subsequently contributed to the 'gastronomic identity of New Caledonia' (CA, Email, 21 September 2015). *Achards*, another condiment famously brought into New Caledonia from Reunion, has similarly become a stalwart of local cuisine.

The family derived enormous pleasure from cooking and had a keen appreciation for quality produce and excellent food, 'food in the full expression of cuisine' (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015). They ate all that their garden provided and hunted deer, rabbits and flying foxes. They adapted recipes from Reunion to incorporate

indigenous ingredients into fusion dishes, such as the flying fox *bourgignon* that Chris sampled when she was young. 'I remember', she said, 'the rich taste of the wine sauce and the mushrooms and the gaminess of it' (CA, Interview, 3 March 2015).

Louis's family also enjoyed gastronomic picnics at the beach (**Fig. 12**). Simone described to Chris how, after her father won the lottery (**Fig. 11**), the family would head off to Magenta with the car loaded up:

The packing of the car began at five in the morning, all the pots and pans and everything else, and it was just down the road at Magenta. . . It was the men's job to catch the fish so the *bouillabaisse* could be made so, you know, we're not talking about just throwing a few bits of *jambon* on a *baguette*, it was the full production. . . Then, for fun, the men would go out further on the reef to fight sharks while the women mopped up the pots and the pans and loaded them all back up into the car. There was a very strict division of labour. The men hunted and brought the kill back to the home and there was a slab out the back where things were washed and hung and so forth. (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015)



Figure 11: The Aymard family car bought with the lottery winnings. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

Bringing the recipes and some of the ingredients from the old colony and embracing the plentiful provisions of the new land, the Aymards, like so many other Reunionese settlers, preserved something of their cultural and gastronomical heritage while making a mark on the local cuisine.

Language and Song

While Reunion creole was undoubtedly the first language of Gustave and Marie-Alexandrine, as free people of colour and with some degree of literacy, they probably also spoke French. According to the stories that Christian Aymard had heard about his great-grandmother, Marie-Alexandrine spoke French with a 'strong accent' and would sing songs from her island in creole (CA, Email, 21 September 2015). Yet, as is common among the children of migrants, especially those who were seeking to fit into their new environment, the next generation were all French speakers. If the home language was apparently not kept alive, a trace of creole was passed down to Chris by her mother through a little song:

This song was taught to my mother Simone by her eldest brother Louis (who was 19 years older than her). It is about a little bird (*le paille en queue*) that helped its owner catch fish. I don't know if my mother transcribed it from memory or whether it had been written down previously. Given that she was taught the song as a little girl, most likely that transmission was oral. Unfortunately, I have no idea of the melody. (CV, Email, 20 February 2015)

Here is the version of the song that Chris sent me:

Moi n'en a un p'tit paille en queue,
Y volait, y volait,
Moi n'en a un p'tit paille en queue,
Ca va la mer chercher poissons (repeat the 2 first verses)
Allez pas baigne bord la mer
Fais attention c'qu'y a dans la mer,



Figure 12: Simone Aymard fishing at Magenta with her brothers circa 1930. Photo: Chris Vidal. Reproduced with permission.

Allez pas baigne bord la mer
Fais attention c'qu'y a dans la mer.²²

As it happens, this song, 'P'tit Paille en Queue' is very popular and well known in Reunion. The *paille en queue* (white-tailed tropicbird) is the Reunionese emblem. The song does not actually talk about a bird that helped its owner to catch fish. Rather, it tells the tale of a little bird that wanted to go fishing on its own. Its mother warned it that it was too young, its wings had not fully developed, and not to go too far out as there are sharks in the sea! It would seem as if Simone's shark-fighting relatives had forgotten that part of the song²³ even if the idea that the sea contains dangers and people should not swim there was retained.

²² My translation: I had a little *paille en queue*, who flew away, who flew away, I had a little *paille en queue*, who flew to the sea to go fishing, don't go swimming in the sea, be careful of what's in the sea, don't go swimming in the sea, be careful of what's in the sea.

²³ The lyrics in creole with a French translation can be found on the website, 'Partitions de chansons': <http://www.partitionsdechansons.com/pdf/4329/G.-Fourcade-J.-Fossy-Paille-en-queue.html> (Last accessed 28 July 2016).

When I shared the YouTube clip of Georges Fourcade singing the song, Chris was delighted to finally hear what, for her, had just been words on paper, a written trace of a forgotten language and melody, sung and played as her ancestors would have known it.²⁴

Shifting Identities

If, as Chris suggested, the family's adaptation to life in New Caledonia seemed to be linked to 'the abundance of food' (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015), it was also related to their sense of belonging and figuring out where they fit in in the new colonial context. One of the interesting factors to contemplate is their negotiation of their whiteness and how they set this against what they were not, namely, the indigenous Kanak population.

While their apparent blackness was said to have kept them safe from the Kanak during the 1878 revolt, Chris wondered whether the fact that Marie-Alexandrine was a midwife and healer also had something to do with it. 'I don't know whether it was just an issue of their colour', she said, 'but it was also Marie-Alexandrine Elphège's work as a healer. She may have been a respected or feared member of that area' (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015). Indeed, in view of the value placed on reciprocity and exchange in Kanak culture, the everyday interactions, including midwifery, may well have counted more in their feelings of security than an imagined solidarity through blackness.

The second and third generation, however, were said to have had very little 'interaction with Kanak people. These were people who were identifying as French, who were trying to be French – and the Kanaks were different' (CV, Interview, 11 February 2015). From the early days of colonisation, the French had passed laws to alienate, dispossess and restrict the movement of the indigenous people. From 1887, the Indigenous Code introduced a legal distinction between those considered French citizens (including enfranchised slaves) and those deemed French subjects (colonised peoples including the Kanak). This set of laws deprived Kanak of many

²⁴ The original version of the song can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcRGXSE1wHs> (Last accessed 19 August 2017).

rights and imposed a *régime* of forced public works, movement restrictions, head taxes, corporal and capital punishment and other degrading measures designed to keep 'good colonial order' through segregation and institutionalised racism and inequality (Merle, 2004). The colonial authorities sought to limit contact between the Kanak and different categories of settler. That the Reunionese, free settlers and French citizens, did not identify with the Kanak is not, therefore, surprising. Simone perceived the Kanak as other, 'not part of who she was'. Her notion of her own identity encompassed her heritage from the two islands inhabited by her family but also her 'Frenchness'. Chris explained that her mother 'viewed herself as French from New Caledonia with Bourbonnais ancestry' (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015).

Yet, one member of the family opted to go against the trend. Christian mentioned that his great-uncle, Alexandre Joseph Aymard, married (or lived with) a Melanesian woman in the far north of the island. His aunt had told him that he was the 'black sheep' of the family and was banished from the 'family pantheon' due to this relationship (CA, Email, 21 September 2015).

The *non-dit* cast a shadow even over close family affairs. Louis Aymard never spoke of his younger brother, who eventually ended up moving to Sydney where he worked (as befitting the family love of cooking) as a chef. He was still listed on the Sydney electoral role in 1949 so he was there until at least that date. No one knows whether his Kanak wife accompanied him to Australia.

Chris spoke of her grandfather's pride and fierce temper that she speculated was an inheritance from his particular family history:

. . . and that is one of the themes that runs through the families, this extraordinary temper, this sense of being aggrieved. Something that is quite extraordinary and I don't know whether it is particular to the Aymards or was common across people from La Réunion, was that once people had offended you or there had been a disagreement, people were just cut off. It was almost a readiness to let people go and I don't know whether that's related to, again, generations of slavery. . . it may have begun as a coping mechanism, I mean that's purely speculative. . . you know families were

being split during slavery and so the idea of that being a way of coping. Once they are gone, they are gone. (CV, Interview, 3 March 2015)

A relationship with an indigenous woman, someone who, in the settler colonial context, was the black to the settler white was seen as too transgressive when made open or public for someone whose ancestors, only a couple of generations before, had occupied a similar place in the free/unfree or white/black binary of a slave-based economy. Given the firmly social construction of black and white in Reunion,



Figure 13: Léonie Augustine Malinowski née Aymard, seated on right. Photo: Debbie Reeves Gibson. Reproduced with permission.

however, their viewing of themselves as white (and Kanak as black) most likely had little to do with colour or race. The power base had shifted and the descendants of the oppressed in one colonial space found themselves on the other side in a new colony. Louis cut off his brother as he did his sister, Léonie Augustine (**Fig. 13**), who, in some way, must have offended him too.

Léonie Augustine married Charles Malinowski, a Frenchman of Polish background and, incidentally, the brother of the famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski on 22 February 1902. The couple spent many years travelling the Pacific on their boat and they had 17 children. Simone discovered her aunt's existence – she was by then living in Tahiti – and found her address sometime in the 1940s before she left New Caledonia for Australia. She then began a long correspondence with her aunt whom she never met. From the letters, she learned the family adage, 'don't get off the boat!' Chris recounted the story:

As the children grew up and were old enough, each would get off the boat on a different island and the family spread throughout the Pacific and over to San Francisco. Louis had no contact with his sister. He was a harsh and unforgiving man. But Léonie's message to the girls in the family was "don't get off the boat!" When she was due to give birth to her seventeenth child, the doctors in Tahiti said to her, "You really can't give birth on the boat, you need to get off the boat, you need to have this child in the hospital". And so she did get off the boat. And it was then that her husband left her. (CV, Email, 5 March 2015)

The *non-dit* moved with Léonie Augustine across the Pacific to Tahiti and then on to the United States where two of her daughters, Anna and Pauline, migrated to San Francisco in the 1920s. While they left their children subtle clues about their origins including a newspaper cutting on Reunion and numerous photos, unsurprisingly, given the implications of the 'one drop rule' in the United States, they did not talk about their black or slave ancestors from Reunion.

Conclusion

Through the stories of the Aymard-Elphège families in New Caledonia, we can see clearly, as Stuart Hall (1997) has argued, that notions of identity are constantly evolving, fluid, negotiated and subject to changing contexts of history, culture and power. The stories help us to tease out the agency of the Reunionese in the negotiation of their whiteness in different colonial and postcolonial spaces. As the Aymard-Elphège families moved from Ouégoa to Nouméa and then on to Australia, Tahiti or the United States, different forces and sensitivities were at work in the maintaining or breaking of silences around their racial and social backgrounds. In New Caledonia, the myth of the wealthy, 'white' Reunionese sugar planter as the face of this 19th-century horizontal migration, a myth that was carefully cultivated, shows us that the servile backgrounds of many settlers were swept under the carpet with the long Oceanic voyage proving something of a transformative one. It was a journey during which they abandoned their blackness, metaphorically throwing off the last remains of their shackles while at the same time adopting a white mask. This social adjustment saw them become foundation members of the New Caledonian settler population, eventually giving them access to a position of power and dominance that, despite their post-emancipation French citizenship, was more difficult to do in Reunion, where many remained ostracised (Fuma, 2000). Indeed, as Françoise Vergès has noted, the descendants of slaves and poor whites continue 'to live on the margins of the postcolonial society' in Reunion (1999: xiv). Archival silence, the official 'colour-blindness' of the Republic and the tradition of the *non-dit* seem to have worked in tandem to enable the Reunionese to complete this transformation as they put down settler roots in New Caledonia.

Nevertheless, the stories also invoke a process of 'anamnesia', a resistance to forgetting (Damlé, 2009: 229) that resides in the cracks (the photographs, recipes, snippets of language and songs) that have appeared in this colonial whitewash. These artefacts were kept in families and the stories were passed on, at least to some family members, but it is only now, four generations on, that the *non-dit* is being questioned

and challenged by descendants in their quest for identity. The resurfacing of these artefacts and stories is indicative of a sort of resurrection of the long-buried, black ancestors by their white twenty-first century heirs.

The acknowledgement of the existence of black and mixed race people from the African diaspora in New Caledonia's settler population and an understanding of the racial fluidity among mobile black/formerly enslaved/subaltern people is important for challenging the binaries of settler colonialism. Cassandra Pybus, in her ground-breaking research (2006a, 2006b, 2007) on the 'Black founders', settlers of the African diaspora in Australia, has argued that their erasure from the Australian story served the 'foundation narrative of the new nation' which 'promulgated an uncomplicated racial divide: white settlers (civilisation) displacing black Aborigines (stone-age savagery)' leaving no place for black Australians of African descent (Pybus, 2006a: 180). Relating the story of 'Black Caesar', a runaway African slave turned bushranger, Pybus observed '[w]hat a powerful foundation story Black Caesar could provide Australians if only we knew about him. Or if we knew that African bushrangers have a long history in Australia' (Pybus, 2006b: 45). Making space for the black Reunionese, I would argue, is of similar value in the nuancing of the New Caledonian historical narrative.

Chris Vidal's family stories are rich, contradictory, and uncomfortable, acutely demonstrating a tension between the desire of her ancestors to blend into the white settler population and later, 'respectable colonial society' and to preserve, albeit strictly behind closed doors, the memories, the knowledge, the culture and the cuisine of their forebears. Chris's inherent feeling of difference, the strange customs, the language and spicy food of her childhood in Australia was part of this strong cultural inheritance from Reunion that has passed through the generations from New Caledonia, throughout the Pacific and to Australia. The retelling of these stories, the breaking with the *non-dit*, helps us to build a much clearer picture, put faces to the names, of this hidden black diaspora in the Pacific. The stories also illuminate, with an astonishingly vibrant humanity, the archival footsteps left by the Reunionese ancestors.

Ethics and Consent

The research contained in this article has been undertaken with approval by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee, Reference no. 5201401048 and with the written consent of all parties.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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