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## Creole Mobilities and the Slow Violence of Silence: A Case Study of Réunionese Families in the Pacific

*Karin Speedy*

### *Introduction*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, thousands of Réunionese migrants of African, Malagasy, Indian and mixed-race backgrounds, many descendants of the enslaved or formerly enslaved, entered the Pacific, mostly via New Caledonia.<sup>1</sup> If, upon emancipation in 1848, the formerly enslaved in Réunion became French citizens, they were not to enjoy the full freedoms that citizenship brought other sectors of Réunionese society. Indeed, pandering to the demands and fears of the planters and in order to keep the sugar industry going, Governor Sarda Garriga, in his decree of October 24, 1848, imposed obligatory indenture upon the *affranchis*.<sup>2</sup> Once they completed this “apprenticeship” to their former master, most left for the towns, particularly Saint-Denis, to work in their trades but their easily recognizable slave name meant that many of them faced discrimination and difficulty in finding employment.<sup>3</sup> Their impoverished position was only exacerbated when Réunion’s sugar industry went into crisis in the 1860s and 1870s and the island’s economy went into free-fall.<sup>4</sup> Fleeing marginalization and increasing destitution at home, the Creole<sup>5</sup> migrants crossed the ocean as French citizens; their new status affording them fluidity of identity and a power shift to settler as some of them began to realize their dreams of a better life in a new colonial space.<sup>6</sup> However, the *non-dit*,<sup>7</sup> or the silence around their origins that allowed this

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see: Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*; Speedy, “Out of the Frying Pan”; Speedy, “From the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.”

<sup>2</sup> Fuma, “Le servilisme.” Only *affranchis* who could prove that they had a job or a piece of land did not have to remain on the plantation or in the workshop of their former masters. For the text of the decree, see “Décret du 24 octobre 1848, le travail est rendu obligatoire”, [www.mi-aime-a-ou.com/histoire\\_decret\\_24\\_octobre\\_1848.php](http://www.mi-aime-a-ou.com/histoire_decret_24_octobre_1848.php) (accessed April 13, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Hintjens, “From French Slaves,” 108. By 1858, *affranchis* made up 15 percent of indentured laborers on plantations. See Fuma, “L’homme et le sucre,” 532–33.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the sugar crisis, see Fuma, *Une colonie*, 157–72.

<sup>5</sup> The term “Creole” refers to people born on Réunion Island of any ancestry but was not historically extended to later groups of immigrants arriving after the abolition of slavery such as the Indian *engagés* (Malabars), Muslim Indians or Chinese. See Chaudenson, *Des îles*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> See Speedy, “Transformative Mobilities.”

transition into settler “whiteness,” a move that saw them profit, like other settlers, from stolen Kanak land in New Caledonia,<sup>8</sup> also meant that the contributions of this black and mixed-race population in the Pacific were largely erased.

Official French republican “color-blindness,” ongoing *métissage* and, most importantly, the Réunionese Creoles’ status as free, French settlers (as opposed to convicts or Indigenous people), were factors in their absorption into the settler population in New Caledonia.<sup>9</sup> While the New Caledonian sugar plantations and, later, farms and plantations of other crops such as coffee, were the landing places for many,<sup>10</sup> some Réunionese, who had arrived as free or indentured laborers, dreamed bigger and sought their fortunes elsewhere in the Pacific.

Their trans-imperial mobilities must be understood within the context of the nineteenth-century Pacific, a hub of global exchange where encounters between anglophone, francophone and Pacific peoples (and others) to trade, work, worship and intermarry were more frequent than they are today. The whaling, sandalwood, bêche-de-mer, copra and blackbirding trades saw the forging of networks and interdependent relationships that crossed the imperial divide. Franco-British relations were a complex, entangled mix of competition, tension, cooperation and movement in and between islands and colonies. Missionary connections (both Catholic and Protestant) spanned the anglophone and francophone Pacifics and facilitated the mobility of converts/laborers into other colonial spaces. And the emergence of sugar industries in Queensland, Fiji, Samoa and Tahiti made them attractive destinations for some Réunionese planters and sugar workers once New Caledonia’s sugar industry fizzled out from the 1880s.<sup>11</sup>

This article follows the fascinating mobilities, multiple migrations and the differing trajectories of the Montrose and Florian families, two Creole families whose lives intersected in New Caledonia, Fiji, French Polynesia, and New Zealand. While Ernest Montrose acknowledged his Réunionese origins and claimed his status as a French citizen in his mobility, the Florians remained silent about their origins as they moved between colonies. How did these contrasting approaches to or perceptions of their identities affect their opportunities in different colonial spaces? In their trans-imperial movements, how did these families fit into or disrupt the white settler/black Indigenous binary promulgated by the colonial project? Did their perceived “blackness” impinge on their activities and lives in the Anglosphere? What traces of Creole knowledge and culture did they leave in their new island homes? And to what extent was silence an integral part of the slow violence, a gradual, incremental, and often invisible form of violence engendered by the ongoing effects of slavery and colonialism,<sup>12</sup> that they continued to experience, even oceans and generations away from enslavement in Réunion?

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<sup>7</sup> See Barbançon, *Le pays du non-dit* for a book-length analysis of this sociological phenomenon where, in New Caledonia, the *Caldoche* or settler population tended not to speak of their origins, especially if they had convict or non-white ancestors.

<sup>8</sup> See Speedy, “From the Indian Ocean”; Speedy, *Foundations*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> See Fuma, “L’esclavage et le métissage,” 114–18 for the complexity of “blackness” and “whiteness” and their fluidity in the Réunionese context as notions tied to the statuses of servile and free. For a discussion of race and status in New Caledonia, see Speedy, “From the Indian Ocean”; and Speedy, “Transformative Mobilities”.

<sup>10</sup> See Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Rechniewski, “The Perils of Proximity”; Hosie, *Challenge*; Bergantz, *French Connection*; Speedy, “Toppling Joubert”; Speedy, “Who Were the Reunionese Coolies.”

<sup>12</sup> Nixon’s concept of slow violence describes the delayed destructiveness of structural and attritional forms of violence that unfold out of sight over time and are thus often unacknowledged as violence (Nixon, *Slow Violence*). The silence around a (hidden) enslaved past and the social inequalities and intergenerational trauma that may ensue are also forms of slow violence that can have insidious effects on descendants.

*Ernest Montrose: Free Man of Color, Engagé and Vanilla Planter*

Ernest Montrose was born Louis Ernest Montrose in 1852 in Sainte-Marie, Réunion. He was of African, Malagasy and probably some European descent, a free person of color, whose family had been freed from slavery several generations before. Indeed, the family were land owners and had slaves themselves.<sup>13</sup> However, the financial hardship that came with the failing sugar industry must have hit Ernest hard. He was one of the Creoles who sought escape through signing up for a period of indenture in New Caledonia, in effect returning to something resembling the slavery that his family had left behind many years earlier.<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to the publication of a list of *engagés déserteurs* in *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* in 1875, we know that Ernest was an indentured worker of Boyer from Uraï. The indentured laborers on the list were described in language that evoked the runaway slave notices that appeared in newspapers in pre-abolition Réunion and around the French empire. Ernest's description reads: "Ernest Montrose, Creole, aged 24, 1.6 meters tall, missing his two upper front teeth."<sup>15</sup>

Réunionese Creole and "Malabar" (or Indian) indentured workers were brought to New Caledonia under the same conditions as those in Réunion, signing five-year contracts that could be renewed.<sup>16</sup> "Vagabondage" or absconding from an employer's property were very common "crimes" in New Caledonia and the court records are full of such cases of runaway *engagés*. In a recent research trip to New Caledonia, I scoured the archives of the *Tribunal correctionnel* for any sign of Ernest Montrose. While I found cases involving some of the other men who were on the published list of *engagés déserteurs*, I did not find Ernest.<sup>17</sup> He had almost certainly arrived in New Caledonia with his *engagiste* Casimir Boyer in 1874. Whether or not he was ever returned to Uraï to complete his indenture is unclear but, by 1880, he was working as a (free) carpenter in Nouméa.<sup>18</sup>

Pearl Montrose, wife of Ernest's grandson Alfred, then living in New Zealand, contacted me after seeing Ernest in the list of runaway indentured workers in my book, realizing that this was a missing puzzle piece in the genealogical research she had done on the Montrose family. Pearl sent me many archival documents and photos that she had gathered

<sup>13</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 6. See also Speedy, "From the Indian Ocean." This situation, where the formerly enslaved had slaves of their own, was not unusual in Réunion, particularly if their freedom was obtained through a close relationship to their master and they inherited property (which included slaves). See Barrasin, *Antoine Boucher*; Fuma, *L'esclavagisme*; Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries*.

<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps useful to place this return to a bonded form of labor within the context of Indian Ocean slavery, as discussed by the various authors in Schrikker and Wickramasinghe, *Being a Slave*, where environmental or economic factors, including indebtedness, might lead individuals into accepting a form of bonded labor. This was certainly the case in this sugar crisis years of the 1860s and 1870s in Réunion when free Creoles signed up as indentured laborers to go to New Caledonia (Speedy, "From the Indian Ocean").

<sup>15</sup> "Ernest MONTROZE, Créole, âge 24 ans, taille: 1m600; il lui manque deux dents de devant à la mâchoire supérieure." *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, le 22 décembre 1875, no. 848. See also Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*, 137–38 for a table containing the full list of runaway laborers from December 8, 1875 and December 22, 1875, published in *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Note, I have used the spelling Montrose as this is the spelling Ernest used in other documents.

<sup>16</sup> From the earliest immigration schemes, such as those outlined in the Brown and Byrne Treaty of 1858, indentured workers were to be engaged under the same conditions as those in Réunion. In 1874, New Caledonia adopted this practice into law with the passing of the *Arrêté réglant les conditions de l'introduction des travailleurs asiatiques, africains et océaniens, et le régime de leur protection dans la colonie* (Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*, 43–46, 125–26).

<sup>17</sup> Archives de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 23 W B 1, Tribunal correctionnel, 1872–1876. This research was undertaken in March 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*, 123; Martinet, *Originaires de la Réunion*, 81.

over the years.<sup>19</sup> As she was eighty, she wanted to pass this information on to me so that I could continue to research and tell the stories of the Montrose and Florian families in the Pacific. While she had found that Ernest's great-grandmother was an enslaved woman by the name of Eleanor and that his family were classified as free people of color in Réunion, Pearl had not known that Ernest was an *engagé* in New Caledonia.<sup>20</sup> She had thought that he had gone directly from Réunion to Fiji where he planted vanilla and where he married the pregnant and not quite sixteen-year-old Mathilde Florian, whose parents also hailed from Réunion.

Ernest likely arrived in Fiji from New Caledonia in the early 1880s. In a letter written to the governor of Fiji on November 21, 1887, he requested to lease land to grow vanilla and described his situation as follows:

[F]or many years I was involved in the planting of vanilla in Réunion. Since my arrival in Fiji, I have managed to find a few jobs and bring up my family. But today, in the current state of the colony, I find that I am reduced to poverty and am seeking any way to get out of this miserable position. I thought, therefore, *Monsieur le Gouverneur*, that by telling you about my project and praying that you consent to it, I would finally be able to find a useful occupation and work for the good of the colony. Could you please lease to me, at a good price, a few acres of land in the vicinity of Suva? I will then be able to go back to growing vanilla, sure that my knowledge and experience will yield good results.<sup>21</sup>

He continued his plea, mentioning the few vanilla plants that he had nursed back to good health in Mr. Milne's garden. In a subsequent letter, he requested a nine-year lease and proposed Mr. Henry Anson, a "landowner of Fiji," as his guarantor.<sup>22</sup> In a Memorandum of Agreement signed on February 16, 1888, the Colonial Government of Fiji granted Ernest a "piece of land in Suva containing fifteen acres more or less .... The said land to be held by the said Ernest Montrose as a tenant from year to year."<sup>23</sup> Ernest did not get the nine-year lease he had requested but his plan to cultivate vanilla was supported and Flagstaff vanilla plantation began.

Ernest's persistent pleas through the 1890s for a longer lease, however, fell on deaf ears. In an 1892 letter written in excellent English, perhaps by a lawyer or professional letter writer, Ernest requested a twenty-one-year lease, commencing retrospectively from 1888, for his "vanilla plantation" on the "Flagstaff Hill, Suva." While he was growing vanilla, he had gotten into debt and became embroiled in a court case with merchant Leslie Brown who had helped him with rent arrears but had then claimed a half-share partnership of Flagstaff plantation. In this letter, Ernest stated, "Considering that I may fairly claim the credit of initiating the development of the vanilla industry in Fiji, I trust that his Excellency will grant to me the like concession as I am prepared to pay to Mr. Brown all that may be due to him."

<sup>19</sup> Pearl Montrose, personal archive, sent to me in 2010. Pearl had taken it upon herself to research the Montrose family history for her children when her husband died at forty-five.

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see Speedy, "From the Indian Ocean."

<sup>21</sup> My translation. The original reads: "je me suis occupé pendant de longues années à La Réunion de la plantation de la vanille. Depuis mon arrivé à Fiji, j'ai pu jusqu'à ce jour trouver quelques emplois et élever ma famille. Mais aujourd'hui, en l'état actuel de la colonie, je me trouve réduit à la misère, cherchant partout un moyen de sortir de ce triste état. J'ai donc pensé, Monsieur le Gouverneur, qu'en vous faisant part de mon projet et vous priant ardemment de le favoriser, je pourrai enfin trouver un emploi utile, travailler pour le bien de la colonie ; si vous pouviez me louer à bon marché quelques acres de terrain dans les environs de Suva. Je me livrerai de nouveau à la culture de la vanille sûr que mon expérience et mes connaissances donneront d'heureux résultats." Ernest Montrose to the Governor of Fiji, November 21, 1887, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

<sup>22</sup> Ernest Montrose to the Governor of Fiji, December 9, 1887, Pearl Montrose, personal archive. Henry Anson was the Agent-General of Immigration in Fiji from 1882 to the end of 1887.

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum of Agreement between the Colonial Government of Fiji and Ernest Montrose, February 16, 1888, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

Bolstering his claim, Ernest added, “I beg to assure His Excellency that it is my intention to prosecute on a more extended scale the growth and preparation for the market of vanilla in this colony.” Moreover, he went on, he had had “numerous conversations” with Sir William McGregor,<sup>24</sup> Sir Charles Mitchell,<sup>25</sup> and Mr. Anson who assured him that “in consideration of the advantage accruing to the Colony at large by the development of the vanilla industry in Fiji, my tenure of the said land should not be interfered with but would practically amount to a grant in fee.”<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile the dispute between Brown and Montrose went to court. Brown sought dissolution of partnership while Montrose claimed that there was no partnership as he had been duped into signing an agreement that he did not understand. While an initial agreement in French had been drawn up by Brown and was signed by both parties, this was “subsequently embodied in a more formal document, drawn up in English by the plaintiff’s [Brown’s] solicitor, but containing two additional clauses, and this document was on the 21<sup>st</sup> November executed by both parties in the office of the plaintiff’s solicitor.”<sup>27</sup> The judge was not swayed by the argument that, as a Frenchman and a debtor of Brown, Ernest had been taken advantage of and induced into signing the agreement and found in favor of the (white anglophone) plaintiff, ordering a dissolution of partnership, repayment of Brown’s capital and court costs. The direction to sell Flagstaff to divide assets, however, was not followed, presumably as it was not owned but rented.

On December 17, 1892, Ernest implored the Governor to “please have pity for the sake of [his] children,” stating the he was “not a Refugee.” He asked to have “a list for the land” that he leased, on which he had “planted 4 acres of vanilla, and 3 acres of coffee.” He noted that he owed thirty pounds to the government and some one hundred and fifty pounds to Mr. Brown that he proposed to pay so that he could “continue to have a successful cultivation that will grow and prosper for Fiji.”<sup>28</sup> The following month, he advised the Colonial Secretary that he had “completed arrangements” with Brown over his vanilla plantation, “by which the property becomes solely mine (receipt attached).” He then requested again “that his Excellency may be pleased to grant me a lease of the land for a period of 21 years at the rate of £7.10.0 per annum.”<sup>29</sup>

This was refused and, in an earlier letter, Ernest was advised by the Commissioner of Lands, that the Governor was “unable in any way to recognise your claim to the credit of cultivating vanilla planting in Fiji, or its development as an industry” and “does not feel that you are entitled to any concession whatever from the colonial Government.”<sup>30</sup> Ernest appeared to have continued on with the year-to-year lease and there was no further correspondence until August 30, 1897, a few weeks after he had married Mathilde Florian, his previous family seemingly no longer in the picture.<sup>31</sup> He addressed the governor, this time

<sup>24</sup> This was Sir William MacGregor, doctor, chief medical and health officer, treasurer, colonial secretary and acting governor of Fiji (1885, 1887, 1888) who was also a French-speaker and had previously worked in both the Seychelles and Mauritius. See Joyce, “MacGregor.” Ernest Montrose may well have had conversations with him, given the Franco-Indian Ocean connection.

<sup>25</sup> Governor of Fiji, 1887–1888.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Montrose to the Commissioner of Lands, August 31, 1892, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

<sup>27</sup> Udal, “Civil Jurisdiction, Brown vs Montrose,” 290. The case ran from October 28 to November 21, 1892.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Montrose to the Governor of Fiji, November 17, 1892, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Montrose to the Colonial Secretary, December 16, 1892, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

<sup>30</sup> The Commissioner of Lands A. Stewart to Ernest Montrose, September 21, 1892, Pearl Montrose, private archive.

<sup>31</sup> Pearl Montrose did not know what had become of Ernest’s previous family and I have not, to date, discovered what became of them either. However, I have noted that some of the Florian children born in Suva have godparents with the surname of Montrose. It seems likely that these were Ernest’s children. Maria Florian, born in 1887, had Adrian Montrose as a godparent; Jean-Baptiste Florian, born in 1892, had Alice Montrose; Julian

in halting English, noting “I can nearly at all speak English I am of French Nation” asking again that he be granted the land in title of cession as repayment for his role in initiating the development of the vanilla industry in Fiji, something, he claimed, was promised to him by Governors Mitchell and MacGregor should his Flagstaff plantation prosper. He said that he had been exporting his vanilla for four years (since 1893) and that “many planters commence in planting it and in sometime it will be a great resource for Fiji as it was for the island of Réunion.”<sup>32</sup> Governor O’Brien categorically refused Ernest’s request, like his predecessor he was “unable to assist [him] any further.”<sup>33</sup>

If landownership was more or less unattainable for settlers after Fiji became a British colony,<sup>34</sup> to what extent, we have to wonder, were these barriers to Ernest’s requests for a longer lease due to his otherness, his non-Britishness, his Frenchness, his Catholicism or his unmentioned “blackness”? The white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan, which later morphed into the British Subjects Mutual Protection Society, was active in Fiji from the 1870s and Ernest may have faced clandestine opposition from this and other racist settler elements.<sup>35</sup> While Ernest alleged that he had the support of earlier administrators and governors (Mitchell and MacGregor), Governors Thurston and O’Brien clearly did not share their confidence. Indeed, Ernest’s claims to have kick-started the vanilla industry in Fiji were dismissed out of hand. It is true that he was likely not the first person to have grown vanilla in Fiji. In 1888, the same year that Ernest’s lease on the land at Flagstaff began, the *Evening Post* reported on the “excellent samples of vanilla grown in Fiji on Mr Livingstone’s estate” that was “the product of a nursery started four years ago.”<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Ernest may well have been the first to introduce “Bourbon” vanilla, the variety grown in his home country of Réunion, and he was certainly among the first to successfully grow and export vanilla and have the vision to anticipate its future value as a colonial crop for Fiji.

The sense of aggrievement that comes through in his later letters is understandable as the powers that be (the judge in his court case, the governors and land commissioner) failed to recognize his worth and contribution, due, at least partially, to his status as a non-white other. In his correspondence, Ernest was, however, forthright in his identity as being a French citizen from Réunion and a holder of the Creole knowledge of vanilla cultivation, the manual pollination of the vanilla orchid invented by former Réunionese slave Edmond Albius,<sup>37</sup> that he had brought to Fiji. He was not, as he vehemently stated, “a Refugee.” It is telling that he would have to declare who he was and who he was not in his dealings with the colonial administration. It would seem as if, in his remaking of himself in his mobility, his mindset was still attuned to the Réunionese (and subsequent New Caledonian) conception of “whiteness,” which his free, French settler status afforded him. In Fiji, however, while it remained in the realm of the unspoken, his dark skin color appears to have smudged his legitimacy in the settler sphere under the influence of American color-based racism.

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Florian, born in 1895 had Julian and Anna Florian as godparents; and James Alphonsus Joseph Florian had A. Montrose as his godfather. See Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 95, 98, 100, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Montrose to the Governor of Fiji, August 30, 1897, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

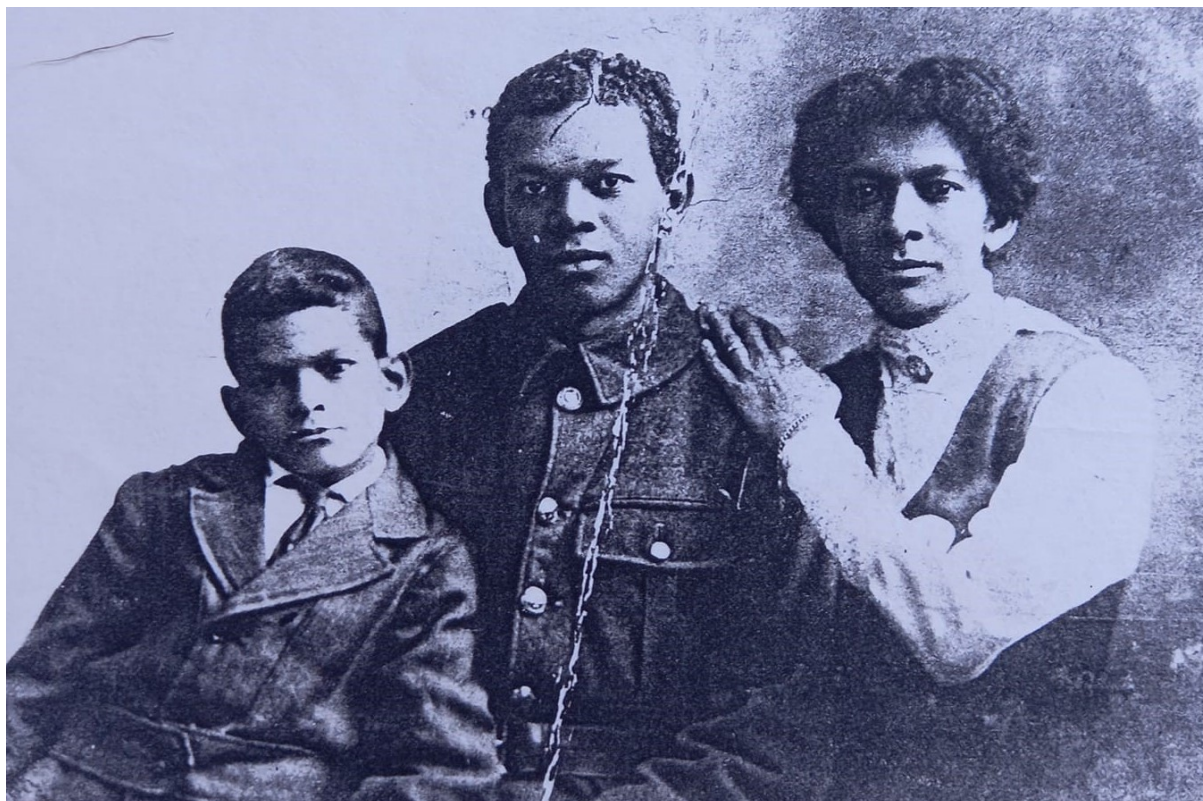
<sup>33</sup> The Colonial Secretary of Fiji to Ernest Montrose, September 4, 1897, Pearl Montrose, personal archive.

<sup>34</sup> After the Deed of Cession to the British was signed in 1874, sale of Fijian land to settlers was stopped. Pre-Cession claims went through the Lands Claims Commission. For details on the complexities of land ownership in Fiji, see, for example, McNaught, *The Fijian Colonial Experience* or Jolly, *Custom and the Way of the Land*.

<sup>35</sup> The Ku Klux Klan arrived in Fiji with American planters who migrated after the US Civil War, the abolition of slavery and the slump in the cotton industry. While they were quite visible prior to British rule, they then moved to more secretive meetings and activities. See, for example, Horne, *The White Pacific*; Banivanua-Mar, “Cannibalism and Colonialism.”

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, “Fijian News.”

<sup>37</sup> For Albius’ story, see Chérier, *La vraie couleur*.



**Figure 1.** William, George and Mathilde Montrose née Florian. George Montrose (middle) enlisted in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and was sent to Southampton in 1918 at the age of twenty. This photo with his mother and (half) brother was taken before he left for the war. Photo credit: Pearl Montrose. Reproduced with permission.

Ernest and Mathilde's son George was born in 1898 at the Flagstaff plantation (see fig. 1). Their relationship, however, did not last long. Mathilde migrated to New Zealand in 1907, claiming British citizenship despite being born in New Caledonia.<sup>38</sup> She gave birth to her second child, William, in Auckland in 1908.<sup>39</sup> Ernest, however, had long since disappeared. Pearl had assumed he had remained in Fiji but she had been unable to find his death certificate and she put this down to there having been fires in the archives.<sup>40</sup> The reality is more fascinating. Pearl wrote to me excitedly later that year to say that Ernest, a cultivator, had died in Tahiti in 1929.<sup>41</sup> In 2017, I was contacted by another of Ernest's descendants, Yacine Benhalima, who had also found the fugitive *engagé* in my book, and he sent me Ernest's death certificate.<sup>42</sup> Ernest had moved to Tahiti in the early 1900s. While still legally married to Mathilde, thus committing bigamy, perhaps not for the first time, he wed Miriama

<sup>38</sup> Archives New Zealand, Wellington, Passenger Lists, 1839–1973, Montrose, 4 Feb 1907, Hauroto. Available online: [www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6SVS-H9R?i=8&cc=1609792&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AQJDF-V99T](http://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6SVS-H9R?i=8&cc=1609792&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AQJDF-V99T) (accessed Dec. 19, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> William's father was not Ernest Montrose, despite Mathilde declaring him as such on William's birth certificate. William later changed his surname to Way, the surname of Mathilde's second husband, Edgar Reginald Way, who she married in 1921. See Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 38, 41, 91.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Pearl Montrose, personal communication, July 31, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Acte de décès, Ernest Montrose, November 1, 1929, no. 16, Papeari, French Polynesia. Available at <https://en.geneanet.org/archives/actes/actesenligne/2466729> (accessed Dec. 20, 2022).



Taumi in 1904, and the couple had at least nine children.<sup>43</sup> Miriama, a Mā'ohi, or Indigenous Tahitian, had family land in Papeari.<sup>44</sup> And so, after all the years in Fiji trying to go through the colonial system to acquire Fijian land as a settler, a system in which his “blackness” was to play against him even if it was not made explicit, finally, in Tahiti, through marriage to an Indigenous woman, Ernest was able to occupy and farm the land he had always desired. In his *périples*, Ernest never gave up on his agricultural dreams of land ownership and vanilla cultivation and he did not keep his Réunionese identity a secret. On his way to achieving his goals, however, he left behind at least two families.

If Ernest Montrose's story of multiple migrations highlights his tenacity to improve his situation, it also reflects the clash between his own perceived “whiteness” in French republican terms and his reception as a dark-skinned French man in the Fijian context, an otherness that perhaps proved too much of a barrier for him to gain acceptance into the settler fold. The Florian family, in contrast to Ernest, chose to maintain silence around their Réunionese and enslaved heritage. Did this assuage or reinforce the slow violence that they continued to face in their mobilities?

### *The Florian Family*

In our correspondence, Pearl Montrose had mentioned that she had written an (incomplete and unpublished) family history that was in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. I did not get to see *A Voyage around our Past: Montrose-Florian Family History* until very recently (in 2022) when I found that there was also a copy in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington. What struck me immediately upon reading this book was the continuation of the *non-dit* among the descendants in the Florian family. “The Florian family seem to have been the most dis-jointed and fragmented family I have come across in my researching and writing family histories,” Pearl herself wrote.<sup>45</sup> Auckland-born Thomas Tague, for instance, Mathilde Florian's younger sister Maria's son, was quite in the dark about his family's origins. He told Pearl, “Nobody spoke of family origins, family relations or family connections.”<sup>46</sup>

Thomas' maternal grandparents, Aston Florian and Julia Festin, were descendants of enslaved people in Réunion and had been settlers in New Caledonia, both travelling there from Saint-Denis on the *Néréide* in October 1871.<sup>47</sup> Yet this crucial fact was not passed on to their grandchildren, perhaps not even to their children, a silence and form of slow violence that would adversely affect their descendants in their sense of self. Thomas, for instance, imagined his veiled past as one rooted in the penal system and his ancestors hailing from metropolitan France. He posited:

Napoleon III exiled many radical and political activists to the penal colony of Réunion Island. French authorities don't want to know – they seem to keep no records of political expulsions, so this could explain how the families ... made their way from Réunion to New Caledonia (another penal settlement) and then to

<sup>43</sup> Yacine Benhalima, “Miriama Taumi.” Available at Geneanet, <https://gw.geneanet.org/ybenhalima?lang=en&pz=yacine&nz=benhalima&p=miriama&n=taumi> (accessed Dec. 20, 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Yacine Benhalima, personal communication, April 17, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> I was astounded to find Aston Florian, employee of Ernest Jean-Baptiste Compas, traveling on board the same ship as Toussaint Festin, his wife Euphémie Lorete and their six children, including the then eight-year-old Julia in the Archives départementales de La Réunion, 4M133, Listes nominatives pour les passagers pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1869–1874. Aston's age was declared to be eighteen, however, as he was born on August 8, 1855, at Saint-Denis, he was actually only sixteen. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, État Civil, Saint-Denis, La Réunion, August 22, 1855.

Fiji – a British colony with freedom for its citizens, and the chance of becoming British subjects. So possibly by the time some of them arrived in Auckland ... they wanted to conceal their previous history and appear as free immigrants. Birth records were a little haphazard in those days, some countries eagerly sought new arrivals ... and not too many questions were asked about origins, previous marriages, abandoned wives and children etc. Some new arrivals deliberately sought a fresh chance to make new beginnings in life. Hence there was a reluctance to talk about origins, especially if they did not have a British tradition .... This could explain the vague mystery about forebears as I experienced as a boy, at least about the Florian side of the family.<sup>48</sup>

There is much to unpack in Thomas' theories, not least the assertion of the lack of French record-keeping, but the mystery around his family had nothing to do with convict ancestors. Réunion was not a penal colony. Although New Caledonia was one, his grandparents were not transported there to the penitentiary. His family names were on the lists of freed slave names from Réunion that I had uncovered in my archival research.<sup>49</sup> All of them had a much longer history in Réunion that had nothing to do with Napoléon III and everything to do with slavery.

In 1871, Julia's father, Toussaint Festin, a "Creole, aged 39 ... hard-working and of good conduct"<sup>50</sup> and an *affranchi* of 1848, wrote to the governor of Réunion requesting a free passage for himself, his wife and six children to New Caledonia. Victim of the worsening Réunionese economy, he described his situation as follows:

I have, for a very long time, worked as a shoemaker and a carpenter. I am highly skilled in both trades and can supply proof of this in the form of trustworthy certificates. For the past few years, the little daily work that my wife (a seamstress) and I get does not cover our most basic needs. My brother-in-law was once a wretch here in Bourbon. He has lived in New Caledonia for only three years and is now a great success. He is very happy and has just acquired a lovely piece of land on which he is building a beautiful house and is calling my family and I to join him.<sup>51</sup>

While there is no letter from sixteen-year-old Aston Florian in the archives, it is safe to assume that poverty also drove him to leave with his employer for New Caledonia. Born Floriant Asthon (Clarisse) to Alexandrine Clarisse and an unknown father in 1855, his changing name attests to a remaking of himself in his mobility while also demonstrating the difficulties that descendants of the formerly enslaved face when tracing their ancestry through a "surname." While Aston was not enslaved himself, his grandmother, Clarisse, was. She was freed along with her mother, Lucine, a Malagasy woman, her father Hilaire, a Creole, and her three siblings by their "owner" François Gédéon Moreau of Saint André in 1797.<sup>52</sup> In 1848,

<sup>48</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies*; and Speedy, "From the Indian Ocean to the Pacific."

<sup>50</sup> Letter from the Police Commissioner of Saint-Denis in support of Toussaint Festin, September 20, 1871, Archives départementales de La Réunion, 4M130, Demandes de passage pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1871.

<sup>51</sup> My translation. The original reads: "J'exerce depuis fort longtemps les métiers de cordonnier et de charpentier ; je suis très habile dans ces métiers, je puis vous en administrer la preuve par des certificats dignes de foi.

Depuis quelques années mon petit travail quotidien ainsi que celui de ma femme couturière achevée ne peut [*sic*] suffire à nos besoins les plus nécessaires. Mon beau-frère jadis malheureux ici à Bourbon, habite depuis trois années seulement la Nouvelle-Calédonie, a parfaitement réussi, il est très heureux et vient d'acquérir une jolie propriété sur laquelle il a fait édifier une belle maison, il m'appelle ainsi que ma famille auprès de lui."

Letter from Toussaint Festin to the Governor of Réunion, Saint Benoît, September 23, 1871, Archives départementales de La Réunion, 4M130, Demandes de passage pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1871.

<sup>52</sup> Archives départementales de La Réunion, Acte d'affranchissement, 29 nivôse an V, Saint-Denis (Ile de la Réunion). I would like to thank Réunionese genealogist Claude Rossignol for his help in untangling this trail of names and locating this certificate of manumission.

Clarisse Lucine, having taken her mother's name as her surname, was living in Saint-Denis with her five children, the youngest being Alexandrine Clarisse, who also went by Alexandrine Clarisse-Hilaire, using both her mother's and grand-father's names.<sup>53</sup> Florian Asthon Clarisse departed Réunion as Aston Florian, dropping his mother's name and using his first name as his new "surname." Interestingly, in 1880, on his New Caledonian marriage certificate to Julia, Aston declared his mother as "Alexandrine Hilaire," using his formerly enslaved great-grandfather's first name.<sup>54</sup> It would seem, at least for Aston, that this family history was known. Did he pass this knowledge on to his children or did he hold it back for fear it might encumber their futures in their new environments?

Aston worked as a carpenter in Nouméa. His path may well have crossed with Ernest Montrose's at this time as he too was a carpenter in this town. Julia gave birth to Mathilde, their first child, there on September 12, 1881.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after, the couple left for Suva where they had six more children. Pearl speculated that Aston perhaps used his carpentry skills in "the early building programme of the Suva township."<sup>56</sup> Curiously, the fluidity of names continued in their trans-imperial shift. In Fiji, Aston transformed into Gaston and Julia gave her maiden name as Toussaint, her father's first name, rather than Festin.<sup>57</sup> We can only speculate as to whether this was some attempt to fit in, administrative errors, or a concerted effort, on the part of Julia and Aston, to hide their past and remake their future. Perhaps hoping to start a new tradition, their first child born in Fiji in 1885 was named Gaston Nicholas. Like his sister Mathilde and at least three of his younger siblings (Maria, Julian, and Felecia), Gaston Nicholas would eventually leave Fiji for New Zealand. Each Florian sibling would remain silent about their origins and, especially in the case of the boys, find adapting to life in the British colony challenging.

### *Gaston Nicholas Florian*

Before moving to New Zealand, Gaston Nicholas had a family in Fiji. He married Samoan-born Filiata Fouti in 1911 in Suva and had three children. Filiata died in Apia in 1916 but Gaston had moved to New Zealand prior to this, leaving his wife and children behind.<sup>58</sup> Pearl mentioned that he married his second wife, Olive Taylor, in 1918 in England, bringing her back to New Zealand after the First World War.<sup>59</sup> I started searching for information about Gaston's service and immediately found this striking portrait of him in a New Zealand army uniform (fig. 2).

<sup>53</sup> Archives départementales de La Réunion, 6M353, Recensement Saint-Denis, 1848.

<sup>54</sup> Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, État Civil, Nouméa, Nouvelle-Calédonie, October 9, 1880.

<sup>55</sup> Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, État Civil, Nouméa, Nouvelle-Calédonie, September 12, 1881.

<sup>56</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 85.

<sup>57</sup> These name changes can be seen in, for example, their children's birth and marriage certificates in Fiji and Mathilde's death certificate in New Zealand. See, for example, Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 90, 91, 103. The latter contains the variant (and surely a misspelling) Jaston. Gaston Nicholas, does, however, name his father as Aston Florian in army records in New Zealand.

<sup>58</sup> Gaston's war records list Filiata Florian as his next of kin in July 1916, she is later listed as deceased and his three children (Marie, James Joseph, and Clementina) are named with their dates and places of birth in Fiji. Archives New Zealand, Wellington, FLORIAN, Gaston – WWI 20801, WWII 5/1/993 – Army. Marie is also known as Maria.

<sup>59</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 92.



**Figure 2.** Portrait of Private Florian of the Māori Contingent, New Zealand Māori Pioneer Battalion, wearing a New Zealand Returned Soldiers Association Badge, not under copyright. DigitalNZ <https://digitalnz.org/records/30051299>

Gaston and his brother Julian, both having disembarked in New Zealand just two days before,<sup>60</sup> had answered an Auckland recruitment campaign and enlisted at Narrow Neck camp on July 19, 1916.<sup>61</sup> Along with other people from around the Pacific, Gaston, a “Fijian” joined the Māori Contingent in the New Zealand Māori Pioneer Battalion, and bizarrely, despite his birthplace being recorded as Suva, Fiji, his iwi or “tribe” is listed as “Māori” on the Online Cenotaph.<sup>62</sup> This, it would seem, was a Pākehā (settler) move to lump all of the brown men together as Māori. Gaston left for the Western Front on the troop ship *Tofua* in September 1916, landing in Plymouth, England, on December 29, 1916.<sup>63</sup> Fascinatingly, in one those familial palimpsests, over ten years later, his daughter Maria would travel on this

<sup>60</sup> Archives New Zealand, Wellington, Passenger Lists, 1839–1973, Florian, July 17, 1916, Talune. Available online at [www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJDF-1DMB](http://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QJDF-1DMB) (accessed Dec. 22, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous, “The Recruiting Campaign”.

<sup>62</sup> Gaston Florian, Online Cenotaph, [www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C79757](http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C79757) (accessed Dec. 21, 2022).

<sup>63</sup> Archives New Zealand, Wellington, FLORIAN, Gaston – WWI 20801, WWII 5/1/993 – Army.

same ship from Samoa to New Zealand to take up her high school studies.<sup>64</sup> Gaston spent the rest of the war fighting in Western Europe and was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.<sup>65</sup> His slightly slippery identity, his evident “blackness” being read as, or being passed off as, Indigenoussness by Pākehā, his wartime contribution, and his return to New Zealand with a British wife appeared to be his pathways to fit into his adopted society. His silence on these matters of identity, however, seem ultimately to have exacerbated the slow violence he was experiencing.

Fitting in for Gaston was not easy. Steady work was not easy. Storekeeper, interpreter, trader, railway clerk, laborer, failed fruit shop owner and, shortly before his death, clerk at the Papakura military camp in South Auckland, Gaston’s life after the war seemed unsettled.<sup>66</sup> Relationships were not easy either. His nephew, Thomas Tague, remembered that “Gaston and Olive did have some marital difficulties” and his family “took in Olive and the children for a while.... Later when the final separation came Gaston [came] back to live with [us] in Parnell.”<sup>67</sup> Thomas did not mention the particulars of the divorce or Gaston’s alcoholism. Nor was there any comment on the loss of Gaston and Olive’s third child, Gordon Marcell, who had died in 1928 at just six months old.<sup>68</sup> This must also have placed strain on the relationship. In 1938, the *New Zealand Herald* reported on Olive’s divorce petition: “In consequence of [Gaston’s] drinking habits she had to take proceedings for separation and maintenance against him.... In January, 1934, he came to her place and assaulted her and the police had to intervene.... Since they had been separated, she had had to maintain herself and two children mostly by her own efforts.”<sup>69</sup> Olive was granted the divorce with custody of both surviving children.

In March of that year, Gaston, described as “a native of New Caledonia” with a “dark” complexion, “black” hair, “brown” eyes, a “large” nose, and with “G.N.F” (Gaston Nicholas Florian) tattooed on his left wrist and a star behind his left knee, was before the courts charged with “default of maintenance.” He was found guilty and sentenced to a month in prison.<sup>70</sup> Gaston’s nationality was also recorded as New Caledonian when he worked as a trimmer on steamships before the war<sup>71</sup> and in a military X-Ray report in 1941.<sup>72</sup> His birthplace was listed as “New Zealand” when he re-enlisted in the army at the age of fifty-five.<sup>73</sup> And, perhaps the most curious of all, in 1937 when “returned soldier” Gaston Florian collapsed in the street, fracturing his skull, the *New Zealand Herald* described him as “a native of Canada” further smudging his identity.<sup>74</sup> If the Canadian identity might have come from the imagination of the newspaper reporter, the others (New Caledonian, New Zealander)

<sup>64</sup> Archives New Zealand, Wellington, Passenger Lists, 1839–1973, Florian, March 21, 1927, *Tofua*. Available online at [www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KLYN-51K](http://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KLYN-51K) (accessed Dec. 22, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Gaston Florian, Online Cenotaph, [www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C79757](http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C79757) (accessed Dec. 21, 2022).

<sup>66</sup> Gaston’s various jobs are listed on the New Zealand Electoral Rolls, 1853–1981: 1922, Auckland – Parnell, 1925, Auckland – Parnell, 1928, Auckland – Auckland East, 1931, Auckland – Auckland East, 1938, Auckland – Auckland Central, 1941, Auckland – Auckland Central, 1943, Auckland – Auckland Central, 1943, Auckland – Auckland East. Available online at [www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3662227](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3662227) (accessed June 22, 2022). Others were mentioned by Pearl in Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 92.

<sup>67</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 92.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, “Deaths”.

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous, “Divorce Cases”.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, “Return of Prisoners as Discharged from Gaols”.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826–1922: *Atua*, from the Port of Apia to Sydney, New South Wales, June 14, 1916.

<sup>72</sup> Archives New Zealand, Wellington, FLORIAN, Gaston – WWI 20801, WWII 5/1/993 – Army.

<sup>73</sup> Document undated but probably in 1940 or 1941. Archives New Zealand, Wellington, FLORIAN, Gaston – WWI 20801, WWII 5/1/993 – Army.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, “Fracture of Skull”.

seem to have been given by Gaston himself. What advantage might he have gained from this cherry-picking of origins? He was not born in New Caledonia but did he believe that his parents were? And, through them, might he think that he could claim this identity? Nowhere, however, did he mention a connection to Réunion Island. Gaston died in 1944, his next of kin listed in his military records as James Joseph Florian, his son with his first wife Filiata; his relationship with Rupert Gaston, his son with Olive, having apparently long since broken down “so it is no wonder they had kept themselves so isolated,” his grandson Terrence observed.<sup>75</sup>

### *Julian Florian*

Julian Florian (see fig. 3), born in Suva in 1895, enlisted in the Māori Pioneer Battalion with his brother Gaston but was rejected as unfit for service.<sup>76</sup> Undeterred, he crossed the Tasman, lied about the rejection, and went to war with the Australian Imperial Forces.<sup>77</sup> Like his older brother, before the war Julian enjoyed a certain mobility as a crew member on the trans-Pacific Island steamers, the “webs of empire” that linked the Islands, Australia and New Zealand with news, travelers, and trade goods.<sup>78</sup> He was employed as a “boy” and “brass boy” prior to enlisting and worked again on the steamships as a fireman and then as a cook for a time after returning from the war.<sup>79</sup> As it seemed for his brother too, the static nature of life in the settler colony of New Zealand seemed stifling, contrary to his existence, and drunkenness and violence were also to feature in his quotidian. Thomas Tague remembered him as a “sad and lonely man,” “unmarried” and who would “intermittently turn up at our house to stay a short while, spend a short time each day at the local pub, then disappear into obscurity again.” Julian was a cook for a time during the Depression but seemed to drift, “barely existing,” Pearl said, dying alone in Dannevirke hospital in 1941.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 94.

<sup>76</sup> On August 8, 1916, the Commandant of Narrow Neck Camp ordered a Medical Board meeting to report on the health of Private J H Florian: “The Board having assembled pursuant to order, proceed to examine the above-named individual, and find that he has been suffering from rheumatism and has not been able to do more than two days drill since going with camp.” Discharge was recommended. Archives New Zealand, Wellington, FLORIAN, Julian – WWI 20800 – Army.

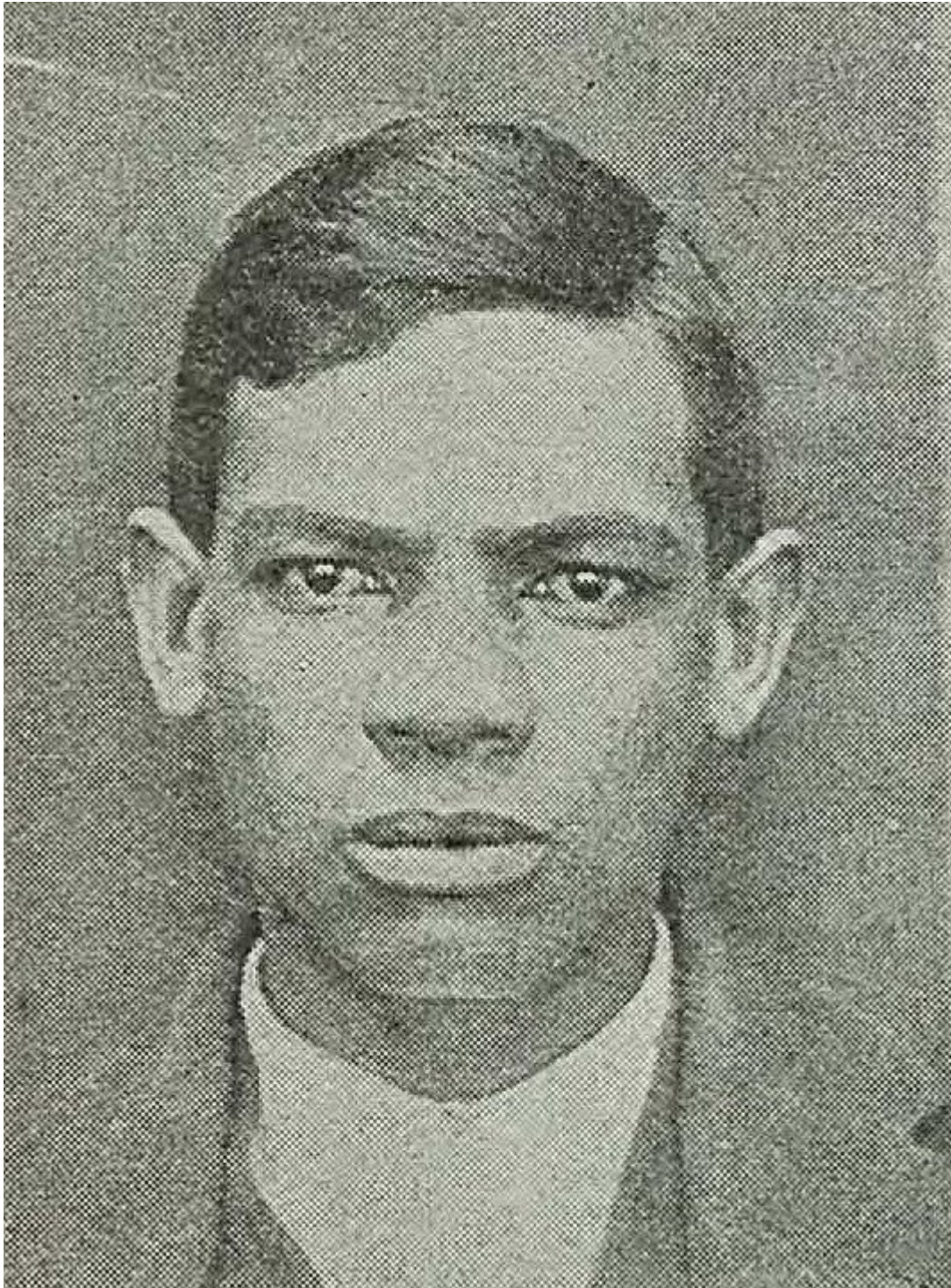
<sup>77</sup> Julian fought in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, no. 3046 for the Australian Imperial Forces. On his Attestation Form for Enlistment, he answered “No” to the question, “Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty’s service?” National Archives of Australia, Australian World War I Service Records, 1914–1920, Julian Florian. Available at <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=4007310&isAv=N> (accessed April 13, 2023).

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Steel, *Oceania Under Steam*; Kennerley, “Stoking the Boilers.”

<sup>79</sup> In 1916, Julian was working on the *Atua*, with records of him arriving in Sydney from Suva and Apia. In 1919, he was a fireman on the *Fiona* that went from Suva to Auckland to Sydney. He was listed as engaged on the *Kaitoke* on April 7, 1921. New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826–1922, *Atua*, from the Port of Apia to Sydney, New South Wales, June 14, 1916, *Atua* from the Port of Suva to Sydney, New South Wales, October 4, 1916, *Atua* from the Port of Suva to Sydney, New South Wales, October 31, 1916. *Fiona* from Fiji via the port of Auckland to Sydney, New South Wales, September 21, 1919.

<sup>80</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 100.





**Figure 3.** Julian Florian. P.G. 21/572. F.P. Class 13/18 R/A (OI/O) 13. Source: *New Zealand Police Gazette*, XLVII, issue 1, January 11, 1922, 2 (Supplement), not under copyright. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/periodicals/NZPG19220111.2.16.2.8>

In contrast to this rather bleak assessment of Julian, I was pleased to find evidence of a glimpse of joy in his life, even if it did get him into trouble. In 1920, while in Sydney, Julian and three friends were arrested for “footpath jazzing.” The report quoted Constable McCarron, at the Central Police Court, as saying, “the four accused were drinking beer and jazzing on the footway. They were very drunk, and a crowd had collected around them.” McCarron was referring to “Julian Florian, aged 26, laborer, Norman Morton, aged 35, laborer; Theresa Willis, aged 34, domestic, and Leah Brown, aged 26, domestic, who were

each charged with behaving in an offensive manner in List Lane.”<sup>81</sup> A slight sense of moral panic is conveyed in the report. While Julian’s “blackness” is not mentioned, one wonders if it may have played some role in his arrest.

After his return from the war, Julian began running afoul of the law. In addition to the “footpath jazzing” in Sydney, he was arrested for drunkenness in Newcastle.<sup>82</sup> In August 1921 he was before the courts in Auckland, New Zealand and fined for using threatening behavior. On his release from the Magistrates’ Court, his distinguishing marks – tattoos of a “nude woman and nurse’s head on left forearm” – were recorded.<sup>83</sup> Two months later, Julian, described in various reports as “a native of Fiji,” a “half-caste,” a “Fijian,” and an “Islander” was involved in what was termed a “racial riot.” The *Auckland Star* reported:

There was an exciting racial riot in Cook Street yesterday evening, resulting in the knocking out of Du Moy, a Chinese.... From what can be gleaned of the affair ... some Islanders came in contact with a Chinaman, and commenced passing uncomplimentary remarks concerning the Celestial. This the Chinaman is said to have resented forcibly, and a melee ensued, in which several of his compatriots, summoned by his shout for assistance, swiftly joined. A fierce riot followed, until one of the Chinamen was stretched senseless on the roadway, when the Islanders decamped.... Two Islanders were arrested by the police later that evening.... This morning Julian Florian and John Peckham, two half-castes, natives of Fiji, were ... charged with having assaulted Du Moy.<sup>84</sup>

The essentialist categories used to describe the actors in this episode (Fijian, half-caste, native, Islander, Chinaman, Celestial etc.) are striking and we see here how Julian’s “Fijianness” was perceived as Indigenous Fijian. Yet, he was not an Indigenous Fijian; his true origins were never imagined by the Pākehā society in which he lived. Du Moy subsequently died and the charges against the “Islanders” were upped to murder<sup>85</sup> before being downgraded to manslaughter as more details of the incident were revealed. Julian Florian escaped conviction, however, and was discharged, one witness stating that “he was too drunk to fight.”<sup>86</sup> Julian’s alcoholism, however, continued to scar his life. He appeared in the newspapers throughout the 1930s convicted for drunkenness and he spent time in and out of jail.<sup>87</sup>

Along with the undoubted trauma suffered in the war, to what extent were racism from without and the slow violence of intergenerational trauma (from slavery and the silences around their family history) from within, both concealed and not talked about, part of Gaston and Julian’s everyday existence, part of their everyday torments? In New Zealand, the racial ambiguity of the Florians, saw them attributed (and perhaps claim) Indigenous identities (Fijian, New Caledonian, Māori) among others. It is remarkable, though, that Thomas Tague did not see, mention, or even imagine his mother’s family’s “blackness.” Terrence, Gaston Nicholas’ grandson did not realize until his teenage years that there were other Florian families in New Zealand, all descended from the original Aston and Julia in Fiji. He noted, “I have found the Florian name only very occasionally in Europe but in this part of the globe all seem to be related.”<sup>88</sup> It is interesting too that, like Thomas Tague, his assumption is that the Florian name originated in Europe. As I have explained above, however, Florian was not a

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous, “Footpath Jazzing”.

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous, “Newcastle Police Court”.

<sup>83</sup> Anonymous, “Return of Persons,” 572.

<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, “Racial Riot”.

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous, “Fijians Charged with Murder”.

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, “Charge of Murder Reduced”.

<sup>87</sup> Just one example is his conviction and imprisonment for fourteen days on his fourth statutory charge of drunkenness in February, 1938. Anonymous, “Magistrate’s Court”.

<sup>88</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 94.



“surname” as such; at least not one that could be traced back through many generations. Rather it was the name (his original first name) that their forbear chose to use in his mobility, a new “surname” for a new life. Moreover, none of the descendants knew about, or at least they did not mention, the violent behavior of Gaston and, particularly, Julian, although Thomas Tague’s recollection of him staying a while at his mother’s house before disappearing “into obscurity again” may have been an oblique reference to his uncle’s time spent in prison.<sup>89</sup> Here again we see the perpetuation of the *non-dit*, the slow violence of silence, from one generation to the next.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on archives, newspapers and family histories of the Montrose and Florian families to bring together some of the fragments of the forgotten, entangled lives of their little-known ancestors. Ernest Montrose was a Creole from Réunion who wrote (and presumably spoke) about his origins (although perhaps omitting his stint as an indentured worker in New Caledonia) and was proud to bring his Creole knowledge to the Pacific, growing vanilla in both Fiji and Tahiti. He undoubtedly faced discrimination in Fiji and, despite his efforts to integrate and work in with the settler society there, was ultimately unable to find his place. The color-based racism in colonial Fiji, heightened by the influx of cotton planters from the American South and the presence of the Ku Klux Klan and the British Subjects Mutual Protection Society, meant that whatever Ernest’s self-perception was, colonial society could not see past his “blackness.” For him, a third marriage with a Mā’ohi woman in Tahiti, accompanied by landownership, meant that he was able to settle and live in one spot. Interestingly, his children with Miriama were apparently aware of their father’s background.

For the Florians, however, the silence they kept about their ancestry meant that there was little chance for them to pass on their Creole culture and knowledge to their children and grandchildren. This may have been a survival mechanism but the loss seemed to have had an especially negative effect on the second generation, particularly on Gaston and Julian who, along with wartime trauma, seemed to struggle with their identity and the way that Pākehā society read their “blackness.” In the Florians’ trans-imperial migration, memories of Réunion, family history, and even names were obfuscated and descendants had no idea who they were or where their families had come from. Indeed, all of this family secrecy led to the imagining of fantastical origin stories that were quite far from reality. The descendants might not have known their family history but they sensed that there was something untoward in their ancestors’ past that had been hidden. The loss of family connections, the isolation, the unspoken intergenerational trauma, the unmentioned “blackness,” the ambiguous relationship with Indigeneity, the overwhelming slow violence that the silences only exacerbated, likely led to the alcoholism, violence, and broken relationships that some of them experienced. At the same time, it also, perhaps, allowed their children and grandchildren to imagine/create their own “whiteness” or “Pākehāness” in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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<sup>89</sup> Montrose, *A Voyage around our Past*, 100.

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