

# TOPPLING JOUBERT

Exposing the colonial routes of island connectedness beneath the  
apparent French roots of Hunters Hill (Sydney, Australia)

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**ABSTRACT:** The #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement, which has seen the felling of statues of white invaders, colonisers and slave traders, has highlighted the racist legacy of slavery and the inequities, racism and ongoing impact of colonialism throughout the world. The toppling of statues sits within an ongoing historical push to remove visible tributes to colonial violence from the land. The colonial project, however, in its consumption and transformation of the colonised space, has seen the settler narrative firmly imprinted on the landscape. While knocking down statues is a powerful demonstration of resistance, the layers of embedded colonial presence in and on the landscape and in the national narrative remain. In this article, in the spirit of the BLM movement and through both decolonial/activist historiography and a creative/poetic interpretative approach to history writing, I challenge and topple the colonial narrative surrounding Didier-Numa Joubert, 19th Century Franco-Australian trans-imperial entrepreneur and slave trader with interests in and across islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A man of routes but also of roots, Joubert's legacy is embodied not in a statue but in the topography and European architecture of Hunters Hill, the Sydney suburb he 'founded'. I reveal how the ostensible Frenchness of Hunters Hill, 'islanded' between two rivers, conceals a complex history of island connection to far-flung sites of colonial exploitation and forced labour in the French and British empires.

**KEYWORDS:** routes and roots, decolonising histories, creative histories, trans-imperial island connectedness, slavery

## Introduction

The murder by asphyxiation of Black American man George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 sparked a global movement of protest against police brutality and racism. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement organised street protests and rallies in the United States and around the world when video of Floyd's death came to light. In the video, police officer Derek Chauvin was seen kneeling on Floyd's neck while Floyd cried out, 'I can't breathe' and begged for his life. After almost 9 minutes, Floyd died with Chauvin's knee still on his neck (Thorbecke, 2020). This violent image of blatant and complacent contempt for human life struck a chord with Black and Indigenous people in many countries where racist targeting and use of excessive, and often deadly, force by police and other state institutions are commonplace. In France, for example, the image of Floyd's murder brought back the death of Adama Traoré, a young Black man who was held down by three police officers while in police cells in Beaumont-sur-Oise in 2016. Like Floyd, Traoré's last words were, "Je n'arrive plus à respirer" ('I can't breathe'). The BLM rallies in France have seen the juxtaposition of placards calling for justice for both' George Floyd and Adama Traoré

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(Arama, 2020; McAuley, 2020). Similarly, in Australia, BLM rallies have appealed for justice for the killing of over 400 Aboriginal men and women in police custody in the past 30 years (Smyth, 2020). Protesters carried signs bearing names of people like David Dungay who was restrained by up to five officers in a Sydney prison in 2015 and also cried out repeatedly, “I can’t breathe” before his death (Regan and Watson, 2020).

At the heart of these violent, discriminatory practices against Black and Indigenous people is the structural and systemic racism that colonialism has engendered. In addition to marching in the streets, BLM supporters have turned their anger upon visible symbols of colonialism and white supremacy, in particular statues of white invaders, slave traders and colonisers. In Australia and New Zealand, the BLM protests have intersected with local history, leading to calls to take down statues of colonisers and agents of empire like James Cook, Lachlan Macquarie, Charles Cameron Kingston, George Grey and John Hamilton. In Cairns, where a giant statue of Cook towers over the city, Emma Hollingsworth, an Aboriginal artist has launched a petition to have it removed. “It just represents all the bad things that happened to my people pretty much straight after Cook stepped foot on our land — the genocide, the slavery and the stolen generations”, she said (Smyth, 2020). In New Zealand, in response to requests from local Māori (Waikato-Tainui) leaders,<sup>1</sup> the Hamilton City Council removed John Hamilton’s statue in Kirikiriroa (Slessor and Boisvert, 2020; Ballantyne, 2020). The hurtful memorialisation of other colonial villains, such as notorious blackbirdier Bully Hayes, has also been highlighted in concert with the BLM protests. In a series of Twitter posts, later taken up by media outlets, historian Scott Hamilton criticised an Akaroa restaurant named after Hayes, Pacific slave trader, murderer, paedophile and rapist. His posts created intense debate and the restaurant owner eventually agreed to change its name (Burrows and Carran, 2020).

While the global nature of the protests has created a groundswell of activism, there is a long history of resistance to colonial symbols in the Pacific islands and in the settler colonies of New Zealand and Australia.<sup>2</sup> The toppling of statues, or campaigns to remove them, is part of an ongoing push to eradicate these traumatic tributes to colonialism. Yet the colonial project, in its relentless consumption and transformation of the colonised space, has seen the settler narrative firmly imprinted on the landscape. Farms, mines, industry, towns and cities repose on stolen land. The men (and to a lesser extent women) who drove this violence have been memorialised, not only in statues but also in place names, street names, and the names of institutions. Their stamp on the land is echoed in their inscription as the ‘heroes’ of national historical narratives. It is essential, then, to dismantle these narratives, pick back the layers of untruths and national myth-making, dethrone the ‘settler heroes’ and reveal how, and on whose backs, they become wealthy and powerful.

In this article, through a combination of decolonial historiography and creative history writing, I expose the lies and half-truths in the Australian historical narrative surrounding settler ‘hero’ Didier-Numa Joubert (1816-1881) and the Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill that he ‘founded’. By focusing on and ‘toppling’ the figure of Joubert, a trans-imperial business man whose activities in colonial economies in the Pacific and Indian Oceans supported his

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<sup>1</sup> Waikato-Tainui is the local Māori *iwi* (tribe) in the Waikato region where the city of Kirikiriroa or Hamilton is situated.

<sup>2</sup> In Hawai’i in 1779, James Cook himself was cut down (and cooked); between 1844 and 1845, Ngāpuhi chief Hōne Heke Pōkai repeatedly chopped down the British flag flying over Kororāreka, New Zealand; and Kanak in Balade attacked, and burned to the ground, the first church of the Marist mission in New Caledonia in 1847 (Rozier, 1997: 19).

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prominence in the Sydney community, I uncover critically important dissonant historical currents underlying his official self-image as memorialised in the landscape and heritage European architecture of affluent, ‘islanded’, Hunters Hill.

In the mid 1800s, a number of suburbs in Sydney’s inner harbour along the Parramatta River were primarily connected to the city centre, around Sydney Cove, by water transport (roads and bridges across various arms of the harbour not being constructed until the late 1880s, when Hunters Hill was first linked into road networks leading to Drummoyne and through to the city). In this regard, the peninsula on which Hunters Hill and Woolwich sits was effectively ‘islanded’ within Sydney’s inner harbour during its first 30 years, served by boats and having both a distinct insular culture and a high degree of connectivity to the broader region through maritime transport. Interestingly, as I reveal in this article, Hunters Hill’s history is also one of a distinct network of island connectedness involving the transport of labour and commodities hidden beneath an urban area designed to historically emulate a continental European habitat. It thus created and materialised an illusion of roots by concealing and suppressing the reality of the colonial routes that underpin it. These buried routes/roots link Hunters Hill to sites of colonial exploitation and forced migration/slavery in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Reunion Island and Mauritius.

### A sandstone memorial in colonial Sydney: building Joubert’s legend

The Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill (Figure 1) sits on Wallumedegal land. The clan is said to have called this peninsula, overlooking, and nestled between, the Parramatta and Lane Cove rivers in Sydney’s Lower North Shore, “Moco Boula, meaning two waters” (Sherry, 2009: 98). By 1847 when Didier-Numa Joubert bought Figtree Farm from former convict Mary Reibey, the Wallumedegal, like most of Sydney’s Aboriginal clans, had disappeared from the area, victims of smallpox and other European diseases and deliberate genocidal activity to ‘clear’ the land, including alienation from food sources, massacres and punitive expeditions (Heiss and Gibson, 2013).

In many ways, the affluent suburb of Hunters Hill, with its French-style village, collection of impressive mansions, villas and sandstone cottages, manicured lawns and well-tended gardens, is a sort of grand Europeanised memorial to its founder, Didier-Numa Joubert. Local historian, Ros Maguire, has described Joubert as “one of the most prosperous of the French who settled in Australia in the middle years of the 19th Century, accumulating considerable wealth and property, and developing influential social and business contacts” (Maguire, 2012: np). Joubert, a trans-imperial trader, merchant, friend and advisor of the Marists, property developer and speculator, photographer, and municipal politician, had arrived in the Pacific in 1837, aged 21, from his native Angoulême in France. Sent to Australia as an agent for the Barton & Guestier winery, he soon left for New Zealand where he had purchased some land (unseen) in the Bay of Islands. In Kororāreka he struck up a relationship with Bishop Pompallier, signalling the beginning of his long-standing involvement with the Marists. Pompallier married Joubert and Lise Bonnefin in Kororāreka in 1839 and Joubert was one of the merchants to whom Pompallier soon became indebted (Hosie, 1987). Pompallier recommended Joubert’s services to Father Jean-Claude Colin in France, writing in May 1840:

*I have in Sydney a very likeable and obliging correspondent, he is French, married, and has settled right in Sydney; he is a young, well-educated merchant, well brought up and very competent in business matters. His name is M. Joubert, and he lives in Macquarie Place in the city; our men*

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*should take care to visit him and to entrust him with what they need to do in choosing one of the first ships preparing to go to the Bay of Islands; if they need to buy anything he will be well pleased to do it for them (Quin, 2011: online).*

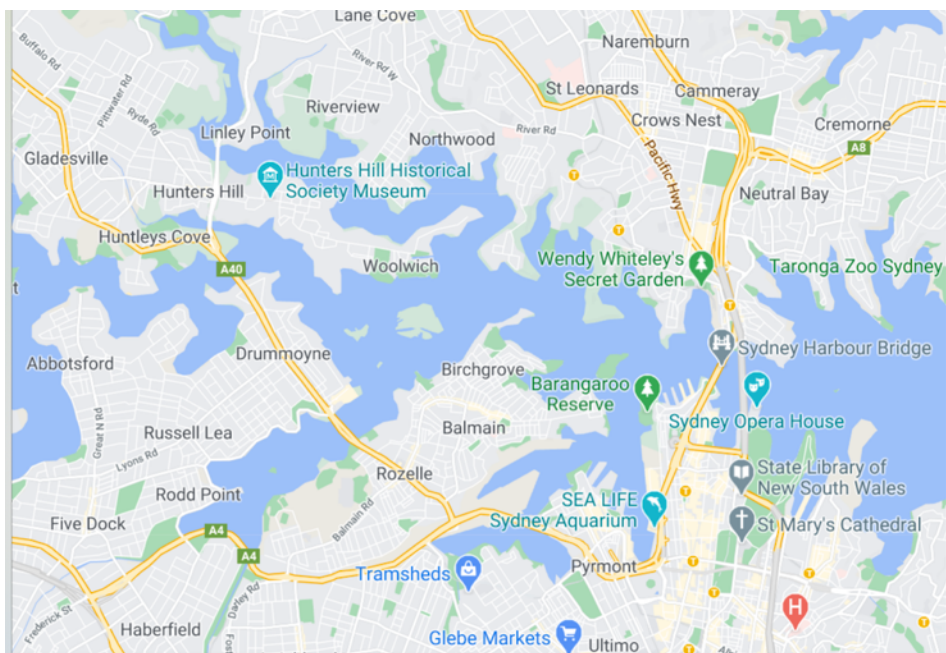


Figure 1 – Contemporary map of inner Sydney, showing position of Hunters Hill (top right). (Source: Google Maps, nd)

In Sydney, Joubert established a business with Jeremiah Murphy. Trading as Joubert & Murphy, they began as wine merchants but soon expanded to become a successful shipping agency, importing and trading a variety of consumer goods including sugar from Mauritius and French wine (Maguire, 2015). Joubert also bought the first daguerreotype camera in Sydney. He purchased it from Captain Lucas and he, Lucas and Murphy are credited with producing the first recorded photo taken in Australia (Design & Art Australia Online, 2011).

On a trip to Paris in 1844 to recoup debts from his New Zealand venture, Joubert won 37,289 francs in a court case and made a connection with the Marist Father Dubreul, who, like Pompallier, saw the usefulness of having such an ally in Sydney (Hosie, 1987: 34; Maguire, 2012). The Marist Fathers did indeed call on Joubert who availed them of his shipping services and helped them negotiate and buy land and a house on Tarban Creek in Hunters Hill. They called it 'Villa Maria' and they used it as a storehouse and a place for missionaries to rest and recuperate. They later moved to the stone monastery they had built on Mary Street, transferring to it the name 'Villa Maria' (Hosie, 1987: 116). From his European trip, Joubert also brought back four daguerreotype cameras that Joubert & Murphy advertised for sale in 1847 (Design & Art Australia Online, 2011).

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Seeing the potential for lucrative real estate development in Hunters Hill, in the 1850s Joubert, joined by his brother Jules, began subdividing land on the peninsula and building cottages and villas made from the locally quarried sandstone (Bevan, 2017: 101-102) (Figure 2). Along with these ornate houses, resplendent with the handiwork of Italian stonemasons, Joubert built imposing mansions. He commissioned architect William Weaver to design a number of his buildings, one of which, the elegant ‘Passy’, perched on the hill and overlooking both of the rivers, became a local landmark, all the more so when Joubert leased it to the French Consul Louis Sentis and the tricolour flew from the flagpole (Maguire, 2011; Sherry, 2009). He also converted the stone cottages on Figtree Farm into ‘Figtree House’ and constructed a cluster of other villas on the property. The Jouberts had 4 children: Numa, Ferdinand, Louise and Rose and their family home, ‘St Malo’, was a grand sandstone bungalow that stood out in the neighbourhood. It had 4 French doors opening onto deep verandas, “a generously proportioned formal entrance with decorative fanlight and a roof lantern – unique in Hunters Hill” (Maguire, 2011: 88). As befitting a man of his station, St Malo bore all “the trimmings of affluence, with marble mantelpieces imported from Italy” (Bevan, 2017: 137). French settlers followed Joubert, Sentis and the Marists to form a francophone hub, the French Village, in Hunters Hill. A man of considerable influence in the French community, Joubert had also been the first person to receive a Certificate of Naturalisation in New South Wales on 17th December 1849, which afforded him the same rights and privileges as British subjects (State Library New South Wales, nd).



Figure 2 - One of the first marine villas built by the Jouberts in Hunters Hill. (Photo: Karin Speedy, 2016.)

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For Hunters Hill to become attractive for residential buyers, it needed good land access from other parts of the city. Joubert successfully campaigned for bridges to be built across the Parramatta and Lane Cove rivers: Gladesville Bridge, crossing the Parramatta, was completed in 1881 and Figtree Bridge, crossing the Lane Cove River, was finished in 1885 (Sherry, 2009: 101). He and his brother also set up a ferry service on the Lane Cove River in the 1860s, providing residents transport to and from the city (Bevan, 2017: 137). Joubert, like the Marists, had a vineyard on his property. He produced white wine and served as treasurer of the New South Wales Vineyard Association. He formed close ties with other wealthy and influential men in the colony, joining them on numerous committees and boards and, after pushing for the suburb to have municipal status, he was made Hunters Hill's first mayor from 1867-1869 (Maguire, 2015: 104, 106). Having survived a few scandals, Maguire esteems that Joubert had "earned a quiet respect" in Sydney society. On his death in 1881, his estate of land and houses was valued at a substantial 16,000 pounds (2015: 113).

### Digging up the roots to expose the routes through creative histories and decolonial historiography

The above account of Didier-Numa Joubert's life fits the archetypal settler narrative. Joubert 'developed' Hunters Hill very much in his own (idealised) image. Not only did he construct sturdy sandstone buildings and carve out decorous French gardens on Wallumedegal land, he also Frenchified the area. He installed the French Marist religious order and encouraged numerous French settlers to make the French Village at Hunters Hill their home. He thoroughly inscribed himself into both the history and the landscape of Hunters Hill calling his lavish dwellings 'Passy' and 'St Malo' and naming streets after himself (Joubert Street), his wife (Bonnefin Road) and his son (Ferdinand Street). He also facilitated transport links to and from this 'islanded' and seemingly European sanctuary through ferry services and, albeit posthumously, bridges.

Biographers paint him as something of a settler hero, a romantic sea-trader, a successful and wealthy merchant who brought civilisation and religion to untamed land. This is, however, very much a whitewashed, 'official', pro-colonial version of the man I have come to know through my research. This trans-imperial man was seemingly everywhere in and across the Pacific and Indian Oceans in the second half of the 19th Century. Using his dual nationality and intimate knowledge of both French and British colonial worlds, he sought out every opportunity for capitalist exploitation, and this included slave trading. Thus Joubert's fixation with roots, his desire to leave a permanent imprint of himself in Hunters Hill, must be reconciled with his passion for routes and the way in which his island connections underlay, and indeed founded and funded, the European façade of the Sydney suburb.

Based on extensive archival evidence,<sup>3</sup> I have exposed Joubert's role in the 'Sutton case' (Speedy 2015a; 2015b; 2016a), the first known instance of blackbirding or slave trading of Pacific Islanders to the Indian Ocean island of Reunion. In 1857, 51 Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) and 14 Solomon Islanders were kidnapped by the crew of Joubert's Sydney-based barque *Sutton*

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<sup>3</sup> I consulted documents in the National Archives in London and in the Archives Diplomatiques in La Courneuve, Paris as well as a considerable number of newspaper articles from the *Empire* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. For all details and archival references for this section, see Speedy (2015a; 2015b; 2016a). Dorothy Shineberg also outlined this incident in a brief article that focused on the diplomatic dispute (1984).



and sold for £40 each to sugar planters in Reunion. As an “immigration scheme” to supply the planters with Pacific Island labour, the venture was approved by the Reunionese administration so long as a delegate, endorsed by Louis Sentis, the consul of France at Sydney (and also Joubert’s friend and tenant at ‘Passy’), was placed aboard the ship. Sentis recommended John D’Allemagne, Joubert’s agent, as the unofficial delegate and claimed Joubert also intended to use the services of missionaries (who all involved knew were inexistent on the islands in question) to explain the contracts to any interested parties (Speedy, 2016a: 97-98). In the Gilberts, two white beachcombers were taken on board to act as interpreters. They told the Gilbertese they would be extracting coconut oil on a neighbouring island and got them to sign contracts to avoid any accusations of slave trading. While D’Allemagne maintained the fiction of a happy group of ‘recruits’, the beachcombers later confessed that two men went mad when they realised that they were being taken away. They were tied up and kept below deck before being dumped on two separate islands in the Solomons. They also described a large cache of weapons kept on board “in case of the natives rising” (Speedy, 2016a: 109). After inducing 14 Solomon Islanders on board, the *Sutton* headed to Reunion where Wilson sold the human ‘cargo’, paid off the crew and sent them on to Mauritius.



Figure 3 - Contemporary map of the Western Pacific showing Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands) at top right, the Solomon Islands (top left), New Caledonia (centre) and Sydney (bottom left). (Source: [https://www.nationsonline.org/.](https://www.nationsonline.org/))

Eventually, details of the incident reached the governor of Mauritius, William Stevenson, who, suspecting French slavery, ordered an investigation into this “nefarious traffic” of “ignorant natives” (Speedy, 2016a: 103). The Reunionese declared the operation legal, lying about the official status of the delegate. Despite their moralising, once the British realised that the Gilberts and the Solomon Islands were not under their sovereignty, they decided

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there was nothing further they could do. When news of the affair broke in the Sydney newspapers, Joubert and his captain Wilson were accused of abduction, piracy and slave-trading (Speedy 2015a). Media stories highlighted Joubert's opportunistic identity smudging and exposed the simplistic Franco-British divide that framed the diplomatic correspondence. Joubert appears to have cynically embarked on this scheme fully cognizant of the British anti-slaving laws and had arrangements in place to circumvent them (Speedy, 2016a). Despite this, before long, the 'scandal' blew over and Joubert quickly returned to his exploitative activities along the Pacific and Indian Ocean routes.

At this point, it is useful to remember that archives, as a mirror of the societies they recorded, are notorious for their selective exclusions and tendency to document the voices of the privileged and powerful. The colonial project has always aimed to exclude other/Indigenous/colonised voices, an epistemic continuation of the everyday violence colonised people experienced during their lifetimes. Rereading the colonial archive through a postcolonial lens often enables recovery of the lost narratives and a retelling of colonial history that highlights Indigenous or colonised people's agency and resistance.<sup>4</sup> Historians, particularly those working on marginalised groups, engage with fragmented archival material in order to piece together the stories of those whose voices have been excluded from the colonial archive and, until recently, historical narratives.

In Speedy (2016a), I undertook a close reading of the documents available in the colonial archive (in London and Paris) to describe the very deliberate production of subaltern silence in the *Sutton* case. I showed how agents of empire like Joubert, men with trans-imperial, inter-island connections, were able to draw on these webs of knowledge to create and exploit this silence. Yet, despite the thorough, cynical and ruthless efforts to mute the voices of the Pacific Islanders on the part of the men holding the power in the 'transaction', the gaps left by so many untruths spoke volumes. The ghosts hiding in the interstices of the archive were whispering loudly (cf Bastian, 2005).

While I was writing my academic article, concentrating on teasing out a recipe for the construction of subaltern silence, I was also listening to these ghostly revelations and I turned to creative history writing to express them. Will Pooley (University of Bristol) and Kiera Lindsey (University of Technology Sydney), both of whom are working in creative histories research groups at their respective institutions, have offered this joint definition of the movement:

*Creative histories involve working with the archives in ways that experiment with method and medium to push disciplinary and generic boundaries for the purpose of crafting a past that allows for deeper truths, more aesthetic pleasures, and more engaging histories* (Pooley, 2019: online)

Creative responses to the material culture that commemorates colonial figures can be found in various media. Some symbols of violence have been re-named, re-labelled, re-located, defaced, and re-contextualised. The Captain Cook statue, for instance, that stood on the Kaiti Hill in Gisbourne, erected without the consent of local iwi, has been moved to the Tairāwhiti Museum where staff plan to present it in such a way so as to "encourage ongoing critical thinking and discussion" (Wrigley, 2020). This approach aligns with the decolonising

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Stoler (2009) for reading the colonial archive against the grain.



movement in many museums around the world that aims to “communicate global and local histories in the context of shifting structures of political and cultural power, including imperial, postcolonial and neo-colonial narratives” (Giblin, Ramos and Grout, 2019: 472). Visual artists have also played a part in re-contextualising memorials, both in galleries and on the street. Creative history writing too is emerging as a way for historians to contest and rewrite colonial history.

Creative histories are not to be confused with historical fiction. They are creative non-fiction and provide alternative ways of conveying history that push conventional boundaries of the discipline. They acknowledge the multiple ways of reading an archive and embody the detailed and rigorous research that goes into creating them. They take different shapes. There are creative historical essays, such as Alice Te Punga Somerville’s ‘Two hundred and fifty ways to start an essay about Captain Cook’ (2019), memoirs based on archival research and family histories, like Sonja Boon’s *What the Oceans Remember: Searching for Belonging and Home* (2019), speculative biographies, such as Kiera Lindsey’s *The convict’s daughter: the scandal that shocked a colony* (2017), blogs, and poetry, like Nadia Rhook’s (2019) collection *boots*, in which she speaks back to her colonial ancestors. While we must recognize that all historical practice is subjective and all historians have a certain position when approaching archival material,<sup>5</sup> creative histories play on and highlight the subjectivity of the historian.

As for me, my intense engagement over many years with the colonial archive has led me to a deeper, more personal connection and understanding of the historical players in this article and their (often untold or hidden) stories. Writing creative histories in the shape of poetry has allowed me to experiment with form and ways of communicating these decolonising readings of the colonial archive. In the following poem,<sup>6</sup> I use multiple voices to tell the story of the Pasifika men who Joubert tricked, kidnapped and sent to die as sugar slaves on Reunion Island. The poem underscores the Oceanic links between Hunters Hill (Sydney), Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Mauritius and Reunion Island. My position here is clearly that of an activist historian and writer, concerned with unsettling the settler narratives, unpicking the webs of colonial lies to disclose stories of Australian slave trading and to challenge the untruths in the memorialising of Joubert.

#### Secrets of the *Sutton*

Her whaling days over  
leaky, saggy, weighed down  
with blubbery death stench  
the *Sutton*  
a Baltimore clipper-built barque  
18th century relic  
unseaworthy really  
receives a cheap lick and spit  
  
*She’ll be good  
for one more*

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Curthoys, in her conversation with Kiera Lindsey, also clearly articulates this point, that historical objectivity is a fallacy and we are all subjective in our practice (Lindsey, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> I have not published this poem, ‘À la mode in Hunters Hill’ or ‘Colonial Curtains’ but I have featured them on my blog, *Embruns* (nd).

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*South Sea  
adventure*

Villainous voyage  
quick fire trickery  
fast money plunder  
for her slick talking owner  
and duplicitous  
filibuster crew

Marist collusion  
or cynical suggestion  
of non-existent missionary middlemen  
coconut-oil tales of  
short sojourns  
on a neighbouring isle  
a pound of tobacco  
in return  
for copra dreams

A pair of Judas beachcombers  
fair weather interpreters  
embark to aid  
the kidnapping mariners  
*Come hither*  
*strapping young men of the Gilberts*  
*your brown bodies our bread*  
*your muscles our meat*  
*inspect below decks*  
*mind the swivel guns*  
*no we're not slavers*  
*but we'll lock the hold*  
*as we haul anchor*  
*and head out to sea*

Solomon Islands  
ideal dumping ground  
for mutinous Micronesians  
knife-wielding prospective assassins  
according to sailor testimony  
one on New Georgia  
the other one...

*where was it again?*  
*no one can quite recall*

tossed out trussed up  
no food or water  
life expectancy measured  
in hours not days

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Fourteen Solomons bondsmen  
traded for shiny glass trinkets  
join fifty-one Gilbertese captives  
packed in tight down below  
sixty-six days  
of suffering and gagging  
on putrid dank air  
whale flesh planks  
unwashed bodies  
fear  
vomit  
human excreta  
bilge water slops underfoot

*In the cabin are  
muskets and pistols  
cutlasses and axes  
gunpowder and canisters  
an arsenal to save us  
from native rebellion  
to keep us safe from  
the savages down there*

Disembark the cargo  
on the Isle of Bourbon  
France's sugar bowl  
in the Indian Ocean  
1848 emancipation  
leaving a desperate craving  
for slave replacements  
on boom production plantations

Top price fetched  
for fresh strong flesh  
Pacific Islanders snatched up by planters  
on five-year French indentures  
for forty pounds sterling a head  
Coconut and tobacco promises  
exposed as nowt  
but fraudulences...  
the seamen decamp  
to British Mauritius  
where petty jealousies play out  
on the imperial stage

*Those bloody Frogs!*

Governor Stevenson sniffs slavery  
statements solicited  
but not from the Islanders  
muted and left to their cane-cutting fates

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yarns spun criss-crossing  
fact with fanciful fiction  
flurry of indignant diplomatic dispatches  
*What, they're not our natives?*  
*Nevermind*  
*Nothing more we can do*

Sham enquiry over  
scandal hits Sydney  
headlines scream high sea irregularities  
kidnapping  
privateering  
slaving  
these dastardly acts  
damaging money-making prospects  
with South Sea cannibals  
so ripe for exploiting  
furious merchants  
pen letters to the editor  
their ocean-going  
capitalist  
dreams  
at stake

*The captain should swing!*

Ship owner Joubert  
backed by French consul  
deftly dismisses attacks on his honour

*Outrageous accusations!*  
*Nothing untoward*  
*occurred on board*  
*a French sanctioned delegate was present*  
*no laws were broken*  
*no harm was done*  
*no persuasion needed*  
*the natives were more than willing*  
*why, they were happy ship helpers*  
*of course they knew what they were signing*  
*those beachcomber interpreters*  
*double-dealing scoundrels trying to scam us*  
*pay them no heed*

Lie, defy, deny  
expert extrication  
establishment players emerge from the mêlée  
rich man reputations intact  
no charges laid

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*It was all above board  
a legal business transaction*

Newspapers fall quiet  
blackbirding implicitly sanctioned  
Queensland's future assured

What of the abductees from the Islands?  
How did they fare on faraway fields?  
Did they find their way back to the Pacific?  
Or were they buried an ocean away?

No news of the men  
caught in this nefarious traffic  
nothing to report  
no update  
no footnote  
the colonial conspiracy  
to banish their voices  
to hide their stories  
to silence the archive  
creates  
an echoing void of indifference  
that violently shouts  
the truth  
from the page

Joubert escaped sanction, maintaining the best reputation money in a settler colony could buy. He had organised the first blackbirding expedition to the Pacific Islands to furnish Reunionese sugar planters with workers, an example that would be followed in the 1860s on a large scale with the onset of the Pacific slave trade, the blackbirding of Melanesian workers for Peru, Queensland, Fiji, Samoa and Tahiti (Maude, 1981; Banivanua-Mar, 2007; Speedy, 2015a; 2016b). The fine line between indentured labour and slavery had clearly been crossed in the *Sutton* case. The Gilbertese and Solomon Islanders had been duped into signing contracts that they could not read and lied to about their destination, the length of time they would be away from their homes, and the nature of the work. What is more, Joubert, without conscience, had sent them to their deaths. In 2019, Reunionese historian Gilles Gérard found records in the local archives confirming that none of the Pacific Islanders had made it out of Reunion. Sold into sugar slavery, they lived in wretched conditions, separated on three different plantations. They never saw any payment for their labour for almost all of them died well before their 5-year indenture was completed (Gérard, 2019). Some of the profits Joubert made from this deal were probably invested in the building of marine villas in Hunters Hill, the blood of the blackbirded i-Kiribati and Solomon Islanders pooled at their very foundations.

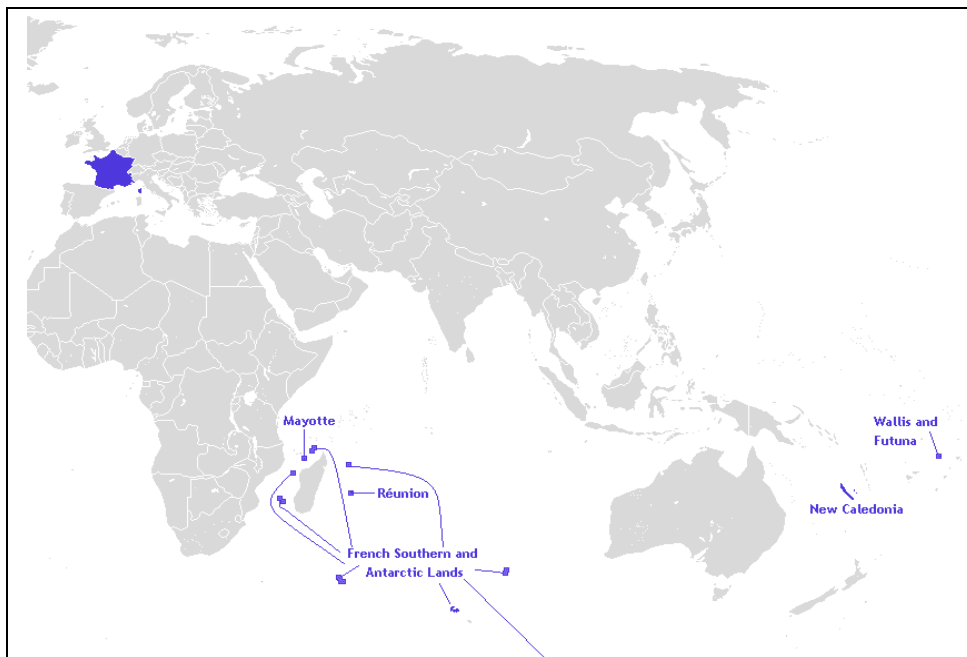


Figure 4 – Map showing positions of France, Reunion Island and New Caledonia. (Source: Wiki Commons.<sup>7</sup>)

### On whose backs?

The *Sutton* affair was not the first, nor the last time Joubert engaged in trickery and inter-island people trading. In 1841, his ship, the *Ville de Bordeaux*, undertook an illegal inter-colonial trading voyage that saw a South Australian customs official kidnapped and the allegedly mistreated British crew (under a French captain) mutiny. The ship was seized and the colony's governor, George Grey, who would later find infamy in New Zealand, invading the Waikato and 'confiscating' 1.2 million ha of Māori land, refused to release it to Joubert. Nonetheless, despite a guilty verdict, Joubert eventually received 4,000 pounds in compensation for the ship from the British government (Hunter, nd; Marshall, 2001: 243).

From the 1840s, Joubert was transporting around the Pacific and bringing into Sydney not only trade goods (sugar, wine, coconut oil, pearl, ebony, tortoise shell etc.), but also people. When examining the shipping records for Sydney, I was struck by how many 'natives' from the 'South Sea Islands' were coming and going sometimes accompanied by Marist priests, other times as passengers on Joubert's trading ships. Hosie (1987: 99-100) also noted Pacific Islanders arriving in Sydney in "ones and twos", in larger groups and sometimes as crew members of trading ships who subsequently found themselves stranded in the city.

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<sup>7</sup> Hoshie, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1619941> – accessed 18<sup>th</sup> July 2020





Figure 5 – The second Villa Maria, Hunters Hill. (Photo: Karin Speedy, 2016.)

In 1847, 14 young Kanak converts from New Caledonia, who had fled with the Marists after the mission post at Balade had come under attack by local Kanak, arrived at Villa Maria (Hosie, 1987: 99; Delbos, 1993). From the early 1850s, groups of Pacific Island neophytes, brought to Sydney ostensibly for religious instruction, ended up labouring for the Marists in Hunters Hill. One of their main occupations was to quarry rock at the Pymont quarry for the churches that they would build back in their respective islands (Hosie, 1987: 99). These young men, ‘personnel’ at the mission house, served as free labour and it was almost certainly they who quarried the local white sandstone for the second Villa Maria built on the shore of Tarban Creek (Figure 5). Hosie mentions that the brothers were “aided by islanders” in the carpentry, joinery and roofing work on Villa Maria (1987: 118).

My poem, ‘Rites of Passage’ (Speedy, 2016c), brings to the fore the largely forgotten or obscured history of the movement through and presence in Hunters Hill of these Pasifika converts. It draws attention once again to the silenced or buried Pacific Island connections and histories of dispossession, exploitation and forced labour in 19th Century Hunters Hill, this time through the Marist order who Joubert had helped to set up on the peninsula.

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

### Rites of Passage

Port Jackson at last  
months of seasickness  
some schooling in Wallis  
a local temptress  
bless me Father  
you mumbled  
almost sincerely  
in the stranger's tongue  
and now Sydney town  
and the mission house  
promises of scriptural instruction  
French perfection  
a lesson in civilisation  
in the Australian haven  
of the Marist order

With ecclesiastic fanfare  
you, newly baptised Polynesians  
future catechists  
soon-to-be spreaders of the Word  
receive first communion  
at Saint Mary's cathedral  
and you wonder why  
there are so many spectators  
to mark the occasion  
with curious gaze  
suffocated white glove giggles  
and whispers of cannibal taming  
under the holy roof

While cutting, hewing, lugging  
Pymont yellow block  
with its smooth texture  
and sensuous ripple lines  
left by the flow of an ancient river  
you also ponder  
exactly what biblical enlightenment  
the Marists are bestowing upon you  
in this quarry  
as you toil and sweat  
in Saunders' Purgatory  
Hellhole best avoided  
Paradise if you are lucky  
harvesting God quality stone  
for the churches  
you will build  
back in Wallis and Samoa

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

The scraps of learning  
imparted by candlelight  
as you fuel your shattered bodies  
with morsels of bread and miserly broth  
will have to suffice  
for now  
the schooner  
heavy in the water  
packed with the sacred rock  
a few bibles, robes, Catholic paraphernalia  
and worldly provisions  
is ready to sail  
for the Islands

And you, newly confirmed Polynesians  
catechists in training  
a few with silicosis cough  
will return  
to labour  
for free  
some to preach  
forever in indenture  
to the cloth  
others just until  
the pull  
of your cosmos  
prevails

Given the very close relationship between Joubert and the Marists, his track record (see also below), and the fact that he was bringing in Pacific Islanders on his ships, it is likely that he also used them to quarry the sandstone and provide some of the labour to build his mansions, villas and cottages in Hunters Hill. Maguire makes a reference to an Anglican bishop visiting the French Village to lay a foundation stone, who “was pleased to note hard working natives in Mr Joubert’s garden” (2015: 109). The coconut palms planted down the side of Villa Maria are visible reminders of this early Pacific presence. They are not the only ones in Hunters Hill. There are also pockets of coconut palms, standing up tall against the sandstone buildings on former Joubert properties, natural memorials to the neophytes from the Pacific who travelled to and toiled in Sydney.

The following poem also refers to the island connectedness in Hunters Hill. It is set in the home domestic space overlooking Joubert’s garden. It features Louise, daughter of Didier-Numa, and a friend who are sitting on the veranda at the Joubert house in Hunters Hill. Unlike ‘Secrets of the *Sutton*’, which represents an alternative poetic form of (hi)story telling, it is an imaginative response, informed by my archival research, to Louise’s photograph (Figure 6) that I saw in the archives of the Hunters Hill museum. The poem gestures toward the critical-creative possibility of a dramatic monologue or an imagined dialogue that could expose the ‘inner life’ of a wealthy colonial family. It reflects on the material trappings and lifestyle afforded certain sectors of white colonial society and how this was enjoyed at the great expense of others.

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert



Figure 6 – Louise Joubert. (Photographer unknown, source: Joubert File, Hunters Hill Museum)

### À la mode in Hunters Hill

Is it silk?  
Incredulous look  
Mais naturellement!  
Hand stitched  
delicate detail  
embroidered yoke  
ample sleeve  
teasing flounce  
rustling skirts  
gently graze  
the ankles of  
la belle  
Mademoiselle  
Louise

Tortoiseshell buttons  
left unfastened  
reflecting amber light  
tracking  
mapping  
tacking down

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

to snake around  
her bourgeois breasts  
showing  
a rather daring  
swathe  
of luminescent  
white

Beautiful dress  
my dear  
a stand out  
in this English  
colony  
it's French....  
n'est-ce pas?  
Mais oui!  
No one sews  
such sophistication  
in the  
antipodes!

A trunk  
brimming  
on Papa's order  
arrived  
last week  
in Sydney town  
full of hats  
and gloves  
and undergarments  
and the most exquisite  
Parisian gowns

Taking in  
the sumptuous vista  
sun caressing  
sparkling waters  
crisscrossed  
by the foliage  
of a flourishing  
flame tree  
the two ladies  
on the colonial veranda  
slowly sip  
their China  
tea

Coconut palms  
perform  
a wilted waltz  
in the stifling

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

breeze  
while bent  
brown backs  
toil  
under  
the oppressive  
summer  
heat

What brings them here  
these bronzed youths  
from their homes  
in the South Seas?

They are  
the exploited workers  
the unpaid builders  
of Papa's Paradise  
a sandstone  
Sydney suburb  
founded on  
trade  
tenacity  
luck  
and plunder  
and a slice of  
slavery

### More 'immigration schemes'

Interestingly, it was not in Hunters Hill where I first came across Didier-Numa Joubert in my research. Rather it was on the Pacific island of New Caledonia when I was investigating the origins of the New Caledonian creole language, Tayo (Speedy, 2007a; 2007b; 2013; 2014a). This creole emerged on the Marist mission in Saint-Louis, situated about 17 kilometres from Noumea, and is spoken by descendants of Kanak converts and children educated at the mission schools who later formed a village around the mission station. My research in the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence led me to uncover a hidden migration of Reunionese workers to New Caledonia, most of whom were *affranchis* (freed slaves or descendants of freed slaves), poor 'whites' (who were mixed-race individuals), or Indians. The Reunionese began arriving in the early 1860s; some were brought in as indentured labourers for the sugar industry, others arrived as free settlers (Speedy, 2007a; 2008; 2009; 2012; 2014b, 2017). It is no surprise that Joubert was one of the key figures behind this migration, nor that he and the Marists would be exploiting them on their respective sugar plantations.

On 28th July 1858, while the *Sutton* case was still in the news, Joubert penned a letter to the New Caledonian authorities requesting to take over, on a much smaller scale, the immigration scheme that had been agreed upon in the Brown and Byrne treaty of February 1858. Brown and Byrne, merchants residing in Sydney, had negotiated an enormous 40,000 ha land concession in southern New Caledonia with the *Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies* (French Colonial Office) in exchange for supplying 1000 workers, indentured for between 5 and 10 years. A third of these labourers would be "from the white race" and the rest would



## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

be Polynesians, Malaysians, Chinese or Indians to be indentured under the same conditions as those in Reunion. Unable to come up with sufficient capital, Brown and Byrne abandoned their plan. Byrne, of course, was none other than the notorious slaver Joseph Byrne, who shifted his efforts to the blackbirding of Pacific Islanders for the Peruvian slave trade (Maude, 1981). Joubert saw his opportunity and proposed to bring in 100 indentured workers and pay a bond of 25,000 francs for a 4,000 ha land concession. On 9 December 1858, the French government granted Joubert's request and he took possession of 4,000 ha of fertile land in Dumbea, neighbouring the Marists' lands in La Conception and Saint-Louis.<sup>8</sup> These lands had all been stolen from the southern Kanak clans as punishment for their "hostile" behaviour, particularly for killing the settler Louis Bérard and his workers on his concession in Mont Dore. The missions, with their Kanak neophytes from the north of New Caledonia, and the new land concessions, with the promised arrival of indentured labourers, would serve as a buffer zone between the fledgling European settlement in Port-de-France (Noumea) and newly "pacified" (massacred and dispossessed) local Kanak.<sup>9</sup>

Joubert sent his sons, Numa and Ferdinand, both in their late teens, to prepare the land for sugar plantations. Ferdinand had spent some years in Mauritius learning about the sugar industry and he would take charge of the plantations and sugar factory at Koé (Garnier, 1867: 168; Speedy, 2007a: 47). In September 1859, Joubert had invested 300,000 francs in clearing, construction and planting and had 'introduced' 55 'Europeans' and 40 'natives' from the Pacific on indentured contracts. He claimed to have 100 Chinese labourers on their way, although they never materialised (Speedy, 2007a: 47-48). The Koé sugar factory was opened in 1865 and in 1866, Joubert went into a partnership with Reunionese sugar planter Gustave Clain, owner of a top-quality sugar mill. The Koé factory began 'importing' Indian and other specialist sugar workers from Reunion (Speedy, 2007a: 61-63). The 'coolies', as these workers were often called, lived on camps in rudimentary shacks, worked extremely long hours, were often cruelly treated, and many turned to alcoholism to cope with their miserable situation. Mortality was high. (Speedy, 2007b: 136). Despite Joubert complaining that more labour was needed, Koé was successful in producing sugar and rum for the Australian market until 1874 (Speedy, 2008: 11). In true Joubert style, some of the land in Dumbea was subdivided to be leased to Reunionese settlers, after they had finished their indentures, to grow sugar cane. The sharecroppers would then supply the sugar factory at Koé (Speedy, 2012: 17).

The Joubert name became so associated with Reunion that New Caledonian histories have long described Didier-Numa erroneously as a rich Reunionese planter (Speedy, 2014b: 274). Although his children Ferdinand and Rose did marry into Reunionese families and he had many business and social connections with the Reunionese planters in New Caledonia, he was not from Reunion. However, he certainly used his transnational Indian-Pacific Ocean networks to his advantage. Just as he leapt at the opportunity to supply the Reunionese planters with slave labour from the Pacific when the sugar industry there was undergoing a boom, he just as quickly saw the chance to capitalise on the struggling, unemployed sugar workers of Reunion when the sugar industry went bust. It was this group of desperate souls who he targeted as indentured labourers for his New Caledonian plantations. After the death of his son Ferdinand and before the New Caledonian sugar industry collapsed in the 1880s, Didier-Numa Joubert sold up his Koé property and removed his investments from New Caledonia.

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<sup>8</sup> Joubert's letter along with details of the Brown and Byrne treaty were published in the New Caledonian newspaper *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, n320, on 12th November 1865. See Speedy (2007a).

<sup>9</sup> See Dauphiné (1995) for a comprehensive history of the colonisation of the south of New Caledonia.

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

An interesting link, perhaps further cementing Joubert's friendship with the Marists and also underscoring the island connectedness between Hunters Hill and New Caledonia, is through his granddaughter, Marie Joubert who, as Marie Wamytan, would become one of the matriarchs of the Saint-Louis village. In 1864, Marie was born to Ondabui, a Kanak woman residing at Koutio-Koueta. This was the cattle station managed by Numa Joubert. Marie was sent to live at Saint-Louis, to be brought up by and schooled by the nuns. While her baptismal record does not name her father, Numa Joubert is recorded on her marriage certificate as the father of the bride who had given his consent to her union with Joseph Wamytan (Speedy, 2007a: 181-182; Cornet, 1997). The Marists had also engaged in sugar and rum production at Saint-Louis and the Jouberts had maintained good relations with their neighbours, helping them with the technology and processing their sugar cane until they opened their own sugar factory in 1868. The Marists employed Indian indentured labourers from Reunion at Saint-Louis and rented out their lands to Reunionese sharecroppers but, true to their habits, mostly relied on the free labour of their Kanak converts, men, women and children, who worked the cane fields when not in school (Speedy, 2007a: 175; 2013: 65).

A man with shifting identities, Joubert was also a man of shifting loyalties. In 1864, while he was making money out of his New Caledonian plantations on stolen Kanak land and on the backs of his indentured labourers, the so-called “dregs” of Reunionese society (Speedy, 2007b: 135-136), he made a trip to South Australia to sell the idea of financing an immigration scheme to settle “middle-class”, Reunionese Creoles in North Australia. Bad-mouthing both the Reunionese and New Caledonian administrations and praising Australian colonisation, he underlined, with shades of white supremacism, the wretched state of the “white” and “half-caste” Reunionese, cultivators of sugar, coffee, tobacco etc., who were unable to find employment as “Black labour” was all that was available. They were desperate to leave and Joubert was campaigning for them to migrate to North Australia.<sup>10</sup> A number of Reunionese planters and workers did eventually make their way to Queensland when the sugar industry failed in New Caledonia. Others settled in Hunters Hill.

### Pulling back the colonial curtains

There is a copy of a portrait of a young Didier-Numa Joubert in the Joubert file at the Hunters Hill Museum. This image was later reproduced by Noel Chettle and used as a Christmas card.<sup>11</sup> While the Joubert file in the State Archives in Sydney contains information on Joubert's property speculation and financial documents *ad infinitum*, it tells us little about the man, except that he was very interested in the accumulation of money. In contrast, the Hunters Hill file includes a lot of family history and many family photos, testament to Joubert's love of photography. Amongst all of the images, this portrait of Joubert stood out (Figure 7). It was striking, revealing, giving me a candid glimpse of the character hidden behind the establishment pose.<sup>12</sup> My poem, ‘Colonial Curtains’, addresses Joubert in

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<sup>10</sup> This news was published in the *Empire* on 14th December 1864.

<sup>11</sup> The inscription on the back of the (undated) card reads, “Christmas Greetings. Noel Chettle, a friend of ours, produced this card for Xmas, and I obtained two more from him as I thought it would interest you Rock Hounds of Hunters Hill. Our warmest wishes to you for the New Year. Arch and Lyn McBurney, 61 Cross St, Baulkham Hills 2153” (Joubert File, Hunters Hill Museum).

<sup>12</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article, but it is interesting to ponder what the artist saw, or indeed what the artist was looking at, when painting Joubert's portrait. Philip Hayward (personal communication, 2020) believes, due to the signature and stylistic traits of the portrait, that Agnes Beatrice Chettle (b. 1900) was the artist. If she was, she was painting in the early 20th Century, which suggest that she may have painted the image from a photograph, probably taken in the 1840s or 1850s on Joubert's

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imaginative hindsight as the powerful colonial agent he was to become. As such, it offers a counter narrative, a creative reading of the archive that disrupts the Joubert myth.

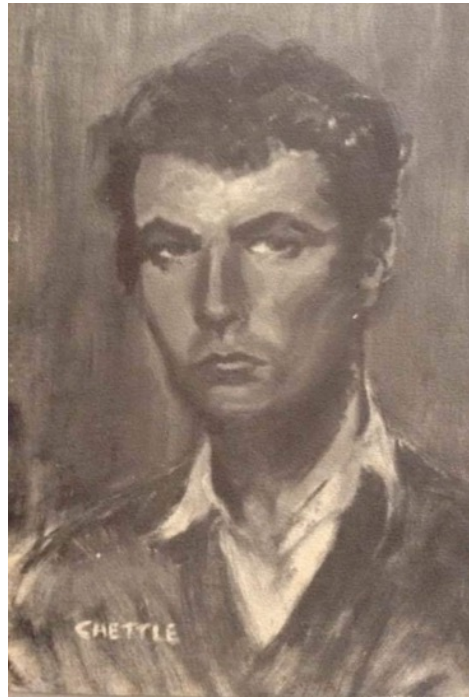


Figure 7 - Didier-Numa Joubert (probably by Agnes Beatrice Chettle, c1925, from Joubert file, Hunters Hill Museum.)

### Colonial Curtains

There's a portrait of you  
serious, rather dour  
with strangely dead eyes  
for such a young man  
with a fulsome life  
of adventure, scheming, slavery, scandal  
and some serious money-making  
ahead of you

The portrait of you  
shirt open like a sea trader  
shiftily handsome with your

---

daguerreotype. If so, it is fortuitous, as the original photo does not seem to have survived unless it is in a personal collection. What, then, are the implications of me, a historian, reading character into a painted portrait, itself an artistic work, and perhaps an interpretation of a photo? Even if my poem is, in effect, a third lens, a third creative interpretation of the Joubert narrative, it still has merit as a counter reading of the 'official' history.

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

high cheekbones and masculine brow  
and those eyes that refuse my gaze  
is now in the Hunters Hill museum  
unceremoniously filed  
in a yellowing Manila folder  
stuffed full of family history

This portrait of you  
a watercolour  
in unusually casual attire  
eyes darkly to the side  
with cash transactions  
deals and deceptions  
swirling around  
your businessman brain  
was later reproduced  
to serve as a Christmas card  
"I thought it would interest you  
Rock hounds of Hunters Hill"  
scrawled on the back  
"our warmest wishes to you  
for the New Year"

Did you ever imagine that your  
pinched-lipped portrait  
devoid of joy  
would be used in place of  
holly or Father Christmas  
or sleigh bells or baby Jesus  
to send Christmas greetings  
your image an emblem of that manicured  
sandstone beacon  
of French Village life  
on the edge of the  
Parramatta?

I had always known you  
in other portraits  
or photos  
taken in later life  
the mutton-chop profile  
of a middle-aged man  
eyes averted and comfortably bourgeois  
or the stouter  
fully-bewhiskered  
grand-père  
in a black suit  
with your eyes firmly shut

This painted portrait of you  
a man in his twenties

## Speedy – Toppling Joubert

clean-shaven, straight-nosed  
slightly unruly  
coal-coloured curls  
teasing your forehead  
is different, striking, unnerving

It's the eyes  
those curiously  
dead  
eyes  
for a man  
in the bloom of youth

Yes, in this candid portrait of you, Didier  
you had not quite learned the art  
of curtaining  
your windows

Knocking down statues is a powerful, visual metaphor of resistance. However, the layers of embedded colonial presence in and on the landscape and in the national narrative persist. Alongside the BLM protests and the felling of statues, historians have a role in the righting of narratological wrongs, in the correcting and contextualising of the colonial record, and in the amplification of silenced voices and stories.

My academic writing has always been decolonial and focused on bringing to light a variety of colonial histories across the French and British colonial worlds. In my more recent experimentation with creative histories in *Speedy* (2015c; 2016c) and on my public history blog *Embruns*, I have been able to bring these decolonial histories to a wider, more diverse audience. The traffic and feedback I receive on the blog testify to the impact of creative histories, and their appeal, not only to a broader public but also to educators who have used them in their teaching. In this article, the inclusion of creative history poems illuminates the decolonial historiography, providing an alternate way of communicating it. By emphasising the subjectivity of the historian, they allow me to interrogate and respond to the material culture memorialising colonial figures and narratives and to dismantle and decolonise them by pulling back those colonial curtains to reveal the ugly truths that they conceal.

A slave-trader, people trafficker, exploiter of stolen land in both Australia and New Caledonia, ruthless deal chaser across two imperial/colonial spaces, and profiteer of the blood, sweat and tears of (black/brown/impooverished) others, Didier-Numa Joubert managed to maintain his carefully cultivated image of bourgeois respectability as a wealthy member of Sydney's elite. He carved out his legend in the historical narrative of Hunters Hill and left behind a permanent, grandiose sandstone memorial to himself on the 'islanded' yet very island-connected suburb of Hunters Hill. While physically shifting this memorial is not possible, I have, in this article, toppled the narrative around it, and revealed the histories of colonial exploitation, forced labour and Pacific and Indian Ocean island connectedness that lie beneath its self-styled European foundations. At the same time, I have toppled the legend of the colonial man of routes and roots who was its author.

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