

The Unsung Mothers of Négritude: An Examination of the Efforts of Women Behind the Movement

Emily C. Sheffield

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Alumna (2017)

ABSTRACT

As a result of endemic racism and sexism, the contributions of people of color and women to historical movements remain largely underreported and overlooked despite extensive evidence of their involvement. This reality is particularly striking for women and non-binary individuals of color as individuals who exist at the intersection of these discriminations. In this paper, I examine three black woman scholars – Paulette Nardal, Jane Nardal, and Suzanne Césaire – whose contributions to the Négritude movement, and to the spread of the ideology of black consciousness throughout the African Diaspora, have been undermined by many scholars of Africana studies and overshadowed by the male scholars of their time.

Keywords: Négritude, black consciousness, African Diaspora, Africana studies, intersectionality

Black and female bodies have been consistently omitted from the script of history as a result of systemic racism and sexism. This is one of the many reasons behind the re-envisioning of Africana Studies as “a discipline that transgresses, transverses, and transcends the academic boundaries and intellectual borders, the color-lines and racial chasms, and the jingoism and gender injustice of traditional single phenomenon-focused disciplines” (Rabaka 2010, 5). This critical revision of the discipline allows for the inclusion and appreciation of scholars, regardless of demographic classifications that, inadvertently or otherwise, perpetuate destructive hierarchies such as patriarchy and white supremacy. Writing histories outside of the umbrella frameworks of Eurocentrism and androcentrism is thus absolutely vital. Although they are not necessarily incorrect, histories written within those frameworks are without a doubt incomplete.

It is with this argument in mind that one must examine the experiences of those individuals who exist directly at the intersection of racist and sexist historical records: black women. Particularly within academic fields such as the natural and social sciences, black women and their contributions to their respective fields have been undermined and overlooked, leaving scholars with histories that can be incontestably classified as incomplete. Through his scholarly research in African Studies, Reiland Rabaka has come to define Africana critical theory as an “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, and sexual orientation-sensitive critical theory of contemporary society” (2010, 5). I will thus make use of this theoretical construct as a lens through which to examine the contributions of the women behind the Négritude movement, notably those of Paulette and Jane Nardal and Suzanne Césaire, the inclusion of which are imperative for establishing a more accurate history. Following a brief discussion of the movement and the three scholars to whom its development is most often attributed, I will analyze the contributions of each of these women to the movement and to the development of black

consciousness ideals by examining their primary literary compositions as well as those of scholars of black feminism and Négritude.

The Négritude movement was born in the 1930s out of a need for valuing blackness, and to promote African identity, values, and culture. The movement itself became a way for scholars from Africa and the Caribbean to reject the assimilationist politics of colonial oppressors and to establish the foundation of a collective black consciousness. Ideological frameworks like *black consciousness*, which were promoted by scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, emphasized the need for empowering and unifying African and African descended individuals to challenge the historical overshadowing of their experiences and intellect due to notions of white supremacy. The Négritude movement is attributed to three scholars critical to its development, who are often referred to as *les Trois Pères*, or the Three Fathers, of Négritude: Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas. However, the purported history of this movement has been largely androcentric and comparably little research has been done about the women scholars who were their colleagues.

Primarily a literary movement, Négritude became equally important as a political and social ideology. Césaire, Senghor, and Damas were poets living and studying in Paris in the 1930s, and hailed from Martinique, Senegal, and French Guyana, respectively. All three had encountered stark racism and exclusion from their white peers during their time in France, which ultimately worked to define their racial identities in ways they had not previously experienced. This sparked their realization of the need to establish a collective black consciousness, as black bodies had been historically denied notions of humanity and needed to resist what Aimé Césaire termed “the politics of assimilation” (A. Césaire 1972, 88). Thus, Négritude was, overall, an intellectual resistance against the foundations of racism that occurred through the reassertion of black histories and intelligences and through the affirmation of blackness and black consciousness.

In his interview with René Depestre, included in *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire discussed three areas of inspiration that influenced his personal doctrine for the movement: the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and its associated literary artists, such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay; the Surrealism school of poetry; and finally, his interactions with African scholars in Paris, most notably Léopold Sédar Senghor (A. Césaire 1972, 81–94). The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that took place in the 1920s, in Harlem, New York, was born out of a similar need for a reaffirmation of humanity following colonialism, slavery, and continued marginalization of black bodies in the United States and around the world. Given this relatively parallel political circumstance, the literary artists involved with this movement largely impacted those involved in developing the Négritude ideology. Though he claimed that he “was not directly influenced by any American Negroes,” Césaire felt that the scholars associated with the Harlem Renaissance helped to establish a foundation for the collective black consciousness that resulted from the promotion of the ideals of Négritude and the process of disalienation from European cultural and intellectual influence (A. Césaire 1972, 87). Arguably, these processes were direct results of scholars’ realizations of the depth of solidarity that existed among black individuals throughout the diaspora.

Césaire first introduced the term Négritude in his book-length poem published in 1939, entitled *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*). Césaire also established a journal through the Association des étudiants Martiniquais en France (Association of Martinican Students in France) entitled *L’Étudiant Noir*, or *The Black Student*, in 1935. A Pan-African publication that served to encourage transdisciplinary dialogue among black students, the journal contained poems and articles by various black scholars studying in the

area. Among these scholars were Césaire, Damas, and Senghor, as well as one sole woman contributor, also hailing from Martinique: Paulette Nardal (Nardal and Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 4).

Paulette Nardal and her sister, Jane, were two scholars who were critical to the development of the Négritude doctrine and to the spread of its ideology. They were among the larger group of academics studying in Paris that included *les trois pères*. One of the most notable contributions that Paulette and Jane made to the movement was their holding of the Clamart Salon, along with their sister Andrée, which is ultimately how the Nardal sisters became connected with Césaire, Senghor, and Damas. The sisters founded the salon, an alternative meeting space for scholars dedicated to issues of racial equality, after noting their exclusion from other intellectual circles in the city (McGee 2012, 123). The literary salon was held in their apartment in the Clamart suburb of Paris, where scholars of all disciplines would meet to discuss larger issues impacting those on the African continent and within the diaspora. *Les trois pères* were often in attendance and could be found in conversation about issues of racial identity, race consciousness, and colonialism with other French, African, Antillean, and US scholars. It has been suggested that the sisters' development of the salon was one of the reasons why Paulette Nardal was the only woman invited to contribute to *L'Étudiant Noir*, although this is still uncertain (Nardal and Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 4). Moreover, Paulette Nardal's creation of the Clamart Salon was arguably one of the most critical foundations of the Négritude movement, given that it was where Aimé Césaire first began engaging in discussions with Léopold Sédar Senghor, and given the latter scholar's influence on Césaire's development of the concept of Négritude. Indeed, had this intellectual space not existed, it cannot be known whether these scholars would have been able to construct and spread the doctrine, forever altering the scope of African diasporic history.

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, one of the leading researchers on the Nardal sisters and other women involved in the Négritude movement, has asserted that “the ideas laid out in *L'Étudiant Noir* – the very ideas that have been identified as ‘sketch[ing] the contours of the matrix of the movement: the claiming, affirmation, and illustration of the Negro identity’ [Ngal 1994, 3] – had been taken up three years earlier by [Paulette] Nardal,” referencing a journal she had founded years prior in 1931, entitled *La Revue du Monde Noir* (*Review of the Black World*) (Nardal and Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 4). Prior to it being dismantled due to financial constraints in 1932, relatively soon after its debut, this bilingual (French and English) journal had addressed a vast number of issues affecting the diaspora, including, but not limited to, the politics of black consciousness. Among other female scholars who contributed literary pieces to the journal were Roberte Horth, from French Guiana; Marie Magdeleine Carbet (Magd Raney), from Martinique; and Clara Shepard and Margaret Rose Martin, both from the United States (Sourieau 2001, 331). The Nardal sisters have received little credit for the development of the movement in terms of their convening of the Clamart Salon, leading to the primary interactions between Césaire, Senghor, and Damas. Even more importantly, their literary works, including those regarding themes of black consciousness, are often overlooked – an indication of just one of the problems with the purported history of Négritude philosophy being largely androcentric. In a paper on African literature, renowned Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé wrote of the “great pity that the major roles of Jane and Paulette Nardal in the globalization of black culture are unduly forgotten in literary history,” in reference to the publication of *La Revue du Monde Noir* and other intellectual advances, because “Paulette Nardal became the most important intermediary between the Harlem Renaissance writers and the francophone university students who were to become the core of the Négritude movement” (Condé 1998a, 2).

The sisters' other intellectual advances, to which Condé alludes in her (1998a) work, were made mostly during the time that Jane and Paulette Nardal spent studying at the Sorbonne in Paris. Jane, in particular, spent a great deal of time in communication with Alain Locke, another significant contributor to the Harlem Renaissance who was teaching at Howard University at the time, and she proposed the idea of a project to translate his work, *The New Negro* (1925), into French. Although Jane was studying classic literature and French at the university, Paulette had received a degree in English and offered to translate. Despite the later discontinuation of the project, the Nardal sisters had established an important line of communication between the scholars of the Harlem Renaissance and those who would continue to lay the foundations for the Négritude movement across the Atlantic (Condé 1998a, 2). Thus, the Nardal sisters, in spite of their lack of recognition in the history of the development and spread of the Négritude ideology, were intellectual conduits between literary artists throughout the African diaspora.

The exchange and development of ideology among scholars of different national backgrounds was a topic of great importance for Jane Nardal in particular. She was one of the founders of *La Dépêche Africaine*, the newspaper produced by the *Comité de défense des intérêts de la race noire* (Committee to Defend the Interests of the Black Race), under the direction of Maurice Satineau, a scholar from Guadeloupe (Sharpley-Whiting 2000, 10). Through many articles composed for the newspaper, which ran from 1928 to 1932 before being shut down by French colonial authorities for its radical politics, Nardal advocated for what can be termed *black internationalism*. In her article by the same name included in *La Dépêche Africaine*, Nardal declared the need for the development of “some interest, some originality, some pride in being Negro, to turn oneself towards Africa, the cradle of the Negro, to remember a common origin” (J. Nardal 1928, in Sharpley-Whiting 2000, 8). She further argued that the inclusion of the prefix “Afro-” for individuals of African descent located throughout the diaspora, using terms such as Afro-American and Afro-Latin, provides a strong linguistic reinforcement for that solidarity and asserts a pride in black identity and shared experience. Jane and Paulette Nardal both embodied this ideal of black internationalism, proposing the great importance of recognizing the shared experiences of enslavement, forced migration, unending exploitation, white-imposed racialization, and an overall connection to Africa (Nardal and Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 2).

Similarly, Jane Nardal's ideology of black internationalism and positive globalization encompassed the idea of “look[ing] towards the transnationalization of black culture as a solution” for problems evident in nations of Africa and in the diaspora during the period following World War I (Condé 1998a, 2). In her examination of the work of the Nardal sisters, Maryse Condé posited that Négritude and Pan-Africanism were derivations of a larger idea of globalization, given that the goal of each ideology was to find a common experience and establish solidarity among those who shared it (Condé 1998a, 2). It should be clarified that these views emphasized the need for a *positive* globalization – in contrast, of course, to the pseudo-globalization claimed by colonial powers to justify the exploitation of black peoples under the guise of promoting civilization. Contending that, “it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other [and] it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds,” Césaire argued that “exchange is *oxygen*,” so long as it remains a cultural exchange rather than cultural domination and eradication, such as that which was attempted by European powers (A. Césaire 1972, 33; emphasis added). In one of her articles for *La Dépêche Africaine*, entitled “*L'internationalisme noir*” (“Black Internationalism”), Jane Nardal stated that “Negroes of all origins and nationalities with different customs and religions vaguely sense that they belong, in spite of everything, to a single and same race” (Condé 1998a, 2). This was a statement made in

agreement with most of the leading black scholars of the time, with the exception of Frantz Fanon, who argued of the impossibility of a blanketed black identity in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Condé 1998a, 2). Though this view of Nardal's is not necessarily representative of modern day race theory among the majority of Africana Studies scholars, as the concept of race is no longer considered much more than a pseudoscientific classification, she was undoubtedly an influential scholar involved in the promotion of globalization and the formation of a collective black consciousness, and was key in pushing forward the ideology of Négritude.

As scholars fiercely dedicated to illuminating the experiences of those impacted by the intersectionality of oppressions – before the term even existed – the Nardal sisters worked tirelessly to promote the realization of a collective black consciousness, to speak against androcentrism, to advocate for women's voting rights in Martinique, and to campaign for the rights of those of the lower and working class in their native country. The Nardal sisters were, however, often criticized for their advocacy of the rights of the poor in Martinique because they had been born into a wealthy family and were considered part of the French elite on the island. Particularly through Paulette Nardal's publication of *La Femme dans la Cité* (*Woman in the City*), a monthly journal published for *Le Rassemblement Féminin Martiniquais* (The Martinican Women's Assembly) following World War II, which focused significantly more on women's rights concerns than her previous works, "her own class position and the organization's primarily middle-class constituency inform[ed] an oftentimes paternalistic top down elitism" (Nardal and Sharpley-Whiting 2009, 23). The Nardal sisters, like many other intellectuals, did have blind spots in their scholarship as a result of their socioeconomic privilege. However, despite their privilege, it is difficult to contest the proposition that Paulette and Jane Nardal represented what it means to be engaged scholars, particularly within the disciplines of Africana and Women's Studies.

Another woman scholar whose contributions to the development of Négritude were vital was Suzanne Césaire. Also from the island of Martinique, Césaire grew up within an assimilated French culture like the Nardal sisters, eventually attending institutions of higher education in Paris, where she met and married Aimé Césaire. This relationship has defined much of the history written about Suzanne Césaire, as her husband's identity as one of *les trois pères* has overshadowed much of her own contribution to the movement. However, as a brilliant scholar herself and as an influential contributor to the literature that helped develop and spread the ideology, Suzanne Césaire was undoubtedly an influential voice in the promotion of black consciousness and Négritude.

One of the most important contributions Césaire made to the Négritude movement was her involvement with the cultural journal *Tropiques*. She was one of the co-founders of the journal, alongside her husband, Aimé, and another Martinican scholar by the name of René Ménéil. Another woman scholar who contributed to the journal was Lucie Thésée, a poet and teacher also from Martinique; though not regarded as a major contributor and thus not widely studied, she was strongly associated with the Négritude movement and anti-colonial discourse in general. The publication released fourteen issues in Martinique between 1941 and 1945, an especially tumultuous time in the area's history due to heavy censorship by the Vichy government of France under Marshal Pétain during World War II. In spite of this and various economic and geographic limitations, "the journal had a profound impact as the hidden voice of Négritude aimed at all the colonized people in the world" (Sourieau 1997, 842). The contributing authors to *Tropiques*, like those of the journals that the Nardal sisters helped to found and produce, could not be conspicuous in their politics; disguised as a cultural review published in the interest of

inciting pride in Martinicans' African heritage, the journal was established to covertly begin the processes of disalienation and mental decolonization for its readers (Sourieau 1997, 842). With the country under the control of a fascist government, it was rather risky of the Césaires to begin this publication. In order to obscure political messages from the Vichy regime and to further the ideal of complete cultural liberation, the journal's contributors began to incorporate surrealism into its literary features.

Surrealism was one of Suzanne Césaire's strongest literary influences and this can be seen throughout her writings published in *Tropiques*. It was a cultural movement that began in the 1920s with the objective of blending reality and imagination, primarily exhibited through the visual and literary arts. André Breton, a French poet, first defined the term and movement in his *Manifeste du Surréalisme* in 1924, enabling the Césaires to find a solution to the problem of creating a political journal during the years of the Vichy regime. So inspired was Suzanne Césaire with Breton's work and ideology that she wrote articles praising him to be included in *Tropiques*, so that others might both understand the work of their literary inspiration and potentially become influenced themselves. In particular, she marveled at his ability to represent suffering in poetry that was, by all accounts, joyful, writing that, "in effect, Breton inhabits a marvelous country where clouds and stars, winds and swamps, trees and animals, humankind and the universe yield to his desires" (S. Césaire, 1941). The ability of surrealism to resolve suffering and oppression with joyful discourse, as opposed to masking them, had a great influence on Suzanne Césaire's compositions for *Tropiques*.

Several of the articles authored by Suzanne Césaire for the journal are compiled in *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*, along with texts by other scholars, such as André Breton, René Ménil, and Suzanne's daughter, Ina Césaire, as well as poetry that was dedicated to Suzanne by her husband. The translator, Keith L. Walker, includes a note in the introduction to the collection that describes the lyricism of her writing style and the purpose that it served, asserting that "the ponderousness of her opening lines [of the essays] was a rhetorical ploy, indeed a camouflage, to divert the attention of the censors away from the dissident consciousness-raising content at the core of her essays" (S. Césaire and Maximin 2012, xxiii). Indeed, this is true. To begin her last contribution, "The Great Camouflage," Césaire details the aesthetics of her home island of Martinique, with its "beautiful green waves of water and of silence," and the grave beauty of water-borne natural disasters swirling around the islands of the Antilles (S. Césaire and Maximin 2012, 39). This poeticism gradually transitions into a discussion of the "refined forms of slavery [that] still run rampant," providing a commentary on the striking effects of neocolonialism that impacted the people of the Antilles (S. Césaire and Maximin 2012, 41). By so constructing her compositions for *Tropiques*, Suzanne Césaire effectively helped to spread the ideology of Négritude among the people of the Antilles, by raising awareness about the impacts of neocolonialism and the need to establish a collective black consciousness. She accomplished this while circumventing the attention of a fascist government that would have intervened had its representatives been privy to the genuine objectives of the publication's editors and contributors.

Relatively little is known about Suzanne Césaire, apart from the compositions included in *Tropiques*. In her ruminations on the scholar and her part in establishing the theoretical foundations for not only a collective black identity, but also the Caribbean identity of Créolité, Maryse Condé questioned whether "it is the fate of women writers in the Caribbean" to be left out of narratives on the literary history of the region (Condé 1998b, 64). This question is posited as part of a larger discussion on why, in many instances, Césaire has been entirely left out of

narratives regarding Caribbean literature of the time, when scholars such as Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant are discussed extensively. Although her absence from such discussions is potentially the result of her divergence from canonical Négritude, it can be contended that it is a direct result of histories being constructed through an androcentric framework. Thus, even in being fundamental to the movement, an intellectual like Suzanne Césaire has been victimized by the gender hierarchy evident within academia.

The integration of her life and work makes evident that Suzanne Césaire could be classified as an engaged scholar. In a poem composed in 2009 by her daughter, entitled “Suzanne Césaire, My Mother,” Ina Césaire provides descriptions of Suzanne Césaire that are largely indicative of her character and intellectual persona:

My militant mother hungry for freedom
sensitive to the sufferings of the oppressed
unwilling to accept any injustices
enamored of literature and passionate about history,
making us be quiet when our father was working,
writing tirelessly, with her mysterious script,
on white sheets with the letterhead of the National Assembly.

Here, Ina Césaire depicts the nature of Suzanne’s unrelenting activism. It seems that these characterizations – being interested in history and writing, being a champion of the oppressed, and always seeking justice – can be applied to the Nardal sisters as well. Through their scholarship, literary contributions to journals founded during the Négritude movement, and fierce dedication to empowering the members of the African diaspora and the women in their communities, Paulette Nardal, Jane Nardal, and Suzanne Césaire embodied what it means to be engaged scholars. Their literature and commitment to social change proved to be so critical for the creation and perpetuation of the movement that the refusal by many to acknowledge their scholarship is a particularly striking example of historical erasure in academia. For example, Maryse Condé states that in *Aimé Césaire: un homme à la recherche d’une patrie* (1994), Georges Ngal, a scholar from the former Zaire, discussed Suzanne Césaire’s contributions as simply extensions of her husband’s work, dismissing her importance as well as her identity as an intellectual (Condé 1998b, 62). This is one example of how detrimental the reduction of histories can be. By attributing Suzanne Césaire’s intellectual products to her husband and refusing to acknowledge her individual scholarship, Ngal contributes to the essential erasure of this woman’s history and of the histories of the black women intimately involved in developing the Négritude doctrine. This is a striking example of the process of androcentrism within academia.

Regarded by Martinican author Joseph Zobel as “the godmother of Négritude,” Paulette Nardal, along with her sister Jane, played an integral role in setting the foundations for not only the Négritude movement, but for the overall intellectual atmosphere in which Négritude ideals were born (as quoted in Sourieau 2001, 331). The Nardal sisters can, particularly through their establishment of the Clamart Salon and engagement with various journal publications, “be considered the *precursors* of the Négritude movement” (Sourieau 2001, 331; emphasis added). Paulette Nardal was quite aware of this unjust distribution of credit for the movement. It was recorded that, in a letter sent to Jacques Hymans, the biographer of Léopold Sédar Senghor, she “complained bitterly [that] ‘Césaire and Senghor took up the ideas tossed out by us and expressed them with more flash and brio. We were but women. We blazed the trail for men’” (Edwards 1998, 168). As yet another example of intellectual erasure within an androcentric

historical framework, the Nardal sisters' work went largely underappreciated and remains so to this day, leaving an incomplete history of the development of Négritude.

This process of erasure is applicable to the entirety of women's scholarship behind the Négritude movement and its doctrine, and has indeed inspired this very composition. The revalorization of black culture and the promotion of a collective black consciousness among those of Africa and the diaspora were part of an intellectual movement in which both women and men were intimately engaged. Thus, intentional or not, the expunging of black women's contributions to such movements, whether by attributing their work to men or simply not acknowledging it, ensures that histories remain androcentric and incomplete. The inclusion of all scholars in discussions of social and political movements such as Négritude – irrespective of race, gender, or other identity classifications – will actively dismantle the androcentric historical framework that excludes so many dedicated and brilliant woman scholars, allowing for the acquisition of more complete, and more accurate, histories.

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