There is much to discover and ponder in Black women’s contributions to African diasporic intellectual and literary history in Paris, France, a major crossroads of the Black Atlantic. Paris in the early decades of the twentieth century was a dynamic center of artistic, intellectual, and financial activity that attracted people from all classes and many nations. Political and economic refugees, from dislodged aristocrats to persecuted Jewish musicians, laborers from throughout France’s colonies, aspiring artists, restless intellectuals, and students seeking the prestige of a French university degree converged upon the city, particularly in the years between the First and Second World Wars.

Women from throughout the African diaspora were among those who were drawn to Paris, particularly for the educational and performing opportunities the city offered. Several Black women writers had meaningful sojourns in Paris that influenced their aesthetics and politics as they discovered that the French imperial capital was also a major nodal point of the global African diaspora. The questions that the work of these women writers, who came from various backgrounds, raise about the intersections of race, class, gender, and citizenship status demonstrate that each of these writers in her own way theorized intersectionality *avant la lettre*. Their writing engaged questions of race, class, gender, religious, national, cultural, linguistic, and other identities.

**French Antillean women writers**

A handful of bright young men from the relatively privileged class of “*gens de couleur*” (mixed-race people) of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Pierre had been leaving their islands to pursue an education in the metropole since the eighteenth century. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, public education opened educational possibilities for less privileged young people: “Le développement de l’école laïque à partir de la fin de XIXème siècle permet l’éclosion dans la sphère intellectuelle, de personnalités masculines et féminines, issues de la bourgeoisie mulâtre ou noire”*/“The development of secular schools at the end of the nineteenth century spurred a sudden transformation in the intellectual sphere of both masculine and feminine identities among the *mulâtre* and Black bourgeoisie.”* It was not until after the First World War, however, that French Antillean women began to arrive in significant numbers to earn university degrees.
and professional certificates in France. At a time when the vast majority of people of African
descent in the French Antilles labored in the fields and lived in abject poverty, the presence of
these young women in the city that epitomized modernity was unprecedented. The Martinican
actress and singer Jenny Alpha was among them. In her autobiography, *Paris Créole Blues*, Alpha
describes the expectation that young women like herself from the *petite bourgeoisie* of the island
would earn a degree and return to take a comfortable place in the colonial economy:

Mes parents voulaient que je quitte la Martinique, pour continuer mes études … [M]es
parents voulaient que j’aillie à l’université pour devenir professeur, ou à la rigueur que je
travaille à la douane ou à la poste comme eux.

(My parents wanted me to leave Martinique to continue my studies … My parents wished
that I go to university to become a teacher, or if need be, to work in the customs or post
office, as they did.)³

Although according to Alpha’s compatriot, the journalist, editor, and activist Paulette Nardal,
earning degrees through correspondence courses was “très en vogue” in Martinique at the time,
a young Antillaise who was serious about her education “va passer quelques années en France,
de préférence à Paris”/ (“was going to spend a few years in France, preferably in Paris”).⁴ These
years, however, were not easy for young Black Frenchwomen as they navigated French gender
and racial biases.

Paulette Nardal credited deracinated and marginalized young Black Frenchwomen for cata-
lyzing what she called the “éveil de la conscience de race”/ (“the awakening of race conscious-
ness”) that undergirded the Black diasporic cultural and political activism of the twentieth
century. In this essay, Nardal alludes to her friend and colleague Roberte Horth’s short story
“Une histoire sans importance”/“A Story of no Importance” as epitomizing the social and
psychological condition of young Black women students in Paris. The story draws upon Horth’s
own personal experiences. Horth, who was originally from French Guyana, was the first female
student to study at the College de Cayenne and came to Paris to achieve a degree in philosophy.
The story describes the racism that confronts Léa, a smart, idealistic, young Black woman, when
she comes to the metropole to pursue her studies. The story, written in the manner of a fair-
ytale, describes Léa as a smart and imaginative child who had long dreamed of the metropolis,
“une ville de cristal et de rêve, un visage énorme, brillant et doux auquel elle donne un nom
chantant … ce pays lointain est policié, courtois et que le people qui l’habite accueille tous les
bons esprits/[a phantom city, a cristal [sic] dream to which she gave a musical name … people
were polished, courteous, and friendly to all intelligent strangers].”⁵ Yet the very first paragraph
situates her as someone who will never be a full citizen of that city because she cannot express
her true identity there. The story opens with her name in a one-word sentence. It is “[u]n nom
comme un autre/([j]ust a name like any other),” but it is not the name that she goes by when
she eventually sojourns in the city: her white French friends believe that the name does not do
justice to the exotic identity that they impose upon her:

Ils la baptisent de quelques onomatopée, évocatrice de fruits étranges, de senteurs incon-
nues, de danses bizarres et de pays ignorés./ (They christened her with some queer nick-
name full of the aroma of strange fruits, of unknown fragrance, of weird dances and
far-off lands.)⁶
By changing her name, they strip her of her identity as her mother’s well-loved daughter as well as “une femme comme toutes les autres/(a woman like all the others).”\(^7\) They replicate the rhetorical violence of enslavement by substituting a Black person’s given name with a new name. Thus, she acquires a new identity as a subordinate subject in a colonial and racist caste system. Black women of Horth’s generation who arrived in Paris brought with them many of the idealizations of the city that other young intellectuals shared, but Black women’s presence as intellectual compatriots was new and unprecedented. Thus, Paris plays a significant role in the Black Frenchwoman’s imaginary and intellectual formation.

Paulette Nardal is one of the major figures in the literary history of Black Paris. Born on October 12, 1896, to a family that included seven sisters, she arrived in Paris in 1920 to study American literature. She hoped to complete a dissertation on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but there is no evidence that she achieved this. In a series of articles on Antillean women that she wrote for the Parisian newspaper *Le Soir*, Nardal asserts that most Antillaises were drawn to studies in the humanities, but the fields in which Antillean women were found were expanding:


She seems up until this point to prefer letters and arts to the sciences. There are, among the Antillean women, many who are licensed in philosophy. Foreign languages, pure letters, history, and geography also hold a lot of attraction for them. They are developing an interest in the social sciences and in journalism. One counts already a few doctors in medicine, but many more chemical engineers, dentists, and pharmacists.\(^8\)

Nardal came to Paris to earn a degree but soon got caught up in journalistic and cultural activities. She was joined by her younger sisters: Jane, who had a fierce interest in Africa and Black internationalism and was studying classical literature at the Sorbonne; Andrée, who studied and wrote about Martinican folk music; and Alice, also musical, who later developed a solid career as an opera singer. All the sisters were fluent in English and had a special interest in the ideas of the American New Negro movement. They were committed to fostering dialogue and cultural exchange among the members of the African diaspora who crossed paths in Paris. They held salons every Sunday afternoon at their apartment just outside Paris, in Clamart, where Black artists, students, writers, and intellectuals met for lively conversations and impromptu concerts.

It was in the Nardal sisters’ salon that Langston Hughes and Claude McKay met Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Etienne Léro, among others. The relationships nurtured in the salon led to a myriad of collaborations and cultural exchanges. The Howard University professor Clara Shepherd met Louis Th. Achille, who later taught in Howard’s French Department. Clara Shepherd also became a regular contributor to *La Revue du Monde Noir*, a bilingual journal that Paulette Nardal co-founded with the Haitian scholar Léo Sajous. It was in these rooms that Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor encountered the young artists and writers on the frontiers of the New Negro movement, and honed the political and cultural ideas that underpinned the Negritude movement. According to Achille,
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Les sœurs Nardal rassemblèrent, à Clamart, près de Paris, des descendants des Africains déportés au nouveau Monde et dispersés sous une demi-douzaine de bannières nationales européennes ; elles les présentaient à de vrais Africains, plus récemment colonisés. Au cours de réunions récréatives ou laborieuses, ces Noirs se sentaient habités par un formidable et pacifique défi aux caprices de la géographie et de l’histoire, de la politique et de l’économie. Ils se découvraient une commune manière d’être, de sentir, d’espérer et bientôt, d’agir ! Incapables pour la plupart de retrouver de communes racines africaines, ils se dirent tout simplement « Noirs. »

The Nardal sisters gathered, at Clamart, close to Paris, the descendants of Africans deported to the new world and dispersed under a half dozen European national flags; they introduced them to true Africans, more recently colonized. Through these recreational or task-oriented meetings, these Black people felt themselves inhabited by a formidable and peaceful defiance of the caprices of geography and history, of politics and economics. They discovered in themselves a communal manner of being, of feeling, of hoping, and shortly, acting! Incapable for the most part of finding again common African roots, they said to themselves simply, “Black.”

Paulette Nardal also contributed to Black international conversations in Paris’s lively print culture. Thanks to an introduction by her sister Jane,10 Nardal was a regular contributor to *La Dépêche Africaine*, a newspaper that covered current events in the colonies and incidents of racial injustice throughout the African diaspora. *La Dépêche* followed the Scottsboro case in the United States, the outrages of the Belgians in the Congo, as well as “erreurs et brutalités coloniales” in Madagascar and elsewhere in French colonies and territories. While *La Revue* was bilingual in French and English, *La Dépêche* published occasional whole pages of stories in English. Though she preferred living in Paris, Nardal returned to Martinique at the outbreak of the Second World War, where she became active in early childhood education efforts. When French women earned the right to vote after the war, Nardal spearheaded the effort to maximize Martinican women’s civic engagement by founding the newsletter *La Femme dans la Cité*, which was associated with a Catholic women’s group.

Paulette Nardal was a Catholic humanist who was skeptical of the Marxist politics that other feminist leaders on the island espoused. Her sister, Jane, was more radical in her politics than her older sibling. In a photograph found by the historian Emily Musil of the two sisters en route to France on an ocean liner, Paulette is in a suit and pearls, and Jane is in African-inspired garb. Jane was a classics teacher but had a life-long interest in Africa, and made several efforts to find a way to work and live there. Although she was denied a visa when she applied to travel to Africa in 1930,11 she did spend two years working in Chad later in life. In articles that she wrote for *La Dépêche Africaine*, she attacked the exoticization of Black women (“Pantins Exotiques” (“Exotic Puppets” [1928]) and advocated for Black internationalism (“Internationalisme Noir” [1928]).

Nardal saw that the various white constructions of blackness – be they the idealized creations of Bernadin and Harriet Beecher Stowe or the “realistic” vile and violent portrayals in works by Soupault and Carl van Vechten – served white interests and perpetuated white supremacy. Nardal notes that Josephine Baker, with her “shellacked hair” and banana skirt, unites white fantasies of the primitive jungle with the allure of urban modernism, and once more presents an opportunity for a Black woman’s body to serve white economic, political, and psychological interests: “la vogue des nègres en ces dernières années les a surtout faire à considérer comme des gens destinés à servir à l’amusement, voir au plaisir artistique ou sensual du blanc”/*the vogue for negroes during these last years have above all made them
considered a people destined to serve the amusement and artistic or sensual pleasures of the white.”

Another notable Martinican woman writer in Paris during the interwar years was Suzanne Roussy (also spelled Roussi). Suzanne Roussy was born in the same village as Napoleon’s wife Josephine, Les-Trois-Îlets, in 1915 and came to France to study literature at the University of Toulouse. There she met the student Aimé Césaire through her sister, married him, and moved to Paris in 1937. She was very involved in the editorial work of the militant student newspaper that her husband co-founded, L’étudiant noir, and after her return to Martinique during the Second World War, she co-founded with Césaire and Réné Ménil the influential surrealist cultural journal Tropiques. Although her published body of work is small, consisting of only seven essays, all originally published in Tropiques, and a play, Youma: Aurore de la liberté, whose manuscript has been lost, her literary legacy is significant, as it forged new ground for thinking about Antillean identity that rejected the predominant tendency to valorize assimilation to French mores. Powerful and prescient, her writing diverges from the basic premises of Negritude in that it highlights the multicultural aspects of Caribbean identity, leading some critics, such as the novelist Maryse Condé and the literary scholar Kara Rabbitt, to see her as a mother of theories of créolité and hybridity as later expounded by Edouard Glissant and others.

As is frequently the case with earlier women writers, Suzanne Césaire’s literary productivity tapered off once she started mothering; she and Aimé had six children. Roussy Césaire sought a divorce when their youngest child was 12 and returned from Paris to Martinique, where she wrote a play that apparently was staged by a youth group in Fort-de-France. Sadly, 3 years after her divorce, she died at age 50 from a brain tumor.

Tempting though it may be to mourn the paucity of literary output from what was clearly a woman with a critical and creative mind as sharp and original as her more famous husband’s, we can only imagine “what might have been” if the traditional constraints of gender – the expectations of mothers and wives – had not shaped her literary career.

However, the Guadeloupean novelist Daniel Maximin, who edited and provided a foreword to the collection of Césaire’s work, Le grand camouflage: Écrits de dissidence 1941–1945 (2009), cautions readers against drawing such easy conclusions about the limitations of her literary output:

En cela sûrement réside la fascinante leçon de vie de Suzanne Césaire, car malgré son absolu silence après Tropiques, en dehors d’une pièce de théâtre … malgré tous les malgrés que font taire scandaleusement l’écriture des femmes, malgré tant de place laissée à l’homme dans sa vie comme dans ses textes, malgré la réticence des poètes à libérer les muses, elle a, dans tous ses articles … enracinés sa pensée non sur un territoire littéraire balisé, une propriété privée d’altérité, mais dans une terre fertilisée par tous les possibles de l’écriture et de la mémoire vive.

(Therein lies the fascinating life-lesson of Suzanne Césaire, for in spite of her absolute silence after Tropiques – outside of a play … despite all of the “in spite of” that scandalously silence women’s writing, in spite of so much space left to man in her life as well as in her texts, in spite of the reticence of poets to liberate their muses, she has in all her articles … rooted her thought not in a marked-out literary territory, a private property of otherness, but in a land made fertile by all the possibilities of writing and a sharp memory).
specifically Martinican subjectivity: a subjectivity formed by the particular social, cultural, and physical environment of Martinique and a frank confrontation with the legacy of slavery: “La poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas” (“Martinican poetry will be cannibalistic or it will not be”). Surrealism, for Roussy Césaire, could bypass the dangerous and delusional adherence to and imitation of the colonizer’s ways by the colonized, by connecting directly with the Martinican self and thus allowing an authentic and critical freedom.

**African American women writers**

Paris during the interwar years was a lively crossroads for African Americans from all walks of life, from itinerant jazz musicians and stage performers to diplomats and, of course, artists and intellectuals, as well as bourgeois tourists such as teachers and ministers who found postwar Paris affordable. Many educated African Americans harbored a keen interest in France and the French language, which was the primary foreign language taught in the segregated Black schools in the United States. The interest in French was augmented by the experiences of African American soldiers during the First World War, when France, and Paris in particular, gained a reputation as a space free from the daily indignities of Jim Crow.

In Paris, Black people could sit in cafés, buy theatre tickets and sit wherever they pleased, and even socialize with white people. Of course, France also represented the sacred font of the best that European civilization had to offer, from its Enlightenment values to its storied art history. But African Americans who spent time there had a nuanced and complicated view of the city and the French history and culture that it represented. The American activist and educator Anna Julia Cooper was the first Black woman to defend a doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne in 1926, but her dissertation topic, a new reading of the Haitian Revolution in relationship to French narratives of liberty, was from a Black and thus unconventional perspective.

Jessie Redmond Fauset, one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, visited France several times, at least twice for extended stays. A French major with a degree from Cornell University who later taught French in Black public schools, she helped W.E.B. DuBois organize both the First and Second Pan African conferences, which were held in Paris in 1919 and London in 1921. She lived for a year in Paris, earning a certificate in French language and cultural studies. Fauset, who served as literary editor for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s *The Crisis Magazine: A Record of the Darker Races* from 1919 to 1927, was a frequent contributor to both the magazine and its offshoot for children, *The Brownies Book*. Her fiction and poetry often included allusions to France and French culture, and she published a handful of nonfiction articles on her experiences in France, from her reminiscence of France on the eve of the First World War, “Tracing Shadows,” to her report on her trip to French colonized Algeria in 1926, “Dark Algiers the White.” Although she was sometimes mischaracterized as a “genteel Francophile” by scholars such as Michel Fabre, her view and use of France in her life and work was critical and complex. Like many well-read African Americans of her time, including Langston Hughes, she often employed France and French society as a lens through which to compare and contrast American racial attitudes and possibilities, as both nations professed to be founded on liberty and equality.

Though Fauset enjoyed her sojourns in France and the respite it offered her from segregation and discrimination in the United States, she was adamant that she had no interest in permanently expatriating herself to France. In an interview with Pierre Loving, a writer for the American newspaper based in Paris, the *Herald Tribune*, Fauset stated that while she enjoyed the freedom Paris offered her, she had no desire to leave her native country:
I am colored and wish to be known as colored, but sometimes I have felt that my growth as a writer has been hampered in my own country. And so – but only temporarily – I have fled from it. I love my own people and love to be among them, despite the race issue in America.16

In her early short stories, “Emmy” (1912) and “There Was One Time!: A Story of Spring” (1917), both published in The Crisis, the French language connects Black characters from across the African diaspora whose shared past was forged by the experience of enslavement and colonialism. The eponymous protagonist of the former story is the daughter of a woman who makes her living doing French translations from her home in a period when few professions were open to educated Black women. However, the reasons why Emmy’s mother is fluent in French are a product of a painful history of enslavement, the psychological remnants that destroyed a Black marriage a generation after abolition.17 “There Was One Time!: A Story of Spring” features a young Black woman, like Fauset, a reluctant and resentful teacher of French in a segregated school where French fairy tales have little relevance to the pupils’ constrained and impoverished lives.

Fauset’s story depicts a relationship – initiated, then obscured, then revealed – between the teacher and a colonial nomad that offers a new paradigm of Black love by, to use Roussy Césaire’s term, “cannibalizing” the French fairytale form.18 In her writing, Fauset often made claims for a Black woman’s place in spaces thought to be properly and purely white,19 as she does in “The Enigma of the Sorbonne” (1925), at the time one of the most renowned universities in the world. She ends the historical overview of the fabled university with a description of its current place in the French university system, and concludes the article with a description of Black women students striding confidently across its iconic square:

Across the courtyard they file, loitering, rushing, gesticulating, exclaiming, living, being, – being simply what they are; unhampered by externals, impervious to criticism. No criticism exists. Two absolutely black girls swing through the rectangle, Haitian, I judge from their accent, pure African I am sure from their coloring. Their hair, stiff, black, and fuzzy frames cloudly the soft darkness of their faces; their voices ring clear and staccato; their movements free and unrestrained striding beneath the indifferent and tolerant gazes of the statues of Louis Pasteur and Victor Hugo. 20

Like Paulette Nardal, Fauset makes an argument for a space for Black women to exist and belong on their own terms in Western intellectual, artistic, and political discourses that are symbolized by literal and metaphorical spaces in Paris. Fauset recognized that Parisian spaces were polyglot and multicultural, and raised issues of class and migration. In “This Way to the Flea Market” (1926), an essay that recounts Fauset’s excursion to the marché aux puces at the Porte de Clignacourt, she notes that “the poor of Europe are very poor” and the market was full of the poorer groups of all those nationalities with which Paris teems. Many of the merchants were Poles and Russians, but among the changing crowds of customers were Greeks, Italians, Spanish, Tunisians, Algerians, Annamites, Chinese, Kabyles. These last formed a striking and easily detected group … Hardy sons of the desert they might be, yet not the least of such nostalgia as they felt could be traced back to an unvoiced sense of contrast between the dampness of a French winter and the baking sun of Africa.21

Here, as elsewhere in her writing, Fauset is particularly interested in the condition and activities of women: “the women merchants are the hardest bargainers, seldom if ever yielding.”22 In an
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excursion to Algiers, then a French colonized city, Fauset focuses her attention on learning more about the women of the city, who for cultural reasons are not easily encountered by tourists such as Fauset and her traveling companion, the artist Laura Wheeler Waring. Fauset enlists the help of a white French woman to arrange a visit over tea with some local women, and the two-episode essay becomes a meditation on the possible interactions between women across class, race, national, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Being in France afforded Fauset more mobility in exploring spaces and places that were not policed by formal and informal Jim Crow laws and practices, but her commitment to her communities in her native country kept her from romanticizing French society in both her life and her work.

Fauset’s compatriot, Gwendolyn Bennett, was far more ambivalent about her experiences in Paris than Fauset was. Bennett was a poet, painter, and professor in the Fine Arts Department of Howard University when she took a leave of absence in June 1925 to study at a variety of well-known art schools in Paris. Funded by a $1000 scholarship from the Black sorority Delta Sigma Theta, Bennett was able to live over the course of the year in comfortable lodgings both in Paris and in the bucolic commune of Pointoise, 17 miles from the city. Despite pursuing an active social life between her hours in studios, Bennett often felt lonely and disconnected, as recounted in her diary entry describing her first Fourth of July abroad:

To have one’s National Holiday roll around when one is in a strange land and can’t speak the language is an experience never to be forgotten. A homesickness more poignant and aching than anything I can ever imagine held me in its grip. All day long I did not see or speak to a single one of my compatriots nor did I even hear a word of English spoken. There is this marvelous thing about being here in France. A strange new patriotism has sprung up in me since I’ve been here in France … there are times that I’d give half my remaining years to hear “The Star Spangled Banner” played. And yet even as I feel that way I know that it has nothing to do with the same “home” feeling I have when I see crowds of American white people jostling each other about the American express [sic].

Bennett’s two short stories that are set in France are frank about how in France, the American racism that shapes Black life does not disappear on the other side of the Atlantic. The protagonists in both “Wedding Day” (1926) and “Tokens” (1927) are Black American men who at the time of the stories are drifting and disconnected, having suffered traumatic love affairs that leave them with little to live for. In “Wedding Day,” Paul Watson, an embittered former boxer with a virulent hatred of white people, finds himself falling in love with a desperate white American performer, stranded penniless in Paris. They get engaged, but then she abandons him on the morning of their wedding when she realizes that love between individuals in a foreign country cannot overcome the United States’ history of visceral racial animus.

Jenks Barnett, the protagonist of “Tokens,” an alcoholic former jazz musician who finds himself dying in a tuberculosis clinic outside Paris, is the victim of a “madness” he felt for a singer who eventually left him after his obsession with her caused him to be unable to work, and his subsequent alcoholism sent him on a downward spiral of poverty and violence. He meets a young French girl in the clinic, whose perseverance and kindness give him hope for humanity; the story closes with his asking his last friend from the past to make sure that the girl inherits his most valuable possession: a clock. His visitor doesn’t have the heart to tell Jenks that the girl had passed away several months ago:

Bill sighed as he placed the little clock on the mantle-piece. Funny world, this! The French girl had died in late May. He had better not tell Jenks … it might upset him. No-o-o-ope
better just keep the clock here. Funny how the first kind thing Jenks had done for anybody since T ollie left him should be done for a person who was dead.28

Just as the close of “Wedding Day” depicts Paul Watson discovering that he possesses “a first-class ticket in a second-class coach,” the close of “Tokens” shows that any French respite from the loss and suffering that has shaped both African American men’s lives is purely illusory. It was daring of Bennett to take on the highly charged topic of sexual or emotional relationships between Black men and white women and to portray the Black male partners in the relationship as emotionally complex and damaged, rather than damaging.

Both these stories were first published in “radical” publications. “Wedding Day” was included in FIRE!!, a very short-lived little magazine co-edited by Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and others, dedicated to the work of “younger Negro artists” who were rejecting the politics and aesthetics of the Black bourgeoisie; “Tokens” was originally published in Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea, edited by Charles S. Johnson, whose editorial philosophy was to show how the range and richness of Black life challenged stereotypes and familiar narratives. Bennett’s own sojourn in France was a very mixed experience, and after her one year living there, she never returned.

Conclusion

These writers came from different backgrounds, but their writing enterprises share particular characteristics. Each in her own way was inscribing the experiences and perspectives of Black women in the overdetermined literal and metaphorical spaces of Paris, which in the early decades of the twentieth century was the intellectual and artistic capital of the Western world, as well as a powerful empire. In their own particular ways – as activists, as creative writers, as journalists committed to exploring, valuing, and sharing conversations throughout the global African diaspora – these women were both making a claim for a space for Black women in already established cultural and political discourses and creating new narratives born of their own intersectional experiences of class, gender, race, nationality, and other markers of difference. Their intelligence and efforts were at the heart of, not peripheral to, the Black liberation project in the early decades of the twentieth century. Black women’s intellectual history is a relatively new field, and only recently have scholars begun to acknowledge and analyze the contributions of Black women to the political and cultural projects that undergirded modern civil rights and anti-colonial movements. These women raised questions that we are still struggling with today: what does freedom look like if we decenter whiteness and maleness? What is the relationship between civil rights, citizenship rights, and human rights? When the colonizer’s language is your mother tongue, how do you express yourself in words? The body of these women’s work provides a variety of intriguing responses that are relevant to us today.

Notes

1 All translations, with the exception of those from La Revue du Monde Noir, which was a bilingual French/English periodical, and the excerpt from La Grande Camouflage, are my own.
2 Muriel Descas-Ravoteur, Micheline Marlin-Godier, and Dominique Taffin, Femmes de la Martinique: Quelle Histoire? (Fort-de-France: Archives départementales de la Martinique, 2008), 60.
Ibid., 48.
6 Ibid., 49.
7 Nardal, “L’Antillaise étudiante à Paris.”
9 Jennifer Boittin, Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris (Omaha: The University of Nebraska Press, 2010).
21 Ibid., 162.
24 Gwendolyn Bennett, A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing, Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl Fish, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 177.
27 Ibid., 150.
28 Ibid., 150.

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