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Gaining Her Freedom: Slavery and Citizenship in the French Antilles

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Gaining Her Freedom

SLAVERY AND
CITIZENSHIP
IN THE FRENCH
ANTILLES



"Solitude," a statue in Guadeloupe to a woman who fought against slavery. Photo courtesy of Max Mongongnon / www.ouassous.com



Memorial in Martinique to the French abolition of slavery on May 22, 1848.
Photo courtesy of the author

***EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF
WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT
WHO HAD WORKED FOR
RACIAL JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S
RIGHTS IN THE FRENCH EMPIRE
SINCE ITS INCEPTION.***

ON May 11, 1850, two years after slavery was abolished in the French empire, a 36-year old woman on the French Caribbean island of Martinique walked to her local municipal office with five children in tow to have all of their names moved from the list of legal human property to the official government list of French citizens. Less than a century later, this woman's great-granddaughter, Paulette Nardal, served as a representative at the United Nations for France's overseas territories. I first went to Martinique in 2002 to research the role Paulette Nardal had played in the negritude movement, a cultural and literary movement of the 1930s to affirm Black cultural identity. I wanted to find out more about her and her six sisters who were

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among the first women of African descent to be educated in Paris in the French colonial system. They were journalists and activists who fostered important networks of intellectuals from Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Although scholars recognized the importance of the Nardal sisters for connecting Black intellectuals across the Atlantic, there had been scant historical research into their lives. Over the past decade, my research into their lives has brought me to France, Senegal, Guadeloupe, numerous archives in the United States, and return trips to Martinique. I am working on a book that weaves the story of the Nardal sisters and their intellectual circle into the larger historical context of the development of modern human rights. What I found as I did my research into the Nardal family was that there was a rich history of women of African descent who had worked for racial justice and women's rights in the French empire since its inception. In my latest trip to Martinique I was able to mine the archives and trace the Nardal family's ancestors back to enslavement and began thinking about how the Nardals' ancestors experienced race and gender in their time. Slavery was abolished in the French colonies in 1848, but it would take another hundred years for Black women to be granted the rights of full, voting citizens. Women of African descent in the French empire were active participants in securing their freedom from enslavement through suffrage.

The vast French colonial empire was based on an economy that relied on the enslavement of Africans, the domination of women, and the exploitation of colonial labor. Exploration, settlement, and ultimately colonization of lands across the Atlantic have been crucial elements in France's history and development since the seventeenth century.¹ Sugar cultivation in the Caribbean marked a dramatic shift in Atlantic trends, as European powers—primarily the French, British, and Dutch—fought for control over these profitable islands, and demanded a sharp increase in the number of enslaved people they were exporting from Africa.² Millions of Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas, and today the vast majority of people living in the Caribbean are of African descent. As long as there has been slavery, there have been people who fought for their freedom from slavery. Resistance to slavery is often thought of in terms of armed rebellion, but enslaved women employed many additional techniques in their resistance such as controlling their fertility (to either avoid or create offspring with white masters in particular), poisoning food and livestock, and running away to maroon societies.³ When the French Revolution threw the French empire into chaos, enslaved people used the opportunity to organize greater resistance to slavery.

1. Quinn, Frederick. *French Overseas Empire*. West Port, CT: Praeger Press, 2000: 79.

2. Klein, Martin. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 3.

3. For more on this, see "Ch. 7: Women and Resistance" in Bernard Moitt's *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

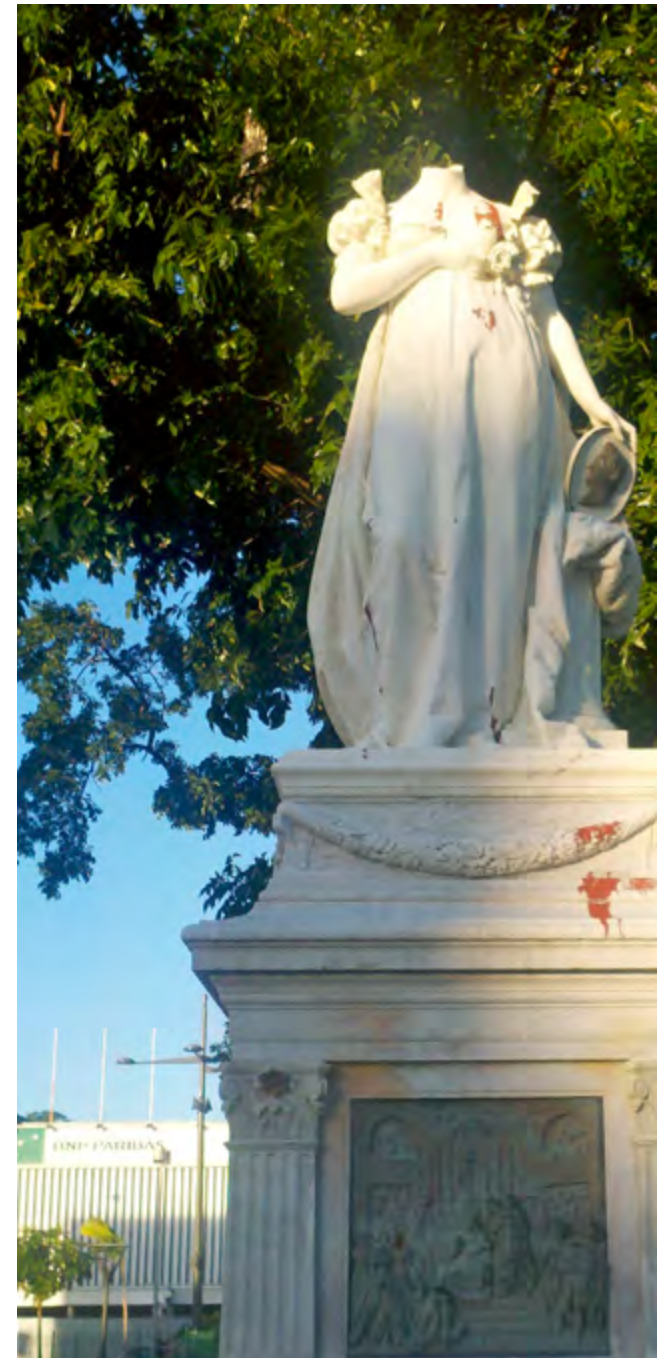
The French Revolution in the late eighteenth century overthrew monarchical rule in favor of democratic ideals. The grotesque hypocrisy between these ideals and the entrenched system of slavery that fueled the French empire inspired slave revolutions throughout the colonial empire. The most successful was in Saint-Domingue, renamed Haiti after independence, where their revolution resulted in the formation of the second republic in the Western hemisphere (after the United States). Haiti's success inspired further uprisings by people enslaved throughout the Atlantic world. The French abolished slavery initially in 1792, but the British sought to seize French territories and maintain slavery. Guadeloupe, the French Caribbean island near Martinique, ignited in a series of uprisings. In contrast to the image of male, armed rebels, Guadeloupe celebrates the legacy of one of the women heroes of this revolt. Solitude was a woman who had run away from the plantation where she was enslaved to join a maroon society. Pregnant when the revolution was at its height, she was famed for her courage in battles even while very pregnant. In May 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte took control of the French empire and reinstated slavery. Solitude and her comrades, however, continued to fight and elude the authorities until November 1802. The institution of slavery continued for nearly another half century, and was not abolished permanently until May 1848.⁴

4. Quinn, *French Overseas Empire*, 95.

Today, you can see the historical memory of women and slavery portrayed in stark contrast in two statues. The first, erected in 1999, commemorates Solitude, the revolutionary pregnant freedom fighter, standing proudly in a defiant pose in the middle of a prominent traffic circle on the Boulevard of Heroes in Guadeloupe (*see photo on page 9*). The second is a statue commemorating the Empress Josephine, Napoleon's wife who was from Martinique (*at right*). In 1991, the statue was beheaded with red paint poured from the neck and red spray paint written across the memorial in Creole "slavery is a crime against humanity."⁵ Many Martinicans believe that Empress Josephine, who had grown up in a white slave-owning family in Martinique, had a hand in convincing Napoleon to reinstate slavery after the French Revolution.

Even during the French Revolution, there was a sense that women were being excluded from the rights of citizens in the Republic. Olympe de Gouges, a French female playwright, wrote "*Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et la Citoyenne*" in 1791, modeled after the famous 1789 Declaration of the National Assembly, in which she argued that women were equal to men. For this she was executed at the guillotine two years later. The "rights of man" promoted in the At-

5. When I first saw the statue in 2002, those were the words inscribed. In her book *Cultural Conundrums: Gender, Race, Nation, & the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2006) her Prologue "Josephine Beheaded" says that words were "Respect Martinique. Respect 22 May [the date that slavery was abolished in 1848]" so it seems that the phrases are updated or changed over time.



The beheaded statue of Empress Josephine in Martinique. Photo courtesy of the author

WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN THE FRENCH EMPIRE FOUGHT FOR THEIR FREEDOM FROM THE EARLIEST RECORDS OF THEIR ENSLAVEMENT. THEY SOUGHT ACCESS TO FREEDOM THROUGH NUMEROUS FORMS OF RESISTANCE AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES.

lantic revolutions in the late nineteenth century were not granted to any women, or most men of African descent. The revolution of 1848 granted “Universal Suffrage” which allowed men who were citizens to freely choose their deputies and councilors, although it excluded suffrage for all women.⁶ It also excluded the majority of Africans who remained non-citizen subjects in the French empire.⁷ The same year, the French Minister of Education proposed to include girls in their law of compulsory education until the age of fourteen. His position that girls should be educated was so radical that it forced him to resign due to controversy.⁸ These democratic reforms continued to be extremely limited for those who were not European men.

In the late nineteenth century, as industrialism and capitalism were growing and thriving in Western Europe, there was an increased demand for more materials, workers, and trade routes to and from the colonies. In the short time between

1880-1900, European colonial empires claimed all of Africa, with the exceptions of Liberia and Ethiopia.⁹ France added the bulk of West Africa as well as French Equatorial Africa, French Somaliland, and Madagascar to its colonial empire. Unlike the British colonial policy that implemented “indirect rule” in the colonies, viewing colonized lands as separately governed entities; French colonial policy was one of “direct rule.” It viewed the lands it had colonized as an extension of France. The accompanying ideology was known as the French *mission civilisatrice*, or “civilizing mission.” This philosophy promoted the idea that the infusion of French culture could improve the lives of the “uncivilized” and “savage” indigenous peoples from the colonies.¹⁰ Although slavery was legally abolished in the French colonies, forced labor continued to be widespread in Africa. The *Code de l’indigénat* was a legal code adopted in 1887 that gave colonial administrators authority to fine and jail indigenous people without trial.¹¹ The



**Statue of Gerty Archimède in Guadeloupe.
Photo courtesy of the author**

6. Senators were elected by indirect suffrage.

7. Quinn, *French Overseas Empire*, 156.

8. “Women’s Rights in France,” S. Joan Moon in *Encyclopedia of 1848 Revolutions*, 2005. www.ohiou.edu/~chastain/rz/womrgt.htm. Accessed April 27, 2007.

9. Boahen, A. Adu. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987: 27.

10. Conklin, Alice. *Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and French West Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000: 8.

11. Quinn, *French Overseas Empire*, 118.

immense extension of the French empire during this period created a distinct difference between the “Old Colonies”—such as those in the French Caribbean—and the new colonies in Africa. People from the Old Colonies were granted more rights and were considered more “civilized” than the new African subjects. It was during this period that families such as the Nardals were able to slowly gain some of the privileges of citizenship.

The Nardal sisters’ father, Paul Nardal, was one of the first men of African descent to be sent to France to get educated in the late nineteenth century. It was rare for Black men to get such an education, and virtually unheard of for Black women. Paul Nardal’s daughters, then, became among the very first group of women of African descent to be eligible to be educated in Paris a generation later, although they were still not voting citizens. In the French context, where deep connection to *la Patrie* is particularly central to national identity, those seeking reforms had to carefully negotiate between patriotism and international progress. During World War I, when British and American women were on the verge of achieving suffrage, the main French suffrage group, *Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes*, declined to sign a peace petition with international women’s groups, citing their patriotism and support for France as reasons to not join.¹² For Black women, whose loyalty to France

12. Rupp, “Constructing Internationalism,” *The American Historical Review* 99.5 (Dec. 1994): 1588.

was even more in question as the French feared anti-colonial organizing, challenges to the French system were even riskier. Paulette Nardal, however, became involved in women’s groups soon after her arrival in Paris in the 1920s. She joined the *Union Féminine Civique et Sociale*, a moderate feminist group founded in 1925 to create a group of elite, civically engaged female leaders and to promote women’s emancipation in the social agenda of the Catholic Church.¹³ From 1935 to 1939, she had published in a number of journals, including *le Cerf*, promoting the organization.¹⁴ When the Nardal sisters were back in Martinique after World War II, they organized women into a political delegation to reshape their political and domestic roles where they went door-to-door, organized conferences and expositions, and infiltrated the local media with new ideas. Other women in the French Caribbean created similar types of women’s groups, many with ties to international organizations.

While women’s political activism most often affected local issues, the inclusion of women into the global political arena after World War II allowed for their unprecedented circulation internationally both physically and intellectually. Before this time, Black women in particular—despite notable exceptions such as Ida B. Wells’ trans-Atlantic anti-lynching campaign in the late nineteenth century or the Black intellectuals in

13. “Présentation de l’Union Féminine Civique et Sociale (UFCS);” CAF, Fonds 16AF.

14. “Paulette Nardal: l’âme de la perfection,” *Carib Hebdo*, 1.

Paris—had extremely limited mobility and access to international communities. That shifted dramatically in the mid-twentieth century, especially as French women first won the right to vote in 1944, realized in 1945. Black women in the French empire had greater opportunities to influence the global political landscape and worked to increase their influence.¹⁵ Paulette Nardal was appointed as a delegate to the United Nations in 1946 where she worked on a committee focused on non-autonomous territories in the French empire throughout the globe. Gerty Archimède, the first Black female lawyer in Guadeloupe, first woman from the French Caribbean to be elected to the National Assembly, and Communist friend of Nardal’s, traveled and worked in Senegal, Hungary, and the Soviet Union, among other places, as a result of her political inclusion. She spent several weeks in Côte d’Ivoire doing legal work to aid a vast number of detainees—many of them women—imprisoned for supposed crimes as starting schools without colonial authorization.¹⁶ Women across the political spectrum joined with international women’s groups to work for political and economic reforms, as well as improved rights for women in the domestic realm.

Women of African descent in the French empire fought for their freedom from the earliest

15. For more on the ways that suffrage was granted unequally based on a racial hierarchy, see Boittin, Firpo, and Musil Church in “Hierarchies of Race and Gender in the French Colonial Empire, 1914-1946,” *Historical Reflections* 37.1 (Spring 2011): 60-90.

16. Laurent Farrugia, *Gerty Archimède*, Interview transcript. Jeunes Antil (1976): 52

WHAT I FOUND AS I DID MY RESEARCH INTO THE NARDAL FAMILY WAS THAT THERE WAS A RICH HISTORY OF WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT WHO HAD WORKED FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE FRENCH EMPIRE SINCE ITS INCEPTION. IN MY LATEST TRIP TO MARTINIQUE I WAS ABLE TO MINE THE ARCHIVES AND TRACE THE NARDAL FAMILY'S ANCESTORS BACK TO ENSLAVEMENT AND BEGAN THINKING ABOUT HOW THE NARDALS' ANCESTORS EXPERIENCED RACE AND GENDER IN THEIR TIME.



The author in front of the street named for Paulette Nardal in Martinique. Photo by Joshua Musil Church.

records of their enslavement. They sought access to freedom through numerous forms of resistance and strategic alliances. Slavery was abolished in the French colonies in 1848, but it would take another hundred years for Black women to be granted the rights of full, voting citizens. In the series of democratic reforms that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, women were categorically denied the increased rights of their male counterparts. As women slowly were granted greater access to the public realm in the early twentieth century, they formed groups, published widely, and advocated for suffrage and increased rights. Once women became full voting citizens after World War II, they used their political influence to ameliorate the lives and rights of women around the globe. It was a long journey from Paulette Nardal's great-grandmother's walk to liberate herself and her children from the list of human property to Paulette's position as a voting citizen who represented France at the United Nations. Yet their story allows us a glimpse of the courage and dedication that women of African descent in the French empire had in working to secure their freedoms.

Emily Musil Church is a CSW Research Scholar and is currently on research leave from her position as Assistant Professor of History at Lafayette College in Easton, PA. She is working on a book project entitled *From Emancipation Towards Equality: Race, Gender, and the Transformation from "Rights of Man" to Human Rights*.