IN SEARCH OF SEVEN SISTERS
A Biography of the Nardal Sisters of Martinique

by Emily Musil Church

Introduction

“There were other black diasporic intellectual circles in Paris at the time, notably the group surrounding the Nardal sisters of Martinique . . . “ (Kelley). This phrase sparked a search into the lives of these women that has lasted over a dozen years. Who were they? What notable group surrounded them? My research began with an exploration of the many connections between African American writers and black French intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance authors, a new literary movement began in Paris known as the negritude movement. Just as early scholarship about the Harlem Renaissance focused on the men in the movement, until very recently there was almost no information about women writers in the negritude movement. There were references to the Nardal sisters in much of the scholarship, especially regarding famous intellectuals who had been introduced to each other by the Nardal sisters. However, there was scarce and often conflicting historical information about who the Nardal sisters were. Born on the small Caribbean island of Martinique at the turn of the twentieth century, the seven Nardal sisters were among the very first women of African descent to be educated in the French colonial system. The Nardals organized for social reform, published widely, and influenced some of the most important politicians, artists, and intellectuals of their time. They developed an early pan-African identity, fought against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, created women’s political networks as women first won the right to vote, promoted African American music and literature, and worked at the United Nations during its foundation.

After researching in thirteen archives in Europe, Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean, I have found the Nardal sisters to be even more well-connected and influential than I had originally guessed. Yet the story of this remarkable family has been left largely untold. While there is little biographical research on the Nardal family, there has been important work on the tremendous influence of the Nardal sisters in interwar Paris and their significant literary contributions by scholars such as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Tyler Stovall, Brent Hayes Edwards, Jennifer Boittin, Claire Oberon Garcia, and Shireen K. Lewis. In addition, Martinican filmmaker Jil Servant made a film about Paulette Nardal, and there have been a number of articles on the Nardal family in the local press in Martinique over the years. What I have done here is collected oral histories, personal correspondences, and other archival documents in an attempt to reconstruct the lives and contributions of these women. There are still some unanswered questions and opportunities for further research about the Nardals, but I believe this biographical narrative is long overdue. My
forthcoming book will provide substantial analysis of the sources and provide greater historical context. This article is split into four sections: an outline of the Nardal’s ancestry, traced back five generations to enslavement; a biography of Paulette, the luminary of the seven sisters; a section on the lives of her six accomplished sisters; and an outline of the Achille family, their maternal line, with special attention to their cousin Louis-Thomas Achille, who was like a brother to them and was a critical link to the African American intellectuals in Paris. For visual reference, I have created a family tree based on research at the archives in Martinique, records at the cemetery in Fort-de-France, and interviews with the Nardal family.

Nardal Ancestry

The story of the seven Nardal sisters does not begin with the birth of the first sister, but rather with their enslaved ancestors who were forcibly exported from western Africa to the Caribbean during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. This historical legacy was central to shaping the worldview of their descendants. The first ancestor I have found a record for is a woman named Zilia, who was the great-great grandmother of the Nardal sisters. Zilia and her family were enslaved in the region of Martinique called Trinité, located along the Atlantic Ocean in the northeastern part of the island. Trinité was particularly known for sugar production, and by the eighteenth century was composed of a number of large sugar plantations. It is likely that the Nardals worked on one of these large sugar estates. Zilia was deceased by the time her daughter, Sidonie, was officially recognized by the French government as a free person in the spring of 1850. Sidonie is the first person of African descent I have found to have the surname “Nardal” officially attached to her name. She has no father listed in her documentation and is listed as a “fille naturelle” or “illegitimate daughter” of Zilia, who is recorded only with a first name (Acte d’Individualité No. 1762). On May 11, 1850, two years after slavery was abolished throughout the French empire, thirty-six-year-old Sidonie Nardal walked to the local municipal office with five children in tow to have herself and them listed officially for the first time as citizens rather than as property. The first of the five children recorded was her twelve-year-old son Henry Nardal. There were two other Nardal children with her—sixteen-year-old Victor Nardal and fifteen-year-old Clémencia Nardal—who I presume were her nephew and niece. Sidonie’s son Joachim, the Nardal sisters’ grandfather, would have been about eleven years old at the time, but was not with her on that day. Joachim was not registered as a free person until December 22, 1854, when he was fifteen years old (Acte d’Individualité No. 2212). Where this child was when his mother, brother, and cousins were freed over four and a half years before him remains a mystery. Sidonie’s brother Jean Nardal was the last Nardal that I found to be registered as a free person. On March 17, 1855, forty-five year old Jean, listed as the fils naturel of Zilia, went by himself to the municipal office—seven years after the abolition of slavery—to have himself moved from the slavery register and declared a citizen (Acte d’Individualité No. 2336).

As a young man, the Nardal sisters’ grandfather Joachim Nardal moved from Trinité to what was then the bustling capital of Martinique, Saint-Pierre, on the western side of
the island. Saint-Pierre was a center of trade and culture in the nineteenth century Caribbean world, often referred to as the petit Paris des Antilles, or the “little Paris of the French Caribbean.” Joachim developed a relationship with a woman named Alexandrine Avanet, who had been born enslaved in Saint-Pierre in 1835 and freed at the age of fourteen (Acte d’Individualité No. 3231). Joachim and Alexandrine had two children together, Marie-Hélène and Paul. Marie-Hélène was born on October 8, 1861 (Etat Civil, Sainte-Pierre, No. 1736). There is some controversy, however, surrounding the birth of the Nardal sisters’ father Paul. Paul was first registered by Alexandrine under the name Paul Avanet on June 12, 1867, with no father listed. He was not recognized by his father until 1878, when Paul’s last name was changed to Nardal and Joachim revised the date of Paul’s birth to March 14, 1864 (Etat Civil, Sainte-Pierre, No. 1884). Joachim and Alexandrine were married on August 28, 1890, when they were both in their fifties (Etat Civil, Sainte-Pierre, 1736). Alice Nardal would later recall her paternal ancestry as coming from “a very good-looking man, without doubt from Côte d’Ivoire” (“Paulette Nardal est morte”).

The Nardal sisters grew up in a home with parents who were accomplished, musical people who fostered a deep patriotism and commitment to learning in their children. Their father, Paul Nardal, did his primary studies with the Frères de Ploërmel, followed by a technical school, and then was admitted into university. He was the first black man to earn an academic fellowship for the national École des Arts et Métiers after the abolition of slavery in 1848 (“Paul Nardal” 231). According to his granddaughter, one of his most prized possessions was a personal letter from Victor Schoelcher, the famous French senator who had worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean islands, who had written to personally congratulate Nardal on his achievement. Nardal was asked to donate the letter to the archives in France, but he was afraid it might get damaged in the trip across the Atlantic. The letter was later destroyed in a fire at the family house.

Paul Nardal became the first black engineer in the Department of Public Works in Martinique, and was well-known on the island as an accomplished engineer. He had an illustrious forty-five year career in the colonial service for public works on the island. He gained recognition for noteworthy projects including the intricate ceilings of the churches in Ducos and François, the water reservoir at Evêché, and the Absalon bridge (“Paul Nardal” 231). However, because Paul Nardal was categorized as “Black,” rather than mixed European-African lineage in a culture that maintained a racial hierarchy, he was prevented from moving to the highest ranks in the colonial administration. Despite this, Paul Nardal was deeply devoted to France and was proud of his French citizenship. Paulette said her father “is the most important Negro on the island” (Robeson 9). He won prestigious French honors such as the Ordre des Palmes Académiques and the Légion d’Honneur (ADMIM 1103). He also worked as a teacher, training a generation of Martinican engineers. When the school was in danger of being shut down, Paul Nardal believed so strongly in the education of the young students that he continued to teach for no pay. In 1968, a street was named in his honor. According to his family, he was a devout Catholic, well-read, open, socially connected, and a noted flute player. He loomed large within his family. His daughter Paulette would often note the “intelligence and generosity” of her father (“Paulette Nardal nous a quitte”).

Their mother, Louise Achille, was from a métisse family described by Alice Nardal as coming from a “beautiful love story between a European man and an African woman
our great-great grandmother was one of the girls of this couple . . . [named Adite] had blue eyes and everyone knew her.” The family was living in Lamentin, Martinique, and their neighborhood was known as “Adite with the blue eyes” (“Paulette Nardal est morte”). When speaking of their mother Louise Achille, a schoolteacher and prominent musician, the sisters often commented that although their father was the dominant parent, their mother was “everywhere spiritually,” and had spent a lot of time raising them. Paulette referred to the “silent courage” of her mother (“Paulette Nardal nous a quittes”). Archival sources reveal that long before women were granted the right to vote, a cause her daughters would later advocate for, Louise Achille Nardal was a leader in Martinican civil society. Before the birth of her daughters, Louise was a schoolteacher for nearly a decade (ADM IM 3686). In 1901, Louise co-founded and served as president for one of the first women’s groups in Martinique, the Société Saint-Louis-des-Dames (Pago 65, 76). Her particular interest was in women in their childbearing years because of the many complications that arose around pregnancy and childbirth (Burac and Adams). During World War I, Louise organized fundraisers and concerts on the island to raise funds for soldiers. She was the president of the association Prévoyantes Martiniquaises from 1915 to 1932, and was a member of the Fédération Mutaliste de la Martinique for which she served as secretary for their committee on the home for the elderly, l’Asile de Vieillards de Bethléem. She also was the founder and president of a nursery and home for orphaned children (ADM IM 3686).

Paul and Louise Nardal opened their home to frequent visits from the local intellectuals and musicians, a tradition that would be carried on by their daughters. Paulette described her childhood upbringing as “bathed in music. There were always young men and women around me interested in this art . . . my parents would organize at the house music sessions and concerts . . . thanks to our parents . . . we were immersed in an atmosphere lighted by faith and interior beauty” (“Paulette Nardal nous a quittes”). Like their parents, the seven daughters—Paulette, Emilie, Alice, Jane, Lucy, Cécile, and Andrée—were all accomplished and educated women who remained committed to civic activism and social uplift, surrounded by music, and close with one another throughout their lives.

Paulette Nardal

Paulette Nardal, the oldest and most prolific of the seven Nardal sisters, was born October 12, 1896 in François, Martinique. Like other girls of her era, she went to grade school at the pensionnat colonial, the colonial school. She earned her Brévet Supérieur, which allowed her to teach for a year after school in Saint-Esprit, Martinique. She was a relatively tall woman, standing at 5’8’’ (“Paulette Nardal,” New York Passenger Lists). She studied English in Jamaica before leaving for Paris in 1920 to study English literature at the prestigious Sorbonne University, an extraordinary accomplishment at that time. There, she wrote her thesis on white American anti-slavery activist and author, Harriet Beecher Stowe (Fabre 152). The title was most likely “The Life and Works of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe (Uncle Tom’s Cabin—Puritanism in New England).” She then returned to Martinique to teach for a few years, but found it too provincial and moved to Paris again (Stovall 106).
She worked as a Parliamentary Secretary for Joseph Lagrosillière, who has been called the “father of Martiniquan Socialism” and was the Deputy representing Martinique from 1910 to 1924, and again from 1932 to 1940 (“Paulette Nardal,” Nos Histoires). In a letter to the Governor of Martinique, Nardal says that she later worked as Parliamentary Secretary for Galandou Diouf, the Senegalese Deputy to the National Assembly.

In addition to her political work, Paulette Nardal became engaged in the black literary and cultural scene early in her career in Paris. One source notes that she was the first black French female journalist in Paris (Tesseron 16). By 1929, she was working as a journalist for Le Soir and opening her apartment at 7, rue Hébert in the Parisian banlieue of Clamart to international friends and visitors (“Identified People,” Robeson papers and Sirinelli 83). Paulette published in a number of other sources during the interwar era, including La Dépêche Africaine, Je Suis Partout, and l’AUCAM.

Paulette Nardal is most known for her multicultural, multinational literary salon, pioneering in its inclusiveness and inspirational to a generation of black leaders and the important journal that grew out of it, La Revue du Monde Noir. In 1931, the same year that she co-founded this journal, Paulette Nardal was commissioned by the French government to publish a travel guide to Martinique (Nardal, Guide des colonies). It is her work during the interwar era, and above all in her salon fostering transnational friendships and collaborations, that has secured her place as an essential figure to know in the study of black internationalism in Paris.

The archival record as well as every interview confirms that one defining feature of Paulette Nardal was her vast social network. Her friends in Paris included Countee Cullen, Nicolas Guillen, Marian Anderson, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Roland Hayes, Clara Sheperd, Léopold Senghor, and Eslanda Robeson, among many others. She was also particularly close with René Maran and his wife Collette. Above all, the social network of all seven sisters revolved around each other. Paulette Nardal is often remembered for repeating the adage, “Black is beautiful!” (Servant). While Nardal was particularly dedicated to the improvement of the lives of people of African descent around the world, she also fostered many friendships with people across boundaries of nationhood and race.

All of the Nardals were raised Catholic, but Paulette became especially involved with Church activities in the early 1930s. She joined the Association universitaire catholique des laïques missionnaires (AUCAM), went to Rome in 1932, and in 1935 was sponsored by AUCAM to do a speaking tour of Belgium with her Martinican friend Anita Véry about the importance of Ethiopia’s independence in the face of the Italian invasion (“Paulette Nardal: l’âme”). She became a tireless activist for Ethiopia’s independence, publishing a series on the topic in AUCAM’s journal. Yet despite her Catholic activism, throughout her life Paulette had friends whose religious beliefs differed from her own. She had her portrait painted by Maxa Nordau in 1935, a French Jewish painter whose father Max Nordau co-founded the World Zionist Organization.5

On July 21, 1939, Paulette Nardal left her apartment in the 14th district in Paris to embark on one of the many trans-Atlantic journeys in her life. This one, however, would result in a nearly fatal accident that would keep her from ever again living in her beloved Paris. Nardal’s experience was emblematic of the trauma experienced throughout the French empire as France declared war and then surrendered to Nazi Germany. In a detailed letter written to the Governor of Martinique on November 7, 1943, Nardal explained the
events of that life-changing voyage. She had been commissioned by the Minister of Colonies, Georges Mandel, to write the screenplay for a governmental film entitled, “Young Craftsmen of Cinema.” In early September of 1939, after Nardal researched and wrote in Martinique for six weeks, France and Great Britain declared war on Nazi-controlled Germany. Nevertheless, ten days later, Nardal stated: “attentive to nothing but my work, I didn’t hesitate to head back to my job” in Paris, and boarded the passenger ship, the SS Bretagne, on September 13, 1939.

When the ship neared the English coast, it was torpedoed by German submarines throughout the day and into the night. The British destroyer that came to pick up the survivors had been partly damaged during the firing, so passengers had to use knotted ropes to descend off of the Bretagne for rescue. In the midst of continued fire, 44-year old Nardal who was, in her words “not sporty,” was finally able to propel herself onto the destroyer on her third attempt. However, the jump that saved her life also left her permanently disabled as her left leg was nearly severed by the edge of the ship. In later years she would joke with her family that it was only the fat in her leg that kept her from losing it.

The injuries that Nardal suffered required an eleven-month stay at the City Hospital of Plymouth where she teetered between life and death for the first three months. She had lost all of her belongings, and, moreover, was isolated from most friends and family due to the conditions of the war. However, during her year in the hospital she wrote all the telegrams destined for Martinique (ADM 25J5/10). While her life was spared, Paulette was left permanently disabled after her accident, which greatly frustrated her and affected her mobility. The trauma also affected her psychologically, and for the rest of her life, loud noises—and in particular sirens—bothered her. In July 1940, her cousin Louis-Thomas Achille, a professor at Howard University with whom she had lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, cabled her the money necessary for her to return to Martinique. Nardal once more climbed aboard a passenger ship and sailed across the Atlantic from Liverpool to New York to Puerto Rico, where she flew back to Martinique only to find it taken over by Vichy rule.

Upon Paulette Nardal’s return to Vichy-controlled Martinique, she risked arrest by giving covert English lessons to Martinicans who wanted to escape to nearby Anglophone islands to join Charles de Gaulle’s Free French movement (Koda). Once Martinique was with the Free French in 1943, Paulette seemed determined to invest in making Martinique more cosmopolitan. In 1944 she founded the Rassemblement Féminin, the Martinican branch of the Union féminine civique et sociale, around which she founded another literary salon and a journal, La Femme dans la Cité. This journal coincided with women in the French empire winning the right to vote for the first time after the war. The Minister of the Colonies was scrambling to find information about women in Martinique at this time, especially how they might vote. The local government said there was only one person who could answer this question: Paulette Nardal. In November 1945, Nardal received a letter saying that the Minister of the Colonies wanted her to provide information about “colonial feminism.” She took the opportunity to write a long memo entitled “Féminisme Colonial,” in which she outlined challenges for women categorized by race and marital status, with specific recommendations for how the state might support the education and protection of women (Nardal, “Féminisme Colonial”).

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Although Paulette Nardal’s near-death experience on the *S.S. Bretagne* left her permanently disabled, she braved crossing the ocean once again and arrived in New York City on November 15, 1946 (“Paulette Nardal,” New York Passenger Lists). She was appointed to the United Nations by her friend Ralph Bunche in 1946. She spent a year and a half in New York serving as a delegate to the section on non-autonomous territories (“Paulette Nardal: l’âme”). After eighteen months in New York, Paulette returned to Martinique in 1947 and became an English teacher at Collège de Cluny. The following year she hosted a musical and historical event with her sister Alice commemorating the centennial anniversary of the abolition of slavery (Koda). Paulette translated African American Spirituals into Martinican Creole and was a member of the *Société des auteurs, compositeurs, et éditeurs de musique* with nine original compositions (“Paulette Nardal: l’âme”). For one of her more famous songs, “*An ni songé*,” she collaborated with Gilbert Gratiant, her friend from her interwar days in Paris. He wrote the lyrics to her music (“Un compositeur”).

In Martinique she is still most famously and affectionately remembered for the singing group that she founded in 1954. Initially it was called *La Chorale de la Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne*, then it became *La Chorale de Paulette Nardal*, and finally it transformed to the name it still carries today, *La joie de Chanter* (“La fondatrice”). In addition to spreading her love of music Paulette continued to encourage young writers, as she had in the 1930s. She served as a member of the jury for the *Prix du roman des D.O.M.* She was awarded *Officier des Palmes académiques*, and was particularly proud to be honored with the *Commandeur de l’ordre national de la République du Sénégal* that was awarded to her in 1966 by her old friend, then President of Senegal, Léopold Senghor. In 1976 she was awarded the *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur*. She passed away on February 16, 1985, and her funeral was held at the Saint-Louis Cathedral in Martinique on February 22 (ADM 25J5/10). The following year, the Municipal Council in Martinique voted to have the street intersection *Place Fénélon* near the family home, renamed *Place Paulette Nardal*. Throughout her life, Paulette Nardal fostered networks that transcended racial, national, political, and religious boundaries.

**Paulette’s Sisters**

One day Paul Nardal said to his daughters, “I have nothing to leave you except a house, it is your duty to work like seven boys” (ADM 25J5/10). In an era when women had few professional opportunities, he raised his daughters with the unconventional expectation that they would be educated and work outside of the home. Paulette was born in 1896, and her sister Emilie was born two years later, also in François, on June 19, 1898 (Etat Civil, François, No. 275). Emilie was known as being the most charming, particularly lovely, and having a “queen’s air.” Her nickname was “Lily” (with the Anglophone spelling of a “y” at the end), although they also called her “la petite angoisse” because she was a heartbreaker. The Nardal lore is that she was so beautiful that men would stop and stare when she entered a room. Like most of her family, Emilie was a musician, and she played and taught both piano and violin. She was also involved in commerce. She married Victor Fortuné, an accomplished teacher, in September 1926, and had two sons, Louis and Albany (Archives Municipales, Fort-de-France).
Alice, the third born, studied music in Paris from 1923 to 1930, during which time she was actively involved with the Clamart salon. Upon her return to Martinique, Alice became a teacher at the Lycée Schoelcher and created both the first boys choir and flute à bec (recorder) ensemble. She married Wilhem Eda-Pierre, a designer and journalist, with whom she had two children, Christiane and Jacques. Wilhem died when the children were quite young, and Alice never remarried. She was also considered by the family to be their historian. In 1948, Alice and Paulette organized a musical tribute to celebrate the centennial of the abolition of slavery where they created and directed a history of musical traditions in Martinique (Tesseron 16). Her daughter, Christiane, became a world-renowned opera singer, performing and recording music across the globe in prestigious theatres such as the Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Opéra de Paris (“Eda-Pierre” 26).

The fourth daughter, Jeanne or “Jane” as she most often went by, was the free spirit of the family, and all the sisters said she had always been an original. She was someone who did as she pleased, and was interested in everything. She wanted to know what everyone thought and how they saw the world. Because Jane was so unconventional, some dismissed her as “crazy.” She would wear jangling bracelets all up and down her arms, or an earring in one ear and not the other, or paint her fingernails all different colors, and took great delight in such whimsy. She loved to laugh, and would often dance the Charleston and the Cakewalk. Every person who has talked about Jane Nardal mentions her uniqueness. One of their peers recalls seeing her walking down the streets of Paris in the early 1930s with an “elegant black silhouette,” wearing an elaborate hat, pearl grey gloves, and holding a cane (Sablé 63). She was elegant, with a strong body and what the Nardal family described as the most “African” features of the sisters. She took pride in her African heritage, and would often wear African jewelry and turbans. She sometimes used the pseudonym “Yadhé,” which her niece believes to be named after an African woman or spirit. Jane went to Paris to study classical literature and French from 1923 to 1928, and, according to Paulette, was the first one to become interested in pan-African literary and political movements (Servant). On January 17, 1929, while back in Martinique, Jane hosted a conference on “le chant Nègre aux Etats Unis,” featuring African American Spirituals and blues music (“Annonces”). In September 1931, she married Jules Joseph Zamia, a doctor of Indian descent from Guadeloupe.

Professionally, Jane was a popular classics teacher who was adored by her students. She would teach outside of the curriculum, and use methods that were quite unconventional for the time, such as screening films. After initially having her visa denied for travel to Africa in 1930, she taught for two years in Chad later in her life (Smith 61). While she was a dynamic teacher, Jane followed her whims. She was put on professional probation for six months at one time because she was having such a good time vacationing in Sicily that she decided to extend her vacation by three months, missing a third of the school year. She got in more serious trouble at another point when she wanted to get into politics. Someone threw a burning torch through the window of the Nardal home, and Jane was thereafter forbidden by her family to get involved with politics. She began going blind in the early 1960s, which ultimately led her to shy away from public life.

Lucy Nardal, the fifth daughter born, became a highly esteemed teacher and administrator in Martinique. She married Anatole Goussard, a businessman, when she was still quite young and had two children by the time she was twenty-three. She had a daughter,
Marie-Thérèse, and a son, Yves, with Goussard. The couple divorced, however, and she reclaimed her name Nardal and raised the children as a single mother. Lucy spoke English well and taught physical sciences at the Pensionnal Colonial in Martinique from 1936 to 1957. She served as Vice President of the Lycée d'État des Jeunes Filles from 1957 to 1964, and was the Director from 1964 to 1971 ("Nardal, Lucy"). She was one of the founding members of Centre Martiniquais d’Action Culturelle (CMAC) in the 1970s (Hersilie-Héloïse), and also served as the President of the Martinican branch of the Soroptimist Club, a worldwide organization of professional women committed to creating a more just and peaceful world for all people by making it better for girls.

Lucy’s son, Yves, born on January 2, 1928, had finished his primary studies and in 1938 was sent to continue his studies in metropolitan France when he was ten years old. The war broke out a year later in 1939, but the family was afraid to send him home to Martinique on a ship across the Atlantic during wartime. At this time, his aunt Paulette was teetering between life and death after such a voyage. Soon after his arrival, Yves became a scout with the Scout Troop of Raincy, an activity that the German authorities soon banned (André, “Yves” 215). The Scouts began to meet in secret (“Yves Goussard”). As the war progressed, the Free French forces became increasingly organized against the Axis powers. Eager to join the French Resistance, Yves lied about his age and joined the Free French Forces. When he was sixteen years old, he joined the “Armand spiritualist,” under the direction of Commander Charles Hildevert (André, “Yves” 215). Tragically, Yves was arrested by the Germans on August 26, 1944, and was deported first to Neue Bremm, then to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen (“Yves Goussard”). In February 1945, he was deported to the infamous Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, at the height of the second major typhus outbreak (Roussi). He died of typhus in March 1945—the same month, year, camp, and disease as Anne Frank—one month before the camp was liberated. He was reported missing, and his death was not officially confirmed until 1965, over twenty years later. On July 12, 2007, Yves Goussard was officially honored by the Minister of Defense in charge of Veterans Affairs (Journal Officiel).

Cécile, described as the most timid and sensitive of the Nardal sisters, was the sixth born. She was a mid-wife and healthcare specialist, remembered as a dedicated worker. She married Gaston Marie-Magdelene, a Martinican Deputy Agent who worked in shipping, with whom she had three children: Lucienne, André, and Annie. According to her family, she was particularly passionate about ameliorating the life of young mothers and prostitutes in Martinique. She also worked for a time as a mid-wife in Guadeloupe alongside her sister Jane’s physician husband, Dr. Zamia (Robeson 11).

Andrée was the youngest of the Nardal sisters. As the baby of the family, she was beloved and protected by all her sisters. She was an exceptionally talented piano player, was active in the Clamart salon in Paris, and published an article “Study of the Biguine Creole” in the second issue of La Revue du Monde Noir. She was apparently popular with young men, described by one Martinican man as a “real exotic beauty, [with] a distinguished smile, voluptuous body, [and] great education” (Sablé 63). Andrée received three marriage proposals before the age of twenty-five. The first was a young bourgeois man she had been dating in Martinique. When he told his mother he planned to marry Andrée, she allegedly replied, “Nous sommes dans le salon, pourquoi tu veut aller à la cuisine encore?” Meaning, in effect, she did not approve of the marriage because the Nardals were not a
métisse family. This promptly ended their relationship. Her most famous suitor was Léopold Sedar Senghor, the future President of Senegal, who proposed marriage to her in Paris. She declined, and he was reportedly quite vexed at this rejection.

Eventually, Andrée married Roland Rene-Boisneuf, a very accomplished Guadeloupean man who had been part of the Revue du Monde Noir group and published two articles in the fourth issue of the journal. Their marriage was like the two great bourgeoise families of Martinique and Guadeloupe joining forces, a union that was much discussed. Tragically, Andrée died a mysterious death ten days after her marriage to him. She was twenty-five years old and completely healthy when she waved good-bye to her family after her wedding. Yet on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1935, the Nardal family received the message that she had passed away. The Rene-Boisneuf family claimed that she had caught some sort of sickness, but many in the Nardal family suspect that she was murdered. Her death remains shrouded in mystery. Every Christmas Eve for the rest of his life, Paul Nardal would weep over the loss of his youngest daughter. The sisters would refer to her as “ma pauvre petite soeur,” and they would often reminisce about her.

The seven Nardal sisters of Martinique believed in human dignity and the progress of humanity. Although they had different personalities and interests, they did not have deep political, philosophical, or religious differences. They were so close-knit that they were almost a unit. After World War II, Paulette, Jane, and Cécile all lived with their father in the family home on 83, rue Schoelcher (their mother had since passed away), and Alice, Lucy, and Emilie lived in the family apartment on 52, rue Galliéni. In 1956 a fire destroyed the family home on rue Schoelcher, which was very traumatic for them, especially for Paulette who was living there with her father at the time. Officially the cause of the fire is unsolved, but the family believes it was the fault of the electrician who lived next door. Jane and Cécile remade the house after the fire into a three-level apartment. They also had the apartments on 52 rue Gallieni; the apartments were connected by a walkway between the back of the two buildings so they were all connected. Alice lived on the first floor, Lucy on the second, and Emilie on the third. The other had Paulette and Paul on the first floor, Cecile on the second, and Jane on the third.

The Achille Family

There had been one boy born to Paul and Louise Nardal, the eighth birth after the girls were born, but he died in infancy. Yet one of their male cousins, Louis-Thomas Achille, from their mother’s side of the family, was like a brother to the Nardal sisters. I include him in their biography because his life and work was so closely intertwined with his cousins’, particularly Paulette’s. His father Louis Achille, the Nardal sisters’ uncle, was prominent and came from a bourgeois and interracial family. Born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, in February 1878, Louis Achille was the first black man to earn the Agrégation, the highest degree for teachers in France, awarded to him in 1905. He was a teacher at the Lycée Schoelcher in Martinique from 1906 to 1937 (“Notice Biographique”). He served as the guide for Theodore and Edith Roosevelt when they visited Martinique in February 1916 (Dauphine). The major sports stadium in Martinique, the Stade Louis-Achille, is named after him.
Louis Achille’s children were Louis-Thomas, Albert, Pierre (who later became an Ivorian citizen and helped create the archives in Côte d’Ivoire), Jeanette (called Jeanne), Isabelle (who performed for De Gaulle’s army in North Africa and later married Léon Damas), and Marguerette (called Magie). Louis T. Achille, the eldest, was born in Martinique on August 31, 1909, and received his Licence-en-lettres in English and his Diplôme d’études supérieures d’anglais, both from the University of Paris (“Louis Achille”). As an adult, he had many connections with prominent African Americans. An instructor of French at Howard University in Washington, DC, the capital of the African American intellectual elite, he was hired as a professor in 1932 and worked there until 1943 (“In Memoriam”). Indeed, Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche hosted Louis Achille for six months in Washington, DC. Achille returned the favor in 1932 by housing Bunche in the Achille’s villa in the south of France while Bunche researched French colonial policy on his Rosenwald Doctoral Fellowship (Achille, Letter to Ralph Bunche).

Achille, who occasionally wrote under the pen name Leon Terraud, was a devoted Catholic and a musician, like his cousins. During the summers while teaching at Howard University in the 1930s, Achille would travel with a Catholic group “Companions of St. Francis of Assisi.” He taught members of this group spirituals in English, and in 1931 reportedly made the first recordings of spirituals in France (Cook 44). He combined his artistic and intellectual interests on the subject in an article entitled “Negro Spirituals” in the journal Esprit in 1951. In addition to publications in Esprit and Revue du Monde Noir, this prolific writer published in numerous other journals, including: The Washington Post, Association Universitaire Catholique pour L’Aide aux Missions, l’Etudiant Martiniquais, La Revue de L’AUCAM, The American Catholic Sociological Review, L’appel de la Route, The Washington Tribune, Présence Africaine, La Revue Anglo-Americaine, and The Afro-American. While writing, teaching, and producing music it is likely that Achille was also involved in setting up a student exchange program at Howard University. The university created an exchange with Martinique in 1938, while Achille was on the faculty (Muse 405).

Letters reveal that Achille served in the United States Army during World War II and paid for his cousin Paulette Nardal’s hospital stay and return voyage when she was wounded. He continued to combine his religious work, musical interests, and transnational ties. In 1948, he founded the “Park Glee Club” in Lyon, France, to popularize the music of African American Spirituals. He led the group for nearly forty years (“In Memoriam”). In the early 1950s, Achille directed a choir of students from the French colonies that performed Spirituals in Paris in a tribute to his friend, Ralph Bunche (Cook 44). In 1956, Achille was a delegate at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in Paris, along with scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Richard Wright, and Cheikh Anta Diop, where he presented on “‘Negro Spirituals’ and the Expansion of Black Culture” (“Remembering”). Achille helped to bring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Lyon for a conference in 1966 (“Un espace”). These transnational connections continued in both professional and personal contexts.7 In 1992 he published the complete collection of the Nardal’s journal Revue du Monde Noir, along with an introduction. He passed away on May 14, 1994.
Conclusion

The Nardals were an extraordinary family whose work helped shaped the world as we know it. The intellectual circle they fostered was instrumental in articulating a pan-African consciousness and the ideas they generated spurred social advancement for racial justice. Scholars have begun to recognize the sisters’ pivotal role in literary movements and they have been called the “godmothers” of the negritude movement. Yet their biographical history has been largely unknown. This article has attempted to pull together sources to outline the history of these remarkable women. Using oral histories, personal correspondences, police records, and documents from over a dozen archives across the globe, this article traces the history of the Nardal family from their ancestors’ enslavement to Paulette’s achievements, the lives of the sisters, and their Achille relatives. Together, these sections illuminate the story of a close-knit family whose story crosses oceans and is interwoven with nearly all major events of the colonial era. I hope this article will serve as a helpful reference and jumping off point for future scholarship.

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NOTES

1. They list a deceased woman named Babet as their mother, who age-wise was likely Sidonie’s sister.
2. The two youngest children with her were seven-year-old Florentine Ségarel and four-year-old Lambert Ségarel, listed as the daughter and son of Héloïse Ségarel. Their relationship to Sidonie Nardal is unclear.
3. Born with the name Félicie Jeanne Paule Nardal, she was commonly known as “Paulette” and published as such. A very few documents refer to her as “Paule,” her legal first name. ADM 2Mi485, 1896 François, or Archives nationales d’outre-mer online records for État Civil, births in François in 1896, record No. 464.
4. Although, as noted below in the section on sources, I have not yet been able to locate an original copy or official documentation of her thesis, a number of sources have mentioned that she was one of the first black women to receive a diploma in études supérieures d’anglais at the Sorbonne, and that she wrote on Stowe. In Nardal’s “Awakening of Race Consciousness” in the 6th issue of Revue du Monde Noir, she lists many recent transnational connections and black accomplishments. In that list, she writes, “for the first time, for the diplôme d’études supérieures d’anglais, one of them opted for ‘The Life and Works of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe (Uncle Tom’s Cabin—Puritanism in New England)’” (30). It is reasonable to assume that she was modestly referring to herself.
5. “Nostalgie: Adieu Paulette Nardal,” Télé 7 jours 12–18 Oct. 1985: 1. In this article, the Guadeloupean poet Florette Morand recalls seeing this portrait in Maxa Nordau’s work studio in the 1950s. I do not know the current location of this painting, although there is a reproduction of it in the article.
7. Achille’s daughter, Isabelle Victoria Vécilia Achille, later married negritude scholar Léon-Gontran Damas.
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NARDAL FAMILY TREE

Zilia
Sidonie Nardal
b. 1814
d. 7 Nov. 1861

Brigette
Fabien Avanet
b. 1800

Heloise Netave
b. 1806
d. 13 Sept 1874

Francois Achille

Louise Emilie Clovisse

Charles Joseph Julie
b. 1818
d. 2 Dec 1894

Marie Asselie
b. 1817

Joachim Nardal
b. 1839
m. 28 Aug 1890
d. 1903

Alexandrine Avanet
b. 1835
d. post-1903

Louis Thomas Achille
b. 1834
m.
d. 12 April 1905

Elizabeth Merope
Charles-Joseph Julie
b. 12 Jan. 1842
m.
d. 2 Dec. 1894

Marie-Helene Avanet/
Nardal
b. 8 Oct. 1861

Paul Avanet/
Nardal
b. 14 Mar 1864
m.
d. 11 Oct. 1960

Louise Merope
Achille
b. 2 July 1869
m.
d. 1942

Marie
Helene
Avanet/
Nardal
b. 8 Oct. 1861

Louis Achille
b. 4 Feb 1878
m.
d. 10 Jan 1965

Louis Paterne Achille
b. 16 Apr 1880

Paulette Nardal
b. 12 Oct 1896
d. 16 Feb 1985

Emilie
b. 19 Jan 1900
m. William Eda-Pierre,
27 June 1931
(sndr early)
d. 5 Jan 2000

Alice
b. 21 May 1902
m. Joseph
Zamia, 18
Sept 1931
(div)
d. 19 Nov 1993

Jane
b. 1 Aug
1902
m. Neustor
Gouassand, 26
Jul 1924
(div)
d. 13 June 1998

Lucy
b. 7 Jan 1905
m. Gaston
Magdeleine
d. 15 Feb 1999

Emilie
b. 19 Jun
1898
m. Victor
Fortune, 3
Sept 1926
d. 28 July
1981

Louis
Albany
Christiane
Jacques
Yes
Marie-Therese
Andre
Lucienne
Annie

Mlle. Margaret
Pand

Heloise Netave
b. 1806
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