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Panel IV, Maryse Condé

Body and Soul: Josephine, Jane and Paulette

### **Josephine Baker: A Century in the Spotlight**

First of all, I have to warn you that my presentation of today has a very ambitious agenda. I want to redress a kind of injustice. It seems to me that while Josephine Baker was called the “Queen of Paris,” and was termed the “Black Beauty” who haunted the mind of Baudelaire, at the same time, at the same period of time, other black females were trying to assert the black presence, to make people understand that not only “Black is beautiful,” but Black is essentially meaningful.

One of those women, whom I am going to talk about today, is called Paulette Nardal. I repeat the name because yesterday so many people asked me, “But who is that Paulette Nardal?” Paulette Nardal. She was born in Fort-de-France, Martinique. You know, there is a kind of belief that everyone in the Caribbean or in America belongs to the same social status: it is not true for Paulette. Paulette Nardal belonged to the first black middle-class family of Martinique. Her father was an engineer; and if you go to Fort-de France today, one of the streets of the city bears his name. His mother was a schoolteacher. And Joseph Zobel, whom we know because of the movie *Sugar Cane Alley*, wrote about them in one of his books, *Et si la mer n'était pas bleue*. You see, he tried to give a description of the family. He said: “*Monsieur Nardal était le seul homme de la famille. Une espèce de chef de tribu ou de seigneur, dont les pouvoirs ne rayonnaient que sur sa femme et sur ses sept filles, et dont le prestige s'étendait bien au-delà de la ville. Une belle maison avec, au rez-de-chaussée, un salon où l'on pouvait voir le piano et les plantes vertes quand les persiennes étaient baissées; mais pas de voiture.*” Even if you don't understand French, you heard the word *piano*. You know that there is a kind of hierarchy among musical instruments. Black people are entitled to beat the drum; they are entitled to play the banjo, to play the guitar; but the piano is supposed to be a noble instrument—only there for the middle class, for the elite. And so all of the members of the Nardal family used to play the piano. And in

fact Joseph Zobel used one sentence to summarize the family: “*Ainsi, les Nardal étaient la négritude en action.*”

So Paulette was the eldest of seven sisters, one of them called Jane, another one called Andrée, and all of them worked together and helped each other out. And she was the first black girl to be admitted to the brevet supérieur in the Pensionnat Colonial and went to France in 1920 to study English literature and culture. She went there five years before Josephine Baker in *La Revue Nègre*. It is very interesting to note that in fact she was older than Josephine; she was ten years older, born in 1896. When she went to France, to Paris, she wrote for a very important magazine called *La Dépêche africaine* and later on, in 1932, she founded her own magazine called *La Revue du monde noir*. If you want to read *La Revue du monde noir*, it has been republished by Éditions Jean-Michel Place in one volume, and you can see that maybe she was trying to impose the idea of a black presence in Paris at a time when “black” was equated with savagery, brutality, pure force and nothing intellectual at all.

So from what I have heard today, you get the feeling that Josephine and Paulette offer the classic opposition between body and soul: a kind of dancer-popular-activist opposed to somebody who is intellectual and sophisticated. But it seems to me that it is much more complex than that. First of all, Josephine Baker herself was not only a black body. Everybody wanted to reduce her to a black body, but we know that she was interested in writing—she wrote about three autobiographies. She wrote a novel called *Your Blood in my Veins*. So she was not dumb, you see. On one side there was a dumb, beautiful body, and on the other side, a very intelligent lady. If you make the interesting comparison between the pictures of Josephine and the few pictures of Paulette, Paulette is extremely beautiful and handsome. But on the serious side: no clowning, no crossing of the eyes; she did not even smile. In a way, she was rather sad-looking. Especially at the end of her life, when she had that terrible accident. She broke both her ankles and she became almost a cripple, she was very sad. She went to New York; she worked for the United Nations and you have a lot of pictures of her in the capacity of a worker-activist and it is true she has nothing of the smiling face of Josephine. But do we have to smile to be accepted? I don't know; I don't believe so. First of all, they shared the same love of clothes and material colors, which is surprising. However sad Paulette used to be, she was always dressed in a way that was

striking and she left a group of followers in Martinique who still talk about the way she used to dress, very nicely in bright and vibrant colors.

What is much more important is that she was extremely interested in music and dancing. I don't believe that somebody who is interested in music and dancing can be called a snob; I believe it is impossible to be a snobbish person and be interested in music, because if you love music, you love all forms of music: popular as well as classical. In fact, you have a kind of communion with all sorts of musical expression. So I am going to quote, in French again, a small paragraph in which Paulette tells us how wonderful all those places were where they were playing music, the Blomet, and so many others. So I quote: « *Dans les quartiers industriels du Théâtre de la Glacière un nouveau bal nègre a pu trouver une place : la salle des fêtes du syndicat confédéral de la Seine* ». If she goes there, a place which is for workers, means that she cannot be snobbish. I know why I am telling you this, because you will tell me that Paulette was certainly feeling a kind of superiority complex on the subject of Josephine. I don't believe so. I believe that —without them even knowing it—it was their love of music that really binds them together. And thus she explains the bals nègres to visitors : « *Après avoir acheté des tickets aux deux noirs qui les vendaient à l'entrée de la cour, nous regardons curieusement l'intérieur de la première salle. A travers les vitres de verre dépoli nous apercevons une estrade aux décors de verdure sur laquelle prend place un orchestre noir qui joue une biguine à réveiller les morts. Rien dans cette salle qui rappelle la France.* » That last sentence—'nothing in that room reminds us of France'—is very important. It means that Paulette is already politically-minded; she wants something, a black personality totally free from the shackles of colonialism. A black mentality, a black culture which could be proud of itself.

We know that in those days it was very difficult to be black. White culture was supposed to be seen under attack by black people. "Black" and "culture" seemed to be two contradictory terms: if you say "black," you cannot say "culture." And so for the love of music they had together, Paulette and Josephine tried to persuade people that in fact black music was a form of culture that you should accept. But even more importantly, there was at the time an actor called Habib Benglia from Mali performing at the Théâtre de la Madeleine. And so Paulette went to see Habib Benglia, like everybody else, and she explained how she felt about the way he was acting: « *Ses sautes d'humeur, ses volte-faces psychologiques, surprennent comme les mouvements*

*inattendus d'un jeune animal, d'une sensualité très saine, d'un être encore plus proche de la nature*"—*d'un être encore* 'very close to nature,' - listen to that carefully—"Et c'est par là qu'il me touche le plus. Ses cris de passion sont des cris de la chair fraîche, certes Benglia a appris son métier mais il est comme tout homme de sa race, poète de naissance." I'm trying to translate—she said that, "He is like all the men of his race, a poet by birth."

So you know there is a major question still being debated today: that black people are not entitled to technique. They are supposed to do everything by instinct. Even for me, a writer, I am faced with this kind of problem all the time. We are supposed to be *conteurs*, to know and hear stories that we repeat, sort of by rote—we hear a story and we repeat it—but we are not entitled to the craft of writing, to narrative tradition, to the art of writing; that is only for white people. So it is a bit disturbing to see that Paulette Nardal, intelligent and clever as she was, believes that Habib Benglia was an artist, an actor, only through instinct. It was not a question of technique; it was not a question of learning his craft; he was gifted by birth and he was performing like an animal. Of course, every actor after all is an animal; even a white actor—if you want to play something deeply, you have to resort to some forces in yourself which are beyond your control. So it seems to me that the limit between technique and instinct is a bit overrated. Maybe we can discuss that later, but anyway, for Paulette as well as for other black people, the craft, the genius of Habib Benglia was true instinct and not at all true technique. But I believe that that kind of dichotomy between technique, art, craft and feeling is a bit farfetched anyway.

So you see Josephine and Paulette were closer than it seems at the beginning. What brought them together again was a question of political ideas. Josephine was not politically-minded, but because she suffered so much from racism, she became quite opposed to white supremacy. She did not want to fight it, but go round it. For example, we know, as we saw yesterday, that her dream was to marry a white man. Paulette was totally opposed to that. Paulette was not at all longing for a world without color, for that rainbow tribe uniting people from Finland, Argentina and so on...not at all; Paulette was the founder of what we can call a kind of pan-Africanism. All black people whatever, whoever, wherever they are, are brothers and sisters. They share something which is extremely important, and in fact, they give the same message to the rest of the world. So the main difference between Paulette

and Josephine, according to me, lies there. One was dreaming of the end of the color bar, and the other wanted the color to be there, to remain there, but for the black color to be dominant. She was already—long before Négritude, long before black militancy—a black militant. For her, there was something special in black people that they had to deliver, that they had to offer to the rest of the world.

Anyway, *La Revue du monde noir* that Paulette created was censored, banned by the interior minister—if you have a look at it now, it seems very harmless, a few articles devoted to culture, but nothing really which could bring about a revolution. But anyway it was really too much for the time and so *La Revue du monde noir* was abolished in 1930. And so Paulette Nardal was left without a means of expression. She went on, I understand, giving talks, lectures and so on, participating in colloquia but without a journal to write in.

I forgot to tell you that at the time a lot of people were debating whether a black culture existed. André Bréton should be singled out as an exception and though often criticized, he was in fact a very big supporter of Paulette Nardal. I don't know how they met. I tried to understand how they met, where they met, how they came into contact, and I could never find out. But anyway, if you look at his writing, you will see a few lines praising the ideas of Paulette, meaning that what she did didn't go totally unnoticed.

We are now coming to a very important question. Josephine and Paulette never met—that's surprising. Why? Because in fact Paulette and her sisters were living in a suburb of Paris called Clamart. And they had a salon, a literary salon. We know for example that Aimé Césaire never went to that salon because he was too *sauvage* and he wasn't at all sociable. But we do know that all the African-Americans in Paris went there: we know that Richard Wright went there, we know that Claude McKay went there... I'm not sure about Alain Locke, but anyway, even if he was not there physically, everybody discussed his ideas. We know that Paulette was the one who wanted her sister to translate *The New Negro*, meaning that even if Alain Locke was not there, his ideas were very present.

So why no mention of Josephine? That is for me a bit disturbing. I have three possible explanations.

First explanation: in spite of everything, there was a kind of intellectual snobbism by Paulette and she looked down upon a girl who was dancing with a banana belt in a Revue at the Folie Bergères. That is one possible explanation. But I don't quite agree with my own explanation because Paulette, for me, was too intelligent to have that kind of feeling.

Second explanation: Paulette was deeply Catholic, extremely religious. So a woman who was half-naked on the stage, who was singing a very deviant song, did not appeal to her. You know that she was very fond of Negro spirituals and gospels, and at the end of her life she had a *chorale* in Fort-de-France where she took in young Martinican girls to sing Negro spirituals and gospels.

Third explanation, which I believe to be more credible: Paulette certainly believed Josephine was a creation of white folk. A word that we don't like now—authenticity—a word that we know to be fundamentally dangerous and very harmful, at that time was in favor. So Josephine was not authentic. And, you know, a lot of people for many different reasons say the same of Josephine: black people found that she betrayed a bit of their heritage; white people believed that she became too sophisticated for a black person, that in the beginning, when she was clowning, crossing her eyes and so on, she was more authentic. So, in a way, Josephine poses a problem, and it seems to me that for Paulette, the authenticity of Josephine was questionable and she did not approach her. For a woman who spent her time talking about black culture, it is surprising that she never mentioned Josephine, that she never passed judgment on her, unlike her sister Jane who was highly critical. This silence is full of meaning for me. Anyway, we can always imagine a meeting of the two, body and soul coming together, body and soul shaking hands, body and soul exchanging ideas, but in reality, in real life, it did not happen.

So I was going to tell you a few words about the literary salon. You know “salon” is a word which is prestigious; only very important people do very important things there. No. In the Nardal salon you see young people who were going to become important, but who were not at the time. For example, when Claude McKay became a regular visitor, nobody had ever heard of him since his novel *Banjo* published in 1928 had not yet been acclaimed by Césaire and Senghor. He was there more like a young poet. The success of *Banjo* was made by people like Césaire and so on, who came later. In the salon you drank only tea, English tea, evidence of a strain of snobbism. No strong drinks, no wine, no liquor, only tea, and you had a few

biscuits. So, you see, it seems to me that it is very difficult not to see Paulette Nardal somewhere as a snob. I suppose it was there, and that is the reason why she never approached Josephine Baker.

Now we come to the Second World War. Josephine Baker became an informant for the Free French. She was decorated by General de Gaulle, and that was the beginning of a certain mythical period of her life. Alas, for poor Paulette Nardal, the war forced her to go back to Martinique, and while she was returning home, her ship was attacked by the Germans. So she had to jump into a lifeboat and in doing so, broke both her ankles. As a result, she became a cripple. She spent about a year and a half in a hospital in Europe and when she returned to Martinique, she could not walk without a cane and was confined to her house. But what is interesting for me is that she devoted all her time to music. You see the link between her and Josephine becomes extremely apparent at the end of her life. She wrote in one or two magazines published in Martinique, but mainly she was the director of a *chorale*. She taught Negro spirituals and gospels. In fact she believed that there was a close link between African-Americans and Martinicans. This is extremely important because even if you look at the journal *Tropiques*, you find only two or three articles devoted to African-American culture. But here you have a woman using the most popular form, which is music, to tell the people of Martinique, your brothers and sisters are living in America. So it seems to me that the end of her life is very important. But very sad for her because Aimé Césaire returned home to Martinique at the same time and in 1940 founded the journal *Tropiques* which totally eclipsed Paulette Nardal. Paulette Nardal became somebody of the past. And you know that she complained to her sister Jane, “We are the ones who invented Négritude, who invented pan-Africanism, who invented African unity and we are now totally forgotten.” So you see she was not only forgotten on the popular side—somebody like Josephine Baker took everything, took precedence over her --- she was also forgotten on the intellectual side—somebody like Césaire took everything from her.

Read Brent Edwards because he is one of the few who have paid homage to Paulette Nardal. There is also a movie by Jil Servant on Paulette Nardal, *La fierté d'être négresse*. If you want to order the movie from this young Guadeloupean I'll give you details after the panel.

Anyway, I'm trying to pay justice to somebody who seems to me unjustly forgotten, who shared with Josephine Baker the desire to insist on the beauty of blackness, on the importance of being black. Thank you very much.