

*Woman in the City*  
(January 1945)

The first essay in the series of essays written by Paulette Nardal between 1945 and 1951, “Woman in the City” is perhaps the most important as it announces not only Martinican women’s ascension to the status of citizen with the ratification of the vote for women in 1944, but their entry into public life via the Women’s Assembly and its journalistic organ *La Femme dans la Cité*. With these claims to full citizenship come certain duties, particularly as they relate to the public good. Nardal is careful to map out gendered spheres of influence. Women and men excel in different areas by virtue of biology and psychology. When one thinks of these two spheres of science in the 1940s and theories about their relationship to women, one cannot help but think immediately of Nardal’s hexagonal French feminist counterpart Simone de Beauvoir.

Simone de Beauvoir and Paulette Nardal would have certainly found themselves circling about and through various cafes and seminars at the Sorbonne in the late 1920s. But unfortunately, an encounter seems not to have taken place. Beauvoir was a very young woman of twenty-one years old in 1929, having just received her *agrégation* in philosophy at the Sorbonne. She would certainly not have been at that juncture the feminist pioneer that would go on to write *The Second Sex*. Indeed, she did not write it until 1943. Moreover, there would have been in all likelihood philosophical disagreements between the two women along the lines of religion,

gender, race, and sexual propriety. Nardal's gender politics were informed by the social conservatism of a specifically black Antillean bourgeois household and her staunch Catholicism, which would have been distinctly at odds with Beauvoir's bohemian lifestyle and professed atheism. Nardal had more in common in terms of ideas about respectability and sexual propriety with upper-class African American women despite her Frenchness.

But whatever their differences, racial, social, religious, there are certain resonances in their work that are worthy of brief exploration. Beauvoir's famous line from *The Second Sex*, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one," would at first glance appear to run counter to Nardal's assumptions about women's nature and character articulated in various articles in *Woman in the City*. Psychology and biology are wholly linked in Nardal's expositions about women's natural predispositions. Beauvoir was a materialist feminist and existentialist who believed that Existence preceded Essence. And yet both women recognized womanhood as a process of acculturation, adaptation, and, in Nardal's case, assimilation. Nardal and Beauvoir concur that women indeed become women, though Nardal embraces the idea of a "feminine essence" as long as it does not impinge upon women's rights or enact gendered hierarchies.

If for Beauvoir, woman has always been cast as man's "Other," and *The Second Sex* endeavors to uncover just what that "Otherness" means for woman, Nardal takes this "Otherness" as an affirmation of feminine difference. Nardal's is a question of ontology, of being. Woman simply *is* or *does*. Where such "otherness" does not correspond to Nardal's ideas about women's equality, in effect, where she deems feminine characteristics as male-manufactured, she is quick to dispense with them.

For her, women's veritable otherness cannot be defined by men for the benefit of men. Given her religious fervor, such differences, where they exist, are ordained by God. She is, as the reader will note in the progression of her arguments articulated in the

various articles in this volume, quite surefooted in her navigation of the line between what is natural and what is cultural.

The social sphere then is women's natural sphere of influence like men. Women, like men, are wholly tied to social duty, the obligation to foster and nurture human progress:

Now, the social is the aspect of life that interests woman first and foremost. Regarding social duty, she is man's equal. As an individual, she is also intelligent and free. But as a social being, her services are bound to human-kind. Like man, she must contribute to the progress of humanity. . . . In fulfilling, this social obligation, she remains true to her feminine vocation.

And women who are indifferent to this duty, who resist entering the City and taking up what should be a natural predisposition as a social being, as part of a greater humanity, are for Nardal, not "worthy of the name woman."

*La femme dans la Cité*

Faut-il déplorer l'accession de la femme martiniquaise à la qualité de citoyenne? L'avenir nous le dira. Mais une chose est certaine: une révolution s'accomplit actuellement dans les esprits.

Un appel a été lancé auquel un certain nombre de femmes intelligentes, dynamiques, ont répondu. Nous regrettons vivement de n'avoir pu atteindre jusqu'ici la masse de nos concitoyennes parmi lesquelles se trouvent certainement d'intéressantes personnalités, des tempéraments, des femmes ayant le goût de l'action efficace.

Une moisson d'idées a été offerte au public féminin de chez nous sous la forme d'un programme qui s'est volontairement cantonné dans les limites du social. Or, le social est l'aspect de la vie qui intéresse la femme au premier chef. Devant le devoir social, elle est l'égale de l'homme. Elle est aussi en tant qu'être personnel, intelligent et libre. Mais en tant qu'être social, elle doit à la communauté humaine ses services. Comme l'homme, elle doit contribuer au progrès de l'humanité. Mais ce service, du fait des différences d'ordre physique et psychologique qui existent entre l'homme et la femme, sera un service différent, mais pas nécessairement de moindre valeur parce qu'il est différent. C'est en l'accomplissant qu'elle restera fidèle à sa vocation féminine.

En quoi consiste ce devoir social? D'abord, à se débarrasser des préjugés anciens, des routines paresseuses, pour connaître des milieux sociaux autres que le leur. Les femmes martiniquaises devront donc étudier les problèmes concernant la famille, la profession, la cité . . . C'est donc à une œuvre d'éducation sociale qu'elles sont conviées.

À la suite de l'homme, elles sont entrées dans la Cité. Mais pour d'y diriger, elles ont besoin de ses lumières. Et c'est pour nous l'occasion de remercier tous ceux qui ont bien voulu s'inscrire à notre Commission de l'Information pour nous faire des conférences, des causeries et même nous donner de simples conseils.

*Woman in the City*

Must we deplore the Martinican woman's ascension to the status of citizen? Only time will tell. But one thing is certain: a revolution of the mind and spirit is now in progress.

A call was issued to which a certain number of intelligent, dynamic women responded. We deeply regret not having been able to reach before now the masses of our fellow women citizens, for among them are certainly to be found some interesting personalities, temperaments, and women who relish action.

A host of ideas has been presented to our female population in the form of a program that voluntarily confines itself to social undertakings. Now, the social is the aspect of life that interests woman first and foremost. Regarding social duty, she is man's equal. As an individual, she is also intelligent and free. But as a social being, her services are bound to humankind. Like man, she must contribute to the progress of humanity. But this service, owing to the physical and psychological differences that exist between man and woman, will be of a different kind, though not necessarily of lesser value because of its difference. In fulfilling this social obligation, she remains true to her feminine vocation.

What does this social duty entail? First, we must free ourselves from old prejudices, from lazy routines, in order to become familiar with social environments different from our own. The women of Martinique will therefore have to study problems concerning the family, the professions, the city . . . It is thus to social education work that they are summoned.

Following men, women have entered the city. But in order to navigate the city, women need their insight. And it is at this time that we thank all those who wanted to join our Information Network Committee in order to provide us with lectures, discussions, and even to give us simple advice.

Pourtant point n'est besoin d'études compliquées pour connaître certains problèmes qui s'imposent journellement à l'attention de la femme, celui de la domesticité, par exemple? C'est pourquoi, joignant l'acte à la parole, nous avons fondé un Cours d'Enseignement ménager pour les domestiques dont l'ouverture est fixée à ce jour et une Association de Maîtresses de Maison. Pour obvier au défaut d'imprévoyance de nos concitoyennes moins évoluées, nous avons créé l'Œuvre des Layettes et comme nous désirons avant tout éduquer la masse, relever son niveau social, nous avons décidé de nous transformer en assistantes sociales.

Les femmes martiniquaises se sont donc éveillées à la réalité sociale. Elles ont compris que l'accomplissement de ce devoir constitue la meilleure des préparations au rôle politique qu'elles seront appelées à jouer. C'est pourquoi elles adhèrent, chaque jour plus nombreuses, au Rassemblement féminin, groupement d'Information, et d'Action civique et sociale.

Le Rassemblement féminin? Un service social animé par un grand élan de solidarité.

Ses moyens d'action? Cette revue qui se propose de vulgariser la substance des cours et conférences en même temps que les résultats pratiques de nos enquêtes sociales et des travaux faits en cercle d'étude.

La Femme martiniquaise est entrée dans la Cité des Hommes.

However, we do not need complicated studies to know the particular concerns that daily occupy woman's attention, such as the household staff. This is why, combining action with word, we have established a course on Domestic Instruction for domestic workers, which will soon open, and an Association of Ladies of the House. In order to obviate the lack of preparation of our less privileged fellow women citizens, we have created the Layette Effort; and since we want most of all to educate the masses and raise their social status, we have decided to transform ourselves into social servants.<sup>1</sup>

The women of Martinique have thus been awakened to our social realities. They have understood that the realization of their duty requires the best preparation for the political role that they will be called to play. This is why they join, in greater numbers each day, the Women's Assembly, a group for Information, and for civil and social Action.

The Women's Assembly? A social service enlivened by a great spirit of solidarity.

Its means of action? This publication intends to integrate lectures and course materials with practical results from our social investigations and work undertaken in study circles.

The Martinican woman has entered the City of Men.

### Note

1. Despite Nardal's genuine concerns about poor and working-class Martinican women evidenced in her contributions to the journal, her own class position and the organization's primarily middle-class constituency inform an oftentimes paternalistic top down elitism.