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Gaspard Njock

Paulette Nardal

A VOICE FOR FREEDOM



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Texts and illustrations:
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Paulette Nardal



Paulette Nardal was born in 1896 in Saint-Pierre, Martinique, and grew up in a bourgeois family that believed strongly in education as a path to success. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father a public works engineer, they both encouraged her to use her intelligence and independent spirit in a colonial society where racism and sexism shaped everyday life. Still, her privileged position did not shield her from racial prejudice: from early on, Paulette understood that as a Black woman, she would have to fight to make her voice heard in a world that tried to silence her. It was with this determination that she left Martinique to study in Paris, an act of emancipation that was both rare and daring at the time.

In 1920, Paulette Nardal became the first Black woman to study at the Sorbonne. She faced a double glass ceiling: being black in a colonial capital, and being a woman in a male-dominated academic world. Instead of letting these obstacles stop her, she chose to open new spaces for discussion and recognition for Afrodescendants, especially through the literary salon she organised with her sisters in Clamart. This salon became a workshop of ideas where Black intellectuals from the Caribbean, Africa and the United States gathered, among them Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Langston Hughes. Paulette played a key role as a cultural mediator, translating texts and laying the foundations for what would later become the Négritude movement. Her intellectual work was also a struggle to ensure that Black women were recognised as full contributors within movements for identity and freedom.



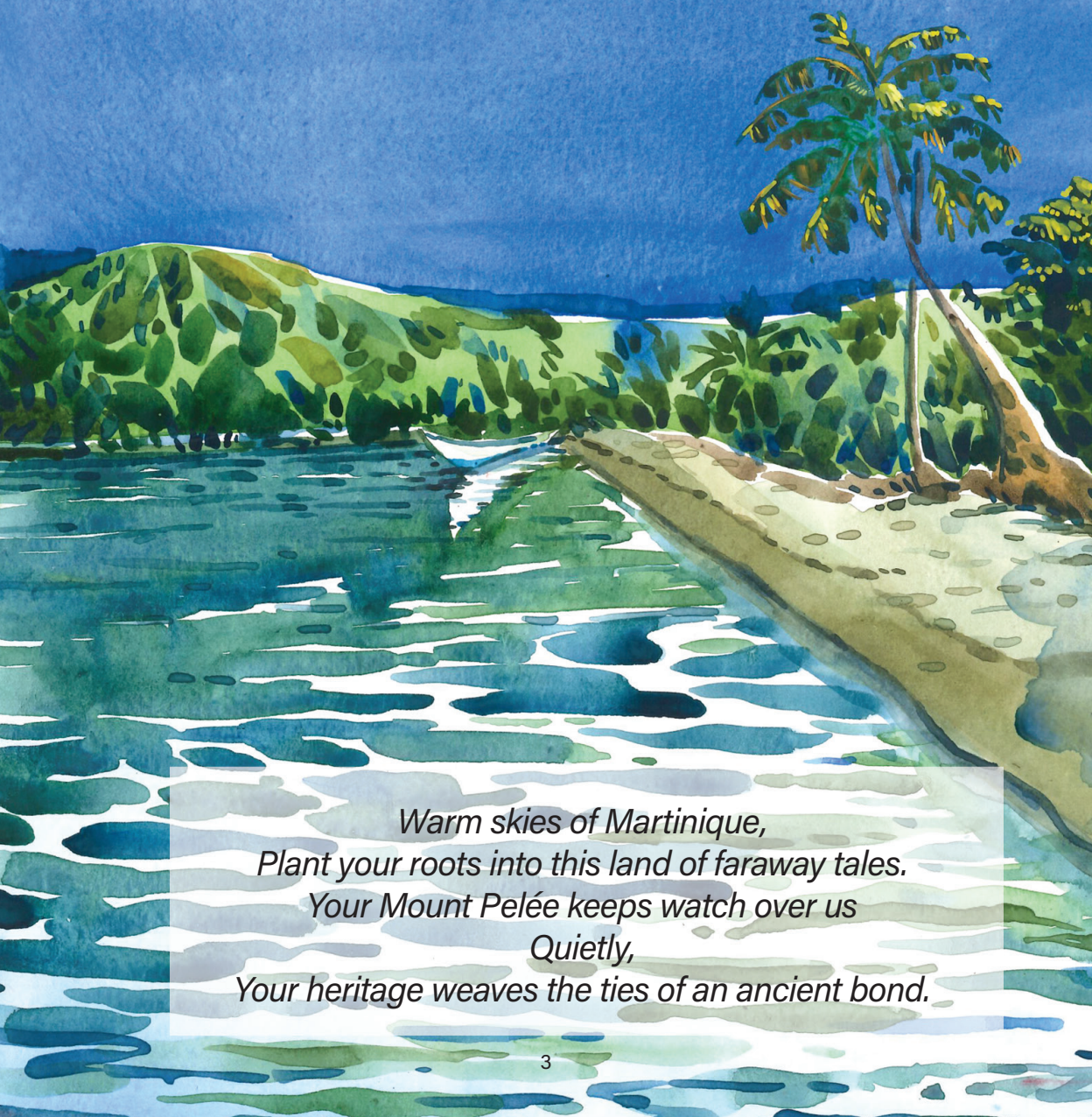


After the Second World War, back in Martinique, Paulette Nardal continued her social and political commitments. She campaigned for women's education, for the recognition of Black cultures and for equal rights in a post-slavery society that remained deeply unequal. She helped found women's groups and actively supported Black women's access to citizenship and culture, notably through the creation of a choir named Joy of Singing, dedicated to celebrating Martinican heritage. Throughout her life, she remained true to this approach of militant philanthropy, convinced that personal freedom could only grow from a shared collective awareness. Despite her major role in twentieth-century intellectual history, she remained in the shadows for a long time. Only recently has her influence been fully acknowledged. She passed away in 1985 in Fort-de-France, leaving behind a powerful intellectual and activist legacy.

The Weight of Racial Prejudice

Martinique is Matinik!

Matnik, also written Matinik, is how the island's inhabitants call their French overseas territory: it comes from Martinican Creole. Paulette was born in this beautiful, lush land on October 12, 1896.

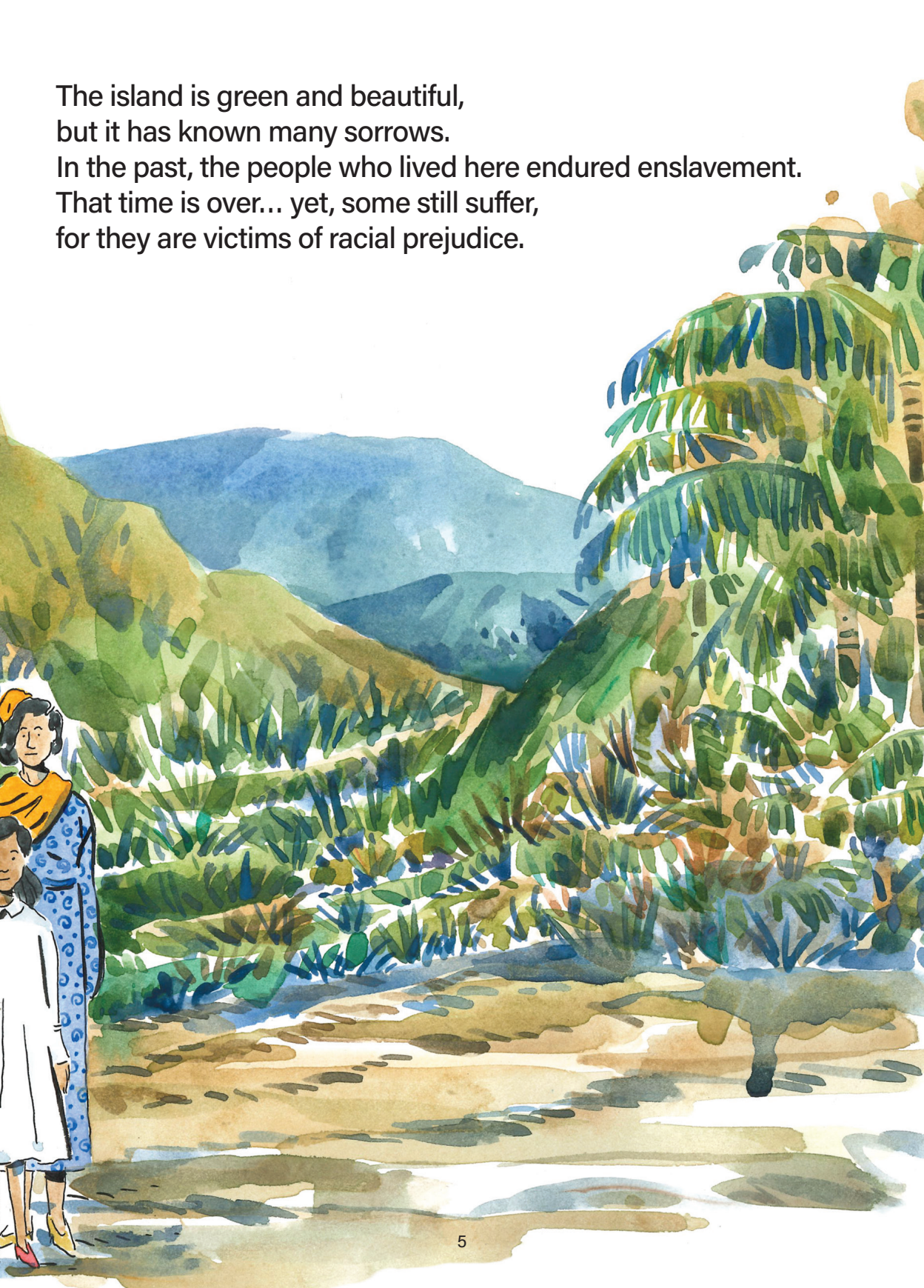


Warm skies of Martinique,
Plant your roots into this land of faraway tales.
Your Mount Pelée keeps watch over us
Quietly,
Your heritage weaves the ties of an ancient bond.

Paulette Nardal grew up in an upper middle class family in a small town on the island called Le François. She was the elder daughter of Paul Nardal and Louise Achille.



The island is green and beautiful,
but it has known many sorrows.
In the past, the people who lived here endured enslavement.
That time is over... yet, some still suffer,
for they are victims of racial prejudice.



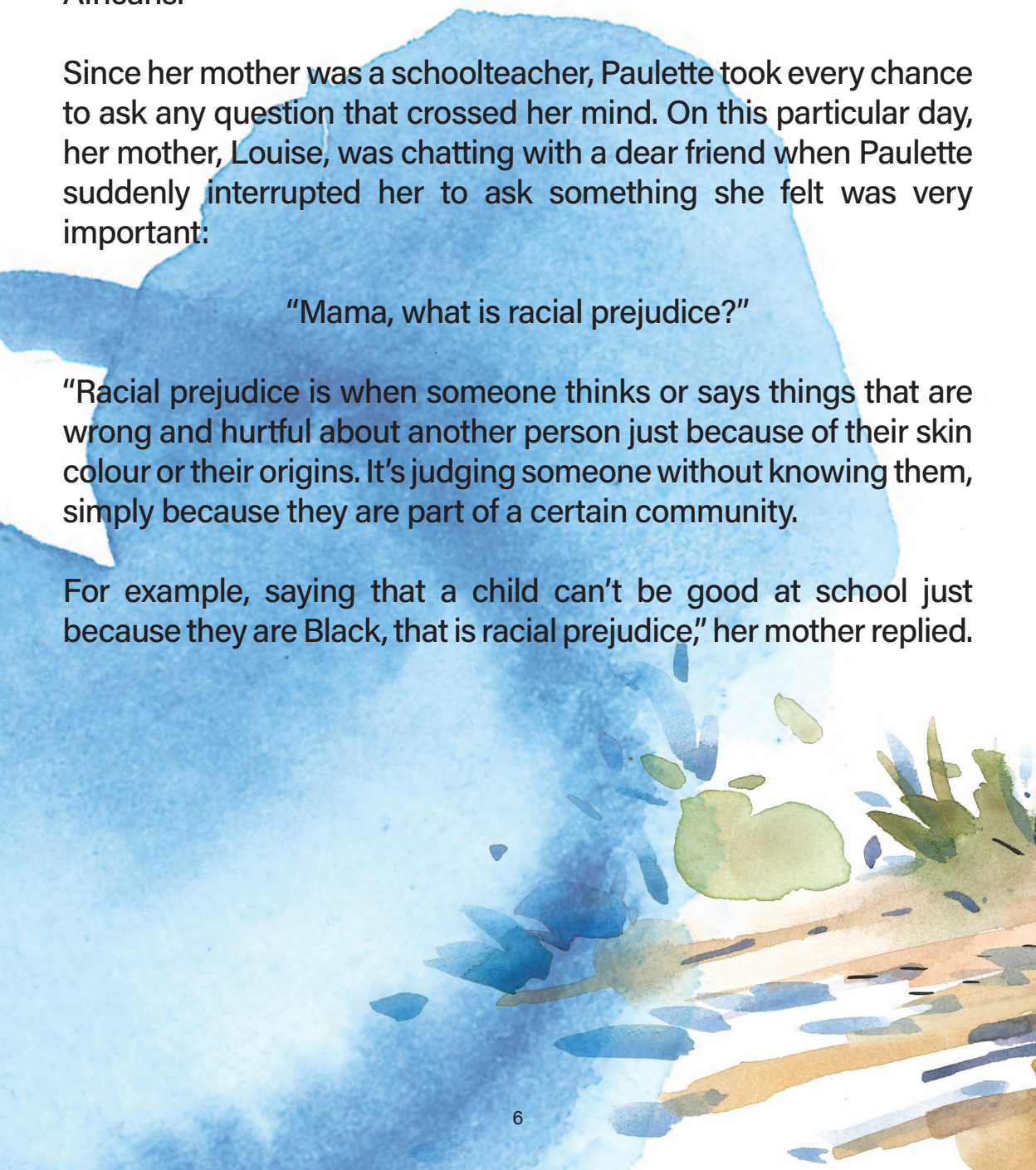
From the time she was a young girl, Paulette was bold and curious. She loved books, art and music, and wanted to learn everything she could about the history of France, and especially about the history of her her own people, who were descended from enslaved Africans.

Since her mother was a schoolteacher, Paulette took every chance to ask any question that crossed her mind. On this particular day, her mother, Louise, was chatting with a dear friend when Paulette suddenly interrupted her to ask something she felt was very important:

"Mama, what is racial prejudice?"

"Racial prejudice is when someone thinks or says things that are wrong and hurtful about another person just because of their skin colour or their origins. It's judging someone without knowing them, simply because they are part of a certain community.

For example, saying that a child can't be good at school just because they are Black, that is racial prejudice," her mother replied.




THAT'S UNFAIR! A PERSON'S SKIN COLOUR SHOULD NEVER BE USED TO JUDGE THEM! WE SHOULD LOOK AT HOW PEOPLE ACT AND BEHAVE, NOT THE COLOUR OF THEIR SKIN!
MY CHILD, THAT IS WHY YOU NEED TO BE STRONG AND POWERFUL, JUST LIKE MOUNT PELÉE.

The Power of Mount Pelée and the Dreams of Freedom

In 1902, Paulette was just six when the strong and fearsome Mount Pelée erupted, hurling lava and a blazing cloud that swept over the entire island. Her family was spared, but the volcano took many lives and caused great destruction, wiping out the island's capital, Saint-Pierre.



My mother told me that the island was crying and that the mountain had been angry for a long time.

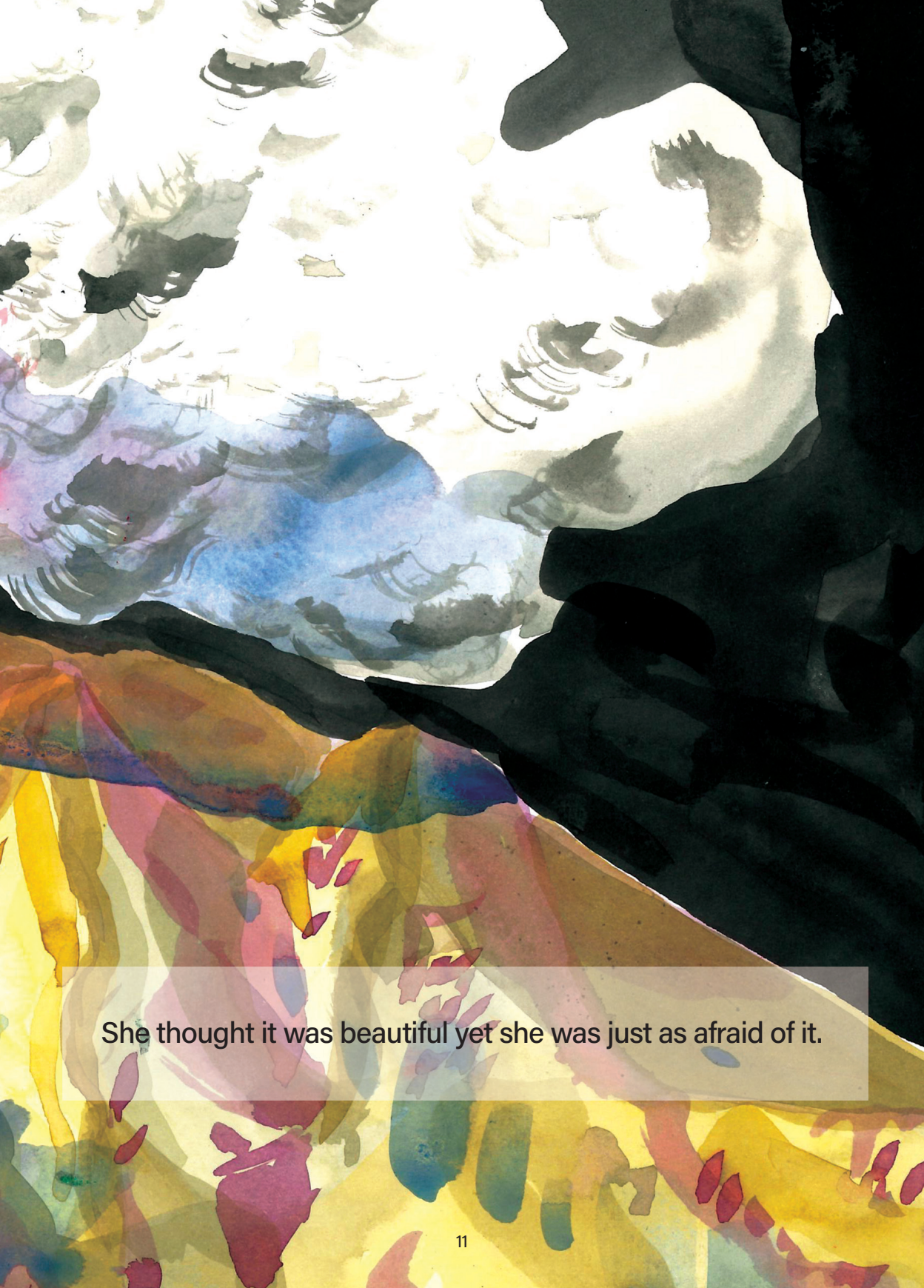


I am a goddess of fire.
I am a mountain.
I am a volcano.
Beautiful, tall and powerful most of the time.

Sometimes I get furious.



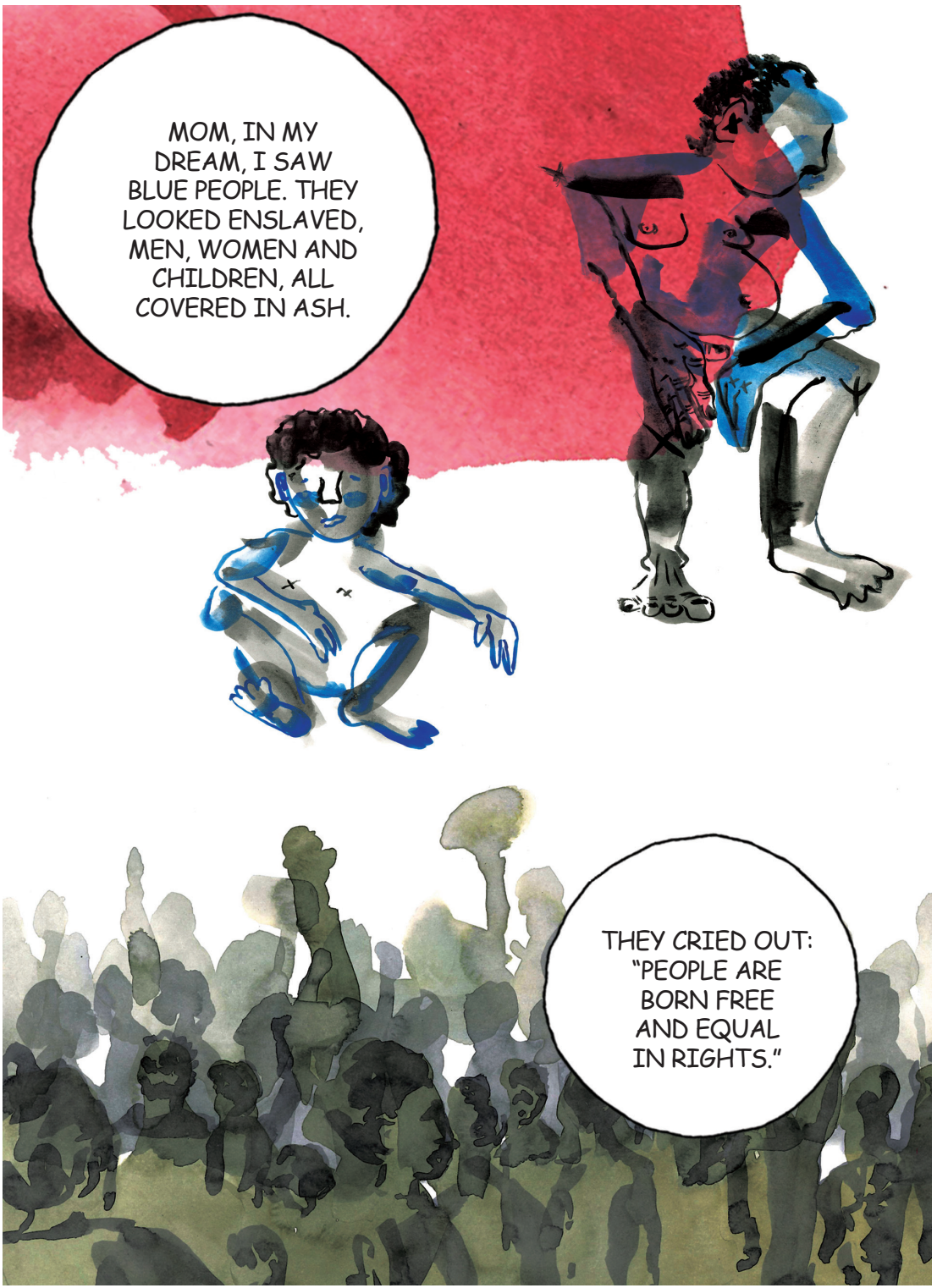
Paulette was impressed by the power of the mountain.



She thought it was beautiful yet she was just as afraid of it.


MOM! LAST NIGHT I DREAMED THAT MOUNT PELÉE TOLD ME SECRETS TO FIGHT AGAINST RACIAL PREJUDICE.
DID SHE TELL YOU ANYTHING ABOUT POVERTY IN MARTINIQUE?


WHAT WAS YOUR DREAM ABOUT?


MOM, IN MY DREAM, I SAW BLUE PEOPLE. THEY LOOKED ENSLAVED, MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN, ALL COVERED IN ASH.
THEY CRIED OUT: "PEOPLE ARE BORN FREE AND EQUAL IN RIGHTS."


MY DEAR, YOU DREAMED ABOUT THE 1789 DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF THE CITIZEN!
THAT'S RIGHT, ALL THESE ENSLAVED PEOPLE ALSO DREAMED OF FREEDOM.

Article 4 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: freedom means being able to do anything that does not harm others.



Guided by these words, Paulette, then 24 years old, left Martinique for metropolitan France in 1920.

Paulette's Literary Salons in Paris



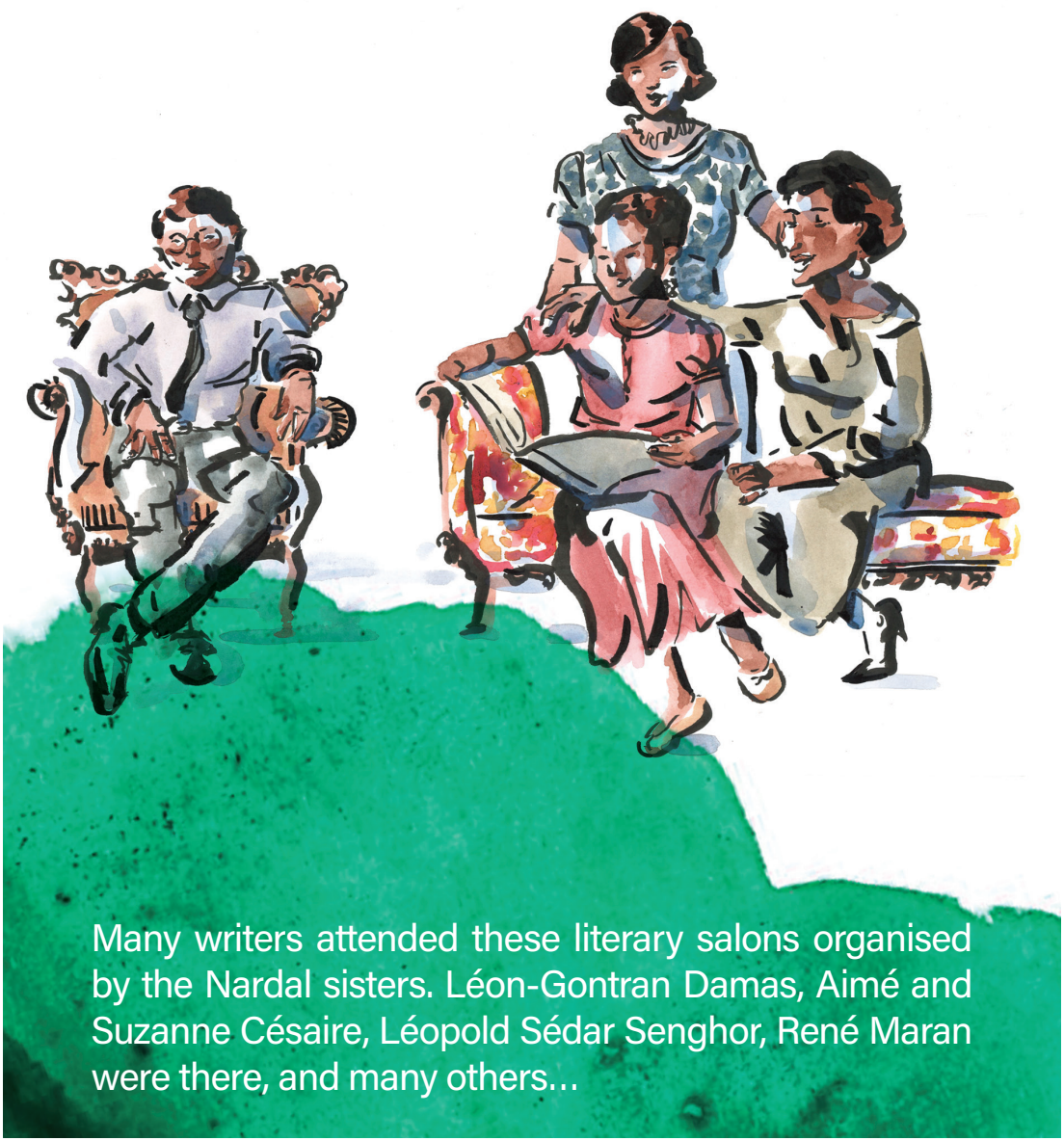
For Paulette, discovering mainland France marked the beginning of a difficult struggle against racial prejudice.


I CAN'T WAIT TO DISCOVER PARIS!

Paulette was the first Black woman to attend the Sorbonne. The city witnessed her most passionate speeches, and her friends loved listening to her. She brilliantly responded to anyone who doubted her intellectual abilities.



Supported by her sisters in their Clamart apartment, Paulette Nardal hosted meetings with renowned figures of African descent.



Many writers attended these literary salons organised by the Nardal sisters. Léon-Gontran Damas, Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, René Maran were there, and many others…

The discussions were always about emancipation, the freedom of Black women and men across French borders.



"Mr. Césaire, I believe that the condition of Black women deserves careful thought and needs to be approached in all its complexity, since we face prejudice and mistreatment both for being Black and for being women."



Black women must not be forgotten in the struggles for emancipation.

Thanks to her strength and determination, Paulette is credited with the great Négritude movement. Her voice still resonates at the Sorbonne and beyond.







In 1939, at the age of 43, Paulette was returning to Martinique when a German submarine torpedoed the ship she was traveling on.

She would remain disabled for life, yet she never stopped fighting.





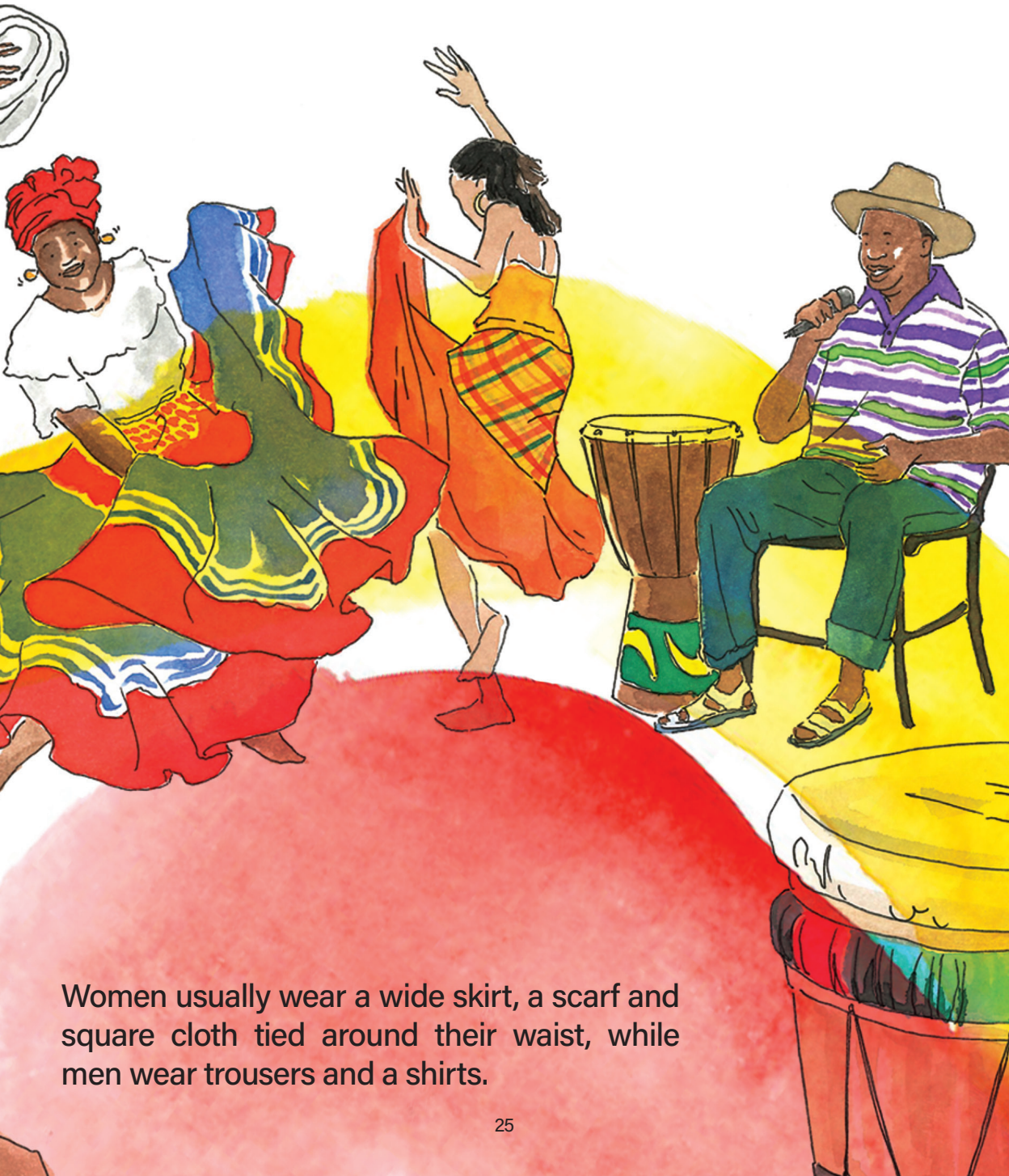

Through dance and music, Martinicans keep alive the collective memory of slavery and the emancipation of their people.


Music has played an important role in the island's resistance movements. It weaves connections between people.

The bèlè is a practice that combines storytelling, dance and music. It takes on many different meanings all at once.



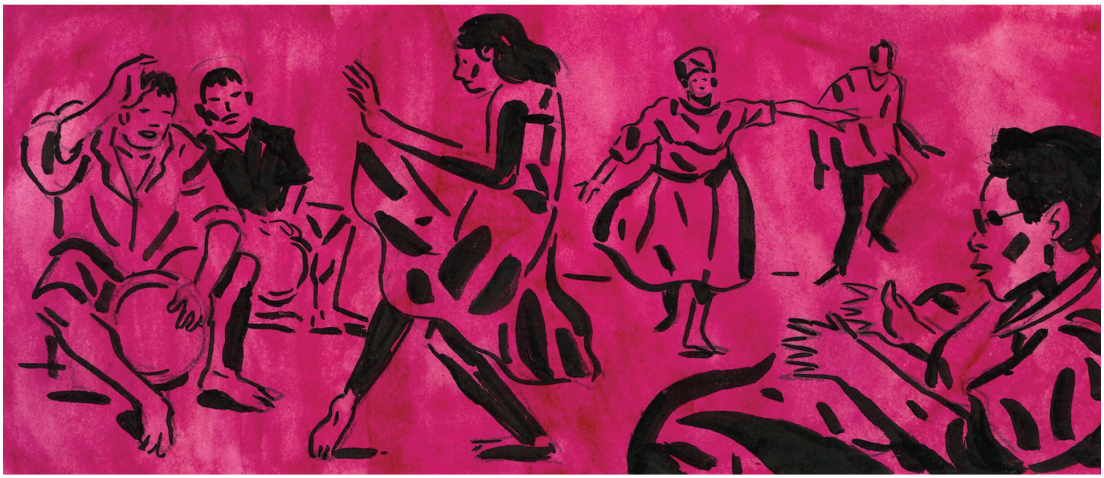
It is a living archive for the people, born from the injustices suffered by the enslaved. Those who practice bèlè recall the eruption of Mount Pelée and the many lives it claimed.



Women usually wear a wide skirt, a scarf and square cloth tied around their waist, while men wear trousers and a shirts.



Paulette felt a deep connection to bèlè and music in general. She saw it as a powerful way to let Martinicans feel proud of their culture.



In fact, she wrote a book about the history of Martinique's traditional music.



Paulette, the Woman Who Inspires the Fight for Freedom

Paulette would seize any opportunity to speak about the rights of the oppressed. Many women, both in Europe and across the world, have led and still lead the struggle for these rights.







For instance, we can name Aminata Aidara, Assita Kanko, Eugénie Éboué-Tell, Jenny Alpha, Grada Kilomba, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, etc.

Her entire life was a constant struggle. She had the power of a mountain and the determination of volcanic lava carving a path toward freedom.





Paulette died on February 16, 1985, at the age of 88, in Fort-de-France, Martinique. She was honoured by countless people across the globe.



"I read her memoirs, and her words moved me deeply."

Everyone, no matter their skin colour, age or gender will be touched by Paulette Nardal's speeches.


BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL! THANK YOU, PAULETTE.

Sugar fields

Tobacco fields

Capital: Fort-de-France, Paulette's birthplace

Cities

1635 Dates

OCEAN Sea, ocean

Maritime route and related event

1. Kalinago village of the Indigenous people who lived on the island before colonization
2. Slave ship of the transatlantic trade* that transported enslaved people under horrific conditions
3. Creole plantation house with the colonist's agricultural land and Rue Cases-Nègres
4. Mount Pelée volcano, a refuge for maroons** during slavery
5. 1822: Maroons' uprising at the Carbet estate against the békés***

1848: Abolition of slavery under pressure from a popular revolt

1635

arrival of the colonists led by Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc

ATLANTIC OCEAN

exportation of resources to Europe

Sugar field

Fort-de-France

CARIBBEAN SEA

Les Trois-Îlets

1638 - 1848

deportation of African slaves to the colonies

**the largest forced migration of innocent people, spanning over 400 years, which uprooted 15 to 20 million Africans, who were captured and forcibly taken to the Americas and the Caribbean*
***marrons were enslaved people who resisted by escaping from plantations to the mountains, where they found refuge*
****békés are the white descendants of the first colonists, the slave owners of Creole estates*

Quiz

1. Before Martinique was colonised, who were the Kalinagos?
    a. Africans
    b. Europeans
    c. Native Americans
2. Where did the Maroons take refuge?
    a. In the colonial plantations
    b. In the mountains like Mount Pelée
    c. In the Kalinago village
3. How did slavery end in Martinique?
    a. Thanks to revolts by enslaved people
    b. Thanks to the agricultural productivity of the colonial plantations

Correct answers: 1-c; 2-b; 3-a

What I learned from this story: …

Paulette Nardal

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Author: Gaspard Njock
Graphic design, layout and photoengraving: Giuseppina Bernabei and Adine Barak (Sofia Comics)
Schools' workshop coordination: Elsa Berthelot, Anapaula Lopez Fournier,
Audrey Nicaise Nemagou Wouadeu, Sofia Comics

Project and Scientific Coordination: Remicard Sereme, Linda Tinio, Nonso Obikili, Agathe Leborgne

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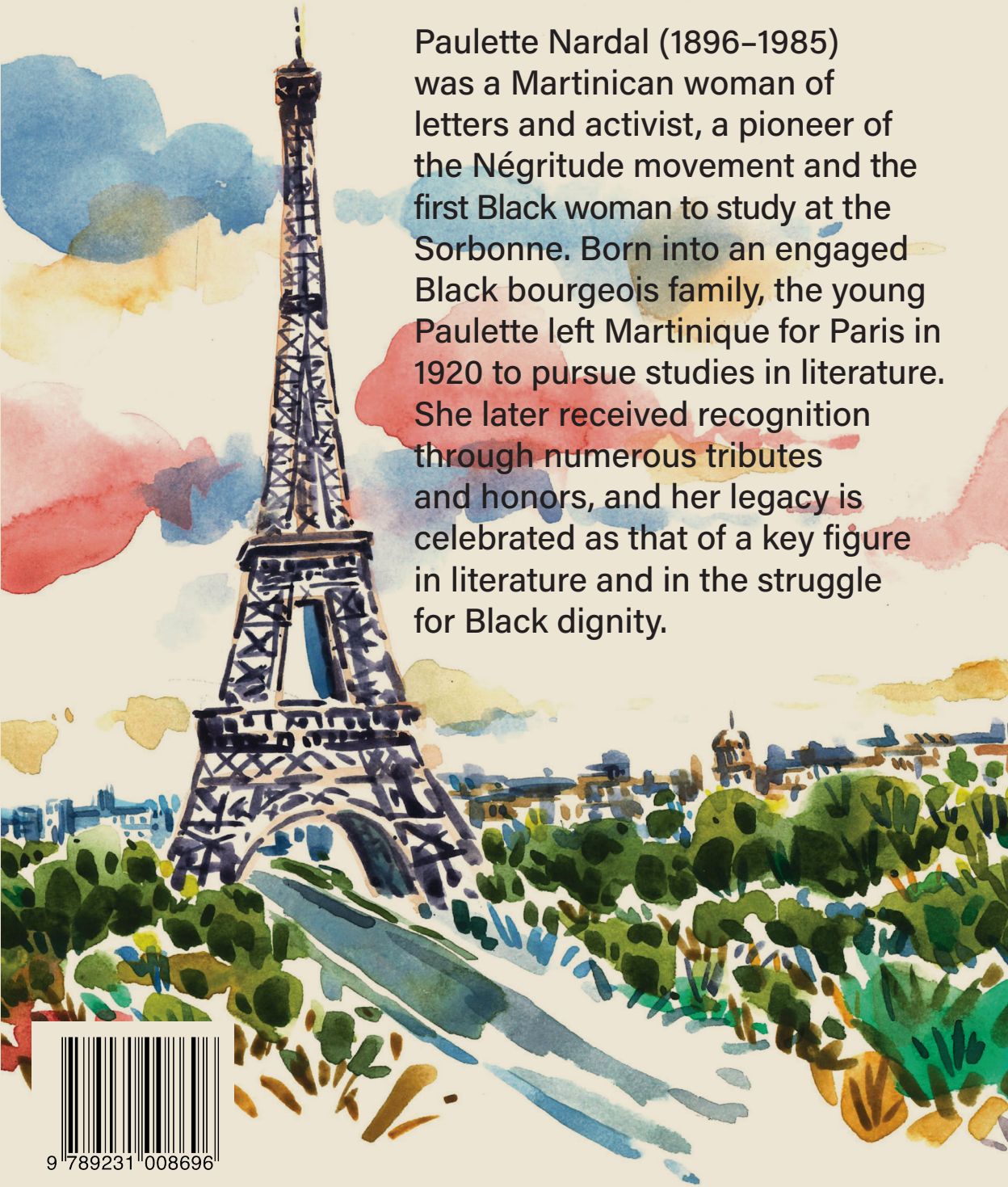
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Paulette Nardal (1896–1985) was a Martinican woman of letters and activist, a pioneer of the Négritude movement and the first Black woman to study at the Sorbonne. Born into an engaged Black bourgeois family, the young Paulette left Martinique for Paris in 1920 to pursue studies in literature. She later received recognition through numerous tributes and honors, and her legacy is celebrated as that of a key figure in literature and in the struggle for Black dignity.

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