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## The Novel Map

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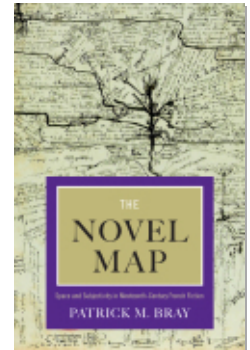
Published by Northwestern University Press

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The Novel Map: Space and Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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## CHAPTER SIX

### Carte Blanche: Charting Utopia in Sand's *Nanon*

George Sand's last major novel, *Nanon* from 1872, narrates the appropriation of a tool of elite power, the Cassini "Carte générale de la France," by a humble peasant girl, who uses these maps to internalize and negotiate the space of revolutionary France. The novel presents the history of the French Revolution from a displaced perspective: it is told as a memoir by Nanon, an old woman, who remembers her experiences as a young girl in the countryside. Nanon's story is thus very far from the center of the Revolution in terms of time (the story is told sixty years after the events), space (the novel takes place in an isolated region days from Paris), and gender. *Nanon's* new perspective on the French Revolution reiterates republican values but also invents new textual spaces for thinking about ideological conundrums—both those posed by the original Revolution of 1789 and also by the Paris Commune of 1871.

The violence of 1871 required a different novelistic response from that of the hypocrisy of July 1830. As I have argued, Sand's first novel, *Indiana*, portrayed the political necessity for women in the wake of the Revolution of 1830 to expose the widening gap between discourse and deed, between language and its referents. If the realist mode, with its tendency toward ironic distance and objective detail, proved the most effective way to depict society's cynical opinion of itself, realism in fiction has difficulty breaking away from mimetic representation in order to invent new social structures. The unrealistic, utopian ending to *Indiana* signals the need within the novel to create new, virtual spaces in which women and men can exist equally. As Naomi Schor argues in *George Sand and Idealism*, "idealism for Sand is finally the only alternative representational mode available to those who do not enjoy the privileges of subjecthood in the real" (73). Sand's position as a woman writer marginalized by the social

order led her to see in idealism a mode of writing capable of affirming equality as a precondition of social harmony.

Whereas the utopian spaces imagined by Indiana are islands of idealism within a realist novel, *Nanon* portrays in realistic detail an alternative experience of the Revolution of 1789 and so affirms that revolutionary ideals do not have to lead to violence and destruction. At the fragile beginnings of the Third Republic, born out of the chaos of Napoleon III's defeat by the Prussians and immediately challenged by the Paris Commune, the legacy of the French Revolution and the viability of republicanism were very much in question. The head of state of the provisional government, Adolphe Thiers, was the same man who played the decisive role in 1830 by thwarting any attempt at a republic in favor of a new monarchy. Sand, along with many other intellectuals, reluctantly backed Thiers in the hopes of founding a stable republic incrementally, instead of a more radical government, which might easily collapse (as had the First and Second Republics). As she wrote in a letter to Edmond Plauchut on March 27, 1871, "Mr Thiers n'est pas l'idéal, il ne fallait pas lui demander de l'être. Il fallait l'accepter comme un pont jeté entre Paris et la France, entre la République et la réaction, car la France, *hors des barrières de Paris, c'est la réaction*" (Sand, *Correspondance XXII—avril 1870—mars 1872*, 352–53) ("Mr. Thiers is not the ideal, we shouldn't ask him to be it. We have to accept him as a bridge between Paris and France, between the Republic and reactionaries, since France, *outside of Paris, is the reaction*"). From her home in Nohant far from Paris, Sand had limited first-hand knowledge of the events unfolding in Paris; the often exaggerated tales of savage violence on the part of the Communards horrified her, and politically she felt that their actions would undermine the possibility of an eventual republic as Thiers laid siege to the city. For these reasons, the Commune tested Sand's faith in equality and the wisdom of the common people.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the Commune produced an astonishing number of political innovations in a brief amount of time (73 days): the first government ruled by the working class; the separation of church and state; a push for free, compulsory education; the unprecedented participation of women in government as well as significant advances in gender equality. The Commune, despite Sand's pragmatic objections, resonated with her sympathy for the people and her ideological agenda.

In *Nanon*, Sand displaces her concerns about violence, women's rights, and education that come out of the events of the Paris Commune of 1871 and works through them by returning to the original French Revolution of 1789. Sand's novel manages to remain faithful to the actual events of the French Revolution as well as to its spirit, while at the same time it

proposes new ways of thinking about community. *Nanon's* many communal spaces are at once identifiable on the Cassini map of France and imaginary utopias produced by a fictional text. This doubled space, both real and ideal, both historical novel about 1789 and treatise on 1871, allows Sand to replicate the Commune as site of social innovation and to deny the Commune the quality of event or singular intensity, which would spread violent revolution around the world.<sup>2</sup>

As Nicole Mozet argues in her preface to the novel, while the narrative taken as a whole may be improbable, even utopian, each element of the story is realistic (Sand, *Nanon* 7). Nancy E. Rogers has written that though the history of the French Revolution in Sand's novel is exact, "the disjunction between historical accuracy and the effect of these key events on the peasants of *Nanon*, who are lost in ignorance and without access to accurate news from the capital, creates a distancing, or an ironic stance, on the part of the reader" (Rogers, "Nanon: Novel of Revolution," 138). The peasants of the novel's fictional village are alienated from the events in Paris, but I argue that this very distance from the Revolution, and from what the reader knows about it, allows for a rethinking of the essence of revolution and the possibilities for collective action in the future. Consequently, interpreting the events in the novel requires particular attention not only to the historical context, but especially to the counterfactual, the break with history opened up by the fictional text.

### From Shepherdess to Marquise

*Nanon* combines the realism of detailed descriptions of everyday peasant life with the idealism of what the French Revolution could have been outside of Paris, starting with a shift in narrative perspective. According to Janet Beizer in her article "History's Life Story: *Nanon* as *Histoire de ma vie*," *Nanon* is one of only a few novels by Sand, out of dozens, to have a first-person woman narrator (4). Sand's novel about revolution also narrates the revolution that allows a peasant girl to become a historical agent and a writing subject. *Nanon* recalls her own story beginning at the age of twelve, as an orphan who lives with her uncle and two cousins in extreme poverty. The novel is set in a fictional village named Valcreux in the Creuse region near the geographical center of France. Valcreux is dependent on the local monastery, "le moutier," whose ignorant monks serve as incompetent if relatively harmless landlords. *Nanon's* fortunes change when her uncle decides to buy a sheep, Rosette, and give it to her to raise. Having a purpose in life, another being to care for, inspires

Nanon with a sense of self, hygiene, economy, and eventually public and private space as she follows Rosette around town looking for new pastures. Rosette quickly leads her to the green pastures of the *moutier*'s vast property where Nanon meets a young nobleman, destined to a life of sacrifice as a monk by his family's archaic devotion to primogeniture. The young novice, Émilien de Franqueville, teaches Nanon to read, to use maps, and to challenge received ideas.

News of the events of the Revolution of 1789 eventually filter down to Valcreux, and the peasants learn with joy and incredulity that they are no longer serfs. What began as an eighteenth-century pastoral novel becomes an adventure story as the Revolution speeds up the pace of the novel and complicates the lives of the characters. The monastery is sold off by the state to a bourgeois lawyer from Limoges, Costejoux, but entrusted to the last remaining monk, Père Fructueux, and to Nanon and Émilien. A short idyllic interlude ensues before Émilien's noble ancestry leads to his arrest and condemnation during the Terror. Nanon along with Émilien's former servant Dumont break Émilien out of prison and flee to a remote part of Sand's cherished Berry, in a mystical place named "l'île aux Fades" ("isle of fairies") near the town of Crevant. Another brief few months of isolated bliss follow before Émilien goes off to join the Republican Army, and Nanon returns to Valcreux to make enough money to marry Émilien. She believes that only money can compensate for her lowly social status, given his aristocratic birth. Through a little hard work and especially a very large inheritance after the death of Père Fructueux (who thereby lives up to his name), Nanon amasses a fortune and buys the *moutier* outright from Costejoux. Émilien returns from the war, proud at losing his right forearm and thus merits the right to be a French citizen, Costejoux marries Émilien's snobbish aristocratic sister Louise, and Émilien and Nanon finally marry, have numerous children and live happily ever after as the marquis and marquise de Franqueville. Nanon writes the story in 1850, and an anonymous narrator appends a concluding paragraph to inform the reader that the marquise died in 1864 at the symbolic age of 89, after carrying for the sick.

The novel's narrative arc, as told by Nanon, follows the systematic unraveling of the old order, the *ancien régime* and its replacement by a community of equals led by Nanon. Starting with the fall of the Bastille, which Nanon believes at first was the name of a person who was put in prison, the peasants are liberated from serfdom. The monks themselves are forced to be independent and eventually disband when the *moutier* is sold by the state. The aristocracy, in the form of Émilien's family, discredits itself by emigrating and then actively works to destroy the republic.

When Nanon's uncle dies and Émilien's family flees the country, there is no stable family structure to dictate the actions of the two main protagonists, who, still more or less adolescents, take charge of their community.

Nanon, the poorest girl in town, and Émilien, the youngest in the *moutier*, have no qualifications to lead, no experience, and no authoritative position from which to speak. But during the days of mass hysteria at the start of the Revolution known as *la grande peur*, when peasants all over France feared roving bands of armed vagrants (who never appeared), Nanon and Émilien confront the illusion in order to calm the rest of the town, in the absence of leadership from the monks or the town's mayor. Similar events abound in the novel where Nanon protects the community from an external danger, either real or imagined, because no one else proves able to do so. The spontaneous and courageous Nanon struggling in the face of repeated violence from the outside evokes the image of the popular leaders of the Paris Commune. After Parisian revolts following the capitulation of the provisional government to the Prussian armies, the Commune began unexpectedly on March 18, 1871, when Adolphe Thiers ordered troops to confiscate 400 cannons controlled by the Parisian National Guard on Montmartre. The troops resisted firing on their fellow citizens (many of those defending the cannons were women), and the two commanding generals were shot.<sup>3</sup> Having broken relations with the provisional French government, the Central Committee of the National Guard found itself suddenly the highest authority in Paris. The Central Committee decided to hold elections and, instead of parliamentary representatives, simple delegates were chosen by arrondissement. These delegates, mostly workers with no political experience, could be revoked at any time by their constituents. The Commune was therefore run by those considered by the political class to be "incompetent" and without authority.<sup>4</sup>

The novel appropriates some of the structural specificities of the Commune, such as a greater role for women and rule by the inexperienced, but rejects the singularity of the urban event in favor of a multiplicity of idealized communities situated in no particular place. The greatest danger faced by the Commune was from the "Ruraux" ("Rurals"), the army made up largely of provincials that the provisional government assembled in Versailles to attack Paris. Danger in *Nanon*, however, comes from Paris and from other cities and workers, in the form of ideology.<sup>5</sup> In her travels Nanon is always sure to avoid larger towns. Her short stay in Limoges is marked by the impression that cities are ugly, dirty, and dangerous. In the novel, there is no solidarity among the poor, since city workers cannot speak in the name of peasants; Nanon chides bourgeois

revolutionaries like Costejoux who, because they live in the city, only listen to the violent workers:

Je sais, pour l'avoir entendu assez déplorer chez nous, que c'est le peuple de Paris et des grandes villes qui vous pousse et vous mène, parce que vous demeurez dans les villes, vous autres gens d'esprit et de savoir. Vous croyez connaître le paysan quand vous connaissez l'ouvrier des faubourgs et des banlieues, et, dans le nombre de ces ouvriers moitié paysans, moitié artisans, vous ne faites attention qu'à ceux qui crient et remuent.<sup>6</sup> (231–32)

Nanon can form her community in Valcreux only because of its distance from Paris and other cities, from the bourgeoisie, and from outside political influence. The initial moment of the Revolution proves to be the most liberating for the peasants, when the chains of the old order are broken. Jacobinism, centralization, and the Terror all become linked in the novel to the unfortunate radicalism associated with cities, which threatens the tranquil revolution of the countryside.

The Revolution brings to Valcreux a radical new equality among the peasants, one that is made all the more apparent because the poor village has neither bourgeois nor aristocrats. Its isolation from urban centers, and thus from dangerous political influence, forces the peasants to rely on each other; moreover, the sweeping away of the old order can allow for a young woman like Nanon to exercise power for the first time and to organize a new community along rational lines. Nanon's success is due in large part to her ability to find isolated, abandoned places, the blank spaces on a map, and transform them into viable habitations. The novel's rejection of cities as well as radical politics suggests that utopias neutralize politics in nondescript places far from the historical events of the capital. The novel's utopian, neutral or blank, spaces, while the result of Nanon's tireless efforts, nonetheless reflect the profound changes in the conception of French space during the Revolution.

### Mapping a New France

French national space went through drastic and unprecedented transformations at the end of the eighteenth century. The Revolution reapportioned public space by seizing and then selling church property and émigré estates; as *Nanon's* portrayal of the auction of the "moutier" suggests, the bourgeoisie (embodied in the novel by Costejoux) profited the most, while for the peasants, the absence of church and aristocratic domination

desacralized space, subjecting it to the apparently more democratic movement of capital.

Political boundaries, too, were redrawn during the Revolution as large ancient regions were divided into *départements* along natural, geographic borders. Regionalism, it was hoped, would disappear along with political regions, to be replaced by new ties to an abstract and idealized nation. As Nanon herself says, “j’étais devenue moins paysanne, c’est-à-dire, plus Française” (234) (“I had become less of a peasant, which is to say, more French”). A precise image of the whole of France became possible for the first time as the completion of a decades-old cartographic endeavor, the “Carte de l’Académie” or Carte de Cassini, coincided with the founding of the First Republic, thereby greatly facilitating the restructuring of French political space.<sup>7</sup> The Carte de Cassini was the first attempt to map an entire country using very accurate geodesic triangulation. Surveys of France were taken from 1756 to 1789, and the 180 individual maps were published by subscription, successively from 1756 to 1815. By the simple fact of its mathematical cartographic method, the Carte de Cassini relied on a survey of the natural, supposedly immobile, landscape and not on the changeable man-made landscapes of political borders and cities and towns. France could be imagined as a country whose unity was not subject to human history because its natural boundaries were self-evident.

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke famously argued that human nature is far too complex to be understood by any single rational intellect, and so the French Revolution’s blind destruction of tradition in favor of abstract notions could only lead to disaster: “I cannot conceive how any man can have brought himself to that pitch of presumption, to consider his country as nothing but *carte blanche*, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases.”<sup>8</sup> Taking Burke’s pronouncement both literally and figuratively, the French Revolution’s organization of society and space was at once the unauthorized assumption of divine power by the new government, a new beginning or blank slate that ignored history and tradition, but also a blank map upon which anyone could draw up new connections and new boundaries between places and citizens. Opposed to the conservative and skeptical Burke, Sand’s *Nanon* demonstrates that the new blank map born of the Revolution allowed not just the abstract “scribbles” of Parisian elites, but also and especially the more intuitive rewriting of space by peasants, those who have for centuries worked on the land but who could only take possession of it with the Revolution.

Burke’s *carte blanche* critique suggests, however, that sweeping away religion and history in favor of “nature”—whether in the form of natural borders or natural laws—relies on a more or less hidden Enlightenment



ideology even as it seeks to eliminate ideology in the abstract. A new map of France cannot help but reveal the paradigms governing its reconfiguration of space. Similarly, as I have tried to show, Sand's novelistic cartography of the French countryside during the Revolution, while plausible, still betrays the ideological signature of its author, who was simultaneously inspired and traumatized by the Paris Commune. *Nanon's* innocent story of community building and business success proposes an ideological alternative to violent revolution.

Louis Marin's *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces*, written in 1973 as a reflection on the neutral places of the French university after May '68, offers a conceptual framework for describing utopian texts. Marin asserts that utopia is an ideological critique of ideology, one which consists of the textual creation of a neutral space for the fictional resolution or play of contradictions: "L'utopie est une critique de l'idéologie dominante dans la mesure où elle est une reconstruction de la société présente (contemporaine) par un déplacement et une projection de ses structures dans un discours de fiction" (249) ("Utopia is a critique of the dominant ideology in so far as it is a reconstruction of present or contemporary society by a displacement and projection of its structures in a fictional discourse"). Marin connects utopian discourse as it developed from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries to the emergence of modernity, and in particular to the foretelling of a capitalist transformation of the world. Utopia is above all a spatial and textual construction, for Marin: "L'utopie est organisation de l'espace comme texte et discours construit comme espace" (25) ("Utopia is the organization of space as text and discourse constructed as space"). Space is organized around opposing concepts and thus is readable and writable, while the utopian text itself becomes a space that can be navigated. Spatialized, opposing concepts can only coexist side by side; the utopian text produces multiple places (concepts) in a unified project and set in a neutral space of play (10). The nonplace suggested by utopia's etymology is also a neutral or neutralized place, whose referent is a placeholder, real but absent.<sup>9</sup>

*Nanon's* utopias, like Burke's *carte blanche* and Marin's utopian neuter, construct places according to Sand's socialist ideology in the blank spaces of the *Carte de Cassini*. On the textual level, the novel's fictional places can be easily situated on the map, often in places where the map gives no toponym. The novel's places, just like its retelling of historical events, are at once fictional and entirely possible. Within the narrative itself, *Nanon* repeatedly insists that the understanding of her environment only occurs in tandem with her slow acquisition of reading and writing, as the places around her become translated into text. After she learns to

read texts and then maps, she understands how to master space, not only in order to navigate safely the routes of France, but also so that she can work the land for profit. In the *mise en abîme* of the character and the novel, the writing of *Nanon* requires imagining what could have occurred in the blank spaces of a map and the blank spaces of history, whereas Nanon's very survival depends upon finding isolated places where she can forge new ways of being.

The novel's utopias have their origin in Nanon's education and her subsequent exploration of the countryside, which turn space into text (as she learns to describe her world in writing) and text into space (as she memorizes maps in order to walk long distances in unfamiliar territory). On the very first page Nanon humbly observes that she may have difficulty accurately narrating the story of her life and that of her husband because she lacks a formal education:

Je ne sais pas si je pourrai raconter par écrit, moi qui, à douze ans, ne savais pas encore lire. Je ferai comme je pourrai. Je vais prendre les choses de haut et tâcher de retrouver les premiers souvenirs de mon enfance. Ils sont très confus, comme ceux des enfants dont on ne développe pas l'intelligence par l'éducation.<sup>10</sup> (37)

The paragraph shows more than just modesty regarding Nanon's poor education or her provincial turns of phrase, since reading and writing profoundly transform the way she thinks and perceives her surroundings and imply that language itself structures memory. At the end of chapter 9, Nanon makes a striking announcement about her mastery of language:

À présent, ceux qui m'auront lue savent que mon éducation est assez faite pour que je m'exprime plus facilement et comprenne mieux les choses qui me frappent. Il m'eût été impossible, durant tout le récit que je viens de faire, de ne pas parler un peu à la manière des paysans; ma pensée n'eût pas trouvé d'autres mots que ceux où elle était alors contenue, et, en me laissant aller à en employer d'autres, je me serais prêté des pensées et des sentiments que je n'avais pas.<sup>11</sup> (116–17)

Nanon's narrative, although retrospective, must follow exactly the course of her education, since her vocabulary expands with her world. The words themselves contain her thoughts and feelings of the past, thoughts whose very simplicity cannot be translated into a more sophisticated, in her words, "bourgeois," language. Even though born a peasant and illiterate until the age of twelve, Nanon progressively changes into an eloquent

writer and complex thinker, as she herself remarks and as the increasingly rich vocabulary of her narrative attests.

The correlation between reading, space, and perception becomes clearer when Émilien teaches Nanon how to read in chapter 4. Sitting outside on a wide plateau and looking out on the narrow valley of her hometown for the very first time, Nanon learns the alphabet from Émilien. Afterward, she begins to notice natural beauty for the first time and, remarkably, to see the world as a function of letters:

Je connus tout mon alphabet ce jour-là, et j'étais contente, en rentrant, d'entendre chanter les grives et gronder la rivière. . . . Le soleil se couchait sur notre droite, les bois de châtaigniers et de hêtres étaient comme en feu. . . . Ça n'était pas comme ça les autres fois. . . . Mes yeux éblouies voyaient des lettres rouges et bleues dans les rayons du couchant.<sup>12</sup> (70)

The new spatial perspective achieved by walking to the crest of the valley combined with what might be described as the afterimage produced from staring intently at the printed letters in Émilien's book provokes in Nanon a transformative vision, where not only rays of sunlight become colored letters, but also where everyday natural objects take on new meaning, as if she had just discovered metaphor ("tout me paraissait *drôle*"—"everything looked *funny* to me"). She notices the sounds of birds and moving water, the color of the prairie, and even compares the golden hue of the stream to the *moutier's* statue of a virgin. Nanon then looks to the sky for a "sign" that could tell her if she will soon learn to read and is comforted by the sight of one of the thrushes that follows the couple. In a peasant version of Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, the world turns into a prophetic text to be deciphered.

After learning reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, the next subject Nanon asks Émilien to teach her is geography in order to read the maps she glimpsed at the monastery (87). Émilien, as ignorant as she, promises to teach himself geography so he can then teach it to her. Nanon later makes extraordinarily good use of her knowledge of geography and her ability to read maps, not only those of the monastery, but also a copy of the Carte de Cassini in Limoges at Costejoux's residence (149). Before traveling alone she memorizes her route, engraving, as she says, the image in her mind; she thereby internalizes a textual, cartographic space before writing her own itinerary in the spaces of central France and the space of the novel.

Though exact numbers are unavailable, Cassini maps were not best sellers. Each small section was sold separately as it was completed, over

a thirty-year period beginning in 1756. Though it is not impossible for both the intellectually and geographically backward monastery and the more sophisticated bourgeois Costejoux to have owned copies of such detailed maps (and particularly Costejoux's Cassini maps), it seems rather coincidental.

In fact, the reference to these particular maps indicates that they not only serve as a mark of narrative authenticity, since the fictional places can be located on the real maps, but that a reading of the maps actually generates the space and the narrative of the novel. George Sand herself owned copies of various Cassini maps. In a letter from 1853 addressed to her son Maurice, she asks for Cassini maps of the Bourbonnais region in order to complete her collection, which she says includes maps of Nohant and part of the Creuse (Sand, *Correspondance XI*, 603–4). The narrative action in *Nanon* takes place entirely within the space represented in the maps in Sand's possession, at least as early as 1853. By paying close attention to the geographical descriptions in the novel and comparing them to the Carte de Cassini, Sand's writing process shows itself to be closely linked to her reading of the empty, uninhabited regions of the maps.

The itineraries traced by Sand in the novel coincide exactly with the spatial representation of the Cassini maps, so much so that at least once she relies on what may be a too literal interpretation of the map. On the way to liberate Émilien from prison in Châteauroux, Nanon explains, "En fait de ce que nous appelons route aujourd'hui, il n'y en avait point du tout de la Châtre à Châteauroux. . . . On s'engageait dans une grande lande où les voies se croisaient au hasard; nous faillîmes nous y perdre" (156) ("In point of fact there was nothing of what we would call today a road from la Châtre to Châteauroux. . . . We headed into a large marsh where paths were crossed haphazardly; we almost got lost").<sup>13</sup> According to the geographer Monique Pelletier, one of the major problems with the Cassini maps observed even at the time of their publication was the overemphasis on major routes to the exclusion of local highways, rendering small towns apparently without any connection: "Les critiques de la partie topographique de la carte de Cassini concernent surtout la figuration des chemins de terre, dont un grand nombre ont été omis—si bien que de nombreux villages semblent ne pouvoir communiquer, ni entre eux, ni avec une grande route" (Pelletier, 226) ("The criticisms of the topographical portion of the Carte de Cassini are focused especially on the representation of roadways, a large number of which were left out—so much so that numerous villages seem to have no way of communicating with each other or with a major route"). The cartographic simplification and abstraction of space, here as elsewhere, leads to narrative complication

as the novel's protagonists must find their own paths through seemingly uncharted territory.

The novel's two principal utopian spaces, Valcreux and the île aux Fades, take on a narrative significance precisely because they exist as cartographic blanks. By their very names, Valcreux being the tautological "hollow valley" and the île aux Fades "fairy island," these fictional places suggest empty and imaginary space, utopian nonplaces. Nanon situates Valcreux very precisely at various times in the novel: "J'avais vu sur la carte qu'à vol d'oiseau, le moutier était à égale distance de Limoges et d'Argenton" (154) ("I had seen on a map that as the crow flies, the *moutier* was equidistant between Limoges and Argenton"). Early on, one of Nanon's cousins exclaims that at twelve leagues, Saint-Léonard is far from Valcreux (51). Mozet asserts (*Nanon*, 28), and a quick look at the Carte de Cassini confirms, that following the novel's indications "Valcreux" would correspond to the village of Ahun, next to the Moutier d'Ahun, which counted 1,850 residents in 1793, and is strangely prominent on the Carte de Cassini for a town its size (see figure 3.1).<sup>14</sup> Ahun is near the geographical center of France, relatively far from any city, and utterly unremarkable except for the almost immaterial, or "hollow," quality of its name, which is composed entirely of vowel and nasal sounds.



Figure 3.1. Ahun and Its Moutier. Carte générale de la France, dite Carte de Cassini, Detail of no. 12, feuille 56. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G5830 s86 .C3 Vault.

The Cassini maps allow us to locate as well the second utopia of the novel: the île aux Fades, the refuge Nanon, Émilien, and his former servant Dumont find near Crevant in the Berry. Nanon describes the voyage from Châteauroux to this mysterious wilderness: down the Gourdon stream, through the forest of Villemort, across the Bourdesoule River, past the road leading to Aigurande, and then left into a “pays sauvage” (“wild country”) (176) (figure 3.2). The uninhabited space of the map in the area indicated by Nanon’s travels consists of a woods, a valley, and an oddly formed hill in the shape of a peninsula. The topographical contours of the hill (figure 3.3) inspire the isolated utopia of the île aux Fades, which Nanon compares to the island of Robinson Crusoe, complete with indigenous “savages.”

If, on the level of the novel’s composition, the utopias can be read as closed communities born from the blank spaces of the Cassini map, on the diegetic level the successive places of the novel all share similar narrative fates that taken as a whole suggest a direct engagement with the events of the Commune, all the while reversing its tragic outcome. Whether Nanon’s uncle’s cottage, the “moutier,” Costejoux’s apartment



**Figure 3.2.** The Bois de Villemort, Crevant, and the area around Sand’s fictional “Île aux fades.” Carte de Cassini, detail no. 11, feuille 83. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G5830 s86 .C3 Vault.



Figure 3.3. The blank space corresponding to the “Île aux fades.” Carte de Cassini, detail of no. 11, feuille 83. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G5830 s86 .C3 Vault.

in Limoges, Émilien’s prison in Chateauroux, the hut in the île aux Fades, or Émilien’s ancestral castle, the places begin as enclosed fortresses, protecting their inhabitants, sometimes against their will, from the outside world. The “Grande peur” at the start of the novel forces Nanon and her family to lock themselves up in the cottage; at one point the monks throw Père Fructueux in the dungeon; Costejoux locks up Nanon in his apartment for her own safety; and at the île aux Fades the three refugees avoid all contact with strangers for fear of being discovered. It is as if the characters are continually under siege, but in almost every case the siege is only imaginary. After a few days, the “Grande peur” is shown to be based on a rumor; after the mayor puts some pressure on the monks they not only release Fructueux but make him the prior; the peasants around the île aux Fades show themselves to be just friendly peasants who are superstitious of the Druidic ruins that surround the refugees’ settlement. Once the danger is seen to be illusory, or at least has passed, in every case a healthy work ethic returns and the characters set about cultivating the land for maximum productivity, always under the direction of Nanon. The enclosed spaces thus begin as defensive barriers and end up as ideal, self-contained communities. Nanon emphasizes the point by saying that Valcreux was no longer a “paroisse” (“parish”) but a “commune”—a change in terminology certainly not unique to Valcreux during the Revolution, but one that had a strong resonance in 1871, since the rallying point of the Commune was to claim for Paris the same status as “commune” that other cities and towns in France enjoyed (76).<sup>15</sup>

The novel’s cartographic intertext, the Carte de Cassini, guarantees an accurate historical and geographic reference point for the narrative’s utopian places. But by exploiting the maps’ empty spaces, the neutral areas devoid of place names or, in the case of the île aux Fades, topographical signs, the text superposes onto the historical space of the French Revolution an alternative space that collapses multiple times. While the novel as

a whole constantly evokes the Commune of 1871, Nanon's retrospective narrative weaves back and forth not only between events in her own life, but also reaches back to the distant past. The *moutier* at Valcreux resembles a medieval monastery as much as one from the late eighteenth century; even after the Revolution, Nanon transforms the *moutier* into a communal and agrarian enterprise that combines the original functions of a monastery with nineteenth-century agricultural discourse. Likewise the île aux Fades provides refuge to Nanon, Émilien, and Dumont because the local peasants are afraid of the ancient remains left by the Druids. Nanon converts a dolmen into a shelter and begins to cultivate the surrounding land, thereby incorporating traditions of the ancient past and simultaneously disproving local superstitions. She recounts how much the area changes decades after the events she describes, now that the region has been modernized and people circulate freely across the land. Revolution in *Nanon* comes about by tracing new paths in overlooked areas, by writing in the margins of history.

### Nanon, or the Neutral Subject

Like the novel's isolated communities, drawn in the interstices of the map of France, Nanon herself exists between categories. She serves as catalyst for the events in the novel and as a negotiator between the other, more ideologically rigid characters. The communities formed in the text, from her uncle's home to the "moutier," from the île aux Fades to the Franqueville château, hold together disparate, even antagonistic, individuals around a center formed by Nanon's neutrality. The novel's more theoretical or political moments all consist of long conversations between the rational and coolheaded Nanon and a more zealous, if often misguided, friend: in some of the novel's most passionate exchanges, Nanon discusses the nature of revolution, violence, and social change with her peasant uncle, Père Fructueux, the bourgeois revolutionary Costejoux, and of course her friend and husband the reformed aristocrat Émilien. Through these conversations, Nanon is able slowly to form, though not impose, a consensus, namely, that the end does not justify the means and that a lasting revolution cannot come from violence. Peasants, servants, bourgeois, monks, and aristocrats all cohabitate, sometimes more and sometimes less peacefully, in Nanon's utopian community, without losing any of their diversity of opinion or identity.

Nanon's own identity, however, does not fit easily into nineteenth-century social categories, a fact revealed by George Sand's hesitation about



the novel's title. As Mozet notes, Sand refers in her letters to two different titles, "la paysanne parvenue" ("The Upstart Peasant Woman") and "la Marquise de Franqueville" (*Nanon*, 10–11), both of which focus on only one aspect of Nanon's narrative trajectory. Throughout her story, Nanon insists on her humble origins even though her financial situation and her education have her rise through the social ranks. The last few pages, narrated in the third person, confirm that the marquise still dressed in peasant attire despite her bourgeois fortune and noble title (287). Instead of remaining a simple peasant or becoming an aristocrat, she embodies all social classes at the same time as if she were an allegory for France itself. As she says describing her own education, "j'étais devenue moins paysanne, c'est-à-dire, plus Française" (234) ("I had become less of a peasant, which is to say, more French"). One is not born French, apparently, one becomes French, and Nanon's expanding knowledge of history and geography, along with her role in forming communities, make of her the ideal citizen.

While she plans her adventurous rescue of Émilien among other exploits by memorizing the complex Carte de Cassini, Nanon cannot travel freely on the roads of France. As she repeatedly remarks, it was not at all safe for a young girl of seventeen or eighteen to walk for days unaccompanied in regions far away from her own. Walking, what for Indiana constituted a mad attempt at escape (and was interpreted by Ralph as suicidal), is for Nanon not only a proof of her commitment to Émilien but also a way for her to gain firsthand knowledge of the new nation. Her walks start off relatively limited as she follows her sheep Rosette looking for pasture. Soon Émilien accompanies her and they explore the town and the region as he shares what little he knows about the world. Her first long trip, to Limoges to visit Costejoux, takes her two days on foot, and though she can intuit the way, she decides to look at the map: "J'avais dans la nuit calqué sur une carte tout le pays que j'avais à parcourir" (139) ("During the night I had traced on a map all the area I had to cover"). Already her travels are described in masculine terms, since the first day she says she walked as far as a man would (139).

Her next journey, following Émilien's carriage as he is transferred to another prison, is considerably more dangerous, as the coachmen make remarks about her beauty. Similar to the attention given to Indiana as she traveled by ship to France, Nanon's gender and her looks attract unwanted attention once she has left her native region and travels as an unknown young woman:

Pourtant, j'avais une inquiétude pour la suite de mon voyage. La manière dont on me regardait et me parlait était nouvelle pour moi, et je m'avisais

enfin de l'inconvénient d'être une jeune fille toute seule sur les chemins. À Valcreux, où l'on me savait sage et retenue, personne ne m'avait fait souvenir que je n'étais plus une enfant, et je m'étais trop habituée à ne pas compter mes années. . . . Je voyais enfin dans mon sexe un obstacle et des périls auxquels je n'avais jamais songé. . . . La beauté attire toujours les regards, et j'aurais voulu me rendre invisible.<sup>16</sup> (152)

A week later, on her next voyage to meet Émilien, she asks his former servant Dumont to accompany her, and she disguises herself as his adolescent nephew (156). For the next few chapters she succeeds at making herself almost invisible by cross-dressing as a boy named Lucas (157). Nanon's masculine attire, reminiscent of course of Sand's own youth, represents more than a simple disguise as she begins to enjoy a new freedom of movement. Later, after she helps Émilien escape from prison and they hide in the île aux Fades, she notices how self-sufficient she has become: "J'étais devenue, depuis que j'étais garçon, adroite et forte de mes mains pour les ouvrages de garçon" (179) ("I had become, ever since I started being a boy, skilled with strong hands for boy's work"). Just as she effortlessly makes the transition from peasant to bourgeoisie to marquise, Nanon has no emotional or practical difficulty dressing and acting like a boy.

The paradox of Nanon's extraordinary neutrality, or even her identity as a neuter beyond gender, while suggested throughout the text, becomes explicit near the end of the novel when Costejoux declares to her: "Vous êtes une exception, vous, une très remarquable exception. Vous n'êtes ni une femme ni un homme, vous êtes l'un et l'autre avec les meilleures qualités des deux sexes" (229) ("You are an exception, you, a very remarkable exception. You are neither a woman nor a man, you are both with the best qualities of each gender"). Costejoux's statement, while obviously problematic from a feminist perspective, makes evident how Nanon as a character exists in a neutral area, since her identity is constructed in the space between categories. For Costejoux, she is "neither" woman "nor" man; the negativity inherent in her name (*Nanon*) reinforces her quality as neuter (*ne-uter*, "neither one"). Nanon's protean subjectivity, in its positive dynamism emerging from negative space, is both perfectly adapted to the changing events of the Revolution and to a text that superimposes political contexts from different time periods onto the same textual space.

Nanon personifies utopia by her neutrality, by her idealistic hope of avoiding violent conflict, by her devotion to community building, and by the chiasmus of space and discourse generated from her many travels across central France. Yet the end of the novel shares with the end of

*Indiana* a troubling silence from the woman protagonist. While Indiana's silence at the end of that novel, as I suggest, might be interpreted as a mirroring of the hidden omniscient narrator (who in turn begins to resemble Indiana), Nanon's silence is solely political:

Ils [Émilien and Costejoux] n'ont pas été dupes de la révolution de Juillet. Ils n'ont pas été satisfaits de celle de Février. Moi qui, depuis bien longtemps, ne m'occupe plus de politique—je n'en ai pas le temps—je ne les ai jamais contredits, et, si j'eusse été sûre d'avoir raison contre eux, je n'aurais pas eu le courage de le leur dire, tant j'admiraais la trempe de ces caractères du passé.<sup>17</sup> (286)

Nanon's pronouncement carries her neutrality to what seems to be its extreme, abandoning all politics in order to work and in deference to the men in her life. The opposite of the *pétroleuses* (the stereotypical image of the enraged women of the Commune who, according to Versailles propaganda, set fire to the city's monuments), Nanon refuses to give up her work for the political cause of the day, since "she doesn't have the time." As a woman involved both in negotiation between factions and dedicated to her own business ventures (*négoce* in French, *negotium* in Latin meaning business, both come from *neg-otium*, the negation of leisure), she implicitly condemns politics as leisure time. Moreover, the political passion and ideologies of Émilien and Costejoux have solidified into part of their personalities; Nanon seems to mock them gently by her fear of contradicting such caricatural figures from the "past." Politics, as the Communards argued, is not the exclusive realm of the leisure class, but belongs to all those who take part in their community. Nanon's activities such as farming the land and helping the sick and the poor constitute an extraordinary amount of labor; indeed, she dies of fatigue at the age of eighty-nine while caring for the sick during an epidemic (286). In the wake of the carnage of the Terror of 1793 (and the even greater carnage of May 1871), *Nanon's* call for nonviolence beyond ideology and for a return to work may be not only the most politically responsible of acts but the ultimate paradox: a pragmatic utopia.