

Representing Race in Indiana

This paper looks beneath the surface of the ostensibly all white society depicted in George Sand's Indiana in an attempt to discover the author's conflicted attitudes, and ours as readers and critics as well, toward race and the problems of slavery and racial oppression in general. Those attitudes are examined here as indications of this novel's "ideology," not in the traditional, prescriptive connotation of some reprehensible bias or false consciousness, but in the more recent, descriptive sense which serves to characterize the kinds of unarticulated or "preconscious" attitudes that we all hold, which are inextricably related to some general historical and political context or other. Looking at the revealing treatment or in many cases the equally revealing "non-treatment" of two main topics affecting the representation of race--color and sexuality--, I shall argue that in Indiana, Sand both conformed to and resisted her society's values concerning race. On the negative, conformist side, Sand will be seen to resemble other white middle or upper-class members of French society of her time in being driven to contain the potential threat to society by racial "others," for example by seeming at an explicit level to make all of her major characters white and by disapproving of intermarriage. On the positive, resisting side, however, resistance will also be found in the novel's strong, albeit implicit, identification with and appeal on behalf of persons of color and the disempowered in society generally. While in the remarks that follow I shall want to acknowledge the ideological limitations that mark Sand's writings, as we all of course similarly suffer from blind spots and ideological limitations, I shall want to place special emphasis on resistance, which to my mind is more interesting than conformity and marks Indiana as an enlightened representation of race.

Beginning the consideration of the topic of color outside the text, the very use of the word "créole" in French is curious and problematic. Traditionally, as a noun, the word means a "personne de pure race blanche, née aux colonies." At the same time, however, definitions of the word as an adjective or qualified noun introduce a multiracial meaning that definitions of the noun exclude. As Léon-François Hoffman explains about the historical use of the adjectival form, "L'adjectif `créole' qualifie d'ailleurs, quelle que soit leur pigmentation, les natifs de l'île Bourbon aussi bien que ceux de la Guadeloupe ou de Saint-Domingue" (pp. 52-53). Since the adjective form sometimes indicates mixed or black race while other times it means a white person from the colonies, there is conflict not just between the noun and adjective but in the different uses of the adjective, which allow for ambiguity. Today, some dictionaries record the distinction between noun and adjective (e.g. Littré) while others adopt the monoracial, nominal definition exclusively (e.g. Larousse).

The conflict apparent in the very meaning of the word "créole"--the conflict between explicitly denying and implicitly acknowledging differences of race as fundamental to the identity of the inhabitants of the French colonies--is not, I

think, merely a linguistic curiosity, but reflects a fundamental conflict about French thinking about their colonies. That conflict is also apparent in Sand's novel with respect to the two feminine characters both described as "créole." The treatment of these two characters duplicates textually the problematic denial of difference of race that also occurred historically, socially, and linguistically. On the conformist side, the novel tends to shy away from openly acknowledging differences in color. Indiana, the wife of the prototypical colonialist, Colonel Delmare, is described as a "créole" in what would seem to be the sense of a white colonial ("Le blanc mat de son collier, celui de sa robe de crêpe et de ses épaules nues, se confondaient à quelque distance," p. 80), although there are few places in the novel where her race is explicitly identified. Far more problematic is the use of the same nominal form "créole" for Indiana's servant Noun ("M. de Ramière était amoureux de la jeune créole aux yeux noirs," p. 73) especially in the absence of any direct evidence that she is white, and in the presence of considerable hints in the text that she is in fact black or of mixed race. For example, her hair is referred to as being "d'un noir nègre," p. 192; and her arms, as "frais et bruns," p. 104). And toward the end of the novel, Indiana's cousin and eventual soul mate Ralph Brown refers in passing to Noun as "créole dans l'acceptation la plus étendue" (p. 321), but without spelling out this more extended sense of the term.

Aside from the curious use of "créole" coupled with a sprinkling of hints about color, however, race hardly ever plays an explicit role in Indiana: that it affects the main characters personally is rarely made clear, despite the fact that the novel is set in the French colonies at an historical moment when racial tensions and slavery were urgent and unresolved social issues and despite the fact that Noun is a servant. And yet I have found that most readers, both French and American, when asked their impression of Noun's color, will respond that she is not white; and curiously, she appears as a person of mixed race in the illustration in the Garnier edition of the novel, although there is no acknowledgment in the introduction to this edition that race is an issue in either the illustration or the novel.

The conformist refusal in Indiana to acknowledge differences of color directly reveals an unwillingness in Sand's society's, if not ours still today, to recognize the actual conditions in which persons of color live. Instead, there is a regrettable tendency to pretend that they and whatever problems are associated with them simply do not exist. Thus Noun's and Indiana's tragic love stories often seem to be merely the tales of any two French women and not specifically two women from the colonies, where issues of race are to the forefront. Because the word "créole" in French, as noted earlier, has both monoracial and multiracial meanings, the text can function conservatively to avoid the issue of color by seeming to rely only on the monoracial meaning. For example, when there is talk of the class disparity in Noun's love affair with the aristocratic Raymon de la Ramière, but no mention of the issue of race, the text and the strict nominal sense of "créole" tempt one into thinking of her as white.

Sand's conformist indirectness in representing race lives on among her critics, who typically follow Sand's lead in failing to raise openly the issue of Noun's color. For example Kathryn Crecelius provides a fascinating in-depth study of black and white imagery in Indiana (pp. 63-70) but astoundingly without ever acknowledging the possible relevance of that imagery for the issue of race. And in another important and interesting study, Leslie Rabine dwells on Noun as a lower-class woman but without looking as carefully at the issue of race as she does at that of class. Rabine states, for example, that "Sand makes the pure and desirable woman a white bourgeoisie while the sensual and unattractive woman is a lower class Creole" (p. 13). What is surprising about this statement is the claim that Noun is unattractive, since Sand stresses her beauty consistently in the novel. It is also surprising to find "white bourgeoisie" contrasted with "lower class Creole" since in Sand's novel "créole" is applied to both Indiana and Noun and thus, at the level of explicit usage, clearly does not stand in opposition to white. Given the ambiguity surrounding the word "créole," Rabine may thereby be introducing the issue of race into her analysis; but, following Sand's lead, she does so only indirectly, failing to unpack the meanings of the word and the ideological implications of its usage, not only Sand's usage but her own, a usage which, as I have indicated above, may not be free of racist overtones, assuming that Rabine did intend indirectly to raise the question of race. In Rabine's analysis, the issue of class overshadows the issue of race. Thus Noun, a character that Sand portrays as a respectable servant from the colonies, is treated by Rabine as a lower-class prostitute:

the use of Noun in the novel demonstrates how the prostitution of lower class women was necessary to preserve the chastity of bourgeoisie women Finally, in the novel, the lower class woman must be sacrificed to maintain the innocence of the bourgeoisie woman and the stability of the social order (p. 14).

By failing to come to grips adequately with the issue of race in Indiana, Rabine's interpretation is in some ways even more conformist than Sand's novel, which as we shall now see also displays a highly significant resisting thrust.

That there exists a resisting side of Indiana, and thus that conformity goes hand in hand with resistance in Sand's novel, is apparent in the various intrusions of black and mixed race in the novel, intrusions that reveal a willingness to recognize racial difference, even if such often merely implicit recognition does not seem to go very far by today's standards. Resistance can be discovered in the very fact that Indiana and other apparently white inhabitants of the colonies often seem indirectly imbued with the attributes of mixed race that can occur in the adjectival form of "créole." Consider for example the very fact of setting the novel in the West Indies and giving its ostensibly pure white heroine a name connoting the non-white race of Indians. The novel thereby resists conformity to the rigid standards of the times whereby whites were set off from persons of other races in an absolutely separate and superior category. Indiana, in her very essence, bridges a gap that racists and anti-abolitionists wished to preserve as absolute and unbridgeable. Consider also that Indiana reveals at one point that the

woman who nursed her was black ("il me vit venir à lui dans les bras de la négresse qui m'avait nourrie," p. 157). Not only does this revelation suggest that Indiana's "soeur de lait," her servant Noun, may have been the daughter of the wet-nurse and thus black or of mixed race, but it also stresses that Indiana was nurtured with the non-white, racially "other" milk of her wet-nurse and thus is herself partially non-white too. I might point out that the suggestion that milk was connected with racial purity is not without historical precedent. We learn, for example, that Portuguese Franciscans opposed admission of non-European born inhabitants of the colonies into their order, alleging that "even if born of pure white parents [they] have been sucked by Indian ayahs in their infancy and thus had their blood contaminated for life." (Anderson, p. 60) The term "soeur de lait," used on a number of occasions in Indiana, thus carries racial connotations that heighten Indiana's association with persons of color.

The resisting side of Indiana is also apparent in the many passages in the novel in which Indiana herself voices resistance to the analogous oppression imposed on women and slaves, passages that make the point that blacks, whites, and persons of color do indeed share the common identity that definitions of the adjective "créole" acknowledge. The following passage is representative.

en voyant le continuel tableau des maux de la servitude, en supportant les ennuis de l'isolement et de la dépendance, elle avait acquis une patience extérieure à toute épreuve, une indulgence et une bonté adorables avec ses inférieures, mais aussi une volonté de fer, une force de résistance incalculable contre tout ce qui tendait à l'opprimer . . . Elle n'aima pas son mari, par la seule raison peut-être qu'on lui faisait un devoir de l'aimer, et que résister mentalement à toute espèce de contrainte morale était devenu chez elle une seconde nature, un principe de conduite, une loi de conscience . . . Élevée au désert, négligée de son père, vivant au milieu des esclaves, pour qui elle n'avait d'autre secours, d'autre consolation que sa compassion et ses larmes, elle s'était habituée à dire: "Un jour viendra où tout sera changé dans ma vie, où je ferai du bien aux autres" (p. 89)

On occasion Indiana even serves as a spokesperson for ideas of resistance by slaves themselves to their oppressors, ideas that have a clear abolitionist ring:

Dieu ne veut pas qu'on opprime et qu'on écrase les créatures de ses mains. S'il daignait descendre jusqu'à intervenir dans nos chétifs intérêts, il briserait le fort et relèverait le faible; il passerait sa grande main sur nos têtes inégales et les nivellerait comme les eaux de la mer; il dirait à l'esclave; "Jette ta chaîne, et fuis sur les monts où j'ai mis pour toi des eaux, des fleurs et du soleil." (pp. 249-250)

In this passage and elsewhere in the novel, Indiana, referring to herself metaphorically as a slave although she is white, grounds her plea for resistance in the multiracial meaning of the word "créole" noted above. Indiana's implicit

non-whiteness is proudly proclaimed here in her use of the first-person plural "nos" in speaking together with black slaves of "nos chétifs intérêts" and "nos têtes inégales."

Commenting on Sand's metaphorical use of the notion of slavery, Nancy Rogers rightly concludes that "Indiana joins the other rebellious runaway slaves so often depicted in the literature of the times . . . Indiana is branded as blatantly as any runaway slave recaptured by his master." (p. 31) There is thus an important sense in which one could say that by choosing to live in the colonies and to live apart from its white colonialist inhabitants, both Indiana and Ralph can be seen as joining the ranks of a non-white community at the end of the novel and thus symbolically becoming honorary full members of the black slave community. The novel closes, revealingly, with Indiana and Ralph devoting their efforts to helping black slaves--if not to escape slavery altogether at least to bear its burden with less suffering in sickness or old age: "La majeure portion de nos revenus est consacrée à racheter de pauvres Noirs infirmes. C'est la principale cause du mal que les colons disent de nous. Que ne sommes nous assez riches pour délivrer tous ceux qui vivent dans l'esclavage!" (p. 342)

I might add that it is not surprising to find Ralph coupled with the racially impure Indiana and treated in many of the same ways as she is. A native of the colonies, he too is a "créole," with all of the ambiguity that surrounds that word for Indiana and Noun. As Isabelle Naginski's analysis of Indiana makes it possible to see, he is also an androgynous double of the feminine writer, "a working model for the author's double-gendered voice" (p. 65). And like Indiana, although he is white, his identity and hopes for the future are as rooted in the dream of the abolition of slavery and oppression as if he were black: "Ralph allait donc toujours soutenant son rêve de république d'où il voulait exclure tous les abus, tous les préjugés, toutes les injustices; projet fondé tout entier sur l'espoir d'une nouvelle race d'hommes." (p. 167) It is thus possible to see in the couple, Indiana and Ralph, about which I shall have more to say later, a locus of combined masculine and feminine, white and non-white, resistance against the oppression and racism that for Sand characterizes the colonies generally and the colonialist colonel Delmare specifically.

The treatment of sexuality in Indiana provides another occasion to observe both conformity and resistance in Sand's representation of race. Conformism is apparent in the deprecation or denial of non-white sexuality. Deprecation often occurs through the dichotomy established, typically from Raymon's point of view, between Indiana and Noun as (at least at the implicit level) a woman of color. In that dichotomy, Noun is physically denigrated more often than Indiana because an emphasis, typical in Western culture, is placed on her physicality as a person of color. The following description of the two women is representative: "Noun, grande, forte, brillante de santé, vive, alerte, et pleine de sang créole ardent et passionné, effaçait de beaucoup, par sa beauté resplendissante, la beauté pâle et frêle de madame Delmare . . ." (p. 60) To Indiana is granted the delicacy and light color of the white colonial woman. To her servant is reserved the animal-like strength and the lustiness implying sexual

availability typically associated by colonialists with black women slaves. Elsewhere that same sensuality reappears, as when Raymon is making love to Noun and thinking about the sexual opposition between her and her mistress:

C'était Indiana qu'il voyait dans le nuage du punch que la main de Noun venait d'allumer; c'était elle qui l'appelait et qui lui souriait derrière ces blancs rideaux de mousseline; ce fut elle encore qu'il rêva sur cette couche modeste et sans tâche, lorsque, succombant sous l'amour et le vin il y entraîna sa créole échevelée. (p. 105)

Raymon blames the physicality of his "créole échevelée" for his own abandon and debauchery ("succombant sous l'amour et le vin"); he interprets her seductiveness as solicitation ("le nuage du punch que la main de Noun venait d'allumer," "c'était elle qui l'appelait"). He further denigrates her, speaking of "l'ardeur insensée qui consume les flancs de cette créole lascive." (p. 106)

Another of Sand's conformist practices consists, paradoxically, in the opposite of dichotomizing the two women. This practice consists, instead, in lumping the two women together and treating them both as inferior, along with all those who live in the colonies. The sexualization and diminution of women of color thus extends to all "créoles," again playing on the multiracial sense of that term. In the following passage, for example, Raymon subjects Indiana to the same sexualization as her servant:

en reconduisant madame de Carvajal et madame Delmare à leur voiture, il réussit à porter la petite main d'Indiana à ses lèvres. Jamais baiser d'homme furtif et dévorant n'avait effleuré les doigts de cette femme, quoiqu'elle fût née sous un climat de feu et qu'elle eût dix-neuf ans; dix-neuf ans de l'île de Bourbon, qui équivalent à vingt-cinq ans de notre pays. (p. 84)

Although overtly Indiana's sexual purity is proclaimed in this passage, its covert message is her inherent propensity to the same excessive passion, the same "lasciviousness," as Noun. The novel similarly emphasizes that both women have the same luxurious, erotic dark hair: "S'il baisait ses cheveux noirs, il croyait baiser les cheveux noirs d'Indiana." (p. 104)

Conformism is similarly directed at men born in the colonies, who, because they belong to a multiracial society, are implicitly disparaged sexually and relegated, like women, to the inferior category of the European male's sexual "other." A notable example is Indiana's soul mate Ralph. Throughout the novel, Ralph is symbolically emasculated and feminized through analogy with women, slaves, and members of oppressed groups; we read for example that "Ralph n'avait connu de la vie que ses maux et ses dégoûts." (p. 166) No less than Noun and Indiana, he is a powerless and thus symbolically impotent victim of the masculine oppression of the colonialist system, which is consistently associated with slavery. Thus Ralph states: "Mon père . . . était prêt à me maudire si j'essayais d'échapper à son joug. Je courbai la tête; mais ce que je souffris, vous-même, qui fûtes aussi bien malheureuse, ne sauriez l'apprécier." (p. 323) Unlike powerful masculine Europeans such as Indiana's husband Delmare and her lover Raymon, Ralph is disparaged through his portrayal here in a

symbolically feminine and slavelike guise as weak, submissive, silent, all-suffering, impotent, and asexual. Indeed, James M. Vest rightly captures the reader's overall impression of Ralph when Vest designates him as phallically "oarless," in contrast with the oarsmen ("**ram**-eurs") who kill Indiana's defenseless female dog Ophelia and with Raymon de **Ram**-ière (p. 53). Denying the sexuality of male slaves, including the actual practice of castration, were facts of colonial life with which the literary desexualization of Ralph is consistent. (Jordan, p. 154)

The existence of conformist sexual and racial standards in Indiana is further evident in this novel's implicitly negative message about mixed marriage and children of mixed race, a message that the novel never openly acknowledges but that is revealing of its conflicted ideological attitudes toward race. When Noun, the servant, becomes pregnant by Raymon, the European aristocrat, the death of the mother before bearing the child precludes any possibility of racial mixture. One might conclude, although the novel itself refrains from openly addressing the issue of mixed marriage, that mixing races would be too radical a solution to the problems of slavery and oppression that Indiana explores. And indeed Sand states in the preface to the 1842 edition that her goal in that novel was to find moderate solutions to social problems: "Je cherchais . . . le moyen de concilier le bonheur et la dignité des individus opprimés par cette même société, sans modifier la société elle-même." (p. 44) Michèle Hirsch observes along similar, conformist lines that the political revolt depicted in the novel at the moment of Indiana's arrival in Bordeaux in 1830 seems to be dismissed as illegitimate in Indiana (p. 125).

It is crucial to stress again, however, that conformity goes hand in hand with resistance in the treatment of sexuality and race in Indiana, pace interpretations such as Crecilius's--"classes are left in place in the marriages and bourgeois values dominate," p. 80--that only acknowledge the conformist meaning. Resistance in Indiana consists of granting to women and men, to whites and non-whites alike, the right to enjoy a combined emotional and physical sexuality that transcends an exclusively carnal or reproductive bond. For women and slaves who have been relegated to the inferior roles of mere sexual object or procreative resource, such a more humane and expansive definition of sexuality constitutes a significant form of resistance against forces in society that refuse to recognize racial and sexual differences.

An interesting contrast that points up the resisting side of Sand's treatment of sexuality and race is suggested in Gayatri Spivack's analysis of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, a novel that was also written by a nineteenth-century woman but later, at what Spivack identifies as an imperialist phase of history, in which bearing children and saving souls were the chief roles assigned to middle class English women. Spivack emphasizes the sharp opposition that Brontë draws between Jane and Rochester's first wife, the white Jamaican Bertha Mason; and Spivack argues that in order for Jane to replace Bertha as the lawful wife and mother, Bertha must be subjected to the kind of egregious animalization and sexualization that was often applied to women of color from the colonies. For

Spivack, Brontë's treatment of Bertha serves "as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer." It is an allegory, Spivack claims, in which the woman from the colonies is "sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation." (p. 270)

The sharp difference between Jane Eyre, at least upon Spivack's reading, and Indiana is striking and reaches to the heart of Sand's resistance to conformist notions of sexuality and race. Although sometimes presented as more sexual than Indiana, Noun is subjected to little of the violent deprecation that Bertha Mason receives. Nor are Noun and Indiana radically separated in their fate as either sexual partners or mothers, as Bertha and Jane are. On the contrary, Sand's novel repeatedly emphasizes the shared sexual experiences of the mistress and her servant and thus implicitly of women of all races. Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding the word "créole" in Sand's novel, with its admittedly negative function of sidestepping issues of race, also functions positively to emphasize the commonality of the two women. Both Noun's sexuality and her eventual childlessness are also Indiana's. Nurtured on the same milk; both destined to play subservient roles as women; treated similarly as slaves; mistreated by the same unfeeling lover; cut off from power, language, successful marriage, and enduring progeny: Noun and Indiana serve less as models of the oppressed and the oppressor than as joint illustrations of slave women's sexual oppression. In their shared oppression, they are offered to the reader for sympathy and understanding. Most importantly, unlike Jane Eyre, Indiana allows readers to recognize the racial implications of feminine sexuality. Sand's novel thus provides an implicitly contestatory, resisting representation of sexual practices in colonial society.

Resistance, at least as much as conformity, thus marks Sand's treatment of feminine sexuality and race in Indiana. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that at the end of the novel, Indiana and Ralph live together in what appears to be a spiritually if not a legally sanctioned union. True, on the conformist side, Ralph's feminization implicitly calls into question his ability to play a standard masculine, paternal role in society, just as Indiana's symbolic non-whiteness raises the specter of intermarriage. More importantly, however, on the resisting side, the refusal to assign to Indiana the traditional roles of wife and mother constitutes an attempt to recast traditional notions of sexuality and love in new forms. That refusal needs to be interpreted as a resistance to the idea of relegating Indiana to the kind of biologically and socially reproductive role as mother and model of national values to which Spivack claims that Jane Eyre conforms. Naomi Schor perceptively discerns in Indiana "a yearning to be delivered both from the base desire for carnal possession characteristic of male sexuality and the injustices of a man-made system of laws that enables the enslavement of both women and blacks"; and thus she sees in Sand's refusal to assign a reproductive role to Indiana a refusal to "legitimate a social order inimical to the disenfranchised, among them women." (p. 73)

Along with Rogers and Naginski, Schor correctly reads Indiana as an emancipatory text of resistance, as against Crecelius, Hirsch, and Rabine, who, to my mind, overemphasize its conformist side. Common to those readings that privilege resistance is a feminist perspective that sees beyond the sexual compromises that Sand's characters inevitably make. Those readings acknowledge Sand's protest against injustice in Indiana and her willingness to fight that injustice through the limited means that she found available to the disempowered in the society of her time. Clearly Sand could not totally transcend or stand outside of the ideology of her times with respect to race. Clearly, too, her positive representation of race in Indiana today appears to be largely indirect and symbolic. In short, conformity is an inescapable ingredient in that novel as in her writings generally. At the same time, it needs to be remembered that in a work such as Indiana, Sand does endorse many of the most liberal and enlightened views that were available to people of the nineteenth century, an endorsement that we today as critics need as much to applaud as to critique.

Doris Y. Kadish
Kent State University

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