

Boris Vian's American Movie: The Lost Authorship
of *I Will Spit on Your Graves*

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At the origin of this article is a paradox presented by the front covers of two paperback books. The first is Boris Vian's pastiche of an American *roman noir*, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, (*I Will Spit on Your Graves*), which he wrote over a period of two weeks in August, 1946. (See Fig. 1.) It appeared that fall with the name of a fictional black American author, Vernon Sullivan, and the now famous inscription "translated from American by Boris Vian," and went on to become the best-selling book in France in 1947. The second, written in 1959 by Françoise d'Eaubonne, is a novelization of a movie loosely based on Vian's novel (See Fig. 2.). The paradox is that the first book shows Vian's name as the translator, when he was in fact the author; the second displays his name boldly before the title, *as if* he were the author, when in fact he wrote not a single sentence. The real author's name, Françoise d'Eaubonne, is printed after the title, but in smaller, faded letters, as if she had only minor input into the book of which she was in fact the author. This perfectly symmetrical deception on the two covers, printed thirteen years apart, frames a complicated story that illustrates some of the consequences of writing for the popular culture market.

The climax of this story occurred on June 23, 1959, when Vian was previewing the filmed adaptation of his novel, in order to decide whether he would allow the use of his name in the credits. Ten minutes into the showing, he died suddenly of heart failure.

In the years between 1946 and 1959, which encompass his entire literary career, his novel underwent several metamorphoses. I will briefly examine these versions, and attempt to describe the dynamic tension they embody between the author's claim of control over his creation and forces that deny that claim. Parallel to the literal and figurative "death of the author" which this story illustrates, another plot unfolds: Vian's willful misappropriation of American popular culture in his pseudo-roman noir, which he presented to the French public as the "real thing." I will argue that both developments—Vian's gradual loss of authorial control to the point of his complete disappearance or "death," and his decision to mimic, in both form and content, the conventions of contemporary American pulp fiction—are aspects of the same plot. In other words, Vian's doomed struggle to regain control over his work is symbolic of a larger phenomenon in French society: the seduction of the French public by American popular culture, vastly accelerated after World War II, followed by increasingly desperate attempts to resist that seduction. The voyeuristic attraction to the themes of Vian's novel, racial violence and sado-masochism, helps to explain France's perverse relationship to America in the last fifty years as an obsession with the possibility of its destruction at the hands of another.

The evolution of *J'irai* . . . illustrates the manner in which the conjunction of sexual racial violence and the popular culture market threatens the death of French culture, which lurks as a potential in France's submission to American mass culture. The process was marked by a sensational murder case, a trial on charges of offense against public morality, and continued after Vian's death with the release of the movie which he had no part in producing, and the subsequent novelization of the movie.¹ In addition to these two "endpieces" (Vian's and d'Eaubonne's books) I will examine a reconstruction of the obscenity trial by Vian's biographer, Noël Arnaud, Vian's stage adaptation of his novel and the final draft of Vian's own screenplay which the movie's producers rejected.

The plot of *J'irai* . . . is simple. Until the final three chapters, which are in indirect mode, the first-person narrator and pro-

tagonist is Lee Anderson, a man of mixed race who passes as a white. When the novel begins, he has just fled to a new town after his darker-skinned younger brother was murdered by a lynch mob for having slept with a white woman. He has sworn to avenge his brother, and we learn later in the novel that his revenge consists in seducing, then murdering white women, and to go on killing as many rich and powerful whites as he can in a vain effort, either to square accounts between him and the white population, or to assuage his blood lust: both motives, revenge and sadism, become indistinguishable as the story unfolds.

The novel recounts Lee's seduction of Jean and Lou Asquith, the daughters of an aristocratic family. Lee meets Dexter, a depraved character who believes that Lee is really black and is intent on proving it in order to humiliate the Asquiths. In a climactic passage, Dexter takes Lee to a roadside juke joint and brothel, and offers him a 14-year-old black virgin, convinced that this will force him to unmask his identity as a black man when he refuses her. So strong is Lee's desire to maintain his deception, however, that he proceeds to have sex with the young girl in spite of the moral consequences: as he penetrates her, she is "*brûlante comme l'enfer*" 'burning like hell' (104), his commentary on the moral price he is paying in order to sustain the possibility of revenge.

Pursuing his secret plan, Lee eventually convinces both Jean and Lou that he will marry them; by then the reader already knows that he wants to murder them, which he does at the end of the novel in a paroxysm of sadistic lust described in a half-dozen pages which alone are probably responsible for the banning of the book, a year and a half after its publication. Finally, he is gunned down in his car by the police whom Dexter put on his trail. His corpse is then hanged anyway by the mob "*parce que c'était un Nègre*" 'because he was a negro' (211). The novel ends with a self-consciously cinematographic technique: the view of the lynching scene narrows like a zoom shot on Lee's "*bas-ventre*" 'lower abdomen' (211), the part of his anatomy which had played such an important role in the plot, and which was no longer anything but "*une bosse dérisoire*" 'an insignificant bump' (211).² In addition to its cinematographic quality (to which I will return), the final

sentence highlights the intersection of sex, race and violence which fueled the novel's popularity and undermined Vian's efforts to reestablish his authorial power.

Even before the novel acquired its scandalous reputation and best-selling status, a trend began to appear: the first reviews showed a fixation with the racial theme of the novel, which quickly came to overshadow any other aspects. In *Le Spectateur* of November 26, 1946, for example, Robert Kanters wrote:

Il faut bien dire qu'aucun vrai problème n'y est traité, même par allusion, comme par exemple celui de la persistance de certains caractères psychologiques nègres chez ce métis presque blanchi, ou même celui du sadisme.

One has to say that no real problem is treated [in this book], not even allusively, such as that of the persistence of certain negro psychological characteristics in this almost whitened mulatto, or even that of sadism. (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 12)

Kanters's observation that the novel fails to explore the "persistence of negro psychological characteristics," or the "problem" of the sadism which pervades the work, is accurate, and it betrays a frustration which many readers of *J'irai* . . . apparently shared: the feeling that the novel really is about the nature of blackness, but that it fails to satisfy sufficiently the voyeuristic desire to witness the "negro character" in all its exotic, bloody splendor. The question of whether Lee Anderson displays "Negro psychological characteristics" will become increasingly important in the public's response, in its desires and expectations, and hence in the subsequent rewritings of the story by Vian and others.

Vian's original Lee Anderson is white in almost every respect. The only allusions to his quality as an "octoroon" are his singing voice, and the fact that he swore allegiance to the black race when he chose to take upon himself the task of avenging the black(er) man's murder. His sexual magnetism could be a symptom of his latent "blackness," but it is left to the reader to make the connection (and the reader, as we shall see, was only too eager to do so). Vian's novel, therefore, in spite of its sensationalization of the race problem, is at least potentially anti-racist in that Lee's black-

ness is (for the most part) not an intrinsic property, nor an ineradicable taint hidden by his white exterior, but is only perceived as such in the racist society which the novel describes. Vian was unconcerned, however, that his readers might share with the white characters of the novel a propensity to cast Lee Anderson in the role of the alien black predator, and to read his double murder as an animalistic, gratuitous act, when Vian had arguably intended to represent a highly motivated act of revenge which had simply gone out of control.³ Generally speaking, “blackness” in Vian’s novel is the mostly invisible sign of oppression and revolt, forces which enter the story as a result of the circumstances of Lee’s and his brother’s lives in society, and not of any irreducible difference between them and members of the white population. The novel’s reception, however, shows a different interpretation.

The novel had already started to make an impact on the market when a sensational event dramatically accelerated the growth of its popularity: on March 28, 1947, a married man named Edmond Rougé strangled his lover in a Montparnasse hotel room before hanging himself. According to news reports, he had left a copy of *J’irai* . . . next to the dead body, opened up to its most lurid passage in which Lee rapes and strangles Lou Asquith.⁴ To a certain part of the French public, this was a case of murder incited by literature, for which the author, publisher, and even “translator” should be held accountable. The murder added weight to charges of “offense to public morality” already brought against *J’irai* . . . by Daniel Parker, the president of a private watchdog group which had already led the successful crusade against Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*.

Had it not been for the Edmond Rougé murder case, the Vernon Sullivan literary fraud case (prosecuted in the press), and the Boris Vian pornography case, it is hard to imagine that *J’irai* . . . would have caused a scandal. In terms of the quantity and explicitness of the sex and violence, Vian remained faithful to the boundaries that Gallimard’s *Série noire* label had established.⁵ Many *Série noire* titles sold well, some of them attained the status of recognized masterpieces, but none are pornographic, even by 1940’s standards. It is curious that a critic should defend Vian by

writing that “*J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* never obtained the success of an *Histoire d’O* . . . nor was it a purely pornographic work” (Cismaru 30). In fact, not only is it not “purely pornographic,” none of the sex acts are described in detail, and it would be irrelevant to compare it to a hard core classic such as *Histoire d’O* even if it *had* sold as many copies. Other critics have also reacted more to the novel’s reputation than its text. Speaking of the entire Vernon Sullivan series, Anaïk Hechiche wrote in 1986 that “*La vie dans les romans de Sullivan est en grande partie honte et dégoût, le sexe y est odieux, culpabilité, violence et nausée y scandent les accès de sensualité*” ‘Life in Sullivan’s novels is largely shame and disgust, the sex is odious, and guilt, violence and nausea punctuate the outbursts of sensuality’ (37).⁶ The graphic passages, while indeed cynical and devoid of lyrical pretensions, are nevertheless more subdued than Hechiche suggests. It is important to gauge these responses by quoting representative passages from the text. A typical one shows Lee having sex with Jicky, a “bobbysoxer” who will return in later versions of the narrative:

Je n’écoutai pas ses protestations, et je la saisis par derrière comme une brute. Elle lâcha le coussin [de la voiture] et se laissa faire. J’aurais pris une guenon. Elle dut s’en rendre compte et se débattit de son mieux. Je me mis à rire. J’aimais ça. L’herbe était haute, à cet endroit-là, et douce comme un matelas pneumatique. Elle glissa sur le sol et je l’y rejoignis. Nous luttions tous les deux comme des sauvages. Elle était bronzée jusqu’à la pointe des seins, sans ces marques de soutien-gorge qui défigurent tant de filles nues. Et lisse comme un abricot, nue comme une petite fille, mais, quand je réussis à la tenir sous moi, je compris qu’elle en savait plus qu’une petite fille.

I ignored her protests and grabbed her from behind like a brute. She dropped the [car seat] cushion and let herself go. I could have taken a she-monkey for all I cared. She must have realized this and fought back as hard as she could. I started to laugh. I liked it. The grass was high on that spot and soft as an air mattress. She slid onto the ground and I followed her. We both fought like savages. She was tanned to the tip of her breasts, without the bra-marks that disfigure so many naked girls. And smooth as an apricot, naked as a little girl, but when I managed to hold her under me, I could tell that she knew more than any little girl. (38)

This passage, with its mild sadism, and the pornographic convention of making the victim of a rape into a willing participant, is typical of the sexual episodes up until the end of the novel; there, the tone changes suddenly into a crescendo from rape to torture and murder that indeed surpasses the rest of the text in shock value. Here is a sample of the passage where Lee murders Lou Asquith, and is either the same passage, or one very close to the one Edmond Rougé allegedly underlined before he killed his lover and himself:

Je l'ai mordue en plein entre les cuisses. J'avais la bouche remplie de ses poils noirs et durs; j'ai lâché un peu et puis j'ai repris plus bas où c'était plus tendre. Je nageais dans son parfum, elle en avait jusque-là, et j'ai serré les dents. Je tâchais de lui mettre la main sur la bouche, mais elle gueulait comme un porc, des cris à vous donner la chair de poule. Alors, j'ai serré les dents de toutes mes forces, et je suis rentré dedans. J'ai senti le sang me pisser dans la bouche, et ses reins s'agitaient malgré les cordes.

I bit her right between her thighs. My mouth was filled with her hard, black hairs; I let go a little and started again further down where it was softer. I was swimming in her perfume, she even wore it down there, and I clenched my teeth. I tried to put my hand over her mouth, but she was screaming like a pig, screams that made your skin crawl. So I clenched my teeth as hard as I could and sank into her. I could feel the blood pissing into my mouth, and her back squirmed in spite of the ropes. (186)

In fact, this climax of sadism verging on cannibalism is the point in the text where Lee is about to lose control of the narrative. He narrates up to and including his torture and murder of the Asquith sisters, as if his extreme transgression deprived him of the authority to tell his own story.⁷ From a narratological standpoint it seems that the level of violence at the end is justified as a logical termination of Lee's first-person account, itself born out of violence. It is a crucial and even contradictory passage, because the realism of the violence is at once the guarantee of the authenticity of Lee's rage against all whites (not just women), as well as the novel's most blatant appeal to the reader's voyeuristic urges, and, in the suggestion of cannibalism, perhaps a cliché of African exoticism. Only about five pages near the end can therefore be said

to exceed contemporaneous norms for popular fiction. The quality which throughout contributes most to the novel's sensationalism is neither sex nor violence, but race.

Of course, race was an important component in post-war France's fascination with America, and many popular novels used race as plot device, means of social critique, or sensationalist "hook." In *J'irai* . . . race works on each of these levels. What distinguishes Vian's use of it is the fact that the ontological status of Lee Anderson's "blackness" is different, depending on whether it is perceived by himself or by others. Nothing betrays to the world the fact that Lee is "really" black, except for small details that will grow increasingly important throughout the history of the text's permutations: for example, his voice has a quality which others consider strange, without realizing why. They register blackness unconsciously, finding something indefinably obscure (in both senses of the word) in his speech. The voice motif begins in chapter one, when Lee shares a drink with a character who says:

—Vous êtes sympathique. Il y a quelque chose en vous qu'on ne comprend pas bien. Votre voix.

Je souris sans répondre. Ce type était infernal.

—Vous avez une voix trop pleine. Vous n'êtes pas chanteur? . . . Vous aurez toutes les femmes, avec cette voix-là. . . .

—I like you. There's something about you that's hard to understand. Your voice.

I smiled without answering. This guy was too much.

—Your voice is too full. Are you a singer? You'll get all the women you want with a voice like that. . . . (20-21)

Only the sinister Dexter will follow the mysterious appeal of Lee's voice to its source by "outing" him. For the female characters it is indeed an attraction, perhaps subliminally communicating Lee's identity and its conventional connotation of sexual potency. The murders Lee commits are the unveiling of the mystery of his voice. His crimes justify the fear of irrational violence which had attracted the women to Lee in the first place. His transgression (rape and murder of rich white women) and his punishment (shot to death, then hanged) are stages in a logical progression.

From Lee's perspective, however, his racial identity is a matter of choice: he consciously decided to "be black" in solidarity with his brother who did not have the option of passing the color line, and simultaneously to "be white" in order to avenge his death. But in spite of this restriction of race to a social choice rather than biological fate, Vian could not resist giving his protagonist an involuntary outward sign of his "true" identity. That he chose the musical character of voice as the one sign for blackness is not surprising, since Vian's relationship to blacks was to the jazz musicians he met in Paris such as Miles Davis, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. The name "Vernon Sullivan," according to some sources, was formed from the names of two jazz musicians, one French, the other African American (Cismaru 31). Vian's enthusiasm for Black American music is amply documented by his articles which often verge on fetishization of the black jazzman.⁸ His tendency to grant black musicians the exclusive authority to perform jazz (ironic, since Vian himself was an above-average white jazz horn player who counted another one, Bix Beiderbecke, among his strongest influences) was another symptom of an inadequately suppressed tendency toward racial essentialization.

The issue of racial determinism and essentialism, already explicit in the early reviews of the novel, came up again when the obscenity trial instigated by Daniel Parker began in 1948, marking Vian's first public admission that he and Vernon Sullivan were one and the same.⁹ It became necessary for the defense to justify the allegedly obscene passages in *J'irai* . . . so as to distinguish it from the gratuitous pornography which the law of 1938, under which the charges had been filed, sought to control. The argument of Vian's defense team, as reported by Noël Arnaud, was the artistic necessity of a realistic depiction of American race relations: in brief, that the novel was realist, socially responsible literature, not pornography.¹⁰

Clearly, the strategy was to argue that *because* Vian's novel centered on race relations in America, it *had* to contain a high degree of sexual explicitness, since it is mainly through sex that the conflict between blacks and whites occurs. It must be said, in defense of the defense lawyers' argument that the sexual aspect of

race relations overshadows all others, that they were in the difficult position of justifying the novel's sexual content: as long as the alleged obscenity was not gratuitous, but arose out of a serious artistic or sociological concern, it could not be considered illegal. Under those circumstances, claiming that sex is the only way of representing the serious social critique underlying *J'irai . . .* may have been their only available strategy. Nevertheless, by declaring the sexual nature of the novel to be the inevitable consequence of the choice of the subject of a black man's revolt against white society, the defense, supported by witnesses such as Vian's friend and fellow *Pataphysicien* Raymond Queneau, reproduced its commercial exploitation in which sexual violence, advertised by the previous year's murder case, became the novel's selling point.

The prosecutor, on the other hand, was anxious to invalidate the claim that the novel's sexual passages are socially significant. He began his case by alluding to Vian's use of a pseudonym, saying that by hiding his identity, the author admitted his shame. He added that the pseudonym is an American name, which can only be an attempt by the author to cash in on the vogue of American fiction in France, in other words: to commit fraud (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 187). Sex and violence, rather than being required by the novel's subject (race), are required by its subgenre (pornography); they are its essential ingredients which require additional seasoning in the form of a black man—or, in this case, the even more exotic white man with a secret black identity. The sole justification for the use of race and sex is commercial. It is important to note that in order to be termed pornographic, the sexual violence in *J'irai . . .* had to be seen purely as an attempt to profit from public prurience, justifying its censorship. Vian's defense was that the sexual content is justified by the honest treatment of the subject matter, race. But it is precisely the invocation of the interdependence of sex and race which, as we shall see, led to Vian's surrender of the title of his novel and what it represents.

To underscore the economic stakes, the prosecutor went on to say that, unlike some pornography which is privately printed and distributed in deluxe editions for a small crowd of connoisseurs, the genre which *J'irai . . .* represents so perfectly is guilty of

attacking French society at its base in the person of the contemporary "Everyman": the consumer. Here is the argument as Arnaud reports it in his *Dossier*:

J'irai cracher sur vos tombes, . . . Les Morts ont tous la même peau tirent à 50 000 exemplaires, ces ouvrages se vendent à 165 francs, le prix du paquet de cigarettes américaines, ils s'étalent à toutes les devantures . . . à la portée de tous, à la portée de n'importe qui, de n'importe quel adolescent perverti, à la portée de n'importe quel demi-fou.

[Novels such as Vian's] have print runs of 50,000, titles sell for 165 francs, the price of a pack of American cigarettes, displayed in every storefront . . . within anybody and everybody's reach, within the reach of any perverted adolescent or any semi-degraded individual [e.g. Edmond Rougé, the Montparnasse murderer]. (197)¹¹

Cigarettes and pulp novels, later fast food and television: France since World War II has continually been waging *le même combat*. It is a defense against the American attack on French life, all the more insidious when the perpetrators are not themselves bona fide Americans, but rather French collaborators.

Another aspect of Vian's novel, according to the prosecutor, contributes to its perniciousness. Arnaud reports that he stated that: "[L]e style de ces ouvrages use incessamment d'images violentes, brutales, fortement évocatrices, sans aucun contrôle de la raison, donc d'une technique cinématographique" "The style of these works constantly employs violent, brutal, strongly suggestive images, without any rational control; a cinematographic technique, therefore" (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 197). It was necessary for the prosecution to draw a clear line between literature and film: the more "cinematographic" the novel is, the more pornographic as well. Indeed, French limits on freedom of expression accord special status to the printed word, concentrating more on visual depictions, on the principle that the print medium represents speech in its purest form, and that censorship of print should be harder to justify than censorship of other media.¹² By arguing that the novel is in fact visual and even cinematographic in its effect (an argument supported by techniques such as the final

“zoom shot” to which I allude at the beginning of this essay), the prosecution sought to undermine the greater tolerance traditionally enjoyed by books. The Vian case therefore exemplifies one of the first waves of opposition to American cultural imperialism in the form of cinematographic (to which were soon to be added televisual) *images*, which renders all the more ironic the fact that all of the people involved in the case were themselves nothing other than French.¹³ The obscenity trial therefore brought two forces into the open which determined the novel’s fate: reduction of race to sexuality, and reduction of the novel itself to the purest “popular fiction”: a *movie*.¹⁴ The following ten years were to witness Vian’s unsuccessful attempts to control these twin forces either by resisting or coopting them.

The first such attempt was the stage adaptation, which failed on a number of levels. Vian’s motives for writing a play based on *J’irai . . .* at first glance appear simple: the astounding success of the novel led him to believe it was a cash cow, and he needed money. In addition to these “*considérations alimentaires*” ‘nutritional concerns’ (Rybalka 230), however, the play made Lee’s story into a much more explicit anti-racist polemic. It appears that Vian’s response to the appropriation of his novel through fascination with its racial content was to purge the motif of race of its conventional links to sexuality and violence, making Lee Anderson into less of a sadist and more of a martyr. Although it is an exaggeration to say that “Lee Anderson devient un personnage entièrement sympathique qui tue par accident et non par sadisme” ‘Lee Anderson becomes an entirely likeable character who kills by accident rather than sadism’ (Rybalka 231), there is no doubt that his character underwent a profound transformation.¹⁵

In the play, Lee moves into town before his brother’s murder. There is no ulterior purpose, initially, to his flirting with the “bobbysoxers” in Dexter’s gang, and even after he learns of his brother’s death, he only prophesies an unspecified retribution: “Mais c’est eux qu’ils puniront en nous pendant aux arbres . . . c’est eux qu’ils puniront . . . c’est eux qui seront punis . . .” ‘But they will punish themselves when they hang us from the trees . . . they will punish themselves . . . they will be punished . . .’ (qtd. in

Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 328). He comes up with a revenge plot that is more fantasy than intention—to seduce Jean and Lou in order to be invited into the houses of rich white people and kill them with his bare hands: “Et ils me recevront . . . ils seront fiers de me recevoir . . . parce qu’ils ne savent pas ce qui les attend . . . j’ai pas besoin de corde, moi . . . j’ai pas besoin de goudron . . . j’ai mes pattes (*il les regarde*). . . .” “They will let me in . . . they will be proud to have me in their homes . . . because they don’t know what awaits them. . . . I don’t need a rope . . . I don’t need tar . . . I have my hands (*he looks down at them*) . . .” (336).

After his seduction of the Clarke sisters (a name that was easier for the actors to pronounce than Asquith), when Jean comes to tell him that she is pregnant, he promises, as in the novel, that they will elope; *this* time, however, he is sincere. But Lou comes to his room later that day with the news that Dexter has hired a private detective who can prove that Lee is black, and that Jean has written a letter admitting that the child she carries is his. She tells him that he will die as his brother did, and for the same reason, while Jean has the baby aborted. When Lee ignores her threats, she shoots him and wounds him in the arm—and *only then* does Lee finally react equally violently, although the force of his pent-up resentment makes him go far beyond the bounds of self-defense: after a struggle, he strangles her. He then drives to the house where Jean is waiting, and, presumably in retribution for his brother’s death (and not “by accident” as Rybalka claimed), kills her as well. Dramatically, though, Lee’s motives seem to be less revenge for his brother than simply for the way the sisters have treated him, which is the proximate cause of his running amok. He returns to his room, where Dexter comes to taunt him, and there follows a shootout with the police: “*une dernière rafale le cueille—il reste là, crucifié sur le mur.*” ‘*a last burst of gunfire mows him down—he stays there, crucified against the wall*’ (372).

When the stage adaptation of *J’irai* . . . was announced in 1948, there was much speculation about how Vian would create the same cocktail of race, sex and violence on stage as he had in the novel. To the disappointment of many, the only ingredient he had preserved wholesale from the novel was race which, *by itself*,

was not sufficient to make people reach for their wallets. By separating race from sex and violence, Vian hoped to recover its social message. Naturally, the play flopped. For many critics, however, this first permutation of the original text was proof of Vian's underlying integrity. Arnaud, for example, said that the social message of *J'irai . . .* was merely obscured by sex; it was necessary, therefore, to promote race, which had been overshadowed (*Les vies* 60). Alfred Cismaru also sees the decision to purge the play of graphic content as an attempt at redemption, though it is hard to share his view of the original as a political pamphlet as well as a pulp commodity: "Vian wished to eliminate anything which might appear propagandistic or simplistic and, above all, he wished to soften most of the physical details that could tend to detract from a purely artistic work" (33). The only problem is: what then is left?

Perhaps Cismaru is right when he suggests that Vian wanted to reassert his authorship by making the novel into a work of art. If, as Arnaud said, race in the novel was connected in readers' minds only to sexual potency ("*puissance génésique*"), in the play race becomes the dominant theme, with sex and violence mostly relegated off stage. But whatever prompted Vian to make *J'irai . . .* into an anti-racist polemic devoid of sadism scared away the public.¹⁶ Vian may have tried to avoid "propaganda," yet included a ponderous speech by Lee in Act II, when another character informs him that his brother was hanged and burned: "Ils ne veulent pas que les Noirs s'envoient les Blanches! . . . Ils vont être servis. . . Ils font leur justice eux-mêmes. . . On en fera autant" "They don't want Blacks to sleep with white women! . . . Fine. . . They make their own justice. . . We'll make ours" (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 326). Now we know, much earlier than in the novel, that Lee is motivated by revenge to repeat his brother's "crime," seducing white women, but without overt murderous intention. From that point onward, his relation to the female characters is simply the march of justice, untainted by the selfish gratification that dominates the novel; the result is less sadism, and a sacrifice of the novel's gratuitous dimension.

While much was removed in the adaptation process, one element was emphasized. Several times, stage directions tell us that

Lee is supposed to look at his hands (including a passage quoted above), when nothing in the action obviously justifies this. Why, then, does he do so? The answer is clear when one reads the final, usurped versions of the story: the film's screenplay (written by the director Michel Gast and his associate, not Vian), and its subsequent novelization, in which Lee is constantly obsessed by his hands. Françoise d'Eaubonne's version refers repeatedly to his "yellow fingernails," and the fact that they are the only physical manifestation of his race. This alludes to the belief that mixed-race individuals, even when they have caucasian physical attributes, can still be recognized by their fingernails: either their overall yellowish color, as is the case here, or else the shape and tint of the moons.¹⁷ The same belief explains, in the play, Lee's self-consciousness about his hands, which is another example (besides voice) of Vian ascribing indelible physical racial characteristics to his protagonist. Already, French readers of the novel in 1946 were aware of the fingernails' meaning, even though there is only one mention of it in the text, and only to point out that they are in fact *normal*—Lee has a white man's fingernails;¹⁸ Vian made his protagonist free of racial markers, with the lone and ambiguous exception of the timbre of his voice. The review in *Samedi Soir* of December 7, 1946 shows that this briefest allusion was not lost: "Blond, la peau claire, les ongles vierges de toute lunule suspecte, ce garçon évolue sans éveiller le moindre soupçon" 'Blond, light-skinned, his nails pure of any suspicious-looking moons, this fellow goes around without arousing a single suspicion' (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 1974:14).

In addition to the repeated stage directions concerning Lee's hands which indicate the possibility of a "taint," there are continued references in the play to his voice. The character of Dexter is even more intent than in the novel, if that is possible, on confirming his suspicion that Lee is really black, and takes over the role of interlocutor in the conversation whose version from the novel I quoted above:

Dexter (*perfidie*): Vous avez une drôle de voix, en tout cas.
 Lee: Qu'est-ce qu'elle a de drôle, ma voix?

Dexter (*toujours insinuant*): Je ne sais pas. Elle a quelque chose de drôle. Vous chantez? . . . Vous avez une voix de chanteur de blues.

Dexter (*treacherously*): You have a funny voice, in any case.

Lee: What's so funny about my voice?

Dexter (*still insinuating*): I don't know. It's strange. Do you sing? . . . You have the voice of a blues singer. (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 321)

As Vian claimed repeatedly in his jazz criticism, only Blacks can perform jazz music convincingly. Lee says so himself when he tells the teenagers who are playing records in his room not to dare put on any Benny Goodman or Stan Kenton (336), an admonishment which could have appeared in Vian's music column in *Combat* or *Jazz Hot*.

The sexual dimension of the play hangs on the quest for justice. As Lee says to Jeremie, a mute black man who does odd jobs for him, and exists only in the play: "tu sais que je donnerais toutes ces garces pour une femme de ma race . . . une femme qui n'a pas besoin de boire et de s'exciter sur des bouquins pour faire l'amour . . ." 'you know I'd trade all those bitches for one woman of my race . . . a woman who doesn't need to get drunk and get excited by books in order to make love . . .' (335). Sexual prowess still serves as a marker for race, this time applied to black women. In the context of *J'irai . . .*'s own reputation, however, Lee's tirade can be read ironically as an attack on the novel's readership rather than a statement about blacks.

Whatever pleasure Lee derives from his sexual conquests of the white women is therefore overshadowed by the fact that he is simply acting out with them a scene of racial retribution. True, such acting out shows the difficulty of separating the political from the sexual: rituals of discipline and humiliation are, after all, about power. The women of the play are no strangers to such games. Their masochistic desire to be dominated is blatantly represented, even if one of the possible reasons for this desire—the thrill of a white woman being dominated by a black man—is one of which they are only unconsciously aware. After Lee has slapped her ("une beigne du tonnerre d'Allah," according to the stage direction, which one might translate as "one hell of a big slap"), Jicky, the nymphomaniac bobbysoxer of Dexter's gang, says: "Lee

. . . ça me fait . . ." (331), leaving the sentence in suspense. What does it do? "Mal" or "du bien"? Does it hurt, or does it feel good? Both statements, contradictory only in an innocent world, are true. The classy Asquith/Clarke sisters may not admit to deriving pleasure from such literal displays of violence, but their eager submission to the overly-virile Lee betokens a class-related masochism, the thrill of slumming, of dealing in rough trade. In the novel, Jicky's "seduction" by Lee in the passage quoted earlier is a rape, in that it emphasizes her resistance as much as her final submission; significantly, the play shows no such resistance, emphasizing the masochistic half of the encounter and lessening Lee's responsibility: he is a redeemer, not a pervert.

Several years after the play closed, Vian and Jacques Dopagne, a friend who professed great admiration for the novel and enthusiasm for its cinematic potential, began work on a film adaptation. Vian by this time was understandably tired of the whole affair. He nevertheless agreed to go along with Dopagne, though he insisted on changing some of the plot, most of the characters' names, and even the title. For a certain period, the project was "rebaptized" as *La Passion de Joe Grant*. The title reflected Dopagne's belief, supported by Vian, that the story had an underlying messianic significance (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 259-60), perhaps conveying the idea of artistic redemption of a work tainted by commercial success a little too literally. Later, in another victory of commerce over art, Vian had to revert to the original title, since the producers wanted to cash in on the book's notoriety. The main character's name stuck, however, and Lee Anderson became Joe Grant.

Vian submitted his final version of the screenplay, which contained many hilarious passages of absurd filler which he had added in order to meet the producers' page number requirement, in January 1959. The production company used Vian's nonchalance as an excuse to reject his screenplay and ask the director Michel Gast to make up his own (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 262-96). In fact, it is quite clear that the producers wanted their own text all along, with no interference from the author who by now had established himself as an avant-garde writer whose commercial acumen, not

to say greed, was suspect. Over the repeated protests of Vian and Dopagne, and their last-ditch effort to prevent the company from using the original title, the bastardized film was finally ready for release in June of 1959.

The opening scene of Vian's screenplay (and virtually the only one that is preserved in the final movie) shows Joe Grant driving into the woods, trying to find the lynch mob that took his brother, and arriving too late to save his life. He then takes the body back to his brother's house and sets it on fire, declaring by this sacrifice his symbolic assumption of his brother's blackness, and responsibility for his revenge. As he walks away, a black preacher comes up to him:

Tu n'as pas le droit de répondre à la violence par la violence. . . .
[L]a haine te rend fou comme elle a déjà rendu fous ceux qui ont tué ton frère.

You have no right to answer violence with violence. . . . Hate is making you crazy, just as it made those who killed your brother crazy. (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 384)

Another man yells:

—Joe, ne te venge pas sur des innocents.

Joe, don't revenge yourself on innocent people.

To which he replies:

—Il n'y a pas un Blanc qui soit innocent dans ce pays. Et mon frère, il n'était pas innocent?

There's not an innocent white person in this country. What about my brother, wasn't he innocent? (387)

Billie Holiday's recording of *Strange Fruit* plays as a leitmotiv throughout Vian's screenplay, extending its already important role in the stage play as a musical conscience, a reminder that the justification of Joe's violent actions lies in his brother's hanging.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Vian's screenplay and the actual movie appears when Joe shows Dexter that he

is “really” black. In his screenplay (as in the novel), Vian has Joe go to a black church in the poor part of town, without realizing that Dexter has followed him:

A l'intérieur, Joe se glisse parmi les Noirs qui, surpris, s'écartent pour lui faire une place. Le visage de Joe fait un contraste saisissant avec celui plus sombre de tous les fidèles. On assiste alors avec Joe à la fin de l'office. Le chant s'enfle majestueusement. Tous les fidèles y participent avec recueillement. Joe baisse la tête, absorbé. Mais bientôt, le cantique cesse. C'est la fin de l'office. Joe sort de son rêve, comme si quelqu'un le touchait à l'épaule. Au passage, certains Noirs le dévisagent, avec curiosité et sans hostilité. Dehors, Dexter assiste à la sortie de la messe. Le visage de Dexter trahit une satisfaction évidente. Cette fois, Joe est catalogué, c'est un Noir!

Inside, Joe inserts himself among the Blacks who, surprised, step aside to give him room. Joe's face makes a striking contrast with the darker ones of the faithful. We watch the end of the service with Joe. The hymn rises majestically. All the faithful take part meditatively. Joe bows his head in concentration. Soon the canticle ends. The service is over. Joe emerges from his dream as if someone tapped his shoulder. As he walks by, some Blacks gaze at him, with curiosity and without hostility. Outside, Dexter watches the exit from the service. His face shows obvious satisfaction. This time, Joe is pegged: he's black! (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 432-33)

Dexter's conviction that simply by going into a church and communing with other blacks in the spiritual energy of gospel music, Joe has betrayed his racial identity, may not carry much weight on the big screen. Furthermore, the scene as described by Vian is surprisingly race-neutral: the service he describes could easily be in a Catholic church in France, except for the faces of the congregants. Even though Vian had never been to the United States, he was knowledgeable enough about American culture to know that a church service in a black neighborhood in the South would not be the setting for quiet meditation and introspection—and yet, that is the quality he decided to emphasize in the crucial scene of Joe's self-betrayal.

Michel Gast's movie version of the self-betrayal occurs not in a church but in the juke joint, before the two young virgins are

brought in, while a black jazz band is playing. When viewing the movie, it is easy to miss Joe's unconscious rocking to the beat of the music, and he doesn't reveal himself completely until the young black girl is introduced; Françoise d'Eaubonne's rewriting of this scene (based on Gast's screenplay), however, narrates what occurs (Dexter's name in the movie has changed to Stanley Walker, and d'Eaubonne practiced the French overcompensation of spelling all words containing the letters *oe* with a *tréma* over the *e*):

Joë n'écoutait pas; il gardait les yeux fixés sur le saxo qui se démenait au-dessous du tue-mouches. . . . Joë s'aperçut qu'il éprouvait une envie folle: sauter sur scène, demander un harmonica. Au milieu des Noirs, son frère tout à coup redevenait présent. Toutes ces filles blanches étaient un écran, une faiblesse. Sois fort, Joë! . . . Je suis encore saoul, se dit-il, fais gaffe. Oh, Johnny! Heureusement que je n'ai pas ton harmonica en poche. Je n'aurais pas résisté. Il se mit à marquer la mesure avec le pied et la tête, en bourdonnant entre ses dents la mesure: un-deux-trois-quatre-cinq, un-deux, un-deux-trois-quatre-cinq, un-deux, et Stan le regardait, épanoui, sourire au lèvres.

Joe wasn't listening; he kept his eyes on the sax player who was writhing beneath the flypaper. . . . Joe realized that he had an insane urge to jump on stage and ask for a harmonica. Surrounded by Blacks, suddenly his brother became present once more. All those white girls were a screen, a weakness. Be strong, Joe! . . . I'm still drunk, he said to himself, be careful. Oh Johnny [*Joe's younger brother*]! It's a good thing I don't have your harmonica in my pocket. I couldn't resist. He began to keep time with his foot and his head, murmuring the beat between his teeth: one-two-three-four-five, one-two, one-two-three-four-five, one-two, and Stan watched him, delighted, grinning. (179-80)

One could hardly imagine a starker contrast between Joe's unmasking while in the rapture of the gospel choir's music, and Gast's (and d'Eaubonne's) scene where his innate sense of rhythm makes him vibrate in such sympathy with the musicians that he feels that he might jump up on stage if he had Johnny's harmonica, his memento from his dead brother, on him. He tries to hide his race-specific reaction from Stanley/Dexter, but the latter has already seen Joe betray his identity. When Stan tells the Madam to bring down two young black girls, Joe therefore no longer needs

to dissimulate; besides, if he cannot keep still with the saxophone playing, he certainly cannot control himself while a girl of his race is being raped. As he watches Stan undress one of the girls, he bursts into a frenzy and beats him savagely.

The movie, in its attempt to make Joe Grant more human (making him reject the young black virgin and beat Stan in a righteous rage), actually dehumanizes him by announcing his imminent self-betrayal (due to his fidelity to his race), by having him unconsciously react to the jazz music; one uncontrollable physical urge (to hurt Stan) prefigured by another (moving to the music). The sinister parody of black identity (the sadist) is replaced by the clownish one: an impulsive character with an irrepressible sense of rhythm, like the cartoon character Roger Rabbit in an eerily similar scene in the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*¹⁹

It is easy to see why Vian was upset as he learned of his protagonist's transformation by Michel Gast, which recapitulated the manner in which the public had taken control of the novel; one can also see that he had planted the seeds of such a transformation himself. But what would the movie be like if Vian and Dopagne had succeeded in maintaining control? The biggest surprise in Vian's own screenplay comes at the end. In the novel and play, the attraction the female characters feel for Lee/Joe is masochistic. In an abrupt change of direction, Vian made the movie into a love story. Dexter's plot to destroy Joe by revealing his race to the sisters is foiled when they both declare their love for Joe, whatever race he might be. It still is possible that both Jean/Lizbeth and Lou/Sylvia were initially attracted to Lee/Joe because of the "blackness" they were intuitively able to discern, and which lured them as long as it was not openly admitted; but the spell of jungle fever now gives way to a more noble sentiment.

Dexter now must change his strategy for getting back at Joe and the sisters. He lures Sylvia into the basement of Joe's house and shoots her, staging the murder in such a way that Joe will be the logical suspect. In the meantime, Lizbeth declares her love for Joe while revealing to him that she knows his secret; her love has the power to convert. Joe sees for the first time his desire for re-

venge as misguided. His relationship to Lizbeth miraculously breaks out of its cycle of ritual domination and submission, to become the bond between star-crossed lovers. For the first time in its tortured history, and under Boris Vian's own authorship no less, the plot of *J'irai . . .* metamorphoses into a conventional love-narrative.

When they discover Sylvia's body and realize that Joe will be the suspect, Lizbeth and Joe escape to Mexico. On the way, the police give chase. The fugitives ditch the car and run to the border which is in sight. The police shoot. Lizbeth is wounded, but they cross the border, and appear safe. Joe, carrying Lizbeth in his arms, asks a farmer where the nearest doctor is. The farmer points to a big white house on the other side of the border, back in the United States. Realizing that he has to choose between his freedom and Lizbeth's safety, Joe crosses back over the border and takes her to the house. After delivering her into the doctor's arms, he steps back outside and is immediately killed by the first bullet which the police fire at him—The End.

In Vian's rejected screenplay, the story takes on a completely new meaning. Joe's desire for revenge, even though it explained his sordid actions, did not justify them. The black preacher who had told him to turn the other cheek was right. The love which grew unexpectedly out of the soil of interracial and inter-class sado-masochism is the instrument of his redemption. Instead of killing both sisters, he saves the life of one of them at the sacrifice of his own. Suddenly and for the first time, *J'irai . . .* is not about the doomed revenge of a black man against violent oppression, but about the salvation of a man who had until then been locked into the illusion of racial justice through violence.

What compelled Vian to make such a change? Mostly, no doubt, the influence of Dopagne, who saw *J'irai . . .* as a spiritual journey, and from whom Vian got the idea of calling the movie *La Passion de Joe Grant*; but there are reasons why Vian alone might have wanted to impose a new meaning on his work. Having reaped the rewards of writing an infamous best seller, Vian became aware of the price of such success. The public took literally Vian's parodic intertwining of race with sex and violence. The evidence of

his guilt feelings are the increasingly desperate attempts to regain control, first of the story, then only of the title. The ending of Vian's screenplay removes the novel's most problematic (and most commercial) aspect: the demonization (or bestialization) of the black male, and the white female's fascination with the strange creature engendered by the process which he had set in motion.²⁰

If it is undeniable that Vian planted the seeds of his own death-as-author by giving the people what they wanted: an easy-to-consume package of clichés and misapprehensions surrounding the historical fact of American racial violence, one still cannot help but admire the tragic irony of which he was the victim. In the first act, he played the role of the Black American in exchange for commercial success, like a prostitute adopting a persona for the gratification of a client. In the second act, he abandoned the role only to realize that it had developed a life of its own, and that he was branded forever as the perpetrator of a very particular deception: smuggling American popular culture into a French society whose members were eager to become addicted. Finally, the tragic resolution was not Vian's "literal" death while viewing the final, corrupted version of his work, but occurred earlier, when he and Dopagne completed their screenplay. Vian's last attempt to reclaim ownership of his movie, while it removed most of the ambiguous references to racial essentialism and sado-masochism, did so at enormous cost. Instead of the almost existentialist ending of the novel, in which Lee's death is an absurd coda to a revenge narrative that had spun out of control, the screenplay ends with the sacrifice of his own life so that his lover might survive. The injection of meaning into the screenplay, which gives it the redemptive quality (though not the "happy end") of Hollywood fiction, signifies a "worse" contamination of Vian's artistic sensibilities by American popular culture.

Vian was concerned, too late, with the *ownership* of his creation as much as with its political and artistic redemption. When the novel appeared, he enjoyed the speculation about Sullivan's identity, and coyly denied having written it. It was not long, however, before he realized that he in fact was *not* the author except in the strictest sense of the term. The name "Sullivan" came to sig-

nify the other “authors”: first, the hard-boiled American writers whose style he tried to emulate, just as he tried to mimic musicians of the swing era in his jazz compositions; then ultimately, the mob of French consumers who, like the Montparnasse murderer Edmond Rougé, saw in his disowned text a legitimation for and fulfilment of their transgressive urges.

Notes

1. In the title of her adaptation of the movie back into a novel, Françoise d'Eaubonne, no doubt under instructions from the publisher Pierre Seghers, claims to have followed Vian's own screenplay. In fact, her book simply adapts the entirely different screenplay written by the director, Michel Gast, along with Louis Sapin and Luska Eliroff (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 287). Seghers, in his introduction, states that Vian had given d'Eaubonne permission to write “a new version of his famous novel” (10) a few days before his death; but Vian had assumed that the novelization would be based on his screenplay, not on the final movie, and that it would present to the public his own intentions, which the movie betrayed (*Le Dossier* 286-87). The fact that the exact opposite occurred, and that the novelization completely ignored Vian's screenplay at the same moment it claimed to represent it faithfully, is an apt conclusion to the saga.

2. The final sentence of the novel seems to allude to the fact that men have an erection at the moment they are hanged. This presumably cannot be the case with Lee Anderson, however, since he was killed before the purely symbolic lynching occurred. Vian draws attention to Lee's sexuality at the same time as he dismisses it, which could be a sign of ambivalence toward his association of race with sex.

3. One of the few critics to recognize the exploitative aspects of race in Vian's novel, interestingly, was Martiniquais author Joseph Zobel (famous for *Rue Cases-Nègres*, 1950). His short piece “Les nègres et l'obscénité en littérature” ‘Negroes and Literary Obscenity’ appeared in *Les Lettres françaises* of July 25, 1947.

[L]ibre à ceux des Français qui font de ce roman, auquel je me garde d'accorder une épithète quelconque, la nourriture immonde dont est devenue friande une certaine catégorie, sous l'excuse que la guerre et

l'occupation ont éveillé des instincts de corbeaux, des appétits d'hyènes; il y a des Blancs qui sont assez imbus de complexes de supériorité pour se payer des avilissements et des déchéances; mais qu'ils se gardent bien d'identifier les Nègres avec certaines abjections dans lesquelles ceux-ci sont loin de passer maîtres.

Let those French people who make of this novel, to which I refrain from granting any sort of epithet, the revolting nourishment for which a certain category of people has become starved, with the excuse that the war and occupation have aroused crows' instincts and hyena's cravings; there are white people who are sufficiently ruled by superiority complexes to indulge in degradation and decadence; but let them not associate Negroes with certain kinds of abjection in which the latter are far from being the masters. (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 73)

4. In an example of how quickly the press rushed to make an issue of the presence of the novel at the murder scene, *France-Libre* at first reported that it was a work by Kafka (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 52). On March 30, *Libération* alluded to the "mystery" of its origin, indicating that there was speculation about the author's identity from the beginning. At this time Vian claimed, and *Libération* repeated his claim, that the title of the original work was *Ye Shall Defile and Destroy Them*. This introduces a Faulknerian, biblical element that foreshadows the spiritual interpretation which Vian later tried to impose (*Le Dossier* 54); though not a quote from scripture, the alleged title is similar to God's injunction to the Israelites to cast away their graven images of silver and gold in Isaiah 30:22.

5. Marcel Duhamel created the *Série Noire* at Gallimard at the end of World War II. Translations of American hardboiled fiction (and its European imitators) were its mainstay from the beginning. The upstart *Editions du Scorpion*, which published *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, mined the same vein. It is noteworthy that Vian wrote his "Sullivan novels" during a period which included his translation of Raymond Chandler (*The Lady in the Lake* and *The Big Sleep*) and Peter Cheyney (*Dames Don't Care*) for the *Série Noire* label.

6. Michel Lebrun has pointed out the similarity in the plots of all four Sullivan novels: the first is about a black man disguised as a white; the second about a white man who is convinced that he is black; the third and most tongue-in-cheek *Et on tuera tous les affreux* (*We'll Kill All the Ugly Ones*) is concerned with creating a master race of beautiful people, and the fourth and shortest of them, *Elles se rendent pas compte*,

(*The Women Don't Know*), has a male protagonist who dresses as a woman. This last novel was published together with a short story called *Les chiens, le désir et la mort* (*Dogs, Desire and Death*) in which the main character is Slacks, a sadistic woman who always wears pants. Taken as a group, the works of Vernon Sullivan all pose the question of racial or sexual identity in a manner that becomes increasingly trivialized as one goes from one title to the next (Lebrun 34).

7. As David Noakes points out, the last three chapters are in the third person for purely practical reasons as well: "Il s'agit d'un pis-aller inévitable quand on veut qu'une histoire racontée à la première personne se termine par une description réaliste et objective de la façon dont le narrateur est mort." 'It's an unavoidable stopgap one uses when a story told in the first person ends with a realist and objective description of the manner in which the narrator dies' (101). Without denying this, I also believe it is significant that Vian's novel describes a loss of control by the narrator, both of his body (when he runs amok), and of his voice (when the narrative perspective changes). Such loss of control is uncannily repeated in Vian's own doomed attempt to exercise authorial power over his novel's reception.

8. Boris Vian was an expert on jazz, and his own songwriting, composing, and performing skills are represented by his many recordings. In his music reviews for the magazine *Jazz Hot* and others, he displayed a frank prejudice against white jazz musicians. Mike Zwerin's comment that "In hindsight, [Vian] can be called sexist, and Crow Jim [reverse racist]" ("Translator's Preface," *Round About Close to Midnight: The Jazz Writings of Boris Vian*) is an understatement.

9. The French word for ghost writer, "nègre," inspired many jokes in the press as the rumor spread that Vian was the real author. He was, so to speak, the nègre of his nègre, a pun used by *Le Franc-Tireur* on November 24 1948, the day after Vian admitted the truth in court: "—C'est vous le nègre?—Oui, missié, a répondu Boris Vian" 'Are you the negro/ghost writer [asks the judge]? —Yes massah, replied Boris Vian' (qtd. in Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 135) .

10. Noël Arnaud's fascinating account of the affair is somewhat coy when he describes the testimony at the trial, saying only that this is what one might *imagine* was said (*Le Dossier*, 195). I take this merely as an indication that it is improper, and even illegal, to publish such

testimony. Arnaud had direct access to the individuals involved, if not to the actual transcripts of the trial.

11. *Les Morts ont tous la même peau* (*Dead Men All Have the Same Skin*) is the second novel published under the name Vernon Sullivan in an attempt by Vian to cash in on the growing popularity of the first. It continued to exploit the question of race, this time with a protagonist named Dan Parker (after the president of the moral watchdog agency that brought charges against Vian) who is in some respects the direct opposite of Lee Anderson: he believes mistakenly that he is black, and tries with all his might to keep this identity secret. Hounded by a blackmailer (a black man who claims to be his brother and who threatens to reveal his identity to his wife and his employer) and then by the police, he discovers finally that he is actually white, and all his troubles were caused by mistaking his own racial identity. His fear of being discovered has caused him to become sexually impotent. With his life already in shambles, he kills himself.

12. The printed word is much more difficult in France to censor than other media of expression, a principle which is deeply rooted in tradition; the Constitution of the Fourth Republic defines freedom of expression as “[le droit] de parler, d’écrire, d’imprimer, de publier” “[the right] to speak, to write, to print, to publish” (Godechot 373), placing pictures (covered by the word “publish”) well after modes of expression that are purely verbal. One consequence of this privileged status is mentioned in Arnaud’s account of the legal problems of *J’irai . . .* and other titles that came under the scope of the obscenity law: some of these works were banned from being printed and sold, but existing copies could not be confiscated *unless* they were illustrated (*Le Dossier* 158). As a result, it was not especially difficult to obtain a copy of *J’irai . . .* even years after it had been banned.

13. As he became famous, Vian came up against the assumption that he was foreign. David Noakes quotes a letter that had been written to Vian which expresses a common attitude in the public after the publication of *J’irai . . .*: “Vous semblez oublier que ce pays vous a accueilli et vous devriez vous estimer heureux qu’il vous accepte encore malgré votre infâme bouquin” ‘You seem to forget that this country welcomed you and you should consider yourself lucky that it still tolerates you in spite of your vile book’ (13). The name “Boris,” his almost asiatic features, and even his jazz-playing had contributed to an inability to recognize his French Catholic pedigree.

14. Keith Scott is the only person to have explored Vian's parodic novels as a symptom of France's combined fear of and fascination with American popular culture, especially in a recent article in *French Cultural Studies*: "Pornography, Parody and Paranoia: The Imagined America of Vernon Sullivan." He argues that Vian's novel is a harbinger of sorts, creating a hysterical response that would not typically characterize the French view of America until the end of the century. As Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême Occident: French Intellectuals and America* suggests, however, this attraction/repulsion reflex has existed at least since the nineteenth century. But Scott is right, I think, when he suggests that Vian accelerated the growth of this violently ambivalent attitude among *all* classes of French society, not just the elite.

15. As Rybalka points out, some of the change in Lee's character may be the responsibility of the play's director Pasquali, who contributed to the adaptation. I believe that Vian was the main force behind the (partial) sanitizing of Lee's character, though, since it is consistent with his repeated attempts to elevate the story to the status of moral allegory, which culminated in the screenplay he wrote with Jacques Dopagne several years later.

16. Arnaud and Vian's many other biographers give an indication of how titillated the public must have been by mentioning that not only did Sartre's play on the theme of American race relations, *La putain respectueuse*, have to be advertised in the metro with the last five letters of the word *putain* taken out, but the entire title of Vian's play, performed the same year, was censored. Passengers in the metro saw posters only for "*la pièce de Boris Vian*" 'Boris Vian's play' (*Les vies* 62).

17. Fingernails as a racial sign have a long history in the genre of "race literature," both in the US and abroad, as Werner Sollors explains in *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. The dominant literary convention ascribes a "bluish tinge" to the "half-moon," according to Sollors, whereas d'Eaubonne, in her novelization, clearly speaks of a yellowish tinge. Vian does not specify the hue. As an arbitrary sign denoting blackness, of course, the precise color of the moons is irrelevant.

18. On the very first page, as Lee recounts his journey up North, he says: "Je regardais mes mains sur le volant, mes doigts, mes ongles. Vraiment personne ne pouvait trouver à y redire. Aucun risque de ce

côté" 'I looked at my hands on the wheel, my fingers, my nails. Really nobody could complain. No risk from that side' (11).

19. The scene from the Disney animation/film hybrid *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* takes place in a bar. Roger is hiding in a back room from his nemesis, Judge Doom. Rather than search the building, Doom simply raps out the rhythm of "Shave and a haircut—two bits," leaving out the final two beats. Roger's nature as a "Toon" will not allow him to withstand this "incomplete" rhythmic sentence; he bursts into the room screaming "TWO BITS!" Interestingly, we discover at the end that the villainous Judge Doom is not a person, but a "Toon" passing as a person, underscoring the racial subtext of the movie.

20. Another example of Vian meretriciously undermining the story's moral is the stage play's allusion to the cliché of the slave and plantation owner's daughter. Jean makes a speech during the "orgy scene" in Lee's room, which replaces the similar scene in the novel that takes place during a party at the Asquith mansion. She reminisces about her father's sugar plantation in Haiti:

C'était dans la plantation de mon père, dans la maison d'un contremaître noir, et on y avait trouvé une femme . . . elle ne voulait pas de lui, alors il l'avait fait boire . . . ça sentait le rhum, c'était terrible . . . et puis il l'avait violée et il s'était suicidé . . . c'était . . . je ne sais pas . . . cette odeur et ces deux Noirs . . . ça m'excitait. (*Elle a un rire un peu crapuleux, les regards au loin.*) C'est comme ici . . . ça sentait comme ici.

It was in my father's plantation, in the house of a black foreman, and they found a woman there . . . she didn't want him, so he had made her drink . . . it smelled of rhum, it was awful . . . and then he raped her and killed himself . . . it was . . . I don't know . . . that smell and those two black people . . . it excited me. (*She gives a slightly depraved laugh, staring into the distance.*) It's like here . . . it smelled like it does here. (Arnaud, *Le Dossier* 343)

Jean is reminded of the sordid scene at the plantation by the smell of alcohol in Lee's room. But when she says "ça sentait comme ici," it is impossible not to read this as another hint that the characters are aware of Lee's secret identity. There is a "smell" of black people in the room that arouses her.

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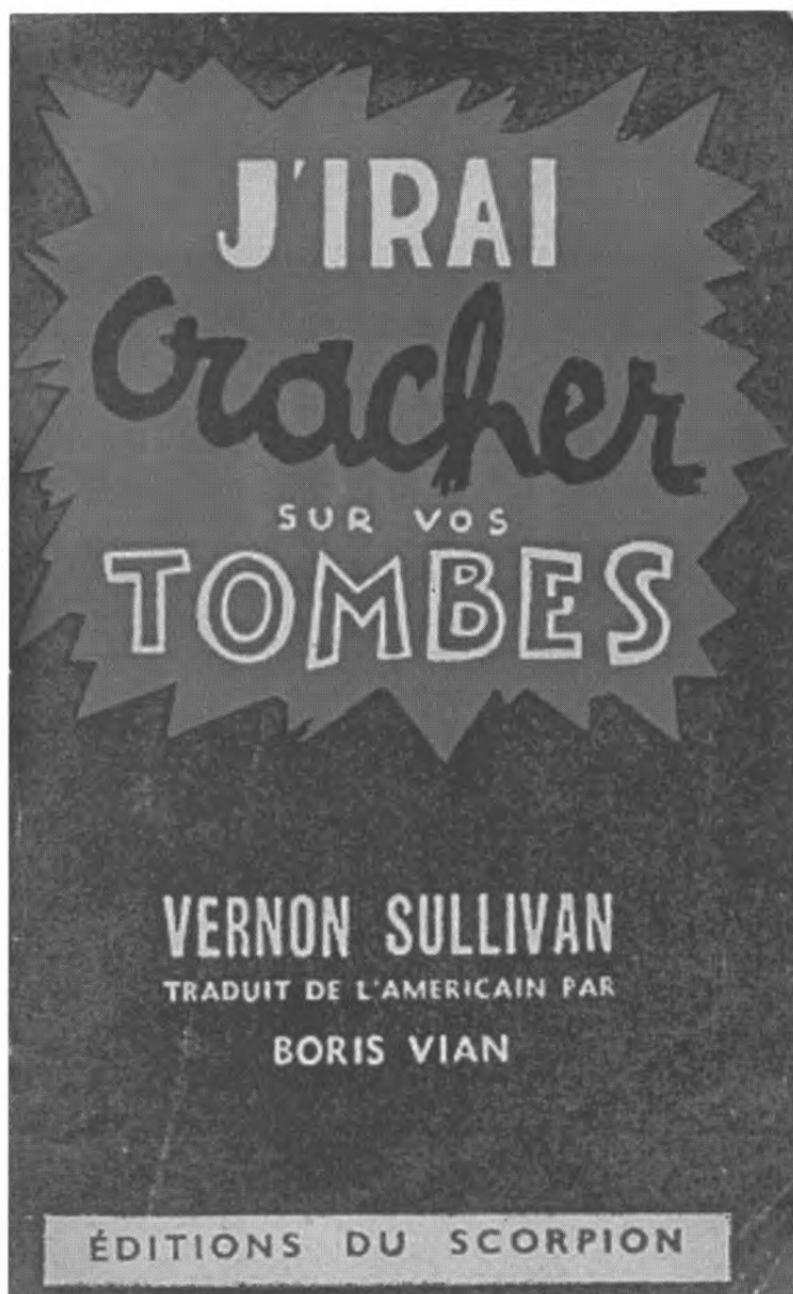


Fig. 1

BORIS
VIAN j'irai
cracher
SUR VOS
tombes
FRANCOISE D'EAUBONNE



l'inter

Fig. 2