

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: *IRRESPONSIBLY ENGAGÉ: BORIS VIAN AND USES OF AMERICAN CULTURE IN FRANCE, 1940-1959*

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During the postwar and early Cold War periods, author and jazz critic Boris Vian (1920-1959) developed his own approach to the increased presence of American culture in France. Instead of dismissing America outright, he learned to choose his battles carefully. Vian never considered America to be a paragon for emulation, and he used both jazz and detective novels as a way to criticize American conformity and especially racism. This thesis focuses not only on how Vian disconnected a political critique of America from a cultural critique of America, but also on the ways that his appreciation of American cultural artistry informed his continued disdain for other aspects of American politics and society. Vian used American jazz and pulp fiction to understand how black American culture could be used as a model of “good” American culture that could be mobilized against “bad” American culture.

IRRESPONSIBLY *ENGAGÉ*: BORIS VIAN
AND USES OF AMERICAN CULTURE IN FRANCE, 1940-1959

by

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Introduction

During the postwar and the early Cold War periods, French intellectuals grappled with the increased presence of American culture, and author and jazz critic Boris Vian (1920-1959) developed his own approach. Although he worked within the context of contemporary discourse, occasionally complaining that American culture amounted to vulgar consumerism, he tried to stretch beyond the constraints of common responses to perceived shortcomings in America. Anti-Americanism was not new to France in the 1940s, but it had its own historical flavors. Postwar intellectual leftist critiques of America adopted arguments about American dehumanization that had a long tradition throughout Europe but that had most recently been articulated in France by conservatives in the 1930s.¹ Although the Left appreciated the classless appearance of American society, it condemned capitalism's greedy individualism, the automatic and sheep-like behavior of American consumers, and America's racist and imperialist drives. At the same time, the Frankfurt school exhibited similar trends in thinking about America. Horkheimer and Adorno's Marxist-inspired work on critical theory led to the articulation of the theory of the Culture Industry. This theory codified the political Left's fear of Americanization as represented by mass culture, a standardization of mediocrity that mystified consumers into neglecting their real needs, and the equation of consumer behavior with submission to totalitarian and imperialist policies. By the late 1960s, however, France had become more comfortable with consumer habits and the Left had learned how to separate critiques of America's racism and foreign intervention from the previously obligatory critique of American mass culture. Through his appreciation for

¹ Stanley Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993) 13.

jazz and black American culture in the 1940s and 1950s, Boris Vian helps elucidate the transition.

Americanization and Modernization

Although Vian decried American racism and imperialism and abhorred the lack of imagination of “the masses” or those he felt were outside of his culture, he did enjoy certain fruits of American mass culture. A critic of dogmatic fidelity to party doctrine, Vian was what we might call an “irresponsible *engagé*.” He was not irresponsible in the sense of being unreliable or unaccountable, but rather according to his own definition of artistic irresponsibility that freed the intellectual to question ideas and issues individually as they appeared. He was not *engagé* in the Sartrean sense of taking a deliberately active role in History with a capital H, but he gave himself the responsibility of evaluating discrete manifestation of America and publishing his opinions. Rather than adapting to the Left’s politics of the hour, Vian actively formulated his own ideas about American culture. Like the 1950s cinéphiles of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, Vian developed his own criteria for judging American culture that was distinct from the Left’s overtly political rejection of America prevalent in the early Cold War. These independent thinkers helped forge France’s transition to consumer society, grappling with ways to reconcile an appreciation for a culture of abundance with concerns about American racism and economic and cultural domination of Europe in the decade following World War II.

Fear of mass culture and resistance to Americanization included at least two distinguishable strains in France, both of which had been developed before the war and which only became more pronounced after the war. The first was the overtly political use of American culture to infuse France with a sense of the benefits of mass culture as

connected to American capitalism and democracy. As American economic power increased, American companies viewed Europe as a market for their goods and services. Political leaders saw American culture as a way to sway Europeans towards embracing democracy, both shedding their fascist heritage and resisting communist influence. The 1948 Smith-Mundt Act explicitly linked American cultural products with the effort to sell democracy, establishing radio programs, newspapers, and information centers to teach Europeans to appreciate American values. The second strain of resistance stemmed from fears that modernization would destroy a French humanistic tradition. Americanization would replace a sense of community with selfish consumers who failed to notice that commodities were poisonous to their interests and exacerbated social problems. The second strain was connected to the first as intellectuals viewed policies of spreading American culture in France as deliberate efforts to “colonize” France, rendering the country a pawn to American interests.

Among the twentieth-century examples of America’s critics, André Siegfried (*Les Etats-Unis d’aujourd’hui* 1927), Georges Duhamel (*Scènes de la vie future* 1930), and Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu (*Le Cancer américain* 1931) demonstrate the politically conservative anti-Americanism of the 1920s and 1930s. Authors such as Simone de Beauvoir (*L’Amérique au jour le jour*) evidence the politically leftist fears of Americanization in the 1940s and 1950s. In *Le Défi américain*, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber signaled that by the late 1960s France could no longer cling to its traditional relationships and hierarchies in the market if it hoped to compete with the American economy. Historians have used these texts to link postwar modernization with the tensions between anti Americanism and Americanization. For example, Richard Kuisel’s

Seducing the French examines how American modernization threatened France's sense of itself as a humanistic civilization. Kristin Ross' *Fast Cars Clean Bodies* looks at the accelerated process of modernization taking place between 1958 and 1968, and she reconnects the stories of French modernization and decolonization, explaining how administrative rationalization developed in the colonies also reorganizing the lives of French citizens in the metropolis. She describes how modern France placed Frenchmen and women in managerial roles that yet remained subservient to the process of modernization. In the public sphere, the new figure of the *jeune cadre*, or young professional, energetically and efficiently managed his workers while at the same time succumbing to a vision of a rationalized technological future, and in the private sphere his wife managed a modern home with modern appliances according to the images afforded her in magazines. In *The American Enemy* Philippe Roger argues that far from being an occasional strain on Franco-American friendship, anti-Americanism is actually a French tradition dating back to the birth of the American nation

Despite the concerns of anti-American intellectuals during the 1940s and 1950s, the majority of the French were busy coveting or beginning to acquire televisions (10 percent of households by 1959), refrigerators (20.5 percent of households by 1959), and cars (more than five million private vehicles registered by 1959).² Boris Vian's concessions to American culture were not based on the tastes of the majority but rather on a barely articulated yet evident belief that the "throw-away" bits of American high culture were more valuable to individual freedom than they were dangerous to French identities. He was aware of the prevailing criticisms of Americanization and at times

² Charles Sowerwine. "The 1950s – Of Coke and Culture" in *France Since 1970: Culture, Politics and Society* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 274-283.

even seemed to believe in the American threat, but instead of dismissing America outright, he learned to choose his battles carefully. In very concrete terms, Vian extolled the values of jazz to French and American audiences alike, and he adapted the hard-boiled style of American crime novels to suit his temperament. Vian never considered America to be a paragon for emulation, and he used both jazz and detective novels as a way to criticize American conformity and especially racism.

Biography

Vian never traveled to America during his short life. He told his first wife, Michelle Leglise, that the only reason he would ever be tempted would be to buy a big American car.³ He was born to a bourgeois family outside of Paris during the last decades of the Third Republic. Vian had a privileged childhood, supported by his grandfather's fortune made by sculpting bronze. Vian's father converted that fortune into investments that did not survive the Depression-era market, compelling the family to lease their grand villa and move into the neighboring carriage house. The reduced quarters did not diminish the family's spirits, and leisure time continued to be filled with chess matches and genteel parlor games recalling the surrealists' Exquisite Corpse, involving wordplay and poetry.

Vian did not initially choose a literary career, however, and in 1939 he entered the Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures to be trained as an engineer. He completed his education under the German Occupation and went to work for the Association Française de Normalisation (AFNOR). Bored by his work, Vian distracted himself and his friends with irreverent poetry and stories and devoted most of his energies to the regular parties he organized on weekends where he and his friends danced to jazz music, some of which

³ Gilbert Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les amerlauds, et les godons* (Paris: UGE, 1978) 64.

had been outlawed under the Vichy government. An amateur jazz musician himself, he played trumpet in a family jazz orchestra with his brothers and then with the Abadie orchestra, which found a certain amount of success in early postwar jazz festivals. He became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in 1946 when the Saint-Germain-des-Prés jazz scene overlapped geographically with the existentialist crowd. Sartre and de Beauvoir's *Les Temps Modernes* published one of Vian's short stories and Vian began writing a semi-regular column entitled "Chroniques du menteur" for the respected journal. He had been noticed two years earlier by author Raymond Queneau who helped him sign a contract with Gallimard to publish a novel Vian had written during the war, *Vercoquin et le plancton* (1946). Still bored with engineering work, Vian used much of his time in the office, first at AFNOR and then at the Office Professionnel du Papier et du Carton, to write novels. One of those novels, *L'Écume des jours* was published by Gallimard in 1947 and Vian was assured that he was on the short list to receive Gallimard's Prix de la Pléiade. He was deeply disappointed when he did not win.

It was at this point in his career that Vian wrote his most famous, even infamous, work, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (1946) claiming he was merely the translator and that it had actually been written by an black American author he named Vernon Sullivan. Using the hard-boiled style of American police fiction, the novel describes a black man's attempt to seek revenge for the lynching of his younger brother by passing for white, raping, and ultimately killing two white girls. The Sullivan novel drew widespread attention and created a scandal when a copy was found next to the body of a murdered woman in Paris and when it was prosecuted by the French courts as a moral outrage. Vian wrote three additional works under the Sullivan pseudonym, but none sold as well

as the first. The subsequent novels he wrote in his own name also remained largely ignored until a posthumous effort to recuperate his work began in the 1960s. Along with a half dozen translations of American novels and his own plays that were staged during his lifetime and shortly thereafter, Vian penned numerous musical comedies and screenplays, most of which were never produced.

If Vian's aspirations of literary renown were dampened by his failure to receive the Prix de la Pléiade, he nevertheless managed to make a life for himself as a writer. He contributed articles about song, cars, and home-life to dozens of publications, but his favorite subject by far was jazz. He earned a solid reputation as a jazz critic and not only wrote for *Jazz Hot*, the official publication of the Hot Club de France, but he was also invited on numerous occasions to discourse on jazz for radio shows. Part of his claim to authority derived from his musical direction of two of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés jazz caves of the postwar period, which brought him into contact not only with the great French jazz musicians of his day, but also with the American jazz royalty, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis. When the Hot Club split over whether be-bop should be considered progress in jazz or perversion of jazz, Vian publicly sided with the be-bop musicians even though his personal tastes and abilities tended towards the New Orleans style. His articles gave him an opportunity to parse out what was American, what was African-American, and what was universal in jazz music.⁴ Throughout his jazz writings, Vian supported black American innovation and rejected white critics who claimed to preach the truth about

⁴ Vian never used the term "African-American," preferring the terms "black" or "negro" that were in common usage.

jazz. He insisted above all that although jazz appreciation could be refined, the final decision about what was good and what was not remained with the individual listener.

Vian's knowledge about jazz led him to the jobs he would hold at the end of his short life. Having quit engineering work in 1947 to pursue full-time writing, Vian became the artistic director for variety music at the Philips label in France in 1957, and then the artistic director for Fontana, a Philips subsidiary in 1958, and then the artistic director for Barclay's in 1959. Vian had been writing songs since the early 1950's, even recording several under the title *Chansons possibles et impossibles*, and touring them in 1955. His famous song "Le Déserteur" was initially well-received in Paris but created upsets on tour in the provinces during the summer because elements of the French public found it disrespectful to the military and to the Fourth Republic within two year of the Geneva Accords and the start of the Algerian war. The song was banned on French national radio, but it would become a popular protest song during the Vietnam War, crossing the Atlantic to be recorded by American musicians and then returning to France through Peter, Paul, and Mary's 1966 interpretation of the song as the number one foreign import. Vian died of a heart attack during the screening of the adaptation he had repudiated of his infamous novel *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*.

An Irresponsible Engagé

Vian's split with postwar leftist criticism of America based on the dangers of mass culture can be seen as early as 1946 when *Les Temps Modernes* rejected his imaginary American travelogue. Vian never traveled to America, but he wrote a humorous account that, at first glance, did not stray very far from his contemporaries' representations of an imagined America, containing such necessary components as

baseball, lynching, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, juke boxes, cinemas, and sexual puritans. However, Vian twisted each of these symbols in his own particular fashion: baseball became sexualized as “baise-bol,” or “sex-ball,” lynching became a sport that New Yorkers were too apathetic to practice, the Statue of Liberty was avoided by taking a submarine, the elevator was all that remained of the Empire State Building, and juke boxes and cinemas played French music and movies.⁵ The piece was intended to run in *Les Temps Moderne’s* special issue devoted to the United States, but Vian’s parody refuted the other articles’ visions of America as standard and monotonous.

Although Vian was friendly with the existentialist crowd, he almost never considered himself an engaged intellectual, and then mostly with irony. During a time when French intellectuals were deeply divided over what Sartre called “engagement” and the level of individual responsibility towards the political and economic struggles between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Vian adapted American culture to create his own space. Until recently, most of Vian’s biographers and critics have considered Vian to be apolitical, because he preferred individualism to party politics. For some, Vian’s skepticism towards political engagement stemmed from his disdain for anything that would constrain the individual.⁶ Other Vian scholars have written that Vian was unable to take sides in the great political debates of his time because his “skepticism and, just as much, his tolerance and his sense of objectivity” prevented it.⁷ I think that such characterizations of Vian fail to recognize the truly political nature of many of Vian’s cultural statements. Although for Sartre, engagement meant making clear

⁵ Boris Vian, *Chronique du Menteur*, ed. Noël Arnaud (Paris : Christian Bourgois, 1974) 79-101.

⁶ Henri Baudin, *Boris Vian: La poursuite de la vie totale* (Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1966) 106, 119.

⁷ Jean Clouzet, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1966) 100.

distinctions between American capitalism and Soviet communism, to the advantage of the latter, Vian's embrace of some American cultural products functioned as a pro-American statement even if Vian did not classify himself as an American supporter. Although Vian deplored American racism and certain elements of American consumerism, he saw opportunities for creative freedom in American *noir* and jazz, and his tastes tended to prefer the West over the East.

This thesis will focus not only on how Boris Vian disconnected a political critique of America from a cultural critique of America, but also on the surprising way that his appreciation of American cultural artistry informed his continued disdain for other aspects of American politics and society. The first chapter will examine the way Vian and his fellow *zazous*, or young French jazz fans, discovered and appropriated aspects of the American jazz subculture as a way to resist the alternative choices being offered to them during World War II. Although Vian's statements about America occasionally sounded similar to his contemporaries, Vian enjoyed some American culture and used it as a tool while facing modernization. Between 1940 and 1944, Vian used American culture to reject fascism, flirting with irresponsibility and entertainment to make a very serious statement about wartime France. The second chapter will look at the two novels that Vian wrote under the pseudonym of a black American author that deal with race in the United States. In these novels, Vian demonstrated an awareness of the seriousness of American racism, but he examined it in sexual rather than racial terms. The third chapter will focus on Vian's professional writings about jazz in which he embraced black American culture not as an expression of America, as Cold War American cultural politics would have preferred, but at the expense of America and without overtly

applying any lessons he learned from American racism to France's own problems dealing with decolonization.

Chapter 1: Vian the Zazou: American Culture as Escape

Boris Vian's adult work on American culture was rooted in the appreciation for jazz he developed during World War II when expressing a taste for American music was considered by the Vichy government to be not only irresponsible but probably unpatriotic. The term "zazou" described young French jazz fans during the war, but the designation was somewhat fluid as it could describe both swing kids as well as budding experts in traditional jazz. Teenage culture had not yet really developed, but it is worth noting that Vian was already 20 when the war reached France and that the war years witnessed not only his marriage but also the birth of his first child. Despite his family and career, Vian identified with the zazou youth whose escapist fun implied a rejection of both adult responsibilities and the war itself. After the war, he would be quick to reject newspaper articles equating the night life of Saint-Germain-des-Prés with the zazous, arguing that existentialism and swing dancing, although sharing some common ground on the left bank of Paris, had virtually nothing in common. In several respects, however, the zazous anticipated the post war Saint-Germain without realizing it because in the middle of world conflict, the zazous lived "by dream . . . according to the optimistic norms or the postwar, of reconstruction, and of mass consumption."⁸ Though not an open revolt against the Occupation, the zazou subculture denied that the Occupation applied to them, and the zazous instead gave their attention to details of appearance and superficiality, leading many historians to equate them with the dandies of the nineteenth century although the zazous were not reactionary.

⁸ Patrice Bollon, *Morale du masque: Merveilleux, Zazous, Dandys, Punks, etc* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) 261.

A rejection of both the collaborationist government and the bourgeois Third Republic blamed for France's defeat, the zizou subculture helped open part of the young, urban, bourgeois population of France towards the acceptance of American cultural products. Boris Vian and his fellow zizous of the early 1940s chose to reject or delay the choices being offered to young people, collaboration or resistance, by choosing instead to adopt the clothing style of the American zoot-suiters and jazz aficionados, a choice that in America has been described variously as "a detour on the road to politicization" and "an essential element of [. . .] radicalization."⁹ The zizous also embraced American fiction, rifling through the bookstalls along the Seine and thrilled any time they found a forbidden book by Faulkner or Hemingway.¹⁰ In his writings from the period or about the trend, Vian maintained the tension among many of the conflicts within the jazz culture such as between transitory and die-hard fans, between high culture and popular culture, and between entertainment and intellect. In affecting disinterest in the life or death problems of Occupied France, however, Vian also chose not to inquire into problems of racism facing his favorite black American musicians, nor to examine his own problematic understanding of the relationship among race, gender, and jazz music.

By the outbreak of World War II, Vian had already discovered jazz music. He had become a member of the Hot Club de France in 1937 and attended the Paris concerts of Coleman Hawkins in 1937 and Duke Ellington in 1939. He formed a jazz band with his brothers, performing for their friends as often as possible, and joined Claude Abadie's jazz orchestra in 1942. Although his appreciation for jazz increased throughout his life, leading him into professional jazz criticism, he recognized a difference between a

⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and The Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 163.

¹⁰ Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les amerlauds, et les godons* 37.

youthful enthusiasm for jazz that exploded in France around 1940 and the more refined jazz tastes of adult audiences. He wrote that for young people, jazz represented rebellion against one's parents, dance, and the high life described in movies, in turn represented by furs, dropped necklines, champagne and whiskey soda. To some, however, jazz was an art that they learned to appreciate gradually. He wrote that "it is precisely those who will remain faithful to jazz and follow its evolution whereas for the rest, it will only be a moment of their life, a youthful craze, from the time when they were 'zazous.'"¹¹ Vian would be described as a "gloomy zazou," but he remembered his own zazou youth fondly.¹² Vian's mature outlook on jazz will be described in a subsequent chapter. This chapter will focus on his youthful preoccupation with jazz when the music represented a rejection of fascism and when Vian was disinclined to engage the political situation on its own terms.

Jazz during the Occupation

Jazz music flourished in 1940. Membership in the Hot Club of France exploded, increasing from 350 just before the war to five thousand during the winter of 1940-1941 and many Hot Clubs sprang up in the provinces.¹³ The popularity of jazz did not mean that most jazz fans followed Vian's example or turned jazz into a career. Charles Delaunay, president of the Hot Club of France during the Occupation, thought that jazz attracted many indiscriminate young people because jazz tasted like forbidden fruit to them. Jazz was not entirely forbidden, but a number of laws and regulations restricted live performances and radio presentations, for example preventing Jewish composers

¹¹ Boris Vian, *Chroniques de Jazz*, ed. Lucien Malson (Paris: Editions Pauvert, 1996) 66.

¹² Michel Rybalka, *Boris Vian: Essai d'interprétation et de documentation* (Paris: Minard, 1969) 117-118; Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 171, 30.

¹³ Jean-Claude Loiseau, *Les Zazous* (Paris: Le Sagittaire, 1977) 31.

from being identified. Nonetheless, building on the politically conservative anti-Americanism of the interwar period that viewed American culture as uncivilized and inhuman, the press was eager to demonize and sensationalize jazz right from the start, with Radio France decrying it as “Jewish-negro-American.”¹⁴ Delaunay, already distinguishing among sectors of jazz’s public, feared the possible excesses of the youth who used jazz as an exercise in rebellion rather than for itself.¹⁵ In 1941, jazz concerts continued to be permitted but authorities warned organizers to be vigilant against overly agitated swing fans who might threaten disruption.¹⁶

French jazz elites were further concerned with the identification of jazz with America, especially after America entered the war. The “New Europe” promoted by collaborators saw its mission as defeating both bolshevism and pernicious American plutocracy.¹⁷ In order to promote jazz within a restrictive climate of censorship, Delaunay sought to make jazz appear French rather than American, underscoring the French origins of New Orleans and the Creole folklore origins of blues, contrasting them with Anglo-Saxon racism.¹⁸ The “frenchification” of jazz became even more important after America entered the war as new regulations prohibited all public performance of American music and only orchestral versions of re-named American jazz were

¹⁴ Philippe Roger, *L'ennemi américain: Généologie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 362-374; Loiseau 31-36.

¹⁵ Loiseau 31-36.

¹⁶ Bollon 125.

¹⁷ Roger 390. Writers such as Georges Duhamel and Bertrand de Jouvenal railed against capitalism’s manipulation of needs that turned the individual into a consumer. Others complained that the standardization of individuals in America was worse than in the Soviet Union and prevented the option of resistance through individual taste. Duhamel and André Siegfried linked standardization with the manipulation of needs to claim that in America people seemed to be made to serve things rather than the other way around. This version of anti-Americanism claimed that no real individuality could exist in America and that the European individual needed to be protected from mass culture in order to be spared a similar fate (Roger, 492-493, 506, 519-520).

¹⁸ Loiseau 41. Meanwhile Delaunay organized his own resistance network, naming it Cart and calling himself Benny, after Benny Carter, arranger of swing music.

permissible on the radio.¹⁹ Jazz writers such as Andre Coeuroy substituted French spellings for jazz terms such as “blouse” for “blues” and “strette” for “straight.” Some writers even argued that jazz was not really a specifically black music, that it first appeared among black Americans only by coincidence, and that jazz was historically and materially derived from European and white roots.²⁰

Vian felt sufficiently comfortable in his jazz knowledge during the Occupation to evaluate others’ wartime positions on jazz. He criticized writers such as Coeuroy for taking the frenchification of jazz seriously but distinguished the practice from Delaunay’s efforts to keep jazz viable during the war. Despite the “jazz craze in Europe,” Vian described the Occupation as a “bad time” for jazz music because it ran up “against German will.”²¹ He gave examples of the way songs had to change titles to survive the Propagandstaffel, such as “Dina”, “Lady Be Good,” and “Some of These Days” being renamed “Dinette,” “Les Bigoudis,” and “Bébé d’amour,” joking that American songs had to be recorded under new French names because “Mr. Goebbels did’nt (sic) like American titles.”²² Vian had his own Occupation-era fun inventing new names for jazz songs. While bored at his first engineering job, Vian composed *Vercoquin et le plancton*, taking pains to give English titles to a number of imaginary songs played at the party opening the novel. He listed, among others, “Keep my wife until I come back to my old country home in the beautiful pines, down the Mississippi river that runs across the screen with Ida Lupino,” “Until my green rabbit eats his soup like a gentleman,” “Holy pooh doodle dum dee do,” “Cham, Jonah and Joe Louis playing Monopoly to-night,”

¹⁹ Loiseau 41-42, 96.

²⁰ Loiseau 176, citing Andre Coeuroy, *General History of Jazz* (Paris, 1942).

²¹ Vian, *Jazz in Paris*, ed. Gilbert Pestureau (Paris: Pauvert, 1996) 104, 50-52.

²² Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 50-52, 72-74; Vian, *Chroniques de Jazz* 100.

“Palookas in the milk,” and “Baseball after midnight,” mixing American references with nonsense.²³ Vian even nostalgically set his novel in Ville d’Avril, City of April, named after his home in Ville d’Avray, the site of the zazou parties he organized during the war.

Vian’s second novel, *L’Ecume des jours*, is also impregnated with jazz. The protagonists live near Louis Armstrong Avenue and Sidney Bechet Street and are constantly listening to Duke Ellington: “Black and Tan Fantasy,” “The Mood to be Wooed,” “Blues of the Vagabond,” “Misty Mornin’,” “Blue Bubbles,” and “Chloe.”²⁴ In fact, when the novel’s hero Colin is introduced to the heroine Chloe, his first remark is to inquire whether she is a jazz piece: “Good Af. . .Are you arranged by Duke Ellington?”²⁵ Jazz is so strong a character in the novel that it affects its surroundings as, for example, when Colin puts “The Mood to be Wooed” on the record player: “There was something ethereal in the way Johnny Hodges played, something inexplicable and completely sensual. Sensuality in a pure state, disengaged from the body. The corners of the room modified themselves and became rounded under the effect of the music.”²⁶ The doctor recommends playing Ellington’s “Slap Happy” to put the room back in shape.²⁷

Vian spent much of his spare time with the small subset of jazz fans who enjoyed not only swing dancing but also listening for the subtle differences among jazz records and practicing jazz themselves. These zazous clarified their tastes in music, making distinctions between the French jazz musicians Django Reinhardt and Alix Combelle on

²³ Boris Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 18, 20, 35, 39, 41, 51.

²⁴ Vian, *L’Ecume des Jours*, in *Œuvres Complètes* vol. 2 (Paris: Fayard, 1999) 27, 104, 136, 27, 104, 136, 29, 109-110, 149, 150, 42.

²⁵ Vian, *L’Ecume des Jours* 52.

²⁶ Vian, *L’Ecume des Jours* 109-110.

²⁷ Vian, *L’Ecume des Jours* 115.

one hand and music-hall singers such as Johnny Hess on the other.²⁸ By the end of 1941, ersatz commercialized jazz reigned in part because performers including Johnny Hess and Irène de Trébert had recuperated swing music into the French variety show and music hall traditions.²⁹ When Vian later spoke about the “jazz craze in Europe” during the war, he was largely referring to the French form of swing that transformed American jazz into a product resembling a French cultural tradition of musical entertainment. To the untrained ear, Hess may not have sounded very different from Louis Armstrong, but to fans like Vian, a French jazz musician’s caliber was measured by how well his jazz sounded like its source, African-American jazz, especially in the New Orleans style. Cultural misunderstandings that arose from Vian’s preference for and attempted imitation of African-American jazz will be examined further on, but first we need to take a look at the immediate political context of Vian’s preference for jazz as a rebellion against both the German occupiers and the France disputed between collaborators and resisters.

Zazou Style

Although to the zazous, their lifestyle focused on jazz, they were most easily identified, or misidentified, by their sense of style. The wartime press claimed that they were easy to recognize:

The men wear an ample vest that hangs against their thighs, tight dark pants over large unpolished shoes and a coarse linen or woolen tie, but as that did not suffice to distinguish them from so many other Parisians, they shined their hair with salad oil, due to a lack of grease, their hair a little too long, descending to meet a supple collar held in the front by a cross pin.

They always carried an umbrella although they never opened it in the rain, and they enjoyed getting their shoes and pants wet and muddied. As to the women:

²⁸ Bollon 126.

²⁹ Loiseau 37-39.

under their leather jackets they hide a sweater with a rolled collar and a very short pleated skirt; their shoulders, exaggeratedly square, contrast with those of the men, who ‘carry’ theirs down; long hair descends in curls on their neck; their stockings are striped, their shoes flat and heavy; they are armed with a large umbrella that, no matter what the weather, remains obstinately closed.³⁰

The zazou style conflicted with the order of the day, as the country’s attire was supposed to suggest mourning. Their long jackets and extra pockets opposed regulations regarding the conservation of fabric, and their long hair indicated their refusal to donate their cropped hair to the country in order to make a certain kind of thread for slippers.³¹

The zazou fashion style derived largely from the American zoot suit style that appeared in New York jazz clubs towards the end of 1938.³² Some historians and critics have argued that the zoot suit and zazou style had no intended meaning, and the gratuitousness of the styles sketched “the limits of a universe liberated from material constraints where all is only pleasure, leisure, and libertine game.”³³ Among American black youth, however, the zoot suit signified not only leisure but also freedom “from alienating wage labor” and an effort to “survive and transcend the racial and economic boundaries” of everyday life.³⁴ Vian’s more affluent and white zazou friends did not have the same material concerns, but the black American culture they imitated offered an escape from alienating ideologies and a model for rejecting the cultural hegemony by creating an alternative space. Without realizing it, the zoot suiters argued for the possibility of an alternative and viable organization of society even before the question of reorganizing society was posed.³⁵ They created a demand for the oversized suits among urban youth in night clubs looking for a way to express their rejection of the war and

³⁰ Loiseau 74-75.

³¹ Loiseau 78-79.

³² Bollon 85.

³³ Bollon 89.

³⁴ Kelly 179.

³⁵ Bollon 101, 102.

their embrace of pleasure and leisure as part of a generalized revolt against their parents.³⁶ For Vian jazz culture was not simply an assertion of autonomy from his parents but rather an indication that black American jazz musicians were in possession of some secret key to a viable alternative lifestyle.

Vian's youthful wartime associations of black Americans with particular powers of resistance and vivacity were not unique in time or place. White subcultures and countercultures in various countries linked African-American music with liveliness and opposition. For example, in Great Britain the youth subculture of the working class in the 1950s adopted rhythm and blues because as an expression of an "outsider" culture, the music represented solidarity, an articulation of oppression, and the hope of resistance. It contained "oppositional values which in a fresh context served to symbolize and symptomatize the contradictions and tensions" in their own lives.³⁷ Jack Kerouac expressed a similar appreciation for the dynamics of African-American culture in *On the Road*:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching amongst the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.³⁸

Like Kerouac, Vian saw black American culture as uniquely privileged and authentic.

Zazou Politics

Politically, as a subculture, the zazous were neither collaborators nor resisters, neither to the left nor to the right, neither submissive to the German occupiers and their

³⁶ Bollon 90-91.

³⁷ Iain Chambers. "A Strategy for Living" in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976) 161, 166.

³⁸ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957; New York: Viking Press; New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 179-180.

Vichy collaborators nor really fighting against it.³⁹ Without even trying, by barely saying a word, the zazous managed to ridicule the National Revolution. They were almost like statues, refusing to engage, apparently lacking the political means to engage with the world around them, yet condemning it by that very refusal to take it on its own terms. Their refusal was perhaps what was the most threatening aspect about them, for how could collaborators refute a position that was not verbally articulated? Replete with contradictions, for example affecting indifference to the world and yet revealing “an intimate knowledge about what they criticize,” the zazous were hard to classify. Despite their lack of formal political organization they inspired fear in the collaborationist population. Not members of the Resistance, the zazous were closer to the allies than to the fascists, although they were “very distant and barely trustworthy” allies of free France.⁴⁰ Collaborators turned the zazous to create a more easily locatable enemy than the true Resistance, underground and harder to find, by rhetorically turning the zazous into active Gaullist conspirators: “Unanimously rejected, that is exactly why they were hounded: the Zazous were deserters from the world. They demobilized, they demoralized everyone.”⁴¹ Their enemies described the zazous as “moral exiles” as an insult, but they took pride in their figurative exile.⁴²

The efforts of the collaborationist press indicate that just by existing, the zazous threatened the social order. They were not required to organize demonstrations or harass pedestrians in order to disrupt society. Their simple existence as an alternative possibility to the quiescence and restraint and National Revolution was enough to make people take

³⁹ Bollon 132.

⁴⁰ Bollon 139.

⁴¹ Loiseau 146; Bollon 139.

⁴² Loiseau 118, 109.

note, and their continued presence implied a failure of the National Revolution.⁴³ The language of the collaborationist newspapers *La Gerbe* and *Je Suis Partout* described the majority of the French during the Occupation as “*attentiste*,” or taking a wait and see attitude, occupying themselves with daily survival and indifferent to the ideological goals of the National Revolution, and listening to jazz and to radio reports out of London secretly at night, the *zazous* became the perfect target for the collaborationist press to unleash its attacks.⁴⁴ The journal *Jeunesse* complained about “The selfishness, the ‘I don’t care’ attitude, the absence of effort, the total disinterest in correction that is a question of life or death for us.”⁴⁵ The *zazous* were not themselves blamed for the 1940 defeat, but because they refused to join others in a dignified suffering, they were portrayed as a prototype of *mauvaise éspit* and a propagator of the virus of decadence that had led to defeat.⁴⁶

In wartime France, Marshal Petain’s government explicitly told the youth that decadent elements of their parents’ generation had caused the defeat in 1940 and that it was up to the young people to create a new civilization.⁴⁷ In July 1940 the French government created Les Chantiers de la Jeunesse for 20-year-olds and Les Compagnons de France for youth aged 15-20 indicating that these groups were to transform France not through weapons but through a reconnection with nature.⁴⁸ From the beginning, the

⁴³ Bollon 126; Loiseau 81.

⁴⁴ Bollon 127.

⁴⁵ Loiseau 82.

⁴⁶ Loiseau 83, 84.

⁴⁷ Loiseau 17.

⁴⁸ Les Chantiers de la Jeunesse was compulsory and sent young people to countryside camps for eight months at a time where fresh air and comradeship were supposed to cleanse them of the city’s corruption. The Compagnons de France were voluntary camps run like scouting organizations, and members performed outdoor labor and participated in cultural activities in order to learn about patriotism and a spirit of community. Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 338-339.

zazous indicated they were not interested such options. The collaborationist media reported on the zazou subculture in an effort to marginalize that culture, but their condemnation of the zazous elevated the zazous to the status of a subculture made them available to other youth as an option to emulate.⁴⁹ The zazous were not the only youth to rebel, as clandestine dance parties, petty theft, and delinquency were common, but Vian and his friends were unique in choosing American music as their weapon of resistance.⁵⁰ Like many of the so-called “attentistes,” they deferred the choice between collaboration and resistance by withdrawing into an internal space, but they did so conspicuously and bringing a foreign culture with them.

One of the few acts of overt political resistance among the zazous occurred in protest to the May 1942 regulation obliging Jews to wear yellow stars. Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton have demonstrated that the regulation sparked the first open and extensive resistance to anti-Jewish persecution, and they described how a number of university students protested the regulation by wearing their own yellow stars and claiming that the letters JUIF stood for “Jeunesse Universitaire Intellectuelle Française.”⁵¹ Newspaper reports from the period indicated that a number of zazous took to wearing yellow stars as well, replacing the letters JUIF with the letters SWING.⁵² After the yellow star incidents, ever increasing restrictions on activities, punishments for acts of resistance, and expanded German occupation of French territory made it impractical if not impossible for the zazous to continue their open rejection of

⁴⁹ Loiseau 92-93. See also Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976) 184: “Sub-cultural styles have become the principal way in which the mass media report or visualize ‘youth.’”

⁵⁰ Jackson 340.

⁵¹ Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981) 239.

⁵² Loiseau 164; Bollon 128.

collaboration.⁵³ The zazous did not remain visible long after 1942, and the press lost most trace of them as their clothing style blended more with the mainstream.⁵⁴ When the French government instituted the widely hated Service de Travail Obligatoire (STO) on February 16, 1943, some of the collaborationist press took the occasion to promote using the STO to put zazous to work. The STO also had the contrary effect of encouraging youth, including some zazous, to avoid being sent to work in Germany by disappearing into a Resistance network.⁵⁵

Although Vian disdained Nazi supporters, he also ridiculed de Gaulle's army, the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieure (FFI), and members of the Resistance shortly after Liberation. In his short story *Blues for a Black Cat*, for example, he mocked Resistance heroics through the character of a cat whose Resistance wounds turn out to be the result of an amorous encounter.⁵⁶ Without articulating an opposition stance to the Resistance army, Vian had trouble taking the FFI seriously as well. He remembered playing jazz with Claude Luter one night "at Rambouillet for the Liberation; at the third piece, the FFI's climbed onto the stage and wanted to shoot us to death because we refused to play *Le Petit Vin Blanc* in a New Orleans style."⁵⁷ Even the postwar purges of collaborators could not escape Vian's irony. Noting that collaborators were not all punished equally, he commented that treason "must remain the portion of cops, judges, military officials,

⁵³ Bollon 129-130.

⁵⁴ Bollon 129; Loiseau 161.

⁵⁵ Loiseau 190.

⁵⁶ Vian, "Blues for a Black Cat," in *Blues for a Black Cat and Other Stories*, ed. and trans. Julia Older (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) 29-31. Originally published as *Les Fourmis*. Paris: Editions du Scorpion, 1949.

⁵⁷ Vian, *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Pés*, ed. Noël Arnaud (Paris: Pauvert, 1997) 185.

and priests, for whom it makes up part of the routine,” condemning the Fourth Republic’s hypocrisy in how it chose to mete out justice.⁵⁸

Zazou Rebellion

Beyond the Occupation and collaboration, Vian used the zazou spirit to rebel against conventions of bourgeois adult life. In the adult working world, Vian chided executives for allowing business to eclipse the war. For example, while Miqueut, the ineffectual manager in Vian’s zazou novel *Vercoquin et le plancton*, is on the phone with his supervisor, he does not notice that war has broken out and that his city is under foreign occupation. Although never explicitly stated, Vian’s character Miqueut could be read as a condemnation of those civil servants and businessmen who, without actively collaborating with the German forces, focused on following instructions or keeping their businesses running rather than confronting the implications of the Nazi occupation. Indeed, upon learning of the war and continued occupation, Miqueut’s primary concern is for his documents: “He also learned during that period about the extraordinary events that had taken place during his telephone call: the war, the defeat, the severe rationing, without showing any concerns other than, retrospectively, having seen his documents running the terrible risks of pillage, ransacking, fire, destruction, theft, rape, and massacre.” As an empty gesture of resistance, “He hurried to hide a cap gun in [...] his kitchen and considered himself thereafter worthy to give his patriotic advice at any moment.”⁵⁹

Zazous objected not only to adult work, but also to adult play. According to Vian, “Receptions ‘with parents’ are, from the point of view of young people, failures from the

⁵⁸ Vian, *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Pés* 151-152.

⁵⁹ Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 96-97.

start.”⁶⁰ The adult reception organized to celebrate the engagement of the hero and heroine of *Vercoquin et le plancton* was no exception. At bourgeois parties, adults overshadowed the youth, paying little attention to their needs: “And the little zazou boys and girls disappeared little by little in mouse holes, because the serious people were hungry.”⁶¹ Adults deprived young people of the alcohol that enhanced their festivities, and “If an unhappy zazou succeeded in tracking down a glass of champagne, he was just as soon oriented, thanks to wise movements of the old academics, towards a disgusting and overly painted old biddy who took the glass from his hands and granted him a sticky smile in exchange.”⁶² Most egregious of all, however, adults did not allow the zazous to dance. Equating jazz dancing styles with sex, the adults, “according to the principle that the youth ‘dance in such an amusing way’, did not lose sight of their daughters and surrounded the group of young people by a practically impenetrable wall,” and they quickly put a stop to any swing dancing.⁶³

Zazou Parties

Zazou parties, in contrast to adult parties, were lively and exuberant. According to the memoirs of Anne-Marie Cazalis, Vian began giving his regular *surprise-parties* in 1943, and Vian’s orchestra, named “Mon prince et ses voyous” would play Armstrong tunes on their expensive instruments. The girls would bring cakes and the guys would bring red wine.⁶⁴ Guests at such parties “danced, and drank, and chatted, and disappeared by couple into the empty rooms, as at any successful party.”⁶⁵ Vian occasionally

⁶⁰ Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 160.

⁶¹ Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 162.

⁶² Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 160.

⁶³ Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 160-161.

⁶⁴ Loiseau 212-213.

⁶⁵ Vian, “Surprise-Partie chez Leobille,” *Le Loup garou, suivi de douze autres nouvelles*, ed. Noël Arnaud (Paris: Christain Bourgois, 1970) 191.

described zazou parties as somewhat mechanized or scripted, for example at the final party in *Vercoquin et le plancton* where “The anonymous crowd put itself to work in the salons, rolling up the carpets, moving the furniture out of the way, emptying the cigarette packs into more appropriate pockets, preparing the dance.”⁶⁶ As Vian peppers his writing with such regimented descriptions, however, they can be read as further parodies of the business style of the bourgeoisie.⁶⁷

Aside from jazz, the most important element at a zazou party was dancing. “Despite the hundred thousand dead in this war, despite the hundreds of thousands of prisoners still in captivity, when France had the modesty to forbid balls,” the zazous continued to dance much to the chagrin of the collaborationist press.⁶⁸ Although some authors have argued that clandestine surprise-parties were an opportunity not only to dance but also to talk frankly about the war and resistance, Vian’s zazou works contain no reference to such overt politics.⁶⁹ An amusing regimented description of the swing style using a young man and a young woman both named Coco simultaneously portrays the energetic and sexual nature of the dance and helps explain adult incomprehension in face of it:

Coco seized Coco by the left ankle, skillfully making her pivot in the air, receiving her straddled on his left knee, then, passing the right leg above the head of his partner, he dropped it suddenly and she found herself standing, her face turned toward the back of the boy. He fell suddenly backwards, making a bridge, and insinuated his head between the thighs of the girl, standing up very quickly and picking her up off of the ground and making her pass again, head first, between his legs to find himself in the same position, his back against the chest of his companion. Turning then

⁶⁶ Vian, *Vercoquin et le Plancton* 170.

⁶⁷ See Hall on subcultures using “combinations of both releases from, and reproductions of, the rhythms of work in the apparently free activities of leisure,” Hall 176. In Vian’s case, the rhythms of engineering work included lists, policies, and procedures to be followed, practices ridiculed by taking them out of context.

⁶⁸ Loiseau 97-98.

⁶⁹ Loiseau 98.

to face her, he yelled out a strident ‘Yeah!,’ shook his index finger, backed up three steps in order to move forward four right away, then eleven sideways, six turning, two on a flat stomach, and the cycle began again [. . .] They were very, very swing.⁷⁰

Of course no dancing could take place without music, and in Vian’s life, that music was played by the Abadie Orchestra (he was their trumpet player), whom he summoned to his fictional world as well. At the final party in *Vercoquin et le Plancton*,

Abadie gracefully kept himself in charge of his men and launched an aggressive sobbing warble every eleven measures, to create syncopation. The atmosphere lent itself particularly well to the outbursts of the cadence, the musicians gave the best of themselves and managed more or less to play like negroes of the thirty-seventh order.⁷¹

As with the *bigle moi*, described shortly, Vian explicitly connected the “negro” caliber of the Abadie orchestra to an infusion of sexuality in the dancing:

The zazous’ joy was at its highest. Their legs twisted like forked woodwinds while their wooden soles forcefully punctuated the four beat rhythm that is the very soul of black music, as Andre Coeuroy would say [. . .] The deceitful prolonged and forceful sounds of the trombone gave the dancers’ playful movements a quasi-sexual character and appeared to issue from the gullet of a lewd bull. The pubic areas rubbed vigorously against each other [. . .]⁷²

Nightfall only increased “the zazous’ frenzy” as, “gorged on cognac,” the zazous increased their dancing:

Couples dripping with sweat traveled kilometers at a racing pace, grabbing each other, letting go of each other, projecting each other, catching each other, pivoting each other, un-pivoting each other, playing grasshopper, duck, giraffe, sewer rat, touch me here, hold this tight, move your foot, lift your butt, hurry your legs, come close, back off, hurling swears in English,

⁷⁰ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 46.

⁷¹ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 174-175.

⁷² Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 174-175.

American, negro, hottentot, hot this morning, Bulgarian, Patagonian, Terrafuegan, et cetera.⁷³

The party did not peak until well into the morning.

Another regulated description of dancing, this time of a jazz style Vian invented himself that translates roughly as “look at me” or “check me out” highlights the racial element of jazz. The Jeeves-inspired butler and chef in *L'Écume des jours* describes that dance: “In principle, the dancers hold each other at a medium distance apart. With a slow song, the undulation can be regulated in such a manner that the fixed foyer is located at half the height of the two partners: the head and the feet are thus mobile.” The tempo of the dance is important, however, and Nicolas’ explanation takes on a racial element: “It has, regrettably, happened that less scrupulous people have danced the *bigle moi* the way the Blacks do, to a rapid tempo.” The increased tempo changes the dance so that instead of the head and feet performing the movement, most of the motion centers on the pelvis. Nicolas links the sexuality created by the mixture of dance and race to the music itself: “Danced to a boogie, concluded Nicolas, the effect is, let’s say it, as more obscene as the song is in general.”⁷⁴ In the novel, Vian sustained the tension between sexual obscenity and bourgeois propriety because although he allowed the foil couple to dance the *bigle moi* to a boogie rhythm, he required the hero Colin to shield the heroine Chloe’s eyes so that she will not see their friends’ sexualized dancing.⁷⁵ Vian celebrated the sexuality of African-American music, but he sought to shield it from respectable French society.

⁷³ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 181.

⁷⁴ Vian, *L'Écume des jours* 42-44.

⁷⁵ Vian, *L'Écume des jours* 54.

Sex in zazou culture was not limited to sexualized dancing. Zazou parties, as hinted earlier, were also opportunities for zazou boys to meet and seduce zazou girls, and Vian offered instructions and procedures on how to achieve this objective.⁷⁶ The novel is replete with couples having sexual intercourse at parties and at one party, the coatroom is even turned into a *baisodrome* or sex arena.⁷⁷ Sex is not limited to the *baisodrome*, and the protagonists' right hand man finds he has to extricate "two couples from the Major's bed, two others and a homosexual couple in his own bed, three in the broom closet, one in the shoe closet (it was a very small couple.) He found seven girls and a boy in the coal cellar, all of them naked and covered in mauve vomit."⁷⁸ At the final party, young couples find even more exotic locations for sexual activity, including "on the divans, in the closets, under the furniture, behind the furniture, behind the doors, under the piano (there were three), on the balconies (with blankets), in the corners, under the rugs, on the armoires, under the beds, in the beds, in the bathtubs, in the umbrella stands, here and there, a little everywhere."⁷⁹ Even the protagonist is not spared a cuckolding as his best friend Antioche takes his love interest's virginity.⁸⁰

Despite the sexual promiscuity portrayed in his novels, Vian was himself a rather shy and hesitant zazou when it came to girls. Desperately afraid of venereal disease, he never had the sex-life of his characters, and in any case, Vian was a young husband and father by the time he wrote the novel.⁸¹ One of Vian's closest friends as a young adult, Jacques Loustalot, was nicknamed "the Major," and Vian scholars have enjoyed pointing out the similarities between the friend and the character of the same name. The same

⁷⁶ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 28-33.

⁷⁷ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 44.

⁷⁸ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 60.

⁷⁹ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 186.

⁸⁰ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 44.

⁸¹ Noël Arnaud, *Les Vies parallèles de Boris Vian* (Paris: Union générale d'Éditions, 1976) 30.

critics have declared the Major's fictional friend, Antioche, to be Vian's fictional representation of himself, but the character is not sufficiently well developed or exposed to declare certainty. However, it does help to explain why Vian allowed Antioche to preempt the Major's quest for Zizanie's virginity. It is therefore possible that Vian exaggerated the sexual escapades of his characters in order to create the kind of parties he would have wanted to enjoy but never permitted himself as a zazou.

Violence in Zazou Culture

An examination of zazou culture cannot fail to include the element of violence present at the parties described in Vian's work. Zazou violence, perpetrated by zazous on adults as well as on fellow zazous, took several forms, included fistfights, rape, and explosions. In the short story "Surprise-partie chez Léobille," the violent character is the erstwhile hero, the Major, who upon his arrival at the titular party, shoots the doorbell and then has a physical fight with the host over control of the women at the party. Remarkably, although the fight includes broken furniture, "The guests had not remarked much" because they were busy dancing and flirting as at any party.⁸² Either the zazous at the party were particularly self-absorbed or this kind of violence was not an unusual occurrence. The Major subsequently tries to rape Jennifer, the girl who caught his eye, and succeeds in tearing her clothes before the title character Léobille tosses him out of a window.

The cook in *Vercoquin et le plancton* was not as fortunate as Jennifer. Stuck in a cupboard during the final party, she became the rape victim of five zazous carried away by their dancing frenzy:

⁸² Vian, "Surprise-partie chez Leobille" 191.

From a nail in the ceiling of the office there hung, its flesh torn off, the hambone. Five males (visibly) danced a fierce dance around it. The muffled punches of the cook, Berthe Planche, locked in a cupboard, punctuated the savage circular dance. Because she beat against the tempo, they freed and raped her, all five, two by two. Then they shut her back in the cupboard, but this time, on the bottom shelf.⁸³

The rape seems to be motivated by the sexualization of jazz dancing described earlier, degenerating in this instance to a primitive ritual around the gnawed bone of a piece of meat, but the cook's transgression is beating the door counter to the rhythm of the music. To the zazous in the scene, her behavior constitutes a crime worthy of a punishment that Vian does not take seriously, mathematically joking that five young men raped her two at a time.

The final act of violence in *Vercoquin et le plancton* takes place by accident. Two zazous knock over a candle, lighting the gas jet. The entire building where the party is taking place explodes, and only the heroes, the Major and Antioche, survive.⁸⁴ As with "Surprise-partie chez Leobille," no one seems to notice the blast, in this case because "a little bombardment was taking place in the direction of Billancourt."⁸⁵ A real bombardment of Billancourt had in fact taken place on March 3, 1942, when the English air force targeted the Renault factories, resulting in 623 deaths.⁸⁶ Perhaps the *Vercoquin* explosion was meant to be a condemnation of the arbitrary nature of war, but the heroes not only fail to mourn the loss of their friends but do not even seem to notice that the Major's fiancée was included in the death toll. Critics have further worried that the body count in Vian's zazou fiction minimizes the actual losses suffered by the Jewish

⁸³ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 172.

⁸⁴ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 187.

⁸⁵ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 188.

⁸⁶ Christopher Jones, *Boris Vian Transatlantic: Sources, Myths, and Dreams* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) 59; Bollon 127.

community through France's contribution to the Holocaust.⁸⁷ Indeed Vian's zazou work fails to address the Holocaust at all. Although the zazou community, considered pro-American, was lumped together with the Jewish community for persecution by the germanophile conservative press who painted the zazous as disguised Jews with "menacing looks, crooked noses" the zazous never suffered the actual persecution that the Jews did.⁸⁸ It would therefore be an insufficient argument to claim that by giving his zazou heroes the authority to commit violence (while also suffering from the same violence) Vian was in any way addressing the Jewish plight.

The absence of an awareness of the Holocaust in the zazou stories brings us back to another problematic element, the organized or even regimented description of zazou behavior. Described earlier as a condemnation of rigid bourgeois conventions, an alternative reading that views organized zazou movements as militia-like or even fascistic should be examined. In the world of the zazou party, the Major and Antioche seem to have a singular license to behave as they please while the lesser zazous are ordered around, made to carry ice and sandwich trays and to clear space for dancing. Even their sexual intercourse can be interrupted by the Major or Antioche who arbitrarily evict them from their semi-privacy whenever they choose.

Even more disturbing is the potential parallel between the regimented zazou movement and the youth movements organized by fascist regimes, including in this period in France the organized Chantiers de la Jeunesse, the Compagnons de France, and the Jeunesse Populaire Française (JPF, the 25,000 strong youth movement created in May 1942 by the fascist Doriot, a group who wore a blue uniform) who picked fights with

⁸⁷ Jones 60.

⁸⁸ Bollon 128.

zazous in the streets. The JPF tasked themselves with clearing the Boulevard St. Michel of Jews and zazous alike through menace and with shaving the heads of zazous, prelude to the head-shaving that women would receive after the war as punishment for sexual relations with the occupiers.⁸⁹ The journal *Le Cri du peuple* encouraged the last act by devoting a regular column to the JPF and inviting professional barbers to join.⁹⁰ The police began to carry out raids on the zazous during the summer of 1942, and some were sent to work at harvesting fields.⁹¹ Vian belittled military organizations in his later plays such as *L'equarrissage pour tous* (1948) and *Le Gouter des généraux* (1951) so the regimented zazou life could be read as an objection to the constraints of military life. In a beloved anecdote, the real Major, Jacques Loustalot, purchased a military uniform from a drunken American soldier, and proceeded to inspect “his” American troops.⁹² Vian’s regimented descriptions of zazou life are parodies of the fascist militias rather than devoted imitation. They further point to the distance that Vian allowed himself to take even with regards to the zazou subculture. By not engaging completely in the zazou world, Vian recognized that the zazous’ non-conformist attitude could create militarist conformity. This is the same detachment he used in his study of American culture, as will become more evident in subsequent chapters.⁹³

One final and significant shortcoming in Vian’s descriptions of zazou life as a viable alternative remains his blatant sexism. Nearly all of Vian’s writing, and especially his zazou writing, issues from a male perspective in which women have little or no

⁸⁹ Loiseau 155-157.

⁹⁰ Loiseau 158.

⁹¹ Loiseau 160.

⁹² Arnaud, *Les vies parallèles de Boris Vian* 56.

⁹³ In a 1958 article about jazz, Vian insisted that whereas non-conformism could take many paths, anti-conformism was just as limiting as whatever conformity it was opposing. Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 115.

autonomy or agency. Silly characters that exist in order to be seduced, the zazou girls receive very little character development and can barely be distinguished one from another. The rape and attempted rape described above provide one possible outcome. In the workplace, the *Vercoquin* bureaucrat Miqueut dismisses his female stenographers' demands that their salaries be increased because the war has increased living expenses by merely recommending that they marry.⁹⁴ In the domestic sphere, the girls are quite clearly relegated to the role of cook or at least server as they bring cakes to the parties and circulate sandwiches among guests.⁹⁵

For an author who resented social limitations, it is startling to what extent he ignored the limitations imposed on women by the sexual division of labor, but sexism in the zazou culture was not far from the sexism in the zoot-suit culture that inspired it. In the black hipster culture of the American war years, "Women were merely objects through which hustling men sought leisure and pleasure."⁹⁶ Investigations into subcultures have revealed that females associated with those groups are often not integrated the way males are. Girls are subjected to a kind of "collective chauvinism" according to which they are "'available' for collective or individual sexual experimentation." The group dynamic breaks down, however, when individual members begin forming monogamous relationships. As a result, "with the onset of individualized 'courtship' patterns, the group life and involvement declines, the subcultural alternative 'dissolves' through its failure to mount a viable alternative to the dominant patterns of

⁹⁴ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 97.

⁹⁵ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 172.

⁹⁶ Kelly 175.

long term sexuality.”⁹⁷ Vian’s own marriage and entrance into the workforce notwithstanding, Vian chose to end his *zazou* novel with an explosion; the Major’s questioning of his desire for marriage indicates that he is not ready to leave the comforts of the *zazou* subculture for the realities of adult life.

The ultimate violence in *Vercoquin* implies a rejection of even the *zazou*-created space. Even the replacement reality is determined to be unsuitable. The Major’s response to the explosion and death of his fiancée and friends is simply to wonder whether he was really “made for marriage.”⁹⁸ Too dramatic to be a single critique of the bourgeois institution of marriage, the violent collapse of the building could be a rejection of the flimsy construct of *zazou* life or a rejection of any reality that includes rules and shades of conformity. It is possible that the violence in *Vercoquin* must be interpreted strictly within the context of the Occupation, that *zazou* culture refused to be interpreted according to mainstream definitions and categories, and that the explosion concluding the novel represents Vian’s and the *zazous*’ rejection of any normal entry to regular adult life during a time of extreme irregularity.

Conclusions

After the war, elements of the *zazou* style were diffused and adopted by the new youth subcultures described as “be-boppers” or “bobbysoxers.” The *zazous* were a wartime phenomenon, but the press continued to discuss them during the post war period, lumping them together with the existentialist philosophy and jazz caves of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Like the *zazous*, the boppers and bobbysoxers would continue to listen to American music and read pulp fiction crime novels, but these cultural practices

⁹⁷ Clarke, John, “Style,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, Eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976) 190.

⁹⁸ Vian, *Vercoquin et le plancton* 88.

lost their wartime meaning and became instead an argument about postwar modernization. For Boris Vian, the zizou experience during the war years would lead not to overt political action but to a refined appreciation of jazz music and a greater interest in the social conditions of the American jazz musicians he admired.

Vian's war years ended with a shared meal with American soldiers. Vian and his wife Michelle bicycled to meet the first Americans who reached Paris through the forest of Ville d'Avray. They invited a dozen or two soldiers home but had almost nothing to serve them because wartime ration restrictions were still in place. The Vians began to prepare the Americans some vegetable soup when the Americans insisted they not trouble themselves. The following day the Americans returned loaded with tins of food to offer the Vians.⁹⁹

Although American jazz represented a form of young resistance during the war, Vian was wary of the American presence in France. As de Gaulle feared, the acceptance of American culture began to look like the acceptance of American domination as collaboration with Germans gave way to cooperation with Americans. Vian's attachment to jazz grew stronger, and his admiration for parts of American culture continued to focus on a black American "other" where sex and race were heavily connected. American jazz remained linked to resistance, even if the uniforms of the "occupiers" changed. Vian had a young family to support, and with his wife's help he began translating popular American novels, especially hard-boiled detective fiction. Using the mass culture phenomenon of the crime novel, Vian began to explore the black

⁹⁹ Gilbert Pestureau, Intervention, *Boris Vian: actes du colloque, 23 juillet – 2 août, 1976, Centre culturel international de Cerisy-la-Salle*, eds. Noël Arnaud and Henri Baudin, vol. 2 (Paris: Union Générales d'Éditions, 1977) 143.

American “other,” who represented his wartime resistance, embracing certain aspects of American culture while criticizing others facets of that culture.

Chapter 2: Vian the Black American: American Culture as Laboratory

In the early postwar period Boris Vian began to examine the American culture in which jazz was produced. During the war jazz represented a kind of freedom, but after the war, as America's presence increased in France, Vian was not comfortable embracing jazz without objecting to American racism. In magazine articles about jazz he cited examples of that racism, and in 1946 he explored its effects through a couple of quickly-written novels, imitating the dark style of the American detective fiction he enjoyed so much. Although Vian's critics argued that his work was not only obscene but irresponsible, Vian insisted that it was an author's responsibility to remain detached and to consider possibilities beyond those offered by the order of the day.

In the immediate postwar period, stark political choices were offered. The Communist Party had more support than ever, and General de Gaulle already feared American power. He withdrew from politics when the Fourth Republic adopted a Constitution that maintained a strong Assembly against a weaker executive as well as Resistance coalitions he no longer thought were necessary.¹⁰⁰ The intellectual Left had been seduced by the Communist Party, and Sartre and de Beauvoir founded *Les Temps Modernes* as a vehicle for responsible intellectuals to engage in the teleological march of History. Vian's social circles overlapped with Sartre's in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Vian wrote a number of articles for *Les Temps Modernes*. Although he considered Sartre

¹⁰⁰ Sowerwine 226, 238.

a friend, he never subscribed to Sartre's philosophy of existentialism, even parodying it in *L'Écume des jours*, nor to his admiration for Marxism.¹⁰¹

In this political climate, Vian made a name for himself under an American pseudonym. He had already dubbed himself "Baron Visi" and "Brisavion" in his first manuscript, *Trouble dans les Andains*, but he named his most famous alter-ego, Vernon Sullivan, after Paul Vernon, a fellow musician in the Abadie Orchestra, and Joe Sullivan, the American jazz pianist. "Vernon Sullivan" was born in the summer of 1946, the result of a whim. Le Scorpion, the publishing company of Vian's friend Jean d'Halluin, was not doing well after the war, and d'Halluin needed a best-seller in order to stay in business. In 1946 France, the formula for creating a best-seller was simply translating popular American novels because the words "Translated from the American" advertised on a book's jacket assured high sales. As noted by the French press in 1946, "in today's style, just about anything is translated, as if the mention 'translated from the American' were a mark of magic fiber."¹⁰² American fiction was proscribed during the war, but it inundated France in the early postwar period. American *film noir* became very popular in France at the same time, so popular, in fact, that the term for the genre was coined in France. Translations of American novels, particularly American crime novels or detective stories, sold so well that publishers often did not care if particular works had any interest or merit.¹⁰³ When a number of dubious works appeared on French

¹⁰¹ Vian's first wife, Michelle Leglise, was a great intellectual companion, sharing Vian's tastes in jazz and American novels. After their marriage disintegrated in 1950 and 1951, she became Sartre's lover.

¹⁰² Alfred Cismaru, *Boris Vian* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974) 32 (*Spectateur*, 26 Nov. 1946).

¹⁰³ "The mention 'translated from the American' was in effect a guarantee of sales: readers wanted works translated from the American, they were given it, and often no matter what," Jacques Duchateau, *Boris Vian* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1969) 129.

bookshelves, the example of pulp fiction reinforced the Left's assertion that American mass culture amounted to shoddy work.

Vian's interest in American *noir* novels pre-dated their immense popularity after the war. He had begun reading American novels during the war, when such a choice in reading material could be considered political because by 1941 all American books were placed on the forbidden "Otto list." Vian had developed a certain taste for them, but he decried the prevalence of poor translations, even complaining about Marcel Duhamel's *Série Noire*, the premier French collection of translated American detective novels.¹⁰⁴ When d'Halluin asked Vian to find his publishing house a good American *noir* to translate, Vian replied that he could write a better one himself. The remark might have remained a casual comment had not Vian's wife Michelle, who would later help Vian translate Raymond Chandler's *The Lady of the Lake*, dared him, saying, "Yeah, go ahead, write him a best-seller."

The Novel

Vian wrote *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* in just two weeks, while on vacation from the Professional Office of Industry Commerce of Paper and Cardboard, his second and final engineering job. The novel tells the story of a black man passing for white who avenges the lynching of his younger brother by seducing and then gruesomely murdering two young sisters of a respectable white family. Vian claimed that the theme of race relations in America came from Herbert Ashbury's "Who is a negro?," an American magazine article that he had just read in *Collier's* describing the phenomenon of black Americans passing for white.¹⁰⁵ Despite the American government's attempts to portray

¹⁰⁴ Noël Simsolo, "De-Polar-isation," *Arc* (1984): 53.

¹⁰⁵ Duchateau 130; Cismaru, 29. See also Herbert Ashbury, *Collier's*, 3 Aug. 1946.

an image of improved race relations in an effort to promote democracy, the American race problem remained prominent in the press, and French newspapers had been full of articles describing lynching in the South during the summer of 1946. Among excerpts from Saint-Clair Drake and Horace Clayton's *Black Metropolis*, *Les Temps Modernes*' August-September 1946 issue included an article on the phenomenon of African-Americans passing for white. The article estimated that between 25,000 and 300,000 African Americans crossed the color line every year and cited the fear of lynching as the greatest deterrence.¹⁰⁶ In the fall of that year, Sartre's play *The Respectful Prostitute* adapted the 1930s case of the Scottsboro boys to condemn persistent American racism. *J'irai cracher* also recalled Richard Wright's *The Children of Uncle Tom* and *Black Boy*, which Marcel Duhamel would translate. In his memoirs, Duhamel wrote that he "would sometimes have trouble defending [Boris'] reputation against certain American friends who accused him of lending grist to the racist mill."¹⁰⁷ The lynching theme in hard-boiled style also reminded certain audiences of Don Tracy's 1938 *How Sleeps the Beast*, which appeared a few years later in Duhamel's *Série Noire*.

Written quickly, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* was an opportunity for Vian to prove to himself that he could write in an American style of pulp fiction as well as or better than other authors on the market, but it was also an opportunity to earn some money, or "vendre sa salade" as Vian phrased it in his characteristically informal manner of speech. *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* did not sell well initially, but Daniel Parker, secretary of a watchdog group calling itself the French Cartel of Social and Moral Action,

¹⁰⁶ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, "A Travers la ligne de demarcation des races," trans. Jeannine Metier, *Les Temps Modernes*, 11-12 (1946): 532.

¹⁰⁷ Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les Amerlauds et les Godons* 94 (Marcel Duhamel, *Raconte pas ta vie*, 555).

set out to pursue a ban on the book for indecency in February 1947, four months after the novel's appearance, invoking a 1939 law protecting families. Sales of the novel increased dramatically two months later when a woman named Anne-Marie Masson was found murdered next to a copy of the novel.¹⁰⁸ Newspapers reported that when Vian "learned about the crime which he had inspired, of which he was even a kind of author by proxy," Vian made a curious reply. Instead of denying his book's role in the murder, Vian stated, "'A novel is made for relief. This crime therefore proves that my book was not violent enough. What I write next will be much more virulent.'"¹⁰⁹ Vian claimed to have intended his novel to be a release from pressure, a liberating experience, rather than an incitement to violence or a manual for murder.

The novel became a *succès de scandale* as newspaper reports provided publicity for the work, simultaneously provoking a prurient interest in reading it and permitting readers a way to rationalize their desire to read it: any comment on its immorality required first-hand knowledge of its content. An August 1947 law amnestied all works published before January 16, 1947, but the re-edition of *J'irai cracher* in August 1948 provided Parker another chance to pursue Vian. In November 1948, after much speculation in the press and evidence shown in court, Vian finally admitted authorship of the novel and was fined a 100,000 franc penalty. Shortly after the fine was imposed, Vian demonstrated his effort to maintain his good humor, writing an article for *Combat* entitled "I Am a Sex Maniac." The article explained that books do not create perverts or criminals and that Vian's eight-year-old-son preferred to read *Tintin* comics rather than the volumes of Miller, Sade, and Vernon Sullivan on Vian's bookshelves. In a

¹⁰⁸ Duchateau 131-132.

¹⁰⁹ Arnaud, *Dossier de l'Affaire "J'irai cracher sur vos tombes"* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1974) 59.

remarkable reversal of stereotypes, Vian cited the case of a judge in the United States, usually portrayed as the land of puritanical fear, who apparently explained that he preferred his children to learn about sex from books rather than from experience.¹¹⁰ The Court of Appeals later added two weeks in prison to Vian's penalty, but the final sentence was immediately annulled. *J'irai cracher and Les morts ont tous la même peau*, a second novel Vian had by then published under the Sullivan pseudonym, remained censored.¹¹¹

Vian's subsequent novels, including two more written under the Sullivan pseudonym, *Et on tuera tous les affreux*, 1948 and *Elles se rendent pas compte*, 1950, describing amateur detectives racing through Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. between sexual exploits, never garnered the audiences of his first novel. Vian scholars of the 1960s and 1970s devoted most of their efforts to rehabilitating Vian's literary reputation by focusing on novels written under his own name such as *L'Écume des jours* and *L'Arrache-cœur* and on his plays such as *Le Gouter des généraux* and *Les Bâtisseurs de l'empire*, now considered by many to be forerunners of the Nouveau Roman and Theatre of the Absurd. Michel Rybalka was one of the first Vian scholars to re-connect explicitly and psychologically Sullivan and Vian. Resurrecting an earlier press reference to Vernon Sullivan as Boris Vian's "alter-negro," Rybalka argued that the Sullivan novels provide evidence of what Vian would have written in his own name if he had felt completely free.¹¹² He further explained the link between the first two and last two

¹¹⁰ Boris Vian, "Je Suis un Obsédé Sexuel," *Combat*, 16 May 1950: 1,4.

¹¹¹ Vian, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2. Vian wrote two additional novels under the Sullivan pseudonym, *Et on tuera tous les affreux* (1948) and *Elles se rendent pas compte* (1950). They will not be discussed in this thesis, however, because they do not address racial themes.

¹¹² Rybalka 104.

Sullivan novels and the importance of considering the Sullivan oeuvre in its entirety to show that what began as racial masking ended in gendered masking:

From *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* to *Elles se rendent pas compte*, the evolution is not as big as it appears; what we will call eroticism resulted in misogyny and in the idea of man crucified by woman; what was a racial problem finished by crystallizing itself as transvestite. [. . .] Cross-dressing and misogyny are present everywhere in the work of Boris Vian and are perhaps only two aspects of a more fundamental problem. Vernon Sullivan helps us understand Boris Vian; their work is not only inseparable, but complementary. Esthetically less viable, Sullivan is more explicit on the psychological plane; hidden behind his pseudonym, believing himself to be writing farces, Vian delivers to us in reality his most secret obsessions.¹¹³

In other words, Vian used what critics have since dubbed “paraliterature” in order to shed constraining literary conventions. Rybalka was not the first to notice Sullivan’s usefulness in Vian’s self-expression and in understanding his psychology. Several of his contemporaries, including Sartre, thought that Vernon Sullivan “was better suited to the expression of Vian’s dark-edged playfulness than the works the author wrote under his own name.”¹¹⁴ I argue that Vian used the “esthetically less viable” but commercially popular form of pulp fiction in order to explore the possibilities of using American mass culture to examine race and gender relations.

Vernon Sullivan’s America

Vian’s first two Sullivan works sparked controversy in part because of their sexual explicitness, but they were also a rebellion against French literary norms and bourgeois cultural values. Like Francois Truffaut, who nearly a decade later wrote “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” rejecting the “tradition of quality” of the “*cinéma du papa*” for being controlled by literary formulas, Vian scolded his critics for

¹¹³ Rybalka 113.

¹¹⁴ James Campbell. *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, and Others on the Left Bank* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 93.

failing to admit that they were surprised by his work and as yet incapable of categorizing it.¹¹⁵ The differences between Vian and Truffaut are obvious (Truffaut chastised screenwriters for their anti-clericalism and anti-militarism while Vian embraced such sentiments), but both were described as apolitical and both looked to American cultural production to diversify French cultural production.

Vian's Sullivan novels simultaneously evoked, fed off of, and fed into familiar images of America prevalent in popular culture. They appealed to audiences whose vision of an America of tough gangsters and seductive "broads" corresponded to Vian's because it was informed by reading the same pulp fiction and watching the same American films that were available to a wide section of French audiences.¹¹⁶ The French press recognized the America in *J'irai cracher* as easily as its readers:

All of the specifically American details of the novel correspond exactly to the conception that any French person who goes to the cinema and reads American magazines could have about the U.S. One finds all of the banal clichés that come to mind when one speaks of America: Coca-Cola, Packards, drug stores, chewing gum, bobby-soxers, etc.¹¹⁷

Noir-inspired clichés transcended the popular/intellectual divide, as even Simone de Beauvoir found herself comparing the America she discovered in person in the mid-1940s to detective stories. For example, driving through California she found an apparently deserted wooded road that she thought would be perfect for Humphrey Bogart to cover up his wife's murder by simulating an accident.¹¹⁸ De Beauvoir had no interest in trying out the genre herself, but she did criticize Marcel Duhamel, France's leading

¹¹⁵ Francois Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 224-237; Vian, preface, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau, Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 404.

¹¹⁶ Jones 106.

¹¹⁷ Arnaud, *Dossier de l'Affaire 23 (France-Dimanche, January 19, 1946)*.

¹¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour," *Les Temps Modernes* 28 (January 1948): 1214.

translator of American noir, for discrepancies between his descriptions and her observations. She decided that Duhamel was wrong when he claimed that the view of the American countryside was blocked by billboards because she herself had a lovely view of the country.¹¹⁹

Vian's ready audience for his adoption of "the hard-boiled conventions and an American literary persona" was liberating in several ways. It freed him not only from the constraints of what one author has described as the "discredited postwar social and literary context in which he found himself" as well as "the controlling influence of the dominant Left Bank publishing houses," but also from the "engaged" writing of the existentialists. Such critics argue that the gambit did not succeed in the long term, and that it did not help propel Vian into the literary elite, because the literary establishment ultimately "marginalized Vian for his lack of attention to the rules of the game,"¹²⁰ but they fail to notice the political nature of Vian's work. If the rules of being an "engaged" author included taking seriously both the profession of author and the written text and not pandering to commercialism, Vian's work was an effort to follow them in spirit, but without the existential strings attached. Vian defined himself as an irresponsible *engagé* when he responded to articles demanding he take responsibility for his work by writing that "an author is the standard of irresponsibility." He claimed that it was the figure of the author "who accomplishes the most brilliant about-turns (Aragon, Gide, etc.), who lends his ear to his least moral or physiological disorders [. . .] who hurries [. . .] to invoke the 'drama' of the writer."¹²¹ He was arguing that he was not responsible for the murder of Anne-Marie Masson, but he was also arguing against Sartre's call for writers

¹¹⁹ De Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour," *Les Temps Modernes* 28: 1213.

¹²⁰ Jones 136.

¹²¹ Arnaud, *Le Dossier de l'affaire* 63.

to be politically engaged. Unlike the “responsible” political person who consistently defended the same argument, Vian wanted to use his literature to explore possibilities one by one.

During a time when Sartre was demanding that collaborationist authors such as Robert Brasillach be punished for their fascist writings during the war, when authors’ written words were being offered as evidence of crimes against the nation, Vian believed that an author’s freedom resided in disruption and in questioning rather than in servicing a party line.¹²² As an arena for individual cultural expression, novels needed to be freed from politics that threatened to limit the author. Far from being apolitical, Vian’s attempt to disconnect literature from politics aimed at the very center of ideological power. He bristled against attacks on his work, writing in the preface to *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, “When will you allow that one can write for *Les Temps Modernes* and not be an existentialist, enjoy farce but not write it all the time? When will you allow freedom?”¹²³

Vian’s defense during the litigation against *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* centered on artistic license and therefore on the question of whether or not the novel was a work of literature. Instead of viewing Vian’s effort as an example of how pulp fiction could be used to examine issues of gender and race in front of a larger public or a wider audience, the press largely used the work’s sexuality to dismiss the genre entirely. Lumping Vian’s work together with pornography coming from the United States, journals felt little need to examine the Sullivan novels as literature. Part of the prosecution’s objection to the novels was that they were inexpensive and widely available, prompting Vian’s lawyers to

¹²² See Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹²³ Vian, preface, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 404.

emphasize the difference between *J'irai cracher*'s focus on race versus typical American pulp fiction "where sex and money predominate as motivators."¹²⁴ While Vian's defense cited *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover* as examples of literature that had previously been censored, most of the literary establishment did not see the equivalence between Joyce and Vian.¹²⁵ The literary elite chose instead to defend the work of Henry Miller, whose *Tropics of Cancer* and *Tropics of Capricorn* were being pursued for indecency by the same Cartel of Social and Moral Action objecting to Vian's work. Considered an established author of literary merit and a representative not of mass culture but of high culture, Miller found himself supported by a defense committee composed of established French authors. In a letter *Combat* published in 1947, Miller expressed his gratitude for the eternal humanist quality he saw in French intellectuals, writing that "In time, it will become evident to all that the only menace for humanity resides in the spirit of intolerance and injustice," but even his words did not extend to Vian.¹²⁶

Vian later wrote that the novel was "not rooted in literature but in diversion," making a classic distinction between high culture and mass culture, a distinction Europeans often coded as the difference between a European culture of quality and an American culture of quantity.¹²⁷ In the preface to his second Sullivan novel, Vian ultimately seemed to accept the distinction between literature and popular novels. He wrote that *J'irai cracher* contained "a theme that, well-treated, could have been a good novel, with the ordinary accompanying risk of mediocre sales (through the fault of the critics and editors) of any good novel. And that, treated commercially as it is, results in a

¹²⁴ Jones 131.

¹²⁵ Arnaud, *Dossier de l'Affaire* 224.

¹²⁶ Henry Miller, "Lettre aux Francais," *Combat*, 4 April 1947: 1.

¹²⁷ Arnaud, *Dossier de l'Affaire* 197; Arnaud, *Vies Paralleles* 165.

popular novel, easily read and well-sold.”¹²⁸ Vian remained ambivalent about his own embrace of commercial literature, worrying that the public might not think him capable of producing high literature, and insisting that he knew that artistically *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* was “bad, very bad.”¹²⁹

Race and Sexuality

Despite his lawyers’ assertion that race was more important than sexuality in Vian’s work, a few passages from the Sullivan *pas-se-blanc* novels clearly reveal the centrality of the themes of sexuality. Although many Vian scholars have preferred to assume that his appreciation for jazz was sufficient not only to inoculate him against racism but also to set him on the path towards civil rights, others have argued that the Sullivan novels used racism as a literary device, as “a problem like any other, a problem that gave him the occasion to retread familiar paths. The importance of sexuality, a sexuality based on possession, had as effect the relegation of the theme of racism to the background.”¹³⁰ The novel remains problematic because the scenes of revenge for the lynching of a young black man take the form of the brutal rape and/or murder of women. In *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes*, the black man’s revenge derives from the strangulation of one sister, Jean Asquith, and from the oral mutilation of her sister Lou’s genitals. In the strangulation scene, Lee achieves revenge and sexual climax at the same moment:

I again felt that strange sensation that ran up my back and my hand closed on her throat and I couldn’t stop myself; it came; it was so strong that I let her go and almost staggered to my feet [. . .] I took Lou’s gun from my pocket and I sent two bullets into her neck, almost point-blank; the blood started bubbling out, slowly, in spurts, with a squirting sound [. . .] She jerked suddenly, and I think that was

¹²⁸ Vian, preface, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 404-405.

¹²⁹ Arnaud, *Vies parallèles* 165; Emma Baus, *Boris Vian: “Un jour il y aura autre chose que le jour”* (Paris: L’esprit frappeur, 2002) 6.

¹³⁰ Duchateau 137.

when she died. I turned her over so I wouldn't have to see her face any more, and while she was still warm I did to her just what I had done in her bedroom.¹³¹

The strangulation of one sister draws links to the lynching of the protagonist's younger brother, but whereas the brother's lynching was punishment for sleeping with a white woman, Lee Anderson manages to strangle the white woman with whom he had slept and who was pregnant with his child. Lee seems to blame his brother's white mistress for his brother's death rather than the lynch mob who killed him, and Lee's revenge comes from killing that woman by proxy. Lee follows up on his murder by raping the still warm corpse of the white woman, symbolizing his complete power and victory over her.

The earlier murder of Lou, even more vile and sadistic than Jean's murder, is also more complicated. Although Lee has had oral sex with Lou, he in fact kills her without ever having vaginal intercourse with her. This omission is even more pronounced because the earlier sexual contact of mouth to genitals is replaced by animalistic biting and tearing of the same flesh:

I bit her right between the thighs. I had my mouth full of black stiff hairs. I opened my jaws and clenched them again a little farther down where it was softer. I was dizzy with her perfume, – she had plenty of it down there, and I closed my teeth tighter. I tried to put my hand on her mouth, but she squealed like a stuck pig, blood curdling cries. I bit harder with all my strength and I cut through the flesh. I felt the blood gush into my mouth and her body writhed in spite of the rope. My face was smeared with blood and I sat back on my haunches a bit.¹³²

Through genital mutilation Lee is able to remove the putative source of the white woman's power over the black man, sexuality, but his full vengeance comes not from her death but from her scream. Lee explains, "I'd never heard a woman scream like that; all of a sudden I felt that I was shooting off in my shorts. It effected me stronger than any

¹³¹ Boris Vian, *I Spit on Your Graves*, trans. Boris Vian and Milton Rosenthal (1946; Paris: Scorpion; Los Angeles: Tam Tam Books, 1998) 167.

¹³² Vian, *I Spit on Your Graves* 156-157.

other time in my life, but I was afraid somebody would come (sic).”¹³³ A scream like he has never heard before, full of terror, gives Lee the revenge and simultaneous sexual release he is seeking because the scream represents the fear in which he has lived as a black American at the mercy of murderous white lynch mobs. Although Vian’s final condemnation is actually of the “blackness” of the lynch mobs, his portrayal of Lee as a dangerous sexual predator could be viewed as undermining his social critique. In the final image of *J’irai cracher*, Lee’s “ridiculous” erection protrudes under his pants while he sways dead from the hangman’s noose, and the novel’s hero loses any sense of heroism.¹³⁴

Vian’s second novel under the Vernon Sullivan pseudonym abandons the pretext that a black man passing for white must act as violently as he does in order to avenge a racist act perpetrated by whites. In this novel violence is presented as the natural result of a man’s loss of faith in his own manhood based on the color of his skin. He loses his ability to define himself and who he is as an individual when he feels compelled to take on stereotypical behavior of a black man. In *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, racial identity is more explicitly linked to sexuality, particularly a dirty, smelly, sweaty kind of sexuality. When Daniel’s black brother Richard appears in his life threatening to reveal Daniel’s black identity if he is not paid enough, Richard brings Daniel to a dirty apartment with two of his black lovers. Daniel has intercourse with the women in a way that makes him feel black:

With my lips I caressed the grain of her skin, the bitter humidity of her sweat, and I wanted to bite right into her flesh. She brought me towards her and guided my head, and I felt her offer herself to me when I kissed her – and during this time,

¹³³ Vian, *I Spit on Your Graves* 157.

¹³⁴ Vian *I Spit on Your Graves* 177.

Anne slipped against me. I took her savagely, to make her cry out; our bodies steamed in the cold air of the room and I no longer knew that I had white skin.¹³⁵

He defines white skin shortly thereafter, when he is unable to be aroused by his wife Sheila's body: "I suddenly recoiled. She smelled distinctly and decidedly like soap. Hell. Might as well sleep with a washing machine."¹³⁶ Cleanliness was coded in France as white and civilized, the goal especially for women, and the opposite of primitive or barbarous indigenous populations of the colonies.¹³⁷ But for Vian's protagonist, white cleanliness is no longer appealing. Instead Daniel returns to the seedy apartment where his blackness betrays him again as he is aroused by the scent of the black women. He finds the women have left, "But their odor impregnated the room. I felt my body react in spite of myself, as I had not been able to make it react in the presence of Sheila and the chick from Nick's place."

Daniel blames his brother Richard for his loss of control: "In one leap I was on top of him and shook his neck."¹³⁸ Although Daniel originally hated Richard for threatening to reveal his racial identity, he ultimately kills Richard for revealing his racial identity not in physiological terms to his friends and family but in sexual terms to Daniel himself. By making Daniel feel sexually black, impotent in front of his white wife and sexually obsessed with black women, Richard had taken away Daniel's power to regulate his own sexuality and, by extension, his power to pass for white. The racial issue is ultimately erased when he discovers, along with the reader, that Richard was not really his brother at all and that Daniel has been a white man all along. However, by sleeping

¹³⁵ Vian, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 434.

¹³⁶ Vian, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 448.

¹³⁷ See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995).

¹³⁸ Vian, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 455.

with black women, by reacting to them in a “black” way, he believes himself to be black and finally commits suicide in disgust.

By transforming race into a question of sexuality, Vian put his finger on one of the problems haunting white American men, as civil rights activists had been arguing for more than fifty years: women’s sexuality. Ida B. Wells, for example, had been writing pamphlets since the 1890s arguing that the truth about sexual relationships between black men and white women was that they were consensual.¹³⁹ She argued that most interracial rapes were perpetrated against black women rather than white women, and that as “naturally licentious” and “bad” women, black women were not deemed to deserve protection against rape.¹⁴⁰ On the other hand, white men took it upon themselves to defend white women against the indecency of rape, according to a frontier code of justice that excused murders committed to rectify judicial imbalance, and the same code encouraged white men to read any act of black agency as equivalent to rape.¹⁴¹

Although it is unlikely that Vian was aware of Wells’ work, his first Sullivan novel includes more scenes of consensual interracial sex than of rape. In *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* the young black man is lynched despite the consensual nature of his relationship with his white girlfriend, and the early stages of his brother’s revenge plot include convincing white girls to sleep with him of their own free will before revealing his race to them. The argument breaks down, however, as Lee devolves into a primitive state, unable to control his sexual satisfaction at dominating white women. *Les Morts ont tous la même peau* offers the reverse study: white male aggression in response to black

¹³⁹ Jacqueline Jones Royster, ed., introduction, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (New York: Bedford Books, 1997).

¹⁴⁰ Royster 30.

¹⁴¹ Royster 9, 32.

female sexuality. As with the black male interacting with white women, the white man finds himself incapable of preventing his own arousal when confronted with black women. Because the white character believes he is black, however, the examination of the white man's culpability remains incomplete and explorations of black agency are abandoned.

African-American Authors in Paris

"Vernon Sullivan" was not the only African-American author in Paris in the early postwar period, but to these other authors, matters of race and sexuality were an entirely serious matter. Richard Wright arrived in Paris in 1946 and, like many black American writers and musicians, would remember France as a place of freedom. Through existentialism he learned that anxiety about existence was not limited to the black experience, and in Paris he began to feel less like a black man and more like a man.¹⁴² Although he appreciated existentialism, he doubted that its arguments about freedom of action applied to blacks in America, arguing with Sartre that for a black American, choosing to be something other than he was could lead to being lynched.¹⁴³ Vian scholars have noticed the similarities between his and Wright's work, some even arguing that Vian had taken Wright as his model in creating Vernon Sullivan.¹⁴⁴ Vian certainly knew Wright casually through the Saint-Germain literary circles, and his French translations of Wright's story "Bright and Morning Star" appeared in the French-African journal *Présence-Africaine* in the same month *J'irai cracher* was published.¹⁴⁵ Vian also translated Wright's story "Down by the River" for the review *Age Nouveau*. Wright's

¹⁴² Campbell 12.

¹⁴³ Campbell 11.

¹⁴⁴ Campbell 93.

¹⁴⁵ Campbell 19.

Native Son was not published in French translation until *J'irai cracher* had already been published, but it is possible that Vian had read it in the English text and that it influenced *J'irai cracher*.

Richard Wright was welcomed and celebrated in France, and interviews with him in the press reveal the influence of the French intellectual setting on Wright. The author succumbed to certain American stereotypes developed before World War II, arguing for example that America was more primitive than Europe because European civilization had not crossed the Atlantic and that France represented a civilization of quality in contrast to America's anti-humanist civilization of quantity. He worried that consumption had become a crude end in itself rather than the means to a better life, and he thought that *The Respectful Prostitute* demonstrated Sartre's profound understanding of American reality and naivety. Interviewers described Wright's family as being more French than American, fueling a French perception that black Americans in France were exempt from the category of superficial Americans criticized for their consumer habits.¹⁴⁶ Wright agreed, to an extent, describing the average American as "constrained to live in exile from himself in order not to know that he is desperate." According to Wright an American was someone who was content with "a conventional image of himself" and avoided "becoming conscious of himself."¹⁴⁷ His "Debuts in Chicago," published in the 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes* devoted to America, described white women living superficially, pursuing mediocrity and insignificant material rewards, and he implicitly offered blacks as an exception to superficial America just as Vian would in his articles.

¹⁴⁶ Michel Gordey, "Une Interview de l'écrivain Richard Wright: L'Amérique n'est pas le nouveau monde," *Lettres Françaises* 10 Jan. 1947: 1, 7. The interviewer was particularly struck by Wright's calm and intellectual demeanor that presented a strong contrast to Wright's virulent books.

¹⁴⁷ Maria Le Hardouin, "Richard Wright parmi les siens," *Combat* 11 July 1947: 2.

Nevertheless Wright saw black Americans as being influenced by a certain “degree of Americanism,” taking part in “a civilization that condemns him and [seeing] that the appetite for junk is what makes the nation blind to its problems, that is what makes storms burst in [the black man’s] soul.”¹⁴⁸

James Baldwin, another black American author in Paris in the late 1940s, had different ideas from Wright about what literature should be. In an article titled “Everybody’s Protest Novel” published in the first issue of the English language journal *Zero*, Baldwin argued that although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would have made a good protest pamphlet revealing the evils of slavery, it was a “very bad” novel because its Manichean divisions of men into good and evil ignored the complexity of human behavior. He viewed Wright’s work in the same vein, arguing that Wright’s insistence on his social message against racism made Bigger Thomas, his character from *Black Boy* who bears a strong resemblance to Lee Anderson in *J’irai cracher*, the direct descendant of Uncle Tom.¹⁴⁹ In an apocryphal story set at the Brasserie Lip, Wright is meant to have explained to Baldwin that “All literature is protest!” to which Baldwin retorted that “not all protest is literature.”¹⁵⁰

A couple of African-American authors followed the lead of “Vernon Sullivan,” perhaps unwittingly, making their way to pulp fiction. William Gardner Smith, for example, who was no longer having much high-brow success by the mid-1950s, tried to

¹⁴⁸ Richard Wright, “Débuts à Chicago,” trans. J.B. Pontalis, *Les Temps Modernes* 11-12 (1946): 483, 474.

¹⁴⁹ Campbell 32, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Campbell 35. Boris Vian was not the only author interested in American detective novels. James Baldwin wrote an article for the English language journal *Zero* during the summer of 1949 entitled “Preservation of Innocence” about “the repressions implicit in the approved image of American machismo, as exemplified in the novels of James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler.”

earn some money with the hard-boiled *South Street*.¹⁵¹ Chester Himes was very successful in the genre as the result of Marcel Duhamel's request that he write a book for the *Série Noire*. Turning from Himes' violent protest novel *The End of a Primitive*, his *Série Noire* novels featured Harlem detectives "Coffin" Ed Smith and "Gravedigger" Jones working in Harlem. Although as an African-American Himes had an easier time describing Smith and Jones than Vian describing Lee Anderson, Himes, like Vian, had to invent his American setting because he was not very familiar with the real Harlem.

Africans and Colonialism

One of the few French-speaking authors who took Vian's theme of racism seriously, rather than as an excuse to write about sex, was Joseph Zobel, a black author from Martinique, and he tried to bring a colonial perspective to the work. Zobel's own 1942 novel *Diab'la* about a man who leaves the sugar cane fields to start a new life in a fishing village had been forbidden by the Vichy government on the grounds that it contained a provocative anti-colonial message. Unlike subsequent scholars who likened *J'irai cracher* to the work of Richard Wright or Chester Himes, Zobel objected to Vian's novel for its distance from the new black literature of the French Caribbean. He argued that by portraying blacks as violent, Vian had betrayed the black race. He explained that real black literature was about "defensive weapons, testimonials of struggle, need for justice, joy of living, desire for freedom" and that good novelists translated the black struggle not into revenge but into "human cries," "persuasive pleas," "cordial laughter," and "calls for understanding, in such a healthy and pure tone." Zobel insisted that these were the "characteristics, the same accents that already mark the works of the new black

¹⁵¹ Campbell 102.

writers from the French Antilles,” implying that Zobel’s own work fell into the model category.¹⁵²

Zobel particularly objected to Vian’s character of Lee Anderson because the claim that Lee Anderson was the creation of a black author lent credence to the verisimilitude of the character’s thoughts and emotions. He worried that *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* would worsen race relations because “If at one level the novel does indict racial injustice, at another level it plays on the worst stereotypes of white people about violent and sexually predatory black behavior.”¹⁵³ Indeed, the novel’s extreme violence and rage use preconceived notions about black primitivism to create horrific scenes of black revenge. In contrast, Zobel’s novels such as *Diab’la* and *La Rue des Cases-Negres* portrayed resistance to persistent French racism in the colonial territories through agricultural images and peaceful means. In the preface to *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, Vian responded to Zobel’s charges against *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* with the weak argument that Zobel was not qualified to speak authoritatively on the behavior of every black man and especially not on black Americans:

We will respond all the same to this Black that he is just as qualified to talk about his American brothers as a Chinese man in San Francisco to resolve the problems at hand in Shanghai, and that besides, if he has no desire to avenge his younger brother by sleeping with white women in order to subsequently reduce them to gruel, it is all the same conceivable that others do it.¹⁵⁴

Implying a distinction between modern urban cultures and agricultural village communities, Vian rejected the notion that a black author from the Antilles could understand black Americans better than he, a white author from Paris.

¹⁵² Joseph Zobel, “Les Negres et l’obscénité en littérature,” *Lettres Françaises* 7/25/47, 4.

¹⁵³ Zobel 4.

¹⁵⁴ Vian, preface, *Les Morts ont tous la même peau*, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2., 402.

Vian's inability to connect the French colonial story with American racism was not uncommon among postwar critics of America.¹⁵⁵ The French Republic argued that its civilizing mission was a far cry from both American racism and the English paternalism of the "white man's burden," and that what the French did to black people in their colonies had nothing to do with what the Americans did to black people within their borders.¹⁵⁶ When asked by an interviewer about the French Africans Richard Wright had met in Paris, the author replied that the black French seemed much more French than African. Noting that most of the French Africans with whom he had spoken were students and intellectuals, Wright explained that they had become "French by diploma" and no longer seemed to identify with the brutal realities of colonial life. Claiming an interest in meeting "real" Africans, Wright believed he would have to visit Africa in order to find any.¹⁵⁷

In an article appearing in the 1946 *Esprit* issue devoted to America, African-American scholars Horace R. Clayton and Saint Clair Drake cited Wright and Chester Himes as examples of the new black American authors who were beginning to reveal black Americans' hatred and fear of racist society and the intense degree of revolt against an unfair social system. The article argued that the African Americans were not accepted as full Americans even within America even though they were more assimilated than blacks living in European colonies. The authors united American racism and colonial racism as part of the same worldwide problem.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ See Ross, *Fast Cars Clean Bodies*.

¹⁵⁶ Nicolas Blancel, ed., *La République Coloniale: essai sur une utopie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

¹⁵⁷ Gordey 1, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Horace R. Clayton and Saint Clair Drake, "Le Negre," *Esprit*, November 1946, pp. 595-596, 604.

Similarly, a 1947 article in *Combat* relocated Richard Wright from the American setting into a global struggle. Maurice Nadeau argued that although the “terrifying adventure” of Bigger Thomas could not have been created by a Frenchman, Wright’s genius transcended racial and national categories. Nadeau situated Wright in a class rather than a race struggle, writing that the American race problem is universal and falls into the same category as Spanish minors, Renault factory workers, and the indigenous of Madagascar.¹⁵⁹ Drake and Clayton also linked African Americans with class struggle by explaining that blacks respected the Communist Party as being the first to accept black men as equals.¹⁶⁰

Sartre also believed that the race struggle could be linked to the class struggle and the Marxian progress of history. His introduction to *Black Orpheus*, a collection of poems by authors of the negritude movement celebrating black cultures and African heritage, explained the negritude movement to Western audiences, differentiating between “synthetic Africa” and the “analytic Europe” of “cold rationality.” He argued that European materialist culture had not contaminated black culture and that the black man was authentic because he was subjective rather than objective.¹⁶¹ Sartre elevated negritude from a cultural, nationalist, or anti-colonial movement to a key position in the teleological march of History. By finding universality and leadership in negritude poetry, he set negritude alongside Marxism and existentialism in an important historical role.

Unlike Sartre, who praised the negritude movement for its apparent freedom from the negative, cold, rational aspects of European modernity, Wright worried that African

¹⁵⁹ Maurice Nadeau, “Un enfant d’Amérique,” *Combat*, 7/11/47, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, “Black Metropolis,” trans. Jeannine Metier, *Les Temps Modernes*, 11-12, (1946) 498-522.

¹⁶¹ Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 2-4. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* (Paris: Gallimard, n.d.).

poets were insufficiently imbued with a sense of the benefits that modernity could provide. He worried that instead of modernity, European imperialism had reinforced African patterns of traditionalism and misogyny.¹⁶² When the first Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists (Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs) was held in Paris in the summer of 1956, Wright shocked authors such as Léopold Senghor, Leon Damas, Alione Diop, and Aimé Césaire when he applauded European colonialism for having helped to destroy the old pagan gods of Africa.¹⁶³

Vian's Vernon Sullivan efforts had a different goal than Sartre, Senghor, and Wright. He depoliticized blackness both from communism and from contemporary Africa in order to examine it as the potential site for a positive example of America. Whereas Sartre believed that through negritude Africans could be conferred the torch of the world historical humanist movement born by modernity, Vian explored whether blacks in America possessed some knowledge of a humanist modernity unknown to white Americans. In *J'irai cracher* his character Lee Anderson explains to white Americans that blacks are the source of the best American music and encourages white Americans to learn more about the roots of their modern amenities. He says, "You know, it wasn't just the white Americans all by themselves who invented the movies, the automobile, or nylon stockings, or horse-racing. Or jazz."¹⁶⁴ Vian's effort fails to the extent that audiences can no longer identify with Lee Anderson once he begins his murder spree, but his brand of pulp fiction remained popular in France and paved the way for Chester Himes' *Série Noire* novels.

¹⁶² Diawara 61-76.

¹⁶³ Campbell 216.

¹⁶⁴ Vian, "*I Spit on Your Graves*" 96.

The sexuality of Vian's Sullivan novels, underscored by the prolonged proceedings against *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* on charges of obscenity, would long overshadow any social message Vian was trying to share, and the popular label of "pornographer" would cling to him for the rest of his life. Indeed Peter Cheyney would be scandalized when he discovered that his French translator for *Dames don't Care* was the "pornographer" Vian.¹⁶⁵ Vian defended himself during a conference lecture he gave about erotica on the grounds that pornography was necessary for human freedom and that any literature could be considered erotic depending on the reader's state of mind.¹⁶⁶ The last two Sullivan novels are delirious whirlwind romps through unbelievable plotlines dotted with sex scenes, and, more farcical than serious, they were never able to attract the audience of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*.¹⁶⁷ In abandoning the racial themes, Vian appears to have decided that pulp fiction was better suited to parodying American erotic thrillers than to examining American racism.

The Play

While adapting *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* for the stage, Vian realized that stage limitations and stricter censorship would prevent him from capitalizing on sex to the extent he did in the novel. He chose to push American racism to the forefront, probably having noted the popularity of this theme and the power it gave Sartre's *The Respectful Prostitute* at bringing in audiences. Some critics argue that it was also at this time that Vian, through his American black jazz friends, began to see racism as a real problem, as a motivating factor, but others focus on the scrutiny Vian was receiving from

¹⁶⁵ Duchateau 162-163.

¹⁶⁶ See Boris Vian, *Ecrits pornographiques: précédé de Utilité d'une littérature érotique*, ed. Noël Arnaud (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1980).

¹⁶⁷ Some critics have pointed out that even as a work of pornography, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* would never achieve the popularity of the Marquis de Sade's works or of the *Story of O*, i.e. Cismaru 30.

censors.¹⁶⁸ He adapted the play while the court case was still ongoing, and he may have wanted to emphasize the racial message in the play in order to prove his case about the merits of the novel.¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the press continued to assume that the play would be scandalous for its sexual obscenity, and metro authorities refused to allow advertisements of the play to be posted if they included the title of the work. Posters were restricted to advertising the anonymous “Play by Boris Vian.”¹⁷⁰

While adapting the play to focus on lynching and oppression, Vian perpetuated popular themes of European exceptionalism and the belief that the American color line did not apply to Europe. He inserted the color line theme into the mouth of his protagonist:

They killed my [brother] Danny, Jerry. . . you understand? You get it. . . They hung him. . . Just at the moment when I was going to get him out of there. . . I would have gotten him out of prison, and then we would have gone away all three of us. . . with Tom. . . we would have been in Europe, we would have been able to live. . . we would have been able to work. . . we can work there, Jerry, without the risk of being killed every day because we did not cede the sidewalk to a white man.”¹⁷¹

A review of the play, published in *Combat*, also assumed racism to be a distinctly American problem. Its author jokingly claimed to know Vernon Sullivan personally, from a fictitious account of studying at Columbia University (“We met once at Columbia University, in our junior year as Be-bops. We would cut classes in order to go read Racine in the toilet”). The review was full of irony and claimed that Sullivan was responsible for bringing an awareness of slavery and continued American racism to Europe. The author wrote that Sullivan “had closely studied the rapports between

¹⁶⁸ Duchateau 137.

¹⁶⁹ Jones 133.

¹⁷⁰ Noël Arnaud, “Une Existence surmenée,” *Les Vies de Boris Vian*, spec. issue of *Les Collections du Magazine Littéraire* 17.

¹⁷¹ Arnaud, *Vies parallèles* 176-177.

Negroes and Whites” and that when *J’irai cracher* appeared in France, “The conscious of the French was finally touched by the problem of slavery . . . the message of Vernon Sullivan reached its destination, and France, troubled, became involved in a good cause.¹⁷² Of course Vian did not have to teach France that America had a race problem. That fact was already well-established in French minds.

The play opened in April 1948 and ran for three months. The press equated the play with both the existential crowd and the lively young jazz scene of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, describing it as a cultural offensive on Paris’ conservative right bank. Reporters were uninterested in or unconvinced by the play’s morality lessons, and many cited *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, already nearly one hundred year old at the time, as a stronger case against racism in America.¹⁷³ They did not consider whether the play’s anti-racists lessons applied to France. After hyping the opening as inevitably scandalous, the press reported that audiences eager to see the lascivious novel incarnated onstage were disappointed that the sex had been moved offstage. Annoyed that the play had failed to meet its expectations in terms of shock, Vian over the first few weeks peppered the play with salacious morsels, “a daring line, a spicy note, a suggestive look” and even added a supernumerary whose role was to undress onstage, but it is not clear that he was ever satisfied.¹⁷⁴

The Movie

The film version of *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* was a disappointment to Vian, and he would denounce it with his last breath. The film company Sipro had obtained the

¹⁷² Cismaru 30-31.

¹⁷³ Arnaud, *Dossier de l’Affaire* 120.

¹⁷⁴ Arnaud, *Dossier de l’Affaire* 121-129.

rights but hated Vian's adaptation because it was too long and did not seem serious.¹⁷⁵ Indeed Vian's screen directions are replete with jokes such as "If we were in Hamburg, we would now see boats, but the car soon crosses a typical town of the United States South, a town that requires a very particular talent to describe, but that we will describe with a very ordinary talent."¹⁷⁶ *J'irai cracher* was not the first screenplay Vian composed as he had been playing with scenarios as far back as 1941, but *J'irai cracher* was the first to come to fruition, even if it was not the version Vian preferred. A great fan of the cinema, Vian worked for many years with Pierre Kast, an associate of the *cinéphiles* at *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, elaborating his projects, and his knowledge of cinematic terminology appears in his screenplay, including "*plans, flashes, champ et contre-champ, traveling, fondu and fondu-enchainé, voix off, plan américain.*"¹⁷⁷

When Vian's script failed to please the production company, he asked the company nevertheless to underscore the message against racism. He did not manage to convince the company to downplay the sexuality so that it would not be forbidden to audiences younger than 18 and would not be considered a vulgar work of pornography. He asked the company "to understand 'how much in the current circumstances (the war in Algeria, menacing militarism. . .) it would be grave to miss this film.'"¹⁷⁸ By 1958, Vian had realized that the color line did not only apply to America, that persistent French colonialism was just as tinged with racism as lynching in the American south, and that the danger was possibly even greater in France where racist colonialism was being defended by military action. He had provoked anger and hostility during a 1955 tour in

¹⁷⁵ Arnaud, "Une Existence surmenée," *Les Vies de Boris Vian, Magazine Littéraire* 24.

¹⁷⁶ Arnaud, *Dossier de l'Affaire* 381.

¹⁷⁷ Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les Amerlauds et les Godons* 363.

¹⁷⁸ Arnaud, *Vies parallèles* 179.

which he sang “Le Déserteur,” encouraging Frenchmen to resist military service that led to killing “miserable people.”

Although Vian was unconvinced by the film, reviews were not all bad. *Le Canard Enchaîné* wrote that “it is as though you were watching a perfectly dubbed American film.”¹⁷⁹ For other reviewers, the film was an occasion for the reappraisal of the novel. Writing for *L’Aurore*, Claude Garson wrote that the book was in fact “less pornographic than was claimed” and that it would certainly be remembered as “a great work of literature” because it “shows to what levels of the degradation of man the unreasonable hatred of colored people can lead.” He attributed to Vian a lifelong struggle against racism, assuming the source of that struggle lay not in American racism but in Nazi genocide.¹⁸⁰ Others were unconvinced, re-hashing the same criticisms of the novel and writing that the film’s antiracist message was a pretext “to uncover as much skin as possible” and that praise for the fight against racism through artistry should be reserved for the likes of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Sartre’s *La Putain Respectueuse*.¹⁸¹

Conclusions

Although in the long term the Sullivan novels hampered Vian’s reputation as a serious author of fiction, the importance of his income from *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes* cannot be underestimated. Vian himself told reporters about writing such novels that “It allows one to eat.”¹⁸² A leading Vian scholar of the 1960s and 1970s, Noël Arnaud, could not help but enjoy the image of the American author Sullivan feeding the French

¹⁷⁹ *Le Canard Enchaîné* 1 July 1959.

¹⁸⁰ Claude Garson, *L’Aurore*, 1 July 1959.

¹⁸¹ Henry Magnan, *Lettres françaises* 2 July 1959.

¹⁸² Arnaud, *Vies parallèles* 164.

author Vian in the immediate postwar period in France. Arnaud noted that “The French government did not act differently, incessantly begging Washington for dollars and then wasting them with speed.” Arnaud praised Vian for at least creating his own America, but recent authors have demonstrated that Vian worked well within the limits of an image of America that was handed to him by American pulp fiction and newspaper articles about American lynching.¹⁸³

While Vian may have succeeded in making America his own by using an American genre and American themes freely to create and explore his own private interests, and to earn a certain living, he was not completely successful in confronting either his own racism or the sexual dimensions of his understanding of race. He eventually recognized that France had its own problems with racism and the colonies, particularly regarding Arabs, leaving behind the scrap of a note intended for an unfinished volume: “As for me, I will never be able to breathe or sleep easily as long as I know that in the paper mills of the Seine Arab chimney sweepers whose life is not worth that of a cow.”¹⁸⁴ He convinced himself and his country that he could successfully write an American best-seller. Americans, especially black Americans, came to Paris after World War II in search of freedom. Vian became a black American to allow himself some freedom in France. He ultimately abandoned his efforts to explore black American identity through noir, but he continued to translate American noir novels for French audiences. He remained engaged in the cause of black Americans and continued to promote integration and anti-racism in his articles about jazz, but he never joined and

¹⁸³ Arnaud, *Vies parallèles* 164; Jones 106.

¹⁸⁴ Boris Vian, *Traité du civisme*, ed. Guy Laforet (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979) 170.

barely even seemed to be aware of any organized civil rights movement. The black American “other” retained his fascination yet remained beyond his grasp.

Chapter 3: Vian the Jazz Critic: American Culture as Criticism

In his youthful appreciation of jazz, Vian did not explicitly address the culture of racism into which jazz was born. In his novel *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, he used his fictional character Lee Anderson to explain the racial origins of jazz and to decry racism in America, but he explained racism in gendered terms rather than in racial or political terms. In the late 1940s, Vian embarked on a career as a jazz critic and was finally able to use his writing to address the problems of America racism as they influenced jazz musicians and jazz consumers. He largely continued to consider racism to be a specifically American problem, and he did not overtly link racism to the problems of European decolonization in his articles. He sought to promote black musicians, but he continued to use problematic essentialized descriptions of blacks. Vian engaged in debates with reputable American, French, and English jazz critics, and he implicitly disagreed not only with Theodor Adorno's claim that jazz can only ever be commercially driven but also with Simone de Beauvoir's more informal focus on jazz as the experience of a white, American, intellectual audience. He remained opposed to strict dichotomies, refusing to be circumscribed by the debate between partisans of older and modern jazz styles, and demanding of a critical reader, "What right do you have to limit me, you damn bore?"¹⁸⁵ He developed an understanding of jazz that placed blacks at the controls while simultaneously recognizing the possibilities that consumer culture created for expanding the ranks of jazz audiences.

In his writing about jazz, Vian tried to distinguish the music from stereotypes commonly portrayed in the press. For example, in his 1950 *Manuel de Saint-Germain-*

¹⁸⁵ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 193 (April 1953).

des-Prés he argued that the jazz scene in the caves of the famous neighborhood had little to do with the existentialist philosophy that reigned in the neighborhood's cafes. Vian frequented both circles, describing Sartre as a "Writer, playwright and philosopher whose activity has absolutely no connection to the checkered shirts, the caves, or long hair, and who deserves to be left in peace because he is a cool guy."¹⁸⁶ Vian complained about the way the French press misinterpreted jazz, confusing it with the wild nightlife of the jazz clubs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in order to dismiss the music altogether as hedonistic.

The new bebop styles in jazz arriving in France from the United States in the mid 1940's sparked a sharp division between French critics who promoted an appreciation of the new styles and those who considered bebop to be a betrayal of jazz's origins. The apparent contrast between older and newer styles was exacerbated by wartime factors such as the "Petrillo Ban," which led to a two year gap in jazz recording during the time when jazz musicians were beginning to experiment with new sounds.¹⁸⁷ Vian found the V-disks that the War Department produced for troops to be an "inadequate substitute" because they featured service bands rather than proven artists and because they were produced in small quantities.¹⁸⁸ The only way to be exposed to early bebop during the war was to attend live performances, and few Americans had such opportunities.¹⁸⁹ Chances were even rarer for French jazz fans, so the innovation of bebop appeared even more pronounced in France when new jazz finally began to make its way across the Atlantic after the war.

¹⁸⁶ Vian, *Manuel de St-Germain-des-Prés* 203.

¹⁸⁷ The Petrillo Ban was named for the president of the American Federation of Music who called a strike in an effort to convince record companies to share their profits with musicians through the union.

¹⁸⁸ Burton W. Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1998) 87 88.

¹⁸⁹ Peretti 102.

La Querelle du Bop

Some Vian scholars have argued that “Intelligent as he was, Boris Vian spontaneously took, against the Old, the side of the Moderns,” but his position in the debate between traditional and modern jazz was actually more nuanced than that.¹⁹⁰ Vian argued that the critics who dismissed bebop did not understand that so-called bop was just the “present materialization of an evolution that continues.”¹⁹¹ In a 1955 article introducing jazz, Vian briefly recapped the “querelle du bop,” not taking sides. He listed Hugues Panassé and Alix Combelle as opposing bop because they believed that bop betrayed the essence of jazz by renouncing the goal of making human instruments sound like voices. He listed Charles Delaunay and Andre Hodeir as being partisans of bop because it enriched jazz, and they believed that the older styles were only defended by old black musicians and young white musicians who could not master the new music. Vian suggested that for more information, his readers should consult Hodeir’s *Hommes et problèmes du jazz* and Panassé’s *Dictionnaire du jazz*. He revealed his own preference for including bebop under the umbrella term of jazz by qualifying the magazine *Jazz Hot*, the original publication of the Hot Club de France, as “progressive” and Panassé’s *Bulletin du Hot Club de France* as “parochial.”¹⁹²

Vian did not divide the jazz world neatly into “bop” and “not bop.” In America the label “bebop” annoyed musicians such as Miles Davis who resented labels, Vian mocked his fellow critics who stubbornly fought against the term or label “bop.” He was not interested in the label itself, arguing that “There is just jazz” and that “bop” was a

¹⁹⁰ Malson, ed., *Chroniques de Jazz* 169.

¹⁹¹ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 112.

¹⁹² Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 196-197.

term manipulated by journalists that falsely segmented the jazz world.¹⁹³ Instead of labeling Gillespie a bop musician, he qualified Gillespie's playing as being in the "most pure black tradition."¹⁹⁴ Although he denied the term significance, he recognized the importance of modern jazz, writing, "Bop being no more than a word, is dead, but as a style, it is as alive as ever. I have always killed myself to tell you: bop doesn't exist. But Parker, Dizzy, etc... that exists. And it's very much alive. And it is still influential."¹⁹⁵ In 1956 Vian could finally announce the availability of some of the American jazz recordings from 1938 and 1939 that had intimated the direction jazz was taking, including some Duke Ellington music and a recording of "Body and Soul" by Coleman Hawkins. Vian took the opportunity to equate jazz with French cultural sophistication by remarking that ten years after the bop revolution, Parker and Gillespie, were aging as well as bottles of good wine.¹⁹⁶

Jazz and Progress

Vian continued his argument that traditional jazz could not be so easily distinguished from modern jazz by noting how bebop continued to influence traditional jazz: "All of those who have been burying bop for the last ten years, along with 'progressivism', and the rest . . . have not noticed that all of the harmonic and innovative research, and the research of sonority, have *completely impregnated* what they continue to take today to be 'traditional' jazz!"¹⁹⁷ He did not automatically consider modern jazz sounds necessarily to be an improvement on traditional jazz just because it was more recent. He preferred the term "evolution" to "progress," responding to a critical reader

¹⁹³ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 192.

¹⁹⁴ Peretti 102; Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 160.

¹⁹⁵ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 190-191.

¹⁹⁶ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 228 -230.

¹⁹⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 217.

that “*nobody*, unless they are idiots, imagines ‘that evolution means progress’ [. . .] It is completely different to *notice* an evolution (and how can you not notice it?) and to judge it (to deny it, for example).”¹⁹⁸ In contrast, the jazz musician Coleman Hawkins who like Vian had denied the relevance of the term “bebop,” did profess a belief in the progress of jazz. He is quoted as telling a European reporter: “‘Bop? Man, I ain’t never heard of bop! What is this bop?... I don’t know any bop music. I only know one music– the music that’s played. There’s no such thing as bop music, but there is such thing as progress.’”¹⁹⁹

The apparent discrepancy between Hawkins and Vian points to the multiple meanings that “progress” can take. For black musicians in the first half of the 20th century, the term “progress” had a different meaning than it did to the descendants of French positivists. For the black Americans, “progress” was a way to improve one’s position in society; for the French it was related to a late nineteenth-century philosophy of the scientific improvement of society itself. In the 1930s, to jazz musicians like Coleman Hawkins “progressive” meant technical mastery and versatility, not the naïve positivism of Europeans at the time.²⁰⁰ Progressive fit with “advancement” and “improvement” among the goals set by Booker T. Washington for the development of African Americans in American society.²⁰¹ A third reading of “progress” was possible in the early Cold War, however, as American leaders made political arguments about the progress of African-Americans. For example, a USIA brochure recounting a tale about

¹⁹⁸ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 211-212.

¹⁹⁹ Sott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 446.

²⁰⁰ DeVeaux 39, 62.

²⁰¹ DeVeaux 45.

improvement in the lot of black Americans was a pro-American argument implying that the United States was the place where such improvement was possible.²⁰²

Vian understood that the debate about modern jazz was tangled with the issue of race. French critics on all sides of the debate bent over backwards to explain how their position best coincided with black American interests. White European critics who were partisans of Dixieland and New Orleans styles complained that modern jazz did not contain the same expression of or rebellion against black oppression. Vian rebutted critics such as Gerald Pratley, who complained that in America “jazz is dying for real because over there they are in the process of *‘slowly but surely exterminating the creative faculties of the Blacks.’*” Vian insisted that modern jazz was not just a muffled version of the black voice, and he wrote that “if the Blacks have turned their backs on this music, it’s because it had to evolve: it’s not a question of progress or of value judgment: there is evolution, it’s unavoidable; let’s take advantage of it... the Blacks are *necessarily* right when it comes to jazz.”²⁰³

Jazz and the Black Man

Vian rejected critics who placed themselves in the role of defender of the black voice but who ignored the fact that modern jazz was developed by black American musicians who, in an effort to retake jazz from commercialization and show business, sought to promote professional artistry. During a time when discourses about French modernization emphasized the metropolis at the expense of the colonies, promoting the home as the site of technological improvements and the indigenous populations of the colonies as barbarians who needed to be modernized by force if necessary, Vian was

²⁰² Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 49.

²⁰³ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 172-174, italics in original.

cognizant that the agency of the black American minority needed to be respected.²⁰⁴ Unlike his outright rejection of Zobel's criticism of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, Vian carefully considered what blacks had to say about jazz. He rejected arguments that black American music was only valid if it represented the primal emotions associated with normative descriptions of blacks as primitive. He argued for example against the English jazz critic Berta Wood's lament that "Music as an expression has lost its meaning to Negroes," replying that "Maybe it's that, the material condition of Blacks having improved, they have less need to express themselves through music." On the other hand his rejection of the primitive jazz thesis did not put him in line with Adorno's views on jazz. Whereas Adorno denied that jazz music was infused with any primitive or spiritual force by its black musicians, arguing rather that an oppressed black culture could only produce what it was allowed to or forced to by the market, Vian continuously emphasized the creativity and artistry of black musicians.²⁰⁵

Vian explained that the raw expressions of early jazz were no longer necessary for black American jazz musicians as their music evolved and that beginning in the 1940s they would express themselves more calmly and deliberately, with intentional artistry, and that in its development and execution jazz music would more closely resemble literature, painting, and cinema.²⁰⁶ Reiterating his message three month later, he wrote that "if the Blacks and jazz are no longer what they were, it is that protests, having overturned the largest obstacles, now attack forms of opposition that are more subtle and maybe it's just because of that (for that subtlety) that [certain critics do] not perceive it as

²⁰⁴ See Ross, *Fast Cars Clean Bodies*.

²⁰⁵ Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 164-165.

²⁰⁶ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz*, 52-53.

jazz.”²⁰⁷ He argued that his view had been influenced by none other than Duke Ellington himself. When Milton Mesirov admonished Charlie Parker for his virtuosic skills, writing that “especially the blues must be able to be played by musicians who do not know music,”²⁰⁸ Vian cited Ellington in reply. Ellington had explained in an interview, “Thus, as I said, jazz is, today as in the past, a question of deliberate creation and not only a natural instinctive phenomenon . . . It will be a combination of the contribution of all these people who supposedly received a natural gift and the work of those who come out of conservatories and introduce their improvements.”²⁰⁹ Although not explicit in their criticism, European jazz critics who saw traditional jazz as something to be defended against modern jazz seemed to imply that black musicians whose jazz playing was influenced by classical training in conservatories were somehow “acting white” or at the very least betraying their black heritage. In contrast, Vian would promote the skilled and learned playing of jazz musicians, referring to Armstrong as the Shakespeare of jazz and Fat’s Waller as the Rabelais of the piano not to scorn them for crossing a color line but in recognition of their talents.²¹⁰

Although Vian would grant black musicians the same space for careful and professional artistry respected in white classical musicians, he continued to endow the black musical tradition with magical characteristics that were not natural to white musicians. He argued that white musicians suffered from “a non-acquisition of the black tradition that allows professional colored musicians to be able to play what is written with as much flame and ‘swing’ as they invent.” Just as “classical musicians rest

²⁰⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz*, 55.

²⁰⁸ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz*, 258.

²⁰⁹ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz*, 259.

²¹⁰ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 231, 253.

automatically on a musical culture and tradition at least 400 years old,” a tradition he implied was European or white, “jazz as it is effortlessly experienced and felt by a black can only be assimilated by a white at the price of an attention and willingness to learn,” an apprenticeship that required extensive training.²¹¹ Many critics would accuse such an argument of harboring reverse racism based on cultural traditions, but Vian was also implying that blacks would have the same trouble with classical white music. Indeed, Vian had made that argument four years earlier while trying to explain the natural talent of black musicians:

In the domain of complex arrangement, the whites are disposed of a certain heritage that the Black have not yet had the occasion to assimilate in as great a number. Do not forget that three quarters of these white American musicians come from Europe and are the inheritors of a whole well developed musical science (see Raymond Scott, son of a Russian musician, Benny Goodman, a Jew also of Russian origin). This permits them to acquire a certain advance. But, despite their privileged situation, it is beyond a doubt that they lag well behind Henderson’s creations, Lunceford’s arrangements in his good days, and especially Ellington, whose characteristic genius knew how to cross all of the intermediate steps in one bound.²¹²

Vian dismissed the fraction of wartime collaborators whose arguments tried to attach white jazz musicians to a European tradition. He insisted that by not being European, African American jazz musicians had the advantage that they did not have to apply European musical science to their jazz because their natural talents rendered it unnecessary. Thus although Vian could appreciate the learned apprenticeship of black jazz musicians, rejecting the essentialized myth of the black jazz musicians’ talent deriving from wild uncontrollable ties to a primitive nature, he nonetheless embraced the view of a natural skill possessed only by blacks.

²¹¹ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 131-132.

²¹² Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 268.

Vian was trying to move the definition of jazz from the primal scream that white musicians thought they could imitate to the serious study of jazz that only black musicians could lead. Arguments that “hot jazz” was a primitive expression of black Americans insisted on the direct and unmediated relationship between the experience and the music. They classified anything that intervened as commercial perversion. For example, Hugues Panassié argued that black Americans’ realization that music could lead to social mobility cut those artists off from their innate sources of pure primitive inspiration. Not unlike Theodor Adorno’s view that jazz artistry masked a fundamental market rule of conformity, Panassié wrote that black Americans’ understanding of their music as a marketable commodity necessarily poisoned their true artistry. Unlike Adorno, Panassié allowed white jazz musicians to be inspired by New Orleans jazz and develop creative performances, but he denied black musicians the same authority if they chose to stray from tradition jazz sounds.²¹³

Vian argued that jazz criticism should not adhere to strict dogma or snobbism valuing one form over another, and he promoted a broad education in jazz. He hoped that his articles would expand some readers’ opinions about jazz and that they would at least clarify for his readers “see the affinity between jazz and the other arts: one needs to know the rules in order to judge it soundly... just like literature.”²¹⁴ Although in some of his articles in *Combat* he argued that from “its very first cry of origin, from the auction blocks of the Deep South,” jazz was “freedom music,” he did not believe that jazz needed to remain in that cry in dispossessed whitened copies.²¹⁵ In a similar way, Duke

²¹³ Panassié’s ideas did not influence jazz musicians because the few who knew Panassié existed ignored him. (DeVeaux, 91).

²¹⁴ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 313.

²¹⁵ Campbell 17.

Ellington criticized white use of jazz, arguing for example that George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* was "old hat" and condemning "its reception as a work of 'Negro music.'"²¹⁶

A popular view of the development of jazz, referred to by some as "consensus liberalism," sees jazz as rooted in African-American life and culture but sees the expression of jazz as an art form that is separable from the racial and social background of the musician who plays it. Furthermore, jazz historians have insisted that racism and oppression were "obstacles to free expression, not causes" and that the culture into which jazz was born cannot be granted authorship of its birth. The "consensus liberalism" view of jazz as a modern art drowns the African-American specificity of its origins in a wider concept of America in general or of American liberal democracy.²¹⁷ As America's "classical music" and a representation of American democracy, jazz lent itself to use as a Cold War tool, but Vian hoped to use jazz in a different way. He agreed with many Europeans of his time that as America's "classical music," jazz was the only artistic innovation that America offered the world, but he did not want to empty jazz of its black content in order to replace it with an American content. Nor did he want to replace it with a European content, as some of his contemporaries did. Vian wanted the direction of jazz to remain in the hands of black Americans as an alternative both to France and to white America.

Simone de Beauvoir's writings about America offer another insight into the way jazz was viewed as a means of liberation from an oppressive society. De Beauvoir's focus was not on blacks or even Europeans but on white Americans. She was, in some sense, a student of Boris Vian's in matters of jazz as she and Jean-Paul Sartre would

²¹⁶ Peretti 81.

²¹⁷ DeVeaux 18, 20.

discuss jazz with Vian and his wife Michelle in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés cafes, listen to American jazz records in Vian's apartment, and even buy jazz records according to Vian's advice.²¹⁸ She preferred hot jazz to its popularized form known as "sweet jazz" and during her visit in America quickly tired of hearing Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra on the radio and in juke boxes.²¹⁹ Unlike Vian, however, she did not extol the values of be-bop, even though her American friends explained to her that be-bop had once stretched hot jazz to its breaking point, expressing "the palpitation of life at its most fragile and most feverish." In her opinion, be-bop had wandered into the realm of "abstraction" that plagued so much of American life, an abstraction that Americans preferred because it allowed them to ignore the absurdity underlying so much of their daily lives, and that be-bop had thus lost its meaning and relevance.²²⁰

De Beauvoir focused instead on traditional jazz, noting that older jazz dominated the collections of every intellectual she knew anyway. Although she admired many African American jazz musicians, particularly when their performances seemed more like artful introspection than like entertainment for the audience, she was more interested in what jazz meant for many of jazz's white devotees. For de Beauvoir, the importance of jazz resided in the way it revitalized white American intellectuals in the face of the oppressive dullness and mediocrity of American life. She wrote, for example, that for new young writers with little money, jazz was "the only antidote to American conformism and its boredom, their only opening to life."²²¹ At a jazz club in New Orleans, she was surprised to find an excellent band playing to a minimal audience and

²¹⁸ Pestureau, *Boris Vian, les Amerlauds et les Godons* 383.

²¹⁹ De Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour," *Les Temps Modernes* 30: 1648.

²²⁰ De Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour" *Les Temps Modernes* 30: 1649-1650.

²²¹ De Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour" *Les Temps Modernes* 30: 1645.

was very much taken with two young white Americans listening enraptured. They reminded her of Dorothy Baker's novel based on Bix Biederbeck, *Young Man with a Horn*, a novel that Vian would soon translate. De Beauvoir described the two fans as "no doubt some of those young people who suffocate in American civilization and for whom black music is an escape door."²²² She did not stretch the conclusion across the Atlantic to examine the place of jazz in French life, nor did she ask what kind of liberation French jazz fans might have been seeking.

French Developments in Jazz Criticism

Jazz's popularity in France is historically important in part because jazz historians largely credit Europe with the birth of formal jazz criticism. Hugues Panassié's *Le Jazz Hot* was published in 1934 and translated into English in 1938. Although Panassié's work "excessively praised white groups," it was prominent in signaling "the spawning of 'formal' jazz criticism out of the classical tradition" along with books by Charles Delauney, Edmond Goffin, and Constant Lambert.²²³ Vian assumed that American jazz was indebted to European critics, and he argued that European jazz criticism helped promote blacks not only in jazz but also in films about jazz because European criticism was less racist than American criticism. He objected to the minimal appearances of black musicians in American films about jazz, contrasting America's preference for casting blacks as "shoe-shiners, collectors of kicks in places, servants (if necessary) and cotton pickers (and again if they let themselves be hanged or burned from time to time)" with the nation's reticence in casting them as jazz musicians, playing the very music they

²²² De Beauvoir, "L'Amérique au jour le jour" *Les Temps Modernes* 29: 1464.

²²³ Peretti 79.

created, in favor of white musicians.²²⁴ He wrote that Hot Clubs in America, imitating those developed in France and in Great Britain, encouraged “the development of a critic not muzzled by racial preoccupations” and that they “rendered little by little to Caesar what was Caesar’s, to ‘King’ Buddy Bolden and ‘King’ Oliver their royalty.”²²⁵

Vian agreed with French critic Andre Hodeir that jazz criticism had progressed so far by 1954 that it was “no longer permissible today to ask what jazz is.” He explained that even if not everyone could answer, they should at least know what sources were available, writing that “if the average level of the tabloids has remained about the same as it was before the war, criticism has made surprising progress.”²²⁶ Vian did not want to establish himself as the ultimate arbiter of jazz, believing that each individual had to make his or her own selections according to his or her own tastes. He wrote that “sooner or later, it comes back to the music itself and one has to tell oneself either I like it or I don’t like it.”²²⁷ Vian allowed his readers the same responsible critical distance that he enjoyed himself. Although he certainly had his own preferences and was happy to share them, Vian insisted, especially in his articles destined for a public of jazz novices, that while he hoped to give people a better background on which to base their decisions, his intention was not to be a “desperate proselytizer,” forcing a new jazz dogma on his audiences.²²⁸

Vian Addresses American Audiences

Vian’s jazz lessons were not limited to a French or European audience; he also had messages for America. One of his first opportunities to address an American

²²⁴ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol . 8, 278.

²²⁵ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol . 8, 279.

²²⁶ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol . 8, 173.

²²⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz*, 80.

²²⁸ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol . 8, 313.

audience was exactly the forum where one might expect the Americans to have the pedagogical upper hand: French soil where locals interacted with American G.I.'s

Although jazz fans including Vian had assumed that the Americans could teach the French more about jazz, when the American army would engage Vian's jazz band, the Abadie Orchestra, to entertain the troops, Vian realized that such was not the case.

Although French jazz fans assumed that the Americans "had an innate taste for [jazz]," Claude Leon, fellow Abadie band member, explained the contrary:

[Vian and I] quickly realized that America was not at all a country of encyclopedic knowledge of jazz. In fact the Americans were totally uncultured in jazz. And as for us, we had principles, our principles consisted of refusing to play the pieces that did not please us. Our goddamn G.I.'s always asked us for 'Besame mucho' and other great nonsense from the time. Boris replied: 'No, we will not play 'Besame mucho,' we will play Duke Ellington' and in the end, it all arranged itself quite nicely and everyone was happy: the soldiers danced and we, we played 'our' music.²²⁹

Vian provided a fictional account of a similar scene in his short story "Martin phoned me" about a French jazz musician who, like Vian, was an engineer by day, and who was called upon in the evening to play at a party well-attended by American military personnel. Two French girls at the party asked the band to play a dance song, "and to make them groan, we play 'Petit Vin Blanc' in swing, they don't even recognize the song, what nuts, but yes, just at the end, and they make an ugly face." Although the French girls eventually recognize the trick being played on them, "the Americans don't care, they like everything that is ugly [. . .] we played so many old stupid songs"²³⁰

²²⁹ Arnaud, *Les vies parallèles* 92-93. Simone de Beauvoir was equally surprised that jazz was not widely appreciated and understood in America ("L'Amérique au jour le jour" *Les Temps Modernes* 29: 1463).

²³⁰ Vian, *Le loup-garou* 113.

Throughout his life Vian would return to the opinion that white Americans knew nothing about jazz.

Vian's lessons to Americans were not limited to those he met in France. He was given the opportunity to address Americans on their own airwaves, on the New York station WNEW, during 1948 and 1949 in a weekly program about jazz recorded in France. In these installments, Vian offered Americans a stereotyped image of France, "the Land of the Frogs," the "Eiffel-towery" creator of "existentialist jazz," making the link between jazz and existentialism that he denied to French audiences.²³¹ Referring to stock French characters in American movies, he suspected of Americans that "Whenever you think of a Frenchman, you think of a black beard and a mustache, of a cane and of very polite manners," but he explained that "French youngsters may sometimes become more or less frantic," offering a new image of France, the lively *zazou*, to replace the stiff image of French tradition.²³² After describing a familiar image of France, perhaps in an effort to make his audience feel more comfortable with the subject matter, he began his jazz lessons. The first lesson was simple but bold: merely by hosting a jazz show, he indicated that the French had something to teach Americans about jazz. The second lesson was that jazz collaboration between Americans and French produced excellent results. He announced that "When people in France began to become jazz conscious, there was quite a craze and very soon after that, records began to be waxed with mixed groups of French and foreign musicians especially from the USA, land of Jazz." He played pieces "elaborated around [19]37 by mixed groups of French and American

²³¹ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 60, 80, 108.

²³² Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 74-76.

music,” considering Don Byas to be a strong example of “that Franco-American strange mixture.”²³³

Vian’s third jazz lesson to Americans was the one closest to his heart, the one concerning race relations. Rejecting segregation, he made a point of reiterating what wonderful music black and white musicians could create when they played together. He explained that “In 1937, Combelle recorded one of his best platters with Freddie Johnson and a group of colored musicians,” establishing France as a place where integrated music flourished in contrast to persistent segregation in America.²³⁴ His jazz shows included several examples of “French hot recordings made by various conglomerations of black and white musicians.”²³⁵ In the face of the Cold War argument that America was the land of improved race relations, Vian offered the rebuttal that France should be America’s example.

American Racism

Vian gently encouraged Americans to integrate by teaching them to appreciate integrated jazz bands, but when addressing French audiences, he was not so delicate in criticizing American racism. He saw numerous examples of American racism in the jazz realm and did not hesitate to share them. He noted, for example, that black musicians were not allowed to register at Local 47 of the Union of Musicians, even though the law did not prohibit them from joining the union. He wrote, “Oh, sweet country of liberty,” remarking that Lady Liberty “turns her back to the country and only lights the other side.”²³⁶ He further noticed that black jazz musicians were slighted in the press, joking “I

²³³ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 112, 116, 114.

²³⁴ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 36.

²³⁵ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 130.

²³⁶ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 22-23.

have the idea that in America, all the Blacks must have returned to cotton picking if the space that is accorded to them in jazz matters is to be believed.”²³⁷ He called the United States the “tomb of jazz” because Americans did not sufficiently support black jazz musicians.²³⁸ Vian warned Americans that if they continued their racist treatment of black musicians, American “Blacks will be getting out of there,” and he thought it would be fair punishment.²³⁹ Curiously, although occasionally headline items about lynchings, such as the 1955 murder of Emmet Till, appeared in Vian’s jazz columns, references indicating that he was following the Civil Rights movement were few.

Although the American State Department hoped to use jazz as a political tool to demonstrate to European audiences the progress America had made in race relations as proof of the superiority of democracy over communism, Vian’s jazz reviews told a different story. While American politicians were constantly trying to link European anti-American sentiments to communist influences, Vian joked that his own criticism of America was the result of secret deals with the Soviet Union, writing, “I am decidedly anti-American today because I just received my check from Khrushchev.”²⁴⁰ He added that MacCarthyist meddling in American culture was leading to disastrous results, and he was glad that jazz music was not facing the same pressures from the Soviet Union: “The Americans are in the process of being eaten by a band of idiots. We are lucky that Moscow does not like jazz!”²⁴¹

Louis Armstrong, who cancelled his State-Department sponsored trip to the Soviet Union in the fall of 1957 saying that “the way they are treating my people in the

²³⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 30.

²³⁸ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 24.

²³⁹ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 25.

²⁴⁰ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 43; see also Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*.

²⁴¹ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 48.

South, the government can go to hell,” was not the only individual who was loathe to swallow the bait. For Vian, “as for others of the St-Germain elite, this taste in [jazz] music was inseparable from an interest in the social conditions in which blacks lived, particularly in the American South. Vian wrote in his jazz column in *Combat* about the introduction of anti-lynch laws in Southern states which previously did not have them.”²⁴² In fact, many in the French audience used jazz to turn the American Cold War argument on its head, pointing out that Americans had little room to lecture the French about decolonization when America had not redressed the problems “of its own, imported ‘colonial’ population, the blacks.”²⁴³

Crow Jim: European Reverse Racism

Vian joked sarcastically that the Americans had not learned Andre Coeuroy’s Occupation-era jazz history arguing that jazz was really an invention of white but had instead developed a new argument.²⁴⁴ If they finally acknowledged that jazz had been developed by black artists, they argued that white musicians had since exceeded black accomplishments. Vian wrote that “the American thesis was born: the Blacks had been great men, okay; we accept it; but, now, the Whites do better than them: the Whites are the kings.”²⁴⁵ Vian agreed with other Europeans who argued not only that white jazz musicians were not better than black jazz musicians but that they could never really be as good as black jazz musicians. He was disgusted by Leonard Feather’s 1950 article dubbing the European preference for black jazz musicians over whites as “Crow Jim,” or reverse racism. Feather was not the only individual to make the argument that white jazz

²⁴² Dudziak 66; Campbell 16-17.

²⁴³ Campbell 116.

²⁴⁴ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 278.

²⁴⁵ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 279.

musicians were disfavored in Europe, but Vian asserted that it was “*always* the most horrible jazz musicians who protest in that fashion.”²⁴⁶ The accusation of reverse racism was not new to jazz in the postwar period. American jazz reviews such as *Down Beat* had frequently accused swing band leaders such as Hammond of reverse racism against white musicians. In American jazz history, the accusation spoke to the ways in which “swing was generating new tensions.” Even though American jazz reviews appreciated black jazz bands and concerts, many “clearly felt more comfortable in a white jazz milieu, and their readers repeatedly named white bands and soloists as their favorites in annual polls.”²⁴⁷

Vian refused to be persuaded by Feather’s blindfold test during which reputable jazz musicians were unable to tell just by listening whether a jazz piece was being played by a black or white jazz musician. He wrote that Feather’s conclusion that “there is no black or white music, there is just one American music” was wrong although understandable because “jazz, in fact, is the only original art that the world owes to America, and it is quite annoying for the white Americans to tell themselves that the Blacks are its inventors.” He insisted that the problem with the blindfold test lay in the fact that the jazz amateurs who insisted they could distinguish between black and white jazz had expressed their position poorly. Vian tried to describe the distinction as “a common element to the Black records – a perceptible element eventually, an element that talented Whites can assimilate – an element very difficult to measure out in each execution by direct listening and comparison, just as it is difficult to say if a certain big guy with brown curly hair and a bronze tone is a Spaniard, a mulatto, or a southerner

²⁴⁶ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 69, italics in original.

²⁴⁷ Peretti 82.

tanned by the sun.”²⁴⁸ Over and over Vian defined jazz as black music and good jazz as that which was played by black musicians.

Vian encompassed in his definition of jazz “the rhythmic music of American blacks from the New Orleans style through the modern Gillespie” and insisted that “the only valid white jazz music comes from those who have schooled themselves on black jazz not only in form but also in spirit.” He rarely expanded on which white jazz musicians he would place in the latter category, usually preferring instead to discount popular white jazz musicians such as the American Paul Whiteman or the English Jack Hylton who drew crowds but whom Vian considered to be frauds and whose popularity he attributed to audience prejudices against black musicians.²⁴⁹ Although Vian tended to view racism as a primarily American problem, he saw its pernicious effects within the French Press. Racist descriptions of jazz musicians faced his irony: “One ends by no longer laughing at all at ‘Hampton who rolled his big eyes,’ at ‘Bechet, that old negro with his troop (imagine Charles Munch and his troop), old storyteller of the country of fables’ (*Le Figaro* of course), and at ‘Jazz, that music of half-drunk negroes’ (*La Croix de l’Est*), or at ‘all the most pure pianists of boogie-woogie were at their beginnings car-washers’ (*Paris Match*).”²⁵⁰

Continued Racism

Despite Vian’s promotion of black jazz musicians, his conception of black men retained an element of mysticism. A fierce opponent of Jim Crow laws in America, Vian encouraged the integration of jazz groups and, by extension, of society. Vian openly

²⁴⁸ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 293-294.

²⁴⁹ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 112.

²⁵⁰ Philippe Constantin, “Un Chroniqueur au Vitriol,” *Les Vies de Boris Vian, Magazine littéraire*

believed that blacks could play jazz better than whites, explaining for example that Bob Wilbur would never equal his teacher Sidney Bechet because of the former's age and "the color of his skin, because I maintain, because I am racist, that the Whites will never equal the Blacks in jazz matters."²⁵¹ He did not go so far as to prevent white musicians from playing jazz. He more or less agreed with a 1950 *France-Soir* article arguing that "'jazz is a music of Blacks written by Blacks for Blacks.'" He added that "'Played' would probably be better than 'written'". Actually, it takes both. It must also be added that Whites have the right to try it, both playing and listening."²⁵² After all, Vian himself played jazz, but he never considered his jazz ensembles to equal the quality of black groups. He was astute enough to recognize that jazz was linked to the black American experience, but he never fully explained his continued belief in the black exception.

The "querelle du bop" did not divide clearly along race lines, and that helps explain why Vian promoted bop music without believing the label accurate; what he was really promoting was continued black leadership in the evolution of jazz. Critics and musicians on both sides of the bop argument tried to cover their positions with a patina of cultural sensitivity to black musicians, but many of them would ultimately undermine the unique role of black musicians in the jazz realm in one of two ways. First, some insisted that true jazz was some form of primal or tribal jazz linked to the early years of jazz but that white musicians who played versions of that form were more authentic than black musicians who innovated in newer styles. Others admitted that the new developments black musicians brought to jazz in the 1940s and 1950s were valid, but they argued that jazz had become a universal American music that could exist independently of the black

²⁵¹ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 119.

²⁵² Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 290.

experience. Vian offered a third solution: despite his disappointment upon learning that black Americans could be just as taken with consumer conformity as other Americans, which will be examined shortly, he continued to insist on black leadership in jazz because he wanted to protect the black exception as a way to preserve jazz as a music of contestation rather than letting jazz be emptied of its importance and replaced with a commercialized and watered down substitute. After complaining about bad white copies of jazz, he explained, “Now I am an *engagé* musical critic.”²⁵³

Jazz as the Music of an Elite

Despite Vian’s efforts to use jazz as a vehicle for contestation, it remained for Vian a music of and for an elite. Although in his opinion the only requirement for participating in that elite was an appreciation for the music, he recognized that acquiring records and attending concerts required a certain amount of both money and leisure. The *zazous* had been considered children of the privileged classes, and even among adults jazz largely remained an upper class privilege. Vian himself enjoyed a certain disdain for the masses, although he never openly connected the masses to social class or education. Rather he considered the public’s taste to be too vulgar for the cultural pursuits he enjoyed. As jazz became more popular in France, he regretted the jazz elite’s loss of authority over it. In 1955 in his regular press review of jazz, he lamented that there was “Nothing in the French press – at least nothing is happening on the jazz front – but the appearance of innumerable concerts, the arrival of innumerable musicians; it’s all so sad! Where is the time when jazz remained the privileged of a genius elite. Alas, that time is no longer. Too bad.”²⁵⁴ He watched in disgust as public polls of jazz musicians ranked

²⁵³ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 175.

²⁵⁴ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 207.

what he considered to be mediocre jazz at the top of the list. After reading the American jazz review *Down Beat*'s opinion poll ranking of jazz musicians in 1958, he wrote that "one is led once more to this curious consequence of the imbecilic principle according to which ten thousand cretins carry more weight than one intelligent man."²⁵⁵ As he saw jazz continue to lose its charm as it was continually commercialized, he remained ambivalent about the popularity of jazz. He encouraged his audience to appreciate the music but seemed to worry that, as an avant-garde movement, it could not become popular without losing its edge or authenticity.

Commercializing Jazz

A third significant limitation on the uses of jazz in France involved issues of money, capitalism, and commercialization. Vian often lamented that the availability of good jazz was relatively limited in France for various reasons, regretting for example that the V-Disks the United States produced for its troops were destroyed after use despite the fact that they "included several jazz sides that were properly exceptional."²⁵⁶ He was not sympathetic to the problem of intellectual property rights because he thought bootleg copies were simply the result of an artificially low supply: "In all logic, besides, the only commentary that one can make is that the big labels just need to prevent the records that are always in demand from being sold out."²⁵⁷

Although he worried about efforts to increase the mass appeal of jazz, he simultaneously recognized that restrained jazz audiences implied limited profitability. He told his American audience during his WNEW broadcasts that "when you play jazz

²⁵⁵ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 62.

²⁵⁶ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 20.

²⁵⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 25.

over here, you've got to be a millionaire, because people don't really go for it."²⁵⁸ Again and again Vian explained that French audiences were right to dismiss most available jazz as bad music because there were not enough good French jazz musicians on hand. Even if there were enough jazz musicians, there would not be enough audience members because the young audiences who could appreciate jazz innovations could not afford to pay the entry price. The audiences who could afford it were the older crowd, and Vian argued that in order to attract those crowds, jazz musicians had to commercialize their sets in a way that would disgust the young audiences if they ever managed to scrape together the price of a ticket. Furthermore, by the time those musicians had saved enough money to record, they were no longer sufficiently connected to the jazz scene and its latest innovations to interest the younger audiences.²⁵⁹

The increased demand for jazz in America after World War II contributed to Vian's perception of a dearth of good American jazz music in France after the war. He explained that before the war "it did not cost much more to hire a quality black orchestra than to use a raw orchestra" but that the "war upset the relationships in price between France and America, land of jazz." Because it cost so much to bring American musicians to France after the war, "one no longer would even consider trying it lightly; one limits oneself from now on to sure profits." The cost of jazz music once again brought Vian to the discrepancy between the avant-garde jazz aficionados who had less consumer power and less-discriminating jazz fans: "Thus the alternative is posed: the enthusiastic public is in large retrograde; the useful public is sidelined by the first. And we, my good friends,

²⁵⁸ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 78.

²⁵⁹ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 113-114, 130, 174.

the jazz amateurs, we have nothing more to do but buy records.”²⁶⁰ Even more unfortunate, this discrepancy sometimes led good jazz musicians to abandon their artistic goals and to commercialize their playing. For example, after playing Alix Combelle accompanying Django Reinhardt on “Tears,” Vian announced to his WNEW listeners: “Now that we’ve cried let me tell you why. Alix Combelle had become a big shot in French jazz and he began to play not for fun but for money. And consequently he lost his enthusiasm, which he recovered only on rare occasions.”²⁶¹ Although recognizing that no quality French jazz groups had the commercial success of Louis Armstrong, and that no jazz groups had the international reputation of the Americans, Vian disagreed with critics and fans who believed the answer to be increasing the pay of lesser-known musicians to increase their status.²⁶² Despite examples such as Alix Combelle, Vian professed his belief that “Real jazz musicians have always been and will always be passionate about jazz, even if it does not bring them anything.” Practice, refinement, and mastery were the ways to increase reputation, and Vian wrote that “It is not by declaring that [Freddy] Randall should be paid as much as Louis that one will make of Randall (excellent trumpet player it’s true) a jazzman of Louis’ class”²⁶³

Jazz historians have continued to debate the varying roles of artistry and income in the development of jazz. Vian was not the only jazz critic to argue that financial success often led to artistic laziness, but others have argued that a certain amount of security within the music business was seen by some as necessary in order to obtain the

²⁶⁰ Vian, *Chroniques de Jazz* 70.

²⁶¹ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 38.

²⁶² Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 101-102.

²⁶³ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 102.

freedom of individual artistic creation.²⁶⁴ Continued questions include, first, whether by innovating for themselves and ignoring consumer demands jazz musicians became “irresponsible ‘elitists,’” and, second, whether the most popular forms of jazz were just “pandering to the ‘lowest common denominator’ of public taste.” The two apparently contradictory questions could even be applied at various moments and by various critics to the same jazz musician. Even Duke Ellington “who straddled popular success and avant-garde innovation more successfully than any other figure in jazz, was accused at various times either of ‘losing his audience’ or shamelessly seeking the leisure dollars of the musically ignorant masses.”²⁶⁵

Vian’s proposed solution was to have regular studio jazz orchestras that recorded regularly: the orchestras would have to commercialize a little to appeal to the wide public, but their self-respect would require them to include good innovative solos that would help accustom the public’s ear to new jazz.²⁶⁶ Vian proposed a balance between an element of commercialization, taking into account the utility of mass audiences to increase financial support for jazz, with an effort to guard the artistry of jazz from pollution by audiences who wanted jazz to be tailored to popular tastes. Even Vian himself did not think that all commercial recordings were bad. Just after the war he wrote, “So I will go to Beaulieu this evening, despite the fact that I hate night clubs, full of smoke and horrible people who will surely request *Sentimental Journey*.” He admitted, however, that “played by boys like them, *Sentimental Journey*, that could be something. . . I will no doubt request it also. . . just to see.”²⁶⁷ As early as 1946 Vian

²⁶⁴ DeVeaux 331.

²⁶⁵ Peretti 178-179.

²⁶⁶ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 176.

²⁶⁷ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 263.

saw the possible overlap between audiences who wanted to hear a song they already knew and those who would listen to almost anything that was played by the musicians they admired, as long as it was played well.

Vian's tastes in American music even extended into the realm of popular or variety music, including certain recordings of Nat "King" Cole, Mary Lou Williams, Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, Doris Day, Sarah Vaughn and Billie Holliday.²⁶⁸ Even before he took over the artistic directory of variety music at Philips, he was impressed by the label's series of variety recordings entitled "Musidfrom USA ," including Rosemary Clooney and Frank Sinatra, remarking that American variety recordings "have in common a sort of perfection that is very rarely attained by French 'variety' records."²⁶⁹ He saw American variety music as a way for novices to discover and begin to appreciate jazz, in part because of the relationship he saw between jazz and American ballads and the positive influence that jazz had on variety.²⁷⁰ Whereas he thought he had recognized the influence of ballads in earlier jazz, he was beginning to see jazz styles and techniques lending themselves to American variety music.²⁷¹ Just as he argued that the bebop styles had impregnated renditions of New Orleans or Dixieland jazz, he argued that jazz styles spilled over into more popular American music. In very concrete terms, Vian was beginning to discern the benefits that one form of mass culture could bring to another.

²⁶⁸ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 183-184, 198, 214-215.

²⁶⁹ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 213-214.

²⁷⁰ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 232.

²⁷¹ Vain, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 235.

Blacks and the Superficiality of Americans

Although Vian recognized that jazz could benefit American popular culture just as easily as that culture could threaten to corrupt jazz, he continued to complain about the lack of American culture when he considered Americans *en masse*. He was disgusted, for example, to discover that in 1957 RCA Victor had sold ten times as many Elvis Presley records as jazz records.²⁷² Like many intellectuals of his time, he occasionally complained that Americans were not only unrehearsed in jazz, but also vulgar and consumeristic, seeking escapist pleasures:

First, the Americans want *noise*. For them, an orchestra is only good (almost everyone has told us this in any case) *if it is made up of at least eighteen musicians*. It must make your head ring like a church bell. It's an example of their taste for evasion from a world that, in general, overwhelms them. (Stupefaction by sound is only one way among many, such as American football, marijuana cigarettes, radio programs with public participation and treasure hunts, the absorption of ice cream all day long, rented background music, illuminated signs, electric guitar, Bob Hope, the Jeep, roller-catch, Alcatraz, the criminal press, and chewing gum).²⁷³

What is more, from Vian's perspective, even black Americans could not always escape the negative influences of their country. He revealed:

. . . of all the Blacks that I have approached in the last few years. . . a good number seemed to me, and especially the women, much more American than Black (of course I am talking about Blacks from America). It seems that a civilization that has for effect to render people as stupefied and lacking in personal judgment, as falsely intellectual, as attached to the purely conventional, as full, to be frank, of prejudices that the Americans (we make exceptions for all of our friends as is just) must act with certain effectiveness on all people, whether they be Black or White.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 64.

²⁷³ Vian, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, 266, italics in original.

²⁷⁴ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 51-52.

He was disappointed to discover that even blacks in America had Fords, ties, refrigerators, and watched Bob Hope on television.²⁷⁵ He looked at the magazine culture of America and decided that “magazines such as *Tan* or *Jet*, read by hundreds of thousands of Black [. . .] allow us to affirm that if racial distinctions persist in an odious manner in the USA, the Black of America is now much more American than Black in the bucolic sense intended by [Panassié].”²⁷⁶

Even Louis Armstrong did not escape Vian’s criticism, and he imputed to Armstrong the equation of money with proof of personal success and divine blessing. He wrote that “The attitude of Louis Armstrong concerning his own success is in fact typically American in the general sense of the term; the only criteria of success over there is the dollar, at least for the large majority [...]. It is evidently regrettable to have to consider Louis, from a point of view other than music, to be an average American.”²⁷⁷ One of the attractions of black culture for whites was its element of resistance or rebellion.²⁷⁸ Vian hoped black American music could resist mainstream culture and serve as an inoculation against consumerism and superficiality. This view helps explain why French anti-Americanism seemed to apply less to blacks than to whites:

While anti-Americanism in general increased in France during the early years of the decade [1950’s], the American black man or woman could still feel more at home in Paris than when actually at home. The reception here was often a mixture of curiosity and friendliness. Jazz as still popular, and the American Negro, in French eyes, *was* jazz. ‘Jouez-vous la trompette?’ [‘Do you play horn?’] was a typical way of starting a conversation. Charming, but rather limiting. Baldwin joked that if he ever came to write an account of his Paris years, he would call it ‘Non, nous ne jouons pas la trompette.’²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 51-52.

²⁷⁶ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 255-256.

²⁷⁷ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 60.

²⁷⁸ Clarke has shown how “embedded in black culture, in black music, are oppositional values which in a fresh context served to symbolize and symptomatise the contradictions and tensions played out in British working class youth sub-culture” (Clarke, 166).

²⁷⁹ Campbell 115-116, italics in original.

Chester Himes bristled in France when he was assured by the French that it was the “other Americans” that they did not like and that he was not even “really an American.” He wrote, “I didn’t particularly like the connotation or the exclusion. If I’m not an American, what am I?”²⁸⁰

Despite Vian’s distaste for “Americanized” blacks, he was not describing a distant America of imagined black Americans. In the 1950s there were about 500 African Americans in France, about half of them in Paris.²⁸¹ Whether his observations were astute or not, Vian was speaking about black American jazz musicians whom he met and with whom he interacted in Paris. When complaining about the apparently inevitable Americanization of black Americans, he exempted those musicians he had met in Paris.²⁸² He prided himself on his personal acquaintances with jazz musicians and could refute Panassié’s argument that young jazz fans, whom he called the *zazotteux*, could not comment on black American jazzmen with any authority because he never saw them visiting with those who came to Paris. Vian indignantly responded that the *zazotteux* were not avoiding the musicians but rather were avoiding Panassié. He further noted that because Panassié preferred New Orleans jazz to bop, “he would have a hard time knowing that the *zazotteux* had always teemed around Dizzy, John Lewis, Parker, Garner, McGhee, Miles and twenty others.” Vian proudly concluded that as to himself, he was “one of those sincere and honest *zazotteux* who takes the trouble, notebook in hand, to collect the words of the great ones.”²⁸³ The jazz circles in Paris mixed French and Americans so tightly that Vian saw some of them becoming French. Not unlike

²⁸⁰ Campbell 118.

²⁸¹ Campbell 117.

²⁸² Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 39.

²⁸³ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 274-275.

interviewers who described Richard White as more French than American, Vian considered Don Byas a “perfect European” if not quite “a genuine Frenchman,” in part because Henri Leduc was teaching Don Byas French slang.²⁸⁴ Vian related that “One day when one of his compatriots asked him if he wanted to return to America, he answered: ‘Tu te tripes’ [You’re dreaming] so naturally that it brought tears of joy to his teacher.”²⁸⁵

Conclusion

In his writing about jazz music, unlike his youthful interest in jazz or his use of black characters in pulp fiction experiments, Vian finally addressed racism in its own terms rather than in sexual terms. Although a jazz musician himself, he refused to allow jazz music to be co-opted by whites, be they American or European, and he insisted that only black jazz musicians could define the extent and limitations of jazz. However, even in defending the right of black musicians to keep holding the reigns in the realm of jazz, Vian embraced a problematic vision of black men. Ostensibly positive, this vision endowed black musicians with a magical creative power or quasi-spiritual connection that, while elevating blacks above whites in jazz matters, ascribed to them a separate sphere. Vian’s promotion of integrated jazz orchestras demonstrated that he was no proponent of the American “separate but equal” experiment, and indeed he fell over himself to explain why black and white jazz musicians were far from equal, but by putting black jazz musicians on a pedestal, Vian continued to make the black man the “other.” Black Americans disappointed Vian when he perceived them as average Americans giving in to consumer culture, because he did not really want to categorize them as “American” at all. Among other black Americans who spent time in France after

²⁸⁴ Vian, *Jazz in Paris* 106-108.

²⁸⁵ Vian, *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Pés* 149.

World War II, the writers James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Chester Himes have written about the strange experience of being recognized in France as a representative of an America they did not know. We do not know whether Vian would have ever made the mistake of asking Baldwin whether he were a jazz musician, but if he had, he would have really been asking “Which kind of American are you?”

Conclusion

Boris Vian used American jazz and pulp fiction to understand how black American culture could be used as a model of “good” American culture that could be mobilized against “bad” American culture. This openness to American mass culture allowed him to move beyond jazz and be among the first to adapt other American musical styles, including rock and roll, making them available to larger French audiences through his own performances and through songs he wrote and records he produced while artistic director at Philips and then at Barclay. His distaste for dogmatic theories of the kind embraced by the Left in the postwar period allowed him to enjoy both Coca-Cola and Frank Sinatra without believing that music and soft drinks made him a tool of American cultural, economic, or political imperialism.

Many of Vian’s biographers have focused on explaining Vian’s renewed popularity in the 1960s through literary themes rather than historical context. They emphasize the value Vian placed on liberty and individuality and his preference for creativity over party politics. They argue that he was a useful model for the students of the 1960s because he worked towards individual happiness rather than tragedy and demanded freedom rather than order. Indeed, he wrote that “there is only one conformism but an infinite number of non-conformisms, the non-conformism is much richer in possibilities. . . .”²⁸⁶ Although student protesters in 1968 would look to *One Dimensional Man* author Herbert Marcuse for inspiration, they lived in a world that was becoming accustomed to American-style consumerism. Although they supported Third World Marxism and railed against the American war in Vietnam, their anti-Americanism

²⁸⁶ Vian, *Chroniques de jazz* 110.

derived largely from foreign policy rather than from the fear of mass culture that had informed the anti-Americanism of earlier decades. Nonetheless, even the continued confusion created by using an anti-American language of anti-consumerism within a consumer society was not new to the French students of the late 1960s. Vian's 1955 song "Complainte du progrès" is an eloquent criticism of a society where a man could no longer court a woman simply by professing his love. Modern France required a young man to offer his beloved a refrigerator, an oven and glass stove, electric blankets, a trash compactor, and all sorts of strange kitchen gadgets that complicated and deformed traditional relationships between men and women.

Despite his openness to some American culture and modernization, Vian remained aware of the political Cold War context surrounding American culture in Europe, and his songs reflected his understanding in frankly political language. From "La Java des Bombes Atomiques" to "Je Chante des Chansons," Vian complained about the nuclear threat. Written in 1955, "La Java des Bombes Atomiques" describes the experience of Vian's fictional uncle, a *bricoleur* who stops worrying that the A-bombs and H-bombs he built in his workshop only had a three and a half meter range when he realizes that what matters is not their size but their strategic deployment. The fictional uncle then renders France the service of using his nuclear devices to kill world leaders, most of whom he considers to be crazy. In "Je Chante des Chansons" Vian wrote about trying to distract nuclear scientists including Heisenberg, Nils Bohr, Fermi, and Einstein by singing about uranium and nuclear fission before realizing that roses, strawberries, and girls were a better topic.

Vian's anti-military songs were not limited to atomic war. His song "Les Joyeux Bouchers" compares war to a butcher's abattoir, and "Le Petit Commerce" describes a petit-bourgeois whose canon business is so successful that all of his clients wind up killed. His 1952 "Allons z'Enfants" and 1954 "Le Prisonnier" prepared the way for his famous song "Le Déserteur," the first by describing the boredom and dissatisfaction of a life spent following military orders and the second by explaining the disillusionment of a soldier who, after breaking under torture in the hopes of being released, finally returns home to find that his wife has left him. "Le Déserteur" was his most famous song during his lifetime and threatened to create the same degree of scandal as *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. A protest song, it was adopted by pacifists during the Vietnam era a decade after Vian's death in large part because of its message of peaceful resistance. The song adopts the first-person narrative of a draftee who refuses to oblige, explaining that he was not put on earth to kill "miserable people." Although the famous version of the song ends peacefully, with the protestor taking to the streets without weapons, Vian's original lyrics put a gun in the narrator's hand and the threat that he knew how to shoot.

Vian was not unique among the French in re-appraising pieces of American mass culture, nor was he unique in relocating American mass culture from a French discourse of conformity to a discourse of artistry.²⁸⁷ The film critics and later directors of the Nouvelle Vague took similar action in the world of cinema in the late 1950s. And just as the *cinéphiles* "tended to exaggerate the freedom of the individual film director in

²⁸⁷ "Time and time again the French were first to adopt bits from an American throwaway culture, as if picking up cigarette butts from the sidewalk, proclaiming their stats as art. This happened to jazz music, the hard-boiled detective novel, comic strips, and Hollywood B-movies" (Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall*, Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1996: 145). See also Kroes on "the characteristically French preoccupation with artistic creation as an individual act" (Kroes 147).

Hollywood,” Vian, like many jazz fans, largely ignored the actual conditions of jazz production in America, preferring instead a romanticized vision of the African-American’s journey from cotton fields to New Orleans’ Storyville brothels to concert halls.²⁸⁸

Vian’s deep attachment to American jazz was rooted in his connection of jazz with resistance to German-occupied France. He suspected that there was a cultural alternative to the war, but he did not ask himself why he thought it resided in black American music. After the war, when France faced the growing presence of American culture, he began to think about the black American experience. He experimented with pulp fiction in an effort to reach popular audiences, make money, and shock the establishment, but also to imagine living a black American experience, at once heroic and degrading. Unable to empathize with the black man, he nonetheless continued to sympathize with the black musician, promoting black jazz as the best kind of music and black jazz musicians as the best artists, technicians, and innovators. The irresponsible *engagé* had turned his passion for music, which Vichy collaborators had deemed an irresponsible disengagement, into a tool he could use to encourage a responsible critical distance and an active pursuit of what he believed what right.

Without perhaps realizing it and without ever consciously articulating it, Vian spent much of his life learning how to use American culture to enter an economically and socially modern world without falling into the American traps of materialism and conformity that had been defined by the pre-war political Right and co-opted by the postwar Left. By succeeding in his efforts without ever abandoning his critique of American racism and militarism, Vian’s example proved to anyone who was paying

²⁸⁸ Kroes 148.

attention that the shift in focus of anti-Americanism from mass culture to social, economic, and political policy did not necessarily weaken critiques of America. On the contrary, American mass culture provided an extra weapon in the responsible critic's fight against racial, economic, and social inequality.

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