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How Bigger Mutated: Richard Wright, Boris Vian, and “The bloody paths through which we push logic into dread”

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), Richard Wright argued that “The history of the Negro is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small. It is the history of men who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were levelled against them. The Negro is America’s metaphor.”¹ The French writers and directors considered here whose representations of US race relations derive from Richard Wright, demonstrated much less concern with American history. The metaphor of the Southern black man as the product and the victim of racial violence, and the fear of race mixing at the heart of a pathological racial fantasy, coincided with the psychologically-inflected, dark and desperate sensibility of the *roman noir* and of its cinematic version *film noir* in 1940s and 1950s France. In the summer of 1946 French filmgoers were catching up on the American films they had missed in the war years when US cinema was banned – *Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Murder, My Sweet* – and cineaste Nino Frank coined the term *film noir* to describe them. As James Naremore has summarised, “The French liked their Americans exotic, violent and romantic,” with “American” narratives emphasizing what André Gide called “a foretaste of Hell.”² The southern gothic, especially Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, and the crime genre epitomised by film adaptations of stories by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, provided fascinating images of America on which to build, trammelled as they were with the promise of sex and violence. *Sanctuary* may have been too noir for Hollywood in the 1930s but in France its dark vision was becoming the determining factor of each French version of the ‘Southern’ story. As Eric Rohmer noted, “Our immediate predilection tends to be for faces marked with the

brand of vice and the neon lights of bars rather than the ones which glow with wholesome sentiments and prairie air.”³ Richard Wright’s stories of murder, crime, sex and racism contained all the prime ingredients.

Wright’s fiction was based in social protest and grounded in the specificities of the segregated South or what he called “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” His protagonists personified racial alienation and rebellion, as when Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940) describes himself as “a man born for dark doom, an obscene joke happening amid a colossal din of siren screams and white faces and circling lances of light under a cold and silken sky,” an apt description of many a *film noir* anti-hero. However, Bigger’s tragedy is specifically that of the African American man and, as summarized by Wright, is inspired by the fear and hatred which have seeped “into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, and have become the justification of his existence.”⁴ Wright’s images were constellations of racial violence and its effects. In his autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945), Wright described feeling terrified by the violence that led to his uncle being lynched and the inevitability of racist violence, especially as it pivots on the fear of race mixing, is a constant motif in his work from the burning of Bobo in “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1937) through the lynching and castration of Chris Sims in *The Long Dream* (1958), the novel Wright set in Mississippi in the 1930s but wrote in France. In *The Long Dream* Wright has a tired Tyree state simply that black men “ain’t strong enough to fight back,” even though he challenges white corruption, a decision that leads to his death, and his son, Fishbelly, can conceive of survival only as flight, leaving the US South for Paris. Such images of the South as far as they derived from Wright also reflected his role as the representative African American writer, his role in Paris validated by Gertrude Stein, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and André Gide. It was the role Baldwin would go on to describe as indubitably Wright’s since his earliest publications: the artist/revolutionary who in French circles became “the representative of some thirteen million people.”⁵

This essay considers some of the ways in which Wright’s literary lexicon of social protest was extended but also distorted when the African American experience he depicted was fetishized by writers as different as Jean-Paul Sartre and Boris Vian in the 1940s and by the French directors who adapted their works for the screen in the 1950s. In 1946 Wright travelled to Paris and in November of that year Sar-

tre's play *La Putain Respecteuse* premiered at the Théâtre Antoine and Boris Vian published the novel *J'Irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes*, under the pseudonym Vernon Sullivan and in the guise of an African American living in Paris. France was seen as a civilized haven for blacks in the form of a 'colour-blind' nation, an image Wright fostered, and it was therefore believed to be the natural home for a no-holds-barred critique of America and its race relations. In Paris, the African American man was becoming the distillation of the existentially modern, displaced and alienated figure at the heart of jazz and Beat culture, Hipsterdom and Be-Bop. Vian created the consummate mutation of Wright's metaphor, pushing his protagonist to erotic and sensationalist extremes. Vian was an 'Americaphile,' a symbol of creative and rebellious youth, a jazz icon, and the ultimate 'White Negro' before Norman Mailer even began to theorize his existence. Instead of fear and flight as the dominant fuel for the anger that drives Wright's characters, in *J'Irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes* desire and dread drive Lee Anderson's rage-filled trajectory. He will fight the social forces around him, yoking his desire and vengeful rage to the dread that underpins white fears of miscegenation. Vian also harnessed key elements of the sensibility of *film noir* – most specifically an eroticized violence, savage cruelty and a sense of doom and nihilism – or what Borde and Chaumeton in the first study of American *film noir* would describe as “les filières sanglantes par où l'on faut passer la logique aux abois” [“The bloody paths through which we push logic into dread”].⁶ Vian pushed Wright's character past his breaking point in a scandalous *roman noir* of race vengeance.

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) first 'passed' as autobiography as a result of its anonymous publication; in a similar vein Boris Vian, first published his novel *J'Irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes* as its 'translator,' alleging its author was a southern black man telling an 'authentic' southern story from an authentically 'black' point of view that was so daring in its close-up on racial and sexual taboos that it would have been banned in the US.⁷ By the 1940s, the American novel in which a black character passes for white was traditionally an emotive melodrama with a tragic denouement in which the protagonist learns that loss of family and community are not worth the 'mess of pottage' he or she gains by crossing the colour line. However, Vian's Lee Anderson passes for white in order to avenge the lynching of his brother, killed for falling in love with a white girl in the segregated South. Anderson's plan is to rape

and murder two sisters from a powerful white family that he sees as comparable to the family which demanded his brother's death. He will make himself sexually irresistible to the white girls before revealing his racial identity in the moments before he kills them:

“Do you always like it so much when you get laid by a colored man?”

She didn't say a word. She looked paralyzed.

“You know, I've got more than an eighth colored blood in me.”⁸

As fears over Americanization took hold in the immediate post-war period, Vian mobilized an image of a guilty fantasy South to sell his novel; anything American or “translated from the American” sold in post-war France.⁹ The implication was that liberal French audiences could better appreciate a forthright, hard-hitting novel or film.¹⁰ French ‘Southern’ iconography was based on an affective pattern that drew on the *noir* sensibility evolving in France and the popularity of ‘genre fictions,’ such as the crime fiction that Marcel Duhamel edited at Gallimard,¹¹ at the same time that it referenced the writings of Richard Wright.

Margaret Walker once described Wright as an “ambivalent, angry and alienated man whose aberration is a mirror image of the South.”¹² In Europe Wright and *Black Boy* were revered and could be used as a mirror in which there might be discovered the ‘authentic’ reflection of Southern race relations. Vian looked in Wright's mirror and sensationalized what he saw there. James Sallis gets it exactly right when he describes *J'Irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes* as “nothing so much as a line of funhouse mirrors.”¹³ Vian borrowed from Wright but capitalised on the rhetoric of exposé, satirizing his own pulp style in doing so. For example, when Lee Anderson first passes for white, he takes on the role of managing a bookstore. He will be feeding the white imagination with the stories he stocks. When he enquires what the clientele in small-town Buckton usually prefers, he is assured by the out-going manager that ‘bad novels’ are the standard fare. Buckton is, however, also a very religious community and Lee is strongly advised that he should try to pass as religious, at least by attending church each Sunday, if he is to maintain the current sales. In this way, the consumption of pulp fiction is precariously balanced on sin and hypocrisy, issues at the heart of Vian's narrative. Before he takes on his new post, Lee asks the same bookseller what he intends to do next:

“Write,” he said. “Write best-sellers. Nothing but best-sellers. Historical novels; novels where colored men sleep with white women and don't get lynched; novels

about pure young girls who manage to grow up unblemished by the vicious small-town life which surrounds them.”

He chuckled.

“Yep, best-sellers . . . some very daring and original novels. It doesn’t require much to be daring in this part of the world. All you’ve got to do is write about things everybody knows, and take a little trouble in doing it.”

Lee is not convinced that it is possible to write a best-selling book “just like that, even if you do have dough.” He speculates, “Maybe he did have talent. For his sake I hoped so” (3-5).¹⁴ It is a sly tongue-in-cheek allusion to Vian’s success in writing his own daring bestseller as a bet – “A bestseller? Give me ten days and I’ll make you one!” he is reputed to have boasted and *J’Trai Cracher* sold more than half a million copies in France alone by 1950.¹⁵ Once in post as the new bookseller, Lee Anderson discovers that all new novels “of a sexy nature” sell within only a few hours (10).¹⁶

J’Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes is a grotesque pastiche of the culture Wright depicted. In “Blueprint for Negro Writing” he warns of the importance of perspective: “There are times when [the writer] may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.”¹⁷ Wright could not have imagined the Frenchman Boris Vian following his literary model. In *J’Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes*, murderous and suicidal rages as by-products of black emasculation remain potent motifs but where in *Native Son*, rape is “a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America,”¹⁸ Vian’s picture of angry black manhood is based on the black penis as the tool of revenge against whites, a precursor to the image of the black rapist of Amiri Baraka’s *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968), in which the rape of white women is described as an insurrectionary act. Vian’s Lee Anderson is a sexual avenger, the rebel ready to die if he can only kill whites first, and where Wright’s characters reaffirm their humanity in recognition of their crimes, Lee Anderson remains murderous to the end. In the final lines of the novel, his powerful sexuality mocks the white townsfolk who “hanged him anyway because he was a nigger. Under his trousers, his crotch still protruded ridiculously” (141).

If Vian admired the excess he perceived in Richard Wright’s work and extended his images into clichés with mass appeal, it was, of course, Wright’s clear-sighted expression of black fury that received the most condemnation from American critics, notably James Baldwin in “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” This 1949 essay was something of a

demolition of his mentor because in its first English publication in the French magazine *Zero*, it was situated immediately after Wright's new story "The Man Who Killed A Shadow."¹⁹ In "The Man Who Killed A Shadow," whites are "shadowy outlines" to southern-born Saul Saunders and he kills a white woman because she taunts him sexually. In this way he plays out the fate for which his embattled childhood prepared him and from which he cannot escape: "Saul got used to hearing the siren of the police car screaming in the Black Belt, got used to seeing white cops dragging Negroes off to jail. Once he grew wildly angry about it, felt that the shadows would some day claim him as he had seen them claim others . . ." ²⁰ When Saul confesses his crime to the police who arrest him, "his narrative sounded so brutal that the policemen's faces were chalky." Listening to the story of a black crime against a white woman makes the white police whiter, and Saul's crime all the 'blacker.' This racially-coded melodrama bristles with anger and epitomizes what Baldwin professed to disdain most in social protest fiction: that it becomes a "report from the pit," a story caught in "a web of lust and fury."²¹ The elements that worried Baldwin are precisely those that Vian emphasizes in his pulp experiment; for *J'Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes* to become a bestseller, it had to be condemned. When in 1947 a French businessman carried out a copy-cat murder based on the way Lee Anderson strangles Jean Asquith in *J'Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes*, the book was held responsible. It was also prosecuted for obscenity in a lawsuit funded by a private citizen, a self-appointed public watchdog. In 1948, Vian was finally forced to concede that he was 'Vernon Sullivan' in the first French trial of a work of literature since *Madame Bovary*. The book was banned in 1950 and, consequently, its underground sales as well as Vian's celebrity status were assured.

In Paris, Wright and Vian would die of heart attacks within weeks of each other and each death would be subject to media scrutiny. Aged only 39 and suffering from a congenital heart problem, Vian died in 1959 during the preview of Michel Gast's film adaptation of his novel at the Cinema Marbeuf. According to legend, Vian had only watched the first few frames of *I Spit on Your Grave* but he was already unhappy. His final words before suffering a fatal heart attack, apocryphal though they may be, were "These guys are supposed to be American? My ass!" In 1960 Wright's death would be the source of conspiracy theories, largely because J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI had kept Wright under surveillance for so long. As Wright said in "I Choose Exile"

(1947), “a bare recital, when uttered in an alien atmosphere [France], of the facts of Negro life in America constituted a kind of anti-American propaganda.”²² Even in the controversies surrounding their deaths, Wright and Vian can each be seen as embodying some of the tensions in the relationship between French and American culture in the immediate post-war era. Adjectives typically applied to Vian are ‘mercurial’ and ‘iconoclastic’; he is compared to Rimbaud and carefully situated between the surrealism of Raymond Queneau and the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, often the scourge of both intellectual positions as he was a keen satirist of each.²³ Vian had read Richard Wright in English before his novels were translated into French and he translated Wright’s “Bright and Morning Star” (1938) with its scenes of racist violence in the same year that he wrote *J’Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes*.

Vian was a rebel artist but so was Wright and in far more courageous ways. Nor did Wright condemn or avoid the genre fictions that Vian favoured or the controversies that he exploited so successfully. In *Black Boy*, for example, Richard confides that Sunday school narratives seemed “slow and meaningless when compared to the thrill of pulp narrative” and his first story, graphically titled “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre” and published in the *Southern Register* (1924), was received as sinful, the “Devil’s work.”²⁴ *Black Boy* itself was famously denounced as dirty, filthy and obscene by Mississippi Congressman Theodore Bilbo and another Mississippian David L. Cohn reviewed *Native Son* in 1940 as “a blinding and corrosive study in hate.”²⁵ Wright’s still unpublished *Island of Hallucinations* has been described as daring and potentially libellous; an “autobiographical melodrama and psychedelic terror,” to borrow Margaret Walker’s terms, it contains “psychosexual violence, crimes of murder and rape, the drug scene, alcoholism, and even some sexual deviancy.”²⁶ Wright also left a partially written novel called *The Father’s Law* which details the involvement of a black man in serial killings of white women.²⁷ Looking back over Wright’s oeuvre to include the unpublished work reveals more common ground between Wright and Vian’s sensationalist imagery than might initially be supposed.

This is not to imply that Richard Wright’s South did not find philosophical ground in the French variations on the themes he had made his own. Wright agreed to write an introduction to *La Putain Respectueuse* and claimed that Sartre had brought “his keen and philosophical temperament to bear upon the problem of race relations in

America.” Wright went so far as to say, “Let us . . . be thankful for the eyes and mind of Jean-Paul Sartre who . . . is helping us to see ourselves . . .”²⁸ Wright had faith in European writers and filmmakers: when preparing to film *Native Son*, he feared that Hollywood would dilute the political message and in the left-wing French director Pierre Chenal Wright felt assured that he had found a politically-committed filmmaker. Wright and Chenal sailed from France to New York and went on to Chicago to shoot *Native Son* but they ended up in Argentina, recreating Chicago’s Southside in Buenos Aires.²⁹ In this way, Wright was all too aware that representations of American race relations did not always invest in verisimilitude but he believed in the message movie and in the melodrama with a political edge. Consequently, he agreed to act as adviser to Sartre for the movie of *The Respectful Prostitute* (1952), again with French directors but aimed at American audiences. In the film, New York prostitute Lizzie is a ‘chantoosie’ travelling South for a nightclub engagement. Aboard the train she is annoyed by the attentions of a drunken white man and escapes into the ‘colored car.’ When the drunk follows, he kills a black man who tries to defend her. The rest of the film follows his black friend who witnessed the crime. The murderer is the nephew of a Senator and succeeds in making the black witness his scapegoat for supposedly having tried to rape Lizzie. When a lynch mob is mobilized, only the prostitute may be able to save the innocent black man, unless her ‘respect’ for the Southern Senator and his family curbs her northern sense of justice. Literary biographer Michel Fabre has argued that Wright’s notes on the shooting script prove he did a thorough job supplying American context.³⁰ Nevertheless in the United States, *The Respectful Prostitute* was still marketed as “‘sexational’ pornography rather than polemics.”³¹

Sartre’s play and the film *The Respectful Prostitute* can be read as prototypes for director Michel Gast in filming *J’Irai Cracher sur Vos Tombes* insofar as Gast, like Sartre, utterly dispenses with the need to locate his South in anything other than the word itself – and the mythology that the word conjures in the popular imagination. Sartre’s play is set in “A room in a Southern town in the United States. White walls. A couch. . . .”³² And while Richard Wright nuanced the screenplay with a much stronger sense of southern society, directors Marcel Pagliero, most well-known for acting in Rossellini’s *Roma: Città Aperta* (1946), and Charles Brabant based their image of ‘The South’ on the small-town and the idea that American racism is located there. Real

places are avoided so that the image becomes representative and universal.³³ In *The Respectful Prostitute*, the train is shot travelling through unspecified countryside in the opening frames and the streets down which the innocent black man flees the lynch mob are indistinguishable from any ‘mean streets’ down which an American hero might be seen to flee. A lack of geographical specificity characterizes each French version of the US South. In Vian’s novel the fictional town of Buckton that Lee Anderson infiltrates is not only homogeneously white but situated in a geographical interregnum that is a fantasy space: when he finally flees, Anderson heads for the Mexican border which is “not too far away” (111). In Gast’s film *I Spit on Your Grave* when Joe Grant flees into the night, he is very quickly welcomed by a sign that points to Canada. History like geography is a *canard*, whether designed to show that the North does not know the South³⁴ – that Gast and his screenwriters know or care even less – or as a critique of *American* race relations rather than solely their southern formulation. Lee Anderson’s renaming as Joe Grant ironically also recalls Baldwin’s worry in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” that: “The aim has now become to reduce all Americans to the compulsive, bloodless dimensions of a guy named Joe.”³⁵ Vian’s ‘Joe’ is far from bloodless.

Boris Vian did begin working on the film of his novel with Michel Gast but they soon had their differences. Vian and Jaques Dopagne had written a screenplay but Gast did not follow it, preferring Joe Grant to fall in love with one of his intended victims so that the sadistic sexual violence of his revenge would be lost. When Joe is killed by the police, it is because a false charge of rape has been levelled against him by the white characters that have discovered he is black: he has killed no-one. On the one hand, Gast restored a typically southern narrative formula in which the falsely accused black man is the scapegoat of the race-sex code. On the other hand, he, more than any other French writer or director discussed here, constructed “a French America,” what Gast has called “un peu l’Amérique peut-être qu’elle est vue par nous en Europe” [a little like America as we in Europe see it], his aim “de créer une intrigue plus crédible en France” [to fashion a plot that would be more credible in France].³⁶ Most significantly, Gast dampens Joe Grant’s fury and lust so that, like his brother, he is killed only for loving a white woman. His dying words are a lame reworking of this idea: “On n’a pas le droit d’aimer une blanche, Johnny. On n’a pas le droit. Johnny, rest avec moi” [We’ve no right to love a white woman, Johnny. We don’t have the right. Johnny stay with me].

Gast instituted many other changes that dilute the most scandalous aspects of Vian's narrative and which coalesce in a bloodless and insipid hero, swayed too easily from avenging his brother's death. For example, the Asquiths in Vian's novel specifically recall the Daltons in *Native Son* who make a fortune as slum landlords for poor blacks on Chicago's South Side. The two Asquith daughters, Jean and Lou, are the objects of Lee's revenge because their parents own a sugar plantation in Haiti and they are "a fine pair of crooks who had inherited a lot of money but used it to exploit people whose only crime is that they have a different skin colour" (68-69). The powerful and corrupt white family is an important motif in French representations of US race relations. In *The Respectful Prostitute*, for example, Lizzie is offered \$1,000 by the Senator's nephew to say that the innocent black man tried to rape her and that he saved her. Vian's Lee Anderson targets the Asquiths precisely because they are like the Morans on whose say-so Anderson's younger brother is lynched for his association with their white and wealthy daughter. His older brother is beaten mercilessly and bullwhipped by the same Morans for challenging Mississippi's 'Senator Balbo' by campaigning for black voter registration. Set in Trenton rather than Buckton, in the North rather than the South, the white aristocracy in Gast's film are of old southern stock but the Shannon family "est fondée sur la saucisse." The white family simply makes excellent sausage and the town's rich and spoiled wide boy is planning a marriage of convenience with Elisabeth Shannon in order to become "le roi de la saucisse." Although Elisabeth may be the object of his revenge initially, by the end of the movie Joe Grant simply wants to save her from that fate. "I was going to avenge my brother by killing you," he tells her. She gently replies that "If we are happy together, he'll be avenged," moments before they both die in a hail of police bullets. *I Spit on Your Grave* ends on an image of thwarted interracial love rather than of remorseless sexual revenge.

Despite the publicity declaring Gast's cinematic version of Vian's novel "the film they dared not make until now," standard publicity for any 'adult' film that used the challenge to the censors as a marketing tool, *I Spit on Your Grave* is a pale, passionless adaptation. Vian's novel is witty as well as shocking. For example, while Gast's visualization of the drug store where the young people socialize is pure *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), in Vian's novel it may also be read as a clever satire on the Americanization of Paris. By the late 1940s, Sartre's former hang-out Café Le Flore had become grossly Americanized, with

Janet Flanner of *The New Yorker* describing it as “a drugstore for pretty upstate girls in unbecoming blue denim pants and their Middle Western dates, most of whom are growing hasty Beaux-Arts beards.”³⁷ Gast retains those images that recall teenage rebellion but he includes a new scene in which an electric chair is rigged up in the drug store so that white youths can bully other boys with gleeful cruelty. While Gast has said that the torture scene was a way of alluding to the French war in Algeria while subject to censorship on the topic, the scene simply seems a bizarre pandering to sensationalism.³⁸ Vian was daring, shocking, angry, thrusting and controversial. Gast’s film capitalised on the novel’s reputation but failed to garner much critical interest beyond that created by scenes of “skinny dipping,” a pastiche of the erotic as emphasized in the directorial freedom of the French New Wave at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s.³⁹

More interesting than the film is its exhibition and reception. *I Spit on Your Grave* was released in France on June 26, 1959 where it enjoyed some controversy, largely because of Vian’s death. In Latin America it proved quite popular. The publicity in Mexico for example, was – in translation – “Only the French cinema has dared to present the horrible problem of discrimination” and the marketing emphasized those aspects of the plot that were very different from Vian’s: “A beautiful white woman in love with a black man – they are persecuted like beasts by a civilized world.”⁴⁰ By the 1960s, in France the film disappeared except for its association with Boris Vian’s cult status. Their marketing drive over, the production companies that made Gast’s film were not very active in the years following its release.⁴¹ In the US, however, the controversy over *I Spit on Your Grave* began in the 1960s and related not just to its subject matter but to its status as a French film and the assumption that it would therefore also be an art film even though it might be risqué, even sexually explicit. It opened in cinemas across the country in the early 1960s – in Los Angeles at the Apollo Arts Theater in July 1962 as distributed by Beverly Pictures and in New York in June 1963 by Audubon Films. *I Spit on Your Grave* in its American incarnation may be located between the trend to make more ‘adult’ films that characterized Hollywood in the 1950s – rebellious youth had become a money spinner as had sexual promiscuity – and the ‘new’ generation of films of the early 1960s that pushed the boundaries of ‘bad taste,’ manoeuvring out of the censor’s grasp in pursuing a form of soft core pornography. Any attempt to apply industrial labels to *I Spit on Your Grave* reveals something of the con-

traditions of mid twentieth-century cinema in which industrial hierarchies became harder to maintain. For example, one producer of exploitation films likens Gast's *I Spit on Your Grave* to *Black Like Me* (1964) and assumes that by capitalizing on 'the racial problem' it grossed a lot of money in the US.⁴² Despite expectations, the film of Vian's novel failed to chart either as an exposé of American racial violence or as a low-budget drive-in staple but it was, unsurprisingly, the focus of censors in the South.

French films had not traditionally fared well with southern censors: Marc Allégret's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1955) had been condemned for representing adultery as a positive life choice and Roger Vadim's *And God Created Woman* (1956) was banned from black movie theatres as "too exciting for colored folk."⁴³ In January 1963, the Virginia Film Board reversed its 1960 decision to ban the exhibition of Gast's film in the state. This was the breach that opened the film to Southern audiences. In 1962 in Memphis, an art house manager had been prosecuted for showing *I Spit on Your Grave* at the Studio. The Vice Squad closed the cinema and confiscated the film. The manager began a two-year battle against the charge against him which was based on Tennessee's (then) 105-year-old anti-obscenity laws. The charge was levelled because the French-made film was believed to depict the "questionable morals of a southern town, supposedly Memphis."⁴⁴ After the film secured release in Virginia and elsewhere in the South, the judge, Preston Battle, finally threw out the indictment in 1964, declaring the Tennessee law under which the cinema manager had been charged unconstitutional because it violated free speech.⁴⁵

The controversy over the distribution and exhibition of the film in Memphis is revealing because the city is mentioned in the film a number of times as the scene of the lynching of Joe Grant's younger brother. He is seen in the opening frames supposedly docking in Memphis, the Mississippi river bearing a surreal resemblance to the south of France rather than the US South. Michel Gast filmed his depiction of America on sound stages at the Victorine studios and his location shots in France and in Italy between February 9 and April 11, 1959. Like the novel from which it was adapted, the film was conceived and staged entirely in Europe. It wrapped in only two months, ironically recalling the story that Vian had written the novel in less than two weeks. In fact, only the word 'Memphis' uttered by Joe Grant (Christian Marquand) in heavily-accented French signals any correlation at all with the actual Southern city. By January 1965, the film was play-

ing around Memphis and the vindicated arts cinema manager told the *Hollywood Reporter* that *I Spit on Your Grave* was “packing ‘em in.” Nevertheless, although the *Memphis-Press Scimitar* included a still to advertise the film in its Show Times section, the *Commercial Appeal* refused even to name it, writing simply “Call-theater-for-title . . .”⁴⁶ Edward Hopper, the *Scimitar*’s film critic in the 1960s, concluded that the film was tasteless but that “an audience neigh – a loud horse laugh – will do more to combat such fare than a censorial nay.”⁴⁷ Away from Memphis, the *New York Times* described Gast’s film with similar disdain: as absurd social propaganda in which foreign misconceptions of America were at the forefront. It is easy to deride a film that purports to be a sex melodrama but turns out to be rather “conventional and mild,” and whose “improbable” plot is undermined even further by implausible location shooting. However, the *New York Times* review ends quite seriously: “the thought of a foreign audience’s reaction is sobering.”⁴⁸ This is precisely the transnational effect stories of US race relations could engender. Richard Wright had recognized this fact in his introduction to Sartre’s play *La Putain Respecteuse*, when he observed that American race relations would be treated as farcical by any foreign observer conversant with American ideas of democracy.⁴⁹

When in the 1940s Faulkner and Wright’s American South was enfolded into Sartre’s and commandeered by Vian, the larger effect was of the South demonized for the violence that underpinned the fear of race mixing, and of the *roman noir* as a transnational genre through which ‘The South’ could be successfully exported. In *J’Trai Cracher sur Vos Tombes*, Vian adapted a southern genre, “the black-white, sex and murder thriller”⁵⁰ in which a black man crosses the colour line, comes to the attention of angry whites in search of a scapegoat, and faces murderous consequences. Lee Anderson is ultimately hunted, killed and mutilated in a similar way to Joe Christmas, but where Christmas lashes out indiscriminately, Anderson’s violent retribution, like his death when it comes, is defiant. Boris Vian was called “a prototype of the New Novelist” for imagining such characters and he was lauded by Raymond Queneau in France and Leslie Fiedler in America. Fiedler looking back ten years after Vian’s death, declared him an “Imaginary American” who more than any other cross-cultural artist “managed to straddle the border, if not quite close the gap between high culture and low, belles-lettres and pop art.”⁵¹ In many ways Vian’s 1946 novel was prescient of the creative dialectic that emerged in a transatlantic exchange of adventure stories and melodramas charac-

terized by a love of American popular culture, as in Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1959), a remake of the popular American *noir*-ish thriller *Gun Crazy* (1950), and Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) which recalls what many believe was the final *film noir* of the classic phase, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

The image of US race relations that evolved in the French imaginary in the 1940s and 1950s combined the hedonistic with the nihilistic to an extent that surpassed most American exploitations of the southern 'race problem.' The bloody paths through which Vian pushed his version of Bigger Thomas, from logic into dread, and his version of the 'White Negro' captured the French fascination for America and American popular culture. In post-war France, Wright's *roman à these* became a *roman noir* and the South mutated into an example of Americana, a gothic side-show. The French adaptation of the plight of Bigger Thomas was an excursion into a fantasy South, that was less related to the US than it was reflective of Europe's condemnation of American race relations.

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Notes

- ¹ Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge* (1937) repr. *Race and Class* 21.4 (Spring 1980): 403.
- ² James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 23.
- ³ Eric Rohmer, "Rediscovering America" ("Redécouvrir l'Amérique") *Cahiers du Cinéma* 54 (Christmas 1955) *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s, Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985). Writing in 1955, he cites *Sanctuary* as already "quite at home here" but worries that French cinema will forget the thriller genre and will see the end of *film noir* if too heavy an emphasis continues to be placed on "a philosophy of behaviour" 91.
- ⁴ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (London: Penguin, 1979) 434.
- ⁵ James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998) 25.
- ⁶ Raymond Borde et Étienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955) 5. The statement is the epigraph from a poem by Lautréament.
- ⁷ At the same time as Vian published his novel, African American crime writer Willard Motley was racially "whitening" Bigger into Italian American Nick Romano in *Knock on Any Door* (1947). Ironically, Vian's novel would not be published in the US for another fifty years.

- ⁸ Boris Vian, *I Spit on Your Graves* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001) 133. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
- ⁹ See, for example, Thelma M. Smith and Ward C. Miner, *Transatlantic Migration: The Contemporary American Novel in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 31-32.
- ¹⁰ For example, Jean Renoir tells a funny story about *The Southerner* as tellingly misrepresented on its French release. An early review was phoned in and the sub-editor who took down the words that were printed later in the press heard *Le Souteneur* (the Pimp) instead of *The Southerner* and described it as “un film de genre noir” (a film noir) instead of “un film de Jean Renoir.” Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 238.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Perry Miller, “Europe’s Faith in American Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1951): 50-56.
- ¹² Margaret Walker, “Richard Wright as a Product of Southern Culture,” Shelby State Community College February 4, 1982 as quoted in Miriam DeCosta-Willis, “Avenging Angels and Mute Mothers: Black Southern Women in Wright’s Fictional World,” *Callaloo* 9 (Summer 1986): 541 and 569, n.6.
- ¹³ James Sallis, “Boris Vian: Bussing the Lips of the Grave,” *I Spit on Your Graves* x.
- ¹⁴ Boris Vian, Preface, *I Spit on Your Graves* 3-5.
- ¹⁵ In the summer of 1946, Jean d’Halluin in an effort to compete with Gallimard, launched a new press, Editions du Scorpion, and asked Vian to write the first bestseller for him.
- ¹⁶ In the film, which retains the bookshop as Joe Grant’s Trenton base, an elderly Miss Zwick comes in to buy *The Smiling Hangman* from his collection of suspense fiction and mumbles that the detective genre is always introspective. Her predilection for detective fiction has clearly taught her little, though. She accuses Joe Grant of smoking too much because his finger nails are yellow from nicotine. The audience is expected to readjust her observation to reflect a racial ‘clue,’ the spurious if legendary international signifier of the finger nails that are supposed to give away black racial identity. And the very sign that Joe Grant was told in the South would never allow him to pass. If missed, however, Miss Zwick’s reference is followed swiftly in the same scene by a young admirer’s observation that Joe Grant has “des épaules de boxer noir” (shoulders like a black boxer), a phrase taken almost directly from Vian’s novel (27). Vian’s protagonist revels in his body unlike most passers in fiction whose discomfort with their corporeality indicates that they remain ‘thin-skinned.’
- ¹⁷ Wright, “Blueprint” 407.
- ¹⁸ Wright, “How Bigger Was Born,” *Native Son*, Introduction 31.
- ¹⁹ James Campbell compares Baldwin’s essay to a policeman on the point of arresting Wright’s story in *Paris Interzone* (London: Vintage, 2001) 26.
- ²⁰ Richard Wright, “The Man Who Killed A Shadow,” *Eight Men* (1961; New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) 188.
- ²¹ Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” *Collected Essays* 17-18 “Many Thousands Gone” 18. Baldwin later famously said that “No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull.”
- ²² Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.: 1973) 356.

- ²³ Vian's column in *Les Tempes Modernes* was called "Chronique du menteur" and in the novel *L'Écume des Jours* (1946) he invented a philosopher called Jean-Sol Partre.
- ²⁴ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (London: Vintage, 2000) 156, 169.
- ²⁵ Bilbo is quoted in Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 282; David L. Cohn, "Review of Native Son," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1940). Although writing from opposite political positions, Cohn's argument and Baldwin's are very similar: they use the same example of Bigger watching the airplanes he will never be allowed to fly to introduce their critiques of Bigger's overwhelming hatred as "a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy," Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Collected Essays* 18.
- ²⁶ Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man and a Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Amistad Press, 1988) 307. *Island of Hallucinations* has been withheld from publication. It is a sequel to *The Long Dream* (1958) and a roman à cléf about African Americans in Paris, including Richard Gibson whose supposed connections to the CIA fuelled Wright's belief that he was being spied on. The Wright estate fought against Walker's use of unpublished material in her book, as James Campbell has explained, returning to the controversy most recently in "The Island Affair," *The Guardian* January 7, 2006, 21-22. *Island of Hallucinations* is located with Wright's papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale.
- ²⁷ Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 313, n. 10.
- ²⁸ Richard Wright, quoted in Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) 162.
- ²⁹ After the critically acclaimed theatre adaptation of *Native Son*, with Canada Lee and produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman, it is hard to imagine how Wright imagined the quality of that performance might have been matched by Wright aged 40 playing Bigger Thomas but Canada Lee had turned down a part in the film.
- ³⁰ Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 597, n. 30.
- ³¹ Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 271.
- ³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1955) 251.
- ³³ The film's publicity states that, "It dares to cross the barriers of convention." The film was not without its signifiers of quality, however. It was shot by the acclaimed cinematographer Eugene Schüfftan (Oscar-winning for *The Hustler* in 1961) and the screenplay was written by Alexandre Astruc whose 1948 thesis on *le caméra-stylo* was well-known and who would become renowned as a contributor to *Cahiers du Cinéma*.
- ³⁴ When, for example, Joe Grant introduces himself in Trenton he is told by the book-seller – presumably not the least educated of the small town's citizens that Grant is "Un nom vénéré dans le nord. C'est celui du libérateur des noirs" [a highly-respected name in the North. It is the name of the man who freed the slaves].
- ³⁵ Baldwin, *Collected Essays* 16. Baldwin would go on to condemn the film as "an utterly cynical use of the name Boris Vian," claiming "the book's power comes from the fact that he forces you to see this anguish from the undisguised viewpoint of his foreign, alienation." James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Laurel, 1976) 47-48.

- ³⁶ Michel Gast “Sex, Jazz et Violence: L’adaptation cinématographique de *J’irai Cracher Sur Vos Tombes*,” DVD, CTI Paris, 2006.
- ³⁷ Janet Flanner as quoted in Harvey Levenstein, *We’ll Always Have Paris: American Tourists in France Since 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 124.
- ³⁸ Michel Gast: “J’ai tenté de rester fidèle à ce qui avait dans le livre, c’est à dire cet anti-racisme, ce probleme. . . . C’était l’époque de la guerre d’Algerie, vous vous souvenez. C’est à dire qu’on ne pouvait rien dire, certaines scènes comme la scène de la torture dans le film sont une manière de parler de ce qui passait en Algerie . . .” [I tried to remain faithful to what was in the book, that is, its anti-racism . . . it was the time of the war in Algeria, if you remember. That is to say, we couldn’t say anything about it, so certain scenes, like the torture scene, were a way of discussing what was going on in Algeria . . .] in “Sex, Jazz et Violence,” DVD, 2006.
- ³⁹ See, for example, the cover of the British film journal *Continental* advertising the British premiere of *I Spit on Your Grave* with the image of Christian Marquand helping a nude blonde out of the water and the general tenor of the discussion in “Sex and the Nouvelle Vague,” *Continental* December 1959: 12-13, 46.
- ⁴⁰ Information taken from publicity posters for Francia films of Mexico.
- ⁴¹ It was largely produced by a Spanish company (CIT) and Soprofilms who made only one other film in the 1950s and were silent until the 1980s when they produced the French hit *3 Hommes et un Couffin* and had a stake in Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor*.
- ⁴² Barry Mahon, “The Truth, The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth About Exploitation Films,” *Film Comment* 2.2 (1964): 12. Mahon misremembers the title as *Don’t Spit on My Grave* but it is the sub-genre or type according to which he categorizes the film that is important in his discussion.
- ⁴³ Anon., *Variety*, April 2, 1958 and as quoted in J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1992) 82. Though made in 1956, the film was first distributed in the U.S. in 1958 and in the South at the beginning of the 1960s.
- ⁴⁴ Anon., “Virginia Censor Lifts Ban on ‘Your Grave,’” *Variety* January 2, 1963; Anon., “Tenn. State Obscenity Law Upset As Judge Rules For Memphis Exhib.,” *Motion Pictures Exhibitor*, December 2, 1964.
- ⁴⁵ The prosecutors had planned to cite 15 other films as comparable, including a number of European examples: Sartre’s *No Exit*, *Phaedra* and *La Dolce Vita* as well as *Peyton Place*, *The Chapman Report* and *Toys in the Attic*.
- ⁴⁶ Anon., “Confiscated Film Now Packing ‘em In,” *Hollywood Reporter*, January 18, 1965: 1 and 13.
- ⁴⁷ Anon., “Confiscated Film . . .” 13.
- ⁴⁸ Eugene Archer, “False Impression: French ‘I Spit on Your Grave’ at the Rialto,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1963.
- ⁴⁹ See Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest* 326.
- ⁵⁰ See Sharon Monteith, “The Murder of Emmett Till in the Melodramatic Imagination: William Bradford Huie and Vin Packer,” *Emmett Till in the Literary and Historical Imagination*, ed. Christopher Metress and Harriet Pollack (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, forthcoming 2007).
- ⁵¹ Leslie Fiedler, “Cross the Border – Close the Gap,” *The New Fiedler Reader* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000) 277.

