

Chester Himes, Boris Vian, and the Transatlantic Politics of Racial Representation

In his 1969 review of Chester Himes's *Blind Man with a Pistol*, Edward Margolies offered these kind words: "Himes's crime fiction sells rather well in France, where presumably it whets and sates an appetite for erotica-exotica (violent and passionate jungle-black Harlemites); perhaps it also narcotizes French readers about their own race problems" (59). Though it suggests Margolies's knowledge of the intricacies of French race politics, this statement betrays a certain annoyance with the terms of Himes's French career and the fame he had secured by writing "pot-boilers" featuring "plenty of gore, as well as sex to the lively accompaniment of much bawdy satirical humor" (59). Although he grants certain qualities to Himes's thrillers, Margolies appears particularly to lament what he sees as Himes's choice to settle for less and not try to "transcend genre." To Margolies's dismay, "it is as if Himes in the course of writing potboilers inadvertently discovered that . . . [he had] freed himself from the 'art' of the novel" (59). Margolies goes on to speak of Himes's two separate French audiences: the intelligentsia, who consider that "Himes has plumbed the savage-sick essence of America," and the wider population, presumably in it for cheap thrills and racial caricature.

Margolies's statement suggests how crucial audience expectations, both real and imagined, have been in the assessment of Chester Himes's work in the United States and France. Himes's detective fiction novels were a contract job ordered specifically by Marcel Duhamel, a major force in the circulation of Himes's writings in France in his position as the head of Gallimard's famous *Série noire*. Duhamel's advice led Himes to a profitable career in detective fiction, if not to producing "art." As his first French translator, Duhamel was well aware of Himes's early attempts at perfecting his "'art' of the novel." His "five 'major' works" had only brought him a "very minor American reputation," and such intellectual analyses of Himes's works as offered by the French intelligentsia, Margolies notes, "ha[d] scarcely been expressed . . . over here" (59). Himes's writings did not quite fit the social and political values expected from protest fiction. They were dismissed for lacking in aesthetics, political value and cultural authenticity. French expectations in these areas, in turn, were instrumental in building Himes's reputation, partly thanks to the influence of a relatively small circle of literati. Boris Vian occupies a unique position among them with *I Spit on Your Graves* and *The Dead All Have the Same Skin*, two graphic tales of passing that Vian pretended to have translated from manuscripts by an unknown African American author. These novels were both an expression of French sensibilities on the American "Negro problem" and a commentary on them. Vian's background as a jazz critic hints that these novels should be read as humorous riffs on the debates over racial authenticity shaking the French jazz scene at the time. His literary hoax profoundly disturbed this discussion by revealing the utter artificiality of its terms and creating the critical vacuum within which Himes was able to "free himself from the 'art' of the novel." Himes found that the idiosyncrasies of French discussions on race and culture made it possible for him to take part, as noted by Jonathan Eburne, "in an ongoing French public discourse surrounding the status of writing as a political and ethical practice" (807) from which he had been all but banned in the United States. In order to do so, Himes rejected engaged writing as defined by the protest genre,

and adopted a controversial absurdist style that both fit his French readership and gave him the freedom of movement necessary to make his own unique contribution to literature. If this process would eventually produce the Harlem series, its early movements can be discerned in *The End of a Primitive*, a novel Himes wrote between France, England, and Spain.

Terms of Engagement

The protest novel label was attached to Himes from the publication of his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), the tale of Bob Jones, an African American metalworker in a Los Angeles shipyard doomed by both the pathological desire and equally pathological hatred his white female colleague Madge bears him. The novel was compared to the unavoidable Richard Wright's *Native Son* for its depiction of the crushing determinism of racism in American society. Himes described in painfully direct fashion the different levels at which race and sex collide in the United States—what he would call elsewhere “America’s sex and racism syndrome” (*Quality* 4). Yet if Himes’s early novels followed structurally the deterministic perspective of protest fiction, his sarcastic and bitter tone made for a style rather different from Richard Wright’s blend of naturalism and already suggested an original voice in African American fiction. The novel received praise from some critics, including James Baldwin and Wright himself, but reviews were generally mixed, as many voiced dismay at its “overwhelming bitterness and hatred” (R. E. C. 210). Criticism only became harsher with Himes’s following novels. In the aptly named *Lonely Crusade* (1947), Himes wrote about racist practices in trade unions and of Communist duplicity towards African Americans. The book infuriated the Communist press and drew acid comments from part of the black press. In Himes’s own words, “everyone hated the book . . . the left hated it, the right hated it, Jews hated it, blacks hated it” (*Quality* 100).

The book was critical of the race politics of trade unions, and Himes seemed to offer no way out of the race issue, so what good could it be?¹ What Philip Butcher termed Himes’s “unilluminating concern with violence” (qtd. in Locke 6) was severely judged by many critics who saw it as an attempt at cashing in on popular tastes at the cost of realism, and therefore Himes’s necessary commitment to racial uplift. Worse yet, Himes’s experience as a black man was called into question by Milton Klonsky in a particularly scathing review for *Commentary*. Klonsky felt that through books such as Himes’s “the dignity of the cause and the dignity of the injured themselves must suffer” (189). Such dead reckoning of Himes’s position in relation to the black question soon became standard procedure in reviewing his writings. By the late 1940s, Himes was generally reviled in the United States for the grim, allegedly pointless darkness of his stories, and for a tone at odds with the expectations brought about by the protest genre and by white liberal influence on it. Milton Klonsky went as far as to say that “although the author himself is a Negro, his book is so deracinated, without any of the lively qualities of the imagination peculiar to his people, that it might easily have been composed by any clever college girl” (190).

This kind of reception certainly influenced the speech Himes delivered later that year at the University of Chicago on “The Dilemma of the Negro Writer.” According to Jodi Melamed, Himes “charged that white racial liberal practices of reading African American literature for information retrieval and sympathetic identification amounted to an act of racial power” (770). Himes’s speech was the basis for the stylistic turn he would operate years later with *The End of a Primitive*, which “satirizes the culture, ideology and social milieu of literature in order to make racial liberalism visible as a mode of racial regulation that ironically operates new forms

of racialized violence and discipline though the very mechanisms of its antiracism” (772). Melamed’s insightful analysis of U. S. racial liberalism is indispensable to this study, both for what it reveals and for what it omits. In asserting that Himes “published [*The End of a Primitive*] immediately after his University of Chicago speech,” Melamed elides seven years of his life, during which he traveled around Europe. Already settled in France at the time, Richard Wright had told Himes about the wonders of Paris. Though Himes “didn’t expect any utopia,” by the end of the 1940s he “wanted out of the United States” (*Quality* 141). In 1952, he made the trip to France.

Existential Blackness

French interest in African American culture was not new. Paris had been a city of refuge for African Americans since the 1920s. From Victor Séjour to Anna Julia Cooper and beyond, the black presence in France has long been a fact of important historical significance.² The comparatively good treatment African Americans had received there between the two world wars had generated a vision of Paris as a counterpoint to Jim Crow that mostly ignored the abuses suffered around by black populations under French rule. As postwar Paris welcomed an increasingly diverse and politically conscious African American community, the myth regained some currency with the help of Parisian elites. Not that the issues faced by France’s own black populations were hidden. Colonial questions made for no small part of the public debates of the Fourth Republic: independence movements were flourishing throughout the colonies and the government was working hard at putting them down.³ The Parisian literati were of course aware of this and often got involved. The Existentialists collaborated with Alioune Diop’s *Présence Africaine* and ran in the same circles as the Négritude poets, and in keeping with their left wing politics generally supported independence movements.⁴

But even for those Frenchmen who saw their country’s “Negro problem” as part of a worldwide liberation struggle, it was also a colonia—and therefore external and remote—issue. Only in 1946 did the “old colonies” of the Caribbean become *départements* and their black inhabitants more than mere colonial subjects, while most African colonials could become citizens only if able to obtain a diploma showing their understanding of French culture. At the same time, institutional racism in France remained outwardly more subtle than Jim Crow: the French had no qualms using highly visible colonial troops in both world wars, and black people, including Senghor and Césaire, sat in the National Assembly. Nevertheless, discussing the American Negro problem had different, and indeed more self-serving implications. American culture was becoming unavoidable, with American troops still present in liberated France and already becoming a source of resentment for Frenchmen of all political stripes. Taking the side of African Americans was tantamount to a political act and the “Negro question” became, in the words of Michel Fabre, “a brick to hurl in the window of American propaganda” (308).

Yet the French were genuinely fascinated by American culture at large, and African American culture in particular. In the 1920s and 1930s, French critics and jazz aficionados had pioneered serious critical appreciation of jazz and had more importantly celebrated black musicians as the authentic inventors of the genre at a time when they were barely allowed to play to white audiences in their country of origin. After the war, the whole St. Germain scene centered around jazz clubs animated and patronized by the most preeminent representatives of the Parisian intelligentsia, among whom were Existentialists such as Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It is especially significant that many of the St. Germain luminaries

were fluent in English, as this fact made them crucial cultural links between American and French culture after World War II. As Paris was liberated, most French jazz lovers discovered the latest musical trends from the U. S. by mixing with Americans. In the process they also became reacquainted with white American soldiers' intense racial prejudice, and their complete lack of interest in the history of jazz.

After four years without American literature, France went through a craze for American fiction, pulp in particular, as exemplified in the creation of the *Série noire*, started by Marcel Duhamel for Gallimard in 1945. Pulp fiction was widely considered a window into the American soul, and the genre's bleak and merciless style of choice a reflection of its time and place of origin. The St. Germain literati acted as cultural gatekeepers in this trend; they read, selected, translated and framed theoretically American fiction in general and African American fiction in particular for the wider French public. Thus the majority of French readers discovered Richard Wright and the "Negro problem" as understood and presented by the Existentialists. Sartre and Camus visited the United States early in 1946 and met Wright, whose story "Fire and Cloud" Sartre had published in translation in the first issue of his journal *Les Temps modernes* [*Modern Times*] in 1945. In May 1946, Wright came to visit France, officially invited by Claude Lévi-Strauss on behalf of the French government. Wright became an instant sensation; he met with the country's leading intellectuals, and by the end of the month several of his stories were translated and published in popular French newspapers.

On the heels of Wright's triumphal visit, the Existentialists made the "Negro problem" a *cause célèbre*. Wright's "Early Days in Chicago" was featured in an August 1946 special issue of *Les Temps modernes* on the United States. Wright's *Native Son* would finally be published in French translation (by Duhamel and Hélène Bokanowski) in 1947. Earlier, in November 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre himself had taken on the "Negro question" with *La Putain respectueuse* [*The Respectful Prostitute*], his successful play about lynching in the Jim Crow South. As shown by Michel Fabre, this sudden and profound interest for Wright and the "Negro problem" was related to "the ideological implications of French literary criticism," which betrayed "strong ideological bias in their interest in literature as social action" (308). This outlook is evident in Madeleine Gautier's review of *Native Son* in the first issue of *Présence Africaine* in 1948. Gautier hails the book's potential to make its reader "penetrate to the heart of the U. S. social problem in all its gravity, scope and mystery" (163). Wright, "with the power typical of his race," explores the psychological dimensions of the American race problem," she writes; "one cannot doubt the authenticity of the atmosphere depicted with such vigor in this novel. It is a source of information that beats studies, reports and statistics by a hundred yards, the same way physical presence beats a photograph. . ." (163, 165).⁵ Gautier's words also suggest the peculiar mix of primitivist and ethnographic outlook pervading white French liberal views of African Americans. It owed much to an already decades-old French tradition of jazz criticism.

Voix Nègre and Surrealism

Jazz and jazz criticism were for many Frenchmen the prism through which they had come to encounter African Americans in the first place. According to Matthew F. Jordan, in the early stages of jazz's introduction in France after World War I, "French culture critics got exposed to jazz more by way of recorded music than live concerts," and focused in their analyses on "a certain kind of voice in jazz performance . . ., *la voix nègre*" (the Negro voice) (90). As Jordan shows, the notion both covered an actual, though vaguely defined grain of voice, "but also something that we could think of as a metaphysical voice . . . that says something about—or can

be heard as speaking to—the plight of *les nègres* and/or the human condition” (91). For French critics, *la voix nègre* was what separated authentic, black jazz from its commodified white version. French critics eventually found out that in many cases singers they had touted as authentic “Negro voices” without seeing them turned out to be white (95). They had an explanation for this embarrassing mistake: the phonograph, critic André Coeuroy advanced, “is the school of emulation,” and could help apt pupils imitate what remained defined as an essentially black style of singing. After these mistakes were acknowledged, the notion of an essential Negro voice did not disappear so much as it fused into a new distinction, proposed by jazz critic Hugues Panassié, between “hot” and “straight” jazz: “The word ‘hot’ served the same function and did the same cultural work as *la voix nègre* had in jazz criticism, but made the particular timbre, tone and affective approach to expression something that need not, at least overtly, depend on race” (97).

Indeed, while the movement led by Panassié ostensibly distanced itself from this racial distinction, it was also characterized by its quest for the pure, original form of jazz. By the late 1930s, Panassié had traveled the Great Migration backwards to designate the turn-of-the-century New Orleans district of Storyville as the birthplace of jazz, and black Dixieland as the unit of ethnocultural authenticity by which to measure all of jazz’s subsequent incarnations. This trend, followed by four years of German occupation, effectively cut France off from the American jazz scene. When the first bebop records arrived in liberated Paris with American G.I.s, French jazz bands were still emulating Jelly Roll Morton. While some, like Boris Vian, managed to embrace the new style while still appreciating the old, Panassié and his consorts rather ironically condemned the new style as being inauthentic. Camps formed and pro- and anti-bebop critics and listeners entered into what became known as *la querelle du jazz*. Panassié could not “hear” the essential Negro voice over the modern noise of bebop, which he saw as too-much influenced by Western music. He felt that through close and extensive study of jazz, he had been able to distill what only came naturally to Negroes—in this case, the musical essence of blackness.

In his profound respect for African American musical expression and his interest in African American musical history, Panassié seemed, and indeed often was in agreement with the rising figures of the different groups of black cultural and political nationalism, from the writers of the Harlem Renaissance to their French-speaking counterparts of the Négritude movement.⁶ The latter were famously supported by Sartre in “Black Orpheus,” the famous preface to Senghor’s 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* [*Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry*] in which he presented Aimé Césaire in particular as successfully having adapted Surrealist methods of writing to politically engaged ends (Sartre 309-11). It is all the more significant that Sartre condemned Surrealism for having betrayed its revolutionary promise, which he saw realized in Césaire. If Sartre’s interest in black literature rested in part on his overall negative judgment of the Surrealist legacy, it is interesting to note that such was not the case with all of the French “cultural gatekeepers” responsible for the introduction of African American fiction in postwar France. Two of the most important translators of African American texts at the time, Duhamel and Vian, though personally close to the Existentialists, felt philosophically closer to the cynical, nihilistic bend Sartre lamented in Surrealism, and it was this sensibility that helped shape their outlook on African American literature.

Early in 1944, while France was still under German occupation, Duhamel had somehow obtained Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” and translated it for the underground journal *L’Arbalète*, along with texts by other American authors (Duhamel 501). Soon after the liberation of Paris in August 1944 he traveled to London to renew translation rights and secure new contracts for the list of English-speaking authors published by Gallimard, among whom were Erskine Caldwell, Steinbeck, Hammett, Chandler, and quite a few others no one had yet read in France, and many of whom

Duhamel would go on to translate himself for the *Série noire* (511-13). At definite odds with the Existentialist view of engaged literature, Duhamel's project performed "an extension of surrealism into the public sphere" (Eburne 811). It proposed to counteract the didacticism of politically engaged, naturalist literature with the less obviously political snicker of black humor, the "partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit" first introduced by André Breton in his *Anthology of Black Humor* (Polizzotti vi). Himes's alleged "unilluminating concern with violence" was therefore edifying to Duhamel perhaps because more moralistic souls were repulsed by it.

When *If He Hollers* was first translated into French in 1948, Himes's racial authenticity was invoked by critics specifically to distinguish his books from those of white French writers arguably inspired by Himes in the first place.

Duhamel recognized this banality of violence as the foundation on which he and Himes would eventually build their collaboration on the Harlem series.

The second key figure was Vian, "the Prince of St. Germain," a jazz DJ, columnist, concert organizer, and trumpeter. Vian also wrote articles for diverse publications and translated American texts for *Les Temps modernes* and Duhamel's *Série noire*. Vian was a follower of turn-of-the-century absurdist writer Alfred Jarry, one of the many authors included by Breton in his *Anthology*. Jarry was the creator of "pataphysics," or "the science of imaginary solutions," about which Vian asserted that "one of the fundamental principles of pataphysics is equivalency. This might explain why we refuse what is serious as well as what isn't, since for us, they are exactly the same thing, it's pataphysical. Whether you want it or not, you're always doing pataphysics" (Arnaud 369).⁷ His taste for equivalency was not necessary to everyone's liking; his "Chronicles of a Liar" did not last long in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*, where Vian's jokes jarred with the overall serious tone. But Vian's involvement in the fledgling French jazz scene is especially relevant here: if many of the French literati were also jazz aficionados, Vian was a specialist. As such, he knew well the debates on racial authenticity that were shaking the French jazz world. Though acquainted with both Panassié and Sartre, Vian had profound divergences of opinion with them. He would lampoon Panassié's jazz essentialism in countless columns during the *querelle du jazz* years, and was a friend of Sartre but no disciple of his. In a 1946 column for *La Rue*, he quipped: "I am not an existentialist. Indeed, for an existentialist, existence precedes essence. For me, there's no such thing as essence" (qtd. in Arnaud 244).⁸ This statement also suggests where he stood regarding Panassié's dreams of sound and racial purity. A similar mix of provocation, humor and derision for the seriousness of others would generate *I Spit on Your Graves*, the novel that would put Vian on the literary map.

Of Vernon Sullivan

I Spit on Your Graves is the story of Lee Anderson, an African American whose complexion is light enough to allow him to pass for white. His brother was lynched for becoming involved with a white woman. Lee Anderson is out for revenge, and his plan is dreadfully simple: move to a different Southern town where nobody knows him and where he can pass for white, seduce a rich white girl, reveal his true race to her and kill her. Working days at the local bookstore, he manages to become a fixture among a crowd of boisterous rich white youths. He soon sets his sights on

Lou and Jean Asquith, the two daughters of a rich planter, and executes his plan. Though increasingly sickened by his own scheme, Anderson eventually rapes and kills both sisters. Chased by police, he is shot to death in a barn before “the townspeople [hang] him anyway because he was a nigger” (177).

The genesis of this novel has become the stuff of literary legend. Asked by his friend the publisher Jean d’Halluin to suggest an American novel he could publish to capitalize on the interest in pulp fiction, Vian declared he would write a best-seller in ten days, a book by a manufactured African American author, Vernon Sullivan, that Vian would pretend to have translated. The publisher’s advertisement presented the elusive Vernon Sullivan as “a young author no American editor has dared publish” (qtd. in Arnaud 162).⁹ The novel would likely have gone unnoticed but for a lawsuit charging “incitation to debauchery” brought against it by an association for moral action in February 1947. Its success only increased after a copy was found next to the body of a woman murdered by her lover. Investigated with increasing vigor, the Sullivan hoax was soon uncovered. Vian had never set foot in the U. S., and it showed. The America of the novel was full of errors and approximations, but his description of the stifling atmosphere of systemic racism hit home. If Vian’s knowledge of the American scene came mostly from his readings, what he knew of American racism had been passed on to him by the many African American artists he had come to know in Paris. Baldwin thought that the novel was informed by “that rage and pain which Vian (almost alone) was able to hear in the black American musicians, in the bars, dives, and cellars of the Paris of those years” (47). But scandal made the novel a best-seller, to Vian’s own despair. He was led to defend the book much more than he would have liked, as he himself considered it a joke. Yet as Baldwin further notes, the joke revealed much serious information about the French misunderstanding of the way race was lived in the United States. Baldwin advanced that

one of the reasons—perhaps *the* reason—that the novel was considered pornographic is that it is concerned with the vindictive sexual aggression of one black man against many women. . . . The novel takes place in America, and the black man looks like a white man—this double remove liberating both fantasy and hope, which is, perhaps, at bottom, what pornography is all about. This is certainly what that legend created by Rudolph Valentino, in *The Sheik*, is all about . . . and this fantasy contains the root appeal of *Tarzan* . . . white men who look and act like black men—act like black men, that is, according to the white imagination which has created them. (46-47)

It arguably revealed much about the position Vian himself was writing from. His joke was one for cultural insiders, funny only for those in the know, but also funny *about* those in the know. This vision of the black man as phallus, a fantasy Frantz Fanon would later deconstruct in *Black Skin, White Masks*, was promoted by Négritude poets and defended by none other than Sartre. In “Black Orpheus,” Sartre declared that “the black man remains the great male of the earth, the world’s sperm” (316). Vian’s novel pushed the image to its grotesque extreme, providing a basis for the criticism of Négritude’s and Sartre’s shared position on blackness that Fanon would soon develop. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon would also mention Vian’s novel as instrumental in revealing the sexual ambiguity at the heart of Negrophobia (159).

Graves was published before either the publication of *Native Son* in France or the serial translation of *Black Boy* in *Les Temps modernes*. The first “protest novel” read by most Frenchmen turned out to be the vulgar copy of an inaccessible original. Vian’s book dared literary critics to recognize the true accents of a black voice behind his knowledgeable white hoax. To a degree, it worked. Fooled for a time, some did analyze the novel thinking its author to be truly African American, with interesting results.¹⁰ By introducing the protest novel in France through a hoax, Vian had tainted the political discussion around the genre. In the process, he had also introduced, possibly unwittingly, “a means to explore what is meant by an African American novel (and voice) in the first place” (Brown 66).

A Form of Banter Characteristic of Negroes¹¹

Though some recognized the humor in Vian's trick, most were not impressed. Mainstream newspapers devoted sensationalist articles to the graphic sex and violence of the novel. Many in French literary circles found moral and political fault with Vian's hoax. Among the first French critics to seize the issue was black Martinican author Joseph Zobel, who pilloried *Graves* in a 1947 article for *Les Lettres françaises*. Zobel felt that readers might mistake the novel for "the formally realistic story of a poor Negro's fit of desperation . . . and that the book has the merit of discussing a conflict of which we know everything, and of revealing one of the possible solutions, however ignoble, considered by a certain category of its victims" (4).¹² Zobel also knew this had not been written by an African American, and felt that Vian's endeavor was dangerous. Zobel thought that black literature was and should be irreproachable, lest it reflect badly on the black community at large. Indeed, he wrote that the main characteristics of "the poetry and the novel blacks across the Atlantic . . . gave to the United States" were their function as "defensive weapons, testimonials of struggle, need for justice, joy of living, desire for freedom." The anger, violence and vengeance displayed in Vian's novel was "betraying a race that deserves friendship and respect." The book presented black men as brutes and ran the risk of scaring white audiences at a crucial time when "Negroes—American or French" were going through a "cultural awakening" (4).¹³

Zobel also felt that his own literary reputation as a black man was directly tied to the network of white liberal condescension, literature and race politics exposed by Vian's book. He underlined something Vian apparently only realized as the scandal unfolded: though the graphic sex and violence of the novel made the headlines, Vian's pretending to be an African American and therefore blurring a racial definition deemed crucial to the assessment of the novel was truly the heart of the matter. Introduced to the protest novel through Vian's ultra-violent hoax, the wider French public might just infer that revenge, sex, and violence, these superficial characteristics of the genre, were accents specific to the literary Negro voice, a true representation of African Americans' views of themselves.

Indeed, *Graves* toyed with the dynamite of racist stereotypes. In often quoted dialogue from the novel, Lou Asquith comes close to discovering Anderson's true racial identity when she ponders the origin of Anderson's peculiar voice:

"I don't know. You're alright physically, but it isn't that. Your voice, maybe. . . . It isn't just an ordinary voice."

"That comes from singing and playing the guitar."

"No," she said, "I've never heard singers or guitarists with a voice like yours. I have heard a voice that yours reminds me of, yes, it was back in Haiti. Some black men." (94-95)

Asquith goes on to argue that white bands are better than black ones, only to have Anderson reply that "whites are in a better position to exploit the Negro's inventions" (95). Lou is ultimately unable to understand what her ears have told her and recognize in Anderson a black man. Yet by invoking *voix nègre* criticism, Vian made clear that however laudatory it may be on the surface, essentialist analysis could always be the tool of racists. This is the bittersweet paradox embodied by Asquith and her bobby-soxer friends. They, and behind them American (and soon global) popular culture could exploit, enjoy and emulate African American culture while, like Lou, admitting to "hat[ing] the colored race" (95). It is unlikely that Vian, who himself was no stranger to primitivist analyses, had all of this in mind at the time he wrote *Graves*, but his reaction to Zobel suggests he did take the criticism somewhat seriously.

In his following Sullivan novel, *The Dead All Have the Same Skin* (1947), Vian challenged Zobel's authority to speak for African Americans

There was even an individual who claims to be a black man from Martinique . . . who affirmed that a Black man could never have written that book because he himself knows how Blacks live. Well, let's just say that this particular Black is about as qualified to comment upon his American brothers as a Chinese resident of San Francisco is capable of resolving the current upheavals in Shanghai. (116)

Fanon would criticize what he saw as the essentializing nature of Négritude along similar lines, arguing that "Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*" (136). In his new novel, Vian set out to demonstrate this point and more. His protagonist, Dan Parker, works as a bouncer in a night club; he has been successfully passing as white for years, until his long estranged brother comes to town and threatens to reveal the truth about his racial background if Dan does not give him money. Parker goes on a rampage to protect his secret, realizing on the way that the blackness he has so long repressed is returning with a vengeance. After having sex with black women, Parker finds himself unable to satisfy his white wife, and he punctuates his actions with a constant stream of self-conscious racial discourse.

But there's a catch. Dan Parker is not "black," even though he always believed he was. He was raised in a black family, but his parents were white. Parker finds out too late to save himself, but soon enough to leave readers asking themselves how much allegedly essential racial characteristics might just be socially—or fictionally, as it were—determined. With this final twist, the embarrassing ways in which Parker and others were able to "see" his blackness throughout the novel (in his build, in the close scrutiny of his fingernails, in his taste for violence and for the "characteristic" smell of black women) are shown to be as unreliable as the author's name on the book's cover. The joke is on the reader for buying the lie of a seemingly omniscient and therefore truthful narration. Race and discussions of race are presented as an endless play of mirrors, a conceptual *mise en abyme* within a narrative *mise en abyme*. The racial fiction that is Vernon Sullivan is mirrored in Dan Parker, and the critical reception of his novels was always already mirrored in the racialist assumptions driving the plot. Blackness is revealed as a shifting political and cultural marker both intangible and eminently constructed. The truth of African American experience happens outside of the text. Its external manifestations in art, aspects of which can be evoked in print can, to some extent—and much like jazz—be emulated, mimicked, and copied, yet without diminishing this experience. What is considered authentic in the artistic manifestations of the African American experience rests, ironically enough, on what the listener or the reader already considers authentic. The lesson Vian had drawn from his original hoax and the way it was received was simple enough: there was nothing in *voix nègre* but context.

Vian showed that apparent manifestations of blackness through art could not quite be trusted as such, especially not in translation. He demonstrated that "raced, 'real' selves, black and white, are always the products of fictions of one kind or another," and "ask[ed] at what cost readers, including himself, privilege the 'authenticity' of the writer over the text itself in their unwillingness to question the racializing of the word" (Brown 66). Yet nobody *had* to take the lessons of the joke seriously. The essentialist criticism exposed by Vian's hoax did not go away. It can be seen at work in the making of Himes's French reputation. When *If He Hollers* was first translated into French in 1948, Himes's racial authenticity was invoked by critics specifically to distinguish his books from those of white French writers arguably inspired by Himes in the first place. The 1949 review of *If He Hollers* by Jean-Claude Brisville published in the literary monthly *La Nef* thus put Himes's novel in line with Vian and Yves Malartic's own takes on the protest genre:

In spite of all the sympathy one feels for the Negro protest novel, we are paying a dear price for our admiration for Richard Wright, which, one has to admit, is being exploited.

For example, between *If He Hollers* and the busy works of a Vian-Sullivan or of an Yves Malartic, the only difference might be authentic experience. That, some will say, is essential. Yes, but only if this experience is served by an art strong enough that we can tell it apart from a vulgar pastiche. And it is not the case here. In truth, the story, or rather the misadventures of colored man Robert Jones, which would be too long to recount here, smell as if they came right out of the mold. This mold, no doubt, will be used again. And let us admit that the product can be consumed without boredom. It is true that Marcel Duhamel's signature package—mass-produced, satisfaction guaranteed—is enough to rouse one's appetite, and reassure in the same moment with its famous taste. (131)¹⁴

Although he acknowledges Richard Wright and therefore the American origin of the protest novel, Brisville interprets the protest "mold" as a repetitive "package" conceived by the likes of Duhamel, Vian, and Malartic. This last, a future translator and friend of Chester Himes, had in 1947 published *Au pays du Bon Dieu*, a novel about an African American's dealings with American racism throughout the U. S., and eventually in the segregated U. S. Army in World War II France. Brisville felt they had merely transcribed a foreign recipe, commercialized it, and proved rather successful at adapting it. To tell the real thing apart from its copy, strong, "spicy" art was needed that would make one taste that authentic experience. This culinary take on the *voix nègre* argument is rather ironic. Brisville laments that he has not recognized in Himes's writings the "je ne sais quoi" that should have helped him tell the authentic black voice from the white French copies, but it is likely that he had felt it while reading Wright in translations by none other than Vian and Duhamel. But Wright, as we have seen, had come chaperoned by the Existentialist organ *Les Temps modernes*. Brisville demanded serious art, and the *Série noire*, in his opinion, was not very serious.

Duhamel only selected novels with which he felt a certain aesthetic and/or ideological affinity. As Eburne demonstrates, he had found in *If He Hollers* the spark of black humor Himes would develop into a raging fire for his Harlem Detective series. Himes himself saw what he defined as "surrealist absurdity" in his novels as "something borrowed" from the "lived experience of black Americans" (807). Surrealist absurdity can certainly be detected in the bitter irony of Bob Jones's fate in *If He Hollers*, as he joins the army to avoid a jail sentence for a rape he did not commit, all following a savage beating at the hands of his white colleagues. Yet if the Harlem series embodies the final stage in Himes's movement towards a self-aware racial parody, *The End of a Primitive* must be read like the eulogy delivered at the funeral of his old protest novel-writing self, one inspired by Vian's caustic joke.

The Beginning of the End

Himes wrote *The End of a Primitive* during trips to France, England and Spain, between 1952 and 1953. His manuscript was refused by a series of American editors before it was accepted in 1955 only to be published in a heavily truncated version. Gallimard published it in translation the same year, but used the original unexpurgated version. Neither version did very well commercially, but the novel made Himes a "minor celebrity in the [Latin] Quarter" (*Life* 38).

The End of a Primitive is the story of Jesse Robinson, a forty-something black writer, and Kriss Cummings, a white woman in her late thirties. If her career has been a success, Kriss's intimate life has been a long disaster: to escape from her parents' house she married Ronny, a "chunky, habitually boozed, over-brilliant, condescending, Yankee-hating, low-browed, black-haired, misanthropic Mississippian" (108), whom she had met in college and never quite liked. Ronny was adulterous throughout the

following ten years of their marriage. In spite of these multiple affairs, he was impotent with her, and in retaliation Kriss cheated just as often, mostly with black men, writers and artists she met through her job at the Rosenwald Foundation. This had not bothered the enlightened Ronny, a self-confessed “extreme Negrophile” who had himself been known to enjoy “the beds of his black colleagues’ wives without any condescension whatsoever” (16). That is, not until Ronny had discovered his “homosexual urges” in psychotherapy. The treatment somehow also changed his views on blacks, which he started liking less, a fact that “always struck him as being very strange” (16).

Jesse has issues all his own: his first two novels were critical successes but brought him little money, and his last has been rejected flat out by his publisher. It is a sordid, bitter protest novel, and according to his editor “the public is tired of the plight of the poor downtrodden Negro”; what it wants instead is “a black success story” (124). But Jesse’s book is an autobiography in disguise, and his life is a failure. His marriage has fallen to pieces, and Jesse spends his days drinking hard liquor. Out of the blue he contacts Kriss, with whom he had an affair a few years earlier. They arrange to meet at her apartment for dinner, but find themselves regularly interrupted in their exchanges by visits from old friends and lovers. Frustration mounts as Kriss and Jesse ruminate over the havoc wreaked in their lives by the constraints of patriarchal and racist systems; they become drunker, meaner, and increasingly violent as their usual release, sex, is constantly deferred. The novel ends with Jesse emerging from a drunken stupor only to realize he has stabbed Kriss to death, and in the same moment has finally “joined the human race” (205).

Himes considered this novel his best, an opinion with which many critics came to agree through the years. Yet its pitch-dark humor and its overwhelming bleakness generated uneasy comments about its relevance—or lack thereof—to the race problem, when it generated comments at all. It garnered very few reviews in the year it was published. Its “buffoonery,” embodied in such eerie elements as the recurrent TV show featuring a talking chimpanzee prophesying on coming world events, mixed oddly with angry introspection and social commentary.¹⁵ Often recognized as the link between Himes’s protest novels and his detective novels, *The End of a Primitive* is also very much an articulation between countries and audiences, in which Himes, already living outside the United States, is considering the implications and terms of the esteem granted him by the French public.

Himes’s awareness of these two audiences pervades the novel. The prophetic mode is not limited to the chimpanzee’s pronouncements. The treatment of Jesse Robinson’s manuscript “I Was Looking for a Street” by his editor suggests on Himes’s part bitter memories about his last novel, and a profound awareness of the reactions this new novel would cause. Within the novel, Jesse imagines his editor’s reaction to his latest novel before he has to actually hear it. Pope, the editor, breaks the news to Jesse that his book has been refused, and explains how it happened:

“[I] like the book. I fought for it all the way. I think all it needs is cutting. But Hobson thinks it reads like fictional autobiography. And he doesn’t like the title. . . .”

“Why not publish it as an autobiography then?”

“It would be the same. Hobson thinks the public is fed up with protest novels. And I must say, on consideration, I agree with him.”

“What’s protest about this book?” Jesse argued. “If anything it’s tragedy. But no protest.”

“The consensus of the readers was that it’s too sordid. It’s pretty strong—almost vulgar, some of it. . . . The reader is gripped in a vice of despair and bitterness from start to finish—”

“I thought some of it was funny.”

“Funny!” Pope stared at him incredulously.

“That part when the parents wear evening clothes to the older son’s funeral. . . . Alright maybe you don’t think that’s funny—”

“That made me cry,” Pope accused solemnly. (123-24)

The *mise en abyme* makes this scene as much a reflection on Jesse's novel as it is one on Himes's, and ultimately also one on mid-1950s black fiction at large. This is what Jodi Melamed has dubbed Himes's "killing joke," whose main target is "the culture, ideology, and social milieu of literature in racial liberalism" and main goal is to "make racial liberalism visible as a mode of racial regulation that ironically operates new forms of racialized violence and discipline through the very mechanisms of its antiracism" (772). Melamed sees *The End of a Primitive* as "Himes's final attempt to intervene in what he identified in 1948 as 'the dilemma of the Negro writer,' which 'lies not so much in what he must reveal, but in the reactions of his audience'" (790).

This dilemma took on related, yet different characteristics in France. For seeing novels by African Americans in an ethnographic and political light not altogether different from that of their American counterparts, French readers also had enough national distance to give the benefit of the doubt, if not credence, to Himes's writing style. In a 1954 article, Gabriel Venaissin thus compared Chester Himes's *Loneley Crusade* to what he calls "novels of false testimony," in which authors "transcribe [their] experience but . . . not [their] existence" (464).¹⁶ What made Himes's novel a good one was not so much its style, which could be imitated, nor the mere, possibly onetime experience of racism, but instead was the author's status as a full-fledged victim of racism: "it is not enough to have been the actor in the drama that makes the book. . . . one has to have been its victim. True witnesses are victims. And I call a false witness the author of a testimony without suffering" (465).¹⁷ Venaissin saw Himes's novel, once again, as a testimonial—a text whose main value is documentary, and as such much more genuine than the works of "false testimony" of a Vian or Malartic. The text itself takes a secondary position to the racial identity of its author; the text as manifestation of blackness is less crucial than a recognition of the presence of blackness, however ineffable, in the text. This was a bold critical pirouette, a return of the repressed *voix nègre* criticism. But Vian's hoax made outright race-based arguments difficult. Vian had once stated that "in matters of jazz, blacks are necessarily right" (qtd. in Ténot 39).¹⁸ His hoax had been instrumental in pushing literary critics to declare that in matters of race in literature too, blacks were always right. Crossing the Atlantic had somewhat paradoxically given Himes the cultural authenticity necessary to say whatever he felt about American racism—the same authenticity he had been denied in his country of origin.

How widespread Venaissin's take was on Himes is perhaps best illustrated by Himes's own description of the way the African American male contingent in Paris saw relationships: "Most of us believed that white women only wanted to be fucked by us if we had been hurt by other whites. . . ." (*Life* 40). As constricting as was this image of the African American man as perpetual victim of racism, it was comparatively better than the perpetual rapist of American lore. It was no less absurd, and it also implied its share of sexual psychosis, but this French translation of the American "race and sex syndrome" provided more freedom of movement. Himes mordantly exposes this in the following exchange between Jesse and Kriss in *The End of a Primitive*. After having watched an episode of the TV chimpanzee's prophecies, Jesse and Kriss have a drunken conversation regarding the type of topic Jesse could manage to treat in his books without offending anyone. Kriss suggests Jesse emulate the popular romance novelist Kathleen Windsor, but Jesse disagrees with her prudish approach:

"But it's below the waist the color problem lies," Jesse pointed out.

"Lays!" Kriss corrected him. "It's not the *lies* but the *lays* that make the color problem."

"The *lies* make the *lays* and the *lays* make the *lies*," Jesse expounded, feeling very clever.

"If there were more *lays* and less *lies* it would soon be solved, or conversely, if there were more *lies* ad less *lays* it would soon be resolved. (92)

Jesse and Kriss's pun plays at the most literal, intimate level. Both have cheated on their spouses, each has lied to the other about the importance of those relations,

and has paid for it dearly in emotional suffering. But the “lays” to which they so cleverly refer can easily be understood in their literary meaning as historical poems and stories, myths. Both American and French fictions of blackness eroticize the black man.

“[W]hoever says *rape* says Negro. . . . The Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis,” says Fanon, using both Himes and Vian to illustrate what he knows to be the entire Western world’s “race and sex syndrome” (170). These myths can be repulsive, attractive, or a mix of both, and so lies increase sexual desire and envy, which in turn make for better myths. Blackness is always already a story, a *mise en abyme*. As Kevin Bell notes, for Jesse, “the only avenue into self-actualization is textuality, as he has literally written himself into personal subjectivity, staging a rhetorical ‘identity’ by which to insert himself into the grand narrative of abstracted humanity” (215). Writing for Jesse is “generative,” a cultural form of intercourse, one in which he will certainly be the sperm of the world, although this does not so much consist in imposing the terms in which he expresses subjectivity so much as it does rearranging the means of expression with which he has to work. Blackness is accessed strictly through its textual manifestations, and the ways these express blackness ultimately depend on the reader’s own understanding of blackness.

The author has only so much control over this, and as Bell shows, “Himes realizes that language is not ‘his’ to manipulate. . . . He finds himself within its grip and not the other way around” (204). He definitely breaks with the propriety of literary engagement *à la* Wright or Baldwin; he avoids outright social and political engagement to instead attack directly a “cultural metanarrative of American ‘blackness’” in his writings (201). He does this precisely by putting into play “a delegitimated and out-cast sensibility . . . [that is] augmented, reshaped and intensified exactly by those dimensions of lived experience unique to the scene of public fascination and public abjection . . . that is cultural blackness” (196). Not surprisingly, Bell centers his analysis of Himes’s “aesthetico-political engagement” around a conversation between Wright and Baldwin witnessed by Himes at Les Deux Magots in Paris. If the silent frame Bell discerns in Himes’s description of the scene is provided by “the literary rules of professionalized ‘blackness,’” it is especially important that this scene would take place at the headquarters of literary Paris. The literary rules Himes set out to undermine in his writings were indubitably international, and his books mean to destabilize notions of blackness, and expose the system of “lies” and “lays,” the rules of fictional (and not-so-fictional) engagement at the center of the color problem on both sides of the Atlantic.

Margolies’s concern that French readers might mistake Himes’s Harlem for the truth echoes Zobel’s alarm over *I Spit on Your Graves*. Both Vian and Himes demonstrate that in matters of race and literature, truth matters very little, as it always comes obscured by a palimpsest of representations and accreted layers of interpretations. Rather than treating their subject in the expected straight, documentary, and realistic manner, Himes’s Harlem Detective series novels mix the dead-serious American race issue with a nonapologetic use of sex, violence, and humor, smirking the whole way through. This move away from the transparent politics of protest started with *The End of a Primitive* is informed by a reflection on race and its embarrassing sway over international letters similar to the one revealed by Vian in his first Sullivan novel and further developed in his second. Himes said that *The End of a Primitive* portrays a black man as “a new man—complex, intriguing, and not particularly likable” (*Hurt* 285). The form of truth Himes is shooting for is useless in the grander, calculating scheme of race relations, but is rather a matter of individual honesty, a representation of his personal blackness.

That this honesty would translate into black humor was for Himes a testimony to the utter nonsense of race. In the opening pages of the second volume of his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity*, he declares:

If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life. . . . The first time I read the manuscript of my novel *The End of a Primitive*, I knew I had written an absurd book. But it had not been my intention to write about absurdity. I had intended to write about the deadly venom of racial prejudice which kills both racists and their victims. (1)

The unnamed country mentioned by Himes is not only the United States. Himes's novel fed on the innumerable examples of racist absurdity its author witnessed firsthand throughout his life, and the terms of French reception of his work certainly contributed to the realization of this absurdity. Jesse sheds his "primitivity" through murder as, from the cover of his French reputation, Himes stabs a very Sartrean vision of blacks as admirable in their utterly "primitive" inability to harm.¹⁹ In the wake of the Vernon Sullivan affair, Himes was presented as an authentic African American voice in contrast to Boris Vian, just as he remained a pariah of sorts in his home country. More than topical or stylistic similarities, Himes and Vian's common appreciation of irony might ultimately be what makes it important to draw connections between them. Each on his side of the ocean dared their readers to try and answer the absurd yet unavoidable question that Himes spells out in no uncertain terms in his autobiography: "*What motherfucking color are writers supposed to be?*" (*Life* 5).

Notes

1. Williams showed how lasting such feelings were by quoting a recent letter from NAACP Labor Secretary Herbert Hill dismissing a screenplay by Himes as "nothing more than a travesty on Negro life in Harlem . . . hav[ing] no relationship to reality and . . . not redeemed by any literary values" (Williams, "Chester" 21).

2. See Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991).

3. The wars of independence in Indochina (1945-1954) and Algeria (1954-1962) tended to overshadow other conflicts such as the bloody repression of the 1947 uprising in Madagascar.

4. If *Les Temps modernes* were seized several times by the French police for their strongly pro-independence editorial line, Albert Camus's reluctance to take sides during the Algerian war of independence also comes to mind.

5. My translation: ". . . avec cette puissance typique de sa race"; ". . . on ne peut douter de l'authenticité de l'atmosphère qui est rendue avec une telle vigueur dans ce roman. C'est une source d'informations qui dépasse de cent coudées comptes rendus, reportages, statistiques, autant qu'une présence dépasse une photographie."

6. Panassié would notably contribute articles to Alioune Diop's *Présence Africaine*.

7. My translation: "Un des principes fondamentaux de la Pataphysique est d'ailleurs celui de l'Équivalence des contraires. C'est peut-être ce qui vous explique ce refus que nous manifestons de ce qui est sérieux et de ce qui ne l'est pas; puisque pour nous c'est exactement la même chose, c'est pataphysique. Qu'on le veuille ou qu'on ne le veuille pas, on fait toujours de la pataphysique."

8. My translation: "Je ne suis pas existentialiste. En effet, pour un existentialiste, l'existence précède l'essence. Pour moi, il n'y a pas d'essence."

9. My translation: "un jeune auteur qu'aucun éditeur américain n'a osé publier."

10. A January 1947 review of the novel in *Les Lettres françaises* thus judged that if the author were "an American half-Negro," "purported to defend the Negro cause, which we hold dear, he uses a form of reverse racism that certainly has excuses, but does not deserve approbation" (H. T. 4). Duhamel himself says Vian's manuscript fooled him, although "the systematic violence and a certain attitude regarding blacks seemed to me fabricated and somewhat repulsive" (555).

11. In the introduction to the 1966 edition of the *Anthology of Black Humor*, Breton declared that "this book, published for the first time in 1939 and reprinted with a few additions in 1947, marked, as it is, its era. Let us simply recall that when it first appeared, the words 'black humor' made no sense (unless to designate a form of banter supposedly characteristic of 'Negroes!')" (xii; original emphasis).

12. My translation: ". . . d'un récit réaliste dans sa forme, d'une crise de désespoir d'un pauvre nègre . . . et que ce livre aurait au moins le mérite d'aborder un conflit dont on connaît l'ensemble, et de révéler une des solutions, fût-ce la plus ignoble, envisagées par une certaine catégorie des victimes."

13. My translation: ". . . l'éveil culturel des Nègres—Américains ou de nationalité française. . . ."

14. My translation: “En dépit de toute la sympathie que l’on se sent pour le roman nègre à tendance revendicatrice, il faut bien avouer que l’on est en train d’exploiter et de nous faire payer cher notre admiration pour Richard Wright. Par exemple, entre *S’il braille, lâche-le* et les travaux en chambre d’un Vian-Sullivan ou d’un Yves Malartic, il n’y a—peut-être!—que la différence d’une expérience authentique. C’est l’essentiel, me dira-t-on. Oui, mais à condition que cette expérience soit servie par un art assez fort pour que nous puissions la distinguer d’un vulgaire pastiche. Et ici ce n’est pas le cas. A vrai dire l’histoire, disons mieux: les mésaventures de l’homme de couleur Robert Jones, qu’il serait un peu long de conter, sentent le moule. Un moule qui servira encore, n’en doutons pas. Reconnaissons d’ailleurs que le produit se laisse consommer sans ennui. Il est vrai que l’emballage, signé Marcel Duhamel—gros débit, garanti à la chaîne—suffit à vous ouvrir l’appétit, et à le rassurer en même temps de sa saveur célèbre.”

15. Himes wrote that “the French, who published it first, referred to the book as ‘sadism and buffoonery’” (*End 12*).

16. My translation: “. . . il a transcrit son expérience. Mais c’est une expérience, pas une existence. . . .”

17. My translation: “. . . il ne suffit pas d’avoir été l’acteur du drame qui fait le livre . . . il faut en être la victime. Les vrais témoins sont des victimes. Et j’appelle faux-témoin l’auteur d’un témoignage sans douleur.”

18. My translation: “[I]es noirs ont forcément raison quand il s’agit de jazz.”

19. Himes declared, “I remember Sartre made a statement. . . . (I never had any use for Sartre since) that in writing his play *The Respectful Prostitute* he recognized the fact that a black man could not assault a white man in America. That’s one of the reasons I began writing detective stories. I wanted to introduce the idea of violence” (Williams, “My Man Himes” 218).

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