



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAM IN
European, American, and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures

FINAL THESIS

THE SUBLIME AND THE PASTORAL
IN JOHN FANTE'S WORKS:

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE NATURAL LANDSCAPES
OF COLORADO AND CALIFORNIA

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ACADEMIC YEAR

2022/ 2023

A nonno Rolando e nonna Carla

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the guidance and help of several people to whom I express my deepest gratitude.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Elisa Bordin, point of reference for scholars of John Fante and inspiring mentor who has contributed to the development of my academic and personal interest for the author. Her guidance, encouragement, and precious insights have made the research and writing process an enriching and stimulating journey.

I would also like to thank my assistant supervisor, Valerio Massimo De Angelis, whose support and guidance extend beyond the realization of this project. His stimulating and challenging classes prompted me to deepen my interest in American literature and introduced me to the works of John Fante, on whom I wrote my Bachelor thesis under his supervision.

I would like to express my gratitude for his advice and support to Enrico Mariani, brilliant scholar of John Fante and attentive reader of this work. Our enriching conversations and exchange of opinions on the author during the revision process remarkably contributed to the completion of this study.

My appreciation goes also to all the professors who have supported, guided, and encouraged me during my studies and the realization of this project. At Ca' Foscari I had the possibility to meet enlightening and inspiring lecturers, and I want to particularly thank Gregory Dowling and Filomena Mitrano with whom I had the enriching and rewarding opportunity to work as tutor. My gratitude goes also to Giorgia Tommasi from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich who provided precious insights for this study during my Erasmus.

Without the ongoing support of my family and friends, this goal would have seemed unattainable. Many thanks to the old and new friends who have stood by and assisted me during the realization of this project. I would particularly like to thank Costanza and Rebecca who provided invaluable suggestions and helped me on a daily basis in the realization of this work. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my parents, my sister, Agnese, my aunt, Simona, and Sandro for their trust, patience, understanding, and love.

INTRODUCTION

BEYOND THE ITALIAN AMERICAN

On April 8, 2010, one hundred and one year after the author's birth, the Los Angeles City Council dedicated to John Fante the intersection of Fifth Street and Grand Avenue, recognizing, in the words of Jan Perry during the ceremony, that Fante "was a literary spirit that embodied Downtown in all of its history" ("John Fante Square").¹ The newly renamed John Fante Square is located in the vicinity of the Central Public Library, an important place in Fante's literary production but also a symbolic space in the life of the author. As highlighted by Stephen Cooper, libraries have played a "vital" role in Fante's life and literary career ("John Fante in the Library" 97); not only are they the places where his young protagonists gravitate, but also the site of the author's "rediscovery."² Indeed, we owe the recovery and republishing of Fante's out of print works by Black Sparrow to Charles Bukowski's fortuitous encounter with *Ask the Dust* in the Los Angeles Public Library.

Actually, as highlighted by Elisa Bordin, Fante's "rediscovery" and fortune in the 1980s is not limited to Bukowski's mediation with his publishing house; it is also determined by

¹ Jan Perry is the Los Angeles City Council member who put forward the motion to designate the intersection of Fifth Street and Grand Avenue as John Fante Square.

² Fante's literary fate was determined by various circumstances: after a successful debut and a very positive early critical reception in the 1940s, Fante's works received little success and scant critical attention. According to Barbara Lanati, this was determined by the author's geographic marginality with respect to the US publishing market. Actually, Fante's literary misfortune derived also from the political instability of Europe that at the end of the 1930s captured the public and media attention — something that the young protagonist of *Ask the Dust* laments in the novel — and from the disastrous advertising campaign of Fante's publishing house Stackpole & Sons, which in those years went through a period of economic difficulties due to legal problems because of the publication of an unauthorized edition of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. After the 1930s, as highlighted by Fante's wife, Joyce in Jan Louter's 2001 documentary *A Sad Flower in the Sand*, the author's main occupation as a screenwriter and his habits of playing long matches of golf and drinking contributed to his literary recess until his fortunate "rediscovery" few years before his death.

the emergence of Ethnic Studies and the evolution of a Los Angeles literary tradition (*Un'etnicità* 55). Soon before his death, Fante's works come back in circulation, receiving an increasing critical attention resulting primarily from the academic consolidation of the post-60s desire to overcome the unifying and monolithic interpretation of national history and culture that led to the development of Ethnic Studies. Fante owes his late fortune to this social and cultural spirit. The nascent canon of Italian American Studies, in fact, seeking the forefathers of an Italian American literary tradition, reappraises and acclaims Fante's works, placing them alongside the production of Pietro di Donato, and Jerre Mangione. On the one hand, the inscription within the Italian American literary tradition has substantially contributed to Fante's "rediscovery" and critical fortune.³ On the other, however, it is precisely the sectorial attribute of Italian American writer that has determined Fante's categorization as a niche author and impeded his rightful inclusion to American canonical literature, hindering a broader analysis of his works that raise a set of questions often disregarded by scholars.⁴

Recent approaches to Fante's works, in line with what Robert Tally defines as the 1990s "reassertion of space in literary studies" (1),⁵ have underlined the primary relevance of space

³ In line with Olga Peragallo and Rose Basile Green who included Fante within the first categorizations of Italian American literature, in the 1990s, scholars retrieve the early critical reception of Fante's works and place particular emphasis on what Werner Sollors defines as the tension between descent and consent, i.e. the ethnic identity inherited from the family of origin and the desire of assimilation to the society of adoption.

⁴ Bordin argues that Fante's scholars have overlooked important issues in the author's literary production, such as the representation of animals, sexuality, the conflict between materialism and spiritualism, masculinity, and the role of sport (*Un'etnicità* 18).

⁵ According to Tally, "the transformational effects of postcolonialism, globalization, and the rise of ever more advanced information technologies helped to push space and spatiality into the foreground, as traditional spatial or geographic limits were erased or redrawn" (2). This reassertion of spatiality in literature draws back to what Edward Soja defines as "spatial turn" (*Postmodern* 16), a redefinition of the category of space and spatiality which occurred at the end of the 1980s as the result of the encounter between the Marxist sociology of space of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey and the postmodern approach to human geography.

in the author's narrative production.⁶ These works have contributed to the development of the critical discourse on the author's literary production, departing from the traditional readings that confined it to Italian American literature.⁷ Highlighting the author's attention to the specificities of place, this work aligns with these studies and analyzes the symbolism of the natural landscapes of Colorado and California represented in the author's works, encasing them within the dichotomous juxtaposition of the pastoral and the sublime.

Following Bordin's categorization of Fante's works according to their spatial setting (*Un'etnicità* 32), this study develops in three chapters. While the first chapter defines the categories of the pastoral and the sublime in relation to the environmental history of the American West, the second concentrates on Fante's works set in mountainous environments, focusing on the snowy landscape of Colorado represented in the "books of youth" and on the Northern California mountainous and pastoral environments of the *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. The last chapter analyzes the manifestations of the sublime force of nature within the urban spatial dimension of Southern California in *Ask the Dust*. Recurring to the categories of the pastoral and the sublime, this work ultimately aims at emancipating Fante's works from the often-restricting categorization of Italian American literature, recognizing their primary relevance within the literary history of the American West and the *mainstream* American literary canon.

⁶ While Anna Barattin, Bordin ("Palme"), Cooper ("John Fante's Eternal"), David Fine ("Down and Out"), and Mark Laurila focus on the spatial dimension of Southern California in relation to the Bandini quartet, Silvia La Regina takes a comparative approach and aligns the representation of Los Angeles offered in the tetralogy to the one represented in Andrea De Carlo's *Treno di panna* (1981). Moreover, Ruth Hawthorn and Enrico Mariani ("John Fante") analyze the suburban dimension of Los Angeles represented in "My Dog Stupid."

⁷ In addition to the studies on space in Fante's works, other scholars have contributed to expand the critical discourse on the author departing from the traditional readings. Emanuele Pettener for example has focused on Fante's irony and aligned the author to Pirandello (*Nel nome*), George Guida and Jay Martin have highlighted the connections with modernism, Jean Béranger has placed Fante's works near Marx's, Schopenhauer's, and Nietzsche's philosophies ("John Fante"), and Bordin (*Un'etnicità*), Matthew Elliott, Stefano Luconi, and Suzanne Roszak have focused on ethnicity from an intersectional perspective.

CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN THE WILDERNESS AND THE GARDEN:
THE AMERICAN SUBLIME AND THE AMERICAN PASTORAL

“How does one stand / To behold the sublime?” (130), wonders Wallace Stevens in the 1935 poem “The American Sublime.” “One grows used to the weather, / The landscape and that;” continues the poet, “And the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself, / The spirit and space” (130). Nevertheless, in opposition to the European philosophical aesthetics of sublimity that associate the concept of the sublime to attributes of greatness and terror (Panella), Stevens’s contemplating spirit is “empty” and the contemplated space is “vacant” (130). As highlighted by the American scholar Rob Wilson, within a context where the term sublime eludes a precise definition, “Stevens’s metaphysical question [...] reverts into a more genealogical one worrying the context of any such sublimating perspective” (3).

As highlighted by Robert Clewis, “the sublime can be described as a complex feeling of intense satisfaction, uplift, or elevation, felt before an object or event that is considered to be awe-inspiring” (1). The scholar argues that “the term has been applied to rhetorical style, natural wonders, works of art, subjective states, the mind or reason itself, ideas of reason, and even the Ideal or Absolute” (4). The sublime is therefore a multifaceted concept that dates back to the first century CE Greek aesthetic treatise *On the Sublime* written by an unknown author conventionally referred to as Longinus.⁸ The Greek author defines sublimity as “a certain distinction and excellence in expression” that, “flashing forth at the right moment [,] scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the

⁸ As highlighted by William Rhys Roberts in the 1907 introduction to the treatise, “the contents and character of the treatise will be found to be admirably indicated in the traditional Greek title *Περὶ ὕψους*, and in its accepted English equivalent *On the Sublime*, if only the words *ὑψος* and *sublime* be correctly understood. The English equivalent has, no doubt, often caused misconception. [...] The object of the author [...] is to indicate broadly the essentials of a noble and impressive style” (Longinus 23).

power of the orator in all its plenitude” (43). In spite of the rhetorical and stylistic nature of the treatise, the association of the disruptive manifestation of nature with the sublime, later retrieved by late seventeenth-century European Modern philosophy,⁹ is evoked since this first definition of the concept. According to Longinus, “sublimity is the echo of a great soul” (61) and “consists in elevation” (77) “above what is mortal [...] [,] near the majesty of God” (135). These first definitions of the sublime are echoed in early eighteenth-century accounts of the journey across the Alps by British travelers that reinterpreted the concept of the sublime as an aesthetic quality in nature juxtaposed to the beautiful.¹⁰

The aestheticization of the untamed European natural dimension paved the way to the analysis of sublimity by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. According to Marjorie Nicolson, this fascination and interest in the sublime is attributable to new theological, philosophical, and scientific approaches to nature (3). For Burke, “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (45). The Irish philosopher ascribes the attributes of greatness, horror, and astonishment to the sublime (73) which, coming “upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness” (88), induces an instinctive response of self-preservation in the bewitched spectator of the untamable natural dimension. Burke’s juxtaposition of the categories of the beautiful and the sublime is retrieved by Kant who, identifying sublimity

⁹ The retrieval of the sublime coincides with the emergence of literary criticism and is associated to the works of Pierre Corneille and Jean-Baptiste Racine.

¹⁰ The distinction between sublime and beautiful was popularized by the Earl of Shaftesbury, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison. Addison’s poem *Pleasures of the Imagination* was a primary source for Edmund Burke’s 1756 aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. According to Mary Arensberg, Addison and Burke were the first to theorize the dichotomy between the two categories; “since then”, the scholar argues, “the beautiful is reserved for positive qualities, while the sublime is linked with emotions of displeasure such as anxiety, panic, and terror” (4).

in “the sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton” (*Observations* 14), identifies a rational response to different sorts of sublimity.¹¹

As highlighted by Joseph Kronick, “while reason serves as the redeeming agent in Kant and instinct serves a similar function in Burke [...], both treatments of the sublime involve a dialectic whereby difference is maintained between self and other” (54), where the other is the realm of the inhuman, namely the untamable and unknowable natural dimension. The concept of the sublime emerges therefore in its first etymological meaning of boundary,¹² between the self and nature in the European tradition and, recurring to Emersonian transcendentalism, between “*I and the Abyss*” (Emerson 405) in the American.¹³ According to Wilson, “crossing the Atlantic, the sublime underwent an ideological sea-change” (4), primarily ascribable to the vastness of the American natural landscape, its symbolic potential, and its imaginatively unconstrained extension.¹⁴

Leo Mellor argues, “differing traditions in British and American writing stem from, most obviously, the radically different scale of the landscape, but also the dissimilar senses of the meaningfulness of wilderness in the respective cultures” (106). Exceeding the

¹¹ While in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* Kant differentiates the sublime into the terrifying, the noble, and the magnificent (16), in *Critique of Judgment* the philosopher differentiates it into the mathematical and the dynamical (101).

¹² From the Latin *sublimis*, compound of *sub* (under, beneath) and *limen* (threshold, boundary), literally “that which reaches all the way below the highest threshold.”

¹³ According to Harold Bloom, Emerson’s words emerge as the definition of the American sublime, where for “the Abyss” we can read European tradition and history, “while for ‘I’ we can read ‘any American’” (255). Bloom argues that the most distinguishing mark of the American sublime is “that it begins anew not with restoration or rebirth, in the radically displaced Protestant pattern of the Wordsworthian Sublime, but that it is truly past even such displacement [...]. Not merely rebirth, but the even more hyperbolic trope of self-rebegetting, is the starting point of the last Western Sublime, the great sunset of selfhood in the Evening Land. (244).

¹⁴ Wilson argues, “the *American* sublime becomes a way of doing battle with the hegemonic British tradition” (30).

European tradition, the American sublime overturns the long-established delineated relation between self and nature,¹⁵ emancipating the contemplating subject and ascribing sublimity to the contemplated landscape in view of a “suprapersonal design to elevate nature into commodity” (Wilson 9).¹⁶ According to Donald Pease:

In the ideological American rendition, the sublime was not man’s but Nature’s discourse. And Nature, through rude scenes eloquent with signs of some prior dramatic conflict, some order *beyond Nature*, seemed to command man to get in touch with Nature’s higher will and to obey the implicit command to move beyond Nature. Of course the actual source of this will emanated neither from the natural landscape nor from some higher will but from man’s future power over the landscape expressed in the policy of western expansionism. Through the subtle turns of the American sublime, the liberal in taking axe and hammer to the virgin land could, with childlike innocence, proclaim that only through the destruction of Nature’s bounty could he feel by doing what nature commanded as if he were truly in touch with nature’s will. (46)

As highlighted by Henry Nash Smith, “the character of the American empire was defined

¹⁵ In opposition with the Burkian or Kantian contemplating subjects always distinct from the contemplated landscape, the Emersonian (and later Whitmanesque) self ascends to an ontological plane whereby the contemplation of the natural dimension leads to a dissolution of egotism and the blurring of the boundary between the observant and the object of observation. Emerson first theorizes the resolution of this dichotomy recurring to the image of the transparent eyeball: “Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (24).

¹⁶ Something that, according to Louise Westling, emerges from the conflicted relation that American authors have with the natural dimension. The scholar argues: “Emerson’s foundational essay ‘Nature’ begins by claiming ‘an original relation to the universe’ through the natural world for American writers, but goes on to feminize Nature and describe her meekly receiving the domination of man. ‘Nature’ ends with a heroic call for the kingdom of man over nature. Thoreau’s essay ‘Walking’ similarly aims to speak a word for Nature and claims that ‘in wildness is the preservation of the world,’ yet celebrates the westward migration of European settlers into this ‘wildness’ as the nation’s destiny. Scottish immigrant John Muir followed the American pattern of moving westward to California for such adventure. But he chopped down primeval redwood forests before turning to worship the sublime landscapes of the Sierra and to fight to save Yosemite and other ‘wilderness’ landscapes” (4).

not by streams of influence out of the past, not by a cultural tradition, nor by its place in a world community, but by a relation between man and nature – or rather, even more narrowly, between American man and the American West” (187). Approaching the “virgin land”, the concept of the sublime underwent a rhetoric process of nationalization that entailed the transmutation of the European philosophical tradition. Exceeding the boundary between the self and nature, the American sublime emerges as an independent tendency that “helped to consolidate an American identity founded in representing a landscape of immensity and wildness (‘power’) open to multiple identifications (‘use’)” (Wilson 5). A similar process of Americanization is also undergone by the tendency of the pastoral.

As a literary mode,¹⁷ the pastoral dates back to three conventional texts that established the features of idealized simple shepherds’ lives to which later authors refer back. Hesiod’s didactic poem *The Works and Days*, written around 700 BCE, inaugurated this literary tradition. Referring to a primordial “Golden Age” (30) of abundance and pleasure where men lived in harmony with nature, *The Works and Days* is much more than a farmer’s almanac and emerges as the first text featuring the depiction of a virgin natural dimension where the earth offered mankind its fruits in abundance. With Theocritus’ *Idylls*¹⁸ and especially Virgil’s *Eclogues*,¹⁹ this spatial dimension came to be referred to as Arcadia, a literary idyllic space of unspoiled wilderness based upon a real mountainous region of Greece. As highlighted by Gifford, “the term pastoral came to refer to any literature that

¹⁷ Paul Alpers argues that, rather than a genre, the pastoral should be considered a mode that can be applied to different literary genres (ix).

¹⁸ According to Terry Gifford, the *Idylls* is the first pastoral text. The scholar argues that the *Idylls* “gave us the word ‘idyllic’ and established a sense of idealization, nostalgia, and escapism in a poetry of the countryside written for a court audience – all qualities that have come to be associated with definitions of the pastoral” (18).

¹⁹ As highlighted by Gifford, “in the *Eclogues* (42-37 BCE) Virgil evokes a Golden Age of the past that is set against the instability and alienation of the present” (19).

described the countryside in contrast to the court or the city” (19); nevertheless, the scholar argues, “confusion about the term is rooted in its historical shifts in meaning” (17). Indeed, with the revival of the pastoral mode in the eighteenth century,²⁰ the pastoral was aligned and related to the georgic, a literary mode dating back to Virgil’s *Georgics* “which gave emphasis to the practices of a human relationship with nature through the detail of husbandry” (Gifford 20). According to Leo Marx, it is from the combination of this articulation of the pastoral and the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian democracy that originates the American pastoral (74).

Marx defines the American pastoral as “a variation upon the contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication, which has been used by writers working in the pastoral mode since the time of Virgil” (19).²¹ The scholar argues that “the pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination” (3).²² From the Renaissance onward, America represents an untamed natural dimension — in contrast with the urbanized Old World — where Arcadia, or in Smith’s terminology, the myth of the garden (123),²³ could be materialized. Simultaneously,

²⁰ According to Gifford, this interest in the pastoral mode is “partly driven by an Augustan valuing of supposed order and stability in Roman literature” (20).

²¹ According to Lawrence Buell, “ever since an American literary canon began to crystallize, American literature has been thought of as markedly ‘pastoral’ in the loose sense of being preoccupied with nature and rurality as setting, theme, and value in contradistinction from society and the urban” (1).

²² Gifford argues, “it was James Thomson in *The Seasons* (1727-1744) who took pastoral poetry directly into the georgic challenges of the newfound lands of the exotic Americas and the East”; for Thomson, “the untamed fertility of nature in the tropics was almost frightening in its untamable relentlessness” (23).

²³ Smith argues, “the image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society – a collective representation, a poetic idea [...] that defined the promise of American life. The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred

however, the fascination for an untamed natural dimension is derived and conditioned by a potential process of urban civilization and environmental domestication, highlighting how, in Marx's words, "the pastoral ideal has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction" (4). As highlighted by Gifford, "at the heart of this Americanist tradition was Thoreau, whose *Walden* (1854) engaged with the possibility of a backwoods, pioneering, idealistic, retreat while accepting the presence of the railway at the far end of Walden Pond that made retreat possible for a nation inhabiting, uneasily, a wilderness" (24). According to Lawrence Buell, "this duality was built into American pastoral thinking from the start, for it was conceived as a dream both hostile to the standing order of civilization (decadent Europe, later hypercivilizing America) yet at the same time a model for the civilization in the process of being built" (20).

The sublime and the pastoral are juxtaposed dichotomous constructions that, applied to the idealized and imaginatively boundless American natural landscape, often overlap and resolve within the broader discrepancy between civilization and nature. Within this dichotomy, nature, as highlighted by Louise Westling via Raymond Williams, is elevated and romanticized only after the occurrence of a process of conquest, domestication, and commodification (4) — a process that spatially pushes westward the boundary with the untamed. According to Richard Lehan, "the movement went by a number of names [...] but implicit in it [...] [was the] transforming belief that man must dominate his environment, impose his will upon nature and the land, and turn that control into wealth" (29).²⁴ The

plow" (123). According to Marx, what Smith defines as "myth of the garden" corresponds to his definition of "pastoral" (7).

²⁴ This belief is according to Frederick Jackson Turner the defining element of American character and was decisive in defining the structure of American democracy as distinct to European societies. In his popular work *The Frontier in American History*, the historian argues that American progress has repeatedly undergone a cyclical process of redefinition on the frontier line as the nation expanded westward into the territories expropriated from native populations and acquired through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

scholar argues, “the seed of these thoughts, the idea of West, was carried from Europe across the Atlantic and then across the whole continent” (29) to California, “the last frontier” (Durrenberger) before the pioneer spirit runs up against the ocean. As highlighted by Kevin Starr, “while yet barely a name on the map, [California] entered American awareness as a symbol of renewal. It was a final frontier: of geography and of expectation” (*Americans* vii), the quintessential spatial dimension where the pastoral dream could be attained. “Part legend, part land”, argues Paul Skenazy, California “is to America as America once was to Europe, that mythological ‘world elsewhere’” (113), where Arcadia could be constituted.

As highlighted by Douglas Sackman, “the making of a garden is a cultural and historical project. Gardens are anthropogenic landscapes, the result of humans shaping nature into patterns that they find hospitable, inviting, and desirable” (“A Garden” 248). The making of the pastoral California garden epitomizes therefore an historical and political project that entails the conquest, domestication, and commodification of the region’s natural dimension. This process originates with what Kevin McNamara denominates “the School of Sunshine” (1): a group of influential politicians, writers and publicists who at the turn of the twentieth century created a fiction that boosted and marketed Southern California as an idyllic promised land. In response to this propagandistic rhetoric, in the 1930s emerged a literary tradition defined by Mike Davis as *Noir*: a regional fiction inaugurated by James M. Cain and Horace McCoy that debunked the promoted idealized image of Southern California. According to Davis’s definition, this literary tradition “was like a transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of [...] arcadia into a sinister equivalent” (*City* 38), starting from the anthropogenic pastoral garden.

Whereas Davis and Mark Laurila align the works of John Fante with this specifically Californian literary tradition, in the following chapters I explore the symbolism of the natural landscapes of Colorado and California represented in the author’s works, attempting to

encase them within the broader dichotomous juxtaposition of the pastoral and the sublime. By pastoral, I refer to the anthropogenic Arcadia attained through a process of spatial conquest, domestication, and commodification of the natural dimension in line with Leo Marx's theorization of American pastoralism. In line with the American tradition that ascribes sublimity to the contemplated landscape, by sublime I intend the yet untamed natural dimension that, opposing this colonizing process of taming, emerges as an annihilating and terrifying counterforce²⁵ which dwarfs and empties the contemplating self.

²⁵ As highlighted by Leo Marx, the term counterforce has "portentous" and "melodramatic" connotations (25) which may lead to a misconception of what I intend with sublime. With the term counterforce, Marx refers to "a world which is more 'real' into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision" (25) and "may impinge upon the pastoral landscape either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilization" (25-26). Disregarding the latter, which aligns rather to what Frederic Jameson defines as "postmodern or technological sublime" (*Postmodernism* 37), with the term counterforce, I refer to the former which, in line with Rob Nixon's concept of non-human resistance, identifies the powerful retaliation of the targeted natural dimension "which may prove harder to commodify and profitably remove or manage" (Nixon 21) than foreseen.

CHAPTER TWO

COLORADO AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPES:
NATURAL FORCES AND THEIR SYMBOLISM IN THE “MOUNTAIN WRITINGS”

2.1 “Frozen Stillness”: The Sublime Meteorological Element of Snow and the Imaginative Dimension of California in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*

*All the leaves are brown / And the sky is grey / I've been
for a walk / On a winter's day / I'd be safe and warm / If
I was in L.A. / California dreamin' / On such a winter's
day.*

The Mamas & the Papas, “California Dreamin'”

“Frozen stillness” (1933 25) is how Dominic Molise, the young protagonist of Fante’s posthumous novel *1933 Was a Bad Year*,²⁶ describes the snowy and mountainous landscape of Roper, his hometown in Colorado. Extrapolating it from the narrative frame, Dominic’s definition comes to represent an accurate characterization of the sublime potential of nature in Fante’s works, since it simultaneously signifies the restraining force of the natural dimension and the helplessness of the human and pastoral response to it. In its potential annihilative properties, therefore, the sublime element of nature epitomizes a disruptive tendency that permeates and characterizes the author’s literary production. Fante, defined by Ruth Hawthorn “as a writer centrally concerned by ideas of place” (767), situates his extremely space-conscious protagonists in distinctive environments that, in apparent self-

²⁶ Even though the novel was only published in 1985, Fante had started working on the book in the first half of the 1950s. In a letter of February 1954, according to Seamus Cooney probably addressed to Stanley Salomen of Little Brown (*Selected Letters* 231), the author notes: “I put in two months thinking, writing, and rewriting the novel we talked about at the Beverly Hills Hotel; story of the boy who runs away to become a big league ballplayer” (231). Defined as “not ‘important’” (231), *1933 Was a Bad Year* was set aside and only retrieved after the author’s death.

contradiction, both dichotomize and meld the two counterposed poles of the sublime and the pastoral. Thus, the Californian or Colorado landscapes of the Italian American author's works do not solely stand out as the geographical backgrounds where his picaresque heroes move, but also as spatial dimensions imbued with a profoundly symbolic significance: spaces that epitomize the metonymic ground to suggest — and yet simultaneously blur — the dichotomous nature of the two forces identified in the environmental history and mythology of the American West.

This chapter focuses on Fante's "mountain writings," works that, as highlighted by Bordin, place particular emphasis on the Italian descent (*Un'etnicità* 32) and the cultural discrepancy between first and second-generation immigrants. Through the analysis of the allegorical function of the natural and meteorological elements represented in these works, this chapter attempts to detect the diverse manifestations of the tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime in the author's works set in mountainous environments, highlighting Fante's meticulous attention to the symbolism of the ecologies of Colorado and California. While the first section concentrates on the cold landscape of Fante's native state in some of the works classified by Catherine Kordich as "books of youth" (*John Fante* 19),²⁷ the second presents a spatial analysis of the Northern California mountainous and pastoral environments represented in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. The analysis initially concentrates on the sublime role of the meteorological element of snow and subsequently moves towards the role of wine, focusing on the juxtaposition between the dimension of the mountains and of the vineyard.

²⁷ Kordich classifies Fante's works according to thematic and spatial cores. In the chapter entitled "Boyhood in Colorado" (*John Fante* 19-56), the scholar argues that, considered together, the novels *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* and the novella "The Orgy" "comprise a portrait of growing up Italian, Catholic, and poor in depression-era Colorado" (19). What follows focuses primarily on the novels *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*.

Notwithstanding the frequent allusions in the rest of the author's fiction, Fante's works that more thoroughly feature the domestic dimension of the snowy Colorado landscape — above all in its sublime sphere — are *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*.²⁸ Despite the consistent time interval that separates their writing, the two works display numerous thematic and narrative analogies, to the point that Kordich argues that *1933 Was a Bad Year* “shows Fante taking *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s childhood poverty and ethnic marginalization to its teenage consequence” (*John Fante* 19), with the most significant difference lying in the age of the protagonists (39). The two novels, in fact, characterized by the protagonist's underlying eagerness to leave the domestic dimension of Colorado, for the author become, borrowing Melissa Ryan's reading of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, “a writerly act of going home — of revisiting his Colorado childhood” (186). The spatial dimension of Colorado assumes therefore primarily relevance in the analysis of the juxtaposition between the two poles of the pastoral and the sublime within Fante's works.

Defined in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as the “rear end of God's creation” (16), Colorado comes to represent a space that elicits a process of withdrawal by the novelist's young protagonists and at the same time requires the authorial imaginative reconstruction of the spaces of his childhood. Thus, recurring to Barbara Piatti's definition of projected places, spaces “not physically accessed [...] but called up in the mode of memories, dreams and longings” (185), the snowy landscape of Colorado at the same time epitomizes a projected spatial dimension to reconstruct through an imaginative process for the author, and a place to evade in order to reach the warmer California for his characters. If on the one hand, from a strictly meteorological perspective, Fante's “native Colorado and Southern California are as distant and unrelated as two different countries” (“A Dissenter's” 83) as highlighted by

²⁸ The other work by Fante that primarily features the sublime element of snow is the short story “Bricklayer in the Snow” originally included in the 1940 short-story collection *Dago Red*.

Leonardo Buonomo in relation to *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, on the other, the juxtaposed spatial dimensions exemplify two interdependent and complementary spaces, characterized by the same natural forces yet manifesting themselves in divergent manners.²⁹ What follows, therefore, focuses on the juxtaposition between the sublime dimension of the Colorado environment and the projected pastoral ideal of an imagined California in *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*, with particular attention to the symbolic association of violence to the sublime meteorological element of snow.

The similar narrative structures of *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* revolve around a process of familiar reconciliation after an initial collision determined by the individual's aspirations and dreams of assimilation. In the case of *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini*,³⁰ the paternal figure of Svevo Bandini abandons his wife Maria and his three children at Christmas for an affair with the wealthy American widow Effie Hildegarde, thus momentarily impairing the stability of the familiar microcosm. The precarious familiar stability is ultimately safeguarded by the fourteen year-old Arturo, who brings his father back home.³¹ Likewise, in *1933 Was a Bad Year*, the familiar tensions are determined by the sports dreams of seventeen year-old Dominic. Whereas his father expects him to become a bricklayer, Dominic steals and attempts to sell his father's concrete mixer to gather enough money to reach California and try out as a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs. As in *Wait Until*

²⁹ In Fante's last novel, defined by Francesca D'Alfonso as "a story made of many stories" ("I was Robinson Crusoe" 67; my translation), the author portrays his protagonist's momentary farewell to Los Angeles and return to his hometown in Colorado. In the representation of the landscape of his native state (*Dreams* 733-745), Fante resorts to the same depiction and symbolism rendered in *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*, underlying therefore a symptomatic affiliation between his first and last works.

³⁰ The novel is set in the fictional town of Rocklin, Colorado. But Rocklin is also a real city located in Placer County, California. Considering the pastoral role that the natural dimension of California plays in the novel, one may speculate that the choice on the name of the town in Colorado is designed to blur the dichotomy between the sublime and the pastoral dimensions respectively associated to Colorado and California.

³¹ According to Ernesto Livorni, Arturo's restoration of the familiar stability draws to a close his "Telemachy" (56; my translation).

Spring, Bandini, also in *1933 Was a Bad Year* the domestic animosities are eventually resolved, in this case by the paternal figure who sells his mixer, symbol of his working struggles and source of revenue for the family, ultimately accepting Dominic's aspirations and paying for the ticket to reach California.

Like the rest of Fante's "mountain writings," the two novels analyzed in this section resort primarily to the themes of ethnic heritage and intergenerational cultural discrepancies. As highlighted by Kordich, the two novels are "deeply invested in the Italian Old Country that characterizes home" (*John Fante xi*), standing out as the author's most personal works.³² Scholars have primarily concentrated on the analogies between the author's life and his works, detecting as their main tropes the protagonists' conflicted relationship with their Italian descent, the religiously drenched parental conflicting dialectic, and, specifically for *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the juxtaposition between Italian and American models of masculinity.³³ Indeed, the majority of critical studies on *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* have placed it alongside the works of Pietro di Donato (Béranger, "Italian American"; and De Lucia) and Jerre Mangione (Buonomo, "The Italian"), or both (Gardaphé, "Left Out" and "John Fante's"). Moreover, even the studies that do not explicitly associate the novel to the works of other Italian American writers focus primarily on the characters' conflicted relationship with Italian culture, either from the paternal (D'Alfonso, "Quel ragazzo"; and Marinaccio) or filial perspective (Payne; and Mattevi). While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*

³² In a letter to his cousin Jo Campiglia, dated November 23, 1939, Fante defined *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as a much more personal work than *Ask the Dust*; in his words, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* was a book that "came from [...] [his] heart" (*Selected Letters* 157).

³³ Scholars of the two novels have primarily concentrated on how Fante's works, in Gardaphé's words, "focus on the development of an American identity through attempts to distance his characters from their Italian and working-class identities" ("Left Out" 59). Fante's first novel has often been studied in terms of what Michael Denning has defined as the "ghetto pastoral" — a genre that emerged from proletarian literature in the 1920s and 1930s that provides the insider's perspective of a second generation immigrant "growing up in Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Bronzeville, and Chinatown" (230).

has extensively been studied by Fante's scholars, *1933 Was a Bad Year* has received scant critical attention, with the most noteworthy study by Collins ("Stealing Home"), concentrating on the connections between baseball and ethics in the novel.

The primary relevance of the Colorado environment and the underlying allegorical symbolism of the element of snow in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* are elements detected by the majority of scholars, but only the works by Ryan and Mirko Mondillo have highlighted the relations between the landscape in Fante's first novel and the pastoral rhetoric at the heart of the American process of conquest and domestication of the natural dimension. While Ryan, drawing from Leo Marx, highlights how *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* parallels and replicates the rhetorical model of imaginative conquest that has characterized America's mythical foundations (Ryan 187), Mondillo, in his study on *Tobacco Road* (1932) by Erskine Caldwell,³⁴ identifies and collocates Fante's first novel within an American narrative production that opposes the spatial dimensions of wilderness and plantation (111). Despite the scholars' recognition of this correlation, this insight is only at the germinal stage³⁵ and restricted to the pastoral dimension, whereas Fante's "books of youth" primarily feature its sublime counterpart, which in what follows is analyzed in relation to the meteorological element of snow.

Both *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* open with a character's acrimonious meditation while walking home "through flames of snow" (1933 7); they thus recur to the meteorological event to highlight the immobilizing sublime potential of the natural landscape of the region. While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* opens with the paternal

³⁴ Mondillo argues that, alongside *Hunger* (1890) by Knut Hamsun, Caldwell's novel is *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s primary source of inspiration (115).

³⁵ While Mondillo only hints at *Wait Until Spring Bandini*'s recurrence to the juxtaposition between wilderness and plantation, Ryan's finding of the presence of the pastoral ideal in Fante's narrative is secondary and subjected to the analysis of the characters' imaginative construction of their American identities and symbolic "homes."

figure of Svevo Bandini cursing and kicking the deep snow (5), in *1933 Was a Bad Year* the character wandering through the white mounds is that of the young Dominic Molise (7).³⁶ In view of the narrative analogies identified between the two novels, one can discern a clear connection between the two filial figures of Arturo Bandini and Dominic Molise.³⁷ Moreover, as highlighted by Marinaccio, “the narratives of father and son are inextricably entwined” (43), creating therefore a correlation between the paternal and filial characters in both novels ascribable primarily to their contemptuous attitude towards the sublime dimension epitomized by the snow. Indeed, as “the snow literally puts [...] [Arturo and Dominic’s] visions of baseball glory on ice” (Kordich *John Fante* 23), it also impedes the work of the two bricklayers. The four figures merge therefore into a composite character, defined by Marinaccio as “the dreamer awaiting the rebirth of spring and a return to the activity” (43); a tragic character, who, paralyzed by the sublime nature of the Colorado winter, fantasizes about the return of spring and imaginatively withdraws to the idealized pastoral dimension of California.

As highlighted by Kordich, “Fante places considerable symbolic weight on snow” (*John Fante* 23), which, epitomizing the immobilizing potential of the sublime dimension of nature, is associated in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* to acts of violence and death. Both works employ in fact the sublime meteorological element to feature

³⁶ I believe that the main dissimilarity between the two works can be discerned from the different incipits of the novels: the novels’ diverse openings, in fact, become emblematic of their different narrative points of view. On the one hand, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* presents a polyphony of voices that makes the father, the son, and the mother simultaneous protagonists of the novel, on the other, *1933 Was a Bad Year*, centers on Dominic Molise and his struggle to overcome the familiar and the Colorado winter’s constraints. Thus, differently from Fante’s first novel but in line with the rest of the author’s literary production, *1933 Was a Bad Year* resorts to a first-person narrator whose struggles, ambitions, and imaginative self-fashioning assume indisputable preponderancy in the narrative.

³⁷ Considering Kordich’s narrative chronological collocation of *1933 Was a Bad Year* within the Bandini tetralogy (*John Fante* 46), the assimilation between the two characters is strengthened by the protagonist’s middle name of Dominic in *Ask the Dust* (580).

the subjects' fears, dismay, and denied opportunities that prompt a violent response. In *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini*, Svevo channels his physical and verbal violence against nature and God. The bricklayer, in fact, kicking the "suffocating snow" (*Wait* 5) and glancing up the mountains,³⁸ curses God and the meteorological element impeding the act of construction. According to Mondillo, Fante's novel develops along two structural tensions: between man and nature and between nature and the divine — with the latter emerging as a response to the first tension (111). Thus, at the heart of Fante's narrative there is a triangular correlation between the human, the natural, and the divine, ultimately resolved by the bricklayer through violence towards the sublime dimension of nature and blasphemy against its transcendent creating agent. The immobilizing dimension of snow emerges therefore as an annihilating force that hinders the process of construction and as such opposes the attempt to tame or conquer the natural dimension. Snow and the Colorado mountains epitomize a dismaying force that immobilizes the characters and makes them "most vulnerable to themselves and to each other" (Kordich *John Fante* 23), determining both their violent reactions and their imaginative retreat to a projected pastoral dimension exemplified in California.

The castrating potential of the meteorological element of snow is reflected in Fante's characters, who, subjected to the immobilizing power, become at the same time perpetrators of a fierce and disruptive force against something or someone else. In *Wait Until Spring*,

³⁸ Svevo associates the Colorado mountains to his Italian boyhood describing them as "a huge white dress dropped plumb-like to the earth" (*Wait* 5). This association is important since it connects the sublime dimension of nature both to a feminine sphere and to his native country. Indeed, Svevo's conflicted relationship with the Colorado landscape is mediated by his ambivalent perception of his masculinity and ethnic heritage. Impeding the bricklayer's work, snow in fact imaginatively threatens Svevo's virility and, as highlighted by De Lucia, implies "that coming to the United States has brought no true change" (De Lucia 155). Snow represents therefore a feminized and Italian spatial dimension that Svevo attempts to overcome through the assertion of his American identity and masculinity in his affair with Effie Hildegard. According to Marinaccio, snow "compose[s] in Svevo's mind a private, feminized Italian sphere from which he must emigrate in order both to assimilate and to establish his manhood" (47).

Bandini, this violent reaction becomes evident in Svevo and Arturo's relations, especially with female characters, who are associated to snow and the disruptive and immobilizing sublime force of nature.³⁹ While Arturo pushes his brother August (*Wait* 99-100) and his beloved girl Rosa Pinelli (125) into the snow, Svevo's initial reactionary violence for his impossibility to lay brick in the Colorado winter is directed towards inanimate objects: the snow, Arturo's sled (8), the laces of his run-down shoes (9), and the stove that only his wife can operate (18).⁴⁰ This fierce aversion to the sublime dimension is soon redirected towards his white and fertile wife Maria,⁴¹ from whom he withdraws, shivering disgusted because of the contact of his skin with her cold white rosary, "so white you could drop it in the snow and lose it forever" (7).

Thus, Svevo's abandonment of his home and family for the alternative "American life"⁴² offered by the wealthy widow Effie Hildegard epitomizes a reaction to snow and the sublime dimension of nature. This withdrawal from the familiar dimension entails an attempt

³⁹ Despite the association to the sublime destructive potential of nature, Fante's female characters are not *femmes fatales* — above all if they are of Italian descent — but rather the embodiment of the protagonists' ethnic past and identities that they attempt to refashion and Americanize.

⁴⁰ All these objects are symbolically connected to Svevo's aversion for the snow; the sled symbolically represents amusement for the meteorological element that impedes the bricklayer's work, the shoelaces cannot be untangled because of his frozen hands, and the stove appears to him as an "untamed and ill-tempered" block of ice (*Wait* 18).

⁴¹ Maria — or Mary in *1933 Was a Bad Year* — is the name of the maternal figure in all of Fante's "mountain works", with the exception of the novella "The Orgy", where the name is not specified. The choice of the name is extremely symbolical, as Fante's works set in mountainous environments are primarily concerned with the characters' familiar relationship with their Italian cultural and religious descent, primarily represented by the maternal figure. As highlighted by Marinaccio, in fact, "despite having been born in the US, Maria appears the least assimilated member of the Bandini family. As such, she becomes Svevo's chief antagonist, the embodiment of the feminine/ Italian identity he believes he must repress if he is to become a successful American man" (48). The symbolic essence of the name is epitomized in this passage from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*: "Her name was Maria, and so was the Savior's mother, and she had gone to that other Maria over miles and miles of rosary beads" (22).

⁴² As highlighted by Marinaccio, Svevo "considers his affair with the widow Hildegard and his residence in her home as the occasion of his long-deferred, heroic 'making of America'" (51).

of taming, since, as highlighted by Ryan, “to conquer the wilderness or to own land is, on the level of metaphor, never quite separable from ‘having’ a woman, possessing her sexually” (191).⁴³ According to D’Alfonso, Svevo’s aversion for the meteorological element of snow is in fact ascribable to his impossibility to possess his house and, as an extension, his wife (“Quel ragazzo” 138). Nevertheless, I believe that what Svevo is ultimately unable to claim possession of and tame, through the process of creation, is the sublime dimension of nature that, associated to his wife and the domestic sphere she inhabits, is juxtaposed to a warmer pastoral ideal embodied by Effie Hildegarde.⁴⁴ While Maria is associated to the immobilizing dimension of snow and cold,⁴⁵ the wealthy widow, providing Svevo a job and an oil heater (*Wait* 150), epitomizes an alternative to his seasonal, economic, and familiar restraints. Svevo’s return home on Christmas Eve, however, entails a process of reversal in

⁴³ Fante’s works present an interesting analogy between the sublime dimension of nature and female characters that draws from the imperialist rhetoric of the “land-as-woman” identified by Annette Kolodny in the colonial spatial conquest of the continent. This becomes evident in *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* with Arturo’s identification of the Colorado landscape to Rosa — similar to the association between the Mojave desert and Camilla Lopez in *Ask the Dust*. See this passage from the novel: “This was Rosa’s land. This was Rosa’s tree. Because you’ve looked at it, because maybe you’ve touched it. And those are Rosa’s mountains, and maybe she’s looking at them now. Whatever she looked upon was hers, and whatever he looked upon was hers” (*Wait* 182).

⁴⁴ In a passage of the novel Arturo catches sight of Svevo in Effie’s car and, remaining fascinated by his father’s poise, takes him as his role model, imagining that one day he too would be doing it with Rosa. “And he was like his father. A day would come when he and Rosa Pinelli would be doing it too. Rosa, let’s get into the car and drive out in the country, Rosa. Me and you, out in the country Rosa” (*Wait* 96). Calling attention to Arturo’s repetition of the words “out in the country”, Ryan highlights how Effie’s presence next to his father evokes in Arturo an imaginative escape to a pastoral dimension away from Colorado (184-185).

⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the analogy with snow and cold, Maria, “always wanting to know if [...] [Svevo] was warm enough” (*Wait* 14) and “endlessly waiting for passion” (7), “had only to think of the muscle in his loins and her body and her mind melted like the spring snows” (6). Thus, Svevo’s withdrawal from her “to an even colder part of the bed” (7) has to be attributed to the different meanings of the sexual intercourse. As highlighted by Marinaccio, in fact, “while sex with Maria is represented as a passive submission to his Italian identity, sex with Effie is represented as a conquest of America and, consequently, a powerful affirmation of his masculinity” (53).

the dynamics of power and authority.⁴⁶ Hurling herself at her husband, Maria, in fact subverts the passive role in which she had been confined. Leaving profound lacerations on his face (*Wait* 129), Maria stains with her husband's blood — the blood of “Bandini, hater of snow” (16) — the sublime meteorological element she had been compared to. Thus, the white snow covered with Svevo's blood,⁴⁷ becoming the symbol of his lost virginity in his first sexual relationship with an American woman, questions his masculinity⁴⁸ and as such it is something that according to Arturo “nobody should see” (*Wait* 131). The young protagonist, therefore, attempting to conceal his father's abasing bleeding, kicks clean snow over the red spots, mirroring Svevo's initial reaction towards the sublime meteorological element.

Thus, in its immobilizing potential snow evokes a violent reaction in the characters and,

⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Maria Bandini never emerges as an example of a strong and independent female character who takes on the role of *capo famiglia*, as for example Lucia Santa in Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. Indeed, even when Svevo is temporarily cast out of the domestic space, sporadically caring for her three children, she awaits his return in prayer.

⁴⁷ The image of snow spotted with blood recurs other times in Fante's works. In *Wait Until Spring*, Bandini, Arturo, tired of eating eggs, kills an old hen by throwing a lump of coal on its head, leaving “a zig-zag of brilliant red painting weird patterns in the snow” (46). At the end of *1933 Was a Bad Year*, before the reconciliation between Dominic and his father, Peter punches his son on the nose and uses snow to make the bleeding stop (117). A similar depiction is offered at the end of *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, when Arturo uses snow to make his nose stop bleeding after being punched by Biff Newhouse (744). Moreover, the bricklayer's blood on the white snow evokes a mournful presage that echoes the role of the meteorological element within other works by Italian American authors. The most suitable example is Pascal D'Angelo's autobiographical work *Son of Italy* that, in its representation of snow as a sublime meteorological element, portrays America as “a land in which man struggles with nature, a place where man's imprint on the world destroys the natural relationship of his past and create in its place a tension that often results in confusion” (Gardaphé “The Consequences” 70).

⁴⁸ Svevo departs from the traditional expectations of the Italian patriarch — see Gambino (117-145) and Gardaphé (*From Wiseguys*) — presenting some feminine physical traits such as his soft, brown eyes, defined in the novel as “a woman's eyes” (*Wait* 6). According to Marinaccio, Svevo's sexual relationship with Effie represents an unsuccessful assertion of his manhood that ultimately determines his relegation to the role of prostitute (60).

spotted with blood, becomes an omen of death, which, in both *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*, is a recurrent disquietude for Fante's characters. On his way home through the snow, the young protagonist of *1933 Was a Bad Year* senses "certain forces [...] at work trying to destroy" him (1933 7) and associates the sublime meteorological element to death. Reminded of Grandma Bettina's belief that "snowflakes were the souls in heaven returning to Earth for brief visits", Dominic links the white crystals to "the billions who lived a while and went away, the poor soldiers killed in battle, the sailors lost at sea, the victims of plague and earthquake, the rich and the poor, the dead from the beginning of time" (10). Snow, therefore, emerges as an ominous sublime element of nature that foretells and entails violence and death. Thus, contrary to Ryan's assertion that in Fante's works "there is no sense of pervasive cold [...] [and] winter is chiefly significant [...] as a symbolic event more than a phenomenon of the body" (189), I believe that snow in Fante's "mountain works" is primarily a manifestation of the immobilizing sublime potential of the freezing Colorado landscape. Despite the underlying sexual and religious symbolism associated to the meteorological event, snow and cold are ultimately sublime lethal elements of nature that, in fact, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* determine Rosa Pinelli's death from pneumonia (196).⁴⁹ Eventually, the novel closes with Svevo and Arturo's homeward journey with the snow starting to melt and the appearance of "a patch of blue in the east" (*Wait* 214) auguring the coming of a warmer season. Nevertheless, Svevo's auspicious and forward-looking remark on the arrival of spring is promptly sapped by the fall of one last "small star-shaped snowflake" (214), maybe — in line with Grandma Bettina's beliefs — the soul of young Rosa Pinelli returning to Earth. Thus, in its cyclical structure, ascribable to the centrality of the sublime meteorological element in the incipit and the conclusion, Fante's novel closes

⁴⁹ Arguably, the cold is also the cause of death of a rabbit and a bird, whose bodies are revealed at end of the novel when the first warm rays of sunlight start to melt the snow.

with the sublime element of snow falling upon the living and the dead.

The cold Colorado mountainous landscape of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* comes to represent a sublime natural dimension that, subjugating the characters to a condition of passive immobility, entails the reiteration of a violent process towards themselves and each other. This condition of annihilation fosters, however, an imaginative process of withdrawal to a pastoral space, which, in line with the boosters' propaganda, is exemplified by the idealized Arcadian landscape of California. In both novels, in fact, California emerges as a projected dimension of renewal and hope, a quixotic frontier, juxtaposed to the sublime natural dimension of Colorado. In *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the imaginative pastoral space of California recurs moderately in the narrative, predominantly as a response to Svevo's seasonal working impediments. In his homeward journey through the snow at the beginning of the novel, Svevo in fact states: "It harassed him always, that beautiful snow. He could never understand why he didn't go to California. Yet he stayed in Colorado, in the deep snow" (6).⁵⁰ In *1933 Was a Bad Year*, instead, California emerges as an Arcadian and dreamlike dimension that symbolizes Dominic's sport aspirations and dreams. "Dreamers, we were a house full of dreamers" (1933 36), observes in fact the young protagonist, who, together with his wealthy friend Kenny Parrish, fantasizes about Catalina, "a little island paradise where all you do is play baseball and eat good food in a fine hotel" (61).

Thus, with its "palm trees along the blue Pacific [,] [...] [its] blue skies bathed in sunlight, [and its] warm tropic nights" (61), California emerges as an idyllic pastoral

⁵⁰ According to Marinaccio, "this self-query points up the continuity of his life in America with that in Italy, suggesting that Svevo has made an incomplete journey across the Atlantic" (47), a journey that will be carried out by his son Arturo in the following works of the tetralogy. Kordich instead highlights how "this passage begs the question not answered in the novel — not why he does not move to California, for surely he is too poor for such a journey, but why did he go to Colorado in the first place?" (*John Fante* 30).

dimension that epitomizes an acquired Arcadia. California imaginatively exemplifies a pastoral natural dimension where even in winter strawberries grow.⁵¹ “No snow!” (1933 61), exclaims in fact Kenny, “nor ice nor sleet; and, above all, no mud” (McWilliams 103), would add the region’s boosters, who, promoting it as an Arcadian paradise whose fruits and sunshine make “the sick well and the strong more vigorous” (Cleland 130), had used the climate as a marketable commodity. Thus, the image of the natural dimension of California emerging from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*, disclosing congruity with the region’s depiction employed by boosterism, figures as a pastoral projected space that, juxtaposed to the sublime dimension of Colorado, elicits an imaginative process of withdrawal. As Fante’s characters in the “books of youth” attempt to escape the seasonal and familiar constraints of the sublime landscape of Colorado, echoing Nathanael West’s question in *The Day of the Locust*,⁵² I am led to wonder, “where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?” (411).

⁵¹ In chapter four of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* Maria goes to Mr Craik’s next-door grocery shop, and at the sight of strawberries exclaims astonished: “‘Strawberries!’ [...] ‘And in winter, too! Are they California strawberries, Mr Craik?’” (80). The whole chapter, with slight variations, was published as a short story of its own with the title “Charge It” in the posthumous collection *The Big Hunger*.

⁵² Published in the same year as *Ask the Dust*, Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* is one of the first novels debunking the Californian dream and providing a grotesque depiction of the Midwestern sun seekers roaming the streets of Los Angeles. Often compared to *Ask the Dust*, West’s Hollywood novel features a much more cynical and detached image of Los Angeles and its inhabitants than Fante’s contemporary novel. According to Fine, along Chandler, Cain, and McCoy, West inaugurates the literary tradition featuring the identification of Los Angeles “with dark imaginings and violent endings” (*Imagining* 13). For more information on West see Veitch.

2.2 Mountains, Bees, and Wine: The Northern Californian Landscape of *The Brotherhood of the Grape*

*I want you to take me to my California wine / She said I got
to get back where the bright sunshine / And then she turned
my head around like California wine / And then she smiled
at me and put her hand in mine / And poured another cup
of wine, sweet California wine.*

Bobby Goldsboro, "California Wine"

The image of California as an imaginative Arcadian dimension emerging from *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* is extremely different from the one presented by the author in the works set in the region. In Fante's Californian works, in fact, the two tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime constantly merge and overlap, ultimately highlighting the twofold and contradictory dimension of the symbolism of the region's environmental history and mythology — something that emerges from the analysis of the Northern Californian landscape represented in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*.

Just as *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* deals extensively with the issue of fatherhood and the intergenerational cultural gap between fathers and sons of Italian descent. Nevertheless, though one can argue that all the works eventually resolve with reconciliation and the strengthening of familiar ties,⁵³ in *The Brotherhood of the Grape* the domestic resolution is preceded by a filial understanding and reiteration of cultural practices that ultimately confer to the novel a more mature articulation. This difference has to be attributed to both autobiographical and social factors. In spite of the fact that Fante had started to work on the novel since the mid-1950s,⁵⁴ *The Brotherhood*

⁵³ A process that Richard Collins defines as "epiphany of failure" (*John Fante* 20), a familiar appeasement at the expenses of individual aspirations.

⁵⁴ In the letter of February 1954 mentioned before, Fante expresses his intentions to write a novel on his father's last days and last affair when he was seventy-five (*Selected Letters* 231-240).

of the Grape was published only in 1977, six years before the death of the author, whose health problems are similar to the ones suffered in the novel by the protagonist's father. What is more, the social and historical background in which *The Brotherhood of the Grape* was created was different: with the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, a new ethnic awareness developed in the US, leading to a more common desire to recover one's origins. This phenomenon, which went down in history as Ethnic Revival and spawned in response to Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Jacobson), necessarily catalyzed a change in ethnic literature and, as a consequence, in the representation of the intergenerational gap.⁵⁵ With particular reference to Italian American literature, Samuel Patti takes 1974 as the year in which this change occurred.⁵⁶ Indeed, Patti theorizes the development of what he designates as "recent Italian American literature" (327) and holds Fante's *The Brotherhood of the Grape* as one of its first and most successful examples.

The Brotherhood of the Grape comes to represent a complex and mature work that simultaneously stands in line with the rest of Fante's narrative and brings to resolution the culturally drenched father-son conflicting dialectic at the center of his works since his early fiction.⁵⁷ This topic has been at the center of scholarly attention, which has focused on the

⁵⁵ The different intergenerational approach to the process of assimilation between first-generation immigrants and their Americanized children is a central trope in ethnic literature. Indeed, the second-generation immigrants' attempt to distance themselves from their cultural heritage and the traditional values embodied by their parents is a recurrent theme in the literary production of writers of ethnic descent. Gardaphé highlights that "Fante's early writings focus on the development of an American identity through attempts to distance his characters from their Italian and working-class roots" ("John Fante's" 44) embodied by the paternal figure. For an analysis of this topic in Fante's early fiction, see Weber.

⁵⁶ The choice of the year is not accidental. In 1974, in fact, Rose Basile Green published *The Italian American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*, which, according to Gardaphé, "was the first major attempt to identify and examine critically the contribution that American writers of Italian descent have made to American culture" ("Introduction" xvi). By choosing 1974 as the year of a new stream of Italian American literature, Patti is excluding from the definition the works analyzed by Green (Patti 329).

⁵⁷ Fante's works address the topic of fatherhood and intergenerational gap almost uniquely from the filial standpoint, with the exception of *The Brotherhood of the Grape, Full of Life* — where the protagonist deals

intergenerational differences,⁵⁸ highlighting how the novel, paraphrasing Robert Viscusi, is ultimately a son's (partly successful) last attempt to understand and embrace his father's bequeathed ethnic cultural "empire" (62-63).⁵⁹ Building on Bordin's and Massimo Zangari's studies, I aim at highlighting how Fante's work proposes an image of the Northern California mountainous landscape and, specifically, of the vineyard, that oscillates between the two conflicting and often overlapping tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime.

The Brotherhood of the Grape opens with middle-aged writer Henry Molise's return to San Elmo, his hometown, to deal with his parents' imminent divorce. Even though the familiar crisis is eventually averted, Henry's return to Redondo Beach, where he lives with his wife Harriet, is postponed. Despite his initial reluctance, his parents in fact convince him to go to the nearby mountains to work as a hod carrier for his father Nick, a seventy-six year-old retired bricklayer who wants to carry out one last job: building a smokehouse in the Ramponis' Monte Casino Lodge in the Sierras. During the construction, interrupted only for the consumption of wine from the nearby vineyard of Angelo Musso,⁶⁰ Henry draws closer

with fatherhood both in the role of father and son — and the novella "My Dog Stupid," where the protagonist plays the role of the father.

⁵⁸ Scholars of *The Brotherhood of the Grape* have especially concentrated on the father-son dialectic and the role that Italian American culture plays within this relationship. Teresa Fiore and Robert Viscusi focus on bricklaying; Bordin, Verzella, and Zangari analyze the importance of food and wine in the narrative, and Carole Brown takes a comparative approach, addressing the role of family in Fante's novel and Robert Canzonieri's *A Highly Ramified Tree* (1976).

⁵⁹ The term empire is here employed in line with Viscusi's argument that Italian American literature reflects the ideology of empire and colonial aspirations. According to the scholar, the bricklayer Nick Molise emerges as a "failed patriarch" (62) whose aspirations to "inscribe" his name in stone for posterity did not materialize.

⁶⁰ It is interesting to highlight that twice, at the beginning of the novel, his name is not Angelo but Joe. See the passages in the novel: "The thin slices of veal had me fighting tears again as I washed them down with *Joe Musso's* magnificent wine from the nearby foothills" (50; my emphasis) and "beguiled and voracious Virgil filled his cheeks with gnocchi and eggplant and veal, and flooded them down his gullet with the fabulous grape of *Joe Musso*" (55-56; my emphasis). I believe that the discrepancy in the name of this character comes from the fact that Fante started to work on the novel more than twenty years before its final publication. In the letter of February 1954 mentioned before, the author writes about the winery of Joe Muto (*Selected Letters* 232)

to his father and the cultural values he embodies. Resembling a biblical endeavor, on a Sunday the smokehouse is completed. Nevertheless, the construction does not make it through the night and is completely destroyed by a violent storm, an event that precedes Nick's hospitalization for an alcohol-induced diabetic coma. Nick survives, but his lifestyle has to change: no more wine, no more pasta, and no more cigars. Just like the smokehouse, Nick's initial resolutions to adapt to this new lifestyle do not last more than a day and he ends up escaping from the hospital for one last fatal round of drinks at Musso's vineyard with the rest of the "brotherhood" — his old Italian friends of the Café Roma.

In line with the rest of the author's production, Fante's attention to the specificities of place is central in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. The setting of the novel is initially that of the town of San Elmo, located in Northern California, near Sacramento. Notwithstanding the fact that the town represented in the novel is fictional, in Fante's state of birth there is a ghost town in Chaffee County called St. Elmo. The town, founded at the end of the nineteenth century, was a mining town⁶¹ of around two thousand settlers, which, with the decline of the mining industry, saw a drastic decline in population, especially after 1922, when the railroad discontinued service. The town of San Elmo in the novel does not seem much different. Described through Henry's eyes, San Elmo is in fact presented as "a sick town" with deserted streets, where "one had the feeling that bulldozers lurked at the city limits, waiting for the death rattle" (*The Brotherhood* 35). Furthermore, just like the ghost town in Colorado, once San Elmo's main connection to the rest of the country is severed when the highway veered two miles north, "the town was dying" (*The Brotherhood* 30). It is perhaps because of the

close to his father's house.

⁶¹ The mining industry is a central issue in the history of Northern California (see Isenberg), but also a topic connected both to Fante's life and works. Fante's father, in fact, owned a gold mine near Boulder, in the minor mining town of Sunset, Colorado (*Selected Letters* 41-44). Moreover, a gold mine few miles from Boulder called Yellow Belly is the setting of Fante's novella "The Orgy."

increasing depopulation and decline of the town that Nick Molise, who considered San Elmo “his Louvre [...] spread out for the world to see” (*The Brotherhood* 19), wants to carry out his “last paltry triumph” (82) — a last attempt to “inscribe” in stone his art of bricklaying that he cannot bequeath his children.⁶² After sleeping in his mother’s bed, olfactory experience that triggers the recollection of his first departure for Los Angeles and return home,⁶³ Henry realizes that Nick’s desire to build the smokehouse in the Sierras is “his last cry for achievement” (82) and as such has to be complied. This realization leads to a change in the narrative course, with the two characters leaving San Elmo to reach the Sierras, whose sublime destructive potential is presented since the beginning of the novel.

The mountains, which scare Henry’s mother (*The Brotherhood* 49) and are associated to the Abruzzian⁶⁴ landscape of his childhood⁶⁵ by his father (41), are perceived by the

⁶² See this passage in the novel: “My old man had never wanted children. He had wanted apprentice bricklayers and stonemasons. He got a writer, a bank teller, a married daughter, and a railroad brakeman. In a sense he tried to shape his sons into stonemasons the way he shaped stone, by whacking it. He failed, of course, for the more he hammered at us, the further he drove us from any love of the craft” (25).

⁶³ The sense of smell is the most present and symbolic sense in Fante’s fiction and it develops according to Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that “transitional objects to which desire becomes attached in seeking to escape subjectivity and reach out to ‘the other’ are founded primarily on the olfactory sense” (198). As highlighted by Lefebvre this is true especially for erotic objects (198). In Fante’s works, in fact, the olfactory dimension is often associated to objects that metonymically stand for (erotic) possession. The most blatant and noteworthy examples are Rosa Pinelli’s coat in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (116), Ginger Britton’s letter in *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (632), and Camilla’s tam-o-shanter in *Ask the Dust* (489), whose smell is later substituted by Vera’s “mysterious saccharine odor” (*Ask* 503) in what Ryan defines as an olfactory conquest (207).

⁶⁴ The reference to Abruzzo is at the very heart of the novel. The title in fact comes from Eduardo Verga’s *The Abruzzi*, quoted in the epigraph: “The brotherhood of the grape! You see them in every village, these old rascals, loafing outside the cafes, drinking wine and sighing after every passing skirt” (*The Brotherhood* vii). The author and the novel referred to in the epigraph are yet to be recognized by Fante’s scholars.

⁶⁵ One of the peripheral themes of the novel is Nick’s simultaneous process of aging and regression to childhood that is one of the main drives to the job in the mountains. Nick in fact cries in his sleep dreaming of his long time deceased mother, something that upsets Henry, once terrified by the figure of his father and now taking care of him like a child. See this passage in the novel: “I gathered his limp head in my arms (as I had seen my mother do), I wiped his tears with a corner of the sheet, I rocked him like a child, and soon he was no longer crying, and I eased him gently to the pillow and he slept quietly” (*The Brotherhood* 108). The same feeling of

protagonist as dangerous and “deadly” (78). Attempting to turn down his father’s proposal, Henry in fact states: “Something else I don’t like is mountains and forests and owls and mountain air and coyotes and bears” (*The Brotherhood* 44). It is therefore the sublime dimension of nature that initially keeps Henry from undertaking this journey. A journey that starts with his mother’s fatal premonition that they are going to have a car accident and Henry would be left to die screaming with his chest “broke wide open” (*The Brotherhood* 91) in the wilderness. This *noirish* outcome would be more suitable for a novel of the debunkers of the LA myth,⁶⁶ since in fact, as highlighted by Fine, “the car in fiction became the symbolic death instrument” (“Introduction” 16). In spite of the representation of the deflative imaginary of California in line with noir fiction, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* is not a noir, and neither is its author. I believe in fact that rather than exposing the deterioration of the American dream as noirs would do, Fante’s novel attempts to deconstruct the allegorical imaginary associated to California recurring to the juxtaposition of the two conflicting tendencies detected within the region’s experience of nature.

While, on the one hand, the sublime potential daunts Henry and his mother, on the other its pastoral counterpart seems to initially reassure the protagonist. Henry, in fact, from the window of the car, observes plantations and pastures that, exemplifying the ideal of a tamed wilderness, become instances of what Douglas Sackman defines “the most perfect garden — if not the original Eden, a simulacrum that excelled the model. For here, one could have

estrangement and contempt for his father’s softness and pride for his work as a writer is expressed by Fante in a letter dated June 1, 1934 to H.L. Mencken (Fante and Mencken 62-65).

⁶⁶ The most suitable example is James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). According to Fine, Cain’s novel, which ends with a fatal car accident, marks, together with Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* (1935), “the real starting place of the Los Angeles novel, a regional fiction obsessively concerned with puncturing the bloated image of Southern California as the golden land of opportunity and the fresh start” (“Beginning” 44). Mike Davis also highlights how these two novels inaugurate a new literary tradition debunking the image of Arcadia promoted by boosters (*City* 37-38).

one's fruit and eat it" ("A Garden" 247):

Through the window the lovely autumn hillsides glided by, the manzanita, the scrub oak and pine, the farmhouses, the vineyards, cattle and sheep grazing among white stones, the peach and pear orchards. Autumn up here was a strong season when the earth showed its muscle and its fertility, and there was a wild feeling in the air. There was a knock on the window behind the seat. I opened it. "Want a beer?" my father asked.

"Sure".

He passed it through, dripping and cold from the cooler, gorgeous in my warm throat, perfection, with the hot sun above, the white peaks of the Sierras in the distance, and the Datsun humming confidently along the wide highway. I felt good now. Perhaps the trip would turn out well after all. (*The Brotherhood* 92)

The reassuring pastoral landscape of the garden⁶⁷ is however subjected to the presence of the mountains, whose white peaks, appearing in the distance, screen the ocean and desert winds (Burcham 67), allowing therefore the climatic foundation for this tamed pastoral dimension of nature.

Since its first appearance in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, the pastoral dimension of nature is associated to alcoholic beverages. Even though in this case Nick offers his son a beer — mirroring an earlier scene at the Café Roma (*The Brotherhood* 41) — with Henry's increasing understanding and reiteration of his father's cultural practices, the drink associated to the pastoral image of nature becomes wine, particularly the wine from the nearby vineyard of Angelo Musso. As highlighted by Bordin's and Zangari's works, wine plays a fundamental role in the novel⁶⁸ and comes to represent a central element of Italian

⁶⁷ As highlighted by Smith, despite the image of the garden had primarily been exploited by Los Angeles boosters, it was "spread over every square mile of the United States to the uttermost western margin of the fortunate land" (186).

⁶⁸ And in Fante's narrative in general, as can be inferred from the title of his first collection of short stories *Dago Red* (1940) and its new posthumous edition *The Wine of Youth* (2000) (Bordin *Un'etnicità* 88), (Zangari 7).

American identity and cultural practices. Nick's selection of beer for his son stands therefore as a symbolic act of recognition of the intergenerational cultural boundary between the two characters that increasingly vanishes in the narrative course. In Zangari's words: "the choice of drinks is significant, and draws attention to the gap between the generations: Nick seems to acknowledge the American taste — and identity — of his son by choosing for him a beer, while keeping for himself the wine from the Musso vineyard" (10). While scholars have detected the primary relevance of wine in Fante's novel, the role that the drink plays within the discourse of the Californian natural dimension remains unexplored and is the focus of what follows.

The history of California is characterized by a continuous attempt of redefinition of its own origins and mythology. According to Carey McWilliams,⁶⁹ one of the fixed and grounding symbols of the region's past is the image of the Franciscan *padre* in the Mission garden (21) where grapes were cultivated along oranges and wheat. Imported from Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, grapes, only secondary to oranges — whose importance will be analyzed in relation to *Ask the Dust* in the next chapter — became the quintessential symbol of the pastoral dimension of California. As highlighted by Robert Glass Cleland, "grape culture, like orange ranching, brought California its most distinctive reputation as an agricultural state. Indeed, in some respects the growth of the table and raisin grape industry after 1900 constitutes the most remarkable aspect of California agriculture" (166).

Grapes and wine became the archetypal "fruits" of the garden, pastoral elements that,

⁶⁹ McWilliams's analysis of the region's grape industry is one of the few that mentions the exploitation of Indian labor (45). For an in depth analysis on California's grape industry, see Sullivan and Pinney. While the former provides an historical overview on the region's grape industry from its mission period to the present, the latter focuses specifically on Los Angeles. For a study on the important role of Italians in the California's winemaking industry, see Cinotto.

inscribing the region within an idealized Catholic past, reconstruct California's history and mythology and serve as metonymic ground to inflate the Mediterranean analogy created and exploited by boosters. As highlighted by Kevin Starr:

The touchstone of the analogy, its common denominator and its most interpreted element, was the vine. Obviously symbolic of civilization, the vines planted by Spaniards suggested to those Americans who first saw them that California was not an unrelieved wilderness. Like the missions themselves, the vines of California bespoke history, solicitude, and patience. (*Americans* 371)

Thus, if on the one hand, as underlined by Zangari, wine “is considered a basic component of Italianness” (8), on the other, it has an important role in the history of California and its natural pastoral dimension.⁷⁰ Wine plays a highly symbolic and mediating role in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, since it does not only lead to a familiar rapprochement between the first-generation immigrant Nick and his son, but also between the cultural spaces they come to embody, respectively Italy and California, that in fact had been marketed by boosters as “the American Italy,” “the Better Italy,” and “our Italy” (McWilliams 97). This analogy has also important repercussions from the religious point of view, given that grapes were imported by Franciscan *padres*, therefore placing a Catholic element at the foundation of the mythical garden: an element that in Fante's narrative is often associated to femininity, superstition, and *italianità* and which, representing a hindrance to *mainstream* assimilation, becomes something the characters attempt to conceal and the author ironizes on (Pettener “Tra umorismo” 15).

The centrality of the Eucharistic drink highlights therefore the presence of a mythic and religious component in Fante's novel. On their way to the Sierras, in fact, the characters' stop in Angelo Musso's vineyard is not simply an occasion to stock up on the ambrosial

⁷⁰ Norman Klein argues in fact that: “New arrivals to Los Angeles often mentioned the overpowering aroma of orchards, and of vineyards — that the air smelled like wine” (33).

drink but a pilgrimage (Bordin *Un'etnicità* 94) to a pastoral Eden just beside the highway. Indeed, Henry defines the vineyard as “sacred soil to my father and his friends” (*The Brotherhood* 93). This religious dimension, connected to the pastoral landscape of California, cannot be exhausted in terms of Catholicism.⁷¹ In the representation of Musso’s vineyard, scholars have also identified a mythological component that can be ascribed to pagan rituality, particularly to ancient Greek deities.⁷² One of the most interesting parallelisms with Greek mythology offered by Fante’s scholarship is presented by Massimo Verzella.

Drawing from Gianni Paoletti’s analysis of the rituality of meals in the novel (180-181), Verzella opens his study on the ceremonial role of food and wine in Fante’s works by providing an analogy between the Italian American author’s “heroes” and the mythological figure of Antaeus — son of Poseidon and Gaia. According to the scholar, just like the half-giant, Fante’s protagonists draw from maternal nourishment their “pantagruelic vitality” (45; my translation). Albeit directed to stress the fundamental maternal role within the culinary practices represented in Fante’s works, Verzella’s parallelism is important for the analysis of the Californian natural dimension in Fante’s works as Gaia in Greek mythology is the personification of Earth — in both its pastoral and sublime dimensions. Just like Antaeus, therefore, that could only be defeated by Heracles once eradicated from the ground, Fante’s first-generation immigrants in *The Brotherhood of the Grape* are uprooted figures that come

⁷¹ The connection with Catholicism is not only limited to the Spanish missions but is also connected to boosters’ image of California as “the New Palestine” (McWilliams 97).

⁷² As highlighted by McWilliams, among the many other epithets, California was also marketed by booster literature as “the New Greece” and as “a geographical Pleiades” (97). These toponyms underline the mythological dimension associated to the region that, in fact, had also been affiliated with Italy and Greece through the figure of the fruit goddess Pomona — who also gives the name to one of the cities of the Los Angeles County. As observed by Sackman: “Greece and Italy were famous for their fruits, and California promoters had long used icons of the fruit goddess Pomona, with her horn of plenty or overflowing bowl of fruits” (*Orange* 3).

back to life only once “replanted” in the pastoral dimension of Musso’s vineyard, where “the milk of their second childhood” (*The Brotherhood* 93) is produced.⁷³

Thus, in Fante’s novel wine becomes the ambrosial drink in its first etymological meaning of immortality.⁷⁴ This, associated to the Californian agrarian dimension of nature, transforms the tragicomic group of elderly immigrants into “followers of Dionysus” (Bordin *Un’etnicità* 94; my translation).⁷⁵ In such a reading, wine assumes its original meaning of “gift from the Gods,” with the brotherhood’s lesson to the younger Henry that recalls the one offered by the prophet of Apollo Teiresias to the king of Thebes Pentheus in Euripides’s tragedy *The Bacchae*:⁷⁶

There are two powers, young man, which are supreme in human affairs: first, the goddess Demeter; she is the Earth — call her by what name you will; and she supplies mankind with solid food. Second, Dionysus the son of Semele; the blessing he provides is the counterpart to the blessing of bread; he discovered and bestowed on men the service of drink, the juice that streams from the vine-

⁷³ Zangari connects the mythological dimension of the drink with the Italian immigrants’ spatial displacement and with bricklaying: “The drink becomes for the Italian immigrant the *pharmakon* needed to endure the physical and psychological drama of taking root and fitting in an alien world, the companion to the lifelong drama of the first-generation immigrant, the workhorse on whose shoulders rests the prosperity of future generations” (11-12).

⁷⁴ From the Greek *ἀμβροσία* — negative prefix a- (alpha privative) and βροτός “mortal.” Highlighting and retracing the recurrence of the word in Fante’s fiction, Verzella underlines how the Italian American writer often uses it in relation to meals prepared by the maternal figure (50-51).

⁷⁵ The analogy proposed by Bordin between the Italian immigrants and the Greek god assumes primary relevance if we take into account Marcelle Detienne’s analysis of Dionysus as “the strange stranger” (10) — “the god who comes from outside, who arrives from Elsewhere” (8).

⁷⁶ Another important parallelism between Ancient Greece and California arises from the *Bacchae*. The female followers of Dionysus, often represented in the act of *Sparagmos* (*σπαραγμός*) — the act of rendering and tearing apart living animals or more rarely humans — recall in fact the figure of Calafia, the pagan warrior queen of the island of California, first introduced by the 16th-century poet Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo in his epic novel, *Las sergas de Esplandián*. Often figuring in the mythical accounts on the origins of California, the warrior queen ruling over a kingdom of Black women comes to embody an untamed and bountiful land prior to European settlement. In view of this embodiment, I believe that an interesting — though to a certain extent hazardous — analogy between this figure and the character of Camilla Lopez in *Ask the Dust* can be drawn.

clusters; men have but to take their fill of wine, and the sufferings of an unhappy race are banished, each day's troubles are forgotten in sleep — indeed this is our only cure for the weariness of life. Dionysus, himself a god, is poured out in offering to the gods; so that through him mankind receives blessing. (189-190)

Thus, wine emerges as a sacred and curative substance⁷⁷ that, offering promises of immortality, becomes instrumental to reach out and enter into Communion — also in the literal meaning of participation to the sacrificial banquet — with the divine, with the pastoral dimension of the garden, and with the rest of the proselytes guided by a sacerdotal figure. Indeed, the toothless, sun-blackened, eighty-four-year-old “shriveled, bald gnome of a man” (*The Brotherhood* 94), Angelo Musso, once invested in this role “that made him divine” (94), turns from a grotesque figure into an “ancient oracle who dispensed no wisdom, a sage who gave no advice, a prophet without predictions, and a god who fermented the most enchanting wine in the world” (94). Even his enforced silence — due to a laryngeal cancer that had entailed the removal of his voice box — becomes something venerable and redeeming for his devotees who “approached him reverently, [becoming] monks in single file paying homage to their abbot” (*The Brotherhood* 94).

Musso's mutism plays an important role in one of the last and most evoking scenes of the novel. When Henry reaches the vineyard after his father's escape from the hospital, he finds the “brotherhood” gathered — in what appears to be Nick Molise's last supper — around the Christological figure of the winemaker, who, in response to the protagonist's cry for help to bring his father back to the hospital, scribbles a message in Italian that the old *paisani* will decipher.⁷⁸ ““It is better to die of drink than to die of thirst”” (*The Brotherhood*

⁷⁷ To the point that Henry's mother informs him that Nick takes enemas with warm wine (*The Brotherhood* 52).

⁷⁸ According to Zangari, through this act of translation, the *paisani* become “ancient priests of the Delphos temple” (14). This analogy proposed by the scholar perpetrates the image of the elderly immigrants as proselytes of an ancient pagan cult.

160), this is the translation of Musso's message, that, once noted down, becomes the first and unbreakable commandment of the "brotherhood" and supposedly the central message of Fante's novel. Indeed, according to Zangari, in view of this scene, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* falls entirely within Fred Gardaphé's theorization of the "mythic moment" (*Italian Signs* 16)⁷⁹ of Italian American literature. In Zangari's words:

Thus, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* falls entirely into the theoretical framework developed by Fred Gardaphé under the influence of philosopher Gian Battista Vico. The second stage of development of Italian-American literature, according to this framework, is called the "mythic mode", the moment when the mythologies of the oral tradition get written down and preserved. (14)

Nevertheless, if on the one hand there is an undeniable connection to Italian traditions, on the other the scene appears to be saturated with Fante's sharp irony, to the point that Musso's commandment echoes a James Bond's quote.⁸⁰

Thus, Musso's mutism entails the emergence of the vineyard as a spatial dimension of religious silence where the only noise is that of the humming of bees. On the one hand, the insects, partaking in the ceremonial banquet and forming "a little halo around Angelo's gray hair" (*The Brotherhood* 95),⁸¹ seem to exemplify the animal⁸² kingdom's blessing and active

⁷⁹ Along with other important works of Italian American literature, Gardaphé selects *Wait until Spring, Bandini* as representative of the "mythic mode narratives", that he defines in this way: "Narratives developed in the mythic mode present models of behavior based on heroic figures who inspire a struggle with destiny. While there are elements of folklore present in these narratives, the sense of folklore is not as dominant as it is in the poetic mode. There is an obvious dominance of Italian American traits over both Italian and American traits, yet there is a significant presence of Italian words and phrases. It is in this mode that we can observe the transition from auto-biography to autobiographical fiction" (*Italian Signs* 16).

⁸⁰ See the passage in Ian Fleming's novel *Thunderball* (1961): "Miss Money Penny screwed up her nose. 'But, James, do you really drink and smoke as much as that? It can't be good for you, you know'. [...] Bond controlled himself. He summoned a desperate effort at nonchalance, at the throw-away phrase. 'It's just that *I'd rather die of drink than of thirst*'" (12; my emphasis).

⁸¹ This act consecrates him in the sacerdotal role bestowed upon him by "the brotherhood" in what Bordin defines as a "mystical-naturalistic vision" (*Un'etnicità* 96; my translation).

⁸² The simultaneously conflicting and harmonious relationship with animals is a central element in Fante's

consumption along with humans of the “fruits” of the pastoral garden. On the other, their piping becomes a funeral “roar” and a “mournful cadence” (94) that, associated by Henry to the “sound of traffic” (94), “seemed to lift the house off the ground and hold it in melancholy suspension” (94). The bees therefore simultaneously epitomize a ravishing force on the Californian natural dimension, in line with the pastoral ideal of the garden, and an exemplification of the sublime potential of nature, exerting, like the mountains, a lugubrious dismaying force on the protagonist. Henry in fact, surrounded by bees, is reminded of “the crab attack” (*The Brotherhood* 71) he had suffered in Wilmington under Tucker Bridge (69-70) and, terrified by the contact with the insects, he describes it in this way: “They were in my hair and on my ears, on my hands and along my neck, and I remembered the crabs and I trembled with a creeping fear and a desire to bolt for open country, holding my breath, resisting panic, knowing they would clobber me if I made a run for it” (*The Brotherhood* 95).

Thus, in Fante’s novel bees represent the two conflicting, yet often overlapping, tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime, especially if taking into account the role they played in the history of California. Just like grapes in fact, the insect is not native of the State and was imported only in March 1853, when, according to John Muir’s essay on the Sierras, *The Mountains of California* (1882), “a bee-keeper by the name of Shelton purchased a lot, consisting of twelve swarms” (347) and brought them from New York to San Francisco. Nevertheless, similarly to grapes and oranges, in the region’s history and mythology bees attain a unique and twofold symbolism once again connected to the legendary account of the foundation of the state and its Mediterranean analogy. Eleven years before the importation

works never analyzed by scholars. Though there are examples of this interesting rapport in almost every longer work of the author, the most noteworthy and exemplifying one is that with the crabs in *The Road to Los Angeles* (31-35).

of the insect in the state in fact, the explorer John Charles Frémont,⁸³ during his first westward expedition, happened to see a “solitary bee” (Frémont 69) on the summit of what will be later called Frémont peak. This fortuitous encounter however assumes a forceful symbolic relevance since, as highlighted by David Wyatt, it became an example of exploitative possession and assimilation — or better assertion — of the self on the natural dimension of the region (*The Fall* 20).

Frémont in fact not only uses the bee to correlate the human and animal conquest of the natural dimension of California but also identifies with the insect, whose presence on the summit of the mountain allegorizes the advance of civilization and therefore the taming and subjugation of the wilderness. In his account of the expedition Frémont describes the encounter in this way: “It was a strange place, the icy rock and the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, for a lover of warm sunshine and flowers, and we pleased ourselves with the idea that he was the first of his species to cross the mountain barrier, a solitary pioneer to foretell the advance of civilization” (Frémont 70). Notwithstanding the identification with the insect, the explorer ultimately decides to carry out “the law of this country, where all animated nature seems at war”, and after seizing the bee, he places it “in at least a fit place, in the leaves of a large book” (70). The bee therefore, being imported in the region and fundamental for the process of pollination, epitomizes an extension of the human’s attempt to tame the sublime dimension of nature and at the same time an element of the natural dimension itself that as such needs to be classified, tamed, and eventually exploited in order to create the pastoral dimension of the garden. Furthermore, the insect was at the center of

⁸³ The explorer and politician was one of the fundamental figures in the unfolding of the myth of California, as highlighted by Smith: in fact, his expeditions were extremely and carefully publicized (27). Moreover, Frémont was the first advocate for the Mediterranean analogy; according to Starr, “in his *Geographical Memoir upon Upper California*, Fremont made Italy the central analogue for his topographical description. California, Fremont wrote, had the same length and breadth as Italy, the same climates and products, and a similar configuration of mountains, plains, and valleys” (*Americans* 375).

an important debate in the region in the years that preceded and succeeded the publication of Fante's novel. Indeed, during the 1970s there was a widespread fear that the so-called "killer bees" — the Africanized honeybees⁸⁴ — might reach California and prove to be harmful for humans and the region's ecosystem. A fear that is identifiable in the Hollywood film production of the time.⁸⁵

Considering their relevance in the history and mythology of the region, bees in Fante's fiction represent the two juxtaposed forces of the pastoral and the sublime, creating an analogy with wine and the mountains. The insects in fact partake in the banquet, an act that, according to Verzella, sets forth "the ancient alliance between man and nature" (53; my translation) and confers a funereal atmosphere to the scene. Indeed the bees' mournful snarl seems to foretell Nick's imminent demise. In *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, bees and wine therefore — both imported and yet founding symbols of the region's history and myth⁸⁶ —

⁸⁴ The species was first imported in 1956 to Brazil from Tanzania to increase honey production in the area. The first swarm of Africanized honeybees to reach the US entered Texas in October 1990, while four years later a nest was discovered on the Californian side of the Colorado River. Today Africanized bees have colonized most of Southern California. For more information about this topic, see Davis's chapter "Land of Honey" (*Ecology of Fear* 260-267).

⁸⁵ American productions on this topic were Curtis Harrington's *Killer Bees* (1974), Bruce Geller's *The Savage Bees* (1976), and Arthur Herzog's *Swarm* (1978) — based on Herzog's 1974 novel. Also the British *The Deadly Bees* (1966) by Freddie Francis and the Mexican *The Bees* by Alfredo Zacarías (1978) received critical attention in the US.

⁸⁶ Just like wine, bees in California's history and mythology simultaneously become symbols of colonization and elements of the pastoral dimension exploited by boosters to market the region. California in fact was promoted with the biblical reference of "a land flowing with milk and honey" (*The Bible*, Exodus 3:8). Moreover, bees and honey play an important role also in Greek mythology. While, in fact, the insects were deified in the figures of the Thriae — three nymphs with women heads and torsos and lower bodies and wings of a bee — honey, like wine, was considered a gift from the Gods and a symbol of immortality and rebirth. Like wine, therefore, at least in terms of the underlying symbolism, bees and honey play an important role in Fante's fiction, emerging as metonymical elements that both recreate and deconstruct through irony California's mythological origins and as a consequence also the Mediterranean analogy. This becomes particularly clear in the novel with the element of honey, which becomes for Henry, after Nick's death, the means to passionlessly commit adultery and "a ghastly way to honor [...] [his] poor father" (*The Brotherhood*

emerge as deceptive simulacrum that metonymically stand for the pastoral desire of an idyllic garden that however shatters against the sublime force of the natural dimension. Thus, “the witchery of the wine [,] enveloping [...] [the characters’] souls within the cocoon of the humming bees” (*The Brotherhood* 96), is that of separating them from the sublime reality of nature and transporting them in a dreamlike and timeless⁸⁷ pastoral dimension carved from the natural space of the region. Indeed, this atmosphere of timeless suspension is epitomized by Henry’s reference to another mythological figure, the Greek God of sleep Hypnos (*The Brotherhood* 96). In Greek mythology, Hypnos is the twin brother of Thanatos,⁸⁸ God and personification of death. Thus, if on the one hand, the allusion to the God of sleep reinforces the pastoral and surreal atmosphere of the vineyard, on the other it highlights the destructive potential of the drink — that in fact ultimately determines Nick’s death — and ironically accentuates the illusory entity of the pastoral attempt to carve an idyllic garden out of California’s natural dimension.

If in fact wine had been one of the most important elements to construct and reinforce the Mediterranean analogy proposed by those, who, as highlighted by McWilliams, “wanted an Italy nearer home” (96),⁸⁹ Fante seems to ironically reverse the image of the drink proposed by boosters. Pursuing the continuity with myth, the act of drinking wine in the novel becomes for the protagonist a ritual and sacrificial libation. Rather than offering him

165).

⁸⁷ This timeless spatial dimension is evoked in a conversation between the drunken Henry and Nick during the constructions of the smokehouse. At Henry’s inquiry of the time in fact, Nick answers “there ain’t no time” (*The Brotherhood* 118), prompting an amused reaction of admiration from the son who meditates about his profundity.

⁸⁸ Comparing the experience of bricklaying in Fante’s novel with that in di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*, Fiore refers to the Greek divinity, highlighting how Henry and Nick’s construction of the smokehouse in the Sierras is a combination of Techne, Eros, and Thanatos (354).

⁸⁹ “An Italy without the Italians, an Italy in which they could feel at home, an Italy in which, perhaps, they might settle and live out their days in the sun” (McWilliams 96).

the divine and spiritual prosperity promised by the Arcadian ideal of the pastoral, wine enables him “to tempt death quietly” (*The Brotherhood* 96), drowning him in the Underworld — abode of Hypnos and Thanatos — from which he rises back only through water.⁹⁰ If therefore wine had been used by boosters to market California as the “New Italy”, Henry finds himself refreshed and transported to the hills of Tuscany only after drinking water from a sprinkler to sober up from the mystical fumes of the “ambrosial” drink:

I stepped away and hurried down the path, past the winery and out into the vineyard. On a hill two hundred yards away I saw oscillating sprinklers forming a rainbow as they pulsed jets of water upon a field of grape stumps sprouting new buds. I scrambled up to the section, peeled off my clothes, and stood naked at the end of the rainbow. It was a summer shower, refreshing my soul, nostalgic, a day in Italy, the hills of Tuscany, and I was sober again as I put on my clothes. (*The Brotherhood* 97)

Thus, the protagonist’s relationship with wine, as a central component of the Californian pastoral dimension of the garden, stands out as conflicted and twofold, becoming the means to understand and reiterate the paternal cultural practices but also the chthonic and annihilative beverage that ultimately determines perdition and death. Henry therefore develops an apparently contradictory affiliation with the pastoral dimension, becoming both driven towards and away from it. If in fact, at times, the protagonist is dismayed by the sublime potential of the region’s nature and appears enthralled and actively engaged in the

⁹⁰ Water is another extremely symbolic element within the history and mythology of California and particularly Southern California. As highlighted by McWilliams, in fact, “the absence of local water resources is, indeed, the basic weakness of the region — its eternal problem” (183). For a deeper analysis of the problem of water in California see Gumprecht, Didion’s chapter “Holy Water” (*The White Album* 59-66), and Cleland’s chapter “Rivers of Water” (178-207). In *The Brotherhood of the Grape* Fante does not only refer to the symbolic dimension of water by juxtaposing it to the wine, but also tackles Southern California’s problem with water and droughts directly when describing the protagonist’s condition of homelessness in Wilmington. Henry in fact, finding himself without an abode, sleeps beneath a bridge over the Tucker River, described as “no more than a trickle of sewer water through white sand” (*The Brotherhood* 69), echoing therefore the famous words by Mark Twain: “I once fell into a California river and got all dusty” (qtd. in McWilliams 6).

pastoral reconfiguration of the ecological dimension of California, at others he unveils his fascination for the untamed sphere of the sublime, revealing his scorn and repudiation for the Arcadian design to subdue wilderness. This binary and contradictory attitude becomes evident in his approach to the Sierras and to the smokehouse in the Ramponis' Monte Casino Lodge.

Whereas at the beginning of the novel Henry is afraid of the mountains and their sublime potential, he ultimately develops a profound allure for the “uncanny forests” and the “bizarre creatures” (*The Brotherhood* 116) who inhabit them, to the point that he defines this sublime dimension as “an enchanting spot, an island in the forest” (112). An appellation that highlights once more Fante’s implicit yet pivotal allusion both to the ecological history and the mythology of the region. Indeed, from a strictly ecological point of view, as highlighted by Jared Farmer, “California is an island” (xxii), since, “like an island, [...] [its] environment hosted the evolution of unique species and ecosystems” (Schiffmann 39-40). This definition however becomes problematic in terms of the mythological origins of the region and its promotion by booster literature. The notion of California as an island comes in fact from Helen Hunt Jackson, who, describing it as “a sort of island on the land” (qtd. in McWilliams 7),⁹¹ promoted an image of the state’s exceptional nature ascribable to a “melange of mission myth [...], obsession with climate, political conservatism [...], and a thinly veiled racialism, all put to the service of boosterism and oligarchy” (Starr *Inventing the Dream* 76). Fante’s association of the sublime dimension of the forest to an isolated and enchanted island,

⁹¹ According to McWilliams, Jackson’s “is the best description of the region yet coined” (7). Jackson’s 1884 novel *Ramona*, “which appeared just as the booster movement was born” (Fine *Imagining* 29), is the novel responsible for the creation of the California’s climatic and religious myth. As highlighted by Davis, in fact, the novel was so influential that it “transformed selected elements of local history into romantic myth (still popular to this day)” (*City* 26), thanks to what Edward Soja defines as its “ersatz romanticism” (*My Los Angeles* 13). For more information on how the novel boosted tourism in the region and influenced the shaping of Southern California see DeLyser.

echoing Jackson's definition, at the same time epitomizes a direct reference to and a reversion of the mythological founding elements of the region's natural sphere.

Drawing from John Ruskin's theorization, Wyatt argues that "the mythology of th[e] region takes as its underlying premise the apotheosis of the Pathetic Fallacy" (*The Fall* xvi). The scholar's depiction of California as quintessential spatial dimension where non-human elements are imbued with human emotion underlines how the region's natural landscape is charged with allegorical meaning. In view of Wyatt's postulation, the mountains, the forests, and the fantastic creatures that inhabit them represented in *The Brotherhood of the Grape* emerge as sublime elements juxtaposed to the pastoral image of the Californian garden.

This sublime counterforce, however, just like its pastoral counterpart, is also associated to Greek mythology and therefore to the Mediterranean analogy, since in fact, as highlighted by Smith, "the American forest has become almost an enchanted wood, and the image of Antaeus has been invoked to suggest the power of the Western earth" (253). Thus, in line with Verzella's premise that Fante's "heroes" are molded on Antaeus's image, one could argue that Henry experiences a process of spiritual growth from the contact with the sublime dimension of the Californian nature that had initially intimidated him. If in fact at first the pastoral dimension of nature seems to represent a reassuring force for the protagonist,⁹² at the end of the novel, after the construction and the following collapse of the smokehouse in the Sierras, Henry seems to be much more drawn and fascinated by its sublime, untamable force.

Henry seems in fact to develop a connection with the natural dimension of the forest and its inhabitants. Indeed, once he discovers that the scope of the smokehouse he is constructing with his father is that of smoking the meat of deer that Mrs. Ramponi shoots by

⁹² Once the characters reach the lodge in the Sierras, the reader comes to discover that Henry had ultimately accepted the job only because his father had mentioned the presence of a golf course, a tennis court, and a swimming pool (*The Brotherhood* 100).

luring them with food (*The Brotherhood* 111-112), he refers to it as a “slaughterhouse” (112) and, terrified that Mrs. Ramponi might serve him deer meet, states: “God bless the deer!” (115). The smokehouse represents therefore a manmade object whose scope is that of subduing and exploiting the wild natural dimension around the Monte Casino Lodge. Thus, once the smokehouse is completed and a storm completely destructs it,⁹³ Henry cannot conceal his delight and fascination for the destructive sublime potential of the rain:⁹⁴

Toward the smokehouse I ran, the rain peppering my face and slapping my body with water bullets, gleeful and shrieking with delight, telling me the smokehouse was down in the storm, down, down, down. I laughed with joy. I hoped it was true. The monster was down, it had to be down. And it was. Down. All the way, flat on its ass, down. It lay sprawled, dead in the rain, a pile of bones, a Godzilla breathing its last — the walls collapsed, washed out at the foundations, rain beating it unmercifully, thunder exploding boom boom, lightning flashing zip zip, lighting up the forest as bright as the sun. Holding hands, the Ramponis stood beside the fallen ogre with bowed heads, paying their last respects. I went to Mrs. Ramponi’s side. Her face was saddened in disappointment, her eyes moist at the loss of her beloved smokehouse and all that it had promised. There was no way to conceal my delight. I took her hand and squeezed it, and when she turned to me I smiled, and she could see the demons dancing in my eyes. (*The Brotherhood* 127)

Simultaneously invoking and deconstructing the mythological history of California, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* proposes an image of nature that oscillates between the two conflicting yet often overlapping tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime, highlighting

⁹³ The storm represents the sublime response of nature to the pastoral attempt to tame the Californian landscape. In line with Rob Nixon’s terminology, this force can be defined as “natural resistance” (21).

⁹⁴ Rain is another important climatic element in Fante’s works. Though the most evocative in terms of the juxtaposition between the sublime and pastoral dimension of nature, this passage is not the only one in the author’s fiction that describes the destructive potential of rain. While in fact in *Dreams from Bunker Hill* Fante describes the floods caused by heavy rains that periodically hit Los Angeles (699), in the short story “Washed in the Rain” included in the posthumous collection *The Big Hunger*, the author underlines the sublime force of the first winter rains that hit Southern California.

how eventually the Arcadian design to subdue wilderness is destined to fail. If in fact Henry is initially terrified by the sublime potential of the mountains and reassured by the pastoral dimension of a tamed natural landscape, after the experience of perdition catalyzed by the consumption of wine and the cathartic realization of his allure for the destructive forces of the Californian environment, the protagonist recognizes that the eagerness to carve an idyllic garden out of the region's landscape ultimately epitomizes, in Wyatt's words, "an illusion in which we cannot finally dwell" (*The Fall* 210). The author therefore reconstructs and rewrites the natural history of the region through a redefinition of its symbolism, a process that likewise is at the heart of his 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*, where, however, the investigation of the juxtaposition between sublime and pastoral requires the addition of another interpretative layer, that of the urban space of Los Angeles.

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND PALMS AND ORANGES:
THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA OF *ASK THE DUST*

3.1 The Sour Fruits of the Garden: Debunking Los Angeles and Its Symbolic Pastoral Apparatus

*I've a longing to go / Where the oranges grow / I know a
cozy nest / 'Way out west / And I miss it so / California my
own / Oh how lonely I've grown.*

Irving Berlin, "An Orange Grove in California"

Unlike the “mountain works” analyzed in the previous chapter, but in line with Fante’s Los Angeles writings,⁹⁵ *Ask the Dust* departs from the tropes of fatherhood⁹⁶ and the intergenerational cultural gap between first and second-generation immigrants of Italian

⁹⁵ With the exception of the “books of youth” and *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, Los Angeles epitomizes the pivotal spatial dimension in Fante’s literary production. Moving from the Wilmington fish canneries of *The Road to Los Angeles* to the Hollywood studios of *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, or from the multiethnic inner-city of *Ask the Dust* to the Y-shaped ranch at Point Dume (Malibu) of the novella “My Dog Stupid,” Fante provides a multifaceted portrayal of Los Angeles that features its accentuated ethnic and income gentrification. For a spatial analysis of the income and racial inequalities in Los Angeles, see Ong and Blumenberg.

⁹⁶ While in Fante’s “mountain writings” the figure of the father is of primary relevance, in the works set in Los Angeles it is generally marginal or absent. In *The Road to Los Angeles* for example the protagonist’s father is dead. As highlighted by Bordin, however, the absence of the paternal figure often entails the presence of a putative literary father (*Un’eticità* 100), who in *Ask the Dust* is embodied by the editor J. C. Hackmuth, alter ego of H. L. Mencken. Mencken played an important role in Fante’s literary career, to the point that the Italian American author dedicated the novel *Full of Life* to him and maintained with him a personal correspondence that lasted more than twenty years (Fante and Mencken). Moreover, one could speculate that it is because of Mencken that Fante approaches Southern Californian history, a theme defined in a letter to Carey McWilliams dated June 24, 1936 as “a new source of interest” to him (*Selected Letters* 127). In a letter dated August 31, 1932, in fact, the critic from Baltimore had suggested Fante to “stop writing about [his] family”, a “subject that seem[ed] to obsess” him (Fante and Mencken 37), and get inspiration from the life in California. On the relationship between Fante and Mencken see Barone, Bordin (*Un’eticità* 101-103), Collins (*John Fante* 17-18, 41-42), Kordich (*John Fante* 1, 4), and Paoletti (17, 29).

descent. *Ask the Dust*⁹⁷ delves into the writing process as a means of assimilation and withdrawal from one's ethnic heritage, featuring as a pivotal narrative element the symbolism of the Californian dream. The sublime meteorological element of snow in the author's "books of youth" is in *Ask the Dust* nothing more than just a distant memory for Arturo Bandini who, wandering through the streets of Bunker Hill and downtown Los Angeles, exposes the inconsistency of the pastoral vision of California imagined by the characters of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year*. Indeed, the urban spatial dimension emerging from the novel is not that of Hollywood, nor of Bel Air, Lakeside, or Pasadena, "no and no a thousand times" (Fante *Prologue*), as the author's remarks blare in a 1938 never-sent letter to his editor — later published with the title *Prologue to Ask the Dust*. Arturo's Los Angeles, as highlighted by Bordin, is "the city of the dispossessed and the marginalized" ("Palme" 9; my translation), the dream seekers, who, looking for a place in the sun, have carried over the "dust of Chicago and Cincinnati and Cleveland on their shoes" (*Ask* 456). As highlighted in the previous section, the imaginative spatial dimension of California emerging in the author's "books of youth" is downsized and challenged by the juxtaposition of the tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. In *Ask the Dust* this image of California ultimately exacerbates in a counterfeit chimera, something that can be easily designed, advertised, and marketed in line with Harvey Molotch's representation of the region (225).

The pastoral dimension of the garden ultimately succumbs to the juxtaposed sublime force of the natural dimension — a force that in *Ask the Dust* emerges in disruptive and

⁹⁷ Scholars of *Ask the Dust* have primarily focused on how the novel features the encounter of ethnic identities and the spatial dimension of Los Angeles. For a critical analysis of *Ask the Dust* see Barattin, Bordin (*Un'etnicità* 109-155, and "Palme"), Béranger ("John Fante"), Bracey, Cooper ("John Fante's Eternal"), Elliott, Fine ("Down and Out", and "John Fante"), Guida, Kordich (*John Fante* 70-84, and "John Fante's *Ask the Dust*"), Laurila, Mazzucchelli, Roszak, Ryan, Scambray ("Success"), Scruggs, and Tumolo.

untamable manifestations and in the allegorical debasement of the region's historical and mythological symbolism. The pastoral dimension of the garden therefore is substituted by and buried under a growing urban dimension, a concrete garden whose "street lamps, the red and blue and green neon tubes burst [...] to life like bright night flowers" (*Ask* 437). In line with Wyatt's analysis of the development of Los Angeles, in Fante's novel the urban dimension "defaces a Southern California Eden even as it finances it" ("LA Fiction" 35) through a continuous advertisement. Divergently from the "mountain writings," the investigation of the juxtaposition between the two tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime requires in *Ask the Dust* — and more generally in the Los Angeles works — the addition of the interpretative layer of the space of the city, an urban space simultaneously juxtaposed and overlapping the natural dimension. Fante's novel presents therefore a twofold dichotomous structure that integrates the juxtaposition of the two tendencies of the pastoral and the sublime within the broader discrepancy between the natural and the urban. Thus, with the introduction of the element of "the machine" (Marx 145) within the Californian natural dimension, the delicate tension between the pastoral garden and the sublime wilderness ultimately resolves in favor of the latter, epitomized in the narrative by the earthquake that hits Long Beach and by the spatial dimension of the desert that, through its winds, reclaims its spaces appropriated by the city.

What follows analyzes the manifestations of the sublime force of nature within the urban spatial dimension of Los Angeles in Fante's novel, highlighting the author's attention to the specificities of the region's environmental history and the illusory entity of the pastoral attempt to carve an idyllic garden out of California's sublime natural dimension. In line with the analysis of the apparatus⁹⁸ of Northern California's natural mythology in *The*

⁹⁸ With the term apparatus, I am here referring to Giorgio Agamben's expansion of Michel Foucault's concept of the apparatus theorized in *Confessions of the Flesh*. In his analysis of Foucauldian apparatuses, the Italian philosopher provides the following definition: "I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way

Brotherhood of the Grape, the first part of this chapter focuses on Fante's sardonic representation of the Southern California symbols of the orange, the palm tree, and the automobile. In *Ask the Dust*, these emerge as allegorically imbued signifiers that, exploited by boosters as the quintessential exemplification of the pastoral to market the region, are charged with a dismal potential that renders them corrupted. The second part of the chapter centers on the destructive sublime potential of the region's natural dimension, and specifically on the cataclysmic event of the earthquake, which aligns the novel to the literary tradition featuring Los Angeles as a doom city destined to a catastrophic epilogue (Davis *Ecology* 277), and the desert.

Los Angeles emerges in *Ask the Dust* in all its contradictions, in its simultaneous and apparently self-contradictory essence of quintessential place of the pastoral dream and city of cataclysmic endings. According to McWilliams, Fante's novel is one of the few works "that suggest what Southern California is really like" (364), along with Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Frank Fenton's⁹⁹ *A Place in the Sun*, and Mark Lee Luther's *The Boosters*. Thus, as highlighted by Robert Towne (Warga 22)¹⁰⁰ and Kenneth Scambray,

the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses" (14).

⁹⁹ Fante met Frank Edgington Fenton through McWilliams. In 1934, with the author of *A Place in the Sun*, the Italian American novelist co-wrote the screenplay of the film *Dinky* (*Selected Letters* 79-80, 82-84), released the following year by Warner Bros. The character of Frank Edgington in *Dreams from Bunker Hill* who invites the protagonist to spend some nights at his place (668) clearly refers to his friend Fenton, who, as highlighted by a letter to his parents dated August 1937, invited Fante to stay at his home in Hollywood (*Selected Letters* 146-147).

¹⁰⁰ Robert Towne is the screenwriter of *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974), a neo-noir film inspired by the California water wars, a series of disputes that eventually secured Los Angeles the water rights in the Owens Valley. Polanski's movie, according to Liahna Babener, "is the quintessential Los Angeles film" that "offers up a cinematic version of the Fall of the New World Garden" ("*Chinatown*" 274). Towne also directed the film

“John Fante captured better than any Los Angeles writer the heterogeneous nature of early Los Angeles” (*Italian Immigration* 276), a city of both hope and despair “habited by a multiethnic population of pensioners, laborers, and hangers-on” (Fine *Imagining* 184) who, chasing the advertised Californian dream, clash with the racially stratified hierarchy of the city. As highlighted by Bordin, the author’s intentions to provide a multiethnic portrait of the city is evident from the prologue (*Un’etnicità* 126), where the novelist compares *Ask the Dust* to Jackson’s *Ramona* “in reverse” (*Prologue*).

Ask the Dust emerges as a polyhedric work that, giving voice to the marginalized ethnic and featuring autobiographical elements, reveals the author’s “genuine sympathy for the inhabitants of the city, tinged more with sorrow than irony; [as] he is one of them” (Fine *Imagining* 186), one of the dream seekers. At twenty-three and poverty-stricken, as he wrote to his mother, the author realized that “Los Angeles is a hard town to break into [...] too big [and with] millions of people, and no friends” (*Selected Letters* 151-152). Thus, *Ask the Dust* highlights the crumbling nature of the pastoral ideal promoted by the region’s boosters,¹⁰¹ but also reveals the protagonist’s celebration of “the rough substance of life as he finds it in the rented rooms and sooty streets of old L.A.” (Cooper “John Fante’s Eternal” 84). Indeed, as highlighted by Fine,

Fante was neither a Hollywood novelist (though as screenwriter he touched on his movie career in his later work, particularly *Dreams from Bunker Hill*) nor one of the hard-boiled boys in the back room. The city he offered in his 1930s work is less the graveyard of California dreams — as it appeared to most of his contemporaries — than a place alive with hope and possibility, desire and allure.

version of *Ask the Dust*, released with little success in 2006.

¹⁰¹ In line with the other novels featuring the spatial dimension of California published in 1939, a year that saw the publication of many American classics, to the point that Fine defined it as an “annus mirabilis in West Coast fiction and film” (*Imagining* 161). The most notorious examples are Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Aldous Huxley’s *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*.

His unglamorous, un-Hollywood central-city neighborhood is a diverse, multi-ethnic enclave represented without sentimentality, derision, or a sense of impending doom. (*Imagining* 188)

Reconstructing the multiethnic landscape of Los Angeles, *Ask the Dust* emerges as a multifaceted work, a *Ramona* in reverse which does not provide a sentimental depiction of an interracial love story within an idealized pastoral dimension as in Jackson's romance,¹⁰² nor a disinterested satirical condemnation of "a deracinated urban hell" (*Davis City* 37) as Fante's noir contemporaries. *Ask the Dust* primarily features a living portrait of Southern California and emerges as a novel that departs from the region's advertised and marketed symbolic apparatus because of its simultaneous juxtapositions of the urban and the natural — and consequently of the pastoral and the sublime. Indeed, the novel presents since its first lines the author's twofold approach to the city and its crumbling marketed dream. While Arturo's first meditations are on his limited resources and the possible resulting displacement and homelessness,¹⁰³ his thoughts soon flow to the memory of advertisements (*Ask* 411) and his heyday, when he "got to town by bus from Colorado with a hundred and fifty dollars in [...] [his] pocket and big plans in [...] [his] head" (417).¹⁰⁴

As highlighted by Soja via Baudrillard,¹⁰⁵ the urban dimension of Los Angeles "is

¹⁰² With *Ramona* Jackson wanted to expose the US government's crimes and abuses towards California's Native Americans reaching a wider audience than that of her previous non-fiction work *A Century of Dishonor*, published in 1881. In a letter to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* Thomas Bailey Aldrich, dated May 4, 1883, Jackson wrote in fact: "If I could write a story that would do for the Indian a thousandth part of what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the Negro, I would be thankful the rest of my life" (qtd. in Tumulo 16).

¹⁰³ See the incipit of the novel: "One night I was sitting on the bed in my hotel room on Bunker Hill, down in the very middle of Los Angeles. It was an important night in my life, because I had to make a decision about the hotel. Either I paid up or I got out: that was what the note said, the note the landlady had put under the door" (*Ask* 411).

¹⁰⁴ Arguably, the advertisements bursting in the protagonist's mind are about the city, its curative pastoral climate, and its allegorically imbued symbolism, since Los Angeles, "the best advertised city in America" (McWilliams 129), emerges as "a city made of words" (McNamara 1).

¹⁰⁵ Soja draws his analysis from Jean Baudrillard's theorization of hyperreality. The French philosopher defines

shrouded in [...] an armor of deflective imagery [...] [which makes] it difficult to know whether what one sees is actually there, or whether there is a there there at all” (*My Los Angeles* 13). Thus, the allegorically imbued symbolism of the city transfigures the urban spaces in imaginative pastoral dimensions that, juxtaposed to the real conurbation, become quintessential representatives of what Umberto Eco defined as “cathedrals of iconic reassurance” (58), that is, fictive landscapes that imitate and attempt to ameliorate the real spatial dimensions. Fante’s novel emerges as a work of iconoclastic nature that, reinterpreting the apparatus of Southern California, debunks these fictive landscapes. Thus, *Ask the Dust* is not radically reworking “the metaphorical figure of the city [...] to expose how the dream had become nightmare” (Davis *City* 20) as noirs would do,¹⁰⁶ but rather embraces Soja’s postulation that “the first tasks in looking at Los Angeles is to challenge this persistent inheritance of increasingly anachronistic imagery” (*My Los Angeles* 53). This process starts with the dismantlement of the Mediterranean analogy and its quintessential pastoral fruit: the orange.

Like the tree bearing golden apples of the Gardens of the Hesperides (McWilliams 207), the orange is “a sacred tree in Southern California” (209).¹⁰⁷ This is primarily evident from the production numbers. As highlighted by McWilliams, in fact, “from meager beginnings, the citrus industry of Southern California expanded phenomenally in the years from 1880 to

hyperreality as a dimension of self-referential signs detached from their original referents that determines the impossibility to distinguish between the real and the imagined (43).

¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as highlighted by Mark Laurila, Fante takes up some themes and attitudes of his noirs contemporaries (113).

¹⁰⁷ The connection between the mythological golden fruit and the Californian orange is also noted by Farmer, who, recapitulating the myth of Hercules and his Twelve Labors, highlights: “For the penultimate exploit, the hero traveled to the western edge of the horizon — the place where Atlas held up the sky — to find the sacred fruit tree tended by nymphs, the Hesperides. The tree, part of Hera’s private orchard, bore golden apples that imparted immortality. By tricking Atlas into helping him, Hercules managed to abscond with magical fruits. Whether or not Grecian narrators had sweet oranges in mind, later listeners made the connection. The Roman term for oranges was mythologically literal: pomum aurantium (golden apple)” (221).

1890. By 1880, 1,250,000 citrus trees had been planted in the region. At the close of the decade, 12,667 acres were devoted to oranges alone in Southern California and the production from this acreage had an annual value of \$2,000,000” (90). Moreover, with the increase and modernization of advertisement,¹⁰⁸ the market and consumption of oranges soared along with that of the other imported fruits of the Californian garden. As highlighted by Sackman, in 1939, the year of publication of *Ask the Dust*, “California’s cornucopia yielded 462,000 tons of prunes,¹⁰⁹ 2 million tons of grapes, 10 million bushels of pears,¹¹⁰ and 75 million boxes of oranges” (*Orange Empire* 262).

As the “golden apples” of the Californian garden, oranges were imbued with a metaphoric charge. As wine and grapes, they imaginatively evoke the romance and legend of Southern Californian Spanish missions and, as a consequence, the Mediterranean. “Here”, one observer wrote, are “the fruits and flowers of Sicily without its *lazzaroni*” (qtd. in McWilliams 103).¹¹¹ Thus, as highlighted by Sackmann, the identity and economy of Southern California “became fixed to plants” (“A Garden” 247), and especially the orange tree, for, as Charles Fletcher Lummis pointed out, “of all the trees that man has corseted to uniform symmetry and fattened for his use, none other is more beautiful and none more

¹⁰⁸ As highlighted by Cleland, “the citrus industry is the most widely publicized branch of California agriculture” (161). Indeed, in the issues of the booster magazine *Land of Sunshine*, “filled with celebrations of the sunshine, citrus crops, and health benefits that Southern California offered”, “it was the oranges that got most of the attention” (Fine *Imagining* 40).

¹⁰⁹ Just like grapes and oranges, prunes were also imported by Spanish missionaries. For more information on the history of the Californian prune industry see Connell and DeBuse.

¹¹⁰ Pears are also not native to California and were imported in the region during the Gold Rush.

¹¹¹ In July and August 1957, Fante sojourned in Naples to work on the script of a Columbia Pictures comedy for Jack Lemmon called *The Roses*. During his Neapolitan stay, the author was impressed by the size of Italian fruits, downsized by boosters in comparison with the Californian ones. Indeed, in a letter to his wife Joyce dated August 8, 1957, Fante states: “Yesterday we went down the Coast past Castellamare [*sic*], Sorrento, Amalfi, to Positano. We drove close to Vesuvius, through very rich farm country, the soil made extra fertile by lava. I don’t care how big California fruits grow, here they’re bigger” (*Selected Letters* 251).

grateful than the orange” (qtd. in McWilliams 208-209). Called the “gold nugget of Southern California” (McWilliams 209), the orange emerges therefore as the quintessential symbol of the pastoral garden cultivated by the city’s boosters and pitted against the dimension of the desert, the sublime space that threatens to delimit Los Angeles’s unbounded process of territorial expansion. Thus, imaginatively, for boosters “the appearance of orange and lemon groves in such a land was as pleasing to the eye as the sight of an oasis in the desert” (McWilliams 208).¹¹²

Remolded into a marketable commodity, the orange epitomizes the region’s Spanish past as well as attributes of health. With the slogan “Oranges for Health — California for Wealth” (McWilliams 163), boosters both advertised the abundance of the region and “prodded the nation into adopting the ‘orange habit’” (Sackmann *Orange* 97).¹¹³ As highlighted by Cleland, in fact, “through persistent, patient, and seductive advertising” consumers were taught “how desperately ... [they] needed the nectar of orange juice to give color to the cheeks, keener sight to eyes, and abounding vitality to the anemic body” (156).¹¹⁴

The image of the orange as a curative and invigorating fruit, however, is ironically overturned in Fante’s novels. In *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, for instance, the author

¹¹² To the point that, as reported by McWilliams, “oranges were stuck on Joshua trees in a desert tract advertised as the only region in Southern California in which the orange was indigenous” (119-120). This is something that epitomizes the boosters’ marketing strategy to advertise and sell one desert tract as a potentially Arcadian space but also their intimate desire to transfigure the sublime wilderness into a pastoral garden.

¹¹³ As highlighted by Sackmann, nutritionists received funds to support the marketing strategy of oranges’ curative properties, to the point that “oranges were [...] sutured to such dietary staples as meat and eggs, so that the everyday consumption of citrus would become as natural as eating one’s daily bread” (*Orange* 111).

¹¹⁴ This form of advertisement did not only foster the consumption of oranges but also featured the image of Southern California as a therapeutic pastoral garden juxtaposed to the urbanized spaces of the East and the Mid-West, since, as highlighted by Sackmann, “in the form of the orange, the curative effects of nature could travel to those suffering from the ‘rust’ of modern life. To eat an orange was to imbibe the spirit of the land, to be lifted momentarily from the city sidewalks of Chicago or Boston and placed in the paradise of California’s resplendent valleys” (*Orange* 108).

ridicules this belief in the phone conversation between Henry and his sister-in-law Peggy, who deems plenty of orange juice would cure Nick's diabetes.¹¹⁵ Likewise, *Ask the Dust* features a negative depiction of oranges that debunks their marketed image as "fruits of Eden" (Sackmann *Orange* 8). In contrast with Francesco Marroni's reading of oranges in Fante's novel as a symbol of opulence and salvation and in line with Bordin's analysis (*Un'etnicità* 117), I believe that in *Ask the Dust* the quintessential fruit of the Californian garden epitomizes Arturo's poverty, who, unable to afford anything else, buys them for five cents a bag from a fruit seller at the Japanese market.¹¹⁶

The days of plenty – plenty of worries, plenty of oranges. Eat them in bed, eat them for lunch, push them down for dinner. Oranges, five cents a dozen. Sunshine in the sky, sun juice in my stomach. Down at the Japanese market he saw me coming, that bullet-faced smiling Japanese, and he reached for a paper sack. A generous man, he gave me fifteen, sometimes twenty for a nickel. (*Ask* 432)

Corroding Arturo's stomach, the emblematic fruit of the Californian garden emerges in *Ask the Dust* as a noxious element whose thought makes the protagonist wince (449).¹¹⁷ Through the representation of Arturo's detrimental dietary habits, Fante ironically dismantles the marketed image of oranges "as pure products of nature that would provide instant contact with California's therapeutic environment" (Sackmann *Orange* 88) and arguably refers to acidosis — the excessively acid condition of the body fluids or tissues. A theme that, as highlighted by Sackmann, interested the public debate in the years preceding the publication

¹¹⁵ See the passage from the novel: "'He's very sick with diabetes' 'Really? My aunt had diabetes. He'll be okay. Just give him plenty of orange juice' 'Great idea, Peggy. I'll tell Dr. Maselli. Will you please call Mario to the phone?'" (*The Brotherhood* 141).

¹¹⁶ In Fante's novel, the image of the orange as a noxious element is reinforced by the refusal to eat its peels by Pedro, the mouse that Arturo had adopted as a pet (*Ask* 433).

¹¹⁷ See this passage from the novel: "They were miserable oranges. Sitting on the bed I dug my nails into their thin skins. My own flesh puckered, my mouth was filled with saliva, and I squinted at the thought of them. When I bit into the yellow pulp it shocked me like a cold shower" (*Ask* 438).

of *Ask the Dust*, especially when Sunkist, the organization of Southern California fruit growers, seized on Elmer McCollum's idea that "consuming different foods created either acid or alkaline effects in the body" (*Orange* 110).¹¹⁸ Thus, to foster orange consumption, Sunkist supported the belief that acidosis would be caused by the ingestion of foods as cereals, fish, and meat without sufficient fruit (Sackmann *Orange* 110-111). In truth, orange consumption does not prevent acidosis.¹¹⁹ On the contrary, ironically, the overdose of vitamin C can determine severe cases of acidosis (Sackmann *Orange* 111), as is arguably the case with Arturo in *Ask the Dust*.¹²⁰ Arturo's unbalanced diet of oranges is occasionally varied by the consumption of other fruit offered by the Japanese fruit seller,¹²¹ whose disinterested generosity is, according to Bordin, pitted against the lust for meat of Arturo's neighbor Hellfrick (*Un'etnicità* 154-155). Indeed, just like the fruit seller, Hellfrick provides the protagonist with opportunities to vary his monotonous eating habits. Nevertheless, these entail the theft of milk¹²² or the slaughter of a calf and are motivated by the obligation to

¹¹⁸ Elmer McCollum was an American biochemist known for his work on the influence of diet on health.

¹¹⁹ As highlighted by Sackmann, the marketed properties of orange consumption included "promoting growth, protecting against scurvy, colds, and scarlet fever, aiding in the development of perfect teeth and bone structure, and, of course, counteracting acidosis" (*Orange* 112). The author ironically adds: "Without oranges, Americans would be vulnerable to disease, their children would be underdeveloped, businessmen would lack the proper 'punch' to get the job done, and such everyday problems as headaches might prevent Americans from performing a whole host of activities vital to both production and reproduction" (114).

¹²⁰ See this passage from the novel: "My teeth tore them to pulp, the juices skewering and whimpering at the bottom of my stomach. It was so sad down there in my stomach. There was much weeping, and little gloomy clouds of gas pinched my heart" (*Ask* 432).

¹²¹ See this passage from the novel: "'You like banana?' Sure, so he gave me a couple of bananas. A pleasant innovation, orange juice and bananas. 'You like apple?' Sure, so he gave me some apples. Here was something new: oranges and apples. 'You like peaches?' Indeed, and I carried the brown sack back to my room. An interesting innovation, peaches and oranges" (*Ask* 432).

¹²² As already highlighted, boosters promoted California with the Biblical reference of land of milk and honey to emphasize the abundance of the region. In *Ask the Dust*, Arturo's theft of two bottles of milk (437-440) symbolically debunks the lie behind that promotion. Moreover, just like oranges, milk is charged in the narrative with a sublime potential that renders it spoiled or undrinkable. It is the case of the two bottles stolen by Arturo (440), the glass that the Jewish housekeeper Vera offers to the protagonist (514), and the glass that

repay his debts towards the protagonist.¹²³

Just like oranges, other symbols of the city and the region are charged in *Ask the Dust* with a sublime potential that renders them corrupted and noxious. It is the case of the first marketed element of Los Angeles encountered by the protagonist upon his arrival to the Alta Loma hotel,¹²⁴ the palm tree.

Through that window I saw my first palm tree, not six feet away, and sure enough I thought of Palm Sunday and Egypt and Cleopatra, but the palm was blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street Tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts. (*Ask* 417)

Despite their symbolic role within the history and mythology of the region, palm trees, like oranges and grapes, are not native to California.¹²⁵ As highlighted by Farmer, in fact, much of California “was basically treeless before European colonization” (xxiii), which radically changed the vegetation of the region through the introduction of various alien plants (Burcham 185), among which the palm tree. With the 1932 Olympic Games, around twenty-

Arturo forces Camilla to drink (582). Eventually milk emerges also as an omen of death, since a little bottle of milk for her dog Willie is the only thing that Camilla carries with her in the desert (600).

¹²³ Hellfrick constantly borrows money from Arturo to satiate his craving for meat and never shares his food with the protagonist. See this passage from the novel: “All day I heard him frying cheap steaks, the odour creeping under my door. It gave me a mad desire for meat. I would go to Hellfrick. ‘Hellfrick,’ I would say. ‘How about sharing that steak with me?’ The steak would be so large it filled the skillet. But Hellfrick would lie brazenly. ‘I haven’t had a thing for two days’” (*Ask* 534).

¹²⁴ As highlighted by Laurila (129), Fine (*Imagining* 187-188), and Bordin (*Un’etnicità* 118-119), Fante, differently from the rest of the Los Angeles writers of the decade like Cain, McCoy, and Fitzgerald, is not interested in the representation of the city’s eclectic architecture, with the peculiar exception of the space of the hotel where his protagonist resides. The space of the Alta Loma, in fact, appears in the narrative as “built on a hillside in reverse, there on the crest of Bunker Hill, built against the decline of the hill, so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels. If you had room 862, you got in the elevator and went down eight floors, and if you wanted to go down in the truck room, you didn’t go down but up to the attic, one floor above the main floor” (*Ask* 416).

¹²⁵ With the exception of the *Washingtonia filifera*, or the desert fan palm, native to the South-West and the Mexican state of Baja California.

five thousand palms were planted in Los Angeles and since then the ornamental tree “has become virtually synonymous with the city” (McClung 125). In Fante’s novel, Arturo’s first sighting of a palm tree evokes in him an imaginative association with exotic landscapes, relating the ornamental tree first to the Biblical Jerusalem and then to Cleopatra’s Egypt.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, in the course of the narrative, these initial associations are debunked when the protagonist has a closer contact with the ornamental tree. Indeed, in *Ask the Dust*, the palm tree eventually emerges as a simulacrum of a sublime exotic dimension, a fictive metonymical element that rather than epitomizing the wild natural landscape of Southern California, stands, in line with William McClung’s analysis of the tree, as “an affirmation of a desired wildness in the culture of the city” (125). It comes to represent something that evokes a sentimental exotic landscape but is a product of urban design de facto.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ The association of the palm tree to the Palm Sunday is extremely important from different points of view. It highlights the protagonist’s Catholic education and his subconscious adherence and impossibility to withdraw from the values of the Roman Church (Roszak 191) — and as an extension from his Italian identity — something that becomes evident later in the narrative in relation to his self-condemnation in response to the cataclysmic event of the earthquake that hits Long Beach. Moreover, this association symbolically aligns Los Angeles to the Holy Land — John Gregory Dunne has noted that the climate of Los Angeles exactly duplicates that of Bethlehem (31). This alignment metaphorically renders Los Angeles “the new Jerusalem” (Klein 27), as it was sometimes portrayed by boosters, and as such the quintessential exemplification of John Winthrop’s “city upon hill” (609), in view also of its symbolic nature of corner of the frontier and of capital of various religious trends and movements (Daley). The protagonist also associates the ornamental tree to Egypt, another country that boosters aligned to Southern California to recall the Mediterranean. One visitor of the region stated: “Here is the fertility of Egypt without its *fellaheen*” (qtd. in McWilliams 103). Moreover, as the last Queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, Cleopatra emerges as an important female figure that shares many analogies with the character of Camilla Lopez in Fante’s work. The last pharaoh, in fact, committed suicide after Octavian — who later became the first Roman emperor — invaded Egypt and planned to bring her to Rome for his triumphal procession. Metaphorically, in Fante’s novel, Camilla is portrayed by Bandini as a “Mayan Princess” (*Ask* 446, 451, 515) and embodies in the protagonist’s eyes a civilization destined to a tragic demise and a native spatial frontier to colonize. Moreover, Camilla’s supposed demise at the end of the novel recalls Cleopatra’s iconic self-murder to avoid Octavian’s display of her subjugated body as a metaphorical extension of her kingdom.

¹²⁷ As highlighted by Farmer, “[o]rnamental palms [...] have been planted more for what they signify than for what they tangibly provide. They are best understood as aesthetic infrastructure” (xxix).

Eventually, in *Ask the Dust*, the palm tree emerges as an instance of the urban attempt to integrate a tamed natural dimension within the space of the city to foster its marketing as “the pick of the garden” (Luther 9). This process, however, is destined to fail, as this imagined pastoral ideal is simultaneously challenged by a fast and unsustainable process of urbanization and by the sublime dimension of nature epitomized by the desert. On the one hand, the branches of the ornamental tree that Arturo sees through his window are blackened by the carbon monoxide of cars,¹²⁸ on the other, its trunk is crusted and choked with dust and sand blown from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts, an admonition of the real sublime dimension of nature. Palm trees therefore are choked by sand, oil, and grease, the tangible elements of the highly marketed Los Angeles climate that, instead of displaying miraculous curative powers, seem to restrain the young writer’s creativity and ability to write (*Ask* 418) to the point that the only two words the protagonist can write are “palm tree”:

Only two words written over and over across the page, up and down, the same words: palm tree, palm tree, palm tree, a battle to the death between the palm tree and me, and the palm tree won: see it out there swaying in the blue air, creaking sweetly in the blue air. The palm tree won after two fighting days, and I crawled out of the window and sat at the foot of the tree. Time passed, a moment or two, and I slept, little brown ants carousing in the hair on my legs. (*Ask* 419)

The ornamental tree emerges therefore as an element employed by the urban dimension of “Los Angeles [to] come [...] to terms with the wilderness by symbolically asserting its presence while denying its power” (McClung 125). Featuring the city’s attempt to tame the natural dimension into a marketable pastoral garden, the palm tree represents a noxious element, simultaneously corrupted and corrupting, that, inducing the protagonist to sleep¹²⁹

¹²⁸ This depiction mirrors an earlier scene in the novel where “the smell of gasoline made the sight of the palm trees seem sad” (*Ask* 412).

¹²⁹ This initial scene in the novel mirrors a later passage where Arturo sleeps for six hours under the palm trees outside Sammy’s shack in the desert (*Ask* 571).

evokes an omen of death. Fante's representation of the palm tree emerges as proof of the city's failed attempt to tame the natural dimension and, as highlighted by Bordin, as an instance of an "emerging ecocriticism" (*Un'etnicità* 118; my translation) in a city increasingly seized with speed and its quintessential symbol, the automobile.¹³⁰

In line with its role as "central component of the California – and American – Dream" (Fine "Beginning" 50), the automobile plays an important role in *Ask the Dust* and even modifies Arturo's view of the palm trees. On board of Camilla's car, in fact, the palm trees along the highway appear to Arturo as "green" (*Ask* 479) and "wild" (480). The automobile emerges in *Ask the Dust* as an element that enlarges the spatial dimension in which the narrative unfolds. Indeed, as highlighted by Anna Barattin, while the first part of the novel is centered on a "pedestrian dimension" (2; my translation) that revolves around Bunker Hill, with the introduction of the automobile, the second part of the novel features the outskirts of the city.¹³¹ Nevertheless, *Ask the Dust* does not conform to Southern Californian literary productions featuring the automobile as symbol of unsustainable acceleration,¹³² but rather "slows things down" (Wyatt "LA Fiction" 40), presenting alternative models of transportation to the city's symbol. Arturo, in fact, moves with public transportation and primarily walks around the city, to the point that, according to Wyatt, he becomes "Los

¹³⁰ For an analysis of the environmental degradation of Los Angeles in relation to the city's process of urban expansion see Johnson.

¹³¹ Designing the outer parts of a city, the term outskirts does not comprehensively suit the "uncharacteristic" architecture of Los Angeles (Fine "Introduction" 10). Indeed, as highlighted by McWilliams, Los Angeles is "a city without a center" (234) and *Ask the Dust*, especially after the introduction of the automobile, features this peculiar spatial structure of the city.

¹³² A genre that Wyatt defines "novel of speed" and situates in Los Angeles. The scholar provides the following definition: "The novel of speed takes as given a background that must be inferred. It tends to be short, and to be marketed by striking economies of style. It leaves little room for the direct expression of emotion, preferring fascinating surfaces to mere depth. It can also question these efficiencies, and come to know that there has to be a better, more life-affirming way. And it is a kind of novel that seems to arise from, and to be especially suited to, the place called Los Angeles" ("LA Fiction" 38).

Angeles's first flaneur" (41). Thus, walking in the "automobile metropolis" (McWilliams 236), Arturo resists and opposes the boosters' marketed image of Los Angeles as "city on wheels" (Fine "Beginning" 51), and emerges as a threat to the city's illusory aspirations of unbounded spatial expansion, since in Los Angeles, as highlighted by Blaise Cendrars, "anyone who walks around on foot is a suspect" (52).¹³³

In contrast with the city's literary productions of the time, in *Ask the Dust*, the automobile does not represent an instrument leading to a tragic demise nor uniquely a symbol of the city's uncontrollable process of spatial expansion. In response to the emergence of the automobile and the freeway as quintessential icons of the region's landscape,¹³⁴ in fact, the literary works of the 1930s features a noxious image of the automobile. Indeed, as highlighted by Fine, "ever since the city emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as the city on wheels, the car has offered itself to the novelist as either death instrument or metaphor for the illusory promise of mobility" (*Imagining* 23). In *Ask the Dust*, the automobile emerges as neither. In Fante's novel, the car epitomizes an innate desire that, for characters of ethnic descent, crystallizes in the desire of assimilation.

The first car that appears in the novel is Camilla's run-down 1929 Ford roadster registered in the name of Camilla Lombard (*Ask* 477). Camilla's decision to register the car in the name of Lombard, a clear reference to the Hollywood icon Carole Lombard,¹³⁵

¹³³ This unwritten law of Los Angeles features in *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. Indeed, in his recollection of his working experience as cab driver in Los Angeles, Dominic Molise recounts of his arrest for walking in the streets of San Bernardino after his car had been stolen (*The Brotherhood* 64). Moreover, in the novel, the displaced protagonist uses as a precarious abode an abandoned Cadillac, the quintessential car representing the American dream of the open road in the West (67).

¹³⁴ To the point that Reyner Banham defines the freeway as one of the four ecologies of the city and Martin Wachs highlights that the highway is for Los Angeles what the Eiffel Tower is for Paris and the Statue of Liberty for New York (106).

¹³⁵ Carole Lombard embodied an iconic model of American feminine beauty for women of ethnic descent like Camilla. The actress figures also in other works by Fante; indeed, she is mentioned in *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (679, 742) and *1933 Was a Bad Year* (35-37), where she emerges as object of sexual desire for Dominic's

highlights her desire to distance herself from her ethnic background and the exoticized demeanor that Arturo had assigned her.¹³⁶ Despite her modern character,¹³⁷ in fact, Arturo binds her in a romanticized pre-Columbian dimension (Bordin *Un'etnicità* 139), where imaginatively even her car is compared to a mule (*Ask* 479).¹³⁸ Later in the narrative, Arturo also buys the same car model and, discarding his pedestrian habits, drives around the city and the region without a destination. This is an act that imaginatively consecrates him as a real *Angelino*:

I bought a car, a 1929 Ford. It had no top, but it sped like the wind, and with the coming of dry days I took long rides along the blue coastline, up to Ventura, up to Santa Barbara, down to San Clemente, down to San Diego, following the white line of the pavement, under the staring stars [...] I prowled the city with my Ford: I found mysterious alleys, lonely trees, rotting old houses out of a vanished past. Day and night I lived in my Ford, pausing only long enough to order a hamburger and a cup of coffee at strange roadside cafés. This was the life for a man, to wander and stop and then go on, ever following the white line along the rambling coast, a time to relax at the wheel, light another cigarette, and grope stupidly for the meanings in that perplexing desert sky. (*Ask* 588)

In *Ask the Dust*, the automobile emerges as an advertised commodity that epitomizes the individual's latent desire of assimilation. In Fante's novel, in fact, the quintessential symbol

younger brother.

¹³⁶ When Arturo asks her about the name Lombard on the owner's certificate of her car, Camilla indirectly expresses her dissatisfaction with her name, as it reveals her Mexican descent. See the passage from the novel: "What's the Lombard for?' 'For fun,' she said. 'Sometimes I use it professionally.' I didn't understand. 'Do you like your name?' she asked. 'Don't you wish it was Johnson, or Williams, or something?' I said no, that I was satisfied. 'No you're not,' she said. 'I know'" (*Ask* 479).

¹³⁷ Camilla emerges in the novel as a modern and independent female character who lives by herself, works, — earning more than the protagonist — and owns a car in which she speeds.

¹³⁸ This association should be interpreted in relation to Arturo's romanticized and exoticized vision of Camilla. The mule, in fact, represents a symbol of California's Mexican past and evokes the system of the *hacienda* that features a "Mission aura of 'history and romance'" (Davis *City* 27). Indeed, the protagonist of Fante's only Mexican novel, *Bravo, Burro!* — written with Rudolph Borchert — is the brave donkey Valente. For more information on California's Mexican period, see Sanchez and Pita and Clay and Werner.

of the city can be aligned to Roland Barthes's definition of the automobile as "the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates in them a wholly magical object" (88).¹³⁹ Fante's novel ultimately features the depiction of the automobile as a marketable commodity that bounds characters to roam without a clear destination. The characters in *Ask the Dust* appear, in fact, unconsciously driven to purchase a car despite their precarious economic situation¹⁴⁰ and eventually drive around the city yearning to overcome their marginalization and "make it" in the "city of dreams" (Carr), (Boyarsky).

Thus, the automobile simultaneously emerges in *Ask the Dust* as one of the city's icons whose symbolism the author attempts to debunk and as an imaginatively emancipating element that actually conforms the characters to the grotesque sun-seekers who roam the streets of Los Angeles. Arguably, as highlighted by Matthew Elliott, this is the destiny of the protagonist (538), who, in the last scene of the novel, drives his car back to Los Angeles, leaving behind Camilla and the spatial dimension of the desert, analyzed in the following section as the quintessential manifestation of the sublime force pitted against the space of the city.

¹³⁹ Barthes provides this definition in his comparisons of modern cars to Gothic cathedrals (88).

¹⁴⁰ It is the case of Hellfrick, who after spending all his pension cheque on an old Packard, compared by Arturo to "a hearse" (*Ask* 535), attempts to sell it to the protagonist to satiate his lust for meat and gin (535).

3.2 “The Wrath of God”: The Long Beach Earthquake and the Mojave Desert as Archetypes of the Sublime

The sea was red and the sky was grey / I wonder how tomorrow could ever follow today / The mountains and the canyons start to tremble and shake / The children of the sun begin to awake (watch out) / It seems that the wrath of the gods got a punch on the nose / And it's startin' to flow, I think I might be sinkin'.

Led Zeppelin, “Going to California”

“The visible wrath of God”, wrote one tourist of Los Angeles, “is not to be found here” (qtd. in McWilliams 103). Indeed, as highlighted by McWilliams, “Southern California was a land in which natural disasters were unknown” (103), or better, erased from collective memory.¹⁴¹ In the issue of January 2, 1934 the *Los Angeles Times* claimed, “no place on Earth offers greater security to life and greater freedom from natural disasters than Southern California” (qtd. in Davis *Ecology*). Only ten months earlier, however, Long Beach was the epicenter of one of the most destructive earthquakes in the history of the country, which caused the death of over 100 persons and damage in excess of \$40,000,000 (Cleland 115).¹⁴² As highlighted by the historian, “earthquakes of damaging proportions have been a familiar California phenomenon from very early times” (114), as confirmed by the numerous references to earthquakes contained in the early Spanish chronicles. Nevertheless, in order to market Southern California as a pastoral Eden, “the very word ‘earthquake’ disappeared from the vocabulary of the region” (McWilliams 103). “What earthquake?”, ironizes Davis,

¹⁴¹ Norman Klein defines the history of Los Angeles as the history of forgetting. Indeed, as highlighted by Wyatt, “the willful abstraction of events from both their causes and their consequences repeats itself even in accounts of California’s natural disasters” (*Five Fires* 7).

¹⁴² Referring to *The Earthquake History of the United States*, Cleland argues that “the Long Beach earthquake is rated as the second most destructive shock in the United States” (115). Cleland’s work was published in 1947; now the classification has changed with the Alaska earthquakes in the 1960s.

“in Southern California we bury our dead, then forget” (*Ecology* 59).

The attempt to conceal Southern California’s high susceptibility to earthquakes is disclosed in the literature boosting the region as a pastoral environment devoid of perils and scarcity. While according to the *Los Angeles Times*, after all, earthquakes are “not so bad” (qtd. in McWilliams 201), eight months after the Long Beach shocks, the *San Bernardino Sun* contended that “an earthquake never killed anyone” (qtd. in McWilliams 201). Moreover, as highlighted by McWilliams, “not only are earthquakes seldom mentioned in the history books, but, when mentioned, they are usually praised” (201).¹⁴³ This process of misinformation and minimization of the hazards of living in Southern California is countered by a literary production featuring the natural destruction of the region and of the urban dimension of Los Angeles in particular. Indeed, as highlighted by Fine, “natural as well as man-made disasters have furnished the plot lines for much of the region’s fiction, as they have for much of the city’s history” (*Imagining* 21). The scholar argues, in fact, that “apocalyptic renderings have been there almost as long as there have been novels about Los Angeles” (*Imagining* 233), to the point that according to Davis, “the destruction of Los Angeles has been a central theme or image in at least 138 novels and films since 1909” (*Ecology* 325).¹⁴⁴

The process of consolidation of Southern California as the quintessential setting for disaster fiction inaugurates in the 1930s, a decade defined by Davis as “tempestuous” (*Ecology* 173). Indeed, no other decade in the history of Southern California has been characterized by extreme natural events as the 1930s,¹⁴⁵ as highlighted by the literary

¹⁴³ McWilliams provides the following example from a history book: “We have an earthquake/ Now and again/ To let the people know/ God’s greater than the men” (201).

¹⁴⁴ Davis’s *Ecology of Fear* was published in 1998; *ça va sans dire*, the list of novels and films depicting the destruction of Los Angeles is much longer now.

¹⁴⁵ According to Davis, in Southern California “the 1930s represented a sharp spike in the short historical record of extreme events: the catastrophic Long Beach earthquake of 1933 (113 dead) was followed by major floods

production of the time. Despite the boosters' propaganda, in fact, the environmental instability of the region is reflected in the numerous works that, debunking the fictitious allegory of the pastoral garden, feature the image of Southern California as the quintessential locus of natural calamities, especially earthquakes. Davis's analysis of Southern California disaster fiction highlights in fact that "there is a dramatic trend over time toward the merging of all Los Angeles fiction with the disaster or survivalist narrative" (280),¹⁴⁶ and that the most recurring natural calamity striking the region in these works is the earthquake (281).¹⁴⁷ As highlighted by McWilliams, "how deeply the experience of living in an earthquake country has impressed the residents of the region is clearly shown in the novels that have been written about California" (204).

The list of disaster fiction featuring Southern California as a region prone to natural calamities includes Fante's *Ask the Dust* that, recurring to the representation of the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, aligns with the literary tradition of the 1930s. The Long Beach

in 1934 (40 dead) and 1938 (83 dead). And just as the decade had opened with an unexpected tornado, it ended, on 24-25 September 1939, with a surprise tropical hurricane, or *cordonazo*, whose 65 mile-per-hour winds and 40-foot waves killed 45 people in the Los Angeles area" (*Ecology* 173).

¹⁴⁶ Davis reconstructs the history of disaster fiction and traces back its genesis as a literary genre to Europe in the second-half of the eighteenth century, when the rediscovery of the archeological sites of Pompeii and Ercolano and the destruction of the city of Lisbon by an earthquake dismantled Leibniz's positivistic creed of *the best of all possible worlds* (*Ecology* 282-283). According to the scholar, "in American literature, the city of doom is a potent image" (284) recurring already in early novels portraying the yellow fever in Philadelphia. Despite the destruction of other American cities such as New York or San Francisco moderately recurs in some disaster works, Davis recognizes "Los Angeles's reigning status as Doom City", highlighting that "no city, in fiction or film, has been more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future" (*Ecology* 278). Moreover, the scholar argues, "the City of Angels is unique, not simply in the frequency of its fictional destruction, but in the pleasure that such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences. The entire world seems to be rooting for Los Angeles to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas fault" (277). For more information on disaster fiction see Rigby.

¹⁴⁷ Among the works of disaster fiction analyzed by Davis, 28 feature an earthquake striking Southern California, making it the most recurring natural calamity employed to highlight the environmental instability of the region and the second most recurring event employed to depict the destruction of Los Angeles, preceded only by the atomic holocaust (281).

earthquake is in fact represented also in other works definable as disaster fiction where, according to Fine, the natural calamity “marks a shift in a protagonist’s consciousness and destiny” (*Imagining* 21). Indeed, Fine argues, the earthquake “serves as a symbol of radical disjunction [...] signal[ing] the end of one life for the major character and the beginning of another” (“Introduction” 14). It is the case of *Ask the Dust*, Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon*, Hisaye Yamamoto’s “Yoneko’s Earthquake,”¹⁴⁸ and — one should add to Fine’s list — Fante’s “The Wrath of God.”¹⁴⁹ According to Davis, disaster fiction can be categorized into subgenres that the scholar classifies according to their principal period of popularity (280). Both *Ask the Dust* and “The Wrath of God” conform to the subgenre of disaster fiction identifying a religious cult with natural calamities, a major story type whose popularity according to Davis extends from the 1930s to the 1950s (280).

Despite the fundamental role it plays in *Ask the Dust*, seldom have Fante’s scholars concentrated on the Long Beach earthquake and, when studied, the cataclysmic event is

¹⁴⁸ Originally written in 1951, “Yoneko’s Earthquake” is included in the collection *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* first published in 1988. Yamamoto’s short story correlates with Fante’s narrative production not only in view of the depiction of the 1933 earthquake, but also in its pioneering representation of the interethnic animosities between the Japanese and the Filipino communities, a theme at the center of Fante’s short story “Mary Osaka I Love You”, originally published in October 1942 in *Good Housekeeping* and later included in the collection *The Big Hunger*. “Yoneko’s Earthquake” illustrates the Japanese stereotypic exoticization of Filipinos, whose history and struggles were supposed to be the topic of Fante’s novel *The Little Brown Brothers* (*Selected Letters* 174-176). For more information on Fante’s “Asian writings” see Bordin (*Un’etnicità* 157-187, and “The Marginalizing”), Collins (John Fante 174-180), Mariani (“Narrating”), and Zulli.

¹⁴⁹ Originally included in in the collection *Dago Red*, the short story “The Wrath of God” on the 1933 Long Beach earthquake was a cause of dispute between Fante and his editor Pascal Covici of Viking Press. Despite the author expressed his resolute desire to include the short story in the collection (*Selected Letters* 167), “The Wrath of God” was judged “not in key” (171) with the rest of the stories. This disagreement, inflated by a divergence of opinion over the advertising campaign of the collection, led Fante on August 1, 1940 to send a telegram announcing the breaking of the contract (*Selected Letters* 173). In spite of the mending mediation of another editor of the publishing house, Fante was resolved on including the short story in the collection and on August 9 expressed this condition to the new editor: “I disagree with your opinion that ‘The Wrath of God’ is not in key. [...] It seems to me very important that ‘The Wrath of God’ be included. [...] The story stays. It is the only point on which I insist” (*Selected Letters* 174).

analyzed almost uniquely in its connections with religion and as an imaginative divine punishment ascribable to what Fine defines as “Bandini’s postcoital Catholic guilt” (*Imagining* 187).¹⁵⁰ Jay Martin, for example, argues that “the earthquake is an emblem, meditatively considered, of the overthrow of [...] [the protagonist’s] spiritual sloth” (35). Nevertheless, I believe that the earthquake plays an important role in the narrative that draws back to the juxtaposition between the pastoral and the sublime, especially when analyzed in relation to Arturo’s manifestation of his sexuality. The natural disaster is in fact preceded by Arturo’s loss of virginity with Vera Rivken, the Jewish housekeeper who had followed the protagonist to his hotel room and shown him her disfigured body. The sexual relation is mediated by an imaginative process of substitution: Vera in fact impersonates Camilla in order to entice Arturo, who in turn imagines to be Cortés to unleash his “conquering spirit” (*Ask* 512) and fancifully tame and possess the Mayan Princess who reigns over a natural land where “there are no Americans, and no California. Only deserts and mountains and the sea” (517).

“Here too history was made” (*Ask* 518), remarks the satisfied protagonist before leaving Vera’s room. Arturo, in fact, imaginatively aligns the intercourse to a colonial conquest and attempts to “rewrite” the history of the process of taming California’s sublime natural dimension. Imaginatively, the protagonist inscribes himself within this process,¹⁵¹ but soon acknowledges his self-deception and recognizes that the woman he lost his virginity with is not a Mayan princess ruling over California’s nature, but a lonely and poor woman, a grotesque figure who, like him, roams the streets of Los Angeles in search of some company. It is in fact the intense feeling of loneliness creeping upon the protagonist (*Ask* 519) that

¹⁵⁰ Fine marks a clear distinction between the author and the protagonist, arguing that “the young Bandini may envision the earthquake as apocalypse, but Fante makes it clear that the envisioning is that of an impressionistic, guilt-haunted Bandini, not the author’s own apocalyptic haunting” (*Imagining* 188).

¹⁵¹ A process from which he is excluded because of his ethnic origins and poverty.

induces his meditations on mortality and sin that precede the tremors of the earthquake.¹⁵²

Moreover, Arturo's realization of his caducity and ephemerality occurs among the sand dunes of Long Beach, a spatial dimension that metaphorically evokes to the sublime spatial dimension of the Mojave desert where the novel comes to an end. Before Long Beach is crushed by the earthquake, the protagonist in fact attempts to reach the ocean but imaginatively finds himself lost within a wasteland that anticipates the annihilating dimension of the desert against which eventually the destinies of Fante's characters are pitted.

This is the sea, and this is Arturo, and the sea is real, and Arturo believes it real. Then I turn from the sea, and everywhere I look there is land; I walk on and on, and still the land goes stretching away to the horizons. A year, five years, ten years, and I have not seen the sea. I say unto myself, but what has happened to the sea? And I answer, the sea is back there, back in the reservoir of memory. The sea is a myth. There never was a sea. But there was a sea! I tell you I was born on the seashore! I bathed in the waters of the sea! It gave me food and it gave me peace, and its fascinating distances fed my dreams! No Arturo, there never was a sea. You dream and you wish, but you go on through the wasteland. (*Ask* 520)

Arturo's imaginative search for the ocean after the intercourse reinforces the reading of the sexual relation with Vera as a colonial attempt to tame the natural dimension of California. Indeed, the protagonist's imaginative quest allegorically recalls the westward expansion of the country to the edge of the Pacific, the spatial dimension "where the dream offered its

¹⁵² See the passage from the novel: "But there was a tinge of darkness in the back of my mind [...] and it seemed to come stronger; some disturbance of peace, something vague and nameless seeping into my mind. [...] It crept upon me — restlessness, the loneliness. What was the matter? I felt my pulse. It was good. [...] Then it came to me like crashing thunder, like death and destruction [...] the world seemed a myth, a transparent plane, and all things upon it were here for only a little while; all of us, Bandini, and Hackmuth and Camilla and Vera, all of us were here for a little while, and then we were somewhere else; we were not alive at all; we approached living, but we never achieved it. We are going, to die. Everybody was going to die. Even you, Arturo, even you must die" (*Ask* 518-519).

most seductive image” (Fine *Imagining* 88) but also came to an end.¹⁵³ According to Mark Royden Winchell, Southern California is the region where “the pioneer spirit runs up against the unbreachable boundary of the Pacific Ocean” (166).

The protagonist’s attempt of colonization faces the opposition of the sublime dimension of nature, which, manifesting itself through the earthquake and the imaginative dimension of a desert wasteland, emerges as the prime reason behind Arturo’s identification of the shocks with a divine response. In other words, I believe that Arturo identifies the natural disaster with a supernatural punishment not so much because of his sexual relation with Vera as argued by Fante’s scholars, but rather because of what it symbolically signifies after the housekeeper impersonates Camilla who imaginatively embodies to Arturo the untamed sublime nature of California. Thus, *Ask the Dust* seems to develop according to Mondillo’s aforementioned theorization of the two interconnected structural tensions between man and nature and between nature and the divine that the scholar applies to *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (Mondillo 111). As in Fante’s first novel, in fact, a religious superstructure is imaginatively bestowed upon the sublime manifestation of nature which, epitomized in *Ask the Dust* by the earthquake, for the protagonist epitomizes the expression of the wrath of God in response to his failed attempt to tame the Californian natural dimension:

Suddenly I felt a rumble, then a roar. The stone bench fell away from me and thumped into the sand. I looked beyond to the Long Beach skyline; the tall buildings were swaying. Under me the sand gave way; I staggered, found safer

¹⁵³ According to Fine, “as a mental construct or physical presence [...] the Pacific Ocean persists as an image in LA fiction, one which evokes a sense of arriving at the end of the line, the border of dreams, the place where the road and the hope run out” (“Beginning” 59). The scholar argues in fact that the menace of the ocean recurs as a motif in California’s literary production of the 1930s, especially in Cain’s, Chandler’s, and Macdonald’s crime novels. Also *Ask the Dust* features the image of the Pacific Ocean as a lethal sublime natural dimension. In the novel, in fact, Arturo imagines Camilla’s death by drowning after the waitress pretends not to know how to swim (482-483). This is the first time that Arturo imagines Camilla’s death, an imaginative process that recurs also after the earthquake (524) and eventually in the desert (602).

footing. It happened again. It was an earthquake. Now there were screams. Then dust. Then crumbling and roaring. I turned round and round in a circle. I had done this. I had done this. I stood with my mouth open, paralysed, looking about me. I ran a few steps towards the sea. Then I ran back. You did it, Arturo. This is the wrath of God. You did it. [...] You did it, Arturo. Up in that room on that bed you did it. (*Ask* 521-522)

The protagonist's failed attempt to inscribe himself within the process of taming California's sublime natural dimension metaphorically connects him to the urban space of Los Angeles he inhabits. Indeed, as highlighted by Cooper, Los Angeles is imaginatively tied in with the innermost impulses of the protagonist ("John Fante's Eternal" 93), whose sins and destiny are inexorably intertwined with those of the city. In line with Fine's reading of the natural calamity as a symbol of change ("Introduction" 14), after the earthquake, the protagonist is transformed and his relationship with the city is altered. "Something had happened to Arturo Bandini" (*Ask* 526), recognizes the protagonist, who, once back in Los Angeles, is terrified of skyscrapers¹⁵⁴ and admits: "The city was the same, but I was afraid" (526). Indeed, although the protagonist expresses his fear for earthquakes since the beginning of the novel (*Ask* 423), it is only after experiencing the violent manifestation of the sublime dimension of nature in response to his attempt of conquest that he recognizes that "Los Angeles was doomed" (527) and destined to an apocalyptic future. Thus, Arturo's recognition that Los Angeles was doomed to be destroyed by another earthquake elicits a change in the

¹⁵⁴ According to Lefebvre, skyscrapers represent phallic elements that convey "an impression of authority to each spectator" (262). After Arturo's manifestation of his sexuality and attempt to tame the Californian sublime natural dimension, skyscrapers imaginatively become for the protagonist "traps to kill you when the earth shook" (*Ask* 526). Arguably, the protagonist's association is ascribable to his latent fear for the manifestation of his sexuality that, aligned to the city's attempt to tame the natural dimension of California in the intercourse with Vera, is projected onto the city and its skyscrapers. From this perspective, the city is imaginatively connected to Arturo and epitomizes a masculine space pitted against a feminine sublime natural dimension associated by the protagonist to Camilla. Indeed, just like Arturo attempts to conquer and tame the imagined Mayan princess Camilla, Los Angeles attempts to enlarge and create a pastoral garden at the expenses of the region's wild natural dimension.

protagonist and in his relation with the urban dimension that arguably contributes to his decision to discard his pedestrian habits.

These people walking in and out of huge concrete buildings – someone should warn them. It would come again; it had to come again, another earthquake to level the city and destroy it forever. It would happen any minute. It would kill a lot of people, but not me. Because I was going to keep out of these streets, and away from falling debris. (*Ask* 526)

“The world was dust, and dust it would become” (*Ask* 529),¹⁵⁵ eventually recognizes the protagonist, not just the dust of the title carried by the dream seekers from the East and the Mid-West, but also the sandy dust blown from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts. These are the sublime spaces pitted against the city where death is “a thing of no great importance” and the “ageless wind” (*Ask* 602) covers the passage of any form of life.

Although the desert assumes foremost significance with Camilla’s supposed death at the end of the novel, its presence is constantly evoked by its unpredictable hot dry winds that jam with sandy dust the mechanism of Arturo’s typewriter.¹⁵⁶ These are the same winds that Joan Didion associates to violence, death, and suicide (*Slouching* 19)¹⁵⁷ and that, Raymond Chandler writes, “make your nerves jump and your skin itch”, inducing “meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks” (7).¹⁵⁸ As highlighted by

¹⁵⁵ According to Livorni, dust has a symbolic importance in the Bandini quartet and especially in *Ask the Dust*, where, after the earthquake, it assumes apocalyptic significance (57).

¹⁵⁶ See the passage from the novel: “It was a hot night. Sand from the Mojave had blown across the city. Tiny brown grains of sand clung to my fingertips whenever I touched anything, and when I got back to my room I found the mechanism of my new typewriter glutted with sand. It was in my ears and in my hair. When I took off my clothes it fell like powder to the floor. It was even between the sheets of my bed” (*Ask* 449).

¹⁵⁷ Didion writes: “Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, and, just as the reliably long and bitter winters of New England determine the way life is lived there, so the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are” (*Slouching* 179-180).

¹⁵⁸ Raymond Chandler is considered one of the founders of the hardboiled fiction, a literary genre influenced by detective, noir, and western fiction that finds in Los Angeles its prime setting. Chandler and Fante are both

McWilliams, these winds, “once called ‘northers,’ but which the Spanish called ‘santannas’” (11), do “not permit the residents to forget the nearness of the desert” (200), the sublime spatial dimension that, blowing sand and dust on the streets of Los Angeles, claims back the spaces appropriated by the city. “Southern California is inclined to forget the desert, but the desert is always there and it haunts the imagination of the region” (McWilliams 200), emerging as a sublime dimension that fosters an imaginative process either of taming of the wilderness or escape from civilization. As highlighted by Kevin Starr:

For those who crossed it in the early years the desert was the cruel, killing barrier before the garden of the Pacific, the ordeal of Sinai before the Promised Land. By the end of the [nineteenth] century, having settled the continental edge, Americans started to drift eastward into the desert regions. Some dreamt of conquest [...], [o]thers sought escape from civilization. (*Americans* 385)

Recurring to Peter Plagens’s definition of Los Angeles’s process of urbanization as an “ecology of evil” (67),¹⁵⁹ Davis recognizes “the rapidly diminishing distance between the solitude of the Mojave and the gridlock of suburban life” (*City* 8). Analyzing the spatial development of the urban dimension of Los Angeles at the expenses of the desert, the scholar argues, “it seems almost a truism that the wild and the urban must be inversely related to one another: the growth of the latter must involve a net subtraction from the former. In fact, the relationship is far more paradoxical” (*Ecology* 239). Despite Los Angeles emerges as “a city without boundaries, which ate the desert [...] and dreamt of becoming infinite” (Davis *City* 12), the sublime dimension of the desert is interconnected with the urban dimension and

labeled as noirs by Davis and owe their literary launch to Mencken. While in 1932, Fante published his first short story “Altar Boy” in Mencken’s magazine *The American Mercury*, one year later Chandler published his first short story “Blackmailers Don’t Shoot” in *Black Mask*, a pulp magazine founded by the Baltimore critic in 1920. For more information on Chandler, see Jameson (*Raymond Chandler*) and Babener (“Raymond Chandler”).

¹⁵⁹ Plagens argues: “LA’s worst quality is a spiritual disease, a thinly disguised sense of hopelessness and frenetic ennui” (68).

actively opposes its attempt of spatial conquest. As such, it emerges in Fante's novel.

As highlighted by Viscusi, in *Ask the Dust*, Los Angeles “rises and subsides in the landscape with the random rhythm of dunes in the desert” (90). Depicted by Arturo as a “sad flower in the sand” (*Ask* 414), Los Angeles is carved from and juxtaposed to the sublime dimension of the desert. As such, the city becomes further cause for identification and pride on the part of the young writer who interprets its creation as the manifestation of Anglos' superiority over Mexicans:¹⁶⁰

I was an American, and goddamn proud of it. This great city, these mighty pavements and proud buildings, they were the voice of my America. From sand and cactus we Americans had carved an empire. Camilla's people had had their chance. They had failed. We Americans had turned the trick. Thank God for my country. Thank God I had been born an American! (*Ask* 455)¹⁶¹

Los Angeles's emergence from the desert and its attempt to tame the surrounding sublime natural dimension are aligned by Arturo to his relation with Camilla, imagined by the protagonist as the personification of “The Long Lost Hills” (*Ask* 470) of the pre-urban and native natural dimension of California.¹⁶² From this standpoint, the city's conquest of the

¹⁶⁰ As highlighted by Laurila, “beliefs in the inferiority of Mexicans and the superiority of Anglos were the prevailing societal attitude in 1930s Los Angeles. It would be difficult to fully understand *Ask the Dust* without some awareness of this attitude” (118).

¹⁶¹ This scene is saturated with Fante's sharp irony. Indeed, Arturo's identification as an American and imaginative alignment with Los Angeles's spatial conquest of the desert is preceded by his retrieval of a cigarette butt from a gutter, an act that highlights the poverty of the protagonist and his exclusion from the American and Californian dreams of prosperity and abundance: “In the gutter I saw a long cigarette butt. I picked it up without shame, lit it as I stood with one foot in the gutter, puffed it and exhaled towards the stars” (*Ask* 455).

¹⁶² “The Long Lost Hills” is the title selected by Hackmuth for Bandini's second short story, originally a letter to the editor. Despite the content of the story is not disclosed, when the young writer starts to write the letter, he explains: “Dear Mr Hackmuth, I wrote, describing the glorious past, dear Hackmuth, page upon page, the sun a ball of fire in the West, slowly strangling in a fog bank rising off the coast” (*Ask* 433). From the title selected by Hackmuth and the few elements offered by the protagonist, arguably “The Long Lost Hills” features the past of Southern California that Arturo imaginatively aligns to Camilla. See this passage from the novel: “I

desert epitomizes for the young writer his innermost desire of “triumph of [...] man over space” (*Ask* 577).¹⁶³ Nevertheless, after the manifestation of the sublime potential of nature via the earthquake, the protagonist recognizes that Los Angeles is “a city with a curse upon it” (*Ask* 527), destined to succumb to a violent natural counterforce; in the last part of the novel this is represented by the desert, a space indifferent to the destiny of the urban dimension and the dream seekers roaming its streets. In line with Ryan’s postulation that in Fante’s narrative “the lifeless becomes animate” (196), the desert emerges as a sentient sublime spatial dimension that refuses to be tamed, an imperishable wild animal that taunts the ephemerality of mankind and obliterates the signs of its existence.

Here was the endlessly mute placidity of nature, indifferent to the great city; here was the desert beneath these streets, around these streets, waiting for the city to die, to cover it with timeless sand once more. There came over me a terrifying sense of understanding about the meaning and the pathetic destiny of men. The desert was always there, a patient white animal, waiting for men to die, for civilizations to flicker and pass into the darkness. Then men seemed brave to me, and I was proud to be numbered among them. All the evil of the world seemed not evil at all, but inevitable and good and part of that endless struggle to keep the desert down. (*Ask* 548)

In response to the sublime power of nature, Arturo emerges as a philanthropist¹⁶⁴ that unites mankind in the common struggle against the untamable forces of nature represented by the

said, ‘Ah Camilla, you lost girl! Open your long fingers and give me back my tired soul! Kiss me with your mouth because I hunger for the bread of a Mexican hill’ (*Ask* 561).

¹⁶³ Arturo explains with this expression the feeling of bravery and power experienced after smoking marijuana with Camilla. Indeed, the substance temporarily allows Arturo to overcome the feeling of estrangement that Camilla’s rootedness in the region evokes in him, giving him the illusion of the possibility of conquest and taming. Nevertheless, once the effects of marijuana wear off, the protagonist recognizes the deterioration of his hopes of conquest and is left with “nothing but the old sense of guilt, the sense of crime and violation, the sin of destruction” (*Ask* 578). As highlighted by Bordin, marijuana in *Ask the Dust* is represented as a destructive element (*Un’etnicità* 139) that leads to addiction and dehumanization, as underlined by the scene in the black neighborhood of Los Angeles where Arturo and Camilla buy the substance (*Ask* 574-575).

¹⁶⁴ Imaginatively the protagonist portrays himself as a “lover of man and beast alike” (*Ask* 417, 493, 539).

desert patiently waiting to swallow and conceal any sign of human life. “Dying was a supreme task” (*Ask* 548), recognizes the protagonist, and his rival in love Sammy, the sick Anglo bartender living in a shack at the edge of the Santa Ana,¹⁶⁵ would soon die and “be swallowed by the desert” (548). From this perspective, his former adversary imaginatively becomes a comrade for the protagonist, who admits: “Murderer or bartender or writer, it didn’t matter: his fate was the common fate of all, his finish my finish; and here tonight in this city of darkened windows were other millions like him and like me: as indistinguishable as dying blades of grass” (548).

Eventually, as underlined by Bordin, the desert emerges as a space of death (“Palme” 13), against which, at the end of the novel, the destinies of Fante’s characters are pitted. Indeed, after Arturo’s ill-fated last attempt to encase his conflicted relation with Camilla within his canons of domestication of the waitress’ exoticized alterity,¹⁶⁶ she escapes in the

¹⁶⁵ Loved by Camilla, Sammy is an interesting character in *Ask the Dust* but often overlooked by Fante’s scholars. Differently from the rest of the characters in the novel, his origins are not revealed; his racist views on Mexicans, however, align him to the ideals of the “native sons,” Californian-born Anglos who wanted to keep the region “a white man’s paradise” (McWilliams 178). The bartender’s decision to move to the edge of the Santa Ana, where he writes pulp western stories, is attributable to his poor health after the diagnosis of tuberculosis. Despite curative powers were conferred to Los Angeles’s Mediterranean climate, as highlighted by McWilliams, towns located near the desert, far from the polluted air of the city, were promoted and marketed as health resorts (120-121). Sammy’s decision to move to the edge of the desert has also a high symbolical meaning; it can be interpreted as a withdrawal from civilization that imaginatively makes him an anti-progressive western hero like the characters of his stories but also aligns him with the socialist colony of Llano del Rio that settled and colonized the southern edge of the Mojave Desert. Devised by Job Harriman to be “Socialism’s New Jerusalem” (Harriman, qtd. in Davis, *City* 12), the Llano del Rio Colony transformed a part of the Mojave “into a small Socialist civilization” (9) with crops and an efficient irrigation system.

¹⁶⁶ After Camilla’s escape from the mental institution where she was hospitalized ensuing a nervous breakdown (*Ask* 584), she roams the cities of Northern California asking the protagonist to wire her some money. Her return to Los Angeles provides Arturo with the opportunity to pursue a last attempt to tame Camilla’s wild spirit and encase their relation within his standards of normativity: the protagonist imaginatively conceives an idyllic family portrait where the two of them and a puppy would happily live together in Laguna Beach: “She couldn’t stay in Los Angeles. She needed rest, a chance to eat and sleep, drink a lot of milk and take long walks. All at once I was full of plans. Laguna Beach! That was the place for her. [...] We didn’t have to be

desert to reach Sammy, who, however, dooms her to wander among the sand dunes towards her supposed death. “Why should I search for her? What could I bring her but a return to the brutal wilderness that had broken her?” (*Ask* 602),¹⁶⁷ wonders the protagonist who, as highlighted by Scott Bryson, recognizes “nature’s elemental wildness and mystery” (172) and aligns Camilla to the sublime natural dimension of Southern California one last time.¹⁶⁸ Defenseless against the sublime potential of nature, the defeated protagonist is left with one last return to make.¹⁶⁹ Before driving back to Los Angeles, however, Arturo recognizes the failure of the pastoral attempt to subdue California’s wilderness: hurling his book on Vera Rivken and his colonial attempt to “rewrite” the region’s process of colonization among the sand dunes,¹⁷⁰ the protagonist relinquishes his dream to conquest and tame an imaginative Mayan Princess to the oblivion of the sublime Mojave.

married, brother and sister was alright with me. We could go swimming and take long walks along the Balboa shore. We could sit by the fireplace when the fog was heavy. We could sleep under deep blankets when the wind roared off the sea. [...] ‘And a dog!’ I said. ‘I’ll get you a little dog. A little pup. A Scottie. And we’ll call him Willie’” (*Ask* 592-593).

¹⁶⁷ Arturo recurs to the term “wilderness” to describe the urban dimension of Los Angeles and Camilla’s humble apartment, which, imaginatively for the protagonist, emerge as noxious spatial dimensions that have corrupted her untamable native spirit. Elliott argues: “while he becomes one of the pale anxious faces of the modern American city, he imagines, she cannot be contained in this way” (538).

¹⁶⁸ See the passage from the novel: “The hills had her now. Let these hills hide her! Let her go back to the loneliness of the intimate hills. Let her live with stones and sky, with the wind blowing her hair to the end. Let her go that way” (*Ask* 602).

¹⁶⁹ Despite the symbolical difference with *Ask the Dust*, the image of the protagonist’s departure to Los Angeles appears also at the end of *1933 Was a Bad Year*, *The Road to Los Angeles*, and *Dreams from Bunker Hill*.

¹⁷⁰ Scholars are divided on how to interpret this scene and in general Arturo’s conflicted relation with his and Camilla’s ethnic heritages. According to Ryan the book represents Arturo’s “writerly self” (208); hurling it across Camilla’s supposed deathbed, the protagonist is “writing himself into the space of her absence” (208). Conversely, Tumolo argues: “Arturo’s identity is somewhat more open and accepting at the end of the novel” (29). Whether eventually *Ask the Dust* reiterates fictions of whiteness as highlighted by Elliott or promotes a cross-cultural solidarity as highlighted by Roszak is a question that remains unanswered.

CONCLUSIONS

AN AMERICAN AUTHOR

In the 1980's foreword to the Black Sparrow edition of *Ask the Dust*, Charles Bukowski writes, "there is much more to the story of John Fante" (7); more than forty years later, these words assume a different meaning but remain valid. Despite Fante's "rediscovery" in the 1980s and the following critical fortune related to the emergence of the nascent canon of Italian American Studies, his categorization as a niche author has impeded his rightful inclusion to American canonical literature, hindering a broader analysis of his works.

Highlighting Fante's attention to the specificities of place, this work has moved from recent studies on space in the author's narrative production and analyzed the symbolism of the natural landscapes of Colorado and California represented in the author's works, attempting to encase them within the dichotomous juxtaposition of the pastoral and the sublime. Eluding a precise definition, once applied to the idealized and imaginatively boundless American natural landscape, these categories have undergone a process of nationalization that have entailed the transmutation of the European philosophical tradition and interweaved with rhetoric elements at the hearth of the US mythical foundations.

Including Fante's works within this discourse, this study aims at emancipating the author from the often-restricting categorization of Italian American literature and, analyzing his representation of the natural landscapes of the American West — a theme that interested authors since the emergence of an American literary canon —, attempts to recognize his primary relevance within *mainstream* American literature. I want to conclude this work recurring to the words of Fante's friend Carey McWilliams, who, in a letter addressed to a graduate student interested in Fante's life dated February 18, 1972, argues, "in my view, for what it may be worth, John is as American as Huckleberry Finn" (*Selected Letters* 291).

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