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(Anti)Heroes and Imaginative Frontiers

John Fante's *Ask the Dust* as a Post-Frontier Western

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Abstract

Despite not conforming to a traditional Western story, John Fante's second novel *Ask the Dust* (1939) re-evokes and subverts traditional tropes and symbols associated with the history and mythology of the American West and its quintessential spatial dimension of the Frontier. Focusing on its anti-heroic characters and the imaginative frontiers they construct, the essay interprets Fante's novel as a work that reconfigures the mythic foundations of the American conquest while laying bare the violent colonial mechanisms that sustain them. Moving from the grotesque portrayal of the sick, idle, and senescent Anglo characters represented in the novel as products of the failed myth of renewal promised by the Frontier, the analysis then turns to the Italian American protagonist and aspiring writer Arturo Bandini and his conflicted and obsessive relationship with the Mexican waitress Camilla Lopez. Interpreted as an imaginative re-enactment of the colonial process of continental conquest, Arturo's obsessive and fetishized desire for Camilla becomes the key to reading Fante's novel as a post-Frontier Western. The essay proposes a reading of *Ask the Dust* as a work that both draws upon and dismantles the mythical foundations of the American Frontier, anticipating the revisionist impulse that would begin to reshape the Western genre from the 1960s.

1. Introduction

John Fante's work is imbued with traces of the Western mythos and Frontier imagery. Multifaceted and pervasive, the space of the American West surfaces – at times explicitly, at others obliquely – throughout his oeuvre. Its presence is perhaps most evident in the 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*, where the spatial dimension of the Frontier and its symbolism is not only implicitly evoked but foregrounded throughout the narrative. Published at the dawn of the Golden Age of the Western, while Fante was already active in the film industry, *Ask the Dust* does not conform to the conventions of the genre and markedly diverges from the narrative

formulas that Hollywood would soon popularize.[1] Nevertheless, by portraying the conflicted relationships among its multiethnic characters and the spaces they inhabit, the novel both evokes and subverts tropes and symbols associated with the colonial conquest of the continent and the mythology of the American West. In that light, the present essay proposes a reading of *Ask the Dust* as a post-Frontier Western, in which anti-heroic characters negotiate their identities through the construction and eventual retreat into imaginative frontiers.

Moving from the grotesque portrayal of sick, aging, and morally compromised Anglo characters as products of the failed myth of abundance and renewal promised by the Frontier, the analysis then turns to the protagonist, aspiring writer Arturo Bandini. Excluded from the Frontier's promise of renewal and opportunity by his poverty and Italian descent, Arturo seeks to appropriate its symbolic space through his conflicted and ultimately destructive relationship with Camilla Lopez, the Mexican waitress at the run-down saloon the Columbia Buffet. Woven from insecurity, obsession, and fleeting glimpses of compassion rooted in shared marginality, the young protagonist's troubled bond with Camilla becomes his wretched way of writing himself into the colonial legacy of the continental conquest. For this to occur, however, Camilla must be stripped of her individuality and recast as an archetype of a vanishing Native race – a passive receptacle onto which Bandini can project his imaginative frontier, thus re-enacting the symbolic dynamics of settler colonialism. Shaping the fraught connection between the two main characters, this process lies at the heart of the novel and is resolved only in its finale, as Camilla's erasure exposes the inevitable hollowness underpinning Arturo's quest.

Interpreting Fante's novel as engaging with and challenging the history of the American conquest and the mythology of the American West means situating it within the long-standing rhetorical and ideological debates concerning the legacy of the Frontier, whose meaning has remained a point of contention among Western historians ever since Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 influential thesis.[2] At the same time, this interpretive framework places the novel in dialogue with the revisionist impulses of later reworkings of the Western genre – novels such as *Warlock* (1958), *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), and *Blood Meridian* (1985), as well as films like

[1] According to Frank Gruber there are seven basic plots that conventionally inform the Western: 1) *The Union Pacific Story*; 2) *The Ranch Story*; 3) *The Empire Story*; 4) *The Revenge Story*; 5) *Custer's Last Stand*; 6) *The Outlaw Story*; and 7) *The Marshal Story* (1967, 184-186). Yet, as the pulp author admits, "it is not the plot that is important" (Gruber 1967, 186). Rather, the genre's essence lies in its emphasis on setting and iconography. John G. Cawelti notes how easily the Western formula can be recognized: "When we see a couple of characters dressed in ten-gallon hats and riding horses we know we are in a Western" (1984, 61). Comprehensive studies of the Western and its evolution include James K. Folsom's *The American Western Novel* (1966), John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* (1970), and Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* (1992).

[2] According to Turner's Frontier thesis, American democracy and national identity were shaped by the process of westward expansion. Turner argues that the continuous effort to tame the wilderness at the meeting point of civilization and savagery fostered distinctive American traits and marked a decisive fracture with European societies still burdened by feudalism.

The Wild Bunch (1969), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), and *Unforgiven* (1992), among many others – which set out to deconstruct the traditional narratives surrounding the Frontier's mythology. It is upon this constant tension between retrieval and debunking of the Western tradition that *Ask the Dust* unfolds, thereby rightfully claiming an important place within the mid-century Los Angeles literary tradition recently identified by Michael Docherty – a tradition that, despite being set in a post-Frontier multiethnic urban dimension, continues to be shaped by persistent "Frontier dynamics" (2024, 22). Although Docherty devotes considerable attention to Fante, the study confines itself to his unpublished or lesser-known works, purposely omitting "any substantial reading of the critically well-trodden *Ask the Dust*" (2024, 31). In contrast, this essay focuses precisely on Fante's most famous work, providing a reading that moves beyond its traditional critical reception and, in uncovering its complex and ambivalent rapport with the foundational myth of the American West, reveals the central importance of the Frontier imaginary in the novel.

What, then, does it mean to read *Ask the Dust* as a post-Frontier Western? The term post-Frontier here does not simply refer to the historical period following the 1890 announcement by the US Census Bureau that a clear line separating settled and unsettled land could no longer be drawn. Rather, it denotes a critical approach that questions and attempts to move beyond Turner's dualistic Frontier as a zone of opposition between East and West, civilization and wilderness, pioneer and savage. Scholars have argued, through different interpretive lenses and critical angles, for "post-Western" approaches that move beyond this dichotomic vision and reappraise the Frontier as a multifaceted and nuanced construct (Campbell 2013; Klein 1996; Knobloch 1996; Kollin 2007; Scharff 1999). "Frontier, then, is an unsubtle concept in a subtle world" (Limerick 1987, 25), argues Patricia Nelson Limerick, who promotes a less rigid and deterministic framework for understanding the complexities of the American West, foretelling the emergence of new critical paradigms that would later be defined by Stephen Tatum as "Postfrontier Horizons" (2004, 460).

To consider *Ask the Dust* a post-Frontier Western is eventually to recognize in Fante this revisionist impulse that questions and rewrites the master narrative of westward expansion and colonization. While Fante's work predates the emergence of explicitly revisionist, anti-, or post-Western narratives, the novel nonetheless operates as an early site of deconstruction of the genre's canon and its dominant imagery, thereby emerging as a precursor to these later transformative rearticulations. Thus, ironically, in the same year of the Western's cinematographic ascendance through landmark productions such as *Dodge City*, *Jesse James*, *Union Pacific*, *Destry Rides Again*, and *Stagecoach*, *Ask the Dust* lays bare the genre's fault lines, staging a Western in which the foundational ideals of Frontier heroism are already hollowed out and exhausted. By projecting alternative imagined frontiers, the novel gives voice

to the desire of marginalized subjects to write themselves into the foundational myth of the American Frontier long after its dissipation. Yet, for those subjects, this retrospective identification proves a failed and hollow endeavor resulting not in heroic belonging but in mere grotesque survival – a condition that thoroughly echoes that of the Anglo characters in the novel.

2. "The dusty people in the dusty lobby"

"Dust and old buildings and old people sitting at windows, old people tottering out of doors, old people moving painfully along the dark street" (Fante 2002, 45). In stark contrast to the celebrated youth and vitality of the Frontier's pioneers and early settlers, this is how Arturo depicts the Anglo residents of Los Angeles. Sick, idle, and senescent, these grotesque figures exemplify the deepest anxieties voiced by critics of urban life as early as Jeffersonian agrarianism. Yet, Fante does not partake in "the powerful tradition of anti-urbanism" that scholars like Morton and Lucia White have identified "in the history of American thought" (1962, 3). On the contrary, as recognized by Stephen Cooper, the author "celebrates, even exalts the rough substance of life as he finds it in the rented rooms and sooty streets of old L.A." (1995, 84). Fante does not lament the decline of an agrarian past, nor does he denounce the city as a space of moral decay. Rather, in line with David Río Raigadas's analysis of post-Frontier authors, he reframes "the city landscape as a fundamental feature of the New West" (2016, 40), challenging the enduring myth that cast the American West – and California as its final frontier – in the role of a land of boundless renewal and promise for Anglo settlers.

This bitter unraveling of the Frontier's narrative of regeneration and prosperity emerges with clarity as Arturo reflects on the tragic fate of these transplanted Midwesterners who "tore themselves out by the roots in their last days, deserted the smug prosperity of Kansas City and Chicago and Peoria to find a place in the sun" (Fante 2002, 45). Far removed from the idealized image of heroic agents of progress, this defeated crowd is made up of "the uprooted ones, the empty sad folks" who had come "to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun, with just enough money to live until the sun killed them" (2002, 45). These are the Smiths, Parkers, and Joneses, the weary Anglo heirs to the settler legacy who have been deceived by "other and greater thieves" (Fante 2002, 45) – politicians, land speculators, and cultural boosters who sold sun-drenched fantasies in newspapers like Harrison Gray Otis's *Los Angeles Times* and magazines like Charles Fletcher Lummis's *Land of Sunshine*.[3]

[3] With the aim of luring settlers from the East and Midwest, at the turn of the 20th century and through the mid-1920s, these so-called boosters crafted a narrative that marketed Southern California for its Mediterranean climate, affordable land, and abundant job opportunities. In reaction to this propagandistic rhetoric, a literary tradition had emerged by the late 1920s – later defined by Mike Davis as *Noir* (2006, 18) – which dismantled the idealized vision of Southern California by turning each alluring promise into its dark and ominous counterpart. Davis and Mark Laurila align Fante's novels with this

It is their dust that gives the novel its title – the dust they carried with them on their journey from the East and the Midwest. This is not the dust of a showdown rising on a sun-beaten street, nor the dust trailing a posse riding across the plains. "It is a dust where nothing will grow," explains the author in the prologue to the novel, a heavy dust that testifies to "a culture without roots, a frantic grasping for entrenchment" (Fante 2000, 147). It is this dust that gathers on "the dusty halls," "the dusty lobby," and the "the dusty people in the dusty lobby" (Fante 2000, 149) of Arturo's shabby residence, the Alta Loma hotel.

With its no-Mexicans, no-Jews policy, the Alta Loma functions as a Frontier-like threshold: a space that regulates access by drawing lines of separation along racial boundaries – even if, as with the dimensions of the Frontier, these boundaries remain porous.[4] The parallel with the Frontier becomes all the more striking insofar as the Alta Loma ostensibly offers, in Turnerian terms, promises of "perennial rebirth" (Turner 1985, 28). Yet this rebirth conceals a jarring process of effacement – a shedding of individual histories and identities in favor of a grotesque, decontextualized reinvention. In relation to the Frontier, Turner writes: "It strips off the garments of civilization" and forces he who crosses it to "accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish" (1985, 29). The Alta Loma imposes a similar logic, as its admission requires compliance with its policies of racial exclusion and the disavowal of one's own past as a precondition. This is precisely what happens to the protagonist upon his arrival at the hotel; only after the landlady, Mrs. Hargraves, translates Arturo's "intricate, oriental, illegible" signature into readably standard print and forces him to alter the entry for his hometown, from Colorado to Nebraska, is he granted access and acknowledged as a writer (Fante 2002, 49). But as access to the Alta Loma does not hinge on historical truth but on narrative compliance and revision, so it is for the dimension of the Frontier, where legitimacy is secured not through fidelity to the past, but through its transformation into a standardized script.

This understanding of the Frontier aligns with Richard Slotkin's interpretation of its history in terms of myth – "a history whose events are acts of imagination embodied in prose or pictures and set before the public" (1985, 24). Via Barthes, Slotkin argues that when history is translated into myth the distinction between past and present is blurred: "The past is made metaphorically equivalent to the present; and the present appears simply as a repetition of persistently recurring structures identified with the past" (1985, 24). Building on this observation, the historian concludes, "both past and present are reduced to instances displaying a single 'law' or principle of nature, which is seen as timeless in its relevance, and as transcending all historical contingencies" (Slotkin 1985, 24). In this light, Fante's sick and grotesque Anglos are rendered

specific literary tradition (2006, 41; 1999, 112).

[4] The two main relationships Arturo forms in the novel are with women of Mexican and Jewish descent, both of whom repeatedly cross the threshold of the hotel, transgressing its policies of racial exclusion.

metaphorical equivalents of the frontiersmen of the past, their present condition laying bare the bitter irony of the Frontier's failed promise.

Haunted by failure, disillusionment – and even a real ghost[5] – the Alta Loma is populated by displaced and dispossessed heirs to the Frontier myth. Among this cluster of misfits, it is Hellfrick – the drunkard veteran who lives across the hall from Arturo – who most powerfully crystallizes the abject afterimage of the Frontier's failure and dissipation. Presented as an atheist whose meagre pension scarcely suffices to afford "the cheapest gin on the market," Hellfrick "lived perpetually in a grey bathrobe without a cord or button, and though he made a pretense at modesty he really didn't care, so that his bathrobe was always open and you saw much hair and bones underneath" (Fante 2002, 28). These disturbing glimpses of his wasted, emaciated body are compounded by the grim description of his living space: a squalid room cluttered with blackened sheets, scattered clothes, gin bottles, dishes, cigarette butts, and pulp-western magazines – a symbolic nod to his degenerate inheritance of the Frontier legacy.

But Hellfrick's deterioration extends beyond the physical, revealing a deeper form of moral and spiritual corruption. This is first glimpsed early on, as he drinks away Arturo's borrowed money and then seeks to settle his debts by luring the protagonist into the petty theft of milk, but it becomes all the more evident and disturbing as his initial reliance on alcohol morphs into a compulsive lust for meat. What begins as a nostalgic reminiscence of the "good old steaks you got back in Kansas City" (Fante 2002, 70) becomes a dehumanizing descent into a more primal, animalistic form of addiction. "Hellfrick the meat-eater, the man who never paid his just debts" (2002, 109), Arturo bitterly thinks. Tormented by hunger as the aromas of frying steaks creep under his door, day and night, he is met only with Hellfrick's refusal to share his abundant meals. Never offering "so much as the scraps from his plate" (Fante 2002, 109), Hellfrick encapsulates a ravenous greed and a gluttony devoid of civilization with none of the heroic aura of the mythic frontiersmen. The sole metaphorical connection, perhaps, is a distant echo of their insatiable hunger for land.

Hellfrick's trajectory of dehumanization and animalistic degradation culminates in his final appearance in the novel – a moment that, in Arturo's eyes, brands him a "murderer" (2002, 111) and marks the symbolic end of their deranged camaraderie. When neither Arturo's money nor his pension can pay for his carnivorous urges, Hellfrick resorts to the only remaining solution: trespassing into a cattle ranch to claim his "big thick steak" (2002, 109) straight from the source.

[5] A minor yet interesting figure in the novel, entirely overlooked by critics because of his brief appearance, is Bert Hargraves, the deceased husband of the Alta Loma's landlady. Mrs. Hargraves preserves his belongings as relics, proudly displaying them to Arturo. Disturbed by her stories, Arturo becomes convinced that Bert "was not dead at all" (Fante 2002, 50) and that his ghost prowls the hotel, haunting him for two nights straight. Though an ironic, secondary detail, Bert's wandering ghost nonetheless adds to the grotesque atmosphere of the Alta Loma.

This grisly episode casts Arturo as a reluctant witness and unwitting accomplice to the disturbing slaughter of a calf with a jackhammer. "A lover of man and beast alike" (2002, 16), as he repeatedly calls himself, Arturo is "sick and horrified" by the sheer violence and animalistic glee of Hellfrick, who, "exultant" in the thrill of the kill, grins at his bloody arms and clothes as he offers him a grim "lesson in butchering" (2002, 111).

As well as providing a revealing glimpse into Fante's suggestive depiction of animals,[6] this dramatic scene is charged with lingering echoes of the myth of the Frontier. Hellfrick's gruesome violence not only conjures the historical memory of the systematic extermination of buffalo herds by settlers in the second half of the 19th century, but also casts him in the familiar Western role of the rustler. A lawless figure driven by greed, the rustler plays an important role in Western fiction – not only as the villain from whom the hero draws legitimacy, but also as a subversive antihero whose defiance of property rights poses a threat to settler order. But Hellfrick lacks both ambition and the romantic aura often associated with Western villains. In fact, what propels the shabby pensioner to crime is his obsessive, animalistic hunger that consumes any trace of dignity and humanity. While Hellfrick may be a warped and pitiful parody of the Western villain, his role still prompts an essential question: if he is the outlaw, who is the cowboy? Or better: Who, if anyone, plays the role of the hero in *Ask the Dust*?

Before turning to Arturo, another character who has received comparatively little critical attention warrants closer scrutiny, particularly for his own failed re-enactment of Western heroism: the Anglo bartender at the Columbia Buffet, Samuel Wiggins. As the third component of the love triangle with Camilla and Arturo, Sammy emerges as the embodiment of normative whiteness in the novel – the man who could grant Camilla the Anglicized surname she yearns for even as he advises Arturo to mistreat the "Little Spick" (Fante 2002, 121). In a novel where even the most marginal characters are defined by their ethnic or geographical origins, Sammy stands out for the opacity of his own background. His racist views, however, align him with the ideology of the "Native Sons" – Californian-born Anglos who sought to preserve the region as "a white man's paradise" (McWilliams 1973, 178) – suggesting an implicit identification with this supremacist group and raising the possibility that he, too, hails from the region.

Like the other Anglo characters, Sammy is depicted as a grotesque, corrupt, and unhealthy figure who epitomizes the contradictions of the Frontier's promises. As with Hellfrick, Sammy's degenerate character and sickly disposition are reflected in the spaces he inhabits. In his first significant appearance,[7] as Camilla and Arturo drive him home, the novel ironically exposes the

[6] From peripheral yet symbolic figures like Pedro the mouse in *Ask the Dust* and the crabs in *The Road to Los Angeles* (1985), to full-fledged protagonists like El Valiente the donkey in *Bravo, Burro!* (1970) and Stupid the dog in "My Dog Stupid" (1986), animals are a recurring presence throughout Fante's works. Yet this theme has remained critically underexplored.

[7] Before this scene, Sammy is only briefly mentioned as "the thin bartender," with whom Arturo

contradictions of his supremacist racist views by revealing that he lives in a black neighborhood, described through Arturo's eyes as "an area of dirty frame houses and tired picket fences" (2002, 63). Although Arturo does not describe the interior of Sammy's home as he does with Hellfrick's room, he lingers on a striking detail outside: a dying pepper tree that has shed its brown leaves across the ground in front of the house. While this may seem a minor detail at first, it portends Sammy's sickness and impending death from tuberculosis, reinforcing the novel's core focus on identity, death, and space – a motif that reaches its climax in the closing desert scene with Camilla.

Mirroring the trajectory of the meat-greedy pensioner, the tubercular bartender increasingly takes shape as a grotesque, violent, and morally corrupt figure, while paradoxically assuming the tragic aura of an ascetic hero, who, entertaining fantasies of literary success as a pulp-western writer, withdraws to a shack on the edge of the Santa Ana Desert. In an attempt to enlist Arturo's help with Sammy's writing, Camilla hands him the bartender's first manuscript, a Western short story on a Texas Ranger titled "Coldwater Gatling," "the toughest man in leather they had down there" (Fante 2002, 116). "Hogwash" (2002, 116), declares Arturo upon reading the opening lines, yet he yields to Camilla's plea, thus becoming Sammy's rival on two fronts: one for her love, the other for authorship – the mythopoeic domain that, as I will later argue, becomes Arturo's ultimate imaginative vehicle to enter the space of the Frontier and the legacy of continental conquest.

Yet Sammy, much like Arturo, does not merely write about the Frontier; rather, he imaginatively fashions one of his own, as suggested by his decision to relocate to the edge of the Santa Ana. Although his illness seems to be his primary motive,[8] his retreat into the desert holds deeper symbolic resonance: it stands as a withdrawal from civilization into the wilderness – a metaphorical act that casts him in the mold of the Western heroes he portrays in his writing. But the tubercular would-be pulp writer is no "Coldwater Gatling" nor any of the rugged heroes he concocts in his cheap stories. Instead, he joins the grotesque cast of characters that define the region's landscape, perhaps even serving as the archetype of Anglo degeneration the novel repeatedly exposes. "He was tall, gaunt, a cadaver of a man, tanned almost to blackness" (2002, 137), observes Arturo in one of Sammy's final appearances in the novel, further enlarging the aforementioned ironic reversal of his racist logic – the same logic he enforces to regulate access to his abode. With its racial gatekeeping echoing that of the Alta Loma, the dusty and remote shanty "smelling of old underwear and the sleep of a sick body" (Fante 2002, 137) eventually

exchanges "a comradely greeting" (Fante 2002, 36) after shaming Camilla for the first time over her tattered shoes.

[8] Among the claims made by boosters promoting Southern California was the region's reputed healing climate. As Carey McWilliams observes, desert settlements were marketed as health resorts (1973, 120-121).

becomes inaccessible to Camilla. In a final act of ethnic hatred, Sammy bars her entry, casting her into the desert, exiled by her former coworker and lover to a fate of wandering and, presumably, death. Sammy's final act of exclusion will eventually enable Arturo to bring to a dubious conclusion his ongoing effort to shape and inhabit an imaginative frontier of his own and thereby to claim – or at least so he hopes – a place in the mythological legacy of the American conquest.

3. Bandini the conqueror

The idea that Fante's oeuvre imaginatively re-enacts American history through the character of Arturo was first articulated by Melissa Ryan. Exploring the role of imagination in the self-fashioning of American identities, Ryan notes that in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), the young "Arturo practices a Whitmanesque absorption of the exterior world into the ego," crafting his American identity "by taking in the world, by conquering and claiming the 'frontier' in its many formulations" (2004, 188). Although the parallel with the conquest of the Frontier remains unexamined in Ryan's essay, her insight opens up a new critical perspective that introduces a dual vision of Arturo as both an imaginative agent within the mythos of the American West and a critical observer of its narratives. It is from this perspective, Ryan argues, that Arturo's decision to become a writer in *Ask the Dust* enables him "to split himself – to live on the multiple planes of self and text, experience and myth – while it gives him the literary tools to both contain and exploit that schism" (2004, 201). Yet it seems necessary to take this analysis a step further and stress that Arturo never fully assumes the role of an external onlooker of the nation's historical trajectory in the tradition inaugurated by Crèvecœur and Tocqueville. On the contrary, despite his sharp critiques, Arturo consistently seeks inclusion in the national narrative, striving to bridge the distance that separates him from the Smiths, Parkers, and Joneses he scorns as embodiments of physical and moral decay.

> I have vomited at their newspapers, read their literature, observed their customs, eaten their food, desired their women, gaped at their art. But I am poor, and my name ends with a soft vowel, and they hate me and my father, and my father's father, and they would have my blood and put me down, but they are old now, dying in the sun and in the hot dust of the road, and I am young and full of hope and love for my country and my times. (Fante 2002, 47)

Despite indicting such Anglos and acknowledging that the future of the nation no longer belongs to them, Arturo cannot escape the sense of exclusion rooted in poverty and ethnicity – barriers that prevent him from accessing the national narrative and its legacy. "I know what you're thinking, Bandini," he tells himself, shaking his fist at the sky, "you are not to blame […] that

you were born poor, son of miseried peasants" (2002, 20). And yet, far from finding relief in this self-absolution, Arturo sinks into a deeper form of self-loathing – one that transcends his material and social marginality only to find its most poignant and intimate disqualification in what he refers to as his "ignorance of life" (2002, 18), namely, his lack of sexual experience. Thus, it is across the three intersecting axes of ethnicity, poverty, and sexuality that Arturo finds himself barred from the legacy of the Frontier. While the first two remain largely immutable, he sees his sexual inexperience as the one arena in which he might assert himself and claim entry into the space of the mythos. In this sense, much like the non-white protagonists of the Los Angeles literary tradition identified by Docherty, Arturo engages in an attempt to fashion a "frontierist white masculinity" (Docherty 2024, 20), transferring the heroic imaginary of conquest onto the metaphorical terrain of sexuality.

That Arturo's imaginative confrontation with this legacy is mediated through sexuality underscores Fante's engagement with the gendered dynamic that envisioned the landscape of the American continent (specifically the American West) as a feminized space to be conquered – the colonial rhetoric of the "land-as-woman."[9] Ryan is acutely aware of this dynamic, noting at the center of Arturo's narrative the same figurative relationship between gender and landscape that characterized the colonial conquest of America. But she also takes a step further, recognizing that in Fante's novels "the feminine is intertwined with history" (Ryan 2004, 189). The sexual act thus serves, in Arturo's imagination, as the symbolic re-enactment of the territorial conquest, projecting himself spatially onto the female body as a metaphorical landscape, and temporally into the mythic past of the American colonization as a belated hero-conqueror. Yet such a symbolic conquest can only take place on one condition: that the female body be a racialized one – the body of one of the "Aztec princesses and Mayan princesses" that from the outset the protagonist envisions possessing in a "time of dream and reverie" (Fante 2002, 15). In this light, the imaginative frontier Arturo fashions for himself exceeds the boundaries of the American West and expands, in a violent imperial fantasy, to encompass the colonial past of the entire continent. Arturo is not content to imagine himself as merely one among the many heroes of the West; he dreams instead of becoming the great Conqueror who inaugurates its myth and sweeps away the old continental order. It is along these lines that the protagonist's relationship with Camilla unfolds.

Their first encounter takes place at Camilla's workplace – the Columbia Buffet – a place whose very name, as Daniel Gardner observes, "evokes the history of American Indian conquest" (2020, 95). This seedy saloon, described by Arturo as "an old style place […] where the past

[9] This rhetoric was later identified by feminist literary critic and activist Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* (1975, 12).

remained unaltered" (2002, 34), becomes the symbolically charged setting for Camilla's first appearance. When Arturo first sees her, he describes her simply as "not beautiful" and "too strange for me" (2002, 34). Paradoxically, however, the very racial features that lead him to perceive her strangeness – her flat "Mayan" nose and thick "negress's lips" – also compel him to admit: "She was a racial type, and as such she was beautiful" (2002, 34). This first of many contradictions in Arturo's perception of Camilla reveals that, for him, she epitomizes a racialized vessel for his imaginative frontier. In this way, the shabby bar fantastically transforms into "a sacred place" and a "castle" where Camilla transcends her status as impoverished waitress and is recast as a "Mayan princess" (Fante 2002, 41). Even her tattered huaraches – target of his disgust and mockery as emblems of her poverty and racial otherness – are now charged with sexual allure, fetishized as objects he longs to possess, press to his chest, and breathe in before falling asleep. Camilla is thereby divested of subjectivity and reduced to a racialized sexual commodity, archetype of a vanishing pre-Columbian civilization that Arturo imaginatively conquers through an act of symbolic sexual domination. This is why Arturo remains passive and unable to express his sexuality whenever Camilla offers to consummate their relationship. In his imagination, conquest – whether territorial or sexual – can be fulfilled only through violence.

"I was worried and afraid and without passion" (2002, 68), Arturo confesses, as Camilla lies beside him on the beach, waiting for his desire to reawaken and grant him the intimacy he had so obsessively longed for. It is only at the end of their silent drive back to the Alta Loma – when Camilla, asking for a kiss, sinks her teeth into his lip until it bleeds – that Arturo is finally seized with lust. The stinging pain and the sight of his blood on a handkerchief epitomize his wounded virility and the failure of his attempted conquest of Camilla's body, prompting a solitary outburst of violent passion as he tears the pillow in his room. Yet his pathetic emasculation in real life is imaginatively sublimated in writing as a triumphant act of brutal domination: "On paper I stalked her like a tiger and beat her to the earth and overpowered her with my invincible strength. It ended with her creeping after me, in the sand, tears streaming from her eyes, beseeching me to have mercy upon her" (2002, 70). It is precisely this fracture between his pathetic real-life experience and grandiose heroic imagination that eventually enables him to lose his virginity, in what is arguably the most pitiful and grotesque scene of *Ask the Dust*: the scene of his sexual initiation with the Jewish housekeeper Vera Rivken in her Long Beach apartment.

Abruptly appearing halfway through the novel, as she stalks Arturo back to his hotel room one night, the dramatic figure of Vera becomes, for the protagonist, the one "who might perform a miracle" (Fante 2002, 90). She is the woman who can finally save him from his own virginity and thus pave the way for "a new Arturo Bandini [who] will face the world and Camilla Lopez" (2002, 90). Yet to fulfill its symbolic function as a colonial conquest, the sexual act requires that

Vera not merely stand in for Camilla, but become the racialized fantasy-image of her that Arturo has constructed. Thus, through this double mechanism of substitution, the Jewish housekeeper is reduced to a mannequin-like surrogate who, indulging Arturo's perverse fantasy, steps into the role of Princess Camilla, ruler of a vast and pristine California awaiting the arrival of a hero-conquistador.

> "I'm so lonely," she said. "Pretend that I am she."
> "Yes," I said. "That's it. That's your name. It's Camilla."
> I opened my arms and she sank against my chest.
> "My name is Camilla," she said.
> "You're beautiful," I said. "You're a Mayan princess."
> "I am Princess Camilla."
> "All of this land and this sea belongs to you. All of California. There is no California, no Los Angeles, no dusty streets, no cheap hotels, no stinking newspapers, no broken, uprooted people from the East, no fancy boulevards. This is your beautiful land with the desert and the mountains and the sea. You're a princess, and you reign over it all."
> "I am Princess Camilla," she sobbed. "There are no Americans, and no California. Only deserts and mountains and the sea, and I reign over it all." (Fante 2002, 94)

"Then I come" (2002, 94), Arturo proclaims, entering the symbolic stage he has so carefully crafted. Stepping into his role, he simply asserts his identity – "I'm myself. I'm Arturo Bandini" – only to give in to an extravagant delusion of grandeur: "I'm the greatest writer the world ever had" (2002, 94). But even this overreaching self-image fails to satisfy his narcissistic fantasy. To complete his charade, Arturo must take on the guise of the hero-conquistador who braves and tames the wilderness, brings order to the New World on his own terms, and subdues and sweeps away the relics of a vanishing race: "I wasn't through. It had to be my way or nothing. 'I'm a conqueror,' I said. 'I'm like Cortés, only I'm an Italian'" (2002, 94). Only by imaginatively rewriting the history of the conquest of the Americas can Arturo assert himself over Vera's body – now fully fused in his mind with Camilla, or rather with the Mayan princess of his fantasy – sobbing and pleading before her conqueror. "She was Camilla, complete and lovely. She belonged to me, and so did the world. And I was glad for her tears, they thrilled me and lifted me, and I possessed her" (2002, 95).

"Here too history was made" (2002, 95), Arturo thinks as he triumphantly walks away from Vera's room, having left two dollars for her performance in his imagined drama. Yet the realization of his self-deception follows quickly. In one of the novel's most enigmatic passages, Arturo's euphoric ecstasy dissolves into misery as he sees that his conquest was in fact a tragic masquerade. In a long and intricate stream of consciousness preceding the destruction of Long Beach by an earthquake – most often interpreted by scholars in religious terms, as an expression of Catholic guilt (Fine 2000, 22; Martin 1999, 35) – Arturo does not step outside the paradigms

of conquest. On the contrary, by imagining a mythical journey through the wasteland in search of the sea (Fante 2002, 96-97), he continues to re-enact the colonial logic of expansion and the westward draw of the Frontier. From this perspective, Arturo's guilt stems less from the sexual act per se than from the realization that his partner was no Mayan princess but a lonely and grotesque figure who, like him, roams the streets of Los Angeles in search of company; "Vera Rivken, Arturo Bandini. It was not meant that way: it was never meant that way" (2002, 96). Yet even this tragic insight, made all the more dramatic by his interpretation of the following earthquake as a divine punishment, fails to halt his pursuit of conquest. Indeed, after a brief moment of despair, Arturo envisions turning Vera's story – or more likely the story of his own imaginative subjugation of Vera-as-Camilla – into his first novel, thus reigniting his desire to possess Camilla – this time, the real one: "Camilla! I had to have that Camilla!" (2002, 106).

When Camilla returns to the Alta Loma, Arturo is again presented with the same opportunity he had failed to seize on the beach. But once more he is paralyzed, crippled by a lingering sense of inadequacy stemming from the realization that she is not only "so much more beautiful" but also "deeper rooted" than he: "she was all of those calm nights and tall eucalyptus trees, the desert stars, that land and sky, that fog outside" (2002, 123). This very insecurity causes him to measure himself against those he refers to as his "marvelous predecessors" (2002, 124) – perhaps Camilla's former lovers, but more compellingly, considering his identification of her with the Californian landscape, the heroic frontiersmen who once conquered the region and whom he now imaginatively tries to emulate through the sexual act. It is only when Camilla, weary of waiting, tells him to "Get away" and "Let me go" that Arturo manages to break free from his paralysis. Only when she resists him and the act is no longer consensual is his desire revived: "It was then that I wanted her, held her and pleaded with her, and with each wrench of her black rage my desire mounted and I was happy" (2002, 124).

After yet more displays of his ineptitude as would-be lover and would-be Western hero – including a pitiful attempt at the shooting range, where he fails to hit a single target (Fante 2002, 126-127) – Arturo achieves the long-awaited consummation of his love for Camilla in her apartment on Temple Street. As with the Alta Loma, the Columbia Buffet, and other spatial settings depicted in the novel, Camilla's apartment is rendered in symbolic terms, especially as it relates to Arturo's imaginative re-enactment of conquest. Described as "a sick building, a frame place diseased and dying from the sun" (2002, 141), the sparse and dirty apartment takes on the shape of a suffocating enclosure in Arturo's eyes – a space of confinement utterly at odds with Camilla's nature, who "belonged to the rolling hills, the wide deserts, the high mountains" (Fante 2002, 142). The apartment, which Arturo stigmatizes as "her ruin, her scattered dream" (2002, 142), appears to him as a perfect reflection of Camilla's unraveling.

He notes that although there were several hooks available, her many clothes lay scattered

across the floor with the only exception of a straw hat "that hung alone, ridiculous up there by itself" (2002, 142) – a garment that, like her huaraches, gestures toward Camilla's ethnic background and symbolically conjures the condition of peonage and exploitation endured by Mexican laborers in California. Yet the most symbolically charged elements in Camilla's apartment are two paintings placed on opposite walls: "A reproduction of the Blue Boy on one wall and a print of an Indian Brave saluting the sky on another" (Fante 2002, 142). While the first is almost certainly a copy of Thomas Gainsborough's famous 18th-century portrait, the second is harder to identify: it might be a print of a painting by Frederic Remington or Charles M. Russell, or of a photograph by Edward S. Curtis. Most likely, however, considering Fante's brief description of the gesture of saluting the sky, the most plausible identification is Cyrus Dallin's 1909 sculpture *Appeal to the Great Spirit* – an icon of "the myth of Native people as a 'vanishing race,' doomed to perish in the face of modernity," which was "reproduced endlessly in photographs, on postcards, on record labels, and in advertisements" (Bermeo and Lukey 2020). Beneath these two paintings – one evoking the Old-World aristocracy of Europe and the wealth and power of the emerging Anglo elite of modern California,[10] the other melodramatizing the defeat and disappearance of a Native race and social order – Arturo and Camilla's sexual union finally unfolds.

But even this latest attempt at conquest – facilitated by the marijuana he shares with Camilla – ends in failure. Temporarily "invincible," Arturo experiences an "extraordinary sense of power" and "the joy and triumph of a man over space" (Fante 2002, 143) that enable him to overcome his fear of Camilla and "laugh at her tears" (2002, 144) as she creeps in his arms. Yet as the effects of marijuana wear off, the fleeting strength gives way to "the old sense of guilt" (2002, 144), forcing him to recognize that entry into the mythos of the Frontier and the legacy of American colonization cannot be achieved through sexual conquest. Camilla cannot simply be divested of her subjectivity and recast as a racialized sexual commodity; she must be removed, erased, and overwritten.

4. Conclusion: Arturo's Pyrrhic victory

"There shall be consolation, and there shall be beauty like the love of some dead girl" (2002, 97), muses Arturo in the frenzied interior monologue following the sordid scene with Vera. As early as the beach scene with Camilla, Arturo's desire for sexual conquest is intertwined with a foreboding sense of her death. Rather than being repressed, this ominous premonition is

[10] In 1921, *The Blue Boy* was purchased from the second Duke of Westminster by railroad magnate and Southern California booster Henry E. Huntington, for what was then the highest price ever paid for a painting. The transaction came to represent the economic ascendency of the railroad industry and the financial power of the emerging ruling class of the American West.

sublimated by the protagonist, who vividly voices it in the aftermath of the earthquake, picturing Camilla's lifeless body among the debris of the Columbia Buffet: "She was dead and I was alive. Good. I pictured her dead: she would lie still in this manner; her eyes closed like this, her hands clasped like that" (2002, 100). This morbid fantasy is rooted in Arturo's desire to bridge the chasm between the real Camilla and the symbolic version he has imaginatively constructed, for her death would allow him to render her into pure form – a malleable, pliant shape that could be freely molded to fit his authorial needs. It is no coincidence, then, that from the first moment Arturo imagines Camilla's drowned body, he feels a latent urge to transform her death into narrative. Thus, her final disappearance into the desert – marking both her last appearance in the novel and her presumed death – grants him the space to exercise full narrative authority over her, enabling his closing return to Los Angeles cloaked in the illusion of conquest.

This reading gains further resonance considering that, even before the final scene, Arturo imagines Camilla as a symbolic writing surface – a textual space over which both he and Sammy compete to exercise authorship. Not only does he resort to writing and literary metaphors to describe her face – "her face was a manuscript of misery and exhaustion," "her face was the face of an old rose pressed and dried in a book" (2002, 139; 146) – but he also, albeit ironically, attributes authorial value to the bruises Sammy leaves on it: "He's a great writer, alright. That story he wrote over your left eye is a masterpiece" (2002, 132). Thus, Arturo's exclamation – "That *he* should strike you! That fool. Even his punctuation was bad" (2002, 131, emphasis in the original) – uttered in yet another moment of sexual impotence, should be read less as an expression of compassion for her suffering, or indignation at the violence she endures, than as a veiled form of envy toward Sammy, who, despite his dubious literary credentials, succeeds in violently "writing" himself onto her in ways Arturo cannot – at least until she is dead.

Once dead or removed, she could no longer resist his imaginative control and would be rewritten as the Mayan princess he desires, woven into his narrative of domination. "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" (2002, 164), Arturo finally declares in one last imaginative projection of Camilla. And aligning her once more – and this time definitively – with the Californian natural landscape, he wonders: "How could I search for her? Why should I search for her? What could I bring her but a return to the brutal wilderness that had broken her?" (2002, 164). In so doing, he not only subverts the meaning of "wilderness" – turning it into a metaphor for Camilla's urban disintegration – but also erases the violence and despair behind her disappearance into the Mojave, recasting it as a restoration of a preordained order separating civilization and savagery.

With Camilla fully divested of agency and her body dissolved into the natural landscape she

has been made to represent, Arturo can finally consummate his metaphorical conquest, sealing the imaginative frontier he has projected onto her upon their first encounter. But this conquest no longer unfolds on a sexual level; it is transfigured into an authorial accomplishment, enacted through Arturo's iconic final gesture of hurling his first novel – inscribed "*To Camilla, with love, Arturo*" (2002, 164, emphasis in the original) – into the desert dunes. Marking the symbolic end of his relationship with Camilla, this final gesture mirrors an earlier moment in the novel: his awkward attempt to impress her with a copy of his first story *The Little Dog Laughed*, scribbled with the clumsy dedication "To a Mayan Princess, from a worthless Gringo" (2002, 38). But whereas this initial attempt at asserting authorial control ends in failure – first through Arturo's own self-censorship, as he replaces his dedication, and then through Camilla's rejection, as she tears up his story and throws the pieces into a spittoon – his final farewell, met with no resistance or opposition, grants him the illusion of narrative conquest and the fulfillment of his writerly identity.

Thus, rather than signaling any genuine empathy or comprehension, as Joseph Tumolo suggests in arguing that "Arturo's identity is somewhat more open and accepting at the end of the novel" (2018, 29), the protagonist's final resolution aligns more convincingly with Ryan's interpretation, as the ultimate act of "overwriting a deleted Camilla" (2004, 209). In casting Vera's story into the void left by Camilla's disappearance, Arturo lays authorial claim to both deleted women and their stories, which serve as the narrative groundwork for the construction of his own tale of affirmation – a tale he imaginatively mapped onto the mythic conquest of the continent. But even this final assertion of authorship ultimately falls short of any heroic triumph and instead exposes the inevitable hollowness underpinning his quest to enter the realm of the Frontier's legacy. Arturo is not a hero – much less a Western hero – and his final act of casting his novel into the desert is not a heroic culmination, but rather a Pyrrhic victory which leaves him with one last return to make. Back in Los Angeles he could finally be one more weary heir to the colonial legacy of the American West, or in Matthew Elliott's words, "one of the pale anxious faces of the modern American city" (2010, 538).

Slotkin locates the genesis of myth "in the basic psychological processes of linguistic creativity – specifically in our capacity to make metaphors" (1985, 22). As I have sought to demonstrate throughout this essay, Arturo's relationship with Camilla is not only metaphorical from the outset, but also structured as an attempt to overcome his marginality and enter the realm of the Frontier myth. Though at the end of the novel Arturo achieves what appears to be the culmination of this imaginative quest, fulfilling the colonial conquest of the Mayan princess he has pursued since the opening pages, his final resolution is a failed and hollow endeavor that does not result in heroic belonging but in pathetic survival. This bleak and disenchanted conclusion reveals how *Ask the Dust* does not merely retrace the history and mythology of the

American West and its conquest. By articulating the desire of marginalized subjects to write themselves into the foundational myth of the region, the novel unsettles the dualistic Turnerian Frontier – reframing it as a multifaceted threshold that can imaginatively be reappropriated, reentered, and reshaped – while simultaneously exposing its contradictions. Anticipating the revisionist impulse that would begin to reshape the genre in the 1960s, *Ask the Dust* can be approached through the lens of a post-Frontier Western that, by revisiting and reconfiguring the mythic foundations of the American West, lays bare the violent colonial mechanisms at its roots.

Bionote

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