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## THE MARGINALIZING EFFECT OF ETHNIC EXPECTATIONS: JOHN FANTE'S 'ASIAN' WRITINGS

The advent of ethnic studies, with its emphasis on dynamics of descent, has been necessary to reshape the American canon and free new voices, articulating what being American means and which American dream, upon which much national rhetoric has been based, one can really aspire to; yet the definition of literature according to ethnic belonging may also lead to monotonous reading keys, according to which the authors' voice is 'authentic' and therefore representative only as long as it is in tune with themes of ethnic origin and clash. As William Boelhower highlighted in the by-now distant 1987, the practice of dividing American literature in ethnic (or racial) categories has unintentionally played with the master's tool within his reductionist house. Above all, the focus on ethnic consciousness has in certain cases limited the analysis of so-called ethnic works, excluding them from broader and transethnic literary movements, contexts, and practices. In other words, the expectation of ethnic difference may ghettoize authors in given themes and patterns, in some cases even preventing them from exploring different affiliations and sharing voluntary connections with other groups or movements.

This is, in part, what happened to John Fante, one of the fathers of Italian American literature. Even though an 'ethnic' approach has been seminal to tackle Fante's works because it has revealed important insights in his narrative, the focus on Fante's *italianità* has also obscured other topics present in his literary work, in certain cases reducing Fante's complexity and potentiality as a writer with consequences on his place in the American literary landscape. The label 'Italian American writer,' for example, has blocked Fante's works' circulation in mainstream American literary circuits and their possible critical interpretations. As a result, such label has restricted the literary evaluation of a writer who, in the voice of his alter-ego Arturo Bandini, aspired to bolster up the shelf of the Bs in the American libraries next to Arnold Bennett and the other "big boys" such as "old Dreiser, old Mencken" (*Ask the Dust* 4), who was inspired by writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Theodore Dreiser, Knut Hamsun, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and James T. Farrell (Cooney 337) – writers well outside his ethnic enclave – and who has been a source of inspiration for authors such as Charles Bukowski, the beats, the Italian Pier Vittorio Tondelli, and others (Kordich, *John Fante* IX-X).

In their book *The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity* (1997) Joan Ferrante-Wallace and Prince Brown Jr. write that "when we encounter another, we make many assumptions about what that person ought to be. Judging from an array of clues, we anticipate his or her identity (or category) and the qualities we believe to be ordinary and normal for a member of that category" (13). Likewise, we can assume that, in literature, ethnic writers are subjected to a similar process: judging blood lines and literary topics as correspondent, sometimes editors, publishers, and markets anticipate what can be accepted as proper by writers. This is even more so when they belong to an ethnic or racial minority and their writing is expected to be an 'authentic' representation of their 'particularity.' As Fante wrote to his friend Carey McWilliams in 1936, "the modern writer is a pimp of the advertisers," (Cooney 133), meaning that writers have to adjust to the publishers' requests, or they cannot make it to the market. In Fante's case, pieces on Italian Americans were the only thing editors and publishers apparently were interested in. If on the surface this accent on ethnicity of descent could grant Fante a safe niche in the American literary panorama, a reductionist force was also at work.

Such a demand for 'ethnic authenticity' is what prevented Fante from developing a theme he valued and cherished, but which publishers did not want from him. After the publication and good reviews of his first two novels *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938) and *Ask the Dust* (1939), and a collection of short stories (*Dago Red* 1940), Fante wanted to move out of the Italian American pattern and write of the Filipinos in the California of

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the 1930s. Fante started researching the project in the 1930s, and abandoned it only in 1946 after the many rejections he received from his publishers (Cooney 204). *The Little Brown Brothers* is what is left of Fante's concept: it is a group of three short stories, "Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me," "Bus Ride" and "Mary Osaka, I Love You," thought of as a single book on which the writer started working in the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Fante considered this new adventure as his masterpiece, the book that would bring him eternal fame.

Things did not go how he hoped, though. The topic of the novel was not well received by Pascal Covici, Fante's editor at Viking Press; after reading the drafts Fante send him, Covici thought the subject lacked the "truthfulness" of Fante's previous writings, and advised him to go back to more appropriate Italian American matters. The fact that Fante was writing about an ethnic group he did not belong to pushed Covici to reject *The Little Brown Brothers* project, rebuking that Fante could not know Asian dynamics fully enough to write authentically about Filipinos. As Covici wrote, "the writing is fine, warm, and colorful. It is the story and the plot that worry me" (Cooney 206). Frances Phillips, another editor whom Fante discussed the drafts of *The Little Brown Brothers* with, did not believe in the project either, and in his diary Fante wrote that "Publishers discourage me. They almost always want what I don't feel like doing. Phillips was only faintly interested in the Filipino book. She wants a big Italian book from me" (Cooney 324). In more recent years, Seamus Cooney similarly writes that "one can scarcely regret that Fante abandoned [*The Little Brown Brothers*]. However much he sympathized with the exploited Filipinos of California and however much he researched the subject, one suspects he simply didn't know enough to write authentically about them" (Cooney 12-13) – even though what "to write authentically" means remains unclear.

Besides Viking Press, the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation also rejected the financial backing of *The Little Brown Brothers*, although Fante had presented letters of recommendation by well-known literary figures of the time such as Carrey McWilliam, William Saroyan, and John Steinbeck, whose *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a novel about Californian *paesanos*, had proved that writing outside one's descent was possible, at least if one was a WASP American. The publishing world's closure to Fante's expressive potentialities draws on what had already happened to other ethnic writers, as Louis Owens recalls in *Mixedblood Messages* (1998). Owens relates the example of Francis La Flesche, a Native American writer who submitted the manuscript *The Middle Five* to his publishing house in 1899. The book was rejected because, according to the publisher, its Indian protagonists were "too much like other, non-Indian boys" (14) and thus did not meet the readers' (and the publisher's) expectancies - they were too universally human, and racially not well-defined. More recently, the African American writer Charles Johnson laments a similar case, reporting that he was discouraged from developing a certain project because it bore "no resemblance whatsoever to other Negro books."<sup>3</sup>

The ten years during which Fante brooded over *The Little Brown Brothers* testify to the centrality of this work in his maturation as a writer, and this editorial failure had some severe after-effects in Fante's literary career, consequences that have not been fully investigated. Critics explain Fante's literary silence between the publication of *Dago Red* (1940) and *Full of Life* (1952) in different ways. They dig into Fante's personal life and point to his four children as the reason for such a long silence: the kids needed care and pushed Fante to work harder in the Hollywood studio system; what is more, Fante's personal fondness for golf and booze may have distracted him from his literary goals. Finally, even the delicate condition of Italian Americans during World War II may have contributed to silence an author who was Italian American and who had exclusively published Italian American stuff so far. However, the fact that his biggest project, thanks to which he expected anointing as an American writer, never came to life, is likely to have pushed Fante into a ten-year silence which is telling for a writer that had previously published three works in three years in a row. After this literary humiliation, he rather felt forced towards the safer pattern of descent-consent clash, as the works he published after the 1950s testify to. His decade-long silence was interrupted only in 1952 by the publication of the novel *Full of Life*. For that same need of authenticity that made *The Little Brown Brothers* unacceptable, *Full of Life* was commercialized as autobiography, although the book was "fiction, pure and simple," as Fante himself wrote to his life-long friend H. L. Mencken in a letter dated March 21, 1952 (Cooney 137).

*The Little Brown Brothers's* rejection contributed to locate Fante within a framed literary context, the Italian

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<sup>2</sup> "Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me" and "Bus Drive" are now published in *The Wine of Youth* (2002), while "Mary Osaka, I Love You" appears in *The Big Hunger*, the 2000 expanded version of *Dago Red*.

<sup>3</sup> As reported in Tim Ryan 12.



American one, which is still the way critics approach his works and readers perceive them. Among major scholars on Fante, only Richard Collins provides an analysis of the Filipino stories in his *John Fante: A Literary Portrait* (2000). Here Collins argues that “Fante’s Filipino stories, his only non-autobiographical fiction, are crucial to his other works in how they deal with prejudice. Fante’s empathetic treatment of the Filipino experience allowed him to see his own ethnic conflicts in a new light” (174-175). Contrary to Collins’ opinion, great part of the critics concentrates on Fante’s *italianità* or, at best, Italian-Americanness, persuaded that the ethnic approach is “natural, real, eternal, stable, and static [...]. The studies that result from such premises typically lead to an isolationist, group-by-group approach that emphasizes ‘authenticity’ and cultural heritage within the individual, somewhat idealized group— at the expense of more widely shared historical conditions and cultural features, of dynamic interaction and syncretism” (Sollors XIII-XIV).

Werner Sollors’s “shared historical conditions and cultural features” are exactly what, instead, pilot Fante’s interest for the Filipino community in 1930s and 1940s California. Fante came into contact with this segment once he moved from Boulder, where his family lived, to California. Fante’s letters to family and friends testify that he researched the subject extensively and had first hand experience of the Filipino Californian community. For example, he worked with Filipinos in the fish canneries during his juvenile years, and, as he tells Mencken in his letters, the name of the character Julio Sal, protagonist of “Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me” and “Bus Drive,” comes from one of his colleagues at the fish canneries of Wilmington, Los Angeles. Furthermore, the years spent in Bunker Hill introduced him to both the Mexicans of downtown Los Angeles and the Asian population of Koreatown, Tokyotown, and Chinatown, all in the roundabouts of Bunker Hill and reachable on foot. Through their common friend Carrey McWilliams Fante got also acquainted with Carlos Bulosan, a leading representative of Filipino American literature of those years who in his turn presented Fante to the circle of Filipino Californian writers (Collins 178, 305). Finally, in the 1930s Fante had more than once found refuge on Terminal Island, a place he describes as “dirty and crude, a center of the fishing and shipping industry,” whose smell will keep out all his friends not interested in the “working-man’s town, full of life, labor and Japs and Filipinos” (Cooney 98). To Fante, Terminal Island becomes “a relief from white people” (Cooney 97), and, even though we have to admit Fante’s superficial social analysis of his juvenile years, in his diary he expresses his interest for the Filipino community, “one of the most colorful and pitiful of Californians” (Cooney 316). He admits that “I worked with them at the canneries in Wilmington. I didn’t like them then, but I was young and full of prejudice which is gone now” (Cooney 316). He repeats, “I understand them. I like them. I see them because I am Latin and their tradition, if any, is Spanish and Latin too” (Cooney 175).

The consideration of some of the points Fante’s ‘Asian’ works (*The Little Brown Brothers*, “The Dreamer” and, to a lesser extent, *The Road to Los Angeles*)<sup>4</sup> share with his Italian-American-focused works is enlightening, as the comparative analysis casts doubt on why the same processes are addressed as authentic when they regard Italian Americans, while inauthentic when they involve Filipinos. The use of an ethnic slur in the title of his Filipino book,<sup>5</sup> for example, follows the use of negative expressions in works such as the already cited *Dago Red*, or the short story “The Odyssey of a Wop”; such titles come from the same reflection on discrimination and ethnicity and play on the contrast between the use of discriminatory expressions to define the supposed protagonist and hero of the story, thus introducing the reader to what appears a mainstream point of view just to reverse it through narration and glimpses to the ethnic character’s personal pain. It goes without saying that the protagonists of both Asian and Italian American works are described as outsiders with respect to the mainstream Californian society, participating in the same circuits of exclusion, exploitation, and aspirations. Collins fairly compares Julio Sal, for example, to all the other immigrants of Fante’s works, as they inevitably are all dreamers who have abruptly to wake up and become aware of their socio-economic – and ethnic/racial – position in the California of their times (117). Julio Sal, in this sense, is not different from Jimmy Toscana or Arturo Bandini, with whom Sal shares places, job, dreams, and fortune. These characters are equally poor (they live in overpopulated houses where privacy is impossible); they equally participate in the consumerist culture of the time, dreaming of new clothes as a way

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the Asian presence in Fante’s early works such as *The Road to Los Angeles* and *Ask the Dust* see Bordin 2014.

<sup>5</sup> “Little brown brothers” is a derogative expression used by President Taft at the beginning of the twentieth century to call Filipinos.



to 'buy' a negated Americanness; and they equally fantasize about white women as a symbol of America and integration. As Svevo Bandini's romance with the widow Hildegarde in *Wait until Spring*, Bandini, Arturo Bandini's imagined possession of the white woman in the silver-fur coat in *Ask the Dust*, Dominic Molise's adoration of a picture of Carole Lombard in *1933 Was a Bad Year*, in *The Little Brown Brothers* Julio Sal's love for the blue-eyed Helen talks of a vision of assimilation. Helen is the repository of Julio Sal's dream of an interracial union, which would elevate him above all the other Filipinos of California. Such a romance is, however, impossible and interrupted by the iciness in Helen's blue eyes (262), which makes Julio aware of his subaltern position in 1930s Los Angeles. This broken dream follows in the same line of Arturo Bandini's impossible love with Camilla Lopez, in whose opinion he remains too Italian for being a valuable mate.

The imagination of interracial love and the identification of the white woman as the top aspiration for an ethnic subject come again in another Asian work by Fante, "The Dreamer" (1947). Here Cristo, the protagonist, dreams of a blonde American woman to serve as the highest achievement among the different goods he has been accumulating in his twenty years of hard work in the United States. As Dominic Molise chooses a celebrity for his dreams of interracial love, Cristo similarly chooses Charleen, a showgirl. Cristo is so blind to the "glittering poverty of California" (241), a place that proposes women such as Charleen as objects of desire, that he cannot see love and tenderness in Mrs. Flores, the young widow and landowner of the hotel where he lives. As Camilla Lopez in *Ask the Dust*, Mrs. Flores is proposed as the 'real' American, "dressed in the fashion of her people— a peasant skirt and blouse, silver earrings, a matching silver trinket at her throat. Her small feet were shod in huaraches" (237). These, however, are also symbols of her being a subaltern, as Cristo himself is despite his desperate attempt at hiding his alterity by means of his elegant attire. Mrs. Flores is too similar to Cristo, whose name betrays centuries of Spanish colonization in the Philippines. Such closeness in marginality is what makes Cristo impermeable to Mrs. Flores's love. The woman, then, recurs to material goods in order to achieve that Americanness Cristo is looking for: she gets rid of her huaraches, buys high-heel shoes, a new dress, and, finally, bleaches her hair. She physically wears those symbols Cristo needs to fulfill his dream of Americanness. Such symbols, however, once applied on Mrs. Flores's body, reveal their emptiness: they are but goods, and they finally appear so even to Cristo's eyes. As Svevo Bandini returns to his Italian American family after his affair with the widow Hildegade, Cristo understands the vacuity of his previous dream and enters into a new transethnic community he forms with Mrs. Flores.

Considering these overlapping features, one can argue that in his Asian works Fante, instead of lacking truthfulness and authenticity, was embarking on a new path that may have led to transethnic comprehension, even more so if we recognize that space of exclusion and inequality shared by Italian and Filipino Americans living in California in those years (Bordin 2014). Literature would thus open to what David Hollinger has defined as a post-ethnic perspective, which "balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities" and "promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (3). Embracing such an approach means coping with Fante's Italian American protagonists not only as stuck between the Italian family and the Anglo surroundings, but also as simultaneously living within more possible circuits of belonging, within which *italianità* is only one of the possible affiliations. Although Fante never openly talks about class and rather concentrates on questions of identity, discrimination, and assimilation, his non-Italian works are made possible by a common experience of both poverty and discrimination, which enables Fante to bridge the descent gap in order to recognize mutual spaces of marginalization which are inhabited by Italians and Filipinos alike.

In order to understand Fante's Asian writings one could consider what Michael Awkward writes in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (1995), when he claims that "rather than emphasizing the impossibilities of reading across man-made and, hence, fundamentally arbitrary lines, I posit that a willingness to acknowledge that race and gender are constructed can enable rather than disable provocative journeys" (9). The attempt at writing outside one's descent segment indicates a "provocative journey": it is Fante's marginal position as an Italian-American that enables him to move towards the Other and understand other margins – even though the push towards integration, typical of the pre-1960s years, may also lead to trans-ethnic discrimination (see Bordin 2014). Ethnic studies proved that descent ethnicity is an imaginative form, which in this case is functional to recreate one's own past and sense of community.



The un-naturalness of ethnicity suggests that it is not a fixed quality, but it can change over time and space. Therefore, ethnic boundaries are not definite and always the same. The division along ethnic lines is rather unstable, and can allow multiple and temporal affiliations. Despite the reduction imposed upon Fante by the publishing industry, his Asian works are in this view a first attempt at dealing with ethnicity in a different way, moving “beyond individual ethnic spheres” (Ferraro 6); furthermore, by recognizing the shared spaces of rejection and marginalization, Fante transcends the descent-consent clash. Literary imagination, in this case, is not used to construct an American identity the ethnic subject is still denied,<sup>6</sup> but as an attempt at establishing mutual comprehension among those who were at the margin of Californian society.

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<sup>6</sup> See Melissa Ryan 2004 on this.