

2013

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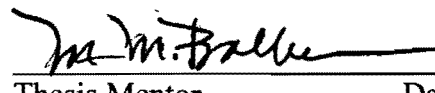
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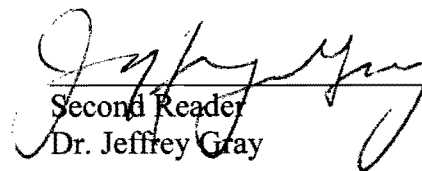
Thesis Mentor: Dr. Mary Balkun
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts
Department of English,
Seton Hall University
May, 2013

Approved by:

 5/16/13

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 5/14/2013

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Abstract

“California Grotesques: Torture, Fiction, and Ethnic Identity in John Fante’s
Ask the Dust”

by
Elizabeth Bracey

Seton Hall University, 2013
Under the supervision of Dr. Mary Balkun

John Fante’s *Ask the Dust* has become a veritable cult classic in the Western noir canon. Critics have largely examined the text as a semi-autobiographical account of the struggle to assimilate into 1930s California culture as a first-generation American. Building upon previous criticism, this paper uses theories of the grotesque as a new lens through which to examine issues of assimilation and ethnic identity within the text. The sense that the Western American way is founded upon torment is exemplified in the grotesque imagery of masks, sick or scarred bodies, and the eventual death or exile that separates the “adequate” Western American from those people who are somehow inadequate. Using theories of the grotesque to evaluate the tortured identities of the characters, *Ask the Dust* can be read as both a satire of the California myth and a tale about the fear of displacement and alienation from the American dream. Ultimately, the grotesque reveals cultural anxieties about the presence of the “Other” in an illusorily homogenous state as it emphasizes the moral degradation that is necessary in order for the racial or ethnic other to assimilate into Western American culture.

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Elizabeth Bracey

The mystique of California that has existed since the Gold Rush of the nineteenth century and the quest for Manifest Destiny touted the state as the epicenter of success and wealth. However, California's allure is artificial and reliant upon illusion, especially when its development within a harsh physical environment is considered. California historian Kevin Starr notes that California, and Los Angeles in particular, "envisioned itself, then externalized that vision through sheer force of will, springing from a Platonic conception of itself, the Great Gatsby of American cities" (69). Surrounded by desert, Los Angeles occurred from nothing other than fantasy. There were no natural resources to draw attention to the area, considering its precarious position within a harsh desert scape. As such, California's allure became based on an illusion that required the people who migrated there to adopt the same sort of fakery, substituting their ethnic and racial roots for a mask of Western American-ness. While issues of cultural and ethnic assimilation were faced by immigrants on the East coast, the same struggles in California are differentiated by the illusion and torment that defines the landscape and culture.

The necessity to hide one's ethnicity in order to assimilate into the American West is a matter explored in the literature of John Fante, a writer working out of Los Angeles in the 1930s. Fante's works address issues of identity from the point of view of the son of Italian immigrants who struggles to define himself in the American west. The autobiographical component of these

works is undeniable. The son of an Italian immigrant and a first-generation Italian mother, Fante called himself “as American as is necessary”; however, his writing reveals the discomfort that he felt reconciling his parents’ Italianness and his own Americanness. Family is the focus of nearly all of Fante’s work. His novels explore the dynamics of religion within the Italian household and the braggadocio and machismo of Italian men. However, they also reveal the detrimental effects of his experience in the Italian household on his assimilation into American society, since he was pegged as “the Italian kid...the son of a man who smelled of Toscanelli cigars, garlic, red wine, and brick dust” (Collins 39). Theoretically, Fante’s assimilation was moderately easy because of his appearance. Fante was red-headed with a freckled face, and therefore not immediately distinguishable as an Italian. Yet he notoriously oscillated between “pride and resentment” with his ethnicity and his American identity, which he explores in depth in a collection of short novels referred to as the Bandini Quartet (39). Of the four novels in the Bandini quartet, *Ask the Dust*, has been touted as Fante’s greatest work and has earned a veritable cult following. The novel follows Arturo Bandini, who has found moderate regard as a published writer living in a Los Angeles hovel. Bandini’s obsession with becoming successful is conflated with his unrelenting desire to solidify his American identity. Finding his identity comes at the expense of the people he loves as well as others around him, as Bandini brutalizes Camilla, the woman he loves, physically and verbally, and denies the needs of others he meets in order to validate himself and his place in the American West.

Identity, of course, remains the issue central in discussions of *Ask the Dust*. Issues of Americanness as well as humanness are addressed in many critical readings of the novel. In other cases, the novel is read as a Homeric epic, with Bandini as Odysseus on a quest to find himself as he winds his way “home” (Collins 123). Other criticism contends that Bandini comes to

accept his ethnic identity while others in the novel do not. That is, as Richard Collins contends, Bandini's misanthropy throughout the novel culminates in his acceptance of his difference as a first-generation American in the west (139). However, the notion that the dour Bandini recognizes the necessity of accepting one's difference as a means to move forward is questionable.

Many critics focus on either the materiality or the need to conform to the commands of a dominating culture in order to be accepted—what critic Matthew Elliot calls “fictions of whiteness”—as a means for characters to attempt to assimilate that pervades the text, but criticism has notably overlooked the presence of the grotesque as a tool with which to convey assimilation and the quest for identity in *Ask the Dust* (530). The characters' identities are established by materialism and distinction of themselves from other perceived immigrants while their attempts to assimilate require that they not only torment themselves but also that they torment others. As a result, the characters become monstrous, the landscape grotesque, and the values of American identity inverted. Although Catherine Kordich remarks that some of the secondary characters of *Ask the Dust* are Californian grotesques, there is not much attention paid to the way that problematic identity is manifested on the bodies and in the monstrous behaviors of the characters (74). Interestingly, psychoanalytic examinations of California culture have stressed the importance of a “no pain, no gain” attitude that is rampant within the state (Rickels 3). Laurence A. Rickels posits that identity in Los Angeles is based upon sadomasochism and is perceivable in the culture of dress, television, and body-building. However, he does not apply this assessment to twentieth-century California writers. The sense that the Western American way is founded upon torment is exemplified in the grotesque imagery of masks, sick or scarred bodies, and the eventual death or exile that separates the “adequate” Western American from those people who

are somehow inadequate. Using theories of the grotesque to evaluate the tortured identities of the characters, *Ask the Dust* can be read as both a satire of the California myth and a tale about the fear of displacement and alienation from the American dream. Ultimately, the grotesque reveals cultural anxieties about the presence of the “Other” in an illusorily homogenous state as it emphasizes the moral degradation that is necessary in order for the racial or ethnic other to assimilate into Western American culture.

The grotesque embodies what Geoffrey Galt Harpham calls “the art of disgust” (200). While overall this summation of the ultimate effect of grotesque imagery is accurate, the forms of the grotesque in *Ask the Dust* are best exemplified by the theoretical approaches of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. Tracing the emergence of the grotesque from the Roman Empire through the nineteenth century, Kayser describes the disgust that is the result of the grotesque as being a combination of the “playfully gay and careless fantasy world” with an underlying “ominous and sinister sense” that arises from a combination of the elements that are unlike and incompatible (21). These elements are typically manifested in art as the combination of both human and nonhuman forms or exaggerated features which produce a sense of both the comic and the threatening. For Kayser, the grotesque is firmly based in fear. He understands the shock derived from “an agonizing fear of the dissolution of our world” and the sense that the horrifying thing that disgusts us has some semblance of truth related to our own reality (31). The imagery of chimeric bodies or instances of madness exemplify this sense that there is the presence of something insidious and alien which removes a person from the world that he or she understands. The possibility of alienation from the world we understand is therefore the primary producer of the “abysmal...terror and insecurity” (51) associated with the grotesque.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical approach to the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World* is based upon the same fundamental principles but he criticizes Kayser's basis of the grotesque in fear and focuses more intensely upon the comic excess that eradicates fear through "absolute fearlessness" (39). Instead of evoking only ominous fear, the grotesque for Bakhtin has its foundations in the celebratory laughter of the conqueror over the monster or the excessive celebrations which temporarily condoned massive consumption and sex before the recognition of or return to rigid convention (88). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque is the external internalized and vice versa: "the limits between the body and the world are erased leading to a fusion of one with the other and its surroundings" (310). However, the mixture of the body with the world around it is not inherently fearful, as it is in Kayser's view, and is based notably within the celebratory comic of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque is punctuated with images of consumption and excretion, of masks and "playful celebrations of life" (40). Hyperbole is essential to any of this humorous imagery. Thus, like the fearful grotesque, features of the scenery and of the body are exaggerated. The limits of the body, in particular, are transgressive protrusions—gaping mouths, bulging eyes, large noses—pushing the limits of the body in an "interchange" between the external and internal worlds (317).

However, if there is one point upon which Kayser's and Bakhtin's theoretical perspectives meet, it is the inability to distinguish fantasy from fiction that creates a sense of the grotesque. This perspective clearly contrasts classic forms of "complete" men "cleansed, as it were, of all scoriae of birth and development" with the grotesque "low" and unclean man (25). However, the grotesque fails to give the reader any "[instruction] how to react to and how to interpret" a work of art or a character (Kayser 33). The grotesque, then, focuses on the incomplete character, one who has not reached the ascetic or even aesthetic completion of the

classical hero. In assessing *Ask the Dust* as a novel in the grotesque tradition, it is necessary to draw on the types of the grotesque specified by both Kayser and Bakhtin. While comedically-grotesque scenes pervade the text, the feeling of alienation from one's reality provokes an undeniable sense of discomfort that can most adequately be described as fear.

In beginning a discussion of the grotesque elements in American identity, it is necessary to address the violent imagery of the "melting-pot" by which America is defined. Of course the image is meant as a metaphor for the diversity of the nation and the adoption of various customs into American culture. However, the melting-pot also evokes an image of turbulent hostility. American identity is a conglomeration of boiled human parts and reduced human bodies, ethnicities, and identities which in turn become blended into one another as they liquefy. Moreover, the image makes particularly clear the necessity for Americans to blend together. Commonly, this may be understood as taking on the characteristics of one another; however, the sense that individuality is eradicated in favor of one violent act that successfully melts individuals into an unrecognizable pool is sinister. Thus, the melting pot can be understood as a violent symbol for the destruction of otherness. American identity, consequently, seems inherently connected to torment and violence.

The novel's protagonist conveys a sense of misguided identity in a struggle manifested in words and, ultimately, through the body. In spite of his label as protagonist, Arturo Bandini's role is largely antagonistic as he torments himself and the people around him in an effort to live his fantasies of becoming a great American writer. From previous novels by Fante, the reader is aware that Bandini is a first-generation Italian-American who was raised by parents who have attempted to assimilate but who have also held onto the Italian traditions surrounding religion, work ethic, and cooking. He consistently rails against any ideology that aligns him with Italian

identity, takes odd jobs from which he is quickly fired, and vehemently denies religion. Critics have pointed out that the Bandini of earlier novels oscillates between his need to separate himself from his Italian roots and his desire to return to the comfort that they provide.

The California of the early twentieth century lent itself well to the development of an identity that was as theatrical as the town of Los Angeles itself. The town “set national standards of American identity as the attitudes and style of Southern California were exported via the film industry” (*Inventing the Dream*, preface). As a result, history seems essentially to have been replaced by a material culture that regarded possessions and property as more important than cultural capital. American culture was made even murkier by “Hollywood/Tunisian” style festivals that celebrated the expansion of cities using Eastern traditions (*Material Dreams* 92). This bizarre juxtaposition of American pride and Eastern celebration speaks to the up-and-coming show business in Hollywood as well as the confusion about American identity for foreigners in the West. Compellingly, in spite of the evidently mixed cultural and ethnic components of Los Angeles, the city’s fear of ethnic and racial differences is both a vein that runs glaringly through *Ask the Dust* and contributes significantly to its categorization as a novel of grotesque and torturous identity. The separation of immigrants, particularly Mexicans, from mainstream California culture was held in place by “de facto Jim Crow laws” for much of the 1920s and into the 1930s; According to historian Kevin Starr, “conflict, competition, and exploitation” in the face of the Depression facilitated the further segregation of white “Americans” and minorities with whom they competed for work (*Endangered Dreams* 65-70). Los Angeles was what painter Ed Ruscha called “the ultimate cardboard cut-out town... full of illusions and it allows people to indulge in those illusions” (qtd in Rieff 131). For east coasters, Los Angeles became a mecca for success, having been advertised as such. However, this allure

was essentially a marketing ploy forged by businessmen to attract east coasters away from New York and Chicago and toward the West in a second manifest destiny. Yet Los Angeles was developed upon the conceptualization of what it meant to be successful and American without basing itself upon any of the typical conditions that would facilitate the development of a modern city. It was, for a long time, without a railroad terminus, a harbor, or even a river (*Material Dreams* 69). Los Angeles was instead founded upon ideas and successful marketing strategies. However, the promise of success that California offered was notoriously difficult to capitalize upon, a realization that is famously tackled not only by Fante but also by later novelists like Nathanael West, who notoriously projected the California of the early to mid-twentieth century as a veritable wasteland of migrants all vying for the same success. Fante's narrative projects the repercussions of Los Angeles' questionable history upon the migrants who continue to attempt assimilation even after success has become an impossibility.

The grotesque nature of *Ask the Dust* comes from this understanding of Los Angeles as both hopeful illusion and desolate wasteland, especially because of its inversion of the "booster myths" of the early twentieth century, in which the city is touted as idyllic and perfect. Mark Laurila points out the novel's satire of these conceptualizations, explaining that all of the conditions of Los Angeles that were once appealing are inverted in order to turn the booster myth against itself. He points out:

When oranges are the only food Arturo can afford, thus making up his breakfast, lunch, and dinner, a quintessential Booster icon becomes directly linked with nausea. Soothing ocean breezes give way to Santa Ana winds...the beautiful beaches turn into scenes of death and destruction following the 1933 Long Beach earthquake, and sunny skies fill with smog. (114)

While this certainly categorizes the novel as a satire of the booster myth, it also establishes a sense of monstrosity and fear that permeates the setting and tone.

The Los Angeles of *Ask the Dust* inverts the heavenly setting that early booster myths convey. Instead of a “Miracle City,” California “smells of mice and dust” and is full of palm trees that are “blackish at [their] branches stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street Tunnel, [their] crusted trunk[s] choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts” (AD 16). California becomes a barren hell where all the elements that were used to market the state rot and lose fecundity. Fante acknowledges the significance of this barrenness in his explanation of the book’s title. He states: “I call my book *Ask the Dust* because the dust of the east and the middle west is in these streets, and it is a dust where nothing will grow, supporting a culture without roots and the empty fury of a lost hopeless people, frenzied to reach a peace that cannot ever belong to them...” (AD Prologue 12). The hopelessness associated with the people of California echoes the words with which Dante Alighieri is confronted when he reaches hell with Virgil: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” It is the “pathetic destiny of men” (116) to be consumed by the desert and to live hopelessly in the hell that is California which also establishes the torturous nature of Western American-ness in the novel.

Throughout *Ask the Dust*, California is presented in just this way. It is on the one hand a bastion of hope for Americans and immigrants alike, the representation of the melting pot. In perhaps one of the novel’s most famous lines, Bandini exclaims, “Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles, come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town” (13). Critics have contended that Bandini and the city share equal weight as protagonists since his descriptions of and

relationship to the city mimic his own experiences as a migrant to California (Baillet 60). Stephen Cooper posits that Los Angeles is the externalization of Bandini's and other characters' desires and that desire is the true theme of the story (Cooper 83). However, the irony of the description of Los Angeles lies in the sinister, grotesque nature of the landscape. In the middle of the desert, Los Angeles is hot, dry, and practically barren. The terrain does not prompt growth and what does grow there—namely palm trees—is blackened by smog. The city is pervaded by the image of dust, evoking the biblical sentiment to which Bandini later refers: “the world was dust and dust it will become” (104). Compounding this are things such as Camilla's response to Bandini's statement that her lover is dying: “who isn't?” (116). These references suggest a connection between Los Angeles and death—that it is a dead city full of dead people. Far from being a city of angels, Los Angeles is populated by what Bandini suggests are “the dead restored”: a “broken man from Milwaukee” is the elevator operator in Bandini's building, an abusive husband who batters his wife for being pregnant lives next door, and at night the streets are full of prostitutes (12, 19). The people in California have left their homes in other parts of the country to “die in the sun” (45). They are like those in T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland*. They move mechanically through their lives in a city synonymous with success but without any sense of being alive. Los Angeles becomes ominous and sinister as a result. Thus, at the same time that the city is “pretty” and hopeful, it is also a figurative indication of mortality because, despite the city, “the desert is always there, a patient white animal, waiting for men to die, for civilizations to flicker and pass into the darkness” (116).

The problematic nature of this Californian identity is established early in *Ask the Dust* when Bandini describes his move to Los Angeles. As he checks into his hotel, Bandini is confronted with his indecipherable identity when Mrs. Hargraves asks, “Young man, are you a

Mexican? We don't allow Mexicans in this hotel...or Jews" (49). That Bandini is questioned about his identity suggests that it is problematic insofar as he occupies what Catherine Kordich calls a "borderland" ("Border Reading" 17) As a result, he is able to "operate within and between different cultures," successfully transgressing the boundaries between his own ethnicity and the dominant culture (18). Bandini's immigrant experience is unique since the liminal space that he occupies is based upon his body and his appearance does not reveal his race. However, instead of providing comfort as one would expect based upon the touting of California as progressive, Mrs. Hargraves expresses fear of Bandini's indistinguishable ethnicity. Bandini is instead treated as though he is a monster who threatens the desired homogeneity of the city. This fear of cultural change and threats to social order are part of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls "monster theory," an extension of the grotesque that examines the presence of monsters as externalization of fears surrounding cultural change and progression. Although Bandini is not a monster in the general sense of the word, he is exemplary of the terror of the cultural Other—the immigrant that "challenges [the history] that is commonly understood within California (*Monster Theory* 6). Although Bandini is not a monster in the general sense of the word, he is exemplary of the terror of the cultural Other that pervaded California. What makes him more frightening is the possibility of his successful assimilation because of his appearance. Bandini's skin color does not distinguish him as any race other than white and, as a result, Bandini is familiar yet shockingly sinister, a monster with the ability to easily assimilate into the dominant culture.

In order to assimilate successfully, Bandini must construct a fictional identity based upon the California ideal of superiority over the Other. This is made possible by Bandini's consistent disparagement of the ethnic other, which critics posit makes him more American in his own eyes (Laurila 115; Gardaphe 46). Consistently, he feels compelled to point out ethnicity. He examines

the appearances of everyone he crosses, labeling them “greasers” and “wops,” and when he falls in love with Camilla Lopez, he cannot allow himself to accept the feeling because she is Mexican. Bandini is simultaneously disgusted and awed by her appearance: her “Mayan” nose, “flat, with large nostrils. Her lips...were heavily rouged, with the thickness of a negress’ lips. She was a racial type” (34). Bandini acknowledges that Camilla is beautiful, but her ethnic features make her “too strange” (34). Bandini’s description makes Camilla seem monstrous because she and other “racial types are strange and unfamiliar and consequently threatening. The threat is directly connected to Camilla’s distance from the American archetype, and as a result Bandini reacts to her angrily, calling her a “greaser” nearly every time he acknowledges her. He makes Camilla a monster because of her strangeness, even though he is essentially the same type of stranger. In order to assimilate, Bandini must become indistinguishable from other Californians; however, in order to do so, he must demonize and overpower the Other using verbal and physical violence and torment, an exposure of moral degradation which becomes grotesque particularly in light of Bandini’s liminality.

As he attempts to overpower the other, Bandini’s behavior becomes the grotesque Bakhtinian imagery of uncontrolled consumption. His inclination to figuratively tear apart the people who threaten his America mask might be described as “biting” or “cutting.” The breaking down of the identities of others through his vitriolic speech is the first evidence of Bandini as a man with his mouth always open: a cannibal who not only consumes the culture around him but is consequently consumed by it. Perpetuating the open-mouthed, cannibalistic American ideal is Bandini’s consumption of food. The oranges he eats become synonymous with his own flesh, into which he digs his fingernails hoping to feel pain that will confirm his existence; and these images of his consumption of fruit are not satisfying but are instead horrifying. Identity and its

establishment are equated to consumption at all costs, but are ultimately unsatisfying.

Interestingly, the overwhelming hunger that Bandini feels not only associates him with the cavernous, all-consuming imagery of the grotesque but also aligns him with the fearfully grotesque act of cannibalism. Bandini's search for food is more often than not met by others who share their food with him. In particular, the oranges that Bandini so violently consumes are often donations from a nearby Chinese vendor. He is once treated to a portion of liver and onions as a courtesy by Hellfrick, a miserly alcoholic who lives next door to him. Bandini consistently consumes the food of the Other just as he figuratively "bites the heads off" the immigrants with whom he takes issue. On its own, the act of eating is an indication that man is "tast[ing] the world, introduc[ing] it into his body, mak[ing] it part of himself" (Bakhtin 281). As a person's open "rending, chewing mouth" devours the world outside of him, he is able to align himself with the elements that function outside of him, thus transgressing his bodily limits (281).

Similarly, the act of cannibalism consumes the other, transgressing social and physical limitations. In its way, cannibalism also suggests that a person may take in the attributes of the person whom he consumes. Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror* explains that this notion is most commonly seen in the religious ceremony of consuming the Eucharist as the body of Christ. In Kristeva's view, the practice of cannibalism as a means by which to absorb the qualities of someone else is often used as a method by which to resolve abject behaviors and help a person assimilate (119). Instead, Bandini's ingestion of the Other is another form of what critic Donald Weber calls his ascent to the "appropriate imperial position" (72). That is, by ingesting what is provided by the Other, Bandini inverts Kristeva's imagery and violently devours flesh that is associated with abjection as though by ingesting the Other he will be able to overpower it. Thus,

ingesting the Other becomes an extension of the melting pot. Bandini must eradicate—devour—the cultural Other in order to blend into the world around him.

Bandini's American identity is further aligned with consumption and materialism as clothing becomes equated with flesh, turning Californian clothing into a grotesque symbol of moral degradation. Bandini's obsession with the material leads him to spend the royalties he earns from the sale of an article on new clothing and accoutrements that he feels reflect his outward success. He buys suits, shoes, lotions, and cigarettes and takes expensive cab rides, exhausting all of his funds nearly as soon as he earns them. Some critics have assessed Bandini's actions as indicative of the importance that Americans place on material items (Weber 73). Of course, a state of socio-economic success is indicated outwardly by expensive clothing, cars, or even beverages, as evidenced by Bandini's early assertion that he can only afford to drink the coffee that is served at Camilla's bar because a beer is too expensive. The outward projection of wealth as an American ideal is established not only by Bandini's recognition of people's "sick...eyes watching every dollar bill" but also by the aforementioned conceptualization of California by others as posh and wealthy (74).. Bandini argues that California is incorrectly perceived as a progressive, beautiful oasis of a city. Rather, it is a squalid place where hopeful Americans come to die. Similarly, outward projections of wealth potentially hide the squalid insides of "the sad, empty folks...the new Californians" who Bandini calls his "countrymen" and who "belong" because of their "polo shirts and sunglasses" (45). While Bandini's materialism is an outward projection of a cultural understanding of American success, it seems not to be the type of identity that Bandini associates with true Western Americanness. Notably, once Bandini has bought his new clothes, his cologne, his food, and his hair products, he begins to feel strangled and uncomfortable. His body itches. His clothes are so

tight that they choke him and his hat band “squeezes his skull” (59). The scene becomes grotesque as Bandini begins to violently rip his clothing from his body and wash his skin until it is raw in an attempt to remove all of its traces. His clothing is synonymous with flesh and its tightness and burning with the discomfort of the identity that he projects. It is only once his old, ragged clothes are back on that he feels well again. However, the comfort that Bandini feels is expressed from the viewpoint of the clothes. “They were happy to have me again,” Bandini says. The clothes “cling to him” and his shoes hold tightly to his “tormented feet,” but it is not Bandini himself who wants to hold onto his old, impoverished identity (59). The identity with which Bandini is familiar is uncomfortable, poor, and starving. The comfort that he gains from this sense of discomfort seem to be the defining factor in making Bandini feel truly American. His California identity is based upon the suffering in which he will either accept or create for himself.

In creating an American ideal of torment and suffering, Bandini further establishes the necessity of fiction in becoming American. Because he is a writer, Bandini relies upon fiction to propel him into the ranks of the American successful. However, fiction begins to permeate Bandini’s life to the point that he becomes indiscernible from the fiction that he creates, in part because of how excessively he distributes his only published work, “The Little Dog Laughed.” He places copies in the lobby of the hotel, scattering them to make them look as though they have been read. He willingly autographs copies of his work for the hotel’s owner and for Camilla. Bandini essentially spreads himself like a sickness in the hope that people will catch on. However, just as his clothes become synonymous with a permeable exterior, so his text becomes synonymous with flesh. In his book *On the Grotesque*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham regards text as a veritable skin. It becomes a “permeable membrane” that allows the conflation of the body with

external influences (141). In drawing this conclusion, Harpham refers to literary texts as mask-like in the sense that they “grant the self-provisional form” and ultimately facilitate “annihilation of the self.” This is to say that the mask-wearer feels uninhibited when he is disguised but ultimately becomes his disguise, believing that it is reality. So literature creates this through a “too-close relationship” to the text that facilitates the reader’s or writer’s belief that the text has become his identity. His text becomes entirely fictionalized when a letter to Hackmuth, Bandini’s first publishing agent, is renamed and published as a short story.

I stood before the mirror once more, shaking my fist defiantly. Here I am, folks. Take a look at the great writer! Notice my eyes, folks. The eyes of a great writer. Notice my jaw, folks. The jaw of a great writer. Look at those hands, folks. The hands that created *The Little Dog Laughed* and *The Long Lost Hills*. (57)

Bandini is thus allowed to wear the mask of American success insofar as it is validated by the fiction in which he finds himself. This grotesque connection of Bandini with written fiction in order to create a mask is enhanced by the rejection of his own ethnicity.

Bandini’s creation of fiction is perpetuated by the attempts of other characters to affect similar changes in the hopes of assuming an appropriate identity. Camilla Lopez, a Mexican waitress with whom Bandini becomes questionably enamored, attempts to change in order to assimilate but is met with a failure that emphasizes her inability to occupy the liminal, fictional space as do more racially ambiguous characters. Camilla is tormented by Bandini for her ethnicity, and in particular Bandini chastises her for her huaraches. Camilla then buys a pair of white pumps at Bandini’s suggestion. Like Arturo’s clothing, lotions, and cigarettes, Camilla’s new white pumps are symbolically American. They are not only materialistic but, of course, they are also white. The color and significance of Camilla’s shoes as adhering to the hegemony of the

white American male gaze of twentieth-century Hollywood is compounded by Camilla's insisting on keeping them on in spite of how painful they are. She is so uncomfortable, in fact, that Bandini observes her to have "lost her old sparkle" (61). If Camilla's old sparkle is present in her comfort in huaraches then she too is paralleled with Bandini and his discomfort in his new clothes. Camilla would likely feel comfortable in her Mexicanness if she were allowed to be. However, Los Angeles forbids it. Moreover, Camilla seems to realize that the game of Hollywood is a norm of torture by white, male moguls whose wealth and luck have made them power hungry. The misery of Camilla's character comes from her willingness to subject herself to torment in order to perpetuate her own grotesque fiction of whiteness where she sees opportunity to become the Californian American she insists she is.

However, for all its torturous moments, *Ask the Dust* does contain the type of Rabelasian comic horror which Bakhtin emphasizes. In particular, Bandini's and Camilla's trip to the beach evokes a sense of playful clowning while simultaneously breeding disgust as the pair brutalizes one another. What is Bandini and Camilla's first outing together seems oddly like a date. The two drive in a convertible to the beach; Camilla happily rests her leg on the door of the car, and the two talk casually. However, once they arrive at the beach, their "date" goes awry. Camilla cannot swim, so Bandini practically allows her to drown. Upon her return to the sand, Camilla begins to physically fight Bandini. The two roll around on the beach, shoving each other's faces in the sand and tearing at each other, screaming racial epithets the entire time. In this case, the body and its surroundings are literally conflated. Camilla becomes immersed in the place into which she tries to assimilate. During their fight, Bandini forces Camilla's face into the sand, an act which effectively continues the inversion of the California landscape and pegs her as a monstrosity. The beach takes on a sinister connotation, changing from a place of leisure into a

place of torment and struggle, and within this grotesque landscape Camilla becomes a Californian monster as her facelessness indicates a violent eradication of identity. Without a face, Camilla is only a body that is unassociated with personality or even with personhood, making her more vulnerable to the attacks of the dominant culture on the ethnic Other. Her personhood is consequently defined by subjugation, and her identity is refocused to what Bakhtin establishes to be the “lower stratum” of the body: genitals, flesh, or organs that are separated from the higher-order function that is typically associated with intelligence or humanness (311). Thus, Camilla’s facelessness creates the opportunity for further torment since her identity as a woman and a human are obscured. Camilla’s facelessness, her conflation with the veritable “dirt” of California, further removes her from humanity and aligns her with base monstrosity. Camilla’s brownness is a staple of her ethnicity that prevents her from assimilating and which makes her monstrous in light of the importance of homogeneity in California.

In addition to Camilla’s association with dirt and suffering, her sexuality and gender also become significant within the context of Western American identity and the grotesque. In the case of Camilla and other women in the novel, Mary Russo’s conceptualization of the female grotesque is especially relevant. Russo posits that the female grotesque is concentrated most specifically on the body. As “open, protruding, irregular, secreting...and changing,” the female body is instantly grotesque: associated with “low culture” and the Carnavalesque (Russo Loc 219). Women, therefore, occupy their own kind of borderland between normality and monstrosity, which, in *Ask the Dust*, is exacerbated by the cultural and ethnic liminalities to which the women are already subject. Throughout the novel, the female grotesque appears for women in the form of the inappropriate usage of the female body. The women in whom Bandini is initially interested are all prostitutes who he feels will help him experience life in such a way

that it will facilitate his success within the American literary market. These women too have tried to disguise themselves in order to portray the American ideal of beauty; they have blonde hair that is clearly not natural, since their black roots show through, or they have put on enough makeup to hide their ethnicity. Similar attempts of women in the novel exemplify the violence that is associated with the female body as a result of attempts or failures to assimilate into not only the homogenous ethnic culture but also the sexual culture of Los Angeles.

Although Camilla resists the white American culture that pervades her relationship with Bandini, she too exhibits cannibalistic behavior that indicates a desire to absorb the Other. Yet for Camilla, these scenes are nearly always sexual in nature. That is, Camilla does not consume the other by eating but instead consistently attempts to kiss or sleep with the Other. Even in her moments of extreme vitriol, Camilla kisses Bandini—"thick, warm kisses for services about to be rendered-- or stands naked in front of him, imploring him to confirm if he "still likes [her]" (117, 68). The focus on Camilla's mouth invites the reader to imagine that she might devour Bandini as he earlier devoured his oranges. Yet this focus is equally as important when it is equated with sexuality in terms of its relationship the myth of the vagina dentate—the concern that a woman's vagina "is a trap, a black whole which threatens to swallow [men] up and tear them to pieces" (Creed 60). Camilla's attempts at sexual contact with Bandini therefore become threatening in light of her violent conflicts with him and her seeming desire to injure him in the same way he has injured her. However, Camilla's investment in consuming Bandini is twofold. He not only is able to toe the line between American and immigrant but he is also given the added advantage of being a man. As a result, sex becomes a commodity on which Camilla can capitalize as a quasi-cannibalistic mechanism for absorption of the Other.

Camilla is unwilling to entirely relinquish her identity, which is the catalyst for her inevitable descent into madness. In spite of her insistence that she is as American as Bandini and her desire to assimilate via a name change that she feels will align her more closely with ambiguous ethnicities, Camilla's relationship to Bandini's Americanness goes only so far as her recognition that Bandini is the monstrous other within California society. Unlike Bandini, Camilla cannot find a liminal space to occupy. She is wholly defined by her body and seeks not so much to enter into as to eradicate American society. However, the need to be both American and California proves so impossible that Camilla is eventually deemed insane and must either occupy the American institution to which the abject Other is committed in an effort to hide the monstrous from the public eye or forcibly remove herself by suicide. This necessity is reminiscent of the ancient Spartan practice of killing weak and disfigured children of their society by exposure in an attempt to avoid being viewed as a culture associated with weakness. The need for 30s California to establish itself as a cultural mecca for success, beauty, and virility is much the same. Particularly in the city of Los Angeles, the insistence that happiness hinges on the perfection and veritable homogeneity of the area excludes any person who deviates ethnically or personally from the manufactured Californian cultural ideal. Camilla thus becomes a foil for her lover, Sammy, whose failure forces him into the desert to die. She is banished and disregarded by a culture that prides itself upon the blending of tradition and is consumed by the vast expanse of the dust that permeates the novel.

While Camilla's inability to successfully assimilate is manifest in her outward physical discomfort and gradual psychological decline, the particular torture of the female struggle for assimilation in the West is most brutally manifest in Vera, a woman who stumbles upon Bandini's hotel room late one night after drinking too much. Outwardly, Vera is more materially

composed than the other characters. She is dressed “intelligently” in black and is “mature,” although not beautiful (79). She is able to quote Millay from memory and proudly exclaims to Bandini that she has money. Unlike Camilla or the other women briefly mentioned in the novel, Vera seems composed. Her composure, in fact, seems to separate her from the other characters who are desperate to establish an identity. Instead, she has come the closest of all the characters to achieving the American dream. However, Vera’s outwardly American identity is perverted by the suggestion that she has had to sacrifice her life, her humanity, and her femininity in order to achieve some semblance of this dream.

Like Bandini, Vera occupies a border space in between whiteness and ethnicity. A Jewish woman who has come to California from the east coast, Vera is also a liminal ethnic Other. Beginning in the 1920s, California attitudes, particularly in Hollywood became “notably anti-semitic” and the success of Jewish people in California was resented (*Inventing the Dream* loc 6923). Vera is subject to this scrutiny particularly by Others who have already hidden their ethnicity and have consequently assimilated. She is watched “like a criminal” when she enters a bar owned by a Jewish man, as though her loudness will give her and the bartender away. In fact, the disapproving frown and stern look that the bartender gives her alerts Bandini to her Jewishness and consequently motivates his desire to escape from her (*AD* 83). However, like Bandini’s, Vera’s ethnicity is not clearly recognizable by accent or skin color. As a result, she is fearsome to white Californians unless she commits to the projection of a homogenous ethnicity and acceptable femininity, yet she still occupies the same liminal space as Bandini between fearsome Other and normal Californian. Her liminality is more convoluted not only because she is Jewish but also because she is a woman in a town that prizes a certain type of woman as being representative of American desire.

The composure that Bandini sees projected in Vera's dress is indicative not only of the reinforcement of materiality in American culture but also of the necessity for torture in the process of assimilation. Vera appears at Bandini's door wearing a "black coat with furpiece, black shoes, black skirt, and white blouse" (79). In her description, Vera is curiously aligned with a woman who Bandini sees at the opening of the novel whose "fur is silver fox" and his longing for women whose "shoes are worth all [he has] ever possessed (12, 20). This projection of the successful woman as outwardly beautiful and clothed expensively is not only the stuff of Bandini's fantasy but also of the importance of material wealth that is imposed on American women in particular. However, Vera's clothing can be equated to the dress of a mourner at a funeral. Ironically, the act of mourning, in a constant and consistent fashion, is closely in line with traditional Jewish funerary customs. In Judaism, mourning is a continuous process, beginning with the tradition of sitting *shiva* for seven days. Upon the completion of *shiva*, the Jewish faith requires a reading of *Kadish* mourning prayers weekly for the first year of the person's death and the yearly lighting of the *yahrzeit* candle in remembrance of the deceased (Matz 346). Vera's wearing of mourning dress is a veritable *shiva* for the loss of her Jewish identity, the irony of which is undeniable since it is the adoption of an American ideology and the subsequent relinquishment of all parts of her Jewish identity that is the catalyst for her mourning.

The sense that Vera is mourning the loss of herself is reinforced by the smell of death with which she is associated. She is first and foremost associated with adjectives related to death and putrefaction. The smell of her perfume and her breath resemble "the distinctive odor of decay, sweetish and cloying" and her kisses are, for Bandini, like "dead flowers" (AD 80). Vera's decaying insides, juxtaposed with her composed outside, indicates the California

necessity to project an image that is synonymous with the Los Angeles dream of success. Vera latches on to materiality and can be assumed to have escaped the anti-Semitic sentiments of Los Angeles in the same way Bandini has managed to in his exchange with Mrs. Hargraves. Yet what connects Vera and Bandini is the necessity to relinquish identity. As Vera proclaims to Bandini that he is “nobody” and that she “could have been somebody” (83), Bandini notices the smell of her putridity “impregnating” the room, as if the continued establishment of her loss of self amplifies her association with death (81). In insisting that she “could have been,” Vera removes herself from the world of the California living and aligns herself with Bandini in the struggle to become significant through the sacrifice of the body. Vera’s ultimate embodiment of the grotesque is significant to the feminine struggle for success in Los Angeles and the sacrifice not only of the body but also of feminine identity.

Like Bandini, Vera Rivken wears clothes and makeup as if they are flesh. While Bandini is initially compelled to remove his clothes hastily, Vera has clearly become dependent upon hers in spite of an overwhelming feeling that she is undesirable and unattractive. Vera’s Americanness is written upon her body in a large burn “at the loins...it was a birthmark or something, a burn, a seared place, a pitiful, dry, vacant place, where flesh was gone, where the thighs suddenly became small and shriveled and the flesh seemed dead” (88). Vera’s significant mutilations exemplify an image of the the female body as “monstrous and lacking” (Russo loc 442). Bandini’s description reveals a loss of gender and sexuality that Vera has undergone as a condition of her outward projection of success. That she has been burned at the loins ultimately eradicates Vera’s sexual and gender identity, just as it obscures her genitals. She has had her gender, her femininity and her sexuality removed in an image as violent as that of the melting pot, the burning, molten image which is in conjunction with Vera’s injury. The vast scarring of

Vera's abdomen, thighs, and genitals becomes an external expression of her failure not only as a Jew in Los Angeles but also as a woman pursuing fame in a highly misogynistic industry. Thus, while she may once have been defined by her genitals and her sexuality, Vera has become sexless and must hide the evidence of her failures under the mournful clothing of American success.

Perhaps more grotesque than the scarring of Vera's body and the death that surrounds her is her willingness to bare herself to Bandini. She disrobes unexpectedly, insisting that Bandini see her body but that he must "forgive [it]" and "think of her soul" instead (85). While the scene is indeed tragic in its sense of desperation, it is more grotesque that Vera's actions seem geared toward selling herself—selling her soul—to be considered real and beautiful in light of standards established by Hollywood and the film industry. As a veritable mecca of mass media, Hollywood established and perpetuated a normalizing very of female bodies via the film industry. Considering that film industry moguls at the time were predominantly men, the normal body was established on the basis of what was attractive to the wealthy California man and restricted ethnic-looking women to marginalized roles as racial stereotypes (Walsh 28). Because of her questionable ethnicity, Vera has eradicated much of what defines her as a Jewish woman in hopes of being acceptable in the view of the Hollywood male. However, the grotesqueness of her body prevents this. Thus, when Vera pitches her soul to Bandini and continues to follow him from his home to a bar and then back to his home, begging him to love her and to think of her soul, she evokes the image of a salesperson haggling with a customer over an item for sale. As a result, Vera appears to be typical Los Angeles dweller: both dead and soulless, having sacrificed herself at all costs to maintain the hope of "being somebody" in California. She is one of the California undead, robbed of all identity and humanity. Vera's "lack" of femininity, identity, and

humanity defines Vera's struggle to assimilate into the Western aesthetic at the same time as it defines the grotesque female body in the view of Russo. Vera lacks what she has given up in order to be accepted into the California aesthetic, becoming monstrous in order to survive in the city and revealing an anxiety of rejection from a desirable cultural space.

Vera becomes a glimpse into the future that Bandini can expect as he continues his quest for an American identity. However, his association with her only exacerbates the dependence on illusion that is at the core of American identity in the novel, insofar as it both necessitates Bandini's attempts to live a fiction of his own creation and Vera's attempts to negate her own identity in order to keep up appearances. She is so much a revelation into Bandini's future that he resolves to write his greatest work: a fiction with Vera as the main character. By fictionalizing Vera's life, Bandini can deny the grotesque implications of his own.

However, as if mimicking the fragility of the characters' identities, the Los Angeles landscape literally collapses around them, reaffirming earlier images of the instability of the town's own identity. Shortly after meeting Vera again, Bandini finds himself on the streets of Los Angeles during a sudden earthquake that swiftly demolishes both the apartment building he has just left as well as many of the buildings surrounding him. The entire city is finally and explicitly defined by carnage, with the ruins of the apartments containing the broken bodies of their inhabitants. The Los Angeles by which Bandini and the other characters have defined themselves is a weak, easily collapsible structure. This pivotal point halfway through the novel gives Bandini the opportunity to forgo his commitment to the assumptions of American identity, but instead, it only strengthens his role as a California grotesque. Earthquakes occur in other Fante's works, in particular his collection of short stories, *The Wine of Youth*, and critics often interpret the experience of the earthquake as an "emblem...of the overthrow of [a character's] spiritual sloth

(Martin 34). Certainly, this logic holds up in Bandini's post-apocalyptic behavior. Bandini begins sending money home to his mother; "I went to Mass in the mornings," he says "I received Holy Communion. I picked out a little frame church, squat and solid, down near the Mexican Quarter. Here I prayed. The new Bandini" (*AD* 104). While his behavior can be read, as it often is, as a return to spirituality or even an acceptance of common Italian-American traditions, Bandini's new identity is merely a brief foray into the instinct of his old Italian-American customs rather than a move toward acceptance of his grotesqueness. He avoids the city of Los Angeles and sleeps outside in the desert, essentially exiling himself from the illusory lifestyle he has led until the earthquake. Yet, by his own admission, it is better to revert to fear and "die a coward [rather] than a madman" (103). The cowardice about which Bandini speaks, however, does not refer to the cowardice of religion but rather to the cowardice of following the temptation of American masochism. This concept is best exemplified by the image of a vampiric woman who stalks Bandini as he wrestles with the draw of the "heavenly light" of his new-found religion:

I turned and found the window, saw a head; the flash of teeth, the black hair, the leer, the gesturing long fingers. What was that thunder in my belly? And how shall I prevent that paralysis of thought, and that inundation of blood making my senses reel? But I want this! I shall die without it! So I'm coming you woman in the window; you fascinate me, you kill me dead with delight and shudder and joy, and here I come, up these rickety stairs. (105)

Both the booster myth of Los Angeles and the inversion of the landscape are evoked by the femininity of this imagery. In early booster publications, Los Angeles is given a female pronoun, and the beauty of "her" appearance is expounded upon. However, the dark lover that lures

Bandini back onto the streets of Los Angeles not only exposes the insincerity of his religiosity but also exemplifies the torturous, sadomasochistic way of life that assimilation requires. Instead of being beautiful and fecund, Los Angeles is a thin, leering woman whose grotesque appeal nearly kills Bandini instead of nourishing him.

Bandini is once again compelled toward grotesque Los Angeles and away from the ethnic roots that comfort him. Denying his roots, he returns to Los Angeles life where his behavior becomes more sadomasochistic, perpetuating his grotesqueness within the monstrous landscape. Bandini becomes more stolidly insistent upon his Americanness than before, attacking Camilla's ethnicity with a vitriolic, "you try so hard to be American. Look at yourself in the mirror" (121). Attacking ethnicity does not work in the way it once did, however. Camilla points out to Bandini that she is "just as American" as he; he is "dark like the Eytalians" and his name "ends in a soft vowel" (122). Bandini has been exposed, sensing that Camilla is "more deeply rooted" than he, which results in his need to lament the profound failure of his disguise. He is "black awful Arturo Bandini, black vile dog" instead of the powerful author of his imagination (118). In order to overcome this feeling and reassert himself as a powerful American man, he forces himself upon Camilla. Although he does not rape her, Bandini is reassured by his ability to subdue the Other. In overpowering Camilla, he is able to empower himself and in "knowing that [he] can have her, [he is] no longer afraid of her" (125). Recognizing that he no longer has to fear the Other indicates that Bandini has become the grotesque, morally degraded Californian that he believes he must be in order to assimilate. Despite his brief return to old habits, Bandini reasserts himself as a torturer of the Other and acceptable American while ironically becoming more grotesque himself.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of Bandini's self-torture is the fleeting moments during which he recognizes the extent of his feelings for Camilla. In spite of their monstrous behavior and fights, Bandini still reveres Camilla as the Mayan princess he fleetingly pictured her to be in the diner. Although he brutalizes her, he still throws himself to his knees before the place on his bed where Camilla sits when she visits. He intermittently and desperately proclaims his love for her, picturing her there and longing for her. However, the fiction that Bandini creates for himself such a pervasive source of obsession that he must ultimately deny the truth of his emotions, consequently tormenting himself further for the sake of the persona he has created. Camilla represents all of the elements in Bandini that he loathes: his ethnicity, his anxieties over fitting in and seeming "normal" in California, and his fears that giving into desires besides the one to assimilate will destroy him; these are all exemplified by Camilla's mercurial personality, brownness, and the sense that, because of her persistence, she might be "more beautiful...more deeply rooted" than Bandini (*AD* 123). Giving into the passion that Bandini feels toward Camilla would be to validate all of these problematic feelings and to pierce the enigmatic self that Bandini has worked to create. Resisting the draw of the Other and the possibility of finding satisfaction in the acceptance of the Other is an integral part of Bandini's pursuit of Americanness, and so he actively seeks the misery that contributes to this identity.

What seems to Bandini to be an ascent from the vileness he felt earlier is aligned with the grotesque imagery of men as animals, perverting the masculine ideology of the Wild West of American lore. The archetype of the Wild West, of course, is best exemplified by "heroic cowboys and deadly gunmen," whose images continued to be projected in film westerns and novels well into the twentieth-century (Blake 202). This popular imagery is compounded by the necessity of hunting for food that the early settlers had to do as a survival tactic. These mystical

valorizations of the west are essential to the politics of American identity, built as it is upon tenacity leading ultimately to success (Martin 93). Priding himself upon possessing the traits necessary for Americanness, Bandini perverts this archetypal notion with the assistance of Hellfrick in their post-earthquake attempts to eat.

Once Bandini has resumed living in his apartment, he is visited by Hellfrick, who proposes to feed him the greatest steak he will ever have. However, Hellfrick reveals that in order to cook this steak, the two must slaughter a calf, which they find at a nearby farm. Keeping Bandini ignorant, Hellfrick disables the calf and carries it back to his car, telling Bandini that he will give him a “lesson in butchering” (*AD* 109). In opposition to the early western archetype of the cowboy, Hellfrick and Bandini do not wrangle cows or hunt for their food. Instead, they attack a helpless, penned, and practically domesticated animal. Bandini is rightfully horrified, but he curiously refers to himself and Hellfrick as “murderers” (111). Since the word “murder” is defined as the unlawful killing of “another human” its use equates the animal to a person, suggesting that both Bandini and Hellfrick have failed in their attempts to emulate the powerful Western archetypes and have instead been exposed as base and animalistic (“Murder”). That the two men decide to kill a creature that is as defenseless as a child exacerbates the grotesque inversion of the Wild West myth. The slaughter of a calf evokes the imagery of occult ritual in which an animal might be sacrificed in exchange for power. Like Vera Rivken’s attempt to sell her soul for love, Bandini and Hellfrick perform a sacrifice that ultimately annihilates their humanity in order to survive in Los Angeles, where race places the characters in a veritable food chain based upon ethnicity. The qualities previously aligned with Americanness are inverted and the the American West becomes dark, primal, and alienating.

The struggle for survival and the ultimately inhuman nature of American identity in the novel is exposed in the concluding events in which the weak are cast out of California either by illness or madness, both of which are equated with the inability to assimilate or to become successful by the standards of the Californian American dream. In particular, Camilla's lover Sammy is revealed to be dying of tuberculosis, and in a desperate attempt to gain success, he commissions Bandini to edit his work. Although Sammy is the only Anglo-American character in the cast other than Hellfrick, he exemplifies the fate of those Californians who fail to adopt the racist, contemptuous attitude of Los Angeles. However, the sick body is "saintly because it suffers" and "triumphs over the limitations of mere flesh" (*Medieval Identity Machines* 20). On the one hand, Sammy's body fits this hagiographic model because of the American condition of suffering for assimilation. However, his illness suggests that his body cannot triumph over the sacrifice that the American identity demands. It is Sammy's continued hope that ultimately exiles him from the Los Angeles landscape of the dead and dying. The conundrum of this idea—that Sammy's will to live kills him—again perverts the American Western ideal of tenacity by rejecting the hopeful American as though he is a leper. The alienation from hope and from one's own identity is crucial to Americanness in this novel and consequently finalizes the image of California in general and Los Angeles in particular as a grotesque American landscape: a land that is populated by the walking dead who have achieved the dream of American assimilation at the cost of their humanity.

In spite of his literal and figurative separation from the rest of California, Sammy still demonstrates the familiar vitriolic reaction to the Other that is pervasive in the text. As a result, Sammy's condemnation and ultimate rejection of Camilla becomes instrumental in her exile from California, which marks her failed assimilation into American society. If Bandini's

constant struggle with Camilla can be examined as a struggle for agency between others, Camilla's relationship with Sammy effectively exemplifies what critic Catherine Kordich calls a "love/hate relationship with Los Angeles" (*John Fante* 70). This love hate relationship, for Kordich, exists between the characters, the environment, and the necessities within the borders of Los Angeles. Yet this relationship is also present between Sammy and Camilla to the extent that Camilla consistently attempts to sexually ingest Sammy's Americanness and is as consistently rejected by him. Bandini reminds a destitute, mad Camilla of a time when she and Sammy "drove out to the desert and he slugged [her] twice for waking him up," a recollection that should logically repel her. However, Camilla admits that she consistently tortures herself because she loves Sammy (130). Sammy is more American than either Camilla or Arturo because he is a white man. Therefore, while his behavior does not meet the California standard assimilation, his appearance does. If Camilla is accepted by either man, she is also accepted by the Californian standard of whiteness and veritable deadness. Like Bandini, Camilla has tortures herself in an attempt to assimilate, which influences her gradual decline throughout the novel as she is constantly rejected. Camilla's madness is directly evocative of Kayser's grotesque, since her madness gives "human nature...an ominous tone" (184). The mad person is simultaneously human and alien, seeming to have had an "inhuman force" enter them (184). Camilla's failure to assimilate aligns her more closely with the inhuman, abject Other and forces her to face the monstrosity that Los Angeles society makes her. In the end, Camilla must be cast out like a monster from California in order to protect its illusion of ethnic homogeneity.

Camilla's fate is the most extreme of all the characters' in *Ask the Dust*. While Sammy is exiled, it is she who is forced into the abyss of the California desert. Camilla's ultimate punishment suggests another dimension within the California grotesque: the demonization of

women who do not fit the Tinsel Town aesthetic. In spite of her adoption of a seemingly ambiguous last name—"Lombard"—Camilla is unable to escape the condemnation as a result of her ethnic appearance (62). Unlike Vera Rivken, she cannot find a space in the borderland between her own ethnicity and the dominant culture and is consequently forced out of California and away from the public eye entirely.

Like the calf Bandini and Hellfrick slaughter, Camilla is Bandini's final sacrifice in the quest for Californian assimilation. When Camilla is gone, Bandini drives back to Los Angeles, ultimately committing himself to the grotesque torment of assimilation. While the cultural anxieties of Depression-era Californians make the Other monstrous, Bandini ultimately becomes the monster, leaving his lover to die and sacrificing his humanity in exchange for acceptance and success. His face finally becomes the face of people around him: a face "with the blood drained away: tight...worried [and] lost" (161). Thus, assimilation into the American West is exposed as an act of moral degradation based upon cultural anxiety and which culminates in the creation of a grotesque American monster who has sacrificed humanity for a "place in the sun" (45).

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