

Stephen Cooper and Clorinda Donato, eds.

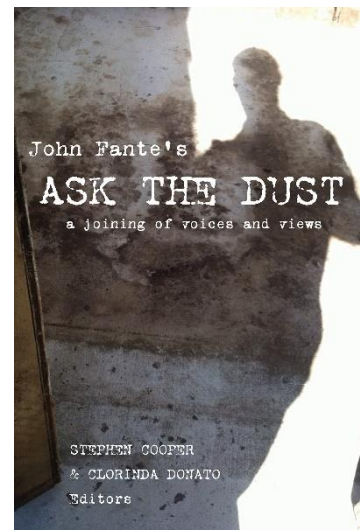
John Fante's *Ask the Dust*

A Joining of Voices and Views

New York: Fordham UP, 2020, pp. 329

Review by Elisa Bordin

Keywords: *John Fante*, *Ask the Dust*, *Italian-American literature*, *review*



If I could add my voice to those of the authors here gathered to pay homage to John Fante and his masterpiece, *Ask the Dust* (1939), I'd say Valencia, Spain, 2001. Just as they recall their first encounter with Fante's narrative, I remember when I was a young international student living abroad and a comrade made me discover the power of Fante's narrative. We stood by the window, dusk outside and the green cover of a 1990s Marcos y Marcos Italian edition of *The Brotherhood of the Grape* between us. I say *discover* because, as all the contributors to Stephen Cooper and Clorinda Donato's *John Fante's Ask the Dust* attest, the first experience with the writer from Boulder is usually described as an epiphany of sort. Native American writer Joel Williams, Italian-American Angelino Miriam Amico, Fante festival director Giovanna Di Lello, French translator Philippe Garnier or Stephen Cooper himself confirm what Charles Bukowski wrote in the by-now famous preface to the new 1980 Black Sparrow edition of *Ask the Dust*: they all talk of their encounter with Fante as a manifestation of humanness through literature; a moment of sudden insight into our identitarian complexities; the revelation of dreams and failures alike—a disclosure of life, of truth.

This is the power of the novel at the center of Stephen Cooper and Clorinda Donato's collection of essays, which comes out exactly eighty-one years after the first publication of *Ask the Dust* by Stackpole and Sons, an edition that brought difficulties and bad luck to Fante. As illustrated here by Ryan Holiday, the legal and economic problems the publishing house had to face because of an unauthorized version of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* may explain the only partial success of the novel when it came out. But at some distance from the 1930s, we can safely say that *Ask the*

Dust is now acknowledged as Fante's undisputed masterpiece, equally recognized as such by his ever-growing fans, by scholars of Italian-American studies and Californian literature, and finally—even though too timidly—by those who work with American letters broadly understood. It is *Ask the Dust's* narrative complexity, its fresh prose style, the multilayered interpretation of the protagonists' love-hate relationship, based on issues of race, class, and gender, and the influence it has had on new generations of writers, that has elevated this work above others by Fante.

John Fante's Ask the Dust communicates the importance of the novel by giving space to both scholarly essays and nonacademic testimonies, which investigate the role the book has played in the development of the authors here gathered. Rather than a thorough work of academic inquiry, the present volume is therefore an homage to the writer, as the editors themselves declare. A tribute framed by four solid research essays by Valerio Ferme, Suzanne Manizza Roszak, Meagan Meylor, and Daniel Gardner, which make up the first and more original part of the publication. While Ferme analyses Vittorini's Italian adaptations of *Ask the Dust*, revealing the inter-relatedness between literature reading and world politics, and Roszak focuses on aspects of religiosity and alienation in Fante's masterpiece, both Meylor and Gardner look at *Ask the Dust's* critical dialogue with Californian *latinidad*, one in the form of the character Camilla Lopez, the other through the book's intertextuality with *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson (1884). Their contributions are long due, because they unveil *Ask the Dust's* importance in the all-American (and not only Italian-American) discourse on race and its historical and geographical situatedness. In this sense Meylor implements David Wyatt's reading of Camilla as an allusion to the 1930s Repatriation Program, thus displaying "the novel's political unconscious and by extension its relevance to today's global immigration crisis and the consequences especially for women" (7). By including references to unpublished material now entrusted to the Charles E. Young Research Library (UCLA), Meylor expands on the potential signification of Camilla, the character who is achieving more and more critical relevance in contemporary interpretations of *Ask the Dust*. Rather than focusing on the writer-to-be Bandini or reading the novel as a fictionalized autobiography, Gardner proves that other critical tools, such as those coming from postcolonial studies, can enrich *Ask the Dust's* import and give critical depth to the discourse on Anglo-Mexican relations in California. As these contributions show, time is ripe for other explorations of *Ask the Dust* matching the book's fertile intersections with things other than Italian Americana.

For scholars of American, Italian-American, or Italian letters, the essays by Gardner, Meylor, Roszak, and Ferme constitute the most gripping part of the volume, as examples of those 'new

approaches' to the study of Fante that many have been asking for. Equally captivating is the attention to archival research, visible in Fante's letter to Jo Pagano, published here for the first time; or the short story "Goodbye, Bunker Hill," a work that helps reflect and expand on the key features of *Ask the Dust*.

The following parts of the book are more engaging for a public who is less familiar with Fante criticism, as they include some edited versions of already-published essays (such as those by Teresa Fiore and Chiara Mazzucchelli) and personal testimonies (see Part 2 and Part 4, with letters by Jan Louter, Bukowski, and an interview with Robert Towne).

Although more private and less academic, these personal contributions are no less powerfully suggestive. While significant for the historiography of Fante's studies, they also stimulate future trajectories in the interpretation of Fante's work. Remembering his approach to Fante and the new archival discoveries after the publication of his milestone biography *Full of Life*, Cooper writes that one of the forceful features of Fante's prose is its whispered fascination with failure. Be it the failure of a writer's block, as reported in the letter to his friend and fellow writer Jo Pagano, or of the romance between Arturo and Camilla, the sense of failing is what makes each and every one of Fante's characters so more humane despite their superficial bravado. In closing her essay, Giovanna Di Lello writes that Fante's stories recount the "precarious quality of life experienced by everyone at one time or another" (191). Perhaps, then, the word "precarious" is the keyword to appreciate Fante's magic: the precariousness of one's ethnicity, of one's own feelings and desires, which demolishes the boundaries of one's identitarian self, when writing as well as reading. Even though the idea of precariousness is much more reminiscent of contemporary philosophical conceptions than the atmosphere of a world in black and white as that of the 1930s, it does suit the interpretation of Fante's writing in its reference to uncertainty: the chanciness of Fante's success as a writer during his life; the mutability of Bandini's ambitions; the ambiguity of the character's ethnic inscription; and also the unpredictability of Camilla's end in the desert. In such precariousness of human endeavors lies the brilliance of a writer who, paraphrasing Cooper's words, tells the truth about ourselves, "about how we can feel—and makes us laugh at ourselves" (309).

Elisa Bordin (*elisa.bordin@unive.it*) is Assistant Professor of American Literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research deals with the western, a genre she analyses in her *Masculinity & Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the Millennium (2014)*; the literatures of minorities and of migration, with a special focus on Italian-American and Chicano literature; critical race studies, especially the memory of slavery. On this topic, she edited *Transatlantic*

Memories of Slavery: Remembering the Past, Changing the Future (2015, with Anna Scacchi) and A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità (2017, with Stefano Bosco). In 2019 she published Un'etnicità complessa. Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante.