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## **Angelenos? What's That? Young Italians in Los Angeles in the Fiction of John Fante, Andrea De Carlo and Chiara Barzini**

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In the complex and varied history of Italian migration to the United States, the Californian experience has stood out for the original dynamics of its mobility, especially in relation to the transit of Italians to Los Angeles. This article investigates specific features which emerge in descriptions of the Italian experience in Los Angeles provided by three authors whose novels, which take place in different moments in the city's history, embody different transnational Italian perspectives, namely John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), Andrea De Carlo's *Treno di panna* (1983) and Chiara Barzini's *Things that Happened before Earthquake* (2017). This article explores how these representations of the Los Angeles experience have contributed to broadening the representation of Italian youth abroad. At the same time, I identify how the Italian experience has expanded the prism of literary interpretations of the city and deepened the knowledge of the metropolis itself, due to its historic role within the dense stratification of ethnic communities and cultures which make up the constantly evolving identity of the city.

There is a before and an after in every Los Angeles experience. Narratives and counternarratives about the city have influenced global imagination since Hollywood became the capital of the American film industry in the 1920s and 1930s. Hence, nobody can say to have truly visited a metropolis that represents such a powerful imaginary construction, without having experienced the city already somehow. Although this aspect is also true for many cities that have similarly imprinted themselves onto the global imaginary, Los Angeles appears to stand out for its ability to manufacture its own myth while simultaneously providing a self-reflection on its mythopoeic

power. A significant number of creative sources have specifically pointed out that the impact of the city leaves a permanent mark on subjectivity. Alongside more credited academic sources, Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, more commonly known by her stage name, Lana Del Rey, has also described the indelible nature of the city on the psyche of its visitors. The multi-platinum artist and prominent voice for the youth of today, perfectly encapsulates this sentiment in her song *Fuck It I Love You*, with the line: ‘So I moved to California, but it’s just a state of mind / It turns out everywhere you go’.<sup>1</sup>

Outsiders like Lana del Rey have long held a crucial role in the representation of the city. Literary criticist David Fine emphasized that the Los Angeles novel is ‘chiefly the work of the outsider—if not the tourist, then the newcomer’.<sup>2</sup> Combining a fresh viewpoint with a diverse cultural background on their arrival, visitors to Los Angeles have contributed in disseminating the narrative of a place constantly reinventing itself. In the passage between the before and the after, the Los Angeles newcomer unveils the difference between their imaginary construction and the actual town, drawing a line between the image constructed by films and TV shows, and the concrete experience encountered by exploring the different areas constituting its vast urban structure. An early, yet exemplary model of this literature is F. S. Fitzgerald’s posthumous novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941). An expert of re-invention and stories of youth, Fitzgerald relocated to Los Angeles at the age of 44 to follow the flow of writers attracted by the promises of the rapidly growing film industry. In this article, I focus on three writers—John Fante, Andrea De Carlo and Chiara Barzini—who equally constitute answers to Fine’s understanding of Southern Californian literature as different from any literary regionalism produced by ‘writers deeply rooted in, and

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Watman, Louis Bell, Jack Antonoff and Lana Del Rey, *Fuck It I Love You*, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> David Fine, *Los Angeles in Fiction* (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 1984), p. 2; also, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press, 2000).

committed to, the places about which they write'.<sup>3</sup> In reality, Fante, De Carlo and Barzini were all born elsewhere, albeit in places which connect them within the context of the Italian diaspora.<sup>4</sup> By drawing from their respective peripheral backgrounds, they are able to translate this process into fiction and describe the shift from the Los Angeles visitor to the 'transplant', and the discovery of the reality of the city behind its façade. I argue that, by observing the city through the lens of their shared transnational Italian background not only are these writers able to contribute to the dissemination of the global representation of the city, both in Italy and internationally, but they also engage their specific viewpoint to reflect on the ways their Italian culture is projected on the city.

In particular, these writers reveal that the shift from the before to the after implies a process of negotiation between specific expectations and a reality that does not match them, even though this aspect does not always necessarily prove to be a negative. First of all, the true experience of Los Angeles turns out to be both a transnational and a multicultural one. It reveals a variety of cultural backgrounds and identities of which Italianness is just one within the multitude, which in their interaction have produced the powerful cultural image often portrayed on screen. Deep under the surface, these identities have enlarged the representation of the multilayered ethnic framework on which the reality of the city is built. In this respect, the visitor approaching Los Angeles first notices that only a minority of the Angelenos are white, blonde, fit and wealthy cinema stars or entrepreneurs, who wear expensive outfits and drive fancy cars along glamorous boulevards or dazzling beaches, according to the picture that mainstream Hollywood narrative has promoted for decades.

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<sup>3</sup> Fine, *Los Angeles in Fiction*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of the Italian diaspora, see Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (London, UCL University Press, 2000).

Specifically, here I analyse three novels which represent contrasting examples of Italian migration to Los Angeles: Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), De Carlo's *Treno di panna* (1983) and Barzini's *Things that Happened before Earthquake* (2017, translated into Italian by Barzini and Francesco Pacifico as *Terremoto*, 2017). These authors depict the city in different phases of its development, yet they all offer unexpected portraits and shed light on aspects and contradictions which rarely appear in the most established and recurrent narratives of such a place. Inspired by their autobiographic experience, which differs both according to their understanding of Italianness and the period in which they wrote and set their novels, Fante, De Carlo and Barzini transition from Fitzgerald's generation to the one represented by Lana Del Rey through the original ways in which they describe the contradictory nature of the city from an Italian viewpoint. The most original aspects emerge when they create a connection with their cultural heritage. On this premise, this article investigates how these representations of the Los Angeles experience capture the multifaceted character of the city, while enlarge the description of the Italian youth abroad. At the same time, it identifies how the Italian experience has expanded the prism of literary interpretations of the city and deepened the knowledge of the metropolis itself, due to its role within the dense stratification of ethnic communities and cultures which constitute its multifaceted structure and constantly evolving identity.

### *The Literary Success of a Unique City*

The first point of my argument concerns how Los Angeles has built its image and its reputation as a city that seeks to create and perpetuate its own myth, which is crucial in understanding how each of my three cases chose to portray the city. Architect Michael Sorkin emphasized how the mythologization of Los Angeles has undermined the possibility of recognizing the city behind the

filter created by its narratives: ‘L.A. is probably the most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive scrim of its mythologizers’.<sup>5</sup> The possibility of capturing its elusive magic has constituted a challenge for many writers who resided in town for short or long periods, who, alongside film directors and musicians, arguably played a major role in shaping its mainstream identity.

In cinema, Damien Chazelle’s musical *La La Land* (2016) offers a fascinating example of how the fictional image of the city can be built on one of its most renowned issues. A recent re-examination of the age-old tale of the aspiring artist struggling to make it in Los Angeles, Chazelle’s Oscar winning film tells the story of recurrent Hollywood dream to succeed, on this occasion in both the film and music industries. In the opening scene, it shows aspiring actress Amelia Dolan (Emma Stone) stuck in Los Angeles traffic, while she tries to join her friend musician Sebastian Wilder (Ryan Gosling). Suddenly, people leave their cars and start dancing around the angry protagonist. One would hardly see people dancing in the traffic in actual Los Angeles, nonetheless the vast majority of the city’s real-life residents would confirm at least one element emerging from this portrait of Los Angeles life as true: one easily gets stuck in traffic on a ten-lane motorway for hours. Whilst it confirms that this naïf Hollywood fantasia still endures, the film also demonstrates realistic and unpleasant aspects of the city, like those depicted in another recent Hollywood fable, Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019). By contrast, in *Licorice Pizza* (2021) Paul Thomas Anderson chose to set his more realistic and down-to-earth story of youth in the San Fernando Valley, which is the same area where De Carlo and Barzini set their Los Angeles stories.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Sorkin, ‘Explaining Los Angeles’. In *California Counterpoint: New West Coast Architecture 1982* (San Francisco Art Institute, 1982), p. 8.

In his introduction to the anthology *Writing Los Angeles*, editor David L. Ulin states: ‘If L.A. has often seemed like a city without history it is perhaps because so much of its past has been recycled into myth’<sup>6</sup>, pointing out that that LA has reinvented itself so many times, it has effectively created a ‘history [...] of self-invention’.<sup>7</sup> Hollywood started disseminating its own myth about a hundred years ago, while on the East coast, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) was contributing to the edification of a global imaginary by presenting the most celebrated case of self-invention in world literature. According to Fine, Fitzgerald also stands as a crucial figure in the literature of Los Angeles for his role in bridging the city with New York. A figure of transition between two generations of writers, the ‘lost’ one that emerged during the roaring twenties and the writers of the great depression period: ‘Fitzgerald depicted Los Angeles as located at an end point in time and filling up with weary desperadoes’.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Fitzgerald failed in transferring the imaginary density of his fiction to his scripts, as his Hollywood dream remained unsatisfied. The following generation, represented here by Fante, understood that the greatest talent in writing could not compete with the imaginary power of the pictures particularly in a moment when the city was becoming a product of the imaginary over its own reality. Fante then paved the way for De Carlo and Barzini, who have also frequently focused on weary desperadoes, giving voice to the subsequent generations of Italians who have followed the decision made by Fante’s family and emigrated to the United States in recent years. Deciding to come to the city as young, talented, and creative individuals, these generations understood that its specific nature made Los Angeles

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<sup>6</sup> David L. Ulin, ‘Introduction’. In *Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology* (New York: The Library of America, 2002), p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Fine, *Los Angeles in Fiction*, p. 31.

appropriate for stories of coming-of-age, where the transformation into an adult evolves alongside their process of assimilation to a city which encourages rebirth in multiple ways.<sup>9</sup>

Chronologically, the history of Los Angeles as an American city coincides almost exactly with the history of Italy as a nation state, with the history of Italian mass emigration starting shortly afterwards.<sup>10</sup> The dualisms and contrasting definitions upon which the city's identity as a 'quintessentially American promised land' was built began to take shape from the moment California joined the United States in 1850, while the country was involved in 'the Golden Rush'.<sup>11</sup> Shortly afterwards, the discovery of oil in the Long Beach area played a crucial part in attracting new residents. At the turn of the century, Los Angeles was reinvented as a 'Mediterranean idyll', often emerging from the representation of California as a sort of Italy across the Ocean.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, it was arguably the relocation of the film industry to Hollywood that led the transition from small town to metropolis during the Great Depression period. As Fine points out, it was the increasing involvement in the cinema industry in the 1920s and 1930s that allowed the city's reputation to expand and attract creative talents; while America was soaking in economic and financial crisis and Europe was ruled by shaken by the rise of totalitarianism, Hollywood continued making films, making money and manufacturing dreams.<sup>13</sup> From Los Angeles, the United States projected the narrative of the American dream worldwide and promoted California as a golden paradise, thus inspiring the post-war Americanization of Europe.<sup>14</sup> This narrative travelled to Italy as well. The Hollywood myth strengthened the cultural relations between Italy and the United

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<sup>9</sup> For more specific references to nomadic subjectivity and transnationalism, see Olga Campofreda, Francesco Chianese, 'Italian Youth in Transit: A Nomadic Approach to the Transnational Representation of the Italian Coming-of-age', in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ullin, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Devis, *City of Quartz*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Fine, *Los Angeles in Fiction*.

<sup>14</sup> Devis, *City of Quartz*, p. 17.

States, while the Marshall Plan was tying the political ones, both contributing to the expansion of American cinema by importing a film icon destined to have an indelible impact on cinema worldwide: Rodolfo Pietro Filiberto Raffaello Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguolla, more widely known as Rudolph Valentino. Another Italian immigrant, Francesco Rosario Capra also became a prominent film maker under the name of Frank Capra.<sup>15</sup>

The film industry grew alongside the expansion of Los Angeles as a modern city, supported by the construction of the intricate network of freeways and highways and the promotion of the city's car culture, 'a symbol of the country's most expansive dreams and its most streamlined technologies'.<sup>16</sup> However, historian and urban theorist Mike Devis clarifies that the city did not invent itself. In truth, he argues, its narratives were accurately engineered by multiple groups that ruled the city, following one another and characterizing the political instability of the city's multcentred structure. In *City of Quartz* (1991), Devis focusses on the multiplicity of cultural representations of Los Angeles that were produced and disseminated to attract newcomers, who rapidly increased the population of the city from the turn of the last century and characterized specific areas in specific moments. Hollywood started growing alongside the city industry, while the studios sprung up in a constellation of neighbouring areas, such as the San Fernando Valley, during the 1920s and 1930s. Places like Studio City and Universal City became the threshold where the imaginary Hollywood met its more realistic surroundings, creating a paradoxical relationship by feeding each other with the substance of the same dream. In quoting Morrow Mayo, Devis recalls that since 1888, Los Angeles had been conceived as a 'commodity', rather than a location to inhabit: 'something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles,

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<sup>15</sup> See Peter Bondanella, *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Ulin, 'Introduction', p. xv.

cigarettes and mouth wash'.<sup>17</sup> The cultural representation of the city expanded alongside its urban development, emerging from the desert as 'an artifact of giant public works' established in an 'anarchy of market forces, with only rare interventions by the state, social movements or public leaders'.<sup>18</sup> Devis also points out that: 'Beyond its myriad rhetorics and mirages, it can be presumed that the city actually exists'.<sup>19</sup> He describes the contrasting literary representation of the metropolis placing the sunny city in daylight in opposition to its *noir* soul that emerges after sunset, created by writers immigrating from all across the United States. These writers shift between the description of a utopia to a complementary dystopia, both of which are often recognizable in the same areas of the city, thereby contributing to the description of the Californian dream and its opposed Californian nightmare. It is only in this way that Hollywood, the fancy avenues of Beverly Hills, the glamorous restaurants and bars on the Sunset Strip, and the big corporations in the Financial District could coexist with the largest homeless community in the world, the urban traffic conglomeration, and the unsustainable cost of living. The strongest common thread that emerges in the works of Fante, De Carlo and Barzini is their ability to surf between those extremes and balance the dream and the nightmare. Their capacity to see the utopia and the dystopia at the same time, and without contradiction, places them in the same constellation of the Los Angeles literature, even despite their position in their respective national traditions. The protagonists of their novels, Arturo, Giovanni and Eugenia respectively, are all attracted to the city by its lure and decide to remain despite the disappointing reality they encounter, eventually falling in love with the true city.

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<sup>17</sup> Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles*, New York 1933, p 319.

<sup>18</sup> Mike Devis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London, New York: Verso, 2006 [1990]), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Within the earliest examples of Los Angeles literature, Fante was one of the first writers to portray the city and its inhabitants as they actually existed.<sup>20</sup> Another quintessential Los Angeles writer, Charles Bukowski points out that Arturo Bandini's controversial viewpoint is crucial in allowing Fante to produce a sympathetic and compassionate depiction of people who, like him, were experiencing the difficulties of the newcomer, trying to find their place in a city undergoing rapid growth, residing in its bowels while on the surface the studios attracted vast sums of money. In *Writing Los Angeles* Ulin strengthens Bukowski's point, stating: 'What sets Fante apart is his celebration of the streets of downtown, its cafeterias and flophouses and dreamers, which came as something of a revelation: before him, no one had ever written about Southern California's nameless, faceless citizens with so much tenderness and love'.<sup>21</sup> De Carlo and Barzini followed Fante in providing an updated portrayal of this population in subsequent moments of the city's history. They present Los Angeles through the viewpoint of characters exploring its contradictions, living among the ashes of the Hollywood dream with the population that feeds the dream residing at the city margins.

### *Three Italian Stories in Los Angeles: Fante, De Carlo, Barzini*

Focussing now more closely on my three cases, all of whom have contributed in their own way to the constant process of reinvention of the city from the perspective of the Italian young newcomer, the next point of my analysis will address the representation of Los Angeles in Italian culture. Yet in order to present a clearer picture of the changing perspectives on Italianness, my study will examine these works chronologically, starting with Italian American writer Fante (1909-1983),

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Introduction'. In John Fante, *Ask the Dust*, (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 5-7.

<sup>21</sup> Ulin, *Writing Los Angeles*, p. 218.

arguably the most popular of the three writers explored in this article. His novel *Ask the Dust* completed an ideal Los Angeles classic trilogy with Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, all published in 1939. Alongside them, Fante has been posthumously recognized as one of the greatest Los Angeles writers of the 1930s, his counternarrative shaping the critical revision of the utopian view of the city promoted by Hollywood. Yet Fante's place within Italian literature is a somewhat controversial topic. The inclusion of an Italian American writer within a larger, transnational definition of Italian literature has created an ongoing critical debate, challenging the definition of Italian culture outside Italy's national borders.<sup>22</sup> Having written solely in English, except from a scattering of Italian words across in his texts, Fante represents a significant divergence from the typically Italoophone definition of Italian studies. This is in contrast to De Carlo and Barzini, who, as native speakers, have been more easily integrated into mainstream Italian literature, which traditionally excludes authors who do not write in Italian.<sup>23</sup> In Fante's work, the notion of Italianness first arises as one of the ethnic backgrounds present within the communities actively participating in the definition of multicultural United States. He moved to Los Angeles as a second-generation immigrant born into an impoverished family of Italian immigrants residing in Boulder, Colorado. Like many Italian Americans, he often escaped from his Italian family. In particular, he sought to distance himself from his father Nicola, who emigrated from Torricella Pelliccia, in Abruzzo, although this did not

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<sup>22</sup> This aspect was addressed by Teresa Fiore investigating the circulation of Fante's works in Italy. In conversation with her, Cooper maintained: 'He is like the rich emigrant who goes back to his Italian village: his literary reception in the country of his ancestors reads to me like the parable of the returned emigrant'. In this image we may recognize the protagonist of Cesare Pavese's Italian classic *La Luna e i falò* (1950). Teresa Fiore, 'From Family to Institutional Memory: John Fante's Archive (A Conversation with Fante's Biographer Stephen Cooper)', *Italian Americana*, 31, 1 (2013), pp. 17-23. Fiore also questioned if Fante's writing was a passport for (Italian) Americans to Italy or for Italians to America: 'Is Fante Italian American? Is he Italian? Is he American? Is he Californian?'. Teresa Fiore, 'The Road to Italy and the United States: La creazione e diffusione delle opere di John Fante', *Quaderni del '900*, 6 (2006).

<sup>23</sup> See Bond, 'Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?'; Charles Burdett, 'Moving from a National to a Transnational Curriculum, *Languages, Society & Policy*, 2018; Clodagh Brook and Giuliana Pieri, 'Italianistica in Gran Bretagna: tra Interdisciplinarietà e Tradizione', *La Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana*, 1, 2 (2016), pp. 207-16.

liberate him from their complicated relationship that we see transposed in multiple ways in Fante's fiction. Conversely, Fante's mother, Mary Capolungo, a second-generation Chicago-born Italian woman, was the main inspiration for the prominent Catholic heritage that often emerges in his characters. After a brief moment of fame as a short story author during the 1920s, Fante reinvented himself as a successful and wealthy screenwriter, but he never gave up his dream of becoming a writer. Though he may not have achieved it himself, Fante's dream lives on in his literary alter-ego Arturo Bandini, who is now a Los Angeles icon. The quartet of novels of which Arturo is protagonist achieved widespread commercial and critical success in both Italy and in the United States, when Fante's literary relevance was finally recognised during the last years of his life, in the early 1980s, thanks to Charles Bukowski, who invited his publisher Black Sparrow to reprint Fante's works. The critical discovery of Fante's work in the 1990s was inspired by Stephen Cooper and David Fine, who organized the first international conference devoted to his works in 1995 at California State University Long Beach, resulting in a ground-breaking collection of essays in 1999.<sup>24</sup> Shortly following the complete reissue of his *oeuvre* in the United States, Italian publisher Einaudi reprinted Fante's works into Italian, starting from a new edition of *Ask the Dust* (2004) translated by Mariagiulia Castagnone. A new introduction by Italian writer Alessandro Baricco emphasized the relevance of Fante's Italian background for the Italian audience.<sup>25</sup>

Coincidentally, about forty years after the first publication of *Ask the Dust*, Fante's rediscovery coincided with the publication of the debut novel of a young Italian writer, De Carlo (1952--), whose writing is similarly inspired by his own experience as an Italian immigrant to Los Angeles. Born in Milan, De Carlo travelled extensively across the United States and lived in

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen Cooper and David Fine, eds. *John Fante: A Critical Gathering* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Baricco, 'Introduzione', in John Fante, *Chiedi alla polvere*, trans. Mariagiulia Castagnone (Turin, Einaudi, 2004), p. 3-5.

Boston, New York, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, before moving to Australia, establishing the transnational background which has deeply inspired his fictional works. Although De Carlo's attempt to publish his book in English was not successful, *Treno di panna* captured the interest of Italo Calvino in Italy, who endorsed its publication as part of the series that publisher Einaudi devoted to young talents, 'I nuovi coralli'. Calvino championed De Carlo's ability to portray contemporary Italian youth: 'L'insaziabilità degli occhi che bevono lo spettacolo del mondo multicolore ingigantito come attraverso la lente di ingrandimento. È questa la giovinezza che De Carlo racconta'.<sup>26</sup> De Carlo arrived in Los Angeles in the same stage of life as Fante, inspired by analogous ambitions as part of a new first-generation migration. More accurately, through Giovanni's experience, De Carlo sought to present what would later be described as the 'brain drain': a phenomenon by which young, educated, or otherwise skilled Italians migrated abroad to find better job opportunities, otherwise unavailable in their home country.<sup>27</sup> The people De Carlo encountered in Los Angeles and the difficulties he experienced his intercultural interactions with them represent a common thread the works of Fante and De Carlo, though their approach in describing this is rather different. De Carlo's work initially focusses on Giovanni's relationships with the inhabitants of the suburbs and the crew working in the restaurants where he works, before then describing on his encounters with more recognizably successful Angelenos, after he becomes an Italian teacher at a renowned language school. Accordingly, *Treno di panna* presents De Carlo as a cultural mediator introducing Los Angeles to an Italian readership; like Fante, he builds a counter-narrative which subverts expectations of established narratives of Los Angeles more specifically tailored to an Italian audience. This strategy is also recognizable in the work of Barzini.

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<sup>26</sup> Italo Calvino in De Carlo, *Treno di panna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), back-cover.

<sup>27</sup> See Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, 'Introduction: Real Italians, New Immigrants'. In *New Italian Migrations to the United States: Vol. 1* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), pp. 1-32.

Furthermore, De Carlo, Barzini, and Fante also share a connection to the cinema industry. Not only did De Carlo direct the film adaptation of *Treno di panna* (1988) after working as assistant with Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini, but he also reported this experience in a subsequent novel based in Hollywood, *Yucatan* (1986).

Yet it was Barzini (1979--) who achieved Fante's and De Carlo's dream of breaking into the US book market, whilst also becoming a successful screenwriter, which constitutes much of her prominent activity in Italy. Her first novel *Things that Happened before the Earthquake* appeared in Italian shortly after its American edition as *Terremoto*, translated by Barzini and Pacifico. In the two editions, perhaps also influenced by her collaboration with Pacifico, she follows different strategies in order to engage both the American and the Italian readership, relying on a strong characterization of Eugenia as an Italian girl in a multicultural environment.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, Barzini's experience in Los Angeles differs from Fante's and De Carlo's in terms of gender, but also because amongst the three writers, she is the only one who describes the migration of a first-generation family, which resonates primarily with previous patterns of Italian migration rather than more recent narratives. Her protagonist, Eugenia, is a teenager whose family decides to move to California from Rome, mirroring Barzini's own teenage experience.

It is worth noting that Fante, De Carlo and Barzini all choose to structure their novels as a first-person narrative of youth, defined by a homologous pattern: a traumatic arrival, a series of discomforts and encounters with other ethnicities and identities within the city, followed by a final integration in the larger community. Their starting point is explicitly related to their Italianness, which increasingly disappears into ethnically undefined mainstream of their Los Angeles dream. The area of the city on which their narratives focus is different and follows the rapid

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<sup>28</sup> Francesco Chianese, 'Italian items in domestic spaces Representing Italianness through objects in the fiction of Helen Barolini and Chiara Barzini'. *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 17.1, 2022.

transformations of the city and the social redefinition of its areas, especially when we shift from Fante to De Carlo and Barzini. Fante set his story in the downtown area, where he used to live and work as a busboy, which has since become the city's most popular area for tourist, mainly due to its historical importance. De Carlo and Barzini instead choose to base their main narrative in an area of the city where more recent flows of European immigrants settled between the 1970s and the 1990s, where they probably lived. Both Giovanni and Eugenia start their Los Angeles adventure in the San Fernando Valley, an area recently explored by literature and cinema as a sort of Hollywood wasteland where cinematic dreams come to die, while the ethnically diverse local population produces a vibrant and original culture. Both Giovanni and Eugenia arrive in the Valley after landing at Los Angeles airport, ending up in Sherman Oaks and Van Nuys respectively. De Carlo combines the description of the Valley with the contrasting representation of wealthier areas, such as the university village of Westwood, and Santa Monica, which host the restaurant and the language schools where Giovanni works as he slowly climbs upwards in the social scale until he reaches Beverly Hills, where he gives private lessons to popular actress Marsha Mellow in her villa. Likewise, Barzini sets the most significant moments of the novel outside the Valley in contrasting environments, like the spectacular Matador beach in Malibu, the peaceful and psychedelic Topanga Canyon, where Eugenia freely experiments with sexuality and drugs, Disneyland, and an undefined desert where she joins a rave party, and more.

### *Three Ways of Embodying the Los Angeles Experience: Arturo, Giovanni and Eugenia*

Fante, De Carlo and Barzini surround their stories with descriptions of the city, beginning with passages designed to introduce their readership to Los Angeles, and concluding their narrative with a more complementary view. These descriptions are extremely interesting in terms of the before

and the after, as they show how the city appears to their characters both at the beginning of their adventure and at the end of their process of transformation. Through the relationships that the characters establish with the metropolis, we gain a vital insight into the lived experiences of the three writers.

We would expect the arrival in Los Angeles is the first representation of the impact of the city on the newcomer. It is interesting, therefore, that amongst the three writers, only Fante avoids describing the arrival of his protagonist. Arturo did not immigrate to Los Angeles from Italy, nor did Fante: Italian migration is part of his family history. As such, when we encounter Arturo, he is already acquainted with the city. In the opening lines of *Ask the Dust*, we recognize him as part of the lower-class population residing in Bunker Hill, from which he leaves for a walk downtown:

One night I was sitting on the bed in my hotel room on Bunker Hill, down in the very middle of Los Angeles. It was an important night in my life, because I had to make a decision about the hotel. Either I paid up or I got out: that was what the note said, the note the landlady had put under my door. A great problem, deserving acute attention. I solved it by turning out the lights and going to bed.<sup>29</sup>

Having no plans, Arturo walks randomly around the town and provides a detailed map of the area and a picture of the everyday life in downtown LA, including his fellow inhabitants who experience similar conditions, all of whom come from other American cities:

I walked down Olive Street past a dirty yellow apartment house that was still wet like a blotter from last night's fog, and I thought of my friends Ethie and Carl, who were from Detroit and had lived there [...]. And I remembered the inside of that apartment, how it smelled of mice and dust [...].

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<sup>29</sup> Fante, *Ask the Dust*, p. 11.

Then there was the elevator man, a broken man from Milwaukee [...]. Then I went down the hill on Olive Street, past the horrible frame houses reeking with murder stories, and on down Olive to the Philharmonic Auditorium [...]. And so I was down on Fifth and Olive, where the big street cars chewed your ears with their noise, and the smell of gasoline made the sight of the palm trees seem sad, and the black pavement still wet from the fog of the night before.<sup>30</sup>

Arturo's Los Angeles is dirty and loud. Fante shows Arturo descending Bunker Hill. Today, the entire area has been reorganized around a crossroad named after this character, which is the core of a walkable part of the city. It is easy to recognize the places mentioned in the first pages of the book. At the bottom of the hill, Arturo pronounces his most famous lines: 'Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I come to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town'.<sup>31</sup> At the bottom of the city centre we find the bar where Camilla Lopez works; she answers Arturo's wish to meet a Mexican girl to fall in love with, which constitutes the core of the plot, alongside his dream of becoming a writer. Arturo and Camilla's troubled love story represents the attempt to form an intercultural—interracial—companionship, for which neither of them seems to be ready. Fante presents their diverse cultural background as something to hide in order to achieve their common desire to be recognized as mainstream Americans. In the closing chapter, now a published writer, Arturo looks for Camilla in the desert:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

I carried the book a hundred yards into the desolation, toward the southeast. With all my might I threw it far out in the direction she had gone. Then I got into the car, started the engine, and drove back to Los Angeles.<sup>32</sup>

Camilla disappeared in the dust without giving answers to Arturo's questions, and he dives back into the city again, alone.

Arturo's story is the story of an individual finding his way in the big town. Walking the streets downtown Los Angeles, he seems to be 'in preda ad astratti furori', like the protagonist of an Italian classic published in the same period in Italy, Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1938-39 in the magazine *Letteratura*, then in volume in 1941), which circulated widely in the United States in an edition enriched by a beautiful introduction by Ernest Hemingway (1948).<sup>33</sup> Similarities in the plot suggest that Fante may have drawn from this book later in his writing career, perhaps as an inspiration for *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (1977), which tells the story of an older alter-ego of the writer, Nick Molise, returning to Colorado as a successful writer. Conversely, the story of Bandini is that of a boy searching for his own identity while seeking to reconcile his Italian background with his newfound American dream, in which we also recognize the protagonist and narrator of *Treno di Panna*, Giovanni. In the first lines of his novel, De Carlo describes the uncanny first encounter with this strange land. Describing the city from the window of the aircraft, he is agitated by similar 'astratti furori':

Alle undici e venti di sera guardavo Los Angeles dall'alto: il reticolo infinito di punti luminosi.

Stanco com'ero cercavo di seguire la vibrazione dei motori, così come arrivava al mio sedile

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Elio Vittorini, *Conversation in Sicily*, trans. Alane Serlierno Mason (New York: New Direction, 1949).

attraverso la struttura di metallo in tensione. Ero sicuro di scoprire qualche cambiamento improvviso di ritmo, o vuoto di frequenza. Cercavo anche di leggere le scritte al neon in basso, man mano che venivano a galla nel buio; i contorni delle freeways vicino al mare.

[...]

Siamo scesi ancora, quasi a picco, e la prospettiva mi slittava da tutti i lati. Questo più che paura mi faceva rabbia. Tenevo le mani strette ai braccioli, la testa all'indietro, le gambe distese. Avevo la nausea e volevo essere altrove.<sup>34</sup>

De Carlo describes the arrival on the plane in the first lines of his book. Like Fante, he too introduces the reader to Los Angeles through a vertical movement, in this case following the aircraft landing. There are three noticeable elements to this description. The first is the feeling of vertigo while the aircraft proceeds downwards: Giovanni does not arrive to Los Angeles, he precipitates into the city. The second is how the uncanny sensation Giovanni feels translates into a feeling of dislike, and he starts noticing things that are bothering him: “girare in circoli nel vuoto, inclinato di tre quarti e quasi senza equilibrio”; “le fodere gialle a fiori viola dei sedili, l’effetto d’insieme che creavano fila dopo fila”; “le hostess che parlavano tra loro e si annodavano foulards al collo e guardavano orologi senza occuparsi dei passeggeri”.<sup>35</sup> Overall, he does not like the feeling of not being in control of the situation. He can only precipitate and wait, while somebody else makes decisions for him. Finally, we recognise that this feeling of dismay slowly becomes rage, which resonates with the behaviours showed by Arturo in many sections of Fante’s book: he becomes aggressive in situations he cannot control, like Giovanni. Arturo and Giovanni do not simply panic, their abstract furies are pure rage against the unknown. They are angry young men.

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<sup>34</sup> De Carlo, *Treno di panna*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

This attitude as impatient newcomers connects their different experiences: they are not depicted as unskilled immigrants who left their families out of desperation, they are a writer and a photographer, both looking for their place in the city, and they get greedy because they cannot immediately find it. Furthermore, Arturo and Giovanni are both in their early twenties, and they both decide to move to the big city on their own to make a change. Equally unstable, Giovanni can only count on temporary accommodation at his friends' house, needs to find his own place. His process of social climbing starts from an Italian restaurant, *Aflredo's*, which, apart from the Italian management, is run by a Latino crew, like the café in Fante's novel. Like Arturo, we see Giovanni interacting mostly with Mexican characters or characters of more generic Latino background.

The conclusion of both novels shows both Arturo and Giovanni in control of their situation, much like Eugenia in Barzini's book. In the last paragraph of *Treno di panna*, Giovanni has found his place in the city, and in the world. Standing next to his favourite American actors in a Hollywood villa, he looks at the city from the hill, like an emperor contemplating his reign:

Così ho pensato che alla fine ero al centro del mondo; che quando avevo dodici anni tenevo un manifesto di Tim Howards appeso in camera da letto, e adesso avrei potuto mettergli un piede in testa per far ridere Marsha Mellow; che la notte era solo a metà.<sup>36</sup>

Like Arturo, Giovanni is now a different person. He recognizes the lighting dots that he saw from the plane—'punti luminosi/punti di luce'—but now he is no longer a stranger to the city:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

Ho guardato in basso, e di colpo c'era la città, come un immenso lago nero pieno di plancton luminoso, esteso fino ai margini dell'orizzonte. Ho guardato i punti di luce che vibravano nella distanza: quelli che formavano un'armatura sottile di paesaggio, fragile, tremante; quelli in movimento lungo percorsi ondulati, lungo traiettorie semicircolari, lungo linee intersecate. C'erano punti che lasciavano tracce filanti, bave di luce liquida; punti che si aggregavano in concentrazioni intense, fino a disegnare i contorni di un frammento di città e poi scomporli di nuovo, per separarsi e allontanarsi e perdersi sempre più nel buio. Li guardavo solcare gli spazi del tutto neri che colmavano inerti il vuoto, in attesa di assorbire qualche riflesso nella notte umida.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, those black empty gaps still represent unknown voids, confirming the impossibility to embrace the city in its entirety even if he has indeed 'made it'. For both Arturo and Giovanni, the accomplishment of the Los Angeles experience is a circular process, at the end of which they both belong to Los Angeles. Giovanni is now part of the black lake of bright plankton in which he recognizes the population of the city. He disappears into it like Arturo: they assimilate into Los Angeles like conscious men. Hence, despite the generational distance and their belonging to radically different experiences of migration, Arturo and Giovanni follow a homologous pattern of assimilation to Los Angeles. They fix their instability by integrating into the city's own instability.

Despite differing from Arturo and Giovanni's experience in its distinctive female viewpoint, the younger age of its protagonist, and its position as a story of the migration of an entire family, in the first chapters of *Things that Happened before the Earthquake*, we see in Eugenia the same feeling of uncanny and displacement which De Carlo describes while landing at LAX. Barzini opens her novel with a prologue portraying the family on Matador Beach, in Malibu,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

where in a moment of awkwardness that marks her distance from them: they are chased by the police because her grandmother and mother are sunbathing topless. Subsequently, we witness Eugenia's prior arrival to the San Fernando Valley, where her myth of Los Angeles rapidly turns into disillusion in encountering a reality which significantly differs from the stories told by her family. Barzini's story addresses legends and stereotypes about Southern California circulating among young Italians during the 1990s, when the novel is set. It is the only description of a family migration out of my three cases: Eugenia follows her film-maker father's dream of breaking into American cinema, in a migration that is not of her own volition. Yet in the conclusion of the book, she decides to remain in the city to complete her education and pursue her own dreams, going against the family decision to return to Italy, like Barzini did in her youth. Barzini's description of the San Fernando Valley is more accurate than De Carlo's:

It was August 1992. Three months before standing on that windy beach, our father had announced we would be moving to Hollywood to become rich and famous. What he didn't tell us was that we'd be moving to the vast and scorching basin that sprawled seamlessly for miles north of Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than the promised Hollywood glamour, Eugenia recognizes a somewhat cheaper, seedy, and ultimately disappointing version of it:

It wasn't just our neighborhood; the whole Valley was disconsolate—a pale, discount imitation of the grandeur that existed on the other side of the hills. The actors who lived here were B-rated stars or grown child actors who got in trouble with the law. Corey Fieldman, my favorite Goonie, got

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<sup>38</sup> Chiara Barzini, *Things that Happened before the Earthquake*, p. 4.

caught with heroin and Todd Bridges, the elder brother from *Diff'rent Strokes*, whom every Italian child from the eighties adored, had been arrested for trying to kill his drug dealer when he was high. [...] Those were the kind of celebrities who lived in the Valley.<sup>39</sup>

In Eugenia's first experience in Los Angeles, we also recognise the discomforts depicted in the previous two cases. In the first few chapters, Barzini describes the difficulties Eugenia experiences in adjusting to American life, through the peculiar features of her new house and new school. She has her first sexual experiences with boys and girls while coping with her peculiar family. The conclusion of *Earthquake* combines Fante's and De Carlo's endings. It shows Eugenia looking at Los Angeles from uphill, while the desert wind caresses her back, gently pushing her towards the city:

I climbed up the ascending lane toward Hollywood and Henry's store. [...] From where I was the city seems suddenly credible. It was indeed a city, not an agglomeration of low-rise buildings. I pressed the accelerator and rode farther up, leaving behind the polluted afternoon low clouds—moving out of the Valley's last sliver of land.

Clusters of treetops on the horizon swayed in the tropical sky as a golden amber light poured in. There was silence and then the steady breath of hot air at my back—a strong, dry wind blowing from the desert, pushing me toward the city and its ocean. It streamed upon me moving in different directions at the same time, tickling the corners of my eyes. I'd felt that breeze before, I'd seen that light and knew what it was: the luminous unseen. This time I did what Max said. I didn't try to grasp it. I didn't focus on it or try to understand it. I just let it shine.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

‘The luminous unseen’ mentioned is an expression used by Max, a friend of Eugenia’s father, to describe the evanescent nature of the Los Angeles experience. Through this metaphor, Eugenia sides with Arturo and Giovanni: she has learned to be part of the city, she has made it her own. Ideologically, the journey of the Italian in Los Angeles introduced by Fante is concluded by Barzini.

Furthermore, more explicitly than Fante and De Carlo, Barzini acts like a cultural mediator broadening the depiction of Los Angeles beyond their readership. She describes crucial moments in the city’s history, such as the city riots following the murder of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police, an event sadly resonating with the recent episodes following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis: ‘News had arrived that the four police officers who were on trial for brutally beating the African American construction worker Rodney King had been acquitted. We had all seen images of the assault on television.’<sup>41</sup> Historically speaking, Barzini’s description of Los Angeles is more accurate than the one presented by Fante and De Carlo and focuses on episodes presenting the city in one of its most troubled periods. Starting with the riots, Eugenia’s coming-of-age is accomplished during the 1994 Northridge earthquake, the description of which resonates with Fante’s representation of the 1933 Long Beach earthquake. Both Fante and Barzini choose to coincide the peak of their characters’ personal turmoil with the moment that the ground shakes. Eugenia literally comes of age during the earthquake mentioned in the book title, which shook the entire LA area from the core of the San Fernando Valley.

### *A Matter of Italianness*

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

So far, my argument has identified the three case studies selected as stories of young newcomers who come of age in Los Angeles. One may wonder what makes those newcomers recognizable as Italians, and which aspects make their stories relevant from an Italian viewpoint. After acknowledging that Fante, De Carlo and Barzini belong to a transnational context of Italian culture, one needs to situate them in this context by considering how they present themselves as Italians in their narrative, the ways in which their protagonists define themselves as Italians, and the elements the authors use to make their characters appear as Italians.

Fante is one of the most popular Italian American writers. As such, he gained prominence in both the United States and Italy as an American author. Yet his Italian background becomes visible when he engages with ethnicities and communities residing in the United States.<sup>42</sup> In an atlas of world literature, Fante would be considered Italian in the same way other Californian writers such as Nathaniel West or Myriam Gurba are considered respectively Jewish and Mexican. Despite their preponderant American literary citizenship, those writers are constantly in dialogue with their ethnic heritage, which is often the main topic of their fiction. In the transnational context of Italian culture, Fante finds his place in the long tradition of Italian American writing as the most significant literary witness produced by the network of Italian communities that sprang abroad alongside the foundation of the nation-state, during the Great migration (1870-1924).<sup>43</sup> Fante's Italian background offers a crucial example of how Italian culture and identity were adapting to a new context and developing original expressions of Italianness.<sup>44</sup> In Fante's fiction, Arturo often challenges his Italianness as part of his family heritage, especially when he wants to present himself as American while he interacts with characters of different ethnic background. In other

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<sup>42</sup> See Elisa Bordin, *Un'etnicità complessa: Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante* (Napoli: La Scuola di Pitagora, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation*.

<sup>44</sup> See Fred L. Gardaphé, 'John Fante's American fantasia'. In *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*.

moments, Arturo reproduces traits typically associated with the representation of Italians in the United States, and often confirms expectations and stereotypes of the American audience rather than disappointing them. Suggestions of Italianness emerge in the book from the first page, when Arturo is reading the results of the National League and notices ‘with satisfaction that Joe DiMaggio was still a credit to the Italian people, because he was leading the league in batting’.<sup>45</sup> For Arturo, DiMaggio’s fame symbolises not only a moment of Italian pride, but also serves as a moment of unity between Arturo’s Italian background and the American dream of becoming a baseball champion. At the beginning, we do not know for certain that Arturo is Italian, unless we read Fante’s previous book *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, which is dedicated to his childhood in Colorado. Despite his name and the reference to an Italian American icon, we can believe he is an average American boy from a poor family, obsessed by Mexican girls, by his family and by a problematic Catholic background, until we encounter a character who addresses him with a racial remark attributed to Italians in the United States: ‘You stinking Greaser—what have you got to smile about? You come from a bashed and busted race, and just because you went to the room with one of our white girls, you smile’.<sup>46</sup> ‘Greaser’ and ‘dago’ used to be typical derogative names used to identify Italians in the United States. Racial remarks often constitute the basis of multicultural interaction in Fante’s Los Angeles. When the twenty-year old Arturo rents his room downtown, the landlady makes clear that she would not rent to Mexicans, nor Jews, hence Arturo informs her that he is American.<sup>47</sup> His Italianness often emerges when he encounters Camilla, to whom he introduces himself by announcing: “‘I am a conqueror,’ [...] ‘I’m like Cortez, only I’m

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<sup>45</sup> Fante, *Ask the Dust*, p. 11. For the definition of ‘Italian signs’, see Fred L. Gardaphé, *Italian signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> Fante, *Ask the Dust*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

an Italian””.<sup>48</sup> When Arturo addresses Camilla as a ‘Little Mexican princess’, she calls him ‘you dago sonofabitch’ and states, likewise, ‘I’m an American’.<sup>49</sup> Fante’s Italian background also occasionally emerges through abusive behaviours which recur in the often problematic representations of Italians in the United States, or during moments of guilt related to his Catholic religion, for example after hooking up with a woman, in the monumental scene where he witnesses the Long Beach earthquake:

It was an earthquake. Now there were screams. Then dust. Then crumbling and roaring. I turned round and round in a circle. I had done this. I had done this. I stood with my mouth open, paralysed, looking about me. I ran a few steps towards the sea. Then I ran back. You did it, Arturo. This is the wrath of God. You did it. [...] You did it, Arturo. Up in that room on that bed you did it.<sup>50</sup>

Arturo’s inability to establish a genuine connection with women from other ethnic groups reveals Fante’s view of the true nature of multicultural Los Angeles. Analogous dynamics appear in the multicultural context of his previous work *The Road to Los Angeles*, written in 1935 but only published in 1985. The novel is set in the Long Beach harborside area, where Arturo encounters characters of Filipino, Japanese and Jewish background alongside Latinos. In Fante’s Los Angeles everybody’s behaviour appears to be determined by their specific ethnic background. In this light, the conclusion of *Ask the Dust* suggests that Arturo’s Italianness symbolically vanishes when the only character recognizing him as Italian, Camilla, disappears. In this way, Fante highlights a process of ethnic removal: the Italian boy returns to Los Angeles from the desert as an American writer.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

De Carlo and Barzini highlight the multicultural texture of Los Angeles in a similar manner; the Italian character is emphasized in its interaction with other ethnic groups. Like Fante, Barzini shows Eugenia heading back to the city as a new person, after leaving her former family identity and her Italian past in the desert. In De Carlo's work, this shift takes place in Beverly Hills, when Giovanni encounters his favourite American actors and realizes that he has reached their level. Three American Angelenos have replaced their Italian former selves.

De Carlo and Barzini differ from Fante due to their stronger connection with mainland Italy, presenting the Italianness of their characters in different ways. De Carlo introduces Giovanni without providing any specific explanation, as he was immediately recognizable as Italian by the Italian readership. Only later in the book, De Carlo starts emphasizing Giovanni's Italianness as an asset that can facilitate his job hunt. Giovanni notices the glamorous shops selling Italian brands in Beverly Hills, and how easily Americans are attracted by picturesque images of Italy and stereotypes about Italian men, and because of this he decides to apply to various positions in Italian restaurants in LA. He ends up in *Alfredo's*, where he is the only Italian waiter: 'Michelucci aveva bisogno di almeno un cameriere italiano, nel suo ristorante italiano pieno di messicani'.<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, he profits of his identity to teach Italian in language schools in Santa Monica and Beverly Hills. Giovanni's Italian heritage turns out to be crucial when he is selected to teach Italian to actress Masha Mellow, celebrating his dream as an Italian boy in Los Angeles. Hence, Giovanni's Italian background becomes his business card: 'Abbiamo sentito che insegni italiano a Marsha Mellow'.<sup>52</sup> Differing from Fante, in De Carlo's narrative, Italianness is always considered a positive, glamorous identity: 'La signora mi ha chiesto "Lei è italiano?". Ho detto sì, e lei ha

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<sup>51</sup> De Carlo, *Treno di panna*, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

detto “Che bello””.<sup>53</sup> From Fante to De Carlo, the Italian image in the United States changed because in the post-war period a more socially prestigious category of Italians started to immigrate to the United States.<sup>54</sup> Arriving twenty years after the Los Angeles experience described by De Carlo, the family portrayed by Barzini belongs to this category, as a family talented Italians leaving the country to increase their chances of finding better job opportunities, especially within the creative industry.

In Los Angeles Eugenia explores her subjectivity and builds a new identity in opposition to the Italianness represented by her parents. In the first chapter of the book, her mother and grandmother are identified as Italian because they were sunbathing topless in Malibu, a habit which is immediately recognized as distinctly Italian by the police. Barzini takes up Fante’s focus on Italianness as part of a sense of shared familial heritage, as opposed to the exploration of Los Angeles as a destination of personal growth. Eugenia introduces herself as Italian to the gang of Persian boys and Latino girls who she hangs out with at school, inspiring comments such as: ‘They are way behind with fashion there. They got that dictator there, what’s his name? The bald guy who got rid of all the Jews along with the German hater?’<sup>55</sup> Like Arturo, she develops an ambivalent sense of religion, electing the Virgin Mary as her role model while freely experimenting with sex and adopting disputable behaviours at school and at home. Even though Barzini’s description of the Italian family context describes a contemporary dysfunctional family rather than a traditional one, American education facilitates Eugenia’s emancipation from the attempts of her family to incorporate her, which is a process we identify in *Ask the Dust* and a traditional topic in other ethnic American literatures.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>54</sup> Ruberto and Sciorra, ‘Introduction: Real Italians, New Immigrants’.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Fante, De Carlo and Barzini stress the Italianness of their characters in their texts in many other ways. Despite their diverse approach, Arturo, Giovanni and Eugenia all experience a progressive assimilation to Los Angeles, which they accomplish by distancing themselves from their Italian origin. At the end of their story, they decide to remain in the city and assimilate into the *maelstrom* of the metropolis urban multiplicity, becoming Angelenos. Nonetheless, their Italianness remains with them, under the surface, ready to emerge again from the multicultural texture of the city.

#### *A Lacanian Twist: When the Earthquake of the Real Shakes the Imaginary City*

I would like to conclude my article with a re-elaboration of my main argument in light of Lacanian theory. Looking at Los Angeles and its representations through a Lacanian lens shows more clearly how the city's image has been engineered as a device designed to manipulate our pulsion in its more spontaneous, unconscious image. In this way, the behaviours illustrated by Fante, De Carlo and Barzini in Arturo, Giovanni and Eugenia reveal their inner struggle between their attraction to the city and an awareness of its hidden pitfalls. In their narratives, these writers depicted Italianness as a force that resists assimilation to the lure of the Los Angeles dream, and must be abandoned in order to fully embrace their will to integrate in the crowd of the city. As a city constantly reinvented as a promised land, Los Angeles retains an endless power to capture people coming to pursue their dream, especially if this dream is related to the creative industry. In other words, Los Angeles has been built as an epicentre of desire, able to deeply manipulate people's drive. A city with such a strong imaginary power requires its residents to be in a constant process of negotiation between the glamorous façade and the problems hidden beneath the surface. It is hard to accept the social and economic differences encountered when one rapidly moves from one area of the city to the

neighbouring one, and even harder to accept not being part of the small portion of the population that enjoys the privilege that the city promises. Despite the strategies followed to promote the city over the decades, spending a period of time in Los Angeles demonstrates that it is not a place for everybody, and yet the ideology on which the city's myth is built continues to sell it as such.

Los Angeles is the core of many forms of bipolarism. In the passage between the before and the after lies the difference between the imaginary construction of the city and its reality. Fante, De Carlo and Barzini successfully detach the representation of the real city from its myth in their narratives and translate their own disillusion in that felt by their characters. In many ways, the contrast between the reality of the urban traffic jam and the fantasy of the Angelenos dancing around their cars in *La La Land* resonates with the description provided by Fante, De Carlo and Barzini, despite the fact that they outline a more realistic and ethnically defined representation of the city. *La La Land* is a textbook example with which to explain the imaginary power of Los Angeles in Lacanian theory. 'Imaginary' is a key term in the Lacanian dictionary, describing our tendency to create our own view of things and places, which are balanced by our relationship with the 'Real' hidden behind this imaginary construction. According to Lacan, the Real is to be considered as the direct experience against the ideology that keeps our social reality functional. The Lacanian Real uncovers the 'deceptive layers' that ideology builds up.<sup>56</sup> In short, the *Real* is what escapes the order of the *Imaginary*, which is the view of the world that an individual builds; it is located beyond the order of the *Symbolic*, which is the order that structures reality for us through a network we build up with language. More straightforwardly, we can take the Real to mean everything one excludes or does not want to accept in order to keep living an ordinary life

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<sup>56</sup> I draw here from a variety of sources related to Lacanian theory, including Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London, New York: Verso, 1992). For further reference, see Francesco Chianese, 'Sicily as a Space of Resistance Against Consumerism in Pasolini's *Teorema* and Coppola's *The Godfather*', in Giovanna Sumerfield, ed., *Sicily on Screen: Essays on the Representation of the Island and Its Culture* (Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2020).

in the happiest way. In fact, this ideology works on this perception of the Real, which is not part of the Symbolic; rather, it makes the symbolic impossible, yet at the same time possible via the exclusion of the Real.

In Fante and Barzini, the Real emerges in its full potential as an earthquake, which breaks into Arturo and Eugenia's lives to shock them and make them aware of their delusional view of the city. In De Carlo, the Real lies more subtly behind Giovanni's detached approach to the Los Angeles life, without a traumatic event. Nonetheless, from their first representation of the city, Fante, De Carlo and Barzini underline the seductive power of Los Angeles and its impact. While Arturo is completely overwhelmed by it, Giovanni registers this effect on the people surrounding him from a critical distance, and so too does Eugenia, at least initially. Subsequently, they fall for the city even as they experience it in the most disturbing aspects. The collision with the Los Angeles Real determines their coming-of-age, and at the end of their story, they are not delusional characters anymore. Nonetheless, they decide to live in the city because they have learnt how to keep its reality separate from its imaginary projection: they own the city. Arturo abandons his fantasies of romance with Camilla; Giovanni seats next to actors who he now perceives as regular humans; Eugenia sees the 'luminous unseen'. They have also become acquainted with the truly multicultural nature of the city, which also constitutes part of the Real—the Italian heritage which forms part of its prismatic nature. They know that nobody sings nor dances during the long hours spent in line on the motorway, but also that they can have a chance to fulfil their aspirations: they choose to keep believing in the dream, despite knowing that it may just turn out to be a dream. The strongest point that the three books share is the ability to show both views of Los Angeles without siding with the utopian, nor the dystopian one. The three writers choose a first-person narrator who constantly affirms and questions at the same time, while the moments of objective description in

the novels show that the facts may differ from the opinion of the narrator. Nonetheless, at the end of their experiences, Arturo, Giovanni and Eugenia decide to ignore the Los Angeles Real to return to the city without compromising, embracing its full imaginary potential and forgetting its dark side. Like everybody does in every city, they try to keep living a regular life.

I also addressed the dualism behind the fictional construction of Los Angeles against its realistic ethnic structure, which is not often represented accurately in its true multiethnic and multicultural variety. To the newcomer inspired by the most glamorous Los Angeles narratives, the emergence of its realistic multicultural background often comes as a surprise. From this viewpoint, Fante, De Carlo and Barzini stood out from the mainstream representation of the city for their ability to portray its contradictory nature without hiding any of its contrasting aspects: their characters loved Los Angeles in its multicultural, multiethnic entirety, despite the conflicts they develop within this environment. In this way, they contributed as Italians to the multiplicity of voices describing the city throughout the entire century. For all those reasons, the Italian experience in Los Angeles turns out to be different than the other experiences of Italians in the United States and abroad: in a city where you can constantly reinvent yourself, the attachment to any original identity and culture is *de facto* a contradiction.

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