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Arturo Bandini the Viking: How Long Beach Junior College Transformed the Writing of John Fante

My SURF research focuses on stylistic inconsistencies in Author John Fante's work from 1931-1933 and the correlation that his brief stint at Long Beach Junior College played in his ultimate development as a writer.

Who is John Fante you may be asking yourself? John Fante was an Italian-American author born in Colorado in 1909. He is most well-known for his "Bandini Quartet," comprised of the novels: *Ask The Dust*, *Wait Until Spring Bandini*, and *The Road to Los Angeles* that focuses on the protagonist and alter-ego of Fante, Arturo Bandini. He is considered a major influence on people like author Charles Bukowski and screenwriter Robert Towne. Although he attended LBJC from the fall of 1931 until April of 1932, the majority of current research continues to identify Fante as Los Angeles author. The result is current research tends to disregard the extent and impact Long Beach Junior College played in his development as a writer.

In the spring of 1932, while attending Long Beach Junior College (LBJC), John Fante published his short story "Eleven-Thirty" in the campus literary journal, *Edda*. The story, bursting with clichés, depicts a young man, disappointed in love, at the brink of suicide. Critic David L. Ulin dismisses it as "pure juvenilia" and "mostly overwrought."¹ A few months later *The American Mercury* published Fante's story, "Altar Boy." Aside from sharing Fante as the author, the two stories hardly resembled one another. My familiarity with Fante's work enabled me to immediately recognize a significant variation in the quality between the two stories. This variation suggests the tremendous impact that Fante's experience at LBJC exerted on his thinking and literary career. In months, he transformed from the author of the immature and nearly unrecognizable "Eleven Thirty" to the prolific and emotionally wrought voice found in "Altar Boy."

The assumption of LBJC's significance led me to ask a subset of research questions related to the larger question of how, if at all, Long Beach Junior College affected Fante's writing, such as: What happened at Long Beach Junior College from 1931-32 for Fante? How did Fante's writing change and what made this change possible? What specifically about this place and this moment in time allowed Fante to develop his writing? And, how, if at all, does this affect our perception of success at Community Colleges?

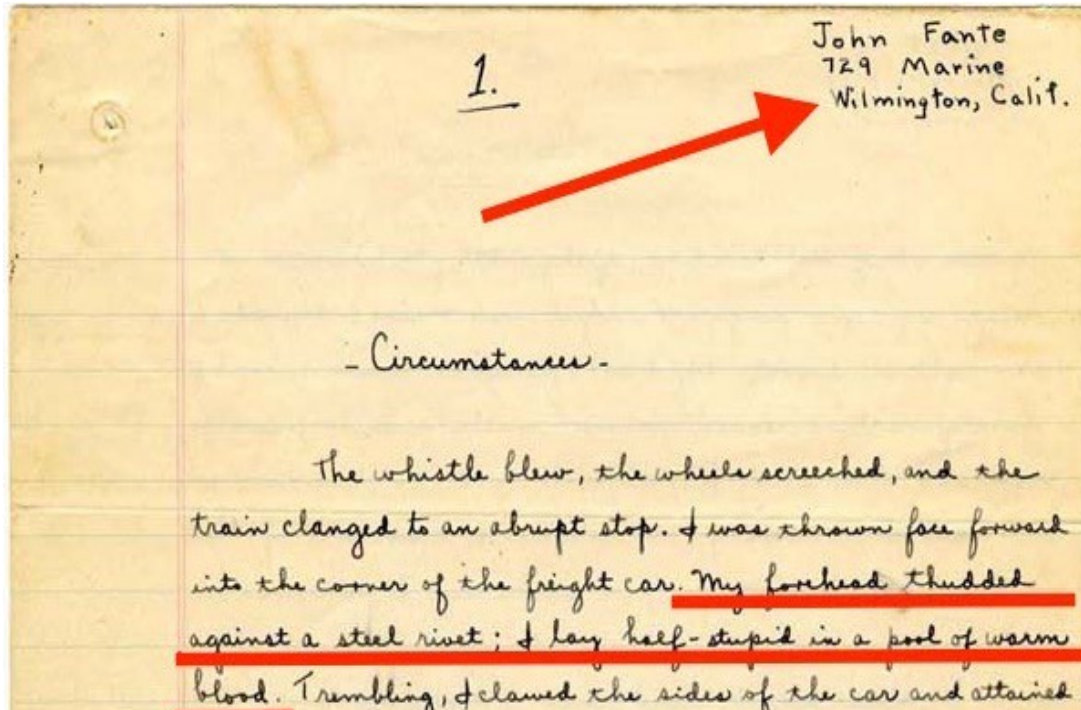
Assuming LBJC did, in fact, play a significant role in Fante's development and by accepting LBJC's importance as a sort of "given" or veritable truth, I was then forced to pivot my research plan to address how this happened, rather than if it happened in order to provide answers to my questions. And just as importantly, how do I bring together these "givens" in a responsible scholarly process?

The first aspect of this process starts with my love and enthusiasm for Fante's work. Fante's novel, *Ask The Dust* reinvigorated my interest in literature and was directly responsible for my choice to pursue a degree in English. Learning that Fante had attended LBJC while I, myself took classes there only cemented my enamor for all things Fante. After reading all of Fante's work and both Stephen Cooper's *Full Of Life: A Biography of John Fante* and Richard Collin's *John Fante: A Literary Portrait*, it became apparent to me that LBJC was an important place and time for Fante as it was for me.

The second aspect of this process is the research plan I created for this summer. I began by spending four weeks in Los Angeles. I spent the majority of my time, around 150 hours going

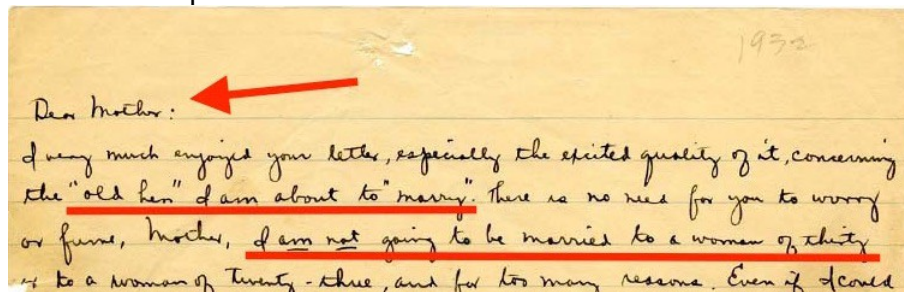
through the “John Fante Papers” special collection at UCLA, which includes early handwritten manuscripts, letters, and diaries amongst myriad of other documents related to Fante. I also spent time in the archives at Long Beach City College looking over the Viking Student Newspaper published during Fante’s time there (1931-32), as well as the Yearbooks and EDDA Campus Literary Journals.

Here are some examples of how I determined whether or not documents were relevant to my research.

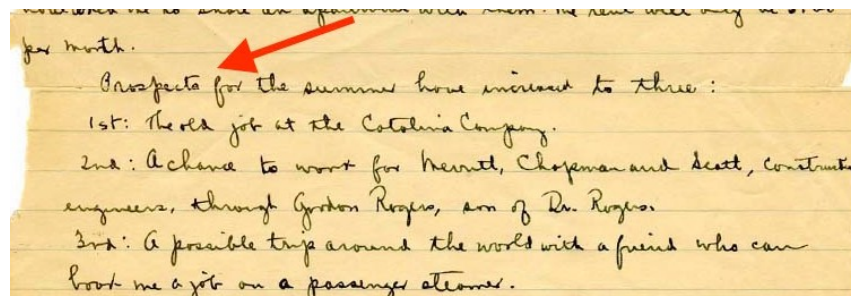


With this manuscript, for instance, I used the return address and the fact that it is handwritten to determine a general time stamp of sometime between 1930-31. Recognizing the use of clichés found in similar works enabled me to place the creation this manuscript before or near the story “Eleven-Thirty” as written before he attended LBJC

Determining relevance with correspondence was a little more difficult. However, due to my familiarity with both Fante’s work and life, I was able to use the content of the letters to determine a plausible timestamp.



Although this letter written to his mother, again handwritten, contains no date or return address, Fante’s mention of what his mom refers to as the “Old Hen he’s about to marry” and reassurance that he is “not going to be married to a woman of thirty” point to a woman named Helen Purcell that Fante was romantically involved with and lived with from time to time between 1932-35.



prospects for the summer have increased to three:

- 1st: The old job at the Catalina Company.
- 2nd: A chance to work for Merritt, Chapman and Scott, construction engineers, through Gordon Rogers, son of Dr. Rogers.
- 3rd: A possible trip around the world with a friend who can book me a job on a passenger steamer.

Combined with his "prospects for the summer" suggest at the very least that the letter was written in the spring of 1932.

When I entered the archives at UCLA and LBCC, I had a pretty clear idea of what I had hoped to find. I was hoping to find the "smoking gun," which for me would look like a diary entry or letter that would explicitly state what about LBJC enabled Fante's growth. Unfortunately, I didn't find anything of that nature. I did, however, find multiple manuscripts containing different versions of the stories written between 1931-1933. The first being two versions of "Eleven-Thirty." One published in EDDA in 1932, and one with a return address of "General Delivery, Long Beach" and a stamp indicating it received an "Honorable Mention" from the "Writer's Digest." The other manuscripts contained two versions of an unpublished story titled, "Jakie's Mother," one with a return address in Long Beach and one with return address in Los Angeles.

My next steps are to analyze the differences between the multiple versions of "Eleven-Thirty" and "Jakie's Mother." An early comparative analysis done in MS word of "Eleven-Thirty" revealed 101 total changes, including 53 insertions and 48 deletions. After running this analysis of the manuscripts, I will close read the revisions compared with later works to determine whether they added or took value away from the texts and attempt to correlate my findings to the influence received from LBJC. From there I plan to add my findings to my thesis, which focuses on Fante's education and his tenure at LBJC as a larger testament to the significance of the type of education offered at LBJC then, and what continues to be offered at the community college level now.

i John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.