READING
HELEN HUNT JACKSON’S
RAMONA
by Karen E. Ramirez

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Reading Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*

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Reading Helen Hunt Jackson’s
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*Ramona*

Helen Hunt Jackson was one of America’s most renowned and prolific female writers of the 1870s and 1880s, best known during her lifetime (1830-1885) and into the early twentieth century for her poetry, domestic essays, travel sketches, and moralistic novels. However, as Jackson herself predicted, her most enduring legacy is her writing advocating American Indian rights (Higginson, “Helen” 151). Most significantly, her 1884 novel *Ramona* protests American Indian displacement in southern California and, more broadly, criticizes Anglo-American conquest through land acquisition. A bestseller when it appeared, *Ramona* has never gone out of print; has been translated into many languages; was adapted for four movie productions between 1910 and 1936; was scripted for several theater versions as well as the annual Ramona Outdoor Play, held annually in Hemet, California, since 1923; and was the source of a Ramona-centered tourist industry in southern California between 1887 and the 1950s (Moylan 226, DeLyser 80-81). The publication of two new paperback editions of *Ramona*, in 2002 and 2005, suggests the novel’s continued popularity and its importance in the study of American literature.

Critical attention to *Ramona* pivots around the novel’s rich paradoxes, particularly the central irony that while *Ramona* protests American Indian displacement and disputes late nineteenth-century, Anglo-American territorial and cultural conquest of southern California, it nevertheless ideologically participates in, and ultimately contributed to, that same conquest. Printed against a
history of Hispanophobia that had expanded after the Mexican-American War and only eight years after the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Ramona critiques Anglo-American racist expansionism by sympathetically presenting Californios, or native-born Californians of Spanish or Spanish-Mexican heritage (Pitt ix), as rightful land owners in Southern California and the region’s American Indians as Christianized, individualized farmers who also deserve to remain on their agriculturally settled land. Nevertheless, as this study will discuss, Ramona simultaneously reflects expansionist ideology through its reaffirmation of Anglo-American superiority and its nostalgic rendering of the West as a soon-to-be abandoned Californio dwelling place. Furthermore, contemporary readers of the novel understood it as a call for assimilating Indians and as historical source material for a burgeoning tourist industry in southern California. Such readings secured Ramona’s participation in the conquest of the very Californio and American Indian populations and cultures that Jackson originally sought to protect.

In addition to being the first Southern California novel (McWilliams, Southern 72), Ramona stands as a significant text in western American literary and cultural studies for several reasons. First, Ramona’s blend of sentimentalism and regionalism generated “sympathetic identification” (Phillips 163) with western characters and settings. Second, the novel played a historical role in promoting late nineteenth-century assimilationist American Indian policies. And finally, Ramona’s evocation of a mythic Californian past problematically produced a lasting regional identity for southern California.

By attending to Ramona’s position in western literary and cultural studies, this study introduces and intersects with several key debates in recent Ramona criticism. Following a brief overview of the novel and its author, the first section considers the novel’s
mixture of sentimentalism and regionalism, as well as attending to Ramona's presentation of racial and cultural mixing and to Ramona as a borderlands novel. The second section adds to the debate over Ramona's basis in assimilationist thought and the novel's contribution to late nineteenth-century assimilation policies. Finally, the study concludes by discussing the development of the Ramona Myth as well as arguing for Ramona's position within critical debates about authenticity in western American literature.

RAMONA'S STORY

Ramona tells the story of forbidden love between the beautiful, half-Indian orphan, Ramona Ortegaña, and the displaced Luiseño Indian, Alessandro. Jackson interweaves the novel's romance plot with its thematic focus on the consequences of Anglo-American expansion in California following the American acquisition of California in 1848. Ramona first introduces its central concern with American conquest through the Señora Moreno, a dogmatic matriarch struggling to maintain personal status and her rancho's agrarian lifestyle in spite of significant land-loss to American "thieves" (12; this and all subsequent references are to the Signet edition of Ramona). The Señora, while somewhat disempowered by the incoming Americans, nevertheless demonstrates control at the rancho over the laborers, such as the head shepherd, Juan Can, and the maid, Margarita, as well as over her own grown son, Felipe, who only nominally runs the rancho. The Señora also asserts power over Ramona, the culturally and racially mixed heroine, who passes as the Señora's Californio daughter, but who is really the orphaned daughter of a Scottish seaman, Angus Phail, and his Indian wife. Despising Ramona for her Indian blood, the Señora grudgingly provides for her, but makes Ramona feel unloved and unwelcome. Despite the Señora's coldness, Ramona is
cheerful, devout, and universally loved by everyone except the Señora (33).

Jackson also introduces the novel’s romance plot at the Moreno rancho, where Ramona meets and gradually falls in love with Alessandro, whose father is the chief of the Luiseño Indians living at the nearby Temecula village. Unaware of her Indian heritage, Ramona pledges to marry Alessandro, in an act that demonstrates her own racial tolerance. In stark contrast, the Señora vehemently opposes their engagement. Attempting to exert indirect control over the situation, she sends Alessandro away and discloses to Ramona her true heritage, along with an inheritance of jewels that will be lost if she marries Alessandro without the Señora’s permission (134). However, Ramona becomes encouraged by the knowledge of her Indian mother, renounces the jewels, and leaves “the only home she had ever known” to elope with Alessandro when he returns to the rancho (192).

With Ramona and Alessandro’s reunion and Ramona’s decision to leave her first home, the novel returns to the central theme of American conquest in California, this time focusing on the even greater struggle for the Indians living at Temecula, who have been entirely displaced by incoming American settlers. As a married Indian couple, Ramona and Alessandro suffer one misfortune after another: American settlers claim the couple’s comfortable homes at the San Pasquale and Saboba villages; their first child dies after being denied care from the Indian Agency doctor; Alessandro goes increasingly crazy from the strains of displacement and loss; and finally, an American rancher, Jim Farrar, murders Alessandro, who, suffering from a moment of insanity, mistakenly takes Farrar’s horse instead of his own. During these years of hardship the couple befriends the poor, unsophisticated southerners, Aunt Ri and Jeff Hyer. Aunt Ri’s admiration for Ramona and Alessandro leads her to overlook her initial fear of Indians and
inspires her to speak out on behalf of all Indians. She serves as a model for the growth of racial tolerance and reformist action that Jackson hoped to instigate in her readers.

After Alessandro’s murder, Ramona endures an extended illness at the Cahuilla Indian village before Felipe Moreno finds her and takes Ramona and her second daughter back to the Moreno rancho. Ultimately, in response to his own disgust with the growing American presence and Ramona’s fear of race-prejudice against her daughter, Felipe and Ramona move to Mexico, where Ramona reluctantly weds Felipe and shares with him a “loyal, loving, serene” heart, and bears him children (362). Although Ramona ends up materially well off and loved by Felipe, the ending accentuates that “[p]art of her was dead” and that her “new life” lacked the passion and fulfillment she enjoyed with Alessandro (361, 362).

JACKSON’S LITERARY CAREER, INDIAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY, AND THE WRITING OF RAMONA

Jackson, born Helen Maria Fiske, first turned to her long-time passion of writing in 1866 to keep industrious following the death of her first husband, Edward Hunt, in 1863, and the death of her only surviving child, Rennie, in 1865. Well-connected in the Newport, Boston, and New York literary circles, Jackson (who wrote under the pseudonyms H. H., Rip Van Winkle, and Saxe Holm) quickly became one of the top American women writers of the 1870s and 1880s, publishing an average of three periodical pieces per month over the course of her career (Phillips 110). Jackson’s travel sketches and domestic essays were popular, but she was especially respected for her poetry. In his 1879 Short Studies of American Authors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson recounted that when Ralph Waldo Emerson was asked “whether he did not think ‘H.H.’ the best woman-poet on this continent, he
Cheating, robbing, breaking promises—these three are clearly things which must cease to be done. One more thing, also, and that is the refusal of the protection of the law to the Indian’s rights of property, “of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

When these four things have ceased to be done, time, statesmanship, philanthropy, and Christianity can slowly and surely do the rest. Till these four things have ceased to be done, statesmanship and philanthropy alike must work in vain, and even Christianity can reap but small harvest. (342)

Up through the publication of A Century of Dishonor, Jackson’s Indian reform writing focused on the Ponca Indians’ forced
removal to Indian Territory. However, after traveling in southern California between January and June of 1882 on a commission from *Century Magazine* for travel articles, Jackson’s Indian Rights advocacy shifted to the ongoing displacement of California’s Luiseño, Cahuilla, Dieguño (Kumeyaay), and Serrano Indians, whom Jackson collectively called “Mission Indians.” While in southern California, Jackson visited many bands of Indians who had lost, or were poised to lose, their village lands to incoming American settlers who could squat and file on the Indians’ unsurveyed land according to California’s 1853 Preemption Act, which opened all land with unconfirmed titles to settlement as public domain (Haas 59). In addition to devoting one of her four *Century Magazine* articles to the Mission Indians’ plight (“Present”), Jackson requested an appointment as a federal commissioner to investigate and report on the Mission Indian lands, a position she received from Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller in July 1882, making her one of the first women to hold this position (Phillips 247).

Working with Abbot Kinney, her requested co-commissioner, Jackson traveled to eighteen Indian villages in San Bernardino, Riverside, and San Diego counties between March and May of 1883. The investigation culminated in Jackson and Kinney’s 1883 “Report on the Condition and Needs of the Mission Indians of California,” in which they present eleven recommendations supporting their primary request for resurveying and “distinctly marking” separate Mission Indian village reservations in order to “uphold and defend [the Indians’] right to remain where they are” (464, 466). Although a congressional bill for Mission Indian relief was drawn up from the Jackson-Kinney Report and submitted to Congress in 1884, it failed in the House. (For discussion of the bill’s failure see Byers 332, Mathes 74, Senier 49.) It wasn’t until 1891 that Congress passed the Act for the Relief of the Mission
Indians, setting aside a reservation “for each band or village of the Mission Indians” on “as far as practicable, the lands and villages which have been in the actual occupation and possession of said Indians,” as initially requested by Jackson and Kinney (Shippek 165; see also Mathes 75).

Jackson’s interest in protecting the Mission Indians’ rights also colored her view of the region’s Spanish missionaries and Californios, who she felt were more “wise and humane” in treating Indians than the Americans (“Report” 461). Jackson saw the mission era, which lasted from the founding of the missions in 1769 until their secularization in 1834, as a time when Indians were “living comfortable and industrious lives under the control of the Franciscan Fathers” (“Report” 461; see also Jackson, “Father”). Her idealism was fueled by her visits to the missions themselves, especially to the still-active Santa Barbara mission, where she met several Fathers and visited the mission library to read about the Franciscan missionaries in California (Phillips 238).

Jackson’s equally idealistic view of post-secularization California as a time of pastoral, Arcadian prosperity for the Californio rancheros and their Indian laborers echoed the nostalgic stories she heard while staying with Antonio and Mariana Coronel in Los Angeles. Antonio Coronel, a politically influential and wealthy Los Angeleno, was among an older generation of “native-born politicos” (Pitt 271) whose nostalgic reminiscences of pre-American California served as a form of resistance against Anglo-American conquest and Anglo-American disparagement of Californios and other Spanish-speaking peoples (Padilla x, Sánchez ix). Coronel was one of about sixty-two older Californios who, in the 1870s, dictated testimonios, or mediated testimonials, for Hubert Howe Bancroft’s library of Californian history, a library Jackson consulted on her first visit to California in 1882 (Sánchez ix, 7; Phillips 240). As Rosaura Sánchez notes in her study of the
testimonios, in Coronel’s testimonio “elements of the ‘Arcadian’ myth surface,” especially in his descriptions of the ranchos as “a patriarchal society of protected women and authoritarian men, all generous to a fault, perfect hosts to travelers, and so on” (167, 316 n. 11). Sánchez positions Coronel as one of several “co-opted” Californios who “fell prey” to performing a glamorized representation of preconquest Californio life by dressing up, playing the guitar, hosting Mexican dances, and telling stories (167). This performed Californio life is largely what Jackson witnessed (DeLyser 39). Additionally, Coronel’s testimonio reflects the belief that the Californian Indians were better off under Spanish-Mexican rule than under later American rule (Phillips 242).

Reflecting her sources and her own regionalist interest in threatened local cultures, Jackson’s Century articles and Ramona articulate a grossly inaccurate image of Spanish-Mexican colonialism that dismisses the exploitation of Indians during that colonial era. During the mission era, the native population in California between San Diego and San Francisco declined by over seventy-five percent, mostly because of Spanish diseases (Rawls 18). Far from lovingly caring for the Indians, most priests forcibly gathered and kept the Indians at the missions, where they constituted a free labor force for the missions themselves and for the accompanying military garrisons, or presidios. (See Castillo and Jackson 80-86 on the use of force, and 26-28 on the mission/presidio relationship.) Treatment of Indians did not improve after secularization, when the Indians formerly tied to the missions, while nominally free, began working for secular rancheros who frequently exercised control over them through economic pressure and violent force (Shipek 25-26; Rawls 20; Haas 33-34; Sánchez 156, 168). Clearly, as Sánchez writes, the mythic image of the Spanish-Mexican era in California as a pastoral ideal “all but begs for disarticulation” (165). To this end, readers must recognize the exploitation that the
myth overlooks and understand how the myth became authen-

ticated as history. (See “Ramona and the Ramona Myth” below.)

Ramona was Jackson’s culminating effort to influence public
opinion about American Indians. Frustrated with poor sales of A
Century of Dishonor and aware that her Congressional Report
would have a limited audience, in Ramona, Jackson deliberately
shifted to sentimental romance to “reach people who would not
read [her] Century of Dishonor” (Jackson, Indian 300). That
Jackson aimed Ramona at a feminine and moralistic audience is
clear from her choice to publish it first as a series in the Christian
Union, contending that “100,000 readers of this sort will do more
for the cause, than four times that number of idle magazine read-
ers” (Indian 319).

Jackson wrote Ramona in only three months, astonishing herself
by her writing pace and feeling that the novel was divinely in-
spired, a claim frequently made by women writers that allowed
them to stand apart from their own writing when it challenged
dominant ideology (Phillips 253). But her pace also reflects that
Jackson “spent longer mulling over this particular project than
any in her past” (Phillips 254), and that she drew directly on her
previously published Century articles for the chapters of Ramona
set at the Moreno rancho and on her Congressional “Report” for
the later displacement chapters (which begin once the couple
leaves the Moreno rancho). For instance, Ramona’s account of the
“morning hymn” is taken from “Echoes in the City of Angels”
(Ramona 38, “Echoes” 196), and the novel’s account of Señora
Moreno’s wedding exactly parallels the tale of a Californio wedding
related in “Father Junipero and His Work” (Ramona 19-20,
“Father” 201). As in her Century articles, which nostalgically pre-
sent California as a place where the “delicious aroma from the old,
ignorant, picturesque times lingers still” (“Echoes” 199), Ramona
depicts the Moreno rancho as the embodiment of “a picturesque life, with [...] more romance, than will ever be seen again on those sunny shores” (12).

Jackson drew heavily on her Congressional “Report” for the Temecula and San Pasquale evictions and the murder of Alessandro, who is Juan Diego in the “Report.” Ramona even describes the murder with the same wording as the “Report” (Ramona 315-16, “Report” 483-84; see also Byers 342-44). As in the “Report,” Ramona’s displacement chapters focus on the Indians’ loss of their settled homes and villages as an example of them being denied basic human rights “in the name of the law,” her original title for the novel. In Ramona, though, Jackson sentimentalizes this injustice by calling attention to the Indians’ religious piety and by emphasizing women’s experience and women’s bonds of compassion. For instance, whereas the “Report” only briefly mentions a graveyard in its description of the abandoned Temecula village, Ramona depicts Temecula’s graveyard as a central feature. It is there that Ramona waits with Carmena (a former Temecula resident whose husband died during the eviction) while Alessandro tries to procure money for his and Ramona’s flight. In addition to emphasizing the Indians’ established village and Christian faith, the graveyard scene between Ramona and Carmena demonstrates the power of feminine compassion. In spite of Ramona’s superior education, cultured background, limited experience with grief, and their language barrier (Ramona speaks Spanish, Carmena speaks Luiseño), Ramona connects with Carmena through her willingness to weep openly for Carmena and genuinely pity her. Ramona thereby aids Carmena, who “felt for the moment lifted out of herself by the sweet, sudden sympathy of this stranger”—precisely the type of sympathy Jackson hoped to evoke in her readers (214).
Jackson's use of these two very different sources in *Ramona*—the *Century* articles and Congressional "Report"—helps elucidate the novel's uneven blend of regionalism and sentimentalism. As Jackson biographer and critic Kate Phillips explains, Jackson's "central literary vision as expressed in her travel essays and fiction [...] is best labeled 'regionalist'" because of her consistent attention throughout her career to detailed, local description; her criticism of industrial destruction of charming, rural places; and her consistent appreciation of other regionalist writing (34). In contrast, only some of Jackson's work can be labeled sentimental, either because it reflects "excessive emotionalism" or concerns "domestic matters and private emotions" (Phillips 32), and Jackson herself derided women's writing that led readers to "thrill and weep in sympathetic unison with ridiculous joys and sorrows, grotesque sentiments, and preposterous adventures" (*Bits of Talk* 194). Nevertheless, in *Ramona*, Jackson explicitly turned to sentimentalism, a genre that, as literary critic Joanne Dobson explains, "takes as its highest values sympathy, affection, and relation (and indeed builds these values into its very language and literary form)" (283). As Jackson wrote to her Los Angeles host, Antonio Coronel, in writing *Ramona* she hoped to "set forth some Indian experience in a way to move people's hearts" (*Indian* 298).

In *Ramona*, Jackson combines her regionalist interest in local details and a nostalgic rendering of passing lifestyles with a sentimentalist attention to generating a "sympathetic unison" between the readers and her characters. The Moreno rancho chapters' detailed landscape description and wistful longing for a passing Californio culture struggling against American industrialization initially align the novel with regionalism. Later, the displacement chapters' compassionate attention to separation and loss and the use of formulaic sentimental tropes, such as the keepsake of Ramona's father's handkerchief (symbolizing Ramona's loss of
inheritance), the concentration on the mother-child bond and on homemaking, and the deathbed narratives of Alessandro’s father, Ramona’s first child, and finally of Alessandro, generate readers’ sympathy and align the novel with sentimentalism.

Jackson’s oft-quoted comment, “If I can do one hundredth part for the Indians that Mrs. Stowe did for the Negro, I will be thankful” (Indian 307), reveals her recognition of sentimental fiction as a powerful, feminine reformist tool. As critic Philip Fisher explains in his study of the cultural work of popular fiction, the nineteenth-century sentimental novel functions as “a radical form of popular transformation” because, as a future-focused genre, it “arouses and excites action toward that part of the public future that is still open to decision and alternatives” (18). Other literary critics, including Jane Tompkins and Shirley Samuels, also develop sentimentalism’s role in the nineteenth century as a cultural and political discourse “halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (Tompkins 126).

*Ramona* sold 21,000 copies in 1885 and over 74,000 by 1900, and its popularity did help mollify public opinion of American Indians (Alemán 61, Dorris xvii). On the whole, though, *Ramona*’s popularity was unrelated to its future-focused reform message (Mathes 82). Most of Jackson’s contemporary readers and critics solely attended to *Ramona*’s love story and its pastoral Californio setting (aspects that did not encourage reformist action), prompting Jackson to write in December 1884, “I am sick of hearing that the flight of Ramona & Alessandro is ‘an exquisite idyl’, & not even an allusion to the ejectment of the Temecula band from their homes” (Indian 338). To a degree, readers’ reluctance to recognize the novel’s anti-expansionist story may actually reflect the novel’s foundation in nineteenth-century sentimental discourse. Despite Jackson’s overt critique of American conquest, she drew on a
discourse that, as Amy Kaplan demonstrates in “Manifest Domesticity,” was long engaged in the nation’s racialized imperialism. (See also Gonzalez.) Additionally, as many critics explore, the novel’s reception as romance and mythic history also results from the novel’s regionalist nostalgia, which problematically conflicts with the forward-looking sympathy of sentimental fiction (see DeLyser, Goldman, Gutiérrez-Jones, Phillips, and Wagner).

THE CULTURAL WORK OF RAMONA’S REGIONAL SENTIMENTALISM

Like other nineteenth-century sentimental novels, Ramona builds readerly compassion for its characters by attending to woman-centered communities and to what Joanne Dobson calls the “shared devastation of affectional loss,” or the common human experience of losing the sources of deepest affection and human connection, which, for nineteenth-century women, included loved ones (especially children), feminine companionship or community, and most broadly, a sense of home. Ramona’s “affectional losses”—including the loss of her child, her husband, her communities, and her homes—invite readers to feel a “shared devastation” with Jackson’s culturally Californio, half-Indian character. Therefore, Ramona becomes the object of what Philip Fisher terms “sentimental compassion,” because Ramona earns “the right to human regard by means of the reality of [her] suffering” (99). Similarly, Alessandro, the home-loving Indian, invites readerly compassion through his suffering. Jackson also appealed to her readers by drawing Californio culture in the manner of regional fiction, as a picturesque, exotic local lifestyle disappearing to American progress, and by associating the Mission Indians with this alluring lifestyle (see DeLyser 21-29). Through these two intertwined means of generating interest in and sympathy for seemingly “foreign” characters, Ramona molded new ways of envisioning and
feeling about the West and its inhabitants. Namely, *Ramona* presents Californios as rightful landowners and their Catholic culture as an admirable, communitarian heritage; it depicts a West defined by community and home, not by movement, wilderness, or emptiness; and it portrays Indians as subjects whose inherent human rights are being denied by American law.

By drawing sympathetic Californios and Indians in a welcoming western setting, *Ramona* challenges imperialistic, Anglo-American assumptions about the primitivism of Spanish Catholicism, about the West as wild, about “race” as a deterministic category, and about Indians as categorically “primitive,” “heathen,” and “savage.” Nevertheless, Jackson consistently undermines this anti-imperialist critique in *Ramona* by romanticizing her characters and settings in ways that reaffirm Anglo-American superiority and progress. It was because Jackson’s readers could imaginatively inhabit the seemingly disappearing lives of her Californio and Indian characters and her domesticated West that the novel invited its two predominant responses: reading *Ramona* as promotional material for assimilationist Indian reform and reading the novel as California “history,” and thus as source material for southern California tourism.

**Ramona’s Californio Community**

Jackson’s letters indicate that she hoped to capture her readers with an opening focus on Californio culture. Through her *Century* articles Jackson found Californio life to be an appealing subject for her eastern, female, periodical-reading audience. Thus, while writing *Ramona*, she conceded to William Hayes Ward, the superintending editor of the New York *Independent*, that the novel “is laid in So. California—and there is so much Mexican life in it, that I hope to get people so interested in it, before they suspect anything Indian, that they will keep on” (*Indian* 307). As a regionalist,
Jackson depicts Californio culture as charming and generous, in contrast to the aggressive, materialistic culture of Gilded Age America (Phillips 242, DeLyser 41). For instance, Ramona’s portrayal of the Moreno rancho, where even the oldest and feeblest such as old Juanita have a role and where everyone stops their labor to participate in a Catholic Mass at the Moreno chapel (7, 51), stands in stark contrast to the isolated and driven lives of newly arrived American ranchers like the Merrills who, as Aunt Ri reflects, “don’t worship [God] so much’s they worship work” and who find themselves “druv to death” primarily because that was “thar reggerlar way” (336).

Ramona also builds empathy for the Californios sentimentally through its depiction of the Moreno rancho as an established, family-focused, religious community. Contrasting somewhat with Antonio Coronel’s concentration on patriarchal authority in Californio culture, Jackson draws a Californio setting that reflects sentimentalism’s “highest value” of relationship (Dobson 283) and is distinctly woman-centered by calling attention to the rancho’s house and chapel, its two communitarian centers, and by placing the rancho under the Señora’s management. Although the Moreno rancho is imperfect because the Señora’s unjust racial prejudice leads to Ramona’s relative isolation there, in depicting the rancho setting as otherwise supportive and woman-centered and by stressing its garden-like landscape, Jackson emphasizes the Señora’s injustice while also suggesting that an idealized domesticity was possible in this place.

The rancho’s eighty-foot long veranda and chapel serve as the central symbols of the Moreno rancho’s idealized, relational community. The veranda blends domestic and common spaces; it is the centerpiece of the rancho’s “family life” where young and old, laborers and gentry gather to wash babies, shell beans, weave lace, smoke, nap, talk, play music, and even woo lovers (14). (See Sculle
21-23 for further discussion of verandas in *Ramona*.) The rancho's chapel also functions as a community center, a meeting place for Indians and Californios alike (*Ramona* 17). In fact, *Ramona* repeatedly portrays Catholic devotional places as multi-racial mingling sites, as is seen again at Ramona and Alessandro’s house-turned-shrine in San Pasquale, where Father Gaspara visits (250), and even at Ramona's sick room in Cahuilla, where Aunt Ri joins the Indians and Felipe in prayer before a picture of the Madonna, in a “moment and a lesson [she] never forgot” (341). These devotional places function, like the rancho veranda, as architecture that “brings out its denizens' concern for others” (Sculle 26).

In general, *Ramona* favorably draws the Californios' strong Catholicism as an exotic, but no less devout, version of her readers' presumed religious piety. Jackson encourages what Kate Phillips refers to as “sympathetic identification” with her Catholic characters, by highlighting common virtues, such as “cheerful submission and diligence” (something Ramona displays), or common values, such as family and community (Phillips 162-63). For instance, the foreign-seeming morning hymn, a “beautiful custom” of “all devout Mexican families,” while sung as invocations to the Virgin or the saint of the day, reflects the shared value of community by joining the entire rancho harmoniously together at the start of the day, not unlike the Protestant singing of hymns for praise and communion (47). *Ramona* also encourages readers’ empathy for this Catholic population through direct comments to the readers, such as the following gloss on Margarita's prayer to Saint Francis of Paula that the altar cloth be repaired: “We think we are quite sure that it is a foolish little prayer, when people pray to have torn lace made whole. But it would be hard to show the odds between asking that, and asking that it may rain, or that the sick may get well” (45).
In accepting Californio Catholicism at the outset of a novel directed at a Protestant readership, Jackson inevitably confronted the divide between Protestant and Catholic thought. Nina Baym shows that in nineteenth-century women's writing of and about American history, Catholicism was considered ritualistic, pagan, or primitive and thus to be overcome by enterprising Anglo-American Protestants (46-66). Perhaps conceding to her Protestant readership, Jackson at times demonstrates some skepticism about Catholic practices, for instance labeling the Californio Mission era "half-barbaric," even while eulogizing its "free-handed life" (11); or dismissing Ramona's false belief that her daughter died because Ramona removed the baby Jesus from her Madonna statuette (299-300). But, on the whole, Jackson commends the Californios' Catholic beliefs as well as the Mission Indians' appropriation of Catholicism because their Catholic faith demonstrates their piety and creates community. In doing so, Jackson defies sectarianism in general and complicates an assumed, hierarchical division between primitivism and civilization, since Californios and Indians alike are "civilized" by following religious practices that draw them into communities Jackson's readers could sympathetically identify with, and yet their Catholic religious practices are ones assumed to be "primitive."

In spite of Jackson's compassionate presentation of Californio religion and culture and her denigration of American expansion into Californio lands, though, the novel's pervading sense of nostalgia weakens its critique of American imperialism. Unlike Antonio Coronel's use of nostalgia as an active form of resistance, in Jackson's portrayal, the pre-industrial Californio culture seems ir-retrievably passing. Ramona accentuates that the "grand old days" were "indeed gone, gone forever" (6, 7) and suggests the Californios' resignation to this loss, for instance, in Father Salvierderra's comment that "we are all alike helpless in their
hands. [. . .] We can only say, ‘God’s will be done’” (67), as well as in Felipe and Ramona’s eventual retreat to Mexico. Jackson’s elegiac treatment of the Californios thus participates in the “monumentalizing” of the Spanish-California past that, as Anne E. Goldman illustrates, began appearing in magazines like The Century Magazine, the Atlantic Monthly, and the Overland Monthly in the 1870s (40). In Ramona, Jackson does present the Californios as rightful landowners and as victims of American “thieves and liars” (177), whereas her contemporaries often erased Californios completely (Goldman 41-42) and earlier Hispanophobes dismissed Californios as so lazy, vengeful, and untrustworthy as to be unworthy of land ownership (Pitt 14-16). But in offering her Californio characters no agency for resistance, Jackson still anticipates their disappearance and indirectly reasserts Anglo-American dominance.

Ramona’s West

In addition to challenging assumptions about Catholic Californios, Jackson’s presentation of the Moreno rancho community also complicates late nineteenth-century, popular frontier images of the American West as primitive, empty, and wild, and thus as a place for what historian Richard Slotkin identifies as masculinized “regeneration through violence.” Ramona depicts southern California as a flourishing, cultivated land where “nothing was to be seen but verdure or blossom or fruit at whatever time of the year” (16), and as a dwelling place with extensive human history being erased by incoming Americans. Ramona also portrays American appropriation of Californio and Indian lands as legalized robbery by emphasizing that at any time “the United States Government might send out a new Land Commission to examine the decrees of the first, and revoke such as they saw fit” (18). Thus, although Jackson uses the terms “wilderness” and “frontier”
in *Ramona*, by dramatizing California as a settled garden before the advent of so-called Anglo “pioneers,” and by questioning the American right to these occupied lands, Jackson dismantles the idea of progressive Anglo-American expansion in the West.

While Jackson’s presentation of the Moreno rancho undermines a popular, male-focused frontier image of the West, it can be read in connection to Anglo-American women’s long-held “fantasy” for the West to provide ideal homes and communities. Annette Kolodny, in her study of early female settlers’ writing, explains that women, like men, imagined transforming western frontiers, but instead of dreaming of a “virgin” land which they could possess for personal gain, they turned their attention to planting gardens and creating model communities: “they claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity” (xiii). Not only is *Ramona*’s Moreno rancho garden-like, it is also a distinctly woman-centered community. With the exception of the sheep shearing, which is presented distantly as “a dramatic spectacle” (57), the narration in the Moreno rancho chapters centers on women’s work—such as mending the altar cloth, preparing food, and tending the ill—exoticized versions of the domestic tasks presumably performed by Jackson’s readers (42, 44-45, 70-71; see also DeLyser 18-22).

The Señora’s management of the rancho and her provocatively eulogized “power” and “genius” of being “able to wield other men [and women], as instruments” even further positions the rancho as woman-centered (11). The Señora’s “domestic empire” (Gonzalez 444) reveals women’s circuitous influence, or the feminine “power” of indirectly “wielding” others’ actions that Jackson herself consciously employed in *Ramona*, as is evident from her comment that she hoped readers of *Ramona* “would have swallowed a big dose of information on the Indian question, without knowing it” (quoted in Phillips 259; see also Gonzalez 444). Nevertheless, that
Jackson both praises the Señora’s “power” and draws her as an antagonist to Ramona, suggests an awareness that this power can be misused, as the Señora does by failing to exercise womanly love and sympathy for Ramona and Alessandro solely because they are Indian. The Señora’s unjust racial prejudice and “imperious pride” mars the almost-ideal rancho community and destroys the Señora herself (154). As Felipe surmises after discovering Ramona’s hidden dowry and recognizing his mother’s mistreatment of Ramona, “It is this that has killed her. Oh shame! oh, disgrace!” (277)

Ironically, Jackson’s extensive critique of the Señora’s racism actually works against the novel’s reformist message. By condemning the Señora’s bigotry even more dramatically than the bigotry of the American “thieves” (who are not killed as a result of their actions), Jackson potentially displaces her critique of race antagonism onto the departing Californios, whose idealized, garden-like, communitarian ranchos nevertheless remain to be imaginatively inhabited by her Anglo readers.

Ramona’s Treatment of “Race”

In denouncing the Señora’s tyrannical treatment of Ramona and Alessandro, the novel questions the late nineteenth-century social Darwinist conceptualization of “race” as an inherent category, or as critic Margaret D. Jacobs writes, the idea of race as “a matter of blood” (217). This conceptualization of race as a deterministic category rather than as a social construction, seen in the Señora’s belief that Ramona’s Indian blood “would show some day” (132), lay behind Americans’ own categorical mistreatment of Hispanic peoples and Indians. Jackson criticizes such deterministic racism through the Señora and through the incoming Americans who indiscriminately think Indians “are all the same” (228). In contrast, Father Salvierderra, Ramona, and Aunt Ri all learn to look past racial difference and to sympathize with others as individuals.
Ramona also challenges race determinism by questioning Ramona’s own supposition that she holds inherent Indian characteristics. For instance, although Ramona packs her belongings into Indian nets when escaping the Moreno rancho and reflects to herself that she carries them “on her back ‘like the true Indian woman as I am’” (191), when she meets up with Alessandro with a sore head, she discovers that, unlike the village Indian women, she unknowingly “had no basket to cover the head,” revealing that she is not necessarily the “true Indian woman” she imagines herself to be (193). In another instance, after their initial escape from the Moreno rancho, when living with Alessandro in a secluded cañon, Ramona wonders if her joy in living out-of-doors is “because I am Indian,” further suggesting she holds some essential Indian qualities (209). However, the narrator previously indicates the universality of a delight in outdoor living, stressing that nothing “is stronger proof of the original intent of Nature to do more for man than civilization in its arrogance will long permit her to do, than the quick and sure way in which she reclaims his affection, when by weariness, idle chance, or disaster, he is returned, for an interval, to her arms” (208). Ramona senses that this cañon is her “first home” (209), not because she is Indian (although Indians may share that feeling), but because, borrowing from the Christian Edenic tradition of romanticizing Nature, it is truly her (and everyone’s) first and most “natural” home.

More broadly, the novel disrupts the idea that race determines behavior by consistently presenting Ramona as Californio and by referring to her as Ramona even after she has taken the name Majella, which she adopts from the name Alessandro gives her of Majel, or Wood-Dove. When Ramona marries under the name Majella Phail, the narrator comments that “the last step was taken in the disappearance of Ramona. How should any one, searching in after years, find any trace of Ramona Ortegña, in the
woman married under the name of ‘Majella Fayeel’?” (236) However, “Ramona Ortegña” does not disappear at all since the narrator continues to refer to her as Ramona and since, ultimately, Felipe reinscribes her as Ramona and then solidifies her Californio status by marrying her and moving with her to Mexico. Jackson even (mistakenly?) has Aunt Ri, who should have known Ramona only as Majella, refer to her as “Ramony” (347) and refers at the end to Ramona’s second daughter as “Ramona, daughter of Alessandro the Indian” (362) in spite of the previous comment that “Alessandro had at last given his consent that the name [for the baby] should be Majella” (314).

Ramona’s consistent Californio identity may reflect Jackson’s reluctance to present her protagonist as an Indian, or more generally as lower-class (see Guiterrez-Jones 63), but the decision to uphold Ramona’s Californio status also emphasizes that culture and identity are learned, not racially determined. Considering the extent of national concern in the 1880s about racial purity and the superiority of the Anglo race (see Slotkin, Fatal 338-45; Wrobel 48-50; Higham 35-67), the narrator’s unfailing representation of Ramona as the Californio she originally believed herself to be is itself a powerful message about the insignificance of racial constitution for self-construction and about the supposed superiority of the Anglo race. Apart from the (nearly invisible) physical feature of her blue eyes and her choice to give the last name Phail when marrying, Ramona has no noticeable association with her Anglo heritage. In foregrounding the ways that Ramona’s cultural background defines her, Ramona indirectly questions racial determinism and the assumption of racial superiority.

In the end, though, having Ramona come across as Californio, not Indian, does diminish Jackson’s critique of race-based antagonism against Indians. The inconsistency in naming, along with the novel’s conclusion in which Ramona abandons her Indian life
altogether, potentially diminishes Ramona’s Indian heritage to the point that readers may not view her as an Indian at all (Moylan 231-33). Additionally, Ramona’s exceptionalism invites readers to distinguish Ramona from other Indians because of her more refined traits—the very traits that connect her to Jackson’s Anglo-American readers. For instance, at San Pasquale, Ramona is “half-revered” for her “readiness to teach and to help” the other Indians; this position as “a sort of missionary” elevates and distances her from the Indians while also emphasizing their inherent need to be taught and helped by women trained in Euro-American culture from outside the tribal community (255). Likewise, the narrator’s description of Ramona and Alessandro’s San Pasquale home, with its “clean whitewashed walls, the bed neatly made, with broad lace on sheets and pillows,” connects Ramona to Jackson’s readers, who presumably would find this domestic scene familiar and appealing (253). Meanwhile, the comment that the room “made up a picture such as Father Gaspara had never before seen in his pilgrimages among the Indian villages” (253) distinguishes Ramona’s homemaking from that of most Indian women and even suggests that other Indian women are poor homemakers. Since Ramona’s exceptional qualities are those shared with Jackson’s Anglo-American readers, and since they set Ramona above the rest of the Indians, they reconfirm readers’ belief in their own cultural and racial superiority. Furthermore, Ramona’s separation from the broader Indian community works against Jackson’s hope to “move people’s hearts” to feel for all Indians, since readers could sympathize with Ramona without moving on to sympathize with other Indians (Indian 298).

Of course, as critic Carl Gutiérrez-Jones points out, Ramona’s position as a “representative of her Native American race” is really a “misnomer throughout the novel since she is undeniably a mestiza,” or blended character, both biologically and culturally (61). As
Robert McKee Irwin explains, Jackson’s “adoption device” complicates the “standard bicultural marriage allegory” and thus creates “a border novel whose cultural context exceeds a white/indigenous dichotomy” (544). Indeed, it is Ramona as a cross-cultural, multiracial character that drew the Cuban independence activist José Martí to read Ramona as the story of “the arrogant mestiza who through persecution and death is knit to her Indian” (quoted in Gillman 93). But, as Gutiérrez-Jones argues, Ramona’s predominant association with Californio culture works against reading her as a mestiza character, or one who truly merges cultures and races, since her identity, instead of being blended, is “reconfigured in the narrative into different periods connoting separate, secure racial natures” (66). Ramona is a story about ethnic mixing and ethnic conflict that advocates a multi-cultural and equitable America, making it a provocative companion to María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s 1885 novel, The Squatter and the Don (see Alemán, Goldman 48-53, Jacobs, Luis-Brown, Phillips 261). However, the denial of Ramona as mestiza complicates reading it as a borderlands novel dramatizing a multiracial, intercultural California, or as Martí’s “our America.”

Ramona’s Indians

Jackson was well aware that to reach people’s hearts and make them “feel” for the Indians meant fighting not only against ideas of the West as wild and race as a deterministic category, but also against entrenched ideas of Indians as “primitive,” “heathen,” and “savage”—or uncivilized, un-Christian, and violent. In the conclusion of A Century of Dishonor Jackson asserts that the “old tales of the frontier life, with its horrors of Indian warfare, have gradually, by two or three generations’ telling, produced in the average mind something like an hereditary instinct of unquestioning and unreasoning aversion which is almost impossible to dislodge or soften”
California’s “Mission Indians” provided Jackson with convenient material for “dislodging” her readers’ “aversion” to the Indians because these Indians lived in well-established villages, participated in agrarian land use that her readers could understand as “civilized,” and were Christianized. Jackson’s own sympathies for Indians were heightened by witnessing the southern Californian Indians’ removal, as evidenced by her comment that “[t]here is not in all the Century of Dishonor, so black a chapter as the history of these Mission Indians—peaceable farmers for a hundred years—driven off their lands like foxes & wolves—driven out of good adobe houses & the white men who had driven them out, settling down, calm & comfortable in the houses!” (Indian 240)

*Ramona* creates sympathetic identification with its American Indian characters by stressing that the Indians are “peaceable farmers” with a strong Christian faith who are unjustly being denied their rights to property, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For instance, when Ramona and Alessandro stop in Temecula, after the graveyard scene between Ramona and Carmen, the narration attends to another symbol of the Indians’ settled lives, Alessandro’s former home, where he stops to eavesdrop on the American couple now living there. That Alessandro overhears the Americans’ conversation at all is due to a crack in the window, which he recollects having “put off” planing (215). This detail emphasizes the amenities of his previous home, as does the American husband’s reference to the Indians’ “first-rate rawhide bedstead” (216) that the couple wishes had been left behind. In an ironic role reversal, the bickering American couple parodies the image of self-reliant pioneer families moving west to improve the wilderness through hard labor, something the Indians have already accomplished. The scene reveals the Americans to be pillagers of a pre-existing agricultural community. Through this look into a Temecula home, as well as the subsequent depiction of San
Pasquale as an established village with family farms, individual homes, and a church, Jackson presents the Indians as individualized, yeoman farmers who exemplify the ideal of American settlement rather than standing as a “barrier to civilization” (Century 338). Similarly, Ramona’s attention to the Indians’ Catholic practices, as seen for instance in their eagerness to receive the priest’s blessing (18), their willingness to follow Father Salvierderra’s wishes (68), and their decision to ask priests for help against the incoming Americans instead of resorting to violence (259), also disallow images of heathen or violent Indians (see also Phillips 246, Padget 854-55).

By emphasizing the Indians’ Christianity, garnered through the mission system, Jackson also implicitly contrasts the Spanish colonial tactic of “gathering the Indians by thousands into communities” and the American tactic of “driving the Indians farther and farther into the wilderness,” thereby exposing American mistreatment of the Indians as inhumane genocide (Jackson, “Father” 56-57; see also Phillips 244-45). Alessandro openly acknowledges the genocidal implications of American expansion when he tells Ramona, “These Americans will destroy us all. I do not know but they will presently begin to shoot us and poison us, to get us all out of the country, as they do the rabbits and the gophers; it would not be any worse than what they have done” (183). Juan Can similarly reflects that “the Temecula Indians had disappeared [...] like any wild creatures, foxes or coyotes; hunted down, driven out; the valley was rid of them” (268).

In contrasting Spanish and American colonial tactics, Jackson over-romanticizes the Spanish mission system as altruistic toward the Indians (see Venegas 72-73, Padget 852-54). But Ramona does include some critique of the missions, and in fact, the novel’s recognition of Spanish-Mexican mistreatment of the Indians only draws further attention to the broader issue of Indians’ rights.
Alessandro directly discusses the missions’ use of force in responding to Ramona’s sanguine belief that the missions “were like palaces, and that there were thousands of Indians in every one of them; thousands and thousands, all working so happy and peaceful” (229). In contrast, Alessandro emphasizes the hurtful “power” and control the Fathers exercised over the Indians, concluding:

The Indians did not all want to come to the Missions; some of them preferred to stay in the woods, and live as they always had lived; and I think they had a right to do that if they preferred, Majella. It was stupid of them to stay and be like beasts; and not know anything; but do you not think they had the right? (231)

This passage beautifully conveys Alessandro’s internalized battle between his belief in individual rights that leads him to tentatively defend the unsubmitive Indians, and his Catholic education that has taught him to see the Indians’ former way of living as ignorant and “beast”-like.

Perhaps holding her “civilized” readers in mind, or reflecting her own belief that the Indians’ lives were improved by leaving their former lifestyle (see Jackson, “Father” 34), Jackson has Alessandro concede that it is “stupid” to stay in the woods. But his question, and Jackson’s central question to her readers—“do you not think they had the right?”—ultimately proclaims that the Indians, like all people, should have the right to choose their own form of living. Alessandro’s presentation of living in the woods as a “right” cautiously validates the Indians’ former lifestyle while poignantly applying a Protestant, American creed of individual decision making to the Indians’ situation. Alessandro’s question exposes that Indian mistreatment, during the mission era and in his own lifetime, results from denying Indians’ rights.

Jackson’s depictions of agrarian, Christianized Indian villages and her attention to the Indians’ individual rights collectively
challenge an assumed division between Indian tribal primitivism and Anglo-American individualized civilization. While the Indians live in a tribal community, sleep out of doors, and can live comfortably (as do Alessandro and Ramona) in the "wilderness" (204), they also demonstrate the "civilized" practices of Christian faith, individual family farming, and living in privately owned, permanent homes. Additionally, unlike James Fenimore Cooper's or Francis Parkman's Indians who, as children of the wilderness, must inevitably vanish when American "progress" or agrarian settlement destroys their wilderness homes, Jackson's Indians, like the Californios, are land-owners living in a garden-like environment who have already "improved" their land through agrarian and domestic development—precisely the enterprise and industry that American homestead laws were intended to promote. Not surprisingly, early Californian readers of Ramona criticized it for challenging the conception of the region as a frontier complete with dangerous Indians, and Jackson received letters claiming her Indians were pure fantasy and testifying to the real "brutality of the Indians" (Moylan 229; see also McWilliams, Southern 73).

Nevertheless, in the most dramatic example of how Ramona destabilizes its own reproach of American racist imperialism, by concluding the novel with Alessandro's death and Ramona's exodus from her Indian life, or her rescue "not so much from death, as from a life worse than death" at the Cahuilla village (348), Ramona re-asserts the belief that even Indians who model agrarian settlement will necessarily vanish in the face of American expansion. While, as Phillips asserts, "this is not a happy ending" since it "implies that California is on a road to self-destruction" (259), as many critics acknowledge, it nevertheless undercuts Jackson's social reform message (DeLyser 29, Whitaker 37, Mathes 84). By providing closure for Ramona and Felipe Moreno but not for the Indians Ramona leaves behind (Noriega 218), the ending
reiterates the popular opinion that Indians’ lives were unredeemable and also suggests that Californios can find fulfillment only in exodus.

RAMONA AND ASSIMILATIONIST REFORM

*Ramona* promoted some reform work that reflected Jackson’s primary goal of protecting Indians’ rights and existing Indian lands. In particular, the novel helped reformers push for the eventual passage of the Congressional Act for the Relief of the Mission Indians in the State of California (Mathes 115). Most of the reform work *Ramona* inspired, however, consisted of integrating Indians into the American system of private property and enterprise through Christian teaching and domesticating influences. For instance, Edmon Chase, the school superintendent of the Ramona Indian School, which removed young Indian girls from their families and taught them homemaking skills, wrote in 1890 that the “management of the children of the worst U.S. Apaches is entirely after the spirit of that little volume, and the effect is marvelous” (quoted in Moylan 230). Presumably, such reformers saw the “spirit” of *Ramona* supporting “management” through forced removal and cultural conditioning. (For further examples see Mathes ch. 6-8.)

Assimilationist beliefs, promoted by reformers like Chase who saw themselves as “friends” of the Indians (see Prucha), resulted in the creation of Indian schools that eroded Native culture and in the passage of the 1887 Allotment Act that constituted a means for American acquisition of Indian land and was, in part, a response to the end-of-the-century fear of a closing frontier (Hoxie 148, Wrobel 17). Primarily because the US government opened up all unallotted tribal lands as “surplus” for incoming settlers, in
time nearly two-thirds of tribal land became white-owned (Limerick 199, McDonnell 8).

Jackson herself was less enamored by assimilation than by the need to uphold the Indians’ rights. As previously noted, Jackson’s Indian reform writings reveal that her main interest was encouraging Congress to implement existing treaties and thus prevent additional theft of Indian land. (See Senier 41-49 for further discussion of Jackson’s nonfictional resistance to assimilationist discourse.) Nevertheless, Jackson occasionally endorsed the assimilationist idea that Indians should be subsumed into a system of private property, believing that “some Indians would find individual rather than collective ownership the best means of legally securing their lands,” since that was a way to “counter white industrialists and pioneers” (Phillips 28). But it is Jackson’s view of the Indians as lacking volition, or the power to will their own change, and therefore their ultimate need for Anglo-American protection, that most closely aligns her reform work to the assimilationist beliefs. As critic Gutiérrez-Jones points out in his analysis of Jackson’s legal discourse in A Century of Dishonor, Jackson “uses the concept of volition in a very strained manner, inasmuch as she acknowledges that Native Americans were legally conceived of as wards of the state during her time” (59). Her subsequent inability to give the Indians independent “agency” and “volition” in negotiating their treaties strains against her advocacy “to revivify the treaty promises made by the U.S. government” (Gutiérrez-Jones 60).

While Ramona ultimately invited assimilationist readings, the novel, like Jackson herself, straddles the question of assimilating Indians into Anglo-American society. Ramona resists the strict division between primitivism and civilization upon which assimilationist enterprises were founded and yet draws characters that are
sympathetic because they share Jackson's readers' "civilized" traits of education, manners, homemaking, Christian religion, and agrarian living. As previously mentioned, the novel muddles the primitive/civilized dichotomy by presenting Ramona's and Alessandro's "civilized" traits as those of the Catholic Californio population and through the depictions of the Indians' tribally-run "civilized" villages (see above pp. 22, 32-33). However, the novel most pointedly disrupts the assumed polarity between the terms "primitive" and "civilized" through its descriptions of Alessandro, who is introduced as a "primitive" and "simple" man and yet frequently acts and thinks in "civilized" ways. For instance, in the first extended description of Alessandro, the narrator presents him as a "simple-minded, unlearned man" who mistakenly believes the earth was standing still (48), and then challenges that label of ignorance with later descriptions of his writing and reading abilities and his position as a tribal leader who, like his father, "looked beyond" the day to day concerns of other Temecula Indians (53). The proximity of these two descriptions of Alessandro, as a "simple-minded" man who "looked beyond," beg for reconsideration of the terms "simple" and "learned." Alessandro may not know the scientific principles of astronomy, but this does not make him simple-minded or even unlearned.

The subsequent account of Alessandro wrestling with his feelings after seeing Ramona for the first time goes even further in destabilizing the division between primitivism and civilization. Having irrevocably fallen in love with Ramona at first glance, Alessandro finds himself unable to understand his own feelings. The narrator informs us that

If he had been what the world calls a civilized man, he would have known instantly, and would have been capable of weighing, analyzing, and reflecting on his sensations at leisure. But he was not a civilized man; he had to bring to
bear on his present situation only simple, primitive, uneducated instincts and impulses. (53)

This passage raises significant questions about the labels "civilized" and "primitive" by textually reconstructing the term "civilized man" into "what the world calls a civilized man" and by suggesting that Alessandro has only "primitive, uneducated instincts and impulses" even though earlier on the same page he was shown to be educated and "capable of weighing, analyzing, and reflecting" on his tribe's predicament of being displaced by the Americans.

As it turns out, Alessandro's inner turmoil stems from his inability to conceive of loving a Californio woman, not from his primitivism. After all, if "Ramona had been a maiden of his own people or race, he would have drawn near to her as quickly as iron to the magnet" (54). In other words, if he had been "what the world calls a civilized man," he could "instantly" have recognized his feelings because they would have been acceptable. However, since Ramona appears off-limits (and since this is a sentimental novel), Alessandro resolves to live just for the sight of her. Ironically, the narrator praises this voyeuristic love by commenting on the civility of his behavior: "Ever so civilized, he could hardly have worshipped a woman better" (54). By the end of this seven-page introduction to Alessandro, the distinction between a "civilized" and a "primitive" man has been significantly blurred.

In spite of the novel's destabilization of the primitive/civilized binary, simply by upholding these Anglocentric terms Jackson furthers the divisions and assumptions they imply, especially since she presents Ramona and Alessandro as exceptional Indians who stand apart because of their "civilized" Californio training and since neither Ramona nor Alessandro survives in their Indian setting. *Ramona* also invites assimilationist readings by denying the Indians any agency to change themselves. Both Alessandro and
Ramona abide by unjust racial and cultural boundaries rather than forging ways to subvert or cross those boundaries. Alessandro and the other male Indians can either maintain a semblance of their agrarian lifestyle by retreating from the incoming Americans into more remote areas or move into American cities, such as Los Angeles, where they will be further oppressed by discrimination (278-79). Likewise, Ramona can either be subjected to poverty, relocation, and death among the Indians or rescued by Felipe and escape both her home and her Indian heritage. In this vein, Gutiérrez-Jones contends that, “Jackson does not significantly challenge the supremacy of the conqueror’s cultural position, and although she offers several blanket condemnations of the law, no real threat to its power is envisioned. [. . .] The ‘magic’ which will suggest a cultural rallying point for the construction of alternative forms of agency in later Chicano texts, [. . .] is here a dislocated and universalized concept, essentially devoid of any power to unify a community around action or changes in perception” (67). The Indians’ powerlessness to confront American supremacy can be interpreted as their need for American acculturation; they must be assimilated or lost.

While Ramona fails to perform the political work of constructing agency for the Indians by unifying the oppressed community around what Gutiérrez-Jones refers to as “action” or “changes in perception,” Ramona did produce a “change in perception” for many of her readers. Jackson primarily sought the agency of her Anglo, female readers, who like Aunt Ri, would presumably work on the Indians’ behalf once persuaded of the Indians’ full humanity. In terms of creating agency for her readers, Ramona was successful, even if her readers did not act in ways that fit Jackson’s specific reform goals. As John Gonzalez persuasively argues, Ramona was foundational in helping white women advance “their own quest for national agency” by “making the national problem of
managing Indians a matter of domestic incorporation” and by positioning women as necessary domesticators of the Indians (437, 441).

Indeed, *Ramona* advocates managing Indians through domestic care in the portrayal of Aunt Ri, whose honest concern for Ramona and Alessandro makes her much more effective at helping them than the Indian Agency men, whose core contempt for the Indians makes them ineffectual, and in the doctor’s case, harmful. Although Aunt Ri does not model a woman whose caring involves teaching or assimilating Indians into American life, that is partly because Ramona and Alessandro already are well-assimilated; they even model domestic and agrarian ideals more than do the Hyers, as evidenced by the comment that Aunt Ri “at her best estate, had never possessed a room which had the expression of this poor little mud hut of Ramona’s” (288).

Thus, while Jackson was “not overly committed to the destruction of Indian culture and their acculturation into American society” (Mathes xvi), and she may not have written *Ramona* to promote assimilation, it is easy to see that the novel invites an assimilationist response. In fact, *Ramona*’s affiliation with assimilationist beliefs is so strong that it is sometimes misinterpreted as Jackson’s primary goal in writing *Ramona*, as is reflected in Gonzalez’s claim that *Ramona*, along with other Indian reform narratives, “sought to transform the antebellum policy of Indian expulsion into the pedagogical project of Indian assimilation” (440), or Venegas’s comment that “at a time when the idea that the solution to ‘the Indian problem’ was extermination, her call for assimilation was progressive” (77).

**RAMONA AND THE RAMONA MYTH**

While *Ramona* contributed to the late nineteenth-century Indian reform movement and the increased acceptance of women as
political actors, its most long-lasting impact has been the development of a "Ramona Myth," a term originating in 1910 (DeLyser xvii) that describes a pastoral image of southern California’s Spanish-Mexican past as a vanished golden era of prosperity and leisure. As discussed previously, Jackson’s romanticized view of California’s Spanish-Mexican era and her sentimentalized, regionalist presentation of the seemingly disappearing Californios positioned Californio lifestyle as one that Anglo-Americans could sympathetically imagine themselves inhabiting and yet one temptingly differentiated from industrialized American society. This depiction of Californio history and life constituted an ideal regenerative folklore for incoming Anglo-Americans in the 1880s and 1890s who were eager to escape the increasingly corporate and industrial society evolving at the end of the century which, ironically, was epitomized by the railroad that brought them to their southern Californian escape.

Jackson’s fictionalized image of southern California’s past quickly outgrew its articulation in her novel. It was actively sold and authenticated by late nineteenth-century boosters and tourists, subsequently becoming the “real” southern California for many visitors and residents from the late 1880s well into the twentieth century. While the Ramona Myth is less prominent today, it still lives on in southern California, for instance, in the Ramona Outdoor Play, formerly the Ramona Pageant, which has been running since 1923 and continues to draw crowds to Hemet, California, where a cast of over 400 local actors theatrically enact Jackson’s story. The Myth’s lasting legacy is also reflected in southern Californian roads, schools, towns, and even a housing project carrying the names Ramona, Alessandro, or Moreno (DeLyser 164), as well as in the region’s proliferation of mission style architecture—an architectural style that, as anthropologist David Hurst Thomas explains, developed between 1888 and 1893
largely in response to the Anglo-American desire to recreate the mission past as described in Ramona (Thomas 125-27, DeLyser 179-80).

By appropriating fiction as historical fact, and in the process producing lived experiences and places based on a myth, the Ramona Myth poignantly reveals the constructed or imagined nature of western “authenticity.” First, Ramona’s reception speaks to the complicated relationship between that which is perceived as authentic and a feeling of belonging. The “authentic” experience often produces the effect of belonging; it allows one to feel connected, in this case to a supposedly historic or more native California. Secondly, the construction of Ramona as an “authentic” history of the region reveals how the representation of something as “real” or “true” often reflects deep-seated desires, in this case the nationalistic desire for a western retreat from the ills of industrialized, urbanized American society. Examining Ramona’s construction as authentic reveals how Ramona participates in positioning the West as a land of Anglo-American wish-fulfillment and how the Ramona Myth legacy serves as one example of “imperialist nostalgia,” or the process of people mourning “the passing of what they themselves have transformed” that occurs when the threat of the colonized “other” appears securely in the past (Rosaldo 108).

Development of the Ramona Myth

Ramona did not single-handedly invent the myth of southern California’s pastoral Spanish-Mexican heritage that historian Carey McWilliams terms the “fantasy heritage” (North 43). In spite of a general rise in Hispanophobia after the Mexican-American war, favorable and nostalgic treatments of Californios can be found as early as Bret Harte’s 1862 story, “Notes by Flood and Field,” and they became more prevalent through the 1870s
and early 1880s as the Californio population throughout California declined (for further examples see Goldman 40-42, Thomas 121-22, Padget 845). But as historian Kevin Starr explains, on Ramona’s Moreno rancho “the myth of Southern California attained a local habitation and a name” (Starr 62).

According to the idealized version of southern California’s Spanish-Mexican history, which became known as the Ramona Myth, the advent of Spanish colonial rule brought to California a time of progress and prosperity without the competitive materialism of modern American development. In the mythic rendition of Spanish colonialism, devout Franciscan friars first spread civilization by baptizing and teaching the supposedly peaceful Indians, paving the way for secularization of the missions and the introduction of grand ranchos where Indians and Mexicans supposedly labored freely and were treated as family by generous, but largely indolent, Californio rancho owners (McWilliams, Southern 71; Thomas 125). Ramona paints a version of this mythic history in its chapters set at the Moreno Rancho, in part, through its cast of characters. The self-effacing Father Salvierderra, the affable but idle Californio gentleman, Felipe, and the seemingly willing Indian sheep shearers under Alessandro’s leadership who are well cared for by the rancho personnel, all typify the myth.

But even more so than individual characters, the setting of the Moreno rancho, with its idealized veranda and lush landscape, inspired the Ramona Myth. The rancho’s appeal may be initially surprising since, as discussed previously, Jackson depicts the rancho sentimentally in ways that would appeal to her primarily female readership. However, by 1887 the time was ripe for American appropriation of a Ramona-inspired Californian myth because the novel dismissed the idea of the West as a rugged frontier and rewrote the landscape as a well-established dwelling place. In 1887 the Santa Fe Railway acquired an independent
roadbed into Los Angeles, sparking a rate war with the Southern Pacific that brought to Los Angeles in one year more than 120,000 visitors seeking sunshine, health, repose, and sometimes a residence (DeLyser 36, Pitt 249). Suddenly, there was little interest in promoting the region as a frontier, and as Kevin Starr explains, the “pastel ideality of Ramona’s locale was a way of suggesting that the frontier was over” (62).

Additionally, when the boom ended in late 1888, Anglo-American promoters of the region, such as *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harrison Gray Otis and *Land of Sunshine/Out West* editor Charles Fletcher Lummis, worked to sustain the area’s sudden growth by turning to Ramona’s memorializing of the then-dissipated Californio culture for a new regional image that, as cultural geographer Dydia DeLyser explains, “suggested continuity, not the fragile ephemerality of the boom” (DeLyser 42; see also Starr 76). Thus, although Jackson’s evocation of Californio-ruled southern California was feminized and countered expansionist imagery of the West as a frontier, it was nevertheless eventually incorporated, by men as well as women, into the same imperialist, nationalist project that lay behind the formulation of the West as a frontier. While Jackson may not have intended or approved of this response to her novel (Phillips 275-76), it nevertheless reflects what Amy Kaplan discusses as the imperial implications of antebellum women’s sentimental and domestic fiction.

From 1887 onward, increasing numbers of people experienced California through Ramona’s story. As DeLyser details, a series of Ramona sites were established, some as early as 1886, including the Rancho Camulos outside of Santa Paula that Jackson visited briefly in 1882 (Phillips 238), which was identified as Jackson’s primary source for the Moreno rancho; and Ramona’s marriage place in Old Town San Diego, identified as Father Gaspara’s house where Ramona and Alessandro were married (DeLyser chs. 3, 5).
Notably, the creation of a Ramonaland tourist industry influenced how the novel was read, or what was remembered, thereby solidifying its reception as a romance of Californio history (not as a protest against Indian displacement or American expansion) since the easily accessible sites (especially before car travel) drew solely from the novel’s Moreno rancho chapters.

Ramona’s “Authenticity”

Part of Ramona’s lure for boosters and promoters was the novel’s basis in “real” places and people that Jackson had visited between 1882 and 1883 and mentioned in her letters and Congressional “Report.” In 1884 Jackson wrote to Thomas Aldrich, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, that “[e]very incident in Ramona (i.e. of the Ind[ian] Hist[ory]) is true” (Indian 337), and her vivid descriptions in the Moreno rancho chapters also depict places and people she visited (Starr 60). Following Jackson’s death, the factual background for the novel’s fictional story led many to investigate her sources (DeLyser 69), and a series of books were published between 1888 and the mid-1920s that collectively validated southern California as Ramonaland by drawing out Ramona’s basis in “real” people and places that tourists could still visit (see Lummis, Vroman and Barnes, Davis and Alderson, and James).

George Wharton James’s Through Ramona Country, for instance, repeatedly cautions readers to remember Ramona’s characters’ fictitiousness (xv, 59, 63), while progressively diminishing their invented status by suggesting that “facts that actually occurred were woven into the lives of her fictitious hero and heroine” (xv) and by extensively discussing Jackson’s “original” character models. Furthermore, James claims that apart from the now-questionably fictitious characters, “there is scarcely a statement of fact relating to the country, the Spanish home life, of description, of the treat-
ment of Indians, etc., in the whole book that is not literally true” (xv), and he details a vast compendium of these “facts of detail” (22), such as the location of the Santa Clara road that passes behind the Camulos ranch and the presence of a torn altar cloth at the Camulos chapel (25, 33).

But beyond Ramona’s basis in lived experience, for many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers, Jackson “authored” a sense of place in southern California, to borrow terminology from Bonney MacDonald’s essay, “Authoring an Authentic Place.” As MacDonald writes, “the authentic can, in part, be created or authored. A regional writer giving a name or a story to a land calls the given particulars of that place into being and authors a story or a place in which to dwell. [. . .] And so, the labor of authoring opens up a dwelling place and helps us move into belonging” (287). Ramona offered Jackson’s readers a way to imaginatively belong in southern California.

For instance, James’s belief in Ramona’s authenticity depends not only on its genesis in lived incidents, people, and places, but also on his ability to witness and occupy the “beautiful pictures of the country” Jackson paints, or to physically place himself into Ramona’s story (380). James inhabits Jackson’s novel both textually, through his narration of his own experiences in Ramonaland, and visually, in the over one hundred photographs that accompany his text, including many he took himself and some in which he appears in the Ramonaland scene (238). Because James can connect his own experience in California to the “beautiful pictures” Jackson describes, he ultimately feels that Ramona becomes “more true than fact” (xvi); it speaks to a “larger truth which lies behind all human life” (62). This “truth” James speaks of is not based on the historical veracity of the novel, but rather on the novel’s contribution to James’s experience of belonging in this place.
James's reading experience reveals how *Ramona* molded late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American experience in southern California in ways that parallel postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s discussion of “Orientalism” as a discourse that directed European experiences of the Orient. Said’s “Orientalism” describes the process by which representational texts, written from within a dominant culture about a “foreign” place and culture undergoing imperialism (for Said, the “foreign” was the Orient), create the authoritative or “true” version of that place and culture, particularly for those within the dominant culture. Said presents the “Orientalist” as one whose “exteriority” to the Orient “makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to” Europeans, and whose representation of the “Orient” then comes to displace “any such real thing as ‘the Orient’” (Said 20-21). Jackson similarly performs this role of rendering southern California to an Anglo-American readership, in that *Ramona*’s exteriorized representation of Californio California comes to displace any “real” California and thus becomes, as James puts it, “more true than fact” (xvi). Not only did *Ramona* enact a western American version of Said’s “Orientalism,” whereby the dominant, imperial party textually creates the subordinate group, but since *Ramona* presents the Californios as disappearing, the novel’s imperialist discourse goes even further in its conquest by drawing the subordinate group in a way that physically removes them.

James’s experience of using *Ramona* to inform and create his lived experience in southern California was not unique. As DeLyser’s compilation of tourists’ “Ramona memories” reveals, for many visitors and new residents of California, *Ramona* provided a narrative that helped them make sense of what they saw and experienced to the point that the myth became the “real” California for them (see DeLyser 60-61). As more and more people experienced California through Ramona’s story, largely because of the
proliferation of tour guides and testimonials about Ramona sites, *Ramona* and the Ramona Myth became a significant part of the region’s history, even though it obscured other, more veritable, versions of the region’s past as well as the native cultures *Ramona* originally sought to protect.

The active production of *Ramona*’s authenticity and its lasting effect on southern Californian landscape and culture exposes the extent to which “authenticity” is, as western American cultural critics William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis explain, a powerful “rhetorical figure or concept that works in and works on culture and society”—a concept whose “‘existence’ is a kind of effect of desire, an effect of loss, or an effect of displacement” (7). Drawing from the philosophical tradition of understanding desire as longing for what is absent (see Schrift 174), *Ramona*’s construction as “authentic” can be understood as primarily an “effect of” the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century desire for a simpler way of life that followed from what Alan Trachtenberg calls the “incorporation of America.” By the 1880s, with the dramatic rise of industrialization and mechanization, the increase in urban populations, the growth in labor difficulties, and the overarching development of a corporate economy, American desire for a pre-industrial, pre-corporate lifestyle surged. Californian boosters tapped into that desire by associating Spanish southern California with an “easygoing, relaxed, fun-loving life-style of a semitropical people, a fantasy attainable by any hardworking Anglo willing to settle in sunny California” (Thomas 129).

Of course, this *Ramona*-inspired fantasy of a simpler life depended on and advanced the very mechanisms that it sought to escape. As Kevin Starr points out, the myth “celebrated a simple, feudal society” while fostering an industrially driven mass society (85). In sum, then, Jackson’s sentimentalized, sympathetic portrayal of a Californio setting combined with her regionalist
nostalgia for a passing Californio culture that contrasted with advancing American materialism fueled an extended experience of imperialist nostalgia in which generations of Anglo-American visitors and residents of California could presume their own innocence in the despoliation of pre-existing cultures and landscapes through the nostalgic incorporation of remnants of those cultures and landscapes (see also Padget 844 on Ramona’s reception as an example of imperialist nostalgia).

Ramona’s encouragement of imperialist nostalgia reveals the novel’s participation in the broader national construction of the American West as a geography of desire for freedom, innocence, hope, and regeneration—desires traditionally linked to a male-centered perception of the West as an open frontier and of western geography as wilderness. Whether the frontier was envisioned as territory for improving American civilization (as in William Gilpin’s and Frederick Jackson Turner’s texts), or envisioned as a vanishing refuge away from civilization (as in Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels), over time the frontier consistently represented a realm seen as “other” and separate from the structure or limitations of existing society. The frontier was, as Henry George put it, consistently the nation’s “well-spring of hope” (390), and even by the 1850s that land of hope had become the western territory. But Ramona, while participating in this signification of the West, shifts the site of the nationalist desire for that “other” land of hope away from the open frontier and onto previously inhabited places—the ruins of a Californio past. Thus, the novel parallels frontier literature’s imagining of the West as the fulfillment of some perceived or imagined loss and the associated desire for a new beginning, even while it challenges the idea of the West as a frontier.
CONCLUSION

In her 1883 essay, “By Horse Cars into Mexico,” Jackson both praises the railroad for opening regions to her own travel and decries the railroad for destroying those regions’ quaint original character, thereby concluding that she is one of “those unfortunately constituted persons who are born with a worse than second sight; that sort of double sight which persists in seeing both sides of a thing” (351). Reading *Ramona* invites a similar experience of “double sight.” For instance, in her confessional “Introduction” to the 2005 Modern Library edition of *Ramona*, Denise Chavez expresses her mixed contempt and admiration of *Ramona* by criticizing the novel’s implicit racism while lifting up *Ramona* as fiction that daringly “speak[s] truth” about race-based injustices that are “still with us” today (xv, xix).

As this study has explored, *Ramona*’s response to the late nineteenth-century, western American issue of racialized, gendered conquest through land acquisition also reflects a “double sight” because the novel subverts frontier ideology while still asserting Anglo-American enterprising dominance. *Ramona* denounces American racist expansionism by questioning race determinism and by sympathetically depicting communitarian, Catholic Californios, a settled western geography influenced by female sensibility, and peaceful, agrarian Mission Indians. Nevertheless, *Ramona* simultaneously reaffirms expansionist assumptions about Anglo-American superiority and the understanding of the American West as a geography of Anglo-American desire by failing to give the Californios or American Indians agency to resist the invading Anglo-Americans and by nostalgically presenting the Californio and Indian cultures as eventually disappearing. As a result, while *Ramona*’s creation of sympathetic identification with Jackson’s western characters and setting exposes the wrongs of

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American expansion, it also forms the basis for the novel's assimilationist and historicist readings, which contributed to the cultural and territorial imperialism that Jackson sought to fight. While Jackson hoped Ramona would unequivocally criticize American conquest and advocate for American Indians' rights, in fact, Ramona remains Helen Jackson's greatest legacy because of its provocative "double sight" on the issues of race, culture, citizenship, and the formation of nationhood through conquest.
Selected Bibliography


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Karen E. Ramirez received her PhD in American Literature from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Dr. Ramirez is a Core Instructor in the Sewall Residential Academic Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she also teaches for the Center of the American West and the English Department. Dr. Ramirez will be co-president of the Western Literature Association in 2008. Her research and writing focus on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's narrative mappings of the American West as a geography of desire.

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Cover image of Ramona by Henry Sandham, from the Pasadena Edition of Ramona (Boston: Little Brown, 1900), 42. Sandham, who traveled with Helen Hunt Jackson in southern California in 1882 and illustrated her Century Magazine articles, opts not to convey the character Ramona’s mestiza ethnicity. His notes on his illustrations for the novel, too lengthy to reproduce here, are included the Pasadena Edition.
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