Ramona, I Love You

by Douglas Monroy

Love for a landscape, what we might call topophilia, derives not so much from how a place looks, but rather from our interactions with the place, and the stories and songs we create to record our recollections and emotions associated with the place. It is the stories that bring a landscape to life for me and make it beautiful. Beauty is never simple: for a landscape to be alive, its stories must be alive, and things that are alive are always growing and changing. Sometimes the stories change in ways that nourish our emotional longings and fears. Sometimes the stories make for a fantasy heritage that dishonestly obscures what people actually did in history, and sometimes the stories hide ugly things about what happened in the place. We all have our stories. I will tell you now my tale of love and landscape.

When I was seventeen, a senior in high school in Los Angeles, I got the family Volkswagen as a combination Christmas and birthday present. It was a '64 with those little tail lights and a 44 horsepower engine, but, more important, in it I learned my first lessons about love. Furtive sex in the back seat, you might be thinking, but no—it was just kissing and listening to small tastes of Joe Tex, Percy Sledge, Solomon Burke, and Eddie Floyd, and large quantities of the Temptations, the Rolling Stones, and their idol, Otis Redding, on the AM radio. Yes, readers, I’m referring here to Wolfman Jack’s broadcasts from south of the border on station XEB. Those of you who never knew the Wolfman and XEB, skip it; you had to have been there. I can’t convey in words this scene driving around Hollywood late at night listening to the Wolfman, coming to know that one’s little world is neither what it seems, nor all there is in life.

These were such fabulous songs of heterosexual love and devotion. Joe Tex sang “Show Me a Man Who’s Got a Good Woman” and you need to “Hold on to What You’ve Got”; Solomon Burke sang “Cry to Me”; Eddie Floyd, so full of thunder and lightening about his love that he told us how to “Knock on Wood” to keep it. But then there was nothing like the Temptations’ “My Girl,” and, well, when Percy Sledge came on with “When a Man Loves a Woman,” it was the only time there was quiet in the car; my friends and I just called the song “Whenna,” and we listened in awe. Back then I thought, in this little world of R&B love on the Volkswagen AM radio, that Otis Redding’s eloquence about the need to “Try a Little Tenderness” would solve any love problems that I might encounter.

This is still the music I listen to, and I still think about love in many of these ways: I’m still averse as soon as “Whenna” comes on what is now the oldies station. It’s just that love hasn’t seemed to work out so easily and not even Otis’s “Pain in My Heart” or the Stones’ “Heart of Stone” have made the disappointments ok. I, and I will be presumptuous and say “we,” need more metaphors about love than these precious and sublime songs provide to find satisfaction. When I say “we” here I must say right off that I speak as a heterosexual man. I won’t pretend here to write about other kinds of love, though I treasure talking about love with all manner of lovers. I will say, perhaps with some presumption, that these are good songs for all of us: What can I say but that I was a heterosexual teenager when I first heard Otis Redding, the Temps, and the Stones on the AM radio in Los Angeles and thought I knew something about love.

Partly out of nostalgia for this place, for southern California, I have read and reread the magnificent novel Ramona. Helen Hunt Jackson, a peculiar Victorian woman from New England, moved west and became interested in California Indians. She wrote her story about the man-made catastrophe of the California Indi-
“I can’t convey in words this scene driving around Hollywood late at night listening to the Wolfman, coming to know that one’s little world is neither what it seems, nor all there is in life.” Wolfman Jack, born Robert Weston Smith, broadcast on the powerful XERB blasting out at 250,000 watts from Tijuana from 1965 to 1971 and reaching much of North America. Courtesy Tafcommedia, Kansas.

ans and about the tragic love of the two protagonists, Ramona and Alessandro. Through her tale I have learned a new song of love, one from 1927: “Ramona, I hear the mission bells above/Ramona they’re ringing out our song of love/ I press you, caress you, and bless the day you taught me to care/To always remember the rambling rose you wear in your hair/ Ramona, when the day is done you’ll hear my call, Ramona, we’ll meet beside the waterfall / I dread the dawn when I awake to find you gone, Ramona, I need you my own.”

I must disclose something right away because it is the absolute precondition to understanding all that I have to say in this essay: Ramona, I love you. I’ve read your book several times now, and I’ve seen the movies of you too. Not as Loretta Young or Mary Pickford do I love you and maybe not even as the beautiful and revered Dolores del Río (whose movie rendition of Ramona remains inaccessible), but as the character in the book. I only love you when I read about you.

I must say too that my love for your book character combines with a fair dose of topophilia, the love for our place, our southern California. This is our land, Ramona, where we were born, where flora and peoples from all over the world have replaced the indigenous plants and humans, where diverse people have mixed their love and their blood.

I know to be true several things about all this: There are so many reasons why I feel this way, and I will reveal them soon. You are worthy of all of our love, yet it is the accidental emotion to take from your great novel. When Helen Hunt Jackson wrote your book I know that she did so to call attention to the plight of your real love, Alessandro, and his people, the Indians of Southern California. To fall in love with you is to miss the point of the story, much like simply affirming the need for the inspection of meat packing plants after reading Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, when, after all, he intended us to be pro-union and Socialist. This brings me to another issue that I will address shortly: What is it about humankind that they tend to misread such great novels, and, instead of being roused to action or even mere indignation, personalize the stories and respond in such narrowly self-centered ways?

Me, of all people, to confuse the meaning of the novel. I wrote a whole book detailing, with scrupulous indignation, the disgraceful and shameless destruction of the California Indians at the hands first of the Spanish and then the Americans. It even criticizes Ramona because it “ignored the complexities of the mission and rancho periods.” Many of the
fanciful and unprincipled things said about the missions I discussed in the book’s first chapter derived from the Ramona-esque vision in which, as I stated with disdain, “it appears that the humble and innocent Indians were treated with heavenly and blessed kindness as they received civilization.”

The writer about California that I admire the most, Carey McWilliams, doesn’t much like Jackson or Ramona either. He wrote that the crumbling missions “exerted a potent romantic influence on Mrs. Jackson’s highly susceptible nature” and that what she knew about California Indians “was second-hand and consisted, for the most part, of odds and ends of gossip, folk tales, and Mission-inspired allegories of one kind or another.” “It was this novel,” he concluded, “which firmly established the Mission legend in southern California,” and which, in the hands of grasping and tawdry tourism boosters, instigated “a Ramona promotion, of fantastic proportions.”

This songsheet, which accompanied the 1927 film version of Ramona starring Dolores del Rio, included lyrics in Spanish, Italian, and English as well as scoring for banjo and ukulele. Its lyrics, invoking some topography other than southern California, include the exhortation to “wander out yonder o’er the hills / By a babbling brook / Where we’ll find a nook / To build our own love nest.” Courtesy the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

**ENTREPRENEURIAL FANFARE**

Maybe it didn’t have to be that way, though. Twenty-five years after the novel’s publication a celebrant of “Ramona Country” congratulated Jackson on her research and attested to her portrayal of the Indians’ plight as “a work of essential truth.” “She saw scattered Indians, like sheep without a shepherd, worried and pillaged by wolfish Americans, driven from house and home, abused, lied to, vitiated, corrupted and cursed by the white race,” George Wharton James affirmed in 1909.

But yes, it probably is true what McWilliams said about Ramona and the mission legend in California. James also rhapsodized about how “the loving power the Franciscans held over the Indians was well understood by Mrs. Jackson,” and how “Ramona, in its references to Missions and padres, is so true to life, so true to their spirit, that it can be used as an auxiliary textbook with great advantage to those who wish to gain a true conception of the Franciscans and their work.” In her California and the Missions Jackson cites the “verbal testimony” of “old Indians who recollect the mission times in the height of their glory. Their faces kindle with a sad flicker of recollected happiness, as they tell of the days when they had all they wanted to eat, the padres were so
good and kind." Ramona really is, then, a combination of outrage over the treatment of the Indians, the sentiments of a "California Pastoral," the fables of the missions, the white woman's burden, and a spectacular and tragic love story. Strong and compelling stuff indeed.

It was out of this entrepreneurial fanfare that came the desecration of the beautiful Ramona and the transmutation of Jackson's intended message. Ramona's and Alessandro's wedding place—unlike other locations in the novel, entirely fictional—came to be located at the run-down Casa Estudillo in old town San Diego through a combination of popular lore and the efforts of the owners of the Hotel del Coronado around 1910. As it is still presented, as it was displayed in the picture postcards with the recently planted palms trees and imported agapanthus from Africa and the begonias from South America in its garden, "Ramona's Marriage Place" has spoiled, if not blasphemed, Ramona's and Alessandro's love.

Then, too, there are such matters as the controversy over the ersatz "Home of Ramona" that diverted people away from the novel's intent. There can be little doubt but that the Rancho Camulos, between Ventura and San Fernando and home of the del Valle family when Jackson visited it briefly in 1882, served as the model for Señora Moreno's fictional house, the one in which Ramona was raised. Yet, in the decades after the publication of the novel, Rancho Guajome, indeed closer to Mission San Luis Rey that figured importantly in the lives of Alessandro's people, became "Ramona's Home" once land developers and nostalgia marketers found the story useful. The boosters even insinuated that Helen Hunt Jackson wrote Ramona there, when in fact she wrote the whole thing in the Berkeley Hotel in New York City. Real estate developers and railroad companies captured the story of Ramona and used the compelling myths it contained about the halcyon days of old California to sell house plots and train tickets to newcomers. Thus it was that people uprooted from the Midwest could find rootedness...
in California as they adopted the captivating myths of the new place, stories that Ramona helped generate. To this day developers use whimsical Spanish names with faux Mediterranean architecture that recall Californio society to sell real estate. Thus it was that the Americans came to venerate the Californios, even emulate the unreal lifeways of these people whom they had only recently displaced from the landscape. The nostalgia myths consequently work to transform the landscape even further—to make southern California even less like the way it was before the Americans came or like the southern California Helen Hunt Jackson invented.7

I have taken visitors to all of these places. The missions San Luis Rey and San Diego, Old Town San Diego with Ramona’s “Marriage Place,” Rancho Camulos where we dined outside surrounded by orange groves and palm trees, even the recently sprouted wineries of Alessandro’s bygone domain of Temecula all enchanted them. I told them a little about what really happened at all of these places, about the paradoxes and contradictions of the story of Ramona, and about all of the undocumented Mexicans who these days do the work that the Indians did in the novel. I couldn’t bring myself to sully the legend too much, however. Or maybe there was something in me such that I just didn’t want to spoil it—for them or for me. These make-believe images were once popularized by millions of postcards printed for both tourists and potential real estate customers. The cards of the “Marriage Place” and other Ramona locales that I acquired in antique stores I have rather reverentially placed in a display book. My toposphilia waxes maudlin and profound: I wish I lived there.

I have, in other words, tried to dispel the myth in one place—thrown among Strangers—yet perpetuated it in others and then revealed it as I imagined myself living in this foolish fantasy of halcyon days gone by. (Anyway, I could not take care of such a home and garden by myself any more than Señora Moreno could take care of hers without a squad of gardeners—then Indians, now illegal Mexicans. And it was such hired help—which will become clear shortly—that started all the trouble in Ramona.) Certainly, Ramona’s tale is one of myriad enticements. Mostly, people have understood and used the story and its characters in ways that have much more to do with their emotional, economic, and social purposes than with anything Jackson intended.

An old tourist brochure, “The Story of Ramona’s Marriage Place,” stumbles deafly and insularly upon this matter:

Yet all this [meaning old California] would be forgotten and unnoticed . . . were it not for the fact that way back in 1884, that charming and gifted woman, Helen Hunt Jackson, gathered in southern California, the material around which she wove, Ramona, a story so beautiful, and so throbbing with love and life and sympathy, that it sent a thrill around the reading world.8
The tourist tract has no mention of that which was Jackson’s point, the outrages against the Indians, but reminds us of the potency of love stories, of stories in general, and their power to keep both the glory and the seamy underside of the past before us.

**LANDSCAPE OF FIRE AND BLOOD**

Living in the actual story Jackson told in *Ramona* would be terrible. She meant to make us sick to our stomachs and angry over the treatment of the ex-mission Indians of southern California and to make us understand the lawlessness of the Americans and their occupation of California. Alessandro tells how “I have no home; my father is dead; my people are driven out of their village. I am only a beggar now.” (171) He understands that the perpetrators were Americans—eight or ten of them. They all got together and brought a suit, they call it, up in San Francisco; and it was decided in court that they owned all our land. That was all Mr. Rothsaker could tell about it. It was the law, he said, and nobody could go against the law. (172)

And “He said the judge had said he must take enough of our cattle and horses to pay for all it had cost for the suit…” (173) Alessandro concludes with the drastic prediction that “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.” (178) And that is exactly what happened, in the novel and in real life.

Jackson, of New England Protestant stock, minced no words in her condemnation of the Americans. She has the gentle and guileless Ramona say:

> There is no hope. They have power, and great riches. ... Money is all that they think of. To get money, they will commit any crime, even murder. Every day there comes the news of their murdering each other for gold. Mexicans kill each other only for hate, Alessandro,—for hate, or in anger; never for gold. (230)

Indeed, if Helen Hunt Jackson is to be believed, her country people acted like lawless, murdering thieves in their treatment of the Indians of southern California. And this is something which the historical record quite utterly bears out. (10)

Jackson contrasts the Americans with Ramona and Alessandro and describes the interior of their humble household in the Indian village of San Pasquale: “Below [Ramona’s statuette of the Madonna] hung her gold rosary and the ivory Christ; and many a woman of the village, when she came to see Ramona, asked permission to go into the bedroom and say her prayers there.” And “with the money from the first sheep-shearing, and from the sale of part of his cattle, Alessandro had bought all he needed in the way of farming implements,—a good wagon and harnesses, and a plough.” (241-242) The Indian and his half-breed spouse are the good Christian plowman and housewife; in fact, it was a model Victorian marriage. But into this paradise came the news:

> The Doctor said the land did not belong to Ysidro [the Indian captain who had let them farm on land at San Pasquale] at all, but to the United States Government; and that he had paid the money for it to the agents in Los Angeles, and there would very soon come papers from Washington, to show that it was his. (248)

Then another man would come:

> Alessandro had not been plowing more than an hour, when hearing a strange sound, he looked up and saw a man unloading lumber a few rods off. ... Presently he came toward him, and said roughly, “Look here! Be off, will you? This is my land. I'm going to build a house here. ... I've got my family in San Diego, and I want to get them settled as soon as I can. My wife won't feel comfortable till she's in her own house.” (254-255)

The frenzied Alessandro (who knew these Americans by now—people simply of “fraud and cruelty”), his grief-stricken wife, and his baby child simply left. (230)

A conceited, vicious, and revealing reversal had transpired in the Southwest at this time about family values. That the indigenous peoples of the area—be they pagans or papists—would be civilized provided important justification for Manifest Des-
tiny, which included the taking of the Indians’ ancestral lands. The curious thing, though, was that so many Mexicans—and California ex-mission and New Mexican Pueblo Indians—lived as Christian farmers while Anglo-American men drank, whored, and brawled. Recall that Ramona and Alessandro had been married in a church; that when he found transgressors in his dead father’s house Alessandro “felt for his knife,” thought of Ramona, and “thoughts of vengeance fled” (208); and that they obeyed “the law” when they were evicted from their lands. The footloose and seedy American Jake said to Ramona “It is but a poor place he [Alessandro] gives you to live in” and, understanding that a “squaw wife” was “first-rate about a house, and jest’s faithful’s dogs,” asks her to live with him. Ramona “faced him, her eyes like javelins... ‘Beast!’ she said, and spat towards him.” (298–299) Of course, it would be the Americans’ promiscuous resort to guns and brutal, extra-legal violence in the cause of family and property that would bring the catastrophic end to the majestic romance of Ramona and Alessandro. It’s not just love for Ramona that I have associated with southern California, but the pain and suffering of Alessandro’s people that will forever and indelibly haunt the landscape. This is how history, my favorite subject in school, so confuses my sense of the putatively impasive, actually complicated, landscape. There is beauty and love there—and fire and blood. After you read Ramona you can feel the immensity of the ambiguity of this distress in the hills and valleys of the place.

There is one good American. She is Aunt Ri, whose deep Tennessee drawl hid a ‘certain gentle dignity.” (273) Ramona and Alessandro transform her attitudes about Indians and Mexicans. Through her Jackson castigates Americans and their government: “‘We’re Ummerikens! ‘n’ we wouldn’t cheat nobody, not ef we knew it, not out er a dollar. We’re pore, an’ I allus expect to be, but we’re above cheatin’; an I tell you naow, the Ummeriken people don’t want any o’ this cheatin’ done, naow!’ cried Aunt Ri.” (282) The crusty old woman rages at the lawlessness of the Americans when she heard tell of Ramona’s and Alessandro’s displacement: “Why, they take folks up, ‘n’ penetentiary ‘em fur life, back’n Tennessee, fur things thet ain’t so bad’s thet!”’ (281) Becoming devoted to Ramona, Aunt Ri nurses her back to health after Ramona’s breakdown following Alessandro’s calamitous death, and she does so with the herb she calls “old man”: “I knew I smelt the bitter on’t somewhars along hyar; and in a few minutes more she had a mass of the soft, shining, gray, feathery leaves in her hands... ‘This’ll cure her, ef ennything will,’ she said.” (328) The one good American turns out to be a curandera, an Indian of sorts.

It is, upon reflection, quite remarkable how critical of American government and settlers Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona actually is. The American novel in print for the longest uninterrupted time is scathingly critical of the American mission in the Southwest. I cannot resist pointing out the obvious hypocrisy Jackson reveals in the American character when she points out the greed and meanness of Anglo families who displace the Indians and the horrible consequences of Americans’ ready resort to guns to settle their matters. Then, too, it is quite apparent that Jackson, through Aunt Ri, affirms those other American values of respect for equality of opportunity, compassion for those less fortunate, and equal justice under law. It is these issues that Jackson intended that her readers confront, not that they should fall in love with her main character.

“THESE CROSSES”

Helen Hunt Jackson constructed Ramona’s lineage to suit the needs of a tragic novel and not for historical credibility. She was not a real Californio like her adoptive mother, but the product of a dissolute Scottish sea captain—whose heart had been broken by an elder sister (named Ramona) of Señora Moreno—and a “squaw” of the Mission San Gabriel, already mother to several Indian children, whom he later married. When he sought a more appropriate home for their new baby he gave it to Señora Moreno’s sister—his long-forsaken love—and then, as she in turn was dying, convinced Señora Moreno to agree to take care of the child: “This promise came
Alessandro (Warner Baxter) kisses Ramona (Dolores del Rio) as she sleeps in the 1927 filmed version of *Ramona*, one of at three movies made of the classic love story. When Alessandro and Ramona exchanged their first kiss, they heard "the Señora's step, and her sharp cry of amazement . . . looking at them with her indignant, terrible eyes." (121) Courtesy Charles Von der Ahe Library, Loyola Marymount University.

hard from Señora Moreno. Except for Father Salvierderra's influence, she had not given it . . . 'If the child were pure Indian, I would like it better,' she said. 'I like not these crosses. It is the worst, and not the best, that remains.'" (32) "And this was the mystery of Ramona. No wonder the Señora Moreno never told the story. No wonder, perhaps, that she never loved the child." (33)

Yet, "no one would have known, from Ramona's face, manner, or habitual conduct that she had ever experienced sorrow or had a care . . . and she never was seen to pass a human being without a cheerful greeting." (36) Except for her adoptive mother, everyone loved Ramona, "for a gentler, sweeter maiden never drew breath than this same Ramona, who been all these years, save for Felipe [Señora Moreno's natural born son], lonely in the Señora Moreno's house." (90) She is the uncomplaining woman, a rather standard fantasy figure for many men.
Ramona's beauty is a bit too racialized not to be suspect. "She had just enough of olive tint in her complexion to underlie and enrich her skin without making it too swarthy," Jackson explained. That "her hair was like her Indian mother's, heavy and black, but her eyes were like her father's, steel-blue," (40) makes one wonder about what colors and features qualify one for beauty. Would everyone have loved Ramona as much had she looked otherwise? If her father had been a Mexican or a Spaniard instead of a Scot, she would just be another mestiza, another Mexican. Would her American audience still be so enthralled with her character?

I suspect not, because Americans always construed things in nineteenth-century California as "Spanish" if positive and "Mexican" if negative.
Ramona is neither, though culturally she is certainly a Californio having been raised by the Señora Moreno. She is Europeanized and, in her case, her mysterious Indian origin only serves to exoticize her. Ramona is beautiful, strange, devoted, and uncomplaining—what more could a man want?

There is much facetiousness in my critique of Ramona here, an amusing aside that might explain something of why I love Ramona: I am just like she was. While I don’t have the blue eyes of my mother, I certainly have her straight Yankee nose. Ramona and I could move in several groups and feel accepted. When we go to El Mercado in Boyle Heights or to mariscos restaurants around Vermont and Sunset people speak to us in Spanish and we respond in kind. When we go to the beach or to a chic seafood restaurant at the west end of Sunset Boulevard we become Mediterranean, apparently (and actually) prosperous enough to afford dinner and wine and the time and travel to sport a nice tan. Ramona and I could go most anywhere this way; we would enjoy together the impudent privilege of passing.

California, I would say, more than any place else in the world, is not just about ethnic and racial identity, but about mixing. Californians affirm their ethnic group and associate their politics and identity with their modern tribe. Yet, really Ramona and I are the true and increasingly typical Californians—mixes, or, as Señora Moreno would call us, “these crosses.” Everywhere I go I notice the various “crosses,” the ones from the previous generations of immigrants to California, the ones I imagine will be most unlikely to deprecate others or fall prey to political demagoguery that exploits issues of race or country of origin. We know how much race, religion, “looks,” occupation, and language and accents, are matters of happenstance and irony. The critique of her is too facile; maybe Ramona really is the true, and best, Californian.

And California is about the mutable self, and about passing. People often come to the place to reinvent themselves. Ramona herself changes from Californio to Indian and then finally to Mexican. Of all things, many Americanos have recast themselves as Spanish Californios—never Mexicans—and assume an air of nobility at the old Fiesta Days and Missions Days, carried on most famously in Santa Barbara to this very day. Mexican Americans in the 1930s insisted to the Census Bureau that they be counted as white, and the category “Mexican” indeed disappeared in the 1940 census. Now, of course, we have become “Hispanic,” something that Ramona never was.

Perfect Man, Perfect Victim

Alessandro is likewise a fantasy figure for Victorian women. Much like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom, Alessandro is not simply the tamed Indian but a domesticated man. Alessandro had inherited his father’s love and talent for music, and knew all the old Mission music by heart.” When he sang a hymn to “Beautiful Queen,/ Princess of Heaven... Ramona felt every note of it penetrating her consciousness with a subtle thrill almost like pain.” (51–52) Again, resembling the Victorian domestic ideal in which men were to be more like women—religious, sensitive, refined, and virtuous—Alessandro “plays the violin beautifully.... He plays the old San Luis Rey music.” (56) When Felipe faints and falls into the huge wool bag, from which Alessandro rescues him, he is forced into bed and appears incapable of recovery. Alessandro tends to him with music and builds him a bed that he places on the veranda in the sunshine. Much as a Victorian woman would do, his tenderness and caring effected Felipe’s cure, a scene reminiscent of Jane Eyre ministering to Rochester in Charlotte Bronte’s great novel.

“Whenever there were troubles with the whites, or rumors of them, he went from house to house, urging, persuading, commanding his people to keep the peace,” Jackson explained. “At one time when there was an insurrection of some of the Indian tribes further south, and for a few days it looked as if there would be a general Indian war, he removed the greater part of his band... to Los Angeles, and camped there for several days, that they might be identified with the whites in case hostilities became serious,” she continued. (53–54) It’s not simply that Alessandro is a sell-out—taking care of the Cali-
The American Indian Alessandro was a fantasy figure for Victorian women, resembling the domestic ideal in which men were religious, sensitive, refined, and virtuous. Indeed fantasy figures, needless to say, neither Alessandro nor Ramona portrayed in a 1940s Ramona Pageant in Hemet wear clothing typical of the Luiseño Indians of southern California nor are the principal actors American Indian or Mexican American. The pageant did and still does capture the romance of the classic love story, however. Courtesy the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Oddly enough, Alessandro got to where he was not through Victorian school marm’s, but through other Christians in robes, namely Franciscan priests who were next in line for re-creation in the Victorian female mold: “His father, Chief Pablo,” Jackson related, “had been the leader of the choir at the San Luis Rey Mission in the last years of its splendor.” “Father Peyri was passionately fond of music, and spared no pains in training all of the neophytes under his charge who showed any special talent in that direction,” she supposed. (51) Later writers would assume that “The devotion of the San Luis Rey Indians to Padre Peyri is truthfully told in Ramona. They would do anything for him....” Actually, Father Antonio Father Peyri, the true scion of the mission wrote on Christmas Day 1828 regard-
ing the disease and demoralization at San Luis Rey that “apathy reigns among the Indians.”12

Jackson described the missions as the “most profoundly melancholy in all southern California.” There

the grand old [of course] Franciscan, Padre Junipero Serra, began his work [actually he began missionizing in the interior of Mexico and Baja California long before], full of devout and ardent purpose to reclaim the wilderness and its peoples to his country and his Church. . . . And the only traces now remaining of his heroic labors and hard-won successes were a pile of crumbling ruins. . . . (224)

“It is in this spirit,” G. W. James said, “she looked upon all the work of the Franciscans that was noble, self-denying, self-sacrificing, heroic.”13 Surely, Jackson’s fantasies about the missionaries—obviously she is construing them as ideal typical Victorian women—mark a disservice to history and an abuse of the Indian cultures the missions sought to eradicate. Perhaps this commentary relates to a passage that refers to Señora Moreno, but which might reveal Mrs. Jackson’s aspirations for the proper relation of indigenous and colored peoples to Euro-Christians: “that a handful of Indians might once more confess their sins to a Franciscan monk in the Moreno chapel.” (26)

I understand and accept as injurious this construction of Ramona’s womanhood; and, anyway, I’m not about to have Protestant Victorians tell me how to be a man. My views about the California missions and my doubts about religious belief should be becoming apparent. Indeed, if there is a place in my soul for spirituality, it is for the localized and polytheistic notions associated with the Indians of the Americas, the very ones those Spanish missions sought to eliminate. I would like Alessandro, my rival, more if he had remained a pagan. Californio society was cruel to the Indians on the ranchos—though not as much so as the missions had been or the Americans would be—and warred constantly and viciously against those outside the mission system. And I am aware of the selective appropriation of the Ramona story by Anglo Americans. They only take what is gratifying and ignore that which would complicate their tenure on the land of southern California. I still love Ramona.

SITTING ON SEÑORA’S VERANDA

Surely part of the reason I still love Ramona is the nostalgia that I feel for nineteenth-century California as Jackson envisioned it: “The Señora Moreno’s house was one of the best specimens to be found in California of the representative house of the half barbaric, half elegant, wholly generous and free-handed life led there by the Mexican men and women of degree . . .” (15) There are descriptions of the “wide veranda on three sides of the inner court” of the house where “babies slept, were washed, sat in the dirt, and played, . . .” where “women said their prayers, took their naps, and wove their lace, . . .” where “herdsman and shepherds smoked (and) lounged, . . .” where “the young made love, and the old dozed. . . .” (18) Beyond the house

all was garden, orange grove, and almond orchard; the orange grove always green, never without snowy bloom or golden fruit; the garden never without flowers summer or winter . . . Nothing was to be seen but verdure or bloom or fruit, at whatever time of year you sat on the Señora’s south veranda.

A curious sensation is this nostalgia for a place that never existed.

The California mythology has already received considerable debunking here and other places, but I cannot resist pointing out how important the word “sat” is here. Indeed Californios “of degree” would have sat while Indians, addicted to the alcohol with which they were often paid for their labors, tended all that lush verdure, except that such verdancy didn’t exist because this was a cattle economy until the droughts of the early 1860s, and citrus only began to be cultivated in the mid-1870s. People sat nastily fussing about, realistically fearing, and then later savagely fighting the rancho Indians’ untamed brethren; and, consistent through the hot, dusty summers and sometimes muddy winters they would have sat suffering the fleas,
which one British traveler called "decidedly the best lodged, and, as we found to our cost, not the worst fed denizens of California."14 Everyone of degree sat, except for the women who were doing all the housework.

As Jackson describes it, it would be a good place to live, though not if you were an Indian, which reminds us how often topophilia requires selective memory. It's a curious thing about southern California today that many of the rich, and there are lots of them, sit in their lush gardens, which have incredibly luxuriant foliage, which undocumented Mexicans tend; sit at high-paying jobs while Mexican women take care of their children; sit at dinner parties routinely fussing about how Mexicans are taking over their Arcadia; and, while flea collars and chemical bombs have reduced the flea problem, sit and complain about the heat, smog, and possibility of earthquake. People have long been compelled to create little paradises in Los Angeles: the Huntington Gardens, the Rose Garden in Exposition Park near the Natural History Museum downtown, Descanso Gardens, and the once beautifully maintained Fern Dell in Griffith Park. I went to most of these places as a child on class field trips, when we fied school, the place I first learned about missions, Indians, and ranchos. I also went to Fern Dell in that family Volkswagen with the Wolfman on, to park and to kiss—in the midnight hour. These remain all good places to sit. And to kiss, as if one were on the veranda at Ramona's house.

Ramona's places are usually analyzed in terms of Anglophile Los Angeles. "Nostalgia," William McClung points out in his discussion of Ramona, "which in its root sense means yearning not for another time but for another place, is actually another word for 'homesickness'; Anglo Los Angeles was largely an effort to satisfy that yearning by building the imaginary home."15 Yes, indeed, Anglo migrants to southern California have found in the landscape and story of Ramona a sense of place and a history to connect them to their new land.

Few, though, are aware of how Ramona gives form to some of the plática of Mexican southern California. There are stories passed down—what McWilliam's called the "odds and ends of gossip, folk tales, and Mission-inspired allegories"—about how Mexicans once owned the land, of how they were often lumped with the Indians and cheated of their lands, of those Indians who once came down from the hills to work, of the haughtiness, deceit, and meanness of the Americanos. In 1927 Adalberto Elías González's stage adaptation of Ramona broke box office records in Los Angeles, where it was performed in Spanish. It then toured throughout the Southwest and sometimes featured the great, talented, and beautiful Virginia Fábregas. The United Artists production of Ramona starring the elegant Dolores del Río opened in downtown Los Angeles in 1928. That year La Opinión, the Mexican newspaper in L.A., called her "nuestra estrella máxima de la pantalla" (our brightest star of the screen).16 Ramona is the Mexicans' story too, one that was well-known to them. Indeed it is the only piece of classic American literature to feature Mexicans.

Why have Mexican women so adored Ramona? Many have commented that "la gente mexicana tiene tres madres." The first is the Virgin of Guadalupe, the virginal, forgiving, mestiza goddess; the second is Malinche, the mistress of Cortés, once called "la puta," the whore, but now seen in the same complex ways that we see the virginal Ramona; and the third is La Llorona, the wailing woman who searches for the children she has killed after her husband wronged her. Too passionate and in love with a man for virgin status, Ramona resonates with the wronged women of Mexican society and culture. While her persecutors are Señora Moreno and the Americano men and not Mexican patriarchs, Ramona suffers with fortitude her victimization as her culture told women to do, and she courageously rebels against it. Twice she flees her oppressive homes and twice (!) she marries a good man. Not only do men like me love Ramona, but women who experience the constraints of traditional, hierarchical cultures like that of the Californios will also identify with Ramona and yearn for the passion she first experienced with Alessandro and then the deliverance she reaped when she escaped with Felipe.
"No novel of strong purpose can be pure fiction. It is to mould fact, it must deal with fact" begins the introduction to an 1888 illustrated guide to Rancho Camulos in Ventura County published by Charles F. Lummis & Co. in Los Angeles. The promotional booklet, hand-tied with a rose-colored ribbon, advertises the Rancho as the place that Ramona was based upon. It contains several cyanotype images, such as the one featured here, of the placita, the south veranda, the bells, and even the torn altar cloth. Each image is coupled with text from Ramona, and notes from the booklet's publisher. California Historical Society, FN 35190 and 35191.

**Ramona’s Pageant**

You can tell how the story lives if you go to the Ramona Pageant in the distant and desolate town of Hemet. It’s a scene very different from Sunset Boulevard, one where I felt quite out of place, at first. There is some mix of people there, mostly Anglos but a good number of Mexicans and a few African Americans. I realized quickly as I marched up the hill from the parking lot to the amphitheater that this is where we who love Ramona come to see her story brought to life, and I knew this was a good place to be. At the summit, in the open-air theater, a cast of nearly forty people, and supporting cast of dozens including at least fifty Soboba Indian people, re-enact the epic. The men are dressed in marvelous chalecos, the women in beautiful dresses like the ones you see at the Santa Barbara Historical Society, and some of them really are Mexicans. There are lots of Indians, true descendants of Alessandro. Everyone sings songs reminiscent of Old California, at least as we wish it were. This is serious theater.

Next to me sat a Japanese American woman and her African American companion—yet another of "these crosses" that so riled Señora Moreno. At the intermission she launched into a diatribe about how the play just didn’t follow the novel at all. "I know," I said, "like it just starts out with Felipe being sick . . . ."
Performing enthusiastically since 1923, the Ramona Pageant is, according to its website, "much more than just a love story. Woven into the romance of Ramona and Alessandro is a glimpse of the tragic history of Southern California's native people. It is a love story with a moral, and a message that is as important today as it was when the story of Ramona was written more than a century ago." Courtesy the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

"They didn't show at all how the book was about the Indians and not all this Spanish stuff."

"Yes, that's true," I said, "but ol' Helen Hunt Jackson didn't exactly follow the historical..."

"Well, this is ridiculous," she interrupted again. "The characters just aren't like..."

I tuned out, thinking "wouldn't you know it, I come here looking for everyday people's take on Ramona and I get seated next to a zealous literary critic."

"Well, you know, this IS a pageant, something different from theater." I find myself defending Ramona, but to little avail.

"I go to from 30 to 40 plays a year," I hear from her. "The Mark Taper Forum, Pasadena Playhouse, and..."

Through the second half I get more running critical review. I watch the play. It is so tragic. The Americans' avarice is portrayed mincing no words or actions. Alessandro's end is depicted with all of its horribleness. A hundred Indians on the hillside—Soboba people—and what seemed like a similar number of other cast members receive the crowd's hearty and righteous applause. More diatribe comes as the cast takes its bows. I venture, "Now could the Pasadena Playhouse ever assemble anything like this?"

"The actors could have been more..." I tune back to the audience applauding the performers, knowing I should keep quiet.

I renege on my own advice as we are walking out: "Well, look at it this way, Jackson took all of these stories and wove them into the book, then came the
Surely, then, this is part of the reason that I love Ramona: I love the stories; I love the fantasy lifestyle she inhabited in the novel; the way Jackson constructed Mexican ways as so superior to American ones; and I honor the wholeness of Jackson’s telling, which includes both the beauty and the meanness; and I feel nostalgia for this place that has never really—well, yes and no, actually—existed. And I love how so many of us share this grandly encompassing story. It’s probably understandable then that I yearn for a beautiful landscape, I crave generous social relations, and I desire Ramona.

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

There are so many reasons why we love. We can wonder why Ramona and Alessandro fell so completely in love. A psychologist might direct our inquiry to her relationship to her adoptive mother: “the shepherds, the herdsmen, the maids, the babies, the dogs, the poultry, all loved the sight of Ramona; all loved her except the Señora.” Ramona would always be searching, mostly unconsciously, for the warmth denied her by “the Señora (who) loved her not; never had loved her; never could love her.” Likely, the Señora would always be withholding of any sort of emotion for Ramona owing to her grudging promise to her sister, Ramona’s mother, to stand “in place of mother to the girl . . . and with all the inalienable staunchness of her nature she fulfilled the letter of her promise.” (26–27) It is not hard to envisage the little girl’s endeavors to win the affection of this reluctant mother figure, and the coldness and aloofness with which her efforts were met. Almost any reader can imagine entering into the novel to love Ramona because the Señora did not. It is not hard at all then to understand the utter thrill and fulfillment Ramona would experience when Alessandro would say to her, “O Señorita, then you will not be angry if I say that I love you!” And then to receive a kiss, right there, out in the open, from a man sobbing, saying, “I love you!” (120–121) On the contrary, to say the least.

How could either know love except as compensation for something else lacking in their lives?
Alessandro "had not thought much about women. He was a distant, cold boy, his own people of the Temecula village said. It had come, they believed, of learning to read, which was always bad." (53) Ramona did not know much of the world:

No one would have known, from Ramona's face, manner, or habitual conduct, that she had ever experienced a sorrow or had a care. . . . She had two years at school, in the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Los Angeles, where the Señora had placed her at much personal sacrifice. . . . Here she had won the affection of all the Sisters, who spoke of her habitually as the "blessed child." They had taught her all the dainty arts of lace-weaving, embroidery, . . . not overmuch learning out of books, but enough to make her a passionate lover of verse and romance. (36)

Perhaps the final words of this quote would suggest that she could know of love through romance novels, but really there were very few of those in southern California of the 1850s.

Even those of us who see maudlin, Victorian sappiness in their love can't help but be drawn—be honest, readers both female and male, at least a little bit—to how this love was so all-encompassing and passionate, so unintended and serendipitous, and so rapturous and delivering from their disappointing lives. Such a love, when one falls in love with someone they don't really know, can only derive from subconscious cravings, from frustrated yearnings. When we abruptly fall in love with Ramona we have the opportunity to investigate the nature of our own sensual longings and emotional hunger. We can put the book down for a while and contemplate love, though such reflective devotion probably pales before that ecstatic, devouring love that has that most powerful of charges: the psychic electricity of the anxious, even neurotic, individual yearning for emotional and sensual redemption. Ramona's and Alessandro's love, its thunder and lightning, is the most exciting and compelling, and the most volatile and unpredictable.

Ramona could have known of love from her faith, from her devotion to the Virgin Mary: "It is not by what happens to us here in this world that we can tell if the saints love us, or if we will see the Blessed Virgin," she informs Alessandro. Rather it is "by what we feel in our hearts . . . just as I knew all the time, when you did not come,—I knew that you loved me. I knew that in my heart." When Alessandro responds that "it is not possible to have the same thoughts about a saint as about a person," Ramona answers, "not quite, about a saint; but one can for the Blessed Virgin . . . Her statue, in my room at the Señora's, has always been my mother." (32)

We moderns often don't realize that people in the past have had many of the same emotions that we do. Love, among nineteenth-century Latin Americans, emerged from two sources: from the command to love God and thus thy parents and humankind, and love from the heart, the sort of love that was subversive because it was associated with sexual desire, exalted the self, and potentially undermined one's family of origin. Ramona's and Alessandro's bond obviously exemplified the latter type in both source and consequences, but I suspect that it was in the context of the former that Ramona, at least, came to know of love. Such an interesting notion—that people in the deep past had feelings of love springing from their hearts, which may have been religious in origin, especially for the Virgin of Guadalupe for Mexicans, but which informed people about the nature of the feelings they might have had welling up in their hearts for another person. You see, when such people found themselves in situations where they might love another mortal, the love they already knew was for the Blessed Spirits. Perhaps they felt conflicted about the way those two allegedly different sorts of loves converged, but just as likely they did not. Or maybe they transformed the passion they felt for their spirit love into passion for their human love.

My own spirit love has not come from the Holy, however, but from the other senses—from the music on the radio and from the art works in museums. Thinking and writing about all of these matters makes me recall, makes me realize, that it was not only something of other people's devotion to God that I came to know from looking at beautiful paintings, but that I came to know, or thought I knew, something of love. No, it was not love I came to know
standing before those images, but desire: Botticelli’s _Venus_ and Ingres’s many _Odalisques_; of course, Manet’s _Olympia_ and Goya’s _Maja_, the nude one naturally; even Parmigianino’s _Madonna of the Long Neck_; and now any of Kahlo’s self-portraits, especially _On the Border between Mexico and the United States_. My experience before the canvases is much like those who confront the Holy Spirits: it’s more about yearning for the sublime or simply longing for a happier life. Ramona, do I ache for you because you are like those paintings? Is it that I have confused my love for you with my carnal desire for those beautiful, so apparently innocently available, women? Or is it that I simply want to share a simple and splendid kiss with you?

Of course these sorts of passions—Ramona’s, Alessandro’s, and mine—would confirm everything that Señora Moreno and other elders would have said about the destructiveness of romantic love. Nothing is more important in Latin American society than marriage. Among the propertied classes the sanctified event maintained and enhanced a family’s reputation and wealth, created a broader web of blood ties and alliances, and made sure that the family treasure would not be lost to undesirable outsiders. The young, those most prone to pride, passion, and concupiscence, could not be trusted to make such alliances on their own. Love could not be allowed to play itself out in often subversive and individualist ways, ones that put the self and its desires above the requirements of family. Ideas about race and marriage were very complicated in California society. Some people mixed, especially in the lower classes, while others, more often in such elite families as the Valdejos, took such precautions as arranging a marriage of a daughter at her birth and acquiring a certificate of _limpieza de sangre_, or “purity of blood,” which affirmed that there was no Moorish, Jewish, or Indian blood flowing in the veins of the those who would carry on the family patrimony. Ramona’s passion, thus, called forth an unmitigated family disaster.

Ramona’s father, through his terrible emotional and financial decline, had still managed to save out a fine cache of jewels the Señora was to maintain in trust for his little daughter, jewels that would fall to the Church should Ramona grievously err in life. Under Spanish and Mexican law, widows and daughters could inherit and hold property. While Señora Moreno’s dislike of such mixed marriages probably precluded a significant endowment to Ramona, no doubt some dowry of land would have been hers to attract a proper husband. All this she lost when her selfish emotions for Alessandro carried Ramona away from her family bonds and obligations.

Their love proved psychically calamitous as well. It’s an ironic and dangerous aspect of love, like devotion, that it contains destructive elements. Lust, passion, desire, loss of the self in one’s _objet d’amour_ make us humans do things that hurt ourselves and others. Indeed Alessandro’s and Ramona’s love brought them only abundant pain, even without the Americans’ torment of Alessandro.

Deception worked its evil too. Almost everyone has a secret, something that would change one’s whole social and moral stature if people knew about it. For Ramona it was her past and her genealogy, and it was a secret even she did not know. At some point, to be free of the weight, a person must release that secret. When Ramona found out that she was half-Indian, and that this secret lay behind Señora Moreno’s disparagement of her, Ramona unleashed the secret and fell for the Indian Alessandro. It was either break away or let the secret condemn her to endure her pathetic life in which the Señora would continue to punish her for her shameful origins.

**The Good and Bad Ramonas**

That we humans so consistently, across time and cultures, act in so many destructive ways is unnerving and disheartening to contemplate. Do we love within this context? Is love about creation and destruction both? When we subjugate our libidinal desires to family imperatives and to the cause of labor and the creation of civilization, does not that energy often transform itself into antisocial and aggressive acts? Indeed, does not the repression of desire damage our erotic selves and on occasion
make even courting and the sex act itself something hostile? It may well be that Ramona and Alessandro prove not only Señora Moreno right, but Sigmund Freud as well. Love, like devotion, is creative and destructive both. Rethinking this I realize that what was creative about their love was also painful, and what was destructive was also generative. There was so much anguish when Ramona had to leave her loved ones Felipe and Father Salvierdera for Alessandro. Ramona and Alessandro lost their first child; Alessandro met a heiress death. But a consequence of their tragedy is that Felipe and Aunt Ri are transformed in their ideas about Indians; Ramona and Felipe have another child when they go to Mexico (and now I have given away the end of the story), the one that would carry her mother’s name into the twentieth century; and reflective readers of Ramona will know the history of southern California in new ways.

In one sense, Ramona was “good” as long as she lived up to her society’s moral expectations: she was always dutiful, selfless, guileless, and uncomplaining. “This childlikeness, combined with her happy temperament,” Jackson explains, “had kept her singularly contented with her monotonous life.” (91) This “good Ramona” would have been rather provincial in her thoughts, wooden in her efforts to live up to her society’s standards, and unimaginative in conversation. The “bad Ramona” is the one who courageously breaks free from her cultural commands, heroically challenges the racism of her adoptive mother, and bravely overcomes her fearfulness about heading into the unknown with Alessandro. Ramona’s endeavors provide the best of arguments for the idea that moral judgments, especially about “good” and “bad” people and their actions, are contingent upon what one values. Do we esteem the compliant everywoman—usually a rather dull person—who does as her family and culture expect or the intrepid challenger to the status quo—often immature or impulsive—who remakes herself in some new, maybe better or maybe not, way?

Of course we proceed ahead with life and love anyway, most successfully, I think, when we acknowledge their contingencies and complexities. There is no one universal reason why we love, and my affection for Ramona reveals the truth of this to me. I fear that I love Ramona, actually, because she is the Ramona of my imagination, the one I can conjure up when I travel by book to southern California of the 1880s. I can make her what I want her to be when I hold her book in my hands, when I wander away from the text into this imaginary world where there is a beautiful woman whom I could be confident would never play me for a fool. “This childlikeness . . . (and) happy temperament” tells of her happy adaptation to any person, place, or situation. Part of the frustration of love, perhaps why people become destructive, is that we imagine an objet d’amour to be a particular way, and then when they don’t actually correspond to how we have constructed them in our minds, we rage, and then justify actions that wind up playing our own love for the fool. I wonder and fear what would have happened had I been able to love the Ramona of my dreams, and have her love me, only to find her conversation consistently pointless, her interests sadly narrow, her religion constantly foolish, her lovemaking frustratingly insipid.

Could she even be such a perfect beauty? I suspect that such an exquisite woman would not have gone so unspoiled for so long. “A man must be dead not to thrill” at the sight of Ramona, Jackson exclaims. (40) Yes, it’s true in California then and now that the pretty women get the most attention. This means that they get the most solicitude, presents, and (usually unwanted) propositions. They may then feel the most entitled, qualified, accomplished, and deserving of more attention because of the treatment they get only because of their looks. Everything I know about men tells me that this scenario with Ramona would have been the case. Maybe it’s not that my trust in Ramona is not strong enough, rather that I have good reason to think that she would be so many men’s objet d’amour that they would spoil her or sour her on love.

What else does it mean to be such a perfect beauty? What man would want to love a woman who is not so beautiful as Ramona? Can he ever find
her desirable if he has in his mind the image of Dolores del Río, Loretta Young, the olive-skinned enchantress on the paperback’s cover, or the winner of the 1959 Ramona beauty pageant, Raquel Welch? Always yearning for, or even feeling desiring of, such a beauty makes it hard for a man to love a woman because none could ever be as perfect as Ramona. Always looking for Ramona, in whatever incarnation, means that men can’t see love in front of them—a woman at once sweet and smart and strong—or even that they will go in search of a new love confident that, because their present love doesn’t look like Ramona, no other man will want her. And that, of all things, he will find a woman like Ramona.

I am quite certain that more women have read Ramona, and cried in the movies of Ramona, than men. I wonder about the women who have known these Ramonas and their experiences of her. The physical beauty of this fantasy character is likely unattainable, except, in my opinion, by Dolores del Río. If they can never be as pretty and pleasing as Ramona, will they be confident in their love? If their man’s standard of beauty is Dolores del Río or Raquel Welch will women ever feel safe in their love? There is no better proof of the notion that beauty and femininity are social and historical constructs than Jackson’s fabrication of Ramona. Fiction—in the pages or on the screen—too often becomes the truth of what beauty is, of how women should be, of what makes a woman desirable. I’m not sure what to say about what Jackson’s ideas about these matters mean for women, but I do know that such constructions make love hard for everybody.

Books, it should be clear by now, are for me more conducive to love than movies, though not for lust and desire, which images enhance and make explicit. I couldn’t love either Mary Pickford or Loretta Young, and, alas, probably not even Dolores del Río. As Ramona, Pickford swoons a lot, and there is not much that rings true when Ramona materializes as a middle-class, dedicated wife (Young) married to a convivial man (Don Ameche) who has a bounce in his step in spite of the cultural and physical debasement his people have experienced for the previous century.

The book is not only always better than the movie, but better than real life too. The book facilitates imagination in ways that the movie never can. The private world of the printed word is a special, dare I say magical, place. Rereading passages, thinking about the stories, considering oneself in relation to the characters, being transported to some place far away and long ago—or in this case, a place very near and not so long ago—all of these practices help us wonder, imagine, and engage in self-reflection. There is much more to love than songs on the radio and dramatic kisses on the screen. And there is much more to this simultaneously miraculous and bizarre landscape of southern California than meets the eye. I guess that’s one of the things I’ve had to learn again writing my story of Ramona: a lover as perfect as Ramona, and a love as perfect as Ramona and Alessandro’s, exists only in a place we can explore in a book, in the imagination. Maybe, Ramona, your and Alessandro’s story helps remind me that my love for southern California must be as complicated as my love for you. Maybe, Ramona, it’s not even you that I love; it’s that I love imagining you, beautiful woman, who impels me to think about myself, and all of us who love, in all of these good and hard ways.

See notes beginning on page 171.

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Ramona Country, Then and Now

TEMECULA

Ramona's Temecula

"Is it a large town?" asked Ramona.

Alessandro sighed. "Dear Señorita, it is not a town; it is only a little village not more than twenty houses in all, and some of those are built only of tule. There is a chapel, and a graveyard. We built an adobe wall around the graveyard last year. That my father said we would do, before we built the fence around the village."

"How many people are there in the village?" asked Ramona.

"Nearly two hundred, when they are all there; but many of them are away most of the time. They must go where they can get work; they are hired out by the farmers, or to do work on the great ditches, or to go as shepherds; and some of them take their wives and children with them. I do not believe the Señorita has ever seen any very poor people."

—Ramona, p.121

Temecula Today

In 1875 the local Luiseño Indians living in the Temecula valley were evicted from their land. Ten years later the Pechanga Indian Reservation was established near downtown Temecula, a federal reservation of Luiseño Indians. The reservation now has a population of 467, with an adjacent population of 305.

Today 67,000 people live in the wine country of Temecula. Visitors can experience Old Town Temecula, a representation of the town that existed when Temecula was a stop on the Butterfield Overland Stage Line and when it was home to the seventh post office in California. Old Town Temecula was also the site of the Ramona Inn, a building now occupied by an antique store and deli.

SAN PASQUAL

Ramona's San Pasqual

"When they [Ramona and Alessandro] rode down into the valley, the whole village was astir. The vintage-time had nearly passed; everywhere to be seen were large, flat baskets of grapes drying in the sun. Old women and children were turning these, or pounding acorns in the deep stone bowls; others were beating the yucca-stalks, and putting them to soak in water; the oldest women were sitting on the ground, weaving baskets. There were not many men in the village now; two large bands were away at work,—one at the autumn sheep-shearing, and one working on a larger irrigating ditch at San Bernardino."

—Ramona, p. 243

San Pasqual Today

 Twelve miles from Escondido, the San Pasqual Band of Indians, affiliated with the Kumeyaay Nation, lives on a federally recognized reservation of 1,400 acres of land in Valley Center. The people of San Pasqual are known as the Kumeyaay-Ipai and Northern Diegueño Indians. The reservation is home to a nationally recognized community center and fire station and is in the process of building a new educational center, a new upgraded water delivery system, and permanent cultural displays in surrounding communities.

SAN JACINTO

Ramona's San Jacinto

"It was a wondrous valley. The mountain seemed to have been cleft to make it. It lay near midway to the top, and ran transversely on the mountain's side, its western or southwestern end being many feet lower than the eastern. Both the upper and lower ends were closed by piles of rocks and tangled fallen trees; the rocky summit of the mountain itself made the southern wall; the northern was a spur, or ridge, nearly vertical, and covered thick with pine-trees. A man might roam years on the mountain and not find this cleft."

—Ramona, p. 309

San Jacinto Today

Every year 400 actors, singers, dancers, and horsemen come together in Hemet in the San Jacinto Valley for three weekends to perform the Ramona Pageant at the Ramona Bowl Amphitheater. Since 1923 the Official California State Outdoor Play has entertained thousands of visitors with this unique production based on Ramona. The play uses the natural setting of canyons and hillsides in place of a traditional stage and employs only two actors, Ramona and Alessandro. The rest of the cast are volunteers.

SEÑORA MORENO'S HOUSE

In Ramona's Day

"The Senora Moreno's house was one of the best specimens to be found in California of the representative house
of the half barbaric, half elegant, wholly generous and free-handed life led there by Mexican men and women of degree in the early part of this century. . . Besides the geraniums and carnations and musk in the red jars, there were many sorts of climbing vines,—some coming from the ground, and twining around the pillars of the veranda; some growing in great bowls, swung by cords from the roof of the veranda, or set on shelves against the walls.”

—Ramona, pp. 11, 15

Señora Moreno’s House Today

As Errol Wayne Stevens wrote in “Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona: Social Problem Novel as Tourist Guide,” (California History, 77:3), both Rancho Camulos in Ventura County and Rancho Guajome in Oceanside continue to claim that they are the site that served as the inspiration for Ramona’s home.

Rancho Camulos, now a forty-acre National Historic Landmark, was originally the Indian village Kamulus. The del Valle family, once one of the most established Spanish families and the original owner of the ranch, was forced in 1924. In the 1990s the owners opened a museum and began to restore several historic buildings. The grounds now comprise more than a dozen structures including a schoolhouse, a chapel, a barn, and a bell structure. The museum is open to the public.

Built in the 1850s, Rancho Guajome is now part of the Guajome County Park, popular among southern California hikers and campers. The adobe home, once the site of huge parties entertaining the state’s elite, contains twenty-eight rooms and was built of impressive adobe bricks weighing up to seventy pounds each. Rancho Guajome is open to the public.

CASA DE ESTUDILLO

Ramona’s Casa de Estudillo

“Father Gaspara’s house was at the end of a long, low adobe building, which had served no mean purpose in the Old Presidio days, but was now fallen into decay; and all its rooms, except those occupied by the Father, had been long uninhabited. On the opposite side of the way, in a neglected, weedy open space, stood his chapel,—a poverty-stricken little place, its walls imperfectly whitewashed, decorated by a few coarse pictures and by broken sconces of looking glass, rescued in their dilapidated condition from the Mission buildings now gone utterly to ruin. In these there had been put candle-holders of common tin, in which a few cheap candles dimly lighted the room. Everything about it was in unison with the atmosphere of the place,—the most profoundly melancholy in all Southern California.”

—Ramona, pp. 231–232

Casa de Estudillo Today

Located in San Diego’s Old Town, Casa de Estudillo is one of the most famous adobes in the region. Its construction began in 1827 by Captain Jose Maria de Estudillo, commander of the San Diego presidio, and was maintained after his death by his son, Jose Antonio Estudillo. The younger Estudillo was prominent in his community; he served, among several other leading positions, as the San Diego judge under Mexican rule, and the treasurer and assessor of San Diego County under American rule. He lived with his wife, Maria Victoria Dominguez, and their children in the adobe until 1887. The building was restored in 1910 and donated to the state. It is now a furnished museum open daily to the public.