

Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief

Edited by

Zbigniew Białas, Paweł Jędrzejko
and Julia Szoltysek

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5059-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5059-9

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CHAPTER FIVE
GRIEVING THE LOSS
OF NATIVE AMERICAN CALIFORNIA:
HELEN HUNT JACKSON'S *RAMONA*
KATARZYNA NOWAK-MCNEICE

On the opposite side of the way, in a neglected, weedy open, stood [Father Gaspara's] 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 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.¹

Helen Hunt Jackson

When in the mid-nineteenth century John O'Sullivan coined the term "manifest destiny", he was responding to the spirit of optimism pervasive in the country. The nation's belief in America's glorious future performed a double function: it was partly motivated by and simultaneously justified the unencumbered growth of the nation's territory. O'Sullivan portrays this spirit when he claims, "Our annals describe no scenes of horrid carnage, where men were led on by hundreds of thousands to slay one another". In his assessment the American past is spotless, but that only sets the scene for the future, and the future belongs to America: "The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past".² Such an understanding of the American destiny led to precisely the kind of excesses that O'Sullivan praised as lacking in American history. But more importantly, at its basis lay a set of preconceptions that emptied the imaginary space for the

¹ Jackson, *Ramona*, 232.

² O'Sullivan, *The United States Democratic Review*, 427.

singular narrative of the historical fate of the nation: it was not a jumbled and difficult mix of paths shared by various groups equally entitled to inclusion in the official history, but one lucid space, where the direction of the nation's fate lay obviously clear. Just as the land was emptied of those whose right to the official narrative was unrecognized, the historical space was now free to be occupied by the one nation whose greatness demanded and justified it.

At the historical moment in which O'Sullivan documented the American exclusive destiny, other writers were writing texts documenting the nation's emergent conscience. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton were written with specific aims: that of educating the public, moving their moral sense, and inspiring change.

The 1884 novel *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson was spurred by a similar impulse, as it was written with the sole purpose of directing public attention to the deplorable living conditions of California Mission Indians, who were, in the words of one critic, "systematically stripped of their lands by Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans during the nineteenth century".³ Jackson herself expressed hopes for the book's ability to amend the wrongs done to California's Native American population: "If I could write a story that would do for the Indian a thousandth part of what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the Negro, I would be thankful the rest of my life".⁴ Jackson died a year after the novel's publication, bitterly disappointed. Errol Wayne Stevens thus estimates the novel's impact: it "might just as well have been set in ancient Rome – for all the good that it did to arouse public awareness of the conditions of Mission Indians".⁵ Noble as the impulse behind its composition might be, it did not change the situation of the group whose rights it advocated.

The sense of failure that accompanied Jackson at the end of her life is curiously matched by the spirit of hopelessness pervasive in the novel – and might help explain the book's failure. The eponymous heroine moves from one hopeless situation to another; her life is a series of failures, not because of who she is or what she does, but because of the external circumstances which she cannot control. From the beginning of the

³ Sherer Mathes, "Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern California's Mission Indians", 262.

⁴ A letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, 4 May 1883, qtd. in Moddelmog, *Reconstituting Authority American Fiction in the Province of the Law, 1882-1920*, 62.

⁵ Stevens, "Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*: Social Problem Novel as Tourist Guide", 161.

narrative till its end both personal and socio-political factors conspire to the protagonist's doom.

Ramona tells the story of an orphan girl of mixed Scottish Indian origin, who is raised by a Californio⁶ family. She experiences racism and discrimination, and – much like Uncle Tom – suffers with Christian stoicism. Ramona falls in love with Alessandro, an Indian sheep herder, and they elope from the ranch to live with Alessandro's tribe. They are, however, driven away from their land by Anglo Americans. Experiencing constant humiliation and deprivation, Alessandro goes mad and dies. Ramona considers herself emotionally dead and moves to Mexico.

The mood of the novel is best illustrated by the fragment in which Ramona and Alessandro mourn the death of their firstborn. Ramona finds consolation in her Christian beliefs; for Alessandro, however, there is no solace:

"Dear Alessandro", said Ramona, "it is a sin to always mourn. Father Salvierderra said if we repined under our crosses, then a heavier cross would be laid on us. Worse things would come".

"Yes", he said. "That is true. Worse things will come". And he walked away, with his head sunk deep on his breast.⁷

Ramona expresses the conviction that interminable mourning is forbidden within the parameters of her system of belief; thus, mourning is designated as a process that, when properly structured, should lead to an ending. If we allow the process to continue inconclusively, then we are sinning against a higher agency.

The distinction between an acceptable, terminable process of mourning and an unrelenting mourning that is a transgression in itself corresponds to the division proposed by Sigmund Freud in a 1917 text. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud explains that the distinguishing factor of melancholia lies in the unconscious: "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious".⁸ In melancholia, he suggests, the loss is "of a more ideal

⁶ Charles Hughes thus explains the term: "It is occasionally necessary to consider a Californio as any non-Indian with a Spanish surname, and born in California, Spain, or Latin America. Strictly speaking, however, Californios were those Mexicans who inhabited California prior to American conquest, and the term also refers to their descendants" (2).

⁷ Jackson, *Ramona*, 311-312.

⁸ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 3043.

kind;" it may imply "the loss of some abstraction (...), such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on",⁹ though it can also be, as in mourning, a reaction to the loss of a beloved person. Perhaps the most pertinent distinction between the two states is that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself".¹⁰ However, the impoverishment of the ego, Freud makes clear, is linked to the emergence of a critical agency, that is, conscience.

The novel I discuss here is, in Hunt Jackson's assessment, a product of conscience; it was written to amend the wrongs inflicted on the group that suffered the ugly side-effects of American expansionism and it was meant to move the conscience of Americans benefiting from those processes that left others impoverished. In this sense *Ramona* is a melancholic endeavor.

Freudian melancholia helps explain the novel's ambiguous treatment of its central romantic theme and political agenda: it is the melancholic conflict at the core of the dominant American identity, caused by its reluctance to acknowledge the rights of another dispossessed group, Native Americans, that are lost to history and the official narrative of the nation, yet remain a powerful influence on its identity.

My reading of *Ramona* is inspired by the idea proposed by Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race*, in which the critic claims that the dominant American identity operates melancholically. Cheng refers to Freud's 1917 essay, whose important implication is that melancholy is a necessary prerequisite for identity formation, thus locating loss at the core of selfhood.

Cheng suggests that melancholia is an especially useful concept to understand American identity. She states: "American melancholia is particularly acute because America is *founded* on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over" (emphasis hers).¹¹ I want to argue that the problem becomes acutely pronounced in the case of California, the territory whose acquisition marked the beginning of the process of closing the American frontier. The Californian variety of melancholia is connected to a particular loss of a loss, the loss of an illusion of the unstoppable expansion, the illusion of an empty territory forever open to settlement, the fantasy of an unencumbered liberty and freedom.

When the United States acquired California after the war with Mexico, its Native American population, already decimated, struggled for survival

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3041.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3043.

¹¹ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, 10.

now against yet another wave of incoming migrants. The Anglo-Americans' claim to the land that their country had recently acquired was questionable from the point of view of the Californios, and in the conflict between the two groups Native Americans were in a losing position.

The competition for land was triggered by the omission of Article X in the final draft of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that was signed after the U.S.-Mexican war: this article, had it been signed, would have secured the Californios' rights to their land. Its deletion from the text of the treaty meant that the responsibility for proving the validity of the land title rested on the occupant. The dominant prejudiced approach of the courts to which the land disputes were taken and the legal costs involved were such that most Californios ultimately lost their land to the newcomers, American "squatters".¹² As James A. Sandos explains, "While the question of private legal title dragged through the courts, in time-honored frontier tradition, newcomers squatted on what they regarded as vacant public land, seeking thereby to establish claim to what they wanted to believe was federally held property, which would eventually be open to settlement".¹³ This trend is manifest destiny materialized: the future of the nation is glorious, and nothing can prevent its fruition.

Addressing the racial/ethnic tensions between the Anglo newcomers and the Californios, *Ramona* represents Californios as white, at the same time attempting to "whiten" the Native characters as well: and thus, for example, the eponymous Ramona is portrayed as having black hair, like her Indian mother, but with "steel-blue" eyes, like her Scottish father.¹⁴ The presentation of the Californios as white, on the other hand, can only be successful at the expense of Native American characters, whose position on the ethnic scale is inevitably the lowest. The category of "whiteness" claimed for the Californios strictly corresponds to the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. The same category claimed for the indigenous characters, whose aim was possibly to make them easier to sympathize with by the white audiences, makes the ethnic difference oblivious, and hence no platform for political action or ethical charge.

Though in this sense a failure, in other aspects *Ramona* was extremely successful. Errol Wayne Stevens calls it "one of the most popular novels in

¹² For a detailed discussion of the consequences of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo see e.g. Haas, pp. 56-68, Pitt, pp. 26-47, Perez, pp. 54-55.

¹³ Sandos, "'Because He Is a Liar and a Thief': Conquering the Residents of 'Old' California, 1850-1880", 102-103.

¹⁴ Jackson, *Ramona*, 38.

American history"¹⁵ and thus estimates its influence: "The impact of the book was enormous, although not in the way that Jackson intended".¹⁶ He adds: "Ramona's success as a romance undercut its effectiveness as an exposé of the problems of California's Indians".¹⁷

The novel, with its charming characters and emotionally involving romantic plot, not only sparked interest in California missions as tourist destinations, but also inspired several film versions. "The Ramona Outdoor Play", the official play of the state of California, has been performed annually since 1923.

Contemporary critics, however, did not find the presentation of Native Americans credible. Some thought it regrettable that "a squat Indian, with straight, coarse black hair, thick lips and high cheek bones, capable of sitting all day in a bamboo wickiup and contenting herself with the weaving of baskets" could be exchanged for "one of the most charming characters fiction has ever donated to the world of letters".¹⁸ Another found it hard to believe that 'lazy, cruel, cowardly, and covetous' creatures such as the Mission Indians could produce 'specimens of physical beauty and mental sublimity as Alessandro and his father'.¹⁹

Perhaps anticipating such a response and to make the Native characters more palatable, Hunt Jackson portrays Ramona as blue-eyed. Ramona's lover, noble Alessandro, bears an Italian, not a Spanish name. This cautiousness can be one of the reasons behind *Ramona's* failure: its presentation of Native Americans is so vague that the contemporary readers might have easily disregarded any signs of racial or ethnic difference.

Another ambiguity about *Ramona* is that it removes Native American characters from present day California. Goldberg and Champagne point out that *Ramona* "provided a convenient myth supporting American settlement in California – the Indians had been so mistreated that they either died or fled south of the border, leaving behind empty lands for the Americans to occupy. This myth of the disappearing Indians put them out

¹⁵ Stevens, "Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*: Social Problem Novel as Tourist Guide", 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁸ Carlyle Channing Davis and William A. Alderson, qtd. in Stevens, "Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*: Social Problem Novel as Tourist Guide", 162.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Baker Bohan, qtd. in Stevens, "Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*: Social Problem Novel as Tourist Guide", 162.

of the consciousness of non-Indian Californians for over a century".²⁰ Contrary to Hunt Jackson's design, the novel removed the Native American population to the romanticized past of California missions. By its air of melancholic longing of what has been lost forever it suggested that the future belonged to the whites.

For all its pessimistic assessment of the political prospects of the group whose rights the novel advocates, the very impulse behind the novel's composition is worth noting. The other, the Native American, is falsely mourned as already gone, yet what this act of mourning signifies is that this loss is at the same time incorporated into the dominant identity. Judith Butler makes a similar point in *Precarious Life* when she discusses the norms that underlie human constitution: "I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world".²¹ As for Freud the lost object of affection that provokes unending melancholic grieving is incorporated into the melancholic ego, so for Butler the impossible grief constitutes part of the ego.

In *Ramona* Native Americans, for whose sake the novel was written, remain the silent, un-grieved minority. The novel romanticizes the past and mourns it. It also suggests that the Native Americans belong to the past. Their loss is presented as enabling the emergence of the critical agency or conscience to which the texts testify. It is this melancholic process that the novel documents.

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²⁰ Goldberg, C., and Duane Champagne, "Ramona Redeemed? The Rise of Tribal Political Power in California", 60.

²¹ Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 46.

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