Joaquin Murieta, Mexican History, and Popular Myths of Freedom

John Lowe

Joaquin Murieta, the celebrated California bandit, was a real man whose legendary leadership of a band of bandits during the Gold Rush era quickly became the subject of myth. His exploits were often combined with those of other “Joaquins” of the time, and eventually the story was codified in John Rollin Ridge’s stirring novel, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854). Rollin Ridge, aka Yellow Bird, was a Cherokee Indian who had been displaced along with his family and people from their ancestral home in north Georgia. After the trail of tears and further tribal dispossession in Oklahoma, Ridge had tried his luck in the California Gold Rush, finding success ultimately in writing rather than prospecting. His richest literary “mine” was Joaquin, and since Ridge, many other writers, poets, film-makers and story-tellers of every sort have used this Robin Hood of the West story to recycle trans-cultural myths that focus on mobility, heroic outlaws, and the dream of freedom.

This paper will briefly sketch in the achievements of the real Joaquin (whose life is charted in Remi Nadeau’s *The Real Joaquin Murieta*), those of Ridge’s hero, and then chart a list of other versions. The main body of the paper, however, will be a speculation on Ridge’s interest in Mexican history; why Joaquin has had such broad popular appeal (particularly in California, Mexico, and Chile) and why he seems likely to continue to fascinate and inspire future readers and writers. My special focus will be on concepts of freedom and how those become transformed over the decades as Joaquin’s tale is told in different forms, and how humor is used as an integral part of the narrative, and in tandem with a form of “democratic narrative.” These latter terms will be examined in light of both United States and Mexican literary and cultural traditions.

The word California has always had a certain magical poetic resonance for Americans, partly because of the state’s tremendous size, but also because of its unique and abundant beauty. It is the original dream of the New World garden magnificently magnified and gilded. Indeed,
the term "golden republic" refers to the native grasses, themselves emblematic of the state's general fecundity, but also to the mother-lodes of gold discovered in the mid-1800s, facts that underline the tensions inherent in the state's identity.

The name, however, was given to the state by the Spanish, and it was part of Mexico until the Mexican war. Suddenly, families who had lived in the area for generations were transformed into "foreigners," who had to pay an outrageous mining tax levied by the anti-Hispanic state government. Especially aware of these ironies, as a man who had been exiled twice from his homelands—first Georgia, then Oklahoma—Yellow Bird (John Rollin Ridge), in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), gives us a saga of space and freedom set in the Golden Republic's haleyon days of the 1850s. It is, to be sure, a story with a didactic purpose that pushes a moral message, and much of it is mediocre and slack; at its best, however, it is a powerful reminder of how the metaphysics of access to the American dream have always depended on the appropriation of space for the concept of identity, and how the politics of displaced and relocated peoples can give rise to heroic and sometimes mythical folk literature. Increasingly, it has been the important task of those denied the benefits of American life—the poor, the dispossessed, blacks, Native Americans, and immigrants—to remind all Americans of who they are as a people, and of what America says it is and should be. Fighting a battle for equality, armed with an awareness of our stated national principles and the demand that they be extended to all, disadvantaged Americans keep a national dynamic alive, and they often encode their myths in popular culture. We should always remember, however, that many of these stories are multi-ethnic in nature, and may be—indeed must be read through all relevant ethnic prisms.

John Rollin Ridge (Yellow Bird was his tribal name) was born in Georgia to one of the most powerful families in the Cherokee Nation. The Ridges saw the inevitability of the Federal Government's plan to relocate the Nation, and urged a negotiated acceptance, thus pitting them against the equally powerful Ross family. The issue had really been resolved, however, when gold was discovered in north Georgia, and all parties were relocated to the Reservations in Oklahoma.

When the Rosses killed both Yellow Bird's father and grandfather, the family fled their new home too; subsequently, Yellow Bird killed a man in a dispute, and went to California to mine gold. Failing at that, he embarked on a literary career, but remained obsessed with getting revenge for his relatives' murders. Meanwhile, he vented his spleen by indirectly damning U.S. imperialism in California. He did this by writing
a dramatic version of the contemporary and compelling legend of Joaquin Murieta, seeing an affinity between that figure's wronged ethnic, familial, and sexual honor, and his own. Yellow Bird's publishers obviously saw the parallel too; the "Publishers' Preface" to the original edition, prominently announced that the author was "a 'Cherokee Indian' born in the woods—reared in the midst of the wildest scenery—and familiar with all that is thrilling, fearful, and tragic in a forest life" (2). The author of this mini-biography seems intent on establishing a romantic yet forbidding association between Yellow Bird and the pre-existing tradition of the Noble Savage. This latter figure had long been connected, in the popular imagination, with the mastery of treacherous space, i.e., the forest, forever linked in the Eurocentric mind with the moral "wood of error," the labyrinth, and the abode of the devil. The physical Western counterpart of these images could easily be found in the desert, the plains, the mountains, and all of these function in Joaquin's narrative; indeed, the expulsion from Eden/home is a constant theme. And indeed, Joaquin Murieta, branded as Cain and made to wander, like Ridge himself, has had the American dream snatched from under him; a Mexican, his homestead in California has been seized by the Anglo government. The narrative seems intent on reversing this imposed typology, on making us see Joaquin as more of an Abel/victim figure. Still, we must be careful in building this parallel; as his biographer notes, Ridge paradoxically favored assimilation as the ultimate answer to the "Indian question," and eagerly pursued wealth and position in Anglo America for himself and his family (Parins 2). More recently, John Carlos Rowe has reminded us of Ridge's white mother and wife, his excellent education in the Northeast, his "white" appearance, and his elegant dress. Still, at least psychologically, Ridge seems to have been caught in limbo, neither inside nor outside a secure "American" identity, and his writing resonates with that tension, and helps account for what seems his exuberant relief in the expansive spatial metaphors of Murieta's story.

The Joaquin myth was a composite of several bandits' careers. In Joaquin, Ridge faithfully follows the basic facts, but interweaves them with details suggested by his own life; as noted, his family was originally driven, along with most other Cherokees, from Northern Georgia, where the discovery of gold led to a land rush for Indian property. Ridge arrived in California in 1850, the same year that Joaquin rides up from Mexico. As his family was in Georgia, Joaquin is driven from his gold field claim, by both predatory Anglo marauders and an equally unjust set of laws which persecuted foreign-born miners with an outrageous tax. Unlike Ridge, however, Murieta terrorizes most of California and is pur-
sued and finally killed by a crude gang of deputies under the leadership of Captain Harry Love. The bandit's head and the hand of Three-Fingered Jack, his sidekick, are preserved in alcohol, and then go on display for years in the sideshows and "museums" of the state as a warning to others. Rumor has it that these grisly trophies were lost in the great San Francisco fire and earthquake, which would seem to be an appropriate coda to a heroic and brutal tale that takes much of its power from that of Nature.

We might further note the metonymy involved here, and the hidden intent of Anglo society. The spatial confinement of the robbers' bodily parts backfire, for as the subsequent display of Joaquin's head and Three-Fingered Jack's hand across the state portrays, the "relics" are considered icons, retaining tremendous power. Though dismembered and "caught" in glass jars, the meaning of the bandits' lives radiates endlessly.

What makes Ridge's Joaquin story different from its many other variants, and adds to the residual power of the myth, is his realization of this power; in his romantic and poetic evocation of Joaquin and his enchanted progress through the edenic spaces of the Golden Republic, Ridge similarly "caught" Joaquin and his men in the "space" of the novel, but found a means to make their magical powers work anew for the readers. This aspect of the text perhaps accounts for its popularity in California, for in addition to providing the state with a heroic myth, it sets it against what Gaston Bachelard calls images of "felicitous space," which grow out of a kind of "topophilia," a mapping of space we love, space "that may be defended against adverse forces," and also space that may thus also be "eulogized" and therefore further "poeticized" (Bachelard xxxi). Anyone familiar with the similar "topophilia" of almost all Native American literatures will immediately see the usefulness of Bachelard here, and of the centrality of Joaquin Murieta to that pattern. For Mexican readers, the "lost homeland" of California has a similar felicitous resonance.

Joaquin begins traditionally but significantly with the narrator's words, "I sit down to write somewhat concerning the life and character of Joaquin Murieta" (7). The sedentary stance of the author, a trite commonplace, here becomes an effective contrast to an extraordinarily mobile hero, whom the narrator then refers to as a "truly wonderful man" who was nothing more or less than the "natural production of the social and moral condition of the country in which he lived, acting upon certain peculiar circumstances favorable to such a result, and consequently, his individual history is a part of the most valuable history of the State" (7).
The narrator is interested in establishing Joaquin’s amazing ability to range freely and quickly through the vast spaces of California; he therefore claims that although there were supposedly at least five “sanguinary devils” named Joaquin ranging the country at one and the same time, there was really only one, Joaquin Murieta. Our omniscient guide then quickly sketches in the series of outrages that transformed Joaquin into an outlaw. Here the story has much in common, in a symbolic sense, with more current explorations of imperialism and empire, such as The Jewel in the Crown and David Lean’s film of A Passage to India, for all three feature a cry of rape, which signifies what has been done to a country and a people. Here, the rape of Rosita (Joaquin’s mistress) by Anglos similarly and ironically comments on the “rape” of displaced Hispanics in California, and obliquely, on the “rape” of the Cherokees, whose tragic story of displacement and disintegration is surely on Ridge’s mind as he maps out parallel events in California. Joaquin’s inability to stop the rape echoes the military collapse of Mexican troops against the Americans in the recent war. Rosita’s rape is followed by the murder of Joaquin’s half-brother by a crazed vigilante mob of Anglos. These events have a catastrophic affect upon Joaquin, which is expressed in a spatial metaphor: “His soul swelled beyond its former boundaries, and the barriers of honor, rocked into atoms by the strong passion which shook his heart like an earthquake, crumbled around him. Then it was that he declared . . . he would live henceforth for revenge and that his path should be marked with blood” (12-13). Joaquin’s circle of self, thwarted in its effort to grow via the traditional American way (hard work, enterprise, and democratic comradeship), has burst through into a new and larger circle through the passion of anger. His vow to cut a “bloody path” through the state as he avenges the wrongs done to him and his family presages ever widening circles of spatial/criminal conquest.

Equally devastating was the increasing loss of ancestral lands; Spanish and Mexican land grant owners had to prove titles, which was virtually impossible in many cases. Hostile Anglo judges and land commissioners often ruled unfairly against Latino applicants. It is this aspect of Joaquin’s story that needs to be emphasized when considering the tale as a Mexican rather than a Native American or American paean to liberty.

In Joaquin Murieta we therefore follow a somewhat romantic and poetic evocation of a hero through Edenic spaces, but because of the complicated and brutal history of U.S. imperialism, it is a vision that coexists easily with a gruesome litany of murders, robberies, and tortures. Yellow Bird was able to achieve this fusion, perhaps, because he was taking folkloric materials and transforming them into narrative virtually
at their moment of formation. Bakhtin has demonstrated that the novel’s roots must ultimately be sought in folklore, where the object of artistic representation is degraded to the level of a contemporary reality, and the fluid periods of history are ideal for furnishing such material (Bakhtin 39). Besides, readers had no problem at this time accepting equal doses of romantic fantasy and gruesome realism; this had been the manner of Cooper and the Melville of Moby-Dick as well, to say nothing of the many dime novels that Joaquin perhaps more closely resembles, especially those quickly composed numbers that dealt with the sudden riches and lawless maneuvering of a key moment in American history, when prospectors from all over the world converged on the mother lode. The folklore that developed quickly became the stuff of legend and literature, and after Ridge, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and others would mine it.

What had been left out of the literature, however, was the displacement of Mexican-Americans. The U.S. victory over Mexico in 1848 coincided almost exactly with the discovery of California gold. Two years later the state’s legislature passed a “Foreign Miners’ Tax Law”; ironically, Germans, French, and for a time, Chinese were permitted to stay, but Latino miners were forced out. The great Mexican ranches in the state, with their hundreds of dependents, contributed a vast displaced population; some became outlaws who were supported by many in the Hispanic community. Joaquin’s story was written after the United States violated the 1848 Protocol of Queretaro, which had affirmed Mexican civil, political, and religious guarantees established by the treaties that ended the Mexican American war. The rapid growth of Anglo population soon eviscerated Mexican political power; the California legislature subsequently levied new taxes on land rather than production, which was devastating to Mexican property owners.

Because of these and other events, the force of history seemed to accelerate drastically during these years, and Joaquin’s hectic narrative keeps fictional pace. As the narrator points out, one of the most amazing things about the ensuing and terrifying assassinations of the men who had brutalized Joaquin and his family is the swiftness with which the miscreants are dispatched. Throughout the tale, the banditti act swiftly; celerity works hand in hand with mastery of space. Joaquin’s apparent ability to be everywhere is partially explained in the text, as the narrator conflates another Joaquin story by having the actual Joaquin Valenzuela (one of the five Joaquins) function as Joaquin’s lieutenant. This also implies Joaquin operates as part of a long line of Mexican bandits, for Valenzuela, we are told, rode with the famous guerilla chief, Padre Jurata, in Mexico, and presumably has schooled Joaquin in the tricks of the trade. Ridge’s cutting and fitting of the story with heroic figures from
Mexican history helps explain the enduring appeal of the story for Hispanic Americans and readers in Central and South America as well. Physical security, often expressed in terms of spatial refuge, frequently set as Nature’s bosom, also finds illustration in material goods that answer immediate temporal needs. Joaquin’s only safety is said, for instance, to lie “in a persistence in the unlawful course which he had begun. It was necessary that he should have horses and that he should have money” (13-14). Soon the local newspapers are full of accounts of attacks on ranchers, coaches, and travelers. As Joaquin’s mastery of space expands, that of the public at large shrinks, for “all dreaded to travel the public roads” (22), a fact that contributes powerfully to the Anglo community’s growing anger and resentment.

Joaquin’s most impressive feat comes when he is surprised by a band of men in a canyon: “His only practicable path was a narrow digger-trail which led along the side of a huge mountain, directly over a ledge of rocks a hundred yards in length, which hung beating over the rushing stream beneath in a direct line with the hill...It was a fearful gauntlet for any man to run...[There was] danger of falling 100 feet... [He] must run in a parallel line with his enemies...with their revolvers drawn. He dashed along that fearful trail as if he had been mounted upon a spirit-steed, shouting as he passed, “I am Joaquin! Kill me if you can!” (87). It is hardly surprising that this is the moment in the book that artists have most often depicted (it appears on the cover of the current Oklahoma Press edition), for as Ridge remarks, “It was perfectly sublime to see such super-human daring and recklessness” (87). We may read the scene’s spatial semiotics both ethnically and politically; Murieta, belonging to neither the Indian or Anglo world, nor even to the community of law-abiding but oppressed Mexicans, rides a razor thin ridge (also the author’s last name) of marginality throughout the book, boldly outlined against nature, riding on it, across it, against it, supported by it yet threatened by it (the abyss) as well. Politically, he is alien, outlaw, racial and religious other; but all this becomes transcended through his “sublime” mastery of American space(s), much of it forbidden. Again and again, the narrator refers to Joaquin’s lightning-like ability to range across the land as “magical.” He is also careful, however, to provide a counterpoint of realistic reasons for Joaquin’s success, such as the general support and encouragement the protagonist receives from the rest of the Mexican community, the unsettled condition of the country, the isolation of the mining regions, and so forth. Joaquin also, like Robin Hood, deals gently with those who support him, and many ranchers buy protection by sheltering the band for the night and keeping quiet about it later.
The most important statement of the central theme of space and freedom comes when Joaquin relocates to a spot near Mount Shasta in the northern part of the state. The mountain, Ridge maintains, "serves at a distance of two hundred miles to direct the course of the mountain-traveler, being to him as the polar star to the mariner" (23). Mount Shasta awesomely "rears its white shaft at all seasons of the year high above every other peak . . . in its garments of snow like some mighty archangel, filling the heaven with his solemn presence" (23). This rather trite description nevertheless parallels Yellow Bird's main themes, for like Joaquin, Mount Shasta towers above its peers, is unassailable and unavoidable, and extends into space both horizontally and vertically.

The mountain creates a peak of sorts in the narrative as well, for Yellow Bird inserts his two and a half page poem, "Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance." At first the mountain is personified as a proud blasphemer, a tower of pride that defies the storms of heaven which beat against it in wrath. Mount Shasta, however, is not static; age by age, it is still rising higher/Into Heaven!" (23). In an astonishing turn, Yellow Bird reveals that the mountain, far from being the blasphemous rebel that it seems to be, was created by God and symbolizes the higher law of God that man should strive to attain. "And well this Golden State shall thrive, if, like / Its own Mount Shasta, sovereign law shall lift / Its own atmosphere—so high / That human feeling, human passion, at its base shall lie subdued. . . . Its pure administration shall be like / The snow, immaculate upon that mountain's brow!" (25). In his poem Ridge points to the discrepancy between what the law should be and what it actually is, and it is easy to see why Mexican readers have been drawn to it, as it locates God on their side regarding the illegal seizure of a former Mexican Eden. Similarly, this long apostrophe to the mountain enables Yellow Bird to take us as readers high above the state to share this lofty monarch's view of "the fertile / Vale, and undulating plains below, the grass. . . ." From this vantage point we understand the purifying effect that Mount Shasta has on the land, for from its flanks come cool breezes and vapors which "guarantee . . . health and happiness" to the farms and farmer below, which have been created by Mexican culture and Mexican labor. Even better, and more romantically, the mountain inspires "loftier feelings . . . nobler thoughts" for the humble plowman; little children, asking who made the mountain, learn from their mothers it is God's creation. We thus, like the spotted hawk in Walt Whitman's similarly conceived Song of Myself (1855), aspire to "the eagle's cloudless height" and the clear-eyed perspective on American nature and the law that should proceed from the continent's grandeur and majestic space.

The poem ends, in fact, by transforming this "blasphemous" babel-
like natural phenomenon into a symbol of law, a pure white shaft that towers above man’s activities as a moral guide. It is in the shadow of this peak that Joaquin and his men take refuge for several months, descending at intervals into the valley below to steal horses with the aid of the Indians. Mount Shasta thus suggests the doubled nature of Joaquin, who as rebel against an unjust set of laws that discriminate against Mexicans, actually represents a purer law. Like Mount Shasta, his freedom in space gives him a kind of vertical presence in the society of men as well; like most mythical bandits, his actions, which take place during hard times for many people, offer heroic and poetic imaginative space and freedom for the oppressed and the weak who lack Joaquin’s resourcefulness and courage. The fact that the Mountain’s base in earthly nature is frequently obscured by clouds aligns with Joaquin’s mythical stance, one much like trickster’s, between God and man. Moreover, the cooperation with California Indians underlines Yellow Bird’s doubled role as narrator, and begins a long skein of references to the shameful treatment Native Americans had received in the Golden State, both as victims and as scapegoats. Ridge will charge, in fact, “The ignorant Indians suffered for many a deed which had been perpetrated by civilized hands. It will be recollected by many persons who resided at Yreka and on Scott’s River in the fall and winter of 1851 how many ‘prospecters’ [sic] were lost in the mountains and never again heard from; how many were found dead, supposed to have been killed by the Indians, and yet bearing upon their bodies the marks of knives and bullets quite as frequently as arrows” (27).

Joaquin’s role as trickster and his alignment with Indians dovetail in the episode where he and his men are robbed by the Tejons. The trickster, as mediator between God and man, usually has his way, but if he did so always he would be all too close to the status of God; therefore, he too must occasionally come to grief, as Coyote, Raven, and Brer Rabbit all do from time to time. Moreover, it is often true that a weaker creature does the tricking of the trickster, and that is precisely how the Tejons function here. As masters of the region’s terrain, and as silent, superb hunters, the Tejons have little difficulty surprising the Joaquin and his band, stripping them naked, and beating them soundly with willow rods. The episode is a version of the “trickster tricked” syndrome that Paul Radin has identified in trickster narratives, one also found in African American folktale, and confirmed by Ridge’s statement “The robbers were robbed” (40). Joaquin, however, laughs off the episode, and refuses to take revenge on Old Chief Sapatarra and his band. He knows, as we do, that they were inspired to this mischief by a wealthy white rancher, who sought their aid in retrieving stock the bandits had
stolen. Moreover, when Joaquin’s band, men and women alike, are stripped naked by the Tejons the men find new clothing, while the women hide themselves in the brush, “like mother Eve”; the phrase points both to the regenerative nature all around them and to the parallels between their retreats and the Garden of Eden/Mythical Nest.

It should not be supposed, however, that Ridge is in tight consort with California Indians; his portraits of them are quite mixed, perhaps because of his own ancestry in a supposedly more “civilized” tribe, the Georgia Cherokees, who had their own alphabet, had adopted white modes of production, and had established thriving business enterprises before the forced march to the West. Since I formulated this view in an earlier paper, John Carlos Rowe has in fact indicted Ridge as a racist, and we have both pointed to a later scene, where Ridge paints the Tejon Nation in lazy poses, as they eat acorns and worms, and charges them with treachery and cowardice. When they succeed in robbing Joaquin and his band, Ridge comments, “The poor, miserable, cowardly Tejons had achieved a greater triumph over them than all the Americans put together!” (38).

Nor are the Tejons the only Native people who operate against Joaquin; later, some Cherokees aid the Anglo pursuers, and kill two of Murieta’s band. Presumably, Ridge had in mind those renegades who sided with the Ross faction rather than his own family; there were no good Indians, per se, for Ridge, even in his own tribe. Similarly, Ridge’s verdict on the “Digger” Indians is mixed; like the Mark Twain of Roughing It, he has contempt for their supposedly low standards of living and their employment in menial positions by Anglos (the term “Digger” was a derogatory label imposed by white settlers), but he admits that in their capacity as runners bearing mail, they are “very expeditious.”

We should note the relation of these mixed attitudes toward Indians in Mexico itself, where “pure-blood” theories also prevailed favoring citizens with light skins and an absence of Indian forebears. Since the United States between 1845 and 1854 acquired almost half the territory formerly belonging to the Republic of Mexico, it inherited this particular form of bias as well, which segued all too easily into its own “Indian hating” policies that had always been a part of manifest destiny.

Ridge’s novel presents us with an ideal hero of sorts (at least at first, before he begins indiscriminate killing) but he has few characteristics that mark him as specifically Mexican, and there is virtually no display of the rich culture that had developed in the region, such as guitar driven music, religious traditions, or any mention of popular art such as gold and silver filigree, weaving, tin, or iron work; nor do we see Mexican
rodeo or vaquero traditions except in the horsemanship of Joaquin’s band. In short, Joaquin’s ability to achieve his own rough version of justice in an unjust world is a beacon of hope for all oppressed Californians—exemplified in his frequent, but sometimes problematic, alliance with the Indians.

In political terms (and we should not forget that Murieta represents a persecuted and exiled minority and a kind of proto-guerilla movement), the retreats are reminiscent of those of the Montagnards of Vietnam or the freedom fighters in Afghanistan. The thrust of Nature, the interplay between Mexicans and Indians, the guns and horses and sweeping rides over vast plains of Western narrative—all these qualities and several more, linked indelibly with American republican iconology and transcendentalism, stimulate shocks of recognition for the American reader. But Joaquin’s escape into vast space is underlined by his preceding ability to puncture the restricted space, the “temple” of the profane Anglo world, the saloon. Murieta is not content to merely penetrate this sanctum sanctorum of the patriarchs; the poker table, a doubled altar, with the Gods of money above and guns below, is literally trampled and profaned by Joaquin’s muddy boots. However, Joaquin is not a blasphemer of the truly sacred. He and his colleagues are befriended by the Catholic Church and take shelter for weeks at a time at places like the Mission of San Gabriel, thereby appropriating sacred as well as secular space and adding yet another “nest” for rest and recuperation. More often, however, Joaquin returns to the maternal embrace of the arroyos, moving back and forth between his multi-directional raids and his secret mountain dens, “so rugged with their ten thousand fastnesses in which to hide” (15).

Who can stop this “outrageous” bandit? Clearly, only a man such as Captain Harry Love, who is as masterful as Joaquin in transcending space and time. That is exactly how the bandit’s ultimate nemesis is introduced, quite early in the book, long before he is to kill Joaquin:

Love had served as an express rider in the Mexican war and had borne dispatches from one military post to another over the most dangerous tracts of Mexico. He had traveled alone for hundreds of miles over mountains and deserts. . . . Riding fleet horses and expert in the use of the lasso, it required a well-mounted horseman to escape [bandits] on the open plains, and many a hard race with them has the Captain had to save his neck and the valuable papers in his charge. (34)

Similarly, the real Love’s men succeeded in tracking Murieta partly because, as Edwin Corle has observed, they were “expert horsemen,
superb marksmen and perfectly capable of handling themselves in any terrain, be it the coastal valleys, the dry deserts or the High Sierras” (Corle 270). Furthermore, Love comes from a pioneer background, and is thus suited to the hardships and dangers of border life. Finally, in his role as Deputy Sheriff of Los Angeles County, he is a representative of the law that Joaquin scorns. Mexican readers might have had a few difficulties accepting Ridge’s balanced portrayal of Love, for many displaced Mexicans came to see the Anglo lawmen as lawless marauders.

Still, Love has difficulty finding the charmed Murieta. Throughout the book Ridge creates the impression that Joaquin is enclosed in a magical space, making him immune to legal retribution, no matter how close the situation has become. This theme frequently becomes interwoven with the concepts of moral space as well. One evening, Joaquin, riding alone, meets Joe Lake, a friend of his “more happy and honest days.” After the men exchange greetings, the text quickly becomes sentimental: Joaquin weeps, confesses that he is not the man he once was, admits that he hates almost all Americans, but still loves Joe, and thus implores Joe not to betray him. “Lake assured him there was no danger, and the two parted, for the wide gulf of dishonor yawned between them, and they could never again be united” (51). Lake, unaware of Joaquin’s uncanny ability to be everywhere at once, immediately betrays his friend to Americans in Ormetas while a serape-clad Mexican listens; this bystander, Joaquin’s spy, reports to the master himself, who is just outside. Charging “you have lied to me,” Murieta shoots Lake dead. An instant later, he is seen on top of a nearby hill with fifty men, once again protected by “the magical luck which pursued this man, following him like an invisible guardian fiend in every hour of his peril” (51). The passage reaffirms our sense of Joaquin’s “magical” space, and mastery of space, but adds the sense of moral distance and “gulfs” dictated by ethnicity and imperialist history. One can see how all these qualities would appeal to Mexican readers. Such passages—and there are several—are more than merely adventures. They exemplify the ballooning myth of Joaquin in the state that Ridge was chronicling, as well as the legend he would become in Mexico. Although the various versions of the tale over the years have taken many liberties, there is one quality they all share: mastery of space. When Edwin Corle published his study of banditry in 1949, he emphasized that Joaquin’s “forays ranged throughout the gold towns in the High Sierras and up and down the Royal Highway, and nobody could be sure just where he was, what he was planning or where he would strike next” (Corle 267). His haughty progress over El Camino Real marks Joaquin as profoundly Latino and regal.

In Arroyo Cantoova, Joaquin announces a final master plan of
revenge and destruction that will end his days as a bandit. Now that he commands 2,000 men spread over the state, he intends to make a clean sweep of the southern counties, killing and burning as he goes on toward the refuge of Sonora. "When I do this, I shall wind up my career. My brothers, we will then be revenged for our wrongs, and some little, too, for the wrongs of our poor, bleeding country. We will divide our substance and spend the rest of our days in peace" (75). This last campaign to salvage some honor for a humiliated Mexico begins in earnest with a strategic attack by Joaquin’s full forces on Calaveras County, which is described by Ridge in Edenic terms. The gang’s terrifying assault brings on the final conflict with Captain Love, which is made possible by Joaquin’s inexplicable decision to travel apart from his band and with only three followers.

Joaquin in these last pages is not the man he was, as is suggested earlier in the scene with Lake. His decision to leave a trail of scorched earth behind him actually masks what amounts to his surrender. Unfortunately, perceptions can change. Joaquin’s transcendence of his sense of being on the outside eventually becomes a trap; the originally authenticating sense of identification with the powers of vast landscapes pales. We can only go so far, however, in reading Murieta’s sensibilities; Ridge created a composite hero to command our attention, but was unable to satisfactorily develop his psychology. To Ridge’s credit, however, our interest in, and frustrations with, the narrative relate to more important issues than the character of Joaquin; Murieta’s story, calculated for popular appeal, has more to tell us than we suspect. One must be struck by the way in which Ridge inserts into American and Mexican outlaw narrative the assertion that ethnicity constitutes an affront to society, as surely as broken laws. Joaquin speaks not only for the poor but also for the racially and ethnically oppressed, all denied “space” at the feast of America. He becomes a necessary mythic hero, who like Robin Hood and Rob Roy, has been generated from and supported by the folk. As Lukacs has noted, both Goethe and Scott were interested in this kind of figure, as demonstrative of the possibilities for “human upsurge and heroism” that are widespread among the masses (Lukacs 52-53); the ruptures of history and their consequent patterns of dislocation and relocation thus provide revolutionary possibilities for heroic behavior.

Although the Joaquin legend is in many ways the chief mythic nugget from the mother lode created by the birth of the state of California, it is also inspiring to Mexicans. For Californians, Murieta’s story has become more than folklore; we may surely call it an epic. Mexicans, as recent scholarship in Spanish attests, also see him as an epic hero from past Mexican history, one who embodies the heroic resis-
tance to Anglo imperialism. The celebrated Mexican writer Ireneo Paz (1836-1924) set down a version that has recently been reissued by Arte Publico Press, with an important introduction by Luis Leal. We are sure to see new scholarship on Murieta’s Mexican visage as a result.

Nor is Mexico the only Latin country that honors Joaquin; the Chilean Pablo Neruda, one of the more recent writers to set this tale, makes Joaquin Chilean; he ends his lyric poem, “Splendor and Death of Joaquin Murieta” with a passage highly redolent of both Joaquin’s link to the people, and seems to suggest that Joaquin’s poetic spaces still exist, most particularly in the souls of people still yearning to be free:

Joaquin, return to your nest:
gallop the air toward the south
on your blood-colored stallion.
The streams of the country that bore you sing out of silvery
mouths.
Your poet sings with them.
Your fate mingled bloodshed and gall,
Joaquin Murieta; but its sound
is still heard. Your people repeat
both your song and your grief,
like a tolling bell struck underground.
The people are million. (Neruda 175)

Works Cited


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John Lowe is a Professor of English at Louisiana State University.