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Representatives of their nation these gold-seeking Californian Americans were; yet it remains true, and is, under the circumstances, a very natural result, that the American had nowhere else, save perhaps as conqueror in Mexico itself, shown so blindly and brutally as he often showed in early California, his innate intolerance for whatever is stubbornly foreign.

Josiah Royce, California from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study of American Character (1886)

Remember Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian? Well from my dealings with whites I would add to that quote: "The only interesting Indian is dead, or dying by falling backwards off a horse."


"Listen," Samuel said. "Coyote, who is the creator of all of us, was sitting on his cloud the day after he created the Indians. Now, he liked the Indians, liked what they were doing. This is good, he kept saying to himself. But he was bored ... so he decided to clip his toenails.... He looked around and around his cloud for somewhere to throw away his clippings ... then he accidentally dropped his toenail clippings over the side of the cloud and they fell to the earth. The clippings burrowed into the ground like seeds and grew up to be the white man. Coyote, he looked down at his newest creation and said, Oh, shit."

"The whites are crazy, the whites are crazy," the children would chant and dance around Samuel in circles.

"And sometimes so are the Indians." Samuel would whisper to himself.

Sherman Alexie, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993)

John Rollin Ridge's 1854 thriller, The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta,1 is an extraordinary example of how literary texts condense the contradictory political, social, legal, cultural, and psychological effects of colonial conquest. Indeed, literature's ability to incorporate conflicting social experiences is one of my reasons for focusing this study of U.S. imperialism primarily in terms of literary narra-

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1 Ridge is also known as Yellow Bird. The spelling of Joaquín Murieta is not standardized and will appear in the various forms used by the authors who have contributed to the Murieta legend.
tives, whose interpretations are often occasions for exploring larger social and political events associated with U.S. colonial ventures at home and abroad. Yet just what I mean by literature’s *condensation* of the historical consequences of colonialism requires a diverse account of the many ways literature distorts, displaces, and incorporates these materials, as well as an equally nuanced treatment of how such literary varieties have been understood by readers. The weird reception-history of Ridge’s novel and the even stranger history of the U.S. conquest of California teach us the futility of ever theorizing how literature functions in relation to ideology. Instead, we should begin with specific cases of ideological instability, use theory to help us *select* literary or other kinds of texts that respond to such a historical crisis, in order to assess the roles played by culture in ideological normalization. Although theory, especially critical social theory, can be of immense help in this work, there can be no *general rule* that covers the many possible roles of literary and cultural texts in this process.

I argue in this essay that Ridge’s novel resolves the conflicting and traumatic experiences of his personal history as a Cherokee, of the U.S. conquest of California in the Mexican-American War, and of the social disorder in California during the Gold Rush in a narrative organized around the myth of progressive individualism, a crucial part of dominant cultural values in the United States in the 1850s. In short, I contend that Ridge’s *Joaquin Murieta* fits most definitions of the category of “mass culture” in its resolution of social and political problems by recourse to established cultural conventions. Yet, we should be especially interested in the ways in which Ridge’s narrative does this work of cultural normalization, including the formal and technical aspects of the novel, keeping in mind that the *value* of *Joaquin Murieta* resides primarily in the *history* it requires for its comprehension. A new category of literary value is required, I think, to account for works of little intrinsic aesthetic interest that nevertheless bring into sharp relief historical and ideological issues crucial to the formation of dominant cultural values.

Shelley Streeby has argued that the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 has been largely forgotten as an important U.S. colonial venture, in part because its history challenges our understanding of American national identity. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo concluding that war not only increased the territory of the United States by one third, it also guaranteed under U.S. law the civil and property rights of those people living and working in this territory before the War. These peoples included native-born Californios, many of whom owned the large cattle and sheep *ranchos* on which the agrarian economy of California under Mexican rule depended, working-class Mexicans and Latin Americans, Native Americans representing more than 100 different tribes, Chinese laborers, and U.S. settlers who first came to California as illegal aliens after the U.S. annexation of Texas in 1836 (Monroy 173). The discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill on January 22, 1848 barely antedates the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, and the great influx of “Forty Niners” who would arrive after the conclusion of the War. These miners included at various times representatives of all the pre-war groups living in California, as well as foreigners from Peru, Chile, Australia, England, Ireland, Germany, France, Holland, and a host of
other countries. By 1850, California was both an extraordinarily diverse society and a violent one. The legal protections of property and civil rights provided by the Treaty were generally ignored, and new territorial laws were adopted, like the Land Act of 1851, that violated specific provisions of the Treaty. To justify claims to both the mineral resources and productive land of California, interested and powerful groups quickly established social binaries between “foreigners” and “U.S. citizens” that drew upon the prevailing racial, class, and gender hierarchies of U.S. culture at mid-century.

The U.S. colonization of California was the result of the economic and military struggle with Spanish colonialism in the region and, to a lesser extent, with continuing British efforts to control territory on the Pacific coast. Mexican rancheiros who were victimized by new Yankee laws had themselves displaced Native Americans from their ancestral lands, systematically destroyed Native Americans’ food sources, and employed Native Americans under conditions of virtual serfdom. Defined as “sin razón” by the Franciscans who replaced the Jesuits in Spanish America after 1767, Native Americans in California were the first group to be constructed ideologically as “alien” by Eurocolonial forces, and they constituted thereby the cultural horizon of civilized “identity” and “selfhood” well in advance of U.S. conquest (Monroy 44). In mid-nineteenth-century California, they were collectively named “Diggers,” a derogatory term referring to their hunting-and-gathering societies and homophonically linked with the racist epithet for African Americans.

By the 1850s, public policy favored reservations for the “protection” of Native Americans in California, legitimating both U.S. governmental paternalism toward the Indian and tacitly acknowledging the continuing genocide of Native Americans. With the passage in April 1850 of the “Act for the Government and Protection of the Indians,” Native Americans were legally defined as subalterns, prevented from testifying against “a white person,” and made virtual slaves to the capitalist economy advocated by Yankee settlers (Monroy 185–86). The displacement and murder of Native Americans increased dramatically during the Gold Rush as prospectors poured into the remote Sierra foothills and mountains that under the Mexican rule of California had been left largely to Native Americans (Pitt 49). Driven out of the mining areas, often unemployed as a consequence of the part-time hiring policies of most rancheiros, and increasingly desperate for food and clothing, Native Americans in California often appeared as vagrants, by necessity committed petty thefts, and in such ways increasingly

2 Pitt estimates 100,000 newcomers to the gold fields in 1849: “80,000 Yankees, 8,000 Mexicans, 5,000 South Americans, and several thousand miscellaneous Europeans—and with numbers that swelled to a quarter million by 1852” (52–53).

3 “The Land Act of 1851 wreaked havoc on the rancheiros’ claims. It created a three-person commission to which all titles of the Spanish and Mexican era had to be submitted for validation.... [It] effectively dispossessed Californios of approximately 40 percent of their lands held before 1846” (Monroy 203–04).

4 For President Polk (1845–1849), his campaign slogan of “54 40 or Fight,” by which he referred to settlement of the Oregon boundary question with Great Britain, and his campaign promise to acquire California were related foreign policy questions. In his campaign, Polk played on traditional U.S. antagonism to Great Britain as anticolonial struggle.

5 Article 6 forbade Indian testimony against a white person. Article 14 allowed a white person to pay the fine of a convicted Indian and then use that Indian for labor in payment of the fine. And article 20 imposed such strict rules forbidding Indian “vagrancy” that virtually all Indians displaced from their lands could be subjected to the law at any given moment, making them subject to conviction, payment of the fine by a white person, and indentured labor.
fulfilled the prophecies of those advocating laws to “govern” Native Americans—laws that actually hastened their extermination.⁶

After the War, the Californio landowners, who had traditionally emulated the aristocratic cultivation of Spanish Hidalgos, found themselves lumped together in the U.S. cultural imaginary with Mexican and Latin American immigrants. Whereas many rancheros in California had grown weary of Mexican rule in the 1840s and distanced themselves from the central government, they were identified in postwar California with the losing side and with those mestizos, who were racially denigrated by U.S. troops as a “mongrel,” largely Indian race (Horsman 260). The derogatory term “greaser” was not just reserved for working-class Mexican and Latin American immigrants; it was increasingly used in reference to the rancheros, who were often imagined to be in conspiratorial league against U.S. law and economic “free-enterprise” in the California of the 1850s. Such U.S. cultural anxieties were inflamed by envy of the sudden profits the rancheros made from the Gold Rush as beef and sheep prices soared, along with land prices, and organized mining efforts by Californios resulted in conspicuous successes (Pitt 49–50).⁷ Australian, Irish, European, and other foreigners, as well as Texans and proslavery Southerners, brought their own racial and cultural prejudices along with them to California during the Gold Rush and quickly adapted those prejudices to any individual or group likely to get the better of them in the increasingly crowded gold fields.

This was the sort of adversarial and extremely dangerous cultural, political, and economic context in California that John Rollin Ridge encountered when he arrived in 1850 as one of the many young Cherokee joining the Gold Rush (Parins 61). Given the degraded status of the California Native Americans, Ridge and other Cherokee must have taken special pains to avoid identification with the demonized “Diggers,” anticipating the distinction Ridge would make in his journalism between Native Americans “west of the Rocky Mountains—the Utah, Oregon and California Indians”—and those tribes east of the Rockies, who “have manifested the traits upon which the immemorial ideas of Indian heroism, nobility of character and dignity of thought are founded” (Ridge, Trumpet 69).⁸ Handsome and cultivated in his speech, elegantly dressed even in the rough mining towns of California, Ridge apparently did not experience racial discrimination or exclusion during the few months in 1850 he worked in the gold fields, but he must have known how important his education, speech, and dress were in protecting him from the violent, racist xenophobia experienced by so many other “foreigners” in the mines.

The son of the successful Cherokee lawyer and landowner, John Ridge, and grandson of Major Ridge (The Ridge), who “got his name from fighting for the

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⁶ Monroy points out that even when Californian Native Americans were moved to reservations, they were not given adequate food or other supplies in the 1850s. This was also the way the Lakota and other Plains’ tribes were treated on the reservations in the Midwest (52–53).

⁷ Pitt points out that the success of the Californios in the mines was short-lived, because by 1849 they had been forcibly driven from the gold fields by Yankee aggressors, anticipating the gang of Yankees who drive Joaquin from his claim and rape his wife, Rosita, at the beginning of Ridge’s novel.

Americans in the Creek War," John Rollin Ridge had been raised and educated to
inherit the wealth and political power of his family in the Cherokee nation
(Parins 13–31; Walker 230–31n3). Advocates of Cherokee assimilation to the
dominant culture, politics, and economy of the United States, the Ridges and
Boudinots, especially Major Ridge’s influential nephew, Elias Boudinot (1803–
1839), a founding editor of the Cherokee Phoenix, and his younger brother, Stand
Watie (1806–1871), were signatories of the New Echota Treaty of 1835, “agreeing
to the imperialistic demands of the state of Georgia that insisted upon the re-
moval of the indigenous people west to Indian Territory” (Walker 116). Under
the terms of this treaty, the Cherokee were moved from their homes in Georgia to
Oklahoma Territory in two stages, the first involving the voluntary move in 1836
by those Cherokee able to afford their own transport and “sixteen thousand ... removed by force in 1838 and marched at bayonet point” on the infamous “Trail
of Tears,” during which as many as 8,000, or one half, died (Walker 116–17).9 Their
political opponents in the Cherokee leadership, John Ross and John Howard
Payne, condemned not only the New Echota Treaty but also the authority by
which the Ridges and Boudinots had signed it. The Ross faction accused the
Ridges and Boudinots of treason.

The Ridges and Boudinots moved to Oklahoma Territory in the first phase and
used their capital to establish stores that would cater to the newly arrived
Cherokee immigrants. The two political factions continued their rivalry for con-
rol of the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma, and the Ross faction met secretly to
condemn John Ridge, Major Ridge, and Elias Boudinot to death, under the
“provision of Cherokee law—one John Ridge helped frame in 1829—that anyone
involved in the sale of Cherokee land without the sanction of the people would
be put to death” (Parins 29). On June 22, 1839, John Ridge, Major Ridge, and Elias
Boudinot were separately ambushed and assassinated by three “execution
squads,” and Stand Watie, also targeted for execution, escaped only because he
was forewarned. Dragged from his bed at dawn, John Ridge was stabbed repeated-
ly (“twenty-nine times” in the son’s account) by one man as two others held
him and twenty-two more surrounded the house while the whole family, includ-
ing the twelve-year-old John watched. As Ridge’s biographer, James Parins puts
it, “John Rollin Ridge was to carry that image in his mind for the rest of his life”
(29–30).

Hostility between the Ross faction and those Cherokee who advocated assimil-
ation to U.S. culture continued unabated, even though the Ridge family moved
to Fayetteville, Arkansas. Educated in Fayetteville and later at the Great
Barrington Academy in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (1843–1845), where
W.E.B. Du Bois would be born a quarter of a century later (1868), married in 1847
to a white woman, Elizabeth (“Lizzie”) Wilson, and interested in poetry, the arts,
and the law, Ridge exemplified the cultivation and cosmopolitanism he argued
Native Americans could achieve within Euroamerican society. He also typified
everything that was abhorrent to the Ross faction, and when he participated in
the 1845–1846 treaty negotiations between the Cherokee nation and the U.S.

9 Parins estimates “four thousand Cherokee died, a fifth of the Nation,” and points out that the majority of the victims were
“women, children, and the aged,” including “John Ross’s wife, Quatie” (28).
government, he renewed the deep enmity between the two factions (Parins 35-37, 50–55). In 1849, that old dispute again involved the Ridges in violence, and this time it was John Rollin Ridge who killed his neighbor, “a pro-Ross man named David Kell.” According to Parins, the dispute that resulted in Ridge shooting Kell was superficially about “Ridge’s missing stallion” but more likely a plan by the Ross faction “to provoke a fight with young Ridge in order to have an excuse to kill him” (55).

John Rollin Ridge’s decision in 1850 to join a party heading west to the California gold fields was certainly motivated in part by his desire to avoid prosecution for this event and his fear that his trial, especially if influenced by pro-Ross supporters, might be unfair. In California, Ridge quickly learned that gold mining in 1850 was drudging physical labor that also exposed miners to constant, unpredictable dangers and rarely resulted in profits, much less fortunes. Abandoning gold mining after little more than two months and turning to a career in journalism, Ridge followed his background and education to pursue a professional, urban career for which he was suited.

Most of the scholars who have interpreted his Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta have interpreted it as a complex sublimation, if not explicit allegory, of the violence his family experienced in the stormy politics of Cherokee Removal and the establishment of a government for the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma Territory. In his seminal reading of Ridge’s novel, Louis Owens argues that “Ridge transforms himself and his bitterness against the oppression and displacement of Indians” into his Mexican character, Joaquín Murieta, using the novel as “a disguised act of appropriation, an aggressive and subversive masquerade” (Owens 32, 33). In his brief account of Ridge’s novel in The Cambridge History of American Literature, Eric Sundquist characterizes it as a “double-edged” narrative that “may be understood to be Yellow Bird’s own indirect statement about the justification for revenge against whites felt by American Indians, whether in California, Georgia, or Oklahoma” (211). But when read as the novel of an educated, cosmopolitan, urban professional, who repeatedly endorsed the values of progressive individualism, Joaquín Murieta appears to be a reasonable indictment of violence unchecked by law, whether such anarchic violence was experienced personally amid the political upheavals of Cherokee Removal or in the gold fields of California.

In many respects, then, Ridge’s Joaquín Murieta belongs with the countless popular adventure stories of frontier life that exploit citizens’ fears of lawless anarchy, barbarism, and other threats to civilized life resulting from westward expansion. Thus Ridge’s novel does ideological work similar to Brockden Brown’s Gothic romances, and it achieves these ends in ways thoroughly compatible with the Native American politics of the wealthy, slave-owning, assimilationist Ridges and their Treaty party in the Cherokee Nation. To be sure, anxieties in the United States about the effects of frontier anarchy and “savagery” “contaminating” the rest of the nation have different connotations in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War from those prompting the Alien and Seditions Acts of the 1798, but there are considerable similarities in crises separated historically by more than half a century and geographically by a
continent. In both cases, the “purity” of “American identity” is threatened by “foreigners” coming from all corners of the globe, whose dangerous conduct is nevertheless judged by a standard of “savagery” defined by Native Americans. “American identity” is an unstable category in both post-revolutionary Philadelphia and in California, where the Yankee settlers before the Mexican-American War were perceived by Californios as “foreign” by the cultural and economic standards of California under Mexican rule. In both historical cases, the ideological construction of “foreigners” was crucial to legitimate an American identity threatened by specific historical crises and its own internal contradictions.

Ridge uses the crisis of the U.S. conquest of California (and, of course, the rest of the Mexican Southwest) and the accompanying social disorder, exacerbated by the arrival of foreigners during the Gold Rush, to develop his position on the assimilation of “foreigners” into the United States as part of a rational legal and cultural process guided by the prevailing myth of “American individualism” and its economic complement, free-enterprise capitalism. It is a position that in no way contradicts the class and racial hierarchies the Ridge family and Treaty party members would endorse in Cherokee politics and in their support of the Confederacy—and extension of slavery to new territories—during the Civil War. In his journalism during the Civil War, Ridge was a staunch anti-abolitionist, who was frequently attacked for his anti-Lincoln editorials and Copperhead affiliations (Parins 184–221). In this same period, Ridge wrote three articles intended to be the first parts of a long scholarly series “on the North American Indians for Hesperian magazine,” which reflect not only his knowledge of Native American cultural and tribal histories but also his commitment to Native American rights and politics (Parins 188). Ridge’s interests in Native American history in these three articles focus on the potential for gradual and successful adaptation to Euroamerican social and economic practices, thus complementing rather than contradicting the assimilationist argument of Joaquín Murieta and his proslavery, anti-abolitionist journalism of the Civil War period.

Despite John Rollin Ridge’s complaints that he had earned no money from the first edition of The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit, published by W.B. Cooke of San Francisco, it does seem that the ninety-page pamphlet circulated rather widely among the reading public of California in the mid-1850s. Whether or not Ridge was right that the publisher had gone bankrupt and “left me, along with a hundred others, to whistle for our money,” the pamphlet was “widely read and reviewed and, eventually, frequently plagiarized” (qtd. in Jackson xxxii). One reason for the popularity of Ridge’s fictional

10 In a letter to Stand Watie of October 9, 1854, Ridge complains of making no money from “my life of Joaquín Murieta” because “my publishers, after selling 7,000 copies and putting the money in their pockets, fled, bursted up, lee totally smashed, and left me, with a hundred others, to whistle for our money” (qtd. in Jackson xxxii).

11 Pitt argues that Ridge’s condemnation of racism in Joaquín Murieta was “too strong a homily for the 1850’s, and the book sank out of sight until the gringos could swallow it more readily,” but Pitt doesn’t explain his reasons for believing the novel to have been “unpopular,” other than Ridge’s equivocal letter to Stand Watie (81). Given the hysteria about bandidos in California from 1850–1856, it is far more likely that Ridge’s slight moralizing about the negative consequences of racial prejudice would have been ignored and readers’ interest in the graphic violence, ruthless robberies, and conspiracy to rebellion gratified. The incorporation of liberal political sentiments in contemporary mass-cultural texts with conservative political aims is today a conventional practice, visible in a wide range of post-Vietnam-era films from the Rambo series to Lethal Weapon and The Terminator series.
account of the exploits, final capture, and beheading of the legendary bandit, Joaquín Murieta, was public anxiety in California regarding several groups of bandits operating in California in the early 1850s. The legend of the Mexican *bandido* is traceable to the political divisions of the anti-colonial forces in Mexico from the 1820s, when strong military leaders, *caudillos*, like Santa Anna, supported various regimes according to their preferences and special interests (Pitt 75). The Mexican-American War added to these legends of *caudillos* with powerful organizational skills and yet unscrupulous in their use of power. Many of the popular novelettes about the war not only celebrate U.S. heroes who are “thinly disguised Natty Bumpos,” but demonize the enemy as ruthless Mexican *bandidos* or *caudillos*, who stand in the way of the Mexican people’s desire for liberty. In these formula texts, the U.S. military helps the Mexican people achieve the full revolution against colonial and tyrannical rule that they have been unable to accomplish on their own (Johannsen 189–91).

Reginald Horsman has argued that “the overt adoption of racial Anglo-Saxonism” that “became commonplace by the mid-1840s” was driven in large part by “the meeting of Americans and Mexicans in the Southwest, the Texas Revolution, and the war with Mexico” (208–09). Americans associated Mexican peasants with “Indians,” both of whom were imagined to be “unable to make proper use of the land.” In the U.S. imaginary in 1850, of course, this was specifically attributed to the large *mestizo* population in Mexico: “Since the time of the Texas Revolution the Mexicans had been repeatedly attacked in the United States as a degenerate, largely Indian race unable to control or improve the territories they owned” (Horsman 210–31). Unable to govern themselves, as shown by their constant internal warfare, these imagined “Mexicans” also exemplified the dangers of unchecked miscegenation that Southern, proslavery interests argued would result from the abolition of slavery and the open transgression of racial and class boundaries.

In the California gold fields following the Mexican-American War, the racialization and “mongrelization” of Mexicans was used to exclude them from overcrowded mining regions and to justify Yankee claims to mineral wealth, land, and political power. This stereotype of the Mexican also served the convenient purpose of lumping together thoroughly different peoples and cultures for the purposes of economic and political exclusion. The passage of the Foreign Miners’ Tax in 1850, authored by Thomas Jefferson Green, a Texan émigré well-known for his proslavery and anti-Mexican views, was nominally directed against all non-U.S. citizens, but the monthly tax was levied primarily against Mexicans, Californios, Chilians, Peruvians, and Chinese. Often collected by unauthorized individuals, the tax was widely viewed as unjust in conception and practice. At one point in Ridge’s novel, Joaquín saves a group of Germans from the blood-thirsty Three-Fingered Jack by “remarking that it was better to let them live as he might wish to collect taxes off of them for ‘Foreign Miners’ Licenses,’ at some

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12 Green had proposed initially a monthly tax of $20.00, but reduced that to $16.00. In fact, the tax was “collected” in such erratic ways and by so many unauthorized collectors that it would be impossible to determine just what the average monthly tax was for those who paid it. Sometimes, the tax amounted simply to what the foreign miner could afford. Chinese miners often paid $3–5.00 (Pitt 60).
other time" (Life 130). Joaquín's comments are meant, of course, to be ironic, suggesting both how the tax was often collected illegally and yet rarely levied against Europeans, like these Germans. In his history of California, Josiah Royce sarcastically condemns that tax as an attempt "to exclude foreigners from these mines, the God-given property of the American people," and describes in detail American mob violence against Mexicans and Latin Americans protesting the tax (Royce 358–59). Vigorous opposition to the tax by Mexican miners resulted in local militias forming to respond to what many imagined might be a recommencement of the Mexican-American War. Such militias often included substantial numbers of veterans, decked out in their old uniforms. The tax also resulted in countless foreigners abandoning their claims as too expensive and too dangerous to mine, thus leaving boom towns that had grown up to provide supplies and services to the miners. Although merchants in these towns recognized the economic crisis produced by the tax and had it repealed in 1851, the "ultimate result ... was the expulsion of non-Americans—Mexicans and Chinese especially were singled out—from the mining opportunities of California through apparently state-sanctioned mass violence against people of color" (Monroy 203).

The Foreign Miners' Tax was simply one highly visible example of American animosity toward racially and linguistically identifiable "foreigners" competing with them in the gold fields and more generally for economic power in California. Shortly after gold was discovered, Californios began well-organized mining operations. Pitt estimates that "1,300 native Californians mined gold in 1848" versus 4,000 Yankees, and that the Californios' greater organizational skills and experience enabled them to extract as much gold as the Yankees in that year. Yankee miners began to harass Californios soon after and by 1849 few Californios returned to mining (Pitt 50–52). Replacing them were experienced miners from the Mexican state of Sonora, who were also well-organized in their mining operations, albeit more recognizably mestizo than the more Spanish Californios, and they were joined by Chilean and Peruvian miners. Lumping together Latin Americans, Northern Mexicans, and Californios, the Yankee miners helped create the very social disorder they feared. Driven from the gold fields either by overtly unfair laws, like the Foreign Miners' Tax, or by mob violence and racially driven vigilantism, some recent immigrants did begin robbing gold dust from traveling miners, horses from rancheros, food and supplies from small farmers and merchants. By the same token, white gangs preyed upon displaced Latin American, Mexican, and Chinese miners: "The notorious San Francisco gang, the 'Hounds,' for example, which was staffed by former New York Volunteers and Australians, took particular delight in attacking the Chileans who came to San Francisco after fleeing enemies in the mountains" (Pitt 56–57). In the Los Angeles area, Texans who settled in El Monte formed vigilante groups called "Monte

13 Mexican, Latin American, and Chinese miners "knew that they alone of all foreign miners were being subjected to the tax: when they taunted the collectors to tax Irishmen, Frenchmen, and other Europeans they received no satisfactory reply" (Pitt 64).

14 The Harvard philosopher's late-nineteenth-century history of California indicts squarely the "sinful" and "unmoral" conduct of Americans in the gold fields toward foreigners and each other, and it is a distinct contrast with the exploitation of frontier anarchy and racism in more celebrated works, like Mark Twain's Roughing It (1872) and Bret Harte's racist ballad, "Plain Language from Truthful James" (1870), which led to the pirated broadside, The Heathen Chinee, and Harte's and Twain's stage adaptation, Ah Sin (1877).
boys,” who would lynch Mexicans suspected of robbery and murder (Monroy 208–10). It was common practice for these white vigilantes to cut off the heads or mutilate the bodies of their victims as visible warnings to others.

Ridge’s Joaquin Murieta plays upon these social upheavals, paranoias, and the history of racial and national conflict in the competition for gold between 1848 and 1853. By tracing the origins of Joaquín’s banditry to the injustice he and his wife, Rosita, experience repeatedly at the hands of lawless Yankees, Ridge appeals to the reader’s sympathy for a man whose forbearance is almost saintly and whose eventual vows of revenge seem more than justified. Yet it is neither as a Sonoran nor as a disguised “Cherokee” that Joaquín gains the reader’s sympathy, but as a man who has left Sonora in order to become an American:

*At an early age of his manhood ... he became tired of the uncertain state of affairs in his own country, the usurpations and revolutions which were of such common occurrence, and resolved to try his fortunes among the American people, of whom he had formed the most favorable opinion from an acquaintance with the few whom he had met in his own native land. The war with Mexico had been fought, and California belonged to the United States. Disgusted with the conduct of his degenerate countrymen and fired with enthusiastic admiration of the American character, the youthful Joaquin left his home with a buoyant heart and full of the exhilarating spirit of adventure.* (Life 8)

In this introduction of Joaquin, Ridge replays popular stereotypes of Mexican degeneracy, U.S. military heroism in the war, and the consequent legitimacy of our colonization of California and implicitly the rest of the Southwest.

“Born in the province of Sonora of respectable parents,” Joaquin is *mestizo* but has the physical characteristics and character of a Californio of the *ranchero* class: “[T]he proud blood of the Castilians mounted to the cheek of a partial descendant of the Mexiques, showing that he had inherited the old chivalrous spirit of his Spanish ancestry” (Life 9). Ridge also gives Joaquin just the physical qualities necessary for him to be able to “pass” in Californian society as a Yankee, an ability he will use on the several occasions he disguises himself to spy and avoid capture: “He was then eighteen years of age, a little over the medium height, slenderly but gracefully built, and active as a young tiger. His complexion was neither very dark nor very light, but clear and brilliant, and his countenance is pronounced to have been, at that time, exceedingly handsome and attractive” (Life 8–9). Several times in the novel, Ridge moralizes about the evils of the “prejudice of color, the antipathy of races” and how such prejudices are used by “the ignorant and unlettered” to “excuse” “their unmanly cruelty and oppression” (9–10). Yet, Ridge’s didactic aim will be to appeal for justice “to individuals” as the best possible defense against “prejudice of color or from any other source” (Life 158).

Joaquin’s “rich mining claim” is stolen from him by “lawless and desperate men, who bore the name of Americans but failed to support the honor and dignity of that title,” and thus the reader is not surprised when they not only steal his claim, but beat him and rape his wife, Rosita (9-10). Abandoning the
gold fields for "a little farm on the banks of a beautiful stream that watered a fertile valley, far out in the seclusion of the mountains," Joaquín and Rosita are again attacked by a "company of unprincipled Americans—shame that there should be such bearing the name!"—who "coveted his little home surrounded by its fertile tract of land, and drove him from it" (10). Although he is "twice broken up in his honest pursuit of fortune," Joaquín's "spirit was still unbroken," a determination indicating that his very soul is defined by the "honest pursuit of fortune," a typical predicate of progressive individualism in 1850s America (11).

Joaquín's subsequent experiences of Yankee xenophobia merely confirm Ridge's claim that the lawlessness in California discourages the honest pursuit of the basic ideals of American individualism, especially when the immigrant is racially identified with a debased group. Unsuccessful mining in Calaveras County, Joaquín turns to "dealing 'monte,'" and Ridge is careful to point out that this is "in no manner a disreputable employment" either in Mexico or frontier California (Life 11). Despite his apparent success as a Monte dealer, however, he ends up victimized again, this time accused of stealing a horse, which his "half-brother" has lent him. Tying Joaquín to a tree, an angry mob whips him, then "proceeded to the house of his half-brother and hung him without judge or jury" (12). "Then it was," Ridge writes, "that he declared to a friend that he would live henceforth for revenge and that his path should be marked with blood" (12–13).

Raping Rosita and lynching Joaquín's half-brother, the Americans violate his family and privacy; whipping him without due process, they violate his legal and civil rights. Jumping his mining claim and driving him from his farm, they violate his property rights. In all three cases, the dishonor Joaquín Murieta experiences is not so much that of the Spanish Hidalgo—although many Californios were similarly abused by ruthless and greedy Yankee interlopers in this same period—but that of his American identity. What Joaquín Murieta had expected in the United States was protection of his individual and familial rights—rights by no means guaranteed in his native Mexico, as Ridge represents the postwar nation, in keeping with anti-Mexican stereotypes of the period. What Joaquín had also expected was "liberty" to pursue his own fortune in a laissez-faire capitalist system unaffected by considerations of race and class; what he discovers in California is a society that fails to realize the democratic (and progressive) promise of individual liberty. The failure of democratic idealism in postwar California is a social problem that Ridge's narrative proposes both to analyze and solve. But it does so not by staging a well-justified rebellion

15 Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe's letters from "Rich and Indian bars on the North Fork of the Feather River in California's gold diggings," were written in 1851 and 1852, signed "Dame Shirley," and "first published serially in The Pioneer Magazine of San Francisco during 1854 and 1855" as Wheat notes (v). In her "Nineteenth Letter," dated August 4, 1852, Clappe describes the whipping of a "Spaniard," who "implored for death in the most moving terms," rather than be whipped and dishonored (Wheat 167). When refused, "he swore a most solemn oath, that he would murder every American that he should chance to meet alone,..." This episode is often cited as a possible source for Ridge's account of Joaquin's whipping and vow of vengeance at the beginning of the novel.

16 One of the modernizations of the legend of Joaquin Murieta is Walter Noble Burns, The Robin Hood of El Dorado: The Saga of Joaquin Murieta, Famous Outlaw of California's Age of Gold, in which Joaquin and Rosita come from "old pioneer stock and boasted pure Castilian descent" with just a "drop or two of Yaqui or ancient Aztec blood," but must elope from Sonora because Rosita is affianced by her father, Ramon Felix, to an elderly Hidalgo, Don Jose Gonzalez, whom she does not love (6–8). Ridge does not include such details, but Burns's later version does seem to work out the logic of Joaquin's and Rosita's desire for the liberty of the United States over the European class determinants governing nineteenth-century Mexico.
engineered by the heroic Joaquín and his loyal followers, but by demonstrating the anarchic consequences of this failure. Appealing for the law to suppress such anarchy and restore the democratic promise that first drew Joaquín and Rosita to California Ridge sounds much like law-and-order politicians of the 1980s.

Cheryl Walker has analyzed at length how Ridge’s novel appeals repeatedly to the sort of sublime and absolute “law” that would adjudicate the social, political, and psychological contradictions of mid-nineteenth-century California. Paying special attention to Ridge’s 1852 poem, “Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance,” which Ridge includes early in Joaquín Murieta, Walker interprets the poem as representing the desire of humans amid the social anarchy of the period for the “sovereign law” Ridge allegorizes in the natural sublimity of Mount Shasta’s transcendental power—a law, whose “pure administration shall be like/The snow, immaculate upon that mountain’s brow” (Life 25). Nevertheless, Walker views this ideal of natural law as so inapplicable to the socially constructed and transient circumstances of the characters in Ridge’s novel and California in the 1850s that she concludes the novel contradicts Ridge’s effort to find some “absolute”—“Nature, Law, and Nation”—“by means of” which these contradictions might be resolved or adjudicated (Walker 123–25, 138).

Ridge’s novel is, I think, more consistent in its appeal to the law than Walker suggests. What it demands is a legal system that ignores different classes, races, and political or economic interests for the sake of judging the “individual” alone according to his deficiencies or merits. The poem opens with a view of the mountain as a sublime representation of just such individualism:

Behold the dread Mount Shasta, where it stands,  
Imperial midst the lesser height, and like  
Some mighty, unimpassioned mind, companionless  
And cold. (Life 23)

The mountain’s allegorical sublimity is that of “genius,” itself an idealization of human individuality, a category crucial to romantic idealism.17

We may not grow familiar with the secrets  
Of its hoary top, whereon the Genius  
Of that mountain builds his glorious throne!  
Far-lifted in the boundless blue, he doth  
Encircle, with his gaze supreme, the broad  
Dominions of the West, that lie beneath  
His feet, in pictures of sublime repose  
No artist ever drew. (Life 24)

The personification of genius as a divine power, predictably masculine, is typical of romantic idealizations of human rationality as the “divine mind,” and it is the

17 See, for example, Kant’s Critique of Judgement: “Genius ... is the exemplary originality of the natural endowments of an individual in the free employment of his cognitive faculties.” As Parins points out, “(Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance) closely follows Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’ in theme, natural description, diction, and even meter.” Shelley’s romantic conception of genius, like Kant’s, is perfectly in keeping with Enlightenment notions of middle-class individualism (87).
An utopian goal of realizing such genius that justifies Manifest Destiny and transposes colonial tyranny into a metaphysical (and thus less obviously politicized) "imperial" power. Without forgetting the sufferings of his own family and the Cherokee people in the course of their removal from Georgia to Oklahoma, and keeping before him the racial prejudice and social violence in California in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, Ridge argues that such history can be redeemed only by a rule of law that will allow each citizen to be judged as a free individual and, of course, a system of immigration that will permit "foreigners" to be admitted to such a legal and ethical utopia.

Walker reads Ridge's novel as divided between his commitments to the American national culture such individualism supports and his nostalgia for the Cherokee community that was the source of his tribal identity as a member of the powerful Ridge family and the Treaty party (Parins 122, 136). But most of the violent action in Ridge's novel focuses on the group action by Joaquín's "well-organized" gang, which has several branches with different leaders, coordinated masterfully by the elusive Joaquín. Frustrated in his efforts to realize his identity as an individual capable of governing his family and personal fortunes, Joaquín becomes a tyrant. Ridge represents him as admirable in many respects, still displaying the personal qualities that should have served him so well as a democratic citizen of the United States, but Joaquín's tragedy is that his talents for civic virtue can swerve so easily into criminality.

It is, I think, difficult for readers today to understand how Ridge could so thoroughly condemn cooperative labor and its communal ideals as he seems to do in The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta. There are, however, specific ideological reasons for doing so in postwar California. In the gold fields, rancheros used ranch workers, including Native Americans, to mine gold far more efficiently than Yankee miners, who worked primarily alone or in pairs. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo guaranteed prewar California land titles, the end of the War initiated a period in which Yankee settlers manipulated existing laws, passed new laws, and used overtly illegal means to alienate the land of the Californios and break up the large ranchos, generally under the banner of "free-enterprise capitalism." By driving Californio, Chilean, Peruvian, and Sonoran miners out of the gold fields, Yankees had also provoked incidents of retaliation by these groups, often working together. These incidents fueled paranoia regarding "conspiracies" by Spanish-speaking "foreigners" to retake California from the U.S. Militias, and "vigilance committees" formed quickly in response to real and imagined threats from ousted foreigners. Such groups usually included veterans of the Mexican-American War (Pitt 70–74).

Ridge's Joaquín is no Robin Hood, who robs from the corrupt rich to save the victimized poor. Despite episodes in which he displays his honor and respect for others, Joaquín is ruthlessly violent, even if he is not as thoroughly bloodthirsty as his henchman, Three-Fingered Jack. Many critics point to the grisly beheading of Joaquín by Captain Harry Love and his rangers at the end of the novel as evidence that Ridge criticizes the brutality of a society that claims to be "civilized," just as Ridge elsewhere condemns the barbarism of the lynchings, ear-croppings, and whippings by which Americans enforced their authority over "foreigners" in
the gold fields (Life 138). Unquestionably, Ridge intends for the reader to share his criticism of a society that fails to rule by laws to which all members have equal access, but he also intends for Joaquin’s gang to represent the violent anarchy that will result when the rule of law is ignored or unequally applied. Joaquin’s decapitation is foreshadowed several times by the violence of gang members, especially Three-Fingered Jack who cuts off an “American’s” head early in the novel, shouting with murderous exultation as he tosses the head into the rocks (Life 59). Despite the common practice by militas and vigilantes of decapitating and disfiguring bodies of their victims, usually Mexicans, Ridge stresses the practical necessity behind Captain Harry Love’s order that Joaquin’s and Three-Fingered Jack’s bodies be decapitated: “It was important to prove, to the satisfaction of the public, that the famous and bloody bandit was actually killed, else the fact would be eternally doubted, and many unworthy suspicions would attach to Capt. Love. He, accordingly, acted as he would not otherwise have done” (Life 155).

Three-Fingered Jack’s violence is reflected on a grander scale by Joaquin’s plan to cut off Southern from Northern California in a revolt that would divide California and avenge “our wrongs and ... the wrongs of our poor, bleeding country” (Life 75). Joaquin does not clarify what the goal of this revolt would be, and his outraged honor regarding Mexico seems to contradict his earlier contempt for a country so corrupt as to be defeated easily by nobler Americans. Nevertheless, the purpose of his elaborate organization of different bands operating throughout California is conspiratorial and political. One gang leader, Joaquin Valenzuela, a historical figure often confused with the historical Murieta, “had acted for many years in Mexico as a bandit under the famous guerilla chief, Padre Jurata [sic]” (18). As Americo Paredes points out, Father Jarauta was “the fighting priest who was a guerilla against [Winfield] Scott’s forces” in Mexico during the War “and was executed because he refused to recognize the Treaty of Guadalupe” (Paredes 135). Ridge follows his description of the legislative action authorizing Captain Harry Love to organize his “rangers” to capture Joaquin with an account of the larger political dangers these bandidos pose to U.S. territorial rule: “[Joaquin’s] correspondence was large with many wealthy and influential Mexicans residing in the state of California, and he had received assurances of their earnest co-operation in the movement which he

18 Latta provides biographical backgrounds for “Three-Fingered Jack,” also known as “Tres Dedos,” who was born Manuel Duarte in the state of Sonora and often called “Garcia” or “Jack” (101-05). According to Catarina (Aunt Kate) Duarte de Wilson, grand-daughter of Antonio Duarte, Three-Fingered Jack’s brother, he was not given this nickname until after his death and legends of his three-fingered hand circulated with other stories about the Murieta gang. He was reputedly known for his “violent nature” from his earliest years. According to Juan Joaquin Murrieta’s testimony, “When Jack had his forefinger injured Grandfather cut it off so he couldn’t shoot a gun to do any good anymore” (Latta 279). Of course, Ridge plays upon the “inherent” violence of the character, which suggests some of these stories must have been in circulation during the gang’s brief reign of terror. I am grateful to Jesse Luna, who produces re-enactments of the Murrieta legend, for directing me to the oral history contained in Latta’s book.

19 Although Harry Love and his rangers probably turned in someone else’s head than that of the real Joaquin Murieta, should he have actually existed, primarily for the bounty offered by the California State Legislature (Love’s allotted time was, after all, running out), our contemporary skepticism regarding Love’s “heroism” should not distract us from recognizing that Ridge consistently portrays Harry Love, who earned his military title in the Mexican-American War, as “a leader ... whose soul was as rugged and severe as the discipline through which it has passed, whose brain was as strong and clear in the midst of dangers as that of the daring robber against whom he was sent, and who possessed a glance as quick and a hand as sudden in the execution of a deadly purpose” (Life 146). Harry Love is never ironized by Ridge.
contemplated. A shell was about to burst which was little dreamed of by the mass of the people, who merely looked upon Joaquín as a petty leader of a band of cut-throats!” (Life 147–48). Although class distinctions kept Californio rancheros from associating with Sonoran, Chilean, and Peruvian immigrants to the gold fields, even after the latter groups had been forced into the urban areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco, Ridge identifies the Sonoran Joaquín with the Hidalgo Californios by stressing his noble appearance, cultivation, honor, and preference for elegant clothing.20

Ridge seems careful to discriminate between the “evil” of Joaquín’s conspiratorial and revolutionary designs and the residual “good” of his individualism. When Joaquín and some of his men lure a group of hunters into their camp with promises of hospitality, only to surround them and threaten them with murder, a young Arkansan “bravely” steps forward and swears to the bandit: “I stake my honor, not as an American citizen, but as a man, who is simply bound by justice to himself, under circumstances in which no other considerations can prevail, that you shall not be betrayed. If you say you will spare us, we thank you. If you say no, we can only fight till we die, and you must lose some of your lives in the conflict” (Life 78). Ridge, who grew up in Arkansas before the family moved to Oklahoma and returned there after his father’s and grandfather’s murders by the Ross party, invests his own sense of manly honor in this character, distinguishing such courage from mere patriotism and stressing that it always has its roots in a certain pragmatism. Yet, the split between the Arkansan’s manhood and American citizenship reflects the social disorder in postwar California and the failure of U.S. law to support and protect such a worthy individual.21

Such individualism is bound up with nineteenth-century U.S. stereotypes of manhood, and it is thus inevitably connected with the bandit’s protection of the sexual honor of women. While considering the Arkansan’s proposal, for example, “Joaquín drew his hand across his brow, and looked thoughtful and undecided. A beautiful female approached him from the tent near by and touched him on the shoulder. ‘Spare them, Joaquín,’ she tremulously whispered, and, looking at him with pleading eyes, retired softly to her seat again” (Life 78–79). In another episode, just twenty pages later, Joaquín’s lieutenant, Reis, who abducts the beautiful Rosalie from her mother and her fiancé, is “stung with her voluptuous beauty,” and thus protects her from his men, who are intent on raping her. Even

20 Monroy notes that the Los Angeles barrio, where Mexican immigrants lived, was named “Sonoratown,” in reference to the large percentage of Mexican immigrants from the state of Sonora (206). Once again, Ridge’s views in this regard seem to fit neatly with the dominant U.S. ideology. In the Career of Tiburcio Vasquez, the Bandit of Soledad, Salinas and Tre Pinos, with Some Account of His Capture by Sheriff Rowland of Los Angeles, a pulp thriller “compiled from newspaper accounts” of the later California bandit, Vasquez, and published in a single volume with the “third edition” (1871), supposedly revised by Ridge before his death, of Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murietta, under the collective title, The Lives of Joaquin Murietta and Tiburcio Vasquez: The California Highwaysmen, the anonymous editor notes: “One thing, however, was greatly in [Vasquez’s] favor, as was also the case with Murietta: in all those counties where he operated, he had the moral and physical aid of his countrymen, and especially his countrywomen, the native Californians. There seems to be an ever present hostility of these later remnants of the early mixed Indian and Mexican stock that roamed the hills, canons, and all the valleys of California; who owned the mighty bands of wealth-producing cattle, and whose hospitality was ever generous to the stranger knocking at the gates of their haciendas” (1). The original of this 1874 edition of the two narratives bound together is in the Huntington Library and is the basis for a 1927 edition, issued in Hollister, California.

21 Ridge may anticipate here his anti-Lincoln, anti-abolitionist journalism in the Civil War, in which he consistently attacked the Republican administration as war-mongering and anti-Union while defending the Confederacy as upholding, however improbably, the Union by seceding. See París 184–85.
though he risks “a mutiny” among his own men over this blonde, blue-eyed woman, Reis fears even more “Joaquín’s opinion of his conduct in this specific matter”; when Joaquín does show up, he curses and threatens Reis on the suspicion the latter has “done her any injury” or “taken any advantage of that girl” (Life 104–05). Such displays of honor may seem perfectly conventional in patriarchal U.S. culture in this period, but they are by no means typical of prevailing U.S. attitudes toward Mexican men and their treatment of women. In his study of U.S. literary and cultural responses to the Mexican-American War, Robert Johannsen points out that:

_Soldiers’ perceptions of the role of women in Mexico mirrored the culture in which they had grown up. They regarded Mexico’s women as superior to the men, more industrious, more humane, and more keenly sensitive to human needs. At the same time, they were indignant at the attitude of contempt in which the women seemed to be held by the men, and they charged Mexican males with treating their women as little more than slaves or beasts of burden._ (Johannsen 170)

Joaquín’s fierce respect for women’s honor combines the Hidalgo culture of the Californios and the prevailing paternalism of U.S. culture at mid-century, suggesting that he has just the personal qualities needed to incorporate the best qualities of Hidalgo California into the recently admitted state (1850) of California.

On the other hand, several of the women accompanying Joaquín’s gang fit the equally prevalent “stereotype of exotic, receptive Mexican women,” including a certain savagery they share with men like Three-Fingered Jack (Horsman 234). Margarita, widow when her husband Pedro Gonzales is killed by Harry Love, quickly takes up with another gang member, the rough Guerra, who beats her. Plotting her revenge as calmly as Joaquín plans his, but now acting against her “family” (and her gender), Margarita waits until Guerra is asleep, then tips “from a ladle” “just one drop of hot lead into his ear” (Life 81). Mourning loudly and long over the husband she “had made a corpse,” Margarita promptly takes up with yet another gang member, Isidora Conejo, “who loved her much more tenderly than did the brutal Guerra” (81–82). Quoting Byron on the deviousness of women, Ridge hardly intends Margarita to represent a positive example of just revenge, but much rather the dangerous unruliness of women when the regulation of patriarchal society fails. Margarita fits the type of the _femme fatale_: “Twice widowed, her sorrows had not dimmed the lustre of her eyes, or taken the gloss from her rich dark hair, or the rose from her cheeks. Her step was buoyant as ever, the play of her limbs as graceful, the heave of her impulsive bosom as entrancing, and her voice as full of music as if she had never lost Gonzalez or murdered Guerra” (82). On the other hand, Joaquín’s wife, Rosita, and Reyes Féliz’s “devoted Carmelita” are both faithful to their husbands even after these two gang members are killed, Rosita returning to Sonora, where she “silently and sadly work[ed] out the slow task of a life forever blighted,” and Carmelita committing suicide to be “buried ... by the side of her well-beloved” (Life 159, 54). Like heroines in Victorian novels, Rosita and Carmelita sacrifice themselves for
their lovers, who earn such worship by protecting fiercely their feminine dependents. Reyes Félix is also Rosita's brother and thus Joaquin's brother-in-law, so these bonds of fidelity are strengthened by family ties (Life 17). Such men, Ridge suggests, are natural leaders, both of the family and in the state, even if their abilities are misused in organizing the gang's violent raids.

The bloodthirsty and utterly lawless behavior of Joaquin's gang is tempered only by occasional glimpses of the heroic individual, distinguished by manly virtue and a nearly transcendentalist self-reliance. Reflecting on the hanging of Reyes Félix and Carmelita's suicide, Ridge echoes the romantic sublimity of Mount Shasta in his celebration of the immortal soul: "We may go down to our graves with the scorn of an indignant world upon us, which hurls us from its presence—but the eternal God allows no fragment of our souls, no atom of our dust, to be lost from his universe. Poised on our own immortality, we may defy the human race and all that exists beneath the throne of God!" (Life 55). The Christian sentiments here seem to support primarily the romantic individualism Ridge affirms. Although in this passage Ridge pits the transcendental self against "the scorn of an indignant world," as if echoing the iconoclasm of Emersonian man, he clearly favors a social order designed principally to protect the rights to such individualism, which is an equally transcendentalist position.²²

Ridge's advocacy of liberal individualism as part of the politics of assimilation helps explain his otherwise inexplicable prejudices toward other ethnic minorities in the novel, especially the Chinese. Even for the reader of the 1990s, accustomed to the lurid and accelerated violence of films starring Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger, Joaquín Murieta is often shockingly violent. Gang members, including Joaquin, kill travelers without a moment's hesitation and on the flimsiest pretexts of self-defense or to avoid identification by distant pursuers. Joaquin's occasional acts of mercy occur so unpredictably as to make the overall conduct of the gang appear even more nightmarish. Nowhere is this violence more terrible than in the gang's robberies of Chinese miners, and none more horrible than Three-Fingered Jack's torture and murder of the defenseless Chinese: "I love to smell the blood of a Chinaman ... it's such easy work to kill them. It's a kind of luxury to cut their throats" (Life 64). Although Joaquin applies his erratic mercy in several cases of Chinese threatened by Three-Fingered Jack, he defends them as "pitiful," sometimes entertaining, "creatures," whose uncivilized qualities are reinforced by animal imagery (64). As Ronald Takaki has shown, the ideological representation of the Chinese as the "new barbarians" in the nineteenth century linked them with African Americans and with Native Americans, in keeping with the prevailing racial binaries of white versus non-white, American versus foreign (220).

As an anti-abolitionist, Ridge undoubtedly hoped to distance himself and his distinguished family from those African Americans, Native Americans, and

²² Parins discusses the influence of "the works of English and American romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, poets that Ridge read at school" on his love and nature poetry and his familiarity with "major British and American romantics such as Byron, Shelley, Keats, Poe, and Bryant" (84, 91). My suggestion here is that Ridge works more in the vein of American Transcendentalism than has hitherto been acknowledged and that Joaquín Murieta, as well as Ridge's poetry, is organized in large part around transcendentalist concepts of radical individualism, regulated and directed by social law.
Chinese Americans ideologically treated as a single racialized "other." Whereas Ridge’s rhetorical tirades against the racial discrimination experienced by Joaquin and his wife at the hands of Americans ought to lead him to condemn all discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or class, Ridge is actually quite selective and treats both the Chinese and California Native Americans with a mixture of amused paternalism and contempt. Although the gang at various times murders German, French, Dutch, Native American, and Mexican travelers, its greatest cruelty seems reserved for Chinese miners. To be sure, newspaper accounts of the gang’s crimes stressed its robbery and murder of Chinese, but Ridge uses these rumors to support his own assimilationist and hierarchical social values (Pitt 77).

At one point, Ridge offers a simple explanation for why one gang leader prefers to kill Chinese victims: “It was a politic stroke in Reis to kill Chinamen in preference to Americans, for no one cared for so alien a class, and they were left to shift for themselves” (Life 97). Yet such sentiments do not lead Ridge to identify with the Chinese; instead, he appears to use them as subjects of the gang’s worst violence, as if to indulge white readers’ fantasies of punishing the alien Chinese. In Ridge’s account, the Chinese are always cowardly and abject, indistinguishable from each other, compared with sheep or ants following a herd mentality. In one robbery, the gang surprises “two helpless Chinamen,” who “were sleeping off their fatigue and the effects of their luxurious pipes of opium” (47). In the most violent scene in the novel, Joaquin allows Three-Fingered Jack to murder six Chinese miners, who “made no effort to defend themselves,” even though “each had a double-barreled shot-gun,” but instead “begged for their lives” (133). Dragging each into a line by “his long tail of hair,” Jack “tied their tails securely together,” robs them, and murders them all. Although the scene is intended to reinforce the Satanic qualities of Three-Fingered Jack, it also emphasizes the extent to which the group psychology of the Chinese contrasts with the radical individualism of the American that both Ridge and his character, Joaquin, emulate.

In one of his 1858 articles for the Marysville, California Daily National Democrat, which he was editing at the time, Ridge refers to some Chinese participants in a parade, who “finding themselves in the rear—(a very unenviable position to occupy in a retreating army, but a very appropriate one in this case) ... bolted from the ranks of the main procession ... and they slunk off to their own more congenial hovels, muttering curses loud and deep on ‘Melican men’ generally” (qtd. in Parins 141–42). Like the “Digger Indians” of California, the Chinese are used by Ridge to establish a horizon of civilization according to which others are judged. Just as he mocks in this newspaper column the imperfect English of the Chinese, so he satirizes in Joaquin Murieta the illiteracy of the

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23 Ridge makes no reference to African Americans in the novel, ignoring the important debate surrounding the use of slaves by Southerners in the gold fields. My guess is that Ridge omits such cases of organized labor to avoid the contradiction between his condemnation of the use of peons by the rancheros in the gold fields and his continuing advocacy of slavery in the U.S. and in California. For the history of slave labor in the gold fields, see Pitt 57–58.

24 At one point, Ridge describes the “industrious Chinese” miners as “innumerable ants, picking up the small but precious grains” of gold, thus reinforcing popular anxieties about “foreigners” taking gold from “Americans” (Life 83). Elsewhere Ridge describes the “miserable Chinamen” killed by the gang, who leave their bodies “along the highways like so many sheep with their throats cut by the wolves” (97).
Euroamerican mining population, implicitly contrasting the latter’s phonetically spelled, garbled written messages with the elegance and correctness of his narrative, with its allusions to Byron and inclusion of his own verse (Trumpet 58).^25

The “Digger Indians” are similarly used by Ridge to establish his cultivated distance from their savagery and to criticize the failure of Americans to live up to their social ideals in California. Several critics have commented on Ridge’s characterization of the chief of the Tejon tribe, who is introduced “seated upon his haunches in all the grandeur of ‘naked majesty,’ enjoying a very luxurious repast of roasted acorns and dried angle worms” while his “swarthy subjects were scattered in various directions around him, engaged for the most part in the very arduous task of doing nothing” (Life 36). Reinforcing prevalent stereotypes of California tribes as primitive and “lazy”—often the result of their displacement from native hunting grounds by white settlers—Ridge adopts a consistently mock heroical style to refer to Chief Sapatarra’s “Nation,” “capital,” “majesty,” “council of state,” and “dominions” (36). Louis Owens argues that Ridge’s representation of the Tejon people lacks “any sense of irony,” suggesting that “Ridge thought primarily and perhaps almost exclusively of his own people when he addressed the concern of racial injustice through the example of Joaquin Murieta” (39). Cheryl Walker, on the other hand, considers Ridge’s treatment of both the Chinese and the Digger Indians to be ironic, even dismissive, in part because both groups are “fundamentally nonaggressive,” “cowardly,” and “therefore not to be taken seriously” (131–32).

Both Owens and Walker interpret Ridge’s treatment of the Tejon as evidence of what Owens terms his “internal conflict,” divided between his passionate condemnation of racial injustice toward Joaquín and Rosita (and his own Cherokee people) and his endorsement of the racial ideology of his times in regard to Chinese and Californian Native Americans. In his journalism, Ridge condemned strongly Euroamerican violence against the “Digger Indians” as “inhuman acts” caused by “civilized ignorance,” but he also describes California tribal peoples as “a poor, humble, degraded, and cowardly race” (Trumpet 62).^26 However conflicted Ridge was in these respects, he is quite consistent in working out the explicit moral of his story “that there is nothing so dangerous in its consequences as injustice to individuals—whether it arise from prejudice of color or from any other source; that a wrong done to one man is a wrong to society and to the world” (Life 158). The Chinese and Tejons, even when they are named, as “Woh Le” and “Chief Sapatarra” are, lack the crucial qualities of romantic individuation: self-consciousness, control over one’s representation of self, manly assertiveness, a distinct power over signs, and the desire for higher civilization.^27 In short, they lack those qualities that in the highest degree constitute romantic genius, the soul (or “spirit”) of radical individualism.

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25 Originally published as “A True Sketch of ‘Si bolla.’ A Digger Indian” in the Sacramento Bee (June 24, 1857), “old Si Bolla,” the Native American Ridge describes, sends Ridge a written invitation that resembles the style of the Yankee miners in their writings in Joaquin Murieta: “Mr. _______ deer sur: If you want any bar mete cum to my camp.” Compare with examples of Americans’ bad grammar in the novel (Life 131–32).

26 These passages originally appeared in Ridge’s letter to the New Orleans True Delta (November 1, 1851).

27 “Woh Le,” the name given a Chinese traveler spared from Jack’s violence by Joaquin’s mercy, may well be a tag-name, as in “Woe Le,” an Orientalist “Woe-is-me.”
Joaquín Murieta has all of these qualities in abundance, but lacks a social order in which they could be protected and developed. His innate sense of honor, as well as his fierce dedication to avenging dishonor, are complemented by a courage that often verges on the reckless and by abilities to disguise himself that indicate how well he understands the social construction of the self by way of fashion, rhetoric, and general deportment. Able to slip in and out of towns in various disguises, Joaquín encourages the late twentieth-century reader to interpret him, as well as John Rollin Ridge, as precursors of the postmodern subject.\textsuperscript{26} Certainly the elements of the socially constructed, multicultural, and multiregional subjectivity often identified with postcolonial metropolitan societies may be found in nineteenth-century texts and characters, but it is probably more historically accurate to understand Ridge's Joaquín Murieta as the embodiment of a liberal individualism Ridge imagined would "solve" the problem of racial discrimination and, more specifically, of the violent political struggles within the Cherokee Nation, by making available education and cultural imitation to "aliens" desiring a place within the encompassing nationality of the U.S.

The romantic sublimity of Ridge's "Mount Shasta" is emulated, albeit never achieved, by Joaquín Murieta on several occasions in the novel, but never as explicitly as when he adopts the fictional pose on which the illustrator of the third edition of \textit{Joaquín Murieta} (1874), Charles C. Nahl, would base his famous 1868 painting, "Joaquín Murieta," which is reproduced on the cover of the University of Oklahoma Press's paperback edition of the novel. Having just tricked twenty-five miners by speaking "very good English," so that "they could scarcely make out whether he was a Mexican or an American," Joaquín is identified by Jim Boyce, who knows him by sight, and is forced to flee by way of "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 upon which the miners had pitched their tents, and not more than forty yards distant." Shouting to his pursuers, Joaquin identifies himself with the "monarch-mountain" of Ridge's poem and defies the "inferior minds" below (24):

\begin{quote}
[K]nowing that his only chance lay in the swiftness of his sure-footed animal, he drew his keenly polished bowie-knife in proud defiance of the danger and waved it in scorn as he rode on. It was perfectly sublime to see such super-human daring and recklessness. At each report, which came fast and thick, he kissed the flashing blade and waved it at his foes. He passed the ordeal, as awful and harrowing to a man's nerves as can be conceived, untouched by a ball and otherwise unharmed. In a few moments, a loud whoop rang out in the woods a quarter of a mile distant, and the bold rider was safe! (Life 87).
\end{quote}

Joaquín's triumphal "whoop" echoes that of "the genuine North American red men, whom Ridge celebrates in his journalism as "brave, subtle, and terrible in their destruction" during the "bloody frontier wars of the United States," but they are not to be confused with the "poor and imbecile" California "Diggers."

\textsuperscript{26} Walker specifically refers to Ridge himself "as an example of the metropolitan postmodern" (119).
whom Ridge believes should be moved to reservations and thus "protected ... by the General Government" (Trumpet 62, 64). Embodving the residual qualities of the "noble savage," a figure rapidly giving way at mid-century to the myth of the degraded and unregenerate "Indian," in the hybrid form of a Sonoran with Hidalgo traits and democratic aspirations, Ridge's Joaquin is literally incorporated in a landscape borrowed from the Euroamerican romantics.

And the figure works, because the ideology of assimilation allows such hybridities to cohere, shedding those dangerous or incongruous elements that mark the boundaries of Ridge's verbal painting. Nahl's 1868 portrait accurately follows several details of Ridge's prose, including the hat shot from Joaquin's head to let his "long black hair" stream "behind him" and the wild look of horse and rider that express a natural sublimity (Life 87). But in his dress, face, and his horse's equipage, Nahl's "Joaquin Murietta" is decisively Mexican, from the fringed serape, scarlet waistband, and silver buttons dotting the seams of his breeches to the tooled leather saddle, boots, and stirrup guards. In Nahl's iconography, the figure is the prototype of the demonic, exotic, and often strangely honorable Western bandido, whose image would migrate from Mexico to Texas, California, and the Southwest in the form of risk-taking outlaws, such as O. Henry's "The Cisco Kid" and Johnston McCulley's Zorro. In his poem, "Joaquin Murietta" (1869), Joaquin Miller represents the dangerous and Mexican qualities of a romantic figure, who can at the same time be used to affirm U.S. imperial ambitions in the West. Effectively stripped of his political qualities, Miller's bandido is part of the general California legend, a reminder of:

What wondrous marvels might be told!
Enough, to know that empire here
Shall burn her loftiest, brightest star;
Here art and eloquence shall reign,
As o'er the wolf-rear'd realm of old.... (Miller 36)

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29 These passages originally appeared in Ridge's letter to the New Orleans True Delta and in "Oppression of the Digger Indians," which appeared in The Daily Bee (July 12, 1857).

30 O. Henry popularized "The Cisco Kid," who "killed for the love of it—because he was quick-tempered—to avoid arrest—for his own amusement—any reason that came to his mind would suffice," in "The Caballero's Way" (187). Like Joaquin, Cisco represents frontier anarchy—the Spanish word cisco means colloquially "a noisy brawl" or "to smash something to bits," as in jacer cisco. O. Henry's "Cisco Kid" combines the ruthlessness of Three-Fingered Jack with the courtliness of Joaquin, but the Kid plays a deadly game of romance, arranging a plot in which his lover, Tonia Perez, will be mistakenly killed by Lieutenant Sandridge, the man to whom she has betrayed the Kid. Of course, later Hollywood and television versions of The Cisco Kid would thoroughly sanitize this potent brew of colonialist evils. Johnston McCulley (1883–) wrote the original story for the Zorro films, made first for Douglas Fairbanks, whose production company made the first films in the 1920s, and the 1940 remake, The Mark of Zorro (directed by Rouben Mamoulian and starring Tyrone Power as Zorro), whose popularity led to the 1950s Disney television series. McCulley's The Mark of Zorro was an early version of the "made-from-movies" books now so popular. At this writing, SONY Pictures is producing a new The Mask of Zorro, starring Antonio Banderas, the exoticized "Spanish/Mexican outlaw" for this generation of Americans. The Zorro films are set, of course, in "Spanish California" and much more explicitly play upon the "Robin Hood" themes than Joaquin Murietta. Yet both Zorro (Spanish for "fox") and Joaquin rely on the respectability and cultivation of the Californio's Hidalgo heritage—Zorro is the Los Angeles Hidalgo, Don Diego de la Vega, fighting the corrupt Alcalde of Los Angeles, Luis Quintero, in a symbolic enactment of the Mexican Revolution against Spain. Such are the wayward routes of popular culture!

31 Like Ridge and Nahl, Miller identifies Joaquin Murietta with romantic sublimity. Miller was derogatorily referred to as "Joaquin" in the press for this poem, and he defiantly took the nickname as his poetic name (40). See also Varley 1.
In Miller’s mythic landscape, the U.S. aspires to ancient Roman authority in part because of its ability to sustain “legends” as dramatic (melodramatic?) as the story of Joaquín Murieta. Miller’s poetical figure, however, is stripped of the threatening anarchy and rebellion with which Ridge invests his bandido, and it is proportionately more conventional.

For Ridge, Joaquín’s sublimity embodies the identity that U.S. culture ought to cultivate in a democratic society: self-reliance based on an ability to harness natural power and to defy social conventionality. In Ridge’s portrait, Joaquín is decisively American, far more so even at his most rebellious and criminal than those “lawless and desperate men, who bore the name of Americans but failed to support the honor and dignity of that title” by first attacking Joaquín and his wife, Rosita (Life 9). Ridge by no means endorses Joaquín’s specific plot to rebel against the U.S. and return the Southern counties of California to Mexico, but he invests Joaquín’s rebellious spirit with the zeal of revolution that Ridge identifies with the democratic aspirations of romantic individualism. Walker concludes that “liberty as individualism, as Ridge himself seems to know at some level, undermines the force of nation in which Indian life was traditionally rooted” (Walker 136). If so, then Ridge is the deeply conflicted, postmodern metropolitan that both Owens and Walker represent in their readings of this novel. But there is little evidence that Ridge endorses the more communal or collective values of the Cherokee in preference to the prevailing individualism of mid-century U.S. culture.

In his articles on North American Indians for The Hesperian, for example, Ridge makes virtually no comment on how Native American social organizations differ from Euroamerican, looking instead for points of connection and comparison. Even when such opportunities present themselves, as when Ridge discusses the special stoicism and fortitude of Native Americans, he does not explain such cultural differences as the result of the Native American’s greater sense of social obligation or the imbrication of religious, legal, and personal ethics in Lakota society, for example (Trumpet 79–80). In the few places he does comment on Native American political organization, he notes how the Iroquois confederation of “The Six Nations” was a “confederated system” that “was the most remarkable example of native political sagacity and untaught savage forecast that occurs in all history,” referring thereby to Iroquois’ anticipation of U.S. nationality (Trumpet 71; emphasis added). Throughout these articles, he refers to tribal organizations as “nations,” in keeping with the prevailing and quite unreflective nationalism of nineteenth-century U.S. culture.

A good deal has been written about the wayward historical reputation of Joaquín Murieta, whose name dotes the California countryside and is still considered the state’s most popular legend. Beyond California, the story has been revised in Spanish-language versions of “nationalistic narratives in Chile, Spain, and Mexico,” which have drawn upon Joaquín’s rebellion against the U.S.

Varley gives a good sample of the persistence of the myth of Murieta in the state and abroad (129–55). As reported the Los Angeles Times (January 9, 1998), recent restoration of the Greystone Church at Mission San Juan Capistrano has revealed numerous inscriptions on the interior stones, including the neatly incised and mysteriously dated:

JOAQUIN MURIETA
1865
conquest of California for nationalistic or anti-colonial purposes of their own (119). The most celebrated of these revisionary accounts of Joaquín’s legend is Pablo Neruda’s *Fulgor y Muerta de Joaquín Murieta* (*Splendour and Death of Joaquín Murieta*, 1967), the five-act musical drama in which Neruda claims Joaquín was a Chilean, following the Chilean legend that he was born in Quillota.33 Neruda’s Joaquín predictably defends the working classes against Yankee imperialism, and he is martyred by “a man wearing Uncle Sam’s tall hat and striped trousers” (Monaghan 217): Connecting Joaquín’s banditry in California of the 1850s with the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism in the 1960s, Neruda plays upon a potential within Joaquín’s legend that Ridge clearly does not intend.

The postcolonial reffunctioning of colonial narratives is often a self-conscious way of establishing counter-discursive authority amid a history saturated with colonial cultural traces. Something of this sort seems to motivate Neruda’s revision of the legend of Joaquín Murieta, a modern interpretation complemented by nineteenth-century appropriations of the story designed to indulge Chilean miners’ fantasies of revenge against their American persecutors. In this case, however, the counter-discursive, often anti-colonial Chilean and Mexican versions of the legend are themselves matched by the persistence of the story in the popular literature, folklore, and even place-names of modern California. From the 1859 *California Police Gazette* version of Ridge’s novel to Walter Noble Burns’s *The Robin Hood of El Dorado* (1932), the Hollywood script based on that book, and even James Varley’s recent *The Legend of Joaquin Murrieta: California’s Gold Rush Bandit* (1995), the myth of Joaquín Murieta has bolstered U.S. ideology. The legend has done this work by maintaining Joaquin as the criminal “outsider” whose romance depends crucially on his ritual exorcism by means of literary denouement, laws “regulating” foreign immigration from the Chinese Exclusion Acts to California’s recently adopted propositions 187 and 209, and physical violence of real and imaginary sorts.

Scholars are fond of pointing out how Ridge’s novel originated a legend that came to be taken for historical fact, gaining for Ridge a reputation for literary verisimilitude capable of fooling such nineteenth-century historians of California as Hubert Howe Bancroft and Theodore Hitell (Jackson xxxviii). But the realism with which Ridge’s version of Joaquín has been invested is more likely the result of the adaptability of Ridge’s character to the ideology of American individualism, which is itself crucial to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. historiography, than Ridge’s technical skills as a novelist. This is not to diminish in any way his accomplishment in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta*, which ought to be measured both by its successful incorporation of romantic idealist concepts and by its help in establishing the pulp literature and dime-novel industry that would so profoundly shape U.S. cultural attitudes from 1840

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33 Monaghan notes that Quillota, Chile, “religious and extraordinarily conservative, was an odd background for the outlaw revered by Chileans” (214). The legend of Joaquin as Chilean probably derives from Roberto Hyenne’s translation back into Spanish of a French edition of the pirated “second edition” of *Joaquin Murrieta*, published by the *California Police Gazette* in San Francisco from September 3 to November 5, 1859, in “ten installments of an anonymously-written Murrieta story,” as Varley describes the pirated work (141). According to Monaghan, Hyenne’s new translation of the story from French into Spanish (again) “was published in Santiago, Chile, under his name as author and with the title *El Bandido Chileno*,” in which Hyenne “moved Joaquin’s birthplace from Mexico to Quillota and made him a national figure who avenged the persecutors of his fellow countrymen in California” (216).
to 1940.34 Both the high and low cultural traditions did real and enduring violence to native peoples, racialized “foreigners,” and ethnic minorities while waving banners of liberty, justice, and economic opportunity, not simply by stereotyping and caricaturing such marginal groups but by colonizing in advance many of the counter-discursive practices available to them. In the long and still to be determined history of multiculturalism in California, this ideological co-optation of the right to speak out, to rebel, to conspire against injustice may be the ultimate, and finally postmodern, highway robbery.

**Works Cited**


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34 Hutchinson traces the term “pulp fiction” back to “as early as the 1840’s when publishers decided that one way to lower costs, and thus price, was to use newspaper presses and cheap newsprint paper.” The first edition of Ridge’s novel was printed in this pamphlet format, which may be why only one known copy has survived.


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