

men indiscriminately because he cannot attain his aims without Three-Fingered Jack's support. Murieta's belief that the ends justify the means is difficult to distinguish from the vigilante tactics of his pursuers, who torture and execute Mexicans suspected of aiding the bandits without due process.

In the novel, Murieta is mirrored by his most formidable pursuers, Captains Charles Ellas and Harry Love. Ellas emerges as a counterweight to the intensification of the bandits' activities in 1853: "so diverse were their operations, so numerous and swift, that I shall not attempt to give a minute account of them," writes Ridge. Ellas, a courageous, active, and honorable "young man of fine appearance," is "naturally looked to as a leader" by the terrified populace. Like Murieta, however, Ellas finds himself torn between his "chivalrous" character and the exigencies of his mission. He relies on information acquired through the arbitrary detention, torture, and murder of suspicious-looking Mexicans, and (like Murieta) he delegates these methods to others: "A doubt arising in the minds of some persons . . . as to whether it was right to put the fellow to death, Ellas left him in charge of the two Cherokee half-breeds with the request that they would give a good account of him. . . ." The two lithographs included in the first edition (see pages 6 and 75), portraits of Murieta and Love, invite readers to compare the bandit with the man who killed him. Ridge describes Love as Murieta's counterpart, an energetic and "stealthy pursuer" 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." If the state's agents of discretionary violence appear to help establish the rule of law, they also spread chaos and insecurity. With armed parties scouring the

countryside, "Arrests were continually being made; popular tribunals established in the woods, Judge Lynch installed upon the bench; criminals arraigned, tried, and executed upon the limb of a tree; pursuits, flights, skirmishes, and a topsy-turvy, hurly-burly mass of events that set narration of defiance." Even the suspected "harrowing places and dens of the robbers"—presumably the homes of Mexican non-combatants—are systematically destroyed and burned by a mob of angry citizens. While Ridge generally uses the distancing techniques of euphemism and passive voice to describe atrocities committed in the name of the law, at one point he breaks off his narrative to offer an ironic commentary on the "custom" of lynching: "Bah! it is a sight that I never like to see, although I have been civilized for a good many years."

In the last sixty-plus years since the novel's 1955 republication, critics have come to interpret Ridge's novel variously as a folk story of a charismatic Robin Hood-like bandit, an impassioned protest against racial injustice, a troubled justification of state violence, a thinly veiled plotting of Ridge's personal revenge fantasies, an allegory of the tensions between ethnic assimilation and anticolonial resistance, and a foundational work of Native American and California literature.* These readings explore important questions about the novel's significance: Does Murieta stand in for the wounded and vengeful Mexican body politic, or does he unravel Mexican group identity by embracing an individualist and elitist individualism?† Does his ability to move undetected throughout California empower him, or does it give license to the state's deployment

* See, e.g., Jackson, Rifkin, Owens, Rowe, Smith, and Walker.

† See Aleman, "Assimilation and the Decapitated Body Politic in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*."