

## Introduction

Like its elusive hero, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murrieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) is difficult to pin down. It has the distinction of being the first novel published in California, the first novel published by a Native American, and the first American novel to feature a Mexican protagonist. Its story draws together transnational events in the history of three nations, connecting the California Gold Rush with the Cherokee Trail of Tears and the US-Mexican War. It blends elements of epic, folk tale, revenge tragedy, and romance—yet historians have often treated it as a factual record. It has been repurposed, and sometimes plagiarized, throughout the US, Mexico, Europe, and Latin America; in publications ranging from the *California Police Gazette* to the popular *Corrido de Joaquín Murrieta*, a play by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; and the 1998 Hollywood film *The Mask of Zorro* (in which Joaquín's brother, played by Antonio Banderas, takes up the mask of Zorro). While few Americans today would recognize the name of Joaquín Murrieta, most are familiar with figures such as Zorro and Batman, whose creators were inspired by this sensational account of vigilante justice and righteous violence. Paradoxically, John Rollin Ridge's book (published under his Cherokee name, Yellow Bird) has become both one of the most influential