

and one of the most invisible novels in the history of American literature.

In addition to its profound and wide-ranging cultural influence, *Joaquín Murieta* is distinguished by Ridge's formal and thematic ambitions. Formally, Ridge stretches the conventions of sensational crime fiction to plot not just the rapid and mysterious movements of his protagonist across California's sparsely settled landscapes, but also Murieta's conflicted character and the ideological tensions between individual and collective motives. The novel's formal idiosyncrasies—interpolating a landscape poem; jumping around in space and time; and shifting among the perspectives of Murieta, the minor characters who comprise his organization, and the men who try to hunt him down—express the social frictions at the heart of Ridge's concerns. Meanwhile, *Joaquín Murieta* takes up some of the most complex themes in American literature: cultural assimilation, racist and antiracist violence, the tension between ethical and political action, and—perhaps most centrally—philosophical questions about the legitimacy of state and extralegal violence. It stands alongside such works as Nat Turner and Thomas Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), William Apess's "Eulogy on King Philip" (1836), Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855), Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, and Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859) as a classic American story of antiracist insurrection.

The "Publishers' Preface" to the 1854 edition inaugurated one influential model for reading *Joaquín Murieta* by suggesting that the novel reflects "the tragical events" and "civil commotion" precipitated by the federal government's removal of the Cherokee Nation from their ancestral lands. In the wake of the estimated four thousand

Cherokee deaths resulting from the Trail of Tears, negotiations with the US government caused intense ideological conflict among the Cherokee. Ridge's father (John Ridge), grandfather (Major Ridge), and cousin (Elias Boudinot) were prominent Cherokee leaders who believed that the only way to protect the Cherokee Nation's rights was to negotiate a treaty with the federal government. Without the approval of the Cherokee National Council or Principal Chief John Ross, they signed the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, which ceded the Cherokee Nation's territory in the southeast and established a basis for forced removal. In 1839, when Ridge was twelve years old, a group of Ross's supporters assassinated Ridge's father, his grandfather, and Boudinot for having signed the treaty; in the lurid terms of the Publishers' Preface, "While the bleeding corpse of his father was yet lying in the house, surrounded by his weeping family, the news came that his grand-father, a distinguished old war-chief, was also killed; and, fast upon this report, that others of his near relatives were slain." Ridge's mother (Sarah Bird Northrup, a white woman) fled with her children to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where Ridge studied law. In 1849 Ridge killed a Ross sympathizer named David Kell in a horse dispute, and fled the state. He moved to California to join the Gold Rush in 1850, but soon gave up mining to work as a poet, journalist, and the editor of several newspapers.\*

In California, Ridge witnessed a young state shot through with social contradictions and upheavals. California had been transferred to the US under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which concluded the US-Mexico War (1846–48). The treaty stipulated that

\* Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*, pp. 1–94, provides a detailed account of Ridge's early years.