

Mexican inhabitants of the territory could choose to remain in California and receive US citizenship, and the majority of California's Mexican inhabitants chose to remain. However, California's constitution restricted voting rights to white men (thus disenfranchising Mexicans of black or Native descent), and the federal government failed to honor the property rights of former Mexican citizens. In the same years, the California Gold Rush led to rapid growth, as miners from all over the world swelled the non-Native population from 15,000 in 1848 to 165,000 in 1850.* By contrast, this influx of settlers brought about a catastrophic decline in the state's Native population. "From 1846 to 1873, colonization policies, abductions, diseases, homicides, executions, battles, massacres, institutionalized neglect on federal reservations, and the willful destruction of indigenous villages and their food stores seem to have reduced California Indian numbers by at least 80 percent, from perhaps 150,000 to some 30,000."† The nascent state government quickly moved to legislate white supremacy by imposing racially targeted laws. In 1849 General Persifor Smith, the US military governor of California, sanctioned the rumor that it was illegal for non-citizens to dig gold in the state. In addition, voting rights were withheld, black and (later) Chinese witnesses were prohibited from testifying in court, Native Americans charged with "vagrancy" were subjected to forced labor, and in 1850 California instituted a Foreign Miners' Tax that was chiefly (and often violently) enforced against Mexican, South American, and eventually Chinese miners. (In the novel, Ridge refers to the last of these outrages when he describes

* McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception*, p. 66.

† Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*, p. 346.

Murieta's robbery of a group of Germans as "collect[ing] taxes off of them for 'Foreign Miners' Licenses.") Racially motivated lynchings and other forms of mob violence such as those depicted in Ridge's novel were common occurrences. In 1851 Native Cahuilla and Cupeño warriors conducted a series of raids in Southern California before their alleged leader, Antonio Garra, was captured and executed. Newspaper accounts of the "Garra Uprising," which reported that the charismatic leader was secretly aided by *Californios*, may have informed Ridge's account of Murieta's activities.*

Although Ridge advocated for the rights of the Cherokee Nation and Mexican Americans in his writings, his ideas about race and identity were complex and often incoherent. Ridge did not believe in the equality of races. Descended from a family of slaveholders (Ridge had held slaves while living in Arkansas), he opposed both abolitionism and the Civil War. In *Joaquín Murieta* he depicts California Indians as uncivilized cowards and presents titillating descriptions of well-known bandit Three-Fingered Jack's brutal massacres of passive Chinese miners.† Even among his characters of Mexican descent, Ridge distinguishes between the nobility of Murieta (whose "complexion was neither very dark nor very light") and the frequently ignoble, undisciplined character of his followers. In his newspaper writings, he endorsed amalgamation and cultural assimilation as the best path forward for Native Americans. Whereas many Native Americans emphasized the importance of sovereignty and

* Rifkin, "For the Wrongs of Our Poor Bleeding Country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquín Murieta*," p. 38.

† On Ridge's depiction of cross-racial interactions, see Christensen, "Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*."