Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge's
*The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*

Peter G. Christensen
*Marquette University*

*The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) by John Rollin Ridge (1827-1867) begins two traditions in American literature. Not only is it the first novel written in English by a person of Native American ancestry, it is also the first novel by an American in English treating the Mexican community of post-Mexican War California.1 Surprisingly, critics of the novel have as yet failed to look closely at this cultural intersection and analyze Ridge's depiction of different ethnic groups in the novel.

Increased attention is bound to come Ridge's way soon. The new *Heath Anthology of American Literature* edited by Paul Lauter includes three selections by Ridge, two poems and an essay on Indian affairs, even though there are no excerpts from *Joaquin Murieta*. In their two-page discussion of Ridge (1: 1772-73), James W. Parins and Andrew G. Wiget note four attitudes characteristic of Ridge's thought: he urges all Indians to become "civilized" and assimilate; 2) he "celebrates[s] the expansion of United States power and human technological mastery over nature"; 3) he has an "ambivalent" stance toward the traditional concerns of his people; and 4) he believes that less acculturated Indians need to be protected during the transitional period. The ambivalence of his concerns for Native Americans can be extended to other minority groups in the United States, such as Mexicans and Chinese laborers, as we find in *Joaquin Murieta*.

This dimension of the novel is not made clear in the preface to the currently available paperback edition (written for the 1955 edition) by Joseph Henry Jackson. Unfortunately, the University of Oklahoma Press has not had this essay updated and revised, and it still serves as the principal introduction to the novel, especially for students. Jackson misread the novel as a Robin Hood story, supplying an emphasis on the redistribution of wealth that is not there. In addition, he did not have available to him either the later researches of Remi Nadeau (1974) and Frank F. Latta (1980) which establish the historical basis for the Murieta gang or the collection of Ridge's essays on Native Ameri-

Although Ridge was dedicated to seeing justice done for the Cherokee Nation, and he hoped that it would be admitted to the Union as a state, we should not allow this attitude to cloud our evaluation of *Joaquin Murieta*. Here Ridge is not as concerned with justice to the Mexicans as he is with courage and heroism in the face of oppression. Ridge champions the Mexicans for facing the American oppressors, for they have organized a heroic resistance, even if their retaliation methods are often characterized by murder and violence aimed at innocent people. In contrast, American Indians and Chinese immigrants in the novel do not receive this praise, since they act cowardly. This lack of empathy for these unfortunates is reflected in Ridge’s philosophical poem “Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance,” written in 1852 and inserted early in the novel. Although this poem is not about minority groups, it praises noble isolation rather than group spirit and gives a hierarchical view of the world. A look at Ridge’s essays on the so-called Digger Indians and his other poems reveals that he has a scale of values in which some Native American tribes, such as the Cherokee, Aztecs, and Incas are seen as the superior representatives of their race.

One might initially be surprised that Ridge did not choose to write a novel chiefly about injustice to American Indians or about bloodshed among the factions of the Cherokee Nation. After all, he was the son and grandson of leaders of the Treaty Party, which agreed in 1835 to removal beyond the Mississippi. His father, John Ridge, held twenty-one slaves in 1835 (Halliburton 192), and the family lived like well-off Southern planters. The elder Ridge was murdered at his home in 1839 by the rival Cherokee faction of John Ross, but his son escaped. The younger Ridge moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas, with his mother after the assassination. In his late teens he killed a member of the Ross faction and in 1850 headed for the California gold fields. After some years as a miner, he became a full-time journalist. Although as a newspaper editor Ridge denounced secession as treason (Foreman 304), he was very much opposed to Abraham Lincoln (305). At the end of the Civil War, he led the Southern Cherokee delegates to Washington, D. C., trying “to secure federal recognition of a Southern Cherokee Nation, separate and distinct from the Cherokees under Ross” (Wilkins 344). However, his efforts were unsuccessful (see Cherokee Nation 1866) and he died in 1867, one year after Ross.

Despite these vivid events in his life, Ridge chose not to focus his novel directly on Native Americans, and American Indian themes are at the heart of only a few of his poems. Probably this decision comes
from the fact that he favored assimilation, and his audience was primarily white. Furthermore, Frank F. Latta suggests that he was one-eighth Cherokee (352). Ridge’s skin was fairly light and except for his dark black hair, he had Caucasian features (Walker, Literary Frontier 49). Although Angie Debo speculated in 1932 that Ridge’s concern for the Cherokee Nation was probably more sentimental than real (67), republication of some of his journalism in A Trumpet of Our Own shows his concern for Native Americans, while at the same time indicating how distanced he felt from such California tribes as the Digger Indians.

It might initially seem that the theme of Mexican rights in California, as treated in Joaquin Murieta was a projection of some of his concerns for his own race. Indeed for Franklin Walker, Ridge’s support for the Mexicans was equivalent to championing the cause of his fellow Indians. There are, however, problems with this interpretation. We should remember that his hero Joaquin is presented as being of full-blooded Spanish descent, and not as part-Indian like many Mexicans.

In his preface to Joaquin Murieta, Ridge defends the Mexicans and champions their heroism and courage:

Besides, it is but doing justice to a people who have so far degenerated as to have been called by many, “A Nation of Cowards,” to hold up a manifest contradiction, or at least an exception to so sweeping an opinion, in the character of a man who, bad though he was, possessed a soul as full of unconquerable courage as ever belonged to a human being. Although the Mexicans may be whipped by every other nation, in a battle of two or five to one, yet no man who speaks the truth can ever deny that there lived one Mexican whose nerves were as iron in the face of danger and death. (4)

The “justice” mentioned here pertains not to Murieta’s righting of social wrongs such as the exorbitant prospecting tax of 1850 used to keep the gold fields in the hands of white Americans, but rather the defense of the honor of the Mexican people. The preface also stresses the reliability of his narrative in order to indicate that the Mexicans have not “degenerated,” as many have claimed.

Murieta begins life as a noble-souled man willing to get along with the Americans, but he turns to crime for many pressing reasons. His girlfriend is raped, and his half-brother is beaten and killed as a result of a trumped-up charge of horse stealing. Murieta’s prospecting claim is stolen, and he is later whipped. (The researches of Nadeau and Latta have indicated that the real Murieta bands did not have their origin in this type of direct social injustice.) The other members of his band do not have such noble instincts, and one of them, Three-Fingered Jack, is known for his particular bloodthirstiness.4
Murieta and his band have no sense of camaraderie with the oppressed Chinese and American Indians. In fact, the Chinese sometimes offer comic relief in the novel. As Latta points out, the Chinese were actually often victims of attacks by the Murieta band, and the unfair Foreign Miners' Tax was not the chief cause of the raids (35). Unfortunately, the humor used by Ridge in describing the Chinese has strong tones of prejudice. The first encounter between the bandits and the Chinese begins as follows:

... at this place two helpless Chinamen were encamped by the foot of a sycamore tree, and, it being near eleven o'clock in the night, were sleeping off their fatigue and the effects of their luxurious pipes of opium. Their picks and prospecting pans showed them to be miners, who were most probably supplied with a due amount of cash, as Chinamen generally are. Joaquin was for riding on, but Three-Fingered Jack could not resist the temptation of at least giving their pockets an examination. He, therefore, dismounted and walked up to the unconscious Celestials, who were snoring very soundly in their blankets and shook them. They awoke, and, seeing a horrible-looking devil standing over and glaring upon them, raised a hideous shriek, and, rising, fell upon their knees before him with the most lugubrious supplications in a by no means euphonious tongue. (47)

Ridge seems to be mocking the Chinese through such phrases as "unconscious Celestials" and "by no means euphonious tongue." Their opium use has not only rendered them incapable of fighting back, but also of perceiving clearly, since they mistake Jack for a devil. After they hand over twenty or thirty dollars, Jack cuts their throats against Murieta's wishes. The Chinese are seen as rich men rather than as a transplanted minority group which might also desire to resist white American exclusion and repression.

In the next appearance of the Chinese we have another piece of racial humor:

... they met a Chinaman with a long tail, carrying a large bundle suspended at each end of a stick laid across his shoulders. ... Looking up and seeing so large a number of armed men before him, his eyes rolled in sudden fear, and he ducked his half-shaved head in unmistakable homage and respect to— the revolvers and bowie-knives which met his vision. No one harmed him, and he shuffled on vastly gratified and relieved. He had passed only a few minutes when he was heard howling and screaming in the most harrowing manner; and, looking back, they discovered the horrified Celestial with his tail flying in the wind, running towards them at the top of his speed, with arms wildly sawing the air. ... (63)

The stereotypically racist image of the eye-rolling victim reminds one
of the image of frightened blacks in many Hollywood movies. Fortunately, this time Joaquin is able to save the Chinese man from Jack, who says, “I love to smell the blood of a Chinaman. Besides, it’s such easy work to kill them. It’s a kind of luxury to cut their throats” (64). Although Ridge hardly supports killing the Chinaman, he can not be completely excused from making him a laughing-stock. In a third incident, Jack humiliates the Chinese by tying their pig tales together before he splits their skulls and severs their neck-veins (133).

The Chinese seem to be the objects of a deliberate violence because they are foreigners and because they are hard-working and supposedly likely to have thousands of dollars on them. At one point, another robber, Reis, commits crimes, lurking in an abandoned tunnel. These are described by Ridge in the following terms:

All his thefts and robberies had been done in the night. The miserable Chinamen were mostly the sufferers, and they lay along the highways like so many sheep with their throats cut by the wolves. 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. (97)

Later we learn that in February 1853, near the end of Murieta’s career, a dozen Chinese camps had been plundered. The Chinese felt that “they were singled out for destruction” (139). Seized by panic, they fled to the towns. Had Ridge made some attempt to show redistribution of wealth, perhaps it would be possible to understand this event somewhat more sympathetically.

Like the Chinese, the American Indians are also presented as cowardly. In May 1852, Murieta and his men encounter the Tejon Indians led by Sapatarra:

The cupidity of the old chief and his right-hand men was raised to the highest pitch, and they resolved to manage the matter in hand with great skill and caution; which last, by the way, is a quality that particularly distinguishes the California Indians, amounting to so extreme a degree that it might safely be called cowardice. Joaquin and party, having ascertained that they were no longer pursued by the Oris Timbers Ranchero, and feeling perfectly secure amongst so harmless a people as the Tejons, disencumbered themselves of their weapons to spend a few days in careless repose and genuine rural enjoyment. (37)

Through deception the cowardly Indians capture Murieta’s band. This is the only way they can be victorious, since had Murieta’s men made any resistance, the Indians “would have left the ground on the wings of the wind—so largely developed is the bump of caution on the head of a California Indian!” (38). For a week or two the “poor, miserable, cowardly Tejons had achieved a greater triumph over them than all
the Americans put together!” (38).

At other times, Ridge uses other unflattering terms to characterize the Indians. He states that the “ignorant Indians suffered for many a deed which had been perpetrated by civilized hands” (27). Is “ignorant” a term of reproach or of sympathy? If a later passage discussing superstition is a clue here, I would say the former. Ridge writes:

To those unacquainted with California customs, it may be necessary to explain that it is common in the mountains and mining districts to employ Digger Indians as bearers of letters, or runners upon errands, from one point to another, they being very expeditious on foot and willing to travel a considerable distance for a small piece of bread, fresh meat, or a ragged shirt. I have known them to swim rivers when the waters were high and dangerous in order to carry a letter to its destination. They are exceedingly faithful in this business, having a superstitious dread of that mysterious power which makes a paper talk without a mouth. (130)

Although the poverty of the Indians is made clear, their naivete makes the biggest impression on us. They are also presented as subservient to a more civilized race.

Ridge’s lack of human warmth toward the Native Americans and Chinese is also reflected in “Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance” (23-25). This poem, the only one included in the novel, champions isolation over community effort and emotional distance over empathy. In the first of the four stanzas, Mount Shasta is praised for its solitariness:

Behold the dread Mount Shasta, where it stands,
Imperial midst the lesser hight [sic], and like
Some mighty, unimpassioned mind, companionless
And cold. The storms of Heaven may beat in wrath
Against it, but it stands in unpoluted [sic]
Grandeur still; and from the rolling mists up-heaves
Its tower of pride e’en purer than before. (1-7)

In a novel in which Murieta responds emotionally to the outrages committed against him and his loved ones by forming a robber band, the mountain is nevertheless championed for its stoical detachment.

In the second stanza we suspect that perhaps Mt. Shasta is being praised for its distance from humanity:

Aspiring to the eagle’s cloudless hight [sic],
No human foot hath stained its snowy side,
Nor human breath has dimmed its icy mirror
Which it holds unto the moon, and starts [sic], and sov’reign
Sun. We may not grow familiar with the secrets
Of its hoary top, whereon the Genius
Of that mountain builds his glorious throne! (14-20)

In these lines, man and mountain are rigidly divided despite the earlier simile comparing the mountain to a mind. Mountains were, of course, important in Romantic poetry. We need think only of Shelley's Mount Blanc and Wordsworth's Mount Snowdon. Ridge twice refers to the Romantic sublimity of Mt. Shasta, not, however, because a divine spirit infuses it (although it is made by God), but because it defies accurate representation by artists. Mt. Shasta is so great, it towers over all the other peaks near it:

- Itself all light, save when some loftiest cloud
- Doth for a while embrace its cold forbidding
- Form—that monarch-mountain casts its mighty
- Shadows down upon the crownless peaks below,
- That, like inferior minds to some great
- Spirit, stand in strong contrasted littleness! (33-38)

Although the poem here rather pessimistically indicates the failure of the human mind to attain a spiritual level, the reference to "monarch-mountain" may also reveal a hierarchy of human relationships. We have noted that "mind" in line 3 represents the human; and Genius, or Spirit, has been anthropomorphized in the second stanza. After the close of the poem we get an example of the hierarchy when the local Indians are called "human savages" and associated with "savage beasts" (26).

After this assertion of the imaginative distance between the exalted Mount Shasta and the mundane human realm, the fourth stanza again draws the two together:

- Well might it win communities so blest
- To loftier feelings, and to nobler thoughts—
- The great material symbol of eternal
- Things! (54-57)

Although here the mountain should win communities to lofty feeling, in the puzzling closing of the poem, we find that human feelings, such as pity, must be abandoned:

- And well this Golden State shall thrive, if, like
- Its own Mount Shasta, sovereign law shall lift
- Itself in purer atmosphere—so high
- That human feeling, human passion, at its base
- Shall lie subdued; e'en pity's tears shall on
- Its summit freeze; to warm it, e'en the sunlight
- Of deep sympathy shall fail—
Its pure administration shall be like
The snow, immaculate upon the mountain's brow! (68-76)

The poem is inserted after Ridge recounts the unsuccessful attempt of a sheriff named Buchanan to kill or capture Murieta. Despite the romanticization of the origins of Murieta's band, for Ridge, pity can only go so far before it gets in the way of justice.

Ridge had already written against outlaws five years before. In his essay, "The Cherokee: Their History—Present Conditions and Future Prospects," which appeared in the Clarksville (Texas) Northern Standard on January 20, 1849, Ridge denounced banditry by members of the Cherokee Nation:

Then there is another portion of the nation, (not inconsiderable by any means) who have framed themselves into a banditti, and attracting to themselves the lawless and corrupt in the nation and on the line, both, white and red, bid defiance to society and law. Some of the banditti have recently been killed, and although their daring wickedness was everywhere acknowledged yet so numerous were the relations and friends of these lawless men, that a high excitement on their account alone arose in the nation, and the lives of prominent individuals were threatened. (Ridge, Trumpet 51)

Apart from the Mt. Shasta poem, such a denunciation of banditry does not appear in Joaquin Murieta. Perhaps this is because of the differing political situations. Ridge goes on to plead for making the Cherokee Nation an integral part of the United States, first as a territory and then as a state. Only in this way will one faction be prevented from tyrannizing another. The strong arm of the federal government is the only answer. Ridge believes that this policy will also ultimately come as a relief to the federal government as well. The situation for other Indian tribes was quite different than that of the Cherokee, who had probably gone farther than any other tribe in adopting white ways. The 1981 collection, A Trumpet of Our Own, includes three articles by Ridge on the unfortunate situation of the Digger Indians in California, one from 1851 and two from 1857. Ridge thought that the best hope for these persecuted people was to be left alone on reservations where they would not be killed by whites. In the New Orleans True Delta of November 1, 1851, Ridge discusses the murder of Digger Indians by the whites:

I know not how to account for such inhuman acts unless I lay it to what may be called civilized ignorance, for I have remarked that these deeds of cruelty have always been committed, in this country by ignorant men. This civilized ignorance seems to destroy the finest feelings of nature, while it denies those delicate sensibilities which belong to cul-
tivated minds. There is just sufficient civilization in such ignorance to
destroy all that is worth anything in untutored nature. (62)

The idea of "civilized ignorance" has a strange ring to it. Instead of
condemning the murders of the Digger Indians as brutality, Ridge
does not want to give the impression that he is entirely against Euro-
American society. After all, his mother was white, as was his own wife
and his paternal grandfather's wife, and he chose to live among whites
in California.

In addition, Ridge does not feel any special racial kinship to the
Diggers, as the following passage makes clear:

Were these Indians like the genuine North American red man in the
times of the bloody frontier wars of the United States, brave, subtle, and
terrible in their destruction, it would be a different matter. But they are a
poor, humble, degraded, and cowardly race. The instances are few,
where they have shown any heroism in fight. And however much
military or any other kind of men, may strive to make them appear like
dangerous or even respectable antagonists with their bows and arrows
against muskets and Colt's revolvers, it remains nevertheless a fact, that
it is no credit for a white man to kill a Digger, or even fifty of them. It
requires no heroism at all, no more than to slaughter the deer in the hills,
or the coyote in the plains. It is pitiful to think of so cowardly a contest
on both sides—contemptible to try to make a hero out of such battles as
these! (62)

This paragraph supports the idea of hierarchies of people implicit in
Ridge's novel. Unlike Joaquin's band, the Diggers are incapable of
fighting heroically for their freedom and rights. The Diggers are at the
bottom of the Native American ladder. In an article from Ridge's own
Sacramento Bee of July 12, 1857, he writes that the Digger "has none of
the romance which gathers around the nobler savage of the western
prairies—he cannot defend himself of his rights, and a prayer for
mercy is his only argument against cruelty and oppression" (62).
These Indians do not have the stoicism and sense of honor that Ridge
praises in an article in 1862.

Not surprisingly, Ridge prefers the ancient Aztecs and the Incas to
the contemporary Diggers, stressing the political power and wealth of
their civilizations. In what is perhaps his most successful poem, a piece
simply entitled "Poem," which was "delivered before the Agricultural,
Horticultural, and Mechanics' Society of the Northern District of
California, on Wednesday Evening, August 5th, 1860" (Poems 114),
Mexico is pictured as better off under the Aztecs than under the
Spanish:

Let truth impartial say, if happier now
Is that historic land, broad Mexico,
Than when all greenly spread the cultured plain,
And waved the far Cordilleras with grain,
And rolled the deep canals, with streams that blest
A thousand homes in Eden beauty drest,
And all the realm from mountain slope to main,
Was fair Montezuma's golden reign? (Poems 119)

Here Ridge expresses his scorn for those who believe that the Aztecs were barbarous because they were not white. He stresses the idea that peace had brought the people prosperity; and he ignores the bloodier side of their civilization. In addition, the Aztecs are depicted as socialists:

As all, too, labored daily for the State,
If sickness fell or any evil fate,
The State provided, not as charity
But right, for him whose former industry,
Still looking to the common weal in this,
Had swelled her coffers and her granaries. (121)

The closing of the poem looks for the day when California, spurred on by agricultural achievements, can realize the dream of El Dorado that the Spanish invaders once heard from the North American Indians.

Here we have Ridge espousing propaganda for his adopted state. Law and order, according to Ridge, are the hallmark of the good society, and it is hard to believe that the author of this poem would ever have pictured an outlaw in a sympathetic light. In addition, the theme of equalized wealth is much more prominent in this poem than it ever becomes in Joaquin Murieta. The robbers, unlike the Aztecs, do not redistribute wealth to the community.

Rather than think of the novel as a Robin Hood story, a reflection of Ridge's desire for revenge against the Ross faction, or a vicarious projection onto the Mexicans of his Cherokee resentment against the federal government, we need to be aware of the ambivalent position that Ridge held as a minority writer towards other minority groups of the time, including other Native American tribes. He adopted the negative Anglo perception of Chinese laborers, separated the so-called noble savage groups from the ignoble, and defended the Mexicans as a people willing to assimilate but thwarted by greedy Easterners. When we examine Joaquin Murieta with these thoughts of ethnic and racial interaction in mind, Ridge's romance of banditry seems more closely connected to later novels by American Indians than it usually has been taken to be.
MINORITY INTERACTION IN RIDGE'S JOAQUIN MURIETA

Notes

1. Although Ridge authored only this one book during his lifetime, many of his poems and articles appeared in periodicals. In 1868, the year after his death, his widow published a collection of forty-four of his poems, which also included part of an autobiographical letter to a friend written in 1849. Nine of his letters, written to members of his family between 1848 and 1858, are available in Cherokee Cavaliers (1939). Unfortunately, only one letter from this collection comes from the period during which he wrote his novel. From this we learn that his publisher cheated him out of any profits from it (82). In 1981, A Trumpet of Our Own, a collection of seven essays and editorials by Ridge about American Indian affairs, was edited by David Farmer and Rennard Strickland. Short uncollected articles remain in various California newspapers of the 1860s, some of which he was editor, such as the Sacramento Bee and Red Bluff Beacon. Unpublished letters and poems can be found in the manuscript collection of the University of Oklahoma Archive.

2. From 1926 to 1937 Ridge's life was the subject of articles in historical journals by such authors as Edward Everett Dale (1926), M. A. Ranck (1932), Angie Debo (1932), Carolyn Thomas Foreman (1936), and Franklin Walker (1937). However, after the publication of both Walker's San Francisco's Literary Frontier and Dale and Litton's Cherokee Cavaliers in 1939, interest waned until the novel's centennial. Then in 1955, the University of Oklahoma Press reprinted Joaquin Murieta for the Western Frontier Library. The 1955 edition was based on the original version of 1854, published in San Francisco by W. B. Cooke and Company, a copy of which turned up in 1937. In 1859 the unauthorized Police Gazette edition appeared. According to Franklin Walker, this edition was the source of many Latin-American variants of the legend. Ridge (although this is disputed by Nadeau) made some revisions to his novel after 1859 for the version which is now called the "third." It was published in 1871 and it "added no major features to the story" (Walker, "Ridge's Life" 262). In 1927 the Evening Free Lance of Hollister, California, reissued Ridge's revised edition, and in 1932 the Police Gazette version was republished by Grabhorn Press. Thus the 1955 edition of the 1854 version was, in a sense, overdue. James W. Parins provides biographical material in his recent book, John Rollin Ridge: His Life & Works.

3. In reference to black Americans, Remi Nadeau (121) quotes an unnamed detractor of Ridge's who stated that Ridge "believed negro bondage to be a divine institution; was against the war on the part of freedom, and for anything Southern..."

4. Frank F. Latta interviewed many descendants of the families who participated in the actual Murrieta (the spelling with double "r" is the true historical one) horse gangs of California. They had their base south of the border in Sonoma, Mexico, where they took horses for sale. Latta conducted extensive research between 1920 and 1970, and shows that the leader of the band was not the Joaquin killed by Harry Love. He escaped with his girlfriend Rosa but was killed soon after.

5. Of the real Joaquin's twenty-four known victims, nineteen were Chinese (Nadeau 145).

6. The misspellings are corrected in the 1868 Poems, where "Mount Shasta, Seen from a Distance" is the lead poem.
Works Cited


