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1998 marked the 150th anniversary of the American 1848, the year that gold was discovered in California just before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo formally ended the war between the United States and Mexico. Eighteen forty-eight has been and continues to be, of course, a crucial date for Chicano Studies scholars and cultural workers. In the 1960s and 1970s writers and activists formulated theories of internal colonialism as responses to the events of 1848; more recently the violent break marked by the war has been central to work by Tomás Almaguer, Genaro Padilla, Beatrice Pita, José David Saldivar, Rosaura Sánchez, and many others. Despite the significance of 1848 for Chicanos, however, many other Americans are unaware that the U.S.-Mexican War ever took place. While the Civil War is a major period marker in history and literature courses and is the subject of numerous popular movies and books, the U.S.-Mexican War is still scarcely mentioned in most college survey classes and rarely figures in mainstream, contemporary popular culture. Forgetting the U.S.-Mexican War, however, means eliding an influential early episode in imperialist U.S. nation-building, taking the national boundary-line between the United States and Mexico out of history, and naturalizing postwar redefinitions of the native and the alien. Today, as neo-nativisms play an increasingly large role in state and national politics, addressing the meanings of the American 1848 is clearly an important task for a post-nationalist American Studies.

In what follows, I explore the ways that U.S. racial economies and class relationships were reshaped by the redrawing of boundaries that followed the U.S.-Mexican War and the Gold Rush. For if the war led to the remapping of national borders, the discovery of gold in California drew miners and other workers to the region from all over the world, but especially from Mexico, Hawaii, Chile, Peru, China, Ireland, Germany, France, the Eastern...
United States, and Australia. While these shifts affected racial classifications in general, they dramatically influenced the racialization of former Mexican nationals and the construction of a transcontinental white national identity in particular. Far from serving as a safety valve for class pressures, the newly conquered land in the West remained a battlefield where race and nationalism decisively shaped class conflicts. These conflicts sometimes erupted as nativism, often pitted white workers against workers of color, and were always powerfully affected by the migratory movements of people across national boundaries and by the larger fields of hemispheric and global relations.

When Michael Rogin coined the periodizing phrase “the American 1848” in his excellent 1979 study of Herman Melville and nineteenth-century U.S. politics and culture, he compared the United States and Europe in order to argue that the U.S.-Mexican War ironically exposed the limits of republicanism and the contradictions within U.S. nationality at the very moment when both seemed unassailably triumphant. While other scholars, including Saldívar and Carolyn Porter, have subsequently resituated Rogin’s American 1848 in relation to the history of U.S. imperialism in the Americas, a good deal of American Studies scholarship still subsumes all other meanings and consequences of the events of 1848 within a national narrative of slavery and freedom. For instance, Eric Lott argues in Love and Theft that “the minstrel show provided the soundtrack for the American 1848,” revealing “the political unconscious of Manifest Destiny.” The “racial repressed” that Lott uncovers, however, has little to do with U.S. imperialism, Mexico, immigrant workers, or international conflict. Instead, Lott focuses on “the sectional conflict western emigration not only failed to dispel but—in reopening the question of whether the occupied land would be slave or free—actually revivified.” As a result, his brilliant analysis of the relationship between the formation of U.S. working-class whiteness and fantasies of blackness elides the important relationships between whiteness, blackness, and other racializations as they were elaborated during and after the U.S.-Mexican War in the borderlands and in the gold mines of California. Lott’s analysis shows how the international dimensions of the U.S.-Mexican War and the non-binary race relations that it affected tend to disappear within national narratives that isolate domestic, sectional conflict from a larger global framework.

How might we explore the significance of the American 1848 more fully, giving more attention to the U.S.-Mexican War, inter-American relations, and the intersections of multiple class and racial formations? In this essay, I address this question by focusing on the international circulation of the story of Joaquín Murrieta, the California social bandit who supposedly terrorized California during the early 1850s. John Rollin Ridge’s 1854 novel, The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murrieta is, at least in literature departments in U.S. colleges and universities, probably the most well-known
version as well as the first novel written by an American Indian. But the Murrieta story has also inspired an astonishing array of national and transnational textual fantasies, including one that was serialized in the *California Police Gazette*; a number of cheap novels; a 1936 Hollywood film; several widely circulated Spanish-language *corridos* or ballads; plays in both English and Spanish, including one written by Pablo Neruda; and revisions published in Mexico, Spain, France, and Chile. Although Ridge’s novel certainly provides an important point of departure for an investigation of the American 1848, I suggest that a focus on this narrative must be supplemented by an analysis of other revisions of the Murrieta story, especially the *California Police Gazette* version, which informed many of the Spanish-language adaptations, and the *corridos*. This supplementation is crucial because the dialogic interplay of all of these texts foregrounds the inter-American context of the American 1848 in ways that are not as apparent if only Ridge’s text is consulted.

Finally, I hope to show that tracing the intersecting trajectories of the different revisions of the Murrieta crime narrative reveals the interdependent relationships among the mid-nineteenth century popularization of a fictive, transcontinental, white, American identity; the long, uneven postwar re-racialization of former Mexican nationals and other Spanish-speakers; and the articulation of a disjunctive, transnational, *mexicano*, cultural nationalism which introduces gaps and fissures into what too often passes for a seamless story of U.S. national belonging. The different versions of the Murrieta story suggest, in other words, how whiteness took hold as a unifying national and transcontinental structure of feeling and how its parameters began to shift decisively in the postwar period to include previously despised groups of Europeans and to exclude most of the newly conquered peoples in the West.

This is only one side of the story, however. In *corridos* and other revisions of the Murrieta narrative, Latinos have challenged such exclusionary constructions of national identity by celebrating Murrieta’s exemplary resistance to U.S. laws. While most U.S. citizens have naturalized the post-Treaty boundaries between Mexico and the United States, many border ballads refuse to accede to this mapping of the territory. Insisting that he is not a stranger (*extraño*), the Murrieta who tells his story in one of the most well-known of these *corridos* argues that “California is part of Mexico because God wanted it that way” (“De México es California/porque Díos así lo quiso”). Such a heroic narrative of resistance may in turn perform closures of its own: the sanctification of Mexican sovereignty elides the Spanish and creole subjugation of indigenous peoples, and Murrieta’s insistence on his status as a “native” could imply a disdain for other immigrants such as the Chinese workers who are persecuted by his gang in the English-language versions of the story. What is more, figuring resistance to U.S. power as a
paradigmatically masculine feat best accomplished by the *corrido* hero with a pistol in his hand marginalizes female agency, as many feminist critics have suggested.\(^\text{12}\)

But if the *corridos* paradoxically try to locate a national community in transregional and transnational movements of male workers, during and after the war a good deal of popular U.S. sensational literature labors to redefine and restrict a white national identity by identifying a community of people of Mexican origin and other Spanish-speakers with a “foreign” criminality.\(^\text{13}\) Postwar sensational crime literature, especially, continues the work of wartime representations by racializing this community as essentially alien in an early example of what Etienne Balibar calls “the immigrant complex”: the “functioning of the category of immigration as a substitute for the notion of race and a solvent of ‘class consciousness.’ ” This does not mean that pseudo-biological notions of race become irrelevant, but that they are supplemented by “culturalist” definitions of race which suggest that the differences between national cultures are natural and insurmountable but also perpetually endangered by the transnational movements and mixings of populations.\(^\text{14}\) While I would dispute the claim that the category of immigration dissolves class consciousness rather than strongly shaping the latter’s multiple manifestations, Balibar’s theory of the immigrant complex is suggestive for an analysis of racialized criminality in the post-1848 period. To explore the ways that national cultural differences are recast as the difference between legality and illegality, I turn to the *California Police Gazette*’s sensational account of Murrieta’s scandalous crimes and border crossings.

**RACE WAR CRIMES**

*The criminal fait divers, by its everyday redundancy, makes acceptable the system of judicial and political supervisions that partition society; it recounts from day to day a sort of internal battle against the faceless enemy; in this way, it constitutes the daily bulletin of alarm or victory. The crime novel, which began to develop in the broadsheet and in mass-circulation literature, assumed an apparently opposite role. Above all, its function was to show that the delinquent belonged to an entirely different world, unrelated to familiar, everyday life. . . . The combination of the fait divers and the detective novel has produced for the last hundred years or more an enormous mass of “crime stories” in which delinquency appears both as very close and quite alien, a perpetual threat to everyday life, but extremely distant in its origin and motives, both everyday and exotic in the milieu in which it takes place. . . . In such a formidable delinquency, coming from so alien a clime, what illegality could recognize itself?*

*MICHEL FOUCAULT, Discipline and Punish*

It is easy to recognize the basic outline of the *California Police Gazette*’s version of the Murrieta story in the pattern of the typical heroic *corrido*. As in
the classic heroic corrido, in *The Life of Joaquin Murieta, the Brigand Chief of California*, a man with a “very mild and peaceable disposition” turns into a criminal after being violently persecuted by white Americans and the regimes of law and lawlessness they bring with them. But these two types of popular crime narrative show how complex and divided the international field of popular knowledge about crime and criminality was during this period. For while corridos take the part of the criminal and question the justice of U.S. law, the *Police Gazette* disseminates ambivalent representations of criminals but ultimately upholds the law by striving to make its victory over criminality seem natural, inevitable, and best for the safety of the public. That is, even though both types of popular crime narrative respond to what Michel Foucault calls “the desire to know and narrate how men have been able to rise against power” and “traverse the law,” corridos attack the legitimacy of the new forms of power and law that the *Police Gazette* ends up defending. For as popular crime narratives, corridos and the *Police Gazette* are engaged in a discursive battle not over a generalized, abstract law or power as such, but over the violent transition from Mexican to U.S. law in the postwar period.

Even the title of the *California Police Gazette*, which was apparently modeled on the more successful and long-lived *National Police Gazette*, already implies a panoptic gaze leveled statewide, pulling together diverse incidents, crimes, and historical events into a field of visibility for the eye of police power. Founded in 1845, the *National Police Gazette* was itself modeled on British police gazettes and “promised to publish descriptions of criminals and accounts of crime for the avowed purpose of revealing the identities of criminals and to supplement the work of the police.” During the U.S.-Mexican War the *National Police Gazette* even printed the names and descriptions of deserters from the U.S. ranks and the War Department “thereupon authorized a large subscription for distribution among the soldiers.”

The *California Police Gazette*, a weekly, four-page journal published in San Francisco that sold for twelve and a half cents per issue, or five dollars per year, was first issued in January 1859. The Murrieta story ran from September 3 to November 5 of that year, and was subsequently reissued as a pamphlet novel. In the same issues of the *California Police Gazette* that contained installments of the Murrieta story, readers could find news of California prison escapes; an editorial advocating that the state take over the management of prisons, using convict labor to pay their costs; a story about the capture of 218 California Indians by a detachment of volunteers; and reprints of short crime stories from newspapers across the nation about the suicide of an unemployed ex-soldier, about a creature with the “form of a woman” and the head and arms of a pig, and about white people sold as slaves. Each week, the paper ran a long profile of one in a series of “California Thieves,” ending with a description of the criminal and specu-
lations about his current whereabouts. Another weekly feature was the “City Police Court,” a long column that listed the names, crimes, and often the race or nationality of those who had appeared before the San Francisco court that week. While these features inspired a range of responses in its readers, the paper’s main business is stated succinctly in an ad for a special edition of a *Pictorial California Police Gazette*, which promised “Portraits and Lives of About Fifty of the Most Notorious Thieves, Felons and Desperadoes in the State, many of whom are now at large!” along with portraits of judges and other state officials, and views of the state prisons and jails. “This Pictorial Should Be In the Hands of All,” the ad states, “as by it many of the Escaped Convicts and Desperadoes now at Large Can be Detected and brought to justice. It will also serve to put Residents of the Remote Portions of the State upon Their Guard when visited by them.”

Despite its sometimes ambivalent representations of criminals such as Murrieta, then, the *California Police Gazette* ultimately tried, in Foucault’s words, to make “acceptable the system of judicial and political supervisions that partition society” by framing crime stories within a popular format that was strongly identified with the state and the police and was devoted to helping citizens detect and capture criminals.

In the territories newly acquired from Mexico, however, making the “system of judicial and political supervisions” seem natural and right was both a more difficult and a more urgent task. Thus the *California Police Gazette* imports sensational racial stereotypes from popular literature of the U.S.-Mexican War, which help, on the one hand, to make a hero out of a representative of the state—namely, Harry Love, the California Ranger and former U.S.-Mexican War soldier who leads the company of men who finally kill Murrieta—and, on the other, to racialize Mexicans by identifying them both as essentially foreign and as similar to so-called “savage” Indians. In this way, people of Mexican origin are represented as natural criminals, as part of what one contemporary writer called “the semi-barbarous hordes of Spanish America, whose whole history is that of revolution and disorder.”

The *California Police Gazette* makes crime both alien and familiar as it brings the story of the Sonoran immigrant bandit back into the homes of its readers. This version of the Murrieta crime narrative, which most of the Latin American versions seem to echo, follows Ridge’s version closely, often word for word, but it mixes up the order of events, cuts or elides some passages and scenes, notably those which justify or excuse Murrieta’s crimes, and adds new ones, especially flashbacks to the recent war, which most of the criminals and lawmen in this narrative are said to have fought in. War and crime are brought into an intimate and menacing relationship with each other as memories of war explode in the middle of different scenes. The *California Police Gazette* story is gorier and even more sensational than Ridge’s, lingering over dripping blood, severed heads, and
other body parts. It replaces Murrieta’s mistress, Rosita, who survives a gang rape and a beating at the hands of lower-class, “false” Americans in the Ridge version, with a first wife, Carmela, who is raped and killed, and a second wife who, dressed in male drag, often rides along with Murrieta and survives to mourn his death. In both of these versions of the Murrieta story violence directed at women’s bodies represents threats or violence to a larger community. In this and in innumerable other ways, Ridge’s and the Gazette version are part of an international field of popular sensational crime literature, one that includes broadsides about crimes and criminals; pamphlets supposedly based on criminal confessions; novels about the crimes of the rich and about capitalism as crime; detective fiction; an array of ballads and tales about bandits, rogues, and criminals; articles in daily and weekly newspapers; and mass-produced papers devoted to crime, such as the police gazette.  

Beginning in the 1850s, the story of Joaquín Murrieta began to circulate in a variety of such popular forms, but daily and weekly newspapers in California were one of its most important early sources. In January of 1853, California newspapers such as the San Francisco Herald, the Calaveras Chronicle, the San Joaquín Republican, and the Sacramento Union started carrying lurid articles about the crimes of a gang of “Mexican marauders” led by a Mexican named Joaquín. But only a year later, crime narratives about Murrieta were being published, including two that were serialized in relatively obscure weekly police gazettes and one novel, Ridge’s The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murrieta, which appeared in San Francisco. Although Ridge’s story was published as a book instead of being serialized in a paper, his novel cannot be neatly separated from the daily and weekly newspaper accounts of Joaquín’s crimes. Ridge’s narrative is episodic, sometimes reading like a series of newspaper stories loosely pulled together, and many of the incidents he describes recall the contemporary newspaper reports that Ridge almost certainly read while he was living in Marysville and Yuba City, California, during those years. The narrative registers its place in this larger world of popular crime writing when Joaquín reads crime stories in the newspapers such as the Los Angeles Star, “which made a very free use of his own name in the account of these transactions and handled his character in no measured terms” (R, 30).

From the beginning of the narrative, Ridge also alludes to different types of crime literature, placing his novel within an international field of popular knowledge about crime by comparing Murrieta to the “renowned robbers of the Old or New World, who have preceded him” (R, 7). This body of crime literature about famous robbers not only “precedes” the crimes committed by Murrieta’s gang, but also actively inspires them. Reyes Feliz, for instance, “had read the wild romantic lives of the chivalrous robbers of Spain and Mexico until his enthusiastic spirit had become imbued
with the same sentiments which actuated them” (R, 17). So Ridge repeatedly registers his awareness of a larger body of crime narratives set in Spain and Mexico as well as in England, France, and the United States, which provide a framework within which his own text will inevitably be read.

If Ridge insists that Murrieta’s story is a part of “the most valuable history of the State” (R, 7), and thereby suggests that this is a story from which all Californians can take a lesson, however, the California Police Gazette restricts the meaning of Murrieta’s example by making the latter only a part of “the criminal history” of California (PG, 1). This revision of Ridge’s language pathologizes Murrieta, making him an example of an alien, racialized criminality instead of an example of how “prejudice of color,” in Ridge’s words, may lead to “injustice to individuals” (R, 158) and the abrogation of moral law, which in turn provokes crimes such as Murrieta’s. In other words, while Ridge implies that the citizens of California need to think about how race prejudice turned Murrieta into a criminal, the California Police Gazette makes Murrieta into an example of an innate, alien criminality.

The California Police Gazette version of the Murrieta story gives crime a Mexican face, making it seem “very close” and yet still “quite alien”—an enduring stereotype which resurfaces today ad nauseam in debates about immigration, welfare, and citizenship. Indeed, it is the very combination of the “close” and the “alien” that makes the Mexican immigrant bandit seem especially threatening. Mexico is “close,” first of all, because it is geographically adjacent to the United States, sharing a common border. In both Ridge’s version and in the Police Gazette, Joaquín and the members of his gang repeatedly cross and recross national boundaries, mapping out transnational networks of migration and illegal activity. The gang is continually reconstituted through the departures and the arrivals of new members across the border, especially from Sonora, but also from Chile and Peru. Ridge suggests that the “ramifications” of Murrieta’s “organization” are in Sonora, Lower California, and in this State” (R, 74), while the California Police Gazette notes at the beginning that Murrieta’s “powerful combination” was “steadily increasing by arrivals from Lower California and Sonora” (PG, 8). In both versions, Murrieta’s “gang” is a sort of international army which both recruits and deploys soldiers across national boundaries. Much of their business involves moving stolen horses from the United States to Mexico. Again and again, the narratives expose secret connections between Mexico and the United States, as when the wife of a “wealthy ranch owner in Guadalajara, Mexico,” travels to California to “urge [Joaquín] on in his bloody warfare against the Americans” (PG, 105); or when Murrieta repeatedly sends “remittances of money” to a “secret partner” in the state of Sonora (R, 32). In these ways, the novels incessantly link the cross-border movement of money and people to international crime networks, thereby suggesting that the “closeness” of the
United States to Mexico and the “openness” of adjacent national borders make the United States vulnerable to invasion by an alien race of lawless Mexicans who can easily move between nations.

This pattern of transnational movement is established in the beginning of the California Police Gazette version, when Joaquín initially travels to San Francisco in 1848 to look for his brother Carlos, “who had long been living in California, and had obtained a grant of four leagues of land from one of those excessively generous governors who flourished about that time” (PG, 3). Not finding Carlos, Joaquín “retraced his steps homeward” to Mexico (PG, 3). A year later, however, when a letter from his brother arrives, which also brings news of the Gold Rush in California, Joaquín and his wife set out on the journey back to San Francisco. When they arrive, Carlos is about to leave for Mexico City, because his land has “been taken from him by the Americans, by means of forged papers” (PG, 3), and he needs to go to Mexico to “see the grantor himself, and so recover the land” (PG, 3). In the opening chapter of the novel, these actual and anticipated journeys across the border make national boundary lines seem porous and insecure, given the spatial proximity or “closeness” of Mexico to the United States. They also imaginatively link up northern Mexico and California, as the story of Joaquín’s brother, who is a Sonoran, is identified with the history of the Californios, many of whom were forced to become involved in costly litigation over land grants. Carlos even plans to take “a young native Californian named Flores” (PG, 3) to Mexico with him to serve as a witness.

The journey into the heart of Mexico that Carlos proposes activates the memory of another system of political supervision, an older set of Mexican laws and institutions (the land grants of the “excessively generous” Mexican governors), which were in the process of being replaced by the U.S. political and legal system. But this transition did not happen seamlessly, and the older order continued to clash with the new one. So the “Mexican period” still seemed close and yet alien to U.S. settlers in the sense that California had until very recently been a part of Mexico, and so had been governed by other laws and institutions. Mexico’s property law, for instance, continued to be a factor in land disputes throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, when white immigrants squatted on land owned by Mexicans and went to court (sometimes with forged papers) to challenge land grants made by the old regime. After California became a state within the U.S. system, the Mexican period was increasingly represented with both fear and nostalgia as a superseded stage of history, as a time which was historically close and yet alien, which was always already passing away, naturally giving way to Anglo-Saxon energy, institutions, and mastery of the “commercial principle.” But as an earlier “stage” of California history, the period of Mexican rule continued to haunt, at times erupting from within
that history to make national law and national boundary lines seem strange, new, and artificial rather than familiar, primordial, and natural.

For during the 1850s, U.S. boundaries, laws, and institutions were strange, new, artificial, unevenly in place, violently enforced, and violently abrogated. Instead of war giving way to peace and the rule of law, after 1848 war continued to be fought by other means as Spanish-speakers and other so-called foreigners confronted racist legislation, claim-jumping, vigilantism, and lynching at the hands of newly arrived immigrants from the Eastern United States, many of whom had fought on the U.S. side in the war. In San Francisco, for instance, the members of the nativist vigilante gang The Hounds, who were especially fond of persecuting Spanish-speakers, were mostly “disbanded soldiers from the regiment of the New York Volunteers.”

The war, in other words, was very recent, raw history which continued to shape the present as many of those who fought it reencountered each other in California.

The *California Police Gazette* tries to close the wounds of war and to unify a heterogeneous society by defining a white American identity in opposition to what are constructed as the “savage” and therefore naturally criminal, essentially alien, even if native, bodies of Mexicans, Latin Americans, and Californios within the state. This effort to stabilize differences responds to a crisis in the boundaries of whiteness and national identity in mid-nineteenth-century California. While the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed “all the rights of citizens” to Mexicans who chose to remain in the new territories, and while the California State Constitution defined Mexicans as “white” and declared them, as opposed to Indians, eligible for citizenship, these legal provisions were unevenly enforced during the postwar period. The big wave of immigration from Mexico and South America during the Gold Rush years, especially, upset the system of racial meanings and classifications that were initially proposed in California. Leonard Pitt suggests that whether “from California, Chile, Peru, or Mexico, whether residents of twenty years’ standing or immigrants of one week, all the Spanish-speaking were lumped together as ‘interlopers’ and ‘greasers.’ . . . In essence then, the Latin-American immigrants were a sort of catalyst whose presence caused the sudden and permanent dissolution of the social elements.”

The precarious whiteness of certain Spanish-speakers did not simply dissolve into thin air, however. Rather, during the postwar period, the racialization of different groups of Spanish-speaking people was a problem addressed through legislation like the Foreign Miner’s Tax and the Federal Land Law of 1851, through violence, and through popular representations such as the crime literature I have been describing.

The racializations promoted by the Murrieta story must be understood in the context of what one historian has called “the great Sonoran migration of 1848–1856.” During these years, between ten and twenty thousand miners made the long journey across the desert and up the coast from
Sonora to the gold fields of California, bringing with them superior mining skills as well as “hard feelings toward Americans developed when the latter invaded their homeland.” They were joined by five thousand miners from Latin America, most of them from Chile, in the year 1849 alone. From the beginning, the Americans who were moving west in large numbers loudly voiced their resentment of “foreigners” in the mines; they believed that their recent victory in the war with Mexico entitled U.S. citizens and only U.S. citizens to claim the prodigious amounts of gold that had been discovered. In January of 1849, General Persifor F. Smith, whose ship had stopped at Panama on the way to California, where he would take command of the U.S. army, issued a proclamation in response to this nativist hysteria, announcing his intention to fine and imprison “persons not citizens of the United States, who are flocking from all parts to search for and carry off gold belonging to the United States in California.” Xenophobic Americans violently turned foreigners away from Sutter’s Mill in April, and other vigilantes drove Sonorans “out of the Tuolumne, Stanislaus, and Mokolumne River placers in the summer of 1849.” The Foreign Miner’s Tax Law, which was enacted in 1850 and required all “foreigners” working in the mines to pay $20 a month for a permit, was thus only one example among many of the ways that U.S. citizens quickly naturalized the new national boundary lines and, in Josiah Royce’s words, “turned upon foreigners as a class, and especially upon Sonorans and South Americans.”

Despite the efforts of many Californios to distinguish themselves from the new immigrants, most Americans included them within this newly revised “class” of foreigners. While “local attachments and loyalties, class differences, and subtle variances in customs and language patterns” divided the different groups of Spanish-speakers from each other, many white Americans saw no significant differences among them. In a discussion of the criminalization of the Spanish-speakers during this period, Josiah Royce scathingly exposes the essentialist logic that supported the classification of these diverse groups of people as a race:

It was, however, considered safe by an average lynching jury in those days to convict a “greaser” on very moderate evidence, if none better could be had. One could see his guilt so plainly written, we know, in his ugly, swarthy face, before the trial began. Therefore the life of a Spanish-American in the mines in the early days, if frequently profitable, was apt to be a little disagreeable. It served him right, of course. He had no business, as an alien, to come to the land that God had given us. And if he was a native Californian, a born “greaser,” then so much the worse for him. He was so much the more our born foe; we hated his whole degenerate, thieving, land-owning, lazy, and discontented race.

The “denial, or flattening, of differences within a particular racially defined group,” which Michael Omi and Howard Winant identify as a key feature of
racial essentialism, can be seen in the pejorative epithet “greaser” that collapses the differences between the “native Californian” and the “alien” Mexicans, Chileans, and Peruvians. The more neutral, but still homogenizing term “Spanish-American,” which Royce chooses in order to distinguish himself from the nativist vigilantes, also covers over differences between those who had elected to become U.S. citizens, those who became citizens by default under the terms of the treaty, those who retained other national or regional allegiances and never hoped to become citizens, and those who were excluded from citizenship because they were considered Indian or mestizo. And while the nativists assume that all “greasers” are “aliens,” even the qualifier “native” fails to protect the Californios from those who find a natural criminality, common to the native and alien alike, inscribed on their “swarthy” faces. Indeed, their “native” status makes them even more of a threat to the white settlers who covet their land; it is not surprising that Royce adds “land-owning” to the long list of racist adjectives that the white nativists use to vilify the native Californians.

Of course, many Californios were still legally considered “white” and were therefore in a much better position than the Chinese, Blacks, and Indians, who were absolutely excluded from citizenship on the basis of their race, as well as many other people of Mexican origin. But racial categories were swiftly being recreated, reinhabited, transformed, and destroyed during the 1850s. In practice, access to white privilege was always severely stratified by class. As Tomás Almaguer suggests, while the ranchero elite were usually considered white, potentially assimilable, and worthy of intermarriage with other kinds of white people, working-class people of Mexican origin were “often denied their legal rights by being categorized as Indians.” Even members of the elite, however, could lose their white privilege if they were too dark-skinned. Almaguer tells the story of Manuel Dominguez, who had served as a delegate to the California State Constitution of 1849, but was barred from testifying in a San Francisco courtroom in 1857 because the judge ruled that he was an Indian. In the wake of the war, the increasing dispossession and proletarianization of the Californio ranchero class, and the influx of new immigrants, the hold of any of these Spanish-speakers on whiteness became increasingly tenuous as, more and more, they were all lumped together and were at best considered ambiguously white. In this strange new world, then, Spanish-speaking people were uncanny and therefore especially threatening, for what seemed to be familiar (at least marginally white) was now becoming disturbingly alien, positioned on the shifting border of whiteness.

The California Police Gazette version of the Murrieta story exploits this uncanny racial status but ultimately labors to unify and racialize these diverse groups, placing them precariously on the boundary of whiteness by identifying them with an innate, savage criminality. As we have seen, the novel
initially focuses on postwar injustices inflicted on different groups of Spanish-speakers, linking these injuries together only to override them in favor of a crime narrative that justifies state-sponsored violence. I have suggested that the story of Joaquín’s brother, Carlos, whose Mexican land grant is taken away from him “by means of forged papers,” recalls the fate of the Californios, who were displaced during the postwar period through fraud, through the complicated and costly Land Law of 1851, and through frivolous lawsuits. The ensuing scene in which Joaquín is prevented from working the mines on the Stanislaus River by a group of “lawless and desperate” Americans typifies a long, bloody history of Anglo claim-jumping and violence inflicted on Sonoran miners during the Gold Rush. Finally, the existence of an extensive, hidden network of Californios, Mexicans, and Latin Americans who help Joaquín avenge his injuries implies that all of these groups have suffered similar injuries and injustices at the hands of the Americans. The opening frame, then, suggests that Joaquín’s injuries are representative of injuries suffered by Californios, Sonorans, and Latin Americans as a group, and that the criminality of the group is to some degree a legitimate or at least understandable response to these postwar injuries. If the novel’s opening emphasizes the constructedness of Joaquín’s criminality, however, the narrative ultimately overrides this explanation in favor of one which suggests that this criminality is rooted in the dark recesses of his nature—a “savage” impulse that takes him outside the pale of white civility.

This redrawing of boundaries around whiteness depends upon the importation of stereotypes from U.S.-Mexican War-era sensational literature that define American, Anglo-Saxon heroism by opposing it to Mexican “savagery.” One flashback in particular, which fleshes out Captain Love’s U.S.-Mexican War encounter with a “hideous-looking fellow, half Indian, half Mexican,” suggestively indicates the larger project of this version of the Murrieta story. Echoing Ridge’s language, the California Police Gazette sets up Love as a point of identification for white readers early on by characterizing him as a “hardy pioneer” who “during the Mexican war had performed valuable service as an express rider, carrying dispatches from one military post to another, over the wildest and most dangerous parts of Mexico” (PG, 14). But the police gazette embroiders with lurid and telling details a scene that Ridge only hints at as it interjects a long description of Love’s victory over a band of guerrillas led by a “half Indian, half Mexican” warrior. The threat represented by this mestizo soldier, “whose face was marked with a deep scar across his right cheek . . . urging his animal on with such savage fury, that its sides were covered with gore” (PG, 15) haunts the narrative, which opposes white representatives of the racial state to “savage,” lawless Mexicans by reinserting both within the theater of the recent war.
The novel repeatedly describes the gangs’ crimes as the continuation of war by other means. At night, the members of Murrieta’s gang sit around the campfire remembering the war by telling gory, sensational stories about the battles they fought with “the guerrilla chief and priest, Padre Jurata [sic]” (PG, 8). The brutal Three-Fingered Jack, in particular, who is closely identified with Jarauta and who lost his finger while fighting the war, is a character straight out of U.S.-Mexican War–era pulp fiction. A long story about Jarauta in combat, “sheathing his dripping blade in the bodies of the dead as well as the living, and in a perfect frenzy of excitement severing the neck-joints and casting the gaping heads into the rushing water” (PG, 21), is framed by multiple accounts of Jack’s murderous abandon. Indeed, when one of the bandits suggests that Jack “takes rather too much delight in drawing blood,” another replies, “Not half so much as old Padre Jurata whom some of us had for a leader in Mexico” (PG, 20). As Jack satisfies “his brutal disposition” by “discharging three loads from his revolver into the head” of a corpse, tortures Chinese miners, and exults in “the luxurious feast of blood” (PG, 23), the police gazette implies that Mexican “savagery” has migrated from the battlefields of the U.S.-Mexican War to the California goldfields.

If early on the novel suggests that Joaquín is an “exceptional” Mexican who is made into a criminal by un-American Americans, by the end it identifies him with the essentially depraved and bloodthirsty Jack. Even in the opening chapters of the novel, however, Joaquín is more brutal than in Ridge’s version. For instance, Joaquín’s first vengeful murder, which is briefly described after the fact by Ridge, becomes a full-blown, bloody scene in *The Life of Joaquin Murieta, the Brigand Chief of California*. Joaquín’s eyes glare “with the fury of an enraged tiger,” and his body seems to “quiver with excitement” as he plunges his knife again and again “into the body, until the latter was almost hacked to pieces, for the demon of revenge possessed the soul of Joaquin and urged him to excess” (PG, 6). And when Joaquín and his gang later meet up with the men who killed Carmela, Joaquín, who has intermittently tried to control Jack’s sadistic behavior, commands him to exercise his “natural propensity,” an order which encourages Jack to disembowel them and cut out their hearts. As the narrative proceeds, Joaquín’s desire for revenge is thus figured, more and more, as savage, innate, and out of control, as something which links him to the utterly savage Jack, who indiscriminately hacks people to pieces because his “heart to its very core is black with evil” (PG, 29). In this way, the wild, brutal Jack is figured as Joaquín’s inner “truth”: Jack is an indispensable part of Joaquín’s organization that Joaquín cannot control, and ultimately does not want to control, as long as the “demon of revenge” spawned by postwar California possesses him.

By identifying Joaquín’s gang and the extended network of people who support them with an innate, savage criminality linked to the U.S.-Mexican
War, the narrative implicitly redraws the boundary lines around the white nation, collapsing the differences between diverse peoples of Mexican origin and other Spanish-speakers, whether they are “natives” or “foreigners,” and classifying them as an inassimilable body within the nation-state. When, after a day of adventure, the bandits sit around the fire singing a song called “Our Home Is Mexico,” which they claim was “a favorite with the padre Jurata” (PG, 64), this vision of an insurgent alien nation within the white republic is even supported by a cultural nationalist anthem, albeit one which is sung to the tune of “The Maid of Monterey.” In this fantasy of postwar cultural hybridity, the California Police Gazette has Joaquín’s men proclaim their eternal allegiance to Mexico (the novel includes a full set of lyrics) to the tune of a song which is about interracial, “south of the border” romance. While the novel’s representation of this musical interlude says a lot more about the work of postwar national fantasy than it does about Mexican culture, the Gazette does get one thing right when it insists upon the importance of music in disseminating a nationalist sentiment across borders and in defiance of official national jurisdictions. This transnational national sentiment transmitted by mexicano songs is the subject of the concluding section.

JOAQUÍN MURRIETA AND THE CHICANA/O COUNTERCULTURES OF MODERNITY

It could be argued that diverse forms of twentieth-century cultural production, from barrio murals to Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s nationalist epic poem “I Am Joaquín” to versions of the Murrieta corrido sung by Los Madrugadores, Lalo Guerrero, and Lydia Mendoza, among many others, have made Joaquín Murrieta an important and pervasive symbol of resistance for people of Mexican origin in the United States. Stories about Murrieta’s severed head, which was exhibited in mining camps throughout California, seem to have stimulated many Chicana/o responses, including Luis Valdez’s play The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa, Richard Rodriguez’s essay, “The Head of Joaquín Murrieta,” and Cherrie Moraga’s Heroes and Saints. Moraga’s play, which focuses on a woman who is born without a body because of her mother’s exposure to pesticides in the fields of the Central Valley, might be read as a radical revision of the many male-authored accounts of displacement and loss provoked by Murrieta’s head. Rodriguez’s essay offers one such account, albeit one which is unusual in that it ultimately recoils from, rather than celebrates, Murrieta as a symbol of the larger community. Rodriguez writes in a half-satirical, half-serious way about his travels around the state with a Jesuit priest named Alberto Huerta in search of the head, which he describes as a symbol of California’s violent, gothic past. But the more Huerta urges Rodriguez to help him pursue
various leads and thereby calls him “to come to terms with California,” the
more Rodriguez anxiously “pull[s] back” in order to return to “the Califor-
nia of Fillmore Street, of blond women and Nautilus-educated advertising
executives, this California of pastels and pasta salad . . . where I live.” These very different examples suggest that whether the myth of Murrieta as
symbol of a larger Chicano community has been enthusiastically endorsed,
implicitly criticized and imaginatively transformed, or nervously relegated
to a dead past, many Chicana/o cultural producers have felt compelled to
come to terms with it.

Accounts of the transmission of the Murrieta story that focus exclu-
sively on Ridge’s novel obscure this important history of Chicana/o re-
sponses to the legend. Critics often privilege Ridge’s narrative as a literary
point of origin, implicitly distinguishing it from the subliterary newspaper
accounts that preceded it in the 1850s, as well as from the mass cultural
texts, such as the California Police Gazette and the dime novels, that fol-
lowed it. I have suggested that such an analysis elides a larger, violently
divided, inter-American field of popular knowledge about crime that re-
sponded to and helped to reshape class and racial formations in the wake
of the American 1848. But if the low or mass-cultural world of cheap sens-
tional literature and the crime gazette comprises one important part of
that field, the ballads and legends produced by diasporic corrido commu-
nities are surely another.

Neither the police gazette nor the corrido versions of the Murrieta story
can be attributed to an individual author, as Ridge’s novel can, and this
may be one of the reasons, aside from the fascinating set of issues that his
text raises, that many discussions of Murrieta focus only on Ridge. While
the “author” of the California Police Gazette version is unknown, the text’s
close relationship to Ridge’s novel, to the newspaper stories, and to the
conventions of U.S.-Mexican War-era cheap fiction make traditional no-
tions of individual authorship untenable anyway. On the other hand, corri-
dos also challenge such notions of authorship because they are extremely
formulaic, influenced substantially by oral traditions, and because their
producers are usually anonymous, so that rather than reflecting the views
of an individual author, corridos offer, in Ramón Saldívar’s words, “a height-
ened, reflexive analysis of the mutual values and orientations of the collec-
tive.” In the case of the Murrieta corrido, we could go even further, for its
migratory movements call into question notions of a stable, unitary com-
munity. The formulaic nature of the corrido, as well as its sensational, body-
grabbing qualities, doubtless facilitated its transmission across widely dis-
persed sites. As José Limón suggests, “the sheer music, the strict predictable
measured poetics, the Spanish language of the corrido,” and its “strong sen-
sory quality” may well have “constituted a point of resistance” to U.S. capi-
talist modernity at “the level of form.”
Attempts to fix the literary origin of the Murrieta story miss the important point that the latter was from its inception a profoundly intercultural construction. While Ridge’s novel, which itself depends heavily on newspaper accounts, forces a consideration of intercultural relationships in post-war California, it is but one of many texts, articulated from different social locations, that contributed to the construction of the Murrieta story and to the debate about law, race, and criminality which took place after 1848. To these newspaper accounts and novels, we must add the corridos that circulated about Murrieta, beginning at some point—no one knows exactly when—during the nineteenth century. Because corridos are usually transmitted orally, it is difficult to confidently fix their point of origin. Luis Leal has suggested that the Murrieta corridos are based on a song about Indian warfare from nineteenth-century Zacatecas, which gives the date of the events it describes as 1853, and he concludes that there was probably an earlier prototype for both corridos which is lost today. According to Víctor Sánchez, a member of the group that first recorded it in 1934, “The corrido was written before I was born; it is from the last century. I heard it as a child in Mexico, sung during the time of the Revolution, and later in Arizona.” As this sensational crime story moves across regional and international boundary lines, it exposes the violence of U.S. empire-building and incessantly registers shifts in racial and national boundaries, thereby foregrounding the historical contingency of changing definitions of the native and the alien.

The corrido recorded during the 1930s must be understood in relation to the virulent nativism of the period and to the English-language versions of the story that were published during these years. Novels such as Ernest Klette’s The Crimson Trail of Joaquin Murrieta (1928), Dane Coolidge’s Gringo Gold (1939), and especially Walter Noble Burns’s The Robin Hood of El Dorado (1932) look back upon an earlier era of immigration and state formation and try to exorcise the ghosts of race wars past, or rather to argue that racial injustice and the violence of conquest are part of the dead past, which has given way to equality and the rule of law. They also labor to make the post-1848 boundary between the United States and Mexico seem natural and right by representing Spanish-speakers and especially people of Mexican origin as outlaws who threaten the state, in part because they easily move between nations. But the dead past is reanimated, the border becomes uncanny, and the alien and the native become hopelessly entangled in these narratives, which invoke ghosts that they cannot possibly lay to rest. To follow the ghosts in these Murrieta narratives means, then, as Avery Gordon puts it, to be startled into a recognition of the animating force of “what seems dead, but is nonetheless alive,” to confront “whatever organized violence has repressed and in the process formed into a past, a history, remaining nonetheless alive and accessible to encounter.”
In the final part of this essay I argue that the Murrieta *corridos* still have the power to reanimate history and to make the familiar seem strange, for the circulation of Murrieta stories across regional and national boundaries during the 1930s made different mappings of America a haunting presence at a time when the policing of the border between United States and Mexico was being intensified. As debates over nativism and immigration grew more heated during the Depression years, and as the 1930s began to resemble uncannily Murrieta’s California, the ghosts of California’s so-called past clamored noisily in the present, troubling claims that acts of racist injustice had been superseded by democracy and the rule of law.

More than a million Mexican immigrants crossed the border and resettled in the United States between 1890 and 1920. As David Gutiérrez suggests, “Mexican immigrants filled a wide variety of occupations, ranging from agricultural labor, mine work, and railroad construction and maintenance, to common day labor on innumerable construction sites throughout the Southwest.” In California, workers of Mexican origin comprised almost 17 percent of unskilled construction workers and almost 75 percent of the state’s farm labor force. During prosperous times the immigrants were welcomed by California agribusiness and other employers and were more or less uneasily tolerated by most white workers, who generally benefited from their better position within the racially segmented labor market. But after the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, Mexican workers became convenient scapegoats for white nativists. The American Federation of Labor, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion, to name just three groups, supported the Immigration Service’s intensified efforts to deport so-called illegal and undesirable Mexican immigrants, and between 1930 and 1939 Mexicans comprised “46.3 percent of all of the people deported from the United States.” During the early 1930s, U.S. Secretary of Labor William Doak specifically targeted labor organizers and strikers for deportation, and Southern California in particular became “the focal point of the deportation frenzy.” In August of 1931, the California state legislature also passed the Alien Labor Act, which made it illegal for companies to hire aliens for public works projects such as construction, highways, schools, and government office buildings, a policy which often meant that workers who “looked” Mexican were presumed to be illegal aliens. Finally, repatriation programs were established that, according to Camille Guerin-Gonzalez, “made no effort to distinguish between immigrants and U.S.-born Mexicans and, in fact, set numerical goals that included both groups.” In all of these ways, nativists insisted that people of Mexican origin were fundamentally alien despite the promise of abstract equality enshrined in the rhetoric of liberal democracy.

For many writers, this context made the Murrieta story newly relevant.
For instance, in Walter Noble Burns’s 1932 novel, *The Robin Hood of El Dorado*, which inspired the Hollywood movie, racial injustice is deplored, but it is also relegated to the dead past, represented as part of an older age of terror and lawlessness that has been superseded by “an era of law and order.” In the early chapters of the novel, as Burns rehearses the racist acts of white nativist terrorism that turned Murrieta into a criminal, he explains that nativists contravened the Constitution and the laws of the United States:

As California had fallen into American hands as spoils of war, the American miners were imbued with the idea that the gold of California was rightfully theirs and theirs only. But as selfishly human as the idea may have been, it was legally without justification. According to the constitution and laws of the United States, Mexicans and all other foreigners had as much right to mine in California as Americans themselves. But the legality of the position of the Mexicans had no effect in mitigating American hostility towards them. The feeling between the two races grew more and more embittered. (44)

Here, Burns extends some sympathy to the Mexican immigrant, who is treated unfairly by the Americans. But as we shall see, he also mitigates this criticism of the nativists by calling their behavior “selfishly human,” and he justifies state intervention after Murrieta becomes an outlaw.

In Murrieta’s California, according to Burns, the “law was a dead letter. Citizens were helpless and dared not defend themselves. The marauders came and went as free as the winds with reckless bravado but they left no clews behind. Their trails were red with blood but from the scenes of their crimes they vanished like phantoms” (129). Inevitably, then, in Burns’s account law must be enforced by the state, which, as he imagines it, rightfully unleashes its “crushing power” to end what he sees as Joaquín’s reign of terror. In Burn’s narrative of state formation, an age of lawlessness and terror must give way to an age of law. As he puts it in the novel’s concluding chapters, the “age of law was dawning in 1853. For more than three years, the state had endured Joaquin Murrieta’s reign of rapine and devastation. Now the Days of the Terror were drawing to a close. The state had grown weary of the red nightmare; and the weariness of the state was a menace of death. Herefore communities, countrysides, counties, had fought Murrieta. For the first time he was to feel the crushing power of the state as a state” (256). Here Burns animates the state, endowing it with a kind of moral agency as it awakens from the “red nightmare” and crushes resistance. For Burns, the death of the Mexican immigrant outlaw coincides with the dawn of a new age. “As the outlaw died, the sun rose over the distant Sierras, and plains and mountains were bathed in the radiance of the morning. For California, a new era came with the sunrise—an era of law and order” (275). By concluding in this way, Burns suggests that the ghosts that haunted Murrieta,
and the legally unjustified acts of nativist terrorism that provoked him, have been safely quarantined in the past, so that now they are no more than part of a “tale told in the twilight or a song sung to a guitar” (304).

If Burns labors to make the age of lawlessness and racial terror part of the dead past, however, there are several places in the text where his allusions to the present open up a wider, contemporaneous frame of reference for the Murrieta story. For instance, even as Burns tries to distance this story from his contemporary moment by making it, in the opening frame, a sort of gothic story told by an old-timer, a second-generation forty-niner who mourns the death of the old mining towns like a “mourner standin’ by an open grave,” he still yokes the past to the present as he comments on the fate of the succeeding generations of white Californians. “The Forty-Niners dipped up a fortune casual-like from some nameless creek in a tin washpan,” the old-timer suggests, “but their children have had to scratch mighty hard for a livin’ ” (1). Here, this reference to economic hard times and perhaps to agricultural labor almost, but not quite, brings into view the scenes of nativist terrorism, labor competition, and white supremacist retrenching that were taking place in California during the early 1930s. Instead, this context eerily looms on the margins of Burns’s story, only to be repressed by a temporal shift of the setting back to the California of the 1850s, which Burns tries to place securely in the past.

Burns’s efforts to use a narrative of development to separate an age of terror from an age of law fail in part because the context of the 1930s keeps resurfacing on the margins of his text, but also because, in spite of his manifest intentions, his revision of the story also shows how law and racial terror frequently accompanied rather than worked against each other. In other words, the laws to which Burns appeals often supported nativism and white supremacy. This point is made even more forcefully in the Joaquín Murrieta corrido, “a song sung to a guitar,” which is also a product of 1930s California, a time when laws often enabled racial terror rather than prohibiting it.

Luis Leal suggests that the earliest, most complete surviving version of the Murrieta corrido was recorded in 1934 in Los Angeles by Los Hermanos Sánchez y Linares, otherwise known as Los Madrugadores, or the Early Risers. According to Chris Strachwitz, Los Madrugadores “were one of the first groups to make an impact via Spanish language radio as well as via recordings in the Los Angeles area during the early thirties.” Jesús and Víctor Sánchez, the original members of the group, grew up in Sonora, Mexico, where their father worked as a miner. When the two were teenagers, the family came to the United States as contract laborers, and eventually Jesús and Victor worked in the fields in the Fresno area. In 1930, the brothers went to Los Angeles, and for several years they, along with Pedro González,
developed an extremely successful radio program which aired from four to six in the morning, “because it was cheaper to buy air time, and it was the time when farm workers got up to go to work.” The radio show mixed music and community activism as González, its host, provided important job information to laborers and spoke out against the mass deportations of both “native” and “alien” Spanish-speakers that were taking place in Los Angeles. In 1934, the same year that Los Madrugadores recorded the Joaquín Murrieta corrido, González was sent to San Quentin on trumped-up statutory rape charges. If, as “an exceptionally flexible musical genre,” in George Sánchez’s words, the corrido’s “relation to the working-class Mexican immigrant audience in Los Angeles” was “critical to its continued popularity,” then the story of the unjust treatment and criminalization of a Mexican immigrant in the United States must have taken on new and tragic resonances for that working-class audience during these years of intensified nativism and forced repatriation, especially in light of Gonzalez’s harsh experiences with the law.

But although the version of the Murrieta corrido recorded by Los Madrugadores in 1934 undoubtedly responded to the particular conjunction of post-Revolution immigration, Anglo-American nativism, and mexicano cultural nationalism in Los Angeles, it also continued to transmit countermemories of the American 1848. For while a fictive, precariously unified, white national identity was reformulated in the cheap sensational literature that was moving west along with the Americans who were rushing for gold and land, the U.S.-Mexican War also provoked other forms of national fantasy in the décimas, corridos, and other songs which accompanied the Spanish-speaking people who were migrating north to California during the postwar period. Although the apex of the heroic corrido tradition comes, according to Américo Paredes, during the Mexican Revolution, the post–U.S.-Mexican War era marks a crucial transitional time for Mexican folk music, as songs about the war, in particular, relied more upon narrative and thereby became more corrido-like. Paredes argues, for example, that “décimas about Jarauta, the fighting priest who was a guerrilla against Scott’s forces and who was executed because he refused to recognize the Treaty of Guadalupe, are more purely narrative than most others of their time. Jarauta himself is cast in the pattern of the corrido hero.” We last encountered Jarauta, you will recall, in Ridge’s novel and in the California Police Gazette, where he was instead cast in the role of the bloodthirsty, savage leader of many of the members of Murrieta’s band during the U.S.-Mexican War. If in the English-language versions, the evil Padre Jarauta prefigures the monstrous Three-Fingered Jack, whose viciousness justifies the imposition of U.S. laws despite Murrieta’s appeal, Paredes implies that the décimas underline the injustice of U.S. law by celebrating Jarauta’s doomed resistance to it.

María Herrera-Sobek and other corrido scholars have suggested that
there was a “renaissance” in *corrido* production during the middle of the nineteenth century, when ballads dealing with conflicts between Anglos and Mexicans began to proliferate. These songs helped to disseminate an uneven, contradictory national sentiment. As Paredes puts it, the “blaze stirred up by the daily conflict” between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans meant that a “nationalist feeling” arose in the borderlands before one was strongly and widely articulated in greater Mexico. While “Mexican nationalist feeling does not define itself until the last third of the nineteenth century,” Paredes argues, in “the northern frontiers, however, and in the parts of the United States recently taken from Mexico, nationalism begins to be felt toward the end of the 1830s, if we may take the folklore of these regions as an indication.”

In the face of a conquest that was often figured as the dismemberment of Mexico, the postwar producers of *décimas* and *corridos* struggled to re-member a truncated national body, reasserting its integrity by constructing a nationalist sentiment that was in many ways a defensive response to Anglo-American racism and the violence of U.S. nation-building.

I am arguing that, despite their different relationships to literacy, orality, and national languages, *corridos* and sensational crime literature such as the English-language Murrieta novels are intersecting, hybrid forms. But this hybridity does not magically dissolve differences or reconcile warring interpretations of the conquest and its consequences. Instead, the cultural syncretism of these popular texts forces us to confront the unequal power relations and the larger sphere of inter-American conflict that mutually shaped them.

As popular forms, *corridos* and U.S. sensational literature might initially seem to belong to incommensurate worlds. *Corridos* are, after all, closely linked to oral traditions, while sensationalism signals the emergence of a U.S. mass culture marked by industrialized modes of cultural production and enabled by improvements in literacy rates, changes in print technology, and the development of transportation networks. This does not mean, however, that *corridos* were produced by a thoroughly premodern folk or that sensational literature is simply the corrupted, debased result of the incursions of capital into the sphere of popular culture, because there are many folkloric motifs and patterns in sensational literature and many links between *corridos*, the spread of print capitalism, and the uneven modernization of social space. Although they were inevitably transformed as they moved from one context to another, *corridos* were frequently printed as broadsides or in newspapers, for instance, and they are sometimes based on newspaper stories; their dissemination was facilitated by the growth of railroad networks throughout Mexico and the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and they often register the dislocating effects of U.S./capitalist restructuring. For even though some *corridos* were
produced and performed by people who had lived in the border regions for years and were now being encroached upon by Anglo immigrants, corridos communities from at least the mid-nineteenth century on have more often been multiple and heterogeneous; marked by displacements and movements; stratified by differences of gender, generation, and regional origin; and composed of both immigrants and “natives.” All of this suggests that corridos negotiate the forces of modernity along with those who produce and perform them, traveling along routes which are inevitably shaped and constrained by the “political disciplines and economic pressures” of that modernity.

While corridos and popular sensational literature mark different paths through modernity, however, both expose the ways that modern nationalisms have, as Cynthia Enloe suggests, “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope.” Sensational U.S.-Mexican War literature and postwar crime narratives most often focus on violent encounters between men; nation-building is represented as a patrilineal enterprise; and women are usually figured as the spoils of war or as mediators whose bodies facilitate or threaten national unity. Similarly, nineteenth-century corridos frequently valorize a violent masculine hero who steadfastly resists U.S. expansion and depredation, avenging a series of humiliations.

In the version of the Murrieta corrido recorded by Los Madrugadores, for instance, cowardly Americans murder his brother and kill Joaquin’s wife, Carmelita, after making her suffer (“Carmelita tan hermosa / Cómo la hicieron sufrir”). The corrido omits the third humiliation that is presented as decisive in the English-language texts: the public whipping that Murrieta is forced to endure at the hands of the Americans. In the corrido, the violence done to Carmelita seems to stand in for the physical punishment that Murrieta himself withstands in the other versions, for the outrage done to his wife is the occasion (“Vengo a vengar a mi esposa”) for his transformation into a Robin Hood–style social bandit who robs from the rich, takes his hat off to the humble and poor, and is only called a bandit because U.S. laws are so unjust. The writer of the California Police Gazette version, who suggests that Murrieta’s wife, Carmela, is “ravished” and then killed, is more explicit about her suffering than the corrido is, or than Ridge is about Rosita’s fate, who in his version is raped but not killed. Despite their differences, however, all three versions still figure violence to the woman’s body as the ultimate outrage which prefigures or stands in for, depending on the version, violence done to Murrieta’s own body and to the larger community. By making the woman a victim rather than an actor in this drama, and by provoking nationalist affect through a patriarchal narrative of rape, masculine humiliation, and violent homosocial revenge, the corrido, like Ridge and the police gazette, identifies masculinity with resistance and makes
emasculating and the violated female body the signs of conquest. Thus all three versions appeal to so-called natural gender differences in order to stabilize the ruptures of a violent, migratory, inter-American modernity.

It could be argued that the Murrieta corrido evokes, in Julie Skurski’s words, “ideas of undisputed origins, original creation, and sustained tradition” in order to suggest that people of Mexican origin “share an original identity which can be liberated or restored through the rejection of colonialism’s pervasive influence.” In other words, in response to U.S. imperialism, the corrido strives to make Murrieta the bearer of an originary, authentic “Mexican” identity, reasserting the wholeness and reintegration of the Mexican nation as a way of dealing with the trauma of the war and the losses imposed by the Treaty. What is more, by naturalizing the connection between the soil and the Mexican nation (“I’m neither a Chilean nor a stranger on this soil which I tread. California is part of Mexico because God wanted it that way”), the corrido constructs a national sentiment that conceals its own constructedness. An insistence on the integrity of the Mexican national body despite the ruptures of war is also signaled by the corrido’s conclusion, which omits any mention of Murrieta’s severed head, so important in Ridge’s and the Police Gazette texts, in favor of a first-person assertion of Murrieta’s mexicano identity (“Yo soy ese Mexicano / de nombre Joaquín Murrieta”). While most corridos are narrated in the impersonal third person and end with a reflexive return to the metanarrative that frames the main story, the voices of the singers of this corrido must ventriloquize the first-person voice that dominates it from beginning to end. As the distinction between the impersonal third-person voice of the performer and the voice or dialogue of the corrido protagonist disappears, the singers become much more closely identified with the protagonist, who represents the Mexican nation, thus embodying more directly the values he champions.

But if the corridos circulate a cultural nationalism that may seem to be equivalent to the white, nativist nationalism of 1850s and 1930s California promoted in the crime gazette and the sensational novel, the different relationships that these nationalisms have to the U.S. nation-state significantly affect their meanings. In other words, while nationalisms as such may be inherently exclusionary, the different material and political histories of U.S. and Chicano nationalisms suggest that their identity can only be affirmed at the cost of an extremely high level of abstraction. Although the nationalism of the migrants who called themselves Anglo-Saxon usually supported the white-supremacist U.S. state, the nationalist sentiments invoked by the members of corrido communities were both at odds with official U.S. nationalism and at a distance from and irreducible to an emergent nationalism associated with the Mexican nation-state. Thus while the corridos can support exclusionary forms of nationalism, they also disseminate
memories of another America and thereby challenge narratives of U.S. national identity that require the interiorization and naturalization of the external borders of the state. For the process of internalizing national boundaries allows only some of us to, as Balibar suggests, “inhabit the space of the state as a place where we have always been—and always will be—‘at home.’”

Even when the corridos seek to disseminate exclusionary national sentiments, they underline the impossibility of a unitary national identity as they incessantly register the disruptions, displacements, and movements that provide the unstable ground for asserting it. The very facts that we can only guess about the corrido’s origins and that we have no access to a complete, unfragmented, certifiably nineteenth-century Murrieta corrido suggests that the folk tradition that transmits national identity is in this case manifestly synthetic, unavoidably responding to capitalist modernity even when resisting it. As Víctor Sánchez remembers, “We had many requests for this corrido, at parties, and then after we began to sing it on the radio, people would send us cards to the station and ask that we record it so they could have the disc. Felipe Valdés Leal added three or four verses to make it fit both sides of the record—I don’t remember which ones but possibly the one about coming from Hermosillo.” In other words, the national sentiment preserved in the Murrieta corrido was not only disseminated through mass cultural media such as records and the radio, but was also decisively shaped by these cultural technologies, since additions were made so it would “fit” the record. What is more, according to Luis Leal, the earlier Zacatecan corrido that the Murrieta corrido seems to be echoing asserts a strong regional identity rather than a national identity (“I am zacatecano because God wanted it that way” instead of “California is part of Mexico because God wanted it that way”) and thereby decenters claims to an originary Mexican identity by preserving a countermemory of a time when regional or local identities were more powerful than national identity. Finally, the transregional and often transnational trajectories of those who have performed this corrido—from Zacatecas to Sonora, from Sonora to Arizona, from Sonora/Arizona to California, and maybe back again, to name just a few possible routes—problematicize any appeal to the idea of a static, unfragmented national community. These singers, musicians, field laborers, miners, and other workers have preserved memories of the American 1848 and of a postwar crisis in the racial state that continues to haunt the U.S. “home” in an age of law and racial terror that has not ended.

NOTES


I understand the process of racialization in Michael Omi’s and Howard Winant’s terms, as “occurring through a linkage between structure and representation. Racial projects do the ideological ‘work’ of making these links. A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning.” See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 56.


6. See Saldívar, *Border Matters*, pp. 170 and 177; and Carolyn Porter, “What We Know That We Don’t Know: Remapping American Literary Studies,” *American Literary History* 6 (Fall 1994): 518–19. Porter suggests that we should view 1848 “not only as a moment in U.S. history, but also as a moment in Pan-American history” (519).

8. Ibid., p. 170.

9. See Cheryl Walker, *Indian Nation: Native American Literature and Nineteenth-Century Nationalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 111. According to Walker, although Ridge was of Cherokee descent, he was “a metropolitan, acculturated Indian who migrated from Indian territory to California and upheld views repugnant to those who wished to maintain traditional Indian cultural practices” (111). Nonetheless, Walker suggests that Ridge “speaks as much as an Indian as he does as a voice of white culture” (112).


13. See Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Gutiérrez-Jones’s important study of the “process by which Chicanos have become institutionally and popularly associated with criminality” (1) has significantly influenced my argument about the construction of a post–Mexican War racialized criminality.

14. Etienne Balibar, “Is There a Neo-Racism?” in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso Press, 1991), p. 20. Balibar further defines the immigrant complex as “a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions” (21).

15. On the epic heroic corrido, see John McDowell, “The Corrido of Greater...


21. California Police Gazette, September 24, October 8, and October 15, 1859.


27. In a longer version of this essay, I explore in much more detail Ridge’s negotiation of the shifting field of racial classifications in postwar California. For other approaches to this topic, see Peter G. Christensen, “Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge’s The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murrieta,” MELUS (Summer 1991–92): 61–72; Karl Kroeber, “American Indian Persistence and Resurgence,”


34. Pitt, Decline of the Californios, p. 52. See also Monaghan, Chile, Peru, and the California Gold Rush.

35. Cited in Monaghan, Chile, Peru, and the California Gold Rush, p. 114. See also Pitt, Decline of the Californios, pp. 55–56.


38. See Pitt, Decline of the Californios, p. 53; Royce California, p. 277; and Standart, “Sonoran Migration,” p. 10.


40. Royce, California, p. 364.

41. Omi and Winant, Racial Formation, p. 72.

42. In Racial Formation, Omi and Winant define racial formation “as the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55).


44. Ibid., pp. 65–68.


46. See Richard Rodriguez, Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Fa-
ther (New York: Viking, 1992), p. 140. Thanks are due to Barbara Brinson Curiel for telling me about this essay.

47. Many of the Spanish-language versions of the story, including a novel published in Los Angeles in 1919, seem to be based on the *California Police Gazette* adaptation. See Raymund F. Wood, “Supplementary Notes on Joaquin Murieta,” in *Joaquin Murieta, the Brigand Chief of California*, x.


49. Limón, *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems*, p. 34.


54. Ibid., p. 45.


56. Ibid., p. 55.


61. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, p. 184. According to Sánchez, District Attorney Burton Fitts, who “believed that only English should be heard on the radio and that only American citizens should have the right to broadcast” (184), was responsible for the arrest.

62. See Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, pp. 178, 183–85, and Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands*, pp. 2–3, 50–56. I agree with the latter that González’s example shows how “the stereotypical ascription of ‘criminality’ to Chicanos must be read in the context of larger U.S. institutional aims, including the maintenance of Chicanos and Mexicanos as a malleable, productive underclass” (3).


65. Américo Paredes, “The Folklore of Groups of Mexican Origin,” in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, p. 9. According to Paredes’ logic, a “nationalist sentiment” would first be strongly articulated in Texas because of the battles there in the 1830s. In general, nationalist feeling was weak in the borderlands areas after Mexican independence in 1821, especially in California, which was so far re-
moved from greater Mexico. See also Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, p. 30. According to Gutiérrez, “In the quarter century before annexation, many, if not most, Spanish-speaking residents of Mexico’s northern provinces did not even identify themselves as Mexicans and instead probably thought of themselves first as Nuevomexicanos, Tejanos, or Californios” (30).

66. My understanding of hybridity has been influenced by Lisa Lowe’s discussion of this concept in the Asian-American context in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). Lowe suggests that “Hybridization is not the ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities. It is the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process by which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives” (82).


72. In Spanish, the lines are as follows: “No soy chileno ni extraño / en este suelo que piso. / De México es California, / porque Dios así lo quizo.”

73. Citing Fichte, Balibar suggests in “The Nation Form” that for nationalism to take hold of subjectivities, “the ‘external frontiers’ of the state have to become ‘internal frontiers’ or—which amounts to the same thing—external frontiers have to be imagined constantly as a projection and protection of an internal collective personality, which each of us carries within ourselves and enables us to inhabit the space of the state as a place where we have always been—and always will be—‘at home.’ ” See Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, p. 95. Hence the unheimlich qualities of the corridos, which haunt the U.S. home and make its borders unfamiliar. For a strong analysis of nationalism and the uncanny, see Priscilla Wald, *Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 4–13.


This course complicates the conventional periodization of nineteenth-century U.S. history and culture that makes the Civil War the pivotal event in a narrative that moves from sectional conflict to national consolidation and then to imperialism at the end of the century. By examining the early history of U.S. empire-building in Mexico as well as the filibustering attempts in Cuba and Latin America in the years that followed, we will think about how the events of 1848 established patterns for subsequent U.S. imperialist policies in 1898 and beyond. Topics to be addressed include the relationship between Indian Removal and the U.S.-Mexican War; the war and mass culture; cultural nationalism and Young America; the Revolutions of 1848; the complicated politics of anti-imperialism; slavery, resistance, and colonization schemes in the Americas; and migration and racial formation in the wake of the Gold Rush. The premise of this course is that U.S. class and racial formations throughout the nineteenth century were decisively shaped by international conflict and both the internal and the global dynamics of empire-building.

**PRIMARY TEXTS**


SECONDARY SOURCES


Kaplan, Amy. “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture.” In *Cultures of United States Imperialism*,


