Theses and Dissertations

2018

Backcountry Robbers, River Pirates, and Brawling Boatmen: Transnational Banditry in Antebellum U.S. Frontier Literature

Samuel M. Lackey
University of South Carolina

Backcountry Robbers, River Pirates, and Brawling Boatmen: Transnational Banditry in
Antebellum U.S. Frontier Literature

by

Samuel M. Lackey

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2006

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2006

Master of Arts
College of Charleston, 2009

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2018

Accepted by:

Gretchen Woertendyke, Major Professor

David Greven, Committee Member

David Shields, Committee Member

Keri Holt, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

First, I would like to thank my parents for all of their belief and support. They have always pushed me forward when I have been stuck in place. To my dissertation committee – Dr. Gretchen Woertendyke, Dr. David Greven, Dr. David Shields, and Dr. Keri Holt – thank you for your patience and assistance. I am especially grateful to Dr. Woertendyke for guiding me through the early dark days of dissertation writing, and to Dr. Greven for offering friendly advice and a sounding board. The genesis of this project was a pair of seminar papers I wrote during my second and third years in the PhD program, in the classrooms of Dr. Greven and Dr. Leon Jackson, respectively, and I owe both scholars many thanks for suggesting that the papers had the potential to be dissertation chapters. To my colleagues and all the English faculty at the University of South Carolina, I give my thanks for fostering the collegial and supportive environment that I have enjoyed for the last six years. On a more personal note, I would like to extend my gratitude to Ms. Courtney Tunmore. I could not have done this without her.

Abstract

This dissertation argues that in the midst of an uncertain but formative period of continental expansion, a revolutionary brand of popular crime fiction appeared and flourished in the pages of cheap periodicals and paperback novels. It consisted of conventional adventure romances and pulpy proto-dime novels that focused on frontier violence and backwoods criminals. Often popular in their day but quickly forgotten, these texts have been given short shrift by scholars and critics due to their shoddiness or ostensibly minor role in literary history. I contend that this obscure brand of crime fiction in fact has much to offer in the ongoing conversation about geographical borders and the roles they play in our conception of nation, culture, and literature.

I will demonstrate the ways in which a specific group of American literary figures – Steelkilt, John Murrell, and Joaquin Murieta, among others – all of whom were featured in popular fiction between the 1830s and 1850s, dramatically altered the representation of crime in antebellum U.S. fiction, while also helping to shape national conceptions of expansion, imperialism, region, and identity. Though often subsumed under the umbrellas of various genres, I consider the narratives containing these characters to be forerunners of a transnational crime genre that continues to be popular today. The texts under consideration in this study begin with Morgan Neville's 1828 sketch "Last of the Boatmen," continue through the crime novels of the 1830s and 40s penned by

iv

Emerson Bennett and H.R. Howard, and reach their murderous pinnacle in Herman

Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin*

Murieta (1854). The transnational frontier bandits developed in these pages represent the

unstable and at times impossible nature of the U.S. 'civilizing' mission. My dissertation

aims to perform a threefold critical intervention: to argue that these characters'

appearances in popular texts reveal disturbing fissures in the conventional narrative of U.S.

western expansion and national identity, to show that the regions they inhabit function as

alien or non-national spaces characterized by culturally polyglot populations and

unmapped terrain; and, finally, to demonstrate the overall impact they have on popular

U.S. literature and culture in the 1830s, 40s and 50s.

Table of Contents

<u>Introduction: Region, Identity, and the Geography of the Unknown West</u>

In this dissertation I argue that a specific group of American literary figures –
Steelkilt, John Murrell, and Joaquin Murieta, among others – all of whom were featured
in an emerging subgenre of frontier crime fiction, dramatically altered the representation
of crime in antebellum U.S. fiction while also helping to shape national conceptions of
western expansion and U.S. imperialism. Though often subsumed under the headings of
Southwestern Humor or Walter Scott-style adventure romances, the narratives containing
these characters form a separate corpus distinguished by its ambiguous and frequently
troubling treatments of newly-incorporated U.S. regions and the often-permeable borders
they share with non-national spaces.

The texts under consideration in this study begin with Morgan Neville's 1828
sketch "Last of the Boatmen," continue through the crime novels of the 1830s and 40s
penned by William Gilmore Simms, James Hall, Emerson Bennett and H.R. Howard, and
reach their pinnacle in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and John Rollin Ridge's
The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta (1854). These works are distinct from one
another in terms of tone, subject matter, and generic conventions but united through their
frank portrayals of violence and lawlessness along the various frontiers of America. Not
only do they depict backwoods disorder, they convert it into a primary narrative focus. In
the pages of these texts, a new frontier bandit character emerges with new forms of
mobility and power in a rapidly-expanding nation. The adventures and travels of the

bandits featured in these texts provide the grist for escapist fantasies and projections of imperial might; however, strangely enough, they also demonstrate disturbingly violent antisocial and unruly tendencies which often call into question the civilizing and progressive missions underwriting U.S. expansion in the early nineteenth century.[1] Ultimately, they exemplify the mystery and dread surrounding the process of westward settlement and the conceptions of western geography that it created.

In *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (1992), James S. Romm makes the case that ancient geography, as it was practiced by the Greeks and Romans, should be considered a literary and narrative genre rather than strictly a descriptive branch of physical science (3-5). As he states in his introduction, early geographers "such as Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Strabo went about their task chiefly by way of narrative: they sifted through a vast storehouse of traveler's tales in order to separate fact from fiction," then retold both the credible accounts and the "*in*credible" ones, "revealing that the geographer's science and storyteller's art, in many periods of antiquity, could not be fully detached from one another" (5; emphasis in original). Though existing in a vastly different historical and cultural context, these early imaginative geographies share much in common with the literature about the American West that proliferated throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century. The geographers, travel writers, and fiction authors of the latter age may have known more about the arrangement of continents and

---

[1] As Ian Baucom argues, the term "brigand" or "bandit" has been used throughout western history to refer to "unlawful, unprotected, and rightless" enemies of the state. More specifically, the term refers to "stateless" enemies held in contrast to oppositional nations and armies. This idea of bandits being, by definition, stateless has shaped many of my ideas here. For more on early definitions of banditry, see Baucom's "Cicero's Ghost: The Atlantic, the Enemy, and the Laws of War" in *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies* (2009).

the shape of the globe, but many details of newly-acquired western spaces and the peoples inhabiting them remained clouded in obscurity, as huge expanses of largely unexplored territory were added to the United States, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Thus, those who wrote about the West often relied on vague, sometimes inaccurate reports of travelers and frequently propagated incredible accounts of places that most U.S. citizens had never seen or even conceptualized.

Romm goes on to point out that the "most fundamental act" by which ancient geographers defined their world was the setting of boundaries to mark off finite stretches of the earth from what they perceived as a larger and formless expanse: "without such boundaries, both land and sea would become *apeiron*, 'boundless,' and in fact they are sometimes so called in the poems of Homer and Hesiod" (10). Romm mentions the "cognitive dissonance" inspired in ancient peoples by unlimited expanses of unexplored land, and this experience was felt similarly by early nineteenth century Americans coming to terms with rapid territorial gains and learning about previously unknown regions. With its purchase of the vast Louisiana Territory from France, the U.S. more than doubled its land holdings, but at the time of its acquisition, "a century and a half of Spanish, French, and British exploration had furnished only a skeleton of information" on the territory, and U.S. officials remained unsure of its exact boundaries (Wishart 13). After all, French Louisiana, though immense in total land size, never practically consisted of much beyond "New Orleans, a corridor along the Mississippi, and a few "fingers of land" extending up nearby tributaries (White 37). And the Spanish, after taking control of the portions of territory found west of the Mississippi following the French-Indian War, did nothing to push European settlement outward.

As a result, the purchase was more of a claim or an object of desire than what Europeans or Euro-Americans would consider a settled space; it was appealing for what it *could* be rather than what it was already known to be. Richard White explains that most of what had been considered French Louisiana – all the lands west of the Red and Missouri Rivers and east of the Rockies – had laid beyond imperial control and usually registered blankly to European colonizers of the eighteenth century. With no permanent white settlements and a vastness that rendered exploration difficult, this area remained the domain of Indian tribes and wild animals, and though it was frequently traversed by traders and trappers, it was not truly a part of any established white civilization. Having no "specific name for such a place" and conceiving of it as "quite literally nothing," the French, Spanish, British, and, later, Americans often described it as savagery personified, a place which "history had not yet overtaken," or as "great wastes" and "vast solitudes" (White 38). It was valuable as a potential bulwark against other empires, a future site of economic and commercial expansion, and a new home for westward-moving settlers, but at the time of its acquisition, the land did not yet represent any of these things.

Since much of the purchase was largely unexplored in 1803, U.S. officials were uncertain about what exactly they were receiving. As David Wishart explains, a lack of specific geographic knowledge of the area led to widespread misconceptions: early Spanish explorers had implanted the idea that much of it was a desert, an image later substantiated by the expedition reports of Zebulon Pike in 1810 and Stephen Long in 1823 (17). Any land yet to be settled by whites was often viewed as a desert in New World contexts: "if Europeans did not yet have a use for a given piece of land, it was not merely wild but a desert, a place of danger and deprivation" (Heyne 4). And to be sure,

the U.S. government did not have much of an immediate use for the parts of the Purchase lying to the west of New Orleans and the Mississippi River: the western portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri, along with much of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, most of the Dakotas, and parts of Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Much of this vast expanse was almost completely unmapped at the time. Theoretically, the purchase extended west all the way to the Rocky Mountains, but boundaries and distances remained murky.

President Thomas Jefferson "envisioned neither statehood nor cultural integrity" for much of the area and its largely French or Spanish-speaking inhabitants. Instead, he planned to attach Lower Louisiana (essentially everything south of the present-day Arkansas-Louisiana border) and its crucial port of New Orleans to the U.S. controlled Mississippi Territory for the purposes of assimilation, while setting aside most of Upper Louisiana (which meant Arkansas and everything else to the north and west) as an Indian reserve (Meinig 14-15). The majority of these new lands struck American observers as uninhabited and perhaps uninhabitable. Even beyond the 1830s, when much of the eastern reaches of the Purchase had become prime farmland, U.S. travel writing and fiction employed the image of empty desert in order to portray much of what would later come to be regarded as the Upper South and American Midwest as wild and inhospitable regions.[2]

---

[2] For more on early literary depictions of Illinois and other parts of the great western prairies, see Ralph Leslie Rusk's *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* (1925), Dorothy Ann *Dondore's The Prairies and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description* (1926), Robert C. Bray's *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois* (1982), Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie*: *Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989) and James Hurt's *Writing Illinois: The Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago* (1992).

For example, William Cullen Bryant, in his famous 1833 poem "The Prairies,"

uses the term 'desert' not in the sense of a "desiccated wasteland" but rather to mean "an

utterly deserted place" yet to be cultivated, which was his impression of Illinois when he

visited it in the early 1830s (Bray 15). When he refers to "gardens of the Desert" and

boundless "unshorn fields," Bryant is capturing the paradox of a larger frontier region

stretching from the former French holdings in Indiana and Illinois to the more recently-

acquired lands across the Mississippi (qtd. in Bray 14). Initially, this area appeared

inimical to agriculture and civilization due to its empty vastness, but those same qualities

that made it so sublime and foreboding in the present also created the possibility that it

would provide a bountiful garden in the future, thereby adding to the U.S.'s wealth and

territorial holdings. Many early travel writers who penned accounts of Illinois, such as

Charles Dickens, Eliza Farnham, and John Stillman Wright, also commented on the vast

and boundless quality of the Midwestern prairieland. Though many of them still viewed

it as a promising territory for future national use, the limitless horizon and relatively

feature-less landscape often inspired dread or, at the very least, uncertainty on the part of

the writers (Hurt 11; Bray 16-17).

In reality, the landscape they described is composed of various types of prairie

ecosystems, primarily the tall grasslands of Illinois, Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota, and

the shorter grasses found in the central plains of Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and the

eastern portions of Colorado and Wyoming. But as long as they remained largely

unoccupied and seemingly limitless, these sprawling precincts could exist as an awe-

inspiring and at least partially unknown site of adventure. As Theodore Roosevelt notes

in *The Winning of the West* (1910) the backwoodsmen who first stumbled upon the

prairie had no name or conception of it, since it differed so greatly from the forests and mountains they had previously encountered (34).

Perhaps no American writer captured this mysterious quality of the region better than Herman Melville. Though he rarely wrote about the region explicitly, Melville drew on popular travel accounts and his own 1840 visit to his uncle's Illinois farm in the numerous allusions to the prairies found in his novels, particularly *Moby-Dick* (1853). As John Nichol demonstrates in his 1951 article, "Melville and the Midwest," *Moby-Dick* is rich with analogies between the Midwestern landscape and the open sea, as the author compares the ocean with "wide-rolling watery prairies" and depicts the masts of distant ships "struggling forward, not through high-rolling waves, but through the tall grass of rolling prairies: as when western emigrants' horses only show their erected ears, while their hidden bodies widely wade through the amazing verdure" (qtd. in Nichol 616). For Melville, the ocean functioned symbolically and metaphorically much like the West, and by extending into each other, these two limitless expanses both came to comprise, "as imaginative probability, the entire imaginable cosmos" (Fussell 263). But on a more practical level, Melville was both intrigued and a bit confounded by the physical geography of the region: for him and other writers of the period, such immensity signaled infinite possibility, but also primal dangers and man's inability to grasp the full extent of its reach. As James D. Hart states in his magisterial 1950 study, *The Popular Book*, "neither novelist nor poet could domesticate the West…it was too new, too strange" (141).

Much of this image of the region as vast, monotonous, and strangely mysterious was furnished by memoirs of explorers such as Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Long, all of

whom had actually traversed parts of the Louisiana Purchase.[3] Pike, in his 1810 quest for

the source of the Mississippi River, became convinced that the tall and short grasslands

of the Midwest could not be cultivated; he called them "inland deserts" that could only

serve the U.S. in two capacities: as a natural barrier to westward settlement or "an ideal

habitat for other nations, particularly Native Americans" and the scattered European

Creoles who had settled there during Spanish or French rule (qtd. LeMenager 24). A

decade-and-a-half later, Stephen H. Long confirmed these perceptions and was the first to

dub the Great Plains "the Great American Desert" (LeMenager 25). He claimed that the

region was "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people

dependent upon agriculture for their subsistence" (qtd. in Sundquist 22). Both explorers

recoiled at the lack of trees and apparent desolation of the windswept and often

featureless landscape, falsely equating the sparse vegetation in places like modern-day

Missouri and Kansas with overall aridity. As late as the 1840s and 50s, many U.S.

citizens continued to regard virtually everything west of the Mississippi River and east of

the Rockies as an "Asiatic wasteland." As such, these inland deserts provided settings

remote and foreign enough for the leading authors of the United States to utilize them as

"a passage into the unstable core of national consciousness" (LeMenager 25).

　　　　To this end, in *The Prairie* (1826), James Fenimore Cooper stages the elegiac

close of Natty Bumppo's career on the lonely plains of the Midwest and treats it as a

parallel to the close of the old frontiers that the consummate hunter and "white savage"

---

[3] For more on these expeditions, see *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*
(1905), Pike's *An Account of expeditions to the source of the Mississippi and through the western parts of
Louisiana to the sources of the Arkansaw, Kans. La Platte, and Pierre Jaun rivers* (1810), and Stephen
Long's *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, performed in the years 1819 and
1820* (1823).

formerly called home. Removed to modern-day eastern Nebraska, Bumppo finds himself in a region "too messy to support an image of the expanding United States" – too filled with Indians, too geographically unknown, and too close to the influence of other empires, the Spanish to the southwest and the English and French to the north (LeMenager 24). Stephanie LeMenager claims that the novel "reveals just how shallow the United States' past in the West had been and how little government policy or public opinion about the desert West had changed from the era of Lewis and Clark" to the 1820s (39).

In a similar vein, Washington Irving refers to this region as the "Far West" in his *Tour of the Prairies* (1832) and claims that, "several hundred miles beyond the Mississippi," there begins "a vast tract of uninhabited country" that he later calls "fertile and verdant wastes," on which buffalo and elk still roam and Indian hunting parties remain a more common sight than log cabins (10). In the decades to follow, other popular writers – such as Robert Montgomery Bird, William Gilmore Simms, Emerson Bennett, Edward Bonney, and Friedrich Gerstacker – followed in Cooper and Irving's footsteps by featuring wild western locations as the settings for their novels. Near the Mississippi River and beyond, in places like Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas, geographic mystery and cultural difference still lingered well into the 1850s. These traits are reflected in several popular works about frontier crime, several of which will be discussed in the ensuing chapters of this study: James B. Nourse's *The Forest Knight* (1846) and Bennett's *Bandits of the Osage* (1847), both set in Missouri; Bonney's *The Banditti of the Prairies* (1850) and Bennett's *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio*, set in Illinois (1847); and Gerstacker's *The Pirates of the Mississippi* (1848), set in Arkansas

(De Menil 320). Other works, such as H.R. Howard's *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, The Great Western Land Pirate* (1835) and even a chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) make use of locations that were at least *near* these wild interior precincts. For example, in Howard's text Murrell travels to Arkansas, Texas, and Mexico, while Melville's Steelkilt occupies the ultimate gateway to the unknown West: The Great Lakes.

In terms of style and characterization, many of these works belong to a long historical Romance tradition codified earlier in the century by Sir Walter Scott, while others are more indebted to the broadsheet and criminal confession genres popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather than united through genre, these texts are joined by the strangeness or lawless disorder of their settings – for all intents and purposes, they were the first American "Westerns." Like future Westerns, they depicted frontier violence, vigilante justice, and settings considered to be wild and not yet fully incorporated into the national project. The settings of these texts were often found in what the U.S. Census now designates the East North Central (including Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois), the East South Central (Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky), the West North Central (including Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska), and the West South Central (Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana). In the 30s and 40s, however, much of these areas were still considered "western" and, to varying extents, outside the bounds of a clearly-defined national sphere. The enormous stretch of land from the Great Lakes in the north to the Mexican border in the south registered to most Americans during this time as frontier locales full of disorder and danger. In the years to follow, this same perception lingered in the public consciousness as the American frontier extended further

west to the newly-incorporated U.S. possessions of the Rocky Mountain region and the Pacific Coast. Soon, the outlaw romances and lurid criminal narratives first crafted in the forests and swamps of the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys adapted to the mountains and deserts of the Far West. At each stage of the western frontier's migration, sensationalized crime fiction featuring legendary outlaws moved with it. And as U.S. citizens tried to make sense of a rapidly-expanding nation, they relied heavily on notions of western aridity, desolation, wildness, and crime.

Throughout this uncertain but formative period of continental expansion between the Louisiana Purchase and the Civil War, a revolutionary subgenre of crime fiction emerged and grew exceedingly popular. Among the cheap, sensationalized "paperback potboilers" comprising much of the "broad river" of U.S. crime fiction that began to course through the literary marketplace in the 1830s and 40s, these texts featured outlaws and their organized gangs wreaking havoc along the untamed margins of western settlements and first developed many of the tropes necessary for the formation of a distinct and recognizable Western genre that would later emerge in U.S. popular culture (Slotkin 132; Reynolds 175). Often popular in their day but quickly forgotten, these works have been given short shrift by scholars and critics due to their aesthetic shoddiness or ostensibly minor role in literary history. But I want to suggest that this obscure brand of crime fiction in fact has much to offer in the ongoing conversation about geographical borders and the roles they play in our conception of nation, culture, and literature. Appearing and flourishing in a time when the United States was still imagined and described as "formless" and "diffuse," the works examined here develop an original bandit character type defined by a limitless mobility and a distinctively non-

11

national regional identity.[4] More than mere ruffians or thieves, these characters provide a pre-history for the questions and uncertainties concerning the nation's shape and identity that remain relevant today.

Over the last twenty years, a wide range of contemporary scholars have discussed the future viability of a nation-based paradigm serving as the basis for American literary study. Most of these commentators, from Janice Radway to Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhaba, and Wai Chee Dimock, have concluded that the paradigm is no longer useful in a global age as national borders erode and global capital reigns supreme. In such a climate, Americanists have been busy redefining what it means to be "American," in terms of both national identity and national literature; more and more are determining that future studies in the field must regard the U.S. as "a porous network" with "no tangible edges" rather than a "discrete entity" (Dimock 2-3). By relying less on arbitrary and ephemeral geographical borders, we can better engage texts and ideas on a hemispheric or trans-Atlantic level, thereby instigating a search for the "alternate geographies" and histories necessary for the creation of broader and more "empirically robust" platforms for American literature (Dimock 2-3). Taking these developments as a point of departure, critics such as Ann Baker, Stephanie LeMenager, and Paul Giles have shown that the American public has long been wary and conflicted over expanding and defining the United States. More than a mere outgrowth of the modern neoliberal global order, this ambivalence toward borders and a coherent national identity actually arose in the early days of the republic and never fully dissipated in the years since.[5]

---

[4] As Ann Baker points out, "formless," "diffuse," "ungirt," and "procumbent" are among the specific words Ralph Waldo Emerson used in an 1847 journal entry to describe the young nation (2).

[5] For examples of this type of scholarship, see the essays contained *within Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (2007) and *American Literary*

For example, Giles argues that the association of America and American literature with the geographical boundaries of the nation did not develop until after the Civil War. He explains that in the first half of the nineteenth century, rapid territorial gain and the articulation of Manifest Destiny engendered too many instabilities and uncertainties regarding American geography and discourse for the concept of a unified and well-defined nation to take firm hold (Baker 1; Giles 39). During this early period of national history, "the country's sense of national identity was as uncertain, as provisional, as its cartography" (Giles 41). Ann Baker makes a similar point when she claims that for much of the nineteenth century no American would have been able to call to mind a clear picture of his or her nation (1).

Reactions to continental expansion during this time were varied: some welcomed it while other raised moral objections. Lyman Beecher, for example, a prominent New England clergyman and the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, warned about an alien nation rising up beyond the eastern seaboard comprised "of land hungry speculators, Catholics with more allegiance to the pope and his European allies than to the United States, and half-savage westerners who had never been exposed to the civilizing influences of schools and churches that had shaped the eastern citizen" (qtd. in Baker 3). Beecher and many of his contemporaries argued for the value of a "compact" nation that could remain relatively homogenous and unified without the responsibility of stitching together a geographically diverse landscape. As early as the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas

Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900, ed. Martin Bruckner and Hsuan L. Hsu (2007). Of particular importance to the present study are Dimock's "Planet and America, Set and Subset" and Paul Giles' "The Deterritorialization of American Literature," both of which are found in _Shades of the Planet_. Two other works of scholarship that greatly influenced my understanding of the issues outlined above are Stephanie LeMenager's _Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States_ (2004) and Ann Baker's _Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America_ (2006).

Jefferson noticed the difficulties inherent in trying to rule a vast stretch of land between the Atlantic and the Mississippi River and conjectured that one day it would be split into two independent nations (Holt, Watts, and Funchion 1).

While the nation seemed infinitely expandable during this time, it nevertheless remained peripheral in a global context, and much of its limitless possibility was tied to the relative weakness of its borders and a prevailing sense of decenteredness (LeMenager 8-9). The rise of Manifest Destiny expressed the nation's desire to change this uncertain and marginal status by filling in the map's blank spaces and finally establishing a sense of "grounding and enclosure" (Giles 41). By the 1840s, the U.S. began to position itself as a fledgling commercial empire and to assert a stronger diplomatic presence with the rest of the world. By the decade's end, the young nation struck a huge victory in its quest for continental supremacy with the conclusion of the Mexican-American War. But critics such as Eric Sundquist and Stephanie LeMenager have shown that, even at this critical point, the American West was "not yet a symbolically coherent or geopolitically recognizable region of the United States" (LeMenager 6).

Most easterners had very little conception of what the West was, in terms of landscape, the peoples inhabiting it, and its relation to other parts of the nation. LeMenager asserts that even the Mississippi River Valley, which geographically ceased to be the true West early in the nineteenth century, was still regarded at midcentury "as a region of international trade and movement rather than a settled, prenational culture" (119). Such ambiguity helped to generate some of the mythology and romanticism that would later come to characterize western locales and the protean cultural functions they continue to serve today. The West can symbolize Edenic landscapes, sources of sublime

inspiration, or havens for renegades and ne'er-do-wells (Sundquist 15). At the same time, this uncertainty about western borderlands also led early nineteenth century commentators such as Lyman Beecher to worry about them becoming "frontiers of desolation and blood" (Baker 3). As critics such as Patricia Limerick, Giles, and Baker have demonstrated, the successful establishment in these wild, mysterious places of Anglo-American institutions (schools and churches), along with Anglo-American conventions (such as individual property ownership and the rule of law), was no great certainty in the early decades of the nineteenth century. And if such a difficult civilizing mission could not be accomplished, the only conceivable alternative in the minds of many U.S. citizens was perpetual lawlessness on the frontier and a constant threat to the overall nation's security.

In the literature of the antebellum U.S., this threat of an unsettled frontier was manifested most often in what I call the *transnational frontier bandit*. I employ this title for three reasons. First, the figure's entire criminal existence is predicated on the ability to cross borders and carry out activities involving multiple national territories or jurisdictions; secondly, it occupies frontier spaces on the margins of U.S. civilization during the early years of western expansion; and finally, it can be considered criminal because it routinely breaks laws and eludes capture. The modifier "original" is also important here, as I contend that these characters were the first criminals in U.S. fiction to function in these ways. For example, in the pulpy stories published by H.R. Howard in the 1830s and 40s, John Murrell crosses national borders to sell stolen slaves and travels to Mexico to recruit new members to his gang. Similarly, in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick,* Steelkilt operates much like a pirate as he wreaks havoc on the high seas and moves

beyond all forms of human law. Later, in John Rollin Ridge's novel, Joaquin Murieta transports weapons and horses back and forth across the newly-formed California/Mexico border. In all of these cases, the characters take advantage of loose borders to perform a brand of criminality that far exceeded past literary depictions of criminals in terms of scope and range of movement.[6]

Living and working in the hinterlands of unsettled border regions, the bandits of this study occupy a liminal space where their nationality is always in flux and they can be deployed as either "the national par excellence" or "exemplars of anti-national traits" depending on the context (qtd. in Waldstreicher 270). While their criminality and peripheral status at the margins of the nation often mark them as separate or peculiar, many of the texts in which they appear render them sympathetically and uphold them as prime examples of certain national values. Such liminal positions and ambiguous identities allow them to call into question the adventure narratives they anchor and the values they ostensibly endorse. At the same time, though, they work to enact readers' fantasies of colonial domination and wild adventure by travelling to exotic places and enforcing their own brand of justice. This perplexing duality indicates that the transnational frontier bandit character cannot easily be reduced to a convenient symbol or a historical signpost on the well-marked narrative of development and progress.

One of my primary aims in this dissertation is to demonstrate the ways in which this coherent and critically important group of transnational outlaws emerged from the

---

[6] For more on the nature of English and European examples of literary criminals, many of which serve as precursors to American models, see Graham Seal's *The Outlaw Legend* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996) and *Bandit Territories: British Outlaw Traditions* (Cardiff: U. of Wales P., 2008). Also see Stephen Knight's *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (1994), Tim Lundgren's "The Robin Hood Ballads and the English Outlaw Tradition" (1996), and Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels: studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (1959) and *Bandits* (1981).

explosion of frontier crime fiction in the 1830s and 40s. These characters are united not so much through criminal vocation or key characteristics, but rather through their unique physical mobility and their distinctive regional identities. They all display a disturbing ability to cross borders and commit crimes that exceed mere attacks on people or property and actually threaten the stability of entire frontier communities. In fact, Steelkilt, John Murrell, Camilla, and, on a later frontier, Joaquin Murieta, all create a revolutionary brand of crime hitherto unseen in U.S. literature. In the pages to follow, I will demonstrate how they do this. By using historicist and cultural studies methodologies and pairing them with my own close readings, I will illustrate how the characters factor into the history of U.S. imperialism and economic development. My two most salient concerns are region and identity, and the ways in which the transnational frontier bandit embodies non-national and destabilizing traits within both registers. My most important critical intervention is ultimately threefold: to argue that these characters' appearances in popular texts reveal disturbing fissures in the conventional narrative of U.S. western expansion and national identity, to show that the regions they inhabit function as alien or non-national spaces characterized by culturally polyglot populations and unmapped terrain, and, finally, to demonstrate the overall impact these bandit figures have on popular U.S. literature and culture between the 1830s and 1850s.

Identity, Region, and the Historical Crimes of Early U.S. Frontiers

"..Wherever pioneers had invaded the wilderness beyond the Alleghenies, in Tennessee, in Kentucky, and the trans-Mississippi territory, they had had to come to grips with the problem of controlling crime, sporadic or organized, when the instrumentalities of law were too weak or too remote to fulfill their function."   – Harrison R. Steeves

"*Where is an American vagabond so likely to go as a frontier territory*?"
                                        – Sidney Smith

Historian Ray Allen Billington once described the U.S. West as a "migrating geographic area which moved from Atlantic to Pacific over the course of three centuries" (Billington, *Westward Expansion* 3). In colonial days, this mobile theatre lay beyond the Appalachian Mountains; by the end of the eighteenth century it was the Ohio River Valley; and in the early years of the nineteenth century it reached the Mississippi River. By the 1820s and 30s it existed in Missouri and the vast plains to the west; then, by the end of the 1840s, it consisted of the Rockies and the Pacific coast, though regular citizens and writers would continue to refer to virtually anything west of the Atlantic seaboard as "The West" until the years leading up the Civil War (Billington 3-4; Sundquist 15).

The ideas and ideals associated with this fungible notion of the West became the "imagined locus of national character" by the late 1840s (LeMenager 15-16). The mythology of the American West – whether the term denoted the Mississippi River Valley or the gold fields of California – was at the center of the country's new sense of nationalism and expansion; it also figured prominently in the discourse of American exceptionalism, which has existed since John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" but was not fully endorsed or promulgated until the tremendous growth of the nineteenth century (Sundquist 17; Bruckner and Hsu 15). In the introduction to *American Literary Geographies*, Bruckner and Hsu discuss one of the most famous representations of

American exceptionalism and expansion: John Gast's painting entitled *American Progress* (1872). With its depiction of an angelic feminine personification of the nation leading white settlers westward as Indians and wild beasts flee in their wake, the work makes the implicit promise "to unify and reduce all forms of U.S. mobility and geographical experience into an overarching narrative of westward progress" (15-16).

Andrew R.L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute explain that the word "frontier" did not come into common usage until the late 1700s and early 1800s, when a newly independent nation began to contemplate the conquest of the continent it called home (1). Implicit in this conception of the frontier was the Enlightenment idea of a progressive development of society through stages – from scattered settlements, to small agrarian communities, to industrial cities. Modern day historians now reject this clean cut narrative of Anglo American progress and interpret the frontier as a series of contact zones and exchanges between different cultures rather than binary lines or simple stages in a narrative of conquest (1-2).

In many ways, conventional narratives of Manifest Destiny and other renditions of Anglo-America's march to the Pacific are similar to Edouard Glissant's concept of filiation, which he defines as a relationship in which one entity descends or derives from another and is thus established as legitimate. As he explains in *The Poetics of Relation* (1997), creation stories and classic works of myth and epic give rise to a generalized history that memorializes the deeds and lineage of a particular people and confers upon them a sense of rootedness and permanence (*Poetics* 47). In the U.S., such a history first began to be crafted in a systematic, coherent fashion during the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, but transnational frontier bandits threaten to dissolve the

legitimacy of this linear narrative of conquest and in its place introduce something resembling Glissant's ideas of expanse and Relation. Instead of the "ancient intolerant violence of filiation," the American Wests inhabited by these bandits feature culture clashes and "voluminous circularities" that often oppose and dismantle the reason and order "derived from possessions and conquests" (61).[7] The bandits themselves, defined as they are by their uncertain origins, the non-American spaces they inhabit, and the rootless mobility they evince, serve as unexpected oppositions to the popular discourses of the period championing conquest and American exceptionalism.

Though most antebellum authors and texts supported the idea of linear western progress, many contemporary critics, such as LeMenager, Keri Holt, and Douglas R. Powell, have shown how localized or regionally-inflected texts of the period challenged and subverted both larger national rhetorics of expansion and "eastern versions of the nation and its formative values" (Watts, Holt, and Funchion 2). Keri Holt and Edward Watts claim that antebellum audiences' concept of region differed from the later Regionalism of William D. Howells and Hamlin Garland. Initially, regions lacked the cultural cohesion and clearly-marked borders that characterized Garland's Wisconsin in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) or Howell's Boston in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Prior to the Civil War, the term "region" could often refer to an unsettled space at the edge of a map or areas that needed to be reimagined because they no longer reflected commonly-held American identities (5-6). These types of areas often seemed unstable and distinctly un-American, especially when they still contained Indians and European creoles. These were the sort of places that threatened eastern observers like Beecher.

---

[7] See Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), p. 47-63, and *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1999) for more detail on these terms and concepts.

Holt and Watts dispute the popular belief that regionalism always upholds specific parts

of the nation as epitomes or symbols for the nation as a whole, and they point out that

early American nature writing, Southwestern Humor, and other forms of regional

literature frequently presented people, places, and ideas that diverged sharply from

national discourses (6).[8]

The unsettled or peripheral regions discussed by Watts and Holt are all located in

some type of American frontier – the Old Southwest of Alabama and Mississippi, the

Caribbean, Revolutionary-era upstate New York or Mexican-controlled New Mexico –

and they are all characterized by permeable borders, cultural mixtures, and unknown

terrain. By serving as nodes on the western frontier's constantly "moving demarcation,"

such regions provide fertile ground for travel literature, nature writing, and fiction

(Johnson 111). Despite the alien qualities discussed by Holt and Watts, these regions of

the West became symbols for the independent spirit that increasingly defined America

during the nineteenth century. And somewhat paradoxically, they also came to represent

the dark side of frontier settlements – namely, social regression and rampant violence –

that was always part of "what the Western quest was all about" (Johnson 113). Thus,

literary depictions of frontier regions bolstered and codified American identity by

celebrating national ideals such as freedom and progress, but they simultaneously

titillated and frightened audiences by depicting the violence and instability of borderland

regions. And since this two-pronged portrait was captured by so much frontier fiction of

the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, no character type was better equipped than the transnational

---

[8] For more on early works of Regionalism and their often subversive functions, see *Mapping Region in Early American Writing*, ed. Edward Watts, Keri Holt, and John Funchion (2015).

frontier bandit to deliver the contradictory appeal of the western frontier to antebellum audiences eager for a thrill.

During this period, when expansion and dreams of empire first begin to influence and then drive American discourse and culture, this distinct character emerges in a variety of guises and in a variety of literary forms. What unite all of the character's iterations are the strange renderings of the frontier regions they inhabit and the unique nature of the work they perform in the realms of U.S. nationalism and culture. The national identities they help construct are contradictory and ultimately troubling, while the regions they call home are defined largely by the indefinability of their porous borders, mysterious geographies, and proximity to Indians or Europeans. In addition to serving as foil and symbol in early American literature, the transnational frontier bandit also anticipates later real-life developments in global economics and large-scale crime. Indeed, characters such as Murrell and Steelkilt possess a relevance that exceeds strictly aesthetic, narrative, or cultural concerns and relates to world-wide processes of a far greater import than the novels or pamphlets that house them. As literary creations, they are criminals the likes of which American fiction had never seen: harbingers of a global, speculative economic order and the true progenitors, at least in the American literary sense, of an extranational brand of criminality.

Perhaps the most famous examples of borderless criminals are the pirates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Marcus Rediker points out, these bandits understood that transatlantic trade was intrinsic to the world economy. And the fact that such trade was largely conducted through ocean-faring ships created a unique opportunity to take advantage of the immense wealth transported between various countries and

colonies.[9] The oceans were and remain the ultimate liminal space, a truly borderless

frontier where laws and regulatory measures are never foolproof. While the bandits of

this study do not possess quite the same level of mobility as their deep sea brethren, they

too occupy lawless zones outside the control of any sovereign nation. To better

understand their milieu, one must first know the social conditions and violent traditions

of the early American frontier.

<div align="center">***</div>

Western settlements were usually renowned for their rowdiness and disorder. As

historian Ray Allen Billington memorably puts it, the "thermometer of sin" and "pace of

lawlessness" rose steadily as the frontier moved across the Appalachians and beyond the

Mississippi River. Profanity, violence, tobacco, home-distilled whiskey, and deadly

weapons quickly became hallmarks of both the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Later, they

would become just as essential to the mining and railway camps found across the plains

and mountains leading to the Far West (Billington, *Frontier Heritage* 70-71). The typical

equipage of the western man in the early decades of the nineteenth century often

consisted of dirks, pistols, brass knuckles, and swords contained in walking canes (Clark

27). Fights broke out regularly over card games, a snide comment, or a particularly large

bill at the tavern. Combatants resorted to the gouging of eyes, the biting of noses, and

other forms of disfigurement with such frequency that in 1798 the Kentucky state

legislature enforced special penalties for the "slitting of nose or ear, or putting out an

eye" (qtd. in Billington, *Frontier Heritage* 71). After observing violence of this sort,

---

[9] For more on this, see Rediker's work on high-seas piracy: *Between the Devil and Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Piracy, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (1987) and *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (2004).

travel writers like William Faux, Morris Birbeck, and Timothy Flint labeled frontiersmen "savages" and semi-barbarians" guilty of debauchery, drunkenness and a general sense of lawlessness. Charles Dickens commented on their prodigious swearing; other writers marveled at their capacity for drinking, chewing tobacco, and merry-making. As Billington puts it, the original Wild West originated in those days, and it was wild because some of the settlers "had temporarily shed the garments of civilization as they adjusted to frontier life" (Billington 70-71).[10]

Though historians and critics have argued persuasively that accounts of backwoods disorder were exaggerated and that most pioneers were law-abiding citizens, there is no doubt that images of hard-drinking and brawling frontiersmen have been staples of American popular culture for over two-hundred years. In time, the advancing frontier came to be defined not only by its rowdy settlers, but also by the "rascals and fugitives from justice" who rode in upon "the great wave of settlement and exploration" (Steeves, "First of the Westerns" 74). The atmosphere of general lawlessness and the presence of genuine criminals on the frontier have been acknowledged in diaries and literature as early as the colonial period. Ebenezer Cooke's 1708 poem *The Sot-Weed Factor; or, a Voyage to Maryland* depicts the colonists of the early Chesapeake region as drunken schemers whose inhibitions have been forgotten as a result of living in the wild

---

[10] For more detailed descriptions and discussions of some of these primary sources, see Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (1966). Among the sources he employs are Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806* (1808); Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour in the Western Country* (1810); Morris Birbeck, *Letters from Illinois* (1818); William Faux, *Memorable Days in America* (1823); Timothy Flint, *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828); Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are: Described in a Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (1828); Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842); Sidney Smith, *The Settler's New Home; or, the Emigrant's Location* (1849); Ralph Rusk*, The Literature of the Middle Western Border* (1925); Richard Hooker, ed. *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (1953).

new world. As Armin Paul Frank puts it, the colonists "appear as what present-day readers may take for hillbillies: ragged, dirty, shirking work but never a drink or a fight, experts at cursing and cheating and, possibly, worse" (67).[11] In Cook's text, an English tobacco merchant on a visit to Maryland finds "roaring Planters on the ground, / Drinking of Healths in Circle Round" and witnesses an open-air law court in which illiterate lawyers and judges lie, carouse, and brawl (ll. 374-375). Charles Woodmason claimed that the Carolina backwoodsmen he encountered in the mid-eighteen century informed him that they wanted no "damned Black Gown Sons of Bitches among them to interfere with their "Revelling, Drinking, Singing, Dancing, and Whoring." These brawny settlers, he lamented, lived in a "State of Nature more irregularly and unchastely than the Indians" (qtd in Billington, *Frontier Heritage* 71).

Exaggerated or fanciful as these accounts may be, many of their particulars are borne out by the historical record. In 1763, looking to stem the tide of westward expansion in his American colonies, King George III made a royal proclamation forbidding any new white settlements west of the Appalachian mountains. This measure was at least partly due to the banditry and brutality of the settlers near remote Fort Pitt in what would later become Pittsburgh. When the British soldiers began selling arms to local Indians in this area, the enraged settlers blackened their faces, ambushed drovers, stole liquor and weapons for themselves, and set supply stores alight (Hogeland 14). The subsistence farmers, squatters, trappers, and fur traders living around Fort Pitt were

---

[11] For more on Cook's poem, see Frank, "Ebenezer Cook's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: An Intercultural Reading," in *Finding Colonial Americas: Essays Honoring J.A. Leo Lemay*. Ed. Carla Mulford and David S. Shields (2001); Lemay, *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland* (1972); David S. Shields, "The Literature of England's Staple Colonies," in *Teaching the Literatures of Early America*. Ed. Carla Mulford (1999); and Scott Peeples, "Teaching 'The Sot-Weed Factor' Out of Historical Context." *Early American Literature* 40.2 (2005): 351-355.

characteristic of many backcountry inhabitants throughout the colonies. Unsurprisingly, they refused to comply with the king's orders. They continued to push west in the years leading up the American Revolution, and, as far as the British and residents of Eastern seaboard cities could determine, their manners and morals underwent no discernible improvement as they moved.

In the aftermath of American independence, political leaders such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson wrestled with policy issues connected to the vast western lands U.S. citizens were increasingly anxious to inhabit. As historian John R. Van Atta explains, there were many political and economic reasons for the nascent U.S. government to attempt to regulate western settlement, but there was also a strong social component: "the fear had started to spread that frontier regions were filling all-too-rapidly with a crowd that recognized no real authority other than themselves – settlers who, if left to their own will or the intentions of scoundrels, could in no time degenerate into 'white savages'" (18).

This fear surfaced in several colonial texts. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur claims that, as a result of the degeneracy arising from their isolated condition and Indian-like habits, the "back-settlers of both the Carolinas, Virginia, and many other parts, have long been a set of lawless people; it has been even dangerous to travel among them" (133). Others echoed this sentiment and regarded the frontier population as generally "dissolute," irreligious, savagely violent, and habitually drunken" (Slaughter 64). One commentator noted that "as man civilizes the wilderness, the wilderness more or less brutalizes him"; while another warned prospective travelers that if they preferred "cleanliness to filth, "honesty to theft," and civility to "lawless license" they should *not*

go West (qtd. in Billington 61; 254; emphasis mine). As more and more settlers crossed

the mountains and poured into the primeval forests of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee,

more and more accounts of their riotous conduct and general disorder filtered back to the

towns and cities of the East.

Much of the large-scale disorder represented by the western frontier stemmed

from the fact that settlers occupied areas that were either not yet equipped with local

governments or far removed from the control of any real civic authority. Because they

were so isolated, they often found themselves underrepresented in colonial capitals and

largely ignored by the ruling elites (Hogeland 15; Brown 18). Not only were they

physically isolated from eastern seats of power, they also felt culturally and economically

alienated, not to mention increasingly mistrustful of authority, whether it was represented

by the British crown or state governments. As a result, several frontier conflicts arose

throughout the 1760s and 1770s in which frontiersmen rejected colonial or federal

authorities and often took up arms against them. It is important to note that most of the

perpetrators of the violent acts of protest and secession that became commonplace in the

late eighteenth century were small landholders and farmers, not necessarily career

criminals. Since they were rarely habitual outlaws, their disruptive and seditious

behavior was typically viewed through a political lens rather and juridical one. For

example, in 1763 central Pennsylvania, a Scots-Irish vigilante group known as the Paxton

boys marauded their way through a village of peaceful, Christianized Indians and a

reward was soon put out for their capture. This riot, like the earlier Bacon's rebellion and

the later Regulator movement of Revolutionary-era North Carolina, stemmed from "a

series of frontier protests" over the perceived inadequacies of seaboard governments

(Slaughter 32). And like these earlier frontier insurgents, the Paxton Boys were viewed as political agitators, not common criminals, despite the fact that their political protests consisted of wanton murder and destruction. They later marched on Philadelphia and had their grievances read before the colonial legislature. Afterwards, they dispersed peacefully, having achieved their political aims and avoided the sort of punishment usually reserved for violent outlaws.

After the Revolution, upheaval continued when backcountry settlers rose up during Shay's Rebellion in Massachusetts and the various whiskey rebellions that developed in the Appalachian regions of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. In western Pennsylvania, the locals demonstrated their displeasure over an excise tax on whiskey distilleries by assaulting tax collectors and establishing their own extralegal posses and courts (Slaughter 103-112). Collectors were tarred and feathered; their property was threatened and destroyed. Though the guilty parties were censured and sometimes punished, in the eyes of the press and politicians back east, they remained political rebels or disaffected citizens rather than true outlaws. This remained true even as westerners grew increasingly radical in their opposition to taxes and unfair distributions of wealth. Western Pennsylvanians, for example, soon organized an armed militia and began to talk openly of violently opposing the elite interests of the national government (White xvi). In the words of Thomas P. Slaughter, "outright rebellion in the names of liberty and justice" came to rule the day (47).

Frontiersmen did not stop with resisting federal and state control – in some cases, they also sought to sever ties entirely with the newly formed United States. One such instance occurred in 1794 when Kentuckians and western Pennsylvanians meet with

British and Spanish officials to discuss possible alliances and the possibility of western frontier areas breaking away from the U.S. At the same time, many Kentuckians were pushing to gain navigation rights to the Mississippi River from the Spanish crown and agitating for further conflict with native tribes; in other words, they were looking to claim non-national spaces without any official sanction from the federal government (White 191). Actions like these indicate the westerner's frequent disregard for the law; but more importantly, they are a testament to the borderless nature of backcountry settlers and reminders that the United States was far from united during this historical period.

In a country where the power of the government is dependent upon the consent of the people, laws are, by design, routinely questioned and challenged. As a result, the figure of the rebellious frontiersman was not only tolerated, but oftentimes tacitly encouraged by the very nature of the United States' founding concepts. And while the brutality and retribution characteristic of even the ostensibly upstanding westerner shocked legislators and eastern observers, it was the patchwork of social classes *beneath* the middle-class settler that was said to contain the true and habitual outlaws. Indeed, the frontier was home to a complex network of marginalized identities and occupations: "hunters and squatters," "absconded debtors," idlers, gamblers, and "crackers" – an appellation commonly given to ruffians living on the fringe of settlements – all of whom lived amongst respectable planters and small freeholders (Brown 28).

Writers and commentators of both the eighteenth century and the present day have drawn a line dividing the prosperous planters and leading men of the frontier from the various sorts of "low people" who were also pushing west. Most inhabitants existing beneath the stations of prosperous planter or yeoman landowner would have been

29

considered low, and their values and way of life were considered different enough from

the respectable elements of society to comprise a separate society altogether (Brown 27).

The lower members of the social hierarchy have usually been described by historians as

uneducated, listless, and thoroughly alienated from respectable citizens; they were

content to chip away at the edges of respectability by "squatting, poaching, or minor

thievery" (28). Within this disreputable side of the frontier, there was a distinctive

criminal element, and though a chronicler of backcountry life like Charles Woodmason

distinguished between bandits and run-of-the-mill low folk, he also asserted that most of

the latter had "Connexions" with the former (qtd. in Brown 184). However, the bona fide

outlaws were more organized, mobile, and intent on carrying out large-scale depredations

than were squatters or shiftless malcontents.

Outlaw gangs of backcountry regions were well-documented in the newspapers

and travel literature of the late eighteenth century. Before the Revolution, notorious

renegades such as the Moon brothers, the Tyrells, and Winslow Driggers were active in

the Carolinas, while a couple of decades later Samuel Mason and the Harpe Brothers

perpetrated atrocities throughout Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and Mississippi

(Boulware 1-3). These renegades performed highway robbery, assaulted and sometimes

killed fellow backcountry residents, passed counterfeit currency, and stole slaves, horses,

and livestock. They also transgressed borders freely: toting their stolen goods north or

south, communicating with bandits in other areas, and crossing from colony to colony,

creating considerable jurisdiction problems for colonial governments (Boulware 13).

These bandits established the template for the frontier outlaw character type that would

later come to dominate American popular culture. Their mobility and murderousness

were captured by early newspapers. In the 1760s, South Carolina periodicals began

running articles on the depredations of upstate outlaw bands. The June 1, 1803 issue of

the *South-Carolina Gazette* (Charleston) details the grisly tale of a group of "outlying

men" who rob and assault planters in the Ninety-Six District. Subsequent reports from

this paper and others like the *South-Carolina and American General Gazette* include

similar depictions of brutal robberies and occasional murders carried out by roving bands

of thieves who "lived in open defiance of the whole country, and went about armed with

rifle barreled guns." In 1767, one troubled observer wrote that the crimes carried out by

outlaw gangs were "so numerous and shocking, that a narrative of them would fill a

whole gazette, and every reader with horror" (*South-Carolina Gazette*).[12]

In the decades to follow, brief items on backcountry banditry became a regular

feature of U.S. papers nationwide. For example, an 1803 article from the *Kentucky*

Gazette depicts an unfortunate young traveler "robbed and taken by [Samuel] Mason on

his passage down the river" and ends by noting that Mason and his gang later relocated to

Mississippi, "where they have of late committed many robberies" (2). This piece later

appeared in papers from New York and Massachusetts, and an announcement for

Mason's capture appears in the *Boston Commerical Gazette* in the summer of 1803.[13]

The literature of the United States was not yet robust enough to depict these men

consistently in verse or fiction, but colonial and early national newspapers helped to

spread their stories and legends. By the 1820s, writers like James Hall and Timothy Flint

were penning accounts of bandits, and Hall's sketch on the Harpe Brothers, which first

---

[12] These quotes comes from the *South-Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), June 1, 1765; the *South-Carolina and American General Gazette* (Charleston), Dec. 12, 1766; and the *South-Carolina Gazette*, July 27, 1767.
[13] These articles are found in the *American Citizen* (New York), vol. 4, issue 1084. Sept. 22, 1803 (2); and the *Boston Commercial Gazette* vol. 14, issue 44 August 1, 1803 (2).

appeared in his collection *Letters from the West* (1828), was later reprinted in scores of

U.S. papers. [14] Thus, when the transnational frontier bandit character begins to appear in

short fiction and novels of the early nineteenth century, it comes equipped with a fully-

furnished stock of attributes, preoccupations, and mythologies.

The Literary Development of the Transnational Frontier Bandit
*"The problem of the dangerous classes behind the frontier, and the vigilante solution to
that problem, persisted in both social fact and literary mythology…"*
<div style="text-align: right">--Richard Slotkin</div>

Under the broad heading of early nineteenth century crime fiction, one can

discern the emergence of two distinct camps. The first consists of the urban tales of vice

and detection exemplified by Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and George

Lippard's *The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk Hall* (1844). Lippard in particular

was instrumental in the creation of the American "city-mystery" novel. These dark and

often twisted tales depicting the unbridled depravity of the rich and the desperate poverty

of the urban poor became popular during a time of rapid industrialization in the U.S. In

the years since, scholars of American literature and culture have paid close attention to

these texts' combination of outrageous subject matter and subversive cultural

commentary (Reynolds 82).[15] However, the second camp, that of frontier crime

literature, has generally been less discussed and catalogued. More importantly, it has

---

[14] Hall, along with Timothy Flint, has long been regarded by scholars as one of the authentic spokesmen of the West during the first half of the nineteenth century (the West here meaning Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and surrounding areas). His best known works are the travelogue *Letters from the West* (1828), the historical work *Legends of the West* (1832), the novel *The Harpe's Head* (1833), and the short story collection *The Wilderness and the War-Path* (1845), which includes "The Indian Hater," a story that factors heavily into the John Moredock section of Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857). Hall, too, figures into the novel, as he is frequently a target of Melville's mockery in that section (Flanagan 4).
[15] For more on the City Crime genre, see David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988) and Stephen Knight, *The Mysteries of the Cities: Urban Crime Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (2012).

rarely been conceptualized as a coherent category with a common set of conventions. By

analyzing this specific subgenre, I will reveal the nexus of an important cultural project

and describe the literary character it created: the transnational frontier bandit personified

by Steelkilt, John Murrell, and Joaquin Murieta.

Clearly-drawn bandit characters were not fully developed until the 1820s and 30s.

In the popular captivity narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, frontier

danger was present in the form of trackless forests housing wild beasts and deadly

Indians; the enemy was the "vast and howling wilderness," not professional criminals

committing theft and murder. Texts of the early republic also evince a tendency to

portray the "wilderness" as a spiritually barren, potentially diabolical space full of

midnight noises and demonic beings. For example, the awe-inspiring landscape itself

provides much of the terror in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, as the narrator

discusses an outlying Pennsylvania district of the mid-eighteenth century as a "desert" of

"craggy eminences" and "deep dells" in which the "melancholy umbrage of pines" utter

murmurs of "vacancy and solitude" (85). There are terrifying scenes of violence and

danger in Brown's novel, and disorder along the frontier is omnipresent, but the actual

outlawry on display is perpetrated only by Indians and the deranged.

Since early frontier fiction was largely preoccupied with the trials and tribulations

of building new civilizations in the wilds of North America, the leading figure in many of

these texts was not a criminal or crime-fighter, but the hunter-scout best epitomized by

James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking. As Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin

point out, this hunter type was a modernizing device: he paved the way for future military

men and entrepreneurs to subdue the frontier and profit from it, yet he was never suited to

life in the settlements he helped create (Slotkin 64). This "plebian advance guard of civilization" found expression in so-called "hunter narratives" and stories of the early frontier. One of the first examples of this genre appeared in 1727 with Benjamin Church's *Entertaining Passages Relating to King Philip's War*. Church anticipates Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett as an expert woodsman who lives amongst Indians and "deliberately separated" himself from the jurisdiction of his colonial society (65). Though Church purportedly keeps a local "squaw" as a wife and opposes authority, he and the future hunter-heroes primarily function as the sort of Indian fighters and scouts necessary for Anglo settlement.

The hunter-scout character reaches its apotheosis in Cooper's Leatherstocking series beginning in the 1820s, and goes on to appear repeatedly in popular writings on western figures such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill Cody, and Kit Carson (Slotkin 63; 126). Most U.S. citizens valued this character purely for practical reasons: not for his "intrinsic wildness or half-savage glamor, but because he blazed trails that hard-working farmers could follow" (Smith 53). The romance of these trailblazers was emphasized in texts such as Daniel Bryan's *The Adventures of Daniel Boone* (1813) and Timothy Flint's *The Shoshonee Valley* (1830). The legend of Boone, in particular, owes much to the image of him bringing "civilization to the trans-Allegany wilderness" but forever maintaining his love of the unspoiled woods (Smith 53-54). Boone's intrinsic role in spreading U.S. society to new regions allows readers to excuse or even celebrate his uncouthness and isolation; in the popular narratives of his adventures, such traits were regarded as essential and nationalistic, not dangerous or ungovernable. But as the frontier moved ever farther west and the period of heavy industrialization began, the

hunter-scout underwent extensive reevaluation (Slotkin 126). Due to the fecundity of the land and the opening up of new markets, many of his old traits that had formerly been heroic and essential – such as his restlessness and fighting spirit – grew exploitative and often criminal. Furthermore, the anti-social and Indian-like qualities that suited him so well to woodcraft also rendered him suspect and alien once American bourgeoisie democracy began to arrive in the settlements (Smith 64).

According to Slotkin, in the "backwash" of the closing frontier, the old hunters and trappers transform into the swindlers, brigands, and brawlers of Southwestern Humor and the frontier writings of James Hall and Robert Montgomery Bird (126-127). By the 1830s, the forever moving West was no longer the domain of the hunter or scout in popular fiction; instead, it was an ever-dwindling last resort for "scoundrels, thieves, and land speculators" (Slotkin 127). In texts of this period, territory was acquired and settled so quickly that borders were unclear, laws were ineffectual, and the usual means of restraint and social decorum were either in flux or nonexistent.

Beginning in the 1820s and continuing throughout the 30s and 40s, popular fiction began depicting various elements of the frontier's backwash, including the criminal element. It is during these decades that the transnational frontier bandit first emerges. This character did not necessarily replace the old hunters and scouts as protagonists of frontier romances, but it received increased space and consideration in the pages of several antebellum sketches and novels. And though they were rarely the heroes per say, the frontier bandits' blend of derring-do, nonconformity, and roughly-hewn charisma enabled them to capture readers' interest and imagination, if not always their sympathy. Even when functioning as threats and menaces, these characters enabled the

sort of expansionist dreams and masculine fantasies that sold well in a rapidly expanding

nation.

One of the first U.S. pieces of fiction to depict frontier outlaws was George

Watterston's *Glencarn* in 1810. The novel's chief narrative concerns lie elsewhere, but it

provides a vivid account of a group of river pirates terrorizing a frontier community

(McLaurin 83). In the four decades that followed, popular fiction began to feature all

manner of outlaws and marginalized characters: Revolutionary-era Tories, river pirates,

highwaymen, savage hunters, squatters, and outright murderers. In many cases, these

renegades were historical figures such as the Kentuckian Simon Girty, a backwoodsman

who abandoned white society to live amongst Indians. In the 1830s and 40s, now-

forgotten authors such as Uriah Jones, J.D. Nourse, and J.H. Robinson penned historical

romances about Girty and other "white Indians."[16] In a similar vein, Revolutionary War

romances by William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy, and J.A. McClung

portrayed mercenary Tories working against the Patriot cause in the southern

backcountry. Many of these so-called Tories, such as the brutal "Hell-Fire Dick" in

Simms's *The Forayers*, were in fact rootless marauders who seized the opportunity to

plunder war-stricken rural areas (McLaurin 87-88).[17]

Though interesting and compelling as characters, these outlaws were often thinly

drawn and secondary in importance in the works that contained them. In the 1830s,

however, several texts began to appear that utilized frontier crime as a central component

---

[16] For examples of white Indian characters, see titles such as Jones's *Simon Girty, the Outlaw*: *An Historical Romance* (1846), Nourse's *The Forest Knight; or, Early Times in Kentucky* (1846), Robinson's *Rosalthe; or, the Pioneers of Kentucky. A Tale of Western Life* (1853), Emerson Bennett's *Ella Barnwell: A Historical Romance of Border Life* (1853), and John Beauchamp Jones's *The War-Path* (1856)
[17] For titles that depict these sorts of "Tories," see McClung's *Camden: A Tale of the South* (1830), Kennedy's *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (1835), and Simms's *The Partisan* (1835), *Katharine Walton* (1851), *The Forayers* (1855) and *Eutaw* (1856).

36

of their plots and themes. These are the "sensationalist potboilers" discussed by Richard

Slotkin in *The Fatal Environment* (1987). They are often misleadingly classed with

works of Southwestern Humor; though many humorists had an interest in frontier crimes,

the criminal deeds they portrayed were usually meant to amuse more than terrify.[18] In the

violent frontier crime fictions of the period, on the other hand, the crimes were more

serious and the consequences more dire. Many of these stories continued to relegate

outlaw characters to secondary roles, but they proved groundbreaking in their frank

depictions of a frontier rife with bloodshed and danger. Examples include James Hall's

The Harpe's Head (1833), and H.R. Howard's *The History of the Detection, Conviction,*

Life and Designs of John A. Murel, The Great Western Land Pirate (1835), Edward

Bonney's *The Banditti of the Prairie* (1850), and the lurid tales found in periodicals such

as *The National Police Gazette* (Slotkin 132). According to David Reynolds, the "broad

river" of crime narratives which appeared in the 1830s had become "a virtual flood" in

the 1840s. By the 1850s, one troubled observer commented that "no narrative of human

depravity or crime can [now] shock or horrify an American reader" (qtd. in Reynolds

175). James Hall, Robert Montgomery Bird, and William Gilmore Simms were among

the three most notable practitioners of the frontier crime fiction subgenre developing in

the 1830s and 40s. Hall, a lawyer and journalist who lived in Illinois and Ohio during

this period and achieved a small degree of fame as an early "spokesman for the West,"

wrote about the bloodthirsty Harpe brothers in 1833 with *The Harpe's Head; a legend of*

Kentucky (Flanagan 4).

---

[18] For examples of the sorts of comical crime often found in Southwest Humor, see A.B. Longstreet's
Georgia Scenes: Characters and Incidents in the First Half Century of the Republic (1835) and Johnson
Jones Hooper's *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of Tallapoosa Volunteers; Together with
"Taking the Census" and Other Alabama Sketches* (1846).

Robert Montgomery Bird, a more accomplished and successful novelist, penned

two novels in the 1830s that portrayed frontier crime: *Nick of the Woods* (1837) and

Robin Day (1839). The former is a fairly conventional romance that features unusual

amounts of graphic violence in its depiction of the Kentucky frontier in the years

following American independence. The main thematic concerns do not lie with its

criminal character, "Roaring Ralph Stackpole," but he is undoubtedly one of the book's

more interesting and discussed figures as he boasts and bluffs his way through a number

of comic episodes. Described as a "stout, bandy-legged, broad-shouldered, bull-headed

tatterdemalion, ugly, mean, and villainous of look," Stackpole is called "captain of the

horse-thieves" and a "landless, good-for-nothing, yet contended vagabond" (67-70; 348).

Robin Day, though less popular in its time, has come to be known as the most humorous

and unapologetic account of a renegade in all of antebellum frontier literature. Here, the

picaro-like General Brown kills a slave trader, takes up residence amongst the Creek

nation, and later helps them in their armed struggle against American forces (McLaurin

83).

Written in the same period, William Gilmore Simms's border romances – *Guy*

Rivers (1833), *Richard Hurdis* (1838), *Border Beagles* (1840), and *Helen Halsey* (1855)

– are among the first skillful and realistic portrayals of frontier crime in popular

American literature. Simms remained committed to the Walter Scott-influenced romantic

tradition of populating his adventure stories with stiff, uninteresting leading men of

aristocratic lineage, but his criminal characters, unlike those of Hall and Bird, often take

center stage in his novels. *Guy Rivers*, for example, takes its title from the main villain, a

sinister gentleman robber who leads a notorious gang of horse thieves known as the Pony

Club in the wild precincts of northwest Georgia, near Cherokee territory. Rivers

memorably describes his gang to the novel's protagonist as follows:

> The Pony Club is the proprietor of everything and everybody throughout the
>
> [Cherokee] nation and in and about this section. It is the king, without let or
>
> limitation of powers, for sixty miles around. Scarce a man in Georgia but pays
>
> some sort to its support – and judge and jury alike contribute to its treasuries.
>
> Few dispute its authority, as you will have reason to discover, without suffering
>
> condign and certain punishment…It finds us in men, in money, in horses. It
>
> assesses the Cherokees, and they yield a tithe, and sometimes a greater proportion
>
> of their ponies, in obedience to its requisitions. Hence, indeed, the name of the
>
> club. It relieves young travellers, like yourself, of their small change – their
>
> sixpences; and when they happen to have a good patent lever, such a one as a
>
> smart young gentleman like yourself is very apt to carry about him, it is not
>
> scrupulous, but helps them of that too, merely by way of *pas-time*. (27)

Characters like Rivers and the smooth-talking man confidence man Clement Foster from

Richard Hurdis stand as the main attractions of their respective narratives despite their

villainy – or perhaps because of it.

Among the many texts portraying unvarnished frontier banditry during this period

were several penned by two European travelers who successfully illustrated "the problem

of law and order in the primitive Western community": Charles Sealsfield and Friedrich

Gerstacker (Steeves and Steeves xix). The sketches and romances of these two, an

Austrian and German respectively, often focus on outlawry and vigilante justice. In

many ways, they serve as early forerunners of the genre later known as the "Western"

and feature many elements of future fiction about the West, including gunfights,

vendettas, and land disputes. A trilogy of works written by Gerstacker – *The Regulators*

in Arkansas (1845), *The River Pirates of the Mississippi* (1848), and *The Moderators*

(*Die Moderatoren*), which was probably written in the early 1850s but never translated

into English – has received particular notice due to its now familiar stories of vigilante

groups violently confronting outlaw gangs (Steeves and Steeves xvi). *The Pirates of the*

Mississippi has been called the "only novel of the antebellum period in which the

dominant characters are river pirates and the major events concern their activities"

(McLaurin 91). Here, Gerstacker describes a "well-established band of robbers [that] had

established themselves" on small islands in the Mississippi River between the states of

Mississippi and Arkansas "in order to murder, plunder, and produce counterfeit bank-

notes" (iii). Harrison Steeves considers the novel "baldly extravagant" and improbable

but claims that Gerstacker achieves more success with *The Moderators*, a compelling and

relatively accurate account of late 1830s Texas, a time and place in which the fledgling

republic was seething with "political disorder, Mexican conspiracies, land swindles,

Indian depredations, and most and worst of all, the violence of what might properly be

called professional criminals" (Steeves, "The First of the Westerns" 78). Though he is

better remembered for his travel writing, Gerstacker's long-neglected romances helped to

further the depiction of frontier crime and convert it into a larger thematic concern.[19]

---

[19] For an example of his travel writing, see *Wild Sports in the Far West* (1854) which remains a relevant text for scholars of the early American frontier, though, as Harrison and Edna Steeves note in their introduction, it is curious that the outlawry Gerstacker describes at length in his romances hardly appears at all in his travelogue. The only real frontier violence on display in *Wild Sports* is a barroom knife-fight in the wilds of Arkansas (Steeves and Steeves xviii).

In the years following the publication of these texts, The Far West, or the New Southwest, became the final frontier for the crime melodramas that had originated in the forests and swamps of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama. Novels featuring mountain men and trappers had been popular since Timothy's Flint's *The Shoshonee Valley* in 1830, and authors like Sealsfield, Flint, and Emerson Bennett often portrayed such characters as uncouth and Indian-like "monsters[s] peculiar to America" (Smith 82). Following the Mexican-American War, authors such as Bennett, Newton M. Curtis, and George Lippard wrote about wild rancheros (a catch-all term applied to Mexican guerilla forces) and described them in a manner similar to the depictions of older frontier renegades like Simon Girty, the Kentucky backwoodsman who allied himself with the Indians and British during the American Revolution. As this brief history indicates, the genealogy of frontier crime literature is a long and complex one, but within these broad parameters I will analyze the transnational frontier bandit and reveal the indelible mark it left on U.S. popular culture.

Aims of the Project and Summaries of the Chapters

One overarching aim of this dissertation is to illustrate the different manifestations of this character prototype. Over a roughly thirty year period, it appeared in a variety of texts and assumed a wide range of roles. It functioned under several different guises, from hardy boatman to insurrectionary robber, and each one will be examined in the pages to follow. My reason for articulating and exploring these different guises is simple: in order to fully understand the type, we must pull back the facades by which it has hitherto been known to readers and critics. For example, figures like Fink and Steelkilt have traditionally been defined as rough-and-tumble inland mariners, while

characters like Murrell and Murieta have often been construed as outlaws in the tradition

of Robin Hood and other social bandits from the British Isles.[20] While such designations

are useful at times, it is my contention that they ultimately obscure the commonalities and

transnational links that bind these bandits together and enable them to perform the

destabilizing cultural work illustrated in the upcoming chapters.

My work commences at the very beginning of the transnational frontier bandit's

literary career. Chapter 1 focuses on the early nineteenth century boatmen of American

rivers and lakes, a group that attained literary popularity between 1828 and the Civil War.

Though these men possessed lawful occupations and homes, they were described by

writers like Timothy Flint, Joseph Field, and Morgan Neville as a race apart. Irreverent,

coarse, and reckless, they were also fond of theft, wanton violence, and general mischief.

More importantly, they carried out their criminal depredations on a transnational scale,

taking full advantage of the mobility afforded by the waterways along which they

travelled. Mike Fink, as the most famous boatman of antebellum literature and folklore,

provides a template for violent and criminal behavior in a series of short stories published

between 1828 and the 1850s. I contend that he demonstrates an ability to move

transnationally in and out of U.S. territory, and this mobility presents opportunities for

wide-scale piratical behavior rarely glimpsed in previous American fiction.

Taking Fink and his keelboatmen of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as a

departure points, Herman Melville later creates the apotheosis of the criminal boatman by

---

[20] In "Robin Hood and Some Other Outlaws" (1958), W.E. Simeone compares Robin Hood to figures of the American West like the James gang, Murietta, and the 1860s Montana renegade Henry Plummer. Similarly, Kent Steckmesser's "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw" (1966) confirms that characterizations of Billy the Kid and Jesse James borrow extensively from the English social bandit tradition. For more on the social bandit concept as a whole, see Eric Hobsbawm's landmark studies *Primitive Rebels: studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (1959) and *Bandits* (1981).

making him into a mysterious, globe-trotting villain deeply enmeshed in the economic and military machinations of a global world order. Steelkilt, a lake mariner from western New York and minor character in *Moby-Dick*, represents the fully-realized pinnacle of this character type. In the chapter entitled "The Town-Ho's Story," Melville initially crafts the character as a recognizable frontier boatman type – bluff, fearless, a bit boisterous at times but ultimately a symbol of strength and untamed virility. However, as the chapter progresses, Steelkilt ceases to function in any sort of familiar fashion and transforms into an unstoppable menace who is both connected to colonial regimes across the world and instrumental in spreading American commerce, influence, and imperial might.

In Chapter 2 the focus shifts to John A. Murrell, a legendary "land pirate" of the Natchez Trace and Old Southwest in the 1820s and 30s. Though in actuality he was probably little more than a small-time thief and counterfeiter, in the pulpy crime fiction that proliferated in the 1830s and 40s he became a larger-than-life villain. These tales about Murrell often employed him and his sprawling criminal network – dubbed the Mystic Brotherhood – as the narrative center. Some of the later works feature Murrell travelling to Indian Territory, Texas (still held by Mexico during the time in which the stories are set), and Mexico. Between 1835 and 1850, he remained a highly popular outlaw character, and I argue that he helped to define the transnational frontier bandit type through his mobility, mastery of disguises, and massive criminal conspiracies. By having him plot to overthrow the fledgling governments and societies of frontier regions, H.R. Howard, Murrell's most prominent literary chronicler, suggests that transnational crime can truly destabilize or even defeat American efforts to "tame the wilderness." In

43

this chapter I will also explore some of the fictional characters Murrell inspired in order to illustrate how he and his literary progeny expanded the scope and potential of transnational frontier bandits at a critical time of expansion and conquest.

In Chapter 3, I examine the river pirates who preyed on travelers and mariners during early settlement of the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys. These characters were influenced by real-life outlaws like Samuel Mason, James Ford, and James Colbert, each of whom was active on American waterways between 1790 and 1830. Though the real impact of such men on frontier societies was fairly small, they took on a larger importance and resonance in the crime fiction of the era. Novels such as George Watterston's *Glencarn* (1810), Emerson Bennett's *Bandits of the Osage* (1847), and Friedrich Gerstacker's *Pirates of the Mississippi* (1848) all feature rousing adventures involving river pirates. Like the boatmen they often fought in the pages of popular fiction, these characters anticipate later frontier outlaws by moving in and out of U.S. jurisdictions while committing their crimes. For example, Mason was reportedly apprehended by Spanish authorities in modern-day Missouri around the year 1803. Operating in a period in which national borders were murky and power was constantly shifting, river pirates played a foundational role in literary depictions of frontier crime. Moreover, the nature of their vocation and their complex, often multicultural characterizations called into question several foundational notions of American identity.

Chapter 4, the concluding chapter of the project, takes as its subject a later American West and a revolutionary new breed of transnational literary bandit. Here, I move to California in the years following the Mexican-American War and examine John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854). Murieta was a

legendary bandit of the Gold Rush era made famous first by newspaper accounts and then by Ridge's novel, the first ever published in California. By depicting the Mexican-born bandit performing daring raids in California and freely crossing the U.S. border with his large network of thieves and assassins, Ridge continues to follow the conventions and characterizations of earlier transnational frontier bandits. But in this particular iteration of the character type, appearing as it does after the United States achieves its goal of hemispheric domination, the cultural hybridity and regional uncertainty that have always surrounded the character type become even more manifest. To an even greater extent than his predecessors, Murieta transgresses borders and destabilizes frontier settlements and civilizing missions, calling into question the very notions of nationality and cultural identity that were so essential to nineteenth century expansion.

The primary organizing principles of this project are geographical region and identity. Like the cultural histories David S. Shields discusses in *Material Culture in Anglo-America* (2009), my works attends to the "multiplicity of identities that can attach to a place and to the ramified senses of region, inflected by history and colored by the onlooker's perspective" (2). Each of my chapters takes as its focus a broadly-defined geographical region containing various cultural identities and pairs it with a corresponding example of the transnational frontier bandit prototype. Each of the four case studies comprising this dissertation will demonstrate how these bandit characters are both shaped by and reflective of the regions from which they hail. More importantly, I will illustrate the ways in which the non-national characteristics of their native regions enable them to construct hybrid and alternate identities often at odds with normative values of the larger nation. To do this work, I borrow a few key concepts from cultural

geographers, particularly Carl Sauer's influential scholarship on landscapes, which he viewed as manifestations of the cultures that made or perceived them: "reading a landscape, therefore, provided the geographer with a window on particular cultures themselves" (qtd. Mitchell 21).[21] Above all, I will rely on my historicist and cultural studies methodologies, my own close reading, and careful attention to the literary history of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. My final and perhaps most long-lasting aim is to construct a valuable and durable archive of frontier crime fiction and frontier bandit characters. It is my sincere hope that these contributions will serve an important and hitherto unfilled role in American literary studies.

---

[21] For more on cultural geography, see Donald Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (2000); Carl Sauer, *Selected Essays*, *1963-1975* (1981); and David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (1996).

Chapter 1: A Lakeman in Lima: Transnational Banditry in *Moby-Dick's* "The Town-Ho's Story"

Among the many guises in which the transnational frontier bandit appeared was that of the western boatman of Jacksonian-era literature and popular culture. The term 'boatman' usually applies to the men responsible for piloting the rafts, flatboats, keelboats, barges, and sailing crafts found on U.S rivers and lakes during the first half of the nineteenth century.[22] They were commonly featured in folktales and popular literature between 1820 and 1860, and continue to live on in the oral legends and local lore of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. As it played a critical role in U.S. expansion and assumed folk hero status, the boatman character came to occupy a cultural position in Jacksonian America comparable to the modern-day cowboy: a likable folk hero that audiences tend to root for and romanticize despite his disreputable habits (Allen 8).[23]

However, the boisterous good charm and bold spirit that made this character so popular in the first half of the nineteenth century also served to mask its violent nature

---

[22] Primitive boats like these first appeared on American rivers in the 1780s and 90s and grew to dominate river transportation in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Though somewhat displaced by steam power between the 1820s and 1840s, they continued to be familiar sights until a decade or so after the Civil War, when the advancements of steamboats and railroads made them mostly obsolete. For more information on pre-steam river crafts and this historical period in general, see Archer Hulbert's *Waterways of Westward Expansion: The Ohio River and Its Tributaries* (1903) and *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (1920), along with Erik Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton's *Western River Transportation* (1975). Michael Allen's *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (1990) incorporates all of these older sources while also including additional primary documentation.

[23] For more on the Fink legend, see Walter Blair and Franklin Meine's *Mike Fink: King of Mississippi Keelboatmen* (1933), Leland Baldwin's *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (1941), and Michael Allen's *Western Rivermen 1763-1861* (1990). For the definitive collection of Fink tales, see *Half Horse Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*, edited by Blair and Meine (1956).

and criminal tendency to destabilize nascent law and order in frontier communities. Even when configured as heroic or sympathetic, the boatman evinces a dangerous appetite for violence and a disturbing ability to change physical locations frequently. As the following pages will demonstrate, these characters are more than just lovable rascals or unruly ruffians, and they are more than mere criminals. They are, in fact, among the first transnational criminals ever to be portrayed in U.S. fiction. As such, they establish the groundwork for future depictions of U.S. outlaws, many of whom follow the boatman tradition of transgressing borders and committing crimes made possible by physical mobility and the use of lawless border regions.

In this chapter, I will trace the development of the literary boatman through two major regions and historical periods. The first consists of the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys, where from 1783 to 1823 the preindustrial era of riverboating took place and gave rise to the classic image of the American boatman.[24] This character experienced a surge of popularity in the pages of newspapers and popular periodicals between the 1820s and the Civil War, the very decades during which steam power largely replaced the preindustrial keelboats, flatboats, and barges on which the old-time boatmen transported goods and western emigrants. The second region and era I explore in this chapter is the Great Lakes area of the 1840s and 50s, a period in which sailing vessels like brigs and schooners plied the lakes carrying heavy freights of grain and iron to eastern cities. Though far from identical, the lakes and river valleys developed along similar lines and

---

[24] Different regions of America featured boatmen of different ethnic groups: Mississippi River barges were often manned by French-Indian Creoles; the ones on the Missouri had mixed crews, with French Canadians frequently predominating and a few Spaniards also turning up. On Ohio keelboats the majority of men were American born of English and Scots-Irish ancestry, with a healthy mix of Germans, Irish, and French-Canadians. Ultimately, it would be this figure of the American-born keelboatman that would emerge as a popular literary staple of the nineteenth century. Baldwin claims that they maintained their distinct identity and an often legendary reputation in the years between 1795 and 1840 (Baldwin 87).

functioned in similar ways as early iterations of the American West. I contend that the

river boatman of the Mississippi and Ohio, embodied by the legendary character Mike

Fink, establishes the foundation for Herman Melville's Steelkilt, the star of "The Town-

Ho's Story" and the most significant manifestation of the boatman character type. Much

of what makes Steelkilt significant to American letters is what he can tell us about the

process of expansion and the ways in which popular literature both endorsed and

questioned its viability. The strange history of the boatman's professional and literary

life reveals the strange brew of excitement and dangerous violence that undergirds the

character type as it has appeared over the last two hundred years in literature, travel

fiction, and folklore. In turn, this intoxicating boatman's brew reveals the fraught

contradictions and profound fears that accompanied U.S. westward expansion in the first

half of the nineteenth century.

Brawling Boatmen of the Ohio and Mississippi

Between 1800-1810, travel writers began to discuss the rough and tumble sailors

operating keelboats, flatboats, and barges on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Authors

such as Christian Schultz, Thomas Bolling Robinson, and H.M. Brackenridge observed

these inland mariners' distinctive appearance, speech, and pastimes. They recorded

snippets of boatmen songs and performative boasts, described the rough-and-tumble

crews, and related many tall tales and folk legends of the Ohio and Mississippi that they

heard during their travels (Allen 8; Baldwin 93-94).[25] The legend of the boatmen grew in

---

[25] See Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage in the years 1807 and 1808* (1810); Thomas Bolling Robertson's "Journal of a Tour Down the Ohio and Mississippi" (1951); Henry M. Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana; Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811* (1814); and John Bradbury, "Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811" in Reuben Thwaites' *Early Western Travels* (1904).

large part out of their role as frontiersmen pushing through the outer boundaries of the United States, and it was also rooted in the seemingly freewheeling but always dangerous lives they led. Steering unwieldy keelboats through the rapids and bends of rivers using only long oars and muscle power was brutally hard work, and much of the lore surrounding them involves their prodigious strength and impressive musculature. They also became legendary for their navigation skills, courage, and endurance, along with their propensity to play music and dance.

Their vigor and carefree way of life inspired a famous series of paintings by Missouri-born painter George Caleb Bingham, the most famous of which is known as *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846). Here, boatmen are shown as handsome, romanticized figures floating down a river while playing the fiddle and dancing (Allen 18). The picturesque nature of their vocation and their penchant for singing and frolicking are emphasized in Bingham's work and in many other retrospective accounts of the early river days along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. But in the folklore and popular literature of the antebellum U.S., they achieved just as much fame through the drinking, carousing, and verbal boasting they carried on while ashore.

As James Hall notes in his *Letters from the West*, the boatmen stopped frequently at riverside towns during their travels, thus coming into regular contact with the local inhabitants and making full use of local taverns, gambling dens, and brothels. Thomas Clark writes of "rough, crudely dressed river bullies who smelled of a hundred days' perspiration" prowling the streets of places like Natchez, Mississippi (89-90). V.L.O Chittick claims that the "whipcord muscles and calloused minds" developed by their dangerous vocation ensured their lawless indulgences while on shore (17). Over the

years, a wide variety of writers have documented the boatman's love of excessive

drinking and fighting. In *Abraham Lincoln* (1939), Carl Sandburg described how they

terrorized river districts with violence; Theodore Roosevelt, in *The Winning of the West*

(1910), mentions their numerous drinking bouts and barroom brawls, and even Frederick

Jackson Turner alludes to the boatmen's turbulence, recklessness, and prodigious

drinking (Chittick 17; Allen 23).[26] In her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832),

Frances Trollope, adopting a more moderate approach, observed that such men were

"very seldom sober" (17-18)). Indeed, no boat was complete without a keg of whiskey

on deck, and a drink of whiskey (called a "fillee") was usually the reward for the crew

after an especially difficult battle with the current.

Over time, their violent tendencies, proximity to fledgling civilization, and

supreme mobility grant these inland mariners a prominent place in antebellum U.S.

culture, though not always a particularly distinguished or favorable one. After appearing

in travel literature throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, boatmen

became a staple of Southwestern Humor and frontier fiction in the 1820s and 30s and

rose to even greater prominence in the periodicals and newspapers of the 40s and 50s.

For a time they were quite popular in the pages of U.S. popular fiction, but once their

fame faded, they never fully reentered the U.S. adventure story genre that they had

helped to codify. During the very period (1841-1860) in which their clumsy crafts were

rendered obsolete by steam power, they were described in various works of travel

literature and also appeared frequently in the pages of newspapers and journals such as

the *St. Louis Reveille* and *The Spirit of the Times*. Writers such as Thomas Bangs

---

[26] These texts are quoted and discussed at length in Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen*, 1763-1861 (1990)
and V.L.O Chittick, *Ring-Tailed Roarers: Tall Tales of the American Frontier, 1830-1860* (1941).

Thorpe, Joseph Field, John Robb, and Menra Hopewell, many of them journalists and one, Thorpe, a fairly accomplished humorist, helped to popularize these often comic and episodic tales, which were often based on oral legends and folktales of the old Northwest and Southwest. There was much fascination with preindustrial river travel during this period, as keelers were giving way to steamboats, and old-time boatmen were convenient stand-ins for a wild, untamed version of America that was rapidly vanishing. To perform such symbolic work, the characters had to be romanticized a good deal. While many actual boatmen were stricken with injuries, disease, alcoholism, and poverty by their forties, in the stories their bold freedom was a perfect symbol for the adventurous desires of many readers, and the hardships of their vocation were rarely mentioned at all (Allen 215).

The fictional pieces featuring them were almost always short and comical. These sketches often veered toward the absurd, taking as their focus an outrageous practical joke or an especially harrowing episode on the waterways. The boatmen characters in such texts reliably provided colorful boasts about their physical prowess and marathon drinking sessions, but due to their primarily symbolic purpose, they were rarely developed as distinct characters or provided with much of an interior life.

Outside of short fiction and the American stage, the American boatman was generally scarce. He is mentioned briefly in poems by Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but most authors and critics of the first half of the nineteenth century viewed them as "unsatisfactory for main characters in novels and poems." As critic W.H. Gardiner noted in 1822, boatmen and their ilk were best served in short, minor works like "the popular and domestic tale" (Blair and Meine, *Half Horse* 29-30). Confined to this

narrow lower tier of literary production, the group saw only one representative ascend to a lasting perch within the popular consciousness: Mike Fink. Other boatmen characters such as Big Jim Girty appeared in popular tales of the period, but only Fink achieved genuine literary fame in the 1830s, 40s and 50s.[27]

Featured in scores of Jacksonian era stories, Fink, often called "The King of the Boatmen," was an actual frontiersman born near modern-day Pittsburgh around 1770. After spending his youth and early manhood as a scout and Indian fighter in western Pennsylvania, he migrated west and became the best-known keelboat operator on the Ohio and Mississippi. With the advent of steamboats and the growth of western populations, Fink moved onto a third frontier as a hunter and scout in the fur-trapping grounds of the trans-Missouri area, where he eventually died a violent death in the early 1820s (Allen 9; Franklin and Meine, *Mike Fink* 231-233).[28] Fink's overall skills as an inland mariner – the knowledge to navigate treacherous water and strength to lead the other oarsmen in battle against the current – were reputed to be the best of all and quickly became the stuff of legend, but much of his fame was based on his equally impressive drinking and fighting skills (Allen 9). Self-described as being able "to outrun, out-hop,

---

[27] Examples of tales featuring other boatmen characters include "Jim Girty's Beef Story," which appeared in Volume XIII of *The Spirit of the Times* in November of 1849, and an often-reprinted story originally from an 1846 issue of *The Western Citizen* in which a Louisville flatboat captain caught "tearing up" a town in Louisiana is brought to justice due to the testimony of a Frenchman; after paying his fine, the captain asks the judge if he can pay the additional fine for beating up the Frenchman in corn. Several works of T.B. Thorpe also prominently feature boatmen characters: *The Mysteries of the Backwoods* (1846), *The Hive and the Bee Hunter*, and "Remembrances of the Mississippi" (1855). For more on these texts, see Thomas D. Clark's *The Rampaging Frontier: Manners and Humors of Pioneer Days in the South and Middle West* (1939).

[28] Many of the writers who penned Fink tales – such as Morgan Neville, Joseph M. Field, and Emerson Bennett – discussed various iterations of Fink's death somewhere near the Yellowstone River in modern-day Montana. In general, the only account of Fink's life and death that can be credibly terms biographical rather than literary, insofar as it purports to tell the story of the of the actual man rather than the mythical character, is Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine's magisterial *Mike Fink: King of the Mississippi Keelboatmen* (1933).

out-jump, throw-down, drag-out, and lick any man in the country," Fink was known to

declare himself a "Salt River roarer," who loved the wimming" and was "chock full of

fight" (Clark 89). These larger-than-life qualities, whether or not they were all true to the

real-life Fink, made for a compelling and enduring literary character. Between the 1820s

and the 1850s, this is exactly what Fink became.

Western historian Leland D. Baldwin considers him to be the true archetype of the

American boatman immortalized in folklore and literature (Baldwin 146). Known as the

"Snapping Turtle" on the Ohio and "The Snag" on the Mississippi, he was generally

considered to be quick-tempered, fond of brawling, and at times a bit frightening, but

overall, at least in his literary appearances, he was depicted as a generous, fun-loving

rascal – a bit too fond of whiskey and pranks perhaps, but fundamentally sympathetic and

representative of the bravery and virility often associated with the Anglo-American

frontier. No other boatman literary character was so representative of the type or so

richly developed in various oral legends and short fiction. His legend and literary career

are so closely tied to the early days of riverboating that his death is often employed by

historians as the symbolic end to this preindustrial era of inland water transportation

(Allen 4).[29]

The first widely-published Fink tale, Morgan Neville's "The Last of the

Boatmen," appeared in the *Western Souvenir* in 1828, and similar narratives continued to

appear regularly in the pages of newspapers, periodicals, and collections of folklore until

---

[29] In making this point, historian Michael Allen draws on the earlier work of historians and folklorists such as Archer B. Hulbert, Walter Blair, Franklin J. Meine, Thomas D. Clark, V.L.O. Chittick, and Leland Baldwin.

the Civil War and at least occasionally for several decades afterward.[30] Most of these

tales portray Fink as the last of a vanishing breed of frontiersmen who helped push U.S.

civilization westward in the early nineteenth century (Allen 25). Fink was also a

character in Alphonso Wetmore's popular 1821 play *The Pedlar*, in which he marches

onto the stage "with red shirt and tow trousers on – a little drunk, singing soundings such

as 'Quarter less twain.'" He then fights another frontiersman and demands a swig of

"Monongahela whiskey" (Blair and Hill 115). However, at the same time that Fink

ascended to a prominent perch in popular culture, he also frequently veered into patterns

of criminality and deviance that strike modern readers as profoundly unsettling and

strange. Despite his often heroic or at least sympathetic characterization, Fink evinces a

surprisingly dark and subversive side that has rarely been accounted for or explained by

audiences and critics.[31] In many of the tales and sketches about him that appeared

between the late 1820s and the 1850s, he is clearly operating in murky legal and moral

territory.

     In Neville's "The Last of the Boatmen" (1828), the narrator mentions the need for

farmers to keep on good terms with the king of the boatmen: "otherwise, there was no

safety for his property." Wherever Fink found opposition or enemies, he "levied the

---

[30] A brief history of Fink-centered fiction includes, in chronological order: Neville's 1828 short story, Timothy Flint's similarly-titled 1829 tale, "Mike Fink: The Last of the Boatmen," T.B. Thorpe's "The Disgraced Scalp-Lock" (1842), John S. Robb's "Trimming a Darky's Heel," (1847), Joseph Field's "The Death of Mike Fink" (1844) and "The Last of the Boatmen" (1847), Emerson Bennett's 1848 novel, *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (the only extant novel featuring Fink), and Ben Cassedy's "Mike's Practical Jokes" (1852). Post-bellum titled include Menra Hopewell's "Jack Pierce's Victory," Col. Frank Triplett's "Mike Fink – Last of the Flatboatmen" (1883), and Julian Lee Rayford's "Two Stories about Mike Fink" (1956). For a complete anthology of Fink narratives, see *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend* (1956). All of the Fink stories cited in these pages are contained within this definitive work.

[31] To be fair, Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill point this out in *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (1978) when they observe that, due to shifting standards of literary tastes, late nineteenth century readers were less likely than earlier audiences to enjoy the "drunkenness, recklessness, racism, male chauvinism, violence, and sheer cruelty" on display in most Fink stories (Blair and Hill 113).

contribution of Black Mail for the use of his boat" (Neville 52). In addition, Neville and

virtually every other writer who has penned a Fink tale references his love of dangerous

pranks, such as shooting tin cups off men's heads, and his propensity for sudden

violence. His desire to fight could be aroused by just about anything: the sight of an

Indian, his crew's unwillingness to laugh at one of his jokes, or simply boredom. In his

1829 Fink sketch, Timothy Flint introduces Fink with the disclaimer that presenting the

boatman's story is done merely to "show the monstrous anomalies of the human

character under particular circumstances" (57). In T.B. Thorpe's "The Disgraced Scalp-

Lock," the sailor is shown to be guilty of an unprovoked, violent prank which leads to the

death of his friend and wide-spread destruction by the end of the tale. Even as he is

celebrated or romanticized in these tales, the danger associated with Fink is intrinsic to

his characterization. Furthermore, this danger goes beyond the boatman's violent

tendencies and becomes associated with his very occupation: authors such as Neville,

Field, and Thorpe include details about crimes committed by Fink that are only made

possible by the mobile nature of his vocation. In this way, the vocation itself is

criminalized and tied inextricably to the depredations committed by its practitioners.

In Field's "The Last of the Boatmen" (1847), the most well-developed and

detailed portrayal of Fink, the extent of his cumulative law-breaking is quite staggering.

The short story was originally published in serial form in the St. Louis *Reveille*, the

newspaper for which Field worked as a journalist (Oehlschlager 15). One of the tale's

most well-wrought scenes comes when Fink and his crew arrive in New Orleans. Their

stay in the city includes fighting with local gens d'armes on the levee, clearing out three

French ball rooms through drunken brawling, and "breaking a bank" (a gaming term for

winning more money at cards or dice than a gambling house can pay out). Next, Fink

winds up in a "noted dancing house" in a part of the city known as "the swamp." The

narrator describes this "haunt" as a place "of vice, and even crime" before adding that it

also, unsurprisingly, serves as the "usual place of resort for boatmen" (Field 110). In

detailing Fink's "folics," Field's narrator echoes the narrator of Neville's original Fink

tale of 1828: in both texts, the boatman routinely forces the inhabitants of the places he

visits to provide him with services or money in order to avoid outright violence. Neville

simply calls this "Black Mail"; Field refers to the custom as "regulating the town" and

observes that, upon his arrival in New Orleans, Fink is "particularly active in the

discharge" of this piratical practice (109). Indeed, Fink and his boat crew are often

presented as bandits or pirates – marauding through a wide swath of territory, never

staying in one place for long, terrorizing local populations, and spending all their money

on alcohol and prostitutes in the port towns through which they pass.

In his *Letters from the West* (1828), James Hall elaborates on the criminal

customs of Fink. [32] While describing old days along the Ohio River, Hall mentions that

the arrival of a "squadron" of boatmen in a small town was "a certain forerunner of riot."

To the typical boatman offenses of drunken debauchery and general lawlessness, Hall

adds the charge of frequently waging small-scale war against inhabitants of river towns:

"Sometimes, the citizens, roused to indignation, attempted to enforce the laws; but the

---

[32] Hall, along with Timothy Flint, has long been regarded by scholars as one of the authentic spokesmen of
the West during the first half of the nineteenth century (the West here meaning Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and
surrounding areas). His best known works are the travelogue *Letters from the West* (1828), the historical
work *Legends of the West* (1832), the novel *Harpe's Head* (1833), and the short story collection *The
Wilderness and the War-Path* (1845), which includes "The Indian Hater," a story that factors heavily into
the John Moredock section of Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857). Hall, too, figures into the novel, as
he is frequently a target for Melville's mockery in that section (Flanagan 4).

attempt was regarded as a declaration of war, which arrayed the offenders (the boatmen) and their allies in hostility" (229; parenthesis mine). Hall does not refer to any specific crimes here, but by regarding the boatmen as "despots of the river" who "infested the whole country" and even carried arms against law-abiding citizens, he characterizes them as a sort of occupying force or non-national band of roving marauders. Later, he claims that only rapid emigration into western districts and the introduction of the steamboat finally enabled regular citizens to gain ascendancy over these "wretched ministers of crime" (229-230).

But in most of the popular Fink tales, this sort of law-breaking is often framed as a byproduct of excessive exuberance rather than a marker of true criminality. Neville and Field in particular emphasize the innate goodness of Fink. Throughout "The Last of the Boatmen," Field claims that there "was nothing malevolent about Mike's heart" and that his nature, while impulsive, was also warm and generous (Field 109-110). The writers who penned Fink tales between 1830 and 1850 generally softened the character by rendering him sympathetic in this way. By turning his violence and intemperance into comedy or by justifying them a through romantic reimagining of American's frontier days, they convert the boatman into a mythical symbol similar to Old World heroes (Franklin and Meine, Half Horse 26-27; Dorson 95-102).[33] This process owed much to the nostalgic retrospectives of a burgeoning industrial society fondly remembering a supposedly simpler and more roughly-hewn age. In order to make Fink fit for public consumption, authors such as Neville, Field, and Thorpe replace some of his wanton

---

[33] For more on comparisons between Fink and legendary heroes from older European cultures, see Richard Dorson's "Print and American Folk Tales," *California Folklore Quarterly* IV (July 1945). 207-215.

brutality and cruelty with "daring intrepidity" and a "mournful sensibility" (Justus 281-282).

As long as Fink is regarded as part of a past stage of historical development already rendered obsolete by progress, he can be successfully reconstructed into legends of U.S. history (Justus 284). And for audiences reading of boatmen's exploits in the 1840s and 50s, a time in which the steamboat dominated U.S. waterways and the western frontier had moved beyond the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys, the wild days of keelboats and flatboats was already a bygone era. To those looking back on a time of remarkable expansion, the boatmen's defects and recklessness take on a romantic, admirable glow and are seen as necessary to the nation's growth. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, historians such as Thomas Clark were still contending that, underneath the drinking, fighting, and uncouth habits, the group was "endowed with a spirit of defiance which made them noble pioneers" (95); while V.L.O Chittick observes that these inland mariners were enjoyably colorful and necessary to the growth of western trade (Chittick 17). As one critic put it, they helped to make the frontier habitable for more law-abiding but less enterprising citizens: "they were reckless, and because they were reckless they were useful" (qtd. in Franklin and Meine 33). In *Mark Twain's America* (1932), Bernard DeVoto perhaps best summarizes the character's appeal when he describes the boatmen as "the sublimate of frontier hardness. And America, incurably artistic, demanded a culture hero. Mike Fink became the symbol" (62).

However, despite many authors' best attempts to mythologize and romanticize Fink, the makings of villainy – a rash nature, a tendency toward theft, chronic substance abuse, excessive merry-making, or, in darker iterations, murder – are all on display from

the very beginning of his literary life. It is no surprise, then, that many post-Civil War

works configure Fink as an outright villain and murderer.[34] And by the early twentieth

century, the word "Fink" was often used pejoratively to refer to "a contemptible person."

According to the context, the term could refer to a spy, informant, alcoholic, or simply a

person considered to be no good. Though folklorists do not necessarily attribute this

usage to the king of the boatmen, Archie Green mentions him and his death near the

Yellowstone River as a possible starting point for the word's origins (143).[35]

No matter the exact details of his characterization, most of the short stories

starring Fink feature him and his crew causing a ruckus in disreputable districts of New

Orleans, Natchez, and other areas which, in the first two decades of the nineteenth

century when the stories are set, had just recently come under United States jurisdiction.

In addition, these inland sailors frequently venture into lawless border regions that most

readers would fear to visit. James Hall mentions that, "during the reign of the

bargemen," isolated river settlements presented "the most barbarous scenes of outrage"

and were the "odious receptacles of every species of filth and villainy" (231). One

---

[34] In some lesser-known and later tales, Fink is configured as an outright villain. An 1845 piece by an anonymous correspondent of the *Western General Advertiser* depicts him forcing his wife, Peg, to lie down in a flaming bed of leaves as punishment for "winkin at them fellers on the other boat" (Blaire and Meine, *Half Horse* 86). This same correspondent claims that Fink was "one of the very lowest of mankind, and entirely destitute of any of the manly qualities which often were to be found among the bargemen of his day" (86). This sentiment is echoed by Menra Hopewell, an obscure St. Louis writer of the 1860 and 70s who frequently portrays Fink as a bully and murderer. A few other Fink tales from this period follow a pattern of showing Fink defeated by a more virtuous boatman such as Jack Pierce or Peter Cartwright. In his 1830s appearances in *The Crockett Almanac* stories and even much later as a character in the 1950s Walt Disney television series about Crockett, Fink grew into something of a comedic heavy. For example, when he attempts to frighten Crockett's wife by donning the carcass of a dead alligator and surprising her while she takes a walk through the woods, the bold lady simply cuts the dead alligator's head off with a "teeth pick…the blade jist shavin the top of Mike's head." Then, seeing the true identity of her assailant, she rolls up her sleeves and batters "poor Fink so that he fainted away in his alligator skin" (Franklin and Meine 209).

[35] For more on the origin of this word, see Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations* (1993).

prominent example was Shawnee Town, an outpost along the Ohio River in Illinois

Territory that was well-known during Fink's time. It lay on the extreme fringe of the

nation – though under U.S. control, the area was hardly settled except for a few French

and Spanish holdovers from previous colonial regimes and the remains of local Indian

tribes.[36] As they traveled through the margins of U.S. territory, boatmen occupied such

places that were under the nominal control of the U.S. but still largely uninhabited by

Anglo settlers. Fink's heyday on the river took place between 1800-1820; during that

period, many of the places Fink visits – such as Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Arkansas –

were not yet states, while Texas was still in the hands of the Spanish. And if the

adventures occurred at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, trips to St. Louis and

New Orleans were in fact journeys to foreign lands under the control of European

colonial governments.[37]

Far from being just an incidental detail of his work on the grand waterways of the

Old Northwest and Southwest, the borderless mobility of Fink works to transform him

into a unique bandit prototype. When he performs robbery and extortion while traveling

in and out of settled U.S. territory, he is establishing a template for literary outlaws that

dime novelists would eagerly employ in the post-bellum Wild West. The authors of Fink

tales often seem unaware or uninterested in the ramifications of the characters' travels,

---

[36] For more on the history, culture, and economies of French and Spanish Illinois, see Arthur C. Boggess'
The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830 (1908), Clarence W. Alvord's *Illinois Country: 1673-1818, The
Centennial History of Illinois*. Vol. 1 (1920), Arthur P. Whitaker's *The Spanish-American Frontier*, *1783-
1795* (1927), and Carl J. Ekberg's *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in
Colonial Times* (1998).

[37] For more on the history and literature of these yet-to-be-nationalized spaces, see Robert Thacker*, The
Great Prairie: Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989); *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the
American Frontier*. Ed. Eric Heyne (1992); Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies:
Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2004); *The Louisiana Purchase and American
Expansion, 1803-1898*. Ed. by Sanford Levinson and Bartholomew H. Sparrow (2005); and Ann Baker,
*Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum Americ*a (2006).

but even in their cursory descriptions and throw-away references lurk the raw materials

of what modern readers can regard as transnational crime. Much like deep sea pirates,

boatmen are not confined to any one place or nation, and their wide-ranging travels put

them in a position to accomplish two ends that posed considerable danger to the nation.

First, and most obviously, their mobility allows them a wide theatre of operations for

their criminal deeds, while also making it difficult for law enforcement to find and

capture them. Secondly, they come into contact with places and cultures found on the

periphery of the United States, leading to cultural admixtures and the formation of non-

national or extranational identities. Employed as he was through his long literary life as

either a symbol of the American frontier or a comical heavy, Fink did not exactly perform

this second maneuver, but he made it possible for his literary descendants.

Just a few years after the peak of Fink's literary life in the 1840s, the boatman

character type that he embodied served as a general model for Herman Melville's

portrayal of Steelkilt, a backwoods mariner from the Great Lakes who takes center stage

in a chapter of *Moby-Dick* (1851). The two characters are not exactly analogous, but in

constructing his lakeman, Melville clearly draws on past traditions and literary

conventions surrounding Fink. More importantly, Melville picks up on the strain of

transnational violence and criminality permeating the Fink character and uses Steelkilt to

magnify them into frightening proportions.

The Strange Saga of Steelkilt

In *Moby-Dick* (1851), Herman Melville blends characteristics of Fink with the

culture of a newly-emerging geographical region to create the apotheosis of the criminal

boatman in Steelkilt, the star of Chapter 54 of the novel, "The Town-Ho's Story." At

first, the character resembles Fink and other preindustrial inland mariners through his physical strength, courage, and pronounced rowdy streak. He seems to stand as a symbol of strength and restless individualism, but later in the chapter, after a gradual process in which he grows increasingly mysterious and violent, the character becomes a repository for all the fear and darkness antebellum Americans saw lurking in border regions.

This "lakeman and desperado from Buffalo" is an oddity with no real analogue in American literature.[38] Fiction from the later eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries featured rough and rowdy Great Lakes sailors, but these characters lived and worked in a far more settled and nationalized U.S. region. Steelkilt, appearing almost a half century earlier, functions in a liminal zone where borders are not yet solid and the heterogeneous frontier past of the Great Lakes is still very much alive and foundational to the character and customs of the place. More importantly, by breaking national laws *and* participating in an increasingly global economy, Steelkilt far surpasses Fink and all other literary boatmen in the scope of his crimes. Fink, too, works as an economic agent in early America by transporting goods in his keelboat, but his criminal depredations mostly consist of the petty variety: extortion, public drunkenness, perhaps an occasional theft, and undoubtedly assault and battery in many cases. Steelkilt, on the other hand, is implicated in a complex criminal network tied to imperialism and global commerce.

---

[38] He does, however, have a real-life analogue. According to Hershel Parker, the character of Steelkilt was loosely based on Luther Fox, a young sailor from "Rensselaerville, New York (a village named for Melville's mother's ancestors) who was put ashore at Honolulu in irons in 1843, just after Melville arrived there, and with whom Melville had talked at the 'calaboose'" (Parker n6 214). Melville learned that Fox had committed a violent assault onboard a New Bedford Whaler and later, in January of 1844, learned that the New York mariner has escaped from a U.S. frigate while docked in Monterey, California (Parker 253). An article from *The Temperance Advocate and Seaman's Friend* in June of 1843 details Fox's crime and escape, but offers little about the man himself. While this basis for Steelkilt is undoubtedly a compelling subject for further analysis, I could not find the specifics about Fox's life or relationship to his home region that would allow me to position him as a clear example of the lakeman and canaller types of the present study.

Like the other frontier bandits of this study, he takes advantage of lawless zones and weak legal institutions to wreak havoc and disrupt existing social hierarchies (Friman 16).[39] At the same time, through his participation in global commerce, the character demonstrates a truism often discussed by legal scholars: transnational criminals are empowered by the increased privileging of economic markets over sovereign nations, a development that has become commonplace in the modern global order. In a world with porous borders and a relentless push of supply and demand, transnational criminals like Steelkilt are able to "hide and flourish" (Friman 9). Years before legal scholars discussed such developments or literary texts attempted to depict them, Melville anticipates a global economic system that encompasses both European capitals and peripheral border zones of the United States. Thus, while Steelkilt is a wild inland mariner from a wild American region, he also becomes something much larger.

Ultimately, the character is the product of an inventive mind pushing a character type to its conceptual limit and laying bare what so many popular narratives either glossed over or merely implied. More than any other literary boatman, Steelkilt represents the fear and uncertainty of America's "civilizing mission" in the West. He also establishes the template for a new kind of transnational outlaw whose bold freedom and limitless mobility make for an enduring staple of U.S. crime fiction.

If he is not a direct relation of Fink and the old-time rivermen of the Mississippi and Ohio, Steelkilt is at the very least an integral part of their extended family. His

---

[39] For more on definitions and descriptions of modern-day transnational crime, see *Transnational Crime in the Americas*. Ed. Tom Farer (1999*); Don Liddick, *The Global Underworld: Transnational Crime and the United States* (2004); Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations* (2006); Richard Friman, *Crime and the Global Political Economy* (2009); *The Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime and Justice*. Ed. Margaret Beare (2012); and Jay Albanese, *Transnational Organized Crime: An Overview from Six Continents* (2013).

native region of the Great Lakes developed a bit later than the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys but along similar lines.[40] There were sailing ships in the Lakes during the eighteenth century, but most shipping at that time was related to the fur trade or military exploits. The U.S. did not gain full control over the region until British defeat in the War of 1812, and in the ensuing years emigrants increasingly chose to head west by boarding "a Great Lakes packet in Buffalo" (McKee 164). By 1830, more than half of immigrants heading west departed from Buffalo, New York and headed for western lake ports like Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit (Brehm, *Sweetwater* 11). In these early years of settlement, many of the same sorts of boats found on the Ohio and Mississippi could be found tracking the lake coasts, while larger sailing vessels such as sloops, brigs, and schooners plied the deeper waters (Havighurst 65). The first steamboat on the Lakes was launched from Buffalo in 1818, and within a few years, "a sizable squadron of them were carrying passengers and good west on the Lakes" (McKee 164). Over the course of the next decade, new western settlements in this region were connected to the rest of the nation through the construction of a series of canals, the most famous of which, the Erie, opened in 1825. This growing interconnectedness allowed eastern merchants to profit from the sale of their goods out west, western farmers to find new markets to the east, and emigrants and land merchants to utilize an all-water route to new western settlements (McKee 164-165; Brehm, *Sweetwater* 12).

---

[40] For more on the history and development of this region, see Archer B. Hulbert, *The Paths of Inland Commerce: A Chronicle of Trail, Road, and Waterway* (1920); Walter Havighurst, *The Long Ships Passing: The Story of the Great Lakes* (1956); Russell McKee, *Great Lakes Country* (1966); Victoria Brehm's Introduction to *Sweetwater, Storms, and Spirits: Stories of the Great Lakes.* Ed. Victoria Brehm (1990); Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (1991*); The Sixty Years War for the Great Lakes, 1765-1814*. Ed. David C. Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson (2001).

Water routes were especially appealing during the first few decades of the nineteenth century, a time when many overland roads leading west were little more than narrow trails, and the prevalence of swamps and forests made for difficult treading. By 1815, two distinct travel options existed for settlers: go overland to Pittsburg and raft down the Ohio River, perhaps on a craft manned by boatmen of Fink's ilk, or travel on a Great Lakes packet to a western lake port (McKee 164). By the 1830s, with the completion of the Erie Canal and the establishment of treaties with Indian tribes that opened up settlement in the interior of states like Illinois and Michigan, the lake travel option became the most popular.

At the center of such rapid development were the sailors who worked on the lakes. Though steamships often transported settlers to their new western homes, most heavy freight commerce was carried out by sailing vessels, primarily schooners, and it was on these vessels that the majority of lake sailors made their living (Havighurst 65). In "The Town-Ho's Story," Melville states that Steelkilt came of age on "square-sailed brigs and three-masted schooners, well nigh as large and stout as any that ever sailed out of your old Callao to far Manilla." The boisterous life aboard these sailing crafts, spent traversing the waters of Erie, Michigan, and Superior, works to nurture in the hearts and minds of lake sailors "all those freebooting impressions popularly connected with the open ocean" (201). By the middle of the nineteenth century, towering schooners would race each other from Chicago to Buffalo in springtime with the year's first shipments of wheat; later, they would race from the iron ranges of Lake Superior down to the cities below loaded with timber or iron ore (Brehm, *Sweetwater* 12). At the end of the 1850s, Chicago was sending over twenty million bushels of corn and wheat north and south by

boat; meanwhile the rich lands beyond Lake Superior in Upper Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota "revolutionized the copper and steel industry of the world" (Hulbert 165-166). Transporting such cargo across the massive and dangerous lakes was hard, treacherous work. In order to unwind and relax, sailors turned to the same disreputable leisure activities – drinking, fighting, and whoring – that their predecessors on the Ohio and Mississippi had enjoyed. Thus, a culture of revelry and vice sprung up in the lake cities of Chicago, Buffalo, Oswego, and Cleveland just as it had a few decades earlier in river towns like Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. It stands to reason, then, that the typical lakemen possessed many of the same attributes found amongst the earlier boatmen of Fink's day, and Melville clearly makes this assumption in Chapter 54 of *Moby-Dick.* Writing in 1850 and 1851, Melville makes use of existing oral legends and first-hand accounts of the Fink-style boatman – a character type still quite popular at this time – and uses it to construct a new strand of western boatman mythology.

Though they were rarely featured in antebellum fiction and never became key players in popular culture to the same extent as their Ohio and Mississippi River counterparts, Great Lakes mariners possess a textual history of their own, albeit a limited one. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder* (1826) includes a lake mariner, Jasper Eau douce, who is shown to be the equal of any condescending saltwater man. Ten years later, the anonymous author of *Scenes on Lake Huron* also emphasizes the dangers faced by lakemen and defends their prowess from seafaring sailors' attacks (Brehm, "Great Lakes Maritime Fiction" 226; *Sweetwater* 4). But while these authors labored to attain respect and recognition on behalf of the lakmen, this unique class of men would not be the subjects of detailed portraits until the very end of the nineteenth century and the early

decades of the twentieth, at a time when the old lake schooners were being replaced with bigger, engine-powered steel ships helmed by professional sailors (Brehm, *Sweetwater* 14). Just as the nostalgia created by the steam age on America's great rivers spawned a cottage industry of tales about old-time river boatmen, technological advancements on the Great Lakes created a similar market for the celebration of its own earlier frontier era.

In Steelkilt, Melville creates the prototype of the rough and tumble Great Lakes sailor that would later be celebrated in much regional and natural literature. Around the turn of the twentieth century, this character type would appear in texts such as Morgan Robertson's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1899) and *Sinful Peck* (1903). In the former, Robertson, the son of a Great Lakes ship captain, crafts a memorable portrait of a group of lake sailors from Oswego, New York (a small port on Lake Ontario) (Brehm, "Great Lakes Maritime Fiction" 227). Shortly before they lead a violent mutiny aboard a deepwater ship bound for Peru, their captain proclaims that a "schooner sailor from the Lakes" would "rather fight than eat" and possesses "the fighting spirit of a bulldog; he inherits it with his Irish sense of injury; he sucks it in with his mother's milk, and drinks it with his whiskey; and when no enemies are near, he will fight his friends" (Robertson 32). Robertson set his stories in the 1870s and 80s, at a time when the old lake schooners had not yet given way to engine-powered ships. In the years since Sinful Peck appeared, an extensive body of folklore and mythology about Great Lakes region has entered print, and much of it focuses on the history of the lake sailors and lake travel. Examples include Richard Matthews Hallet's *Trial by Fire* (1916), Frances Doner's *Glass Mountain* (1942), Jay McCormick's *November Storm*, and George Yukelich's "The

Bosun's Chair" (Brehm, "Great Lakes" 229).[41] In a similar vein, several legends have

sprung up around "Roaring" Dan Seavey, an actual lake pirate from the early twentieth

century known for his frequent thefts and illegal shipping and poaching operations. A

character like Seavy would have been right at home in a Robertson short story, but by the

time of the his death in the 1920s, notorious lakemen like him existed only in memory

and local folklore ("Cap'n Dan Seavey" 2). Though influenced by Fink and earlier

rivermen, Melville's Steelkilt is the first detailed and well-developed lakeman character

of this type to appear in fiction.

<div align="center">***</div>

Steelkilt has rarely garnered the scholarly attention devoted to Ahab, Ishmael or

Queequeg, but he takes center stage for one chapter of *Moby-Dick* and serves as the

nexus of a complex web of symbols, interlocking narratives, metaphysical meditations,

and deeply encoded cultural commentary. He brings with him the character traits and

imagery often associated with the western frontier, and Ishmael introduces him

specifically as a "backwoods seaman fresh from the latitudes of buck-horn handled

Bowie-knives" (201). I contend that his star turn in "The Town-Ho's Story" represents

the most important and textually rich appearance of the sort of criminal boatman

character type developed in American fiction between 1820 and 1860. More importantly,

Melville performs a strange maneuver with this frontier type, introducing him as a

recognizably brawny and heroic backwoodsman and then converting him into a bizarre

symbol of violence, ambiguity, and transnational movement.

---

[41] For a complete literary history of Great Lakes fiction, see Victoria Brehm, "Great Lakes Maritime Fiction," in *America and the Sea: A Literary History*. Ed. Haskell Springer (1995).

Steelkilt's story functions as one of the many interludes that interrupt the novel's main narrative thrust. During a "gam" or social meeting between the Pequod and another vessel, a seaman in possession of a powerful and bizarre secret suddenly decides, for reasons unnamed, to communicate it to Tashtego, the Pequod's Native American harpooner. Though knowledge of the secret tale proceeds to spread rapidly, it somehow exerts "so potent an influence" on those who hear it that they are governed by a "strange delicacy" and thereby never allow it to become known behind the main-mast, meaning it never reaches the ears of the captain or the mates (200). However, Ishmael must have deemed discretion no longer necessary after returning from the high seas, because at some point after the Pequod's destruction he shares the story with a "lounging circle" of Spanish friends in Lima, Peru, as he informs the reader early in Chapter 54. For his "humor's sake," he announces the intention of repeating the tale to his readers in the same style in which he narrated it "upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza" of Lima's Golden Inn (200). And this tale, though introduced as primarily about the whale, is in fact Steelkilt's.

As it turns out, this desperado lakeman from the shores of Lake Erie is the leader of an impromptu mutiny onboard the Town-Ho. Initially presented as a paragon of masculine beauty and strength, Steelkilt takes part in a drama similar to the one enacted in Melville's *Billy Budd* (1924), as he provokes jealousy and violence in Radney, the first mate, due to his tall and noble bearing, his "head like a Roman," and "his flowing golden beard like the tasseled housings of your last viceroy's snorting charger" (202-203). Radney, on the other hand, is an unusually hostile and cowardly Nantucketer said to be ugly, stubborn, and malicious as a mule. While the Town-Ho's crew works at the pumps one evening, Radney gives Steelkilt the insulting order to sweep the floor, a task

70

normally performed by one of the young boys in the crew. When the lakeman refuses,

Radney menaces him with a hammer, and, ignoring "the nameless phantom" that comes

over Steelkilt and the "awful and unspeakable intimations" by which the lakeman warns

him to desist, the mate continues to wield the hammer and utter threats. After Steelkilt

declares that if the hammer so much as grazes his cheek the mate will be murdered on the

spot, Radney strikes him anyway, and in "the next instant the lower jaw of the mate was

stove in his head; he fell upon the hatch spouting blood like a whale" (205). It is no

coincidence here that Steelkilt's brute force is compared to the violence of the sea, for the

phantoms and "unspeakable intimations" that animate his exchange suggest a truth about

the character that becomes clear by the end of "The Town-Ho's Story": there are certain

things about Steelkilt that are simply beyond the powers of explanation.

As a result of the assault, Steelkilt is seized and set to be flogged, but he breaks

free from his captors with the aid of a couple of comrades, "canallers" from New York

state, and makes his way to the forecastle deck where he erects "three or four large casks

in line with the windlass" and entrenches himself behind the barricade (206). When the

captain demands that he surrender, the lakeman demands fair treatment and refuses to

follow orders. He then silently elicits the allegiance of other sailors, and these new

supporters are not said to be natives of the Great Lakes region like his countrymen the

canallers. First, the other seamen join him behind the barricades, and then, though "most

of them were against it," they obey Steelkilt, not the captain, and accompany the

renegade down into the forecastle to seek refuge (207). This power he effortlessly exerts

over all types of men is never explained, but it is echoed in the power of the Town-Ho's

story to bind men to secrecy and serves as an indication that the potency and terror of his

tale derive not just from its thrilling conclusion featuring Moby-Dick, but also emanate from Steelkilt himself. Despite the mysterious influence he wields, his resourcefulness, self-possession, magnetism, and physical prowess have tempted many to associate the character with a roughly-hewn and fiercely-independent American working-class or a free-wheeling frontier archetype.

He has been described as "one of Melville's "worker-heroes" and a representative of "rugged North American frontier heroism" (Whalen-Bridge 47; Kaplan 45). Sherman Paul claimed Steelkilt was a handsome and pure-hearted "democratic hero" in the mold of other Melville characters like Jack Chase and Billy Budd who embodied "the American savage, the natural man, a being free from civilized hypocrisy" (5). More recently, John Whalen-Bridge has characterized him the same way: a brawling, freedom-loving blue-collar worker who refuses to be treated like property. He also interprets the Buffalonian's story as a subversively revolutionary narrative depicting the proletariat throwing off the yoke of owners and tyrants. According to this reading, Ishmael employs storytelling strategies like entertaining ethnographic flourishes, "encyclopedic details," and "other kinds of exotica" while narrating "The Town-Ho's Story" in order to conceal the politically volatile theme of the tale from his aristocratic audience in Lima (51).

Other critics have noted the ways in which Steelkilt functions as a symbol of the West. For example, Edwin Fussell declared in 1965 that this "backwoods mariner" fuses "in a single personal image" the ocean and the West, and thereby "lies at the axis" of *Moby-Dick* (Roripaugh 49; Fussell 263). While it is easy to view Steelkilt as a frontier figure or working-class revolutionary, he is much more. During the character's transition from suffering unjust persecution to spearheading a revolt and seizing power, Ishmael's

characterization of him changes from sympathetic and celebratory to violent and ungovernable. In addition, over the course of the chapter Steelkilt becomes implicated in global networks of trade and violence that allow him to transcend the specific regional characteristics of Buffalo and the Great Lakes that ostensibly define him. Initially rendered as a familiar frontier figure, Steelkilt soon comes to play a role in "The Town-Ho's Story" that is far darker and stranger than what nineteenth century audiences would have expected from a roughly-hewn but noble frontiersman.

From the beginning of "The Town-Ho's Story," Steelkilt's proud bearing and handsome mien receive a good deal of Ishmael's attention, but he is also portrayed as wildly untamed, much like the region from which he hails. From his perch as narrator, Ishmael emphasizes the savage primitiveness of the region and makes a concerted effort to compare New Yorkers like Steelkilt to other types of "savages" (many of which are represented in the Pequod's crew). He tells the Spanish dons that lakemen inhabit a land where "gaunt pines stand like serried lines of kings in Gothic genealogies; those same woods harboring wild Afric beasts of prey and red painted faces of barbarians (201). White men of the Great Lakes and the surrounding areas do not merely reside near such savagery – they are part of it themselves. Ishmael indicates this when he claims that on the Erie canal of New York one will see the "true Ashantee…there howl your pagans; where you ever find them; next door to you; under the long-flung shadow, and the snug patronizing lee of churches" (205). Here we arrive at a central theme of the chapter and a chief source of terror for Ishmael: strange and potentially "savage" peoples existing alongside civilization. To have rough and uncultivated pathfinders living and working near more "civilized" elements of society was a common occurrence during America's

westward expansion, but here Ishmael views these frontiersmen as fundamentally connected to their wild environs, not engaged in the typical Anglo-American mission to tame them. So when "corrupt and often lawless" canallers pass through small towns and major cities in addition to dismal swamps and ancient forests, this poses an immediate threat, as Ishmael makes clear when he compares these "sinners" abounding in "holiest vicinities" to "metropolitan freebooters who "encamp around the halls of justice" (205). When Ishmael refers to pirates or similar types of outlaws with the term "freebooters," he makes it clear that Steelkilt and the canallers belong to the same category.

Canallers and Lakemen are characterized as distinct groups whose members are likened more to Africans or Pacific Islanders than to other recognizable forms of white Americans. Indeed, as Amy Kaplan points out, Ishmael never refers to Steelkilt or his cohorts as Americans but always as lakeman and canallers. And though they have often been viewed by critics as typical American frontiersmen, they are always very much a species apart – not only far different from the more civilized forms of whiteness represented by Ishmael and the dons, but different from other denizens of wild frontier regions. They are not outlaws in a strict sense, for they work on canal boats or the larger sailing vessels of the Great Lakes in the employ of private companies or individual ship-owners; nevertheless, they are almost never characterized as regular sailors or law-abiding citizens, but always as brigands and reprobates. Furthermore, they are frequently depicted as nonwhite. The canallers, in particular, are exoticized and oddly historicized as Ishmael's descriptions of them grow increasingly fanciful:

> Freely depicted in his own vocation, gentlemen, the Canaller would make
> a fine dramatic hero, so abundantly and picturesquely wicked is he. Like

74

Marc Antony, for days and days along his green-turfed, flowery Nile, he

indolently floats, openly toying with his red-cheeked Cleopatra, ripening

his apricot thighs upon the sunny deck. But ashore, all this effeminacy is

dashed. The brigandish guise which the Canaller so proudly sports; his

slouched and gaily-ribboned hat betoken his grand features. A terror to

the smiling innocence of the villages through which he floats; his swart

visage and bold swagger are not unshunned in cities. (206)

While Ishmael does mention that a Canaller did him some "good turns" once, he depicts

this class of inland mariner as plundering and vicious criminals, albeit somewhat

romantic and picturesque ones. Much like the old-time boatmen of Fink's era, they travel

from town to town committing a litany of crimes in the course of their usual workaday

routines. Their flamboyant attire and "swarthy" appearance evokes Orientalism, with its

associations of decadence and corruption, and their proclivity for mischief is

unmistakable. Ishmael sums up "the wildness of this canal life" by claiming that no other

"race of mankind," aside from "Sydney men," is as mistrusted by whaling captains as the

New York canaller (206).

Kaplan follows other critics' lead by assuming that the terms lakeman and

canaller are synonymous.[42] They certainly appear to inhabit the same environs, but the

canallers are said to move through the "entire breadth of the state of New York," while

the lakeman's domains extend beyond the confines of the state and into the Great Lakes,

---

[42] In "Transnational Melville" (2010), Kaplan refers to Steelkilt as both "a Lakeman from the shores of
Lake Erie" *and* "a Canaller from the wilds of upstate New York" (44; emphasis mine). However, in "The
Town-Ho's Story," Steelkilt is always referred to as a lakeman and never as a canaller by Ishmael or any
other character. Similarly, his canaller croniers are never bestowed with the title of "lakemen" by the
narrator or anyone else. It is my contention that a careful reading of the chapter reveals that these two
designations are indeed separate.

described by Ishmael as "those grand fresh-water seas of ours" (201). Completed in 1825, the Erie Canal runs from Steelkilt's home of Buffalo, perched on the western edge of New York along Lake Erie, all the way to Albany and the Hudson River in the eastern part of the state. This means that Steelkilt's home includes the canal but is not restricted to it – he was also intimately familiar with the wide-open expanses of the Great Lakes, which are characterized in the novel as part of a transnational network of trade and imperial relations. Furthermore, Ishmael lavishes the lakes with generous descriptions: they are said to possess "an ocean-like expansiveness" and "many of the ocean's noblest traits." Canallers, on the other hand, possessed a "limited mobility on and along the waterway," and often lived and worked on narrow ribbons of water in the Erie or various side canals (Melville 201; Wyld 51). Also limiting the majesty of the canallers's habitat was the fact that their shallow and squarish barges were often pulled by horses or mules on the towpaths lining the shore, thus limiting speed and freedom of movement. Nevertheless, the lengthy expanse of the canal allowed them to live more fully on the water than their counterparts on other inland waterways, and they consequently developed as a distinct cultural subgroup (Wyld 51-52; McKee 166).

The canal itself was termed "The Big Ditch of Iniquity" during the 1840s and 50s, and canallers were primarily responsible for the title. Canal settlements were renowned for disorder, and the entire area was dubbed the "Barbary Coast of the East" due to its general air of dissipation (Stott 190). The "indigenous canawler" has been said to "represent a rather definite, separate social grouping, one apart from the mainstream of society." Indeed, a distinct culture developed along the canal and towpaths between Buffalo and Albany between the 1830s and the end of the nineteenth century (Wyld 51).

Characterized by historians as "rough, sometimes dishonest, itinerant" and troublesome to "local landowners and village constables," canallers' penchant for drunkenness and brawling has been well-documented by New York state historians and chroniclers of the Canal Age. Historian Charles Hadfield asserts that "during the pre-railway age, little public notice was taken" of boatmen like them who made possible U.S. industrial expansion (Hadfield 121). In later years many of these boatmen would become objects of regional and national folk mythology, but when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* these figures were still largely obscure in many corners of the country. He was thus free to exaggerate a bit and enlarge this class of backwoods ruffians into larger-than-life villains.[43]

Ishmael offers two separate ethnographic portraits to explain canallers and lakemen, and he seems to regard them as two separate entities, or, to follow the language of the text, separate races. Evidence for this distinction can be found by comparing Ishmael's portrayal of Steelkilt to his portrayal of the canallers, two of whom aid the lakeman in his battle with the captain's men aboard the Town-Ho. While the canallers are brigands who strike fear in villagers' hearts, Steelkilt is graced with a brain, a heart, and a soul which would have made him "Charlemagne" in past times (203). Ishmael compares him to a great king and an aristocrat's war-time steed in order to mark him as the heir to warriors and conquerors, affiliations that make his status as working-class hero potentially problematic. More importantly, Steelkilt is invested with the sort of innate nobility, at least initially, that is always lacking in his canaller cronies. This becomes

---

[43] There is not a wealth of contemporary sources on New York canallers. Among the few works of history that discuss them in detail are Lionel D. Wyld, *Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal* (1962) and Charles Hadfield, *The Canal Age* (1968).

clear in "The Town-Ho's Story" while the mutineers are holed up in the forecastle. After remaining in the suffocating dark for several days, watching most of his party surrender and growing "maddened by his long entombment in a place as black as the bowels of despair," Steelkilt devises a desperate plan: he and the two canallers will rush the deck with their mincing knives and seize the ship by force (208). While outwardly assenting to the scheme, the canallers reveal their treachery by conspiring to apprehend Steelkilt while he sleeps and present him to the authorities as soon as the scuttle is thrown open, in the hopes of avoiding any further punishment. Such conduct seems to fall in line with their reputations as corrupt and immoral highwaymen. Even the avenging captain is disgusted enough to ignore their assistance in subduing Steelkilt, and they are soon lashed up to the mizzen rigging alongside their erstwhile leader.

The contrast between Steelkilt's brawny nobility and the canallers' craven baseness illustrates that two separate identities are present in this passage. Consider for a moment the lakeman's home of Buffalo. By 1840, the hardscrabble village next to Lake Erie that had been burned to the ground during the War of 1812 had grown into "a western metropolis" with over twenty thousand inhabitants (Parker 174). It was the home of a large port and, in 1843, witnessed the invention of the world's first steam-powered grain elevator.[44] It was also the point of departure for settlers heading west and the shipping destination for grains and other raw materials coming east. Due to the "increasingly national transportation network based on the Erie Canal, the Great Lakes, and a rapidly expanding system of railroads," Buffalo soon had the necessary conditions

---

[44] For more on the history of Buffalo and the grain industry, see R. Edwards, *Great Industries of Buffalo, New York* (1884); Henry H. Hill, *The Municipality of Buffalo. A History* (1923); J.G. Clark, *The Grain Trade in the Old North West* (1966); Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (1983); and David Tarbet, *Grain Dust Dreams* (2015).

for a booming economy and population growth (Goldman 70). Clearly, this was not exactly the wilderness, and it seems fair to assert that, as a native of the place, Steelkilt was not merely a backwoodsman or savage. At the same time, however, the city's attachment to the Erie Canal helped it to earn a reputation as a wild scene of commotion. The fittingly named Canal Street, featuring numerous brothels and taverns, was dubbed by many in the nineteenth century as "The Wickedest Street in the World" (Stott 190). According to Hershel Parker, Melville himself traveled to Buffalo in 1840, and while there he undoubtedly noticed the slums where the sailors and "wilder young clerks from the forwarding houses and stores drank and danced with rouged women" (qtd. in Parker 174). He also noticed more American Indians than he had probably ever seen before, as the city's southeastern border was on an Indian reservation.[45]

As he appears through most of "The Town Ho's Story," the lakeman mirrors his hometown by functioning as a curious mix of wild and social. He is capable of reckless violence and stunning brutality but also of leading men and inspiring loyalty. A composite of frontier adventurer and city dweller, his duality demonstrates that he is acquainted with the two main currents of American life – the pastoral and the industrial, the rural and the urban – or, as Ishmael puts it, he mirrors "the paved capitals of Buffalo and Cleveland, *as well as* Winnebago villages" (201; emphasis mine).

While Ishmael's characterization of Steelkilt certainly exoticizes a particular sub-culture, through the first nine pages or so of the chapter, the lakeman is rendered familiar

---

[45] Chapter 9 of Parker's *Herman Melville: A Biography* (1996) contains some excellent material on Buffalo in the 1840s. See p. 171-176 for insights on Erie Canal life and the early boom times of city. In this section, Parker makes extensive use of the travel narrative of Thomas Low Nichols, a New Hampshire native whom Melville knew in passing. Nichols recorded his impressions of traveling on a canal packet and visiting Buffalo in a book published in London in 1864 entitled *Forty Years of American Life* (Parker 172).

enough, sympathetic enough, and certainly American enough to be fundamentally knowable to readers. He seems to fit in nicely with frontier archetypes and the closely-related "jolly fellows" discussed by Richard Stott in his study of male milieus: hard-drinking, roughly-hewn men who inhabited the many mining towns, lumber camps, and canal settlements of the early nineteenth century. As Stott observes, in places such as these where men worked and lived somewhat apart from conventional U.S. society, excessive drinking, frequent fighting, and all-around "roistering" were commonplace and came to be expected (Stott 188-189). The men who lived in these locales helped to conquer America's various frontiers, and they are often celebrated in American fiction and in the collective mythology of the nation despite their inclination toward lawlessness. But Steelkilt imbues this familiar frontier type with levels of brutality and malice that not only call into question the usual masculine paradigms at work in early nineteenth century male milieus, but also the value of traditional "manly" virtues that began to be celebrated in U.S. society by the end of the eighteenth century: "assertiveness, ambition, avarice," and "lust for power" (Rotundo 16).

At first blush, in his refusal to bow to his superior and his insistence on his innate equality and dignity, Steelkilt appears to be embodying the sort of masculine individuality identified by Anthony Rotundo as a byproduct of the commercial and social changes wrought by the American Revolution and the development of a market economy.[46] But Steelkilt wields this individuality for inexplicable, terrifying motives; rather than a self-made man of the sort discussed by Rotundo, he becomes a fugitive and

---

[46] For more on the development of this masculine identity, see Joseph Ellis's *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (1979) and Anthony E. Rotundo's *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity From The Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993).

complete enigma to his fellow characters and to Ishmael, the man who tells his story.

Similarly, Steelkilt initially seems to correspond to the familiar figure of the Handsome

Sailor, a charismatic and idealized man who "promotes communal feeling" in the all-

male milieus often depicted by Melville (Greven 197). Much like Billy Budd, the

character to whom he is most often compared, Steelkilt "plays a type," and "manifests a

recurring symbolic character in the worlds of fraternal orders like those on Melvillean

ships" (Greven 198).[47] But despite the numerous similarities between "The Town-Ho's

Story" and *Billy Budd*, Steelkilt does not remain the "clueless catalyst" or unthinkingly

"inviolate vessel" that David Greven sees Billy Budd consistently embodying (207).

Instead, the lakeman acts on his desires, pursues his own ends, and *actively* serves to

demolish the homosocial bonds that the Handsome Sailor is expected to uphold. Like

Billy, he is subject to a sexualized male gaze and, like Billy, he administers a vicious

blow to the head of a man who desires him, but rather than an uncomprehending

innocent, Steelkilt functions as a full and early representation of the post-bellum male

characters in American fiction who "deal death to desire" and "fulfil their "Lawentian

core identity as killer" (Greven 220).

    Not only does Steelkilt deal death to those desiring him, he also has a piratical and

insurrectionary streak that is found nowhere in Billy Budd and or other familiar

masculine types. A certain degree of recklessness and rowdy disorder might be expected

of jolly fellows or handsome sailors, but Steelkilt's crimes grow to an extent that renders

---

[47] Much of David Greven's discussion of Billy Budd's function in the homosocial and homoeotic spheres
of a naval ship in Chapter Eight of *Men Beyond Desire: Manhood, Sex, and Violation in American
Literature* (2005) could equally be applied to Steelkilt and the analogous roles he plays aboard the *Pequod*.
The two characters diverge, however, in the latter stages of their respective tales, as Steelkilt exercises a
level of agency and indomitable will never bestowed upon Billy.

him unrecognizable. Simply put, in the final pages of "The Town-Ho's Story," the character transforms from a seemingly familiar American type of the early nineteenth century frontier into a terrifyingly unknowable force of nature.

The canallers, however, are not depicted with the same level of indirectness, opacity, or intrigue. They possess no heroic attributes and are presented merely as nomadic and lawless inland pirates, belonging to no civilization and falling under no jurisdiction. Though white, they are depicted as savages, as a race apart. They are excluded from the normative category of whiteness for primarily social reasons, much like other marginalized groups of whites in the nineteenth-century United States. Just as the poor rural whites of the South or Irish immigrants in northern cities were compared to Indians or blacks as a result of their perceived indolence and immorality, these canallers are set aside because they are said to strongly resemble uncivilized races in terms of conduct and worldview (Wray 39). Even in terms of appearance, they are cast as something other – recall the canaller's "apricot thigh" and oriental effeminacy on the waterways in the aforementioned passage from "The Town-Ho's Story." It bears repeating, though, that the canaller's effeminacy is dashed upon his arrival on shore; once on land he is violent and ruthless, a pirate plundering the hamlets, towns and cities of New York State. Ishmael describes him as "wicked," "a terror," and a "man of violence." The "wildness of canal life" renders him criminal and dangerous; although capable of the occasional kindness often found in brutal men, he is inherently untrustworthy, avaricious, and prone to mischief (206). Like Steelkilt, he possess dual personas, but instead of intermixing the civilized with the savage, the canaller combines savage violence with a sensual, "oriental" languor. As a result, these brigands serve as

oppositional models of American masculinity, standing as they do in stark contrast to normative categories of whiteness and upright manliness.

Also barring his admission to normative society is the canaller's distinctly corrupt character, which delights one of Ishmael's friends at the Golden Inn, Don Pedro. Upon hearing of the canallers, the don exclaims that all the "world's one Lima," meaning the corruption and decadence associated with his home seems to apply to other places as well, even America's "temperate north" where he long assumed "the generations were cold and holy as the hills" (206). Kaplan notes that Melville saw Lima as a "standing trope for corruption," so by conflating it with an American region, he undercuts American exceptionalism and narrow-minded provincialism (45). True enough, but it is not just the places that are being compared to one another here, but the inhabitants of the places as well.

This means that Steelkilt and his canaller associates are implicated and intertwined in a larger, transnational network of mystery and horror. Rarely considered in the text as U.S. citizens, they share more kinship with Indians or Spanish Americans than they do with men like Ishmael. The New Yorkers are not only connected to the luxuriant dons lounging at the Golden Inn – the "stereotypically Spanish American fop[s] in ruffled sleeves" – and the associations they evoke of colonial oppression and ill-gotten gains; they are also caught up in a burgeoning American empire and new global trade networks. As Kaplan has shown, the Great Lakes are likened in this chapter to the Atlantic Ocean, exotic Polynesian waters, and the Mediterranean coast of Africa, comparisons that convert the lakes into a transnational waterway with global importance (45). Ishmael no doubt underscores the region's commercial and imperial value when he

83

points out that the lakes "furnish long maritime approaches to our numerous territorial colonies from the East" and are home to "silken creatures whose exported furs give robes to Tartar Emperors" (201).

The Great Lakes are thus responsible for providing access to U.S. territorial acquisitions and furnishing consumer goods to faraway lands. Long a supplier of fur and other animal products, the region's economic role became more critical and diversified throughout the 1830s and 1840s due to the development of the aforementioned U.S. canal system. The Erie Canal was widened and deepened in 1835, the Oswego and Black River canals were later built to connect Lake Ontario with Lake Erie, and planners in Cleveland developed the Ohio Canal soon afterward. Though it was rendered somewhat obsolete in later decades by railroads, this canal system constituted the first phase of the U.S.'s transportation revolution and yielded a dramatic reduction in shipping rates (Bukowczyk 32). The system allowed agricultural commodities such as wheat and flour to flow out of the region and would later result in the growth of the timber, iron, and copper industries in places like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. In addition to creating an interregional or national commercial empire, the canals also drew commodities from both the U.S. side of the Great Lakes and the Canadian side, thereby fostering the integration of Upper Canada with the economy of the northeastern and upper Midwestern portions of the U.S. (Bukowczyk 34). Timber, grains, and minerals were extracted from Canadian forests and lowlands and then shipped to major American cities and abroad. As a producer of commodities sought after by other nations and faraway consumers, the greater Great Lakes region helped the U.S. grow into a larger

player on the stage of global economics.[48] And at the helm of the ships conveying the

region's goods to national and world markets were the lakemen represented by Steelkilt.

The transnational nature of the region, and, by extension, of the lakemen who live

and work there, is strongly suggested by the descriptions Ishmael provides to the dons at

the Golden Inn. He tells them that the lakes are "swept by Borean and dismasting blasts

as direful as any that lash the salted wave" and that they are also just as acquainted with

shipwrecks, naval victories, and "archipelagos of romantic isles" as any ocean. More

importantly, the lakes also contain the same "rimmed varieties of races and climes" found

in other parts of the world (201). The racial exoticism Ishmael notes here rests primarily

on the area's Native American population. As Richard White points out, few sharp

distinctions existed between Indian and white worlds in the Great Lakes region between

the seventeenth century and U.S. victory in the War of 1812; though differences

remained identifiable, the groups "shaded into each other" (xi). By the early nineteenth

century, a cultural syncretism forged from Algonquin, French, British, and American

influence had become traditional in the Great Lakes region (White 506-507).[49] White

claims that the exchanges, conflicts, and acculturations of this period took place on a

"middle ground": a place "in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the

nonstate world of [Indian] villages…the area between the historical foreground of

European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat" (x).

---

[48] For more on these processes and developments, see Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (1960); Harry S. Scheiber, *Ohio Canal Era: A Case Study of Government and the Economy, 1820-1861* (1969); Alfred Eckes Jr., *Opening America's Markets: U.S. Foreign Trade Policy since 1776* (1995); and *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650-1990*. Ed. John J. Bukowczyk, et al. (2005).
[49] For more on the middle ground concept, see Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (1991).

While this middle ground depended on Indian-white distinctions, it also "depended on the porousness of the boundaries between Indian and white" (506).

Steelkilt's time comes a little later than the period described by White, but Melville is obviously drawing upon the region's history as a site of cultural exchange. Through Ishmael's descriptions, Melville blurs the lines between white and Indian inhabitants of the Great Lakes by stating that the lakemen inhabit the same woods and beaches as "wild barbarians" who flash their "red painted faces" from "their peltry wigwams." And as previously mentioned, sailors like Steelkilt are said to frequent "Winnebago villages" just as often as they visit the "paved capitals" of settled U.S. states (201). In a similar vein, one travel writer active in Steelkilt's era recalled a visit to Green Bay, Wisconsin where he saw "some tall, stately, dignified warriors, in their paint and feathers" "come down from their wild hunting grounds to receive their Government annuities of powder, lead," blankets, and whiskey" (qtd. in Parker 176). Though the Great Lakes region was rapidly modernizing in the 1840s and 50s, it still maintained much of its primeval physical characteristics and a good deal of its racial heterogeneity. Ultimately, the long-standing cultural syncretism of the region, along with its commercial and cultural connections to far-away places such as Russia, Africa, and the Pacific, works to configure it into a very peculiar geographical area: one that serves discrete and important functions for the United States yet remains isolated – a region that is both within the nation and without, a scene of triumph and progress that is also othered as wild and nonwhite.

In addition to describing the area's commercial importance and transnational identity, Ishmael also emphasizes the crucial role it has performed in national defense and

imperialism. Its history of martial significance is suggested by the descriptions of the batteries that "frown upon" the lakesides and the "goat-like craggy guns" of Fort Mackinaw in Michigan, the site of a great naval victory over the British in the War of 1812 (201). This war was just one of many fought in the region since the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century. As Andrew Cayton points out, control over the region's lakes, rivers, and trade portals meant control over the North American continent (375). As a result, the years between the 1750s and 1810s saw a series of armed conflicts between the French, British, U.S., and various Native American tribes. The victories and territories gained in the War of 1812 enabled a northward expansion of American borders and a newfound security from European rivals. And once the area came under U.S. jurisdiction, it was developed with a speed and efficiency virtually unseen in the annals of history. By the 1870s, the region was no longer the Old Northwest but the new Midwest, a center of commodity production and a "unique place in its unequivocal commitment to market capitalism and its diverse western European population" (Cayton 375). Though the wars of the Great Lakes were presumably over by the time Steelkilt came of age, the region has always been shaped by war and conquest. Throughout the nineteenth century, the lakes remained an important bulwark against the British presence in Canada and a reminder of past U.S. military glory.

Whether serving as a supplier of commercial items or a strategic military outpost, Melville gestures repeatedly to the region's important role in global events. While still home to the brutal violence and lawlessness of the frontier, it also contributes to a global economy, assists in the spread of western civilization, and offers the space necessary for urban growth. The same can be said for the Peruvian capital of Lima, the home of

Ishmael's dons. Lima was an important nexus of colonial power under the Spanish that proceeded to lay relatively dormant for centuries before experiencing rapid development and modernization during the 1850s (Klaren 70). The city expanded during this decade due in large part to increased revenues from guano exports. As it enhanced its ability to supply commodities to other parts of the world, Lima, like the Great Lakes during the same period, grew, prospered, and became connected to other nodes in a global network of trade and commerce.[50]

Consequently, the Great Lakes region is connected to Peru in much the same way that it is connected to all other cities and nations of the world: through international trade and nation-building. More specifically, the two places share a kinship due to their housing of violent and immoral men, whether they come in the form of decadent aristocrats oppressing darker-skinned peoples or brawny frontiersmen running roughshod over law and order. Steelkilt, the canallers, and the Spanish dons lounging at the Golden Inn with Ishmael are all part of a larger landscape of capital and empire-building. Thus it is no coincidence that Ishmael chooses to tell the "The Town-Ho's Story" in Lima. During his earlier meditations in Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," he describes the Peruvian capital as "tearless" (due to its lack of rainfall) and "the strangest, saddest city thou can'st see" (163). Many critics perceive at least some of the sadness and "higher horror" contained in the city to result from the many centuries of oppression and corruption that characterized its Spanish colonial regime. Wyn Kelley perceives in

---

[50] As James Higgins states in *Lima: A Cultural History* (2005), Peru in the post-independence period "was incorporated into the international economic system as exporter of primary products and importer of manufactured goods" (10). My use of Lima is mostly derived from Higgins; Peter F. Klaren, *Peru: Society and Nationhood in the Andes* (2000); Holligan de Diaz-Limaco, *Peru in Focus: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture* (2000); and Wyn Kelley', "The Style of Lima: Colonialism, Urban Form, and 'The Town-Ho's Story,'" in *Melville Among the Nations*, ed. Sanford Marovitz and A.C Christodoulou (2001).

Ishmael's narration a deep ambivalence about the histories of colonial violence and class divisions that are so well-preserved in cities like Lima. Colonial violence is also a legacy of the Great Lakes, as the French, British, and Americans took turns fighting local Indians and each other. After the displacement of the French, first the British and then the Americans established commercial empires there along with military strongholds that completely shifted the balance of power in the region and displaced countless native inhabitants (McKee 77). In this way, American settlement of the Great Lakes resembled the work of the Spanish empire in much of South America.

Thus, history and economics tie the corrupt Spaniards at the Golden Inn to the wicked canallers and their lakeman leader (for though they are separate races in Ishmael's taxonomy, these two types live close enough and share enough of the same habits to be natural comrades). This connection cries out for closer attention. Critics such as Kaplan and Kelley have focused primarily on what "The Town-Ho's Story" says about Lima and how the city embodies or comments upon American imperialism and class conflict; others have explored the satirical content of the story and how it is directed at Melville's readership, or even how the story is about the politics of storytelling (Kosok 55; Whalen-Bridge 57). Though these pursuits are all worthy, they miss out on the opportunity to explore what the tale says about Steelkilt and the canallers and their role in the larger economic and imperial systems that are so clearly on display throughout "The Town-Ho's Story."

If one accepts the crucial economic role these boatmen played in the early to mid-nineteenth century by transporting goods and facilitating western emigration, it is not difficult to locate the troubling long-range implications of Ishmael's characterizations of

them. When he references the canallers' corruption and inclination toward theft and physical violence, or when he calls Steelkilt "a sort of devil" and desperado, the meaning is clear: *these* are the men responsible for carrying out commerce, for clearing the woods and swamps of Indians, for advancing American civilization. These wild men, untamed, criminal, and seemingly beyond any form of law or civility, are shown to wield enormous power throughout the quixotic "Town-Ho's Story." It hardly matters that Melville ever depicts them committing any actual transnational crimes because he makes abundantly clear that that they are prone to criminal behavior and in possession of a far-flung mobility. Presented with this information, readers can safely conclude that these frontier bandits are transnational criminals tasked with important roles in the formation of an American empire. As such, they maintain a lasting relevance as symbols of the corruption and violence that appear irretrievably intertwined with power and economic success in Melville's vision of the modern world.

Ishmael claims that Steelkilt possesses a composite nature, mixing nobility and natural regality with savagery and brute force. In fact, his duality is better described as being, on one side, a mixture of economic agent and transnational criminal, and, on the other side, an ambiguous symbol of the senseless and unstoppable violence of the frontier. Indeed, in the latter half of the tale, this backwoods mariner assumes a menacing orientation that remains unaccountable within the context of the heroic and democratic functions often ascribed to him, or even within the commercial and colonial roles discussed above. By the story's conclusion, he is a nothing short of a malevolent force that proves to be implacable, inexplicable, and without reason.

After leaving Steelkilt and the canallers to hang in the rigging for a night, the captain of the Town-Ho gets them down and prepares to flog them. Considering the violent tendencies Steelkilt has already evinced, it is no real surprise to hear him declare in "a sort of hiss": "What I say is this – and mind it well – if you flog me, I murder you" (209). But what happens next is far stranger. As the captain draws back the rope to begin the lashing, Steelkilt "hissed out something, inaudible to all but the Captain; who to the amazement of all hands, started back, paced the deck rapidly two or three times, and then suddenly throwing down his rope, said, 'I won't do it – let him go – cut him down: d'ye hear?'" (210). What could Steelkilt say to compel such a reaction? Ishmael's narration implies that the "hissed" threat was so unspeakable and mortifying that the captain had no choice but to break convention and forgo the flogging. The captain's rapid pacing and the anxious order he gives to release the prisoner make it seem as if he beheld or heard something daunting and beyond his understanding. One could argue that Steelkilt merely told him the nature of Radney's unbearable provocation and the captain was shocked by it, but it is worth mentioning that Steelkilt is not said to speak in this sequence but rather to emit a serpent-like "hiss," and before his inaudible comment he was openly threatening to kill the captain. His whispered message, then, was not a plea for justice or an explanation of his actions, but an odious oath or bone-chilling guarantee of future wrath.

Though the captain is too overwhelmed to carry out the flogging, Radney is not. The furious mate immediately seizes the rope and administers the blows despite a warning from Steelkilt signified by another hiss and an uplifted arm. This obscure threat,

"whatever it might have been," is ignored by Radney, and the indomitable lakeman is made to feel the lash. But his defeat is only temporary.

Following the flogging, life returns to normal onboard the Town-Ho; as Ishmael says, "no sign of mutiny reappeared," and this is because, "at Steelkilt's instigation," the rest of the sailors "resolved to maintain the strictest peacefulness, obey all orders to the last, and, when the ship reached port, desert her in a body" (210). In order to ensure a speedy end to the voyage, the men resolve not to cry out for whales in the event any are sighted. So all is quiet on the whaler, and the only uproar is the unkind treatment received by the two low-life canallers, who must seek assistance from the captain after being abused by the rest of the crew for their treachery. But all the while, Steelkilt is planning his revenge against Radney. His preferred method for killing the first mate is "to knit a sling of sorts in which he intends to insert an iron ball" and thereby shatter Radney's skull while the latter is on night-watch (Whalen-Bridge 55). The Buffalonian's steel-willed determination is evident here – Ishmael describes the mate as "already stark and stretched as a corpse, with his forehead crushed in" the day before Steelkilt plans to carry out the deed (211). And the lakeman even intends to borrow the thread for his sling from Radney! Whalen-Bridge reads Steelkilt as a Christ-like figure who suffers a symbolic death before coming back to punish Radney the sinner, but it is difficult to imagine Christ crushing a man's skull and taking gleeful pleasure in borrowing from that very man the materials needed for the murder (55). It is at this point in the narrative that Steelkilt stops functioning as anything remotely resembling a worker-hero or noble white savage and grows into a brutal and mostly silent force of vengeance.

Making him even less human is his connection to the white whale, which becomes clear when a "stupid Teneriffe man," forgetting Steelkilt's orders, sounds the call of a whale sighting and the Town-Ho's boats are lowered for the chase. The whale they pursue is, of course, the "very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster," as Ishmael briefly describes Moby-Dick to the dons (211). During the chase, Radney ends up on the whale's flank and is soon devoured. Thus, in the words of Ishmael, "the would-be murderer" is saved by the whale's wonted appetite for destruction. Though he is unable to strike the fatal blow himself, Steelkilt plays his role as the bowsman of the mate's boat; he leads the other oarsmen in their effort to bring Radney up to the whale's "topmost back" and none of the other oarsmen "howled more fiercely with delight" than he (212). Whalen-Bridge reads the insertion of the whale as the "punch-line of this shaggy-dog story of revolution" and considers it proof that the subversive political content of "The Town Ho's Story" is submerged beneath the first direct account of the leviathan's violence (55). This is probably true, but it is also true that the whale takes up Steelkilt's quest for revenge and executes it mercilessly Though Steelkilt owes the whale's assistance to the Teneriffe man's forgetfulness, the fact remains that he and the whale are united in this sequence through their desire for blood and their intended target. As Edwin Fussell puts it, Steelkilt's "insulted manhood is vicariously revenged by Moby Dick" – but here the whale functions as an embodiment of the violent West, not an instrument of divine justice (264). Steelkilt functions as a similar embodiment of the violent West: not only does the revenge executed by the whale originate with him, but his own plot for killing Radney surpasses even the brutality of the whale.

After the men desert the Town-Ho upon reaching port as planned, the captain is forced to set out in a whale boat for Tahiti to find a new crew. En route, he encounters Steelkilt bearing down on him in a canoe. The lakeman threatens to "run him under water" if he does not "heave to," and when the captain grabs a pistol, Steelkilt merely laughs scornfully and assures him that "if the pistol so much as clicked in the lock, he would bury him in bubbles and foam" (213). Strangely enough, the avenging Buffalonian is not presented as being armed in this exchange, nor does he appear to have any ready access to weapons or dangerous implements of any kind. Much as he did when the captain prepared to flog him, Steelkilt seems to overawe others through words, gestures, and intimations alone; he communicates the threat of violence and death without any actual physical manifestations. How exactly he does this remains unknowable to Ishmael and the captain, making the lakeman's powers seem almost supernatural, or, if nothing else, indecipherable to mankind.

After discouraging him from firing the pistol, Steelkilt forces the captain to beach his craft on a nearby island and to stay there for six days, with death by lightning promised as a punishment for not complying. This gives the lakeman enough time to reach Tahiti and join the crew of a French ship, upon which he leaves the Pacific before disappearing entirely. As Ishmael tells the dons by way of conclusion, "where Steelkilt now is, gentleman, none know" (213). It bears noting here that Steelkilt utilizes his spatial mobility right up to the end of the chapter. Not content with merely procuring a canoe and terrorizing the captain in the South Seas, the lakeman also takes advantage of the international nature of nineteenth century seafaring by hopping aboard a French ship to pursue new adventures in new climes. Even as he disappears from *Moby-Dick*, the

renegade proves to occupy a sphere much larger and more complex than the backwoods region from which he hails.

Though a full reckoning of Steelkilt still eludes us, it is clear that by working on the Great Lakes, providing commodities, and committing crimes across national borders, Steelkilt becomes not just an early incarnation of the transnational frontier bandit, but a surprisingly modern one as well. Like money and power, he is everywhere at once, imposing his will – often without words and even without direct action – and always willing to put down dissent with ruthless force. Men follow him not because they choose to, but because they truly have no other choice but destruction. Steelkilt is not a hero nor does he represent what was good and lost about the American frontier from the perspective of the rapidly modernizing mid-nineteenth century. Instead, he is a criminal and a frightening one at that. But his importance goes beyond this plain fact. His criminality is not akin to Fink and the other boatmen characters from which he sprang – he is not merely a drunkard, brawler, and petty thief. His canaller cronies fill these roles quite ably in the text, and their contrast to Steelkilt is designed to make an important distinction clear to readers. But this distinction is not between low ruffians and the nobler Steelkilt; it is between the familiar, localized criminality of the canallers versus the global and imperial crime represented by the Buffalo lakeman.

Thus, it is the canallers who form the direct link with Mike Fink and the boatmen of old. Like them, they stop frequently and infest the towns and villages onshore, raise hell with their raucous carousing, and generally make a habit of small-time crime. Such a role suits them well since they are confined to the Erie Canal and lack the freedom and wide-ranging mobility possessed by lake mariners. The canallers serve as Steelklt's

subordinates, and though they are related to him through region, they are also categorized as a separate subgroup. Steelkilt, however, is defined by unlimited power and mobility, and it is he who is directly tied to global economics and colonial domination. In the process, this "desperado from Buffalo" breaks free from all past paradigms and establishes a shockingly modern prototype for future frontier bandits. In place of the Indian fighting and merry-making the character type had previously performed, Steelkilt participates in a global economic order and supplies the mysterious and violent force needed to enforce and protect it at all costs.

Chapter 2: The Many Travels of John A. Murrell, "The Great Western Land Pirate"

In the opening pages of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857), the flaxen-haired stranger comes across a placard announcing a reward for a mysterious imposter thought to have arrived recently from the East. Swarming around this announcement is a large crowd of people, including various pick-pockets and a "versatile chevalier" hawking cheap crime pamphlets: "the lives of Meason, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country, in Kentucky – creatures, with others of the sort, one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors" (2). References such as these confirm David Reynolds's assertion that now-canonical authors like Melville were intimately familiar with the sensational literature that comprised much of U.S. popular culture in the decades leading up to the Civil War. This brief passage also speaks to the "broad river" of popular crime narrative that began to flow through the states in the 1830s.[51]

One of these criminal "creatures" mentioned by Melville, John A. Murrell, appeared in several sensationalized crime novels of the 1830s and 40s. Like Mason and

---

[51] According to David Reynolds, the "broad river" of crime narratives which appeared in the 1830s had become "a virtual flood" by the 1840s; and by the 1850s, one troubled observer commented that "no narrative of human depravity or crime can [now] shock or horrify an American reader" (qtd. in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 175). Examples of these texts include James Hall's *The Harpe's Head* (1833), several texts about Murrell, William Gilmore Simms's *Guy Rivers* (1833), and the lurid tales found in periodicals such as *The National Police Gazette* (Slotkin 132).

the Harpe Brothers, he earned some renown for stealing and reselling slaves, a common criminal enterprise in frontier regions. As both an actual and a literary criminal of the Mississippi River Valley, he achieved a high level of fame and recognition for a few years beginning in the mid-1830s.

In 1835, Virgil Stewart, the man who brought Murrell to justice, published *The History of the Detection, Conviction, Life and Designs of John A. Murel, The Great Western Land Pirate* under the pseudonym of Augustus Q. Walton. The legend of the notorious bandit grew primarily from this source (Penick 3). Most scholars believe its author to be Stewart, though some attribute it to H.R. Howard, a New York-based "hack writer" who also ghostwrote a criminal autobiography – *The Life and Adventures of Joseph T. Hare: The Bold Robber and Highwayman* – about a Natchez Trace robber from the second decade of the nineteenth century (164). Later in 1835, Stewart worked with Howard and produced *The History of Virgil A. Stewart and His Adventures*. The later narrative shifts the narrative focus to Stewart, but largely recycles material from the earlier text and in many cases reuses the exact same prose. Together, the two works inaugurated the land pirate's literary life. Next came a collection of sketches published in the *National Police Gazette* mostly written by Howard and later compiled into his 1848 book *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate*. By this point, the material had grown more lurid and the scope of Murrell's crimes even more considerable. Throughout the twentieth century, several texts followed which were either explicitly about Murrell or at least partly based on his deeds.[52]

---

[52] Most of these twentieth-century texts utilized the first three published narratives as the basis for their purportedly factual accounts. Robert Coates's *The Outlaw Years* (1930) is perhaps the most well-done and well-known repackaging of the Stewart and Howard texts. Later half-fictional retellings of Murrell tales such as Paul Wellman's *Spawn of Evil* (1941), and Jonathan Daniels's *The Devil's Backbone* (1962)

Though varied in style and level of detail, all of these narratives tell the same essential story: Murrell grows up in rural Tennessee and takes to crime from an early age. As an adult, he earns a local reputation for stealing horses and slaves and spreading counterfeit money; then, at some point in 1833 or 1834, he steals a couple of slaves from a nearby parson and is pursued by a young man named Virgil Stewart, who is hired to the task by the parson. Stewart is a settler in the newly purchased Choctaw territory in northern Mississippi, and after he finds Murrell on the Natchez Trace, he quickly befriends him and learns his secrets before ultimately betraying him. Murrell is always eager to find like-minded young men willing to join his gang, and believing that Stewart is equally fond of stealing horses, slaves, or anything else available, Murrell takes him in as a confidante and tries to initiate him into his numerous and far-flung gang, known as the Mystic Brotherhood. The basic outline of these events, which are reused in every Murrell narrative, seem to be mostly true, at least insomuch that Stewart was in fact responsible for deceiving and apprehending Murrell.

In all three of the fictional works treated here, Stewart is the protagonist and the oft-repeated plot centers on his discovery of a vast slave insurrection plot concocted by Murrell and the Brotherhood. This plot consists of Murrell and his crew inciting the local slaves to "commence carnage and slaughter" among the nearby settlements, plantations, and stores, thereby providing an opportunity for Murrell and his men to "fire the towns" and "rob the banks" while "all is confusion and dismay" (Stewart 26). Contemporary historians such as William C. Davis and Joshua Rothman have shown that Murrell was hardly the intrepid and ruthless "land pirate" that he was portrayed to be in these

---

continued to push into more titillating territory, and though they are less skillful than Coates's violently elegiac portrailargely retain the spirit of Howard's *Police Gazette* work (Penick 171-72).

pamphlets, and Rothman in particular has shown that Stewart himself was probably a shiftless con man guilty of stretching the truth and committing thefts of his own. Nevertheless, Stewart's fantastical version of the Murrell gang's plot scandalized the Old Southwest, earned national press, and led to brief fame for Stewart and imprisonment for "the great western land pirate."[53] In fact, the fictions about Murrell helped to cause "one of the most serious outbreaks of popular fear over servile insurrection that the South ever witnessed" (Eaton 95-96).[54]

Through Stewart and Howard's sensationalized accounts of his criminal outrages, Murrell emerges as a unique hybrid of familiar criminal types. On one hand he is a highwayman and common robber of the sort found frequently in the folklore and literature of the British Isles and North America; at the same time, he registers as something new: a backwoods confidence man who takes advantage of the frontier's sparse population and shoddy legal apparatus to perform a series of complex cons and speculations that belie his ostensibly modest origins.

Murrell's criminality represents the bygone and lawless era of frontier life that was found in the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys during the first three to four decades of the nineteenth century, when they were still considered the western frontiers of the nation. By the 1840s and 50s, these areas had been mostly nationalized, and large-scale

---

[53] For more on Stewart, the trial of Murrell, and the general hysteria surrounding the whole conspiracy, see Clement Eaton's *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South* (1965), James L. Penick's *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (1981), Thomas Ruys Smith's "Independence Day, 1835: The John A. Murrell Conspiracy and the Lynching of the Vicksburg Gamblers in Literature," *The Mississippi Quarterly* (2005-2006), and Joshua Rothman's *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (2012).

[54] As Eaton notes in The *Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South*, the Nat Turner-led slave revolt in Southampton, Virginia in 1831 "started a wave of contagious fear in other southern states," and this fear was further stoked by the appearance of Stewart and Howard's hair-raising pamphlets in 1835. See Chapter 4 of Eaton's book for more on this topic.

criminal activities of the sort attributed to Murrell had become rare. This is what

Melville means in *The Confidence-Man* when he notes that the criminals of these old

frontiers had been hunted to extinction with few successors following in their wake. But

between the 1790s and the 1830s, outlaws like Murrell, "Meason, the bandit of Ohio,

Murrel the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River

country" emerged as threats both real and imagined to the white settlers attempting to

cultivate vast tracts of forests, swamps, and prairies formerly inhabited by Native

Americans. As William Faulkner puts it in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Murrell and his ilk

were the "Dillingers and Jesse Jameses of [the] time" (7). Murrell, the Harpe Brothers,

and Mason (Melville misspells the name Meason) helped to codify the conventions

regarding fictional portrayals of Wild West outlaws and Prohibition-era gangsters in late

nineteenth and early twentieth century American popular culture.[55] They did so through

the types of crimes they committed – such as robbery, extortion, trafficking illegal goods,

and violent acts that sometimes included murder – and through the attributes of physical

courage, intelligence, and charm that came to characterize them. But unlike many of the

criminal characters that followed in his wake, Murrell cannot be brought under a

convenient national categorization or converted easily into a romanticized symbol of the

country's roughly-hewn past.

---

[55] Mason, like Murrell, was an actual person who later became the subject of fictional works. He was a distinguished Revolutionary War veteran originally from Virginia who moved west following the war and eventually turned to highway robbery and murder, first along the Ohio River and later on the Natchez Trace in Mississippi. The Harpes Brothers, also real people, were violent killers in Kentucky who may have been tangentially involved in some of Mason's criminal conspiracies. For more on Mason and the Harpes, see Raymond M. Bell, *Samuel Mason, 1739-1803* (1985), Chapters 4-11 of Otto Rothert's *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock* (1924), and Chapter 13 of William C. Davis' *A Way Through the Wilderness: The Natchez Trace and the Civilization of the Southern Frontier* (1995). In terms of fiction, the Harpes are the primary villains of James Hall's *The Harpe's Head* (1833), a novel which, like the Murrell narratives discussed in this chapter, fall under the general heading of what Richard Slotkin calls the "paperback potboilers" featuring frontier crime that rose to prominence in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s (*Fatal Environment* 132). See pages 27-31 of my Introduction for more on this subgenre.

When analyzed closely, his crimes are too sweeping for simple symbolism, and his identity is far too unclear for obvious romantic or national labels. Partly a gentleman robber of the old English tradition, in part a hardy frontiersman, Murrell is ultimately unmasked as too brutal and wickedly ambitious for a traditional highwayman and too destructive to settle the frontier for fledgling U.S societies. Such a character undermines Manifest Destiny and other pro-expansion arguments first articulated by the founding fathers and later crystallized in the 1830s and 40s by the likes of John O'Sullivan, who saw the nation advancing the highest form of "human progress" sanctioned by Providence in its march toward the Pacific. More specifically, expansion was supposed to provide those "of simple habits and strong hands the opportunity of carving out a properly independent American existence" (Stephanson 41). But what happens when virtuous yeomen are replaced by avaricious bandits? What effect on the growing nation is wrought when human progress and limitless freedom are replaced by bloodshed and criminal conspiracies? Murrell takes the logic of Manifest Destiny to its extreme and dangerous end point: by infiltrating other sovereign nations and plotting the destruction of U.S. frontier communities, he shows both an imperial impulse and the ability to appropriate other cultures for the sake of social upheaval. He is both the enterprising pioneer carving out a home in what the rest of the nation still regarded as a wilderness, *and* a destructive sociopath capable of utilizing other nations for the purpose of undermining U.S. ideals, economics, and government. As the following pages will show, these traits make him the dark current running underneath the breathless optimism of expansion and territorial acquisition.

The Rise of Murrell

As soon as he became a literary character, Murrell transforms from an unremarkable frontier hoodlum into a much larger and more difficult thing to understand, even for the authors and readers of his stories. The exaggerated deeds and facts of his life have been labeled "the stuff of nonsense" by one contemporary historian, but they largely form the basis of the character's composition (Davis 279). The flesh-and-blood Murrell was born in southern Virginia in 1805 or 1806, and early in life relocated to central Tennessee with his family. The family was obscure; his father probably owned some land and farmed, while little is known of his mother other than the fact she later had a run-in with a band of local regulators (Penick 14).

The historical record indicates that Murrell's criminal exploits began early, as he was first arrested in 1822 at the age of sixteen for "'riot" –a misdemeanor akin to disturbing the peace – in Williamson County, Tennessee (Penick 14). While he was settling the case out of court, he was picked up for stealing horses and, after a failed attempt to leave the state, was eventually convicted and served almost three years in prison in addition to receiving a public whipping. Upon his release, he relocated to Madison County in the still-wild western portion of Tennessee, returned to thieving, and perhaps began to circulate counterfeit money (Penick 15). These were common activities for criminally-inclined young men on the frontier during this period (Brown 99).

In 1834, the flesh-and-blood Murrell was convicted for slave stealing "on dubious evidence" and returned to prison. One of his few credible biographers, James L. Penick Jr., claims that the circumstances of Murrell's conviction suggest "that to a fair number of

property owners in Madison County he had become a prime nuisance" (26).[56] Following

his conviction, Murrell attempted to escape from prison, was recaptured, finished his

sentence, and later died of tuberculosis. William C. Davis sums up most historians'

evaluation of Murrell when he characterizes him as a "petty thief" and "braggart" who

"rarely had two coins to rub together and neither the brains nor the brass to organize

anything more than a bungled attempt to steal a couple of slaves" (279). However, in the

fictional accounts of him penned by Virgil Stewart and H.R. Howard, this small-time and

oft-apprehended nuisance morphs into a criminal overlord who routinely eludes capture

and controls a legion of thugs hard at work terrorizing settlements throughout the Old

Southwest. Most importantly, in these fictional treatments he consistently demonstrates

the ability to move in and out of national or settled spaces.

Beginning in the first Murrell narrative, mobility undergirds the significance of

the bandit's criminal exploits. His entire operation is dependent on movement; his

operatives steal horses and slaves and then transport them across rivers or state borders

and occasionally into different territories. They also spread counterfeit money and

engage in highway robbery as well. As a horse thief, Murrell is accustomed to stealing

his wares and "disposing of them hundreds of miles away – preferably across state lines"

(Brown 99). Furthermore, he sometimes plies his trade as an itinerant Methodist minister

after learning "how easy it would be to lay down" counterfeit currency and to buy and

sell slaves amidst the "frenzied atmosphere of the camp-meeting" (Coates 221). He also

---

[56] Penick's *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (1981), is the most
comprehensive study of the historical Murrell. Penick's extensive use of public and court records in
Tennessee make clear that Murrell was an actual criminal active in the 1820s and 1830s who was
eventually convicted for stealing slaves and jailed for several years. Many contemporary historians – such
as William C. David, Richard Brown, and Joshua Rothman – cite Penick's book when discussing the flesh-
and-blood Murrell.

traverses the wild terrain of southwestern Tennessee and northern Mississippi, much of which was purchased or stolen from the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians between 1820 and 1832. The basic infrastructures of law and government were not yet fully established in these areas, and Murrell and his men take full advantage (Davis 72).

In the three popular texts featuring him between 1835 and 1848, Murrell travels quite a bit. For the sake of furthering his criminal network and financing his planned slave revolt, he journeys to Indian Territory, Texas, and Mexico. Though the scenes depicting these travels are often brief and underdeveloped, they reveal much about the character and the exact nature of the threat he posed to readers in the Mississippi River Valley. By inhabiting and mastering such non-national spaces, this "stately, old-time criminal" reflects the common perceptions associated with these spaces: foreign, dangerous, and somehow inimical to U.S. settlement. He also uses non-national spaces as part of his larger insurrection plan, and in doing so reveals the ways in which both the execution of this plan and the very conception of it are based on transnational movements and a larger hemispheric influences.

Murrell's grandiose criminal schemes and his ability to shift in and out of national frameworks sustain his relevance as an especially dangerous character and potent symbol. To put it simply, he represents a vivid nightmare of the farmers and merchants of the Old Southwest, and he serves as a cautionary tale warning them of potential danger while also alerting them to the precariousness and possible inadequacy of their attempts to impose civilization on a freshly-settled region. Unlike heroic outlaws or the typical villains in romantic adventure stories, Murrell never seems truly defeated by the forces of western civilization, and this is due to the pervasive and haunting quality of his grandiose and

transnational criminal scheme. It is true that he is apprehended and imprisoned as a result of his crimes, but in the fiction and folklore that sprang up around him, he always seems to represent a more general sense of disorder and unrest that continued to roil the Old Southwest in the years following his defeat. As James L. Penick, Thomas Ruys Smith, and other scholars have shown, the uproar and fear surrounding Murrell's fictionalized conspiracy became synonymous not only with the gamblers and speculators of the region, but also with the region itself and the violence, massive inequality, and constant threat of slave unrest that came to define it.

Through his border crossings and planned slave revolt, the Murrell character undermines the control mechanisms and economic systems of the settlers in western Tennessee, northern Alabama and Mississippi, and eastern Arkansas during the first several decades of the nineteenth century. This is what makes him worthy of future study. And since the character operates in a historical period during which the national borders he transgresses are still in the process of being strengthened – a period characterized by rapid spatial changes, ongoing conflict with Native Americans and Mexico, and a still uncertain geographical future – Murrell's distinctly transnational brand of criminality brings with it a destabilizing menace that registered as a genuine threat throughout the Mississippi River Valley of the 1830s.

This threat stems not only from Murrell's transnational movements but also from the nature of the large-scale slave insurrection he plots. Far exceeding the modest goals of most backwoods bandits – acquiring horses, money, and slaves – this plot aims at tearing down the entire power structure of the region. The sweeping ambition of the plot is what strikes Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) when he compares Murrell

to postbellum western outlaw Jesse James: "James was a retail rascal; Murel, wholesale. What are James and his half-dozen vulgar rascals compared with this stately old-time criminal, with his sermons, his meditated insurrections and city-captures, and his majestic following of ten hundred men, sworn to do his evil will!" (312). Twain marvels at the elevation of James, who had just recently been assassinated in 1876 Missouri, to the status of "the most marvelous creature of his kind that had ever existed" (312.). This is "a mistake," Twain asserts, for the "Murel" of the 1830s "was [James's] equal in boldness; in pluck; in rapacity; in cruelty, brutality, heartlessness, treachery, and in general and comprehensive vileness and shamelessness; and very much his superior is some larger respects" (312). What makes Murrell superior and "wholesale" rather than "retail" is the scope and grandiosity of the criminal schemes he is seen carrying out in "the cheap histories" and newspapers stories that depicted his life and adventures. While post-bellum bandits like James "dreamed of no loftier flight than the planning of raids upon cars, coaches and country banks," Murrell "projected negro insurrections and the capture of New Orleans" (312).

It is this grand ambition of Murrell that intrigues Twain, and it also figures into the extended passage in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) which details a few of the slave thefts, border crossings, and disguises perpetrated by the master criminal.[57] The literary Murrell's favorite schemes involve waylaying backwoods travelers, impersonating a Methodist circuit preacher in order to steal money at camp meetings, passing counterfeit

---

[57] According to Horst Kruse, the passage Twain includes in taken from p. 89-92 of Captain Frederick Marryat's *Second Series of a Diary in America* (1839), which in turn is taken almost verbatim from Stewart's *The History of John A. Murel* (1835). As Kruse demonstrates in *Mark Twain and "Life on the Mississippi"* (1981), Twain relied quite a bit on Marryat's travel memoirs when composing *Life on the Mississippi* (1885).

currency, and transporting stolen slaves into Indian territory or Texas (which was still under the control of Mexico at this time) for the purpose of reselling them several times over. The criminal activities orchestrated by Murrell and his Mystic Brotherhood, are always of a wide scope, and nowhere is this more clear than the specific passages detailing his transnational travels in the three major fictional works about his life and crimes: *A History of the Detection, Conviction, Life, and Designs of John A. Murel, The Great Western Land Pirate* (1835), to be referred to hereafter as *The Life of John Murel*; *The History of Virgil A. Stewart and His Adventures in Capturing and Exposing "The Great Western Land Pirate"* (1835), to be known as *The History of Virgil Stewart*; and H.R. Howard's 1848 collection of later Murrell sketches, *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate*.

In these texts Murrell wreaks havoc both in America and in lawless zones outside national jurisdiction, areas that are points of contention between an expanding United States and other sovereign nations. In these foreign spaces, Murrell finds a promising theatre for criminal operations and the means to challenge both U.S. law enforcement and its societal norms. More importantly, with the massive slave insurrection Murrell plots for Christmas Day of 1835, he manages to concoct a transnational criminal scheme that promises a wholesale destruction of U.S. society along the Old Southwestern frontier (Stewart 24-27). This conspiracy is transnational because he attempts to recruit collaborators in Mexico while also operating and accumulating money in both the recently-purchased Choctaw territories in Mississippi and the newly-created Choctaw territories in Oklahoma and Arkansas (Young 47-72). The pages to follow are focused on these two specific contact zones of the 1830s: Mexico and Choctaw territory. Within

these places, this early U.S. bandit prototype serves as both a symbol of the rapidly

expanding United States, and a frightening warning of what happens when national

boundaries and national laws fail to contain an especially vicious iteration of the

transnational frontier bandit.

Slave Stealing, Land Speculation, and The Choctaw Purchase

The story of white settlers encroaching upon the domains of Native American

tribes might be the oldest story of post-contact America, and the three texts treated here –

A History of John A. Murel (1835)*, The History of Virgil A. Stewart* (1835), and H.R.

Howard's later *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell* (1848) – fall within this

lineage by depicting Murrell traveling to Indian-controlled lands. Long before Murrell,

the very first Europeans on the continent had to become rapidly acquainted with

unfamiliar Indian-held land as they relentlessly pushed westward, a process that began as

early as the seventeenth century and as far east as New England. One of the first

documented instances of this process comes in the form of Benjamin Church's

Entertaining Passages Relating to Philip's War (1727)*.* Church, a native of the

Plymouth Colony in modern-day Massachusetts, was one of white America's first war

heroes and, as Richard Slotkin argues, one of the first White Indian character types that

would later come to be popularized by James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking.[58]

Around 1674, Church receives a plot of land near what is now Newport, Rhode Island

within the territory of the Sakonnet (Sekonit in the text) Indians. In the following

passage, he briefly describes the experience of settling here prior to the area's full

---

[58] For more on Church and the concept of the White Indian, see Chapter 4 of Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment* (1985) and his *So Dreadfull a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip's War* (1978).

colonization by the English settlers: "I was the first English Man that built upon that Neck, which was full of Indians. My head and hands were full about Settling a New Plantation, where nothing was brought to; no preparations of Dwelling-House or Outhousing or Fencing made. Horses and Cattel were to be provided, Ground to be clear'd and broken up; and the uttermost caution to be used, to keep my self free from offending my Indian Neighbours all round about me" (64-65).

Despite his initial circumspection, Church eventually establishes a precedent for the sort of exploitative relationship between whites and Indians that would characterize later U.S. frontier regions: shortly after settling along the neck of Little Compton in Rhode Island, Church becomes embroiled in King Philip's War, a colonial conflict that led to the virtual extermination of the Wampanaog and Narragansett Indians and the ascendance of the Puritans in New England. Since he fought alongside Indian allies and adopted many of their ways, Church acquired knowledge and experience unavailable to many English setters of his time, but he ultimately uses such skills to work in the interest of the settlers and displace the Indian neighbors with whom he initially tries to coexist peacefully.

The cautious, respectful approach to settling in Indian lands first adopted by Church is a far cry from the strategies employed by Murrell and other speculators of the Old Southwest who unscrupulously cheated and bullied the local Indian tribes in accordance with the federal government's Indian Removal policy, but the end result of both instances of cultural collision are largely the same. In the first two Murrell texts – *The History of John A Murel* and *The History of Virgil A. Stewart* – the bandit is often seen making criminal forays into Indian territory. Specifically, he spends time in the

110

Choctaw Purchase of northern Mississippi. The Choctaw Purchase was an "enormous,

boot-shaped tract" of land stretching from southeastern to northwestern Mississippi

(Rothman 20). White settlers acquired it from the Choctaw Indians through a series of

treaties orchestrated by the U.S. government, the most important of which was signed at

Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830.[59] The efforts to remove the Choctaws from their

traditional homelands in Mississippi and Alabama were part of the larger process of

Indian Removal, a policy priority of President Jackson which reached its zenith by the

early 1830s.

When Jackson took office in 1829, the four "civilized tribes of the U.S. Southeast

– the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Cherokees – comprised a total population of

nearly sixty thousand and occupied a domain of twenty-five million acres, stretching

from the pine-scented foothills of the Appalachians to the swamps of the Mississippi

[River]" (Young 5). As one historian puts it, the territory of the Choctaw and

Chickasaws consisted of "what is today the heart of Mississippi and western Alabama.

On the eve of the War of 1812, most of these two future states remained under

indigenous control" (Adam Rothman 42).[60] A general Indian Removal bill became law

on May 28, 1830, and in the years that followed the U.S. government established

lopsided treaties with each of the "civilized" tribes and organized their removal to Indian

Territory in what is now Arkansas and Oklahoma. But as Mary Elizabeth Young notes,

these treaties and the land allotments they authorized reflected contradictory goals: "on

---

[59] For more on the removal of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, see Mary Elizabeth Young's *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks: Indian Allotments in Alabama and Mississippi, 1830-1860* (1961), Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr.'s *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians* (1970), and Samuel Wells's "Federal Indian Policy: From Accommodation to Removal." *The Choctaw Before Removal*. Ed. Carolyn Keller Reeves (1985).
[60] For more on the origins of the Old Southwest, see Adam Rothman's *Slave Country: American Expansion and the origins of the Deep South* (2005).

111

the one hand, the Southeastern Indians were expected to migrate west of the Mississippi; on the other, most of the adult tribesmen were given individual plots of land within the areas ceded to the United States, presumably so that they might occupy and cultivate them" (5).[61] Under two articles of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, members of the Choctaw tribe were entitled to claims of land within their traditional territories; according to the American policymakers, most of these Indian landholders would sell to whites once they saw the influx of incoming settlers. In conjunction with the pressure they put on the Choctaws to sell, government-appointed Indian agents also frequently cheated tribe members out of their allotments by not registering the claims properly or at all (Young 51).[62]

Another effective tactic employed to deprive the natives of their legal rights was the institution of public land sales, which often took place before the Choctaws' claims could be registered and confirmed (Young 52). According to historian Joshua Rothman, in 1833 the federal government sold over a million acres of land in Mississippi alone. The removal of the majority of Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians from the northern parts of the state opened up this area to mass migration, and in 1835 more public land was sold in Mississippi than had been sold in the entire U.S. just a few years earlier (Rothman, "Contours" 127).[63] In the opening pages of *The History of Virgil Stewart*, the narrator

[61] See note above for more information on Choctaw and Chickasaw removal.
[62] Mary Elizabeth Young provides evidence for this claim by citing a copy of the register kept by one U.S. government Indian agent in Mississippi, William Ward. Young goes on to state that Ward, "often drunk and careless in his methods," rejected or destroyed a large number of claims and advised most Choctaw applicants that they should emigrate west. Young also cites courtroom depositions given in regard to Choctaw land sales that point to large-scale malfeasance on the part of the U.S. agents like Ward (51-52).
[63] This information comes from Joshua Rothman's "The Contours of Cotton Capitalism" (p. 127) in *Slavery's Capitalism*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (2016). Parts of this discussion also appear in Rothman's *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (2012). Among the sources he cites are Malcolm Rohrbough's *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (1968), and Edwin Arthur Miles's *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi* (1960).

situates Virgil Stewart, the man responsible for Murrell's capture, squarely within the historical process of white settlers descending upon this newly available Indian land. Stewart arrives in the Choctaw Purchase during the summer of 1833. Soon after settling near the town of Tuscahoma, he begins "examining the country" in preparation for the Chocchuma public land sales scheduled for the upcoming fall. Government documents verify that President Jackson proclaimed over one hundred townships in the recently-ceded Choctaw lands for sale in October and November of 1833, despite the fact that many of the Choctaws had been denied their rightful claims within the same area. The sale at Chocchuma was among those scheduled for fall 1833. (Young 52; DeRosier, Jr. 136-137). The first Murrell-centered work of fiction – *The History of John Murel* – only makes brief mention of land sales and Stewart's purpose in emigrating to the Chocatw Purchase. But in the subsequent follow-up, *The History of Virgil Stewart,* it becomes clear that the enterprising young Stewart is engaged in land speculation of the sort that was running rampant through the former Indian territories.

Joshua Rothman asserts that Stewart "was not opposed to land speculation" and never intended to work the land he bought in the Chocchuma sale (27). Nevertheless, Stewart was apparently disappointed at the explicit fraud of this particular land auction, in which the Chocchuma Land Company took advantage of legal loopholes that allowed shareholders and certain preferred customers to end up with most of the choice plots; in fact, the auction was so crooked that the company later came under investigation by the Senate Committee on Public Lands (Rothman, *Flush Times* 26-27). Stewart was no wide-eyed innocent, though. According to the story of his life that Rothman cobbles together from James L. Penick's biography of Murrell, along with the details about

Stewart included in *The History of John A. Murel* and *The History of Virgil A. Stewart*, Stewart was not merely an honest farmer eager to break new ground. Rather, he was one of many anxious would-be-settlers eyeing the Choctaw Purchase who were hoping to acquire and hoard property that they could later sell off when prices grew inflated (20-21). These qualities do not appear in the fictional portraits of Stewart, where he functions heroically and selflessly to bring order to the frontier. But according to Rothman and the historians he cites, the flesh-and-blood Stewart was a far less admirable personage.[64]

As Walter Johnson discusses in *River of Dark Dreams* (2013), "speculative investment flowed into the land market" of the Mississippi Valley, and big-time speculators often bought up desired land before first-time purchasers or the general public could place bids. These moneyed interests would eventually comprise the backbone of the Cotton Kingdom and the "slaveocracy" that would come to define the region   But, Johnson goes on to say, "even as settlers were swindled at land auctions and power consolidated amongst a cabal of wealthy players, an atmosphere existed of opportunity and free-wheeling buying and selling" (Johnson 5). Indeed, no region of the United States was as "flush" as the Old Southwest during the early 1830s, a period of "material prosperity and expansive growth" (2). In what had previously been impenetrable forests were now well-ordered tracts suddenly cleared of many of their native inhabitants; this new land was fertile and mostly untouched by large-scale cultivation. With cotton booming and the regular laws of business and finance not yet established, banks issued currency based on credit, land was often available in obscure places, and a unique culture

---

[64] For the more extensive treatment of Stewart's biography, see Chapter 1, "Inventing Virgil Stewart," of Joshua Rothman's *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: The Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (2012).

of speculation developed over the course of the 1830s and 40s in which fortunes were made and lost quickly (Rothman, "Contours of Cotton Capitalism" 125-129).[65] The real-life Virgil Stewart is one of the region's typical examples of an ambitious young striver, looking to buy up new land and then move onto the next opportunity. After securing the capture of Murrell, Stewart returns to the Choctaw Purchase, where he had previously been "trading among the Indians and new settlers…for about nine months…and makes an attempt to settle in that country" *(A History of John A. Murel* 52). He even considers running for county clerk. In *The History of Virgil Stewart*, H.R. Howard expounds on the development of the Choctaw Purchase by mentioning that the first courts in this new territory are in the process of being established when Stewart returns from apprehending Murrell. Though neither of the first two Murrell texts dwell on the peculiarities or specific characteristics of the area, they both clearly mark it as a wild space transitioning toward a more nationalized and stable future.

The full significance of the Choctaw Purchase manifests most visibly in Murrell himself and the context of his criminal exploits. Amidst the speculative and boom-time atmosphere of the place, Murrell plies his criminal trade, taking advantage of the lack of law enforcement in an area that was neither under full U.S. control nor any longer under coherent indigenous control. During the treaty negotiations and later land sales like the one at Chocchuma depicted in the first two Murrell texts, a general air of lawlessness often prevailed. The "worst elements of white society" were often present to separate Indians from their property or, in some cases, the cash they had received from the sale of

---

[65] Among the sources cited by Rothman when discussing land sales and speculation in "The Contours of Capitalism" is Joseph Baldwin's *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketche*s (1854), Edwin Miles's *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi* (1960), and J. Van Fenstermaker's *The Development of American Commercial Banking* (1965).

it. Gambling was rampant, and "saloonkeepers, frontier rowdies, and prostitutes" often set up shop and exploited the permissive attitude surrounding land auctions and newly-settled land (DeRosier, Jr. 120). Murrell takes advantage of the ready cash and wild atmosphere of frontier regions like the Choctaw Purchase to pursue two of his primary criminal activities: slave stealing and robbery.

When relating his exploits to Stewart in *The History of John Murel* and *The History of Virgil Stewart*, Murrell mentions the "Choctaw nation" at least three times; on two occasions he seems to be referring to the Choctaw Purchase of Mississippi; on the other he means the new Choctaw territories formed in Arkansas and Oklahoma. In both areas, he finds ample opportunity for "speculations." Historians and literary scholars such as Rothman, Johnson, Thomas Ruys Smith, and Stephanie LeMenager have demonstrated that one of the chief items of speculation throughout the Old Southwest was slaves, for the growing Cotton Kingdom called for a huge and ever-constant workforce. In many ways, this was a problem. Southerners often struggled with the reality that slave trading was based on speculation, and many critics worried that selling slaves for profit led to "personal debasement" (Gudmestad, *A Troubling Commerce* 2-3). As a result, ambivalence about the trade led to negative stereotypes about "speculators." Stephanie LeMenager discusses how the Murrell tales "link the domestic slave trade to white hucksterism and charlantry and more generally to the increasingly destabilized and 'mobile' idea of economic value which characterized the Jacksonian period" (*Manifest and Other Destinies* 160-161). An anxiety surrounding the constant movement and "fungibility" of black bodies became visible in both the crime fiction and humor of the Old Southwest, and the Murrell narratives are prime examples (161). With the soaring

116

demand for slaves in the 1830s, prices rose and many slaves were bought on credit, while

speculators developed a system of travelling to eastern slave markets with large amounts

of cash in order to buy huge numbers of slaves to resell in Alabama, Mississippi, and

Arkansas (Doyle 131). In addition, these traders and speculators also developed a

penchant for criminality, either through practices of fraud or due to their trafficking of

stolen slaves. As an experienced practitioner of slave stealing, Murrell fits into an

economic niche that was prevalent if not openly discussed in the frontier communities of

the Old Southwest during its period of rapid growth. Illegal dealings in slaves, whether

they consisted of stealing and reselling them or of acquiring convicts and runaways and

reselling them under false pretenses, was well-known and often feared in frontier

communities. [66]

For example, Murrell explains to Stewart how he and his brother had ridden

stolen horses into the former Choctaw nation and convinced a slave to run off with them

to Texas; while travelling across the Mississippi to New Orleans, the man begins to

suspect that the Murrells plan to resell him and soon voices his concerns, at which point

John Murrell "shot him through the head, and then ripped open his belly and tumbled him

into the river" (Stewart 68). This promise of transporting slaves to Texas was a common

tactic. As a province of Mexico, where slavery was outlawed, Texas was an attractive

destination for slaves living in the Mississippi River Valley. But Murrell never intends to

take them there – the promise is merely a pretext to lure slaves away from their masters

---

[66] For more on the slave trade in general and the illegal traffic of slaves in particular, see Clement Eaton's
The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South (1964), Michael Tadman's *Speculators and Slaves*
(1989), Don Doyle's *Faulkner's Country: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha* (2001), Robert H.
Gudmestad's *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (2003), and
Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman's *Slavery's Capitalism* (2016).

so that he can later resell them. If the slaves are ever recognized or pursued, he kills them and sinks the bodies into a swamp or the muddy waters of the Mississippi. The fear of many slaveholders in the 1830s was that illegal traffic in slaves would undermine the fragile system on which their growing economy rested (Gudmestad 100; Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams* 34). And undermining this nascent economy of the region is the exact purpose that animates Murrell throughout the three major fictional treatments of his life and crimes.

LeMenager has deftly demonstrated how the plots of both Stewart's *The History of John A. Murel* and Howard's *The History of Virgil Stewart* consist primarily of the "violent, completed movements of Murrell's illegal slave trade" (164). His grand insurrection plot, meanwhile, consists of "only a small proleptic gesture." In these pamphlets that LeMenager considers to be generally pro-slavery but still ambivalent about the slave trade, the threat of stolen slaves and mobile property serves as a "central spectacle of horror" to southwestern readers (163-164).[67] But Murrell represents this horror not merely through his participation in an industry where the lines between legal and illegal remained blurry; he, much like the black labor discussed by LeMenager and Walter Johnson, is "fungible" and constantly moving, threatening to infect the nearby landowners and slaveholders not only with the stigma of race – which he represents in

---

[67] For more on the Murrell narratives and how they fit into the economic and political framework of the growing Cotton Kingdom of Alabama, Mississippi, western Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas, see "The Nation's Mouth," the fourth chapter of LeMenager's *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (2004), p. 156-166. As she explains, Murrell and his brethren generally stole slaves and then held onto them until the owners posted advertisements for runaways, at which point they resold the slave using the ad as a cover. By doing so, they could either pretend to be returning the slave or act as "temporary masters" during the interval between finding and returning him, which was allowed by law. Essentially, the ad announcing the slave's absence allowed any white man to temporarily take control of said slave until the authorities or original owner could arrive, a legal blind spot that was often exploited by slave traders.

part due to his trafficking of slaves – but also the taint of violent crime and unrestrained avarice, which he represents in full.

Another example of the pervasiveness of slave stealing and land speculation in the Old Southwest during the early nineteenth century comes in the form of James Bowie, namesake of the famous knife and one of the heroes of the Alamo. Bowie, like Murrell, was a backwoodsman of the Old Southwest who turned to slave stealing and land speculation. But Bowie's success was more in line with the grandiose literary Murrell than with the small-time criminal that Murrell most likely was in reality. According to historians, the Louisiana-bred Bowie went into business with the famous Gulf of Mexico pirate Jean Lafitte around 1818 or 1819, a period during which Lafitte had established a stronghold on Galveston Island off the coast of Texas. Here, outside the jurisdiction of the United States, Lafitte would sell slaves he had captured from Spanish ships to U.S. planters looking to bypass the abolition of the African slave trade imposed by Congress in 1808 (Davis 54-58; Douglas 20-21). Bowie and his brother purchased stolen slaves from Lafitte on Galveston and then resold them in the interior of Louisiana. More than just a slave smuggler, Bowie was also a land speculator in the vein of Virgil Stewart. In one of his better-known schemes, Bowie forged Spanish land grants and deeds of sale for areas in the sparsely-settled bayous of western Louisiana, then presented them to the appropriate land office in January of 1821 and took possession. In order to bribe witnesses who would attest in writing to having seen him purchase the grants, Bowie probably used some of the proceeds from his slave smuggling venture with Lafitte (Davis 97-98).[68]

---

[68] Bowie died at the Alamo in 1836 while fighting against Mexican forces during the Texas Revolution. For more on Bowie's various pre-war smuggling operations and land cons, see William C. Davis, *Three*

Across the Mississippi River in Arkansas, Murrell finds a location for his criminal

enterprises akin to Lafitte's island compound. In the swampy eastern reaches of the

Arkansas Territory lay an area commonly known to locals as "the Morass." It was a

notorious haven for horse thieves, slave speculators, highwaymen, and counterfeiters, all

of whom took advantage of the difficult terrain and lack of large-scale settlement

(Rothberg 34).[69] The real-life Murrell was almost certainly aware of the criminal element

present in this particular corner of the Old Southwest, and legends still exist in Arkansas

involving him and other local highwaymen and speculators, but it is doubtful that he

constructed the criminal stronghold depicted in the fictional works (Myers 353). As an

actual slave stealer and all-around criminal, Murrell merely travelled to "the Morass" for

illicit business dealings; as a literary character, however, he embodies the geographical

area rather than just occupying it. As authors, Stewart and Howard offer little geographic

specificity about the area, just as they spend little time on the details of the Choctaw

Purchase and other unsettled places. Instead, the places become a sort of shorthand for

the traits that animate Murrell and his gang: wild, foreboding, hard to find, and a bit

exotic due to their separation from normative U.S. society and law.

In the initial 1835 Murrell fictions, the bandit is proud to show Stewart his secret

lair across the river, and leads the way to an island "covered with thick matting cane,"

where, amidst a "growth of lofty trees" rises a solitary cabin, the "council-house of

Murrell's Mystic Confederacy" (90). Here, "protected by the secrecy of surrounding

---

Roads to the Alamo: The Lives and Fortunes of David Crockett, James Bowie, and William Barret Travis
(1998). For more on his business relationship with Lafitte, see C.L. Douglas' *James Bowie: The Life of a
Bravo* (1944).
[69] Among the sources Rothberg mentions in *Flush Times and Fever Dreams* are editors from Tennessee and
Arkansas commenting on the "lawless freebooters" and "gangs of villains" inhabiting "the Morass." For
more on the area, see Larry D. Ball's "Murrell in Arkansas: An Outlaw Gang in History and Tradition,"
Mid-South Folklore 6 (1978) and George Featherstonhaugh's *Excursion through the Slave States* (1844).

deserts and trackless solitudes," the gang "originated and digested a plan of operations more alarming in its tendency, extensive in its object, and destructive in its effects than any of which history furnishes a record in all past time" (*The History of Virgil Stewart* 90). Though Howard's language here – "deserts and trackless solitudes" – often falls into the typical romantic conventions of describing wild and untamed lands, there is a larger significance to this bandit hideout in Arkansas. In the years prior to its statehood in 1836, Arkansas was the destination for many southeastern Indians targeted for removal under the policies of the Jackson administration: many Cherokee moved there around 1817, and the Choctaws were then granted a reservation there under the terms of an 1820 treaty (Whayne 98-99).[70] In fact, the federal government initially ceded more of the Arkansas Territory than it had intended and was later forced to draw a firm boundary separating the western edge of Arkansas Territory from Indian Territory, the latter of which was comprised in the 1830s of the modern-day states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and parts of Iowa (Whayne 99; Everett 5).

In the texts, Murrell occasionally ventures into the newly-established Choctaw holdings in Arkansas, such as when he rides between "Benton and Rankin planning for his designs" of "giving some of [the Choctaws] a chance for their property" (*The History of Virgil Stewart* 107). He might be engaging in land speculation here in the fashion of Stewart, or he could simply be referring to his practice of selling stolen slaves and implying that he plans to resell some of the Choctaws' own slaves back to them. But defrauding Indians and engaging in speculation were just two of the criminal enterprises

---

[70] For more on the Indian settlement in Arkansas brought about by the U.S. government's removal policy, see .Jeannie Whayne, "The Turbulent Path to Statehood: Arkansas Territory, 1803-1836," in *Arkansas: A Narrative History* (2002) and Lonnie J. White, *Politics on the Southwestern Frontier: Arkansas Territory, 1819-1838* (1964).

Murrell pursues in Old Southwestern locales like Mississippi and Arkansas. He also engages in highway robbery and murder. While riding through the "high, hilly, and broken country" of the Choctaw's Arkansas territory, "where there was no house for twenty miles," he comes across a gaily dressed and boastful youth whom he robs and kills, only to find that the young man "was a puff for true" who possessed only "four and a half dollars in change in his pockets, and no more" (108). Murrell salvages the situation by selling the man's fine horse to an "Indian native for four ponies," and then in turn sells the ponies to finance his trip back home to Tennessee, where he spends "a few weeks with the girls of my acquaintance, in all the enjoyments that money could afford" (108).

In conversation with his well-dressed young victim, Murrell broaches the subject of "speculation" and hears the young swell curse the speculators and claim that "he was in a bad condition to fall into the hands of such villains, as he had the cash on him that twenty slaves had sold for" (107). Though this boast of ready cash proves false, Murrell turns out to be just the sort of villain the young man fears. As Stephanie LeMenager points out, Murrell uses the term "speculation" to refer to his numerous "slave thefts and resales" (170). By the time H.R. Howard published his *National Police Gazette* articles on Murrell in the 1840s, a "speculator" had come to be defined as a "professional depredator in the Western country," but even as early as 1835, in the first two Murrell fictions, his victim seems to employ the word in the same sense (170-171). The well-dressed young man is not afraid of having his slaves stolen and resold; rather, he seems anxious of being robbed by an all-purpose "depredator" like Murrell.

After enjoying the spoils of his grisly crime awhile, Murrell sets out again, this time "through Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland, and then back to South Carolina, and from there round by Florida and Alabama" (108). As he moves throughout the southern seaboard and the Old Southwest, he establishes his "emissaries over the country in every direction" for the purposes of his upcoming slave rebellion (108). The particularities of his activities in each stop are never detailed, but based on other episodes and descriptions, one can assume he is engaging in slave stealing and possibly counterfeiting. These two ventures, along with his various types of theft, finance his ultimate goal of full-scale insurrection. His travels also afford him the opportunity to recruit new members to the Mystic Confederacy – both the "strikers" who can carry out criminal acts and the ostensibly respectable citizens who can help launder money or provide a cover for illegal operations. The literary Murrell has big plans, but the day-to-day criminal operations he conducts consist primarily of slave "speculations" and cold-blooded murder. In Stewart and Howards' 1835 texts, the murders provide the requisite sensationalized thrills, while the slave stealing incorporates the far-flung travel and limitless mobility that render the Murrell character distinctive and not wholly under U.S. control.

LeMenager, Johnson, Joshua Rothman, and others have provided valuable scholarship on the slave trade, boom-and-bust economics, and wild speculation that ran rampant in the Old Southwest of the 1830s. In the process, many of them have discussed Murrell and placed him within these frameworks of understanding both the region and the cultural productions emanating from it. But a full understanding of Murrell requires an understanding of how the regions he occupied serve the narratives that made him

famous. In these texts, much of the minute detail provided on Murrell's slave stealing

and other criminal exploits include the backdrop of non-national spaces such as the

Choctaw Purchase, Arkansas Territory, or, as the pages to follow will show, various

provinces of Mexico. Stewart and Howard do not offer much explicit commentary on

these marginal frontiers, but, in the case of the Choctaw Purchase and its surroundings,

the land speculation and slave stealing that Murrell becomes known for are inextricably

tied to the places themselves and the lawlessness that characterizes them. Not only are

Murrell's *crimes* made possible by the regions he inhabits; the *criminal*, too, is made

possible by the places.

Murrell in Mexico

The criminal trajectory of this "great Western Land Pirate" also encompasses

areas completely outside of the United States. In the first two narratives to feature him,

Murrell is portrayed as moving through Texas and crossing into Mexico. In *The History

of John Murel*, the term "South America" appears a few times, but the description is

vague and may simply indicate Mexico. The second Murrell narrative, *The History of

Virgil Stewart,* mostly follows the lead of *The History of John Murel* and makes a brief

reference to Murrell's Mexican travels. But H.R. Howard's 1848 book, *The Life and

Adventures of John Murrell*, compiled from several short woks that appeared in *The

National Police Gazette*, offers far more international intrigue by replacing the vague

locales with a descriptive Mexican setting complete with place names and a general sense

of the nation's geography, revisions perhaps motivated by the recently-concluded

Mexican-American War. These travels testify to Murrell's relatively worldly nature,

ability to adapt to new cultures, and his ability to organize large-scale criminal maneuvers.

The stakes are raised and his crimes take on a more frighteningly exotic cast during these fictional travels. And this is largely due to the fact that early 1830s Texas still existed in the minds of many Americans as a "border province" functioning as a buffer between Mexico on one side and both the slave-holding South and the ever-expanding western frontier on the other (Foley iii). Prior to Mexican independence in 1821, "United States contact with Latin America and specifically with Mexico had been extremely limited" and knowledge of these vast southern domains was mostly restricted to Louisiana, Florida, and Cuba (Schmitt 30). During the Spanish colonial era, a neutral territory was established between the Sabine River (which still serves as part of the dividing line between Louisiana and Texas) and the Arroyo Hondo (a stream near modern day Natchitoches, Louisiana) to separate U.S.-held Louisiana from the Spanish province of Mexico. This agreement of neutrality between Spanish and American authorities ended in 1819 with the passage of the Adams-Onis Treaty, but long before that point American settlers were already pouring across the border along with "bandits, fugitive slaves, future filibusters, and squatters" (Nasatir 129). Once there, the Americans interacted with the Spaniards and Frenchmen left behind from previous eras, along with several Native American tribes. In *The History of John Murel*, the outlaw follows in these footsteps by crossing the Sabine River in order to resell a slave he has recently stolen. This done, he resolves to travel to "South America" in order to "get some strong friends in that country to aid me in my designs relative to a negro rebellion" (42). He also hopes to discover an "opening in that country for a speculation" (42). As noted

125

earlier, speculation for Murrell usually denotes illegal slave selling, though later the term would come to encompass virtually all of his criminal deeds. However, his hope of finding new opportunities is dashed when he soon finds that "of all the people in the world, the Spaniards are the most treacherous and cowardly" (42).

According to the narrative he spins to Stewart as they travel along the Natchez Trace, this discovery of innate Spanish nature prevents him from recruiting for the insurrection, but he still manages to find a way to swindle while abroad. Murrell claims to have "stopped in a village and passed for a doctor" somewhere in what he calls South America. His shapes-shifting skills are on display here as he impersonates a physician. Richard Slotkin argues that Murrell's tendency to disguise himself and orchestrate complex scams position him as a Suggsian-style criminal. Simon Suggs, the fictional hero of Johnson Jones Hooper's short story collection, *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers* (1846), was a likable con man and swindler in frontier Alabama who coined the phrase "It's good to be shifty in a new country."[71] This cardsharp, land speculator and slave-trader is often considered to be "one of the nation's first fully articulated confidence men" (Lenz 21). The comparison between Suggs and Murrell is certainly apt, but Slotkin goes on to note that Murrell is only posing as this relatively benign Southwestern trickster type in order to conceal his larger-scale machinations (132-133). Thus, even when he appears to fall into existing paradigms of either daring robber or rascally confidence man, the scope of Murrell's crimes and his protean nature place him in an entirely different category of renegade.

---

[71] For a complete collection of Hooper's Suggs tales, see Johanna Nicol Shields ed. *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers; Together with "Taking a Census" and Other Alabama Sketches* (1993).

At other times he poses as a Methodist preacher or licensed slave trader, but here he adapts to a new religion and adjusts to a new culture in a completely foreign land. The ease with which he carries off this disguise and his surprising mastery of other cultures indicate his unusual talents. He soon becomes a favorite of "an old Catholic" who adopts Murrell "as a son in the faith" and introduces him to "all the best families as a young doctor from North America." This detail of Murrell posing as a doctor is perhaps the strangest aspect of the entire episode. In *The History of John Murel* and *The History of Virgil Stewart*, little else is said about the matter: Murrell merely notes to Stewart that he "could ape the doctor first-rate, having read Ewel and several other works on primitive medicine" (42).[72] Murrell in effect begins to operate as a doctor. He then becomes even more established in local society by becoming "a great Roman Catholic" who "bowed to the cross" and "attended regular to all the ceremonies of that persuasion" (42). After three months of living with the old man as a Catholic, Murrell begins to receive "a heavy practice" as a successful doctor. But an "opportunity soon presents itself to rob the old man's secretary of "nine hundred dollars in gold" – needless to say, Murrell seizes the opportunity and notes that he could "have got as much more in silver if I could have carried it" (42). He then returns to the United States with his loot and blows it all during a three-week debauch in New Orleans.

In H.R. Howard's *Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell (*1848), the third and most popular Murrell text, Murrell's movements are far more detailed and specific. The

---

[72] "Having read Ewel" is mostly likely a reference to Dr. Thomas Ewell, an early American chemist, and his 1806 book, *Plain Discourses on the Laws or Properties of Matter: containing the elements or principles of modern chemistry : with more particular details of those practical parts of the science most interesting to mankind, and connected with domestic affairs: addressed to all American promoters of useful knowledge.*

bandit first crosses the Rio Grande into Mexico and visits the border town of Matamoros. "Discouraged after a short stay there," he then sets sail for Campeche on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico to seek "openings for his particular talents" (Howard 38). Finding nothing there either, he travels to the interior of the nation and lodges with the old Catholic character; only this time there is the added implication of sexual misconduct with the old man's niece.[73]

In addition, Howard further develops the conceit of Murrell impersonating something so well that he essentially becomes that very something, even though his only goal is theft and personal gain. In Howard's 1848 version, the narrator repeats the assertion that Murrell played the part of the doctor with "tolerable success," but then he goes on to state that Murrell, "having read Ewel and several other elementary works on medicine during his recent stays at home, and confining his practice to the use of a few simple remedies, managed to give as much satisfaction, and to produce, perhaps, as beneficial results to his patients, as most of the more diplomatised members of the medical profession" (Howard, *The Life and Adventures* 38). Once again, Murrell's mastery of various professions signals his innate ability and potential, heightening the tragedy of his degradation and downfall. Howard then explicitly connects Murrell's Mexican disguise to his aforementioned habit of impersonating Methodist ministers back in Tennessee: "The supple character of the American robber moulded itself with facility to the condition of things around him, and he soon was as faultless in the observances of the Church of Rome, as he had been previously been admirable in the more eccentric and violent forms of the Methodist persuasion" (38). Later, he travels to the state of Tabasco

---

[73] This is mentioned on p. 38 of Howard's *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, The Great Western Land Pirate* (1848).

in southern Mexico and falls in with a band of thieves before returning to the states.

Throughout all of these travels, Murrell attempts to use foreign spaces for his own

personal gain, but he also establishes an extended residency in Mexico and demonstrates

a mastery of its local customs, feats not usually attributable to a backwoods bandit of

American popular fiction.[74]

Howard also inserts additional details about Murrell's travels in Mexico. While

in Tabasco, Murrell receives tidings of a former partner in crime named Crenshaw. Back

in the Old Southwest, the two men committed highway robberies and murders together

while trafficking stolen slaves through Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas. Since their

last meeting, Crenshaw has taken to the high seas and engaged in the illegal slave trade

"between the Brazils and the coast of Africa." After his capture by an English cruiser,

this former backwoods bandit is executed for piracy (38). Though he ends up dead,

Crenshaw's employment in the transatlantic slave trade confirms Murrell's far-flung

connections to other national spaces and his commitment to an international brand of

crime. After the U.S. and Great Britain banned the slave trade in 1807, Cuba and Brazil

became the two most common destinations for slaves entering the New World, and both

---

[74] The knowledge he acquires of local customs and geography echoes the education of Francis Berrian, the title character of Timothy Flint's 1826 romance *Francis Berrian, or the Mexican Patriot*. A New England-born adventurer, Berrian spends some time in Mexico and becomes fluent in the land's language and culture before getting swept up in its revolution for independence. As Keri Holt explains, the character "comes to feel at home" in the western districts he visits (which include but are not limited to Mexico) "by gaining greater knowledge about the differences he encounters" (Holt 320). As a result, Berrian ends up fostering a "pluralistic sense of American citizenship" in which "identity is based upon regional knowledge rather than a condition of birth" (321). Though Murrell's criminal designs differ wildly from the morally upright pursuits of Berrian, the former participates in the latter's project of "defining 'American-ness'" outside of U.S. boundaries (321). For more on Flint and *Francis Berrian*, see James Folsom's *Timothy Flint* (1965), Andrea Tinnemeyer's "Enlightenment Ideology and the Crisis of Whiteness in *Francis Berrian* and *Caballero*," Edward Watts' *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (2002), and Keri Holt's "Double-Crossings: The Trans-American Patriotism of *Francis Berrian*." Holt's points about Berrian's mobility, expansive sense of American identity, and mastery of Mexican culture can be applied almost verbatim to Murrell, if one simply replaces Berrian's virtuous patriotism with Murrell's predatory criminality.

places' plantation-style commodity production shared much in common with parts of the southeastern United States. Unlike Brazil, the U.S. was not bringing in new shipments of slaves in any significant amounts after 1807, but the internal slave trade, Murrell's primary business, was just as booming as Crenshaw's transatlantic practice, as more than one million enslaved African Americans were transported from older southern states like Virginia and the Carolinas to the new states of the Mississippi Valley during the first half of the nineteenth century (Baptist 53-54).[75]

These journeys of Murrell are cursorily-developed plot points in narratives filled with brief scenes of action that often lack specific detail. His stay in Mexico, much like his trips to Indian Territory, occupy no more than a few paragraphs, but their implications reach far beyond their narrative importance or aesthetic quality. In his hemispheric pursuit of crime, Murrell is distinguished by his ability to appropriate other religions and cultures. A bandit with his ability to assimilate and borrow identities is presented as a grave threat to the rudimentary justice system of the Old Southwest, which already must contend with Indian conflicts, clearing new land for farming and, in some cases, mitigating border disputes with Mexico.

While it is easy to cast Murrell as merely a representative of the volatile frontier, a liminal space where identities are unstable and borders are constantly shifting, it is clear that his successful pose as a Catholic doctor in Mexico surpasses even the fluidity commonly encountered in places like the Choctaw Purchase and western Tennessee in

---

[75] In "Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor: Hands, Whipping-Machines, and Modern Power" (2016), Edward E. Baptist cites the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* for his claims about the slave trade. For more on the internal slave trade in the U.S., see Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (2004) and two works by Robin Blackburn*: The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988) and *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (2011).

the early 1830s. In Robert Coates' 1930 retelling of the Murrell legend, *The Outlaw Years*, Coates perceives the rich possibilities of Murrell's travels and adds detail about the Underground Railway, a chain of "under-cover stations stretching west to Texas (then part of the republic of Mexico)" through which stolen slaves could pass undetected. Other twentieth century texts continued to amplify the transnational nature of Murrell by setting scenes in lawless territories such as "The Free State of Sabine" and "Shawneetown," places where "many languages were spoken: French, Spanish, English and half a dozen other European tongues." These locales are said to be inhabited by a "few stubborn Spaniards, unconcerning half-breeds, and half-wild French traders" (Coates 62; Phares 66). The persistence of this travel trope throughout the many iterations of the Murrell story serves as testament to the continued relevancy and evocative power of his transnational permutations.

In the two 1835 Murrell texts by Howard and Stewart, along with Howard's 1848 *National Police Gazette* edition, Murrell draws on his transnational experiences and border-crossing mobility for the purposes of constructing a successful slave rebellion. He leaves the United States and enters Texas with the intention of reselling slaves, knowing full well that Texas is still part of a Mexican nation that outlaws slavery. This fact allows him to offer the slaves a free passage to Texas and freedom should the rebellion fail; also, he claims that he will give them a share of the spoils should they succeed. As stated earlier, his trips to Latin America are designed to recruit "strong friends" to aid his rebellion. It is not clear if he is looking for foot soldiers or money men, but the distinction hardly matters. Crossing over into these former Spanish colonies affords him the opportunity to both inveigle hopeful slaves and locate more white allies. When

deceiving slaves in Tennessee or Mississippi, his men promise them that "there are many good white men" willing to help fight for their liberty, and as disingenuous as this assurance certainly is, members of the gang do in fact plan to lead the slaves into battle. The gang members' persuasive rhetoric is unsurprisingly peppered with Enlightenment thought and allusions to recent insurrections, but it is still more thorough than one might expect. They cite the slaves' inherent right to freedom, the wealth of their masters, the central role blacks have played in the accumulation of that wealth, and the abolition of slavery in other places. At the conclusion of their pitch, they exhort the bondsmen to "follow the example of the West India negroes" and fight for their liberty (27).

One of their key rhetorical strategies is to invoke non-national spaces as signifiers of freedom and escape: they encourage slaves to emulate their counterparts in the Caribbean while also presenting Mexican-owned Texas as a promise of liberty. Again, it is important to emphasize that all of their rhetoric and proffered assistance are shams, but Murrell and his men undoubtedly rely on his transnational travels and knowledge of foreign spaces. Once they recruit enough slaves to carry out their immense and extravagantly violent con, Murrell provides Stewart with the following description of what is to follow: "The plan is, to have the negroes harrowed up against the whites…and let none but such as we can trust know the intention and time of the rebellion" until they are instructed to "rebel and slay all the whites they can" (27-28).

The scope, complexity, and finely-tuned structure of Murrell's criminal schemes make him both a compelling villain and a terrifying symbol of societal unrest. The danger he represents registers most clearly in the connections he establishes between far-flung locales such as the Choctaw Purchase, Texas, and various parts of Mexico. This is

how he obliterates many conventions previously governing literary bandits, by refusing to be localized within a specific region. His motives and movements thus exceed audiences' comprehension. And while he joins criminals like deep-sea pirates and the notorious counterfeiter Stephen Burroughs in venturing beyond national borders and moving freely between spaces, he carves out a space of his own through the sheer magnitude of his diablerie. Thus, he blends international mobility with savage ferocity, a combination that did not go down smoothly in Old Southwestern communities still trying to impose order on newly-nationalized parts of the U.S.

Murrell's Afterlife

Though he quickly declined in popularity, John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate, retained a foothold in antebellum popular culture, in part due to the softening of his portrayals. Long-running plays staged by Nathaniel Harrington Bannister and Charles Burke featured him as a melodramatic villain and were quite popular among antebellum audiences (Smith, "Antebellum Stage" 263).[76] Murrell's influence was also felt within the burgeoning genre of sensationalized crime fiction that was flooding the literary marketplace in the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. As I mentioned in the Introduction, there was an entire corpus of potboiler crime narratives during this time centered on backwoods bandits along the Mississippi River and Natchez Trace.[77] Appearing in the

---

[76] For more on Murrell's life on stage, see Thomas Ruys Smith's "'Dead men tell no tales': outlaw John Murrell on the antebellum stage" *European Journal of American Culture* 28.3 (2009).

[77] Richard Slotkin and David Reynolds touch a bit on this genre in *The Fatal Environment* (1986) and *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), respectively, but the most extensive treatments are found in Thomas Ruys Smith's work, including "Independence Day 1835: The John A. Murrell Conspiracy and the Lynching of the Vicksburg Gamblers in Literature" (1997) and "*The Dying Confession of Joseph Hare*: Transatlantic Highwaymen and Southern Outlaws in the Antebellum South" (2016). I also discuss it on p. 35-40 of the Introduction.

form of cheap novels, or installments in newspapers and other periodicals, they all owed

something to the legend of Murrell and his Mystic Brotherhood.

For example, Jonathan Green's *Secret Band of Brothers; or, the American Outlaws* (1847) rehashes several familiar details from the Murrell tales about a vast criminal fraternity spreading from Virginia to the very western edge of U.S. settlement at the time. The main criminal character in this novel is Goodrich, a "gambler-general" of New Orleans and member of the aforementioned secret criminal brotherhood. The emphasis on gambling is appropriate, as Green himself was a reformed Mississippi riverboat gambler who renounced his profession around 1842, according to the foreword to his work. Goodrich and Green's involvement with the sprawling confederation of "gentleman blacklegs" is hardly worth rehearsing here, but one scene stands out as a direct inheritor of the transnational bent evidenced by the earlier Murrell tales. In Chapter XIV, Green's narrator travels through the "Choctaw nation" in 1833 in what is now southeastern Oklahoma, a territory he describes as a wilderness. He explains that all sorts of profligates and outlaws flocked to this area, and the worst among them often headed for the south side of the Red River in order "to evade the pursuit of the United States' officers of justice" within "the boundaries of Texas," a land still under the control of Mexico at this time (Green 147). Green's narrator goes on to declare that "the whole region was one of peculiar debasement in all respects" where "drunkenness, debauchery, and murder walked abroad, hand in hand, day and night" (147).

Here and in many other places, Green's text borrows plot points from the Murrell tales, but the more important commonality for our present purposes is the transnational travel trope that so many future crime fictions borrowed from Stewart and Howard. In

another reworking of the Murrell legend, William Gilmore Simms renders the Land

Pirate as a charismatic and more palatable villain by *removing* this sort of wide-ranging

mobility and dulling the character's desire to permanently disrupt frontier societies. In

Simms's Border Romance series, the memorable villains Clement Foster from *Richard*

Hurdis (1838) and John Saxon in *Border Beagles* (1840) are clearly influenced by

Murrell. They are the two masterminds behind The Mystic Confederacies of their

respective fictional worlds, but neither is made explicitly into a stealer of slaves or

fomenter of a mass insurrection. As Dianne C. Luce notes, Foster and Saxon represent

contrasting views of the famous outlaw; while the former is charismatic and mostly

genial, much in the fashion of the English gentleman robber of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries personified by Claude DuVall and Dick Turpin, the latter is nasty

and anti-social, so much so that *Border Beagles* primarily focuses on the efforts of law

enforcement to expel him from the Choctaw Purchase (Luce 242).

In *Richard Hurdis*, Simms depicts his protagonist engaging in the region's

rampant land speculation in the same fashion as Virgil Stewart. Hurdis plans to start a

new life of unfettered freedom in the Choctaw Purchase, but in the process he also

intends to "find out the best spots" within the territory and "secure them by entry as soon

as the government could effect the treaty which should throw them into the market" (15).

In doing so, he acts on behalf of some friends, described as "neighboring capitalists" (15-

16). Though they are said to make much money, the restless and manly Hurdis pities

these speculators; for him, the land is valuable because of its "climbing hills," "lovely

hollows," and the "eternal solitudes" of its "spacious forests," not the monetary gain it

offers (16). But ultimately Simms is more interested in the machinations of these vast

135

criminal conspiracies than geographical history and land speculation. He remains faithful to Stewart and Howard's original accounts when detailing the enormity of the Mystic Brotherhood and its reliance on ostensibly law-abiding members of frontier communities; he also seems aware of Murrell's shape-shifting and mobility. Though Murrell-as-Foster refrains from any travels to Mexico or South America in the novel, he proves to be a criminal of considerable gifts and vision. Posing as an itinerant Methodist minister aboard a steamboat on the Mississippi, Foster meets the title character Hurdis, essentially playing the part of Virgil Stewart. Thinking he has found a like-minded ally, Foster proceeds to disclose his own personal history and the nature of his criminal confederacy.

Here, in a skillfully-wrought scene, the bandit tells of how a "poor boy of West Tennessee" came to regard an honest life as unprofitable and needlessly difficult. Realizing that there were many men who felt the same way in the still-wild districts of the Old Southwest, he conceives of a criminal brotherhood and travels to all the slave states "making proselytes to his doctrine" (314). Posing as a preacher, he ranges widely and designs his criminal conspiracies in perfect secrecy. Soon, he has criminal operatives "scattered through all the slave states, and some of the free" that altogether number close to fifteen hundred, most of whom profess to careers in "religion, law, physic, planting, shopkeeping – anything but roguery" (315). Though Simms is merely borrowing these details about Murrell's criminal conspiracy from the earlier narratives, he paints the outlaw as more of a "polished confidence man" than a ruthless renegade. For example, he has impersonated a preacher for so long that he continues to speak like one even after dropping his act with Hurdis (Guilds 47). With this detail, Simms picks up on the conceit present in the earliest Murrell tales of having the outlaw so closely mirror the habits and

skills of legitimate professionals that he essentially becomes legitimate himself, at least until an opportunity for crime emerges. When he travels to Mexico in Stewart and Howard's versions, Murrell impersonates a successful doctor, but in *Richard Hurdis*, he plays the part of Methodist preacher. In this way, Simms gives the land pirate's aptitude and gift for imitation a more benign and admirable bent. Later, Murrell reveals additional humanity when he shows sympathy and concern for young Hurdis and other members of his gang.

Perhaps sensing that the best way to romanticize the outlaw was to soften his sharp edges and remove the most sordid of his criminal deeds, Simms converts his Murrell proxy into a noble robber of the highest order who has not lost all marks of civilization. Foster is never shown planning a slave revolt and he seems to strive for personal gain more than social disruption. He justifies his criminal deeds to Hurdis by framing them as necessary actions perpetrated against the elite privileged class on behalf of the poor and oppressed. And, as Simms biographer John Caldwell Guilds observes, the character is rendered ambivalent enough that "his presumable fake professions of idealism and altruism do not seem utterly the machinations of a charlatan" (47). Accustomed as he is to playing the role of Methodist preacher and all around Good Samaritan, Foster in part becomes those very things. He also frames his crimes as a logical response to an unjust social order when reciting his life story to young Hurdis: as a boy he claims to have "worked for his bread and education, such as it was, at the same moment – and, in spite of all his labors [he] found, at the end of every year, after casting his accounts, that he had gained during its passage many more kicks than coppers" (312-313). Hurdis's reply that this "is no uncommon fortune in a country like ours" confirms

Foster's assertion that the often difficult economic circumstances of many western

settlers drove them toward crime (313). The justifications of childhood poverty and

thankless toil dull the sharp edge of Murrell's depredations, and in Simms's portrayal he

ultimately shows himself to be more corrupt and avaricious than vicious or evil.

But even while performing these softening maneuvers, Simms acknowledges and

even lingers a bit on Murrell's ability to play different roles, travel freely, and organize a

confederation far more sophisticated and subtle than one would expect to find in the

sparsely-settled backwoods of a relatively new American region. In order to remove

some of the danger inherent in such abilities, Simms makes Foster a likable rogue (Luce

239).[78] It is worth noting, however, that despite these efforts to render Murrell as a more

recognizable and less menacing villain, Simms encountered a fair amount of censure for

Richard Hurdis. According to *William Gilmore Simms: A Reference Guide*, several

reviews of the novel expressed shock at Simms's realistic portrayal of crime and

violence. For example, *The Knickerbocker*'s review of October 1838 laments the

"hideous distortions of character" and "diabolical narrative" on display (5).

Simms anticipated much of this criticism following the mixed reception of his

previous Border Romance, *Guy Rivers*, a tale of the 1820s Georgia gold rush featuring an

another Murrell-like villain and his wide-ranging criminal gang which critics said

possessed "too gloomy and savage a character." In order to avoid similar attacks, Simms

published *Richard Hurdis* anonymously, a tactic that allowed him to freely expose the

ugliness and brutality of the southwestern frontier in the novel and convert his rehash of

---

[78] For more on Simms's use of the Murrell legend, see Dianne C. Luce's "John A. Murrell and the
Imaginations of Simms and Faulkner" in *William Gilmore Simms and the American Frontier*, ed. John C.
Guilds and Caroline Collins (1997).

the Murrell legend into one of the first true examples of American realism (Guilds 50-52). The accomplishment was largely buried under the negative reviews, though, many of which reflected the distaste a large section of eastern readers had for violent frontier bandits. At the root of this distaste was a very real fear about the sort of chaotic possibilities such bandits embodied, a fear that still registered in faraway eastern cities.

After the Civil War, Murrell-themed fiction entered a relatively fallow period. In *Tom Sawyer* (1883) and the unfinished *Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy* (1897-1902), Mark Twain mentions Murrell several times and makes clear that the criminal and his legend filtered into the consciousness of those living along the Mississippi in the decades leading up to the Civil War, but the two scholars who have done perhaps the most work on Murrell as literary figure – Thomas Ruys Smith and James L. Penick, Jr – both conclude that by 1900 he had receded into a minor role in the mythology of the Old Southwest (Ruys Smith 153).

A series of twentieth century literary accounts of Murrell, most of which debuted between The Great Depression and the Civil Rights Era, attempt to revive his mythology through over-the-top reimagining of his exploits, and many include a magnified version of his insurrection plot. However, judging by the obscurity of the majority of these works, their attempts were largely ineffectual. The one exception is Robert Coates's aforementioned *The Outlaw Years*, which was successful upon its 1930 publication and introduced a new generation of writers to the Murrell legend (Thomas Ruys Smith claims that Faulkner owned a copy of *The Outlaw Years* and drew on it for the references to Murrell he sprinkled throughout many of his own books ("Independence Day" 151)). So while it would be wrong to say that Murrell faded from public consciousness after the

1840s and 50s in the same fashion as his captor Stewart, it is nevertheless true that his star certainly dimmed and he failed to appear as the primary character in any other literary work for nearly a century. Authors as diverse as Eudora Welty and Jorge Luis Borges borrow details of Murrell for brief passages or character sketches (see Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) and "A Still Moment" (1941), and Borges's *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935)), but such appearances ultimately amount to little more than cameos for the notorious outlaw.[79] His place in regional folklore remains secure, but he is often indistinguishable from the Harpes brothers, Joseph Hare, and the other legendary criminals from the Old Southwest of the early nineteenth century.

In the relatively small world of Murrell scholarship, it is commonly accepted that part of Murrell's decline resulted from his highly unpleasant rebellion plot According to James Penick, Joshua Rothman, Thomas Ruys Smith, and other scholars who have worked extensively with Murrell and the fiction about him, southern audiences were ultimately turned off and a bit disturbed by the detailed and wholly destructive slave rebellion associated with Murrell in both fact and fiction.[80] Furthermore, these same

---

[79] Borges reimagines the Murrell legend in "The Dread Redeemer Lazarus Morrell," a text probably influenced by a combination of Twain, Howard's *Police Gazette* work, and Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain's America*. Interestingly enough, in another story found in *A Universal History of Infamy*, "Streetcorner Man," an Argentine political boss and professional gambler in control of various hooligans and gangsters in a wild suburb of Buenos Aires is said to have once been a member of "Morel's gang." There is no evidence that this is another reference to Murrell, but Borges must have noticed the similarity between his spelling of the two names, and perhaps he had read about the bandit's so-called South American travels in Stewart's *The History of John Murel*.

[80] Apprehension among the reading public in regards to a potential slave uprising is not difficult to understand, especially in the Old Southwest and other southern districts. Between the beginning of the eighteenth century and the outbreak of the Civil War, there were at least forty-three significant slave revolts, both actual and aborted. By the 1830s the threat of slave insurrections was a common theme and a familiar fear throughout the South (Brown 190). Eugene Genovese asserts that southern slaveholders usually confronted the prospect of slave insurrections from a position of strength. To silence any threat, real or merely perceived, they simply suppressed internal divisions and established political consensus without any "visible rupture of ruling-class solidarity." As a result, "Southern slaves had much less reason than Caribbean or Brazilian slaved did to believe that they could take advantage of their enemy's internal divisions" (24). However, the Murrell narratives disrupt this vision of solidarity and expose white divisions for which many members of the ruling class cannot account, thereby striking a nerve with southern

scholars have also shown that the publication of Howard and Stewart's sensationalized 1835 texts, along with the actual Murrell's trial, led to vigilante posses throughout the Old Southwest taking the plot as truth and rounding up every gambler, prostitute, and bandit they could find in order to put a stop to it.[81] Thus, the violence and discord associated with Murrell's imaginary plot ultimately cancelled out much of the sensationalized appeal of the 1835 texts.

The bloodlust of the Murrell character (as historians have pointed out, the actual Murrell never conceived of anything more than theft and counterfeiting) is inexplicable, but the structure of his plan is easy to understand: a close look at the character and his travels reveals that mobility and border-crossing are integral to the crimes he commits and the grandiose rebellion he plots. Murrell's mobility might not have frightened audiences in the Old Southwest quite like his rebellion did, but his journeys to non-national spaces still registers as part of his overall menace and contributes to some of the more disturbing and unknowable aspects of his characterization.

But even more frightening than his rebellion and mobility is the fact that this criminal with such international range and terrifying ambition is also, at least externally, a recognizable frontiersman much like his neighbors. For Murrell to plot the destruction of his home region, and to find so many willing participants among the ruling classes, is a

---

slaveholders and the larger reading public, both southern and otherwise. For more on the threat of slave rebellions in the antebellum South, see Richard Brown's *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of Violence and Vigilantism* (1975), Eugene Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* and Kevin Pelletier's "David Walker, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the Logic of Sentimental Terror." *African-American Review* 46.2 (2013).

[81] For more on the Vicksburg riots and the rest of the aftermath of the Murrell fictions and trial, see Penick's *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (1981) and Thomas Ruys Smith's "Independence Day, 1835: The John A. Murrell Conspiracy and the Lynching of the Vicksburg Gamblers in Literature" *Mississippi Quarterly* 59.1-2 (2005 Winter-2006 Spring): 129-160.

stern rebuke to the foundations and prospects of the society people like Virgil Stewart were attempting to build. In the mid-1830s, the Murrell legend achieved sensationalized fame and made a definite impression, but by the 1850s this extreme form of the transnational frontier bandit ceased to be entertaining enough to remain regularly in print or in the minds of readers. This character's shape-shifting qualities and boundless reach made for an initially memorable villain, but the symbolic power he wielded eventually became more condemnatory than enjoyable.

Chapter 3: Camilla and Kelly: River Pirates of the Middle West

The term "river pirate" generally refers to criminals who preyed upon the numerous types of watercrafts found on American rivers between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Rothert 37). These pirates were a real danger for boatmen and travelers in the trans-Ohio and Mississippi West during the early years of the republic, though most historians assert that their overall impact was most likely sporadic and relatively insignificant (Allen 83; Wagner and McCorvie 228). Once river piracy ceased to be a threat in the rapidly modernizing middle of the nineteenth century, the reading public was fed a steady diet of folktales, newspaper sketches, and novels dramatizing the old dangers found along America's major inland waterways (Allen 83). While much of this lore was based on kernels of real-life cases, most of it was pure fiction, crafted by newspapermen and popular novelists to capture the interest of readers eager for stories of adventure and violence. Tales of river pirates were a part of the larger boom in frontier crime fiction discussed in the Introduction, and the pirate characters discussed in this chapter comprise a distinct and recognizable character type with traits and regional affiliations that are striking and often anomalous. In the pages to follow, I posit this lightly-studied literary villain as one of the embodiments of the transnational frontier bandit prototype discussed throughout this dissertation.

As fictional characters, river pirates made appearances in several sketches about Mike Fink, Colonel Plug, and other colorful personages of the "old times" along the Mississippi and Ohio published in popular periodicals of the day such as *The Spirit of the*

Times, the *St. Louis Reveille*, *The Western Monthly Review*, and the *New Orleans*

Picayune. They were also featured in several novels, each of which features a pirate

chieftain of great cunning.[82] A key quality found in all river pirate fiction between the

1820s and 1850s is mobility. Like the other frontier bandits of this study, these

characters are capable of travelling long distances and inhabiting various environments,

which then enables them to transgress national jurisdictions and operate in liminal spaces

beyond the control of any sovereign state.

      In a vein similar to Steelkilt and John Murrell, river pirates are transnational

because of the frontier spaces they occupy and the alternative national identities these

spaces allow them to fashion. Such settings, whether they are on the eastern or western

side of the Mississippi, before or after U.S. possession and settlement, are consistently

portrayed as lawless locations, almost entirely separate from the larger nation and

occupied largely by non-white populations. These places associated with river pirates are

defined as untamed and un-American to an even greater extent than the Great Lakes of

Steelkilt or Murrell's Old Southwest of Mississippi and Arkansas. Furthermore, the

pirate captains and crews that inhabit these frontier outposts are often shown to be

polyglot mixes of different nationalities and cultures owing no identity or allegiance to

the United States. In the narratives to be discussed here, the homes, hideouts, and

backgrounds of the pirate characters serve as clear testaments to the instability of national

borders and the mutability of national identity along the western frontiers of the early

---

[82] For more on river pirates and their appearances in fiction, the best places to start are Otto Rothert's *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock* (1924), Leland Baldwin's *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (1941), Michael Allen's *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (1990), and Mark J. Wagner and Mary R. McCorvie's 2006 article "'Going to See the Varmint': Piracy on the Ohio and Mississippi River, 1785-1830" in *X Marks the Spot: The Archeology of Piracy*, ed. Russell Skowronek and Charles R. Ewen (2006).

nineteenth century. The settings of these tales supply the characters with originality and genuine menace by connecting them to national perceptions and fantasies of newly incorporated U.S. territories. The pirates are specifically tied to the areas west of the Mississippi River during the early decades of the 1800s. Most of this area had been part of The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, and large tracts of it remained mostly unsettled until the years leading up the Civil War. The river pirate, more than any other antebellum literary figure, represents the instability and cultural hybridity that largely defined America's interior and westward expansion during this crucial early phase of U.S. imperial history. As mentioned in the Introduction, most of the land purchased in 1803 had never been fully conquered by the Spanish or French and thus registered blankly to most European and U.S. observers. The regions that would later emerge from this huge expanse – the Upper South and Midwest – were viewed in largely non-national terms throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Having no "specific name" for the new and vast interior of the nation, writers often described it as savagery personified, a place which "history had not yet overtaken," or as "great wastes" and "vast solitudes" populated only by wolves and Indians (White 38).

With the Louisiana Purchase, the U.S. for the first time incorporated aliens – individuals of different nationality and ethnicity – as American citizens (Levinson and Sparrow 5). Many historians have discussed the French character of the "settled" portions of the Purchase, such as New Orleans and other outposts along the Mississippi River like Natchez and St. Louis. The French population in these places consisted of U.S. born French creoles, French- and Caribbean-born immigrants, Acadians removed from Canada by the British, and large populations of blacks and Indians who had

145

intermixed with French settlers. Also populating the area were indigenous peoples, Spaniards, and Spanish creoles, more recent immigrants from Europe, and African slaves (Meinig 4; Levinson and Sparrow 5). This polyglot, primarily Catholic and French-speaking population did not seamlessly blend in with Protestant U.S. society, and their incorporation was met with a great deal of skepticism and anxiety, although it ultimately paved the way for future national expansions that officially subsumed non-white people: the annexation of Texas, the 1848 Mexican Cession, and the additions of Caribbean and Pacific islands annexed to the U.S. in 1898 and 1899 (Levinson and Sparrow 6).

Further north or west from settled French areas were the truly wild districts of the Purchase, often labeled the Great American Desert by authors and explorers. These supposedly uninhabitable and un-nationalized locales became the setting for several popular romance novels of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s: Emerson Bennett's *The Bandits of the Osage: A Story of the West* (1847) and *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (1848), and Friedrich Gerstacker's *The Pirates of the Mississippi* (1848). In terms of style and plot, these works were similar to the types of sensationalized adventure yarns appearing in the story papers and newspapers of the period discussed by scholars like Shelley Streeby and Michael Denning. By the late 1840s, authors such as George Lippard and Ned Buntline were penning best-selling city mystery novels or imperial adventure stories set against the backdrop of the U.S-Mexico War (Streeby and Aleman xvi-xvii). The romances set in and around the Great American Desert do not quite fit into these generic dimensions, but like sensational works and later post-bellum dime novels, they evoked imperial fantasies and reached a national mass audience (xvii).

In places like Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas, popular romancers found settings as compellingly violent, mysterious, culturally diverse, and far-removed from everyday experience as Lippard and Buntline rendered Mexico or the backstreets of New York City and Philadelphia. The key distinction separating imperial adventures and city mysteries from the frontier romances set in and around the former Louisiana Purchase is the tendency of the latter to question or complicate the positivist narrative of westward expansion. In fact, the most compelling of the river pirates – Emerson Bennett's Camilla and Friedrich Gerstacker's Kelly – serve as vivid representations of the lawless and untethered qualities defining the territories they inhabit. They do this not only through the criminal acts they perpetrate in their respective narratives, but also through the geographical and cultural oddities of the spaces they occupy.

By the time these romances appeared, much of the Great American Desert had already begun to be converted into prime farmland and habitable destinations for settlers, but within recent memory it had been something other than American. By extension, the criminal characters inhabiting this vastness west of the Mississippi, with their foreign origins and transnational schemes, took on some of the same characteristics that typified unsettled areas of the nation in the minds of many early nineteenth century readers: un-American, dangerously ungovernable, and potentially unassimilable. Popular stories about river pirates, then, reflect the antebellum reading public's fascination with frontier crime and disorder. At the same time, they also serve as a lens through which to view the ambivalence and uncertainty that continued to surround westward expansion throughout the 1830s, 40s, and 50s.

A Brief History of River Piracy

Perhaps no physical location better exemplified the perceived wildness of the lands in and around the Louisiana Purchase than Cave-in-Rock. An actual geological formation found in modern-day Hardin County, Illinois, it is located just across the Ohio River from Kentucky and not far from the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi. At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, this "long limestone bluff" served as a hideout and base of operations for a variety of criminals who took advantage of the period's "primitive commerce and travel between Pittsburgh and the Lower Mississippi" (Rothert 37). Ohio River Valley historian Otto Rothert notes that piracy and other illegal activities began to take place near the cave as early as 1788, at the dawn of the so-called Golden Age of Flatboating, a period that saw a huge influx of western migrants leaving the eastern seaboard for places like Ohio and Kentucky and a corresponding explosion of water travel and commercial activity carried out by primitive crafts such as flatboats, keelboats, barges, and rafts (Rothert 38).[83] These boats were easy targets for pirates, who often commandeered them by armed force or lured passing crews to shore with promises of whiskey and card-playing (Rothert 43-44; Baldwin 120). Other methods included sinking boats while the crews spent the night on shore or waylaying travelers on foot or horseback along nearby trails (Baldwin 119-120; Allen 81).[84]

---

[83] See Chapter 1 for more information on pre-steam river crafts and this historical period in general. Rich sources on the subject include Archer Hulbert's *Waterways of Westward Expansion: The Ohio River and Its Tributaries* (1903) and *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (1920), along with Erik Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton's *Western River Transportation* (1975). Michael Allen's *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (1990) incorporates all of these older sources while also including additional primary documentation.

[84] Among the original sources cited by historians Rothert, Baldwin, and Michael Allen when discussing instances of piracy are an 1801 edition of *The Kentucky Gazette*, Zadok Cramer's *The Ohio and Mississippi Navigator* (1806), Ben Casseday's *The History of Louisville from its earliest settlement till 1852* (1852), Firmin Rozier's *History of the Early Settlement of the Mississippi Valley* (1896), Arthur Whitaker's *The Mississippi Question* (1934), and *The Natchez Court Records, 1767-1805,* ed. by Mary Wilson McBee (1953).

Many of the western river routes used by emigrants and merchants during the early decades of the nineteenth century passed through relatively unsettled or thinly-populated areas of Indiana, Illinois, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas. Prior to the end of the French-Indian War, most of this area was nominally controlled by France as part of the Illinois Country, a loosely defined territory often considered coterminous with all of French Upper Louisiana.[85] Later, all French lands east of the Mississippi River were ceded to the British crown in 1763, which utilized it as Indian land. Though this territory began to be administered by the United States in 1783, parts of it remained unsettled and outside the confines of the young nation for years longer (Woods, *English Prairies* 114). According to Rothert, the area of southern Illinois encompassing Cave-in-Rock was sold to the U.S. by the Kaskaskia Indians in 1803, but the land remained largely outside U.S. jurisdiction until 1818, when the sale was confirmed by the Kaskaskias and the other tribes making up the Illinois Confederacy. Thus, when the cave first became a popular hideout for bandits, the area surrounding it was still Indian territory and not yet under the control of the government in Washington (29).

River pirates have long been part of Ohio and Mississippi River Valley folklore, and the legends associated with these bandits continued to grow well into the twentieth century with such popular films as *Davy Crockett and the River Pirates* (1956) and *How the West Was Won* (1962), the latter of which features a fictional pirate named Colonel Jeb Hawkins vanquished at the hands of the frontiersman hero played by Jimmy Stewart (Wagner and McCorvie 219). According to Leland Baldwin, Otto Rothert, and other

---

[85] Officially, French Illinois stretched from the Wabash River in Indiana to the Rocky Mountains, including all land south of the Great Lakes and north of the mouth of the Ohio, located at the border of Illinois and Missouri (Ekberg 32).

historians of the Middle West, the most notorious of the pirates to utilize Cave-in-Rock, and the one most well-enshrined in popular folklore, was Samuel Mason, a decorated veteran of the American Revolution originally from Virginia. After the war, he moved west and became a well-known outlaw throughout the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys between 1797 and 1803 (Baldwin 122; Wagner and McCorvie 225).[86] He was eventually captured by Spanish authorities near New Madrid in Missouri, transferred to an American jail in Natchez, Mississippi and later, after escaping from captivity, he was killed by his own men (Kerr 61-62).

Even before Mason and the emergence of Cave-in-Rock as a popular hideout, river piracy was a feature of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as early as the 1760s. During the Revolutionary War, the Spanish termed the fighting and plundering carried out along the Mississippi by irregular American forces as piracy (Baldwin 116). According to Mark J. Wagner and Mary R. McCorvie, the first documented mention of American river piracy occurs in a 1785 letter from Francisco Cruzat, the Spanish governor of St. Louis, to the U.S. authorities on the other side of the river in Illinois; however, Cruzat does not reveal the identities or nationalities of the alleged pirates (229). In the years following the Revolution, James Colbert, a half-Chickasaw trader and occasional ferryman on the Tennessee River, grew notorious for his raids on the flatboats and barges bound for St. Louis or New Orleans. His gang and others like them were

---

[86] For more on the historical Mason, see Rothert's *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock* (1924), Baldwin's *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (1941), Derek N. Kerr's *Petty Felony, Slave Defiance, and Frontier Villainy: Crime and Criminal Justice in Spanish Louisiana* (1983), and William C. Davis's *A Way Through the Wilderness* (1995), and Mark J. Wagner and Mary R. McCorvie's 2006 article "'Going to See the Varmint': Piracy on the Ohio and Mississippi River, 1785-1830" in *X Marks the Spot: The Archeology of Piracy*. Ed. Russell Skowronek and Charles R. Ewen (2006).

enough of a menace to force the Spanish governor in 1788 to decree that all ships bound for either destination sail in company (Baldwin 116-117; 127). That same year, a group of pirates near Grand Tower on the Mississippi River were captured by the Spanish (Wagner and McCorvie 229). Other popular locales for these criminals included the Chickasaw Bluffs, Walnut Hills, Stack Island, and the Crow's Nest, all found along the Mississippi; pirates also committed numerous depredations on land in places like The Natchez Trace in Mississippi and the St. Louis-Vincennes Road in southern Illinois (Baldwin 132-133; Whitaker 141; Wagner and McCorvie 239).

Michael Allen and other contemporary historians assert that the legends surrounding these places and the outlaws that called them home are often substantiated by rather flimsy sources: oral legends, semi-reliable accounts of travelers, and partially true works of journalism. When working in the early to mid-twentieth century, many historians of the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys, such as Rothert, Baldwin, and Arthur Whitaker, draw heavily on the folklore and adventure fiction that had risen to popularity roughly a hundred years earlier (Allen 80). They cite newspapers stories in *The Pittsburgh Gazette, The Western Monthly Review*, *The Kentucky Gazette*, *The Vincennes Star*, and *The Ohio and Mississippi Navigator* detailing the depredations of Colonel Plug, Jim Wilson, and Mason, all of whom were real criminals but whose exploits were likely magnified in the later written accounts.

Though their deeds were undoubtedly embellished, pirates in the upper reaches of the Mississippi River *did* pose enough of a problem to compel the Spanish to begin patrolling the area with naval vessels in the 1780s (Kerr 61). According to historian Abraham Nasatir, an expert on Spanish Louisiana, the river galleys stationed near the

mouths of the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Ohio Rivers served to "protect the commerce of

the king's vessels from Indian attack or white pirates," aid "in the capture of criminals,"

and prevent smuggling operations (Nasatir 37-38). In a similar vein, Rothert and Allen

both cite travel accounts and newspaper reports from the first two decades of the 1800s –

along with official letters exchanged between William C. Clairborne, the American

governor of The Mississippi Territory, and Manuel de Salcedo, the governor of Spanish

Louisiana – that all touch on the subjects of Mason in particular and river piracy in

general.[87] Among the documented pirates that existed after Mason's death are members

of the Clary Gang in Arkansas between 1811 and 1817 and James Ford, who operated a

ferry near Cave-in-Rock on the Kentucky side of the Ohio River and was killed by

vigilantes in 1833.[88] Further to the south, a contemporary of many of these figures ruled

the smuggling operations of the Louisiana gulf region. Jean Lafitte, a real-life pirate and

U.S. naval hero, became a romantic figure in both fact and fiction after fighting under

Andrew Jackson and defeating the British during the War of 1812. He later conducted

successful smuggling operations around Barataria Bay and from his compound of

Campeche on Galveston Island, Texas.[89] The scope and scale of Lafitte's criminal

activities far surpasses the robberies and assaults most commonly attributed to the river

---

[87] For more on these types of correspondences, see *Official Letter Books of W.C.C Claiborne,* edited by Dunbar Rowland (1917), and Ronald Rafael Morazan's Ph.D. dissertation "Letters, Petitions, and Decrees of the Cabildo of New Orleans, 1800-1803: Edited and Translated" (Louisiana State University, 1972).
[88] For documentation on the Clary gang, Baldwin cites the journal of Thomas Nuttall's *A Journal of Travels in the Arkansas Territory*, included in R.G. Thwaites's *Early Western Travels: 1748-1846*. For information on Ford, Rothert cites extensively from William Courtney Watts's *Chronicles of a Kentucky Settlement* (1897) and other, less reliable, sources such as an 1879 article published in *The Chicago Times* entitled "Hell on the Ohio." For more on these sources, see Rothert's *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock* (1924) and Baldwin's *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters* (1941).
[89] For this concise overview of Lafitte, I relied on the coda of Gretchen Woertendyke's *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre* (2016). For more on Lafitte, see William C. Davis, *The Pirates Lafitte: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (2005). Unlike the river pirates of this chapter who always occupy secondary roles, Lafitte became the romantic hero of several fictional works, the most popular of which was Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Lafitte, Pirate of the Gulf* (1836).

pirates of the present study, but he shares with them a common period in American history and lasting roles in folklore and popular fiction.

By the end of the 1820s, the success of steam power and the full establishment of U.S. sovereignty in the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys had mostly eliminated the real threat of organized piracy along major waterways (Rothert 192; Allen 84). But the end of actual river banditry meant the beginning of its many manifestations in writing. Travel writers and historians, such as Thomas Ashe, Daniel Blowe, and Henry Howe, began to pen accounts of Mason and similar bandits as early as 1806 and continued well into the late nineteenth century.[90] Other accounts of river piracy came from the likes of botanist Thomas Nuttall, who in his journal discusses a "formidable gang of swindling robbers" on the banks of the Mississippi; similarly, John James Audubon, on a voyage to New Orleans, witnesses the scene of a pirate-related murder; and even Abraham Lincoln testifies to the reality of river piracy, as he recounts being attacked near Baton Rouge, Louisiana while serving as crewmember on a flatboat in 1828 (Wagner and McCorvie 235).[91] Fictional tales of river pirates, often based on nuggets of factuality, began to proliferate in the 1830s and 40s. Emerson Bennett's *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (1848) was the first novel to utilize Cave-in-Rock as a setting; in its wake came similar works such as the popular serial *Virginia Rose*, written by a Dr. Edward Reynolds, which first appeared in the *Alton* (Illinois) *Courier* in 1852 (Rothert 327). Prior to these longer

---

[90] Ashe wrote about Cave-in-Rock in *Travels in America Performed in 1806* (1806), Daniel Blowe discusses pirates in *View of the United States of America* (1820), and Henry Howe mentions both in *Historical Collections of the Great West* (1852).

[91] Wagner and McCorvie, in their 2006 article "'Going to See the Varmint': Piracy on the Ohio and Mississippi River, 1785-1830," cite Nuttall's *A Journal of Travels in the Arkansas Territory,* Howard Corning's 1929 edition of *The Journal of John James Audubon during his Trip to New Orleans in 1820-1821*, and Lincoln's "Biographical Sketch Written for John L. Scripps," included in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume 4*, edited by Roy P. Basler (1953).

works, several short stories about river pirates appeared in periodicals and magazines, such as Timothy Flint's oft-reprinted tale, "Colonel Plug: The Last of the Boat Wreckers," which originally appeared in an 1830 edition of the *Western Monthly Review*, and Joseph Holt Ingraham's "Rapin of the Rock; or, the Outlaw of the Ohio, A Tale of the Cave-in-Rock," published in *The Ladies' Companion* in 1841.

River pirates constituted a relatively small but important part of the sketches and stories about rivermen and other frontier heroes that proliferated between the 1820s and 50s.[92] Throughout their many textual appearances, river pirate characters are marked by their statelessness and serve as reminders of just how unsettled America was in its early years. And as the young nation set its sights on further western gains in the rapidly expanding Jacksonian era, the old-time river pirates functioned in much the same fashion as the other transnational frontier bandits of this study: in the midst of ostensibly rousing and nationally affirmative adventure tales, they convey a message of caution about the destabilizing forces at work on the outer edges of the national project.

Simply put, these river pirate characters express the borderless nature and social instability present in early iterations of the American West. They reveal these traits through their relation to the Louisiana Purchase/Great American Desert region discussed in the opening pages of this chapter and in the Introduction. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, this region, at least in the eyes of many eastern readers, remained "ungirt," "diffuse," and impossible to know fully (Baker 2). Thus, the identities of river pirate characters are correspondingly wide-ranging, ambiguous, and outside the norms of

---

[92] For more on popular boatmen fiction, see Chapter 1, p. 3-15. Stories about legendary keelboat operator Mike Fink, such as Timothy Field's "The Last of the Boatmen" (1847), frequently appeared in newspapers like the St. Louis *Reveille* and *The Spirit of the Times*.

white America. Whether they are occupying desolate caves in Illinois and Missouri or

hideouts in the river islands between Arkansas and Mississippi, the characters discussed

in this chapter represent the danger lurking in the unsettled, boundless territories found on

the periphery of the nation. Moreover, they evince, for better or worse, many traits that

would later come to define America during this time: freedom, courage, physical

mobility, and cultural pluralism. In the four novels of the antebellum period that

prominently feature river pirates, these rarely-explored villains reveal themselves to be

exemplars of the virtues and violence characterizing early U.S. westward expansion.

River Piracy in Fiction

      The first appearance of river pirates in an extant novel occurs in *Glencarn; or, the*

Dissapointments of Youth, a largely forgotten sentimental work penned in 1810 by a

largely forgotten author, George Watterston, who achieved more notoriety in his role as

official Librarian of Congress than he did as a dilettante writer. But in the moody,

Byronic Wilson, the leader of a gang of Ohio River bandits, Watterston crafts the first

well-developed river pirate of American literary history. And though the eponymous

main character's time with Wilson and the pirates represents just one dramatic episode in

a novel full of them, it is almost certainly the first extended treatment of river piracy in an

American novel.[93] Otherwise, the novel is not an aesthetic achievement, nor has it ever

attained a particularly high level of popularity – in fact, past critics have labeled it as

"highly colored, "preposterous," and a vague Charles Brockden Brown copy (Watts 57;

---

[93]) In her 1957 PhD Dissertation on the southern frontier in early American fiction, Nancy McLaurin
classifies *Glencarn* as an early example of frontier fiction depicting "renegades, Tories, and outlaws"
(83).[93] Though she mentions them and notes their early vintage, McLaurin's observations on titles such as
Glencarn and the works of Bennett and Gerstacker are quite brief.

Petter 322).[94] Nevertheless, despite its numerous flaws, *Glencarn* contains a couple of

scenes that reveal much about the ways in which the Ohio River Valley and the entire

Middle West region in general were perceived and interpreted in the early years of the

nineteenth century.

The young hero's trouble with pirates begin after he falls in with a group of

merchants on their way to New Orleans. While traveling down the Ohio River, he soon

enters a region which, to his eyes and the eyes of many easterners at this point in

American history, was still an untamed wilderness. Watterston's method of description

here, vague though it is, reflects this common perception: after seeing "towns and

cultivated farms" during the first part of the voyage, Glencarn and the merchants descend

into "impenetrable forests" described as "the growth of centuries and the abode of

wolves, bears, and tigers" (115). Glencarn's marvels at the "delights of sense": the

beautiful foliage of the river banks, the sweet smells of budding flowers, and the

"mellifluent tones of sylvan songsters," but this aesthetic splendor only occupies a

paragraph. The danger of such wild regions assumes primacy when the boat is attacked

and the men aboard "furiously and vigorously assaulted by a band of ruffians who

infested the river" (115-116). These ruffians then take Glencarn back to their cave

hideaway, which is clearly based on the famed Cave-in-Rock that supposedly housed

Mason and other prominent river pirates.[95] These details imply that piracy along the

Ohio was a well-established fact among readers in 1810 and confirm the popularity of

folklore and legends surrounding earlier figures such as Mason and his gang. However,

---

[94] Cathy Davidson echoes this assessment when she claims that "Brownian ploys proliferate" in
Watterston's novels (*Revolution and the Word* 235).
[95] For more on Cave-in-Rock, see Rothert's *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock* (1924), Baldwin's *The Keelboat
Age on Western Waters* (1941), and p. 148-149 of this chapter.

Watterston makes little direct use of these legends or the travel accounts that proliferated throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century. Instead, he taps into the remote and decidedly un-American character of this early iteration of the West.

The foreign aspects of the region manifest after Glencarn momentarily escapes from the pirates and takes refuge in the nearby countryside. While stumbling through woods and grasslands, he finds himself in "a kind of amphitheater surrounded by mountains of immense magnitude and grandeur" (124). He soon realizes that he has blundered upon a gigantic and skillfully-wrought mausoleum built by some ancient Indian tribe. He is duly impressed with the craftsmanship and antiquity evinced by the surviving structure, and claims that it could "rival the Egyptian excellence of former times" (125). The oriental and romanticized comparisons continue as Glencarn discovers mummified princes, the skeletal remains of what may have been human sacrifices, and hieroglyphics on the walls. In many ways, such descriptions anticipate later representations of Midwestern settings, such as William Cullen Bryant's "The Prairies," in which the author concocts an elaborate and wholly imaginary history of the region. Like Watterston, Bryant alludes to an ancient culture of mound builders, "a disciplined and populous race," likened to the ancient Greeks (Hurt 20-21; Bryant line 46). Bryant imagines lovers wooing "in a forgotten language" and "old tunes" issuing forth from "instruments of unremembered form." But then the "red man," described as "warlike and fierce," arrives and destroys the ancient society's idyllic existence (lines 56-58). Like these long-vanished mound builders, the ancient race whose remains Glencarn discovers are presented as sophisticated and admirable: they are said to have been "acquainted with the art of embalming and the use of hieroglyphics, in a degree of perfection equal to that

157

which was attained by the ancient Egyptians." They also mastered "the art of making potters' ware" and "the art of working brass" to an extent unequaled by any modern civilization (Watterston 127). By providing these details, Watterston in invested in the same task that would later occupy Bryant, a task described by James Hurt in *Writing the Prairie* (1992) as the summoning up of "scenes from a fantasy history within which the immediate landscape is placed" in order "to provide a Romantic frisson, to place the otherwise innocuous scene within a context of gothic melodrama" (22).

Thus, rather than accurately rendering a sense of place, Watterston in this scene is utilizing well-worn romantic devices to invest a U.S. setting with a sense of sublimity and drama. Later frontier romancers like James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms would perform the same maneuver with the forests of upstate New York or the Carolina mountains. To be sure, Watterston's scene lacks specificity and geographical coherence – for example, Glencarn notices a mountain range nowhere to be found along the banks of the Ohio – but the strange and exotic character of this physical space still registers strongly, and it generally fills the young and romantic protagonist with a combination of aesthetic appreciation, curiosity, and fear. As a result, despite Watterston's hazy understanding of it, the part of the country in which his protagonist finds himself registers to readers as profoundly unmapped and redolent with mysterious antiquity. Herman Melville, in a brief allusion in *Moby-Dick*, conjures a similar image when the markings of a captured whale remind Ishmael of "the old Indian characters chiseled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi" (qtd. in Nichol 621). Here, Melville appears to be drawing on the earlier observations of travel writer Edmund Flagg, who notes that upon "a bold, precipitous bluff," "at an

elevation seemingly unattainable by human art, is graven the figure of an enormous bird with extended pinions" (qtd. in Nichol 621). Though Melville and Flagg draw on an actual rather than an imagined Indian history of the Midwest, Watterston and Bryant's "fantasy history" serves essentially the same purpose and casts the overall region in the same exotic light. Most importantly, the ancient history discovered by Glencarn serves as a reminder to readers that this part of the country remains the province of a long-lost race of Egyptian-like people and has not yet come under the sway of white America.

Much like Cave-in-Rock and the surrounding area, Wilson, the leader of the bandit crew, is othered and cast as a distinctly non-national character. An Englishman born into wealth, his vices and dissipation drive him to the "western country which was then a subject of general conversation." After descending the Ohio, he resolves to enter a life of crime and arrives in Kentucky, wherein he gathers a "band sufficiently strong to answer every purpose [his] business should require" (146). Depicted as a tortured man possessed of many talents and beset by many infirmities, he is also, more importantly, a foreigner in control of a large, multinational criminal organization located in a wild terrain that is more indicative of ancient Indian civilizations than anything recognizably Anglo-American. It would be left to later authors to fully realize the river pirate's transnational possibilities, but in this otherwise forgettable sentimental novel, Watterston not only inaugurates the river pirate's career as a recognizable and compelling villain; he also begins to foreground the character type's troubling connection to unsettled regional spaces and un-American identities.

Emerson Bennett, a popular antebellum romancer, seizes upon these same characteristics and connections with the river pirate characters he develops in two of his

159

works: *The Bandits of the Osage: A Story of the West* (1847) and *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (1848). These popular novels, both originally published in periodical form, feature bandit chieftains that are cut from a mold similar to Wilson's, but they are far more developed and central to their respective plots. They exist in more fully-realized extranational spaces beyond the reaches of civilized society, and they victimize eastern travelers attempting to settle and inhabit the early American frontier. Bennett's river pirates are symbols of the early Wild West, with all of the cultural admixture, violence, and mystery that attended the region and concept throughout the nineteenth century. The two characters, Bonardi from *The Bandits of the Osage* and Camilla from *Mike Fink*, are originally framed as typical romantic villains, but Bennett converts each into a veritable leading man freighted with symbolic importance. There are multiple scenes devoted to the characters' development, and they are both provided with ultimate redemptions that reveal them to be noble and brave. In other words, they largely steal the show in these conventional romances populated by stiff, virtuous leads. The non-national frontier spaces they occupy and the ultimately mixed cultural identities they construct are the most compelling and culturally important aspects of Bennett's novels. By placing his river pirates in wild areas "unseen and untrod by the eyes and foot of the white man," the romancer furthers the development of the river pirate as a transnational criminal whose home region and personal identity stand in stark contrast to the normative values of the United States.

Emerson Bennett is hardly remembered today aside from Mark Twain's contemptuous reference to his work in *Roughing It* (1872) (Coulombe 31).[96] But

---

[96] When mocking Cooper's Indian characters, Twain claims that their diction is much like the remarks "a Broadway clerk might make after eating an edition of Emerson Bennett's works" (qtd. in Coulombe 31).

between 1847 and 1880, Bennett published over thirty novels and hundreds of short stories, most of them dealing with the American West and written in the formulaic romantic style popular during the period. He was part of a wave of now-forgotten authors who followed in the footsteps of early western romancers like Cooper, William Gilmore Simms and James Kirk Paulding (Jones 2). Bennett is commonly lumped together with other writers – Nathaniel B. Tucker, Charles Fenno Hoffman, A.W. Arrington, John Esten Cooke, and Mayne Reid – whose work sold well in the antebellum period but later came to be regarded as "poorly written, highly melodramatic, and embarrassingly derivative" (Jones 3). As Joseph Coulombe puts it, "kidnapping, outlaw gangs, virtuous maidens, and surprise revelations abound" in Bennett's novels (31).

Despite their aesthetic shortcomings, Bennett and other now-forgotten romancers participated in the same project that occupied figures like Cooper, Simms, and Edgar Allan Poe: taking the expansive geography of the United States and recoding it as historical depth (Woertendyke 3). In the process, they helped to make the "sophisticated entanglements of the hemisphere" and the threat of "French, British, and Spanish imperial contests" integral parts of the romance's form during the long nineteenth century (3-4). Bennett's works stand as prime examples of how the romance genre accounted for U.S. geography and history, and it also demonstrates the national anxiety over "geographic space and shifting regional affiliations" (3). Bennett is very much interested in the hemispheric entanglements and vastness of the new nation. And in the absence of a clearly-defined national history, he uses the Spanish imperial past and the unknown

qualities still found in places like Illinois and Missouri during the 1840s to make his

formulaic romances come alive.[97]

Bennett enjoyed even greater popularity than most of his romancer rivals in the

years leading up to the Civil War; in fact, one of his novels, *The Prairie Flower; or,*

Adventures in the Far West (1849) (also known as *Leni-Leoti*) sold over one hundred

thousand copies (Jones 3).[98] His romances usually debuted in regional newspapers, and

the successful ones were then distributed nationally in cheap paperback editions

(Coulombe 31). He was also one of the first real Western novelists the U.S. produced;

not only did most of his works deal with the frontier, he also lived and worked in Ohio

and Indiana at a time when they were still considered to be western locales. After

moving to Ohio as a young man in 1844, a previously published and forgotten story of

his appeared in the *Cincinnati Dollar Weekly Commercial* and became a hit with local

readers. Soon Bennett was supplying regional newspapers and journals with a steady

stream of frontier romances in the form of serialized novels and short stories.

Emerging at the beginning of U.S. mass-print culture, he capitalized on a growing

nation's thirst for stories about the West, and he satisfied that thirst with fast-paced

romances full of frontier violence and suspense. His familiar formula relied on

traditional aspects of sentimental romance such as stock heroes, contrived plots, and

---

[97] I am borrowing these concepts concerning the romance genre's relationship with U.S. history and geography from Gretchen Woertendyke's *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre* (2016).

[98] Among Bennett's other popular titles are *The Renegade: A Historical Romance of Border* Life (1848), *Kate Clarendon; or, Necromancy in the Wilderness: A Tale of the Little Miami* (1848), *The Pioneer's Daughter: A Tale of Indian Captivity* (1851), *The Forest Rose: A Tale of the Frontier* (1852), *The Border Rover* (1857), Intriguing for a Princess: *An Adventure with Mexican Banditti* (1859), and *Wild Scenes on the Frontier; or Heroes of the West* (1859). He continued publishing into the 1880s, but his post-Civil-War work was generally less successful. One exception was *The Phantom of the Forest: A Tale of the Dark and Bloody Ground* (1867).

idealistic endings (31). Bennett's adherence to old-fashioned romantic style of Samuel

Richardson and James Fenimore Cooper ultimately brought him ridicule at the hands of

Twain and others in the second half of the nineteenth century, and to be sure his

popularity waned significantly in the 1860s and 70s as more realistic modes of literature

took hold. Nevertheless, in the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s, his tales helped to

establish many conventions upon which the Western genre would later be established. In

the midst of all the news sheets, magazines, and cheap paperbacks that were creating a

new print culture in the 1840s and 1850s, Bennett's formulaic frontier romances brought

him a large readership and successful career (Lehuu 17).

Like the dime and pulp novelists of the late nineteenth century, he borrowed from

Cooper the basic plot materials and patterns of "attack, captivity, and pursuit" that would

later become so central to the Western (Bold 11). But where Bennett provides a degree

of innovation is in his choice of setting. Cooper and the frontier romancers that followed

immediately in his wake – William Gilmore Simms and Robert Montgomery Bird were

perhaps the two most popular examples – wrote historical romances, meaning that their

novels depicted places that *had* been non-national or unsettled in the not-so-distant past,

such as New York, the Carolinas, or Kentucky. But by the 1820s, 30s, and 40s, when the

novels were published, such places had become safely ensconced within the national

framework. Bennett's locales, however, continued to be viewed as outside or on the very

outer edge of a recognizable America when his novels debuted in the late 1840s. To

many Americans of this period, Illinois, Missouri, and other areas that had been near or

part of the Louisiana Purchase were not just *former* western spaces; they were *still*

western and, in many ways, still foreign or strange to U.S readers. Thus, while Cooper

163

and Simms wrote historical romances set on long-vanished frontiers, Bennett was among the first U.S. writers to pen true "Westerns" set on current or very recent frontiers.

In terms of their themes and rapid production, Bennett's works have been described by critics as forerunners of the dime novel that would come to dominate American popular culture after the Civil War (Coulombe 35; Mills 4). In Ronald Bonardi and Orlando Camilla, the outlaws featured in *The Bandits of the Osage: A Story of the West* (1847) and *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (1848), one can see the creation of the future dime novel formula: first creates a momentary disruption to the status quo by introducing places and people alien to most middle class readers, and then, once the disruption has brought sufficient excitement and suspense, return the reader to "a safe, harmonious world" where eastern values triumph over western barbarism (Coulombe 31). Exotic and daring but never base or cruel, Bonardi and Camilla offer excitement and conflict without seriously threatening the sensibilities of their audiences. Their ultimate defeat and the conventional endings to their stories seem to further reinforce the safe and conventional message that Bennett's romances are meant to convey: the West is wild but will soon be tamed. However, Bonardi and Camilla complicate this message by crafting a criminal identity that cannot be reconciled with conventional notions of American exceptionalism and expansion. They both occupy unsettled, non-national, and mostly unknown western regions. Hidden away in them, the two river pirates transgress everything that the spread of U.S. society is meant to protect: physical borders, social mores, and clear racial definitions. Even though they are defeated at the end of their tales, Bennett includes unlikely plot developments that tie both outlaws to respectable white characters who will later have a hand in settling the region in the name of the U.S.,

164

thus demonstrating the uncomfortable proximity between hybridized, criminal identities and normative nationality.

As Amy Kaplan points out, a major contradiction of U.S. expansion is that it often incorporated nonwhite populations which seemed to "undermine the nation as a domestic space" (xx). Bennett's novels do not quite make this move, but in many ways their depiction of the U.S. Midwest involves an even more radical and racially destabilizing vision: rather than subsuming non-whites in a westward push, the protagonists representing U.S. progress must contend with free-floating, non-white characters residing in unsettled frontier spaces. They cannot be subsumed or even fully accounted for, and their linkages to the land pre-date those of any of the white characters. Many of the same racial issues at stake in the sensationalized story papers explored by Shelley Streeby in *American Sensations* (2002) are also present in these works, but Bennett is dramatizing an older U.S. past than the Mexican-war fictions discussed by Streeby and constructing river pirate characters that are both non-national *and* fully at home in the western U.S. areas they occupy (Streeby 82). Thus, his frontier romances create a regional and racial conflict that they can never entirely resolve.

In *The Bandits of the Osage,* Bennett opens with a description of western bandits, telling his readers that "a few years since, most of the Western States and Territories – particularly those bordering upon the great Mississippi – were infested with bands of lawless desperadoes" seeking refuge in an untamed wilderness (1). The novel is set "a few years subsequent to the close of the last war with England" (The War of 1812) in the interior of Missouri along the Osage River, an area that the narrator asserts was still largely unsettled at this time. While the eastern part of Missouri, described as "the

eastern forests bordering on the Mississippi River," is "beginning to exhibit signs of settlement and civilization," beyond the great river the traveler encounters little more than a "large and beautiful" prairie with its sea of tall grass waving in the breeze (1). When describing this prairieland, Bennett's narrator makes vague mention of wild animals and occasionally mountainous terrain while mostly emphasizing the awe-inspiring vastness. Here, he seems to be borrowing from popular conceptions about the Middle American grasslands circulating in the first half of the nineteenth century. As previously mentioned, early explorers like Zebulon Pike and Stephen Long were struck by the treeless expansiveness of the Midwest and supposed it to be largely arid and infertile (LeMenager 24-25). In later years, as the western reaches of the nation became better known and mapped, the Plains of the modern day Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas would come to be differentiated from both the tall grass prairies of Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa to the east, and from the true deserts found further west in the Great Basin beyond the Rockies. But at the times in which Bennett's stories are set and published, all three geographical regions were often considered to comprise one huge uninhabited desert largely untouched by white men.

In fact, though he draws on inaccurate images of the larger region, Bennett's assessments of the settlement patterns in Missouri are fairly accurate. By 1840, virtually the entire eastern part of the state along the Mississippi River, which included former French outposts and towns such as St. Louis and St. Genevieve, was populous and "civilized" in the minds of most Americans. But several areas in the central, western, and north-central portions of the state remained relatively uninhabited until the 1850s, while a few isolated locations to the far south in the Ozark Mountains were not fully brought

166

under state and national control until after the Civil War (Rafferty 56). Though undoubtedly embellishing for affect, Bennett is largely correct when he portrays his central Missouri setting as remaining wild and lawless for most of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Not only were the lands west of the Mississippi barely known and often sparsely-populated during this period, they were also sites of past "international contention" and conflicts that were outside the jurisdiction of specific U.S. states or territories (LeMenager 55). This was especially true in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the French character of places like Louisiana, eastern Missouri, and western Illinois remained strong. Bennett's *Bandits of the Osage* and *Mike Fink* take place in the states of Missouri and Illinois, respectively. By the time Bennett was writing, both had become mostly settled domains of the U.S., but in the two hundred years prior they had been home to Native Americans, Spaniards, and the French. Both were originally part of the Illinois Country, which in turn was part of French Upper Louisiana, an administrative district of New France. This was the extreme margin of the sprawling and often sparsely-settled Gallic empire of North America (Ekberg 3). Though explored by the French as early as the seventeenth century, the Illinois Country was not the home of a civil government or military presence until the early 1720s (Ekberg 32). Its borders were loosely-defined; initially they corresponded roughly to the northern two-thirds of the present state of Illinois and adjacent areas in Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin, but in 1722 a royal ordinance defined it more broadly, as it came to be considered essentially coterminous with the entirety of Upper Louisiana, meaning all of the French-claimed land west of the Wabash River in Indiana, east of the Rocky Mountains, south of the

167

Great Lakes, and north of the Ohio River's mouth. Eventually, fur-trading posts and

missions evolved into agricultural villages with less transient populations. Though never

densely settled, a unique culture developed in the region consisting of French, French

creoles, Indians, African slaves, and metis peoples (Ekberg 32-33).

A few years after French cession of the land in 1763, the Spanish officially

assumed control of the Illinois Country west of the Mississippi. Their rule lasted until

1803, when the area was transferred back to the French three weeks before its eventual

transfer to the United States. During its second colonial era, the Illinois Country became

an important grain producer and a key cog in the commercial network of Spanish

Louisiana. Its inhabitants remained largely French creoles and metis, though a smattering

of Spaniards and Anglo-Americans also settled there. Former French holdings east of the

Mississippi, such as the future state of Illinois, became U.S. territory after the Revolution

but retained much of their former character for decades longer until Anglo settlement

increased.[99] Due to their deeply-rooted European heritage, these vestiges of Upper

Louisiana still contained a "polyglot mixture" of largely Catholic and non-English

speaking people at the time of their absorption into the United States (Levinson, et al 5).

In the early days of Illinois and Missouri's statehood, these associations with foreign

nations and cultural mixing were still fresh in the minds of many American readers. In

addition, the states were perched on the eastern edge of the "Asiatic wastelands"

discussed in the Introduction and the vast solitudes associated with all of America's

---

[99] For more on the history, culture, and economies of French and Spanish Illinois, see Arthur C. Boggess'
The Settlement of Illinois, 1778-1830 (1908), Clarence W. Alvord's *Illinois Country: 1673-1818, The
Centennial History of Illinois*. Vol. 1 (1920), Arthur P. Whitaker's *The Spanish-American Frontier*, *1783-
1795* (1927), and Carl J. Ekberg's *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in
Colonial Times* (1998).

holdings west of the Mississippi and east of the Rockies, rendering it foreign in terms of both geography and population (LeMenager 25).

Though he creates these non-national associations through his choice of setting, Bennett rarely returns to the land for comment after the opening pages of his romances and makes virtually no mention of the Indian tribes that were still there in the 1810s and 20s. Instead of focusing on geographic or ethnological details, he spends more time on the exotic and foreign associations evoked by Bonardi and Camilla's hideouts and backstories. Through his use of the pirates' current homes and previous histories, Bennett marks this particular western region of tall grasslands and rocky bluffs as supremely othered and non-American.

His narrator describes the central Missouri setting of *The Bandits of the Osage* as a "wild, gloomy, and romantic spot" which "even at the present day" civilization has yet to reach (41). It features yawning chasms and wild, rushing rivers, with rugged mountains rising in the distance (these could presumably be the Ozarks, which terminate south of Jefferson City). In a small cove surrounded by high cliffs, one finds "The Robber's Cave," a structure similar in appearance and utility to Samuel Mason's Cave-in-Rock in nearby Illinois. Serving as home to a gang of river pirates, the cave is also home to the bandit chieftain Bonardi's private chamber. Inside this chamber are all sorts of luxury items stolen by the gang: damask silk curtains, mirrors in gilt frames, fine works of art, elegant sofas, and finely crafted musical instruments. Also found within the chamber is Bonardi's wife, the beautiful Inez Orlandi, a noblewoman of Mexican or Spanish descent. Inez is dark-skinned and black-haired, traits said to confirm her Spanish heritage, though the exact details of her lineage are never provided. Her attendant is a

striking mulatto slave named Cynthia, who, in Bennett's feverish romantic fantasy, shares both the lady's good looks and musical talent. Such a varied scene suits Ronald Bonardi perfectly, as this bandit leader a well-born Englishman trying to escape from a troubled past. In the American West, he finds a secluded and culturally diverse theatre for his criminal talents.

Like Watterston's Wilson, he is urbane, sensitive, and mostly disgusted with the robber crew he has assembled. And as Joseph Coulombe notes, he fits the mold of Robin Hood-style social bandit by swearing to war "only on the rich and avaricious" (qtd. in Coulombe 32).[100] But as a character, Bonardi is distinguished more by his urbanity, Spanish wife, and comfort with foreign luxury items than he is with any social banditry or concern for the common man. Another of his defining characteristics is exoticism. In fact, nothing about the character is recognizably American – not his home, his wife, his name, nor his personal backstory, which, like Wilson's, involves an English birth and the organization of a multinational criminal outfit.

If Ronald Bonardi pushes the river pirate further toward non-American regions and forms of identity, Orlando Camilla, Bennett's other river pirate character, completes the movement and becomes a clear symbol of the mystery and exoticism of the early nineteenth century Middle West. In *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* (1848), Camilla is the main villain, a river pirate hiding out in Cave-in-Rock much like past pirates of folklore and popular fiction. His main purpose in the narrative is to animate the heroic efforts of the two male leads: Maurice St. Vincent, the typical aristocratic hero of the

---

[100] According to Eric Hobsbawm's definition in *Bandits* (1981), social bandits are outlaws who fight government forces or the landed aristocracy on behalf of local peasantry – Bonardi is never seen doing this, however.

170

romantic tradition, and Fink, the legendary rough-and-tumble riverman and subject of

many antebellum sketches and tall tales. But unlike past bandits who took up residence

in the famous cave, Camilla is a shape-shifting Spanish-born ex-soldier who flees Mexico

for New Orleans and then wanders into the wilds of southern Illinois, where he organizes

a multinational criminal outfit that operates along the bluffs, forests and swamps of the

Ohio River country. Despite his depredations, the character is intelligent, brave, and later

revealed to be connected by blood to European nobility. More importantly, he is a master

of disguise in the style of notorious confidence man and slave stealer John Murrell, and

can successfully pose as a regular white American citizen in order to better perpetrate his

atrocities.

His story is a testament to the borderless and bloody nature of the Ohio River

Valley in the early 1800s, and an indication that not all formulaic frontier romances of the

period endorsed expansion in all of its facets. Although Camilla is ultimately defeated,

Fink and the other victors still conclude the novel by leaving Cave-in-Rock and retiring

to more peaceful and settled precincts back east, a move echoed in other frontier

romances of the period by Robert Montgomery Bird and William Gilmore Simms. In

doing this, Bennett presents the frontier as a theatre for temporary excitement and

intrigue, not a permanent home. Like his romancer contemporaries, he keeps the

American West exciting but relatively inhospitable for this romantic heroes and heroines

by supplying formidable outlaw characters to oppose them. Among these outlaws, none

better exemplifies all the ways in which easterners can misapprehend newly-incorporated

frontier regions than the unlikely but compelling Camilla.

The character is first introduced in Chapter 1 of *Mike Fink*, as Fink and his fellow boatmen prepare to leave a fortune-teller's den in Cincinnati. The story takes place at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the city is still a muddy village along the Ohio River. Camilla is described as the physical equal of the famously brawny Fink, with a tall frame and broad chest and shoulders. His "swarthy complexion" denotes Mexican or Spanish origin, and the narrator asserts that his "countenance would have been rather prepossessing, but for certain dark and sinister expressions that occasionally crossed it" (14). After an initially tense introduction, Camilla requests passage on Fink's keelboat the *Light-foot* to Shawneetown, a "scruffy" frontier outpost located just upriver from Cave-in-Rock in modern-day Illinois (Allen 204).

The well-known western travel and fiction writer James Hall claimed that Shawneetown in the early 1800s was home to "barbarous scenes of outrage" and "odious receptacles of every species of filth and villainy" (Hall 231).[101] As discussed in Chapter 1, the notoriously rowdy boatmen often ran wild in riverfront settlements during this time, and such places were always filled with brothels, gambling dens, and all-night taverns. By the time Hall published his *Letters From the West* in 1828, most of the towns along the Ohio had been sufficiently settled and civilized to the point where large-scale disorder was no longer the norm (Allen 84). But during the period in which *Mike Fink* is set, Illinois is still said to be "a wild territory" thinly settled by "the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the Anglo-Saxon" (24). Bennett's narrator goes on to say that the

---

[101] Hall, along with Timothy Flint, has long been regarded by scholars as one of the authentic spokesmen of the West during the first half of the nineteenth century (the West here meaning Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and surrounding areas). His best known works are the travelogue *Letters from the West* (1828), the historical work *Legends of the West* (1832), the novel *Harpe's Head* (1833), and the short story collection *The Wilderness and the War-Path* (1845), which includes "The Indian Hater," a story that factors heavily into the John Moredock section of Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857). Hall, too, figures into the novel, as he is frequently a target for Melville's mockery in that section (Flanagan 4).

inhabitants, "as was then common in all territories," "looked upon themselves as beyond the pale of the law, and acted accordingly" (24).

Such descriptions clearly hearken back to a bygone era when western locales like Cincinnati knew keelboats and bandits more intimately than steamers or merchants, and when the Ohio River Valley was teeming with all sorts of different people who freely passed through Indian villages, old French and Spanish settlements, and new American towns (Allen 42). When describing Shawneetown, Bennett's narrator emphasizes two primary characteristics of the area: its physical remoteness and its foreign origins. He points out the "rocky and precipitous" river bank where stood "three or four old log cabins erected by the French long prior to the date of our story." To bestow an air of antiquity about the place, the narrator adds that "even at the period here alluded to, these buildings were rapidly going to decay, and presented little that would have been attractive to a stranger" (Bennett 24). Earlier, at the very beginning of the novel, the narrator first establishes the foreboding, desolate character of this stretch of the Ohio River when he recalls that "near the close of the eighteenth century, the entire area "westward of the Alleghanies" was populated by "savages and wild beasts," both of whom served as "sole masters" of the "dark and mighty forests" (1). Bennett's evocation of the past is meant to inform readers that the novel's setting is ancient and non-national. That is why he mentions the French cabins and why he puts Anglo-Saxons *after* the Spanish, French, and Dutch in his list of nationalities who settled there. All of these details are not simply part of a larger project of sentimental reminiscence, but rather key aspects of the novel's characterization of both the region and Camilla, and they work to suggest that the racial indeterminacy and borderless mobility that define the region and the character are not

173

merely relics of past times. In fact, *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio* works to prove that these traits continued into the 1840s, when former frontier regions of the American Midwest had ostensibly assumed most of the standards and institutions of U.S. society.

When he is next seen in the novel, Camilla is onboard the *Light-foot* posing as an American named Richard Hardick. He falls into conversation with a beautiful girl named Aurelia, a man claiming to be her father named Herman Fontaine, and the aristocratic American hero Maurice St. Vincent. Fontaine thinks he recognizes Camilla-as-Hardick from somewhere else, while St. Vincent comes to resent the newcomer's impudence. The details of the complex disguises and relationships on display during this river voyage are not essential to the present discussion, but suffice to say that Camilla is not the only one pretending here, and Bennett emphasizes the mysterious origins of Fontaine and the lovely girl he claims to be his daughter, both of whom are of Spanish or Mexican origin just like Camilla. The bandit has adopted his disguise in order to carry out reconnaissance work for his crew's upcoming robbery of the keelboat. In doing so, he demonstrates a fluency and comfort with the trappings of U.S. culture that puts him squarely in line with Murrell, Mason, and other early U.S. bandits known for adopting disguises and posing as legitimate professionals in order to better carry out their crimes. But men like Murrell and Mason were Anglo-Americans born into the society they later disrupted; Camilla, on the other hand, is a man who truly belongs to no nation and observes no borders.

A Spanish-born Mexican soldier, Camilla runs into personal strife in Mexico that forces him to leave with his daughter for New Orleans.[102] Once in the debauched former

---

[102] Originally a native of Spain, Camilla immigrates to Mexico at an early age with his brother and takes up residence in a small coastal town called Zuella. There, he poses as a gentleman of fortune and soon falls in

French and Spanish city, he turns to highway robbery and is soon apprehended and jailed.

His criminal apprenticeship complete, he escapes from the New Orleans prison along

with some other local ruffians, and together they head north to the wilds of Missouri and

Illinois. Just as it had been the northern limit of French Upper Louisiana, this undefined

region constituted the northernmost extremity of Spanish dominion in North America

from 1763 to 1803, thus making it a frontier region long before its incorporation into the

U.S. To find a Spaniard in the early years of the nineteenth century journeying from New

Orleans to the Illinois Country would not have been terribly unusual (Ekberg 228; Kerr

3). However, everything east of the Mississippi, including all of the modern-day state of

Illinois, had passed first into English hands in 1763 and then become U.S. territory after

the Revolution, meaning that when Camilla and his associates cross into southern Illinois

along the Ohio River and establish a criminal stronghold deep within the area's abundant

caves, steep cliffs, and isolated woodlands, they have effectively crossed the border

separating the Spanish frontier from the Northwest Territory of the United States.

Though much of this territory is still wild and largely unmapped, it is nevertheless

American land by the time Bennett's romance takes place, except, of course, for the

sections still under Indian control. Camilla travels often to destinations unknown, and

probably passes back and forth across U.S. borders. In the novel he is never explicitly

shown traveling along the river or through the backwoods, but the region itself connotes

---

love with the sister of a local nobleman's wife; after being denied her hand in marriage, he elopes with her
to an unknown destination far from Zuella. He later joins the Spanish Army and rises to the rank of
captain, but the influence of the angry Don Emmanuel Helvetia, the nobleman who had refused to sanction
the marriage, results in Camilla's sudden dismissal and an uncertain future. Enraged over his discharge,
Camilla challenges the wealthy old man to a duel and wounds him; later, the increasingly paranoid Camilla
becomes suspicious of his own wife and apparently poisons her before leaving Mexico for New Orleans.

movement through its borderless, unsettled quality. And when Camilla moves, it is almost always in order to commit some criminal act.

In the narrative, no river pirate along the Ohio – from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Cairo, Illinois – is feared more than him, and he is crowned at one point as the "most terrible and bloodthirsty ruffian that had ever existed" (41). His crew is just as fearsome; at one point they are described as "personifications of Hell's arch-fiends, let loose from their bonds to revel out a dismal night, and make the earth hideous with their orgies" (25). They are also "a mixture of various races" speaking different tongues, though all, like Camilla, possess a good understanding of English (25). Despite his inevitable defeat at the hands of Fink and St. Vincent, Camilla is portrayed as a committed criminal and skilled leader. He is also granted some degree of complexity: he dotes on his daughter Celia, who resides with him at Cave-in-Rock, and he falls madly in love with Aurelia, the beautiful and mysterious girl he meets aboard the *Light-foot* and later kidnaps. This love drives him to murder Herman Fontaine, kidnap the object of his desire, and, at the end of the novel, attempt to escape with her as his wife. On the run from Fink and his vigilantes, Camilla, with his daughter and his captive in tow, manages to reach a boat tied to the shore near his cave. But just as they begin to float away, Mike Fink, always a crack shot, levels the villain with a well-placed rifle ball. Appropriately enough, Camilla then falls into the water and upsets the boat, spilling Aurelia and Celia into the river and precipitating a heroic rescue by St. Vincent. Even in death, Camilla continues to cause a ruckus and cast innocents into the Ohio River.

As the heroes search the bandit's dead body for stolen goods, they discover a letter written by Fontaine revealing that Aurelia is the long-lost daughter of a Mexican

nobleman related to Camilla through his wife. This convoluted plot matters in the

present context for only one reason: it lends an air of respectability and legitimacy to the

bandit by linking him with a noble family and a heroine consistently portrayed

throughout the novel as virtuous and dignified. As part of the romance's conventional

happy ending, the victorious Maurice St. Vincent marries Aurelia, thus cementing the

bond between an American frontiersman and a member of the Mexican aristocracy.

Existing uneasily in the back channels of this extended family is the most terrifying river

pirate the Ohio has ever known. Bennett does nothing to alleviate this apparent conflict

at the heart of his novel's resolution, and the complex ties between Camilla and the future

progeny of the American West (imagined as the forthcoming children of St. Vincent and

Aurelia) are impossible to ignore. Ultimately, Camilla is more than just a memory of

lawless days gone by. He remains etched into the Ohio River Valley's history by his

blood ties to the forces hard at work nationalizing the West. As a result, he complicates

the tidy assimilation process of bloody and borderless frontier regions during the early

nineteenth century.

The American River Pirate's Final Stage of Development

Despite their importance as representatives of regional difference, river pirates

such as Wilson, Bonardi, and Camilla clearly lack the wide-ranging criminal schemes and

intimate relationships with American commerce and imperial power that characterize

transnational bandits discussed in other chapters of this study such as Steelkilt and John

Murrell. Though they offer intriguing alternative national identities, these river pirates

are developed so haphazardly in the novels featuring them that their import must be

searched for and carefully cultivated. But this is not true for all river pirates. In 1848,

German travel and fiction writer Frederick Gerstacker published *The Pirates of the Mississippi*, the only extant antebellum novel "in which the dominant characters are river pirates and the major events concern their activities" (McLaurin 91). Here, the criminal workings and personal lives of the pirate characters take center stage, and Gerstacker offers an extended commentary on the social role played by these bandits and the consequences of their interaction with frontier communities.

The lead pirate, Richard Kelly, is mostly a retread of Murrell-style outlaws who masquerade as legitimate members of society while secretly committing crimes, but Gerstacker develops the double life in far more detail than did any other western writer of the period. The German traveler-turned-author offers the sort of nuanced, detailed view of a settlement on the fringe of U.S. civilization that Watterston and Bennett were simply incapable of delivering. He also frankly portrays the full range of menace posed by transnational criminals and reveals the many ways in which they can disrupt and sometimes even destroy fledgling communities. To be sure, Gerstacker does not entirely escape the clutches of certain old traditions of the Romance, and though his novel is far more realistic than the others discussed in this chapter, it is also full of embellishments and far from what would now be called a "realist" work. Nevertheless, no antebellum novel better demonstrates the transnational bandit's ability to undermine the national project of early nineteenth century expansion.

In the preface, Gerstacker discusses the well-organized bandits who plied their trade on the Mississippi River during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. He draws extensively on travel writings and past fictional accounts, but Gerstacker's tale, like the ones about Cave-in-Rock along the Ohio, is inspired largely by real events.

Historians have verified that the lower reaches of the Mississippi were infested with river pirates prior to comprehensive U.S. settlement in the area. Places like Cape Girardeau in Missouri and a series of small islands at the mouths of the Arkansas and White Rivers in modern-day Arkansas offered perfect hideouts and staging grounds for outlaws (Allen 84). Gerstacker first mentions Stack Island, where he claims a "well-established band of robbers had established themselves" in order to murder, plunder, and produce counterfeit bank-notes (iii). The author cites a few sources in this section, and in general his preface has the air of factual account rather than fanciful romance. He goes on to say that the law-abiding citizens of river towns eventually rose up and chased the bandits off, but after the passage of many years the vigilance of the townspeople slackened and the pirates reassembled, this time "higher up the river, between the states of Mississippi and Arkansas," where they continued to perpetrate "numberless cruelties" (iii). He then provides a brief summary of other organized frontier gangs in the area, including Murrell and his Mystic Confederacy, which was said to occupy Stack Island at one point. After all this, Gerstacker settles down to the actual setting for his novel: Helena, Arkansas, a real place that still exists in the mid-eastern part of the state along the Mississippi. Here, a murderous crew of river pirates has set up shop to menace the principals of the novel.

Though a specific time for the events portrayed is never provided, certain historical details and adherence to the Murrell legend place it in the 1830s. By then the heyday of river piracy had ended, but when it had been at its peak, Arkansas offered an ideal situation for it. Originally explored and nominally claimed by the French in the late seventeenth century, the future state's only real colonial settlement was the so-called Arkansas Post located on the Arkansas River near its confluence with the Mississippi

179

(Arnold 47; 53). It would come to be included in the vast tract of French Louisiana,

which in turn became Spanish Louisiana for roughly thirty years before passing back

briefly to France and then into U.S. hands in 1803. Throughout these shifts in power, the

area remained a complete backwater. After coming under U.S. control, it was initially

part of the Missouri Territory and administered from New Madrid, a ten day journey

from Arkansas Post. As a result, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century,

"the residents of Arkansas were often left with little government" and remained under

military authority longer than any other part of the Louisiana Purchase (Whayne 77-78).

In 1819, it officially entered the United States as a discrete entity known as the Arkansas

Territory; it would later become a state in 1836. By then, Arkansas's frontier days were

coming to an end, and it was in the process of becoming a part of the market economy of

the U.S., particularly the sociopolitical structure of cotton production and slavery in the

South. Yet corners of the state remained relatively wild and unsettled for years longer,

and popular images of Arkansas continued to center around "violence, lawlessness, and

poverty" (Whayne 78-79; DeBlack 117).[103]

At around this same time, Gerstacker left his native Germany to explore the

American West. After a brief sojourn in Canada, he arrived in Ohio and travelled by foot

to Cincinnati. From there he continued pushing southwest by foot, eventually crossing

over the Current River from Missouri into Arkansas in 1838. He stayed there off and on

for the next three years pursuing a number of occupations but mostly subsisting as a

hunter and occasional laborer (Miller 7). His experiences in Arkansas and nearby locales

---

[103] See Arkansas: *A Narrative History* (2002) and Brooks Blevins' *Arkansas/Arkansaw: how bear hunters, hillbillies, and good 'ol boys defined a state* (2009) for more on popular images of Arkansas since the nineteenth century.

such as New Orleans and Texas would supply the basis of his later travel writing and fiction. In his novels *The Regulators of Arkansas* (1845), *The Pirates of the Mississippi* (1848), and *The Moderators*, frontier crime takes center stage, and Gerstacker's fairly realistic portrayal of backwoods violence and retribution results in what some critics have labeled America's first true Westerns (Steeves xviii-xix). These novels develop the basic plot devices of the Western genre – "the depredations of an outlaw band, followed up by organized pursuit, apprehension, and retribution" (Steeves, "First of the Westerns" 79).[104] As Wolfgang Hochbruck points out, the "wilderness" in these novels is never complete and the settings are always viewed as inhabitable; instead of Indians hiding behind every tree as in the frontier of Cooper or Brown, the danger lurking in Gerstacker's works often comes from the human element: the characters who "cross a moral rather than natural line from civilization to wilderness" (50-51). For a society that had not yet established reliable modes of governance, such characters pose a considerable threat to the future viability of U.S. settlement.

Inspired by the Murrell legend, Gerstacker emphasizes the fact that crime in frontier districts is often rooted in the depredations of the wealthy and successfully landowners who are ostensibly leading their regions toward a more civilized and nationalized future. In the Murrell tales, many leading men of the Choctaw Purchase in modern-day Mississippi are discovered to be working in concert with the notorious outlaw Murrell, and in some cases are even official members of his Mystic Confederacy.

---

[104] Gerstacker's novels are full of "political disorder, Mexican conspiracies, land swindles, Indian depredations, and most and worst of all, the violence of what might properly be called professional criminals (Steeves, "The First of the Westerns" 78). Though he is better remembered for his travel writing, Gerstacker's long-neglected romances helped to further the depiction of frontier crime and make it into a larger thematic concern for future works. For more on this, see Harrison and Edna Steeves' Introduction to Gerstacker's *Wild Sports of the Far West* and Harrison Steeves' article "First of the Westerns." *Southwest Review* 53.1 (1968): 74-84.

In *The Pirates of the Mississippi*, the pirate leader Kelly is also Squire Dayton, magistrate, family man, and de facto ruler of the frontier town of Helena, Arkansas. Widely respected and admired for his rectitude, Kelly maintains a pirate crew on a nearby island in the Mississippi River, and seems to be in charge of vast criminal network that extends into the surrounding areas. Murrell was often portrayed as adopting disguises, but his double lives were never captured with the same level of detail as Kelly's are here.

More importantly, Gerstacker seems genuinely interested in both the workings of Kelly's criminal outfit and his role in town as a judge and moral authority. The corruption Kelly embodies at the very heart of Helena means that the only real justice in the novel can be achieved by the people. In fact, all three of Gerstacker's frontier romances depict vigilante justice, as the German, who was always fascinated by the possibilities and excesses of American-style Democracy, seems to argue that the only ones capable of bringing true order to the West are yeoman farmers, fighting men, and other hard-working middle-class Americans. As Manfred Berg explains in *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (2011), it was commonplace during the first half of the nineteenth century for men in frontier states such as Missouri, Illinois, and Arkansas to organize themselves into vigilante groups in order to find and punish outlaws (41). Though such vigilante actions could often descend into "anarchy and mob violence," they were often the only form of law enforcement available to residents of isolated western communities (42). Richard M. Brown identifies several waves of vigilante activity emerging in the trans-Mississippi West, the first beginning in the 1830s along the Lower Mississippi Region of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana in which local bands of citizens – often locally called "slicks" – took up arms against horse

thieves and counterfeiters (Brown 99-100). The motif of local justice filling the void left

by the absence of centralized control and organized governments would show up in later

Westerns of both page and screen, as cowboys, soldiers, and, on occasion, good-hearted

bandits wage righteous war on corrupt landowners or crooked railway men in order to

ensure fair play and justice for all. In many of these works, the struggle between "wide-

spread, organized outlawry and popular justice" is highlighted, and this struggle forms

the core of Gerstacker's vision of the West (Steeves xix). Such is the case in *The Pirates

of the Mississippi*, and here the struggle is rendered in vivid colors through Gerstacker's

detailed and violent portrayals of the pirates' machinations.

In many ways, the island hideout of Kelly/Dayton resembles a more southern

version of the Cave-in-Rock settings found in Watterston and Bennett's novels. But

Gerstacker devotes far more time and care describing the place and makes clear that this

is "a complete settlement," not merely a capacious cave carved out of a limestone bluff.

It contains nine block houses, five stables, and a mounted piece of artillery. It also

houses the same collection of guns, liquor, and lounging ruffians found in the earlier-

discussed novels, but the peripheral status of the pirate island is far more developed than

the caves of the earlier works. Gerstacker's narrator states that the island is a haven for

fugitives and largely hidden from the view of river travelers by its dense vegetation and

sandbars; in the same vein, the nearby town of Helena is later described as "nearly

isolated on account of a large swamp to the west" and fairly distant from the more

prosperous towns of Little Rock and Batesville (163). As Hochbruck says, this is not the

complete wilderness, but rather a society in embryo that was extremely fragile due to its

physical isolation. In his introduction to Gerstacker's collected tales and sketches, James

W. Miller asserts that the author used the term *backwoods* in the 1830s and 40s to distinguish the "partially settled forested region west of the Mississippi" from the Rockies and Far West, which were inhabited by hardly any white men at this time aside from fur trappers. As a traveler, hunter, and amateur ethnographer, Gerstacker felt at home in the backwoods because it afforded human interaction without the disruptions of "large-scale human settlement" (6-7). But this lack of large-scale settlement also made crimes easier to carry out and conceal, and when the crimes achieve the organized and terrific scale that they do in *Pirates*, the effects are potentially devastating for a region hanging onto the fringe of the nation.

In addition to waylaying travelers and luring boatmen to their island, Kelly's crew also operates a gambling house on the outskirts of Helena, perpetrates highway robberies, and passes counterfeit currency in the surrounding undeveloped areas. Even Kelly's men marvel at their network's influence: one declares that "there is hardly a town in the whole West, where either constable, or gaoler, or lawyer, or magistrate, or postmaster, is not our comrade or accomplice" (49). "With agents in all the river towns of the United States," the gang is capable of transporting shipments of stolen goods from point to point; moreover, with "confederates at Houston, in Texas," they can move to and from the newly-formed Republic of Texas, an entity still separate from the United States at the time of the novel's setting (51). Kelly and his crew, then, can be considered transnational criminals due to their access to ports and other nations. Though the Old Southwest was rapidly becoming a solidly American region in the 1830s, it still bordered non-national spaces – first Mexico, then Texas, and additional unsettled territory lay further to the west.

Despite all the talk of the bandits' far-flung exploits, much of the novel consists of their attempts to escape Helena and their prized island, as the people of the town, led by a virtuous young farmer and a Yankee hotelkeeper, rise up to repel the villains. Kelly has his sights set on Mexico, and the crew intends to hijack a steamship named *The Van Buren* in order to slip away from vigilante justice by sailing down the Mississippi into the Gulf. The large scope of their escape, like that of their criminal enterprises, is a reminder of the region's proximity to places outside the U.S. and the rapidity with which one could leave the comfortable confines of the nation. Not content with merely gaining passage on the steamer as it passes by Helena, Kelly's men attempt to take it by force. After a signal is answered in various parts of the town, "coarse brutal figures seemed to appear suddenly in the streets" and rushed from the assorted rafts and flatboats tied in the water nearby "armed with rifles, knives, and axes" (266). They then climb over the bulwarks of *The Van Buren*, overpower its startled sailors, and open "a fire from her decks upon the advancing crowd" (267). Momentarily, it appears as if they will escape. But when an army gunboat called *The Black Hawk* arrives on the scene and catches sight of the runaway steamer, it gives such hot pursuit that *The Van Buren*'s boiler eventually explodes, sending "mutilated bodies and pieces of wreck" in every direction (269). Here ends the reign of Kelly and his pirates.

Gerstacker's knowledge of the Old Southwest and his interest in depicting the real-life criminal activities so common there enables him to place more detailed emphasis on the region's half-settled and lawless character than the other river pirate authors discussed in these pages. He also pushes the severity of the pirates' crimes to the level of national security threat by introducing the military as the force required finally to put

185

them down. In this way, the novel effectively illustrates the wide-spread disorder of western districts and their almost complete disassociation from the larger nation.

In what is ostensibly just another conventional frontier romance, notable for little more than a level of accurate detail rarely found in the genre, Gerstacker creates the apotheosis of the river pirate. No longer just a romantic outlaw brooding in caves, Kelly reveals the full range of possibilities for the character type by fusing together a pirate captain with a Murrell-style confidence man and conspirator. The result is a villain capable of representing the excesses and limitations of frontier regions in a general sense, for Gerstacker makes clear that what holds true in Helena holds true in any peripheral station on the either side of the Mississippi River. In his quest to realistically render the crime and violence of the frontier – and the difficulties of establishing law and order in a place where many of the most accomplished men turn to crime – this German traveler manages to craft a frontier outlaw character with a degree of power and influence previously unseen in American fiction. That Kelly is ultimately defeated hardly seems to be the point; the conditions of this particular regional space ensures that only vigilante justice and increased settlement can prevent others like him from achieving similar results.

By the time *The Pirates of the Mississippi* debuted in 1848, the wilds days it portrayed had largely passed in Arkansas. But further to the west, the U.S. was busy incorporating new territory in California and the Pacific Northwest, meaning that the threat signaled in Helena could be replicated in future frontier outposts in future years. Belonging as it does to "the huge body of printed texts and visual images that circulated widely during the years of the U.S.-Mexican War," Gerstacker's text at first glance seems

to be participating in the popular print media-fueled construction of a unified national identity that can be contrasted with the "imagined disunity" of a country like the recently-defeated Mexico (Streeby, *American Sensations* 39). But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the text is endorsing no such hopeful vision. There is nothing unified about the town of Helena, and the defeat of Kelly's band does not presage the end of criminality and disorder there; it merely demonstrates that, for the time being, vigilantes have triumphed over outlaws and the local leader at their head.

More notable than the specific criminal activities carried out by the river pirates in the works discussed in this chapter are the frontier spaces themselves and the alternative national identities they contain. The pirate characters cannot be said to construct coherent identities of their own, but their oppositional stance and sweeping power work to mark them as profoundly separate from the larger national project of westward expansion and the implicit endorsement of it usually found in the frontier romances of the period. These characters live on, despite the occasional shoddiness with which they were conceived and depicted, because they embody the otherness and alternative realities of frontier communities during a transformative time in American history.

<u>**Chapter 4: Joaquin Murieta, California, and the Homecoming of the Ultimate**</u>
<u>**Transnational Frontier Bandit**</u>

In *Where I was From*, her memoir about growing up in post-World War II

California, Joan Didion claims that the history of U.S settlement in her home state never

proceeded in the fashion of an orderly westward push: "the American traders and trappers

who began settling in California as early as 1826 were leaving their own country for a

remote Mexican province, Alta California…As late as 1846, American emigrants were

starting west with the idea of reaching territory that was at least provisionally Mexican."

But once these settlers arrived, the Mexican War had placed the former colonial outpost

under U.S. military authority, where it would remain until it was admitted as a state in

1850 (24). Didion goes on to say that California was predicated on a general idea of

"cutting loose and striking it rich," making it an attractive destination both for the drifters

of what she calls an "entrepreneurial inclination" and the "hunter-gatherers of the frontier

rather than its cultivators" (24). Adventurers and opportunists alike soon found a

bountiful region of great geographical diversity that had languished under Spanish and

Mexican rule due to its immense size and isolated location. To most Spaniards and

Mexicans, California had seemed like "the end of the world," and it was never more than

a faraway and sparsely populated fringe of the Spanish empire or independent Mexico.

But to the Californios, the Hispanic natives of the region, it was a "nearly empty and

fertile land with a balmy climate, a population of Indian serfs to do most of the work, and

a leisurely, quasi-medieval lifestyle based on raising cattle on huge *ranchos"* (Thornton 32; 40).

Historians such as Bruce Thornton and literary scholars like David Wyatt have demonstrated the ways in which California's mythology became intrinsic to the state's history and identity. From the beginning, this mythology was tied to the impressively grand and extraordinarily varied geography of the place – a dizzying array of landscapes that often seemed to control or validate human life (Thornton 34; Wyatt xvi).[105] As Thornton points out, early historians of the state such as Hubert Howe Bancroft routinely pined for the pastoral days of Alta California, when the land was still "the garden of the world" and "the Arcadia of reality" (34). Despite many of these historians' belief in the progress of U.S. civilization and their prejudice against Catholicism and all things Hispanic, they found a romance in old Spanish California that was based largely on the untouched quality of the state's natural resources and the majestic scenery that was not yet marred by cities or large-scale agriculture. Also contributing to the mythology of this so-called Eden was the luxury and elegance of the Californios, known for their skilled horsemanship and lavish hospitality.

In later years, the romance of this period found expression in many forms: the mission architectural style still popular today, novels like Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), and local heroes such as Zorro and Joaquin Murieta (Thornton 35; Leal ix).[106] As

---

[105] For more on cultural geography in general and California geography in particular, see Ellen C. Semple, *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911); David Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden*: Landscape and Imagination in California (1986), Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain* (1974); D.W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979); John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984); Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (1991); and Philip L. Fradkin, *The Seven States of California: A Natural and Human History* (1995).
[106] For more on the history of Spanish California and its mythology, see Hubert Howe Bancroft, *California Pastoral, 1769-1848* (1888); Irving B. Richman, *California under Spain and Mexico, 1535-1847* (1911); Myrtle Garrison, *Romance and the History of the California Ranchos* (1935); Robert G. Cleland, *From*

Bruce Thornton puts it, the 1840s and 50s featured events and changes in California that

"tapped into the great mythic adventures of American history": war, the Gold Rush, and

the gunslingers of the Old West. All of these themes would converge in the legend of

Murieta, a Sonoran-born bandit who may or may not have actually existed and was made

famous by a notorious crime spree, a series of newspaper articles, and John Rollin Ridge's

1854 novel *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (Thornton 6).

One of the easier statements to make about Murieta is that he functions much like

the other transnational criminals discussed in this project. As virtually all of the historians

and literary scholars who have studied him have shown, he freely crosses borders and

blurs the line between different national identities.[107] In the chapter of *American*

Sensations entitled "Joaquin Murrieta and Popular Culture," Shelley Streeby states that

the bandit and his gang function much like "an international army that both recruits and

---

Wilderness to Empire: A History of California, 1542-1900 (1944); Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (1948); Leonard Pitt, *Decline of the Californios: A Social History of Spanish- Speaking Californians, 1846-1890* (1966); Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream* (1973); David Lavender, *California: A Bicentennial History* (1976); Ramon Gutierrez and Richard Orsi, *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (1998); Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. 4th edition (2000); and and Luis Leal's introduction to the 2001 edition of a 1908 Spanish translation of Ridge's work compiled by Mexican editor Ireneo Paz: *The Life and Adventures of the Most Celebrated Sonoran Bandit, Joaquin Murieta*.

[107] Murieta has been the subject of many excellent works of scholarship in recent years, though only some of them are pertinent to my present study. Examples of recent works that deal with issues of imperialism, race, identity, and antebellum print culture are Lori Merish, "Print, Cultural Memory, and John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*" *Arizona Quarterly* 59.4 (2003): 31-70; Jose Aleman, "Assimilation and Decapitated Body Politic in The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta." *Arizona Quarterly* 60.1 (2004); Mark Rifkin, "'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*." *Arizona Quarterly* 65.2 (2009): 27-56. David J. Drysdale, "Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*: Banditry, Counterinsurgency, and Colonial Power after Guadalupe-Hidalgo." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46.1 (2016): 62-83. There are also a few older and foundational pieces worth mentioning: John Carlos Rowe, Highway Robbery, 'Indian Removal,' The Mexican-American War, and American Identity in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Spring 1998); Susan Lee Johnson's prologue to *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (2000); Chapter Nine ("Joaquin Murrieta and Popular Culture") of Shelley Streeby's *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002) and Streeby's "Joaquin and the American 1848" in Post-Nationalist American Studies. Ed. John Carlos Rowe (1999).

deploys soldiers across national boundaries" (266). Furthermore, as Streeby has deftly

demonstrated, the Murieta legend itself was mobile and deployed by different social

communities in different countries for different purposes, making its circulation and

historical significance transnational as well (Streeby, "Joaquin and the American 1848"

182). However, the importance of the character goes well beyond the border-crossing he

performed and facilitated. The legend of Murieta has always been tied to the geography

and history of California, both of which, like the bandit himself, are irreducible to a

national ideal or a clearly-defined set of boundaries. Thus, Murieta is impossible to

separate from the region he inhabits and the uniquely hybridized cultural identity he

embodies. In his role as transnational frontier bandit, the character does more than just

demonstrate the permeability of national borders; he reveals border regions of the United

States to have inherently hybridized geographies and cultures, even after an assumed

assimilation into the larger nation. His travels through California provide glimpses into

the variety of different cultures coexisting there during the Gold Rush era. Further, his

knowledge of the landscape and the ease with which he crosses the Mexican border

indicates that there is a history and geography in California that predates the Mexican-

American War and Anglo occupation. The California on display in John Rollin Ridge's

1854 novel has not recently become an amalgamation of different peoples and different

cultures – rather, it is shown to have always been that. And Murieta, a native-born

Sonoran, has always been a Californian as well.

Though quickly forgotten in its time, Ridge's novel established conventions of

movement and geography that would reappear in later and more popular versions of the

Murieta story. It is easy to overlook or neglect these conventions because they are usually

expressed as details of the bandit's travels. These details consist of such seemingly banal items as the names of counties, towns, and physical landmarks, or the mapping of escape routes and descriptions of Murieta's band outmaneuvering lawmen. However, it is precisely in these details that Ridge's surprising contribution to frontier and border studies is located. The author shows the landscape of California as one big border region, a place of strife and instability, a diverse space in which many different races and cultures collide; but also, most importantly, it is a space that in many ways retains an identity that is distinctly non-American, for reasons not confined solely to the tumult of the 1850s.

In making these points about the Murieta character as he appears in Rollin Ridge's novel, I will be drawing on past work concerning borderlands and frontiers. I apply Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" to Ridge's rendering of early 1850s California. Pratt uses this term to refer to spaces "in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (8). Without question, California is a contact zone after the U.S. conquest and the sudden collision of Anglo culture with the culture of Californios and migrant Mexicans. Also useful to the present study is past work on borderlands conducted by scholars such as Annette Kolodny, Gloria Anzaldua, and Noreen Lape, all of whom situate border regions as liminal, oftentimes transitional places of cultural contact and collision (Lape 5).[108] Ridge's California is all of that, but its narrative focus is almost exclusively on Murieta's

---

[108] For more on contact zones and borderlands, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992); Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and the Experience of the American Frontier, 1630-1860 (1984);* Eric Heyne, "The Lasting Frontier: Reinventing America," in *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier* (1992); Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1999); Noreen Lape, *West of the Border: The Multicultural Literature of the Western American Frontier* (2000); and Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica: War Along the Borderland* (2010).

crimes and where they occur. These details reveal truths about borderlands to be sure, but they also provide an early literary instantiation of the sort of transnational crime that would later exist along the U.S.-Mexico border regions toward the end of the nineteenth century, throughout the twentieth, and during the first two decades of the twenty-first.

Shelley Streeby claims that the Murieta legend articulates "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" (168). Murieta is indeed expressive of this mexicano identity existing along the U.S.-Mexico border, both because of the transmission and revisions of his legend, and as a result of his very existence and the success of his criminal exploits. His life and crimes, as they are set down coherently for the first time in Ridge's novel, establish Murieta as a powerful illustration of the disjunctive and transnational identities discussed by Streeby. However, Ridge's pulpy work does not develop Murieta in enough detail for the character to ever construct or even conceptualize a separate cultural identity. What Ridge's novel *does* provide are the specific movements and machinations of Murieta's criminal enterprise – the places he goes, the patterns he follows, the local communities with which he interacts – and these details are what ultimately form the basis of the character's cultural work.

In the pages to follow, I will reveal Murieta intrinsic ties to a geographical region that has always resisted both the narrative of orderly western progress and the homogenizing effects of Anglo-American society. The stateless quality of the California landscape detailed in Ridge's novel, and the amalgamation of different peoples and cultures found there, serve as essential underpinnings to the Murieta legend: in a chaotic, polyglot world, one stylish and vengeful bandit achieves supremacy and captures the

admiration of whites, Mexicans, and Californios alike through a romantic, slightly revolutionary characterization that proved appealing for all three groups, albeit for different reasons. In Murieta, the transnational frontier bandit of the antebellum United States reaches its most modern form. While Steelkilt, Murrell, and river pirates like Camilla and Kelly serve as latent harbingers of things to come, Murieta's connections to future developments in transnational crime are clear and indisputable. And while the earlier frontier bandits create *potential* rifts in stable notions of U.S. geography and identity, Murieta turns the potential into the actual by completely tearing such notions asunder and suggesting that, in certain places, they never held much sway in the first place.

The Rise of Joaquin

When John Rollin Ridge published *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* in 1854, California was still in the midst of the violent transitional period that commenced with the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in 1846. The small cloth-covered volume, the first original novel published in the state, never reached a large audience or sold many copies, but by exploiting and exploring the widespread violence and disorder of the period, Ridge laid the groundwork for a legend that would eventually assume a critical role in California's mythology and history. He also crafted a character that is now considered the state's first folk hero, and the fact that this hero is a Mexican renowned for waging war on white men attests to the complex regional history of California.

At the point of its incorporation into the U.S., the state possessed a history that stretched back to the Spanish empire, but to most Anglo settlers and observers, it was a largely sedate, uneventful history. A permanent Spanish presence was not established

until 1769, when missions were set up in San Diego and Monterey. Over the next few decades, a total of twenty-one of these missions were strung along the *El Camino Real* (the king's highway), all of them close to the coast and supported by small *presidios* and *pueblos*, while the interior of the vast territory was largely left to Indian tribes such as the Modocs, Yokuts, and Paihuts (Thornton 35; Lavender 23).[109] Though settlement increased over the years, California was always "little more than an outpost of empire, a remote frontier" (Pitt 2). Many of the residents were illiterate, the *El Camino Real* remained "little more than a track for horsemen," and living conditions in general were poor for the majority of the population (Lavender 31). Continually short on supplies and settlers throughout the Spanish period, the colony continued to languish after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. For the next twenty-seven years, it remained an isolated outpost without widespread industrial or agricultural production. It also lacked schools, manufacturing, or adequate defenses, and when it became part of Mexico only around 3,500 people of Spanish descent lived there (Thornton 40).

The provincialism inherent in such a place led to the creation of a quasi-feudal society based on the church during the Spanish period (1769-1821) and on the large *ranchos* of the Mexican era (1821-1847). The latter were formed from generous land grants handed out by the Mexican government after the secularization of the mission system (Leal ix). The recipients of these grants were often former soldiers or adventurers,

---

[109] For more on the early period of California's settlement, see Alfred Robinson, *Life in California* (1846); Carey McWilliams *California: The Great Exception* (1949); W.W. Robinson, *Los Angeles: From the Days of the Pueblo* (1959); David Lavender, *California: A Bicentennial History* (1976). For more on the state's Indian history, see A.L Kroeber, "The Nature of Land-Holding Groups in Aboriginal California" *in Aboriginal California: Three Studies in a Culture History* (1963); William Brandon, "The California Indian World." *The Indian Historian* 2.2 (1969); Robert F. Heizer, *The Natural World of California Indians* (1980); Alfred L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1972); and William Simmons' "Indian Peoples of California" in *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (1998).

and they used their immense lands almost strictly for cattle grazing. In such a bountiful

country complete with many Indians to perform manual labor, these *rancheros* began to

develop a luxurious, lordly lifestyle more centered on riding horses and entertaining

visitors than on anything resembling vocation or the establishment of civil institutions.

While several prominent families possessed immense tracts of land, many middle-class

Californios found work as foremen or artisans on the *ranchos* (Monroy 182).[110] In *Two*

Years Before the Mast (1869), Richard Henry Dana claims that 1830s California contained

"no streets or fences," no credit system or banks, and little in the way of land cultivation

or cultural institutions. Nevertheless, he marvels at the Californios' extravagant fashions,

love of luxury and gaming, and talent for singing, dancing, and riding horses. At one

point Dana claims that they possess nothing of real value aside from "their pride, their

manners, and their voices" (79-88).[111]

The elegance and horsemanship of the Californios would later become the stuff of

historical romance in the hands of state chroniclers, but throughout the 1820s, 30s, and

40s their old-world sensibilities and expensive tastes made them vulnerable to foreign

traders and merchants, mostly American, British, French, or Russian, many of whom

increasingly came to provide the everyday necessities and luxury items that were

---

[110] For more on the rancho lifestyle and the larger world of Californios, see two works by Douglas Monroy: "The Creation and Recreation of Californio Society" in *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (1998), and *Thrown among Strangers: the Making of Mexican Identity in Frontier California* (1990). Also see Lisbeth Haas*, Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (1995) and Rosaura Sanchez*, Telling Identities: The Californio Testimonials* (1995).

[111] Many contemporary historians continue to regard Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative* as one of the preeminent (Anglo) sources on the history and culture of California prior to its absorption into the United States. Dana provides many unflattering portraits of Californios – calling the men "thriftless, extravagant, and very much given to gaming" while characterizing the women as beautiful but morally deficient (Dana 108-109). Despite his biases, Dana also seems a bit charmed by their lavish dances and impeccable manners. As David Lavender puts it, Dana often "felt the tug of these sunny people even while clucking at their customs" (Lavender 31). An excellent discussion of Dana and his treatment of Californios is found in Douglas Monroy's "The Creation and Recreation of Californio Society," in *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (1998).

unavailable inside the province (Thornton 42). Many Yankee traders settled down in

California, and other Americans or Europeans acquired land grants from Mexico and did

the same, forming "the advance column of an immigrant host that ultimately facilitated

the state's absorption into the United States" (43).

Though the U.S. government had designs on California for years, it acquired the

territory somewhat unexpectedly during its war with Mexico, a conflict precipitated

primarily by a border dispute in Texas. When the U.S. declared war on Mexico in 1846,

California became a minor theatre: far removed from most of the fighting, but not spared

from violence and disorder. Its ports were occupied by U.S. naval forces and soon a

group of mostly white American settlers fomented the Bear Flag Revolt, in which they

attempted to throw off what little Mexican authority they could find in the territory

(Lavender 46; Haas 333). Later in 1846 and the beginning of 1847, official U.S. army

units moved into California. The Mexican government refused to send troops to the

province's defense, leaving the local Californios, most of whom still thought of

themselves as nominally part of Mexico though culturally distinct, entirely on their

own.[112] At first, the Californios seemed up to the challenge, as they resisted the Bear Flag

Revolt and defeated a detachment of men under U.S. army general Stephen Kearny at the

Battle of San Pasqual in the midst of an official U.S. occupation.[113] They fought off the

---

[112] As Americo Paredes has demonstrated, nationalist feeling was weak in Mexico's borderland territories, and Spanish-speaking residents of Texas, New Mexico, and California generally thought of themselves as Tejanos, Nuevomexicanos, or Californios rather than Mexicans (30). Nevertheless, they were still aware of the fact that, on the eve of war, they were still Mexican citizens and still reliant on the government in Mexico City for official support.

[113] For more on the U.S-Mexican War in California, see James M. Cutts, *The Conquest of California and New Mexico by the Forces of the United States in the years 1846 and 1847* (1847); Hubert Bancroft, *History of California, Vol. V, 1846-1848* (1886); Gabrielle M.N Santelli, *Marines in the Mexican War* (1991); Neil Harlow, *California Conquered: War and Peace on the Pacific, 1846-1850* (1982); Lisbeth Haas, "War in California, 1846-1848" in *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (1998); John Fox, *Macnamara's Irish Colony and the United States Taking of California* (2000), and Stephen Carney, *Gateway South: The Campaign for Monterey* (2005).

Americans for a while and retook control of the south, but the Californios eventually succumbed to U.S. army regulars. By January of 1847, the territory had been officially severed from Mexico and its provincial government was disbanded (Pitt 35; Lavender 47; Haas 333). Within a year, many ranchos were broken up and scores of Hispanic workers displaced. As Joseph Henry Jackson states in his 1955 introduction to Ridge's novel, the "free and easy days" of the Pastoral period came to a sudden end, and the state was rapidly taken over by Anglos (Jackson xvii).

In January of 1848, gold was discovered in California a few days before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially ended the Mexican war. Soon, miners from across the globe began pouring in, with as many as 100,000 present by the rush's peak in 1852 (Leal ix-x). Many of the early miners were Sonorans (the northern Mexican province of Sonora had always supplied many of California's colonists), Chileans, and Californios. These groups were largely dispossessed by land-grabbing U.S. settlers and a U.S. government willing to grant squatter's rights to the white immigrants and to discriminate against Spanish-speaking "foreigners." This discrimination was crystalized in 1850 in the form of Foreign Miners Tax Law, which "amounted to a confiscatory tax imposed on any miners not native or natural-born citizens of the United States" (Jackson xv).

Spanish-speaking native-born Californios, of course, *were* American citizens and had been declared as such at war's end, but despite the fact that they had developed a unique identity largely separate from Sonorans and other inhabitants of Mexico, they were often lumped in with Mexican and even South American miners when it came to the

enforcement of discriminatory laws and practices (Thornton 67; Miller 218).[114] In this

"fluid, mushrooming society at odds with itself," lands changed hands quickly, fortunes

were made overnight, laws were not always observed, and outlawry became common

(Jackson xviii). Left with few legitimate options, many Californios and Mexicans drifted

toward crime. In their gangs were disreputable British, U.S., and French settlers, convicts

fleeing the law, and Mexican criminals who had been previously sent to California in

order to boost the province's small population. The Gold Rush period has generally been

characterized by historians as brutal and Darwinian, fueled by large doses of racism and

xenophobia, and defined by "lawlessness and mayhem" (Thornton 58). Unsurprisingly,

Hispanics, Blacks, Indians, Chinese, and other groups deemed non-white were the ones

most commonly subjected to violence and injustice.

Despite their distinct cultural identities, many of the various groups of Hispanic

miners or displaced ranch hands began organizing into criminal outfits; they often had

different interests or backgrounds but were united in their opposition to avaricious Yankee

settlers. At such a time as this, the conditions were ideal for the literary creation of

Joaquin Murieta, a Latin avenging hero who could appeal to dispossessed Hispanics *and*

new Anglo residents eager for stories of adventure. Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of*

Joaquin Murieta did not resonate very widely at the time of its publication, but it provided

the core narrative of the Murieta legend that was later repeated and expanded in more

popular forms throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Most

importantly, Ridge recognized that the first hero of California could not be a miner,

---

[114] A provision in the Treat of Guadalupe-Hidalgo declared that all Mexican citizens living in territory
annexed by the U.S. would become American citizens automatically. For more on this, see Mark Rifkin,
"'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*"
(2009) and *Treaties and other International Acts of the United States of America*. Ed. Hunter Miller (1937).

squatter, or merchant but rather, in a land "where some had much but many had nothing," a noble outlaw modeled on Robin Hood who could defend the poor, woo the ladies, and cut a dashing figure as he escaped from the hapless authorities. No such thing existed in California, so Ridge drew on the state's chaotic tapestry of crime and violence to invent it; or, as Jackson memorably puts it, "since there wasn't a Murieta – at any rate, not much of a Murieta – it was necessary to create one" (Jackson xx; Jackson, *Bad Company* 40).

Murieta's literary history is a serpentine one, and several historians have done excellent work in uncovering most of it.[115] Ridge came across the basic outline of the character in a handful of newspaper articles from 1852, '53, and '54 detailing the depredations of a Mexican bandit, at first known only as Joaquin, who headed a gang of horse-thieves and killers preying on miners, Chinese immigrants, and white landholders between northern California and Los Angeles. A wide range of brutal crimes between 1850 and 1853 was attributed to this figure, and newspapers like the *San Joaquin Republican* and the San Francisco's *Alta California* published lurid and embellished accounts of his deeds. What remains unclear to historians is whether there was truly one Joaquin and one gang behind the string of murders and thefts rocking California at this time, or if the common name was held by several different bandits leading several different criminal groups. The full name Joaquin Murieta first appeared in the *Alta California* in December of 1852 in connection with the murder of General Joshua Bean, a local landowner, businessman and occasional vigilante, but it is difficult to determine if

---

[115] Good places to start for publication histories are Joseph Henry Jackson's introduction to the 1955 edition of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, Bruce Thornton, *Searching for Joaquin: Myth, Murieta, and History in California* (2003); Lydia Hazera, "Joaquin Murieta: The Making of a Popular Hero" (1989); and Luis Leal's introduction to a new edition of a 1908 Spanish translation of Ridge's work compiled by Mexican editor Ireneo Paz, *The Life and Adventures of the Most Celebrated Sonoran Bandit, Joaquin Murieta* (2001).

Murieta was the perpetrator of this or any of the crimes attributed to him, or if he even

existed at all (Leal xvi). By 1853, newspapers throughout the state were publishing

breathless accounts of atrocities perpetrated by a single roving band of outlaws.

When the outraged citizens of Mariposa Country petitioned successfully in the

summer of 1853 for the creation of the California Rangers, a loose band of army veterans

and former Indian fighters tasked with stopping the crime spree, five distinct Joaquins

were named as possible leaders of the marauding gang, including one named Murieta or

"Muriati" (Thornton 19; Streeby, *American Sensations* 261). Eventually, all of these

Joaquins merged into one larger-than-life villain known simply as "Joaquin." One of the

attributes of this bandit chieftain is his mobility, as his gang was reportedly on the move

constantly and capable of covering vast stretches of ground in the wild landscape of pre-

industrial California. Much of their remarkable speed was probably due to the fact that

the various crimes reported in the papers were carried out by different criminal outfits in

different parts of the state – this likelihood hardly dampened the growing Murieta

mythology, though. One article from February 1853 issue of the *Alta California* warns

readers that Joaquin controlled "a gang of organized outlaws" and that "the scope for the

exercise of their butchering propensities reach from Shasta…down as far as the white

settlements" ("The Journals from the Southern Mines"). Scholars like Bruce Thornton,

Susan Lee Johnson, and David Drysdale have already shown us the ways in which

Joaquin's mythical gang represented white settlers' fears of a Hispanic uprising. As

Drysdale puts it, they "gave concrete shape to Anglo-American fears of a collective,

racialized, anti-colonial resistance to the United States' invasion and occupation of California" (65).[116]

The California Rangers searched for the gang for months before one day wandering into a group of Mexican mustang hunters near Tulare Lake in the San Joaquin Valley. When the head of the Rangers began questioning the men, an argument broke out and the two sides began shooting. The Rangers proceeded to kill the leader of the Mexicans and another member of the group while capturing two more; the rest of the party apparently escaped. Next, the white vigilantes severed and preserved the head of the leader and cut off the disfigured hand of his dead associate, who was later identified as Bernadino Garcia, or "Three-Fingered Jack," a notorious killer wanted by local authorities. Anxious to collect the reward placed on the head of the mysterious Joaquin, the Rangers asserted that the decapitated leader was indeed the Joaquin responsible for the recent crime wave. They then took his head and the hand of Garcia to Sacramento to be displayed to the public (Leal xxiv). But even before his death, a backstory for Joaquin Murieta had begun to emerge in leading California newspapers of the day: early articles asserted that he was a native of Mexico, had been a guerilla fighter against the U.S. during the late war, and was "cruel, "sanguinary," and crafty (qtd. in Thornton 78-79).

In April of 1853, an article in the *San Francisco Herald* began the process of converting Murieta into a more romantic figure by having him suffer grave injustice at the

---

[116] Johnson's prologue to *Roaring Camp* and Rifkin's "'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*" provide excellent overviews of the "Murieta scare." Rifkin claims that many white Calfornians were so anxious to separate themselves from an Indio-Mexican population that talks of bisecting the state "remained alive in public discourse throughout the 1850s" (38). The line would have been drawn westward from San Luis Obispo, leaving everything to the south to the Mexicans and Indians and to the north to whites. According to Rifkin, many Californios and Mexicans supported the measure as well in the hopes that it would allow them to preserve their own heritage in the face of ever-increasing waves of Anglo immigrants.

hands of Americans as he searched for his fortune in the gold mines; in addition, he was

now of "Spanish descent," "well-educated," and possessed of military prowess and

"manly bearing" (qtd. in Thornton 83). Other articles picked up on these charismatic and

redeeming qualities, and soon the bandit took on the appearance of a hero, albeit a

misguided and occasionally dangerous one. After the aforementioned shootout and the

public exhibition of the severed head, controversies soon arose over the head's true

identity: many newspapermen dismissed the Rangers' claim of authenticity and insisted

that the head belonged to another Joaquin or possibly even an Indian named Chappo.

Other sources contended that Murieta *was* an Indian, or that he had escaped back to

Sonora, or that he had died in a different shootout at a different place.[117] According to

Luis Leal, one account, written well after Ridge's, even had him drowning in a lake (Leal

li).

By the time Ridge began writing his novel later in 1853, any trace of an actual

outlaw named Joaquin Murieta had been lost under an avalanche of speculation, sloppy

reporting, and wild romance. Ridge, a part-time journalist himself who contributed to a

number of San Francisco publications, was no doubt familiar with the basic contours of

the Murieta legend. He may have been especially drawn to the details of the bandit's

mistreatment at the hands of Americans, for Ridge was a Cherokee Indian from north

Georgia whose father had been one of the signers of the 1835 treaty that sold off the

---

[117] One interesting debate explored by Bruce Thornton in *Searching for Joaquin* is the battle over the
bandit's racial identity. Drawing on the work of earlier historians, Thornton claims that members of the
California Rangers who supposedly killed Murieta claimed that he was blond-haired and blue-eyed (what
the Mexicans called a *guero*). But many first-hand accounts assert that the head displayed later was of a
man with a darker complexion, though primitive preservation techniques may have led to the head's
discoloration. As Thornton notes, the remaining questions of whether Murieta was European, Indian, or
mestizo allow many different groups to continue to claim him.

tribe's homeland in exchange for reservations in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Inner-tribal

strife over the treaty soon led to the murder of the elder Ridge at the hands of a rival

faction; a few years later, young Rollin Ridge would kill a member of this faction,

ostensibly over a horse but probably in retaliation. He then fled the law by traveling west.

He eventually ended up in California, where his attempts at mining and business were

largely failures, but he found some success in selling poems and short articles to local

papers. Jackson offers a less-than-flattering assessment of Ridge's literary talents: "if he

was not quite a poet, or even a very good writer, at least he tried conscientiously to be

both" (xix).

Though he was a former slave-owner who would later evince Confederate

sympathies, John Rollin Ridge clearly identified with the wrongs inflicted by Americans

on the fanciful versions of Murieta as they were put forth by the papers. Ridge also

recognized that the growing reading public of California was hungry for a homegrown

hero and legend, so he took the newspapers accounts, along with some material from a

San Francisco magazine called *The Pioneer* (to which he had earlier contributed pieces of

his own), and became the first writer to coherently organize the Murieta legend into a

linear narrative encapsulating most of the established details about the bandit, his crimes,

and his dramatic demise (Thornton 90; Jackson xxx-xxxi).[118] Despite the popularity of

the legend, Ridge's novel was not circulated widely and sold little, possibly due to

financial difficulties encountered by its publisher, W.B. Cooke. Scholars note that the

---

[118] For more on Ridge and his influences in writing *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, see Frank
Latta, *Joaquin Murrieta and His Horse Gangs* (1980); James Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*
(1991); James Varley, *The Legend of Joaquin Murrieta: California's Gold Rush Bandit* (1995); and John
Boessenecker, *Gold Dust and Gunsmoke: Tales of Gold Rush Outlaws, Gunfighters, Lawmen, and
Vigilantes* (1999).

novel was reviewed in a few local newspapers but largely ignored by the public. Ridge's

biographer, James Parins, located an 1854 review from the San Francisco-based *Daily*

California Chronicle in which the reviewer labels Ridge's style "respectable" but claims

to have no stomach for "the horror" on display and seems to question whether the work is

fiction or history (a question, Parins notes, that continues to accompany the text today

(104)). In 1859, *The California Police Gazette* published an anonymously pirated version

of Ridge's text that attained a level of popularity far beyond that of the original due to a

successful marketing campaign and popular illustrations of Murieta done by Charles C.

Nahl, an established artist of the day (Leal xxxiii). Subsequent re-workings of the

material would further romanticize and embellish the events and details of the legend, and

this process continued well into the twentieth century with Walter Noble Burns's popular

novel *The Robin Hood of El Dorado: The Saga of Joaquin Murrieta, Famous Outlaw of*

California's Age of Gold (1932), which was later turned into a Hollywood movie in 1936,

television shows such as *Branded* and *Bonanza*, a 1965 film called simply *Murieta*, a play

penned by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda in 1966 entitled *The Splendor and Death of Joaquin*

Murieta (which draws upon an earlier reworking of the myth attributed to Carlos Morla in

which the bandit is reimagined as a Chilean), and even in the popular 1998 film *The Mask*

of Zorro, in which Murieta is the older brother of the protagonist played by Antonio

Banderas.

The backdrop of the Murieta legend is Gold Rush-era California, a place described

by Ridge and contemporary historians as chaotic and full of violence, a place where vast

stretches of land were regarded as essentially ungovernable due to geographical isolation

and rampant crime (Pitts 82). Although the legend comes to serve later Californians' need

for an idealized and exciting localized history, in its earliest iterations it was also convenient shorthand for a period in which laws were ineffectual and boundaries remained undetermined. By the time the novel's action begins, in 1850, the territory of California officially belongs to the U.S. and is on the verge of being added as the thirty-first state, but Ridge's narration makes it clear that any official control exercised by the national government at this stage is strictly nominal. As Timothy Sweet observes, the landscapes depicted in the novel cannot "provide any realizable model for human law" (150). Sweet sees Ridge's treatment of California's "wilderness landscape" as aesthetic and distant from "questions of political, legal, and economic practice" (150). The lack of linkage between law and land is said to mirror the Cherokee's experiences in their Georgia homeland, from which they were forcibly removed despite having a legitimate legal claim to it.[119] But rather than Sweet's image of a dispossessed Murieta, denied his "agrarian-domestic" hopes by corrupt whites, I see Ridge's novel elaborating on Murieta's intrinsic and unalterable ties to the land. While it is certainly true that he is deprived of his home and rights in the novel, it is also true that he is shown to be master of the local terrain and a friend of many of its inhabitants.

When detailing the character's early attempts at farming and domestic tranquility, Ridge's descriptions are short on specificity, but once the bandit's crime spree beings, the author offers more detail on particular locations such as Arroyo Cantoova, Calaveras County, and the town of Stockton, thereby creating more vivid and complete scenes. The main impressions conveyed by these descriptions are constant movement and instability: Murieta and his gang are constantly shifting their position and eluding local authorities;

---

[119] For more on Indian Removal and the Cherokees' rhetorical and legal attempts to avoid it, see Chapter 6 of Sweet's *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in American Literature, 1580-1864* (2002).

over time they develop a recognizable circuit between the mountainous mining camps to the north and the rocky ravines of the south. At every stop along the way, Murieta displays his knowledge of local geography, small settlements, and the sprawling ranchos first established during Spanish and Mexican rule. Here, in this large swath of territory populated by Americans, Europeans, Mexicans, Indians, Californios, and Chinese, Murieta and his band commit terrible crimes and terrorize settlers, but are never depicted as intruders or aliens. Instead, they are insiders and true borderland operators who know the terrain, the people, and how to exploit both for criminal gain.

Travels and Transnationalism in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*

According to the information available to Ridge, Murieta is a native of Sonora in northern Mexico, a state that borders modern-day Arizona and New Mexico along with the Mexican portion of the Baja California peninsula. He first comes to California to engage "in the honest occupation of a miner in the Stanislaus placers, then reckoned among the richest portions of the mines" (Ridge 8). This mining area was located in and around modern-day Stanislaus County, found in California's Central Valley near the Sierra Nevada Mountains; its county seat, Modesto, is roughly ninety miles east of San Francisco.[120] Clearly, this is not an area located just across the border from Mexico, but Ridge never presents California as particularly separate from Sonora. The prevalence of Mexicans in the new U.S. state and the ease with which Murieta and his gang cross the

---

[120] The basic geography of the Central Valley will prove instructive for later discussions: it is a large, mostly flat valley that runs 450 miles north to south, bounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west and the Coast Ranges to the east. It consists of the smaller Sacramento Valley to the north, the larger and more arid San Joaquin Valley to the south, and the desert-like Tulare Basin at the far southwestern corner. Each one of these smaller valleys are physically distinct and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to develop fairly distinct cultures. In addition, each one of them plays a role in Ridge's novel. For more on the history, geography, and cultures of the Central Valley, see Chapter V of Philip L. Fradkin's *The Seven States of California: A Natural and Human History* (1997).

border back and forth prove that any recently-made distinction between the former Alta California and the current nation of Mexico is arbitrary at best. As readers will come to learn, Murieta is "incognizant of the national borders imposed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo" and carries on "as though the treaty had never been signed" (Drysdale 71).

The young and good-looking Murieta, joined by his beautiful wife, initially meets with success in the gold mines. But his good fortune only incites the jealousy and anger of nearby American miners, described as "lawless and desperate men," and they soon force him to give up his claim. When he protests, the Americans beat him and rape his wife (I must note that Ridge is not particularly interested in Murieta's wife and says little about her after this, though she is occasionally mentioned as accompanying Murieta during his crime spree). Despite the terrible nature of this "first injury he had ever received at the hands of the Americans," whom he formerly admired, Murieta chooses to remain in California, taking up residence on a "little farm on the banks of a beautiful stream that watered a fertile valley, far out in the seclusion of the mountains" (10). This description lacks specificity of place and relies on stock language of pastoral settings. Unlike his later descriptions of places, Ridge does not offer the names of any nearby towns or mining camps here, nor does he mention any counties or specific landmarks. But after Murieta is again wronged by Americans – this time they covet and forcibly take his small but ideally located estate – the author supplies more detail and locates the character more clearly within the specific landscape of early 1850s California.

Relocated to Calaveras County at "Murphy's Diggings" in the Southern Mines of the Sierra Nevadas, the dashing young Mexican first returns to mining but quickly

abandons it after seeing that it will not yield the same results as before.[121] He then turns to

dealing monte, a card game that the narrator explains is popular in Mexico and "has been

almost universally adopted by gamblers in California" (11). With his "pleasing exterior"

and lively disposition, Murieta makes a great success of this new career, but again he is

pursued by envious and violent whites, who proceed to execute his half-brother on

trumped-up charges of horse stealing and lash young Joaquin for being complicit in the

scheme. This, finally, is the last straw for the dashing young Sonoran, as he declares that

henceforth he will live only for revenge and blood. Though he is ultimately driven to

crime by a brand of persecution based solely on his status as a non-American or

"foreigner," Ridge takes pains to show Murieta as being at home in California. He settles

down to an agrarian life somewhere between the San Joaquin Valley and the Sierra

Nevadas; he moves easily as a miner and gambler; and his half-brother had been living

near Murphy's Diggings for several months. Though xenophobic whites regard him as an

alien, they will soon find out just how well he knows this former Mexican frontier.

Fueled by outrage and driven from all honest occupations, Murieta proceeds to

form an organized criminal band early in 1851 and begins to rob and murder throughout

the territory.[122] Ridge's narrator explains that there were "many wild and lonesome

regions" in California at this time, and these provide an excellent theatre for the gang's

---

[121] As Susan Lee Johnson points out in *Roaring Camp*, there were three major mining areas in California during this period: the Shasta-Trinity diggings in the far northwest of the state, and the Northern and Southern Mines, both located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Southern Mines, where Murieta is located at various points in the narrative, roughly comprises the modern-day counties of Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and Mariposa (Johnson 27-28). This large area comprises the western boundary of the aforementioned Central Valley.

[122] According to Thorntom, Pitt, and the older sources they cite, the trusted associates of Murieta included the brutal murderer Bernadino Garcia (known as "Three-Fingered Jack"), a romantic young Sonoran named Reyes Feliz, and an older bandit named Joaquin Valenzuela who had served as a Mexican guerilla fighter during the late war with the U.S., a detail attributed to Murieta himself in earlier newspaper accounts.

horse stealing, armed robbery, and murder. But throughout the early pages of the novel, a concrete sense of place continues to be noticeably absent. The narrator stresses the constant movement of Murieta's gang and their ability to shift the scenes of their crimes "with the rapidity of lightning," and while they often remain vague, some details emerge concerning these movements (15). For his part, Murieta resides for "weeks at a time in different localities," going from a "secluded part of the town of San Jose" to "the more northern part of the state" near Marysville in Yuba County, a town now considered an outer suburb of Sacramento. Located nearby is the "Sonorian Camp, a cluster of tents and cloth houses" where Murieta stays for another short period of time (20-21). For all intents and purposes, this is the first well-established location featured in Ridge's novel.

Here, the embeddedness of Mexicans within the state of California is underscored; as Mark Rifkin puts it, the novel "heightens the impression of a coherent sense of 'Mexican' identity in California" (35). This is a theme that is also prevalent in travel literature about California. For example, as late as 1892 Robert Louis Stevenson was observing that Monterey, the former capital of Mexican-owned Alta California, was still "essentially and wholly Mexican," despite the fact that "almost all the land in the neighborhood belonged to Americans" (*Across the Plains* 30). In addition, a more general racial and cultural diversity is on display in the settings of the novel – such as the town of Marysville, which was formerly a rancho granted to a German settler by the Mexican government and later sold to a group of investors consisting of two Frenchmen and a Chilean (Durham 266). Such a mixed origin is characteristic of the Gold Rush period, as Ridge also discussed the presence of Chinese immigrants, native Indians, and ragtag bands of European miners (he references French, English, and Germans in particular).

Furthermore, he occasionally alludes to the half-breed Cherokees who live in the mountains near Cherokee Flat in Calaveras County. This early incarnation of U.S.-owned California can be many things, but a clearly-demarcated part of the United States is not yet one of them.

With settings like these, it is easy to see how the novel can be approached through the methods popularized by borderlands scholars who view contact zones rather than nations as the premier "unit of and frame for analysis" and focus on physical spaces that are less territorially and culturally stable than previously imagined (Fishkin 21). And to be sure, every corner of California described by Ridge is a contact zone full of collisions between the increasingly dominant U.S., represented by swarms of land-hungry Anglo settlers, and virtually every other race or nationality drawn to California for gold or other fresh opportunities. Conflicts also existed between Californios and natives of Mexico who had immigrated north, though, as Rifkin shows, Ridge's novel elides the differences between different Hispanic groups in an effort to portray a unified sense of Mexicaness that never really existed in California (35-36). But as the narrative of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* progresses, the crude romance reveals more than just contact zones – it begins to provide detailed descriptions of specific California locations that are not legible through a nationalist lens, do not appear to be under the control of any U.S. body, and are often inhabited and understood more extensively by Hispanics than by whites. Once Murieta and his gang become truly adept veterans of crime, Ridge begins to offer detailed descriptions of their various movements. More importantly, he demonstrates that the Hispanic knowledge and use of the land is more authentic and wide-reaching than that of the white vigilantes pursuing them. Ridge clearly lifted many places

and the basic patterns of Murieta's movement from the newspaper articles that formed the

foundation of the character's legend, but much of the accompanying detail and description

seem to have been his own invention.[123]

After Murieta's initial burst of violence near Marysville and the Sonorian Camp,

he and his gang head west toward the Coast Ranges of mountains on their way to Mount

Shasta, which rises in what is now Siskiyou County along California's border with

Oregon. In the remote fastness of this area "inhabited only by human savages and savage

beasts" the outlaws hide for several months, stealing forth into the valleys on occasion to

steal horses with the assistance of local Indian tribes. Ridge's narrator speaks of gold

miners at nearby camps in Yreka and Scott's River disappearing in the mountains: "many

were found dead, supposed to have been killed by the Indians, and yet bearing upon their

bodies the marks of knives and bullets quite as frequently as arrows" (27). In the spring

of 1852, the outlaws descend from the mountains and "by forced marches in the night,

drove some two or three hundred horses which they had collected" during the winter

"down through the southern portion of the State into the province of Sonora" (28). The

scope of this transnational criminal scheme does not appear to originate in newspaper

stories. Ridge undoubtedly recycles material about Murieta wreaking havoc in the

northern gold country and stealing horses throughout the Central Valley and southern

California, and there is a precedent for Murieta travelling widely, as newspapers

throughout the first half of 1853 often reported that he was simultaneously in two or more

---

[123] This assertion of mine is based on reading many of the Murieta stories in the newspapers that created them, such as *Alta California*, the *San Francisco Herald*, the *Calaveras Chronicle*, the *San Joaquin Republican*, and even the *New York Tribune*. I then compared the details of Murieta's travels and crimes found in these articles to the details found in Ridge's novel and determined that Ridge invented a good deal of material himself. Many of the central events and the basic plot are the same, but he provides additional information, descriptions, and observations.

places at once: at one point, he was said to have killed four men in the Central Valley while also supposedly driving stolen horses to Baja California (Thornton 15-18; 80). But Ridge provides a level of innovation by elaborating on the movements and stitching them together into a (mostly) coherent narrative. By amplifying these travels, Ridge works to highlight the bandit's mastery over the entirety of California's massive borderland.

By seizing hold of preexisting details about the movements and criminal schemes of Murieta and further developing them, Ridge opens up the bandit's travels and transnational criminal activities as the key to understanding both the character and the novel's larger message concerning borders and physical space. More than merely incidental plot details of a violent work of romance, Murieta's patterns of movement may well be the most compelling and vital aspects of Ridge's work.

After depositing their stolen horses in Sonora, Murieta and company return to California and set up shop along what Ridge calls the Arroyo Cantoova, which appears to be a mispronunciation of a stream known in the Spanish days as the Arroyo de Cantua and now known as Cantua Creek. This small waterway was named after a local California *ranchero*, and it flows down from the Diablo Mountains in San Benito County south of the Bay Area and heads east through Fresno County, where it eventually ends in a canyon separating two landmarks of the western San Joaquin Valley: the Big Blue Hills and the Ciervo Hills (Hoover and Kyle 89).[124] Somewhere along the creek's course, the bandits lay low along "a fine tract of rich pasturage" fenced in by mountains and filled with game. Ridge's narrator claims that the "rich and fertile basin" is over a hundred and fifty miles

---

[124] For more on this particular geographic area, see Mildred B. Hoover and Douglas Kyle, *Historic Spots in California* (2002): p. 89, and the article "Arroyo Cantua" from the website of the California State Parks' Office of Historic Preservation.

away from any other habitation (28). This scene is described as idyllic, but there is also a

strong sense of ownership imparted to the bandits. No rival claimants appear to challenge

their presence, and they do not merely hide out along the arroyo – they set up a semi-

permanent camp and put their stolen horses out to pasture with impunity. The scenic and

secluded valley is, in short, their land. Here they rest and divide some of their spoils, but

soon Murieta splits up his band and sends them in various directions to commit more

robberies and steal additional horses. Meanwhile, Murieta himself heads north to the gold

mines of Calaveras County, the area where his rampage first began.

Generally speaking, the spaces the bandit chieftain occupies are depicted as either

barren of other human habitation (California's Native Americans are rarely mentioned) or

just as much in the hands of Mexicans as in those of the oncoming Anglo settlers. Once

arrived at Mokelumne Hill, one of the richest gold mining towns in the state at the time,

Murieta quickly falls in with the local Mexican population and disguises himself as a

wealthy and elegant gambler (30). Meanwhile, his gang continues to bring stolen horses

to Arroyo Cantua, and after a few months in mining country, Murieta returns to the

hideout and orders another horse drive to Sonora. Not until later in the narrative is the

larger plan behind all of this horse smuggling made clear: Murieta plans nothing short of a

full-scale insurrection. Here, the full implications of his criminal career become evident,

as once again Ridge takes existing details from sensationalized newspaper accounts, such

as smuggling horses across the border and swearing eternal vengeance against whites, and

enlarges their scope and intensity. Historians have shown that the revolutionary motives

Ridge attributes to Murieta were influenced by the rumors of Mexican rebellion in the

recently-added U.S. territories that were often propagated by popular newspapers, but no

specific or well-elaborated plans for insurrection appear in the original accounts of the bandit (Thornton 93).

In Ridge's novel, the bandit may turn rather rapidly into a Mexican freedom fighter, but his vision is not ultimately one of reform or lasting change – instead, it is the classic criminal fantasy of one final "score" or large payday followed by a peaceful retirement, with a little Robin Hood-esque social banditry thrown in for good measure. Here is the entirety of Murieta's plan, in his own words:

> I am at the head of an organization…of two thousand men whose ramifications are in Sonora, Lower California, and in this State. I have money in abundance deposited in a safe place. I intend to arm and equip fifteen hundred or two thousand men and make a clean sweep of the southern countries. I intend to kill the Americans by 'wholesale,' burn their ranchos, and run off their property at one single swoop so rapidly that they will not have time to collect an opposing force before I will have finished the work and found safety in the mountains of Sonora. When I do this, I shall wind up my career. (74-75)

He goes on to add that he and the gang will then be "revenged for our wrongs, and some little, too, for the wrongs of our poor, bleeding country," though it remains unclear what exactly the bandits will do for Mexico, since their main objectives seem to be murder and personal enrichment. But whether they hope to help their countrymen or not, Murieta's notion of their country or "what is rightfully theirs" obviously extends beyond the recently-formed border between Mexico and the U.S. The bandit makes a point to say that he has men with "ramifications" throughout the state, an indication that his support system consists of local Californios who, like him, seek to throw off the yoke of Anglo

settlers. If readers take these revolutionary statements at face value, it seems fair to assert that the bandits are resisting the imperial rule of the U.S. in a typical example of the sort of culture clash brought about in contact zones. But, to shift the conversation a bit, it is also fair to assert that they resemble modern-day transnational criminals such as Mexican drug cartels. In truth, they do not truly represent any national interests, and the very nature of the region they occupy renders national allegiance mostly meaningless. Like the cartels, Murieta and his men function in lawless border zones; and though these zones may be under U.S. control, they are often characterized as distinctly Hispanic in terms of inhabitants and culture. Murieta's mobility and mastery of the terrain demonstrate the ways in which California locations are only tenuously connected to American government and law enforcement.

Many commentators and scholars have demonstrated the ways in which the borderland is "a territory in its own right," estranged from the centers of power in Washington and Mexico City – and this was certainly the case in 1850s California as well (Vulliamy 7). The border has also been called "an open wound" where the third world grates against the first and bleeds, creating a border culture that contains the lifeblood of both worlds but also, presumably, their toxins and diseases. At the present time, perhaps no figurative disease takes a bigger toll on the borderlands than the drug trade, as the "flood of narcotics" running across and along the U.S.-Mexico border has turned the area into a veritable battlefield (Anzaldua 25; Vulliamy 7). This contemporary battlefield has much in common with the one Murieta and his men create in Ridge's novel. But in the fictional world devised by John Rollin Ridge, all of California is a border: a peripheral, still-wild region, a frontier to Mexicans and Americans alike, and here Murieta and his

216

men manage to exploit the isolation and divided loyalties that continue to define borderlands to this day.

A few scenes demonstrating Murieta's familiarity with the terrain stand out as prime examples of the ways in which Ridge emphasizes the outlaw's physical movements and intricate machinations. The author does not bother to divide his episodic and primitive novel into chapters, but from the point at which the gang heads back to the Southern Mines for the second time (mentioned above) all the way through the climactic shootout at the story's end, travel and movement assume primary importance in the narrative.

After a lengthy stay in southern California, which includes a battle with lawmen in Santa Barbara County and the capture and execution of a member of the gang in Los Angeles, Murieta takes advantage of the rumors of his return to Sonora and heads north to Mariposa County, another mining area located south of his former stomping grounds in Yuba and Calaveras Counties. Amongst desperate miners of French, German, American, and Chinese extraction, Murieta and his crew perform their usual thefts, killings, and hair-breadth escapes before moving west to the "goodly city of Stockton," located at the northern end of the San Joaquin Valley (66).

During the Gold Rush, Stockton became the first settlement in California to have a name with an origin neither Spanish nor Native American, and its location on the San Joaquin River made it a vital inland port and the gateway to the state's vast Central Valley. Even in this Anglo-established river town, Murieta blends in comfortably. As he rides through the streets, a group of well-dressed white women speculate that he is a "young Mexican Grandee" on a "journey of pleasure" or the son of a prominent local

217

Californio, General Vallejo. According to a legendary episode first set down in newspaper accounts and repeated by Ridge, it is here in Stockton that the "youthful cavalier" sees a wanted poster offering a five thousand dollar reward for his capture. Seized with his usual haughty grandeur and recklessness, Murieta writes on the poster, "I will give $10,000. Joaquin" (66-68). Such an event almost certainly never happened (according to historians, no reward for any of the various bandits known as Joaquin was ever posted in Stockton), but the charming episode continues the character's pattern of moving constantly and finding a measure of comfort and familiarity wherever he goes.

After leaving the town, he catches wind of a schooner bound for San Francisco that will soon travel down the low-lying San Joaquin River laden with a shipment of gold. Taking three of his men with him, Murieta procures a small skiff and they head for a bend in the river where they can hide in the tules lining the shore and await the schooner. Tules are large sedge plants native to North American freshwater marshes. They once lined the shores of Lake Tulare, located near Stockton, formerly the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi before its tributaries were diverted for agricultural and municipal purposes in the late nineteenth century. Settlement of the delta region around the Tulare Lake Basin in the southern portions of the San Joaquin Valley began in earnest during the Gold Rush era: first it was a passageway for miners anxious to reach the goldfields of northern California; soon it became a food producer for the nearby booming cities of Stockton, San Francisco, and Sacramento, with ranching and agriculture becoming dominant pursuits. From the very beginning of its organized settlement in the 1850s, the region was tied to the commercial interests of the rapidly-growing state, making it both a practical and

symbolically-fitting location for the Murieta gang's criminal endeavors (Preston, *Vanishing Landscapes* 219; 71-72).[125]

In general, tule marshes were a prominent feature of California's Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, much as the gold mining country is typified by high mountains and secluded valleys, but the great "sweep of agricultural settlement" soon to come over the valley would change the landscape, as many of the marshes were drained and rivers diverted for the sake of farm irrigation (Miller and Hyslop 27-28). By moving into this marshy area, Murieta and his gang evince an ability to move freely between the contrasting landscapes of central and northern California. While waiting for the gold shipment, they are tormented by mosquitos and heat until spotting the schooner coming down the slough; soon they have "shot down the two young men who managed the vessel" and attacked the miners on board transporting the gold (69). After taking the riches and setting fire to the ship, the bandits returns to their hideaway at Arroyo Cantua, where they rest awhile and Murieta reveals his aforementioned transnational insurrection scheme. This scene confirms that whether they are skulking in marshes or riding through mountains and valleys, on water or on land, Murieta and his men function not as aliens or outsiders in California but rather as natives and experienced hands.

Over the course of Ridge's narrative, the bandits' pattern of movement becomes clear: they seem to make most of their money by robbing miners and merchants in the foothills and mountains of Mariposa and Calaveras Counties. Then they descend from the high gold country and enter first the Sacramento Valley near Marysville and then the San

---

[125] For more on the history and development of the Tulare Lake Basin, see William L. Preston, *Vanishing Landscape: Land and Life in the Tulare Lake Basin* (1981) and Crane S. Miller and Richard Hyslop, *California: The Geography of Diversity* (1983).

Joaquin Valley to the south, where they make their headquarters along the Cantua Creek not far from modern-day Fresno. They continue to range south to Los Angeles and San Diego, usually for the purposes of transporting stolen horses across the border into Mexico. As they move from place to place, Murieta and his men often stay at the large ranchos owned by local Californios: San Luis Gonzaga and Santa Buenaventura near Los Angeles, or Joaquin Guerra's place near San Jose. As the narrator points out early on, "there were many large rancheros who were secretly connected to the banditti, and stood ready to harbor them in times of danger and to furnish them with the best animals that fed on their extensive pastures" (19).

During this period, Californios and Mexicans often worked together to fight back against the depredations of encroaching white settlers, and since Murieta was earlier cast as a bit of revolutionary, details like this seem to confirm that he and his fellow Hispanic inhabitants of California sought redress for the lands and rights they lost. Many scholars have noted the ways in which Murieta functions like a social bandit or a holdover of the Mexican-American War, but Ridge never develops Murieta's connections with local residents or describes any nationalistic feelings stirring within him.[126] Instead, the narrative simply catalogues the bandit's movements and the places he visits. The actions performed in the various locales are essentially the same: Joaquin and his gang rob miners, particularly Chinese and other immigrants, often killing a good number of them; and during his downtime he lounges with his wife at the rancho of a friend or at the Arroyo Cantua. For contemporary readers, neither Murieta's specific actions nor the

---

[126] See more on how Murrieta fits into wartime or revolutionary paradigms, see Mark Rifkin, "'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*." *Arizona Quarterly* 65.2 (2009): 27-56. David J. Drysdale, "Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*: Banditry, Counterinsurgency, and Colonial Power after Guadalupe-Hidalgo." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46.1 (2016): 62-83.

stock romantic sentiments and dialogue Ridge provides him will resonate as much as the details concerning the physical spaces of a still-wild region and the free and bold movements of the bandits. Indeed, the only real source of interest or originality found in Murieta and his men derive from the relatively novel places they inhabit. Ultimately, the effects rendered by the steady stream of prosaic details related to the bandit gang's journeys are akin to the cataloguing of places and sights often found in travel writing.

For example, in his *California, its Characteristics and Prospects* (1858), nineteenth century historian Horace Bushnell describes the typical California valley with much of the same descriptive vocabulary that Ridge employs when depicting the bandits' hideout along the Arroyo Cantua: Bushnell notes that, in this state, a valley means "more than a scoop or depression" and denotes a "rich land-lake" of the "highest beauty" encircled by mountains and cut off from nearby settlements (Bushnell 7). Ridge verifies this by classifying the bandit hideout as "a rich and fertile basin" embosomed by the rugged mountains of the Coast Range (28). Furthermore, Bushnell mentions towns like Marysville and San Jose, the distances between them, their climates, and topographies with a level of detail that Ridge often matches or at least approximates. Similarly, Murieta's interactions in the novel with Chinese "celestials," "impoverished Frenchmen" and "dilapidated Germans" echo the accounts of travel writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H.V. Huntley, and Elisha Smith Capron, all of whom comment on the Mexican, Chinese, American, and European inhabitants of the area (Ridge 32).[127] With little interiority or character development on display, the Murieta character functions

---

[127] See Stevenson, *Across the Plains* (1950); Huntley, *California: Its Gold and its Inhabitants* (1856); and Capron, *History of California, From its Discovery to the Present Time* (1854); and Horace Bushnell, *California, its Characteristics and Prospects* (1858)

primarily as a stock romantic vessel conveying ethnographic information and cataloguing ranchos and towns, flora and fauna, and notable landmarks of a new and still largely-unknown U.S. acquisition.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Following Murieta's announcement of his plan to destroy the developing Anglo society of California, his gang returns to gold country for more robberies. Back again in Calaveras County, the chieftain divides his men into two separate companies and they resume their normal operations until a group of tough-minded miners take up arms against them. When Murieta's crew escapes into the mountains, the miners pursue them, and what ensues is perhaps Ridge's clearest symbolic expression of the bandits' connection to the land. As the robbers flee, their leader conceives a plan described as "the most brilliant and ingenious that ever entered an outlaw's brain," one that will allow them to avoid the vigilantes while also carrying out their "original intention of robbing them" (88). Murieta leads his men in an easterly direction through "pin ridges" and "very rough ground" for a couple of days before ordering them to double back and retrace their steps, all the while leaving behind signs that they had stayed the night in various camps moving progressively to the east, when in fact they are circling back to the start of their flight and positioning themselves strategically behind the vigilante posse. As Ridge puts it, the leader of the miners was "unsuspecting in the remotest degree that his arch-enemy was at that moment in his rear" (88-89). The bandits eventually overtake the miners, attack them, and kill most of the party. The leader, Jim Boyce, and a few others escape and continue to find success at the mines, but Murieta's bloody work is again done well, as the gang ends up with close to thirty thousand dollars and fifteen good horses (91).

More importantly, the renegade has outsmarted the brawny Anglo settlers by displaying a superior knowledge of the land and a better sense of how to use the rocky, rugged terrain of Calaveras County to his advantage. Surely there is also some underlying significance to the fact that Murieta defeats the Americans by always doubling back behind them; by continuing to reverse course and riding to the back of the miners' course, he and his fellow Mexican bandits seem to be staking their older and more lasting claim to the mountains and valleys over which they ride, fight, and die. As David Drysdale and Mark Rifkin have observed, this terrain "bears the traces of an older order of laws" and contains many peoples within "the putative bounds of the nation" (Drysdale 71; Rifkin 27). As a result, Americans are often bewildered in their attempts to override old traditions and a heterogeneous, moving population.

Another scene cementing Murieta to the physical space of California and revealing his mastery over its cultural complexities occurs right after his victory over Boyce and the miners. He has returned to profitable thieving amongst the mining camps in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of what is now in Tuolumne County when he decides to help one of his associates, a criminal named Luis Vulvia, escape from local law enforcement. Vulvia is accused of robbery and murder, so Murieta presents himself to the magistrate as a white merchant from San Jose named Samuel Harrington and claims that Vulvia is his employee with a sound alibi. Here, Murieta truly morphs into a John Murrell-like figure by assuming a disguise and employing a smooth tongue and dissembling manner just as effectively as a gun or knife. Furthermore, by posing as a white man, Murieta is again staking a symbolic claim to the land and his mastery of both its physical features and its local legal conventions. As his alter ego Harrington, Murieta is a respectable and

successful businessman with a well-established business in the growing town of San Jose; this is all pure fiction of course, but the bandit pulls it off so well that the disguise could well have become, if enough time was devoted to it in the narrative, much like the other identities under which Murieta appeared prior to his criminal turn: humble miner, rural farmer, and fashionable monte dealer.[128] Past critics have pointed out that Murieta is a "shapeshifter" who slips between different ethnic identities, as is typical among characters occupying borderland regions. But when Shelley Streeby, Robert M. Irwin and Maria Mondragon discuss Murieta as a malleable and hybrid creation, they are referring to the various uses made of the character and the legends surrounding it, as successive versions of Ridge's novel convert him, in turn, into "a Chicano icon," "Chilean anti-imperialist rebel," and "even a Mexican national hero" (Irwin 40). But less has been said about the fact that, even within Ridge's narrative, the character proves mutable and capable of embodying different identities at different times for different reasons. Not only can he pass for white – he also shows a mastery of the chaotic and diverse cultural and ethnic landscape of early 1850s California.

Prior to the climactic shootout with the California Rangers that brings Ridge's narrative to its close, Murieta and his men are bested in their attempts to utilize the local landscape for criminal enterprises only once: when they are captured by a band of wily "Tejon" Indians.[129] Rifkin notes that "Tejon" is a "misnaming of the Miwoks, a powerful and organized tribe formerly found throughout what is now considered northern and

---

[128] Luis Leal cites Frank Latta's claim, in Latta's *Joaquin Murieta and His Horse Gangs* (1980), that the real-life Murieta spoke fluent English and "was able to pass as either a Gringo or an Englishman" (qtd. in Leal xcix). Leal goes to state that other historians have dismissed Latta's claims as "absurd."

[129] For more on Ridge's treatment of California Indians, see Peter Christensen, "Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*" *MELUS* (1991-1992) and 61-72 and John Carlos Rowe, Highway Robbery, 'Indian Removal,' The Mexican-American War, and American Identity in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Spring 1998).

central California. Rifkin argues that Ridge's confusion about the tribe's name probably

stems from the fact that one of the original reservations for the tribe was established near

the Tejon Pass, which is often regarded as the dividing line between the Central Valley

and southern California. It is here near the Pass, between the Tehachapi and the San

Emigdio Mountains, that a very peculiar scene plays out. The one extended treatment of

Indians in the entire book, and one of only three or four times that Ridge mentions them at

all, the scene takes place early in the narrative, as the bandits drive south for the first time

toward Los Angeles after pillaging the gold country. In their wake comes a group of

robbed Americans pursuing the gang. These Americans then appeal to the local Indians to

help them catch the thieves and recover their lost property. The ancestral homeland of

this particular band of Tejons (or Miwoks) is the southern San Joaquin Valley and the

Tehachapi Mountains, so it is thus appropriate that in their home region they manage to

outmaneuver the outlaws by sneaking up on their encampment one evening, overpowering

them, and binding them hand and foot before "they were aware of what was going on"

(37). Ridge depicts the Tejons as "poor, miserable, and cowardly" but also somewhat

frivolous, lazy, and avaricious. The Indians parade the captured bandits through what

Ridge derisively refers to as the Tejon "capital" village, strip them naked, and seize their

clothes and horses before eventually flogging and releasing them.

      The episode is meant to be comic and lighthearted, though it is certainly colored

by Ridge's obvious prejudices against California Indians, prejudices commonly held at the

time by Mexicans, Americans, and other Native Americans alike (Lightfoot 3; Christensen

66).[130] More important for the present purposes, however, is the local peoples' inner-connectedness to the land and the ways in which it contrasts to California's newly-arrived and frequently bewildered immigrants who so often provide inviting and helpless targets for the outlaws. It matters little to Murieta if the new arrivals are Anglos from the east, French, German, or Chinese – in each case they are strangers to the land, unfamiliar with how to protect themselves from its native dangers, and often in possession of money or horses coveted by the criminal mastermind.

California in general and the Gold Rush era in particular have always been characterized by sudden floods of immigration: by 1849, more than 40,000 people from all over the world had arrived in San Francisco Bay, and another 20-40,000 arrived overland along the California Trail or by way of the southwest and Mexicans (Lavender 59). By and large, these people knew little to nothing about California. However, Murieta and his gang, while categorized as Sonorans, do not fit the description of immigrant, both because they can easily cross back and forth to Mexico and due to their intimate familiarity with the valleys, mining camps, and burgeoning settlements of the state. Only the Tejons are crafty enough in their movements and knowledgeable enough about the landscape to get the best of Murieta and his men, but Ridge degrades the Indians and renders them ridiculous to such an extent that the defeat becomes merely a humorous anomaly and an opportunity for Murieta to display his grace and good humor, though the narrator does note in passing that the lowly Tejons "had achieved a greater triumph over them than all the Americans put together!" (38).

---

[130] For more on prejudice against California Indians, see Christensen, Kent Lightfoot, *California Indians and their Environment: An Introduction* (2009) and Karl Kroeber, "American Indian Persistence and Resurgence" *boundary* 2 (Fall 1992): 6-11.

Until the conclusion of the narrative, no other group, and certainly no white men, manage to find victory against Murieta. In his magisterial study of the Spanish-speaking Californians, historian Leonard Pitt sums up the romantic bandit's importance: "Joaquin in his heyday seemed possessed of an uncanny ability to strike everywhere at once; to operate under many names and guises; and to agitate, organize, and unite all the Spanish-speaking in their antigringo crusade" (82). Pitt goes on to explain that the character became ubiquitous because hostility between Anglos and Latin Americans took so many forms and erupted so often, not to mention the fact that in many Anglo eyes all Latinos, whether they be Sonorans, Chileans, or Californios, were essentially the same. As a result of the very real crime wave of the early 1850s often attributed to the probably mythical Murieta, "vast stretches of California became a no-man's land" as foreboding to white settlers as Indian territory or other peripheral regions not yet under full U.S. control (82). Ridge's narrative does little to develop Murieta's revolutionary inclinations, but what it *does* attend to is the war-torn, lawless geography of California's no-man's land, a region that Murieta both represents and masters. As he appears in the novel, Murieta is a criminal first – his claims to being a romantic lover or revolutionary hero are limited and underdeveloped in Ridge's work. His borderless mobility and the physical details of his criminal deeds are what truly matter, and they are what influence later crime narratives of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Evolution of Borderlands Crime and Contemporary *Narcocorridos*
        To borrow a phrase from Shelley Streeby's *American Sensations*, the Murieta story that Ridge helped to codify with his 1854 novel has since "circulated in an astonishing array of popular cultural forms." Among the examples she provides are

"crime narratives serialized in police gazettes; dime novels; twentieth-century western fiction; U.S. television shows and films" and "several Spanish-language *corridos* or ballads" (254). Streeby shows how the popular version of the story that appeared in *The California Police Gazette* in 1859, entitled *The Life of Joaquin Murieta, the Brigand Chief of California,* though mostly a plagiary of Ridge's text, removes much of the material employed in the original to emphasize Murieta's humanity or cast him in a favorable light. However, even the more sympathetic iterations of the legend follow the *Police Gazette'*s tendency "to uphold the ideal of the rule of law and to reproduce racialized stereotypes of Mexican savagery and lawlessness" (255). The corridos about Murieta that circulated as popular songs in borderland regions toward the end of the nineteenth century work to challenge the newly-established forms of Anglo-held power endorsed by Ridge and the newspaper versions of the Murieta story and also refuse the radical remapping of Mexico that took place after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. In one corrido, Murieta insists that he is not a stranger (*extrano*) in California and explains that the state is still a part of Mexico "because God wanted it that way" (Streeby 256-258). Streeby, Luis Leal, and other scholars have demonstrated how such sentiments have helped to popularize Murieta as a symbol of heroic resistance, but it is important to note that the entity he represents and fights for is not necessarily a nation-state or any other officially-sanctioned group.

Historically speaking, the Mexican sense of nationalism that began to develop in the 1830s did not fully translate to border regions in what is now Texas, Arizona, and California, places in which the Spanish-speaking residents, whether they had been born there or migrated there from other parts of Mexico, tended to consider themselves separate

in both geographical and cultural terms from the larger nations of Mexico and the United States. Streeby discusses how corridos constitute a travelling culture on the borderlands and were often circulated through migrant workers such as cowboys, railroad men, and miners who passed back and forth between Mexico and the United States. In general, borderland inhabitants were accustomed to constant change and movement. Alterations to the border and huge influxes of Anglo settlers in the years between the end of the U.S-Mexico War and 1900 displaced many Hispanic natives of border regions or at least drastically changed their lives. As a result, "the 'mexicano' border community that the corridos invoke cannot be neatly circumscribed within a fixed space," and it ultimately comes to stand for a sort of "disjunctive transnational nationalism" that does not fit into the container of the traditional nation-state (Streeby 284-285).

In the late 1800s, the border was still an open one where anyone could cross at will; such crossings were officially illegal, but neither the U.S. nor Mexico had the resources or inclination to put a stop to them. Mark Overmyer-Velasquez writes that, prior to the formation of the Border Patrol in 1924, "the border was a largely symbolic space easily crossed by laborers, political refugees, and tourists" ("Histories and Historiographies" xxxi).[131] Another reason for border crossings was economic: as U.S. towns sprung up on the other side of the border, their Mexican counterparts struggled to commercially compete. On the U.S. side, goods were cheaper and wages for workers were higher, forcing borderland inhabitants into the unenviable position of choosing

---

[131] Among the sources about the U.S.-Mexico border that Overmyer-Velasquez cites are Douglas S. Massey, Rafael Alarcon, Jorge Durand, and Humberto Gonzalez, *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico* (1987); Robert Alvarez, "The Mexican-U.S. Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 447-70; Alejandro Lugo, "Theorizing Border Inspections." *Cultural Dynamics* 12 (2000): 353-73; Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism." *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and the Rights*. Ed. William Flores (1997): 27-38.

between abandoning Mexico "or remaining at home and becoming *contrabandistas*

(smugglers), the only occupation that offered any real economic prospects" (Mora-Torres

9). Indeed, a thriving black market existed in borderland regions in which various

agricultural and manufactured goods routinely passed back and forth illegally between the

two nations (Payan 8-9). The Mexican Revolution and growing anti-immigration

sentiment in the U.S. largely halted such trade, but by the 1890, a range of new products

began to cross the border: drugs.

In his book, *Home Grown: Marijuana and Mexico's War on Drugs* (2014), Isaac

Campos points to news reports from 1897 claiming that the native plant was being

smuggled into the prisons of southern Arizona (207). Marijuana was commonly known to

border residents but tightly prohibited by the Mexican government; in fact, one of

Campos's central claims is that Mexican demonization of the substance influenced later

anti-drug legislation in the U.S. Though it was undoubtedly sold and used in border

regions, marijuana did not become big business until the second half of the twentieth

century; the drug that first created a transnational drug trade along the U.S.-Mexico border

was heroin. With a lightly-guarded border and conditions suitable for poppy production,

Mexico became a major opiate supplier by the 1940s, and other drugs soon followed. By

the 1970s, Mexican drug traffickers supplied as much as 80 percent of the heroin and

marijuana consumed in the U.S. (S. MacDonald 70).

Nevertheless, up until the 1980s drug smuggling in Mexico remained a regional

activity. It was largely confined to the border regions due to the control of the

international trade exercised by Colombian cartels. But U.S.-led crackdowns on the

Colombians cleared the way for Mexican trafficking organizations that had previously

worked merely as middlemen or suppliers in localized areas. The drug trade was also

enhanced by Mexico's 1994 signing of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement),

which "flooded the country with cheap agribusiness-produced" commodities and

converted many farmers and farm laborers into traffickers (Muehlmann 11-12). Over the

course of the late 1980s and early 90s, a culture began to spring up around these

increasingly-powerful *narcos*. [132]

Juan Pablo Dabove, in his *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and

Literature in Latin America, 1816-1929 (2007), makes explicit the link between Murieta

and the drug traffickers of present day: "Murieta was the first and most prominent in a

series of Mexican-American outlaws that includes Tiburico Vazquez, Gregorio Cortez,

Juan Cortina, and Eligio Baca, and whose last individuation is the legion of drug dealers,

both big and small, of the Mexico-U.S. border who have become heroes in the epic of the

narcocorrido" (10-11). In the final decades of the twentieth century, these contemporary

corridos and a wider body of folklore developed along the border in which the "big men"

involved in drug sales and smuggling along the border become archetypal heroes or social

bandits in the tradition established by Hobsbawm. Mark Edberg and other anthropologists

have shown that contemporary *narcocorrido* draw on the traditions of past "border ballads

with epic themes of heroes who resisted the Texas Rangers, U.S. authorities, or, in some

cases, even central Mexican authorities." In a vein similar to "gangsta rap or early

reggae," contemporary ballads and folktales about narcos usually center on the everyday

---

[132] For more on the U.S./Mexico drug trade and drug trafficking, see Scott B. MacDonald, *Dancing on a Volcano: The Latin American Drug Trade*. New York: Greenwood, 1988; Mark Edberg, *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Tony Payan, *The Three U.S-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security*. Westport, CN: Praeger, 2006; and Alfredo Corchado, *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey through a Country's Descent into Darkness* (2013).

hardships these outlaw heroes face and the criminal deeds they must undertake in order to find success within their volatile home region (25). The classic border hero type of earlier corridos continues to serve as the basis for the modern-day narco trafficker: gun-toting and ruthless, but also sympathetic to the poor and dispossessed because he, too, comes from an impoverished, rural background (111). Macho and violent, this type is also charismatic and appealing to a large audience due to his bravery and resistance to unjust authority. Despite the brutal violence that often characterizes the drug trade, the figure of the *narcotraficante* "constitutes a positive symbolic resource for ordinary people," many of whom enjoy seeing border residents like themselves become powerful actors on the large and violent stage of the international drug war (Muehlmann 86). [133]

All of this is not to say that contemporary drug traffickers are directly analogous to the sort of nineteenth century border bandits represented by the literary Murieta. The two groups are obviously separated by time, technology, and method. However, the scope of Murieta's crimes and the manner in which they were recorded and celebrated, by Ridge and by later writers, anticipates the narcos in both fact and fiction. More importantly, Ridge's treatment of the Sonoran badman establishes the groundwork for understanding and depicting criminals of the U.S.-Mexico border that remains very much in place today. In both the Murieta legend and the later songs and stories surrounding the borderland drug trade, there is an illegibility and indeterminacy that work on two related but distinct levels:

---

[133] For more scholarship on *narcocorridos*, see Elijah Wald, "Narcocorridos: A New Ballad Tradition." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* 46.1 (2002): 71-72; Mark Edberg, *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2004); Howard Campbell, "Drug-Trafficking Stories: Everyday Forms of Narco Folklore on the U.S.-Mexico Border." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 16.5 (2005): 326-333; and Shaylih Muehmann, *When I Wear my Alligator Boots: Narco Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (2014).

physically, these regional traits work to hide outlaws from justice; culturally, they blur the lines between nationalities, jurisdictions, and official borders.

In one of the more recent iterations of the Joaquin legend, Isabel Allende's 1999 novel *Daughter of Fortune*, the title character follows her Chilean lover to the gold fields of California, only to learn that the political rebel and idealist she knew back home as Joaquin Andieta has become Murieta, notorious bandit and murderer. One passage near the end of the book illustrates the ways in which mobility and untraceable, borderless movement have remained central components to the character even when he is far removed from Ridge's original vision: "On a brittle map she tracked Murieta's steps with the determination of a navigator, but the available information was vague and contradictory: routes crisscrossed like the web of a demented spider, leading nowhere" (403). In Allende's version of the legend, the outlaw has merged so completely into the wild and varied landscape of California that the novel's protagonist never succeeds in finding him. No matter how the character has been deployed over the years or which marginalized group adopts him, Murieta is always understood chiefly through both his relationship to a border region that facilitates crime through its rugged physical geography and relative isolation, and his kinship with a border culture that prizes resistance to oppression and glorifies the sort of violent outlawry that often serves as the only effective pushback against American hegemony.

The Murieta of late nineteenth century corridos or Allende's novel does not bear much resemblance to the composite created by John Rollin Ridge from California newspaper articles back in 1854, but even the biggest departures from the character's origins retain details about his transnational crime and the sense of regional displacement

captured in Ridge's pulpy novel. These features shine through the brightest in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* when Ridge offers rich descriptions of the specific towns and landmarks that Murieta visited and used as hideouts or staging grounds for criminal acts. Such descriptions, along with fine-grained summaries of movements and escape strategies, provide an often-shoddily constructed narrative with its most impactful and symbolically-redolent passages. In these moments, by demonstrating time and time again the bandit's familiarity and kinship with the immense borderland that is 1850s California, a largely-forgotten nineteenth century author provides an unforgettable template for transnational crime and border identity that has remained pertinent ever since, especially now in the uncertain and volatile political terrain of 2018.

<u>Coda: Shinbone, John Ford, and the Americanization of the Transnational Frontier Bandit</u>

Film critics and scholars have lauded John Ford's 1962 classic Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, as one of the director's more thoughtful and elegiac works. It is perhaps best remembered for the famous line uttered by the editor of the town's newspaper in the small western settlement in which the film is set: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" (Bellah and Goldbeck). The editor says this after learning that the legend of Senator Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), the hero who killed the villainous outlaw Liberty Valance years earlier, is all fiction. The film "questions the role of myth in forging the legends of the West," and Sergio Leone claimed that it was the only time that Ford "learned about something called pessimism" (Nixon, *TMC*).

Despite its somber atmosphere, Ford's film is very much about the modernization and development of frontier settlements. When Stoddard first arrives as a young lawyer in Shinbone, a lonely frontier outpost located in an unnamed and isolated western territory, he finds a place with virtually no civic institutions or law. When he returns decades later as a distinguished senator, he finds a thriving and well-organized town. Stoddard himself is largely responsible for this change: as a young lawyer, he opens a school for the illiterate townsfolk and later becomes an official delegate for a statehood convention at the unnamed territorial capital. The local cattle barons oppose statehood but Stoddard maintains that it will improve infrastructure, safety, and education;

ultimately, the entire town comes to share his vision for the future. Indeed, as critic

Richard Brody points out, the film is a bit unusual in its careful depiction of a free press,

free school, town meetings, and statehood debates – processes and places not usually

depicted in popular Westerns (RogerEbert.com). But the primary means by which

Stoddard brings progress to this western backwater is more traditionally exciting and

cinematic: his defeat of the evil Valance. The bandit and his crew had been terrorizing

Shinbone for years, and they waylay the stagecoach carrying Stoddard and a few other

passengers into town. Later, as he recovers from the beating Valance gave him, Stoddard

hears townsfolk like his future wife Hallie (Vera Miles) and Tom Doniphon (John

Wayne) discuss Valance and the impossibility of dealing with him peacefully. When

Stoddard refuses the carry a gun and declares that he plans to throw the bandit in jail,

Doniphon tells him, "I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out

here, a man settles his own problems" (Bellah and Goldbeck). Stoddard, a young and

earnest lawyer looking to open his first practice, incredulously notes that this scorn for

legal process echoes the sentiments Valance expressed during the robbery. He realizes

that the entire town has adopted the belief that life on the borderland is inherently lawless

and rife with violence. But with Stoddard's tireless efforts to modernize the place, and

the assistance of the other main characters, Shinbone becomes the home of democratic

institutions and the rule of law, thereby transforming into something more recognizably

American.

Much like Helena, Arkansas, Shawneetown in Illinois, or the various settlements

Joaquin Murieta visits in California, Shinbone is initially portrayed as undeveloped,

isolated, and culturally diverse to such degrees that it is essentially precluded from full

236

incorporation into the nation. And like bandits discussed throughout this project, Valance

is mobile and not bound by any sense of borders: he visits the town occasionally but

commits most of his crimes out "in the territory," an undefined and seemingly vast

theater of operations   At one point, the cowardly and comic town marshal (Andy Devine)

claims that anything Valance does outside of Shinbone is subject to "territorial law" and

that he has no jurisdiction out there. Without clear municipal or state laws, the town is

effectively removed from the national framework.

It is only when virtuous Americans like Stoddard assume leadership roles and

establish schools, newspapers, and town hall meetings that such a place can be truly

"American." Thus, the same questions and anxiety concerning the inclusion of marginal

frontier and borderland spaces that characterized antebellum frontier crime fiction

continue to register in later Westerns set on a much later frontier. And just as the

transnational frontier bandits of the first half of the nineteenth century disrupted the

modernization process on the frontier with their violence, mobility, and non-national

identities, Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) subverts and opposes any attempt to bring

Shinbone and the surrounding territorial areas under firm national control. In fact, much

of what defines Marvin's swaggering and brutal character as dangerous is his resistance

to progress and regular American institutions.

There is a memorable scene in the film when Valance and his crew beat Dutton

Peabody (Edmond O'Brien), the drunken newspaper editor, and ransack the offices of the

Shinbone Star. A sign for Stoddard's law office hangs outside the door (a favor from

Peabody to Stoddard), and the bandits go ahead and destroy it, too. Moments later,

Stoddard emerges to shoot Valance down in the street. Attempts to destroy the free press

and the law prove a bridge too far for the notorious bandit. Even though Stoddard is not

actually the one to kill Valance, it is on the strength of his efforts modernize the frontier

that Shinbone is no longer a safe home for western outlaws. The institutions Valance

strives to tear down are now more powerful than he is, and the end of his reign signals the

end of an older, more barbarous, and less nationalized way of life on the frontier.

However, Ford's film is not nearly so simple as all that. The man truly

responsible for eliminating the threat posed by Valance's destabilizing criminality is

Wayne's Doniphon, a local rancher and Stoddard's friend who never becomes a public

figure or the face of progress. The stout rancher is hiding nearby during Stoddard's

showdown with Valance and fires the fateful bullet at the same time that the greenhorn

lawyer shoots inaccurately. Doniphon had earlier echoed Valance's scorn for law and

told Stoddard that "out here, a man takes care of his own problems." And despite all of

his protestations on behalf of order and reason, Stoddard *does* resort to carrying a gun and

attempts to shoot Valance dead. Later, the entire legend surrounding his heroism is based

on a lie. Thus, while seeming to promote progress, the film also indicates that the forces

of chaos like mobile frontier bandits can only be vanquished by similarly lawless forces

like Doniphon, not the men of civic virtue and strong morals like Stoddard. Thus, when

Shinbone becomes too orderly for men like Valance, it becomes too orderly for men like

Doniphon as well. His only scene in the film following the shootout features him in a

drunken rage burning down much of his house. This ignominious end to his narrative arc

illustrates that the character's time is up: he flourished in the lawless and borderless days

of yesteryear, but is now no more equipped than Valance to transition to statehood and

modernity.

Steelkilt, John Murrell, Camilla, Kelly, and Joaquin Murieta all function in their respective works of fiction as disruptive forces standing in the way of American progress. The adventures and travels of these bandits provide grist for escapist fantasies and romance, but they also call into question the civilizing missions underwriting U.S. expansion in the early nineteenth century. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to show how the regions these bandits occupy and the alternative national identities they construct complicate the orderly march of Anglo-American expansion in popular crime fiction of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s. By the golden era of Hollywood Westerns, all regions of the United States had been nationalized and all borders securely fastened. Yet in their retrospective look at "how the West was won," these films continued to return to the same set of questions of that appeared in the works of Melville, H.R. Howard, Emerson Bennett, and John Rollin Ridge: just how *does* the nation go about incorporating new regions with Native American, Mexican, or European histories? When do frontiers become safe for eastern settlers? And what if crime and cultural plurality are inherent and unchangeable parts of certain newly-incorporated places?

Though he continues to carry many of the same symbolic functions and troubling implications, the frontier bandit is also very different by the time of Lee Marvin's performance as Liberty Valance. The basic contours of the character are the same, as are many of the things he represents, but the mysterious and unknown qualities that characterized Steelkilt, Murrell, Camilla, and Murieta, and are reflective of the regions they inhabit, are largely absent from Valance and from the town he terrorizes. Shinbone is just as much a fringe territory as the places the earlier bandits occupied, but while Melville, Howard, Bennett, and Ridge lingered on the details of these spaces and

marveled at their strange, non-national, and often non-white histories, John Ford and his writers are concerned with their setting only insomuch as it provides a stage for their drama of progress and the building of America. They do not explore its origins or the ways it resists easy assimilation into the national framework. And in Valance, they present a villain who has no traces of a pre-national or borderless identity: he is merely a white man living in a wild zone. He is not marked, like his predecessors, by his region's association with Native Americans, Mexicans, or Europeans. He is not compared to Ashantee warriors like Steelkilt and does not serve as a holdover from the Spanish empire in the fashion of Camilla. The whitewashing and complete nationalization of the typical frontier bandit was mostly complete by the time of Ford's film, but vestiges of the character's basic structure and cultural importance remained in place, as did the primary message it conveyed to audiences: as long as borderless bandits run rampant, frontier spaces cannot become fully integrated into the fabric of the nation.

While it is true that the transnational frontier bandits of this study were the foundation for many of the Wild West outlaws that became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is also true that Steelkilt, Murrell, Murieta, and Camilla are far stranger, more difficult to categorize, and more threatening than later characters of their ilk. Post-bellum outlaws operated in a West that was far better understood and mapped than the frontier regions described by Melville, Bennett, and Ridge. Once western cultures and terrains were fully subsumed under U.S. control, the typical bandit character becomes merely a robber and bully, a violent man in a violence place. But the bandits of this study are more than that. They represented western frontiers that were often just as unknown to readers as the Pacific Ocean or Asian empires. And the

characters themselves did not behave in the ways audiences might have expected: Steelkilt at first seems to be a typically bold and bluff boatman of middle American folklore before growing into an international agent of terror. Murrell seems to be a familiar backwoodsman of the Old Southwest but is actually a transnational criminal plotting a large-scale slave revolt. And Murieta, at first blush, appears to a Sonoran bandit in Gold Rush-era California, but in the borderland geography of Ridge's novel, he is reconfigured as a local fighting for his native rights.

Ultimately, these characters were a bit too untenable for future fictional use. In the decades to follow, their destabilizing and borderless criminality was either ignored or romanticized into more palatable symbols of revolution and the roughly-hewn frontier spirit. Aspects of their characterization, mobility, and regional difference transferred to later figures like Deadwood Dick, Billy the Kid, and Jesse James but underwent a process of homogenization and Americanization that rendered outlaw characters quite different in the 1870s and 80s than they had been in the 1830s and 40s.

Two years ago, I began this project with the intention of establishing an earlier prototype of the Wild West outlaw and constructing a genealogy of the character from its origins in the days of the early republic to its most famous incarnations of the twentieth century. But I soon discovered that the early bandits of America's early Wests were too unruly and complex to be anything so simple as a standard-bearer or prototype. Rather, they continue to function as symbols of the instability and fears associated with U.S. expansion in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their limitless mobility, over-the-top violence, and often inexplicable motives illustrate the shaky ground on which American progress so often rested. They refute the terms and assumptions under which

expansion took place, so it is thus fitting that their literary relevance ends after the regions they represent are no longer in flux or hanging on the periphery of the nation. Once the Great Lakes, the Midwest, the Old Southwest, and California become fully nationalized and recognizable, these bandits must disappear.

Some of their most obvious dangers continue to lurk in characters like Valance, but the regional and identity crises of old frontiers were largely gone by the time the nation emerged from the Civil War. After the 1860s, there was no longer any doubt about the essential viability of the United States and its quest for continental domination. Therefore, the transnational frontier bandit as he had been no longer had a place, for the fears he represented had been largely quelled. In the end, I believe that what Melville says about Murrell in *The Confidence-Man* is equally true of all the original transnational frontier bandits discussed here: they were "one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors" (2). The wolves may be gone now, but it will benefit students of American literature and culture to know what they did, what they represented, why they were exterminated, and the ways in which some of their attributes live on.

References

Albanese, Jay. *Transnational Organized Crime: An Overview from Six Continents.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012.

Allen, Michael. *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

Allende, Isabel. *Daughter of Fortune: A Novel.* New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury. Ed. Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands: La Frontera*: *The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.

Arnold, Morris S. "Indians and Immigrants in the Arkansas Colonial Era." *Arkansas: A Narrative History*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2002.

Baker, Ann. *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Baldwin, Leland. *The Keelboat Age on Western Waters.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, (1941).

Ball, Larry D. "Murrell in Arkansas: An Outlaw Gang in History and Tradition." *Mid-South Folklore* 6 (1978): 65-75.

Baptist, Edward E. "Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor: Hands, Whipping-Machines, and Modern Power." *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of*

American Economic Development. Ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman.

> Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Bennet, Emerson. *The Bandits of the Osage: A Western Romance.* Cincinnati: Robinson

> & Jones, 1848.

----. *Mike Fink: A Legend of the Ohio.* Cincinnati: U.P James, 1852. Sabin Americana.

Berg, Manfred. *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America.* Chicago: Ivan R.

> Dee, 2011.

Billington, Ray Allen. *America's Frontier Heritage.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, and

> Winston, 1966.

Blair, Walter and Franklin J. Meine. *Mike Fink: King of the Mississippi Keelboatmen.*

> New York: H. Holt and Co., 1933.

Bold, Christine. *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960.*

> Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *A Universal History of Infamy.* Trans. By Norman Thomas di

> Giovanni. New York: Dutton, 1972.

Boulware, Tyler W. "Outlaws of the South Carolina Backcountry, 1759-1775. M.A

> Thesis, University of South Carolina, 2000.

Bray, Robert C. *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois.* Chicago: University of

> Illinois Press, 1982.

Brehm, Victoria. "Great Lakes Maritime Fiction." *America and the Sea: A Literary*

> *History.* Ed. Haskell Springer. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995:

> 224-232.

Bridge-Whaley, John. *Political Fiction and the American Self*. Chicago: University of

    Illinois Press, 1998.

Brown, Charles Brockden. *Edgar Huntly; Or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*. Intro. Eric

    Carl Link. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007.

Brown, Richard M. *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and*

    Vigilantism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Bryant, William Cullen. "The Prairies." *PoetryFoundation.org*.

    https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55341/the-prairies

Bukowczyk, John J. "Migration, Transportation, Capital, and the State in the Great

    Lakes Basin, 1815-1890." *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as*

    Transnational Region, 1650-1990. Ed. John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David

    R. Smith, and Randy William Widdis. Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh

    Press, 2005.

Bushnell, David. *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century*. New

    York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Bushnell, Horace. *California, its Characteristics and Prospects*. San Francisco: Whitton,

    Towne and Co., 1858.

Campos, Isaac. *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs*.

    Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

"Cap'n Dan Seavey Dies at 83, Ending Colorful Career on Great Lakes." *The Escanaba*

    Daily Press (Feb. 1949): 2.

Cayton, Andrew R.L. "The Meanings for the Wars for the Great Lakes." *The Sixty Years' War for the Great Lakes, 1754-1814*. Ed. David C. Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2001: 373-390.

Cayton, Andrew R.L. and Fredrika J. Teute. "Introduction: On the Connection of Frontiers." *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830*. Ed. Andrew R.L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

--- and Fredrika J. Teute. "Introduction: On the Connection of Frontiers." *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830*. Ed. Andrew R.L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998: 1-15.

Chittick, V.L.O. *Ring-Tailed Roarers: Tall Tales of the American Frontier, 1830-1860*. Claxton, ID: Caxton Printers, 1941.

Christensen, Peter G. "Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*." *MELUS* (Summer 1991-92): 61-72.

Church, Benjamin. *Entertaining Passages Relating to King Philip's War: Commonly Called the Great Indian War of 1675 and 1676*. Exeter, N.H: J & B. William, 1829.

Clark, Thomas D. *The Rampaging Frontier: Manners and Humor of Pioneer Days in the South and Middle West*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1968

---. *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*. Sixth Edition. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.

Coates, Robert. *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace*. New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1930.

Cook, Ebenezer. "The Sot-Weed Factor; or, A Voyage to Maryland." London: D. Bragg, 1708.

Coulombe, Joseph L. "Emerson Bennett." *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction Writers*. Ed. Kent P. Ljungquist. Detroit, Gale Research, 1999.

Dabove, Juan Pablo. *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America, 1816-1929*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

Dana, Richard Henry Jr. *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative*. Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Co., 1869.

Davidson, Cathy. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Davis, William C. *Three Roads to the Alamo: The Lives and Fortunes of David Crockett, James Bowie and William Barret Travis*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

DeBlack, Thomas A. "'The Right and Rank to Which We Are Entitled': Arkansas in the Early Statehood Period." *Arkansas: A Narrative History*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2002.

DeGuzman, Maria. *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

DeMenil, Alexander Nicolas. *The Literature of the Louisiana Territory*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1971.

DeVoto, Bernard. *Mark Twain's America*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1932.

DeRosier, Jr., Arthur H. *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians*. Knoxville, TN:

    University of Tennessee Press, 1970.

Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier. Ed. Eric Heyne.

    New York: Twayne, 1992.

Didion, Joan. *Where I Was From*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Dimock, Wai-Chee. "Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset." *Shades of the*

    Planet: American Literature as World Literature. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and

    Lawrence Buell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007: 1-16.

Douglas, C.L. *James Bowie: The Life of a Bravo*. Dallas, TX: Banks, Upshaw, and Co.,

    1944.

Doyle, Don H. *Faulkner's Country: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*. Chapel

    Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Drysdale, David J. Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*: Banditry, Counterinsurgency, and Colonial

    Power after Guadalupe-Hidalgo." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 46.1

    (2016): 62-83.

Eaton, Clement. *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South*. New York: Harper

    and Row, 1964.

Edberg, Mark. *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural*

    Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.

Ekberg, Carl J. *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in*

    Colonial Times. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Empire and the Literature of Sensation: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction. Edited with Introduction by Jose Aleman and Shelley Streeby. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime and Justice. Ed. Margaret Beare. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012.

Everett, Diana. "Indian Territory." *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Norman, OK: Oklahoma Historical Society, 2000.

Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Random House, 1951.

Featherstonhaugh, George William. *Excursion through the Slave States*, *from Washington to the Potomac, to the frontier of Mexico; with sketches of popular manners and geological notices*. New York: Harper, 1844.

Field, Joseph M. "Mike Fink: The Last of the Boatmen" (1847). *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*. Ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Fitz James, Zilla. *Zilla Fitz James, The Female Bandit of the South-West*. In *Blacklegs, Card Sharps, and Confidence Men: Nineteenth-Century Mississippi River Gambling Stories*. Ed. Thomas Ruys Smith. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010.

Flanagan, John T. *James Hall: Literary Pioneer of the Ohio Valley*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1941.

Flint, Timothy. "Mike Fink: The Last of the Boatmen" (1829). *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*. Ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Foley, Neil. *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

Fradkin, Philip L. *The Seven States of California: A Natural and Human History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Frank, Armin Paul. "Ebenezer Cook's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: An Intercultural Reading." *Finding Colonial Americas: Essays Honoring J.A. Leo Lemay*. Ed. Carla Mulford and David S. Shields, 2001.

Friman, Richard. *Crime and the Global Political Economy*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009.

Fussell, Edwin. *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965.

Genovese, Eugene. *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

Gerstacker, Friedrich. *The Pirates of the Mississippi*. New York: G. Routledge, 1856.

Giles, Paul. "The Deterritorialization of American Literature." *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007: 39-61.

Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983.

Green, Archie. *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and other Heroes: Lablorlore Explorations*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Green, Jonathan H. *Secret Band of Brothers, or, The American Outlaws*. Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber and Co., 1847.

Gudmestad, Richard H. *A Troubling Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade.* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003.

Guilds, John Caldwell. *The Writings of William Gilmore Simms: A Centennial Edition*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1969.

Gutierrez-Jones, Carl. *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Haas, Lisbeth. "War in California, 1846-1848." *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush.* Ed. Ramon Guiterrez and Richard J. Orsi. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998: 331-356.

Hadfield, Charles. *The Canal Age*. New York: Praeger, 1968.

Half Horse, Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend. Ed. and Intro.Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956

Hall, James. *Letters From The West; Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs; And Anecdotes Connected with the First Settlements of Western Sections of the United States* (1828). Ed. John T. Flanagan. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1967.

Hall, James. *The Harpe's Head, a Legend of Kentucky*. Philadelphia: Key & Biddle, 1833.

Hart, James D. *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Havighurst, Walter. *The Long Ships Passing: The Story of the Great Lakes*. New York: MacMillan, 1956.

Higgins, James. *Lima: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Bandits*. New York: Pantheon, 1981.

---. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1959.

Hochbruck, Wolfgang. "Leatherstocking and River Pirates: The Adventure Novels of Friedrich Gerstacker." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXIII (Spring 2014).

Hogeland, William. *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty*. New York: Scribner, 2006.

Holt, Keri. "Double-Crossings: The Trans-American Patriotism of *Francis Berrian*." *Western American Literature* 44.4 (Winter 2010): 313-341.

Hoover, Mildred B. and Douglas Kyle. *Historic Spots in California*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Howard, H.R. *The History of Virgil A. Stewart and His Adventure in Capturing and Exposing The Great Western Land Pirate and His Gang*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836.

---. *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate*. New York: H. Long and Brother, 1848.

Hsu, Hsuan L. and Martin Bruckner. "Introduction." *American Literary Geographies: Spatial Practice and Cultural Production, 1500-1900*. Ed. Martin Bruckner and Hsuan L. Hsu. Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2007: 11-28.

Hulbert, Archer B. *The Paths of Inland Commerce: A Chronicle of Trail, Road, and Waterway*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920.

Hurt, James. *Writing Illinois: The Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

In the Arkansas Backwoods: Tales and Sketches by Friedrich Gerstacker. Edited and Translated by James W. Miller. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991.

Irving, Washington. *A Tour of the Prairies*. Ed John Francis McDermott. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956.

Irwin, Robert McKee. *Bandits, Captives, Heroines, and Saints: Cultural Icons of Mexico's Northwest Borderlands*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Jackson, Joseph Henry. "Joaquin Murieta." *Bad Company: The Story of California's Legendary and Actual Stage-Robbers, Bandits, Highwaymen and Outlaws from the Fifties to the Eighties*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949.

Johnson, Michael L. *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007.

Johnson, Susan Lee. Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Jones, Daryl. *The Dime Novel Western*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University
Popular Press, 1978.

Justus, James. *Fetching the Old Southwest: Humorous Writing from Longstreet to
Twain*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004.

Kaplan, Amy. "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of
American Culture." *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Ed. Amy Kaplan and
Donald E. Pease. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

---. "Transnational Melville." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 12.1
(March 2010): 42-52.

Kelley, Wyn. "The Style of Lima: Colonialism, Urban Form, and 'The Town-Ho's
Story.'" *Melville Among the Nations*. Ed. Sanford Marovitz and A.C
Christodoulou. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001. 61-71.

Kerr, Derek N. *Petty Felony, Slave Defiance, and Frontier Villainy: Crime and Criminal
Justice in Spanish Louisiana, 1770-1803*. New York: Garland, 1993.

Klaren, Peter F. *Peru: Society and Nationhood in the Andes*. Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2000.

Kosok, Heinz. "Ishmael's Audience in "The Town-Ho's Story." *Notes and Queries* 14
(1967): 54-56.

Kruse, Horst H. *Mark Twain and "Life on the Mississippi."* Amherst, MA: University
of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Lape, Noreen *West of the Border: The Multicultural Literature of the Western American Frontier*. Athens, OH: University of Ohio Press (2000).

Lavender, David. *California: A Bicentennial History*. New York: W.W Norton, 1976.

Leal, Luis. "Introduction." *The Life and Adventures of the Most Celebrated Sonoran Bandit, Joaquin Murieta*: *His Exploits in the State of California.* Ed. Ireneo Paz. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2001.

Lehuu, Isabelle. *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

LeMenager, Stephanie. *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

Liddick, Don. *The Global Underworld: Transnational Crime and the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.

Lightfoot, Kent G. *California Indians and their Environment*: *An Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Luce, Dianne C. "John A. Murrell and the Imagination of Simms and Faulkner." *William Gilmore Simms and the American Frontier*. Ed. John Calwell Guilds and Caroline Collins. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

MacDonald, Scott B. *Dancing on a Volcano: The Latin American Drug Trade*. New York: Greenwood, 1988.

MacLean, Angus. *Legends of the California Bandidos*. Fresno, CA: Pioneer Pub., 1977. *Making of the Modern World.* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

McKee, Russell. *Great Lakes Country*. New York: T.Y Crowell Co., 1966.

McLaurin, Nancy Della. "A Study of the Southern Frontier in Prose Fiction Prior to
1860." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1957.

Meinig, Donald William. *The Shaping of America. Vol. 2, Continental America, 1800-
1967: A Geographical Perspective of 500 Years of History*. New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1993.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*: *Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd edition. Ed. Hershel Parker
and Harrison Hayford. New York: Norton, 2002.

---. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Indianapolis: Bobbs:Merrill,
1967.

Meyer, Richard E. "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype." *Journal of the
Folklore Institute* 17.2/3 (1980): 94-124.

Miller, Hart S. and Richard S. Hyslop. *California: The Geography of Diversity*. Palo
Alto, CA: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1983.

Mora-Torres, Juan. "Los de casa se van, los de fuera no vienen': The First Mexican
Immigrants, 1848-1900.'" *Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S.
Migration*. Ed. Mark Overmyer-Velazquez. New York: Oxford University Press,
2011: 3-27.

Muehmann, Shaylih. *When I Wear my Alligator Boots: Narco Culture in the U.S.-
Mexico Borderlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Myers, Robert. "Nick Trammell: The Making of an Old Southwest Legend." *The
Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXXIV.4 (Winter 2015): 352-378.

Nasatir, Abraham P. *Borderland in Retreat: From Spanish Louisiana to the Far*
     Southwest. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

---. *Spanish War Vessels on the Mississippi, 1792-1796*. New Haven:
     Yale University Press, 1968.

Neville, Morgan. "The Last of the Boatmen" (1828). *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The*
     Growth of the Mike Fink Legend. Ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine.
     Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Nichol, John. "Melville and the Midwest." *PMLA* 66 (Sept. 1951): 613-625.

O'Brien, Thomas. *Making the Americas: The United States and Latin America from the*
     Age of Revolution to the Era of Globalization. Albuquerque: University of New
     Mexico, 2007.

Old Southwest Humor from the St. Louis Reveille, 1844-1850. Ed. and Intro. Fritz
     Oehlschlaeger. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990.

Overmyer-Velazquez, Mark. "Histories and Historiographies of Greater Mexico."
     Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration. Ed. Mark Overmyer-
     Velazquez. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011: xix-xlv.

Pabis, George S. *Daily Life Along the Mississippi*. Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press,
     2007.

Paredes, Americo. *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*. Austin, TX:
     CMAS Books, 1993.

Parins, James W. *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works*. Lincoln, NE: University of
     Nebraska Press, 1991.

Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography*. Vol. 1. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996.

Paul, Sherman. "Melville's 'The Town-Ho's Story." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 2 (1949): 212-221.

Payan, Tony. *The Three U.S-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security.* Westport, CN: Praeger, 2006.

Penick, Jr., James L. *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and*

Petter, Henri. *The Early American Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1971.

Phares, Ross. *Reverend Devil: A Biography of John A. Murrell*. New Orleans: Pelican, 1941.

Pitt, Leonard. *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Preston, William L. *Vanishing Landscapes: Land and Life in the Tulare Lake Basin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Rafferty, Milton D. *Missouri: A Geography*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983.

Rediker, Marcus. *Between the Devil and Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Piracy, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

---. *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

Ridge, John Rollin. *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* [1854]. Introduction by Joseph Henry Jackson. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955.

Rifkin, Mark. "'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*." *Arizona Quarterly* 65.2 (2009): 27-56.

Robertson, Morgan. *Where Angels Fear to Tread and Other Tales of the Sea*. New York: McClure and Metropolitan, 1899: 5-58.

Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *The winning of the West*. New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1900-1901.

Roripaugh, Robert. "Melville's *Typee* and the Frontier Travel Literature of the 1830s and 1840s." *South Dakota Review* 19.4 (Winter 1982): 46-64.

Rothert, Otto. *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock*. Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1924.

---. *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock*. Foreword by Robert A. Clark. Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois Press, 1996.

Rothman, Adam. *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Rothman, Joshua. *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

---. "The Contours of Cotton Capitalism: Speculation, Slavery, and Economic Panic in

    Mississippi, 1832-1841." *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American*

    Economic Development. Ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman. Philadelphia:

    University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Rotundo, Anthony E. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the*

    Revolution to the Modern Era. New York: BasicBooks, 1993.

Schmitt, Karl M. *Mexico and the United States, 1821-1973: Conflict and Coexistence*.

    New York: J. Wiley and Sons, 1974.

Seal, Graham. *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America, and*

    Australia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Simeone, W.E. "Robin Hood and Some Other Outlaws." *The Journal of American*

    Folklore 71 (1958): 27-33.

Simms, William Gilmore. *Richard Hurdis; or, The Avenger of Blood. A Tale of*

    Alabama. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1838.

Slaughter, Thomas P. *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American*

    Revolution. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Slotkin, Richard. *So Dreadfull a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip's War,*

    1676-1677. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978.

---. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of*

    Industrialization, 1800-1890. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. New York:

    Random House, 1957.

Smith, Sidney. *The Settler's New Home; or, the Emigrant's Location*. London: J.

    Kendrick, 1849.

Smith, Thomas Ruys. "Independence Day, 1835: The John A. Murrell Conspiracy and

    the Lynching of the Vicksburg Gamblers in Literature." *Mississippi Quarterly*

    59.1-2 (2005 Winter-2006 Spring): 129-160.

---. "'Dead men tell no tales': outlaw John A. Murrell on the antebellum stage."

    European Journal of American Culture 28.3 (2009): 263-276.

---. "*The Dying Confession of Joseph Hare*: Transatlantic Highwaymen and Southern

    Outlaws in the Antebellum South." *The Oxford Handbook of the Literature of the*

    U.S. South. Ed. Barbara Ladd and Fred Hobson. New York: Oxford University

    Press, 2016.

St. John de Crevecoeur, J. Hector. *Letters from an American Farmer*. New York:

    Oxford University Press, 1997.

Steckmesser, Kent. "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and

    Folklore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 79 (1966): 348-355.

Steeves, Harrison. Introduction. *Wild Sports in the Far West: The Narrative of a*

    German Wanderer Beyond the Mississippi, 1837-1843 by Friedrich Gerstacker.

    Ed. Edna L. Steeves and Harrison R. Steeves. Durham, NC: Duke University

    Press, 1968.

---. "The First of the Westerns." *Southwest Review* 53.1 (Winter 1968): 74-84.

Stephanson, Anders. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*.

    New York: Hill and Wang, 1995.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Across the Plains*. Hillsborough, CA: L.D. Allen, 1950.

Stott, Richard B. *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Streeby, Shelley. "Joaquin Murrieta and Popular Culture." *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.---. "Joaquin and the American 1848." *Post-Nationalist American Studies*. Ed. John Carlos Rowe. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000: 166-199.

Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Sundquist, Eric J. *Empire and Slavery in American Literature 1820-1865*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1995.

Sundquist, Eric J. *Empire and Slavery in American Literature, 1820-1865*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1995.

Sweet, Timothy. *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

Sweetwater, Storms, and Spirits: Stories of the Great Lakes. Ed. Victoria Brehm. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Tadman, Michael. *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Thacker, Robert. *The Great Prairie: Fact and Literary Imagination*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

The Louisiana Purchase and American Expansion, *1803-1898*. Ed by Sanford Levinson and Bartholomew H. Sparrow. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

Thornton, Bruce. *Searching for Joaquin: Myth, Murieta, and History in California*. San

Francisco: Encounter, 2003.

Thorpe, T.B. "The Disgraced Scalp-Lock" (1842). *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The

Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*. Ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. Foreword by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Introduction

by Willie Morris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Vulliamy, Ed. *Amexica: War Along the Borderland*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and

Giroux, 2010.

Wagner, Mark J. and Mary R. McCorvie. "'Going to See the Varmint': Piracy on the

Ohio and Mississippi River, 1785-1830." *X Marks the Spot: The Archeology of

Piracy*. Ed. Russell Skowronek and Charles R. Ewen. Gainesville, FL: Univ. of

Florida Press (2006).

Waldstreicher, David. *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American

Nationalism, 1776-1820*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Walton, A.Q. (probably Virgil Stewart) *History of the Detection, Conviction, Life, and

Designs of John A. Murel, the Great Western Land Pirate*. Lexington, KY:

George White, 1835.

Watterston, George. *Glencarn; or, the Disappointments of Youth*. Alexandria, VA:

Cotton and Stewart, 1810.

Watts, Edward and Keri Holt. "Bordering Establishments: Mapping and Charting Region

before 1860." *Mapping Region in Early American Writing*. Ed. Edward Watts,

Keri Holt, and John Funchion. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015: 1-

22.

Watts, Edward. "Reading the Routes: Early American Nature Writing and Critical

Regionalism before the 'Postfrontier.'" *Mapping Region in Early American

Writing*. Ed. Edward Watts, Keri Holt, and John Funchion. Athens, GA:

University of Georgia Press, 2015.

William Gilmore Simms: A Reference Guide. Ed. Keen Butterworth and James E. Kibler.

Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980.

Whayne, Jeannie M. "The Turbulent Path to Statehood: Arkansas Territory, 1803-1836."

Arkansas: A Narrative History. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press,

2002.

Whayne, Jeannie M., Thomas A. DeBlack, George Sabo III, and Morris S. Arnold.

Arkansas: A Narrative History. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press,

2002.

Whitaker, Arthur. *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803: A Study in Trade, Politics, and

Diplomacy*. New York: Appleton, 1934.

White, Richard*. "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the

American West*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

White, Richard. "The Louisiana Purchase and the Fictions of Empire." *Empires of the

Imagination: Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase*. Ed. Peter J.

Kastor and Francois Weil. Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2009.

---. *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Wishart, David. *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840: A Geographical Synthesis*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Woertendyke, Gretchen. *Hemispheric Regionalism: Romance and the Geography of Genre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Woods, John. *Two Years' Residence on the English Prairie of Illinois*. Ed. Paul M. Angle. Chicago: R.R. Donnelley and Sons, 1968.

Wyatt, David. *The Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Wyld, Lionel D. *Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962.

Young, Mary Elizabeth. *Redskins, Ruffleshirts, and Rednecks: Indian Allotments in Alabama and Mississippi, 1830-1860*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.