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# Mapping Joaquín: How Literary Cartography Opens New Perspectives on the Western Novel

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank Dr. Anastasia Lin for introducing me to literary cartography and supporting me during every step of this journey! I also want to thank my parents for always believing in me and making this journey possible in the first place.

## Mapping Joaquín: How Literary Cartography Opens New Perspectives on the Western Novel

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With literary cartography increasingly on the forefront in European literary criticism, its seldom use in the United States despite its many benefits is surprising. The following essay will show its importance to academia and apply it to the novel *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* by John Rollin Ridge, published in 1854, further referred to as *Joaquín Murieta*.

To do this, the term *literary cartography* must first be established. Barbara Piatti, a leading critic in the field, describes literary cartography as “being able to provide one possible *method*, more precisely: *tools* in order to explore and analyse the particular geography of literature” (2009, p. 3). This means that critics must look at the geography described in a literary text in order to fully understand it. In particular, the researcher creates maps out of geographical points gathered from a literary work and then interprets them.

Now that the term has been defined, it is crucial to understand why it is such an interesting field to pursue. The use of literary cartography tools helps open up to new points of view on literature, therefore providing new ways of analyzing even canonic literature. Moreover, it helps understand certain points in well-known works that were not able to be understood before. Sadly, the tool of cartography in literary analysis has been widely ignored by critics and even openly discouraged; Virginia Woolf is one of them: “A writer’s country is a territory within his own brain, and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar” (1905, quoted from Piatti 2009). With this she means that critics will destroy the world of fiction created by the imagination by trying to connect it to reality. However, luckily, there are also advocates of literary cartography, for example James Joyce. According to Piatti, he wishes to create images of geography that are so realistic it could be entirely recreated by someone who has not seen it (Budgen 1934, quoted from Piatti 2009). A further explanation is given by Peter Turchi. He explains that the purpose of maps is “to help people find their way and to reduce their fear of the unknown” (2004, p. 7). Maps created from literary works have the exact same purpose: They help the reader to orientate him- or herself by providing reality to the fictional world. It is therefore important to consider the relationship between literature and geography to fully understand the meaning behind a work.

Literary geography is a field that, although only recently established

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in academic discourse, has a long tradition (Piatti 2009, p. 2) in Europe. An example is the Expressionist period at the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany. During this time, writers intensely described the urbanization and the problems of big cities, guiding the focus onto particular real geographies for the first time. Since German high school students as well as German literature majors in college are therefore forced to interact with geography in literature when they cover this epoch, it is no surprise that German language scholars and other scholars all around Europe are interested in pursuing this field. Since many early works that are considered American literature describe the geography of the country, it is especially surprising that American scholars use literary cartography as little as they do.

For the purpose of this project, the novel *Joaquín Murieta* will be mapped and interpreted as an example. It tells the story of a Mexican of the same name who initially comes to California looking for success in the Gold Rush. However, after he is beat up, his wife raped and his half-brother killed by Euro-Americans, Murieta swears to kill everyone involved in the mob as revenge. He establishes a gang, consisting only of Mexicans, with whom he steals horses and money. The narrative stresses that Murieta doesn't kill unless he can't rob, but does not hesitate to take care of people who stand in his way. While he is initially described as kind and noble, especially when compared to the other members of his gang, the character grows darker throughout the novel. A valley at the Arroyo Cantoova serves as a sort of headquarters where he stores his loot of horses and money. There, Murieta reveals his plan of arming 2000 men to ride to the southern counties and kill all "Americans 'wholesale'" (Ridge, p. 60). After this, they shall live in peace. On multiple accounts, groups of white Americans try to stop these bandits; however they are unsuccessful. A man named Prescott even manages to catch and shoot Murieta in the chest, but he miraculously survives and is able to flee. Finally, a man named Henry Love is contracted to kill Murieta; he succeeds almost by accident and is able to catch him by killing his horse. After the battle, the bandit's head is cut

off and displayed, preserved in alcohol.

Even though this novel was originally published to be sold as a dime novel and is barely discussed in today's literary criticism, it is of historic significance: *Joaquín Murieta* is the first novel to be published in the state of California and is also the first published novel written by a Native American. Furthermore, it provides a lot of information on the geography<sup>1</sup> of California, allowing critics to draw connections between today and over 165 years ago.

Different critics offer diverse interpretations on the meaning of this novel. Some argue closely to the text, namely that it is a novel on classism.<sup>2</sup> Other critics come to the conclusion that it is supposed to be a sensation novel, basing their reasoning on the preface: It makes the novel out to be an adventure just because it was written by a Native American, even referring to the author by his Native name Yellow Bird although he generally goes by John Rollin Ridge. Other critics in turn interpret *Joaquín Murieta* as allegorical in several different ways. One is an allegory to Ridge's move to California which supposedly created an identity-break within himself,<sup>3</sup> another allegory is that of the Cherokee struggle and their removal to the West through the Trail of Tears, yet another is to make the reader sympathize with Mexico for losing large amounts of land in the American-Mexican War. Although these are all valid interpretations that are mostly based in solid evidence, the tools of literary cartography will help interpret this novel

<sup>1</sup> While landscapes mostly stay the same overtime, literary cartography allows critics to follow Murieta's travel routes and compare them to today's major roads.

<sup>2</sup> This means the regard of social classes as well as treating others according to those classes. At first glance, one may view *Joaquín Murieta* as a novel on racism; however Murieta is described much like a Euro-American and as having a lot of money. Furthermore, he treats other minorities in the same negative fashion as the Americans treat him, therefore showing the class-focus of the novel rather than one on racism.

<sup>3</sup> Although this move to California did not happen because he was forced by an entity but rather because he was being criminally prosecuted for killing someone in Georgia (Payne).

**Figure 1: Mapping of the geographical positions in Joaquín Murieta.**

in more ways and further establish the novel as a travelogue.



There are multiple approaches to creating a map. The suitability of the approach depends on the effort researchers are willing to put in and the scale of the project. Obviously, there is the well-tried *pen and paper* method in which a physical paper-map is marked with pens or push-pins. This method is very simple; however the map itself cannot be distributed easily and is therefore only accessible to a limited number of people (this can be enlarged only through digitalization). Furthermore researchers have to decide on a scale at the beginning of the project and stick with it – realizing that a different scale is more suitable means starting the map over. This

method also has the disadvantage of imprecision; therefore it is not well-suited for academic settings. Despite these negative aspects, *pen and paper* mapping does offer some advantages, especially when using literary cartography in teaching; this will be discussed later.

One of the best ways of creating maps is using a Geographic Information System, shortened to GIS. Besides using it to create maps, it can be used to layer data on top of it, analyze it, manipulate it, etc. Even though those programs can handle large amounts of data, they still work very precisely and are therefore a great choice for work in academia. However, the use of GIS is often expensive, and the programs are difficult to use because of their many features. This means that there often needs to be interdisciplinary cooperation with researchers working in geographical disciplines. Since the use of

GIS is frequently linked to high costs, it is not suitable for small-scale projects.

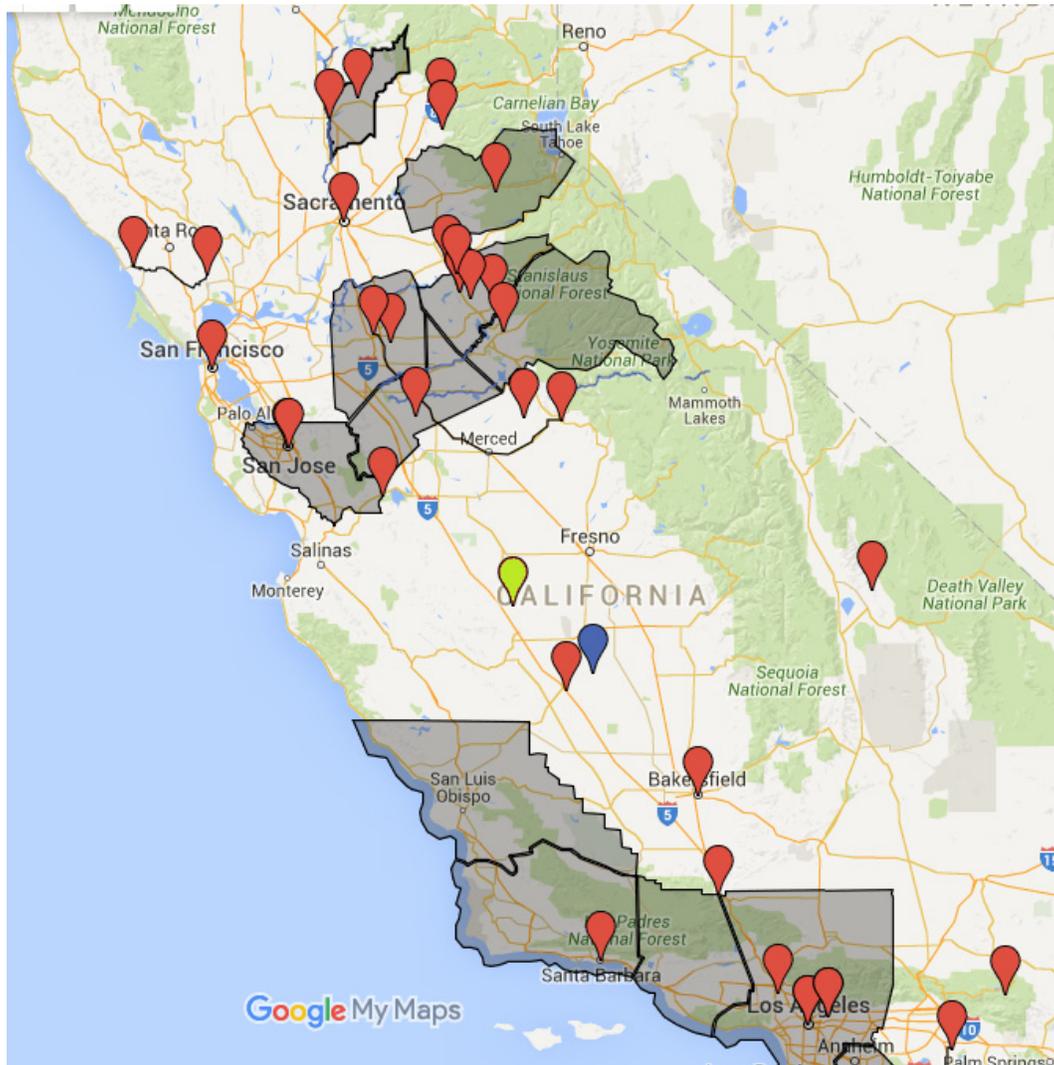
In contrast, an option well-suited for projects of small scale and which was also used for this project is Google Maps. The *My Maps* feature lets the user create a map and then pinpoint places, trace areas and lines (for example for roads and rivers), add directions and measure distances on top of the regular map material used by Google Maps. Apart from being completely free of charge, maps created with this feature can be easily shared through a Google Account and make collaborations – and even simultaneous work on the same map – possible and simple.

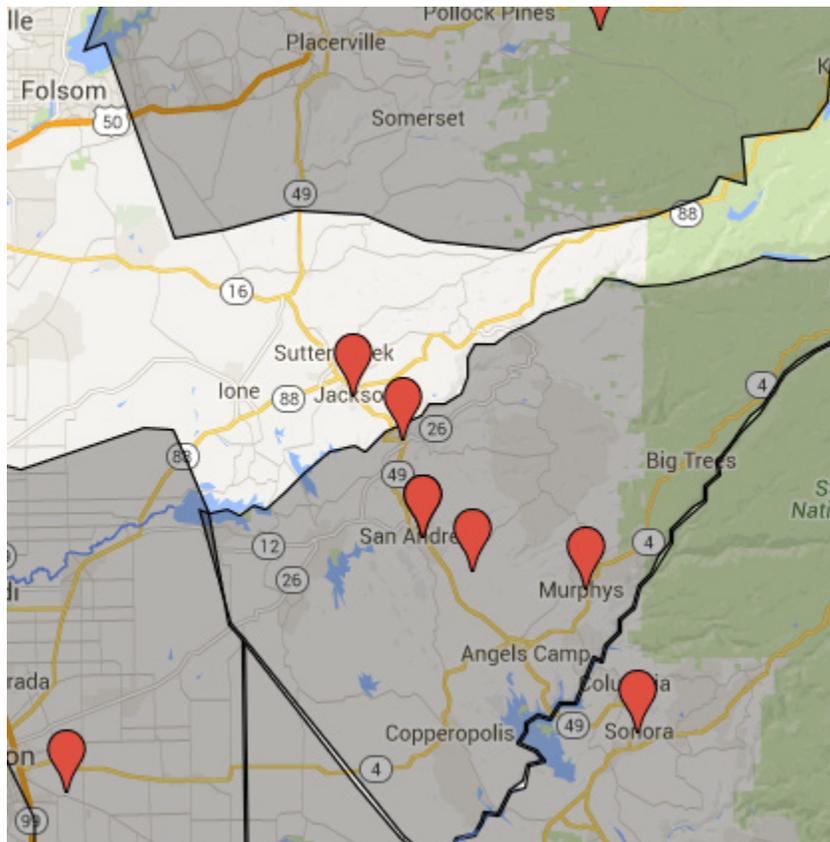
First, however, the geographic information must be collected from the text. When creating a map of a novel, it is helpful to collect

the geographical points during the initial read-through; this makes the reader inherently more aware of the traveling aspect of the novel and keeps the imagined and real geography from drifting apart. Now a decision must be made on which types of geographical information will be included. Specific locations like “Murphy’s Diggings in Calaveras County” (Ridge, p. 4) will obviously be included. However, there are also less specific locations like “a little stream about fifteen miles from the capital” (ibid., p. 25) which can be located on the map but allow for interpretation through the mapmaker.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Here it is important to note that such locations can be easily accurately placed if the mapmaker has knowledge of the geographical region. Researchers

**Figure 2: A closer view on the Sacramento and San Francisco area.**



**Figure 3: A closer view at the modern-day California State Road 49.**

Unspecified locations like “on the highways” (ibid., p. 6) completely rely on the mapmaker’s interpretation of the journey. If this information is included in the map, the researcher must acknowledge the fact that different mapmakers have different interpretations and therefore the resulting maps will vary. Since the goal is to map as many places as possible in this project, these unspecific points will be included wherever feasible and simply must be considered during the interpretation of the final product.

While the issue of precision is one of the only problems that applies to mapmaking in general, there are many more problems that occurred during this project due to the maturity of this novel. *Joaquín Murieta* was originally published as a dime novel; it may therefore occur that the

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who have never visited the target geography of their novel (here: California) can also achieve this by partnering up with someone who does have knowledge of the area. Another solution is to research the geography of the state; however it makes the task more complicated.

author did not do appropriate research and simply made some places up. It is surprising, though, that virtually all places mentioned in the novel do exist.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, since *Joaquín Murieta* is such an old novel, it must be considered that some places may not exist anymore or have been renamed. However, many such places can still be ascribed a location by using modern technology. Even though Wikipedia is disdained as an unreliable source for academic work, it does provide great help along with Google, especially when considering the ranchos that Joaquín visits. Streets, areas, and certain locations can also be placed through Google, as modern sites

often incorporate the names used in the past. In the case of small towns being incorporated into bigger cities, the districts often keep their original name or schools are named after them. Some places were renamed due to a change of prevailing languages and are therefore hard to find, e.g. the river that is called Arroyo Cantoova from Ridge’s novel is most likely the Cantua Creek because of its geographical location and similarity in name. These problems should also make researchers aware of the fact that not every point that exists can be mapped precisely and that sometimes “close enough” will have to be sufficient.



The map in Figure 1 above shows all specified geographical locations that were visited throughout the novel, with the pins being points and the

<sup>5</sup>The means of travel were by far not as developed as today; the same goes for acquiring information.

areas being counties. It shows at first glance that while Murieta and company traveled through all of California, they mainly visited places in the greater Sacramento and San Francisco area in the center of the state. Figure 2 shows the area of greatest concentration.

Going from the assumption that the Cantua Creek is the Arroyo Cantoova, in both maps marked in green, it becomes obvious why he chose it as his headquarters. The valley is in the center of California and is therefore easily accessible – no matter if he rides south or north, he will not have to travel further than half the state to store his loot. Furthermore, while it is relatively close to San Francisco, San José, and Sacramento, it is far enough away so as to not be discovered, therefore being a perfect hiding spot. This also means that Murieta is able to start his final attack on Euro-Americans at any given moment and is able to reach big cities after only a short journey.

A closer look at what is now the California State Route 49 (Figure 3) reveals that Murieta travels along this road a lot, too – Sonora, Murphy's Diggings, San Andreas, and Jackson are all places that he visits multiple times. This lets us deduct that there already must have been a well-populated road at that place in the 1850s, even though the 49 wasn't built until 1934.

Furthermore, taking this map into consideration shows that, apart from one visit to Phoenix (Arizona), and one to Tijuana (Mexico), Murieta stayed exclusively in California after his initial departure from Mexico. The fact that he does not travel further into Mexico is especially confusing since he is portrayed as a proud Mexican. However, keeping in mind that he travels only because he needs money and horses clears up the confusion quickly. His scorn is only towards Euro-Americans and not towards Mexicans; stealing from his fellow countrymen would not help further his cause. This instance shows that researchers must always keep the story in mind when interpreting maps created from novels.

Layering outside data<sup>6</sup> on top of the maps

<sup>6</sup>The sort of data used is completely up to the researcher and what he or she sees as helpful. For example, the data may be of socio-economic, linguistic, historic, or geographical importance.

provides additional insights: Murieta only steals horses on soil that used to belong to Mexico and was given up to the USA after the Mexican-American war. Therefore it makes sense that he does not steal from Euro-Americans e.g. in Oregon. However, the states of Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and parts of Colorado used to belong to Mexico as well and were given up at the same time as California in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, making it unclear why Murieta does not travel there. This map suggests the possible interpretation that the mobs of Euro-Americans that beat up Murieta at the beginning of the novel were from California.

Additionally, these maps can be interpreted more closely intertwined with the text: very few Mexicans appear in the novel that are not part of Murieta's following. Since California has a long north-south-stretch, without a doubt more Mexicans live in the south than in the north. Nevertheless, they all have the same means of transportation at their disposal as Murieta who travels through the whole state. This makes the rare appearances of other Mexicans hard to believe. It may be possible, though, that the narrator does not mention them because they seem "normal" to him, and humans are more inclined to mention the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. Since most of the Mexicans that appear in the novel work for Murieta, this may mean that they invaded the country in secret, all spying on the Euro-Americans and secretly in favor of his war against white people.

The aforementioned interpretation that *Joaquín Murieta* is supposed to be allegorical of the Cherokee struggle, whose removal to the West can now be dismissed almost entirely when considering the map. The Cherokees had a set destination, the West, which was enforced by the Euro-Americans. In contrast, Murieta does not have a set destination or direction; he travels sometimes south, other times north, at his own will, only coming back to the Arroyo Cantoova to quarter the stolen horses. Much rather than a set destination he has a goal, and that is to kill all Euro-Americans.

Lastly, the map provides the conclusion that John Rollin Ridge must have either traveled a lot around California himself, or have had access

to a lot of source material in order to be able to describe such a wide space of geography so specifically.<sup>7</sup>



Looking at these new interpretations makes it obvious that using literary cartography as a tool in literary criticism facilitates discourse and opens the mind to new interpretations. Nevertheless, they have benefits in academic settings as well. Employing maps to graph a character's movement gives students an opportunity to visualize the geography or a character's movements better. If the story is set in a place that the students have never visited, they let their imagination run wild and make wrong connections within the story; having maps at their disposal can help them keep track of reality. While presenting completed products of literary cartography to the students can be impressive and helpful, it is even better to create a map together as a class. This makes for a fun project and is a productive exercise because the students are deeply immersed in the text and may already come to conclusions while they are still evaluating the geographical points. This makes a subsequent interpretation easier. For younger students, e.g. in middle school or for in-class projects it is advisable to use paper-maps because giving the students something they can actually hold in their hands – or hang up in the classroom when it's finished – achieves higher motivation among students. For older students I recommend using the Google *My Maps* feature because it allows the students to work independently, meaning that creating a map or interpreting it can be assigned as homework. Furthermore, working with technology may be more appealing to older students.

This shows that literary cartography has many benefits and should be employed more frequently, in academia as well as in school

teaching. It provides useful information and helps the reader and interpreter connect fiction and reality. As the above rough mapping of *Joaquín Murieta* shows, literary cartography can further discourse, and it especially helps laymen keep their imagination in check. Knowing that Murieta stays almost entirely in California makes for a much more pleasant reading experience compared to believing that he travels throughout the United States only to be snapped back to reality when the truth of his geographic wanderings are realized.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the latter definitely seems more accurate since the novel is based on the legendary Mexican bandit Joaquín Murrieta Carrillo, which would provide Ridge with many accounts on the bandit's whereabouts that he would be able to use as resource material.