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# 'Like a Choctaw': Revisiting Adrien Rouquette, La Nouvelle Atala, and Whiteness in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana

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# Études Francophones

*Franco-Louisianais : identifications plurielles  
et déclinaisons contemporaines*

Sous la direction de  
Sara Le Menestrel et Nathan Rabalais

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## **‘Like a Choctaw’: Revisiting Adrien Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala*, and Whiteness in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana**

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In a review published February 25, 1879, in the *New Orleans Daily City Item* Lafcadio Hearn rapturously announced that Adrien-Emmanuel Rouquette’s new novel, *La Nouvelle Atala, ou la fille de l’Esprit: Légende indienne*,<sup>1</sup> was “the most idyllic work in the literature of Louisiana,—a creation inspired by the Spirit of forest-solitudes,—a prose-poem melodious as an autumn wind chanting a language, mystic and unwritten, through woods of pine” (“A Louisiana Idyl” in Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 118). Hearn’s praise of the novel joined a chorus of contemporary plaudits for the already celebrated and beloved Creole poet, priest, and missionary Rouquette. Like Hearn, these reviewers extolled the author’s lyricism, his command of the French Romantic literary style, and his zealous commitments to God and Nature. One notice in the Catholic monthly periodical, *Le Propagateur Catholique*, mentioned that:

Rarement la langue française, ce marbre rebelle, a été sculptée à coups de ciseau plus audacieux, plus fermes, plus sûrs [. . .] L’œuvre de Chahta-Ima est comme une efflorescence d’une resplendissante et grandiose imagination: le génie de Chateaubriand a jeté une poussière fécondante sur cette terre de la Louisiane qu’il a immortalisée, de cette poussière est née La Nouvelle Atala. (“La Nouvelle Atala par Chahta-Ima” in Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala*, 125–26)

Here, the reviewer references the French Romantic writer François-René de Chateaubriand, whose pair of “Indian” novels *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802) and historical romance *Les Natchez* (1826) had a profound influence on Rouquette’s life and work. In *La Nouvelle Atala*, the review suggests, Rouquette earned his status as a “Creole Chateaubriand,” a writer equal in

talent and stature to the leading figures of French Romanticism: Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, and Alphonse de Lamartine.<sup>2</sup> The review also employs Rouquette's preferred moniker and frequent *nom de plume*, "Chahta-Ima," a Choctaw word meaning "like a Choctaw" or "he who resembles a Choctaw" (LeBreton 213). This name was, at least anecdotally, given to Rouquette by Choctaw elders during his time spent as a missionary in St. Tammany Parish, on the Northshore of Louisiana's Lake Pontchartrain.

*La Nouvelle Atala* is arguably Rouquette's most widely read and most discussed work, prompting near-universal critical acclaim and inspiring one reviewer to argue: "C'est pour tout Louisianais un devoir d'acheter un exemplaire de *La Nouvelle Atala*" ("*La Nouvelle Atala* par Chahta-Ima" in Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 127). As a result, the novel cemented Rouquette's renown as "the last of the Indian missionaries" ("A Louisiana Idyl" in Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 118) and even more, as a Choctaw himself.<sup>3</sup> Longtime friend John Dimitry recalled following Rouquette's death in 1887 that "the name Chahta-Ima conferred by the tribe was never a misnomer. In personal characteristics this was in a rare manner true" (538). And yet, throughout his life, Rouquette self-fashioned and disseminated a very particular ethos of himself as a wild hermit, a romantic wanderer in exile, and the metaphorical hyphen between the "civilized" and "savage" worlds. In *La Nouvelle Atala*, Rouquette centrally places himself in the narrative, signifying his permeance as an inextricable part of the Choctaw community. Rouquette saw himself not just as an outside observer looking in, but as someone who had successfully assimilated into Choctaw life. Writing to Dimitry in 1884 Rouquette reflected: "J'ai fait pour mes Indiens tout ce que j'ai pu ; je leur ai tout donné ; j'ai mangé de leur nourriture ; j'ai dormi sur la dure ; j'ai vécu de leur vie ; je suis devenu un vrai Chabta" (Letter to John Dimitry; emphasis mine).

Early studies of Rouquette's life and work, including Joseph Alfred Reinecke's "Les Frères Rouquette, Poètes Louisianais" (1920), Susan Blanchard Elder's *The Life of the Abbé Adrien Rouquette, "Chabta-Ima"* (1913), Edward Larocque Tinker's *Les Écrits de langue française en Louisiane au XIXe siècle* (1932), and Dagmar Renshaw LeBreton's *Chabta-Ima: The Life of Adrien-Emmanuel Rouquette* (1947), are all laudatory, even hagiographical. To this day, very few studies have taken a critical stance towards Rouquette, especially concerning his complicated relationship with the Choctaws, religious orthodoxy, and conservative views on immigration, African Americans, and women. The dearth of critical scholarship on Rouquette is especially remarkable given Rouquette's prominence within francophone Louisiana letters and his place as part of the "elite circle of cultured Creole French

Americans” that “produced a Creole New Orleans literature” during the long nineteenth century (Fertel 3). Even more surprising still is that Rouquette scholarship, with perhaps the notable recent exceptions of Catharine Savage Brosman’s *Louisiana Creole Literature: A Historical Study* (2013) and Rien Fertel’s *Imagining the Creole City* (2014), has ignored the pivotal social, economic, and political forces that animated the mid-nineteenth century in Louisiana and the United States more broadly, especially relating to issues of race and the contested construction of whiteness.

This essay intervenes in the critical spaces ignored by past studies by investigating Rouquette’s attitudes on race and gender and by revisiting *La Nouvelle Atala*, the apotheosis of his literary career. By framing Rouquette’s novel as the crystallization of his social and political views, I will discuss how the author renders and navigates his own racial anxieties and those fears tied to the encroachment of American modernity, by centering himself—*deus ex machina*—as the literal and symbolic White savior of the novel. Rouquette’s attempt at minimizing racial hierarchies in the novel is ultimately undermined by a more dominant commitment to the supremacy and virtues of whiteness. Meanwhile, his efforts to cast Indigenous characters in a primeval innocence reveals long-standing fantasies Rouquette had from childhood, including the desire to be and marry a Choctaw.<sup>4</sup> In this context, questioning Rouquette’s whiteness is a critical strategy that “subverts the typical power dynamic in racial classification that usually marks as *other* those who are not white” (Jolivette 2). Building from the work of Caryn Cossé Bell, Andrew J. Jolivette, Angel Adams Parham, and Cécile Vidal, I will address how Rouquette was writing at a time when the boundaries of what it meant to be “Creole” and “White” were irrevocably shifting.

Parham traces this change to the rapidly increasing American presence in Louisiana, and with it, an Anglo-American binary racial system. She explains that “white Creoles were gradually forced to relinquish the identifier ‘Creole’ so they could be accepted as unequivocally ‘white’ according to the logic of the Anglo-American binary system” (10). Rouquette’s life-long encounter with the Choctaws and his insistence on being “like a Choctaw” place him in a unique position in which to consider the effects of what Parham calls the “racial palimpsest” (2) in southern Louisiana. According to Parham, the gradual repositioning of racial systems (an Anglo-American system and a Latin/Caribbean system) in Louisiana over the course of the nineteenth century resulted in tensions and renegotiations on categories of whiteness (*ibid.*). Some historians, like Cécile Vidal, have pushed back against these models, specifically against the purported fluidity of the Latin/Caribbean three-tiered racial system

and more fixed, biracial system in English North America. Vidal argues that “many American historians still consider the American regime as exceptional” within the context of other colonial slave societies (24). She instead insists that “even though race did not operate in the same manner in West Indian and North American slave societies, it mattered as much in both places” (Vidal 23). In New Orleans, as in other Caribbean port cities, the social order was structured by the supremacy of whiteness, with its “purity, its protection, and its deliberate cultivation” (Parham 21).

Finally, Rouquette’s attempts to record, represent, and emulate the Choctaw’s way of life in his poetry, prose, and nonfiction ultimately locate him as a kind of early American ethnographer, occupying an alternating insider/outsider positionality vis-à-vis his “subjects.” Gordon M. Sayre has written extensively on early American ethnographic writings of Native people, including in *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (1997) and *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (2005). In the latter, he points out that Chateaubriand relied heavily on the colonial ethnographies of Antoine-Simone Le Page du Pratz and Jean-François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny in the writing of *Atala*, *René*, and *Les Natchez* (241). While Chateaubriand largely borrowed the material for his romances from these and other sources, Rouquette’s *La Nouvelle Atala* can be seen as a more direct extension of his own ethnographic writings.<sup>5</sup> Rouquette’s prose and poetry must also be considered in the context of popular American writers who wrote about Indigenous Americans and included them in their stories, including James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton as well as francophone Louisiana writing of the period, notably by Jacques Arago, Alfred Mercier, Jacques de Roquigny, and Paul Louis Le Blanc de Villeneuve. Sayre astutely notes that much of these works are replete with tropes of the “Noble Savage” and “Tragic Hero,” offering their authors an opportunity to criticize the failings of modern society with “the honest virtues of primitive life” (Sayre, *The Indian Chief* 8).

Rouquette was no exception to these trends. Throughout his life and work, Rouquette used his proximity to the Choctaws as a way of expressing his own perceived sense of victimization and self-imposed ostracization from society,<sup>6</sup> akin to writers like Morton who, “came from elites who believed they had been victimized by a populist mob” (Sayre, *The Indian Chief* 9). In this way, it is possible to view Rouquette not just as a benevolent missionary who “went Indian” (D’Antoni xii), as many previous studies have insisted. Instead,

we may consider him as something of a “seeing-man,” or what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (7). For Pratt, the seeing-man is an agent of imperialism whose writings, either in poetry, prose, natural history, or ethnography, depict America “as a primal world of nature, an unclaimed and timeless space . . . but not organized by societies and economies; a world whose only history was the one about to begin” (126). The seeing-man not only attempts to convey colonized spaces to European audiences, but contrives and invents them. As such, the seeing-man is a “self-conscious double of the first European inventors of America, Columbus, Vespucci, Raleigh, and the others” (ibid.). Operating in this vein, Rouquette sought to preserve a lost edenic American landscape while promoting a narrative of White saviorhood that mourned the destruction of Native peoples and cultures.<sup>7</sup>

### *Adrien Rouquette’s Life and Work*

Born in New Orleans on February 26, 1813, to a prominent Creole family, themselves members of the Louisiana literary elite,<sup>8</sup> Rouquette was first educated at the Collège d’Orléans in New Orleans and then a preparatory school in Louisville, Kentucky. Ultimately, he was sent to study in France, where he was enrolled at the Collège Royal in Nantes in 1829. Rouquette’s transatlantic crossing was not uncommon but, as Fertel explains, mirrored the movements of “elite Americans who between 1830 and 1860 took the same voyage by the thousands. They went for work, for art, to escape, and to arrive” (36). In particular, French-speaking White Creoles and Creoles of color from Louisiana, like Charles Garrayé, Mercier, and Victor Séjour, all flocked to France, which they viewed as their “spiritual home” (ibid.). There, they were more easily able to assimilate “linguistically, religiously, and, on a larger scale, culturally and socially” (ibid.) than they were in the United States. After several trips between France and New Orleans, Rouquette set out to study law in Paris in 1835 but ultimately decided to pursue his literary interests. While Rouquette would eventually criticize and distance himself from the fast pace of modern metropolitan life, his multiple stays in France were formative for his spiritual and creative development (Elder 39). In particular, in France, Rouquette first read the work of the French Romantics, including Chateaubriand, Joseph de Maistre, and Lamartine. Chateaubriand’s *Atala* and *René* especially marked Rouquette. They provoked in him a profound sense of homesickness as they recalled the bayous, flora and fauna, and peoples of his native land.

Like many of his contemporaries, Rouquette was drawn to Romantic thought, which stressed an idealized view of nature and emphasized native simplicity and religion. As Caryn Cossé Bell explains, French Romanticism was influenced by the work of German philosophers G.W.F. Hegel and Johann Gottfried Herder (100). Against the “artificial creations” of the institutions of class, church, and the dynastic state, these thinkers argued that self-realization “could occur only within the context of individual liberty” (ibid.). Moreover, they argued that “a purposeful, natural, and harmonious social order existed as part of God’s design” (ibid.). Inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romantics sought to return to the state of nature, where only true human freedom could be pursued and attained. The Romantics were also profoundly shaped by the European Age of Revolution, which ushered in an unprecedented era of social and political disruption and cultural transformation. The dizzying pace of these events caused a *mal du siècle*, which prompted artists to turn inward and away from the monolithic philosophies of the Enlightenment. As Gérard Gengembre notes in his commentary of Chateaubriand, writers expressed their *mal du siècle* through, “Rêverie stérile, apathie, pulsions morbides, dégoût de la vie, sentiment du vide ou au contraire désirs désordonnés” as they were traumatized “par le cours vertigineux des évènements et par la perte des repères spirituels et moraux” (xxvi). It is then not surprising that Rouquette sought a mooring in French Romanticism, as he had witnessed firsthand the upheavals of the Jacksonian era at home and the turmoil of the July Monarchy in France. At the same time, Rouquette’s ennui was also part of a “social pandemic of American melancholia,” which Fertil points out, included, “[f]eelings of personal loneliness, social alienation, and intellectual futility” (37).<sup>9</sup> Nature, imagined as an ahistorical Eden, provided the panacea for Rouquette’s Romantic melancholy. Like the Romantics, he saw in it the opportunity to flee “vers des refuges comme l’ailleurs du rêve ou du passé” (Gengembre xxvii) and the chance to rebuild a new world constructed in his own image.

Rouquette articulates his inner turmoil, feelings of uprootedness, and nostalgia for American nature in the poem “Regrets d’un étudiant créole exilé à Paris,” included in his first collection, *Les Savanes, poésies américaines* (1841). It begins with a cry: “Oui, je regrette enfin la pinière natale! / Je suis las de Paris, las de la capitale! / Tout ce bruit des plaisirs, au cœur désenchantés” (121), and continues with a number of plaintive meditations on the flora of Louisiana: “Je le sens, il me faut mon grand fleuve et mes bois / [. . .] / Le pin, rouge colonne, au frais chapiteau vert / Le chêne, d’un linceul de mousse recouvert

/ Le cèdre qui soupire, et balance son cône” (ibid.). The poem ends with a call to Chactas, the Natchez hero of Chateaubriand’s *Atala*. In the poem, Chactas also serves as metonymy for the Choctaw Nation, a group that he had brushed up against during his childhood, both at his home on the Bayou St. John in New Orleans and at his family’s Bayou Lacombe estate on Lake Pontchartrain’s Northshore. He writes:

Oui, Chactas, je le dis ; je voudrais être toi :  
J’aurais d’autres besoins, j’aurais une autre loi ;  
J’irais boire aux torrents qu’à creusé la nature ;  
Je mangerais le fruit qui mûrit sans culture ;  
[ . . . ]  
J’errais, en fuyant tous lieux civilisés !  
Oh! qu’il est donc heureux, celui qui naît sauvage ;  
Qui jamais n’a connu notre dur esclavage. (123–24)

Here, the young poet expresses a desire to be the “heureux Chactas” (123) and thus to become a Native American himself—a motivating impulse that would singularly define his life and work.

In the poem, Rouquette compares his own feelings of exile and loss with that of Indigenous people, who were routinely forced off their land and faced near-constant incursions into their culture and way of life by White America.<sup>10</sup> Rouquette himself bore witness to this gradual destruction, intensified because of the Civil War, which further “scattered” his beloved North Shore Choctaws (“In Search of a Word”). In Romantic fashion, “slavery” in the above poem does not signify actual enslavement but an existential condition bred by the onslaught of modernity and civilization and its “orgueilleuse barbarie” (Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 103). Beginning with *Les Savanes*, Rouquette expressed a profound *mal de siècle* and sought to fold the subjugation of Native Americans into his own psychology and feelings of alienation. In Paris, he saw himself outcast by the French elites as an American Creole, and by society more broadly as a poet and burgeoning man of God. Poems in *Les Savanes*, like “Regrets de Paris,” “Le Voyageur créole,” “Le Poète méconnu,” “A un jeune poète découragé,” and “Le cri du jeune Chrétien harcelé par le monde” acutely testify to these sentiments.

Much like Romanticism, Catholic thought and practice provided a refuge for Rouquette. As Fertel aptly argues, “Catholic devotion underscored all that Adrien Rouquette thought, wrote, and accomplished throughout his life” (33). In France, Rouquette “turned to religion for comfort and guidance”

and was given his First Communion at the age of twenty-two (Fertel 38). Upon returning to America, Rouquette entered the St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Plattenville, Louisiana, and was ordained in 1844 (LeBreton 105). Following his ordination, Rouquette served as a secretary to the Archbishop of New Orleans, Antoine Blanc. However, much like his aborted efforts at studying law, Rouquette soon grew tired of the responsibilities of his post and longed to withdraw to the wilderness of the Northshore. There, he desired to establish a mission among the Choctaws (LeBreton 167).

Before he was finally granted permission in 1855, Rouquette concentrated his efforts on writing, including frequent contributions to the recently-established *Le Propagateur Catholique*, whose mission was to “explain, develop, and defend the different points of Catholic doctrine” (Fertel 43). His writings of the time focused on Catholic orthodoxy, such as in “La Fête Dieu au Séminaire” (1844), his speech *Discours prononcé à la Cathédrale de St. Louis (Nouvelle-Orléans 1846) à l’occasion de l’anniversaire du 8 janvier* (1846), and the unpublished stories “Celibacy and Marriage” and “La Chasteté.” Increasingly, he wrote about the Choctaws and nature, which, along with his faith, provided the thematic pillars of three well-received collections of Romantic poetry, including the English-language *Wild Flowers, Sacred Poetry* (1848), *La Thébaïde en Amérique ou Apologie de la vie solitaire et contemplative* (1852), and *L’Antoniade ou la solitude avec Dieu (trois âges) poème érémitique* (1860). Rouquette established a permanent mission and residence among the Choctaws of St. Tammany Parish by 1858 (Fertel 47), with the eventual goal of converting the larger group of Choctaws west of the Mississippi River in the Indian Territory where he could, “exercer notre zèle et fonder quelque chose de durable et sûr” (Rouquette, Letter to John Dimitry).

According to Rouquette, his mission among the Choctaws was founded as an effort only to convey Catholic teachings and convert his “wards” to Christianity.<sup>11</sup> As he wrote to Dimitry, “[J]’ai jamais eu l’idée de les civiliser, d’avoir des écoles et de leur apprendre à lire; c’était assez pour eux de lire dans le Grand Livre de Dieu [. . .] Je n’ai pas cherché, non plus, à plier leur nature libre et spontanée à mon usage et à nos servitudes conventionnelles; je l’ai laissée dans toute son originalité *unsophisticated*” (Letter to John Dimitry). Whatever his intentions, Rouquette followed a long history of foreign intervention into the Choctaw Nation, historically settled in and around the watersheds of three major river systems, the Tombigbee in the East, the Pearl and Big Buck in the West, and the Chickasawhay and Pascagoula in the South (Kidwell 4). Michelene E. Pesantubbee points out that the French sent Jesuit missionaries

to the area beginning in the late seventeenth century to foster alliances with the Choctaws who “represented the largest and most strategically placed group between the French and the English” (63). More broadly, Catholic missionaries aimed to Westernize, that is, to “replace indigenous customs and beliefs with Christian morals and habits” (Pesantubbee 59). Specifically, these missionaries greatly impacted Native women as they “wanted to teach them to be subservient to their husbands, to restrict sexual relations, and to dress more modestly” (ibid.). Later, the federal government employed Christian missionaries to be “agents of cultural change and adaptation to American society so that the Choctaws would settle as farmers and cede their hunting lands” (Kidwell 199). Missionaries also eventually played a role in the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the disastrous Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which displaced the majority of the Choctaw Nation west of the Mississippi via the “Trail Where We Cried” (Akers 33, 52). By the time Rouquette began his mission, the Choctaw population in St. Tammany Parish and neighboring Mississippi, known as the “Six Towns Group,” had dwindled to 2, 262 (Akers 53; Kidwell 169).

While the “success” or “failures” of Rouquette’s mission are beyond the scope of this essay, there is information that points to *how* Rouquette impacted the Choctaws. Most studies indicate that Rouquette had a mostly “positive” effect, especially during the Civil War, which further decimated the Six Towns Group. Kidwell explains that “Rouquette and his church provided a central point for Choctaw community life in Louisiana. There, in a life-style very similar to that of Mississippi, the Indians lived off the land” (170). Moreover, numerous studies explain that Rouquette managed to bring the Choctaws medicines and supplies during the Civil War despite Confederate and Union blockades (Tinker 407–408; LeBreton 222–23). Additionally, Rouquette’s religious teachings did seem to change the St. Tammany Choctaws fundamentally. In a report published by the Smithsonian Institute, the author argues that Rouquette specifically modulated the Choctaws’ beliefs concerning the afterlife: “It is evident that, before the coming of Père Rouquette, the Choctaw did not even agree among themselves regarding the future state. Some held the belief that with death all existence ceases” (28). What is usually missing from these reports and assessments is the testimony of Choctaws themselves, who ostensibly accepted Rouquette’s presence among them. When they appear, these firsthand accounts are most often told through the filter of a White ethnographer, historian, or journalist—even Rouquette himself.

According to his own accounts, the Choctaws did not at first accept Rouquette as a missionary as they feared that he was a government spy. Rouquette records telling them: “Do not believe that I am an agent of the great American chief who is at Washington. I am not! But I am the messenger of the Great Chief who resides above,—the Great Chief of all chiefs. . . . Will you not give me a spot of land and let me build upon it a peaceful house, not far from your own habitations?” (qtd. in LeBreton 202–203). Yet, Rouquette was nothing but persistent in gaining the guarded approval of the Choctaws and eventually, according to Rouquette, Chief Wellee of Buchuwa agreed to his presence. These and other documented encounters between Chahta-Ima and the Choctaws are inevitably tinged with a brand of benevolent paternalism.

Rouquette recalls how the Choctaws pined for his return whenever he would travel to New Orleans. On one such occasion, a member of the community is said to have traveled across Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans and entreated Rouquette to return, stating in a speech (later translated by Rouquette and published in the *New Orleans Bulletin*):

Answer me, and let thy cheering answer chase away, as the wind chases the black clouds, the doubt and uneasiness, the sadness and anxiety that weigh so heavily upon my people’s heart. Dost thou not know, that we love thee as our father; that we have full confidence in thee; that thy presence rejoices our Village. . . . Tell me, what words of hope and love shall I bring to those who are expecting thy answer, and longing for thy return? The wind is moaning in the forest, the campfires are burning darker, and all around the Village and the wigwams are sad and cold as winter.—Give me an answer. (Rouquette “Choctaw Eloquence”)

This speech, published on December 24, 1870, is significant. To begin, it indicates that Rouquette was not only interested in aiding the Choctaws, but in recording them and shaping their speeches into a literary form.<sup>12</sup> The above was part of a more extensive article he penned on Choctaw oratory that, he assures the reader at the start, is “genuine and home grown” (“Choctaw Eloquence”).<sup>13</sup> Curiously, his translation reproduces the supposed words of the Choctaw Pissah and adds to them a stylistic twist; the Romantic lyricism and imagery that were recurrent in his poetry. The speech, addressed to “thee, our father,” also clearly establishes and reproduces a dynamic of dependency—the reader is meant to understand that the Choctaws sent an emissary on the multi-day trek to New Orleans because they needed his spiritual and moral guidance. Viewed

together with Rouquette's many other writings on the Choctaws (mostly published in the New Orleans press), the speech above gestures to a penchant for self-promotion. If not exactly propaganda, Rouquette's ethnographic writings all include references to himself and the magnanimity of his presence among the Choctaws. Even LeBreton, who cannot be said to have written an impartial biography of Rouquette, admits that "He is not innocent of the build-up of [his] legend, however. He loved to say that he was something of an Indian, and he was fond of repeating, once it had been said of him, that there was a Boone-like quality in his spirit" (379). Fascinating as it is to consider this dimension of Rouquette's life and work it is nevertheless regrettable that any assessment of his missionary work and interactions with the Choctaws is irrevocably clouded by his self-praise, obscuring the lived experiences of the people he had tasked himself to serve.

Despite Rouquette's stature as a beloved, benevolent, and even liberal public figure, a closer examination of his writings reveals more conservative views on women and Afro-Americans. Rouquette recorded several meaningful encounters with women in his diaries and letters to friends. In France, there was his "first love" Estelle who eventually broke off their romance to enter a Carmelite convent (LeBreton 44) and another woman in Paris, also named Estelle, who nursed him to health during an illness in 1834 (LeBreton 53). More than a physical relationship, both women marked a symbolic ideal for the young Rouquette; they were lovely virgins who came to represent an indelible literary and spiritual archetype.<sup>14</sup> Of the Parisian Estelle, Rouquette remarked that he was "entertaining a sort of spiritual relation with a woman. . . . She was as good as a mother, as considerate as a sister" (ibid.). In the unpublished poem, "Mon Idéal," Rouquette portrayed Estelle as a "lovely virgin, a chaste Diana of the fields and woods" (qtd. in LeBreton 44). Later, he would fold Estelle into his portrait of chaste womanhood in "Celibacy and Marriage," where Estelle became "the symbol of woman, mature, remote, disconcerting, somewhat mocking" (LeBreton 54). Rouquette more often embraced the "spiritual" image of women as Madonna in his writings. However, he nonetheless frequently expressed his fears about falling for women's charms, and thus, falling into sin.

His poetry, beginning with *Les Savanes*, marks several instances in which Rouquette fulminates against women and perpetuates the image of woman as whore. In "La Femme adultère" he warns that women are incapable of remaining faithful: "Oui, la femme a failli; la pudeur virginale / [. . .] / Pour elle, le fardeau de la fidélité / Fut un fardeau trop lourd ; elle l'a rejeté !" (*Les*

*Savanes* 243). Later, he reflects how the stain of femininity, the adulterous woman, cannot be removed but by the grace of God: “Oh ! son corps, désormais, couvert de lèpre immonde / Qui pourra le laver, le laver dans quelle onde ? / Son âme, Dieu le peut : la grâce, c’est cette eau” (ibid.). In *L’Antoniade* Rouquette also includes women in a long list of other groups, movements, and people he excoriates. In part three of the poem, “Le Conciliabule infernale,” Satan and his demons delight in their corruption of the modern world, including America, “which should have been a paradise but instead has become an anti-Eden” (Brossman 35). Along with the Enlightenment, industrialization, Protestantism, the French government, and American democracy, Rouquette attacks women. He writes: “Toute femme est encore ce qu’Eve était jadis / Prompte à quitter le bien pour des plaisirs maudits” and later that, “L’amour est pour la femme une fièvre, un délire / L’homme qu’elle a séduit est celui qu’elle admire / . . . / Se faisant, pour séduire, Ange, animal, Démon” (130). These familiar misogynistic tropes of women are indeed recurrent throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, Rouquette’s use of these images, even in *La Nouvelle Atala*, are nevertheless remarkable for a man who insisted on moral and spiritual impartiality.

In addition to his rather problematic perspectives on women, Rouquette expressed conservative views on immigration<sup>15</sup> and later, under the alias “E. Junius,” on African Americans as part of his diatribe against George Washington Cable’s divisive 1880 novel *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life*. Cable’s incendiary novel primarily sought to satirize and critique the romanticized version of French Creole society in New Orleans and, with it, the violence of race relations in the city and slavery in the United States. For Rouquette, and other prominent White Creoles like Charles Gayarré, the novel represented an attack on Catholicism and Creole culture. As Brossman recounts, “the Creoles seemed offended as much by his mockery of their customs, seen as ‘quaint’, and his exposure of their overweening pride as by his implication of miscegenation . . . in the best families and appeals for racial justice” (94). Rouquette’s attack, presented in the satirical pamphlet, *Critical Dialogue Between Aboo and Caboo on a New Book, or a Grandissimes Ascension* (1880), calls out Cable for writing, “for the prejudice and inimical North, against the olden customs, habits, manners, and idiosyncrasies of the Southern Creole population of Louisiana” (9).<sup>16</sup>

The fictionalized dialogue is replete with racist tropes and imagery, calling out Cable for getting his historical information from “the babbling lips of some old negresses, reeling on the brink of Eternity” (11), referencing Bras-

Coupé's "cabin in the swamp, and all the *horrors* of a semi-barbarian state of society" (14), and referring to Cable as a "High-Priest of Negro-Voudouism" (20). The dialogue ends with a "Weird Solo by a Zombi-Frog," which Rouquette writes in Creole and where he intimates sexual relations between Cable, labeled "Missié Kabri" ("Mister Goat"), Marie Laveau, and another woman of color (23). The fact that the frog's chorus alone is written in Creole is significant, as it attempts to demean Cable by associating him with Black Creole language and culture. As Jennifer Gipson argues, "Rouquette then used the Creole language and depictions of Creole folkways to make Cable, in essence, black by linguistic and folkloric association" (467).<sup>17</sup> The strange, polemical, and "anonymous" *Aboo and Caboo* dialogue certainly did not appear to align with Rouquette's public persona or political positions, especially since he had previously preached against slavery (Brossman 100). In fact, a year earlier in *La Nouvelle Atala* Rouquette aimed to depict a harmonious multi-racial utopia with characters of various rank and race. For some, including LeBreton, this signifies Rouquette's "liberal" stance concerning race. She reflects, "We are glad that Rosalie was admitted to this enchanted Eden. It confirms certain suppositions we are bound to have made concerning Rouquette's position toward the Negro" (316). However, rather than prove such a distinction, *La Nouvelle Atala* more directly stands as the culmination of Rouquette's life and work, including his views on race, gender, and sexuality.

### *La Nouvelle Atala*

Rouquette's best-known work is his prose romance *La Nouvelle Atala*, a literary parallel to Chateaubriand's *Atala*. While Rouquette greatly admired Chateaubriand, he lamented that the Frenchman's works lacked verisimilitude. In the preface to *Les Savanes*, Rouquette argued that for all his literary talents, Chateaubriand was a foreigner who wrote about America at a distance: "Cette nature âpre, sauvage, souvent monotone, toujours grandiose, elle ne parlait pas à son cœur comme une mère parle au cœur de son enfant" (3). In order to truly paint America with a "touchante vérité", "il fallait donc des enfants nés du sol ; il fallait des Américains" (3-4). It was perhaps lost on Rouquette in writing *La Nouvelle Atala* that he was also an outsider looking in; a seeing-man whose work attempted to capture Choctaw life and culture from afar. Despite his close physical proximity to the Choctaws throughout his life, Rouquette remained a clumsy, if not popular, cultural translator, attempting to relay Choctaw language, politics, and spirituality to White America. He

emphasized what he saw were characteristics of Native people that resonated with his own spiritual and patriotic ideals. In the preface to *La Nouvelle Atala* he writes: “Les Sauvages de l’Amérique ressemblent aux héros d’Homère et d’Ossian ; leur simplicité est aussi grande que leur franchise et leur fierté : pour les comprendre, il faut les aimer” (30). While Rouquette aimed to provide a more truthful picture of Native living in *La Nouvelle Atala*, he ultimately created a story with many of the same tropes and Romantic embellishments of Chateaubriand’s earlier work.

The novel, set in the idyllic forests of southern Louisiana, tells the story of Marie-Atala, a young virginal Creole woman who flees civilization, that vestibule of “éternel désespoir” (Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 74), to commune with God and Nature. During her peregrinations, she meets and befriends a diverse cast of characters: Lossima, a Choctaw woman, Lossima’s brother Issabé, Atala’s former Black servant Rosalie, a kindly White European Catholic missionary-turned-Choctaw Hopoyouksa, and the Père Emmanuel, both avatars for Chateaubriand and Rouquette respectively. The form of the narrative, set as a romance, is particularly significant. As Brossman points out, the romance is different from the novel in that it is a “lengthy fictional tale involving elements of the marvelous or wondrous, or set in a former time or place, conveying a sense of the strange” (37). Leslie Fielder has also argued that the romance offered a “vicarious tourism” to readers, representing, “the sight-seeing of the middle classes before cheap and speedy transportation had made it possible for them to do it in the flesh” (163). In this respect, the romance is not mimetic, that is, “not set firmly in reality” (ibid.), but rather encapsulates White fantasies of the Other and the unknown.

Like the work of James Fenimore Cooper, Rouquette’s American romance contains heavy natural symbolism and many mystical and spiritual elements, including a pair of anthropomorphized animals and a fantastic scene with a rattlesnake and panther. However, Rouquette’s work also reflects his preoccupations with Louisiana’s rapidly changing social, cultural, and religious landscapes. In this way, Toni Morrison argues against seeing the romance as a kind of “evasion of history” (36). Rather, she posits that it represents a direct engagement with “very real, pressing historical forces and the contradictions inherent in them as they came to be experienced by writers” (ibid.). She explains:

Romance offered writers not less but more; not a narrow a-historical canvas but a wide historical one; not escape but entanglement.

For young America it had everything: nature as subject matter, a system of symbolism, a thematics in search for self-valorization and validation—above all, to opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities. (37)

In *La Nouvelle Atala*, Rouquette sets his characters under a subtropical bell-jar, allowing him to articulate the world as he saw it, or rather as he wished it could be: in racial and spiritual harmony. However, a closer look at the presentation of his three female heroines—Atala, Lossima, and Rosalie—reveals a more complicated truth. Cast in contradistinction to the White saviors of the novel, Hopoyouksa and Père Emmanuel, the three women become racialized and gendered caricatures, trapped in relationships of subordination.

First, reiterating the virginal ideal of women cultivated in his youth, Rouquette's Atala is never bereft of the spiritual purity in which he envelops her. He describes that: "Son âme contemplative se tournait instinctivement vers la Solitude, comme l'héliotrope vers le soleil. . . . Dieu voulut la mettre à l'abri, en la transportant dans le désert. Cette Fleur virginale ne pouvait prospérer et s'épanouir que dans la solitude" (41–42). Above all, the "chaste et douce" (42) Atala is a servant of God, to whom she remains completely devoted. She prays: "O mon Dieu . . . pourquoi m'as-tu donné une âme, si ce n'est pour t'aimer ; pourquoi un esprit, si ce n'est pour m'élever vers toi . . . pourquoi un corps, si ce n'est pour t'en faire l'entière offrande sur l'autel de la virginité ?" (50). Moreover, Rouquette uses a language of subservience to underscore her devotion, noting that, "un aimant mystérieux l'attachait au désert ; elle s'y sentait comme *enchaînée*" (36; emphasis mine). In addition to being the paragon of Rouquette's ideal woman, lacking in agency but full of piety, Atala is also described as "la Blanche Sauvagesse" (40) and the very personification of Nature itself: "Sa longue chevelure noire ondoyait au vent comme la mousse qui pend des sombre cyprès du Sud. Ses yeux . . . avaient la profondeur mystérieuse des forêts" (ibid.). Just before her death during the final narrative crescendo, it is revealed that Atala is half-Choctaw, further legitimizing her claim as the "queen" of her forest domain (36).<sup>18</sup> Neither entirely White or Indigenous, Atala's mixed-race heritage is used to signify a kind of moral virtue and an amalgamation of recurrent American tropes surrounding Indigenous people as "noble" and "sorrowful."<sup>19</sup> Seen another way, Atala's European heritage "redeems" her from being wholly Choctaw like her companion Lossima, and thus less vulnerable to a host of associations regarding her gender.

Lossima, also known as “Fleur-du-Soir,” becomes Atala’s most trusted companion in solitude. Along with her brother Issabé, her presence in the story serves as a tangible reminder of Rouquette’s long obsession with the Choctaws and their way of life. However, where the half-White half-Choctaw Atala represents inviolable Christian purity, the characters of color are all ascribed immoral and unfavorable attributes. Lossima, for one, stands in as the symbol of feminine vanity. In a long passage, Rouquette describes her dazzling multi-colored clothing, made from cardinal, blue jay, swan, and flamingo feathers. He writes: “Pour qui se paraît-elle ainsi ? Avait-elle le désir de plaire à quelqu’un ? Et, à qui rêvait-elle, lorsqu’elle dormait sur la peau de tigre que son frère lui avait donné ? O femme ! la coquetterie te suit jusqu’au fond du désert le plus reculé” (54). Rouquette sexualizes Lossima by drawing attention to her carefully constructed dress and the pleasure it could excite in men. Such a distinction reveals Rouquette’s imperialistic longing, contributing to a broader history of depictions of Indigenous women as promiscuous. As Kirsten Fischer explains, “if civilized women were chaste, then lascivious Indian women . . . further proved that Indians in general . . . were ‘uncivilized’ and therefore without legitimate claim to the land” (6). More compelling still, Rouquette’s fascination and furor over Lossima’s dress speaks to what Richard Godbeer has referred to as the “eroticization of the middle ground,” where Native women are seen with both desire and disdain, allowing them to be denigrated and admired within imperial racial hierarchies (92). Ultimately, this process reasserts “the European male viewer’s sense of superiority over the object of his gaze” (Fischer 7).

More than Lossima, Rouquette fixes the character of Rosalie as the embodiment of excessive sensuality. Throughout the text, he uses a recurrent lexicon of racialized tropes to underscore and punctuate Rosalie’s otherness, highlighting discursive constructions of whiteness and non-whiteness. Rosalie is described as “la fille de la nuit,” “la plus belle des filles de la chair,” and “la fleur solitaire de la nuit, fleur que le soleil n’a jamais brûlée de ses rayons, fleur des cimetières, fleur des tombeaux” (60–61). Rouquette ponders: “Quelle femme t’a créée, dans une nuit d’été, pendant que l’atmosphère était chargée des parfums enivrants de toutes les corolles entr’ouvertes par le frémissement de la brise caressante ?” (60). Such images play into long-standing tropes of African women in colonial and early American literature as both primitive and oversexed. In a similar vein, Fielder has pointed out that of the two half-sisters in Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cora, who has an Afro-American mother, represents a “corrupted woman, stained even before birth with the

blackness of the primitive and passionate” (206). Referencing such depictions, Fischer notes how “women were described as lascivious and crude, with overheated passions” (10). Like Lossima, Rosalie’s presence in the novel also signifies a dangerous threat to man’s happiness and spiritual tranquility. After being rebuffed by Rosalie Issabé laments: “O femme ! n’es-tu pas semblable à la fleur dans laquelle un serpent s’est caché ? Tu fascines, tu attires pour blesser ; et tu blesses d’une blessure que, toi seule, tu pourrais guérir” (66). Issabé takes Rosalie’s initial rejection hard, mourning how he must not only contend with “calomnies par des persécuteurs au pale visage” but is “méprisé et repoussé par une fille à la peau d’ébène!” (65).

Rosalie is also irrevocably anchored to her supporting role as attendant—both to Atala, her former mistress, and later to Issabé. Early in the story, Rosalie maroons from the Atala family estate; not to gain any measure of personal autonomy or freedom but rather to rejoin Atala. Rosalie who had been “given” to Atala (57), follows the latter’s journey into the wilderness to be reunited and made whole with the “sublime Solitaire” (59). Rouquette writes: “Rosalie, sa bonne et mélancolique négresse, dépérissait de ne plus voir, de ne plus entendre, de ne plus rencontrer nulle part sa jeune et douce maitresse ; elle projetait de s’enfoncer dans les bois à sa recherche” (58). While Rouquette’s triptych of wandering women all represent singular feminine archetypes, it is only the heavily racialized Lossima and Rosalie who are overtly sexualized. This suggests that Rouquette’s text was part of a larger trend that sought to maintain the hegemony of whiteness. As Jolivette argues, “This complex *othering* process of indigenous American and African women . . . led to a color hierarchy in the state of Louisiana that is still very much intact today” (12). Rouquette’s study, cast as a utopian romance, perhaps represents the kind of discursive hypocrisy on race relations that Cable railed against in *The Grandissimes*.

Following this line, Rouquette’s work also signals a mid-nineteenth-century “pornotroping” that freezes his female characters as the physical and biological expression of otherness. As Hortense Spillers reveals in her study of the image of captive Afro-Americans, “captive bodies,” “become the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” that are reduced “to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor” (67). Similarly, in the context of European imperialism, Anne McClintock positions imaginings of the “porno-tropics”—Africa, the Americas, and Asia—as the “long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment” (22). These feminized, libidinal spaces represented, “a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (ibid.). In *La Nouvelle Atala*, Atala, Lossima, and Rosalie

form the parameters of a sexualized and racialized erotic topography that predicates relationships of power and superiority, forming the “absence *from* a subject position” (Spillers 67) that is occupied instead by the only two White characters, the men Hopoyouksa and Père Emmanuel.

While both may individually represent avatars of Chateaubriand and Rouquette respectively, they collectively signify the author’s Romantic ideals of masculinity and his own aspirations to become Choctaw. We can see, for example, a clear parallel between how Rouquette saw himself and how he depicts Hopoyouksa, meaning “Wise-Man,” in the novel.<sup>20</sup> He writes: “Après s’être fait Sauvage, il avait conservé assez du civilisé pour être distingué du Sauvage, et assez pris du Sauvage pour n’être plus regardé comme civilisé: C’était *le trait-d’union* des deux extrêmes. . . . À ce demi-sauvage, à ce demi-civilisé, à ce nouveau Daniel Boone . . .” (75; emphasis mine). The archetype of the White man who turns “Native” by taking refuge from modern civilization in American nature is not unique to Rouquette. Chateaubriand includes René, a Frenchman who is adopted into the Natchez Nation, in his fiction, while Cooper’s Natty Bumppo serves as the central protagonist of his *Leatherstocking Tales*. Like Hopoyouksa, these characters are all valorized as refugees and renegades; or, what Sayre describes as being, “in flight from and in opposition to his nation” (*The Indian Chief* 241). Hopoyouksa, the “noble exile de la Bretagne” (76), plays a pivotal role in *La Nouvelle Atala* in two key scenes. He arrives in the narrative—*deus ex machina*—to save Rosalie and Issabé from a vicious snake attack and, later, he proposes marriage to Atala before realizing that she is his daughter. Despite being the harbinger of the incest taboo in the narrative, it is Atala who pays the price as she ultimately fulfils her own prayer to be sacrificed at the altar of virginity. We can speculate that the incest taboo here highlights a trend in early American fiction, where “in the dreams of Caucasians forbidden impulses are typically projected in dark-skinned figures” (Fielder 179).<sup>21</sup> At the same time, in the novel, the taboo of incest collides with the taboo of miscegenation, an encounter that would become more prevalent in Louisiana literature throughout the nineteenth century. Following the big revelation of potential incest, punctuated with a bolt of lightning and a clap of thunder, Atala falls ill and dies.

The Père Emmanuel, most directly representing Rouquette himself, is the spiritual center of the tale. He blesses the marriage between Issabé and Rosalie and performs Atala’s last rites. In both moments, he interrupts the narrative with long passages, resembling sermons, in which he meditates on the unfair treatment of Native Americans, the importance of liberty and personal freedom, and the insignificance of man and human institutions against

God. Throughout, Rouquette continues his fondness for self-promotion by referring to the fictional priest as a “vénérable missionnaire parmi les Indiens du Sud” (88) and as “le rude et énergique missionnaire des Indiens, qu’on eût pris pour l’un d’eux” (105). In both cases, the White characters play dominant roles, narratively and spiritually. On the other hand, the non-White characters seem to be present in the story only for Rouquette to discuss his views on chastity and moral weakness. As Morrison explains, this strategy was typical of the White American romance, which frequently cast Black characters to imagine, through their surrogate selves, “meditations on problems of human freedom, its lure and elusiveness” (37). Both Hopoyouksa and Père Emmanuel operate as coequal, benevolent father figures whose unimpeachable moral authority represent the standard by which all the other characters are judged. Unlike Lossima, Issabé, or Rosalie, who are fixed in their racial positions, the White men easily transgress color and cultural lines, moving from Europe to the virgin forests of Louisiana to adopt the ways of its Indigenous people. Their racial drag is celebrated as the bridge between civilization and nature, where, “L’extrême aristocratie de la civilisation s’était rencontrée avec l’extrême aristocratie de la nature” (Rouquette, *La Nouvelle Atala* 76).

### ***The White Ethnographic Gaze***

Most critical assessments of Adrien Rouquette’s work tend to center his contributions as a Romantic Creole poet,<sup>22</sup> while appraisals of his life focus on the “positive” aspects of his mission among the Choctaws.<sup>23</sup> Despite the copious number of articles he published about the Choctaws, few have considered his role as an early ethnographer or his positionality as an outsider in a tight-knit, increasingly scattered Indigenous community. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, for one, sees Rouquette’s writing stemming from a “connaissance intime des cultures amérindiennes et de sa volonté de présenter une autre image de leurs réalités sociales” (245). In contrast to these assessments, this essay has begun to trace an alternative critical stance regarding Rouquette’s fervent ethnographic longings. When viewed together, his poetry and prose reflect a profound uneasiness with the encroachment of American modernity and a deep-rooted nostalgia for the purported simplicity of Native living, which is itself tied to his experiences with Choctaws in his youth (LeBreton 6).<sup>24</sup> Like other writers of the period, Rouquette saw in the disappearance of many Native Americans an opportunity to center his own “Rousseauian dream of a return to primitive virtues” (Sayre, *The Indian Chief* 242). In this

context, it would be helpful to consider the fruits of his ethnographic gaze and the multiple representations it engendered.

Ethnographic writings on Indigenous populations have long been predicated on the significance of the gaze. Specifically, Maria Kakavoulia tells us that ethnography is underpinned by spectatorship: “spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses” (214). No gaze can be unbiased as all visual practice “seems to submit everything that is seen to a specific representational order” (216). The ethnographer, as Sayre avers, has largely replaced the work of colonial travel writers and explorers in “describing and interpreting the cultural Other” (*Les Sauvages Américains* 99). Such a task can provoke perspectives that foster a “bird’s-eye view.” As Pratt describes, “the scientific position of speech is that of an observer fixed on the edge of a space looking in and/or down upon what is other” (“Fieldwork in Common Places” 32).

There is no evidence to suggest that Rouquette considered himself an ethnographer. However, his work follows many conventions of colonial travel writing and formal ethnography, including authoritative depictions of Indigenous dress, language, and spiritual practice. Unlike many earlier European travelers, like Dumont, Alexander Humboldt, and Le Page Du Pratz, who recorded their observations after brief sojourns to the Americas, Rouquette spent nearly thirty years living at intervals among the Choctaws (Elder 150). As such, his positionality is unique—as a “modern” American mission, Rouquette’s residence among the Choctaws may be viewed as pseudo-anthropological fieldwork. While presented as objective fact, Rouquette’s ethnographic writings and observations were inextricably interwoven with his own beliefs and Romantic aspirations—e.g., the Choctaws as “noble savages” and “tragic heroes.” This tendency becomes especially apparent in his poetry and prose, which serve as an amalgamation of literature, personal narrative, and ethnography. As such, he provides a way of contemplating the continued complexities and contradictions surrounding the ethics of fieldwork within modern anthropology—notably the tensions between personal and scientific authority. As Pratt observes, “Fieldwork produces a kind of authority that is anchored to a large extent in subjective, sensuous experience” (“Fieldwork in Common Places” 32). In the context of nineteenth-century Louisiana, Rouquette’s White ethnographic gaze had a material impact on the lives of the Choctaws of St. Tammany Parish. It also marks a confrontation with a growing transformation in the construction of identities and racial categorizations.

Once signifying those native to Louisiana, Creole identity increasingly became the site for a cultural renegotiation of whiteness in the nineteenth century, as Parham explores in *American Routes* (2017). She argues that the arrival of an Anglo-American racial system in Louisiana, based on a binary White/non-White division, eventually came to cover the tripart Caribbean/Latin American racial system, which generally allowed for more fluidity between Whites, Free people of color, and enslaved Afro-Americans (47). As we have discussed, not all historians agree with this assessment, critiquing these systems' supposed fluidity and rigidity. Vidal counters in *Caribbean New Orleans* (2019) that New Orleans was not less oppressive or racially rigid in relation to other Caribbean port cities. Instead, "The Louisiana capital was a Caribbean port city for the way racial prejudice quickly came to inform all its social institutions and relations" (23). Vidal's thesis importantly emphasizes that white supremacy was just as significant in the Caribbean as it was in North America. Throughout the nineteenth century, the discursive construction and power of whiteness gradually stretched in Louisiana, further sharpening existing racial divides. The Civil War expanded the racial cleavages between groups as "the already fragile space for interracial relationships and intimacy . . . was gradually but divisively closed" (Parham 28). The threat of being seen as non-White, coupled with the waning capital of White Creole society, prompted many francophone writers in the mid-nineteenth century to make a desperate hold on their whiteness.

Parham reveals that Alexander Dimitry, father of Rouquette's close friend John Dimitry, argued in an 1875 essay, "The 'Creole' Defined," that Creoles were "only, and purely, white" (85). In his essay, he argues against the popular definitions of Creole from the Spanish and French as applying to anyone "born in any one of the colonies of the two Americas," including, "negroes and mulattoes, whether free-born, or born in slavery" ("The 'Creole' Defined"). Instead, Dimitry argues, via the jurisprudence of a Spanish colonial functionary, that Creoles are pure Europeans—i. e., White—in the sense that their birth in the Americas still lent them the protections of their "parents' origin and birth" (ibid.). While Creoles may be born "in those remote and barbarous regions, they do not share in the accidental dwelling-place" (ibid.). Following Alexander Dimitry, Charles Gayarré sought to further defend Creole whiteness, joining in the attack on Cable in a lecture delivered at Tulane University in 1885, "The Creoles of History and the Creoles of Romance." In it, he outlines the genealogy of the Creoles, concluding that, "Therefore to be a *criollo* was to possess a sort of title of honor—a title which could only be the birthright of the superior white race" (qtd. in Parham 87).

Into this pivotal moment of cultural and social inflection, Rouquette's work can be seen as an effort to negotiate his own racial identity, both White and as an "adopted member" of the Choctaw Nation. We see, for example, a concerted attempt by Rouquette to distance himself from the categorizations of whiteness in his efforts to assimilate with the Choctaws. However, while Rouquette increasingly self-identified as a Choctaw, or "like a Choctaw," the Indigenous populations of America became increasingly invisible from a legal and economic standpoint. Jolivéte avers that while definitions of Creole in Louisiana were applied to Black or monoracial groups, "Indians were racialized as 'invisible' subjects ready for thorough assimilation into mainstream white society" (18). This process, coupled with the gradual displacement of Native people and the expansion of White America, ultimately culminated in the Dawes Act of 1887, which aimed to "assimilate Native people into mainstream society by treating Indians as individual 'Americans' rather than as members of autonomous Indian nations" (Jolivéte 32).

On the one hand, Rouquette's writings can be seen as an effort to freeze this trend by highlighting the Choctaws and their way of life, specifically in the New Orleans press. On the other, his life and work may be viewed as part of the attempted disappearance of Indigenous people from American history. By centering his own racial/ethnic transmutation, Rouquette covers his observations of the Choctaws he studied in a veneer of his own whiteness. Throughout his poetry and prose, Rouquette's benevolent paternalism and Romantic literary style maintain entrenched racial categorizations and discursive constructions surrounding Native people as "simple," "sorrowful," or "noble." *La Nouvelle Atala* further attests to a desire to record a race and gender hierarchy that depended on othering people of color and women, particularly as virginal or excessively sensual. This essay has explored some of these complexities within Rouquette's oeuvre, while highlighting how Louisiana during the nineteenth century was a volatile site of "contested and ethnic amalgamation" (Jolivéte 28).

Ultimately, Rouquette's work is an exercise in nostalgia, oriented toward an antebellum past where he could imagine himself in harmony with nature and with the Choctaws, a feat that he set out to accomplish in *La Nouvelle Atala*. The desire to capture and preserve the past is a defining characteristic of nineteenth-century Creole writing. As Parham points out, it engages literature as a *lieux de mémoire* (90), which is Pierre Nora's notion of memory sites that emerge as actual memory is disappearing. When viewed in this context, Rouquette's work powerfully stands as an effort to stem the tide on the perceived loss of francophone White Creole identity in the mid-nineteenth

century. At the same time, Rouquette's articulated mourning is part of a much larger trend of White writing about Indigenous people. Sayre points out that travel writing, literature, and ethnography offered a space to navigate feelings of White shame and complicity in the killing of millions of Native Americans (*The Indian Chief* 4). In his discussion, Sayre cites Renato Rosaldo's notion of "imperialist nostalgia," which refers to how "agents of colonialism . . . often display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was 'traditionally'" (ibid.). Rouquette not only expressed this melancholy himself, but throughout his life became a key producer of its dissemination in Louisiana.

Rouquette came to stand in as prominent figure of antebellum nostalgia in New Orleans; as Chahta-Ima his public persona frequently eclipsed the experiences of Native people that were being scattered. In an August 6, 1875, issue of *The New Orleans Bulletin*, one reporter recounts their visit to an elderly Rouquette in order to determine the origin of the word "Tchefuncta," the name of a river flowing into Lake Pontchartrain. The short report is peppered with references to the near-mythic status of Rouquette, who "calls to mind the greatest naturalist, Audubon," and is replete with references to his connection to edenic Louisiana nature: "A perfume of bay leaves, a sweet scent of Louisiana hillsides, pervaded the apartment" ("In Search of a Word"). Rouquette's connection with the Choctaws is cemented when the reporter leaves, seeing a Choctaw woman passing by with a head-basket filled with "aromatic sassafras and bay" while, "the sunlight played amongst the bright green leaves of her burden, and a breath of fragrance floated after her like the dim misty traditions of her race" (ibid.). The moment quickly passes, and the reporter concludes that, "the street car came and poetry vanished. We were in the New Orleans of to-day" (ibid.).

While Rouquette was firmly fixated on the past, he also had a keen eye on the future. He was aware of the public figure he cast as the "famed, the self-sacrificing missionary among the Indians" (LeBreton 376). In an undated letter to John Dimitry, he urges his friend to "increase the interest of your illustrations and of a legendary story" by including a romanticized version of his life, one that incorporated a fabled cabin-chapel that had been built into a live oak. He tells him that "in the history of every saint, of every hero, of every extraordinary personage, there is the legendary element which is added like the lichen (or moss) and vine to that tree. . . . Legend is permissible, it is a superfetation, a poetic excrescence, a sort of pious mythology" ("Cabin in the Oak"). We have begun to unravel the threads of Rouquette's distinctive mythology here; including his unique status as "like a Choctaw," complex role and positionality as a missionary and ethnographer, and contributions to nineteenth-century Louisiana life and literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1879 by *Le Propagateur Catholique*. Recent editions of *La Nouvelle Atala* have been published by Editions Tintamarre (2003), which serves as the principal reference for this essay, and by Leopold Classic Library (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Catharine Savage Brossman notes how “Thomas Moore called Rouquette ‘the Lamartine of America,’” and that, “Rouquette also received praise from William Cullen Bryant, Charles-Auguste Sainte-Beuve, Lamartine, and Chateaubriand” (33).

<sup>3</sup> LeBreton explains that “He had become a sort of public hero, to be pointed out to strangers who visited the city” and that “To the little children in the seventies and eighties, Chahta-Ima was an Indian who walked their streets [ . . . ] he wore a blanket and highly colored ornaments and his hair hung down to his shoulders” (376–77).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life, Rouquette recounted a romantic and spiritual encounter he had with Oushola, a Choctaw, whom he met crossing Lake Pontchartrain. Oushola died tragically shortly after the pair married, apparently marking Rouquette for the remainder of his life. While early biographers have both accredited and discredited the story (LeBreton 49), it is noteworthy that, according to his own diary Rouquette, “dreamed of finding an Indian maiden, like the one described by the inspired genius [Chateaubriand], and he looked for her among those whom he met in the woods” (qtd. in LeBreton 51).

<sup>5</sup> Rouquette published several articles in the New Orleans press on the language, culture, and customs of the Choctaw.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, his first collection of poetry *Les Savanes, poésies américaines* (1841).

<sup>7</sup> Sayre, among others, has argued that expressions of mourning and melancholy were prominent in early American writing and anthropology because “Colonizers recognized, at some semiconscious level, their responsibility for these deaths [of Native Americans] but summoned up complex responses to assuage or dismiss this responsibility...In the first half of the nineteenth century, expressions of melancholic grief for the ‘vanishing Indian’ became [ . . . ] commonplace [ . . . ] a hackneyed trope of public discourse” (*The Indian Chief* 4).

<sup>8</sup> Brothers Dominique and Terrence would become established poets in their own rights.

<sup>9</sup> Fertel also points out that, “Undoubtedly and understandably, Rouquette suffered from depression; he had lost both his father and his mother in extremely painful circumstances and he missed his siblings” (37).

<sup>10</sup> Clara Sue Kidwell reminds us that the “Eastern” Choctaws, those who did not immediately relocate to Indian Territory via the “Trail Where We Cried” following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, faced enormous social and political pressures: “They remained separate from southern society, constrained subjectively by their fear and suspicion of white men, a legacy of numerous instances of forced dispossession, and objectively by the racial stratification of the antebellum South” (163).

<sup>11</sup> Rouquette was vocal about his mission in the New Orleans press, frequently giving interviews and making public statements. For example, in an interview published in the *Daily Picayune* on September 22, 1882, the writer notes how Rouquette conveyed his “work of studying the traits of the primeval dwellers of the country and inducing them to accept Christianity as a consolation for their loss of the possession of the land” (“The Choctaws of Louisiana”).

<sup>12</sup> This was a recurrent practice by White ethnographers, as Sayre and David Murray point out. See Sayre, *The Indian Chief*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> He notes that “The translation was made on the very spot where the address was delivered and portrays as faithfully as the distinctive beauties of one language can be reproduced in another, the simple dignity of nature’s aristocrat—his hurt feelings, delicate sensitiveness, slighted honor and querulous affection” (“Choctaw Eloquence”).

<sup>14</sup> A phrenologist had reportedly once told him that “your love for women is not sensual but ideal, platonic, and even mystical” (LeBreton 48).

<sup>15</sup> See Brossman 35. *L’Antoniade* also reveals his anti-immigration stance, particularly against Europeans who would emigrate to America: “Les races, qui abandonnent ses compagnes et ses populeuses cités, n’apportent que la médiocrité sur nos rivages hospitalières” (10).

<sup>16</sup> The dialogue also pans Cable’s use of English: “Never before were verbs, nouns and adjectives so multitudinously disallied, tied together, whipped into forced union” (Rouquette, *Critical Dialogue* 12).

<sup>17</sup> Anamaria Seglie also points out that Rouquette sought to rebuke Cable’s Protestantism, suggesting that, “*The Grandissimes* both provoked anxieties

about Creole racial purity and evoked long-seated tensions concerning New Orleans' religious and moral institutions" (284).

<sup>18</sup> In this way, Atala also recalls Rouquette's earlier obsession with Oushola (Elder 60).

<sup>19</sup> Rouquette writes that, "On eût dit, parfois, l'amazone guerrière, et, d'autres fois, la chaste génie des rêveries mélancoliques, la muse des tristesses du désert" (*La Nouvelle Atala* 40).

<sup>20</sup> Much like Rouquette himself, the European man is described as leading a kind of noble self-exile: "Hopoyouksa vivait en dehors des de la contagion littéraire et politique, en dehors des aveugles instincts et des folles théories de ce grand siècle impie, qui s'est intitulé le *siècle de lumières*" (*La Nouvelle Atala* 89).

<sup>21</sup> Fielder's comment appears in the context of his discussion of James Fenimore Cooper, one of Rouquette's literary idols. For Rouquette, Cooper was, "le héros des forêts" and "l'Homère des tribus indiennes" while *The Last of the Mohicans* represented the "Iliade moderne" (*Les Savanes* 4).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Viatte 271 and Weiss xxxi.

<sup>23</sup> See Blaise D'Antoni's writings on the subject, in his *Chabta-Ima and St. Tammany's Choctaws* (1986) and article "Remembrances of Adrien Rouquette: Chinchuba and the Cabin the Oak" (1986). His life has even inspired a young adult adventure novel, *Chabta-Ima: La voix des Indiens* (1999).

<sup>24</sup> Rouquette recalled to an interviewer that, "When I was a child, in 1820, there were more Indians in the city than there were whites or negroes. Bayou St. John was lined with their encampments" ("The Choctaws of Louisiana").

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