

Remembrance of the Lost Guianese Novel: *Atipa*

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In 1885 the Ghio publishing house in Paris brought out *Atipa, roman guyanais* (*Atipa: A Guianese Novel*), written in Guianese Creole by an author who signed himself Alfred Parépou. This is the first known novel in a French-based Creole. *Fab' Compè Zicaque* (*Les Fables du compère Zicaque*), a collection of Creole fables by Gilbert Gratiant from Martinique, was the next work of fiction in a French-based Creole to appear in print, and it was published only in 1958. The second Creole novel, *Dézafi*, written in Haitian Creole by Frankétienne (Frank Etienne), appeared in 1975. Four years later, in 1979, Raphaël Confiant from Martinique published a volume of short novels in Creole, entitled *Jik dèyè do bondyé*.¹

When first published in 1885, *Atipa* went unnoticed. It was only in 1894, nine years after its publication, that a German linguist, Hugo Schuchardt, discussed the work in a German philological journal, where he apologized at the outset for the fact that the book had “escaped [his] attention over the years, although it was published in Paris” (my translation; 319).² The scholar praised the extraordinary quality of this first novel written in Creole from beginning to end, pointing to the unique insight into the Guianese language offered by its writer. Apart from this solitary instance of praise for the work, *Atipa* failed to attract the attention of readers and scholars down through the years. In fact, from 1894 to 1980, the novel languished in virtual oblivion.

Unexpectedly, the 1980s witnessed two translations of the novel into modern French. The first, by Guianese author Michel

Lohier, appeared in 1980, and the second, by Marguerite Fauquenoy, a professor at Simon Fraser University in Canada, was published in 1987. One might ask, what happened in 1980 to cause the resuscitation of *Atipa*? Simply stated, the committee appointed to organize the annual festival of cultural heritage (*la Fête du Patrimoine*) considered it appropriate to seek out this particular book in order to celebrate Guianese cultural identity.³ Translated into French, spotlighted by the cultural development project, the book became more attractive, readily digestible, and commercially viable. Through what I call a transgenic manipulation, referring to genetic manipulation by scientists who seek to transfer desirable qualities from one organism to another, *Atipa* was reborn and celebrated in a way that no one in 1885 could have ever imagined. Jean Bernabé, Director of the Regional Center for Creole Studies, went so far as to associate *Atipa*, the character within the novel, with both Socrates and Christ. He wrote: "Alongside Socrates, yet another great figure of the Western world passes quietly through the symbolic realm of *Atipa*: Christ himself" (289). Praised today as the messiah of Creole literature, *Atipa* was reborn from cultural expectations. The book was well received in 1980 since the translator and those who requested the translation anticipated the success of a publication whose appeal was intensified by the impending Heritage Celebration.

Carried along by what Alain Viala calls its *sociocritique* (sociocriticism), the logic of *différance* and the aleatory destination of a work (no work can ever anticipate all of its readers or predict its future),⁴ the book drew the attention of modern readers a century after its composition precisely because of its *guyanité* (its distinctive Guianese character). Specifically, three things attracted these modern readers: its purported record of Guianese life a century earlier, its literary and linguistic aspirations, and its desire to reunite and energize the body and soul of the Creole people, stigmatized by slavery and colonization.

If it is considered normal for contemporary critics of this book to prioritize the linguistic and ideological over the literary aspect of the text, it is nevertheless regrettable that the only pleasure left is that of archival and linguistic research; the pleasure of

seeking out and discovering the locations and customs of the past and the people who played their part in the everyday life of the country. It is as though these scholars must always circumvent what is essential in Parépou's book: the ambivalence of a style in which mockery is always barely concealed under the guise of naively enthusiastic praise. What kind of apologia for Guiana written in 1885 would not be marked with ridicule? The only way to subvert both the official discourses emanating from elsewhere and the weight of history—or rather an outsider's version of history—was to distort these in a slightly clownish manner. This practice of discursive distortion has been used in literature since the earliest examples of the Encomion in classical antiquity. *Atipa* thus plays on the disjunction between the insignificance of the hero and the exaggerated importance that he assumes in the social and political life of his country. If the goal of this strategy is to bear witness to a Guianese vision and a Guianese voice speaking about Guiana, it is also to bear witness to the paradox of the fragmented Guianese reality, which has grown increasingly fragmented since 1885. But when the author conceals his identity under a pseudonym, we are faced with the question of where Atipa's speech is coming from and what is the nature of his desire. It raises the issue of the writer's authority and credibility in the eyes of the Guianese people.

This is why, today, the controversy surrounding the text centers on the author's use of a pseudonym. We might well ask, who, in reality, was Alfred Parépou? Was he Meteyrand (or Mettérand), the great grandson of the Indian chief Cépérrou? Or was he Alfred de Saint-Quentin, a White author who spent most of his childhood in Guiana and who wrote several works, including the *Study of Creole Grammar*, published in 1862? Is the author White or Creole? Is it imaginable that he might not even been Guianese? Would Parépou command less authority or interest if he were thought merely to be Alfred de Saint Quentin rather than Meteyrand? In fact, perhaps it is no less important to resolve the mystery of the name than to understand the operative logic of the writing, the problem of the relationship to language around which the novel is organized. Bernabé suggests something like this when

he puns on the protagonist's name and on the writer's. *A-ti-pa*, a creolization of *à petits pas*, meaning "the one who moves forward with short steps," and *Paré pou*, a Creole expression suggesting "one who announces that he is ready to change the state of things" (*Atipa revisité* 289). Nonetheless we must bear in mind that this order of things only concerns one part of Guiana, the Creole population, which is far from being the whole of Guiana. This is why the generous efforts of certain Caribbean intellectuals who wish to make Guiana part of the great Creole adventure seem somewhat misguided.

Paré pou's novel is situated within the confluence of the key events that determine the country's history: the abolition of slavery and the establishment of a penal colony (which was closed in 1947). His work reflects the arrangement of ethnic groups within a social landscape that was still far from homogeneous and appeared unlikely to become so.

With the publication of *Eldorado*⁵ by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1596, migratory waves of voluntary participants and captive people went to Guiana. These migrations were met with varying success, and they have continued up to the present. First, the official slavery trade began in 1680 but for practical reasons few ships came to Guiana. Sparsely populated, the country thus remained under-exploited. In 1763, there was the failure of the immigration of Europeans organized in Kourou by Choiseul. After the French Revolution, and especially from 1794 onward, Guiana became the land of political exile and it was given the name the "dry guilotine." The penal colony was created, following the abolition of slavery in 1848. Thus France established Guiana as an area of deportation and chain gangs in 1852. Subsequently, gold was discovered—reputedly by the Amerindian Paoline—and a gold rush began in 1870. Massive migrations ensued in the 1880s, as the Chinese, Indians, Antilleans, Brazilians, and Venezuelans arrived in Guiana. The image constructed during the gold rush years, of a rich though under-populated and under-exploited country, never left the colonizers' imagination. The emigration of people from Martinique and Guadeloupe to Guiana, and the element of governmental dependence among the three have often led out-

siders to associate these *départements* with each other. Yet the French Caribbean Islands and French Guiana do not share the same history, geography, or economic and social realities.

Recently, in 1968, near the Creole town of Kourou, an artificial city was established. This city is the residence of technicians from mainland France who work at the European Space Center. In this mushroom city everything is organized in a way that allows technicians to feel at home. During the construction of the new Kourou, a Guianese musician, J-R Verderosa, sang in Creole “Adieu Kourou” lamenting the end of the Creole Kourou, and the end of the *carbets* of the Indians along the road. The Creoles were in fact relegated to the old part of the city and were segregated from the newcomers. More recently, in 1977, six hundred Hmong refugees from Laos were transported by the French to Cacao, a small village near Roura in a region seventy-five kilometers from Cayenne. French is still, of course, Guiana’s official language. However, in addition to Creole deriving from a French lexical base and the Sranan spoken near the border with Surinam, many other languages are spoken by the diverse communities now living in the country. In addition, the approximately four thousand Amerindians—a community whose native tongue is often exclusively oral—speak six different languages throughout Guiana.⁶

When *Atipa* was written, the abolition of slavery, the exploitation of gold and penitentiary colonies provoked an extraordinary self-absorption in Guianese society. The people turned away from the collective practices of helping one another (*mayuri*) and many of the Creole practices disappeared amid the ostentatious frivolity brought on by the desire to play at being French:

Li gain òte pitit nègue, mo ca wai souvent, lò yé metté yé soulié, yé paletot, yé chapeau di côté; yé prend yé badine la lanmain, yé crai roai pas yé maite. Si to tendé, coument yé ca croché francé. Jé jé, jé jé ca tombé.

There are some little Negroes I see all the time. When they put on their shoes and their overcoats, tilt their hats to the side, and take their canes in their hands, they think that not even the king is their master. If you only knew how they scratch away in French, [instead of saying *je*] they pour out heaps of *je* *je*, *je* *je*. (*Atipa* 14)⁷

The character Atipa concludes that the state of Guiana can be summed up in three words: “order, counter-order, disorder” (*Atipa* 59). The country, he contends, needs “rules of conduct” (71). Rules that would require Creole behavior to be based, no longer on an imitation of the French model, but on real perceptions of everyday life, which only the Creole language can experience and communicate.

In his preface, Parépou addresses the Guianese people, his countrymen. He does not want to redeem them, in the way implied in Bernabé’s reference to Christ. He wants to share something with them, a common cultural reference: *Atipa*. He calls out to his Guianese fellows to tell them, as we say colloquially, a couple of home truths. But in the present case, we are dealing with no less than four home truths. Hence the French expression *dire ses quatre vérités à quelqu’un* applies perfectly at both the literal and metaphorical level. This expression means to drop one’s masks and to speak with absolute, undiluted candor. The truth is evidenced not only in what is said, but also in a necessary sense of discomfort and in a subsequent sense of relief. Indeed, to speak the truth by praising something that goes against the behaviors and ways of thinking sanctioned by the society of the time is, on the part of this author, whoever he may be, a way of exploiting an inevitable sense of discomfort and distress. With this cathartic strategy, Parépou hones in on the element that creates a sense of unity among the Guianese as a community of compatriots, namely, the common feeling of the Guianese towards the French language. The writer Raphaël Confiant has noted that, in asserting or describing Creole reality, the French language inevitably betrays it. Parépou is very conscious of what is called today the problem of diglossia, that is, when two languages spoken in the same territory have a different social status. Those who have an excellent understanding of French, the language of successful integration and of social advancement, generally understand Creole, while the reverse is not true or may vary from case to case. Parépou knows the Creole people take a defensive stance toward French as the result of their constant fear of being caught in an error. This is not to say that the native speaker of Creole is afraid

of making mistakes when he communicates, but rather that he is obsessed by grammar, by the correct form of French with which others have filled his ears. The Creole subject thus becomes in every case what colonization wanted him to be, a behavioral system of pure reflex, a machine with solid arms, a robot, a robot who wants to perform according to the accepted rules of the French language. Faced with the Creole text, the reader may suffer from the comical reflex of looking out for the rules he was taught to refer to, instead of enjoying himself and savoring the charm of the story. In essence, Parépou is interested in the unique qualities found in Creole behavior that has been contaminated by French. He is interested in detecting the essence of Guianese Creoleness—*Guyanité*. The Guianese reader can realize this only through the distanciation created by parody, thus stepping back from the manner in which he organizes his daily life between Creole and French, and seeing himself as living between the two.

Parépou begins, therefore, by addressing his readers in Creole in the following manner:

My dear compatriots, it is for you alone that I created Atipa. What I write is not French, but Creole. Therefore, those who are looking for French rules are wasting their time, since this book was not made for that. It is true that we know how to read French; nevertheless, many of us do not understand it. (*Atipa* 3)

He concludes by saying: “Those of you for whom the book can teach nothing will still find it entertaining” (3). Parépou addresses his compatriots in order to reveal the following four truths:

1. Guiana suffers a sense of disaffection from itself. The Guianese subject is not at peace with himself. He does not know why he is unhappy. Maybe he does not even know he is unhappy (which would be the last straw). Just by reading this Creole text together, Guianese readers form a vast family of fellow countrymen. In the act of writing the preface, Parépou engages himself in a forceful speech act which empowers him to interpellate and identify his readers as a group. This group forms a unique family, the members of which enjoy equal standing regardless of their level of fluency in French.
2. At the root of this disaffection there is a sense of misrecognition, a refusal to see themselves as they are. The multicultural mix, and

the resulting mixture of interests, have created a problematic self-image. It is thus important that the Guianese understand that the book was written exclusively for them, and this is the reason the author choose to write in the Creole language rather than in French. This is not a reflection or a duplication of a French text translated into Creole, as writers used to offer. When he reads this book the reader has to abandon any reflex of translation. The book resembles no other; its truth has to be found in the reader's *soul*. The book contains a purity that is untranslatable, and at the very least, it would be foolish to try to translate it. (Why should it be translated since it has nothing to do with the French?).

3. Through this therapeutic reading, the Guianese people must throw off the ills that afflict them, the disorder that overwhelms them, leaving behind the country's political, economical and social stagnation. To read this text is to suffuse oneself with Creole, to take Creole medicine for a Creole malady. In Creole, pronunciation is more important than all other rules. It is by way of accentuation that the Creole language colonizes French words. As a result, the French language is always in the process of becoming Creole. This does not mean that the French lexicon is simply a reservoir for Creole words. Going in the same direction as the modern concept of creolisation articulated by Glissant, Parépou is interested in the process of modulation, transforming French words vocalized by Creole throats. Filtered through Creole pronunciation, the French word visually becomes another word. The constraints of pronunciation provide the master key to all systems. The speaker who can master this can feed off any linguistic system, and in the process, gain access to his own truth.

4. The liberation achieved through reading the novel must be experienced not as a painful, strenuous process (like learning), but as the kind of relief that comes from laughter. Pleasure must be found in this act of liberation, the pleasure of laughing at what one is leaving behind. The lack of ironic distance towards books and newspapers that are intended to instruct provokes an identical attitude among all Guianese: they do not read them. *Atipa*, therefore, is destined to instruct and to amuse; that is, to instruct without appearing to. How? Just by being a novel from French Guiana. Just by bringing to the forefront a reality that had always seemed unworthy of being the central subject of a book. The power of the book stems from the absence of a model: it is a "Guianese novel" and the juxtaposition of these two terms has never been witnessed before (this emphatic specificity will become even more comprehensible in the subtitle of *Batouala* by René Maran in 1921: "A True Black Novel").

Curiously, both translations subscribe to the legitimate and rational desire to make *Atipa* known by the greatest number of readers. Their argument is serene even while they are in the process of distorting the initial intention of the project: "it is for you only that I wrote *Atipa*. This is not French, this is Creole" (*Atipa* 3). The author, who adopted the pseudonym Alfred Parépou, in fact, explains at length in the preface that he made a conscious decision to write in Creole so that he could create with his Creole readers an interactive effect of meaning that French language had proven incapable of giving. Incapable of establishing Parépou's initial project, critics do not understand why the book is identified in the title as a Guianese Novel (*roman guyanais*), because they see no more than a satirical and simplistic pseudo-comedy of quotidian life in French Guiana at the beginning of the Third Republic. It is for this very reason that both translations underscore the naive but spiritual tone of the book. For these critics, the work cannot be considered as a viable novel as it purports to be. Its literary qualities are non-existent, and its only charm resides in the lucid observation and insightful commentaries. As if the Creole language was ultimately only an ornament, or a frame providing a more or less successful container for Parépou's portrait of quotidian life, a frame that could easily be removed, if thought necessary, for convenience. To explain the novel's literary and commercial failure, several logical reasons were suggested: the awkwardness of the book's composition; its limited distribution outside of the Martiniquan network; and the resulting marginalisation of Creole, as a language of the ignorant, by the potential reading public.

The author is said to have lacked common sense or discernment while at the same time revealing clairvoyance and courage. He is recognized for his courage in criticizing the established institutions. Some believe that he adopted his pseudonym to avoid punishment from those in power. But, above all, I would argue that he showed the greatest courage in his decision to deliberately distance himself from the trend to imitate fable, and to risk appropriating the genre of the novel. We know that such an attitude can blind or render deaf those who respect rituals and fixed genres,

those who live under the authority of the laws that celebrate the culture of the French language. Sometimes, the risk can pay off if the work succeeds in being legitimized in France and returns valorized on the micro market of the creolophone population. This is not the case for *Atipa*, a work which marks the birth of Guianese literature through a double transgression—the transgression of language for a book of this genre, and of genre for a book in this language. The book could not sustain the tension of anticipating a Guianese Creole public while simultaneously arriving on the Parisian literary scene embellished with a French title. This tension led to an inefficient distribution of the book, which is seen in the fact that it took Schuchardt nine years to learn of its existence.

Atipa tells a rather simple story about a gold prospector who comes back to see his wife in Cayenne for about four weeks. During this time, he visits places he remembers from the past—the market, the city streets, the bistros, the dance halls, the forest where he spends time waiting uselessly during the hunt. He meets his friends and gets carried away with talk. His wife tells their friend Dorilas “li content palé” ‘he talks a lot’ (44). In fact, as the narrative proceeds, *Atipa* is possessed by a torrent of words, and seems in great haste to say everything. And indeed, he is pressed for time, since his stay in Cayenne is nearly over, and he has to go back to Mana. Towards the end, we are far from the enjoyment of the early chapters, there are hardly any replies by other characters, and one anecdote quickly follows the other without much in the way of transition. It’s as though, once the effort has been made to capture the reader’s attention in the earlier chapters, entertainment gives way to the need to remember and to instruct, to say everything. Just as the first chapter opens a new day, the final chapter brings another day to a close. Now, it’s evening, after dinner, on the eve of *Atipa*’s departure; one of his friends, Totie (Tortoise), whom *Atipa* didn’t expect to see again, drops by to visit. “Let’s go for a walk,” says Totie. But *Atipa* is tired. For a whole month he’s been traipsing around the streets of the city talking incessantly. He would rather sit down on a bench in the Grande Savane square.

If *Atipa* must be translated into French, then we could say that by virtue of its realistic and provocative content, as well as its almost picaresque structure, this work belongs to the tradition of satirical narratives that stretches from *The Satyricon* of Petronius to the writings of Scarron, Lesage, and Montesquieu. According to the conventions of the genre, a traveler or wanderer, in the course of his various encounters, becomes a critical witness of his era, and of the society in which he lives. This work of fiction is a novel, though it doesn't have a plot that moves progressively from beginning to end. First, because it is a Guianese story, because it tells of a Guianese reality as it is experienced from one day to the next from a single point of view, *Atipa*'s. The microcosm of Cayenne, which *Atipa* perpetually traverses, explores and rediscovers, is the very image of the country itself, unfathomable at its boundaries, always in the process of discovery and penetration. As the novel weaves the fabric of a Creole community that is made up of people with different African origins, it also invokes what Guiana consists of, a collection of communities that are located side by side but do not necessarily live with each other. Second, because it is the story of a language embodying the very process of its becoming Guianese, just as the earliest French writings were written in Romance—a vernacular tongue that was looked down on when compared to the dominant Latin. These writings were thus called *Romans* (novels). *Atipa*, by contrast, is a story written in Creole, a language which, in 1885, aimed at establishing its pedigree in a genre different from poetry and the transcription of La Fontaine's *Fables*.

If it is to be lived or experienced in Creole, this novel is the surprising result of a calculated attempt to entertain and to teach. The author does not conceal this in his preface. Above all else he wants to amuse the reader in order to incite him to read. But what kind of readers is he addressing? The competence of the author who really knows how to speak correctly is juxtaposed against that of his mouthpiece, who always talks too much and often in a mixed-up way. According to the sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu, *Atipa*'s "plain speech" grounds him in a relationship of easy familiarity with his own people. This plain speech runs

counter to the official speech of government administration and the newspapers, in relation to which the Guianese subject has a relationship that is marked by resistance and/or self-censorship. Let us not forget the sensible irony inherent in Atipa's advice: if you cannot speak French correctly, then limit yourself to speaking Creole as well as you do. In other words, why persist in speaking French imperfectly when you have at your disposal a community language that is infinitely flexible? If by speaking Guianese Creole, Parépou inspires emotion in his readers, this does not mean that the latter loses his awareness of the weight of French as the official language. On the contrary, his emotion is the result of this awareness.

At the time the book appeared one would imagine that those literate readers who would buy the book published in Paris would have no desire to identify with men like Atipa, this big mouth, this uneducated fish eater, who praises Creole and the banalities of ordinary life. When he glances through this book, Schuchardt does not laugh and he doubts if the Guianese can find any pleasure in it. But Schuchardt speaks the Creole of the learned individual, and not a "delirious Creole," as Glissant would say, given to unpredictable verbal inventions. Laughter can only be experienced by those who understand the gap between the seriousness of the subjects introduced and the manner in which they are dealt with. The eloquence deployed to defend the merits of Creole may seem paradoxical if not laughable to the educated reader persuaded that the only way of achieving success is through the French language. Let us not forget that the perspective is that of a gold miner whose friends are all endowed with nicknames or comical traits, beginning with the author himself dressed up as a palm fruit (a *parépou*). In his *Cayenne*, Cherubini remembers that "from the 1860s onwards 'the bush' and 'the communes' became devalorized spaces in relation to the cities," and that "from the point of view of identification, the gold prospectors were people who came from 'the bush'" (97). The opposition of city and country is as important as in other cultures, except that here the sun is not responsible for the color of people's skin. The gold prospectors are a despised social caste that could almost be compared to

the *nègues bitation*, blacks from the countryside who are barely acculturated and barely of mixed race. On the other hand, *Atipa* is not presented in a worse light than others, he is simply shown as more talkative. What distinguishes him from his interlocutors is that he has been to France as a servant with his boss. The power he holds and the laws he sets forth are valid for whom?

These few prefatory notes for a deeper study show that there is a particular rhetorical model allowed by Creole in this text which cannot be rigidified into a discourse of excessive and homogeneous praise. Let us remember the tautological opening to the preface which makes clear to the reader—in Creole—that what they have in front of them is not French. A subversive discourse of paradoxical oscillation thus presents itself in the in-between space, between French and Creole. Speaking to Sorossi, *Atipa* exclaims: “I’m neither for the Whites nor the Blacks. . . . I’m for the ones who are right” (*Atipa* 109). This double distance opens a very effective space for a novel that is really a novel and also a eulogy of ordinary futility by the palm fruit and its spokesman, *Atipa*, the *walking fish*. None of this takes away from the polemical character of the writing.

Notes

1. French-based Creoles were born like Spanish-, Portuguese-, Dutch- and English-based Creoles in the seventeenth century from the need for communication between masters and slaves and between slaves who shared no common language. A dozen of these French-based Creoles are spoken by more than 10 million people in such areas as Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, Guiana, Haiti, Reunion, and the Seychelles islands. In Haiti and the Seychelles Islands, Creole is the official language.
2. Le livre “a échappé à mon attention pendant des années, bien qu’il fût publié à Paris” (Schuchardt 319).
3. In the preface of the first reedition of *Atipa* (1980), Rodolphe Robo, Directeur du Service Culturel Départemental de la Guiane, makes the following statement: “la réédition d’*Atipa*, d’Alfred Parépou, était

souhaitée depuis longtemps. Toutefois, il s'agissait d'une entreprise périlleuse que de procéder à une publication en créole. Seuls les initiés s'y seraient retrouvés, car le créole guianais a bien évolué depuis 1885, date de sortie du roman. La traduction en français par Michel Lohier, en 1972, devait susciter un regain d'intérêt pour la publication de ce roman, cette fois dans sa version créole et française. Et puis, le 21 novembre 1979, le Comité ad'hoc pour 'l'Année du Patrimoine' (année 1980) a exprimé le désir de voir réaliser cette action de revalorisation dans le cadre de 'l'Année du Patrimoine.' ” (9)

4. See Molinié and Viala 150-51.

5. Sir Walter Raleigh's full title of the edition published in London in 1596 reads: *The Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guyana; with a Relation of the Great and Golden City of Manoa (which the Spaniards call Eldorado) performed in the Year 1595.*

6. It should be noted that when *Atipa* appeared, there was a Creole specific to Guiana that was different from the versions spoken in Martinique and Guadeloupe. This is almost no longer the case today, since Guianese Creole is still being absorbed by the others.

7. All quotations from *Atipa* are taken from the 1989 reedition. All English translations are mine.

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