

Jean-Claude Fignolé

quiet dawn

A Novel of Haiti



Translated and with an Introduction by Kaiama L. Glover and Laurent Dubois



Quiet Dawn

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Quiet Dawn

Jean-Claude Fignolé

Translated by Kaiama L. Glover and Laurent Dubois

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For Jean-Claude Fignolé,
with gratitude for this whirld he has brought to the page.

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Translators' Introduction

Kaïama L. Glover and Laurent Dubois

Let us quiet the rancor of history without denying or forgetting it and allow literature to introduce us into the eternity of its fantasies.

—Jean-Claude Fignolé (2010)

The Americas have a history problem. The Caribbean and its diasporas in particular have long struggled, that is, to fashion a historical identity untethered from the overdetermining degradations of colonialism and its stultifying (lack of) imagination. For Black peoples whose collective past has been so dramatically constituted by the relentless avarice and fantasies of racial capitalism—peoples for whom recorded history, the history of what has been deemed modernity, first emerged from the Middle Passage and the “monstrous intimacies”¹ of the plantation—possibilities for autopoiesis have been hard to come by.

Different thinkers have proposed different responses to this conundrum, to this “quarrel with history,” as the Jamaican poet and scholar Edward Baugh has pithily named it. The Martinican writer and intellectual Édouard Glissant, for example, has placed the matter of history at the very center of his creative and scholarly work and has profoundly shaped the discussion of these questions over the past more than half century. In his celebrated essay collections *Caribbean Discourse* (1981) and *Poetics of Relation* (1990), as well as in his many novels and plays, Glissant exhorts his readers to embrace what he calls “a prophetic vision of the past.” A much-theorized and complex concept, this generative formulation calls for reading the past against schematic chronology

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and toward collective destiny. It proposes looking beyond the so-called facts of history as given, and understanding present realities as the tattered dreams of the past. To look backward in time prophetically, he explains, is a process of querying and recovery that relies not on the purportedly universalist but profoundly ethnocentric “capital *H* History” of Hegelian chronology, but rather on a rhizomatic tangle of histories, lowercase and plural.

Haiti has had its own consuming problem with history, as novelist and essayist Jean-Claude Fignolé understands well. “History, you see, is my ‘thing,’” he declared in a wide-ranging 2010 interview, “despite the fact that I’m not trained as a historian.” Committed in his storytelling practice to exposing the fraught persistence of the past in Haiti’s present-day struggles, Fignolé insists that “the indignity of the present that we’re living is a direct consequence of the turpitudes of our History, since the very beginning.”²

Haitian thought around history-telling reflects the unique circumstances of the nation’s relationship to the empires of Europe and the United States. Ostensibly sovereign since its seizing of independence from France in 1804, Haiti has long been understood—and understood itself, for better and for worse—as an exception in the Americas and in the wider Black Atlantic.³ This singularity has had consequences, consequences that are perhaps nowhere more robustly analyzed than by the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Trouillot’s groundbreaking 1995 study of the practice and nature of history and historiography within the context of global capitalism, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, is a focused reminder that stories of the past emerge in a situated fashion—that historical narratives are bound by the conditions of their production and reception and, as such, can and should be approached with a measure of skepticism.⁴ Trouillot’s most powerful example of this phenomenon is what he famously calls the silencing of the Haitian Revolution—that is, the Revolution’s marked absence from the “official” archival record and its active erasure of histories that undermine or contest the prevailing history of white supremacy and conquest in the Americas.

A world-shattering and world-(re)making event that very literally constituted the state of Haiti as such, the Haitian Revolution was an epistemic rupture of global proportions—an unprecedented challenge

to the modern world order, both in its time and in the more than two centuries since. Indeed, to this day, Haiti and its revolution remain in many ways incommensurate with desired histories of the American hemisphere and wider Atlantic world. As Haitian sociologist Jean Casimir has argued, the social and cultural structures and perspectives that emerged from 1804 among the Haitian people are still very difficult to apprehend—even for Haiti’s own intellectuals—given the stubborn circulation of colonial categories and ways of thinking in the present.⁵

Haiti’s novelists have largely avoided writing the story of Haiti’s founding event, for reasons that speak to the Revolution’s insistent effect on the nation’s fate in the more than two centuries since its wresting of sovereignty from Napoleon’s imperial state. As literary scholar Natalie Léger has argued, this is very likely due to the fact that the Revolution has been so cynically co-opted and deployed among Haiti’s political leaders.⁶ The tendency of the nation’s politicians—none more notoriously so than François “Papa Doc” Duvalier—to lean on a heroic nationalist narrative with the goal of manipulating or obfuscating the country’s present realities is a narrative practice that Haiti’s writers are wary of legitimating.

Jean-Claude Fignolé is a rare exception to that rule. Neither a historian nor a theorist, Fignolé writes always with Haiti’s revolutionary past present in his mind, a perspective that is strikingly apparent in *Quiet Dawn*. One of the very few contemporary works of Haitian prose fiction to grapple explicitly with Haiti’s revolution, it pushes forcefully against the silences and silencings of Haiti’s past. Indeed, despite its title, Fignolé’s novel gives us a clamorous Atlantic world—a world that simply would not have been without the events of 1791 to 1804.

Seamlessly, Fignolé brings the reader of *Quiet Dawn* through several key moments in Haiti’s revolutionary history, including watershed events that appear in historical works like C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and, more recently, Sudhir Hazareesingh’s *Black Spartacus*.⁷ Through Wolf’s story, for example, we learn the history of the Swiss Regiment, an all-Black military force that played a key role in conflicts in the western province of Saint-Domingue, only to be betrayed and massacred. We discover the intricacies of the conflicts among planters, and their positions toward the free population of African

descent—described variously in the novel as “freedmen” and “mulattoes,” depending on who is speaking—including the executions of rebel leaders Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes. We learn about Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel, the commissioners who decreed the abolition of slavery in 1793; about their defeated royalist enemy, François-Thomas Galbaud; and about the rise of “a certain Toussaint Louverture, once known by the name of Patras-Bâton” (page 153). We are called to witness the famous Bwa Kayiman ceremony, which launched the mass revolution of the enslaved in 1791, through Saintmilia’s fervid remembrance: “Live free or die, a pig was brought out and you, possessed with hope and justice, raised your cutlass, to live free, our voices shaking with emotion, hate and vengeance merged into a single will, or die, a cry, a decision flowing from the plains to the hills, from the valleys to the mountains, to no longer be afraid, an ardent thirst, to be born, to be resuscitated, to rise up, to affirm ourselves, even if the world were to explode, even if the world were to perish, yes to remake the world” (page 151).

Quiet Dawn operates on a global stage, fully engaging with the complexities of eighteenth-century France and the revolutionary era in Europe. History is everywhere in the novel, whether or not that history ever made it into the record book of those granted the authority to account for the past. We see how the writings of Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau circulated within the context of Saint-Domingue, and we travel through Europe, as well, as it contends with the French Revolution and its continental repercussions. We bear witness to the counterrevolutionary war in the Vendée and its bloody suppression, to the mechanisms of the Terror, and to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, “the tyrant who has stolen our revolution and turned it to his own ends” (page 155). French cultural and literary history also become part of the story through evocations of the libertine writer the Marquis de Sade, the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, and the novelist and playwright Pierre de Marivaux, and through Fignolé’s humorous evocation of the celebrated Romantic writer, diplomat, and historian François-René de Chateaubriand, whose presence dominated the literary world during the first half of the nineteenth century.

This vast scope speaks to Fignolé’s unsilencing of Saint-Domingue within a global frame, despite Haiti’s isolation with respect to today’s

political power brokers. The Haitian Revolution haunts our collective human past, Fignolé insists, and he has boldly written the ghosts. He narrates the Revolution as part of an eternal return to a set of unending, spiraling histories, revealing Haiti's para-revolutionary moment as crucial to any understanding of the nation's troubling subsequent fate. In his 2010 interview, he laments that so much Haitian history has been "essentially a process of hagiography," in which "the principal actors, according to the dictates of partisan passions, are deified." Haitian politicians during the twentieth century, he notes, have led the way in "sacrificing historical truth to the lies of an excessive nationalism," leading to a tendency to refer "only to the super-heroic, quasi-divine dimension of our ancestors." Thus, while *Quiet Dawn* implicates well-known historical actors and events, it adamantly refuses any rehabilitating mythification of the Revolution. Haiti, Fignolé argues, needs a different relationship to history, and *Quiet Dawn* proposes just such a different path. It "authorizes [him] to express the human fiber of the various characters, to seize the key figures in all their weaknesses, with their qualities and their faults" and offers a way to consider the workings of Haiti's unresolved revolutionary history in a troubled global present, making plain how that history has continued to repeat itself in Haiti's at once insular, regional, and global positioning today.⁸

* * *

Published in 1990 by the prestigious French press Les Éditions du Seuil, *Quiet Dawn* is a truly singular work of literature. The author's "favorite" among his six novels,⁹ it obliquely points to the painful irony of Haiti's long postrevolutionary sociopolitical circumstances through its staging in the present of events that are putatively past. Both the novel's obliqueness and its attention to the ways that history loops back on itself are reflections of Fignolé's biography and of the very particular circumstances in which he wrote.

Born in 1941, Fignolé was raised in Les Abricots, a commune in the small seaside town of Jérémie, located in the southern province of Haiti. In the mid-1960s, at the height of François Duvalier's fascist regime, he, along with fellow writers Frankétienne and René Philoctète, began developing an approach to literature and history they named Spiralism. Characterized by unresolved yet generative tension—between the insular and the global, the individual and the collective, the past

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and the present, the spiral enabled the three writers to embrace time's unfettered linear passage, allowing them to present—that is, quite literally to make present—Haiti's complicated past as integral to and explicitly implicated in its contemporary circumstances.¹⁰

Spiralism emerged against the backdrop of the excessive violence, pervasive government criminality, and absolute terror that marked Duvalier's totalitarian state. Fignolé would have been acutely aware of the imminent and awesome threat of such brutality, as Jérémie had been the site of the massacre of entire families accused of conspiring against Duvalier in 1964. In the years following, he became deeply involved in projects aiming to address environmental and economic problems in Les Abricots, and was elected mayor of the town in 2007, continuing this role through the devastating 2010 earthquake and its aftermath. *Quiet Dawn* was written during the late 1980s, a time of tremendous political transformation and upheaval in Haiti, as the country sought to rebuild democracy in the wake of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's ousting and exile in 1986.

The extent to which Duvalierism transformed the social, cultural, and intellectual landscape of the nation cannot be understated. Modes of creative representation and the imaginary itself were considered the purview of Haiti's all-powerful leader, subject to his most absurd pronouncements and paranoid whims. History was shaped in accordance with Duvalierist doctrine, perverted in service to a symbolic order that gave no quarter to ordinary citizens—be they artists or athletes, journalists or priests, women or even children—who dared to call the regime into question. Many of Haiti's writers left the country during this period, having been victims of torture and other forms of repression. The Spiralists Fignolé, Frankétienne, and Philoctète, however, made an explicit pledge not to leave Duvalier's Haiti, for fear of being refused return, as had been the fate of several of their colleagues and friends.

Though the three men pursued this creative practice very differently, they were all aligned in their belief that reality has always been "lived schizophrenically by Haitians."¹¹ Having made the decision to stay and write in Haiti despite the material and psychological constraints placed on the individual (and the) artist by the successive Duvalier regimes, Fignolé, Frankétienne, and Philoctète necessarily sought out ways of writing the Haitian real at once faithfully and with

a certain measure of caution. They were well aware that writing subversive content into their fiction could have mortal repercussions, and so they emphasized the formal dimensions of their literary endeavors, utilizing the figure of the spiral as a platform for creating narratives that are pointedly imprecise or multivalent in time and space.

For Fignolé in particular, the spiral form provided a clear narrative structure from which to delve into an infinitely relevant and repeating past. This is palpably the case in *Quiet Dawn*, a swirling epic that amounts to a fulsome confrontation with Black Atlantic history, in all its complexity and irresolution. Switching among narrators, places, and moments in time, it is not meant to be an easy read. By constantly shifting the parameters of the present in his narrative, Fignolé implicitly demands that his reader recognize the absolute contingency and even unhelpful arbitrariness of a linear conception of time or a bordered conception of space. The present of the novel is fractured, traumatic, and multifaceted. The brutal violence of the world its characters share has broken each of them in ways more and less metaphorical, more and less literal.

This disjointedness mimetically communicates the chaos and the fissures of history without attempting to construct a single coherent, complete, or stable story of the past. Instead, that past is literally everywhere all at once. And while the narrative intends, like one of the novel's characters, to be "faithful to the rendezvous of our history" (page 128), no stable notion of what "our" history might be—of whose history is being told and experienced through the novel—is ever determined with any certainty. Alternating between and conflating the apocalyptic and the personal tragic, *Quiet Dawn* pushes the reader to perceive events without hierarchizing them, without allowing any one version to supplant any other as truth or fact. Traumatic memory, fantasy, and "official" narratives emerge as equally (un)reliable means of accessing New World (hi)stories.

The novel suggests, ultimately, that we too often limit ourselves in the ways we tell our stories, that our intellectual approach to the past little resembles the overlapping, unending, unfinished, and unwritten nature of how we live in this world. This aesthetic of the unsettled and the undone is constant throughout Fignolé's work, and it is intentional, pedagogic. His novel invites us into a different understanding of the

relationship between time and place; it enjoins us to let go of what we might desire from the past. The experience of reading it thus enables a different kind of consciousness about the imbricated copresence of multiple events and our perceptions of what “really” happened.

Quiet Dawn paints an at once intimate and sweeping portrait of the Black Atlantic that is as much grounded in history as it is the fruit of Fignolé’s extraordinary imagination. It plunges the reader into the time-space of colonial Saint-Domingue through the sorrowful chronicle of the eighteenth-century planter Baron Wolf von Schpeerbach; his wife, Sonja Biemme de Valemburn Lebrun; the enslaved woman Saint-milia; and her son, Salomon, all of whom live unhappily together on a vast plantation in Saint-Domingue’s southern province. The tragedy of these four individuals’ entwined colonial lives is set in parallel to—and eventually becomes interwoven with—the chronologically post-colonial story of the twentieth-century French nun Sister Theresa, a von Schpeerbach descendant, who has been sent to Haiti in part to do penance for the atrocities committed by her ancestors. Juxtaposing and integrating the young nun’s present-day narrative with events that have taken place more than five hundred years in the past, *Quiet Dawn* is a tale of vengeful ghosts and reluctant spiritual possession, in which time refuses to keep to its proper place.

The framing twentieth-century narrative itself operates in a sort of double time. It places Sister Theresa, whose given name is Sonja Biemme de Valemburn Lebrun, at once in a convent in Haiti and in the airplane transporting her across the Atlantic to begin a missionary sojourn at that very convent. In both spaces—the convent and the airplane—Sister Theresa recounts her experiences in the first-person present of the narrative. That is, the scenes that occur in the airplane are not positioned as flashbacks; although logically they are antecedent to the events that unfold in the convent, they unfold as if existing simultaneously, so many equally present moments in the temporality of the novel. Further, it is while in the air that Sister Theresa/Sonja listens to a cassette tape given to her by her mother just prior to her boarding the aircraft. The tape is a recording of the transcribed memoirs of her great-great-great-grandfather the Baron von Schpeerbach. On it, yet another first-person, present-tense voice recounts the horrors that take place on von Schpeerbach’s Saint-Domingue planta-

tion at the hands or on the orders of his capricious and sadistic Breton wife, Sister Theresa's great-great-great-great-grandmother, a.k.a. the original Sonja Biemme de Valembrun Lebrun. From the moment the cassette tape begins playing, the entire narrative is resituated within the present of eighteenth-century Haiti, with Wolf (via his unnamed ventriloquist) at the storytelling helm.

As it excavates and unravels history through its imagining of these intimate tales of family tragedy and trauma, *Quiet Dawn* unfurls a breathtaking canvas and traces a devastating arc of the Black Atlantic spiral. Its depiction of the dramatic exploits of the Breton dynasty to which Sonja Biemme and Sister Theresa belong evokes Brittany's deep ties to colonial Saint-Domingue as a crucial port of the French commercial trade with both Africa and the Americas. Figiolé posits this seventeenth-century saga of the merciless slave-trafficking Biemmes as the precursor to the guilt-ridden hypocrisies of twentieth-century missionary work, thus pointing to Brittany's significance as a dynamic nodal point in the Atlantic world, both past and present. Reflecting on his initial impulse for writing the novel, Figiolé explains, "from the 17th to the 20th century, Breton missionaries stirred up all the simmering discrimination on the island, by ostracizing voodoo [*sic*], castrating the Haitians by obliging them to reject Creole as a tool of communication between each other, and inflaming color prejudice in their schools and even in their churches."¹² The sins of the fathers (and mothers!), Figiolé thus suggests, are as much reenacted by as they are visited upon their children.

Sister Theresa's crossing of the Atlantic, the reader eventually learns, is in fact a spiral echo of her ancestors' honeymoon voyage to Saint-Domingue. As such, it is at once incredible and yet somehow also unsurprising that, once in Haiti, Sister Theresa discovers an avatar of Saintmilia, also (still?) named Saintmilia, presently interned within the twentieth-century convent where she has come to reside. Consumed by "a fury repressed for two centuries" (page 3), the present-day Saintmilia lives among the ruins of her and Sister Theresa's entangled past; she remembers all the details of her ancestral suffering, and she has vowed to settle accounts. Time, Figiolé thus makes clear, most certainly does not heal the wounds of history.

Quiet Dawn is animated almost entirely by this unhealed past. At the same time (the pun is very much intended), Figiolé reveals how

history's tragedies can infuse the present with transformative revolutionary power. In his depiction, for example, of the night of the Bwa Kayiman ceremony in 1791, originary event of the Haitian Revolution, he surfaces the abundance of stories that converge within this specific, pivotal episode in Haiti's history. Staging this moment as the triumphant return of the Black maroon leader François Mackandal, who had in fact been brutally executed by white planters more than three decades earlier in 1758, Fignolé powerfully invokes Vodou cosmologies to conjure the Revolution's expansive temporality: "blessed day, Agoué, the day of your rage, Mackandal rises up, a giant statue spitting fire and flames, distilling poison, Biassou cuts off heads, a tornado, a hurricane, a cyclone, Fatras-Bâton releases the *lwa*, razing plains and hills, the salt of vengeance sets fire to the cane fields" (page 178). In this scene and others, the novel spirals through the centuries of oppression, the enduring spiritualities, and the courageous imaginings of alternate futures that made it possible for the enslaved to shatter and reconfigure the political and economic landscape of Saint-Domingue and, ultimately, to create Haiti.

Quiet Dawn thus powerfully represents the gradual opening of imagination and possibility that constituted the Revolution, revealing how the nature of power shifted and how specific possibilities for action emerged among the enslaved. It captures the way the Haitian Revolution somehow accelerated time—"information seemed to travel faster than before" (page 124)—even as the events the novel relates are clearly embedded in deep and slow chronologies. The novel presents a narrative of the Revolution, and of central figures like the insurgent leader Biassou, that anticipates its own afterlives, not just imagining but embodying them. Fignolé does not create the rupture between our present and "their" past; he represents it—seeking the very most faithful rendering of the out-of-time-ness of Haiti's revolution. How, he asks, can it possibly be finished if it still so adamantly haunts the now?

Fignolé's avowal of the Revolution's imminence and immanence comes through with particular force in his writing of the enslaved-woman-turned-zonbi-warrior Toukouma, whose experience of loss and unspeakable violation starkly evinces the possible transformation of slavery's horrors into a concrete political endeavor. An avatar of such revolutionary figures as Cécile Fatiman and Sanité Bélair, among others, Fignolé's Toukouma summons to the text the many women

who played crucial roles in combat, healing, and spirituality during the Revolution.¹³ Whereas Haitian women writers—including Marie Vieux-Chauvet in her 1957 novel *Dance on the Volcano* and Évelyne Trouillot in her novels *The Infamous Rosalie* (2003) and *Désirée Congo* (2020)¹⁴—have foregrounded women’s presence during and in the years immediately preceding the Revolution, Fignolé is unique in having configured a woman character so mighty as to lead warriors into battle.

Wrathful and empowered with a strength that recalls the Petro *lwa* Ezili Dantor, Toukouma rages in pursuit of vengeance both intimate and global.¹⁵ The ferocity of the punishment she metes out to the white man who raped and beat her is proportionate to that brutalization, but also exceeds it. This is because her demand for justice extends to all the enslaved women in the novel—Maité, Saintmilia, and countless unacknowledged others—whose bodily autonomy has been made subject to the demands of the plantation order.¹⁶

Not only is the reader compelled to confront the specifically gendered brutality of the colonial world through Toukouma’s tragic tale, but her experiences prefigure the harshness of the postcolonial world, as well. The racism and violent encounters of the present are always in dialogue with those of the past, as is the case, for example, with the novel’s third Sonja, the imperturbable Senegalese flight attendant who cares for Sister Theresa on her transatlantic and transhistorical voyage to Haiti. Sonja tells Sister Theresa about her experience of having been called a “Negro whore” and subjected to a vicious sexual assault by a group of white men in Neuilly, an upscale neighborhood of modern-day Paris. Interjected into her description of this terrifying racist attack and rape in contemporary France are the words “as naked as earthworms,” a provocative intertext that gestures explicitly to words used by Toussaint Louverture in the last letter he wrote from prison (pages 160–61).¹⁷ This rhyming of then and now suggests that in some ways the past was always already saturated with ongoing future violence.

The intimacy established between the privileged white nun Sister Theresa and the Black flight attendant Sonja is woven through the novel to multiple ends. Importantly, it allows for useful exposition: nervous and (therefore) more than a little tipsy on her first flight, Sister Theresa confides openly in Sonja from the outset, laying out the circumstances of her journey to Haiti and the long and reprehensible

history that undergirds it. By no means a passive listener, Sonja refuses to let Sister Theresa wallow in self-pity, nor does she let her take comfort in any euphemistic perceptions of the past. Rather, she expands Sister Theresa's understanding of Europe's devastating toll on Black peoples across the globe by compelling her to confront the third point of the Black Atlantic triangle, the African continent. The two women argue, philosophize, and debate this long, braided history; they tell one another stories of how the conditions of the immediate and distant past have limited their personal horizons. They also flirt openly with one another, becoming ever more familiar as they pass the hours of their journey together, mutually confined in the indeterminate space-time of the aircraft. Indeed, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that Sister Theresa's feelings for Sonja are more than platonic. A subcurrent of erotic desire percolates beneath the surface of the two women's banter and becomes a portal through which the reader learns of Sister Theresa's torturous romantic and sexual relationship with Sister Hyacinthe, an older nun from her former convent in France. These queer connections among women allow for crucial, albeit fraught, modes of escape from otherwise constricted lives.

Quiet Dawn is replete with such stories of the complex lives of women—Black and white, enslaved and free, centuries gone and present day. More so than any other of the slim corpus of Haitian-authored revolutionary fictions, Fignolé's novel reminds us to attend to women's experiences, too often buried within and obscured by grand narratives of history. Thus, while the white male plantation-owner Wolf undoubtedly believes himself to be the hero of his own story, it becomes clear to the reader that he is mostly helpless and clueless in the face of women who, despite their explicit subjugation to the colonial and patriarchal order, are in many ways running the show. From his worldly and cynical courtesan-counselor, Cécile, to his unforgiving former wet nurse, Saintmilia, to his uncontrollable and viciously cruel bride, Sonja, women maroon from the world slavery has built. They make tactical strikes designed to destabilize and promptly undermine the conditions they find unbearable—so many radical bids for freedom within systems of domination, long-historical and present day. Their actions determine the course of history; they are forces

of disorder, both within the novel and in the world in which Fignolé produced it. Morally ambivalent, profoundly disruptive, and in many respects unlikeable, they form no discernible sisterhood, and they are often at each other's throats. The disorderly women who populate *Quiet Dawn* highlight the narrowness and violence of the world they are driven to refuse. Desperate and despairing, they want love above all else, and they are enraged by its impossibility.¹⁸

"What does love taste like?" asks one of these women toward the end of the story (page 162). This question seems to run through the whole of *Quiet Dawn*. The search for tenderness, for spaces of joy and connection, is interwoven within even the most conflictual of relationships. The possibility of something else is evanescent but also ever present, spiraling through the novel just as histories of violence do. And what somehow emerges throughout is the flawed yet striving humanity of Fignolé's characters, despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the novel's risky grappling with the most disquieting human-perpetrated horrors.

It is only in the revelation of the book's final pages, a scene of unimaginable and heartbreaking brutality, that the reader discovers the original act of violence that lies at the heart of the entire narrative spiral. This scene of subjection is shown to be at once the source and the reflection of the myriad other conflicts—personal, collective, global—that structured the colonial world and that continue to take a toll on the present.¹⁹ The novel's devastating conclusion seems to confirm the impossibility of finding a way through—or a clearing within—the absurdities of the plantation order toward relations grounded in friendship or even love.

In *Quiet Dawn*, none of this is set firmly within one moment in history, but rather exists palimpsestically in what came before and what has come since. Through his radical refusals of the conventions of historical fiction, Fignolé writes away from even the most ostensibly nontraditional literary representations of time's passage. "Histories contract and come back to life," as Fignolé puts it in the novel (page 38). He helps us experience the inescapability and oppressiveness of the past, but also offers a different kind of invitation. He asks that we readers confront, see, and feel the past as present in its full complexity. The novel proposes a way of understanding our rootedness in history as

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the necessary place from which to see the world around us anew, and perhaps to move forward within it. “She reconquers her past,” Fignolé writes of one character (page 20), and this novel struggles to retrieve a past that has largely been silenced by dominant histories—not by narrating it in any straightforward way, but by changing the very terms through which the past is constituted and accessed. In this sense, Fignolé’s novel is a radical commitment to evoking the presentness of history. It is a model of temporal instability, and as such, it raises questions about the very nature of historical time and about chronology itself.

* * *

Quiet Dawn is choral and polyphonic—orchestral, even. The novel’s constantly shifting perspectives and voices suggest that its characters are at once distinct beings and nonindividuated subjects. Fignolé makes it a challenge to understand exactly who is speaking to whom, when, and where. He goes so far, even, as to bring entirely other textual worlds into the story, notably, his extraordinary 1987 novel *Les possédés de la pleine lune*, in which Saintmilia is the primary suspect in a murder mystery involving her fisherman husband, Agénor; his doppelgänger (a giant river fish named Miyan! Miyan!); and his suspected young lover, Violetta.²⁰

Such disconcerting and destabilizing aspects of the novel are buttressed by a set of stylistic and grammatical choices that act as both clues and invocations. In translating *Quiet Dawn*, we have sought as much as possible to find a way to transmit the experience of reading the novel in the original French, maintaining the velocity and energy of Fignolé’s breathless narrative. We adhered as closely as possible to Fignolé’s punctuation, which we understand as a matter of style and rhythm. He almost never uses periods, preferring commas, to create the pacing of his prose. He also largely avoids capitalization, as a way of creating a stream-of-consciousness flow, which we have pointedly maintained.

Fignolé often moves seamlessly between the past and present tenses in ways that do not track directly with the temporality of a particular scene or dialogue, simply because time is so unstable throughout the work. Tenses often shift midparagraph, which also means midsentence, given the absence of periods. Here then, too, we followed Fignolé’s lead in the original text, aware that the differences between the range and valences of tenses in French and English make this an imperfect process.

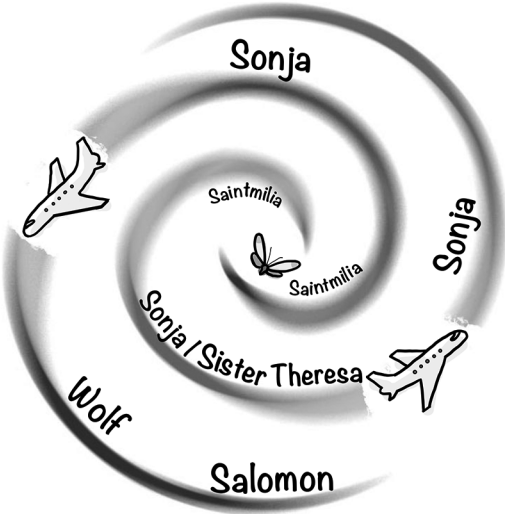
The translation of racial terminology from French to English also raises its own thorny set of issues. The French words *Nègre* or *Nègresse* have always been multivalent, used in juridical and literary works as well as in daily life in different ways. This has also been true of other racial designations, such as *mulâtre*. The term *Noir*, however, was also used as a racial construct but sometimes with a different connotation. During the revolutionary period, the question of racial terminology itself became one of the terrains for political struggle. Fignolé chose to use these words variously to accord with particular voices and moments, but not in any stable or predictable way. Thus here, again, we chose to preserve the disconcerting experience of navigating these powerful and shifting terms, and we did so by translating *Nègre* and *Nègresse* as *Negro* and *Negress*, and *Noir* as *Black*.

Fignolé was clearly comfortable with unsettling his readers—with creating a complex and at times difficult experience, and asking that we embrace a world of opacity, uncertainty, and shifting truths. The white eighteenth-century characters are particularly challenging, given their racism and the violence of their relationship to the enslaved. In translating the passages that are in their voices we have maintained terminology and phrasing that may be triggering and offensive in English, with the idea that Fignolé very pointedly aimed to expose the nature of the colonial and slave-holding mindset. We recognize that reading these and other passages in the novel may be disturbing and, at times, even painful but see our role as transmitting as best we can the atmosphere and experience Fignolé proposed in the original.

This commitment to unsettle his reader is also evident in Fignolé's occasional use in his novel of Haitian Creole words or phrases that he does not define for his French-language readers. We have followed this practice, leaving those same words or phrases in Creole for readers of English. Similarly, Fignolé references many historical figures, places, and literary and theatrical works without providing explicatory details, and so we have chosen not to add notes or context to those or, in the case of literary and dramatic works, to translate their titles into meaningless approximations. *Quiet Dawn* is full of such invitations to learn more, to pursue a glancing mention or travel down one rabbit hole or another, and we hope that Anglophone readers of his work will respond to that call.²¹

Figinolé describes his novel as a “universe” of meaning.²² Unsurprisingly, then, his work aims to contain what is uncontainable—the incommensurate and the conflictual, the causal and the correlative, the possibility of love and the many obstacles to its full expression. Readers of *Quiet Dawn* must be willing to dwell in the cacophony and the chaos of this world Figinolé has built, to journey with him along the dizzying arcs of history’s spiral—and to accept from word one that it will be quite a ride.

20th Century



18th Century

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The spiral structure of *Quiet Dawn*. Illustration by Samantha Stephens

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Notes

Epigraph: Kathleen Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity: A Conversation with Jean-Claude Fignolé,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 21.

1. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
2. Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity,” 9.
3. Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Jhon Picard Byron, Kaiama L. Glover, and Mark Schuller, eds., *The Haiti Exception: Anthropology and the Predicament of Narrative* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
4. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
5. Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
6. Natalie Léger, “Partisan Politics and Twentieth-Century Fictions of the Haitian Revolution,” in *A History of Haitian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).
7. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020). There is a rich and expanding corpus of Anglophone scholarship on the Haitian Revolution that includes Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), and Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); this work is all built upon the crucial foundations of Haitian historiography, which, as Marlene L. Daut argues in *Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), also played a role in the rethinking of history more broadly during the nineteenth century.
8. Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity,” 9.
9. Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity,” 9.
10. See Kaiama L. Glover, *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Post-colonial Canon* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010).
11. Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity,” 13.
12. Gyssels, “One Hour for Eternity,” 11.
13. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Fick, *Making of Haiti*; Karol K. Weaver, *Medical*

Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

14. Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Dance on the Volcano*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (New York: Archipelago Books, 2016); Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie*, trans. Marjorie Attignol Salvodon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Évelyne Trouillot, *Désirée Congo*, trans. Marjorie Attignol Salvodon (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024).
15. On Ezili Dantor, see Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*; Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Omise'oke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
16. Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
17. Louverture described himself in this letter as having been shipped to France "as naked as an earthworm." See Deborah Jenson, "From the Kidnapping(s) of the Louvertures to the Alleged Kidnapping of Aristide: Legacies of Slavery in the Post/Colonial World," *Yale French Studies* 107 (2005): 162–86.
18. See Kaiama L. Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
19. The reference to Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), a powerful study of—among else—the imbricated perversions of love, promiscuity, subjugation, and performance required by the slave order, is intentional.
20. Jean-Claude Fignolé, *Les possédés de la pleine lune* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).
21. Shepherding *Quiet Dawn* into the English-speaking world would not have been possible without the generosity of Madame Fulvie Fignolé and the Fignolé family. We are grateful, too, for the patience and steadfast support of Ken Wissoker and for his selection of excellent reader-reviewers, whose careful engagement with our translation brought welcome insights to this work.
22. Gysseels, "One Hour for Eternity," 9.

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