

BENEATH THE UNDERGROUND

By N. Frédéric Pierre

Every weekend, since the 2010 Haitian earthquake, members of my community meet to discuss happenings here, in Brooklyn, and back home. That group —*Anba Tonnèl* (loosely translated in English as “beneath the underground”)— functions as a forum for grandparents, teenagers, Aristide-era activists, and other hyphenated-identity Haitians to express and create political understandings of our realities. On 20 March 2020, when shelter-in-place commands were announced in New York City, we made the difficult decision to stop holding our weekly meetings. *Anba Tonnèl* is a vital source of social support for our elders and provides translated information for the non-English speaking members of the community.

Like many institutions across these United States, we went remote. However, for Haitian immigrants, who came up during the dictatorship years (1957-1986), free conference call services and Zoom were convenient tools for surveillance; any information shared on those platforms can be used against us in a court of law. In addition, we are a community of economically-marginalized workers, which makes reliable internet a luxury most cannot afford. Our solution? — an elaborate string of “each one, call one.” Despite the cumbersomeness of it all, we recognize COVID-19 as an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of community during distress.

We anchor our current work in the memory of how the first generation of Haitians birthed itself on a tumultuous battlefield. Yes—you must *koupe tet, boule kay*.¹ However, there is much tedium in the work of revolution. There is virtually no tempo in tame times. It is precisely in the moment of global crisis that our ancestors snatched a slippery, quivering liberation in their revolutionary maw. In closing, I share the remarks of an elder who garnered strength from the group to quit her job after being told that essentially-disposable workers had to return to the COVID-19 floor at a

¹ Quote attributed to Haiti’s first postcolonial leader, Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Translation- cut off heads, burn down houses, i.e. wage total war against European imperialists.

hospital in Brooklyn. The brim of pride in her voice shone through clearly on the call when she said, “I didn’t realize I gave the plantation the right to kill me” for a paycheck. Which makes me wonder –what rights shall we reclaim during this plague?

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