

Beyond poto mitan: Challenging the “Strong Black Woman” archetype and allowing space for tenderness

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In this article, we contend that the “strong Black woman” archetype constricts expressions of Black womanhood and girlhood and thus limits individual and collective liberation. We maintain that strength need not preclude tenderness, highlighting two forms: wounded tenderness—a raw and aching feeling pointing to the vulnerability of human beings—and liberated tenderness, a practice of meeting woundedness with embodied awareness and gentleness. We foreground the concept of *poto mitan* to illustrate how the “strong Black woman” archetype upholds virtues of strength at the expense of tenderness, thus taking up Faye Harrison’s call to theorize from “ex-centric sites.” Translated as “center posts,” *poto mitan* describes the architecture of spaces for traditional ancestor worship and conventionally refers to Haitian women’s central role as pillars of the family and community. We begin this article by discussing the limits of this discourse within feminist scholarship and activism. Second, we examine how this discourse both engenders and limits liberation for Haitian rural women. By concluding with “tenderness as method,” we argue that feminist anthropologists working with Black women must not only attune themselves to how discourses and performances of strength may occlude liberation but also call on our own vulnerability to allow space for liberated tenderness.

Keywords Haitian women, liberated tenderness, mechanistic dehumanization, *poto mitan*, strong Black woman

there is no place

for a soft / black / woman.

there is no smile green enough or

summertime words warm enough to allow my growth.

—“Present” by Sonia Sanchez (2000)

On a bright afternoon in June 2016 in Pestel, Haiti, I (Darlène) chatted with Paula, a young and outgoing single mother of two, outside the home of one of her neighbors.¹ Paula lived by the

seaside, on the edge of the town square that housed a grand Catholic church, cinderblock homes and shops, and brightly painted old gingerbread houses. Paula and I bonded over shared motherhood as I played with her one-year-old daughter, who toddled on chubby legs. Toward the end of our conversation, I asked Paula when her older daughter learned to walk. She replied that her four-year-old neither walks nor talks. She then led me across the alley to her one-room home, too close to the ocean to be protected from high tides. Paula’s four-year-old lay on the floor naked, happily babbling to herself. Paula explained, matter-of-factly, that she had brought her daughter to several doctors, but she could not get her to a specialist without proper resources. “What about her father or the government? Can’t they help her?” I asked, already knowing the answer. She shrugged off the question and asked me when I would visit her again. As a Haitian diasporic woman and single mother myself, I understood her stoic dismissal all too well.

Paula’s stoicism was a specific expression of the long-standing designation of Haitian women as *poto mitan*. Translated as “center posts,” *poto mitan* describes the architecture of spaces for traditional ancestor worship and conventionally refers to Haitian women’s central role as pillars of the family and community (N’Zengou-Tayo 1998). In this article, we argue that while the *poto mitan* concept gestures toward the autonomy and strength of Haitian women, it also requires women’s silent forbearance in the face of state neglect and gender-based oppression. We further maintain that the concept is an example of the “strong Black woman” archetype—a form of mechanistic dehumanization with real consequences for the health, well-being, and liberation of Black women.

Black women have been represented through two overlapping discourses of dehumanization: animalistic and mechanistic (Anderson et al. 2018). Animalistic dehumanization denies Black women “uniquely human attributes, such as civility and rationality, and thus subtly [likenes them] to animals,” and mechanistic dehumanization refuses them “human nature attributes, such as warmth, emotionality, and vitality, and thus subtly [likenes them] to machines or objects” (Anderson et al. 2018, 462; see also Haslam 2006). Prevalent animalistic portrayals of Black women include figures like Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, or the “angry Black woman,” the “welfare queen,” or the “third world woman.”² As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) argues, Black women in particular are bestialized and objectified as a necessary condition for white liberal humanism. We can argue, by extension, that such humanism entails a cognitive dissonance that values human life yet treats Black women as mere sites of physical, emotional, and reproductive labor extraction. To wit, the “strong Black woman” archetype, as a form of mechanistic dehumanization, has morphed the fact of Black women’s resilience—a resilience required for survival—into the lionization of the Black superwoman who works and never tires, who sacrifices herself for the sake of others (Wallace [1987] 1990). This myth not only places an unfair burden on Black women to “keep going even when it hurts” (Scott 2016, 126) but also refuses them the right to voice their pain.

Embodied discourses and practices of the dehumanization of Black women across the Atlantic world are continuous gendered acts of violence inherent to slavery and the logics of racialization deployed to justify them: they are products of—and simultaneously reproduce—racial trauma (Johnson 2020). As such, dehumanization archetypes—among them, the “strong Black woman”—are found across the African Diaspora, although legacies of racial trauma have particular local contours. In this article, we focus on a Haitian variant of the strong Black woman archetype. Haiti was one of the first sites in the Atlantic world where racialized dehumanizing discourse was codified into law via the 1685 Code Noir. Often exceptionalized because of the singular achievement of the 1791-1804 revolution that ended slavery and forged a free nation, Haiti is the “longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West” (Trouillot 1990, 5). Following its precocious independence

and diplomatic isolation from surrounding slaveholding powers, Haitian people, and particularly Haitian women like Paula, have been forced to contend with a collusion of global and national elites that alternatively centralized and decentralized state control. These processes normalize women's silence and embodied oppression while simultaneously venerating them as model citizens.

Attending to how systemic oppression manifests in the body, and voicing and tending to pain with tenderness, ought to be central to feminist scholarship and activism. Conversely, valorizing strength—defined as silent forbearance—precludes softness or tenderness. African American Zen Buddhist priest and feminist Zenju Earthlyn Manuel (2015) describes two types of tenderness. The first form is wounded tenderness—a raw and aching feeling that ultimately points to one's vulnerability as a whole human being. The second is liberated tenderness, which meets woundedness with embodied awareness, gentleness, and softness (Manuel 2015, 16). The two forms of tenderness are inextricably bound in the quest for liberation—an active movement toward true freedom from oppression. As Manuel (2015, 4) writes,

Oppression is a distortion of our true nature ... Awakening from the distortion of oppression begins with tenderness: we recognize our own wounded tenderness, which develops into the tenderness of vulnerability and culminates in the tenderness that comes with heartfelt and authentic liberation.

Similarly, Charlene Carruthers (2018) argues for the centering of *healing justice* in Black liberation struggles. Healing justice “identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on intergenerational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our collective bodies, hearts and minds” (Page 2013, np). Along these lines, we address the question: How can we, as feminist anthropologists and activists, make visible the experiences and agency of Black women and still allow space for a softness grounded in liberation?

We foreground the concept of *poto mitan* as a way to illustrate how the “strong Black woman” archetype upholds virtues of strength at the expense of tenderness, thus taking up Faye Harrison's (2016) call to theorize from “ex-centric sites.” We begin this article by discussing the limits of this discourse within feminist scholarship and activism. Second, we examine how this discourse both engenders and limits liberation for rural women: our ethnographic engagement is in Pestel, far from the resources—as well as restrictions—of the capital. We write this article as feminist anthropologists with various forms of engagement in Haiti. Together, we—a first-generation Haitian American woman and scholar-activist, and a white queer man who has been working alongside Haitian women's organizations since the early 2000s—draw on our positionalities to interrogate our work toward dismantling the intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy, and class oppression) that Black women face (Simmons 2001). By concluding with “tenderness as method,” we maintain that feminist anthropologists working with Black women must not only attune themselves to how discourses and performances of strength may occlude liberation but also call on our own vulnerability to allow space for liberated tenderness.

Moving beyond Poto Mitan: A History of Haitian Women's Activism

While feminist scholarship has been pivotal in challenging animalistic portrayals of Black women, many works still tend to reproduce the mechanistic portrayal of the “strong Black woman”: “a perception that Black women are naturally strong, resilient, self-contained, and self-sacrificing” (Donovan and West 2014, 384). Black feminist anthropologists have examined the social and political agency and resilience of Black women as they navigate and seek to transform overlapping systems

of oppression (Cox 2015; A. Davis 1983; D.-A. Davis 2014; Harley and Terborg-Penn 1978; Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982; Mullings 1997; B. Smith 1983; Terborg-Penn, Harley, and Benton 1987; Ulysse 2008). Within Caribbeanist anthropology, there is a long tradition in the ethnographic literature documenting peasant women’s relative autonomy within the household, partly because of women’s role within the formal economy. In his work that began in the 1950s, Sidney Mintz (2010) outlined a gendered division of labor wherein men work the land while women sell the crops in the market. Women establish relationships that do not depend on their husbands, given their access to public settings as well as being entrusted to handle money. Scholars have also discussed women’s roles as heads of households since Edith Clarke’s (1957) work. This “matrifocal” thesis reflects what Hortense Spillers (1987) termed “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” and what Christine Sharpe (2010) called “Monstrous Intimacies,” reminding scholars that matrifocality is a product of the sexual violence inherent in slavery. Yet such research tends to reproduce the myth that Black women are strong enough to support and even transform their families, communities, and society on their own. In contrast, we use the case of Haitian women as *poto mitan* to examine how Black women may internalize strength as a virtuous quality they must embody and perform in representations of self, sometimes at the expense of their full humanity and, indeed, liberation.

There are two perspectives from which to examine *poto mitan*. On one hand, *poto mitan* empowers women and highlights their organizing; on the other, it justifies the lack of legal and material support for women in Haitian society. Since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), women’s organizations have promoted *poto mitan* in feminist/Freirean consciousness-raising popular education programs. The use of *poto mitan* partly refers to essential contributions of women’s organizations during critical moments in Haitian history, when they have promoted democratic and anti-imperialist values as “citizenship from below” (Sheller 2012). This began with the first women’s sociopolitical organization, the Lique Feminine d’Action Sociale, which was founded in 1934 and became a central player in the movement to end the nineteen-year US occupation (Charles 1995; Verna and Poujol Oriol 2011). Women reprised this crucial role in the 1986 movement to overthrow the twenty-nine-year father-and-son Duvalier dictatorship (Benoit 1995; Clermont, Mangonès, and Métellus 2003; Dejean 1995). At that time, a revitalized women’s movement, notably the organization Solidarite Fanm Ayisyen (Solidarity of Haitian Women [SOFA], one of Haiti’s longest-running women’s organizations), played a key organizing role. Throughout these years, women’s organizations used the discourse of *poto mitan* to promote self-esteem and confidence, valuing their own and other women’s contributions to their family, community, and society. Notably, the term does not borrow from so-called “Western” feminism. Haitian women’s organizing—having its own distinct traditions, needs, and priorities—does not correspond to the “waves” of feminism in Europe and North America (Lamour 2020). The metaphor is instead based on Vodou, an African-derived Creole ancestor veneration.

However, *poto mitan* fails to adequately challenge multiple manifestations of gender inequality: lack of access to education, healthcare, reproductive autonomy, and income, as well as exposure to gender-based violence (GBV). Haitian sociologist and director of SOFA, Dr. Sabine Lamour (2017, 2019), argues that the term offers lip service to the “brave” or “valiant” woman but also offers the state an excuse to opt out of providing resources and other support. The Ministry of Women’s Condition and Rights, for example, hailed women as *poto mitan* of the country’s reconstruction after the 2010 earthquake, and yet the ministry still receives less than half a percent of the overall government budget per year (Lamour 2019). Lamour (2019) concludes that *poto mitan* is a tool to maintain a governmentality of irresponsibility toward women. Neglected, too, is the mental, spiritual,

and emotional well-being of women as full humans; instead, they are conceived of simply in terms of their economic and reproductive labor. As such, the *poto mitan* concept is an example of mechanistic dehumanization.

The highlighting and even celebration of Haitian women's "resilience" is a common trope, particularly in foreign writing about Haitian women—wrapped up in promoting the *poto mitan* and "strong Black woman" archetype, again enacting mechanistic dehumanization. It may come from a sympathetic solidarity perspective (see Bell 2001), an attempt to challenge the stereotypes of "victimhood" (see also James 2010) and rescue some form of agency, but this common ethnographic practice of promoting Haitian women's strength as measured by their almost super- (or sub-) human ability to endure pain and adversity comes at a high cost. Following the 2010 earthquake, "resilience" became a primary keyword within foreign media, solidarity organizations, and ethnographic texts (see Ulysse 2011 for a critique). Foreign focus on resilience, thus, served to justify fewer resources: since Haitian people, particularly women, can endure great suffering, there is no need to provide them with legal or material support. Indeed, humanitarian agencies rolled back from so-called "minimum standards."

Relatedly, the concept of resilience also functions as a cornerstone of women's role in social transformation. Haitian feminist activist Marie Racine (1999) cites Tantàn, a local women's organizer, who explains:

I told the women to wipe their tears from their eyes. I told them, "The hope of the country resides in women because it is the women who are responsible for raising children. If we raise our kids badly, we will always continue to have coup d'états in this country. We will continue to find people who are raping our children. We will continue to see husbands beating up their women. But if we raise our children as we should, we will have another society someday." These few words were like rain—like the dew that waters the grass. It can water the faces and the bodies of all women and make them courageous. (40)

Tantàn's demand that the women wipe their tears and shore up strength supports a mechanistic dehumanization that says women—namely, mothers—must carry the burden of social transformation with stoicism. This idea is not exclusive to Haitian women and is common across the African Diaspora. On August 23, 2020, Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin. On August 28—the fifty-seventh anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington speech and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the murder of Emmett Till—Blake's sister Letetra Widman declared:

So many people have reached out to me saying they're sorry that this has been happening to my family. Well, don't be sorry, because this has been happening to my family for a long time, longer than I can account for ... It happened to Emmett Till. Emmett Till is my family. Philando [Castile], Mike Brown, Sandra [Bland]—this has been happening to my family. I shed tears for every single one of these people that it's happened to ... I'm not sad. I'm not sorry. I'm angry. And I'm tired. I haven't cried one time. I stopped crying years ago.

Widman's speech underscores how Black women's strength and anger are publicly legible, even while their embodied pain is not. Misogynoir—the transnational material forces of global racial capitalist anti-Blackness intersecting with patriarchy—offers Black women only two options: demonstrating silent forbearance or becoming (or being seen as) "just another angry Black woman." In both instances, white patriarchal society refuses to hear her. But why must Black women suffer

in the present for the benefit of a better tomorrow? Why are they, particularly as mothers, held responsible for raising the next generation to fix social ills?

Dr. Sabine Lamour was named the director of SOFA in 2017. In this position, Lamour criticized how foreign institutions that intervened post-earthquake devoted inordinate attention to gender-based violence (GBV) in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps (Jean-Charles 2014; Nolan 2011)—to the exclusion of all other women’s issues. This disproportionate attention stirs up the familiar demonization of the “superpredator,” the racialized stereotype of Black masculinity that Black feminists like Angela Davis (1983), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), and others have deconstructed for over thirty-five years. Foreign NGOs’ single-minded focus on GBV had decisive impacts on the Haitian women’s movement. There was a lively debate—at least within Port-au-Prince—among Haitian women’s groups about whether to accept the aid and, therefore, foreign framings of women’s issues. Lamour’s predecessors at SOFA chose to push back and challenge the ways foreign intervention was neglecting important women’s needs. SOFA and other established feminist organizations also challenged the statistics and the depiction of an “epidemic of rape.” As a result of these challenges, SOFA saw that, almost literally overnight, all their foreign “partners” deserted them and, instead, funded a newer women’s organization: the Commission of Women Victims for Victims (KOFAVIV in the original Kreyòl).

Women from low-income neighborhoods founded KOFAVIV to redress what they defined as their exclusion and class marginalization by the more established women’s organizations. In the wake of the 2004 coup d’état of President Aristide, a foreign woman in her twenties assisted in the formalization of and initial fundraising for KOFAVIV. As a pro-Aristide activist, this foreign woman’s self-narrative was that this was a correction of previous organizations’ anti-Aristide (and therefore class) bias. KOFAVIV’s own narrative centered on women’s status as victims of state and paramilitary violence and as coming from the *klas popilè*, the “popular” or poor socioeconomic class. After the 2010 earthquake, KOFAVIV’s leadership was primarily drawn from those living in the IDP camps. Networked into an international solidarity effort, members of KOFAVIV were the focus of several international stories showcasing their heroism. This international attention eventually led to KOFAVIV’s co-director, Malya Villard Apollon, receiving CNN’s 2012 Hero of the Year award. This award, broadcast on national TV, came with a cash prize, and Haiti’s President Michel Martelly—no fan of Aristide—offered Villard Apollon a hero’s welcome. Her extreme visibility made her a target, especially of many of the women who were essentially treated as props by the nine-person CNN crew filming at a particular IDP camp. Almost immediately, the death threats began. Villard Apollon fled the country for the United States, where she remains in exile as of the time of writing.

Thus, just as quickly as it rose to international prominence, KOFAVIV disappeared from the scene. Meanwhile, SOFA was undergoing a generational shift, embodied by Lamour’s tenure as its director. KOFAVIV did not have a national architecture, being only loosely connected to other pro-Aristide groups via an international human rights law firm, the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux. By contrast, SOFA had dozens of field offices in all ten provinces, including far-flung Grand’Anse. Once foreign partners abandoned SOFA, what little funding had gone to their provincial offices dried up. During the five years of our ongoing research, the local SOFA offices in several Grand’Anse municipalities remained shuttered. In other words, it is not at all clear what reach women’s organizations still have outside of the nation’s capital, as a direct result of foreign interference.

Being Andeyò (Outside)

Haiti is an exceptionally divided society; one of the most pervasive exclusions and inequalities is the urban/rural divide. The state is notably absent *andeyò*—literally “outside”—as rural people are termed by the urban elites (Barthélémy 1990; J. Smith 2001). While women activists and feminist organizations are present and visible in urban centers like Port-au-Prince, they are less visible in regional centers like Jérémie, the capital of Grand’Anse, and still less in rural Pestel. As Mikki Kendall (2020) has argued about mainstream US feminism, Haitian feminist movements often exclude the voices of the most socially marginalized women even while aiming to liberate all women.

We began research in Pestel in 2016, as part of a multi-year study of NGOs, which saw teams of graduate students from Haiti’s state university—specifically from the Faculté d’Ethnologie—paired with students from across the United States. I (Darlène) was paired with a male master’s student and aspiring politician from Pestel. I wanted to examine women’s issues and organizing in the province, in addition to the project’s focus on NGOs. When I inquired about women’s organizations in Pestel, various interlocutors told me that, a few years before our work there, a women’s group had formed in Pestel with the help of an NGO. However, a few women explained that this group had been short-lived and ineffective due to internal conflict over resources and lack of direction. I heard of no plans to resurrect the women’s group despite the observable marginalization of women and girls in the community.

I was raised to see myself as a *poto mitan*—disciplined to be strong and independent and to remain silent around gender-based abuse and violence. This positionality allowed me to sense that the young women I met in Pestel had also been disciplined into silence. This “sensing” (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012) was eventually confirmed through careful observations and listening: women’s complaints about being forgotten by the state; the (in)visibility of young mothers living in poverty on the edge of town; the subtle innuendos and instances of nonconsensual touch that I experienced. Yet I questioned whether my education, feminism, and diaspora status compromised my judgment. And so, I decided to stay silent—until the day the innuendos became an explicit proposition. Choosing to share my experience with my local research partner, I circuitously asked him if there were instances of gender-based oppression or violence in Pestel. He replied with an unequivocal no. I pressed him further and wondered why so many young mothers lived in poverty on the town’s periphery. To this, he replied, “*Se paske yo cho,*” or “It’s because they are loose” (literally, “hot”). His dismissive and disapproving manner suggested that I had transgressed an implicit rule that women should not speak openly about gender-based neglect and oppression.

News traveled fast: WhatsApp connected all but one of the students at the Université d’État d’Haïti, and by the time I (Mark) got to Abriko, the other field site in isolated Grand’Anse, three and a half hours away on moto, there had been a whole discussion. The first question I was greeted with was, “Are you a feminist?” My coauthor’s research partner had WhatsApp-ed his perspective on their exchange, calling her a feminist. This engendered a lively conversation in all of the field sites: What does it mean to be a feminist? What actions constitute “feministing”? Most of the US team, including a Haitian Diaspora male, proudly declared themselves “feminist.” The Haitian masters’ students at the state university, which was founded by a wave of “indigénisme”—small-b black nationalist pride initiated by Jacques Roumain and Jean Price-Mars—critiqued the term as a foreign imposition. They stated it was brought to Haiti via NGOs, which populist nationalist leftists denounced as tools of imperialism (Lwijiis 2009). Although occluding women’s organizing as a long-standing feature of democratic struggles in Haiti, this critique is a response to the emergence of women’s NGOs in Haiti

that engage in advocacy and empowerment, often intending to force the state to respect women’s rights as pillars of society. From politicizing the wage gap to universal girls’ education, women’s NGOs target the state, demanding action from a “provider” and “protector” state-as-papa—in effect, rendering it relevant. However, in the context of Haiti, paradigmatically defined as a “weak state,” this advocacy effort has limitations.

The discussion evolved into the appropriateness of various frames for understanding our fieldwork, and from there the question of who the most appropriate researcher is to interpret and discuss these frames. The conversation was productive, if at times painful, bringing up issues of authenticity, reflexivity, “science,” as well as the fraught and fragmented claims to being “Haitian” for researchers from the “Diaspora” (Bernard 2013). In many ways, researchers from Haiti’s “middle” classes mainly from Port-au-Prince were also forced to confront their social distance from *moun an deyò*, “outsiders,” highlighting the need to deconstruct methodological nationalism and essentialist understandings of what it means to be “Haitian.” Simply collaborating with colleagues in the country is not sufficient for decolonizing research, as it can leave intact hierarchies within the country. This discussion was filled with tension, a necessary step to disentangling multiple subject positions and learning from one another, as we outline below.

Several days later, and notwithstanding my fraught positionality, I (Darlène) decided to organize a women’s talking circle. I went and spoke with Alice, a socially active diaspora returnee, to ask her to co-organize the circle with me. Alice had worked in healthcare in the United States but returned to Pestel after retirement to improve the lives of youth, particularly *restavèks*—children who work in wealthier households as live-in domestic servants. She also walked throughout the village center with a megaphone, giving weekly public service announcements around women’s health. During her rounds, I stopped Alice to ask whether she would be interested in helping me lead a conversation on women’s issues. Alice stiffened and immediately suggested that I take on the endeavor alone. That same day, I overheard a young man criticizing Alice for making no mention of the solicitation of young women by older men. I later saw Alice’s elderly husband at a party with two young women hanging on his arms—which seemed to confirm rumors I had heard about his penchant for young women. When I interviewed Alice a few weeks later, I asked her about her role in the community. She replied, with mixed humility and pride, that people saw her as a *poto mitan*. But when we turned to the subject of gender-based violence, Alice placed most of the onus on the young women, stating, as had my research partner, that they were somehow immoral and loose, or Jezebels. Why did Alice negate the asymmetric power relations between young women and older men in Pestel? What did her silence seek to protect?

Despite not having a co-organizer, I decided to help create a safe space where young women in Pestel could voice their individual and shared experiences. On a Wednesday afternoon in July, I met with twenty-five women between the ages of thirteen and thirty at the Catholic church. I began by explaining my positionality and providing an overview of gender-based oppression and Haitian women’s movements. I then asked them about their experiences as young women in the community. They were silent, and some shifted in their chairs. After allowing room for the tense silence, I shared what I had witnessed while living in Pestel and my own personal experiences with gender-based oppression. Nervous laughter punctuated the silence. Finally, Miriam, a mother in her early twenties, exclaimed, “We experience discrimination every day.” A passionate conversation ensued. One woman explained that older men offer girls money, but that if they take the money, they enter a transactional relationship where the men expect in return *yon ti bagay* (sexual favors, literally “a little thing”; the word “bagay” also references the colloquial term for having sex). A

teenage girl added that male teachers sometimes solicit them for *yon ti bagay* for a passing grade. Building off this, Miriam clarified that parents are also involved in “selling” their daughters. She shared how her mother encouraged her to “get with” a much older man because he would be able to provide their family financial support.

The conversation then turned to *pitit san papa* (“illegitimate” children; literally “a child without a father”) and the challenges of single motherhood. Another mother in her twenties, Evelyn, began to cry. As her silent tears became audible sobbing, I grew concerned that the conversation was starting to touch the woundedness that the young women and I shared. I paused the discussion to allow Evelyn the space to feel her emotions. Evelyn walked out onto the terrace overlooking the town square. Miriam and others joined Evelyn to console her. That simple moment on the terrace counters social convention that tells Haitian women to hide the emotional pain resulting from gender-based neglect and oppression, and it demonstrates the liberatory potential of authentic tenderness.

When I asked Evelyn, Miriam, and other women what issue they would like to focus on in our next meeting, they settled on *pitit san papa*. They wanted information about a significant victory of Haiti’s Ministry of Women’s Conditions and Rights (Ministère de la Condition Féminine et des Droits des Femmes, MCFDF): a 2014 law on paternity, maternity, and filiation. This law sought to eliminate the social category of *pitit san papa* by holding fathers responsible for their children. It also put in place other measures “to repair the Haitian social fabric, improve the status of women, and put all children in Haiti on equal footing before the law, both in dignity and rights” (MCFDF 2014, np.). We had a follow-up meeting, where I provided the women with copies of the law, which they received with zealous enthusiasm. Yet I knew that the absence of a local court and women’s organizations meant that these young mothers would have difficulty holding their children’s fathers and the state accountable. Moreover, the “victories” for women’s rights cannot improve the material conditions of rural Haitian women so long as they remain on the periphery (*andeyò*) of state concerns.

In Port-au-Prince, in ways similar to the experience in Pestel, members of women’s organizations have challenged the limits of *sansibilizasyon* (awareness-raising). Ghislaine, a mother of three who had been a factory worker before she was laid off, said, “I come here [to the women’s organization], and I feel great. Then I go home to my husband [and] my kids. Nothing changes. *Sansibilizasyon* doesn’t bring food to my table.” Hélène, Ghislaine’s colleague at the women’s association, shared a story highlighting the limits of training women to stand up for themselves without addressing the larger political-legal-economic structures that constrain women—particularly rural women and women of the poor majority:

Women are victims of violence and rape, but they are afraid to go to the police station to file a complaint because all the police officers are men. There’s no woman to help victims feel comfortable. Women know that when they go to the station, the men are just going to grin at them. And again, even if they do file a formal complaint, and the police do their job and arrest the guy, there’s another problem. Say the police finally agree to arrest the man [the perpetrator of intimate partner violence] at 2:00 in the afternoon. Around 6:00, she comes and asks, “if you don’t let him out, the children are going to die of hunger!” Therefore, if the woman held some economic power in her hand, had a livelihood, she could have the guy stay in prison. But now, the man disfigured her, and she begs for forgiveness.

What, then, is the purpose of women voicing their pain if it does not benefit them and may even harm them? This reality encourages women to endure in silence; then, the very structures that

perpetuate harm and deny support use their silent endurance as a reason to place the onus of social reproduction and transformation on women’s backs.

Women’s experience in the poor majority in Port-au-Prince and remote areas like Pestel requires feminist ethnographers and activists working in Haiti to move beyond *poto mitan*—beyond discourses that purport to value women in the abstract, even as real-world settings, including feminist consciousness-raising groups, require them to be silent. Alice, Miriam, Evelyn, H  l  ne, and Ghislaine highlight the necessity to end the social, political, and economic structures that reinforce patriarchal oppression. Changing these structures requires more than strength (often defined as an absence of tears); it requires gentleness and healing, which, we argue, are prerequisites for women to enact their power, both political and personal.

“Tenderness” as Method

We propose a feminist ethnography grounded in liberated tenderness as a way to move beyond facile notions of strength. Bringing the insights of standpoint theory (see Haraway 1989; Harding 1991; Harstock 1983), feminist ethnographers have ushered in the collapse of the artificial boundary between object and subject and embraced reflexivity while rejecting “masculinist” concepts of “neutrality” and “objectivity” (Moore 1988). Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues for a politically engaged “barefoot anthropology,” and Ruth Behar (1993) models reflexivity as method and praxis. While feminist ethnographers also widen “the circle of methodological approaches ... to include the contextual and experiential—making life and oral history valid modes of investigation, among others—the process also revealed ellipses of power differentials between researcher and subjects” (Davis and Craven 2011, 193). Stacey (1988) and Abu-Lughod (1990) call for collaborative models that include interlocutors as coauthors to address the researcher-subjects power asymmetry. Additionally, McClaurin (2001, 56) proposes autoethnography as a “viable form through which Black feminist anthropologists may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses to levels recognized by both margins and center of the discipline.” But what would it look like to infuse core feminist ethnographic methods with “liberated tenderness”?

First, we suggest conducting autoethnography during fieldwork, not simply during the write-up phase of research. Incorporating autoethnography in fieldwork would require ethnographers to be more vulnerable (Behar 1996) and transparent about their positionality and personal connection to the study, and uncover the tensions such as the divide about what it means to be a “feminist.” As such, ethnographers could permit the reverse gaze of interlocutors as a means of interrogating their authority as researchers (Hurstun [1935] 2008).

Second, we argue for collective oral histories that bring interlocutors together in a safe space to discuss their shared and divergent experiences. Emphasizing the importance of safe spaces or “sanctuaries” for achieving liberated tenderness, Manuel (2015, 59) argues that such sanctuaries allow people—of the same race, gender, etc.—“to address the circumstances that are specific to who [they] have been born as, on [their] own terms, without interference.” For Black women, creating and finding safe spaces permits them to let go of performances of strength that require their silence. Creating such a space would require shared agreements that privilege nonjudgment, transparency, nonperformativity, and confidentiality. As with our work in Pestel, the creation of safe spaces would also require ethnographers to decenter themselves and allow interlocutors to co-construct meaning without interference.

Third, when wounded tenderness emerges during collective and individual interviews, ethnographers should invite a pause, then ask interlocutors to describe the embodied feeling of wounded tenderness and, if possible, meet the emotion with softness and compassion (Manuel 2015). By connecting feminist ethnography with *healing justice* (Carruthers 2018), feminist ethnographers could also examine the collective healing practices in which women are engaged—such as those found in Vodou (Brown 1991; Vonarx 2011) and dance (Cox 2015). Finally, in line with feminist ethnography's commitment to transformative praxis, feminist ethnographers must engage in research that is "socially and politically relevant" to interlocutors' self-defined liberation (Davis and Craven 2011, 194).

The ethnographic writing resulting from research grounded in liberated tenderness ought to reflect the tensions between performance and "truth" through "sensing." Feminist anthropologists, who occupy ambivalent spaces in society and the field, can draw upon what Gloria Anzaldúa ([1987] 2012, 60) calls *la facultad*—"an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning." Attuning to *la facultad* through careful observation and presencing during fieldwork, they can meet the truths behind Black women's silences and performances with their embodied knowing and, as such, illuminate the "experiences of [Black] women and theorize from the materiality of their lives to broader issues of political economy, family, representation, and transformation" (Mullings 1997, xi). I (Mark) first attempted this during my dissertation as my part in decolonizing anthropology (Harrison 1997). Women in one of the women's organizations asked me to make a documentary about their lives and struggles. The result was released in 2009: *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* (Bergan and Schuller 2009). Years after making a documentary about the lives and struggles of Haitian women, I remain in contact with the women featured in the film (one has moved to the US and another passed away); I am constantly reminded of their complexities, inconsistencies, and vulnerabilities, not to mention my own. In retrospect, the documentary was deliberately hopeful. While royalties from the DVD sales have been welcome to the women, in many cases tripling their income, it freezes them in time and only portrays what they wanted to show us at that time.

Conclusion: Tenderness for Individual and Collective Liberation

Confronting generations of animalistic dehumanization, and pushing back at their white, and mainly white male, colleagues who presume them to be incompetent (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012) and shunt them to the "kids' Thanksgiving table" (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013), feminist ethnographic portrayals often prop up the archetype of the "strong Black woman." Neither animalistic nor mechanistic dehumanization discourses can be detached from misogynoir. Theorizing from an eccentric site (Harrison 2016), our work in Pestel asks: How do we move beyond *poto mitan* to address misogynoir—as it manifests in state neglect and gender-based oppression in Haiti—without recycling Western feminism's notions of the victimized female Other (Mohanty 2003) or falling back into dependency on foreign NGOs?

The more I (Mark) wrote for multiple audiences and made my scholarship in the service of solidarity activism, the more people in Haiti—including and especially activists—sought me out to share their analyses. I have increasingly understood their analyses as not some abstract "truth," nor what they think I want to hear, but what they want to share. People often saw me as powerful, at least more powerful than they are, given my identity as a white male US citizen. My response has been to try harder to speak truth to power, and in the process, I have gained more personal

power, and so the narratives resulting from this perspective of increased power have no place for softness in Sanchez’s (2000) words. I increasingly understand this as true of all research, even of using quantitative tools: research is simultaneously performance and relationship. Beginning with my vulnerabilities, rather than hiding behind the gender-neutral “I” in Kreyòl, I have started mentioning my same-sex partner instead of sidestepping conversations about being queer. This has led to more complex and contingent understandings. Sharing my hospitalization after the earthquake encouraged women interlocutors to speak to their pain and their attempts to cope. This work has helped me hear and understand Haitian people’s, especially women’s, assertions of their own humanity, which has inspired my own radicalization and offered a platform to understand urgent contemporary movements “at home” (Schuller 2021).

Our roles as feminist activist ethnographers working with women in Haiti, as a particular site within the African Diaspora, require us to uncover how *poto mitan* as discourse—as a particularly Haitian variant of the dehumanizing “strong Black woman” archetype—is a response to historical racial trauma. While this trauma presents a need for strength, healing justice requires action to change the underlying material conditions. For Black women like Darlène, this means offering spaces for identifying and addressing common/shared traumas. At the same time, white men like Mark must cultivate and practice radical empathy, identifying human connections across differences and acknowledging complicity in Black women’s oppression. Both approaches to healing justice center a specific, contextualized, inclusive humanity, complete with its contradictions.

Acknowledging the human dimensions and the tenderness at the outset allows (writing about) collective action to be more supportive and collaborative, and therefore more effective at realizing liberation. It is an element of what Melissa Harris-Perry (2017) called “squad care.” Carruthers (2018) captured the focus of the broader millennial civil rights movement—which includes the Movement for Black Lives—on healing justice. While “self-care” has also been co-opted by neoliberal racial capitalism to promote individualism and consumption, it was initially a radical collective approach to address dehumanization of Black women within intersectional spaces (Lorde [1988] 2017). Black feminist movement spaces, such as the Breathing Room in Chicago and Tricia Hersey’s Nap Ministry, bridge self and collective healing while offering safe spaces for cooperative movement organizing.

We support Berry et al.’s (2017) insistence that marginalized people need to center our own bodies in our collective activist praxis. As a Black woman, my (Darlène’s) practice is to care for myself—in solitude and community—as a revolutionary form of activism, in the same vein as Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017, 130), who asserts that this is “Crucial. Physically, Psychically. Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” As a cisgender white man, I (Mark) have a responsibility to first attend to my own healing so as not to turn my activist work with others into a personal healing project, thereby exploiting marginalized groups as my unpaid teachers or healers. Instead, spaces I co-create with interlocutors need to focus on collective liberation, interrogating our specific connections to the issue and to one another.

Any transformational work must also work to change legal, political, material, and social structures, in addition to challenging complex discourses like that of the *poto mitan*. This can be done by supporting individual and collective healing spaces simultaneously. International collaboration is one option, but putting this into practice can also be messy. Such collaboration requires constant self-interrogation and critique, and it requires making room for tenderness in how we see and hear Black women’s experiences and silences. A proverb—initially a warning against state elites who failed to see and thus misunderstood rural people’s strength—declares that the people are like bamboo;

we bend, but we don't break: *Nou se wozo; nou pliye, nou pap kase*. Drawing from experience in Haiti, in a diasporic exchange, feminist anthropologists can illuminate other definitions of strength that emphasize softness, flexibility, and healing as forms of resilience.

Indeed, Sanchez's (2000) "Present" locates the Black woman's reclamation of "softness" in her collective belonging to the earth and ancestors. Within this circle of care, the woman in Sanchez's poem can walk with resilience into her whole self—she is a "blue/black/magical/woman. walking. / womb ripe. walking. loud with mornings. walking./making pilgrimage to herself. walking" (Sanchez 2000, 19).

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Endnotes

- 1 We use pseudonyms for interlocutors.
- 2 The Mammy archetype of antebellum slavery is the de-sexed, altruistic caregiver who supports white women's reproductive labor by nurturing white children at the expense of mothering her own offspring (Sewell 2013). On the flip side is the Jezebel, whose beauty, lasciviousness, and Blackness make her both sex object and "animal" (Anderson et al. 2018). Then there is the Sapphire or "angry Black woman," whose is read as overly aggressive (Walley-Jean 2009). The "welfare queen," while sharing the basic attributes of the Sapphire, is distinguished by her refusal to contribute to capitalist production by "shirking" economic labor. She is read as the "lazy" woman, "with numerous children she cannot support, who is cheating taxpayers by abusing the system to collect government assistance" (Gilman 2014, 247). The foreign counterpart to these is the "third world woman," who is read as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc." (Mohanty 1988, 65). The stereotypes hold discursive power in their ability to direct attitudes toward, and treatment of, Black women in the United States and globally.

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