Self-Help Activism in a Traumatized Community: Womanist Ideals in Grassroots Initiatives

by Faisal Mohammed



The Elaine Legacy Center.
Photo by Andrea A. Gluckman.

The prevalent narrative of rural places marked by traumatic experiences emphasizes these locations' apparent social, economic, and political consequences but frequently overlooks the individuals' profoundly personal and embod- ied experiences. Furthermore, the dominant narratives often neglect to acknowledge the po- tential that can emerge from such rural places. This essay is the outcome of an enriching intern- ship journey, where I, as a doctoral student in Heritage Studies, ventured into grassroots and self-help initiatives from a gendered perspective, investigating the dynamic relationship between grassroots initiatives driven by womanist ideals



Volunteers of the Elaine Legacy Center.
Photo by Andrea A. Gluckman.



Water Stories Project Center.
Photo by Andrea A. Gluckman.



Lenora Marshall addresses the crowd at the 103rd Commemoration of the Elaine Massacre at the Legacy Center in 2022.
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasamy.

and the crucial endeavor of safeguarding cultural heritage. My focus was to unravel the complex re- lationship between intrinsic heritage resources nestled within traumatized places and their capacity to serve as transformative lenses, thus of- fering fresh perspectives on the resilience of communities. My active participation in and close observation of local activities informed this study. Notably, the study showcases the remark- able self-help and grassroots efforts led by women in Elaine, a significant locale nestled in the heart of the Arkansas Delta, currently undergoing a dy- namic process of transformation. This essay aims to illuminate the often-overlooked roles of women in preserving heritage and promoting community well-being within a rural setting by using selected photos to aid the text. Rural areas often exhibit diverse characteristics, and perceptions of them can vary widely. Some individuals perceive rural settings as idyllic and picturesque, while others see them as rife with challenges and difficulties. Unfortunately, Elaine, Arkansas, falls into the latter category. A century ago, Elaine was a flourishing town populated by a thriving Black farming and business community. However, in 1919, a tragic and horrifying event unfolded that is largely ignored in America's history—a massacre perpetrated by white landowners and military personnel result- ing in the brutal killing of Black residents and the displacement of many others. The devastat- ing event in Elaine and its vicinity left a lasting imprint on the area's predominantly African- American population, reshaping it from a flour- ishing

community into an enduring symbol of trauma, where individuals are socially displaced and often feel a sense of hopelessness (Proudfoot 2019, 194–201). It is essential to investigate what lies beyond this history's burdensome weight. Is there hope for healing and growth in Elaine and other communities like it? Such an originating question inspires a look into grassroots, self-help strategies for community improvement and healing.



Mary Olson speaks at the 103rd Commemoration of the Elaine Massacre at the Legacy Center in 2022.
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasamy.

Womanist Ideals in Structuring the Elaine Legacy Center The Elaine Legacy Center (ELC) is a prime example of a community-led organization that embodies the concepts of self-help and grassroots activism, reflecting the essence of communal em- powerment. Physically, the ELC building is a re-purposed and transformed educational facility strategically positioned on the outskirts of the community. Established over a decade ago with the mission of preserving the oral history of the Elaine 1919 Massacre, the ELC is a thriving local non-governmental organization with 501(c)(3) status, dedicated to preserving the historical memory of African Americans, advocating for en-vironmental justice and the socio-economic well- being of Elaine's marginalized population, and providing a venue for locals to promote and pur- sue civic activities. Of the seven board members, four exemplify the leadership roles women wield. The Elaine Legacy Center operates with in-spiration drawn from grassroots and womanist perspectives. Within the town, it functions as a resource center that draws volunteers in for ca- pacity building and provides them with resources for community development activities. The organization seeks to strengthen the community and promote resiliency through various self-help activities and initiatives. Pragmatically, these ini-tiatives go beyond the typical charitable frame- work; they directly and indirectly empower individuals and equip them with competencies to control their destinies and collaborate toward a better future. As such, the Elaine Legacy Center exemplifies a path to overcoming Elaine's trau-

matic past and constructing a more optimistic fu- ture for its residents by emphasizing concrete ways to aid others while fostering community connections. Womanist-inspired self-help initiatives in Ar- kansas exhibit various characteristics and have transformed over the years in response to the evolving needs and circumstances of women and their communities. Rural initiatives, such as the Lee County Self-Help Project formed in 1965,



Legacy Center volunteers at the 103rd Commemoration of the Elaine Massacre in 2022.
Photo by Shobhithan Kandasamy.

and the dedicated endeavors of Black women serving as home demonstration agents beginning in the 1910s, have significantly promoted women's rights, enhanced community well-being, empowered marginalized communities, and pas- sionately advocated preserving invaluable community heritage. Self-help can be understood as a dynamic process in which individuals utilize their social capital—represented by their networks and connections—to engage with cultural capital via various cultural activities. Womanist-inspired self-help initiatives typically uphold core values such as diversity, empowerment, collaboration, sustainability, and a strong focus on local engage- ment as guiding principles. (Morris 2015). Firmly rooted in grassroots activism, the Elaine Legacy Center wholeheartedly embraces these values and actively incorporates them into the heart of its initiatives. This commitment is apparent in the organization’s self-description as the “Moth- erland of Civil Rights.” These ideals focus on the active participation and mobilization of social networks in which in- dividuals who share comparable ideas and experi- ences collaborate, which, by extension, aids in preserving a shared heritage. Guided by wom- anist ideas, the Legacy Center has actively pro- moted a diverse range of local initiatives, including impactful endeavors such as food activism, the preservation of oral history narratives, and projects centered on environmental justice, such as collaborative efforts related to clean water access. Furthermore, the center has taken

proac- tive steps to involve and educate the younger gen- eration through engaging arts initiatives. It is crucial to emphasize that these very ideals persist as vital instruments in the preser- vation of heritage, as they entail local commu-



The Elaine Legacy Center, also known as the “Motherland of Civil Rights.”
Photo by Andrea A. Gluckman.

nities actively protecting, promoting, and trans- mitting their rich cultural heritage.
Women as Drivers of Rural Grassroots Sus- tainable Development The ELC’s grassroots approach addresses perceived inequities within the local community by advancing social and environmental justice programs. These projects are critical to increasing community sustainability because they prioritize the social and cultural aspects of the commu- nity’s well-being over profit-driven causes. No- tably, women are vital in the Legacy Center, holding important administrative positions and actively participating as dedicated volunteers. The extensive networks created by these women are crucial to the center’s information exchange and transmission mechanisms. Through their self-help activism, women play a critical role in the Legacy Center's diverse operations, exempli- fying the essence of grassroots transformation and community empowerment. sts

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