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THE EMPOWERMENT OF AN INDIGENOUS SOUTHERN BLACK LEADERSHIP, 1961–1964

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One of the major emphases of SNCC, from the beginning,
was that of working with indigenous people, not working for them,
but trying to develop their capacity for leadership.
Ella Baker, 1967

Between 1961 and 1964, SNCC launched over a dozen projects in rural and urban communities across the South. Young civil rights activists participated in grassroots struggles in places like Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Danville, Virginia; Albany, Georgia; and, later, Lowndes County, Alabama, and the heart of the Mississippi Delta. In some cases, SNCC supported and helped sustain desegregation and voter rights projects that were already under way. In other places, where protest campaigns had stagnated or had been halted after violent reprisals, SNCC organizers had to start over, identifying people who were ready to take action, helping them select targets and tactics, and offering them whatever resources they could mobilize to confront their adversaries. Whether SNCC sent activists into a community to support an ongoing campaign or to reinvigorate a local movement, its approach to organizing was a direct outgrowth of Ella Baker's teachings and represented a major shift in the way Black Freedom Movement groups operated in the South.

Ella Baker's unofficial political curriculum was not the only contributing factor to the formation of SNCC's radical democratic approach, but it was a major one. Her message was simple and subtle. She urged SNCC organizers to suppress their own egos and personal and organizational ambitions as

much as possible and to approach local communities with deference and humility. She stressed the need to resist organizational chauvinism or any attempts to make proprietary claims on political campaigns that might emerge from their efforts. Finally, she rejected the notion that the black middle class had special claims on leadership of the black community. Even though most of the black youth who were attracted to SNCC in the early 1960s were not wealthy, and some came from very modest means, virtually all of them were college-educated and consequently had social, if not material, capital. Baker appreciated the skills and resources that educated black leaders brought to the movement, but she urged SNCC organizers to look first to the bottom of the class hierarchy in the black community, not the top, for their inspiration, insights, and constituency.[1] Baker influenced SNCC's emergent politics and values primarily by exposing the young activists to people and situations that represented alternative adult leadership—people who would demonstrate to them first-hand the willingness, ability, and determination of oppressed people to resist and overcome their oppression while speaking for themselves: people who were not lawyers or ministers but just as capable as a Martin Luther King or a Thurgood Marshall.[2] Nothing made this point more dramatically than the struggle in Fayette County, Tennessee.

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SOLIDARITY WITH THE BLACK POOR IN FAYETTE COUNTY

In the fall of 1960, SNCC's national leadership, with Ella Baker's strong encouragement, began building ties to the constituency that soon became the focal point of its southern organizing efforts: the rural and small-town black poor. In August 1959, a group of impoverished black tenant farmers in Fayette County (and later in adjacent Haywood County), a cotton-producing region of southwestern Tennessee, had begun an intense and protracted struggle that was as much about economics as it was about segregation and citizenship. This conflict between black sharecroppers and white landowners was precipitated by black people asserting their right to participate in elections. The response of whites to this political initiative revealed the extent to which land ownership and economic prowess determined the racial hierarchy of the South. White landlords evicted dozens of sharecropping families from the land they had worked and lived on for years because they dared to go down to the county courthouse and attempt to register to vote. Unbowed despite their tactical defeat, the landless farm families had refused to leave the community, opting to stay while they

petitioned the federal government for redress. In an unprecedented act of collective resistance, they built makeshift homes on a 200-acre plot of land donated for their use by a sympathetic black landowning farmer, Shepard Towles. The encampment was dubbed "Freedom Tent City."[3]

The struggle in Fayette County received wide coverage in the African American press. The NAACP, CORE, and other civil rights and social justice groups, along with several labor unions, raised funds and collected donations of food and clothing to sustain and support the Tennessee activists. Before he joined SNCC, James Forman helped establish the northern-based Fayette County Emergency Relief Committee and spent many months going back and forth between Chicago and Tennessee with supplies and advice. Forman saw the struggle in Fayette County as a kind of "watershed" in the movement because, in this instance, an indigenous leadership had emerged and was connecting demands for full citizenship and civil rights to economic issues. Forman became so immersed in the Fayette County struggle that at one point he was accused of trying to take it over from the local people. Whether or not this charge was justified, he took it seriously and brought the lessons he had learned in Fayette County with him into SNCC.[4] Ella Baker shared this concern, and from the outset SNCC strove to avoid even the perception of trying to dominate local struggles. SNCC activists publicized the Fayette County struggle through the *Student Voice* and conducted a food drive to provide material aid.[5]

Baker followed the Tennessee story closely, and in the early months of 1961 she urged Ed King, who was then the executive secretary of SNCC, to travel to Tennessee to explore ways in which the young people could lend greater support. The newly formed organization provided both material and moral support to the Fayette County "freedom fighters." For SNCC staff person Jane Stembridge, the struggle graphically illustrated "the connection between poverty and civil rights."[6] In addition to collecting food and clothing, SNCC's leadership cosigned a statement directed at the federal government demanding intervention and relief aid for the embattled former sharecroppers. The significance of this struggle and the heroism of the local people became the topic of many informal discussions around the SNCC office from the fall of 1960 through the summer of 1961.[7] John Lewis recalled that the example of Fayette County was a sobering one for many young SNCC organizers and gave them a glimpse of what lay ahead.[8]

The *Student Voice*, SNCC's newsletter, highlighted the courage and suffering of Fayette County activists and cast them as pivotal forces in the struggle for freedom in the South. The SNCC newsletter covered the issue quite

differently from the *Crisis*, the NAACP's journal. Perhaps encouraged by Baker's editorial guidance, the *Student Voice* emphasized the leadership, courage, and oppression of the evicted sharecroppers. Although the *Crisis* also described the desperate conditions of the tent dwellers, it stressed the fact that respectable, middle-class blacks as well as semiliterate sharecroppers had been denied the ballot in Fayette and Haywood Counties. In praising the Justice Department for filing suit in November 1959 against nineteen white Democratic Party officials for excluding blacks from the local primary, Gloster Current, the NAACP's director of branches, pointed out that among those who were denied the right to vote were a "well-to-do grocer," a teacher, and a minister. Current described another would-be voter as a "high school teacher, educated at Iowa State University, and possessor of a master's degree."[9] These four individuals, however, were certainly not representative of the 100 illiterate and semiliterate tenant farmers who were at the center of the struggle in Tennessee.[10]

Ella Baker visited Fayette County in January 1961, met with residents of the tent city, and wrote her own story about the conditions there for the *Southern Patriot*, the newsletter of the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF). Baker's report, like the coverage in SNCC's newsletter, differed sharply in tone and emphasis from how the NAACP portrayed the situation. Baker conveyed vividly to her readers the depth of southern black poverty and the harshness of white reprisals against activists. The sharecroppers she visited lived in "olive-drab tents without floors, surrounded by inches of mud and mire: the darkness within these tents that are lighted by kerosene lamps and heated by wood stoves; the not-too-well-clad children crowded into the tents or squashing around in the mud; and the hungry shivering dogs wandering about; all of this painted a picture of anything but hope for the new year."[11]

While the *Crisis* applauded the small steps taken by the U.S. Justice Department, Baker's article in the *Southern Patriot* expressed outrage at how little government intervention there had been. Indicting any notion of American progress that would leave destitute black farmers behind, Baker wrote that "the real tragedy is that in the wealthiest country in the world, in the jet-propelled atomic age of 1961, human beings could honestly say that their mud-floored tents were more comfortable than the shacks they formerly called 'home' for five, ten or 30 years." The material hardships that activists suffered in Freedom Tent City were similar to those they had endured during their entire lives as sharecroppers; and once they had undertaken this act of resistance, their outlook and morale had actually

improved. Baker was optimistic that the resolve of the oppressed themselves, rather than the benevolence of the government, meant "a new dawn of freedom [was] breaking through the age-old social, economic and political discrimination that blighted the lives of both whites and Negroes in the South."[12]

The Tennessee activists founded their own independent group, the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, which was led by John McFerren, a store owner who had become a militant. The McFerrens had a home of their own, so they did not live in the tent city; but they strongly sympathized with the evicted families because they had previously been tenant farmers themselves. The White Citizens Council orchestrated a campaign of harassment and intimidation against the league. White merchants refused to sell medicine, food, or supplies to tent city residents, and McFerren and his wife, Viola, were subjected to constant surveillance and harassment, including many threatening phone calls.[13] Moreover, John McFerren was deliberately run over by a truck and nearly killed. Despite these reprisals, neither the McFerrens nor the members of the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League gave up their crusade to document and protest political and economic discrimination against blacks in the county.

Baker had known some of the Fayette County activists before their struggle hit the national press. On the eve of the Greensboro sit-ins in January 1960, she and Carl Braden had brought John McFerren to Washington, D.C., to testify at the civil rights hearings cosponsored by SCEF and SCLC. His emotional testimony was one of the most compelling moments of the hearings. As she did with many of the local activists whom she met during her years of organizing, Baker adopted the McFerrens into her political family and kept in touch with them long after the struggle in Fayette County had subsided.[14]

Baker introduced young SNCC activists to the McFerrens so that they could learn from the example, experiences, and perspectives of poor black people.[15] The struggle in Fayette and Haywood Counties was in crucial respects a model of indigenous black defiance and self-defense. The Tennessee tenant farmers were the victims of enormously exploitative and repressive conditions. Once moved to act, however, they were not afraid to stand up for themselves with unrelenting courage and defend themselves forcefully if necessary. When shots rang out one night from a passing carload of white men, a group of armed black men immediately mobilized to defend the tent encampment. Early B. Williams, who had been shot, was transported to a nearby hospital under armed escort.[16] For Ella Baker, this

situation underscored not only the terribly oppressive conditions under which so many rural black people suffered but also, perhaps more importantly, the depth of the determination that resided in such communities. Poor black southerners were not downtrodden victims; they were eager to fight to improve their lot.

Baker was rarely surprised by an upsurge of protest in places like Fayette County because, as a keen observer of southern black culture, she could detect rumblings beneath the surface of seemingly calm situations. As she talked with people like Papa Tight in Shreveport and the sharecroppers in Tennessee, they sometimes spoke about things only tangentially related to politics, but she was collecting valuable information all the same. In such seemingly casual conversations, she listened for what historian Earl Lewis calls the "semi-public transcript" of opposition within oppressed communities. Building on the work of political scientist James Scott, historian Robin Kelley, and others, Lewis suggests that what people laugh at, the songs they create and listen to, and the slang they use are all subtle indicators of a nascent political consciousness. A careful, reflective listener can ascertain what those people, if organized, might be prepared to do politically.[17] Ella Baker wanted the young activists in SNCC to hear the stories of Tennessee sharecroppers, to look to them as sources of inspiration, and to extract lessons about the potential, and the dangers, as they could be applied to similar struggles in the future.[18]

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DEVELOPING A PHILOSOPHY FROM PRACTICE

Between 1960 and 1962, as the historian Clayborne Carson's organizational biography of the group demonstrates, SNCC underwent a dramatic evolution in its politics, culture, and personnel. Many of the students who had attended the Shaw meeting dropped out to pursue other interests or to return to their studies. Those who remained with the organization were augmented by a new cadre of activists who were more determined and more politically savvy than their predecessors. One of them was James Forman. A thirty-three-year-old former teacher from Chicago, Forman joined SNCC's staff in 1961 after he had gained a reputation for his organizing skills in Fayette County. Years later, he recalled that he was told by Charles Jones that he had to meet with Ella Baker's approval before SNCC would make a final decision to hire him. Of course, this practice was entirely unofficial; Baker did not believe that any leader should exercise veto power. But because SNCC staff held her in such high esteem, her

opinion was sought on virtually every important decision. Forman made the obligatory pilgrimage to Baker's Harlem apartment to discuss the job, the organization, and politics in general. She sized him up and authorized the hire.[19]

With the skills and passions that Forman and other new recruits brought with them and the help of Ella Baker's subtle, yet powerful guidance, SNCC grew far beyond what its founders had envisioned. Explicit references to religion gradually gave way to a more secular and militant rhetoric, and nonviolence was increasingly viewed as a necessary tactic rather than as a sacred philosophy. Most significantly, the SNCC activists' involvement in struggles like the one in Fayette County directly impacted their class politics, grounding them firmly with black people who were rich in wisdom and courage but poor in terms of economic assets.

When SNCC members went into small towns and cities throughout the South, for example, they first paid their respects to the clergy and to others who might cast themselves as the leaders and representatives of the black community. But then the activists knocked on doors in the most run-down parts of town and in the most remote and impoverished rural areas. Gradually, those doors creaked open. The activists sat down with individuals who had little formal education and asked them to analyze the situation around them and help shape the agenda for change. This was a major departure, both in substance and in style, from the practices of national and regional groups like the NAACP, CORE, and SCLC, which operated on the assumption that leadership came from an educated, professional, or clerical class.[20] Baker understood, however, that small-town black communities were often polarized by class differences, even as they were united by Jim Crow segregation. She had learned from experience that using local elites as conduits to the masses could actually backfire, lessening the credibility of outside organizers who were trying to gain access to a particular community.

In pursuing a more egalitarian political practice, SNCC broke new ground. According to the Mississippi historian John Dittmer, "Not since Reconstruction had anyone seriously proposed that illiterate sharecroppers had the same right to the franchise as did teachers, lawyers and doctors."[21] This radical departure from the approach favored by liberal civil rights groups was heavily influenced by Ella Baker's ideas and organizing style. Through her own life, teaching, and example, she connected the young activists to a tradition of black radicalism that hearkened back to the early twentieth century and before.

In the early 1960s, SNCC organizers were not only challenging white supremacy; they were contributing to the dismantling of the caste system that existed within many black communities.[22] At every opportunity, Baker reiterated the radical idea that educated elites were not the natural leaders of black people. Critically reflecting on her work with the NAACP, she observed, "The leadership was all from the professional class, basically. I think these are the factors that have kept it [the NAACP] from moving to a more militant position." She urged SNCC, as she had urged SCLC and the NAACP, to seek out "indigenous leaders," ordinary people engaged in struggle, regardless of credentials or social class, and to affirm their right to define the politics and direction of the movement.[23]

Local autonomy was the cornerstone of a meaningfully engaged democratic practice. If local people did not have ownership of the struggle they were engaged in, they would be beholden politically to others who would not necessarily experience the consequences of that struggle. Julian Bond observed that the goal of SNCC organizers in local struggles was to help generate "a community movement with local leadership, not a new branch of SNCC."[24] Jane Stembridge, who spent time in the Greenwood office after working closely with Baker in Atlanta, put it this way: "The field staff saw itself as playing a very crucial but temporary role in this whole thing. Go into a community. As soon as local leadership begins to emerge, get out of the community, so that the leadership will take hold and people will not continue to turn to you for guidance. You work yourself out of a job rather than trying to maintain yourself in a position or your organization. It doesn't matter if you go in and call yourself a SNCC worker or a CORE worker or just a person who is there."[25]

The real test of a democratic leadership was whether groups and individuals could downplay their partisan and personal interests for the greater good. Proprietary claims to or by an organization, or to any position within it, were corrupting, Baker believed, arguing instead for placing the ideals and politics of the movement above the interests of any one organization, including SNCC itself. This approach stood in contrast to that of the NAACP, which sought to exert tighter control over its branches despite, and sometimes because of, aggressive local leadership and resistance to centralized authority.

Baker recognized that an organizer's own personal interests and desires might readily become conflated with the larger goals of the group, and the group's partisan interests might get conflated with the goals of a larger movement; so she took deliberate steps to prevent such confusion. Her

motto was "I was never working for an organization. I always tried to work for a cause. And that cause was bigger than any organization."[26] Having repeatedly built, let go, and rebuilt movement groups, on some level, Baker considered the process healthy and rejuvenating.

This philosophy accounts, in part, for Baker's rather nomadic political existence and explains why she never stayed with any one organization for very long. Although she maintained a home base in New York City for most of her adult life, she was on the road more often than not. From 1957 on, she had a sparsely furnished apartment in Atlanta's all-black Wallahuje residential hotel. Aside from the family photographs she brought with her from New York, the apartment revealed little about the tastes, preferences, or private life of its occupant. Her interests were revealed primarily by the papers, magazines, books, reports, clippings, and letters that accumulated in piles awaiting her attention. This was a place to read, to catch up on what was happening in other places, and to reflect on the struggle. Except for fixing her signature lamb stew occasionally, she did not cook much, and her refrigerator and cupboards were usually bare. She also paid little attention to other domestic tasks.[27]

Baker's mobility and her belief that organizational loyalties should remain fluid made for a migratory political existence. Before she became involved in SNCC, her political ties were tenuous at best. Because she never stayed in any one organization for very long, she was never able to influence how an organization like the NAACP or SCLC would evolve politically or structurally, as she had once hoped to do. At the NAACP and SCLC, she worked around the centers of power, organizing those who remained on the margins. Yet her identity as a political vagabond helped her because she was always perceived as an independent person without vested interests in one faction or another. This earned her enormous credibility with the young people of SNCC, as it had done with grassroots activists. In the early 1960s, SNCC became the political home and family that she had sought for so long. She was finally settling down—at least temporarily.

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SOUTHWEST GEORGIA: POLITICAL DIFFERENCES AND PERSONAL LOYALTIES

As SNCC became a more visible and formidable political force, the more established civil rights groups viewed the upstarts as naive and cocky. They resented SNCC for encroaching on what they regarded as their political turf. These tensions came to a head in the small town of Albany, Georgia ("all

benny" as the locals called it), where competing strategies and personalities made national headlines and revealed the growing political rifts within the civil rights movement. The NAACP, SNCC, and SCLC were all involved with local activists in Albany, and they eventually came into conflict over issues of tactics, turf, and leadership. Although Baker dissuaded SNCC from sectarian inclinations, the group had to fight for its autonomy and visibility vis-à-vis other civil rights groups that were throwing their weight around and, in Baker's view, attempting to undermine SNCC's efforts at grassroots organizing.

In November 1961, Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon were asked by SNCC's coordinating committee to go to Albany to help bolster the local movement there. Sherrod, whom Baker had recruited as one of SNCC's first field secretaries, placed a high priority on building a strong base with ordinary people in the community.[28] So, the two SNCC activists settled in, got to know community residents, and slowly gained the confidence of a significant number of them, especially the young people. As Cordell Reagon put it, he and Sherrod "acted like neighborhood boys," doing "work with the common people first."[29] This down-to-earth approach became SNCC's trademark. In describing the mode of organizing that the young people in SNCC adopted, John Lewis recalled: "We were meeting people on their terms, not ours. If they were out in the field picking cotton, we would go out in that field and pick with them. . . . Before we ever got around to saying what we had to say, we listened. And in the process we built up both their trust in us and their confidence in themselves."[30]

The Albany Movement, the local umbrella organization, coordinated street demonstrations to protest segregation, organized consumer boycotts against racist businesses, launched a bus boycott, and initiated a campaign to promote black voter registration. As in most other places in the South, Albany's black electorate was virtually immobilized. The NAACP, which had been organizing in the region for years, counseled its local allies to document discrimination and prepare for litigation. The NAACP's national leaders strongly objected to what they viewed as provocative, illegal actions on the part of the "young Turks" in SNCC. Roy Wilkins believed that SNCC had acted irresponsibly in Albany when it pushed for an escalation of protests. Moreover, he resented the young activists' ungrateful attitude. Wilkins felt the NAACP had supported the neophytes, even helping to get some of them out of jail, "only to be insulted for being on the wrong side of the generation gap."[31]

When SCLC came to Albany, the situation became even more complex.

William Anderson, a doctor of osteopathic medicine and a local leader of the Albany Movement, appealed to Martin Luther King to visit the town in order to gain publicity for the struggle and pressure white officials to act on the movement's demands. Many SNCC organizers strongly opposed this move, as did some local activists. Although some early SNCC supporters had tightened their ties to SCLC and some, like James Bevel, had even joined the SCLC payroll, the core leadership of SNCC had grown increasingly skeptical of SCLC's style of organizing and of Dr. King's charismatic style of leadership. Some of the young activists had taken to mockingly calling King "da lawd" behind his back.[32]

On his arrival in Albany in December 1961, King ignited controversy. After being arrested in a protest demonstration, he allowed himself to be bailed out of jail and gave a tacit nod to the city leaders' offer to negotiate an end to the protests. Although recollections vary, there was apparently a breakdown in communication between King and sectors of the Albany Movement. He felt that he was adhering to the consensus of the local leadership, but some local movement participants and SNCC organizers disagreed.[33] Baker saw King's highly publicized visits as undermining local people's confidence and autonomy and lessening the visibility of the Albany Movement's own spokespersons. When he came to town, she complained, "you can imagine who the press looked to."[34] Several SNCC leaders were very vocal about their criticisms of King, making comments to reporters that revealed schisms and tensions within the movement that had not previously been made public.[35]

From the fall of 1961 through the summer of 1962, both Baker and King shuttled in and out of Albany. However, Baker's low-key interventions were in contrast to King's high-profile appearances. Howard Zinn recalled that when he first arrived in Albany in December 1961, Baker was engaged in practical work:

> Hundreds of people were coming out of jail. Many of them had been fired by their white employers, and they gathered in the Shiloh Baptist Church for help. Ella Baker sat in the corner of the church, pen and paper in hand. . . . She was a middle-aged handsome woman with the resonant voice of a stage actress, who moved silently through the protest movements in the South, doing the things the famous men did not have time to do. Now, hour after hour, she sat there as people lined up before her, patiently taking down names, addresses, occupations, immediate money needs.[36]

In addition to her role as an analyst and political strategist, Baker held another job in the movement: attending to the mundane details necessary to keep organizations and individuals going.

The confrontations in Albany were rooted in the political histories of the organizations involved, but personal relationships were entangled in the mesh as well. Vernon Jordan, then a savvy young lawyer, and Ruby Hurley, the tough veteran organizer, were the two top NAACP staffers dispatched from the national office in the fall of 1961 to take charge of the situation in Albany. The NAACP naturally felt it had a proprietary claim to defend, having been active in the area for years; Baker had even spoken there under its auspices. So, the NAACP's national leadership was flustered both by King's appearance and by SNCC's militant activism. Charles Sherrod and other SNCC activists experienced "very sharp confrontations" with Hurley.[37] But while Hurley was one of SNCC's chief adversaries in the Albany struggle, she was not just another NAACP bureaucrat to Ella Baker: she was an old and dear friend.

The two women had significant bonds. Both had worked as field secretaries in the NAACP during the 1940s, and on more than one occasion they had been allies against the top leadership of the organization. They had socialized together too, eating at one another's homes and commiserating about their egotistical male "superiors" in the New York office. Hurley remained part of Baker's extended political family in New York City during the 1950s. In fact, Hurley had taken Ella's niece Jackie shopping to buy her first pair of high-heel shoes, a rite of passage Jackie remembered fondly some forty years later.[38] In Albany, however, Hurley and Baker found themselves on opposite sides of a struggle within the movement. Yet their friendship, even then, survived.

Ella Baker's ability to sustain long-term friendships with other activists when particular political circumstances put them in adversarial positions was one of her most important gifts. Her talent for making and keeping connections, for recognizing in people more than their ideological stance or organizational position, was an important, if sometimes invisible, contribution to the movement. Although she strove to be principled and consistent in her own politics, she allowed for divergent opinions between herself and others, keeping in mind the need for broader networks and coalitions. In turn, people who knew her trusted and respected Ella Baker, even if they did not always agree with her about strategy and tactics.

Baker and Hurley had taken divergent political paths some years before. When Baker decided to break with the national office of the NAACP over

questions of democracy and leadership, Hurley opted to stay. The political differences that were reflected in those choices were at the heart of the internal movement struggles that were played out more than a decade later in Albany. Baker had become even more convinced that grassroots activists had to confront their oppression directly, by challenging exploitative landowners, biased voter registrars, and official and vigilante enforcers of segregation. Although she knew full well that racial inequality was structural, to her it was not an abstract system to be tackled indirectly. People themselves had to make a change by challenging inequality concretely, as they encountered it in their daily lives. From the perspective of Hurley and the NAACP leadership in New York, on the other hand, a nationwide organization and a centralized, well-coordinated strategy gave coherence and stability to local struggles. In their view, it was ultimately the Congress and the Supreme Court, not protests in the streets, that would determine the outcome of the struggle. What Baker viewed as suffocating interference by outside national leaders, Hurley saw as supportive, expert guidance.

As civil rights struggles sharpened after 1960, militant, confrontational tactics became a key area of disagreement. The NAACP had charted the legal route to political empowerment. This route was not narrow or exclusive, but it had to be navigated very carefully to ensure success. The NAACP did engage in protests, and at times its presence elicited violent and repressive reactions from southern segregationists. Hurley and her co-workers were certainly experienced and politically sophisticated enough to understand this dynamic. Still, the law was the national NAACP's weapon of choice against racism and discrimination, and it had already secured some important victories. Ella Baker, on the other hand, did not have much faith in lawyers, judges, or legislators. In order to shift the political climate and effect real change, the masses had to push against and even disrupt the status quo, and the pressure they applied had to be steady and sustained, not sporadic. In Baker's view, if people did not feel they had taken an active part in their own emancipation, but believed that it had been won for them, then half the battle had already been lost; ordinary people's sense of their own power would be compromised.

The struggle in Albany wore on for nearly eighteen months. Although more than 1,000 activists were arrested, SNCC's participation yielded few tangible concessions from the city government or local businesses. Some observers deemed the Albany struggle a failure, but historians agree that it was an important testing ground for SNCC. Clayborne Carson, Vincent Harding, and Howard Zinn have argued convincingly that SNCC's involve-

ment in the Albany Movement had long-term implications for the organization: the young activists gained greater confidence in their capacity to organize in the face of sustained repression. Carson emphasizes that SNCC was "able to bring previously dormant elements of the black populace into a sustained struggle for civil rights" through the use of militant nonviolent tactics.[39] Because of SNCC's democratic organizing practices, Albany's youth, its poor, and its working class came to be active participants in the movement.

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SCEF

Although Ella Baker devoted most of her political energy in the early 1960s to SNCC, she continued to maintain multiple affiliations, in keeping with her view that one's chief loyalty should be to the movement and not to any one organization. From 1961 to 1963, her income came principally from her involvement in the special human relations project sponsored by the southeastern regional YWCA, but she also had a very close working relationship with her friends in SCEF, including the Bradens, the Shuttlesworths, and black South Carolina radical Modjeska Simkins.[40] As soon as her tenure with SCLC ended in the fall of 1960, Baker embarked on an association with SCEF that eventually led her to join its small staff in the spring of 1963. As rifts developed between various organizations within the movement, she sought to build bridges, in particular between SCEF and SNCC. Each year, SCEF donated several thousand dollars to support SNCC's work, and Anne Braden attended most of SNCC's meetings during its first few years.

In a consulting capacity, Baker attended SCEF board meetings, spoke at SCEF conferences, and documented anti–civil rights activity in the Florida legislature as a part of a monitoring project there. In October 1961, Baker, the Bradens, and allies of theirs, including C. T. Vivien and Myles Horton, formed Operation Freedom, something of a successor to In Friendship, which funneled money to activists "suddenly in dire straits." Their first project was to aid the militant farmers in Fayette County, Tennessee, and they later provided support to Mississippi activists who were victims of economic retaliation by local whites.[41]

One of SCEF's political priorities during the early 1960s was to combat the corrosive effect of anticommunism within the civil rights movement. Toward that end, SCEF launched a concerted effort to link civil rights and civil liberties, pointing out in its literature that the two issues were inseparable; it organized workshops, conferences, and lectures throughout the Southeast to bring attention to the issue. As Ella Baker's respect and admi-

ration for the Bradens strengthened, her ambivalence about the role of suspected communists in the movement seemed to weaken. She became one of the strongest voices within SNCC advocating the principle of free association without any ideological litmus test, the opposite of the NAACP policy she had defended in the 1950s.

In October 1961, Baker helped organize a SCEF-sponsored conference on freedom and the First Amendment in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Hoping to attract a more mainstream audience, she and Anne Braden went to great lengths to put together a roster of well-respected presenters, such as retired New York City judge Hubert Delany, whom Baker had known in Harlem in the 1930s; Methodist bishop Edgar Love of Baltimore; and SCLC's executive director, Baker's successor, Rev. Wyatt T. Walker. Most of the speakers were ministers, professors, lawyers, or judges; of the nineteen people listed on the program, only three—Baker, Anne Braden, and Casey Hayden—were women.

A lot was riding on this conference for Anne Braden. The explicit harassment and subtle slights that she and Carl had experienced were taking their toll on her emotionally and psychologically, and she simply needed some positive results. She did not mind fighting southern segregationists, the real enemies of racial justice, but, as she would confide to Ella Baker a year later, she was weary at having to "fight for [her] right to fight" alongside supposed allies.[42] The hope was that the 1961 conference would temper some of the anticommunist antagonism within the movement and generate more support for SCEF and other left-wing forces.

The Bradens may have felt shunned by some in liberal circles, but they had won many friends. Some people opposed red-baiting in the southern movement largely out of personal loyalty to Carl and Anne, whose determination, commitment, and courage were admired. They did not operate like party functionaries, if they were indeed members of the Communist Party. They were such staunch antiracist fighters that allowing them to suffer government attacks was deemed by their allies to be indefensible.[43] In Ella Baker's case, friendship may have been the factor that led her to shed her own ambivalent anticommunism, but she quickly developed a more sophisticated and deeply reflective position on civil liberties that extended well beyond her personal relationship with the Bradens.

Around the time of the Chapel Hill conference, Anne and Ella discussed the fact that framing the red-baiting issue in terms of personal friendships and individuals had severe limitations. Anne felt that both Wyatt T. Walker and Fred Shuttlesworth had overemphasized their support of the Bradens

as a gesture of personal loyalty rather than as a matter of political principle. She complained, for example, that Shuttlesworth had given a speech in Louisville in which he praised her generously but failed to even mention HUAC's harassment or the issue of civil liberties. Anne explained to Jim Dombrowski that she and Ella had agreed on the need for more internal education and candid private conversations in order to politicize the issue in people's thinking.[44]

Ella Baker and Anne Braden devised a list of people that they thought it important to engage in this process. Among the students they identified were Diane Nash, Bob Moses, Charles Jones, Henry Thomas, and Dion Diamond. Anne commented that Jones had previously testified voluntarily before HUAC but seemed apologetic about it later. Ella had suggested him because she thought he was someone who "responds to his environment and in a civil liberties gathering would be better" than in other settings.[45] Anne also suggested to Baker that she invite her friends John and Viola McFerren from Fayette County to attend.[46]

The daylong conference was held on October 27, 1961, at the Educational Building of the Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. As chairperson of the afternoon session, Baker had the difficult task of facilitating an intense, unwieldy, and sometimes fractious discussion involving some fifty people. In her opening remarks, she speculated that "the reason I was asked to preside at this session is because I have had a great deal of experience in being pummeled from both sides [presumably the right and the left] and so I am here to try to keep the session going."[47] She guided and contained the debate with finesse and humor. The audience included some of the most active and engaged intellectuals and organizers on the left, such as Tom Hayden from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the socialist leader Michael Harrington, and all of them had something to say. Sympathizing with an especially long-winded questioner, but still trying to get him to wrap up his comments, Baker asked him to get to the point, confessing that she was also restraining herself from speaking: "You don't know how I am burning to talk because I love it."[48]

Another person expressed an unpopular opinion about HUAC, eliciting boos and calls of "liar" from the audience before he stormed out of the conference in frustration. After that incident, Baker had to wrestle back control of the floor, chastise the audience, apologize to the speaker for the heckling, and invite him to come back into the room and restate his minority opinion, assuring him he would have the right to do so as long as she was chairing the meeting. Freedom of speech was not only about protest-

ing the government's suppression of dissent but also about insisting that the left not engage in suppression within its own ranks.[49] In terms of the goal of garnering a coalition of forces to challenge political repression and link it to civil rights, this did not occur. What the conference scenes illustrate, however, is how an individual like Ella Baker navigated the ideological minefield that surrounded the burgeoning black freedom struggle where she had located her efforts.

Throughout the early 1960s, Ella Baker worked with SCEF to highlight the principles of civil liberties and freedom of association within the movement and within SNCC in particular. In March 1962, she wrote an article for the *Southern Patriot* titled "Lack of Thought Cripples the South" in which she noted: "Today freedom of speech, association, the right to protest for redress of grievances, and freedom from excessive bails and inhumane punishment are daily being denied in the South under the guise of defending the country against communism, and we should no longer be hoodwinked by that."[50] She put the point more directly in an article in *Liberty Magazine* a few years later: "Man can only be free if he is free to question the postulates of a society. It is the perversion of this position that has given birth to the McCaran Act, HUAC, McCarthyism and the little HUACs of such states as Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi."[51] In advance of a workshop on civil liberties in the spring of 1963, and later that year as a follow-up, Baker traveled to communities throughout the South and West to speak at small community gatherings about the need to defend civil liberties as an extension of the goals of the civil rights movement.[52]

In June 1963, some seventy-five people gathered in Atlanta for a three-day workshop titled "How Free Are the 'Free'?" Anne Braden and Ella Baker were again the principal organizers, and once again they were faced with the question of whom to invite. Unlike at the conference in Chapel Hill, no formal presentations were scheduled. The workshop was meant to be an opportunity for key people in the movement to speak candidly about the issue of civil liberties and challenge one another on areas of disagreement. Six months before the event, Anne expressed her frustration with SCLC, feeling that she had to nag them to get their support for anything related to civil liberties, including Carl Braden's clemency petition, which both Wyatt T. Walker and Martin Luther King did endorse. "I am tired" Anne confessed. "I have pursued them [people at SCLC] for almost two years on this civil liberties question (and longer in a sense), and to put it bluntly I have had it."[53] But she had become more optimistic and even argued with Ella about the strategic importance of inviting Walker to be involved in the June

workshop. Baker reluctantly conceded after Anne pleaded Walker's case, pointing out that while he was not perfect, she felt he had spoken out more than others had and was worth cultivating as an ally.[54]

The three-day discussion was lively, with Ella Baker and Bob Moses finding themselves sometimes slightly at odds. Moses expressed his concerns frankly. He did not have a gripe with communists; but he was trying to be practical. Fearing the loss of much needed foundation money, he suggested that funders would "pull the rug out from under us if we don't face up to this situation." Baker responded with a warning: "I'm very much afraid of this 'Foundation complex.' We're getting praise from places that worry me."[55] According to Moses, the police were using the charge of communism to attack and undermine the movement; such attacks, he felt, were causing real hardship and undermining the movement's work. Anne Braden challenged Moses to consider whether alleged communists were in fact the cause of the attacks, indicating that she would leave the South immediately if she thought it would further the goal of black freedom. When someone added that organizations like SNCC should look at the person and not the ideology, Moses rejected this as an oversimplification of a complex question. "We don't necessarily accept people just because they are helpful," he argued.[56] Moses noted that he had invited Carl Braden to speak on civil liberties in Mississippi the previous summer and had gotten raked over the coals in the local press. "We were tied up in Mississippi" as a result, he concluded.[57] This made him leery. Still, the majority of those in attendance seemed less uncomfortable about communist affiliations, and many spoke of the need to challenge HUAC more forcibly.

At its December 1963 retreat, SNCC took up the issue of civil liberties yet again. The official position was not to exclude anyone based on organizational affiliation but also not to pick a fight with HUAC by launching a campaign against it. For her part, Ella Baker was not willing to let HUAC off the hook so easily. She continued to raise concerns about civil liberties in her speeches and writings and at SNCC meetings.[58] The issue would haunt SNCC for years to come.

In the meantime, Baker had formally joined the SCEF staff. Jim Dombrowski, SCEF's executive director, was a Christian socialist and an early supporter of the Highlander Folk School; he had been trying since 1961 to bring Ella Baker on board. Because of his confidence in her good judgment, political instincts, and reputation, he conveyed to Anne Braden his willingness to support unequivocally just about any project that Baker proposed.[59] Once she was on the SCEF staff, she enjoyed more freedom and flexibility

than she had ever previously experienced within an organization. Dombrowski offered her a paycheck along with the autonomy to choose and define her work. During the years that followed, Baker was essentially a free-floating movement consultant, adviser, teacher, and resource person. Not surprisingly, one of her first projects after she joined SCEF's staff was to go on a three-week organizing tour with SCEF field secretary John Salter, a white former Tougaloo College professor, to rally movement support in several western and midwestern states. The pair traveled to Iowa, Nebraska, and Arizona, meeting with church and civic groups and cosponsoring events with local CORE and NAACP people in Des Moines.[60]

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GENDER POLITICS AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

Bernice Johnson Reagon, who became politicized by the Albany struggle, has pointed out that, although gender politics were not explicitly articulated in the southern-based Black Freedom Movement of the early 1960s, gender was nonetheless deeply implicated in the daily lives and interactions of movement participants. As the young freedom fighters in SNCC set out to dismantle white supremacy in the South, they began, sometimes inadvertently, to challenge and transgress conventional notions of gender. Rather than replicating the patterns of male dominance and female deference that characterized middle-class culture, traditional politics, and certain aspects of working-class culture, the movement created alternatives to them. In Albany and elsewhere, young women who defied segregation inevitably defied the norms that defined middle-class femininity. By being bold, brave, and independent, they stepped out of their "place." The organizational ethos of SNCC also provided a space for older women, who had long worked as rank-and-file troops at the grassroots in local community struggles, to act as leaders and serve as role models for younger people. The emergence of women as indigenous leaders transformed gender relations within the movement. For example, many movement participants recalled seeing more women in the pulpit of the otherwise male-dominated black church during the 1960s than at any time before or after.

In places like Albany, Georgia, and Fayette County, Tennessee, women engaged in acts of protest and suffered arrests and beatings alongside the men. In a sense, this was neither new nor unusual. During the 1940s and 1950s, in places like Birmingham and Shreveport, women had led NAACP branches and local desegregation organizations and had consequently become targets of harassment and violence. In the eyes of many participants

and observers, the acts of retribution were regrettable instances of white barbarity, but the role of female militancy remained obscured. What was new about SNCC was its embrace of women as key participants in mass protests and as leaders at the center of the struggle.

Because of its deepening irreverence for conventional standards of authority and respectability, SNCC bestowed credibility and honor on women and girls who protested and fought back in the most unladylike fashion. Young Ola Mae Quarterman drew attention to the Albany bus boycott by confronting a driver who attempted to force her into Jim Crow seating. "I paid my damn twenty cents and I can sit where I want," she proclaimed loudly before being arrested and carted off to jail.[61] Sixteen-year-old Shirley Gaines was arrested and beaten by the police after a protest to desegregate a bowling alley. Glenda Fleming, a rebellious junior high school student, participated in demonstrations in open defiance of her parents' wishes. College students like Bertha Gober and Bernice Johnson risked expulsion from Albany State—and placed their coveted degrees in jeopardy—by continuing their involvement in the protests. Bernice later left school voluntarily in order work in the movement full time.[62] Ella Baker, who summoned Bernice to her apartment to discuss her decision, gave her blessing once she was convinced the young woman had thought through the options carefully.[63] Ignoring the prevailing gender norms, these young women were warmly applauded by SNCC as exemplary militants. Quarterman's language and Gaines's recalcitrance contrasted sharply with the genteel, ladylike demeanor that Rosa Parks exhibited, which had made her an ideal candidate to personify respectable black resistance to segregation in Montgomery in 1955.

Women were also prominent in the struggle in McComb, Mississippi, where SNCC participated in an ongoing desegregation campaign and initiated a voter registration project. Brenda Travis, a tough and tenacious teenager, typified the kind of young women SNCC attracted there. The Travises were not one of town's upstanding families. Brenda's parents were poor and often out of work. In her class origins and defiant demeanor, Brenda resembled Claudette Colvin, the young girl whom the leaders of Montgomery's desegregation movement had deemed unsuitable to represent them in 1955. Colvin, pregnant, poor, and unmarried, had been thrown off a Montgomery bus weeks before Rosa Parks took her now-famous stand, but because Colvin did not fit the image of a respectable, middle-class citizen—because she was not a "lady"—her case was passed over by those who were looking for an opportunity to test the segregation

laws and launch a public campaign. In McComb, SNCC welcomed Brenda Travis, even though, or perhaps because, she was labeled a rabble-rouser. She was only fifteen years old, but she was so determined to join the movement that she lied to Bob Moses about her age in order to be accepted as a volunteer.[64]

In August 1961, Brenda Travis and other students from Burgland High School sat in at a Greyhound bus terminal in Pike County, Mississippi. This bold action netted the leaders jail sentences, even though they were minors.[65] After two months in detention, Travis was released on probation, but she was arrested again shortly thereafter for participating in yet another protest. This time, Travis was sent to the Colored Girls Industrial School, a reform school for delinquents in Oaklie, Mississippi. When she was released from custody several months later, her future was uncertain. She was headstrong and stubborn, and her family had problems. Ella Baker quietly intervened and agreed to become Brenda Travis's legal guardian. For several years, Baker arranged for Brenda's care and education.[66]

As her political children entered into more and more dangerous situations, facing formidable enemies at great personal sacrifice, Ella Baker struggled to minimize the casualties of activism. She did not urge vulnerable people to take such risks and then abandon them to the tender mercies of white society. Brenda Travis might have become one of the movement's casualties had Baker not been willing to help out by "accepting a responsibility that [she] had not looked for but consequently [could] not refuse to accept."[67] It was a difficult and frustrating undertaking, and for a time the situation with Brenda put Baker in a state of "constant turmoil." Nevertheless, she saw to it that Brenda had schooling, went to summer camp, and could stay with her in New York for a while. Eventually, Brenda Travis was reunited with her family. Years later, she reflected that her relationship with Baker "changed the direction of my life."[68]

Baker's personal politics and radical humanist philosophy meant that she stayed in touch with local people after the smoke of battle had cleared. She made sure that parents were contacted when their children were arrested, that people going to jail had toothbrushes and hair combs, that those who were expelled from school for their activism found other institutions to accept them and obtained scholarships to support them. She always tried to minimize the emotional and physical hardships experienced by young people like Brenda Travis.

Baker paid particular attention to nurturing the development of young women, whether they had joined local campaigns or had volunteered as

field organizers.[69] Ruby Doris Smith, who became one of the more vocal and active members of SNCC in 1961, benefited from Ella Baker's guidance and support.[70] A Georgia native and student at Spelman College, Smith joined the Atlanta Committee of Appeal for Human Rights, a SNCC affiliate, in the fall of 1960 as the group picketed segregated businesses in downtown Atlanta. Her initial foray into politics was modest, and so was her manner; but as she read books about social justice and met more young people involved in the growing movement, her interest and commitment deepened. Along with other SNCC activists, Smith went to Rock Hill, South Carolina, in February 1961 as an act of solidarity with local sit-in leaders who had been jailed and were refusing bail as a matter of principle. This was a bold act for Ruby Doris Smith, but SNCC's Judy Richardson has noted that "it later became a badge of courage."[71]

Smith's brief jail stint in South Carolina was nothing compared to what she and other activists endured a few months later. In May 1961, Smith spent two hellish months in Mississippi's notorious Parchman Prison for her participation in the Freedom Rides. These experiences made Smith more mature politically, more militant tactically, and more determined than ever. Like Ella Baker, she was more inclined toward self-defense than nonviolence. A serious organizer who never hesitated to speak her mind, she became by the fall of 1961 a formidable force within SNCC. According to Cynthia Griggs Fleming, her biographer, Smith had a reputation within the movement as "a savvy veteran . . . who was incredibly brave, as well as politically sophisticated."[72] Five years later, she succeeded Jim Forman as SNCC's executive secretary, becoming the first woman to hold that powerful position.[73]

The relationship between Ruby Doris Smith and Ella Baker was marked by genuine affection and mutual respect. When Smith was in the Hinds County jail in 1961, Baker wrote her a letter to boost her spirits and remind her of the value of her sacrifice: "I hope your present experience has not been too trying for you." Baker spoke of her "continued pride in the courage you have manifested on more than one occasion" and expressed "the hope that your health will not suffer as a result of your stay in Jackson."[74] In seeking to strengthen the resolve and confidence of Smith and other young women, Baker wanted them to rise toward leadership roles in the larger movement.

The transformative process of involvement in a democratically constituted social change movement represented a personal rite of passage for Ruby Doris Smith and the other young activists engaged in the struggle.

Men and women found that, as the meanings of "whiteness" and "blackness" began to change, so too did the meanings of womanhood and manhood. Men were moved to rethink masculinity, questioning the place to which white society had relegated adult black men and, at times, even questioning black men's aspirations to fulfill white norms of manhood. When Charles McLaurin talked about the day he accompanied to the courthouse door three elderly women who were attempting to register to vote in Ruleville, Mississippi, he said that this was "the day I became a man." It was not the day he was jailed or pummeled or delivered his first speech to a large audience or "led" someone from one place to another; it was the day he became the kind of humble warrior whom Baker so often praised. McLaurin's political and personal coming of age was signified by his supporting the political empowerment of a group of poor black women.

Many teenagers became men and women in the dangerous and dynamic context of the evolving civil rights movement. They fell in love, had their first sexual experiences, and defied their parents or allied with them on issues that were more important than doing chores or smoking cigarettes. They experienced local government officials' wrath and vigilantes' violence as adults, not as children. They made life or death choices every day that had consequences not only for themselves but also for people whose trust and confidence they had earned. It was a coming of age like no other. They matured intellectually and emotionally in the Freedom Houses and Freedom Schools that SNCC established in dusty southern towns. In these rural communities, SNCC volunteers taught and learned from black folk who were old enough to be their parents or grandparents. In the process, they forged new identities at the same time that they forged new political ideas and strategies.

As the SNCC activists were tried and tested by the violence that so often met black people's open resistance to white supremacy, it is no wonder that young men in the movement were tempted to reach for the conventional mantle of manhood and act as protectors of "their" women or as the generals and soldiers in a war of liberation. Many of these young men had been socialized into the dominant society's attitudes about gender and behaved in sexist, even macho ways. What is surprising is not the degree of conformity to social norms but rather the extent to which many young men in SNCC began to rethink and reject conventional notions of gender in the process of reconsidering the meanings of race and class and redefining their own identities. For example, reflecting years later on his maturation in the movement, Charles McDew recalled that he embraced his male

comrades and told them that he loved them in a way he could not have conceived of doing before he entered the movement. It was not a conscious decision to transgress gender roles; instead, it came somewhat organically out of the situation he found himself in. The ethos of heroism combined with humility bred such displays of warmth and affection. It was a different time, and McDew was consciously becoming a different kind of man.[75]

Lawrence Guyot, a tough, husky Louisianan who attended Tougaloo College and then worked with SNCC in Mississippi, was humbled by his exposure to women like Ella Baker and Pauli Murray, to whom Baker introduced him. He once made what he later admitted was a sexist comment in Baker's presence, and she calmly corrected him with a brief history lesson about women's role in the struggle. "I made one of the most idiotic statements I ever made," he confessed, "and I have never said anything like that since." In his opinion, there was "no one more compassionate or tougher" than Ella Baker; her example inspired him to see differently not only women's role in the movement but his own role as a man as well.[76]

Ivanhoe Donaldson, a New Yorker who attended Michigan State University, was described as a "shrewd and savvy hand at civil rights work" and a "polished pool player."[77] He understood his own transformation in the context of the patriarchal training he and most others had received before coming into the movement. "We came from homes where dinner didn't start until [the father] sat down, and he determined the rules of the house. But then in SNCC you are thrown in with women who are smarter and more talented . . . [and you come to realize] that manhood isn't the ability to knock someone down but finding your own humanity."[78]

What made these alternative practices and philosophies of gender possible within SNCC? In the early 1960s, it was clearly not any explicitly proclaimed feminist principles on the part of the organization. Probably a combination of factors was involved, but Baker's example and influence were crucially important. She was a striking exception to the predominant images that defined black womanhood; her style and demeanor encompassed socially ascribed masculine and feminine qualities—nurturing warmth coupled with a ruggedly unshakable confidence. That made her an inspiration to those who wished to step outside the boundaries of conventional, middle-class gender norms. It is tempting to attribute these norms to the "middle class" because they were certainly embraced more enthusiastically by that sector of the black community. However, through school and church institutions, working-class blacks also adhered to certain pa-

triarchal family practices and restricted gender roles, even when the realities of their everyday lives prevented black women from conforming to the idealized model of homemaker and helpmate. Yet in regard to gender, as in SNCC's alternative approach to class, Baker's indirect influence was even more powerful than her direct presence. In SNCC's grassroots campaigns, young activists met and learned from poor and working-class women who had developed a striking independence of thought and action through years of hard work and repeated confrontations with whites in day-to-day resistance to Jim Crow. As SNCC activists followed these women's examples, they learned other ways of being men and women.

Although women had always been central to community-based campaigns for civil rights, they seldom were accorded recognized leadership roles, and their contributions were often unknown outside the locality and often forgotten after the struggle was over. In the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56 and the school desegregation battles in Little Rock and elsewhere, for example, Joanne Gibson Robinson and Daisy Bates played central leadership roles, but in the organizations with which they were affiliated, the Montgomery Improvement Association and the national NAACP, men were the principal spokespersons and decision makers. The MIA and the NAACP were hierarchical in their structures, with the result that gender and class inequities were perpetuated by the overwhelmingly male leadership. The strategy of racial uplift in the early and mid-twentieth century was rooted in the notion that the educated elite would skillfully guide the race toward progress, on the one hand lobbying and litigating for reforms and on the other grooming and socializing the "lower-class" elements to prepare themselves for integration. Restrictive norms of masculinity and femininity were part and parcel of the mainstream, middle-class approach to social change and to leadership roles.[79]

The SNCC activists always had to struggle against the tendencies toward elitism and male domination, but SNCC did enable women, workers, farmers, and youth to emerge as strong, effective, and publicly recognized leaders of the movement. This achievement was in no small measure the result of an active assertion of leadership on the part of SNCC women themselves. As SNCC developed a bold and brazen public image, bold and brazen women were attracted to it; and once they joined, no one sought to constrain them. Ella Baker nudged them along this path and cleared obstacles from their way whenever she could. As architect of SNCC's democratic approach, she in effect widened the space of leadership, so that those most marginalized or

excluded from the centers of power in society and in civil rights politics could stand up and be heard. Her fundamental commitment to a democratic vision and inclusive political practice was not based on a feminist perspective per se, but unconsciously, Baker had laid a foundation for subsequent black and white radical feminist work.