

Ella



Baker

and the Black Freedom Movement

A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC VISION

Barbara Ransby

The
University
of North
Carolina
Press
Chapel Hill &
London

8

MENTORING A NEW GENERATION OF ACTIVISTS

THE BIRTH OF THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE, 1960–1961

.

Throughout the decade of the sixties, many people helped to ignite or were touched by the creative fire of SNCC without appreciating the generating force of Ella Jo Baker.

James Forman, 1972

In the young and determined faces of the sit-in leaders, Ella Baker saw the potential for a new type of leadership that could revitalize the Black Freedom Movement and take it in a radically new direction. Baker wanted to bring the sit-in participants together in a way that would sustain the momentum of their actions, provide them with much needed skills and resources, and create space for them to coalesce into a new, more militant, yet democratic political force. Maintaining the neophyte activists' autonomy from established civil rights organizations was one of her key objectives. But she also hoped they would develop their own vision and strategy based on the transformative experience of confronting injustice personally and collectively. The students' direct assaults on Jim Crow had done more to demolish the most ubiquitous and offensive everyday forms of segregation than years of carefully orchestrated national campaigns. While exemplary local movements such as the Montgomery bus boycott seemed difficult to replicate in other locations, the sit-in tactic had spread with startling rapidity. Above all, the young activists themselves seemed transfigured by their success, and their challenge to segregation was reshaping national politics.

After the success at Greensboro and the wave of sit-ins that rippled

across the South, Baker took immediate steps to help the students consolidate their initial victories and make linkages with one another, and she set the stage to move them in what she hoped would be a leftward direction. Under the auspices of SCLC, Baker called for a gathering of sit-in leaders to meet one another, assess their respective struggles, and explore the possibilities for future actions. The Southwide Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation was held on April 16–18 (Easter weekend), 1960, and attracted some 200 participants, more than double the number Baker had anticipated. Many of the young people came out of sheer curiosity, eager to protect their local autonomy but interested to hear what others were doing. The gathering took place at Baker's alma mater, Shaw University, in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she herself had begun her activist career more than forty years earlier. Around the country, a number of similar meetings were convened by various organizations to support the southern students, analyze the significance of their actions, and capitalize on the momentum they had generated. The gathering that Baker convened in Raleigh had the most profound and lasting results.

A month before the Shaw meeting, Baker conducted her own political reconnaissance, contacting friends around the country to collect information on the political mood of the students and others' responses to their actions. She wanted to put her finger on the political pulse and assess the protests' potential before deciding what role she would play at the conference. During the week of March 7–12, Ella Baker met and talked with literally hundreds of students and community leaders about the impact of the sit-ins and potential for future actions. She then wrote up a ten-page report for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that reflected her findings.¹ Baker also talked the issue over with Doug Moore, a young minister from Durham, who had convened a smaller meeting of sit-in demonstrators in North Carolina in February, and Rev. Glen Smiley, a white official with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and persuaded them that the students would be better off as a new and independent group.² When the Shaw meeting got under way, Baker had already decided to support what she determined was the sit-in leaders' desire for autonomy. Her "basic hope from the beginning was that it would be an independent organization of young people."³

A politically shrewd and purposeful organizer, Baker clearly had her own political goals going into the Raleigh meeting, but—ever the democrat—she was careful not to be too presumptuous about what the students themselves did or did not want. She had to strike a balance between put-

ting forward her own very strongly held views and values and being careful not to intimidate, overwhelm, or alienate her prospective allies. After all, in the spring of 1960 there was no basis for them to “embrace me with open arms,” as she put it.⁴ She had yet to earn their trust. Baker appreciated and encouraged their desire to arrive at their own consensus and even make their own mistakes. She was also a stickler for process. She did not want to rush things; she knew that forming an organization, like building a movement, took time and patience.

Even if Baker had been so inclined, she could not simply have dictated what direction the student movement was going to take. The young activists were inexperienced, but they were not blank slates on which Baker or Martin Luther King Jr. could write a political script. They each brought something with them: ambitions, passions, ideas, and ways of doing things. In the case of the Nashville students, they had already embraced the philosophy of nonviolence as articulated by their mentor, a Vanderbilt seminarian named James Lawson, who was an admirer of Gandhi and a resolute devotee of nonviolence as a philosophy and way of life. The Atlanta students, led by Julian Bond and Lonnie King, had their own ideas as well. They had participated in sit-ins, but they had also drafted a document, the Atlanta Appeal for Human Rights, which had been published in a local paper and which embodied their concept of how the struggle should be framed. So the students had ideas of their own, and no one understood or appreciated this more than Ella Baker.

• • • • •

SETTING THE STAGE AND PLANTING THE SEEDS

The atmosphere on Shaw’s campus that weekend was electric. The discussions were lively, and the mood was optimistic. For many of the students, it was not until the gathering in Raleigh that they fully appreciated the national significance of their local activities. They felt honored by the presence of Dr. King, whom they had watched on television or read about in the black and mainstream press. He was a hero for most black people in 1960, and his presence gave the neophyte activists a clear sense of their own contribution to the growing civil rights movement. Baker was content to use King’s celebrity to attract young people to the meeting, but she was determined that they take away something more substantial. Most of the student activists had never heard of Ella Baker before they arrived. Yet she, more than King, became the decisive force in their collective political future. It was Baker, not King, who nurtured the student movement and

helped to launch a new organization. It was Baker, not King, who offered the sit-in leaders a model of organizing and an approach to politics that they found consistent with their own experience and would find invaluable in the months and years to come.

Baker's imprint was all over the Raleigh meeting. She did not make any unilateral decisions, but she handled virtually all of the logistical details.⁵ She understood how important details were in shaping the character of an event like this, and she gave every task her utmost attention. She collected news clippings about sit-in protests in various cities and made profiles of the organizations and individuals involved for her own knowledge and for publicity purposes. The group that gathered at Shaw was an amorphous body that, at the outset, had the potential to take any number of political paths. Baker structured the meeting so that those who were politically engaged rather than those who claimed the label of "expert" would be at the center of the deliberations.

The first goal was to provide those who had been directly involved in the protests the opportunity to confer, compare notes, and brainstorm about future possibilities in private. Baker urged those in attendance to give southern students, who were disproportionately black and less politically experienced, the time and space to meet separately, setting the stage for them to be the principal framers of whatever organization might emerge. "The leadership for the South had to be a southern leadership," Baker insisted. In her view, the sit-in leaders were on the front lines. They had taken the initiative and endured the violence. Therefore, they should retain the prerogative to structure and direct whatever organization emerged from the conference. It was a matter of self-determination, defined broadly. Ella Baker was wary of experienced leaders' tendency to move in and take control of locally initiated struggles because they saw themselves as more capable than the local folk. She had seen such dynamics again and again within the NAACP and SCLC. Baker was determined not to let this happen to the nascent sit-in movement.

On the second day of the Raleigh conference, Baker was invited—or, as she described it, she invited herself—to a private meeting at the home of the president of Shaw University, William Russell Strassner. The incoming executive director of SCLC, Rev. Wyatt T. Walker, was there, along with Ralph Abernathy and Dr. King. According to Baker, an effort was made to "capture" the youth movement, an effort to which she refused to be a party.⁶ There are different versions of the meeting, and certainly differing views about whether SCLC intended to "capture" and subordinate the emer-

gent student movement. In Baker's account of what occurred, she reprimanded the presumptuous ministers for their territorial ambitions and walked out of the meeting.⁷

Although Baker was generally a sharp judge of character, her suspicions of King's motives may not have been fully warranted in this instance. King's speech to the Raleigh delegates praised the students for having taken initiative and leadership. Yet Baker remained skeptical. Her distrust of SCLC leaders had deepened over the course of her three-year tenure with the organization. In her view, the SCLC ministers had badly mismanaged their own organization, and she wanted to minimize their control over this new crop of activists. She feared their efforts to annex the new group would stifle and suppress the militancy and creativity that the students had displayed. She also understood that since her own troubled relationship with SCLC was about to come to an end, if the students opted to become a part of King's organization, her role would be sorely limited.

While Baker wanted to protect the students' autonomy, she was not the hands-off facilitator that some have made her out to be. She understood that the students needed guidance, direction, and resources from veterans like herself who shared their general political orientation. As she put it at the time, "However hopeful might be the signs in the direction of group-centeredness, the fact that many schools and communities, especially in the South, have not provided adequate experience for young Negroes to assume initiative and think and act independently has accentuated the need for guarding the student movement" against those who might steer them in an undemocratic direction.⁸ Simply stated, Baker saw some forms of intervention and influence as empowering and supportive of the students, and others as meddling and self-serving. This may seem like a double standard, but it was a position that grew out of Baker's honest assessment of the political forces at play at the time. She feared that the heavy-handed ministers would usurp the mantle of leadership and the media spotlight. Her own intention was to provide a gentle mentorship that would enable the sit-in movement to develop in a direction that she could influence but would not determine.

Baker's push for the students to remain unaffiliated did not stem primarily from the fact that they were young and the more moderate forces were older, although this was part of the rhetoric that she and others used to make a case for their autonomy. She saw the emergent movement not as a youth-only movement, but as "an opportunity for adults and youth to work together to provide genuine leadership."⁹ The fundamental divide

was not generational. After all, King, who was only thirty-one years old in 1960, was closer in age to the students than Baker was. The hypothetical case could have been made that SCLC's ministerial leaders, most of whom were some twenty years younger than Baker, were also youthful activists who deserved protection and insulation from the critical interference of old-timers. This was not at all Baker's position. In fact, she argued just as passionately for the autonomy of middle-aged sharecroppers and community activists when student organizers began lending support to their struggles beginning in 1961. In Baker's view, the students who convened at Raleigh needed to be encouraged to take the lead because they were at the forefront of the struggle and represented the greatest hope for a renewed militant, democratic mass movement, not simply because they were young.

For Baker, radical youth did have a unique, although not isolated, role to play in the movement for social change. The energy and passion they brought to bear was a vital resource. Students were less inhibited than adults by concerns about jobs, children, and reputations. Still, Baker was living proof that one did not have to be young to be radical. Her friend Howard Zinn was another example: a white antiracist professor at Spelman College, he became one of the early adult advisers of SNCC. Septima Clark, the civil rights activist who organized Citizenship Schools, first on the Sea Islands, then for SCLC in Georgia, was another middle-aged radical. So were Fred and Ruby Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Dorothy and C. O. Simpkins of Shreveport, and, of course, Anne and Carl Braden of SCEF. Since young people were less socialized and less indoctrinated with prevailing ideas than their elders, they were generally more rebellious and more open to new ways of thinking. But certainly youth was no guarantee of political radicalism, and age did not always mean moderation.

It was *radical* youth Baker was concerned with. She wanted to preserve the brazen fighting spirit the students had exhibited in their sit-in protests. She did not want them to be shackled by the bureaucracy of existing organizations. At this early stage, the nascent political ideas of the students were not much more radical than those of SCLC's leadership. However, Baker saw enormous promise in their courageous actions, their creativity, and their openness to new forms of struggle, and she wanted to give them the space and freedom for that potential to develop.

Another move Baker made that influenced the climate of the Raleigh meeting was to limit media access to the proceedings. In closed-door strategy sessions, the young people were able to express their views and expectations candidly, without the intrusive presence of reporters. Some of the

students had already been captivated by the publicity their actions had garnered, and Baker did not want to encourage any grandstanding or speech making. As she put it, “the step that I took as far as the conference was concerned, was to prevent the press from attending the sessions at which kids were trying to hammer out policy. . . . You see, I’ve never had any special inclination to being publicized and I also knew that you could not organize in the public press. You might get a lot of lineage, but you really couldn’t organize.”¹⁰

The sum of Baker’s influence in shaping the outcome of the Raleigh conference was both strategic and ideological. If the group that came together on Easter weekend at Shaw was going to become a permanent organization, a myriad of unanswered questions had to be broached. What type of structure would it adopt, if any? Would the group become a coalition of local chapters or a membership organization? Would it be interracial or all-black? Would it be national or regional? Would it be an explicitly Christian group, or would it be secular? What place would the philosophy of nonviolence have in the group’s identity? What tone would the spokespersons set in articulating its politics and purpose? Finally, would the group tackle only the problem of segregation or, as Ella Baker urged, would it take on a more expansive political agenda? All of these were critical questions in the spring of 1960. How they would be answered was not at all clear. In the end, while many factors informed the course of events, Ella Baker had more influence than any other single individual on the development and sustenance of the new organization.

Baker was one of several keynote speakers at the Raleigh conference, and the only woman to address a plenary session. When her opportunity came to speak, she urged the students to see their mission as extending beyond the immediate demand to end segregation. She reiterated this goal in an article published a few weeks later in the *Southern Patriot* summarizing the conference. In her remarks, Baker drew a clear distinction between the “old guard” leadership, which implicitly included the four-year-old SCLC along with the more established NAACP, and the more militant new leadership represented by the students. She warned against having the sparks the students had ignited smothered by bureaucratic organizations. She praised the neophyte activists for their “inclination toward group-centered leadership” rather than toward following a charismatic individual. In a thinly veiled criticism of King, she observed that many had felt “frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.”¹¹ In her *Patriot* article, Baker empha-

sized the students' unwillingness to tolerate any treatment by their elders that "smacked of manipulation or domination." This was as much a warning from Baker as it was an account of the sit-in leaders' sentiments.¹²

In her formal remarks at Shaw and in individual interactions with participants over the ensuing weeks, Baker gave the students an enlarged sense of the importance of their actions. The sit-in movement was part of a worldwide struggle against many forms of injustice and oppression, she insisted. Baker encouraged the participants to see themselves—not their parents, teachers, ministers, or recognized race leaders—as the main catalysts for change. She was trying to pull the student activists beyond the confines of the South and the nation to grapple with, and connect to, a large and complex political world. Her comments made quite an impact on her listeners. Max Heirich, a young white staff person for the American Friends Service Committee working in Chapel Hill, had driven over to attend the conference and was overwhelmed by Ella Baker's presence. "She spoke simply but powerfully. It was as if she was speaking right to you about such large and important issues. She was much more effective than the men," he recalled.¹³

No one was more impressed by Baker's message and the compelling image she projected at the conference than Diane Nash. An idealistic eighteen-year-old, Nash was a native of Chicago and a student at Fisk University. She had become the leader of and principal spokesperson for the sit-in movement in Nashville, Tennessee. Nash looked up to the youthful Reverend James Lawson, who was a political guru for many Nashville students. But, with few female role models, Nash was uncertain of her own abilities as a leader and insecure about the leadership role that she had come to hold. When she went to Raleigh that weekend, she was looking for reassurance and affirmation. Ella Baker provided both.

Diane Nash's involvement in the sit-ins in Nashville was her first taste of politics, and she was both excited and nervous about meeting other students and civil rights leaders. She drove from Nashville to Raleigh with a young seminarian named James Bevel, whom she later married (and divorced), and Marion Barry, soon to be elected the first executive secretary of the new student organization (and, much later, mayor of Washington, D.C.). Articulate, poised, and beautiful by conventional standards, Diane Nash was one of the few young black women leaders who rose to national visibility in the early months of the student sit-in movement. By the time she attended the Raleigh meeting, she had faced down the mayor of Nashville at a press event, braved rowdy mobs, delivered speeches to large

crowds, and given interviews to the national press—all bold acts of political leadership she had never dreamed of for herself before February 1960. Yet her sophisticated exterior concealed a scared and naive young woman who was deeply ambivalent about assuming the mantle of leadership. When she saw Ella Baker in action, speaking without a glimmer of self-doubt and exuding confidence with every gesture, Nash's political self-esteem was buoyed. She was struck by Baker's self-possession and eloquent command of language. She recalled thinking to herself, "I'd love to be able to make contributions like that."¹⁴ Ella Baker became a confidence-builder, role model, and adviser for Nash as she evolved into one of the most influential young personalities within the student movement during its first few years.

Raleigh was the launching pad for a new phase of the Black Freedom Movement and a new phase of Ella Baker's career. Northern-based white leftists, southern antiracist liberals, and even anticolonialist leaders abroad followed media coverage of the gathering to see what would come out of it.

At the end of the weekend, the conference participants formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ella Baker, Dr. Martin Luther King, Howard Zinn, Connie Curry, and several other observers at the Raleigh meeting were invited to serve as adult advisers to the new organization. For King, this meant lending his name to the effort and attending its formal gatherings. For Baker, it meant much more: she coordinated the business of the new organization. In her words, "The writing that took place between the conference in April and the activities of the group in the summer came out of the office where I was and much of it I had to do."¹⁵ She typed minutes, drafted internal documents, maintained a mailing list, kept in phone contact with interested students, and recruited new ones. She found meeting sites and office space and secured funds from SCLC and other sympathetic donors. Although Baker was still being paid by SCLC, she was now working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

.....

THE SUMMER OF 1960

At Baker's side for most of the summer of 1960 was the hard-working and tenacious Jane Stembridge, who had attended the Shaw meeting and volunteered to take a leave from her studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York to work for the new organization. Stembridge was first moved to act after hearing a speech by King in New York City. His words touched a chord. As a liberal white southerner, she had never felt at ease with the

racism that permeated her childhood world, and now she had a way to act on that uneasy feeling. Baker and Stembridge did much of the day-to-day work to hold the embryonic organization together during its first few months of life. Baker's leadership and Stembridge's tireless labor were indispensable at that critical stage. Ella Baker was a heroine for Jane Stembridge, just as she was a model of black female leadership for Diane Nash.

All of the young people who came into Baker's and SNCC's orbits in the 1960s did so at a formative time in their lives, roughly ages eighteen to twenty-four, when they were enormously impressionable. Most were searching. They had been living on their own, away from their parents, for only a short time, if at all. So, they were figuring out their adult identities in a new way in the midst of trying to figure some other very important questions about social change and American society. For Jane Stembridge, coming to grips with her sexuality as a lesbian at a time and place where "absolutely no one talked about such things," as she put it years later, was extremely difficult. In fact, it was "awful" in some ways. Here she was rearranging her life to be a part of a struggle and she could not even reveal to her closest co-workers what she was feeling and going through personally. Like Nash, Stembridge was looking for affirmation and for role models. She turned first to Lillian Smith, the author of *Strange Fruit*, an activist, and a rebel against what it meant to be a southern white woman in those days. Smith was a militant antiracist, an outspoken social critic, and a closeted but suspected middle-aged lesbian. Stembridge visited Smith at her home in Atlanta in search of counsel and support, but she was quickly turned off by Smith's vitriolic anticommunism and her insensitivity to some of the personal dynamics of race. Even though Stembridge never directly came out to Baker and discussed her sexual orientation, she was "open, and didn't hide anything consciously."¹⁶ The perceptive Baker did not miss much. Stembridge found in Baker an accepting mentor whose politics and sensibilities about social change and her personal open-mindedness were in line with her own.

Bob Moses, like Diane Nash and Jane Stembridge, was drawn to Baker's humanistic style of political acumen. A deeply spiritual young man with a sharp intellect and a perceptive ear, Moses read Camus, loved math, and wanted to change the world, especially, but not exclusively, the black world. A resident of New York City, Moses had not participated in the sit-ins and did not attend the Easter weekend meeting. Baker deliberately pulled him into the expanding orbit of SNCC in the summer of 1960, when it was still in the making. From 1961 on, Moses played a critical role in the organi-

zation. He and others who made a full-time commitment to activism eventually displaced many of the students who had ignited the sit-in protests in February 1960. Bob Moses, like his mentor Ella Baker, led the group in a radical democratic direction.

In 1960, Moses was working as a math teacher at New York City's prestigious Horace Mann School. He had previously been an undergraduate at Hamilton College and, briefly, a graduate student at Harvard University. During his spring break, in the immediate aftermath of the sit-ins, Moses traveled to Newport News, Virginia, to visit his uncle, a faculty member at Hampton Institute and an activist in the local NAACP. While there, he went to hear Wyatt T. Walker, the incoming director of SCLC, speak about the growing civil rights movement in the South. Moses had already read about the sit-ins in the mainstream and black press. Although the student movement was sweeping the region and plans were already under way to form a southern-based student organization, Walker said little about them. Moses went home energized about the southern struggle—but still unaware that SNCC was in formation.¹⁷

After returning to New York, Moses immediately went to the Harlem SCLC office and became reacquainted with Bayard Rustin, whom he had met some years before. Rustin, a pacifist, had been a conscientious objector during World War II, and Moses had sought him out for counsel when he was confronted with a similar moral dilemma. Moses hung around SCLC's small Harlem office for a while, where he met and got to know the veteran leftist organizer and former union leader Jack O'Dell and other northern supporters of the movement. But he was still itching to return to the South. So he persuaded Rustin to write a letter of introduction, which was actually addressed to Ella Baker, that would open the door for him to go to Atlanta as an SCLC volunteer.¹⁸

When Moses arrived in Atlanta in the summer of 1960, he got a room in the Butler YMCA and reported for duty at the SCLC office on Auburn Avenue, letter of introduction in hand, eager to throw himself into the struggle. But, far from feeling he was on the front lines of the resurgent Black Freedom Movement, Moses quickly realized that there was virtually no meaningful work for him to do. He rarely even caught a glimpse of the SCLC leaders. So he spent his time getting acquainted with Jane Stembridge, hearing about SNCC's embryonic campaigns, and learning his way around the city. Stembridge and Moses struck up a friendship right away, talking about religion and philosophy, reminiscing about their common East Coast ties, and sharing their thoughts about the ideals that had brought them both to Atlanta.

They debated the writings of philosophers Paul Tillich and Albert Camus and pondered their relevance to the realities of the agrarian South.

A couple of weeks after Moses arrived, Ella Baker returned to Atlanta from an extended trip, and things began to look up. Baker and Moses developed an immediate rapport, beginning a relationship that changed both of their lives over the coming decades. When Baker first noticed the bespectacled and pensive-looking Moses sitting around the SCLC offices, she took an immediate interest in him. As was her manner, she called him over to her desk one day and began to query him about his life, his family, and his ideas. Who were his people? Where did he attend school? What did he want to accomplish? Ella Baker was always interested in people's life stories, even though she often found it necessary to protect her own privacy. Her personal interest impressed Bob Moses.

Baker's initial response to Moses stood in stark contrast to his first meeting with Dr. King. Moses recalled that one day, after weeks of feeling invisible to the higher-ups in SCLC, King summoned him to his office and grilled him on his participation in a rally that had been sponsored by members of Atlanta's white antiracist left. Moses, who had attended the rally, had been identified in the Atlanta newspapers as an affiliate of SCLC. To King, this meant bad press for the organization. No one in SCLC had endorsed the protest, and Moses had inadvertently linked the group to it. King warned the earnest young student to be more careful. Unlike Baker, he did not bother to find out who Bob Moses was, why he had come to the South, or what he had to offer the movement. His concerns were wholly pragmatic. Moses was sorely disappointed.¹⁹ What King's reaction also illustrated was how strictly SCLC sought to police its public image in 1960, quietly working with leftist allies, like Rustin, Levison, and Baker, but careful not to tarnish its respectability by associating too closely in public with those who may have been labeled subversive by the government.

Baker's and King's differing responses to Moses are telling. King was focused on external perceptions of the movement and how negative publicity might undermine SCLC's efforts. He overlooked what Baker would have regarded as more important: the possible alienation of a talented young recruit. Baker was not worried about bad publicity, especially at that stage. She was more concerned with identifying and developing potential leaders like Moses, who could contribute to the movement's future, than she was about maintaining an organization's public profile.

Moses had been exposed to a brand of politics that predisposed him to

progressive ideas and to the direction that the new student movement, under Baker's influence, was headed. He had attended New York's Stuyvesant High School during the 1950s, and many of the young people in his circle had leftist parents. He remembered meeting the radical folk singer Pete Seeger while visiting the apartment of some friends in Greenwich Village. The psychiatrist Alvin Pouissant was a high school classmate of Bob's. According to Moses, Pouissant's father was a black printer who had a number of left-wing clients and customers, which also exposed Bob to these ideas in a roundabout way.²⁰

Moses credited his own humble but politically astute father with instilling in him certain values and sensibilities that he later applied in his political work. The senior Moses, an educated blue-collar worker in Harlem for most of his life, always emphasized the integrity of "the common person." Bob Moses recalled that his father "viewed himself as the man on the street . . . and the person at the bottom."²¹ The egalitarian values Moses learned in childhood from his father were reinforced during the 1960s by the woman who became his political mother. Baker did not spoon-feed new ideas to Bob or any other young activist. Rather, she looked for and connected with individuals who had a predisposition to the ideas and values she embraced, and she worked with them to deepen and refine those ideas. When Moses entered the movement, he admittedly "hadn't worked out any notions of leadership," but he had an inclination toward "what people later termed grassroots leadership." Baker helped turn that inclination into a conviction.²²

Bob Moses became Ella Baker's political apprentice. He was one of the young people whom she spent a lot of time talking with and listening to, and he continued in her political tradition—teaching, listening to, and organizing young people—long after her death.²³ Ella and Bob had similar sensibilities. Both were intellectuals, thoughtful and analytical, yet at the same time practical and personable. Both were deeply attentive to ideology and the ideological implications of certain tactical decisions, but both were equally willing to do the messy, hands-on work necessary to implement those ideas. "What is the larger picture we are framing here?" was the implicit, if not explicit, question both of them often asked. Moses absorbed Baker's message that revolution was an ongoing process intimately bound up with one's vision of the future and with how one interacted with others on a daily basis. Moses also shared Baker's confidence and faith in young people. After leaving SNCC in the mid-1960s and living for several years in

Tanzania, he became a radical teacher, in Ella Baker's style and tradition, focused on creative methods of teaching and learning as a strategy for empowerment and social change.²⁴

Connie Curry, like Jane Stembridge, immersed herself in the work of the newly formed student wing of the movement during the summer of 1960. A white antiracist southerner, Curry had attended Agnes Scott College, where she was introduced to what was called intergroup work for whites, a euphemism for civil rights and antiracist organizing, through the YWCA. After college she moved to Atlanta to take a job with the National Student Association. Curry often felt quite lonely as a progressive white person in the Jim Crow South, which was nearly as hostile to antiracist whites as it was to all blacks. Curry was ecstatic to meet Ella Baker and the interracial group of young people in the sit-in movement. In 1960–61, Baker used Curry's apartment as a sort of local youth hostel to accommodate the varied assortment of female volunteers who floated through Atlanta. Curry was evicted from one apartment because one of her roommates had entertained a black guest, an act that was viewed as so scandalous she was forced to move out right away. Curry officially became one of SNCC's "adult advisors," but she was not much older than the students themselves were. She was typical of a small minority of white southerners who did not fit into their own communities, and sometimes even their own families, because of their open-mindedness about race issues and sympathy with black aspirations for freedom.²⁵

Baker appreciated the importance of progressive white allies like Connie Curry, but she understood the even greater importance of cultivating allies among southern black activists. Baker knew that the students who started the sit-in movement had to move into other areas of political activity and forge a broader base of black support throughout the South if they were going to have a sustained impact. Toward that end, Baker decided to work with Bob Moses to make links and initiate contacts that would pull the students away from the lunch counters and their campuses and into the front lines of the southern battlefields against racism. She wanted to expose them to the kind of grassroots organizers she had worked closely with, most recently the SCLC affiliates in Shreveport and Birmingham and, before that, the activist branches of the NAACP.

The summer of 1960 was filled with hopefulness and newfound camaraderie for Baker as well as for the students. Curry remembers many occasions when the small group of activists deliberated about the possibilities for the resurgent Black Freedom Movement while eating ice cream sundaes

in the back room of B. B. Beamon's, Atlanta's legendary black-owned restaurant.²⁶ Baker's personal regard for them endeared many of the young people in SNCC to her. She was clearly not a peer, but she was willing to engage them on their turf, not just intellectually but socially too—over ice cream sundaes, in smoke-filled back rooms, or on long, uncomfortable rides in jalopies of various sorts. Baker was often shuttled back and forth to meetings and conferences in Curry's beloved convertible Karmen Ghia sports car, which Curry emphasized was not a jalopy, holding onto her hat so it wouldn't fly off. Despite her age and encroaching health problems, Baker often rejected anything that could even remotely be construed as special treatment that would put distance between herself and the students. If they sat in uncomfortable chairs for long hours debating this or that, so would she. If they walked long distances, she walked with them at least as far as she could. If they slept in cramped accommodations on road trips, she did the same.²⁷ Lenora Taitt-Magubane, a Spelman student who became involved in the movement through the YWCA and became a dear friend of Ella Baker near the end of her life, remembered one such instance. The two had traveled to Albany, Georgia, in 1961 after there had been numerous arrests of civil rights demonstrators. They were staying at the home of a local activist, Irene Moore, but there were not enough beds to accommodate everyone. Lenora offered to give up her bed, but Baker, then almost sixty, insisted they share the tiny bed since she did not want anyone to have to sleep on the floor, even though Lenora knew Baker "hated sleeping in the bed with someone else."²⁸ Her example, in this instance and many others, was a lesson in personal egalitarianism that the young people in SNCC applied to their own organizing efforts with southern farmers, workers, and youth.

• • • • •

To young women, black and white, Baker embodied the possibility of escaping the restrictions that defined conventional femininity. Authoritative yet unassuming, self-confident and assertive, forcing others to take her seriously simply by presuming that they would, Baker was a revelation. At the time, few of these young women thought they could actually emulate Ella Baker. She was a larger than life figure more than twice their ages. Still, because of her, many young women in the movement did realize that they could define their own identities rather than be defined by others, and in the course of their work with SNCC they developed new ways of interacting with women and men, with other young people and their elders, both in the movement and in the larger black community. Decades after their involvement in the movement, dozens of women remember their lives were touched at a formative stage by a woman who, through her example, showed them a different way of being in the world. Prathia Hall, an African American woman who went south from Philadelphia in 1962 and lived and worked in Terrell County, Georgia, for a year, remembered quite vividly the impact Baker had on her. Qualifying a recollection by saying she did not mean to actually compare herself to Baker, she nevertheless said, “I would see myself in her . . . I was a wandering pilgrim . . . [and] the more I talked to her, the more I understood myself.”⁴²

Ella Baker was the comforting, nurturing, rock-solid mother to the movement. Yet there was nothing maternal about her in the traditional sense of that term. She was a militant activist, an insurgent intellectual, and a revolutionary, descriptors that are usually associated with men rather than women and with youth rather than the middle-aged. Baker’s complex, carefully crafted persona enabled her to cross gender and generational boundaries within the movement. Even in retrospect, she defies categorization.

Baker maintained a dignified public self-presentation partly as a form of camouflage that allowed her to operate in male-dominated and some-

times mainstream political circles. She was a freethinker at heart, accepting of alternative lifestyles, personal eccentricities, and violations of social etiquette.⁴³ For example, in contrast to her ever-so-sober public posture, Baker frequently enjoyed a stiff shot of bourbon or a glass of red wine at the end of the day. She was not as prim and proper as her conservative gray suits suggested. Baker would talk comfortably about almost any subject, including sex. She often gently teased her young colleagues about their romantic interests or inquired about the lack thereof.⁴⁴

The growing irreverence for conventional standards of morality and respectability among SNCC members disturbed some of their more moderate adult supporters, but it did not bother Baker. Virginia Durr, a white civil rights activist in Montgomery, complimented Baker on her ability to socialize with the young people and tolerate what Durr viewed as their “wild” behavior. Baker responded that she “was prepared to forgo manners” for the sake of the larger politics that were at stake.⁴⁵ She was, in fact, prepared to do more than that. She was instrumental in SNCC’s rejection of bourgeois respectability as a defensive political strategy, a rejection that opened the organization up to historically marginalized sectors of the black community. When SNCC broke with the largely middle-class, male-centered leadership of existing civil rights organizations, it stripped away the class-based and gender-biased notions of who should and could give leadership to the movement and the black community. Some of the manners and decorum that Durr valued were evident at the Shaw conference in April 1960. Within a year, a visible change was well under way. The young activists’ dress, comportment, and language changed considerably, making the organization more welcoming to those traditionally excluded from formal leadership circles. They donned blue jeans and overalls instead of skirts and suits, resembling in their dress workers and peasants of the South rather than preachers and teachers.

Baker encouraged and affirmed the young people’s boldness, their growing radicalism, and their risk-taking. Her reasoned approval was important to them. Diane Nash recalls that, as the movement intensified, many of her own relatives were worried about her safety. “Older people would look at you and say you were young and you would calm down when you matured. So, she was the first older person I had known who was so progressive. And I needed that reinforcement. It was important that someone like her thought we were right. It was really important when things got hot and heavy.”⁴⁶

.

MOLDING A NEW ORGANIZATION

Ella Baker gave up her plans to move back to Harlem after leaving SCLC in the fall of 1960, deciding to stay in the South in order to work as closely as possible with the young sit-in activists in SNCC. She still needed a paying position. Although SCEF had offered her a full-time job, which she was tempted to accept, she ultimately declined it because she thought it would demand too much of her time. Aware of Baker's need for autonomy and some flexibility in hours in order to continue her unpaid work with the students, her friend Rosetta Gardner helped her get a job with the YWCA. Gardner was typical of Baker's lesser-known female friends and admirers. She supported the movement but never became a leader herself. As one Atlanta activist who worked alongside the two women remarked, "Rosetta just loved Ella."⁴⁷ Women like Gardner admired Baker's competence, her self-possession, her intellect, and her compassion. Above all, they admired her courage to forge another path and assert herself in all kinds of situations. These are the things that most of Baker's close associates loved about her. So, Rosetta did what she could to make it possible for Ella to do the work that was important to her. Ella in turn used her position at the Y to build, nurture, and protect SNCC. Lawrence Guyot recalled that Baker obtained YWCA and YMCA membership cards for young civil rights workers as soon as they came south to give them local identification in case they were stopped by the police and were accused of being outside agitators.⁴⁸ More significantly, she traveled around the South conducting workshops for the Y on human relations, which essentially meant trying to foster greater interracial understanding—not as simple a task as one might think given the racially polarized context of the 1960s South. It was through this work that she met and subsequently recruited to SNCC a number of serious, idealistic young women searching for meaningful ways to apply themselves.⁴⁹

In describing her southern-based work with the YWCA in a 1962 report, Baker used the metaphor of planting and cultivation to describe the slow methodical process of bringing young people into political consciousness. She wrote of planting "first the seed," alluding to the outreach recruitment and orientation of new activists, which would nurture their motivation to want to make a difference. Part two of her report, entitled "Then the Blade," described the first rumblings of political activity among "Y women," some of whom had participated in desegregation sit-ins. This was the first visible result of the seeds having been planted. Next, in Baker's

narrative of organic leadership development, “the full corn appears.” This section describes the need for creating concrete channels for “meaningful social action.”⁵⁰ The same metaphor could have applied to her work with SNCC.

• • • • •

Ella Baker once confided in Vincent Harding, her friend and colleague, that if she ever wrote her memoir, which she never managed to do, she would entitle it “Making a Life, Not Making a Living,” because while she did a very good job of the former, she barely accomplished the latter.⁵¹ In the summer of 1960, she made the same choices as before: finding a job that barely paid the bills, she focused instead on creating a meaningful life for herself by building a movement. The movement was more important to Baker than religion, money, or even romantic love; the movement had become her life and her extended family.

Baker was relieved finally to be free from her obligations to SCLC, and she was excited about the emerging student movement. The young people’s optimism and sheer energy were uplifting. When Baker was immersed in this kind of struggle, she felt most alive and her creative talents could soar. She had always enjoyed the challenge of building something new: the YNCL in the 1930s, local NAACP branches in the 1940s, even SCLC at the outset. These had been the high points of her political career before 1960. Inherent in Baker’s philosophy, however, was the recognition that no organization should last forever. Each must yield to something new as historical circumstances changed. Just as SCLC was yielding, albeit unwillingly, to SNCC, so SNCC would have to be prepared to make room for whatever new, grassroots organizations it might help to create. These politics and sensibilities pervaded SNCC from its inception.

Baker realized that the radical pulse she had detected needed to be sustained, cultivated, and propagated. In the summer of 1960, as several leaders of the emergent organization went off to make speeches to the political elites of the Democratic and Republican Party Conventions in Los Angeles and Chicago, she assigned Bob Moses to meet and speak with an entirely different constituency, one that Baker thought was far more important than national elected officials. She freed Moses up from his mundane clerical duties at SCLC and dispatched him on a bus tour of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to do outreach for SNCC and to recruit local activists of all ages to attend the group’s October conference. Baker had another objective in mind as well. She wanted to put the students in touch as quickly as possible with a set of elders who represented a different class

background and political orientation than the ministerial clique heading SCLC.⁵² This was her way of planting the seeds.

Ella Baker placed great confidence in the smart and earnest Bob Moses. In him, she saw the makings of the kind of leader she herself had striven to become: modest, principled, and able to empower others through the force of example. Moses did not disappoint her. Baker wrote down the names of contacts in each state, and Moses set off for a monthlong journey with a bus ticket and a list of telephone numbers in his pocket. The contacts he made that summer laid the foundation for some of SNCC's most important community organizing work.

The October conference of SNCC, when it officially formed, was the culmination of Baker's efforts over the spring and summer to help build a permanent organization. Marion Barry, the confident and charismatic young chemistry graduate student from Fisk, stepped down as chair, and Chuck McDew, a stocky, dark-skinned former football player from South Carolina State with a quick wit and disarming sense of humor, was confirmed to replace him. Others were jockeying for the position, but Baker had her eyes on McDew. She had probably been observing him in meetings and recognized his ability to gently but effectively steer the organization forward without indulging his own ego. McDew had to leave the October conference early, so he was not even present when he was nominated and elected as the group's new leader. "Ella Baker made me chairman," McDew later recalled. She persuaded him to accept the nomination and urged others to support it. This was a little behind-the-scenes meddling, but Baker was convinced she was placing the organization in fair and able hands.⁵³

Several issues of a newsletter, which Baker suggested they call the *Student Voice*, were published during the spring and summer. The group acquired temporary office space in one corner of the SCLC office on Auburn Avenue and hired one staff person, Jane Stembridge. Representatives made their mark on national electoral politics by testifying before the two major party conventions. Student leaders also met with the nation's top civil rights leaders, from King and the ministers of SCLC to the national officials of the NAACP. Moses established contact with older activists who were conducting their own campaigns and with other students throughout the Deep South who had not been directly involved in the original wave of sit-ins. Already the movement was growing beyond its circumscribed beginnings.

Early on, one of SNCC's difficult decisions concerned the plans for the

October conference and involved Baker's friend Bayard Rustin. The Packinghouse Workers Union had pledged some funds to help finance the conference. When the union officials learned that Rustin was a scheduled speaker, they threatened to pull the money because of his radical past. Nervous about alienating new allies, especially funders, but not terribly scrupulous about retaining existing ones, SNCC awkwardly disinvited Rustin. The details of this decision remain unclear. There is no indication that Baker intervened to question or challenge the decision, and she likely had been instrumental in obtaining the funds since she was handling most of the outreach and fund-raising over the summer. Stembridge, however, was highly upset and feared SNCC was abandoning its principles before it had even gotten off the ground. She abruptly resigned but declined to make a public issue of the matter. Years later, she reasoned that it was probably as much Rustin's sexuality as his leftist past that caused the union to reject him and prompted SNCC not to stand up in his defense. For Baker's part, she was either opting to choose her battles or, in a pragmatic vein, allowing the students to make their own mistakes as they groped to define themselves. Still, Stembridge was "sure" that "Ella would not have approved of this if she had been asked." The SNCC of 1960 took the easy way out. Four years later, the outcome would have likely been quite different.⁵⁴ Rustin, used to being mistreated by colleagues, had developed a thick skin. He continued to advise and work with SNCC despite the affront.

Throughout 1960 and early 1961, SNCC staged sit-ins and stand-ins at lunch counters, bus stations, movie theaters, and other segregated public facilities and mounted support campaigns for protesters who were arrested. The group also coordinated Christmas boycotts of segregated businesses in December 1960. Meanwhile, bitter debates and personal power struggles embroiled the more established civil rights leadership, even though they maintained the appearance of unity in public. Baker felt that much of this wrangling was attributable to a kind of egocentrism and organizational competition that she desperately hoped would not infect SNCC, but the young organization was inescapably drawn into the quarrel.

Roy Wilkins of the NAACP was upset that Martin Luther King's supporters were portraying SCLC as the vanguard of the civil rights movement. Wilkins was particularly outraged when Jim Lawson, a sit-in leader and ally of King, was quoted in the *New York Times* as dismissing the NAACP as "a black bourgeois club."⁵⁵ Both SCLC and SNCC tried to distance themselves from these comments, and Lawson claimed that his words were taken out of context. In another political skirmish, Harlem congressman Adam Clay-

ton Powell harshly criticized both Wilkins and King for the protests that occurred outside the Democratic National Convention in August. Powell threatened to spread erroneous rumors about King if he did not sever his ties with Bayard Rustin, whose left-leaning politics Powell objected to. Rustin was a socialist, not a communist, but he was still labeled a “red” by those who did not care about the distinction between one type of leftist and another. However, the nature of Powell’s threat, which was that he was going to leak the false rumor that King and Rustin were lovers, suggests that his dislike of Rustin had as much to do with homophobia as with anticommunism, especially since Powell himself had a radical political past. This is what movement infighting had come to.

In the midst of all this animus and rancor, Ella Baker accompanied a small delegation of SNCC leaders and several members of SCLC to a meeting with NAACP officials to try to clear the air. The response was lukewarm, but the fact that the meeting was held signaled the student group’s growing reputation as an organization to be reckoned with in national black politics.

Through the summer of 1960 and the winter of 1960–61, a core of about twenty SNCC activists huddled together in a series of meetings to map their future course. While the work in Mississippi was still being contemplated, there were continuing sparks of direct action protest that were inspired by the 1960 sit-ins. One such spark was in Rock Hill, South Carolina, in the early months of 1961. A group of young people had been agitating there for months, picketing, conducting sit-ins, and getting themselves arrested. Finally, they decided to up the ante and refuse bail. They sent out a call to others to join them. The coordinating committee of SNCC was in a meeting at the Butler Y in Atlanta when word of the Rock Hill stance came. A group immediately latched onto the idea and prepared to go. Ella Baker went along to inspect the situation, visit those who had already been arrested, and make sure parents, lawyers, and the media were contacted. She and Connie Curry stayed with a local minister who was supportive of the protests, and the two women drove back to Atlanta two days later to get the word out to allies and the press. Rock Hill was SNCC’s first collective protest action after its founding, and Baker was there to urge the students on and help minimize their losses.⁵⁶

• • • • •

FREEDOM RIDES

The following spring, SNCC was propelled into a much more visible national spotlight by its involvement in the Freedom Rides. The rides were begun in April 1961 by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a northern-based civil rights group, to desegregate interstate transportation. Still reeling from their stay in the Rock Hill jail, SNCC members looked to the Freedom Rides as their next challenge. Interracial teams of freedom riders took busses from the North to the South and attempted to use waiting rooms and restrooms in violation of the “Whites Only” and “Colored” signs that were posted everywhere. Southern segregationists’ response to this campaign was swift and vicious. Vigilantes firebombed busses and angry mobs pummeled the freedom riders, threatening them with death and beating some protesters within inches of their lives. Even the U.S. Justice Department officials who were sent South to observe the civil rights protests and the news reporters who were assigned to cover them were caught up in the violence; some of them were also beaten severely by white mobs. Several freedom riders were hospitalized after an especially bloody melee in Anniston, Alabama. Fearing that the next attack might be fatal, CORE leaders then called off the rides.⁵⁷

So that the protesters would not appear to be caving in to vigilante violence, brazen SNCC activists immediately intervened to continue the Freedom Rides. A determined Diane Nash flew to Birmingham to be part of a team to coordinate a resumption of the rides. SNCC activists, such as John Lewis, a Nashville student who would become SNCC’s chairman and later a member of Congress, volunteered for the dangerous assignment. When the rides resumed, so did the violence. The situation provoked a clash between civil rights activists and the new administration in the White House. John F. Kennedy, the son of Irish immigrants and the nation’s first Catholic president, had been elected in 1960 with strong African American support by promising to be an ally of civil rights and racial equality. The spectacle of violence in reaction to the Freedom Rides and Kennedy’s fairly slow response to the open violation of federal law caused many movement activists to question how strong an ally the young president was really going to be. This distrust of the federal government deepened as the struggle in the South intensified over the next few years.

Ella Baker did not participate directly in the 1961 Freedom Rides. In 1947, she and her close friend Pauli Murray had volunteered to engage in

the same kind of action during the Journey of Reconciliation, but they were rebuffed because they were women.⁵⁸ This time, even though she was still not a rider, she would not be excluded. In daily contact with Diane Nash, who was on the front lines, Baker dispatched a written critique and analysis to the committee coordinating the rides, raising issues about publicity, future strategies, and what she viewed as bungled negotiations with Attorney General Robert Kennedy.⁵⁹ Baker insisted that a better media and outreach strategy had to be crafted: “Although one can understand that the demands upon the committee in recruiting and processing riders would consume a great deal of time and energy, one is, nevertheless, also aware that the full value of the Freedom Rides could only be realized in proportion to the degree to which an aroused and vocal public made its voice felt.”⁶⁰ She went on to discuss the committee’s mistake in its meeting with Robert Kennedy, on which she had been briefed, probably by Nash, after the fact. “It would seem clear to me,” she chided, “that the point to have been concentrated on in the conference with the Attorney General was not that of seeking his aid to release persons from jail directly [since they had declined bond already to make a point] but that of urging action in the enforcement of existing laws and regulations which prohibited segregation practices in interstate commerce especially.”⁶¹ She pointed out that Robert Kennedy had already noted this contradiction in some of his public comments to the media as a way to get himself off the hook.

It is unclear if Baker ever received a formal reply to her letter, but a three-page typed memo from someone as well connected and influential on the grassroots level as Baker would not have been taken lightly by the committee coordinating the rides. Her motive for such a formal and forceful intervention, as opposed to her preferred mode of communication by telephone, is not fully clear. On the last page of the document, however, there is a hint that this was a gesture to bolster Nash’s authority and confidence and to protect SNCC from other organizations that may have wanted to claim the Freedom Rides as their own organizational victory. In this regard, she wrote: “What coordination is to be expected or exacted in connection with public appeals for financial support? All of us, I am confident, will have to agree that the Freedom Rides are the primary basis on which recent contributions to constituent agencies have been made. Therefore, it would appear that the question of stewardship in the handling of public funds is one that deserves more attention than may have been given.”⁶² She then demanded to know what would happen to “the students who are spending the longest periods in jail [and] will be in need of money

for maintaining themselves and for scholarships next school term. Where will this come from?"⁶³ In other words, since SNCC had salvaged the Freedom Rides and provided most of the courageous volunteers, it deserved its rightful place in the leadership and its share of funds to further advance its work.⁶⁴

Eventually, federal authorities had no choice but to offer some protection to the unflagging freedom riders, whose bloody and bandaged faces appeared on nightly television newscasts across the country. Attorney General Kennedy, brother of the president, cut a deal with local officials in Mississippi, but the deal compromised rather than aided the activists' immediate goals. They were protected, but only by being taken into police custody and charged with violating Mississippi's segregation ordinances, which prevented the protest from continuing. Hundreds of protesters eventually served jail time in Mississippi's notorious Parchman Prison as a result of the so-called protection they were provided. Among those prisoners was Ruby Doris Smith, who later recalled the experience as a transformative moment in her life. It was also a watershed in SNCC's political maturation.⁶⁵

In November 1961, after dozens of freedom riders had been beaten, some nearly to death, and while dozens more were still imprisoned, the Interstate Commerce Commission finally mandated the full desegregation of all interstate travel facilities, implementing a Justice Department ruling made in September. The freedom riders felt at least partly vindicated. Now SNCC had a concrete national victory to its credit. SNCC activists had demonstrated determination and courage under fire. And they had garnered visibility and recognition as a major political force in the growing civil rights movement. After 1961, SNCC members were increasingly viewed as the movement's shock troops. They were able to quickly mobilize people to go to sites of intensified racial conflict: Birmingham in 1963, Selma in 1965, and James Meredith's short-circuited one-man march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer of 1966. And the activists were willing to take on difficult and dangerous organizing challenges—such as voter registration in the Mississippi Delta—that other civil rights groups were unwilling to touch.

In the summer of 1961, after a difficult first year, SNCC activists came together to grapple with the question of the political course the organization should take. Smaller groups had met in June in Louisville and in July in Baltimore, but it was the August meeting at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, itself an institution under siege and soon to be closed down because of its radical and antiracist politics, that was the most

intense. Highlander was the site of many historic meetings. This gathering included new people, discussed new proposals, and faced new political challenges. The political landscape in the country was changing rapidly, and the young people in SNCC were changing as well. One impulse was to do more of the same, to continue nonviolent direct action tactics on an ever more massive scale until the last bastions of segregation fell before the onslaught. After all, the tactic had been successful, although the victories were purchased at a high human cost. Some veterans of the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides wanted to move beyond the demand for desegregation and the tactic of nonviolent direct action. The number of people who were willing to risk their lives to achieve desegregation was limited, and segregated public transportation and accommodations were not the only, or even the most important, forms of oppression that southern blacks faced. The SNCC activists wondered whether they could confront those in power over such issues as citizenship rights and economics.

Layered on top of everything else was the question of allies and affiliations. By attending the national conference of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in June, Chuck McDew, Casey Hayden, and Bob Zellner had linked SNCC to the nascent antiwar movement. Baker was working with Myles Horton to defend the Highlander School against the threat of closure, and in so doing she linked SNCC to the southern white left that had been one of the targets of government red-baiting. Even more significant than the Highlander connection was SNCC's deepening relationship with SCEF, which Baker had largely facilitated and encouraged. Anne Braden had attended most of SNCC's meetings, and SCEF, at Ella Baker's urging, had pledged an annual contribution to SNCC's budget. On the liberal front, politicians attached to foundation funding sources were also vying for SNCC's attention.

As it tried to chart its own course, SNCC was presented with an opportunity to receive funds from several liberal foundations, including the Taconic Foundation, if it joined a Voter Education Project to be administered by the Southern Regional Council. This project was strongly supported by the Kennedy administration. With a hefty residue of suspicion left over from the federal government's response to the Freedom Rides, SNCC activists debated the White House's motives. The Kennedys may well have been sympathetic to civil rights in principle, but they also had a direct interest in promoting voter registration. A campaign that added thousands of new voters to the rolls, most of whom were likely to vote Democratic, would certainly increase the administration's chances of reelection. Some

SNCC members thought that such an intimate involvement with electoral politics would compromise the organization's values and lessen its effectiveness. They felt that the Democrats' obvious opportunism should not be rewarded with cooperation. At one point, the controversy threatened to split the young organization wide open.⁶⁶

Bob Moses had come to the conclusion that the disenfranchisement of poor southern blacks was the cutting-edge issue the movement needed to address. He was not so naive as to think that voting would solve all the problems African Americans faced, but he did become convinced, strongly influenced by Amzie Moore, that their oppression hinged in large part on their total political powerlessness. Moses could not attend the Highlander meeting, but Charles McDew, Charles Sherrod, and Charles Jones were in favor of the voter registration project and argued for that position in the meeting. In contrast, Diane Nash and many of the Nashville activists had retained an almost spiritual investment in the tactic of nonviolent direct action. Becoming involved in the messy business of electoral politics, they concluded, would take the group away from its strength and the moral high ground that they felt the protests embodied. John Lewis feared that the "voter registration push by the government was a trick to take the steam out of the movement, to slow it down."⁶⁷ Passions were heated; tensions were high; and some of the participants felt that the only way both factions could remain true to their convictions was to part ways.⁶⁸

Baker vehemently disagreed with the formation of two organizations. And it was her aggressive intervention that calmed the situation, abated the rancor, and preserved unity. "I opposed the split as serving the purpose of the enemy," she recalled years later.⁶⁹ The importance of this intervention in SNCC's decision making is generally acknowledged, even by those who remain unaware of the crucial role Baker played at many other moments of decision. She understood that the two approaches being proposed were not mutually exclusive. While she leaned in the direction of expanding the scope of SNCC's work and activities to include voting rights, she knew from her recent experience with SCLC's Crusade for Citizenship and from her years with the NAACP that organizing for voting rights did not preclude direct action. In fact, any attempt to register black voters would precipitate confrontations with white registrars and public officials in small towns and big cities. As both sides stated their case with great fervor, Baker saw that if some compromise were not reached, the group was headed for an even more serious crisis. She stood up and spoke forcefully in the meeting, calling for the formation of two wings of one organization. Rather than

two organizations, one wing would focus on direct action and the other on voter education and registration. Nash would head the direct action campaign, and Charles Jones would coordinate the voting rights project.⁷⁰ Not everyone was completely won over to the idea, but Baker made a compelling case. No one was prepared to stand up in a meeting and argue vehemently against her.

Although the compromise appeared to give equal weight to both positions, this decision to expand the group's political agenda began the process of redirecting SNCC's energies in significant ways. The shift from transitory, high-profile events like the sit-ins and freedom rides to protracted, day-to-day grassroots organizing in local communities was a significant turning point. Baker insisted that a movement was a web of social relationships. Charismatic leaders could rally an anonymous mass of followers to turn out for a single event or series of events; millions could watch television coverage of heroic actions by a brave few or speeches by mesmerizing orators; but that was mobilization, not organization.⁷¹ In order to be effective organizers in a particular community, Baker argued, activists had to form relationships, build trust, and engage in a democratic process of decision making together with community members. The goal was to politicize the community and empower ordinary people. This was Baker's model, and in 1961 it became SNCC's model.⁷²

From the spring of 1960 through the summer of 1961, the new student movement and the group that emerged out of it toughened and matured tactically and ideologically. In the beginning, SNCC was not Baker's ideal organization. As a result of the Rock Hill jail action, the Freedom Rides, and its growing reputation for boldness, SNCC's practices and philosophy became more recognizably similar to Baker's own vision and values. But exactly what were those political values? Dorothy Miller (Zellner), a young white leftist from New York, who worked in SNCC's Atlanta office, admired Ella Baker but always found her politics "a bit of a mystery."⁷³ What Dorothy really meant by this was that she could not precisely situate Baker within the various ideological tendencies of the left, and Baker was neither a nationalist nor a liberal.⁷⁴ She defied orthodoxy, and her views transcended traditional political categories.

Since Baker never wrote an organizing manual or an ideological treatise, her theory was literally inscribed in her daily work—her practice. Some of the most powerful political lessons that she taught were through example, which represented an articulation of her unwritten theory in a

conscious set of actions and practices. In no sense an armchair radical, Baker pursued a politics of action more than of words. The concept of political “praxis,” meaning the marriage of theory and practice, is a helpful way to try to map Baker’s political ideas on the bumpy landscape of her work of more than half a century.⁷⁵

Baker had enormous confidence in the knowledge base of poor and oppressed communities and in the intellectual and analytic capacities of people without formal academic training. This was in part what she modeled in her own exchanges with students, sharecroppers, and movement co-workers. Because she and other women did clerical work, it was assumed that they could not think, analyze, and articulate. Baker rejected the artificial division between mental and manual labor. It was, she said, a problem that “so many people who are ‘not educated’ always defer to those who have got book learning.”⁷⁶ She spelled out this problem in the movement’s own practice: “The clerical people are the people who take the dictation, . . . put it on paper . . . you don’t expect them to be the ones to have the ideas . . . it’s not a given.”⁷⁷ Baker made this observation critically, suggesting that there should be no distinct intellectual leadership; rather, thinking and analysis should be incorporated into all aspects of movement work. She was willing to run the mimeograph machine and type letters, but she was just as determined to offer historical insights and theoretical critiques to the process.

.

Ella Baker earned the incontestable position of resident elder and intellectual mentor of SNCC during its first six years of existence. Her ideas and teachings permeated the group’s discussions, shaped its ethos, and set its tone. She was consulted on issues ranging from strategy and analysis to logistics and fund-raising on an almost daily basis. As Jim Forman, executive secretary of SNCC, later remarked, “Throughout the decade of the sixties, many people helped to ignite or were touched by the creative fire that was SNCC without appreciating the generating force of Ella Jo Baker.”⁷⁸

Even though the national media never cast the spotlight on Baker’s political career in the 1960s, her colleagues and coworkers fully appreciated the contribution she made. When Howard Zinn, a historian and movement activist, published *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, the first account of the organization’s development, he dedicated the book to Baker. In his words, she was “more responsible than any other single individual for the formation of the new abolitionists [SNCC] as an organized group.”⁷⁹ In the

1960s, her lifelong friend Pauli Murray, a keen observer of progressive politics, praised Ella Baker as “the gal who I think has done so much for spearheading the revolutionary movement among Negroes in the South.”⁸⁰ Stokely Carmichael, another SNCC leader, recalled that by the mid-1960s Baker “was just so overwhelming and ubiquitous in SNCC that it seems as if she was always present.”⁸¹

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. "Report," 10-page handwritten report from Ella Baker (on SCLC letterhead), Mar. 12, 1960, EBP, SCLC files; Ella Baker to "Students" requesting biographical information, Apr. 8, 1960, SNCC Papers (microfilm), reel 11.
2. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 68, 131.
3. Baker, interview by Carson, 8.

4. Baker, interview by Hogan, 6.
5. Baker met with and consulted King, but she sent out the actual correspondence and made most of the final decisions about logistics, program, structure, and precisely who would be invited. This authority was not bestowed on Baker; rather, it was a byproduct of her location within the organization. She did most of the planning and outreach; so the details were left to her. The details in shaping the Raleigh meeting were important and ultimately politically significant.
6. Baker, interview by Carson, 9. According to Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 132–33, King was receiving pressure from advisers to push for an affiliation with the new sit-in movement without getting into an all-out fight with Ella Baker. King relented and never made an effort to “capture” the group, as Baker feared he would.
7. Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 217. See also Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 99, for a portion of Ella Baker’s comments about her walkout at the SNCC conference.
8. Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” 4.
9. Ibid.
10. Baker, interview by Britton, 43–44.
11. Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” 4.
12. Ibid.
13. Hierich, interview by author.
14. Nash, interview by author, Sept. 1997.
15. Baker, interview by Carson, 12.
16. Stembridge, interview by author.
17. Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 28.
18. Moses, interview by author.
19. Ibid.
20. Moses, interview by author; Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 108.
21. Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 8.
22. Moses, interview by Carson, 3.
23. Baker’s influence on Moses is evident in his writings. A larger-than-life poster of Baker greets visitors as they walk into the offices of the Algebra Project in Cambridge, Mass., which Moses heads. His book, with Cobb, quotes and pays homage to Baker throughout. The Algebra Project is a math literacy project based on Moses’s view that unequal access to mathematical knowledge perpetuates social, racial, and economic inequities.
24. See Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*.
25. See the personal accounts of white women in the movement in Constance Curry et. al., *Deep in Our Hearts*.
26. Curry, interview by author.
27. Taitt-Magubane, interview by author. Taitt-Magubane would later become one of Ella Baker’s closest friends in New York City, hosting annual birthday parties in her friend’s honor.
28. Ibid.
29. Braden, interview by author, June 1991.
30. Brockington, interview by author, Feb. 1990.
31. Reagon, interview by author; and Joyce Ladner, interview by author.
32. Clarke, interview by author.
33. In 1960 most young women activists admired Ella Baker and saw her level of political savvy as being far out of their reach; but, as they matured, many of them found

they had modeled their identities as politically active adult women after Baker. See author's interviews with Diane Nash, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Dorie Ladner. See also Evans, *Personal Politics*.

34. Dorie Ladner, interview by author.

35. Abernathy, interview by author.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Author's interviews with Donaldson, Taitt-Magubane, Dorothy Miller Zellner, and Nash.

38. Moses, interview by author.

39. Zinn, interview by author.

40. Donaldson, interview by author.

41. Burlage, interview by author.

42. Hall (Wynn), interview by author, 1–2.

43. Author's interviews with Curry and Taitt-Magubane.

44. Curry, interview by author.

45. Grant, *Fundi*.

46. Nash, interview by author, Sept. 1997.

47. Curry, interview by author.

48. Guyot, interview by author.

49. Mary King and Casey Hayden both entered SNCC via the YWCA, and Connie Curry had Y affiliations, as did Lenore Taitt-Magubane and Bobby Yancy, all of whom would remain a part of Baker's life until the end.

50. Baker, "Report for the Southeastern Region, 9/1/61–8/31/62," YWCA Files, YWCA New York Branch Collection, YWCA National Headquarters, New York.

51. Harding, interview by author.

52. It would be inaccurate to characterize all SCLC ministers as privileged. But even though these ministers comprised the more activist wing of the black church, Baker felt they were resistant to grassroots leadership, democratic organization, and militant tactics.

53. Grant, *Ella Baker*, 144.

54. Stembridge, interview by author; Carson, *In Struggle*, 29.

55. Claude Sitton, "Negro Criticizes N.A.A.C.P. Tactics," *New York Times*, Apr. 17, 1960, 32.

56. *Student Voice* 2, no. 2 (Feb. 1961): 1; Curry, interview by author; Coordinating Committee meetings, Feb. 3–5, 1961, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Papers. For Powell controversy, see Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 847.

57. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 195–203.

58. For information on 1961 freedom rides, see Branch, *Parting the Waters*; for 1947 rides, see Grant, *Ella Baker*, 91–92.

59. Nash, interview by author, Sept. 1997; and Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 466.

60. Ella Baker, memo to "Coordinating Committee of the Freedom Rides," n.d. [ca. May 1961], 1, SNCC files, EBP.

61. *Ibid.*, 2.

62. *Ibid.*, 3.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Baker's partisan intervention on behalf of SNCC during the Freedom Rides reflects the tension embedded in her advice that organizational affiliation and loyalty should not matter. In the context of competing organizations, the group that is least selfish or self-promoting is likely to get the least attention and resources, which then has a negative bearing on its practical ability to continue and expand its work.

65. Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry*.
66. Dittmer, *Local People*, 119–20; Carson, *In Struggle*, 70; and Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 178–81.
67. Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 180; and Carson, *Struggle*, 41–42.
68. Minutes for Meeting of Co.-Committee, August 11, Highlander Research and Education Center Papers, box 71, folder 16, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW), Madison, are handwritten and incomplete. The tone of the meeting and the debate about splitting the organization are recounted in numerous SNCC interviews and chronicled in secondary sources.
69. Baker, interview by Emily Stoper, in Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, 269.
70. Ibid.
71. This is a distinction that sociologists Aldon Morris and Charles Payne elaborate on in their works on the movement.
72. Payne, “Ella Baker and Models of Social Change.”
73. Dorothy Miller Zellner, interview by author.
74. Ibid.
75. The best definition of praxis, a term introduced by theorist Antonio Gramsci, is “a philosophy which is also politics.” The function of praxis “draws out and elaborates that which people already ‘feel’ but do not ‘know,’ in other words that which is present in nascent or inchoate form in their consciousness but which is contradicted and immobilized by other conceptions.” In discussing the idea of praxis, Gramsci describes the work of revolutionary intellectuals as that of “drawing out and elaborating elements of critical awareness and good sense.” Forgacs, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 323.
76. Baker, interview by Morris, 69A.
77. Ibid., 29A.
78. Forman, *The Making of a Black Revolutionary*, 215.
79. Zinn, *SNCC, the New Abolitionists*, dedication and acknowledgements.
80. Murray, interview by Martin.
81. Ture (Carmichael), interview by author.