# "Neither Bedecked Nor Bebosomed": Lucy Mason, Ella Baker and Women's Leadership and Organizing Strategies in the Struggle for Freedom

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*It is dangerous to remember the past only for its own sake, dangerous to deliver a message that you did not get.*

**Wendell Berry**

*It is not enough just to study the South unless your basis of study is to make it better.*

**Will D. Campbell**

*The thing that is most important is that we understand that the movement which encompasses many organizations of which SNCC was one, is still going on, was going on before SNCC, and will continue to go on in the future. And we as organization, we as individuals in those organizations must understand that, and work to make sure we do our rightful part. If a people feel that it does not have a movement, that's very self-defeating. And we should understand that in a movement we do not have a leader but we have many leaders. That's the way it always has been and that's the way it will continuously be.*

**Hollis Watkins**[1]

**Section One**

Edmund Morgan, in his landmark study *American Slavery, American Freedom*, records that in August, 1619, for the first time, a ship carrying black human cargo, most probably African indentured servants, landed in Jamestown, Virginia; their descendants would comprise the slave population in that colony. In the same month of that year, the first representative legislature met in Virginia, an embryonic form of the emerging American democratic experiment. The legislature consisted of men who either supported slavery or trafficked with slave traders. These colonial leaders would help construct the edifice of slavery in the New

[1]Wendell Berry, "In a Motel Parking Lot, Thinking of Dr. Williams," in *Entries* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 22; Will D. Campbell, interview by author, Oxford, Mississippi, September 8, 1997; Hollis Watkins, quoted in by Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed. *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 65-66.

World, uniquely undergirded by racism. Thus, from its inception, the country's founders forever wedded freedom and slavery in the American experience.[2]

As Americans, we learn the reality of racism in childhood, as perpetrators or victims, and perhaps as some measure of both. What we do not learn, except by luck or persistence, is how to resist the pattern. The stories of the many who have resisted, who could teach us, are too often overshadowed by the limelight of "heroes" who have come and gone. Dr. King's dream is officially, finally, celebrated every January. His contributions were great, immeasurable perhaps, but the historical presentation of his life inculcates in us one of the first misconceptions of history--the savior myth. It is a illusion that most histories and popular representations of the Civil Rights Movement continue to perpetuate.

William Manchester contends in *The Glory and the Dream* that when Rosa Parks refused to get up from her seat on a Montgomery bus in December, 1955, "somewhere a gear shifted in the universe."[3] The shift required her presence but an interesting translation has occurred to her image. When queried by professors if they know a woman's name from the Civil Rights Movement, most undergraduates name Parks, if they can name one at all. If asked to describe her, visions of seniority dance to mind. Ms. Parks was an old woman, they say, too tired to get up out of her seat that day. We see her then as she is now, paraded out at National Democratic Conventions, white-haired, bespectacled, grand motherly and non-threatening.

The "mother of the Civil Rights Movement" was only forty-three years old, active and vital, when the Montgomery Police Department arrested her for violating its segregation ordinance. Moreover, she had been trained for that revolutionary act. She attended a workshop sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and directed by Ella Baker; she worked with E.D. Nixon in the NAACP office as a secretary, and participated in a seminar on activism at Highlander Folk School, again led by Ella Baker.[4] The activists in Montgomery included a network of women just waiting for an opportunity to challenge Montgomery's segregated buses, prepared with a plan to organize a one-day boycott

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[2]Edmund Morgan. *American Slavery, American Freedom*: *The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 3-6, 111, 380-387.

[3]William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988) p. 740.

[4]Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 63-64. See also Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker, Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), 101.

should such a case present itself. It would have been inconceivable to mobilize an entire community from the Friday of Parks' violation to the successful first day of the boycott the following Monday without the tedious, everyday activities, without the training and personal relationships established over time. The networks and preparation painstakingly created by activists in Montgomery made the challenge to segregation in that city successful, indeed, possible.

The reality of Rosa Parks and her revolutionary act, the organized resistance from which and into which she stepped, interrogates what most Americans think they know about social movements. We believe we cannot rely on our own abilities. We think social change does not require invisible, plodding, everyday, unrewarded work. We believe we need leaders to tell us what to do. We do not know how to participate in a revolution without them. We prefer our leaders to be male; if they must be female, we prefer them to be old, non-sexual, wise.[5] In short, they must be simple, good, perfect. And we cannot have a revolution without them.

We need heroes. Our souls lean into the stirring cadences, the call to visions of freedom and justice, of Dr. King at Lincoln's feet. It is not so surprising--one of the first games we learn to play in childhood is "follow the leader." We wait, are taught to await, the arrival of a leader. Our textbooks reiterate the notion, of Big Events, Big Leaders, saviors. An examination of major high school history textbooks entitled *Lies My Teacher Told Me* uncovers the nationalism, the mythic lessons and American patriotism that masquerade as history.[6] And it is not just from our school books that we learn these myths. In the religious undergirdings of our culture, from our Judeo-Christian heritage, we learn that a savior will deliver us to the Promised Land. But Christ is reduced to some other anointed earthly representative who will show us the way.

We have purchased a lie, bought preciously with the lives lost or wearied or made invisible, who have daily struggled to combat racism. Their lives belie the savior myth. We do not need a leader. We are, each of us, leaders, capable of and necessary for the laborious task of

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[5]One case prior to Parks had presented itself. Claudette Colvin, a young teenager, was arrested for violating the segregation ordinance and the Women's Political Caucus, under Jo Ann Robinson's direction, prepared to implement the boycott plan. But many believed that Colvin, who was unmarried, was pregnant. The women deemed her too controversial a figure to mobilize the community. When the city arrested the respected Ms. Parks, a more appropriate heroine had been found. Thus conservative notions of suitable leaders and heroes grew out of the Movement as well as being thrust upon it. See Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 63-64.

[6]James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1995 ) 1-9.

creating social change. The strategies in this paper, of Lucy Mason and Ella Baker, reflect the more intricate and invisible actions of thousands throughout history which bind the historical veneer of Great Leaders and Big Events.

This talk recovers the stories of two women who, from the early decades of the twentieth century through the years of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, challenged the American South's and the nation's racial system of white supremacy. They accomplished much of their work in organizations dominated by men. However, their leadership styles and organizing strategies do not fit the masculinized paradigm of charisma and competition that describe traditional leadership and organizing. Rather, these women help to feminize this century's most significant social movement which challenged racism by creating a leadership that was non-charismatic, cooperative, utilitarian, collective, and nurturing. They resisted the understanding, embedded in American culture, of these characteristics as weak and ineffectual; as historian Charles Payne asserts, their maintenance of "a deep sense of community was itself an act of resistance."[7] They redefined success as the development of healthy human relationships, rather than numbers of votes received or funds raised or legislation passed; in short, they redefined freedom. And they proved that their non-traditional organizing strategies were appropriate, indeed necessary, tools for conducting a social movement.

The lives of Mason and Baker suggest much about the ways in which women reject and/or change traditional leadership roles in order to accomplish the work of mass movements. Their experiences in religious and social action groups shaped their goals and determined their strategies. Both Mason and Baker shared an association with community organizations which facilitated female leadership and encouraged support for a variety of causes from equitable treatment of the working class to race relations. Both women also shared a commitment to the cause of labor, particularly the integration of unions. And both women believed in the fundamental necessity of local people determining the responses to their oppression.

It is crucial to any understanding of the success of the Civil Rights Movement and the larger struggle of which it is a part to consider the gendered styles of leadership and organizing tactics that Mason and Baker represent. Ultimately, the abilities of these women to achieve such astounding results against a racist, male-dominated backdrop can provide a textbook for

[7]Payne, 405.

conducting social movements using the strategies of each woman. Their lives also suggest reconsidering how the Civil Rights Movement accomplished so much. It is, therefore, necessary and appropriate to look at the lives of Mason and Baker to begin to fathom the different styles of leadership in grassroots movements and the organizing tenets that made such movements possible. Interestingly, there is perhaps no greater proof of the effectiveness of their work than in the transformation of the men around them who employed their feminized styles of organizing and leadership to accomplish change; as Lawrence Guyot exclaims, "I was a chauvinist before the Movement; Ella Baker changed me."[8] More importantly, the work of each women effaces any notion of a struggle for freedom that began in 1954 and ended with King's assassination--they struggled years before and continued long after the distinct dates most historians have assigned to their movement.

There are four major goals of this work. The first is to explicate one of the constant themes articulated by civil rights activists: "Freedom is a constant struggle." In one of the first works on the intellectual history of the Movement, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom,* Richard King suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on precedents for the Movement before the fifties. He laments the "tendency to particularize the movement by historicizing it, to considere the context within which it emerged as all-determining."[9] To do so "makes it difficult to imagine how a similar movement might emerge elsewhere." He argues instead that there are particular differences in the activism of the fifties and sixties which distinguish it from previous work and which, therefore, render it more accessible for others.[10]

King deplores the focus on origins of the Movement in pre-1950s activism. He suggests that the period of activity from 1954-1968 is different from what came before and after that period. And this era is unique from the struggles of previous and later times. But King so emphasizes the period's distinctiveness that he misses the lessons inherent in its connection to other times. His overemphasis of the "uniqueness" of the Movement is troubling because it elides the very necessary work of community building and organizing that made the Movement of the fifties and sixties possible; indeed, it particularly erases the work of women.

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[8]Interview with Lawrence Guyot, by author, Oxford, MS, August 29, 1998.

[9]Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press,1996), xi.

[10]Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press,1996), ix-xvi.

Bob Moses, for example, knew who to go to for help in Mississippi because Ella Baker had established those relationships long before he arrived. IN the early seventies, Fannie Lou Hamer, when asked if the Movement was dead, replied, "I don't think you would say it is dead, but every so many years things change and go into something else. Now, you might never see demonstrations. I'm tired of that. I won't demonstrate no more. But I try to put that same energy . . . into politics. So it means that even though it's not just called civil rights, it's still on the move to change."[11] Clearly, for Movement participants, the work they were doing almost ten years after scholars had performed death rites on their Movement was closely connected to the work done from '54-'68. Perhaps unintentionally, scholars (and the popular press) have served to hamper or impede work that continues today because it takes a different shape and seems unrecognizable. But the goals are similar–equitable pay, fair housing, affordable medical care, representative political participation. Until these goals are achieved, the Movement continues.

The second goal of this work is to show the feminized strategies of organizing and leadership employed by Lucy Randolph Mason and Ella Baker. While growing out of their different experiences, their strategies served a common goal. That goal was the creation of a space for local people to organize and determine their own lives. Mason based her strategy on her visibility; as a white woman, and the daughter of prominent families in Virginia, and later as a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's, Mason had a certain access to a prominent Northern elite white network of women in national government. She also used that influence to sway opinion-makers in the South: politicians, ministers, factory owners, editors, etc., in order to create a communicative space in which "ordinary people" could interact with dominant groups.

Much has been written on the middle-class women's network of reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century.[12] A great deal of that literature celebrates the work of such reformers while neglecting the condescension that these middle-class women often exhibited toward the working-class women they purportedly assisted. In addition, such scholarship often glosses over the ways in which their work consolidated a white, middle-class, Northern power

[11]Neil McMillan, Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer. University of Southern Mississippi Oral History Program, April 14, 1972.

[12]See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Second Volume* (??), which one reviewer asserts is so celebratory as to "run now and then to hagiography." See Lance Morrow, review of *Eleanor Roosevelt, Second Volume,* by Blanche Wiesen Cook, in *Time* (July 26, 1999): 73.

base. Mason's insistence on Deep South and interracial activity, as well as her involvement in the labor movement, differentiated her from these Northern elite reforming impulses, even while she shared their failure to critique the capitalist system that impelled many of the conditions they sought to alleviate. Mason's ability to appeal to that Northern power base, as well as her manipulation of her image as a "respectable white woman" characterizes her leadership style and organizing strategies and they are tools that Baker could not have employed because of her race.[13] This project traces the transformation of her thought in these issues, from her early fears of embarrassing of her father with her activism to her later vehement public support of organized labor.

Unlike Lucy Mason, Ella Jo Baker used her invisibility to organize working-class people. Aware that politically active black voters threaten white power structures, Baker most often eschewed the limelight deliberately to allow local people to develop outside of the glare of restrictive public attention. Describing similar moves by minorities, anthropologist Edwin Ardener identifies the space within dominant and non-dominant cultural relations as the "wild zone;" it is an area uniquely experienced by a muted culture in relationship to a dominant culture.[14] Outside the purview of the predominant culture, this relatively safe space allows those in it to create methods of resistance to their oppression beyond the gaze of the dominant group. Baker worked within this wild zone, using the veil created by race oftentimes to help protect the organizers from the dominant culture. Baker's role within this "wild zone" can be described in two ways. The first is as a member of an intellectual "vanguard," in the manner of a Gramsciian "organic intellectual," as some scholars have suggested.[15] Comparing her to the intelligentsia of the Italian communist movement, historian Joy James has characterized Baker's role as an idea maven, someone who constantly sought to clarify and promote an ideological foundation for the Movement. She was particularly concerned with encouraging activists and local people to think beyond the short term. Her oft-cited address to the newly-formed SNCC, "Bigger Than a

[13]My work on Mason will use Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* to explore the notion of gender performance theory. Mason used feminine trappings of respectability in order to subvert traditional gender paradigms and secure advancement for the labor cause.

[14]Elaine Showalter, editor, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 261-263. James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* suggests a similar dichotomy which he describes as public and hidden transcripts, public being those open to the dominant culture and hidden transcripts being those that minority cultures keep concealed from the hegemonic culture.
[15]See Joy James and Barbara Ransby's upcoming biographies.

Hamburger," reflects this concern. She suggested that Movement goals must be larger than simply eating at desegregated lunch counters; future work must insure that blacks had the wherewithal to purchase goods. In short, she encouraged a larger economic and social vision.

The second characterization of Baker's role can be compared to the black middle-class reformers who worked in the early part of the twentieth century. Historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Glenda Gilmore have documented the activism of these reformers.[16] Many of these middle-class black reformers acted from a sense of responsibility to those they tried to help. Their strategy of "lifting as we climb" meant that black reformers shared the same challengers common to all blacks in a racist society but they also enjoyed some measure of protection from their higher economic status. That higher economic status often embued such reformers with a sense of superiority to the people they purported to aid. Baker did come from a more privileged background than many of the people with whom she worked. Her mother's work through the Methodist Church certainly shaped her early activism. However, Baker chose to identify herself with working-class people and their concerns and resisted any notion of leading people. Rather she sought to create an indigenous leadership which would continue to work long after she was gone. Her undercover work as a domestic worker in Harlem showed her attempts to understand fully the plight of working-class women.[17] While it is true that, given her education and family background, Baker had the luxury of leaving that job, she chose not to exploit those advantages by creating an audience of followers.

Both Mason and Baker's leadership styles and organizing strategies are feminized-_nurturing, collective, non-charismatic, grassroots, non-hierarchical, and banal.[18] These characteristics grew out of but ultimately transcend their gender; one need only witness the successful appropriation of these strategies by organizers such as the famed Saul Alinsky, who modeled much of his organizing strategies on the early work of the CIO, a pattern Lucy Mason helped create, as well as the use of these strategies by the men in SNCC, which led to much of the long-lasting success of the Movement.

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[16]See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[17]Joy James, "Ella Baker, 'Black Women's Work,' and Activist Intellectuals."

[18]See "Women and Ennui," in *The Persistence of History.*

The third aim is to suggest a more useful model for activism and for understanding and writing history. The ultimate goal, I believe, should not be integration (which has come to mean assimilation), but hybridity; not a new hegemony, but a simultaneity of meditated truth-_where a sharecropper and a senator have the same access to power and equal respect and opportunity-_that they create a world together, a world in which both are "heard."[19] The goal is the "other side of freedom" which means equal access to resources and power, equal participation in the political process, and the ability to question economic forces; in short, freedom goes beyond the ability to buy a hamburger at a lunch counter or drink from the same fountain _it is "bigger than a hamburger," as Baker said. It is the assurance of an invigorated civic culture in which all voices participate and are heard.

Finally, this work is an attempt to offer a description of Mason and Baker's organizing strategies and leadership styles which can be read as a manual for conducting social change. This guide is geared especially to activists as a primer on how to organize based on a feminized model of leadership and organization, especially learning from middle-class and working-class strategies. This model grows out of a belief that social change occurs in three stages: community building, which consists of creating and cementing relationships and education of the conditions which require change; community organizing, which moves from the theoretical base of community building to praxis; and a movement, which ties together multi local community organizing centers. Both Mason and Baker participated in each level of social change at various times, culminating in the flashpoints of the labor and civil rights movements that appropriated their strategies for development in each stage. Each woman had a cache of techniques they employed to accomplish organizing. I will describe these tenets and offer a genealogy of each.

Scholarship on community organizing techniques dichotomizes strategies into two major strands–one is known as the Alinsky model and the other is a women-centered model. I am interested in going beyond this binary pattern. The well-known Alinsky model, which was a self-admitted masculine model, used strategies that Lucy Randolph Mason helped create. The women-centered model, so often attributed to Ella Baker, did not just employ women; one need only look at the young men of SNCC to see its effects. Mason and Baker have already helped to shape a tessellated model of community organizing. Studying their lives will provide activists

[19]See David Theo Goldberg, "Multicultural Conditions," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* edited by David Theo Goldberg. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 1-41.

with tools for employing this integrated model.

In sum, this project critiques the way that most Movement historiography addresses questions of gender, leadership, organizing, and historical meaning. Broader understandings of the struggle for freedom challenge the way we "see" the mostly invisible actions of those who have challenged white supremacy, indeed, such understanding questions the way that we write history.

Each woman offers a glimpse into the contested world of women's activism and leadership--contested because prohibited. Whether white or black, rich or poor, each women lived in a culture that proscribed leadership and activism for women. Given these prohibitions, each woman chose a path of leadership and organization that used her experiences for social change. Taken together, the work of these women offers a blueprint for alternative leadership in civil rights. They each used tools provided by their specific vantage points for challenging racism, ultimately fashioning complementary archetypes for creating social change. The women were "neither bedecked nor bebosomed," as Ella Baker declared in a speech at a rare event honoring her, which is to say, they refused to remain constrained by any construction of women's work or identities that limited them to a pedestal, a kitchen or bedroom. Instead, they used those roles to help undermine a system of racial supremacy that continues to haunt us. The project will show that community organizing waxes and wanes according to the conditions in which activists works. Different approaches at different times are more appropriate and then there are flash points, as from 1954 to 1968, when the two approaches exhibited by Mason and Baker work together to effect great change.

We are, ultimately, left with a question: "whether there is an endless counterpoint between two ways of speaking about human life and relationships, one grounded in connection and one in separation, or whether one framework for thinking about human life and relationships which has long been associated with development and with progress can give way to a new way of thinking that begins with the premise that we live not in separation but in relationship."[20] In this project, I hope I provide a fuller picture of the Movement, one that is instructional and accessible rather than the more mythic and unattainable impression many of us have. It is a picture essentially founded "in relationship." How we think about our interaction with other

[20]Gilligan, xxvi-xxvii.

human beings can become a political act and these women show us "a new way of thinking" about that act.[21]

**Section Two**

In the spring of 1948, the Tifton, Georgia, chapter of the United Packing House Workers of America enlisted the aid of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to assist them in their strike against the local packing companies. On the evening before the arrival of the CIO representative, guards hired by the company seized an African-American worker, beat him repeatedly and threatened to burn his home if he did not go back to work and convince others to do the same. The next morning the CIO intermediary arrived in Tifton. The organizer met with the man who had been beaten and then proceeded directly to the sheriff's office to register a complaint. Finding the sheriff unavailable, the CIO emissary visited the local judge and requested assistance. Later in the afternoon, a meeting between the sheriff, his deputies, the local union organizers and the CIO representative escalated into a shouting match and threats of violence. When a physical assault seemed imminent, the CIO organizer stepped between the men, calming them and ushering the labor leaders out of the building, promising a full investigation into violations of civil rights by the US District Attorney's office. The promised investigation came from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the packing companies and workers settled the strike successfully. A newly-elected sheriff replaced the sheriff who had condoned violence against the union workers and proved more amenable to labor activity.[22]

While this scene is a frightening and stirring example of labor efforts in the American South, a striking component of the story is the identity of the fearless CIO organizer who faced down the sheriff and helped bring an effective resolution to the strike. The courageous union representative was a petite, fifty-five year old, white-haired Virginia aristocrat named Lucy Randolph Mason. Eschewing the ease and security offered by her aristocratic lineage, Mason instead devoted her life to a variety of liberal causes-–workers' rights, women's suffrage, and justice for African Americans among them. Mason represents a small but significant population of Southern whites who are what Morton Sosna defines as "Southern liberals," those who love

[21]Gilligan, xxvii.

[22]Mason, *To Win These Rights*, 114-117.

their region but dissent from its cultural restrictions in matters of race.[23] Amidst a predominantly male presence, the women who comprised this group were even more remarkable because their activism not only challenged white supremacy but also the patriarchal system which undergirded that ideology.

In the case of Lucy Mason, some used their personas as white women in the patriarchal South to affect change. Labelled "voluntarist politics" by some scholars and "female consciousness" by others, these terms nevertheless describe women who were cognizant of the acceptable role allotted to them and who used that role to challenge the foundations of their society.[24] Mason learned to use the tools of her relatively privileged experience to challenge racial and economic injustice. Philosopher/theorist Judith Butler describes this process as "gender performance," a display comprised by the "acts, gestures, and desires [that] produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*."[25]

The result of such a performance can be to sabotage the very identity it seeks to fabricate, if, in the repetition, the effect is "to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself."[26] Such duplication is subversive, then, when it undermines the very gender constructions

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[23]Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), viii-ix. Sosna uses a framework provided by Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* to define a Southern liberal as "those white Southerners who perceived that there was a serious maladjustment of race relations in the South, who recognized that the existing system resulted in grave injustices for blacks, and who actively endorsed or engaged in programs to aid Southern blacks in their fight against lynching, disfranchisement, and blatant discrimination in such areas as education, employment, and law enforcement. The ultimate test of the white Southern liberal was his willingness or unwillingness to criticize [the South's] racial mores." (viii).

[24]For discussion of "female consciousness," see Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* (Spring, 1982), p. 545. For discussion of "voluntarist politics" in feminism, see Nancy Cott, *The Groundings of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[25]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136. See also Diane L. Fowlkes, *White Political Women: Paths From Privilege to Empowerment* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Fowlkes compares the act of political empowerment for white women to drama and asserts that "all of us should be explicitly conscious of the political nature of our different identities under the systems of domination that have placed us in a variety of social locations with different political consequences." She goes on to suggest a category of women activists called "women spinning networks," and describes this group as "women continually in the process of becoming. They appear to be locating standpoints from which to transform self and society, to create new political "realities," in order that they and theirs might live their lives to the fullest on their own terms." Such "politics of reality" defeats "a politics as usual" and in so doing becomes subversive. This paradigm is suggestive of Mason's life. Fowlkes, 1-3, 215-219.

[26]Butler, 148.

imposed upon it. Lucy Mason affected such a mutinous pastiche of gender norms when she used feminine markers, her "respectability" especially, to upset the racial and economic order of her society. She did so by manipulating elite, Northern women's networks of reform but she also very deliberately inserted herself into a predominantly male discourse-–with ministers, newspaper editors, politicians, and factory owners. She appealed to her connections with George Mason and Robert E. Lee, her most well-known male relatives, when attempting to sway such men of importance. Interestingly, she did not appeal to her mother's penal reform efforts; perhaps she assumed that her mother's accomplishment would not persuade this predominantly male audience. Her organizing strategies can be termed reformist; she did not seek to change the democratic political and capitalist economic systems of the United States and did not offer a systemic critique of democracy and capitalism. Rather, she used the precepts and ideals of these systems to contest the system so that its benefits might apply equally to everyone.

Mason's strategies for challenging the political and economic practices of her time grew out of her experience in a variety of social movements--from early support of industrial workers through the YWCA to the battle for suffrage to the interracial conference movement of the thirties and forties and finally in labor organizing. Her efforts bore fruit, for a time, in more equitable wage laws for working women and interracial unions throughout the historically anti-union South.[27] Despite this success she unstintingly gave credit for these reforms to men with whom she worked.

The social movements in which Mason participated have been examined extensively; in particular, scholars have attempted to understand the work of specific community organizers. One of the most lauded is Saul Alinsky, called by some "perhaps the best known practitioner in the field of community organizing."[28] Credited with innovative techniques dubbed the "conflict

[27]Michael J. Klarman and Robert Wiebe suggest that a marked difference characterizes the pre-*Brown* and post-*Brown* South in the form of a massive white backlash against school integration. Will D. Campbell has discussed this change in his time as chaplain at the University of Mississippi and John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day* and Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope* underscore the great potential for interracial activity that existed before the Supreme Court's unanimous decision to end school segregation, potential that seemed to die with the *Brown* decision. The change is also reflected in labor unions backing away from civil rights activity and interracial work as increasingly their Southern members joined newly-forming White Citizens' Councils. See Alan Draper's *Conflict of Interest*. Thus, the effectiveness of Mason's work for the CIO occurred in this period of seeming great promise and many of the gains she helped secure lost ground after *Brown.* That said, her feminized organizing strategies and leadership style are important to understand in their context and, indeed, still provide a successful blueprint for organizing from a middle-class perspective.

[28]Neil Betten and Michael J. Austin, "The Conflict Approach to Community Organizing: Saul Alinsky and the

approach," Alinsky admitted that his "innovation" was, in fact, borrowed from the organizers of the early CIO.[29] Mason perfected many of these resourceful techniques in her years as the first Southern organizer for the CIO.[30] These resourceful techniques include many perfected by Mason in her years as the first Southern organizer for the CIO. They reflect a particularly middle-class privileged, feminine style of organizing. To consider Mason's leadership style and organizing approaches is to begin to understand the variety of gendered methods for creating social change.

These gendered techniques grow from three fundamental beliefs in Mason's worldview: the importance of education, the responsibility of government and members of the middle-class to militate against oppressive social conditions, and the crucial presence of those oppressed to participate and shape the responses to their conditions.[31] Mason developed procedures for effecting change which grew out of these concerns. And these concerns grew from seemingly contradictory impulses; Mason's implicit belief in the rights and strengths of the working class would initially appear at odds with her reliance upon governmental action and encouragement of middle-class involvement in social change. Many would charge the latter with the oppression of the former. But Mason believed that democratic principles, undergirded by Christianity, united all segments of the population and she appealed to these connections between them in her attempts to bring economic and racial justice to the South.

She developed a cadre of organizing strategies for accomplishing her work. They include:

1. Use one's privilege to effect local change
2. Persuade others through a shared religious discourse
3. Reform the system in order to change individuals
4. Investigate oppressive conditions and disseminate information about them

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CIO," in *The Roots of Community Organizing, 1917-1939* by Neil Betten and Michael J. Austin, editors (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 161.

[29]Betton and Austin, 152.

[30]Betton and Austin, 152.

[31]See Lucy Randolph Mason, "I Turned to Social Action Right at Home," in *Labor's Relation to Church and Community*, Liston Pope, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 145-155.

5. Use access to networks of power to sway public opinion and secure supportive legislation

6. Work where you know the area and are known.

7. Use the shared strengths of Southern culture to bind groups together, especially blacks and whites.

Mason reinforced each tool with a consistent and prolific letter writing campaign, followed up by personal contact with those she sought to persuade.

Clearly, of the two women examined in this study, Mason was the most privileged; her background and social status afforded her the luxury of relying upon authority figures, especially a network of Northern, white, elite women reformers, to assist in her work. As a middle-class white woman, she could expect a quicker response to her pleas, if one at all, than Ella Jo Baker. Given her position, Mason could have distanced herself, as many white feminists did, from the triple burdens of race, sex, and class experienced by black women.[32] But she, like Baker, chose to cast her lot for racial justice and believed that it would only come through interracial cooperation. Her efforts of challenging the system from inside the system, which culminated in the "controlled conflict" of her CIO years, supported the more radical activism of Baker and those like her.

**Section Three**

Ella Jo Baker evinced a lifelong commitment to equal rights. Born in 1903 in Norfolk, Virginia, the granddaughter of slaves, Baker worked for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and In Friendship, a northern-based organization she co-founded in 1955 in the wake of the Emmett Till lynching to provide financial support to local activists in the South. She was also a human-rights consultant, providing advice on fundraising and grassroots organization for victims of racist violence, including the Montgomery bus boycotters. After the success of the Montgomery boycott, Baker became the unacknowledged director of the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), responsible not only for creating a viable command center out of one room, a typewriter, and a phone but also rescuing Martin Luther King's first planned protest after Montgomery, the Crusade for

[32]See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, editors, *This Bridge Called My Back* for more the triple burdens often experienced by black women which differentiate their lives from those of white women.

Citizenship. Even though she salvaged a badly-mismanaged campaign and helped create a viable civil rights organization out of few resources, Baker's status was temporary in the eyes of Dr. King and the other preacher/leaders of SCLC. In 1960 King finally replaced her with a male minister. Baker went on to become an indispensable advisor to the youth-led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, encouraging the young activists to organize democratically and remain apart from the patriarchal, hierarchical SCLC. Yet, in a speech near the end of her life, Baker recoiled from the designation "leader."[33] However, her work testifies to her leadership and more importantly her redefinition of the concept.

In 1960, a young, black, math teacher from New York, Robert Moses, went to the state of Mississippi, the first representative of the newly-formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to do so. Moses intended to connect with Aaron Henry and Amzie Moore and begin a small voter registration project deep within the so-called "closed society."[34] This meeting between the young civil rights worker and the experienced, Mississippi-native activists was a crucial first step to bringing the Civil Rights Movement to Mississippi. From this meeting, SNCC launched a full-scale Mississippi project which linked the work of Medgar Evers, Moore, and Henry with new activists who sprang from the cotton fields to challenge the oppression of what many believed to be the most racist state in America. The Mississippi project witnessed some of the most dramatic and long-lasting changes in the Movement, exemplifying an organizing tradition founded upon ordinary folk, upon poor people too easily dismissed, who sloughed off their shackles to redefine freedom.

Bob Moses knew to find Henry and Moore because Baker, through previous contact, had identified them as staunch and fearless civil rights activists. She shaped the organizing strategies of the young student workers, impelling them to go to ordinary people and assist them in challenging their own oppression. The links between the old and the new, between the young and eager and the experienced and committed organizers in the state of Mississippi, indeed, the implementation of a grassroots strategy that recast the Civil Rights Movement and wrought some

[33]Ella Baker in *Fundi*, a film by Joanne Grant, 1980. See also Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998) for a biography of Baker.

[34]See James W. Silver's *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966). Unita Blackwell said of Silver's book, "We used that book. It was the crack that opened up voter registration. That a white man said this!" Telephone interview by author, 9 June 98.

of its most tremendous changes can be attributed, in many ways, to one person, Ella Baker.[35]

"I never could call her anything except 'Miss Baker,' " recalls Julian Bond, a founding student member of SNCC. "She just seemed to demand that. Not in an artificial way; I mean there was just this degree of formality about her. A sort of regal appearance; [she was] always in a suit, always proper." But, Bond remembers, "She lived in an apartment building in Atlanta and it was *the* apartment building in Atlanta for black people. And I remember going up there and she had a pint of bourbon and that just struck me. It seemed unladylike."[36] Bond's recollection encapsulates, in many ways, the impression most people who worked with Ella Baker came to have of her and, in a sense, also imparts something of the essence of the woman. Ella Baker came from a background of relative security and advantage for a black Southern daughter. She had the benefit of a college education when many blacks and whites did not finish high school. In many ways, she was the epitome of W.E.B. DuBois' "Talented Tenth," that group of black intellectual whom DuBois believed would rise up from the masses of black Americans to lead their people to freedom. Yet despite this patina of propriety and privilege, Baker chose not to separate herself from the masses. Throughout her career as an activist she fought to empower ordinary people to challenge the circumstances that oppressed them; moreover, she confronted the leaders, white and black, and primarily male, who would have the masses look to them to solve their problems. She stepped outside of the constrictions of ladylike behavior to challenge authority in all of its guises and in doing so she entrusted to a new generation of activists an organizing tradition that valued ordinary people and their abilities to change their own lives.

I would like to suggest eight tenets in Baker's organizing strategy. Viewed separately, they provide a rough outline of the lessons of Baker's life; taken together, they demonstrate the foundation of a new method for social change and the basis for much of the success of the Civil Rights Movement. The nature of that success must be understood precisely; it was not necessarily in the passage of civil rights legislation, although the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made possible thousands of new black voters who dramatically changed the political leadership of the region. This success was not even in the vast numbers of new black representatives, even

[35]John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 101-103.

[36]Julian Bond, interview by author, Tape recording, Oxford, Mississippi, 7 February 1998.

though Mississippi now has more black elected officials than any other state. Rather, as Charles Payne describes, the success of the Civil Rights Movement exists most poignantly and effectively in the thousands of new leaders, working in their own communities to cast off oppression and improve their own lives. They learned not to wait for a savior, but rather to depend on themselves. And they exist because Ella Baker insisted on a new kind of leadership. As Payne describes:

> Leadership among Southern blacks. . . has frequently leaned toward the authoritarian. . . . [O]ther activists across the South were evolving a philosophy of collective leadership. More than any other individual, Ella Jo Baker was responsible for transferring some of those ideas to the young militants of SNCC. . . . If people like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry tested the limits of repression, people like . . . Ella Baker tested another set of limits, the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives.[37]

Baker's tenets are:

1. Identify with the needs of the people with whom you are working and begin with their needs
2. Value innovation that comes from different viewpoints
3. Value small groups
4. Establish relationships between the organizer and the people with whom she/he is working, especially across class, race, and gender boundaries
5. Develop of local leadership
6. Resist hierarchical, traditional leadership that is competitive, authoritarian, and charismatic
7. Understand the plodding, unglamourous, often-unrewarded nature of organizing
8. Appreciate the strength and value of Southern folk culture.

I want to leave you with a few images of Ms. Baker from some of those who knew her best. Reverend Will D. Campbell recalls that "it was amazing the way she could influence something and then step back so that you wouldn't even know she was there."[38] Julian Bond affirms that "her work was invaluable and necessary. It was crucial to the work we did that she worked before us. And we didn't even know what she did, but she paved the way."[39] And

[37]Payne, 67-68.

[38]Campbell interview by author.

[39]Bond interview.

Howard Zinn, an early advisor to SNCC and now historian of the Movement, in a rare tribute to Baker in 1965 (a tribute she would only agree to if it would be a fundraiser for an organization) said, "Ella Baker is one of the most consequential but least honored people in America. This is because we are accepting the going definition of what honor is. If honor is medals and headlines and invitation to the White House, then Ella Baker is not honored. But if honor is the love people have for you and the work people do in a movement you've devoted your life to, then Ella Baker is the most honored person in America."[40]

**Section Four**

Charles Willie, a black educator and classmate of Martin King at Morehouse, writes that " 'by idolizing those whom we honor we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves. By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise.' "[41] The purpose of this work is not to attack the memory of great leaders like Martin Luther King. It is rather an attempt to begin to understand how we too can seek and achieve justice. To lay the success of the Civil Rights Movement solely at the feet of an overly-lionized martyr is not only a disservice to Dr. King but also to the thousands of local people who wrested justice from their oppressors without ever having heard King speak. Moreover, to ignore the contributions of these invisible heroes handicaps future generations who need examples which prove they can also challenge and overcome injustice. Malcolm X asserted that, " 'As long as you are convinced you have never done anything, you can never do anything.' "[42] During the Civil Rights Movement, ordinary people accomplished extraordinary deeds. The lives of Lucy Mason and Ella Baker show new generations that they can do the same.

[40]Howard Zinn, Pacifica tape, 1965.

[41]Charles Willie, quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 625.

[42]Malcolm X quoted in Gil Noble's film *El Hajj Malik el Shabazz (Malcolm X)* (Carlsbad, California: CRM Films, 1965).