Introduction

I believe that the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.

Ella Baker (1980)

I think, as a young girl, I’ve seen a lot of stuff, and been through a lot of stuff at my age. . . . I think it’s a personal thing when a person goes through something and, you know, so many people take that stress to like killing themselves. . . . I want to start a group at my school at lunchtime, with a whole bunch of girls—cause I’m just working with girls—where they sit around and talk about it . . . we could just talk about our feelings and what’s going on with our life and how we should deal with it.

Jamilla, age fourteen (March 10, 2010)

Ella Josephine Baker (1903–1986) was a civil rights and human rights activist whose career as a behind-the-scenes organizer spanned more than fifty years. Her legacy continues to inspire social justice activists around the world to be someone—like Jamilla, quoted above—who “carries on” the struggle for freedom, perhaps infusing it with new meanings given the context of the time. For Baker, inspiration came from her childhood experiences growing up in a tight-knit Black community, only one generation away from the end of institutionalized slavery in the United States. She was born in Norfolk, Virginia, but raised from age seven in rural Littleton, North Carolina, near the area where both sets of her grandparents had been enslaved. She grew up hearing their stories of struggle and suffering, as well as how they fought back and resisted whenever possible to preserve their dignity. She also heard stories of their belief in self-determination and
support for the betterment of the community. For example, by 1888 her maternal grandparents, Mitchell and Josephine Elizabeth (Bet) Ross, along with Mitchell’s brothers and cousins, had worked for decades to save enough money to buy land from the estate that had previously enslaved them. They immediately donated a portion of the land for the construction of a local church, where Mitchell Ross served as a well-respected member of the clergy and which also housed a school for African Americans. The Rosses had become landowners when most Black families in the rural South, like Baker’s paternal grandparents, Teema and Margaret Baker, were trapped in a tenant farming system that for many didn’t seem that different from slavery.

The historian Barbara Ransby has observed that the class distinctions in Ella Baker’s family helped shape her consciousness about class. Baker came to believe, as her grandparents and parents had taught, that those in a position to help others had a duty to do so. But she also believed that those in elite positions should “humble themselves in order to create the social space necessary for the more oppressed people in the community to speak and act on their own behalf” (Ransby, 2003, pp. 44–45). Over time, Baker continued to hone this thinking into a radical vision for participative democracy as she allied herself with poor and oppressed people working to change unjust systems.

Gender roles were also challenged in Baker’s community, providing a foundation for her to confront the sexist norms she later encountered in male-dominated early and mid-twentieth-century change organizations. Ella Baker's parents, Blake Baker, a maritime worker, and Georgianna (Anna) Ross Baker, a teacher, had moved to Norfolk soon after their marriage in 1896 to seek economic opportunity in the city, as did an increasing number of African Americans living in the rural South at the time. It was a period of increasing White terror that often followed Black prosperity in the United States in the Jim Crow era. By 1910, as the family had grown to include three children—Blake Curtis, Ella, and Maggie—Anna Ross Baker returned to Littleton for the security of the strong community ties there. Blake Baker kept his job in Norfolk and visited the family on weekends and holidays. Mitchell Ross, who had recognized his granddaughter’s gifts as a thinker (even at age six), had passed away the previous year.
Ella Baker’s mother and maternal grandmother thus became the strongest influences in her life, instilling in her a sense of confidence that women could, and indeed had a duty to, work for the betterment of their communities. Anna Ross Baker, in particular, was a strong role model for her daughters. She worked as an activist in local church groups to help advocate for education and to promote antilynching campaigns. She became one of the leaders in the National Black Baptist Convention movement that carved out a space for women’s activism in the male-dominated Black church. Ella Baker would do the same in later decades but on a much broader scale.

At age fourteen, Ella Baker left home to attend Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, which at the time was both a boarding school and a college. While at Shaw, Baker began to establish her identity as an activist and began her lifelong work as an intellectual and political organizer. Reflecting on that time when she was not yet the rebel she later became, Baker remarked, “I didn’t break rules, but I challenged rules” (1977, p. 30). In addition to her budding activism, Baker was growing intellectually and honing her political ideology toward coalition building across lines of race, gender, and geographies. She read the works of Kant, Socrates, Aristotle, and Carter G. Woodson and studied the lives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth. Already an impressive communicator, at Shaw, Baker further honed her communication capacities as a member of the debate team and through her service as associate editor for the Shaw University Journal. Baker was an exceptional student. She graduated valedictorian of her class from both high school in 1923 and college in 1927. Defying her mother’s expectation that she would become a teacher, Baker headed to New York City. There, she continued to hone her leadership philosophy, which envisioned an approach to participative democracy inclusive of people living under the heels of oppression.

Baker also broadened her influence through her philosophical debates with leftist intellectuals and critical thinkers, especially during the years of political ferment and organizing from the 1930s through the 1960s (James, 1994; Ransby, 2003). She also carved out a space for her leadership in the predominantly male political circles that included W.E.B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Across the span of her career, “she was involved in more than thirty major political campaigns and organizations, addressing such issues as the war
in Vietnam, Puerto Rican independence, South African apartheid, political repression, prison conditions, poverty, unequal education, and sexism” (Ransby, 2003, pp. 5–6).

Above all, Ella Baker was a conduit through which the legacy of Black resistance and transformative change processes was passed from her generation to future ones. This is perhaps one of the most enduring aspects of Baker’s contributions to social justice philosophy. As exemplified in the words that introduced this chapter, Baker believed that the protracted struggle for freedom was carried on by those who brought the struggle forward within the context of the times. This was most evident in her work with youth at the forefront of the 1960s era Civil Rights Movement. It was Ella Baker's influence that ensured the creation of the autonomous Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (Payne, 1995/2007, pp. 95–96). However, as Ransby has explained in her sweeping and well-documented biography of Ella Baker’s life, Baker’s concern was not simply about the autonomy of the young activists of SNCC (pronounced “snick”). Rather, she saw in the youth leading the sit-ins of the 1960s “the brazen fighting spirit the students had exhibited in their sit-in-protests . . . [and] . . . 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” (Ransby, 2003, p. 244). She mentored the young leaders of SNCC and others who joined the movement, freely sharing the ideas she had honed over a lifetime of social justice activism.

This book tells the story of some of the early twenty-first-century conduits of Ella Baker’s philosophy. It is about people in vulnerable communities working in partnership with people in well-resourced organizations to develop their capacities to lead social justice action. In the case of African American girls like Jamilla, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and other girls of color who live in underresourced, segregated, subsidized housing, this book is about the potential for their coming to consciousness about social activism. Their activism often happens within the context of strict housing policies that threaten basic security and other street-level systems of control that constitute
a “new Jim Crow” era in the United States, and whose tactics reach into neighborhoods and schools. It happens in the context of mass incarceration and anti-immigrant tactics. Globally, inclusive of the United States, girls and women face persistent threats of violence as they expose and challenge misogynistic cultures.

This book is also about the limits and possibilities of alliances with people like me—an African American woman with a PhD, a university researcher and tenured professor at an elite Research I state university, a feminist, and an activist—who come from outside of the community to support social justice leadership. People from outside communities—such as scholar-activists, university student–service learners, and policy professionals—are not immune to exercises of power; even the most progressive scholar-activists may (unwittingly or not) become instruments of state or corporate power, reinforcing some of the very injustices they aspire to work against (Brown, 2015). Indeed, current trends in engagement between organizations and communities for social change have tended to advance a neoliberal project, in the sense that community voices are systematically erased by ostensibly participatory interventions that are actually instruments to further the search for new markets and new sources of raw materials (Dutta, 2011). Neoliberal projects often contribute to the development of “Oppression Olympics,” in which different groups are pitted against one another to fight for scarce resources (Yuval-Davis, 2012).

Strengthening communication capacities for coalition building and solidarity in social justice activism requires that multiple and intersecting kinds of power be made legible through a “decolonizing” approach that gets to the root causes of problems. Without that kind of legibility, we can miss clues about neoliberal processes that erase or distort community voices. A decolonizing approach to research and policy checks how power is operating in collaborations between organizations and communities to level the field of possibilities (Chakrabarty, 2002; Dutta, 2015). Ella Baker’s praxis calls for that kind of legibility, as I learned through my attempts to perform university-community engagement with girls and their families in vulnerable communities.
In the summer of 2005, I was volunteering at the Family Resource Center at Regal Gardens and University Heights, two predominantly African American public housing complexes not far from UNC–Chapel Hill, where I am a faculty member. It is not unusual for even longtime residents to express surprise that there are “low-income housing projects” in College Town. Regal Gardens and University Heights are situated in the historically African American part of College Town, two blocks from the fashionable Main Street that forms the center of the city. The housing complexes were built on a sloping hill, separated from each other by a busy street that slices through the neighborhood en route to the many affluent neighborhoods in the city. University Heights sits at the top of the slope and has fifteen newer duplex units and a large courtyard and playground in the center. Regal Gardens is much older, constructed in the early 1950s, and has four buildings of ten two- and three-bedroom apartments that continue down toward the bottom of the slope and abut a thick wooded area. People who are experiencing homelessness sometimes spend the night in the wooded area behind Regal Gardens. A path that leads from the park at the edge of the wooded area to a small playground at Regal Gardens is often used as a shortcut to get into the center of town. For cars, there is only one way in and out of each of the complexes, and police responding to residents’ calls for assistance regularly lock down the entrances.

I contemplated the prospects of becoming a more community-engaged scholar-activist and my position as a Black woman academic. I was very aware of the crisis conditions facing Black women because of structural inequality in the United States: high rates of unemployment, increasing rates of incarceration, disenfranchisement, and health-care disparity (see Pratt-Clarke, 2013). These conditions especially captured the vulnerability of Black girls and women living in the growing number of segregated spaces created by the “new Jim Crow” context. And there was evidence that government officials and policy makers were not paying attention to the crisis. For example, as Cohen (2004) reported, when journalist Gwen Ifill moderated the 2004 vice presidential debate between then Vice President Dick Cheney and vice presidential candidate John Edwards, she alerted the nation to the HIV/AIDS health crisis facing African American women, which was apparently news to the candidates. “I want to talk to
you about AIDS,” she said. “And not about AIDS in China or Africa, but AIDS right here in this country where Black women between the ages of 25 and 44 are 13 times more likely to die of the disease. What should the government’s role be in helping to end the growth of this epidemic?” Vice President Cheney did not deny his ignorance. “I have not heard those numbers with respect to African-American women. I was not aware that it was—that they’re in epidemic there,” he said. John Edwards decided to evade the question, focusing instead on AIDS in Africa, the genocide in Sudan, uninsured Americans, and presidential hopeful John Kerry.

Despite US policy makers’ lag in taking up the charge to protect Black women and girls, at conferences and in community conversations I was connecting with women who were acting to engage Black girls and women. They included women who lived in towns not far from UNC–Chapel Hill and nearby Duke University and were creating their own survival in their own neighborhoods.

In retrospect, what I was witnessing in the early 2000s was a resurgence of the late nineteenth-century Black women’s club movement that Ella Baker’s mother, Anna Ross Baker, had been a part of. This was a movement of thousands of women-led church groups, social clubs, sororities, and other organizations in Black civil society that responded to the intense racial hatred, violence, and segregation African Americans faced in the Jim Crow era, the period just after the end of the institutionalized enslavement of African Americans. These organizations were at the height of their activity in the mid-twentieth century. They provided not only a safe haven but also “a set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that facilitated responses to economic and political challenges confronting Black people” (Collins, 1998, p. 23; see also Dawson, 1995).

Black women–led organizing was on the rise again in the early 2000s. Kimberly Springer’s Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women’s Contemporary Activism described the legacy of leadership and activism in Black women’s history and noted the “historical continuity” of activism led by African American women (1999, p. 2). Springer chose as her starting point the legacy of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which in 1895 merged two national organizations of Black women’s clubs. The NACW motto was “lifting as we climb,” emphasizing the organization’s commitment to community and its roots in a culture of
resistance that began in the era of US institutionalized slavery. Springer’s book surveyed the growing numbers of Black women–led organizations and their various causes that were alive and well in 1999. Her book described new kinds of oppression in Black communities at the dawn of the twenty-first century, but also the ways that Black women were once again responding to them. I felt a calling to join in this intervention.


Tenured in 2004, I felt I had the academic freedom to expand the boundaries of my research into a program of community-engaged scholarship. Significantly, UNC–Chapel Hill was among the campuses nationwide that were building the infrastructure of support for engaged scholarship, such as engagement-focused research grants and research and study leaves. In 2006, I received two competitive awards through the UNC–Chapel Hill College of Arts and Sciences: the Kauffman Foundation’s Faculty Fellowship for Social Entrepreneurship and a competitive research leave at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities. Those awards provided crucial resources. They afforded me the time away from teaching and service for more in-depth study of Ella Baker’s organizing praxis and opportunities to engage with Black women organizers in communities locally and across the country who seemed to be organizing in the spirit of Ella Baker. They also provided access to a paid consultant, who helped me establish the Ella Baker Women’s Center for Leadership and Community Activism as a nonprofit and community-based organization in 2007. The center would support a newly formed collaboration with African American girls (ages thirteen to seventeen) and their adult allies in the two previously mentioned neighborhoods near the university.

To further prepare for the launch of the center, I networked at conferences and community gatherings (social media had not yet become the primary means for networking, at least not for me) to learn from Black women community-based leaders. Four in particular were crucial to the emergence of the Ella Baker Women’s Center. Cynthia Brown was a local community organizer whose antiracism work on economic and environmental justice grounded her in urban and rural communities across the
state. She taught workshops that became central to our critical pedagogy. She had formed an antiracist organization, Dismantling Racism, that was in high demand across the country. Nia Wilson, executive director of Spirit House in Durham, North Carolina, became an important ally in our work against the prison-industrial complex. Two other key allies were Delores Bailey, executive director at EmPOWERment, Inc., a community-based organization that works with families to achieve homeownership, and Ms. Vergie, a resident and activist in the Regal Gardens and University Heights neighborhoods. These two community experts worked most closely with my students and me as we launched and developed the Ella Baker Women’s Center’s work for social justice leadership.

Since its founding in 2007, the Ella Baker Women’s Center has provided a training ground for undergraduate student–service learners and graduate student researchers interested in learning a critical engagement praxis that centers community knowledge. Service learning is an experiential education methodology based on reciprocal learning, wherein both providers and recipients of service benefit from the activities (Furco 1996; Sigman, 1979). In 2009, I designed a course that applied such an approach, a first-year seminar called Models of Collective Leadership for Social Change (COMM 89/53). The course was designed for transfer students and students in their first or second semester of university study, who could spend their remaining college years applying the capacities they learned in the course. The seminar allows students to explore the critical questions, discussed later, related to community-based partnerships. During the first five weeks of the seminar, students critically reflect on ideas from readings, guest speakers, documentary films, and case studies to explore questions relevant to “power elites” (e.g., university stakeholders, nongovernmental/nonprofit organizations) who work alongside people in vulnerable communities to create positive social change. The course also equips students with applied knowledge about a vast array of communication pedagogies and participatory praxis, such as photovoice, oral histories, community dialogues, and arts activism. (The Ella Baker Women’s Center employed these tools, and they are discussed in subsequent chapters.) Students then
applied that knowledge in diverse teams formed in partnership with community-based organizations or community members who had identified a need and desire to collaborate with service-learning students to complete projects. From 2009 to 2013, the center served as one of four service-learning organizations partnering with our class. At the center, student teams worked with African American teen girls to plan and implement several projects, including the Sharing the Mantle Conference, which showcased their collaborative work and best practices in campus/community partnerships for social justice. Many of the COMM 89/53 students stayed connected with their partnering organizations (including the Ella Baker Women’s Center). Students who have stayed in touch tell me that they have gone on to start social justice organizations of their own or are applying what they’ve learned in public and private sector work around the world.

Graduate student researchers have also advanced the work of the center while honing their own capacities as community-based researchers. These students worked with me to develop and present critical pedagogy workshops and conduct research (Mease & Terry, 2012).

Finally, the Moore Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program (MURAP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is another student research and learning experience that was critical in advancing the work of the center. Founded in 1993, this program attracts students from colleges and universities throughout the United States to spend ten weeks in the summer preparing to apply to graduate school. I served as a research mentor from 1999 through 2010 and worked with eight students who spent their summers helping to build the work of the Ella Baker Women’s Center. It was the critical work of two MURAP students, Joaquín Sánchez and Elisa Oceguera, that laid the groundwork for the center’s flagship program, Striving Sisters Speak!, to emerge and thrive.

Striving Sisters Speak! (S3!) is the girl-centered leadership group that was founded and named in 2007 by the initial cohort of seven teen girls from University Heights and Regal Gardens in College Town. With these girls at the center, a collective of graduate student volunteers, undergraduate summer research interns, and community activists organized to support the emerging participatory research project. S3! leadership cohorts have become a flagship program to create and implement social justice leader-
ship projects at the Ella Baker Women’s Center (see Parker et al., 2011). Over the course of the six-year period reported in this book (2007–2013), S3! cohorts and university- and community-based allies have worked collaboratively to produce several youth-led social justice projects, including (a) researching root causes of state violence and structural inequality, which the girls presented at youth conferences they helped to organize; (b) organizing social justice campaigns, including efforts to “raise the age” limits to end youth incarceration in adult prisons; and (c) creating and presenting youth arts activist projects to advance antiracist civic education. These concrete examples and others from the center’s work are described in subsequent chapters. They illustrate a communication framework and lessons learned for productive university-community collaborations in the paradoxical context in which they are situated.

Ella Baker had what I introduce in this book as a catalytic leadership approach, a decolonizing praxis that is applicable to organizational-community collaborations. Catalytic leadership is a concrete set of communication practices for doing social justice leadership in equitable partnership with, instead of on, communities. I first encountered Ella Baker’s ideas while researching a book on African American women executives’ leadership (Parker, 2004). The participants’ oral histories were filled with references to legacies of leadership wisdom passed on to them that, I argued, represented a tradition of leadership in Black women’s history of antiracist resistance. Ella Baker embodied that tradition. Since then, I have continued to study Baker through archival research and on-the-ground praxis. My understanding of Baker’s approach to social justice leadership is heavily influenced by the work of historians Charles Payne (1989) and Barbara Ransby (2001, 2003). It was Payne who amplified Ella Baker’s approach as “group centered” as opposed to “leader centered.” In other words, Baker believed that people in communities could learn to lead themselves on important issues, centering the decision-making power in the group working for social justice instead of having a charismatic leader decide what action to take. Ransby’s account provided a nuanced interpretation of Baker’s philosophy “based on
militant antiracism, grassroots popular democracy, a subversion of traditional class and gender hierarchies, and a long-term vision for fundamental social and economic change” (2001, p. 43). To better understand Baker’s group-centered approach and philosophy, I also analyzed her writing, speeches, and interviews archived at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture in Harlem, New York; the UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries; and the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement archives at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies.

Using those sources as a starting point for my understanding of Ella Baker’s catalytic leadership, this book describes my own experience as the founding director of the Ella Baker Women’s Center for Leadership and Community Activism. The center’s mission is to advance the legacy and work of Ella Baker through contemporary interventions for social justice. The book covers the first six years of work after the center’s founding in 2007. My account of this history oscillates between the stories of African American girls at the center, developing their capacities as leaders, and the university-based and community allies supporting them. Ultimately it foregrounds the dynamism of the partnership for social justice activism that made up the collective.

The case is an example of university-community partnerships, but readers will find it relevant to other organization types, such as large nongovernmental agencies, state agencies with strategic community initiatives, or other programmatic initiatives that engage with people in vulnerable communities. More important, anyone in pursuit of social justice will find Ella Baker’s philosophy of praxis to be relevant.

**EIGHT QUESTIONS**

Questions Ella Baker was asking in the 1930s through the 1980s are still relevant in the 2000s. I offer the following eight questions, which undergird the case study, as helpful guides for your work. First: *Under what conditions do people living in vulnerable life situations hone their capacities for critical consciousness and agency against oppressive circuits of power?* Today, as in Baker’s time, the effects of extreme poverty—hunger, chronic disease, and economic precarity—are traumatizing people across