ELLA BAKER, 'BLACK WOMEN’S WORK’ AND ACTIVIST INTELLECTUALS

In my organizational work I have never thought in terms of my “making a contribution.” I just thought of myself as functioning where there was a need. And if I have made a contribution I think it may be that I had some influence on a large number of people. – Ella Baker

by Joy James

INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICAL CHOICE

A BRILLIANT STRATEGIST in the civil rights movements, Ella Josephine Baker (1903-1986) was field organizer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1930s and 1940s, and the first director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1950s. She also acted as convener of the student conference in 1960 that lead to the formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), for which she served as advisor. Baker’s “organizational work” expanded US democracy as well as helped to redefine and radicalize the roles of intellectuals and activists in the civil rights era. Her radicalism transformed criticisms of racism into critiques of both capitalism and liberal acquiescence to oppressive state practices. Baker also channeled her critiques into political opposition through civil disobedience and grassroots organizing for a democratic society. Merging rhetoric about black liberation with activism, she embodied both political worker and intellectual.

Ella Baker’s influence on a large number of people extends to generations who, knowing very little about or having never heard of Miss Baker, were shaped by her political legacy. Miss Baker’s obscurity is as instructive as her political thought and action. Charles Payne observes:

That Ella Baker could have lived the life she did and remain so little known even among the politically knowledgeable is important in itself. It reminds us once more of how much our collective past has been distorted — and distorted in disempowering ways.

Part of the distortion stems from which actors are privileged in political memory and knowledge. Reflecting the conservative/liberal bias that privileges men, whites and the affluent, some male (SCLC) civil rights leaders and contemporary civil rights historians de-emphasized the role of African American women in this movement. For most, leadership and agency have been distorted as primarily the attributes of male political and intellectual elites. It is not surprising that the contributions of radicals, particularly black women such as Miss Baker, who spoke and organized not only against racism but also capitalism and imperialism, go unrecognized.

Even the ‘knowledgeable’ may remember Miss Baker’s political contributions in disempowering ways, i.e., in ways that de-radicalize her political commitments. For some Miss Baker may represent the “organic intellectual,” described in Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks as the strategist whose theorizing to end oppression forms the “ribs corseting the masses.” The organic intellectual as activist works with a theoretical and experiential political base, which is precisely how Ella Baker positioned herself. However, Miss Baker
would likely reject as elitist any Gramscian
categorization of her as a member of a po-
litical vanguard. One of her often cited
quotes is that “a strong people don’t need
strong leaders.” As an activist-intellectual
with democratic vision, Ella Baker’s thought
reveals a strong sense of social change deter-
mined by “ordinary” people who wage politi-
cal movements. Her relationships to impov-
erished and militant workers forged political
perspectives that identified African Ameri-
can laborers and workers as political leaders.
Such views on mass leadership shaped her fa-
ciliation of grassroots activism for the
NAACP, SCLC and SNCC; it also led to her
resignations from the NAACP and SCLC
whose bureaucratic leadership, in her esti-
mation, refused to commit to grassroots po-
itical activism. (A study of her political life
reveals the class, gender and ideological dif-
ferences within the civil rights movement.)

Ella Baker’s preference to take her politi-
cal directives from poor or working class
African Americans, rather than civil rights
elites, led some to marginalize her. However
her political instincts were grounded in po-
itical lessons accumulated through activism
in New York City during the Depression.
Labor activism in Harlem planted the roots
of her praxis in the political-economic con-
ditions and collective leadership of black
workers, youth and women. As a young,
black woman worker during this era, Baker
used her own caste position to explore the
relevancy and efficacy of black liberation
politics.

BLACK WORKERS AND LABOR ACTIVISTS

DURING ELLA BAKER’S LIFE TIME, “black
women’s work” generally meant field or
domestic labor for whites (in the North it ex-
panded to include factory work). For a more
privileged minority of African American
women it also included teaching, which
brought both status and a reprieve from the
dehumanizing physical labor characterizing
black women’s work. A college graduate
from Shaw University, Ella Baker recognized
the limitations imposed on anti-racist educa-
tors by white controlled school boards and
rejected a teaching career. In 1927, joining
hundreds of thousands of black women mi-
grating North in search of work and relief
from Jim Crow, Ella Baker left her home and
a somewhat protected, privileged place in
Littleton, South Carolina for New York City.
In New York, she secured employment in the
menial and racially-sexually exploited labor,
considered traditional “black women’s work.”

Racist and sexist hiring policies — the few
African American businesses tended to hire
men for clerical workers with the bias that
men were, and should be, the primary
“bread winners”— meant that for several
years Ella Baker’s first and only paying job
was as a restaurant waitress. Rather than sub-
mit to exploitation, Baker began organizing
with other African American workers for
jobs and collective economic gains. Later ob-
taining factory work, and eventual employ-
ment as a journalist and paid political organ-
zizer, Ella Baker gained a wide range of work
and social experiences. These traditional
and “non-traditional” jobs, along with organi-
zizing with Harlem trade unionists during
the Depression, deepened her understand-
ing of the economic exploitation in racism.

At the height of the Depression, national
production decreased by half, thousands
were left homeless due to bank foreclosures
and millions were left jobless without com-
ensation. By 1933 an estimated 66% of the
“potential labor force of Harlem was unem-
ployed.” In 1935 over two million African
Americans were on relief. Concentrated in
northern cities — eleven had African Ameri-
can populations of over 100,000 by the end
of 1935 — African Americans used their
votes to increase the numbers of black city
officials; yet the majority were impoverished.
In response to their conditions, largely un-
mitigated by electoral politics, African Ameri-
cans formed Unemployed Councils which
supported multi-racial organizing and orga-
nized nationwide “hunger marches” to agi-
tate for immediate emergency relief and un-
employment compensation legislation.

Ella Baker describes New York City in the
1930s, with its “race” men and women, social-
ists, communists, and union activists, as a
stimulating “hotbed of radical thinking.”
During the Depression, Baker herself began
to consider the structural nature of black ex-
ploration and the need for organized re-
ponses to it:
I began to see that there were certain social forces over which the individual had very little control. It wasn’t an easy lesson for me to learn but I was able to learn it. It was out of that context that I began to explore more in the area of ideology and the theory of social change. So during the Depression years, I began to identify to some extent with the unemployed, the organization of the unemployed. . . .

Faced with increasing economic hardship, racist riots, hatred strikes, exclusion from better paying jobs and unions by northern white workers, and the racism of the federal government, African Americans increased their labor agitation, strengthening ties to socialist and communist organizations. Although the majority of Harlem blacks did not join radical parties, during the Depression many organized to create alternative economic relations for their personal survival, and that of their families. The Young Negroes Cooperative League, which Ella Baker joined in 1932, was one attempt at community organizing for black economic self-sufficiency. Eventually working as coordinator of the league, Miss Baker administered its offices in Chelsea, organizing with others to establish stores and buying clubs throughout the country. Ella Baker worked in the league with George Shuyler, whom she called the originator of the “buy black” campaigns, which attempted to discourage consumers from patronizing businesses with racist hiring practices. “Buy black” campaigns focused on black customers patronizing black businesses; yet intended more than “black capitalism” in that the campaigns critiqued structural unemployment and used economic boycotts as a labor strategy. (The Harlem Labor Union picketed for jobs on 125th Street with “don’t buy where you can’t work” as their slogan, foreshadowing the picket lines and boycotts of the civil rights movement in the South.) Devastated by the Depression, many became (ideologically) receptive to cooperative, non-capitalist economic and social relations. In the league, people collectively banked funds, purchased goods, donated services and resources to cooperatives. African Americans also formed cooperative classes in settlement houses and Negro women’s clubs. The league also offered a system of social relations similar to the extended, southern families of many Harlem residents — by 1930, nearly half of Manhattan’s African American population had been born in the South.

According to Ella Baker, young African Americans joined the Young Negroes Cooperative League during the Depression because they “were feeling the pinch, so when people feel the pinch they do certain things that they wouldn’t do otherwise.” The league offered an alternative to Darwinian production and consumption and necessity made it popular among young African Americans. After the Depression, the league’s structures for communal/socialist economic interdependence and black independence from white society dissipated. Organizing with the league had provided Ella Baker with many opportunities as a strategist in confronting the poverty of black workers. However, it was probably not until she worked with New York City’s AfraAmerican domestics, that Ella Baker analyzed how state exploitation of black workers was exacerbated by gender and sex.

ON THE AUCTION BLOCK: SEX, RACE, AND CLASS EXPLOITATION

In 1932, Ella Baker began freelancing for the NAACP’s publication, The Crisis, which W.E.B. Du Bois, as editor, had developed into a major, intellectual vehicle for civil rights politics. Prior to working for The Crisis, she had joined the editorial staff of the American West Indian News in 1929; and later served as office manager and editorial assistant for the Negro National News. Working as an investigative journalist, translating ideas gathered from political activism and research into written analysis, was probably instrumental in clarifying Baker’s politico-economic critiques.

In 1935, by then an experienced labor organizer, Ella Baker co-wrote “The Bronx Slave Market” with Marvel Cooke for the November issue of The Crisis. “The Bronx Slave Market” describes sexual and racial exploitation unique to African American women, particularly black domestic workers. As her most detailed, analytical piece, it appears to be Baker’s only published essay focusing on the exploitation of African American women laborers/workers. Although less well known than her 1960 article “More than a Hamburger,” which dealt with the desegregation
of southern lunch counters by student activists, this article, like her later piece, maintained economic justice for poor and working class African Americans as the primary objective for black political struggles.

To research their essay, Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke posed as domestic workers seeking employment in the "slave marts." Institutional sexism, racism, and segregation rendered black female employment synonymous to menial labor, even for college educated black women such as Baker and Cooke who, struck with the dilemma that American society largely defined black women's work as domestic service for whites, easily assumed their role-play as "servants." Although a few African American men stood on line, waiting to be chosen for day labor, the slave markets were overwhelmingly reserved for African American women. The auction blocks were located at 167th Street and Jerome Avenue and at Simpson and Westchester avenues in the Bronx (now the "South Bronx"). Black women exercised the least control over their labor and bodies at the Simpson slave market which was the most dehumanizing of the two auction sites, according to Baker and Cooke. For paltry wages, workers negotiated salaries with employers who paid anything or, after the work was completed, nothing to women with few political or legal rights. The treatment of African American women domestics as 'disposable' was an important feature of the markets.

The overwhelming number of AfrAmeri cans in the 1930s were trapped in domestic work. The Depression forced middle class African American women who previously had earned factory wages, or whose husbands' or fathers' salaries enabled them not to work outside of the home, back into domestic 'slavery.' (Later, the availability of factory jobs first to white and then black women during World War II created another AfrAmerican exodus from domestic service). With 15 million Americans without jobs and savings, the Depression intensified the economic conditions tying African Americans to domestic and food service. According to Baker and Cooke, while eviscerating the conditions of middle class and working class black women, it elevated the social status of working class white women, increasing their access to AfrAmeriCan servants:

Paradoxically, the crash of 1929 brought to the domestic labor market a new employer class. The lower middle-class housewife, who, having dreamed of the luxury of a maid, found opportunities staring her in the face in the form of Negro women pressed to the wall by poverty, starvation and discrimination..."

Baker's and Cooke's criticisms of the roles of white working class women as employers note many, ironically including the wives of union activists, set their household clocks back an hour or two to cheat black women domestics of their wages.

Grappling with economic exploitation and deprivation, AfrAmericans turned to the federal government for assistance. Government emergency relief provided a desperately needed cushion for those African Americans able to obtain it. Yet, it was riddled with inequities: Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policies excluded blacks from most of the Department of Labor's Federal Emergency Relief Administration assistance (e.g., the Wagner-Lewis Social Security Bill failed to cover farm and domestic work where the majority of African Americans were employed); blacks received less relief assistance than whites; and, the Federal Housing Administration denied mortgage financing to blacks seeking to buy homes in white neighborhoods.21 Baker and Cooke found that subsistence levels of relief, paradoxically, forced women into the slave markets and, by providing a meager "safety net," allowed them to negotiate for better wages: As inadequate as emergency relief has been, it has proved somewhat of a boon to many of these women, for with its advent, actual starvation is no longer their ever-present slave driver and they have been able to demand twenty-five and even thirty cents an hour as against the old fifteen and twenty cent rate."

Yet, the government neither mandated decent wages to enable workers independence from relief nor provided adequate assistance to free workers from the need to "sell" themselves. Despite crucial federal aid, African American women were dehumanized in seeking government assistance and further debased in the free enterprise zones of the slave marts.

Black women (domestic) workers had to contend not only with the government's indifference to their economic exploitation...
but also with the duplicity of employment agencies, which ostensibly were their vehicle for gainful employment. Agencies tended to blame women workers in the slave markets for driving down wages, and consequently the reduction in agencies' fees. Employment agencies' economic self-interest, as well as class bias, fueled anti-worker sentiments. Baker and Cooke summarize one agency's contempt for women in the slave marts:

"[D]eserving domestics are finding it increasing-ly difficult due to the menace and obstacles present-ed by the slavish performances of the lower types of domestics themselves, who, unlike the original slaves who recoiled from meeting their masters, rush to meet their mistresses." 21

Countering these stereotypes, Baker and Cooke suggest economic devastation, rather than slavish opportunism, as the primary motivation forcing women to auction themselves in the marts:

Who are these women? What brings them here? Why do they stay? . . . whatever their standing prior to the Depression, none sought employment where they now seek it. They come to the Bronx, not because of what it promises, but largely in desperation.22

Baker and Cooke also note that AfraAmeri-cans seeking wages in the marts faced not only the derision of "respectable" wage earn-ers but also exploitation from ineffective or fraudulent employment agencies:

Hours of futile waiting in employment agencies, the fee that must be paid despite the lack of in-come, fraudulent agencies that sprung up during the Depression, all forced the day worker to fend for herself or try the dubious and circuitous road to public relief.23

Although Baker and Cooke cite the positive role of some employment agencies that sought to curtail the activities of illegal agencies and to establish minimum and maximum wages for workers, they generally criti-cize agencies for neglecting workers' needs. Pointing out how government and employ-ment agencies invest in workers' exploita-tion, the writers also addressed the public's general indifference towards AfraAmerican domestics, suggesting this public aloofness stemmed from its perception that desperate poverty was peculiar to "lower class" domestics. Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke instead judged the workers' plight as an indictment of the economic system and systemic racism, arguing: "The real significance of the Bronx Slave Market is that the "'mart' is but a miniature mirror of our economic battle front." 26

Forced by poverty into the marts to sell themselves to 'mistresses' and 'masters' who bought by the hour, day or week, African American women grappled with dual com-modification on the block as both domestic and sexual worker:27

Rain or shine, cold or hot, you will find them there — Negro women, old and young — sometimes bedraggled, sometimes neatly dressed — but with the invariable paper bundle, waiting ex-pectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours, or even a day at the munificent rate of fifteen, twen-ty, twenty-five, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour. If not the wives themselves, maybe their husbands, their sons, or their brothers, under the subterfuge of work, offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time.28

As evident in its inadequate provisions for relief, the government shared much of the public's deep indifference towards black women trapped in domestic/sexual labor. Baker and Cooke recount their own experiences with a white male plainclothes detect-ive who attempted to entrap and arrest them while they were posing as domestics for prostitution.

Despite the obstacles posed by state agen-cies, economic institutions, and debilitating labor, African American women resisted. In the slave marts, they created an "embryonic labor union": according to The Crisis essay, domestic workers forced black women who bargained for wages less than thirty cents an hour to leave the market; they also organized workers to collectively demand 35 cents an hour on Jewish holidays. However, Baker and Cooke write that neither their conditions nor their nascent labor activism led these women workers to critically examine the political-economic structures that created the slave marts and drove black women to them. Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke surmise:

largely unaware of their organized power, yet ready to band together for some immediate and personal gain either consciously or unconsciously, they still cling to that American illusion that any one who is determined and persistent can get ahead."

According to the authors, such beliefs in the limitless opportunities of free enterprise and the "American illusion" hindered the devel-
opment of a broad-based, radical consciousness among black women.

Forgoing “American illusion” for labor militancy, Baker and Cooke maintained that the abolition of the slave market required eradicating its causes:

The roots . . . of the Bronx Slave Market spring from: (1) the general ignorance of and apathy towards organized labor action; (2) the artificial barriers that separate the interest of the relief administrators and investigators from that of their “case loads,” the white collar and professional worker from the laborer and domestic; and (3) organized labor’s limited concept of exploitation, which permits it to fight vigorously to secure itself against evil, yet passively or actively aids and abets the ruthless destruction of Negroes.

The oppressive conditions that Baker and Cooke point out, and their remedies based on labor activism as well as alliances between “welfare” agencies, social workers, middle class workers and manual laborers, are important reminders of the centrality of economic struggles. They also point out the necessity of repositioning class alliances for the civil and human rights of African Americans in general, and black women workers in particular.

GENDER, RACE, CLASS AND WORK

Ella Baker’s historical and political significance is usually remembered through her contributions to SCLC and SNCC; yet, decades before helping to develop these organizations, her labor activism placed “work” central to critiques of racism, classism, and sexism. Her activism also made the struggles against racism and sexism indispensable to dismantling economic oppression. Theoryizing on women’s “multiple” oppressions, “The Bronx Slave Market” anticipated analysis of the intersections of race and class, and their relevance to progressive struggles, fifty years before Black Women’s Studies, Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies embarked on their current endeavors. Despite its limitations, the article’s insights remain salient. Today, in the formal economy racist-sexist wage differentials are used to expropriate Black women’s labor; while present day “slave marts” are expanded within prisons and the underground economy where undocumented workers, who also lack civil rights, face grotesque forms of exploitation in the sex trade, sweatshops, fields, and homes.” Social inequities still make domestic labor an economic mainstay for black women. In 1980, more African American women were employed as domestics than professionals.

The work of Ella Baker, and Marvel Cooke, suggests that moving from discourse about the impact of oppression on African American lives, and social work ameliorating black underdevelopment, to political activism challenging oppressive structures, necessitates addressing the labor conditions of marginalized workers. Such a movement would also require identifying progressive and retrogressive relationships between black activists, laborers, the unemployed, and elites, as well as strengthening the ties between street and institutional intellectuals in political coalitions. Miss Baker provided models for such work.

CONCLUSION: ROLE MODELS AND ACTIVIST INTELLECTUALS

For nearly half a century, Ella Josephine Baker organized a praxis for black liberation movements, establishing important models for radical intellectualism, activism and “black women’s work.” That Ella Baker worked as a “facilitator” rather than a spokesperson, had little time to write, and did not seek to establish herself as a “public intellectual” outside of a community of radical activists reveals another feature of Black women’s work - individual anonymity from prioritizing the collective. That her life’s work (mirrored in her few, obscured essays) touched so many people — and that activists, political students, writers, film-makers, and artist keep her memory alive — speaks to the incredible power of her intellect rooted in radicalism, communal relationships, and political counsel to younger activists.

Ella Baker’s work as an activist does not in itself qualify her as an intellectual; likewise, pursuing a teaching career would not have made her an intellectual either. Her standing as activist-intellectual, or Fundi, comes from her ability to analyze, advocate and agitate for the necessary conditions for African American equality in a democratic state. She dedicated her life to this work while rejecting the seductive diversions of AfroAmerican
class pretensions and assimilation. Amid conflicting intellectual modes, Ella Josephine Baker represents an important model of intellectual-as-radical activist. Defying the media marketing of black intellectuals, she provides a framework for contemporary, progressive debates about the role of the "public intellectual" in societies crippled by economic and social crises shaped by white supremacy. As an engagé her political speech was concretized in resistance to labor exploitation where race and gender are denigrated for economic advantage. Transforming debates into strategies, and theorizing into democratic agency, her autobiographical model suggests that the intellectual as political actor, rather than distant spectator, is rooted to resist de-radicalization.

"Functioning where there was a need," Ella Baker's most singular contribution as an activist-intellectual is that she tirelessly worked to maintain and expand an existential base upon which people could confront their relationships to their own exploitation, as well as their exploitations of others. On this foundation, Ella Baker's insights, shared through writing and activism, pass on a political vision which continues to inform our struggles against exploitation and violence.

NOTES


3. Payne, 898-899

4. Taylor Branch's Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) and David Garrow's Bearing the Cross: MLK Jr and the SCLC (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), for example, are largely silent about the contributions of Ella Baker to the civil rights movement.

5. A few of the better known African American women fired from teaching positions because of their political activism include: Ida B. Wells; Septima Clark, JoAnne Robinson, and Angela Davis.

6. Even though Ella Baker married former Shaw University classmate T.J. Roberts, in the early 1930s, marriage did not alleviate the need to find work. (Ella Baker rarely referred to this brief marriage in her later life.) Most African American men were also segregated into low-paying subsistence wages in public "domestic work."

Jacqueline Jones writes: "By 1930 two types of workers symbolized the status of all black male wage earners in the urban North -- the New York City apartment house janitor and the Pittsburgh steelworker who manned the blast furnace during the hottest months of the year." Jones, 161. (See Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to Present. New York: Vintage Books, 1985)

7. In 1930, 5.5 percent of African American women were employed in industry compared to 27.1 percent of foreign-born and 19 percent of US born white women.


10. Grant, 216. According to Grant, in the 1930s, the expanding Congress of Industrial Organizations challenged the American Federation of Labor's racist and exclusionary practices.

11. Cantarow.


15. Grant, 216.

16. Cantarow, 64.


21. Federal administrators exacerbated racial inequities and fueled the migration of the 1930s, giving local southern officials overzealous powers in the distribution of federal funds. Similar trends in the dispensing of federal funds for community programs in the 1960s "War on Poverty" are detailed in Richard Cloward's and Francis Fox Piven's Regulating the Poor.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 330.
26. Ibid., 340.
27. Patricia Hill Collins describes the consequences of sexual objectification and violence: "Treating African American women as pornographic objects and portraying them as sexualized animals, as prostitutes, created the controlling image of Jezebel. Rape became the specific act of sexual violence forced on black women, with the controlling myth of the black prostitute as its ideological justification." See Patricia Hill Collins. Black Feminist Thought (Unwyn Press, 1990, 177).

Collins also writes that the selling of African women during slave auctions constituted the first American pornography. As one of the most graphic illustrations of sexual commodification and violence, the "pornographic" auctions of black women, however, coexisted with, and likely were preceded by, white males’ pornographic treatment of European and Indigenous American women. The historical, sexualized auction block, described by Collins, is supplanted today by largely, white-dominated pornography and prostitution industries marketing to white men; still, black porn, e.g., magazines such as Players which featured a "Daddy’s Little Girls" issue in the 1980s, also effectively markets sexual violence and incest among blacks.

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 340.
31. The use of these terms as analytical categories rather than descriptive terms, as well as their relationships and intersections, requires further exploration not possible within the limitations of this essay.

32. Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith maintain that: "Only a feminist, pro-woman perspective that acknowledges the reality of sexual oppression in the lives of black women, as well as the oppression of race and class, will make black women’s studies the transformer of consciousness it needs to be." See: Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, editors, All Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies (New York: Feminist Press, 1983), xxi. Other black feminist writers on Black Women’s Studies include; Barbara Christian, Deborah King and bell hooks.

33. Angela Davis notes the constraints shared by historical and modern domestic workers:

The enervating domestic obligations of women in general provide flagrant evidence of the power of sexism. Because of the added intrusion of racism, vast numbers of black women have to do their own housekeeping and other women’s chores as well. And frequently, the demands of the job in a white woman’s home have forced the domestic worker to neglect her own home and even her own children. As paid housekeepers, they have been called upon to be surrogate wives and mothers in millions of white homes.

34. Carole Marks documents that: over 50% of African American women employed outside the home were domestics in 1920; increasing to 60% in 1930, this figure dropped to 33% in 1960, and currently remains about 13%. Carole Marks, "Limits to the Decline of White Supremacy," unpublished paper presented University of California-Santa Barbara, April 1990.

35. Ella Baker is also memorialized in song: Bernice Johnson Reagon, who worked with Ella Baker in SNCC, quotes Miss Baker in Sweet Honey and the Rock’s "Ella’s Song": "Until the killing of black men, black mothers’ sons is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest."

36. Payne writes: "What I know of Ella Baker’s thinking does not strike me and never struck her, as offering any complete set of answers, but I think it does offer a more promising way to begin framing questions about where we are and how we get to the next stage than the ideas of many activists who did not become media figures." (Payne, 898-899).