Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement – Trailblazers or Just Nominal Members?

- An analysis at the example of four black women -

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Coming Together or Coming Apart? - Europe and the United States in the Sixties

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Table of Contents

[1] Carol **Mueller**, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 51.

I. Introduction

> the movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women. How many made a conscious decision on the basis of the larger goals, how many on the basis of habit pattern, I don't know. But it's true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of men.[2]

Although, as Ella Baker states in the quote above, women and especially black women made up the larger part of participants in the African-American movement for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s and can be seen in almost all pictures that were published of the movement's demonstrations and campaigns, the roles they played in the movement have largely been overlooked by historians whose accounts mostly examined the national civil rights organizations and their leaders, all of whom were men.[3] Only since the early 1980s have especially female historians started to look particularly at female participants and leaders of the civil rights movement and their contributions to the movement.[4] Women influenced the movement's success one the one hand as numerous members of the national civil rights organizations and participants in all demonstrations, and on the other hand as grassroots leaders in the Southern States of the United States, where they directed voter registration drives, taught in freedom schools, provided food and housing to volunteers of the movement, thereby taking responsibility for sustaining the movement.[5]

By introducing four black women and their work, I want to answer the question posed in the title, namely if black women were trailblazers of the movement, or if they were just nominal members that followed the lead of the big leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. The first woman I will start my analysis with, is Rosa Parks and her little known work in civil rights before she set in motion the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In this context Jo Ann Robinson and Septima Clark will be mentioned as important activists in civil rights also shaping Rosa Park's decisions and the course of the Montgomery Boycott. Following this I will write about Ella Baker and her importance to the movement, establishing and working for several civil rights organizations. Since the program this paper is part of had a transatlantic approach, I will also shortly write about Afro-Germans and the organizations they established during the 1980s. One remark will be of importance before going into my analysis. Of course there are many other black women whose work will have to be left out of this paper and it is also

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[2] Ella Baker cited in: Vicki L. **Crawford**, "Beyond the Human Self: Grassroots Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965,* ed. Vicki L. Crawford, 13-26 (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2005), 25.

[3] Cf. Anne **Standley**, "The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* ed. Vicki L. Crawford, 183-202 (see note 2), 183.

[4] Cf. Britta **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, "'Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders!': Ella Jo Baker and the Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited: Critical Perspectives on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States*, ed. Patrick B. Miller, Therese Frey Steffen and Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche (Münster: Lit, 2001), 87 f.

[5] Cf. Kathleen **Neal Cleaver**, "Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism," in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Adrien K. Wing, 48-56 (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 1997), 49.

important to mention that there were many white women that worked and risked their lives for civil rights but unfortunately there will not be enough space to talk about their histories and achievements in this setting.

II. "The Mother of the Movement"[6]: Rosa Park's Civil Rights Activism and the Events Leading up to the Montgomery Bus Boycott

One cannot talk or write about the civil rights movement without mentioning the Montgomery Bus Boycott which is by many considered the starting point of the movement and of young Martin Luther King Jr.'s rise to fame.[7] As Louis Lomax once said, *"The Negro Revolt is properly dated from the moment Mrs. Rosa Parks said 'No' to the driver's demand that she get up and let a white man have her seat."*[8]Almost every schoolchild will learn about the boycott and the seamstress Rosa Parks that refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus because she was tired and her feet were aching. But Rosa Parks was not only the seamstress that refused to give up her seat only because she was tired and this is what I want to show in this chapter.

In order to better understand why the Montgomery Bus Boycott happened, it will first be necessary to give some information about the city of Montgomery, AL and its race relations during the 1940's and 1950's. As in most southern cities, Montgomery was thoroughly segregated, meaning separate and usually unequal facilities for blacks and whites, they city's buses being no exception. Although black passengers, and especially women working mostly in domestic labor, made up two-thirds[9] of all passengers they still had to suffer under Montgomery's segregation laws. The buses were segregated in seating, the first 10 seats being reserved exclusively for whites, the middle section, often called *"no man's land"*[10], allowed black passengers to sit until a white person was left without a seat. Theoretically, the last ten seats were reserved for blacks. Additionally, black passengers had to pay their fare at the front, then get off and reenter the bus in the back. Often bus drivers would wait until they paid their fare and got off, and would then drive off without them.

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[6] **U.S. Congress**. *Public Law 106-26* (1999), http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ26/pdf/PLAW-106publ26.pdf (accessed September 3, 2011), 1.
[7] Cf. Douglas **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Viking, 2000), 2; OR David J. **Garrow** and Jo Ann G. **Robinson**, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, 4. print. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1990), ix.
[8] Louis Lomax cited in: Marianna W. **Davis**, "Civil Rights: The Movement," in *Contributions of Black Women to America: Vol 2 - Civil Rights, Politics and Government, Education, Medicine, Sciences*, ed. Marianna W. Davis, 2 vols., (Columbia, SC: Kenday Press, 1982), 127–128.
[9] Cf. Rita **Dove**, "The Torchbearer Rosa Parks," *TIME*, June 14, 1999, http://www.time.com/time/prinout/0,8816,991252,00.html (accessed September 5, 2011).
[10] Jerome **Bennett** Jr., "The Day the Black Revolution Began: Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 Marked 'Beginning of End' of Jim Crow System'," *Ebony* (September 1977): 55.

Often, blacks became victims of verbal or physical abuses from bus drivers who were all white.[11]

Rosa Parks was born on February 4, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama.[12] After graduating from school, she first planned to become a teacher but had to give up this plan due to her grandmother's illness. After her grandmother's death she went to Montgomery to work as a seamstress. When she married Raymond Parks in 1931 she would first come in touch with civil rights organizations. Raymond Parks was a member of the local branch of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* and took part in efforts to free the so-called *Scottsboro Boys*, eight black boys that had been convicted of raping two white women and sentenced to death. He had established a legal defense fund for them and took part in meetings of the *National Committee to Free the Scottsboro Boys*. Later on, some of those meetings would also be held in the home of Rosa and Raymond Parks.[13] When Rosa Park's little brother was drafted during World War II she was outraged that he would have to defend a democracy in which he could not even vote, which lead her, as she claims, to join the local *NAACP*, becoming its secretary under E.D. Nixon.[14] Rosa Parks' joining the *NAACP* is remarkable due to the fact that the NAACP was viewed as radical in the South. She also joined the *Montgomery Voters League* to encourage blacks to register to vote despite of white resistance. She herself had tried to register to vote unsuccessfully for two years until she was registered in 1945. In this last attempt she had copied by hand all the answers to the voting test that blacks would be compelled to take in order to register, because she was determined to sue the registration office if she would have failed the test again and therefore would need evidence.[15] This incident shows that she was very much aware of the mistreatment of blacks in all parts of life and would challenge this mistreatment if necessary.

Her work at Maxwell Field Air Base, which had integrated facilities, might have also influenced her thinking. *"You might just say Maxwell opened my eyes up […] It was an alternative reality to the ugly racial policies of Jim Crow."*[16] *"I could ride on an integrated trolley on the base […] but when I left the base, I had to ride home on a segregated bus."*[17] From then on she tried to avoid segregated facilities and the city's buses. Another important part of her work for civil rights was her position as the Montgomery *NAACP* youth group's

[11] Cf. **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks*, 57; OR Julian **Bond**, "Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott," (Lecture, University of Virginia, September 14, 2010), http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/295465-1 (accessed September 1, 2011).
[12] Cf. **ibid.,** 11.
[13] Cf. **ibid.**, 38-41.
[14] Cf. **ibid.**, 48–52.
[15] Cf. **ibid.**, 60.
[16] Rosa Parks cited in: **ibid.**, 43.
[17] Rosa Parks cited in: **ibid.**, 42.

advisor, counseling young people and campaigning against segregation, for example through a desegregation campaign at Montgomery's main library together with E.D. Nixon.[18] Shortly before Rosa Parks would refuse to give up her seat to a white man in 1955 she attended several desegregation workshops at *Highlander Folk School* in Tennessee (see III.), among them one under the title 'Radical Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision [Brown v. Board of Education 1954 <A/N>].' where she would come in contact with several civil rights leaders and workers, among them Septima Clark (see III.2.).[19]

III. Educating the Movement: Septima Clark and Highlander Folk School (HFS)

1. General Introduction to HFS

Highlander Folk School had been founded by Myles Horton in Monteagle, Tennessee in 1932. Originally it was established to train labor organizers, but became indispensable for the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's.[20] From its founding onwards it was an integrated school, blacks served as board members and staff and were invited as speakers, therefore it became one of the few places for interracial meetings in the segregated South. During the civil rights movement it developed three educational programs to strengthen the movement, starting with a series of desegregation workshops for white and black community leaders in 1953 (one of which was attended by Rosa Parks). From 1957 to 1961 its *Citizenship School Program* (see III.2.) aimed at blacks to qualify as voters in the South. The last workshops related to the civil rights movement were concerned with the southern student movement from 1960 to 1961, holding the first workshop for local sit-in leaders.[21]

2. Septima Clark Establishes the Citizenship School Program

The *Citizenship School Program* was developed by Septima P. Clark from 1956 onwards and serves as an excellent example for the important work of women during the civil rights movement. Septima Poinsette Clark was born on May 3, 1898 in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1916 she finished school and took the South Carolina state examination to become a teacher, taking her first teaching job on John's Island, SC where she would soon in her career start campaigning for an equalization of black and white teacher's salaries. After she returned to Charleston to become a teacher at Avery Normal Institute, she attended meetings of the local *NAACP* and started organizing petitions for black teachers being allowed to teach in the public schools of Charleston. Later she became a member of the *NAACP* and its membership chairperson.[22] She too attended workshops on desegregation at *Highlander Folk School*.

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[18] Cf. **Brinkley,** *Rosa Parks*, 71.
[19] Cf. **ibid.**, 90 f.
[20] Cf. Donna **Langston**, "The Women of Highlander," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (see note 1), 145.
[21] Cf. **ibid.,** 153.
[22] Cf. **McFadden**, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights," (see note 1 and 16), 85 ff.

When a law was passed in 1956 stating that no state or city employee could be affiliated with any civil rights organization, Clark was fired as a teacher, but was recruited to become director of education and workshops at *HFS* by Myles Horton.[23] From this point onwards, she devised the *Citizenship School Program* by travelling all across the South and setting up schools in private homes, stores or beauty parlors. Her cousin Bernice Robinson, a beautician, would become the *Citizenship School's* first teacher. Together they conceptualized a literacy program for adults based on the principle of learning through life experience, thereby teaching the adults to read and write using materials such as mail order forms or bank checks, or voter registration material. Additionally, they developed their own textbooks containing information on voting, political parties, taxes and health. Septima Clark went on recruiting new teachers, seeing to it that teachers would be ordinary people with backgrounds ranging from ministers to housewives. The students that returned from the workshops would often become teachers of *Citizenship Schools* in their own communities or become civil rights activists themselves.[24] When the school was closed down by the Tennessee legislature, the *Citizenship School Program* was turned over to the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC) in 1961.[25] With turning the Program over to the *SCLC*, it became a mass-education project which *"eventually prepared over 140,000 adults for registration tests and taught them to read and write."*[26] Septima Clark stayed with the *SCLC*, serving as one of the few women board members and director of education. In 1975 she was reelected to the Charleston School Board and was awarded the Living Legacy Award by President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Highlander Folk School reopened in 1961 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983.[27]

IV. Setting the Civil Rights Movement in Motion: The Montgomery Bus Boycott

After Rosa Parks came back from Highlander she seemingly had changed, as an unknown person reports about her:

> When she came back she was so happy and felt so liberated and then as time went on she said the discrimination got worse and worse to bear after having, for the first time in her life, been free of it at Highlander. I am sure that had a lot to do with her daring to risk arrest as she is naturally a very quiet and retiring person.[28]

There had been protests against the treatment of blacks on the city's buses before 1955 and Rosa Parks wasn't the first woman to be arrested after refusing to give up her seat. In 1955

[23] Cf. **Langston**, "The Women of Highlander," 87 ff.
[24] Cf. **ibid.,** 154 - 156.
[25] Cf. **ibid.**, 162.
[26] **Ibid.**, 163.
[27] Cf. **ibid.,** 163–165.
[28] Unknown cited in: Aimee I. **Horton**, David J. **Garrow** and Martin L. **King**, *Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement: The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932-1961* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1989), 211.

the case of Claudette Colvin, a fifteen year old high school student and member of the *NAACP* Youth Council, who had refused to give up her seat and was arrested also grabbed Park's attention. As the *NAACP* Youth Group's advisor, Parks knew Colvin well and started a legal defense fund for her if she would go on trial.[29] From then on Parks, the women of the *Women's Political Council* (see IV.1.) and E.D. Nixon were debating a decision to boycott the buses against the unfair treatment of blacks on the city's buses. But when Nixon learned that the girl was pregnant and unmarried, boycotting the buses was postponed to another time, because they feared that conservative black community would not support Colvin.[30]

On Thursday December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks was riding the bus home from her workplace at a downtown department store. She sat in the middle section of the bus which still empty when she boarded it, but soon was filling, leaving a white man without a seat. The bus driver told four blacks to move back and, which three of them did, except for Parks.[31]

> Just having paid for a seat and riding for only a couple blocks and then having to stand was too much […] These other persons had gotten on the bus after I did. It meant that I didn't have a right to do anything but get on the bus, give them my fare, and then be pushed wherever they wanted me ... There had to be a stopping place, and this seemed to have been the place for me to stop being pushed around and to find out what human rights I had, if any.[32]

The bus driver called the police and Parks was placed in police custody, photographed and fingerprinted. Later she was released on a bond until her trial on Monday, December 5. E.D. Nixon was now convinced that he had found the right person for a test case to challenge the city's segregationist practices.[33] But the actual idea of boycotting the buses to change the system through direct action came from a black woman named Jo Ann Robinson.

1. Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery

Jo Ann Robinson had come to Montgomery in 1949 to teach at the English Department of Alabama State College. Soon after her arrival she joined the *WPC*, which had been founded in 1946 by Mary Fair Burks to fight against segregation in Montgomery, especially among women's clubs.[34] The women and Robinson herself almost all had their own bad experiences with Montgomery's segregated buses and Robinson became convinced that the *WPC* should do everything *"to bring that practice down […]"*.[35] In 1951 Robinson succeeded Burks as president of the *WPC* and started confronting the city commission about bus abuses,

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[29] Cf. **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks*, 87 ff.
[30] Cf. **ibid.**, 90.
[31] Cf. Howell **Raines**, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983), 40 f.
[32] Rosa Parks cited in: **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks*, 109 f.
[33] Cf. **ibid.**, 41 f.
[34] Cf. David J. **Garrow**, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," in *Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement: The Walking City - The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956*, ed. David J. Garrow, J. M. Thornton and Martin L. King, 607-620 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1989), 607 f.
[35] **Garrow**, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," 608.

threatening the mayor with a black boycott of the city's buses in a letter already in 1954, but their claims went unheard and the boycott did not materialize until Rosa Parks refused to stand up.[36] As soon as Robinson heard about Rosa Parks' arrest, she called E.D. Nixon to inform him that she was going to distribute flyers calling for a boycott on the day of Park's trial.[37] With the help of two students she put together a 218 words flyer calling for a bus boycott on Monday, December 5. By daybreak on Friday she had mimeographed and cut thousands of flyers and had laid out the distribution routes so that flyers could be taken to schools and colleges by morning.[38]

> We had planned the protest long before Mrs. Parks was arrested […] Mrs. Parks had the caliber of character we needed to get the city to rally behind us.[39]

On Monday Rosa Parks and all other inhabitants of Montgomery saw the empty buses riding by when she had to go to court where she was found guilty and fined, which she refused to pay in order to be able to appeal to the Montgomery Circuit Court. The first day of the boycott 90% of Montgomery's black population had stayed off the buses.[40] At the mass meeting in the evening at Holt Street Baptist Church the *Montgomery Improvement Association* was founded and Martin Luther King, Jr. then 27 years old was chosen to be president of the *MIA* which would catapult him into the limelight of the civil rights movement.[41]

On November 13, 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the segregation on public transport in Montgomery as being unconstitutional by violating the 14th amendment. Still, it took the city commission until December 17, 1956 to comply with the decision. The boycott was ended after 381 days by a vote of the black community on December 20th. Until that day the bus line had lost $750,000 due to the boycott.[42] Rosa Parks later also took part in other civil rights demonstrations such as the March on Washington in 1963 and the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.[43]

> She gave Dr. King the right to practice his nonviolence. Because by refusing to get up out of that seat was the real fact that he could organize the boycott and work with people all through.[44]

[36] Cf. **Garrow**, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," 610 f.
[37] Cf. **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks*, 123.
[38] Cf. **Garrow**, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," 615 f.
[39] Jo Ann Robinson cited in: **Ibid.**, 615.
[40] Cf. Thomas J. **Gilliam**, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956," in *The Walking City - The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956* (see note 31), 211.
[41] Cf. **Garrow**, "The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," 616 f.
[42] Cf. George R. **Metcalf**, Black *Profiles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 277 f.
[43] Cf. **Brinkley**, *Rosa Parks*, 184-186; 197-200.
[44] Septima Clark cited in: **McFadden**, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights," 93.

V. *"My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders."*[45] Ella Baker as a Leader in the Civil Rights Movement

Another example for a woman that was indispensable for the civil rights movement is Ella Baker, who was born on December 13, 1903 in Norfolk Virginia. After graduating from Shaw University in Raleigh, NC, in 1927 she moved to New York where she started working as a newspaper editor for the *American West Indian News* and the *Negro National News*. In 1930 she, together with George Schuyler established the *Young Negroes Cooperative League* (YNCL) and became its national director. The *YNCL* focused on forming consumer cooperatives for poor people. She soon came to be known as an expert on consumer protection, a reason for why she was offered a position as a leader of the *Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Consumer Education Project* in 1935. During the three years that she worked for the *WPA*, which had been established during Roosevelt's New Deal, she wrote several brochures and held and organized consumer workshops. She also organized rallies against police brutality and worked together on worker's protection with labor unions in Harlem.

1. Ella Baker and her Work for the *NAACP*

In 1938 she joined the *NAACP*, becoming a field organizer travelling across the South, organizing new *NAACP* chapters and recruiting members to the organization.[46] Although her family background was rather privileged, she was able to relate to people she encountered in the South that largely had little or no formal education, due to the white supremacist practices of denying blacks access to proper education. She believed that strong personal ties were the stepping stones to collective action.[47] In 1943 she was appointed to the position as national director of branches of the *NAACP*, which would make her the highest ranking female in the *NAACP* staff. Her post required her to oversee all field secretaries and coordinating the local charters with the national office.[48] She thought it would enable her to propose and push through changes she envisioned with the style of leadership and organization within the *NAACP*. She felt that *"the program was more or less channeled through the head […] and not the people out in the field."*[49] This lead her to the idea of organizing a series of local leadership conferences to make the grassroots more powerful in the organization, the first of the conferences that took place around the country until 1946 being held in November 1944,

[45] Carol **Mueller**, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 51.
[46] Cf. Britta **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, *From Protest to Politics: Schwarze Frauen in der Bürgerrechtsbewegung und im Kongreß der Vereinigten Staaten (*Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 1998); (PhD diss. Munich, 1996), 38–41.
[47] Cf. Barbara **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003), 112 ff.
[48] Cf. **ibid.,** 137.
[49] Ella Baker cited in: **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 138.

teaching delegates about political pressure, education and mass protest or topics that the delegates themselves voted to choose.[50] *"She believed that people did not really need to be led; they needed to be given the skills, information, and opportunity to lead themselves."*[51]

The fact that she would criticize the organization openly did not sit well with many of her colleagues, especially the leading figures in the *NAACP*. The growing tensions between her and the leadership eventually led her to resign from her post as national director of branches in 1946.[52] This would not stop her activism in civil rights, though. She would spend the next years working for several smaller civil rights and social organizations until she started working for the Harlem *NAACP*'s youth program, becoming its councilor before becoming the first woman to be elected president of the New York branch of the *NAACP*. This gave her the power to push through her own ideas, starting with relocating the office from an office building downtown right into the center of Harlem. She started working together with other civil rights organizations active in New York City, devising campaigns against segregation and police brutality.[53] Within two years she had managed to make the *NAACP*'s New York branch one of the most active in the country. But again tensions with the national leadership flared up and Baker left the organization.[54]

2. The Founding of *In Friendship* and the *SCLC*

In 1956 she, together with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson, founded a new organization called *In Friendship* in New York. It was established to provide resources to activists in the South, especially to the ones engaged in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She had been in close contact with E.D. Nixon as well as Rosa Parks, stemming from her time as a field organizer and later director of branches for the *NAACP* and taking part in workshops at *HFS*.[55] As a representative of *In Friendship*, Baker travelled to Atlanta in 1957 to organize the founding meeting of the *SCLC*.[56] Martin Luther King Jr. became the organization's president and nonviolence was chosen as their main tactic to overcome segregation and racial violence. Baker helped to organize the *SCLC's* first project, the *Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom* in Washington, D.C. in 1957.[57] In 1958 Rustin and Levinson persuaded King to permanently hire Baker, because they already had devised plans for an *SCLC* voter registration project, the *Crusade for Citizenship*, and felt that Baker would be the ideal person to organize this project. A reluctant King hired Ella Baker as a temporary director, until someone more suitable (male)

[50] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 140 ff.
[51] **Ibid.,** 142.
[52] Cf. **ibid.**, 143 ff.
[53] Cf. **ibid.,** 148 f.
[54] Cf. **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, *From Protest to Politics*, 43.
[55] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 161 ff.
[56] Cf. **ibid.**, 173 f.
[57] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 175–78.

for the post would be found. Before she could launch the *Crusade for Citizenship*, she had to set up the *SCLC*'s national office by herself, managing it while writing press releases and flyers, campaigning and organizing the speakers for the *Crusade*.[58] After this project, Baker kept working and organizing for the *SCLC*. She organized workshops and conferences and started the *SCLC*'s newsletter *The Crusader*. But again, conflicts with the organization were inevitable, because as the *NAACP*, the *SCLC* did not engage in direct action campaigns and was not interested in integrating women and young people into their structures that where mainly centered around King as a leader.[59]

> In government service and political life I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. [...]. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing their game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.[60]

3. Baker as a Mentor for the Southern Student Movement

In 1960, the student sit-ins to integrate public facilities first emerged in the South starting at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Soon after, the movement had spread to numerous other cities across the southern states.[61] As soon as Ella Baker heard about the sit-ins and the demonstrations that were staged by young people, she was riveted. Sensing that this was the time to develop a new style of leadership and organization, she wanted the students to continue their actions without involvement of the big civil rights organizations. She contacted the students and called for a conference sponsored by the *SCLC* of the local sit-in leaders at Shaw University, NC from April 16th to 18th to discuss their strategies and plan further demonstrations.[62] Martin Luther King was present at the meetings and gave a speech but it would be Ella Baker that would set the cornerstone of the student movement and helped them to form their own, independent organization, asking them to remain independent from any organization.[63] On April 18, 1960 the *Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* was formed (the name was changed to *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, short *SNCC* in May) choosing Marion Barry as its new chairman.[64] Ella Bakers dream of a group centered leadership was now becoming true.

> What I mean by that is that instead of trying to develop people around one leader, the trust ... should be that the first consideration is to try to develop leadership out of the group, and to

[58] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 179–82.
[59] Cf. **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, *From Protest to Politics*, 48–50.
[60] Carol **Mueller**, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy", 64.
[61] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 239.
[62] Cf. **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, *From Protest to Politics*, 50 f.
[63] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 243.
[64] Cf. **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, *From Protest to Politics*, 52.

> spread the leadership roles, so that you organize people to be self-sufficient rather than to be dependent upon the charismatic leader ... My theory is: strong people don't need strong leaders! [65]

> This inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader centered group pattern of organization, was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.[66]

In the end, Ella Baker left the *SCLC* to stay in the South and work with *SNCC* from 1960 onwards. To make a living, she started working for the *Young Women's Christian Association* (*YWCA*).[67] With her help the student movement and *SNCC* would become nationally and internationally known. The students where especially thankful to their mentor.

> I never had to worry about where Ella Baker was coming from … and I turned to her frequently […]. Very often she was the person who was able to make us see, and work together … She really strengthened us as individuals and she also strengthened our organization.[68]

When *SNCC* started radicalizing from 1965 onwards, Baker first remained loyal to the organization but had to watch it steadily declining and falling into different fractions. In 1972 *SNCC* ceased to exist.[69] This was untrue for Ella Baker's activism. Until her death she remained a civil rights activist, working for the *Southern Conference Educational Fund*, supported the *African Liberation Movement* and several other civil and human rights organizations.

VI. Short Excursion: Afro-Germans Struggle Against Racism

Relations between Africans and Germans reach back to the 15th century when African slaves were brought to Europe as curiosities.[70] During the time late 19th early 20th century Germany acquired several African colonies and lost them after the First World War During the following occupation of the Rhineland by the French with mainly colonial troops, leading to some interracial unions and marriages, during the Nazi-Era their children often became targets of forced sterilization. After World War II and the occupation of Germany by the allied forces, some 94,000 children were born out of relationships between German women and African-American GI's. During the Cold War it would be students that would be the links between the African-American civil rights movement and the German student movement,

[65] Ella Baker cited in: **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, "'Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders!'," 95.
[66] Ella Baker cited in: Carol **Mueller**, "Ella Baker and the Origins of "Participatory Democracy"," 68.
[67] Cf. **Ransby**, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 260 f.
[68] Diane Nash cited in: **Waldschmidt-Nelson**, "'Strong People Don't Need Strong Leaders!'," 98.
[69] Cf. **ibid.**, 101.
[70] Cf. Patricia **Mazòn** and Reinhild Steingröver, "Introduction," in *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History 1890-2000*, ed. Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver, 1-26 (Rochester, NY: Univ. of Rochester Press, 2005), 1 f.

when they visited back and forth holding conferences and learning from each other's techniques.[71]

Today Afro-Germans make up about 500 000 people in the total population, a large part now being former refugees or asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa. Afro-Germans never really had a voice in German society which still saw them as foreigners or outsiders, so Afro-Germans formed their own organization, the *Initiative Schwarze Deutsche*, now *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* (ISD; 'Initiative of Black Germans', now 'Initiative of Black People in Germany') in 1986 , starting the so-called *new black movement* in Germany. [72] The same year the book *Farbe Bekennen* was published by Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz and Dagmar Schulz.[73] Russel Berman sees *Farbe Bekennen* as a book that *"represents something of the founding document of modern Afro-German identity."*[74] The work on the book also led the women to form their own women's organization, *ADEFRA*, an important association for black women in Germany that is still active today.[75]

IV. Conclusion

Women in the Civil Rights Movement where in fact often not only the nominal members of big organizations letting men do all the important work but often where the ones that battled on the frontlines and set up the protests and demonstrations that are now largely ascribed to the big leaders. Women like Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson and Ella Baker can definitely be called trailblazers of the movement preparing the way for male leaders to prominence. Marymal Dryden defines trailblazers as *"women whose heroic acts initiated specific events"*[76] Following this definition, I would consider the four women that were introduced in this paper to be trailblazers of their own fields. Rosa Parks can be seen as a trailblazer because without her refusing to give up her seat, the Montgomery Bus Boycott would not have happened at that particular moment. It might also not have happened if it wasn't for Jo Ann Robinson and the women of the WPC that were the ones to have the idea of boycotting the buses in the first place. Septima Clark prepared the way for many civil rights leaders through her Citizenship Schools and the SCLC's Citizenship School Program could not have prepared as many black voters being able to bring about social change if she hadn't established it in the first place. The student movement might have died down before reaching full force if Ella Baker had not

[71] Cf. Martin **Klimke**, "The African American Civil Rights Struggle and Germany, 1945-1989" in GHI Bulletin No. 43 (Fall 2008) http://www.ghi-dc.org/files/publications/bulletin/bu043/91.pdf (accessed September 5, 2011).
[72] Cf. **Mazòn**, "Introduction," (see note 70), 1 f.
[73] See Bibliography for further details.
[74] Cf. Russel **Bernan** "Foreword: Thomas Mann, W.E.B. DuBois, and Afro-German Studies," in *Not so Plain as Black and White* (see note 70), xiv.
[75]Cf. **ADEFRA** http://www.adefra.de/ (accessed October 10, 2011).
[76] Marymal **Dryden** cited in: *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, xiii.

seized the moment to turn it into an independent student's organization. In short, their work can be summed up by the following quote by Kathleen Neal Cleaver:

> If it weren't for black women, there would have been no Montgomery Bus Boycott, few voting rights campaigns, far less marvelous educational impact–in short, the civil rights movement as we know it could not have occurred.[77]

Still, most of the women mentioned in this paper largely played their roles in the background, even Rosa Parks, who is probably the best well known, certainly is not as well known for her civil rights activism long before the boycott. Nonetheless women were crucial to the success of the movement especially through their organizing work at the grassroots in the South which were often hard to reach by the national or northern-based organizations. Becoming grassroots organizers was often the only leadership position attainable to black women since during that time formal leadership in the black community was often tied to the ministry from which women were excluded. The fact that women mostly were ascribed to the background roles in the movement can also be traced back to the time when the civil rights movement happened, since one has to keep in mind that the women's movement was just starting in the late 1960s. Another reason for why the women would not speak out publicly against themselves being pushed in the background may also be that many women considered battling racism and segregation the first priority and feared that if they attacked male leaders for their exclusion of women it would draw attention away from the fight against racism.

I want to end this paper with a quote by Julian Bond which sums up quite nicely what I just wrote above and that it is important to keep in mind that this does not excuse why historians would also not write about women and their roles in shaping the civil rights movement.

> In some ways it reflects the realities of the 1950s: There were relatively few women in public leadership roles […] So that small subset that becomes prominent in civil rights would tend to be men. But that doesn't excuse the way some women have just been written out of history.[78]

[77] **Neal Cleaver**, "Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism," (see note 5) 48.
[78] Julian Bond cited in: **MSNBC** "Women had Key Roles in Civil Rights Movement," MSNBC, Associated Press, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9862643/ (accessed September 5, 2011).

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