Street Strollers: 
Grounding the Theory of Black Women Intellectuals

Ula Taylor

The year 2003 marked the 100th anniversary of W.E.B. DuBois’s, *The Souls of Black Folks*. Throughout the country, academicians organized conferences and meetings celebrating this influential text as well as DuBois’s other works, which include an additional 20 books, 15 edited volumes, and more than 100 essays, pamphlets, and articles. Clearly, DuBois lived the life of a highly productive academic scholar. He was a visible and vocal public intellectual, although he described himself as shy and reserved and unapologetically explained that he sometimes withdrew “ostentatiously from the personal nexus.” During the 1920s, DuBois seldom spoke to his New York neighbors, even as he “essayd a new role of interpreting to the world the hindrances and aspirations of American Negroes” as the editor and publisher of the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis.* Admitting that his “leadership was a leadership solely of ideas,” DuBois was a gifted thinker and writer; however, his elitism strained his relationship with the Black masses. Perhaps it was this kind of distance from others that Cornel West was referring to when he said, “The choice of becoming a black intellectual is an act of self-imposed marginality; it assures a peripheral status in and to the black community.” Fortunately, marginality was not then (nor is it today) the fate for all thinkers of African descent. In fact, it is through an exploration of intellectuals who fall within the category of street scholar that we can fully see the power of ideas when they are emancipated from their too frequent dependence on linguistic jargon, empty rhetoric, and impenetrable ideological constructs.

How does one become a street scholar? Or how is the making of a street scholar different from that of a professional black intellectual? The locus of the academy, is pivotal to the difference. While academic scholars use a variety of research methods to substantiate or elucidate their ideas, street
scholars, are as likely to ground their ideas in the personal, antidotal, and subjective modes. Too often categorized as individuals who lack critical-thinking skills, street scholars are dismissed as offering simple solutions to complex problems. There tends to be a strong bias against them, which is ironic, considering how frequently academicians repackage street scholars’ thoughts, using inaccessible language and drawing from French theorists, Western philosophers, and sometimes simply any writer who is strategically positioned within the academy.

Why do academic scholars so often feel the need to reframe the commentary of street scholars, dressing it up in abstract language and laying claim to it as their own? Barbara Christian in her seminal essay “The Race for Theory,” explains that “theory has become a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions—worse, whether we are heard at all.” Unfortunately, the trend to exalt theory as the hallmark of brilliance undermines other, more narrative forms (stories, poems, songs, personal testimony, even the Socratic method of questioning) that are central to street scholars. Yet as intellectuals committed to political change, we neglect these other forms at our peril. While we can see in the academy ample evidence substantiating Christian’s fear “that when theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitish,” in the work of street scholars we can witness the dynamic fusion of theory meeting practice. Street scholars are driven by more than intellectual curiosity or the need to publish for fear of perishing professionally. They talk and write about what they themselves are doing socially and politically, whereas the majority of academic scholars talk about and critique what others are doing or have done. The life of the street is the primary text for street scholars. They are involved with the reports and experiences of living people, while many academic theorists are more involved with the ideas themselves.

Grounded in specific, lived realities, many street scholars are not only in the forefront of giving voice to the complicated issues of their day but are what Gramscian theorists refer to as “organic intellectuals.” Rising from the masses, these are Black folks with a sophisticated level of political consciousness, who have learned from their peers and personal experiences rather than from continual formal study, and have organized to build a “counter-hegemonic” movement. And their ideas and expressions, often delivered with the conviction of the prophet, not only move us, but move us to act. As political organizers, Amy Ashwood Garvey (1897-1969) and Ella Baker (1903-1986) represent the epitome of Harlem street scholars. Their
political leadership and social commentary provide us a window on the Harlem freedom struggle and demonstrate the successful merging of theory and practice.

Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker are two women who rebuffed traditional expectations of middle-class black womanhood by becoming street strollers in Harlem. Capturing the essence of street strolling, James Weldon Johnson has written, "Strolling in Harlem does not mean merely walking along Lenox or upper Seventh Avenue or One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street; it means that those streets are places for socializing." I would add that those streets were also a place to mature intellectually. The 1920s cultural upsurge created an atmosphere that allowed stepladder speakers to occupy busy street corners, and political meetings and lectures took place in public parks all over town. Ubiquitous human voices resounding with varieties of tone, tenor, and political perspective, echoed from the streets of Harlem and into the souls of Black folk.

An exciting political spectacle was being staged on the streets of Harlem in the twenties and thirties, and it was so inviting and enticing that Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker could not deny themselves the pleasure of being part of it. Amy Ashwood Garvey first appeared on the streets in 1918, while Ella Baker started stepping out in 1927. With its leisurely pace, strolling (a stylized repetition) allowed them to take in whatever was being said from corner to corner. Like dance, street strolling was an elaborate cultural practice, developing into a Harlem fine art. Challenging the "dichotomization of verbal and nonverbal cultural practices," street strolling asserts "the thought-filledness of movement and the theoretical potential of bodily action." This performative act has the capacity to produce a text, and "the text's capacity to body forth a theoretical and political orientation."

Although Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker had different political agendas, both understood the importance of gathering information from the ground and sharing it with others. For both of them, strolling became a way of knowing. As a structured movement, successful strolling includes mastering a set of protocols. For example, one has to make contact with others, position one's body to hear, and be able to quickly calculate the value of the information one is encountering. Being prepared for a shift in ground tactics [heated arguments] demands a focused lens and a willingness to re-strategize an idea. Crowded, dynamic streets engender a certain quickness of mind; thus, street strollers like Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker had to master the intellectual skill of thinking on their feet. Clearly, the
choreographic dimensions of street strolling helped to build “an image of community, one that articulates both individual and collective identities” and, in the case of Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker, political identities as well.15

AMY ASHWOOD GARVEY

At the young age of seventeen, in 1914, Amy Ashwood co-founded (with Marcus Garvey) the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica. Migrating to the United States in 1918, she settled in Harlem and re-established her political and personal relationship with Garvey. At this point, Garvey had become one of Harlems’ most charismatic stepladder speakers. John Edward Bruce, who joined the UNIA in 1919 after listening to Garvey speak at the corner of Lenox Ave. and 135th Street one cold evening, later wrote that Garvey was “standing on an especially built platform—a step ladder—with which he could take liberties without falling, [and he] unfolded, in part, the plan of his Organization, which was to draw all Negroes throughout the world together, to make one big brotherhood of the Black Race for its common good, for mutual protection, for commercial and industrial development, and for fostering of business enterprises. This sounded not only good to me, but practical.”16

The streets of Harlem provided orators an uninhibited place to holler their critique of the grass tops to the grassroots. As critical thinkers, most stepladder orators or street scholars did not read the world horizontally but vertically. That is, as VeVe Clark has pointed out, they understood that the most effective way to galvanize the grassroots was to focus their analysis on the grass tops (hegemonic institutions such as the church, the state, the schools).17 For example, Garvey convincingly argued that the real cause of black unemployment was “due to [the] determination of white employers to get even with Negroes because they were forced under the stress of [the] times [WWI] to pay them high wages; to which should be added their inborn prejudice against colored people and desire to keep them down as industrial dependents or serfs.”18 Harlem audiences came alive and were inspired by his plain talk implicating white capitalists for their hardships, and, at the same time, offering a plan of African redemption.

Ashwood quickly understood the importance of the Harlem streets for eloquent orators, political theater, and UNIA recruitment. She had already honed her recitation skills in Jamaica, and in Harlem she once again captivated
listeners with her masterful readings of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poems.19 One can imagine the emotion in her voice as she recited a verse from Dunbar’s famous poem “We Wear the Mask,” with its eloquent evocation of the “double nature of the black experience”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
   It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
   With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
   Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
   Nay, let them only see us, while We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ,
   our cries To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile Beneath our feet,
   and the long mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
   We wear the mask.20

By projecting a sincere awareness of the multiple issues affecting Black people through poetry, Ashwood joined a host of Harlem writers and performers who “wove both themes of protest and beauty-in-Blackness into their works,” during the Renaissance.21 On several occasions, Ashwood selected Dunbar’s ballad “The Colored Soldiers,” a praise song for Civil War heroes:

They were comrades then and brothers,
   Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet
   And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
   When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy,—
   Ah! those virtues are not dead.22

Acknowledging the bravery of Black soldiers affirmed the returning WWI “Hell Fighters,” teeming the streets of Harlem.23 Moreover, Ashwood’s verbal performance of the poem was a medium of political mobilization, grounded in “forms of word play” and peripheral street vision.24 Her use of this poem, along with Ashwood’s comments to the Black masses “that they cannot attain Democracy unless they win it for themselves,” help to locate the UNIA’s militant struggle within the larger scope of critical resistance. Essentially, Ashwood funneled her political energy into poetic recitation, using a “hear me talking to you mode of discourse common in folktale and sermon,” to draw people’s attention to her race conscious ideas.25 Theorizing a Pan-African
struggle through public oratory, Ashwood maintained, “The Negro question is no longer a local one, but of the Negroes of the world, joining hands and fighting for one common cause.”

Ashwood was also able to persuade sidewalk crowds to attend UNIA meetings held at Liberty Hall on West 138th Street. As the General Secretary of the Ladies Division, Ashwood opened those meetings with prayers and poems, but her behind-the-scenes activism was equally important. In fact, it was her woman-centered commitment that ensured Black women integrated roles within the UNIA’s constitution. Unlike other popular organizations of the period, such as the NAACP, the UNIA—thanks to Ashwood’s efforts—went beyond carving out an auxiliary niche for women by developing a system in which each local division elected a male and female president and vice-president. Although Ashwood envisioned “separate and equal” roles for men and women, the resulting gender-specific roles, as Barbara Bair has pointed out, were never equal but “separate and hierarchical.”

Given the masculine nature of the Pan-African nation-building effort, it is not surprising that Ashwood’s flowering feminist perspective was often swallowed up by notions of middle-class respectability and decorum. Marcus Garvey, despite his progressive political views, argued that men and women should occupy separate spheres: public and private. Women were encouraged to make the home a haven of comfort, raise children for effective citizenship, and endorse their husbands; men, in turn, were to function as breadwinners and masculine protectors. Honor Ford Smith explains that the “difference between Garvey’s vision of womanhood and that of the colonizers is that it applied what was essentially a vision of upper-class white women to black women of all classes.” No doubt, Garvey was convinced that the replication of gender-specific role playing was a key component to successful nationhood. Despite their fundamental differences on gender performance, Ashwood and Garvey initially worked well together to increase UNIA membership and to build a solid infrastructure for the organization.

The closeness of Ashwood and Garvey’s union became evident to all Harlemites in October, 1919, when she risked her own safety to physically shield him from a former disgruntled employee, George Tyler. Momentarily—and dramatically—adopting the male protector role, Ashwood wrestled with Tyler after he had shot two bullets in Garvey’s leg at their brownstone office on 135th Street. As a shake-up of the male/female binary, Ashwood’s wrestling was both literal and symbolic. Representing a new generation of black womanhood, Ashwood’s courage was indicative of her feminine power,
a power that had found a receptive home in Harlem. Similar to Ashwood, Zora Neale Hurston also felt “the eternal feminine” posture in Harlem. Hurston recalled being able to set her “hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance.”\(^{31}\) Finding agency in her strut, Ashwood was able through her protective act not only to strike a blow against Garvey’s stifling notions of proper gender roles but to transform Garvey’s reputation overnight to that of a “persecuted martyr working for the salvation of his people.”\(^{32}\) The *Negro World* reported that on October 19, 1919, ten thousand Black people listened to Garvey’s version of the event. “Nearly three thousand persons were wedged and jammed in Liberty Hall. The hall-ways, aisles, side rooms, steps, and platform, and every nook and corner were packed with people.” The disciplined crowd outside Liberty Hall was even larger. “Thousands crowded the sidewalks and street adjoining the building. Around every window and door, hundreds were clustered, and hundreds left after trying in vain to get near the windows and doors.”\(^{33}\) Spellbound Harlemites were clearly interested in Garvey as a leader and the UNIA as a “race first” organization—in part because of Ashwood’s heroic action.

As the UNIA’s membership grew, Ashwood’s duties multiplied. She began giving speeches about the importance of the UNIA as a political organization seeking to reconnect all Black diasporians to an imagined homeland in Africa for their economic, political, social, and cultural well-being.\(^{34}\) Garvey scholar Tony Sewell explains Ashwood’s “strength was in being out there and talking.”\(^{35}\) Ashwood’s impassioned message galvanized sidewalk loafers and other strollers to pledge dues-paying membership, with impressive results: UNIA membership was estimated at 35,000 in Harlem alone.\(^{36}\) Strolling the streets from Harlem to Brooklyn, walking door to door, extolling the merits of her Pan-African vision, she helped build an army of international grassroots foot soldiers.\(^{37}\) By the end of 1919, the UNIA was a formidable movement, claiming six million activists with branches throughout the United States, Canada, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Great Britain, and Africa. All were pledged to “Negro independent nationalism on the continent of Africa.”\(^{38}\)

Understanding the imperative to have a strong financial base to the movement, Ashwood solicited donations for the UNIA’s commercial ventures wherever she traveled.\(^{39}\) The *Negro World*, the UNIA’s official weekly newspaper, was its strongest propaganda organ and most viable enterprise. Billed as “a Newspaper Devoted Solely to the Interest of the Negro Race,” it
featured Garvey’s editorials on a wide array of subjects ranging from an assessment of other political leaders and organizations to colonialism in Africa. Ashwood’s artistic touch was evident in the weekly column, “Poetry for the People.”40 Every effort was made to disseminate the objectives and ideological position of the UNIA, also, by this point, known as Garveyism. John Edward Bruce, an important journalist for the *Negro World*, explained Garveyism as a “divinely inspired mass movement bent on rescuing Africa from the plunderers and buccaneers of an alien race.”41

The early editions of the *Negro World* were pushed under the doors of Harlem residences by Ashwood and Garvey in the wee hours of the morning.42 In addition, sections of the newspaper were printed in Spanish and French to accommodate non-English readers. Reasonably priced at three cents in greater New York, five cents elsewhere in the United States, and ten cents abroad, the *Negro World* quickly garnered a circulation estimated at 50,000.43 Driven by a profound desire to shift the political course of black people, Ashwood, who also served as an editor for the newspaper, labored with Garvey to keep regular subscribers, who paid $1.50 in the United States and $2.00 abroad, each of whom was a potential UNIA convert.

Rank-and-file UNIA members adored the dedicated and charismatic Ashwood and were overjoyed when she and Garvey married on Christmas Day, 1919. More than three thousand witnessed the elaborate ceremony at Liberty Hall. Sadly, the marriage began to fall apart within a few months. Ashwood explained their marital demise in feminist terms, citing her desire to “help Afro-American women to find themselves and rise in life.”44 Another reason for their separation, she wrote, was the strain of public life, “In the full glare of the limelight the Marcus Garvey I knew receded into the shadows. The public figure took his place, and we found we were unable to continue the old partnership.”45

Ashwood’s spirited ideas and ways made her a captivating street stroller, but, in the eyes of Garvey, an unruly wife. On July 15, 1920, he filed for an annulment in the New York County Circuit Court. Garvey never wavered in his belief that women should be self-sacrificing helpmates, and his expectations for his own wife quickly clashed with Ashwood’s own developing feminist sensibilities. As the Twenties roared, Ashwood’s feminism flexed in ways that were troubling to Garvey. In short, she refused to support all of his endeavors and had the nerve to critique his leadership. Assertive and confident, Ashwood had become emboldened, in part, through experiencing contested street energy in Harlem. As Michel de Certeau puts it, “walking in
the city”;
"speaks." All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities which vary according to the time; the path taken and the walker. These enunciatory operations are of an unlimited diversity. They therefore cannot be reduced to their graphic trail."

As a street-strolling intellectual, Ashwood valued her ideas, which were grounded in a growing analysis of the Black world, new personal experiences, and "the long poem of walking."

Leaving Harlem was difficult for Ashwood. No longer being the first lady of the UNIA, however, did not stop her from continuing to share her ideas about the roles of women in the Pan-African struggle. Relocating in London, and traveling to Africa from there, she became the "western sister" who brought a cutting-edge message of "feminine emancipation" to Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia. Fully engrossed with the possibilities of Liberia, Ashwood eventually wrote a manuscript "Liberia, Land of Promise," for which her friend Sylvia Pankhurst penned the introduction.

In 1924, Ashwood returned to New York and began a successful theatrical career, partnering with her old friend Sam Manning, a Trinidadian calypsonian and actor. Together they wrote and staged three musical shows—Hey Hey!; Brown Sugar; and Black Magic—at the popular LaFayette Theater in Harlem, which during the 1920s was noted for its exceptional troupe of black actors and actresses. Clearly, street strolling gave Ashwood the confidence to expand her artistic creativity. Despite her contentious relationship with Garvey, they arranged a benefit concert for the UNIA in 1926. In 1927, as Ashwood's Theater company was touring the United States and the Caribbean, Garvey was deported back to Jamaica. Their departure marked the end of the UNIA's heyday but not the end of Harlem as a stomping ground for street strollers.

ELL A BAKER

As a valedictorian of her class at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Ella Baker had had her sights set on attending the University of Chicago for graduate work but lack of funds and a family base there put an end to that dream. So, in the hot muggy summer of 1927, when relatives in New York offered her a place to stay, Baker seized the opportunity, reasoning that one could “make it” easier "with nothing" in New York. Baker's initial street stroll was for the purpose of securing a job. Unfortunately, her prized
undergraduate degree did not cushion her from racists hiring practices. Baker was forced to labor as a waitress and, when she was lucky, at a factory. Keeping her inquisitive ear to the ground, however, Baker soon discovered the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, where she “began to learn some things.”54

It was at the library that Baker helped to establish the first Negro History Club. This group-sponsored forums and other educational events for Harlemites. Irma Watkins-Owens points out that sometimes these heated “discussions would spill over into the street.” Occasionally the librarians paid the speakers, who often stood on a stepladder to address the crowd.55 It does not appear that Baker herself ever climbed on top of a stepladder in Harlem, but her early years there were certainly important for her intellectual maturation.56 The insightful scholarship of Charles Payne and the seminal biography by Barbara Ransby, Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision, provide wonderful detail and analysis of Baker as an amazing grassroots political organizer with deep Harlem roots.57

The Harlem landscape and its people were just as significant for Baker as they had been to her predecessor Ashwood. Joanne Grant, her first biographer and close friend, reports that Baker “pursued her education in the streets of New York.”58 On weekends she would stroll Harlem, meeting friends and listening to “the groundswell of ideas surrounding her.”59 Undertaken initially as a pleasurable pastime, street strolling soon became for Baker a rigorous method of gathering information that would become her future intellectual arsenal. Respectfully and affectionately known as Miss Baker, she went all over town, “everywhere there was discussion,” with a determination to expand her education. She later recalled, “If you hadn’t stood on the corner of 135th and 7th Avenue [protesting and debating]...you weren’t with it.”60 At times, she “was the only woman there; sometimes the only black person, but I didn’t care,” she said, “I was there to learn.”61 Safe streets allowed her to stroll until 3:00 am.62

Having a keen understanding of the differences between her formal study and street strolling, Baker said, “I’d never heard of any discussions about the social revolution, because, basically, Shaw University was run by the Northern Baptist Convention, and they were “clas-si-cal-ly inclined!”63 With her comically extended pronunciation of the word “classically,” Baker gets at the underbelly of elite formal matriculation. The streets of Harlem revealed the shortcomings of her prestigious college study and provided key opportunities for her to extend her knowledge: “[T]he ignorant ones, like me,
we had lots of opportunities to hear and to evaluate” theories, planks, and organizations in Harlem.⁶⁴ Filling her “cup” with the “nectar divine” of ideas, Baker saw Harlem during this period as “the hotbed” of “radical thinking.”⁶⁵

By the time the Great Depression hit in 1929, Miss Baker would witness the magnitude of poverty and privilege commingling in Harlem. As Harlem’s shimmering night life dimmed for lack of patronage, Baker recalled the “tragedy of seeing long lines of people standing waiting, actually waiting on the bread line, for coffee or handouts.”⁶⁶ The sight of Harlem streets swarming with hungry, desolate black folks had a tremendous impact on her, as did a particular conversation she had about the situation with a friend. She later recalled that conversation as follows: “Look, Ella,” her friend said, “a society can break down; a social order can break down, and the individual is the victim of the breakdown, rather than the cause of it.”⁶⁷ Baker cites this comment as an intellectual turning point. “It was out of that context,” Baker said, that she began to focus more “in the area of ideology and the theory regarding social change.”⁶⁸ Armed with the knowledge acquired from strolling the streets, Baker began her political organizing career, aimed at developing the grassroots for “group-centered leadership.”⁶⁹ Charles Payne insightfully argues that Miss Baker’s most persistent idea, produced during the 1930s, was “group-centered leadership rather than leader-centered groups.”⁷⁰ Baker explains, “I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people.”⁷¹

By 1933, Baker’s leadership approach had manifested itself in her Adult Education Committee membership at the 135th Street Library. The following year, the library hired her as a coordinator for educational and consciousness-raising programs (forums and debates) for young people, and in 1936 she helped to organize a street-corner discussion on lynching.⁷² Barbara Ransby cogently argues that from Baker’s perspective, “reading, discussions, forums, and lectures were as important to a movement for social change as mass protests, boycotts, and strikes.”⁷³ I would add that as a street-strolling intellectual, Baker recognized that these activities, which include and engage the black masses, represent a form of collective theorizing.⁷⁴

Street-strolling theorizing depends on the life of the street and can be pursued through a variety of forms. Miss Baker was especially fond of the Socratic method, asking hard questions to push the dialogue and, thus, the political convictions of those with whom she worked. Years later, when Miss Baker helped to organize the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
(SNCC), she continued to couch her advice in the form of questions. Mary King recalled that Miss Baker engendered political growth by probing with a series of questions. "With Socratic persistence, in her resonant and commanding voice," Miss Baker "would query, 'Now let me ask this again, what is our purpose here? What are we trying to accomplish? Again and again, she would force us to articulate our assumptions.'" Believing in the power of the individual to organize for effective change, Baker was committed to encouraging and building up (a process that sometimes entailed self-reflection) the grassroots.

In addition to progressive political organizing, Miss Baker wrote political commentary for a variety of local newspapers and magazines. Her most-cited essay, "The Bronx Slave Market," was co-authored with communist Marvel Cooke and published in The Crisis (November 1935). In the theorizing tradition of Baker, the essay opens with a series of questions: "The Bronx Slave Market! What is it? Who are its dealers? Who are its victims? What are its causes? How far does its stench spread? What forces are at work to counteract it?" Baker and Cooke go on to describe the plight of black women domestics who huddle on Simpson and Westchester Avenues before sunrise, waiting for white, lower-middle-class housewives to "buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours or even a day at the munificent rate of fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour."

Posing as maids, Baker and Cooke were approached and asked "How much [do] you work for?" They "begged the question," with the reply, "How much do you pay?" After observing other women negotiate for their livelihood and asking them questions regarding their work history, Baker and Cooke were able to write a piece that exposed to the largely black middle-class readership of The Crisis how race sorely impacted the daily lives of working-class black women. As critical thinkers and political organizers (embodiments of theory meeting practice), Baker and Cooke further explain, "The women, themselves[,] present a study in contradictions. 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 anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead." Untangling the exploitative web of American capitalism, Baker and Cooke reject the internalized, grasstops, Protestant work ethic, pointing out how it has produced a population of working poor people. At the same time they reveal the unforeseen collective strength of organized black women. This article was informed by knowledge gained literally on the streets. After publication,
Baker presented a copy of the essay to New York City Councilman Adam Clayton Power, Jr. asking for redress.79

As a street-strolling intellectual, Baker not only critiqued capitalism but searched for an alternative solution. Serving as a founding member of the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League (YNCL) in 1930, Baker was committed to the idea that economic power could be gained through consumer education and cooperation. The YNCL, Barbara Ransby points out, although not formally connected to any socialist or communist party, was founded by people intent on demonstrating “how their efforts could transform society and eradicate capitalism.”80 Affiliates were organized into buying clubs, cooperative grocery stores, and distribution networks. The goals were “to provide means whereby we can assure ourselves of the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter)” and “to go from cooperative buying and selling into the field of cooperative production.”81

At the first national conference of the YNCL in 1931, Miss Baker addressed the topic “What Consumers’ Co-operation Means to Negro Women” in a talk that became the catalyst for a conference resolution stating “that we seek to bring women into the League on equal basis with men.”82 At the end of the conference, Baker was unanimously elected national director of the YNCL, and the following year the organization had 12 locals and a membership body of 400. Miss Baker also wrote a “Guide to Consumer Cooperation,” which was in high demand by consumer educators across the country.83 She stated in the Guide, “The main objective is to aid the consumer to a more intelligent understanding of the social and political economy of which he is a part. The approach is to be more informational and suggestive than dogmatic and conclusive, yet the aim is not education simply for its own sake, but education that leads to self-directed action.”84

The Depression years in Harlem fostered a culture of progressive activism for Baker. She describes this period as open and energizing, a time when many approaches to the problems facing the black populace were offered at every bustling street corner. As a street-strolling scholar, all of this activity mattered and informed the core of her own thinking to better the personal and political lives of black folks. Even in the latter years of her life, Miss Baker could be seen strolling the streets of Harlem. Activist Bob Moses recounted a walk across 135th Street with her in the late 1960s. Miss Baker stopped passerby with the greeting: “Hello, brother” or “Hello sister,” followed by “And where do you hail from?” Moses recalled “It was amazing the rapport she established—with total strangers!”85
CONCLUSION

The life of the mind does not require an academic baptism, as the political organizing and theorizing of Ella Baker and Amy Ashwood Garvey makes compelling clear. Street-strolling scholars plow the ground and seed the ideas for many academic intellectuals who follow. Moreover, street scholars are renewed by moving about the street. “Since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements,” the street is a “space of enunciation.” Strollers follow the complexity of the urban text and are grounded in the political activism of their day. As visionaries, street-strolling thinkers not only touch our hearts, minds, and souls but improve the political and material conditions of our lives. When theory merges with practice, it goes beyond the ivory tower of scholars, awakening our consciousness to embrace revolutionary action in what academic theorists, from their often-distant vantage point, call the “real world.”

ENDNOTES

1 Ula Taylor is a member of the African American Studies Department at the University of California at Berkeley.


6 I do not mean to suggest that DuBois’s work was “empty” or “impenetrable.” My point is to underscore DuBois as an intellectual who separated himself from the black masses.

8. Ibid, 153.


11. James Weldon Johnson is quoted in Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), 28. Also, I am indebted to Joanne Grant for introducing me to Harlem street strolling. I simply pushed the activity to include a wider scope of ideas.


15. Ibid., 6.


17. I am indebted to Vevie Clark for pointing out to me the grassroots frame.


37. Lionel Yard, Biography of Amy Ashwood Garvey, 1897-1969: Co-Founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, 45.


40. Negro World, (November 6, 1920), 10. No earlier editions of the Negro World are available but I don’t think it is a stretch to link this section to Ashwood, given her love of poetry.


42. Lionel Yard, Biography of Amy Ashwood Garvey, 1897-1969: Co-Founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, 44.

43. The Negro World (New York) microfilm reel, fragmented issues prior to November 6, 1920, reel #1.

44. Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787 (London: Routledge, 2003), 70.


47. Ibid., 101.


51. Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787, 70.

53. Legal difficulties connected to the Black Star Line gave the United States Government evidence to deport Marcus Garvey.


59. Ibid., 28.


63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 63

68. Ibid.


70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.


73. Ibid., 70.

74. Similar to Barbara Christian, I intentionally use the verb theorizing rather than the noun theory.


77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 340.


82. Ibid., 32.

83. Ibid., 38.

84. Ibid., 38.

85. Ibid., 28.