

Introduction

Around us the history of the land has centered for thrice a hundred years. . . . Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation. . . . Would America have been America without her Negro people?

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

OVER TWENTY-THREE YEARS Mary Robinson has told the stories that have become this book. Often in front of an audience—her sisters, cousins, children, and friends—and sometimes with me as a listener. Her storytelling took on features of a call-and-response, a basic style of the African American oral tradition. Mary’s storytelling has been intermingled with our responses, exclamations, laughter, and nods of approval or empathy. Often these interactions took on the rhythm of a sermon, ending with a moral interpretation by Mary of its contents.¹

Born on November 26, 1943, Mary was a child of African American sharecroppers in rural east-central Alabama, on the edge of what geographers have called the “plantation counties.” The sharecropping system was an exploitative form of farming in which poorer black families did the work for wealthier white farmers for a share of the crop in return. A middle child in a loving family with eight surviving children, Mary worked long hours in the cotton fields alongside her parents and siblings, beginning at age three. Throughout her childhood, she carefully observed the injustices and eccentricities of her rural neighborhood. Her parents’ generation of black southerners had learned that survival

depended on outward compliance within the larger white power structure and subtle subversion, lessons they tried to teach their children. Mary suspects that her own father had worked in secret with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), but to protect his family, he locked these records away in a trunk that was never opened.

But for Mary's generation it was different. A new wave of social and political protest was growing among young African Americans. In 1955, at age twelve, Mary and other curious classmates traveled to Montgomery to witness the historic bus boycott, intended to oppose the city's policy of segregation on its public transit system. After high school graduation, at sixteen, she left the fields to marry a soldier, James Robinson. She went on to join the largest Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, to campaign for the rights of black voters, and to integrate a rural restaurant. Mary's inner strength and innate sense of justice sustained her throughout her tumultuous marriage, as she raised four children while enduring spousal abuse. For years she wrestled with the ideals of patriarchal obedience that she had been taught as a child; ultimately the marriage ended.

Mary's most active and personally fulfilling work in the civil rights movement began when in 1966 she helped to integrate the textile mills in nearby Montgomery. She was one of the first mill workers to join the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) when it began to organize throughout the South. Beginning in 1976, Mary worked relentlessly to recruit members; she bravely testified during trials and court hearings; and she campaigned tirelessly, both on her own and in the media, for support of the consumer boycott of the textile company J. P. Stevens. Her efforts helped to expose the oppressive conditions throughout Stevens's textile plants, forcing corporate and financial institutions to acknowledge their complicity and demand that the company accept public responsibility.

Today Mary continues to struggle for the rights of women and other poor people of all ages and ethnicities, especially those who feel silenced by fear and discrimination. As a community activist, she continues to research the history of her people; she organizes her fellow school bus drivers; and she spreads her message of enthusiasm, hope, and sacred expectation. Mary believes that God has put her on earth "for the underdog, for the people that can't fight for themselves. God gives me the ability." She has said: "He knows I'm not one of those who will sit by and

let somebody else be run over. So I raise all kinds of hell and cause all kinds of problems.”

Mary’s story helps expand our understanding of African American resistance movements throughout the twentieth century.² In a description of her childhood community, Mary makes a claim to the space where poor black people toiled with no legal rights to the land. In chapters 1 through 9 she then maps out a neighborhood in which nature itself recorded the moral struggle between good and evil, maintaining its own history and system of justice—a belief system that was ultimately transplanted to the religious and moral convictions that underlay the civil rights and subsequent social and political resistance movements. The story of her early involvement with the civil rights movement is told in chapter 10. Next, in chapters 11 through 14, Mary carries forward the belief in the righteousness of the struggle for social justice to her participation in the textile union movement. She adds a redemptive religious vision that locates a final claim for the poor and the meek that supersedes earthly claims on space. This final story, revealed in chapter 16, is told in metaphor, squarely locating Mary in the tradition of other African American, Christian activist-mystics, such as Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer.³

All of these experiences provide a document of resistance. In this introduction, with Mary’s help, I have situated her story in its geographical and historical location, describing the existing economic, racial, and gender structures. I also provide a brief history of African American religious traditions and their relationship to resistance. Equally important is the story of African American women’s involvement in the civil rights and textile union movements. The main body of this book—the story of Mary’s life in her own words—includes the stories of resistance of many other women and of the community in which she has lived.

The epilogue tells the story of our joint research on the area surrounding Elmore County, Alabama. Here we place Mary’s record in the long history of insurgency that began before she was born and will continue long after her residence there. Mary believes she would not have survived to narrate her story if those who had come before her had not fought for their lives, for the lives of their children, and for their personal dignity. Mary, in turn, hopes to pass the movement on to those who follow. Thus this story of resistance is part of an ongoing stream in history.⁴

In this final section Mary and I explore several questions: How do in-

dividual lives fit within overall movements of protest? Why do people respond to the call to join in social justice campaigns differently at different times in their lives? What possibilities lie dormant within individuals, waiting for the right challenge to inspire action? Why did Mary and her generation, while they were growing up, not hear stories of radical acts of rebellion that had taken place in or near their home community? Finally, when adults in the community did relate stories of resistance, why did they so often phrase them as parables?⁵

Mary's story provides a female perspective to that of the influential book *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, compiled and edited by Theodore Rosengarten in 1974. *All God's Dangers* went on to win the National Book Award and to influence both oral history methodology and an understanding of the sharecropping South. Nate Shaw, a contemporary of Mary's grandmother, Salena Damous, has since been identified as Ned Cobb. Born in March 1885 to parents who had been slaves in a county neighboring that of Mary's childhood, Cobb and his family toiled as sharecroppers. Cobb himself fought briefly for the Share Croppers Union during the Great Depression. He was consequently imprisoned for twelve years. Part of that prison time was spent in Mary's community, also the base of the white posse that was eventually sent to hunt down his fellow union members. In the epilogue Mary and I uncover additional information about Cobb's union.

On the afternoon of Rebecca Freeman's ninetieth birthday, Mary, Mrs. Freeman, and I entered the gates of the historically white-only cemetery that overlooks the cotton fields in which Mary's family labored. Most of the white southerners who had been buried there decades before would have never considered lying forever in a resting place that included African Americans.⁶ As far as Mary and I know, the small cemeteries for Mary's parents' generation are still kept separate. But the people buried in this cemetery had not reckoned on Mary. At the time many whites had felt so sure about the inferiority of African Americans that they would have barely noticed Mary as a child. Who was she but a shadow to their world? Someone to help with the chores or make jokes about.

On that hot afternoon at the cemetery with its one tree, birds singing, and grasshoppers jumping in front of our feet, I held a tape recorder as we walked from grave to grave. Mrs. Freeman served as a chorus full of laughter that began in her face and moved down her body. Mary acted out the story of each deceased person's life as she had viewed it as a

child. We wrote down dates of births and deaths, which we would later use as the basis of elaborate family trees within which Mary anchored her memories. To be sure, Mary's sharp recollections of her childhood observations represent the inherent dangers a ruling class faces when it conceives of a whole category of people as invisible.⁷

We had a wonderful day. Mrs. Freeman and I laughed at Mary's performance until we could barely stand. Following our visit to the white cemetery, we went to the two cemeteries serving African Americans. Again, Mary walked from grave to grave, telling stories. I became confused by names and nicknames and half cousins. We developed complex genealogies and then began to map out the cabins and houses of Mary's childhood. We stopped for some time over the grave of Mary's mother, Sarah Freeman, with its gray marker and plastic flowers. Later, Mary and I physically charted specific locations in the approximately one and a half square miles of rural Elmore County, where she had grown to young adulthood. The once vibrant, rural African American community, with its surrounding natural features that had nurtured Mary so well as a child, was known to its residents by the names of its two black churches: Good Hope and New Style. However, the community was not recorded on any official road map and was thus erased by the dominant white establishment.

Long ago, slave labor had cleared the original pineland forest in Elmore County, but stands of long- and short-needled pine, interspersed with oak, gum, chestnut, poplar, maple, and a thick undergrowth, still stand or have regrown as less land was used to grow cotton. When Mary was a girl, most of this cleared land was still used for the principal crop of the Southland: cotton. The nearest large plantation, somewhat of the style imagined in *Gone with the Wind*, was located to the south and west of Wetumpka, the county seat.

Mary's neighborhood, a few miles north of Wetumpka, consisted of farms owned, with a few exceptions, by white landlord farmers. During the beginning of the twentieth century, this land was worked by black sharecropping families, but because of mass migration of African Americans to the North and to southern cities and the simultaneous mechanization of the cotton industry during the 1920s to the 1940s, Elmore County's traditional cotton economy and social system was breathing its last gasps by Mary's childhood in the 1940s and 1950s.⁸ Still, the white farmers—many so poor themselves they used outhouses—had several even more impoverished black families working for them. These African

American families lived in little two- or three-room shotgun-style cabins that were owned by the white farmers and scattered the equivalent of perhaps two or three city blocks from each other.

The remnants of the unpainted cabins stand isolated in the fields today. They serve now as homes to birds, vines, and insects as the earth takes the refuge for which the sharecroppers paid so dearly. Often only stone chimneys, a broken dish, a child's shoe, a pear tree, a few flowers, or a piece of cherished linoleum remain. At best, the cabins had provided the large, hardworking families a partial independence from the white owners. Unlike slave quarters, these cabins were not designed to keep humans under the master's constant view. Also still standing today are a number of the more substantial homes that served white owners, lived in by the elderly whites or rented to tenants. These houses have often benefited by modern siding and remodeling and have plaster figurines, flowers, vegetable gardens, and porch swings. Most of the land is now used by upper-middle-class white commuters or white retirees who have luxury houses on several acres. Many of these property owners have bulldozed hills and dammed creeks for fish ponds.

Two small country stores—one owned by the white sheriff, the other by another white man—served Mary's community during her childhood. Typically the white farm owner decided which store should get the black sharecropper's business. Sometime in 1945 or 1946, without any assistance from the state, the African American community, desperately desiring education for their elementary-age children, constructed a small, cement-block, blacks-only school. Before that black children in this section of the county received no schooling, a policy deliberately designed by the white power structure to keep African Americans as an illiterate, cheap labor source.⁹ Mary's own mother had been unable to sign her wedding license, and she never learned to read.

The small city of Wetumpka, where Mary's family bought school clothes and Mary went to high school, still serves as the county seat of Elmore County. It runs along the brown, slow-moving Coosa River, near its juncture with the Tallapoosa River in east-central Alabama. The oldest of the downtown buildings were built before 1855, and the irregular streets wind through the usually quiet old southern town and around the low bluffs that indicate the slight beginnings of the Appalachian foothills.¹⁰ When Mary was a girl, Wetumpka's handful of adjacent African American businesses included a café, a barber shop, a beauty shop, and two funeral parlors. The largest black church in town, the First Baptist, was situated near the black high school. Despite the African American com-

munity's pride in the high school, white city fathers called it the Elmore County Training School in an effort to associate it with vocational training—in contrast to the white high school's supposedly superior emphasis on academics.

Mary described a vivid image from her childhood. In this memory her mother is standing outside, perhaps hanging up clothes, and looking across the creek to the next sharecropper dwelling, where a single woman, Miss Velchie, lives with her children and works in her yard. The women pause for a moment in their continuous labor, and Mary's mother calls across the cotton fields and the creek, setting off an echo: "Hey, Velchie, how ya doin'?" The echo replies: "Hey, Velchie, how ya doin'?" Mary sees her mother, perhaps with a baby on her hip, talking to Miss Velchie. The broom with which Mary's mother had been sweeping the dirt yard rests against the cabin for a few brief moments, and then, as Mary watches, the women pick up again with their hard, unpaid, reproductive labor—domestic toil that ensures the subsistence survival of another generation of workers.¹¹

The never-ending work of Mary's mother and other women of this era has a long history. As early as 1619, slave traders first ripped Africans from the continent of their birth and brought them to North America, to provide the plantation labor that contributed to the industrial wealth that eventually spread throughout the United States and Europe. At first these slaves worked the East Coast, but gradually southern coastal regions lost their soil fertility, and European Americans, with dreams of becoming wealthy planters, drove American Indians from a region of fertile prairie soil that expanded across central Alabama from Georgia to Mississippi. Then white would-be planters marched chains of slaves into the area. Mary believes some of her ancestors came to Alabama from the Carolinas in a similar way.

At the end of the Civil War newly emancipated slave families dreamed of small farms of their own, where they could live in peace, but white planters starved and terrorized these freed black workers, attempting to coerce them into slavlike work gangs and to compel them to live near the planters in former slave quarters. Some African American families, sacrificing and struggling for their independent farms, succeeded for a while, but most were eventually "driven from their land by intimidation, violence, and even murder." In an eighteen-month investigation culminating in 2001, the Associated Press documented the stealing of that black-owned land, which is now overwhelmingly "owned by whites or cor-

porations.”¹² Still, these ex-slaves continued to resist, and they eventually compelled white owners to enter a compromise—sharecropping: the social structure into which Mary was born.¹³

In the sharecropping system African American families gained the right to live in cabins away from the owners and to work together as a family group, thus offering each other a measure of protection from white physical and sexual violence. But these farm laborers paid a heavy price. Landlords forced sharecroppers to borrow money, materials, and the use of a cabin at high interest at the beginning of each season. The entire African American family worked from sunup to sundown in the fields, only to receive a “share,” often a third or a half, of the harvest at the end of the season. Frequently the landlords declared that the family had earned no profit during the year and thus claimed the family to be further in debt than when the year had begun. Often the sharecropping family gained nothing but bare subsistence for their year’s labor and was further bound to a system of unpaid labor.¹⁴ Many times this resulted in white landlords profiting from violence perpetrated against children. Mary’s beloved sister Shane, for example, hated working in the cotton fields, but her father felt compelled by the system to force her to do a long day’s labor. Although the other children could be talked into working in the fields, Mary’s father whipped Shane into compliance.

Black women played a pivotal role in ensuring family survival under this system: laboring in a home without running water, working in the fields alongside their husbands and children, taking on additional work for whites, and giving birth regularly so the family had enough workers. Women also embodied the complex system of *neighboring*: they cared for or adopted orphaned children, they tended the sick and the pregnant, and they taught new mothers necessary skills. Women also worked in an informal economy: bartering household goods, sharing their scraps of cloth to create new quilts, and organizing fish fries to raise money.¹⁵ While doing all this work, African American women struggled to teach their own children the rules of the complex racial caste system. Mistakes could prove deadly.¹⁶

Single black women were vulnerable in a family economy that relied on a husband’s or a son’s contribution, especially in farming. Farm owners expected to negotiate with men; more than one adult was needed for heavy farm labor; and it was difficult to perform outdoor farm chores and inside domestic labor simultaneously, especially with young children in tow who were in constant danger. Cynthia Williams, an African American midwife in Georgia who was born in 1921, described the over-

whelming labor her widowed mother undertook to raise her six children alone on the edge of town. According to Mrs. Williams, her mother “worked herself almost crazy.” She worked five days on a farm; cooked in a tearoom on the weekends; and did many loads of laundry each week for white families, carrying buckets of water and washing outside. In the summers she took the family out to do daily farm labor, picking cotton or shaking peas. The children were always under her supervision, because she did not like most of the work children would get doing errands and babysitting. She felt these jobs put the children under the direct command of whites who might whip them. “We came up pretty [hard],” Cynthia recalled. “But we came up with a mother that really wanted her children.”

One of her brothers had convulsions and could not work on the farm, however, even under his mother’s direction. Cynthia remembers: “So, one man she was picking cotton for, he told her, he says, ‘I ain’t gonna haul that boy [to the fields] because he doesn’t do anything no way, and you don’t make him do anything.’ He said, ‘So I ain’t gonna hire him.’ My mother was doing so much more work than the others that he was hiring. She says, ‘Well, okay, if you can’t carry him, you can’t carry me. Because I have to see about him.’ When he [the farmer] finally found out he wasn’t getting much work done, he [told] her he didn’t care how little work he [her son] did. ‘You just come on back, ’cause you doing twice as much as another person anyway.’” Her mother’s life goal, Cynthia says, was for no one to whip her children.¹⁷

Before World War I, large numbers of black workers were forced to continue toiling away on these poor-paying, labor-intensive plantations, despite their deep desire for better conditions.¹⁸ Among the reasons for this were southern paternalism (the idea that wealthy whites knew what was best for poor whites and blacks), white planters’ threats of inducing starvation among their black workers, widespread “violence and social warfare” inflicted upon many African American males (especially lynching), and a lack of alternative employment for African Americans. When European immigration to the northern United States ceased during World War I, however, some employment opportunities opened for African Americans.¹⁹ Many of Mary’s relatives joined the enthusiastic outmigration from the South to the North at this time.²⁰

The coming of World War II, about a year before Mary was born, brought dramatic changes to the plantation region, as many black workers flocked to new opportunities in the military, so-called war work, or to jobs that had been vacated by whites. “By 1945,” according to political

scientist and historian Daniel Kryder, “one million African Americans had joined the armed forces and another million had moved from the southern countryside into cities across the nation.” Thus the number working in agriculture and domestic service “dropped dramatically,” and those remaining could negotiate higher wages.²¹ In turn, white planters and landlords finally invested in labor-saving machinery and shifted away from cotton production. Eventually they ejected the remaining blacks from white-owned land. Many African Americans enthusiastically left or escaped the sharecropping system, but others were too illiterate or too old to find other work.²² Clinging to the margins of economic life, they lived as a dispossessed people on the outskirts of southern cities or in rural neighborhoods like that of Elmore County.

I was big enough and old enough to stretch my eyes at conditions
and abominate what I seed.

—Nate Shaw [Ned Cobb], 1974

In the racially segregated Jim Crow South, whites and blacks coexisted within fiercely enforced, racially based caste-like, hierarchical categories—categories so rigid that nearly every square foot was fraught with racial, sexual, and economic meaning and involved spatial rules of conduct.²³ When African American and white children played together at a white-owned house, for example, the black children had to go to the back door before they could meet up with the white children inside. African Americans who went to movies had to sit in the balconies.

Mrs. Williams described to me the humiliation of her younger sister when Mrs. Williams had taken her to a local dime store: “We were in the store on Saturday, no work that day, and she held my hand. She said she wanted to pee-pee, so ‘Oh Lord, don’t ask me that. I don’t know where to take you today.’ And it was going all down her little legs before I could get to the car. . . . I didn’t want their [her younger siblings] feelings hurt by things like that. . . . But I know a little boy, maybe he didn’t read, and he didn’t know ‘Black’ and ‘White.’ He was up drinking water here, and one of the store clerks just had a fit on it. ‘You know better than to be drinking that! Don’t you see that sign says “White,” and that says “Black”? You can drink water over there.’ And he, well, when she stopped him, he just didn’t drink anymore . . . he just didn’t drink. . . . He said, ‘I don’t want none.’”²⁴

There are more fatal examples of these racial lines being crossed, to be sure. Mary and her sisters remember one incident when outraged

friends of a white woman threatened an African American woman who had had sex, probably coerced, with the white woman's husband. The African American woman fled the county by nightfall and never returned to her family. American studies scholar Stephen J. Whitfield has speculated that in August 1955, in nearby Mississippi, black Chicago-bred Emmett Till was lynched primarily because of how he had spoken to a white woman but partially because his wallet had contained a picture of a white girl.²⁵

Institutions also were segregated by race. For example, the community maintained separate schools, churches, hospitals, restaurants, and burial grounds for both its white citizens and its black citizens. The inequality and separation included neighborhoods, types of jobs, and levels of social welfare. When African Americans got telephones in Elmore County, for example, they were assigned separate party lines from those of European Americans (these were telephone lines shared by three or four families).²⁶ When nearby Montgomery was forced to integrate its swimming pools as a result of the victories of the civil rights movement, town leaders paved the pools over with cement, rather than allow blacks to use them.

Despite these often vicious restrictions made on blacks' freedom of movement, I believe the African American residents of Mary's childhood community claimed the land on a moral level—an interesting claim, given that few of them owned the land they worked. Many blacks endowed the natural features in their landscape with spiritual meaning. That is, elements of the land they loved served as symbols for the body and the divine, for morality and remembrance. Symbols of history and justice, these places stood rooted in God's nature itself. As the leaves changed colors on the trees, Mary explained, so would ultimate control over the earth. Innocent blood spilled on the earth would rise to the surface in the rain, many of these African Americans believed. And some crimes against humanity were so irredeemable that creation itself remembered. For example, when whites lynched and burned a black man, they believed that the tree would die; all the life around it would die; then finally the town and the lynchers themselves would die. In witness, the leafless tree would still stand.

In the process of telling her many stories over the years to me, Mary has claimed repeatedly that places have meaning and that meaning is formed by labor and the hard struggle to love, to raise a family, and to form a just community under conditions of bare subsistence and deep oppression. She believes that although modern property rights have

legally severed relations to those places and appear to give no place to go outside of property for meaning, traces of an alternative value system are still alive; these traces are ultimately revealed by a sacred history itself.²⁷

It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

The ideological and institutional framework of this unbreakable racial-class system was reinforced by terror. Members of the Ku Klux Klan dressed as night riders in white robes and masks, targeting African American families, especially community leaders and anyone who violated the strictly defined racial categories. During the decades of lynchings between the end of the Civil War and 1968, white vigilantes tortured and murdered five thousand black men, women, and children.²⁸ Although the majority of these lynchings were against black men, black women were not safe from this threat.

Many African Americans fought back against this form of violence. In the 1880s, under the leadership of women's rights activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, African Americans created the Anti-Lynching Bureau, which campaigned tirelessly against such terror. The National Association of Colored Women, especially under the leadership of Josephine Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell, also fought segregation and lynching and pushed for women's suffrage.²⁹ Black women in the NAACP promoted the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill from 1918 to 1923, the first anti-lynching bill to be voted on by the Senate.³⁰

But violence against African Americans continued. One example from the 1940s concerns the family of activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Just when her parents had finally owned a few animals, fixed up their house, and started to get ahead, someone (presumably a white man) stirred poison into the animals' food at night. Hamer recalled of the incident: "That poisoning knocked us right back down flat. We never did get back up again. That white man did it just because we were getting somewhere."³¹

Often the local (white) sheriff, rather than being a protective force for an entire community, was deeply involved in the violence routinely carried out against African Americans. Eventually the tide turned, however, and the general public (black and white alike) rejected the Klan's flagrant actions and passed anti-Klan laws throughout the South. Segregated schools were declared illegal in the mid-1950s, as a result of the

Supreme Court decision established in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. After this landmark decision, recalls Mary, the White Citizens Council took over much of the public anti-civil rights activity in Wetumpka, Alabama. Mary's father minced no words about the organization: "Same dirty dogs as the Ku Klux."

In 1965, when fifteen African American children finally entered the white school system in Wetumpka, white vigilantes firebombed two of the children's homes in retaliation.³² Following the growing successes of the civil rights movement, organized groups such as the White Citizens Council gradually died out, but small groups of white vigilantes continued their hate campaigns in Elmore County throughout the 1960s.³³ In more recent times, unfortunately, especially with the advent of the Internet, the Klan has become a public presence again.³⁴

She had to lay down for him [the white man], poor woman; didn't, no tellin what would happen. She belonged to him but he wanted to keep his doins outside his wife.

—Nate Shaw [Ned Cobb], 1974

As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has explained, among the many racial assumptions that were used to anchor the system of segregation and violence was the belief that all African American men desired white women and were unable to control their lustful impulses. All that protected white women from the terrible consequences of such animal craving, this belief system held, were the structure of racial segregation and white supremacy and the chivalry and power of white fathers, brothers, and husbands. As payment for this protection, white women were expected to be submissive to "their men."³⁵

In fact, this belief system often reflected an inversion of reality. More frequently it was white men who claimed sexual rights to African American women. This sense of white male entitlement can be directly traced back to the circumstances of slavery, when the master and his male relatives, whether married or not, had sexual access to all slaves.³⁶ This attitude was still common in 1948, when a white mother wrote to Governor James Folsom in Alabama regarding her son, who was imprisoned for what appears to be group rape of a black woman. Asking for her son's release, the mother wrote: "If the girl had been a white girl, it would have been different."³⁷ In Mary's own family she recalls that as soon as her beloved older sister Shane reached adolescence, white men she knew

well started accosting her. This situation was so common to black girls Shane's age that it was almost unremarkable, except, of course, to the girl herself and her family.

Like lynching, severe sexual violence was used to send powerful messages to African Americans about the dangers of resistance.³⁸ For example, the sexual assault and near lynching of the activist Annie Mae Meriwether, recorded in NAACP records, was graphic. Meriwether had recently joined the biracial and radical Share Croppers Union. Her assault appears to have been made in retribution for that action. Taken in Montgomery sometime between 1927 and 1936, Meriwether's testimony states:

Vaughn Ryles [the leader of the mob] started doubling the rope and told me to pull off all my clothes. He said, "Lay down across the chair, I want naked meat this morning."

I lay down across the chair and Ralph McGuire held my head for Ryles to beat me. He beat me about 20 minutes. He was beating me from my hips on down. and [*sic*] he hit me across the head.³⁹

Oral histories from a variety of southern locations attest to sexual pressure being exerted on African American women by white men. Many of these actions appear to be in response to such women's resistance to the existing power structure. For example, Josephine Hunter, a contemporary of Mary's mother, described a situation to me in which the husband of the woman she worked for pressured her for sex. One time "he stood outside my house and called me and said he was gonna pay me, but he wanted to get in the house. I had the screen door locked between us, but he jerked the door loose. He came in and I fought him. Then I grabbed my rolling pin and hit him over the head with it and broke the rolling pin."⁴⁰ The man ultimately left. Later his wife contacted Josephine. She knew all about her husband's infidelities and assaults, she said, her voice filled with disgust toward her husband.

There was violence in Mary's marriage as well, often reflected in her husband's accusations of her infidelity. Mary experienced a degree of protection as long as her parents were living, but with their deaths in 1967 and 1974, her system of defense was gone. Eventually, Mary had to find the internal resources to fight back on her own. She asserted her independence from her husband in 1967, when she organized for the union, and the marriage ultimately ended. Today, although she main-

tains close relationships with her three sons, she lives relatively independent of men.

For both white and black women daily life in the segregated rural South, and Elmore County in particular, reflected the costs of being female, as opposed to the “wages” automatically due men, black and white alike. Among the advantages granted to black men were the following: if food was scarce, they were fed first; they took nights out, often with no questions asked; and they preached in the church, although almost everyone agreed that the women were the religious mainstay. As for white men, they benefited from the opportunity to hold public office.⁴¹ Men, not necessarily their wives or girlfriends, expected to get sexual pleasure and could demand whatever it required. Unlike women, they did not have to fear sexual harassment or resort to self-induced abortion.

White men could write editorials and make political speeches. All men kept their original names, while women lost their birth names, even in cemeteries. Men from both races did not have to do housework or to carefully hide any clues of menstruation. Men received higher wages and inherited greater portions. They imitated the male heroes of mythologies and television shows, while there were no female counterparts for women and girls to look toward. Finally, they heard the deity spoken of with a male pronoun.

The cruelty of the complex and vicious structures of race, class, and gender in the segregated South was often smoothed over by an extravagant politeness expressed between the social groups. Symbols of respect and even affection sometimes cushioned the male/female and black/white relationships that were simultaneously intimate yet profoundly superficial and unfair. For example, men talked about the women they exploited as their “better half.” For years Mary’s aunt, Rebecca Freeman, cared for an elderly white couple on whose land she and her family had worked most of their lives. She fed them and changed their linen, even when they had lost all bodily controls. Despite this dedication and service, Rebecca was routinely excluded by the elderly couple. As a member of the despised minority group, Rebecca learned they had actually cheated her out of the use of the house they had promised her. All of this happened even though the old couple had treated Rebecca with warmth and politeness to her face.

In another example, the son of the white man who supposedly lit the match for the legendary lynching that took place when Mary was a child always tipped his hat to Mary’s father when he passed by the family home

in his car. In this community, Mary explained, most black men treated their wives with deference and referred to white girls as little ladies. “Whatever they did [to women], they did it behind closed doors,” she recalls. Yet one of the touching details Mary discovered as we worked on this book concerns her beloved white friend, Miss Abby (we’ll learn more about her in Mary’s story). Mary told me that her stepgrandma, Miss Lula, hid in the cornfields when Mary’s grandfather was drinking and threatening her. After Miss Abby’s death her nephew told Mary that during Miss Abby’s first marriage, she, like Miss Lula, had also hid in the cornfields during her first husband’s drinking and ensuing violence. Perhaps the two women had hid not far from each other.

In the racial hierarchy of the segregated American South, all African Americans were subordinate to all whites, but class hierarchies did exist between various groups of African Americans. Mary makes these distinctions clear in her story. She recalls that African Americans of the countryside were considered lower class than the more middle-class blacks who lived in Wetumpka. On the bottom of the rural workers were the poor, non-farm-owning farm workers like Cynthia Williams’s mother, who worked as day-wage laborers, assisting during times of labor shortages and eking out a living as best they could. Next were sharecroppers, like Mary’s family, who lived on a landlord’s farm and generally used his stock and equipment in exchange for part of the year’s profit. Above them were the tenant farmers, who usually owned their own stock and equipment and rented the farm. At the top were black farmers who actually owned their land, a condition often made precarious by white hostility and resentment.⁴²

Poor whites also lived hard lives throughout the post-Civil War period. The Civil War had devastated the South, which then functioned almost as an economic colony of the North. Few banks, little investment, and a weak consumer base limited its growth. Its unskilled and uneducated labor force worked on farms or produced cheap manufactured goods, like textiles, cigarettes, and lumber products, and as long as conditions remained desperate for both poor whites and blacks, they often competed for jobs on the bottom. Southern industrial development also lagged behind that of the North partly because of white planters’ reluctance to encourage any attractive alternative to lure away its impoverished workforce. As the geographer Charles Aiken has noted, many planters also opposed manufacturing because they feared such industry would bring in new leaders with alternative ideas and political visions.

“Not only were the newcomers usually better educated than members of the indigenous white power structure,” observes Aiken, “but they had economic, political, and social connections beyond the small provincial worlds of planters.”⁴³

Nevertheless, large textile mills, the first major industry in the United States, moved south from New England after the 1890s in search of low wages, a labor force unlikely to unionize, and “one hundred-percent Anglo-Saxon cheap, contented labor.”⁴⁴ Along the red-clay hills and on the outskirts of southern cities, they built mill towns, owned and operated entirely by the company. These towns—composed of the plant, an elegant house for an owner or manager, small company houses rented to workers, a company doctor, a company church, and a company store in which workers quickly went into debt—encompassed the workers’ lives.

White families who had lost their farms and white widows with children moved to these factory towns. The entire family, including children, would work for the mill. There they frequently acquired byssinosis, commonly known as brown lung—a fatal disease caused by breathing cotton dust twelve hours a day. As the workers’ lungs filled, slowly drowning them, company doctors tried to ease their symptoms. Company preachers performed their funerals, burying the victims in company graves. Despite the mills’ policies of paternalism, many of them paid textile workers nearly the lowest wage for industrial work in the United States. They also gave workers few fringe benefits and allowed them to suffer frequent accidents.⁴⁵

Still, these white workers earned more than the African American sharecroppers did in the countryside. Generally, until the 1960s African Americans only worked in these mills as janitors or in the most dangerous jobs. The larger class issues of the era affected all workers: whites in the cities often labeled white textile workers as trash, but those white textile workers could take their vengeance out on all African Americans. In this way the textile industry continued several traditions of the segregated South: it separated the races—factories were for whites, plantations for blacks—and all blacks were considered subordinate to all whites.⁴⁶

For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will
I arise, saith the Lord.

—Psalm 12:5

The question of whether to baptize slaves as Christians was debated among some white Americans for two hundred years. Opponents of the

idea were fearful that no matter how carefully they couched their teachings, slaves would seize the instruction and come to believe that they were equal to their masters in the spirit and that God cared personally for them. But a deeper fear of these whites, which ultimately came to pass, was that the slaves would hold their masters' unchristian behaviors up to higher judgment.⁴⁷ Slaves knew the cruel and unjust slaveholders were going to hell. They created an alternative vision of a moral universe with their own sacred history, a different story from that of the European Americans, both Christians and Jews. To the slaves, a living God revealed himself most clearly in the Old Testament story of the liberation of the oppressed, a story where Moses led the slaves of Israel—a chosen people—out of Egypt to the Promised Land. To the slaves, Jesus became almost an “Old Testament warrior” who fought for the lost and enslaved. In this view God was thus on the side of those who suffered.⁴⁸

Slaves met covertly in the swamps or woods to dance in circles, sing out the pain they suffered, proclaim their knowledge that God would deliver them someday, and declare this world to be a moral battleground in which the earth participated with the slaves in their struggle for justice. Theirs was not a passive belief. Historian Lawrence Levine has quoted white interpretations of the accent with which slaves sang about their faith: “Gwine to argue wid de Father and chatter wid de son,” “Did yo’ ever, Stan’ on the mountun, Wash yo’ han’s In a cloud,” and “We all got a right to de tree ob life.”⁴⁹ The slaves believed that they, like the ancient Israelites, would one day be set free: “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt’s Land; Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go.”⁵⁰

Even after the slaves were emancipated, when, according to Levine, the ex-slaves’ religion became more otherworldly and less overtly political, many of the earlier primary worship techniques continued, including “the ecstasy, the spirit possession, the shouts, the chanted sermons, the sacred sense of time and space, the immediacy, the feeling of familiarity with God and the ancient heroes, the communal setting in which songs were created and re-created.”⁵¹ But in the newer form of the religion now Jesus, not the Hebrew liberation story, was emphasized. Jesus was less a warrior figure and more a “benevolent spirit who promised His children rest and peace and justice in the hereafter.”⁵² African American religion thus continued its potentially revolutionary force. In this view God made no distinctions and judged behavior in the so-called public sphere as well as the private, and the meek would literally inherit the earth.

Throughout this period the church also served as the African Ameri-

can community's dominant self-help institution. In rural communities the church functioned as a center for worship, recreation, teenage flirtation, and social and spiritual mutual aid, as well as public participation and leadership. In larger communities the black church established schools, colleges, hospitals, newspapers, and complex social services.⁵³ Many black churchwomen organized social welfare institutions, and they also struggled against lynching and campaigned for voting rights. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has claimed, these women also developed a form of feminist theology. For example, Mary Cook, born a slave in 1862, taught about women's public responsibility to spread the gospel. Virginia Broughton, raised as a free black, declared to her husband: "I belong to God first, and you next."⁵⁴ In all of these ways the black church gave its believers a sense of sacred meaning to their struggle for political and social justice.⁵⁵

But Higginbotham has also criticized the African American church. Analyzing the black Baptist church from 1880 to 1920, she states that although black women provided the most energy in its press for social and political change, the church members often copied the white culture when it "sought to provide men with full manhood rights, while offering women a separate and unequal status."⁵⁶ Mary describes this phenomenon as well, evident throughout her story. Time and again she recounts the deep spirituality and religious dedication of African American women, but she acknowledges that the church structure of her childhood seemingly endorsed women's submission and male leadership. She believes this was done partly to compensate black men for their low status in the larger (that is, white) world.

To many of the poor African Americans of Mary's childhood, the world itself acted out God's moral purpose. God's will will eventually be done, they believed, regardless of human behavior. God's sacred history will be recorded, in the earth itself if necessary. Over the years Mary frequently repeated the story to me about the community lynching, always mentioning the subsequent suffering of the lynchers themselves. "God don't like ugly," Mary's mother warned her again and again. Fannie Lou Hamer, the sharecropper-activist, gave a similar theological message to the jailers who had imprisoned and tortured her in Mississippi in 1964. She told the wife of the jailer to read Proverbs 26:26: "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return to him."⁵⁷

The cruel and unjust will pay in God's time, these believers maintained. The land will alternately beget or withhold fruit according to the goodness of those who plant the crops. Spirits will haunt the man who

struck the match and burned another alive. Innocent blood will rise up in the earth each time it rains, bearing continued witness. The death agony in the hospital of the racist white sheriff will be watched by expanding circles of his black victims, who whisper each unfolding detail from person to person. "When you dig a grave for another person," Mary's mother warned, "you must dig one for yourself as well." Goodness and evil thus have real consequences.

During times of great repression, like in the Jim Crow South, the strong moral vision of these African Americans could simply serve as a promise of future redemption—not at all a small pledge to a suffering people. But when the social circumstances made it possible, that sense of absolute moral righteousness could be tapped for other purposes. For example, along with the rural despair in these parts during the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s, pressure for fundamental economic change built throughout the country. As white sheriffs foreclosed on cherished stock, equipment, and land, landlords evicted sharecroppers from land they depended on for food as well as employment. Many African Americans who found themselves in these dire circumstances forged new techniques of collective action and protest, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) and the Share Croppers Union (based, at times, in Elmore County, Mary's home community). In these unions black and some white farmers joined together to negotiate and even strike for better joint contracts.⁵⁸

Religion was a significant part of this union movement.⁵⁹ Some of the organizers were preachers, and meetings were often held in churches. These black churches, which were beloved, primary institutions to the country poor, blessed the unions in a sense and gave them political legitimacy.⁶⁰ Joseph North, a white writer for the *Daily Worker*, traveled during this period with a black communist as his escort. He wrote that the escort "had reached his destination—the tumbledown shack of a 'sharecropper comrade' [who] . . . was an elder in the Zion [A.] M.E. Church, who 'trusts God but keeps his powder dry'; reads his Bible every night, can quote from the Book of Daniel and the Book of Job . . . and he's been studying the Stalin book on the nation question."⁶¹

Black women played key roles in these unions. In Tallapoosa County, just east of Mary's childhood home, a young African American schoolteacher named Estelle Milner put black leaders in touch with socialist or communist organizers in Birmingham, Alabama. They then offered sharecroppers strategic assistance.⁶² The resulting organism, the homegrown Alabama Share Croppers Union, reached across both racial

and gender divides. In 1931, for example, several white landlords announced that they were withholding all cash and food advances in order to force sharecroppers to work in a sawmill. In reaction, eight hundred sharecroppers, primarily African American, met in secret groups in homes and churches. Under the leadership of two brothers, Tommy and Ralph Gray, they demanded seven basic concessions, including the continuation of food advancements and nine months of school for their children.

The first confrontation occurred near Camp Hill, Alabama, as eighty sharecroppers met in an abandoned house. Tipped off by an informant, the white sheriff deputized vigilantes, raided the house, and viciously beat the participating (mostly African American) men and women. The sharecroppers met again the next evening in a house guarded by sentries. This time Ralph Gray was wounded in an exchange of fire and stumbled to his home. There, in front of his family, a member of the white posse forced a pistol into his mouth and shot down his throat. Then, after mutilating Gray's body, the posse "waged genocidal attacks on the black community that left dozens wounded or dead."⁶³ Still, the sharecroppers did not give up, and Ralph Gray's niece, nineteen-year-old Eula Gray, went on to lead the movement. Mary and I take up this story in the epilogue to this book.

Because a coalition of poor blacks and whites could significantly challenge landlord and planter power, the planters and the public authorities struck back with a reign of terror—with beatings, shootings, and lynchings. Despite this harassment, however, the STFU organized a five-state cotton strike in 1936, relying primarily on the organizing of African American tenants and sharecroppers. Union activist Annie May Meriwether described the violence with which planters maintained their economic power. They shot, tortured, and then lynched her husband; hanged her until she passed out, revived her, and questioned her again; and then threatened her seven-year-old daughter. Finally, Meriwether and the child escaped.⁶⁴ The events she talks about took place in Lowndes County, Alabama, on August 22, 1935.⁶⁵

Eventually, the farmers unions were crushed but not totally forgotten. Nearly seventy years later Mary and I interviewed Grady Canada, a deeply religious old man with dark circles under his eyes, who talked with enthusiasm to us about these long-ago actions. He chuckled as he remembered his vibrant younger sister, Eula May. She had taken on the role after her uncle had been killed and her father was in danger. Canada stated again that God was on the side of the poor.⁶⁶

This sense of absolute moral righteousness could be tapped for other mighty purposes as well. Take the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, when the women and men of the small rural and urban black churches shook the world. On the Thursday evening of December 1, shortly after Mary had turned twelve, a tired African American seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. When news of Parks's arrest for her so-called crime became known, other African Americans, primarily women from the Women's Political Council, such as Jo Ann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks, unleashed their preplanned strategy of resistance.⁶⁷ By the following Monday morning, one of the most significant mass actions of the century had begun, as thousands of African American women, most of whom were dispossessed rural women who had moved to the city and become domestic servants, refused to ride the buses to the white homes in which they were employed. Thus they added hours of walking to a ten- to twelve-hour workday.

This was not merely a spontaneous action. Rather, the act resulted from nearly five years of "nonconfrontational grassroots leadership, especially persistent organizing by the Women's Political Council," involving thousands of daily organizational decisions.⁶⁸ One such organizer was Catherine McGowen, a young woman laboring to raise two small sons at the time, who worked as a hospital cleaning woman when the boycott began. She became a friend of Mary and mine throughout the course of my interviews. She showed me her first voting card, for which she had risked her life. The only daughter of tenant farmers from "Bloody Lowndes County," Mrs. McGowen had moved to Montgomery for more opportunity with the demise of the sharecropping system.⁶⁹

Mrs. McGowen attended the first mass meeting on December 5, 1955, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called on people to fight "until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."⁷⁰ She boycotted the buses and sang freedom songs at church rallies. One night white vigilantes trapped her and others inside the First Baptist Church on North Ripley for the entire night.⁷¹ An estimated twenty thousand people took part in the boycott, the majority of which were black working-class women. Historian Stewart Burns has stated that three levels of leadership developed in the yearlong action: "Charismatic Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preachers were mobilizers. . . . several dozen others, mostly women, comprised the organizers, including a score of ministers. As many as several thousand activists led at the micro level of extended family, neighborhood, church, and workplace."⁷²

Religion scholar Theophus H. Smith has written that “religious vision and political struggle were twin energies in [such] social transformation.”⁷³ Contradictory religious visions revealed themselves at times throughout the thirteen months of the boycott and in other civil rights events. I have heard contradictory visions of these events reflected in Mary’s voice over the years. On the one hand, she and other activists saw God as all-powerful, omniscient, totally in control; on the other hand, God seemed to them unable or unwilling to prevent human suffering. Mary asks, if God is all-powerful and all-good, why does God allow the suffering of innocents? Why do young men hang from trees? Why do faith-filled women grow old prematurely from exhaustion? And if such suffering occurs because God is circumscribed in some way by the forces of evil, how can goodness be reclaimed?

These questions examine the problem of evil directly. Many African Americans during these tumultuous years dealt intimately with evil and knew firsthand what cruelty humans could inflict upon each other. On the one hand, many held a bedrock belief that God and goodness would prevail, regardless of human behavior, a belief affirmed even in the face of a lynch mob. On the other hand, others believed that God was in some way limited in the face of a very real Satan or a similar evil, and in order to have the victory of goodness, God’s people must actively participate in the struggle against that powerful evil. Even Martin Luther King Jr. hesitated in his affirmation of the predestined outcome of the struggle: “It is a conflict between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and *if there is a victory—and there will be a victory*—that victory will not be merely for the Negro citizens . . . [but] for justice.”⁷⁴

Mary expressed this same ambivalence in 1963, when she cried out to God, questioning his goodness and power, when white racists killed four little girls attending Sunday school in Birmingham, Alabama. King and others declared that African Americans could not just sit and wait for justice to happen. Instead, in a messianic mission as mighty as a whirlwind, he believed, they must join with God in a rigorous life-and-death struggle against the world’s evils and create a commanding form of righteous action that was physical as well as moral. In a sense this returned many African Americans to the theology of the slaves that had been expressed in the spirituals: aided by a Moses, they would be led into the Promised Land. Now, however, God required them to be his agents of justice.

This revised theology was born of a synthesis of African American religion, with its potentially revolutionary undercurrent, and the nonvio-

lent resistance taught by Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the postcolonial independence movement in modern India. The combination resulted in a mass movement of nonviolent power made of “moral absolutes, certitudes, and commandments. Such a force was fueled by powerful faith [and] tempered and bounded by compassion, understanding, and humility.”⁷⁵ It required repeated inspiration and rigorous training in personal and group control as participants took part in mass direct action and did not strike back when attacked. Thus this theology sustained an oppressed people, giving them the fervent conviction necessary to survive and to judge the behavior of their oppressors and drawing on an underground tradition of resistance. This theology of civil rights theorists propelled those people forward.

In turn, the civil rights movement inspired other movements throughout the United States and the rest of the world, including second-stage feminism, the Chicano movement, parts of the labor movement, gay liberation, and other insurgencies.⁷⁶ “The movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women, since it came out of the church groups,” stated Ella Baker, an early African American activist. “It’s true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of the men.”⁷⁷ Certainly, the existence of that relationship between the morality of many African American women, the activism of many black churchwomen, and subsequent liberation movements suggests that African American feminism has deep roots. It also points to the multiple histories of the women’s movement beyond that of white mainstream feminism.

And as you are trying your very Best to get our textile trouble ended,
at the H.ville Manuf. Co which we do need your help very bad As
they are really trying hard to burst our union and make slaves out of
us.

—Letter to Governor James Folsom, May 12, 1955

A combination of grassroots agitation and the early successes of the civil rights movement allowed poor African American workers to begin to force open spaces for themselves as laborers inside the textile mills. Using Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the African American freedom movement encouraged black workers to enter the textile plants, a story Mary tells with enthusiasm.⁷⁸ Three mills operated relatively close to Wetumpka when Mary was young, including the West Bolyston textile mill on the outskirts of northern Montgomery, about twenty-five miles

south. Two of Mary's white neighbors commuted there, and eventually Mary worked there as well. United Elastic purchased the West Bolyston mill sometime in the 1960s, and then in about 1968 J. P. Stevens, the second largest textile company in the South, purchased United Elastic.⁷⁹

The West Boylston/J. P. Stevens factory still stands today, although it has closed down. Its founders had built a huge plant and added a nearby company store; small frame houses that it rented to workers; and, for its owner, a gracious mansion set back along a curving drive in an almost private park. The textile mill resembled a plantation in several ways. Its elite owner/manager almost functioned like a feudal lord. The mill had centralized buildings, and its large workforce of fairly desperate laborers was isolated from the broader community. It certainly was not a world of skilled, middle-class workers.⁸⁰

Workers in various textile plants struggled to unionize at different times in their history, and the planters, professionals, and business owners often joined in the debate, claiming that workers must be denied access to labor unions for their "own good." For example, in an editorial on January 2, 1964, in the *Wetumpka Herald* conservative activist Thurman Sensing stated: "Where right-to-work laws are not enforced, the working man is without adequate protection. He must in effect pay tribute to a union in order to hold down a job. This is an outrageous situation."⁸¹

Indeed, the southern textile industry, employing 45,800 people in 1976, was the last major industry largely without union organization in the country, when in 1963, with strong backing from the AFL-CIO, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) began organizing J. P. Stevens. The TWUA subsequently merged with Amalgamated Clothing in 1976 and called themselves the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union.⁸² In 1976 someone in the West Boylston plant contacted the national union and asked that an organizer be sent to the plant. The evening that organizer showed up at the plant door, Mary's life was changed forever.

The ACTWU developed four components in its strategy to pressure Stevens into negotiating with its workers. First, they campaigned to organize the workers; second, they undertook a legal struggle designed to demonstrate that Stevens engaged in unfair labor practices; third, they initiated a consumer product boycott; and fourth, they engaged in a campaign aimed against Stevens's power base, a "base made up of other corporate and financial institutions."⁸³ Over the years Mary fought for the union on all of these fronts. She worked constantly to organize the

workers; she testified during a trial; she campaigned personally and in the media about the consumer boycott of Stevens production; and she testified to corporate and financial institutions about the oppressive conditions in the plants.

J. P. Stevens was known throughout the nation for its defiance of the National Labor Relations Act, signed into law in 1935. In 1977 the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit stated: "J. P. Stevens, in particular, has acquired 'a reputation as the most notorious recidivist in the field of labor law.'" These unfair practices included illegal firing because of union activity; sexual harassment; racial discrimination; illegal surveillance; refusal to post union notices where employees could see them; and lack of worker safety, especially by using dangerous equipment, having such loud noise the workers' hearing was injured, and generating so much cotton dust the workers developed byssinosis. In fact, administrative law judge Robert A. Giannaski found the company guilty of "massive unfair labor practices" in the West Boylston plant, where Mary worked. There, a majority of 457 workers signed cards authorizing the union to represent them, "a solid 57.3 percent, which, in the parlance of political election results, would have been a landslide."⁸⁴

Over the years Montgomery has grown north, and it now encloses the West Bolyston/J. P. Stevens plant and mill town. The empty plant seems to be crumbling into the earth, its work now being sent to third world countries. Tall trees line the street in front of the plant, and huge garbage trucks pull under the shade trees in front of it during the noon hour. There, the garbage collectors eat their lunches as they let their loud engines continue to run. The company store next door has been converted to a butcher shop, and small wooden dwellings still indicate the outline of company housing.

Late one afternoon in November 1998, as Mary drove her school bus across town, she glanced up at the sky and saw a city where there had been clouds before. It was a city built of old buildings that reached up to the heavens, buildings with countless windows. She thought of a Bible passage: "In my father's house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2). The city remained in her sight for a number of minutes. A few days later she awoke spiritually changed, in a sense reborn. Mary had always been intensely religious, but now a new sense of awe and purpose overtook her. Nevertheless, this transformation was deeply rooted in her religion.

After this vision fellow Christians in Mary's family and community in-

terpreted it to represent the New Jerusalem, as described in the last book of the New Testament, Revelation. Revelation, in highly symbolic language, describes the end of the world, when God will destroy the oppressive imperial city of Babylon and raise up a New Jerusalem, a site of justice and salvation. In the New Jerusalem:

the tabernacle of God is with men,
and he will dwell with them,
and they shall be his people.
And God himself shall be with them,
and be their God.
And God shall wipe away all tears
from their eyes; and there shall be no
more death, neither sorrow or crying,
neither shall there be any more pain
for the former things are passed away.
—Revelation 21:3–4

According to religious scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the vision of a New Jerusalem described in Revelation can offer the political “promise of justice and salvation to the poor and to the oppressed or [serve as a] challenge [to] the complacency and security of the relatively well-to-do.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, she states that Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” contains a “glimpse of the New Jerusalem,” an image echoed in his “I Have a Dream” speech.⁸⁶ In this way the content of Mary’s vision can be related to key ideas of the civil rights movement. Since her revelation, Mary has become personally less judgmental toward those she believes to have sinned against her people. God will judge, not her, she believes.⁸⁷

To be with Mary is a remarkable experience, as her kindness flows out to all. But although her faith is based on a belief that God manifests mercy to those who truly repent, she also expects a fierce judgment, especially for those who mistreat the earth. We will pay, she says, for the ecological destruction we have wrought. In a sense this theology is fervently anticapitalist: no one owns the earth, Mary repeats; property rights sever relationships; and material benefits are meant to be shared.

Mary’s spiritualism reminds me of other African American activists before her. Like Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary grew up surrounded by a pantheon of biblical characters and stories that she interwove with her perception of the surrounding events. Like Truth and

Hamer, she experienced a form of Protestant mysticism in which God was utterly present in her life. Mary too undertook a mission, answering a direct call to a specific political action. All three women believed they lived in a sacred time, when battles between good and evil bristled with energy, and all three rotated periods of activism and contemplation throughout their lives. Each woman believed in a God who manifested both mercy and a fierce judgment; each felt that God had given her the gift of discernment; and from descriptions of witnesses, all three activists reflected a radiance of spirit, a personal incandescence that drew others to their message.

Mary's story presented in this book is a celebration of community, an explanatory tale, and a warning. She describes the oppression of a community of people as well as the love, belief, and inspiration that enabled them to survive. She warns of the spiritual, social, and ecological destruction to come unless the larger community heeds God's warnings. The necessary changes Mary presents include mutual support, especially for the old; a rigorous love for the young, including responsibility for their moral development; the creation of loving and forgiving hearts; profound ecological changes; and a vision of justice that links a community with its God.

Today, after decades of activism, Mary no longer talks a great deal about either the civil rights or the labor movement. African Americans still suffer deeply, she believes, and the labor movement has repeatedly let her down after all her years of service. Instead, Mary shines with a sense of joy that feeds all who touch her life. She lives a simple life filled with nonjudgmental kindness and service.