

Preface

I MET MARY ROBINSON in 1980 while working on an oral history collection titled *Dignity: Lower Income Women Tell of Their Lives and Struggles*. Mary was among the women whose stories are included in that collection, which shed light on issues of race, class, and gender in this country, as well as the workings of the civil rights and textile union movements to which Mary has dedicated so much of her life. Our conversations did not end with the publication of *Dignity*, however. This book, based on a fifteen-hundred-page transcript covering twenty-three years of interviews with Mary, continues that earlier work.

Oral historians must make some editing decisions. In order to tell as much of Mary's story as space allows, I reluctantly cut out much of the iteration that gives the story its rhythm. I also clarified pronouns and added explanatory phrases. Mary changed the names and some identifying information of many of the minor characters but kept the names of her family members, other people we hope to honor, and those individuals who are well known and easily identified. Although Mary related her life history to me over more than twenty years, in order to capture the flavor of a continuous narrative, we present her story here as if she were telling it to me in the present. This is probably the most significant violation of the original texts.

The relationship between the life and perspectives of the compiler of the oral history and the subject of the oral history is so complex, especially when the two are from different racial backgrounds, that it was only with the active assistance of Mary that I was able to write this book. In a sense the microphone at times was turned around, and Mary inter-

viewed me. The entire work is a shared construction. For example, the transcripts refer seventy-eight times to Mary's mother's work when Mary was a child, and I tried to choose among these references and weave them into some sort of chronological narrative. Likewise, in the transcripts Mary refers seventeen times to the murders of black prisoners by white sheriffs. The choices for inclusion here were somewhat intuitive, depending on the emotion with which Mary relayed the story to me, the frequency with which she referred to it, and its location in the center or the periphery of each account.

Finally, to keep the book at a workable length, I eliminated most of the questions I put to Mary over the years. Because of all of these interventions, I have tried to give a sense of our working style in the introduction and epilogue. The transcripts from the 1980 interviews are in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. The more recent ones are in my personal library in Tucson, Arizona, but are available to scholars, so they can review the data directly.¹

This book is many things. It is an edited oral history based on audiotapes of my conversations with Mary, including those from our first collaboration in 1980. It is also a story about location and place, meaning and community, violence and morality, struggles for the land that people work, and an ultimate refusal to accept dispossession. To quote the historian Anne McClintock: "It is a device against oblivion, a strategy for survival."² As the Pulitzer prize-winning writer Toni Morrison wrote in *Beloved*, it is about the battle not only to love small (the mist, a woodpecker, a blade of grass) but also to love large (a partner, a child, one's work, the land).³ Mary's experiences tell a story of the unyielding moral universe that gave the uneducated and dispossessed women in her community the courage and stamina to become the backbone of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. This sense of unwavering moral strength, as Mary describes it, sustained these women as they became key actors in insurgent Southern labor movements. Finally, Mary shares with us a life guided by a profound religious vision, based on the moral landscape of her childhood—a vision that places her in a long tradition of other African American, Christian activist-mystics.⁴