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## Listening For A Life

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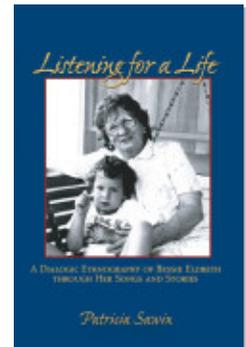
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# I

## *Introduction*

### Dialogism and Subjectivity

Bessie Eldreth and I have been talking, on and off, for the past fifteen years. She, actually, does most of the talking and sometimes sings. I do most of the listening. We have that particular, but not entirely artificial relationship that emerges between ethnographer and subject. The topic of our conversation has been almost entirely Eldreth herself: her ninety years, her life in the North Carolina mountains, her specific experiences as a woman, her large repertoire of old songs, and her interactions with family, neighbors, and, over the past twenty-five years, with folklorists and the new audiences for singing and telling stories to whom they have introduced her. The exposure and opportunities to talk that have characterized Eldreth's later life are an ironic inversion of her earlier experience. It is because she lived in a marginalized region and was often poor and dependent upon her own aesthetic resources that she is now celebrated as a "traditional Appalachian singer." It is because she was for so long silenced by her husband and the restraints of an unabashedly patriarchal society that the stories she tells about her life intrigue me as a feminist.

This book is my attempt to account as fully as possible for our conversations, to make sense of and make meaning from what transpired between us. In these conversations, Eldreth narrated a self, not simply describing an identity that fully preexisted our interaction, but speaking and singing herself into being, insofar as I am enabled to know her. Each individual story, like the overall self-narration to which it contributes, is constructed dialogically. Eldreth narrates herself in relation both to resilient social discourses that partially constrain definition of her gender, class, and region and to the anticipated responses of listeners past and present. While offering an account of Eldreth's life, this book is not a biography or a life history. It is, rather, an ethnography of subject formation that understands the creation of a self as a recursive and dialogic process.

The text thus unfolds at two levels simultaneously. At one level it functions as a portrait of Eldreth, derived primarily from her stories and songs and highlighting those aspects of her life and portions of her repertoire that she has most wished to share. At another level, however, it is an account of how Eldreth constitutes herself as a subject by means of the various communicative resources available to her and of how I as ethnographer construct her as the subject of ethnography. We can come to understand Eldreth, I argue, not by treating her stories simply as transparent carriers of meaning but rather by analyzing how she creates an identity through communicative interaction and how I, as her immediate partner in conversation, am implicated in any account that comes out of our interactions. My approach thus challenges the assumptions that underpin biography or life history, in that biography treats the subject as self-evidently significant, life history presents the subject as representative of a group, and both not only accept the subject as preformed and self-consistent but also obscure the process whereby various bits of information drawn from multiple sources and originally inflected by multiple voices are melded into "the story" of a person's life. The ethnography of subjectivity, in contrast, locates significance in exposing the process through which the subject creates her self through interaction and in interrogating the traces from which we can track that process.

Eldreth is a fascinating individual with striking stories to tell and a distinctive repertoire of songs. She can, indeed, tell us both what it was like to raise eleven children on a rented farm in the southern mountains during the Depression and what it was like to present herself as a person who had had that experience to an audience at the Festival of American Folklife on the national mall in Washington, D.C. In another sense, however, the story I can tell about Eldreth is interesting precisely because it defies and deconstructs conventional definitions of significance and typicality. She is neither a major historical actor nor a "representative Appalachian woman." She is a person doing what every person does, enacting a self. She can indeed provide information about the experience of a particular gender-class-region constellation, that of existing as a poor woman in that place that has been labeled Appalachia. If we think about her self-account in this light, however, we should recognize that our analysis runs counter to Eldreth's desire to stress her own uniqueness. At the same time, I acknowledge the irony that her particular version of the general process of self-creation came to my attention only because of the redressive attention that feminism and folklore pay to those who have been marginalized.

The stories and songs, enactments and performances through which Eldreth creates herself are wonderfully evocative in their artistry and particularity. One purpose of this book is certainly to make those available to a wider audience and thereby to further Eldreth's own project of laying claim to certain cherished identities: virtuous though beleaguered wife, loving mother, hard worker, humorous prankster, talented singer. My reciprocal project is to analyze her means of thus constructing a self, with the goal of tracing her process of subject formation in

detail—her resources and models, the discourses in which she positions herself, the pressures she feels and her ways of responding to them, the influence and limits of my role as listener. To achieve this goal, I approach ethnography as an inherently dialogic process, a responsive interaction between subject and ethnographer. While striving to create a text that serves Eldreth's purposes as well as mine, I acknowledge that they are not identical and reject methodologies that mandate a coincidence and transparency that exceed and belie the nature of actual human communication. In the following pages I articulate a dialogic ethnography that enables me to find a secure and productive footing among the competing claims of multiple models of feminist and folkloristic ethnographic practice. A dialogic ethnography allays anxieties about the ethics of representation, promoting the ethnographer's joyful assumption of her inevitable interpretive responsibilities.

This approach in turn enables me to see and to represent more accurately the complexities and contradictions in Eldreth's character, which are of a kind that folklorists and feminist anthropologists—feeling bound to defend and celebrate their subjects—have rarely plumbed. Although over time she developed ways to resist or reject specific limitations placed on her because of her gender and class, Eldreth was never a conscious critic of the system that oppressed her. Consequently, she achieves positive self-ascription by indirect means and often at the cost of investing in positions that actually make her complicit in gender oppression or that take distressing advantage of racial privilege. Amid the current enthusiasm for studying social movements and activists who seek to understand and alleviate their own oppression, I focus on the much more common and problematic practice of a person who achieves only partial, temporary, and compromised release from hegemonic forces. In so doing I respond to the challenge articulated by José Limón, who critiques folklorists' tendency to see the world of the socially marginalized in wholly positive terms (1994), and by Donald Brenneis, who urges us to acknowledge our attraction to the easy-to-tell, heroic stories of resistance and to document "practices of domination, accommodation, and complicity" as a step toward "illuminat[ing] the complexity and moral ambiguity of those events through which relations of power are constituted" (1993:300–301).

A further clarification involves my abandonment of the notion that Eldreth could be considered an example of or participant in something we could call "Appalachian culture," however attached folklorists may be to that concept. The attention paid to Eldreth by new audiences over the last twenty-five years has been mostly articulated in these terms. To the extent that this attention has been a welcome recompense after years of being taken for granted and has conferred some material advantages, Eldreth has acquiesced. She thus benefits, however, from membership in a club she never joined and to the existence of which she remains indifferent if not hostile. Although she is devoted to her mountains, her religion, and her music, she rejects attempts to treat her as an example of Appalachian culture. The salient difference between herself and those from

elsewhere, her self-accounts suggest, is one not of culture but of class, defined in terms of the kind and amount of work a person has to do. Her song repertoire bears witness to the region's connection with a wider "American" society, although it also reveals her own devotion to an image of an isolated and pastoral Appalachia that depends on nostalgic repression of memories of such connection. And while outsiders value her singing as a remnant of Appalachian culture, she justifies it as a form of practical and spiritual women's work. New audiences provide another resource for Eldreth's self-construction, another object of which to make efficient use, but she defines her subjectivity in terms of gender and labor and defies us to impose the construct of a regional culture that does not correspond to her experience.

### THEORY: DIALOGISM AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY

The self, insofar as others perceive it and indeed to a considerable extent as we experience ourselves, is a product of social interaction (Mead 1934). There is no unified, essential identity, only a continual negotiation using terms that are themselves changed by that negotiation, a recursive but changeable enactment, a performance undertaken in the mode of belief (Bloom 1998; Butler 1990; Davies 1992; Walkerdine 1990; Weedon 1997). The subject authors herself by answering, producing herself through utterances that can exist only as responses to other utterances of other speakers, prior or anticipated (Holquist 1983). In order to engage in this interactive self-creation, one necessarily employs (and modifies) available models and resources—discourses, genres, ways of speaking, formulae, texts (and also, of course, nonverbal forms of enactment and communication, although because of the nature of my relationship with Eldreth, I have access to these mostly through the verbal dimension). It is through the use, nonuse, modification, and innovation of these collective resources that what we recognize as culture in turn emerges and evolves. In her self-performance Eldreth employs certain relatively formalized genres—including ghost stories and songs from the British traditional and early country music repertoires—that are strongly associated with the region in which she lives. She also makes distinctive use of widely available resources such as the reporting of words spoken in previous interactions, the capacity of joking to articulate masked critique, and the persuasive power of aesthetic performance. And she inevitably constructs a self rhetorically in relation not only to her current listeners but also to prior interlocutors and to the discourses that are the sedimented and internalized forms of social attitudes expressed in the past. As a dialogic ethnography of subjectivity, this work focuses on the means whereby Eldreth interactively produces her self, with chapters exploring a variety of discourses and expressive resources. The portrait of Eldreth, the account of what she presents herself *as*, emerges from the study of *how* she creates that self.

I ground this study theoretically by drawing together the feminist concept of gendered subjectivity as nonunitary and as constituted by recursive performance (Bloom 1998; Hollway 1984; Weedon 1997; Butler 1990) and the Bakhtinian model of the self as dialogically constituted (Bakhtin 1981; Holquist 1983). The two bodies of theory are fundamentally consistent because both spring from Derrida's rejection of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976; Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:7; Weedon 1997:81). Language is not conceived of as representing a reality that exists elsewhere. The active, ongoing process of communicating creates the very structures that make "experience" meaningful and thus epistemologically possible. Whereas humanistic philosophy posited identity as a solid, definable entity preexisting social interaction, the theories of gender as performed and the self (and culture) as dialogic see the individual and culture as contingent and emergent constructions, fictions created in the course of interaction. Such constructions are stabilized and perpetuated by reenactment of previous patterns. They can, however, be transformed because of the existence of alternative resources that, although repressed or excluded, can be recovered and incorporated into the enactment (R. Williams 1977). The strength of pressures to repeat must not be underestimated, but both change and continuity are recognized as accomplishments (Butler 1990; Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:8–10). All structure emerges from action. Individual identity and culture are thus seen not only as produced by analogous processes but also as reciprocally producing the conditions for the emergence of the other, with actor and materials seen as mutually constituted and constituting.

Foucault and Bakhtin both locate the genesis of culture and subjectivity in "discourse," the network of actual utterances that supply the terms and define the conditions of possibility for subsequent expression (Foucault 1972; Bakhtin 1981). The fundamental unit of language is not the sentence, word, or phoneme but rather the utterance, an actual expressive statement, which Bakhtin further conceptualizes as a rejoinder in conversation. Both are poststructuralist in going beyond the Saussurean notion of the sign as meaningful because of its position in a system of signs rather than as a representation of reality to challenge the comprehensiveness and stability of the system and to locate meaning in concrete practices and manifestations of speaking. "Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to language" (Foucault 1972:49). "After all, language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well" (Bakhtin 1986:63). In the work of both theorists and those who build upon them, the actual system of meanings in effect in any place or time is thus seen as neither complete nor legitimate but rather as hegemonic, supporting and supported by dominant interests. Yet there is a crucial difference of emphasis. Foucault, beginning with the project of explaining the powerful penetration of scientific discourses into social practice and conceptions of the self, draws attention toward the circulation of

diffuse, abstract ideologies. Discourses in Foucault's sense involve "the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories" (1977:199). Bakhtin, fascinated with literature and especially with the novel's vibrant combination of the characteristic speaking styles of distinctive social groups, draws attention to the multiplicity of contending discourses (1981). Conceptualizing the utterance as primary (over the system of language) means that any act of expression is fundamentally a part of an ongoing dialogue.

Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others'—with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicalizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances. (Bakhtin 1986:69)

Bakhtin thus provides tools for tracing in more concrete form the sources from which determining discourses enter our talk and self-concept and the means available for engaging with and contesting as well as acquiescing to them.

The poststructuralist feminist theory that has elaborated the process by which gendered subjectivities come into being has drawn primarily upon Foucault (Weedon 1997:34). According to this model of "non-unitary subjectivity," the self is constantly reproduced through thought and talk (Hollway 1984:227). The terms of our self-conception and self-realization are established by discourses, invisibly coordinated and self-perpetuating assemblages of expressions that "produce permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible" (Escobar 1995:5; Foucault 1972). People have some choice about how to position themselves within these discourses; they make that investment of self on the basis of the perceived advantages of that position over others (Hollway 1984:238). Subjectivity is thus neither consistent nor static for any individual (1984:228). Still, whatever the ostensible topic of talk, the position options tend to be different for men and women (1984:233, 236). For women, furthermore, the contradictions of a patriarchal society and the multiplicity of inconsistent roles, expectations, and experiences through which we form our subjectivities provide conflicting input (Harding 1987:7) that promotes correspondingly conflicted self-constructions. Given its reliance on the Foucaultian concept of discourse, study of the performance of gendered identity tends to emphasize analyzing texts to detect the semantic fields in which discussion can be couched, the subject positions speakers are allowed to assume, and the institutions that stabilize and promulgate these discursive fields (Davies and Harré 1990). Furthermore, because feminism conceptualizes the current system

as a repressive gender hegemony, much work in this vein has focused on radical alternatives and means of enabling fundamental change.

An approach to discourse drawing on Bakhtin, in contrast, focuses attention on the historical dimension of language use and on the pragmatic communicative capacity of the live utterance. To be involved in discourse in Bakhtin's sense is to engage in dialogue, broadly conceived. To enter into dialogue is to interact not only with one's present interlocutor but also with all the previous speakers who have given meaning to the words one uses, as well as with those previous, internalized, and anticipated interlocutors in relation to whom we form our consciousness. Every utterance both responds to (multiple) past utterances and anticipates the reaction it will elicit. "When the listener perceives and understands the meaning . . . of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it" (Bakhtin 1986:68). The utterance cannot be said to have been completed except in this responsive reception. A dialogic approach consequently emphasizes both the multivocality and inherent contradiction within any act of communication and the crucial role of the particular listener/interpreter. Such an approach focuses attention on the complexity of apparent continuity and on self-performance as interactive, not merely expressive.

My goal in this study is to bring the two approaches together, using the specificity of the Bakhtinian perspective to elucidate the concrete means by which subjectivity is constructed. In exploring Eldreth's creation of a gendered and classed sense of self, I necessarily consider how she positions herself relative to internalized societal discourses. I employ the dialogic perspective, however, for access to dimensions of rhetorical action that exceed the semantic and in order to explore as constructed the conservative as well as innovative facets of her subjectivity. Conceiving every utterance as a rejoinder, potentially at many levels, in an ongoing communicative interaction, dialogism recognizes semantic discourses as only one component of the existing or implicit utterances to which a text or statement responds. Any speaker has access (consciously and unconsciously) to an amazing variety of pragmatic resources. Eldreth prominently employs the capacities of genres (which in turn mobilize multiple lower-level resources), registers, degrees of fluency, conventions for reporting the (ostensible) speech of others, tones (for instance, parodic or serious), and specific performed texts (in her case, songs). By directing attention to some of these levels of the utterance, we can observe with much greater detail and specificity what other utterances and voices a speaker is responding to and how she incorporates, processes, negotiates with, transforms, or rejects them. Even an apparently straightforward or conventional utterance, when closely analyzed, may reveal dimensions of multiaccentuality that suggest how many other voices and potentially new ideas mingle, acknowledged or unacknowledged, in the perpetual constitution of the speaker's subjectivity. At the same time, perceiving the subject as dialogically constituted counters the presentist excess of theories that describe the self purely as a performance. The self is not remade from scratch in every

encounter but rather built up in layers of past interaction. The speaker may respond variably to past interlocutors and past selves, but the present performance of self is inevitably shadowed by the ghosts of previous performances.

A dialogical approach offers numerous benefits to the study of gendered identity. Because of the emphasis on the minutiae of multivocality contained within everyday communication, such an approach provides a more concrete idea of how existing discourses and practices might in effect be subtly challenged or transformed by small degrees. It likewise expands the range of materials and human subjects that can be studied. Analyses of gendered subjectivity have tended to look for major departures from conventional self-construction and hence to rely either on avant-garde literary or artistic works or on the introspection of highly self-conscious feminist intellectuals or of people whose self-identification in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, or disability impels explicit challenge to identity “norms.” A focus on pragmatic manipulations of expressive resources allows us to consider the complex self-construction of those, like Eldreth, who may not consciously confront the social forces that constrain them or, at least, do not articulate their opposition in explicit terms. To perceive how change might be possible, we must understand the mixture of resistance and complicity that characterizes most lives.

To understand my approach to Eldreth’s stories and songs, it is also crucial to distinguish two separable ways in which we recognize the dialogic nature of any particular utterance. On the one hand, we may become aware of the ways that a speaker incorporates prior utterances and expressive resources into her speech via quotation, allusion, the use of multiple languages or registers, and the mixing of genres and styles. In Bakhtin’s memorable phrase, “Our speech . . . is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-ownness.’ . . . These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (Bakhtin 1986:89; see also Holquist 1983). Literary scholars call this creative linguistic recycling intertextuality. Of Bakhtin’s several labels, I gravitate toward heteroglossia to stress the inclusion of another’s word and the diversity of potential sources (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:16; Todorov 1984). Eldreth does make use of a number of generic models: how to tell a ghost story or how to play a practical joke, for example. For the most part, however, she avoids the kind of fluid heteroglossia (which Bakhtin sometimes calls “dialogic overtones” [1986:92]) whereby a discourse stylistically recognizable as typical of another speaker, text, or social group subtly infiltrates the speaker’s own discourse. This is not, perhaps, surprising, given that for most of her life she spoke almost exclusively with people in a limited geographical region, who had education and accent similar to her own, and that she has a principled resistance to “putting on airs” by assimilating to the ways of those wealthier than herself. To the extent that she employs “other peoples’ words,” she rigorously attributes them to the original speaker, quoting “reported speech” directly so as to maximize both the distinction between her voice and that of the other speaker and the rhetorical usefulness of such remarks

to her as the opinion of a separate authoritative speaker (Vološinov 1973:119–120; Bakhtin 1981:343–344).

On the other hand, utterances may respond to prior utterances and anticipate the responses they will evoke without necessarily revealing that by incorporating their distinguishable words or styles. In Bakhtin's view, speakers necessarily respond to multiple interlocutors, only some of whom are physically or temporally present. While addressing a specific person, a speaker does not forget unfinished conversations from the past, persistent social attitudes, possible future listeners who may hear the story secondhand, or perhaps the perfect understanding of God (Vološinov 1973).

In reality, . . . any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it. The speaker is not Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners. . . . But the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communion. . . . From the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. (Bakhtin 1986:94)

This kind of responsiveness to multiple possible listeners may be detectable through emotional or intellectual positioning—unexpected defensiveness, a response to attitudes the actual present listener has not articulated or does not hold, or apparent violations of Grice's maxim of conversational implicature (Nofsinger 1991:35–45). To the extent that Eldreth expressed attitudes that did not seem relevant to the tenor of our relationship or provided less information than I needed to make sense of the actions described, for example, I was able to recognize that she may have been talking (immediately) to me but that I was not actually her most important addressee. This is the kind of dialogism that occurs most often in Eldreth's speech and the interpretation of which is the greatest benefit of the dialogical approach I take to our ethnographic interaction.

## METHODOLOGY: DIALOGISM AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Once culture is seen as arising from a dialogical ground, then ethnography itself is revealed as an emergent cultural (or intercultural) phenomenon, produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues between field-workers and natives. (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:2)

Any work of ethnography is inherently dialogic. The text that is in one sense a single utterance produced by the author fundamentally incorporates and builds

upon all that the ethnographer has heard and learned from her subjects. We may no longer believe that we, as anthropologists or folklorists, can fully succeed in seeing things from “the native’s” point of view (Geertz 1973). Still, the goal of ethnography, in contrast to a more sociological inquiry, is precisely to acknowledge the humanity and uniqueness of those from whom we have sought to learn by giving some sense of how they talk about their own lives. As Mannheim and Tedlock observe,

Even as the voice of objectification or interpretation narrows itself toward an authoritative monologue, it bespeaks, in the mind of an alert reader, the suppression of a multiplicity of other voices, whether they be those of natives, those of the writer in an earlier role as field-worker, or those of alternative interpretations or rival interpreters. (1995:3)

Indeed, the great challenge in writing ethnography is to establish a productive balance between the responsibility to offer a coherent account, which necessarily suppresses or gives short shrift to other voices, and the requirement to give adequate credit to one’s interlocutors and to create a text that preserves some of the specificity of alternative and perhaps contesting voices. One of my aims in this text is precisely to make the dialogic production of the source materials and the text as much an object of analysis as the materials themselves.

From the beginning of our interaction I was interested in analyzing the material that I recorded from Eldreth in dialogic terms. Ironically, however, it took me a long time to widen the frame so as to apply that perspective to our relationship and to the process of composing this text as well. My current dedication to a dialogic approach has emerged in reaction to my previous efforts to deal with Eldreth in ways that did not work—specifically an attempt to focus so completely on her and to transmit her voice so perfectly that my own presence would not be evident. In order to appreciate what had actually gone on between Eldreth and me and thus what kind of material I really had to work with, I had first to recognize that some of what I initially believed was ethically or intellectually required of me was both impossible and destructive. Once I learned this lesson from the scholars who articulate the dialogic critique of ethnography, I realized that Eldreth had been trying, implicitly, to teach me much the same thing.

At the time that I began work with Eldreth in the late 1980s, anthropology was grappling with the problem of the relationship between what was said “in the field” and what shows up in the ethnographic text under the rubric of “representation” (Clifford 1983). Folklore, with its focus on songs and stories—that is, the aesthetically elaborated words of the subjects—approached the issue from the opposite direction, in terms of “natural context.” Anthropologists were initially concerned with the tendency of ethnographic accounts to obliterate the personal and political concreteness of source voices while abstracting the content of what had been discussed as “data” for the ethnographer’s argument (Clifford and

Marcus 1986). Folklorists, conversely, recognized that we had previously recorded and reified subjects' words and detached them from the contexts in which they had been produced. The corrective would be to analyze the functions of the texts in their contexts of use, ignoring or correcting for the influence of the folklorist's presence (Paredes and Bauman 1972; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Bauman 1983a). Early feminist methodology placed further demands on the feminist ethnographer in order to correct for the tendency of previous, male-biased research to ignore women or treat them as objects rather than subjects. Feminist ethnography was supposed to "give voice" to silenced and disenfranchised women. Feminist researchers, women talking to women, should so accurately understand our subjects as to be able to design studies to respond to their needs (Harding 1987). All of these perspectives yearned for purity in the ethnographic relationship—perfect communication and perfect transmission. All, however, were complicated by the further recognition that the kinds of purification apparently required to correct for earlier biases seemed unattainable. While earlier ethnography in a scientific mode unapologetically appropriated and amalgamated what subjects said, postmodern scholars of representation argued that even those current authors who wished and claimed to convey their subjects' words could be accused of disingenuousness and bad faith, on the grounds that the enclosing context of the ethnographer's or historian's text would inevitably distort and contaminate words presented as the subjects' own (Tyler 1986, 1987; Spivak 1988).

When I began working with Eldreth I thus imagined that it was both possible and mandatory to collect her performances of songs and stories in their natural contexts and to minimize or erase my influence on what was communicated between us. I also believed that I was duty bound as a feminist to produce an ethnographic text that gave her voice salience and also responded to her concerns and needs. This likewise seemed to require that I minimize my presence in the text. But I struggled with the contradictions. Perfect communication was unattainable in any case, and, to the extent that I came to the project with interests not identical to Eldreth's, the effort to give priority to her goals would require me to suppress my own voice, which surely contravened feminist principles in another respect. Like others at the time, I wondered if it were truly possible to write ethnography while fulfilling my feminist responsibilities to the woman who was my subject (Stacey 1988) and agonized particularly over whether it was ethical to employ the words and experiences of a woman who would not call herself a feminist in order to build a feminist argument (Borland 1991; Lawless 1992). Certain feminist ethnographers, notably Ruth Behar (1993), responded to these concerns by producing texts in which the subject appears to speak for herself and the anthropologist's analysis is restricted to the margins. In order to produce a coherent, composite narrative in the subject's voice, however, the ethnographer must still engage in manipulations that are then smoothed over. I became increasingly convinced that such an approach would not do justice either to the

richness of the communications between Eldreth and me or to the exploration of the construction of subjectivity in which I hoped to engage. My current approach is inspired rather by the confluence of liberatingly realistic perspectives drawn from authors whose theoretical backgrounds are quite divergent. Ofelia Schutte articulates an antiessentialist feminist philosophy. By arguing that we must never assume that shared gender can bridge the other experiential gaps (of sexuality, culture, and especially power and class) between women, she freed me from the unexamined assumption that I should, for starters, be able to understand Eldreth perfectly (Schutte 2000). Michael Jackson proposes “a radically empirical method [that] *includes* the experience of the observer and defines the experimental field as one of interactions and intersubjectivities” (1989:4). Sherry Ortner, lamenting a retreat from ethnographic “thickness” in recent work on political resistance, insists that “people not only resist political domination; they resist, or anyway evade, textual domination as well.” Thus, assuming reasonably good faith on the part of the ethnographer, it is “grotesque to insist . . . that the [ethnographic] text is shaped by everything but the lived reality of the people whom the text claims to represent” (1995:188). Billie Jean Isbell takes a hard look at her own interactions with several generations of women in a Peruvian family and insists that in order to understand the subjects in whom we are interested we must understand the dialogues with and among them of which we *are* a part, though *only* a part (1995).

Conceiving ethnography as an inescapably dialogic project provides respite from the impossibilities and contradictions that initially plagued me, and here Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock articulate a model especially adapted to the detailed analysis of verbal material (1995). A dialogical ethnography rejects the communicative and ethical nihilism of the postmodern critique of ethnographic representation, reconceiving the problem at its epistemological root. The concern that the ethnographic account *misrepresents* the ethnographic encounter is itself thus revealed as based upon “the notion that face-to-face dialogues are themselves instances of pure presence” (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:7). From a Bakhtinian perspective, in contrast, it is clear “that any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases, and outright quotations of prior discourse” and that “one of the things language does best is to enable its speakers, in the very moment they are present to one another, to breach that presence” (1995:7–8). Seen in this light, the subject’s utterance and the context in which it was communicated appear simultaneously less pure and more rich and evocative. A dialogic perspective on ethnography thus resolves both the contextual and representational impasses. Given that every utterance in its present manifestation alludes to its grounding in past contexts, it is impossible to privilege any single “authentic” context and pointless to regard the ethnographer’s presence as contamination. Conversely, given that any speaker responds to both past and anticipated, as well as present, interlocutors, it is possible to read the influence of prior contexts and interlocutors out of utterances

for which the ethnographer was the only apparent audience. A story, like an individual word, necessarily “tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Bakhtin 1981:293).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, if we recognize context as not preexisting the discursive encounter but rather generated through the active “contextualization” that is part of a performance, we similarly see the relationship of ethnographer and subject as emergent (Bauman and Briggs 1990:68–69). The ethnographer’s influence cannot be eliminated, but neither does it obliterate or take priority over other influences. The ethnographer’s words, in turn, will be inflected by those of her subjects well beyond her conscious quotations and allusions. Trying to erase the ethnographer is mystifying and dishonest. Attempting entirely to disentangle the subject’s and the ethnographer’s purposes is impossible and counterproductive.

In reconsidering my conversations with Eldreth from a dialogic perspective I am heartened by the realization that whatever happened between us provides grist for the analytic mill. Approaches to interviewing that I would not now repeat and interactions that were confusing at the time contribute to my current sense of what I can say about Eldreth’s self-construction, while in other respects the limitations of the material that I could record influence the shape of the project. I also realize with amusement and humility that Eldreth in important respects had a clearer, although implicit, idea than I did of what was going on between us and what could be accomplished.

When I began working with Eldreth I intended to focus, as the contextual paradigm dictated, on her performances of stories and songs in natural context. Much of the material upon which I draw for this analysis comes, however, from about a dozen particularly revealing interviews, intimate conversations that Eldreth and I conducted, with the tape recorder running, at her kitchen table or in her bedroom. My reliance on these sources in part reflects the practical limits of research on people’s social interactions. Eldreth was not involved in as many or as many different kinds of performances during the course of my fieldwork as I had hoped. Running the tape recorder when family and friends were visiting Eldreth, even with permission from all involved, would have constituted a sort of eavesdropping that I was uncomfortable initiating. Although I had imagined the private conversations largely as sources of background data, the stories she told me captivated my attention. A feminist analysis could not ignore these vignettes of stress, drama, affirmation, and conflict. Even though I was at first concerned about including these materials (since they clearly did not involve stories told “in natural context”), I now regard the taped interviews as complex negotiations in which Eldreth and I, without being explicitly aware of what we were doing, worked out what it was going to be possible for me to learn about her and to accomplish in the book about her.

To put it another way, I thought I was “collecting folklore,” while Eldreth intuitively grasped that we were setting up situations in which she would have the opportunity to share extensive portions of her life story. Charlotte Linde

defines “life story” as “consist[ing] of all the stories . . . told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime that . . . have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker . . . [and] have extended reportability” (1993:20). The life story is thus inevitably “temporally discontinuous” and not only any single telling but any series of tellings will be necessarily incomplete (1993:25). The better we are acquainted with a person, the more portions of her life story we know, and vice versa. The temporal ordering of fragments and the conceptual coherence of any listener’s version of a speaker’s life story “must also be understood as a cooperative achievement” (1993:12). There were ways in which Eldreth and I talked past each other because of having different notions of how to conduct a conversation, but the cooperative construction of a life story was a discursive activity we actually shared, though, ironically, she knew it and I did not. Edward Ives points out that the folkloristic notion of some other context being a more appropriate setting for the telling of oral history than the oral history interview is suspect (1988). Without reinvesting in the notion of “natural context,” I believe it is possible to argue that Eldreth’s and my kitchen table conversations were certainly a no less—and possibly even a more—suitable context for the creation and sharing of parts of her life story than the supposed prior settings with family and friends into which I felt bound to project them. In recognizing my responsibility to generate some coherence and to share my version of Eldreth’s life story with readers, I also of course follow the foundational example of Roger Abrahams’s work with Almeda Riddle (Riddle 1970). My commitment to a dialogic ethnography that considers my role in the elicitation of the material and my interest in the construction of Eldreth’s narratives keep me, however, from imposing the degree of coherence that enabled Abrahams to subordinate Riddle’s life story as an explanation of her song repertoire.

I am especially amused in retrospect by the efforts I made to avoid influencing Eldreth. When we sat down to talk I often tried to be nondirective, intending to create a situation in which, theoretically, she could say whatever she wanted. It is, of course, almost impossible to engage in purposeless talk (Wolfson 1976); and in trying to leave the floor open for Eldreth, I effectively left her to guess at or extract my purposes. Going over the tapes of our conversations, I notice how often she ended up prompting me to prompt her, asking, “Have you got anything in mind? Anything you want to ask me?”<sup>2</sup> She was, in effect, showing me that what I thought I had to have—“natural” material completely buffered from my influence—was impossible to obtain but that she could provide me with material that would suit both our purposes if I would take responsibility for eliciting it by simply holding up my end of the conversation.<sup>3</sup>

In my interactions with Eldreth I also never characterized either myself or the project as explicitly feminist, fearing either that I might “contaminate” my subject, inducing her to tell me what I wanted to hear, or that I might alienate her. I did my best to remain neutral, expressing interest in the stories she told me but not evaluating reported actions and especially not offering a feminist or class-based

analysis, even when I later went home and cried over the tragedies and injustices she had experienced. Fortunately, I also taped a couple of conversations in which other less reticent feminist ethnographers joined me in interviewing Eldreth. The comparison enabled me both to see how she responded to their encouragement to express critical opinions and also subsequently to recognize the effect of my interests on Eldreth even though I tried to conceal them. The very fact of Eldreth's and my coming together to talk made gender a topic of mutual discussion. I could not help but ask about and pay particular attention to her reflections on her experience as a gendered subject. She, in turn, took advantage of the particular discursive space created by my questioning in order, in part, to explore facets of her experience that she had not often been given an opportunity to talk about. Whether we say that Eldreth responded to my implicit invitation or that I picked up on implications in Eldreth's discourse that a listener not interested in gender would not have noticed, once the two of us started talking to each other, there was no way that a critical evaluation of gender could *not* be central.

While in certain respects I thus inevitably influenced Eldreth even though I tried not to, in other respects my turning control of our interactions over to Eldreth did allow her to shape the direction the project would take, although sometimes in paradoxical ways. The impossibility (not to say effrontery) of my attempting to study her lifetime of performance in a few months or years was not immediately apparent to me. Eldreth, however, seems to have realized that she was going to have to fill me in on all the years that I could not go back in time to observe, and she made sure to tell me stories about prior instances of singing and storytelling as well as many other aspects of her life. That, of course, is what any narrator does in sharing portions of her life story with a new acquaintance. Some of these accounts may have been told, for the first or only time, to me. It is also important to remember, however, that by the time I started working with her, Eldreth had been singing for and being interviewed by folklorists and folklore students for more than a decade. The dozens of stories Eldreth told me about performances, interviews, and filmings served several purposes I was not aware of until later, one of which was probably to affirm by past example that she was worthy of attention from someone like me (another folklorist) and another of which may well have been to clue me in to my place in the long line of interviewers with whom she had already talked. Eldreth certainly found it congenial to talk at length about her experiences. It seems entirely possible that she had learned from prior interviewers that it was appropriate to tell an extended series of stories entirely about herself, that is, she learned how to act like the interviewee. It struck me that whenever I tried to insert a story of my own, that is, to respond to her story in a more conversational mode, she would treat it as an interruption and go back to another of her accounts without acknowledging any connection. This may indicate a distinctive sense of how to use stories in conversation or could reflect a pressing need to focus attention on herself after many years of

being unappreciated. I suspect, however, that since I left it to her to define the parameters of our interaction, Eldreth was imposing the most likely model, one she had been encouraged to adopt by other interviewers and one I implicitly approved because of my interest in her. Thus, her response to my inserted story was an appropriate rejection of a frame break.<sup>4</sup>

Left largely to her own devices, Eldreth also, logically enough, often provided me with accounts that were clearly well-crafted and oft-repeated versions of her experiences—that is, precisely the sort of previously told stories I thought I wanted. Some contain metareferences to the reactions of earlier audiences. Her tendency to name places and people unknown to me without offering or seeming to sense the need for an explanation (in contrast to Bauman's analysis of the way storyteller Ed Bell "[went] into more detail" for audiences unfamiliar with the setting of his stories [1986:78]) also hints that she was retelling accounts originally developed for a different and probably local audience. Most often, however, I know that these are stories Eldreth tells repeatedly in much the same form because when I have tried to get her to comment either on the events narrated or on some aspect of the narrative itself, she has simply told the story over again. In one respect, this suggests a way in which the purposes of an eloquent speaker and an ethnographer of speaking almost inevitably coincide. The kinds of aesthetically marked or eminently quotable stretches of speech in which analysts tend to be interested are already relatively "entextualized," spoken in the first instance in anticipation of being removed from the original context and repeatedly reused and reinserted into others (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In another respect, however, Eldreth's insistence upon repeating rather than commenting on her stories hints at a resistance to my efforts to make sense of her self-account in my own terms for my own purposes. As Paul Willis reflects, regarding the similar practice of a working-class man he interviewed extensively:

My interpretation is grappling with aspects of the structural-historical formation of persons in a specific site. But Percy will have none of my specific interpretation. Faced with my reductive interpretation, he just tells the story again. The whole tale is the irreducible meaning for him, not any moral, homology, or connection to be drawn from it. (2001:195–196)

Thus, I attempt to approach Eldreth's stories as Willis does Percy's: "How does my 'rightness' relate to [her] 'rightness'? First, not in displacing or denying it. . . . What I propose should be seen as an *addition* to, not a substitution for, what [Eldreth] says" (2001:205).

In a much more pedestrian pragmatic vein, the fact that Eldreth was willing and able to repeat her stories in essentially the same form proved convenient in those frequent instances where she told me a significant story when we did not have the tape recorder running. As readers will observe from the conversational remarks with which many story transcriptions begin, quite a few of the versions

available for analysis are repetitions for the recorder. It is also important to remember that a story's repeatability does not provide absolute assurance as to its origin or the situation in which it was previously or ordinarily told. I know Eldreth gave me (some) stories originally shaped in other contexts, but I cannot be sure if she first (or ever) told them to family and friends or only began formulating such self-accounts when other ethnographers constituted her as an object of interest.

Eldreth also turned many of our interviews into singing sessions, making sure that we got her entire repertoire of close to two hundred songs down on tape. While I regretted not being able to capture more performances "in context," she understood these inherited texts as already multiply de- and recontextualized and thus prioritized the song and her singing of it as an entextualized object. Eldreth's treating the song text and the high quality performance as more important than the context of a rendition makes sense. It corresponds to commonsense notions of a song as a performance piece, to the entire history of recorded music available for replay at the listener's convenience, and to the probable approach of earlier folklorists who had been interested in finding out what old songs Eldreth knew. At the same time, however, she realized that we could capture the song as text by one means (her singing it for the recorder) and the singing context by another (her telling me stories of singing for people in the past), and she actually provided me with both, just not simultaneously.

A dialogic approach to ethnography liberates the ethnographer from the impossible quest for perfect representation or natural context. It also reminds us, however, of the inevitable limitations imposed on an ethnographic project by the constraints of conversational interaction, particularly between two people who come to the interaction with somewhat different notions of what is going on and how to proceed. Eldreth's tendency to retell a story rather than comment upon it highlights the fact that I can analyze the accounts she shared but cannot get behind them to know what *really* happened or what she *really* felt (although people to whom I talk about her often press me for such information). Perhaps a different interviewer might have induced or enabled Eldreth to engage more reflexively with her self-accounts; perhaps I could have, had I been more confident or determined. Still, eventually we run up against the realization that we are not allowed to see directly into others' souls and that, for Eldreth as for everyone, her performed self is the only self that others can know. In formulating these stories, I believe Eldreth has completed the processing of her experiences in which she is willing to engage.<sup>5</sup> I may be able to understand more about her subject formation through analysis—such is the premise of this book—but her unwillingness to elaborate upon or analyze the texts she has created draws the limit beyond which the task falls to me and the insights are necessarily derived.

My reliance upon Eldreth's self-account also means that I am in many respects restricted to consideration of matters of significance to her. In conversation and in her stories she tends to focus on concrete instances and known persons. For

Eldreth, as for the residents of a nearby mountain community whose speech practices have been extensively studied, “nearly all quotidian discourse . . . is about events, personalities, activities, things, and behaviors empirically accessible to interlocutors” (Puckett 2000:30).<sup>6</sup> I can bring her into dialogue with certain scholarly discourses about the region. However, there are many matters historical, political, and economic that probably impinged upon her life and that it would be valuable to have insight into but that she does not talk about. She avidly quotes the words of friends and family members and shapes her self-image in response to local discourses and attitudes she ascribes to outsiders whom she has met. She does not, however, evidently incorporate and respond to official, governmental, or medical discourses or voices (contrast Hill 1995). Eldreth reads only local newspapers and, when looking at them or at television news, seems to pay attention almost exclusively to local human interest stories. She is not involved in politics; and in interaction with articulators of other authoritative discourses—for instance, doctors—she tends to reinterpret their remarks in her own terms rather than allow herself to be drawn into their discursive field. This is another reason that I detect in Eldreth’s talk little heteroglossia—the subtle shading of remarks in one register or style with the voice of a speaker of a different style—except in her singing, where listeners know by other means that the words are not strictly her own. While the focus of our discussions upon Eldreth herself may have excluded certain kinds of talk in which she engages with other interlocutors, I believe that the historical/political framing simply does not fall within her domestic and personal discursive range. To me, in any case, Eldreth is the subject enacted in our conversations; that subject is thus constituted by the range of discourses and techniques she employed with me.

The book I have been able to write about Eldreth thus emerged from my sense of the inherent dialogism of both her self-construction and our interaction. I recognize that Bakhtin’s observation—“Our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words, transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality” (1981:337)—applies equally to Eldreth and to me. While I have tried to be as accurate as possible and to take account of her goals and wishes, I acknowledge my responsibility as a transmitter who could not help but inflect the product with my own voice. In practice, this meant that I decided usually to set Eldreth’s stories and songs, highly entextualized portions of our interaction, as texts quoted verbatim, objects for analysis that could be cut out of the contexts in which they had been conveyed. At the same time, however, I have commented on their functions in both present and past contexts, recognizing their grounding in both and privileging neither. I have also acknowledged the necessity of selecting only some of the stories and songs Eldreth shared with me, summarizing a few more, and leaving out many others, even when it pained me to eliminate them. In thus resisting the impulse to include more and more of what she told me, I recognize not only that I cannot serve as a frictionless conduit for Eldreth’s voice but also that our mutual purpose of creating a portrait of her is

better served by my exercising an editorial prerogative. Her process of telling personal stories to an endlessly and artificially receptive listener and mine of creating a coherent and readable ethnographic text are different and require different treatment of common material. I recognize that in selecting only some of Eldreth's many stories and songs for analysis, I inevitably act as does every interlocutor, processing most of what we hear into propositional information and reproducing verbatim only an occasional especially artistic or authoritative remark. The ethnographic expedient of making mechanical recordings of conversations with our subjects effectively disables the failsafe of partial memory, making the process of choice and elimination conscious and often full of regret rather than automatic. Like Eldreth, however, in order to tell a coherent story—even that of Eldreth's own self-fashioning—I must exclude, summarize, and comment, as well as quote.

My ethnographic approach—as researcher and as writer—differs in ways that require explanation from the innovative approaches that two other feminist ethnographers with goals similar to mine have employed: Elaine Lawless's reciprocal ethnography (1991) and Kathleen Stewart's new ethnography (1996). Reciprocal ethnography “means that [ethnographer and subject] need to sit down together and begin a dialogue about what they each have written and presented and record their responses to this gathering of information” (Lawless 2000:201). It involves sharing transcripts of stories and versions of interpretations with one's subjects, learning from their corrections and disagreements. When it works, reciprocal ethnography is a tremendously powerful method for putting the subject's and ethnographer's words and ideas on equal footing. It is not, however, always possible. I continue to wonder if Eldreth's apparent disinterest in talking *about* what she had previously told me, except by retelling the same stories, was a barrier I could have found a way around with more persistence or more nerve. As Lawless notes, “no one said it was easy” (2000:197). Still, if we take seriously the concept of differing discursive styles, we must acknowledge that not every ethnographic subject will be willing to engage with our texts or even our entextualized versions of their words in a way that seems so automatic within the world of academic hyperliteracy. We do have to try to interrogate our own fear and reluctance, but there is no point in beating ourselves up if subjects are not interested in the project despite our good faith efforts. Though reciprocal ethnography entails juxtaposing the ethnographer's own analyses with those of her respondents, I would argue that it also at some level rests on the assumption that our subjects could tell us everything that needs to be said or known, if only our collection technique were perfect enough—if only, to reuse a term, we could become frictionless conduits. Dialogic ethnography, in contrast, allows the ethnographer not to feel guilty for assuming an interpretive responsibility from which, I would argue, we cannot escape in any case. Putting myself inside the dialogic frame with Eldreth reveals how much can be learned from imperfect material; and all material is imperfect. In effect, I approach my own

fieldwork in the spirit of Bauman's analysis of the successive recontextualizations of Schoolcraft's early nineteenth-century collection of Native American tales, which culminated in Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (Bauman 1993b), demonstrating how prior contexts can be recovered from their influence on the text itself. But this is not only a way of salvaging meaning from texts collected with bad or antiquated technique. Similar questions ultimately apply to any material, no matter how engaged and reflexive the ethnographer.

Stewart, in her postmodern ethnography of a West Virginia coal-camp town, elects to bring her own analysis and her subjects' words into equalizing juxtaposition by creating heteroglossic sentences in which local wording is partially set off with italics or quotation marks but mingles with and is allowed to speak for itself within the analytical discourse: "Those who fail to recognize and engage precise, local *ways* are called *shameless*." "People who seem so nice and 'keep things up so nice' might turn around and treat their mommy and daddy like dogs" (1996:123). Acknowledging the great effectiveness of this technique for supporting her argument about the ways her subjects generate their subjectivity in complex "back-talk" with each other and against hostile and objectifying outside discourses, I have not followed her lead for several reasons. First, Eldreth seems to me to have been more constrained by and compliant with controlling discourses for much of her life. Stewart's inventive style presumably captures the energetic flavor of talk in the community she studied, but things are a lot quieter and more repressed at Eldreth's house. Second, many Appalachian readers have evidently perceived Stewart's heteroglossia as parody rather than as her intended display of equality and respect (Fine 1999). Heteroglossic cleverness may not be read as we would like it to be by those whose sensitivity has been raised by a history of being mocked. And finally, in order to talk about the dialogic nature of the texts Eldreth produced during our interactions, to trace the connections generated by talk between two parties, I needed to keep our contributions perceptually separate.

This book has, nevertheless, been significantly shaped by what I believe are Eldreth's own priorities and by the ways in which she required me to revise my presuppositions and my original framing of her. She welcomed and encouraged the attention she received from those of us who regarded her primarily as a singer, but she insisted on depicting other facets of her life, especially how hard she has worked. She likewise humored those of us who identified her as a participant in an "Appalachian culture." I gradually learned, however, that she did not employ that category, let alone apply it to herself, that she resisted attempts to depict her as an example of that culture rather than simply as herself, and that she regarded class rather than culture as the prime difference between herself and her new audiences. Scholars of the region have argued for some decades that the resilient notion of Appalachia as a distinct region has predominantly been bolstered by successive generations of people from outside, intent upon demonstrating

that the poverty of mountain residents could be attributed to inherent inferiority—biological or social (Batteau 1990; Whisnant 1983). As early as 1980, Allen Batteau argued categorically, “What cultural distinctiveness Appalachia has . . . is either an adaptation to past forms of exploitation which were more clearly based in class relationships, or else is the romanticized projection of the exploiting class itself” (1980:29). Folklorists, however, have listened to the lesson but often assumed we were exempt, since our goal in celebrating a “traditional” Appalachian culture was to honor and celebrate those whom others denigrated (J. A. Williams 2002:356–357). I had to learn, from my dialogic rereading of the stories Eldreth shared, just how little sense the “Appalachian” label made to her. Only then could I fully grasp Lila Abu-Lughod’s exhortation that feminist anthropologists must create “ethnographies of the particular” in order to “write against” a reified concept of culture that enforces hierarchical separations between self and other (1991:138, 149) or Amy Shuman’s call for folklorists to “dismantle local culture” and to recognize that the designation or delimitation of a “local” is never politically neutral (1993: 345).

Certain chapters of the book focus on issues that are more evident and more interesting to me than to Eldreth—for example, the changes I observed over the course of her life in her reported pattern of speech interactions with men and with women. Other chapters, however, convey what I gather Eldreth herself most wished me to share with a wider audience, notably her stories on her work life and on the defining experiences of her childhood. The chapters on ghost stories and singing reflect the convergence of my interest in her as a verbal artist with her interest in having her well-crafted stories and cherished repertoire of songs recorded and attributed to her. The chapter on Eldreth’s practical joking reflects the greatest strain between our nonidentical purposes. She loves to promote an image of herself as a harmless jokester, while I have difficulty finding the humor in joking that strikes me as cruel in general and am particularly disturbed by her tendency to target children and her use of blackface disguise. Once subject and ethnographer are engaged in dialogue, however, there is no absolute boundary between their purposes. What is said and known is generated by both through cooperation and conflict. I admittedly create the larger text that frames Eldreth’s stories. While she “speaks” copiously in the following pages, I cannot deny the effects of my selection and shaping on what readers “hear.” I nevertheless have faith that, in this thoroughly dialogized text, her self-depiction will necessarily exceed and escape my control. I also intend that my effort to analyze Eldreth’s means of self-fashioning will support her goal of creating a self that others, near and far, direct and mediated through this book, will understand and admire. As Bakhtin argues, an utterance does not fully exist until it receives an active response from a listener (1986). This book is my way of actively listening and responding to Eldreth.

## BESSIE ELDTRETH: A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

While I resist the tendency to reduce Eldreth's expressive self-construction to an enforcedly univocal biography, I nevertheless acknowledge that part of what we as listeners do with the personal anecdotes told us by an individual in whom we are interested is to organize the incidents chronologically in order to form some picture of a life trajectory. Eldreth, significantly, never showed an inclination to do this for herself with me. Even when I asked her to try to start at the beginning and give me an overview of her life, the details of a particular anecdote and its thematic or emotional ties to other incidents or songs soon pulled her away from a sequential historical narration. I found, however, that in order simply to manage the welter of details and to trace developments and changes over the course of her life, I needed to construct such a chronology (in effect, to approximate the internal personal history—what Linde calls the “inner life story” accessible only to introspection [1993:11]—that is so evident to Eldreth that she has no need to articulate it). I expect that readers will similarly find it easier to make sense of the facets of Eldreth's self-construction explored in individual chapters if given a basic structure to which to attach them, even though such a monologic history is woefully dry.

Bessie Mae Killens was born October 22, 1913, in Ashe County in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the far northwestern corner of North Carolina. She has lived in Ashe County and neighboring Watauga County for practically all of her life. Home for her is this part of the mountains, a rural area in which farming and timbering have been the principal occupations and which has recently become a favored area for vacation homes. She was the third child and third daughter in a family that eventually included thirteen children. A younger brother, Joe, was her favorite childhood companion. As a teenager she most often worked and played with her older sister, Clyde. Her mother, Flora Milam Killens (born 1893), came from a family that was well established in that area. Eldreth's Milam grandparents were relatively prosperous farmers who owned a substantial tract of bottom land. Her father, Romey Killens (born 1883), had moved into the area from Surrey County (two counties to the east of Ashe) as a young man with his mother and siblings after his father's death. His father had made his living as a “musicianer,” and the younger Killens was also a skillful fiddle and banjo player. Eldreth's parents married in 1908, when her father was twenty-five, and her mother, fifteen. When asked about her ethnic background, Eldreth reports that her father “told us we were Irish.”

Ashe County, North Carolina, was home base for Eldreth's parents, and the family maintained strong ties to that area and to relatives living there. Her parents saved money to buy a small farm in the rural area called Buffalo but sold it after a few years and moved to Pennsylvania at the urging of friends who preceded them there. Eldreth's father had no luck finding good work, however, and they came back south. Throughout the rest of her childhood, her father alternated

between farming rented land and wage labor, including a stint at a “dye plant” in Damascus, Virginia, and the family moved frequently. Eldreth remained close to her parents throughout their lives and was mourning the recent loss of her mother when we began our interviews in 1987.

On April 27, 1930, at age sixteen, Bessie Killens married Ed Eldreth, whose brother had recently married her sister Maud. Bessie and Ed had eleven children: Lorene, Clyde, Fred, Grace, Betty, Virginia, Carl, Roger, Bob, Denver, and Patsy—the eldest born when Bessie Eldreth was seventeen, the youngest when she was forty-three. The Eldreths remained married for forty-seven years, until Ed’s death, although Eldreth now describes herself as largely “dissatisfied” with her marriage and professes not to have loved her husband. Ed Eldreth was evidently not a very dedicated worker or responsible husband and father, and in 1945 he was partly disabled in a sawmill accident that injured one of his hands. Under these circumstances, much of the support of the family fell to Eldreth herself, who did housework and fieldwork for neighbors, besides taking care of her own children. The family continued to live mostly in the areas of Ashe County where Eldreth had grown up—near Creston, on “Three Top,” and later in Todd, although in the late 1950s and early 1960s they lived briefly in Lenoir (an hour’s drive south today), where Ed Eldreth had work in a furniture factory. The Eldreths lived in a series of houses that they rented or that were made available to them by family members. One of these was washed away in a flood in 1940; two others burned down.

The 1970s brought several major changes in Eldreth’s life. In 1972 she purchased a plot of land in Watauga County with money she had gradually saved from her own labors. Several of her sons built her a simple but comfortable ranch-style house, which has afforded her greater security than she ever experienced before. In 1976 her husband died, and she became free for the first time in decades to do as she pleased. She has not been solitary, however. All of her children have taken up residence within about an hour’s drive, working in factories or in construction or for the building and maintenance departments of Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone. Her son Roger, who never married, has lived with her. Her son Carl and his family built a house just down the hill on her land. After her own children had grown, she took care of many of her grandchildren, sometimes a dozen at a time.

Eldreth always loved to sing around the house and in church, as well as to teach songs and tell stories to her grandchildren. In the 1970s one of her granddaughters, Jean Reid, was noticed by a teacher who was interested in traditional mountain music, and thence Reid came to the attention of the folklorists and scholars of Appalachian culture at ASU. She was invited to perform publicly in the context of the upsurge of interest in local cultures associated with the United States Bicentennial. Eldreth initially went along to keep her granddaughter company, then began singing with her, and eventually began performing on her own after Reid went to nursing school. I met Eldreth in 1987 when she and Reid were

performing at the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.,<sup>7</sup> as part of a group from Ashe and Watauga Counties intended to represent the distinctiveness of mountain speech. Over the past twenty-five years Eldreth has performed regularly for local festivals, including a festival on Grandfather Mountain in honor of fellow Watauga County resident Doc Watson in 2000. She has also been featured in numerous educational programs at ASU, including an annual Elderhostel on Appalachian music and a summer workshop for K-12 music teachers. She has traveled to perform in Charlotte and Durham, North Carolina, Jonesboro, Tennessee, and New York City, as well as Washington, D.C., and has been filmed twice—by actress Stella Stevens (for an unreleased documentary on “The American Heroine”) and by a group of which I was a member.<sup>8</sup> In 1994 she was recognized for her singing by the North Carolina Folklore Society (see Sawin 1994), and in 1998 she was honored with a North Carolina Folk Heritage Award. These opportunities and recognitions have not made major changes in the rhythm of Eldreth’s everyday life, and she gives family responsibilities priority over invitations to perform. She has, however, received a measure of local fame and has been brought into ongoing contact with groups of relatively educated and (in her analysis) “rich” people, who pay an extraordinary kind and amount of attention to her.

The period in which I got to know Eldreth represented a high point of sorts in terms both of the extent of her travel for public performances and of the focus on her home as a gathering place for the extended family of which she as mother and grandmother was head. In the years since, age has taken its inevitable toll. Although she is amazingly active, cleans her house, cooks several meals a day, attends church regularly, and visits neighbors, Eldreth no longer grows a big garden every summer. Many of her children are retired and suffer from disease and disability brought on by years of intense physical labor. One of her sons died after a long illness through which she nursed him, and another son and her eldest daughter are fighting cancer as I write. It is now grandchildren and their children whom I am likely to meet in her living room on a Sunday visit. At ninety, however, and despite the tremendous amount of work and sorrow she has experienced, Eldreth proclaims herself a “happy person.”

## FACETS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Each of the following chapters explores one facet of Eldreth’s construction of self through her stories and songs. The chapters are, in one sense, intentionally inconsistent in that I have eschewed any attempt to divide either her life or her repertoire into consistent, comparable chunks within a single dimension. Instead, I rely upon multiple criteria—temporal, thematic, technical, generic—to group segments of her repertoire so as to highlight the many different ways in which she enacts herself.

Chapter 2 begins this account by focusing on the childhood about which Eldreth talks so fondly. I argue that the salience of this period in Eldreth's accounts reflects a hard-used woman's reluctance to privilege the subsequent period of her marriage in a similar way. Interestingly, however, her stories of childhood paint what seem to be two contradictory images—one of pastoral stability and one of repeated disruption and economic desperation—although Eldreth herself does not seem to sense a disparity. Eldreth's self-presentation challenges the view (promoted by early Appalachian studies activists) of the region as an agrarian paradise of yeoman farmers prior to industrial exploitation at the end of the nineteenth century. Her presentation is consistent with a more recent historical treatment that traces the coexistence of substantial wealth disparities and resource extraction for export to the beginning of regional development. Still, romanticized images of the moral person created by a tight-knit community have their discursive utility for Eldreth as well.

Chapter 3 highlights the theme of work. Eldreth frequently told me stories about specific kinds of work that she had done, commenting explicitly on how hard she had worked in comparison to other people. In reviewing our conversations I was increasingly persuaded that this was the most important message that she wanted to get across to me and to potential readers of this book. My analysis brings out the multiple levels of discursive self-positioning in even these apparently simple and monovocal accounts. Her obsession with depicting herself as hardworking, I argue, is a response both to older local discourses that connect morality with work and to her impression of her contemporary audiences as "rich" and not hardworking.

In chapter 4 I turn to Eldreth's use of reported speech in her stories, noting changes over time and differences in the ways that men and women (reportedly) spoke to her. While acknowledging that "reported speech" is a fiction rather than an accurate account of exactly what was said on a particular occasion, I suggest that Eldreth's reports may reflect typical pragmatic patterns of verbal interaction. While men offer authoritative (usually positive) evaluations, women compete and talk past each other. In discursive terms, this means that reporting other men's supportive commentary enables Eldreth to depict her taciturn husband's lack of care and responsibility via his contrasting silence. In practical terms, it means that a change in women's talk over the course of the life cycle from competitive to supportive appears to have been crucial in enabling her eventually to talk back to her unsupportive husband. In recent years audience members and folklorists have also become quotable interlocutors, and I explore such outsiders' discursive utility to her and the ways in which her stories thus model the kind of response she encourages new listeners to give.

Internalized discourses and dialogically incorporated voices are ghosts of a sort, lingering presences, not detectable directly, yet made manifest in the actions of those who are aware of them. Eldreth also perceives more literal ghosts, however, and chapter 5 explores her stories of encounters with ghosts and

premonitions. Ghosts seem to emanate from stress and imbalance in sexual relationships; they are experienced especially by young couples negotiating their relative influence and are explained as having been produced by immoral and violent actions, especially those of women abrogating their assigned roles as wives and mothers. Discursively, Eldreth's own insecurity drives her to take advantage of these "bad women" in order to portray herself by contrast as obedient and blameless. In a subset of stories about premonitions, however, supernatural forces back her up, providing rare opportunities for her to challenge her husband's dominance and assert her claim to valid knowledge and perception.

Chapter 6 focuses on Eldreth's practice of playing practical jokes on neighbors and family members. Her expressed intention is simply to add a little levity and surprise to a life largely shaped by hard work and serious moral concerns. I, however, see joking as both powerful and problematic. Spontaneous jokes, like pretending to drop a plate full of food that she is handing to someone, appear to have served Eldreth as a form of coded resistance, allowing her to escape momentarily from the pressures of the role as perfect wife, devoted mother, and blameless Christian she otherwise strove to inhabit. She long ago gave up the more elaborated planned jokes that seriously frightened children and relied upon denigrating, stereotypical blackface impersonations. Given that she still unselfconsciously tells stories about these events, however, her portrait must include a recognition of her willingness to exploit others in order to combat her own marginality. Simultaneously I struggle with the way in which hearing these stories makes me as listener uncomfortably complicit in her assumption of white privilege.

With chapter 7 I turn at last to Eldreth's singing, the practice that piqued my initial interest in her and one that reinforces impressions revealed by her stories. Her repertoire of songs—early country favorites, nineteenth-century sentimental songs, popular hymns, and a handful of American traditional ballads—makes it clear that the Appalachia of Eldreth's youth was scarcely isolated from the American cultural mainstream. Her practice of learning songs by ear and preserving the texts in handwritten songbooks further suggests that she is now perceived as a "traditional" singer in part because of the availability of the kind of schooling that was once considered the death knell for oral tradition. Still, her assumption of the supposedly traditional role of a solitary ballad singer is less a retention than an innovation occasioned because radio and recordings displaced opportunities for communal secular performance. Eldreth's practice as a singer, on the other hand, responds largely to gender expectations. Unable to learn an instrument, because the time required was considered incompatible with women's endless domestic labor, Eldreth channeled her musical interests into singing. Singing proved an acceptable form of artistic expression for a woman because it could be defined as a form of work in the service of one's family (lullabies) and one's religious community (offering solos in church). In her recent interactions with folklorists, however, Eldreth at last seizes the opportunity to

perform in an unhedged way and consequently resists presenters' attempts to frame her musical performance as a cultural example.

In working with Bessie Eldreth I have gone through a learning process. Because I initially framed her as a producer of an objectified "folklore," I set out to collect stories and songs from her "in natural context." In the course of this futile attempt, however, I initiated a form of interaction that gave Eldreth considerable control. I simultaneously opened myself up to being educated about how she wanted to represent herself to me and others. The result is this text, which expounds the central themes of her identity while exploring the discursive and dialogic means that she has employed to construct herself relative to available discourses and interlocutors. For most of her life, Eldreth has had to shape her identity by coded and deniable means, fighting against criticism and prejudice. Later contact with folklorists offered many new opportunities, yet framed her in ways that, as I had to learn, were not entirely congenial. I hope she will judge that I have been a sympathetic listener and an apt learner.