



PROJECT MUSE®

## Listening For A Life

Patricia Sawin

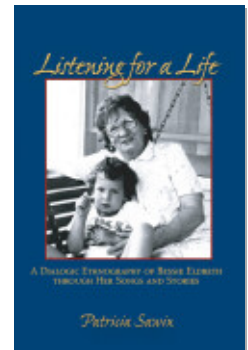
Published by Utah State University Press

Sawin, Patricia.

Listening For A Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories.

Utah State University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/9291](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9291).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9291>

Access provided at 28 Mar 2020 19:52 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## 4

“I said, ‘Don’t you do it’”

### Tracing Development as an Empowered Speaker through Reported Speech in Narrative

*It is not until [a mountain woman] has seen her own boys grown to men that she loses entirely the bashfulness of her girlhood and the innate beauty and dignity of her nature shines forth in helpfulness and counsel.*

—Emma Bell Miles

*Several observers have noted the personality alteration that a widow seems to undergo after an appropriate period of mourning—the quiet, unassuming, unopinionated, deferential lady becomes aggressively opinionated and, perhaps, even raucous.*

—Patricia Duane Beaver

Bessie Eldreth’s stories are full of reported speech. Indeed, in many instances the reported conversation and the relationship between actors therein depicted or the relation between words and actions is very much the point of the narration. Changing patterns over the course of Eldreth’s life in the kinds of conversational interaction described—especially differences in the kinds of speaking attributed to men and women—suggest how she eventually, although only late in life, became able to contest her husband’s dominance and mistreatment. At the same time, stories so constructed serve two crucial functions for Eldreth in her present interactions. They allow her to promulgate positive evaluations of her accomplishments in a socially acceptable form, and they model for current listeners the ways of responding to her words and deeds that she would encourage them to emulate.

## LEARNING TO SPEAK AS A WOMAN

Classic analyses from the two ends of the past century make remarkably similar claims about the lives of working-class mountain women. Only in old age does a woman come into her own, exert some influence, and enjoy evident respect. This change is reflected, or one might better say enacted and reproduced, in a marked alteration in her conduct as a speaker. Eldreth now exhibits more of the helpfulness noted by Miles (1905:37) than the raucousness observed by Beaver (1986:104), but her self-accounts suggest that she has indeed changed. That she, like women of her grandmother's generation, did not emerge as an empowered speaker until late in life provides strong evidence of the conservatism of the community with which she interacted and whose expectations she had internalized. That she did so emerge suggests the possibilities for self-transformation possible even in apparently conservative and circumscribed communities.

What does it entail for a woman to become an empowered speaker? One facet—explored in earlier chapters—is primarily semantic: she invests in particular discourses or discursive positions through which she portrays or enacts herself as valuable. Thus Eldreth claims worth for herself both as a hard and responsible worker and as a person whose inherent good nature was fostered by a neighborly and honest community. Another facet is primarily pragmatic: she learns to speak effectively—to be heard, to have her wishes acted upon, when necessary to defend herself or criticize others' failure to treat her respectfully, and to occupy authoritative speaking roles convincingly (Cameron 1985:145). For Eldreth, to an even greater extent than for most women, inserting herself into positive discursive positions has been a complicated, uneven, and constantly revisited process. Prevailing discourses on gender and class put her in double binds. She has been exposed to relatively few sources of alternative, progressive discourses, and her prior self-positioning sets her up to be suspicious of or resistant to them. In the pragmatic arena, however, Eldreth's shift towards empowered ways of speaking is more obvious and unidirectional. Over the course of sixty years she has transformed herself from a silent girl forced to do things she profoundly wished not to do into a quietly determined woman who stands up for herself and others. How did this happen? And how could I possibly know about the process?

To answer the second, methodological question first, we can track Eldreth's development as a speaker because she has left a record of sorts in her stories. Commonsense notions conceive of the informal, personal, true narratives that we all employ in conversation as accounts of what happened or what was done on a particular occasion. Close empirical study of personal narrative has long revealed, however, that such stories are often equally or primarily accounts of what was said. If the story concerns the teller's interaction with other people, a crucial part of what transpired will probably have been a conversation. Important acts include speech acts (Austin 1962). Furthermore, in informal oral narration just as in novels, short stories, and journalistic accounts, reporting

what somebody said can be an efficient and effective way to suggest a character's qualities or state of mind, to move the action along or, alternately, to provide evaluation of that action (Labov and Waletzky 1967), to make the story more vivid, or to increase listener involvement (Tannen 1995). Eldreth's stories are so full of reported conversation, in fact, that her rare action-focused stories stand out and make a listener wonder who failed to speak or what was left unsaid.

This does not mean that we can treat Eldreth's stories as exact records of what all parties said on past occasions. "Reported speech" is better understood as constructed dialogue (Tannen 1989). Even in true first-person accounts, conversation ostensibly quoted is inevitably a strategic fiction, shaped semantically and pragmatically by the narrator for the purposes of the enclosing narrative. As narrators recreating a past interaction in which we were involved, we need not have an intention to deceive or manipulate; but we nevertheless tend unconsciously to employ words that we represent as verbatim quotation in order actually to summarize longer, messier interactions, to attribute a single uttered opinion to a group (whose members presumably did not actually speak in unison), to verbalize unspoken thoughts, and in other ways to serve the story's larger purposes (Tannen 1989, 1995). I obviously lack any means of verifying in Eldreth's stories the existence or extent of isomorphism between the words a person actually spoke on a given occasion in the distant past and the words Eldreth reports herself or someone else having said. Still, Puckett observed that older speakers in the mountain community she studied "are extremely capable of reproducing speech very close to the way it was spoken to them" (2000:114). It likewise seems reasonable that a woman who prides herself on her memory (for song words, among other things) and who makes limited use of literacy skills might retain and convey more reliable impressions of significant conversations. Minimally, the consistency with which Eldreth represents certain groups of people talking in particular ways, independent of the subject under discussion, leads me to posit that she endows speakers in her stories with re-creations of characteristic kinds of speech interaction that constituted her relationships with relatives, neighbors, and friends. Still, what we can study is Eldreth's representation of her own and others' ways of speaking, even if that pragmatic representation is far less consciously rhetorical than, say, her explicit claims for the value of her work and upbringing.

To return to the substantive question, if Eldreth herself changed dramatically as a speaker over the course of her adult life, how did this happen? If we think of the self as a dialogic construction, constituted and reconstituted in communicative interactions with other people, what makes it possible for a speaker to take on new speaking roles and in that way to enact herself differently? Presumably, one must be offered alternative models or opportunities for conducting oneself as a speaker: the people with whom one interacts have to change, or new people with different notions have to become part of one's speech community. Another possibility is that one becomes sufficiently aware of discrepancies between

individuals' behavior and an accepted norm to feel justified in pushing them to change. Not all the influences on Eldreth came from her immediate speech community or even from human sources.<sup>1</sup> However, the stories Eldreth tells about definitive interactions in her life before her public performances began—quite apart from the interactions with supernatural agents that we will consider in the next chapter—reveal how significantly her self-constitution through speaking changed from the time of her marriage to the last part of her husband's life, forty-five years later. They also provide clues as to why she was able to change. Men in the community provided authoritative validations of her work and contributions, even though her husband did not join them. Women shifted gradually from reticence, competitiveness, and miscommunication to explicit support, attentive listening, and effective interpretation of each others' silences. And as Eldreth and her cohort aged, younger generations emerged who were at least partially immune to the constraints internalized by older generations. Eldreth became a different kind of self-constituting speaker in the course of her interactions with this slowly changing speech community.

One story in particular depicts the tremendous change in Eldreth's conduct as a speaker, starkly juxtaposing the teenager's powerless, self-enforced silence with the grandmother's forceful and effective speech. After I had spent about a month with her in Boone, Eldreth stunned me during a late-night conversation by revealing that she had been very unhappy in her marriage and that her husband had neglected both her and their children. She shared the following poignant tale a little more than a week later in the course of the conversation with folklorist Cecelia Conway, anthropologist Dorothy Holland, and me. The story itself depicts Eldreth's transformation as a speaker before she had much exposure to people outside her local community. Ironically and inevitably, however, these earlier changes are evident to me only because she represents them in personal narratives that she told much later. The contexts within which she told those stories—conversations with me and with other sympathetic feminist scholars, who encouraged her to elaborate when she mentioned difficulties with her husband—exemplify the opportunities for further transformation that interaction with new types of audiences subsequently provided. Eldreth, I gradually realized, had in recent years begun to talk about some of these experiences with some of her children, as the story within this story reveals. With her family, however, she was still often guarded and hesitant, anticipating—rightly or wrongly—her children's negative responses to her complaints or at least an unwillingness to hear their father criticized. This story in fact represents one of the few openings in which someone else's pressing need evidently allowed her to feel justified in bringing her experiences up as a counterexample. In conversation with me and especially with these other concerned and forthcoming feminists, in contrast, she needed no excuse simply to explore her past exploitation and suffering as a means toward more accurately understanding her life experience.

*My momma wanted me to marry him*

BE: But my problem, a whole lot of my problem . . . I think I told | I might a told you [Conway] or I might a told *you* [Sawin]. If I didn't, I | I'm a-saying it now.

But my Momma wanted me to marry him, so that he could | so I could | you know my | the first one that ever married out of the family married his brother [Eldreth's sister Maud married Ed Eldreth's brother]. And she [Eldreth's mother] insisted so many times and so much on me a-marrying his brother, so that, uh (I said this to you last night, didn't I?)

DH: Yeah, you were telling me.

BE: So that, uh, me and my sister could be together.

CC: Umm [sympathetic understanding].

BE: And my aunt, Carrie Burkett, was against it. She begged her not to do it.

DH, CC: [Sympathetic murmurs.]

BE: And that's what I said last night. I told Carl and Libby [son and daughter-in-law, parents of granddaughter Paula]; they was talking about this boy; he's a real smart boy, hardworking. He's a nice, real nice Christian boy, as good as you'll ever find. Paula's nineteen and he's twenty-three. Paula says she don't love him. And Carl and Libby said something about, uh, . . . they'd like | just like for her to marry him.

I said, "Don't do it . . . to her." I said, "Don't you do it." I said, "Never . . . try to get a young'un to take somebody that they don't love."

[Quieter voice.] The day I married, I lay down in an open field aside of a stump and I cried till I thought I was gonna die.

CC: //Oh.//

DH: //Oh, God.//

BE: //I didn't want// to get married. I didn't | I didn't | I didn't care that much for him to start with.

The frame story represents a tragic low point in Eldreth's life, the moment when she exercises least control over a decision that determines her future and happiness. It is the only story Eldreth tells about getting married, which makes it all the more notable that neither of the principals has a speaking role. The decision for Ed and Bessie to marry is represented as having been reached in an obliquely referenced discussion between Eldreth's mother and aunt. Ed Eldreth does not appear at all. Bessie Eldreth is reduced, heartbreakingly, to wordless crying that she feels she must prevent others from witnessing. And even all these years later, even when speaking to a trio of sympathetic women, Eldreth does not appear fully confident of her right to talk about it. At first she is defensive, "I'm a-saying it now," and then she holds back on describing the crucial scene, only introducing it after she has talked about her disagreement with Carl and Libby and has thus effectively forced her own hand, needing the story of her earlier distress to explain her outburst to them. In that inserted scene, however, she shows how far she has come. Eldreth is now the older woman whose analysis should be

respected and the voice of bitter experience. It is not easy for her to take on this role, even with the son and daughter-in-law who chose to live next door to her. The abruptness of her passionate order suggests that she held herself back until she could no longer stand the direction their conversation was taking. Ultimately, however, Eldreth not only assumes the advocacy role that her aunt took on her behalf, arguing that a woman should not be made to marry for reasons other than love, but she also prevails where Aunt Carrie failed. Where her aunt “begged her [mother] not to do it,” Eldreth dares to give a direct order to the parents, “Don’t you do it.”

## GENDERED INTERACTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN SPEAKING

How did Eldreth achieve the self-transformation as speaker that the marriage story depicts? I reproduce an extended series of her narratives that sketches the trajectory of these years, provide examples of the kinds of speaking interactions in which Eldreth remembers herself being involved over the course of her lifetime, and suggest how shifting interaction patterns enable her gradually to become a partially different kind of speaking subject. These stories are among the most dramatic and memorable that Eldreth tells, depicting defining moments in her life and emphasizing her courage, selflessness, skill, and compassion. I arrange the stories chronologically to highlight change over time, and for each I will indicate Eldreth’s approximate age at the time the events took place. In addition to Eldreth’s own development as a speaker, three patterns stand out: men and women take markedly different speaking roles; friends interact differently with Eldreth than do family members (that is, supposed intimates), although members of younger generations act more like friends; and the way women interact with each other changes significantly over time.

### *Stealing Ed from Clyde*

(Eldreth is between thirteen and sixteen; the events described precede and lead up to her marriage. She had alluded to these events in a humorous vein in an earlier, untaped conversation. I asked her to talk about them again when we had the tape recorder running, expecting a funny story. Although I did not anticipate it, this inquiry provided Eldreth with an opening to talk critically about her husband and her marriage with me for the first time. Maud and Clyde were Eldreth’s two older sisters.)

- BE: Well, have you got anything in mind? Anything you want to ask me?  
 PS: Tell me . . . you were telling me about how you met Ed and stealing him from Clyde . . . [both laugh]. Tell me that again.  
 BE: I will. Uh. My sister | one of my sisters [Maud] married a Eldreth and my other sister [Clyde] got to going with his brother. And, uh, so he’d come to see her.

And back when I was, oh, I'd say maybe thirteen, fourteen, me and Clyde'd go to church; or go anywhere that we went together, you know. And we'd be a-walking along; and she'd go looking back, you know, and I'd just | I's just a-playing, you know, hard to get. [Both laugh.]

PS: I can see it.

BE: I's just playing hard to get. So I'd be a-walking along, I'd just ignore 'em, you know, when anybody'd come up to me, and . . . she'd say, "Now that's my boyfriend; I'm going to get him." They'd come right up and take hold of my arm; we'd walk off together. Oh, that would just burn her up. I did that so many times.

And then, uh [sigh], she got to going with this . . . Eldreth boy. And, uh, I think she | I think she liked him pretty good. So one day I decided, "Well, I'll take him from her, too. I'll get him. Which I shouldn't have. And, uh, when I heard him a-fixing to leave, I slipped upstairs out on the balcony and sat down with a book. And when, uh, he got out the lane (he's a-walking) he got out the lane a little ways and I whistled and he looked back. And then I dropped my head, and he knew where I was at. So then that week I got a letter from him.

PS: Um hmm.

BE: And I went to writing to him, and he went to coming to see me, and he quit her and went to coming . . . [phrase dissolves in laughter]

PS: [Responsive laugh.]

BE: So I married him [sigh].

### *Baby Cases*

(Eldreth describes a series of events that probably began before she was twenty, that is, shortly after her own eldest children were born, and continued for fifteen or twenty years. Mary Greene told me that Eldreth had been a midwife, and I asked Eldreth about that in our very first interview. She responded with a long series of stories that are notable in terms of both the reported speech and the lack of speech on the part of significant actors. After the sequence reproduced below, Eldreth's stories became more abbreviated until they consisted of little more than a name. I am not sure how long she might have gone on, because I interrupted her with a question that turned the conversation in a new direction.)

And, uh, let's see now, I deli— | I delivered | I've delivered the babies, by myself. I know one time | now I delivered the baby, Marie Rash's on Three Top. Now her sister was there with me, but she left, she wouldn't stay, she just . . . took outside. And I stayed right with her till that baby was borned. And when Dr. Robison got there he said he didn't | couldn't understand why they sent after him, that they had as good a doctor there as they could've had.

And then . . . I was with | I assisted him in different other cases. I was with Mabel Rash when . . . her baby was born, well, I was there by myself when, when she gave birth to one and it was born dead. And, uh, I took that baby out of the



bed. And it | I | I ain't never hardly forgot that. And that was | that was rougher than anybody ever knowed because it being stillborn, you know. And, uh, I | I ain't never forgot, you know, the feel of it and everything.

But then I was with another lady when, uh, when her baby was born, but I was with Dr. Robison then, I assisted him, you know. He'd | I'd go with him places . . . in the neighborhood. And he told me one time, he said that he'd rather have me for a nurse, assistant nurse, than any nurse that ever stood by him.

And, this lady, her baby was . . . stillborn. And, uh, he went to reach the baby, you know, to, uh, this other lady that was with me, and she said, "Lord, I can't do that." And, I just reach out my hands, took it, and I said, "Somebody has to." I'll never forget how that doctor looked at me, how much he appreciated that. And, they had a little old wood cookstove—it was real cold weather—and we went in there and I sat down and I put that baby on my lap. I fixed it up real purty and dressed it, put clothes on it. And then she did help me lay the baby out.

And, uh, then I was with Lorna Belle Brewer, another lady over there, and, uh, I helped deliver her baby. And Dr. Robison come, and he said, "I don't see why you send after me," he said, "when you've got a doctor right here to take care of . . . of the babies and the mother."

### *The Mean Horse*

(Eldreth must have been in her early twenties, since her third child, a son Clyde, named after her sister Clyde, was about two years old.<sup>2</sup> This is another of the stories Eldreth told me in the same conversation as the story of stealing Ed from her sister, as part of her gradual revelation of her negative feelings toward her husband.)

I know one time I's setting there and, uh, well, I wasn't a-setting there, I's a-getting supper. And my husband come in and he said, "I guess that horse has killed s—" | they had, May Rash's had a *mean* fighting horse. And he said, "I guess that that horse has killed some of them young'uns." And I started out, and he said, "You ain't a-going out. It'll | that horse'll kill you." Said that it had got out the gate. Somebody'd left the gate open and it'd come out right down amongst, in that bottom, right amongst | I guess there's eight or ten children playing. [Sighs.]

And I took out and I met that horse in the road and just screamed and threwed up my arms up over my head? and scared it. And it took around me; it didn't try to h— | paw me or anything. And took on down through the bottom, and I went up through that bottom just a-flying.

Well, all the children had made it safe and got to the house but Clyde. And he was | he's about two. Toddling along. And I run up through there just as hard as I could go and grabbed that young'un on my hip, and, young'uns, now I'm a-telling you the truth—this looks unreasonable and I'm | I've never known how I done it—but I come over a garden fence that had about eight planks . . . on a fence. I

got over that fence with that young'un in under my arm—I used my other hand, you know, to climb.

And as I fell on my knees in the garden | as I looked up that horse was a-standing on its hind feet on the other side of the garden fence. It's after me. It's a-trying | well, it'd killed me if it'd a got to me.

*“But I did save the little young'un”*

(This must have happened a few years later than the “Mean Horse” story, since Eldreth's eldest children are old enough to understand the danger their cousin is in, to go for help, and to describe what has happened. In order to appreciate the risk Eldreth takes, it is important to realize that she and her neighbors believed that a woman should stay in bed and do no work for ten days after giving birth and that exposure to water was especially dangerous. In response to my questions about this story she told another about a neighbor who had tried to please her miserly husband by doing the family's wash too soon: “And her baby was little. And it set up dropsy on her, misting the water and standing over the steam of the | where the clothes | where she's a-washing, set up dropsy on her and killed her.”)

BE: And there's something else, yeah, I told you about my sister's young'un getting in the creek, didn't I, about drowning?

PS: I kind of think so, but I'm not sure. Tell | do tell me.

BE: Yeah, uh, me and Maud lived close together and she'd go work, you know, one day and I'd stay at home and then she'd stay at home and I'd go work. Took it turn about. Our husbands was both lazy. [Laughs.] And we took it turn about, you know, a-working.

And she left . . . and I's a-having to stay at home then 'cause my baby, Grace, was just seventeen days old and I wasn't able to go to work then, and I's keeping her little two-year-old. And it was in October. And, uh, my oldest two, Lorena and Clyde, and her oldest two was carrying some water from the creek bank for me to wash out some diapers. And I hadn't been out and it's a cold frosty morning, up in October. And, uh, the children come in the house, they's just screaming, and said Jean had fell in the creek and she's two year old.

And I, I really didn't know which way to go, but anyway I just went the way the children come and I didn't know whether she had washed on down or what. When I got out to the creek, why I seen her in the water and she's just . . . she's a-laying so far down under the water and she wasn't a-going on down and she wasn't a-coming up. And she's two year old. She had both arms stretched over her head and her eyes just as wide open as could be. She was about gone. And I jumped in that water up to my waist. And my baby was just seventeen days old. And I drug that young'un out. And I turned her with her head down? and carried her with her feet up next to me, to my face, to the house. I had to carry her about as | I'd say about a hundred yards or maybe a little further. And, uh, I worked with her till | and when I,

when I set her down she fell over just like she's dead as a hammer. And I just kept working with her and that water's running out her nose and mouth.

PS: What did you | working with her like pushing on her?

BE: No, I's just, uh, working and a . . . trying to keep her moving and keep life in her, till, uh, till that water run out of her nose and mouth. And she began to show a little sign of | that she | of life. And I kept on till I got her brought to. And, uh, then I got some clothes and I dressed her real good all over and I put her in the bed and covered her up. And by that time—I had forgot, you know, that I was wet. And I was, I was soaking wet from right along there [indicates waist height] plumb down. And, uh, it was real chilly, so I knew then that I'd better do something . . . for myself. And I run and I change my clothes and pulled 'em off and put on dry clothes and got towels and dried myself off and dried that baby.

And, uh, and, uh, when, as the saying is, the news got around, people's a-saying it'd kill me, you know. That me a-going in that water like that and the baby so young that I didn't stand a chance. And I know Johnny Rash come down there and he said, "I wouldn't be in your shoes for your socks." And I said, "Well, I'll just put it like this," I said, "just to have went in the water like that for nothing, I wouldn't risk it either, but," I said, "I'd rather have died than for that young'un to a-drownded and it so close to my back door." And, uh, I said, "If it had been a little colored young'un I would have got it out just the same way; I wouldn't have let it a-drownded."

And about two o'clock the next morning my sister come, I heard her knocking on the door. And I answered the door and she wanted to know if I was all right and I told her, yeah, I was just fine. And she said she wanted to come see about me.

And, uh, I don't know how many people said it'd kill me, you know. And Ed Zank | Liz Eldreth, she's | I went up there a day or two after that and she's a-crying and she said, uh, "Bess," she said, "the Lord was with you," she said, "that's why that you | that it didn't make you sick." And she walked that floor and cried just as hard as she could cry. And a-telling me, a-saying that the Lord won't let it hurt you. "The Lord won't let it hurt you." And, you know, it didn't, it | I didn't even take a cold. And | but I did save the little young'un.

### *Joe Cox's Funeral*

(Eldreth was in her fifties in this story from the 1960s. She insists that this was not the very first time that she had done special singing outside the regular church service, but the event certainly seems to mark a significant transition in the social recognition she receives for her singing.)

Well, you know, I sung at Joe Cox's funeral, that used to live down at Todd? He was always the one, you know, that'd ring the church bells. And me and him was always most of the time the first ones there. And he passed away. And they got to hunting for the song "Will you miss me when I'm gone?" And they couldn't nobody find it. Nobody didn't have it. And none of 'em didn't know it. And, uh, Verna Lee

Green's girl, she said, "I bet Mrs. Eldreth'd know that song." And I just looked at 'em, kindly, you know, give my head a shake, you know, "Just don't say nothing." But I didn't say that, I just looked at 'em and shook my head. They went on in there. And she must've told Arnette Reagan that, that I knew that song, 'cause we went on in our Sunday school class and Arnette said, "Now, Bess, I want to know. Do you know the song, 'Will you miss me when I'm gone?'" And I just shrugged my shoulders and looked at her. And she said, "You do, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah, I know the song." And Mary June Risk, she was my Sunday school teacher, and she said, "Now, Mrs. Eldreth," she said, "this is a request and," she says, "it can never be filled." And I said, "Well, I can't *today*." I said, "I just don't see how I can, Mary June. 'Cause," I said, "I have to go to the hospital and get Ed out." I said, "He's coming home today." She said, "I will make arrangements," she said, "I'll go get Mr. Eldreth or I'll send somebody," she said, "so you can sing that song."

Well, I rushed home from South Fork. And I went in there and sat down and got me a pen and a paper and set down and wrote the words plumb through that song at the dining room table. And then I turned around and went back, back to the church. And by that time, you see, when I stayed for services and everything and the funeral then at two o'clock, it rushed me. So I come on home and fixed . . . and wrote the words down and remembered every bit of the song. And Arnette said, "Now, Mrs. Eldreth, if you get nervous," she said, "I'm going to get Preacher Byrd to sit up there behind you, and if you get nervous I'll just tell . . . I'll just have him set you down." I said [very calm voice], "I think I can do it," just like that, you know? And I got up there and sang that song, "Will you miss me when I'm gone?" And when I started out, the undertakers took hold of me when I started out the church door? And they told me, said, "Lady," said, "I have never heard that song sung so beautifully." I thanked 'em and went on out.

But, now, I didn't . . . you know, that's kindly of a sad song anyway. And they said that Mrs. Cox, his mother, was the one [with a] *special* request to find the song. You see, he played that song all the time. He had a guitar and he played that song and sang that song all the time. Said that everywhere you'd see him setting around, he's a-playing that song on the guitar. And it was special requested that I sang it. So, I did, I sang it. After I got up there and started singing, I didn't . . . it seemed like it didn't bother me a bit in the world then.

*"I'd like to have a house built right up there"*

(By the early 1970s, when Eldreth was in her late fifties, she had saved enough money from her own work to afford a plot of land and materials to build a house. Her daughter and son-in-law drove her around to look at potential properties.)

- PS: Why did you move over to this house? Did you live in 1 over by Todd before this?  
 BE: Uh, we lived down at Todd when the house burnt up. You see, I got washed out once and burnt out twice. And, uh, we moved, uh, up on [Highway] 194 in a real old

house. And, uh, it was a-leaking pretty bad, needed fix | needed some roof on it. And one day I come through there and I said, "I'm going to get out and I'm gonna see if I can find me some land and I'm going to have me a house built." [Sigh.]

So Virginia and Don told me, she said, "Well, Mom, where would you want to look for some land at?" I said, "Just anywhere." Well, we come out through here and we went a-way up yonder on that hill, and it was just almost straight up and down. Well, I didn't talk in favor for that 'cause I never did even say a word when we went up there. I didn't like it. So, Virginia said, "Don, we might as well turn around and go back." Says, "Now Mom's not a-gonna | won't buy this, because she's not interested in this." Says, "She's not talking."

PS: [Laughs.]

BE: So I come on back by and I started to pass down through here, and I said, "I'd like to have a house built right up there." And Don says, "Well, let's see if we can find the owner of the land." So we went on out yonder and Raymond Jones owned the land | Roland Jones | owned the land. And we asked him, and he said, "Yeah," it was for sale. Just got an acre and, uh, he's gonna sell it.

*"I built it to live in"*

(Even after her sons began building her house, one more obstacle stood in Eldreth's way before she could move in and feel secure.)

When I built my house where we live now, they's a man, George Mars (he got killed in a car wreck) he came down there right after we just moved in, didn't have the house plumb finished. And he told me he'd give me \$50,000 for the house.

That was when my husband was living, he said, "Take that money," said, "grab it," said, "and I'll stick it right here in my overall pocket."

And I told him right in front of that man, I said, "I'm going to tell you something." I said, "When I bought this land and had this house built," I said, "I built it to live in." I said, "I've never had nothing but an old shack, and most of the time we were renting this place that the houses leaked." And I said, "I've got one now that I can say it's mine and I'm keeping it."

And I've still got it. It's in a right pretty place, isn't it?

*"If you want you a biscuit, you pick it up"*

(Eldreth is in her sixties and has moved herself and her ailing husband into the new house that her sons finished for her in 1972. Not surprisingly, this especially direct story and the previous one are among those Eldreth shared during the conversation with Conway, Holland, and me in Chapel Hill. As comments in the middle of the narration indicate, Conway's supportive questioning had encouraged Eldreth to share stories with her that she had not previously felt comfortable sharing with me.)

CC: Tell Dottie that story about telling your husband what he can do [laughs], finding your voice.

BE: One Sunday evening, one of my boys called me and said they's in a wreck and wanted me to come get 'em. Well, they was both together when they wrecked the car, and I was real nervous, I thought, you know, I didn't know how I'd find 'em. I asked if they was hurt and they said no, that they didn't get hurt, but they had to have a way home.

So, I had my biscuits made and, when they called, so I left my biscuits setting on the stove. And when I come back the first thing that my husband said to me [petulant voice], "Your biscuits are a-setting there right where you left 'em." I never opened my mouth, never said a word. I went on in there and put the biscuits in the stove and baked 'em and put my supper on the table. (I don't know whether I've told her [Sawin] about this or not.) And I put my supper on the table. And my grandson and his wife was there. And, uh, they's setting there at the table.

Well, I got me a spoonful of green beans and one biscuit and started to the living room. And he was | he said, "You get back here and reach me a biscuit."

Young'uns, so help me, I | I poured his coffee and set it like this [just above his place at the table], set him a plate here [just in front of him], and set the biscuits here [right next to his place]. I started back to | and I looked at the table. My goodness, all he has to do is pick 'em up. And I think I just, I don't know how I felt. But I said, "I'm" (by that time I was crying), I said, "but I'm going to tell you something, now." I said, "If you want you a biscuit, you pick it up there." I said, "You've sat on your [intentionally not speaking the word] (Right in front of them people, black, only I said that, "black") till you've got calluses bigger than my hands.

CC: [Laughs.]

BE: (to PS) Did I ever tell you what I said?

PS: You didn't tell me that!

BE: And I walked on in the other room just a-bawling. He ate supper and went out on the porch. And Danny [her grandson] (she's met Danny) | I've never saw a man tickled in my life as good as Danny was tickled. And he said, "Mamaw, I wasn't a-laughing 'cause that you was so upset in the way Papaw done you." But said, "What tickled me so good was what you said to him." And said, "I had never, as long as I had even stayed with you'uns, I had never heard you raise your voice to Papaw till this time."

And I don't know what hit me; I just turned loose.

And Carolyn, Danny's wife, she jumped up and she *would not* let me wash the dishes. She cleaned my kitchen, just made it shine all over. Clean as a pin. Says, "You're not a-touching a dish." She said, "You're just exhausted."

The speaker who changes most dramatically over the course of this sequence of stories is Eldreth herself. The sixty-year-old who clearly states which land she wants to buy and who directly challenges her husband's unreasonable demands is a far cry from the sixteen-year-old who steals her sister's boyfriend as a joke and then has no voice to protest when she is pushed into marrying him. For much of

her life Eldreth seems to have been willing to “accept the authority of her husband as a natural fact of life,” even though Ed signally failed to confirm the requisite “deep sense of the complementary nature of [a husband’s and a wife’s] roles and of the obligations of a good man toward his family and their needs” (Beaver 1986:98). Through most of her adult life Eldreth must have seen herself as competent and responsible and her husband as lacking those qualities, yet she nevertheless largely internalized the ideology that knowledge drawn from a woman’s experience cannot justify a direct challenge to a man’s knowledge and dominance (see Belenky et al. 1986:29). What effected the change this sequence of stories reveals? If as an older woman she is accorded rights to certain speech roles or behaviors that a young woman is not, how are these new roles made available to the changing speaker and what are the steps in what must be a cumulative process? Ways of talking are presumably not the sole or sufficient cause of Eldreth’s transformation. The financial independence and ownership of her own home that years of labor had conferred, as well as a belief in her own capacities generated by having successfully provided much of her family’s support and raised eleven children, must have played important roles. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, encounters with supportive supernatural forces emboldened Eldreth to confront her husband in rare, though influential, instances. Still, as Beaver argues generally about women of Eldreth’s generation in the region, “finally, old women are privately and publicly acknowledged for their expertise. Recognition of expertise breeds self-confidence” (1986:104). What we see in the stories are Eldreth’s gradually accumulating models, reasons, and justification for speaking her mind. Most crucial, I would argue, is her increasing assurance that her contributions are being recognized, her expertise appreciated, and her preferences heard.

### Men’s Talk: Praise vs. Exploitation

One clear pattern in these stories is the simplicity and directness with which most of the men speak. Men express themselves in straightforward, pithy, and thus eminently quotable declarative sentences. They do not hedge or hesitate. Their role seems to be to assess or characterize others’ deeds—in these instances, Eldreth’s actions—and they apparently feel no qualms about making authoritative evaluations. The men can be extremely critical, as when Johnny Rash declares Eldreth a fool for jumping into the creek to save her niece, “I wouldn’t be in your shoes for your socks.” But they can equally offer positive evaluations, as in Dr. Robison’s litany, culminating with “I don’t see why you send after me when you’ve got a doctor right here to take care of the babies and the mother,” or the undertaker’s compliment, “I have never heard that song sung so beautifully.”<sup>3</sup>

The explicit positive assessments serve Eldreth well at two levels. Initially, it must have been gratifying to receive praise or to have the self-appointed

authoritative evaluators of the community put a positive stamp on her accomplishments. Further, however, these concise appraisals are easily recyclable in narrative. Although in rare and dramatic instances—like the “Mean Horse” story—Eldreth concludes a narrative by offering a positive evaluation in her own voice as narrator, she evidently prefers to construct stories in which she does not have to make any claims for the value of her own actions because she can quote one of these remarks to provide the necessary evaluation. Self-praise is more strictly proscribed in this speech community than in most. Mountain people’s intolerance of anything resembling bragging and the tendency to disclaim one’s own abilities have been commented upon by ethnographers from John C. Campbell (1921, chap.6) to Elmora Messer Matthews (1966:xxix, 28, 54, 75) to Patricia Beaver (1986:162). The person who violates the prohibition on self-praise risks being censured as “proud,” with gossip to that effect serving as a powerful deterrent. Among Eldreth’s friends and family, people are noticeably careful to avoid calling too much attention to their own skills or accomplishments. In the speech of older people, especially, every statement of intended action seems to be followed by an “or at least I’m going to try to . . .” or an “Of course, I don’t know if I’ll do any good at it.” Even her grandchildren, however, refrained from listing their accomplishments in school or sports for their elders in the way middle-class children I know are encouraged to do. And in Eldreth’s church, any deed like preaching or solo singing that might draw attention to the skill of the person doing it is prefaced by heartfelt disclaimers of performance—usually along the lines of “Now, I don’t claim to be a singer, but you all just pray for me while I try to do [hymn title]”—that are employed so regularly as to serve as reliable markers of intended performance (see Bauman 1977:16, 1993a:20). These readily repeatable compliments thus enable Eldreth to draw attention to the merit of her deeds without, usually, evoking censure.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that effective self-praise might still provoke social sanctions, this is a rather transparent subterfuge, but Eldreth is comfortable with it; and her family and friends seem to be tolerant of her desire thus to (re)circulate positive evaluations of what she has done (Sawin 1992).

Fascinatingly, Ed Eldreth appears to be the exception to the rule, the man who fails to talk as other men talk, as well as the man who fails to do what other men do (or at least should do). Although we cannot know for sure to what extent this reflects his actual practice and to what extent it is the result of Eldreth’s prerogative as narrator, Ed is most often notable for his silence and inaction. In important respects Eldreth seems to be editing him out of her life, giving him minimal mention (as noted earlier), and furthermore either refusing to perpetuate what he said or, when she does bring him into a story, portraying him as ineffectual at best. She tells no stories that focus on the criticisms that he probably frequently leveled at her, thus (as Elaine Lawless argues about the lacunae in the life stories she tried to collect from battered women [2001:64]) protecting herself from reliving those moments by refusing to report them. In the story about



Eldreth's "stealing" him from her sister, Ed is more object than agent. We hear that Bessie "got a letter from him," but its content does not merit description. The decision for Ed and Bessie to marry, as noted above, seems to have been made primarily by Florence Killens; she is the only actor who is said to desire the marriage. We cannot even tell if Ed actually proposed to Bessie or if his intention was just assumed. In any case, he is not represented as the originator of the request.

In the "Mean Horse" story Eldreth makes striking rhetorical use of her husband's failure to speak in order to depict his deficiencies without naming them overtly. Ed does initially have a speaking role. He is the bearer of news—"And he said, 'I guess that that horse has killed some of them young'uns'"—and even of warning—"And I started out, and he said, 'You ain't a-going out. That horse'll kill you.'" Far from suggesting honest concern, however, his decision to describe the situation as a *fait accompli* rather than to try to affect the outcome and his feeble attempt to stop his wife from getting involved only paint him as a coward. Once Eldreth ignores his disingenuous attempt to stop her, risks her own neck, and pulls off the miraculous rescue—"This looks unreasonable and I've never known how I done it, but I come over a garden fence that had about eight planks on a fence. I got over that fence with that young'un in under my arm"—her husband does not even commend her. Does he not care even that much about their children, or does he refuse to praise her since to do so would be to admit his own cowardice by comparison? Whatever the explanation, he looks bad. Eldreth's action is so dramatic and her courage so self-evident that the story works without the kind of modestly distanced evaluation that quotation of other people's compliments provides (Sawin 1992). This story is noticeable, however, as one of very few that Eldreth constructs without such an evaluation.

Ed's deficiencies appear egregious and evident, but it is important to note that in many respects his verbal behavior, although different from that of the other men in Eldreth's stories, may actually have been within regional bounds for a husband interacting with his wife. Puckett argues that in the mountain community she studied—and I have observed in Eldreth's everyday interactions—people know their place in networks of interdependence and understand their (highly gendered) rights and responsibilities relative to others. A person within his or her rights need only express a need, and the other person will know to volunteer (2000:68ff). I have often observed Eldreth and her family follow similar patterns in their everyday interactions. Thus in simply stating that the horse had gotten loose and was threatening the children, Ed's speech might have been construed as appropriately indicating a need whose fulfillment Eldreth would understand as a mother's duty, not a father's. Likewise, when requests are appropriate, markers of politeness like "please" are generally unnecessary and even excessive (2000:89). Similarly, perhaps, praise or thanks would not be called for in situations where responsibilities, prominently here a mother's duty to safeguard her children, are clear. The positive evaluations Eldreth receives from people like the

doctor or the undertaker, then, simply index the distance in their relationship and indicate that she has done more than would strictly be expected of her. By extensively describing the horse's malevolence and her own extreme efforts, however, Eldreth strongly suggests that this was an extraordinary situation requiring an out-of-the-ordinary response. Ed should have helped or, failing that, should at least have praised her. Still, Eldreth does not voice this criticism overtly, instead leaving it to those who have heard her tell so many stories that conclude with a quoted compliment to deduce both Ed's failures and her invitation to listeners to condemn them. And I believe that even in thus leading listeners toward criticizing her husband's conduct, she probably felt that she was taking more of a risk than may be obvious to feminist readers.

One might similarly see Ed's order to his wife in the biscuit story as an example of regionally appropriate or at least tolerable behavior of a husband to his wife. Puckett notes that although adult men would never dare to tell each other what to do in this direct way, a "doin for' imperative" is appropriate from an older person to a child or from a man to a woman, and "willing compliance" can index love or at least a relationship running as both parties believe it should (2000:169–175; see also Beaver 1986:93, 152). Indeed, the story indicates that Eldreth has complied without overt complaint for many years. Earlier in the conversation during which she shared this story, Eldreth started to criticize another instance of her husband's ordering her around and making her wait on him. As with other negative remarks that she hazarded (as discussed in chapter 3), however, she almost self-censored and continued only when listeners' silence assured her of permission and sympathy.

When we were first married, [Ed] was twenty-one years old. We didn't have a bathroom in the house to have running water you know. Young'uns, this is terrible. I shouldn't say this, should I? [No response.] He'd sit in the living room and wait for me to bring him a wash pan of water to wash in and a towel.

In the biscuit story—which she may well have dared to share precisely because of our earlier supportive response—Eldreth still goes to great length to show how unusual the situation was. Two of their sons had been in an automobile accident, even if they claimed they had not been hurt. Her duty to go get them was more pressing than her duty to feed her husband his supper at the usual time. There is even, deeply buried, the radical suggestion that Ed could have gone beyond a man's usual noninvolvement in cooking (see Beaver 1986:100) and taken care of himself at least to the extent of putting an already prepared pan of biscuits into the stove. Eldreth piles up all of these justifications on top of the obvious mean-spiritedness of Ed's demand—"You get back here and reach me a biscuit"—and the evidence that it was a pure exercise of power, since the biscuits were already within easy reach: "My goodness, all he has to do is pick 'em up." For years she had bridled under Ed's authority because he had so little sense of his family's

needs, but she had felt constrained not to speak. Now she is proud and daring enough to quote not only her defiant rejection of her husband's unreasonable demand—"I'm going to tell you something, now.' I said, 'If you want you a biscuit, you pick it up there'"—but also her scathing condemnation of his laziness—"You've sat on your [black bottom] till you've got calluses bigger than my hands"—even though she leaves some of the words implied. Puckett notes that while some women gladly comply with their husband's explicit requests as a way of showing love, others do so under duress, for fear of reprisals and even physical abuse (2000:192). Ed's behavior, here as in the "Mean Horse" story, lies technically within area norms, but Eldreth frames the interaction and shapes his words to make it clear that he is being petulant, petty, and abusive. Thus both her willingness to defy him and her decision to tell a story that justifies her response are acts of significant daring.

What enabled Eldreth finally to find her voice, speak back to her husband, and draw the line between acceptable requesting behavior and gratuitous, cruel abuse? What empowers her, in recent years, even to label marriage an inherently unfair institution and to declare that she did not want to marry again because "I never want another [man] to wait on"? One answer is suggested by the discrepancies between Ed's talk and other men's talk that she represents in her stories. Men can and do treat women with gratitude and respect, but not, in Eldreth's experience, when they have the right to control a woman's labor that marriage confers. Intimacy creates exploitation, not appreciation. Another source of strength and resolve appears to have been a significant change over time in the ways that Eldreth and other women interacted verbally with each other.

### Women's Talk: From Competition to Support

Stories from when Eldreth was young almost exclusively depict women failing to communicate or miscommunicating, either willfully or inadvertently. During their teen years Eldreth and her sister Clyde slept in the same bed and worked cooperatively to cut and drag out timber, enjoying the common preference for outdoor work that differentiated them from their sister Maud, who worked in the house. Even in situations where they might have had a choice of companions, they preferred each other's company: "Me and Clyde'd go to church; or go anywhere that we went together, you know." Courting, however, sets up conflict and competition between them. The girls' implied early sympathy and synchrony give way to "communications" between them that are actually designed to mislead or to use each other as mere means to communicate to someone other than the ostensible addressee. In the first part of the "Stealing Ed" story, Clyde employs her sister as a foil, saying, "Now that's my boyfriend; I'm going to get him," ostensibly to her sister, but evidently hoping that the young man in whom

she is interested will overhear and respond positively. Eldreth says nothing to either her sister or the young men walking home from church, but she knows perfectly well that this constitutes a form of “playing hard to get” that the boys will find more attractive than Clyde’s direct expression of interest: “They’d come right up and take hold of my arm.” In ostentatiously “walk[ing] off together” with the boy her sister wanted, Eldreth not only flaunts her own attractiveness and communicative success but also responds to Clyde’s statement of a wish precisely by blocking its fulfillment. And she clearly enjoys twitting and frustrating her sister: “Oh, that would just burn her up. I did that so many times.” In pursuit of male attention, the sisters short-circuit communication between themselves, speaking, in formal terms, to each other but really to a potential suitor, communicating most effectively by pointedly refusing to speak.

Eldreth likewise tells a whole series of stories about the practical jokes she and Clyde played on each other, jokes I will consider in more detail in the chapter devoted to that topic. Practical joking turns precisely on the management of information so as to produce false impressions (Bauman 1986); but while joking can be artful and humorous to some, the girls’ examples, because unelaborated, constitute recriminations thinly disguised. Notably, also, the sisters’ jokes are occasioned by events having to do with courtship and their emerging sexuality. The girls neither confide in each other about the welter of new emotions they are feeling nor try to make sense of their experiences by comparing notes. Instead they appear to respond to their confusion and shame by taking out their anxieties and aggressions on each other, on the person to whom they are supposedly closest. The final joke in the series is Eldreth’s decision to “steal” Ed from her sister just to see if she can. Although she succeeds, the last laugh is on her, since she is induced to marry a man whom she does not love and who will turn out to be far from an ideal husband. Her further inability to protest her mother’s plans may simply reflect her acceptance of an elder person’s right to make decisions and to tell a younger person what to do. Later in the discussion about her marriage, Eldreth reminded us, however, that “Momma loved me as good or . . . I’d say better’n ary young’un she had.” It thus seems equally possible that in grasping for the security of a role she already knew, the compliant child, Eldreth missed an emerging opportunity to express her own preference that her mother would actually have been willing to consider.

Supportive and forthright conversations among women only gradually appear in Eldreth’s life, however. Once married, she and Ed move to the “Three Top” community where her sister Maud is already living, and she begins to make friends with the other young women. As the stories about the baby cases and about her niece’s near drowning reveal, these women depend tremendously on each other. They could neither bring their children into the world nor assure their care while they worked to support them without each others’ help. And yet the kinds of talk in which Eldreth depicts them engaging continue in many instances to be oblique and mystifying. In the birth stories the reportable

conversations occur between Eldreth, Dr. Robison, and, sometimes, another helper whose words, like Ed's, mark her as an inept foil for Eldreth's competence: "Lord, I can't do that." The mothers neither speak nor are spoken to. Obviously this would make a different kind of story and deflect attention from the positive evaluations of Eldreth's contributions. I discovered, however, that whenever I tried to get Eldreth to talk about midwifery, her only response was to tell these baby case stories. At first I simply thought that she was uncomfortable talking to me about birthing because I was not then married. I gradually realized, however, that actually working with the other woman's body, coordinating with and assisting in the birth process, was not something that the women themselves had talked about at the time. Neither mothers nor helpers received explicit verbal training. A woman learned by giving birth herself and then, suitably initiated, by going along as a birth helper and learning that role from experience as well: "I just got to going, you know, where that there's places where that they | the babies'd be borned and I'd, I'd wind up a-helping, and be right there." When I tried to check my theory with Eldreth, she not only confirmed my perception but seemed by her abrupt answers to want to cut off even that discussion of the topic:

- PS: Did people talk and advise? That's what I was thinking about because all the friends with X's wife [whose baby shower Eldreth and I had recently attended] and all my friends who are married and have had kids. There's so much more talk these days to explain to women what they can do and how they can help. Did people talk among themselves and—
- BE: No.
- PS: like tell a new mother—
- BE: No, they didn't.
- PS: —what to expect? Huh?
- BE: Everything seemed like it was kept so quiet.

Giving birth and helping with a birth were arguably treated like the many kinds of labor (men's and women's) that one appropriately learns by watching, doing, and seeking specific correction rather than through explicit verbalized instruction (Puckett 2000:152–153; Briggs 1986). Yet Eldreth's comment that "it was kept so quiet" also hints at a silence enforced by shame that surrounded women's bodies and their functioning.

Maud's minimal and not even directly quoted line in the drowning story—"She wanted to know if I was all right"—similarly suggests these young women's inability to articulate their feelings and concerns to each other. Was Maud furious with her sister for not protecting her daughter better or grateful that she put herself at risk to save the child, or was she struggling with a mixture of anger and gratitude? We will never know, and it is not clear if Eldreth knew or felt she ought to know. Certainly it is not germane to the story she has to tell. Much of the foundational feminist work in the ethnography of speaking depicted women

collaborating to generate meaning and thus to support each other in making sense of their lives and the social forces that constrained them (for example, Kalčík 1975; Johnstone 1990; Hall and Langellier 1988; Tannen 1990). It has been easy to forget that these characterizations were generated mostly on the basis of the speech behavior of white middle-class women involved in or born since the advent of the women's movement (Sawin 1999; Coates 1999). The kind of introspective sharing of personal experience that seemed natural to young women of my generation was not in fact something that Eldreth and her sisters and friends engaged in until much later in their lives, as we discovered when Holland and Conway questioned her about her dissatisfaction with her marriage:

DH: Was your sister's life like that, too, I mean the I did she feel like you did, do you think?

BE: [Pause.] I think so.

DH: Could you talk about it to her? Or did you have anybody to talk to?

BE: Yeah, uh, yeah, we discussed some things between us, but [pause], just for the past few year [pause] that I ever discussed this with anybody, and it . . .

CC: //Oh.//

DH: //Oh, wow.//

BE: //And it seems like// that I've carried this //all these years.//

DH: //Burdens.//

CC: //Whew.// So you all didn't even talk about it when you were young, living there, going through it?

BE: Unh uh, no.

In the story of her niece's near drowning Eldreth does, however, start to experience support from other women and to have modeled for her a woman's forceful insistence upon the validity of her own interpretation. Having taken what everyone believes is a serious risk by jumping into the cold river just a few days after her own baby's birth, Eldreth finds herself not thanked or praised for her altruism but chastised for not taking care of herself. Her neighbor Johnny Rash becomes the mouthpiece for the general gossip, coming over to tell her callously, "I wouldn't be in your shoes for your socks." Her sister-in-law, Liz Eldreth, however, steps in to defend her, insisting that God transcends human logic and will abrogate physical laws to reward those who sacrifice themselves for others: "And she walked that floor and cried just as hard as she could cry. And a-telling me, a-saying that the Lord won't let it hurt you. 'The Lord won't let it hurt you.'" Given some support, Eldreth not only defends her actions—"Well, I'll just put it like this,' I said, 'just to have went in the water like that for nothing, I wouldn't risk it either, but,' I said, 'I'd rather have died than for that young'un to a-drownded and it so close to my back door'"—but elaborates a broader personal ethic—"I said, 'If it had been a little colored young'un I would have got it out

just the same way; I wouldn't have let it a-drowneded." In Puckett's terms, Eldreth certainly had "rights" to do what she did because of her "place," both her responsibility over particular territory and her role as a woman to take care of children (2000:56ff); but it is nevertheless notable that she defends herself out loud and represents herself, perhaps for the first time in her life, contradicting a man's assessment. Readers may flinch at the way Eldreth unselfconsciously alludes to the assumption that a "colored" child's life is worth less than a white child's. And she does not deny the validity of the distinction *per se*, although it is hard to imagine her going through that kind of explicit metacritical process then or now. Nevertheless, she employs the prejudice precisely to insist that she will not conform to it and to further index her Christian duty to serve "the least of these," in her society's definition. Ultimately, Eldreth is able to build her narrative self-justification on her sister-in-law's supportive analysis: "And, you know, it didn't, it | I didn't even take a cold. And | but I did save the little young'un."

In the drowning story Eldreth faces down unflattering community opinion, but it is not until decades later that she feels able to challenge her husband's exploitation and mistreatment of her. Two further significant changes in her interactions with women transpire in the intervening years, as exemplified by the story of her singing at Joe Cox's funeral and the story of looking for the land upon which to build her own house. The funeral story clearly depicts a turning point in Eldreth's life. The women's speech behavior in it is remarkable in two respects. Eldreth is characteristically and appropriately modest, remaining silent and not volunteering that she indeed knows the song they are looking for, one of many Carter Family numbers she had committed to memory when they were popular twenty or more years earlier. The women in her church know perfectly well how to interpret her reticence, however, and how to break through it:

Arnette said, "Now, Bess, I want to know. Do you know the song, 'Will you miss me when I'm gone?'" And I just shrugged my shoulders and looked at her. And she said, "You do, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah, I know the song."

Furthermore, they understand the system of expectations and responsibilities that puts Eldreth's duty to take care of her husband above all other claims. They dare, however, not only to negotiate in pragmatic terms, finding another driver to bring Ed Eldreth home from the hospital (as someone had to do each month when the Medicare payments would no longer cover hospital nursing for his emphysema), but even to challenge the primacy of Eldreth's duty to her husband. "Now, Mrs. Eldreth," she said, "this is a request and," she says, "it can never be filled [unless you sing the song]." The other women, then, construct Eldreth not simply as a wife but as a specialist, a person who possesses unique skill and knowledge and thus has a responsibility to share these more widely in the community. The semantic dimension of their discourse was doubtless significant in Eldreth's

subsequent self-conception. Equally important, however, is the (for this speech community) highly unusual pragmatic speech act of not only working within dominant community discourses but actually moving out to a discursive met-level where the claims of alternative discourses could be juxtaposed.

The story about searching for land to buy reveals a further means whereby the habits of reticence and self-silencing that Eldreth has internalized can be overcome. Her daughter Virginia has learned to read her mother's silences:

Well, I didn't talk in favor for that 'cause I never did even say a word when we went up there. I didn't like it. So, Virginia said, "Don, we might as well turn around and go back." Says, "Now Mom's not a-gonna | won't buy this, because she's not interested in this." Says, "She's not talking."

By acting as interpreter, Virginia makes her mother's wishes part of the effective discussion and thus makes them available to men like her husband who are perfectly willing to be of service in fulfilling those wishes, if they know what they are. How many thousands of times, I wonder, had Eldreth expressed either her desire to do something or her disapproval of something her husband did or said through a silence that he conveniently ignored? Silence is an effective weapon only if one's opponent is willing to acknowledge its meaning (Herzfeld 1991). Either pushing another woman to speak what is in her mind or correctly interpreting a crucial silence for her becomes a means whereby women, through communicative cooperation, begin to challenge men's control.

Beaver argues that an older woman's increasing power is bolstered by the support and appreciation that she receives from grown sons (1986:104). The willingness of Eldreth's sons to collaborate to build her house, though not the subject of one of her stories, demonstrates how sensitively and generously they responded to her needs. Not surprisingly, perhaps, considering her sons' primary model of male speech behavior, the one story Eldreth tells that describes a specific incident of support is another report of silence and indirection. Once he got a job, her eldest son, Fred, would leave money on the floor of his room, pile his dirty work clothes on top of it, and then come out and tell his mother to go pick up his clothes to wash them. I have not been able to get Eldreth to explain if this subterfuge was necessary to prevent Ed from taking the money, or if Fred felt it would shame his father to have it known that he was contributing to the family's upkeep, or if he was embarrassed to take the donor role relative to his mother. The invisible infusion of funds helped Eldreth take care of the other children, and she appreciated her son's kindness tremendously, but it did not give her an opening for taking a different role with her husband.

The biscuit story further suggests that grandchildren can play discursive roles that children cannot. An adult who has intimate access but is not a regular part of the household can disrupt established dyadic communication patterns between spouses. Eldreth must have put up with her husband's niggling meanness



for forty years, never challenging him in front of her children, feeling that even, or especially, for them she must maintain a veneer of propriety. Even though her children must have recognized that their father was being unreasonable and hateful, as long as she said nothing, none of them apparently took the initiative to support her or tell him he was in the wrong. She finally reaches her limit in front of Danny, her eldest daughter's eldest son. He in one sense continues to play the standard male role of the evaluator: "I had never, as long as I had even stayed with you'uns, I had never heard you raise your voice to Papaw till this time." The effect of Danny's statement is not, however, to judge Eldreth but rather to confirm that what Ed said was wrong (he refers to it as "the way Papaw done you"), to highlight the significance of what she has done, and to prevent her from later disavowing the gigantic step he just witnessed. His young wife, however, responds to Eldreth's outburst in an ambiguous way. Her insistence on giving her grandmother-in-law a needed break might also be interpreted as a confirmation that Eldreth had been mistreated and overworked in the past. Her words, however, although sympathetic, constitute an embarrassed attempt to reinstate the conspiracy of silence, given that she characterizes the outburst as an aberration caused simply by exhaustion rather than a long overdue speaking of truth to power. Where Danny recognizes the significance of what has transpired, Carolyn tries precisely to explain it away in a fashion reminiscent of Eldreth's behavior at the same age. Thus, changing responses from men as well as women of younger generations assist Eldreth's ongoing self-reconstruction, even though the women may not themselves feel the right to new roles.

Fascinatingly, other older women may serve as catalysts precisely because they themselves are going through similar transformations. The most trenchant and direct critiques of the gender system to which they all conformed can thus come from surprising sources. Not long before her death, although years after Ed's, Eldreth's mother broached the subject of Eldreth's unsatisfactory marriage with her:

I'll tell you what she told me . . . a few year ago; it's not been all that long, but anyway she told me, she said, "I want to tell you something." [Sigh.] She said, "I wish that you had a told me and I had a known some of the things that you went through with him."

The immediate reaction that Eldreth reports depicts her as still the more conservative speaker: "I said, 'Momma, after I'd done married him,' I said, 'it's too late then.' That's what I told her. She said, 'Honey, you could a come back home.' But it wouldn't a been the same. Would it?" At the time of the reported conversation, evidently, Eldreth could neither give up the opportunity to portray herself as moral by categorically condemning divorce nor, perhaps, let her mother off the hook by joining her in a futile game of "what if?" Still, in telling the story Eldreth brings the account of her life full circle, revealing that even the person who made her marry Ed realized, in the fullness of time, that it had been a

mistake. And she also, in the particular context of a conversation with feminists, opens herself to an overt discussion of the rules and why they had been so hard to challenge.

CC: But it was so hard back then to do that . . . kind of thing.

DH: Yeah, //to leave.//

BE: //Well,// you hardly ever in the world heard of a separation then.

DH: Um hmm.

BE: You got a bad name if you | if people separated. Didn't they?

Eldreth has not been entirely changed as a speaker, nor should we expect her or anyone to abandon the speech habits of a lifetime. A few years after hearing these stories, however, I was able to witness in real time (rather than to hear a much later story about) a process in which Eldreth struggled both to act as an authoritative evaluator for herself and to dare to reveal that that is what she had done. She started spending time with a widower who had once been the pastor of her church and who was now apparently quite wealthy. In phone conversations (I was living in Indiana at the time) she said she liked and respected this man; and she described having fun with him, recounting one story in which they went to pick beans together and got to laughing so hard that a neighbor stopped to tease them about it. It seemed that her definition of marriage as servitude rather than companionship, encapsulated in the oft-repeated phrase, "I never want another one to wait on," was about to be challenged. I was initially delighted at the prospect that, after all those years of marriage to a man who did not appreciate her, she might have found someone to treat her well. I was thus initially saddened when Eldreth reported that this man had repeatedly asked her to marry him but that she had turned him down. I was especially distressed because the only reason she gave at the time was that one of her daughters had been against it on grounds that it would keep their family from being reunited in heaven. Had Eldreth allowed someone else to be the authoritative interpreter of the situation, giving up a chance at happiness in order not to contest a conservative discourse that another woman applied to her life?

It was not until a few years later, when I again visited her in person, that Eldreth offered further explanation. Her suitor, she now revealed, had offered to marry her and share his beautiful home and sizeable bank account, but on the condition that Eldreth give up the singing performances and related opportunities to travel that she so enjoyed and instead stay home to take care of him. It thus became apparent that her own interpretation had been accurate, that even an apparently ideal man of her generation would understand marriage as implying her responsibility to serve him, and that she had in fact acted according to her own maxim. I suspect that her daughter's interpretation became a convenient subterfuge, a way of explaining her decision without overtly challenging beliefs her listeners might hold. I also wonder, however, if the different explanation

was occasioned by changes in what she knew of me, specifically the fact that I was getting divorced at the time of the later conversations and thus could be assumed to share some of her bitter experience and evaluation. And when, another decade later, the family gathered to celebrate Eldreth's ninetieth birthday, her eldest daughter, Lorene, easily drew her mother into sharing critical reminiscences of Ed with a granddaughter and me while we prepared food for the party. As in the narrated instances, who Eldreth effectively *is* changes with the interactional opportunities offered by talking with different people.

### SITUATING LISTENERS, GENERATING SUBJECTIVITY

In the kinds of stories considered in this chapter, Eldreth relies upon reported speech for a variety of purposes—to depict the characters of those involved, economically convey the action, mobilize praise for her deeds—that direct attention to something other than the speech itself. As both Dell Hymes and Greg Urban have argued, however, the point of a story full of reported speech may be to exemplify proper and improper speech roles or proper and improper relationships of speech to action, as much as to describe and comment upon the more obvious extradiscursive elements of the story (Hymes 1981; Urban 1984). This, indeed, is one of the respects in which the act of telling a story about oneself functions as a means of identity creation. Eldreth situates her listeners—be they friends, grandchildren, interviewers, or a festival audience—as witnesses not only to her (depicted) actions but also to former interlocutors' verbal responses to what she has done and sometimes to her responses to those responses. Thus, I would argue, she not only invites present listeners to make their own evaluation of a deed she describes but also illustrates for them the kinds of evaluations that she approves or rejects. In effect, Eldreth models for audiences how they should (and should not) respond to her, assigning preferred speech roles not (only) by taking the reciprocal role (Davies and Harré 1990), but by modeling a recommended future positioning. Listeners are encouraged to adopt an attitude not (or not only) on the merits of an argument or philosophical belief but rather on whether or not they want to be associated with the kind of person who takes on a particular speech role or says particular kinds of things in the story.

The stories that conclude with a reported compliment thus not only recapitulate a positive evaluation in a safe way. They also train those who hear the story that it is appropriate and praiseworthy to offer an explicit positive comment on an action that they admire or from which they benefit or, better still, to compliment the person performing the action. Eldreth often chooses as her authoritative commentators people she herself reveres, like Dr. Robison. Their stature contributes to the efficacy of their remarks, while at the same time listeners are given to understand that people who make a practice of offering this kind of positive evaluation are themselves good and admirable. Indeed, Eldreth also models

other respectful and appreciative speech behaviors. In a group of stories about women for whom she cleaned house, she not only reports their appreciative evaluations of her work but approvingly describes one who always addressed her as “Mrs. Eldreth,” while she called her employer by her first name.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, of course, those who treat her meanly or fail to praise her when they should are condemned by their own unworthy speech. Her husband in particular is cumulatively depicted as completely unreasonable, controlling, selfish, and greedy. “Your biscuits are a-setting there right where you left ’em” portrays Ed Eldreth as lazy (unwilling even to put a pan of prepared biscuits into the oven to bake) and petulantly selfish (more concerned with his supper than with the well-being of sons who had been in a car crash). “You get back here and reach me a biscuit” shows his desire to control his wife beyond, and indeed counter to, any reasonable need he might have. “Take that money, grab it, and I’ll stick it right here in my overall pocket” reveals his lack of appreciation of his wife’s labors and his utter disregard for her needs (money in his pocket, to fritter away as he wishes, is more important than the house Eldreth has toiled and saved for; the profits of her labor should belong to him). No one hearing such stories could possibly want to emulate Ed by responding ungratefully or without admiration to Eldreth’s accounts of her trials and labors.

Furthermore, Eldreth also shows present audiences how crucial the presence of earlier listeners was in allowing her to enact her self-transformation and thus make it a social reality. In the biscuit story, Eldreth can offer no explanation for why she spoke up that time after having bitten her tongue at similar slights for so many years: “And I don’t know what hit me; I just turned loose.” Evidently, her entire family of children had participated in the conspiracy of silence over Ed’s abusive treatment of his wife. However, the insertion of new actors into the exploitative relationship transforms the impacted dynamic. Through the witnessed outburst (and others like it), Eldreth’s mistreatment by her husband finally became a potential topic of discussion for the whole family rather than an undeniable presence so uncomfortable that no one would mention it. Toward the end of Ed Eldreth’s life and especially after his death, the children at last started to question their mother about their father’s behavior toward her. As Eldreth depicts it, interestingly, they are now insistent enough to refuse to accept the reluctance to volunteer information that she herself has cultivated all these years. By asking, they give her permission to speak and to continue her self-transformation.

BE: (to PS) Well, now, you’ve met Fred, haven’t you?

PS: Uh huh.

BE: Lives over at Creston. He came over there [to Eldreth’s house] one day. He got to questioning me about some things. And I looked | I just looked at him. And Carl [the son who lives next door to Eldreth and spends time with her daily] was a-setting there, and Carl looked at me so quick. I never said nothing. And he said, “Mom, I want to ask you something,” he said, “Is there something that you’re not

telling me?" I said, "Well [sigh], you asked me, didn't you?" "Yeah, I'd like to know." So I told him . . . a few things, that'd been twenty | oh my goodness, that'd been . . . , oh, it's been fifty year ago. I'd kept that | and never told | said anything."

New extracontextual listeners—especially ethnographers or journalists who produce records of what she has told them—also provide new opportunities and produce new kinds of resources that Eldreth can use to break old silences, vindicate herself, and set the record straight. Her husband was not the only person against whom she harbored a grudge. The gender double standard was not the only means by which she was exploited. She has gradually allowed it to emerge that she often felt taken advantage of economically by her relatively well-to-do neighbors as well. After telling me the same set of "baby case" stories for years, during a visit to one of Cecelia Conway's classes at Appalachian State University in 1994 Eldreth amazed me by adding another episode. This one described how Dr. Robison, arriving, as he often did, after she had successfully delivered the baby, praised her efforts but nevertheless collected his fee and did not offer to share it with her! In a story about a brother-in-law for whom she worked during the Depression, a newspaper article enables her to get the man to admit his former lack of generosity.

### *A Dollar Check*

But I went to see my brother-in-law a while back, he was in the hospital.

And he had got one of the *Democrats*, you know [an article about her in the local newspaper, the *Watauga Democrat*]. And he said, "Bess," he said, "they was a lot of truth in that paper."

I said, "Yeah, there was." I said, "It's all the truth."

He said, "But you never had to work that hard, did you?"

I said, "Now you wait a minute." (Him laying right there in the hospital and right in front of his two girls. I said, "I've clumb that mountain for you a many of a day," I said, "Work ten hours and when I'd come out you'd give me a little old dollar check.")

And his young'uns looked so funny at him.

He said, "That's right, ain't it?" He said, "That's the truth, ain't it?"

I said, "Sure it's the truth."

See, he didn't want to own up, you know, that I had done work like that. And I just pointed out to him, I said, "I've worked for you a many of a day," I said, "back on the tops of that mountain," I said, "in that rattlesnake country, for five cents a hour," and I said, "When I come off | I'd put in ten hours and I'd come off and you'd give me | write me a check, for a dollar."

As in the biscuit story, the presence of the man's daughters as new witnesses appears to be essential. It is shocking for her to challenge him "right in front of

his two girls," yet they provide pressure because she knows he does not want them to see him persist in a lie. But the newspaper article, which includes the report of her labors over the years that she had shared with the journalist, is the crucial catalyst. It seems unlikely that she would have brought up the topic spontaneously or asked her brother-in-law to acknowledge all these years later that he had paid her minimally for her tremendously hard work. The newspaper, however, circulates her self-account and brings it into the public domain, including into the awareness of those who already know her. She still has to defend her claim, but the publication of the account broaches a subject that would otherwise never have come up. I also now realize that, in telling me this story, Eldreth must in part have been modeling the specific role that I, as someone who intended to write about her, could play. Indeed, when I brought her a copy of my dissertation she took the two big black volumes down to the offices of the *Watauga Democrat* and arranged an interview. In it, as the resulting article reports, she told the interviewer, "This girl wrote a book about me. In fact, she wrote two books." I now realize that I should hardly have been surprised by what she wanted to do with the dissertation. Like every conversation in which Eldreth is involved, my interactions with her and any records I produce of them become potential resources that she can use in her ongoing self-shaping. May this account likewise serve her well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Granting the premise of this analysis—that reported speech in personal narrative represents characteristic types of speech interaction—Eldreth's stories are still inevitably imperfect and haphazard documents. Many crucial interactions surely never made it into stories; many that did, I never heard. Eldreth clearly deploys reported speech selectively to paint favorable portraits of herself by evaluation or contrast. Furthermore, these stories do not answer all the questions we would like to ask about her discursive self-construction. As the conversations surrounding some of these tellings suggest, Eldreth will, when gently encouraged, go a little farther in analyzing her own motivations or revealing discrepancies between her beliefs at a given moment and what she felt safe saying at the time. For the most part, however, these stories are the well-formed product of Eldreth's reflections, the self-accounts she shares when asked, and we must make of them what we can. What they reveal, if only in possibly distorted glimpses, are the concrete interactions, the ways of speaking or not speaking, through which Eldreth's formative relationships were realized. Eldreth's changing self is a pragmatic dialogic accomplishment. In the abstract, the self is thus revealed as a product not merely of the semantics of discourse or of disembodied social rules but of specific speech acts—moments of acquiescing or challenging, confiding and comparing—and of the changing opportunities for them offered by one's likewise chang-

ing partners in talk and life. In the specific, these stories show how women within Eldreth's speech community have been heavily complicit in subjugating other women to men's control and how challenges to the worst abusers and to the gender system emerged as a result of women's gradual and partial, yet collective and mutual, transformation. The stories also, crucially, model for present audiences the ways in which they should and should not respond to Eldreth's labors or her reports thereof. Those who praise her will themselves be praised as generous and wise; those who take advantage and fail to appreciate her will be revealed as greedy and cruel. Thus Eldreth effectively creates herself in the minds of those who have been schooled in how to respond to her, not only as hardworking, moral, generous, and resourceful, but also as deserving of appreciation. And every story, every interaction becomes potential grist for further stories, further interactions, in Eldreth's ongoing self-shaping.