



PROJECT MUSE®

Listening For A Life

Patricia Sawin

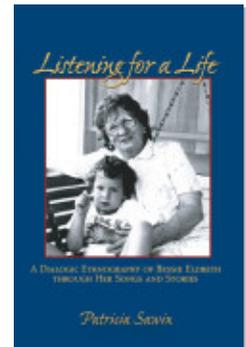
Published by Utah State University Press

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.



➔ For additional information about this book

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

Access provided at 4 Apr 2020 04:12 GMT with no institutional affiliation



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

6

“I’m a bad one to go pulling jokes on people”

Practical Joking as a Problematic Vehicle for Oppositional Self-Definition

To those with whom I have shared Eldreth’s stories, she often comes across as a tragic figure, unappreciated, trapped in a loveless marriage, struggling for subsistence and respect. Despite or perhaps even because of the hardships she has faced, however, she is also an inveterate practical joker and gleefully self-identifies as a person who loves to “go pulling jokes on people.” In order to portray her accurately, as I believe she would have herself seen, it is thus crucial to include an account of these pranks.¹ Still, her joking puts me as ethnographer in a bind. Eldreth herself clearly regards the practical jokes as (mostly) harmless fun and likes to perform and to talk about them (even some that in her view went too far) as evidence of the irrepressible and joyous side of her character. I, in contrast, dislike practical joking and have great difficulty finding anything amusing in causing another person discomfort or distress, even in supposed fun. The jokes that Eldreth has pulled since I have known her, I have to admit, are relatively harmless—starting to slide past someone sitting in the church pew and then startling the person by plopping herself down on a lap or pretending to drop a full glass or a plate of food just before the person to whom she is handing it gets a grip on it. The jokes she describes from the past, however, often involve what strikes me as real cruelty, not only to other adults, but even to children, and several stories describe her use of a disparaging blackface disguise. Still, I recorded these stories during my early fieldwork, when I felt that I had to repress any negative reaction to the things Eldreth told me and so never told her that I was dismayed at her actions and implied attitudes. This means both that I allowed her to position me (though I realized it with horror only much later) as a listener who apparently

agreed with opinions I in fact reject and that I never gave her a chance to respond. It is, however, at least clear to me (from her response to reactions I failed to suppress) that she probably sees my distaste for practical joking as a middle-class affectation, a lack of a sense of humor coupled with a failure to grasp the emotional and physical toughness of people whose lives included so much hard work. Ultimately, I would argue, an analysis of Eldreth's practical joking must be conflicted. I believe that joking to some extent momentarily allowed her to slip free from the requirement to be a constantly self-monitoring perfect daughter, mother, wife, or good Christian lady. To an even greater extent than in her ghost stories, however, in search of her rhetorical goals Eldreth grasps at whatever tactical resources are available and is thus complicit in victimizing—actually or symbolically—those few persons who were in an even weaker social position than she was.

I as newcomer was not immune from Eldreth's joking, but even the funniest story I can tell—one in which I was the accidental prankster but still did not get the last laugh—reveals the tension between Eldreth and me over the matter. One afternoon when I stopped by her house, Eldreth was not feeling well. Quite uncharacteristically, she was sitting still in the living room rather than bustling around, cleaning house or cooking. She even acquiesced in my offer to make her a cup of tea. The jar of tea mix was sitting where I always found it, next to the coffee pot on the kitchen counter, but I had to search the cupboards for the sugar canister. When I brought Eldreth the cup, she took one sip and burst out laughing. I had brought her tea "sweetened" with a heaping teaspoonful of salt! She seemed equally delighted by my demonstration of incompetence in the kitchen, my having played a joke on her, even inadvertently, and my discomfort at both, which meant that I had simultaneously played a joke on myself. My horrified apology just amused her more and gave her the chance to tease me, pointing out that I was indeed "sorry" in the local sense of being inept.

THE PROBLEMATICS OF PRACTICAL JOKING

Practical jokes are "enactments of playful deceit in which one party . . . intentionally manipulates features of a situation in such a way as to induce another person . . . to have a false or misleading sense of what is going on and so to behave in a way that brings about discomfiture . . . in the victim" (Bauman 1986:36). The successful joke depends upon the creation of a "fabrication," "a nefarious design . . . leading—when realized—to a falsification of some part of the world" (Goffman 1974:83). Practical joking necessarily walks a fine line between cleverness and cruelty, acceptability and bad taste, stretching the bonds of friendship and breaking them. Richard Tallman distinguishes "benevolent" from "malevolent" pranks on the basis of intention but notes that in either case misunderstanding will lead to the opposite effect from that intended (1974:264).

And Richard Bauman and Erving Goffman situate all practical jokes as part of the larger category of “routines of victimization,” emphasizing that even those that may be considered “benign,” in that the victim is not seriously injured, use the victim’s distress as the source of humor (Bauman 1986:36; Goffman 1974:87). Even at its best, practical joking involves a “release from suppressed tensions” (Tallman 1974:260) and may contain an element of hostility, all the more distressing because the victim is under pressure to show she is a good sport by not getting mad and by acknowledging the cleverness of the prank (Bauman 1986). Ideally, a benevolent joke will actually strengthen or at least not damage the friendship between those who survive it (and this seems to have been the case in the stories Eldreth tells), but the most reportable accounts, in Eldreth’s case as in Bauman’s study of masterful practical jokers (1986), seem to be the ones that really did go beyond the bounds of taste or even safety.

Additionally, joking is a prime area for inversion and deception, for pretending to be other than you are or hiding who you really are or both. Thus, to an even greater extent than the ghost stories, Eldreth’s jokes allow her to enact facets of her self that she does not find it easy, appropriate, or perhaps even possible to explore overtly. On the one hand, the joking frame facilitates protective denial—“That’s not really me; I was just joking”—and thus permits the joker temporarily to inhabit proscribed roles. On the other hand, however, joking tends to reveal assumptions about self and other so apparently obvious as not to require explicit mention. In playing “the other,” the actor demonstrates by contrast who she most deeply feels she is. These two opposed tendencies can operate simultaneously, making the interpretation of joking complicated and indeterminate. Still, this kind of playing around is a crucial component of the constitution of subjectivity because it incorporates aspects of the self that contradict or hide behind the predominant, socially acceptable face. Furthermore, as with many other facets of her experience, I know about Eldreth’s practical joking mostly through her own accounts. Eldreth stopped engaging in the kinds of joking to which I most strenuously object—blackface impersonations and activities so dangerous that, as she herself says, “we had to cut that out”—decades before I met her. She still talks about those events, however, so I am left to interpret both the jokes themselves and the import of her stories about them in her dialogue with me.

Practical joking has been a part of Eldreth’s experience throughout her life. Her participation displays significant parallels with her ghost experiences and serves like them as a barometer of the degree of pressure she was under. She was introduced to the practice as a child through others’ activities or accounts thereof, and joking at this stage appears, if not exactly harmless, not to have had lasting negative effects on the victims. The stories she still tells of this period, however, depict only two categories of acceptable victims—family members and black neighbors. Eldreth begins to participate intentionally in joking as a young marriageable woman. Her early jokes are, in fact, connected to the ghost experiences

that start during the same period of her life. The jokes she plays as a teenager and as a young married woman, however, are almost out of control and have potentially dangerous outcomes or long-lasting deleterious consequences. She learns to throttle back her jokes to avoid such negative impact, but those she perpetrates as an adult nevertheless reflect serious strains in her assigned female role and in the social fabric. Many of them entail a momentary refusal or reversal of expectations laid on her as a woman, specifically her role as a nurturer. The more elaborate, planned jokes often involve Eldreth disguising herself in blackface, simultaneously engaging in a denigrating portrayal of a black person and using the power of a figure whom she knows the joke victims will distrust or fear to further her agenda. Pretending, teasing, and inverting roles can be a lot of fun and a source of salutary laughter in Eldreth's life, but joking is not only a joking matter.

CHILDHOOD

Although there are many contexts in which traditional practical jokes are perpetrated on successive generations (of college students, campers, workplace novices, and the like), the jokes that tend to be judged most skillful are unique and context dependent, falsifying some aspect of the immediate and specific world in which victim and perpetrator operate. What Eldreth learned from the models to which she was exposed as a child was not specific repeatable jokes, but the skill of devising a joke appropriate to the situation at hand.

The stories Eldreth tells about jokes she observed or heard about as a child are highly variable in terms of situation, means, and both the identities of and the relations between trickster and dupe. One involved the men who worked at a local sawmill and took their meals with a neighbor of the Killens family. On one notable occasion as she poured coffee for her boarders, this elderly woman inadvertently grabbed the cup in which she had deposited her false teeth. The man sitting next to her noticed, but elected not to stop her, and passed the cup with the teeth in the bottom of it to one of his fellows to drink. Another involved Eldreth's brother, Joe, who, one day when they were out working in the woods, managed to "get Dad in a bees' nest." Since his laughter gave him away as the perpetrator, he paid for the joke by receiving a whipping from his father. A third involved her grandmother Milam, who kept bees and, while removing the honey one time, found some of the "bee bread" that was prized for eating unless, as in this instance, it was spoiled by having "young bees" in it. Grandma Milam nevertheless gave that bee bread to two young "colored girls," playmates of Eldreth's mother, who did not know any better.

All three of these childhood joke accounts entail cleverness on the part of the trickster, an ability to recognize and immediately act upon an opportunity for playing a joke that is presented to them. Eldreth presents all three as motivated more by the desire to pull off a good joke than by any established enmity toward

the victim. She even treats the story of Joe causing their father (whom she adored) to receive multiple bee stings as a funny joke. And although Joe got spanked, the incident evidently caused no permanent rupture between father and son. Still, it is hard not to bring different interpretations to joking between adult male coworkers, children challenging the power of an adult, and, conversely, a white adult preying upon the relative ignorance of a black child. Indeed, Eldreth seems to sense that the racial issue is delicate. She made a point of disclaiming any enmity: "Momma played with these two little colored girls a lot. Grandma Milam and their mother was good friends." And she went on to tell another "funny story" about "the night the cat got into the molasses barrel," ending with a report that her grandmother had given the spoiled molasses to another "colored woman" they called Aunt Liza Weddington to feed to her hogs. Nevertheless, her grandmother's story did arguably model for Eldreth the idea that it could be funny to victimize not only one's peers (like the workmates in the false teeth story) or those more powerful (like Joe's father) but also children and people more vulnerable than oneself. I find myself put in the same emotional place by the story about the "colored girls" as by Eldreth's account of jumping into the creek to save her niece. She reveals that some blacks and whites had reasonably neighborly relations in Ashe Country. In the very same breath, however, she both demonstrates that her grandparents probably assumed that their black neighbors were inferior and tries to defend them against that charge. And it is difficult to know to what extent her defensive portrayal of Grandma Milam might reflect a desire to distance herself from the attitudes her grandmother presumably held and to what extent it simply anticipates an objection Eldreth expected me to feel—although, like Eldreth herself when she disapproves of something, I did not voice it at the time.

On a happier note, I also observed that in telling these stories Eldreth tends to mix accounts of what one can clearly label intentional practical jokes with reports of other incidents that just turned out to be funny. Some of these incidents, like my mistake with the cup of tea, could be construed as instances of people inadvertently playing a joke on themselves.

Let me tell you this 'un. This is sorta bad, in a sense.

My Dad and Uncle Bill Milam was a-going to I was a-moving with a yoke of cattle and on a sled. See, we didn't have trucks and things back then. And, you know, when you get cattle together they just seesaw. One'll seesaw this way and the other'll seesaw *this* a-way. And they pull against one another so bad, that they're in the road.

And Dad—I guess I got a whole lot of my old foolishness from Dad; I know I did—he said I he told Uncle Bill, he said, "I'll tell you," he said, "we ain't going to get where we're moving to. Hit's going to be dark," he said, "I want to get them cattle a move on. And he walked out in the [laughs] woods a little ways and got some chestnut burrs. [. . .] And the silly thing, he, uh, he put these chestnut burrs under them oxen's tails.

And they run away! They | when they got to where them | where they got the cattle stopped, they didn't have one *piece* of furniture on the sled. They had to go . . . [laughs]. And the way that them cattle got stopped—now, young'uns, this is the truth—they way they got stopped, they run, you know, they run off that mountain, they run | a tree caught under the yoke and divided them on each side.

And they | instead of getting there before dark, they had to pick up furniture [listeners laugh] and put in on the sled. So it was | it was late, sure enough, when they got to where that they's going. He thought that he'd get a move on. Well, he did. He got a move on.

Similarly, once when the family lived in Virginia, Eldreth and Joe were sent to the store to try to sell some eggs. When the owner told them he would not pay cash but would trade for merchandise, Eldreth thought of a treat she liked and responded, "I'll take mine out in prunes." Only subsequently, when Joe teased her, did she realize that her instant response could be interpreted as an embarrassing request for a laxative. And other accounts, like the story of the cat in the molasses, simply take amusement in peoples' discomfiture even though it was not caused by anyone's intentional action.

In all these instances, the people inconvenienced appear to have appreciated the humor in their own situation. When she narrates these stories, Eldreth and her listeners laugh *with* as much as *at* those who suffered. And note that even though Romey Killens presumably did not intend to play a joke, least of all on himself, Eldreth mentions his decision to put the burrs under the tails of the oxen as a model for her own practical joking: "I guess I got a whole lot of my old foolishness from Dad; I know I did." Overall, my sense is that the funny stories from her childhood, intentional practical-joke stories included, contribute to Eldreth's effort to portray her childhood as largely a joyful time. People did not have easy lives, but they punctuated their labors with laughter. They could see the funny side to some of their travails, laughed at themselves when they had made their own problems, and kept an eye open for an opportunity to make something to laugh at. Practical jokes, as she initially learned about them, seem largely motivated by a desire for humor, although no one was in the least hesitant to take advantage of an opportunity for humor generated at someone's expense.

MARRIAGEABLE GIRLS

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, a lot of things changed in Eldreth's life once she began to be considered marriageable by herself and others. Practical joking, too, takes on a new valence during this period of her life and is significantly connected to both the changes in forms of talk among women and the initiation of her ghost experiences. Grandma Milam's bee-bread story, among other effects, had evidently suggested to her granddaughters that practical joking was

an acceptable activity for women as well as men. As teenagers, however, Eldreth and her sister Clyde turn the jokes on each other in cruel and potentially dangerous ways.

Well, me and Clyde always took it turn about a-building fires, you know. Well, I built 'em most of the time, 'cause she didn't like to get up and it be real cold weather, you know? And she'd stay in the bed till last and I'd just get up to not argue with her.

So [. . .] one evening, late, I went upstairs and clumb up on a chair to hide some love letters I'd got, you know, stick 'em up the garret, we called it. And while I was standing up there in that chair, a steel trap—now hit *wasn't* no steel trap—but a steel | the sound of a steel trap fell out of that garret at my feet. And I looked and there wasn't nary'un there. I looked all around and there wasn't a sign of a steel trap there. But it was just like, you know, one fall down at you. But hit | it wasn't, it was the sound and all.

Well, I run downstairs just a-flying. Momma said, "Well, what was you a-doing up in the garret?" And I didn't tell her. I said, "I's just standing up in a chair." But I didn't tell her I's hiding my love letters.

And the next morning, Clyde had to get up and build the fire; I aggravated her that morning, said she had to get up and build the fire. And they was about thirteen steps . . . from the top of that step, you know, down to the bottom. And she knowed I told Momma about [. . .] the steel trap falling. And, I was a nervous wreck, I's scared so bad. And the next morning 'cause she had to build the fire she slipped and hunted up a steel trap . . . and threwed it back in under my bed.

And, young'un, I jumped out of that bed and I never hit step one. I jumped to the bottom. I *jumped* to the bottom. It could a killed me. But I didn't take time to run down the steps. I jumped to the bottom of that | of them steps. And I's a-crying like everything.

And Momma said, "What've you'uns been into?" And Clyde said, uh, "Momma, I just throwed a steel trap in under her bed." And Momma said, "Well, you ought to've knowed better than to throwed a steel trap in under her bed," said, "after she heard that steel trap fall from that garret."

And, uh, so we kindly got over that. And we had the habit of moving the beds, you know. We'd now, like this, we didn't | we just had lamp light. Well, we'd go to bed after dark, you know, but we wouldn't, uh, didn't have lights to turn on. So one night one would move the bed over here. Next night we'd have it somewhere else, in some other corner. So I run and give a leap to beat her to bed and I hit in the corner; they wasn't no bed there. Hit right on my knees. Boys, it hurt. And I was going to beat her to bed, you know; we'd scare one another when we'd go to bed.

Well, I thought, "I'll get that back on you." So the next day I didn't move the bed; I left the bed a-setting. But I had a big old . . . fur, you know, come way down my back and fastened, it looked like a . . . mouth here where it snapped in front. I went upstairs and I made the bed and I turned the cover down. And I put that in

the bed, just plum down in the bed and up on the | and its head up on the pillow. And then I covered it back up. Clyde she went just a-flying to get into bed and right in on that she went. She threw the covers down. Aaah! I'm a tell you the truth, I thought she was going to jump the banisters. She come downstairs like a *wild* cat; she's a-screaming . . . at the top of her *voice*. She just about had a *nightmare*.

And Mom said, "What are you young'uns a-doing?" And, boys, I's afraid to tell, that time, I's just | stood there and watched Clyde. And that young'un | we never went to bed till about two or three o'clock the next morning. And she stood there afraid to *move*. And, you wouldn't believe it, she blistered her legs a-standing—behind, you know?—a-standing so close to the fire. And she blistered her legs. And she was afraid to *move* from that *fire*. I mean, away from the | she was just scared to death. And I scared her like that 'cause that she scared me with the steel trap.

We used to scare one another, just about scare one another to death, when we | when we's—tell ghost stories; all get in a big bunch and tell ghost stories. And I'd try my best to get in the middle. We had a lot of fun, though.

In the two previous chapters we have noted that both Eldreth's sensitivity to ghosts and her pattern of competitive miscommunication with other women emerged at the point in her life when she began to be perceived as a sexual being, a person whose identity is significantly determined by her gender. In this story those two matters—ghosts and miscommunication—coincide. These events transpired in the Doctor Graham house, where Mary Black killed her twins. Eldreth sometimes tells this story of reciprocal joking with Clyde as a stand-alone incident, but sometimes (as in this rendition) she includes it as one of several episodes of encounters with ghostly manifestations in that house. Even though her parents will shortly encourage her to get married, Eldreth (as suggested in the discussion of the young women's miscommunication in chapter 4) does not seem to have been provided with any productive way of handling her emerging sexuality, her new social identity, and the attention she is receiving from men. She understandably wants some privacy but also seems ashamed. She looks for a place to hide her love letters, the evidence of her new sexual identity, and although she cannot conceal her fright from her mother, she refuses to explain what she was doing up in the garret. The distinctive sound of a steel trap falling, although there is no trap to be found, strikes Eldreth as convincing evidence of a haunting. Later in her life, as we have seen, her perceptions of specific recognizable sounds will prove a resource in negotiations with her husband regarding the ghosts. In this early instance, however, the sound terrifies her and reinforces her sense of the shameful of her romantic and sexual interests.

As in the other stories of Eldreth's interactions with her sister during this period, Clyde responds, not with sympathy, but in a competitive spirit, taking advantage of Eldreth's vulnerability to play a practical joke on her. And Eldreth responds with a joke of her own. Eldreth insists that they "had a lot of fun" playing these jokes on each other, and their tendency to reciprocate, to "get one back" on the other, is often a hallmark of a benevolent joking relationship (Smith

1990:79). Still, these young women are emotionally sensitive and high strung. (Eldreth describes herself as “a nervous wreck” after her encounter with the ghostly trap.) In contrast to earlier jokes aimed primarily at embarrassing people or making them look foolish, from this point forward one of the things Eldreth seems to find funniest is giving people a shock, frightening the victim in a way that produces a strong visceral reaction. Furthermore, as only incipient adults they seem not to have good judgment about the possible effects of their pranks. Eldreth leaps down the entire stairway and in retrospect judges, “It could a killed me.” Clyde almost vaults over the banister and is so terrified that she cannot move from in front of the fireplace even though her legs are getting burnt. The presence in this story of the girls’ mother is notable. She intervenes periodically to ask what is happening but is satisfied when her daughters refuse to explain. Eldreth seems to be reminding us that their mother was there as a guarantor of their safety. They could not really be seriously hurt with her watching. At the same time, Flora Killens leaves her daughters to sort out both their competitive joking and the anxieties over their emerging sexuality on their own. These are not the sort of classic initiatory practical jokes (for example, the fool’s errand) with which youngsters and newcomers may be welcomed into a group (Tallman 1974:264). The presence of practical joking during this transitional period suggests, rather, that the girls are left to initiate each other into womanhood as best they can. In contrast to classic initiates, they neither feel secure in their new identities nor form a cohort bond upon which to rely for future support.

Understanding these practical jokes as an extension of the sisters’ competition for male attention and related miscommunication during this part of their lives also sheds further light on Eldreth’s attitude toward her marriage. We can now recognize that her successful attempt to steal Ed from Clyde was a move in this escalating spiral of practical jokes. Indeed, it turned out to be the final move, because it backfired when her mother expected her to stop playing around and actually take on her adult role by becoming a wife. The result was the tragedy of her being put into a position where she felt she had to accede to her mother’s wishes and marry Ed, even though she did not love him. Was her inability to protest her mother’s plan another instance of reluctance to explain the destructive consequences of a joke? Many factors induced Eldreth’s resignation to staying with her husband, most importantly the seriousness she ascribed to her wedding vows, made to God as well as to her husband. I wonder, however, if she had not also internalized a sort of trickster’s honor, according to which you must accept the consequences of the joke you have perpetrated, even if you end up being your own victim.

MOTHERLY (?) JOKING AND WHITE PRIVILEGE

Even if her marriage was in some sense a joke gone horribly wrong, or perhaps because she continued to be victimized by the very success of that final girlhood

joke, Eldreth has persisted in playing jokes on family and neighbors throughout her adult life. For a feminist analyst, these produce a deeply conflicted reading. I believe that Eldreth has used the deniable power of joking briefly to slip free of the onerous expectations she faced as a woman and perhaps even to enact a coded critique of her position. In so doing, however, she made use of whatever resources were available to a person with minimal social capital of her own, victimizing children and mimicking African Americans in unflattering ways. As Margaret Mills argues, it is one of the strengths of folklife studies to give us “some chance of conceptualizing what ‘feels real’ (pain, marginalization, the intransigence of prejudice both as suffered and as thought)” (1993:185). In Eldreth’s jokes we witness simultaneously her response to prejudice she suffered as a woman and the prejudice she herself “thought” about those relative to whom she could claim some social privilege.

Eldreth’s adult joking interactions with family and friends fall into two categories. The kind I witnessed seem modeled on the jokes she relates from childhood in that they involve taking advantage of instantaneous natural opportunities and momentarily subverting the normal, expected flow of social interaction in familiar, domestic settings, although she often mobilizes techniques she has used repeatedly. As described earlier, at church, sliding into the place in the pew that she always occupies, she will startle a neighbor by stopping short and sitting down suddenly on the woman’s lap. In her kitchen, reaching out to offer a plate of food or glass of milk, she pretends to lose her grip, inducing the recipient to react in a sudden attempt to catch the “dropped” food, although Eldreth has in fact never lost control. These pranks I have both experienced and heard her describe in generalization narratives about the kinds of things she is prone to do. But she is clearly capable of devising entirely new jokes in response to a novel situation. In the middle of a trip to town to do errands, she reports, a daughter and granddaughter came back to the car to find her eating a piece of what they thought was chocolate candy. They asked her to share, and she obligingly dosed them with Ex-Lax!

The other, more premeditated form of joking always, in her report, involves Eldreth’s disguising herself or others in blackface. Significantly, she told a whole string of stories together about incidents that must have happened over a period of twenty or thirty years.

BE: We’s good at scaring one another. We got a kick out of that. We used to black our faces, go places.

PS: Tell me about that.

BE: That was after I got married. Me and my sister’d black our faces just as black as a coal and put on overalls and an old hat and go up the road a-walking. And the neighbors’d just fly [laughs]. They didn’t know us. They got to running, run from us. And Maud, well, the way she got | that they caught up with her is she laughed, and they knowed her smile, you know, when they started to run from her. But we’s

all the time pulling pranks on people. Well, we just had a good time a-doing things like that, playing, and everything.

One evening I blacked Lorene's face, my oldest daughter, just black as a coal, and her first cousin. And then I hid 'em, put 'em in under the bed, hid 'em back in under the bed? And told one of Maud's boys to go in there and get me out from under the bed? Get my *shoes*. That's what I told him, I said, "Go in and bring my shoes." And then I set some chairs kindly in the way. And that young'un, he come out of there just a-screaming. Scared that boy to death. And, boys, we got the scare of our lives then. He took towards the mountain. And we didn't know how we was getting to get him back. We finally told him it was them girls a-scaring him.

And Lorene's first cousin, she didn't know, you know, that we's a-doing things like that. Anyway, they walked to the door, to her sister's, and knocked at the door. And she come to the door. And both them standing there blacker'n a coal and them old hats on and overalls. And she fainted, it scared her [laughs]. We had to quit some of that. We scared people so bad they couldn't stand that. But now we was getting a lot of fun out of that.

I blacked my face as black as a coal and went to—down at Todd, I guess that's been about fifteen or sixteen year ago—put on overalls and an old hat and went to a Halloween party they's having at the schoolhouse. And Leslie Norris come down through there. I went up through that yard a-singing: "For a long time this wul [world] has stood. It gets more wicked evwy [every] day," like a colored person, you know? And he come down through there and he said, "I thought I'd come down here and unlock the door. I had to unlock the door." And he thought we's colored. And it was getting dark, too, you know. He couldn't a told. And I got tickled and I laughed. And he said, "I'm a-telling you, I knowed we hadn't invited no colored people tonight." And he said, "I come down here just a purpose to see just what colored people *was* here."

In his study of blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott argues:

So officially repugnant now are the attitudes responsible for blackface joking that the tendency has been simply to condemn the attitudes themselves—a suspiciously respectable move, and an easy one at that—rather than to investigate the ways in which racist entertainment was once fun, and still is to much of the Caucasian population of the United States. (1993:141)

Following Lott's example, it seems valuable to me to try to resist this kind of collapse in understanding Eldreth's joking. Our challenge, then, is to hold in mind simultaneously both the pleasure and utility Eldreth found in these masquerades and her willingness to invest in stereotyping disparagement of African Americans in order to secure those gains for herself. In so doing, we can see her use of blackface not (simply) as the expression of a preexisting racist attitude but as a crucial component of her effort to negotiate anxieties

around her own social position, which is cast in terms of gender and class as well as race (see Lott 1993:6).

A preliminary question is where Eldreth got the idea of engaging in blackface disguise. None of her childhood stories mention it, although that does not necessarily mean that she never saw her parents or others “black their faces” for a costume or joke. The material for creating this disguise was readily available and free—Eldreth described it as “just pure black from the caps of a wood cookstove.” But I wonder to what extent she was generating her own depiction of African American neighbors—we know there were a few from one story, probably dating to the 1930s, in which she describes helping to lay out a woman in the community who had died—and to what extent she was emulating stereotypes of other blackface performances.

I find no direct evidence in Eldreth’s song repertoire of familiarity with blackface minstrel shows, an entertainment form on the wane by the 1930s. She sang for me only seven songs with any kind of African American connection. Four are spirituals, two (“My Lord, What a Morning” and “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?”) popularized by Marion Anderson, one (“No Hiding Place Down Here”) sung by one of Eldreth’s favorite sources, the Carter Family, and one (“Mary, Mary, What You Gonna Call That Baby?”) that I suspect Eldreth and her granddaughter learned from students at Mars Hill College, who sang it during a shared performance in the late 1970s. Secular songs with African American connections are “Old Cotton Fields Back Home,” popularized by Leadbelly and the Weavers, and “I’m Sitting on Top of the World,” composed in 1930 by a black string band called the Mississippi Sheiks, but famously sung by Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, and Bob Wills. A Civil War era song, “No More the Moon Shines on Lorena,” made enough of an impression on Eldreth that she used a version of the name in the title for her eldest daughter. Bill Malone describes it as a “northern-produced tune,” and it is sung from the point of view of a (clearly romanticized) slave lamenting the death of his love but claiming he was happy working on the plantation until she was sold away. It could lend itself to blackface performance, but it was also apparently widely popular in the Confederacy during the Civil War (Malone and Stricklin 2003:2) and was recorded by the Carter Family and Blue Sky Boys, from whom Eldreth learned so many songs. Even the song she put (or now puts) in the mouth of her blackface character in one of her stories, “This World Can’t Stand Long” (“For a long time this world has stood. It gets more wicked every day”) was written by Jim Anglin, author of a number of Eldreth’s other favorite songs from the 1930s, and again probably came to her from the Carter Family’s rendition. Still, Eldreth’s beloved Jimmie Rodgers, among other early country music stars, “routinely ‘blacked up,’” and during Eldreth’s young adulthood the new and news-making medium of movies featured blackface performances like Al Jolson’s 1927 *The Jazz Singer* (Lott 1993:5). Eldreth may well have been aware of such performances. Perhaps it is simplest to recognize that the image of the blackface

entertainer has been, as Eric Lott argues, “ubiquitous, cultural common coin; it has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence” (1993:4) and that (as I will argue in more detail in the chapter on Eldreth’s own singing) Appalachia was not nearly as isolated from such influential common images as stereotypes of the region led me to imagine.

Even in a highly race-conscious society, it is theoretically possible to engage in what Lott calls “metaphysical” blackface, representing an evil or frightening character rather than a person of African descent (1993:28). Eldreth’s earliest story, of blacking the children’s faces and putting them under the bed to scare the boy sent to get the shoes, might be of this sort. Her later examples, however, clearly involve none-too-flattering pretense at being an African American person. What, then, are the specific uses of the masquerade for Eldreth? Lott describes the impersonations by blackface minstrels as both “love and theft,” a combination of racial insult and racial envy (1993:18). The “insult” part is easy to see. Eldreth, at least once the disguise is discovered, clearly approximates the “triangulated, derisive structure of minstrel comedy, in which blackface comic and white spectator share jokes about an absent third party” (Lott 1993:142). The “love” part is less easy to detect in Eldreth’s practice, though not entirely absent. Many of the ways in which Lott suggests that blackface reveals a partially positive attitude do not apply to Eldreth. She does not call upon the symbolic power and freedom of the savage for political protest (1993:27) or reveal admiration for an African American musical form by expropriating it (1993:18) or, obviously, become involved in a white, male, homosexual fascination with the potency of the black man (1993:57–58).

What the various practical jokes, including the blackface enactments, do provide Eldreth is an opportunity to refuse for a few moments to uphold the image of the virtuous woman, to which she usually so desperately clings. Let me turn first to the issue of directing her jokes at children (or fictional children, like myself) and then return to the symbolic import of blackface specifically. In most of her stories, as we have seen in previous chapters, Eldreth goes to considerable links to depict herself as the definitive and emblematic good mother. She is the person who found ways to support her children even though her husband failed to do his part. She not only bore them, rocked them, sang to them, and cooked for them, she also grew and preserved much of their food and even repaired the substandard houses in which they were forced to live. She embodies the essence of motherly responsibility and nurturing. Yet in these jokes we find her instead preying upon children, startling them, frightening them, and laughing at their expense. As Smith notes, “people often play a particular joke on a particular person as a way of creating poetic justice or of indirectly criticizing their behavior” (1990:78). Eldreth preys on those who depend upon her, not so much to criticize them as to resist the social expectation that they embody.

It is also notable that Eldreth plays jokes *with* her sister and *on* children and neighbors but that her husband is never involved either as co-conspirator or

dupe. To the extent that these interactions were intended in good fun, Ed's absence as a fellow joke player hints again at the lack of warmth in his relationship with his wife. Ed never takes the role as playmate that I have heard neighbors of Eldreth's age who had happier marriages describe with their husbands. It appears that Eldreth may never have dared to play a joke on her husband. While joking can be a means of communicating a veiled or at least deniable criticism against those more powerful and while women who have ways and opportunities for talking candidly with each other have been observed preferentially to tell and enjoy narrative jokes that are hostile to or critical of men (Mitchell 1978, 1985), Eldreth evidently sensed that it would have been much too dangerous actually to act out any such critique on her husband. Absent the kind of joking relationship that she apparently did have with both her sisters, it was presumably too likely that Ed would interpret any joke played on him as hostile and treat it as justification for serious retaliation.

Eldreth's tendency to play jokes on children strikes me as a fairly direct example of the persecuted turned persecutor. Powerless to escape—or even very overtly to protest—her own exploitation by her husband, Eldreth, in this interpretation, launches jokes against children that pass her pain and anger on to those weaker than herself. Surely there is a note of hostility in the sisters' pitting some of their children against others, setting up a joke that scares one of their sons so severely that he runs off into the night and is afraid to come back into the house. And I can attest from my own experience that Eldreth's dropped-plate ploy, which several grandchildren told me she had pulled on them, produces a startle response and a rush of adrenalin that makes it very hard to appreciate the joke with any kind of good humor. I think it is important to acknowledge, however, that Eldreth, especially as a very young mother, had a different notion of appropriate child rearing than the nurturing of the emerging psyche in which parents of my generation have been trained and that she probably had a sense of her children as sufficiently resilient emotionally to take some rough treatment. She even implicitly frames the frightening pranks as suitable means of entertaining children by similarly treating as jokes the later instances in which children got more scared than they had bargained for by stories they had actually begged her to tell:

They said, "Aunt Bessie, will you tell us some ghost stories?" I said, "Yeah, get on in here." And I got to telling 'em ghost stories—and now some of them boys was twelve and fourteen year old—and I'm a-telling you the truth, them boys got so scared, what I was telling, them ghost stories, that you wouldn't believe it. It was 2:30 in the morning and I couldn't get them boys to go to bed. They's | I had 'em scared, you know, they's afraid. And I laid in there and laughed till I about cried. I said, "Now, young'uns, I'm going to tell you something," I said, "You look what time it is," I said, "It's 2:30." And I said, "You've got to get in the bed." "Aunt Bessie, we're afraid. Aunt Bessie, we're scared."

Ultimately, Eldreth acknowledges that she and Maud learned from their mistakes that they were being too rough on the children, "We had to quit some of that." Yet while conceding that that some recipients experienced their jokes as hostile, she does not admit that that was their intention.

It is also interesting to reflect on the apparent permissibility of this rough joking in light of the tenacity with which people in the region insist, in nonplay situations, upon the right to make their own decisions. Individuals' right to decide their own course without even suggestions from others is inviolate (Puckett 2000:169). In interactions within Eldreth's family I often observed the strong rule against telling someone else what to do, that is, assuming the right to direct another's conduct or even to attempt to influence them to do what you think is best for them.² It makes a wonderful kind of inverted sense that the favored kind of joking in such circumstances would involve deception and trickery that makes people react, on the basis of false information, as they would not otherwise, that is, against their will. This situation makes it seem all the more plausible to me that Eldreth's jokes are coded protests against domestic entrapment, since joking would be the only place in which critical or directive messages could be safely conveyed.

Furthermore, there is at least some possibility that Eldreth's subversion of her domestic self may communicate messages that she believes the victims of the jokes need to understand—in other words, that they are in part an indirect manifestation of good mothering in Eldreth's terms, if not in mine. These jokes, especially when directed at children or grandchildren, may in effect toughen the recipients. They may serve as a sort of productive weaning, reminding her family that their caregiver may not always be available and that they need to learn how to take care of themselves. Like the jokes played on newcomers by their elders in the industrial workplace, Eldreth's victimization of those she loves may train them to be on the lookout for falsifications and not to be "put (up)on" by those who would take advantage of them (Willis 2001:198). In practical terms, this kind of joking may thus help train the dupes in anger management. I certainly discovered, on those occasions when Eldreth pretended to drop a plate or glass that she was handing to me, that my startle response developed into surprising anger that I had to find a way to dissipate, sometimes by leaving the house and walking around in the yard to cool off, if I were to keep myself from yelling at her. Developing the capacity to respond as a good sport to disappointment and even victimization may be a crucial life skill for children who are culturally disposed against taking orders but situated by class such that they will often have to.

Symbolically, however, it does seem that Eldreth is striking a blow for a woman's freedom, refusing, if only for a moment, to do the kinds of woman's work—child care and food provision—that she has in fact done consistently for decades. Minimally, in refusing to be dependable, she raises a protest against

being taken for granted. Maximally, she may be engaging in a “subversion of domesticity” (Lanser 1993), momentarily demonstrating the “incompetence at conventionally feminine activities [through which] women may be expressing their resistance to patriarchal expectations” (Radner and Lanser 1993:20). Eldreth does not dare overtly to reject the image of herself as the supremely competent provider; she has too much of her moral worth wrapped up in that discourse. Temporary incompetence, however, conveys a coded protest against the unfairness of the responsibilities she has had to shoulder and the enforced limitation of her identity to that of a domestic drudge. Even here Eldreth runs a certain risk. The performance of “women’s work” is so bound up with local definitions of ethical behavior that serious nonperformance would brand her as a bad woman and therefore a bad person. Her jokes could never be construed as real incompetence, but they might be read as refusal.

Perhaps in order to mute such risk, in these jokes Eldreth enacts a persona that is effectively a parodic inversion of her usual self. Parody, notably, destabilizes, challenges, and complicates the serious image but stops short of destroying it, since it depends upon the straightforward original for its existence (Bakhtin 1981:55). Eldreth thus challenges and momentarily frees herself from the dedication and even self-sacrifice to home and children that have been expected of her as a woman, yet in the same instant reminds us of how faithfully she has in fact fulfilled her maternal obligations. She is simultaneously the perfect mother and her antithesis.

All practical jokes depend upon setting up a false situation that is taken as true, then discrediting that fabrication. In order to be plausible, the fabrication has to correspond to a considerable degree with the victim’s expectations of something that could ordinarily happen. The joker thus pretends that life is going along in a normal way and can be interpreted according to the usual frames. Only when the joke is sprung does the victim learn that that joker has been manipulating things under the surface to foster an appearance of normalcy and reality when the situation is far from normal or real. These jokes of Eldreth’s are especially fascinating in that they enact a sort of double reverse. The first move is to suggest to the startled victim that Eldreth’s ordinary persona was the fabrication. The reliable, giving, motherly supplier of food and person who takes care of you momentarily appears to have been a false image. For a split second the “real” Eldreth seems instead to be the person who drops food instead of feeding you, scares instead of nurtures you, and gives you unnecessary drugs (and diarrhea) instead of candy. She seems, briefly, to discredit as a fabrication precisely the image of herself that in most other situations she is most careful to build up and insist upon. A moment later she reverses the image again, revealing that the new “truth” was the fabrication and what first seemed a fabrication is indeed true.

But what of the blackface enactments specifically? How is race play connected to the anxieties over gender roles and class standing that seem to predominate

in Eldreth's self-construction? At the simplest level, when Eldreth dons this disguise (in contrast to simply, say, pretending to drop a plate), she engages in a full, deceptive performance, trying to get people to perceive her as an African American person and, evidently, briefly succeeding. Playing this fictional part, like performing a song, allows her temporarily to slip out of the repressive and otherwise constant requirement to perform herself as a respectable woman. Devoting herself to intentional performance of any kind enables her to relax the vigilant attention to the performance of her usual self that her tenuous social standing otherwise demands (Sawin 2002; Butler 1990). And at some level, once her true identity is revealed, she also receives recognition for the skillfulness of her disguise. Blackface specifically, however, confers particular powers because it allows Eldreth to activate and play upon her neighbors' fear and distrust of African Americans. In Lott's terms, Eldreth displays a sort of "racial envy" by mobilizing the paradoxical influence of the hated. Instead of being ineffectual young women to whom no one need pay much attention, she and those she dresses up in blackface become powerful figures to whom people have strong conscious and unconscious reactions. One woman faints from fear when they come to her door. A neighbor is motivated to come out to confront what he believes is a threatening interloper in the community. Equally crucial, however, is the moment when Eldreth herself is recognized beneath the soot. Once the neighbor starts explaining his actions, essentially apologizing for having been suspicious of her while acknowledging the effectiveness of her disguise, he treats Eldreth as an insider, validating her identity as a valued member of the community. By enacting the role of someone she knows her neighbors will reject on racial grounds, she gets them subsequently to voice their explicit inclusion of her. She may be poor, pitied, marginally respectable, even "a little slave" (this being the community in which her pastor applied that epithet to Eldreth), but as long as she is white, she's an insider.

Eldreth's willingness to induce people to include her by drawing a race line reminds us how powerfully race and class have been intertwined in characterization of Appalachian people. The views of mountain people promulgated in the mainstream American culture have been schizophrenic but always highly racialized. Those who felt that the United States was being negatively affected by the influx of southern and eastern European immigrants in the late nineteenth century depicted mountain folks as a pool of "pure Anglo-Saxon stock." The myth was that

Southern highlanders, who were isolated from southern black people and from the strange, foreign breeds invading northern cities, seemed to be a unique refuge for white Anglo-Saxonism. Here, in Appalachia, isolation had bred patriotism, a continuation of pioneer traditions, and a sturdy and vigorous nature. The mountaineers exuded a potential for uplift and industry, especially in light of their purer racial heritage and their minimal exposure to the degradations of slaves and the slave system. (Silber 2001:256; see also Whisnant 1983:110)

More commonly, however, middle-class observers despised mountain backwardness and poverty and explained the supposed degeneracy and inferiority of “poor whites,” “white trash,” or “hillbillies” in terms of inbreeding and genetic segregation. Recall that rural poor whites were the object of study from 1880 to 1920 by the United States Eugenics Record Office. Classifying poor whites as racially distinct was crucial to others’ claim of the superiority of the “white race” (Newitz and Wray 1997:2). Supposed racial difference was thus used to explain away differences based on class, that is, differential access to resources, education, or the opportunity to own property. Poor whites, in this explanation, were inherently inferior and were to blame for their own poverty. Given the extent to which Eldreth felt her moral standing was (unfairly) compromised by her continuing poverty, it is not hard to see the attraction to her of using racial division to get others to express their commonality across class lines. Like Irish immigrants in the northeast in the late nineteenth century, who pushed black workers out of certain jobs in order to create spheres of distinctive competence and lay claim to inclusion in the category “white,” from which they had previously been excluded (Brodkin 1998), Eldreth differentiates herself from blacks in order to solidify her whiteness and rescue herself from the disparaged racial category “poor white,” to which her class standing threatens to assign her. If the black face is a removable disguise, then the true self behind the disguise is defined as black’s opposite. Eldreth’s blackface enactments attempt the kind of uneasy purification that denies or represses an actual hybridity, rejecting as foreign and despised what is really part of one’s own culture and society (Latour 1993). Because they depend on momentarily crossing boundaries otherwise unconsciously maintained, these jokes remind us that in everything else she does, Eldreth unconsciously enacts herself, her values, and her ways of being as white. Like the minstrel impersonations studied by Lott, blackface for Eldreth proves crucial to the solidification of an anxious, tenuously respectable white working-class identity (1993:8).

The salience of blackface in Eldreth’s joking also requires us to rethink the attractive image of the mountains as distinct from the rest of the antebellum South in having few slaves and consequently being inherently less racist (another facet of the “Appalachian exceptionalism” critiqued in earlier chapters). From the earliest period of white settlement, however, “certain it is that slave labor was used in clearing the land and establishing backcountry mills, forges, and cowpens. The value of this labor is reflected in the concern that white authorities manifested when they demanded the return of escaped or captive slaves on each occasion when Native and Euro-American differences were negotiated” (J. A. Williams 2002:47). Slaves provided much of the labor for the region’s three “principal nonagricultural industries: ironmaking, saltmaking, and mountain resorts,” although “unskilled immigrant labor also became important as the nineteenth century wore on” (J. A. Williams 2002:127). In the twentieth century black convicts were leased to work on mines, roads, and railroads. John

Alexander Williams holds up the ballad of “John Henry” as an emblem of “how much of the wealth and the infrastructure that made possible the industrialization of Appalachia was extracted from the coerced or underpaid labor of African Americans” (2002:221).

Certainly, the number of slaves was lower in the mountains than in the lowland South. John Inscoe, who has done the most extensive studies on slavery and racism in Appalachia and western North Carolina specifically, maintains that less than 10 percent of the western North Carolina populace consisted of slaves in the antebellum period, and 90 percent of whites owned no slaves (1989). In 1860 Ashe and Watauga counties had slave populations of less than 5 percent (Inscoe 1989:64). Significantly, however, attorneys and doctors were among the slaveholders and there was a strong correlation between business diversification and slaveholding. “Watauga County’s largest slaveholder was Jordan Council, whose store was the nucleus around which the town of Boone developed” (Inscoe 1989:63–65). There is even a mountain in Ashe County whose official name for many years was “Nigger Mountain.” Slaveholding, then, was an important part of the system that generated the class-stratified mountain society at the bottom of which Eldreth later found herself.

Champions of mountain culture, including John C. Campbell and Loyal Jones, have extrapolated from the relatively low percentage of slaves to insist that mountain whites harbored less race prejudice than did lowland whites because they were so little acquainted with blacks (Campbell 1921:94–95; Jones 1975:512). Inscoe, however, challenges this claim, citing observations made by Frederick Law Olmstead during a trip to the region in 1854. Evidently, most of the mountain residents with whom Olmstead discussed the topic of slavery seemed to have had “equal contempt for slaves, their masters, and the system itself,” but almost none advocated abolition, except in East Tennessee, “the only section of the South with an ardent and well-developed antislavery movement” (Inscoe 2001:159). As folklorists, we tend, loyally, to champion denigrated cultures and peoples, but, as José Limón argues, being oppressed does not guarantee that people will not engage in oppressing others (1994). Rather, we need to remember critically the roots of folklorists’ interest in Appalachia in the missionaries and folk-school teachers of the Reconstruction era. If we have “learned to view the white people of the southern mountains as unique among the mass of poor whites throughout the South,” our attitudes are traceable in part to “racial and political myths of the Anglo-Saxonism and unqualified patriotism of Appalachia” (Silber 2001:256) through which those interested in the plight of the mountaineer encouraged contributors to “cultivate an interest in the southern white because he is white,” deflecting attention and support away from earlier work to uplift blacks (2001:247). We are still surprised and hesitant to recognize the presence of racist attitudes in warm and welcoming communities of folk performers (Thomas and Enders 2000), but Eldreth’s unselfconscious comfort with enacting a stereotype of a shuffling, broad-speaking, black hayseed suggests

that we should not be. Indeed, as John Alexander Williams argues, both the existence of exploited slave and later conscript labor and the racism that kept blacks and whites from making common cause were essential components of the system that kept free labor cheap (2002:251) and families like the Killens and the Eldreths poor. It is also interesting to note that Eldreth herself hints that black-face play could end with the joke backfiring on the perpetrator: "I liked to never got that stuff off, especially from around my eyes. I had to go to church the next morning. I had to wear it or stay at home, one." Doubtless, she meant only that it was embarrassing to have to go to church with a dirty face and be identified as the prankster from the day before. To me, however, this image of Eldreth bespeaks the impossibility of completely erasing the black mask, the futility of the social purification she was attempting, and her ultimate complicity in the production of the race/class system by which she was herself controlled. At the same time, Eldreth and her neighbors are well aware of "mainstream America" judging them according to a racial stereotype of the "poor white," an essential component of which is holding negative attitudes toward blacks. The neighbor attempts to deny or disguise any racist intent, both when he thinks he is talking to an African American person—"I thought I'd come down here and unlock the door. I had to unlock the door"—and after he realizes he is talking to Eldreth—"I'm a-telling you, I knowed we hadn't invited no colored people tonight" (which implies that on another occasion they might have). Eldreth, in turn, reports his careful self-justification. We may not be convinced, but she makes it clear that she knows what we are probably thinking about her, challenging our assumptions as we challenge hers.

CONCLUSIONS

Joking turns the world upside down, making the false seem true and the true seem false. Even after the fabrication is discredited, we tend to retain a double image. The usual character of the perpetrator cannot but be inflected by the fictional identity she temporarily, but convincingly, adopted. In inverting her nurturer role, Eldreth mobilizes the shielding power of the joke to enable herself simultaneously to articulate and to deny a protest against being taken for granted in her fulfillment of a woman's work. Even after she resumes her usual role, the joke leaves a tiny gap, subtly destabilizing the assumption that that is the only natural way for a woman to behave. In her willingness to be cruel to children and in playing at blackface, however, Eldreth reveals a measure of desperation. She never dared, apparently, to play a joke upon (and thus level her criticism directly at) her husband. As a woman whose poverty has itself been racialized, she is willing to take advantage, actually or symbolically, of those few social actors with less social capital. In blackface impersonation, however, she mobilizes the paradoxical power of the denigrated, inducing fear and anxiety in those who perceive her as a threatening racial "Other." In an important sense, however,

she cannot escape her own joke, since her own social insecurity is produced by the racialized class label “poor white.” Neighbors may be induced to draw the color line with Eldreth on the white (respectable, not poor) side. Still, by engaging in rough, cruel, and racist joking and telling new audiences about it, she potentially reinforces or justifies prejudicial stereotypes of mountain whites.

It is a classic ethnographer’s mistake not to recognize it when your subjects are having you on (Paredes 1977). It is not entirely clear whether, when she plays jokes on *me*, Eldreth is treating me as another of her “young’uns” or if she is subtly criticizing the ways I, as a rich person in her estimation, exploit and depend upon hard workers like herself. Probably she intends some of both. Certainly on the day when I served her salted tea, I marked a contrast between us, and I daresay she enjoyed coming off well in the comparison. She was the woman who had produced three meals a day, from scratch, often for a dozen or more people, for more than fifty years. I, despite all my education, lacked the practical competence to make a drinkable cup of tea or to realize that a quart container could not possibly store the amount of sugar used by a person who cooks in the volume Eldreth does. Furthermore, she was balanced enough to find hilarity in a joke played on herself, while I showed that I was so effete hypersensitive as to be dismayed at what I had done. At the same time, however, I had established a commonality between us by joining her, albeit unintentionally and unwillingly, in the ranks of practical jokers, and she seemed delighted to level the distinctions between us and include me.

There are, however, significant respects in which I do not want to be included. In fact, I do not like either of the discursive positions Eldreth makes available to me: the person who finds racial stereotyping funny or, alternately, the mirthless class snob who condemns her jokes. When I finally dared to mention that readers might understand her blackface joking as derogatory, Eldreth disavowed any prejudice, telling a story I had never heard before about an African American neighbor whom she had invited to eat with her family when his wife was ill, although she did not grapple explicitly with the symbolism of the impersonation. For me, Eldreth’s stereotypical portrayal of a rural black person is what Moira Smith, following Bauman, calls an “over-saturated metaphor,” too laden with racist connotations to be funny (Smith 1995:134, n. 5; Bauman 1983b:92). Eldreth’s practice, however, rejects that oversaturation, trying to hold onto the paradoxical power of the blackface character and the humor of incongruity. I would love to be able to argue that Eldreth, in mobilizing her neighbors’ own negative stereotypes against them, subtly criticizes the racist attitudes upon which her blackface portrayal relies, but that is probably a fond stretch. Still, neither Eldreth nor her neighbors lose sight of the further racial stereotype that “mainstream America” holds of them as “poor whites.” By having her neighbor insist that in coming out to challenge the apparent black interloper he had really just come down to the church to unlock the door for the Halloween party to which they might actually have invited “colored” guests, Eldreth’s story warns us to be careful, in condemning her use of racial stereotype, not to apply a racial stereotype of our own.