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## Listening For A Life

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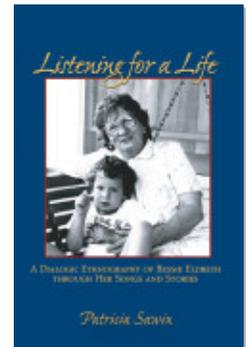
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### Epilogue

In the fall of 2002, while I was deeply enmeshed in the writing of this book, I called Eldreth to wish her a happy eighty-ninth birthday. She reported that “two girls from the college” were coming out to visit her on a regular basis. One plays fiddle, the other banjo, and they sing and play and learn songs from her. They had also asked her if she knew Dr. Robison—it sounded as if they must be doing an oral history of significant actors in the area—and she had obliged them with her stories about her interactions with him. This incident and her account of it perfectly exemplify both the stability and the situational variability of Eldreth’s construction of self and likewise both her willingness to serve as a tool to further others’ work and her creative use of listeners, new and old, as tools in her own ongoing work of self-enactment.

In many respects, I expect, Eldreth has presented herself to these students in much the same way she did to me and, before me, to Mary Greene and Glenn Hinson and Thomas McGowan and Cratis Williams, as well as to Elderhostel and festival audiences and many other students of regional culture, formal and informal. The consistency of Eldreth’s self-presentation derives from at least three factors. The repertoire of songs and stories that she has learned and composed over the years may have gradually expanded, but for the most part she draws on the same store of well-formed texts to represent what she has done and what ideas and sentiments matter most to her. She is also, however, haunted by ghosts, both the literal ones that show up in her ghost stories and the lingering manifestations of old social attitudes and former interlocutors’ voices that supply the framing discourses and quoted remarks in relation to which she shapes her accounts of self. These ghosts cannot be banished; they keep her in line, keep her endlessly responding to their discursive concerns, no matter the identity and interests of her evident current interlocutor. And she has devised consistent and productive ways of forming her stories, selecting from surrounding discourses only those remarks that fit into her focus on local personal relationships and situating them to cast her well in her ethic of care and hard work.

However, Eldreth's approach is also both flexible and generative. For the students who are visiting her now, she is in important respects a different person than she was with me (or, indeed, with earlier interviewers or her neighbors and family). To the young fiddle and banjo players, she is a teacher of music and a coperformer, dimensions of identity and practice in which I could only barely participate. Her stories of Dr. Robison, in their analyses, may form part of an objective history of rural medicine in the mountain counties of North Carolina, whereas for me the same stories revealed Eldreth's accomplishment of a specific kind of woman's work and her negotiations with authoritative men for credit and sorely needed appreciation. In one respect, Eldreth thus seems perfectly happy to answer questions and supply stories and songs without needing fully to understand the motivation behind the questions and the purposes for which her accounts will be employed or how they will be framed. At the same time, however, she obviously retains control of how she presents herself, and she turns new experiences and new interlocutors into resources for her own purposes. The laughter of an Elderhostel audience supplies the final rejoinder to her abusive husband. When invited to perform at a festival, she embraces the opportunity to sing without having to justify it as a form of productive woman's work, yet conveniently ignores the "folk" framing. Ultimately, however, Eldreth maintains a kind of studious innocence, an oblivious unwillingness to project herself fully into the mindset and needs of those with whom she interacts in new settings. Eldreth has been able to define her life as meaningful within certain bounds and even to challenge some local standards so as to improve her position. She seems loath, however, to engage imaginatively with a larger society according to whose standards she might be insignificant. Whether telling stories without explaining the characters, recounting an instance of blackface joking with only the merest acknowledgment that some might find it offensive, or singing a song different than the one her presenter had introduced, she insists upon living in a social world she defines.

I, of course, encountered Eldreth with my own set of preconceptions and expectations. This study explores who she "is" as seen through the particular lens of an interest in gender identity and in the practice of speaking. My initial inclination was to make sense of Eldreth's practice in simplistically cultural terms, regarding her singing and storytelling as a manifestation of "Appalachian culture" or an "Appalachian woman's" way of presenting herself. But Eldreth resists such typical assignments and insists upon an interpretation specific in both personal and historical dimensions. The culture in which she can be said to participate emerges in her internalization of, negotiation with, and self-enactment via particular discourses and texts, not all of which are strictly local. The discourses relative to which she situates herself tell us much about the economic history of a particular locale and the moral grading of classes in a capitalist periphery. Yet she has equally internalized romanticized notions of an agrarian social paradise, drawn in part from a popular musical culture that had its own rhetorical purpos-

es for an imagined Appalachia. Many of her forms of self-expression—including prominently her ghost stories, practical joking, mobilization of reported speech, and playful talking back to romantic songs—appear to have been developed as means of contesting the specific forms of male dominance she experienced in a loveless marriage to a shiftless man. Yet she herself and other women were just as influential as men in maintaining a discursive climate that limited and stifled her options for resistance. Her tendency to build herself up at other women's expense, her need to code and camouflage any defiance to gender norms, and her willingness to engage in racial stereotype in order to position herself securely within a community self-defined by shared white privilege derive from the insecure social and moral standing that her class position defined. Gender, labor, race, and class are inextricably intertwined components of her subjectivity.

Yet even as complex as Eldreth appears to me, I cannot pretend that my presence and my questions elicited the full range of her discursive self-construction. There are doubtless other discourses that provide a frame for Eldreth's constitution of self with other listeners that she did not have occasion to engage in with me. I note in particular that Eldreth's daily practice makes clear that her Christian faith has deeply defined her life experience. However, her religious and spiritual beliefs emerge in this account only to the extent that she expressed them in ghost stories she knew would intrigue a folklorist, hymns that fell within the purview of our plan to record her song repertoire, or the occasional religious testimony that I witnessed in church or that she slipped into a public performance. If Eldreth articulates religious experience in other ways, I was not the person to hear it. I thus remind readers in closing that there are aspects of Eldreth's subjectivity that my interaction with her did not evoke and that my work about her cannot adequately explore.

This book is the product of a protracted and delicate negotiation, conducted as a series of friendly conversations. In one respect, Eldreth is inevitably a means toward my goals, as I employ her example to explore the intricate and sometimes contradictory processes of an individual's discursive and dialogic self-construction. Equally, however, I am a means toward her goals of being perceived by a wider audience as a talented singer, a woman who did her duty, and an extraordinarily hard worker. If this ethnography serves both our purposes, if only partially and imperfectly, then it has accomplished what conversation can.