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Mary HUFFORD

**KNOWING GINSENG :  
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF AN APPALACHIAN ROOT**

*There's something about this root that's more than what we know.*  
(Randy Halstead, Peytona, West Virginia)

*Once you know ginseng, you'll never forget it.*  
(Carla Estep, Horse Creek, West Virginia)

*Wild Ginseng's Geopolitical Context*

Ginseng (*panax* sp.) is perhaps one of the most popular health supplements worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Though some doctors recommend it to their patients, there is little agreement among researchers on whether and how «ginsenosides» – the active ingredient – work both to stimulate the weary and soothe the overwrought. Etymologically related to «panacea», *panax* is believed to be good for what ails you. The term «ginseng» derives from a Chinese word meaning «man-root», and in Asian health belief systems the wild root's wizened, humanoid aspect is linked to its potency. Its popularity for thousands of years in China, Korea and Japan has nearly extirpated the wild species in that hemisphere, so that most ginseng now on the world market is cultivated. The wild root has consequently come to command extraordinary prices. In the 1990s, prices for the wild root fluctuated between \$200 and \$500 per pound, settling back down at the start of the new millennium to a little over \$200. One of the American nicknames for ginseng is «Green Gold».

Of the eight species of *panax* found worldwide, two are most highly prized: the Asian *Panax panax* and its American cousin, *Panax quinquefolia*, which entered the world market in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when

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<sup>1</sup> Ginseng is listed among the top ten dietary supplements in the United States, which include: Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), Cranberry (*Vaccinium spp.*), Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea*), Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), Goldenseal (*Hydratis canadensis*), Kava rhizome (*Piper methysticum*), Milk thistle fruit (*Silybum marianum*), St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), Saw palmetto berry (*Serenoa repens*), Valerian root (*Valeriana officinalis*), Simpson et al. (2001 : 271).

Joseph Francois Lafitau, a Jesuit missionary in Canada, recognized the plant as a relative of the Asian variety and realized its worth. Lafitau, whom the *Catholic Encyclopedia* describes as «the most remarkable historian and naturalist ever sent to Canada by the Society of Jesus», speculated that ginseng's appearance in the very similar forest regions of Canada and Manchuria is a legacy of an era when the continents were joined. He cited not only the similarity in forest vegetation, but the linguistic evidence he found in the Iroquois term for ginseng, *garent-oguen* : manlike root, and in the Iroquois uses of the root in ways similar to the Chinese uses. Between Lafitau and a fellow Jesuit, Father Jartoux in Manchuria, a geological and linguistic linkage between disparate world regions opened the world market for trade in North American ginseng.

Though domestic and medicinal uses for ginseng have been documented among Native American and European groups living within its range, the cultural history of wild ginseng in North America has for the past three centuries been significantly influenced by its value on the world market. The unglaciated topography and soils of Central Appalachia are especially conducive to the wild roots most prized and most depleted in Asia. In contrast to cultivated ginseng («tame» seng), wild ginseng exhibits distinctive «stress rings», the effect produced when a root is forced to grow slowly against the resistance offered by forest soils that are neither too loose nor too compact. «Loosening the soil causes the roots to grow rapidly», said Randy Halstead, a West Virginia broker, explaining why tame seng lacks stress rings. «What makes the roots valuable is the ringiness»<sup>2</sup>. On the Asian markets, where the root's efficacy is linked to human longevity, the more wrinkled and humanoid the root, the better. The root's value in Asian countries has affected the culture and society of Appalachian communities living within the range of wild ginseng by making it an imaginative resource for re-ordering socio-economic domains.

As a hedge against similar extirpation in the U.S., the Fish and Wildlife Service began monitoring the exports of ginseng in 1983. The

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<sup>2</sup> Local brokers can tell by looking at a root whether it is «wild» or «tame». Moreover, according to Halstead, experienced brokers can also tell which county a particular root came from because differences in soil conditions make the difference between ginseng roots that are «bulby» (like pearl onions) or «elongated» (like carrots). «Now in this area we have dark, richer, loose soil, and the ginseng grows longer, like a carrot», Halstead explained. «But you get into some of the neighboring counties with clay soil, it's real bulby because the ginseng can't push down into the dirt.»

resulting statistics hint at an intriguing and largely unappreciated relationship between wild ginseng and the local culture of harvesting. While ginseng's range extends over nineteen states, more than half of the wild export in the U.S. consistently comes from the Central Appalachian region formed at the meeting place of four states: West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Yet while ginseng indeed thrives in the rich, well-shaded humus of Central Appalachia's mixed-mesophytic hardwood forest, these figures do not necessarily mean there is more wild ginseng to be found in this region than elsewhere. Rather, the emergence of this region as the top producer of wild ginseng in North America (and possibly the world) hint at a complex ecology of social, historical, and physiographic factors. «More ginseng comes from there because there are more people digging it», Bob Whipkey, a West Virginia ginseng program officer, told me in a telephone conversation (October 1996): «It's the culture there. The people in those counties grow up digging roots and gathering herbs».

In this article, I will argue that :

1. the identity of the wild ginseng region has been eclipsed by its thematization as the «coalfields» ;
2. the wild ginseng *region* is in fact a cultural artifact – a manifestation of region as «the ecological limit of ethnomimetic process» (Cantwell, 1993) ;
3. a grassroots epistemology of «knowing ginseng» deeply informs this «ethnomimetic process» (Cantwell's term for folklore) and the folk region that is one of its outcomes.

With Whipkey's comment in mind it is interesting to consider the sharp declines shown in recent export figures. Ginseng exports from three of the top producing states (West Virginia, Tennessee, and Virginia) decreased by forty percent in the late 1990s, but no one knows whether this is due to declining populations of ginseng, diminished interest in harvesting ginseng, curtailed access to ginseng patches, or destruction of ginseng habitat through increased clear-cutting and strip-mining in this region. Applications for mountaintop removal mining filed with the state make no mention of the wild ginseng populations supported in the habitat destroyed by this method of mining – thousands of acres of wild ginseng habitat were stripped and filled in during the 1990s (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers et al., 2003). Thus, while one arm of the government is levying fines and imprisonment on diggers caught with green ginseng (*i.e.* freshly harvested) in the off-season

months, another arm is granting permits for strip-mining that destroys thousands of acres of wild ginseng habitat year-round. Such an administrative disjunct not only destroys ginseng habitat, it quietly erases the regional public that forms around the harvesting of ginseng.

Elucidating such regions and their publics through folkloristic and ethnographic research is one of the tasks of an emerging «critical regionalist» project in American cultural studies and social sciences (Herr, 1996 ; Hufford, 2002 ; Reid and Taylor, 2002). This project is not without antecedents, when we recall the work of Lafitau and his contemporaries. Critical regionalism examines the various regionalisms governing the production of regions (from above as well as from below) and the interactions among regions that are linked and delinked through regional production. In understanding the role of folklore in regional production, a theory of a public sphere grounded in the substantive goods of a commons becomes necessary. As the study of narratives and practices whereby collectivities produce localities that interact with larger entities like the nation and the global marketplace, folklore lends itself to critical regionalist study.

Anthropologist Betsy Taylor argues that a crucial task for public folklorists is the reweaving of «the civic and cultural fabric that integrates [...] regions into the national symbolic» (2002 : 2). Here the narratives and practices that folklorists typically study constitute what Robert Cantwell calls «the marrow» of culture, around which protective cultural and political institutions are ideally arrayed. Taylor argues that «the crisis of public life under postmodernity is better understood as an assault on that 'marrow of culture' which carries the capacity for cosmogenesis» (2002 : 5)<sup>3</sup>. It is my argument here that the ecological crisis of mountaintop removal mining is one moment in that assault, and that weaving the civic and cultural fabric of the ginseng region into the national symbolic exemplifies a site for intervention. But first, what and where is the wild ginseng region ?

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor defines «cosmogenesis» as «the symbolic creation of the architectonics of meaning that turns the flatness of 'universe' into the proportionalities of 'cosmos', that allows things to nestle within each other, to co-inhabit, to be a matrix for each other, to make a 'place' out of neutral space, or to be cast out as anti-matrixial» (2002 : 4-5).

*Sightings of the Wild Ginseng Region*

The ginseng region glimmers through documents produced by the federal government : in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's statistics and in the U.S. G.S. Gazetteer of place names. Supporting the thesis of the ginseng officer, that ginseng figures are a reflection of the culture of harvesting in a given region, place names in the U.S. geological survey help to profile the ginseng region in space. A search for place names containing the words «ginseng», «seng», or «sang» yields fifty-eight convincing hits. Illinois, Vermont, and New York each come up with one place name in which the name «ginseng» figures. Pennsylvania and Maryland each have two places named for ginseng. The remaining five states, which include mostly names with the terms «seng» or «sang», line up as follows : North Carolina (four), Virginia (five), Tennessee (seven), Kentucky (fifteen), and West Virginia (seventeen)<sup>4</sup>. While the names do not necessarily indicate the presence of ginseng, we can infer that ginseng has been relatively prominent in conversation in the region formed where West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia meet. The question is, if ginseng habitat extends well beyond this region, what are the factors contributing to its heightened cultural profile and the greater productivity of this region in terms of wild ginseng exported ?

The names profile the geomorphology on which ginseng depends : the coves, branches, forks, creeks, ridges, mountains, hollows and gaps that exude Central Appalachia's mixed mesophytic forest. But we glimpse not only ginseng and its habitat, we glimpse mountain history and society. The names also allude to the economic and social history of those spaces – Seng *Camp* Hollow is a space that has been occupied by people, customarily camped there during breaks in the agricultural cycle to dig for ginseng. But there is another aspect to this sociality. The names are always already quotations, and as such, implicate multiple perspectives constituting a collective view of the spaces of ginseng. The names are outcroppings of, and thresholds to a domain conjured and inhabited through ethnomimetic processes like storytelling and hunting for seng. The names viewed on the

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<sup>4</sup> This data base does not register all of the place names, nor even all of the possibilities for sites associated with ginseng (for instance, places called «Root Hollow», or «Rooting Camp Run», could be associated with ginseng. Likewise, names like «Three Prong Hollow», are known on Coal River, but do not appear in the GNIS data base.

map and the outline suggested by the density of their appearance hint at a region whose center is wild ginseng, and whose ecological limits are marked in the presence of seng hoes, seng talk, seng drying in windows, and seng cultivated in patches around homes, all signs of a state of Mind and Being shared by those who «know» ginseng.

### *Epistemologies of Wild Ginseng*

In the ecological imagination stimulated by ginseng, the condition of «knowing» ginseng is achieved through collectively interacting with a population of wild ginseng. This collective interaction unfolds in a public domain known simply as «the mountains» – a space that has long functioned as an open commons regulated by custom. This regional public space is necessary for the practice of digging for wild ginseng and the cultural region to which it has given rise. «The mountains» cannot be reduced to a set of physical attributes without doing violence to the local, regional, and national publics anchored in them. As we will see below, genres of seng talk form a way of reconstituting such social bodies.

The epistemology producing the «environment» is Cartesian. We think of the environment as a solid object completely detachable from its social and cultural content. Through processes of habitation, the environment becomes a medium for sociality, which K. Stewart defines as «the act of giving and reading signs» (1996 : 140). Enculturated, the environment embodies collective being, harboring cues to memory and action («plant corn when you hear the first whippoorwill»). «Knowing ginseng» results from the embodiment of perception and thought in relation to one's surroundings. One who knows ginseng knows that ginseng favors the dark, northern, «wet side» of a cove, along with a host of other species that serve as indicators of ginseng habitat, and the look-alikes that do not fool one who really knows ginseng.

As a medium for the giving and receiving of signs through talk and other practices, ginseng participates in the social life of the mountains. Even when one is digging ginseng alone, there is a sense of participation in the collective. As Randy Halstead put it :

It's like catching a big fish. You're out here all day and you find this big fish, and you know it's everybody's desire to catch this big fish in the lake. You find this big enormous plant, and you know everybody that's out there digging, this is the one that they'd like to find. So you get an adrenalin rush

when you find them, and when you find a big one it's like showing off your daily catch. You bring it in and say, «Look what I found today.»

(Interview, October 1995)

Ginseng interacts within a dynamic milieu of humans, animals, soils, and a plethora of mixed mesophytic species. A social identity for ginseng emerges through talk. «It's the most beautiful plant in the woods», said Randy Halstead. «Especially when it changes its color and it's got the seed on it». In spring ginseng sends up a stem that branches into stalks, each terminating in a cluster of five serrated leaflets. The older the root, the more stalks, or «prongs», it sends up. A cluster of yellow-green flowers, scented like lilies of the valley, appears in spring and matures through the summer into the bright red «pod of berries» that ginseng diggers look for in fall. In late September, ginseng begins to turn an opalescent yellow, utterly distinctive to diggers. «That is a different color to any other yellow», said Dennis Dickens, of Peachtree Creek. «You can spot that» (Interview, October 1996).

The space of wild ginseng is a space of the commons : a public space that anchors a regional public that at present has little national visibility. Though in fact close to ninety percent of the land in Central Appalachia is owned by a small number of absentee corporations, custom has for many generations treated the wooded slopes rising away from the settled valleys as commons on which to graze livestock and to hunt game and gather forest products for domestic use. While the corporations have reserved the rights to timber and minerals for themselves, fructuary rights have long been exercised by mountain communities, for whom non-timber forest products like ginseng, yellow root, blood root, cohosh and mayapple have provided a source of income in a patchwork economy of wage labor in the mines and mills, farming, and seasonal migration. Though privately owned, the landscape of this commons, produced through generations of custom, bears the impress of collective ideas about nature and society.

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*The Time-Spaces of Ginseng : Surplus Value and Qualitative Excess*

The time of ginseng is not only the seasonal round of gathering, but the time of adventure, of seeking after the treasure which can change one's fortunes. Because of its value and its unpredictability, ginseng represents the possibility of surplus value, and in fact, appears in foundation narratives in



the historical discourse of the mountains. In narratives that rehearse the time of economic growth on Coal River, ginseng is the gift resource that first infused cash into a non-monetized economy. «The whole economy was built up around ginseng», explained Quentin Barrett, a retired principal whose grandfather, R. E. Barrett, founded the oldest general store in Raleigh County. «They had a few eggs and chickens, but most of it was – the whole crew would go out and hunt ginseng in the fall.» Around the export of ginseng, a class of merchants emerged who would buy ginseng from local diggers and trade it in metropolitan centers for goods that could not be produced locally. In 1871, R. E. Barrett began trading merchandise for ginseng from his store on Dry Creek. «Just about his only source of cash was from ginseng sales», commented Bob Daniel, another grandson of R. E. Barrett :

The people would come out of the hollows in the fall and sell him their ginseng and they would buy their shoes and salt and staples and so forth, and he in turn sold it to exporters in New York and that sent some cash dollars back here.

(Interview, June 1996)

Certainly, cash from the sale of ginseng helped some people to purchase the land they cultivated from absentee owners in Canandaigua County in New York State.

Such accounts place ginseng at the origins of economic growth on Coal River. In the quasi-monetized wage labor economy of the first half of the twentieth century, ginseng continues as a source of debt relief in a system which paid miners in scrip<sup>5</sup>. Ginseng could be traded at the company store, and family members who did not work in the mines could supplement the wages of scrip by digging ginseng. «That's all my grandma used to do, years ago, she'd ginseng», recalled Shelby Estep, who now ginsengs with her daughter and granddaughter on Coal River Mountain. «That's the way she bought the kids clothes. She had twelve.» (Interview, September 1996).

As a source of surplus value, ginseng supported, according to Halstead, unionization and education, both of which were ways of getting around the negative reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972) of the coal industry. «My dad was a coal miner when the union was organizing», said Halstead. «He was

<sup>5</sup> Under the plantation-style system of the coal company town, miners were paid in «scrip», company-issued currency that was redeemable only at the company store, where goods were often more expensive than they were on the open market.

involved in that, so a lot of times he was out of work. So you send ten children to school, and working now and then, you had to make money whatever way you could. We would dig ginseng to buy our school clothes and buy our books so we could go back to school in the fall.»

In the ecological imagination stimulated by ginseng, the world reassembles in relation to seng, which becomes an animate player in a vernacular system of forest management. In the vernacular, wild seng is not «picked», «gathered», or «harvested». It is «hunted» and rare six-, seven-, and eight-pronged specimens are coveted like twelve-point bucks. For years before the Sundial Tavern was torn down, a six-prong trophy (*sans* the root) was prominently displayed in a frame behind the bar<sup>6</sup>. As recently prescribed by law, the diggers I interviewed eschew the roots of plants with fewer than three or four prongs. This means that a plant has to be at least ten years old before it is harvestable (Lewis and Zenger, 1982 : 1485). It would seem that watching a patch grow year after year would be the way to locate and keep track of the maturing plants. But it is not that simple. To start with, ginseng does not send up a stalk every year. Added to this is the appetite for ginseng shared by deer, pheasants, groundhogs, squirrels, and other small birds and mammals, which consume stalks and berries, unwittingly conserving the plant both by hiding the roots and serving as agents of dispersal. The situation is compounded by the practice among diggers of snipping the stalks of immature plants to keep other diggers from finding and digging them.

Given that ginseng seems to flow through the mountains, it is not surprising to find an agency assigned to ginseng unparalleled in the world of Appalachian flora. «It hides away from man with seeming intelligence», wrote Arthur Harding in a 1908 manual for diggers and cultivators. «You never know where you're going to find ginseng», said Ernie Scarbrough, of Rock Creek (Interview, June 1995). In stories about ginseng, the plant seems to reveal itself on its own terms, making contact with the digger before the digger notices it. «I was standing there looking around», said David Clay, «and there was a big four-prong brushing my britches legs before I looked down and saw it.»

Diggers look on the «wet side» of the mountain, on the «dark side» of the cove, in «sink holes», where it's not too dark and not too light, relying on indicator species such as sassafras, poplar, sugar maple, and hickory. «If

<sup>6</sup> Whether this trophy was in fact a genuine six-prong, or one cobbled together, as some skeptics have suggested, the fact that it immediately attracts attention speaks to the cultural value of ginseng in this region.

you look under the right tree», said Ernie Scarbrough, of Rock Creek, «you might find a stalk of seng. There's trees I go for yet, ginsenging [...] sugar maples and black gum [...] and the hickories. Squirrels is in the hickories, and they eat the ripe ginseng berries. So it makes a lot of ginseng around the hickories» (Interview, June 1995). Look-alike plants such as sarsaparilla and cohosh have been given names like «fool's seng», «he-seng», and «seng-pointer». In this ginseng-centered ecology, seng does not seem to point to anything else. More than an indicator species, seng becomes not only an object of desire, but the true measure of its habitat. I have heard ginseng used as a means of evaluating soil so rich you could dig ginseng out with your hands; or a slope so steep that ginseng berries would roll from the ridge to the hardtop, or a man: «I work in construction», wrote Dennis Price, of Arnett, «But really I consider myself a ginsenger» (Personal Communication 1994).

Signs that can be given and received can also be suppressed. Dennis Dickens reported snipping the leaves off of any two- and three-leaved specimens he encountered, to give them a chance to grow. Two- and three-leaved specimens are also signs that a mature specimen may be nearby, and can be followed like a trail. «I've done that many a time», said David Bailey, of Stickney. «You go up the hill, you come to a little flat area and if there's any seng growing there, you always look above it for a big one.»

Taking their cue from «the big one», diggers scatter the seeds from any plants they dig back into the surrounding space. This is strongly recommended in the law, but there are additional strategies for managing the local ginseng population. Some diggers carefully remove the root, leaving several joints of the rhizome (called the «curl») attached to the stalk, which they replant. «I usually put maybe two joints of it back», one digger told me, tamping the dirt around a rootless curl someone had replanted. «It's a better way of keeping it going than the berries», he added, «I'll come back here some year and get another root off of that.» (Interview, September 1995).

Such encounters become moments in the continual exchange of signs among diggers. «I hate when you find one somebody else dug first», laughed Carla Pettry, of Horse Creek. «It fakes you out.» Some diggers transplant the young plants to patches in woods near their homes, where they may be monitored until mature enough to dig. Such seng, known as «woods-grown», if properly tended, woods-grown seng can still be sold as wild seng. «If it *looks* wild, it sells for wild», said Halstead.

*Shaping the Ginseng Region from Within : Seng Hoes and Seng Talk*

The ginseng region cannot be measured simply as the extent of the range of ginseng, because it is rooted not in the ginseng alone, but in what Betsy Taylor calls «kinesthetic, multisensory, intersubjective, existential structures of habitual engagements» (2002). Among the structures of habitual engagement that constitute the ginseng region are seng hoes and genres of seng talk, which include carnivalesque inversions, dialogue, and those forms of excess known as «lies».

*Seng Hoes*

At «the nexus of body/place/commons» (Taylor and Reid, 2002), the tool that shapes the ginseng region is an implement known as the «seng hoe», a long handled, homemade, double-headed, lightweight mattock. In most homes that I have visited on Coal River, a seng hoe is tucked away somewhere, no two of them exactly alike. They are usually made by modifying tools made for other purposes. «They used to take old mine picks when they'd wear out and cut them off at the blacksmith shop», said Mae Bonglis, an eighty-four year old woman who worked in the mines at Montcoal as a child, «they make a good one» (Interview, September 1994).

Fire pokers and automobile springs may also be recycled into seng hoes. The most common model has a transverse blade, with one end for use as an axe, the other for use as a mattock. The long handle serves as a walking stick and is used to beat the bushes and to defend oneself against rattlesnakes and copperheads. «It's real light», explained Shorty Bongalis, «something you can carry through the woods» (Interview, December 1996). Seng hoes seem to culminate the evolution of the tool, not something to be recycled, but to be cherished as keepsakes, thresholds to histories of the society of the mountains. Quentin Barrett possesses one that Joe Bradford made in his blacksmith shop. Randy Halstead's father kept the hoe of his deceased ginseng digging buddy. Ben Burnside stored his together with his deceased father's seng hoe and a set of specialty hoes he'd designed and crafted for cultivating sweet potatoes, peas, and onions.

Hoes belong to the class of implements designed for tending the soil around growing things. Seng hoes register in concentrated form a pool of experiential knowledge that shapes the mountains as a commons that is the soil of community life. One could even argue that this implement for fitting

ginsengers to the wild public space of the ginseng field has physically shaped the ginseng region. It is an implement that has been used to extract ginseng without injury to diggers or roots that become entangled with rocks or the roots of trees<sup>7</sup>. It is an implement that is not needed for digging «tame» or cultivated seng; its designated purpose is to harvest ginseng that is wild.

*Seng Talk : The Marrow of the Ginseng Region*

Ginseng is transgressive. Like the seng hoe, which gives a second life to mining picks, automobile springs, and fire pokers, ginseng tales transform the commons into a third space through exaggeration. The world of ginsenging is a space in which exaggeration becomes a mode of engendering male sociality. «Boys go off when they're teenagers», explained Rocky Turner, «especially when I was growing up and my dad was growing up, they would go and dig ginseng and camp out under these rocks and do what boys do : talk and tell big stories» (Interview, April 1996).

In conversational genres that conjure the mountains, ginseng often appears as a «triplex sign» (Briggs, 1988), evoking mountains and mountain society as a particular time-space with a particular set of metaphysical constants. Triplex signs, according to Briggs, function in three ways. First to index the referent, second to summon forth a referential frame conditioned by knowledge of the oral traditions surrounding the referent, and third, to signal a conversational code. In other words, as the ginsenger regenerates the root by replanting the kernel<sup>8</sup>, the storyteller mentions ginsenging in order to set the stage for its socio-natural milieu. «Me and Gregory and that son of mine were out in the mountains, ginsenging», begins a tall tale by Danny Williams in which ginsenging sets the stage for an encounter with Christ (Interview, April 1995).

Like fishing stories, stories about ginseng trigger the expectation of hyperbole. Bakhtin links exaggeration with the larger project of assigning value to that which is good, and which has been devalued in the reigning social order. In one story told on Coal River, Gilbert Massey, on his

<sup>7</sup> James Haught reports on an incident in which an argument over a doctrinal issue turned into a brawl wherein a congregation of Baptists attacked each other with seng hoes (1993).

<sup>8</sup> «Kernel» is the term Joe Williams used for what botanists call the «corm», the fleshy underground portion of the stem above the roots of certain plants.

deathbed, asks a preacher why Jesus recruited all those «fishermen, groundhog hunters, and ginseng diggers. He had the job of saving the whole world. That's a big job. Why couldn't he get *good* help?» Massey's question simultaneously ratifies and challenges the logic of the reigning social hierarchy, reminding the preacher that ginseng diggers, like fishermen, may be among the lowly and despised, but it was from their ranks that Christ recruited his disciples and on whom he founded his Church. This blending of the sacred and profane, the high and the low is a carnivalesque gesture.

Among the premises then is an expectation of excess that is not simply quantitative, but qualitative – a desire to exceed one's physical and social limits to become something else – a Knowing Subject. This exaggeration is fertile and productive of laughter, which dissolves the boundaries between selves and between the selves and their environments. Does anyone really know how old and how big wild ginseng could get if simply left to grow? Some specimens have been reckoned to be sixty years old. Double entendre is freely woven into the fantasy of the ultimate root. «Ginseng Diggers Pack Bigger Roots», runs the inscription on caps available at Randy's Recycling. This is the meaning operating in an account of Giles the Seng Man, a broker from Clay County who spent weeks on Coal River each year buying seng from diggers. «He come in down at Jack's [Tavern]», recalled the 84-year old Mae Bongalis, «And he said, 'Hey lady!' He said, 'I want to show you something. I want to show you my root. I got the biggest root you ever laid your eyes on.' Everybody was looking at him and laughing. He went down in that sack and come out with that big – it was the biggest seng I ever seen. It was a seng root. Everybody started laughing. It was big. I never seen one that big, before or after either.» (Interview, December 1996).

The ginseng region opens up in a videotaped conversation during a visit in Andrew, West Virginia. Sometime in the late 1980s, before I met them, Arnold Pettry and Ben Clay called on an elderly friend who had recently moved down the river from Whitesville. In the course of the conversation, the three men conjure and explore the society of the mountains – a lifeworld in which ramps, aquatic life, and ginseng all index social relations. Flamboyantly, George Everett gesticulates the hills and hollows of his natal home on Shumate's Branch into the living room, reconstituting the mountains through embodied memory. The space he explores with Arnold and Ben has recently been appropriated as the site for a wet waste

<sup>9</sup> This is a classic Menippean threshold dialogue dealing with ultimate questions. See Bakhtin (1984a : 111-118).

impoundment, to be flooded with mine waste hundreds of feet deep behind a dam built of slag. Their dialogue, staged on the threshold of the wasting of Shumate's Branch, undoes the corporate state's thematizing of the region as the coalfields, rehumanizing and reclaiming Shumate's Branch as a vital player in the production of wild ginseng.

The conversation is saturated with rehearsals of landscape and the fortunes – good and bad – of mutual friends. A neighbor who recently died has a son living near Cleveland, Ohio, who came in last year and went ginsenging. The talk then turns to seng, and a commons constituted in large part out of what «they say», a commons collaboratively uttered here in reciprocity with neighbors in other times and spaces<sup>10</sup>.

(Story # 1)

– Me and Arnold dug some seng, Ben opens. We went up in Seng Creek back there. Road Holler, way back there on the left side like you're going toward Bradley, high up in that holler, you know what I'm talking about.

– Yeah, says George, surveying it in his mind.

– And them old log roads had been cut back in there, and I stepped up, and I was standing there looking around and there was a big four prong. Brushing my britches legs before I looked down and seen it.

– Yeah ? George prompts him.

– Arnold brought some four prongs out of Seng Creek that's uncommon to look at, Ben finishes.

(Story # 2)

George takes the lead.

– Well now they tell me up in the holler where Sundial trash dump used to be.

– Stink Run, they call it, inserts Ben, by way of etymology as well as location.

– Stink Run, resumes George. Old Patrick was telling me, he said, 'George, when you go up in there, go on the south side,' and said, 'when you find seng, it'll really have a big root to it.

– Going toward the Cutting Box, back in this way, elaborates Ben.

– I senged in there and senged in there and senged in there, but I couldn't find any ! expostulates George.

– No, agrees Ben, recognizing some chicanery. It's too dry.

– I never did find it, Buddy, George reiterates.

<sup>10</sup> For easy reference in the discussion to follow, I have numbered the stories. To protect the identities of the three men, I have changed their names.

(Story # 3)

- Now they said there was good seng in Sugar Camp, avers Ben, moving the conversation across the river to Shumate's Branch.

- I found good seng in Sugar Camp, George corroborates.

- Maybe Russell Collins was in there before you was, Arnold interjects, relating George's good fortune to the incompetence of a predecessor in the hollow.

- He might have been, returns George, But I dug some real seng in Sugar Camp.

- I'll tell you where I dug a lot of my seng, Ben takes up, most all of it. In the head of Shumate's Branch up there on the left. What they call the Big Creek.

- Yeah, says George.

- Me and Cokey Sheets and used to go in there and bring it out, says Ben.

(Story # 4)

- You know where the most seng is I ever found up in that country ? asked George Everett. I'm going to tell you where it was at. You won't believe it.

- Chestnut Holler, I'll bet you, guessed Ben Clay.

- I found one of the awfulest patches of it, left-hand side of Chestnut Holler, George continued. I never seen such roots of seng in my life, buddy. And where I found all my seng, the good seng, come right this side of Clyde Montgomery's, and come down that first holler, and go up that holler and turn back to the right. Buddy it is steep.

- Going toward the Cutting Box ? asked Ben Clay, referring to a place named for a mining structure.

- I senced that through there, said George, from there to Stickney, and I have really found the seng in there. One time me and Gar Gobel was in there, and Clyde would start up the mountain, and we just kept finding little four leaves all the way up the mountain.

- Gar says, 'George, there's a big one somewhere. It seeded downhill.' We senced plumb to the top of the mountain, Cutting Box, got on top, and that old big nettleweed was that high. Gar had him a big stick, was hunting for the big one. Right on tip top the mountain, directly beneath them, it was about up to my belt, buddy. It didn't have such a big root on it, and I still wasn't satisfied. Gar, he dropped over the Cutting Box, and I still searched around up on top, parting the weeds, and directly, I found them about that high [indicates a height of about three feet], two of them right on top of the mountain. It was so steep [the berries] rolled plumb down next to the hard road, buddy. I got more seng in there than any place I ever senced in that part of the country. It's steep, buddy.

- It's rough too, ain't it ? said Ben Clay.

- It's rough buddy, George agreed. But I swear I dug some good seng in there, buddy. And I dug some good seng in Sugar Camp.