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(Story # 5)

Arnold Pettry is reminded of something that happened to his brother, Bud.

– You remember that time Bud and French Turner was [...] up there sawing timber for Earl Hunter? Remember Bud telling you about that? He said he was sawing that big tree. Thought it was a buckeye. And stuff like tomatoes started hitting him in the head.

– It was seng berries, laughed Ben.

– It was seng berries, Arnold dead-panned.

– Said it was big as tomatoes, said Ben, still chuckling.

– Boy that was some stalk of seng, allowed George.

– And they were sawing it down for timber, laughs Ben.

(Story # 6)

George goes for the big one.

– I'm gonna tell you what. Before I ever knowed seng, we was cuttin timber in Range Holler, for Virgil Anderson. We had to pull a crosscut saw, right pretty close to dinner time, I looked down at my feet and I was standing by a big four prong and it had red berries on it big as my fist.

– He said, 'Lord have mercy, look there, what a stalk of seng.' He dug that root and it went around every which way. He took it down to the Hazy Company Store and they had it weighed. Buddy it weighed three ounces. Buddy, you're talking about a root. I wish you could've seen that.

– Where did you get that? asks Ben.

– Range Holler, up Hazy. That's right where that old Hazy Company Store set right back in there on the right, Buddy.

– Yeah.

– Buddy let me tell you, there's some good seng up in that holler. Heads right up against Pond Fork.

– Right behind the old company store says Ben.

– There's some good seng in that holler now. But boy, let me tell you, that's a long holler. I tell you what, the team would start out of a morning with a good trip of logs [...] and when quitting time come we would pass two teams coming out of the holler. Two trips a day is all they could make.

– It's a long holler, agrees Ben.

– It's a long holler, repeats George. The team would make two trips a day. That shows you how long that hollow was.

Shortly thereafter the conversation turns to wrapping up the visit.

Regional Regeneration : Toward an Ecology of Genus and Genre

In carnival the lower orders deal a blow to the epistemological megalomania of the official culture.

(Bakhtin, 1984a)

If a region could be said to have a marrow, this stretch of seng talk would be one site of its generation and regeneration, which happens through the pitting of carnivalesque dialogue against the monologic discourses that fix the region's identity as an extractive zone. Here the lies and tall tales that are associated with ginseng assail the serious genres of officialdom. As Philip Holland writes :

The serious genres, in Bakhtin's terms, are monological, i.e. they presuppose (or impose) an integrated and stable universe of discourse. The seriocomic genres, by contrast, are dialogical: they deny the possibility, or more precisely, the experience of such integration. As tragedy and epic enclose, Menippean forms open up, anatomize. The serious forms comprehend man: the Menippean forms are based on man's inability to know and contain his fate. To any vision of a completed system of truth, the menippea suggests some element outside the system.

(1979 : 36-37, cited in Bakhtin, 1984a : 106-107)

In the coalfields, life space has been thoroughly subordinated to economic space. More than a century ago, in order to lay claim to the minerals and timber of the region, industry, with the assistance of the state, set out to «sever ownership from occupancy». The severance of ownership from occupancy is a material expression of the Cartesian principles that separate subject from object, nature from culture, humanity from cosmos, spirit from matter and even death from life. This severance of ownership from occupancy is one articulation of what Bakhtin calls «the petty inert material principle of class society» (Bakhtin, 1984b : 90). This principle, and the fixed identities that secure an extractive economy, stifles what Bakhtin terms «gay materiality» – the capacity of things to grow and to exceed themselves to become something else.

A former coal miner summarized the cultural consequences of living in this very tight space to me one evening in the Sundial Tavern. «Henry Ford said that some men work from the neck up. Most men work from the neck down.» He looked at me intently. «What do you think of that ?» Ford's image graphically depicts a social body formed of management and labor, and the dehumanizing fragmentation of the laboring self under the Fordist

regime. This figure of decapitation, imposed on whole populations is experienced as a form of violence. Eerily revisited in the concept of «decapitation mining» (a synonym for mountaintop removal mining, which reconstitutes the regional horizon by lopping off its peaks), the figure comes to signify central Appalachia's status as a sacrifice zone. In both instances the figure of decapitation does violence to the spiritual and cultural aspects of humanity and creation. Fragmenting this arrangement is the business of the Carnavalesque. How does seng talk do this, and what is the role of ginseng in the drama played out in the performance of seng talk above ?

Two events are staged in this collaborative performance. One is the event of narration itself, a sociality unfolding through stories told in the time and space of George Everett's living room. A storytelling event is launched with the words «One time», which splits our attention from the conversation in the living room to events transpiring in the times and spaces of Seng Creek, Stink Run, Shumate's Branch, Chestnut Hollow, Sugar Camp and Range Hollow; places spread out over six miles within a time frame of sixty years. In this alternative realm, another set of social relations is depicted, which is brought to bear on the relationships among the storytellers. In order to appreciate the dialogical character of the carnivalesque it is useful to look at the parallel structures within these two events. To keep such events straight, I will borrow terms invented by folklorist Katharine Young, who calls the time-space of storytelling the *Storyrealm*, and the narrated times and spaces set in an alternative realm the *Taleworld*.

The events unfolding in the two realms can be seen as parallel sets of adventures. Bakhtin argues that «a carnival sense of the world» is «the drive shaft between the *idea* and the *artistic image of adventure*» (Bakhtin, 1984a : 134). With a decidedly droll flourish, Arnold Pettry entitled his videotape «Adventures of Pettry Bottom», after the community he lives in. In both *Taleworld* and *Storyrealm*, adventure is signaled by a moment of recognition, recognition in its most radical sense, as a form of re-knowing. In the *Taleworld*, the discovery of ginseng causes a shift from ordinary to extraordinary time : a time of adventure that, like the picaresque, «draws life out of its ordinary and (as it were) legitimized rut» (Bakhtin, 1984a : 158). The adventure realized in seng talk is the breaking out of an exceedingly tight physical, social, and cultural allocation. In the *Storyrealm*, it is the stories themselves that move conversationalists into extraordinary time, but the participants are on the trail of carnivalesque laughter rather than ginseng.

Storyrealm and Taleworld unfold as a set of parallel adventures, intimating an ecology of ginseng and laughter.

Ginseng and the Image of Adventure in the Taleworld

The artistic image of adventure in the Taleworld is structured as the recognition of ginseng. Here ginseng is more than a triplex sign, it is a *threshold species*, a species that pivots between ordinary and extraordinary states of knowing and being. Because of its particular history and its ambiguous status as a species that is both commercially valuable and impossible to discipline, wild ginseng opens onto a realm in which ordinary rules governing knowing and being are suspended. Carnivalistic *mesalliances*, inversions, and threshold dialogues appear. Both sides of thresholds signified by ginseng at multiple levels of meaning are brought together in the Taleworld¹¹. The seng plant that strews its progeny from ridgetop to the hard road literally unifies high and low, while the berries pelting the head bring together the *materiel* with the locus of thought, recognition : the *ideal*.

Inflating the value of the mountains constitutes another inversion. Regional policies of development in central Appalachia proceed from the assumption that the mountains are worthless apart from the coal and timber they hold. Ben Clay and George Everett pile value upon the habitat of ginseng through an operation that Bakhtin calls «spatio-temporal expansion». Spatio-temporal expansion is, as Bakhtin notes (1984a : 167), a carnivalesque way of conferring value :

This means that everything of value, everything that is valorized positively, must achieve its full potential in temporal and spatial terms ; it must spread out as far and as wide as possible, and it is necessary that everything of significant value be provided with the power to expand spatially and temporally.

In these stories, ginseng demonstrates a striking, almost mystical capacity for simultaneous self-concealment and excess, showing up suddenly

¹¹ In other ginseng tales, the *mesalliances* of carnival bring the authorities of church and government into dialogue with ginsengers. Quentin Barrett, who told of Gilbert Massey's placement of ginsengers in the company of the apostles, cited above, also offered an account of a ginseng thief in the mid-19th century who becomes a U.S. Senator. Such inversions of hierarchy are present in the «Adventures of Pettry Bottom», in both material and social forms.

at one's feet, producing berries the size of tomatoes, a pod the size of a ginsenger's fist, a three-ounce root that protrudes wildly in every direction. Thriving in hidden places, ginseng is excessively productive. In this capacity for growth, ginseng takes on the status of gay matter, exceeding itself to produce a seng patch the length of a mountain slope ; to grow the biggest root George Everett has ever seen ; to become as large as a buckeye tree. This status is achieved with the complicity of mountains (slopes so steep that berries roll from ridge hard road, and a hollow so long that a team of horses could traverse it only twice a day). The steepness, which in official terms is assigned a negative value, is a positive feature here, for aiding the spread of ginseng. And the length confers value on the men, who have traversed it themselves on foot on successful quests for «good» ginseng. Inventorying the places where they have found good ginseng, Ben Clay and George Everett heap reciprocal value on themselves and on the mountains. To begin with, ginseng is *good*. The mountains are good because they harbor ginseng ; ginsengers are good when they can find good ginseng all over the mountains.

What is expanded in time and in space is also deeply humanized. Abstract terms of measurement like «the south slope» or «three ounces» are mixed together with relational terms steeped in images of the body. Terms like the «head» and «mouth» of a hollow, the «gorge» of a river, the «spine» of a ridge recall the culturally-generative body parts of giants strewn across the landscape in creation myths (Stewart, 1984). In contrast to the transcendent perspective conveyed by a glance at a map, a term like «the left-hand fork» imbues the landscape with the perspective of one walking through it. Ginseng plants are evaluated in relation to the human body as well : standing as high as George Everett's belt, or bearing fruit the size of his fist. The Taleworld is conjured not only through words, but through gestures, which precipitate landscape out of the bodies of storytellers, mapping «the mountains» onto the living room and its occupants.

In its penchant for particularity, the carnivalesque's project is historically and locally contingent. Whereas Rabelais produced :

a new picture of the world [...] polemically opposed to the medieval world, in whose ideology the human body is perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife.

(Bakhtin, 1984b : 171),

in the modernist project, ginsengers produce a world, «the mountains», which is polemically opposed to an ideology of progress that reduces those

mountains to «worthless rocks and dirt». Whereas in the ideology of progress, the gathering of roots and herbs is a sign of backwardness and eccentricity, in the domain conjured through seng talk, this work is valorized. The world of industrial work anchored in log roads, mining equipment, and the company store fade into the backdrop, becoming ancillary to the project of the recognition and recovery of ginseng.

But hierarchy is itself anathema to the carnivalesque, which also opposes the lived reality of «the mountains» to its romanticized depictions. Hence the inversion of hierarchy gives way to the repudiation of hierarchy itself through the mockery of all elevating distinctions. In the Taleworld, the focus on the reproductive parts of ginseng, its seeds and its roots, shifts attention from verticality, symmetry, and hierarchy to productivity (Stewart, 1984). In the most carnivalesque images of the set, ginseng overwhelms the mountains with signs of its presence before it is finally recognized by the ginsengers. The first of these images appears in George's account of a seng plant that covers the mountain with its progeny, unifying its peak with its valley (Story # 4). The prospect of adventure dawns on the diggers when they realize they are in fact following a trail. «We just kept finding little four leaves all the way up the mountain», George narrates. «Gar says, 'George, there's a big one somewhere. It seeded downhill.» Arnold follows this up with a mirror image in which a ginseng plant has to pelt a woodcutter (significantly on the head) with berries the size of tomatoes before he realizes he's not dealing with a buckeye seedling (Story # 5). In both stories the characters are slow to realize they are in the presence of something extraordinary : wild ginseng uninhibited.

Laughter and the Idea of Adventure in the Storyrealm

In «The Adventures of Pettry Bottom», the adventures set in Taleworlds are a means of having adventures in Storyrealms. These adventures, which open up an alternative to the tight geographic and social space of the coalfields, are enabled by the unique ontological status of wild ginseng in its native habitat. In the Taleworld, wild ginseng throws off its botanical confines and moves toward animacy. It behaves much more like quarry than like the crop that its tame cousin has become, and its hunters share with hunters of more traditional quarry the dynamic of identification with the object of the hunt. Wild ginseng is portrayed as a kind of trickster, whose capacity for assault from a position of concealment parallels the

disruptions staged by Arnold Pettry in the Storyrealm. In the Storyrealm, Arnold and George both vie for the analogous position of ginseng, a position of agency from which one can call the shots. Growing excessively without anyone noticing, ginseng remains invisible until it can control the terms of encounter.

The stories grant a glimpse of how it is that ginseng participates deeply in the social life of the mountains. As a resource for identity, ginseng participates in the dynamic that James Fernandez (after Mead) terms «taking the animal other», a dynamic that contributes to the development of human identity. Fernandez observes that in order to develop identity, humans must first «become objects to themselves, by taking the point of view of 'the other', before they can become subjects to themselves» (1986 : 35). Fernandez asks (1986 : 32) :

Is it not arguable that primordially animals are predicates by which subjects obtain an identity and are thus objects of affinity and participation ? If so, the first problem is not how animals take human shape, but how humans take animal shape and enact nature.

As the man-like root, ginseng emulates humans. What do humans accomplish by emulating ginseng ?

What is the relationship between the adventures of recognition in the Taleworld and the adventures of laughter triggered in the Storyrealm ? In the Taleworld, the force of the seng berries is of special interest. In *Story # 4*, two seng plants on the ridgetop release seng berries all over the mountain, unifying the slope from ridgetop to hardroad as a seng patch. In *Story # 5*, seng berries pelting the woodcutter on his head force him to recognize ginseng. Like startling new ideas, the four leaves and the berries upset the conventional image of the world, opening onto an alternative prospect. Within the Storyrealm, the images themselves forcefully impact hearers, and the end result is laughter. What is destabilized here is not only the conventional view of reality, but the body image, the composure we effect for ourselves under the terms of a reigning social order. What is the relationship between ginseng and carnivalesque laughter ? If, as Mary Douglas theorizes, meaning leaks from one domain to another along similarities in rule structures (1973 : 13), the social significance of ginseng emerges in the dialogue between the Taleworld and Storyrealm, marked by laughter.

While seng berries threaten the Taleworld characters' grasp of reality, in the Storyrealm, laughter disrupts the composure we effect for our own bodies, those «primordial metaphors» (Fernandez, 1986: 35) for social hierarchy. Several years after Arnold Pettry videotaped this conversation, Ben Clay took me to meet George Everett. Like ginseng, George Everett himself is a threshold to the carnivalesque. The mere mention of his name among acquaintances triggers accounts of his eccentricities and exaggerations, accompanied by Big Laughter. Prompted by Ben during our visit, George Everett recounted the story of the seng berries that rolled from the ridge top to the hard road. Unable to contain himself, Ben Clay savored this image (among others) in the car on the way home afterward. In great detail, he reconstructed the image of the insatiable George Everett tracking the four leaves to the top of the mountain, parting the leaves and finding the seng plant so big that its berries had rolled from the ridge to the hard road. «He told three lies in twenty words!» he declared in amazement, then guffawed with laughter so infectious that I finally «caught it» myself and had to stop the car to regain my composure.

The concept of regaining composure reminds us that this kind of laughter is often described in terms that anatomize us, collapsing our carefully maintained stances toward others, re-opening us to the world. Laughter, the «weapon of the weak», is wielded not only against an official order, but against our own bodies, which bear the impress of that order¹². An entire universe of discourse that claims certain knowledge of the truth, and which depends upon stunting the peoples' ever-growing body can be destabilized by wild mirth. Big laughter sends a tremor throughout the entire system, bridging the mental and the corporeal, creating space by a gleeful contagion that is impossible to contain¹³. Shattering the composure we effect for ourselves, we vitiate the boundaries sustained by that composure, jostling

¹² Think of the terms that express laughter's effect on the body: we can «explode», «die laughing», «convulse», «bust a gut», or «have a heart attack». Jokes, as agents inducing this disarray, are said to be «belly thumpers», «side-splitters», or «thigh slappers». Jokes impact the body by «tickling us» or «cracking us up». Laughing hard, we cross a line between human and animal expression: we say we «roar», «mort», «hoot», «cackle», and «howl» with laughter.

¹³ Bakhtin observes that in the time of Rabelais this kind of laughter, whole-body laughter, formed a response to cosmic terror. For the past century, people in the coal-mining region have lived under the continual threat of catastrophes as death in the mines, flooding from clear-cutting, blowouts from water built-up in underground mines, flooding from strip-mining, damage to homes from powerful explosives used in mountaintop removal mining, flooding from coal slurry impoundments, layoffs due to mine mechanization, flooding from valley fills.

postures designed to uphold an oppressive socio-economic regime. That laughter is often the point of getting together suggests a parallel between laughter and ginseng as equivalent prizes in parallel universes of exchange. «We'd tell lies, talk old crazy stuff, just to get the laughs», Ben Clay told me on another occasion.

What has ginseng to do with laughter's break-up of the body image, and its breakdown of social constraints? It not only assists this breakdown, but it aids the project of completing the self (extended here to collective regional identity). Taking the botanical other is one of the possible thresholds to the adventure that Ortega y Gasset calls «taking a vacation from the human condition» (1972 : 111). Ginseng, showing in its form how plants can take human shape, raises the question of what it means when humans take on vegetative form and enact nature. People do this in other settings, constructing duck blinds, dressing up in camouflage to go deerhunting, sitting in bird blinds near feeders. Blending in with one's surroundings in this way is, as one duckhunter put it, a way to «lose yourself». (Hufford, 1990 : 54). Losing the self is a way of gaining the perspective necessary to completing one's self, by seeing oneself from something approximating another perspective. As Bakhtin put it (1984a : 177) :

A single person, remaining alone with himself, cannot make ends meet even in the deepest and most intimate spheres of his own spiritual life, he cannot manage without *another* consciousness. One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone.

The social life of ginseng suggests that collectivities can't find fullness in themselves alone, whether as regional collectives or as human beings; that region and humanity are generated through encounters between humans and «primordial others». Seeing the world as ginseng might, we grasp more fully what it could mean to become its habitat.

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RESUME

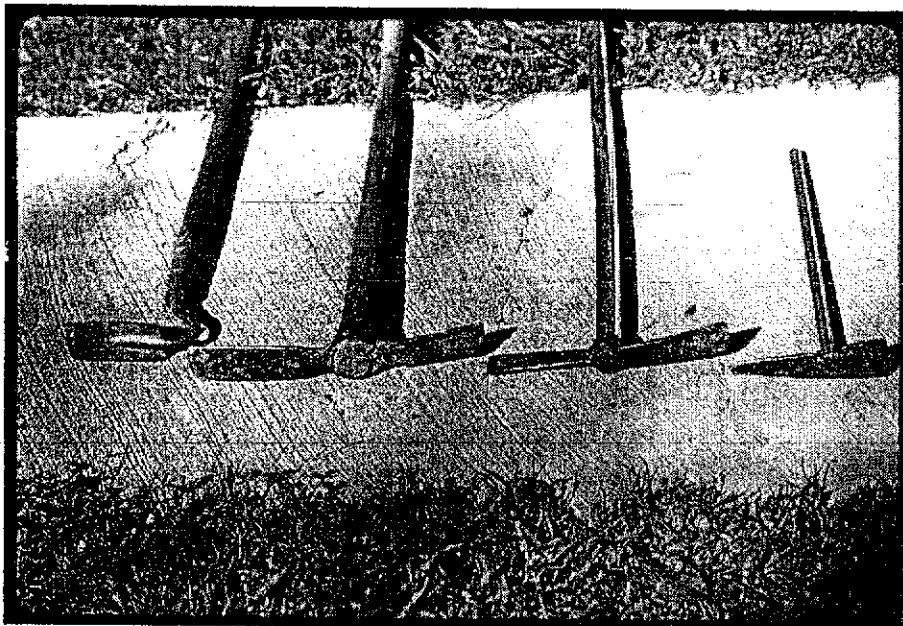
Internationalement très apprécié pour ses qualités à la fois toniques et stimulantes, le ginseng a davantage de valeur lorsqu'il est récolté sous sa forme sauvage. Aux Etats-Unis, ce type de récolte a donné à la région centrale des Appalaches une position de producteur dominant. Les interactions des gens avec le ginseng éclairent le processus définissant une région comme «la limite écologique du processus ethnomimétique». A partir d'une approche critique régionaliste, j'examine les interactions de la région du ginseng sauvage avec celle des bassins houillers, région antithétique qui domine le même espace géographique. Les récits relatifs au ginseng et d'autres genres carnavalesques font partie des pratiques illustrant le heurt entre régions et des stratégies de survie culturelle.

ABSTRACT

Ginseng, prized on the world market as both tonic and stimulant, is most valuable when harvested in the wild. In the United States, a culture of harvesting wild ginseng contributes to Central Appalachia's as the leading producer of wild ginseng. The interactions of people with ginseng illuminate a process giving rise to region as, in Robert Cantwell's terms, «the ecological limit of the ethnomimetic process». Taking a critically regionalist approach, I examine the interrelations of the wild ginseng region with the «coalfields», an antithetical region that dominates the same geographical space. Ginseng tales and other carnivalesque genres are among the practices that illuminate the politics of clashing regions, and comprise strategies for cultural survival.



Ginseng laid to air dry



Ginseng hoes



Ginseng plant with berries in the Fall



Joe Williams Digging



Joe Williams Ginsenging

Photographies de Lyntha Scott Eiler, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress