

**Silas House's *The Coal Tattoo*—  
Permanently Scarring the Landscape,  
or Trajectories in Tradition: Appalachians, Ancestors,  
Land Use, Coal Tattoos, and the Broad Form Deed  
by Hugo A. Freund**

After recently flying over mountaintop removal sites Teri Blanton noted, "What we witnessed was so sickening . . . the stripped, scarred and decapitated peaks, . . . the murky, gloomy slurry ponds . . . the diseased hollers . . . the valley fills, we were in a state of shock and depression."

— Anonymous *Appalachian Newsletter*

An Inez, Kentucky resident considers the loss for the community following the death of a local minister as a result of an accident with an overloaded coal truck. "Somebody in his family has always been part of this church," said Bill Slone, a deacon at the church who retired as county school superintendent this year. "The pew we sit in was made by his great-grandfather."

— *Lexington Herald-Leader*

Liam Trosper (son of Altamont Coal owner) to his wife when discussing ancestral land that his company wants to strip mine: "It's just a mountain, you fool."

— *The Coal Tattoo*

**Prologue**

The first two of the above quotations concern the repercussions of contemporary mining in southeastern Kentucky, and the third is from Silas House's 2002 novel *The Coal Tattoo*. Together they frame a dilemma for those considering notions of tradition and continuity in the face of apparent discontinuities that mining contributes to the Appalachian experience. In *Coal Tattoo*, House suggests that the disruptions mining introduces lead to a sense of discontinuity for southeastern Kentucky residents. Some readers might attribute these sorts of breaks in experience to the nature of postmodern life. But these discontinuities predate the idea of postmodernism that now provides an context for understanding these sorts of discontinuities. Both of the residents quoted above and the fictional Liam live in the Cumberland Mountains of southeastern Kentucky. The circumstances of coal mining raise several thematic issues in House's symbolic universe



Warren Mining Camp, 1930s-1940s, Warren, Knox County, Kentucky. Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Collection in the library of the Knox County Historical Museum, Barbourville, Kentucky.

including ruptures, disruptions, thievery, loss, and what is to be a central symbol in *Coal Tattoo*: a scar, a sorry blemish, in a tattoo on the landscape that parallels the physical marks left on so many miners of the area.

*Coal Tattoo* is the middle volume in House's unnamed trilogy. The first title, *A Parchment of Leaves* explores the close relationship between two women, Serena and Vine, during the period

of World War One. Two sisters also form the core of *Coal Tattoo*. Anneth and Easter are the grandchildren of Serena and Vine. This essay will examine their lives as Easter and Anneth struggle with the tremendous changes of the 1950s and 1960s. The final volume in the trilogy, *Clay's Quilt* focuses on Anneth's only son Clay, as he strives to make his way to manhood and responsibility in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Coal mining is a constant theme in House's trilogy. However, the repercussions of this extractive endeavor form the symbolic backbone of *Coal Tattoo*. To this day the mining industry has a visible and economic presence in southeastern Kentucky. These efforts take the form of shaft and surface mining. Various forms of surface mining have gouged the Appalachian landscape for some seventy years (see Mountrie 2003). It leaves deep scars on the landscapes of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Unlike shaft mining, in which a portal provides access to coal seams underground, surface mining is much more invasive. Large earth-moving machines remove obstructions so mining can take place at the surface. This method of mining is a cheaper and faster process that also requires fewer employees. For instance, today, it only takes nine men to fell an entire mountaintop and then extract the revealed coal (Reece 45). Probably the best known form of surface mining is strip mining. Some thirty years ago, a much more aggressive form of strip mining was developed, currently known as mountaintop removal.<sup>1</sup> Its name suggests the process: all flora is cleared by a bulldozer, the topsoil is scraped away, and then remaining geological layers are blasted away until the coal seam is exposed. To date, hundreds of mountain peaks in Appalachia have been beheaded by this process.

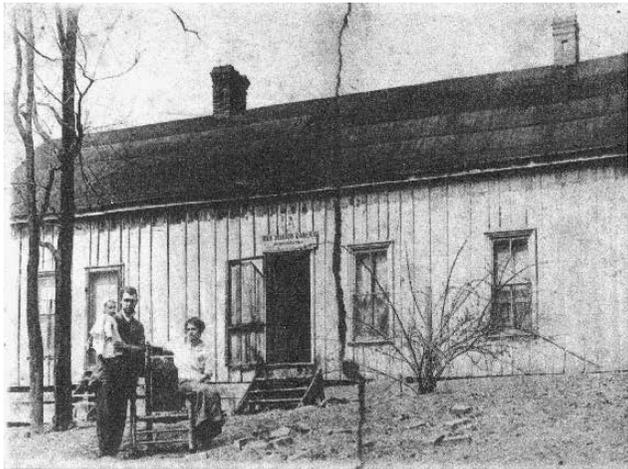
The gouged physical marks on the landscape, once the coal is extracted, leave little for the locals and, simultaneously, much profit is exported to far-flung commercial concerns. House has taken this mining story as a template for informing his novel. In *Coal Tattoo* his characters confront many losses: land, their sense of continuity with the physical environment, and social connections. Mediating between the large changes and the individual characters in the novel is the coal tattoo. A phrase found in the Cumberland Mountains of southeastern Kentucky, this term refers to the marks that coal can make on a coal miner's body. The force of coal in the mine can at times be intense, particularly in the case of an emergency or calamity. Coal particles become permanently embedded under the skin of a miner—thus the name coal tattoo. Coal tattoos are often readily ap-

parent on a miner's face. These indelible coal tattoos are, for those who know the severe dangers of the mines, very visible marks of regional residence and occupation.

House draws symbolic connections between the gouged physical marks of the landscape and the physical etching on the bodies of local miners. These tattoos are neither inexorable natural forces nor efforts and effects of invisible and distant people. Instead, they illustrate a drama played out locally within the context of power and social class.

Both Teri Blanton and the unnamed Inez resident (both quoted at the beginning of this piece) are local witnesses to either the horror and danger of mountaintop removal, or the sense of community and the strength that is derived from these communities as exemplified by the Inez, Kentucky resident's statement about sitting in the church pew made by the great-grandfather of a recently deceased parishioner. In stark contrast, the fictional character of Liam callously remarks that a local mountain is little more than a physical feature that will be little lost when surface mining is completed. At its core each quotation is about the disruptive force of mining. However, these comments illuminate a deeper concern than just a theoretical dichotomy between fiction and nonfiction. They are emblematic of Silas House in his *not* compartmentalizing social concerns from fiction. His journalistic pieces and his fiction are of one cloth. In one of his newspaper columns, he notes that he grew up near a strip mine: "When I was a teenager, there was a strip mine directly across from our house. We breathed in the dust and listened to the groan of machinery for more than a year. I spent long hours on the ridge above the mines watching and mourning the loss of the woods and rolling pasture" ("Devastating View"). The environmental effects of mining and the disadvantages that miners face deeply inform House and his point of view.

In the last several years, American coal interests have promoted a "new" argument for the relaxed regulation of coal mining. Although nothing more than an old argument in new guise, the industry has linked coal production to a concern for national security in the face of terrorism threats. With Islamic jihads, terrorist training centers, and military invasions all within Middle Eastern and Asian regions rich in oil and gas reserves, coal has become a new priority—a safely acquired energy resource unencumbered by international politics. Coal, unlike Asian oil and gas, brings neither threats of attack, nor attempts to disrupt the supply chain. Similar arguments were made in the late 1970s when America faced a crisis in its oil supply. Local and national coal interests tout coal as aiding in the fight against terrorism. The George W. Bush administration has responded to the fi-



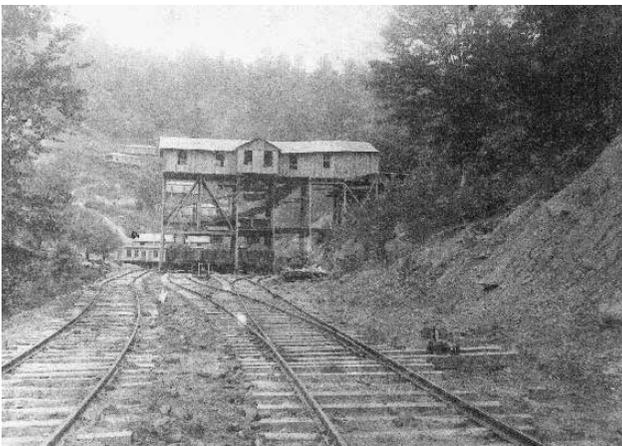
*Man, woman and child standing before offices with a sign reading "Ely Jellico Coal Co" in Ely near Four Mile on the border of Bell County but in Knox County, Kentucky, early 1900s. Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Archives of the Alice Lloyd College McGaw Library, Pippa Passes, Kentucky (negative number 2C-LL45-78).*

nancial contributions of coal interests by proposing the relaxation of laws governing mountaintop removal, environmental degradation and miner health issues (see Drew 2004).<sup>2</sup> These matters are not unacknowledged in southeastern Kentucky. However, the local repercussions of unfettered mineral extraction are evident. In the first quotation that begins this essay, a resident forcefully describes the repercussions of mountaintop removal in the name of business interests. Silas House unites personal experience with Appalachian strip mining and fiction writing. His strong personal concern, particularly in the case of mountaintop removal, and more generally his interest in the effects of mining on the local landscape, informs his focus on strip mining in *Coal Tattoo*. For House, coal mining is not just some narrative infrastructure to order his novel. Instead, his fiction, his home, and his personal life are closely intertwined. He is keenly aware that today coal extraction from the mountains is the result of American energy demands. Long skeins of trains, often eighty or ninety cars long, wind their way out of the mountains to serve as providers of crucial fuel for power plants in the midwest and southwest.

As part of his personal commitment to his community, House has written pieces protesting this destruction. He has also joined other artists in flyovers of the devastated areas that are otherwise so hard to see. Hidden by large stands of trees, the dimensions of this mining are otherwise difficult to observe. As a result of removing the mountaintop in layer-cake fashion, large swatches of forested lands are barren with deep gashes as if sculpted by trowels the size of skyscrapers.

So, too, in the 1960s, the period of focus for *Coal Tattoo*, another troubling mining technique, strip mining, also leaves deep, troublesome gashes on the landscape and in the cultural body of residents. These deep scars—the metaphorical coal tattoos—propel Silas House's novel. These coal scars are not just House's concern alone; they resonate today with sympathetic ecologists, cultural preservationists, Appalachian scholars and locals.<sup>3</sup>

The disturbances and disruptions that the mining of coal has on House's fictional community, named Free Creek, and neighboring communities in southeastern Kentucky during the 1950s and 1960s are at the heart of *Coal Tattoo*. These discontinuities are more than momentary crises. Instead, the effects of mining on Annet and Easter's family

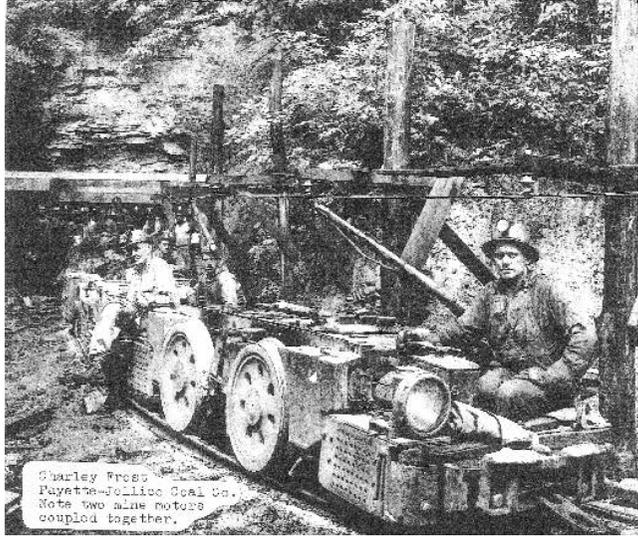


*Anchor Mine, coal loading building—tipple, Brush Creek near Artemus, Knox County, Kentucky. 1930s-1940s.*

*Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Archives of the Alice Lloyd College McGaw Library, Pippa Passes, Kentucky (negative number 14C-LL45-78).*

extend back for decades, and each generation has had to cope with the consequences of such destruction and difficulties. House's theme is the response of tradition and family life in the face of such adversities. Coal extraction in its many guises leaves a trail of mourning that permeates this novel. For example, Annet knows that their family's grief is growing, and in the surrounding area, mourning seems to spread as if it is a growing and living emanation rising from the landscape:

It rose from them and moved out the window, a great wind that whistled through the trees down the mountain until it reached the town. There this wind of grief kicked newspapers along the sidewalks and blew the hats from the heads of a group of men leaving the Depot Cafe. It blew up the skirts of women on their way into the dress shop, caused trees to bend, set waves to peaking on the river. People felt it come out of nowhere, turned to watch it pass. The trees showed the white sides of their leaves



*Miners exiting mine on a motorized car circa 1930s-1940s. Fayette-Jellico Coal Company, Knox County, Kentucky.*

*Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Collection in the library of the Knox County Historical Museum, Barbourville, Kentucky.*

to its approach, and as it moved across the hills the wind tore damp clothes from lines where they had hung to dry. Tomato plants broke in two and tufts of leaf lettuce were lost. Their collected grief moved up the dirt road and took shingles from their own little house on Free Creek. (161-62)

In addition to his descriptions of the intertwined landscape, Silas House's novels are a rich catalog of the continuities of family ties: the constancy of folk foods; Pentecostal baptisms by the riverside; and, most of all, the vitality of traditional music and song in everyday life. House writes like a folklorist approaching tradition as a bridge that ties the past with the present. But the novels are much more than an encyclopedia of Appalachian traditions. There are the darker, coal sooty results of the arrival of modern industrialization, the subsequent monopolizing of an area by mining operations, and—with the exhaustion of ore deposits—the departure of mining efforts from an area. As a symptom of the larger tendrils of industrialization, coal mining generates feelings of fragmentation, dismay, troubles, and disruptions that require the refashioning and flexibility of culture. In the end, Silas House provides new lessons useful in understanding Appalachia.

Anneth and Easter could not be more different in their attitudes toward their own local traditional culture, a vibrant sense of the deeper meanings of life, religious faith and alcohol consumption. Despite differing values, the two sisters are joined as if by an umbilical cord, in part because they share the wrenching experience of losing four close family members while they are still young. Easter is six-years-old when her father Luke Sizemore dies. At age ten, her mother, Birdie, grief-stricken over losing Luke, commits suicide. When Easter is sixteen, she and Anneth lose their maternal grandmother, Vine. The loss of the paternal Grandma Serena means that Easter begins raising fifteen-year-old Anneth. The ties between the sisters are cemented when Easter accepts responsibility for raising Anneth. Even Anneth “knew that Easter could have gone off to teachers college if it hadn't been for raising her. Easter had given it all up to take



*Train tracks with one line running beneath a coal tippie, Ely area of Knox County, early 1900s. Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Archives of the Alice Lloyd College McGaw Library, Pippa Passes, Kentucky (negative number 75C-LL45-78).*

care of Anneth” (137). Although the sisters are only five years apart in age, Easter chooses this parenting role partly out of a feeling of sibling obligation. But this is not an easy assignment.

Anneth was born in early 1940. The novel opens as she dances with drunken abandon at a local bar named Hilltop. She is all of seventeen. As a God-fearing churchwoman, Easter objects to Anneth’s sexually-charged dancing.

Although she is sometimes beset with the blues, nonetheless Anneth has a wild and celebratory spirit. She oscillates between devil-may-care behavior and sequestering herself in bed due to deep depression. Anneth continually seeks excitement in parties, drinking, and particularly the company of men. For much of the novel, Anneth is keenly aware of her unfulfilled desire to fully live: “Sometimes I feel so full up of something that I think I’ll bust wide open. Don’t you know how that feels to want more? I just want to have a big time” (8).

When nearly twenty years of age, Anneth marries and sojourns to Nashville with Matthew Morgan, a musician. After just three months, Anneth leaves him and thereafter divorces him. Anneth’s second marriage to Liam Trosper is a central feature of the novel. They meet at Blackhawk Lake as Anneth approaches Liam and others from the mining company and asks for a beer. They date for about two years and remain married for just a year. By the age of twenty-six Anneth is separated from Liam. Their relationship is ultimately sundered by the Altamont Mining Company’s insistence on initiating the strip mining process on her family’s land at Free Creek. The company claims the mineral rights based on a broad form deed signed by an unauthorized member of the family some fifty years earlier.

In the third quotation that begins this paper, Liam, the son of a coal mine owner, castigates Anneth for objecting to the plans of Altamont Mining Coal to begin strip mining on her family’s land. Instead of acquiescence, she immediately considers her family and ancestors, and their strong tradition of familial and generational links. She recognizes that all of this emotion is anchored in a love of place. Liam can see little beyond the signed-away mineral rights of some fifty years earlier. Coal companies accomplished this thievery in a number of ways. The most malicious instrument of deceit was the broad form deed. As Erik Reece notes, this legal form “gave the deed holders broad rights to extract the coal by any means they desired” (54).<sup>4</sup> It is a financial asset, a legal undertaking for Liam, but he sees little beyond the profit-making process anyway. He does not see mining as uprooting ancestors, destroying cemeteries, closing churches, and bulldozing homes. For House and his local characters, all of these—ancestors, cemeteries, churches and homes—are the sustenance of local mountain communities.<sup>5</sup>

In his daily life, House’s realizations lead not only to stories, but to action. As a result of his commitment to place and people he and fourteen other notable Kentucky

authors toured Lost Mountain, an area that has been ravaged by mountaintop removal. Following this tour they issued statements of what they had seen and the need for concerted efforts to thwart the continuing decapitation of mountains.<sup>6</sup>

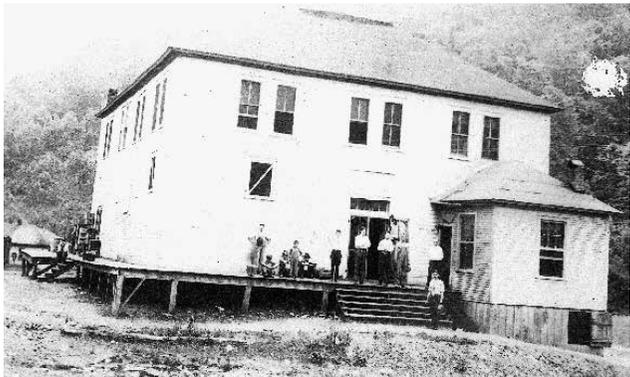
### Coal Owners, Resident Miners and Families

In *Coal Tattoo*, the mining operation introduces social distinctions. House is specifically concerned with how membership in a social class divides individuals who were once on an equal footing. Class also brings with it differing values and a concomitant social distance that separates those of one class from another. The characters in *Coal Tattoo* illustrate both the issue of differing values and social distances.

House's view of Aneth's misalliance with Liam is quite clear: "people like Aneth Sizemore didn't marry sons of coal operators . . . poor, regular girls didn't mix with the company men. Rich people and poor people didn't do things together, period, much less marry" (209). Aneth grew up with miners in her family. She came to see the beauty of honest hard work, even if she were more whimsical in her choice of husbands: "Aneth loved the way the coal got into a miner's eyelashes like mascara and stayed there permanently" (24).

The locals are socially interwoven and closely tied to their land. If Aneth comes from such hardworking stock then Liam Trosper, her husband, is first an outsider temporarily assigned to oversee the southeastern Kentucky mine. Second, his upper class standing establishes his horizon as dominated by economic interests. Liam has two concerns, neither of which dovetail with those of Aneth or her family. Foremost to Liam is the economic prospect of successfully operating the Kentucky mine for Altamont Mining Company. Also, when push comes to shove, his allegiances are with his natal family, part owners of Altamont. Liam is ever mindful of the supervision exercised over him and the miners originating from corporate headquarters in West Virginia, where his natal family happens to reside.<sup>7</sup> This is in sharp contrast to Aneth's commitment to her people and her local community in southeastern Kentucky. Contrary to Liam's protestations to Aneth, his allegiances clearly lie with his own family's financial concerns. When pressed to choose between his ties to his wife's kin and his own West Virginia family, economic interests and opportunities trump other concerns. As Aneth notes, "she loved that land more than him. He couldn't even fathom the idea of loving a place, and she couldn't comprehend the idea of someone's not understanding how that felt, to love a place so much that you could cry for it, that you could hurt for it" (242).

The recognition of these class distinctions runs both ways. Aneth feels the sting of such differences in her waitressing job. In one instance "four men who had gotten off the seven o'clock train were particularly obnoxious with riotous laughter. When she took their order they had made fun



*The Old Warren Commissary, sometimes called the "company store" circa 1900. Warren, Knox County, Kentucky.*  
 Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Collection in the library of the Knox County Historical Museum, Barbourville, Kentucky.

of her accent—raising their eyebrows and shooting knowing looks to one another when she spoke” (159). At Blackhawk Lake, Anneth’s close friend Lolie warns her about the mining company managers who pulled their boat on the lakeshore nearby. The men attract Anneth’s attention because of their ready supply of beer. Lolie forcefully notes that “[t]hem company men won’t fool with no waitress. They’re all highfalutin” (154). Liam and the prospect of beer are too attractive to Anneth, and ignoring Lolie’s advice, she collects a beer. Thus begins the relationship between Liam and Anneth.

At a family meal in West Virginia, it becomes apparent to Anneth that Liam and his father are insensitive to the repercussions of their strip mining plans. When the matter arises, Anneth clearly foresees not just the harm to the landscape, “strip mining tears up the land too bad” (180), but also the change in social relations that will result: “[i]f you switch over to strip mining, people are going to turn against the company” (180). It is this social distance and separate set of class values that concerns Silas House.

Once married, Anneth lives permanently with Liam in the company town of Altamont. Barren, filthy, and ultimately temporary, the town also reflects local class conditions. First, the local landscape of Altamont is shaped by the economic decisions made by the mining company. All of the buildings in Altamont mining camp are positioned by the mining company: “Altamont, a dirty sprawl of houses that were shipped in on railcars” (142). Even the town church was built by the company (185). Second, Silas House uses Anneth’s musing over her married life with Liam to explore how this local landscape of Altamont, with all its buildings positioned by the mining company, illustrates how the haphazard architectural placement embeds social class into the very landscape. Like so many instances in mining and timber camps, once the resource is extracted a settlement like Altamont is disassembled without consideration for the repercussions this will have for uprooted residents, and the temporary homes will again be placed on cars and sent to the next site. Anneth disliked this temporariness as well as hating “the dirt and grime and noise, the barren landscape where the trees had been clear-cut” (225). Unlike the Free Creek community, places like Altamont exemplify the transitory settlement and temporary shelter that extractive industries provide. House draws a sharp contrast between the social deficiencies of Altamont and the more enduring, more substantive sense of community represented by Free Creek.

Anneth comes to despise Altamont not just for the defaced environment that results



*L & N Depot, in coal country, about 1940. Artemus, Knox County, Kentucky. Photograph courtesy of the Michael C. Mills Photographic Collection in the library of the Knox County Historical Museum, Barbourville, Kentucky.*

from this sort of mining, but also because of the changes in her social life, “living in the big foreman’s house while friends of hers lived in the camp down there in the valley” (225). Above the dirt and the locals, the foreman’s house isolates Anneth as it must also Liam. Because his social orientation is not focused on the local community, the isolation is not a concern.

Liam courts Anneth

for about two years. They are married for only a short time. For much of this time she sleeps or resides in Altamont. As a result, her own life changes dramatically. As the foreman's wife, she cannot continue to work. This leaves her devoid of much human contact, and she feels isolated from many who are like her. In the coal camp, both men and women are employed. Anneth, however, because of her anomalous position in town society, has plenty of daytime leisure which she spends shopping, reading, and listening to long-playing records. Particularly, after she marries Liam and resides in the foreman's house, her social world is sharply curtailed. She finds only one other resident with leisure time—Jewel Stubefield. But her relationship with Jewel is insufficient. It does not make up for her former network of social relationships. She misses the camaraderie and social interactions of her kin and her social equals: "She would have traded places with them in a heartbeat. Those little coal-camp houses held much more warmth than her big house on the hill with the long hallways and the gingerbread on the porch" (230).

In a further illustration of the social distances between Liam's and Anneth's families, Gabe, Anneth's brother, approaches Liam for a job in the Altamont Mining Company. Gabe remarks bitterly, "He didn't try to help me, never even mentioned it again" (224). Liam is isolated as a result of the cultural distance which is as wide as the separate residential patterns. In his office and in the socially and physically remote home, Liam is very much removed from the local values and social connections that directed so much of southeastern Kentucky life. If true to "his kin," Liam would have endeavored to aid Gabe. But Liam's worldview was not congruent with Anneth's, and also his allegiances lay elsewhere. This would ultimately doom his marriage to Anneth.

### **Coal as a Symbol of Loss**

In Silas House's worldview, surface mining leaves irreversible mutilations. Once one disrupts the many layers (social, cultural, and physical) that are part and parcel of the land to arrive at the coal beneath, it is irrevocably changed and cannot be reclaimed. As Anneth's sister Easter notes, "Once you strip the land, it'll be changed forever. All those trees, the field of wildflowers up there"(239). These losses include ancestral lands, as was the case with Lolie's cousin who "lost his whole mountain to the coal company. They had a broad form deed" (12). Anneth, like her kin, sees these sorts of legal instruments as fictions at best, but certainly not legitimate: "'Everybody is against them,' Anneth said. 'Most of those deeds were bought for a quarter an acre or something. And then fifty years goes by before the company comes back and says they're ready to mine the land. It's not right'"(183).

Liam would later reveal that Anneth's great-uncle Aaron Sullivan sold the mineral rights by signing a broad form deed (238). During the period of World War I, he did not own the land nor did he have legally-binding authority to sell it, but great-uncle Aaron did just that before he left the area for good.

Once Liam reveals that Aaron Sullivan had indeed signed such a document, Easter and presumably the rest of her family quickly understand that they are now ensnared in a potentially devastating loss of land because of the nefarious history of the broad form deed.<sup>8</sup> Easter quickly retorts "[t]hat was nearly fifty years ago . . . [a]nd he didn't even own this land" (238). For Anneth and Easter the ancestral land was everything, but to Liam it was only a financial transaction buttressed by what he saw as legally-binding instruments. It then hits Easter how inconsequential these serious matters are to him. In a devastating moment of realization she "looked at Liam and realized that this meant nothing to him. He couldn't care less" (238).

At the family meal in West Virginia previously discussed, Liam's father expresses his

family's attitude towards the broad form deeds. These deeds are seen as legally binding documents, and Liam's father and the Altamont Mining Company would invoke them as they saw fit during the course of conducting a profitable business. Notably during this discussion, Liam is oddly quiet. His sympathies become apparent later when he uses the same argument to inform Easter that the Altamont Mining Company plans to strip mine her family's land on Free Creek—the self-same land “sold” by great-uncle Aaron.

For at least fifty years, Anneth's family carried this knowledge of the destructive nature of coal mining and its effect on the land, people and work. There are many examples in *Coal Tattoo* of this destructive character. Beginning at age seventeen, Anneth's brother Gabe worked in a mine (12). Later, when employment sagged, Gabe lost his job. With no other local opportunities and the failure of Liam to help him, he would eventually seek employment in a Dayton, Ohio factory. More seriously, Grandpa Saul died in a “makeshift mine” accident behind his house (143). Anneth and Easter's father Luke died in a coal mining accident when “[t]he Altamont mine caved in” (15). In a not so subtle irony, he worked and died for the very company owned by Liam's family. Ultimately, the Altamont Mining Company would present a still greater threat to Anneth's family living in Free Creek. Anneth's “own father had given his life for Altamont and now they were going to destroy her land. Almost everyone in her family was dead and now her land was going to die too” (239).<sup>9</sup>

House's convictions are also evident in the first novel in his trilogy. In *A Parchment of Leaves*, House explores life before the substantial effects of coal mining took hold. Significantly, House's symbol in *Parchment* is not that of a coal tattoo, but instead the leaves of the redbud tree. The tree represents knowledge, and more specifically the value of traditional knowledge as supported and sustained by folk communities. But this state of affairs has long since disappeared. What had been a place of knowledge, Grandma Vine's homeplace, anchored as it was with a redbud tree, has now been transformed fifty years later. In *Coal Tattoo* the redbud tree and the homeplace described in *Parchment* are now gone and in their stead is a mining camp—“a sprawling, dirty place that sat in the shadow of Redbud Mountain, on Vine's old land” (*Tattoo* 210). It is in House's symbolic universe, where he moves from a focus on the leaves of the redbud tree in *Parchment* to the coal tattoo, that House is suggesting the depth of irrevocable loss once surface mining moves into an area.<sup>10</sup> Both the homeplace and Altamont are human settlements, but economic interests skew social life in the mining camp. In House's symbolic universe, places like Altamont have devastating effects on social relationships.

### Equations of Continuity and Change

Silas House very closely links two siblings—Anneth and her older sister Easter. Anneth realizes that “deep down inside Easter was really all that matters” (137). Similarly, Easter is committed to Anneth. When they lost both parents, Easter had the opportunity to attend Berea College on a scholarship and yet she forfeited this chance to become a teacher in order to raise her fifteen-year-old sister: “Easter had given it all up to take care of Anneth” (137).

Although closely tied to one another, Easter and Anneth are two very different women. Their differences provide House with the opportunity to explore the issues of tradition and change. This exploration ultimately enables House to provide his view of tradition and change in southeastern Kentucky.

Both sisters feel strongly about the land and the family members who preceded them. Through either their maternal or paternal grandmothers they feel indelibly linked to history and place. They carry within themselves something of Grandma Serena or Grandma Vine. But beyond these sorts of familial sympathies, Anneth and Easter live

out their lives in quite different ways. Although in the novel Easter's religious faith is seriously challenged, she sides with tradition. For Easter, a Pentecostal church service is "ecstasy" and "an exhilaration" (140). A central turning point for Easter and her husband El is their adult baptism in the river. To further illustrate the differences between the sisters, Anneth is not visible at the riverside for this important and transforming event. She does honor her promise to Easter to attend, but Anneth is beyond the other side of the river standing in the woods. Clearly, Anneth realizes the importance of this ritual for her sister but also separates herself from this public display of inner faith that is the meaning of a river baptism for traditional Pentecostals.

If Easter finds strength in religion, the old homestead and the "Little Lives" (chapter sixteen in *Tattoo*), snapping beans, canning apricot preserves, and preparing celebratory meals for family members, Anneth is another sort of individual entirely. Anneth is a wild spirit propelled by an admixture of the social lessons she absorbs in Free Creek and the allure of the larger world as represented by popular culture. The novel begins with her sneaking off at the age of seventeen for an outdoor bash among the mountain pines with moonshine, young men, and wild dancing. Throughout the novel, Anneth looks for the magic of life in everyday affairs, and is sadly disappointed when she does not find it. In search of this magic, she is quick to take up with a series of men because of their physical attractiveness and/or succumbs to a suitor's interest in her. Alternatively, she gravitates towards a man because of her own efforts to flee the ongoing blues that seem to periodically afflict her. Anneth and Easter are sisters in contrast: Anneth is impulsive and volatile; Easter is stable and rooted.

House explores the differences between Easter and Anneth through their respective pregnancies. The first to become pregnant is Easter. In the context of their steadfast relationship, cemented as it is by their Pentecostal faith, Easter and her husband Oliver "El" McIntosh conceive a child. However, despite Easter's strong faith and strong connection to local traditional culture, this is insufficient for the vitality of the fetus outside the womb. As House explains, "[n]o matter how hard she tried. No matter how hard she worked to serve God, to sing, to play the piano for His glory. No matter how much she followed Christ's example and treated everyone with compassion. No matter her sacrifices or anything else, nothing ever went the way she wanted" (175).

Ultimately the child is stillborn and "on his forehead, a curved blue line burned into his skin, a mark that she had seen before" (157). Easter then notes that "[h]e has a coal tattoo" (157). Just as the landscape is continually ravaged by the evermore aggressive mining techniques, the family is eroding through deaths as well as the loss of ancestral lands, so too does Easter lose her only child.

Writing of Easter's thoughts, House establishes a direct linkage between family, land and continuity. Both Anneth and Easter face the exigencies of many losses, but their respective responses enable House to comment on the future. Easter seeks strength in the ineffable, the unchanging, in religion, the traditional ways of raising crops and preparing foods, and remaining on the old homestead. And yet she is called upon to absorb a loss, a sacrifice. At this moment of loss, she hears her grandmother Serena's voice, "But it's a sign of sacrifice" (158). The depth of her loss is clear in Easter's sad farewell to the stillborn child:

She had already memorized that face, the big eyes and fat cheeks and most of all the coal tattoo, a faint blue line like the jagged edge of a leaf, stamped onto his temple. She leaned over and kissed him on the coal tattoo. And there her lips felt a coldness that she had never known before, a cold like darkness stretched out eternal. (158)

In describing her loss as cold, dark and eternal, House establishes that this way of life is somehow wanting. The cost of not incorporating the changes all around Easter and El is only loss and sacrifice. Despite her wayward and contrary ways, in Anne's openness to change, her flexibility to popular culture, she will successfully bear a child. House is quite clear that this success is rooted in Anne's worldview.

Some six years after Easter's stillbirth, a new relationship is ignited by just a glance over a cafe counter. Anne becomes enamored with one of the customers. She falls head-over-heels with a soldier in uniform, young Bradley Stamper. They have a fleeting relationship before he is shipped overseas to the Vietnam conflict. But this relationship results in Anne becoming pregnant. In House's next chronological novel, *Clay's Quilt*, Clay, the product of this disrupted union, will endeavor in the 1980s and 1990s to stitch together the traditional and fragmented pieces of his existence into a life that is both postmodern and traditional. Anne, like her son Clay, struggles to remain connected to the character of southeastern Kentucky while simultaneously participating in contemporary American life. It is only this simultaneity that explains both Anne's presence at Easter's baptism and her devotion to movies and popular magazines. The significance is that Anne's child lives and Easter's does not. The differences between them reside in their relationship to tradition and change. Anne is much more willing to embrace such change.

More so than any other character in *Coal Tattoo*, Anne reads paperback novels, thumbs through mass market magazines, and listens to all manner of country, popular and jazz songs. She is also the one who embarks on journeys that take her beyond southeastern Kentucky to Nashville, Louisville, and the Atlantic seashore. But regardless of these influences, Anne only finds an anchor in Free Creek, to which she returns twice.

## Conclusion

Silas House's family has resided for nine generations in southeastern Kentucky. He genuinely feels the power and the strength of such a long multigenerational presence in the area. The rich symbolic world of *Coal Tattoo* is not partitioned from House's familial legacy and local quotidian experiences. Instead, his experiences and strongly held sentiments inform *both* his fiction and his views of the pressing issue of strip mining and mountaintop removal.

In Appalachia, a miner's work is honorable, and for some quite meaningful. In his autobiography, Robert Armstead, an African American, writes about working for some forty years in various West Virginia mines (2002). He holds in high esteem the badge of his work and the coal dust. It is "like wearing a badge of honor, a miner feels almost a sense of pride to wear coal dust on his body or clothes" (95). As if writing a line from *Coal Tattoo*, Silas House wrote in a recent newspaper article his sentiments regarding the value of being a miner: "My Uncle Sam was in a mining accident that left him branded by a coal tattoo across his left cheekbone. I can recall my Uncle Jack coming home from the mines with the coal dust so thick in his lashes that it looked as if he had applied mascara" ("Devastating View").

The repercussions for House's family are much like the characters in *Coal Tattoo*. He writes, "Coal mining is a part of me. My grandfather lost his leg in the Leslie County deep mines in the 1940s. When he was able, he went back into the mines and worked twenty more years" ("Devastating View"). House continues in this same newspaper column, "[t]hey all loved their jobs . . . They are symbols of determination and hard work" ("Devastating View"). Although certainly in his mind while writing, this novel is not about the dignity of work in the mines. This novel also does not regale the reader with details of working in the mine shaft or the dangers of the large open pits of strip

mining, House's novel is instead about the serious and larger repercussions of mining for the workers and their families.

In his interplay between tradition and breaks in a family legacy, Silas House does not see the former as a salve to heal all wounds. Instead, House views these breaks as chasms resulting from unequal power relationships, imperfect succor of tradition and the simultaneous and continuous forces of change. There is no sorting out. There is no resolution, but rather the project is left open, just as lives are open. Easter and Anneth Sizemore are left attempting to establish social connections when they can and as best they can. In the end, life in the Appalachian mountains is marked by pain, loss, and suffering, particularly when inequalities caused by intrusive mining are introduced.

## Endnotes

1. Although positive in its view of coal mining, the industry does have a website that further describes the various mining techniques (see "Mountaintop Mining").

2. In the name of national security, James L. Connaughton, chair of the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, promotes the substantial loosening of mining rules as "all part of the broader effort to sustain coal as a critical part of the nation's energy mix because it's affordable, it's reliable and it's secure" (Drew A11). For a sample of local statements representing coal mining interests see Bill Caylor and Mark H. Prota. For a critical review of this stance, see Jack Spadaro, a former insider of the coal industry, as well as Brosi and Reece (58-9). For a critical review of the Kentucky Coal Association website, see Shelby (A15).

3. For a review of the seventy years of Appalachian resistance to surface mining, see Mountrie. A substantial portion of the analysis focuses on eastern Kentucky. For a discussion of international resistance to mining companies, including coal, see Gedicks. In southeastern Kentucky the recent excesses of mountaintop removal include the cases of Lost Mountain and the Starfire Mine. They have galvanized a new round of protests and concerns. In searing descriptions, Erik Reece has described the devastation that has accompanied Leslie Resources' mountaintop removal mining of Lost Mountain. To dramatize the effects of mountaintop removal, notable Kentucky authors were flown over the devastated areas (see for instance Anonymous, "Saddened," Jester, and Cooper). Noted Kentucky authors such as Wendell Berry and Silas House (May 1, 2005) have published newspaper pieces objecting to the destructive excesses of mountaintop removal. As Mary Ann Taylor-Hall notes, "I flew over several miles of devastation where once a series of mountaintops had stood. Of all the life that had been in that place, nothing remained" (A10)." Some have filed lawsuits to stop the mountaintop removal (Mueller). At root is the nagging concern that left unregulated the coal regions of Appalachia will ultimately see the demise of entire mountain ranges (Cooper A12).

4. There were of course other contrivances. Warren Wright examines how after the Civil War, R.M. Broas oversaw the exploitive execution of Kentucky leases and options in "the Elkhorn Valley of Pike and Letcher Counties and the Shelby Valley of Pike County" (163) to separate locals from their mineral wealth. In the mid-twentieth century new legislation has attempted to end the validity of the broad form deed, yet issues of property ownership as well as absentee owners continue to trouble the area. Following a 1988 Commonwealth of Kentucky law, coal operators are now required to seek permission before mining (Reece 54). This has not stopped coal operators from the brazen mining of coal on property owned by a private citizen (see for instance Anonymous, "Leevon Baker").

5. For a description of the encroachment of mountaintop removal on local cemeteries see Chaltas and Brown (32). In West Virginia, Larry Gibson and his family are concerned because blasting as part of the mountaintop removal process sends large boulders onto a family cemetery that has been in use for some two centuries (Warrick). Carole Harris Barton notes the loss of homes and a schoolhouse because of strip mining—" [w]e had been chased out of our home one step ahead of a strip mine, and now we were being chased out of our school one step ahead of a demolition crew. It wasn't remarkable; it was just coal country" (25).

6. For a sample of House's columns in the *Lexington Herald-Leader* see May 1, 2005, Spring 2005, March 13, 2005, and January 9, 2005 and *The Oxford American* (Spring 2005). For a description of conditions on Lost Mountain see Reece.

7. In Appalachian Studies there are a number of published works that examine social class as it applies to the understanding of coal mining. See for instance, Caudill, Corbin, Scott, Thompson, Some titles have examined the additional issue of race and social class in the mines (see for instance Trotter).

8. House briefly discusses the broad form deed in a newspaper article (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, January 9, 2005 F1).

9. Working in the mines is a risky business fraught with unknown dangers that may result in serious injury and even death. To this day the newspapers include reports of accidents and mortalities in the mines (see, for instance, Brittain, and for personal experience narrative from the 1940s, see Wright). Crissman examines the effects of mining disasters and fatalities on Appalachian culture (165, 180-199).

10. There is precious little published on coal tattoos. A review of the ethnographic literature has not uncovered studies of this form of material culture. House is certainly drawing on an image that has been used in a popular bluegrass song and as a poem. Billy Ed Wheeler recorded "Coal Tattoo" as a bluegrass song. Unlike the song, he does include Ron Rash's poem "The Marked." This poem is included to familiarize the reader with coal tattoos. Silas House only mentions the bluegrass ballad in his acknowledgements that follow the novel. Neither the ballad nor the songwriter is referred to in the novel. At best there is only an oblique reference to it. At one point House mentions the Kingston Trio and their song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." One of the notable recordings of "Coal Tattoo" is by the Trio. Mention of this group occurs at a point in the novel where the full ravages of coal mining become apparent. Thus, House only indirectly invokes the song.

There is one other work of fiction that draws on coal tattoos. Like Silas House, the novelist Denise Giardina incorporates this symbol within the same sort of social circumstances—life in a grimy coal camp. The parallels between *Coal Tattoo* and *The Unquiet Earth* extend to Giardina's main characters of Rachel and Arthur Lee who represent respectively the same social positions as Annet and Liam. Rather than a flighty attraction, Rachel marries Arthur Lee out of concern for the well-being of her daughter Jackie. But their economic interests could not be more different. With deep connections to the local community, her relatives have worked and died for the very coal company Arthur Lee manages.

Arthur Lee's political leanings are staunchly Republican and strongly anti-union. And he impresses his interests on the local area. For instance, Arthur Lee serves as a community commissioner. He is not above using this political office to pull strings in Washington when he feels threatened by the appearance of a VISTA worker, Tom Kolwiecki. He takes these actions because Arthur Lee feels his economic interests are threatened. As a result, Tom is removed and in Arthur Lee's eyes his food store is no longer jeopardized. The community, however, suffers from this loss. Before his departure, Tom was working in tandem with the community to organize a variety of projects that would result in tangible improvements in the community.

As in *Coal Tattoo*, in *The Unquiet Earth* Giardina enumerates the omnipresent dangers of mining—so many of Rachel's relatives suffer injuries, poor employment and rundown living conditions. In a further parallel, Giardina's inclusion of a coal tattoo is also meant to represent how coal mining impresses itself on the human body. Giardina casually notes that Uncle Brigham has a "blue scar he calls a coal tattoo on his forehead where he was hit by a chunk of falling slate" (111). But unlike House, the thrust of Giardina's writing is focused on the placement of her characters in a historical moment. The disappointments and tragedies that follow are less a matter of the initiative of the characters and more the enormous effects of the larger forces of history on everyday folk.

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