

REVIEWS

James J. Lorence. *A Hard Journey: The Life of Don West*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 344 pages. Hardback with dust jacket, \$39.95.

REVIEWED BY RACHEL LEE RUBIN.

Don West, whose time spanned from 1907 to 1992, played—wholeheartedly—such a multiplicity of cultural and political roles that the singular term “life” can hardly be stretched to contain them all. During my childhood, he was playfully mythologized as deserving credit for my birth: when my father, a veteran CIO organizer, could not hold any kind of job in his native New York because of McCarthyite blacklisting, West, who was then living and working in Baltimore, was able to help him find work in what would become my hometown. But my brothers and I were considerably more impressed by the fact that Don was missing parts of two fingers, which he kindly allowed us to examine every time the family visited him in Pipestem, West Virginia, where, after leaving Baltimore, he participated in founding the Appalachian South Folklife Center.

In *A Hard Journey*, historian James Lorence has produced a dazzling book about Appalachia’s poet-activist-preacher-organizer-educator-role model. The beauty of Lorence’s subject is precisely how difficult West is to pin down or categorize; the satisfaction of reading his book is that Lorence proves admirably up to the task of carefully following this moving target. The story of Don West is unusually instructive—and has until recently been puzzlingly ignored. Thus, the first, and perhaps most significant, accomplishment of Lorence’s book is to show that we “need” Don West: we need him to “speak” to our understanding of labor studies, Southern history and culture, Appalachian studies, literary studies, and radical studies—at the very least.

This first published book-length study of the “mountain socialist,” as Myles Horton, West’s co-founder of the Highlander School, tagged him, is exhaustively researched and gracefully written,

presenting West as a figure at once emblematic and extraordinary. It joins an exciting new body of scholarship, kicked off by the 1990 publication of Robin D.J. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe*, devoted to reconsidering outdated paradigms of Southern exceptionalism, and rethinking indigenous Southern politics and art. Although there has been a kind of small "renaissance" of West scholarship of late, much of it very useful, no previous work on West offers the sustained arguments, historical investigation, interdisciplinarity, and detailed political framing of Lorence's book. West makes brief appearances in Michael Denning's landmark *Cultural Front* and Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time*, elicits a call for further literary study in Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery*, appears as somewhat indifferent or unconnected to Communist organizations in George Brosi's afterward to *No Lonesome Road*, and is taken too much at his own word in my own essay, "Voice of the Cracker: Don West Reinvents the Appalachian."

Lorence makes good use of this extant work on West—and then turns on warp speed. He has meticulously "tracked" West in archives, interviews, newspapers, and letters in more than twenty American states as well as the former Soviet Union, yielding a complex portrait of a driven man. Motivated by his conviction that true democracy was attainable in the United States, and fueled by his veneration of working-class Appalachian culture, West used every tool he could find, emerging, and not just in retrospect, as one of the most influential Appalachians of the twentieth century. But *A Hard Journey* is no simple hagiography: Lorence attends to the people West provoked or alienated as well as those who persecuted him, to West's failures political as well as personal (he comes across, for instance, as a somewhat absent father) as well as his staggering persistence and accomplishments.

The major wish *A Hard Journey* left me with is that Lorence had probed more deeply the cultural politics of West's poetry. I am not asking Lorence suddenly to become a literary scholar here; those who wish to investigate West's poetry more fully should look forward eagerly to the publication by Palgrave-Macmillan of literary scholar Chris Green's *Social Life of Poetry: Appalachia, Race, and Radical Modernism*, about the radical poetics of West and others. Nonetheless,

West's views on art—both functional and aesthetic—need to be located historically in terms of the Communist Party's stances on the revolutionary potential of "folk" art, for instance, which led to the Left's "adoption" of singer/songwriter Aunt Molly Jackson—a couple of whose songs were printed in the definitive collection *Proletarian Literature of the United States*—and her resultant "spoiling" in the eyes of West. In *A Hard Journey*, there are moments when West's literary strategies come off as oddly individualistic. I say this with no intention to slight West's own, singular vision. Rather, I would have Lorence use his research to show that there was an organizational context for the cultural side of West's work as well as the community-activist side. West's relationship with the Left African American poet Langston Hughes could serve as a case in point.

But this suggestion is emphatically on the order of a request for "more." I was fascinated and engaged by *A Hard Journey*. I was challenged by the book, and by the example of West, to rethink my own assumptions about regionalism, political history, and approaches to activism, especially the ways in which different generations of radicals have been concretely connected to each other up through the present. Lorence's work will significantly advance our understanding of the history of the American South beyond existing strictures. I'm convinced, in short, that we do need Don West—and that Lorence has succeeded in bringing him to us.

Barbara Crooker. *Line Dance*. Cincinnati: Word Press, 2008. 78 pages. Trade Paperback, \$17.00.

REVIEWED BY REBECCA FOUST.

Line Dance is poet Barbara Crooker's second full length collection of poetry, and one that more than lives up to the high standard set by her first book, *Radiance*, which won the 2005 Word Press First Book Competition and was a finalist for the 2006 Paterson Poetry Prize. Several poems in this collection ("Poem on a Line by Anne Sexton," "Simile," "The VCCA Fellows Visit the Holiness Baptist Church,"