

Wilkerson, Jessica (2019) *To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice*, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL.

Review by Lane Windham

When a delegation of German labor ministers recently toured the U.S. to better understand Trump's ascendance, they asked my colleagues and me about only one book: J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elogy*. To these left-wing Europeans, Vance seemed to offer a clear window into the anger of Trump's white, working-class 'forgotten America.' Yet Vance gets neither the working class nor Appalachia right, as Jessica Wilkerson makes perfectly clear in *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*. Wilkerson's is a well-researched and expansive narrative about working-class women's roles in Appalachian social justice movements in the 1960s and 1970s. She especially focuses on how their caretaking roles defined and motivated their political action. She complicates popular tropes about a disaffected white, male working class, and instead spotlights 'the grave problems poor and working-class people faced in Appalachia: environmental destruction, a punitive welfare system, a lack of democratic spaces, and political elites who demanded working-class people's quiescence.' (43)

Women's stories spill forth from Wilkerson's narrative, rich with complications, aspiration and anger. We get a full introduction to Florence Reese, for example, who penned *Which Side Are You On?* on the back of a wall calendar while caretaking for seven children; her coal miner husband was out organizing a union. We learn that Reese continued her activism well beyond the mine wars of the 1930s, and wrote more ballads for antipoverty activists in the 1960s and striking miners in the 1970s.

We meet Edith Easterling, born in Poor Bottom, Kentucky, who led local fights against strip mining and for greater government benefits, and wound up red-baited and hauled before the Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee (KUAC) in 1968. Her daughter, Sue Ella, got fed up with liberal do-gooderism and instead bunked in the Appalachian Tent of Resurrection City in the Poor People's Campaign, and then formed the Appalachian Free University in 1969.

Eula Hall, the daughter of tenant farmers, worked as a domestic servant and then had the misfortune of marrying a violent alcoholic when she was only seventeen years old. Hall learned to navigate scant social services, and became active in the local Kentucky version of the War on Poverty, the Highway 979 Community Action Council. Her world expanded when she hosted a VISTA volunteer at her house while her husband was drying out in the local Veterans Administration hospital. She dipped her toe into community organizing by agitating for city water service as an alternative to contaminated well water, and helped found the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization (EKWRO). Far from serving as an engine to the backlash against

welfare, Hall led other white women like herself to join forces with the African-American-led welfare rights movement of the late 1960s. Their alliance prompted a Louisville *Courier & Journal* headline touting, 'Mountain Women Join Negro Mothers to Push for Welfare.' (111)

We follow these Appalachian women as they engaged in civil disobedience to stop strip mining in 1972, and then learned to do breast and pelvic self-exams through the Mud Creek Health Clinic in 1973. Appalachia is far from a conservative back water in Wilkerson's tale; her protagonists take a deep dive into the heart of their era's social and political fomentation.

Wilkerson illuminates contrasting versions of Southern feminism in the early 1970s, spotlighting a working-class version that was more focused on gender violence and economic hardship than on equal access to credit and salaries. The Appalachian women's feminism grows out of their understanding of their role as 'citizen caregivers' who 'infused social and political movements with those experiences of taking care of parents, husbands, children, and neighbors in the hostile environment created by coalfield capitalism.' (6) Wilkerson argues that a 'breadwinner liberalism' ultimately defined the women's rights movement, and so focused on shoe-horning women and their reproductive labor into an economy built on a male worker model. The women activists of Appalachia instead saw their roles as caretakers as valued and rewarded, alongside waged labor. This broader vision was embraced by women who began to get hired in the coal mines, following the gains of the civil and women's rights movements. We learn that by 1980, women made up about two percent of the coal industry jobs. (191) These women organized within the Coal Employment Project and as members of the United Mine Workers to argue for protection for pregnant miners and a better family leave policy. They brought their capacity for reproductive labor along with them into the mines, and demanded a more expansive understanding of who a worker was and what she needed on the job.

Yet beyond these women coal miners, little of *To Live Here, You Have to Fight* covers the years beyond 1973. This was a pivotal year that, with the oil crisis and stagflation, marked the weakening of the New Deal order. If Wilkerson had extended more of her story later into the 1970s, she would have had to wrestle more squarely with how her Appalachian women dealt with the beginnings of a shift away from an industrial capitalism, and its ancillary that Wilkerson calls 'coalfield capitalism.' That's when the nation began barreling toward the globalized and financialized capitalism of today. This shift barely registers in *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*. We do learn, for instance, that activists protested when the United Mine Worker Welfare & Retirement Fund began to pull back from cradle-to-grave coverage, but we do not learn that the fund did so in the face of downsizing in coal mining and union membership.

In choosing to anchor the bulk of her story before that shift, Wilkerson takes a pass on exploring how the Appalachian women's activism and hope weathered these larger changes. Did these women fight and lose in the late 1970s and early 1980s? Did their community organizations and clinics endure the incipient neo-liberalism of the Carter years, or did Reagan do them in? Perhaps their organizations live on in some form?

Most likely, the women found themselves caught up in what Nancy Fraser has labelled '[Capitalism's Crisis of Care](#),' in which corporations monetize and profit from the previously unpaid labor that women performed in their caretaking roles. Fraser argues that under

neoliberalism and the new two-earner family norm, capitalism commodifies social reproduction and profits from the crisis that financial capitalism creates in people's lives. There's little doubt that Wilkerson's Appalachian women, including those who performed unpaid care labor, were impacted by this shift, and that it weakened the region's social bonds. In fact, an exploration of how Appalachian women and families fared under financial capitalism could go a long way to explaining Trump's success in the region.

The great strength of Wilkerson's story, however, is in expanding our current historical narrative about mid-twentieth century industrial capitalism by writing Appalachian women's activism into it. It especially breaks new ground in displaying how these women created a 'grassroots war on poverty.' Building on the foundation offered by Johnson's War on Poverty in the mid to late 1960s, they demanded a greater investment in their region and their families. With this book, Southern womanhood takes on a whole new layer of complexity, in a region where it has been seen as one-dimensional for far too long.

Reviewer Bio

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