On writing history in the present tense

An interview with writer and historian Elizabeth Catte

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As told to Kim Kelly, 2869 words.

Tags: Writing, Focus, Inspiration, Politics, Identity, Adversity.

Your new book blends the personal and the political. How did you go about striking that balance and deciding how you wanted it to play out?

The only stipulation from the publisher was that the book be 150 pages, because that's the length of the series that it's placed in. Within that, I could do a lot of things.

I knew I wanted to write about the narrative that formed in response to the 2016 Presidential Election, and how that had an afterlife, even after the election took place. I also knew I had to respond to [JD Vance's 2017 book] *Hillbilly Elegy*. The thing that I wasn't so sure about, which came to be the last part of the book, was how to bring in a contemporary perspective. I'm a historian, so that is where most of my interest lies. It's a new thing to me to write about people in the present.

That's basically how the narrative came to be. It's a book that responds to something. This book couldn't exist without some of the trash that people are saying about Appalachia. So I'm really conscious that it is inside of this vacuum that was created within all these awful stories about Appalachia, and parachute journalism, and the success of *Hillbilly Elegy*.

But what I really wanted to do was interrupt this claim of ownership that I felt had been made about Appalachia, and the stories of Appalachians, and the stories about people like me. Even if it's not explicit, it's implied.

So when people come to the region and explain it to other people, they're explaining me. Or when JD Vance gets up on CNN, or whatever platform he has, and he's talking about, "They do this to themselves," this, that, and the other, he's talking about people like me. I wanted to very strongly interrupt that claim of ownership, and interrupt that power.

That's what I did in the first two sections. For the third section, I wanted to insert some people into the stories of the region that we know about, and we celebrate, and love, and adore, but people outside the region might not be so familiar with. I wanted to create that argument that people are missing out, and then introduce them to the people and the stories they've not seen.

Do you see this book as a work of activism?

Yes and no. What I wanted to do is interrupt the claim of ownership, and I wanted to create possibly a little breathing room for people like me. I'm by far not the first person who has written a confrontational book like this. There's a bibliography that's held by West Virginia University that's over 1,000 pages long that's everything that they could catalog that has been written about Appalachia. So that's filled with all kinds of scholarship, and reflections on activism. I am a part of that.

What we feel in the region right now is sort of a sense of fatigue that we're always put on the spot, answering for what other people think about the region. So if this gets some people off my friends' backs who are doing important community work about prison abolition, or reproduction rights… What I've been told is that people can hand this book out to people and just say, "Read this," so that saves them a little bit of time explaining themselves and having to articulate their identity to people. And that is tremendous to me.

You're open about your socialist politics. Appalachia's radical history is often ignored or glossed over in favor of "Red State" rhetoric. Why are people still so surprised that there are still radicals coming out of this place?

One of the things that really drives me crazy about the *Hillbilly Elegy* phenomenon is that lots of people on both sides of the political aisle have really tuned into this, and one of the reasons that they like it is because they say, "Oh, JD Vance is a conservative, but he set his politics aside to write from the heart." And my position is, if you're blaming poor people for being poor, that's your politics. This is not an apolitical text, it's very clearly political, and it's very clearly aligned to conservative politics. And there's nothing heartfelt or heartwarming about this. It's an expression of one person's politics, and that aligns to a larger conservative tradition.

But contrast that to what I write, and I'm pretty open about my politics, and I don't mind being associated with my politics, or being identified as a DSA member, or anything like that. But people are very comfortable saying, "Whoa you're a socialist," or, "You're a populist," or, "You're a leftist," and things like that, so I really am fascinated by what the breaking point is for being able to have politics and write about Appalachia from an explicitly political standpoint. And I'm happy to create a model for that in my book.

People have short memories, and I think this election has really created a moment where people want simple narratives. They want to read one article, or one take, or have one expert to explain something that is maybe disturbing, or complex, or confusing to them. And once they find a take, or person, or spokesperson that is pleasing to them, that tells them something that they think makes sense, then they don't really feel the need to explore that further.

There's so much more that they should know. They should know about the history of exploitation in the region, they should know about the way that capitalism works in the region, they should know the function that Appalachia has had historically in relation to the rest of the country. I want to stretch the boundaries of people's memories a little bit more. And a lot of the work that I did, and will be doing in the future is trying to collapse some space between what happened in the past, and what's happening in the present.

How does your academic work connect to what you're doing with this book?

I did my dissertation in reparations—obviously a topic that takes more from African American history than regional history. So, I don't really do a lot of work anymore that is explicitly keyed into questions about reparation, but what I wrote about, and what connects to the work that I'm doing now, is that narrative is so important. It's just a fancy way of saying "a story of a people," but what the things that people think that they know about a demographic, or a group, or a region, is all there is. And when powerful people think that they understand you, or that they understand your history, there are material consequences for that.

It's important that when we talk about narrative, that we're always talking about the consequences of those beliefs and how they impact, and impinge upon people in the present. I challenge to myself to always be conscious of the stories that people have been telling, and what consequences those have had on people who are alive today.

I said once I'm a historian, but I also think of myself as a debt collector, because I'm so conscious and sensitive that we have, broadly, lots of debts that are unpaid to people who are vulnerable, to people who are marginalized. I am unapologetic that the work that I do in many different arenas should have political use, and if people want to agitate, or organize around material gains, then I would be humbled if my work had some importance to that.

What came first for you? Was it your personal political awakening and interest in liberation, or were you already of that political persuasion when you became interested in the history of the region?

I'm a public historian, and that's kind of a different kind of specialization of history. I'm concerned with how history works in the world, and making history more interesting to the general public as opposed to academics. So I think the first book that I read as a public historian was a book of Haitian history called *Silencing the Past*. It's about power in history, and so one of the things that was very eye-opening to me when I started to train to be a historian was the way that power worked. I knew that there were powerful people, I knew that

politicians were powerful. I didn't understand the degree to which history helped that power accumulate. I didn't understand that it was easy to write people out of their own history. I didn't understand that gatekeepers could take somebody's history and completely take it away, or make it hard for people to see their place in the world.

Once I started to realize that, I got even more political. And I wanted to do things that were very politically explicit. The person that I trained with, for example, my dissertation advisor, worked on voting disenfranchisement, so she does the history of how felons lost the right to vote historically. Her work is very political, and she tries to use her work to correct that, to make people see that there was explicit racism in the way that voting disenfranchisement works.

I'm still trying to find a use for the history that I do. But yeah, I have no problem giving people flavors and varieties of their own story that can be put to political purpose. We're doing, for example, with Belt Publishing, a quickly put-together volume about the West Virginia teacher strike. We want to tell people how to organize, how to strike, how to create momentum. So we're going to obviously have teachers write most of it, but we're gonna kind of draw some history in there too, to make people better be able to connect their stories with the kinds of organizing and radical action that people have done in the past.

The fact that you have such a firm base in all of this makes it seem like writing this book must have been pretty easy. Was it?

Well, I was very angry—very, very, very angry when I started to write the book, because I live in a world where the consequences of what I'm writing about are seen in so many different arenas. For example, I don't know if you've heard about this, but in eastern Kentucky, a new prison project just got approved recently, so this is going to be like the fourth or fifth prison in eastern Kentucky! Appalachia is one of the most concentrated areas of prison growth. And that tracks back really explicitly to the way that the land has been devalued, and people's labor has been devalued, and the history of white supremacy.

So every day, I encounter in my daily life consequences of these beliefs, and these attitudes, and the way that radical action, or, I suppose, just hope or faith has been taken from the region. And I just reached a breaking point, where I wanted to have something to say about this. I thought I deserved to have something to say about this. And again, I felt that there has been a claim of ownership made about me, people like me, and I couldn't let that stand anymore.

That anger is an important part of the book. A lot of history writing can feel a little bloodless, but it was really effective that you decided to be like, "No, fuck this, I am mad as hell."

Yeah, questions about respectability and civility are obviously huge in the way that people are allowed to voice their truth to power. So I was quite happy to say, "Fuck that," and write what I wanted to write. And sometimes people call me out on that, and that's okay. But yeah, I mean, again, I think of myself as a debt collector. And one of the debts that I think I am owed is just to be angry in public, and to show people what being angry, as far as Appalachia goes, what that looks like.

Because I think people who write for the public and do various sorts of philanthropic organizing feel like they're walking on eggshells sometimes, because they have to have good relations to people of power like funders, and donors, and government organizations that monitor economic development in the region. So there's sometimes not a good space for us to be angry with each other. But right now I'm at the Appalachian Studies Association Conference, and when I was here this time last year, the theme of the conference was rage. So there's these spaces that we have that we connect with each other as ritual of anger, but we don't really have a lot of platform to do that on a broader public level, so I was happy to step into that myself.

We've talked about how you were angry when you wrote the book, but what parts were the most emotionally satisfying to write? What was the fun part?

The fun parts for me was writing the ending, because I think if I could do anything in the world, if my talent could align with something I was actually good at, I would love to be a photographer. I have not a whole lot of talent in that regard, but I think I enjoy thinking like a photographer, and I enjoy thinking visually.

Being able to kind of put together textual portraits of people with dignity, and with power, that was really, really satisfying to me. I loved writing about the people in West Virginia, the miners, the Mine Wars and things like that. I loved being able to kind of synthesize and write in a narrative way about them, and to me, that was satisfying because I'm so used to writing academic history, which can be very dry, very devoid of emotion. So being able to write history with emotion in it was very, very moving to me. And I think it really connected with some of the people who have read this book, who have just been like, "I cried, I had to put this book down, I could only read two or three pages at a time before I felt overwhelmed because it feels good to be seen." And that is a tremendous compliment to what I've done, and it means the world.

Something that spoke to me at the end of the book was the way you talked about how, when people bring up Appalachia's problems, some people just say, "Well why don't you just leave?" And you did leave—and then, you came back.

What was really important to me is to talk about—regardless of who stays or goes—was who keeps the region alive—who is working in the industries that aren't coal mining, like education, or health care, or retail and hospitality. And those are people who tend to be younger, who tend to be part of the most racially and ethnically diverse generation that Appalachia has seen in 50 or 60 years.

I think there is a lot of potential to tell those stories. One of the myths that I'm interested and invested in breaking down is this idea that there is a place where you can go in this world where you're not going to see people being exploited, where you're not going to see racism, you're not going to homophobia, or bigotry, or religious fundamentalism. There is no place in the world where those forces do not exist. So if you're pressuring people, regardless of their economic realities, to move somewhere else, in some ways you're just telling them to trade a different exploitative reality for another.

We have potential to build power with each other, and to see how our stories are connected if we dismiss this myth that there's someplace better for us, as long as it's not in Appalachia.

The concept of home is in such flux, with people constantly being forced to leave, being disconnected, being uprooted. What does home feel like for you?

I definitely feel part of a generation for which the concept of home is in flux. I think that home for me is where I feel that I can do the best work politically. That I can do the best work creatively. Where my work will have the most impact. Where I can be of service to people, to help them build power. When I think of home, I think of being among people that I'd love to build power with, that I feel powerful with, and that make me understand my place in the world without shame, or without embarrassment. People who make me feel seen, and appreciated, and loved—and I can do the same in return.

Elizabeth Catte recommends:

The STAY project

All things Crystal Good

The Trillbilly Worker's Party

Higher Ground Theater

The People's Pastoral by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia

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