On unexpectedly finding your niche



Author and columnist John Paul Brammer on surrendering to the uncertainty of life in quarantine, why the advice column felt like a welcoming medium for his work, the pitfalls of queer media and the labor of love that goes into self-publishing.

January 12, 2022 -

As told to Mitchell Kuga, 3915 words.

Tags: Writing, Culture, Editing, Time management, Process, Identity, First attempts.

You recently said that it took you about a month in quarantine to get back into the writing process again. Do you have any advice for someone, aka me, who was doing okay at first but is currently finding it difficult to string together a single decent sentence?

Yeah, that's the thing, it's like a peaks and valleys thing. For me it's like, "Wait, it's back," when there very well may be another dip. Who knows. I think that the overarching advice I have right now for everyone is to let this be a weird time, so there is some degree of surrender in that. But everything is really strange right now and I'm not going to understand all of it. I'm not going to understand my actions, I'm not going to understand why things that were working before aren't working now and if I can just let that fold into the absurdity and upside down-ness of everything, I think it takes the pressure off a little bit.

So what I've been doing is freewrites, because I think one thing that I cling to as a product of Media World is form. It's like, "Oh, I need to write an essay. I need to write a short story. I need to write X,Y or Z," and that puts an expectation on what's going to come out of me that day and when it doesn't I tend to be like, "Ugh, it's not working. It's gone away." But if we can—those of us who have the privilege to and those who want to reignite the creative juices—just let our writing be a little bit formless, just don't think about it too hard, just let it come out of you, and then you can revisit it in a week or two weeks and see if there's anything in there, when you're in more of an editor brain.

Your writing takes many different forms, but I'm most familiar with *¡Hola Papi!*, your self-described "preeminent deranged advice column." When did you start the column?

I started it in 2017 with Into, which was Grindr's new media outlet, and the idea was going to be that it was more of a joke, like a spoof of Dear Abby. I think I pitched it to Grindr as "queer Latinx Dear Abby huffing poppers." It was going to be this unhinged sort of funny satire because I always thought that I'm—and I still think this—a more competent humorist than I am a competent advice giver. Nobody really sets out to be an advice giver unless you're just completely unhinged. It's hard to imagine anyone believing they have the authority or wherewithal to tell someone else how to live. I still find that really absurd.

So I sort of accidentally stumbled into the format and the medium, but once I found myself there and I saw that the little niche I was occupying was a place where people had genuine anxiety, genuine issues that maybe they felt weren't being heard in other places, I was like, "Okay, I should probably incorporate some degree of earnestness into this," and I think that's what really set the recipe in motion. It's sort of half funny, half earnest today

and I think that's the winning formula for it. It's had a lot of ups and downs in terms of its professional life, but it's a lot of fun to run.

Did you grow up reading any advice columns?

Not really, but I did sort of idolize the idea of a columnist, because of Carrie Bradshaw.

Of course.

So this notion of coming to New York City, right, and being a media person. I remember when I was in high school I was in yearbook and my school was really rough, we didn't have a lot of resources, but once a year we did get to go to the University of Oklahoma, for the Book Summit, and one year the summit was being covered by a reporter from Tulsa. I saw her and she was sitting in the corner and she was really disinterested, checking her makeup in her little… what are those things called? Compacts with the mirror and everything? I was like, "Oh my god, this is the epitome of what being chic looks like. I have to be a journalist now," because the idea of being an observer in one situation and then when you go home becoming a creator, a critic or an analyst of something, I was like, "Oh, that's so cool." I really found a lot of glamor in that, and mixed with the whole Carrie Bradshaw thing, I was like, "Oh, it would be so cool to be a capital 'W' writer." So that was more of the guiding light for a while. And then, of course, you start writing and it stops being glamorous almost immediately.

Totally. That disconnect can be so jarring.

It's just, you don't have a lot of money, there's not a lot of opportunities, especially if you, like me, are writing about Latinx things, LGBT things. There's not a whole lot of institutional support or respect. I think that's where the advice column comes in because it is more of an accessible vehicle for a lot of writers. If you look at the history of advice columnists, it's where a lot of women first saw their way into the field because they were allowed to be anonymous, but also back then people thought, "Oh, domestic and emotional problems. Those are the realms of women." That opened the gateway for a lot of women to find success and to hone their voices and take authority where they otherwise wouldn't be trusted.

I think the advice column has retained that. It's why you don't see a whole lot of straight white male advice givers because those are the people who are allowed to write op-eds and be the authority in a more institutional way, whereas the advice column is sort of the playing field for the rest of us. This is the place that gave me the warmest welcome, the medium that let me in. I'm really grateful for it.

The migration of *¡Hola Papi!*— which bounced from *Into* to *Them* to *Out Magazine*—truly embodies the building-on-fire instability of queer media. Was it a no-brainer to start self-publishing?

Yeah, and I'm really lucky because in a world where my book deal hadn't happened I would still be hosting it somewhere else. There's some bonuses to that. Like you get an editor, for example, or you have someone who picks the cover art. I'm doing that all myself right now, which wouldn't be possible if I hadn't built my own platform, put in the years of work, figured out stuff like Photoshop and InDesign and marketing, all that stuff that goes into running an online property. It's a lot for one person. So there are things that I deeply miss about it running on a website, but at the same time I feel so much less anxiety because it's my project now and I have the resources to pursue it in that way. It's become much more of a labor of love than it was before. I feel better about it.

What's so weird is that I get so closely associated with queer media and yet I've never held an actual staff position at any queer media outlet. I've only ever been a freelance writer or a contractor because I took the inherent instability of media into account when building out my career. I was just like, "No, you never want to be an official staff person, to put all your eggs in any one company's basket because they're all out of their minds and they don't care about you, so they could just fire you at any moment." And I think it's behaved in the way I've expected, so I'm glad I put my eggs in a lot of different baskets. I just wish that we were all in some little commune together and we could just edit each other's work and take each other's pictures and support each other.

Since subscribing to your column is free, can you talk more about how you're making self-publishing work for you financially?

To be perfectly transparent, my book deal is more than enough to keep me afloat, so I thought, *Okay, I want to make this book a success*. I've sort of gotten enough money off of *¡Hola Papi!*—with the book, with the speaking engagements, and with all the little opportunities mixed in between—that it's sort of paying for itself, and what I want to do is collect people's emails so that when my book comes out I can send it directly to them and be like, "The book is out. You can order it here." So I think right now my newsletter is sort of a… I don't want to reduce it this way entirely, but it's almost like a commercial endeavor. Even though I have a pretty big platform on Twitter, a tweet can get lost in the noise, but if you're sending something directly to someone's email that's a lot more effective.

In the past I couldn't do this, right? If I was working for NBC still or Conde Nast there's no way I could write a free newsletter. It's just not happening, but now I have time, I have money and I'm just not one of those people… I don't know if everyone is like this, but I tend to feel like when I have enough I don't like to ask for more. If I have the privilege of being stable I'm not comfortable charging people for my newsletters because it's like, for what? What am I going to spend that on? I don't need more stuff right now. I'm kind of good. I just want to chill out and promote other people's stuff while I have the time. Yeah, I'm wrecked by ex-Catholic guilt. I just don't want to push my luck too much. I'm going to stay humble and write my little newsletter for free.

One of my favorite things about *¡Hola Papi!* is your humor, which gives your advice the flavor of a conversation with a friend at a bar. Where does your sensibility as a humorist come from?

When I was young my dad was really obsessed with *Monty Python*. I remember watching it together the very first time I was sick and on the couch with him. That sort of mixes with my Mexican family's background of roasting each other and always having to be on your tiptoes with a big comeback or something smart to say. I think those are my upbringing in terms of humor and I think it's really stuck with me. Dryness is really funny, but also pairing it with a familial warmth because I never set out to be mean. One thing that really turns me off from a lot of advice columns, and I guess gay male humor, is that it tends to mistake insulting someone for being smart or having something to say and I never want to be that. So I think that all of those things come together in the form, what I think of as a really empathic sort of roasting. It's coming from a place of love.

Let's talk about your book, which is also called *¡Hola Papi!*. It's being billed as a memoir?

So I haven't told anyone this before, but I think I'm allowed to say that the format is going to be like really long *¡Hola Papi!* letters where there's a one-sentence prompt that says something like, "How do I overcome trauma from my past?" And then the chapter is an answer to that prompt, but it's more of a conversation with myself about how I've constructed my own memories, how I've constructed my own experiences, and how those things get in concert to tell a story and how that story is only one way to look at things. So it's about trying to find a way to get agency over the worst things that have happened to you and look at them in a different light. It's sort of anti-memoir in that way because I actively question if I have the right reading on this experience or that experience and if I can change it in a way.

Where are you in the process?

Right now it's on the second round of edits, but my editor and I have been intentionally sort of running slowly with this because there's so much time. We're slowly volleying it back and forth. It's funny, I'm not used to waiting this long for stuff. You know, digital media, I write it, I hit *publish*. This isn't like that. It's been a really jarring transition.

Having that kind of time is such a luxury, but it can also be really scary.

Yeah, and I'm such an impatient person. I'm just like, "But it's done. Put it out." But now I'm also seeing the

benefits of waiting because I'll read it over and I'll be like, "Oh, you were really corny in this part," or "I don't like this part at all. You need to change that." Language and our understanding of language moves so fast, like I remember there was one chapter where I called a relationship "toxic" and I looked at it again and I was like, "What do you mean here? Like I think you're just invoking a buzzword and trusting the audience to be like, 'Oh, that means abusive, it wasn't good, blah, blah, blah,'" but I'm like, "Can't you just elaborate and say that instead of using this word that, while it's an important word, may be a little bit lazy?" I'm trying to make it sleeker, more timeless, more classic. That's been a really fruitful benefit of taking my time with it.

You've described yourself as a "Twitter addled gay Mexican with anxiety." What role does Twitter play in either aiding or hindering your work?

Oh my god, when I look back on it, Twitter is what allowed me to publish my first article. It was an editor for *Huffington Post Latino*, Roque Planas, who was talking with someone else about Latinos and education and I went, "Oh, I have thoughts on this I could send your way." And he sent me his email. I had just graduated college at that point. It must have been 2013, 2014.

So Twitter is the reason I was able to break into publishing. I didn't go to a fancy school. I was living with my parents at the time in rural Oklahoma, so how was I supposed to get into big media environments on the Coasts? You can use Twitter to enter this giant cocktail party even if you weren't invited. It's hard at the beginning, but then you meet some people, make some connections, be professional, be prompt. It helped me build something.

There's obviously the professional component, but running parallel to that is the unhinged humor, the unsolicited hot takes, the kiki'ing that goes on there as well. Does that ever feel like work to you?

Oh yeah, it's sort of a nightmare playground, but at the same time it really keeps your wits sharp, it keeps your opinions clear. I think that listening to other really smart queer people talk has helped me out in determining what my thoughts are, what my voice is, and I don't think I would have been able to do that without Twitter because every once in a while, I don't know if you've seen this, but somebody's who's not on Twitter at all will accidentally offer the worst take possible, and It's just like, *Oh, that won't happen to me because I kind of know this arena.*

You're in the room.

Exactly, and I've always wanted to be in the room. Growing up I've always been like, "How do I just get into these rooms with all these fancy, witty people?" and the internet facilitated that. So I think it's all part and parcel. A lot of the professional editors that I work with are also messy faggots on Twitter. They're editing stuff during the day and then at the same time they're posting and being ridiculous. So that whole culture, I can't really say I really fell in love with it because sometimes it actively pains me. Sometimes I just *hate* Twitter and I'm just like, "god, get me off this website," but at the same time it's like, "This is what I always wanted." I wanted to hear from these really smart, successful people who I've admired for so long and here they are giving me their thoughts, unfiltered.

A writer's voice is such a slippery abstract concept, but you know it when you see it. What advice would you give to writers looking to cultivate their voice?

My voice emerged most when I wasn't thinking too hard. So whatever comes out naturally will usually yield a lot of material, but that being said, it takes years. I still think I'm figuring out what mine is. All I know is that the alchemy golden stuff is voice. You can't just pay for it, you can't fake it, you can't buy someone else's or take someone else's. It's so, so valuable, but at the same time that's why it's so hard to cultivate.

I would say play around. You're not going to find it by straightforwardly writing an article, so I would suggest free writes. Also, find out what's *not* your voice, copy other people's voices. Because I remember I used to try really hard to inhabit that *New Yorker*-esque voice, like "Could I be that really analytical cool girl who's kind of detached from everything but uses fancy words and is a little bit searing, but also doesn't care that much?" and I found out, "No, actually no, that's not my voice," but it was fun to write that way for like two weeks. I

deeply encourage you to embrace the ridiculousness of writing and pretend you're wearing someone else's wig and write the way they would write. It's so much fun.

Literary drag?

Exactly, it helps you figure out who you are in the process.

Do you write every day?

Yeah, even when I don't want to. Right now I'm really obsessed with lullabies in different languages, especially Japanese ones. There's this one called the "Takeda Lullaby," which is about this oppressed group of people who are very poor and sometimes they get hired out to be servants in other people's houses. This one lullaby is about this girl who gets hired to be the permanent in-house babysitter for this rich people's family and the lullaby is just from her perspective about how, *She hates it here, the child is mean to me, I'd rather be at home*. The lyrics are that simple, but they're that loaded with political meaning, and I was like, "Oh god, I want to write one of those."

So I just took out my Notes app—and this was during a week when I told myself I would stop trying to write, because it just wasn't happening—and I wrote a bunch of little quarantine versions of that, where it's just very simply saying, "Why am I upset right now? What am I unhappy about? What am I thinking about? Who am I thinking about?" Very simple lines.

Do you ever write longhand or is it always on the computer or your phone?

You know, I want to get into longhand. I'm left-handed, so when I write by hand it tends to drag and get smudgy and I hate it, but I want to get into it because it feels so romantic to me. I also think writing without the backspace tool might be fun because I use it so much and I tend to lose confidence sometimes. Usually, I know a piece is going to be good right when I start because there's that rhythm to it, the opening is strong and it's like, "Okay I've got this," but I think what's really happening there is I'm just building confidence and so if I just got rid of that backspace button maybe I could write something through and it would end up good instead of being good right off the bat. I think that's one of my biggest flaws, that I need something to be promising and amazing right away or I don't feel like investing in it. Also, I feel like my thoughts travel really fast and I just get really frustrated with my hand not being able to catch up. I'm just like, "Write faster," because I can type like the speed of light. But yeah, writing longhand was one of my isolation goals that I never followed through on, one of my many.

It's not too late.

Maybe I'll try again.

John Paul Brammer Recommends:

1. The NYT Spelling Bee. This thing is like my little quarantine advent calendar. I do it every morning, and it helps to put me in a relaxed yet productive mood. Sometimes the pangram is utter bullshit though. It's free for everyone!
2. This video about Harry Potter fanfic drama. I was so gripped by this. One of the best hours I spent in quarantine. I love niche conflicts where nothing is at stake but pride and honor. It's delicious.
3. "Takeda Lullaby," as illustrated by this video, specifically. I told you I'm a little obsessed with non-English lullabies right now, and this one sits at the top. It comes from the Burakumin people in Japan who were historically ostracized and oppressed. They were people with jobs seen as tainted by death, so undertakers and butchers and such. It later became a sort of folk liberation song for them. The simplicity of the lyrics break my heart in such a satisfying way. I haven't cried yet in quarantine, but I came so close watching and hearing this! The *Grave of the Fireflies* clips probably helped.

4. *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* by Alice Munro. Specifically, the short story "Materials." It contains one of the most awe-inspiring sentences I've ever read. In it, she writes about an author named Hugo who spends a lot of his time trying to come up with new material for his writing. He later captures an acquaintance of theirs in his prose, and Munro (in the POV of the main character) writes that the acquaintance was "lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make." Wow. What a way to describe writing itself.

5. "The Color of Pomegranates" This film is a drug to me and I watch it every few months or so. It's like if an ornate tapestry was a film. I don't speak the language but I enjoy trying to wrangle my own narratives out of it. It's one dazzling visual after the next, and the whole thing is up for free on YouTube.

Name

John Paul Brammer

Vocation

Author and columnist

Eliel Cruz