

On finding the time, space, and voice you need to write



Writer Hua Hsu on waiting until you're ready to tackle a subject, why having less time can be helpful, and the importance of daily commutes and '90s zines.

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As told to Julian Brimmers, 3451 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#).

What's the most difficult story you've ever worked on?

That's a tough question, so this is going to be a more long-winded answer than appropriate, probably. I started to write as a kid in high school. I made my own zine, but I didn't have any real goals as a writer until college, when one of my best friends was killed. That was about 20 years ago. Ever since then, I've hoped to one day write about it all: our friendship, listening to music with my friends as a teenager, about growing up Asian American. All those things that somehow connect around this lost friend of mine. I've been conscious of this ever since I started writing and publishing stuff, but I never really acknowledged it or talked about it, because I never felt ready to write it. I have started working on that now. In a strange way, everything else—from writing my zine to my most recent articles—it's all practice for this thing that I haven't done yet.

That sounds like a new book project.

Yeah, but I have no idea what it's gonna look like. Whatever it is, it's gonna be a combination of '90s history, Bone-Thugs-N-Harmony appreciation, memoir, and court reporting. A bunch of different things. Until I figure out how to start it, it's gonna be pretty amorphous. But the more people I tell about it, the more on the hook I am to actually do it.

That's a really underrated technique, isn't it?

It is *[laughs]*. I feel like sometimes you just need people to hold you accountable. For me, this is something I've always known I would do. Even if I had never published a word for a "mainstream" publication. I always knew that part of me reckoning with what happened would involve writing.

Having this career as a writer is strange to me. It all came out of something that I've never really foregrounded in my writing. I think it's there, in the things I am interested in, and in other people's stories that I'm interested in telling, but when I started writing for music magazines, people didn't put themselves in their stories that much. I think that came with the internet. It's been really great for younger writers to be able to explore their subject's position and their relationship to these things in a way that had to be more implicit before. I'm still trying to teach myself how to do that.

Aside from the obvious trauma of the experience, what else do you think kept you from trying to tackle that specific story before now?

In high school I was already writing about music for my school paper... how much I hated Pearl Jam and things like that. I was a pretty generic snob. There would be these moments where I found myself unable to describe how this guitar or this bass line sounded. I didn't have the language yet to describe someone's voice. I think every writer feels that way. It's this asymptote where you are approaching a possibility without ever getting there.

Remind me, are you classically trained in any instrument?

I played the cello as a kid, but it did me no good other than when I meet someone who also plays the cello I can go, "Hey, I used to do that, too." But no, I don't have a deeper understanding of Arthur Russell as a result of playing the cello *[laughs]*.

Being unable to describe music made me feel like it would be even more difficult to describe tragedy or pain or what it was like in those days after we heard the news of my friend's passing. To describe what my friend's smile was like, you know? Things that would be so fundamental to setting that scene... I thought, if I can't figure out how to describe what Nelly's voice sounded like, then how am I gonna describe what it's like to be looking at a casket? Even when I was freelancing and doing stuff that was irrelevant to this larger story, I would think about that.

Trying to champion a story too early in life can be a real danger.

Yes, and I don't think I was there yet. People can write about things that just happened in ways that are really perceptive, but I don't think that I could have at that time. I still don't know if I can. I mean, this is already the longest discussion I've had about this outside of a private conversation. Every time I talk about it, I'm reminded of how long ago it actually was and how I can't really explain why I didn't try to do it 10 or five years ago. Maybe it's the fact that it's been 20 years that made me feel like, "Okay, at this point I should either just try it, or not do it."

Your first book project, *A Floating Chinaman*, also took quite a long time to get finished.

Yes, a lot of research went into my first book and it took somewhere between five and seven years. Not that I was working on it constantly. One of the reasons it took so many years is because I didn't know how to structure it. I needed to figure out a few sentences, and a few ways to tweak it so it wouldn't have to start with dry historical stuff.

As for the current project I'm working on—part of the challenge is that I never did something like this, but also I'm just waiting to figure out a few more sentences. I thought I had the first sentence of the book, but then I thought about it and it made no sense. Once I've figured out that sentence I feel like I will have begun to reckon with what happened.

Was it helpful for you to have other creative outlets when you wrote your first book? Or would you have liked to be able to fully focus on it?

I covet free, unstructured time, but I have a harder time getting anything done when I have free, unstructured time. Having a short assignment as a journalist just gets you into a rhythm that allows you to return to the book feeling refreshed. Even though it was really daunting to open a document titled "book." It's so much easier to write something short. Even though it wasn't ideal, I'd become accustomed to having short-term, medium-term, and long-term projects. Just on different burners, or whatever the kitchen metaphor would be *[laughs]*. I'm not sure it's the best way to work, but it's how I work now.

How did being a father factor into this? [Music journalist] Jeff Mao told me about a conversation you both had where the question arose as to whether becoming a father means that you're never gonna be as good at something as you used to be.

I think that was one of the waypoints of the conversation, yes. But I think what I was asking was whether anything would matter as much. Once you have a child, it becomes difficult to prioritize things above immediate needs like food, sleep, and shelter. The stakes are just different. After becoming a father, I developed a different relationship to work. I'm not sure if it's better or worse. There is less time to work but there is also less time to fret and feel vexed and erratic. There is less time for all the psychological stuff that makes

writing a challenge. In the past, that stuff helped my writing because it made me so critical of myself in terms of questions of craft. Now there's just less time to worry.

In the beginning, it feels like writing is all inspiration and idealism. Relying on craft is something you have to develop. How much did you learn in that regard from doing a fanzine back in the day?

I'm trying to think of a non-corny way to put this [laughs]. Making my zine was obviously a place to test out identity, voices, and sensibilities. But looking back, I think what I cherish about that time is that I would stay home at night and do something for no real reason other than that I wanted to do it. There were no readers, nobody was asking me to make a zine. And yet these were things I was interested in—things that I wanted to learn more about. I've tried to approach my career similarly. I like spending a couple of weeks learning about something and then moving on to something else.

What was it about DIY-zine culture that fascinated you?

It's weird to look back on that period now because as a result of the publishing world shrinking, social media, the internet, and all these factors that define our lives today, there are fewer spaces to throw something into the world and feel like that was it. There are plenty of creative people who make stuff and put it on Youtube or Tumblr or whatnot, but everything on the internet is just viral content waiting to happen. On the contrary, there is no way for more than 20 people on the planet to have ever read my zine.

I still have all my old zine collections from the '90s. The possibilities were very different. The best-case-scenario horizon you would imagine was it would get picked up by Tower Records distribution or something, and then the next issue would be in a store. But there wasn't any possibility that the zine would make you famous, no matter what ecosystem of fame you are talking about.

I really looked up to Giant Robot, a magazine these guys Eric and Martin made in Los Angeles. They were heroes of mine. I read Grand Royal, the Beastie Boys magazine, and local zines from my area. Nobody seemed to be doing it to pursue a career. Especially not the Beastie Boys. There was an iconoclasm, a utopian desire, in all of these endeavors that I shared. Making a zine was evidence that I was alive during this moment. That was all it had to be.

When I finally met Eric and Martin and they told me how they hustled their way from the zine to getting it distributed, to printing it in color... it sounded like a level of work and hustle and grit that I wasn't capable of doing. Of course, nowadays I am not a teenager anymore, and I'm not just sending stuff out into the world without any anxiety about what it will do.

I was wondering about that. From the zine to your years writing for magazines like Grantland, URB, and The Wire, to now being a staff writer at The New Yorker, your self-awareness as a prominent voice must have changed with every step.

Nowadays I mostly feel responsibility in terms of, "This is a profession and there's this entire workplace, and I want to be accountable to the people I work with." To the people I write about, I want to be fair and open-minded. I don't feel pressure to make a pronouncement or declare anything. When I finish writing something, I actually stop thinking about it.

But the medium clearly shapes the reach and impact of a piece. At least in terms of how the people react to an article.

I definitely had to learn how to not engage with a certain kind of criticism. In 2009 I wrote this cover story for *The Atlantic* called "The End of White America." You can imagine the kind of mail I got. And this was 2009, the proto-Tea Party days. A lot of what we see in America today began right around then, with the re-election of Obama. I just got a torrent of email and physical mail. But I was used to getting mail about ridiculous things. I remember, 12 or 13 years ago I reviewed a De La Soul album for *Slate* and someone wrote in and asked why a communist Chinese woman was writing music reviews now [laughs]. I thought, that's an interesting interpretation of my name.

And that likely came from a Daisy Age rap fan!

Exactly, it was about De La! When I did write about things that were important in the bigger picture and people reacted in ways I felt were wild, I wasn't surprised, but I had to remind myself that this is just how we agreed to live in the digital age. People got worked up in the '70s or '80s, but a lot more effort went into telling someone that they were full of shit. That's an aspect of what I do that I try not to think about too much. On *The New Yorker* homepage, you can't leave comments. *Grantland* didn't have comments either. But working for *Slate* in the mid-2000s, they were famous for having a robust commentary section called "The Fray." When I started, someone advised me to never go into "The Fray." I took that to heart.

This reminds me of a New Yorker piece you wrote right after the 2016 election, titled "What Normalization Means." The Adam Curtis documentary *Hypernormalization* came out shortly before, I think.

Yeah, Kanye West has probably just watched it too. He recently tweeted about Adam Curtis's *Century of the Self* and commented something like, "Only watch the first 20 minutes, it's four hours long but you'll get the gist." [laughs]

So, for the "Normalization" piece, do you think it was kind of a stand-out text for you? As commentary, it felt different than a lot of your writing.

I like writing things that are a little opaque. Things that operate more through allusion or reference than polemic. That's just my personality. I don't think what I'm doing is crazy deep, but the question that animates my writing is more often than not, "Why is this thing happening," not necessarily, "Is this thing the best or the worst?" People sometimes tell me they can't tell whether I actually liked something or not. That's not accidental. I just don't think the question of whether someone likes something or not is as interesting as their interpretation of why that thing exists.

So you're transferring the questions you have for a bit of music or art, or a cultural phenomenon, onto the reader?

With music it's particularly easy. You can listen and figure out your reaction to it yourself. Because there is just less of a general inclination toward context or history. However, those are questions that I am more interested in. The "Normalization" article was spurred on by that specific moment and writing inside that moment, which is different from what I do with criticism. I try to take myself out of it more. I actually haven't got back to reading that article again. I hit send on that draft and I haven't read it since then. I'm sure it conveys a lot of feelings or fears I was having, and continue to have, in a way that I probably would have articulated differently a week or a month later.

Do you think we generally tend to overthink and over-theorize the act of making art?

When I was doing more profiles of up-and-coming artists in the early 2000s, I always noticed that they didn't care about terms like "underground" and "mainstream" as much as writers and fans did. To them, it's just making music. Being able to engage with an artist and understand their perspective helps you recognize what you're buying into as a fan, and what you're projecting on the artists.

I remember being this naive college student thinking that there is this really intense civil war between underground and major label artists. I was at Amoeba Records, in line next to one of the Mystik Journeymen, who would sell their tapes outside the store. I loved Mystik Journeymen. And he was buying an E-40 CD or something like that. Of course, now I understand, but as a teenager I thought, "Is he doing this ironically?" [laughs]

When I started DJing, I came to realize that (to sound cheesy again) "It's all just music." But in high school, when I was making my zine, I was really drawn to this romantic vision of underground vs. mainstream. There still are spaces that embody an underground sensibility. It's still a real divide, it just doesn't map as neatly onto the world as I thought it would as a kid.

Today there's more of a collaborative possibility. I remember when Pharrell did "I'm a Slave for You" for Britney—my mind was blown! When Pharrell went from the Clipse to producing for Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears—it sounds silly now, but it was a real moment! I remember DFA was gonna do a song with Britney. It really opened my eyes as a listener, a critic, and as a fan.

We already briefly touched upon how you tend to work on different things simultaneously. Besides being a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, you're an associate professor at Vassar College. How does teaching inform your writing, if at all?

I wouldn't be able to write if I didn't teach, and vice versa. They're both about the same ambitions: talking about ideas, bringing complexity into everyday focus, and the meeting of different sensibilities and experiences in a shared space—whether it's the page or a classroom. Teaching is such an intimate thing. I used to feel a lot of anxiety, but now I really cherish it. It's like, for an hour or two, we try and get on the same page, and we improvise a community. And then it's over. There's no live-tweet account of it, there's no transcript. There's just the experience of learning, sharing, listening, and thinking together.

What's the importance of the commute and how does one successfully commute in order to get things done?

It's weird to look forward to a five hour round-trip, but I do find it easier to engage with new things when I'm commuting. Thankfully, listening to music in a car is one of the greatest things ever. Being able to stare at the river and listen to music on a train is pretty nice, too. I tend to do a lot of my writing while I'm commuting. Whether it's listening to stuff or reading books that I will write about— not necessarily typing but just writing sentences in my head. I just find that I generate a lot of ideas while I'm driving or riding the train. When I'm waiting for the subway or walking down the street, I'm constantly thinking of sentences. It's important.

What's your strategy for capturing ideas in the moment they appear in your head?

I tend to write stuff in my head. Like a lot of people, I feel I'm almost done with something as soon as I can figure out the first paragraph. And then, at three in the morning, I'm like, "Oh shit, I still have 1500 additional words to write!" Writing a piece consists of a few interesting sentences and a bunch of straight-forward sentences that just carry the narrative forward, historical stuff, etc. I tend to think more about transitions and descriptions of things. The first and the last sentence of a piece, I remember them because I rewrite them in my head over and over.

It's really about finding the balance between those five big ideas, the ones that you will fight your editor for, and the more structural bits that carry the story, right?

Yes, and that's really tough. When I started writing for *URB* magazine, *The Wire*, and *Vibe*, everything for me was about funny references, puns, word play. You just wanted the writing to convey the excitement of the music. But I can't really do that anymore, partly because the internet is filled with so much good writing with a vibrancy I can't match. I'm just way more interested in structure and where to reveal things. I'm very spatial when I write. I often think about, if the page was an endless scroll, where on the page would I want a break. Working around that map of a piece and figuring out where to put certain things.

HUA HSU Recommends: 90s DIY zines

[Secret Asian Man](#)

[Giant Robot](#)

[Kronick](#)

[Bunnyhop](#)

[Ffiction](#)

[Ego Trip](#) (if that counts as a zine!)

[Name](#)

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