

On sustaining creative collaborations



Editor and Journalist Sarah Luby Burke discusses the importance of teamwork, self-acceptance, and perfectionism

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As told to Colleen Hamilton, 2106 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Production](#).

Often when we think about magazines, we see the person at the top of the masthead, and think they are the sole genius behind the publication. In reality, there are so many people making the work happen—editors, writers, illustrators, photographers. To start, how do you decide who to collaborate with?

It feels extremely case-by-case. First and foremost, I think collaboration is about complementary skill sets and what we can offer each other. Depending on the project and what I can offer, I'm looking for something different in my collaborator. I want us to challenge each other, support each other, balance each other out. Also, we need to make sure we're checking all of the boxes in terms of what we need in the group to get the project done.

In addition to that, it really depends on the length and scope of the project. If I'm going to hire a freelance writer to do an article, typically I will look into what they've written in the past. I'll Google them and check out their socials. I might even ask, depending on the scope of the story, editors I know who have worked with them, but I won't require meeting in person or anything like that. I'm pretty open to just taking a chance on someone who cold pitches me.

On the other side of the spectrum, if I'm hiring someone as a constant collaborator [as a member of *Them's* staff], if I'm working with them on every single cover, video, even the captions and the assets on our Instagram, I tend to think about deeper things a little bit. Of course, I'm considering skills, experience, and ideas, and if that fits into the role that I'm looking to fill. But I have a joke that I only hire nice people, which feels maybe basic and silly, but genuinely is really important to me. It matters if someone brings their skills to the table in a way that is kind and conscientious, when they are open to back and forth. I think that when you are on a team with people, there is so much of yourself that you bring to as far as your sensitivities, your insecurities, your communication style, the way you express feedback and ideas.

It's important to me to be able to imagine having a disagreement with that person and feeling like we can—in a positive way—have different ideas about something and have it be productive. I think that is really the most exciting part about collaboration, which is not having everyone be the same, but actually having people be as different as possible. And be the type of people who are willing to lean into that difference in exciting and productive ways.

What qualities do you think define a successful collaboration, and do any projects stand out in your mind?

Honesty is a big one. Complementary skill sets and different experiences. Diversity. That's a buzzword, but genuinely people who are willing to see where each person is at and fit together in supporting each other in a non-hierarchical way. Often, when we are working on teams, we have hierarchical roles and titles, but that

doesn't fully encompass the nuances of what people bring. Even if you are, "below or above another team member," I think recognizing that's not always going to dictate what the dynamic should be or what the dynamic should look like. I think it's best when people are willing to speak up and people are willing to listen, and not be stuck in those hierarchical kinds of roles as much.

How do you approach collaboration with people who you have relationships with that extend beyond work (friends, partners, etc.)?

For me, with every bigger collaboration, I try to be transparent from the beginning about what I feel like I can bring, and what I am hoping to get out of it. I think people's intentions for being part of a project and what they want to get out of it can really dictate [the outcome.]

I think it's actually not common enough that we just state outright, "This is my reason for being here." "I'm really here, because I want this for my resume. I'm really here because I deeply care about this story. I'm here because I need money, and honestly, I don't really care about this that much," which is totally valid. Often, reasons are going to be multiples of those.

I think with friends, it can be especially important to do that. Maybe this is just me, but I'm always concerned when asking friends if they want to collaborate on something if they are doing it as a favor, so I try to be really upfront about expectations. I usually will say, "I thought of you for this because I appreciate this and this about the way you work. I only want you to do it if it feels like something that you really want to do, and if it feels genuinely fulfilling and generative, or worth your while." Because everyone has different needs, especially for freelancers.

When me and Alyza [Sarah's partner] were making Transnational [an award-winning VICE documentary] together, it was our first time collaborating long-term on a project. It was also early quarantine and we were living in a studio apartment. Hierarchically, I was technically managing the team, so I was giving Alyza a lot of feedback on different cuts of the show. After work, if we're talking about household chores, there's not really a difference. You don't reset the clock. You already told me five times today what to do, and so it doesn't really land the same if you're telling me again. That was an interesting lesson for me. Even if we try to say we maintain boundaries between work and personal relationships, emotionally, a lot of the dynamic does carry over and it's important to be sensitive to that.

Have you ever had collaborative projects fall short or not meet your expectations? Why do you think that happened and what did you learn that continues to inform your work if you feel like it has?

For me, being in a position where I am often giving feedback or making decisions, collaboration often involves a constant series of decisions around how much I want to push my own perspective versus how much I want to trust someone, even though maybe it's not what I necessarily would do in their position. That often goes different ways. At the end of something, sometimes I'll find myself saying, "that was so great. I'm so glad that I let that person run with this idea that maybe I wasn't fully on board with but I trusted it. Other times, if there were flags in my head that end up becoming bigger issues and making a project difficult or less successful, I'm kicking myself. I knew, but I didn't say it, because I wanted to trust the process, you know? I think the big thing for me has been just also recognizing that it's okay, and that it's better to more often just trust people and trust the process, even if you have moments where you're like, "I kind of knew that wasn't going to work."

It's worth the relationship to let the process happen.

I'm also someone who suffers from perfectionism, so if something goes wrong, I tend to focus on that. I try to redirect my attention to the times when I've been wrong, where I've been like, "I didn't know about that" but then it turned out to be amazing, and it was a total learning moment for me. Those are the times when I feel most inspired, ironically.

Letting go makes you happier.

Yes, and letting go of things always works out.

You obviously have a very public role. How do you balance your time spent with other people, and a private creative practice, if you have one?

To be totally honest, I'm not that good at it. Part of my process has been being kinder to myself about not being good at it. I think that I kick myself sometimes, because I'm like, "Oh, I haven't worked on my personal projects. I haven't done personal writing or been painting." But I also think that we have this unreasonable expectation of people that we can just do everything at once. The reality is that I put everything into my role at *Them* right now, and I enjoy that so much, and I wouldn't have that any other way. I wouldn't want to show up and just be putting half my energy into it. I'm really in it with my team. But that also means when I get home, I'm pooped. I'm focusing on other things. I'm focusing on my relationships. I'm focusing on my relationship to my body. I'm hanging out with my cat. I'm trying to recognize that there's time and it's okay to be like, "I'm putting my all into this project that isn't a personal project, that is actually a huge ongoing collaboration, and that's just what I'm focusing on right now." I'm sure I'll focus on personal projects at another point.

Is it okay to abandon a project, and how do you come to that decision?

It's definitely okay to abandon a project, and there are so many reasons to do it. The biggest question is, "Am I getting what I need out of this?" I don't want to say that it's just about, "Is this fulfilling me?" because sometimes projects are just about making money or things like that, and I think we need to recognize that in this world of freelancing. So I think it's more like at the beginning when I set out with the intention of, "What do I want to get out of this? Am I getting that?" Sometimes you're not getting that, but you're getting other things that are keeping you around, and that's okay. But I think if you feel like a project is zapping you of energy and inspiration, it's definitely time to put it down. That does not mean you wasted time because with each project you're building on your practice, even if it doesn't get shared with anybody.

Yes. Relatedly, what's been the most surprising thing about your creative path?

I mean, so much has been a surprise. It's interesting, because I've had people say to me, "You're so lucky that you've known what you wanted to do since you were young." I knew since elementary school that I wanted to be a writer, and I knew in middle school that I wanted to be a journalist. I do feel grateful for having that passion and clarity, but to me, I feel like there have been so many twists and turns and "trust the process" moments, where I've taken a leap and trusted my gut. I started as essentially an art critic and culture journalist, and then thought I was going to move into curating, and then I pivoted to writing about identity.

From there I got into special projects and was really excited by this idea of "How do you bring people together around storytelling and collaboration, and bring stories to life in multimedia ways?" I think probably the biggest surprise has been moving into documentary because to me that was the biggest kind of "aha" moment. I hadn't expected myself to land there, but it felt like producing was exciting all the parts of me, as far as thinking about story, but also thinking about visuals, audio, setting, sourcing, access, and collaborating in a big team. It felt like the most exciting challenge that I had encountered. I think that was kind of the biggest surprise, besides getting this job at *Them*. When I took the role, I had many friends say, "We've always thought of you as an Editor in Chief. The way that you approach collaboration and thinking about projects and editing, this makes total sense for you." At the same time, I started writing about art and I'm not a queer media veteran. So becoming this person who is really embedded within [the queer media landscape] was definitely a little bit unexpected for me, but obviously something I'm extremely grateful for.

Sarah Luby Burke recommends:

From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i, Haunani-Kay Trask

"Ever New", Beverly Glenn-Copeland

Monument Valley 1, 2, and 3

Kamikaze Girls (2002)

The Insight Timer app

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