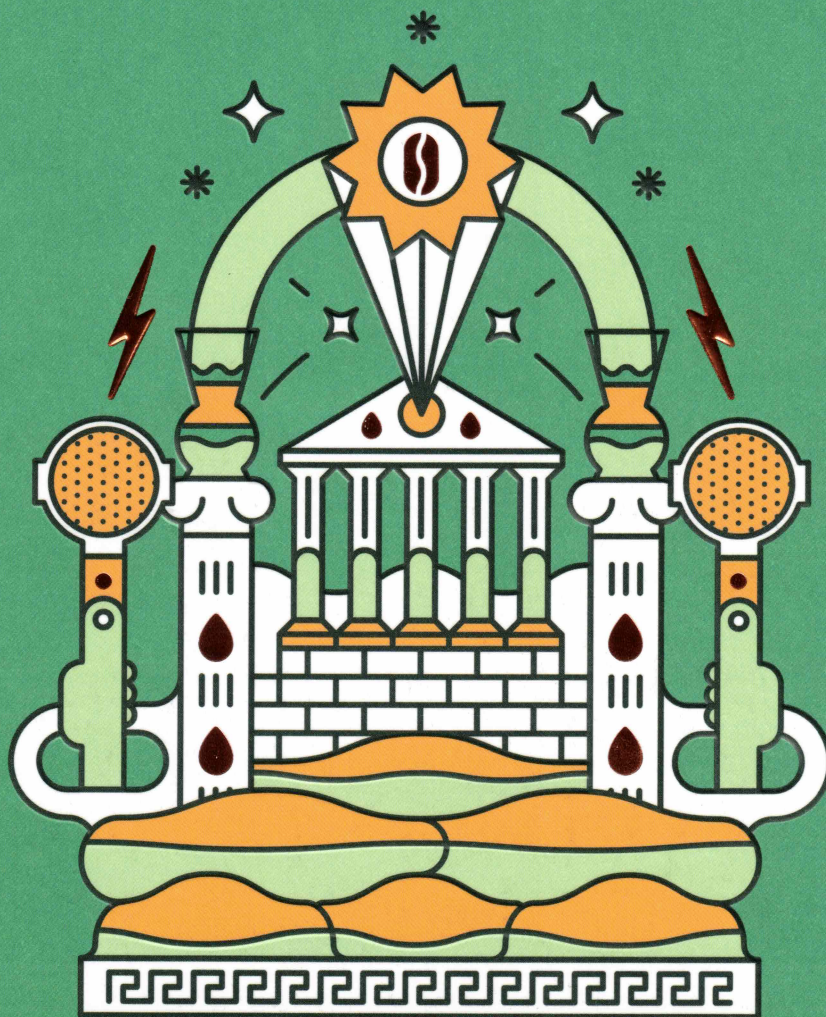


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# Women in Coffee: Baristas

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In June, we celebrated the first ever female World Barista Champion. But for women, it has been and still is a tough road to the competition stage. In this article, we explore the challenges faced by female competitors during competition and preparation and highlight some of their achievements.

**O**n a March Saturday, Hannah Mercer slipped a button-down shirt she'd worn on her last trip to origin in Cauca, Colombia over a Café Campesino t-shirt. She strung on her elephant necklace for luck, and pulled on a pair of hot pink floral leggings and fringed boots. She felt her 'fiercest self' in the combination, but had also done-up her hair and worn makeup to feel 'put together' and prepared: one part personal confidence; one part, perhaps, for the judges. After competing in an AeroPress competition

last August, America's Best Espresso at Coffee Fest was another 'toe in the water' toward the larger competition circuit and the United States Barista Championship (USBC). Giving herself her 'badass lady barista' pep talk, Hannah danced from foot-to-foot as she stepped up to the Black Eagle and dosed her shots. She served her judges singles and brought the remaining demitasse to her lips as they made notes.

She lost, three to zero, and was knocked out of the bracket-style competition in the first round.

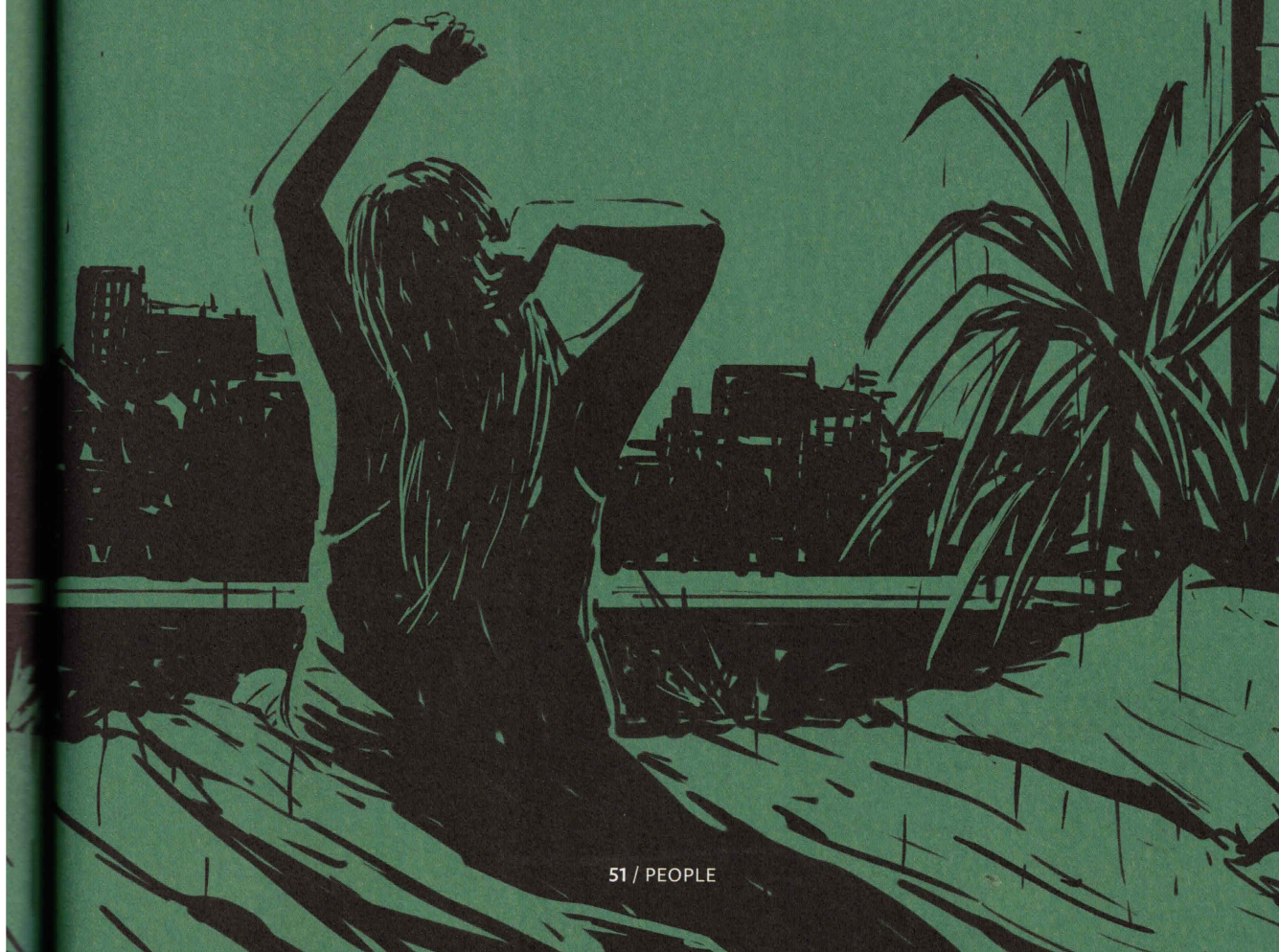
'I came. I did,' she said. 'I didn't conquer, but you get more prepared for next time.' She'd decided the next time would be USBC. And, she added, winning wasn't all she was after. It was female representation. 'I hope somebody sees me and says, "I'm ten times better," said Hannah. 'Great. Please compete.'

For the past several years, industry leaders have scratched their heads when asked why women and non-binary folks compete with less frequency than men, particularly when there's so much at stake for competitors who do well: renown in an industry that sometimes seems built on it; jobs in brand representation offering supplementary income; speaking opportunities positioning a barista to comment on the industry as a whole. Companies strengthen their brands on the prestige it brings. But over the 16-year history of the barista competition, women have, on

average, represented just under one-third of all USBC competitors, and during a decade of those competition cycles, finals rounds were comprised of either only one woman, or no women at all.

During the competition's first three years, however, females dominated. Between 2003 and 2005, women placed first and comprised half of all finalists. In 2004, the top three slots were all awarded to women. But, since 2006, only three women have won, and only twice have finals rounds been evenly split by gender.

While round one of the USBC was in play, Hannah taught Barista Foundations in a cavernous hall, doling out information from the centre of a semicircle of eight espresso machines with 48 students clustered around them. One yelled as she overfilled a cappuccino; another blasted a steam wand into a squeal. Flipping slides, Hannah sprinkled in practical tricks on machine maintenance as she paced the plastic-lined floor. By the end of the day, she would test and grade all students' exams, certifying their skills.



Classes like this are why Hannah teaches. Where she's from, people joke that if you drive through town slowly enough, someone will run out and change the population sign. Americus is located in South Georgia and has 15,000 inhabitants and zero Starbucks, and isn't where you'd expect to find the first and only Specialty Coffee Association-certified training lab in Georgia. But neither did Hannah expect she'd have been responsible for its opening this past fall.

'I just keep doing things without considering them,' said Hannah of her lab. 'While I'm a free-lovin' hippie, [change] isn't about sitting in a circle and singing Kumbaya.'

Three days at Barista Camp at a sleepy resort in the Poconos in 2015 solidified her resolve to be a coffee educator. After learning the basics at a local bistro in 2012, she was hired by Café Campesino, an organic, Fair Trade roastery in 2014, and promoted to management after few months. Now, not yet 30, she's the company's head of education, and works in sales, customer service, and equipment support when she's not instructing. 'My role is not to be a famous barista,' she had said at camp. 'That's not my goal; my goal is to elevate this product and put the thought of others before me.' Teaching was an easy choice.

'My first boss in specialty told me, I couldn't be a barista,' said Jenna Gotthelf as she poured water for her judges during semifinals. 'He said, "Sometimes in life, you just don't get the things that you work for."'

Gotthelf was among a handful of women and non-binary individuals who used their USBC routines

as platforms to illuminate their experiences in the workplace, and to press for dialogue. After declaring themselves outright a 'brown, queer, working barista,' Oodie Taliaferro said their boss told them after Expo last year, 'If women can't handle the heat of competition they just shouldn't do it.' So Taliaferro competed independently, sponsoring themselves with the help of a handful of donors. Andrea Allen acknowledged her position as a 'thought leader' in coffee and spoke of her legacy, including the hope her daughters see her diligence as a business owner, and someday want to take over. She articulated that being a woman in charge doesn't always require toughness or stereotypical masculinity.

This year also marked a shift in numbers. Women and non-binary folks were the best represented they've ever been. For the first time since 2006, they comprised more than 40 percent of round one competitors. However, only two women (Gotthelf and Samantha Spillman) advanced from the first round into semi-finals, joining two others (Allen and Naida



Lindberg) who had earned byes by placing in the top six at one of two qualifying competitions. And, for the first time in the Barista Championship's history, a non-binary individual (Sam Neely, who also had a bye) made it through to the finals round.

'There's something to be said for people who take risks believing in other people,' said Gotthelf, continuing the story of her coffee and explaining how it paralleled her own. The roaster she worked with had supported the production of Burundi's first lot of naturally processed coffee, which had meant advocating for the producer and working with the government to export the otherwise unlawful lot. Last year, she'd used that coffee—from the Buziraguhindwa washing

station—in her Brewers Cup performance, and this year, Gotthelf called notes of pomegranate, raspberry, hibiscus florality, and toasted almond sweetness in her espressos. It became strawberry malt as a cappuccino, and the drink, she said, was the reason she had become a competitor at all.

During her first competition season, two regulars at her shop in Massachusetts lent her their car so she could drive to Durham, which she did alone, discovering most competitors had cohorts of supporters. A year later, still using her own money to compete, she was recruited by Everyman Espresso, who wanted to invest in her.

It turns out, Gotthelf said as she concluded, 'Buziraguhindwa means never retreat.' She pointed to the shirt she wore, on which she'd had the word screen-printed in red. She ended her performance with a cotton candy signature beverage with a burnt



grapefruit expression. 'No matter what obstacles come in your way, it's important to keep pushing forward.'

'The first time I saw the word Buziraguhindwa, some bro barista mocked me for not being able to pronounce it,' said Hannah of the shirt, laughing. She was watching the semi-finals from the front row, inventorying ideas, admitting aloud how equally cool and bogus competition seemed. As plumes of dry ice wafted towards judges, she lamented how little it all seemed to resemble day-to-day service. She had begun to weigh the potential return on investment against the time competing would take away from her salaried responsibilities. And, she'd begun to wonder how to do all that and remain authentic in her performance, which, she'd decided, must discuss the end-points of the value chain—baristas and producers—between which she was enmeshed.

After several competitors, she observed, 'It seems like you either need to have rather masculine energy, or be like a mom, who's super sweet and nice. Why can't you be a ballsy bitch? It shouldn't be intimidating.' But to judges, it has been. After winning Coffee Masters in New York last fall, Erika Vonie's judges found her Reno Brewer's Cup performance to have 'intense emotion'; and to be an 'intimidating experience,' 'aggressive,' and 'uncomfortable.' Vonie posted these score sheets publicly on Twitter. 'You can be whatever you want to be as a man,' Hannah continued. 'But we still have to be put in our little box.'

What troubled Hannah most was the pomp, and she wondered aloud whether it was possible to spend less money and do well. 'You can look at routines and say, "I'd do that, or I wouldn't do that", but cups are important. They're basic. I don't want to source a special reserve coffee from someone else. I'd like something I could replicate in my shop, something I can point people to, that's accessible. Maybe I'll start scoring small wears from Goodwill or something.'

Though Hannah believes she'll be supported, she knows the investment could be allotted somewhere else. Yet, she also recognizes the exposure and esteem that accompany competition. 'It's a like earning a



coffee degree,' she thought aloud. But, 'if you don't win, you've just thrown thousands of dollars at something and have nothing to show for it.'

'And it's not just coffee and milk,' I offer.

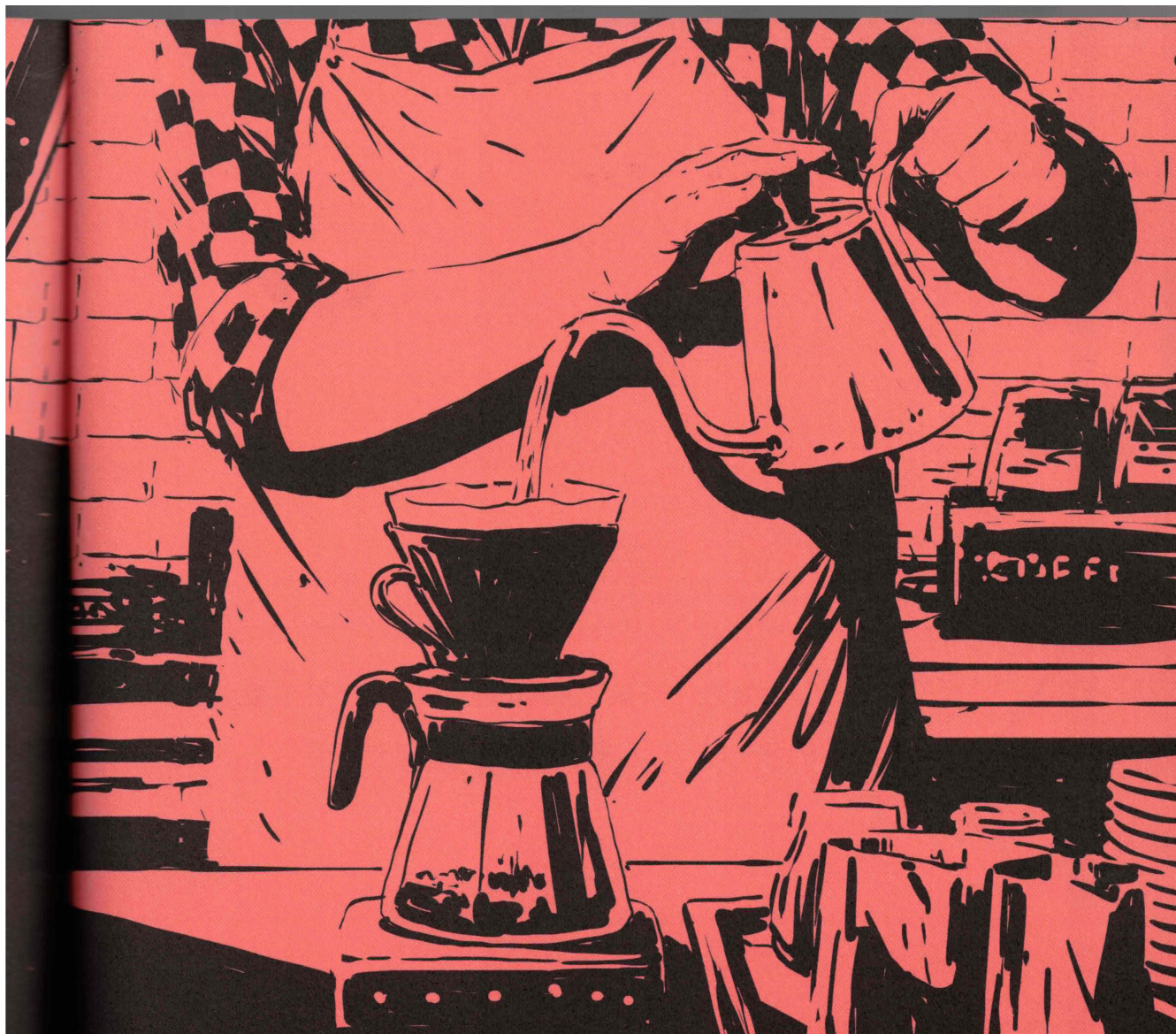
'It's dry ice,' added Hannah.

Or cotton candy machines, or applewood smokers, or CO<sub>2</sub> canisters or all the other ingredients that comprise specialty beverages or shatter coffee into more perfect particles in the grinder. Broken down, competition requires considerable preparation and access to a specific set of resources: time, money, and people.

First, money: competitors generally separate their training into two sets of about six weeks, totaling 12 weeks' preparation for Qualifiers and USBC. In New York, the cost of a reasonable milk, say Stonyfield Farm, is approximately \$4 for a half gallon. If a competitor is averaging 30 gallons of milk per competition phase, they might be spending \$500 in milk alone.

Of course, there's the coffee itself. A competitor may use 10 pounds per week, per phase, or 120 pounds of coffee in rehearsal. They might then bring 10 pounds more to Qualifiers, and another 20 to USBC in multiple roast dates and batches. Given those 150 pounds they blast through is a very-good-but-not-crazy coffee, and purchased wholesale from a roaster, they're likely to spend between \$12-15 per pound, or \$1,800 to \$2,300 total. Buying retail can double that price.

Other costs include ceramics and wares, presentation trays, water, and linens, which may run




a competitor \$300 or more; scales, pitchers, tampers, distribution tools, and bar paraphernalia can tag on another \$1,000. There's then the signature beverage, for which there is no ceiling in the cost of its design.

All told, the average competitor spends about \$4-5,000 per season. This, of course, is given they have access to a practice machine (the required Black Eagle by Nuova Simonelli runs \$25,000 retail), and a competition-approved grinder (either a Mahlkonig EK43 or a Peak which are between \$2,375 and \$2,700). Then there are entrance fees, airfare or gas, lodging, and shipping costs for grinders that can't be checked at the airport.

The process is prohibitively expensive on the average barista's wages and is perhaps why so few working baristas can compete independently, or compete at all.

Tied to that milk and coffee is time: Once they choose a coffee, baristas often spend several weeks cupping it daily to decipher which day off roast it tastes best. They ensure a consistent milk course by

A photograph of a coffee shop interior. The background is a light-colored brick wall. In the foreground, there are several pieces of coffee-making equipment, including a tall, dark-colored machine and a smaller, round machine. The lighting is warm and focused on the equipment.

steaming pitcher after pitcher. They learn a grinder by dialling in again and again. They develop chemically-sound signature beverages using obscure ingredients. In a week, working, competitive baristas may spend 40 hours behind the bar, and another 20 behind a machine—unpaid and often overcaffeinated—in a room, alone.

This further raises the question of who competes for a company, and how companies decide who competes. Hannah readily and easily voiced her competition aims to her bosses through a goal-building platform Café Campesino uses for employees to articulate both their quarterly business objectives and personal aspirations. However, if no such platform exists, how does a company ensure its employees (particularly women or non-binary individuals and other minorities) have an opportunity to ask for support?

The last resource, and most difficult for Hannah, is people: She needs a coach.

'I feel a bit of a logistical constraint,' she said. 'I need somebody who knows what they're doing. I've thought about just [competing] blind, but that doesn't seem like being a good steward of the resources. Someone's going to invest a bunch of money, and I'm going to invest a bunch of time, so if I'm going to do it, I've gotta play the game.'

But understanding the parameters of competition is not as simple as reading the rules. Experienced mentors and coaches are essential to successful outcomes at barista competitions because know the tricks contained in the margins of the rulebook: that you don't have to extract the last pucks from the

machine; to batch signature beverages with an extra set of espressos so you don't under fill a glass; to bring your own knock box so your station starts clean. Hannah's plan, is to find a coach who lives within a three-hour radius of Americus, and gather four or five additional people in coffee whom she trusts.

The Barista Guild of America and the Specialty Coffee Association are striving to bolster inclusivity at competitions. This was the first year competitors were asked their preferred pronouns, as well as to participate in a preliminary competition testing basic skills. If participants could get there, everything was provided: wears, coffee, milk, machines. Also this year, the sensory judges' table dropped from 40 inches to 30, an improvement from what female and shorter competitors—who endeavour to serve beverages across tall tables—frequently cite as a deterrent from competition. Judges also represented a 65-35 split between women and non-binary individuals to men (head judges a 60-40 split), and calibration included a mandatory unconscious bias training. Though the spread of finalists was again biased by gender, they included one non-binary finalist, and three of the four male finalists were of marginalized groups. The winner, Cole McBride, was one of the first working baristas (not in management) to win the competition in recent memory.

All said, there is more to do. Studies may help analyse competition further: there remains the statistical question of the large spread between the few women and non-binary individuals who final, and the larger group who don't make it out of the first round.



Of the 46 percent female and non-binary round one competitors this year, only two individuals advanced to semi-finals, and neither competed as finalists. How are these individuals supported within their companies, and how are they allocated resources? Though five of the 18 semi-finalists were women and non-binary individuals, the number is misleading, as it does not account mathematically for three competitors who were inserted into the semi-final round with byes. Currently, the number of years judges can volunteer is uncapped; as rules and competition develop, space could be allocated for new judges.

At present, however, Hannah is fuelled by the scope of these questions. 'It feels like we have to enact this giant, overreaching change, and I don't think that's how it's going to happen,' she said. 'It

has to be people who say, 'I'm going to try this, I'm going to insert myself into the arena and maybe fail, but maybe it's a little easier for the next person who comes on.' And so she will, whether using the antique teacups she drinks from at home, or a shiny new set of demitasses and spoons. ☉

