

DO THE WORK

Supporting PoC Coffee Pros

Our industry prides itself on being welcoming, inclusive, a “safe space” for all people. This is hospitality, after all. But are we putting into practice those things we profess to be? Are we cultivating environments where black and brown people feel comfortable and valued? Are we hiring people from diverse backgrounds without tokenizing or just meeting a diversity quota? Are we uplifting the voices and experiences of coworkers of color? Are we confronting our internal beliefs and preconceptions of “professional” behavior? Are we actively challenging the cultural norms that frame whiteness as the default?

As a white woman, a person of the dominant culture here in the United States, I have an indescribable amount of intrinsic privilege. I cannot speak to the struggles and experiences of people of color. So I won't. What I can do in this moment is to shut up, step aside, and listen to those who live this every day.

I reached out to a number of coffee professionals who are people of color and asked:

How can we, as individuals and/or an industry, support and uplift People of Color in coffee - specifically and especially in the cafe setting?

Here are some responses.

“I've experienced a lot of white folks taking my being neutral, quiet, or focused in demeanor as aggression because I'm not, in that moment, being over-the-top friendly. This view of 'good customer service' from PoC is oppressive! Let black people be quiet! Let black people be neutral! Let black people be focused! It's probably not personal.”

- Emily Wendorff / Production Roaster &
QC Liaison
East One Coffee / Brooklyn, NY

“When my white coworkers came together to support and advocate for me when I called out discrimination at my job it really made me emotional. Them using their privilege to help advocate for me was exactly what I hoped they would do, what they SHOULD do. I had multiple brave white coworkers use their privilege to speak truth to power, to amplify my voice, to lift and hold me up from the margins. They asked me what they can do to support my struggle, what I wanted to see happen and how they can make it happen. THAT is what allyship should look like!”

- Nyambura Njee (she/her) / Barista
Borrom Line Coffee House / Detroit, MI

“I have struggled with finding a sense of security in my environment. As a Mexican National, the ambiguity of having an identity in an “in-between” space has made me hesitant to being completely vulnerable in these areas. One way to support POC in this industry is by being sensitive and understanding of lows that we face. Functioning is an act of survival, and all good days are not possible when there is a constant fear of news and politics that we will never escape. Defining a safe space is subjective. It must first ask the question of who feels safe in that space. As inclusive as we strive to be, cafes must also recognize that they are inherently flawed in creating that space because it showcases the coffee first instead of the people who make crop-to-cup achievable. Pride, quality, and dedication are not dismissable in specialty coffee, but in that mentality, we as coffee professionals understand that we will mess up, we will get frustrated. Coffee is not a perfect science and it will never be. This is also true for marginalized racial identities.

Show up. Make space. Sit down.

Coffee was never devised by the oppressor.”

- Claudia Campero (she/her) / Barista
Amethyst Coffee Co / Denver

"The best way that I have to support black coworkers is to listen and trust. Although I don't bring up every single time something happens to be because of my race because it literally happens all the time, the times that I do I need to be supported. And the best way to do that is to listen and take action. A lot of times we feel like we can't speak up because we won't be listened to, but a white person will be heard way better than we will."

- Adam JacksonBey (he/him) / Owner & Operator
Tell Coffee / Washington, DC

"I am a small, brown woman who usually looks about 10 years younger than I am, so I'm not always sure what part of my visible identity causes some people to treat me differently from other coworkers. I will also preface this by saying I've generally been very lucky to live and work in diverse areas with diverse coworkers, so my experiences have not been as extreme as others. However, these incidents still DO happen and they're never okay. In my opinion - and considering my experiences - one of the most frustrating things is when coworkers do nothing. If a customer makes a rude and/or derogatory comment, there have been so many times when my coworkers just freeze or try to brush it off when an awkward laugh. Instead, I'd love to feel supported by my coworkers, to have them step up to call out the unacceptable behavior, to have it shut down right away. Otherwise, these people think they can keep getting away with it. Support your POC friends and coworkers by speaking up when they are being attacked; by believing them when they tell you someone made them feel uncomfortable for whatever reason; by being a good person to them.

My least favorite question is 'where are you FROM?' Let's also just stop asking that many times over when we are unsatisfied with the information given."

- Madeleine LG (she/her) / Q Grader & Barista
Holualoa, HI

"I want our talent and love for this industry to be showcased ten times more than just the color of our skin. Representation matters first and foremost. These conversations still need to be had, but at the end of the day, our love for coffee is what took us on this journey. It is what connects us beyond race, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

You don't have to just help in regards to scholarships and spotlights in media outlets. Sometimes it starts right in the shops with a cup of coffee and a normal conversation.

Focus more on their talent as opposed to just solely their challenges. Feed what you want to grow, and starve the things that divide us. I know so many talented women and POC, who only get asked about the challenges they've faced as opposed to their favorite espresso blend, or their favorite coffee house."

- Ciera Young / Owner & Home Roaster
Mama's Brew / Austin, TX

"The best way to support POC in coffee is to understand that we (any of us) don't exist in a vacuum. A lot of time folks in specialty think we are special in the regard, but I'm afraid that only extends to coffee that scores 80+. All of the ills that exist in this world, *also exist for POC in coffee*, and accepting that as a reality is step zero. Literal centuries of governmental policy coupled with a social hierarchy that we are conditioned to see as "normal" creates a different reality for your staff or colleagues of color. Especially for those on the front lines of service—what we need is your awareness and solidarity. Don't make it our responsibility alone to deal with racists customers. If you see something you know isn't right, say or DO something. Know that if a POC raises an issue with you its' because they respect you, and are offering you the opportunity to make it right. It's tough every time we have to do it, *so value it*.

Just as this system didn't create itself, it won't undo itself. Negative conditions that came about as a result of action will require *action* to address. And yes, I said that twice on purpose—because that bit is hard for people to hear at first. That means actively seeking out diverse candidates *and* creating an environment where they can thrive. It means extending opportunities to those who don't look like you, and then creating a feedback loop where you know you might not always get it right, and being willing to hear that. That kind of environment fosters trust, community, and a camaraderie that makes the specialty coffee community a place where everyone feels like they belong. In my coffee career I've had countless mentors (Emily Miller-Olmstead, Lizz Hudson, Teresa von Fuchs) who could *hear* me when I had feedback, and who took chances on me. Their support was (and still is) unwavering, and they've never hesitated to use their networks to give me opportunities and vouch for me. If you're a person whose access has allowed you to have a network where opportunity can be found, *use it*."

- Tymika Lawrence (she/her) / Eastern North
America Sales
Atlas Coffee Importers / New York, NY

"This question has an answer for two different groups of people. For white folk, allowing yourselves to find comfort in your discomfort in not being centered professionally. Uplift and center black and nbpc by using your privilege as a ladder to true equity and inclusivity. For nbpc, using proximity to whiteness as a bridge for black and brown folk who must be seen and heard in our industry. For everyone, there is no us then them here; if we do not rise together and fight together we will lose together."

- Rob Rodriguez (he/him) / Roasting, Sourcing, QC
Night Shift Roasting / Boston, MA

racism: Race Prejudice + Misuse (and Abuse) of
Systemic/Institutional Power

POC: People of Color

NBPoC: Non-Black People of Color

I want to express a huge “thank you” to the folx who took the time to respond to this. As a white person myself, it is not fair or appropriate of me to expect PoC to do the emotional labor of explaining their experience to me whenever I have questions. And so, this is not where it ends. After reading these beautiful responses, take time to check out the other resources (some listed here and *many* more available online), engage in self-reflection about the privileges you may possess, and do the work yourself. Dismantling racism (both internal ideas/beliefs and societal systems/structures) is hard and messy, and also is crucial for the wellbeing of us all. So let’s get to it.

Industry Related Resources

Black Coffee - a live event series brought to you by Michelle Johnson (The Chocolate Barista) and Sprudge. You can listen to the live recordings via the Coffee Sprudgecast wherever you get your podcasts, or watch them on YouTube. Here are the QR codes for vids...



The Chocolate Barista - Michelle Johnson everything
www.thechocolatebarista.com/blog

Boss Barista Podcast - Ashley Rodriguez brings in a hugely diverse group of people to interview about all the topics: coffee, colonialism, feminism, mental health, race, career building, origin, ableism, unionizing, and soooooo much more!
<http://bossbarista.com/bossbarista>

Radical Xchange - an intersectional agency for the hospitality industry
[@radicalxchange / http://www.radxc.com/](https://www.radicalxchange.com/)

^ Founded by Kisira Hill @gemini_rising and Ashtin Berry @thecollectress

Not Specifically Coffee Resources

“Seeing White” by Scene on Radio - a 14-part podcast series that explores the history of how whiteness was created as a concept, utilized (ie: weaponized) to gain power and exploit people, and how it continues to impact us all today

“Me And White Supremacy” Workbook by Layla Saad - a 28-day anti-racism workbook for people holding white privilege to begin confronting complicity in white supremacy

“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh - a PDF that addresses the oftentimes invisible systems of white privilege

“White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement” by Dr. Robin DiAngelo - book

“Women, Race and Class” by Angela Davis - book

Activist to Definitely Follow:

Rachel Ricketts - @iamrachelricketts // <https://www.rachelricketts.com/>

Layla Saad - @laylafaad // <http://laylafaad.com/>

Rachel Cargle - @rachel.cargle // <https://www.rachelcargle.com/>

At CoffeePeopleZine, we believe in continually educating ourselves about privilege, implicit bias, and learning about the experiences of marginalized folx in our community so we can support and uplift each other every day. If you have other questions about supporting people from any marginalized group, please email them to kat@coffeepeople.org. Just like we did here, we will reach out to baristas and coffee professionals who have experience and knowledge in that realm, and collect a variety of responses and perspectives to present to you in upcoming issues.