

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, oriented vertically. To its right is a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments in shades of blue and white.

JUST 3

JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Kayhan Irani

October 23, 2020

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 19:27

[*Music*]

[00:06] **Catherine LaSota:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast, a project of the [Center for the Study of Social Difference](#) at Columbia University. I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. On the JUST THREE podcast, we talk with artists, activists, and other scholars who are deeply engaged with issues of social justice.

On each episode of our podcast, we have one guest, someone who is connected to one of the many working groups here at the Center. And on each episode, I ask the same three questions: one, how does your work engage with issues of social justice? Two, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time? And three, how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? I hope you enjoy this episode of the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]

[00:58] **Kayhan Irani:** The fight for the imagination, for the biggest, most expansive, unlimited, power of the imagination is what we need to fight for.

[01:09] **Catherine:** On this episode of the JUST THREE podcast, I'm talking with Kayhan Irani. Kayhan Irani is an Emmy award-winning writer, a performer, and a Theatre of the Oppressed trainer. She was one of 10 U.S. artists named by President Obama's White House as a 2016 White House Champion of Change for her storytelling work. She's currently working on a new one-woman show, [There is a Portal](#), which asks: can the story of an Iranian-Indian immigrant offer a space of healing for all Americans? Her previous one-woman show, *We've Come Undone*, toured nationally and internationally, telling stories of Arab, South Asian, and Muslim American women in the wake of 9/11. Her work has been supported by the BBC World Service Trust, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Bronx Council for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

I'm so excited to have Kayhan Irani with us here on the podcast today. She does work with our [Migrant Personhood and Rights working group](#) here at the Center for the Study of Social Difference. And the Migrant Personhood and Rights group addresses anti-immigrant sentiments and policies by engaging both academic research and the expertise of community-based migrant advocacy organizations to develop novel questions and approaches that address current immigration issues.

My conversation with Kayhan Irani was recorded on October 23, 2020.

[*Music*]

[02:44] **Catherine:** I'm so excited to have Kayhan Irani here with us on the JUST THREE podcast. Before we get started with our three questions of the JUST THREE podcast, Kayhan I wanted to welcome you here and thank you for being here and ask if you could just briefly introduce yourself and what you do, where you are right now, and how you're doing?

[03:05] **Kayhan:** Thank you so much for asking. My name is Kayhan Irani. I am a writer, performer, participatory theater maker, and a storyteller and community builder. I use the power of story and theater tools to re-center people's creativity as a way to create lasting social change. I am currently in Brooklyn. I moved here as of two weeks ago from Jackson Heights, Queens where I was living for a long time and I am settling. So slightly unsettled but things are starting to slide into place and I'm very excited to be talking to you.

[03:53] **Catherine:** Very excited to have you here and I really appreciate that answer of settling so much. You have done some work with our Migrant Personhood and Rights group here at the Center for the Study of Social Difference. I wonder also if you could just speak briefly about what you have done with that group, with the Migrant Personhood and Rights group, here at the Center.

[04:19] **Kayhan:** Sure, well the group had only recently started before we went into lockdown. So what we were able to quote-unquote "do together" was think and just build our relationships and build a kind of common language about how we were understanding the crisis of migrant personhood. That is, the basic way that experiences and lives and conditions that migrants are in around the world have been pretty much stripped of personhood, stripped of any dignity, stripped of any humanity, and how do we deal with that. How do we talk to the world in a way that re-centers their humanness, helps understand the conditions that they are fleeing, the conditions that they are in and re-connect them to our lives, the urgency of our lives.

That group is made up of—it's an interdisciplinary group—it's made up of academics and researchers. It's made up of educators, teachers, K-12 teachers, as well as activists and organizers and as well as artists, like me. And everyone is kind of a little bit of something else right, there's no like essentialist "you can only be here as an educator because that's what your job is." Educators are also artists and artists are also activists and activists are also researchers, so it's a wonderful group of many different backgrounds and as I said we had just gotten started so things are still up in the air.



[05:21] **Catherine:** Thank you so much for addressing that non-essentialist definition really, of the participation in that group. I appreciate that as well.

We're going to dive into our three questions of the JUST THREE podcast. And they're broad questions. They're meant to be that way so please feel free to answer them however you see fit in this moment as we are recording today. The first question is how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[06:23] **Kayhan:** I would say at the very basic level and at the core of what I do, my work engages with and re-engages people with their birthright of creativity and imagination. My experience in the world, in the U.S. in particular as an immigrant coming from India, as an Iranian heritage Indian woman and growing up as a creative person, growing up as a person who was interested in telling stories and being creative and imagining just like all my peers were.

But the experience that sticks out to me because I was so engaged in creative work and in imagining was one of dispossession from my creativity because of racism, because of classism, because of sexism. I was told and shown, not just explicitly told but, told by the way people treated me, told by the way people responded to my ideas, that my creativity didn't matter as much as other people's, that it was not valid, that it should be sidelined and I should adopt and learn other worlds, other ways of making a world. Primarily, you know, European dominant modes that come through White supremacist education and art-making. Yet, the most vibrant parts of my life, the most vibrant parts of my creativity was, you know, making plays, making stories with my friends in apartment building hallways or in the playground, and this is where I felt most alive. And this is where I knew deep, deep power lies. And so, somehow, I never lost sight of that. I knew that that existed even with all the ways in which I was shut out of my own creativity.

And so the work that I do is really using participatory theater modes, storytelling, as a way to re-engage people in the powerful creative voice that they have, the unique perspective that they have on this world, and the unique imagination that is contained within them so that we can play together, so that we can build new relationships, new ways of being together outside of the structures of domination and oppression, outside of the identities that have been placed on us because of our race, our class, our jobs, our social location, and so that we can dream up and start acting and moving into new ways of being—ones that are inherently dignified for all life and that support all life and that are cooperative and, frankly, that are fun.

[09:16] **Catherine:** Thank you so much for adding fun at the end. It's so inspiring to hear this...maintaining this connection to your power, your own power, despite everything and working with that. I imagine that you've had some powerful experiences working with other people in that work as well.

[09:39] **Kayhan:** Oh yes, oh yes, it's always a joy and it's always so life-affirming to see that light start to come back into people's eyes and hands and bodies and again that space in between us that lights up when we are creative together and people are feeling the juice of

other people. It's harder, a little bit, nowadays on Zoom, but you can still have very intimate and powerful exchanges when you let that space fill up with all that is. Sometimes that little, that source of power, was very, very quiet and was barely able to whisper and I was barely able to acknowledge it. Yet it persisted and here I am.

[10:25] **Catherine:** Yes, and so grateful for that.

So, the next question is quite a large question on the JUST THREE podcast, and that question is: what do you see in this moment, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[10:47] **Kayhan:** It is a big question. I feel like it's so loaded. You need some expert to be called in to answer it. But what I see as an issue I guess is a thread that is interwoven in all issues. By issues I mean, you know, again, conditions on the ground that we see whether it's the climate catastrophes that we're seeing or the migrant catastrophes, which are connected to climate catastrophes or the human rights catastrophe. For me, it is this dispossession and displacement from our own creativity that is threaded through all of these crises. When we have allowed our own unique worldview—the power that we have to imagine and to insist on something new and something different to be overtaken by a different system, by a system of corruption, a capitalist system, an exploitative system, and the dreams of that system—that, to me, is the biggest issue. All other issues are subsumed in it.

But the fight for the imagination, for the biggest most expansive, unlimited power of the imagination is what we need to fight for if we are truly going to save this planet, if we are truly going to live into something that can affirm and grow all life to its fullest potential. We don't even know yet what that could be. We have some ideas from past systems. We have some ideas from past knowledge. Yet, there's still something new to be birthed and to be built and it is within each of us that those answers and a piece of that answer lies.

So, my work is really to allow that imagination, allow that radical creativity, to be cultivated, to be affirmed, to be valued and to live to sprout new arms and legs and wings within each individual that will then carry that work forward, will carry those ideas into new realms, into different spaces that they live in.

[13:04] **Catherine:** Thank you for that. When you began answering that question you said, "I think an expert needs to answer that," but I would argue that, who are the experts really? Who deems who is an expert? And I believe that that answer you gave was quite powerful so thank you.

We are going to move on to our third and final question of the JUST THREE podcast and it's another big one, but I would love to hear your thoughts on this. It's: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[13:40] **Kayhan:** I think the key to that is in intimate relationship building. When we don't know each other, when we allow stereotypes or information from the outside to color in our assumptions of other humans, other communities, other societies, we degrade the possibility of

connection with those other people, those other communities. And again, I include plant and animal life in that too. When we feel, well, you know, I don't know, the sparrows will find a new home, they have wings they can fly and we don't understand what the community of sparrows is telling us, what they need and how they live, then how can we truly build correct relationships that support our lives and that support their lives?

So, when we speak about ethical, there is, sometimes ethics can be erased of emotion and feeling. It's just about kind of maximizing the current quote-unquote "right thing" or the "proper thing." Sometimes ethics can also be along your role, your social role, like what's appropriate in my role to do. Yet again so many of our roles are predicated on oppression and on a sort of pyramid of power where very few people at the top exercise power over very many. We actually need to replace that with relationship and truly understanding situations that we find ourselves in, how change affects others, how it can affect ourselves, and really to stand in poetic imagination of what could be at all times. So even within making ethical decisions projecting into the future of what else could be here, what other ways could we relate to each other, what other possibilities could we make room for if we change the way we acted, if we change something about the situation. And so that has to come with a poetic vision of what could be. And everyone needs that. Everyone needs to actually take a stand in their own poetics. Because otherwise you are adopting the poetic imagination of others and you are adopting the boundaries of what others say exist, without ever exploring the vast open spaces of your own mind and your own heart.

[16:11] **Catherine:** Thank you for that, that was a really amazing answer to that question and I would love to hear if there's anything that you're working on right now, or can our listeners go to your website to learn more about what you're doing with this, and could you share that information.

[16:30] **Kayhan:** Absolutely, I have been working on a really intimate one-woman storytelling project that, at the moment, I'm transforming into an immersive digital story. Hopefully by the time that people are listening to this conversation that story will be available to folks.

And that story is still, even though it's in a digital realm, it's a participatory story where the telling of my story and the looking back through my memories calls forth and asks the audience to look back through some of their memories. Going back-and-forth between weaving my memory and your memory together, I ask you to excavate and think about the places where you felt most broken that we can actually build new definitions of belonging from those places to understand it in the moments we felt defeated, broken, cast out of our own world, is actually a moment we have to extend to another person. We can extend outwards and build community from that moment and also undo some of the messages that came along with that moment.

So there hopefully will be a pedagogy and a curriculum attached to that, some exercises we can do in groups even though we're meeting in groups in a digital space. And I'm trying to create a little workbook/journal for people to be able to tell and build their own story based on watching and listening to my story. So the project is called *There is a Portal* and it is www.thereisaportal.com and hopefully there'll be information there for you.



[18:07] **Catherine:** That's great, *There is a Portal*. I think I remember experiencing a little piece of that work with the Migrant Personhood and Rights, one of the working groups, when we were still meeting in person. That was wonderful.

[*Music*]

[18:21] **Catherine:** Kayhan, thank you so much for your time today and for answering these huge questions. I really loved hearing your voice and hearing your thoughts. I really appreciate you being with us here on the JUST THREE podcast. Thank you.

[18:33] **Kayhan:** It was my pleasure. Thank you.

[*Music*]

[18:38] **Catherine:** Thanks for listening to the JUST THREE podcast. To find out more about our guests, please visit the show notes. To find out more about the Center for the Study of Social Difference, go to www.socialdifference.columbia.edu.

Music in the show is by Blue Dot Sessions and our episodes are mixed by Craig Eley. If you like what you heard, consider telling a friend and leaving a review for us wherever you listen to podcasts.

I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. Thank you and catch you next time on the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]
