

The logo for the 'JUST 3' podcast. The word 'JUST' is written vertically in a yellow, sans-serif font. 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 Noni Carter

Episode 9

March 24, 2021

Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 22:35

[*Music*]

[00:05] **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's 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*]

[0:57] **Noni Carter:** We are able to be together but diverse, right? We're able to recognize that my experience might not look like yours, but I'm here.

[1:08] **Catherine:** This is our final episode of Season One of the JUST THREE podcast and for this episode, I am thrilled to be in conversation with [Noni Carter](#). Noni Carter is a historical and speculative fiction author. She's published work in *RSA Journal*, forthcoming *Kweli Journal*, and she is the author of the YA historical fiction novel [Good Fortune](#), which was published by Simon & Schuster in 2010 and won the Parent's Choice Gold Award. She's a 2016 graduate of Voices of Our Nation and the recipient of the 2019 PEN/Phyllis Naylor Working Writer Fellowship for her work-in-progress novel *Womb Talk*. Noni is currently finishing a PhD in French and Francophone studies with a focus on memory, gender, and slavery in the literary traditions of the Black diaspora, specifically the French Caribbean. She works as an editorial assistant with *Small Axe Journal*, and as a rapporteur for Columbia's *Cultural Memory Seminar*. She has been

a graduate fellow for the Institute on Women, Gender and Sexuality at Columbia University, and last year she was also the graduate assistant for working group [Transnational Black Feminisms](#) here at the Center for the Study of Social Difference. The Transnational Black Feminisms Working Group aims to think about how transnational Black feminisms can move us beyond survivability and demands for recognition, and instead generate alternative frames and understandings around belonging, community, justice, and equity. Our conversation was recorded on March 12, 2021.

[Music]

Hello, and welcome to our final episode of Season One of the JUST THREE podcast. I'm so excited to be here today with Noni Carter, with whom, in the before times before the pandemic, I had the pleasure of catching up with over coffee and just love chatting with Noni, so I'm so glad to have her here on the podcast. Noni before we get started with our three questions of the JUST THREE podcast, I'm just gonna ask if you could say hello, and let us know where you are and how you're doing.

[3:33] **Noni:** Absolutely. Hi, everyone. Hi, Catherine. Thank you for inviting me here. I'm honored, also loved our discussions in the before times before COVID. I am actually in Georgia at the moment.

[3:45] **Catherine:** Excellent. And how is it in Georgia? And how are you doing there?

[3:50] **Noni:** We're coping. It's nice and sunny today. So hopefully this weather stays as it is. It's not New York by any means. But it's good. It's good. I have family here and that's important so.

[4:03] **Catherine:** Yes, I'm glad it's good weather there. We're having an exceptionally beautiful sunny day here in New York, so I hope that the warm vibes bode well for our conversation to come. And I can't wait to hear your answers to these really big questions. So I'm going to go ahead and dive in with question one of the JUST THREE podcast. And that question is: how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[4:32] **Noni:** Thank you for that question. So as you know, I brand myself differently based on where I am and what I'm doing. So I have an academic hat, you know, I have a creative hat, I have an educator hat. And my answer sort of, there's a theme that ties them all together. But they're slightly different depending on where I'm situated at the moment. So I think I'd like to talk about my academic work because, in particular, in relation to last year and the changes that happened, the work that I do, I think, is formative in terms of where we can go.

What's interesting is I don't necessarily—and I'll probably repeat this with other questions but—I know many people who come onto the podcast probably have a long list of action steps that are externally driven. One of the things that I think about that is paramount is sort of the formative language that underlies shifts and movements and revolutions that take place. I question this formative language that we're given, that's assumed normative in many cases and scenarios but

that has a history of genealogy, an origin, right, or various origins as the case may be, that are deeply entrenched in practices, be they legal, performative, scientific, social, the practices that begin with the premise that there is perhaps a White male individual who represents the fully realized human being, up against which everyone else seeks to be whole. So one of the main questions that my dissertation asks or the guiding question is: what is the human? What is this terminology that we use when we talk about rehumanizing particular groups and communities in the world? What is it that we're participating in when we ask to rehumanize? Where did this term "human" originate? Where did it come from?

Usually, if you look at scholarship, they move back to the 19th century, my work attempts to push even further. I look at the 18th-century Enlightenment particularly in France, but also in other places in Europe and I examine the ways in which scientific work or science-based work and in the 18th century, science doesn't mean what it means for us today. But I look at the ways in which science-based work, formulates an idea of what the human is based on experimentation be it physical experimentation done on people of color, in particular women of color, specifically those that are being brought into Europe at the time. And in this way, you know, we have many scholars that argue something similar, you have Sylvia Wynter, and a lot of the Black pessimist thinkers of the time, which, I do not consider myself one of them but I think their work is very powerful and important to the field. But you know, my thesis that I end with is that this genealogy of the human demonstrates that the human has always been a logic that's exclusionary, that does not include a certain sector of people, but also their practices, also their ways of relating to the world.

So then, in order to address concerns and questions of social justice today, many of which, again, are about rehumanizing, one of the questions that our—in my opinion—our movements, our educational incentives have to ask is, what does it mean to make a person human again? And is this something that we want to do? What does it exclude when we say, we're rehumanizing this particular group of people? If we think about other terminologies, what are we able to pull to the surface in terms of ways of relating to ourselves, ways of relating to the world, ways of relating to the environment in which we live? And this is something that we see in a lot of Indigenous activism, right, and our attempts now as part of the West to go back to Indigenous spaces and ask, well, in what ways can we think about our relationship to ourselves in the environment differently?

So I see my academic work, or, in particular, my dissertation as opening up linguistics, semantic, but just overarching questions that I think when really questioned and picked apart and extrapolated, can help us change the dialogue that we begin with in terms of where we're trying to go and the social justice that we envision. So that's the way in which my academic work, I think, would engage in issues of social justice.

I'm also, as you probably mentioned, a creative writer as well. And my goal with creative writing—I do a lot of YA work, I write for young adults. And my goal...it's a bit more practical, obviously, I'm not thinking about the human in the 18th century, and you know, questions of this sort, but rather, thinking about the narratives that are told specifically around young women of

color, Black women of color, the narratives that are told and the ways in which we can speak about trauma, but also move beyond trauma as the identifying principle that allows us to understand young people of color. And this is something that we see. There's a lot of YA that's out there that centers around Black death. And I think it's important to tell these stories, but one of the things that I seek to do in my work is to pass through this, but question it differently. Maybe through speculative fiction, right? How does a young woman who's dealing with sexual abuse, for instance, a 15-year-old, how might she speculatively reflect on her enslaved ancestors in a way that's totally different from what we've read in history books, right? And think about her relationship, her bodily relationship to her ancestors. How might she think about, you know, her grandchildren 50 years, 100 years in the future? And then how might she engage in a dialogue in which all three of these generations are speaking with one another and creating formulations of a world in which we can live in that looks different from the one we live in today? So this is, this is my creative work, a celebration of a speculative form of womanhood that I hope that we're moving towards. And I think, I think I'll stop there with just the academic and the creative. I'll speak about the educational, my educational vision, with another question.

[10:57] **Catherine:** Sure thing. I mean, Noni, you do so much. And I think that we could have an entire hour talking about all of the different things that you do because they do all engage with issues of social justice, and you've brought up issues of exclusion and also storytelling and these are things that have definitely come up in other episodes of the JUST THREE podcast for sure. I am going to move us into the next question, which is a very big question. And you can choose to come at it from whatever angle of course, but the second question of the JUST THREE podcast is: what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?

[11:39] **Noni:** So, I don't know if my answer will be satisfying. I hope so. But because it's a—you know, this is a big question. It's a difficult one to answer straightforward. I'll preface by saying this semester, I was running a discussion section for a course at Barnard on practicing intersectionality. And even though I've read these texts—we specifically look at feminism, feminist movements that go back to the 19th century, specifically here in the States, but also globally. But thinking about, just, thinking through with my students about intersectionality, its origins, and what it means, this is what came up first, when I heard your question the biggest social justice challenge, because I don't—I don't think that it's possible to segregate, right? I don't think it's possible to pinpoint and say “This one is more important than another.” Why? Because, and again, I take from...I'm thinking about the Combahee River Collective, where intersectionality wasn't necessarily explicitly defined as a term, but they thought about identity politics, right? They thought about multiple oppressions that reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering. That's what Crenshaw later defined as intersectionality. So to me, you can't really talk about prison abolition without thinking about the criminalization of sex workers, right. And so when you think about specific social justice challenges as intersecting issues, I think that it enables dialogue that may not have taken place otherwise and it brings to the surface, as we see with intersectional politics, nuances that may otherwise have been overlooked or experiences that may not necessarily be readily accessible via the internet or through narratives that do exist so far. So I'm going to, I'm going to sidestep that question *[laughs]* and say that I really don't think that they can be considered, you know, in separation, I

think it's really about the dialogue. It's really about the ways in which we can celebrate each other's differences, but also relate to one another through our different experiences that we're having. And, um, yeah, yep, I'll end there.

[13:53] **Catherine:** Definitely, that is definitely, one hundred percent, a valid and important answer to that question. And again, it's something that I feel has come up again and again with people answering this question is to say one challenge. It's like, well, what's the underlying—what's...how are things tied together, what's, you know, it is very, very difficult question. So I really appreciate you articulating that so well for us, and I'm going to move us to the third question, which I am really looking forward to hearing your answer on. And the question three of the JUST THREE podcast is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[14:32] **Noni:** Yeah, so this was a difficult one for me, because I think that a lot of what we see even today is...how should I put this in a way that's gentle. *[laughs]* But I think often we—you see answers to this question in which a certain sector of the community believes that, you know, their particular action steps are the correct steps to take and that's it, right. There's, again, there's no dialogue across the board and there's a lack of understanding that different strategies mean different things in different places.

So going back to my answer about formative language, and really thinking about the socially constructed ways in which we participate in our societies, I think I want to take this in a different direction and say that one of the ways—and I'll move on to two others, perhaps...

[15:27] **Catherine:** Sure.

[15:27] **Noni:** ...but one of the first things that I think is important for us to do, perhaps as individuals seeking to create community is to stop and take an inventory of where we are, who we are, how we came to be as individuals, as a community. But just slowing down for a moment, as COVID forced us to do last year, right. And before asking the question, "What can I do for my community?" I think—and that's...don't get me wrong, this is an important question that's paramount to social justice and social change. But before this, you know, can we slow down and ask ourselves, you know, the empowering question: "What aspects of my identity, what beliefs are deeply ingrained, that are socially constructed?" This is, in my opinion, in my experience, is not easy for people to do. It's not easy for me to do, right, to stop for a moment and ask that empowering question to yourself. To look in the mirror, to take a moment and really dive deeply into the ways in which fixed understandings of the world might not be as such. So that's, I suppose that's where it would begin. And I think that prepares us for what I think is missing here.

With the presidential election, we heard a lot of platitudes about unity, right? Unity, unity, unity unity. Someone counted, I believe the President said this 40 times or so in his speech. But I don't know if that's really what we're looking for, right? What about a keen acknowledgement and a willingness to entertain and commune with difference despite the necessary discomfort that that brings. To sort of put our heads together and keep our heads together when things get

uncomfortable and ask ourselves the questions that feel challenging and that shake up our neat and clean worlds that often we find ourselves living in. And so, to slow down and ask of ourselves—to take inventory of who we are—is, in my opinion, one of the first steps towards that sort of celebration. Celebration is a big word, and maybe not the appropriate one here, but just a recognition and acknowledgement, and a willingness to be present with difference.

This is something that one of my favorite—though he's difficult to pick through—theorists, he's a Martiniquan theorist named Édouard Glissant, speaks about in his theory, his poetics and his theories of relationality. He's constantly pushing toward—he calls it *opacité*, but it's a theory of relationality in which we are able to be together but diverse, right. We're able to recognize that my experience might not look like yours, but I'm here. And that's important. It's important to begin to uproot your own pieces of identity that keep you tethered and safe. So I would begin there.

And personally, I've never talked about my sort of—my spiritual relationship to my work in academic spaces. So I celebrate this as the first space in which I can do so.

[18:30] **Catherine:** Excellent.

[18:31] **Noni:** Specifically because I'm defending soon so I envision bringing together these different pockets of my life in a way that really makes sense to me. But I believe very much in energy. I know that people define that in different ways. But just as much as our actions, just as much as the words we speak, the organizations that we pull together...I think that it's just as important to take stock of our energetic resonance. And this, again, is probably something that would take an hour to discuss with you. So I might just leave it there and leave the mystery open.

But this sort of ties in with one of the projects that I am putting together with my talented sisters, my younger sisters, who were thinking about pulling together—are actively doing this—multimedia projects that are educational, and that are geared towards young people of color. And the goal is to collaboratively, right—so it's this isn't just a top-down, this isn't like a unilateral sort of conversation, but entering into these spaces with the understanding that I'm giving you something but you're also giving me something as a young person, right—but our goal is to redefine what excellence means. Our goal is to encourage heuristic and collaborative and creative thinking that challenges the meritocratic society in which we live. I think that's the source of a lot of the social justice problems that we have to be honest. So to enter a classroom or to, you know, to enter a space with young people and to question what this means and to start giving them the language in which they can sort of pick apart what these larger social formations mean for them. In our opinion, that's the place to start, right. Your question is how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? Well, you know, I've always been a big proponent of education. And I think that's where it begins.

So a lot of the work I envision doing is paring down some of the things that I talked about in my dissertation and really creating a space and a language through which young people can find

themselves, can see themselves reflected, to see their genius reflected. And to do that in such a way that fosters healing practices.

[20:46] **Catherine:** Fantastic. Noni, thank you so much for that generosity. And thank you for your honesty and openness with that third question, which was really fantastic. And I love this idea of communing in difference as well. And I'm excited about the project you're working on with your sisters. I can't wait to hear more about that.

[21:06] **Noni:** Absolutely, yeah.

[21:06] **Catherine:** Yes. Yes, yes. And really, after talking to you for this short time, I think that I can't wait for the moment when we can get together again for coffee.

[21:19] **Noni:** Yes, in person, face-to-face.

[21:22] **Catherine:** And I want to hear more about all of it. Thank you so much for being the final guest for our Season One of the JUST THREE podcast. This was just fantastic. Thank you, Noni.

[21:30] **Noni:** Yes. And thank you, Catherine, for putting this together. I mean, these spaces are important moving through COVID, but also thinking about social justice. So you are a force I think in our community, and I appreciate the work you do.

[21:43] **Catherine:** Thank you so much, Noni.

[Music]

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.socialdifferencecolumbia.edu.

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

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